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**Trip Down Memory Lane: Revisiting the Red Classics
as Television Drama in Post-Mao China**

Qian Gong

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature

Date: July 4, 2011

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Abstract

In the post-Mao era, the boundaries of the Red Classics, the canonical Chinese socialist literary and theatrical works, and the values and aesthetics they promoted were transgressed. By adopting the “circuit of cultures” as a methodology, this thesis explicates how a canonical body of texts created to politicise and educate socialist citizens has been transformed into TV dramas appealing to an increasingly sophisticated, demanding audience. The study situates the transformation of the genre within the context of China’s transition from a Maoist socialist society to a neoliberal one. The TV adaptation of the Red Classics embodies the transition from an era dominated by mass production and consumption for ideological control to an era in which political indoctrination and market differentiation compete for audiences in contemporary China. In this process, the norms and standards prescribed by the Red Classics have been dismantled, subverted, transgressed, and re-written.

Transforming the Red Classics: An Introduction¹

In December 2008, I visited my hometown, Linyi, in Eastern China's Shandong Peninsula. Once an agrarian regional centre for the surrounding areas under the planned economy, it is now a medium-sized commercial hub. Besides dining out three times a day, I was also taken out sightseeing, karaokeing and, as a highlight, to the newly released blockbuster film *The Red Cliffs* [*Chi bi*]. The cinema we went to, Dong Fang Hong (*The East is Red*) Cinema, immediately evoked memories of my childhood. In my preteen years in the 1970s, nearly every town had a cinema called Dong Fang Hong. In those days, the local cinema functioned a little like a "church." It served as the venue where people congregated to hear the latest political instructions, where town role models gave their speeches and were praised, where "class enemies" were condemned and humiliated in public, and more importantly but more mundanely, where we went ritualistically to view the revolutionary, historical themed movies, now referred to as the Red Classics, quite often with free tickets handed out by our school or our parents' work unit.

How does a Dong Fang Hong cinema fare in today's booming market economy, at a time when television has replaced film as the balladeer of the everyday, and when privatisation and consumerism have superseded political campaigns and class struggle as the main social development strategies? It has fared very well, actually. Linyi's Dong Fang Hong Cinema is now an entertainment complex that offers urban escape in luxurious comfort. Not only is the theatre refurbished for you to enjoy movies in luxurious lounge chairs, but it now also caters to special events, birthday parties, and class reunions. The manager of the cinema, Wang Yuefeng, told me that his cinema earns around four million yuan (\$500,000) annually and is among the top five most profitable cinemas in all of Shandong Province. It makes money out of screening Hollywood-like blockbusters such as *The Red Cliffs*, or hot-selling Chinese New Year special features such as *You Are The One* [*Fei cheng wu rao*]. However, quite surprisingly, the organised viewing of *The Public Servant* [*Gong pu*], a propagandist initiative that trumpets the morally perfect Party elite, is also a significant money earner.

¹ Parts of this chapter, as well as parts of Chapters 2 and 4, appear in Gong (2008).

With all its state-of-the-art upholstery, Dong Fang Hong has lost the cultural centrality it used to enjoy. Going to Dong Fang Hong has now become a special occasion, and a visit is considered something of a luxury. Some of the roles Dong Fang Hong used to fill are now taken over by television. The original versions of the Red Classics movies are now regularly screened through channel “Classics Theatre.” More importantly, the revolutionary novels, movies, and plays are now adapted for television, unfolding chapter by chapter, allowing local viewers to make the trip down memory lane with the modern convenience provided by the 60-inch plasma screen and Dolby sound. Most of the nights of my stay in Linyi were spent chitchatting in the flickering light of the screen, while my friend updated me on the latest development in *The Red Sun* [*Hong ri*], the TV drama adaptation of a Red Classics novel.

This was a typical encounter during my short stay in Linyi. It was, however, not lacking in revelation. It served as yet another reminder of the dramatic changes that Chinese society has undergone in the three decades since the 1978 reform project was initiated, transforming China from a planned economy to a market one. Nothing better embodies these changes than the changes to the revolutionary culture. Once deemed the core of the proletariat existence and produced to “touch people to their very innermost souls,” revolutionary culture has been subverted, transgressed, and co-opted in the new social order. Yet it still persists in the form of names like Dong Fang Hong, or in the form of the organised viewing, or in the chitchat about the main characters in a TV adaptation of the Red Classics over a tea break at work.

My opening anecdote thus signals the core theme of this thesis: the current transformation of the revolutionary legacy and its challenge to contemporary Chinese identity during a period of rapid social change, along with the ambiguities and contradictions accompanying that transformation. This thesis aims to catch a moment of contemporary China in dramatic transformation, seen through a genre of the socialist legacy—the Red Classics. The Red Classics present themselves as a good prism through which I can explore the tensions and complexities thrown up in this transformation and the shifting cultural boundaries at the intersection of class, gender and place.

The Red Classics: A genealogy

During the late-1990s, the term Red Classics (*hongse jingdian*) began to appear with regularity in the Chinese media. The concept comes from an earlier age, an invention of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) historiography. It generally refers to a body of politicised artistic productions created in line with the famous talks by Mao Zedong in 1942. In response to what he saw as the irrelevance of earlier artistic works, Mao Zedong gave his landmark speech at the Symposium of Literary and Art Circles held in Yan'an, calling for literary and art workers to engage in creative work for the common people, setting the tone of cultural policy for the whole Mao era, from the 1940s to the 1970s (McDougall & Louie, 1997). The post-1949 Chinese art works produced in accordance with the policy were characterised by overt politicisation, mainly focused on the theme of class and class struggle and the efforts and sacrifices of the peasants, factory workers, and soldiers made for the socialist cause. The result is a large number of literary, musical, and cinematic texts that provide a series of cultural imaginaries in keeping with the needs, ideals, and directives of the CCP (Hong, 2007; Link, 2000; McDougall & Louie, 1997).

The use of the phrase Red Classics, however, is a recent phenomenon. The term “Classics” normally refers to works that attain canonical status over a long period of time. In this case, the classics were created in the modern era, a conscious endeavour by the Chinese state to create a revolutionary culture that would mould socialist society. In modern Chinese history, the word “red” is directly associated with the Communist revolution. The term “Red Classics,” however, is a distinctive post-socialist coinage. The revolutionary works it refers to were known neither as “red” nor “classics” from the 1940s to the 1970s, when the majority of these works were produced. A revolutionary theme was the norm then, and they were not viewed as classic at the time but, rather, were a series of modern works created after 1942. Thus, the term Red Classics is a post-socialist attempt to define a socialist genre (S. Chen, 2004).

Despite being widely used, there is no consensus on the exact body of works the term refers to. Most believe the concept first appeared in contemporary Chinese literary studies and was accepted and promoted by the state ideological apparatus (Hou &

Zhang, 2007). In 1997, People's Press published a series of revolutionary-themed novels originally created in the 1950s and 1960s under the title of the "Red Classics Series," and this selection constitutes the core publications that people later referred to as the "Red Classics" (K. Liu, 2003). Some scholars (G. He, 2005) tend to define the genre more vaguely as revolutionary-themed literary writing or creation characterised by grand narratives, such as heroism, patriotism and nationalism, and extend the scope of the genre to include not only Chinese literary works but also canonical revolutionary novels written by Soviet writers (S. Liu, 2007). Others push the boundary even further to include not only literary works, but also fine arts, films, and theatrical productions. The term is also appropriated commercially as a product brand. In the circular issued in May 2004, the General State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) defined Red Classics as "revolutionary or historical themed literary works which evoke nationwide repercussions" (SARFT, 2004). For the purpose of this thesis, I apply the same criteria in defining the genre. A short list of Red Classics commonly referred to includes *Tracks in the Snowy Mountains* [*Linhai xueyuan*], *The Red Detachment of Women* [*Hongse jianzijun*], *Shajiabang* [*Shajiabang*], and *Struggles in the Old City* [*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*]. One of the major controversies centres on whether the "model play" (*Yangbanxi*) during the Cultural Revolution should be included in the Red Classics genre (S. Liu, 2007). Scholars such as Chen Sihe (2004) believes that *Yangbanxi* is a "monstrosity" (*guai tai*) born from extreme leftism and its inclusion in the genre would subvert the significance of the Red Classics. Others such as Song Jialing argue that it should be included in the Red Classics because of its enormous popularity among the populace (Deng, 2004). In this thesis I choose to treat *Yangbanxi* as an integral part of the Red Classics. I concur with Liu Shuo (2007) that *Yangbanxi*, although intensely political, comes down in one continuous line with the pre-Cultural Revolutionary works in terms of the themes, values and ideals it presents to the public and its implementation of socialist realism. Furthermore, *Yangbanxi* as genre can be traced to many pre-Red Classics cultural traditions. Therefore, it is not a disruption to the Red Classics ideological and aesthetic norm, but a continuation.

The Red Classics genre has had an enormous influence on the Chinese national psyche. Most of the Red Classics works were literary productions. From the 1950 to the 1970s, when reading featured as the major activity in people's cultural life, the Red Classics

provided the main leisure and entertainment. A huge number of books were published and consumed by the populace. For example, *The Red Crag* [*Hong yan*] sold five million copies within a year or so after it was published in 1961, creating a publication record in the novel category (Y. Li, 2003). After the Cultural Revolution, there was another surge of interest in the book, and it was reprinted and sold another three million copies.

A few factors contributed to the popularity of the Red Classics in the socialist era. Created at a moment when China started its modernisation project, the Red Classics were designed to promote socialist ideals. The popularisation of these works was consequently backed by state promotion and encouragement, even though some of them went through a few cycles of rewriting to suit the political and ideological needs of the state at that time. Many were later adapted in a variety of genres such as film, theatre, ballet, musicals, and other folk art forms, reaching an ever-larger audience while enhancing their reputation through constant exposure. Secondly, the Red Classics came into being when China was in the process of establishing revolutionary hegemony after the turmoil of major warfare with Japan and other western nations, as well as subsequent civil wars. The epic style that narrates the birth of a nation and the revolutionary grand narratives of the Red Classics works were in keeping with Chinese national sentiment. Thirdly, the Red Classics defined themselves against traditional literary classics by criticising and negating the latter. However, they also relied upon the resources of traditional folk culture, which was readily embraced by the populace. Meng Yue (1997), for example, provides a fine-grained analysis of the transformation of *The White-haired Girl* [*Bai mao nü*] from a popular folk tale in Northern China to its varied propagandist versions as drama, film, ballet, and musical. Li Yang (2003) astutely points out that even though various Red Classics works were promoted through official channels, their appeal to readers was also due to the writer's populist approach. For example, Li's analysis demonstrates convincingly how *The Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* draws narrative strategies from the Chinese classical legend-style novels.

Historical background

The study of change in the Red Classics requires an understanding of modern Chinese history. The idea of the Red Classics as a cultural repertoire is tied closely with the

founding of the nation-state. The modernisation project of China started a century ago with the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Western imperialism led to the rise of nationalist movements under the guidance of an elite minority.

The Republic of China was established in 1911 and chaotic battles between warlords followed immediately thereafter. The First World War ended with the Allies handing over German concessions in Shandong Province to Japan, breaking promises to return them to China in reward for siding with the Allies. This triggered a national rally on May 4, 1919. After that, the idea of an independent sovereign state started to spawn followers, the most notable of which were the Nationalist Party, headed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen and later by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communist Party. The colonial expansion of European and Japanese interests into China exacerbated the downfall of the Qing Dynasty. Along with “the gunboats, merchants, missionaries and colonial administrators” (Hobsbaum, 1994, p. 201), capitalist ideologies and value systems of “development” and “progress” were brought into China and eagerly promoted as the model that could help China to overcome its backwardness and pre-modern existence (Hobsbaum, 1994). Amid these imports, Marxism, anarchism, and other left wing ideologies had a profound influence on Chinese elites. Literature and the arts constituted the most important tools by which these new cultural thoughts were disseminated. The Red Classics, as the product of a proletariat cultural movement, hark back to the Left Wing literature of the 1930s.²

Sun’s efforts to unite China with the help of the Soviet Union were short-lived. With his death in 1925 came the end of the alliance between the Nationalists and the Communists. Chiang Kai-shek launched a series of campaigns to wipe out the Communists, forcing them to embark on a year-long retreat, later known as the “Long March.” The Communists settled in northwest China’s Shaanxi Province, where Mao Zedong consolidated his leadership within the Party and embarked on a series of political and social campaigns, one of the most important being the directive to harness literature and art to serve the interests of the masses and deliver political messages.

² In a detailed genealogy of the Left Wing literature and arts movement, Fang Weibo (2004) argues for the need to broaden the definition of Left Wing literature to include revolutionary literature created under the influence of the Soviet Union, from as early as the 1920s until the 1980s.

On the other front line, the Nationalists were fighting the Japanese, who occupied northern China's Manchuria in the early 1930s. In 1937, Japan waged a full-scale war on China. Pressured by various forces, the Nationalists reluctantly entered into alliance with the Communists. In the ensuing eight years of war with Japan, the Communist Party consolidated its dominance in the revolutionary base areas in the northern part of China. Literary and artistic works during this period focused on the resistance against Japan. In the Communist-controlled areas, land reform and ideological transformation formed central themes for mass literature (McDougall & Louie, 1999).

At the end of the Second World War, a civil war broke out between the Nationalists and the Communists. With the support of the majority of the population, especially the peasants, the CCP gained the upper hand over the now corrupt and demoralised Nationalists. Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. The formative years of the People's Republic saw an all-out effort to build a socialist economy and political system based largely on the model of the Soviet Union. Mobilisation of writers and artists was carried out as soon as the new regime was founded. Art workers were urged to follow the principles set out in Mao's talks in Yan'an in 1942. Socialist realism, borrowed from the Soviet Union, became the officially sanctified representational style, which "took 'reality' to mean success stories of the revolution from the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s to the state-planned industrialisation and agricultural collectivisation of the 1950s" (Link, 2000, p. 109). The bulk of the Red Classics stories were published during this period.

By the mid 1950s, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union had grown sour. In a frenzy to catch up with the economically advanced Western countries within a short period of time, Mao started the Great Leap Forward (*Da yuejin*) campaign, which was an economic and social movement to transform China from an agrarian economy into a modern, industrial economy on par with the advanced capitalist countries. The campaign was an economic disaster. In the ensuing three years, famine caused a great number of deaths. In 1966, the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (*Wenhua da geming*) was launched to revamp society and completely change people's cultural values and attitudes towards tradition and authority. Literary and artistic works played a

central role in mobilising the masses, providing ideological rationale for the campaigns and churning out role models of socialist ideals for moulding citizens or providing fictional illustrations of official policy. The formulaic themes and representational style reached their peak during the Cultural Revolution, in the form of the Model Play (*Yangbanxi*), which depicted a larger-than-life perfect hero and his unpardonably evil counterparts, featuring class struggle as the main theme.

After a political coup, the Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1976. The new leadership, led by Deng Xiaoping, shifted the Party's priority from political and ideological struggle to economic development. The plan for modernisation included dismantling communes and contracting land to individual peasant households, adopting an "open door" policy to attract foreign investment and reform, and introducing limited reform to heavy industry. As a result, China's economy experienced rapid growth in the next decade or so. The economic reform was accompanied by liberalisation in the ideological field. Literary intellectuals were at the forefront of breaking into the ideological "forbidden zone." Humanism and subjectivity³ were the two major theories advanced by the intelligentsia to challenge the Maoist formula of "class struggle" underlining philosophy for literature and the arts. These attempts were either praised or criticised by the government depending on the political mood of the time.⁴ The Deng era was legitimised partly on the repudiation of the Maoist policy. As the core cultural product of the Mao era, the Red Classics were dismissed as an extreme form of political propaganda immediately after the Cultural Revolution. However, revolutionary symbolism could not be totally abandoned or subverted as long as Deng's regime remained rhetorically committed to socialism.

³ The discussion of humanism and alienation formed an important cultural debate among intellectuals in the early 1980s. Humanism was advanced as a theoretical critique of Maoism-Marxism's proposition that abstract human nature does not exist. Novels, such as Yu Luojin's *A Winter Fairy Tale* and Dai Houying's *People, Oh People*, represented the writers' reflection on the political alienation of the revolution and their quest for humanism. The theory of the subjectivity of literature advanced by literary critic Liu Zaifu and others is seen as a plea for an aesthetic subject, a depoliticised being with human dignity and human value. For a detailed account of the humanism and subjectivity debate in the 1980s, see Jing Wang's (1996) *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*.

⁴ The two major political campaigns against intellectuals were the 'anti-spiritual pollution' campaign in 1983 and the campaign against 'bourgeois liberalisation' in 1987.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the often-undesirable by-products of the reform—competition, corruption, and deregulation-induced inflation—began to surface. A sense of moral decay and anxiety pervaded the society. The Party’s lack of inertia in political reform exacerbated public dissatisfaction. Mounting demand for democracy and political openness led to the public showdown in the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. The government violently suppressed the demonstrations and rallies. Faced with the post-Tiananmen tension and uncertainty within the Party, Deng and his clique decided to continue liberalising the economy and put the ideological debate aside. The masses were “hushed” and “depoliticised” (H. Wang, 2006), and neoliberal governmentality⁵ became the guiding principle of the Chinese government for the next two decades. As the economy developed further, the government continued to rule according to neoliberal principles. In the privatisation process, state-owned assets were redistributed and new interest groups, many of them previous power holders in the bureaucratic system, were formed. Jiang Zemin, in line with Deng’s policy, provided guarantees to the interest groups by recognising their legitimacy legally. The great impact of neoliberalism’s “accumulation through dispossession” (Zhao, 2008b, p. 6) was felt strongly in the 1990s and beyond. Despite the overall economic growth, social polarisation deeply divided Chinese society. Environmental pollution, institutionalised corruption, and the withdrawal of state responsibility in education, public health, and other social welfare systems have caused social upheavals (Selden & Perry, 2010). To contain the negative impact of marketisation, the new leadership under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, aims to bring the deeply polarised society into a “harmonious” one by invoking socialist values and some traditional Chinese values. The recognition and reiteration of the revolutionary legacy has been an important part of the Party’s project to seek popular consent and, thus, the legitimacy to rule. The nationalistic elements of this legacy are particularly stressed and manipulated in an attempt to bind the society together (Brady, 2008).

The spectrum of the red: Hybridising the revolutionary culture

First of all, in the official cultural realm, the CCP updated its propaganda technology, packaging Party moral education and socialist ideals in commercial publicity gambits

⁵ Following Zhao (2008a, p. 5), I take neoliberalism as not only the economic policies of marketisation, deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity, but also a social theory that advances the values and relations of the market as the model for the broader organisation of politics and society.

designed to make it more attractive and entertaining (Barmé, 1999; Brady, 2008). Tear-jerking films about iconic Party officials such as Jiao Yulu and Kong Fansen are examples of such “soft-sell propaganda” (Barmé, 1999, p. 112). While state propaganda has continued to promote “saintly” Party members as role models for citizens to emulate, these party heroes’ human nature and goodness has been exalted with great emphasis given to their compassion for the less fortunate, dedication to their cause, and necessary moral struggle at significant moments. In the meantime, the public nostalgia for the Mao era allowed the Party to see an opportunity to reconfirm its legitimacy by re-broadcasting original Red Classics films, performances, and music through official media, especially TV. China Central Television’s (CCTV) film channel has, consequently, been regularly featuring the original Red Classics movies.

Secondly, in the popular cultural scene, revolutionary nostalgia has featured prominently since the late 1980s. Revolutionary symbols, as well as well-known forms of revolutionary culture such as collective singing (K. Liu, 2004), have never ceased to be in circulation (Barmé, 1999), and the “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) accompanying the lived experience in consuming the Red classics remains intact. As the turn of the 21st century saw China further abandoning its commitment to socialist revolution and integrating into global capitalism, paradoxically, popular memory of revolutionary history has been in ascendance and grown into a sizable industry (Lee & Yang, 2007; K. Liu, 2004). Starting from the “Mao Fever” of the 1980s, memory of revolution proliferates in different media and sites, ranging from print media (books and magazines) to electronic media (television and films) and the new digital media. In the book market, the publication of personal memoirs of the Cultural Revolution often top the bestseller lists (G. He, 2005).

Repackaging the Red Classics in the popular arts realm is “as much a state-mandated propaganda campaign as a market-oriented commercial operation” (K. Liu, 2004, p. 93). The products were necessarily hybrids, tentatively toeing a middle ground between out-and-out commercialisation and orthodox Party style. Revolutionary songs were now packaged in karaoke style, sung by popular singers with modern electronic accompaniment. Popular TV shows such as *American Idol* inspired singing competitions of “Red Songs” in cities with long revolutionary histories. The

phenomenon of “Red Tours,” which are either organised or self-sponsored tours to pay homage to revolutionary sites, has drawn its popularity from the new middle-class travelling fad, revolutionary nostalgia, as well as Party educational tours. In all these cultural practices, there is a strong tendency towards cross-fertilisation between state culture and commercial culture, in terms of content, form, style, and the organisation and funding models.

Thirdly, in the avant-garde arena, Red culture is the key component of a successful formula. Traditionally, unofficial culture defines itself in opposition to state ideology, repression, and censorship, as demonstrated in the case study of rock music (Jones, 1992). However, since the 1990s, commercialisation and commodification have seriously eroded the boundary of the dichotomy. The Party symbols and icons were repackaged into political pop in the push to go international, the work’s visibility guaranteed because of its perceived anti-state, subversive nature in the eyes of foreigners, even though the bottom line was usually the main concern for the producer. In the meantime, the avant-garde appropriation of revolutionary symbols and cultures has also created a “more inclusive official culture” over the years (Barmé, 1999, p. 247). In other words, while the avant-garde is feeding off the official culture, the reverse is also happening. Pedagogical official culture has taken on techniques and styles from commercial advertising and the avant-garde to produce a kind of “corporate communism” (Barmé, 1999, p. 251). The boundary between the didactic avant-garde, the revived official culture and the downright commercial is elusive and volatile. This is eloquently summarised by Barmé (1999, p. 251):

[T]hrough broad-based appeals to national symbols and patriotic indoctrination—usually delivered via a mass medium that has appropriated elements of avant-garde art and global advertising styles—the ideological promotion of the Party continues to stake a competitive claim on the public’s attention and continues to shape psychocultural norms.

To appreciate how widely the revolutionary legacy is appropriated in China’s commercialised culture, one just needs to look at TV drama. Despite the proliferation of TV formats and genres, dramas remain the most watched shows among ordinary

Chinese daily viewers (Lull, 1991; Zhu, Keane & Bai, 2008). In this genre, revolutionary, historical themed prime-time TV serials made up about 45 per cent of the total TV drama output during the 1999-2001 period (K. Liu, 2004). The momentum has shown no sign of decreasing. A brief survey of the prime-time drama programs on CCTV's Channel One seems to confirm this trend. From June to August 2010, CCTV has screened three revolutionary, historical-themed drama series. These include the 30-episode *Behind the Shooting* [*Qiangsheng beihou*], a story about how Communists upset a plot by Nationalist undercover agents to blow up a major power plant; followed by 28-episode *The Red Guard on Honghu Lake* [*Honghu chiweidui*], an adaptation of a 1961 musical film on how the Red Army organised local people to rise against the despotic landlord; and immediately after, the 30-episode *Sister Jiang* [*Jiang jie*], another adaptation of the Red Classics novel on an undercover communist agent who died a martyr in 1948. The pre-eminence of this genre lies not only in its sheer quantity, but also in its popularity. Some of the serials are smash hits and odds-on favourites for the annual official awards. A few examples of the series passionately embraced by audiences include *Days of Burning Passion* [*Jiqing ranshao de sui Yue*] in 2001, *Sky of History* [*Lishi de tianchong*] in 2004, *Sword Show* [*Liang jian*] in 2005, and more recently *Hidden Agent* [*Qian fu*] in 2008.

Judging by their origin, these serial dramas tend to fall into two types: those adapted from novels written by contemporary writers and those adapted from the Red Classics produced in the pre-reform era. While both categories have their fanatical fans, it is the latter that is more constrained by the "moral economy"⁶ of the individual viewers and the larger community, as well as the policing of the state. The degree of manipulation the production team can legitimately perform on the primary texts is indicative of how the contemporary cultural boundaries are drawn. This thesis thus focuses on the television adaptation of the canonised Red Classics.

The above genealogy of the Red Classics has shown that the genre has been at the centre of the nation-building project of the Party. Throughout this time, revolutionary culture has been deeply ingrained in the living experience of the ordinary Chinese due to its hegemony in the Mao era. It serves as the cultural barometer of the Party's

⁶ Moral economy in this context refers to the ways in which customs and cultural mores compel the cultural producers to conform to traditional norms at the expense of profit.

ideological control, as well as the ethos of society in different time periods. In particular, the television adaptation of the Red Classics provides a case to study on how cultural boundaries change.

The following sections provide the background to the present research and an outline of the theoretical framework and research scope. This chapter will also review the approaches taken to the study in the area and set out the research problem. The justification for the research and thesis organisation will be included.

Overview of approaches adopted

Along with the thriving popular nostalgia for the revolution, scholarly interest in the Red Classics genre also surged in the 1990s. These research efforts have resulted in the publication of a number of important books, such as *Rereading: The People's Literature and Art Movement and its Ideology* (Tang, 2007), *Revolution, History, Narrative* (Huang, 1996), *Rereading: Chinese Literary Classics from the 50s to the 70s* (Y. Li, 2003), *Creating Critical Space: A Study of Literature in the Twentieth Century* (X. Wang, 1998), *Literary Imaginary and Literary State: A Study of Chinese Contemporary Literature (1949-1976)* (Cheng, 2005) and *The Formation of the Meaning Red: A Study of the Twentieth Century Leftist Literature* (W. Fang, 2004). Generally adopting the method of textual analysis, this line of research engages in not only fine-grain reading of the texts, but also in reconstructing the broad context in which these texts were embedded, with an aim to establish connections between the text and the context. This scholarship represents an attempt to “put literary work in a more complex historical context and cultural construction process” (G. He, 2007, p. 272). Instead of dismissing the literature produced between the 1940s and the 1970s as mere politicised products to be criticised and rejected, these scholarly enquiries have endeavoured to investigate the encoding process and disjuncture in literary creation (G. He, 2007). The “rereading” method invigorates the approach to the study of the Red Classics by deconstructing various myths through close reading of the texts in the context of the period’s political and ideological mood.

However, the rereading approach also has its limits. These studies normally follow the theory-to-case study formula, which can lead to the convenient overlooking of sources

that might contradict the theory or the ambiguity and complexity of the texts (G. He, 2007). The research that has been produced by the “rereading” approach thus largely remains as isolated case studies—interesting in its innovative thrust but failing to provide a more complete, systematic historical account of how the Red Classics became canonised, what conflicts and adjustments were encountered in the process, and, in particular, what leads to the de-canonisation of the Red Classics.

Researchers have also shown increasing interest in *Yangbanxi*, the dramatic form of modern revolutionary works that comprises the “eight great Model Plays” produced during the Cultural Revolution period. From the death of Mao and the restoration to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1976 until the mid 1990s, *Yangbanxi* received little scholarly attention for two reasons: Firstly, it had been regarded as a literary form synonymous with pure propaganda and, thus, unworthy of academic inquiry; secondly, the model plays reminded many of political persecutions and violence of the Cultural Revolution. From the mid 1990s, the scholarship has started to recognise the value of particular aspects of the model theatre and its contribution to a national theatre. The research extended from interpretations of *Yangbanxi* as a mere reflection of politics, to include the exploration of the creative intentions, audience research, artistic analysis, themes, linguistic style, characters, and narrative mode of the genre (S. Li, 2007).

Banking on the popularity of the Red Classics, adaptations of this genre on television have flourished since the early 2000s. These adaptations dynamically reshaped the narratives, normally by blunting the political edge of the original texts and giving them a populist appeal. The more populist dramatic form, however, is highly controversial, attracting serious official censorship, heated discussions among the general public, as well as academic and popular critiques. Responses from academic circles were mainly published in the June 2004 issue of *Contemporary Cinema* and the November 2004 issue of *Chinese Television*. The critical concerns outline several areas for further research: First of all, critical efforts have been devoted to explicate the nature of the Red Classics. This includes the study of the nomenclature of the term Red Classics, the range of works this category includes, the main features that characterise this genre, and its ideological and aesthetic value. Secondly, the phenomenon has spawned research on

the production of the Red Classics by unravelling the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood.

Most scholars believe TV's refashioning of the past can be explained by commercialisation. The television's compulsion to produce more and more is driven by ratings. Critics largely view these adaptations sceptically. The prevalence of consumerism means that the Red Classics, created to answer the political needs of the 1950s and 1960s, could now be tapped as a national cultural heritage to establish a new fashion to be exploited commercially and to generate new significations. The production of the Red Classics en masse is thus a conscious act on the part of the market to cash in on the audience's nostalgia for a collective cultural memory. Situating the production of the Red Classics against the process of globalisation, Liu Kang (2003) maintains that the production of the Red Classics is an act to reconstruct a national cultural heritage and tap it as a cultural market in the age of globalisation. Liu argues that just as the Red Classics served the political needs of the socialist era, they now must serve the dual master of the state and the market. On the one hand, the nostalgic feelings of the generation that grew up with the Red Classics provide the opportunity for the commercial producers to create a new fashion; on the other hand, the Red Classics genre remains an important cultural heritage and symbol for the country in transition to a modern nation. The state, in seeking and revalidating a new set of ideological and value systems, would undoubtedly exploit these resources. Liu's discussion on the dynamism between the two regulating systems is also echoed by Xiong (2004) in his analysis of the initial production, TV adaptation and criticism of the Red Classics. However, besides the market and the state, Xiong also draws our attention to the role of literary criticism, identifying it as the third regulating system.

While the above discussion provides us with a sketchy picture of the operating forces behind the production of the Red Classics, a case study by Fang (2004) lays bare how these forces work in reality by analysing the rewriting and subsequent re-reading of one canonical revolutionary piece, *Shajiabang*, at different stages in modern Chinese history. Fang traces the three large-scale rewritings of the story from a simple local opera about the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) in 1958, to its reification as one of the eight revolutionary model operas after Mao approved it in 1964, to the rampant use of

its signs and symbols to drum up local tourism in the 1990s, and finally to a more recent literary rewriting in “vulgar taste.” The novelette published in 2003 generated huge controversy about the canonical status of the Red Classics, standards of social usefulness, and public morality. Fang suggests that each rewriting was invariably made possible by the cultural and historical context and that behind the “coronation” of ideology in the 1960s and its de-coronation in the 1990s lies the rules of power and control.

Limitations of existing approaches

Criticism like this goes beyond using simple “nostalgia” to explore the complicated relationship between historical memory and commercial culture and between the texts of popular culture and their contexts of creation and reception. While this stress on the political, social, and institutional process of TV production and reception is of great value, three issues merit critical attention.

First of all, these studies tend to focus on the production and representation of the Red Classics. Although each approach has established itself as a legitimate way of analysing the process it has pinpointed as its target, it is “quite evidently inadequate, even ‘ideological,’ as an account of the whole” (Johnson, 1987, p. 73). The cultural studies approach thus call for a theoretical framework that encompasses five moments: production, representation, consumption, identity and regulation. These moments form a circuit of culture, “through which analysis of a cultural text or artefact must pass if it is to be adequately studied” (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997, p. 4). In view of this critical framework, there is a need to establish a link between the research on the text and the cultural economy and identity formation.

The TV adaptation of Red Classics is caught up in China’s transition from socialism to neoliberalism. To fully explicate the tensions and complexities in the adaptation, one needs to examine a range of issues, including representational strategies, thematic devices, state control, funding, ownership, censorship, regulation and institutional restructuring, and post-Mao identity. Most importantly, these different dimensions are interconnected in dynamic and non-linear ways. A full investigation of the phenomenon calls for a more systematic analysis of the whole process of cultural production and

consumption, including the moments of regulation, consumption and identity formation and, in particular, how these discrete moments feed into each other.

Secondly, little of the available research on the Red Classics was done within the specific context of television drama (Zhong, 2010). The discussion of the transformation of the Red Classics genre, however, would be less meaningful if not embedded in the transformation of the TV industry. Television has acquired hegemony over other media technologies since the 1980s as the main provider of entertainment in China. This rise in status, as I demonstrate later, has been partly aided by the Party-state. As a consequence, the position of TV in relation to the state and the public is an ambivalent one. TV played a significant role in repackaging and promoting sanctioned official culture along the lines determined by the Party. In order to survive, the TV industry has fed off official funding sources and organisational structures. But it also constantly adjusts to meet the increasingly sophisticated needs of the consumers. The rewriting of a revolutionary genre like the Red Classics is naturally deeply implicated in the transformation of the TV industry itself.

Since the first commercial advertising was broadcast on Shanghai Television in 1979, the financing and sponsorships of China's television has gradually shifted from total state subsidy to market demands, chiefly through advertising. Advertising accounts for more than 90 percent of the revenues for most provincial and local TV stations (Lu, 2002). This means the audience can no longer be treated as a large, undifferentiated, passive mass of socialist subjects, but critical consumers from diverse demographic backgrounds. The shift from ideology to ratings has set off spiralling competition among TV stations to win over as many viewers as possible. New program-delivery systems, such as cable and satellite, and the proliferation of channels help to intensify the war to win ratings. Under these new conditions, the earlier organisational structures and programming strategies were seen as increasingly inadequate and in need of a shakeup.

In addition, there is also a lack of discussion about how TV drama, as a special mode of story-telling, interacts with the stories themselves to produce certain subjectivities. For example, few scholars have explored how TV drama's episodic nature, which enables it

to enmesh with everyday living, necessitates a different relationship between the Red Classics TV adaptations and the audiences. Compared with the novel, cinema and *Yangbanxi*, adapting the Red Classics to TV drama format has implications for the mode of production, consumption, and circulation. Therefore, there is a need to understand the TV adaptations as not only content evolution, but also format conversion.

Thirdly, so far little has been said on why and how audiences watch these TV dramas. Film critic Zhang Yingjin identified audience research as one of the “neglected and underdeveloped” (Y. Zhang, 2007) areas in Chinese film studies. He speculates that three reasons might account for this reluctance to conduct audience research: first, unfamiliarity with the academic field of audience research; second, the overelaborate procedure and unpredictable nature of the methodology used in audience research, which often involves fieldwork and archival study; third, the ideological concern that audience research serves industry or the state. Perhaps for similar reasons, audience research for Chinese TV remains scarce, with a few exceptions (J. Guo, 2008; Sun, 2002, 2009).

As Zhao Yuezhi (2009, p. 185) has rightly pointed out, the scholars of Chinese media and communication have largely neglected the issue of the agency and subjectivity of Chinese workers and farmers, the main target audience of the Red Classics genre, either in the original form or as TV adaptations. More specifically on the reception of Red Classics TV adaptations, both textual analysis on the preferred meaning of these TV productions and discussions on the context of creation and reception seem to assume a monolithic “silent majority” who sit on the couch and consume whatever is offered. Zhao Yong (2005) has provided a useful analysis of the role of the audience in the reception of such adaptations. Relying on Althusser’s theory on interpellation, Zhao has argued that viewers’ negative responses to the adaptations are in fact genuine. He contends that the Red Classics were created and popularised under very special circumstances when such cultural works functioned as part of a powerful state ideological apparatus. He believes that it was virtually impossible for “negotiated” or “oppositional readings” of cultural products (Hall, 1999) in that highly political atmosphere. Viewers were forced to adopt the dominant-hegemonic position of the creators. Over time they internalised the feelings and ideologies encoded in these works.

In other words, the individuals were “hailed” into a subject position by the state. Zhao’s analysis of audience’s response is based on viewers’ letters to newspaper editors. Despite the fact that it is convincing research, the audience’s responses in Zhao’s article are highly selective. Detailed interviews with a full range of viewers would yield more meaningful insights into the complexity of the viewing process and its relation to audience identity.

Furthermore, the term “audience” needs unpacking. In outlining new dimensions and directions in Chinese media studies, Zhao Yuezhi (2009b) has raised issue with the term. Zhao argues that as the media industry’s own creation, the term implies that viewers are taken as a homogenised group with similar interests and expectations. It is thus rendered ineffectual as an analytical category in contemporary Chinese society, where deep class divisions have emerged recently, particularly the divisions between the urban upper middle class and the rural and urban poor. In Zhao’s own words:

The use of “audience” or “the public” as a privileged and undifferentiated analytical and existential category vis-à-vis the state can potentially serve to mystify the media’s role in the construction of social classes, gender, ethnicity and other categories of difference, and conceal the role of the media and processes of communication in mediating social relations (2009b, p. 184).

In his ethnographic study of TV viewing in a remote ethnic minority area, Guo Jianbin (2008) has also raised issue with the all-inclusive use of the term “audience.” He suggests that the concept of an audience only makes sense within a model of communication as a process of linear transmission. He thus proposes the idea of “locatedness,” which not only takes into account the agency of the viewers, but also locates the viewing practice within a broader the social context.

In developing a methodological approach to Chinese popular cultural studies, Jing Wang advocates combining policy studies with cultural studies and points out that audience studies remain “vulnerable spots of policy-oriented cultural studies”:

Given how much influence the state and global market exerted in tandem on Chinese consumer and popular culture, too often we dwell on the issue of power, drawing a premature equation between the “people”—who are agents with multiple and conflicting subject positions—and the faceless “masses” who are said to be doomed to subjugate to ideological domination of national and/or international power blocs. But whether we define the “people” as agents or dupes, we have to address the complex nature of the “peoples” (and our own) complicity with popular cultural forms. Thus, within the theoretical framework of the popular and its relationship to ideology, the question of pleasure is critical. This is a problem unfortunately given little room in policy studies that emphasize the omnipresence and power of the state over the individual agent of desire (J. Wang, 2001b, p. 49).

Echoing Wang’s view, Liu Kang (2004) criticised the current scholarship on popular cultural studies as dominantly focusing on urban youth, thereby neglecting an important part of the cultural market and audience. The revolutionary mass culture, such as Red Classics, represents efforts to search for a native and vernacular cultural and aesthetic form. To this date, revolutionary mass culture is still highly relevant to the rural population and middle-aged or older lower-class urban residents. The neglected age and class factors form a blind spot in scholarly enquiry, which reflects the ideological nature of popular cultural research.

The above discussion not only calls for bringing the diverse complexity of the audience into the research equation, but also necessitates a more nuanced and holistic approach that recognises the complexity and contradictory nature of post-Mao subjectivity and breaks down the faceless audience into different groupings. Subjectivity here is understood as a form of normality defined and regulated through discourse. This attention to subjectivity is crucial in understanding the Red Classics, which carry the mandate of representing an ideal socialist subject for the citizens to identify with and emulate. This raises the following questions that need to be addressed: What types of subjectivities are foregrounded in the original Red Classics texts? In what way have these subjectivities been changed in the TV adaptation? For what reasons? How do people negotiate and appropriate these subjectivities in relation to the subjectivities

constructed in different periods and in different social milieu? Current scholarship tends to focus on the construction of subjectivity in the original text, but how this changes in the TV adaptations is barely traced, and the viewers' usage of the media texts and the constant relational interplay between the representation and identity remains unexplored.

The circuit of culture

To overcome the division between the three models of cultural studies research—production-based studies, text-based studies, and studies of lived culture—this thesis adopts a cultural and critical media studies perspective to grasp the process of transforming the Red Classics by examining issues of production, representation, regulation, consumption, and identity within the TV adaptations. More importantly, it seeks to explicate how these five “moments” articulate, or how the outcome of each process is contingent on other processes. The analytical framework I adopt here, which is described as the “circuit of culture,” has its roots in Marx’s circuit of capitalism, but represents an attempt to embrace both the Frankfurt school’s attempt to ground cultural practices in their material and historical contexts and the discursive, postmodern tradition of looking at actual practices in a particular situation at a particular time (Grossberg, 1996). The latter strand of critiques, largely following the British cultural studies tradition, seeks to analyse the ruling social and cultural forces of domination. In contrast to the macro-approach adopted by the critical-cultural analysts, the British school followers have a micro-level focus, concentrating on TV practices in a particular situation and treating TV products as materials for pleasure through which individuals construct their identities. Viewers are granted more agency and are deemed as able to appropriate and resist the prescribed message. While this approach has the advantage of remedying the production-determinist view of the Frankfurt school, it was later criticised as being too optimistic, in that it overlooks the relative power relationship between the producers and consumers. It is thus “excessively populist and voluntarist” (du Gay, 1997).

In response to critiques of both approaches, Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists proposed the circuit of culture as a more holistic analytical framework. The circuit of culture consists of five “processes”—representation, identity, production, consumption,

and regulation—through which culture gets its meaning. Although the circuit is artificially divided into separate processes, in reality they are interconnected or “articulated.” According to Hall (Grossberg, 1986), each of the five processes can lead to varied outcomes, subject to the contingencies of the circumstances. There is no predetermined ending for the process, nor is any link necessary and indispensable (du Gay et al., 1997). Using this model to analyse any cultural artifact or text thus entails moving away from the determinism of critical-cultural critique by taking into account situational factors, but also enabling these artifacts to be examined in a broader social, cultural, and political context. Not any one single process can fully explain the meanings of the artefacts or texts; meaning is understood only through the complex articulation of processes. Although the five processes are interconnected in an on-going process, it is useful to look into each moment separately in order to determine what each process involves.

Following the model of the “circuit of culture,” the thesis attempts to analyse the Red Classics TV adaptations as a commodity, cultural artifact, and social practice. It studies the symbolic system of the TV adaptations, including the visual images TV employs to represent heroes or enemies. TV professionals create these representations so that viewers can identify with them. Identity is therefore closely linked with representation. The process of producing these TV drama adaptations, however, is subject to conditions of production in post-Mao China. Representation and identity are linked with the circulation of capital, media as an institutional practice, and political and social relations. Some of these conditions are unique to Chinese society. The cultural forms, production, and consumption processes are also subject to regulatory systems, which may come in the form of censorship, funding, or dominant discourse.

In adopting a holistic analytical framework that incorporates production, meaning, and consumption, this study also follows another thematic organisation. It seeks to analyse the construction of identity through representations along the lines of class, gender, and place. Since the mid 20th century, class, gender, and race have constituted the three most significant categories of social analysis in cultural studies, especially in feminist and post-colonial works. They function as the main categories through which people's identities are defined and as important markers of social differences.

Although these organising categories are neither objective nor exhaustive, they represent one possible and useful means to explore the transformation of Chinese society as manifested in the production and consumption of the Red Classics. However, these three categories must be applied by taking into account the historical and socio-economic specificity of China. For a start, race has a different meaning in China when compared with the western context. Institutionalisation of the household registration system (*hukou*) since the 1950s has resulted in a spatial hierarchy that puts urban residents in a much more advantageous position compared with their rural counterparts. This has led scholars to argue that the *hukou*-based discrimination against rural residents is similar to a process of racialisation (Han, 2010). With the downplay of class as a viable symbol for expressing identity in the official discourse, and as the public have become more mobile and diverse, place has taken on an even more salient role for identity formation and subjectivity (Zukin, as cited in Oaks and Schein, 2006).

Class and gender constitute important forms of marking out personal identity in the reform era. Scholars from different fields have pointed out the contradictory practices of the Chinese state, which claims its adherence to the socialist legacy, on the one hand, while embracing capitalist development paradigms on the other (Dirlik, 2005; Sun & Zhao, 2009; J. Wang, 2001b; Zhao, 2008b). This contradictory way (Dirlik & Zhang, 2000) of governance poses challenges to the principle of egalitarianism, the major socialist legacy. These challenges mainly revolve around the issues of class, ethnicity, locality, citizenship, and gender equality (Lin, 2006). This thesis traces how these social changes are producing new identities as well as transforming the old ones, as manifested in the TV version of the Red Classics. It aims to trace how the earlier, socialist subjectivities sewn in the original narratives of the Red Classics have been superseded by the new subjectivities commensurate with market systems in the TV adaptations. The new representations are not only subject to capitalist production imperatives, but are also structured by the “existing rules of language and discourse,” which are produced by capitalist and other social relations, the most representative examples are the class and gender-based struggles and their effects on different social symbols and signs (Johnson, 1987, p. 55). The viewers then decode the text and appropriate these images to form their own identity. Both the producers and viewers are

socially situated. When the viewers experience their subjectivity, they are subject to discourses that construct meanings in a social context. So, through an inter-discursive model of relations, the production of the text, the subjectivity embedded in the TV narratives, and the situated social viewers who decode the texts are seen as interconnected and contingent on each other (Johnson, 1987).

Class, gender and place are not mechanically dissected categories. They exist in interrelated and complex relationships with each other. In her conceptualisation of social changes in the UK, Doreen Massey (1994) has made explicit the intricate interconnection between class, space/place, and gender. Class and class consciousness had been at the centre of Chinese revolutionary discourse. Class forms the basis of one's subjectivity in Maoist society, and class struggle through mass movement is the central theme of the Red Classics. Women's emancipation was a major part of the agenda of the revolution. Even though women's causes constantly ran the risk of being subsumed in a general "class" discourse, as many western scholars have argued, in reality it could not be achieved in isolation (Lin, 2006). When reform started in the late 1970s, a new set of economic and social relations were formed. The old class and class-consciousness discourses were purposely abandoned. The state encouraged neoliberal ideas such as individualism, entrepreneurship and self-improvement (Breslin, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006; Zhao, 2008b). Old identities based on class divisions had to be reconstructed. The dismantling of the class hierarchy disrupted the gender relations formed during the socialist era. For example, during the socialist era, factory workers or manual labourers as the leading class were endowed with the attributes of masculinity and virility. A female hero in the original Red Classics is often shown, first of all, as a good worker who is competitive in the workplace's manual trade. The form of labour organisation imposed by the market has seen manual labourers relegated to the unskilled, bottom echelon of the social ladder. This has engendered a feminisation of the workers and manual labourers and given rise to a new masculinity characterised by neoliberal individualism, personal charisma and entrepreneurship. Capitalism produces a new kind of femininity with which TV producers must contend in representing the revolutionary era.

Social relations invariably extend into space. Spatial relationships have undergone sea changes from the socialist revolutionary period to the current neoliberal free market era. State planning and the need for scale was emphasised in the first period, while the need for deregulation and privatisation is called for in the latter. While both approaches are undergirded by a national modernisation project, each calls for a different spatial makeup of the country. The examples include the heavy industry based areas produced under the regional policy during the Mao era and the special economic zones created under Deng's economic reform policy. Each period has produced its own geographic inequality with its reorganisation of national political and economic space. As Massey (1994, p. 22) rightly argues, the economic functions of regions and spatial division of labour are class relations "stretching out" over space. The decline in status of the old working class in the rust belt of northeast China is a direct result of the policy shift from heavy industries to service industries. An investigation of place-making strategies in a revolutionary base area such as Linyi must pay attention to the crucial issue of class. In the reform era, the position of the poor, agrarian population has been shifted from the centre to the margin in the symbolic order of society and the government's push for economic expansion. Furthermore, gender also plays a role in the geographic constructions of space and place. Local authorities in Linyi, for example, coded the support for revolution in the area as female, or maternal, in an attempt to break the symbolic association of the place with poverty and backwardness, which incites revolution in the first place. The above discussion indicates that each aspect of the Red Classics is necessarily related to, and intersects with, all other aspects.

Research framework and organisation

The TV adaptation of the Red Classics is a prism through which to view social transformation in the reform era of modern China. The past three decades have seen the application of neoliberal governance technologies to a once highly politicised and ideologically controlled society. In the face of the changing social conditions, cultural boundaries are actively constructed and reconstructed. This shifting boundary is especially salient in the production and consumption of revolutionary culture, such as the Red Classics. The thesis thus seeks answers to the following questions: How do techniques of the market help to recast the defining elements of Chinese socialist ideology, such as equality across class, gender, and region? How do the Chinese public,

politicised and educated by the revolutionary culture, negotiate the shifting demands of the nation?

Research undertaken for this thesis seeks to explore the poetics and politics of the re-invention of the Red Classics on television. It examines how socialist pedagogical tools have been transformed into a hybrid as a result of the Party's contradictory approach to its revolutionary heritage. On the one hand, the country has been undergoing an ideological depoliticising process in which the revolutionary century has been negated and old political subjectivities such as party, class, and nation have been superseded by the new hegemony that promotes modernisation, globalization, and the market (H. Wang, 2006). On the other hand, revolutionary history has to be recognised rhetorically and propagated for legitimisation of the Communist Party. Specifically, the research will look at how these transformations have taken place along the line of class, gender, and locality.⁷ The factors that drive the transformation are not only cultural, but also political and economical. The poetics of this change is thus embedded in the investigation of the political, economic, cultural, and technological context of the production of the original texts, as well as the TV adaptations of the Red Classics genre. An inseparable aim of this thesis is to bring consumption and identity into the study of the Red Classics. This thesis will explore the ways in which the consumption of the Red Classics helps to define social identities in post-socialist China. Most importantly, this study seeks to unravel the relationship between the production, representation, and consumption of Red Classics as an integrated social process.

This research draws from the body of works available on the changes in the television industry in relation to the multiple mechanics and practices that facilitate TV production and distribution (Sun & Zhao, 2009; Zhao, 1998, 2008a; Zhao & Guo, 2005), in particular the growing body of literature in the field of television drama (Bai, 2008; Sun & Zhao, 2009; Yin, 2005; Zhu, Keane, & Bai, 2008). In one way or another, this scholarship presents a multi-faceted picture of “a tightly integrated market authoritarian communication order” (Zhao, 2010b, p. 544). Under this order, television must serve as

⁷ Gradually reducing the distinction between classes, regions, and genders had been a top priority in the Party's rhetoric of egalitarianism. It is in these areas that inequalities and disparities have become more pronounced as neoliberalism prevails.

a pedagogical tool for the Party as well as provide popular entertainment for the market. This poses an especially difficult task for re-presenting revolutionary-themed subjects such as the Red Classics.

To understand the environment in which TV operates, this research is deeply indebted to the literature that explicates the contradictory nature of the policies and practices that China's reform is premised upon. The contexts of production and consumption must be integrated with the study of content, which traces the transformation of the representations from the original text to the TV drama serials, in particular with regard to theme, characterisation, and narrative strategy. My research benefits from the available research on the original Red Classics (X. Cai, 2010; S. Chen, 2002; Cheng, 2005; J. Dai, 1995; W. B. Fang, 2004; Z. Huang, 1996; Y. Li, 2003; Roberts, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Tang, 2007) as well as the literature on the TV adaptations (K. Liu, 2003; Tao, 2008b, 2008c; Z. Zhang, 2005). Comparisons of representational practices related to heroes, villains, and female revolutionaries in different historical moments are drawn on to discuss changes in the broader social environment.

Geremie Barmé's *In the Red* (1999) offers an extensive and insightful analysis of the populist, commercial, and official appropriation of the revolutionary legacy. Challenging the Western liberal view of the dichotomy between market and official discourses, Barmé's project has revealed the porous boundary between revolutionary culture and the commercial and unofficial culture. This thesis shares his concern about the transgression of cultural boundaries marking the high and low, the official and unofficial, yet extends his line of inquiry in a number of ways. First of all, this project takes Barmé's study into the 2000s. Barmé's work surveys the cultural landscape in the 1990s, when commercialisation was at its height. The Red Classics adaptation craze was in full swing in the early 2000s. By this time, the Hu-Wen government had already started to implement measures to contain the negative consequences of unbridled developmentalism. This has impacted the way the genre has been reworked more recently. Secondly, while Barmé's interest mainly resides in examining the hybridity in forms, styles, and representations across such fields as literature, film and the fine arts, this research chooses to zoom into the TV adaptation of the Red Classics. Furthermore, my project links the transgression and negotiations of cultural boundaries to

transformations of subjectivity, which are more acutely manifested along the lines of class, gender, and place. Therefore, the research not only traces the transgression of boundaries at the symbolic level, but also brings identity formation into the equation.

Overall, the thesis sees the adaptation of the Red Classics “as a complex process of cultural, industrial, economic, aesthetic, and individual encounters” (Newcomb, 2000, p. 13). The meaning making process—including production, consumption, regulation, representation and identification—is seen as interconnected to form a “circuit,” and any change at one moment has an impact on the others. Thus, this thesis is not a sociological account of a cultural phenomenon, but an examination of how these “moments” are articulated together in issues significant to contemporary Chinese subjectivity. As such, this thesis responds to the call to action by du Gay (du Gay et al., 1997), Johnson (1986), and other cultural studies scholars to analyse meaning making in a holistic way. As a deliberate choice to establish the links between different “moments,” the chapters do not separately deal with each of the moments, but seek to explicate where the connections between them occur through case studies of key TV adaptations.

Methods

To carry out the proposed research on the Red Classics, four types of investigations have been conducted:

First of all, acquisition of background information on the production and distributions of the Red Classics genre, including data on the financiers, TV production company structures, producers and censors, scriptwriters, directors, studios, festivals and awards, advertising and publicity and trade press.

Secondly, interviews with directors, producers and advertisers for four seminal *Red Classics* works, mainly sourced from journals, newspapers, magazines and internet. Amid the limited extant research on TV drama and *Red Classics* genre, the approach is mainly from the perspective of the power of media to impose economic, ideological and cultural control at the level of production. This research project, however, approaches the issue through the concept of “hegemony,” which means that meaning is always negotiated and contested in order to establish a preferred reading. This approach thus departs from the position of total political-economy domination by bringing into the

picture the “culture of production” (du Gay, 1997). TV drama production is seen as part of the result of the individual or organisation’s professional, aesthetic, commercial and pragmatic choice. It will look at the chain of decisions made at each important stage of production and distribution activities involving choosing the topic, writing the script, choosing actors, deciding on publicity strategies etc.

Thirdly, critical analysis – This part involves a critical reading and analysis of four main drama serials of *Red Classics*. Critical analysis mapped out how the adaptations shifted in any significant way from the genre to which they originally belonged and how changes in the content and style of *Red Classics* suggest about the struggles and changing definitions of “hero,” “enemy,” “femininity,” etc. The close reading also shed light on the ways by which new subjectivities are prescribed in the adaptations.

Finally, focus-group discussion and in-depth interviews of viewers

This project involved in-depth interviews with viewers in Perth, Australia, Beijing and Linyi. Linyi is a place that is both deeply embedded in revolutionary culture and market economy. How the locals view the profound transformation in public representation of revolutionary culture/stories is then highly symbolic and telling of the formation of collective and individual subjectivities in China. I conducted three focus group discussions in Linyin, roughly two hours each and then follow-up in-depth interviews with about 30 viewers. Seventy-one questionnaires were also collected through local contacts in Linyin. The interviewees are solicited through my contacts in Linyin and care was taken in ensuring the diversity of the respondent in terms of their age, gender, education and occupation. The interviews and group discussions were semi-structured and recorded. Interviews and discussions focused on the following questions: What is the interviewee’s life-time experience? What is their previous experience with various versions of the *Red Classics*? How do they view the contested representations of hero, enemy, love and relationships? How do these stories form a reservoir of meanings which the viewers can draw upon to tell stories about and thereby define themselves? This part of fieldwork aims at exploring how the audience decode the representations of women, hero and enemy in the *Red Classics* adaptations and how they appropriate these representations in constructing their own identity.

As mentioned above, Research on how Red Classics adaptations are consumed in post-Mao China have remained sporadic. This part of ethnographic research thus fills in the gap by providing rich data on how the revolutionary legacy is taken up by post-Socialist subjects in China and move the discussions on audience beyond the level of an educated guess at many times. It provides a more direct point of entry for dissecting contemporary Chinese identity, while bringing the issue of agency and pleasure are factored into the analysis. Consequently, the reception process is seen as more nuanced and complex than the “dupe” or “powerful resister” dichotomy.

The different types of research described above largely follow the five moments in the “circuit of culture.” The division, however, is for the purpose of singling out each separate moment for close examination. In the actual practices, these five moments “continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways” (du Gay et al., 1997, p4). The three types of research: production-based studies, text-based studies, and studies of lived culture, are linked together by the internal connections between them. The research on the background information demonstrates how the cultural product *Red Classics* is inextricably bound up with economic process of production, marketing and circulation and political regulations. This provides an empirical base and establishes a context within which the genre can be further scrutinised. The in-depth interviews with the TV producers, advertisers, publishers and other cultural intermediaries provide insights into how strategies and decisions are made to reach the targeted audience as well industrial and political demand of the state. Their decisions and strategies are confined by the political and economic forces and cultural assumptions described in the background information, but nevertheless, are contingent on their own human agency and experience. The second type of research is thus based on the first type of research, but constitutes an important complementary to the first type. Representations never exist outside of discourse. The reappearance of *Red Classics* would not be adequately explained with just the discussion of the general production environment for official and popular culture. The images and subject positions of *Red Classics* are important materials for the individual’s construction of their identities in contemporary China. On the other hand, the genre itself has to be delineated in terms of their viewers and individuals and public all play a role in defining how the *Red Classics* we see on TV comes to be there. The focus group discussion and in-depth interviews thus not only

explain how the representations work at individual and group level but also help to find out how the consumption of *Red Classics* feeds back into the production of the genre and affects the representation.

Thesis organisation

This thesis follows two sets of organising principles: Thematically, the main goal of the three analytical chapters is to examine, through representation, the construction of subjectivity along the lines of class (Chapter 4), gender (Chapter 5), and place (Chapter 6). While each chapter is concerned with one theme, it also aims to illuminate how these three subjectivities interconnect. Applying the methodology of the “circuit of culture,” each chapter was assigned a specific analytical task—media production in Chapter 4, regulation (political intervention) in Chapter 5, and consumption in Chapter 6. These analytical tasks aim to shed light on not only one single meaning-making process in the “circuit of culture,” but also on how each moment articulates with other moments/processes.

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundation of the thesis. In this chapter, I argue that the canonisation and subsequent uncrowning of the Red Classics is metonymic of the change in cultural boundaries in different historical periods. The process of remaking the Red Classics in the form of TV dramas embodies the tension between official culture and popular culture, due to the contradictory practices of the CCP in the reform era. On the one hand, the Party has been practising neoliberal governance and has fully integrated into global capitalism since China’s accession to the WTO in 2001. On the other hand, the Party still resorts to socialist rhetoric for its legitimacy to rule, as the nation was built on socialist revolution. This poses challenges for the ideological state apparatus, such as the Party propaganda departments at various levels, as well as the media, which have to come up with innovative ways to apply neoliberal strategies of market rationalisation, while simultaneously continuing to proclaim their commitment to China’s socialist legacies (Zhao, 2008a, 2008b). Others have demonstrated how television successfully appropriates socialist communication styles and ethos to translate neoliberalism into an effective moral economy and to facilitate neoliberal subject-making (Sun 2009; Zhao 2008a, 2008b). Employing Bakhtin’s (1984) theory of how popular imagery reorders official culture and hierarchy, Chapter 1 looks at how

rituals and symbols of popular and folk culture are applied to transgress the boundary of a “buttoned-up” official genre while submitting it to the new order of consumerism.

In Chapter 2, I give a sweeping overview of the phenomenon of hybridising the Red Classics through four different case studies. This chapter argues that as a result of both political and commercial pressures, the latest appropriation of the Red Classics is a compromised version that challenges a clear dichotomy between the official and the popular. It thus provides an overall background to the study of the TV adaptations. The four cases juxtapose how the revolutionary legacy is appropriated in three domains: the official, the popular realm of the Internet, and the avant-garde art circle. In each case, I attempt to show the contradiction and ambivalence manifested in the intention, the representations, and the production of the hybridised revolutionary legacy.

Chapter 3 focuses on the TV industry and TV drama as a cultural form. It outlines the economic and political transitions that led to some relaxation and commercialisation in the media sphere, particularly the television industry. This chapter aims to explicate the complex nature of the forces that drive change in the TV industry. On the one hand, the development and transformation of the industry are still controlled, regulated, and managed by the state; on the other, the industry is coming under the increasing sway of the market and rising consumerism. These two forces, however, should not be seen as simply oppositional. They accommodate each other, co-opt each other, and form new coalitions. The production and consumption of TV drama, the most popular TV genre, is also subject to the same dynamics. Chapter 3 argues that the dual role of TV and TV drama dictates that the recent TV adaptations of the Red Classics have to negotiate the tension between their own innovative thrust, global capitalism, and state control.

In Chapter 4, I look at a key controversial issue in the TV adaptation of the Red Classics—the representational politics of heroes and villains. Heroes and villains used to be portrayed as ideological opposites in terms of class struggle. With the deliberate suppression of class discourse in the neoliberal governance of the reform era, the black-and-white portrayal of heroes and villains could not find a niche in the market. TV adaptations of the Red Classics thus resort to vernacular and commercial cultures in their refashioning of heroes and villains to appeal to the increasingly sophisticated

audiences. In the TV adaptations, the hero is no longer invincible or perfect because of his or her “proletariat” pedigree, but a self-made individual who earns respect through wisdom, unyielding spirit, and charisma. No longer a saintly figure, he/she invariably comes with a package of human failings. On the other hand, the enemies are also thoroughly remoulded to take on a more humane face. The confrontation of the hero and the enemy has shifted away from the focus on justice and ideology to individual competence and integrity. The recasting of the boundary between the good and the bad thus serves as an example of discursive transition from the ideological to the technocratic and managerial.

Chapter 5 deals with gender and femininity, another key area in which the CCP took pride in effecting positive changes in the socialist era. The chapter investigates the contradictions and tensions surrounding the encoding and decoding femininity in two seminal television adaptations, *Shajiang* and *The Red Detachment of Women*. It argues that the boundaries separating revolutionary women and femininity created in the Mao era have been significantly redrawn according to diverse political, economic, and cultural interests. This chapter stresses the dynamics between the key players involved in the production and reception of the TV adaptations—the TV network, the production company and production team, the television audience, the press, and various interest and pressure groups. This interplay of power produces a depoliticised neoliberal subjectivity for female revolutionary heroes—feminine, capable, entrepreneurial, independent, and sexual, yet within certain moral boundaries.

Chapter 6 uses Linyi, an old revolutionary base during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) and Civil War (1945-1949), as an example to illuminate how consumption of the Red Classics is closely linked with the identity of local people and how locality plays a role in the production and consumption of the Red Classics. The chapter is concerned with unravelling how revolutionary culture continues to be an important resource for local identity production, and how, as the Party’s authority and legitimacy become less self-evident, new strategies have been adopted to make the legacy more accessible to the public. Simultaneously, it also looks at how this discourse articulates with individuals’ desire in negotiating their self-identity. It argues that the local government invokes ideas such as local traits (*minfeng*), locality (*diyuxing*), and human nature

(*renxing*) to better enmesh official history with local memory as a discursive strategy for charting and understanding the revolutionary history that used to be narrated as a black-and-white ideological confrontation. The chapter sheds light on the intricate relationship and messy boundary between official culture and popular narrative. The reinvention of local identity and memory has everything to do with the local economy. The politics of inequality in place and space is played out around the binaries of rural-urban and inland-costal. As a revolutionary heartland, Linyi needs to overcome its spatial disadvantage in this new configuration of place production. The branding of the place as entrepreneurial, trustworthy, and humane represents the efforts to integrate Linyi into the global market. This discourse opens new subject positions that locals readily take on. This chapter also includes a part on Linyi locals' consumption of the Red Classics.

Interpreting the past for the future

This study represents the first large-scale systematic examination of the Red Classics TV adaptations by integrating several important processes—production, representation, consumption, identity formation, and regulation. In doing so, the project contributes to an emerging body of literature, which explores the important relationship between cultural productions, the formation of new social identities, and historical transformation in general. The Red Classics in their various forms span the socialist and post-socialist eras, and as such are both metaphoric and metonymic of social change in China in the era of reform. The research on the Red Classics adaptation phenomenon provides important empirical evidence to unravel the complex and intricate relationship between state power, consumerism, and cultural production.

In his seminal work *The Analysis of Culture*, Raymond Williams (1971) has distinguished three levels of culture: the lived culture, the recorded culture, and the culture of the selective tradition. The recorded culture is one that survives in its records while the selective process is one that absorbs the records into a selective tradition. By this definition, the Red Classics could be regarded as a body of works that serves as the record for the high socialist period. The TV adaptations, which connect the lived culture of today and the recorded culture of the socialist era, constitute the selective tradition. Williams further argued that the selective tradition “will be governed by many kinds of

special interest, including class interest” (1971, p. 67) and that it will not only be a result of selection, but interpretation made for our own purposes.

Williams’ argument is of particular relevance to my discussion of the transformation of the Red Classics. TV’s take on the original revolutionary texts must undergo the process of secularising the revolutionary in order to appeal to popular sentiment (Cai 2010). This is nearly the opposite of the reifying process of revolutionary culture during the socialist era. To demystify the hero, to glamourise revolution, or to parody the sacred is a sign of modernity in post-Mao China, and the adaptations certainly must reflect the zeitgeist. According to Williams, reinterpretation, or reading the past work through contemporary experience, is inevitable. The Red Classics genre has now been integrated into the cultural industry as a cultural product. The values the genre promoted—patriotism, nationalism, and self-sacrifice—are only identified with in a fragmented way by a quasi-capitalist society. Replacing these values are individualism, entrepreneurism, self-improvement, materialism, and a post-socialist humanity that “entails not merely the demolition of those politics portrayed as hindering human nature but a positive encouragement and elaboration of people’s sexual, material, and affective self-interest in order to become cosmopolitan citizens of a post-Cold War world” (Rofel, 2007, p. 13). The embellishment, distortions and reinterpretations made in the TV adaptations of the Red Classics reflect and are governed by these historical changes and the development of the society.

Carrying out cultural analysis of the TV adaptations entails understanding and laying bare this selective process—how old boundaries are transgressed, broken, or re-drawn. The significance of analysing the TV adaptations is not to show the deviations in order to seek a “truer” interpretation of the original Red Classics, but to make TV’s interpretation process conscious and, in doing so, illuminate the contemporary values which underlie the TV adaptations, as Williams’ theorisation on cultural analysis indicated.

Chapter 1: Transgression and Symbolic Boundaries: A Theoretical Framework for Studying the Red Classics TV Adaptations

During the last three decades, China has made the transition from a socialist country to a “market economy that increasingly interdigitated integrated with authoritarian centralized control” (Harvey, 2005, p. 120). This process has been brutal and fast. The boundaries between what is correct, legitimate, and acceptable, which were set in the socialist era, have shifted and are gradually but dramatically being reworked, redefined, renegotiated, and re-managed (Harvey, 2005; Rofel, 2007; Sun, 2009; Zhao, 2008a). As an important part of the socialist legacy, the Red Classics are right at the core of this redefining of the boundaries of key social subjectivities, such as class, gender, and place. Boundaries here specifically refer to the conceptual distinctions used to separate people into groups and cultures into different realms, such as sacred and profane. Therefore, the TV adaptation of the Red Classics presents itself as a good prism through which I can explore such tensions and complexities.

To analyse the transformation of the Red Classics in post-Mao China means dealing with an underlying paradox: On the one hand, popular cultural products seek to depoliticise their content; on the other hand, the process of adapting, especially within the Chinese context, is deeply political. This paradox is grounded in the dialectic at the heart of the Chinese government’s pursuit of neoliberal politics: Neoliberalism poses a threat to China’s socialist legacy, but this legacy, in turn, sets limits for neoliberal strategies (Zhao, 2008b). The New Left scholar Wang Hui has argued that China has, as part of a global movement, been through a depoliticising process, in which the Communist Party “no longer conforms to its past political role, but becomes a component of the state apparatus” (H. Wang, 2006, p. 35). In other words, the Party has abandoned its political ideal as the representative of the proletariat class and become a bureaucratic organisation seeking its legitimacy from economic management, while keeping its internal power struggles at bay. Such a state seeks to incorporate market rationality into the “ruling technology,” while abandoning or suppressing any discussion of the ideological and political nature of marketisation and its consequences. The neoliberal rhetoric of the market as a mechanism for competition and fairness is used to mask its negative impact on class polarisation and regional inequality (Harvey, 2005).

In this situation, the foundations of subjectivity under the socialist era, such as nation, class, and Party, must be reworked (H. Wang, 2006). The adaptation of the Red Classics into TV dramas provides an interesting case to scrutinise neoliberal cultural politics in practice as it lays bare how the language of entrepreneurialism, individual freedom, and personal choice takes the place of the socialist vocabulary of class struggle and class consciousness, gender equality, and revolutionary localism. The Red Classics were a state project that provided the language of liberation to the subaltern—those of inferior ranks and station, such as the peasants, workers, and women under the feudal system—even though this language of rebellion against the ruling class was at best “homogenizing, unilinear, flattening in its inattentiveness to any categories other than those of the official class structure,” or, at its worst, “overblown, with resistance inflated to the point of heroic caricature or downright falsehood” (Hershatter, 1993, pp. 107-108). In her research on domestic workers in China, Wanning Sun (2009) proposes that understanding how the system of meaning of the socialist era was dismantled is vital in unravelling how the acceptance of inequality is instituted in China. To remake the Red Classics in the spirit and mood of neoliberalism involves a similar kind of reworking of the system of meaning.

The remaking process thus involves the negotiation, redefining, and reworking of the boundary of a canonised revolutionary genre. It is a delicate business because many vested interests are at stake. It took a long time for the nation-state to create subaltern speech, such as encouraging women to frame their oppression as a “feudal” practice, and even longer for the masses to adopt these categories to make meaning of their existence and to articulate their experience (Hershatter, 1993). This revolutionary language cannot be written off or remade directly, at least not through the official media. Furthermore, the Party-state still derives its legitimacy from the revolution it led and continuously reinvents and rearticulates its ruling doctrines (Zhao, 2008b). The position of class, gender, and locality within the revolutionary public culture needs to be replaced with a new kind of natural humanity. In seeking to understand this process, I find the theoretical work on boundaries useful. In this chapter, I will discuss the concept of boundaries and the carnivalesque and their relevance to the understanding of recent TV adaptations of the Red Classics. Here, the carnivalesque refers to the use of humour, parody, satire or chaos to subvert and liberate the assumptions of the dominant style and the serious atmosphere or authority. I take Stallybrass and White (1986)’s stance that the

carnavalesque should not be viewed as simply the liberation of official, canonical texts, but as a mode of understanding, a cultural analytic framework. The TV adaptations of the Red Classics represent not a total symbolic inversion and cultural negation of the original works, but a mere hybrid of the high and low driven by multiple forces.

The Symbolic boundaries of the Red Classics and the socialist subjectivities embodied therein

In this study, boundaries as analytical tools are explored on two fronts: First, the boundary of the Red Classics as canonical texts; secondly, within the Red Classics, the boundaries marking the subjectivities of class, gender, and place, as defined in the narratives of this body of work. The concept of boundaries has long been an important tool for social scientists. It is based on the principle of binary opposites, which cultural structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss used to decipher all cultural phenomena (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). The most fundamental binary opposition, according to Durkheim, is the division between “the sacred” and “the profane” (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). The sacred is not only religion-based, but includes all sorts of beliefs, values, symbols, and rituals that are set apart from the profane, the routine of everyday life. As such, Durkheim’s distinction is applicable to a variety of cultural components, such as language, space, and time. In their comprehensive review of the literature on boundaries, Lamont and Molnár propose a distinction between a “symbolic boundary” and a “social boundary.” Symbolic boundaries are defined as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space,” while “social boundaries” are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (2002, p. 168). In essence, they argue that symbolic boundaries are common-sense beliefs held by people to define reality. In further elaborating the nature of symbolic boundaries, Lamont and Fournier (1992) draw our attention to the fact that boundaries are arbitrary and political; they catch particular configurations of power at a given moment and result from the social distribution of advantages and obligations. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators posit that symbolic classification is the means through which class privilege is secured. Dominant groups legitimate their own culture by imposing norms underlining the distinctions between sublime and vulgar, pure and impure, and highbrow and lowbrow. This cultural practice conceals, but also ideologically underpins, the power relationships that impose a

particular set of symbolic systems as legitimate, thus constituting a kind of “symbolic violence.”

Symbolic boundaries are particularly relevant in discussing how cultural texts are canonised and de-canonised. The canonisation of classical cultural texts is determined by a complex interplay between their aesthetic value and a number of other factors, most importantly various types of power—political, economic, racial, and representational (Tong & Tao, 2007). Fokkema (2007) has pointed out that canonical texts are selected on criteria based on a specific worldview, philosophical view, and social and political practice. When the classics reflect the ruling ideology, the ruling class will not refrain from mobilising all its institutional power to ensure its hegemonic status and fiercely guard the purity of these texts. The boundaries of these classics are shaped by the social context and are therefore always subject to transformation and revision when the political-economic conditions change. Fokkema (2007) suggests a useful approach for studying classic texts is to critically examine how existing classics are revised in the social context and cultural temper of the times.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, there has been a move against canonical works such as the Red Classics. The reform process is seen allegorically as the process of setting free the human nature that was repressed by Maoist socialism (Rofel, 2007). Various intellectual movements, most notably the humanistic Marxist critique of traditional socialism, have “accelerated the ‘secularization’ of society—the development of capitalist commodification” (H. Wang, 2003, p. 154). This ideological transformation has had two consequences for the Red Classics. First, the boundary between the official canonical text and the popular, commercial text has been transgressed. Secondly, the national identities constructed in the Red Classics have become malleable and subject to new codifying processes.

Most of the Red Classics were created in a social environment in which literature and art had very limited autonomy. The revolutionary, historical works served as the grand narratives that were designed to educate and regulate society. Political power played a major role in the formation and de-formation of the Red Classics. Explicating how politics intervene in the canonisation process of the Red Classics is an important project for cultural analysis (Tong & Tao, 2007). With the mainstream official ideology and value systems in decline, the Red Classics have lost much of their authority and

pedagogical mandate. Appropriating and rewriting classics, such as the Red Classics, has become the mainstay of popular modern Chinese cultural production. The study of the TV adaptations of the Red Classics is about how the boundaries of cultural categories, such as the official and the popular, state culture and commercial culture, and the sacred and the profane, have been transgressed.

Apart from the high/low, official/popular dimension, boundary transgressions can also be explored with respect to the core subjectivities in the Red Classics. Anthropologist Lisa Rofel (2007) has provided the incisive observation that national public culture functions as the main medium for articulating both socialist and post-socialist subjectivity. The original narratives of the Red Classics set out a number of model subjectivities that a socialist citizen had to take on. These are subject to remodelling in post-socialist China, as both the state and its citizens have embraced and participated in the experimental project of neoliberalism. This project involves crafting a “universal human nature” to replace Maoist humanity, which is seen as inadequate and unnatural. The new cosmopolitan subject is constructed in opposition to the socialist ideal subject depicted and promoted in the Red Classics. The search for this new cosmopolitan subject is thus mapped vis-à-vis earlier socialist representations and the excessive passion manifested in the grand narratives. The key area of revision lies in class, gender, and place, where boundary negotiations are most complex and active and where transgressions across boundaries are sure to incur. Along this line of inquiry, this thesis traces the shifting boundaries of class (Who is classified as a “hero” or “enemy?”), gender (What makes a desirable, good woman in revolutionary terms?), and place (Where does the “revolutionary base area” sit on the new place hierarchy?). I focus on understanding the dynamics of symbolic boundaries, how boundaries are shaped by context, and how people’s identities are bound up with particular boundary distinctions. Public narratives such as television dramas are important in constructing, mediating, and shaping social and individual identities (Thornham & Purvis, 2005). The changing narratives of the Red Classics reflect the shifting meanings and values attached to key subjectivities, such as class, gender, and place. In watching these narrativised representations, viewers also confirm or question their sense of social or individual identity (Thornham & Purvis, 2005).

Rewriting the Red Classics is not a straightforward business, and at times tensions fly high. There are entrenched cultural parameters, and the acceptable way of transgressing these parameters remains quite restricted and well policed. Anthropological research on symbolic inversion and cultural negation has broadened the significance of the carnivalesque high and low inversion to include “any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political” (Babcock, 1978, p. 14). Embracing the broader perspective of the carnivalesque act of symbolic inversion, Stallybrass and White (1986) have further articulated this wider range of expressive behaviours as “transgression.” I owe much of my approach to understanding the rewriting of the Red Classics to this body of scholarship. The TV drama adaptations of the Red Classics in the spirit of consumerism provides a fertile ground for the study of boundary crossing and boundary shifting, as well as how boundaries generate differentiation or dissolve to produce new hybrid forms of categorisation. The concept of transgression thus suggests a more complex, nuanced view of the relationships between the TV drama versions and the original Red Classics, removing the celebratory tone of the carnivalesque while steering clear of the tendency to pit the market against the state.

The carnivalesque and the transgression of cultural boundaries

To talk about the TV adaptations of the Red Classics is to examine many dichotomies: “official culture versus nonofficial culture,” “canonical classics versus television adaptations,” “state versus market,” and “socialism versus capitalism,” to name a few. To discuss the dynamism between these binaries, I borrow the notion of the carnivalesque, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, as a means to explore the inversion of the conventions of official revolutionary culture in the narrative form of television drama.

Bakhtin’s pioneering work has a distinctive semiotic focus. He believes that language can be used as a model for analysing art, especially the novel (Pomorska, 1984, p. viii). In *Rabelais and His World*, he takes this interest into the realm of folk culture in European medieval times. Bakhtin’s analysis focuses on the key ideas of the novel, such as the language of the marketplace, the connection between different popular festivals and the spirit of the carnivalesque, and the significance of the body.

In carrying out a mainly semiotic examination of Rabelais's rendering of these themes, Bakhtin directs us to an important binary functioning in the Middle Ages' aesthetic world: the high and the low. The high discourse, which comprises mainly the official culture, saw the world as unchanging, black-and-white, and rigidly hierarchical. This was a worldview that was serious in tone, righteous in attitude, and based on people's fear of death, authority, disasters, and the unknown. This high discourse is reflected in the classical form of the body, medieval ecclesiology, moral preaching, and official celebrations, such as Lent, the period of fasting, repentance, and spiritual discipline in preparation for Easter.

Through a systematic examination of the market, the carnivals, fairs, popular games, banquets, and festivals, Bakhtin mapped how the images such as the gaping mouth, the body overeating, defecating, urinating, physical abuse, dismemberment, and feasting create a symbolic re-ordering of the serious, authoritarian arrogance of the sober official culture and hierarchy. In Bakhtin's view, the language of the carnival, which he referred to as "grotesque realism," constitutes an expression of freedom from the official norms and values of institutions like the state and the church.

The carnivalesque is also all-encompassing and grassroots in nature. Unlike canonical classics, the carnivalesque does not belong to a separate sphere of art. It is life itself, only arranged in the form of a play. According to Bakhtin, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it." (1984, p. 7)

In medieval times, when official culture was about "hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions," this everyday life of carnival provided a second life for ordinary people. It celebrated temporary liberation from the "prevailing truth and from the established order" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10) through folk humour and grotesque realism.

Bakhtin, then, was essentially concerned with the "uncrowning" of the official ideology. In his analysis, the high discourses of religion and official culture, with their lofty style, exalted aims, and sublime ends, were degraded and subverted. In his own words,

Rabelais' images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 3)

Bakhtin's exultation of the carnivalesque spirit is not only an academic exercise. *Rabelais and His World* is in a way a veiled critique of the official culture of the Soviet Union. He was writing at a time when the Soviet Union was promoting "socialist realism" as the officially sanctioned style for a world proletarian literature. Since the 1930s, Soviet writers such as Maxim Gorky had been searching for a literary formula suitable for the working class. This new literary norm prescribes archetypical figures that embody the essence extracted from typical proletarian qualities. They are larger-than-life, impeccable, heroic, judgemental, standardised, and with a fixed view of the world.

Towards a framework of transgression

Bakhtin's work leads to the employment of the high/low binary, which is further developed by anthropologist Lévi-Strauss in his discussion of rituals and myths (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 284). Bakhtin's concern for "the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial" (Holquist, 1984, p. xvi) sheds light on a body of research on hierarchy inversion. However, his theory also generated significant criticism as it was canonised over time. One of the main ideas that other scholars have challenged is Bakhtin's oversimplistic view of the carnivals. In attempting to develop the carnivalesque and grotesque realism into a generally applicable inversion of the official and the hierarchical, Bakhtin fails to account for the complexity of the politics of the carnival. Terry Eagleton pointed out that carnival is a "licensed affair" in every sense. As long as it is an event controlled and permitted by state officials, its counter-hegemonic potential has to be discounted (Eagleton, 1981).

Other critics go so far as to negate the scholarly value of Bakhtin's theory, suggesting that Bakhtin's discussion of the "carnavalesque" and the "official" is more an allegorical critique of Soviet authoritarian official culture bereft of serious scholarship. Richard

Berrong, for example, challenged Bakhtin's argument in *Rabelais and His World* from both a historical and textual perspective. In his book *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in 'Gargantua And Pantagruel'*, Berrong (1986) argued that there was no clear dichotomy between the popular and the official in Rabelais' time and concluded that Bakhtin's view of "the popular" is fundamentally problematic. The liberating worldview enabled by popular language to combat the establishment is more imagined by Bakhtin than a historical reality.

While Berrong's criticism has provided another perspective on Bakhtin's theory, most of the other scholars still see the theory as a useful analytical framework to explore cultural negations and symbolic inversions in different epochs and places. His theory, though mainly focused on the Renaissance, has been applied in different cultural contexts in different periods of time. However, the ability to apply Bakhtin's theory directly to different cultural and social contexts is only limited to societies where there is a strong antagonistic relationship between the ruling class and the subordinate class, such as Latin America or the former Soviet Union (Stallybrass & White, 1986). In many other instances, Bakhtin's conceptual framework cannot be employed without critical revisions.

An example of the successful application of Bakhtin's work in a critical way is Stallybrass and White's (1986) study of English medieval society. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* tests the formula in the markets, fairs, and festivals in different historical periods and societies. Like Eagleton, Stallybrass and White found that the carnival behaviours were more complex than the simplistic utopian vision put forward by Bakhtin. The markets, fairs, and festivals in their study were also regulated by special rules, and thus their subversive potential was seriously compromised.

Refreshingly iconoclastic, this nevertheless resolves none of the problems raised so far concerning the politics of carnival: its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who "don't belong"—in a process of displaced abjection); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity. (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 19)

On the one hand, markets and fairs are folk traditions with potential to reverse the official hierarchy of the “high” and the “low”; on the other hand, they are the very place and occasion where new power structures take shape (Stallybrass & White, 1986). In reality, the cosmopolitan elements introduced through the markets and fairs could destabilise the traditions and customs of the village. For this reason, the liberating power of the market and fair, and, consequently, the carnival spirit they embody, must be unpacked by taking into consideration a number of factors. In Stallybrass and White’s own words:

Part of the transgressive excitement of the fair for the subordinate class was not its “otherness” to official discourse, but rather the disruption of provincial habits and local tradition by the introduction of a certain cosmopolitanism, arousing desires and excitements for exotic and strange commodities. The fair “turned the world inside out” in its mercantilist aspect just as much, if not more, than it “turned world upside down” in its popular rituals. (1986, p. 37)

Having found that cultural transgression in various sites involves more than just the antagonism of the “high” and “low” suggested by Bakhtin, Stallybrass and White propose a revised analytical framework. This model moves beyond the unproductive argument regarding whether folk culture is subversive, but instead looks at the deep relations between the “high” and the “low.” They proffer that while the cultural categories of “high” and “low” appear as opposites, they are indeed inherently connected. The “high” has been fascinated with the “low.” The low, in the form of disease, pollution, the grotesque body, and the lowly-class servants and prostitutes, has never ceased to horrify as well as simultaneously fascinate the middle-class bourgeoisie. Serving as the Other of the “high,” the “low” thus assumes a central position in the formation of the new bourgeois subjectivity, even though it may have been marginal or peripheral in society.

Stallybrass and White’s study, although limited in scope, provides a more productive way of theorising the binary code of the classical and the popular. Their discussion focuses attention on two important issues in Bakhtin’s theory. First, the authority of moral sanctions and social norms can be transgressed through carnivalesque behaviours such as parody, subversive humour, or meaning inversion. However, one should not overestimate the freedom of such transgression; it is constantly contained and regulated

by the authorities. Secondly, the cultural category of the “high” and the “low” cannot be neatly separated. Stallybrass and White thus advance a case for the “hybrid” of the two opposites.

In the following section, I will embed the concept of boundaries, Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, and Stallybrass and White’s idea of transgression in a specific cultural setting. Specifically, I suggest that although the TV adaptation of the Red Classics is an operation that epitomises many carnivalesque motives as outlined by Bakhtin, it is, however, still a “licensed affair.” Tensions abound in the transgression of the cultural boundaries within the regulatory environment of TV drama production and consumption. In explicating these tensions, my aim lies not so much in proving that popular culture transgresses the official culture, but in unsettling this fixed binarism and in uncovering the messy boundary between the two.

The official/state culture

Bakhtin’s official culture has a clear resemblance to the Red Classics genre at both the aesthetic and political levels. As part of the avowed official culture in the Maoist era, the genre was largely created under the mandate of combining revolutionary romanticism and socialist realism. This creative formula came from the urgent need to legitimise a new regime through art at the height of the Socialist era. This official culture was tightly controlled by the state and was highly prescriptive in the function of literature, its content, and its aesthetic styles.

The function of literature and art: politics or entertainment?

Whether literature and art should serve political purposes had been a question that troubled the Chinese left-thinking writers and artists in the early twentieth century. Following the Japanese invasion in 1937 and the breakdown of the united front with the Nationalists, the CCP retreated to northwest China and established a “liberated area” (*jiefang qu*) surrounding the capital Yan’an. In tandem with the social experiments in the Communist revolutionary base areas and liberated area, a new literary and artistic form started to take shape. In response to military isolation and material deprivation, Mao Zedong launched a series of campaigns to enhance agricultural production and military mobilisation. The war effort called for strong solidarity with the masses.

Consequently, Mao pushed hard for a “mass line” in the ideological and cultural spheres (McDougall & Louie, 1999). Folk tales and folk songs were collected and reworked to deliver the Party message. The new artistic endeavour stressed a high degree of integration of art and ideology. The instrumental function of literature and art became more salient.

The intervention of politics in art was formalised in the conference for writers and artists in 1942. From 1940 to 1941, literary intellectuals in Yan’an criticised the Party cadres for enjoying privileges over writers and the lack of artistic freedom. Seeing this as a challenge to Party control, Mao Zedong summoned writers and artists to the conference to settle a few key issues in literary and artistic development. Despite opposition and disagreement, Mao laid down two fundamental rules for socialist arts: Firstly, the nature of literature and art is to serve the masses; secondly, politics is to dominate art in literary creations (McDougall & Louie, 1999). He made it clear in the talks he gave in the conference that literature and art should “fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy” (Mao, 1942, p. 459).

Mao’s policy, combined with the appropriation of literary theory and practice from the Soviet Union, formed the foundation of systemic views on literature and the art (Chung & McClellan, 1996).⁸ Its starting point was to fulfil the practical needs of mobilising the masses and seizing state power at a time of national crisis. However, the “Talks” were endorsed as the authoritarian official policy of the PRC and strongly enforced to steer literary and artistic creations for the next four decades. Central to the system was the instrumental uses of literature, summarised in the official expression that writers should be the “engineers of the soul,” who were responsible for preparing proper citizens for the nation (Link, 2000).

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took power by winning the Civil War against the Nationalists. The Party, however, still faced the task of convincing its citizens to identify

⁸ The Chinese literary policy was not a direct copy of Soviet policy. Chung and McClellan (1996) delineate the complex, evolving relationship between the two.

with its ideology and to engage in modernisation efforts led by the CCP. It also needed to re-narrate revolutionary history to prove its own legitimacy (Cheng, 2005). Along with the complete overhaul of the established institutional structure in the literary and artistic arena, a series of campaigns was launched to ensure the total control of ideology and politics over all cultural activities. During these campaigns, writers and artists were asked to undergo “ideological transformation” in order to shift their focus from the bourgeoisie to the sides of the proletariat masses. Meanwhile, any thrust to diversify literary development was eventually crushed.

The content of literature and art

In practice, the “Talks” constitute a rigid precept on literature and art. It not only stipulates “for whom” these works must be produced (the function and purpose), but also the subject and theme of what is to be written. In terms of subject, literature must mainly depict the life of the masses, i.e. the workers, peasants, and soldiers. To Mao, the life of the people is the only and “‘inexhaustible source’ of literature and arts” (Mao, 1942, p. 469). The subject and theme are regarded as important elements in determining to what degree literature and art reflect “reality” and to what end they are directed. The subject and theme are strictly categorised either according to the social spaces the narrative deals with, such as industry, agriculture, education, or the military, or according to time period, such as the historical or the contemporary. In essence, this categorisation embodies distinctions made along class lines. It also indicates a preference for the political life of social groups over private daily life as the criteria for classification (Hong, 2008). As such, the categorisation was highly hierarchical. Each category was assigned certain values. For example, novels depicting the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers were deemed more valuable than those on intellectuals; narratives dealing with important political struggles were more highly regarded than those focusing on everyday life matters; epics of the revolutionary movement led by the CCP were considered more momentous than other historical events.

Judging by quantity and artistic merit, the two major categories of literary and artistic works during the period were epic stories of the war and those depicting socialist construction in rural areas. The prescribed topics revolved around eulogising the heroic struggle of the Communist army against their enemies, or celebrating the successful

implementation of socialist policies in rural areas. In both categories, class struggle was depicted as the principle mode of conflict. The war epics narrated the origin and early history of the nation. In many of these stories, the theme was realised through a chronological account of the main characters' personal growth. For example, a peasant who has a personal feud with the landlord gradually acquires class-consciousness and the collectivist spirit under the guidance of the Communist Party. The rural category depicted positive heroes in village life, with class struggle gradually becoming the main theme since the 1960s. Formulaic characterisation by class background became the criterion of ideological soundness. Some of the earlier works underwent several revisions to create images of the heroes that conformed to the revolutionary ideal.⁹ This formula also had implications for how gender and place were constructed. For example, gendered roles tend to be subsumed under class roles in the Red Classics. In other words, the subjugation of women is often accounted for in class terms. At the same time, the representations of place in the Red Classics were often imbricated with class discourse and presented a unique kind of territorialisation of the national space. For instance, in the Red Classics featuring war and battles, towns and villages that once served as the Communist military bases, such as Yan'an and Jingganshang, were configured as the centre of the nation in the revolutionary imaginary. On the other hand, big cities occupied by the Nationalists were pushed to the periphery. Villages in poor, backward areas were depicted as places where class struggle was particularly fierce and villagers, once organised under the leadership of the Communists, were often turned into loyal supporters of the Party.

The Red Classics were produced within this confining rigidity. The representative works in one way or another dealt with the concerns of the Party-state at a given period of time. Two major thematic directions dominate: chronicles of the regime's rise and depictions of successful social reform. A number of the works produced in the 1950s, such as Du Pengcheng's *Defending Yan'an* [*Baowei yan'an*, 1954], Wu Qiang's *The Red Sun* [*Hong ri*, 1957], Yang Mo's *The Song of Youth* [*Qingchun zhi ge*, 1958], and Li

⁹ For example, the author of *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* had revised the image of the hero, Shao Jianbo, many times in response to the criticism that this Communist squad leader was portrayed as an individualistic hero (Li, 2003). Yang Mo, the author of *The Song of Youth* also significantly changed the portrayal of the heroine, Lin Daojing, in latter editions of the novel (Hong, 2007). During the Cultural Revolution, modelling and remodelling a literary or artistic work was routine practice (Clark, 2008).

Yingru's *Struggle in the Old City* [*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*, 1962], narrate the education of the younger generation. Zhou Libo's *The Hurricane* [*Baofeng zhouyu*, 1948] and Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* [*Taiyang zhao zai sangganhe shang*, 1952] deal with the implementation of land reform policy in the northern part of China from the 1940s to the early 1950s. When the Party's focus shifted to rural collectivisation in the mid-1950s, the movement spawned another wave of fictional works celebrating the success of this national policy in the rural interior, such as Zhou Libo's *The Great Changes in a Mountain Village* [*Shanxiang jubian*, 1957-1960], Liu Qing's *The Builder* [*Chuanye shi*, 1960] and Li Zhun's *Do Not Go Down That Path* [*Bu neng zou na tiao lu*, 1953]. Some of these novels are set up in strict alignment with the government directives current at the time and were criticised later by post-reform critics as illustrations of policy (*tujie zhengce*).

Literary and artistic style

Corresponding to the narrowly defined function and constrictive subject and theme, Mao's policy also prescribed a formula for the rendition of subject, method, and artistic style. The Red Classics were largely created by modelling Soviet socialist realism, which treats social life as the "resource" for literary and artistic creation. However, Mao believed that artistic creation should not be a simple, crude copy of reality. In order to better mobilise the masses, writers and artists should incorporate idealism and political utopian vision in recreating reality, so that literature and art become a more typical, stronger version of reality. A combination of revolutionary realism and romanticism was promoted as a major advance on Soviet literary theory, especially after relationships with the Soviet Union soured in the late 1950s (Link, 2000).

The requirement of typicality means that the romantic projection of heroes and their enemies was expressed very much in black-and-white terms. The character line-up was rigidly aligned with class status. The protagonists of the novels must be positive figures, such as Party members and newly awakened proletarians, while the enemies were the Nationalists, foreign invaders, bandits or landlords. The characters displayed exemplary or deplorable behaviours bereft of psychological complexity and ambiguity. In so doing, both the hero and the villain were deprived of various aspects of humanity. As Wang Derwei observed, "If villains are condemned because of their lack of humanity, heroes

are honoured because they can afford to lose their humanity” (2004, p. 166). The heroes were changed into robot-like individuals that could only be stopped by death (D. Wang, 2004). Calls for a more nuanced and complex portrayal of characters, known as “middle characters,” were not only ignored, but also seriously criticised in political campaigns.

Novels and artistic works often underwent several rewritings in order to suit the political dictates of these formulae. An extreme case is the creation of *The Red Crag*. With the writing process spanning about ten years, the novel was collectively written in line with the prevailing political situation. The authors obtained instructions from authoritative figures on how to refine the raw material to exemplify the nature of revolutionary struggle, while eliminating any personal experience that might be in the way of this exercise. The relationships between the Communists and the Nationalists were set up in terms of the opposition between two political groups and two life paths. As a result, *The Red Crag* was later on known as the textbook of communism. Characterisation was carefully typecast, with the saintly Communists depicted as brave, persevering, death-defying, and, in direct contrast, their enemies depicted as deceitful, ruthless, desperate, and terrified.

The Red Crag's mode of production and its romantic, larger-than-life characterisation were emulated and popularised in model Peking operas created during the Cultural Revolution. These works were created based on the “three prominences” (*san tuchu*) theory,¹⁰ considered a major contribution to socialist artistic theory (Clark, 2008). The model works depicted a black-and-white world in which the heroes must be beyond reproach, both in appearance and internal characteristics, summarised nowadays as “tall, large, and perfect” (*gao, da, quan*).

The sublime aesthetic discourse

The “sublime” was the official aesthetic of the literature and art produced during the Maoist period. Seen as a process of “cultural edification and elevation” (B. Wang,

¹⁰ The “three prominences” theory stipulates that “Among all the characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among positive characters, give prominences to the main characters; and among the heroes, give prominences to the central characters.”

1997, p. 2), the sublime functioned in the Maoist era to transform the mundane existence of the individual into a collective ideal that is larger, stronger, and loftier. The socialist grand narratives such as the Red Classics carry the mission of providing endless examples for individuals to emulate. Its narration of modern history is often epic in form, excluding the mundane and the everyday. Its heroes are portrayed as super-human, godlike creatures. This Godly imagery full of hyperbole easily conforms to Bakhtin's "new bodily canon" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 320) in the verbal norms of official culture, which present an "entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 320), put up on a pedestal for people to admire. This characterisation and the rationale it embodies prohibit "whatever smacks too much of the human creature—appetite, feeling, sensibility, sensuality, imagination, fear, passion, lust, self-interest" (B. Wang, 1997, p. 2). Moralism and heroism are valorised in the Red Classics at the expense of everyday life and the banal. Quotidian routines are meaningless unless they are connected in some way to the ultimate, sublime goal (Tang, 2000).

Bakhtin's contributions to literary and cultural studies are particularly relevant to a discussion of the orthodox revolutionary narratives, which have many parallels with the serious elements of ecclesiastical and feudal culture in medieval times. Serious in tone and sublime in aesthetic style, they are canonised through history. These national narratives aim at disseminating ideology and social ideals in order to transform the people into socialist citizens. They thus serve the established order and prevailing truths of the communist regime. Their view of reality is limited and confined. If the Red Classics bear resemblance to Bakhtin's official, high culture, then the next question is, do the commercial TV adaptations represent the opposite? In the next section, I intend to explicate the contradictions and relations between commercial culture and revolutionary culture.

In search of the opposite of the canonical

Since the introduction of the market economy as the operating logic in Chinese society during the 1970s, political control over the cultural realm has been relatively relaxed. The dull uniformity in the function, content, style, and aesthetics of literature and art as dictated by Party doctrine has been gradually chipped away. The ideological control

over art and literature relaxed and tightened in a fluctuating manner immediately after Mao, but generally speaking, the trend has been toward more diversity and openness.

In 1980, the Party leadership changed the slogan that sanctioned literature and art for the past four decades from “literature in service of politics” to “literature in service of the people and of Socialism” (Link, 2000). The change was subtle, yet significant. For the first time, it was possible for literature and art to fall outside the boundaries of politics and to play a different role, such as entertainment or self-expression. From 1978 to 1984, literary theorists were engaged in a debate on “humanism” and “human nature.” This theoretical discussion directly queried the validity of Mao’s claim that there was no human nature, but rather only class nature and class struggle. His claim was premised on the dichotomy between the “inhuman,” the oppressive socialist state authority guided by class struggle, and the “human,” embodied in love, marriage, and family and other relationships confined within the private sphere (G. He, 2005). The humanism debate, together with the recognition of “ideological alienation” during the Mao years and a call for an “autonomous subject” free of ideological constraints, constituted a theoretical counter to the literary policy of socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism.

The relaxation in political control has resulted in a more diversified range of subject matter and themes in literature and art since the early 1980s. Sexuality, love, and personal relations, previously taboo, were openly dealt with in fiction and other artistic genres. Some writers, such as the root-searching school, went back to traditions predating the revolutionary period in search of national identity. Experimental writers and artists turned to the irrational, the grotesque, and the corporeal body, attempting to demolish the state-imposed subjectivity and aesthetics of the sublime (B. Wang, 1997). If Mao’s Yan’an Talk was a counter attack on writers’ “self-indulgent proclamations of their poetic inspiration, feminist grievances, sexual liberation, moral loftiness and political naivety,” (McDougall & Louie, 1999, p. 194), then his efforts have largely failed by now. The increased political tolerance for expression turned out to be a blessing as well as a curse for serious, non-commercial literature and art. On the one hand, liberated from the political mandate to teach or “reflect reality,” literature and art

could express personal and subjective feelings. On the other hand, literary and artistic works that probe into the inner feelings and experiment with language and styles face the risk of being marginalised and trivialised. Indeed, with the dismantling of socialist cultural bureaucracy and the rise of commercial culture, elite literature and art gradually lost ground to popular entertainment for mass consumption, such as the popular press, mass-market magazines, pulp fiction, martial arts films, karaoke bars, and tear-jerking TV soaps in the late 1980s.¹¹

Chinese culture and society experienced drastic transformations in the 1990s. With marketisation deepening and society increasingly secularised, ideological debate and political reform reached an impasse (Tao, 2008a, p. 92). By the mid-1990s, the third-generation leader Jiang Zemin adopted a series of pragmatic approaches to ideological and cultural control. First, Jiang's policy promoted indigenous popular cultural products in an attempt to re-direct the increasing appetite for entertainment among the masses from Western commercial popular culture to home grown culture (K. Liu, 2004). Secondly, the authorities gave free rein to popular nationalism (Brady, 2008; K. Liu, 2004). However, in spite of the hard-line rhetoric, the post-Deng cultural policy lacks an ideological foundation and has become a practical means for maintaining order and stability.

The de-politicised atmosphere of the 1990s resulted in a raging consumerism and commercial popular culture (J. Wang, 2006). The public passion for political participation had receded, replaced with a prevailing attitude of cynicism. Revolutionary art from the Maoist era was transformed from propaganda into commercial kitsch. Revolutionary images were appropriated for commercial usage. The revolutionary period's highly political tone and discourse were parodied and subverted in commercially successful novels, films, and TV soap operas by popular writers such as Wang Shuo. Political censorship was deftly sidetracked or pushed to the limit in the process of bringing official culture down to earth through debasing the lofty. In critic

¹¹ The process of how popular culture overtook official propaganda and high art is discussed in detail in Barmé's (1999) "Kowtowing to the Vulgar," *In the red: On contemporary Chinese culture*.

Chen Xiaoming's words, China is experiencing a "canon crisis" as a result of the disenchantment with socialist realism (X. Chen, 2001a).

In view of the tension between revolutionary culture and commercial culture, it is tempting to use traditional dichotomies—capitalism versus socialism, the market versus the state—to understand the commercial appropriations of the revolutionary legacy. Indeed, prevalent among many Western commentators, such as David Lynch (1999), is the belief that market-induced forces will gradually encroach onto official cultural terrain, eventually subverting and transforming the Party-sanctioned literary and artistic canon in the spirit of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. While not denying these opposites as the major dynamic operating in the Chinese cultural arena, this model is nevertheless a crude one that needs to be qualified in many ways.

First of all, television is not a free agent that can unleash the carnivalesque spirit in an unrestrained manner. In the Chinese context, television may be more adequately described as "a dancer with chains" (Sun, 2007). China's television industry has transformed in a drastic way in the reform era. The changes are palpable across multiple planes, ranging from funding, technology, institutional structure, ownership, and program content and formats. These changes have transformed Chinese television from a state-owned, stringently controlled propaganda tool into a polysemic and hybrid medium (Sun & Zhao, 2009) in which "global, transnational, and national (often government-affiliated) media interests compete for audiences" (Shi, 2008, p. 120). Even though commercialisation has sent Chinese television into the cauldron of the market in terms of funding and ratings competition, the post-1989 era has seen the state expand and intensify its disciplinary power in the media arena (Brady, 2008; Zhao, 2008a). This has been achieved by setting up bureaucratic structures and upgrading the ruling technology in a number of ways. The result is a more "sophisticated propaganda" (Zhao, 2008a, p. 39), rather than a diminishing one.

Furthermore, the Red Classics represent a special genre that has a very special symbolic significance. For its own legitimacy to exist and rule, the Chinese government has consistently claimed its commitment to socialism, in spite of its neoliberal pursuits.

Revolutionary hegemony from the Maoist era still constitutes the basis and core of socialist modernity (K. Liu, 2004). Since 2004, the Hu-Wen government has re-articulated the revolutionary legacy as a correction to decades of rampant capitalism and consumerism (Zhao, 2008b). Even though most of the socialist rhetoric remains largely unrealised, “it nevertheless sets the basic terms of the party state’s hegemony and defines the parameters of elite struggle and grassroots social contestation” (Zhao, 2008b, p. 32). Under such circumstances, the TV adaptations of the Red Classics could not be entirely commercial adventures, but rather must come under the heavy surveillance of the state. In fact, the government adopted a number of ad hoc measures, including moral sanctions, to regulate the TV adaptations of the Red Classics, on top of its usual mechanisms of control, such as pre-approval of topics and post-production censorship, which I will describe in detail in Chapter 2.

Secondly, the liberal-democratic model assumes that dynamics between the state and the market are inherently in conflict. Scholars have, from various angles, problematised this view, proclaiming that the conceptual tools are inadequate for capturing a society in radical transition (Barmé, 1999; Brady, 2008; J. Wang, 2001b; Zhao, 1998, 2008a). China’s market reform is a top-down process. The Party-state not only introduced the market-oriented transformation in the media, but also ensured that it secured “the commanding heights” in the process (Zhao, 2008a, p. 75). To pit the state totally against the profit-driven TV drama production companies in the adaptation of the Red Classics is to miss the nuances and complexities of this issue. The two both co-opt and contradict each other. The commercial rewriting of the genre was both encouraged and constrained by the state. While the TV production companies and scriptwriters mine the Red Classics hoping to feed off the nostalgia for the past and grab ratings, the state treats the revival of the genre as an opportunity to reinstate socialist values by means of willing participation. The process of the reproduction is nothing but a “licensed affair.” In terms of content, the boundaries between the official and the commercial overlap. The end product is often a watered-down version of the original Red Classics that satisfies both the Party line and the bottom line of commercial success. Barmé (1999, p. 101) summarises this relationship as “an uneasy coexistence, one characterised more by constant compromise rather than simply a mutual antagonism or entrenched

opposition.” This comment on the relationships between official and popular or mass media of early 1990s still rings true in the TV rewriting of Red Classics.

Thirdly, the Red Classics can be compared with Bakhtin’s official culture in many respects, with their canonical status, adherence to prevailing social conventions, and established ideological truths and aesthetic of the beautiful and the sublime. Bakhtin sees this dogma rejected, debased, and brought down in the folk festivities of the carnival. To apply Bakhtin’s model to the commercial rewriting of the Red Classics, however, one must take into consideration the fact that the genre is not sealed off from the folk culture or vernacular entertainment. The objective of *qunzhong wenyi* (culture of the masses) was to create a national popular language for the masses. With the audience defined as peasants, this art form draws heavily on indigenous aesthetic forms and literary traditions from the non-canonical folk arts, such as storytelling, puppet theatre, folklore, local operas, and so forth (X. Cai, 2010; K. Liu, 2004). Its characterisation of typical heroes also conforms to the prototypes in folklore. More recent studies track down the folk origin of the Red Classics, especially the early versions of these works. For example, Li Yang (2003) rereads *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* as a revolutionary story told in the form of traditional vernacular fiction. The realisation of traditional ethics and morals was narrated in the story as an achievement of revolutionary morals. Veiled folklore structures and other elements were also identified in the earlier versions of *Shajiang* (S. Chen, 2002) and *The White-haired Girl* (Y. Meng, 1993). Furthermore, Mao’s Yan’an talk was dogmatically based on a series of binaries: politics and art, reality and the ideal, subjectivity and objectivity, humanity and class consciousness, intellectuals and the masses, brightness and darkness, eulogising and exposing. Even though this is applied stringently in the creative process, it is, however, still “porous.” These pores provide space for manipulation under different historical contexts (Hong, 2008, p. 45). The messy boundary between the Red Classics and vernacular culture means the simple, oppositional framework of popular against official needs modification when explicating the TV adaptation of the Red Classics.

Fourth, at the level of consumption, the revolutionary culture is not residual, but highly relevant in post-Mao society, especially among the middle-aged and low-income population (K. Liu, 2004). Most of the TV production companies and scriptwriters mine the Red Classics in the hope to appeal to a niche market that is mainly middle and old aged people from middle and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, the viewers become an important stakeholder in the success of the reproduction; their feeling towards and experiences with the revolutionary works are not to be taken lightly. Suffice it to say that as revolutionary hegemony has given way to consumerism, the ideological meanings and idealism of the revolutionary culture have been largely turned into empty symbols. However, as Liu Kang (2004) has pointed out, the felt and lived experience of revolutionary mass culture has greatly shaped the lives of the generations growing up under the revolutionary hegemony. The emotional effects of the grand narratives are especially sublime (B. Wang, 1997) and have been built into their subconscious. Therefore, even though the popular TV drama reproductions set out to debase the canonical texts with the personal, the titillating, and the everyday, this commercial thrust has to negotiate with the audiences' memories and experiences of the socialist utopia in order to grab maximum ratings.

With the previous discussion in mind, it is less useful to see the TV drama production of the Red Classics purely as a popular attempt to take issue with and subvert the official, canonical genre. Rather, the recent trend of reproducing TV drama series is by nature a commercial endeavour to capitalise on nostalgia and cultural memory in the post-revolutionary age. This cultural phenomenon is not without tensions and contradictions, however. Different camps demonstrate varied interests in the production and reception of these remakes. The state, the TV production companies, the press, and the TV audience all weigh in according to their own investment in the TV adaptations. The transgression of boundaries is most active on three fronts: class, gender and sexuality, and place, which I discuss below.

The commercial vision of the TV production companies and scriptwriters both coincides and collides with that of the state. For example, both the state and the TV producers shun "class" as the major theme in the Red Classics. The former considers the issue of

class as a highly sensitive and dangerous topic that could easily unleash social unrest because of the great differences between the wealthy elite, a small but growing well-off middle-class and the mass of the population. China's recent development has changed China into one of the most unequal countries in the world (Selden & Lee, 2008). On the other hand, the TV producers prefer to ignore the issue of class because it is unappealing to consumers. Likewise, the middle-class, the ideal consumers of television advertising, has benefitted from the creation of a class structure in reform-era China and has no interest in reinstating "class consciousness." Ann Anagnost has pinpointed the rejection of the language of class and the adoption of social stratification as examples of neoliberal logic operating in reform-era China. She proposes that in the media and other public arenas, the newly emerged social inequality is represented as a problem of "social stratification" rather than "class," which can be addressed with public policy, but not social revolution. The new ethos centres on the manufacturing of a middle-class subjectivity "defined in terms of being a consumer" (2008, p. 515). The Chinese ideological practice is indeed ironic: On the one hand, in the Mao years, the state defined its governance on the binary opposites of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, while in reality the "bourgeoisie" was a "sham character" with no tangible corresponding reference in social relations (Y. Meng, 1993, p. 119). On the other hand, this binary is erased or downplayed in the reform era when a capitalist class has emerged as a result of the market economy and class conflicts and when social parity has become a real issue.

This ideological shift to recast inequality as "cultural difference" (Anagnost, 2008, p. 497) has huge implications for the TV adaptation of the Red Classics. First of all, the purpose for such a reproduction is not to "raise the class consciousness" or enhance the solidarity of the social class, but to cater to a differentiated niche market. The audience of these adaptations are not simply socialist subjects, but above all, consumers. Secondly, this commodity must, to a large extent, erase the class struggle discourse or articulate the theme in the ethos current to the time, which often results in "a version of narrow but effective identity politics—that is the politics of nationalism" (Zhao, 2008b, p. 30). Thirdly, the absence of class struggle has become politically motivated in recent years as the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao government has been pushing a "social harmony" agenda in the face of surging social conflicts and intensifying class polarisation.

The boundaries of gender and sexuality are another fiercely negotiated front in the adaptation of the Red Classics. The socialist project of women's liberation sees the toppling of the traditional patriarchal kinship system as a top priority. Indeed, as Lin Chun (2006) argues, taking women's liberation as part and parcel of the revolution is an important Chinese contribution to modern world history. Under the women-friendly state, conditions for women had significantly improved in education, health, employment, and other aspects of gender equality (Lin, 2006). State feminism, however, has its limitations. Most notably, gender equality is based on a male norm, resulting in women carrying the double burden of participating in the labour force and caring for the family. Seeking the "sameness" with men obscures women's sexually distinct identifications and qualities (Lin, 2006). In the Red Classics, the biologically determined features of women were often carefully concealed. Gender non-difference and the de-emphasis of sexuality left a vacuum, which was filled by the terminology of class and class struggle. This means "women were turned into an agent politicizing desire, love, and family relations by delimiting and repressing sexuality, self, and all private emotions" (Y. Meng, 1993, p. 118).

The reform is accompanied by the retreat of the state in its protective role in ensuring gender equality. Market practices conducive to profit making but disadvantageous to women have been tolerated. In the meantime, both "traditional" and commercialised images of femininity have come back in fashion. The neoliberal turn has transformed citizens wanting to display or embody correct class subjectivity into the subject of desire, as elucidated by Rofel (2007, p. 13):

After the June 4th crisis of legitimacy, the constitution of a post-socialist humanity in China entailed not merely the demolition of those politics portrayed as hindering human nature but a positive encouragement and elaboration of people's sexual, material, and affective self-interest in order to become cosmopolitan citizens of a post-Cold War world.

In Rofel's opinion, the neoliberal experience in China is "historically and culturally situated." Specifically, the significance of desiring practices in China "lies in the efforts by the Chinese state and its citizens to overcome their socialist past" (2007, p. 7).

Revolutionary narratives need to be reconfigured to construct a new humanity in keeping with the neoliberal spirit. In the neoliberal social milieu, the task of rewriting the revolutionary women is multi-folded: first, to restore the femininity and sexuality, conventional or commodified, of the revolutionary heroine, so that the “natural” human nature repressed in the original narratives could be set free; second, to uncover the female protagonist’s individuality and private relations and feelings often obliterated in the revolutionary narrative; third, in reinscribing the female body, sexuality and private emotions, state feminism could not be totally discarded.

Complex negotiations also occur around the boundaries of place. China’s socialist modernisation project has been marked by regional differences, with coastal-inland and rural-urban oppositions the most prominent feature. This spatial dynamic informed state policies and strategies in directing labour migration, capital movement and technology diffusion in the Mao era (Lin, 2007). The reform, with its coastal focus, has deepened the regional disparity through a market mechanism. More importantly, the ideological shift to neoliberalism causes radical changes in the symbolic order of places, especially in relation to the revolutionary base areas. In the Maoist era, revolutionary base areas such as Yan’an and Linyi were sacred places, the backbone of the revolution in the public discourse. The Maoist state project of place-making was to foster a “local” identity in line with nation-building and socialism (Oaks & Schein, 2006, p. 6). The sense of belonging within this particular spatial hierarchy means that the locals in the revolutionary base areas were encouraged to imagine themselves as part of China’s, even the world’s, revolutionary cause and socialist development.

The economic reform is in many ways spatial in nature, and with the changes of spatial structure come the changes in meaning and symbolism people attach to places. The old imagery of revolutionary places has to be reconfigured in the global capitalist economy. The place-making practices intended to attract capital and create competitive images, however, also draw on the revolutionary traditions as a resource. The shift from the place identity formed in the high socialist era is a more delicate matter, a site to be struggled over. Place-making in this new context aims to transgress the bounded locality

of the socialist legacy and brand the revolutionary heartland as beyond class—the desired destiny for investment and the market economy.

Conclusion

TV adaptation is not the antithesis of the original Red Classics. Each of the two cultural products has a unique boundary, defined by different cultural presumptions and aesthetic, moral and ideological orders. It is more productive to view the tension between the two as one resulting from “transgression.” Here the carnivalesque is not seen as essentially liberating, or politically transformative, but “*a mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic*” (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 6). In the cultural process of commercialising official cultural genres such as the Red Classics, the original serves as the symbolic resource for transgression, manifested in various forms, such as fragmenting and parodying, or altering and embellishing, what was once considered a sacred model text. Quite often, a “humanising discourse on private feelings, perception, bodily sensations, rooted in the libidinal dimension of the individual” (B. Wang, 1997) is invoked to counter the highly politicised discourse of class struggle or heroic self-sacrifice. However, these attempts to defile the sublime are not driven purely by the urge to dismantle or subvert the symbolic order of Chinese culture established under Mao’s Yan’an Talks, but by the commercial aim to sell and make a profit. The TV adaptations are less preoccupied with breaking the authoritarian representation of history and subjectivity than consigning it to a harmless private domain where old images and structures can be safely consumed for their nostalgic appeal. This kind of decanonisation, if properly used as a supplementary profit-seeking strategy, is one way to bring in huge revenues (F. Meng, 2007). Critics view this glut of TV adaptations in sceptical terms, warning that this kind of refashioning of the past with a contemporary consumerist ethos represents a “hollowing of historical memory and consciousness” (S. Liu, 2007, p. 73). Chen Sihe is quick to point out that adaptation is a double-edge sword; while it dissipates the over-politicised ideology of the originals, it also dissipates the folk elements in the originals (S. Chen, 2004). Their political edge is seriously compromised.

Besides, this transgression operates within a set of power relations and must be read alongside wider political, social and economic forces at work in the post-Mao environment. The success of the TV production depends upon the consumer market, objectified in the form of ratings. The state is still highly relevant in this process in at least two major ways: First, as the official owner and regulator of the media, government agencies can exercise control over the content of the reproductions through censorship and administrative measures. Secondly, under the market economy, the state power to control is also largely realised in the form of a consumer conglomerate, exerting its influences through investment, access to media, and public mobilisation. Under this special circumstance, political power is “capitalised.” Popular culture in defiance of official attitudes often risks not only inviting a high-hand ideological blast, but also losing a large market share. A good example of this synergy is how the state worked in tandem with a commercial production company to cross-promote the reproduction of *The Making of a Hero*. *The Making of a Hero* was an autobiographic account of a legendary young communist, Pavel Korchagin, from his childhood in a working-class family to his role in the Russian Civil War (1918-1920) and in the subsequent reconstruction of the Soviet Union after the First World War. Even though he suffered from rheumatism and typhoid fever and became blind and bedridden later in his life, he managed to write his life story through dictation.

At the ideological level, the socialist canonical works such as the Red Classics still retain their symbolic power. China’s market reform has been carried out under the contradictory banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Socialist rhetoric is not abandoned, and in fact has been intensified under the Hu-Wen regime (Zhao, 2008a, 2008b). The Red Classics, as the cultural core products of the socialist era, have not lost their ideological groundings. The idealism and heroism the genre preaches, the idols and icons of its representation, and its aesthetic mode of the sublime all have boundaries that the market-oriented reproduction must honour.

On the other hand, the TV adaptations have to have a subversive thrust in order to sell to an increasingly critical and cynical audience. This is necessary for the following reasons: First, the reform ideology repudiates the language of class, the core ideology of

the Red Classics, and favours a development discourse and a more “scientific” explanation of inequality that favours strata rather than class. Secondly, the rigid political dogma—the high moral and heroic idealism promoted in the Red Classics—has been seriously eroded by consumerism in Chinese society. After 1989, there has been a growing sense of cynicism towards any political project among the general public. Deemed as highly political and repressive, the cultural institutions constructed under socialist realism and sublime aesthetics provide “a repertoire of speech patterns that are used for parody, subversive humour and inversion” (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 8) in the spirit of the carnivalesque. As such, transgression of the canonical works by bringing the “holy” down to the “ordinary” provides certain pleasures that the commercial reproductions can bank on.

Amid the political and ideological constraints, economic pressures, populist social sentiments, and audiences’ expectations of pleasure, these reproductions are necessarily a hybrid and their meanings necessarily polysemic. It is a representative product of the post-Mao period, reflecting the multiple cultural rules and ideological contradictions and tensions operating within one public space. The key issue here is not to ground it in a symmetrical structure of discourse and counter-discourse, or simply to recognise the cooptation between the state and the market, but to tease out the interplay of the official and the popular culture in transgressing the boundaries of official canonical works. For example, what strategies have been employed to generate public following for the adaptations? What aesthetic and ideological trends do these strategies reflect? What transgressions are considered adequate? How are socialist cultural norms both invoked and changed in the transgression?

Chapter 2: Hybridising the Red Classics in Post-Mao China: The Production and Consumption Context

As discussed in the Introduction, the canonisation of the revolutionary, historic genre was a deeply ideological process, backed by the aesthetic hegemony of socialist realism and the dominant interest groups of the time. As the social-economic power structure changed and new alliances were formed, the status and content of the Red Classics were naturally challenged and transformed. In Chapter 1, I examined the nature of this transformation from a theoretical and historical perspective. In this chapter, I set out to outline the broad context of the production and consumption of revolutionary culture in China in the reform era. This entails an outline of the negation of the Red Classics in the public arena immediately after the Cultural Revolution and their resurgence, albeit in a very different form, since the mid 1980s. I do so through four examples that illustrate and showcase the complex dynamics between the various forces at play. I want to demonstrate through these examples that the latest appropriation of the Red Classics is both the result of political and commercial pressures and the new hybrid challenges and breaks down the clear dichotomy between official culture and popular culture.

Historical context: Nostalgia and the Red Classics

The transformation of the Red Classics runs in tandem with the radical changes in the configuration of political, economic, and cultural capital in Chinese society. Soon after the Cultural Revolution, the principles of Maoism—class struggle, and continuous revolution—lost their appeal with the public. The factional struggles and political persecutions had led many to view the excesses of the past decade as highly destructive, and there emerged a strong demand for a “total negation” of the policies and practices of the era. China has since been through a “depoliticising process” that repudiated Mao’s ideology (H. Wang, 2006). The Red Classics, as a core component of the revolutionary culture, were mostly dismissed as ossified, anti-human propaganda works with little aesthetic or artistic value.

By the mid 1980s, the previously outmoded socialist icons started to come back again. Several factors contributed to this renewed interest in revolutionary culture. Since the

late 1970s, the CCP largely abandoned Mao's pursuit of revolutionary hegemony as an alternative modernity and adopted economic development as its main goal for modernisation. The pragmatic approach of developmentalism left an ideological vacuum. The old ideological system that had stressed revolutionary consciousness, and class struggle, along with its manifestation in the symbolic order, was deemed obsolete, but there were not many effective alternatives except vacuous materialism and hedonism. While the first few years of reform witnessed a surge of optimism in modernisation projects, a series of setbacks soon reset the mood. By the late 1980s, the widespread belief in what economic reform could deliver was soon replaced with anger and disillusion in the face of growing social disparity, corruption, and rising living costs (Lin, 2006; Selden & Lee, 2008; Selden & Perry, 2010; Solinger, 1993, 2002). A public dissatisfied with harsh economic competition in society looked back to the past with a sense of nostalgia and a longing for strong leadership, idealism, and egalitarianism, all principles eulogised in the Red Classics.

Secondly, revolutionary culture as a lived reality still had significant appeal in ordinary people's lives, especially those who grew up during the socialist era. This appeal often comes from an emotional attachment to revolutionary culture or a longing for its collective form.¹² Scholars have begun to examine the affective and emotional side of Maoist discourse (Y. Liu, 2010; Tang, 2000; B. Wang, 1997) and have argued from different angles that revolutionary public culture has helped to shape "the structure of feeling"¹³ for the generations of Chinese growing up from the 1950s to the 1970s. While the entertainment industry started to inundate the general public with sensational and sentimental private narratives, for some of the middle to old aged and people of low socio-economic status, the Red Classics were created with sincere emotions and expressed lofty moral ideas. As Liu Kang summarises:

The nostalgic indulgence and sentimentalism of the audience and popular media are indicative of a deep-seated popular sentiment for the revolutionary past,

¹² Liu Kang suggests that various forms of street dance popular among the elderly in the post-Mao era have their roots in the dancing balls of the revolutionary period. He also argues that the origin of karaoke can be traced to the collective forms of entertainment popular in the revolutionary period.

¹³ "Structure of feeling" is a term created by Raymond Williams in his *Marxism and Literature* (1977). It refers to the meanings and values as lived and felt, as well as the affective elements of consciousness and relations.

however fictional and imaginary, accompanied by an equally sentimental sense of loss of sincerity and innocence. (K. Liu, 2004, p. 94)

Furthermore, with global capitalism influencing all aspects of Chinese society, the need to look for local cultural resources and unique Chinese experiences has gained urgency. In this sense, the Red Classics have been recognised as a national cultural heritage as well as a popular commodity to be exploited for commercial gain. The reproduction of the Red Classics was a conscious act on the part of the market to cash in on audience nostalgia for a collective cultural memory (K. Liu, 2003).

Since the mid 1980s, revolutionary texts, signs, and objects shunned in the 1970s have gradually regained popularity. The nostalgia (Barmé, 1999) peaked in a “Mao Zedong fever” (*Mao Zedong re*), in which this god-like “saviour” was re-imagined, repackaged, and narrated as a humanistic figure in numerous popular novels, TV dramas, and films (J. Dai, 2004a). Revolutionary-themed blockbusters and TV dramas were produced, backed by huge government investment; dozens of biographies, as well as numerous audio and video productions, enjoyed phenomenal success. In 1993, for instance, the government initiated a series of large-scale events to commemorate the centenary birthday of Mao. The Pacific Video and Audio Publishing Company, seeing the opportunity to cash in on these events, came up with the idea to publish a cassette with 30 revolutionary songs sung by popular singers with modern electronic accompaniment. With a next-to-nothing production budget, the cassette sold 7.2 million copies (W. Chen, 2009). Many families, all by now equipped with hi-fi CD players, bought cassette players just to listen to this tape. Since then, revolutionary songs have been constantly re-appropriated and have now formed a genre of pop songs known as Red Songs, or *hong ge* in Chinese.

The sentiment behind the “Mao Fever” articulates ordinary people’s desire for moral leadership and authority in the face of the breakdown of socialist ideologies and moral values. However, one cannot overlook the state’s role in this collective rewriting of Mao. Sensing an opportunity to reinstate its legitimacy, the government joined hands with the market in turning Mao, a God-like figure, into an ordinary man. As Dai Jinhua

astutely pointed out, the “Mao fever” in the 1990s “constituted a successful ideological operation as well as an act to consume ideology” (J. Dai, 2004a, p. 68).

Critiquing the Red Classics: the 1980s

Following Wang Ban’s (2004) insightful analysis of practices of remembering socialist history in China, one can discern two phases—the 1980s and the 1990s—in the engagement of the revolutionary past. According to Wang, in the 1980s, memories of the utopian revolutionary period had a critical sense of history and recognised the relevance of the revolutionary past in the reality of the reform era. The socialist past was often invoked in criticisms of the dystopian 1980s, awash in the world of materialism, corruption, alienation, loss of community, and moral decadence. Consequently, the resurgence of socialist cultural symbols was not without controversy. One example is the fierce debate surrounding the re-staging of *Yangbanxi* after it was banned from the public by the CCP after the Cultural Revolution. *Yangbanxi* refers to the revolutionary-themed Peking Operas that were propagated as model artistic works and widely popularised during the Cultural Revolution. Because of its highly politicised content and close association with Jiang Qing, Mao’s discredited wife and major political player during the era, *Yangbanxi* was taken as a symbol of earlier political traumas. As a result, any mention of the art form was politically taboo in the early reform days. “It makes me tingle with fear every time I hear the word *Yangbanxi*,” Ba Jin, the famous writer who was tortured during the political purges of the Cultural Revolution, said after he heard of the reappearance of *Yangbanxi*. His remark was widely echoed across society. The incident is indicative of the sensitive nature of the appropriation of the Red Classics genre in the 1980s.

A well-publicised example of the critical appropriation of revolutionary canonical works is China’s rock father Cui Jian’s rendition of *The Southern Muddy Bay* [*Nanniwan*]. *Nanniwan* is a desolate area near the former Communist headquarters, Yan’an. In 1942, the 359th brigade of the Eighth Route Army was deployed to open up virgin land to help the revolutionary base area become self-sufficient. It was hailed as a great undertaking in Communist history, and a song was commissioned in the traditional folk melody of northern Shaanxi in 1943. When Cui Jian was invited to perform for the annual official TV gala in 1987, he sang the song in a way that was distinctively different from the

celebratory tone of the original version. Not only did he leave out the stanza that hails the achievement of the brigade, but he also used a number of musical devices to make it sound sad, as if lamenting the changes made to Nanniwan by the Communist army (Huot, 2000). The performance offended Wang Zhen, commander of the 359th brigade, and cost Cui Jian his job. However, Cui Jian made a decision to sing the song in nearly every important gig after the ban was imposed. Cui's *Nanniwan* has since become a symbol of defiance. The incident provides an example of how the appropriation of revolutionary canonical works could open up space for subversion of the official historiography in the 1980s. It also showcases how the meaning of place is contested in the post-revolutionary age.

In the first phase of the revival of revolutionary culture, there was a genuine analysis of how the socialist utopian project led to the impoverishment of everyday experience. The public, especially intellectuals, came to realise that the authoritarian political culture had deprived them of pleasure, emotions, and desires (B. Wang, 2004). Cultural elites were engaged in heated debates on alienation, humanism in Marx's earlier writings, and the restoration of individual subjectivity (J. Wang, 1996).¹⁴ In the realm of literature and art, the Maoist policies were seen as limiting creative expression by imposing narrowly defined aesthetic standards. The collective, uniform identity based on class collapsed in ruin, "with no reliable system of ideology to sustain a liveable existence and identity" (B. Wang, 2004). The society experienced a sense of "spiritual crisis."

Commercialising the Red Classics: The 1990s

By the early 1990s, China underwent a series of further transformations. After the political upheaval in June 1989, the leftists blamed the reform policy for loosening up ideological control. Nevertheless, Deng Xiaoping quickly reaffirmed the CCP's determination to further China's reform and marketisation. On an inspection tour of south China in 1992, Deng made a speech in which he criticised the conservatives for quibbling over political name-branding and called for the reformists to be "a bit bolder" and to move forward "a bit quicker." After that, the government seemed to fully embrace capitalism in everything but name. In line with Deng's policy of "no argument

¹⁴ The New Left scholar Wang Hui (2003) has argued that the intellectual movement of the 1980s has a complicit relationship with the state's modernisation project and reform agenda, despite its self-claimed autonomous stance.

over ideology,” the CCP began to place all its emphasis on economic development. This led to a cultural weariness about politics and ideology, and cultural formations quickly shifted ground.

The criticisms of Maoist culture had gone by now. Private experience and sensual pleasure were not taboo but rather routine subjects. The catch phrase was, “Follow your feeling” (*genzhe ganjue zou*), as one of the most popular songs of the time preached. After the calls for democracy, anti-corruption, and political reform were crushed in the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Square repression, politics was shunned as a subject in everyday life. Rofel (2007) observes that post-Mao culture is characterised by two interlinking processes: the purging of policies seen as repressing human nature; and the positive embracing of people’s sexual, material, and affective self-interest, which help foster a cosmopolitan humanity. The 1990s witnessed an intensification of the second process. By that time, China’s cultural scene was no longer dominated by state-funded propaganda and entertainment promoting the Party’s primacy in history and political doctrine. A consumer revolution had engulfed China, transforming urban life and marginalised writers and artists who searched for the “pure literature and art.”¹⁵ There was a sense of loss among the intelligentsia in the early 1990s, as they were no longer entrusted with the mandate of social responsibility, idealism, and conscience. High cultural forms such as literature no longer shouldered the mission of “saviour” of society. With dwindling government funding for serious literature and art, the intellectuals voiced their concern over total commercialisation. In 1993, a public discussion on the “loss of humanistic spirit” was initiated by a group of Shanghai-based intellectuals. The debate lasted for two years, but by the end of the mid 1990s, most writers, artists, and intellectuals were forced to live with the commercialised reality and to give up their posturing as the guardians of social conscience, moral ideals, and aesthetic standards. Many eagerly joined in the battle to gain a foothold in the burgeoning popular art market (J. Wang, 1996).

¹⁵ Link (2000, p. 319) points out that “pure art” was defined negatively as “non-Maoist, non-political, non-didactic and non-instrumental,” a counter reaction to the extreme oppressive political culture in the high Maoist era.

In the meantime, the cultural industry gradually adopted the model of transnational production, marketing, and consumption (S. Lu, 2000). Imports from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the West swamped the cultural market. Popular culture encroached into official culture and transformed it into a kind of “politico-tainment” (Barmé, 1999, p. 244). Just as often, the Party repackaged its agenda in a glitzy, consumer-friendly form to better appeal to the masses, now more commonly known as customers. The boundary between official culture and nonofficial culture had been greatly eroded.

In the 1990s, the appropriation of revolutionary culture accelerated and became more acceptable. Following the Mao Zedong fever, an interest in “red” culture became a fad. The Red Classics, being an important component of the propaganda tools used to engineer socialist citizens’ consciousness, were the target for commercial exploitation. The Party saw this populist take on socialist icons as an opportunity to reinforce political pedagogy and to reiterate its historical legitimacy, which had become more and more sidelined in a consumer society. For the commercial sectors, the revival of revolutionary culture offered a market opportunity. In the mid to late 1990s, the restaging of the ballet versions of *The White-haired Girl*, *The Red Detachment of Women* and the musical version of *The Long March Song Cycle* [*Changzheng zuge*] were sensational successes, attracting large audiences (Zhang, 2007). Sensing that it would please both the authorities and the market, in 1997, People’s Literature Press republished a number of revolutionary novels from the 1950s and 1960s under the title, “The Red Classics Series.” This seemed to fan the “red craze” even further. The name “Red Classics” became more widely used in both official and commercial discourse.

It is not only the profit-driven commercial production units that were engaged in tapping into the revolutionary culture. Commercially-oriented practices, such as global advertising techniques, and even elements of avant-garde art had been co-opted in transforming the style of the CCP’s ideological promotion. Barmé has referred to this updated form of propaganda as “corporate communism” (1999, p. 251). Contrary to the popular belief that commodification of the socialist sign system would lead to the weakening or diversification of Party control, he argues that repackaging Party culture to compete in the marketplace has actually strengthened the Party’s domination. Barmé backs up his claim with several astutely made observations: First, the Party’s adoption of rhetorical and representational devices from popular culture, language, and images

desensitise the public to the power structure behind the propaganda. Second, the Party maintains strict control over the mass media and thus is able to patrol the boundaries of the commercial appropriation of its sign system to a large extent. Third, media workers growing up in the post-Mao era are well versed in both the Party culture and nonofficial culture. Through their efforts, the Party's view of history, nationhood, and identity has been turned into a pool of signs that Party propagandists can draw on. Fourth, the state-funded arts and propaganda industry and the Chinese avant-garde have a symbiotic existence, each relying on the other for ideas and representational styles. The end product is commodified avant-garde art packaged in political cynicism aiming at the international market and propaganda that looks innovative and "modern" (1999, pp. 252-253).

Scholars have tried to describe the revival of revolutionary culture in the second stage as a postmodern (Mcgrath, 2008) or late-revolutionary (Tao, 2008c) phenomenon. Tao states that, on the one hand, revolutionary culture in this period was not intended for campaign-style ideological mobilisation or the promotion of socialist asceticism; on the other hand, this particular version of Party culture could not lead to critical subversion of the Party-sanctioned public truths, because the state system and the form of government have remained unchanged. The revival is the result of marketisation, the secularisation of social life, and the rise of the entertainment and cultural industries working in tandem. The revived revolutionary culture relies on rewriting and appropriation, while incorporating motifs, styles, icons, techniques, and practices from the thriving commercial culture. Therefore, the end product is a spontaneous one, which is "commercially enhanced and manufactured, not merely state-directed," as Barmé (1999, p. 319) argues.

The official promotion of revolutionary culture has continued since 1989, while at the same time appropriating "red culture" in commercial spaces has been commonplace. These appropriations often resemble postmodern culture in that the old socialist icons are taken out of context and juxtaposed. Wedding companies provide ceremonies in the Cultural Revolution style, with couples dressing up in army soldier uniforms, performing the loyalty dance and bowing to the picture of Mao Zedong. These were daily political rituals during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution (Shangdu.com, 2010). In the eastern suburb of Beijing, the popularity of a restaurant called "Red Classics" has

never been greater. The main entrance is flanked by red flags. Inside, the roof is covered with newspapers, the typical interior decorating style during the Cultural Revolution, and big revolution-themed posters featuring workers, peasants, and soldiers, while a bust of Mao is displayed on the walls. Every evening from seven to eight o'clock, the restaurant staff are dressed in "red guard" uniforms or other period clothes and perform on a stage at the side of the restaurant. With a 300-seat capacity and no public transport available, it still attracts loads of customers—diners have to book well in advance in order to get a seat (J.S.D.J.com, n.d). Meanwhile, "red tours" have become a fashionable tourist trend. Guang'an, a small town in Sichuan Province where the late president Deng Xiaoping was born, created a travel route called "Deng Xiaoping Hometown Tour." The travel route drew 5.4 million travellers and earned a whopping 1.7 billion yuan (\$ 253 million) in 2004. Although a place with nearly nothing else of interest except Deng's birthplace, Guang'an has become one of the three most toured sites in Sichuan, a province famous for its many beautiful scenic spots and historical sites (F. Yang, 2005). Pilgrimage to revolutionary sites was a tradition in the Maoist era. However, in the case of "red tours," it is worth mentioning that many of these tours are organised and sponsored by CCP institutions at the local level in order, for example, to pass on the revolutionary legacy to Youth League members or commemorate the founding of the Party. In such instances, even though the tourist is largely motivated by a free trip, the authorities are happy to foot the bill, as the act of participating in these events still validates the Party's existence, even just at a symbolic level. It is quite hard to say who is taking whom for a ride. The ambiguous aim of the revolutionary tours is very indicative of the compromise each party is pushed to make in the appropriation of the "red."

The popularity of the "red" element is not confined to the street. On the screen, television advertisements, as the best embodiment of commercial culture, frequently evoke powerful red symbols to sell products. In recent years, a great number of Red Classics novels, films, and plays have been adapted into television drama series. The first adaptation, *The Making of a Hero*, was quite well received. The popularity of *The Making of a Hero* signalled the beginning of the "adaptation craze." TV producers quickly jumped onto the Red Classics bandwagon. A niche market had become the primary focus of many aspiring investors. Revolutionary and heroic stories were transformed into products for consumers. From 2002 to 2004, more than 40 TV drama

series with a total of 850 parts were produced. Nearly every single popular work in the genre now has a television version. Most of these reproductions were instant commercial successes, attracting a reasonably large audience, with a few achieving a viewing rate of about 10 percent.¹⁶

The reinvention of the Red Classics could easily be identified as a post-modern phenomenon (X. Chen, 1997; K. Liu, 2004; Mcgrath, 2008; Tao, 2008c). In many ways, it does bear the marks of post-modernity—the flattening of historical depth and the de-contextualisation and displacement of the original images. However, as many scholars have reminded us, post-modernity exists in China in a different way compared with the Western context (S. Lu, 2000b; N. Wang, 2000). On the one hand, modernity is still an unachieved project in China, and the intellectual elites are still calling for the renewal of the Enlightenment mission. On the other hand, socialist revolution, as a large-scale modernity project, has left a legacy that is more than just residual. Its appeal and relevance to the Chinese public, especially the middle-aged and low-income population, cannot be denied (K. Liu, 2004). This partly explains the success of several television drama adaptations of the Red Classics, such as *The Red Crag* and the TV soap, *Days of Burning Passion*. It is also why rewriting the genre in powerful narrative forms like TV generates much anxiety, fear, hope, criticism, praise, and many mixed feelings among various sectors of Chinese society. It is over-simplistic to view the reinvention as political pop¹⁷ (*zhengzhi bopu*) and to interpret the phenomenon as the complete triumph of global capitalism or the retreat of a bygone revolutionary discourse in the face of commercialisation. The process whereby politics makes room for the market is replete with tensions and contradictions. The reinvention of the Red Classics has become a perfect example of the marriage of free capital and state power and a focal point for ideological struggles by various interest groups. State ideology and the market coincide, contest, compromise, and intertwine, producing a complex cultural scene. The real issue is, “to what ideological end such kinds of public sentiment serve to reinforce

¹⁶ According to statistics provided by China Central Television (CCTV), the ratings for *The Making of a Hero* were 9-12 percent across the country. *Shajiabang* captured around 10 percent of TV audiences in the Beijing area on its first airing, and *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* achieved about the same rate.

¹⁷ “Political pop” is a term coined by critic Li Xianting in his 1991 article, “Apathy and Deconstructive Consciousness in Post-1989 Art.” It describes a social trend in the 1990s, when artists began to make connections between the ideological and iconic status attributed to Mao Zedong and the fetishisation of consumer commodities. An artistic movement emerged thereafter, characterised by a satirical treatment of Maoist subjects and style by using Pop Art techniques (X. Li, 2004, pp. 475-476).

or to undermine and to what extent the revolutionary nostalgia is manipulated by different power blocs and interest groups” (K. Liu, 2004, p. 94).

The spectrum of gray: the cultural politics in appropriating red culture

In the following section, I want to explore how red culture is creatively reinvented through media for official, elite, and popular amusement. Furthermore, I seek to demonstrate how various forces have come into play in the appropriation of red culture. The re-emergence of red culture is driven by a complex combination of factors, including the commercial need to tap into a rich cultural resource, the nostalgic desire to look into the past for a lost utopia, and the Communist Party’s attempt to develop its ideology in a world awash with materialism. In detailing the process of reinventing the red, I want to demonstrate that the evocation of a revolutionary past entails highly complex articulations, cultural negotiations, and contention over meanings, beliefs, and values. These diverse cultural configurations and media appropriations defy the simple bifurcation of “red” versus “black” and come into view as a kind of “gray”¹⁸ with many subtle shades, which I call the spectrum of gray.

The four events that I describe here provide us with a window into the issues involved in reinventing revolutionary culture. The first example demonstrates how the commercial and the official co-opted each other in producing *The Making of a Hero*, the first TV drama serial adaptation of the Red Classics. The second focuses on another genre, the 52-part reality TV show *My Long March* [*Wo de changzheng*] created as part of the official celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the Long March. In my view, this example showcases the appropriation of the “red” by the mainstream media for the masses. The third example is the making of the film *Sister Jiang* [*Jiang jie*], a Peking opera remake based on one of the most popular revolutionary fictions, directed by Zhang Yuan. A guerrilla film director who has won a number of international awards, but whose works are mostly banned by the Chinese government because of the taboo topics he deals with, Zhang Yuan’s move to focus on the Red Classics genre generated wide public interest. An independent director dabbling in the orthodox official culture

¹⁸ Barmé used the “gray” to describe the prevailing sentiments of the early 1990s. These sentiments included the “doubtful, ironic, lackadaisical and the cynical elements of society” (1999, p. 100). The gray sentiments resulted from the complex negotiation between orthodox Party culture and the rising commercial culture, represented by popular culture originating from Hong Kong and Taiwan, avant-garde culture and youth culture.

with dubious intentions, Zhang Yuan's Red Classics adventure represents the complex relationship between the Chinese avant-garde and the Red Classics. The last case is the spoofing and parodying of a few revolutionary classics in the Internet film, *The Shining Red Star* [*Shanshan de hongxing*]. The spoofing of the Red classics is an outright commercial act for its sensational value, but it is not without political significance. The event caused the Communist authorities to intervene and regulate the rewriting of revolutionary icons. The ideological stances adopted by various sectors of the general public are indexical of the range of opinions in society toward what can or cannot be done in rewriting the Red Classics.

The first Red Classics adaptation: The Making of a Hero

Revolutionary-themed TV drama series made up a high percentage of the total drama productions from the 1980s to the 1990s. However, the first TV reinvention of the original Red Classics genre is generally considered to be *The Making of a Hero* because it was a direct adaptation of the literary, film, and theatrical works of the Red Classics genre.

The Making of a Hero provides an interesting case to examine in at least three respects: First, its ratings success inspired other TV production units to tap into the Red Classics for subject materials, thus setting the trend for the TV reproduction of the genre. When CCTV broadcast it in 1999, it scooped a sizable audience, with a peak viewing rate of about 12 percent (Hu, 2000).¹⁹ Secondly, the airing of *The Making of a Hero* set off heated public debate on the ideological meaning and values of revolutionary culture in commercialised China. This debate, facilitated by the news media, ran throughout the course of the production over the next few years. Thirdly, the process of its creation and the rendering of the text embody the complicated contradictions and co-optations between the state, the public, the domestic entertainment industries, and transnational corporations, a common feature characterising productions of this genre in the years following. Given the significance of *The Making of a Hero* as an example of the dramatic adaptation of the Red Classics, it is worthwhile to take a close look at how the project was developed and the complexity of its production and representation.

¹⁹ Competition within the TV drama category is high. The rating for an average soap opera is about 4 to 5 percent.

The project to remake *The Making of a Hero* provides a good example of how a commercial venture to seek profit and social impact was co-opted by the state (Yu, 2000; Zhao, 2008a). In early 1998, Vanke Film and Television Co. Ltd.²⁰ proposed a television drama to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic and celebrate the new millennium. In choosing the topic, the investors put forward several criteria: they wanted to have a large-scale project of high artistic standard worthy of Vanke's status (Yu, 2000). After much deliberation, the producer chose to adapt a novel penned by Nicholas Ostravski in 1929.

Choosing to develop this project satisfied several demands. First of all, as a successful enterprise in Shenzhen, the forefront of economic reform, Vanke needed the cultural capital to make it a brand name. This meant mining thematic material that was not only commercially viable, but also socially respectable (Yu, 2000). In this regard, a well-scrubbed mainstream project dedicated to a significant social and political event like the anniversary of the nation was safer than a purely commercial, frivolously themed TV soap or controversial, "downbeat" social drama.

Perhaps more importantly, Vanke as a business expected economic returns for its investment. Although the decision to make a TV drama was an avowedly commercial act, many of the producer's considerations indeed reflected a desire for profit. Before shooting started, director Zheng Kainan and her crew were convinced that there was a market niche for *The Making of a Hero*, as the book remained a bestseller in the PRC over several decades (Ren, 2000). It remained on the list of books recommended to youth by government ideological organisations after the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, the targeted audience was people who had grown up with the influence of Soviet culture in the 1950s and 1960s.

Another reason behind the decision to adapt *The Making of a Hero* was Zheng's personal opinion that China was ready for a TV drama with an all-foreign cast. Zheng was conscious of the fact that it had been common practice for foreign companies to finance TV or film production with a Chinese cast for cheaper labour. Now backed by

²⁰ Vanke Film and Television Co. Ltd. was formerly Vanke Cultural Communication Co. Ltd. Established in 1992, the company specialises in film and television planning and production. It has branches in Beijing and Hong Kong. See <http://mt.vanke.com/>.

the capital accumulated through economic reform, Vanke had the capacity to do the reverse (Guan, 2005). The idea was trumpeted across the media as a selling point, providing an example of how national sentiments are packaged for the market.

The potential for commercial benefit and social impact with *The Making of a Hero* was not missed by the state. According to Yu (2000), who conducted extensive research on the production process, it was the Shenzhen Municipal Publicity Department (SMPD) that gave the project a final push when Vanke was still weighing the pros and cons of taking up such a subject matter. The department fully embraced the concept and even decided to co-sponsor the shooting. In February 1999, SMPD reported to its superior, the Central Publicity Department (CPD), about the project. Officials from CPD gave detailed instructions on the appropriate focus of the drama and its rendering. The arrival of the state propaganda agency on the production scene contributed a measure of official flavour to the project. This official affiliation was further strengthened when CCTV joined in later on. Shortly after shooting started in Ukraine, the crew realised that additional funding was needed. On the advice of SMPD, Zheng Kainan approached CCTV to negotiate a deal. As a result, CCTV and its affiliate, China International Television Company (CITC), became investors in the project. Under the new arrangement, Vanke withdrew from its role as producer and became the production undertaker (Yu, 2000).

One thing worth pointing out is that CCTV's claim on ownership was not only based on the drama's potential social impact, but also on its potential to reap economic benefits. In an interview with *Beijing Youth Gazette*, CCTV was confident about getting back its investment through primetime commercial tie-ins with the show. As the distributor, CITC expected to gain through VCD merchandising and selling reruns to provincial and local TV stations (Yu, 2000). Thus, the change in ownership of *The Making of a Hero* should not be viewed as the hijacking of an independent, commercial production by a state agency and mainstream television for propaganda purposes. Rather, it should be viewed primarily as an attempt to achieve competitive advantage in the prime-time marketplace.

In keeping with the prevailing distaste for ideological indoctrination, the final product made two major changes to the original novel (Yu, 2000; Zhao, 2008a, p. 218): Firstly, it discarded the original portrayal of Pavel Korchagin as a quintessentially positive hero, instead depicting him as an ordinary person who struggled hard against adversity. Secondly, the adaptation to a large degree “purged” the irreconcilable class rift between Pavel and his first love, Tonya Tumanova. The relationship was impossible in the novel because Pavel was a proletarian soldier, while Tonya was an untransformed bourgeois. Since the 1990s, class and class struggle were abandoned or shunned as a mainstream ideological discourse in favour of consumerist values in popular representation. The romance between the hero and heroine in this TV adaptation was thus rewritten according to the mainstream ideology to fall nicely within the traditional Hollywood formula of immortal love surpassing class and family background.

An important observation can be made based on the account above. The production of *The Making of a Hero* was neither completely propaganda-driven nor completely market-oriented. While China’s complicated cultural production environment dictates that there can be many non-commercial considerations in the production of TV dramas, the concern over ratings and, thus, advertising revenue, is a salient factor even in bona fide state TV drama production units like CCTV.

The Making of a Hero embodies, in many ways, the state and market dynamics in the reproduction of the Red Classics. Private production units such as Vanke now constitute the mainstay of TV drama capacity. In 2003, these private companies made up 90 percent of the production force and 80 percent of the total investment in TV drama production (Zhao, 2008a). While private players such as Vanke may be proud of their newly achieved prowess, the state, however, still pulls the strings in many respects. As discussed above, Vanke’s choice of subject took into account the state’s nominal support for “main melody” dramas. Riding on the fanfare of an important official event, the project allowed Vanke to earn the social status it needed, and the subject matter made it easier to pass censorship. Vanke also intended to feed off the institutionalisation of state culture. The state project of promoting the Red Classics over the decades could translate into viewers’ interest, therefore ratings. CCTV’s “hijacking” of the project provides a footnote on how the state broadcaster “serves as a secondary center of power in shaping

private television drama production and distribution” (Zhao, 2008a, p, 215). As the national broadcaster, CCTV’s scheduling power dictates the terms and conditions of entry for private drama producers. For Vanke, co-production with CCTV guarantees the much-coveted prime-time drama spot on the national broadcaster. For CCTV, the collaboration makes it possible to absorb private capital and production techniques in producing a drama series that might resonate with popular taste and public sensibility.

From the Party’s march to my march: the transformation of the spirit and format of the Long March

The year 2006 marked the 70th anniversary of the Long March, the Communist’s massive military retreat from Jiangxi Province to the northwest from 1934 to 1935. The journey, which traversed some 13,500 kilometres and lasted 370 days, represents a significant episode in the history of the Communist Party. After the Long March, Mao Zedong established his status as Party leader over the decades to come. To commemorate the event, CCTV organised a re-marching of the Long March and shortly after ran a weekly 52-part reality show documenting the new march on its news channel.

My Long March was promoted as the most important program in CCTV’s News Department in 2006. A high-profile propaganda initiative, its official mission was to reinforce Party symbolism. However, in the age of television, when viewers can easily “kill” the image with a flick of the fingers, any ideological hard sell would prove to be self-defeating. Even if CCTV is a monopoly enjoying state financial support, it still must generate its primary financial income. Faced with the increasing pressure to bring in funding and sponsorship and to remain relevant in the cultural market, it has to join the battle for ratings as the sector becomes commercialised.

In the case of *My Long March*, the hunt for money was even more crucial. The program was the brainchild of Cui Yongyuan, a CCTV talk show host who enjoys fame in China similar to that of Oprah Winfrey in the United States. As proposed by Cui, and as the trial of a new production system, the program was going to be made in “commission” format (*zhi bo fen li*), which meant that the production of the program had to seek its own funds, while CCTV was only committed to the broadcasting rights. On top of the 30 million yuan (\$500,000) production budget, the producer of the program also aimed

to raise 16 million yuan (\$267, 000) to set up 25 hospitals and 50 primary schools along the route of the Long March. Producer Cui was well aware of the implications of this approach for the ratings of the program. In an interview with the *New Beijing Gazette*, Cui remarked, “If the program turns out to be crappy, then nobody would bother to invest money into it. Without funds, the quality of the program will slip further. Later on, you cannot stay in the trade” (Chang, 2006).

With Cui’s reputation, and in conjunction with the status of CCTV’s news channel and the social significance of the event, the crew encountered very few problems attracting the initial funds and financial sponsorship. However, the producers knew that a documentary done in the old buttoned-up style and preaching didactic Party lines would not appeal to the increasingly sophisticated needs of the consumers. In fact, *My Long March* is anything but crude Party propaganda. It is quite hard to categorise it into any pre-packaged television format. In a way, it is a strange variant of *Survivor*, with staid Party ideological elements interspersed here and there, and at times it reminds people of the reality show, *Big Brother*. *My Long March*’s format innovation was also a result of the changes in the TV industry. Commercialisation, structural changes and technological advancement in the TV industry in the 1990s led to a proliferation of television stations and channels at different administrative levels. With multiple under-funded, small-scale television stations competing head-to-head with each other, TV producers turned to genre imitation and, later, format appropriation for a quick, low-cost fix (Keane, 2002). Reality shows and lifestyle TV programs play a central role in TV stations’ efforts to build their brand and viewership. For example, in 2005, Hunan satellite launched *Super Girl*, a talent show fashioned after the format of *American Idol*. This quickly became the most-watched TV show in China, bringing in huge financial gain and spawning a number of copycat spin-offs across the country (Sun, 2007). Driven by the ratings race, even CCTV is forced to create its own reality shows.

My Long March is organised around the concept of humanism instead of any overt political message. This is clearly evident in the mission statement of the program:

The “Long March spirit” has become symbolic of the positive and enterprising spirit for individuals and even the Chinese nationality. Its significance has surpassed its time. Re-marching the route is not only a way to challenge personal limitations, but also a way to relive the unique historical event in an authentic

way, enabling us to experience vividly the difficult yet great revolutionary course of our older generation. (X. Feng, 2006)

From this statement one can see that the significance of the Long March is translated into a modernist/Enlightenment discourse. It is now valued from very different angles: an individual enterprising spirit, self-fulfillment, the challenging of physical and psychological limits, human experience, and achievement. None of these notions serves the official claim that “it is a response to the call of the central government to better pass on and spread the red culture” (X. Feng, 2006).

Starting from these concepts, the program is organised around a self-centered individual, who re-marches the route, interviewing old Long March soldiers and observing the changes in the regions along the route, while at the same time experiencing first-hand the hardships and heroism of the March. This individual follows ordinary people’s living conditions and life experiences, the local customs, folk culture, local livelihoods and social development. The purpose of the re-march is to reflect history, but it is also future-oriented. Except for the sporadic moments when the team members of the new march paid homage to the Red Army soldiers who died on the route, there is not much recounting of the experience of the previous Long March. The 45-minute program is divided into two parts: In the first 25 minutes, the audiences see how the team members were challenged physically and psychologically by marching and the interpersonal dynamics between the 22 team members, selected from different socio-economic and educational background in different age groups; in the second half, it focuses on the public-good activities. Here, the struggle between the Kuomintang and the Communists, which was essentially ideological and class-based, is supplanted by philanthropic activities, another example of the grafting of humanist discourse onto revolutionary themes.

My Long March transgresses the boundaries of the official revolutionary genre in at least three areas: First, the organisation of the production incorporated market mechanisms, such as the commission strategy. Even though CCTV had largely turned into an advertising-financed system by then, it was still a remarkable experiment for the news channel to risk conceding safeguards against commercial interests, especially when the program deals with the revolutionary legacy. To allow for maximum editorial control over the content, the government usually funds programs made to commemorate

a revolutionary event with great symbolic impact. Secondly, the content of the show is a far cry from the usual reiteration of the spirit and significance of the Long March. The TV producers had tried to connect two diametrically opposed discourses, that of Maoist revolutionary spirit and that of neoliberal individualism and humanity. In this grafting process, the ideas of collectivism, class struggle, and indomitable revolutionary spirit were largely reconceptualised as teamwork, perseverance in pursuing one's goal, the willingness to challenge oneself, and physical and psychological prowess, all of which are qualities necessary for survival in the competitive capitalist society. Thirdly, the format of the program is also participatory and interactive. Instead of a documentary format, which was usually adopted for such occasions, the reality show has a more informal, accessible presentation style. The spontaneity of the format has a less authoritative tone and the program's perspective on the contemporary relevance of the Long March may have provided some sanctuary from stringent censorship. It seems to represent a more populist attempt by CCTV to become more attuned to popular interests and tastes.

From underground to high ground: Zhang Yuan's operatic Sister Jiang

Director Zhang Yuan is most noted for setting himself apart from the mainstream art scene in China. After graduating from the Beijing Film Academy in 1989, Zhang Yuan rose to international art stardom after he directed a number of socially sensitive dramas, most notably *Beijing Bastards* [*Beijing zaizhong*] and *East Palace, West Palace* [*Donggong xigong*]. The former depicts, in a starkly realistic manner, a group of Beijing's underground rock stars and teenagers. The unsteady and blurry images of young people drinking alcohol, cursing, and engaging in sex became Zhang's signature style and were destined to be banned by the censors. The movie was never released publicly because of this censorship. The latter film focuses on the persecution of the gay community by the police, possibly an equally controversial topic. A copy of the film was smuggled to the 1997 Cannes Film Festival and became known as the first film dealing with homosexuality in China. It was Zhang's fifth feature and the fourth in a row banned in China. Zhang was placed under house arrest briefly for making this film and his passport was seized. These and a number of other controversial films earned Zhang Yuan the reputation as an iconoclastic sixth-generation director. For years he remained on the official blacklist of directors who were "not to be financed, supplied

with equipment or services or in any other way supported by companies and individuals” (SARFT, 1994).

In 2002, Zhang baffled both the film critics and his followers by directing a film version of the Peking Opera *Sister Jiang*. Jiang Jie is the key figure of the historic-revolutionary novel, *The Red Crag*. The novel tells the story of a group of underground Communists who, after being betrayed by a traitor, were captured and tortured in the military camp of the Kuomintang in central China. Often described as “the Revelation of Communist Belief,” or “the textbook of revolution” (Y. Li, 2003, p. 178), *The Red Crag* probably enjoyed a publication record of more than 10 million copies since it was first published in 1961, a figure unparalleled by any other Chinese novel in the 20th century. In a sense, we can safely assume that *The Red Crag* contributed to the formation of the Chinese national psyche. In fact, an opera adaptation of *Sister Jiang* was planned by the government as part of the official celebrations to mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party²¹.

Given the highly “red” background of *Sister Jiang*, it is no surprise that Zhang Yuan’s decision to direct the film immediately caught the attention of the public. To most of his admirers, Zhang Yuan is a critic of the socialist regime, or at least a marginalised artist who refuses to cooperate with officialdom. Apart from his talent, his political stance is undoubtedly the reason why he was named one of the world’s top 100 young leaders of the 21st century by the *Time Magazine*. The initial speculation was that Zhang was going to create an Andy Warhol version of *Sister Jiang*. To everybody’s surprise, Zhang’s response was to be faithful to the original interpretation. He stated that “the Peking Opera representation of *Sister Jiang* is ‘expressionistic’ and ‘deconstructive’ enough. I don’t feel it is necessary to play these juvenile tricks. All I have to do is to bring out its brilliance” (Hang & Wei, 2002).

Ultimately, the film, even though fairly well rendered, is only mediocre in terms of cinematography, artistic imagination, and ideological depth. It basically adopts the viewpoint of an orchestral conductor with some changes in camera view. The

²¹ In 2010, a television drama version of *Jiang Jie* was broadcast on CCTV Channel One.

disappointed followers then questioned Zhang Yuan's motivation to make a mainstream film. Many criticised him as "making show of revolution."

However, Zhang Yuan claimed repeatedly he was "dead serious" about making the film. He told *New Weekly* that he strongly identified with utopian ideals just like Sister Jiang, and that he was a firm socialist. He stated:

We were once so moved by heroism and revolutionary romanticism when we were little. I believe these sentiments have become an integral part of our body for our generation. I hope this film will again stir up the passion of that era. One has to have ideals and faith. My own films rarely moved me, but when I heard Sister Jiang's words, "I wouldn't become a communist if I fear death," tears came to my eyes immediately. I want to convey this feeling to people of our era and let them know what a hero is, what revolution is and what revolutionary romanticism is... I love the Communist Party. Equality and freedom is my lifelong goal. You'll find these in *Sister Jiang*. (Zhang, as cited in Hang & Wei, 2002)

Born in 1963, Zhang must have grown up with stories like *Sister Jiang*, one of the few officially endorsed revolutionary-themed stories available at that time. Maybe there is an element of sincerity in his explanation of his motivation. Nevertheless, revolutionary romanticism and heroism in today's context will always be manipulated by both ideology and the media. The sincerity of Zhang's approach towards heroism and romanticism did not prevent him from successfully transforming the production into a fashionable cultural phenomenon. For the contemporary Chinese audience, the combination of "revolution" and Peking Opera has a special reference in Chinese history. Highly ideological in its total emphasis on the class struggle between the proletariat and the ruling class, the Peking Opera model works were metonymic of the ideological control of the Communist Party towards artistic production. For that reason, all eight works were banned from public viewing in the years immediately after the Cultural Revolution. Zhang was aware of that fact and so were the audiences.

Given Zhang Yuan's wilful disobedience in the face of official intervention and disregard for official ideology in the past, the production of the operatic film *Jiang Jie* was taken by the government as a gesture of returning to the mainstream, of a rebel who

accepts amnesty.²² The film was premiered in the hall of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the events were covered by swarms of reporters. Ironically, it was in the international arena where Zhang used to win his fame that he failed to come up with a language to get his message through to his audience. *Sister Jiang* was invited to take part in the Cologne Art Festival in Germany. However, the German audience, operating under the discourse of human rights, could not understand why Sister Jiang would not surrender to the enemy when the Communists were going to win the Civil War (1946-1949) in no time. Nor could they help but sympathise with the Party traitor Pu Zhigao, knowing that he was going to be killed by the Communist Party if he surrendered to the enemy or killed by the Nationalists if he did not.²³

After failing to explain the Communist faith of Sister Jiang to the German audience, Zhang Yuan finally had to make do with a common reference—he explained that Sister Jiang was like the French Joan of Arc. She is a saint and therefore has to be beyond reproach morally (X. Feng, 2006). It is hard to know whether this explanation convinced the German audience of the necessity of Sister Jiang's martyrdom, but the night when Zhang Huoding, the actor who plays Sister Jiang, came to meet the audience, the applause lasted a long time. Perhaps that is enough for Zhang Yuan. From underground youth culture, to homosexuality, to alcohol abuse, and now to a mainstream revolutionary icon done in Peking Opera style, Zhang proved that he always has a nose for newsworthy topics and stories.

This example showcases the many elements that come into play in the appropriation of revolutionary culture. By dealing with controversial or semi-illicit issues, Zhang Yuan and his fellow "dissident" artists have successfully utilised official censure as a way for self-promotion by relying on international moral and financial support in the international market (Barmé, 1999). After establishing his profile as "the nonofficial"

²² It should be pointed out that many Chinese filmmakers in fact do not set out to mark themselves as either underground or unofficial; these markers often exist in the minds of critics and the international film world. Jia Zhangke, for instance, goes back and forth between "underground" and "aboveground." Han Sanping quite happily made *The Founding of the Republic* [*Jianguo daye*] and also collaborated on the Hollywood production of *The Karate Kid*.

²³ Sister Jiang is the Communist heroine in *The Red Crag*. Her husband, Peng Yongwu, is assigned by the CCP to Chongqing to lead the underground struggle against the Nationalists. Peng is captured and killed by the Nationalists after his true identity is revealed. After his death, Sister Jiang takes over as the head of the underground agency. In the course of the espionage battles, Jiang and a few other Communist agents are arrested by the Nationalist secret police after being betrayed by a fellow agent. Tortured in jail, she and others inmates refuse to give in to the enemy and die martyrs.

film director, he surpassed people's expectations by adapting a piece of the orthodox official repertoire. While many nonofficial artists have benefited from the commercial potential of producing political pop, Zhang's strategy was to keep it strictly within the official boundary, which, ironically, was sensational in this case. The case demonstrates from yet another angle the complex relationship between avant-garde artists and the state, which cannot be simply summarised as the binary opposition between the state and the market (Barmé, 1999).

The fact that the carnivalesque thrust in Zhang Yuan's Red Classics adaptation is not conspicuous requires some further explication. Zhang's approach to *Sister Jiang* must be read against the background of the evolving avant-garde art scene in contemporary China. Avant-garde art forms such as rock music were recognised as "essentially a subversive, rebellious form of expression" (Jones, 1992, p. 92) and valued for their anti-establishment capacity in the 1970s and 1980s. A generation of modern artists and independent filmmakers forged a successful career path locally and internationally by taking a nonofficial stance. Since the 1990s, artists have consciously adopted a "counter-culture" label as a strategy to gain visibility, especially in the international realm (Barmé, 1999). As the formula becomes more popular, it is also getting increasingly ineffective. Ironically for Zhang Yuan, playing the carnivalesque trick in representing Chinese revolutionary martyrs would be seen as following the beaten track. In this case, coming back from the periphery to the mainstream is more carnivalesque. *Sister Jiang*, therefore, provides an example of complexity and ambiguity in the appropriation of red culture.

Spoofing Red Classics: when revolutionaries meet netizens

Of all the tampering with red culture, the most controversial approach involves spoofing (*e'gao*) revolutionary figures on the Internet. Spoofing is a new cyber language, employed to deconstruct or parody certain serious discourses for the sake of popular entertainment. Growing in popularity in China, spoofing often takes big-budget films as its main target, but most notably the socialist revolutionary icons. As spoofing is a new and still evolving phenomenon, scholars are still grappling with its cultural meaning and significance. Researchers tend to agree that spoofing on the Internet represents a carnivalesque-style cultural form that transgresses the boundaries of official norms and values and provide catharsis for the emotions repressed by political or social control (B.

Meng, 2009; Voci, 2006; Y. Zhou, 2007). However, it is still debatable if this represents a subversive act against official ideology and how effective these activities are. So far, most of the spoofing practices are individual activities without a common agenda or coherent strategy (B. Meng, 2009), and the access to new media that enables its production and distribution remains limited to only a few (Voci, 2006). The spoofing of revolutionary culture online is often a product of the negotiations between the state's regulatory efforts, the individuals' subversive, commercial or playful impulses, and the openness of the net.

One of the most famous spoofs is a short video clip entitled *Shining Star Hero Pan Dongzi Enters Singing Competition* [Pan Dongzi cansai ji] (Hu, 2006). *The Shining Star* is a film made in 1974 during the Cultural Revolution. It tells the adventures of the ten-year-old son of the squad leader of the Red Army in Willow Brook during the Second Revolutionary Civil War (1927-37). Both the mother and grandfather of Pan Dongzi, the little hero, are killed by the rich and the Kuomintang army. Dongzi's father retreats with the Red Army to another area. With his determination to obtain revenge and achieve wisdom, Dongzi manages to create a great deal of trouble for the Kuomintang army and eventually kills his personal enemy, the local tyrant Hu Hansan. In the video clip created by someone with the pseudonym Hu Daoge (literally "messing around"), Pan Dongzi becomes a daydreamer who yearns to become a super star and earn big bucks. His father is the property shark Pan Shiyi, and all his mother wants is to get into the show *Super 6 + 1*, as she secretly nurtures a crush on the program host.²⁴ The class struggle between Pan Dongzi and the tyrant Hu Hansan is reduced to just a vulgar exchange between the competitors and the judges of the song competition.

Pan Dongzi is one of the many revolutionary figures parodied on the Internet. Another one involves the army soldier Lei Feng, the soldier who Chairman Mao asked the whole country to emulate after Lei died from an accident in the 1950s. In the next few decades, Lei Feng became a mythical figure, the embodiment of the Communist values of self-sacrifice, austerity, asceticism, and the abstract icon of goodness. In 2006, a photo of a girl was published online and news spread fast that Lei Feng actually had a first love (Jiang, 2006). Later on, the girl was identified and interviewed. She denied any

²⁴ *Super 6+1* is a popular weekend entertainment program on CCTV 3. Its format is a mixture of game show and talent competition. The host of the show, Li Yong, is one of the most popular TV personalities in China.

relationship with Lei Feng except comradeship. However, the private life of a saint was too sensational to be missed by those drawn to controversy. Deng Jianguo, a filmmaker famous for causing sensations among the public, decided to do a 30-minute online film entitled *The Girl of Lei Feng's First Love* (Su, 2006). The project came to a halt when SARFT intervened.

Spoofs such as the two mentioned above have met with very diverse responses. The official rhetoric is that these historical figures are “sacred,” as they represent the collective memory and spiritual wealth commonly owned by the public. Thus, spoofing is “disrespectful” to the historical “truth” and the sacred feelings people hold for the heroes in the original works. As Party ideology has weakened, regulation and control is often legitimised in terms of anti-pornography campaigns or copyright protection, a legal governance discourse favoured by neoliberalism. Zhao Yuezhi has defined these practices as “new features in the party-state power” (Zhao, 2008a, p. 32). For example, in April 2006, several campaigns held in the name of protecting minors from pornography successfully eradicated some subversive materials from the Internet and garnered public support (Zhao, 2008a). Similarly, Hu Ge, the creator of *The Bloody Case over a Steamed Bun* [*Yi ge renxue mantou yinfa de xue'an*], an Internet spoof on director Chen Kaige's blockbuster film *The Promise* [*Wu ji*, 2005], was taken to court over the infringement of copyright (B. Meng, 2009).

Public debates are vigorous with regard to taboos or their abstinence in the treatment of the past and public morality in general. Cultural elites largely take a negative stance towards the spoofing of revolutionary culture, condemning the practice for blurring the boundary between good and evil. They also condemn the spoofs for the deconstruction of heroic images and the ideals of socialism and for showing disrespect to the authors of the original works, as well as their infringing of copyright (B. Meng, 2009). In several cases, relatives of the revolutionaries or the authors of the original works threatened litigation. When CCTV aired the spoof of Pan Dongzi as a promotion piece at a party held for journalists covering the 12th CCTV National Youth Singing Competition, August First (PLA) Film Studio, producer of *The Shining Red Star*, made a formal complaint to CCTV, claiming that the distortion of this classic not only hurt the feelings of the creators of the original film and the devoted fans, but also misled the youth. The creator, Hu Daoge, was forced to apologise publicly to the studio (X. Zhang, 2006). The

response from ordinary netizens varied greatly. In the case of the Lei Feng spoof, some vehemently opposed the act, saying that it was a kind of blasphemy against the country's most respected man. Some, however, saw it as a way the younger generation could break the strict ideological typecasting. Still others believed there was nothing wrong if it could help flesh out and humanise a well-known hero. Most were aware of the commercial motive behind the spoof, but nevertheless found it entertaining (Y. Zhang, 2006).

The arguments around spoofs exemplify conflicting attitudes of contemporary Chinese towards the socialist past, deriving from the changing value systems during a period of official corruption, widespread cynicism, and the degradation of ideology. The fact that CCTV, the de facto "mouthpiece" of the Party, actually aired a spoof of a revolutionary classic is not a quirky act of some media professionals. It is evidence that the "de-ideologised" attitude has become almost a new official discourse. However, the important question is whether spoofing has become just a new fashion, thereby losing its subversive potential, or if it expresses oppositional meaning and gestures towards social resistance? It would be hard to deny that parodying the revolutionary classics was driven by commercial desires for sensational value. However, as long as the Party still claims an authorial position and guardianship over red culture, lambasting those works does challenge the state's hegemony to interpret the past. While spoofing may be vulgar and demonstrate a disregard for history, its defiant posture nevertheless has the potential to expand the horizons for more diverse cultural productions in the future.

Conclusion: Remaking the past, making ratings in the present

Each of the above examples captures, respectively, the creative use of red culture by the state media, intellectual elite, and ordinary consumers. Several broad observations can be made from these cases: First of all, the study of red culture in its new form must be embedded in the broad context of the evolution of post-Cultural Revolution Chinese culture. What defines the "new era" is the blatant materialism and individualism supplanting the radical search for idealism and morality as the new cultural hegemony. The transmogrification of red culture is a metonym of the changes taking place in China—from a single-ideology culture to a complex, consumer-driven culture. Secondly, integrating red culture into the burgeoning cultural industry as a commercial

product is a highly complicated process. Compatible with the ethos of the consumer society, the use of red culture had become a conscious act to tap into the existing cultural resources and people's nostalgic sentiment. However, despite their fragmentation, the values the Red Classics genre promoted, such as patriotism, nationalism, and self-sacrifice, are still valued by the society. Thirdly, the double bind of the Party-state and the marketplace serves as the major influence on the configuration of the "red." However, neither ideological control nor market manipulation is fully capable of defining the ways in which revolutionary culture is evoked in the 2000s. Finally, yet equally worth noting, the four examples not only showcase different forms of hybridisation between the popular/official and market/state, they also exemplify four media formats, or four modes of story-telling. The formats of the media have implications for production, representation, and consumption. The reality show format of *My Long March* effectively evacuates any potential risk of reconstructing the "real" historical event, particularly in comparison with documentary's requirement to be objective and truthful. The added advantage of focusing on the stories and crises of individuals provides multiple positions for identification, which help garner a wider demographic. The fact that TV drama in China has the middle class as its ideal target audience²⁵ has no doubt led to the melodramatic treatment of Tonya and Pavel's love story, displacing ideological factors, such as class division, with dramatic events and personality differences. On the other hand, the relatively free online culture has made the spoofing of the Red Classics possible. The producers of spoofs exercise much greater creative liberty, while the spoof's mode of address invites audiences with fewer tendencies to politicise and moralise.

²⁵ There is often a discrepancy between Chinese TV drama's ideal audience and the actual viewers. While there is no consensus on the size and definition of the middle class in China, the fascination over this social category's potential as the ideal consumer and its presumed stabilising function within society has remained unabated. Media such as TV dramas have played an indispensable role in projecting the imaginary of such a social stratum (Ling, 2008).

Chapter 3: TV Dramas as Market Commodities, Cultural Artifacts and Social Practices

The rise and popularity of the Red Classics genre has much to do with the structural changes to China's TV industry. In this chapter, I will discuss the broad context in which the production, regulation, and consumption of the Red Classics TV dramas take place. Modern Chinese TV is a product of the social changes of the reform era. Though still carrying the mandate of political indoctrination and public service, television has increasingly been reshaped as an advertiser-supported, consumer-targeted commercial enterprise in the emerging multi-channel environment (J. Wang, 2008; Zhao, 2008a; Zhong, 2010; Zhu & Berry, 2009; Zhu, Keane, & Bai, 2008). Therefore, the TV drama adaptation of the Red Classics needs to please several masters at the same time. What is regarded as acceptable, necessary, and normal by the state may not correspond with the requirements of the market or the intellectual elite. Under such circumstances, the transgression of boundaries is a perennial issue.

In the Introduction, I argued that a holistic methodology is needed to understand how the Red Classics genre is integrated into the cultural industry as a cultural product and the complicated power struggles thrown up in this process. I proposed to use the "circuit of culture" as the analytical framework to probe the crucial moments of production, consumption, and regulation of the TV adaptations. I take the "circuit of culture" to mean that TV dramas in China should be studied as market commodities, cultural artifacts, and social practices.

The commercialisation of the TV industry started in the early 1980s with the withdrawal of state subsidies. It was further realised through a series of structural overhauls, which gave the industry its institutional base. Competition for viewers has resulted in an increased scheduling of mass-appeal programs, especially in the entertainment area. The opening up to private and foreign capital has further exacerbated the ferocity of competition. TV drama is the powerhouse behind the TV boom. It not only fills in the programming space opened up by the proliferation of channels, but also generates most of the revenues for TV stations. The dynamics within the TV drama genre have direct

impact on the Red Classics genre, which takes up a bigger proportion of the airtime and often faces more stringent state regulation than any other genre.²⁶ It is necessary, therefore, to analyse and explain the historical development of TV drama in China. From an important medium for Party propaganda to the chief revenue generator for TV stations, TV drama's evolving trajectory is symptomatic of the development of the TV industry more broadly. TV drama must simultaneously negotiate its many roles—as a ratings-sensitive commercial product, an art form, an ideological tool with political remits and a cultural forum that reflects national identity. Commitments to these competing needs create great demands in drama production, forcing production teams to search frantically for innovative ways to finance, market, and make their products. It has become difficult to classify and give an appropriate label to the end product made to satisfy multiple demands.

Both the TV set and TV programs are symbols of modernity in Chinese society (Rofel, 2007; Xu, 2009). TV drama is the staple of Chinese viewers' entertainment. Research shows that a Chinese TV viewer on average watches 52 minutes of television drama per day, a third of their total viewing time (Zhu et al., 2008). As Williams has pointed out in other context, there has never been a time when the Chinese had such “regular and constant access to drama, beyond occasion or season” (1989, p. 4). The symbols and images in TV dramas provide models for individuals to shape their own images, and the stories of TV dramas form an integral part of the public narratives that people draw on to form their identities. A study of the Red Classics, therefore, must be based on an understanding of TV drama as a social practice.

Television drama as a genre with its own language also has great implications for deciphering the form the Red Classics TV adaptations take. Even though the adaptations draw on written fiction, theatre, and film, their mode of storytelling is unique. TV drama's forms and conventions have been extensively discussed: its visuality and verbalisation distinguish it from literature; its electronic transmission makes it different from theatre; and its domesticity and quotidian nature set it apart from film, which

²⁶For example, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued a special administrative order requiring that all Red Classics TV dramas must be approved by SARFT and seek a 'Television Drama Distribution Permit' from the national-level agency, rather than one from the provincial-level broadcasting agency, as is the case with other programs (Zhao, 2008a, p. 214).

involves a sense of occasion, a public setting, a dark environment, and the concentration of attention (Sheehan, 1987, p. 44). TV drama also evolved its own forms of narrative, which tend to be more extensive, open-ended, and more reliant on stars, stunts, and symbols (Sheehan, 1987). Many of the narrative strategies adopted by the TV drama adaptations are based on this unique narrative form and pattern of viewing. The criticisms of the Red Classics adaptations often stem from this conversion of format. Viewers first acquire the story through another medium and narrative form and consequently have found the TV drama versions unfamiliar and incompatible with their first impression or previous experience.

In the following section, I will discuss television drama as a commercial product that seeks high ratings, as a cultural artifact that needs artistic and creative strength to excel, and as a social practice that produces and in turn transforms social relations and the everyday sociality of the audience. I will deal with each of these under the general rubric of the complex state-market dynamics to determine how each of them has evolved.

The transformation of the TV industry is driven by the dynamics between the state and the market. These two forces should not be seen as completely oppositional. The rise of a ratings-driven broadcast conglomerate has been promoted and facilitated by the government. The state has been simultaneously pushing for commercialisation of the broadcasting industry and maintaining strategic control of its content. Meanwhile, the Party-state has transformed itself from an authoritarian regime whose main goal was to lead the proletarian revolution to a seemingly more benevolent regulator of the market (J. Wang, 2001a). The post-socialist state's capacity to exert control over popular culture is strengthened through the market. A dichotomy between the authoritarian state and the liberal market is both inadequate and ineffectual in understanding the television industry in China.

Television drama as market commodity

In the three decades since 1976, China has undergone a market-orient reform that has profoundly transformed the communication and culture industry. Previously described as part of the "propaganda state" (Brady, 2008), China's media were undisputedly the

“mouthpiece” of the Party-state, taking as their major role the indoctrination of Party lines and propagation of state ideology. Market economics had little effect on the media, which were fully subsidised by the government. These party organs, however, have undergone significant changes in terms of institutional structure, funding model, social role, and content since China embarked on economic reform in the 1980s, particularly after Deng Xiaoping’s call to further “socialist market reform” during his visit to the south coast cities in 1992.

Researchers have identified a general trend toward commercialisation, pluralisation, and conglomeration in the media sector (Bai, 2005; Chan, 1993; Chu, 1994; Lynch, 1999; Zhao, 1998, 2000b). In her seminal work on Chinese media reform, Zhao Yuezhi (1998) surveys the transformation process in the Chinese press. She presents convincing evidence of how the Party press structure incorporated market-based press forms and practices and how the Party facilitated media capitalisation by pushing for conglomeration since the mid 1990s. According to Zhao, the transformation started in the early 1990s, when the Party-state started to reduce its financial support for press and broadcasting organisations. A major consequence was that these organisations were forced into all-out competition in order to survive and compete with others in the same business. The efforts to solicit finances through alternative sources, such as advertising and enterprise sponsorship, have profoundly affected the institutional structure, social role, and content of the Party media. Although the original hierarchical and monopolistic structure of the media organizations largely remains within the broadcasting system, print media has been much more active in coming up with a more diversified structure. The size of newspapers and magazines mushroomed, but most only affiliated themselves with a government department in order to gain a license to operate. Government organizations have no direct investment in these publications, and thus have very limited control in the editorial affairs and day-to-day management. The role of the media as “throat and tongue” of the Party and educator of the socialist citizen has also been remarkably compromised as radio stations and newspapers try to respond to the popular needs of the audience and reader. There has been a dramatic increase of media content, some of which does not toe the Party line, but rather caters to public taste in order to secure market share.

Today's communication sector in China has been open to multiple purposes, forces, and editorial approaches. It must simultaneously seek to satisfy and appease the Party's direction and demands, provide information and entertainment to society and consumers, and pursue organisational survival, revenue, and power. The process of transformation has been "messy, protracted, confusing, and confused, littered with odd, even counterintuitive institutions, structures, and practices" (Zhao, 2000b, p. 3).

The medium that best embodies the contradictions in this process is none other than the television industry. Television broadcasting started in China in 1958 and was initially introduced as a tool for political mobilisation and social engineering (Y. Huang, 1994). During the subsequent 20 years, television remained a technology accessible only by a very privileged few and, consequently, had minimal influence. It did not constitute part of the popular culture, and even its capacity as a political propaganda tool was very limited (Yin, 2005). The government alone funded TV stations (D. Lu, 2002). There was no relationship between the economy and television, and it could hardly be called an industry, with only one station, Beijing Television Station, running in the whole country for over 20 years. Programs were only transmitted sporadically in a handful of cities and very few people owned a television set (Lull, 1991).

However, this tiny new technology has grown into a giant industry since China embarked on its modernisation program in the late 1970s. Corresponding to the transition from a planned economy to a market economy and riding along with the massive changes in the media sector, China's television not only has undergone huge expansion but also currently operates under financial and policy structures different from before. By 2005, China had about 400 million television sets nationwide (about a third of the world total) and over 2000 licensed TV stations (Y. Zhu, 2006). In 2007, TV reached 96.58 percent of the total population (SARFT, 2008). These profound changes are the result of a series of government policies, funding model overhauls, institutional restructuring, and intensified competition.

Funding model changes

From a political motivation tool to a popular commodity, TV drama has followed the same evolutionary trajectory as the TV industry more broadly. TV drama came into

being in China in the late 1950s at the height of ideological contention between the socialism and capitalism camps, headed by the Soviet Union and United States respectively. It took on its pedagogical role at its very birth. The first production, a one-episode drama entitled *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancakes* [*Yikou caibingzi*], was aired in 1958 to promote the importance of thrift as the country experienced severe food shortages. In the next two decades, the production of drama was minimal and nearly came to a halt during the Cultural Revolution, as most of the production units were engaged in intensive political campaigns.

TV drama production was resumed in the late 1970s and quickly took on a new role, as watching television became a national pastime for hundreds of millions of Chinese viewers. This transformation process must be considered within the top-down economic and political context, as well as the bottom-up need for popular entertainment. Until 1979, China's television industry had depended completely on government funding. The government remained the only financial provider for the less than 40 TV stations across the country, with each station broadcasting between 3-5 hours per day. Because of this financial straightjacket, there had been little incentive, much less the means, for the TV stations to produce dramas, except for some pedagogical single-episode programs required by the government (Y. Zhu, 2005).

By the mid 1980s, the government had introduced market mechanisms into the media sector, leading to the expansion of the press and broadcasting industry. The boom, however, was coupled with declining subsidies and provisions for financial incentives on the part of the state, due to reduced GDP revenue (Zhao, 2000b, p. 5). Left to sink or swim, the burgeoning television industry had to turn to other sources for income. Since 1978, television had gradually weaned itself from government subsidies and turned to commercial revenue, mainly advertising. The total turnover in TV advertisement jumped from 15 million yuan (\$1.8 million) in 1979 to 62.2 billion yuan (\$7.8 billion) in 1999, representing a phenomenal growth of 4,146 times (D. Lu, 2002). This increase in advertising revenue was particularly spurred on by the "four-tiers" policy implemented in 1983,²⁷ which localised the operation of TV stations and intensified the

²⁷ Unable to fund the increasing television coverage, the four-tier policy aims to involve various social groups to invest in the broadcasting industry by allowing provinces, cities, and counties to run full-scale TV stations.

competition for alternative investment (Keane & Spurgeon, 2004). By the late 1990s, government funding constituted less than 5 percent of the financial makeup in most provincial and local television stations. For example, in 2001, government subsidies constituted a meagre 0.5 percent of the total funding for China Central Television (CCTV), China's single most important national TV network (X. P. Li, 2001). By 1996, TV had become the key revenue-raising medium in the media sector and accounted for around 40 percent of advertising revenue in China (Weber, 2002).

Commercial funding profoundly changed the production and circulation of TV programs, including drama. On January 28, 1979, Shanghai TV station aired the first television advertisement ever in China for a tonic spirit. The 90-second advertisement signaled that TV had started to acquire a new source of funding, and indeed over the next two decades advertisements became the largest source of revenue for TV (Weber, 2002). According to Lu (2002), advertising accounted for 11.6 percent of Shanghai TV station's total income in 1979. In 2000, it rose to 78.6 percent. In most other TV stations, the figure is as high as over 90 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of financial subsidies coming from the Shanghai municipal government was slashed from 100 percent in 1978 to 0.3 percent in 2000.

With the new revenue coming from the commercial sector in the form of sponsorship and advertisement, TV drama productions boomed. In the decade from 1978 to 1987, the total output of TV dramas amounted to 5,875 episodes, some 30 times the total amount produced in the first 20 years of television (Yin, 2006). In 2005, the figure was a monstrous 15,000 episodes (H. Zhu, 2006). This growth emerged as a response to the strong demand from the market, particularly when the average Chinese household was able to afford a television set in the 1980s. Consequently, a good many more drama productions were needed to fill up the available time slots.

The diversified financing also means that "serving the Party" was no longer the sole agenda of TV dramas. The market had become another master, and TV dramas now had to establish themselves as a commodity, a marketable product sold to audiences through advertising. Over the next few decades, TV dramas had to continue negotiating the

boundaries between the state and the market, while growing to become the most popular entertainment form for Chinese, second only to the news as the most watched genre.

From the mid 1980s, the original drama production units within TV stations were consolidated and expanded as drama production centres. This development contributed to the increase in drama output because of the increased production capacity. Investment in drama production was further commercialised and diversified. At the initial stage, drama production teams would solicit commercial sponsorship by selling advertising spots to businesses. The producers then traded the drama production, together with the advertisements, for program time with the TV station. Since 1995, TV producers have been able to secure bank loans, and financing through loans gradually became a standard practice in drama production. This diversification in funding gave a great boost to the production of TV drama. The number of production permits granted doubled from 1995 to 1999 (D. Lu, 2002). As the most preferred advertising medium, TV drama now attracted diverse sources of investment. The relaxed rules on ownership also contribute to the growth of a large sector of independent program-making companies of different sizes and production specialties. The production industry now comprises about 36 state-owned production companies, 300 independent and SARFT-registered companies, and 266 television stations with in-house production capacity (J. Wang, 2008). Competition among these production units is fierce, with production costs escalating. Of the 10,000 episodes produced each year, only 20 percent make a profit (H. Liu, 2005). While the production of TV drama is commercialised, the broadcasting is not. TV stations can rely on their monopoly over broadcasting to force the purchase price down. In 2002, the total advertising income for TV drama was 21.9 billion yuan (\$3.47 billion), of which a meagre 1.92 billion (\$304 million) was spent on drama production (H. Liu, 2005). The provincial and local stations prefer to buy the rights to air less expensive reruns from major TV networks, such as CCTV, after they are premiered by the bigger stations (J. Wang, 2008). The Red Classics TV drama serials are often quite easily scheduled by major television networks, not only because the theme has audience reach and appeal, but also because it meets the political mandate.

Despite the commercialising trend in TV drama production, the Chinese government has not fully retreated from this cultural realm. In spite of reduced financial subsidies,

the state is determined to keep a leash on the production and circulation of ideological work. In fact, after the June 4th incident in 1989, the power of the CCP's propaganda units has been strengthened (Brady, 2008). The state has been maintaining control on this particular cultural product through various channels, including policy-making, legal regulations, and administrative intervention.

The official rhetoric still maintains that the function of the Chinese mass media is to serve as the “mouthpiece” of the party, the state, and the people. Therefore, in practice, the media follow the Four Cardinal Principles: “adherence to the socialist road, adherence to the dictatorship of the proletariat, adherence to the leadership of the Communist party, adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought” (W. Yang, 1998). In principle, the Party has always been unequivocal about the function of TV products as tools of ideological indoctrination. This is spelled out clearly in cultural policy documents, such as “Suggestions on promoting the development of Broadcasting, Film and Television Industry,” issued by SARFT in January 2004. The document states: “Broadcasting, film and television products are ideological in nature. Therefore, they must serve the people and socialism.”

Structural overhaul

Chinese television has been a highly regulated sector. Channels of the national networks (CCTV and China Education Network) are broadcast throughout the country via satellite and microwave transmission. SARFT oversees the construction, form, and content of the networks, functioning as a regulatory body, a network builder and operator, and a propaganda organ (Zhao, 2000a). At the local level, there are 27 provincial channels and about 300 regional city stations that both produce programs and transmit national network channels. These stations fall under the administrative umbrella of both the local SARFT bureau and local government. In addition to terrestrial stations, there are also over 1,200 cable stations built and run by various municipal and state enterprises.

The television industry experienced its first growth spurt in 1983 when the Party implemented the “four-tier” policy. This policy resulted in a glut of stations, with nearly 4,000 stations at the peak in 1997 (Bai, 2005). It simply became too cumbersome for the

central administrative authority to manage the stations effectively. Self-funded county-level stations saw no benefits in carrying CCTV's programs and started to barter for foreign programs and other mass appeal entertainment. The competition between the multiple stations for advertising money and programming was fierce, resulting in the decline of the advertising growth rate for the first time in 1998. The pressure to implement reforms was further intensified by other factors, including the entry of transnational media corporations after China's accession to the WTO in 2001 and the possibility of losing territory in the cable market to the newly emerged telecommunications industry (Bai, 2005; Zhao, 2008a).

The response to this multitude of challenges was a structural shakeup. In her book, *Communication in China*, Zhao Yuezhi (2008a) describes this process and teases out the significant power dynamics. With a series of consolidation campaigns starting in 1996, the number of TV stations was reduced by half. The four-tier system was officially flattened to a two-tier system, with county-level stations and cable stations either dismantled or stripped of their programming capacity. In the meantime, under the slogan, "make it bigger and stronger," the state pushed for media conglomeration. The policy saw 18 cross-media, cross-region broadcasting groups, such as Hunan Television, come into being. However, the mergers were resisted and curbed at key points by institutional barriers, vested bureaucratic interests, and central-local feuds (Zhao, 2008a). By 2003, the effort to nurture flagship conglomerations had lost much of its steam. To overcome the impasse, more radically revisionist commercialism was introduced. In the name of "cultural system reform," this project relegated media to a less politicised domain and opened up the market-oriented media sector to free capital investment. Television was now regarded more as an industry than a political and cultural agency. In an all-out effort to seek profit, Chinese TV focused on entertainment (Bai, 2005).

Programming competition

Commercialisation produced fierce competition between various local stations and between national networks and local networks. The prime goal for channels has now become to fully exploit the advertising potential of television. This has a number of implications for TV programming. For example, to seek a larger audience share and to

sustain its status as China's national broadcaster, CCTV, with its 16 Chinese-language channels and 3 foreign-language channels, had to join the battle for ratings as the sector became more commercialised. This has had an impact on its institutional structure and social role, particularly in terms of staffing and programming. Over the last three decades, CCTV has undergone significant internationalisation (J. Hong, 1998), increased its news output, created a number of in-depth reporting programs and, when allowed, spoken for the public on social, economic, and political issues (Hong, Lü & Zou, 2009). For example, in 1993, CCTV created the topical magazine, *Oriental Horizon*, followed by the highly popular in-depth investigative news program, *Focus*, in 1994. Local TV news was also transformed in terms of pace, incisiveness, and flamboyance.

Television stations have largely given up their role “as ideological brainwashers, but continue to be vital ideological managers on behalf of the party-state” (Lee, He, & Huang, 2006, p. 582). CCTV serves as a very straightforward example. CCTV's prime-time news would not reach 92 percent of the total Chinese population (X. P. Li, 2001) without the government's requirement that all local broadcasters carry the program (Keane, 2005). Here, CCTV's political capital is translated into economic capital in the form of lucrative advertising contracts.²⁸ In turn, CCTV carries the mandate to operate within a closer regulatory framework, carefully avoiding any offence to the Party. Indeed, this could be considered a classic example of dancing “because of the chains” (Sun, 2007).

While news and current affairs were under pressure to change, broadcasters gradually saw entertainment as holding the key to ratings success (Bai, 2005). In the tussle to grab market share, the local stations must go further in catering to popular tastes in order to compete with CCTV by reaching out to a larger audience through broadcast satellite. Many stations attempted to distinguish themselves from the others by diversifying programming or copying foreign entertainment programs. Besides the various entertainment, news, and lifestyle shows on fashion, sports, travel, games, and fitness, the main viable source of revenue to be tapped was television drama.

²⁸ The 65-second advertising spots after the prime-time news and leading up to the weather forecast are the most expensive in the country. Adopting a voluntary auction method to set the advertising-spot prices, CCTV was able to earn 6.8 billion yuan (\$860 million) in 2006 (J. Wang, 2008).

In the multi-channel system, the calculation of costs-by-viewers-reached plays a big part in the head-to-head competition between stations. Schedulers are given more power and control and their decisions are heavily skewed by audience research and other data. Audiences are grouped into niche markets based on their expectations and consumption power. One of the main measures to revamp the old system was the adaptation of the program commissioning strategy. The idea was introduced to China in the early 1990s. Traditionally, the broadcast networks were responsible for producing their own programs. Regardless of their quality, these programs had guaranteed scheduling spots. The new policy opened the networks to independent program-making companies for programs (excluding news) that were likely to achieve ratings success. Given that drama series deliver more than 90 percent of all the advertising revenue for most provincial and local TV stations (Zhu et al., 2008), it is no surprise that the reform started with this genre. Major television networks such as CCTV and BTV (Beijing Television Station) established their own TV drama production centres. TV drama production alone has grown into a large sector of over 1,000 companies. TV networks used program commissioning as a means to solve the problem of low program quality and program duplication that had long plagued TV networks. By injecting elements of competition, such as price, into the selection of programs, it also helped to lower the cost. The outsourcing of production also enabled channel specialisation, an initiative responding to the diversified consumer tastes and identities resulting from very diverse social values, expectations, and lifestyles in modern China. Narrowcasting, or *fen zhong* in Chinese, is a means for survival in the new multichannel environment. The prevalence of revolutionary nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon means that this topic would attract a high number of viewers, mainly the urban working class and peasants, particularly among the generation born during or before the 1960s (K. Liu, 2004). While many academics tend to focus on the urban, youth, and commercial productions (K. Liu, 2004), the practitioners within the TV industry have long taken note of the diverse nature of Chinese TV viewers and established the Red Classics adaptations as a market niche. These adaptations cater to the middle to old aged population born before the 1960s, who might harbour nostalgic feelings towards revolutionary culture, as well as middle to low-income urban working class and peasants.

Paradoxically, the increasing number of channels and proliferation of entertainment shows has been accompanied by a narrower range of programming. Television programming in the ratings-sensitive time slots naturally caters to the major metropolitan middle-class consumers, while programs aimed at socially marginalised groups, such as peasants, workers, and women, have been moved out of peak time and even totally shut down. Commercialisation has, as political economist Zhao Yuezhi (2008a, p. 88) observes,

engendered a general structural bias toward the value orientations and tastes of advertisers' most sought-after affluent urban consumers and the business strata in the coastal areas, to the neglect of workers, farmers, low-income women, and other marginalized social groups and regions.

The aggressive competitive scheduling on all channels provides a perfect example of how neoliberal market-based calculations have infiltrated the medium. Despite the fact that light entertainment has—to a certain extent—liberated itself from the socialist didactic approach and the elitism of the high culture movement in the 1980s, this turn to entertainment to compete for audiences has created new patterns of social inclusion and exclusion (Zhao, 2008a).

Operating in these conditions, the Chinese TV system is indeed riding many horses at once. Various impulses—commercial, public service, and propagandist—are commingled in TV stations in assorted balances and gradations. The core editorial areas, such as news and current affairs, still carefully tread the Party line. However, even these editorial operations have upgraded their practices in many aspects to be more responsive to public needs and tastes. TV magazines and reality shows, with a strong emphasis on emotional tales, often help the viewers to deal with the harsh reality of contemporary neoliberal society (Sun & Zhao, 2009).

While tensions between government control and commercialisation dominate the changes in the media industry, accommodations and compromises are increasingly recognised. The cultural environment in which media operate is indeed much more

complex than suggested by many. Jing Wang (2001, p. 37) articulates the convertibility of political, economic, and cultural capital in China:

[N]ot only has the postsocialist state not fallen out of the picture, but it has rejuvenated its capacity, via the market, to affect the agenda of popular culture, especially at the discursive level. The state's rediscovery of culture as a site where new ruling technologies can be deployed and converted simultaneously into economic capital constitutes one of its most innovative strategies of statecraft since the founding of the People's Republic.

Censorship mechanisms

As discussed above, commercialisation has reshaped the funding model, organisational structure, and programming practices of the TV industry. These changes, however, do not mean that the state has loosened its grip on the content of TV drama. The institutions that supervise the ideological functions of the media are still operating. For example, the production of TV drama is mainly supervised by SARFT. The other two state agencies responsible for cultural production censorship are the Central Propaganda Committee and the Ministry of Culture. From 1999, two censorship organs—the Television Drama Censorship Committee and the Television Drama Censorship Review Committee—were set up under SARFT to screen TV drama productions before their release. These two committees have provincial-level branches as gatekeepers.

In practice, government agencies such as SARFT exercise control over the production of TV drama through the following means (H. Liu, 2005; Zhao, 2008a, pp. 212-216):

Granting production licenses to the production unit: Only production teams granted long-term or temporary production permits are entitled to make TV dramas. Most of the production units possessing long-term licenses are state-owned. They include national and provincial TV stations, film studios, and audio and video production companies.

Subject matter planning as a whole: An annual TV drama subject-matter planning conference is held for all production licensees to identify contemporary popular topics and discuss their production plans in order to avoid repetition. This seemingly “market”

practice, however, has a strong element of government control. Government agencies such as SARFT will often provide guidelines that outline the “key topics” anticipated by the government for the next year. Some of these key projects, usually in answer to a major ideological initiative or commemoration of an important Party event, will be designated to the state-owned production units as a political task. The implicit guarantees for the TV drama products to be broadcast on major networks are sufficient attractions for even many nonofficial production units to choose from these topics. This requirement was removed in May 2006 (J. Wang, 2008).

Giving out permits for the production project: Once a production company decides to commence a project, it has to submit an application to SARFT. In 2004, less than a third of the total submissions were rejected.

Censoring before the broadcast and publication (H. Liu, 2005; Yin, 2005): The provincial broadcasting authority or SARFT must preview the completed TV drama productions before their formal release and broadcasting. Overt censorship of TV drama usually involves the removal of ideologically unacceptable content or editing and reworking certain parts of the episodes or series in order to satisfy the censors.

Case-by-case regulative measures—usually referred to as “notices” (*tongzhi*), “directives” (*zhishi*) or “decisions” (*jueding*)—are issued in an ad hoc manner to exercise control over specific genres (Brady, 2008; Zhao, 2008a, p. 214). In May 2004, when the re-adaptation craze was in its heyday, SARFT issued a notice to the administrative departments concerned, stipulating that all Red Classics TV dramas had to be submitted to SARFT’s Censorship Committee for final approval after passing the initial censorship at the provincial level. The document stressed that current adaptations of the Red Classics invariably demonstrated a tendency toward “misreading of the original work,” and were “based on a misinterpretation of the market,” eventually “misleading the audiences” (SARFT, 2004b). According to the notice, the specific problems with the adaptations included imposing complicated love relations on the main characters, representing the heroes and the villains with multiple personalities, so that the ideological intention of the original work was distorted, and diluting content because of the length required for the TV format.

Apart from making the above-mentioned regulations, the state also meddles in production matters and asserts its influence over content through participation sponsorship, setting up academic awards and manipulating public opinion through the media. Nevertheless, this influence is only relative. First of all, censorship is never consistent. In fact, as James Lull observes, television production censorship in the reform era can best be described as “confusing” (Lull, 1991). This is a result of two factors: First, even though government agencies provide general censorship guidelines, it is up to the censors to interpret how these apply to each individual TV drama. The arbiters of artistic standards, taste, and ideological correctness may vary to a great extent depending on who is doing the censoring. Secondly, the criteria for censorship constantly change to keep up with political and socioeconomic developments. Censorship tends to tighten during periods of unrest, particularly during a downturn in the economy. Political incidents such as the June 4th student protests result in the state tightening its censorship of TV drama production. At other times, however, TV dramas focusing on glitzy automobiles, cocktail bars, and businessmen dressed in sleek suits become the main attraction in keeping with the market economy ideology. With all the energy unleashed by reform, China’s TV industry did not become an outright liberal commercial entity; rather, it now serves a dual purpose: providing entertainment for consumers and propagating the political agenda for the nation-state. This hybrid role can only be summarised as a media system “with Chinese characteristics.” The newly gained autonomy must be carefully exercised within the boundaries set out by the state. Balancing the two becomes a delicate business every TV station must deal with on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, the former leader Deng Xiaoping’s epithet, “crossing the river by feeling the stones,” best describes the practices of professionals working in the TV industry.

The state and market dynamism

Many researchers have adopted a market-vs.-state framework in attempting to understand the Chinese media (Z. He, 2000; Y. Huang, 1994; Lull, 1991; X. Zhang, 1993). However, this dichotomy cannot capture adequately the complex media strategies emerging in China today. Researchers have noted that new partnerships are constantly being formed between the state, the market, and various interest groups (Barmé, 1999; J. Dai, 2004b; Keane, 1999; J. Wang, 2001a, 2001b). The state still

effects control in managing China's global integration and private ownership of the media (Zhao, 2008a). In her more recent work, Zhao Yuezhi (2008b) makes an attempt to move beyond the state-market dualism by paying attention to the innovative state ruling technology and new methods of ideological practices, and by taking seriously China's claim to its historical socialist legacy. Specifically, Zhao argues that the state's role in steering media policies and transformative processes could be explored by investigating the "proactive and selective deployment of neoliberal strategies," summarised as the twin modalities of "neoliberalism as exception" and "exceptions to neoliberalism" (Zhao, 2008b, p. 25).

Zhao's work brings new insights and nuances to conceptualising the metamorphosis of the Chinese television industry. Since the 1980s, the state has consciously incorporated market rationality in the media sector, and TV has been defined as a "tertiary industry" and recognised as a key area for economic growth. By the 1990s, significant competition had been injected into the system. Competitive populism was advancing, and the state-sponsored "leisure culture" was highly attractive to a select strata of middle-class consumers. Private investments had been incorporated into entertainment program production (Bai, 2005; Zhao, 2008a). In 2003, the state further deepened TV commercialisation with its "cultural industry reform." As a consequence, broadcasting groups retain their status as "cause-oriented undertakings," but are able to run their business operations, such as program production, program transmission, advertising, and program purchasing, as corporations. The reform also selectively absorbs foreign capital in the non-core communication area. These are good examples of how the state helped to entrench neoliberal market logic in managing the TV sector (Zhao, 2008a).

In endorsing, facilitating, and collaborating with the market, the Party-state has avoided making major errors and managed to consolidate its power through carefully applying strategies of "exceptions to neoliberalism." Zhao Yuezhi's (2008b, pp. 33-35) analysis is again useful here. She argues that the transformation of the Party-state is not only institutional, but also ideological, cultural, and normative. Institutionally, the Party has confirmed its role as leader, despite its aggressive policy of restructuring designed to turn media operations into profit-generating machines. Culturally, the Party-state seeks to encourage a Chinese national identity that replaces the previous class-based

subjectivity. On the ideological front, the Party-state has now based its legitimacy on popular support, rather than its moral right gained from revolution (Brady, 2008). However, it must continue its claim to the revolutionary legacy to justify its existence. The Party-state also promotes its role as crucial to safeguard Chinese citizens against the negative impact of market forces, thus enhancing its normative power.

The official ideology and burgeoning market culture have co-produced a murky mediascape where propagandist texts coexist with popular dramas for mass consumption and elite cultural productions. In many cases, the cultural boundaries among the three are dissolving and new partnerships are constantly being formed (Barmé, 1999; J. Dai, 2004b; Keane, 1999; J. Wang, 2001b; Zhao, 1998). As Jing Wang (2001) has argued, in this land of contradictions, binary systems simply fall short of providing a useful analytical tool.

TV drama as cultural artifact

Having discussed TV dramas as market commodities in general, I now move on to discuss the content of these dramas. By the end of the 1990s, television drama had not only emerged as a full-fledged industry, but had also established itself as a significant entertainment form. TV drama is the major storytelling medium in China. Chinese audiences easily take up its dramatic narrative styles and structures, which are not so different from the traditional Chinese serial novel. TV drama enjoys much more popularity and has a much greater impact on society than film, theatre, and novels. This is a result of several factors. The family-centred lifestyle, the limited choices in cultural consumption, the withering film market, and the relatively low cost per capita of television all contribute to the centrality of TV drama in the cultural and social life of ordinary Chinese. TV drama also provides daily entertainment that can be understood and enjoyed by the relatively large illiterate and semi-illiterate population, even though they are not the ideal consumers.

Like the TV industry in general, TV drama as a narrative form constitutes and is constituted by the rapid social changes that have taken place in the past few decades. Its episodic, serial format has been influenced by both international styles and native aesthetic traditions (Zhu et al., 2008), and its production is driven by the need to

reconcile a political mission with the dependence on advertising potential, all the while satisfying viewers.

A genre beloved: the development of TV drama in China

The curtain-raiser for TV drama was *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake*, a single-episode moral story about class struggle produced in 1958. Up to 1966, about two hundred TV dramas were broadcast by a handful of TV stations in big cities (Zhu et al., 2008). Most of the works carried the mission of promoting ideological and political education. TV drama did not become a powerful and popular medium until the early 1980s, when TV sets became a more common household item. The earliest production models for TV drama came from overseas. Since the late 1970s, and particularly during the early 1980s, the whole nation was mesmerised by long TV soap operas imported from Mexico and Brazil, as well as dramas from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The commercial imperative to gain audience approval was manifest in the nine-part *Eighteen years in the Enemy Camp* [*Diyi shiba nian*], the first TV drama serial launched by CCTV in 1980. A story about undercover communists working in the Nationalist army force, the drama hardly distinguished itself in its characterisation of model communist heroes or in its representations of ideological struggle. Rather, audiences were immediately drawn to its convoluted plot and thrilling action. This serial, crude in its production, signaled the directions for the future development of Chinese TV drama. The serial form, similar to the Brazilian telenovela and congruent with Chinese narrative tradition (Keane, 2005), would eventually become the formula for many dramas produced in the ensuing years. It was received with considerable criticism for catering to popular tastes and playing down the importance of politics, but it clearly demonstrated to both the audience and producers the entertainment value of TV drama.

Over the next few years, the genre became better resourced with official support for the establishment of TV drama production centres and official awards for outstanding TV drama. This effort led to a wider range of TV dramas in format, subject matter, and cultural level. The popular serials included the drama adaptation of literary classics, such as *The Water Margin* [*Shuihu zhuan*] and *Dream of the Red Chamber* [*Hongloumeng*], biopics about CCP leaders, and revolutionary epics. The most notable subgenre was realistic drama serials dealing with significant social issues and moral

dilemmas thrown up by economic reform, such as the 1986 sensational success, *New Star (Xin xing)*, which was a serial about a young, daring country magistrate battling bureaucracy and corruption in rural areas.

By the early 1990s, technological developments had paved the way for new program-delivery systems, multi-channel expansion, and intensified competition for viewers' attention. The period was marked by a great innovative thrust in TV drama. A few young writers and TV production crews from Beijing Television Art Centre (BTAC), envious of the success of cheap imported productions, were eager to develop the "new" genre themselves (Zha, 1995). Their first major hit, the 50-part *Yearnings*, immediately won over the entire population, achieving unprecedented ratings, and was repeatedly broadcast across the country after it was first aired in 1990. Despite the government's claim that it showcased good socialist artistic works, *Yearnings* was fundamentally a commercial attempt to sell an interesting story to the audience. There was a vague suggestion of political events such as the Cultural Revolution and subsequent economic reforms, but these served only as historical background to the main story. Otherwise, it was a typical TV serial on family relationships cleverly grafted from international soap operas. It also adopted a number of techniques standard to international soap opera production, such as indoor blocking, multicamera shooting, simultaneous voice recording, and postproduction editing (Y. Zhu, 2005; Rofel, 2007).

Snubbed by the elite for its vulgarity, *Yearnings* nevertheless represented the dawning of a new age of urban consumer culture in the 1990s. TV drama now not only advanced ideological agendas or promoted nation-building projects, but it could also be watched for its easy, entertaining style. The burgeoning trend was further developed in another BTAC production, *Stories from an Editorial Office [Bianjibu de gushi]*, broadcast in 1991. The comedy provides a satirical account of how a group of editors struggles to run a tabloid magazine, ironically called *Guide for Living*. Besides being the first situation comedy ever produced in China, *Stories from an Editorial Office* also drew business sponsorship by packing product placement advertising in the drama plot.

By the early 1990s, the two most important narrative formats—multi-episode serials and situation comedies—had established themselves as the two main forms of TV

drama and proved to be financially viable. Consumerism cultivated an audience that was more difficult to please than politically subjugated citizens, and producers were forced to consider more complex layers of social sub-groups and identities, as well as divergent moral and political opinions. A variety of genres had established themselves to appeal to widely differentiated groups of viewers. These genres ranged from costume court serials, military series, swordsmen series, and teenage idol series to series focusing on personal and familial vicissitude. As the competition for ratings became ever fiercer, TV producers started to exhaust every available resource in order to maximise audience size.

Major forces shaping TV drama

As they are less politically sensitive than news, light entertainment and TV drama have the major responsibility to attract advertising revenue and maintain a high level of creativity. TV dramas largely fall into the two camps of “main melodies” and “diversity.” The “mainstream melody” refers to the Party-ordained dramas or, more broadly, works that still carry on the socialist tradition and to some extent reflect contemporary social reality. TV stations and production companies regularly churn out biographies of national leaders and historical figures, stories of significant revolutionary events or compelling stories of reformists or contemporary moralists. The state continues to sponsor the production, circulation, and consumption of these works. A variety of themes, however, grow out of the rising plebeian culture (*shimen wenhua*)—the street-bred, mass culture (J. Wang, 1996)—and feed the consumer-oriented population with long martial arts serials, personal stories of urban upward mobility, and tear-jerking melodramas of family relationships. Dramas of this type fall into the “diversity” category. However, the two types of drama never fit neatly into any discrete categories, but, rather, blend potentially opposed elements within them. One good example is the large number of revolutionary-themed dramas, which downplay class struggle while pursuing a nationalist discourse mixed with outrageous sensationalism and populism.

The fusion between state culture and mass culture is evident in quite a few recent TV drama series hits, such as *Sword Show*, *Days of Burning Passion* and *Sky of History*. *Days of Burning Passion*, for example, is a 22-part chronological tale about the life of a

military leader, Shi Guangrong. Shi's identity as a devoted communist commanding officer sanctions the series as a revolutionary mainstream product. Nevertheless, the important historical events that made Shi a revolutionary leader only serve as a blurred background for his quibbling with his wife and three children. Shi is patriotic, idealistic, and brave, yet also domineering, rough, and patriarchal.²⁹ Much of the characterisation is done through the melodramatic dramatisation of everyday events. It is perhaps not too deceiving to promote it as "revolutionary melodrama." Whether a revolutionary drama packaged in a commodity shell or the other way around, the formula of melding revolutionary icons with commercial gambits can be highly profitable. *Days of Burning Passion* was replayed five times on Beijing Television alone. The first run achieved a rating of 12 percent (X. T. Zhou, 2002).

The dynamism between state control and media autonomy is not totally oppositional. Mainstream series with stories about good cadres or Party history have come a long way from the early, crude form found in *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancakes*. Now that the state lacks the ability to underwrite most of the drama productions and political indoctrination has lost its appeal, the official culture has to take on a "new face." This updated style borrows heavily from popular TV soaps in terms of its characterisation, sentimentalism, and plot formula. Geremie Barmé (1999) notes the infiltration of avant-garde art and commercial culture into state-sponsored cultural products, such as Party advertising, photography, and films. However, one should not be too eager to embrace the thesis that consumerism now rules all. In fact, Chinese TV drama, although influenced by the market economy, western culture, and the logic of consumption, is still "largely mainstream in that it embodies political ideology, patriotism, collectivism, nationalism and heroism on the one hand, and the social ideology of the nuclear family and patriarchy on the other" (Yin & Yang, 2004, p. 342).

In discussing the social conditions of TV drama, besides the state discourse and the rising market discourse, another important factor is elite culture (*jingying wenhua*) (S. Lu, 2000a). After a pause in 1989, Deng Xiaoping further endorsed reform in 1992. In the face of accelerated commercialisation, writers, scholars, and other intellectuals had to re-orient themselves to avoid being sidelined by capitalism (Barmé, 1999). Beginning

²⁹ For the analysis of gender relationships in the TV drama serial, *Days of Burning Passion*, see He Guimei (2005).

in 1993, an emergent discourse on “humanistic spirit” took hold as a result of public discussions initiated by thinkers and writers. Intellectuals called for a revival of humanism to counter the vulgar commodification of popular art. Meanwhile, some careerists within the intellectual camps were making use of state funds and institutional structures to advance their own agenda (Barmé, 1999). The intellectual elite remain the third major force that TV drama must negotiate.

Because of these three different agendas, the production of TV dramas is very much a balancing act between *jiaohao* (critical acclaim) and *jiaozuo* (ratings). Before 1990, when ratings came to play a significant role in the success of a TV drama, the main concern of the production team was to seek official approval/sponsorship, as well as good critical acknowledgement, often in the form of a national artistic awards and positive expert reviews. Some of the early major TV dramas were made with an aim only to achieve “state-of-the-art” status, with very little concern for production costs. For example, in response to the official call to promote the “national cultural essence” in 1984, CCTV commissioned the production of the 36-episode TV drama remake of the classical novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Not only did the shooting itself last for an exceedingly long three years, but the production process also reached new levels in terms of artistic standards: on-location shooting was done in major scenic spots across the country; actors for the main characters were selected from tens of thousands of candidates; experts on the novel were extensively consulted; and two lengthy workshops were organised to prepare the actors for their roles. However, this exclusive concern for artistic quality over profitability did not last long. When investment became increasingly diversified in the early 1990s, the struggle to win ratings started.

The race to secure high ratings forced TV producers and the networks to focus less on the state and the intellectual elite and more on ordinary viewers. Ironically, the start of the race for higher ratings marked the end of the golden days when one TV drama could receive remarkable audience ratings of 90 percent. While all TV production companies aim to maximise their audience, it was soon clear to the companies that their viewers did not comprise a monolithic whole. The economic reform launched in the late 1970s widened the rift between the urban and the rural, the east and the western hinterland, the upper class and the lower class, and between generations (Zhang, Hao, Xiao, & Zhu,

2006). It had become increasingly important for TV drama producers to target the right demographic, as advertisers reacted to the narrowing of their target audience. The need to identify a market niche for each consumer group was never so pressing.

As mentioned before, while the state has allowed commercial competition from time to time, it has maintained control over TV content through various means, such as policy, censorship, and production macro-management (Zhu et al., 2008). First, China's accession to the WTO did not bring overall content liberalisation, as expected by many in the West. SARFT remains highly selective in admitting foreign media and incorporating foreign capital into content production and is quite adept at co-opting the influx of foreign capital (J. Wang, 2008). Second, SARFT has developed a stock of censorship measures covering a wide range of matters to ensure compliance. Various administrative directives are applied on a case-by-case manner. For example, at the height of the anti-corruption drama craze in 2004, SARFT issued a ban on all features and documentaries with police and crime themes (J. Wang, 2008). In the same year, two notices were issued by SARFT to regulate TV drama adaptations of the Red Classics, with the implications discussed above.

The selective opening to commercialisation, however, also ties the hands of the state in effecting changes in some areas. Despite the constant calls for more rural-themed production by the government, the area remains seriously under-explored, for the simple reason that dramas aimed at a rural audience do not appeal to middle-class urban audiences with purchasing power (Zhu et al., 2008). Production bases for genres with more limited advertising potential are under a degree of strain. With respect to rural themes, the state has so far failed to come up with a strategy to boost creativity in the industry. Cultural studies scholar Jing Wang (2008) has demonstrated that the megamerger policy to integrate cable and broadcast TV did not ease, but instead intensified, TV channels' single-minded pursuit of ratings and advertising revenue. The business model dictates that quantity overrides quality when there are such low profit margins in TV drama production. Production units are more concerned about making a quick profit through appealing to a mass audience rather than pioneering new forms of television drama. Program cloning has also become rampant (Keane, 2002).

TV drama as social practice

TV drama reigns supreme as the preferred medium for advertising. Its appeal to advertisers and the saturation of the genre on various channels speaks eloquently of its popularity with Chinese viewers. TV researcher James Lull (1991) examined the urban household's fascination with a political soap opera, *New Star*, broadcast in 1986, less than ten years after TV drama made its mass debut in China. Every day in China, over 6,000 episodes of TV drama are broadcast to 100 million viewers (Yin & Yang, 2005). It is no exaggeration to say that the daily viewing of TV drama now constitutes an important part of everyday Chinese life. Yin and Yang (2005) are right in arguing that TV drama in China is distinct from soap operas or situation comedies in the West. It does not merely provide fleeting entertainment, but constitutes "nearly the only channel through which most Chinese read, enjoy and consume narratives" (Yin & Yang, 2005, p. 317). In cities, lunch breaks are often dominated by discussions of characters or plot. In rural areas, watching village opera on special occasions or listening to storytellers in the market has largely given way to following a convoluted story line in the flickering light of the television screen.³⁰

TV drama has not taken over as the "king of leisure" by a sheer stroke of luck. Technological, political, and social changes have enabled its rise. Its popularity also has roots in Chinese cultural traditions. Before the TV set became a household item, it was used as cheap substitute for film technology. Chinese growing up in the 1970s to early 1980s still have memories of communal TV watching. At that time, only big state enterprises or work units could afford to purchase a TV set. It was put out in a public space, usually in the early evening, for their employees and their family members to watch together. Technological advances ensured that by 2005 urban households had an average of 42 channels to choose from, while rural families could choose from 33 channels, with a national TV penetration rate of 98.2 percent (J. Wang, 2008). Attempts by channels to gain market advantage often boil down to how successful their drama offerings are. This has led to the almost constant scheduling of TV dramas on Chinese TV, to the extent that TV drama has gradually merged with the fabric of everyday

³⁰ In a survey on rural viewing habits conducted in seven provinces and municipalities in 2006, 67.36 percent of the respondents ranked TV drama and film reruns as the preferred programs, making them the most watched genres for rural families (Wu, Ni, Zhao, & Wang, 2006).

living. Its indispensable importance within the Chinese household is also buttressed by social and cultural factors, such as the family-oriented lifestyle of contemporary Chinese, the cultural and aesthetic affinity for linear, episodic narrative structures, and the limited repertoire of alternative social/cultural activities available to ordinary Chinese beyond home entertainment (Yin & Yang, 2005).

TV drama's inroad into private space

Politically, post-1989 cultural production has been marked by a shift away from socialist grand narratives (Sun, 2007). This is signified by the groundbreaking drama, *Yearnings* [*Ke wang*]. Created shortly after the political debacle of June 4th, *Yearnings* deliberately departed from narratives that featured the state's intrusion into personal life. The individual's fate and feelings replace the life stories of role models embodying socialist morality or events illustrating the hard truth of class struggle. Even though the story was still political, its engagement with class, nation, and gender was nevertheless allegorical (Rofel, 2007). *Yearnings* pioneered a new form of narrative through which individuals construct their own identity (Rofel, 2007, pp. 62-63).

The significance of *Yearnings* is better understood in the historical context of public engagement with art and literature in Chinese society. The Party policy formed in the Yan'an years held that literature and art had instrumental functions, described metaphorically as either the "engineer of the soul," "cogs and screws" of the whole machine, or "weapons" on the literary "front" (Link, 2000). Stringent Party policies and measures were in place to temper the cultural works that offered a model to civilian society. Heroic models were carefully formulated for the masses to emulate. Once a model work was created and perfected, often emerging out of a strenuous process, it was eagerly promulgated to the populace (Clark, 2008). Millions of the Red Classics books, sometimes in the popularised form of comic strips, were printed for people to read. The private leisure of novel reading was made public through the organisation of frequent group discussions where readers could share their reflections on the novels. Public life included the routinised group viewing of revolutionary movies and plays. Oral forms of storytelling were also utilised when people gathered together to discuss the bitter life in the old society and express their appreciation for their happy lives under socialism (*yi ku si tian*). During the Cultural Revolution period, the eight Model Plays

constituted the only cultural products available. Individuals were forced to conform to state ideology in part because there were no alternative cultural offerings provided. The heroes and the morals and ideologies expressed in *Yangbanxi* were drilled routinely into the public consciousness. Writer Chen Cun once described the propaganda film viewing experience in the 1970s:

I'm probably not wrong in saying that those films are of the most primitive kind. However, the problem is that they were once so popular that their box office was better than any movie blockbuster of today. At that time, there were hardly any urban residents who hadn't seen these films. They were no longer just a film, but the great victory of a certain political line and the liveliest lesson on class struggle (1999, p. 84).

The cultural products created under the principle of socialist realism had the ultimate goal of interpellating individuals into "voluntary subjection to the socialist nation-state, in the name of which the CCP has legitimated its rule" (Y. Zhang, 2004, p. 203). This was achieved by privileging the political and public over the private, domestic, and personal. The lofty meaning and purpose of everyday life was to embody the right class subjectivities prescribed by the Party, often embodied in the "typical characters" in model literary and artistic works. The socialist utopianism dictated that everyday life must be transcended and sublimated into a passionate experience, a higher-level existence for a political cause. This highly politicised life, although passionate and exciting (B. Wang, 1997), was at the expense of everyday life, as summarised by Tang Xiaobing: "With ideology or political identity as its sole content or depth, everyday life is organized, rendered meaningful and effectively reduced in form" (2000, p. 110). Each mundane moment in everyday living had to be imbued with political incentive and energy and linked with the collective, revolutionary cause of human emancipation.

The market economy has brought in a diverse means of cultural production, freed individuals from its total dependence and fixation on politics, and endowed people with more autonomy. The fashioning of a new, post-Mao subject rests on overcoming the socialist past, setting free a human nature that was repressed and alienated by high

moralism and over-politicisation (Rofel, 2007). Public culture echoes as well as drives this reclamation of the private and personal from the public and political.

With literature and art withdrawing from their educational role by the 1990s, prime-time television drama has since taken on the task of providing staple entertainment for Chinese. Although it never ceases to be a useful tool of indoctrination, it can never tout political idealism in the didactic way that the eight model operas once did. As the “cash cow” for nearly all the television stations, primetime’s most important concern is ratings. Producers cannot afford to ignore the general dystopian mood with high official language and its content. It is no accident that *Yearnings*, a melodramatic tale about family, love, and individual destiny, enjoyed runaway success. Even though *Yearnings* is still a deeply allegorical story of national identities, it signaled TV’s turning away from “stories about workers *qua* workers” to “stories about domestic life and personal fates” (Rofel, 2007, p. 48). In spite of being criticised as corny and crude by some among the intellectual elite, *Yearnings*’ popularity showed that popular tastes had shifted to the domestic, the personal, and the everyday.

From this moment onward, private lives were dramatised and subject positions were developed and contested in a contingent manner within the course of daily life. The Chinese state broke away from the focus on class politics and adopted “a depoliticized neoliberal cultural politics of class and nation” in the reform era (Zhao, 2009a, p. 94). Television drama narratives are informed by this re-orientation, reproducing the new configuration of social relations and in turn transforming social identities.

The evidence of this shift abounds. Ideologically, as a direct result of the state-sanctioned depoliticising process, class-consciousness and class struggle have not only been phased out as primary concerns but also deliberately downplayed as viable themes. Instead, TV drama now promotes neoliberal characteristics, such as self-realisation, self-development, entrepreneurialism, and Confucian virtues like filial piety. Workers, peasants and soldiers are no longer the national icons, but have been replaced chiefly by the urban middle class (Sun, 2008). Personal desires and individual fulfillment are the main thrusts replacing concerns for collective interest and public welfare. Private, domestic space has become the preferred setting. Family, instead of any class-based

community, is now taken as “a repository of affection, organic solidarity, and responsibility as cushion to ease the hardships of a market-oriented social transformation” (Zhao, 2008b, p. 30).³¹

Correspondingly, albeit in a very complex and contradictory way, today’s TV viewers are not watching TV to take on the class-based subjectivities defined by the state or to learn how to become proper political subjects in the collective struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. Instead, the allegorical modern citizen on the TV screen is often one who strives for excellence, wealth, personal pride, or even survival through individual endeavours. This new subjectivity is cut from various characters of diverse social backgrounds, including the urban underclass, such as domestic workers (Sun, 2008), cosmopolitan career women in cities (Y.-C. Huang, 2008), and even revolutionary figures in drama series with historical or military themes, which I will discuss in detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

The quotidian nature of television as a technology

The turn from the public to the private is closely linked with the very nature of TV as a technology and the specific viewing context of TV in China. The nature of television as an everyday medium presents problems for political indoctrination. Visual media such as film, theatre, and even posters, were designed to transmit political messages in public space to faceless spectators who had the political competence to understand the political meaning of these visual texts (Evans & Donald, 1999, p. 20). These assumptions can no longer be made easily in the case of TV. No doubt TV is incorporated into ordinary people’s lives. Program schedules and content play a major role in structuring their everyday lives. However, TV’s domesticity determines that it is less reliable in structuring and establishing ideological positions (Ang, 1996; Morley, 1986). Compared with the public-ness of other media, TV has been incorporated into our domestic space, time, and practices, while public space has been suburbanised (Silverstone, 1994). This has implications for the consumption of TV drama. As a technology, TV now competes with the Internet, videos, karaoke machines, stereo systems, and cell phones, which are

³¹ This framework for understanding the transformation of TV drama is borrowed from Zhang Yingjin (2004). He contrasts the characteristics of pre-socialist and socialist cinema in terms of ideology, heroes, setting, action, concern, process, method, and goal and discerns a radical process of politicisation, in which audiences were interpellated into subjection to the socialist nation-state. It is my view that this process is being partially reversed today.

common in urban households. And even if individuals do switch on the TV, their viewing is constantly interrupted by family members, phone calls, commercials, housework, etc. All in all, it is a very complex viewing context. If the viewer is not riveted by the story, they will most certainly change to another channel.

Rofel (2007, p. 45) observes that this longing is closely tied with the domesticity of TV:

The relocation of television viewing into the home (from official and public spaces where the few sets previously existed) turned that longing toward material and affective self-interest rather than toward the politics of the state.

Even though TV is still heavily censored by the state, its domesticity allows the audience to see it as representative of a more open, global culture compared with the print media (Xu, 2009).

Television's ubiquity and domesticity in a Chinese home is vividly described by writer Liang Wu:

To such furniture as the television, I don't have much feeling. True, I use it every day—the first thing I do after I get back home is to switch on a television, as well as a few other lights. The light of the screen starts to flicker at the corner of the house. News or the voiceover of a cartoon will accompany me as I take off my jacket and shoes. I browse through the day's newspaper or letters, then I go to the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove. The television will be on with nobody paying any attention, while I continue to work on the mundane chores everybody does at home. Only after the water starts to hiss and I finish reading all the sports news and interesting highlights on the newspaper, will I remember to glance at the screen.

Therefore, whether a TV program is good or not seems not worthy of much discussion. I believe many people have the same attitude as mine. Watching television has three benefits: you can move your sight in the middle of a show;

you can forgo brainwork; and last, you don't need to spend money' (Wu, 1999, pp. 129-131).

The quotidian nature of the consumption of televisual narratives (Sun, 2007), as captured in the above quotation, means that the public cannot be force-fed any more. In the face of audience weariness, the grand narratives of the nation, such as the Red Classics, have undergone serious changes. For once, stories and characters that resemble ordinary people's own experience constitute the mainstay of TV drama and soaps. The conventions of grand narratives—the politically delicate setting, larger-than-life lead heroes, and Manichean model of good versus evil—have been carefully revised in an effort to address the discursive shift away from the statist representations and gain the largest viewing audience.

In the next three chapters, I will look at how the socialist subjectivities of class, gender, and place in the original Red Classics have been revised in the TV adaptations.

Chapter 4: Villainous Hero and Human Villain: The Erasure of Class Discourse

In the remainder of this thesis, I explore the cultural boundaries and boundary transgression in the transformation of the Red Classics. In this particular chapter, I will focus on the politics of class by examining the representation of heroes and villains in the original Red Classics and their TV adaptations. I begin this chapter by discussing the concept of “socialist realism” and its importance in molding heroic characters to their larger-than-life images and in reducing villains to paper-thin demons in the Maoist era. I then explore strategies used by TV production units in fashioning a socialist genre to cater to the tastes of the masses in the current cultural configuration. I locate these changes in media texts in broad political and cultural shifts—from the class-based moral economy to one based upon neoliberal wealth accumulation (Zhao, 2010b). In this process, peasants and workers have lost their subjectivity as the masters of society and have been perceived as a burden in China’s march towards a more affluent society. The CCP has abandoned its class base and positioned itself as the representative of the advanced forces of production. Class struggle is shunned as a viable and legitimate theme. I argue that, on the one hand, the disappearance of class discourse in contemporary political, social, and economic life has been the major contributor to changes in the representation of heroes and villains; on the other hand, the erasure of class in the cultural domain assists in reinforcing the impression of the absence of class in social life. This dialectical process has resulted in the media’s reorientation of the cultural politics of class. Furthermore, the quest for a depoliticised subject among cultural elites has de-canonised the Red Classics and intensified a sense of repulsion against revolutionary classics. Finally, the rise of popular culture and consumerism has helped dismantle the sublime aesthetics of socialist realism.

The above elements paved the way for the TV adaptation craze in the first half of the 2000s. The adaptation that attracted the most public fanfare was *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain*. The show went on air in January 2004, during a period when both TV crews and the networks, convinced by the huge ratings success of revolutionary-themed TV dramas like *Days of Burning Passion*, believed that the remake would be a winning bet.

The adaptations arose at the right moment: The public looked back to the past with a sense of nostalgia and a longing for the collective benefits of socialism; the state had been searching for new ways to enhance its representational pedagogy; popular media such as TV had become a symbolic resource for the general public to make sense of reality and history; and the “Red” culture could now be more safely appropriated for commercial entertainment. The attention given to the major Red Classics adaptations only intensified the fierce negotiations and contestations surrounding the production and reception of the heroes and villains. The double bind of the Party-state and the marketplace serves as the major influence on the reconfiguration of the Red Classics. However, neither ideological control nor market manipulation is fully capable of defining the ways in which the revolutionary culture is evoked in the reproduction. The exchange between politics and money is exceedingly complex.

Using the reworking of *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* as a main case, I describe various strategies adopted by the TV adaptations to re-inject ambiguity into the black-and-white universe of the Red Classics: On the one hand, the sublime, God-like image of the hero was made human by emphasising the emotional, personal, and domestic concerns of the character and by endowing him with human failings; on the other hand, the stereotype of the villain was also ruptured by giving the character emotional sophistication and more neutral, middle-of-the-road images. In the adaptation, the opposition between heroes and villains, which was framed in terms of class conflict in the high socialist days, is largely displaced to the plane of personal frictions. Taken together, these practices almost constitute a reversal of the typification process of the Maoist era. Specifically, I want to deal with the following question: How and why was the class struggle discourse diluted through the transformation of heroes and villains in the TV adaptations?

The making of a perfect socialist hero: Socialist realism and the boundaries of canonical texts

The Red Classics were created from the 1940s to the 1970s with an aim to develop a historiography of the Communist Party and to articulate Party policies (Z. Hong, 2007). Artists and writers narrated the origins of the revolution and how revolution achieved victory after an arduous journey. They also described the social transformation under the

CCP leadership. At that time, the main form of literary discourse was socialist realism (Bichler, 1996). Beginning in the 1930s, socialist realism was promoted as the only legitimate form for art and literature in the Soviet Union. According to Williams (1971), the version of socialist realism developed by Soviet theorists has one element that is fundamentally different from earlier definitions of realism in the West. Extending Engels' definition of realism as "typical characters in typical situations," the Soviets took "truly typical" to mean "the most deeply characteristic human experience," rather than typical experiences encountered in everyday life (Williams, 1971, pp. 302-303). Realism, thus understood, departs from a sense of the faithful depiction of experiential reality and moves toward a selection of experience based on the "comprehension of laws and perspectives of future social development" (Williams, 1971, p. 302). In the Soviet Union and China, applying the theory of socialist realism meant creating literary and artistic works that reflect the struggle toward the collective goal of socialism. The defining feature of socialist realism is its strong ideological resonance (Link, 2000). Its ideological grounding is the conviction that literature and art are class-based and must serve the dictatorship of the proletariat. After the Congress of Soviet Writers officially approved it in 1934, socialist realism was strictly imposed on artistic output (Z. Hong, 2007).

The Red Classics are the end product of dogmatic adherence to socialist realism, which later evolved into revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism in China. It is a body of literature and art that narrates truth with certain political and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. As discussed in Chapter 1, one can discern certain elements in the Red Classics that could be comparable to many traits of the medieval canonical texts Bakhtin refers to in his *Rabelais and His World* (1984). To understand how these literary norms and canons are revised, transformed, and transgressed in the TV drama adaptations, it is necessary to recount the history of socialist realism, how it was put forward as the indisputable norm and legalised in the official sphere, and what are the specific rules and limits it prescribed.

In his Yan'an talks in 1942, Mao articulated the idea that artistic endeavours should serve socialist ideology (McDougall & Louie, 1997). In that symposium, Mao called for literary and artistic workers to engage in creative work for the common people—the

workers, peasants, and soldiers. By aligning itself with the needs and tastes of the people, the new “people’s art” gained ethical legitimacy (W. B. Fang, 2004). The imagined alliance with the people underlined the passionate utopia for which Mao and many writers and artists yearned.

A set of new norms was set up to outline the nature, function, and use of literature and art, as well as their subject and audience. The main task of socialist realism in the Soviet Union and China was to reaffirm the positive socialist reality and transform the population into conforming and contributing socialist subjects. It was part of the Party machine with the mandate of engineering “the soul” (Link, 2000; B. Wang, 1997). The key to completing this task was to create positive heroes with behaviours and thoughts for people to emulate. The instrumental nature of art and literature as a political tool required the depiction of heroes in an idealised state. Any artistic expressions not in this vein would be criticised as a distortion of reality. Art works were required to deal with important subjects, mainly comprised of revolutionary struggle or rural life. In terms of aesthetic style, sublimity³² was what every artist aspired to achieve (Tang, 2000; B. Wang, 1997).

Tempering a “typical” hero

The new hero should be a socialist subject and epitomise the “prescribed political identity” (B. Wang, 1997, p. 258). How the heroes should actually be depicted, however, was a topic constantly under debate during the 17 years after the founding of the new People’s Republic. In May 1952, *Art and Literature Gazette* (*Wenyi bao*), the official newspaper of the United Association of Chinese Literature and the Arts, opened a column called “Discussions on creating new heroic characters.” In the second Congress of the Writers and Artists Federation in 1953, Zhou Yang, the paramount literary arbiter in socialist China, made a keynote speech on producing “typical” characters (*dianxing renwu*) (Du, 2010). A typical character was believed to represent the essence of a social group or stratum (W. B. Fang, 2004). Creating typical proletariat characters was considered the same as creating a positive, heroic character (Cheng,

³² Literary critic Wang Ban argues that although the sublime is treated as a concept originated from the West, Chinese aestheticians have nativised it to a large extent. In the context of the Red Classics, I adopt Wang’s definition of the sublime as “an aesthetic that furnishes a gigantic image of the people, the figure of the collective subject engaged in a world-transforming practice in order to carry out the telos of history” (1997, p. 8).

2005). The “ideal figure” consistently called for by Zhou Yang in the three congresses of the Writers and Artists Federation predated the formula for the “perfect hero” prevalent in the cultural products of the Cultural Revolution period. His core view rested on two premises (Li, 2007): First, in terms of character development, the backward-to-advanced narrative pattern should not be regarded as typical for heroic figures. In other words, heroes are born perfect and should not go through a “growth” stage. Second, the weaknesses of the heroes can and should be left out in the literary representations. This second rule denied the possibility of a rounded characterisation.

Even though the debate would last another two decades, the principle of constructing the perfect hero was established and strengthened. It was a “sweeping clean” process targeting the traditional literature stocks “possessing ontological significance—writing about reality, about humanity, about subjective feelings, writing about both heroes and small figures; castigating evil (exposing darkness) and praising good (extolling light); and so on...” (Su, 2000, p. 69). This process saw the state machinery force writers and art workers to acquire the new revolutionary language and discourse in their creative endeavours. Individuals who did not play by the rules were relentlessly criticised and punished.³³

Applying Foucault’s concept of the “episteme,” which is a system of rules that enables the production of a discourse and governs its formation, literary critic Li Yuchun examines the transformation from the May 4th Enlightenment literature to the Red Classics. He identifies three major changes in the production of literary discourse: First, a shift from modern individual values to the collective values of the worker-peasant-solider; second, a methodological shift from “experiences” and “facts” to “standpoints” or “world outlook”; third, a shift in principle from “literature of the man” to “literature of the class” (2007, p. 3).

In the same way that Li’s discussion points to the centrality of class in the construction of the revolutionary literary discourse, class also provides a possible angle to examine the transformation of the Red Classics from their prime in the Maoist era to “prime-

³³ In 1962, writers Shao Quanlin and Zhao Shuli, who once challenged the rules by speaking about “writing middle characters,” were severely criticised. Shao committed suicide because of the huge political pressure.

time” TV in the reform era. Sociologists Lee and Selden’s (2005) analysis is extremely insightful in outlining the how the politics of class was played out in the Maoist and reform eras. In their paper on class, inequality, and China’s revolution, Lee and Selden mark out two “revolution” cycles that profoundly transformed the class structure. During the first revolution period (1945-1970s), the Party-state, through land reform, collectivisation, nationalisation of industries, and market constriction, overhauled the existing class structure. The major exploiting class (landlords and capitalists) and the exploited (tenants and hired labourers) were essentially homogenised, while a two-class structure emerged in the form of cadres vs. ordinary citizens, and urban vs. rural. This new structure favoured the cadre and urban. Institutionally contained by the residence permit (*hukou*) system since the 1960s, citizens were classified into the social categories based on their class origins. The former ruling class, including landlords, rich peasants, and capitalists, was pushed to the bottom of the social echelon, while the ruled class was granted more power and higher social status.

This revolutionary cycle coincided with the period when the Red Classics were produced. Class politics had profound implications for literary and artistic production. The proletariat workers, peasants, and soldiers were deemed as the only valid candidates for heroes. Enemies invariably came from the former exploiting class. The essence of a human being was taken to be their class nature. Heroes and villains were formularised and generalised, to various degrees, to represent the class to which they belonged. Class struggle between the ruling class and the proletariat was believed to be the only force driving social progress and became the only legitimate theme and concern running throughout the Red Classics.

The Red Classics consist of a didactic mapping of ideology onto cultural products. As literary historian Hong Zicheng describes, these works were created “within the confines of the established ideology, narrating established historical themes to achieve established ideological purposes” (2007, p. 106). Most of the Red Classics underwent a number of revisions in line with the political and artistic currents of the time. This “purging” reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution, when “class struggle” was

regarded as the universal principle and basic law in artistic creation.³⁴ As relations between the Soviet Union and China deteriorated in the early 1960s, Mao replaced the socialist realism model with a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism (L. Yang, 1996). The addition of the latter meant that heroes needed to be elevated to an even greater level of perfection (Link, Madsen & Pickowicz, 2002, p. 116; L. Yang, 1996). The most important guiding principle for literary and artistic creation was the “three prominences” theory, formulated in November 1969 by Yao Wenyan, the chief propagandist and a member of the notorious Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution.

Hailed as a major contribution to socialist artistic theory, this principle was applied to a number of theatrical works that later served as the model for artistic works of all different genres (Clark, 2008). Following this principle, the central heroic characters in these works all possess “loftiness, greatness and perfection” (*gao, da, quan*). Analyses of the characterisation of heroes in novels created during the Cultural Revolution show that the heroic characters normally possess a number of preferred qualities: In terms of personal background, heroes tend to be young, single, of heroic descent or orphaned, and have military experience; in terms of physical qualities, heroes are normally of “strong constitution,” with “big and bright piercing eyes, a vigorous air and an unaffected expression” (L. Yang, 1998, p. 74); in terms of ideological qualities, they are conscious of line struggles between socialist roaders and capitalist roaders and display altruism and collectivism; in terms of temperamental and behavioral qualities, they show kindness and magnanimity, honesty, politeness and rebelliousness. An example of this formula being carried to the extreme is Hao Ran’s novel, *Golden Road* [*Jin guang da dao*], which depicts a protagonist that is modeled so didactically on the formula that even his name, Gao Daquan, literally means “loftiness, greatness, and perfection.”

The decline and rebirth of the Red Classics

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, the state launched a series of reform campaigns aiming at economic development and modernisation. Continuous revolutionary struggle

³⁴ Lan Yang (1998) outlines three stages in the creation of heroic characters: before 1958, when backward and middle characters were allowed; from 1958 to before the Cultural Revolution, when the heroic characters’ flaws and mistakes were not approved, but no official policy banning these representations was in place; and during the Cultural Revolution, when heroic characters were required to be perfect models.

ceased to be the focus of the CCP. This led to profound changes in social relationships and status in society (Y. Guo, 2008). The Red Classics now serve as reminders of the former ideology, with its prevailing truth of class struggle and the worker-peasant-soldier trio as the perfect proletariat heroes. The genre's themes, vocabulary, and image system must be revised based on the current milieu if they are to appeal to the reform era audience. However, the transformation of the genre is not a total subversion of the original's content, form, and aesthetics. The symbolic boundaries must be carefully renegotiated and transgressed, not only because the rules of the market are just as repressive as the earlier propaganda, but also because the CCP still officially claims the legitimacy of the revolution.

In the following section, I outline three major factors leading to the TV adaptation of the Red Classics in the early 2000s: the shift away from class ideology; the cultural elite's search for a humanist subject liberated from ideological constraints and political utility; and the desublimation of high culture and the commodity fetishism engulfing every aspect of public culture, including revolutionary culture such as the Red Classics. These imperatives did not only drive literary production, but also exerted influence on televisual production.

The media has played an important role in rearticulating the politics of class and nation in this period. Political economist Zhao Yuezhi (2009a, pp. 96-97) suggests that the media has contributed to the reordering of the cultural politics of class and nation in five ways: Firstly, the media participated in depoliticising the reform process. The regime of media control ruled out discussion of the class nature of China's development. Secondly, the media cooperated with the Party in its selective incorporation of the new rich into its ranks. Thirdly, the media mobilised cultural nationalism in support of the government's push for the "Chinese nation's great rejuvenation." Fourthly, the media abandoned the essentialist class discourse of the Maoist era, instead favouring a discourse of "social strata" (Anagnost, 2008, p. 499; Y. Guo, 2008). At the top of these strata is a "middle class," supposedly the foundation of social stability harbouring hope for democracy. In this new discourse, citizens are not recognised as members of a collective political body, but, rather, as individuals in various stages of striving for middle class status. The situation, as Zhao observes, is indeed ironic: "the discourse of

‘class struggle’ was taken to its essentialised extreme when Chinese society was relatively egalitarian during the Cultural Revolution, and it was totally suppressed during a period of rapid class polarisation during the reform era” (2009a, p. 97). Lastly, in playing up the role of the “middle class,” the media no longer feature workers and peasants as the “masters of the new society.” Instead, workers and peasants have been transformed into “the burden” of the nation in its endeavour to become the world’s superpower (Y. Guo, 2008; Zhao, 2009a, p. 97).

In analysing the international and domestic media’s neglect of marginalised groups such as peasants, workers and rural migrants, Wanning Sun demonstrates convincingly that “their problems and issues fail the test of newsworthiness and hence the threshold of public visibility” (2008, p. 44), unless, of course, they appear as spectacle. In an interview with Zhao Yuezhi, Chinese communication scholar Lü Xinyu (Zhao, 2010) has identified the collapse of the subjectivity of workers and peasants as the main factor leading mainstream media to marginalise these groups. The CCP once claimed peasants and workers as its class base and entrusted them with the task of national construction during the Cold War period (Zhao, 2010a, p. 12). With the onset of marketisation, this peasant-worker base has been increasingly depleted of its historical subjectivity. Facing increasing social conflicts since 2003, the Hu-Wen leadership has adopted some corrective measures to restore social justice and equity and has promoted the rhetoric of “building a harmonious society.” Under such circumstances, talking about class conflict or class-consciousness carries certain risks for the media.

Zhao’s discussion of the media’s role in articulating the politics of class and nation in the reform process provides a framework to address the specific cultural politics in the TV adaptation of the Red Classics. The adaptation of the Red Classics was situated within the national reorientation towards a neoliberal state. The figures of heroes and villains in the Red Classics are instrumental in articulating political definitions of the nation and class. The original Red Classics produced socialist myths and indoctrinated political citizens. The prevalent neoliberal, depoliticised discourses necessarily make claims on the cultural representations of the protagonists in these texts. Discussing academia’s collusion in “outmoding” the class discourse, Guo Yingjie (2008, p. 46) provides an insightful argument:

The rejection of revolution has been carried on in the last decade by social scientists and translated into specific ways of reconceptualising social structure and analysing social classes which depart from Marxist approaches, so that the society cannot be conceived as comprising warring classes and class struggle cannot be said to constitute the motive force of history.

In the following section, I examine the way these discursive elements operate via the construction of heroes and villains to produce new ways of categorisation and cultural values. My particular goal is to show how the discourse of class and class struggle, prominent in the original narratives, has been obliterated and replaced in the TV adaptations through a series of narrative strategies and visual constructions. I argue that the changing construction of heroes and villains in the TV adaptations provides a critical entry point into questions about power and social relations.

The dismantling of class discourse in literature and art harks back to the discussions on subjectivity in the early reform era. With the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, the whole nation turned away from the Maoist social engineering that had resulted in the complete politicisation of everyday life. The disenchantment with revolutionary utopia led to “deep-seated suspicion of all forms of polity (the archsymbol of the public and the collective) and a simultaneous construction of a fetishism of the subject” (J. Wang, 1996, p. 196). Theorists explored humanist Marxism as an alternative to the Marxism practiced by the CCP and engaged in hot debates over socialist alienation in 1983. In 1984, literary critic and writer Liu Zaifu made a call for an autonomous aesthetic subject. In Liu’s theorisation, this aesthetic subject is “the privileged site where the ultimate realisation of a total human being is to take place—an imaginary site previously prescribed to the proletariat in the Marxist tradition” (J. Wang, 1996, p. 198). Constructed in opposition to repressive political power and the over-politicising Maoist style, this individual “subject” (*zhu ti*) is free from the subjugation of Party ideology and socialist collectivism. Liu’s subjectivity theory thus presupposes a dehumanising process of politics and ideology in the Mao era. Following these ideas, the “root-searching” (*xun gen*) school of writing emerged in 1985-1986. As a powerful idea in search of an aesthetic subject, this genre of literature resorts to nature and

indigenous culture for a human subject liberated from politics and history. This nativist turn was also accompanied by the conscious abandoning of the rhetoric of socialist realism, and even realism, as the aesthetic language, marking the emergence of experimental fiction.

While the theoretical discussion about the return of “human nature” went on in the mid 1980s, the cultural movement was also in full swing, aiming to debunk the aesthetic of the sublime. Literary scholar Wang Ban has identified the discourse of the sublime (*chong gao*) as the privileged category in modern Chinese aesthetics. Wang has identified three features as characteristic of the aesthetic-political discourse of the sublime: the teleological vision of history; the materialistic conception of the real; and the sublime subject as the maker of history (B. Wang, 1997). The Red Classics best exemplify the sublime discourse, with their narration of linear progress toward the making of the nation, their larger-than-life protagonists, and their dogmatic adherence to socialist realism.

Writers and artists have fundamentally deconstructed each aspect of these grand narratives. Besides the root-seeking school, experimentalists constitute another force that has engaged in textual practices of revolt against the revolutionary aesthetics. Led by young writers Ge Fei, Yu Hua, and Su Tong, the experimentalists entered the literary scene around 1987. By employing the strategies of the grotesque, the fantastic, and the schizophrenic, these writers demystified the grand narrative of the “real,” the yardstick in socialist realism. Instead of seeing these works as mere “linguistic games,” Wang sees these works as representing “the rebellion of the body against the repressive tyranny of the sublime subjectivity imposed by the party-state” (B. Wang, 1997, p. 230).

Sharing similar vision, literary critic Jie Lu (2001), who studied the experimentalists’ role in breaking up the socialist narrative machinery, convincingly argues that experimentalists use memory as a transgressive aesthetic strategy to go beyond the limit of socialist realism. In contrast to the traditional genre of the Red Classics, which represented history as a linear, rational, and coherent progress towards socialism, writers like Ge Fei, Su Tong, and Liu Zhenyun explore personal memory to present a revolutionary history that is fragmented, irrational, dissonant, and purposeless. Lu’s

analysis aims to show that China is experiencing post-history, a result of the confusing co-existence of socialism with capitalism and the disillusion with the “regression” of socialism into capitalism.

The genre of new historic novels (*xin lishi xiaoshuo*), which took shape in the mid 1980s, consciously discards the historicism that underlines the entire body of the Red Classics. In these newer novels, official historical events are deliberately played down. Instead, everyday life and ordinary people are made the centre of the narration. There are no longer absolutely positive or negative characters. By dismantling the official history based on narrating historical events and heroes, the new historical writings have opened up alternative readings of the past. They thus represent a veiled criticism and subversion of the Red Classics (F. Liu, 2006).

The mission of dismantling revolutionary literary discourse, taken on solemnly by the root-seeking school and experimentalists in the 1980s, was taken off the cultural agenda in the following decade. Fighting hard to keep the art free from its instructive and pedagogical role, intellectuals and literati now found, much to their dismay and with no small irony, that pure art and literature have not only lost their social efficacy, but also their function to provide entertainment for the masses. The serious pursuit of human spirit and moral perfection now looked out of touch with a society that had already embraced consumerism. Rising to the occasion, Wang Shuo, author and popular culture icon, took on high culture as a subject for ridicule, making for himself a big name and big money in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After the public outcry for democracy and political reform met a violent end in 1989, the public zeal for politics had sunk to a historical low. The Party’s decision to put ideological debate aside while furthering marketisation had driven the whole nation into frenzy in pursuit of wealth and pleasure. The 1990s represented a “desublimated era” (J. Wang, 1996, p. 268), throbbing with a “popular culture that seeks noisy pleasures and mocks self-restraint” (J. Wang, 1996, p. 268). The new trendsetters were the nouveau riche, entrepreneurs, professionals, and even profiteers, while the backbone of society, the peasants, workers and soldiers, were downplayed both economically and symbolically. The entertainment industry in its formation has sought to package and sell any subject with a commercial value. The

revolutionary culture was transformed from an object for intellectual deconstruction into a commodity marketed to consumers nostalgic for the Maoist past.

Remaking the heroes

The previous section describes the discursive environment in which the transformation of the Red Classics into TV format was undertaken. In post-Mao China, it proved challenging to find new ways to present revolutionary works created with narrow views of politics and high official language. In the 1980s, the film realm had a trial run of reinventing Party history in the popular imagination. Subjects such as the Anti-Japanese War and the Yan'an legacy were recast within experimental films, such as Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* [*Hong gaoliang*, 1988], Wu Ziniu's *One and Eight* [*Yige he bage*, 1983], and Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* [*Huang tudi*, 1984] (Barmé, 1999, p. 247). These films addressed the issues of nationhood and heroes with enough ambiguity to allow them to fall within the state discourse on Party history, while at the same time pushing the detailed historical events into the background and adopting a personal viewpoint (Barmé, 1999). Unlike these films, the TV adaptations of the Red Classics must honour a number of pre-existing productions in other formats, as well as a much more prescribed storyline. The difficulty is obvious: On the one hand, presenting stereotypical characters in a formulaic plot is unlikely to engage audiences in the depoliticised popular discourse and is ill-suited for a medium such as TV, which favours a naturalistic approach to representation and allows greater intimacy with an audience. On the other hand, the original works are still part of the revolutionary heritage to which the Party claims ownership, and it cannot be denied that these stories once offered certain pleasures to their viewers at an earlier time. Both old ideological strictures and new commercial concerns help outline the boundaries the TV adaptations must negotiate.

One example that encapsulates the complexity of adapting the Red Classics to new cultural expectations is related to the presentation of heroes and villains. The opposition between the hero/chief protagonist and the villain/class enemy forms the main theme and the drama that propels the story development in most Red Classics. As I discussed earlier, class struggle is regarded as anti-modern and outmoded, a political excess to overcome in the current popular discourse. Understanding how the language and theme

of class struggle were obliterated in the TV adaptations provides insights into the logic of cultural practice in post-Mao China. In the following section, I will focus on the evolving heroic characters and villains in *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* to discuss tensions and negotiations in appropriating the iconographic characters in the Red Classics, a process that has proven to be very contentious.

Tracks in the Snowy Mountain is one of the most popular Red Classics, its popularity partly derived from its legendary-tale type of narration. Literary critic Liu Fusheng (2006) has identified two types of narrative fiction under the umbrella of the “revolutionary, historic novel”: the epics and the legends. The epics deal with the fights between the Communists and the Nationalists. The legends mainly focus on the Anti-Japanese War. For Liu, the choice of subject is ideological. The epics concern themselves with the nature of Chinese society. The legitimacy of Communist power is predicated on the discourse that it is an inevitable trend of historical development supported by popular will. The epics thus chronicle important historical events, political activities, or battles, demonstrating the legitimacy of Communist rule by narrating the origin of the revolution. For these purposes, narratives of this type tend to have a large temporal and spatial span, and the depictions of events are often panoramic. By comparison, legends are not required to focus on the legitimacy of the war. This leaves much more space for this sub-genre to focus on characterisation. Over all, legends show more affinity with the popular fiction genre.

Tracks in the Snowy Mountain falls into the legend category, as it focuses on an adventurous small brigade within the CCP army, rather than a panoramic recounting of historical and social events. Written by Qu Bo in the 1950s, it is a story about the eradication of defeated Nationalist bandits who had joined professional brigands and landlord tyrants in Northeast China’s Manchuria in 1946. The bandits were trying to locate a large amount of crude opium left by the Japanese army to finance their offensives against the Communists. Meanwhile, both the Communists and the bandits are searching for a map marked with liaison stations for the Nationalist spies. The hero, Yang Zirong, who is modeled after a real soldier, slips into the bandits’ stronghold and wins the trust of the enemy leader. Based on the intelligence Yang provides, the Communist army is able to eliminate the bandit den.

Some literary critics tend to classify *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* under the “revolutionary popular novel genre,” together with *Railroad Guerrilla*, *Struggles in the Old City*, and *Armed Squad behind the Enemy Line* [*Dihou wugongdui*]. Written in the 1950s, these novels, although invariably engaged in representing revolutionary heroes as their subjects, distinguish themselves from others in that they are more deeply rooted in the Chinese vernacular fictional tradition (Y. Li, 2003).³⁵ Since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, cultural elitists have lampooned the Chinese vernacular culture as the vestige of feudalism and an obstacle to China’s modernisation. *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* enjoyed phenomenal popularity among readers precisely because of its adoption of elements of vernacular fiction.

Critics have offered detailed evidence for this close relationship between revolutionary popular fiction and vernacular culture. Li Yang (2003) drew parallels between *Tracks* and three traditional vernacular fiction and drama genres: the heroic (*ying xiong*), the genius and the beauty (*cai zi jia ren*), and the ghost and spirit (*gui shen*). In Li’s analysis, Qu’s heroic figures, such as Yang Zirong, Shao Jianbo and Li Yongqi, were clearly influenced by the characters in vernacular novels such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [*San guo yan yi*]. Even though writer Qu Bo tried very hard to follow the stripped-down formula of “making the good better, making the bad worse,” his characterisation was nevertheless criticised because his heroes and villains were modelled on the archetypes of vernacular classics. Specifically, regimental chief of staff, Shao Jianbo, was likened to the mythical errant-knight in traditional vernacular novels. The character’s dominance in every crucial moment and his omnipotent ability in solving thorny problems outshined the collective wisdom. His hatred toward the bandits who killed his sister also runs the risk of turning a struggle between two classes into a traditional revenge story. The bandits were caricatured to such an extent that they were too farcical to be believable. All in all, Qu’s typification of the heroes and villains is based more on traditional aesthetic and ethical norms and less on class distinctions.

³⁵ Literary historians define vernacular fiction as popular stories told in spoken language close to the daily speech of common people, as opposed to the classical literary language (Ch’en, 1961). Originating from the oral narration of professional storytellers, this vernacular literature took shape in the 13th century. Episodic in form, the vernacular novels are usually good at sustaining drama, with vivid characterisation and effective utilisation of folk language. The masterpieces of this genre are *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Story of the Water Margin*.

More recent research from literary critic Cai Xiang (2010) also contends that works such as *Tracks* represents an experimental incorporation of organic and long-lived structures and elements in popular art form. However, this literary reform was not only inaugurated by political manoeuvre, but also by the intellectuals' search for new mode of expression and subject-matter since the New Culture since early 1900s. Being urged to integrate with the masses, the writers acquired a new, political perspective. This enabled the writers to gain a better understanding of the life at the grass-root level of the society and many then described the village life in a naturalistic way. The search for typicality resulted in a new trope of revolutionary "hero" that links with the pre-Communist vernacular tradition. Yang Zirong, for example, is endowed with the legendary elements of heroes in the traditional fictional tradition, yet, its non-fictionality was constantly stressed by Qu Bo. To prove Yang Zirong's heroic deeds are achievable is crucial so that the hero possess a strong power to "hail" the ordinary citizen. In this process, revolution generates a mythical power through legend.

Although Qu Bo may have been profoundly influenced by the vernacular novels,³⁶ his struggle to stamp out the "invisible folk culture structure" from his work is beyond dispute. This is best illustrated in the characterisation of Yang Zirong (S. Chen, 2002). Yang infiltrates the bandits' stronghold several times in disguise. He is also able to speak the secret language of the underworld. This poses a conundrum for the writer: On the one hand, he must convince the audience that Yang can mingle with the bandits and win their trust; on the other hand, since the major heroic figure is based on a real soldier, Yang must be modelled on moral perfection. The writer's solution was to create another person, Luan Chaojia, who takes on the unspeakable worldly traits for Yang. These traits include unrefined manners, enjoying jokes in bad taste, and swearing in front of women. Chen Sihe (2002) argues that Luan and Yang are complimentary to each other in the novel. The combined qualities of the two may be a closer depiction of the real Yang.

Like many other Red Classics, *Tracks* went through an ideological "purifying" process after it was written, and the novel was revised several times by Qu Bo. A major

³⁶ In an interview with *Beijing Daily* in 1957, Qu Bo told reporters that he could easily recite large chunks of these works, and it was his belief that workers, peasants, and soldiers were also fond of this vernacular style (Qu, as cited in Y. Li, 2003, p. 5)

publishing success, the novel caught the interest of several drama companies. In 1958, an opera version with the title, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* [*Zhiqiu Weihushan*], was created based upon the episode depicting Yang Zirong's battle of wits with the bandits (Clark, 2008). In June 1964, *Tiger Mountain* was performed in the national Peking Opera convention and was watched and approved by the top leaders of the country. It was then refined into one of the eight Model Revolutionary Works widely performed during the Cultural Revolution (Clark, 2008). Yang Zirong became a household name. Nearly everybody growing up in that era could sing the famous aria sung by Yang Zirong during his first encounter with the bandit leader. In this theatrical work, all the distracting traditional motifs were sanitised. The love stories between Shao Jianbo and army nurse Bai Ru were removed from the story. Shao Jianbo's revenge plot was also removed. Yang Zirong had morphed into an icon of socialist realism—lofty, great, perfect. Paul Clark's study of model operas found that heroes in *Yangbanxi* possess a mythical quality; "they start the drama fully in command of the ideological resources and emotional discipline to tackle the challenges ahead" (2008, p. 53). The idealisation of heroes, and the demonisation of the enemy on the other side, was a practice based on the concept of "typification" (*dianxinghua*) in socialist realism. Guided by this principle, Yang Zirong, as the central hero of *Tiger Mountain*, embodies the essence of the proletarian class and therefore must be distinguished by wisdom, bravery, uprightness, and strength.

More than thirty years later, TV producers face an audience no longer accustomed to crude ideological indoctrination or didactic recounting of historical events. Additionally, as Rofel (2007) has argued, urban residents embrace consumerism as an identity that is constructed on the structural dichotomy between the past and the present. The present is marked by consumerism and the search for wealth, while the past is associated only with politics. This results in a construction of the socialist past as a time to be transcended and forgotten. TV's commercial nature dictates that it must anticipate the fidgety public mood. Translated into the context of 21st century China, this means these TV adaptations must produce heroes that are rounder and more multi-dimensional than the model soldier typical of the Maoist era. At the same time, to get scheduled on air, adaptations cannot afford to disrupt old socialist values to an extent that the networks

feel it is risky to take them on. The networks, after all, are institutionally still part of the Party machinery.

How to concoct a mix that satisfies all the vested interests remains a challenge. For the production team³⁷ of *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain*, the strategy was to restore the invisible vernacular elements in the original novel and flesh out heroes like Yang Zirong with humour, toughness, and a small dose of anti-establishment sentiment, while not threatening the legitimacy of the war. The basic storytelling rules were set: heroes are fighting for a just cause, and bandits deserve to be eradicated. But within these rules, there is room to manipulate human stories. Perhaps, despite their loyalty to the revolutionary cause, the heroes are human beings with “warts and pimples.”

One strategy the TV adaptation adopted is to play up the legendary elements of the location—the vast, sparsely populated land of Manchuria covered with snow, the pine forests, a steam-engine train snaking through the ice, and a hostel built with wood in the middle of nowhere. These elements work as a backdrop for the squad soldiers gliding gracefully in skis, with their white camouflage cloaks flying in the snowflakes; or for the bandits, all clad in self-made wolf-skin hats and coats, looming here and there in the mythical woods. The cast speaks northeast dialect, which further enhanced the exotic flavour of the show. The northeast dialect, similar to mandarin in pronunciation and thus accessible to a majority of audiences, is much richer in idioms and colloquial expressions. Dialects as a “folk language” have been suppressed in the national modernisation process, regarded as the antithesis of modernity. In recent years, writers such as Han Shaogong, Yu Hua and Liu Zhenyun have publicly expressed their frustration with storytelling in a national “standard” language. They claim that their vision has been partly lost, due to the fact that their native languages are reduced, deleted, edited, violated, and translated in the creation process. Some of them have been consciously experimenting with using dialects in their fictional writing (X. Zhang, 2003). The director of the TV adaptation, Li Wenqi, once told the media that he hoped the show would give the audiences a taste of the local culture, customs, and scenery. A

³⁷ *Tracks* is a joint production by Vanke Film and Television Co. Ltd., the Shenzhen Municipal Publicity Department (SMPD), and the Theatrical Company of the General Political Department (TCGPD). Like *The Making of a Hero*, this is a project co-funded by an independent production unit (Vanke) and state organisations (SMPD and TCGPD). The producer, Zheng Kainan, is the director of *The Making of a Hero*.

northwest native himself, Li may have made an effort to represent the original work in a more faithful way, but he obviously has an astute business sense, too. Northeast dialect has enjoyed enormous popularity since the country's top comedians, Zhao Benshan and Song Dandan, started to use it for their skits in the New Year's Evening Gala, the largest TV entertainment show in China. The use of dialect on screen may not have the critical edge of many contemporary writers, but it does constitute a small transgression, considering that fictional heroes in the Red Classics in original film and theatre all speak with a pretentious clear and rich tone (*zi zheng qiang yuan*).

What draws the most criticism in the new adaptation are the significant alterations to Yang Zirong's character. Instead of a born hero, naturally brave and wise, he is now a chef in the army. This is considered a trivial position in the Chinese army, not only because chefs are not entitled to the heroism that goes with participation in battle, but also because their work is concerned with the "material bodily lower stratum," as Bakhtin (1984) put it.³⁸

In the opening scene, Yang Zirong makes his first entrance riding on horse-drawn skis and chanting an erotic local tune. A moment later, he is bargaining with a local grain vendor, warning him to only sell the best cornmeal to the Communist army Yang is serving. On his way back to the base camp, he rescues female soldier Bai Ru, who faints and falls off her horse due to fatigue. When younger soldiers inadvertently call him "chief," he is embarrassed and irritated and says, "Listen, I'm not a chief, nothing but a chef."

Indeed, Old Yang is not a particularly disciplined person. In fact, he is quite foul-mouthed. He once made a living wandering around in the underworld among the

³⁸ According to Bakhtin, the material bodily lower stratum is a fundamental component of the "uncrowning" of the official, the sublime, the sober, the sacred, and the exalted in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin describes the material bodily lower stratum as a major thrust downward, a movement that manifests itself in fights, beatings, and blows, in curses and abuses, in carnival travesty, and in banquets and material bodily needs such as swallowing, farting, and birth-giving. Bakhtin believes that this strategy "liberates objects from the snares of false seriousness, from illusions and sublimations inspired by fear" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 376). One could draw a parallel between Bakhtin's strategies with some major changes made to Yang Zirong's image in the TV adaptation: his dialect (not standard), his habit of swearing, his impure social background, his mastery of underworld language, his propensity to get drunk, his job as a chef, his love of indecent folk tunes and practical jokes, his ruffian style, and his emotional entanglement with his former lover. It can be argued that these characterisations were adopted to transform the perfect, Godly hero embodying the proletarian class into an earthly human individual.

bandits. When the commander encourages him to join the special squad for wiping out the bandits, Shao Jianbo, the squad leader, firmly declines. Shao voices his concern to the commander:

We all know what sort of person Old Yang is: His background is very complicated. He was once a security guard for the wealthy. He can make conversation with any sort of person. The chap is just too tricky. No wonder he can speak bandit slang. He is not like Gao Bo or Luan Chaojia, who each suffered bitterly in the old society and have deep class hatred and who therefore joined the revolutionary army in their youth. Neither is he like Sun Dade, who was an innocent student before joining the army. Take a look at the members of our squad—they are all members of the Communist Party or Youth League. But Old Yang did not even write a single application letter to join the Party. He certainly enjoys a drink or two as well. As soon as he drinks, he will start singing those obscene tunes, sweetheart this or sweetheart that.

At the same time, Old Yang himself does not fancy joining the squad too much either. He only becomes a scout squad member because the chief taunts him. His reputation being such, when he reports to the squad reluctantly, the squad soldiers confront him with the question: “So, apart from being able to speak slang, what else can you do?” When Yang answers sulkily, “I can cook,” they jeer in response: “Oh, so it all has something to do with the mouth.”³⁹

His ruffian style causes him further trouble when the squad moves into the village. Shao tells him off when Yang starts his obscene songs during a joint celebration with a squad of Soviet soldiers. Unable to stand the Russian skiing coach Sasha’s advances on army nurse Bai Ru, Yang buries four sharp-pointed sticks in the snow, causing Sasha to fall badly on the ice when demonstrating flying techniques to the squad. This leads to a good scolding from Shao. He privately arranges for a captive bandit to meet his wife.

³⁹ It is interesting to note that Mao (1975), in his “Report on an Investigation in the Peasant Movement in Hunan, March 1927,” once said, “Revolution is not hosting a banquet or dining.” In justifying the violence in the peasants movement, Mao contrasted it with eating, which is relaxed and easy.

Not only that, this bandit's wife was once Yang's fiancée, a woman who had married a bandit due to a bizarre combination of circumstances. Part of the story revolves around the ambiguous feelings that Yang and his former lover have for each other when they meet each other again after living a world apart. His fiancée's son was abducted by the villain, Vulture (*Zuoshandiao*), and it seems Yang's decision to penetrate Vulture's den was partly fuelled by the desire to look for the son for his ex-fiancée. In the last scene, Yang is killed when chasing after the son.

To a certain extent, Old Yang's exploits diminish the serious overtones of the Red Classics. His behavior may not seem that bad, but as a heroic character he certainly exceeds the limits established in the heyday of the Red Classics. The embellishment of his character has been stripped to a considerable extent. He is now human, full of little flaws just like us, and his heroism is somehow inadvertent. To many, his brave actions constitute a trivialisation of the war because they are motivated partly by personal revenge.

The emphasis on kinship relations is not accidental but critical to the rewriting. Li Yang (2003) points out that in the socialist genealogy of knowledge, identification with a class was achieved through transcendence of one's kinship. Li's study demonstrates how the identification with kinship was overcome and sublimated to that of class in *The Red Lantern* [*Hong deng ji*, 1970], another key work of the Red Classics genre. In *The Red Lantern*, "ties of blood" are considered a barrier to the real bond formed on the basis of class. As a conspicuous narrative device, the three main characters in the story are not related to each other: Li Yuhe, a railroad worker who engages in underground work for the Communists in the Anti-Japanese War, adopts Li Tiemei, whose parents died as revolutionary martyrs. After his comrade-in-arms sacrificed his life for the revolutionary cause, Li looked after his comrade's mother and took her as his own mother. When Li's real identity is exposed and Japanese special agents take him away, Grandma Li reveals this special family relationship to Tiemei. This greatly inspires Tiemei to follow the example of her father and carry the revolution through to the end. *The Red Lantern* transformed the traditional human relations based on Confucian ethics, replacing them with a brand new class-consciousness and class relationships. Partly due to its archetypal characterisation of Li's class background, *The Red Lantern* was

considered the “model” of the eight Model Works (Clark, 2008). Similar devices became the normative practice and can be found in a number of other artistic creations made during this time.

As Li Yang (2003) observes, the subordination of kinship to class was a process that, in the case of *The Red Lantern*, involved several rounds of revisions. In the earlier film version of *The Red Lantern*, there were still displays of affection between the three family members. These details were eliminated from the Huju opera version, which came out later, but traces of a kinship bond were still kept in the parting scene when the three generations of the Li family pour out their grief before Li Yuhe’s execution. At this stage, kinship was still regarded as being consistent with the class bond. However, this narrative mode was completely changed in the Peking Opera version, where kinship became a negative relationship in need of transcendence. This is encapsulated in the last few words that Li Yuhe says to Tiemei before his death: “It is said that nothing is deeper than the kindred feeling; to me, class love is weightier than Mount Tai.”

Acknowledging and exploring the emotions of Yang Zirong and other protagonists in the Red Classics is part and parcel of a grand project in post-Mao cultural production. This project involves endowing the protagonists with newly embraced humanism and individualism, in an attempt to reject the political passions of socialism. In a way, the project represents almost the reversal of the process whereby revolutionaries were made saintly in the socialist era. Heroes are depicted as ordinary individuals struggling with common problems in human relations. Almost all the TV adaptations promoted their works with a claim that they would craft a more realistic and natural image of the protagonists as compared with the original version. How to take iconic heroes down from the altar is the selling point for these reproductions.

Common humanity comes packaged with sensationalism in the new formula. A more “humane” hero provides a mass audience with their daily after-work excitement. The extreme form of heroic character based on this formula is the “villainous hero” of the revolutionary historical genre. As mentioned above, this formula was developed by writers like Mo Yan in his *Red Sorghum*, brought to screen by big names like Zhang

Yimou, and then replicated in primetime TV drama. Two smash hits produced with this type of character are *Sky of History* and *Sword Show*.

In these bloody primetime series dealing with the Anti-Japanese War, the main heroic characters are almost all villains to the bone. Unlike the Red Classics written before the Cultural Revolution, which employ the hero's residual "slipperiness" as a device to emphasise their heroic spirit, in the new TV versions, the heroes are like China's Rambo or James Bond (F. Liu, 2006). They no longer epitomise the essence of the oppressed class, but are presented as individual war machines. Like Rambo or James Bond, these heroes are flattened figures who do not grow in depth or sophistication in their characterisation. They struggle not out of concern for social order or justice, but as a result of their innate untamable nature. In *Sky of History*, the heroic character, Jiang Daya ("big-tooth Jiang"), is a salesclerk at a rice store.⁴⁰ He kills a few Japanese soldiers who try to rape a Chinese girl. After this act, the only choice left for him is to join the army. Big-tooth wants to join the regular army led by the Kuomintang so he can get better pay and provisions. When he runs into Communist guerillas, he only stays with them because he is attracted by the charisma of the guerilla leader and by the beauty of a female communist soldier. In the army, he remains a scoundrel, putting his own selfish needs above everything else, and faces frequent disciplinary actions.

In *Sword Show*, Li Yunlong is modeled in a very similar manner. A regimental commander, he never wears his uniform cap properly, and he uses obscenities like "damn" and "shit" frequently. He motivates his soldiers not by persuading them to rise against oppression, but by promising good wine and a meat banquet after the battle. He is a born military commander. This seems to give him enough justification to constantly carry out campaigns without consulting his superiors. The political commissar of the regiment fights with Li all the time, but never wins. Li's likes to say, "I'm the regiment commander. Only my words count," or "I'm in charge of the military stuff. You take care of everyday life matters." Like Big-tooth, he is often the subject of military disciplinary action, but this never changes his mind, nor his image as a true hero.

⁴⁰ In this case, the deformed bodily organs also serve as a device to subvert official piety.

The villain/hero extends the representational boundary of revolutionaries and provides a model for the protagonists in the TV adaptations. This new imagery came into fashion for several reasons. A strong hero caters to the nostalgic yearning for authoritative figures now that socialist ideals are already being destabilised by consumerist hedonism. It answers the call for the return of common humanity in the wake of socialist alienation. At the same time, there is a liberating sensation in the transgression and subversion of the sublime figures of the utopian past. The other half of the story in obliterating the class discourse is found in images of the villain in the TV adaptations.

Heroic Villain

Besides the hero, the other character type the producers have tinkered with is the villain. Like their upright counterpart, villains in the Red Classics were also created in accordance with invisible rules. Because the opposition between heroes and villains evokes the struggle between the classes, much work went into making the enemy characters evil and hateful. As the oppressor class incarnate, they were deprived of anything even remotely human in the eight model plays. As a norm, the villains did not show human emotions. Apart from being invariably ugly, they were also endowed with evil traits according to the traditional Confucian ethics in the Red Classics. In order to instigate strong hatred towards the villains, writers had to borrow from stereotypes in popular culture, which were more deeply rooted in public consciousness. For example, the female bandit leader, Butterfly (*Hudiemí*), in *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* is the bastard child of a prostitute, extremely ugly, and lascivious. According to Confucius, “Lewdness is the vilest of the evil.” Nothing will ever reform her evil nature.

In the first decade after the Cultural Revolution, driven by the pursuit of humanism, entertainment media started to explore human relationships such as love, marriage, and sexuality (Y. Zhang, 2004, p. 229), at first for common people and then for heroic characters and even villains. In the mainstream revolutionary, historical prime-time serials, top national leaders were occasionally depicted as humorous, loving, and fallible. Within the former “enemy” camp, the Nationalist generals, even a party chief like Chiang Kai-shek, could be portrayed as human, not just as symbols of evil power. The limits were pushed further in the 1990s, as pop became dominant. To appeal to

audiences who already had exposure to profanity, transgression of the socialist norm constitutes the major selling point for Red Classics adaptations.

Like heroic figures, the new representations of villains have had to negotiate boundaries laid down in the socialist era. To break the old ideological binds means restoring a certain ambiguity in the characterisation of the class enemies, who were demonised in accordance with the theory of class struggle. In the following section, I will outline a few formal elements that TV adaptations use in dismantling the worn-out formulas of Party aesthetics. I will discuss the changes in the representation of villains from a number of perspectives: appearance, intelligence, sexuality, emotion, and ideological position. I argue that in humanising villains, class struggle is often reduced to human conflict rooted in personality, family background, education, personal experience, and even fate. As such, class-inflected opposition is superseded by personal animosity.

Appearance

TV reproductions no longer treat the villain's appearance as ideologically bound. With a greater emphasis on realism, the TV production units have upgraded the look of villains, generally making them visually appealing to the audiences. Butterfly, the female bandit in *Tracks in the Snow Mountain*, is now not only good-looking, but also well dressed in her furs and wearing makeup. The Japanese spy, Noda Seiko, is a true beauty. In the *Shajiabang* adaptation, the scholarly-looking Chen Daoming in his flowing robe makes the Kuomintang staff officer he plays more pretentious than sinister. Japanese squad head, Ono, is a newly created character in the series, acted by the handsome idol Cheng Qian, despite his role as an obligatory villain. Some negative characters still have grotesque bodies, but obviously for other purposes. For example, they are often used to achieve comic effect, as with the monkey-like, glib-tongued rascal, Diao Xiaosan, in *Shajiabang*. The imperfect, often grotesque characters are also chosen to conform to the original image in the public memory. For example, in the model Peking Opera version of *Shajiabang*, Hu Chuankui was short and fat. This remains so in the TV version. Another interesting detail in many of the adapted Red Classics serials is the use of Japanese actors to play the Japanese military roles. This achieves a more realistic feel and also counterbalances the cartoonish characterisations in the original versions. Overall, the bodies of the negative characters in the adaptations

are not so directly called into the service of politics, but, rather, tend to be more involved in commerce. To a large extent, villains are still portrayed as an embodiment or caricature of some attribute, but in a more sophisticated way.

Intelligence

In the updated versions, the villains are no longer depicted as cartoonish, but instead become serious opponents who must be outwitted. In the socialist version of *Shajiabang*, the local gang leader, Hu Chuankui, was used by Communist agent Sister A Qing to conceal various probes by Japanese and Nationalist spys. In the new version, Hu is shown to be capable of turning the situation around to his own advantage from time to time. The number one villain in *Shajiabang*, Nationalist chief of staff Diao Deyi, must eventually lose his battle of wits with his Communist opponent, Sister A Qing. This is required by the original plot and the teleological socialist logic. But Diao Deyi is certainly brainy enough to take all the right actions, even though these do not lead to the desired result. When abducted by bandits, Diao's soft authority and intelligence ensure that he takes the upper hand from beginning to end. Ironically, he is more like a hero losing to fate than to his own wrongdoings. The character Vulture in *Tracks* is cunning, yet full of worldly wisdom and even well versed in classical literature. Nan Batian, the landlord ogre in the original, becomes, in the adaptation, a bookish literati who is adept at using a typewriter.

Human feelings and ideological stand

The most obvious change comes in the humanisation of the emotional world of the villains. In the black-and-white world of the Red Classics, the villains are killers, muggers, rapists, imperialist invaders, gang members, bandits, and oppressors. They are, in one word, the embodiment of evil, with no private life. Any moral or political ambivalence or complexity was stripped away, including any human emotions that might engage the audience's sympathy. The TV adaptations obviously try to break this mould of uniformity in terms of human emotions. Most of the villains now have some kind of personal life. Sometimes, their private lives actually drive the plot forward. Hu Chuankui's roughness is contrasted with his father's extreme cowardice. Diao Deyi's father is not only willing to pay the high ransom to save his most cherished son from the abductors, but also risks his life by being carried on a rickshaw to meet the bandits in

the mountains. When Diao Deyi uses his home as the headquarters for armed local thugs against his father's wishes, the old man is so traumatised that he loses his hearing overnight. At that point, he looks more pathetic than detestable. Diao, on the other hand, in the dogged pursuit of his assigned mission—to recruit local armed bands for the Nationalist army—is ready to sacrifice his father's love, his home, and his money. His dedication and self-sacrifice can almost be read as a parody of the stories of model Communists. Whether it defies good sense is debatable, but the cold-blooded goon Vulture is extremely loving and paternal to Zhuzi, who was abducted by Vulture's men when he was little. Vulture is constantly shown playing chess with him, taking him everywhere he goes, and teaching him how to conduct himself when the opportunity arises.

Although the villains in the updated versions of the Red Classics have undergone some repackaging, this re-imagining of revolutionary history still largely honours the legitimacy of the revolution and its value systems. This ideological orthodoxy is reflected in the representation of the heroes and villains. It means that the tinkering with the heroes and villains must be restricted to the surface—personality, mannerisms, appearances, or personal feelings. These alterations enable the TV production company to tout their series as more realistic or superior to the conventional socialist representations of the villains or heroes. But the production units know very well that when official morality is at stake, they cannot deviate too far. Villains such as Hu Chuankui can be depicted as humorous or even wise at times. But his role as an anti-revolutionary must remain the same. Depicting a pliant villain is a delicate business; it can easily go awry. To navigate these uncharted waters, the producers and creative units must constantly negotiate the boundaries.

TV drama's logic: the conflicting modes of story-telling

Like other criticisms of the Red Classics adaptations, the criticisms of *Tracks* are directed at its irreverence for the source text. For example, the TV drama version of *Tracks* retains the original plot, but abandons the linear narrative structure. Instead, it adopts a multi-directional block narrative structure and greatly increases the importance of love and romantic entanglement. Many TV viewers who have read the novel or seen

the *Yangbanxi* or film versions tend to complain that the adaptation is slow moving, bland, and full of clichés (Hou & Zhang, 2004).

These failures in the adaptations should not all be credited to the incompetence of the producers; many of them derive from the generic features marking TV drama overall, both as an industry and as a medium with its own conventions. The obvious reason for the extended length of the TV adaptations to over 30 episodes is simple: TV drama production has a very slim margin of profit, and shorter serials do not bring in enough advertising revenue. As a result, some of the TV dramas based on a single play (in the case of *Shajiabang*) or film (in the case of *The Red Detachment of Women*) need to be pumped up with newly created plot developments and characters, stretching their original content.

TV drama's reliance on visual excitement also means that it relies more on stars, stunts, and exotic locations, rather than meaningful story development or psychological characterization (Sheehan, 1987). This invites the criticism that the adaptations are superficial and sentimental. Their episodic nature as an everyday medium consumed in domestic settings, interrupted by ongoing activities, means that the story is "more extensive than intensive; more rambling and open-ended than self-contained; more recursive than hermetic; more collaborative and eclectic than sustained by a single, totalising vision" (Sheehan, 1987, p. 45). The stories call for more vicarious involvement and the incorporation of one's own experience in their viewing. This partly drives the producers' desire to restore or retrieve the "real" or trivial details of life at that time. However, the viewers who have read the novels or seen the plays or films experienced the source text in a very different context. The original Red Classics were usually experienced as a formal occasion, a disruption of everyday life. In a way, the highly stereotypical and stylised model play is perhaps more compatible with the representations of the larger-than-life mythical heroes and villains. When the viewers apply the same matrix for interpreting and evaluating the televisual adaptations, they naturally feel that the images and stories are no longer as compelling and resonant. As such, the negative reactions of the audiences who are familiar with the earlier texts are partly caused by the rules, norms, and procedures that determine the shape the adaptations take.

Critical reception: the press and the viewers

One important dimension of these tensions and mediations involves the audience. The producers of the TV adaptations follow the logic of consumer society and the market to re-imagine and reconstruct revolutionary life. The state, still eager to claim its legitimacy as speaking for the people and to maintain its relevance in the cultural market, manipulates and intervenes through policies, censorship, and public opinion. However, fathoming the needs of the audiences or framing their interpretations of the texts proves to be a formidable task for both the market and the state. Through a few case studies discussed below, I want to show that audiences are not fixed in one viewing position and that their reading of an adaptation is inflected by their gender, age, class, educational background, and socio-economic status, as well as a range of cultural repertoires that the audiences possess. The complexity at the production level is thus further complicated at the reception level.

The reinvention of revolutionary mass culture for popular entertainment has generated much anxiety, fear, hope, criticism, praise, and mixed feelings among various sectors in Chinese society. Unfavourable comments on the representations of heroes appeared after the first run of *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* on Beijing Television (BTV) in March 2004. Citing public anger as a reason, SARFT (2004) issued a circular regulating the TV reproduction of Red Classics. The official sanction was followed by a wide variety of articles and viewer letters in mainstream newspapers highlighting audience dissatisfaction—even indignation—over the “unfaithful” revisions of the original work. Celebrity figures, such as the CCTV program host Cui Yongyuan, made comments in public that they dare not watch the adaptation for fear that the familiar images in their minds would be changed beyond recognition.

Most controversies over the TV dramatic version dwell on the representation of Yang Zirong, as the following review makes clear:

The new version is a “collection of clichés. Adding those so-called emotional entanglements is what the production crew was pleased about. They seemed to believe that these changes enriched the original novel and made it more compelling. But this kind of emotional spice is the easiest to add... At the end of

the series, when Yang Zirong runs up and down the mountain searching for his lover's son, we could not help but wonder: Is this still *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain*? If they have such a rich imagination, why cash in on the fame of *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain*? They could as well do a totally new one on suppressing bandits in Northeast China. (Hongjingsuhongbudong'ai, 2004)

Some of the reviews ridiculed the adaptation by renaming it *Love Affair in the Snowy Mountain*. Several vented their displeasure, accusing the adaptation of “defaming the hero” and “beautifying the villain” (Song, 2004). Liu Bo, the author's wife, was interviewed and claimed that the rendering of Yang Zirong was not “proper”: “In this show, Yang Zirong is depicted as a glib, grumpy man, playing all sorts of little tricks, and even having some romantic relationships with a fictional bandit's wife. I think this is totally unnecessary. I believe this type of character needs to be dealt with more discreetly and seriously” (B. Liu, 2004). Interestingly, nearly every negative review qualified its comments by stating that the stereotyped, flattened images of heroes and villains must be changed somewhat. But nobody offered any solution for how to expand and renew the representation.

The media tend to explain viewers' responses in terms of generational differences. For example, the *Beijing Evening News* (Jin, 2004) conducted interviews and grouped the viewers' responses according to their age. In its final report, the paper concluded that revolutionary-themed TV dramas would never please everybody. According to the report, the 60-year-old cohort was deeply troubled by the new elements added in the series. This group of viewers experienced the war and tends to take the TV's reinvention of heroes as blasphemy against the sacred revolutionary images. In the report, 65-year-old Mrs. Liu is quoted as saying: “I was very angry after I saw the first few episodes. Yang Zirong was portrayed as a wise, brave, and charismatic hero in the novel, film, or *Yangbanxi*. How come he is now a cook?” The 50-year-olds were very familiar with the original text and identified strongly with the original story. But they showed little interest in the TV adaptation. According to 56-year-old Mr. Lin:

Our generation all read the novel and watched the *Yangbanxi* and film version... Many people can easily recite the original script. I watched some of the drama serial. I don't feel it offers anything interesting.

Those viewers in their 40s were disappointed that, contrary to the publicity hype, the TV version provided no real interesting breakthroughs. Mr. Li, a TV editor, was quoted as saying: "This work influenced three generations, but it was too bland and too ordinary. Commercial elements are not just confined to love entanglements. The script should be better done, more fast-paced and absorbing, more suspense and more interesting plots." Those viewers in their 30s only had vague memories of the original story and thus made few comparisons with the earlier version, but they presented themselves as media-savvy. Some were critical of the *mise-en-scène* and factual mistakes. For example, one interviewee, Mr. He, told the reporter: "I've only watched a few episodes, but they happened to be full of slips and holes." Younger people in their 20s have showed little interest in the Red Classics TV version.

Applying Althusser's concept of "interpellation," critics such as Zhao Yong (2005) argue that the viewers' critiques of the TV adaptations were motivated by genuine discontent. Some of the strong feelings invested in the criticisms of the adaptations certainly point to the normalising effects of the Red Classics. Socialist narratives commanded broad followings in the formative years of the now old and middle-aged. The hegemony of these narratives had made it impossible for people to exercise their agency. As a result, these generations eventually embraced the subjectivity prescribed by dominant ideology. However, Althusser's thesis suggests a subjectivity always predetermined by the ruling ideology. Such a position overlooks two important factors in the construction of subjectivity: First, there might be a number of discursive practices at play at the same time, including everyday practices. Second, the process is ongoing—subjectivity is constantly renewing itself and antagonism to a collective subjectivity is possible when a collective subject "finds its subjectivity negated by other discourse or practices" (Mouffe, 1998, p. 98). Recent studies of the genre have shown that, even in

highly politicised eras such as the Cultural Revolution, negotiated or subversive readings of the Red Classics were still possible (Cheng, 2002).⁴¹

The very heated public debate over the TV adaptations may suggest that the ideological over-determination argument is only partially tenable. But this leads to another interesting question: If a large part of the audience is made up of socialist subjects shaped by the revolutionary discourse, why do so few of them use class discourse to frame their objections in the staged polls or debate in the media. In condemning the commercial rendering of heroes and villains, most people only resort to the idea of “authenticity” by declaring these representations as “untrue” and contrary to their own experience of history. The glaring absence of class suggests that it is no longer a viable trope in the public space provided by the media. Even a state agency such as SARFT did not dwell on the question of who can be considered a national icon and the legitimacy of class struggle. Instead, the original Red Classics texts were recast as a kind of cultural heritage that needed to be defended.

Given the concerted efforts to reject or suppress the class narrative, is it obliterated from the popular discourse all together? My own findings show that class-based references are still made, but they are expressed in another way. In my interviews with viewers, they often criticised the divergent portrayal of the heroes and villains as a manifestation of the “money conquers all” philosophy in contemporary society. This often led to accounts of the good, old days, an idealised version of a socialist era free of inequality and injustice. One interviewee, Zhang Yunhong, was quick in pointing out the contrast between the old and the new. Zhang was a 55-year-old retired woman who worked for a film projection team in the medium-sized city of Hengyang in central China’s Hunan Province from 1970 to 1977. As part of her work, she screened and watched the eight Model Revolutionary Works hundreds of times. When I invited her to comment on the

⁴¹ Cheng discusses various readings of the Red Classics films in the 1960s that diverged from the dominant ideological operations. For example, Anti-Japanese War films such as *The Tunnel War* and *The Mine War* did not attract children with their grand narrative of revolution, but, rather, through their depiction of the magic military tactics of the guerrilla war and farcical scenes where Japanese soldiers flee helter-skelter. These scenes connected with the children’s enjoyment of playful games. Cheng’s observations should indicate that film or television texts are open and offer a variety of interpretations to the audience.

TV adaptations, Zhang first lashed out at the demands of commercial realism in the TV reproductions and exhibited a nostalgic longing for the socialist past:

At that time there was no corruption, no bribery whatsoever. The leaders were fair and upright. I once lived in the same compound with a county magistrate. His furniture was a desk and a bed, same as what was in my room. Nothing more. Nowadays, a county magistrate would even have security guards at the gate of his house.

Zhang's account of the 1970s runs counter to the common discursive narrative of the period as inhumane, chaotic, and violent. Her stories could be taken as what Rofel (1999, pp. 129-131) calls "memory-practice"—selective memories re-created against a feeling of irrelevance, antagonism, and marginalisation within the current commercial society. This kind of narrative about an idealised past is constantly reinvoked to comment on the present. Zhang idealises the lived experience of the past because of its absence in the present.

What became clear in my interviews with viewers is that the viewing process involves a relationship with the past, and this relationship varies according to experience. Furthermore, it is entwined with viewers' specific social class, gender, and educational background. The respondents' critique of the revised TV drama is a discursive construction of their own past, present, and future. Zhang's reading of the TV drama, shot through with a concern for public morality, is closely related to her life story and her less powerful position.

Zhang's descriptions of the revolutionary utopia, her indignation toward corruption and economic disparity, and her marriage to a military commander suggested to me that she might have belonged to a politically privileged group during the Cultural Revolution. However, as we discussed the topic of love and marriage further, I discovered that the socialist utopia, as she saw it, was vehemently negotiated in the first place. Zhang's husband-to-be served in the army in Vietnam during the 1960s. In 1969, when he was twenty-six, he came back to his home village for about a month to see his parents. Part of the goal of his trip was also to find a wife, which the local commune Party Secretary

happily took on as a political task. Zhang, only seventeen and a high school student, went on an arranged blind date. In this way, she met her future spouse and he told the Party Secretary that he had chosen her. Persuaded by her mother and the authorities of the commune, Zhang agreed to write to him but soon decided she did not feel anything toward him. However, when she wanted to end the relationship, the army sent representatives to investigate whether there was a “third person.” Scared of getting into serious political trouble, she married him. She described the ensuing years as “a dumb person tasting bitter herbs”—a Chinese idiom for someone who is forced to suffer in silence. She followed her husband across half the country as he was transferred here and there, looking after the children while doing all sorts of work regarded as fit for her. Even though she never developed feelings toward him, she was powerless to take any initiative to leave the relationship, as this would risk her being given a three-year sentence in prison for sabotaging “marriage with one in military service.”

Forced to give up her dreams of love or a career, Zhang suffered greatly in the overtly politicized society. It is therefore surprising to hear that she is nostalgic about the past. As she explained: “Life was simple then.” Our further discussions revealed that she was faring even worse now. In the new society, money is God. Her husband, demobilised from the army, was assigned by the government to manage a cigarette company in China’s southern port city of Shenzhen. Taking advantage of his power in this enviable position, he quickly became rich and powerful and lived a raunchy lifestyle while she, already forced into passivity in the relationship, found it hard to regain the initiative. At forty-five, she opted for early retirement. The freedom of the post-Mao era did not liberate her from political confinement or provide her with opportunities to live a more meaningful and richer life. In fact, she realised that the material society had granted her husband freedom, but not her.

In contrast to Zhang’s response, some other interviewees who have fared better tend to stress their viewing experience as purely pleasure seeking. Gao Ming, the owner of a small but successful business in his mid-forties, said he liked the TV adaptation of *Struggles in the Old City* because the actors did a superb job of portraying the romance between the hero and the heroine: “What else makes people watch a TV drama but the acting? There has to be a reason why the Hollywood stars are paid that much money—

because people are there to see their acting.” Gao also insisted that the success of the original film versions to a large degree depended on the attractiveness of the leading actors and actresses. Gao was uninterested in the ideological message of the TV drama. He was more willing to accept the adaptation as a commercial product and judge its degree of success in commercial and aesthetic terms.

His opinion was shared by a much younger Jie, who claimed that he quite enjoyed both the old and the new versions of the Red Classics, but he treated the genre more as a Chinese version of Hollywood action or thriller films, as many involved scenes of battles and conflict. Gao and Jie’s reactions prove that there are additional dimensions to the reception of the adaptations beyond the feeling that they “offended the public.”

While the difference between Zhang and Gao’s responses may appear to be generational on the surface, it can also be explained by the parallel political and cultural shifts at this particular historical juncture. The TV adaptations arrived at a time when leftist political orientations were replaced by an apolitical, pragmatic climate. The concept of political citizenship went out of favour as neoliberalism became dominant. Popular culture shifted its focus to business, wealth, conspicuous consumption, and self-improvement. The on-going commercialisation of the television industry has gradually transformed the medium into an entertainment engine. The TV adaptation, as a cultural product of its time, demanded a particular manner of consumption, which is in tune with this political and cultural shift. Gao and Jie’s reading reflects the eagerness of those who benefit from the reform to take on the adequate consumer subjectivity. So far, this subjectivity has eluded the marginal groups to which Zhang belongs. There are clearly political dimensions to the public reception of the Red Classics TV adaptations.

Conclusion

As one of the earliest TV adaptations, *Tracks in the Snowy Mountain* foreshadowed the strategies used in a large number of other adaptations in the ensuing period. The formula applied by the TV remakes exemplifies the typical complexity in turning a genre for political indoctrination into a cultural product for consumers. The proletarian nobility of the heroes and the dramatisation of life and death conflicts between different

classes could not be sustained in the TV adaptations when viewers are no longer hailed as political citizens.

The revisions to the representations of the heroes and villains in the Red Classics adaptations should be considered in the context of the disappearance of class discourse in contemporary Chinese society. Despite, and perhaps because of, the mounting social conflicts, there has been little incentive to re-inscribe the concept of class back into the popular discourse. From the CCP to the media, and from academia to the much-hyped emerging “middle class,” social polarisation is conceived in terms of different social “stratum” existing in economic interdependence instead of class opposition, signaling a drastic shift away from the Marxist conception of social relations. The state’s emphasis on a “harmonious society” represents an effort to paper over the drastically denigrated social status of peasants and workers, formerly the much-respected heroes of society. In the meantime, the former social enemies—the landlords and the bourgeoisie—can now be incorporated as the aspiration of the middle reaches of society (Y. Guo, 2008). The adaptation of the Red Classics reflects and is shaped by this change.

The attempt to erase class discourse from the TV adaptations remains a highly sensitive matter, despite the fact that consumerism and commercialisation are now readily embraced as a global ethos. The responses to the adaptations seem to suggest that despite the shifting public mores, central figures in national narratives such as the Red Classics still carry their historical baggage. Changes made to the adaptations must honour the taboos defined by chief stakeholders. Emotional entanglement may prove to be incompatible for these heroes. Even small-scale tinkering with the personalities of the heroes or villains is fiercely contested and negotiated. As Chinese culture struggled to remake its notions of legitimate authority, TV adaptations of the Red Classics have not come up with an updated hero with enough moral and political complexity to rival its black-and-white predecessors. The formula of the “unholy trinity of sex, violence and profanity,” which worked well in some of the more recent revolutionary TV shows and literary works, could not be applied to the Red Classics without some serious problems. In this sense, TV drama, as the main conveyor of a mass culture, indeed specifies the limits of legitimate thought in contemporary China.

Furthermore, it is widely recognised that the Red Classics once provided the pleasure of familiar faces, good music (Clark, 2008), aesthetic models, and sublime sensations (X. Tang, 2000; B. Wang, 1997). The treatment of the Red Classics is also tied with fundamental questions about how to view the revolutionary legacy and national icons. As long as the Party-state still maintains its rhetorical endorsement of the legitimacy of the socialist revolution, some of the institutionalised aspects of the national narrative must be preserved. In the meantime, the economic reform the state instigated has changed social relations in post-Mao society. In the commercialised symbolic order, the heroic workers, peasant, and soldiers have been seriously marginalised in the media. TV adaptations of the Red Classics provide the rare few chances for these figures to re-enter the representational world. However, the production of the TV adaptations is implicated in the fundamental contradiction of the continuity of the political system and the state's radical promotion of marketisation and privatisation (H. Wang, 2003).

The TV adaptations provide textual evidence of how the meaning and theme of class is reconfigured and negotiated. The viewing of the adaptations is motivated by very complex incentives. To better understand how the meaning of the adaptations is interpreted and negotiated, one needs to carry out more detailed audience research, which will be dealt with in Chapter 6. In the next chapter, I will explore the mechanisms of regulation and production via a discussion of the politics of gender boundaries.

Chapter 5: Getting the Right Mix: Revolutionary Women and Contemporary Femininity⁴²

Following on from last chapter's discussion of class, this chapter looks at the issue of gender and how gender and class intertwine in the TV adaptations of the Red Classics. In the previous chapter, I discussed how class is currently suppressed in the public discourse, as well as in the Red Classics TV adaptations. As a consequence, class analysis is not used as a foundation for critiques of the adaptations. In contrast, gender and femininity now constitute the main controversial issues in the representation of female revolutionary heroes. The adaptations of three seminal Red Classics—*The Red Detachment of Women*, *Shajiabang*, and *Struggles in the Old City*—all share one common criticism: the female revolutionaries in these primetime TV dramas are too feminine and too beautiful. Given that attractive women characters have become a staple ingredient of prime-time TV drama, the audiences' critique points to the contested nature of women's representation within the Red Classics genre. The battle over what a woman revolutionary should or should not look like, both in the production and audience reception, indicates that women's bodies are a crucial site of political-economic exchange and ideological contestation.

Gender was usually erased to serve the discursive construction of class in the Red Classics genre during the socialist era. Instead, class was the exclusive, legitimate axis along which the subalterns were encouraged to organise and articulate their experience. Consequently, when women and other subaltern groups speak, they often speak in a vocabulary provided by the state (Hershatter, 1993). In the reform era, the market apparatus and the state machine have connived to produce a class hierarchy and at the same time have de-emphasised and obliterated the class discourse from the public discourse (Anagnost, 2008; Pun, 2005; Zhao, 2009a). However, if this discursive shift provides an opportunity for women to reclaim their specific experience from the homogenising official discourse of class, it nevertheless exposes them to the exploitative sexualisation of the female body in the reform era (Cartier, 2001; Evans,

⁴² An earlier version of this chapter appears in Gong (2010).

1997). The articulation of subjectivity for women in the TV adaptations could not resort to the language of class analysis, which is already dead. Instead, gender differences are being reinscribed in place of class identity. One strategy to reinvent the revolutionary imagery in the spirit of consumerism is thus to reclaim the femininity of the revolutionary women.

In this chapter, I will closely examine how the boundaries of concepts such as femininity, gender, and familial relations are constructed, maintained, transgressed, and repaired by analysing the female characters in one TV adaptation of the Red Classics. By comparing the current version and its relevant predecessors, I draw out the historical process of cultural production and regulation in the definition of boundaries. I observe that with the commodification of the female body and the recovery of sexuality in the reform era, the boundaries of gender and femininity constructed during the revolutionary period are permanently challenged. I suggest that this transgression is achieved by resorting to a series of narrative strategies aimed at humanising (*renxinghua*) the female revolutionary character. The attempt, which embraces the new ideology of consumerism and individualism, upsets the established symbolic order. Criticised as improper, vulgar, obscene, and profane by the government, some viewers, and critics, it was contained and suppressed in the hegemonic struggle waged by the state. I argue that the dissonance manifested in the production and reception reflects the inherent tension between television's commercial thrust for good ratings, the artistic impulse for innovation, and the state's desire for social control. The transgression must define itself against the norms and authority of the state. The TV adaptations of the Red Classics thus enunciate the redrawn parameters of the uses of the socialist legacy in a drastically transforming society. They demonstrate how each era produces its own political, economic, and ideological forces, which interact to shape the ways femininity, women, and gender are portrayed.

Women and femininity in the socialist era: The representational context

Women's emancipation was always high on the CCP's agenda. Women were encouraged to cut their hair short and to free their bound feet, thus liberating women's bodies from oppressive traditions, and to seek marriage partners based on their own

choice. This occurred in the Chinese Soviet Area established by the Communists from 1927 to 1937 (X. Zhu, 2004). Soon after the People's Republic was established, the first regulation published by the government was the *Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China* (1950), which made companionate marriage the only legitimate form of marriage (Evans, 1997). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, equality between women and men remained an important grand narrative of socialist modernity. Women, as Mao Zedong once claimed, could hold up half of the sky.

However, the alliance between the state and women was never as straightforward as it seemed. Scholars argued that in granting women equal rights in politics, economics, education, and marriage, the state exploited women by subsuming them under the nationalist agenda and denying them their differences (J. Dai, 1995, 1989, 2002; L. Liu, 1993; Y. Meng, 1993). For example, in Zhu Xiaodong's (2004) study, liberating women from their tight corsets and bound feet in the 1930s was largely driven by the need to mobilise women for field labour while men were serving the army in the Communist-controlled area. More importantly, reducing the bond between the woman and her family was a way to break the confines of a closely-knit household, making it easier for the revolutionary elite to harness individuals to the cause of revolution.

Evans's study shows that from 1949 to the 1980s the hegemonic discourse on women and sexuality was marked by women's self-denial of their sexuality and individualised self. Women were expected to take responsibility for maintaining social and sexual morality. In addition, love and marriage were defined as moral and social obligations to the collective and the state rather than the individual. Evans points to the connections between this discourse and the Confucian ideology of female chastity or the precedent of collective and familial interest over individual autonomy (1997, pp. 21-23). Within this context, female sexuality and gender were only recognised by their social function. Simultaneously, the CCP practised a "masculinist standard of equality" (Evans, 1997, p. 29), which maintained that equality between men and women meant that "whatever can be done by men, can be done by women" (Mao, 1969, p. 224). Through coercion, negotiation, propaganda, and education, women went through a process of politicisation and desexualisation. Under the gender policy of this period, women could liberate themselves by discarding their femininity and private life and devoting themselves to

the proletarian liberation cause. The media gave wide publicity to the “iron maidens,” women who personified total equality between men and women by competing hard in undertaking physical labour.⁴³ This ideology was carried to another extreme during the Cultural Revolution period, when androgyny became the favoured norm. Any sign of femininity and sexuality was condemned as “bourgeois.” Women had to wear male style clothes and haircut, although men could not be feminine. The whole country went through a period of masculinisation (M. Yang, 1999).

Corresponding to state rhetoric, the representation of women during the Mao era largely falls into two categories. First, it is well documented that women’s bodies were encoded to signify the oppressed class and the suffering of the proletariat in the old society before the Communists took power (J. Dai, 2000; Y. Meng, 1993). Second, in the literature and films created in the spirit of state ideology in the 1950s and 1960s, women were salvaged from misery and exploitation and “hailed” by the Party, usually embodied by a male Party member. Influential films such as *The While-haired Girl*, *The Red Detachment of Women*, and *The Song of Youth* follow the same pattern: the leading female roles were victims of the ruling class or the patriarchal system until a male figure, a Party representative, comes to the rescue. The “oppressed and harmed” were thus led to the road of revolution and truth by the guiding hand of the state and its male leaders (J. Dai, 2002).

Women’s representation in this category is paradoxical (X. L. Zhou, 2001, p. 6). On the one hand, women were used to signify the awakened and strengthened new women as a result of the Party’s progressive gender policy. On the other hand, they also had to bear the burden of signifying the weak and the docile, to be salvaged and enlightened by the Party. Gender politics unconsciously played out in the representation of these characters based on traditional gender roles. There were still traces of femininity and sexuality, even though when love and marriage were touched upon in the Red Classics, they had to be reordered as serving the revolutionary cause, the Communist Party, and the state.

⁴³ Whether women were completely victimised in the process is debatable. Li Xiaojiang (2004), for example, argues that while the state exploited women for its modernisation project, women actually used the opportunity to fight patriarchal oppression. See also Lisa Rofel (1994), for how the female workers’ shame in working outside was relieved by the new socialist discourse, and Gao Xiaoxian (1994), for the positive change in rural women’s social status as a result of their participation in socialist production.

Moreover, these traces of femininity and sexuality were further sanitised and nearly erased during the Cultural Revolution. Gender and sexuality were taboo subjects in the grand political narrative. Artistic works created during this period, such as the eight *Yangbanxi*, featured strong women as central heroic characters. But these women were modeled on the common asexual traits of the proletariat class and were stripped of their gender significance and femininity (Cui, 2003). From the official perspective of class and class struggle, women's experiences and identity had little to do with their biological sex or gender.

As “empty signifiers” of class, the gender specificity of this category of women was neutralised, de-emphasised, and masculinised.⁴⁴ Femininity and sexuality were purged from the representational context. Anything related to an individual's private life and personal feelings was regarded as irrelevant and deleted wherever possible. Humanitarianism and human nature were condemned as “honey words” of the ruling class to rub out the division between classes and to hide the nature of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution. What is normal and natural in human relationships, or *renzhichangqing* in Chinese, was especially harshly criticised in literary creations (X. L. Li, 2008).

Literary works made under this guiding principle feature a series of asexual or genderless female characters, created as charismatic figures for people to emulate. For example, in the *Song of Dragon River* [*Long Jiang Song*, 1972], Jiang Shuiying is the Dragon River Brigade Party Branch Secretary Party Representative. Her status as a married woman is implied in the “honorary soldiers' dependant” plate hung on her doorframe. Her husband never shows up in the production, serving in the army elsewhere. In *Azalea Mountain* [*Dujuan shan*, 1963], Party representative Ke Xiang has lost her husband in a war. Undercover communist Sister A Qing in *Shajiabang* mentions in passing that her husband left for Shanghai on business, angered by a

⁴⁴ Some recent readings of *Yangbanxi* suggest that gender erasure was not total in these works. To various degrees, traditional ideas of gender difference still operate within these works (Roberts, 2004). In revolutionary cinema, the gendered gaze is common and this socialist-realist erotic gaze is often expressed in the revolutionary romance between a young girl and a male Communist hero, as in *The Red Detachment of Women* (Donald, 2000, p. 65). Ip (2003) also argues that feminine beauty is always present in the revolutionary culture.

squabble with her about family matters. In *The Red Lantern*, even “ties of blood” are considered a barrier to the real bond formed on the basis of class.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, post-Mao China saw multiple attempts to repudiate the radical leftists and their political excess. Part of the “thoughts liberation” movement involved the call to release repressed human nature. Women and femininity were no longer conceived solely in terms of class and other political attributes. A more tolerant, open public ethos emerged toward the subjects of sex, sexuality, love, and marriage. The discourse of the elimination of sex differences was gradually losing ground. However, as Harriet Evans (1997) argues, the reassertion of a natural femininity in the narratives of the 1980s is based on a naturalised and essential sex difference and has in a way contributed to the perpetuation of gender hierarchy. As economic reform deepened in the 1980s, competition for employment intensified. Some male intellectuals blamed the equal entry of women into the labour force for intensifying social problems by forcing men to return home. The decline of the master narrative of women, which portrayed them as the absolute equal of men, gave rise to the call for the return of some women to the home (Shen, 2005; Z. Wang, 2000) and the re-emergence of discourse about the “essential role” of women (Roberts, 1999).

The overt backlash against the women’s movement was fuelled by the dawn of the consumerist era in the 1990s, when the commercial drive and the patriarchal male gaze increasingly demanded an explicit sexual dimension to women. The discursive construction of women’s thoughts and behaviour were extremely complex at this stage. On the one hand, the commercial discourse required women to be beautiful and feminine and to be seen as attractive by males. On the other hand, Maoist discourse that promoted equality and new social and political roles for women has left a complex and multidimensional legacy, which, combined with the ethos of capitalist modernity, requires women to be competent and independent in the job market. Therefore, the ideal woman in the reform era is simultaneously “young, beautiful, fashionable, sensual, gentle, virtuous and dutiful, considerate, strong and independent. At home, she should be able to run the automatic washing machine and microwave; outside, she should be a skilled independent woman, who drives a car and competes hard in the workplace” (Dong, 2007, p. 151).

On the cultural production scene, women as a sexless class symbol tapered off by the end of the 1970s. However, the economic and political changes brought on by reform have both positive and negative effects on women. Cara Wallis's (2006) analysis of Chinese women in the official Chinese press elucidates the contradictory nature of official discourse on gender roles in the reform era. Wallis found that while the government press stresses the equality of Chinese women rhetorically, they nevertheless position women as inferior to men. When TV drama established its standing as the most important everyday entertainment in the average Chinese home by the mid 1980s, a greater variety of women appeared on the screen. The divergent roles of skilled, working woman, traditional domesticated mother and wife, tough lady boss, and teenage girl idol were all explored to capture the varied interests of a more fragmented audience. Generally speaking, TV primetime drama affirms the normative gender system, portraying women as docile and domesticated, with motherhood as the essence of femininity.⁴⁵ A more explicit sexual aspect of female bodies was noticeable in the representation, but overall images of women on TV were more conservative compared with cinema images, which were much more sexually charged (X. L. Zhou, 2001).

The intricate relationships between gender, the nation-state, and dominant social discourse provide a window through which I can examine the changing boundaries of gender and sexuality in the process of cultural production and consumption. In reviewing the construction of gender, femininity, and sexuality in different adaptations of *Shajiabang*, I raise two questions: How does the construction of revolutionary heroines change in response to the commercialised cultural reality of post-Mao China, and how far can this transgression of gender norms established in socialist era go?

Negotiating boundaries: Gender, femininity, and sexuality in *Shajiabang*

The changing discourses on women and femininity in the past few decades present a paradoxical task for television drama producers in adapting the Red Classics. On the one hand, androgynous female heroes in the socialist imagination are destined to be

⁴⁵ Liu Huifang, the heroine in the TV soap hit, *Yearnings*, who is gentle, virtuous, self-sacrificing, and forbearing became an overnight "saintly women icon" (Barmé, 1999, p. 104) and was identified as the "ideal wife" by male audiences in a survey. This illustrates how the traditional view of women still held sway.

unattractive to modern audiences, as there has been “a general abhorrence of the state-imposed masculinisation of the female” (Finnane & McLaren, 1999, p. 18) as portrayed during the Maoist period. On the other hand, making the original depictions over with the commercially sexualised discourse would probably be a thankless task, for the Red Classics genre is not the usual domain for eroticism (F. Zhang, 2005).

In the following section, I will analyse how this paradox is played out in the depiction of women, femininity, and love in TV adaptations of *Shajiabang*, with a brief discussion of *The Red Detachment of Women*. I want to demonstrate that the contradictions and tensions exposed in the production and consumption of the heroine’s images reflect inherent contradictions in post-Mao ideology. The market, concerned with producing, first and foremost, an entertaining show, often resorts to portraying women as sex objects, but in doing so, it has to negotiate the boundary not only with a rhetorically socialist state, but the socialist legacy as a lived experience for many viewers. Even though “the market, unlike the Communist state, does not police the boundaries of ideological correctness so much as constantly expand them in whatever direction sales are to be made” (Mcgrath, 2008, p. 92), it must be careful not to stretch the limits too far beyond the boundaries of the permissible zone when it comes to the representation of women in the Red Classics.

Shajiabang was a model work promoted during the Cultural Revolution and was well received by audiences (Clark, 2008). It was first performed in 1960 as a Shanghai opera (*Huju*) under the title, *Emerald Water and Red Flags* [*Bishui hongqi*], in the 1960. After a few major revisions, the new version, now entitled *Sparks amid the Reeds* [*Ludang huozhong*], was performed in 1963 to a wide audience and caught the attention of top leaders. It was then recommended to be transformed into a Peking Opera version to appeal to audiences in different regions. A writing group, led by the well-known writer Wang Zengqi, polished the script. The efforts to improve the lyrics, music, and acrobatics lasted over a decade. The experimentations in *Shajiabang* expanded the conventions of the national theatre and turned it into a popular repertoire even in the years after the Cultural Revolution (Clark, 2008). Its protagonist, Sister A Qing, remains one of the best-loved popular characters. The publicity in the lead-up to the TV

adaptation centered on the choice of actor for Sister A Qing and the possible new interpretations of the popular heroine.

The story unfolds during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) in a prosperous country town of Shajiabang, in Jiangsu Province along the Yangtze River. Shajiabang is a battleground for competing guerrilla branches, including local bandits, the New Fourth Army led by the Communists, the Nationalists, and the Japanese. New Fourth Army commander Guo Jianguang and seventeen other sick and wounded soldiers are recuperating from their wounds in the town. When the Japanese become aware of the Communist presence, they move to mop up all the New Fourth Army soldiers in the area. Guo and his men are forced to take refuge in the nearby reed marshes. In the meantime, the Nationalist Party, the alleged ally of the Communists, sends their spy, Diao Deyi, to recruit local armed forces and keep watch on the movements of the wounded Communist soldiers. Sister A Qing (the leading female role) is the leader of the underground communist cell, and she runs the teahouse as a cover for a liaison station. With incredible intelligence and steadfastness, Sister A Qing artfully dismantles the different factions within the enemy camp. With the information and help provided by Sister A Qing, Guo and his troupe rout the enemy in a single battle.

For several reasons, the story presents an extremely interesting case for analysis. Firstly, it features a woman hero, Sister A Qing, as its protagonist. Secondly, it shares many common features of the TV adaptations of the Red Classics, such as humanising the hero and enemy and romanticising the relationships between the male and female characters. Thirdly, it is unique in its negotiation of gender boundaries in that it is one of the TV industry's latest reproductions⁴⁶ of the Red Classics and thus able to adjust its strategy based on lessons learned from earlier adaptations. Analysing *Shajiabang* promises to shed light on the discursive strategy employed in producing the TV adaptations. The characterisation of Sister A Qing is central to the TV drama, the *Yangbanxi* version, and its more humble precedent, the local opera *Sparks amid the Reeds*. The image of Sister A Qing was revised in each version in keeping with the prevalent ideology and discourse of the time. Specifically, this process involves the establishment and consolidation of the normalising power of the revolutionary

⁴⁶ It premiered on Qilu Satellite TV channel on April 27, 2006.

discourse, its gradual decline, and the rise of consumerism (Ma, 2006). It is thus worthwhile to examine how these changes were made.

The central narrative device in the Huju opera, *Sparks amid the Reeds*, is the dual identity of Sister A Qing as both an undercover Communist agent and a teahouse owner. According to Wen Mu, the script writer of *Sparks amid the Reeds*, the original role of the teahouse owner was played by a male actor, but was later changed. The role keeps alive the link between this local opera and the popular legend genre, which often features a disguised hero or demon. In both the Huju version and the Peking opera version of *Sparks amid the Reeds*, Sister A Qing was the bridesmaid of the wife of local troupe commander, Hu Chuankui, and was able to manipulate the situation to her advantage. It was Sister A Qing who smuggled the New Fourth Army soldiers disguised as an opera troupe into Hu's wedding banquet. Sister A Qing thus plays a pivotal role in the victory in the final scene.

The important works of *Yangbanxi* usually bear the imprimatur of individual political leaders' direct interventions. *Shajiabang* was no exception. Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's wife, and her allies actively involved themselves in the revising of *Shajiabang*. In 1964, Mao Zedong and Jiang Qing watched the Peking Opera version of the play and gave a number of instructions for revision, which aimed at reducing elements of the popular legend genre and the prominence of Sister A Qing. Mao described the wedding scene as "farcical," and suggested the Communist soldiers launch a surprise attack in a heroic manner from outside and annihilate the enemy en masse (Ji, 2007). Jiang Qing went further in stating that whether to give more prominence to Guo Jianguang, the commando platoon leader, or Sister A Qing was a matter concerning which line (the bourgeois or the proletarian) the play emphasised (J. F. Dai, 1995). The extensive revision in 1965 pruned the wedding scene and downplayed the centrality of Sister A Qing. Both the wedding scene and the identity of Sister A Qing as an undercover agent have a strong folklore flavour, potentially distracting from or even competing with the authority of the established revolutionary discourse in the 1960s.

Along with the loss of folklore plot elements, the *Yangbanxi* version that came out of the major revision was stripped of any private discourse associated with love and kinship. As Sister A Qing is addressed as "*sao*," literally sister-in-law, which signifies

her marriage status, we know Sister A Qing is married. This is apparently a deliberate device. A young pretty unmarried woman running a public teahouse would inspire too much erotic speculation about sexual relationships. Sister A Qing's husband, however, never appears in the show. There is just one line in the opera that vaguely suggests he is elsewhere doing business. But the protagonist is never allowed to harbour any personal feeling towards him. Her relationship with the leading male role, Guo Jianguang, is strictly one of revolutionary comrade-in-arms.

However, even though A Qing's personal life and feelings were stripped to the bone, there remained one element in the play that still had an element of folklore. The change to the ending of the *Yangbanxi* version did not alter the relationship structure between the roles (S. Chen, 2002). It is still "one woman versus three men," namely Sister A Qing versus political instructor Guo Jianguang, secret society Chief Hu Chuankui, and Kuomintang agent Diao Deyi. In the heyday of class struggle, this structure left room in the imagination for a forbidden love affair.⁴⁷ Chen Sihe (2002) has made an astute observation that this narrative structure provides a chance for folklore ideology to compete with state ideology. Sure enough, this "one woman versus three men" structure has proved to be a Pandora's box raising the issue of private sexual desires, which greatly complicates the plot.

A controversial novelette: Revising the female hero

This structure was the reason behind another version of *Shajiabang*. In 2003, a novelette with the same name was published in the literary magazine *Jiangnan*. Its author, Xue Rong, explained his motive in rewriting the story as such:

I'm very familiar with Peking Opera version of *Shajiabang*. For as long as I remember, this story is about the relationship between a woman and three men. This relationship was depicted as very serious in the earlier versions. It is not normal for the characters to have only such [serious] relationships. There should be relationships between spouses and other humanised relationships. [I wondered] if it is possible to create a new work by making up the relationship between these

⁴⁷ In a dialogue on ideologies behind films, Yao Xiaomeng and Hu Ke once remarked that to watch the scene "Battle of Wits" is to watch one woman flirt with three men, only in a very secretive way.

roles. I believe I'm allowed such freedom in novel writing. Therefore, I wrote this novelette. (Xue as cited in H. Chen, 2003)

Based on this urge to debunk the political encoding of the saintly Sister A Qing and to restore her original state of being, the novelette explores her libidinal possibilities to the full. The once "chaste" Sister A Qing is now a licentious woman, sexually involved with both Guo Jianguan and Hu Chuankuai at the same time, while her incompetent and chicken-hearted husband secretly provides for a woman who bears his child in the countryside. She is not, however, a liberated woman who uses sex to challenge traditional patriarchy. Sister A Qing's extramarital affair is not so much a release of passion but a choice she is forced to make. As a consequence, her sexual agency is seriously compromised. She was also pejoratively described as barren. Considering that China's traditional ideology defined womanhood by its reproductive role, Sister A Qing's subjectivity becomes ultimately flawed. Constructed largely by subverting the original portrayal and lacking inherent narrative logic, it proves less than convincing.

Xue Rong's paraphrasing of *Shajiabang* is described as "a plebeian cultural adventure," (W. Fang, 2004) characterised by its antiestablishment sentiment, its tendency to desecrate the saintly, and its commercial thrust. While the novelette could be read as a nuanced cultural text, I will focus on one dimension: the responses that it generated, which turned the novelette into an attention-grabbing media event. The critique of the novel underscores the specific dimensions of Chinese society's anxiety towards women, femininity, love, and sexuality.

The novelette caused much agitation soon after it was published in February 2003. A violent attack was launched immediately by the Municipal Propaganda Department of Changshu, which has jurisdiction over the town of Shajiabang, the setting for the story in Jiangsu Province. In the typical manner in which official responses are solicited to attack an artistic work that the state finds distasteful, the Municipal Propaganda Department of Zhejiang Province, where the novella was published, organised a forum attended by literary organisations, such as a writers' associations from the provincial and municipal level. The result was an article published in provincial party organ *Zhejiang Daily*, stating that "the novelette is a serious insult to feelings of the people,"

as it “represents a slander to the heroic images in people’s mind,” and consequently, it “has serious political mistakes” (Xiao, 2003, p. 8).

The highly politically charged terms in which the article casts its judgement were glaring at a time when the official attitude towards popular culture was more freewheeling. However, the article was widely republished in the press, and similar antagonistic comments appeared in major newspapers and literary magazines. Many criticised the novelette for its “distorted, insulting representations of heroic figures,” or for being “unrealistic” historically or artistically. Some saw it as morally degrading and obscene, posing a threat to “public order and good morals” (*gongxu liangsu*) (Hao, 2003). Shajiabang local authorities expressed their indignation on the grounds that the novelette seriously damaged the reputation of their town and was bad publicity that would affect their economic activities. The response was overwhelmingly negative. The only exception was a few literary critics who came out to defend Xue’s right to deconstruct the original work, even though they did not necessarily think it was a good literary piece. In March 2003, the Shajiabang Town Council, in the name of “one million Shajiabang residents,” and the Shanghai New Fourth Army History Research Association jointly submitted a written protest to the publisher, *Jiangnan* magazine. At the same time, the relatives of Wen Mu, the scriptwriter of *Sparks amid the Reeds*, threatened to take the writer and the magazine to court. *Jiangnan* magazine’s editor-in-chief at first refused to back down but was forced to write a self-criticism letter which was rejected when delivered in person to the representatives of the New Fourth Army. Mounting pressures in the ensuing months forced the magazine to publish a written apology and the editor-in-chief to resign. By this time, the incident had evolved into a sensational media drama that involved possible lawsuits, personal attacks, renowned scholars, and local authorities.

Amid this public fury regarding the “blasphemy” towards the heroine, one thing is worth noting. The outcry against the disturbance of “public order and good morals” is particularly tied to the infidelity of Sister A Qing. What the public or the state find irritating is not the commercial appropriation of a hero’s image. In fact, if one does an online search of Sister A Qing, one can easily find a series of restaurants, hotels, snack food chains, and holiday resorts with the brand name of Sister A Qing. But so far, these

have not caused much concern. This indicates that the real issue is not about Sister A Qing being sacrosanct, but about what has become acceptable and what remains untouchable in the commercial present.

With the prevailing attitude of cynicism after the 1990s, political satire and the parody of official culture are now common practices. Barmé (1999) traces in detail how a number of mainland elite artists strategically exploited political images and themes of the Maoist era with one eye on the market. In this tidal wave to cash in on the political past, even Chairman Mao “has become a consumer item” (Barmé, 1999, p. 219). In the popular cultural realm, others have had their way with the Red Classics. The comic skit *Yang Bailao and Huang Shiren* parodied *The White-haired Girl* to lampoon the phenomenon of debt in arrears, a prevalent situation since the 1990s. In this reinvention, the despot landlord Huang now invites audience sympathy, begging Yang Bailao to return the money owed to him, while Yang, the hired farmhand forced to commit suicide on New Year’s Eve for being unable to pay the debt in the original play, becomes a brazen, debt-owing scoundrel. But this skit was performed in the Spring Festival Gala Show in 2005, watched by millions of Chinese on New Year’s Eve, without generating much fuss for subverting class relations, which is central to the original work. The commodification of revolutionary images thus no longer offends the official orthodoxy or irritates the public.

In fact, the revolutionary narratives and images constitute important symbolic and emotional capital for “place branding” in locations such as Shajiabang. Scholars have defined “place branding” as attempts to harness the distinctive features of a location to allow people to maintain an imaginary relationship with the place (Donald & Gammack, 2007, p. 8). This crafting of space relies heavily on images of the place in published narratives and popular culture such as film, TV, and literature. It often aims to present the city as a tourist spot or a location for business investment. Therefore, how to construct a revolutionary location has not only political stakes, but also economic ones. The latter is probably more important. The Shajiabang local authorities protested so strongly about the novelette depiction not least because a morally sound Sister A Qing and profit hang together. Zhu Yahui, the town head, told reporters that the novelette would result in his town suffering from “immense economic losses” (Wang & Du,

2003). Shajiabang is now a tourist destination, with the reed marsh as its main attraction. Scenery spots modelled on Peking Opera sets are everywhere. Most of the hostels have names such as Sister A Qing, as do the boats that take the tourists around the marsh (Y. Wang, 2003). One reason for disciplining the representation of Sister A Qing is precisely because the deviant representation interferes with the normal course of appropriating her image as a commercial brand name.

Ironically, money is probably the main factor that drove *Jiangnan* magazine to publish the novelette in the first place. As literature gradually makes way for other forms of popular entertainment, literary magazines are forced to battle for money to survive. *Jiangnan* magazine's circulation has dropped from 100,000 copies to a mere 2,000 in the past few years. Zhang Xiaoming admitted that he spent most of his time looking for financial support after he was appointed as the editor-in-chief. The publishing of the *Shajiabang* novelette created a cultural event that drew consistent attention for several months. However, it did not boost the magazine's circulation, as might have been expected (Wang & Du, 2003).

I argue that the novelette touched a raw nerve because gender and sexuality are marked out as sites of symbolic struggle in the ideological field as class is suppressed as a relevant category. This is manifested in the way that the sexual aspect of the novelette had been constantly singled out in the media for the purposes of audience attraction. Most of the reports on the event have headlines such as "Yangbanxi Shajiabang Updated with A Licentious Version: Cultural Circle Shocked"; "Sister A Qing Turned into A Licentious Women: What is the Use of Literary Works"; "Sister A Qing Depicted as a Loose Woman, the Wind of Parody Swept Shajiabang"; or "Sister A Qing Turned into Pan Jinlian, Jiangnan Magazine Apologising."⁴⁸ Whatever stance their news stories adopted toward the event, the media in general identified Sister A Qing as a newsworthy "selling point" (*mai dian*). This serves as an indicator that Sister A Qing's sexuality is at the centre of this debate.

In his close reading of films dealing with marital infidelity and its threat, Mcgrath (2008) makes an insightful observation that infidelity is metonymical of the desires

⁴⁸ Pan Jinlian is a character in two Chinese classic novels, *Stories from the Water Margin* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* [Jin Ping Mei], and the quintessential adulterous wife in Chinese culture.

awakened by the new imaginary of global capitalism in the reform era. Furthermore, this body of films articulates “the individual anxieties aroused by private desire as well as collective anxieties over the very privatisation and commodification of desire and fantasy” (Mcgrath, 2008, p. 96). He points out that “the trope of infidelity, with its inherent aspect of ethical transgression, manifests a broader anxiety over the ethical consequences of the privatisation of desire, and in particular over the accompanying divestment of commitment to the good of a larger collective, whether it be the nation, the commune, or the family” (Mcgrath, 2008, p. 126).

Following Mcgrath’s argument, I want to further argue that this anxiety is particularly salient in the TV adaptations of the Red Classics genre, not least because this genre is a product of the collective utopian vision articulated in the Mao era. In the following section, I will delineate how the female heroes in the television remake of *Shajiabang* were rendered in response to institutional regulations, audience and critics’ feedback, and ratings pressure. In order to appease these various forces, the television adaptation became watered down in both its revolutionary idealism and commercial thrust. It showcased how television prime time has adapted to the profoundly changed environment during the age of cultural marketisation.

The TV adaptation: Getting the right mix

As described above, the television adaptation of *Shajiabang* shoulders a lot of baggage. A few earlier television adaptations of the Red Classics genre attempted to stretch the limits by eroticising the main characters, but this failed to boost their ratings. Instead, these shows generated heated debate in the press, with many viewers expressing their discomfort with either the characters’ feminisation or the amorous relationships between the heroes and the heroines. On top of these shows’ ratings failures, SARFT was irritated by the defiling of the official canon, and, as mentioned in Chapter 2, issued a notice, which in effect forewarned the TV production teams of a possible ban.

One example is the TV adaptation of *The Red Detachment of Women*, which was a popular film in 1961 and was later adapted into a model ballet during the Cultural Revolution. The heroine, Wu Qionghua, is the daughter of a poor peasant who suffers as the slave girl of Nan Batian, a landlord despot in a village on south China’s Hainan

Island. Hong Changqing, the Communist Party representative, rescues her from a water dungeon where Nan Batian has incarcerated her. Wu then joins the revolutionary corps to seek personal revenge, and, under the influence and education of Hong Changqing, she gradually becomes a conscientious revolutionary fighter. Wu Qionghua is portrayed with a fiery temper, and there are many close-up shots of her eyes burning with indignation.

However, in the TV drama, Wu Qionghua's feisty personality is downplayed. During a press conference before the start of shooting, Yuan Jun, the director of the television version, claimed that the new Qionghua "should outgrow the old one. She should above all be cute, delicate, and charming, so that everybody has the urge to help and protect her. This will make it easier for the audience to relate to her" (Y. Li, 2006). The TV version (June 24, 2006, BTV) of the drama was refashioned into a "teenage idol" type of show, a melodramatic genre portraying glamorous teens as protagonists, set in urban locations. The delicate "feminine" actress Yin Tao plays Qionghua. The women soldiers wear neat clothes, change their hairstyles at will, and invariably seem to have a crush on Hong Changqing, the male Party representative.

The TV version downplays the didactic content of class struggle, represented by the feud between Wu Qionghua and Nan Bantian in both the feature film and ballet. According to interviews with the film director, Xie Jin, love scenes between Wu Qionghua and Hong Changqing were shot but later censored (N. Cai, 2006). As planned, the TV version turns out to be a teenage idol show. However, the producer's experiment failed: teenagers did not identify with the kittenish women soldiers fighting in the jungle several decades ago. Middle-to-old-aged viewers found the reinvention of femininity and sexuality squarely at odds with their own values and were enraged by it.

SARFT's criticism represented the official disapproval of this show. In April 2004, SARFT made clear that it would not put up with excessive modification of the Red Classics by issuing two special administrative orders. One stipulated that production companies dealing with such topics must seek approval from national-level agencies rather than the local level. The other criticised several recent TV adaptations for tarnishing the Party's revolutionary legacy by presenting the heroes in a way distinct

from the original portrayal. The reinvention of the heroes' sexuality and romantic life was particularly singled out as the worst offence (Zhao, 2008a). These orders served as a warning to production units, particularly those remaking the Red Classics. Because the official criticism could result in a post-production revision or even a total ban, it could be translated into financial loss. The dominant viewer reaction and official attitude toward these earlier adaptations served as a yardstick for the production team of *Shajiabang* on how free their reinterpretation could be.

The second element that the television adaptations must take into account is the struggle over the novelette's characterisation of the main characters. The novelette caused such a fury that the TV production crew had to be extremely careful to tread the line prescribed by the public discourse and to present "appropriate" characterisations.

She is strong, but not always: Sister A Qing's sexuality

Considering the above factors, the challenge TV producers face is to provide a story with moral clarity and enough drama to sustain the interest of the audience. The intention to capture the widest possible audience was made clear in director Shen Xinghao's statements that the show will "provoke the older people's memory and introduce [the story] to the younger ones." The production team's solution was threefold: first, eliminate romantic relationships for main positive characters, such as Sister A Qing and Guo Jianguang; secondly, hire big names for the main roles; and thirdly, inflate the interplay between visual and verbal elements. Here, for the purpose of my argument, I will only focus on the first two points.

The removal of Sister A Qing's romantic entanglement is an exercise in self-censorship. This is apparent in the director's comment in a press interview:

We believe that the viewers would find it hard to accept transforming Sister A Qing from the shrewd and capable Communist in the Peking Opera to a licentious lady boss. Seeing that many people have complained about the portrayal in the TV adaptations, we finally decided to delete the part about Sister A Qing's love affairs. (Pan, 2006, p. 24)

The ultimate decision on Sister A Qing was that the serial should be revised to emphasise her shrewdness and competency, while adding in an element of sensuality. She now devoted her energy wholly to the battle of wits with the enemy and remained in only “working relationships” with the male leading role, Guo Jianguang. But as a new selling point, both Sister A Qing and Guo now have good-looking assistants as their side kicks, who are with them constantly, but their relationship never goes beyond camaraderie.

Sister A Qing’s de facto single life and her sexuality were, however, continually troubling to the producers and scriptwriters. Indeed, the actress in the role looks so young and beautiful that her ability to maintain her honour among a group of powerful men needs to be explained. In one scene, a few customers chatting in her teahouse raise the issue of why no man has yet laid his hand on Sister A Qing. One of them offers an explanation: “Sister A Qing’s popularity comes from her ability. She is the type of women that men respect and women warm to.” The scene and the line are obviously used to contain the danger of Sister A Qing’s sex appeal.

Throughout the serial, the ambiguous attitude of the producers toward Sister A Qing’s sexuality is ubiquitous, emphasising her attractiveness while defending her purity. The script has cut out the romantic relationships between Sister A Qing and her Communist comrade, but she is depicted as the object of sexual desire for the Japanese Army officer who follows and harasses her. But this transgressive desire, coming from a villain, is rightfully thwarted and punished. In doing so, the moral integrity of Sister A Qing is protected, but the gender norm that a beautiful female body will eventually end up serving as a male fantasy is addressed. What is more interesting is the scene that occurs straight after the harassment incident. Sister A Qing comes home and sits motionless in the backyard of the teahouse, enraged, exhausted, and lost in contemplation. Her adopted son, A Fu, notices her unusual look, and asks her what has happened, to which she sighs and deliberately replies: “It is at time like this that I terribly miss your Uncle A Qing. Women after all, are still women.”

This is a significant statement in that it is purposely construed to transcend the socialist discourse of gender neutrality and reclaims a specific gender identity for Sister A Qing

by emphasising her desire for protection from a strong man. It partly squelches the doubt that many may have secretly harboured long before: How did this woman, beautiful and living by herself, deal with the three men without feeling threatened? Here the “one woman versus three men” formula creeps up again stubbornly. In the *Yangbanxi* era, this question could not be dealt with openly, as heroes were larger than life without the complexities and demands of sexual desire. But in the commercial environment of contemporary China, it has become a matter of urgency for this anxiety to be addressed and, more importantly, addressed in the changed gender norm to hold the audience. Sister A Qing’s statement transgresses the socialist norms in two ways: Firstly, she is a hero made human in that she feels vulnerable and frustrated at times. Secondly, in spite of her competence and worldliness, Sister A Qing was portrayed as having an Achilles heel: when her sexual purity was under threat, she felt her inability to defend herself and hence needs her husband, a male figure, to protect her. The post-socialist discourse, while exposing the heroine to sexual violence and ethical dangers, did not endow her with the agency to get out of her predicament. The tensions engendered by the adaptation’s departure from traditional norms in the original work are thus addressed by coming back to the traditional notion of a “helpless” and “vulnerable” woman.

Can Sister A Qing be beautiful? Femininity rearticulated

As discussed above, the preproduction publicity trumpeted the hiring of actress Xu Qing as a tactic to attract viewers. The actress was typecast as sweet and sensual, and most of her previous roles as an urban, modern, sexy girl did not prepare audiences for her leading role in *Shajiabang*. In explaining why Xu was cast for Sister A Qing, director Shen Xinghao explained that she impressed him as one who has the ability to take on a huge variety of roles (Ent.sina.com.cn, 2006a). However, I argue that casting a sex symbol in the role of Sister A Qing is a deliberate strategy on the part of the production team in its efforts to attract younger audiences. This tactic did not proceed without negotiation and contestation. According to media reports, the television crew drafted a line-up of possible actresses in order to survey potential viewer reactions. When the actor Chen Daoming recommended Xu Qing to the crew, it did not appear immediately to the executives that she was “the one.” But Chen believed Sister A Qing’s role should be positioned as “a licentious young *qingyi*” (a female role in traditional Chinese opera).

His interpretation convinced the crew that the kittenish Xu Qing could be cast as Sister A Qing (Peng, 2006).

Chen's interpretation of Sister A Qing is not so different from Xue Rong's depiction in the novelette. In defending his portrayal of Sister A Qing, Xue said:

This story happened in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang region. I know this area, particular the small towns in this area, very well, because I grew up in this milieu. In our neighbourhood, nearly every town has a woman that either runs a tofu store or a teahouse. They are the type that is good at juggling various involvements and they naturally have more stories than most of the ordinary women. (Xue, as cited in Wang & Du, 2003, p. D21).

Judging from audience feedback, Xu's casting and her performance generated most of the controversy, mostly related to notions of femininity. Most viewers compared Xu Qing with the actresses in previous theatrical productions, and many criticised her acting as too "coy." There was a general sentiment that her modern and girlish character was poles apart from the stereotypically capable and steady Sister A Qing (Peng, 2006). Some wrote to say that Xu's glamorous looks and sweet manner cry out for attention, and it was too hard to believe that she could carry on her business as if this accounted for nothing (Pan, 2006).

The comments on Xu Qing's looks and mannerisms were standard in many press reviews of the series, and questions about her looks were posed to her constantly during interviews with the press. To these comments, the director said he valued Xu's personal charm. "Sister A Qing is a smooth and slick teahouse boss who is good at manipulating social relations. It does not bother me if she was a bit attractive" (ent.sina.com.cn, 2006b). Xu reversed the question and asked: "Why can't Sister A Qing be pretty?" (ent.sina.com.cn, 2006b). Xu admitted she had not seen the previous productions before she was chosen for the role, but in her imagination, Sister A Qing would be terribly pretty and so were the actresses playing her role in the past. Xu said:

Sister A Qing was the idol of that [socialist] era. But my Sister A Qing is more in keeping with the contemporary aesthetic standards. I'm not afraid of being compared [with actresses starring in the role previously]. Sister A Qing is a strong woman. She has two sides: as an underground Communist agent, she is righteous; but as a teahouse boss, she is tactful in currying favours from all her clients. (Xu, as cited in Peng, 2006, p. 15)

The predicament of working within the confines of politics and the market

In the talks given on the image of Sister A Qing by the production crew, she is constantly described as a Janus-faced woman. The intention of the production crew was to endow Sister A Qing with enough depth in her character to appeal to today's audience within the permissible zone. To achieve this means transgressing the settled boundaries of what a revolutionary heroine should be. However, how far this transgression could go, and in what area, still needs to be mapped out carefully. Here I identify three strategies the production side adopted.

Firstly, knowing that a revolutionary heroine is a hard sell in society and that overt political indoctrination is shunned by the public, Sister A Qing's political and class identity was downplayed and kept to a minimum. Instead, her wit and business competence were emphasised in order to establish her authority, now that her ideological stance no longer naturally generates symbolic power. However, she still has to be patriotic. Nationalism being the predominant master narrative in post-Mao China, even Xue Rong's commercial rewriting has to honour this boundary. In defending the editorial decision to publish Xue Rong's rewriting of *Shajiabang*, Xie Lubo, Deputy Editor-in-chief of *Jiangnan* magazine, told the press that the main focus of the story is the Anti-Japanese War because A Qing, even though depicted as a coward, makes a suicidal attempt to bomb the blockhouse of the Japanese troupe and dies in the operation (Y. Wang, 2003). The political markers of Sister A Qing were still inserted in the production here and there, not only to appease the state, but also as a tactic to speak to the memory of the older audiences who have watched the Peking opera version. For this purpose, these intertextual political markers were made to resemble the original scene on a superficial level, but they generally do not mix well with the overall de-ideologised tone of the series. One example is the final scene, where Sister A Qing

reveals her real identity to the enemy, stating loudly: “I’m a Communist.” The scene was transplanted wholesale from the Peking Opera, but one viewer told me that the scene looks so odd and out of place that he nearly burst out laughing.

The second strategy involves the treatment of Sister A Qing’s sexuality. Although the TV production intended to reverse the denial of sexuality from the beginning and to add sexual elements to the new image, the strong disapproval surrounding her out-of-control sexuality in the novelette, both official and unofficial, set the limit for the TV production. After deliberation, the producer opted to not deal with the matter. However, there was a need for room to manoeuvre. The repressed sexual relationships found their way into other characters: the supporting characters from the revolutionary camp and the main characters in the enemy camp. In the TV serial, a love triangle was arranged among New Fourth Army soldiers Da Gang, Xiao Wang and nurse Xiao Ling. In addition, there were dating scenes with the rebellious village lad Sha Silong and his fiancée, Xiuzi, who was constantly harassed by the spoilt nephew of the local rich landlord. More importantly, this dangerous and destructive sexual desire was embodied in local thug Hu Chuankui, who carries on a clandestine love affair with a widow and, later on, is seduced by a sexy Nationalist spy. Similar plot elements fulfilled the formula for pulp fiction. The TV serial thus still offers the voyeuristic pleasure for the audiences in a bid to satisfy both the political orthodoxy and entertaining fantasies.

Thirdly, compared with taboo-laden sexuality, nonsexual femininity is marked as a safe terrain and constitutes the major efforts of the TV adaptation to restore the human sensibility of Sister A Qing. The casting of Xu Qing as the leading role, the character’s clothing, makeup, gestures, and mannerisms, as well as a number of plot elements, all contribute to this characterisation. I have already discussed the implications of casting Xu Qing as Sister A Qing. In the series, Xu is shown as a conventionally beautiful woman, with perfect accessories and glossy hair neatly tied up. She is shown in traditional clothes, resembling the costume in the Peking Opera version, but hanging and fitting perfectly onto her slim body and made of beautiful material and tastefully colour-coordinated. She moves gracefully and throws alluring glances.

Her other feminine qualities also include being caring and sympathetic, which were promoted in the press as defining feature of the TV serials. Caring for self and others was defined as a feminine responsibility (Elias, 1982). Sister A Qing's respectability and authority were earned through her ability to care and help. Indeed, Sister A Qing uses her respectability (*mian zi*) many times in the serial to defuse tensions. She provides timely comfort to Hu Chuanqui's father when the old man is distraught at his son's unruly behaviour. She offers her shoulder to Hu Chuankui's widow to cry on. She organises the wedding for Hu Chuankui and straightens him out when he cannot come around. To her shop assistant, she is humorous and considerate. Furthermore, her role as a mother, which is left out in the opera and valorised in the novelette, is restored in the series. Sister A Qing's new role as a mother for A Gui is a deliberate design to restore Sister A Qing's respectability in the traditional patriarchal sense. To maintain consistency with her childless status in the Peking Opera version, the TV serial added A Gui as Sister A Qing's adopted child. This way, she assumes maternal responsibility and conforms to the status quo without directing too much attention to her feminine body. This narrative strategy thus reproduces the traditional way of assessing the value of women and serves to contain and domesticate the difference set into play by socialist discourse.

The genre mismatch: when the grand epics meet the everyday soap opera

While the narrative strategies used in the TV adaptation could be taken as economically and ideologically motivated, genre change is another factor to which few scholars have paid much attention so far. Most of the Red Classics were created as novels, or plays in the case of *Shajiabang*. What characterises this body of literature is a national epic style, grand in time-space structure and heroic in spirit. Literary critic Zhang Zhizhong (2005) suggests that the grand narratives and epic style demand that the conflicts in the Red Classics be based on politics and ideological struggles, while personal relationships can only play a supplemental role. The Red Classics tends to focus on moments of national crisis, landmark historical events, and life-and-death battles and wars—the occasions when individual fate, personal love, and kinship seem to be trivial (Z. Zhang, 2005). According to Zhang, this is why the TV viewers have found unpalatable the adaptations spiced up with love and kinships relationships. Zhang further points out that some of the Red Classics works, while realistic or even at times very close to a kind of

pure recording, nevertheless bear strong links to the classical *chuanqi* (stories of marvels) genre. This narrative literary tradition, dating back to the 5th century, normally records “human events that give rise to feelings of wonder or marvel” (Chan, 1998, p. 11). This generic affinity to *chuanqi* often endows the characters and the narrative in the Red Classics with a sense of “unusualness.” These unusual qualities were deliberately played down in the adaptations and submerged within the depiction of everyday local customs. This constitutes another area in which the TV adaptations are inadequate.

Zhang’s approach draws attention to the significance of format in the adaptations. However, what Zhang does not touch on is the artistic specificity of the TV drama genre. In another words, to account for the reasons why the adaptations take on a specific form, one must understand the genre requirements of TV drama. First, the domestic nature of TV drama (Silverstone, 1994) dictates that the experience of watching TV at home is completely different from watching films or seeing an opera in the theatre. Film and opera are watched in a dark space, with large audiences seated in front of a large screen. The striking visual and sound effects often demand the full attention of the viewers. TV drama, on the other hand, is watched in an everyday setting on a much smaller screen with images and sound of relatively inferior quality. The TV viewing experience is often interrupted by day-to-day house chores and interactions among family members. Television drama thus does not resort to spectacle as its aesthetic goal, but instead demands realism. This inherent approximation to the “real” is summarised succinctly by Thornham and Purvis:

“Reality,” then, in all its rawness, disorderliness and excess, is a quality which characterises television in a way that simply does not apply to film, whose more focused narratives concern events which are assumed to have been already completed before the film begins. (2005, p. 66)

The nature of TV drama as a story-telling machine thus favours the dramatisation of everyday life (Williams, 1989), where personal relationships, love, and everyday routines play a big part. As such, while the grand battle scenes in some Red Classics works provide fodder for the film to play up the visual and acoustic spectacle, they are not the ideal subject matter for TV drama in terms of the mode of representation and

consumption. Therefore, in nearly all the TV adaptations, the role of spectacle has been reduced and the focus has shifted to the subjectivity of individuals, with their depth and complexity, and their everyday lives. This “trivialising tendency” (Thornham & Purvis, 2005) does not respond to the demands of the sublime aesthetics in the Red Classics, but is the inherent principle of the medium that carries the story.

The criticism of Zhang and others can also be understood in terms of the gendered nature of cultural forms. While the Red Classics in the form of literature and theatre can be characterised as masculine, with their realistic style, rounded psychological characterisation, and severity, the world of the TV drama adaptations is feminine, in that it emphasises glamour, emotions, feelings, and private domesticity (Gledhill, 1997, p. 349). This is one of the reasons why critics such as Zhang Fa (2005), Zhang Zhizhong (2005), and Zhong and Zhou (2005), find the two genres incompatible. Beyond these criticisms lies the wider problem of principle—the hierarchy of cultural forms, which regards TV drama as inferior to literature.

Conclusion: Defining female heroines in post-socialist China

The transformation of *Shajiabang* offers an excellent example of cultural production and reception under both socialist and post-socialist conditions. Two opposite processes can be identified in this transformation.

Firstly, in the heyday of socialist cultural experiments, female heroines in the Red Classics were denied their gender, sexuality, and femininity under a “class inscription” in the name of gender equality. The female body and sexuality, kinship, and familial relations were displaced by the political code of class struggle. Meng Yue (1993) provides an example of how this was carried out in the transformation of *The White-haired Girl*. Meng’s analysis shows that in a series of attempts to rewrite this popular story, the body and sexuality of the white-haired girl, Xi’er, were gradually wiped out. The rape of Xi’er by the landlord, her pregnancy, and the birth of landlord Huang Shiren’s son were erased, denying the possibility of reading the story as a tale about gender and sexual oppression. Xi’er’s image was thus transformed into an embodiment of class oppression, and her rivalry with the landlord became only a class issue. Meng demonstrates in a powerful way how this process of politicising private desire, sexuality

and family relations helps to transform liberated women in the Red Classics into “manly” women serving as the locus of revolutionary discourse. However, this political gender identity has a connection with the traditional Confucian view of women as guardians of sexual morality (Evans, 1997).

The growth of consumer society since the late 1970s has re-defined gender distinctions and created a proliferation of market-driven representations of femininity (Y.-C. Huang, 2008). The normalising standards of good and evil based on class have largely ceased to operate, and the female body and sexuality have been reinstalled in the revolutionary figure. Femininity and sexuality have become the subject of contentious public debate and women’s essential characteristics, suppressed during the Maoist years,⁴⁹ have started to reemerge in public (Evans, 1997, 2008). Simultaneously, women’s ability to compete in the private market has become the new defining feature of female modernity in the reform era (Evans, 2008). Representing the female revolutionary hero now entails reinscribing the differences between the sexes (Hu, 1996, p. 62) and representing the female revolutionary in the spirit of the market economy, with its pursuit of individuality, wealth, social mobility, and success.

However, the transgression of the official gender norms must honour boundaries defined by the post-socialist cultural production conditions. Conspicuous in this boundary is the continuation of Confucian puritanical ethics on sexual morality. Traditional values of female chastity were maintained for revolutionary heroes in the revolutionary texts. Sex and sexuality have continued to be highly sensitive issues in post-Mao popular discourse. Sexuality is still kept in the private sphere, and the state vigilantly patrols the representations sex and sexuality in the public sphere (Y.-C. Huang, 2008). Xue’s novelette was severely criticised because it transgresses boundaries on several fronts: the sexualisation of Sister A Qing transgresses the official gender allegory of revolutionary heroines as asexual, as well as the official claims of Chinese Communist Party historiography. More importantly, the market now relies upon the cultural memory of revolutionary heroes as a resource. Furthermore, overt expressions of sex and

⁴⁹ Evans (1997, 2008) has argued that women still carried out naturalised duties in the Maoist era. Many scholars have also moved away from the extreme notion of gender-neutral representation during the Cultural Revolution and demonstrated the ambivalence in the representation of womanhood and femininity (Honig, 2000; Roberts, 2004, 2006a, 2006b).

sexuality and excessively eroticised female bodies disrupt the normative assumptions of womanhood and marriage, which remain grounded in traditional ethics. The unconventional representations of revolutionary women can get mired down in controversy and invite public criticism or an official ban. Therefore, there is no commercial incentive to push the boundary on this issue. Eventually, the state and the market comply in the denunciation of this radical transformation of sexuality.

By comparison, the television adaptation of *Shajiabang* represents an interesting experiment in integrating political interest and commercial feasibility. Drawing lessons from the previous failed attempts at reinventing the genre, the TV adaptation deliberately maintains a certain degree of ideological continuity with the socialist era in its portrayal of the heroines. It does not critique the relationship between women and the nation, and its depiction of the heroine's sexuality remains within the parameters of the gender norms implicit in Maoist communism. But the adaptation also provides a dose of viewing pleasure by presenting a glamorous, feminine, yet competent heroine in keeping with the new imagination of women in the post-Deng era. Sister A Qing's manifestation of sexuality is confined within the "superficial"—the make-up, hairstyle, and clothing that bring out her naturalised feminine attributes. Her characterisation as a capable woman in the revolutionary text is enhanced in the adaptation. The state participates actively in limiting erotic characterisations of revolutionary women, as in Xue Rong's novelette, but acquiesced to the representation of these figures as visually appealing and sexually attractive and capable. The negotiations surrounding the meaning of revolutionary women and femininity took place with considerable conflicts. TV has actively participated in negotiating, repairing, and maintaining the boundaries of gender norms.

Chapter 6: Living Red: the Production and Consumption of Revolutionary Culture in Linyi⁵⁰

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I have looked at the construction of subjectivity along the axis of class and gender. In this chapter, I will shift the focus to place. In the same way that I have examined how class and gender interact to produce social subjects, I will look at how place, as a social marker, interacts with class and gender in constituting subjectivities. The analytical focus of this chapter is consumption. Specifically, this chapter examines how viewers respond to the state's place-making strategies through consumption of the Red Classics.

In addition to class and gender, place has become a very important marker for identification in the reform era for three reasons: First, as the population of China has become more mobile and diverse, so the need to articulate one's identity through place has become more urgent. Secondly, traditional institutions such as social classes have been repressed as an effective mechanism for expressing identity. Thirdly, modernisation and urbanisation have had a homogenising effect on locality, resulting in a desire to recover or even fabricate distinctive features of a place for the purposes of attracting investment, tourism, or for subjectivity formation.

In this chapter, I will examine how viewers in Linyi, a revolutionary base area, form place-specific identities through the consumption of both the original Red Classics texts and their TV adaptations. I argue that media have influenced local people to transgress their "locality" in particular ways. This transgression must be understood within the framework of the broad patterns of unevenness within modern Chinese society—between north and south, coast and interior, and rural and urban—created and exacerbated by the reform. It also needs to be grounded in the state-facilitated market revolution, which transformed the proletarian-centred, class-based, and collectivist

⁵⁰ Part of this chapter is included in Gong (Forthcoming).

subjectivity into one based more closely on humanistic, commercial, and individualistic values.

Sun and Zhao (2009) have demonstrated how television successfully appropriates the socialist ethos and communication styles to translate neoliberalism into an effective moral economy and to facilitate neoliberal subject-making. With a similar purpose but a different focus, this chapter examines the cultural politics of propagating the nation's revolutionary legacy, at a time when the Party's authority and legitimacy have become increasingly less self-evident. More specifically, this chapter looks at the how "Yimeng Spirit," a new conception of locality in Linyi, is propagated through media production and representation, and how the resulting media texts are taken up in the reinvention of local identities. In this way, the chapter seeks to delineate the media's role in the production and consumption of local identities. Using Linyi as an example, this chapter illuminates how the revolutionary legacy was repackaged through media production in a depoliticised discourse of human love and compassion. In the case of Linyi, the local government invokes ideas such as "local traits" (*minfeng*), "locality" (*diyuxing*), and "human nature" (*renxing*) to better enmesh official history with local memory. Meanwhile, the locals invoke unofficial histories, myths, and local memory in their quest for a different social imaginary. This act of humanising and localising represents a new possibility for engaging with homogenous official history.

The chapter is divided into three sections: The first section deals with the complex way Linyi locals appropriated the Red Classics for their identity formation. It looks at how the key concepts of realism and class struggle were negotiated and contested in the everyday consumption of the Red Classics. The second section examines how "Yimeng Spirit" was promoted as the core of place-specific subjectivity for Linyi through media and how the locals respond to and negotiate with this place-making strategy. Place-based identity is shown as intricately linked with class and gender. The third section describes how the essentialised place identity is appropriated by market innovations to forge productive new subject positions.

Living red: The everyday consumption of the Red Classics in Linyi

Linyi, a medium-size city in East China's Shandong Peninsula, presents itself as a good case study to explore the complex relationships between place, locality, and local memories. As a revolutionary heartland, the place once enjoyed political and cultural centrality in the Maoist days. It once served as a revolutionary base and played a pivotal role in the success of the Communists in the Civil War. Several large campaigns were fought in the area, and the heroic deeds of the locals during the war were textbook propaganda pieces for the Party, as well as being staples of popular cultural entertainment. However, the mark that once distinguished Linyi now puts it on the periphery in the shift towards the market. In response to changing political and cultural circumstances, both local and state authorities and ordinary people see the need to repackage its revolutionary cultural heritage with different meanings and values.

Linyi has been branded in different historical periods as a result of the state's place-making agenda. Linyi was represented first as a Confucian stronghold, then as a sacrificing mother who nurtured a revolutionary army, and more recently, as a commercial hub. The discursive shift reflects the changing trajectory in state governmentality, narrative, and vocabulary, from a socialist moral economy that stresses collectivity, egalitarianism, class struggle, and revolutionary idealism to a neoliberal rationality that puts commercial success, self-improvement, and an individualised enterprising spirit at the centre of its paradigm. The transformation is not a linear one, nor is it without contradiction. In fact, the discourse itself is extremely complex and charged with high tension. Different government policies call for different subjectivities, as realised in the Red Classics that were produced throughout different eras. Lisa Hoffman (2006) vividly articulates the re-spatialisation of Dalian from an industrial city to a commercial centre in the north, as well as the corresponding subjectivity this change has introduced, and how these new positions have forged neoliberal subjects in the post-reform era. Echoing her arguments but taking them in a different direction, my discussion of the transformation of Linyi stresses the tensions and contradictions in the competing discourses. These tensions manifest themselves in media productions, such as the TV drama serial *Yimeng*. Meanwhile the everyday consumption of these media products further compounds the complexity. My inquiries in this section thus focus on a set of core questions: How do viewers experience the Red

Classics? How do they see changes made in the TV version of the Red Classics? Do the viewers respond to the place-making practices of the state through media? What is the nature of this response?

Experiences with the Red Classics

The research findings derived from my fieldwork⁵¹ indicate that the Red Classics are still highly relevant in contemporary Chinese life. All of the respondents to the survey and interviewees confirmed that they had some exposure to the Red Classics. Film still remains the major medium in propagating the red legacy. About half the respondents prioritise film viewing as the major channel through which they experience the Red Classics. Television re-runs of old films account for the next most significant medium through which viewers are exposed to the Red Classics. Less than one third of the responses mention *Yangbanxi*, picture-story books (*lianhuanhua*) and literature. This concurs with Link's observation that "though books and magazines in socialist China carried a much greater range of work than other media, some of the others, especially film and radio, reached far larger audiences" (2000, pp. 198-199). While television viewing is a voluntary choice, many respondents first encountered the Red Classics through organised collective viewing. Sometimes respondents watched the Red Classics through the *dianying xiaxing*, a term referring to a government endeavour in the Maoist era that used mobile projection teams to visit rural areas and show the Red Classics films to villagers or urban poor. Sometimes the film viewings were organised by schools or work units. Some respondents had an ambivalent attitude towards this viewing, often forced upon individuals as political education, but quite a few recalled the experience with fond memories.

One survey respondent described the experience emotionally:

⁵¹ My discussion of what the Red Classics mean for ordinary people, particular those in Linyi, is based mainly on my fieldwork in Linyi and Beijing from November 2008 to February 2009. The original plan was to carry out two focus group discussions and some in-depth interviews on the consumption of the Red Classics. After discussing my research with my local contacts, mostly my childhood friends and classmates, I realised that these friends, having lived in Linyi for decades, have developed a much larger local network, a valuable resource for my research. I thus asked them to distribute and collect a questionnaire, aimed at finding some general information on the locals' viewing habits and memories of the Red Classics and some initial response to the TV adaptations. Overall, 71 questionnaires were collected. The respondents mainly came from middle-class backgrounds, and worked in state-owned work units, including the Food and Drug Administration Bureau, the Bureau of Finance, a Polytechnic College, the Environmental Protection Bureau, and the Customs Administration. Most of the respondents were between 25 and 45 years old. The majority had some form of tertiary education.

[My experience with the Red Classics] began with the open-air film show when I was little. The mobile projection team set up the screen and they usually aired two movies of different subjects every time. The children would come out early with their folding stools to grab the best spots. That is one of my most wonderful memories of childhood.

Another recalls the feeling of being obsessed by the films:

The whole village came out to see the open-air films. We did not feel cold in winter, nor hot in summer, always just absorbed by the plot.

These accounts suggest that the propagation of the revolutionary legacy from the 1960s to the 1980s had been consistent and effective in the base area. The Red Classics, nowadays believed to be a crude form of propaganda, first came to ordinary Chinese in various modern media such as film, ballet, and opera, which are metonymic of modernity to the locals. They offered a different form of entertainment—fresh, easily accessible, and widely different from the traditional story-telling or local opera, which constituted a major source of entertainment for a closed, economically backward area such as Linyi. Even though there was a strong tendency in the 1990s to repudiate the role of revolution in the Maoist era as a form of political “radicalism” (H. Wang, 2003), the pleasurable experience, the sense of exoticism, and excitement the Red Classics provided to the generations growing up with them cannot be simply dismissed as brain-washing. The Party-state’s claim to the socialist legacy is not only much needed for its own legitimacy, but it also provides coherence for generations of Chinese in making sense of their feelings and past experience.

The Linyi locals’ accounts indicate that cinema was not always an expensive production relying on spectacular visual and acoustic effects. Nor was it always enjoyed as an occasion at considerable cost to an individualised experience. In fact, it once served as an important tool in narrating the nation’s origin and destiny, which was then actively and commonly affirmed in the communal watching. Today, the commercialised pursuits of mainstream Chinese cinema have introduced a disconnection with peasants, the

marginalised, and the urban poor. Instead, TV drama shoulders the task of providing popular entertainment, as well as imageries that reflect the collective fear and aspirations of the “mass,” consumed free of charge and at the convenience of the viewers.

Ownership of history, realism, and counter memory

In the focus group discussions, interviews, and surveys, realism seemed to be a major evaluative criterion for judging the Red Classics and the TV versions. This concern is closely associated with locality; the respondents tended to make comments on films and TV dramas that dealt with local events. For example, 31 of the 71 survey respondents mentioned *The Red Sun*⁵² when they were asked to list the Red Classics they know. The discussions I had with the interviewees tended to revolve around subjects that features Yimeng Mountain area, such as the TV dramas *Yimeng*⁵³ and *The Red Sun*. The respondents’ perception of “authenticity” was based on a number of factors, including the narrative of historical events, the acting, the props, the costumes, and even the location of the shooting. In commenting on the realistic aspects of the Red Classics, locals particularly feel they “own” the history, and that they have the credentials to present a true version of the past.

Opinions tended to diverge greatly regarding which version is more authentic: the original revolutionary-themed works made in the Maoist era or the TV adaptations made in the 2000s. In the intervening period, a neoliberal discourse has largely superseded the class-based ideology. A humanistic, charismatic, individualistic, and

⁵² Considered one of the core works of the Red Classics, *The Red Sun* was originally a novel published in 1959. Combining history with fiction, the story focuses on the three major campaigns—Lianshui, Laiwu and Menglianggu—fought between the CCP and the Nationalist armies in 1947 in Shandong Province. The novel gave a breathtaking account of the last campaign in Menglianggu, an isolated, ragged mountain area in Linyi. The Communist army fought against the Nationalist’s 74th division, led by military talent Zhang Lingfu. It was a cliff-hanging win for the CCP and the outcome of the campaign suggested the eventual downfall of the Nationalists. The novel, while largely maintaining the “class characteristics” of the characters, gave a more rounded persona to its major characters. The Nationalist army commander, Zhang Lingfu, was depicted as relatively capable, astute and resourceful, despite his evil class nature. The novel was adapted into a popular film in 1963.

⁵³ The 42-episode TV drama serial, *Yimeng*, was commissioned by the Linyi Propaganda Department to narrate the locals’ contribution to the founding of the nation in the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil War in a popular dramatic form. The story revolves around the vicissitudes of one family in a small village called Mamuchi during a chaotic period. Many of the wartime legends in the local area were dramatised and personified by the members of the fictitious family. The serial was shown during prime time on CCTV’s Channel 8 in November 2009. Within weeks, it was CCTV’s second highest-rating prime-time drama (Zhu & Zhang, 2009).

entrepreneurial type of subjectivity has overcome the self-sacrificing, morally perfect Party martyrs. In a focus group meeting at Linyi Normal Institute, participants argued heatedly over which versions were more “realistic.” Two camps formed mainly according to age. The more senior participants pointed out that they could not easily identify with the television adaptations of the Red Classics works because these commercial cultural products “are not true to history.” Lao Huang, the television director, believed nearly all of the commercial reproductions failed, as they simply completely “changed the flavour” of the original works. For the older interviewees, what cannot be changed includes not only the historical facts, but also the representation of the heroes and enemies in the original work. For example, Lao Huang commented that he simply could not take a liking to the current revamped image of the central character in *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* [*Xiao bing Zhang Ga*],⁵⁴ since the little soldier’s image in the original film is strongly rooted in the hearts of people. The new “Gazi” (the nickname for Zhang Ga), far better dressed and full of urban street smarts, conflicts too much with memory. Huang said:

It is all right [for the TV adaptation] to depict the innocence of boyhood. But the story happened during the cruel conditions of war, after all. Too much of the cuteness and pranks is just not realistic.

Lao Lu, the dean of the School of Social Development in his late 50s, criticised the TV drama representation of Sister A Qing, the Communist undercover agent in *Shajiang*, as improperly rendered:

It is true that some facts were covered up due to political needs in the *Yangbanxi* version, but it is more realistic than the TV representation. She [Sister A Qing] might as well be a singing-girl [in this drama serial].

More strident criticism centred on *The Red Sun*. Lao Huang believed the film version of *The Red Sun*, produced in 1963, is a far more realistic and better produced than the 36-

⁵⁴ *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* was made in 1963. It is a story about a teenage boy who was caught in the middle of the Anti-Japanese War. For contemporary Chinese, it is one of the most memorable revolutionary themed children’s movies (Chu, Donald, & Witcomb, 2003).

part TV drama series made in 2008. To Huang, *The Red Sun* is based on real historical events and the main heroes all have prototypes, thus leaving little room for a more daring, creative interpretation. Huang was backed by Lu, who stressed that the film version of *The Red Sun* more faithfully depicted the historical Menglianggu Campaign and the main figures involved the battle. “The film was already accepted as truthful by people, since it spoke to the memory of many witnesses of the war,” said Lu.

Lao Huang and Lao Lu’s comments are representative of their generation’s interpretation of revolutionary media products, and they echo responses I received in 2006 when I conducted interviews among the diasporic Chinese community in Australia.⁵⁵ This generation still bears residual memories of the war and childhood media practices. Earlier research carried out in the Australian Chinese community found that there is a “crossover from memory to nostalgia” (Chu et al., 2003, p. 271) in the consumption of revolutionary media products among adults. Back in Linyi, the older generation demonstrated a stronger tendency to assert their historical and cultural competence, embedding it in memory. This flagging of first-hand experience and memory is exacerbated by the increasing commercialisation of revolutionary media products.

In Beijing, I interviewed 84-year-old Mao FY. After joining the New Fourth Route Army in 1943 as a health worker, Mao took part in the famous “Menglianggu Campaign” depicted in *The Red Sun*. In general, Mao said he preferred documentary rather than feature films or TV dramas on revolutionary history. Speaking with the authority of first-hand experience, Mao told me he found the new TV reproduction of *The Red Sun* untrue to reality, and thus hard to accept. The representation of the hero, Shen Zhenxin, a fictional divisional commander in the TV drama version of *The Red Sun*, failed to fully impress Mao. The whole effort to “humanise” Shen irritated Mao in one way or another. Shen not only spent most of his time pursuing a female junior

⁵⁵ In 2006, in Perth, West Australia, I conducted a focus group discussion and follow-up interviews based on the viewing of *Struggles in the Old City*, one of the seminal works in the genre. The results show that TV consumption is complex and unpredictable. TV dramas are charged with ambiguities and open to interpretation. And it is precisely these ambiguous moments and diverse ways of interpreting the Red Classics that have provided an important discursive space, where a range of new social identities can be constructed and contested.

office, but also set up blind dates for his guard. Mao also found his constant swearing and petty rages unappealing.

Mao commented with trepidation:

Where did this “human element” come from? At that time, most soldiers didn’t have time or opportunity to start relationships. Only those who were over 28-years-old were eligible for marriage and getting married needed to be approved by different levels of leadership. You could not simply add all these tricks from the Reform era into [the media products of] that age.

However, the older generation’s memories and interpretations were challenged by the younger generation, which has developed a more globalised media competence and has a less affective affinity with revolutionary cultural heritage. In the above focus group discussion, the two younger participants, Xiao Wei and Xiao Zhang, both interrupted when Lao Huang and Lao Lu made the comment that new TV adaptations were not faithful to historical truth. “I think it is a misconception to take the old Red Classics as the truth,” Xiao Wei said to Lao Lu. “There is no so-called ‘historical truth.’ The truth you talk about is only the truth in your head,” Xiao Zhang said to Lao Huang. “I believe the TV adaptation is more realistic compared with the earlier versions,” said Xiao Zhang. Finally Xiao Wei asked, “In the original Red Classics, the Eighth Route Army soldiers nearly never die. Can you call this realistic?”

The above comments made by the younger people show that the interpretation of events by the older generation is not observed or respected by the younger generation. In fact, the younger participants were quite eager to present themselves as cosmopolitan, global viewers. The ideological, moral, and aesthetic preferences of the younger viewers are symptomatic of a shift in attitude toward the past, which destabilised the narration of revolution. However, it is important to understand that the discursive change is not linear, coherent, or one-directional. As a result, the viewers manifested a complex and contradictory behaviour and perception in their media consumption. This is showcased in the response of Xiao Li, a forty-year-old journalist with Linyi Television. Li said she

harboured the same type of doubt over the new TV release of *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*. However, she changed her mind several episodes into the TV show.

My son made me watch with him, and at first I just did it as a duty. But as I watched more, I began to see things from my son's point of view. It is true that this "Gazi" has a more contemporary feel, but for children, a TV show has to be fun, more than anything. The Gazi in the TV version has a strong personality and the acting is good. His worldview came from his experience in life, which is convincing enough. While the old film version had a propaganda purpose, the new one can appeal to the younger ones too, even if they are further away from the War period. For example, my son is very close to his grandma. When Gazi's grandmother was killed by the Japanese Army, my son could easily relate to Gazi, because familial love is universal, regardless of time.

Even for the older generation with their stronger sense of morality, national sentiment, and firmer commitment to revolutionary memory, the contradiction is still clear. It is particularly salient in their perception of Zhang Lingfu in *The Red Sun*. Zhang is a paramount figure in modern Chinese history. Strikingly handsome and extremely talented, he was one of the most well-known and highest-ranking generals of the Nationalist army. Zhang led a legendary life. Early on in school, he had already made a name as a fine calligrapher. In 1924, he abandoned his study at Beijing University to follow Chiang Kai-shek in the Nationalists' advances against other warlords in the North. In 1936, in a moment of rage, he shot his wife and was sentenced to ten years in jail. However, his immense military talents earned him a second chance. He was soon released to serve as a regiment commander to fight the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Zhang successfully led a number of campaigns against the Japanese and his courage and military tactics earned him both fame and jealousy amongst his peers. In 1945, Zhang was promoted as commander of 74th Corps, an elite Nationalist military unit. Despite his huge reputation fighting against the Japanese, Zhang remained a prime foe of the Communists. Zhang's troops inflicted heavy losses on the Communists in the Lianshui Battle in northern Jiangsu Province. In early 1947, the 74th Corps was again at the forefront of Chiang Kai-shek's series of attacks against the Communists in Shandong Province. A number of factors worked against Zhang's army. Eventually, he was trapped

in the mountainous terrain of Menglianggu, in Linyi, where he fought to the end and was killed in action by the Communists in a cave hideout.

Zhang's life presents a thorny case for media representation. While the Communists took great pride in defeating him and his army, his unmatched courage, tactics, and victory in the decisive battles against the Japanese are undeniable. The contradiction needs to be reconciled in the viewers' minds. The official historiography was re-configured and challenged in the form of myth and hearsay. In a way similar to how Yi villagers use exorcisms and ghost stories to deal with the trauma caused by the Great Leap Forward famine (Mueggler, 2007), myths and hearsay are a collective strategy of memory to counter the state's selective rendering of historical figures such as Zhang. As Mueggler argues, this strategy requires "a high level of agreement among participants" (2007, p. 67), sometimes out of bounds of the accepted norm of knowledge.

For example, after hearing about my research interests, Lao Yu, a retired cadre who once served as head of the Propaganda Department of Mengyin County, where Menglianggu Campaign was fought, volunteered to talk to me about an "unofficial truth" regarding Zhang's death. As far as Yu knew, Zhang was not killed by the Communists, but committed suicide. He was prepared for his death and that is why he left a letter stating his determination to kill himself in order to "return the favour to the Party." After his death, his head was cut off and thrown into the river. However, myth has it that somehow, miraculously, the head and body joined together and floated to Nanjing, then the capital of the Nationalist government. Chiang Kai-shek held a grand state funeral for Zhang. In addition to Yu's serious story of Zhang's death, there are other stories about the mysterious happenings surrounding Zhang's death. One goes that the moment before Zhang's death, a dark cloud flew over a hill where Zhang stood. It was a strange thing because for days there had been a cloudless sky, causing a serious shortage of water supply for Zhang's army. As soon as Zhang saw the cloud, he sighed and said to his subordinate: "It is my fate to die here."

All these narrations paint an image of a tragic hero who must eventually die when the time comes. These comments refuse to conform to the official version of historiography, but rather stubbornly call for sympathy for a hero in dire straits. The contradictions in

the official narrations of national history, such as the film version of *The Red Sun*, leave gaps that can be filled by the imagination of ordinary viewers. Hearsay and mythical stories form one strategy to counter official historiography. This strategy is needed in Linyi on a daily basis. In the Menglianggu Memorial Museum, my friends and I discussed Zhang Lingfu and Su Yu, the Communist commander who was responsible for the decisive victory of the major campaign. When I probed a little further on how my friends perceive the battle, which wiped out the ablest enemy of the Communist New Fourth Army, but also the army that distinguished itself in action against the Japanese invaders, most of my friends failed to give an answer. Indeed without the class discourse in place, and with the improved relationship between the Nationalist Party in Taiwan and the CCP in mainland China, the significance of Menglianggu could not be easily justified and Zhang's fall can only be explained in terms of bad fortune, strong personality (his arrogance), and the internal power struggle within the Nationalist army. In fact, this is exactly the narrative strategy adopted by the TV drama adaptations.

The good, old locals of Linyi

The above discussion shows that the locals in the old base area still identify strongly with their revolutionary heritage, as many feel they have complex stakes in the specific narratives of the nation. However, there has been a deep sense of ambivalence among this community regarding how to interpret heroic socialist stories such as the Red Classics. This ambivalence mainly results from the discursive shift on the revolutionary legacy. As discussed by scholars such as Wang Hui (2003), Arif Dirlik (1996), and Zhao Yuezhi (2008b, 2009a), the CCP has been pursuing a contradictory policy that both confirms the socialist legacy for its own legitimacy and, at the same time, repudiates it as political radicalism opposed to modernity.

The change in the "hierarchy of identity" caused by shifts in the political, economic, and social environment is happening in a wide diversity of places, such as Jiangxi (C. Feng, 1999) and Dalian (Hoffman, 2006). Under such circumstances, seeking ways of "smoothing out" the disjuncture in transforming ideology is both high on the agenda of the local government and a daily need for ordinary people. In the case of Linyi, there is a concerted enthusiasm for reviving an "authentic core" of values for the construction of a local identity, which we can refer to as the "Good, old locals of Linyi." This identity is

closely linked to the state place-making project in the reform era. The project hinges on the conception and propagation of the “Yimeng Spirit.”

*Yimeng Spirit*⁵⁶: Conception and propagation

Linyi’s old base area (*laoqu*) identity has been contested in the last three decades. This is largely due to the contradictory approach to revolutionary history that China’s reform is premised upon. This schizophrenic way of dealing with its heritage (Dirlik, 1996) has created a new task for the ideological state apparatus, such as the Party propaganda departments at various levels and the media, which must come up with innovative ways to apply neoliberal strategies of market rationalisation, while at the same time proclaiming their commitment to China’s socialist legacies (Zhao 2008a, 2008b).

Linyi’s propaganda organs face the task of reinventing the revolutionary past and reworking its values into a viable political brand to ensure the relevance of this past in the market-oriented society. The improvised practice at the local official level to make the revolutionary past more accessible, relevant, and effective is most clearly demonstrated in the conception and propagation of the *Yimeng Jingshen* (Yimeng Spirit) in Linyi. Following the political tightening in the wake of the June 4th incident, the Party stepped up its efforts in propaganda and thought work (Brady, 2008). But this time, the strategies have been tied in more closely with local history and local identity. The propaganda unit took on the task of promoting Yimeng Spirit with a clear aim of defining it against other standard propaganda pieces, such as “Yan’an Spirit.” From 1990, the Propaganda Department of the Shandong Provincial Party Committee waged four large-scale campaigns to promote and research Yimeng Spirit (Ding, Huang, Zhang, Zheng & Cui, 2008). This process is referred to as “*dazao zhengzhi pinpai*” (political brand making).

Compared with other types of revolutionary spirit, Yimeng Spirit is celebrated for its “grassroots” nature. The other revolutionary spirits, according to the book, *Yimeng Jingshen*, “nurtured under the direct leadership of the Party Central Committee and Mao Zedong, were stamped with the brand of the Party and other proletariat leaders,” but

⁵⁶ The Yi River and Meng Mountain are the two landmarks of Linyi. Yimeng, the acronym for this river and mountain, is often used to refer to the area.

Yimeng spirit is “a local group consciousness, developed against the specific historical and cultural background of Yimeng. It combines Yimeng people’s fine character and advanced revolutionary thoughts” (Ding et al., 2008, p. 238).

The above discussion demonstrates a significant shift in defining Yimeng revolutionary history: the focus on locality and local identity as a means of branding revolutionary history. Ann Anagnost (1997) argues that civility has become the main discourse in society, as the discourse of class ceases to operate in reform-era China. In the absence of articulations of class differences, the notion of civility sparks off anxiety among the elite about people’s *suzhi* (personal quality) or national character. This concern over inferior quality justifies the need for national pedagogy (Anagnost, 1997). Pursuing this line, in the case of Yimeng Spirit, I would argue that the Party’s propaganda apparatus invokes the locality and local characters as a strategy to narrate the revolution in a paradigm different from class struggle. There are several advantages in doing so. First, it allows the Party to get around the issue of class conflict, which is no longer politically convenient in the current environment. Second, the notions of “local traits,” “locality,” and “local characters” speak well to local longings for reshaping the past in a way that is less loaded with ideological meanings. Third, representing the locals as historically and traditionally trustworthy, responsible citizens opens up new subjectivities commensurate with the current ideology of entrepreneurial spirit. These notions are useful in producing new subject positions fit for neoliberal governance in the context of China’s economic reform. It will also help facilitate the commercial use of the imagery of the revolution, reinforced in propaganda as well as within literary and artistic representations.

The development of Yimeng Spirit is a conscious act of the Party at different levels. It emerges from the urgent need to reconcile a contradiction: Linyi is a revolutionary heartland because its rural poverty had incited revolution in the first place; at the same time, Linyi is part of the rural interior, the poor cousin of the coastal cities that have already successfully embraced global capitalism. Linyi thus serves as a painful reminder of the inability of socialism to provide for the very people that made the revolution possible. Together with various poverty alleviation programs designed to boost Linyi’s economy, the Shandong provincial government and the Linyi municipal government have sought to achieve a rhetorical make-over—to transform the image of Linyi as an economic backwater into the image of Linyi as a vital link in the national economy. This

requires the suturing of two narratives: the old narrative of Linyiers as the sacrificing sons of the Party and nation, and the new narrative of Linyiers as pioneers in the national drive for economic development. The meeting ground of these two narratives, as the propagandists discovered, is the locality and the special traits of local people. David Goodman's research on translocal identity in Shanxi Province argues persuasively that the Party-state can effectively project a translocal identity with which the locals seek to identify (Goodman, 2006). The case of Yimeng Spirit confirms this argument, although in the case of Shanxi it is a provincial identity that the Party-state helped to breed, while Yimeng Spirit is linked to identity at the prefecture level.

The idea of Yimeng Spirit was conceived by the political elite in the state propaganda organs, followed by all-out efforts to delineate, develop, and promote the idea. In November 1990, the Propaganda Department of the Shandong Provincial Party Committee and the Shandong Social Sciences Association commissioned research on Yimeng revolutionary culture. The research team, comprising scholars from the disciplines of philosophy, economics, sociology, and ethics, made a submission on promoting Yimeng Spirit as a cultural vision. From 2004, the local Party organised a series of thirteen events aiming at selling the idea to the general public. These included workshops and seminars, the publication of books theorising the Yimeng Spirit, revisiting and revamping revolutionary-themed artistic productions, and campaigns to promote moral role models embodying Yimeng Spirit.

In the next section, I first examine how the local propaganda department appeals to locality and traditional ethics to secure consensus. I then evaluate whether this is reproduced in popular discourse and how it can be productively used to forge new subject positions, such as entrepreneurs with collective consciousness.

Yimeng Spirit incarnated: The TV drama serial Yimeng

Since Yimeng Spirit was conceived and promoted as the essence of the locality, a number of artistic works featuring local revolutionary history have been remade. The major work commissioned to further the image of the Yimeng brand is a television drama serial entitled *Yimeng*.

The 42-episode TV drama serial *Yimeng* was commissioned by the Linyi Propaganda Department to narrate the locals' contribution to the founding of the nation in the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil War in a popular dramatic form. Although the serial is not a Red Classics adaptation per se, it nevertheless incorporates into its plot a few stock stories and characters from the Red Classics that the region is known for, including the story of Hong Sao⁵⁷ and the story of the Yimeng Mother.⁵⁸ Therefore, the serial is in a sense an extension of the Red Classics TV drama adaptations.

The story revolves around the struggles of one family in a small village called Mamuchi during a period full of chaos. The protagonist is an old woman named Yu Baozhen, the head of the family in everything but name. Strong and able, she manages the big house with three sons and daughters, two daughters-in-law and a rather weak and a good-for-nothing husband. In 1938, the Japanese army entered the Yimeng Mountainous Area. In one of their looting expeditions to the village, several Japanese soldiers murder Yu's youngest daughter after raping her. The enraged villagers kill one Japanese soldier in retaliation. In the subsequent series of battles with the Japanese, Yu's eldest son Li Jichang, second son Li Jishan, and daughter Li Yue all join the Communist Eighth Route Army. Yu's husband dies in a mission to deliver supplies to the Communist army. Li Jizhou, the village chief's son, who is now a Nationalist army commander, captures Yu's eldest son and his wife and hands them over to the Japanese. Refusing to surrender, the couple die martyrs. However, despite the personal feud, Yu saves Li Jizhou from

⁵⁷ The story of Hong Sao (literally Red Sister) is nationally known and serves as a metonym of Yimeng Spirit. The tale goes that in one of the "mopping up" (looting) operations by the Japanese army in the winter of 1941 in the Yimeng area, a soldier of the Communist Eighth Route Army went into a coma due to the excessive loss of blood in a battle. When a local woman found him in a backyard, she realised that he was seriously dehydrated. Unable to find any fluid, the woman, who happened to have recently given birth, fed the soldier her milk. In *Yimeng*, this story was incorporated into the character Xintian, Yu's second daughter-in-law.

⁵⁸ The story relates how Wang Huanyu, bequeathed with the honorable title of "Yimeng Mother," sacrificed the lives of her own grandchildren in order to save the children of the Communist army soldiers. At the height of the war against the Japanese, Wang provided foster care for 41 children, ranging from three days to eight years old, whose parents were fighting on the war front. Wang's daughter-in-law just had a child but did not have enough milk to feed both her own child and the other babies still too young for solid food. Wang told her: "These are children of martyrs. Let them have milk and feed our children grain. If our children die, you can still have more, but if the martyrs' children die, then their lineage would end." Eventually, four of Wang's grandchildren died due to malnutrition. In the serial drama, Wang's legendary life story was incorporated into the character Yu Baozhen and her two daughters-in-law.

death when the Japanese ambush the Nationalist army. The villagers are united as never before.

Meanwhile, Yu and her two daughters-in-law, Xintian and Xin'ai, organise a Women's Resistance Association (*fujiu hui*) in the village to supply provisions and assist the Communist army. In one of the battles, when Xintian finds a Communist soldier in a hideout unconscious and dying of dehydration, she feeds the soldier her own milk to save his life. When the Communist army retreats from the revolutionary base area, Yu and her two daughters-in-law provide foster care to a dozen children of the Communist army officers. When the Japanese soldiers take villagers at gunpoint, threatening to shoot them if they do not reveal the whereabouts of the Communist children, Xin'ai offers her own adopted son as the Communist cadre's son and sees him taken away by the Japanese.

During the Civil War, Yu and the villagers continue to give all they have to the Communist troops, offering their last handful of grain and last piece of cloth to the army and sending their last male to the battlefield. After several decades, a general comes back to the village to find his saviour, and someone suggests Yu. However, after a close look, he finds she is not the one. He looks for several days, but cannot locate the woman who saved him. However, he meets many locals who supported and sacrificed for the Communist Army. Many of the wartime legends in the local area were dramatised and personified by the members of the fictitious family.

The discursive strategy employed by this serial is largely consistent with what I have discussed so far. The previously claimed revolutionary consciousness is replaced with traits of the local people—kindness, simplicity, and a sense of justice. According to media reports (X. M. Li, 2008b), the thematic orientation underpinning the serial has come a long way. Initially, when the Linyi Propaganda Department approached the much sought-after scriptwriter Zhao Dongling on the subject, she was unimpressed and vehemently declined. But after a long visit to Linyi she changed her mind. In her own words, other officially sanctioned TV dramas mainly serve as eulogising biographies of the Communist leaders, while *Yimeng* serves as a biography of the common people.

In interpreting *Yimeng Spirit*, Zhao Dongling claimed that “it embodies national righteousness and vigour.” At a time of national crisis, the privileged and the subordinate classes, landlords and peasants, fought shoulder to shoulder, vehemently manifesting benevolence and righteousness, love of the nation and hatred for the enemy—all in their extreme form. The local people also demonstrated an unusual vitality.

Yimeng people lived a more humane existence than any other being. Their vitality was fully set in motion. Their words and behaviour were full of beauty and the energy of life. (M. X. Li, 2008b)

Concurring with Zhao, Guan Hu, the director of the series, said that the most prominent feature of the series was that it did not generalise the concept of *Yimeng Spirit*, but embodied it through an ordinary peasant family:

There is no excessive extolling or eulogising [in this drama series]. It highlights the brightest part of the Yimeng people’s humanity through chronicling how a peasant family stubbornly survived multiple hardships. (X. Li, 2008b)

Both Zhao’s and Guan’s comments suggest that they were won over by the enduring characters of Linyi and consequently focused their show on “the people.” Locality forms the basis of an appeal that transcends the notion of class struggle propagated by the Party-state. This rigid official demarcation of classes is deliberately collapsed in Zhao’s tribute to the comradeship between the privileged and the subordinate, the landlord and the peasants. Guan’s emphasis on an inventive directorial style in making this TV drama is obviously set against a more “outdated” socialist style, which often resorts to “generalising” or using “excessive extolling or eulogising” language. In his genealogy of Chinese national cinema, film critic Zhang Yingjin observes that from the 1980s to the 1990s filmmakers in mainland China and Taiwan engaged in “re-imagining the nation from the perspective of the nation-people (characterised by indigenous or local cultures) rather than that of the nation-state or the party-state (characterized by ideological indoctrination by and political subjugation to a single party)” (Zhang, 2004,

p. 257). The TV drama *Yimeng*, the codified cultural embodiment of the Yimeng Spirit, seems to take this strategic turn away from the nation-state towards the people.

My interviews show that locals respond very positively to the cultural construct of “locality” as it was represented in this production. This is consistent with media reports which show that the viewers had an overwhelmingly positive response to the characters portrayed and praised it on the grounds of its narrative style and acting:

I’ve been watching *Yimeng* for the past few days. This TV drama is very “unrefined,” but it’s unrefined for the purpose of being realistic. It’s so much better than those sentimental “idol shows.” (J. Zhang, 2009, p. C02)

The village head’s last words before death—“I cannot disgrace my ancestor”—are so overwhelming and so full of moral integrity. I was moved to tears at that point. (Jian Wang, 2009, p. C02)

Emerging from these media reports and from my interviews is the fact that viewers responded positively to the TV serial’s highly localised acting style (local actors, a hint of a local accent, setup, and costumes) and its depiction of simple, good-natured local people. There is a high degree of appreciation of a pre-supposed Yimeng people or Yimeng spirit. Xiao Zhang, one of my informants and a teacher in a polytechnic college in Linyi, said she rarely has time for long TV drama serial, but she watched the 42-episode serial after catching it on screen by chance:

I heard the local accents on TV while I was doing household chores, and then I saw on the screen the big cotton-padded jackets and trousers the local women wear and I thought, “This looks like real stuff.” Then I found that even the location in the serial, “Mamuchi Village,” is a real place.⁵⁹

Besides its “local features,” the *Yimeng* series’ construction of a local character—as opposed to Party-imposed ideals—as the source of local support for the revolution also appealed to viewers. The class struggle ideology was carefully “trimmed off.” The

⁵⁹ I conducted a telephone interview with Xiao Zhang on March 28, 2010.

landlord, typically the enemy in the Red Classics of the Mao era, is portrayed here as a patriotic figure who is dead clear on matters of principle. His whole family died fighting the Japanese. His death is counted by my interviewees as one of the most moving parts of the drama serial. The discourse that “Landlords are just peasants who worked harder and became rich earlier than others” has now become so pervasive that it is nearly taken as a given. When I interviewed Lao Mao, the former New Fourth Route Army soldier, his daughter chipped in with the information that Mao’s landlord he worked for in his teenage years was a nice person. The landlord’s own sons worked on the field with Mao and other tenants, and they had quite a good relationship. Mao recently got in touch with the landlord’s son who is now residing in Taiwan, and the two reunited recently in Beijing. The implication is that the class oppression was largely fabricated.

The supra-class humanity of the locals can extend even to the Japanese soldier. The heroine Yu Baozhen’s daughter was raped and killed by the Japanese. However, when the locals burnt the dead body of the Japanese soldier after a battle, Yu told others she felt sad, because after all, these Japanese youth are sons of mothers just like her. I asked several interviewees whether this was possible. Their response is that local people were simple and kind like that. Hard-core Party cadres such as Lao Mao also actively make use of this “good, old Linyi local” rhetoric in their memory narrative: “In my mind I treat the Linyi people as my parents, because when we stationed there, the locals treated us just as their sons, and the young maidens took us as their brothers.” However, in his view, the locals’ willingness to sacrifice was changing to a more money-centred attitude in the current reform era. He recounted that when he went on a tour in the region last year, the tour bus, to be in time for another tourist group, dropped him and his wife 20 kilometres away from the town centre, leaving the two eighty-year-olds to find their way in the middle of nowhere. He said, “At times like this I really want to share with these young people some of the stories of the locals during the War. How come this generation sunk so low?”

The branding of Linyi depends on the revamping of its revolutionary past, thereby providing a false continuity on the surface, while in actual effect instilling it with an essentialist core of local community values. This practice is highly complex in both its conception and execution. Its theme and subject are generally in line with the state’s

general rhetoric of confirming the revolutionary past, giving it easy access to mainstream media and Party approval. However, the reinterpretation of revolutionary history often removes the “stifling holy aura” or the ideological indoctrination (Barmé, 1999) of the Mao era, while the revolutionaries are given a new lease on life as individuals with strong personalities, true humanity, and inevitable and acceptable human failings. These politically washed-out versions of revolutionary works accommodate post-Mao commercialisation and the repudiation of hard-line ideological doctrines. Equally important, this practice serves the purpose of self-affirmation for the locals in revolutionary base areas such as Linyi. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, a huge number of local people had participated in the Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War. The Communist Party’s successful mobilisation in the base areas relied largely on its promise to deliver a just, egalitarian society. The poor living conditions in these areas served as a real-life revelation of class stratification and helped to win unwavering support for the Communist Party, which was perceived as the party for the poor and by the poor. However, in a social environment where class and other socialist concerns are increasingly irrelevant, the locals desperately need to search for a new identity that provides coherence and meaning. This new practice is thus highly creative. Barmé’s comments in “Totalitarian Nostalgia” best summarise the situation:

In China, de-ideologization led to a proliferation and not an end of ideologies. Just as people were finding and creating spaces during the reform era in which alternative identities could be developed and expressed, these spaces were also occupied, co-opted, diverted, or claimed by a concatenation of cultural forces. Those who led the push to give voice to these alternatives themselves, though not simply subsumed by commercial socialism, were transformed by it. (1999, p. 343)

Local responses to media’s place-making: Transgressing the revolution-bound locality

My analysis so far has outlined the media’s discursive shift in delineating revolutionary modern history from a class-based, black-and-white ideological confrontation to a rather ambivalent, locality-centred cultural approach of appealing to emotions. This is encoded in the imaginary about the place of Linyi and has complex implications for local identity formation. In fact, the success of this discursive shift will hinge on whether

local people embrace the idea of reconstructed history based on an essentialised local identity. In the following section, I want to explore further the interplay between the national narrative, personal experiences, and identity formation in Linyi.

The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions I conducted in Linyi have revealed that there is a collective social desire to discard official historiography and reclaim local memory. This attempt to disrupt the reified, black-and-white official narrative is manifested in various myths and superstitions the locals resort to when talking about the revolutionary past. These were rooted in individual memories, which are often lived, personal, incoherent, irrational, and anti-modern. In his book on trauma, history, and memory in modern China, Wang Ban (2004) sees history as having a paradoxical relationship with memory. On the one hand, official history selectively uses and invents collective memory to make a coherent narrative about the past to serve the nationalist or socialist construction agenda. On the other hand, history is hostile and suspicious towards memory, because memory encompasses meanings and values that connect individuals within society in ways that conflict with the orthodox administrative, economic, or exchange processes prescribed by history. Individual anecdotes, speculations, and remembrances are suppressed in official representations, but surfaced in my interviews with informants. Sometimes recounted in an offhand manner, these narratives nevertheless call into question the authority of the historical narrative and give it an ambiguous look.

The Social Development Institute of Linyi Normal College has several research projects on Yimeng Red Culture.⁶⁰ In a focus group discussion I organised in their research centre, a group of teaching staff and post-graduates from the Institute together with a visiting television drama director had a heated discussion on what was unique about the revolutionary legacy in the Yimeng area. Professor Ji, the Director of the Institute, explained that the uniqueness of Yimeng Red Culture lies in its long time span and the

⁶⁰ These projects include a study of the pedagogical value of Yimeng Red Culture in contemporary society; an overview of Yimeng Red Culture resources; and a study of representative performances and theatrical works that have a revolutionary, historical theme.

human compassion it manifested.⁶¹ Linyi is the country's oldest revolutionary base, embodying the CCP's development from its early days until the founding of the PRC. At the same time, the tradition-bound Linyi people have shown extraordinary sincerity and a primal kind of love towards their fellow human beings. This compassion is believed to cross class boundaries at times. Ji said:

Our region is strongly influenced by Confucian culture. Local people are kind and follow traditional ethics. When life and morality come into conflict, life prevails. Certainly in the case of Hong Sao, the class antagonism is not really obvious. She just did what she could to save a man from dying, and that was the important thing. I believe she would save a Japanese soldier if he were dying. The Americans say we do not value life. This is so untrue. We are the ones who value life most.

Ji gave me several examples to illustrate the “unsophisticated” nature of the locals. The first example is from the period of the Western colonisation expedition to China in the 1870s, when a German naval vessel approached the coastal area of Rizhao City, then a county in the region, but was too large to pull into the shore. Locals were watching but apparently failed to understand that there was a war going on, as the idea of a modern sovereign state had not strike its root in people's mind at that time. According to this story, the German Navy asked a missionary to pass on the message to the locals that they would be rewarded with a silver coin for each German soldier they helped to come ashore. The locals enthusiastically took on the lucrative business. As a result, it only took about two hours for the Germans to take over Rizhao County.

This outrageous behaviour of the locals could be treated as a case of high treason by the Communists when nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments run high. It contrasts sharply with literary and filmic images of villagers tortured to death because they refuse to give essential information regarding the plans of the Communist underground

⁶¹ I interviewed Professor Ji Guangyun in a meeting room in the Social Development Institute on January 8, 2009. The quote below also comes from that interview.

organisation or household stories such as that of cowherd Wang Erxiao.⁶² More importantly, the reason for this wrongdoing, in Ji's account, is the locals' "simplicity, to the point of foolishness" (*chunpu dao youdian sha*). This lack of sophistication and trust in others may lead to foolish acts, but it is understandable and can be forgiven. This suppressed stratum of memory unearthed by Ji bluntly dismisses the category of class as an encoding ideological assumption and foregrounds a cultural explanation instead.

Memories and personal stories related to me by my informants also disrupt the national and class boundaries between the oppressed and the enemy that are prescribed in the official narrative. The relationships between the Nationalist army and peasants were always full of antagonism and tension in the mainstream narratives.⁶³ However, Lao Huang,⁶⁴ a television director, said that the locals had fond memories of the Nationalist Fifty-seventh Army when it fought in the area. The soldiers, like the Communist-led Eighth Route Army soldiers, were highly disciplined. Huang also told me that local bandits once looted his uncle's house and nearly cut one of his ears off. It was Japanese army medical staff that treated him. Ji also provided another anecdote: During the Anti-Japanese War, Japanese soldiers could venture into the village shops at night to buy wine and then wander back drunk without worrying about their safety.

Gendered writing of place: Feminine and maternal love as signifiers of sacrifice and humanity

To reinscribe Linyi as a place full of a "humanistic spirit" instead of a revolutionary heartland dominated by poverty-incited class conflicts, cultural works such as the TV drama *Yimeng* rely on fashioning subjects of "good, old locals." The construction of this

⁶² This is the story of a child martyr, Wang Erxiao, who encountered a Japanese army troupe during the Anti-Japanese War. When a Japanese officer tried to trick him into giving them information about the hideout of the Eighth Route Army branch, Erxiao pretended he was taken in. He cleverly led the Japanese into an area that had been encircled by the Communist army. The Japanese were ambushed and suffered heavy losses. Erxiao died a heroic death. The story was later turned into a folk song, which has been popular with children for generations.

⁶³ In countless films and television drama series, burnt village houses, locals screaming and scrambling, and soldiers chasing after the villagers' chickens for their food signify the presence of the Nationalist army.

⁶⁴ Huang is the surname of my interviewee, who preferred to be called Lao Huang. I interviewed Lao Huang at Linyi Normal College on January 8, 2008.

humane subjectivity is best realised by depicting the old base area and its support for the revolutionary cause as distinctively feminine. The main protagonist of the serial, Yu Baozhen, is the mother of a big family in a mountain village and head of the house. To serve as foil to her determination, bravery, and decisiveness, her husband is typeset as meek, weak, and hesitant. The serial incorporated a few stories for which the locality was known, including the story of Hong Sao and the Yimeng Mother.

Such stories have been eulogised in various artistic creations, including musicals, ballets, local operas, and films. They are taken as highly symbolic in the revolutionary narrative. The fact that a mother's milk, meant for her baby, was given to an army soldier signifies the locals' all-out efforts in support of the Communists' war efforts. But one issue has become unclear in the market era: What is the political agency underlining the act of giving to others? In the Party's discourse about class struggle, the answer is self-explanatory: Yimeng women's sacrifice comes from their affinity with the proletariat and hatred towards the oppressors, be they landlords or the Japanese invaders. However, in the current ideological shift from the revolutionary to the market, the CCP-sanctioned class-consciousness must be replaced with more contemporary credibility if people are still to identify with the heroes and their revolutionary spirit. I argue that the Hong Sao-type of stories is codified with a certain ideological ambivalence so that they can also be read in humanistic terms. In the case of TV drama *Yimeng's* representation of Hong Sao, audiences could be convinced in humanistic rather than revolutionary terms that she just did what she could to save a dying man, even if the idea of revolutionary spirit does not appeal to them. The Yimeng Mother Wang Huanyu's story strongly suggests traditional moral legends such as "The Orphan of the Zhao Family."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The story goes that some 2,000 years ago, an upright Minister Zhao was caught up in political strife. All Zhao's family members and servants—totalling 300 people—were killed. Zhao's daughter-in-law was the sister of the Emperor, who was excluded from the massacre. The Princess was pregnant and her child was to be killed after the birth. In order to save the blood of Zhao, the Princess asked the Zhao's friend, Cheng Ying, to help. Cheng managed to smuggle the baby out. But when the treacherous minister discovered Cheng's plot, Cheng offered his own son as the orphan and saw his son killed in front of him. Nobody knew the truth until the orphan grew up and sought revenge for the Zhao family. Cheng is the moral model of altruism through self-abnegation.

Not surprisingly, then, both stories were cited in a book as examples of Linyi people's characteristic loyalty. Entitled *I'm a Shandonger*, this book outlines the local customs and local traits in various part of Shandong Province and essentialises the distinctive attributes of local people. In the chapter on Linyi, it singles out "loyalty" as the foremost attribute characterising Linyiers. After giving an account of famous local patriotic figures in various historical periods, the chapter concludes with this statement: "People in Linyi never bargained with the country whenever the nation needed its support. In the new century, loyalty to the nation still runs in the blood of Linyi locals" (Hao, 2008, p. 218). The chapter makes no distinction between the imperial monarchs or the revolutionary martyrs. Instead, loyalty serves as the overarching moral ideal that transcends class and ideological differences. Confucian and bourgeois virtues (e.g., filial piety, paternal responsibility, and kinship loyalties) have replaced class as the organising concepts that underline the heroic deeds. Self-sacrifice for the country, once fodder for the official class-based propaganda, was now attributed to an archetypical local trait. In her reading of popular texts representative of southern regionalism, Carolyn Cartier (2006) points out that stock terms of place-based traits and characteristics are employed to make sense of the present by using a language of the past in times of drastic social transformation. These essentialised "traits" of Linyiers are used to encode Linyi not as the site of ideological struggle, but as a place with deep-rooted humanity.

Hong Sao: loving older sister or proletarian soldier?

Yimeng's newly forged subjectivity for Hong Sao—that of a loving, humane older sister—no doubt departs from the canonical texts. The official record has it that Hong Sao's prototype was a mute peasant woman named Ming Deying. The fact that decades later she was found and reunited with the injured soldier Zhuang Xinmin completed the revolutionary legend and gave emotional closure to the story. Political exhibitions, such as the *Yimeng Spirit Exhibition*,⁶⁶ invariably display photos of Ming and Zhuang together. Ming's wrinkled face and a grateful Zhuang almost metonymically stand for the relationship between the revolutionary base and the Communist army—that of a self-sacrificing mother and her son. It symbolised the class-based solidarity between the proletariat and the party that represents its interest.

⁶⁶ The exhibition was curated by the Linyi Municipal Party Committee as part of the nation's commemoration event series celebrating the 60th Anniversary of Victory in the Anti-Fascist War in 2005.

But after seeing these photos in various revolutionary sites in Linyi, I was told by my interviewee, Lao Huang, that this Ming was not the real Ming and that soldier Zhuang was not the one actually saved. Not that Hong Sao was a total fabrication. The man who is credited with bringing the story to light, a propaganda cadre, told Huang that everything was true except that the real Hong Sao never wanted to be known. When the soldier started to recover in hospital and news of his fortuitous rescue started to spread, the woman told him to be quiet about the whole thing because she felt really embarrassed and did not want to enrage her husband and thus risk a divorce. Nobody came forward when the CCP tried to identify the real Hong Sao. The event was thrust on Ming Deying because she was mute and could not object, and Zhuang was obliged to submit in the end. This speaks volumes about how women are not only useful to the revolution corporeally but also discursively. The real Hong Sao offered her milk and had to offer her story as well, despite her desire not to publicise it.

Lao Huang's intimate knowledge of the Hong Sao event largely concurs with the official narrative, but diverges in whether Hong Sao has political agency. In his account, Hong Sao is a woman who steps outside the bounds of traditional ethics to rescue a man by feeding him her milk, yet she does not pride herself on this act by embracing the moral legitimacy granted to her by the Party. According to Lao Huang, her extraordinariness lies in her ability to let compassion overrule the traditional ethical implications her actions might have. It is not about her obligations to a fellow member of the same class. This revision of the story stubbornly puts Hong Sao's struggle into the realm of moral economy, but this is not a class struggle. It lays bare the constructedness of the official narrative about Hong Sao. The fact that Ming was mute is a metaphor of the voiceless female subject in the nationalist discourse. Spivak's (1988) famous article, "Can the subaltern speak," most clearly identifies the historically muted subject of subaltern women in the Third World. Working mostly within a postcolonial deconstructive framework, Spivak stresses that women lost their subjectivity/voice under the dual suppression of patriarchy and imperialism, both during and after the national independence struggle in India and other colonial countries. Here we see a double process of speaking for women: in the revolutionary era, Hong Sao's act was usurped by the state ideological apparatus to promote class consciousness; and today,

cultural elites are trying to speak for women again in the humanist discourse. The subaltern women still cannot speak for themselves.

Lao Huang's depiction of the iconic Hong Sao departs from class-based socialist discourse, but fits in the essentialised "good local" narrative promoted by TV drama. In voluntarily searching for an alternative account of the Hong Sao story and offering it eagerly as the "truer" version, one can indeed detect a desire to transcend the revolutionary-bound Old Base identity. What drives the locals to stipulate a cultural essence of the locality? Here I suggest that one of the main reasons for this emerging recourse to traditional order and cultural essence is the contradictory state discourses on history (Dirlik, 1996, p. 192). In three decades since the reform, state historiography is "schizoid": On the one hand, it avows revolutionary history for its own legitimacy; while on the other had, it promotes a counterdiscourse to repudiate the Maoist past in order to justify the neoliberal economic order pursued in the new era (Dirlik, 1996, p. 192). This contradiction, in the context of Linyi, has created an anxiety in local identity. In the era of global capitalism, the revolutionary legacy is no longer valued as a national achievement. In fact, in the newly configured national imagination, revolutionary base areas are associated with backwardness (for their undeveloped peasant economy and poverty) and political excess (for being the places where social organisation based on class was first developed). The anxiety to bridge or obviate the rift between the image of the developed coastal areas and the backward interior is strong at both the official and individual levels in Linyi.

Another reason is that the commercialisation and mockery of revolutionary culture has been so prevalent that self-righteous Party propaganda risks "malfunctioning," or even inviting ridicule. This ideological detour, made in the face of other competing discourses, is nowhere clearer than in the making of the Hong Sao sculpture for the Yimeng Exhibition. Initially, the Linyi Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department commissioned the Academy of Fine Arts of Qinghua University to design and make a sculpture of Hong Sao as part of the project. However, after researching the history of the event, Professor Hong Mai'en, the exhibition's chief designer, at first refused to include the sculpture section in the exhibition. Hong told the Propaganda Department that he doubted whether the story was true, and was worried that it would

be received with cynicism. First, Hong was disturbed by a fake photo event during the Sino-Vietnamese war in the late 1970s. Dubbed “Hong Sao in a new era,” the photo, depicting a woman feeding a PLA soldier with breast milk, was widely published by the media, and only later disclosed as a fake. The subjects of the photo were merely posing. The story caused widespread disgust about the manipulative nature of propaganda. Second, artist Liu Gang created a series of artistic works in which he mocked various revolutionary characters, including Hong Sao. In his parodic installation, a man in PLA uniform was shown sucking on the breast of a woman dressed up in the traditional attire of the Yimeng Mountainous Area. Because of these competing discourses at work, Professor Hong Mai’en expressed his concern over technical difficulties in rendering such a subject as Hong Sao. In this case, the revolutionary body, which was sublime and asexual and accepted as a popular icon, had now to weather the irreverent public imagination.

Professor Hong was eventually convinced of the legitimacy of Hong Sao’s sacrificial spirit, after exploring revolutionary heritage in the region and encountering locals personally. Interestingly, his belief was not only premised on historical “facts” but also on a naturalised local identity—that the “good, old Linyi locals” were capable of such good, selfless conduct because of their cultural heritage. Lao Li,⁶⁷ a local official in charge of the exhibition, told me that Hong Sao’s devotion should be understood as maternal: “It’s the natural feeling a *lao sao* (the local term for older, married women) would have for an adolescent soldier her son’s age. Some soldiers were as young as 12 or 13. Surely one could understand motherly love.” To contain the possible indecent associations with the sexual body of Hong Sao, the “negotiated” version of the sculpture depicts an older woman baring her breasts, looking ahead, while a teenage boy lies unconscious on her lap. In a way, this sculpture is representative of the awkward position of the revolutionary heritage in post-Mao China. Hong Sao’s body, once claimed by the Party, is now turned into a contested site where contradictory discursive forces operate.

⁶⁷ Lao Li is an official working in the East China Revolutionary Martyr Cemetery, which houses the Yimeng Spirit show permanently in its exhibition hall. I interviewed Lao Li in his office on January 4, 2009.

Li's comment represents a deliberate attempt to de-ideologise the historical narrative in Linyi. The local peasants were claimed to have revolutionary consciousness in the Maoist era. Global capitalism as the grand narrative of today does not favour strong political identities or rural solidarity. Regions associated with revolution are now often stereotyped in negative terms as economically backward and weak. The fragmentation of socialist ideology has led to rejection, parody, and cynicism towards the revolutionary legacy. Since regional development is ultimately measured in terms of economic success, there is a need from both the local government above and the local people below to ground the regional historical heritage in a way that is more compatible with the capitalist ethos. Operating under such institutional restraints, the official chooses to re-narrate the ideological positioning within the rhetoric of local cultural essence.

The discursive strategy to reinterpret and repress local history and to connect it with the new capitalist spirit is no less appealing to local people, who themselves share the contradictory desire to both hold and escape the revolutionary past. This complex feeling is evinced, for example, in a local photographer's foreword to his album:

I've been a photographer and engaged in publicity work in Linyi for all these years. I found that lots of people don't really know much about our hometown, although we believe it enjoys high publicity. Sometimes people don't know where Linyi is unless we mention the Yimeng Old Base. No wonder they are biased toward us. (Liang, 2005, p. 1)

The photographer aired his frustration that people in other areas insist on privileging the historical dimensions of Linyi—its revolutionary past. To him, this leads to a misinformed view of the area as backward and poor. A landscape photographer, he also mentioned that there was too much stress on the mountainous features of the landscape in the past, but not enough attention was given to its water. The mountainous, once ideal for guerrilla war, are now perceived as obstacles to economic development, contributing to Linyi's backwardness.

The recuperation of the traditional and the local are thus attempts to get around difficulties and contradictions in replacing the old revolutionary identity with a new, neoliberal one in this new situation. It affirms the revolutionary past but remains ambivalent towards the class subject position prescribed by the state. As the socialist revolution is regarded as a disruption to the ultimate success of capitalism in China (Anagnost, 1997), deploying concepts of local cultural essence instead of class agency to narrate the local past constitutes a conscious reaction to China's market orientation. This strategy rescues the locale from being pinned down as the socialist memory of the nation—the “other” of the developed, coastal area. Furthermore, this construction of regional character proves useful in explaining the material success of Linyi and in staking out new subjectivities that are compatible with the market economic order, yet still embodying socialist legacies. Seen along these lines, the *laoqu* identity stands for trustworthiness, self-sacrifice, and commitment and competitiveness, which have collectively taken the place of class as the central organising ideology for model citizenry.

Forging new subjective positions

To transmogrify the revolutionary past by invoking traditional ethics or an essential local identity is useful not only for smoothing out the disjuncture created by the outmoding of class discourse, but also for integrating Linyi into the market economy. In other words, a political brand name such as “Hong Sao” has become a commercial brand. In the same manner that the image of Shajiabang is packaged for the market, as discussed in Chapter 5, the revolutionary heritage in Linyi has become commodified and is now sold in the marketplace in the form of products, images, and experiences. This grand project to appropriate revolutionary history includes a master plan to promote Linyi as a destination for a “Red cultural tour,” to package commercial products with revolutionary imagery, and to churn out artistic works depicting local revolutionary events (Xue, 2011).

In each of these marketing schemes, the local cultural identity features prominently as the new “selling point.” In September 2007, Linyi municipality undertook a packaged tour promotion that was built on the theme of “beautiful landscape, loving people” (*lingxiu shanshui, qinqing Yimeng*). What is significant is that not only did this image-

making campaign hinge on the historical significance of Linyi as a revolutionary hub, but also, and more importantly, it tried to emphasise Linyi's "local traits"—the recuperated traditions and the people who embodied these traditions. Here, cultural memory was being selectively used as cultural capital. The target audience—tourists who might spend their weekend in Linyi—were not being enticed by the bitterness of the war or the poverty of the region, but by the simplicity of its people. Meanwhile, Linyi municipality has initiated twenty-four projects capitalising on local Red culture, of which ten have been completed. These include Yimeng Old Base brand wine, Hong Sao wine, and the organic food product series named after revolutionary sites such as Jiujianpeng and Lijiazhai. These names, their publicity originally gained from Mao-era propaganda but carried over to the present in public memory, bring positive connotations to the product; they are metonyms of the local people, who are known for their trustworthiness, their single-minded devotion and commitment, and their honesty—something of a rarity in a profit-driven market society. Jing Wang astutely describes the moment in early 1992 when the state started to embrace this culture of symbolic capital, and she argues that economic, political, and cultural capital are now mutually convertible (J.Wang, 2001a). Hong Sao wine serves as a textbook example of her argument.

Furthermore, this construction of regional character proves useful in explaining the material success of Linyi and in creating new subjectivities, compatible with the market economic order yet still embodying socialist legacies. Seen along these lines, the *laoqu* identity stands for trustworthiness, self-sacrifice, and commitment and competitiveness, which have taken the place of class as the central organising ideology for model citizenry. These characteristics are used to explain the locals' achievement in "catching up" with the economically advanced regions; they are thus qualities necessary for the new age. Meanwhile, the self-invented cultural traits, although embracing the individual successes, still avow the authority of the Party and socialist ideals of self-sacrifice and collectivism, demonstrating a kind of market ethos with socialist characteristics.

This kind of *laoqu* moral leadership is showcased in the image of Wang Tingjiang,⁶⁸ a villager in Linyi Luozhuang District, who donated his six million yuan (\$1 million) chinaware factory to the village, causing quite a stir in the local area. Jiang Zemin, the president at the time, met Wang during his visit to Linyi in 1992. Wang said to Jiang: “I owe my achievement to the Communist Party. I’m grateful for the Party’s kindness. Therefore, I must pay the debt of gratitude.” Wang is hailed as personifying the Yimeng Spirit, exemplified in his endeavour to “return favour,” yet another mythic trait of the Yimeng people. It serves as an example of how the remote cultural myth is garnered for the needs of the Party in subject making.

Another case in point is the Yimeng Spirit Exhibition. Leaders of the local propaganda department found the original conception of the exhibition unsatisfactory because it focused only on the revolutionary past. The Yimeng Spirit must extend to the present, manifesting itself in transforming Linyi in an entirely different type of context, that of the market. In the end, the curators had to include the last section, “The Great Practice of the Reform Era,” to showcase a transformed Linyi and the new urbanised landscape resulting from economic progress. Similar advice was also given to scriptwriters of the *Yimeng* television drama serial. They were told the story needed to reflect the “earth-shattering changes” that have taken place since the reform era (X. M. Li, 2008a).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed some new developments in the production and consumption of revolutionary culture by using the city of Linyi as case study. Linyi is a locale wrought with conflicting identities, as a direct result of the government’s contradictory attitudes towards its revolutionary past. On the one hand, as a revolutionary base for the CCP, it figures prominently as a symbol of the Party’s

⁶⁸ Wang Tingjiang is a farmer-turned-entrepreneur in Shenquan Village, Luozhuang District of Linyi. He started his business in the late 1970s, transporting porcelain ware for sale with a hand-drawn cart. With the first profits he received from retailing and transportation, Wang set up a porcelain ware factory in 1986. By 1989, his assets were worth six million yuan. Wang, however, donated all his wealth to the village. The same year he was elected unanimously as the Director of the Village Committee and Party Secretary. He then led the villagers out of abject poverty through a series of entrepreneurial endeavours. Wang was the ideal moral model for the CCP in the current social environment; his success legitimises Deng’s neoliberal motto that “development is a hard truth,” while his willingness to share his wealth overcomes the side-effects of disparity brought by the market and confirms the socialist egalitarian ideal of “get wealthy together” (*gongtong zhifu*). He thus embodies the compatibility of neoliberal strategy and socialist legacy.

solidarity with the oppressed in the discourse of class struggle. On the other hand, this legacy has been rendered obsolete in the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism. Linyi's revolutionary past still features prominently both in the Party's official governance and in everyday life. As long as the centralised political structure is still in place, the need to legitimise the homogenous narrative of official history and myth of the founding of the nation remains strong and perhaps more acute because market forces have threatened to encroach on the old fabric of everyday life and social relations that came into being in the socialist era. However, revolutionary culture needs to be reconfigured to appeal to the populace in a society that has already embraced the market, commodities, and consumerism. This reconfiguration takes place not only consciously at the official level, but also as an everyday practice, when individuals attempt to make sense of the changes and negotiate their subjectivity in a drastically changing society.

Television dramas such as *The Red Sun* and *Yimeng* play an indispensable role in recreating Linyi's past for the present. In Linyi, as in other part of China, TV drama has been central to national cultural life. Just like John Corner's (2001) account of TV's function in the British context, Chinese television, in particular TV drama, should also be seen as both a "shaper" and a "reflector" of national culture: it is a reflector in the sense that it selectively draws elements from the wider culture to achieve contemporary resonance; it is a shaper in the sense that the materials it distributes often set the terms for non-televisual cultural practice (Corner, 2001, pp. 262-263). The contemporary fascination with TV drama, its capacity to provide both edification and pleasure, is the most important motive behind the production of *The Red Sun* and *Yimeng*. It is worth noting that before the TV drama *Yimeng* was proposed, the Linyi Municipal Department of Publicity (LMDP) had already successfully instigated a series of other cultural activities to promote the Yimeng Spirit, including the Yimeng Spirit Exhibition in 2005, the musical extravaganza *Meng Mountain and Yi River* in May 2009, and the feature film *Yimeng Sisters* in July 2009. However, the cultural product that caught the imagination of audiences, critics, and award ceremonies was the TV drama *Yimeng*. LMDP officials have made it clear that the conception of a TV drama about the revolutionary base was inspired by the ratings champion, *Path-finding to the Northeast* [*Chuang guandong*], a 52-episode TV drama serial chronicling an ordinary Shandong

family's adventure in migrating to Northeast China. Based on the biggest internal migration in Chinese modern history, *Path-finding* attracts audience attention by constructing distinctive characters based on Shandong people (X. M. Li, 2008a). *Yimeng* is an attempt to repeat the success of *Path-finding* in constructing an essentialised locality by resorting to an everyday medium.

In reading the Red Classics TV drama adaptations, the interpretative community in Linyi have demonstrated a desire to transgress the revolutionary bound locality. To transcend the class discourse around which the Red Classics formerly revolved, the locals now resort to humanism and other traditional ethics to recast a socialist subject originally distinguished by its solidarity with the Party. Traditional ethics were both expelled (W. B. Fang, 2004) and recalled into service (Y. Meng, 1993) in socialist realism when the discourse of class struggle reigned. In revolutionary discourse, the discourse of class is used to transform and displace familial ethics and kinship bonds. The idea of class in Marxist terms is based on relations of production, not on blood; love and hatred are based on class differences. On the other hand, the class struggle, being such a new concept, was expressed in terms of familial ethics to appeal to the masses. Locals have embraced the recuperated traditions and invented local traits as new ideologies and subject positions. This recourse to locality and cultural essence is useful in imposing cohesion on the memory of the past. The official historiography reflected in the major works of the Red Classics, which reduced history to the CCP's struggle, leaves gaps for individuals to fill when they seek to reconcile the conflicts between national narrative and local memory on a daily basis. This is especially true in Linyi, where revolutionary sites and cultural products are everywhere and readily accessible. A natural cultural essence and locality seem to be adopted by the locals as a strategic response to overcome this predicament. TV drama serials, such as *The Red Sun* and *Yimeng*, both constitute and are constitutive of this discursive strategy. This effort to suture the disjunctions between "socialist legacy and neoliberal strategies" (Zhao, 2008b) seems to be prevalent at both the production and consumption level.

This new discourse is also enabling, in that it opens up new subject positions for the individuals living in the locality. The reframing of the revolutionary legacy through a cultural myth marks a shift from a class-based subject position to one of productive capitalist labour. It offers a subjectivity that locals readily take on in order to be seen as

fitting in with this new ideology of economic development. TV dramas such as *Yimeng* thus construct a discursive space that satisfies the conflicting demands of local identity, global capitalism, and socialist citizenship.

Conclusion

In the years since I first started this project, various attempts to appropriate the Red Classics genre continue to draw enormous attention from scholars. In a highly publicised recent event, the Red Classics acquired a meta-textual importance in the international arena. On the occasion of President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States, a talented young Chinese pianist, Lang Lang, was invited to play in the welcome ceremony hosted by President Obama. He chose to play "My Motherland," the theme song from *Shangganling* [Shangganling, 1956], a Red Classics movie eulogising the Chinese army's fight against the United States and its allies during the Korean War (1950-1953). In his Chinese blog, Lang Lang expressed his pride in playing this piece in the White House for President Hu. Many Chinese celebrated Lang Lang's courage, viewing it as a "slap in the face" to the Americans. But later, when accused of possible anti-American sentiment, Lang Lang denied outright in his English blog any knowledge of the ideological content of this song and said he just loved its tune. Amid heated debate, the incident nearly pushed the two countries to the brink of diplomatic warfare. It again raised the issue of the relevance of revolutionary culture in contemporary China.

This incident reveals that the Red Classics, products of ideological confrontation during the Cold War, still retain their symbolic value in the global capitalist order, complicated further by the rise of China as a world superpower. In this sense, the appropriation of the Red Classics through television and other media is an ongoing process, always tied up with concurrent developments and debates over broadcasting, media and cultural policies, and the intersection of politics and ideology.

In China, the revolutionary legacy remains a sensitive matter, an important card to draw in the continuing ideological struggle between the Left and the Right within the Party and in the public arena. In the last two years, Chongqing Satellite Television, a channel of an important municipality in western China, started a series of re-runs of the Red Classics films and thus has earned the reputation as a "red station." The driving force

behind the channel's branding is the mayor of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, a major contender within the country's next generation of leaders. Since 2008, Bo has led a series of campaigns to promote the revolutionary culture, including singing revolutionary songs, telling revolutionary stories, and more recently, encouraging officials to send messages, such as quotations from Chairman Mao, to mobile phone users. There are vigorous public debates surrounding what kind of political message Bo is sending.

Grounding media studies in social transformation

The above two stories are important because they demonstrate that the Red Classics still matter. They are not outdated products of the Cold War, but rather works that convey collective anxiety and aspirations and continue to have contemporary relevance. The dominance of neoliberalism in China and internationally has been so hegemonic that any attempt to revisit the value of the Red Classics risks being seen as nostalgic for a totalitarian past. As such, research carried out on the contemporary production and consumption of the Red Classics is constrained by this theoretical framework. The TV adaptations were generally seen as driven purely by the commercial motive to tap into a cultural resource, but the connections between the rewriting of the Red Classics and the general discourse of neoliberalism have not been analysed. To fill in this gap, I have opted to link TV drama's interpretation of the Red Classics to the particular contemporary values on which the adaptations are based. A society's major movements are usually closely tied with popular culture. This is especially true with a genre such as the Red Classics, which was produced and disseminated to perform important cultural work. From its inception, the genre has had a political and pedagogical function, and it always operates within and embodies the structure of power at large. In over half a century, these cultural texts have changed from ideological tools, produced with rather rigid prescriptions to deliver political messages, to an element of commercial narrow-casting for a nostalgic audience, or a hybrid light entertainment form catering to populist nationalist sentiment, or even the target of political parody or satire. The implication of connecting these various manifestations in this way is that it brings in sharp relief the underpinning power relations and vested interests in the process of reinscribing national icons such as the Red Classics.

Through examining the cultural process in which key markers of subjectivity, such as class and gender, were changed in the TV adaptations, this study has linked the critique

of capitalist marketisation with the general social transformation of Chinese society. The forces lying behind the changed subjectivities in the TV adaptations are taken as not only economical motivated (propelled by the pursuit for profit), but also deeply political and ideological. For example, the fact that TV adaptations have sought to restore the ambiguity in both revolutionary heroes and their enemies is linked with how class and class struggle are occluded, sidelined, and substituted in current Chinese politics and ideology. The rejection of class discourse derives from the urgent need to cover up the reality of a deeply fractured and stratified society that has emerged in China since the onslaught of neoliberalism. The transgressive refashioning of the past has in effect transcended the official/popular dichotomy. It no longer reiterates the old official discourse, because the discourse of class and class struggle has been discarded as ultra-leftist ideology and excluded from the consumerist discourse that has inundated cultural media, both official and commercial. Its populist appeal lies in its ability to manoeuvre the tension between the official and the unofficial, to transgress in certain areas and to a certain extent, so that the TV adaptation is taken in innovative directions on the surface, while at the same time maintaining a benign political message. Its logic is not that of a carnivalesque celebration of the inversion of the established order, but a product of many determinations, particularly the politics of consumption. It does not constitute a means of resisting dominance through transgression, but at times contributes to the further displacement and fragmentation of revolutionary culture.

Similarly, my analysis has suggested that the boundaries of femininity and sexuality set out for revolutionary women in the Red Classics have been significantly redrawn due to the backlash against state feminism, the commodification of women's body, and the recovery of sexuality in the reform era. All of these changes favour a depoliticised neoliberal subjectivity within a traditional moral boundary. Likewise, people living in the heart of the revolutionary base seek a new identity because the neoliberal symbolic order valorises attributes that are favourable to economic development and tourism. In addition, the old class-based subjectivity has grown outmoded and put residents of the old revolutionary base areas at a disadvantage.

However, my analysis indicates clearly that these changes do not represent a radical, one-dimensional disjuncture. The grand narratives, the perfect heroes, and the idealistic

projects represented by the Red Classics were not all of a sudden transformed into commodities. Indeed, the process has been protracted and non-linear, full of contradictions, tensions, ambiguities, and difficulties, just like the painful social changes it embodies. In addition, the driving forces of this process, the Party-state and the market, have complex relationships. At times, they contest and challenge each other, but at other times they accommodate each other, co-opt each other, and form coalitions. A critical understanding of the interplay of power must delve into the cultural politics at the micro level, foregrounding the subtle strategies of desublimation and disintegration of the former dominant ideology and related institutions. By explicating media's role in the decline and dissipation of socialist morals, this study has made a link between media and social processes. The focus in this thesis on the analytical categories of class, gender, and locality is quite deliberate.⁶⁹

Complicating the state-market dichotomy

Chinese society has experienced the most profound changes since the late 1980s. These changes are most acutely manifested in people's outlook, mentality, feelings, and the way they relate to the outside world. As scholar Chen Xiaoming observes, the "utopian faith and idealistic passion were replaced by practical interest and the fanatical social mobilisation was dissolved by individual opportunism" (X. Chen, 2001b, p. 44). Many cultural critics prophesied the end of history, society, collectivism, and all the grand narratives that had been part of ordinary Chinese life. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see the revolutionary nostalgia as a cultural fad, some kind of postmodern appropriation of popular cultural icons and images. However, I share Liu Kang's view that revolutionary culture is more than just "residual and irrelevant." Instead it is "deeply ingrained in the Chinese cultural imaginary and constitutes a significant dimension in the contradiction-ridden cultural arenas" (2004, p. 19), particularly in terms of the aesthetic forms, structures, and institutions responsible for its production and dissemination. The mass culture in the socialist era has also profoundly shaped the values, meanings, and lived experiences of the population growing up during the Maoist era. Throughout the political and social struggles, the Red Classics, the core component of the revolutionary legacy, have had their fair share of ups and downs. After being

⁶⁹ However, these categories do not represent the only means to organise the study of change in contemporary China, nor are these categories mutually exclusive. Nationalism and ethnicity, for example, could well be used to examine these social transformations.

given an initial “cold shoulder” in the years immediately after the Cultural Revolution, a strong nostalgic sentiment for the revolutionary past emerged. The Maoist era was remembered as a kind of “Golden Age” for its allegedly clean government, strong leadership, and egalitarian pursuits. However, the resurgence of revolutionary icons, symbols, and texts occurred when commercialisation and consumerism were rampant in Chinese society. As a result, these elements took on a new face. The variegated forms the Red Classics take nowadays defy any demarcation between commercial and propagandist. The boundaries between official, commercial, and popular culture have been transgressed in unprecedented ways. The crossover between revolutionary culture and commercial and unofficial culture has produced a cultural “anomaly” (Barmé 1999, p. 99) that, paradoxically, is becoming the norm.

In her study of Chinese television drama, Zhong Xueping (2010) has identified four major forces that future studies on mainstream/popular culture need to take into consideration: the officials, the media, the industry and the academy. Each of the three analytical chapters in this thesis has engaged with these forces in different ways. The thesis describes the creative use of red culture by the state media, intellectual elite, and ordinary consumers and demonstrates the complexity of boundary negotiations and transgressions. The examples examined are in no way formulaic, however useful they are in mapping for us the complex power struggles inherent in appropriating the red. If anything, they should remind us how ideological struggle pervades every aspect of cultural production and consumption in the contemporary era. The criss-crossing of boundaries between official and non-official culture, between consumerism and socialist nostalgia, expresses precisely the chaos and ambiguities of the cultural landscape.

By exploring the transformation of the Red Classics genre, I argue that the interplay between the original texts and the more recent copies (the TV drama versions) of the Red Classics resonates with the interplay of social forces between state power and market rationality in contemporary China. The relationship between the originals and the TV adaptations is that of transgression. The changes in this genre result from and are largely in step with China’s transition from socialism to neoliberalism. This process is not linear, but full of negotiations at various stages of development. Neither can it be simplified as the market’s successful takeover of political control. In this process, the

boundary between what is correct, acceptable, and legitimate, which was set in the socialist era, has shifted and is gradually but dramatically being reworked, refined, renegotiated, and re-managed.

In choosing to study media transformation through a genre such as the Red Classics, this study answers the call by media and communication scholars to re-engage in researching China's revolutionary history and its lasting influence on contemporary Chinese society (Zhao, 2009b). While focusing on the triumph of transnational capitalism and neoliberal governance, scholars are yet to fully recognise that China's march towards modernity is unique and influenced by China's recent past. For instance, the CCP has gained its legitimacy through revolution, and this historical legacy not only "continues to shape the political economic and discursive transformations of the Chinese communication system, but also continues to define the parameters of control and resistance in Chinese communication politics" (Zhao, 2009b, p. 176). This historical legacy is fundamental in understanding the state's handling of the TV adaptations of the Red Classics, themselves part of this legacy. As I argued in the Introduction, the whole process of rewriting the Red Classics is premised on the CCP's contradictory approach to the socialist legacy: On the one hand, the national icons in the Red Classics are symbols of the Party's solidarity with the oppressed, and thus cannot be denied outright; on the other hand, some of the key aspects of this legacy have been rendered irrelevant by the Party's capitalist pursuits. The genre of the Red Classics provides a unique angle from which to examine the changing nature of the CCP's rule and allows us to challenge the binary distinction between the state and the market.

Looking into the future

Finally, studying changes in contemporary China is a difficult task. In the course of this project, the Red Classics adaptation phenomenon has been continually evolving: new situations are emerging and boundaries are forming and reforming all the time. For example, before 2004, during the initial stage of the adaptation craze, the TV adaptations were focused primarily on ratings. This purely commercial approach was widely criticised. After SARFT issued two notices to rein in the production of the genre, the production units were more tactful and restrained in their treatment of sensitive subjects, such as the hero's personal life or emotional entanglement. At the same time,

the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao government has consolidated its rule since 2005. In an attempt to counter the negative consequences of reform caused by rampant commercialisation, the Hu-Wen government has promoted the concept of building a “harmonious society.” Part of their corrective measures also includes bringing the revolutionary legacy back in line and reinstating its symbolic value. Concurrent with the promotion of red culture in the public sphere, the TV adaptations have come under more stringent control, not least because peasants, workers, and soldiers, once the masters of society in the Red Classics, are being marginalised in society, but still retain their relevance as the “power base of the socialist state” (Zhao, 2009b, p. 185). In this context, how to reconstruct their subjectivity in the TV adaptations is a significant issue.

As pointed out above, the Red Classics adaptations rely on popular nostalgia toward the socialist past. This nostalgia is often triggered by nothing but the changed reality of society—the loss of socialist morals, the loss of collective purpose and aspirations, and the spiraling social conflicts and polarisation in a society that once boasted of egalitarianism. In the wake of the bursting neoliberal bubble in 2008, the search for a new model to replace the Washington Consensus⁷⁰ has gained new urgency. China’s socialist experiment, as an alternative model to capitalist modernity (Lin, 2006), is increasingly being recognised. There is no denying that the revolutionary legacy is an important part of China’s experience on the road to modernity. Under such circumstances, it is perhaps not enough to just conclude that the boundaries of the Red classics have been rewritten and the genre has been turned into a hybrid. Besides cultural critique that looks at the alternative meanings of images, the next step is possibly to ask whether the Red Classics could serve as the potential site for protest and agency. A more nuanced, ethnographic study of how this genre is consumed would shed light on whether the subjectivity of the subaltern social classes articulated by the Red Classics still appeals to workers and peasants and could potentially grant them power and legitimacy. Another interesting phenomenon to examine is the newly created revolutionary genre on TV, which not only captures a big proportion of the broadcasting schedule but also secures high ratings.

⁷⁰ The Washington Consensus generally refers to the orientation towards neoliberalism from around 1980 to 2008. The policies associated with the Washington Consensus include market liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity (Zhao, 2008a, p. 5).

Looking into the future, a recent chance encountering proves to be a powerful indication of the potent force that the revolutionary legacy maintains and the new references it subsumes in the reform era. During a conference in China in 2009, I took a day off to visit a small village, Youlong, on the border of Jiangxi and Anhui Provinces. Situated in a serene, lush-green mountainous part of central China, it has been an agrarian, tea-growing place for hundreds of years. The tracks of the “Ancient Tea-horse Road” that once linked southwest China and Tibet and India are still visible. Like many of its counterparts all over China, the village is now left to the elderly, the women, and the children, as most young people have gone to the cities to work as migrant workers. As I walked past one wooden house with its door open, I saw a big poster of Mao Zedong on the wall. I stopped to speak with the old man sitting in the dark front hall of the house watching me and other visitors walk past: “Grandpa, you have Chairman Mao’s picture up on the wall. Why?” He answered in a serious tone: “Chairman Mao is good! He cares about ordinary folks like us.” I did not stop to have a chat with the old man. But I could not help wondering what kinds of stories he would have to tell. At his age, he would have lived his life seeing his identity come full circle: first as a subaltern, then as master of society, and now again denigrated to a subaltern. Perhaps he may not be able to articulate this process clearly, but he certainly feels it. I have no doubt that in the fleeting moment when he hung the picture up on the wall, he had some grudge against what was going on in China. This example indicates to me that the Red Classics, as one of the main components of the socialist legacy, will continue to be a site for protest and agency. Research into the Red Classics is far from being completed. How this genre is remembered and interpreted and for what purposes remain crucial both for scholars and for the future history of the Chinese state.

Filmography

Original texts of the Red Classics:

Little Soldier Zhang Ga [*Xiaobing Zhang Ga*] 小兵张嘎

Synopsis: The film is set against the background of the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945). Zhang Ga, an orphaned boy who lives with his grandmother in northern China, witnesses her murder by the Japanese army after she covers for a Communist platoon leader's evacuation. To seek revenge for his grandmother, Zhang Ga joins the Communist guerrillas and becomes a brave and resourceful scout.

Main characters: Zhang Ga

Production information: A novel by Xu Guangyao published in 1958. Adapted into film in 1963 by Beijing Film Studio. Director: Cui Wei; Ouyang Hongying.

The Making of a Hero [*Gangtie shi zenyang liangchengde*] 钢铁是怎样炼成的

Synopsis: Published as an autobiographical novel penned by Nicholas Ostravski, *The Making of a Hero* is an autobiographical account of a legendary young communist, Pavel Korchagin, from his childhood in a working-class family to his role in the Russian Civil War (1918-1920) and in the subsequent reconstruction of the Soviet Union after the First World War. Despite suffering from rheumatism, typhoid fever, and becoming blind and bedridden later in life, he manages to dictate his life story.

Main characters: Pavel Korchagin; Tonya Tumanova

Production information: The novel by Nicholas Ostravski was published in 1936. The film version of *The Making of a Hero* was released in 1942 in the USSR. The film *Pavel Korchagin* was released in 1956 in the USSR. *The Making of a Hero* TV series, consisting of 6 episodes, was broadcast in 1975 in the USSR.

The Red Crag [*Hong yan*] 红岩

Synopsis: Sister Jiang is the Communist heroine in *The Red Crag*. Her husband, Peng Yongwu, is assigned by the CCP to Chongqing to lead the underground struggle against the Nationalists. Peng is captured and killed by the Nationalists after his true identity is revealed. After his death, Sister Jiang takes over as the head of the underground agency.

In the course of spying, Jiang and a few other Communist agents are arrested by the Nationalist secret police after being betrayed by a fellow agent. Tortured in jail, she and the other inmates refuse to give in to the enemy and die martyrs.

Main characters: Jiang Jie; Xu Yunfeng; Pu Zhigao

Production information: First published as a novel in 1961. In 1965, Beijing Film Studio released a film adaptation with the title *Eternity in Flames* [*Liehuo zhong yongsheng*].

The Red Lantern [*Hongdeng ji*] 红灯记

Synopsis: The story is set in the 1930s, as the Japanese occupy Northeast China. Communist underground agent Li Yuhe is a railway signaller who uses a red lantern to communicate with fellow Communists. He is given a mission to deliver a set of cipher codes to the Communist guerrilla detachment in the region. However, Li is betrayed and subsequently captured by the Japanese. Despite extreme pressure from the Japanese, Li refuses to surrender and finally dies. Li's adopted daughter, Tiemei, carries on with his father's mission and safely passes the code to the guerrillas.

Main characters: Li Yuhe; Li Tiemei; Jiushan

Production information: The story originally appeared as a film, *The Revolution Has Successors* [*Geming ziyou houlairen*], produced by the Northeast Changchun Film Studio. The film was later adapted into an opera by Harbin Peking Opera Troupe. In 1962, Shanghai Opera Company created a Shanghai Opera (*Huju*) version. It was transformed into *Yangbanxi* around 1966 and then filmed in 1968.

The Red Sun [*Hong ri*] 红日

Synopsis: Considered one of the core works of the Red Classics, *The Red Sun* was originally a novel published in 1959 and combined history with fiction. The story focuses on the three major battles—Lianshui, Laiwu, and Menglianggu—fought in 1947 between CCP and Nationalist armies in Shandong Province. The novel gives a breathtaking account of the last campaign in Menglianggu, an isolated, rugged mountain area in Linyi. The Communist army is pitted against the Nationalist's elite 74th division, led by military talent Zhang Lingfu. The CCP achieved a cliff-hanging victory, and the outcome of the campaign prefigured the eventual downfall of the Nationalists. The novel, while largely maintaining the “class characteristics” of the characters, gives more

rounded personas to its major characters. The Nationalist army commander Zhang Lingfu is depicted as relatively capable, astute, and resourceful, despite his “evil” class nature.

Main characters: Shen Zhexin; Zhang Lingfu

Production information: The novel by Wu Qiang was published in 1957 by China Youth Publishing House. In 1963, Tang Xiaodan directed a popular film version released by Tianma Film Studio.

The Red Detachment of Women [*Hongse Niangzijun*] 红色娘子军

Synopsis: The story focuses on Wu Qionghua, the daughter of a poor peasant who suffers as a slave girl at the hands of Nan Batian, a landlord despot in a village on south China’s Hainan Island. Hong Changqing, the Communist Party representative, rescues her from a water-filled dungeon where Nan Batian has her incarcerated. Wu then joins the revolutionary corps to seek personal revenge, and under the influence and education of Hong Changqing, she gradually becomes a conscientious revolutionary fighter.

Main characters: Wu Qionghua; Hong Changqing; Nanbatian

Production information: The film version, directed by Xie Jin, was released in 1961 by Tianma Film Studio. It was adapted into a ballet by the Central Opera and Ballet Company in 1964, and, in 1972, it was adapted into Peking Opera and filmed by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army August First Film Studio.

Shajiabang [*Shajiabang*] 沙家浜

Synopsis: The story unfolds during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) in a prosperous country town of Shajiabang in Jiangsu Province along the Yangtze River. Shajiabang is a battleground for competing guerrilla forces, including local bandits, the New Fourth Army led by the Communists, the Nationalists, and the Japanese. New Fourth Army commander Guo Jianguang and seventeen other sick and wounded soldiers are recuperating in the town from their wounds. When the Japanese become aware of the Communist presence, they move to mop up all the New Fourth Army soldiers in the area. Guo and his men are forced to take refuge in the nearby reed marshes. In the meantime, the Nationalist Party, the supposed ally of Communists, sends its spy, Diao Deyi, to recruit local armed forces and keep watch on the movements of the wounded Communist soldiers. Sister A Qing (the leading female role) is the leader of the

underground communist cell and runs a teahouse as a cover for a liaison station. With incredible intelligence and steadfastness, Sister A Qing artfully dismantles the different factions within the enemy camp. With the information and help provided by Sister A Qing, Guo and his troops rout the enemy in a single battle.

Main characters: Communist undercover agent Sister A Qing; New Fourth Army commander Guo Jianguang; Nationalist spy Diao Deyi; local bandit leader Hu Chuankui

Production information: The story first appeared in 1960 as Shanghai Opera (*Huju*) with the title *Emerald Water and Red Flags* [*Bishui hongqi*]. In 1963, it was revised and staged as *Sparks amid the Reeds* [*Ludang huozhong*]. The Peking Opera version, *Shajiabang*, was presented in 1965.

Struggles in the Old City [*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*] 野火春风斗古城

Synopsis: In 1943, Communist army officer Yang Xiaodong is assigned by the CCP to lead the anti-Japanese struggle in an ancient city in Hebei Province in northern China. Central to his mission is to persuade Guan Jingtao, the commander of the puppet army troops stationed in the city, to stage an uprising. With the help of Jinhuan and Yinhuan, twin sisters who are CCP underground agents, the Communist guerrillas capture Guan in an ambush but then release him, hoping he will convince his army to defect. Due to the betrayal of an insider, the Japanese capture both Jinhuan and Yang. Trying to protect Guan, Jinhuan dies. This makes a great impact on Guan's view of the CCP. After the Communist guerrillas rescue Yang, he and Yihuan successfully win Guan over and together they work out the plan for his army to revolt and cross over to their side.

Main characters: Yang Xiaodong; Jinhuan; Yinhuan; Guan Jingtao

Production information: The novel by Li Yinru was published in 1958. In 1963, the film version, directed by Yan Jizhou, was released by Chinese People's Liberation Army August First Film Studio.

Tracks in the Snowy Mountains [*Lin hai xue yuan*] 林海雪原

Synopsis: The story focuses on the eradication of defeated Nationalist bandits who have joined professional brigands and landlord tyrants in Northeast China's Manchuria in 1946. The bandits are trying to locate a large amount of crude opium left by the Japanese army to finance their offensives against the Communists. Meanwhile, the

Communists, the bandits, and the gangs are searching for a map marked with liaison stations of Kuomintang spies. The hero, Yang Zirong, is modelled on the life experiences of a real person who slips into the bandits' stronghold and wins the trust of the enemy leader. Based on the intelligence Yang provides, the Communist army is able to eliminate the bandit den.

Main characters: Yang Zirong; Shao Jianbo; Zuo Shandiao (Vulture)

Production information: The novel by Qu Bo was first published in 1957. In 1960, the novel was adapted into film by the Chinese People's Liberation Army August First Film Studio and directed by Liu Peiran. The Peking Opera version, titled *Taking the Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, was presented by Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe in 1958.

TV drama adaptations

Little Soldier Zhang Ga [*Xiaobing Zhang Ga*] 小兵张嘎

Production information: Produced by Nanjing Film Studio. Director: Xu Geng. Premiered on CCTV Channel 8 on July 27, 2004. 20 episodes.

The Making of a Hero [*Gangtie shi zenyang liangchengde*] 钢铁是怎样炼成的

Production information: Co-produced by the Shenzhen Municipal Publicity Department, the Film and Television Department of CCTV, and China International Television Corporation. Director: Han Gang. Premiered on CCTV's Channel 1 on February 28, 2000. 20 episodes.

The Red Detachment of Women [*Hongse Niangzijun*] 红色娘子军

Production information: Produced by Asian Union Film & Entertainment. Director: Yuan Jun. Premiered on South Film and Television Channel on June 15, 2005. 21 episodes.

The Red Sun [*Hong ri*] 红日

Production information: Produced by Zhejiang Great Wall Film and Television Company. Director: Su Zhou. Premiered on Zhejiang Satellite TV on February 2, 2009. 35 episodes.

Shajiabang [*Shajiabang*] 沙家浜

Production information: Co-produced by Beijing Zhushi United Media Co. Ltd. and Beijing Huancong Film and Television Co. Ltd. Director: Shen Xinghao. Premiered on Qilu Satellite TV on April 27, 2006. 30 episodes.

Tracks in the Snowy Mountain [*Lin hai xue yuan*] 林海雪原

Production information: Co-produced by Vanke Film and Television Co. Ltd., the Shenzhen Municipal Publicity Department (SMPD), and the Theatrical Company of the General Political Department (TCGPD). Director: Li Wenqi. Premiered on Beijing Television's Channel 2 on March 4, 2004. 30 episodes.

Main television drama productions analysed in the thesis

Days of Burning Passion [*Jiqing ranshao de suiyue*] 激情燃烧的岁月

Synopsis: The 22-episode TV series is a sustained dramatic representation of the troubled marital life and relationship between a military commander and his wife. Division commander Shi Guangrong falls in love at first sight with Chu Qin, a dancer from an art troupe, much younger in age. Pressured by various parties, including her parents, Chu marries Shi reluctantly. This causes great resentment for Xie Feng, Chu's ex-lover. Xie is subsequently killed in a military action in the Korean War. Chu blames Xie's death on Shi and herself. Chu's guilt torments her. Besides, huge differences exist between Chu and Shi in age, education, family background, upbringing, temperament, and experience. In addition, Shi's patriarchal behaviour towards children means the decades of married life together are never peaceful. However, over the years the two gradually recognise the love they have for each other.

Main characters: Shi Guangrong; Chu Qin

Production information: The series is based on a novelette by Shi Zhongshan published in 1998. Produced by Xi'an Chang'an Film and Television Production Co. Ltd. Director: Kang Honglei. Premiered on Beijing Television's Channel 4 on October 8, 2001. 22 episodes.

Sky of History [*Lishi de tiankong*] 历史的天空

Synopsis: The story focuses on two military commanders, Big-tooth Jiang and Chen Mohan, and spans from 1937 to the contemporary period. The epic begins with the two young men killing a few Japanese soldiers to save a young girl from being raped. Having no other choice, the two flee the scene to join the army. Chen, having exposure to revolutionary theory in his schooling, wants to join the Communist New Fourth Route Army, while the lackadaisical Jiang wants to join the Nationalist Army so he can enjoy a soldier's pay and provisions. However, by a series of odd coincidences, Jiang runs into the Communists while Chen meets the Nationalists. Attracted by a female Communist soldier, Dongfang Wenyong, and impressed by the charisma of the Communist leader Yang Tinghui, Jiang stays on in the Communist troupe. Chen, on the other hand, is drawn into the whirlpool of power struggles within the Nationalist army branches. The two troupes have a brief period of cooperation but remain chief enemies the rest of the time. During the Civil War, Chen gets disgusted at the corruption within the Nationalist army and decides to revolt and cross over to the Communists. Jiang's love Dongfang dies in a battle in support of Chen's troop. Jiang believes Chen is responsible for her death and harbours a personal grudge against him. During the Korean War, Jiang is again forced to fight side by side with Chen. The two are persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and are banished to the same farm to work. Their misunderstandings are gradually resolved. After the Cultural Revolution, the two commit themselves to building the modern army.

Main characters: Big-tooth Jiang; Chen Mohan

Production information: The series is based on a novel with the same title by Xu Guixiang, published in 2000. Produced by Shanghai Tianshi Cultural & Media Co. Ltd. Director: Gao Xixi. Premiered on Kunming Television on August 1, 2004. 32 episodes.

Sword Show [*Liang jian*] 亮剑

Synopsis: The story starts in the Anti-Japanese War in the 1930s, when Li Yunlong loses his command because of his misconduct and is working in a quilt-making factory for the Communist army. He is summoned back to take charge of the demoralised Communist regiment after a humiliating defeat by a Japanese force in north China's Shanxi Province. With superb military strategy, Li leads the regiment to victory in a

major battle against the Japanese. Later, he and the Nationalist commander Chu Yufei capture an important town heavily defended by the Japanese. The two become friends. In the winter of 1941, Li's guard is killed by bandits incorporated into the Communist-led Eighth Route Army. Li defies orders and kills the bandits responsible in revenge. As a result, he is again relieved of his command of the regiment.

In the subsequent Civil War, Li meets his Nationalist counterpart Chu in the massive Huaihai Campaign. He is nearly killed in a battle and is taken to hospital to recuperate. He meets a nurse named Tianyu and marries her. After the end of the war, Li becomes bored with the humdrum, everyday life. His request to fight in the Korean War is rejected and instead he is ordered to further his study in a military college. Li is bitterly disappointed at first, but soon finds the challenge rewarding.

Main characters: Li Yunlong; Chu Yunfei,

Production information: The story was first published in 2005 as a novel by Du Liang. Produced by Hairun Film and Television Production Co. Ltd. Director: Zhang Qian and Chen Jian. Premiered on CCTV Channel 1 on September 12, 2005. 36 episodes.

Yearnings [*Ke wang*] 渴望

Synopsis: *Yearnings* is a 50-episode TV series produced after the June 4th Incident in 1989, when tensions over public culture were high. Set in Beijing from the 1960s to the 1980s, the melodramatic story revolves around the lives of two families who are brought together by serendipity. Huifang, a kind-hearted girl from a worker's family, marries Husheng, a college student whose family is under political persecution. She adopts an abandoned child, Xiaofang, who is later paralysed by an accident. After the Cultural Revolution, Husheng's intellectual family resumes their privileged status and Husheng leaves Huifang for his college sweetheart. Huifang is determined to raise the disabled Xiaofang by herself when it is discovered that Xiaofang was the lost child of Husheng's sister. Medical treatment cures Xiaofang but Huifang is crippled by a staged traffic accident. Acclaimed by some critics as China's first soap opera, *Yearnings* is often recognised as the first TV drama to turn attention away from the public realm to private lives and personal feelings and experiences.

Main characters: Liu Huifang; Wang Huisheng; Wang Yaru; Song Dacheng

Production information: The serial was produced by Beijing Television Art Centre. Director: Lu Xiaowei. Premiered on CCTV's Channel 1 on December 6, 1990. 50 episodes.

Yimeng [*Yi meng*] 沂蒙

Synopsis: The 42-episode TV drama serial *Yimeng* was commissioned by the Linyi Propaganda Department to narrate the locals' contribution to the founding of the nation in the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1946-1949). The story revolves around the vicissitudes of one family in a small village called Mamuchi during a period full of chaos. The protagonist is an old woman, Yu Baozhen, the head of the family in everything but name. Strong and able, she manages the big house of three sons and daughters, two daughters-in-law, and a rather weak and good-for-nothing husband. In 1938, the Japanese army makes incursions into the Yimeng Mountainous Area. In one of the looting expeditions to the village, several Japanese soldiers murder Yu's youngest daughter after raping her. The enraged villagers kill one Japanese soldier in retaliation. In the subsequent series of battles with the Japanese, Yu's eldest son, Li Jichang, second son, Li Jishan, and daughter, Li Yue, all join the Communist Eighth Route Army. Yu's husband dies in a mission to deliver supplies to the Communist army. Yu's eldest son and his wife are captured by Li Jizhou, the village chief's son who is now a Nationalist army commander, and handed over to the Japanese. Refusing to surrender, the couple die martyrs. However, despite the personal feud, Yu saves Li Jizhou from death when the Japanese ambush his army. The villagers are united as never before.

Meanwhile, Yu and her two daughters-in-law, Xintian and Xi'ai, organise a Women's Resistance Association in the village to supply provisions and assist the Communist army. In one of the battles, Xintian finds a Communist soldier in a hideout unconscious and dying of dehydration and feeds the soldier her own milk to save his life. When the Communist army are retreating from the revolutionary base area, Yu and her two daughters-in-law provide foster care to a dozen children of Communist army officers. When the Japanese soldiers take villagers at gunpoint, threatening to shoot them if they do not reveal the whereabouts of the Communist children, Xi'ai offers her own adopted son in place of the Communist cadre's son and sees him taken away by the Japanese.

In the Civil War (1946-1949), Yu and the villagers continue to give all they have to the Communist troops, offering their last handful of grain and last piece of cloth to the army and sending their last male to the battlefield. After many decades pass, a general comes back to the village to find his saviour. Someone suggests Yu, but after a close look, the general finds she is not the one. He looks for several days, but cannot locate the woman who saved him. However, he meets many locals who supported and sacrificed for the Communist Army. Many of the wartime legends in the local area were dramatised and personified by the members of the fictitious family.

Main characters: Yu Baozhen; Li Zhonghou; Li Jishan; Li Jichang; Li Yue; Xintian; Xin'ai

Production information: The serial was produced by Shandong Film and Television Group and the Linyi Municipal Department of Publicity. Director: Guan Hu. Premiered on CCTV's Channel 8 on November 27, 2009. 42 episodes.

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