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Television as a Life-Advice Tutorial in Modern Chinese Society:

Historical TV Dramas on-air and Political Discourses off-air

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Abstract

Television possesses the power to frame people's lives and activities on a scale that no other form of media has ever been able to enjoy. This paper explores the various political missions of the Chinese television broadcast, and examines the modern type of propaganda publicized and disseminated throughout contemporary TV formats.

Since its first introduction to China, the domestic digital box has become one of most efficient media for the spread of a new form of propaganda, thus helping the Party in its attempts to construct people's identities. Given the findings that the media have always acted as mouthpieces of the government, this research points out that some particular television formats have been widely employed as thought work distributors. This thesis focuses primarily on TV serial dramas, which, despite often appearing to be the most innocuous and entertaining of broadcasts, are instead practically brimming with political discourses. More specifically, the main aim of this study is to explore the social and political contexts that have given rise to Dynasty dramas, which have emerged as the most conspicuous genre present on prime time TV thus far.

Which sorts of political messages are concealed behind historical dramas? And for which reasons is the Party so committed to promulgating these types of ideas? Do these messages serve to legitimize the Party's mandates?

*This research departs from the well-researched trend of exploring governmental media use in broad terms, turning its attention instead to television in particular. This essay widely examines the use of television in modern society, and epitomizes it as the new platform upon which the Party is able to construct or mold "politically educated" and "spiritually civilized" identities. Ultimately, the active engagement of dramas with cultural and political issues is proved, through the analysis of two of the most renowned contemporary Dynasty series "*Yongzheng Dynasty*" and "*The Great Han Emperor Wu*"-.*

Introduction

One of the most important factors in the development of collective identity continues to be communication (Tubella, 2005). Noticeably, the concept of identity is characterized by a continuous 'work in progress', where communication conspicuously functions as the cement that assembles and hardens identities in this "building process". Nowadays the practice of self-formation -as singular individual or as collectivities- becomes increasingly dependent on access to mediated forms of communication (Tubella, 2005). In addition, much research has pointed out the big impact of media on viewers' attitudes and thoughts, and has argued how television, in particular, has played an enormous role in the construction of identity thus far. However, one main unresolved issue remains: Who are the directors working offstage, helping construct communities and identities?

This thesis principally focuses on the Chinese media system, and how it has been broadly subject to tight government control up to present days (Xi, 2007). As the first chapter of this research will argue, the Chinese media have always been identified as the mouthpiece of the Party, thus playing a very active role in the construction of a social and political reality consistent with the communist ideology.

However, this study mainly aims at examining one of the 'modern tools' employed by the Chinese government to instruct its community: television. Basically, the socio-political changes, mostly deriving from the economic reforms that occurred in the last decades of the 20th century, forced the Party to look for an innovative and more persuasive communicative tool for the spread of political propaganda, a novel mouth through which to dispense its messages. As the second chapter shall demonstrate, then, television proved to be up to this new task, meeting with the expectations of the government. Effectively, starting from the late 1980s, TV sets started to be used as new dispensers of 'life-advice tutorials' and 'soft formats', ready to be employed by the people in their ordinary lives.

Relatively little scholarly and journalistic attention has been focused on the mutual relationship between China's transformation and entertainment media -especially television drama-. Therefore, this thesis seeks to take some specific TV entertaining broadcasts into account and examine the many latent political messages, used by the government to guide audiences into particular ways of being or thinking.

As this research discusses, until the late 1980s, the mere purpose of television broadcastings was to covertly disseminate the dominant ideologies, in order to assure the Party's control over public opinion. Conversely, over the past decades –or more specifically after the Tiananmen massacre- audiences' taste has become fundamental in the production of TV broadcasts, and spectators are understood "to have a preference for programmes that are attuned to their sense of who they are" (Moran and Aveyard, 2014: 20). Therefore, "'soft' television formats [have] started to proliferate"

(Lewis et al., 2012: 548). In effect, up to the present time, nationally televised storytelling has typified the most popular media form, and the most influential way in which the nation has told stories about itself and its place in the world. TV drama has gained remarkable importance in prime time broadcasting, to the extent that it is still identified as the 'gatherer' of the highest share of ratings and the largest amount of television advertising revenue.

This thesis points out that the development of this specific TV format has depended on the wider socio-economic issues which continuously vex the modern individual. In fact, the increasing skepticism towards the government, coupled with the spectators' nostalgia for the past, are progressively raising the audiences' desire for a positive depiction of society. Therefore, wise historical heroes, clean government, economic prosperity and social stability –mostly typified during some of the imperial periods-, have met the biggest demand from the public in the TV drama market.

At this stage, since TV dramas provide a significant and productive site for investigating contemporary politics and culture, this research has chosen to analyse the ways in which the government directs Dynasty dramas from the backstage. Basically, this paper attempts to identify the reasons for which some of the historical occurrences recounted in Dynasty dramas are colliding with real-life past events. For whose pleasure have these incidences been altered? Has the government imposed any filter on what the entertainment dramas should remember about the past? And if so, for what exact purpose?

Television in modern China –and, more generally, around the world- functions as a packing box from which people gather tools, and use them to assemble their identities. Nevertheless, who is entrusted with writing the user manuals? And what are these instructions characterized by? These types of questions will lay the groundwork to further my research.

The first chapter of this research provides a general framework of the 'progresses' made in the political use of media, and in the evolution of "thought work" practices. As we shall see, the moral doctrines which the government has always tried to promulgate for "the sake of development" have progressively changed thus far.

The second part of this thesis, hence, explores how television has become the most accessible and important medium through which the public has been notably moulded (Zhu, 2008). Given the assumptions that TV has increasingly undertaken a politico-pedagogical task, and that it has been transformed into a new kind of "instructor", we shall notice how it is currently used as the new platform for the construction of more 'spiritually developed' identities.

Ultimately, throughout the last chapter, an examination of some historical dramas is carried out. Indeed, this section scrolls two of the most renowned Dynasty dramas, *Yongzheng Dynasty* (雍正皇帝) and *The Great Han Emperor Wu* (汉武大帝), both of which continue to find a place in prime time. However, the analysis mainly focuses on the *Hanwu* drama, that stands as the most recent and blatant

case of ‘politically-charged-format’. These historical dramas are used to classify the various political discourses that the Party is attempting to promulgate.

As shall become clear throughout this analysis, the government has shifted its plans to a sort of ‘television work’, in order to perpetuate its ‘thought work mandate’, and deliver its messages directly to the audiences’ domestic spheres.

Chapter I

Politics Effects on Media or Media Effects on Politics?

The mass media have exercised and continue exercising worldwide a huge influence on political and social issues worldwide. Over a long span of time, they have been able, on one hand, to function both as political instruments in nation building processes and as 'promoters' or 'legitimizers' of the mandate of a regime. Whilst, on the other hand, they have functioned as mere guardians of government performances (Xi, 2003). Many scholars[1] have argued and proven that no form of media is completely free of government control. Therefore, media can be considered as windows through which to 'spy' on the politics of a nation. Along with the educational system, national media are among "the most powerful instruments states have for the construction of their national identity" (Darr, 1993: 1). It is through the consumption of media that a particular conception of national identity can be built and preserved.

Due to the limitations of this paper, this research focuses solely on the Chinese case and on how its national identity has been greatly shaped through the controlled media. This chapter attempts to map out the dynamics of 'thought work', which the Chinese 'Ministry of Truth'[2] has exerted through the media thus far. Despite a number of studies having examined the media's role in Chinese politics, only a few have provided an updated or detailed analysis of the dynamics of media from the pre-opening-up policy period (改革开放) onwards.

By inquiring into the roles of the mass media in China, the main purpose of this chapter is to analyse the dynamics and changes in the relationship between politics and media from the early 20th century up to the present. In particular, this section shall unpack how, before 1978 (the pre-economic reform era), *politics* impacted upon media, *vis-à-vis* during the post-reform period, when *media* also impacted and affected politics. After giving a definition of the meaning of thought work in China, this chapter shall additionally focus on the role of the media as tools for controlling citizens.

I.ii **The Media Are Watching You!**

In official Chinese discourse the term 'thought work' (思想工作), along with the term 'propaganda' (宣传), is used to refer more broadly to all efforts in structuring the symbolic environment. "If a state can control society's communications processes", Daniel C. Lynch argued, "it can structure the symbolic

[1] See Brady A.M. (2008), Cao Q. (2011), Darr B. (1993), Fong V. L. (2007), Latham K. (2007), Lynch D.C. (1999), Oakes T. (2012), He Q. (2008), Teets J.C. (2013), Tubella I. (2005), Xi C. (2003), Zhang X. (2008) and many others.

[2] The Chinese Ministry of Propaganda is now popularly called the 'Ministry of Truth', in homage to George Orwell's "1984". It is quite an obvious form of mockery through which individuals express their skepticism towards the Party (Hao, 2013).

environment in such a way that citizens will be more likely to accept that state's political order as legitimate" (1999: 2). Actually, states that are able to seize control over communication flows are indeed more successful in directing society toward desired ends.

A variety of states have engaged in thought work practices, although the label of 'Orwellian state'[3] has often been used to describe the Chinese case. Nonetheless, are today's Chinese leaders capable of relying on thought work to manage their rapidly changing society? "'Propaganda states' overwhelm their citizens –in the media, in the workplace, and even in the home- with official information and interpretations of reality" (Lynch, 1999: 3). This description completely portrays the one depicted by George Orwell in his book "1984". However, are there Chinese "big brothers watching"[4] or controlling their citizens for real? Or are "The aims of the Party to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought" (Orwell, 1949: 137)?

According to a recent article, due to the rise of the internet and the increasingly easy access to information, there is a growing participation of Chinese individuals in public discussions that are progressively weakening the 'propaganda-thought work machine' (Hao, 2013). Nowadays, the state is no longer immune to mockery, and a rising number of individuals have grown skeptical about government propaganda. Does this mean that the Chinese version of the Orwellian Big Brother is -all of sudden- turning into a permissive elderly father? Or even that the well-known Chinese authoritarian state is showing signs of sinking? Not exactly.

"There is no way to stop the Party's information control" (Hao, 2013), and moreover, "Those genuinely believing in a complete liberalization of thought work are 'as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns'" (Lynch, 1999: 15). As this chapter will show, subsequent to the crackdown that took place in 1989, the Chinese thought control engine has de facto 'risen like a phoenix from the ashes'. In effect, it seems that, over the last decades, the mechanisms of control have just metamorphosed into more graceful and refined models, thus never completely disappearing. "The state increasingly uses more sophisticated and indirect methods to create positive and negative incentives, encouraging groups to work toward meeting state goals" (Teets, 2013: 16).

However, in order to demonstrate the shifts that have occurred, it is necessary to systematically move through the complicated gears that characterize this huge 'thought work machine'. When did the Chinese government actually start to control its society through the media? What were the basic principles pushing the leaders to construct people's identities? And lastly, in which ways is the Party (CCP) currently promoting the new perfect model of citizen?

[3] The connotation of "Orwellian state" describes the societal condition as identified by George Orwell, as being destructive to the welfare of a free society. Often the circumstances depicted in his novels -particularly "1984"- include brutal system of controls by means of propaganda, surveillance and manipulation of the past.

[4] Referring to George Orwell's sentence: "Big Brother is watching you" (Orwell, 1949: 4).

I.iii **An Overview of the Chinese "Thought Work" System**

Given the potentialities of the educational system as a possible governmental operator, education has traditionally been identified as the major thought work propagator. In 1911-1912, for instance, when the Tongmenghui Alliance (同盟会) overthrew the Qing Dynasty, subsequently forming the nucleus of the Kuomintang (国民党, Nationalist Party of China)-, the government tried to engage scholars and students directly, hence attempting to use cultural and educational exchange to promote anti-imperialist and revolutionary movements. "With the collapse of the dynasty in 1911, [in fact] China entered a period of full-blown public-sphere praetorianism, during which the radical New Culture Movement (新文化运动) and May Fourth Movement (五四运动) flourished for two decades" (Lynch, 1999: 19).

Subsequently, with the entrance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), media in general started to be employed as the real spreader of thought work practices, in order to achieve the goal of revolution.[5] Starting from 1921, when the CCP was established, and during its struggles for survival and supremacy, the Party launched various campaigns to gain more followers. During these campaigns, the CCP used every conceivable form of persuasion, including newspapers, magazines, wall posters, radio and public bulletin boards to consolidate its control and to build support (Xi, 2003; Brady, 2008).

Notably, during the Mao era, the ideology of the CCP was closely akin to that of the Soviet Union, and therefore, a system of thought training and indoctrination became necessary. "This was the origin of the anti-Japanese military and political 'university' of Yan'an, where education and ideology went hand in hand" (Lawrance, 1998: 6). Maintaining and developing a 'correct ideological consciousness', thus, became the main concern of the CCP, which led to the clarification of the media as the 'servants' of propaganda, and to the transformation of journalists into authentic propagandists[6].

As Lynch pointed out (1999), it was originally Mao Zedong (毛泽东) who used thought work to 'rectify' Communist Party cadres whom he considered to be vacillating in their loyalty or straying from ideological orthodoxy. At the time, the practice was designed to effect a 'fundamental transformation' in the way cadres viewed the world, and to correct cadre deviance. Once the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, then, thought work was used to manage not only the cadre corps but society as a whole. The mass media, ergo, became the preeminent shaper of public opinion, -just as in many other countries- (De Burgh, 2000).

From mid-1949, following the victory of the CCP in the Chinese Civil War, various new bodies were set up to oversee personnel in the State culture and education system, paralleling the Party propaganda system[7] (Brady, 2008). By the 1950s, the media became fully absorbed by the state, which

[5] Under the influence of Leninism, Chinese media have been held under the control of the Party since the establishment of the CCP (1921) up to the present.
[6] Mao made these arguments clear during "The Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts (延安文艺座谈会)" in May 1942.
[7] This expansion of the Ministry of Propaganda was made in order to restrict all alternative sources of information and to manage cultural artefacts (Brady, 2008).

now increasingly used nationalized newspapers, radio and television to arouse patriotism and toughen the fighting will of the people. The Party's aim shifted to a "thought reform of the Chinese people in all aspects of life" (Brady, 2008: 37), and for this reason, society's members were compelled to take part in political campaigns, without being allowed to generate or express independent thoughts and opinions. The Party was responsible for explaining and popularizing revised ideas and then "making the masses embrace those ideas as their own, stand up for them, and translate them into action" (Frederik Yu, 1964. In Lynch,1999:24).

Despite the brief period of relative leniency during the Hundred Flowers Movement (百花运动; 1956-1957), when citizens were encouraged to voice their opinions and air their grievances on national issues, in the second half of 1957, those Hundred Flowers withered away. Throughout the subsequent Anti-Rightist movement (反右运动; 1957-1959), thousands of intellectuals were in fact imprisoned or sent to labour camps, accused of harbouring "counterrevolutionary" thoughts or "disturbing the social order" (扰乱社会治安).

Later on, with the appearance of Mao's last wife Jiang Qing on the political stage in 1962, this continuous process of 'communication compression' intensified.[8] The government allowed only certain special interest books and newspapers to exist, -even though among these, the works of Mao were still ubiquitous-. The media were then forced to improve the image of the Party and to arouse the enthusiasm of the masses by responding positively to the policies and guidelines of both the Party and the government (Xi, 2003).[9]

However, after the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命; 1966-1976), the death of Mao (1976) and the fall of the Gang of Four (四人帮), the use of the media was redefined. Effectively, starting from the late 1970s, due to the economic reforms adopted by the Party under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), the close ties between the media and thought work were loosened. After 1978, "Deng sought to move China away from the rigidly restrictive communication patterns of the Mao era, but always without abandoning the notion that the Party-state should retain ultimate control over thought work" (Lynch, 1999: 26-27). Deng actually believed that control could be best achieved by relaxing restrictions, and at the same time he always made clear the Party-state's intentions to maintain tight control.

> *As 'engineers of the soul', our ideological workers should [..] use their articles, literary works, lectures, speeches and performances to educate people, teaching them to assess the past correctly, to understand the present, and to have unshakeable faith in socialism and in leadership by the Party.* (Deng 1987. In Lynch, 1999: 28)

[8] "Cultural production was similarly monotonous; music, theatre, and film were dominated by the eight model operas authorized by Jiang Qing" (Brady, 2008: 38). "When the culture of the [Cultural Revolution period] is mentioned, the eight initial revolutionary model theatrical works (革命样八戏) come immediately to mind [..] as models not solely for a new Chinese culture, but also for a new Chinese person" (Clark, 2010: 167-171).

[9] The lack of information in the Chinese media about political, social or cultural problems such as the failure of the Great Leap Forward (1958), the resulting widespread famine (1960-1962) and many others is obvious. Nowadays, there are still many cases of 'hidden news' in China, for instance the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2002 was barely reported by the Chinese media.

'Spiritual pollution' (精神污染)[10] had to be wiped out, and this could only happen with the application of the principle of 'seeking truth from facts and emancipating the minds'[11] and with the affirmation of the Four Cardinal Principles (四项基本原则)[12].

However, during the 1980s the state finally implemented a genuine deconcentration of decision-making authority over thought work. Under the changes brought about in the reform era, in effect, China experienced an unprecedented economic boom that partially distracted the government's attention from reining in the media. Before 1978, for instance, Chinese news programmes famously eschewed negative stories[13] and favoured those intended to inspire or awe the masses; conversely, already in 1979, journalists were allowed to criticize aspects of official behaviour,[14] while the media in general were encouraged to become more realistic (De Burgh, 2000). Both paid advertisements[15] and an increased coverage of entertainment as well as social news started being included. Additionally, "establishing the 'rule of law' [characterized] a crucial precursor to fundamental political change, improving human rights, and earning China the respect of other countries [..] became as important as market reform" (Zhu, 2008: 29). This also resulted in the endorsement of the rights of the citizens of the PRC to "enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration" and "to engage in scientific research, literary and artistic creation and other cultural pursuits" (Constitution of The PRC 1982, Article 35, 47). For the sake of economic growth, the state essentially started to encourage and assist creative endeavours conducive to the people's interests made by citizens, and it also granted primary authority over some of the media to the provincial administrations. Economic prosperity brought about by the reforms contributed to the diversity and autonomy of the media, and finally made possible the expansion of advanced technology.

Nonetheless, the huge exposure to a broad range of information enabled people to become critical readers rather than passive receivers. As a consequence, individuals became increasingly skeptical about authority and almost reluctant to accept government propaganda. They actually acknowledged that, while the economy of the nation was developing towards greater prosperity, changes in the political system had lagged far behind (Xi, 2003). In general, political reforms did not keep pace with economic reforms, and the resulting dissatisfaction led to the Tiananmen Square

[10] "Socialist spiritual civilization" (社会主义精神文明) was first proposed in September 1979, and considered the best weapon in combating the "Three Confidences Crisis" of 'belief in the Party, belief in socialism, and trust of cadres'. On the other hand, the core of "Spiritual pollution" consisted in disseminating all varieties of corrupt and decadent ideologies of the bourgeoisie, and in disseminating sentiments of distrust towards the socialist-communist cause and the Party leadership.

[11] In Deng Xiaoping's speech at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee (十一届三中全会, Beijing 18-22 December 1978) marked the beginning of the "Reform and Opening-Up" policy.

[12] The Four Cardinal Principles were introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. They are: "the principle of upholding the socialist path"; "the principle of upholding the people's democratic dictatorship"; "the principle of upholding the leadership of the Communist Party of China", and "the principle of upholding Mao Zedong thought and Marxism-Leninism". These principles constituted a sign of reasserting control to appease the conservatives in the CCP.

[13] Negative news was basically reserved for information about foreign countries.

[14] Particularly those who still supported the radicals and opposed the reform policies. In other words, the 'relative liberty' served a political purpose.

[15] Advertising provided a revenue source for most media units.

protests of 1989[16]. This mass movement was the result of many economic, political and ideological problems which eventually pushed for real individual freedom and the release of the media from the Party's grip. The people, arguably inspired and influenced by Western concepts, started calling for "The Goddess of Democracy" (自由女神) to be the new ruler of their country. These protests and their negative consequences led the government to conclude that the ambitions of economic growth had most certainly diverted attention away from the thought control process.

"Francis Fukuyama, at the end of the Cold War, concluded that the evolution of human societies through different forms of government had culminated in modern liberal democracy, but China seems to have convinced the world that it will be an exception, at least in the foreseeable future" (in Zhang, 2008: 3). Essentially, after the 1989 event, a new sophisticated authoritarianism was required, and the use of more indirect tools for social control was called for. New types of control mechanisms thus started being adopted by the state, a sort of "differentiated control" (Teets, 2013:16) which was characterized by an increasing use of refined and opaque methods to encourage groups to work toward meeting state goals. Therefore, even though important changes were occurring within society, the government was still controlling the masses, but in a more undisclosed way.

I.iv **Remodelling Authority in the Post-1989 Era**

"Only in 1989 did a wide spectrum of China's leaders finally realize with a shock the extent to which lost control over thought work could threaten the regime's integrity" (Lynch, 1999: 176). As Deng Xiaoping himself admitted in 1989, "The problem was the fact that we [the leaders] didn't uphold them [the masses] thoroughly, lacking in education and political thought work" (Deng, 1989. In Lynch, 1999: 176). From the citizens' point of view, the 1989 crackdown had at its roots all the social ills "created by the rapid marketization and decentralization policies of the reform era: extreme inequality, rampant corruption, the dismantling of public health and education", including nepotism and bribery (Zhu, 2008: 26). According to the Party, however, it indicated that liberalization in the propaganda sector had gone too far, and it hence forced the CCP to re-establish a different type of control over ideology and propaganda system (Brady, 2008).

For this reason, during the period 1989-1991, the Party leaders actively took steps to prevent the importation of external television signals which could negatively influence the masses[17]. In addition, the content of public discourse started including new key themes such as 'selective anti-foreignism', Economic Liberalism[18] and Nationalism (Brady, 2008). "'Selective anti-foreignism' took

[16] Commonly called the "June Fourth Incident (六四事件)" in Chinese, or more accurately as "89 Democracy Movement (八九民运)".
[17] In May 1990 the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT) and others jointly issued an 'order' (命令) that banned the use of dish antennas to receive any signals other than those originating within China (Lynch, 1999).
[18] Economic Liberalism meant greater press freedom as far as reporting economy-related news was concerned (Brady, 2008).

the form of explicit critiques of the system of mass persuasion, and censorship of foreign information that could compromise the country's image" (Brady, 2008: 95). "Think positive", a mechanism based on ensuring that there be "no bad news during holiday periods or sensitive dates", and refraining from "promoting the views of the enemy", characterized the new norms and objectives selected by the Ministry of Propaganda (Brady, 2008: 95-98).

These attempts to regain control show how the leaders have never completely stopped controlling individuals' mind-sets, and how their ways of doing so had simply been modified. However, once the government recognized the mistakes made before 1989, how did the Party solve the contradiction between "maintaining control over thought work and making, at the same time, the transition to a market economy" (Lynch, 1999: 178) ?

In December 1993, the *Ming Pao*[19] newspaper reported, "Top CCP leaders [..] agreed that while building the market economic structure, they must never relax efforts in propaganda work, but new management methods must be adopted to tighten control" (Fang Yuan. In Lynch,1999: 179). Essentially, all manner of cultural products, such as television programs, films, articles, and so on had to please the tastes of the market, whilst also ensuring that the spread of cultural garbage was prohibited. Arguably, China's leaders had never officially replaced Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought with a purely economically-orientated ideology, but behaviourally they had in fact started to emphasize a material civilization over spiritual civilization (Lynch, 1999).

In effect, with the entrance of money-driven values, resulting from the economic reforms period, society has undergone an ethical shift from collective-oriented values -particularly present throughout the Mao era- to more individual-oriented values (Yan, 2010). "The individual has become a basic social category in China" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010: xiii) and the current growing importance attributed to the self (自己) has derived from the irrepressible process of modernization (现代化). Both the influence of the Western-inspired Pop culture[20] and the foreign mass media have widespread notions of freedom, independence, free love and personal development, thus influencing negatively upon aspirations for a 'socialist spiritual civilization' as desired by the Party. "Some scholars [for instance] argue that television, through its transmission of Western cultural practices, has served to accelerate the decline of traditional Chinese values, thus blurring the line between Chinese and Western values" (Darr, 1993: 5). Furthermore, much research has focused on the enormous impact of globalization as a means of explaining the growing rise of the individual in modern China.

Facing this new 'self-absorbed' individual, how could the government then restore traditional values? How could the image of the ideal Chinese be fostered again? And ultimately, how may it be possible to recapture the 'lost sheep' and transform the modern demonized and corrupted individual?

[19] *Ming Pao* (明报) is a Chinese-language newspaper, first published on 20 May 1959 in Hong Kong.
[20] Popular or Pop culture is characterized by ideas, attitudes, images, and other phenomena identified within mainstream Western culture from the early to mid-20th century and global mainstream trends over the past few decades.

The government obviously required its population to contribute positively to economic growth, but it was simultaneously concerned with inculcating socialist messages and values.

It was this conundrum that gave rise to the concept of quality or *suzhi* (素质) throughout the last decades of the 20th century. The people had to embrace the notion that consumption is good, that they could consume conspicuously by working hard and finally that "cultivating high-*suzhi* labourers was the only way to meet the demands of modernization" (Jiang Zemin, 1997. In Yan, 2003: 495). No need for cultural trash, Chinese leaders were now promoting "a marked improvement in the *quality* of people" (Deng, 1996. In Lynch, 1999: 220, emphasis added). The government required and still requires a new capital and resource which could enable the country to become a competitive player in the global field: "Capital Q" [21] (Yan, 2003).

As Tim Oakes pointed out, "since the early 20th century, 'culture' has emerged as a kind of technology of government, and cultural display has become one of China's central mechanisms in managing the tension between order and disorder, and distinguishing civilization and quality from backwardness and ignorance" (2012: 394). Therefore, improving the *suzhi* of the population has become the new Chinese dream, and the task of teaching its people how to get *suzhi* and how to move away from 'every-man-for-himself-values' (Hansen and Pang, 2010: 39) are increasingly undertaken by the current government.

As pointed out in this chapter, since the media have always helped the government with its politico-pedagogical tasks, the Party has chosen 'media's power' once more to convey its message. Given the importance and efficiency of television as governmental mouthpiece, this research examines this tool as the 'new teacher of society' and, more specifically, it looks at the ways through which the Party is employing TV for propaganda purposes. The next chapters will analyse the growing importance attributed to television as a governmental tool and how the Party has used nationalistic soap operas to 'civilize' its citizens, and reshape them on the basis of traditional values.

[21] "Capital Q: 'Quality' ". Definition borrowed from Andrew Kipnis (2006: 303).

Chapter II

The Soul Never Thinks Without an Image[22]

> *Now Thomas [..] said to the disciples: "Unless I see the nail marks in [Jesus] hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."*
> (The Bible, John 20:24-29)

Many psychological studies have supported the idea that images which pass through the visual system play a functional role in cognition, thus influencing individuals' psychology and behaviour. "The more clearly the image depicts [an] object or event, the better that image should function as a cognitive tool" (Libby and Eiback, 2013: 11). As pointed out in a recent article, "images are capable of moving through the brain quicker than texts, more effectively reaching our emotional centre and having more of an impact" (Thurley-Ratcliff, 2013). It seems that "the most powerful, meaningful and culturally important messages are those which combine words and pictures equally and respectfully" (*Ibid.*). Apparently, this depends on the functional properties of the 'mirror-neuron system', present both in human and some animal species' brain. According to many neurological researchers, this 'mirror-neuron mechanism' appears to play a fundamental role in both action understanding and imitation. "A category of stimuli of great importance for primates, humans in particular, is that formed by actions done by other individuals" (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004: 169). Briefly, these mirror neurons' activities mediate imitation, and transform visual information into knowledge and (re)action. Therefore, what better for exerting powerful influence on people than the transmission of moving images? Or even, what could be more effective than the invention of a domestic 'remote-controlled theatre' to affect people's everyday life?

II.ii **Television Told me That!**

Since its introduction in the 20th century, television and its ability to trump reality have captivated the world in a 'click'. Its moving images and sound effects, the lighting and the 'real events' structured for it have definitely proved crucial in its transformation into "the most prolific and important narrative medium in the world today" (Allen, 1992: 20). Obviously, the modern TV has largely surpassed the monochrome combination of images, hence evolving into a more realistic dispenser of three-dimensional reality.

[22] Quot. Aristotle, *De Anima* – Part VII.

"As the primary cultural storyteller and perhaps the most popular source of family entertainment, television has long been the focus of scholarly research" (Wang, 2010: 391). Until the arrival of the Internet, television had largely enjoyed the epithet of "the medium with the greatest social impact" (Lynch, 1999: 45). Once it entered households in the 1950s, TV became a new and indispensable feature of everyday life, as essential as the washing machine and refrigerator. "[Television] took over people's conversations; it accompanied their daily routines; became an accompaniment to mealtimes and offered them new opportunities to see their political leaders and to receive educational broadcasts" (Latham, 2007: 47-48).

Nonetheless, as one of the most effective and powerful media, television has also been exploited as a 'teaching tool', hence performing an important role in the construction of collective identities worldwide. Its entertaining and innocuous nature has actually opened, to many countries, the possibility of working on people's mind-sets, while promulgating a modernized type of propaganda. Indeed, many governments around the globe have benefited from the "couch potato" (Landsberger, 2009: 332) syndrome, to imbue specific and 'necessary' messages into their citizens' brains.[23] Yet, many countries have also pursued the 'right to know' "only to the extent that it served the government's interests" (Zhu, 2012: 100).

However, a significant number of Western scholars have often listed 'televised propaganda', 'messages control' or 'media censorship' among the typical characteristics of the PRC.[24] Why then has China been frequently identified as the most blatant case, employing TV -or media in general- for propagandistic purposes? Apparently, this depends on how "in China, all the cadres of media industry at different levels are required to be CCP members, no media are allowed to produce a sound different from the central government, most of the front-page news are about political elites [..], and so on and so forth" (Bi, 2012: 37).

In the next paragraphs, television is analysed as the modern mouthpiece of the government and the new tool of the Party, having held a core propaganda function that can be traced back to the pre-economic reform era and continues to be highly influential in the present.

II.iii **A New Medium for a New Age[25]**

"From the late 1950s, as China launched its Great Leap Forward", Zhu Ying writes, "a range of other media, from newspapers to posters to live theatre and film, thrived, as did television, which debuted in

[23] Obviously, the possible 'misinterpretation' of televisual messages by the audiences must not be underestimated. Due to the complex form of televisual sign, in effect, "television 'content' might transform our understanding of audience reception"; therefore, "[B]efore this message can have an 'effect' (..), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must be first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall, 1980: 165-167). The 'structure' of discourses, thus, characterizes a crucial point in the process of reception, even though this does not completely guarantee the 'effectiveness' of TV producers' communication (Hall, 1980).

[24] Even though Western media cannot at all be classified as completely transparent, and China is not actually named among the most censored countries worldwide.

[25] Quot. Landsberger (2009: 333).

1958 when Beijing Television [北京电视台] was founded" (2012: 13). However, the disastrous Great Leap Forward (大跃进, 1958-1961), the subsequent chaos of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966-1976) and the Maoist definition of TV as an additional tool for education and propaganda virtually halted the development of television, thus leaving its progress at a standstill until the 1980s (Latham, 2007; Wen, 2009). The first experimental broadcasts, in effect, merely exploited television's power as an innovative "instrument for constructing the political and cultural discourse to create and reproduce national identity, loyalty and pride" (Zhang, 2008: 6). Television was obviously meant to function as the new 'mechanized carrier pigeon', entering people's houses, and "publicizing and disseminating government and CCP propaganda" (Miao, 2011: 91). Broadcasting was most certainly based on the Soviet model, where all programs were not meant to have any entertaining characteristic, and were monitored by the government to make sure that none exceeded the limits of acceptability or political conformity. "News reporting could not carry any criticisms against the government and the Party" and "topics like natural disasters, accidents, social conflicts, failure of policies, and dissent among the population were simply missing from the TV screen" (Xi, 2007: 169). Evidently, this largely depended on the assumption that "If a TV station reports problems here and there every day, then how could it be labelled as the tongue and the throat of the Party?" (Zhu, 2012: 15).

Conversely, with the arrival of the economic reforms, television turned into "a friend coming from faraway",[26] "and one should be hospitable and welcome to its coming" (Wen, 2009: 82). Effectively, from the late 1970s on, the television set exemplified the "ultimate symbol of modernization and personal prosperity"; moreover, "having no TV simply meant that one had lost out on the opportunities offered by the reforms" (Landsberger, 2009: 332). Therefore, people increasingly believed that "Without television you are blind and deaf. You don't know anything"[27] (Lull, 1991: 154).

Arguably, once the effects of the Open Door policy kicked in, hence exposing "many Chinese to the developments taking place outside the borders" (Landsberger, 2009: 332), television's advance took off. During this period, popular culture came to be partly shaped by foreign television, film, and other media materials (Lull, 1991). Overall, by concentrating on the economy, the government slightly relaxed its standards over thought control, thus giving individuals more opportunities to be exposed to the outside world. Additionally, the Party transformed its approach towards the media, turning the mandate of the television industry into a twofold directive: "making profit and delivering politically safe content" (Lewis et al., 2012: 548). Yet, because of the increasing lack of resources necessary to

[26] Starting from the late 1970s, "having [a] TV set made it possible for a person to know an 'unknown' outside world without going there; rather the outside world would come and visit one through one's TV" (Wen, 2009: 82). An advertisement from 1986, for instance, showed a picture of a television set and a few coloured Chinese ideograms saying: "Don't you feel happy when you friends are visiting you from a faraway place? (有朋自远方亲)" (see Wen, 2009: 83).

[27] Quotation of a 53-year-old male food supply worker in Shanghai.

fund TV's rapid development, all provinces, as well as some cities and counties, began to set up their own television stations.[28]

With the growth of television and the explosion of the number of TV stations,[29] the audiences "became more sophisticated; with more channels, [..] and better reception-, viewers became more active in their engagement with television" (Latham, 2007: 48-49). The more channels spread across television, the more spectators' tastes became selective, critical and judgemental of program quality. For this reason, the TV producers were required to appeal to spectators' tastes by supplying them with a larger quantity of information, "serving the audiences, and being entertaining" (Lynch, 1999: 60). By the mid-1980s, the growing gap between viewers' demand and China's own television production capabilities called for a "television revolution", which eventually saw the proliferation of 'soft' TV formats and a turn to the international market to buy or otherwise acquire more entertaining programming[30] (Lewis et al., 2012; Lynch, 1999).

Nevertheless, under this growing exposure to foreign contents, individuals readily compared their lives to the televised Western images, and the marked cultural contrasts did not go unnoticed. People started making their own interpretations of life out of the Middle Kingdom, and after acknowledging the Party's broken promises and discrepancies, they began to feel frustrated and betrayed (Lull, 1991). "Perhaps more than anything else, the resistance movement [specifically, the Tiananmen protest] in China, with its twin emphases on freedom and democracy, has strongly challenged the tradition of autocratic rule. *It could not have happened without television*" (Lull, 1991: 208; emphasis added). Television, then, signified one of the main causes which influenced citizens' shift in thinking towards the Party.

II.iv **Close to Reality, Close to Life, Close to the Masses[31]**

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, "to many Party elders, the events of April-June 1989 were an indication that liberalization in the propaganda sector had gone too far" (Brady, 2008: 44). Party propagandists recognized the need to both regain control over thought work, and at the same time, modernize the propaganda system. For these reasons, the post-89 leaderships were determined to re-focus on political work, which had now to rely more on persuasion than violence (Brady, 2008).

[28] In essence, the Party allowed television stations and other media to support themselves by selling advertisements and competing in the marketplace. The main reason the mass media organizations were required to finance their operations through commercial activities was that it would reduce the government's burden (Miao, 2011; Shirk, 2011).

[29] By 1972, there were about 30 TV stations in the country, while by the end of 1983 the number had grown to 52; and it had shot up to 422 by the end of 1988 (Latham, 2007: 47). By 1993, 589 TV stations had been officially registered (Nangong, 2011). These were all land-based stations; with the advent of satellite TV stations the numbers have increased further.

[30] TV stations, especially the local ones, were actually positively motivated to acquire externally produced programming because its popularity guaranteed large audiences. Famous foreign TV serials or movies from the United States, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong were big hits across Chinese channels. However, the Party always supervised the influx of these programs in an effort to defend the country from unwanted, 'bourgeois liberalist" or "spiritually polluted" broadcastings. Particularly after 1989, the State Council adopted many decrees which restricted the distribution and the installation of satellite dishes, in order to prevent the reception of external TV signals.

[31] "贴近实际, 贴近生活, 贴近群众," a theory partly proposed by Mao Zedong as early as October 1938, but pronounced officially during the Yan'an Forum (Lu, 2006). PRC former President Hu Jintao reiterated this motto as new policy for the CCP.

Effectively, the "hard on economics, soft on politics" approach did not have many positive effects on thought work practices, and it largely depended on the CCP leadership's resolute focus on economic recovery "while downplaying ideological goals" (Brady, 2009: 435). The Party needed to "manufacture consent for the continuing rule of the governing elite" and this could only be achieved by the establishment of a new format for maintaining political power (Brady, 2009: 437). Therefore, the old slogan "Seize with both hands, both hands must be strong" (两手抓，两手都要硬)[32], was reintroduced as part of the CCP's new line.

After the 1990s, 'guidance of public opinion' became the most common euphemism for agenda control, and the centrepiece of propaganda work (Qian and Bandurski, 2011). The media moved to a more "public relations" type of style that was suited to "ruling by popular consent" (Brady, 2008: 71). "Maintaining close ties with the masses" characterized the Party's new political strength, which saw the government cultivating an innovative way of thinking, namely "from the masses, to the masses" (Zhu, 2012: 15).

As of the 1990s, "Party propaganda is very much celebrating Chineseness"(中国性; Zhu, 2012: 51), and the new preferred term has become "Patriotism" (爱国主义; Brady, 2008). Arguably, the Ministry of Propaganda has mainly issued plans for positive patriotism, and additionally, new strategies to improve infrastructures and capacities for building a more favourable image overseas have also been dominant thus far (Zhang, 2008). All of these government programs have been used to cultivate a 'spiritual civilization' to combat the growing 'money-worshipping-mentality' so prevalent in modern China. However, none of these designs would have succeeded in reality without the assistance of media in general, or television in particular, both working as organs of the Party-state apparatus.

> *Thoughts are abstract, but the media that carry and disseminate thoughts (..) are concrete, they are one part of the social undertakings, and must obviously be managed* (Qiu Shi, 2014).

All television broadcasting comes under the jurisdiction of the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), which "performs the actual daily oversight, and censorship of sensitive content" (Zhu, 2012: 4).[33] Politically sensitive news or "vulgar" contents, thus, cannot be promulgated either through television, or through other possible media. "Comprehensive satellite television channels must firmly establish a Marxist view of news, persist [..] in sticking close to reality, sticking close to life and close to the masses, persist in unity, stability and encouragement, and taking positive propaganda as the core, closely revolving around the larger picture of Party and State work" (SARFT, 2011).

[32] This slogan meant a new legitimacy for economic growth and mass persuasion. It was reiterated by Deng Xiaoping throughout the 1980s, but had been largely neglected under Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang (Brady, 2008).
[33] "Day-to-day supervision [..] falls to SARFT [..].Meanwhile, the Ministry of Central Propaganda under the CCP manages the broad propaganda mission and provides ideological guidance" (Zhu, 2012: 23).

All of this means that, despite audiences not always responding positively to managed messages, it remains a requirement that every single message broadcast over TV is approved by the paternal eye of the Party. During their leisure time, people are still being inculcated propaganda directives, which seem to be particularly present within entertaining programming. According to many scholars, TV drama sets have been identified as the most effective fields under which the government has been able to conceal political mines so far. Given this finding, this thesis has chosen to explore those stages throughout its next section. Arguably, the most influential way in which the nation tells stories about itself and its place in the world is through television dramas. In the next part of this paper, then, contemporary politics and culture proposed by the government will be investigated through a selection of episodes from nationalistic TV dramas.

Chapter III

Tell Me a Story

Modern people around the world struggle every day to define their own position in societies that seem increasingly difficult to keep pace with. Running back and forth all day long, they seek to be always up-to-the-minute, while fighting for power in an authentic *Game of Thrones* and constantly appeasing their *Criminal Minds*, so as not to break any *Law and Order*. However, once they reach home at night, even though there are always *Friends* to spend time with, the only things that they usually long for are how to get *Lost*, where to find a way out of the chaos, or more simply, a remote-controlled new experience. There it is, then, a wrapped-up escape from reality, where one can magically and instantly zap life events, using the multifunctional modes of 'on-off-play-standby-rewind'.

After such a tough ordinary day, everybody deserves a proper relaxing time, and is worthy of a 'bedtime story'. We definitely need to know 'what is going to happen in the next episode' of our favourite TV drama, that fable where all the characters are our good friends.

Soap operas have proved to be among the most effective and powerful programming, able to attract large audiences to broadcasting worldwide (Zhu, 2008). The strong points of this particular format seem to be the 'establishment of continuity' which can sporadically lead to a sort of drama addiction, and the 'familiarity with the characters' which enables the public to project one's personality into the object of contemplation.[34]

Many generations around the globe have been raised on a diet of popular TV dramas (Zhu et al., 2008). However, contemporary China appears to be the biggest consumer of television dramas in the world, where soap operas are de facto retaining pre-eminence in viewing schedules.[35] After Beijing Television broadcast the first television drama on 15 June 1958, "many writers moved from state plays to television plays"[36] (Zhu et al., 2008: 4).

From 1958 to 1966, the 'experimental' period of Chinese TV dramas began, and saw nearly two hundred single-episode serials performed (Zhu, 2008; Liu, 2009; Keane, 2005). By the end of the 1970s, after the stagnation of television growth -due to the Cultural Revolution-, the production and consumption of TV dramas increased, preparing the ground for the 'transitional' period of dramas'

[34] "The television characters engage viewers and provide a focal point for identification, with their social and national status clearly marked through their speech, appearance, mannerisms, and the way they interact with other characters" (John Fiske, 1987. In Zhu et al. (eds.), 2008: 39).

[35] TV drama has consistently garnered the highest share of ratings since 2000. In 2010, the output of domestic TV drama reached 14,685 episodes, setting a brand new record. In 2012, 17,703 episodes were released, making the transaction value of TV dramas jump by 44.74% year on year to RMB 11 billion (China TV drama industry report, 2013-1016).

[36] The first Chinese TV drama was a thirty-minute play called *A Veggie Pancake* (一口菜饼子) (Liu, 2009).

development.[37] Subsequently, mainly in the late 1980s, continuous experiments with the scheduling led to the first appearance of the concept of 'prime time television'. However, it was not until the early 1990s, when the 'commercial' period ultimately began, that drama "became aware of its unique narrative structure and potential" (Zhu, 2008: 6). During these years, domestic television dramas evolved, finally seeing the audience reflecting upon itself as "the new subject of drama[s]" (Zhu et al., 2008: 4).

Notably, Chinese fictions are famous for having never properly mirrored the concrete reality of society. Quite successfully, they have instead provided alternative models or gateways from the social unpleasantness encountered by people in daily life. As already mentioned, the Tiananmen protests marked a turning point in the growth of citizens' frustration. Many socio-political issues, coupled with the nostalgia for a perceived 'uncorrupted past'[38] were vexing individuals, thus stimulating their desire for a more positive depiction of society. During the mid-1990s, therefore, TV dramas shifted their thematic from economic reform "to anti-corruption and political modernization", aiming at invocating "Confucian ideology" (Zhu, 2008: 18).

Modern narrative strategies required to put the honest Party in a positive light and to introduce 'clean officials' (清官), who were "more appealing to viewers than notions of democracy and the rule of law" (Bai. In Zhu et al., 2008: 49). TV practitioners decided to exploit the power of China's historical wealth which could now function as a new antidote for the masses, a sort of modern *opium populi* able to soothe people's grievances and fears. Here Dynasty dramas came to the forefront, calling upon exemplary emperors from bygone dynasties to play the role of modern heroes.

III.ii **Capturing the Popular Sentiment and Echoing the Party's Call**[39]

As scholar Janice Xu argues, since consumer culture has become predominant in contemporary Chinese society, and state ideology is increasingly losing its spiritual powers, it is appropriate that "television serials -highlighting the value of tradition- receive so much acclaim" (Xu. In Zhu et al., 2008: 46). According to the Party, in the process of modernization, contemporary individuals must not only attempt to keep pace with evolution, but they must also preserve the importance of tradition by confirming and consolidating moral values in an era of rampant corruption. One of the ways to accomplish these goals is by providing entertainment programs capable to interweaving exemplary past stories with present facts, and portraying a "powerful image of law enforcement institutions", while always preserving a Confucian cultivation of "disciplined individuals and responsible leaders" (Zhu et al., 2008: 8; Zhu, 2008: 27). However, in order to avoid any possible breakdown, TV producers

[37] In the early 1980s, many TV stations began to import serial dramas from foreign countries. By the mid-1980s, the State Ministry of Radio Film and Television (SMRFT) introduced permits and regulations to control production and distribution for TV dramas, always supervising national and imported contents.
[38] During the 1990s, "Red Classics" (红色经典) appeared with increasing regularity in the Chinese media. What many scholars call "Totalitarian Nostalgia" peaked in a "Mao Zedong Fever" (毛泽东热), leading to a resurgence in popularity for the "god-like savior" (Zhu, 2008: 157-158).
[39] Quot. Zhu Ying (2008: 18).

are required to "defend national tradition against foreign culture or any other element defined as negative",[40] "to articulate the moral consensus with emotion that viewers experience as 'real'" and finally to "impose a selective filter on what TV dramas can remember of the past" (In Zhang et al., 2008: 34, 49, 28). All of these 'prescriptions' seem to be the only medicaments left to the Party to cure its citizens who appear increasingly sick of individualism and skepticism towards the government's promises.

Historical dramas (历史正剧)[41] with their traditional materials, -as well as "main-melody" dramas (主旋律剧) which I will not discuss here-, have proved to satisfy audiences and their need for nostalgia, comfort and sympathy. Given these findings, the following sections of this chapter will give an in-depth examination of two renowned historical dramas.

III.iii **Propaganda Masquerading as Historical Drama**

Dynasty and historical dramas had already appeared on Chinese television screens by the late 1980s. Nonetheless, it was only between the late 1990s and the early 2000s that the trend to pay tribute to the sage imperial leaders dominated dramatic programming on prime time television[42] (Zhu et al., 2008). In effect, during the 1990s –when a wave of revisionist historiography had renewed interest in history-, the success of Qing dynasty comedies proved that "there was a profit to be made from mining Chinese history" (Zhu, 2008: 7). "Almost every Manchu emperor who worked for a strong state has been made the hero of a serial drama" (Zhu et al., 2008: 28). A well noted example of this is the 44-episode prime time *Yongzheng Dynasty* (雍正王朝) –directed by the famous female TV director and producer Hu Mei (胡玫)-, which epitomizes the new capture and triumph of the Qing dynasty over the Middle Kingdom.

Broadcast in 1997, this serial features one of the most complex historical figures of the Qing empire -Yongzheng (Yinzhen 胤禛, 1678-1735)-, who ruled China for 13 years and has always been critiziced by historians for his brutal ruling style. Nevertheless, as media scholar Zhu Ying explains, the televised version of the fifth emperor of the Qing dynasty[43] firmly establishes him as "an upright and outspoken character (..), with no tolerance for corruption (..), loyal to his father [the Kangxi (康熙) Emperor] and devoted to the people" (2008: 29). His eagerness to crack down on government corruption made him a nonpareil exponent in an age of cultural and political unity, and above all of economic quality and incorruptibility (Zhu et al, 2008). However, while on the one hand, his contemporarily rehabilitated figure diverges from the former 'cold-faced emperor' (冷面王), and his

[40] The SARFT has issued a conspicuous number of decrees restricting foreign TV serials on Chinese screens. On 9 February 2012, SARFT announced that foreign TV dramas may not be broadcast during the golden hours (19:00 onwards), and all TV channels' daily broadcast of foreign TV dramas may not exceed 25% of the total broadcast time.
[41] The words "历史正剧" literally mean "correct" or even "realistic historical drama".
[42] "In 1999, Dynasty dramas accounted for 10.7% of all productions. By 2000, this had risen to 21.6%, and by following year, it had risen again to 24.8%" (Zhu. In Rojas and Chow (eds.), 2013: 344).
[43] Yongzheng is generally considered to have been the third Qing emperor, who ruled from 1722 until 1735.

scornful behaviour towards Confucian principles and scholars is never really depicted through the drama, on the other hand, his broadcast peculiarities, such as the immunity to corruption, the sympathy with ordinary people and his moral commitment, evoke the image of former Premier Zhu Rongji (朱镕基).[44]

At this stage, it is possible to acknowledge how the myth of the clean official and the anti-corruption hero -depicted in this and many other historical dramas-, is basically "designed to legitimise the rule of the CCP over China" (Schneider, 2012: 1). As illustrated, the Yongzheng Emperor and Emperor Wu –to whom I shall return in the next paragraph- function as mere allegories to present-days politics (Zhu, 2008; Schneider, 2012). They are essentially rejuvenated and employed purely to support the betterment of modern society.

If it is true that "contemporary cultures examine themselves through their arts" (Newcomb and Hirsch, 2000. In Zhu et al., 2008: 13), then, through the active political and cultural engagement of historical dramas, Chinese audiences perceive all the density and complexity of their present society. In effect, departing from *Yongzheng*, viewers were able to spot the commitment to anti-corruption practices and economic reforms of the late 1990s. In the early 2000s, instead, the TV drama *Republic*[45] threw the audience into a deep analysis of political reforms and issues conserning democracy. Later in 2005, spectators were ultimately able to return to the shores of cultural tradition, with the telecast of *The Great Han Emperor Wu*.

III.iv **The Great Emperor Hu Jintao**

Policy makers of the early 1990s assumed the main objective of "reviving Chinese cultural tradition rooted in the Confucian heritage" (Zhu, 2008: 12). In effect, after the Tiananmen massacre and under the rule of former President Jiang Zemin, the Party decided to move closer to the masses and to reform the political system by promoting a return to Confucian virtues, which were now charged to foster the well-being of the public and a moral model of less self-absorbed individuals. Later on, when Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) gained power in 2002, the slogan "putting people first" (以人为本), -echoing one of Mao's mottos- was put forward. Furthermore, the leader also introduced himself as an ideal humanistic ruler, close to his citizens and entrusted with their well-being (Zhu, 2008; Schneider, 2012). As the director Hu Mei (1999) argued, "the personality of a ruler determines the fate of a nation". 'People-caring sage emperors',[46] therefore, became one of the main requisites for the rulers, and starting from 2004, the

[44] Zhu Rongji (1928) is a prominent politician who served as Premier of the PRC (1998-2003). As Zhu Ying (2008) shows, his image as a tough administrator, famous for his novel pragmatism and strong work ethic in a government increasingly infested by corruption, can easily call to mind the ruling style of Yongzheng Emperor.

[45] *Marching towards the Republic* (走向共和) is another revisionist historical drama aired on CCTV in 2003, which represented China during the late Qing dynasty and early Republic. Its alternative, or perhaps paradoxical, version of history has been largely denounced by many critics and historians.

[46] Both Hu Jintao and the Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝) presented themselves as "people-caring sage emperors" in the mold of Confucius' ideal, humanistic rulers.

decision to build a 'harmonious society' (和谐社会) was pursued on all fronts of society. At the time, the Party mainly aimed to create "a consensus on the issue of corruption (..), by representing itself as standing on the side of 'the people'", and for this purpose television was adopted to provide the intellectual and moral grounding on which a sort of "Confucian authoritarianism" could be shaped (Zhu et al, 2008: 49).

Therefore, on the one hand, policy makers needed to emphasize a return to Confucianism so as to cure contemporary social illnesses and focus more on equality and balance, on the other, audiences needed to be inspired with a unique pride in their history and nationality. Dynasty dramas, hence, met all these requirements, and returned to prime time, introducing stories to the masses "strictly based on the respect for history" (Hu Mei, 1999. In Jin, 2005), and broadcasting "deeply moving and commendable history novels" (可歌可泣的历史故事; Hu, 2005), which could stress the grandeur of a bygone era. It was at this stage that director Hu Mei returned to the scene of TV dramas, taking part in the construction of a fictitious sinocentric and harmonious society, by exemplifying the Confucian sage leadership and the need for a renaissance of patriotism.

In January 2005, one of the masterpieces of historical dramas debuted on television: the 58-episode Dynasty drama *The Great Han Emperor Wu* (汉武大帝).[47] It aired daily on prime time CCTV between the 'golden hours' of 8pm-9pm, ensuring it reached the largest audience possible. The drama features the prosperous period of the Han dynasty (汉朝; 206 BC–AD 220) under the reign of Liu Che (刘彻),[48] also known as the Emperor Wu (武) –or the 'martial Emperor' (武帝)-.

Liu Che was the seventh emperor of the Western Han (西汉) dynasty, ruling from 141 BC –when he was 16 years old- until his death. His rule lasted 54 years, and marked a new era in Han history. "With him began many of the policies and institutions that characterize later dynasties", and under his rule the realization that a solution was needed for Han relations with the Huns (匈奴) came to fruit (Watson, 1963: 30). Despite the fact that he never succeeded in conquering the Huns,[49] during his reign China expanded domestically and extended its influence overseas. Emperor Wu demonstrated to the world the dignity and glory of Han rule, making continuous progress across the nation, and favouring Confucianism as the official creed of the state (Watson, 1963).

Hu Mei's drama explores the Emperor Liu Che's life, providing insight into his childhood, adolescence, though focusing chiefly on his imperial feats. However, despite the director's presentation of the show as an authentic depiction of history (历史正剧) -rearranged on the basis of the facts reported in Sima Qian's (司马迁) book "Historical Records" and "The History of Han", written

[47] Already during the first broadcast week, the drama's viewing rate reached a record of 4.49%, "which compared to other dramas constituted a great success" (Southern Metropolitan Daily, 2005). "It became the 12th most popular television series that year [2005]" (Schneider, 2012: 1), and won the 2005 *Flying Apsaras Award* (中国电视剧飞天奖), for Best Long Television Series, Best Director (Hu Mei) and Best Leading Actor (Chen Baoguo, 陈宝国).

[48] Emperor Wu probably lived between 157-87 BC.

[49] The Han victory against the Huns eventually forced the nomadic confederation to accept vassal status as Han tributaries. These campaigns expanded Han sovereignty, and helped establish the vast trade network known as the Silk Road.

by Ban Gu (班固; Hu, 2005)[50]-, many scenes seem to misinterpret the original written records. Yet, it is interesting to notice how the screenplay tends to link with political events taking place in contemporary China, as well as all the pedagogical models currently proposed by the Party to its audience. For instance, many media scholars as well as Chinese journalists have argued that "the portrayal of the Emperor Wu [throughout the serial] is too perfect and flawless" (Zhu, 2008: 57), too much of a "passionate and humane leader who is close to his subordinates" (Schneider, 2012: 28).

In accordance with Florian Schneider's analysis, for example, various scenes throughout the drama depict the emperor discussing with his ministers and generals the basic requirements and moral virtues meant to typify a heroic ruler (*Ibid.*: 25). In order to create unparalleled heroes, qualities such as 'strength-based leadership', 'empathy with the subjects' and 'benevolence of the heart' need to be absorbed into the leaders' practices. Some exemplifications of Liu Che as 'the incarnation of a grandiose emperor' can be found, in particular, through the episodes that depict the ruler during the last years of his reign and more specifically in the closing episode of the serial.

Episode 58, the finale of *Hanwu dadi*, portrays Emperor Wu as increasingly doubtful about his accomplishments, and paranoid after the loss of his first son Liu Ju (刘据), –who killed himself after power struggles at court-, and about his wife, the Empress Wei Zifu (卫子夫). At the beginning, the plot shows one of Liu Che's officials, who visits Sima Qian and apologizes to him on behalf of the ruler for all the mistakes and offences committed toward the renowned historian. In the following sequence, the camera moves over to the emperor, who decides to travel to the countryside together with his young son Liu Fuling (刘弗陵), so as to encounter the "extraordinary 800 men, of whom 710 fought against the Huns, and 135 created military achievements" (Hu, 2005). "Fellow villagers rush! Come and see, your Majesty (皇上) has come!" (Hu, 2005). All the inhabitants rapidly gather around the emperor's carriage, greeting his Majesty and kowtowing to him as soon as he appears. Later on, two of the villagers directly approach him and recount of having fought during the war against the Huns, all in the name of the Han dynasty and for the sake of their "relentless ruler" (老狠). The emperor's satisfaction and pride towards his people flourish on his face, while his soft gazes exemplify his paternal care for his subjects. Slightly bending forward, then, he refers to his crowd gently asking: "Are you all fine?" (都好吧?). Uttering in unison, the villagers reassure his Majesty, and promptly help him down from the carriage before inviting him into their houses. Liu Che blends in with the crowd; his rigid face melts in front of the heartrending conditions he finds in the village. He looks forlorn while entering his subjects' huts, and fragile while helping the war veterans who pass him by. The villagers keep on following their lord in a manner not unlike a religious procession, and once the war memorial has been reached they all bow down to the ground behind Liu Che, shouting in chorus "Long life to the

[50] Sima Qian and Ban Gu were two renowned Han dynasty historians. The Leitmotif of the drama writes as follows: "根据司马迁《史记》、班固《汉书》改编创作" (Hu, 2005).

Emperor!" (皇上万岁). "We don't have to fight anymore", the emperor whispers, a few seconds before starting to cry (Hu, 2005).

"A good ruler has the welfare of his subject at heart –so much so that any suffering of the masses causes the supreme ruler to cry in anguish" (Schneider, 2012: 82). The people's sufferings become the emperor's sorrows, just as naturally as it would happen in the case of a father-child relationship.

This televised version of the Han emperor, however, strays excessively from the authentic greedy ruler Liu Che. Historically, Wu is depicted as the Emperor whose main desires were to strengthen and expand his nation and gather all power in his hands, by showing a callous disregard for the rights and liberties of individuals (Watson, 1963). Various questions therefore arise: in which episode of this "realistic" drama is the real Emperor Wu hidden? Where is the so-called profit-seeking ruler who brought suffering to "his children" with his harsh penal laws; the one who brought fear and punishment to many officials, and threw the economy of the nation into disorder? Where is the genuine "martial" emperor? Surely not in this drama.

Additional key points repeatedly portrayed throughout the drama refer to discourses such Confucian indoctrination as the main dogma of the dynasty, and foreign security –or more specifically the wars against the Huns-. Arguably, all of the drama, from beginning to end, noticeably displays Liu Che's concern for "grasping the situation of the Huns" (和亲匈奴的事儿要抓紧; Hu, 2005). Numerous battles, where a copious number of soldiers lost their lives, are depicted in several sequences,[51] where the pathos acts as the main protagonist, conferring a realistic feature to the scenes. Even though at a certain point marriage diplomacy is introduced as a possible replacement to bloodshed, the belief that war is mandatory, –in order to counterattack foreign threats and expand Chinese power-, is consistent throughout the drama. The sufferings of people seem to move to the background when discussing foreign policy and even "the patriotic sacrifices of the Han women and their family [become] largely useless against a 'barbaric' aggressor such as the [Huns]" (Schneider, 2012: 73). Pacifism is practically portrayed as a common trait of ignorant scholars all through the drama.

These arguments might be connected to the main Confucian doctrines and beliefs applicable at the time, which could serve to explain the conceptualization of the need for war. According to Confucian doctrine, indeed, if an individual aims at achieving world peace, and deems himself as the Son of Heaven (天子), he is 'legitimized' to commence a war for the sake of world peace (Yao, 2011). In the specific case of this drama, then, the Emperor Wu has the moral duty to pacify the world, so as to fulfil his elevated obligations. However, does this mean that the drama is attempting to justify the need for a war? Not necessarily.

[51] These wars cost the drama the appellation of "the most expensive historical drama in China to date", with an investment of 50 million RMB (Zhu, 2008: 56).

In general, the show is considerably saturated with the promotion of Confucianism, and more precisely, with principles such as communitarianism, social harmony and global order. A Confucian egalitarian society genuinely appears to be the main target to which any ruler should aspire, in order to build social standards and to achieve world justice. The televised Liu Che seems fully convinced of this. Yet, another great ruler also feels confident about the importance of fostering Confucian values, to function as a solution for social and moral ills: the former paramount leader of China, Hu Jintao. Is this just a mere coincidence? Can the broadcasting of this type of drama, -coinciding with the concept of 'building a harmonious society' being made a priority by the CCP-, be considered as a sheer coincidence?

However, this overlap between the two rulers does not seem to be the only one. Some critics as well as scholars have pointed out that the circumstances under which Jiang Zemin tried to hang on to power in China, and the subsequent conditions which saw Hu Jintao gain power were quite similar to the Emperor Wu's enthronement (Yan, 2005; Zhu, 2008; Schneider 2012). During the final months of his mandate, Jiang Zemin in fact became reluctant to cede his power, thus giving Hu Jintao a tough battle to contend (Yan, 2005). This event largely recalls Liu Che's rise to the throne, particularly when he struggled to assert himself under the resistance of the three regents[52] who dominated the administration of his reign for long time.

Furthermore, another similarity that widely connects the two 'sage emperors' resides in their 'paternal disposition', or their nature of 'people-caring sage leaders'. These are rulers who rely on wise leadership and commitment to the masses, -a concept principally founded on the Confucian belief that only people educated in morality should rule over others- (Zhu, 2008.) Both of them, in effect, support the assumptions that "the ruler and ruled [should be] as close as family", that their Excellencies should always be perceived by the masses as 'men of the people' (Schneider, 2012: 30). The well-being of ordinary people, hence, constitutes the main concern and passion of the rulers, as it is only by standing on the side of 'the people' that the authority is able to create moral unity and anchor its leadership.

Yet, this 'fatherly characteristic' introduces the last two correlations which conjoin the ancient televised Liu Che to the present Hu Jintao: the exertion of a firm hand in anti-corruption campaigns and a tough attitude in foreign security threats. "A stronger central government that would protect China's interests globally and eradicate social and economic problems domestically" typifies one of the main duties that connect the two 'sovereigns' (Zhu, 2008: 35). Notoriously, as soon as Hu Jintao took over China's leadership, he fostered his reputation as the new "protector of national pride and domestic stability" (Zhao, 2012). Furthermore, he also took "an assertive stance in defending China's core interests, where national pride and regime survival were seen as at stake" (Zhao, 2012).

[52] These three figures were his grandmother grand Empress Dowager Dou (皇太后), his mother Empress Dowager Wang (王姁) and her half-brother Tian Fen (田蚡; Zhu, 2008).

As previously analysed, Emperor Wu likewise demonstrated his great commitment to safeguarding his country and people against foreign threats. Therefore, securing inner stability by protecting the population against crime and corruption, and endorsing outer security by defending Chinese space against foreign 'aggression' –both territorial during imperial times, and economic in the present-, have constantly been at the core of both rulers' agendas. These types of wars are legitimized, and have to be fought for the sake of the nation.

At this stage of the analysis, it is quite hard to misinterpret the real propagandistic and didactical roles that *The Great Han Emperor Wu* plays in contemporary prime time television. Glaringly, this historical drama performs its glorious duty of serving the Party, by guiding public opinion and providing public support for the legitimization of President Hu Jintao and his political agenda. *Hanwu* unites people's hearts, promotes patriotism and collectivism, and above all, it builds a bridge between modern 'ailing' people to the triumphant and upright heroes of the past.

Who is now still capable of considering dramas in general, or these series in particular, as mild or politically neutral genres that principally fulfil the role of mere entertainment? In most of the cases, it is the ordinary 'coach potatoes', the drama's viewers. Audiences appear excessively involved in learning more about the leader who "established an unprecedented respect for the [Chinese] nation, who gave to the ethnic group the self-confidence which would stand for eternity, and whose title of reigning dynasty became the eternal name of a people" (Hu, 2005).[53] Spectators are very closely connected with the characters of the drama, and even acutely moved by their vicissitudes, to ruminate on any possible propagandist intent proposed by the serial. They prefer to identify Emperor Wu as the heroic and unprecedented man of the people, rather than another nefarious accomplice of the Party.

[53] Each episode of *The Great Han Emperor Wu* starts with this headline: "他建立了一个国家前所未有的尊严。他给了一个族群挺立千秋的自信。他的国号成了一个民族永远的名字" (Hu, 2005).

Conclusion

Television is globally considered as one of the most common forms of media used as a source of education. For this exact reason, TV formats have been under the control of many governments around the world, so as to be able to shape their citizens' identities. Effectively, television's powerful moving images, as well as its authentic depictions of reality have widely been exploited by many states, in order to promulgate a modernized type of propaganda. However, since a large number of Western scholars have mainly identified China as a blatant case of propagandist media in general, this thesis has essentially attempted to investigate the political use of the Chinese media. Furthermore, it has also focused on the role that television has broadly undertaken and continues to take in modern China.

Throughout the first section of this essay it has been argued that ever since the second half of the 20th century, Chinese media have extensively performed a mouthpiece function, and considerably legitimized the government's agendas in their thought work practices. Indeed, once the state controlled communication flows, it began to enhance its impact in directing society toward desired ends. Nevertheless, before the Tiananmen protests of 1989, the media in general, as well as their thought control operations, had weakened their influence. As it has been explained, the 'hard on economics, soft on politics' practices, -which came into effect during the economic reforms era-, did not bring about much positive effect on thought work practices. Therefore, starting from the early 1990s, the Party decided to manufacture consensus by reutilizing the old ideological hobbyhorse of 'from the masses, to the masses', all of which was deployed to endorse ideological goals once again.

As pointed out in the second section of this thesis, already during the late 1980s, television appeared to be one of the media forms charged with the greatest social impact. Furthermore, it also formed one of the main causes that negatively influenced individuals in their thinking towards the Party. For these reasons, the leaders decided to modify their approach to the masses, and to appeal to their spectators, using a novel tactic that could both "serve the audiences, and be entertaining" (Lynch, 1999: 60). The Party's new political tactic shifted to the cultivation of an innovative way of thinking, increasingly pushing the media into a more "public relations" kind of work style, hence allowing for the enactment a new sort of authoritarianism. A 'sophisticated' type of control, characterized by a growing use of more refined and opaque methods started to encourage groups to work toward meeting state goals. In accordance with the findings of this research, then, the improvement of 'spiritual civilization' over the growing 'money-worshipping-mentality' started to fill the media, and the Ministry of Propaganda began to issue plans for positive patriotism everywhere, especially on television.

In the 1990s, television -as part of the Party-state apparatus-, was notably entrusted with the mandate of re-creating and re-producing "national identity, loyalty and pride" (Zhang, 2008: 6). The Party, then, genuinely invested most of the TV formats with the responsibility to promote policies and

disseminate desired or 'politically correct' education, so as to generally legitimize the government's agenda. Moreover, in order to inculcate a higher amount of propaganda directives and to reach the largest audience possible, the government decided to exploit entertaining broadcasts and their broad reception to the maximum.

The third chapter of this thesis has explored the use of soap operas, and has argued that –up to the present-, the government has consistently transformed these entertainment formats into one of the main platforms upon which to build political discourses. Actually, the dramas' effectiveness to attract large audiences, and their basic 'story telling' features have significantly enabled the Party to provide politically desirable models to it citizens and to legitimize its agendas.

Ultimately, this paper has also proved how, over the last decades, the shifts of the dramas' thematic have always coincided with the changes of political and social interests, or more specifically, serials' topics have constantly moved in synchrony with the government main programs. For instance, between the 1990s and the early 2000s, when anti-corruption plans, political modernization and Confucian ideology characterized the crucial points pursued by the leaders, honest Party, clean officials and values of tradition stood at the core of the most famous TV dramas. Specifically, Dynasty serials account among the most produced genre, capable to satisfying the audiences' longing for the past and their need for a more positive depiction of society. As has been argued, the ability of TV producers to recreate heroic 'people-caring sage emperors' from bygone dynasties has not only helped the Party in its pedagogical role, but has also pleased people's tastes and gratified their nostalgia.

The last section of the paper has given an in-depth examination of the political discourses broadcast daily in modern society, through the analysis of two of the most representative historical dramas thus far. Essentially, it has attested how historical dramas have been widely employed as allegories to current politics and it has shown how the great concern with anti-corruption practices and moral commitment in *Yongzheng Dynasty* prominently evoked the image of former Premier Zhu Rongji. Conversely, the sage leadership and the Confucian values depicted through *The Great Han Emperor Wu* have largely provided public support for the legitimization of President Hu Jintao and his political agenda.

Due to limitations of space, it has not been possible to provide a broad picture of the ways in which Chinese people react to the many political messages hidden in television programs, or dramas in particular. Therefore, although some general research has been carried out, further detailed investigation should be pursued on this topic, in order to understand whether or not the audience follows the 'correct path' outlined by the Party. To which extent are these 'fables of a bygone era' and their political allegories influencing the people mind-sets? Are these dramas actually helping contemporary viewers to increase their *suzhi*?

Obviously, this thesis has argued that it is not only in China that TV formats are extensively controlled by the government. This phenomenon is, in fact, noticeable everywhere around the world. What has been illustrated here is that behind the innocuous and heartrending fables about 'charming princes' and emperors, in many instances, real leaders' life tales are concealed. Yet, the disclaimer "All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental" cannot always be applied to Chinese historical dramas. And lastly that "No matter what, keep on watching. The media are teaching you!"

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