

**HEROES FOR THE MASSES:
ENGAGING ICONS IN CHINESE TELEVISION**

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Paper 3:

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ABSTRACT

This paper is going to be about how Chinese people talk in terms of different kinds and degrees of engagement with heroes in Chinese television. First, before I get on to my discussion I shall present some brief background of the situation in Chinese television. In this paper, I shall discuss from four main points. First, I shall look into chronotopes of the actual Chinese television programs by using Bakhtin's idea of chronotope. Here, I have chosen to discuss two icons from different television programs (though they may change to one because I am far too many over-words!): one is Wang Zili from the television drama called ³Renzi²(which I translated as ³The son²), and the other one is Xiao Feng from the Hong Kong made martial arts television drama called ³Tianlong babu²(which I translated as ³The Eight figures from the Buddhist scripture²). Then, I will examine what Chinese viewers talk about in terms of these two icons, and discuss to what extent the ideological vision on heroes is working by comparing the official ways to present heroes in Chinese television with what Chinese viewers say. Then, I shall discuss the difference between academics' reading of programs and what Chinese viewers say. In the last section, I shall look into the practices of watching for the Chinese audience. In conclusion, I shall argue for the active and situational nature of the practice of engaging icons in Chinese Television.

Heroes for the Masses: Engaging Icons in Chinese Television

By Makiko Taniguchi

Every place has heroes, but what makes heroes in China so particular is the state's constant attempt to produce and promote heroes. The term "Hero" is usually translated in Chinese as Yingxiong renwu, the character components of which mean a "hero; outstanding person" (ying) and a "male", "grand; imposing", "powerful; mighty" or "a person or stars having great power and influence"(xiong). (Hanying cidian, 1993:776, 830, 831) Sometimes, pop idols are called yingxiong in China, but they are usually referred to as "gexing" (lit. singing stars, or pop stars), "mingxing"(lit. bright stars or pop stars) or "ouxiang"(idols). There are other ways of describing "a person noted or admired for courage, outstanding achievements, nobility etc."(One of the OED definition for the term "hero") and these are "jiechu renwu (an outstanding person), or "mofan renwu" (an exemplary person or a model). They are praised and promoted by various forms of the media, and certainly on the television countless numbers of heroes can be seen. Put like this, most people who are not familiar with Chinese television will imagine television in China as means for the state to promote propaganda, as mouth piece of the state, as highly ideological, or otherwise similarly simplified monotonous images. Somehow we are easily trapped by presuppositions on China and Chinese people often portrayed as the opposite of the "West", based on political facts and ideas. But, this is not just about television in China and surely much more about what is happening to Chinese television.

Introduction

This paper will discuss how people talk in terms of the different kinds and degrees of engagement with heroes in Chinese television. I was particularly interested in how and what Chinese people talk, ask, and comment to one another in their daily conversations. Chinese audience is neither the passive victim of the state control, nor some kind of collective constantly struggling and resisting to the state power, as they

are often portrayed in much of the literature on China. In fact, speaking of a single audience is misleading. For many purposes it is better to think of them as viewers. Watching television, more specifically engaging icons in Chinese television, is far from an unitary practice. It is very active and situational. I have no way of suggesting in simple sentences how Chinese people engage with icons appear on television, since different people have different ways of engaging with icons on various occasions. There is no simple accessible truth about how Chinese watch television.

In this paper I shall first present some brief background of Chinese television. Then in the following sections I shall discuss from four main points. First, I shall look into chronotopes of the actual Chinese television programs by using Bakhtin's idea of chronotope. I shall explain the reason why I use Bakhtin's idea of chronotopes and what I mean by chronotopes briefly. In the following section, I will examine what Chinese viewers talk about two particular icons chosen for this paper. I shall also discuss to what extent the ideological vision on heroes is working by comparing the official ways to present heroes in Chinese television with what Chinese viewers actually say. Then I shall address the difference between the opinions on programs of the academics' and those of the Chinese viewers. In the last section, I shall discuss some of the practices of watching and engaging with icons for Chinese audience.

Most Chinese people I am dealing with in my current research are highly skilled at giving answers to my questions: answering without directly answering while covering what I have asked, and yet never directly disagreeing. My dilemma therefore, is how should I interpret their answers and how far should I encourage people to clarify their comments? Besides, Chinese people are also very good at guessing what the researcher wants to hear. The danger for researchers to deal with these answers is that without realizing we can go completely wrong by pursuing our own preoccupations. Researchers are in dangers of drawing connections between their preoccupations and what Chinese people have answered which otherwise do not have any relationship, then coming up with something which has nothing much to do with Chinese people. I believe that the researcher should not just follow their answers as definite statements

on the person's thought about the matters being discussed. Instead, we need to take into consideration the conversations within their context, how questions were answered, the terms which were used and how these terms were employed on other occasions.

Among those with whom I work with, the main figure of my research is Wang Lei, a businessman who is twenty eight years old, single, and living with his parents who are engineers in State owned company. Wang Lei currently works for a small foreign trade company. He used to work for a state import and export company, but there was not much future for his job there due to the restructurlisation implemented by the government almost two years ago. Wang Lei first moved to a private market research company, then to his current job. Aside from him, there is Miss Guo, a colleague of Wang Lei's at the time. She is twenty four and has just graduated from a university a year ago majoring in French. Miss Guo lives with her parents and her younger brother in a military compound where she has always lived since her father is an officer of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). After working for a year in the company which also employs Wang Lei, she recently quit her job to study accounting. On separate occasions, I also work with Li Ming, who is a traditional Chinese painter, and work in the auditing department of the government to make a living. Li Ming is thirty two years old, originally from Nangchang, in the South of China. He is married to the daughter of the former head of the Central Academy of Arts. Usually I visits the offices where my friends work, have lunch or dinner together, and chat. Sometimes also I invite them to my home for a meal and conversation.

I have been working with people either individually or two of them at a time. Most people I work with do not like to be treated as informants (I suppose, I would not like it either), so they¹ discuss various matters with me on the basis of friendship, but as soon as I start push too far, they often point out to me that I am an academic who sees things in ways which nobody else cares about, or more often they start playing

¹ especially Li Ming and Wang Lei

around with their responses to confuse me. My offer to form a group to discuss various topics has been simply declined without any particular reason. I have yet to be successful in recording conversations as part of my research. In fact, my every request to record the conversation has been rejected so far. In China, I think the idea still strongly remains of the role of traditional intellectuals representing the voices of the people still strongly remains, and most non-intellectuals feel rather uncomfortable about their opinions being demanded and feel it is inappropriate for them to respond to questions for academic purposes, even if not to that extreme at least they still feel uncomfortable being recorded. I must stress that, however, most people I work with are highly intelligent and confident about answering my questions, and are far from being intimidated. What I have learned from these experiences is that people are not always ready to answer my questions, even if they do enjoy engaging in intellectual conversations. The answers which I have obtained from my research in Beijing were full of contradiction, confusions, and uncertainty. As a researcher with a limited experience of fieldwork, I have found this to be a rather confusing and puzzling experience.

Conversations which are used below in this paper have been collected through my fieldwork, and each conversation may not come from one single occasion. They are what people have thought and felt on some occasion during which they engage with various icons, and during which I have talked to them. Comments on one occasion may be different from another. This dialogic nature of engaging icons in television is what I find most difficult to handle and yet is the most interesting part of my research. I have read much literature on popular culture in China suggesting how various aspects of popular culture in China are implicated to Chinese people or Chinese youths, and discussing why they are so popular. The problem with these authors is that they write in such a manner that does not leave much space for questions. They are presented in a neat manner, well written, and sound very convincing. What I have experienced during my fieldwork was, however, far from complete, and leaves me so many questions and incomplete responses.

Since the summer 1997, I have been undertaking the current fieldwork in Beijing, the capital of People's republic of China². Even though Beijing has maintained certain level of economic growth, for the past two years, the economic situation of Beijing seems to be rather visibly going down - more and more unemployment, visible fall in the foreign investments, increasing inequality in wealth, unaffordable housing, rise in the price of vegetables which has increased almost over four times from when I just started the fieldwork - people in Beijing seem to be increasingly unhappy with their uncertain future. I live outside of the university campus and the university area where most foreign scholars stay. In the first year, I carried out my research independent of any academic institutions. Then in the following year, I have started following television courses at the Beijing Broadcast Institute (BBI) which belongs to the department of Broadcasting film and television bureau. BBI is the key university for those who want to work in the field of television in China. Most people with varying ranges of responsibility working at the Central Chinese Television (CCTV) or Beijing Television (BTV) have graduated from this university, and most of my teachers are working for CCTV or BTV at the same time. BBI.

Heroes are culturally defined ideas, so the parameters of the term "hero" in English do not quite correspond to the terms in Mandarin. In order to avoid terminological presupposition arising from English categories of "heroes", "models", "idols", or otherwise, I shall use icons as the general ways of calling these publicly represented humans in this paper, though I am aware that it is impossible to escape from the terminological presupposition arising from English categorisation as every English word involves presuppositions. Here, I would like to emphasise three qualities of the term "icon": 1 representation; 2 being looked upon or admired; 3 resemblance.

Background for Chinese Television

Before I get on to my argument, I shall explain briefly about the background of Chinese television. I present this background with the anticipation of making Chinese

² actually I have been to Beijing every summer since 1994

television appear less exotic. This is to say that Chinese television is neither a mere product of the socialist culture, nor the result of the ideological control, or manipulation by the state. It has been changing very rapidly in the recent years, and it is in a rather confused and disordered state at the moment. It took me a while to get rid of my presupposition that the government is always in the background, tightly controlling how and what is to be shown on the Chinese television.

Comparatively speaking, the development of television in China is somewhat unadvanced. In 1958, the first television station which is the current Chinese Central television (CCTV) was created. At that time there were only about fifty television sets in the whole of Beijing, so the audience was mainly composed of high level cadres and state leaders. The development of television was suspended during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), although television stations continued to broadcast on and off during that period. After the Cultural Revolution, it took a while for them to even reach the standard of television of the pre-Cultural Revolution period, so the development of television actually started in the early eighties. According to a Chinese friend of mine, it was only in the early eighties that television sets entered into the household, and until quite recently television programs were very far from the current standard. The technical aspects of television are often dismissed by anthropologists favoring to discuss the popularity, significance and implication of Chinese television programs. To some extent certain programs became popular due to their sheer novelty in terms of quality of pictures by application of newer techniques. For instance, until the beginning of the 90s, Chinese television stations couldn't afford to buy video cameras which are commonly used nowadays. Until then, they had to use the film making techniques which are based on photographs, so it took a long time to make a program. Consequently there were lots of constraints on time and mobility in terms of making a television program until they finally got video cameras, especially for making television drama consisting of several stories. "Kewang" (Aspiration) which has been widely discussed by the foreign scholars for causing the "Kewang re" (Aspiration fever) among the Chinese audience in early 90s, was in fact one of the first television dramas to be made in the mainland that

reached the standard of television dramas from Hong Kong or Japan. It was also the first mainland television drama which consisted of 50 episodes, and the first soap opera to be shot in a studio.

Nowadays, most households in Beijing have television sets, and most of them are even colour televisions. According to one of my teachers Ms Gao, approximately well over 95% of the people in Beijing have access to television, and many households have more than one television set. It is really hard to see any black- white television in Beijing nowadays unless you go to very poor households or to the outskirts of Beijing city. Small colour televisions are available from around one thousand RMB (about U.S.\$ 120), and upwards. The access to satellite televisions is still limited mainly to those who live in certain area. In fact, I was expecting more people to have satellite dishes³, however, most Chinese residents either do not have a satellite dish or may only receive Phoenix television. I do not have a satellite dish at home, and neither do any of the people I am working with apart from Wang Lei⁴. Phoenix television is a Hong Kong based satellite television station owned by the Murdoch group. Started in 1996, it targets the mainland audience⁵, and is probably the most popular television station at the moment in Beijing. I have heard on several occasions from different people who have access to the Phoenix television saying "I can't stand Chinese television" ("Guo nei de dianshi mei fa'r kan"). Many of the popular television programs are not necessarily mainland ones. Many of them are bought from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or USA and occasionally from Japan or South Korea. However most programs were made a few years ago, as it seems that the

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I have read several people writing about Chinese people fixing their own satellite receivers purchased illegally. I do not know exactly what percentage and what kind of people have actually attempted, and to what extent the control on this kind of access to satellite television has changed over the years.

4 Even Wang Lei has lost the access to satellite television since 1st May, as the government decided that no citizens should be getting free access to satellite television. I think this is due to the tenth commemoration of the Tiananmen incident which will be coming up soon.

5 There are some Chinese satellite television stations which can be received in most households.

mainland television stations cannot afford newer ones. Although in recent months they have broadcasted some newer films from last year.

The idea of television as an entertainment is still new to the Chinese audience. Until quite recently, Chinese television existed as a means to disseminate “the truth”. Most television programs are dominated by what in Chinese is classified as *Xinwen zhi lei*, (lit. news type) which in addition to the standard news programs, include life style and educational programs. There were also some documentary programs. Most films and television dramas shown on the television at that time were mainly about great leaders or good people. Since the enormous popularity of programs like “Feichang nannu”, a Taiwanese version of *Blind Date*, or “Qiangqiang sanrenxing”, a talk show on various news with a guest⁶, both from Phoenix television, and “Kuai le da ben ying”, a television stars play games, from the Hunan satellite television, many mainland television stations increased substantially the number of recreational programs known as “youxi jiemu”. I believe that one of the main factors for the popularity of these programs is novelty, especially “Kuaile da ben ying”, though some programs like “Feichang nannu” which is made in Taiwan cannot be discussed on the same level as the other mainland made programs. I would not argue so far as to point out the cultural significance of these recreational programs specifically to Chinese audience, however, I suggest what is significant about the emergence of these programs is that they brought out the new idea of television as an entertainment. Nowadays, those who make television programs as well as their viewers are more familiar with the idea of television as a form of entertainment⁷.

I shall briefly refer to the different standards and restrictions on Chinese television programs by the Chinese government. There are different standards for two different

⁶ This type of television programs - talk shows on the various topics from the news - is still prohibited in the mainland China, as reporting news is considered as very sensitive topics which needs to be supervised by the government.

⁷ Yet, I must mention that many of my teachers at BBI, especially those who make documentary programs, still believe that television programs should be “high art”, or something which belongs to the literature.

types of programs: one is what Chinese people call the recreational program (yule jiemu) and the other one is the news program (xinwen jiemu) which also include “tebie jiemu” (a special program) and “wanhui” (“an evening of entertainment”). According to most teachers at the BBI, apparently there is only one written regulation and standard for Chinese television and that is how standard Mandarin should be used and spoken on television, otherwise regulations and standards vary depending on circumstance. Most of my teachers claim that in general there are no standards, restrictions or controls by the government for recreational programs. One of my teachers, Mr Zhang, confirmed that this is the case as long as you do not directly criticise the state, leaders, or the party. For the news programs, direct instructions from the government are given on what the contents may be and how they are to be broadcasted in the news. Special programs like wanhui are also directly planned and controlled by a government department. The key seems to be that rules are not clearly stated, so controls are applied depending on the situation and the content of the program. At the same time such application of rules works the other way around, so those who make programs can also manipulate rules to get around the controls. There is no clear and constant distinction between what can and cannot be broadcasted on Chinese television.

More than regulation, what is critical for the Chinese television seems to be money, the capital to make television programs. Most television stations have a shortage of capital. It is often the case that the amount of support from the government is far from sufficient to make the programs, so they need sponsors to invest in exchange for advertising time. Yet the current problem seems to be that there aren't enough advertisers. As a result, advertisements inviting sponsors can often be seen on television. According to another teacher, Mr Cheng, (who is also the manager of the planning/ strategic department of Phoenix television) in general, including at CCTV, the amount of investment reflects the influence exerted in deciding the direction of the programs⁸. Originally, I was expecting to research pop idols ideally from Hong-

⁸ Mr Zhang claimed that even the amount of money required to make a program is given by the sponsor, it is not always the case that the whole budget get through to those who actually

Kong or Taiwan on the television. Then I discovered that I cannot do that as those popular stars do not appear on the mainland Chinese television apart from a few occasions in which they appear in music videos or in their films being introduced on the televisions. This seems to be simply due to the fact that Chinese television stations cannot afford them, rather than for political or ideological reasons.

There is also a problem of understanding the audience, more precisely agreeing who the audience are in the making of Chinese television programs. The first issue is who are the biggest part of the audience? Those who make television programs, including most of my teachers at the BBI, consider that *they* are the standard audience. The problem here is that most people who are involved in the making of television programs are actually intellectuals or those who have high level of education, so their understanding ability, concerns, interests and thought greatly differ from ones of so called *laobaixing*, the “common” Chinese people. In fact, it is the peasants who make up the biggest part of the television audience in China. The second problem is that the idea of who to target in the making of television programs is not agreed on in most cases. China has one of the biggest ranges of audiences in the world, so it is necessary to target the audience group in the making of television programs. Some people say it is important to target the urban audience due to their purchasing power, while others believe in targeting the countryside audience as they make up the majority of the audience. Without discussing who the target audience is, each and every one goes about their job targeting who they believe the audience will be. The research on the audience is still at the conceptual level, and the actual research on the audience is not yet developed in current Chinese television.

On top of the above problems, most Chinese television schedule are not planned long enough in advance. According to my teacher Mr Zhang, often those who make the programs are told all of a sudden told to film ten episodes in a week, for example. He claims that in such conditions it is impossible to make high quality programs. As I have pointed out above some of the constraining conditions for making television

make the program. He said cynically he hasn't got a clue where the money disappears (in hands of various people between!?).

programs, Chinese television programs are not just sheer products of government controls. The reason for them appearing somewhat “backward” often comes from the lack of funding, capital, skills, technology and plans rather than ideological issues.

Chronotopes

In this paper I have chosen to discuss two particular icons from two different television programs: Xiao Feng from “Tianlong babu”(which I have translated as “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture”) and Wang Zili from “Renzi”(Which I have translated as “The son”). I must stress that there are no television programs that can be called “ the most popular” or “the typical” Chinese television programs. So, the problem of doing my research is always how to choose the icons to be discussed. I have chosen these two icons for the following reasons. I have chosen “Tianlong babu” because most people I have talked to have agreed that the hero of this story, Xiao Feng, is considered to be a yingxiong renwu(a hero). This program was very popular in Beijing around March 1999, and at that time it was broadcasted by eleven different television stations. “Renzi” was chosen because Wang Zili, the hero of this television drama, bears a strong resemblance to other Communist icons such as Lei Feng⁹, and the narrative of this story also seemed to comply to the official ways to describe heroes.

“The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture” is a Hong Kong martial art television drama based on the novel of the same name by the very famous martial arts writer Jin You . This story is located in the Song Dynasty when China was divided into small countries and was in rather chaotic state due to conflict between these small countries. This story consists of three parts, and each story has a different hero. In this paper I

⁹ Lei Feng is the best known hero or model soldier in China. He was an orphan who had suffered much due to the evil of capitalism and the Guomindang before 1949, the year before the establishment of the PRC. Born to the peasant family, he was a worker in a steel mill before joining the PLA and CCP. He was “always helpful” and a tireless servant of the people. In 1962, Lei Feng died in an accident at the age of 22. He ardently studied the multi-volume complete works of Chairman Mao, and left a diary which confirms his devotion to the CCP and Socialism. The “Emulate Lei Feng” campaign was launched in China by Chairman Mao in 1963. (originally from Lin 1992 & Farquhar 1996 used in my Research Report) For more information to those who can read Chinese, go to Web site <www.leifeng.com>

shall look at the story of Xiao Feng. He is a martial arts master who is originally of the Qidan nationality, however, as his parents were killed when he was a baby he was raised by people of the Han nationality, and he grew up without knowing the secret of his birth. One day Xiao Feng discovers the secret and searches for his real parents and nationality. Unfortunately when Xiao Feng eventually discovers his real nationality and get to the land of Qidan, Qidan decides to invade the Han nation. Xiao Feng being a martial arts master, is asked by the king of Qidan nation asks Xiao Feng to help Qidan in the invasion. Xiao Feng was torn apart between the two nations - The Han nation which had raised him and taught him martial arts, and the Qidan nation which is the country of his ancestors. Unable to choose between them, Xiao Feng in the end kills himself.

“The son” is modeled on the story of a Beijing University Physics department student called Wu Saijun who has been praised in the newspaper as “mofan da xuesheng” (model university student). It is the story of a university student called Wang Zili set in the current time. Wang Zili is from a very poor family from a poor region. He won a scholarship due to his good character and academic achievement. One day he discovers that his mother suffers from Uraemia¹⁰. His father has lost his job, so there is no money in the family to pay for his mother’s treatment. He works night and day with four hours sleep a day to raise money for his mother’s treatment as well as at the same time keeping up his studies at the university. However, his mother’s illness only gets worse, and the only way to save her life is to get kidney transplant which cost RMB 200,000 (approx. US\$25,000). Of course Wang Zili’s family cannot pay such a lot of money, so Wang Zili decides to leave university. His classmates gradually get influenced by Wang Zili’s spirit of never giving up to save his mother, and help him to raise money so that Wang Zili can remain at university. In the end they manage to raise the RMB 200,000. The drama ends Wang Zili kneeling down in front of the donation box to express his unexpressible gratefulness to the people who helped him save his mother.

¹⁰ Uraemia is an illness which raise level of nitrogenous waste compounds in blood that are normally eliminated by the kidneys. (Oxford English Reference Dictionary)

To attempt to examine what is actually happening on Chinese television programs, I will use Bakhtin's concept of chronotope as an analytical device to examine how icons are unfolded in narratives.

Bakhtin states that time and space are intrinsically connected, and he call this intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships "chronotope" (literally meaning "time-space"). According to Bakhtin, everything happens within a specific chronotope, so an icon is associated with a specific chronotope. Bakhtin further states that each chronotope provides the ground for representing events and determines an "image of the person"¹¹ to a significant degree. Highlighting the similarity between an "image of the person" and an icon, it can be argued that the chronotopes also provides the ground for representing the icons to a significant degree. He analyses three basic chronotopes developed in the ancient novels which later developed into chronotopes used in European literature. They are chronotopes of "The Adventure novel of ordeals", "The adventure novel of everyday life", and "The Ancient biographical novel". Even though Bakhtin's analysis is based on Greek myths and European literature, and does not assume any universal application as they are limited to a specific cultural and historical context, the principle of the analysis can be applied here. Due to the limitation of space, I shall not look into the the three basic chronotopes in this paper, instead, I shall go straight into the analysis of chronotopes surrounding two icons by contrasting them with Bakhtin's analysis of three basic chronotopes developed.

Before I go into my discussion, I shall first look into the official idea of how heroes are supposed to be represented in Chinese television. I believe that it is helpful to keep in mind how heroes are supposed to be represented when we examine how they are actually described. In China, there seems to be a lot of stereotyping for various icons which appear on television, and it seems there are ways in which differently

¹¹ 'obraz cheloveka' sometimes translated as "the image of man" (Morson & Emerson 1990:370)

stereotyped icons are supposed to be described. Whilst following the television course, I have been taught how to describe different types of people on several occasions. One of my teachers Mr Chu once told us that it is easy to describe yingxiong renwu (heroes), because all you have to do is follow set narratives (“taohua” in Chinese). According to Mr Chu “yingxiong renwu” are supposed to be described as follows:

1. Start from what the great thing he/she did - one particular incident perhaps.
2. Background for what has happened.
3. His/her academic career and work unit.
4. Family background.
5. How he/she was working.
6. His/her contribution to bigger the environment (da huanjing)
7. Perhaps his/her character (gexing), like speaking ability etc.

Mr Chu said what is important here is that you shouldn't portray the person too greatly but not too ordinarily either. He told us to illustrate the person from points of views which audience can feel more familiar. According to him, each of the sections above should have details that illustrate his/her style and character (fengge gexing). He also told us to interview people around heroes like his/her friends, colleagues, classmates, or family. The story could be told in three ways: 1. the reporter introducing the heroes which Teacher Chu thinks is the best way; 2. the objective (keguan) way which is often used to portray government promoted heroes; 3. the heroes self portrait.

I must point out that Mr Chu like many others made no distinction between mofan renwu (model figures) and yingxiong renwu (heroes), but it is not my aim here to explore the criteria of classification of icons into various categories. It seemed to me that many icons who appear on Chinese television are described more or less along this line, and this seems to be one of the reasons why various icons often resemble one another regardless of what they might have done. In the section below, I shall

compare and discuss how the actual programs differ from what has been officially recommended, and to what extent this ideological vision is working on Chinese viewers engaging heroes in television.

Analysis of chronotope surrounding Xiao Feng in “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture”

1. Plots of this type of narrative are remarkably similar, as they are all based on the the “spirit of xia”, the chivalrous spirit.
2. Even though there are some aspects of “romance” involved, romantic love is not regarded as the main theme of the story. So, this story is not based on the “adventure time” in which all the action unfolds between the first meeting of the hero and heroine and their successful union in marriage.
3. Nothing changes. There is no biological or maturational duration, so time leaves no trace. Like adventure novels, human movements are the basic indices for its chronotope.
4. Like soap operas, the story consists of an “indefinitely expandable middle”. It could be said that each segment of adventure which Xiao Feng goes through is complete in itself, and would almost be switched into any order. At the same time, there is still a sense of sequence of the episodes creating a notion of linear continuance as the story is working up from revelation of Xiao Feng’s secret of birth to the condition which makes him kill himself in the end. So, this is a mixture of time as used in adventure novels and soap operas.
5. The story is opened to the intrusion of non-human forces -fate, Gods, villains- which take all the initiatives and “fate” runs through the game - the hero endures the game played by remaining what he was or without any change in what he was. Fate (mingyun) plays a particularly important role in this story. The fate of Xiao Feng as the tragic hero plays the key role in the development of the whole story.
6. The majority of adventures are organised as trials of the hero which affirms his nobility, courage, strength, fearlessness and intelligence. So, the novel as a whole is conceived as a test of hero.

7. There are many fortune-tellings, omens, legends, oracular predictions, prophetic dreams and predictions.
8. It is opened to sheer chance. The words like “suddenly” or “by mistake” are often used.
9. There are some traces of the era and indications of historical time. The approximate historical time can be figured out especially from the dresses, ways of living, names of the places etc. Yet, the space is revealed as an alien world, and it could be said that it also appears to be an exotic world: everything in it is indefinite, unknown, foreign, including the hero’s homeland. So there is no confusion between the real-time chronotope and the chronotope of the story.
10. Both social and family ties exist in the story. Xiao Feng exists “in the folk”, his own native people (though this is a complicated point, because he is a Qidan native yet grew up among Han people), and he exists for others. The initial motivation to start this adventures are not private but public. This seems to be a very important aspect for Chinese heroes. Heroes are heroic because they dedicate themselves to the interest of others, ultimately for righteousness (Zhenyi) .
11. The hero’s internal content has political and social significance, though at the same time it is absolutely private. Xiao Feng leads a solitary existence. His parents were killed, he himself kills his wife by mistake. There are still brothers through brotherhood, and some friends and mates, Xiao Feng being the head of the organisation which helps the state and good people who are in the need of help. So in this sense Xiao Feng’s solitary existence is arguable. In the following section, I shall expand on the topic of Xiao Feng’s private existence by drawing upon the conversations I had with Wang Lei and Miss Guo.
12. He is strong, yet he does not use his martial art skills for personal reasons, but uses it according to the chivalrous spirit (“the spirit of the Xia”).
13. The hero is not a perfect being. For instance, he killed his wife by mistake.
14. The story consists of multiple characters and plots, and it is open for a variety of readings and reading positions, though Xiao Feng always seems heroic. So, like soap operas, it is possible to say that the public wholeness of individual does not quite exits here.

The chronotope surrounding Wang Zili in "Renzi"

1. Plots of this type of narrative are similar to each other. Miss Guo, however, claims that this one is a bit different from the other stories of this type, I shall go back to this point in the following section.
2. It consists of a series of short segments that correspond to separate adventures, and the majority of these adventures are organised as trials of the hero's nobility, courage, strength, fearlessness and intelligence. This point makes me wonder whether Wang Zili has the above qualities of a hero? In the following section, I shall present the discussion with Wang Lei on this topic.
3. Wang Zili is not perfect. He makes mistakes and there are shortcomings in his character as well.
4. Like soap operas, this story lacks narrative closure, and consists of an "indefinitely expandable middle". It could be said that each crisis Wang Zili goes through is complete in itself, but cannot be watched in any order, because the precise sequence of the episodes creates a notion of continuance which is linear and irreversible.
5. The story of "Renzi" is in a metamorphosis, but there is no 'becoming' in the character of the hero. Here, the metamorphosis is from ordinary student to model son. It is important to note that unlike what he has been introduced as on television magazines and newspapers, Wang Zili is not quite an "ordinary" student. He is from a very poor family, he won a scholarship, and he works hard, and his morals and character are very good. Like most narratives of this type, the metamorphosis takes place as the most important aspect of this type of icons.
6. Wang Zili is essentially dramatic. The full existence of the hero is realised through his deeds and sentiments.
7. His actions are led less by public and more by personal motivations --such as to save his mother who suffers from uraemia. Like in the case of soap operas, his actions are caused by strong emotions -- in this case, his overwhelming feelings for his mother. So, I argue that there is a significant shift from the traditional heroes of this type whose actions are motivated by the good for the country or people.
8. Unlike the protagonists in "adventure novels of everyday life", Wang Zili participates in everyday life. The environment here is not at all foreign.

6. Wang Zili exists in an organic human collective, “in the folk”, his own native folk. Family ties which are often not emphasised in this type of novel make up the central collective. The importance of the state and society is not directly highlighted, yet it is portrayed through the family existing in the bigger collective, such as society and the state. The outer collective being *qunti* (group) then *shehui* (society) and central collective being Wang Zili’s family, are strongly united under the theme to save Wang Zili’s mother through the help of the outer collective, from his classmates and eventually from the people all over the country who get strongly moved and influenced by Wang Zili.¹²

7. There is no evolution, but the hero experiences crisis and rebirth. The moments of crisis and rebirth shape the definitive image of the man. In the face of a crisis, at first Wang Zili is private and confronts the problem on his own, then later on he realises that he is not alone and that he always exists among others.

8. The image of the man is extremely simple and performed according to a specific profession. Wang Lei stresses this point, and argues that these types of heroes are not considered as *yingxiong renwu* because they are just fulfilling their *renwu* (task), nothing more. I shall come back to this point in the following section.

9. Wang Zili’s internal content has social significance, and perhaps it could be said that it also has political significance in terms of following questions: why was this story made? is he the model that others should follow?

10. Like in soap operas, Wang Zili is revealed in the real-time chronotope, so it causes the confusion between the real-time and the time of the episode. Wang Zili appears as a person existing independently of the narrative situations shown in the serial, and the viewers talk about him in the same way as they talk about people in daily life. I think this is a problem for viewers to accept him - he appears as a real person, yet he is too unrealistic to be a real person.

11. Unlike other narratives of this type, there isn’t any platonic type of chronotope of “the course of one seeking the knowledge”.

12. This television drama is based on the real person revealed in the form of “encomium” - verbal phrases of civic and political acts or real human beings giving a

¹² From Beijing Youth Daily 12th Jan. 1999 PP.1, 2.

public account of himself, like many others of this type of narratives, and in this case the former.

13. This story is not open to a variety of readings and reading positions, unlike soap operas. Wang Zili stands as a public wholeness of the individual who is opened on all sides and completely on the surface, so everything about him is subjected to public or state control and evaluation.

14. The role of “romance” in contemporary narratives of this type need to be emphasised. A bit of Wang Zili’s romance is also incorporated, even though it is not a central theme. “Romance” seems to be an important aspect in the attempt to adjust traditional revolutionary heroes into a modern form. Recently in the Beijing Youth Daily there was an article of Lei Feng’s girlfriend back in the 1960s. This seems to be the attempt to popularise these type of icons through the use of soap opera type of story plots.

15. Apart from the condition of Wang Zili’s mother’ illness, “fate” does not play an important role in this story.

Wang Zili and Xiao Feng are described quite differently. Wang Zili complies with the official way to describe heroes, though there is an attempt to incorporate some aspects of soap operas by putting the emphasis on family ties and friendships as well as inserting some “romance”. Whereas in most narratives of this type, the dominant relationship is that which exists between icons and the state. In this story Wang Zili’s emotions and feelings dominate throughout the series, and most of his actions are led by strong emotions and feelings as opposed to the lofty ideals of a hero commonly seen in this type of narratives. There has been an attempt by social scientists to bring down from the unrealistic level of perfection that the slogans and models display to a level with which people can feel more familiar. Zhang Xiaoqian(1998:179) writes that a hero with some weakness will allow growth (chenzhang) of personality in going through various difficulties (monan) and such growth will convince people more effectively. Xiao Feng was described in a completely different style of narrative from the official way in which these heroes are portrayed. He was revealed in the unfamiliar environment where everything appears to be rather exotic. This story is

dominated by the relationship between Xiao Feng and righteousness, and his action is led by lofty ideas. Xiao Feng is also portrayed as a great rather than an ordinary human being who is becoming something more than himself because of these ideas. I believe that Xiao Feng is described in the narrative closer to narratives of the heroes in Classical Chinese novels. The interesting thing is that most Chinese people I have talked to regarded Xiao Feng as a hero, whereas nobody described Wang Zili as heroic apart from television magazine and newspaper articles.

Are heroes in Chinese television supposed to be role models for the audience? Are they supposed to be emulated? Do they carry any messages? For whom? What kind of effect do they have on people? How do Chinese viewers engage with the heroes on the television?

People have different reactions to icons on Chinese television in different situations. Wang Lei has instant hatred towards any kind of narratives like "The Son" and icons like Wang Zili. He just says that there is nothing worth talking about, and does not even tell me why. On 14th April 1999, in the afternoon when Miss Guo, Wang Lei and I were chatting at his office, I insisted on him explaining to me why he hates programs like "The Son" or icons like Wang Zili so much? Wang Lei accused me of being inadequate for asking him such a question. Wang Lei argued that it is not like the Cultural Revolution time in which people have to learn from model figures and have to have strong feeling of admiration for them. In this generation, he said, people can like them or not, it's a personal choice, so he just does not like them.

I thought this is an interesting point to bring in the issue of the extent to which the ideological vision is working. Wang Lei's comment reminded me of the conversation which I once had with Dr Zhang who is an anthropologist at the Chinese Social science Institute (26th May 1998). Dr Zhang told me about Li Suli who is a current model figure for Beijing at the moment. According to Dr Zhang, at the beginning when she was just promoted as a model figure (mofan renwu), he didn't like Li Suli, and wondered how many people actually liked her. As time went by, the more the government promoted her as a model figure of Beijing, the more Dr Zhang said he

could not help but accept her as a hero (in this case heroine). I must mention that Dr Zhang considers a model figure and a hero can be equated. Dr Zhang argued that the status of hero does not need to be recognised by others, the hero can be imposed over people. Whereas Wang Lei's comment suggest quite opposite of Dr Zhang's opinion.

Miss Guo helped me to continue interrogating Wang Lei. She said to Wang Lei that of course what he said was true, but Makiko just wants to know why you don't like these television dramas or icons. Wang Lei reluctantly told us that there are mainly two reasons why he does not like them. First, it is because they appear to be so fake. Wang Lei read a newspaper article about "The Son" and says he knows exactly which part is supposed to make you moved and which part should make you cry before you actually watching the program. Wang Lei said of course he is also human, so he gets moved and feels sorry for Wang Zili, but in real life there are many more people with more difficulties and in worse situations than Wang Zili, and they make you feel sorry and move you even more. So, Wang Lei claimed that he does not like the kind of story or icon which demands you to feel sorry for the hero, sympathise him and make you admire him for what he does, but in fact they only appear to be so fake. Miss Guo takes quite the opposite view of Wang Lei. She argues that that what is different about "The Son" from other stories of this type is that Wang Zili does not demand viewers to feel sorry for him or give any sympathy. She thought the program and the icon were very realistic. She thought the actor who played Wang Zili acted particularly well, and brought out the feeling of a young man from the countryside, especially his shyness and his upright character. The interesting thing was that after hearing Miss Guo's opinion Wang Lei denied that he ever said they looked fake.

The second reason which Wang Lei raised was that he (Wang Lei himself) is a has-been (wangdan). Wang Lei explained that like Wang Shuo¹³ who used to be popular around 1992 to 1994, described in his earlier work when he sees anything which everyone is saying is good, then he always wants to find out a reason for it not to be

¹³The famous contemporary Chinese writer who is known for his sarcastic tones of writing and his use of Beijing slang.

good. Miss Guo asked Wang Lei whether he actually means that if everyone says it's good and they like it, then he doesn't like it? Wang Lei admitted so with a big grin on his face. So, the reason he does not like programs like "The Son" or icons like Wang Zili is in fact because they are praised in newspapers and TV magazines everywhere, and he just wanted to disagree and criticise them. I have actually noticed this tendency with Wang Lei that if you take any extreme position then he will take the opposite and challenge your opinion. This is a quite an interesting point which illustrates well the situational and dialogic nature of how viewers engage with icons in television and sometimes an ideological vision can be of no use.

I have discussed with Wang Lei whether Wang Zili possesses the qualities to become a hero. Before I get into the discussion which took place, I shall examine what qualities are needed to become a hero, and how they are differentiated from ordinary people. The hero must be, Zhang writes, a "real person" who has common (worldly) life, yet the hero has to be different from ordinary people in terms of outstanding qualities, character and morals. So Zhang Xiaoqiang(1998:177) writes such fixed qualities of heroic nature as:

1. lofty ideals
2. outstanding achievements
3. firm, persistent, and courageous character
4. a devoted (dedicated) spirit

In the narratives of heroes, it seems quite important that for these qualities can positively influence people around the heroes themselves. In this respect, I believe that Wang Zili seems to have the appropriate qualities, character and morals, though he may lack the lofty ideals.

I asked Wang Lei whether he thinks Wang Zili has the character, moral and potential to be a hero? Wang Lei simply admitted that he has, despite his objections against Wang Zili. I pointed out to him that I thought he had told me before that Wang Zili cannot be considered as a hero. He said "yeah, he is not a hero". Hearing Wang Lei's responses up to this point, I was completely lost: why Wang Zili has the qualities to be a hero, does good deeds which influence others, yet he is still not a hero? Am I

presupposing the connection between heroic character and actually being a hero? Wang Lei laughed at me and said that Wang Zili's moral, character and thought are all heroic, but he is not like Xiao Feng who helped the state. Wang Zili was an ordinary student who suddenly faced the problem of his mother being ill. Had he not been faced by this problem, Wang Zili would have continued studying and then started to work. Wang Lei thinks if he exists in real life then he is a type of person who go to fight against flood like Li Xiangqun¹⁴, the hero of the fighting against the flood campaign. Miss Guo agreed on this point. Wang Lei argues that Wang Zili has the kind of sense of responsibility and potential to be a hero. Wang Lei said that in China people say the nature of the man is good. This was a case an ordinary university student who just happened to have the opportunity to express his goodness through facing the problem of his mother's illness. His comments left me two questions: In this case does everyone have the potential to become a hero? Is it the situation that makes the person to become the hero?

On other occasions, I discussed with Wang Lei about Wang Zili's influence on others, and to what extent he change others. I remembered him once telling me that one of the criteria for judging a hero is the ability to change people around him. Wang Lei said he can see that Wang Zili may be great (weida), good person (haoren), sympathetic (tongqing) etc. but what is the use of those feelings? Wang Lei said Wang Zili changed people by emotions, but Wang Lei thinks that the emotion cannot change people. He also said twenty years ago when the country was changing, television could have influenced the way people were in many ways, but now it's impossible, as in the present climate people are going their own ways, they have their own concerns in life and television can no longer change that.

¹⁴ Li Xiangqun was born in Hainan province in 1978. He was born in the very wealthy entrepreneur family, yet he always wanted to join the PLA, and in 1996 he had joined. In 1998, he joined the party to fight against the flood at the frontier of Hubei province. Unfortunately, due to excessive workloads in the hardships, he dies. In 1999, the central government has chosen him as a "heroic fighter of the new generation" ("xin shidai de yingxiong zhenshi"), and encourage people to study and learn from him. (Beijing Youth Daily 5th May 1999: P.1)

We also addressed the difference between heroic deeds and fulfilling one's duty. On 8th Feb. 1999, in the afternoon when I was chatting alone with Wang Lei, I told him that I had read an article of a Beijing television newspaper saying that Wang Zili's love for his mother expressed Chinese people's love for their motherland. Wang Lei commented "that's bull shit" in English. I must admit that as an anthropologist what is written in Chinese newspapers is often attractive, as many things are described, explained and signified in rather flowery language. Wang Lei hates this kind of narrative. He once told me that he is a patriot, and that patriotism comes from the heart. He considers all such newspaper patriotism as superficial, and as such despicable. Wang Lei argued that Wang Zili just tried to save his mother, though it could be said that Wang Zili was an extreme case, but what else was he supposed to do? Wang Lei argued that Wang Zili cannot be even considered as a model, because he is just fulfilling his task like everyone else. So, Wang Lei regards the act of Wang Zili as merely the fulfillment of his duty rather than a heroic deed.

We also had a discussion on how Wang Lei feels in terms of emulating icons who appear on Chinese television. I asked him how he feels when he watches Wang Zili type programs or broadcasts on the PLA fighting the flood? Doesn't he feel like emulating them? Wang Lei responded to me that he doesn't want to emulate or even feel like emulating them, because they have their duty (as he said in English) and he has his own duty. Wang Lei also commented that they do good deeds because those are their duties, so why does he (as Wang Lei) need to emulate this or donates a huge amount of money? Wang Lei said he is a practical man, so he focuses on doing his jobs and obligations well, and he believes that he does it very well. If Wang Zili were a hero, then he is also a hero. I then asked Wang Lei whether he doesn't feel anything at all watching people like Wang Zili? He said of course he feels like doing good things, but not bad things, then again, he said he doesn't feel like helping out those people who are in the need of help. I asked him if everyone were to think like him then why are there so many television programs about people doing good deeds? Wang Lei told me that there is a saying in Chinese "the nature of the people is good, so if they get close to something good their nature will naturally appear" (Ren Zhi chu

xing ben shen xing xian jin xi xian yuan). According to Wang Lei this is why “good” is pushed to the extreme and exposed to the audience in Chinese television.

When I ask Wang Lei questions on “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture”, he seems to be more keen to answer. It seems “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture” does not have some kind of underlying propaganda or obvious ideological plan for producing heroes, so it seems to be easier for Wang Lei to appreciate the program just as an entertainment. It may also have to do with the chronotope of “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture” being easier to distinguish from the real-time chronotope. So, Wang Lei does not have to feel that the hero is too fake to be real, as he can accept that Xiao Feng is not a person in real life. What surprised me even more in talking to Wang Lei about “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture” was that he is all for the idea of Xiao Feng being a tragic hero (beiju yingxiong). Wang Lei says about Xiao Feng that he has a heroic character, that he is great, but the condition he is in is no good, because fate is always against him. Wang Lei thinks this makes Xiao Feng look even more tragic.

On March 19th, 1999, around lunch time, Miss Guo, Wang Lei, and I were chatting. I asked Wang Lei where Xiao Feng’s strength lies? He first thought that what I meant was his physical strength. He responded that Qidan nationals are talented in the martial arts and that many martial arts masters took pity on him and taught Xiao Feng well, so he also became a master of discipline. I asked him what about Xiao Feng’s mental and spiritual strength. The mental or spiritual strength are Godly(tianshan de). Wang Lei cited as an example Xiao Feng taking care of Aci, his sister in law even though she puts him into lots of trouble. He did so because Azhu, his wife, and whom he killed by mistake told him to do so as she died. Wang Lei described this as a commitment, and that Xiao Feng’s commitment is such that he no longer cares about himself and consequently sacrifices himself to help others.

I asked Wang Lei how Xiao Feng differs from Lei Feng in this respect? Wang Lei told me that you can say that they are the same to some extent. Then Wang Lei put up his little finger and said that Lei Feng is like this, he is a small insignificant

person(xiao renwu), he is an ordinary person who became a hero. Lei Feng did sacrifice himself for helping other people, but Xiao Feng is Godly (tianshan de) hero who is not at the level of cleaning the floor for others and doing communal work. According to Wang Lei, tianshan is not something at the individual level, it helps the nation and changes the history of the nation. So I pointed out that what he meant was that Xiao Feng and Lei Feng differ in scale (guimo), and Wang Lei agreed. Then Wang Lei added that what Lei Feng did is also great, and that we shouldn't talk about him in such an evil manner, as he himself cannot do such things such as Lei Feng did. The interesting thing about talking to Wang Lei is that if I take too extreme a side in an opinion or criticise something/someone too harshly, he immediately takes the opposite opinion to neutralise my comment by adding something good about what/who has been criticised, even though he himself has rather extreme opinions. I have also noticed that quite often when I have conversations with Chinese people, apart from Li Ming who assert his own opinions no matter what others may say, that even though during conversations there may be some disagreement, in the end we usually reach some kind of an agreement and a neutral conclusion.

On April 8th, 1999 in the afternoon, I discussed with Wang Lei about Xiao Feng's solitary existence. I asked him whether it is possible to say that Xiao Feng is lonely(I used the term gudu which denotes loneliness). Wang Lei responded in saying that all heroes lead solitary existence, don't they? I asked him to expand on this point. Wang Lei told me that a hero has higher ideals and thoughts than most people. So even though he has some ideas or thoughts, he has no one who can understand him, and people may not follow him because they cannot understand him. Wang Lei described Xiao Feng as being forever lonely. I asked him what about his family, brothers from brotherhood and friends? Wang Lei thinks in this respect Xiao Feng is lonely as he has no family. Wang Lei thinks Xiao Feng's friends and brothers are no use because they are far from being heroes themselves, so nobody can understand Xiao Feng. As a hero at a higher level, he has nobody with whom he can share his thoughts. Wang Lei continued that it could be said that the reason Xiao Feng's life is so tragic is because he is a hero. Wang Lei said if it were Duanyu, Xiao Feng's brotherhood brother, he could have been satisfied with a life with a beautiful woman, a beautiful

marriage, and no more, however, Xiao Feng has higher ideals and could not be content with such a life, so in the end he had to commit suicide.

On March 11th, 1999 in the afternoon - I was anxious to know what makes Xiao Feng so heroic, but Wang Lei claimed that this is something impossible to explain without reading the book. I told him that I have started reading the book. Then Wang Lei told me with irritation that I still cannot feel why Xiao Feng is so heroic. A little later, I heard Wang Lei explaining to a friend of mine who is a foreigner how you are supposed to enjoy the "Water margin" which is very well know classic story of heroes. Wang Lei asked my friend who left you the strongest impression? Wang Lei explained to him that he does not have to understand the story or the meaning behind it, it is the feeling one gets about people in the story. This comment explained to me what I was so anxious to know, a hero is probably someone who one must be able to feel is heroic. This may also be why even though Wang Zili is somebody who possess many factors to be a hero, yet he is still far from being a hero. If this is the case, then may be I am interrogating Wang Lei with the wrong questions, and pursuing something completely different from how viewers engage with heroes on television.

Some problems on doing television research

At the beginning of my fieldwork and sometimes still now, I watch some television programs which are discussed in the newspapers. I try to analyse and think about them, then ask Chinese friends some questions based on my theories or the analysis which I come up with. Often there is not much for them to say other than yes or no. Gradually, I realized that what is important about the story for me may not necessarily be the case for Chinese friends of mine. My analysis was often beyond their concern or understanding, so they didn't comment on my questions as for them there were not much to say.

It is very hard to say what different Chinese people like to watch or what will become popular until the program is actually get broadcasted and people talk about programs at a bus stop, on a bus, or in a shop. For instance, “The Son” was so widely advertised and written in television magazines and newspaper as if the program will be so worth watching and everyone will be watching . I read the newspaper articles on "The Son" and I watched the series rather intensely (I even recorded the program). Once I figured out what was going on, I discovered that it is not that popular at all and most of my friends haven't even watched it. Whereas “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture” is very well advertised and it is indeed very popular. Big sections of many newspapers were dedicated to discussion of “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture”, and at its peak it was broadcasted on the eleven television stations. Of course they are completely different type of stories locating at different times. Besides, “The Son” is mainland production and “The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture” was made in Hong Kong. I am not arguing that Hong Kong television programs are more popular than the ones from the Mainland, even though quite often Hong Kong made programs may have high production value. For instance, “Liehuo Kuangben” (“Run Quickly Like Raging Fire”) did not seem popular at all. This was despite the main role being played by Aron Kwok, one of the most popular Hong Kong pop idol who is one of “The four heavenly kings”(si da tian wang), does the main role did not seem popular at all. At this stage of my research I still have not found out some of the patterns for what Chinese television viewers like or dislike, and I need to look into this topic further in my research.

The problem for researchers who have read much literature on popular culture in China is that one is prone to too readily attaching importance to the terms like “The four heavenly kings”(“si da tian wang”), or names like Cui Jian, China's most famous mainland rock singer. The fact of the matter is that time moves on, and trends change. Many anthropologists seem to hang on to what Bakhtin calls the sum of past performances. It is impossible to keep up with the newest trend of television programs because new television programs are always coming out and they do not wait for me to analyse them, yet I cannot talk about a television program which has

been broadcasted a few years ago or even a few months ago, and expect viewers to tell me what they thought at that time.

At one point I was interested in suffering heroes. This was mainly because my teacher Mr Zhang once told us in class that in times of economic hardship, the audience wants to watch people in even harder and more difficult conditions, so they can feel better about themselves. When I heard this comment it sounded very convincing and all of sudden I actually noticed that there are lots of programs of people in hardship recently. When I was doing research on "The Son", I heard about the film called "Meishi touzhe le" ("Enjoy Life!") from Wang Lei. I simply drew the line between Wang Zili and Damin, the main character of this story "Meishi touzhe le", because they were both poor and struggling to make living by facing various problems, though their problems and attitudes to problems are different. I watched this film, and analysed it carefully, then talked to Li Ming who happened to watched it too. Li Ming asked me whether I understood what people in the film were saying. He said what was haower (Colloquial Beijing expression for fun) about this film is the way Damin talks. I just agreed while Li Ming expected me to say more. Then, Li Ming told me no, you haven't got it. I told him I thought Damin's mumbling was funny. He pointed out that this was a performance of shengxian, a classic style of comedy talk of China, and the main actor who played Damin is a famous performer of shengxian. When I heard this I said "Ahh, I got it!", and he cynically mimicked my "Ahh". I have realized that I was analysing the story, but I totally missed the point from how people actually enjoy the film. Li Ming's comment suddenly reminded me of how popular shengxian is in Beijing, and I even remembered that this actor was actually in the Chinese new year special program performing shengxian. People seemed to enjoy this film not particularly because they see people in harsher condition than themselves so that they can feel happy about themselves, but because of shengxian, though I am sure there are also some other reasons. A few weeks later, Miss Guo pointed out to me that in China there are so many television programs in which the main characters are set with hardships, and they struggle with various problems in life. This made me think that these types of heroes always existed in

China, and the reason we see them on the television is probably not wholly to do with this recent economic depression in China as Teacher Zhang has pointed out.

Practice of watching

I have been having a problem following television programs in China, because in general one or two episodes are broadcasted everyday from each series, and often showing of popular programs are shown at similar time schedules. I tried hard not to miss any episodes so that I can follow the story, but it was rather difficult. I got exhausted because I watched television so intensely for a long time everyday, and it used up most of my evening. One day it occurred to me probably Chinese viewers may have different ways of engaging with television.

In Chinese cinema, I often get annoyed by noises of people talking throughout the film. I often wonder what are they talking about? For instance, when I went to watch film called "Lianxin" ("Good Heart"), a crying girl appeared on the screen. I heard several people pointing out that she is crying as soon as this scene appeared. I heard some people predicting why she is crying, and commenting how they feel towards this girl. I even heard some people discussing whether she is pretty or not. What made me rather surprised even more was that some people enter and leave the theater in the middle of the film. I occasionally see some people come in in the middle of the film then continue watching of the next showing until the same scene they have started appear on the screen. Wang Lei pointed out to me that Chinese audiences and Western audiences are different. If you watch a play in the West, the audience is quiet and watches intensely. Whereas in China, the audience eat and talk among their friends on a topic which may have nothing to do with the play, yet neither the performers nor the other audience particularly seem to mind about this sort of behavior. Wang Lei said Chinese people do not experience the feelings and emotions of the people in the story they are watching, whereas the Western audience often takes the feelings of the characters in stories as their own and enjoys plays that way. It seemed to me, the experience for Chinese people to watch films in the cinema is quite

close to watching television at home. In the West, I think that going to a cinema involves more intense practice of viewing than watching television at home.

In China, if there is a television drama which becomes very popular, then different television stations tend to show different episodes from the same program at the similar time (i.e. golden hour) on the same day. This happens quite often in China, because each television station independently buys a television drama from television production companies from Hong Kong, or Taiwan etc. One television station shows a later episode, whereas the other station has just started showing the beginning of the very same series. This means that one will know what will happen eventually without going about all the building up of feeling, emotions and tensions. I have mentioned this problem to several Chinese friends of mine, but none of them can understand why I must see it in serial from the beginning, and they seem to have no problem with the way things are. Perhaps I have a quite different way of watching television, as I am a foreigner and that my understanding of Chinese is not good as theirs, so I must watch more intensely than they do. Besides, I need to watch television carefully because I study it. Often, some Chinese people do not mind missing a few details or even a few episodes. For instance, Wang Cui, a friend of mine, watches several television programs at the same time by switching between channels. Apparently all my friends with whom I have talked admitted that they do the same. I often hear people discussing on buses and in shops whether the progress of the story is appropriate or not. In fact when I talk to my friends about television programs, this is the topic often comes up. Most people I have talked to prefer the progress of the story to be fast. I often hear people complaining about television programs "tai man", meaning too slow. This can often be the criteria by which people decide not to watch a particular program. Among all these television stations which show the same program, the most watched television station is the one in which the story progresses the fastest.

I have also noticed that many Chinese people have rather personal relation to icons, meaning actors, actresses and stars themselves who appear on television. In general, Chinese people know very well about various stars' personal lives. Many newspapers

dedicate big sections to report the personal lives of the actors and actresses in the popular television drama series. I was again talking to Wang Lei about the Chinese New Year program. I was more concerned about significance, styles, or effects of this particular program which is carefully supervised by the government. Whereas Wang Lei was very concerned about a very famous Canadian comedian called Dashan and his personal life. Dashan appeared on this New Year program and he speaks excellent Chinese. Wang Lei asked me if he is really married to Chinese wife? Is she beautiful(piaolian)? What kind of job does she have? Is Dashan still work for the Canadian embassy? On the other occasion, when United States' President Clinton visited China, I was watching a news program with Wang Lei. I noticed that he was so carefully watching what kind of things President Clinton brought over, his clothes, whether his wife is beautiful or not, whether his daughter is slim or not etc. I used to get irritated by Wang Lei's preoccupations with such things, as I felt that it is not supposed to be what he should be watching. Gradually, I learnt that such ways of engaging icons on the television is quite common in China, and there is no such way of how you are supposed to be watching as I had previously thought.

What I have described above is only a part of the practice of viewing in China. It is difficult to describe some of these practices without really overgeneralising about Chinese people, and I am not saying that all Chinese people follow such practices. Also, It is not my intention to say that Chinese people have rather "exotic" or "particular" ways of engaging with television, and is it not my intention to say Chinese people engage with television like we in the West do, if there is any such generalised way of engaging.

Conclusion

Even though "The Eight Figures of the Buddhist Scripture" was very popular, of course, there were people who didn't watch it. Wang Cui told me that she doesn't like Hong Kong television dramas in which people just fight against one another. She also said that she doesn't like the television drama which doesn't have any historical

significance. Then she added television dramas are resistible if you don't watch them, but once you see one episode, it becomes impossible to not watch the rest of the series. I think whatever she gives me as a reason for not watching the program, the bottom line is her last comment. Anthropologists may seek reasons for people to like certain television programs, and analyse the audience in the bigger framework of ideology (or probably I just don't know various arguments and theories going on in the West...), but the minds of audience seem to be more situational and active than the theories we arrive at. It is very easy to just pick the television program which matches what I want to say, as there are huge numbers of television programs being broadcasted everyday. Imagine a year or more's worth of television programs to choose and match from! But the matter of the fact is they become just a collection of past performances which are meaningless. Practices of watching television and engaging icons are active and situational so these uncontextualised programs and comments are no use for understanding such practices. This will only become the case where researchers pursue their own preoccupations and draw connections between their preoccupations and these past performances which otherwise have no relationship.

Not all Chinese people are like the way I have discussed above. This is only a part of how different Chinese people watch television and engage with icons in Chinese television, and there are many other different kinds and degrees of watching television and engaging icons. The key is that I do not know them all and I will never know completely.

I once talked to Wang Lei about the special Chinese New Year program called Chunjie wanhui. I said to him wanhui is so suitable to watch on the eve of Chinese New Year when you are with your friends or relatives eating and chatting. Then, Wang Lei told me watching wanhui when you are playing majiang is even better, it especially looks good if you are winning, but if you are losing then everything looks bad. I thought Wang Lei described the dialogic nature of research very well.

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