Fruitful Land and National Cadres: Mainstreaming Resistance and Critical Realism in Contemporary Chinese TV Drama

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Abstract

Despite the fact that alternative discourses have been located in recent Chinese TV dramas, scholars have tended to overlook and rarely consider the questions of resistance and the operation of resistance. In contrast, this dissertation argues that complex forms of resistance are very much a part of Chinese TV drama. The thesis thus aims to lay the groundwork for an adequate theorisation of this resistance. In the context of the production and dissemination of TV drama in China, which is explored in some detail, the thesis links the tactics of resistance to the Chinese intellectual critical tradition. I employ the term *mainstreaming resistance* to designate the complexity of this relationship between the television and intellectual contexts. In China, television has become a popular vehicle for expressing dissent at various moments against the system. As such, the divisions that have marked Chinese intellectual culture—between high-brow and low brow culture, mainstream culture and counterculture, dissent and consent – have begun to break down. A new intellectual cultural tactic has emerged in the new socialist market context. As theorised in this thesis, resistance is no longer only a countercultural practice; it can now be found in the mainstream broadcast markets (in both the official productions of the state and in popular expressions), as well as in state sponsored censorship systems and alternative television markets (the video market and the Internet television market).

By taking *Fruitful Land* and *National Cadres* as two case studies, methodologically, this dissertation consists of two components: (1) Textual analysis which explores how *Fruitful Land* and *National Cadres* inherit and redefine May Fourth critical realism as a means of *mainstreaming resistance*; (2) Contextual analysis which places the drama *Land* within the context of production, censorship and broadcasting to examine how *mainstreaming resistance* operates and survives in the mainstream industrial and
policing environments. My argument about *mainstreaming resistance* allows us to imagine that Chinese TV drama may play an important role in cultural politics.
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**Conclusion**  
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1. *Fruitful Land* Characters

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2. *National Cadres* Characters

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(二) Edited Interview with the Scriptwriter of *Fruitful Land*, Li Yanxiong
## Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIBTW</td>
<td>Beijing International Broadcast and Television Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMBRFT</td>
<td>Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Film and Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTAC</td>
<td>Beijing Television Art Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>China Central Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDIC</td>
<td>Central Discipline Inspection Commission (of CCP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Editorial Office (of CCTV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CITVC</td>
<td>China International Television Corporation (of CCTV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFTVD</td>
<td>Department of Film and TV Drama (of CCTV)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DVD</td>
<td>Digital Video Disc</td>
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<tr>
<td>GFAVPC</td>
<td>Guangdong Face Audio &amp; Visual Production Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>S999ECL</td>
<td>Shanghai 999 Entertainment Co., Ltd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sannong</td>
<td>农业, nongcun 农村, nongmin 农民</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARFT</td>
<td>State Administration of Radio, Television and Film</td>
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<tr>
<td>SARS</td>
<td>Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPCCL</td>
<td>Shanghai Paradise Corporation Co., Ltd</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZFTCL</td>
<td>Zhonglu Film &amp; Television Co., Ltd</td>
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Notes on Translations

(1) All cited online discussions, dialogues in the studied dramas and interviews in this dissertation, are translated by me;

(2) The capitalized English titles of Chinese TV programs, films, novels and references are pre-existing translations. Titles with lowercase letters are my translations.
Introduction  Mainstreaming Resistance in Contemporary Chinese TV Drama

Resistance or Main Melody TV Drama? : Fruitful Land and National Cadres

This dissertation attempts to theorize resistance in Chinese TV drama. Chinese TV drama has been recognized as a location for a wide range of alternative discourses under the commercialization and marketization of the TV industry. However, these discourses very rarely include resistance. In contrast, this dissertation shows that oppositional discourses and practices can be discerned in Chinese TV drama. I argue that these discourses and practices demonstrate that a complex form of resistance is taking place in Chinese TV drama. This resulting resistance needs to be defined and conceptualized in the face of misunderstanding and confusion.

Throughout my dissertation, the theoretical issues of televised resistance are related to the case study of two specific TV dramas, Wotu (Fruitful land, 2004; later, Land) and Guojia ganbu (National Cadres, 2005; later, Cadres). I selected Land and Cadres because these dramas are politically unconventional and provocative as they explore political taboos (i.e. political reform) and democratization in a way that is arguably unprecedented in the history of both Chinese television drama and film. The first Chinese TV drama to tackle the issue of political reform was Xinxing 新星 (New Star, 1986).1 Because of its unconventional political criticism, New Star became one of most influential TV dramas in China (Zhang F. 2003). Land and Cadres continue New Star’s examination of political reform but (as I demonstrate in

1 New Star is set in the Gu Ling 古陵 county government, Shanxi 山西 province and vividly illustrates the irreconcilable political conflict between the new reformist Party secretary Li Xiangnan 李向南 and the conservative county magistrate Gu Rong 顾荣. It sharply exposes the darkness and cruelty of present bureaucratic politics and explicitly suggests the need for political reform (Chen 2007, 115). For a study on New Star, see Lull 1991, 92-126.
this dissertation) in an even more audacious and aggressive manner.²

Set in Xiajiang 峡江, an interior agricultural province, *Land* deals with the sensitive topic of farmers’ protest against the government’s overtaxation and other wrongdoings. *Land* does not blame individual cadres’ misconduct for the overtaxation imposed on the farmers as other main melody dramas do,³ e.g. *Shaoguotun de zhongsheng* 烧锅屯的钟声 (The Bell of Shaoguo village, 2003), but instead points to the responsibility of the political system itself which has allowed the privileged bureaucratic class to exploit the farmers. In other words, the farmers’ difficulties originate from the ruling class’ political and economic oppression. Unlike the passive, masochistic “masses” who share difficulties with the government in main melody dramas, the farmers in *Land* are shown as self-conscious fighters, defending their own interests, and changing their condition within power relation.

Adapted from the influential political fiction with the same title, *Cadres* examines the destructive impact of the privileged power-holders on ongoing Chinese modernization. Liu Shibei 刘石贝, a retired Party secretary of Dengjiang 登江 city and Wang Siji 汪思继, the deputy Party secretary in charge of cadres’ promotion and advancement, promote their children, relatives and subordinates to over two hundred important posts

² Compared with Chinese TV drama’s active political examination, Chinese film hardly deals with the issue of political reform. The Fifth Generation’s and Sixth Generation’s films are considered to create the most critical discourses in contemporary Chinese cinema. Yet, the Fifth Generation’s films mostly focus on allegorical readings of history, while, although the Sixth Generation’s films address contemporary issues, they mainly and self-indulgently focus on the edgy urban youths’ lives. See Silbergeld 1999 and Pickowicz 2006.

³ Main melody TV drama is a new official genre that emerged in the 1990s. It reconstructs the old socialist didacticism with commercial popular drama elements so that the political message can be conveyed in a more compelling way. I examine the characteristics of main melody drama in Chapter Two.
in different governmental departments of Dengjiang. Under Liu’s and Wang’s governance for more than 20 years, a huge web of power-relations develops. With their monopoly of power, they capitalize their political power for personal gains, and ruthlessly eliminate their political opponents through inter-Party elections. This self-serving political management in which the people are oppressed and disempowered shows how Chinese reforms have reached a lopsided state. As He Qinglian 何清涟 observes, from the outset the urban reform amounted to “a process in which power-holders and their hangers-on plundered public wealth” (cited from Liu B. 2006, 283, trans. Perry Link) and “the emergence of the ‘government-underworld alliance’ shows that progress [of Chinese modernization] toward a civil society ruled by law is no more likely an outcome for our country than is the descent into a ‘mafia model’” (293).

By showing the wrongs of Chinese politics and the failures of the ongoing economic reform, the two dramas expose unresolved tensions in Chinese society and clearly refer to the need for political democracy. Because of their audacious political criticism, Land and Cadres were persecuted by official censorship and administration. Land was suddenly suspended from broadcast at the last minute by China Central Television (CCTV), because the senior officials thought it politically dangerous and problematic. It was re-censored and cut from 24 episodes into 23. 4 Cadres was similarly troubled by official censorship for over half a year and was heavily cut from the original 40 episodes to 29. When Cadres was finally screened on local television stations, it occurred almost two years after its original production. 5

4 Personal interview with the producer of Land Gu Shiyang 谷诗阳, 25 and 26 April, 2010. A CCTV insider also confirmed Gu’s claim by explaining that the sudden move of CCTV against Land was due to the drama’s political sensitivity; see Wang 2004.

5 See Tong X. 2006. Despite the official intervention, the full versions of Land and Cadres are widely circulated in the DVD and VCD market, as well as available on the internet. I discuss these alternative circulations and their subversive potentials in Chapter Nine.
The state’s political persecutions against *Land* and *Cadres* were not without consequences. In the Sina online fora dedicated to the two shows, anonymous audience members expressed their support of the dramas and their resentment of the Party’s ideological control. One viewer (claiming to live in Beijing) connects *Cadres* to Lu Xun, a famous May Fourth writer, who is well-known for his merciless, ruthless criticism and uncompromised fighting spirit against authority. The audience member writes:

> It [*Cadres*] is a rare, excellent drama …. Why does China lack such good dramas? You will know the reason when you ask the media administration. What audiences expect is exactly what they want to restrict. Don’t you believe? You can see what is on air today: it is allowed to use the past to allude to the present, show intimate love affairs, but it is prohibited to show real problems. Because of this reason, some foreign sinologists say: Lu Xun 鲁迅 would have never appeared in China today.⁶

In the forum on *Land*, a participant (claiming to live in Chongqing) notes with admiration that “the writers of the drama [*Land*] are Chinese with a conscience, are different from those flatter and fawning pugs [the official propagandists]”⁷.

These audience members clearly praise the criticism of *Land* and *Cadres* as resistance against the political establishment. Despite the audiences’ oppositional reading and the authorities’ censorship, scholarship has misrecognized *Land*’s and *Cadres*’

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subversive qualities. For example, in the study on Chinese realist TV drama, Chen Youjun (2007) categorizes *Land* and *Cadres* as main melody dramas that eulogize the Party’s initiatives. Chen states that the two positive Party protagonists in both *Land* and *Cadres* align with the Party’s ideology to bridge the divide between the Party and the people. The narratives of the two dramas, Chen argues, belong to the main melody “grand narrative” to promote socialist collective values and morality. The way the dramas criticize Chinese politics and reality are limited to the dominant reform discourse and thus function to justify the Party’s reform agenda (100-101, 144-147). If we agree with Chen’s preferred readings of *Land* and *Cadres*, one may ask: why are the two dramas which are supposed to be supportive for the Party persecuted by the Party itself? Could *Land* and *Cadres* represent new oppositional cultural practices within the broader context of cultural commercialization and marketization or do they belong to a new official main melody practice as Chen suggests? If they exhibit a cultural resistance as the Party’s persecutions suggest, how can we understand a type of resistance that takes up the main melody form?

This dissertation sets out to answer the above questions in order to assess the complex dimension of cultural resistance in Chinese TV drama. I argue that this complex cultural resistance, what I define as *mainstreaming resistance*, takes a new hybrid form that breaks down the divisions between high-brow and low-brow, mainstream and counterculture, resistance and complicity. *Mainstreaming resistance* has not yet been adequately investigated because of the impact that cultural elites have in shaping the discourses on dissent. In an elitist view, resistance is seen as not only related to ideological criticism but also to the rejection of both official culture and commercialized popular culture, or the embracement of political radical opposition.

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8 Some scholars (Zhong 2010; Wang 2001) correctly point out that it is problematic to locate Chinese popular culture within a framework of “official” and “unofficial” since popular culture is not necessarily unofficial, but in fact often associated with official initiatives. I suggest that different cultural forces (e.g. the state, the market and intellectuals) utilize popular culture to serve their own
I propose that we now need to broaden our understanding of cultural resistance beyond this elitist parameter in order to comprehend its new hybrid form, that of *mainstreaming resistance*. An examination of the politically unconventional *Land* and *Cadres* will show us how the complicated resistance has found in Chinese TV drama a fertile ground for developing a different approach to political discourse.

**The Problem of Cultural Resistance**

What is *mainstreaming resistance*? How does it work? What particularities does it have in relation to other forms of political and cultural resistance of the past (e.g. elitist resistance in the 1980s as represented by the Fifth Generation’s films)? How is the introduction of this new concept necessary? What can *mainstreaming resistance* bring to our understanding of contemporary Chinese culture in general and Chinese TV drama in particular? To answer these questions we should examine how “resistance” has been understood (or in fact “misunderstood”) in Chinese TV drama.

The term cultural resistance is seldom deployed in Chinese television studies. Most scholars are cautious and reluctant to admit the existence of resistance in the Chinese TV drama domain. There are two factors that contribute to such reticence. First, as Chen analyzes, these dramas contain main melody components, thus their “impure” criticism is considered as being compromised, if not dissolved by the influence of main melody discourses. In the academic book, *Television in Post-Reform China*, which contributed remarkably to a greater and more nuanced understanding of Chinese TV drama by Western academia, Zhu Ying (2008) points out that the political ends. Popular culture is therefore better understood as popular cultures (in the plural). In this sense, despite unclear boundaries between these variations, the terms official (popular) culture, commercialized popular culture as well as the official main melody drama, (commercialized) popular drama and deviant drama are still useful categories for analyzing the plurality, subtlety and complexity of Chinese contemporary popular culture.
controversial historical drama *Zouxiang gonghe* 走向共和 (*Marching Towards the Republic, 2003; later Republic*) was banned by the government for its second run. She even mentions an oppositional reading of the drama and writes: “According to Xing Haonian, the show champions a democratic political system in its reappraisal of historical figures …. If history provides lessons, then revolution in contemporary China seems inevitable if the final stage is set for a democratic political system” (55-56). However, Zhu ultimately categorizes *Republic* as a conservative and politically-charged dynasty drama (73), and notes an alignment of the show “with the neoconservatives who favor a strong central government” (49).

Secondly, scholars assume that the Party-state firmly and effectively governs the TV drama industry through regulations and censorship and, thus, there is little space for resistance. In her book, Zhu states that the Communist Party tightly grasps the TV drama industry (11) and this control continually positions the political subordination of the Chinese entertainment industry to the state (29). She concludes that TV drama discourses in post-reform China are still close to the state-permitted view (18, 29, 127-128).

Likewise, in her study on Chinese anticorruption drama, Bai Ruoyun (2007) clearly describes the relentless action conducted by State Administration of Radio, Television

9 Zhu uses three terms to describe almost the same group of dramas: politically-charged dynasty drama, political dynasty drama and revisionist Qing drama. Although she does not explain what politically-charged dynasty drama and political dynasty drama are, Zhu defines revisionist Qing drama as “extolling the sage leaders of early Qing who oversaw a period of exceptional prosperity and national unity as they supposedly put corruption in check while pursuing a more egalitarian economic policy” (1-2). It suggests that this category functions to support the established political order through appropriating historical myth.

10 Anticorruption TV drama is a subgenre of main melody drama. It appeared in the mid-1990s to promote the Party’s anticorruption campaign.
and Film (SARFT) against the genre in 2004 (removing all crime dramas including anticorruption dramas from primetime slots on all television stations nationwide). Bai even cites the former Minister of SARFT Xu Guangchun’s 徐光春 jurisdiction for the government’s radical move:

Some anticorruption dramas actually changed the theme …. [They are] more about power struggles within the party, between the party and the government …. When it comes to portraying corruption, they favor ever higher-level corruption with ever more wicked means on an ever larger scale, and almost none is [incorrupt]. They have had [a] very bad impact among the masses. (69)

Nevertheless, Bai denies the possibility of resistance in this genre by noting that “none of the anticorruption dramas poses an explicit challenge to the Party due to censorship” (164) as “the potential for critical intervention is vitiated by these drama serials’ own status as commodities” (104). One may question Zhu’s and Bai’s (over-)evaluation of the Party’s control and censorship by pointing out the fact that Republic and other targeted anticorruption dramas had already passed censorship and been broadcast on television when the official punishments were applied. The “very bad impact” had affected audiences already. Furthermore, the 60-episode version of Republic which restores all censored parts is widely circulated in the DVD market and on the Internet. There is still room for deviant dramas to bypass tight state control.

In short, scholars have seen deviant dramas such as Republic, Land or Cadres, as either new government-sanctioned practices or market-motivated innocuous variations. Despite their unprecedented political criticism, these deviant dramas are considered to have obvious “sins”: association with the main melody and their “own status as commodities”. These “sins” do not fit in the critical discourse modelled on what Chinese elites used to embody.
The understanding of cultural resistance in contemporary Chinese culture has been buttressed by a non-conformist, clear-cut discourse. By this discourse, resistance is defined by the presence of an obvious challenge against the official culture marked by either a distinctive elitist cultural form (e.g. avant-garde modernism), or an unconventional mode of production and exhibition, or politically radical dissent. The reigning paradigm of cultural resistance is therefore recognized in three main contexts. The first is within the elitist cultural framework, exemplified by the Fifth Generation’s films in the early and mid-1980s. These innovative and non-conformist films locate themselves outside not only official culture but also popular culture and can be described as expressions of avant-garde modernism. Their resistance to the dominant ideology focuses on self-expression and is not concerned with the “masses”. Because of this elitist attitude, these works enclose themselves mainly within intellectual circles, and are distant from the majority of people.

The second is what I call marginal resistance, which is defined by its non-mainstream mode of production and exhibition. It gains creative autonomy through non-cooperation with the state supervision and marginalization from the mainstream market. For example, underground films, such as Zhang Yuan’s Beijing zazhong 北京杂种 (Beijing Bastards), Jia Zhangke’s Xiaowu 小武, and Wu Wenguang’s documentary Liulang Beijing 流浪北京 (Bumming in

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11 In the 1980s, the film directors of the Fifth Generation were all employees of state film studios. However, they worked in the state studio system “with an outsider’s spirit” (Yu H. 2009, 136), and still “could produce ‘official’ work (funded and sanctioned by the state) with ‘unofficial’ themes to represent alternative and minoritized political realities” (143). For a study on the creation and lives of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, see Clark 2005.

12 The “masses” refers to political and cultural elites’ view which regards the general population as a unified, passive object of education.

13 For a study on Chinese elite culture and modernism in the 1980s, see Zhang X. 1997.
Beijing, the Last Dreamers). These films can be considered Chinese cultural guerrilla practices, which they work outside the mainstream industrial system, and often aim at entering international film festivals and circulating in the overseas market (Reynaud 1997). In some cases, some underground products find alternative non-mainstream domestic channels for exhibition, such as movie bars and the Internet. Scholars have noted the relevance of the “underground” production mode which frees the filmmakers from industrial constraints and official policing (e.g. official censorship) (Cheng and Huang 2002; Reynaud 1997). In this sense, underground cinema may be better understood as independent cinema (McGrath 2007).

14 There has been an independent film movement beyond state control since the 1990s. Such movement includes some Sixth Generation’s feature films, independent documentary filmmaking and amateurs’ online short movies. For studies on this wide range of independent filmmaking, see Pickowicz & Zhang 2006; Berry, Rofel & Lü 2010; Voci 2010.

15 Zhang Zhen observes that, in Beijing, there are many bars and cafes, for instance, the Yellow Pavilion Bar near the Beijing Film Academy and the Box Café near Qinghua University, where regularly screen independent and amateur cinema, and often hold informal discussions after screenings. See Zhang Z. 2007, 27-28; also Seio Nakajima, “Film Clubs in Beijing: The Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Film”, in Pickowicz & Zhang 2006, 161-187.

16 In her research on Chinese small screen video practices, Paola Voci demonstrates that cinema has found both a new vitality and alternative screening locations online; see Voci 2010.

17 There are debates among scholars about the terms “underground” and “independent”. The term “underground” is preferred by overseas media and suggests “the subversive function of this alternative film culture” (Pickowicz & Zhang 2006, ix). “Independent” is a term favored by young Chinese filmmakers, and scholarship to refer to “a cinematic project’s independence from the state system of production, distribution, and exhibition” (ix). Other terms, such as Sixth Generation and urban generation, are also used by scholars to describe those young filmmakers’ alternative filmmaking; see Zhang Z. 2007.
The third is political dissidents’ resistance exemplified by the reportage of Liu Binyan and Dai Qing, the Chinese journalists who were persecuted by the Party in the late 1980s. Their resistance is also highly recognized as they publicly and systematically “[voice] dissent and [fight] for journalistic independence and intellectual autonomy” against the Party (Yu H. 2009, 136).

Within the above parameter of resistance, there is an assumed dichotomy: official, mainstream versus resistance, non-mainstream. It is supposed that resistance has to be carried out in a clear-cut, non-official form or in a non-commercial, non-mainstream way. The cultural resistance is approximated to political opposition that must demonstrate itself through radical expression of political dissent, in open conflict with the government. According to this understanding, deviant dramas like Land and Cadres are obviously not subversive: they are impure, commercial, and mainstream and their creators are not political dissidents who actively engage in political resistance and openly confront the regime. The questions I want to ask here are whether cultural resistance can be only defined with a clear boundary in opposition to mainstream cultures (both the official culture and popular culture). Might there be other forms of cultural resistance that are exercised at different times and in different locations? Is the relationship between cultural resistance and political opposition

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18 Liu Binyan (1925-2005) is a famous Chinese dissident writer. He was labelled as a rightist and expelled from the Party for his assault on the Party’s bureaucracy in 1957. After his rehabilitation in 1978, he wrote a range of reportages, such as The Second Loyalty (Liu B. 2006, 149-207), concerning people’s sufferings and exposing social darkness. In 1987, he was expelled from the Party for the second time and denounced throughout the nation. Liu went to America in 1988 and was exiled by the Chinese authority for his support to the 1989 Beijing student demonstration.

19 Dai Qing is another famous Chinese journalist and activist. She publicly criticises the Party, opposes the Three Gorges Dam Project, and advocates Chinese democratic movement. In 1989, because of her support of the student demonstration, she was arrested and imprisoned for ten months. For a study on Dai, see Li C. 1997, 279-299.
defined only in a singular, direct manner, or can it also be expressed in multiple, more tortuous ways? I argue that cultural resistance in the Chinese context should be understood in a pluralistic sense. Resistance is always changing, shifting with various forms, modes and ways to respond to different spaces and different historical conditions. In order to clarify and recognize the resistance taking place in TV drama, we have to go beyond the limits set by the cultural elites to rethink the issue of resistance. We may ask, for instance: what constitutes resistance in Chinese TV drama? Do those mainstream deviant dramas (e.g. *Land* and *Cadres*), which integrate elements from both main melody drama and popular drama, construct a new type of resistance?

A handful of scholars have recognized that resistance can occur in Chinese TV drama and have begun to study this issue. Even though many theoretical issues remain untouched, this emerging scholarship has shown that more in-depth analysis is needed to address the complexity of Chinese TV drama. In *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance*, James Lull (1991) contends that the economic reforms and the consequent cultural changes undermine the efficiency of state censorship and therefore allow certain politically-sensitive dramas to be broadcast. He uses a vague term, “political drama”, to distinguish *New Star* from other officially-sanctioned dramas. Lull describes *New Star* as the “acupuncture that touched the contemporary social dilemma in China” (117). His study clearly suggests that “the *New Star* fever” (116) among viewers originates in its unprecedented political criticism of incompetent bureaucrats and corrupt political systems. Such criticism met viewers’ critical aspirations. Due to the audience research orientation of his study, Lull’s account of resistance focuses on reception to show how active audiences can still produce meanings beyond the government’s ideological framework. Lull does not define in
more details what political drama is and how it works as a critical text.\textsuperscript{20} Because of lacking concrete textual analysis, Lull’s audience-centered study cannot sufficiently tackle the complexity of New Star’s textual resistance or demonstrate its differences from main melody drama.

Gotelind Müller’s (2007) study on the drama Republic and Qian Gong’s (2008) study on remakes of “Red Classics”\textsuperscript{21} continue Lull’s exploration of the subversive features of some Chinese TV dramas. By examining the subversive tactic of rewriting history and the heated public debates stirred by the drama, Müller points out that Republic deconstructs the historical orthodoxy of the Party and hence provides viewers with an oppositional perspective on Chinese history and modernity. Similarly, Qian finds out that some remakes of “Red Classics” (e.g. Linhai xueyuan 林海雪原 (Snowy Mountain 2003)) subvert the dominant revolutionary mythology by rewriting their origins. She argues that it is exactly the subversive quality of these dramas that explain SARFT’s radical response to them. In an urgent circular issued on 9 April 2004, SAFRT re-centralized censorship on television adaptations of “Red Classics” and instructed that these particular TV dramas had to pass censorship at the SARFT level to gain final approval rather than through the provincial level as before. The official circular emphasized a disrespectful adapting tendency among “Red Classic” TV dramas and accused them of tending “towards ‘misreading of the original work and … ‘misinterpreting of the market’, eventually ‘misleading the audience’” (Qian G. 2008, 162). Unlike Bai Ruoyun, Qian interprets the circular as evidence of the subversive nature presented by some of the remakes of the “Red Classics”.

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\textsuperscript{20} In contrast with Lull’s view, scholars in the People’s Republic of China widely regard New Star as a main melody drama that fits within the dominant discourse of economic reforms (Chen 2007, 114-116; Bai X. 2007, 163-164).

\textsuperscript{21} “Red Classics” refers to the artistic works written between 1949 and 1976 to glorify the revolutionary history of the Party. They become classic because these works “have attained canonical status over a long period of time” (Qian G. 2008, 157).
\end{footnotesize}
As these preliminary studies have already begun to show, the possibility of resistance within TV dramas needs to be further explored. More specifically, we need to better understand the inter-relations between the state-supported main melody drama, commercialized popular drama and these non-orthodox dramas that, as I contend, hybridize both genres to develop their resistance. Despite the main melody or entertaining format, I propose that the deviant TV drama represented by both *Land* and *Cadres* still maintains some of the May Fourth intellectual goals, i.e. the pursuit of democracy and social criticism, and ultimately aims at challenging and subverting the dominant orthodoxy. While these types of deviant TV drama pose a relentless condemnation of Chinese reality and politics, they also engage with audiences in everyday terms.

I define this new form of cultural resistance as *mainstreaming resistances* (MR). The term “mainstreaming” localizes this cultural practice within mainstream cultures (both the official culture and commercialized popular culture), mainstream televisual industrial and policing systems and mainstream television market(s) (the broadcast market, the video market and the Internet television market). The term “resistance” reverberates with the intellectual critical tradition, but adapts it to contemporary media tactics. More specifically, *mainstreaming resistance* relies on the development of hybrid tactics at the textual level, production level and distribution level.

**Mainstreaming Resistance**

The term “resistance” has a long history in political studies. It originates in describing popular opposition to fascism in occupied Europe (Ferber and Lynd 1971, 2; McDermott and Stibbe 2006, 2). The theory and practice of “resistance” were further enriched by political movements in Europe and America in the 1960s. For instance, the French “Young Resistance” opposed the colonial war in Algeria and the American antiwar movement appealed people resistance against the Vietnam War (Ferber and
Lynd 1971, 1-3). The term, thus, is often associated with aggressive political thought and activities, related to “revolt” and “revolution” (1-2). However, this narrow understanding of “resistance” has been challenged by scholars who argue that “resistance” is not merely limited in the political sphere and always implemented in belligerent manners (McDermott and Stibbe 2006; Duncombe 2002; Havel 2009; Scott 1990), and instead point to the existence of cultural and “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985).

Culture, as scholars in Cultural Studies have demonstrated, is essentially political and can be also a site of resistance (Hall 1980; Fiske 1989). Within the cultural domain, while the power-bloc tries to control meanings to maintain its power, people may resist the dominant meanings by constructing discourses that serve their own interests. Cultures therefore are locations where we can recognize a constant political struggle for meaning. As a counter-hegemonic move in this struggle, cultural resistance, as Stephen Duncombe (2002) elaborates, means that culture “is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure” (5). In this definition, Duncombe treats cultural resistance as an open, changing concept which can have many forms (e.g. popular cultural form, the dominant cultural form, everyday form), involve many activities (e.g. reading, writing, singing, dancing, shopping, protesting), and occur in many locations (e.g. literature, music, the private and the public, etc.). It “can mean many things” (5).

In his study on power relations in everyday life, Michel de Certeau (1984) proposes that resistance is not always exercised in direct confrontation between the powerful and powerless, but can also be exercised in an indirect and subtle manner by which the powerless play the “art of the weak” (37) to resist, appropriate and evade the dominant power structure. To clarify his argument, de Certeau differentiates strategies from tactics. Strategies refer to calculations and actions taken by the powerful to consolidate the political establishment. Tactics (“art of the weak”) pertain to
calculations and actions of the powerless who take advantage of cracks in the established order as opportunities to achieve their interests (34-39). James C. Scott (1990) similarly argues that subordinates have been never passive in power relations. They are social actors who are able to brilliantly speak social truth to power by practicing the “arts of resistance”.

An example of such tactical resistance is given by Lawrence Levine. In his study on African-American slave songs, Levine (2002) points out that, despite the content associated with the Bible and the words sung in English, African-American slaves used song to connect with their own African culture, identity, and aspirations for a world of liberation. Thus, black slaves adapted and transformed the master’s culture into a radically subversive use. In Duncombe’s (2002) words, those African-American slaves as the oppressed “use the tools of the master, carefully reshaped, to dismantle the master’s own house” (193).

Instead of dwelling on the elites’ notion of resistance which has informed the discourse of contemporary Chinese culture since the New Era (1980s), I embrace the de Certeau and Scott’s views in my investigation of mainstreaming resistance in contemporary TV drama. Mainstreaming resistance is such a tactical resistance occurring in Chinese mainstream media, culture and market. It inherits the intellectual critical tradition; simultaneously it also redefines the New Enlightenment radical resistance with new intellectual tactics in order to meet the challenges generated by the socialist market economy. It is a transformation of intellectual resistance within the new Chinese social and political contexts. In this sense, although mainstreaming resistance bears many similarities to “everyday forms of resistance” formulated by de Certeau and Scott, it has different connotation. While “everyday forms of resistance”

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22 Xin qimeng yundong 新启蒙运动 (New Enlightenment) was an intellectuals’ movement in the 1980s. It was inspired by the May Fourth Enlightenment project to promote westernized modernization. It ended in 1989 when the government suppressed the students’ demonstration on Tiananmen Square.
are understood as resisting against non-political forces of domination, *mainstreaming resistance* targets at the Party’s rule, media authorities, and censorship. In order for us to understand *mainstreaming resistance*, we need to examine the contemporary intellectuals’ role, especially the transformation of the role and their tactics from what can be considered its peak period in the 1980s and its changed location in the 1990s and onwards.

The intellectuals of the 1980s New Enlightenment demonstrated an intellectual independent and critical spirit (Li H. 1999, 387-390; Liu Z. 1994a). The poet Bei Dao’s 北岛 famous verse, “I do not believe”, 23 captures this spirit. The intellectuals suspected the status quo and attempted to re-examine and subvert the established values for transforming China into a modernized and strong country. However, their cultural and political practices, as scholars (Zhang X. 1997, Liu Z. 1994b) point out, were characterized by elitism and radicalism. By elitism, the intellectuals regarded themselves as enlighteners of the “masses” and spokespeople of society, and thus discriminated against popular aesthetic taste and preferences. Scholars often use the term “elite culture” or “high culture” to describe a new cultural force that challenged the dominant culture and consequently stimulated social and political critique in the New Enlightenment context (Zhang X. 1997, 15; Wang J. 1996, 37, 93). The avant-garde Fifth Generation’s films, misty poetry (e.g. Shu Ting’s 舒婷 and Gu Cheng’s 顾城 poems), experimental drama (e.g. Gao Xingjian’s 高行健 absurdist drama) and literature (e.g. Wang Meng’s 王蒙 stream of consciousness novel), are examples of elite culture that link intellectual enlightenment and criticism with high-brow modernist forms. In the mid 1980s, the Fifth Generation’s films were under attack for their distance from the audience. As an answer, Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, a famous director of the Generation, articulated this example of elitist arrogance: “I’ve never had exchanges with the audience … I shot Horse Thief for audiences of

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23 The verse “I do not believe” comes from Bei Dai’s poem Answer, which was influential among intellectuals and the society in the 1980s. For a study on the poem and its impact, see Li D. 2006.
the next century to watch” (Yang P. 1991, 127). The assumed antithesis between intellectual elites and the “masses” revealed a paradox within the intellectuals’ goal and cultural practices. On the one hand, the intellectual elites wanted to enlighten the “masses” and the society; on the other hand, the elitist cultural forms, on which they relied, distanced them from the latter. More problematically, the intellectual elitism was intertwined with radicalism.

In this context, radicalism refers to the intellectual elites’ impatience with the slow implementation of social reforms. They urgently demanded free expression and political democratization without compromise. It led them to radically confront the government. Like the radical reformers of the One-Hundred-Day Reform in the late Qing, their radical resistance was brutally dealt with by the Party’s hardliners and ended with bloodshed. Second, radicalism also pertained to the elites’ radical

24 Pei Minxin (2003) notes: “In the 1980s, Chinese dissidents tended to discuss and promote democracy at relatively abstract levels and appeared remote to the concerns of ordinary Chinese citizens. That elitist approach did not gain much sympathy or support from the working class…” (30-31).

25 Geremie R. Barmé (1999) describes 1980s intellectual radicalism as “typical of the ‘quick fix’ or ‘totalistic’ mentality, one that was characterized by a desire to make a clean break with the past, abandon the present system, and push for radical, systematic change” (55).

26 Liu Zaifu (1994b) argues that the intellectual radicalism has dominated Chinese intellectual thinking since the late Qing and still influences intellectuals’ mentality today. From the One-Hundred-Day Reform of the late Qing (1898), the Revolution of 1911, the May Fourth Enlightenment Movement (1919), to the Communist Revolution and the New Enlightenment Movement of the 1980s, under the impact of intellectual radicalism, Chinese modern history has moved in a strange circle from radical reforms to more radical revolutions and vice versa. For studies and criticism on Chinese intellectual radicalism, also see Yu Y. 1996 and Lin Y. 1999.

27 In his discussion on the Tiananmen Square Incident, Li Honglin (1996) pointed out the radicalism among the students on the Square, who had rejected some influential intellectuals’
repatriation of traditional values and cultures. The TV documentary *Heshang* 河殇 (River Elegy, 1988) is a typical example of the elitist iconoclasm. As Wang Jing (1996) points out, the writers of *River Elegy* and, more broadly, that generation of intellectuals, inherited the May Fourth iconoclastic tradition to devalue China’s past (124). Like their May Fourth predecessors, they regarded themselves above society and were intolerant of any alternative discourse. Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Liu Zaifu 刘再复 (1997) note that radicalism shows the immaturity and irrationality of the intellectuals in carrying out the New Enlightenment agenda (westernized modernization). The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre brought the New Enlightenment movement to an end.

1989 was a watershed in Chinese politics. In this year, Party reformers who were sympathetic to the intellectuals were expelled from the Party leadership (Li H. 1999, 399-404). Instead Party hardliners gained power. By learning the lesson from the suggestions to retreat from the Square and instead insisted on a thorough victory. Li argues that this radicalism is emotional rather than rational since a thorough victory is actually hard to achieve in real politics; see Li 1999, 396-399. For intellectual reflections on the June Fourth students’ radicalism, also see Barmé 1999, 51-61 and Li & Liu 1997, 74, 79-90.


29 Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu (1997) observe that there was a “*Hongweibing xintai*” 红卫兵心态 (Red Guard mentality) (62) among some 1980s’ elitist intellectuals who negated all alternative views and acted as only they had the “Truth”. See Li & Liu 1997, 62-63.

30 The intellectuals’ criticism of the New Enlightenment was tolerated by the Party reformist leaders who relied on intellectuals’ cultural capital to fight the Party conservatives and legitimize the reform agenda (Liu 2005). For example, under the former CCP General Secretary, Hu Yaobang’s 胡耀邦 intervention, the Party’s anti-spiritual pollution campaign against intellectuals merely lasted for 28 days (Li 1999, 341). For a discussion on the Party’s ideological liberation and struggle in the 1980s, see Li H. 1999.
1989 Massacre and the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes, the new Party leadership strengthened its persecution of intellectual dissent and tightened its cultural control through regulations and censorship in the post-Tiananmen period. Intellectual elites were either arrested (e.g. Cao Siyuan 曹思源 and Dai Qing), exiled (e.g. Liu Binyan, Bei Dao and Fang Lizhi 方励之) or silenced (Li 1999, 399-401). The Party could not stand any open challenge. Under high political pressure, the operational space for elite culture and resistance was dramatically reduced. Some of the cultural elite who stuck to non-conformist resistance were forced to work illegally (e.g. the underground film directors Zhang Yuan 张元 and Lou Ye 娄烨). Due to the Party’s relentless persecution, their works were banned in the domestic market and their dissent was marginalized in the society.31

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping travelled to Southern China to speed up Chinese marketized reform. In the same year, the Party officially announced its aim to build a socialist market economy as the goal of reforms. With the intensification of market reforms, China became an increasingly consumerist society. As Dai Qing 戴清 (2004) and Zhang Taofu 张涛甫 (2007) argue, the consumerist-oriented market economy led to the rise of popular culture and this has significantly transfigured the landscape of contemporary Chinese culture. TV soaps, popular fiction and Hollywood blockbusters became a prominent cultural phenomenon and the Taiwan populist writer Qiong Yao 琼瑶, Hong Kong martial art novelist Jin Yong 金庸, and rock star Cui Jian 崔建 became cultural icons, who captured the attention of the society throughout the mid 1980s and the 1990s (Zha 1995, 26-27; Barmé 1999, 101, 143, 303). The market economy disrupted the intellectuals’ role as the enlightener and hero of the society. The “masses” were no longer considered citizens who need intellectual education; they are active consumers with their own power. Cai Xiang 蔡翔 vividly describes: “Now the masses are manipulated by their spontaneous economic interests. Pursuing

31 Both Pickowicz (2006, 10-11) and Zhang Yingjin (2006, 34-35) observe that underground or independent films have little impact in China due to the state suppression.
sensual pleasure, they turn their backs on the preaching of intellectuals. The bell is ringing; class is over. The intellectuals’ identity as ‘adviser’ (daoshi [导师]) has already undergone its own deconstruction (xiaojie [消解])” (cited from Zhang X. 2008, 116). The decline of elite culture and the changing role of intellectuals then raise a question: how do intellectuals speak to the society in the new socialist marketized context?

There is a tendency of anti-radicalism and anti-elitism among Chinese intellectuals in the post-Tiananmen period, which, as Zhang Xudong (2008) argues, indicates Chinese intellectuals’ exploration of different paths or tactics of cultural resistance and transcendence.32 To a large extent, the intellectual debate surrounding “the loss of humanist spirit” between 1993 and 1995 showed the intellectuals’ reassessment of their role and tactics in the new context.33 Lamenting that “[a]n age of vulgarization has descended” (Zhang X. 2008, 115), humanist intellectuals criticized the market and popular culture as they corrupted intellectuals’ enlightenment pursuits. These humanists attempted to rescue intellectuals from indulging in a materialist life (Nan F.

32 In 1988, Yu Yingshi 余英时 (1996), a historian of China at Princeton University, published an influential article criticizing intellectual radicalism in Chinese modern history and “the consequent escalation of radical political and intellectual revolutions” (Zhang 2008, 42). This article had a great impact on the intellectual anti-radical and conservative discourse in the 1990s. For example, echoing Yu, the Chinese leading scholars Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu (1997) also advocated rationally gradual reform instead of the massive revolutionary movement as a way to carry out Chinese democratization. Along with the anti-radical discourse, Chinese postmodernist discourse, as Zhang Xudong (2001, 47) notes, embraced popular culture and the market, and regarded these factors as democratizing, liberating developments that can provide new freedom, leading to a dynamic reconstruction of everyday life, culture and social ethics. For a study on Chinese intellectual discourses of anti-radicalism and anti-elitism, see Zhang X. 2008, 38-52, 113-122.

33 For a discussion on the debate of “the loss of humanist spirit”, see Zhang X. 2008, 113-123; McGrath 2008, 25-58.
2005, 28). To reconstruct a humanistic spirit, they encouraged “resisting the prosaic and the vulgar consumer society” and “transcending the institutions (of the state)” (Zhang X. 2008, 117). A radical and elitist tone could be sensed. Many scholars objected to the humanistic intellectuals’ view by embracing popular culture and the “masses” desire. Zhang Yiwu (1996), for instance, rebuked the humanists’ view as anti-democracy, which tried to maintain intellectual authority as the enlightener of the “masses” at the price of the “masses” right and interests in the marketplace. Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明 acidly asserted: “When people just acquire a certain sensible emancipation, intellectuals immediately feel anxious” (cited from Nan 2005, 28; my translation). However, should the complete embrace of the “masses” and the market be the ultimate goal of intellectuals?

By reassessing Chinese intellectual radicalism in terms of the particular historical condition today, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu (1997, 51-64) propose a third way for intellectual politics: adaptation and resistance. Adaptation refers to (1) intellectuals’ adaptation to current historical, social and cultural conditions; (2) intellectuals’ self-transformation from enlighteners to professionals, from elitism and radicalism to equality, tolerance and reason. Resistance poses the problem that intellectuals still need to maintain an intellectual critical spirit and speak to society but in a non-elitist and non-radical way.

34 He Baogang (2004) also states that one of problems of the intellectual elitism is that they place themselves at the top of social hierarchy, “presuppos[ing] a large degree of inequality in a social sense” (266) and “contain[ing] anti-democratic elements or are ill-disposed towards democracy” (265).

35 Pei Minxin (2003) also observes the transformation of Chinese dissident movement since the 1980s and writes: “The forms and tactics of democratic resistance have undergone significant changes since the late 1970s. While the dissident movement in the 1980s favored direct and confrontational methods of resistance, the same movement in the late 1990s began to rely increasingly on indirect and legal means” (23).
I propose that *mainstreaming resistance* is one of the practices of the new intellectual adaptation/resistance tactic, by which Chinese intellectuals adapt to the new social and cultural conditions to bring their resistance into mainstream cultures (both official main melody culture and popular culture), mainstream media and mainstream markets. To defend “pure literature” in the face of its marginalization generated by commercialism and other cultural forces, Chen Xiaoming (2007, 3) argues that “pure literature” does not die, but transforms itself into a kind of spiritual temperament, a kind of style, becoming a specter that invades every cultural area in which it manifests, producing a literary quality and a sense of indispensability. Similarly, I argue that the intellectual spirit never disappeared from the 1990s onwards, but has instead transformed into a specter that haunts Chinese TV drama.

Despite its less prestigious status, Chinese TV drama was also a cultural location for the New Enlightenment in the 1980s. Echoing elitist high culture, *Xibolakedi de shiyan* 希伯拉克底的誓言 (Hippocratic Oath, 1985) and *Basang he tade dimeimen* 巴桑和他的弟妹们 (Basang, his brothers and sisters, 1984) deployed modernist language (e.g. surrealist visual style, narrative dream structure) to carry out an intellectual criticism of reality. New Star also articulated intellectuals’ appeals for political reform (Lull 1991). With the decline of elite culture in the post-Tiananmen period, TV drama became a refuge for the cultural elite. Most of the Fifth Generation’s filmmakers (e.g. Wu Ziniu 吴子牛, Li Shaohong 李少红, Hu Mei 胡枚, Zhang Li 张黎 and Su Zhou 苏舟) and many novelists and dramatists (e.g. Zhou Meisen 周梅森, Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, and Chi Li 池莉) moved to or became involved in TV drama production. More or less, in one way or another, the engagement of these elites contributed to intellectual discourses within TV drama. For instance, Zhang Li’s *Republic* and *Daming Wangchao* 大明王朝 (The Ming Dynasty, 2007) continued the historical reflection of the Fifth Generation, and in fact Su Zhou’s

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Cadres deepened the political criticism initiated by *New Star*. Besides the cultural elite, young filmmakers also actively articulated intellectual voices in TV drama. The Sixth Generation director Guan Hu’s *Heidong* 黑洞 (Black Hole, 2002), Feng Xiaogang’s 冯小刚 *Yidi jimao* 一地鸡毛 (A ground of chicken feathers, 1995), Teng Huatao’s 滕华弢 *Wojing* 蜗居 (Living like a worm, 2009) and Shen Yan’s 沈严 *Shouji* 手机 (Cell phone, 2010), directly confronted social issues (i.e. alliances between the mafia and officials, bureaucratic repression, the unaffordable housing market and its associated official corruption, media commercialization, as well as intellectuals’ disillusionment) and sharply criticized the political reality. These dramas are other examples of *mainstreaming resistance*. Chinese TV drama has indeed been a new location for the manifestation of the intellectual spirit.

Embedded with the transformation of intellectual radicalism and elitism, TV drama’s *mainstreaming resistance* can be understood via three separate dimensions: the transforming role of TV professionals, the transforming text (both in terms of content and form), and the transforming industrial practices (in terms of both the production and the distribution).

First, *mainstreaming resistance* refers to TV professionals’ resistance. To elaborate their tactical adaptation/resistance, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu (1997) divide Chinese intellectuals into three categories: (1) *Shidafu* 士大夫, traditional intellectuals, who want to be *wangzheshi* 王者师, (advisors of the Emperor); (2) Elitist intellectuals who regard themselves as socially independent heroes. Both of these first two categories of intellectuals see themselves as above the people, tasked with the burden of speaking for them. (3) Professional intellectuals who are connected to the people,

37 Like many of the Fifth and Six Generation filmmakers, Shen, Guan and Teng graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1987, 1991 and 1995 respectively. They mainly work in TV drama production and continue the Sixth Generation’s exploration on the dark side of Chinese urban life.
endeavoring to influence/challenge sovereign power through their professional lives.\footnote{In the Chinese context, “intellectual” is a shifting term according to different historical and socio-political conditions. Yu Yingshi (2004) states that conceptualization of Chinese intellectual originated from ancient junzi 君子 (gentlemen) praised by Confucius as the bearer of dao 道 (the Way) and casted a commitment of “resisting power with dao”. Later, the term referred to “wenren 文人 (men of letters, scholars and literati) who were educated and engaged in mental activities” (Wang Y. 1999, 223). Borrowed from Russian “intelligentsia”, zhishi fenzi 知识分子 (men with knowledge, also commonly translated as intellectuals) first appeared in Chinese in the early 1920s and referred to educated people who received a modern education and acted as social conscience (Wang Y. 1999, 223; Yue D. 1988). In the Maoist era, intellectuals were categorized by the Party as xiao zhanjieji 小资产阶级 (petit bourgeoisie) and thus became a target of proletariat dictatorship (Liu Z. 1994b). In the 1980s, the term often meant jingying 精英 (elite, the cream of society) (Wang Y. 1999, 223).}

Li and Liu advocate building a civil society via a new class of professional intellectuals and their rational and productive attempts to change the society from within (51-78). In many respects, Li’s and Liu’s idea of the “professional intellectual” bears some resemblance to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the “organic intellectual”. Both the professional and the organic intellectual reject the notion that the intelligentsia is separate from society and its peoples. And both seek to underscore counter-hegemonic intellectual activity arising from below (Gramsci wrote a great deal about educating workers). In a statement that resonates with Li’s and Liu’s later
ideas, Gramsci (2005) writes, “The traditional and vulgarised type of the intellectual is given by the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist. Therefore journalists, who claim to be men of letters, philosophers, artists, also regard themselves as the ‘true’ intellectuals. In the modern world, technical education, closely bound to industrial labour even at the most primitive and unqualified level, must form the basis of the new type of intellectual” (9).

Within this context, TV producers are no longer heroic enlighteners but professionals who exercise their resistance against official ideology in a non-elitist, non-radical, and legitimate way. Their resistance through legitimate means derives not only from self-protection, but more importantly from the tactical intention that allows their oppositional voices to be heard by society in the specific Chinese political context. Professionals’ resistance also means that TV producers react against intellectual elitism by rethinking their relationship to an active, diversified viewership and the mainstream market. Professionals see themselves on equal footing with the audience who views their product. They take into account the audience’s aesthetic taste in the new marketized context and thus attempt to communicate with people in an accessible, lucid language. *Mainstreaming resistance* therefore finds in this context favorable ground to flourish, and two of these areas for resistance discourses are indeed main melody drama and popular TV drama.

Second, in TV drama practices, *mainstreaming resistance* also refers to the reconstruction/critique of main melody drama and popular drama in order to develop intellectual criticism. Since the 1990s, Chinese TV drama has been dominated by popular drama and the new official main melody drama (Yin H. 2001; Bai X. 2007). The Party deploys the main melody strategy to reconstitute the previous socialist TV

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39 I will further discuss the term “professionals” and their practical tactics in Chapter Eight.
drama in response to the latter’s crisis generated by the new marketized context.40 The main melody strategy is both a new official cultural policy and creative mode (Liu F. 2005). As the new official policy, the main melody strategy indicates flexible ideological control in the socialist market context, which allows the existence of certain alternative cultures and seeks cultural hegemony through cultural contestation. As a new official creative mode, it advocates “duoyanghua 多样化” (encouraging diversity), which integrates other cultural forms, especially popular cultural ones, into socialist realism.41 In doing so, socialist works are transformed from direct propaganda42 to ideological persuasion.43

In order to encourage production of main melody works and their domination in the market, the Party takes various measures, channels multiple resources and releases supportive policies. Liu Fusheng elaborates (2005) that at the organizational level, the Party demands its local propaganda departments to pay great attention to the creation

40 Socialist TV drama refers to the official drama that developed in socialist China. It adopts socialist realism and aims at directly conveying the Party’s political messages and educating the audience along those lines. Socialist works originated in the late 1950s and gradually declined in the 1980s when China entered into a postsocialist phase.

41 Socialist realism, which originated in the Soviet Union, gradually became the orthodox mode of creation in Chinese art after 1949. It required artists to be loyal to the Party and to depict life from a higher, idealized plain whereby socialism is represented as the unquestionable and absolute “Truth”. The purpose of socialist art is to educate and urge people to participate in the agenda of building a new socialist China.

42 Direct propaganda means to simplistically schematize political messages as a political lesson in an attempt to instil these messages into audiences.

43 Ideological persuasion refers to the repackaging of the political messages with popular cultural elements (e.g. personalized characters and popular genre mixing) and discourses (e.g. Confucianism) so that these messages can be convincingly accepted by audiences as well as compete with other alternative cultures in the market.
of main melody works. Under pressures, every level of governments energetically invests substantial amount of funding and resources in support of the production of main melody works. At the market level, relying on its monopoly over the media, the Party favourably allocates more market shares to main melody works. For instance, SARFT often instructs television stations and cinemas to exclusively screen main melody TV dramas and films at certain times to make these works profitable. In a national meeting about TV drama creation, Li Jingsheng 李京盛, a senior official of SARFT, unscrupulously demanded CCTV and provincial television stations to take their political duties focusing on broadcasting main melody drama. At the industrial level, the Party restructures previously rigid and dispersive national entities into more market-driven media giants through which the Party attempts to maintain its control over the market against massive domestic and global cultural commodities (Yeh and Davis 2008; Hong et al 2009). These national-owned media giants, for example, China Film Group (CFG) and CCTV, have become reliable manufacturers, consistently producing high-quality main melody works. Some examples are the films *Jiandang weiyi* 建党伟业 (The Beginning of the Great Revival, 2011) and *Jianguo daye* 建国大业 (The Great Cause of China’s Foundation, 2009) by CFG, as well as *Jiefang* 解放 (Liberation, 2009) and *Cangtian zaishang* 苍天在上 (Heaven Above, 1995) by CCTV. At the promotion level, the Party employs critics to write positive articles about main melody works and spread them around the media in attempt to

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44 For example, as a political mission, the Party has instructed the local propaganda departments to produce at least one excellent main melody film, one excellent main melody TV drama, one excellent main melody novel, one excellent main melody song and one excellent main melody essay every year. Accomplishments of the five one excellences are taken into account seriously by senior Party leaders to assess local officials’ working performance (Liu F. 2005, 18fn).

45 See *Zongju ge bumen lingdao zai 2006 niandu quanguo dianshiju guihua chuangzuo zuotanhui de jianghua* 总局各管理部门领导在 2006 年度全国电视剧规划创作座谈会的讲话 (The talks of the leaders of SARFT’s departments at the 2006 national TV drama planning and creation seminar) (personal collection 2006, 4-5).
guide audiences’ consumption. Finally, in order to elevate their reputation and further encourage artists’ participation in main melody creation, the Party interferes with award judgement to prioritize main melody works in winning national awards (Liu 2005, 17-22).

With the government’s full support and adoption of the new entertaining-oriented main melody strategy, main melody film, main melody TV drama, main melody fiction and other main melody products (e.g. music and stage drama) have flourished since the 1990s and attracted the attention of millions of audiences, readers and listeners (Liu F. 2005; Bai R. 2007; Bai X. 2007; Su W. 2010). The main melody film *The Great Cause of China’s Foundation*, for example, created a new box office record for domestic film (by 2009) with 450 million RMB (and over one million audience admission).46 The main melody TV drama *Heaven Above* also drew a peak rating as high as 39 percent on CCTV-1, which means around 500 million viewers (Bai R. 2007, 61). *Kewang* 渴望 (Yearning, 1990), which is made by the state-owned Beijing Television Art Centre (BTAC), gained a 27 percent rating in the greater Beijing area, “surpassing all previous foreign hits” (Zha J. 1995, 27). In 2008, besides five commercialized popular dramas such as *Li Xiaolong chuanqi* (The Legend of Bruce Lee), there were also five main melody dramas listed in the ten highest-rated TV dramas (Li H. 2009).47 Thus, hand in hand with commercialized popular products, main melody works have become a new cultural hegemony, a

46 Fan Chen 范晨, “Han Sanping fouren yuce 《Daye》piaofang 4yi5, chenggong wuxu fuzhi 韩三平否认预测《大业》票房 4亿 5，成功无须复制” (Han Sanping denied he had once predicted the 450 million box offices of *The Great Cause* and said that the success was unnecessary to copy), available at http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2009-09-20/01252705410.shtml (accessed on 29 Aug 2012).

47 The five popular, main melody dramas were *Juemi yayun* 绝密押运 (The top-secret escort), *Chuang guandong* 闯关东 (Venturing out into the Northeast), *Xiangcun aiqing* (II) 乡村爱情 (Country love), *Qinglingling de shui lanyingying de tian* 清凌凌的水 蓝莹莹的天 (The clear water, the blue sky), *Renzhe wudi* 仁者无敌 (The benevolent are invincible) (Li H. 2009).
genuine mainstream cultural phenomenon.

However, the domination of main melody drama and popular drama does not mean the silence of intellectual voices. As de Certeau (1984) contends, within the dominant power network, the people always maintain their status as guerrillas who “make do with” (18) the dominant language, meanings and space so that they can establish their own meanings, language and space. The dominant cultures can thus be used in a deconstructive way via playing “an art of being in between” (30). John Tulloch (1990) has demonstrated that some British radical dramatists, for instance Trevor Griffiths and John McGrath, actively engage in popular TV genres to exercise their intellectual opposition against the political establishment. Tulloch describes their countercultural practice as “strategic penetration” by which the radical authors turn the discursive constraints and the generic expectations of popular drama into the deconstruction of dominant myths. In his study of British serious TV drama, John Caughie (2000) also notes that dramas such as Days of Hope (1975), Country (1981) and Boys from the Blackstuff (1991) reconstruct popular forms with authorial critical intentions and an “avant-garde sensibility” to serve the interest of the left-wing politics.

Similarly embracing the “art of being in between”, mainstreaming resistance also constructs a dialectical relationship with main melody drama and popular drama, instead of a simple refusal of them. In his study on main melody fiction, Liu Fusheng 刘复生 (2005) observes that, main melody strategy, despite its triumph in the market, also produces problems which undermines its official goals. One problem is that a mixture of different cultural components and alternative discourses (e.g. Confucianism) creates the possibility of ambiguity and confusion. For example, the script of the main melody drama Heaven Above provoked varying, even opposite understandings and comments inside different levels of official institutions. Some charged that the drama “viciously called the Party and socialism into question” (Bai R. 2007, 64) while some praised it as endorsing the Party’s anticorruption campaign (64-65). To fully exploit the grey area and contradiction within main melody
discourses, *mainstreaming resistance* develops hybrid cultural forms in which intellectual ideas mix with dominant and commercial/industrial discourses not only for the purpose of camouflaging itself but also for tactical deconstruction of them, that is “us[ing] the tools of the master … to dismantle the master’s own house” (Duncombe 2002, 193). In the context of TV drama, *mainstreaming resistance* therefore presents triple layers in a text: an official script, a commercial script and a non-official script. The non-official script is intentionally placed in the center of the text. It challenges the authority of the official script with the help of the commercial script and thus makes the oppositional meanings more possible than others.

The emphasis on the complication of *mainstreaming resistance* also aims at challenging some paradigms within cultural studies particularly designed for the Western context. In the Western context, cultural studies focus on the re-evaluation of popular culture and constitution of cultural hegemony in Western society, which was previously belittled as ideological and reactionary, for example, by the Frankfurt School. Popular culture, as Stuart Hall (1981) and John Fiske (1989; 1993) demonstrate, is not simply reactionary or progressive. It can be used as resistance in various ways. However, because of the different political and social conditions, the definition of the mainstream culture in China is more complicated. Unlike the Western cultural landscape that is dominated by popular culture, the official culture and commercialized popular culture jointly dominate the contemporary Chinese cultural domain (Dai Q. 2004; Wang H. 2002). As Zhong Xueping (2010) writes: “Western cultural studies critics tend not to draw attention to the role of the state in their studies. When it comes to China, no discussion of contemporary Chinese culture can get around noting the role of the state …. [T]o better understand Chinese popular culture (including television culture), the relationship between the ‘official’ and the ‘unofficial’, and between the ‘state’ and ‘the market’ must be fully recognized and
critically examined” (8). Because of the complex and powerful role of state in production of Chinese mainstream culture, the counter-hegemonic move in China not only targets commercialized popular culture, but more importantly, disrupts the official culture. A crucial issue of cultural resistance in the Chinese context is thus becoming how to exercise resistance within the official culture.

In his study of politics of everyday life in the former socialist Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel (2009) emphasizes the specific, totalitarian context that determines Czechoslovakian people to adopt a distinctive practice of resistance from the Western paradigm. Havel argues that, since people’s life is totally politicized and ideologized by the totalitarian regime, which forced people to accept the harsh reality, any attempt and action people take for a better and genuine life are considered resistance against the state’s control. Havel’s argument reminds us of the importance that develops concrete, historically determinate perspectives in understanding specific local issues, especially those, occurring within a socialist autocratic country.49 Echoing Havel’s call, I want to highlight here that mainstreaming resistance is indeed shaped and defined by the specific, Chinese social and political context. An analysis of mainstreaming resistance exemplified by the case studies of Land and Cadres might help us tackle the issue of cultural particularity and widen the concerns of cultural studies beyond the western constituency.

Finally, mainstreaming resistance refers to TV professionals’ practical mediation tactics and practices by which TV professionals negotiate between the political (official) logic, the market logic, the people’s logic, and the intellectual logic so that

48 Western scholars in cultural studies have focused on the issues of meaning construction and reception of popular culture, for instance, Hall 1980a; Fiske 1989; Morley 1980. In contrast, scholars in media studies and political science have mostly paid attentions to the role of state in production of culture in west; for example, Street (2001) and Jowett & O’Donnell 2006.

49 I will discuss Havel’s argument in detail in the Conclusion.
their deviant dramas can be accessed by the public through mainstream media. To break free from the pressures of state regulations, censorship and the commercial institutions’ market motivation, it is crucial for intellectuals to develop alternative modes of production and create autonomous non-official discursive spaces within the mainstream TV drama industry. As scholars in Chinese media studies point out, the state’s marketized reforms have created tension between the economic interest and the political commitment of the national media institutions (Zhao Y. 1998; Pan & Chan 2000). As a result, state institutional practices are discrepant and inconsistent (Lull 1991). The essence of the TV professionals’ mediation tactic is therefore to exploit the ambiguous, grey area of the dominant space, to utilize the ruptures and contradictions within both the state administration and the mainstream industrial structure for exercising intellectual criticism. In this sense, mainstreaming resistance is resistance in negotiation or negotiation in resistance. Pragmatism instead of idealism governs mainstreaming resistance. Intellectual identity is internalized inside a professionalism that seeks appropriate times, appropriate locations, and appropriate opportunities to voice intellectual dissent. In this light, mainstreaming resistance is a flexible and tactical resistance which can be characterized as being opportunistic and unpredictable.

The emergence of mainstreaming resistance shows that intellectual culture has not disappeared from Chinese TV drama. And even though mainstreaming resistance is not merely concerned with intellectual self-expression, it is a catalyst that provokes other popular resistances, such as market forces’ resistance (e.g. investors and distributors) as well as the audience resistance against the state’s homogenization of production, distribution and reception. These interrelated resistances demonstrate, what Havel (2009) calls, “the power of the powerless” (10), a bottom-up power that the powerless in a socialist totalitarian society enable through their tactics in everyday life against the ubiquitous political repression. Although these tactical resistances “are primarily addressing the hidden spheres of society” and are “not a matter of confronting the regime on the level of actual power” (50), as Havel argues, they can
sustainably work to erode the system and consequently change society in the long run.

While my focus is on the deviant TV dramas (Land and Cadres), I suggest that mainstreaming resistance works through other venues as well. For instance, tactical expressions can be located in some “fiction about officialdom and anticorruption”, some films of Fifth Generation in the 1990s, some “experimental” dramas in the 2000s, and the “cultural T-shirt” in the early 1990s. The examination of the shift

50 Tang Zhesheng 汤哲生 (2007) notes Wang Yuewen’s 王跃文 and Yan Zhen’s 阎真 novels are very popular in the market but also politically defiant in how they sharply expose the coldness and darkness of officialdom (89-90). Because of their sharp criticism on Chinese contemporary politics, Wang’s Guohua 国画 (National Portrait) and Yan’s Canglang zhi shui 沧浪之水 (Deep Blue Breakers) are disapproved by the government. For this reason, Liu Fusheng categorizes Wang’s and Yan’s novels as defiant novels (Liu F. 2005, 138).

51 The films of the Fifth Generation in the 1990s are quite different from the avant-garde art form in the 1980s due to the fact that they deeply engage with popular culture (i.e. melodrama). For example, Chen Kaige’s Farewell, My Concubine mixes his ideological critique (political reflection) with certain melodramatic form and thus achieved success in both the domestic and international markets. For a study on the melodramatic politics of the Fifth Generation’s films, see Zhang X. 2008, 269-288.

52 Dai Qing and Nan Fan 南帆 note that the experimental drama, Qie Gewala 切.格瓦拉 (Che Guevara) mixes intellectuals’ criticism and artistic experimentation with commercial consideration and public concerns. This drama was commercially successful. See Dai Q. 2004, 56; Nan F. 2005, 32-3.

53 “Cultural T-shirt” was a kind of T-shirt that featured graphics. It was very popular in Beijing and other cities after the Tiananmen Massacre. “Following the protest movement and deeply aware that most contemporary mainland avant-garde art was divorced from the society as a whole, Kong Yongnian [the creator of cultural T-shirt] became interested in finding his own way of using art to influence public opinion in a nonacademic, nonelitist fashion” (Barmé 1999, 149). Barmé illuminates that some cultural T-shirts contained politically provocative messages and were used as popular protest against the government. Realizing the political danger, the government banned “cultural T-shirts” from being sold on the market in 1991; see Barmé 1999, 145-178.
from elites’ radical resistances into *mainstream resistance* in other cultural locations is an area which invites other scholars to pay more attention.
Chapter One  *Fruitful Land and National Cadres*: Critical Realism, Methodology and Structure of Dissertation

*Land* and *Cadres* conceive *mainstreaming resistance* in a particular way, re-perceiving the reality. This particularity of *mainstreaming resistance* in these two dramas leads this dissertation to the issue of critical realism in Chinese TV drama. As scholars (Chen Y. 2007; Huang & Zeng 2008) point out, realism has dominated TV drama.\(^1\) However, in contrast with the diverse interpretations of the term in other contexts (e.g. Chinese literature and cinema), Chinese TV drama realism is only narrowly understood by scholars as the official mode of representation which in the past used to be identified as socialist realism and has more recently been associated with main melody discourse. For example, Bai Xiaoyi 白小易 (2007) notes that Chinese TV drama realism has the same main goals of socialist realism, namely the promotion of the dominant ideology and the education of audiences (132-133). Bai also points out that, in recent years, this socialist realist tradition has been redeveloped according to main melody’s renewed strategies which convey the ideological message by meeting the audiences’ need for entertainment (154). In his study on contemporary Chinese realistic drama, Chen Youjun (2007) also refers to TV drama realism as both a variation of traditional socialist realism and a new development (the main melody strategy). He defines this new development as an “ideological aestheticization” (96). By “aestheticization”, Chen means that the politicized interpretation of reality is expressed in an “artistic” way, which can be more readily accepted as “real” by audiences.

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\(^1\) Realism is a complex, shifting term and “only exists in critical vocabulary from the mid-nineteenth century” (Williams 1977, 61). Early realists regarded realism as a mimetic mode that aimed at reflection of the empiricist, objective nature. However, Raymond Williams (1977) defines realism as a particular method or attitude towards “what is called ‘reality’” (61). It is essentially political and characterized by conscious interpretation of the life from a particular political viewpoint.
Yet, the “independent” producer of *Land*, Gu Shiyang 谷诗阳, contended that *Land’s* realism was neither socialist realism nor its main melody variation. He instead described *Land* as a “critical realist TV drama” which aimed at uncovering the deep problems in the Chinese (political) system. Gu declared that the critical realism which *Land* deployed could indeed deviate from the officially-supported main melody strategy that only served to glorify the political establishment. The critical realism in *Land*, Gu emphasized, embodied the social commitments of intellectuals who wanted to connect with May Fourth’s critical realism and with writers such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun.  

Echoing Gu’s view, the focus of the dissertation is on examining how the May Fourth critical realism has been adopted and transformed in the specific context of TV dramas, to develop what I have defined as *mainstreaming resistance*. In order to define what TV drama critical realism is, I begin by outlining the May Fourth critical realist tradition and Liu Binyan’s realist discourse of “two kinds of truth” with which the televised critical realism of *Land* and *Cadres* is associated. After addressing some methodological issues, I conclude this chapter by mapping the structure of the dissertation.

1.1 *Fruitful Land and National Cadres*: Critical Realism

*The May Fourth Critical Realist Tradition*

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2 The term “independent” in my usage refers to TV drama professionals’ practices of finding autonomy in a mainstream production system. It is better understood as “in-dependent”, that is to say, independence in negotiation. I define and discuss the term in Chapter Eight.

3 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010. For the transcript of this interview, see Appendix C (一).

The critical realist, following tradition, analyzes the contradictions in the disintegrating old order and the emerging new order. But he does not only see them as contradictions in the outside world, he feels them to be contradictions within himself; though he tends—again following tradition—to emphasize the contradictions rather than the forces working for reconciliation. (114)

Inspired by nineteenth-century European critical realists, such as Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and Henrik Ibsen, Chinese critical realism originated from the late Qing and flourished during the May Fourth period (from 1917 to 1927) when Chinese intellectuals tried to rescue the nation from the crisis4 through a process of cultural transformation and renewal (Anderson 1990; Yu Z. 2006).5 Duke (1984) describes this critical realist tradition as “a combination of serious concern for society and principled demand for social justice” (3) with “its critical edge and humanistic thrust”

4 The crisis is marked by a series of historical events, beginning with the failed 1898 reform, following the failure of the 1911 revolution. “Then, in 1919, China suffered international humiliation when the Western nations at Versailles decided to cede the province of Shandong to Japan, a decision that provoked the student demonstrations on May 4, the date by which the larger cultural movement of the late 1910s and 1920s is now known” (Anderson 1990, 2).

5 For studies on the influence of Russian and European critical realism on the May Fourth literary creation, see Wang 1985, Li 2008.
Self-cultivation, observation and social engagement occupied a central position within May Fourth critical realism.

For the May Fourth critical realists, the new literature should be based on intellectuals’ independence and thus distance itself from the didacticism of classic literature. Marston Anderson (1990) elaborates that May Fourth critical realism “assumes a polarization of the ‘I’ of the observer and the society that is the object of the observer’s analysis” (201). It is different from the 1930s revolutionary or socialist realism in which the independent “I” turns to the collective “we” (202). The May Fourth realists proposed that the new literature should directly confront reality and “authentically portray today’s social situation” (Wen R. 2007, 11, my translation). Lu Xun, for instance, condemned Chinese classical literature as an art of man he pian 瞒和骗 (concealment and cheating) (2005a, 254), and asserted that his writings were based on “the lives of the unfortunate who live in our sick society” (cited from Hu 1996, 485, trans. by Paul G. Pickowicz). The new literature also aimed at reforming life and society through exposing the darkness of the society and criticising the backwardness of Confucianism. Hu Shi 胡适, one of the leading scholars in the May Fourth period, terms realism as Ibsenism to highlight its critical spirit:

Ibsen described actual social and familial conditions in order to move

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6 The May Fourth realists use xieshi zhuyi 写实主义 (realism) to refer to their new literary mode (Wen R. 2007; Anderson 1990). The term realism is not a unified concept as it includes varying realist theories and practices, for example, Mao Dun’s 茅盾 naturalist discourse and novels, Qian Xingcun’s 钱杏村 theory of puluo xianshizhuyi 普罗现实主义 (proletarian realism). Despite its diversity, some scholars, for example Anderson (1990), deploy critical realism to account for the most remarkable trend of May Fourth realism as represented by Lu Xun’s creation in order to differentiate the May Fourth realism from the later politicized realisms (e.g. revolutionary realism and socialist realism). For a study on critical realist quality of the May Fourth realism, see Chen Z. 1990.

readers, to make us feel how dark and corrupt our families and society are and to make us understand that our families and society must be reformed—this is what is meant by Ibsenism. On the surface, it seems destructive, but in fact it is entirely healthy …. Ibsen knows that society’s diseases are many and complex and that there is no panacea, so he can only take a blood test, describe the illness, and let each patient seek out his or her own medicine. (Cited from Anderson 1990, 32.)

Hu’s statement indicated that the May Fourth critical realists regarded the new literature as a means of enlightening the “masses” and society. Similar to Hu, Lu Xun also claimed: “My motive is to expose the illness in order to induce people to pay attention to its cure” (cited from Hu 1996, 485, trans. by Paul G. Pickowicz). The “masses”, whom the May Fourth critical realists attempted to enlighten, were ignorant farmers, for example, Ah Q 阿Q and Runtu 闰土 in Lu Xun’s A Q zhengzhuan 阿Q 正传 (A True Story of Ah Q) and Guxiang 故乡 (Hometown). In order to awaken the numb consciousness of the “masses” (Liu 1994, 255), the May Fourth critical realists aesthetically focused on self-expression (“I”), formal experimentation (e.g. Lu Xun’s allegorical narrative in Diary of a Madman,8 and qubi 曲笔9 in Medicine), and thus rejected readers’ emotional identification with the victims they depicted (Anderson 1990).

With the rise of revolutionary literature in the late 1920s, May Fourth critical realism declined. Its dominant position in literature was replaced by revolutionary realism or

8 David Der-wei Wang (1992) notes that “Diary of a Madman” is “about a figurative reading-through of madness” through which “it leads us to the ideological and epistemological conditions of a realist discourse” (7). For more details, see Wang 1992, 5-10.

9 The term qubi has been translated as “innuendoes” or “distortions” “since the word traditionally referred to deliberate misrepresentations of the truth by historians to avoid the wrath of the powerful”. For a discussion on Lu Xun’s critical use of qubi for a realist discourse, see Anderson 1990, 86-92.
socialist realism, which was based on the Party’s political struggle for a socialist China. In 1942, in his famous seminal Talk at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 explained: “life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plain, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual life” (Mao Z. 1996, 470). Li Yuchun 李遇春 (2007, 92) elaborates that this higher life to which Mao refers is inherent not to the experience and observation of human beings, but to a realm of “Red Truth” which is based on Maoist Marxism. On the practical level, this higher life always corresponds to specific Party lines, initiatives and particular policies. With the founding of People’s Republic of China in 1949, socialist realism had become the orthodox mode of creation by which to dominate Chinese literature and art.

Hu Feng 胡风, a favorite disciple of Lu Xun, was one of the very few who publicly advocated the May Fourth critical realism and objected to revolutionary (or socialist) realism from the 1930s to 1950s. He openly accused socialist realism of being divorced from real life (1996, 487) and forcing writers to tell lies (489). Consequently, Hu was arrested by the Party in 1955 and imprisoned for 24 years. The Party’s persecution on Hu and over 2000 of his sympathizers (they were labeled as an anti-Party clique) signaled the unchallengeable “truth” of socialist realism in the Party’s regime.

**Liu Binyan and Two Kinds of Truth**

However, after the Cultural Revolution, Maoism and its artistic mode, socialist realism, were attacked. Duke (1984) observes: “Accordingly, the majority of Chinese writers in the immediate post-Mao era, like their May Fourth predecessors, endeavored to use ‘critical realism’ once more to ameliorate social ills by probing and criticizing injustices in the immediate past as well as the present” (3-4). Liu Binyan’s discourse of realism and his practice of investigative reportage was a typical example of the return of critical realism in the 1980s (Kinkley 2007). In People or Monsters?, Liu investigates a case of official corruption and accuses the Party for its involvement with the crime. Liu asserts: “The Communist Party regulated everything, but would
not regulate the Communist Party” (cited from Link 2006, 44). In *The Second Kind of Loyalty* which “created a furor that contributed to Liu Binyan’s eventual expulsion from the Chinese Communist Party” (Link 2006b, 149), Liu distinguishes two loyalties: one is the political loyalty to the Party, another is the intellectual loyalty to people and truth. In outlining such separation, the reportage deals with one of Chinese politics’ main taboos and encourages citizens to criticize the authorities (Link 2006b, 149).10

Liu’s discourse of critical realism was explicitly articulated in his startling speech, *Listen Carefully to the Voice of the People*,11 at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Literature and Art Workers on 9 November 1979. In this speech, Liu suggested there were two kinds of truth: one was official truth; another was the factual truth which came from the real life and artists’ experience. By such division, Liu attempted to liberate artists from being political subjects, who were trapped by socialist realism for over thirty years. Liu stated, “writers should face life squarely and listen carefully to the voice of people …. When faced with the ‘two kinds of truth’ … we writers must maintain a strong sense of responsibility to the people in reaching our conclusions. Our thinking must be dead serious, never rash, and always independent” (Liu 2006, 32).

Liu’s understanding of realism is closer to the May Fourth realist tradition. It encourages writers to actively delve into life by truthfully reflecting reality rather than distorting it. Liu allegorized literature as a mirror which revealed “the true appearance of things” (33); “[w]hen the mirror shows us things in life that are not very pretty, or that fall short of our ideals, it is wrong to blame the mirror. Instead we should root out and destroy those conditions that disappoint us” (33). Liu’s statement suggests that

10 For Liu’s selected works including *People or Monsters?* and *The Second Kind of Loyalty*, see Liu 2006.

writers should use an independent fighting spirit to explore the non-official truth of life, to “speed the progress of society” (33). In this regard, Liu advocates that literature should be loyal to people, instead of politics.

In his study on the subversive discourses in the 1980s Chinese reportages represented by Liu Binyan’s works, He Xilai discerns three types of rationalities that can be also applied to characterize Liu’s critical realism. They are: (1) qimeng lixing 启蒙理性 (“enlightenment rationality”), “that of bringing ‘light’ to the dark areas of the covered up or distorted representations in the ruling ideology and thereby awakening [audiences] out of their hypnotic states of subjection” (cited from Zhang Y. 1993, 232); (2) pipan lixing 批判理性 (“critical rationality”) that “maintains a critical posture vis-a-vis official representation ... by its questioning of the latter’s reliability or legitimation, by its exposure of the latter’s superficiality or even falsehood, and, in most cases, by its supply of a corrective to the latter’s distortion” (233); and (3) lishi lixing 历史理性 (“historical rationality”) that indicates a shiguan yishi 史官意识 (historian’s consciousness), “a self-reflectiveness ... applied not just at the level of individuals, but also at the level of the Chinese nation and Chinese culture” (234).

**TV Drama Critical Realism**

After examination of the May Fourth critical realist tradition and Liu’s critical realism, we are now in a better position to define the TV drama critical realism deployed by Land and Cadres. As discussed above, in the context of China, the politics of realism is undertaken in a particular way in which there is something at the core of a struggle between the May Fourth critical realist tradition represented by Hu Feng and Liu Binyan’s realist discourses and socialist realism (its newly developed melody strategy). This political struggle, however, is an uneven fight in which the state relentlessly attacks critical realism and its proponents. Under such a harsh circumstance, it is important for critical realism to develop new tactics that can allow the May Fourth critical realist spirit to revive (and transform itself) within mainstream
culture. In doing so intellectual critical discourses have been extended through the mainstream media.

Politics of realism, as Caughie (2000) argues, is a complex matter. There is no fixed and permanent boundary between progressive realism(s) and reactionary realism(s). Even naturalism and classic realism, which are severely criticized by British radical left-wing theorists as failing to reveal social contradiction, can be also transformed into progressive realism. “The conditions of progressiveness”, Coughie notes, “are highly contingent, and cannot always be determined in advance by the application of ‘correct form’” (108). Rather than situated within the rigid framework (the progressive versus the reactionary; the good versus the bad), Caughie (2000, 109) contends, it is more useful to look at how realism(s) works at complex ways in which realist texts and contexts define each other. Being framed within a mainstream context, TV drama critical realism also takes a similar manner of “making do”, and has thus developed four main traits that differentiate it from the official main melody strategy.

(1) TV drama critical realism tells non-official truth. “Truth is”, according to Kinkley (2007), “of course, subjective, but now the general Chinese presumption is that China remains a bureaucratic society and its officials lie. The precepts they circulate in all forms of propaganda, therefore, also lie .... Lu Xun’s canonical

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12 Classic realism refers to a creative mode that “conceals its own conditions of production, claiming a transparency of version when in fact its narrative is determined by a controlling discourse” (Tulloch 1990, 120). It originates from the 19 century European realist novels (e.g. George Eliot’s Middlemarch) and is later widely adopted and adapted by popular cultural products (e.g. Hollywood cinema and commercialized popular TV drama).

13 For example, by embracing political modernism, Colin MacCabe (1974) denies any progressive potential of classic realism and criticizes it for placing viewers or readers within a comfortable position governed by the dominant “metalanguage”. This subjective position, MacCabe argues, prevents viewers or readers from constructing revolutionary meanings.
realism in May Fourth times countered alleged lies of Chinese society, politics, and culture” (154). In the same fashion, TV drama critical realism rejects the ideological interpretation of reality posited by official realism, which depicts the current social and political structure as unchallengeable and permanent. Instead, TV drama critical realism seeks to grasp reality as process, change and contradiction so that the fixed “truth” in the official representation can be re-examined and corrected.

(2) TV drama critical realism has its roots within intellectual independence and autonomy. With such an intellectual independent stance and fighting spirit in mind, TV critical realists like their May Fourth predecessors and Liu Binyan, play the role of, what the Chinese TV drama writer Zhou Meisen calls, the shehui jiqi jianchegong 社会机器检测工 (“surveillant worker of the social machine”), whose function is to scrutinize and identify what problems society has and where wrong is present in society (Zheng and Pan 2005). They are critical observers and social commentators of their time. TV drama critical realism is thus accusatory and aims at investigating the social inequality, injustice, and especially government wrongdoings.

(3) TV drama critical realism is dissatisfied with the established political and social order and is aware that it should do something about it. Like the May Fourth critical realists who resort to critical realism as a means of social transformation, TV drama critical realists also appeal for social and, in particular, political reform. They intend to activate audiences’ political consciousness and contribute to Chinese political democratization.

(4) Although TV drama critical realism derives from the May Fourth critical realism, it redefines the latter’s elitism in correspondence to the new changing social and cultural contexts. As one of the manifestations of mainstreaming resistance, TV drama critical realism engages with official realisms, but “maintains a critical
posture vis-a-vis official representation” (Zhang Y. 1993, 233). TV drama critical realism also mixes with popularized creative modes (i.e. melodramatic mode), but reconstructs them on the one hand to reinforce its critical power, on the other hand to mobilize audiences for social transformation. In this respect, TV drama critical realism is a kind of eclectic realism that does not completely separates itself from mainstream realisms (both official main melody strategy and classic realism). Rather it “makes do with” mainstream realisms, and brilliantly turns them into a new critical direction. It is critical, simultaneously commercial; is non-official but also mainstream.

1.2 Research Questions and Methodology

In this dissertation, by taking Land and Cadres as case studies, I will examine two main issues in relation to mainstreaming resistance:

(1) How can TV dramas exploit critical realism to reconstruct/critique main melody drama and popular drama, to construct intellectual oppositional discourses which aim at both deconstructing and challenging the ruling ideology, as well as eliciting audiences’ political consciousness? How do TV dramas, such as Land and Cadres demonstrate an intellectual critical position that investigates social inequality and unjustness, and re-examines the intellectuals’ place in society?

(2) How do the authors of critical realist TV dramas interact with different cultural institutions in order to constitute creative autonomy, to bypass censorship? How are the oppositional meanings influenced and modified through the process of negotiation and mediation?

To address the research questions stated above, my study consists of two methodological components:

(1) Textual analysis which examines the two dramas’ aesthetic features, meaning
construction, and textual devices in terms of TV drama critical realism. *Land* and *Cadres* constitute a complex dialogue and interchange with main melody drama and popularized melodrama as they may share similar materials and themes (e.g. farmers’ difficulties and problems within officialdom), but deal with the materials and themes in different ways. However, we cannot understand this dialectic of interchange and transformation—what *Land* and *Cadres* offer that main melody drama and popularized melodrama do not, and the complex relations of connection and difference between *Land*, *Cadres* and the other two types of drama—without discernible and concrete analyzes.

For this reason, I pay particular attention to televisual analysis. Comparing film criticism with television studies, Caughie (2000) points out that one of the fascinations, “which informs film criticism and which is much less marked in writing about television”, is that “[t]he *mise en scène* of cinema holds secrets—even from its creators—which criticism can uncover” (18). Chinese TV drama studies similarly pay less attention to the examination of televisual rhetoric. The analyses are somehow developed within the matrix of literary criticism which concentrates on the examination on the aspects of narrative, character, and motif. However visuality and sound are very important parts of the TV drama language through which TV drama producers create subtle and reflexive meanings, to construct their social investigation, and thus these aspects need to be included in our analysis.

This dissertation takes a multi-disciplinary approach, which is engaged in various theories from literary, film and cultural studies. My research does not see a TV drama serial as being textually isolated. Instead I regard a text as a cultural practice whose meaning construction is associated with broader cultural contexts. In other words, the textual practices of *mainstreaming resistance* are a complex cultural dialogue which is interrelated with and influenced by practices in other cultural arenas. In order to better understand the multifaceted and layered structure
of textual resistance in *Land* and *Cadres*, it is necessary to draw on multiple sources and perspectives (for instance, de Certeau’s theory of tactic (“art of the weak”), Chinese investigative journalism, Lukácsian critical realism, as well as Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar’s melodramatic realism and imagination) in the analysis.

(2) Contextual analysis which places the drama *Land* within the context of production, censorship and broadcasting to examine how TV drama resistance operates and survives in both the industrial and censorship environments. Highlighting the importance of contextual analysis in television studies, Jason Mittell (2004) argues that television genres and texts cannot be understood solely through textual analysis, but must be situated within larger systems of industrial and power relations. Similarly, *mainstreaming resistance* cannot be merely understood from the textual point of view either. Textual definition, interpretation and evaluation cannot tell us how a subversive text is constructed, marketed and finally broadcast within the mainstream industrial and censorship environment, how it “fits into larger relations of power” (26). In this regard, to fully understand *mainstreaming resistance*, we must locate the subversive text within the power structure of the industry and explore it in relation to the creative practices, industrial practices and policing practices.

In terms of research data, my study is based on the DVD versions of *Land* and *Cadres*, which are available through the audio-visual market and internet video websites. The *Land* DVD is 24 episodes, one episode more than the broadcast version. The *Cadres* can also be accessed through many websites, for example, on Shousee.com

14 The 24-episode *Land* is available on many websites, for example, on Baidu.com [http://www.soku.com/search_video?q_%E6%B2%83%E5%9C%9F](http://www.soku.com/search_video?q_%E6%B2%83%E5%9C%9F) and on Sogou.com [http://v.sogou.com/series/wxt4vu5644qm5vwnye.html](http://v.sogou.com/series/wxt4vu5644qm5vwnye.html) (accessed 16 October 2010). The 40-episode *Cadres* can also be accessed through many websites, for example, on Shousee.com [http://www.shousee.com/album-61.html](http://www.shousee.com/album-61.html) (accessed 1 August 2011).
Cadres DVD is 40 episodes and thus significantly different from the screened version which was heavily edited to 29 episodes. The scripts of Land, including two drafts and one final edition, are also important data which this research relies upon. Through comparison between different script versions, between the scripts and their audio-visual form, changes can be traced, and the complex process of meaning construction can be clarified.

In order to further assess the impact of industrial contexts and the TV professionals’ industrial practices, I take Land as a case study. My choice to focus on Land is both supported and complicated by my personal involvement in the creation of the drama (as one of the scriptwriters). While my contribution to the writing of the script makes me necessarily a non-neutral advocate of its critical goals, I have endeavoured to base my analysis on both textual and contextual evidence. In their studies on television fan culture and audience reception of Dallas, Henry Jenkins (1992) and Ien Ang (1989) emphasize the ambivalence as well as the additional value of their dual roles as both researchers and fans. I anticipate that my experience and role as both a researcher and TV drama maker may similarly create a problematic but also useful ambivalence as it enables me not only to have a first-hand understanding of the creative process and industrial practices, but also to establish close connections with the producers of Land. Thanks to these connections, I was able to access relevant documents and materials (e.g. creative notes, drafted character design, story outlines, episodic synopses, scripts, report and synopsis for the SARFT approval, promotional plans and even one censoring report from CCTV). Thus I can include the inside stories that are crucial to understanding how deviant TV dramas like Land or Cadres are produced and broadcast, how the oppositional meanings are constructed and negotiated through the process of production, censorship and broadcasting.

My personal involvement in Land’s creation is one of the main drives for my study—I am indeed attempting to better understand the value and the limits of the mainstreaming resistance which I have experienced in my creative work. One of the
main goals of this study is to bring TV drama makers’ unseen, subversive practices into the light. Due to China’s particular political circumstance, these practices are not discussed and in fact they are even deliberately denied by TV drama makers themselves in public. For self-protection, what scriptwriters, producers and creators say might be quite different from or at odds with what they really did. My study tries to theorize the covered, unspoken practices in Chinese TV drama and make these progressive politics visible. While my own experience and engagement with Land brings additional evidence in support of the existence of mainstreaming resistance within TV drama practices, the full picture can only be gained via a combined exploration of creative, industrial, marketing, policing and scheduling practices behind the drama. As Ang (1989) notes, any study has biases that “always [bear] the traces of subjectivity of the researcher” (11-12), but I hope that my critical analysis and theorization of mainstreaming resistance remains solidly grounded in texts and factual evidence.

1.3 Structure of Dissertation

Structurally, this dissertation is divided into nine chapters. Besides this chapter (Chapter One), the following six chapters investigate Land and Cadres at the textual level by looking at how the two dramas employ critical realism to reconstruct/critique the conventions of main melody drama and popularized melodrama for their own critical purposes. Chapter Two examines the characteristics of main melody TV drama. As I argued in the above, although televised critical realism seeks to oppose the official main melody strategy and main melody drama, it has a dialectical relation with the latter, that is to say, critiquing the latter by engaging with it. Thus, my analysis of the two dramas’ critical realist quality would be incomplete if the analysis did not include this discussion on the characteristics of the main melody strategy and

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15 I include my own voice in discussion of the drama Land, especially in Chapter Eight, the chapter to analyze Land’s production and creative practices.
main melody drama.

I argue that main melody TV drama revitalizes the outdated socialist TV drama through Hollywoodization, which sugar-coats ideological interpretations of reality with Hollywood-modelled entertaining components. Main melody drama therefore demonstrates the following characteristics: firstly, relying on deglamorization and the traditional “clean official” model, main melody drama transforms inaccessible socialist charismatic heroes into more humane and accessible, deglamorized, charismatic “clean officials”. Secondly, it reconstitutes the socialist political narrative with popular dramatic elements (e.g. genre mixing) as well as ideological allegory, therefore not only is the reconstituted political narrative presented as more compelling, but the depicted social issues are bracketed within the official framework of interpretation. Thirdly, main melody drama produces new official myths (i.e. reform myth and anticorruption myths) to justify the Party’s new ideology (“socialism with Chinese characteristics”) and their mandate to rule. Finally, in order to achieve its goal of interpellating audiences, the drama establishes an ideologized sentimentalist-audience position to invite audiences to identify with.

Chapter Three to Chapter Seven examine Land and Cadres’ critique of main melody drama conventions and their reconstruction of melodrama with critical realism. Chapter Three discusses the investigative narrative mode in Land and Cadres. In contrast with the ideologized, popularizing and allegorical narrative of main melody drama, Land and Cadres’s investigative narrative takes a critical position that explores the deep meaning of social issues. In doing so, Land and Cadres rely on non-official

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16 Charisma (from Greek kharisma) originally refers to a divine favor or talent given by God. Germany sociologist Max Weber uses the term to describe such a “superman” with the qualities of innovation and sacred charisma. Chinese scholar Wang Yichuan (1994, 12) borrows this concept from Weber to account for the appearance of positive revolutionary heroes in Chinese socialist art.
sources (e.g. Cao Jingqing’s 曹景清 sociological study of Hennan rural communities) to build their critical inquiry, and place the narrative and characters within concrete social and political contexts. Through constant questions and inquiries, *Land* and *Cadres* challenge the superficiality and distortion of official main melody representations of reality by pointing to the problematic political system as the root of the social difficulties.

Chapter Four explores the drama *Land’s* critique of the main melody, deglamorized, charismatic clean official model. This critique is carried out in three ways: (1) critical reconstruction, which transforms the clean official hero into scholarly knight-errant who exhibits intellectual ideal and fighting spirit to challenge the political authority and strive for social reform; (2) construction of a “tragic structure of feeling”\(^\text{17}\) by which the scholarly knight-errant of *Land* is depicted more as tragic heroes, unlike an optimistic and abstract portrayal of the main melody, charismatic, clean official. In contrast, the scholarly knight-errant is placed within realistic, social conflicts and thus their endeavors to politically reform the nation are largely frustrated by rigid power structures. Through such pessimistic description, the scholarly knight-errant not only differs significantly from the characteristic optimism of main melody heroes, but also exemplifies a self-examination upon intellectuals’ capacity to transform political authoritarianism; and (3) deconstruction of the master-slave relation between the main melody, clean official and the “masses”. In *Land*, the people explicitly become conscious fighters defending their own rights. Through the new image of “masses” (as

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\(^\text{17}\) I borrow the term “tragic structure of feeling” from Ang (1989, 46) but with a different connotation. Ang uses the term to refer to human emotional experience about the unpredictability of life. The feeling of life is tragic, “because of the idea that happiness can never last for ever but, quite the contrary, is precarious” (Ang 1989, 46). The term “tragic structure of feeling” that I deploy in the dissertation, however, is socially represented to pertain to uncertainty and frustration concerning social justice and transformation; see Chapter Four.
peoples), the drama highlights the importance of grassroots active political participation within Chinese political transformation.

Chapter Five discusses the counter-myth tactic in *Land* and *Cadres*. *Land* and *Cadres* as critical realist dramas function as counter-mythmaking texts to subvert the dominant myths and ask urgently for social reform. From a critical perspective, *Cadres* deconstructs the Party’s anticorruption myth. It reveals the corrupt nature of the Party as it has become a self-interested bureaucratic class which politically and economically exploits common people for its own benefit. By deploying critical allegory, *Land* challenges the official reform myth by pointing out that unbridled political power is leading Chinese reform towards a man-made catastrophe. The two shows sharply accuse of the privileged class and political authoritarianism of being the source of social problems as well as being a source of very real danger for China.

Chapter Six explores the *Land* and *Cadres’* reconstitution of melodrama with critical realism. This reconstruction is conducted in two ways: through recognition and defamiliarization. By employing recognition, *Land* and *Cadres* realize the critical power of the melodramatic mode as a necessary means to effectively communicate with audiences and bring the significance of social issues to light. Through defamiliarization, the two dramas also realize the shortcomings of the melodramatic mode in relation to social revelation and thus they defamiliarize certain melodramatic conventions (e.g. happy ending, polarized characters etc.) with a critical realist approach so that audiences can have critical distance when they emotionally engage in *Land* and *Cadres*. By way of this critical distance/emotional engagement, audiences are expected to simultaneously engage in both critical thought as well as popular pleasure. If the two dramas’ adaptation of some elements of the main melody drama is motivated by a non-radical stance, their involvement in melodrama is driven by a non-elitist motivation: affecting audiences by engaging with them. Audiences are therefore presented with the intellectual voices that are conveyed through familiar, populist language.
Chapter Seven is a transitional chapter that links my textual analysis to contextual analysis. It explores the political implication of the melodramatic critical realism in *Land* and *Cadres* in relation to broader cultural and intellectual politics. In Chinese film and TV drama, realism always mixes with the melodramatic mode to serve different political ends (Pickowicz 1993; Berry & Farquhar 2006). The melodramatic critical realism in *Land* and *Cadres* connects with the May Fourth intellectual Utopian view of modernization, but redefines the Utopia from an elitist imagining to a popular fantasy. This melodramatic critical realism indicates that a new popularized intellectual politics has formed in the post-Tiananmen period. By abandoning the previous elitism, this new intellectual politics energetically engages with popular culture and attempts to stir up people’s political consciousness in a pleasurable way.

The last two chapters analyze *Land* as a case study to examine the subversive practices of the drama in the context of production, promotion, censorship, broadcasting, reception and alternative channels of circulation. Marketization, commercialization and privatization of the TV drama industry since the 1990s have somewhat dismantled the previous top-down power structure within the industry. Private capital and TV drama makers have become new forces that reshape the power relations of production. Under this new power structure, the state governance over TV drama has been weakened and a broad range of dissenting spaces have been constructed through every moment of production, marketing, censorship, broadcast and alternative markets.

Chapter Eight explores the subversive practice of the *Land’s* professionals during the production stage. The subversive practice can be divided into two types: (1) creative practice through which the TV professionals generate or discover autonomous space for construction of intellectual discourse. *Land* employs an “independent” mode of production and a *non-boundary writing approach* by which a non-official creative space is established to allow the creators to construct oppositional meanings; (2)
mediating practice (e.g. yin-yang face tactic) which the creators tactically mediate with different institutions (the state, the private) to maintain their encoded oppositional meanings under institutional constraints, e.g. censorship. Mediating practice demonstrates intellectuals’ wisdom to develop their criticism by utilizing the ruptures and contradictions within both main melody culture and state administration.

Finally, the last chapter explores Land’s multiple resistances in relation to its marketing practice, the state censoring practice, scheduling practice, reception and alternative circulating practices. Within the new power structure of the industry, TV professionals, capital forces (e.g. investors and distributors) and audiences are no longer the administrated passive, but are instead active players taking advantage of any opportunity to maximize their dissent (both politically and economically). By demonstrating a bottom-up approach within the industrial structure, the investors and professionals of Land successfully manipulate commercial concerns through their marketing campaign and take advantage of the fissured censoring system to have the drama passed through censorship in Beijing. Despite the fact that Land was withdrawn from the CCTV’s schedule due to Party senior official intervention, the Party’s move did not stop audiences’ protest and condemnation against the persecution through the Sina online forum. On the forum, the cancellation of Land’s broadcast turned into a social event which stirred audiences radically denounce these actions. Finally, the VCDs, DVDs and internet markets constitute alternative channels for Chinese TV drama circulation. They construct a non-official space to allow the officially prohibited content to distribute. They also provide a new way of consuming TV drama by which viewers can be free from institutional scheduling control, organize their own viewing and create their own meanings. The new context of the socialist market economy creates various degrees of autonomy and freedom within the TV drama industry. It makes the government’s total control over Chinese TV drama most likely impossible.

The structural “imbalance” between textual analysis (five chapters—from Chapter
Two to Chapter Six) and contextual analysis (the last two chapters)\textsuperscript{18} may be problematic as it leaves many contextual issues (mainly audience) of mainstreaming resistance unaddressed. To be adequately addressed, these issues would require quantitatively as well as qualitatively designed audience studies that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Such studies are certainly needed and they are indeed an area I intend to further explore in the future. This current research thus merely represents a preliminary step in explaining and analyzing some practices of mainstreaming resistance in Chinese TV drama. One of the possible ways of mainstreaming resistance is critical realism. The inquiries I make in the dissertation show a complex and zigzag route of resistance that is less recognized elsewhere in television, and is important for an understanding of both contemporary Chinese TV drama as well as Chinese culture. These inquiries may extend our vision over the transforming cultural power of intellectuals, and provide possibilities to allow us to imagine Chinese TV drama which may play a much more important role in contemporary cultural politics.

\textsuperscript{18} Chapter Seven as a transitional chapter contains part of my contextual analysis.
Chapter Two  Chinese Main Melody TV Drama: Hollywoodization and Ideological Persuasion

This chapter explores the characteristics of main melody TV drama, which aims at setting a benchmark for my subsequent investigation of Land’s and Cadres’ critical realism. As noted in the Introduction, the Party takes the main melody strategy in attempt to develop a soft, repackaged and propagandist model. Seeking to elaborate the function and mechanism of the model, this chapter explores in great detail how Hollywoodization impacts upon main melody drama’s textual (re)constitution.¹ I argue that by translating Hollywood and popular drama’s tropes into the Chinese context, main melody drama transforms the direct propaganda of socialist drama into ideological persuasion so that it can effectively address the market’s demands and the needs of consumerist audiences. Specifically, through a close examination of the main melody drama Shengwei shuji (Provincial Party Secretary 2002, later Secretary), I explore the particular textual traits of main melody drama’s Hollywoodization and ideological persuasion: deglamorized charismatic “clean officials”, popularized political narrative, ideological allegory, new myth-making, and an ideologized sentimentalist positioning of the audiences. My exploration of main melody drama’s textual features may help to not only clarify the transformation of the Party’s propagandistic strategies and ideological practices in the new socialist market context, but also allow us to better understand how global cultural products interact with local contexts to subsequently influence contemporary Chinese media culture.

Before analysing Secretary, I will examine how the propagandistic approaches within

¹ English-language scholarship has paid less attention to this new official TV genre. The term ‘main melody TV drama’ is occasionally mentioned, but only as a new label of official TV drama (e.g. Keane 2005, and Bai R. 2007). However, there are some studies on main melody film in English; see Yeh and Davis 2008, 37-51, and Su W. 2010, 317-322.
official TV dramas have evolved overtime.

2.1 Socialist TV Drama and Direct Propaganda

Socialist TV drama appeared on 15 June 1958 when the first Chinese TV drama 一口菜饼子 (A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake) was broadcast on Beijing Television (renamed as China Central Television in 1978). In the early period until 1966 when the Cultural Revolution began, approximately 200 socialist TV dramas were transmitted nationwide (Bai R. 2007, 11). These dramas, for instance, 《党救活了他》 (The Party saves his life 1958) and 《新的一代》 (A new generation 1959), were all black-and-white and in the single episodic format. They were artistically unsophisticated, and strongly influenced by conventions of stage drama (Wu S. 1997, 43). There were only two television stations in China in 1958 and 23 stations in 1968 which were all located in big cities such as in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (Hong J. 1998, 78). Since television broadcast was limited within a few urban areas, the impact of those socialist dramas should not be overestimated.

Employing a planned economic production mode, socialist dramas were commissioned, funded, and distributed solely by the state. They were produced not for profit, but to merely function as propaganda of the Party (Bai X. 2007, 135). Propaganda, as Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell define, is “a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (2006, 1). It can be implemented with multiple strategies and methods in correspondence with different social and historical contexts. Socialist drama implements direct propaganda that is similar to religious preaching, with which
the term propaganda was originally associated.\(^2\) By direct propaganda, I highlight that (1) the propagandistic intention of socialist drama is openly emphasized and articulated; (2) like a political preaching, socialist drama teaches political lessons to the audience in a dogmatic and direct manner. The Party’s doctrine is presented as the only legitimate discourse and Truth. Its effect essentially relies on the audience’s faith in the Party and the Party’s total control over the television industry, which rejects any alternative programming that might compete with it. Finally, (3) socialist drama is wholly concerned with propaganda command and therefore gives little or no priority to aesthetic mastery. It is therefore highly stereotypical and formulaic, and is characterized by conceptualized characters, narratives and languages.\(^3\)

For example, adapted from the novel of the same title, the first Chinese TV drama *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake* was made to spread the Party’s call to “save food” and “yiku sitian” 忆苦思甜 (understanding present happiness through comparison with past misery). It is about a woman who teaches her younger sister to economize food by recalling their family’s hardship in the previous society (Wu S. 1997, 29). The political message is directly instilled into the audience through the elder sister in a demystified manner. Nothing is left implicit.\(^4\) Nevertheless, Chinese economic reforms and the consequent social and cultural transformations have changed the audience and cracked the Party’s domination of TV drama. As a result, the symbolic

\(^2\) The term propaganda was first used by the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval era when it set up a position, the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, charged “with spreading Catholicism and regulating ecclesiastical affairs in heretic, schismatic, or heathen lands” (Lambert 1938, 7).

\(^3\) For a discussion of the propagandistic nature of socialist drama, see Bai X. (2007, 132-135).

\(^4\) During the Cultural Revolution, the direct propaganda and its propagandistic aesthetic was regulated by the “Principle of the Three Stresses”, which is stated as “[o]f all the characters, stress the positive ones. Of the positive characters, stress the heroic ones. Of the main characters, stress the central ones” (Silbergeld 1999, 203).
power of socialist drama faltered and a new form of official drama (main melody drama) emerged.

2.2 The Rise of Popular TV Drama, Commercial Aesthetics and the Crisis of Socialist TV Drama

Benefiting from economic reforms, the Chinese TV drama industry has been increasingly commercialized. Advertising replaced state subsidies to become the chief financial source for Chinese television networks (Hong J. 1998, 85). For example, the advertising revenue at CCTV in 1987 was RMB 27 million; this amount was twice that of the governmental subsidy for that year. The revenue reached RMB 5.29 billion in 2000 and RMB 7.53 billion in 2003 (Zhang T. 2007, 47-48). Pan Zhongdang and Chan Joseph Man argue that “[m]arketization in China has brought profound changes to its television system, resulting in what can be called the ‘market-based party organ model’” (2000, 256). In this model, television networks are a particular business which needs to serve two masters, the Party and the market, “to strike a balance between ideological mission and profitability” (2000, 256).

During the 1980s, in order to address TV networks’ economic concerns and a shortage of profitable programs, a substantial number of imported popular dramas, such as the Hong Kong martial art drama Huo Yuanjia, the Japanese soap opera Oshin, and the American soap opera Dallas and Dynasty, flooded into China and attracted huge audience numbers. These imported commercial dramas offered a type of enjoyable entertainment different from the direct propaganda to which Chinese audiences had

5 Through commercialization, the Chinese TV drama industry has developed very quickly. There were only two television stations located in Beijing and Shanghai respectively in 1958. Yet, the numbers of television stations dramatically increased to 566 (with 3,597 channels) by 2003. Correspondingly, TV drama production reached over 10,000 episodes in 2000 and 2001 (Zhang F. 2003, 66).
been used. They aimed at attracting as many audiences as possible and shared a similar commercial end with Hollywood cinema (Gripsrud 1995). Based on the commercial principle, Hollywood cinema (and arguably, popular TV drama as well) emphasise a “libidinal command” (Berry 2004, 50) by which a set of aesthetic conventions, codes and techniques (e.g. personalized characters, transparent narrative, and genre) are established and organized to meet audiences’ aspirations and provoke their emotional engagement (Ang 1989; Maltby 2003). In her study of Dallas, Ien Ang points out that Dallas employs commercial rhetorical strategies (e.g. the melodramatic mode) to “[succeed] in attracting the attention of millions of people with very varied social, cultural and psychological backgrounds, and maintaining their involvement in the programme” (1989, 28). Therefore, the main purpose of popular dramas is to entertain audiences and to make money. This is what makes them quite different from the propagandistic aims (and no concern for profit) of socialist drama.

In the competition with viewer-centred imported popular dramas in the market, socialist drama was vulnerable and at a disadvantage, since it comparatively lacked entertainment value. According to Hong Junhao’s study on Chinese imported TV programs, “the average rating for imported soap operas on Chinese television was 22 percent, much higher than the 15 percent rating for domestic soap operas” (1998, 90). A national survey conducted in 1987 showed that 72 percent of respondents enjoyed imported dramas (89). Even a senior media official acknowledged: “foreign shows are very audience-oriented and lively, and our shows are often bound to the Party’s political guidance” (81). Socialist drama was thus out of favor with audiences. In order to adapt the new market environment, the Party sought a new (main melody) strategy which could regain viewers’ interest.

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6 Inspired by the market success of imported popular drama, domestic popular drama, such as Beijinger in New York, has also flourished since the 1990s and further eroded the authority of socialist drama.
2.3 Main Melody Strategy and Ideological Manipulation

In the early 1980s, the Chinese film veteran director Xie Jin articulated the idea of reforming the outdated socialist model by taking inspiration from Hollywood. He said:

[In the socialist works,] characters are too often stereotypes and the plots are formulas …. [In the United States,] I saw several films which I thought were heavily political, but the difference is in how the political message was being conveyed, explicitly or implicitly. I think you should hide the political message behind rich portrayals of characters and an interesting story. The political message should be wrapped up. (Cited from Silbergeld 1999, 196.)

Xie’s statement points out the hidden ideological function of Hollywood cinema. As Louis Althusser (1977) suggests, ideology is a dynamic practice by which the ideological state apparatus (i.e. institutions such as religion, education and the media), constantly produces and reproduces the dominant ideas and beliefs by naturalizing them into commonsense. Antonio Gramsci (2005) also argues that ideology is affirmed via a constant struggle in which the ruling class maintains its power through the moulding of the consent of subordinate classes. Hollywood cinema and popular drama are sites of ideology in which entertainment becomes the ideal vehicle for the maintenance of consent (Fiske 1993; Maltby 2003, 302). MacCabe explains that, in Hollywood cinema and popular drama, narrative, representation and actions of various characters are structured by “a hierarchy amongst the discourses” (1974, 8) in which the dominant discourse is presented as being transparent, inevitable and desirable. Taking the dominant discourse preference over other discourses, MacCabe argues that viewers will automatically and voluntarily regard it as “truth”. This preferred, unwritten and unrecognized discourse (ideology), which MacCabe calls the “metalanguage” (1974, 8), provides viewers with a privileged ideological position.
through which the textual world makes perfect realistic sense.

Inspired by Hollywood experiences, in February 1987, a number of official film critics proposed to develop a “main melody” strategy which embodied the same idea of reforming socialist works, just as Xie had advanced. These official critics used musical terminology, “main melody”, to advocate a soft and masked propaganda (promoting the dominant ideology through pleasurable entertainment) (Liu 2005, 2-12). This main melody proposal was adopted by the Party to quickly substitute the inefficient direct propaganda to become the Party’s new cultural strategy. On 24 January 1994, Jiang Zemin, the former General Secretary of the CCP, officially set up the Party’s main melody strategy, namely “promoting main melody, encouraging diversity”. It emphasized that cultural products should uphold the Party’s ideology at the centre, meanwhile deploying various alternative discourses and modes (e.g. entertaining forms) to facilitate promotion of ideology (Jiang 1996). As Liu Fusheng (2005) illuminates, “the state ideology must absorb new … resources, rhetoric techniques and expressive strategies, including the experiences from both elitist culture and popular culture, by which it can win receivers and realize its historical mission” (9, my translation).

Main melody strategy can be understood as a transformation of direct propaganda in the context of both cultural diversification and contestation as generated by the socialist market economy. Under this new marketized context, the masses are redefined as consumers/people who have multisided needs (Jiang 1996). The Party cannot totally control culture, discourse and consumers/people anymore. Rather it

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7 In her study of contemporary Chinese propaganda, Anne-Marie Brady (2008) notes: “As Maoist ideology has been cast off, so too have the stable propaganda methods of old. In an extraordinary process cultural exchange, China’s propaganda has deliberately absorbed … other methods of mass persuasion commonly utilized in Western democratic societies, adapting them to Chinese conditions and needs” (3).
needs to constantly win and re-win the consent of other social groups via competition with other alternative cultures. In order to win the competition, dominant cultural products cannot be simplistically propagandist, but have to convince consumers/people through pleasurably ideological mystification and naturalization. Since the end of 1980s, a new type of official TV drama—the main melody TV drama—has been introduced to win this competition. Well-received main melody dramas included Gongguan xiaojie 公关小姐 (Miss PR 1989) and Yearning. Their overwhelming popularity marked the emergence of this new official genre.

2.4 Main Melody TV Drama, Hollywoodization and Provincial Party Secretary

By adopting this strategy, main melody TV drama reconstructs socialist drama through Hollywoodization and thus creates both a continuity with and departure from the latter. Hollywoodization refers to the way that main melody drama integrates popular drama’s entertaining forms and elements (Hollywood-modelled) by which the drama is turned into a propagandistic commodity, capable of competing with popular dramas in the market. In this regard, main melody drama relies on both propagandist command and libidinal command. Most importantly, main melody drama absorbs Hollywood cinema and popular drama’s ideological manipulation to seek to convince viewers through ideological persuasion rather than direct propaganda. Differentiating

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8 One should not conclude that the absorption of western methods will fully westernize the Party’s ideological practices. Embedded within the particularly totalitarian context, the Party’s ideological manipulation bears an inherent “Chinese characteristics”. I will discuss the differences in the Conclusion.

9 Hollywoodization, in my usage, does not mean that main melody dramas merely take inspiration from Hollywood films. Rather, I suggest that a broad range of imported commercial cinema and TV drama (e.g. the American film Patton, the Mexican telenovela Slanders and the Japanese soap opera Oshin) that rely on classical Hollywood cinema’s techniques have all had an impact on the generic construction of main melody drama.
propaganda from persuasion, Jowett and O’Donnell explain: “Persuasion is interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both persuader and persuadee” (2006, 1). It “is regarded as more mutually satisfying than propaganda [mainly concerning the needs of propagandists]” (2006, 32). In this sense, main melody drama fulfils its ideological mission through negotiation with consumerist viewers’ demands.

Main melody drama thus demonstrates a distinct aesthetic which combines the propagandistic aesthetics of socialist drama and the commercial aesthetics of popular drama. By taking the 18-episode TV serial Secretary as a case study, in the next section I examine how this distinctive aesthetic reconstructs the textual traits of main melody drama. Secretary is one of the most successful main melody dramas that have provoked enthusiastic responses among audiences, critics and officials alike. It was aired on 28 channels including China’s most influential channel CCTV-1 and was listed in the top 7 in terms of viewer ratings among the dramas broadcast on satellite television stations in 2002 (China Television Drama Report 2003-2004, 53, 35). Its popularity beat most of the rival dramas transmitted in the same timeslot, e.g. the rendition of the well-known modern play, Richu 日出 (Sunrise, 2002). Having as one of its main goals the celebration of the Party’s 16th Congress, Secretary is produced by the state-owned China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, the largest mouthpiece of the Party in the Chinese media.

Secretary depicts how three generations of the Party’s provincial secretaries overcome difficulties to address the issues of marketization in a state enterprise, the Dashanzi Corporation, and the massive unemployment that results.10 It is the first Chinese TV drama to place provincial secretaries (who are high Party leaders), at the centre of its narrative (Liang 2002). Because of the unprecedented theme, its ‘artistic’ quality and its popularity among audiences, it won the first prize for excellent TV serial in the

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10 Commissioned by the Centre, the scriptwriter Lu Tianming conducted interviews with Party senior officials, based upon which he wrote the script (Liang B. 2002).
23rd Chinese TV drama Flying Goddess Award. The drama is thus a good case study to explore the characteristics of main melody TV drama.

2.5 Characteristics of Main Melody TV Drama

*Deglamorized Charismatic Clean Official Model*

In socialist works, the positive protagonists as symbolic of the dominant ideology are charismatic-like supermen or superwomen who devote all their lives to the public good and are capable of solving any problems with their super powers. The main feature of these socialist charismatic heroes is that they are always placed within a public space and are lacking personal private lives and love relationships (Wang Y. 1994). These charismatic heroes have been discredited and rejected by audiences since the 1980s (Bai X. 2007, 139). In order to regain character believability, main melody dramas have de-glamorized the charismatic heroes, by reducing their godlike nature and making them resemble and be more accessible to ordinary people. This deglamorizing strategy of charismatic heroes is conducted by main melody dramas in two ways: emotionalization and personalization.

Emotionalization involves describing charismatic heroes via a focus on their personal (e.g. family) and emotional lives (e.g. love affairs). For instance, the police hero Gao Tian 高天 in *Yingxiong wuhui* 英雄无悔 (Heroes never regret 1995) is portrayed through his complex romantic relationship with three women. By including family life or love affairs, these charismatic heroes are offered an opportunity to demonstrate the ordinary part of their lives and thus appear to be more human than their socialist predecessors. However, the protagonists’ individual emotions articulated in main melody drama are not completely individualized, as in Hollywood cinema and

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popular drama, but are related to and intertwined with their political lives. In other words, in main melody drama, the private space is connected with and is ultimately guided by the public space.

The main melody drama Secretary can help us understand how emotionalization works. In this drama, the reform hero Ma Yang’s wife strongly opposes his involvement in the reform of the Dashanzi Corporation, because she believes that such involvement might damage his political career. Rather than embodying the intimate spouse relationship for the main hero, she is therefore used as a narrative obstacle for the reform project. This tension between Ma’s family life and his political life creates Ma’s psychological agony, which allows audiences to potentially empathize with the emotional side of the hero as well as simultaneously reinforce Ma’s dedication to the public good. In the end Ma chooses to engage in selfless participation in the reform project, at the risk of breaking up his family. Ma’s wife acts as an agent whose attitude and thinking reflects audiences’ everyday experiences where reforms are difficult, dangerous tasks involving conflicts of different interests. Therefore she invites audiences to identify with her. Yet, at the end, when Ma’s wife is won over by his success, audiences are presumably also persuaded to convert along with her to identify with Ma and the Party’s reform myth. Thus Ma’s private life leads audiences into political discourse by the way of the interplay between the private space (the family) and public space (the reform).

Personalization means that some small flaws are attached to the heroes. Through this technique, charismatic heroes seem to be more rounded and believable than the flawless heroes of socialist dramas. For example, in Draw Your Sword and Lishi de tiankong 历史的天空 (Brothers 2004), the heroes Li Yunlong 李云龙 and Jiang Daya 姜大牙, two commanders of the Communist army, are described as “problematic heroes” who always swear, break rules, and have personal desires. Due to this deglamorization, Li and Jiang became two of the audiences’ favorite TV drama characters (Bai X. 2007, 196-197). In the same fashion, Ma’s flaws also refer to
certain traits of the Hollywood individual hero, such as the rebellious police officer in police dramas, whose behavior, despite being essentially good-natured, can often clash with rules and regulations. In the scene where Ma learns that a German company has come to the province to negotiate a big energy project and Dashanzi is excluded from the negotiation by the provincial leaders, he ignores the warning of the leadership and secretly ‘kidnaps’ the delegates of the German company, finally succeeding in impressing the Germans and obtaining their cooperation. However, Ma’s breach of rules does not reflect Hollywood’s celebration of individualism. Rather, in Secretary, the individual rebellion against norms is allowed only to support a neo-collectivism, the interests of which still lie with the public (in this case, to address the financial crisis of the Dashanzi Corporation). Ma does not really pose a challenge to authority. His “unorthodox” behavior simply transforms a traditional charismatic hero into a less stiff, more attractive character.

In addition to emotionalization and personalization strategies, some main melody dramas (e.g. Heaven Above) appropriate the qingguang 清官 (‘clean official’) model of Chinese traditional folk culture to reconstruct the old charismatic heroes. ‘Clean officials’, exemplified by Judge Bao,\(^\text{12}\) are “a minority of officials who are honest, fair” (Bai R. 2007, 78) and can restore society with justice. As Bai Ruoyun states, “at the core of this ideology, is a yearning for officials who pit themselves against powerful criminals to preserve the interests of ordinary people” (2007, 79). The trope of clean officials has been popular in Chinese culture for over one thousand years. There are numerous traditional stories, dramas and novels concerning clean officials.

\(^{12}\) Judge Bao refers to the historical figure, Bao Zheng 包拯 (999-1062), who “was a high-ranked bureaucrat in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127)” (Bai R. 2007, 79). “Bao’s reputation as a stern, humourless judge who pitted himself against the corrupt and the powerful provided the basis for later Judge Bao stories in popular literature” (2007, 80). For the appropriation of the clean official model by main melody drama, see Bai R. (2007, 78-103).
from ancient times to the present day, which have turned clean officials into cultural icons.

By aligning their heroes with the clean official model, these main melody dramas exploit the latter’s popularity to fulfil their own political goals. In the drama Secretary, the heroes Secretary Gong and Ma are represented as clean officials who can bring justice and hope to the underprivileged people. The two heroes support an investigation to eliminate corruption at Dashanzi, even though the case involves Gong’s own daughter-in-law and Deputy Secretary Song. Their anger at those who have become corrupt evokes the clean official complex amongst audiences whose aspiration for justice is temporarily realized in an imaginative way.

_Popularized Political Narrative_

When addressing the issue of how to make the drama Secretary more enticing for audiences, the director Su Zhou said, “it is extremely important to create suspense, to intensify contradictory conflicts and to speed up the rhythm of plot progression” (Liang B. 2002, 7, my translation). In an interview, Su revealed that one of the narrative strategies of Secretary was to infuse Hollywood narrative devices into a socialist political paradigm of narration to create a more appealing and vivid narrative model.

The foremost feature of this popularized political narrative strategy is genre mixing, which integrates popular genre components into an official generic pattern. For example, the drama Secretary is a “hybrid” form which combines main melody reform drama¹³ and popular police drama. Although Secretary focuses on depicting the governmental reform project within national enterprises, it also contains many

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¹³ Chinese reform TV drama is a sub-genre of main melody drama which emerged in the 1980s to promote the governmental policy of economic reforms. For a study on reform drama, see Bai X. (2007, 160-169).
crime-related themes in order to popularize its ideological reform narrative to a maximum level. The question about who is corrupt and has stolen Dashanzi assets valued at RMB one billion is the biggest mystery in the show, which remains unsolved until the very end. “How do the corrupt collude with the mafia”, Su asked, “how do they intend to prevent the investigation of the loss of national property with various criminal means? An insider is also murdered and Ma Yang is bullied. All these problems, contradictions and subplots capture the audience’s attention and make the drama more interesting” (Liang B. 2002, 7, my translation). These narrative interactions between action/reaction and interrogation/conspiracy in relation to crime are common components of police drama.

As Bai Xiaoyi (2007) notes, police drama did not exist as a genre on Chinese television until the 1990s. Before that time, police officers rarely appeared on either the small or big screen. Bai argues that the formation of the police genre in Chinese TV drama, which concentrates on investigating crime cases through suspense, is actually derived from the impact of imported police and detective dramas, e.g. the American detective drama Hunter (screened in China in 1992). Because of its popularity among audiences, police drama became a new popular genre from the 1990s onwards and its conventions started to integrate with main melody dramas (247-249). However, the elements of police drama in main melody dramas also have an ideological function. In Secretary, by ascribing the loss of national assets to individual corrupt cadres and criminals, the Party is absolved of its responsibilities for the difficulties experienced by national enterprises such as Dashanzi. Furthermore, by aligning Gong’s daughter-in-law with the criminals and showing Gong’s support for police investigations, a positive, clean and just image of the Party, which is represented by Secretary Gong, is established.

The popularized political narrative strategy exemplified by genre mixing is widely used by main melody dramas. Yearning, for example, adopts the format of Latin American telenovela (Zha J. 1995). Heroes Never Regret integrates elements of
romance drama. By becoming popularized, the political narrative of main melody dramas is wrapped up by Hollywood narrative techniques into something more palatable and exciting for audiences.

**Ideological Allegory: Bracketing Reality**

Unlike socialist TV drama, which focuses on the bright side of society and thus avoids tackling real social contradictions, main melody dramas are comparatively more ‘concerned’ with social issues, such as unemployment and corruption. As Shen Lu (2004, 54) describes, the task of main melody works is not only to find a new effective didacticism, but also to provide persuasive official interpretations for the new problems and social contradictions generated by reforms. Nevertheless, the way that main melody dramas handle such social issues is exercised in an ideologically allegorical manner, which can be exemplified in the portrayal of unemployment in the drama *Secretary*.

When the hero Ma assumes the post of the head of Dashanzi Corporation, he immediately resorts to extreme measures by laying off all the 300,000 employees to rescue Dashanzi from crisis. The gradual process of laying off workers from state-owned enterprises has become one of the most serious and controversial issues as a result of marketized reforms. It has generated constant protests and grievances against managerial corruption, as well as complaints regarding low compensation and the poor social welfare system, consequently threatening social stability (Chen F. 2000). To rationalize the government’s massive lay-offs of workers and other social hardships, main melody dramas such as *Secretary* and *Pinzui Zhang Damin de xingfu shenghuo* (Garrulous Zhang Damin’s Happy Life 1998), deploy the narrative strategy of ‘sharing difficulties’ (fenxiang jiannan 分享艰难) with the government. *Sharing difficulties* is the title of a novella written by Liu Xinglong 刘醒龙 (1996). This novella tells a story about how low-ranking township cadres and peasants understand that realistic difficulties are inevitable and temporary on the road of Chinese reforms and modernization. The logic of ‘sharing difficulties’
stresses that hardship and other problems are the necessary price to be paid for reforms and a better future. After the success of Liu’s novella, many critics used this title to describe the masochistic motif, which is also a typical narrative strategy of main melody works (Liu F. 2005, 55, 96).

By employing this strategy, Secretary ingeniously spells out the official ‘price interpretation’ of laid-off workers through the mouths of laid-off characters. Zhao Changlin 赵长林 is a typical example of this strategy. Owing to the fact that he has been honored as a provincial model worker, Zhao is able to keep his job. However, Zhao presents himself not only as someone who is willing to be made redundant, but also as someone who decides to rally some of the laid-off workers into starting a small business to clean shoes. During a public meeting in which the issue of making workers redundant is discussed, Zhao gives a lesson to the participants (also to the audiences). He cites reform hero Ma’s words to analogize Dashanzi’s predicament with an overused ship. In Zhao’s (actually Ma’s) interpretation, the Dashanzi crisis is presented as being caused by the inevitably natural course of time. As a consequence, it is as if laying off workers on a large scale is the only way to repair the damage to the overused ship and make it sail successfully in the future. Thus massive displacement of workers is naturalized as a result of the laws of nature and historical progression. According to such logic, governmental compensation for the redundant workers’ contribution to the state-owned enterprise can be neglected; instead the meagre unemployment welfare to maintain their livings at the lowest level should be considered. The Party is therefore absolved of responsibility via the menacing image of a doomed ship.

Berry (2004) states that, in socialist films, public meeting scenes are always a site where Party representatives deliver political lessons directly to the surrounding masses. In these scenes, the mise-en-scène emphasizes the authority of the Party representatives (e.g. the central position, low-angle shots and close-ups) and encourages exchange of political messages between the representatives and the
masses (e.g. shot/reverse shot). Differing from socialist films and TV dramas, however, in the scene discussed above, the Party’s lesson that justifies the massive lay-off of workers is not delivered directly by the Party hero Ma, but through the words of the unemployed worker Zhao. Zhao’s heartbreaking portrayal and his identity as a member of the unemployed lead him to being depicted less as a teacher, but rather as a masochistic fatalist who recognizes his unemployment only as a matter of inevitable bad luck. He can do nothing about it but renmin 认命 (accept fate). In this scene, Zhao is placed in the centre of the composition and his leading role is emphasized with a series of close-ups. This visual centrality along with Zhao’s emotional demeanour, his tearful dialogue, and the moving music of the scene convincingly create a representation of Zhao’s psychological agony that ‘emotionalizes’ the educating tone of his lesson. The audiences’ deep sympathy with Zhao therefore empathically interpellates them into the official interpretative framework of ‘sharing difficulties’ and allows the request for consensus implied in the teaching message to be disguised as a shared experience.

It is worth noting that Party hero Ma is initially marginalized in the scene as one of the listeners. Instead of a preacher, Ma plays a role of a sympathetic ‘father’ who is moved by ‘his child’s’ obedience. To reward the child’s (Zhao’s) acceptance of his fate and support his small business of cleaning shoes, Ma is shown as stepping down from the rostrum to approach Zhao, kneeling in front of Zhao to clean his shoes, a gesture of confirming his fatalist attitude. Ma thus regains the visual attention but in a deglamourized way (moving from the higher rostrum, to be first at the same level as Zhao, and then to the ground, at a lower level than Zhao). A shot/reverse shot shows Ma’s gesture of shoe-shining and Zhao’s child-like reaction: his eyes are full of grateful tears. Hence an emotional exchange rather than didactic exchange is established between the Party ‘father’ and the unemployed ‘son’. Audiences might be also moved, not by Ma’s authoritarian preaching, but by his paternal/caring action.
Of course, as the last important step, the unemployed attitude of *sharing difficulties* must be rewarded just as in the fairy tale of Cinderella in which the selfless, hardworking and positive attitude of Cinderella is finally rewarded with her royal wedding. Following this formula, the business set up by Zhao and the laid-off workers is very successful and their company is worth several million dollars by the end of the serial. Through this ideologized allegory, namely *sharing difficulties* and being rewarded at the very end, main melody dramas create a reform theology in which, as Liu Fusheng says, “any suffering is temporary, any wound will be automatically recovered, any price paid will be rewarded” (2005, 93, my translation). As a result, the historical, social and political root of unemployment, as well as the injustices and inequalities brought about by reforms are all deliberately concealed.

*Myth-making: Reform Myth*

In the above sections, I have discussed the “Hollywoodized” feature of main melody drama that sugarcoats old fashioned didacticism through the employment of Hollywood techniques. Now I will turn to address another Hollywoodized feature of main melody dramas—myth-making.

Following Roland Barthes, Fiske explains that “[m]yth works to naturalize and universalize the class interests of the bourgeoisie. It is not a narrative but an associative chain of concepts that works below the threshold of consciousness …. Myths … are ideological and part of the power-class structure of capitalist societies” (1993, 133-134). Maltby (2003) and Fiske (1993) have demonstrated that Hollywood cinema and popular drama also function as myth-making. They serve the interests of the ruling class by “making their sense of the real appear common sense: and common sense is as Roland Barthes says, ‘truth when it stops on the arbitrary order of him who speaks it’” (Fiske 1993, 134).

In this manner, the popularized political narrative and ideologized allegory of main melody dramas also work as myth-making to justify the ruling class’s interests. The
most important myths utilized by main melody dramas are the reform myth and anticorruption myth. The reform myth refers to the celebration of economic reforms as the ultimate Truth which can bring China to a prosperous future. Meanwhile the negative consequences of such reforms, such as laid-off workers, are portrayed as either the temporary or the inevitable price of historical developments with which the unprivileged social groups should cope by “sharing difficulties”.

In Secretary, by pointing out the failure of Maoist socialism, Ma argues with the conservative Party leaders that marketization is the best option to solve the crisis of the Dashanzi Corporation. With the neoliberal belief that is completely infatuated with the market, globalization and development, Ma (agent of the Party) makes great efforts to restructure Dashanzi. By introducing private and foreign investments, Ma intends to transform Dashanzi not only into a market-oriented security company but also into a world-ranking modern energy producer. The engagement of foreign capital is an important rhetorical device used by main melody dramas because it uses outsider validation to sanction the correctness and success of Chinese marketized reform (Liu F. 2005). This re-confirmation by advanced western countries endorses the economic and political triumph of China in the world, brought about by the Party’s marketized reforms. At the end of this show, the Party’s promise of marketization is realized. Dashanzi is renamed as Hengfa Energy and successfully lists itself on the Shanghai Security and Stock Exchange market. Its stock price on the first trading day reaches the highest limit. This programme ends with a shot of a plane taking off on which Ma is now travelling to America and Germany to sign cooperation contracts. A prosperous and strong China under the leadership of the Party is taking off as well.

The anticorruption myth is another dominant myth which aims to address rampant official corruption and the consequent frustration and anger that it causes among people. In her study on Chinese anticorruption TV drama, Bai Ruoyun (2007) summarizes the anticorruption myth promoted by official discourses as follows: the dominant trope insinuates that corruption only occurs in a very small number of
cadres and that the majority of Party and government officials are upright and honest. In this sense, corruption is an accidental, rather than structural problem. It is just like a tumour in an otherwise healthy body and can be completely cured by resolutely cutting it out (through the Party’s anticorruption campaign) (51-54). For instance, the portrayal of corruption in Secretary is limited to a few and is represented by Deputy Secretary Song who fails “to uphold the moral standard when facing material temptations that proliferate in the market economy” (Bai R. 2007, 52). Secretary Gong not only fights against the corrupt behavior of Song but also relentlessly supports law enforcement to investigate his own daughter-in-law to demonstrate his (also the Party’s) anticorruption resolution. The message delivered in Secretary is evident: the Party is capable of eliminating all wrongdoing by its few subordinates.

The purpose which the reform myth and anticorruption myth both try to achieve, as the former General Secretary of the CCP Jiang emphasizes, “is to consolidate and strengthen the relationship between the party and the ordinary masses in this new situation—to consolidate the party’s status as a ruling party” (cited from Bai R. 2007, 53).

Audiences’ Positioning

The ultimate goal of main melody drama is ‘conquering audiences’ in the new marketized context. Yet, arguably the mechanism through which main melody drama conquers its audiences differs from socialist drama since it deploys a different creative mode and, furthermore addresses different audiences.

The audience for socialist drama before 1980 was small. There were merely 20,000 television sets in 1960, increasing to 300,000 (0.036 TV sets per 100 people) in 1970. “Television … was a luxury available only for Party elites in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s” (Sun 2010, 88). In this regard, the audience of early socialist dramas were essentially the urban Party elites. They were supposedly preoccupied with the
dominant ideology and thus took an ideologically preferred position in which their viewing pleasure derived from re-confirmation of their ideological knowledge.\footnote{This ideologically preferred reading/viewing position can be found in other socialist art works as well. For instance, Berry (2004) demonstrates that the spectator of socialist cinema is positioned as a pupil who has been ideologically constructed into a political subject before s/he goes to the cinema. He writes, “although the Chinese classical [socialist] cinema is didactic, it does not presume its spectators to be entirely ignorant of the lessons it seeks to teach. Rather it is part and parcel of a wide array of Chinese didactic institutions and discourse that repeat the same lessons redundantly to reinforce their effect” (2004, 72).}

However, this ideologically preferred position cannot be applied to the audiences of main melody dramas. There are two main issues that complicate such a position. Firstly, owing to the rapid development of the Chinese television industry,\footnote{For example, in 1993, there were 230 million television sets in China and the television viewership reached 850 million, or 81.3 percent of the nation’s population (Hong J. 1998, 88-89).} audiences in the reform period become more heterogeneous than the homogenous audience of socialist drama (Lull 1991). The plural term “audiences” takes a diversified demographic pattern into account, including the rural and urban, elderly and young, well-educated and poorly-educated, as well as male and female. Secondly, in postsocialist China, as Bai Ruoyun notes, “the Party is out of favor with the public” (2007, 96). As a result, audiences as consumers have become more tired and suspicious of the Party’s propaganda and they are very different from the 1950s–1970s pupil/audience who were gratified with ideological lessons.

In addressing the issue of why active audiences regard the American popular TV drama \textit{Dallas} as unreal yet still enjoy it, Ang stresses the important role of emotional engagement in audience enjoyment during their viewing of the drama. Ang contends that what audiences perceive in \textit{Dallas} as being ‘real’ actually relies on the “[audiences’] subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling’” (1989, 45),
instead of its content. This “structure of feeling” is not related to the cognitive level but situated at the emotional level by which audiences connect *Dallas*'s dramatic situations and complications with “more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery” (1989, 44-5). For Ang, this feeling of being real is “produced by the construction of a *psychological* reality” (1989, 47) in relation to the audiences’ fantasies, expectations and everyday experiences. She uses the term “emotional realism” to describe this. By applying Ang’s theory of emotional realism to her study on Chinese anticorruption TV drama, Bai Ruoyun (2007) suggests that emotional engagement and attachment by audiences to anticorruption heroes bridges the gap between the fictional world and the real world. “[T]he anger expressed by clean officials is recognizable by audiences. Such emotion speaks to the anger or frustrated structure of feeling among many Chinese people who are not capable of taking actions to right the wrongs in real life” (Bai R. 2007, 95). Bai’s analysis of audience emotional engagement in watching anticorruption drama implies a new ideologized sentimentalist-audience position in which the audiences’ desire for satisfaction and emotional catharsis is deliberately manipulated to “mediate and reduce the gap between the propaganda and the popular” (2007, 96).

This new ideologized sentimentalist-audience position involves a double engagement, which is a mixture of the emotional engagement of popular drama and the pedagogical engagement of socialist drama. The interaction and relation between emotional and pedagogical engagement is a complicated psychological process. Arguably the two engagements actively interact and overlap during the viewing process. For example, in *Secretary*, via an ideologized allegorical strategy, the redundant workers’ miserable situation is identified as real by audiences in the first place, according to their everyday experience and “frustrated structure of feeling”. However, with the identification of these laid-off workers with the government through the narrative device of *sharing difficulties*, the audiences’ emotional identification with them is redirected towards an acceptance of the dominant ideology.
However, as audiences are active and socially constructed (Fiske 1993; Lull 1991), this ideologized sentimentalist-audience position appears to be too passive and does not suffice to explain the pleasures and outcomes involved in watching main melody drama. In his study on official culture in Chinese TV drama, Wang Heite 王黑特 (2002) observes how some audiences can negotiate between main melody texts and their everyday experiences to produce their own interpretations. Wang notes that the tragic portrayal of the intellectualized officer Tang, in the main melody military drama *Tuchu chongwei* 突出重围 (Breakthrough 2000), provokes some audiences to create an oppositional meaning: the People’s Liberation Army is a highly rigid and oppressive institution where independent thinking is subjugated and blind loyalty is encouraged. In this sense, audiences are not “dupes” and cannot be truly controlled.

It is worth noting that the audience reception of main melody drama is a complicated issue, which is beyond this article’s scope. My preliminary account of the issue raises more questions than it answers. Why are those ideologically intended dramas so compelling to huge audiences? What pleasures can audiences gain when they are viewing them? How do (different) audiences perceive and react to those ideologized main melody dramas? More ethnographic audience studies are needed to adequately tackle these important issues.

### 2.6 Conclusion

Beginning with the mid 1980s, socialist TV drama’s direct propaganda faced a crisis produced by the new market economy. To address the crisis, the Party developed main melody TV drama which augmented socialist TV drama with Hollywood popularized forms and components. In doing so, the aim was to convey ideological messages indirectly and persuasively. As Li Ruihuan, the former propagandist leader of the Party, commented on the success of the main melody drama *Yearning*: “The influence we exert must be subtle, imperceptible, and the people should be influenced without being conscious of it” (cited from Zha J. 1995: 28). To achieve such a subtle
ideological effect, main melody drama relied on particular Hollywoodized traits, such as those I have identified in Secretary. Each of these traits is constructed to respond to both propagandistic and commercial principles. The rise of main melody drama since the 1990s indicates that a new type of (main melody) culture, which combines capitalist market economy with socialist authoritarianism, has developed in China in order to revitalize the Party’s rule over the society.

While, on the surface, adopting main melody traits, Land and Cadres embrace critical realism and effectively critique main melody drama. TV drama critical realism, in turn, established its own system of representation and relies on the following narrative and viewing modalities: investigative narratives, scholarly knight-errant characters, counter-mythmaking, critical realist melodramatic modes and an emotional engagement/critical distance viewing position. In the following four chapters (Chapter Three to Six), I will demonstrate how the specific textual devices I mentioned above make Land and Cadres open up to social contexts that consequently construct oppositional readings, meanings and subjectivities. I begin by exploring Land and Cadres’s investigative narrative mode in detail.
Chapter Three  Investigative Narrative: Re-perceiving Reality

This chapter explores how Land and Cadres critique main melody drama and disseminate non-official truths by developing an investigative narrative mode. As analyzed in the last chapter, the main melody drama represented by Secretary adopts an ideologized allegorical narrative which depicts reality through an ideological lens and aims at ideological manipulation. By instead embracing critical realism (i.e. Liu Binyan’s “two kinds of truths”), I argue that Land and Cadres deploy an investigative narrative mode that places reality within concrete social relations and thus functions as a social inquiry into reality. In this chapter, I will first define investigative narrative in the context of other investigative practices (i.e. investigative reportage of the 1980s, investigative journalism and fiction, TV dramas about officialdom and corruption). Then I will explore how Land relies on Cao Jingqing’s (2004) non-official sociological study of the Chinese rural community, *Huanghe bian de Zhongguo* 黄河边的中国 (China along the Yellow River; later, *Yellow River*), to interrogate the predicament of Chinese farmers. Finally, I will examine Cadres’ investigative narrative in relation to political alienation.

3.1. Investigative Mode: Social Inquiry and Cultural Practice

*Investigative Mode and Non-Official Truth*

To explain his motive for writing, “People or Monsters?”, an investigative report into official corruption, writer Liu Binyan (2006) claimed: “The story of Wang Shouxin [the corrupt protagonist in “People or Monsters?”] had already been reported in the newspapers. Wang had already been convicted … but [I] did feel that published reports hadn’t dug deep enough …. There were some general conditions in Chinese society that the Wang Shouxin story made clear, and I thought we writers should dig deeper into them” (8). In this statement, Liu implied that there were two kinds of truth
regarding Wang’s corruption case: the official (comprising the previous reports which were superficial) and the non-official (digging deeper into reality). Commenting about the official truth, Liu continued, “[it—the official truth] wanted people to believe that after Wang Shouxin was tried and executed the whole problem of corruption was finished and over—it was a thing of the past, a creation of the Gang of Four,¹ and now that the Gang was gone, corruption was gone too” (9).

Liu was dissatisfied with this official version and as a result, he decided to investigate this case again. Liu’s investigative journalism differs from the official eulogizing journalism as it employs an investigative mode. This mode seeks to understand social issues through consistent questioning and investigation. It provides “a reconstructed account that will come closer to reality (or ‘truth’ for that matter) than the official version” (Zhang 1993, 222). For Liu, investigative journalism means a ganyu 干预 (“interventionist”) posture that “testifies to the writer’s determination to fight against social injustices” (Zhang 1995, 233) and the Party’s ideological falsification. As a media worker claims: “The job of a journalist is to process the news for the people and to scrutinize the government; yes, the government must be scrutinized” (cited from de Burgh 2003, 803).

Zhang Yingjin (1993) observes that Liu’s investigative mode was widely practiced in Chinese reportage in the 1980s. These reports, e.g. Qian Gang’s The Great Earthquake in Tangshan, Liu’s People or Monsters?, and Su Xiaokang’s The Revelation of the Flood, re-examined realistic and historical events, especially tragic disasters (e.g. Tangshan earthquake in 1976, and the constant flood and famine during

¹ The Gang of Four refers to the four top leaders of the CCP who advocate the Cultural Revolution. They are Mao’s wife Jiang Qing 江青, the First Vice-President of the CCP Wang Hongwen 王洪文, Vice-Prime Minister Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥, and the highest leader of the CCP in charge of ideological business, Yao Wenyuan 姚文元. In October 1976, they were arrested and put in prison by the new leadership of the CCP, indicating the end of the Cultural Revolution.
the 1970s and 1980s in Zhumadian district, Henan province). They provided an alternative truth about these events which encouraged readers to re-think history and reality beyond what was provided by official ideological interpretations. In People or Monsters?, Liu clearly links the official Wang’s corruption to the corrupt social and political context. Also, in The Revelation of the Flood, Su attacks the governmental corruption (e.g. profiting from government funds and grain storage) as being responsible for the frequent famines in Zhumadian district. Su wants “to sing an ‘elegy’ on behalf of the poverty-stricken and voiceless people in Henan” (225). Due to their antagonism to the dominant ideology, Zhang Yingjin defines these investigative reports as “a distinctively subversive discourse” (212).

In postsocialist China, other intellectuals have followed Liu and taken upon themselves the role of *surveillant workers of the social machine* and endeavored to check the wrongs of government and seek social justice. Investigative journalism, fiction and TV drama about anticorruption and officialdom are all evidence of Liu’s legacy from the 1990s onwards. These particular practices constitute a cultural context within which the investigative narrative deployed in Land and Cadres also resides.

*Investigative Mode as a Cultural Practice*

After the mid-1990s, the investigative journalism exemplified by programs (on television news magazines *Jidian fangtan* 焦点访谈 (Focus) and *Xinwen diaocha* 新闻调查 (News Probe) of CCTV) that “‘reflect what people really think and care about’ and are ‘controversial’” (de Burgh 2003, 83), revived and achieved an overwhelming success in the market (Hong et al 2009; Sun 2007; Yu 2009). According to Sun Wanning (2007), *Focus* was the highest-rating (30%) TV show in China for a long time, with a regular viewership of 300 million (196). Inspired by their western counterparts, such as the American *60 minutes* (CBS) and *20/20* (ABC), these investigative programs sought to “[concern] the public and [serve] as a public watchdog by directly criticizing the bureaucracy and the wrongdoings of party and
government officials,” through “in-depth news reports” (Hong et al 2009, 43). An example of such in-depth reporting can be found in *Face to Face*, about the crisis of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Beijing (broadcast 2 May 2003 on CCTV-1). In this program, investigative journalist Wang Zhi 王志 took a “surgical strike” at Beijing’s newly-appointed mayor Wang Qishan 王岐山. Wang Zhi did not allow the official to dominate the interview, but kept questioning him: “When you first took up your post [as mayor], the number [of SARS cases] was between 300 and 400 …. But the number jumped to 2705 yesterday …. This is contradictory to what you described concerning implementing strict measures [to control SARS]. What does that tell us? …. Can we trust you in the fight against SARS?” (Cited from Yu H. 2009, 129-130). The authority’s ability to deal with the crisis was particularly called into question. Yu Haiqing (2009) argues that investigative journalism signals Chinese journalists’ rejection of “being simply ‘policy footnotes’” (136). They strive to exploit any opportunity within the system to carry out social inquiry and intellectual criticism as much as they can. Because of this approach and its popularity among audiences, instances of investigative journalism increased in frequency on television stations and newspapers nationwide throughout the mid- and late-1990s.

Also aiming at scrutinizing authority on behalf of people and, simultaneously, meeting the market (readers’) expectation, novels about anticorruption and novels about officialdom became popular between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. In 2000-2001, around 100 such novels were published and “[o]f the seventeen

2 Investigative journalism is a complex cultural phenomenon. While media professionals struggle to articulate critical voices through deep investigation, the Party also uses investigative journalism to show achievements and prove its ability in correcting wrongs and defending people’s interests. See Sun W. 2007; Zhao Y. 1998.

3 Examples include the newspaper *Nanfang zhounuo* 南方周末 (Southern Weekend), *Jinri huati* 今日话题 (Today’s Topic) on Beijing Television and *Guanzhu* 关注 (Pay Attention) on Shangdong Television; see de Burgh 2003; Sun W. 2007, 196-197.
best-selling novels in the first half of 2001, six were anticorruption novels” (Kinkley 2007, 18). Anticorruption novels and novels about officialdom were even displayed in special anticorruption or officialdom sections in bookstores. The master authors of the genre, such as Lu Tianming 陆天明, Zhang Ping 张平, Zhou Meisen 周美森, Wang Yuewen 王跃文 and Yan Zhen 阎真, became favorites of both readers and critics. In these novels, the darkness of Chinese politics is exposed: dirty behind-doors deals, rampant official corruption (e.g. the misuse of power to appropriate national resources), massive unemployment and social riots (Kinkley 2007, 15). It is undeniable that many of these novels align with the Party’s anticorruption discourse (Xie J. 2005; Tang X. 2006). Nonetheless, fiction about anticorruption and officialdom still contribute to investigating officialdom and the wrongs of the system. For instance, Wang Yuewen’s National Portrait and Yan Zhen’s Deep Blue Breakers attribute individual cadres’ corruption to the essentially corrupt officialdom which the official inhabits (She D. 2006).

Liu Fusheng (2005) describes those anticorruption novels (e.g. Zhang Ping’s National Cadres), which aim at investigating the root-cause of official corruption, as “touching the ideological limit” (119). Liu elaborates that “for those ‘anticorruption’ writers, the real creative intention is challenging the dominant ideology within the articulation of the dominant ideology. It brings a secret pleasure to their writings …. The writers test and measure the possible border of the dominant ideology again and again. The impulse to touch the limit becomes the hidden motivation of their creation” (121, my translation). Liu allegorizes anticorruption writers (e.g. Zhang Ping and Zhou Meisen) as recruited rebels whose subversive quality led them to remain friendly to the dominant ideology in the surface but estranged at heart (120-121). Based on exposing and questioning social and systematic problems, their relationship with the official discourse is thus complex and unstable.

The success of anticorruption novels provides a new profitable model for TV drama. In 1995, the anticorruption drama Heaven Above, which was adapted from Lu
Tianming’s anticorruption novel with the same title, was very successful (its highest viewing rating reached 39%). Its extreme popularity gave a boost to the new anticorruption genre (Bai R. 2007, 61-65). Similar to their literary counterparts, anticorruption dramas explicitly or implicitly contribute to the broader investigation of social and political wrongs, and question the established political order. The drama Zhigao liyi 至高利益 (The Supreme Interest), accuses the political dictatorship of Provincial Party Secretary Zhong for being the root-cause of people’s sufferings. Zhong’s political achievement, an industrial zone, has turned into a pollution disaster which affects millions of residents’ drinking water. However, because of Zhong’s absolute power, nobody dares to correct the wrong. Although the Party leader’s image is saved through Zhong’s final self-reflection, Liu Fusheng (2005, 83-84) argues that the daring accusation against the high-ranking Party official and suggested conflict, if not opposition, between the Party’s political interests and people’s interest, lead The Supreme Interest to approaching the Party’s ideological limit.⁴

At the beginning of the new millennium, anticorruption dramas were accused by SARFT of becoming excessive in exposing the corrupt nature of Party politics and the destructive effect of self-interested power-holders on society. The vice-minister of SARFT, Hu Zhanfan 胡占凡 condemned:

One tendency [in anticorruption drama] is to indulge in portraying corruption in detail and corruption on an ever larger scale. The second tendency is to portray officialdom and power struggles. They indulge in delineating mutual manipulations, deceptions, and dark psychologies. The third one is that some anticorruption dramas overestimate the difficulties facing legal institutions and thus create the impression that in China, “power is bigger than law.”

⁴ In the study of contemporary Chinese TV drama, Zhong Xueping (2010, 73-96) has demonstrated that anticorruption dramas are polyphonic and indeed contain “ambivalence and criticism of the ‘social reality’ of contemporary China” (95) within.
These problems have arisen because the authors do not have a holistic view of contemporary China, and therefore fail to properly handle the relationship between exposure of social ills and the need for social unity and moral elevation. They end up only displaying corruption, hurting the image of the ruling party, misleading the audience away from a correct and comprehensive understanding of the anticorruption situation and exerting [a] fairly negative impact. (Cited from Bai R. 2007, 69-70.)

Hu’s statement indicates that the state administration clearly identifies those dramas as violation for their lack of “a holistic view of contemporary China” and relentless criticism of Chinese politics. Embedded within this cultural context, Land and Cadres embrace Liu Binyan’s investigative mode, finding inspiration in investigative journalism, deviant anticorruption novels and TV dramas. Next, I will examine the investigative narrative in Land and Cadres to see how, more specifically, this narrative mode becomes a vehicle to carry out social inquiry and criticism.

3.2 Fruitful Land, Non-Official Source and Investigative Narrative

The Storyline
The farmers in Xinglong Township angrily protest and clash with the local government against the overtaxation imposed on them. To address the farmers’ grievance, Provincial Party Secretary He Libing 贺立斌 appoints Luo Hansheng 罗汉生, the Chancellor and professor of Xiajiang Agricultural University, as new municipal Party secretary of Xiakou city. Luo immediately implements political reform to downsize the over-staffed Xinglong Township government as a means of relieving the farmers’ economic burden. However, he is severely opposed by the cadres in Xiakou, represented by Mayor Ma Ming 马明. As a result, the provincial leadership shifts Luo’s post from Xiakou. His project of political reforms also fails with his departure.
Four years later, Xiakou city becomes a model city in the province, which achieves an annual GDP growth of 10%. Its subordinate, Xinglong Township, is even set up as a successful example for the rest of the regions of the province to follow. By sticking to the provincial policy of establishing a “High-Tech Industrial Zone” to elevate the local economy, Xiakou and Xinglong Township’s success bears out the correctness of the provincial decision-makers. Opposing the provincial policy, Luo regards the developing “High-Tech Industrial Zone” throughout the province as an unrealistic departure from rural reality. During his stay in Xinglong Township to help prepare the provincial conference of learning from the “Xinglong experience”, Luo discovers that the so-called “Xinglong experience” is a made-up story. Its achievements along with the economic miracle of Xiakou city are all falsified. In attempting to reveal the truth, Luo inevitably conflicts with Provincial Governor Feng who refuses to admit the wrongs of the provincial policies, but instead insists on promoting the “Xinglong experience” in spite of the falsification. Facing political pressure, Luo retreats. The local farmers, who try to tell the truth, are either arrested or suppressed. Regardless of the political threat, Luo’s ex-wife Wei Qing 卫琴 boldly informs Secretary He about what really occurs in the Xinglong Township. Secretary He is shocked by his subordinates’ falsification of economic achievement and also relentlessly rebukes Luo for his cowardly withdrawal from the problem. The Xiakou model and “Xinglong experience” are thus put to an end.

To realize the inappropriateness of provincial policy and the current leadership’s responsibility in Xiakou’s economic falsification, Luo is promoted to vice-provincial Party secretary and widely regarded as He’s successor. Yet, the collapse of the Xiakou reservoir dam changes the intimate relationship between Luo and his political mentor He. The Xiakou reservoir is a newly completed but poorly built hydraulic construction due to the oversights and mistakes of the corrupt officials in charge of the project. In a storm, the back dam is cracked. To save the half million lives behind the dam, Secretary He orders all the residents to safe sites and then blows up the dam. After learning about Luo’s father-in-law’s involvement in the corruption, He suspends
the legal investigation of the reservoir debacle in order to ensure Luo’s advancement as the next provincial secretary. Luo violently confronts He when he insists on restarting the investigation. Luo’s stubbornness is tragic as He feels disappointed towards him, his father-in-law commits suicide and his wife leaves their home. The ending of the drama is seemingly optimistic but vague. Luo is finally appointed as the new provincial secretary as a consequence of He’s resignation and recommendation. In the last scene, Luo meets his wife on the street. They look at each other without words. The drama ends. His marriage is still uncertain.

The plot appears to be main melody as it tells a story about how a good-hearted party cadre fights for the public good. However, by positioning the characters within real social conflicts, Land’s social investigation clearly departs from the eulogizing mode of main melody dramas. One of the writers of Land, Li Yanxiong 李彦雄, illuminates the drama’s critical intention as follows:

*Fruitful Land* is developed from Zong Fuxian’s 宗福先 5000-word synopsis which provides a platform for the drama …. [The] problem with the synopsis is that the central event of the dam collapse is presented as an isolated event, departing from the current Chinese social context. Therefore we decided to set the drama in the context of rural reform in order to delve more deeply into the issue of *sannong* 三农. The reason for this decision came from two aspects: Lu Tianming’s Provincial Secretary has already dealt with industrial reform but failed to truthfully explore social issues. As a drama which similarly focuses on provincial secretaries, we don’t want to present similar content—that of industrial reform—in our program. Second, and more importantly, the issue of *sannong* has caused widespread concern among people and the authorities alike and no TV drama has really

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5 *Sannong* is a Chinese abbreviated phase that stands for *nongye* 农业 (agriculture), *nongcun* 农村 (rural community) and *nongmin* 农民 (farmers).
investigated the root of rural problems in any depth up till now. Therefore there was an opportunity for us to reveal the root cause of contemporary Chinese problems by way of exploration of peasant sufferings.6

The intention to investigate the root of rural problems described by Li leads the writers of Land to adopt an investigative narrative. Investigative narrative aims to explore reality by relying on non-official sources; in the specific case of Land, one such source was the academic book, Yellow River, upon which the authors’ deep interrogation into rural communities and politics were based.

*Fruitful Land and Non-official Source*

To describe the importance of Yellow River in the creation of Land, the writer Li Yanxiong says:

The fundamental concern for us in the beginning was to identify and understand the key issues of contemporary Chinese rural society. What were the causes of such issues? We carried out systematic research in order to “dig up the truth”. We read the book, China along the Yellow River, written by Shanghai sociologist Cao Jingqin, and were inspired greatly by it. The book analyzes rural problems in Henan 河南 province from a sociological perspective. It was an outstanding piece of research and so insightful that we all agreed to base our ‘fictional rural world’ on Cao’s study.7

Cao’s (2005) book comprehensively recorded his empirical interviews and observations around Henan in 1996, in anecdotal and diary form. In order to gain solid first-hand data, he declined to collect his data through official channels, but

6 Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010. For the transcript of this interview, see Appendix C (二).

7 Ibid.
carried out numerous conversations with different levels of party cadres, farmers, and party school teachers via his “personal connections”. In her Introduction to the English version of Yellow River, Rachel Murphy (2005) states: “Cao suspected that if he conducted his research through official channels he would not be able to participate in the open and honest conversations that he so values” (3). Through these non-official channels, Cao observed how the authorities cruelly oppressed farmers with a heavy tax burden by noting that, in some places, “up to 40 percent of farmers’ income is expropriated by local officials” (Murphy 2005, 5). Cao also points out, “The standard of living of a large proportion of farmers has not only not risen; it has fallen under the pressure of ever-increasing agricultural levies” (5). Thus Cao’s research presents a negative picture of Chinese rural reforms, which differs greatly from the official version.

As a sociologist, Cao deeply analyzes farmers’ sufferings and ascribes them to an inappropriate political system. One of the problems of this system is the over-sized governments which always rely on overtaxing farmers to operate. In a township Cao visited, there were less than 30 officials in the government in the late 1970s, but the number skyrocketed to 150 in 1996. According to Cao’s investigation, the rapid expansion of government and officials can be seen everywhere. The heavy burden to pay for these increasingly over-staffed governments is ultimately put on the shoulders of farmers (Cao J. 2000, 91-93). It causes farmers’ constant protest and grievance. In the summer of 1996, there were farmers in eight townships in Kaifeng County that protested against exorbitant taxes levied on the summer harvest (Cao J. 2005, 113).

The writer Li claimed: “we (the writers of Land) followed Cao’s lead and investigated the issue of the farmers’ demonstrations against over-taxation.”8 The narrative structure of Land revolves around Luo’s three visits to Xiakou by which the drama inquires into three fundamental issues: (1) Why is the farmers’ economic burden so

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8 Ibid.
heavy and why can their burden not be reduced? (2) Why do officials fabricate and overstate their achievements? (3) Why do the Party leaders try to hide the truth (of the dam collapse) from the public? (I will explore the third issue in the next chapter). The three issues can be merged into a crucial one: how to change the top-down political system so that officials serve the people rather than cater for their bosses.

**Narrative Inquiry (1): Officials’ Oppression and Class Conflict**

*Land* begins with farmers protesting in Xinglong Township against the government’s excessive agricultural levies. Unlike the main melody drama *Secretary*, which deals with the unemployed workers in an ideologized allegorical manner of “sharing difficulties”, *Land* does not simply display the farmers’ protest, but explores its reasons in depth via the actions of the hero Luo.

In a meeting to address the farmers’ demonstration, Luo as the newly appointed Party secretary of Xiakou city questions the cadres of Xinglong Township and the demonstrating farmers: “What is the root cause [of the over-taxation]?” No-one answers. He proposes his explanation: “Fundamentally it is due to the over-sized governmental organizations in the township, and consequently over-employment. For example, is it necessary to set up a ‘Taiwan Affairs Office’ in every township government?”

Luo offers his own solution to this issue: “spending according to revenue” instead of “collecting revenue according to expenditure”. Luo explains: “How much one government department can do and how many staff it can employ should be completely dependent on its legal revenue …. If we set up the principle of ‘spending according to legal revenue’, the government will be forced to economize and restructure, won’t it? …. I have already calculated that Xinglong Township government can reduce staff by one third at least”.

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9 The writer Li explained that Luo’s monologue was inspired by Cao’s observation (11 and 12 May, 2010). In *Yellow River*, Cao (2005) satirizes the organizational structure of government by asking, “[w]hile there was a real need for the Taiwan Affairs Office in coastal provinces, what on earth it was doing in the interior!” (133).
Luo’s statement clearly reveals that over-taxation (economic oppression) is neither caused by the improper economic system (which can be addressed through marketized reform), nor by the improper behavior of individual cadres (which can be tackled through the Party’s disciplines or its anticorruption campaign). It is caused by problematic governmental institutions and a power structure through which farmers’ interests are actually exploited and abused by the government, represented by different levels of cadres. To solve the farmers’ economic hardship, the government needs to downsize and lay off officials.

Positioned within the collision of social classes, the characters are thus in a dilemma as to which side they should align with. Asking Secretary He to support his governmental reform proposal, Luo says, “One side represents the interests of the cadres while the other side represents the interests of the farmers. Secretary He, which side do we stand on when we deal with the issue [of downsizing the Xinglong Township government]?” Major Ma of Xiakou objects to Luo’s proposed reforms and consciously aligns himself with the cadres. Ma questions Luo’s reforms with an acidic tone: “Secretary Luo, have you ever thought in your heart who protects the interests of the township cadres? If you discourage their working motives [by damaging their interests], how could the rural jobs be done?”

Here, Major Ma points out the “secret principle of operation” in officialdom, according to which the interests of senior and junior officials are closely linked together since the juniors’ working initiatives are encouraged through their seniors’ protection. The linkage of the senior and junior cadres’ interests forms an invisible interest web which traps and confines those officials who dare to break out. Luo is in fact punished for challenging this web. Luo is forced to shift his post away from Xiakou under fierce attack from the cadres as his reformist project clashes with their interests. In this regard, Land not only explores the root cause of farmers’ sufferings but also depicts the difficulty in alleviating them, because, in Luo’s words, “it is not a
problem to do with particular individuals but exactly a problem to do with the system”. Luo’s comment echoes Cao’s (2005) lamentation in Yellow River: governmental reform is certainly arousing stiff resistance within officialdom itself and therefore it is difficult to put into practice (196). The issue of the farmers’ predicament is thus described as having its roots in the problems of the current political system.

Narrative Inquiry (2): Problematic Political System and Falsification of Achievement

The second narrative event in Land centres on the falsified “Xinglong experience”. After the falsification is exposed in a meeting attended by cadres including Secretary He, Governor Feng and some farmers, Luo sharply inquires: “Why do our cadres make up false achievements even though they know they are fake? Why do our cadres carry on wrongs even though they obviously know these are inappropriate?” Showing how officials falsely produce the “Xinglong experience”, the creators achieve their tactical penetration into the nature of Chinese contemporary politics.

This narrative event starts from Episode 8 and 9, which are transitional episodes that link the first narrative inquiry (the farmers’ protest against overtaxation) and the second inquiry (falsification of “Xinglong experience”) together. Confrontations between characters and conspiracy plots do not feature in these two episodes. Even the love affair between the divorced Luo and his son’s teacher, Jiang Wei 蒋苇, is presented in a dull and unromantic way. The central conflict between good and evil is temporarily suspended and the two episodes instead focus on introducing the provincial economic conference and its subsequent consequence (the falsification of the “Xinglong experience”) via a plain “documentary gaze”.

By “documentary gaze”, Caughie (2000) refers to “the look of the camera which observes the social space and the figures within it. Whereas the dramatic look is cut into the narrative space, articulating it and us in the movement of the narrative, the documentary gaze stands outside, exploiting the ‘objectivity’ of the camera to constitute its object as ‘document’” (111). In this definition, “documentary gaze”
differentiates from the “dramatic look” (110) by looking at what is happening to characters in a social context in a less dramatic, coherent manner. Therefore, from the economy and ideology of popular drama, the narrative of the documentary gaze is redundant, excessive and unnecessary for (1) it disrupts and distracts audiences from the narrative coherence established within the chain of cause/effect; (2) it interferes with the unified world built through the classic realist mode according to the dominant ideology and thus threatens the dominant ideological control over the text (Caughie 2000; Fiske 1993).

However, for the writers of Land, this narrative excess and redundancy open a space to investigate the political root of social problems, one of which happens to be a blatantly falsifying of achievement. The writer Li explains:

Possibly in most TV drama professionals’ view, these two episodes should be cut down to 20 minutes because they slow down the whole plot, which means audiences would press the button of their remotes to change to another channel. However, our purpose is not to create an exciting and closing story full of ups and downs of the characters. We sought to reveal deep social contradictions purposefully creating a rupture in the narrative. In other words, the inclusion of these two episodes, which lack exciting plot twists, is a suitable tactic to deliver an important message to the audience.10

The message, which the drama attempts to convey, is inspired by Cao’s observation about how the fallen nature of the top-down political system causes deception and corruption. In the Introduction to the English version of Yellow River, Murphy (2005) notes: “Cao’s survey shows when looking downwards, Party-state officials at the levels of the county, township and village enjoy substantial power. But when looking upwards, they face tightly confined responsibilities and all manner of quotas” (8). In

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10 Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
many cases, these quotas are too high to achieve. Yet, subordinate officials dare not challenge these outlandish quotas or policies from above, but do their best to implement these “impossible missions”. “Under the current system”, the head of a county confesses to Cao (2005) in Yellow River, “the job prospects of the lower ranks are all in the hands of a small minority of senior officials, so the others run around at their beck and call, keeping an eye on the boss’s mood and doing what they think the boss wants. They scarcely bother to question the orders that come down from on high, they don’t even ask whether the targets are achievable or not, they just go ahead and tick them off the list whether they are appropriate to the circumstances or not” (195-6).

Land’s political interrogation is crystallized within the scene of the annual provincial economic conference in Episode 9. A provincial economic conference is normally held at the beginning of every year to set up the economic targets of the province for the year. Land portrays this conference in detail. The conference is chaired by Governor Feng and starts with Feng’s speech:

Comrades, the increase of the GDP in our whole country this year is set at 7%. Our province must not be the one that pulls it back. Regarding this goal, Secretary He has promised to the Central Government. Military has no joke (junzhong wu xiyan 军中无戏言). So, as I always say, huge burdens are required to be carried by huge numbers of people; every shoulder has to carry its own share ….11 According to the decision made by the provincial Party

11 In my interview, the writer Li noted that the words, “Huge burden … to carry its own share” was directly borrowed from the speech of the General Manager of the state-owned Pearl River Film Company (Li’s working unit) when the manager addressed the company’s annual economic target in a cadres’ meeting. In the meeting, the manager set an unreasonably high goal and demanded every department and individual filmmaker share the goal, otherwise they would be economically punished (11 and 12 May, 2010).
committee, we don’t forcibly order the share of each region this year. You set up your own goal first according to the reality, and then the provincial government makes appropriate adjustments to the whole situation.

Soon this seemingly voluntary set-up becomes a process of constant political pressure. Feng calls Luo specifically. Luo expresses the difficulty of achieving the goal of 7% annual GDP growth in Xiaxi city where he is in charge. Feng feels unhappy and threatens the subordinates (especially Luo):

… I can responsibly tell you that this 7% target is decided by the provincial Party committee through repeated discussions and consultations. It can be and must be achieved. Maybe some comrades may find it difficult to achieve …. But, I also want to tell you all that you might not feel unsecured and embarrassed if you resolutely implement the provincial strategy by way of developing the high-tech industries through which the rural economy can be stimulated …. The economic strategy of the province is based on scientific and actual proof and supported by the majority of the cadres and masses. It will stand the test of time. The problem lies in whether the thinking of our cadres is truly liberated or stuck in the past, whether they can only talk of theory but do not put theory into practice. If things are going so, sometimes the magnitude of adjusting cadres’ posts equates to the degree of economic development.

Feng relentlessly conveys three messages here: (1) The economic targets must be reached, and there is no room to negotiate or bargain; (2) Every cadre should resolutely adhere to the provincial high-tech policy as an effective means to achieve the economic target; (3) Those who dare question or challenge the set target and policy will be immediately removed from their posts.

After the threat, Feng calls Ma: “Comrade Ma, you go first. How does
Xiakou plan to achieve a rate of productivity over the provincial target of 7%?”

Ma stands up, “Governor Feng, we are clear that even though we do our best, the final result will be the same as the last year’s that is to keep up with the provincial 7%. The maximum extra can only be one percent”.

Feng smiles: “Major Ma, you can’t say that! The province has invested over 2 billion to build a reservoir in your Xiakou. Once the reservoir is completed this year, the revenue of your arable products will be doubled. Additionally, the high-tech industries of Xiakou have basically developed through the two years’ effort and would take off with a little more encouragement. How can you be so conservative as to aim for the same percentage growth as last year?”

Ma cautiously argues: “Governor Feng, it is not easy even to reach the target of 8%. We should aim for a figure that is within our capabilities”.

Feng replies without enthusiasm: “Comrade Ma, it is improper to be blindly optimistic without considering the reality and the difficulties. But it is similarly inappropriate to exaggerate difficulties and hide your strength as well!”

Ma painfully replies: “Ok, Governor Feng, we can push ourselves even harder … 9%”.

Feng glares at Ma with a look of dissatisfaction across his face: “Major Ma, you don’t appear to be very confident about achieving this figure”.

Ma hesitates, then looks at Feng’s face, finally says: “Ok, Governor Feng, let’s take a lead, 10%” (Episode 9).

This scene is shot inside a huge auditorium with Governor Feng positioned behind a table on the higher stage whereas Ma, Luo and other officials are seated on the lower audience seats. The higher position which Feng occupies not only visually gives him an air of authority but also exerts huge psychological pressure on Ma and the other subordinates below. It reflects the unequal power play between the two. Although the
10% GDP increase target appears to come from Ma’s own mouth, it actually comes from and is manipulated by those above. Noticeably, at the beginning of Feng’s speech, he emphasizes “the 7% GDP increase for our whole country” as a hallmark to set the provincial economic goal. The goal of 7% economic growth for the entire country is set by the central government. Feng’s words, “Secretary He has promised the Central Government. Military has no joke”, clearly suggest that He and Feng are also under tremendous pressure from the central government in the same way that Ma comes under pressure from Feng.

In the last scene before the meeting, He rings Feng from Beijing and tells him that the Party leaders are dissatisfied with the economic development of their province. He feels under pressure. This scene and Feng’s statements open a space for the audience to interrogate the responsibility of the top (central government) in enabling and even encouraging the unrealistic set-up of goals, even though the central government is absent from the narrative. Therefore the deception is depicted in Land not as the fault of one particular official but a problem inherent in the current political system. Under such arbitrary vertical governance, targets are set and decided from above and not decided according to the reality of the situation.

Under such extreme pressure, Ma returns to Xiakou, where he spares no effort in order to fulfil an almost impossible target, a 10% annual increase in GDP. He does not hesitate to replace the posts of the Party secretary of Zhongpin County, Zheng, and the Party secretary of Xinglong Township, Kong, who had objected to such an unrealistic target. Ma then replaces them with two officials who are absolutely obedient but snobbish. As a result, the farce of the “Xinglong experience” is inevitably produced.

Through interrogation of the official falsification, Land explicitly attacks the Party’s political authoritarianism as the root-cause of social problems. This top-down nature of the Party-state, as Cao (2000) laments, leads cadres to take instructions from above rather than listen to public opinion. Therefore this produces two serious consequences:
(1) the worst aspects of governing practices which “include forcing farmers to reach production and tax targets, falsely reporting economic achievement, initiate investment in wasteful prestige projects, and engaging in corruption” (Murphy 2005, 9-10), and (2) increasing tensions between farmers and officials. Such tension is well illustrated by the farmers’ furious demonstrations against the government’s overtaxation and falsification in Land.

3.3 National Cadres and Political Inquiry: Political Alienation

National Cadres also conducts an investigation of the political system but with a different emphasis. It focuses on exploring the inappropriateness of the political mechanism in cadres’ promotion, which empowers the privileged bureaucratic class and penalizes the cadres who stand for the people. Like Land, Cadres similarly utilizes the investigative mode to expose an alternative social truth beyond main melody representation.

The Novel National Cadres and Political Inquiry
National Cadres is adapted from Zhang Ping’s novel of the same title. The novel is praised as “a work to bring a storm to the 2004 literary circle” (78, my translation) as it breaks with precedence by dealing with a fundamental problem within the political system (i.e. the lack of real democracy and the emergence of a self-interested privileged bureaucratic class).

The writer Zhang is a controversial writer. He is an official who is not a CCP member,\(^\text{12}\) and is frequently admired as an intellectual with social conscience (Zheng

\(^\text{12}\) Zhang is a member of the China Democratic League, an intellectuals’ Party founded in 1941 and also one of eight political parties permitted to exist by the CCP in China today. Zhang was the vice-president of the China Writers’ Association between 2001 and 2007. He has been appointed Provincial Vice-Governor of Shanxi since 2008.)
B. 1999; Chen X. 2004). On the one hand, some of his works (e.g. Jueze 扶择 (Choice)) are highly acclaimed by the government (Kinkley 2007, 78-103). On the other hand, he had been sued by over 200 officials over a ten year period, due to his relentless condemnation of official corruption in his novels Tianwang 天网 (Heaven’s Web) and Fa han Fenxi 法撼汾西 (The Law Rocks Fenxi County). Because of the unparalled denouncement of the Chinese legal system in his novel Shimian maifu 十面埋伏 (Ambushed on all sides), the work has been regarded as inappropriate by SARFT to be adapted into film or TV drama.13 Zhang Ping is one of the writers in the 1990s to receive the most letters from readers (Zheng B. 1999, 45). When he was sued by officials, he received over 2000 supportive letters. There were four letters jointly signed by over 1000 readers, 12 by over 500 readers (Qi & Cai 2000, 74). A letter from some farmers wrote: “All people with conscience and all common people support you! We would never forget you, because you are a genuine writer of our common people” (cited from Zheng 1999, 45, my translation).

The novel Cadres is a manifestation of Zhang’s critical intellectual spirit that both reflects the people’s tribulations and grasps the realities of Chinese politics.14 It deals with the most important and burning issue of our time, i.e. political democratization.15

13 Since Ambushed on All Sides was published in 1999, many TV drama directors and production companies have shown great interest in the novel. Yet, SARFT has declined to give the project a green light (my informant).

14 In his study on the CCP’s propagandist leader Deng Tuo 邓拓 (the former editor-in-chief of People’s Daily and the secretary of Beijing municipal Party committee being in charge of ideological business), Timothy Cheek (1997) has demonstrated that Party officials are not homogenous, especially for those literati-officials whose intellectual quality (e.g. “uncompromising integrity” (262)) may disrupt their official identity and lead their artistic creation to challenge the Party’s orthodoxy.

15 In an interview, the writer Zhang claimed that he wrote the novel for the purpose of appealing for political reform. He said: “At the critical moment [of reform], literature should not and cannot be
The novel sharply condemns the Party’s inter-electoral mechanism, suggesting that this problematic self-enclosed mechanism is dangerously leading China into a mafia model of politics. As critics (Chen Y. 2005; Chen X. 2004; Lei D. 2004) point out, the novel transcends the parameters of the main melody anticorruption novel (focusing on eulogizing the Party’s anticorruption resolution). Rather it strives to achieve the same authenticity of investigative journalism by showing deep concern for people’s predicaments and seeks to establish its political roots (Liu W. 2008; Chen X. 2004).

To wrap up the novel, Zhang describes a massive people’s riot against the party’s closed election. Hundreds of thousands of people go onto the streets to protest the protagonist Xia’s failure. They besiege the hotel where the election is held and another several thousand people go to the provincial capital to demonstrate and petition the provincial leaders. It is the people’s furious rebellion that turns the tables. This astonishing resolution, which is seldom seen in contemporary Chinese novels, expresses Zhang’s great anxiety about the Chinese political situation and crisis. Like a warning, this ending exhorts the Party that a revolution may be coming soon if it does not resort to urgent and dramatic change. Zhang’s deep sympathy for the people and concern about reality, as Chen Xiaoming (2004) comments, “make his writing a historical inscription mixed with a kind of sacrifice, lash and prayer” (68, my translation).

The TV drama Cadres takes the novel’s political inquiry and criticism and visualizes it. SARFT’s censorship of Cadres (editing 11 episodes from its original version) indicates that the authorities obviously judge its political investigation as problematic from the perspective of government power.

Political Alienation and Political Inquiry
The TV drama Cadres is set in Dengjiang city and is about the brutal political struggle
between the hero Xia and the privileged bureaucratic class. In order to protect their political and economic interests, the privileged class attempts to kick Xia out of Dengjiang at all costs. Due to these corrupt bureaucrats’ conspiracy, in the end, Xia, an honest and good-hearted cadre, tragically fails in the municipal Party congress election. Following the novel’s lead, this show audaciously investigates problems of the political system: why can’t a good cadre (the hero Xia) be promoted, and in fact survive in the current political system? What is wrong with the system? In the drama, Xia pointedly asks Liu Jinfang 刘景芳, the superior director of the Party’s organizational department: “If the leaders cannot have the final say (on cadres’ advancement) and the peoples cannot also make the final decision, then who on earth has the power of determination (on cadres’ appointment and advancement)?” The answer is the self-interested bureaucratic class. Through the narrative inquiry, Cadres shows how political alienation takes place in China, or more explicitly, the non-official truth: the Party’s arbitrary political power has been turned into something against the people.

The issue of political alienation was initially raised in the early 1980s by some Party intellectuals, who attempted to challenge the orthodoxy of Maoist Marxism as well as rethink the ongoing modernization dominated by the Party-state (Cui W. 2007). By rediscovering the concept of alienation in the work of the young Marx, these reformist officials (e.g. Zhou Yang 周扬 and Wang Ruoshui 王若水) pointed out the existence of socialist alienation within Chinese socialist society. 16 Wang Ruoshui (1986, 186-189) explained, alienation occurred when something created by the people went beyond the people’s control, turned against them, dominated and suppressed them. In the article, Talking about Alienation, Wang (1986) divided socialist alienation into three types: ideological (sixiang de 思想的), political (zhengzhi de 政治的) and economic (jingji de 经济的) alienations. Ideological alienation meant individual

16 For discussions on the debate of socialist alienation in the 1980s, see Cui W. 2007 and Wang R. 1996, 9-35.
worship which treated an individual leader as God. Economic alienation referred to the pursuit of quick economic development at the risk of breaching economic and environmental laws. Political alienation or power alienation meant that the ruling elites turned their power into a means for personal gain. The people’s servants thus became people’s bosses. The notion of political alienation suggests criticism of the Party (the Party’s alienation). Wang says: “It (the CCP) is originally the party of the oppressed. But once it becomes a party in power and the party’s status has been changed, it has a potential danger to depart from the people and probably alienated from the people” (194, my translation).

Gao Ertai 高尔太 (1981) described political alienation as “power fetishism” (88). Under the circumstances of power fetishism, Gao argued that people were in fact devalued for the purpose of elevating the privileges of the few political elite—the latter exploits and occupies the accomplishment of the former’s hard work. He used the “Gang of the Four” as an example and sharply commented:

… [they] exploited their stolen power to establish an invisible nation within the socialist country … and built a bureaucratic institution to execute their suppressive power. This bureaucratic institution further forms a particular, closed group inside the country and a fictitious nation that stands side by side with the socialist country. This institution regards itself as the reason and purpose of the country’s existence …. In their eyes, the country’s own function is disappearing and becoming [their] personal ends, becoming their capital of governance and power’s foundation or their means of being promoted and getting rich. (81, my translation.)

17 These reformists’ political criticism, especially the concepts of “political alienation” and “power fetishism”, really offended the Party authorities. The Party’s conservatives denounced their views of socialist alienation as being “spiritual pollution”, and labelled them as “bourgeois liberals within the
Echoing the critical arguments of the “liberalists,” *Cadres* strives to reveal the social truth of political alienation which is denied by the Party, and points out that political alienation is becoming more and more severe today, because the basic political structure which produces the alienation remains unchanged, and the condition of increasing corruption of power in contemporary China even gets worse. In the drama, a self-interested privileged stratum has developed within the Party. This privileged stratum controls the political structure of Dengjiang and also utilize its power for individual gains (e.g. embezzling public funds and bank loans for their private Huangyuan (皇源) Company and monopolizing the supply of sand and gravel to the city’s public constructions for a huge profit). The monopoly of power and economic benefit by this privileged stratum constitutes a double repression of politics and economy over the unprivileged majority. They can defiantly sell fake pesticides to farmers which lead to many of them being poisoned. They can also prevent justice from being achieved. To maintain their political interests, they ruthlessly overturn the original plan which builds a new residential block as compensation for the dwellers in Red Flag Street, whose houses were destroyed for the sake of public construction. For these privileged ruling elites, as Gao Ertai (1981) observes, people who should symbolically represent the deity “become the sacrifices offered to God”—God being power itself” (76).

There is essential contradiction between the people’s interests and the ruling class’s interests, depicting in the narrative. To defend the cadres’ benefits, the evil Wang shamelessly quarrels with Xia and claims that the cadres’ interests are also the people’s interests, moreover these issues are the biggest interests of the people. *Cadres* points sharply toward a wider public sense that the Party cadres no longer serve the people but have become a corrupt group that violates people’s interests.

Party”. Many liberals, such as Fang Lizhi (方励之), Liu Binyan, Wang Ruoshui, and Wang Ruowang (王若望), were expelled from the Party during the “eliminating bourgeois spiritual pollution campaigns”
Xia’s loss in the municipal Party congress election shows how political alienation and power fetishism turns the Party’s election into a political game of legally sidelining their political opponents and defending their own interests. Following the novel’s political inquiry, the drama is thus a strong critique and condemnation of the problematic politic system. As the writer Zhang Ping (2004) acidly reveals in the postscript of the novel: “in a system in which interest groups are in alliance and all rights of people and masses are almost deprived, the inevitable consequences of such a system are: governmental corruption, political nepotism, severe inequality and widespread poverty, extremely high economic risk and social unrest” (124, my translation).

3.4 Conclusion

*Land* and *Cadres* deploy narrative as a means of social and political inquiry in order to uncover non-official truths. The farmers’ difficulties, the officials’ falsification of achievement, and the good cadre’s loss in the inter-party election are portrayed not as isolated, closed events, but as bearing broader social meanings. Therefore the investigative narrative of *Land* and *Cadre* is fundamentally different from main melody narratives that depict problems as isolated instances of corruption, ultimately eulogizing the Party. Instead, these TV dramas’ investigative narratives portray social relations and contradictions, and expose problems at broader social and political levels. Through constant interrogations, *Land* and *Cadres* display a critical rationality that challenges the reliability and legitimacy of official representation, to reveal its distortion and falsehood. The TV dramas demonstrate that the root of these social problems is not economic, but rather political (political alienation).

Having examined investigative narrative as one of the main tactics through which critical realism in these TV dramas departs from main melody, in the next chapter I will address *Land*’s critique of the main melody deglamorized, charismatic, clean
official model.
Chapter Four   The Scholarly Knight-Errant and Democracy

This chapter examines another tactic of Land’s textual resistance, whereby the drama criticizes the dominant clean official discourse by engaging with the clean official model. As I argued, *mainstreaming resistance* does not reject official cultural forms and devices but subverts them from within. *Land* critically transform this model in two ways: (1) the main hero Luo in *Land* is actually constructed as the “scholarly knight-errant” (Wang D. 1997, 180), who acts as the agent of the public to fight against the political Father (the Party); (2) Luo is no longer charismatic hero, but a Don Quixote-like character who are impotent and thus bear a “tragic structure of feeling”. Through this critical transformation of the deglamorized, charismatic, clean official model, *Land* manifests the intellectual politics of “*minbenlun* 民本论” (people are the first importance) and endorses popular democratization instead of Party worship.

4.1 The “Other” of Officialdom: Scholarly Knight-Errant and Trying the Political “Father”

*Deglamorized, Charismatic, Clean Official: Father Worship*

As an ideological rhetorical device, the deglamorized, charismatic, clean official of main melody drama exploits the traditional “clean official” culture so that Party heroes can be portrayed as positive and incorruptible. These heroes bridge the gap between the Party and the people, and are shown as representing Party cadres in the main, in contrast with the few who may be corrupt. In his study on the cultural origins of the “clean official” archetype, Chen Xu 陈旭 (2004) states that the clean official political principles consist of a trinity of filial piety to parents, sympathy for people and the core principle of loyalty to the sovereign. Although loyalty and filial piety are historically the basic political moral standard in an autocratic political system, in actual political practice the main principle is in fact the absolute obedience of officials
and common people in deference to the government. The clean officials’ sympathy towards the people ultimately serves to consolidate the sovereign government, instead of actually serving the people. Chen (2004) notes: “clean officials are the intermediary between the people and the emperor. However, at any time, their first consideration is to stabilize sovereignty and maintain the emperor’s political authority. Once people violate the interest of sovereignty, clean officials will kill them without hesitation” (100, my translation). Thus, the crucial feature of the clean official is that he only objects to those who are corrupt, never to the emperor.¹

In the clean official narrative, the basic tension between people and the emperor is deliberately denied (or sutured). In the clean official imaginary, the people, clean officials and the emperor are thus depicted as in harmony: clean officials defend the people’s interests on behalf of the emperor. The people’s blind loyalty connects with the emperor’s promise of realizing justice through the clean official. The clean official imaginary therefore demonstrates what Li Yuchun (2007, 157) calls the cultural “Father Worship” complex.

By appropriating the Lacanian concept of nom du père (the Name of the Father) in his analysis of Chinese socialist fiction, Li develops his own interpretation of the “Father Worship” complex in Chinese culture. In Lacan, the Name of the Father refers to the symbolic Father, the Law, which is crucial to the construction of personal identity. Jacques Lacan (2007) illustrates: “It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (230). The symbolic Father therefore is not an actual subject but is (and should remain) merely a signifier, but a very important kind of signifier—one that enables signification to proceed at all.²

¹ In his study on Chinese political culture, Godwin C. Chu (2001, 46) also points out that, in Chinese ancient politics, the officials’ loyalty to the monarch is always understood as blind loyalty.

Borrowing the notion of the symbolic Father from Lacan, Li focuses precisely on the implications of the Chinese people’s “collective unconsciousness” underlying their excessive submission to a symbolic Father. Li writes: “The cultural complex of worshiping the Father means to identify with the authority of the Father, and essentially submit to the dominant cultural power. In other words, if one positions him/herself in worshiping the Father, s/he will lose independence of personality and meanwhile lose independent thinking about the established social and cultural orders” (160, my translation). The Father Worship complex, which emphasizes the people’s submission to the law of Father, is the core value of the clean official myth. It can be epitomized from the description of the protagonists’ relationships in the main melody drama Secretary.

In this drama, Secretary Gong and Ma are politically and spiritually depicted as “father” and “son”. Like a “father”, Gong cares for and educates Ma. He not only provides him with an opportunity to realize his political talent and treats him as his political heir, but also helps Ma to resolve his family tensions. By placing emphasis on the political “father-son” relationship, the interaction between Gong and Ma in the whole drama is thus presented as a coming of age story, in which Ma is constantly

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3 Li’s idea of excessive submission due to the incorporation of political power into a living body is beyond Lacan’s description. At this point, Li draws on Erich Fromm’s analysis of a father and his love. In his influential book The Art of Love, Fromm (1961) writes: “In the nature of fatherly love lies the fact that obedience becomes the main virtue, that disobedience is the main sin—and its punishment the withdrawal of fatherly love” (43). See Li Y. 2007, 160-161.

4 In the traditional politics, the nation (guojia 国家) is allegorized as a family in which the emperor is described as the “junfu 君父” (the Father of the sovereignty) (Ye et al. 2009, 39), officials are the agent of the Father, “fumuguan 父母官” (parent) (Chu 2001, 44) or “chenzi 臣子 (son) (Li Y. 2007, 162)”, while the people are “zimin 子民” (children) (44). According to traditional ethical doctrine, people as children and officials as agents must totally submit to the Father Emperor. For discussions on Father Worship in Chinese culture, also see Ye L. et al. 2009; Chu 2001.
indoctrinated by and pledges allegiance to his political Father. There is actually no real battle and conflict between them. Ma’s letter of complaint about Gong to the central government at the beginning, for example, is in fact described not as a confrontation based on different values but more as a vehicle to show how tolerable and generous the “father” is to his wayward son. In this regard, the drama is about how a talented but politically ruthless son becomes mature and capable under his “father’s” education and guidance. As a result, the kind “father” is happy to hand down “the family property” (the post of the provincial Party secretary) to his filial “son” without anxiety after the “son” thoroughly demonstrates his ability and loyalty to perpetuate political power.

It is worth noting that, within the main melody, clean official imaginary, the Party becomes the Name of the Father, who is the common denominator that shapes the discourses of the characters, while the Party leaders (imaginary “father”) bear a symbolic mandate in being the instruments of the will of the symbolic Father. The clean officials play a mediating role that sustains the given ideological regime of the Father (the Party) and provides a focus for the identification of the “masses” characters. The “masses” therefore vicariously (through the clean official) participate in this identification process and equally submit themselves to the Party and accept it as their symbolic Father. As a result, clean officials and people become empty subjects, or captives of the Name of the Father.

Seemingly, the protagonist Luo in Land shares similarities with main melody, deglamorized, charismatic, clean officials. He is a Party leader, honest and incorruptible. It is precisely these similarities that lead scholars (for instance, Chen 2007) to misrecognize the drama as a main melody drama. However, I argue that Luo eventually departs from the clean official model and is re-located outside the Party’s symbolic order so that the Name of the Father can be criticized and disobeyed. He is not a deglamorized, charismatic, clean official who holds the Father Worship complex
Scholarly Knight-Errant: Trial of the Father

Different from the main melody, clean official, Luo in *Land* is depicted as an “other” of the political world (officialdom). In *Zhuyao renwu sheji* (Outline of the main characters) written by the writers of *Land*, Luo is emphasized as an “other” of officialdom. By “other”, writer Li claims: “we highlight Luo’s identity as a scholar (intellectual) who ultimately contradicts the officials”. Luo first appears on this show as the Chancellor and professor of Xiajing Agricultural University. His scholastic identity is mentioned and stressed throughout the drama, even though Luo transfers to a political role (after Episode 3). For example, after Luo fights strongly against Secretary He for his suspension of the investigation into the dam scandal, He’s former secretary and Luo’s current secretary Zhou goes to He’s office trying to diminish the tension between the two. Zhou says to He: “Secretary He, you know that it is extremely painful to make people like Secretary Luo give up their principles and ideas. He is after all an *academic* person” (emphasis added). Zhou’s words indicate Luo’s intellectual identity as being more prominent than his officiating identity. Hu Zhidong 胡志东, an evil private entrepreneur in *Land*, compares Luo against the majority of cadres represented by Major Ma. Hu suggests that Luo is an “other” of officialdom who has independent thinking and independent personality whereas Ma and other cadres are shaped within the political system in which the foremost rule is obedience and loyalty to their seniors, rather than the common people.

In other words, Luo as the “other” of officialdom is positioned within an intellectual universe to embody a distinctive intellectual fighting tradition and faith. In traditional Confucianism, *shi* 士 (intellectual/gentleman) is defined as an independent noble man who carries himself with *dao* 道 (the Way) and bears a spirit of resisting power.

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5 See *Outline of the Land’s Main Characters* (personal collection, 2003).

6 Personal interview, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
with *dao* (Yu 2004b). Yu Yingshi 余英时 (2004, 105) explains that the *dao*, which *shi* pursues, ultimately resides in the reconstruction of social and political order after chaos. Confucius and Mencius encourage *shi* to criticize and object to cruel governance, in the hopes of restoring social justice. Confucius (1997, 81) suggested there was a need for *shi* to critique politics and power in a world which did not follow the Way. Mencius (1999) also said: “When the correct [way] prevails in the world, it is carried out wherever the gentleman goes. When the correct way is overshadowed in the world, the gentleman adheres to it even at the cost of his life. But I have never heard of yielding to the superiors by sacrificing the correct way” (313).

Following the *shi*’s fighting spirit, in the article *Ruxia pian* 儒侠篇 (An Essay on the Scholarly Knight-errant) published in 1899, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1984) terms intellectuals as scholarly knight-errants and contends that chivalry, which violently fought for people against tyrannical authority, originated from Confucianism. Zhang said: “Is the Confucian scholars’ principle more than sacrificing one’s life for achieving virtue? Is the Confucian scholars’ practice more than eliminating the bane and calamity for nation? …. The great Confucian scholars all advocate chivalry and contain the chivalric spirit” (11, my translation). Zang’s redefinition of *xia* 侠 (chivalry) provided a new intellectual image which combined Confucian values with a chivalric rebellious spirit. Like the heroes of chivalric literature and film, who pursue justice and equality and challenge authority, the purpose of the scholarly knight-errant is ultimately in defending people’s rights and rescuing society from crisis, rather than maintaining the ruler’s power. Inspired by the intellectual chivalric image, David Der-wei Wang (1997) describes some late Qing writers (e.g. Liu E 刘鹗 and Li

7 In the late Qing, many intellectuals, such Liang Qichao 梁启超 and Tan Sitong 谭嗣同, advocated intellectual chivalry. Their call for scholarly knight-errants was motivated to promote a revolutionary or radical reform discourse against the decadently autocratic Qing government, for solving the social crisis they were facing. For a discussion on the late Qing Confucian chivalric discourses, see Gong P. 2004, 22-26.
Boyuan 李伯元), the intellectual characters they create (e.g. Lao Can in *The Travels of Lao Can*), and the May Fourth writer Lu Xun as scholarly knight-errants. Residing within the “living hell” of China, they incorporate elements of chivalric engagement, passionately protesting against social injustice with their pens (180-181).

I argue that Luo is a type of scholarly knight-errant who challenge the established political system for the people’s interests. Embedded within the scholarly knight-errant imaginary, the ideal Father is absent in *Land*. Similar to the relationship between Gong and Ma in *Secretary*, He and Luo in *Land* also display an imaginary “father” and “son” relationship. Secretary He is described as Luo’s political mentor and Father, who appreciates or discovers the “son’s” political gift and attempts to educate him to become the perfect political heir. However, instead of depicting a harmonious relationship between the “son” and “father”, *Land* provocatively enacts cultural patricide by subverting the authority of the political “father” and the symbolic order that the Father is associated with. In the first half of the drama, as a newcomer to politics, Luo (like a political child) identifies with his “father”, He. His “father”, on the other hand, tries to repress his son’s intellectual identity and do his best to transform Luo into a “qualified” politician. In doing so, He assigns his own secretary

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8 Leo Oufan Lee (1985) also calls Lao Can “a civilian knight-errant, a wen-hsia [文侠] who uses his mind and herbal medicines, rather than his sword, to redress social justice” (286).

9 *Huo diyu* 活地狱 (Living Hell) is the title of “a collection of stories about fourteen misjudged cases and cruel tortures presided over by corrupt judges” (Wang D. 1997, 175), written by Li Boyuan and his friends. It is one of the novels that relentlessly exposes the dark reality within the Chinese judicial system.

10 In Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, the Symbolic refers to the structure of language (culture). Slavoj Žižek (2007) explains: “For Lacan, language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: it offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it, it colonizes us” (11-12). For a study on the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic, see “The Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real”, in Sarup 1992, 101-119.
Zhou to work for Luo, to monitor and regulate his behavior. Yet, Luo’s intellectual identity, which was established in his pre-political life, ultimately resists He’s attempts at symbolization (containment). When the dam of the Xiakou reservoir collapses to tear the fabric of the symbolic order, Luo’s intellectual identity is recovered during the traumatic event. He realizes that his identification with the “father” is actually misrecognition.

The Xiakou dam plot is the third important narrative event in *Land*, which opens up a space to display Luo’s challenge against his political “father”. In the narrative, there are five major rounds of conflicts between He and Luo related to the investigation of the dam scandal. In the first four, Luo’s rebellions are suppressed by He. However, after Luo learns He’s motivation being driven by protecting his political career (since Luo’s father-in-law is involved in the dam corruption), Luo resolutely requests an urgent provincial leadership meeting to publicly discuss the matter of the investigation. Luo’s proposal is an obvious rebellion against He, an act of patricide. By way of parallel editing, this climatic scene takes place simultaneously in Luo’s and He’s offices with a large majority of close-ups. The visual style and camera movement in the scene reinforce the political opposition between Luo and He. The scene unfolds as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot No.</th>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Shot and Camera Movement</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Luo’s office (LO)</td>
<td>Camera pans from a close-up of a telephone to Luo (also in a close-up) who picks up the phone.</td>
<td>Luo: Secretary He, it’s Luo Hansheng speaking. I am requesting a meeting of the outstanding members regarding the vote for the dam investigation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 | **He’s office (HO)** | He is holding a telephone as well. Camera slowly tracks forward from his medium shot to the close-up. | He: How can you say this again and again? Do you know what your proposal really means? |
---|---|---|---|
3 | **LO** | Close-up. | Luo: I know. |
4 | **HO** | Medium shot. | He: How can you ignore my words since I have talked to you about the matter so many times? |
5 | **LO** | Close-up. Camera slowly tracks from *left to right*. | Luo: I have listened to you and thought of your words again and again, but I still can’t convince myself. |
6 | **LO** | Close-up. | Luo: Sorry, this is all I can do. |
7 | **HO** | Close-up. Camera tracks from *right to left* to show a small national flag and a Party flag. | He: Hanzheng, you are not putting me down. Do you know you are putting the six million people of the whole province down? You say you are in pain; I’m much more in pain than you! I have already told you that we won’t really wind up the investigation. It is just temporarily suspended. The scandal must be investigated at an appropriate moment. Can you think about it thoroughly? |
| 8  | LO | Extreme close-up. Camera tracks from *left to right*. | Luo: I have already thought about it, Secretary He. A means and its end are not separated but united. I believe the words which Engels said: “the amoral means proves the vileness of its end’. I am willing to give up the position of the provincial head if I achieve it by deceiving my superiors and deluding my subordinates”. |
| 9  | HO | Extreme close-up. He is furiously throwing the telephone on the desk. |  |
| 10 | LO | Close-up. Camera tracks from *left to right*. | Luo: Secretary He … Secretary He … |
| 11 | HO | Extreme close-up. Camera tracks from *left to right*. He is angrily picking up the telephone again. | He: I merely ask you whether or not you insist on holding the meeting … |
| 12 | LO | Extreme close-up. Camera tracks from *right to left*. | Luo: To be honest, Secretary He, I was once cowardly and flinched when confronting the false example of Xinglong Township. Do you remember what you said to me at that time, Secretary He? |
| 13 | HO | Extreme close-up. He’s reaction. | Luo (voice-over): You said: “Hansheng, you really disappointed me … |
| 14 | LO | Extreme close-up. Camera tracks from *right to left*. | Luo: … How could a cadre like you, Luo Hansheng, become slick as well.” Since then, I have repeatedly exhorted |
myself: I, Luo Hansheng, am willing to give up the official post but I by no means make another compromise …

| 15 | HO | Extreme close-up. He is irritated, holding the telephone. | Luo (voice-over): … and another yielding.  
He: Ok. Let’s talk about it tomorrow when you come to my office!  
[He angrily puts down the telephone.  
A small *Party flag* is in front of the telephone.] |

In the whole scene, the shots alternatively shift between two spaces, Luo’s and He’s offices. The offices are constructed as two opposite visual worlds (and symbolic worlds as well). Luo’s office is bright and naturally lit while He’s is dark and foggy (an effect produced by low key lighting and daylight illumination from the big windows of the office). Luo’s face is shot brightly, whereas He’s is in low key (demonized) lighting and half of his face is in light and another half in shadow. The low key light and light fog are the key visual features of film noir of Hollywood. In their study on the visual motifs of film noir, Janey Place and Lowell Peterson (2001) highlight “the constant opposition of areas of light and dark. Small areas of light seem on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that now threatens them from all sides. Thus faces are shot low-key, interior sets are always dark” (67). The black images of film noir create a visible and unstable environment in which no character has a firm or clear moral foundation. Right and wrong become relative and conform to the disorientation and disorder created by anti-traditional lighting and

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11 Film noir is a term coined by French film critics in 1946 to designate a particular type of American crime thriller or gangster film. It is characterized by pessimistic themes of suspicion and paranoia, antiheroes and a bleak, repressed visual style to reflect the insecurity and anxiety during the Cold War period between the 1940s and the 1950s; see Silver & Ursini (2001).
camera movement. “Moral values like identities that pass in and out of shadow, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn” (Place & Peterson 2001, 69). Similarly, the black visual effect in He’s office, typically associated with film noir, constructs an unstable and unsafe milieu whereby the master’s (He’s) morality in the political setting is blurred and shadowed.

At an allegorical level, He’s office is a political space which symbolizes the Party’s power, as the Party and national flags on He’s desk clearly show. Usually political space (based on the clean official imaginary) in main melody dramas is visually presented in a glorious and respectable way. For instance, Secretary Gong’s office in Secretary, as the director Su Zhou emphasizes, “is shown as grandiose in order to reflect the identity of a provincial secretary, of a politician” (Liang B. 2002, 7, my translation). Within main melody drama’s framework of the Father Worship, Secretary creates a visual unity within Gong’s office so that the bright lighting, warm color and dignified decoration all work together to reinforce and intensify the glorification and deification of the Party’s power. Nevertheless, in He’s office, the lighting style of film noir is incompatible with the magnificent decoration of the office and thus disengages the unifying visual glory of political space familiar to viewers of main melody drama. As a result, the deity of the Party’s power which the political space (He’s office) symbolizes is demythologized and demonized.

Besides the contradiction of lighting style, the camera movements also activate and reinforce Luo’s and He’s differences and conflict. In shot 1, 5, 8 and 10, the camera shoots Luo moving from left to right, while in shot 2 and 7, He is filmed by a moving camera from right to left. Shot 11 is a transferring shot and the direction of the camera movement in the following shots is changed. Luo is shot from right to left whereas He from left to right. This opposite camera movement between Luo and He’s shots not only creates a tension between them, but also indicates an irreparable gap between their values. Thus, the sharp visual contrast and opposition (different locations, lighting style and camera movements) constructs conflicted spaces in which Luo and
He inhabit. The appearance of the small Party flag twice in He’s office implies the linkage of He’s world to the Name of the Father (the Party) which is antagonistic to Luo’s scholarly knight-errant world. In this sense, Luo’s rebellious act ultimately shows a rebellion against the Name of the Father symbolized by He.

As Liu Fusheng (2005, 83-4) points out, challenging the authority of a provincial Party secretary is a taboo in Chinese art and literature. Because the provincial secretary is the highest Party leader allowed to appear in artistic works, any challenge and question will undermine not only the purity of the secretary him/herself, but also the sacredness of the Party. *Land* breaks the taboo and unmistakably articulates a cultural patricide against the “father”, Provincial Party Secretary He. Luo’s insistence on the investigation consequently leads his political “father” He to resign in advance (ending his political career). What Luo and He struggle for is not a matter of personal interest conflict but one in relation to two kinds of politics based on two different Laws.

*Two Kinds of Politics and Intellectual Law*

In *Land*, the conflict between He and Luo is depicted as irreconcilable. As the writers of *Land* were aware during the creation process, He and Luo stand for two kinds of politics: the politics of the clean official and the intellectual politics of “people being the first importance”.¹² For Secretary He, Luo’s promotion as the next provincial secretary is more important than the immediate investigation of the scandal because He believes that Luo is a clean, capable official who is able to lead the province to overcome the long-lasting difficulties in the rural economy. He’s political belief echoes the traditional political value of governing society with clean and talented individuals rather than by an appropriate system. With such belief, He tries his best to conceal the corruption related to the dam construction from the public. He even manipulates the process in an attempt to grant a title of martyr to the seven people

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¹² Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
(including a corrupt official) who died in the flood. His aim is to divert public attention from the question of the dam collapse to the heroic deeds that the “martyrs” are supposed to represent. As a veteran politician, Secretary He is not only used to compromise but also believes it to be a necessary political practice for achieving good results (i.e. protecting the clean official Luo), even if this means achieving such a goal by questionable means.

By contrast, Luo is embedded in the framework of intellectual politics. Mencius (1999) summarized the intellectual political value (Law) as “people being the first importance”. He said: “Of the first importance are the people, next comes the good of land and grains, and of the least importance is the ruler” (321-322). Thus, when the contradiction and tension between people, nation and emperor cannot be reconciled, in principle intellectuals should choose to side with the people for social justice, against authority. Through the lens of intellectual politics, Luo perceives He’s intentions and acts as problematic.

Firstly, according to the intellectual Law held by Luo, people are foremost; the individual can only sacrifice his/her personal interest for the public, but people should not be sacrificed for one’s personal gain. With this understanding, Luo clearly rejects He’s protection and fights for the public even it means putting his political career at risk. Underlying the Law of the “people being the first importance” is the pursuit of democracy. Like the May Fourth scholarly knight-errant (e.g. Lu Xun), Luo injects the democratic belief into the traditional intellectual value to resort to a democratic system as being necessary to protect people’s interests. In Land, Luo argues with He that social problems should be addressed through political reform instead of through a charismatic, sage politician. At the end of the serial, Luo instructs his secretary Zhou to study political reform, in order to turn the system into a one that really serves people rather than senior leaders.

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13 For a study on the intellectual tradition of shi, see Yu Y. 2004.
Secondly, for the intellectual hero, He’s political pragmatism is amoral. By sticking to political ethics and departing from political pragmatism, Luo demonstrates an intellectual perception of political morality. As Leo Oufan Lee 李欧梵 (1999, 230) states, an intellectual view of politics does not allow for any conspiracy at the level of power. On the contrary, it requires pure political motivation and operation, and thus inevitably leads to confrontation with those professional politicians who taunt this moralized view of politics as childish and naïve (for example, Luo is always criticised by He as immature and lacking political “wisdom”).

Inspired by a totally opposite view of politics, in Land, the Law of the Father is questioned and an alternative intellectual Law (“people being the first importance”) is highlighted. Through the show, the scholarly knight-errant Luo reaffirms the alternative Law against the enunciated self-interest of hypocritical bureaucrats. He therefore restores his status as subjects (the identity of intellectual) beyond the Law of the Father. After discussing Land in terms of the scholarly knight-errant, in the next section I continue examining the critical reconstruction of the clean official model in terms of Don Quixote qualities and the “tragic structure of feeling”.

4.2 The Don Quixote-like Scholarly Knight-Errant: Impotence and “Tragic Structure of Feeling”

Impotence
As noted in Chapter One, the main melody, charismatic hero has to possess self-sufficiency in order to defeat the corrupt and bring justice to the people so that harmony between the people, the clean official and the political order can be maintained. In this regard, main melody drama always offers hope to audiences. In contrast, Luo obviously shows his inability and helplessness in addressing realistic problems. In Land, in the counter-falsification of the “Xinglong experience” narrative discussed in Chapter Three, Luo chooses to evade direct confrontation with the
official wrongdoers under the extreme pressure from Governor Feng and other officials. At that moment, Luo displays his weakness and cowardice. Luo’s impotence and frustration is exhibited even more blatantly when trying to relieve the farmers’ tax burden. At his first attempt, Luo’s initiative to relieve the tax burden by downsizing the Xinglong township government fails due to the objections of the local cadres. As a result, Luo is compelled to shift his post. During the second attempt, Luo is unable to mediate the conflict between government and the farmers, who voluntarily organize to protect their interests. He has no choice but to hand in his resignation (a gesture of impotence). As discussed above, Luo’s weakness is also demonstrated in handling the investigation of the dam scandal. Even though Luo tries to search for the truth of the dam collapse, his attempts are thwarted by Secretary He again and again.

Luo is completely trapped by the corrupt bureaucratic system. His enemies are not degenerate individuals, but the whole gigantic, powerful political machine. In this sense, Luo is not charismatic heroes who always triumph over any difficulty, but a Don Quixote-like character who fights against a political “windmill” on his own and thus seems ridiculous and tragic. By comparing Luo to Don Quixote, I emphasize an internal paradox within the characters. On the one hand, Luo represents the figures of scholarly knight-errant, resolutely fighting against the Law of the Father for the public; on the other he is impotent and frustrated and fails to change the political reality. His insistence upon an intellectual ideal is incomprehensible from the perspective of others. As depicted in Land, Luo’s idealism even alienates him from his wife Wei who divorces him. Suffering the contradiction between his intellectual ideal and the cruel political reality under the Name of the Father, Luo is no longer manipulators of the scenario, but an unfortunate knight-errant who is embedded within a “tragic structure of feeling”.

Tragic Structure of Feeling
In opposition to the deglamorized, charismatic, clean officials’ optimism, Luo is tragic and pessimistic in essence. Despite the apparent cheerful narrative and happy ending,
Luo demonstrates the need for social transformation, on the one hand, and his incapacity to realize this ideal on the other. This sense of tragedy is ingrained in the social conflict between the subordinate intellectual (on behalf of the oppressed) and the ruling elites, and is closer to the Marxist notion of tragedy. Mike Wayne (2001) elaborates that, in the Marxist sense, the tragedy of the subordinate comes from the problem that revolts are historically premature; “they are a premature anticipation of the latter struggles that *will succeed* but which can only come at the expense of proceeding generations sacrificing their lives”. Thus, “[t]he tragedy lies in the discrepancy between the necessity to revolt, to reaffirm their identity and dignity, and the historical conditions which give the dominant classes an overwhelming advantage” (68).

In *Land*, the Don Quixote-like, scholarly knight-errant hero, Luo, has a tragic fate despite his final reward. After his efforts to investigate the dam scandal (an act of political suicide) are defeated by He’s power, Luo is not willing to submit. He persuades his father-in-law, Jiang Changlin, a famous hydraulic engineer, who was in charge of the quality control over the dam construction, to confess the truth of the scandal to police so that law enforcement can be involved in the case. Although Luo’s insistence finally brings legal involvement, the resulting price is huge and comes at the expense of Jiang’s suicide and his own marriage breakup. At that moment, Luo is utterly isolated from his official colleagues and his family. Luo’s second wife tearfully questions him after Jiang’s suicide, “Is that what you want? Is that what you want?” Luo is speechless. Luo’s sadness is not only mental (suffering from Jiang’s death and his wife’s departure), but also spiritual. His intellectual ideals cannot be understood and accepted by his friends, associates or even his wife.

Luo’s sadness and isolation from his surroundings is epitomized in the scene of Jiang’s funeral. Although Luo is regarded as the “murderer” of Jiang and unwelcome at the funeral, he still attends the service and gives a speech. Apparently he is talking to the attendees who are his wife, relatives, and his subordinates. Eventually this is a
conversation between two intellectuals, the living intellectual who is committing political suicide speaking to the intellectual who committed physical suicide.

Papa, some people say that you died at my hand. If I hadn’t persuaded you to Xiakou, you wouldn’t make trouble. If I had not persuaded you to go to the police for confession, you wouldn’t have committed suicide. I couldn’t go to sleep during the whole night and thought of your death over and over again. I asked myself in my heart: what mistakes did I on earth make to you? I was sad for today’s tragedy, I felt guilty as well …. Papa, I am terribly sorry for you …. But I still want to say that you died by your own hand, from your weakness, from your cowardice …

It is clear, in the above speech, that “I” (Luo) feels guilty for the self-destruction of Papa as a consequence of the former’s uncompromising struggle. The intellectual ideal (fighting spirit) actually leads to another intellectual’s death. There is indeed a conflict between the ideal and the unpleasant reality. On the other hand, “I” blames the suicide of the latter as weakness and cowardice and thus implies the superiority of a fighting spirit promoted by the former. It is a self-confession which combines a sense of being guilty with a sense of self-reaffirmation, a deep sorrow with deep dissatisfaction. In this sense, the tragic feeling of the scholarly knight-errant Luo is always linked to a deep solidarity. As Lu Xun (2005b), commenting on Chinese intellectuals, puts it, “they are never satisfied with society. What they feel is always the suffering, what they see is always the shortcoming. They prepare to sacrifice for the future. Society is colourful because of having them; nevertheless their mentality and body are always agonized” (227, my translation). Like the madman created by Lu Xun, the Don Quixote-like, scholarly knight-errant is jailed in a black cell through which others regard him as a mad, crazy “other”.¹⁴ He is tragic because the historical condition is premature and does not allow his desire for the necessary social change to

take place.

It is worth noting that the trope of the suffering and powerless intellectual is enhanced by the intellectual character Jiang, whose physical suicide similarly contributes to the construction of a latent and more pessimistic layer of the “tragic structure of feeling”. Jiang’s suicide is ultimately caused by his inability to extricate himself from the trap of political power. The sequence of issuing the construction code for the dam illustrates such an unequal fight. When the dam is completed, Jiang refuses to issue the code and insists on another thorough inspection. The manager of the Xinglong Corporation attempts to bribe Jiang and tells him that he is offending other inspectors since everybody except him has already accepted the money and signed the inspection report. Jiang wants to stick to his duty, but the date set for the ceremony to celebrate the completion of dam is coming, and another inspection will disrupt the timing of this ceremony. Mayor Ma thus persuades Jiang to sign the inspection report in order to ensure the ceremony takes place on time. Jiang, as an upright and responsible intellectual, can confidently fight with the new capitalist (e.g. rejecting their bribery and compromise with the construction quality) but cannot confront political power and win. Jiang finally signs the report under Mayor Ma’s pressure and painfully drinks himself into a state of stupor. The political power in fact forced Jiang to derelict his duty and become a criminal. In this regard, Jiang’s death is a protest against the Party’s infanticidal culture in which the symbolic Father destroys his disobedient “sons” in order to maintain the established political order. During the history of the People’s Republic of China, the Party engaged in non-stop persecution against intellectual dissidents. Some examples include: the Anti-rightist Campaign in 1957 in which over 500,000 intellectuals were persecuted, the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, the Eliminating Bourgeois Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983 and the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. Ma’s suicide provides a footnote for the Party’s infanticidal culture. This is echoed in the 1981 banned film Kulian 苦
In sum, the intellectual figures in *Land* are not constructed as heroic rescuers of nation or society, but are fragmented, suffering “martyrs” and victims, chased and hunted by political power. By displaying the intellectual protagonists’ agony, tragic condition and helplessness, *Land* seems to put a question mark on the heroic image of intellectuals, questioning their capacity to initiate social transformation. Through self-examination of the intellectual role and efficacy, *Land* explicitly elevates people as a determinant force of social change, and this is the issue to which I will turn next.

### 4.3 Popular Subject and Democracy

As noted in Chapter One, the “masses” (for example, the laid-off workers in *Secretary*) in main melody drama are characterized by fatalism and passivity. Together they share the difficulties they have with the government, and patiently wait to be rescued by clean Party officials. Within the framework of Father Worship, the playwright Wei Minglun 魏明伦 argues that the clean official model promotes a *qingguan yishi* 清官意识, which regards suicide as a means of achieving virtue or demonstrating “the fearless spirit of ‘resisting’ tyranny” (296). In this sense, suicide in Chinese culture can be acted as social resistance against injustice.

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15 The film *Unrequited Love* was directed by Peng Ning 彭宁 and scripted by Bai Hua 白桦. The Party furiously accused it of expressing hostility against communism and socialism. For discussions on the film, see Clark 1987, 167-172; Berry 2004, 135-138.

16 In their study of suicide in Chinese society, Sing Lee and Arthur Kleinman (2003) notes that there is an intellectual tradition in China, which regards suicide as a means of achieving virtue or demonstrating “the fearless spirit of ‘resisting’ tyranny” (296). In this sense, suicide in Chinese culture can be acted as social resistance against injustice.
官意识 (clean official complex). This complex is embedded within the ingrained master-slave relationship of Chinese social and cultural psychology, and encourages the “masses” to base their hope for justice on individual upright officials instead of the people themselves and the appropriate political system. It therefore obstructs Chinese modernization and the movement towards democracy and rule by law (Zhou Q. 2003).

In contrast with the clean official complex of the “masses” worshiping the Father in main melody dramas, the people in Land are subjects of history who dwell beyond the oppressive walls of the symbolic Father. They not only fully realize their identity as the oppressed, but more importantly they show their power and desire for social justice. With a definite class consciousness, the populace in the two dramas are no longer the weak who require the Party heroes to redeem them but instead they become an active and dynamic force that seeks to change the unjust social structure and redress their own misfortune. By explicit portrayal of the farmers’ protests and legal action against the government, the drama Land also reconstructs an active image of the people acting in a more direct and militant manner. We can argue that this expresses a new relationship between intellectuals and society, and ultimately elevates the “masses” above intellectuals as the key force of change in China. In contrast with the impotent intellectual heroes who are trapped and suppressed by the rigid political system, Land places the hope of social transformation on the shoulders of the populace through democratization. This is evident in the description of the farmers and their self-organization: the Farmers’ Economic Association (FEA) of Poping village. The FEA is a farmer organization beyond government control. Its leadership is democratically elected by all members to serve the farmers’ benefits rather than the government’s. The FEA’s political and economic functions are evidenced in the narrative by the struggle against excessive taxation, led by this rural organization. Soon after the FEA is set up, it takes legal action to sue the Xinglong government for unlawfully over-taxing the farmers. The farmers’ rebellion stirs up a political storm since this is the first time that the people have legally challenged the communist
government in the history of the province. Under huge pressure from provincial leaders, Luo is compelled to negotiate twice with the FEA but fails to convince the farmers to back down.

In the first negotiation, director Chen (of the FEA) says to Luo and another official, Kong: “I can’t decide what to do by myself. I know from the bottom of my heart that you and Secretary Luo are good guys. I, Chen Quan, will certainly follow what you want because of my personal respect for you, but the FEA belongs to all the members, so the big decision should be made democratically”.

Later, Luo is told that the majority of the members are determined to continue their appeal unless the government submits to their request to abolish all illicit taxes and fees. Luo understands the reasonableness of the farmers’ action and proposes to implement political reform in Xinglong Township again to Secretary He. This reform would reduce the number of cadres and permanently tackle the issue of over-taxation. However, his initiative to restructure the government faces objection from all levels of authority (the township, the county, the city and the province). Secretary He and the provincial leadership decline Luo’s suggestion and command him to persuade the FEA to give up its challenge.

Luo and Kong go to Poping village to negotiate with the FEA for a second time. During the negotiation, Luo begs Chen to give him one more year to resolve the over-taxation problem.

Luo: “… Could you tolerate one more year? If the government still over-charges you next year, you can come to charge me! Just one year, ok?”

Chen (his eyes with tears): “Secretary Luo, it isn’t up to me … No!”

Kong, who has accompanied Luo, angrily says: “Old Chen, are you acting against your conscience? Who supported you to establish the association? Who paid back your money owed by the township government? It was
Secretary Luo! If you continuously insist on it, Secretary Luo will step down because of you. What advantage can you gain if such good cadres like Secretary Luo lose their post?”

Chen: “…”

Luo begs once again: “Please give me a little bit more time. Please!”

Chen: “…”

The lawyer who works for the FEA comes in and hands a piece of paper to Chen, “The appeal document is ready…”

Chen silently passes the document to Luo: “…

Luo helplessly: “…

From these two scenes, one can see that the conflict of interest between the farmers and officials is irreconcilable. The Party’s claim that it represents the interests of the majority of people is challenged. The real representative of the farmers is the FEA rather than the Party. Because of Luo’s contradictory, split identity (as both an intellectual and cadre), he is placed in an embarrassing situation between the farmers and the government. Luo really identifies with the farmers, but as an official, he has to carry out the orders from the top to be against the farmers as well his own will. As a result, Luo is rejected by and dissatisfies both sides for his inability to bring them together to make a deal. Despite the fact that Luo is morally and emotionally “a good guy” and is recognized as such by the farmers, the farmers still politically and economically reject his proposition and stick to their rights. In the end, the farmers’ fight and insistence is rewarded. The authorities unwillingly accept the reasonable demand to reduce their taxes and fees in exchange for the withdrawal of the legal suit against the Xinglong government. To realize this agreement, the government is forced to implement political reform in Xinglong Township, which Luo really wanted but failed to do.

The farmers’ resolution to fight for their own interests against governmental wrongdoings differentiates them from the image of “sharing difficulty” embodied in
main melody dramas. They are not weak, but instead are self-conscious fighters who seek to transform inequality and the injustice imposed by the unbalanced power distribution through active political struggle and involvement. They are the force that liberates itself from repression. With this new and refreshed image, in *Land*, the people thus restore their status as the creator of history, as the master of their own destiny, instead of the slaves of the Name of the Father.

### 4.4 Conclusion

*Land* critically transforms the main melody deglamorized, charismatic, clean official into a Don Quixote-like, scholarly knight-errant. Through the transformation, as those African-American slave songs, which I mentioned in the Introduction, did, the drama “use[s] the tools of the master, carefully reshaped, to dismantle the master’s own house” (Duncombe 2002, 193). By this dismantling, the intellectual protagonist gains intellectual independence and garners a fighting spirit to challenge the Father worship set by the main melody paradigm. The scholarly knight-errant has understood the full meanings of critical realism by taking an intellectual stance as the starting point for his thought and actions. Articulating intellectual ideals and enthusiasms, the scholarly knight-errant does not function as a vehicle of the Name of the Father, but is an intellectual “other” who follows the intellectual Law to fight against the privileged class on behalf of the public. The harmony between people, officials and the Party in the main melody, clean official imaginary is thus broken down. The contradiction and conflict between the three parties is highlighted. People are no longer portrayed as masochistic “masses” but masters of their own destiny, whose aggressive political participation is regarded as the fundamental means for social and political transformation. In this regard, the scholarly knight-errant thus works as a centrifugal force that departs from the symbolic Father and approaches towards the people. As a result, the people become the object of desire, while the symbolic Father, the Party, is questioned. The identification with the scholarly knight-errant is therefore an identification with transgression.
Chapter Five  Counter-Myth Making

This chapter explores how *Land* and *Cadres* are locations for the production of counter-myths. As critical realist dramas (one example of *mainstreaming resistance*), *Land* and *Cadres* ultimately aim at articulating intellectual oppositional discourses. “Both myth and counter-myth”, Tulloch (1990) writes, “are circulated very visibly in popular culture” (7). In other words, there are a number of competing ways for thinking about our world. As if being presented as natural and transparently “true”, some of these ways become the dominant myth to justify the ruling class’s interest. The anticorruption myth and reform myth promoted by main melody drama are dominant myths that maintain the Party’s rule and validate its economic agenda. Meanwhile, other ways of thinking emerge as alternative or counter-myths to serve the interests of the oppressed. I argue that *Land* and *Cadres* subvert the dominant anticorruption myth and reform myth and instead produce counter-myths as a means of resisting tactic against the legitimacy of official discourses.

5.1 National Cadres: Disintegrating the Party’s Identity and Challenging the Anticorruption Myth

As discussed in Chapter One, the anticorruption myth is a particular official myth developed by the Party in the mid 1990s to address popular resentment of official corruption. It stresses that the corrupt are a small number and the large majority of cadres are clean and upright, suggesting that the problem of official corruption is accidental, rather than systemic, and can be corrected through the Party’s anticorruption policies. By excluding the corrupt few from the Party, the anticorruption myth maintains the Party’s positive, unified identity so that, as the former president of the CCP Jiang Zemin proclaims in his theory of the “three represents”, the Party represents “the most advanced mode of productive forces, the
most advanced culture, and the interests of the majority of the people” (cited from Zheng Y. 2006, 231). The Party’s new identity as the “three represents” promoted through the anticorruption myth grants the Party a supreme status whereby the Party transcends social differences and contradictions, as well as representing the interests of all social strata. This self-defined oneness of the Party with people legitimates its power.

Bai Ruoyun (2007) has demonstrated that TV drama has become a crucial location through which the Party propagates its anticorruption campaign. Since the mid 1990s, a subgenre of main melody drama, anticorruption TV drama, was developed to function as a vehicle for promoting the anticorruption myth.¹ As noted in Chapter Two, for instance, the main melody drama Secretary delivers an anticorruption discourse: by eliminating the corrupt Provincial Vice-Secretary Song, his corrupt accomplices in Dashanzi Corporation, and the evil businessman Zhang, social justice in the name of public interest is attained by the Party’s clean officials Gong and Ma. At the very end of the show, after the corrupt are punished and the social crisis in Dashanzi is addressed, hundreds of workers who were previously laid off resume their jobs. They flood into the hospital, where Party hero Ma is being treated after he lost consciousness during negotiations to restructure Dashanzi (a good deed for the public). The workers come to request that Ma stays in Dashanzi instead of being shifted to another higher post. After Ma declares that he will stay, the workers cheer and applaud. The previously unemployed clearly regard Ma, the symbol of the Party, as their saviour and the representative of their interests. Furthermore, the three generations of provincial secretaries represent a linear progression of the

¹ TV drama is not the only location to promote the anticorruption myth. Main melody anticorruption fiction (e.g. Lu Tianming’s Heaven Above) and film (e.g. Shengsi jueze 生死抉择 (Fatal Decision, 2000)) also flourished in the market during the 1990s and early 2000s. Because these anticorruption works depicted popular sentiment (against corruption), they attracted hundreds of millions of viewers/readers. For studies on some anticorruption novels and films, see Kinkley 2007; Liu F. 2005.
anticorruption myth. If the retired secretary Pan symbolizes the Party’s past, the current secretary Gong represents the Party’s present, and Ma as a candidate for the future secretariat post symbolizes the Party’s future. The support of the workers towards Ma therefore symbolically perpetuates the legitimacy of the Party’s power.

Despite main melody drama’s promotion of the dominant anticorruption myth, as the vice-minister of SARFT, Hu Zhanfan, points out, some TV drama anticorruption discourses “end up only displaying corruption, hurting the image of the ruling party, misleading the audience away from a correct and comprehensive understanding of the anticorruption situation and exerting [a] fairly negative impact” (cited from Bai R. 2007, 70). Cadres is one drama that articulates a counter-anticorruption discourse.

In Cadres, the unified identity of the Party has been split into three groups, making the Party ambiguous and questionable. In the first group, the majority of cadres are depicted, explicitly or implicitly, as being associated with the privileged bureaucrats who are represented by the corrupt (e.g. Liu and Wang), the township cadres who rely on overtaxing the farmers to survive, and the representatives of the Party Congress who vote against Xia for their own benefit. These bureaucrats have formed a self-interested privileged class against the common people. The official corruption is thus depicted as being large scale. However, it is the very few incorruptible cadres represented by the deputy Major, Xia, who align themselves with the common people, who constitute the second group. As Secretary Chen, the symbol of the Party, acknowledges in reality, a morally noble cadre like Xia is rare. The majority of cadres including himself cannot compete with Xia in terms of high moral standards. Finally, the third group comprises the senior leadership. This group is shown as hesitant and ambivalent in the struggle between good and evil. The senior leaders are portrayed as being aware of the political conspiracy of the self-interested bureaucrats against the hero Xia. However, instead of dealing with the corrupt group immediately, the leaders want to shift Xia’s position from Dengjiang to another city, avoiding Xia’s political failure in the subsequent inter-Party election. Xia disappoints the leaders’ decision and
refuses to make a compromise. He questions the senior leaders:

I am willing to stay in Dengjiang even at the risk of losing the election in the congress of the Party representatives …. For me, it is irresponsible to leave Dengjiang at this moment. It is an escape …. What on earth do we fear? What sort of persons on earth controls our power? Don’t we really practice power not for officials but for people?

Xia’s declaration sharply points out the problematic of the leadership in defeating the corrupt class. One cannot but help asking: why cannot good cadres like Xia, who are really concerned about the people’s interests, be promoted? Why does the corrupt Liu stay as the number one leader in Dengjiang city for over ten years and how can he be appointed to take charge of the provincial Hi-tech Industrial Zone (an important post) after he is retired? The drama provides two reasons: one is that Liu’s networks extend even to the senior leadership (e.g. Mayor Hua and some provincial leaders implied in this show); the other is that numerous letters organized by the privileged class against Xia are submitted once Xia is considered for promotion. There seems to be an invisible power connection between the corrupt and the senior leadership that favors the corrupt and discourages the good.

Although the senior authorities stand with Xia at the end of the serial, their hesitation and complex connection with the privileged group during almost the whole drama casts suspicion upon their justness. In the hospital, facing an unconscious Xia, the senior Party Secretary Wei blames himself and the bureaucracy, and is unaware of Dengjiang’s dangerous political situation. However, Wei’s self-blame is depicted more as a feeble excuse than a meaningful gesture. In the drama, Xia urges the senior leaders many times to deal with the corrupt bureaucrats immediately, but the leadership fails to act. Secretary Chen even tries to compromise with the corrupt bureaucrats (by stopping Xia’s political reform in township governments and agreeing to build cadres’ blocks on the site of Red Flag Street) in exchange for their support.
Hence, the hesitation and ambiguity of the Party leadership ultimately downplays its anticorruption resolution.

By splitting the identity of the Party into (1) the corrupt many, (2) the few honest and (3) the ambivalent superiors, *Cadres* challenges the dominant anticorruption myth by raising crucial questions: Which of the Party’s three groups represents its real identity? Can the Party really represent the people’s interests, since the majority of Party members align with the bureaucratic privileged class, the good ones are just a few and the fairness of the seniors is uncertain? The drama depicts corruption as a systemic problem in which the corrupt class is nurtured while the upright cadres (scholarly knight-errant) suffer. Within such an arbitrary system, as Xia says to Liu Jinfang, his superior leader, if one tries to restrict the cadres’ benefits for the public good, he/she will be relentlessly punished by the corrupt class. Xia’s statement finds its proof when he is voted out from the election of the municipal party congress. The top-down power structure and inter-party election are no guarantee that justice will be served and the people’s interests will be defended. As Chen Xiaoming (2004) notes in commenting on the novel *Cadres*, “political actions are determined from cadres to cadres, from leader to leader and nobody asks the people’s opinion …. The whole process has nothing to do with people, with the people’s interests. It is merely a closed power game within cadres” (55, my translation). If rampant official corruption originates from the problematic political system as the drama *Cadres* points out, one may ask: how can we deal with the system?

As noted in Chapter Three, in the original novel *Cadres*, Zhang Ping transcends the paradigm of main melody populism by setting up a shocking and unusual ending in which several hundred thousand people surround the hotel where the Party’s representative congress is held. The massive public protest forces the senior

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2 In his study on Zhang Ping’s novels, Chen Xiaoming (2004) uses *xin renminxing* 新人民性 (new affinity to the people) to differentiate the representation of the populace in Zhang’s works from the
leadership to interfere and finally restore Xia’s political life. In this portrayal, the people participate in the political struggle and support those cadres who can better protect their interests. For censorship reasons, the adapted TV drama translates this radical “riot” of the people into images of crowds in front of the hospital where Xia is being treated. Although the people’s active political involvement is largely reduced, their protest and aspiration for social justice is still suggested in the scene. To compensate for the loss, the TV drama depicts another violent mass protest. Hundreds of the Red Flag Street residents block the road to stop the huge bulldozer and trucks entering the construction site. Although the government had issued permission to construct a cadres’ apartment block, the residents resolutely defend their interests (for their new homes) with their bodies. This is a struggle of people against the political machine (symbolized by the huge bulldozer) that is attempting to destroy people’s hopes and life. Like Land, Cadres provokes audiences’ political consciousness of defending their rights through active political participation, rather than relying on the Party’s anticorruption campaign.

5.2 Fruitful Land: Critical Allegory and Subversion of the Reform Myth

Besides countering the anticorruption myth, the dominant reform myth is also critiqued. I analyze in particular how this critique takes place in Land by means of a critical allegory that encodes oppositional meanings within the narrative. What Land allegorically expresses is countering the Party’s reform myth that, as Zhu Xueqin 朱学勤 (1997) argues, “[t]o talk about reform while ignoring the political content of Chinese economic structures is to weave a set of emperor’s new clothes” (9; trans. by Perry Link, in Liu B. 2006, 295).

official revolutionary populism. Contrasting with the old revolutionary populism which ideologically regards the masses as the heroes of revolution and representative of the Party, Chen argues that the peoples in Zhang’s novels are described as the ripped-off who energetically aspire for social transfiguration.
In his exploration of Chinese contemporary film, Silbergeld (1999) convincingly proves that allegory is a common artistic mode deployed by Chinese artists “to code socio-political stances”, “of expressing laudatory or dissident attitudes” (1999, 109). Silbergeld’s account of allegory in Chinese art tradition suggests two types of allegories: critical allegory and eulogistic allegory. The former is exemplified by Bada Shanren’s 八大山人 painting and Chen Kaige’s 陈凯歌 film Yellow Earth, which both criticize politics and reality in an allusive way. Liu Zaifu’s account of some official poems of the Ming dynasty, which eulogize the status quo through allegory and metaphor, exemplifies the latter. Eulogistic allegory functions as a myth-making process that seamlessly sutures the gulf between reality and the dominant discourse and transforms the official discourse into “commonsense”.

Main melody drama also deploys eulogistic allegory. An example is found in the flood scene in Secretary. At the critical moment when Dashanzi city is facing a risk of serious flooding, the hero Ma Yang, who is suffering from a brain injury, asks all the communist officials to go with him to the dangerous river bank to fight against the flood. The emphasis on the communists’ morality, the courage that they display in

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3 In the painting Moon and Melon (1689), Bada Shanren, a member of the Ming royal family, uses melon and mooncake, two cultural references associated with allegiance and rebels, to articulate his loyalty to the fallen Ming regime and rebellion against the Qing court. In Yellow Earth, the communist soldier Gu Qing does not keep his promise to take the girl Cuiqiao away from her unfortunate fate. In Silbergeld’s reading, Gu’s failure allegorizes the Party’s failure to keep its promise to the people; see Silbergeld 1999, 32-37, 39.

4 For example, in the poem Mingde zhishi dijiu 明德之诗第九 (No. 9 poem to the emperor Mingde), the official poet Yang Shiqi 杨士奇 allegorically represents Mingde emperor as the beautiful Sun in the central sky (Liu 1994, 26). For a study on the Ming official poems, see “Zhongguo dangdai shiwen zhong de ‘xin taigeti 中国当代诗文中的‘新台阁体’” (“The new-taige style” in contemporary Chinese poems), in Liu Z. 1994, 25-27.
making efforts to save the city and its people from this natural calamity, develops a positive allegory in support of the Party. Allegorically, as Liu Fusheng (2005) explains, overcoming a flood in main melody works symbolizes that “a crisis has been resolved and that this issue will not occur again and, as a result, [China] will successfully stride into the new century” (101, my translation). Therefore, the flood is used to give legitimacy to the Party as the saviour of China.

Conversely, Land uses critical allegory to produce a counter-myth and expose the hidden social structures and controlling powers of China’s ongoing modernization. In Wayne’s (2001) view, the critical allegory “‘shrinks’ a larger social totality, a larger historical narrative, into a smaller story” (130). In other words, the smaller story is transformed into another more significant one. In Land, the “smaller story” of the Xiakou dam construction is such a critical allegory, in which “the larger social totality” (that is the ongoing Chinese reform and modernization) is “shrunk”. In Chapter Four, I examined the dam event in relation to the scholarly knight-errant Luo’s “patricidal complex”. I contend that this narrative event is a crucial rhetorical device that carries multilayered oppositional meanings and functions. Hence, it deserves to be explored further.

A dam, as a visual sign, is usually taken to be a symbol of modernization. For example, John Boorman’s film The Emerald Forest depicts an American engineer, Markham, working on a dam project in Brazil, while his son is kidnapped by local Indians. Markham therefore starts a search for his kidnapped son in the jungle that lasts over a decade. Wayne points out, “The jungle and Tommy’s [his son] world is threatened by the encroaching modernization symbolized by the dam and so Markham must reassess his beliefs and loyalties to ‘progress’” (Wayne 2001, 52). A similar use of a dam as a symbol of modernization can also be found in Sanxia Haoren 三峡好人 (Still Life) directed by Jia Zhangke. The ambitious Three Gorges Dam Project contrasts sharply with the ruins of the city which is destroyed to make way for the construction of the dam and will eventually be submerged under water and disappear.
forever. Allegorically, this film suggests that Chinese modernization is built upon the destruction of ordinary people’s lives. In the same vein, the symbolic dam in Land follows the trend of Boorman and Jia’s reassessment of modernization. If we read the dam in Land as a symbol of Chinese reform and modernization which has been going on at breakneck speed since the 1980s, the poor construction of the dam implies that Chinese modernization has actually gone terribly wrong and, instead of economic progress, has resulted in many disasters.

The Xiakou dam construction, which is worth 200 million RMB, is part of the Xiakou reservoir project built to tackle the drought problems in the area. In the beginning of the serial, Secretary He exhorts Luo to pay particular attention to the project and to ensure a high quality construction. Therefore, Luo repeatedly requests the famous retired hydraulic expert Jiang, who later becomes his father-in-law, to be in charge of this construction. Furthermore he appoints the upright, stubborn cadre Kong Pingheng 孔平衡 as director of the Dam Tender Office, ignoring strong opposition coming from within the Xiakou government. Luo makes an all-out effort to avoid corruption in the tender and to ensure that the subsequent construction of the dam is completed to the highest standards.

Unfortunately, Luo’s political failure forces him to leave Xiakou, so his hard work makes no difference in the end. With the help of bribery, the nearly bankrupt and incompetent Xinglong Corporation wins the bid for the dam project under the false name of a prestigious construction company. Even worse, after Mayor Ma is pressured to set the seemingly impossible target of a 10% annual increase in Xiakou’s GDP, he urges an earlier completion of the dam in order to make the reservoir contribute more to the city’s economic growth. Although Jiang, the chief quality supervisor of the project, strongly objects to the decision, which he believes will compromise the quality of the dam construction, Ma has the final say due to his political authority. To retrieve the loss of paying huge amounts of overtime salaries as a consequence of speeding up the construction, the greedy management of Xinglong
Corporation decides to stealthily use a cheaper and lower standard cement than they had originally planned for the construction, which courts disaster. Soon after its completion, the dam cracks and is destroyed to cause a flood.

This disastrous consequence produces a double-irony: firstly this recently constructed reservoir was originally built to be filled up with storm water which could, in turn, function as irrigation, but conversely the storm triggers its destructive nature; secondly, the reservoir is willingly built to benefit and protect the farmers from flood, however it causes a flood instead. The double-irony allegorically reveals the failures of the Party’s reform agenda (economic reform under the political authoritarianism): its promise of a prosperous future is built on a weak foundation and will come to a disastrous end.

This metaphorical disaster is shockingly exhibited through the shots in which the poorly constructed dam is exploded and the subsequent flood destroys farmers’ houses and lands. After these shots, the director superimposes close-ups of He, Ma, Jiang and Feng’s assistant Li Ya 李雅 over the top of the rapid current of the flood. Firstly, a superimposed close-up shows them together and then there are four close-ups for each single character. These superimposed close-ups are unusual and unrealistic diegetic techniques. They interrupt the realistic narrative and visually link the four characters to the flood. By building allegory upon allegory (the interrelation of the dam story, superimposing shots and flood), this visual linkage directly connects these four people to the dam collapse and invites viewers to explore beyond the surface of the tragic event to grasp the destructive essence in depth. Who is responsible for this man-made catastrophe?

Jiang, as a famous hydraulic expert and the quality control supervisor of the dam project, is guilty of a serious dereliction of duty. In this way, intellectuals’ knowledge and skills fail to secure Chinese modernization on the right track. The rigid, totalitarian political system wastes their productivity and forces them (e.g. Jiang) to
submit, or to be shifted from their post (e.g. Luo). Intellectual capacity and moral purity cannot adequately fight against political machinations. As discussed in Chapter Four, under the extreme political pressure, Jiang is forced to sign the inspection report. The disaster of the dam thus inevitably occurs. It is a quite pessimistic allegory about how intellectuals have become disillusioned with the so-called Chinese modernization and perceived it as being deeply corrupted by the alliance between totalitarian power (represented by Mayor Ma) and the greedy capitalists (represented by the management of Xinglong Corporation). This alliance has led to a monstrous form of modernization in which political power and capital cooperate with each other to take advantage of the common people.

The superimposed shots of Li and Ma metaphorically blame corrupt political power as the source of monstrous modernization. Here, Li, as the trusted subordinate of Governor Feng, stands for Feng5 who compels Ma to set an unrealistic goal for economic growth and pressures the latter to risk construction quality for an earlier completion.6 Feng therefore cannot be absolved from his responsibility for the dam collapse. Mayor Ma (who, through the power of his position, forcibly interferes with both the normal process of the tender and the construction of the dam time and time again to meet political needs) is directly responsible for this disaster. Thus, the visual technique—that of superimposing images—points the finger at the authoritarian political system as the real cause of the catastrophe.

The political accusation is allegorically epitomized in the scene where Mayor Ma deliberately “murders” seven people. When Ma learns that some cadres and workers are busy removing the machines from a farmers’ collective juice factory, he promises

5 In the dam collapse narrative, Feng stays in the provincial capital to take charge of other provincial departments and cities to deal with the coming flood. But he assigns his trusted subordinate Li to Xiakou city as his ears and eyes to monitor Secretary He and other officials’ actions.

6 See Chapter Three.
to inform them of when to leave before the dam is blasted. However, after Ma knows that one of the people has evidence of his wife’s corruption, he changes his mind. Ma deliberately rings them with his cell phone in a blind signal area, and repeatedly shouts, “Can you hear me? Can you hear me?” Of course, they cannot. Because of Ma’s purposeful failure to inform the people, seven of them die in the flood. The cell phone as new technology symbolizes modernity and human progress. However, the modernity based on science and technology is not omnipotent. It also has a “blind area”. Whether modernity can benefit a society depends on who implements it and for what purpose. If technology and modernity are controlled and carried out by the corrupt political power, “progress” will be dysfunctional and against the people’s best interests.

Finally, the superimposed shots of He call the highest Party leader of the serial into question. He, as the representative of the Party, does his utmost to obstruct the investigation of the dam scandal (thus to conceal the truth from the public) for the sake of so-called greater “political interests” (Luo’s political promotion). According to his pragmatic, political logic, He conceals the truth of the dam scandal by falsifying the flood as a freak natural catastrophe. Moreover, he sets up the seven deaths as heroic models, an example of the political manipulation routinely used by the Party to divert people’s attention away from a scandal to the heroic deeds of a few, even though He knows that one of them is a corrupt element. Through this political manipulation, the seven victims of the man-made flood are transformed into the

7 In the interview, the writer Li said that the description of Secretary He’s dealing with the dam scandal was inspired by an actual historical event, the Bohai 2 烏海二号 tragedy. This description mirrored the way this event was handled by the Ministry of Petroleum. Bohai 2 was an oil rig located in the Chinese Bohai sea. Due to the misconducts of the leadership to deal with a storm, it was overturned in 1979 and 72 workers died. However, the Ministry falsified the event as a natural disaster and bestowed the highest honour on the martyrs who died in order to conceal the truth of this tragedy from the public (11 and 12 May, 2010).
heroes who defended the village against a natural disaster. The man-made disaster is therefore naturalized and neutralized in favor of the Party’s political agenda.

By associating the four characters (Jiang, Ma, Li, and He) with the dam collapse and flood, the superimposed shots and the dam narrative allegorically place the incident within the Chinese political context. Not only are Major Ma, Governor Feng (represented by Li) and Secretary He directly responsible for disastrous modernization, they are exposed as trying to hide the truth and prevent the public from ever knowing what really took place. Thus, these superimposed shots act like a visual question mark that provokes the viewer to reflect upon the larger symbolic meanings embedded in the small story of the dam.

The horrifying consequence of this monstrous modernization is effectively displayed in the flooding sequence. The crew spent 1.2 million RMB on computer special effects to authentically present the impact of the flood on the people’s properties and lives. In contrast to the flood in Secretary, which illustrates the Party cadres’ sacrifice and strength, the flood in Land is accusatory and is portrayed as a man-made catastrophe that could have been avoided. Over the course of almost two episodes, the drama Land thoroughly describes the needless tragedy and the process of the evacuation in which the local people, elderly, children, men and women, are hurriedly removed from their homes with few belongings. The two episodes take place during the night and under a storm, accompanied by sorrowful music. The flood that results from the explosion of the dam wipes away people’s houses, furniture, as well as their crops. More tragically, seven cadres and farmers drown in the flood waters. The Chinese modernization that benefited people in the 1980s has thus become a man-made disaster for many of the citizens of China today.

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8 Personal interview with the producer Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
5.3 Conclusion

*Land* and *Cadres* embody an intellectual stance that aims to “[bring] ‘light’ to the dark areas of the covered up or distorted representations in the ruling ideology” (Zhang Y. 1993, 232). In so doing, the two dramas criticize the official reform and anticorruption myths. By using the dam as a metaphor and allegorizing the flood as man-made, *Land* condemns Chinese ongoing modernization as a catastrophe rather than praising it as the glorious path towards a better future, as the dominant myth claims. In a similar counter-myth manner, *Cadres* splits the unified identity of the Party and questions the Party’s anticorruption promise. The Party and the authoritarian political system are depicted as the source of the corruption. *Land* and *Cadres* thus tell the audience that the Party’s new clothes (the official myths) are false, and the Party is eventually revealed as naked. By this counter-myth making, *Land* and *Cadres* attempt to arouse the audience’s political consciousness so that they can re-examine the Party’s reform and anticorruption discourses. The questions, however, are: how do the two dramas succeed in arousing audiences? How do they construct “oppositional meanings”, which can be effectively recognized by audiences? This is the issue I will investigate in the next chapter.
Chapter Six  Critical Realism and Melodrama

In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I examined *Land* and *Cadres*’ multilayered critique of main melody drama in terms of investigative narrative, the scholarly knight-errant character type, and counter myth making. In this chapter, I turn to investigate the two dramas’ critical engagement with melodrama. I have contended that, as critical realist dramas, *Land* and *Cadres* not only critically reconstruct main melody drama but also absorb the form and elements of popular drama for intellectual articulation. In doing so, the authors of the two dramas expect to deliver their criticism more thoroughly. As the writer Li Yanxiong of *Land* stated, “The melodramatic mode and expression is lucid and easy to understand. Thus it can maximally spread intellectual voices”.¹ This critical use of melodrama is what I want to explore in this chapter.

Recent studies of Chinese cinematic melodrama and literary realism have demonstrated a close relationship between the melodramatic mode and realism. For example, by regarding the melodramatic mode as a neutral rhetoric device, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006) have demonstrated that the melodramatic mode often mixes with realistic modes (e.g. classic realism and socialist realism) in Chinese cinematic representation.² In his study of post-Mao literary critical realism, Kinkley (2007) also points out the accommodation of critical realism and melodrama in contemporary Chinese literature. Although these studies show various ways by which Chinese melodrama integrates realism, they do not tackle the issue of how the melodramatic mode works with critical realism (in a Lukácsian sense) to enhance rather than compromise intellectual criticism. In order to explore the mechanism of the synthetic critical realist melodramatic mode in *Land* and *Cadres*, I draw on Peter Brooks’ research on melodrama, Lukács’s study on critical realism and John

¹ Personal interview (11 and 12 May, 2010).
² I will discuss Berry and Farquhar’s study further in Chapter Seven.
Caughie’s study on British TV drama realism. I will first examine the melodramatic features of *Land* and *Cadres*. Based on the above theoretical frameworks, I will then explore *Land* and *Cadres*’ reconstruction of melodrama with critical realism in terms of recognition and defamiliarization.

### 6.1 *Land, Cadres* and Melodramatic Mode

Melodrama, according to Brooks (1976), “include[s]: the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety” (11-12). Following Brooks’ definition, Juliet John (2001, 28) also characterizes melodrama as: the characters tend to be polarized as morally good or bad, and the narrative structure tends to be formulaic, and plots usually consist of a battle between good and evil in a clear process in which virtue is always rewarded while evil is defeated. The main effect of melodrama is to stir up audiences through externalizing emotion.

On the surface, *Land* and *Cadres* seem to share many of the above characteristics of melodrama. In the two shows, the characters are morally polarized to be either overt villains (Zhong Qiming and Hu Zhidong in *Land*; Liu and Wang in *Cadres*) or suffering heroes (Luo in *Land* and Xia in *Cadres*). The narratives are all structured around the conflicts between the heroes and villains. The central confrontation in which the evil Liu and Wang attempt to “destroy” the innocent Xia dominates the narrative of *Cadres*. The narrative conflict in *Land* is relatively complicated since it is divided into two parts: Luo versus his political opponents (Ma and Governor Feng) and Luo versus his political mentor Secretary He. However, the confrontation of Luo with the political power represented by Ma, Feng and He runs through the whole story in which Luo is constantly persecuted and suffers the attacks of the “evil power”. In the end, both Luo and Xia are rewarded with their political promotion while the evil
Ma and Hu (Land), Liu and Wang (Cadres) are punished. Liu and Ma die of lethal illnesses, whereas Wang and Hu are put in prison.

To dramatize these plots, the two shows both deploy melodramatic elements, for instance, murder and crime. In Cadres, the evil characters install a tapping device in Xia’s house to spy on him, and even try to kill him. In Land, to protect himself, Ma technically murders seven people by deliberately not informing them in time to retreat from the flood. Another melodramatic development is created by conspiracy. In Cadres there is a series of conspiracies targeting Xia and his family. For example, the villains lie to Xia’s innocent brother so that he unknowingly brings a bag that contains explosives to the building where a police investigation team resides. As a result, the building is set on fire and Xia is immediately suspected by the police as the backstage plotter behind his brother. In Land, in order to agitate conflict between Luo and He, Governor Feng deliberately sends a complaint letter, which accuses Luo’s father-in-law of corruption in the dam construction, to Luo. Feng’s plot leads Luo to learn that Secretary He is trying to hide the truth of his-father-in-law’s corruption from him. As a result, Luo confronts He.

Divorce and romance also contribute to create melodramatic ups and downs. In Land, Luo experiences both divorce and re-marriage. The romance between the “noble princesses” and “poor young men” are one of the attractions of the two shows.³ Suspense can also be seen as enhancing the melodramatic tension. The two dramas not only set up cliff-hangers at the end of each episode, but also maintain the viewer’s interest through continuously placing the heroes Xia and Luo in danger.

Most importantly, in Land and Cadres all emotions are exaggerated. Almost every

³ In Cadres, the former Party Secretary of Dengjiang Liu’s granddaughter falls in love with Xia’s driver, the son of a working-class family, while in Land, the Provincial Party Secretary He’s daughter re-establishes her love with Chen, the son of a farmer.
episode includes quarrels between characters (for both good and evil), tears, joys, angers, and sorrows. Characters’ emotions are conveyed via over-acting and often underscored by sentimental music. For example, in Episodes 29 and 30 of *Cadre*, there is a long municipal Party membership meeting which discusses how the government deals with the 2000 laid-off cadres generated by the political reform of the towns. Xia and his colleagues violently argue and battle with the evil Wang and his cohorts to extreme in a hysterical fashion. The emotions of the characters are intensified by their heightened voices and gestures (quarrels), and further reinforced by the intense use of the camera (close-up shots). This exaggerated and theatricalized style suggests that *Land* and *Cadres* reside within the framework of melodrama.

Considering melodrama as artificial and vulgar, unrealistic and unrevealing, Pickowicz (1993) asserts: “[t]he melodramatic mode is hostile to realism and naturalism because these modes of representation do not allow the narrative to ‘break through’ to the plane on which moral polarities are visibly at war” (302). Pickowicz concludes that Chinese film melodramatists (e.g. Sun Yu’s 孙喻 and Xie Jin) are “trapped by the melodramatic mode” (322) and their serious intellectual intentions as filmmakers are “reduced to stereotypes and caricatures” (312) for the purpose of popularizing and dramatizing political messages.

I propose that the melodramatic mode in *Land* and *Cadres* can actually work differently from the manner Pickowicz has described. I argue that the melodramatic mode can be politically serious and progressive through its integration with critical realism. Concretely, *Land* and *Cadres* transform melodrama with critical realism in two ways:

1. Recognition of melodramatic strength, through which the two dramas utilize melodramatic forms and devices as an effective means of presenting critical realism (e.g. revealing the social significance and articulating intellectual criticism);
(2) Defamiliarization of melodramatic canons. The two dramas adopt Trevor Griffiths’ critical realist practice to appropriate melodramatic conventions, “of making the natural strange” (Caughie 2000, 147). This tactic locates the political within the popular. Through defamiliarization, which detaches from melodramatic norms in a certain way, *Land* and *Cadres* provide an analytical and critical distance to audiences, just as Griffiths’ critical realist TV dramas do.

### 6.2 *Land* and *Cadres*: Recognition of Melodramatic Power

*Brooks and Lukács: the Melodramatic, Social Totality and Typicality*

In this section, I discuss Brooks’ melodramatic theory and Lukács’s critical realist theory through which we can better understand how the melodramatic mode works with critical realism in *Land* and *Cadres*. Brooks’ (1976) remarkable study on nineteenth century literary melodrama, represented by Honoré Balzac and Henry James’s novels, is possibly the most influential work to rehabilitate melodrama and reevaluate its critical potential. Brooks separates the melodramatic from melodrama. Melodrama is a genre while the melodramatic is a mode of creation that can not only be connected with realism but also be used for various political ends. The most striking feature of the melodramatic mode Brooks prescribes is its ability to bring the deep, hidden significance out. He elaborates that nineteenth century literary melodrama, for instance Balzac’s works, consists of two-tiered planes: the plane of representation (the surface of reality) associated with people’s social existence and everyday, mundane lives, and the plane of signification (the deep meaning of the mind). The plane of signification is invisible and works beneath the plane of representation. The former gives a meaning to the latter. As Brooks notes: “life and acts on the surface of things are explainable only in terms of what is going on behind, in terms of those who know and control ‘the more dramatic existence’” (120). The melodramatic mode functions to reveal the hidden signification through dramatization and emotionalization.
While also recognizing that Balzac’s novels operate within the surface and the depth of reality, Lukács (1970) explains the two planes differently from Brooks’ psychoanalytical focus. His studies are more within the critical realist orientation. The surface of reality, for Lukács, refers to an empirical and naturalistic reality, whereas the depth of reality pertains to a social truth, which Lukács calls social totality, rather than men’s psychic truth (“moral occult”). Social totality is the irreducible and total meaning of society and reality (38). It is, in Wayne’s (2001) explanation of Lukácsian critical realist theory, a microcosm that “has all the essential features of a larger entity but boiled or compressed down into a smaller unit” (39). However, the social totality cannot be revealed automatically either. It can only be brought out through the artist’s intense imagination and creation of characters, situations, actions, in an artistic sequence and climaxing, in the intensifying and concretizing of both appearance and reality (Lukács 1970, 35-36). Although Lukács does not use the term melodramatic in his discussion of the nineteenth century realist novelists (e.g. Balzac), Brooks’ study has convincingly demonstrated the affinity between these realist novelists’ creation, imagination and the melodramatic mode. As Brooks (1976) points out, Balzac uses melodramatic techniques in his fiction, which relate to literal, stage melodrama (111). His novels, Brooks states, “work toward moments of confrontation conceived as scènes à faire, moments where grandiose signification achieves melodramatic representation” (112). Thus, from Brooks’ and Lukács’s perspectives, Balzac’s novels can be both melodramatic and critical realist.

Lukács’s analysis of Balzac’s novels can help us to understand how the melodramatic mode and critical realism work together. Lukács (1970, 49-50) notes that Balzac’s

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4 Brooks (1976) regards psychoanalysis “as a systematic realization of the melodramatic aesthetic, applied to the structure and dynamics of the mind” (21-22) and defines signification as a “moral occult” to relate to men’s psychic world (5).

5 For a study on the melodramatic features of Balzac’s novels, see Brooks 1976, 110-152.
novels uncover the inevitable inner contradictions within bourgeois society and various conscious or unconscious rebellions against oppressive institutions where men are “imprisoned”. Yet, as Lukács has demonstrated, Balzac’s novels depict these contradictions through extremely intensified individuals, situations, and merciless consequences. Concretely, Balzac’s characters are in extreme melodramatic (polarized) situations: being lost or in revolt, thirsting for power or degenerate (e.g. Goriot and his daughter, Rastignac, Vautrin). The (dramatized) events that the characters expose themselves progress “in an avalanche that appears incredible” (49) (e.g. the tragedy of Goriot’s family and the exposure of Vautrin). These exaggerated characters and plots, created in the melodramatic mode, do not reduce the realist quality of Balzac’s novels, “rather precisely on account of this rush of events, the novel provides the effect of a terrifyingly accurate and typical picture of bourgeois society” (50). Thus the secret of Balzac to transform the melodramatic “unreal” into the realist accuracy lies in that he presents a “typical picture” of reality. The typical therefore becomes the key concept to understand how the melodramatic mode in Balzac’s novels can point to the truth of society. What does “the typical” mean?

Lukács explains: “What characterizes the type is the convergence and interaction of all … the most important social, moral and spiritual contradictions of a time …. Through the creation of the type and the discovery of typical characters and typical situations, the most significant directions of social development obtain adequate artistic expression” (78). By this definition, the typical does not refer to ordinary or average, but something that reflects the social totality. The construction of typical characters and situations cannot be achieved via a naturalist mechanical documentation, but must be via artistic ordering, selection, and condensation so that the social totality can be represented. Because of the dialectical relation between typicality and dramatization, between exaggeration and penetration, between surface and depth, the melodramatic representation thus contains contradictions for close inspection. In other words, the externalized melodramatic mode bridges the relation between surface and depth, allowing the masked social totality to be exposed and thus
permitting readers/viewers to penetrate the surface into the signification. Just as Balzac captured an “accurate and typical picture of bourgeois society” (Lukács 1970, 50) in his critical realist works, the melodramatic mode can work to interrogate the surface of reality to open up the question of social justice.

Both Land and Cadres demonstrate this dramatized typicality of characters and situations, as described by Lukács. They weave the characters and their confrontations firmly within the network of social contradictions and relations. The politicians’ individual power struggles in Land and Cadres are therefore depicted as a ‘microcosm’ of the larger social conflict. Land starts with a heightened mass demonstration. Hundreds of farmers furiously surge into the Xinglong Township Government to protest against the overtaxation imposed by the government. Their protest is suppressed immediately, and later sixteen protestors are arrested. How to deal with this social rebellion becomes the drama’s narrative momentum. The cadres split into two parties based on their identification with or detachment from the farmers. The individual conflict is thus determined by the social confrontation.

In a very melodramatic scene, where an urgent meeting is held by the provincial government to discuss the protest, the hero Luo directly confronts Ma. Luo sympathizes with the farmers’ difficulties caused by the heavy tax burden, while Ma defends the necessity of overtaxation for economic development. During their quarrel, the scene is intercut between the meeting and the farmers’ further demonstrations. Irritated by the local government’s persecution, the farmers attempt to head to the provincial capital to express their anger. In spite of being stopped by the local policemen, they still arrive at the railway station and occupy the platform. The farmers’ protest forces Provincial Party Secretary He to suspend the meeting and lead the political leadership to the railway station. On the platform, Secretary He faces thousands of farmers and makes a promise to reduce their tax burden. To realize his promise, Secretary He appoints Luo as the new Party secretary of Xiaokou city. Ironically, when Luo proposes a plan to reform the oversized bureaucracy as a
solution to relive the farmers’ tax burden, He aligns himself with Ma and other cadres to object to Luo’s agenda. Moreover, to resolve the tension between Luo and the local cadres, Secretary He removes Luo from his post. Secretary He’s promise does not produce a solution but only exacerbates the further conflict and contradiction on the political scale.

These are typical characters and typical situations within a melodramatic dramatization. The exaggerated and interrelated fights between good and bad are constructed on the basis of class struggle. They are intensified and boiled down to reveal the social significance contained in these typical characters and situations. The Party’s project fails to accomplish its promise to bring a happy life to people, since reforms do not happen in the political sphere. Thus, it is suggested in the scene discussed above, the people’s oppressed and disenfranchised condition can only be changed through their struggle, through a complete political transformation.

_Cadres_ also starts with a dramatic and typical social event. Dozens of farmers are poisoned by the fake insecticide, sold by a group of family members of the municipal leaders. In order to prevent the “bad” news spreading, the local cadres block roads and cut off all the public and private telephones, and force the victims who lost consciousness to stay in the village. When the victims are near dead, the political elite, led by Vice-Secretary Wang, go to a luxury hospital in the provincial capital to celebrate their boss Secretary Chen’s recovery from illness. Then the drama cuts to the next scene: a group of township cadres “protest” in the municipal government against the hero Xia’s governmental reform project to take them redundant. Meanwhile, another evil character, Liu, the retired Party Secretary of the city, is plotting to rearrange the political structures of the city, so that his men can take control. When the son of a victim-peasant finally rings the hero Xia for help, Xia is instead instructed to meet his senior, the selfish Mayor Hua. Hua persuades Xia to help him win election to the provincial Congress so that he can become the next deputy provincial governor. By evaluating his own promotion over the farmers’ lives,
Hua stops Xia going to rescue the farmers. These different politicians’ activities are intercut with the peasant-victims’ painful situation: more and more farmers are poisoned, and their condition deteriorates. Yet, who cares about their lives?

By depicting the dramatized tragedy, this drama compares and contrasts different social groups, by which “the major opposing forces converge” (Lukács 1970, 142): the farmers’ sufferings and oppression versus the cadres’ coldness and cruelty. The juxtaposition of the politicians’ selfish acts and the farmers’ predicament not only creates an emotional climax but also reveals the fact that the privileged bureaucrats have become the oppressor of the people. It is necessary and urgent to address this crucial problem. In his studies on the nineteenth-century critical realist melodramatists, Lukács (1964) makes a comment which can be also used to describe the authors of Land and Cadres. “Realists such as Balzac or Tolstoy in their final posing of questions always take the most important, burning problems of the community for their starting point, their pathos as writers is always stimulated by those sufferings of the people which are the most acute at the time; it is these sufferings that determine also what they see in their poetic visions and how they see it” (12).

In the following sections, by placing Land and Cadres within the Lukács’s analytical framework, I will investigate further how the authors construct different sorts of dramatized typical characters and situations to significantly represent social reality with the melodramatic mode.

Characters’ Inconsistence: Determination of Social Identity

Pickowicz (1993) describes melodrama as restricting characters within a closed and fictional world that fails to investigate the depth of the characters’ inner and social life. He points out that in melodrama, the victims are masochistic and “suffer and sacrifice rather than resist”. Thus, “[t]he victims do not seem to have a hand in their own salvation” (322). On the contrary, the critical realist melodrama cannot be satisfied by
enclosing characters within a fictional world but instead they are placed within a complex process of concrete social struggle whereby class consciousness plays the central role to determine who they are and what they should do.

In *Land*, the social determination of the characters is clearly manifested in their inconsistent behavior. Characters’ inconsistent behavior signals their changing attitude and acts with the narrative progression. The characters’ acts are described in *Land* as social behaviors rather than personal ones. The character Chen Quan 陈泉 is a good example.

In the first part of *Land*, Chen is the deputy director of the Xinglong Township Government, a morally good cadre. Yet, his morality does not lead him to defend the farmers. Although he acknowledges the difficulties of the farmers and internally experiences a moral struggle about the governmental exploitation, he still stands for the cadres’ interests by strongly opposing the hero Luo’s political reform of downsizing the local government. He even organizes the local cadres to write complaint letters to the provincial leaders against Luo. These letters strengthen the leaders’ resolve to remove Luo from his post. At this stage, Chen undoubtedly aligns himself with the bureaucratic class and behaves accordingly.

However, when he resigns from the government (as a result of protesting against Luo’s reformist agenda) and becomes a farmer, his social attitude and behavior completely change. Chen is later elected as the head of the FEA and becomes a radical activist, resisting the governmental overtaxation which he once supported. When facing pressure from the local government to dissolve the FEA, Chen emotionally questions his former colleagues in tears: “Workers have the Unions, artists have the Artists’ Association, and businessmen have the Industrial and Commercial Association, why can’t our farmers have our own organization? […] Most of you cadres come from farmer families; don’t you forget where you are from!” Chen’s question is both a moral and a social inquiry which aims to awaken the cadres’ ethical
conscience and the consciousness of their social origin. Since the cadres’ social identity has been transformed and is antagonistic to their origin, they stick to overtaxing the farmers in order to support the oversized governmental institutions. Realizing the irreconcilable gap between the cadres and the farmers, Chen takes legal action on behalf of the farmers against the government. The transformation of his behavior (from advocating the overtaxation to radically opposing it) is firmly connected with his class awareness provoked by his changing social identities (from a cadre to a farmer). Chen’s transformation not only tells audiences why he converts into a fighter, struggling against his previous official colleagues but it also vividly charts the process of the farmers’ resistance.

By fully recognizing their exploited situation and subsequent clash with the officials, the victims (the farmers) resolutely resist authority. They suffer and sacrifice, but more importantly they stand firm. In contrast to Pickowicz’s view, they have “a hand in their own salvation” (Pickowicz 1993, 322). The characters’ ordinary lives thus expose the significance of the play of social relations and forces.

*Excess: Acting Out of Hidden Social Significance*

The melodramatic mode works with critical realism to construct social totality and typicality in various ways. Excess is one of these melodramatic, critical ways. As some scholars (Brooks 1976; Feuer 1984) contend, melodramatic excess can have a subversive potential. Brooks (1976) notes that “[e]xcess is necessary to approach the essential and the true, that which is hidden by what men ordinarily call ‘reality’ as by a curtain” (115). In other words, excess is able to direct our attention to reality. Brooks divides the excess of eighteenth-century stage melodrama into verbal and visual. In this section, I analyze how both *Land* and *Cadres* deploy and redefine verbal and visual excess in the TV drama context that—as I argued before—is dominated by critical realism. As critical realist melodrama, they should be “transparent rather than superficial: surfaces, that is, are assumed to have depths” (John 2001, 111).
(1) Verbal Excess and Exposure of the Official Occult

Brooks (1976) defines the verbal excess as the characters’ hyperbolic self-expression to “announce their moral identity, present their name, and the qualification attached to it” (39). Direct and explicit dialogue and soliloquy are used to convey melodrama’s moral message and emotionally affect the audience. In Land and Cadres, such verbal excess is not only for the sake of exerting “emotional affection” (36), but also exposing the covered political “truth”.

Examples of verbal excess are the villain Qi Xiaoyong’s 齐晓勇 self-defense in Cadres. Qi was previously a criminal⁶ but now is the vice-director of the Office of Dengjiang Municipal Party Committee. Qi is a stereotyped villain who is totally corrupt, immoral without any possibility of being redeemed. His evil nature indeed fits the melodramatic polarization between evil and good. As Qi shamelessly claims to his political mentor Wang, “I am a crazy dog of yours. I will follow your instructions to bite anybody you ask me to”. With the support of his bureaucratic class, this vile criminal is nominated to be the only candidate for the high position of the Committee’s chief-vice secretary. However, his nomination is rejected because the hero Xia accuses him of over-spending public funds on eating and entertainment for cadre guests. After learning of this rejection, Qi complains to his boss Wang, and emotionally defends his over-spending:

… How can it be enough to spend RMB 40,000 or 50,000 on reception of guests each month? I actually sign bills up to RMB 70,000 or 80,000 each month …. Eating and accommodation are part of the bills, travelling and shopping are another, and when the guests leave, giving gifts or gift money is the other part …. Let’s take this reception for the inspection team (from the

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⁶ In Cadres, Qi was previously a gangster and later became a national cadre. Because of embezzling public funds and a sexual scandal, he was at one time expelled from public employment.
higher Party’s Organizational Department of Haozhou city) as an example. Secretary Wang, you said to treat them to the highest standard. I did it to the highest standard! The first greeting meal, the last departing meal, and Secretary Chen’s treatment in the middle, every one of these three meals cost RMB 10,000 at least. They had six or seven people who had stayed here for five days. It was not too much to spend RMB 1000 for one person per day on eating and accommodation. That was RMB 30,000 or 40,000 in total. How much gift money should I give them? Wouldn’t have it been too stingy to be RMB 2000 each? It had to be $3000 at least. If you were generous and keen to make friends with them, you should make that RMB 5000. This was another RMB 20,000 or 30,000. Which month is there when we receive guests once or twice to the highest standard? .... Last time, to treat the Departmental Director Lin from the province, I firstly ordered a bottle of Wuliangye 五粮液 liquor,7 worth RMB 400. However, he said to me: “Little Qi, the liquor is too young! Get an older one!” I hurriedly changed to a bottle of 1972. Didn’t he know how much the liquor was? .... Now they [the municipal leaders] have ingratiated themselves with the senior leaders, and then come to check my accounts, to accuse me of overspending! What logic is this?

In this scene, Qi’s acting style is exaggerated and passionate. His hyperbolic acting (e.g. heightening verbal expressions) emphasizes the melodramatic tone. Qi’s emotional complaint reveals in detail that his abuse of public funds is not the result of his personal evil nature but rather the nature of the corrupt political system in which the unchecked and absolute power naturally leads to abuse of public funds for personal use. Qi is merely a scapegoat of the corrupt system. His revelation is astonishing: one meal costs over RMB 10,000 to the taxpayers; bribery with public

7 Wuliangye is luxurious and expensive liquor made in China and is always used at lavish banquets to treat important guests.
funds in the name of gift money has become a routine political practice. What Qi expresses is not just a personal lamentation but refers to a broader social problem: hundreds of billions of taxpayers’ money are misused each year for officials’ personal consumption, e.g. extravagant treatments, overseas travel, business cars. Qi’s self-defense unfolds the inside story of the corrupt official world which is otherwise hidden from the public.

In another scene, Qi negotiates with Xia and attempts to gain Xia’s support for his advancement. He ironically justifies himself as a good cadre and claims to have made great contributions to Dengjiang’s economic development. He declares to Xia:

… the original provincial highway construction plan excluded the Haozhou-Dengjiang Highway. Departmental Director Yu came to Dengjiang for working inspection and I hosted him for three days. Consequently, the Haozhou-Dengjiang Highway was listed in the plan and has contributed 3 or 4% rise in the Dengjiang’s annual economic growth …. Because of my role, this highway was constructed three years earlier and importantly it was almost financed by national funds, Dengjiang just contributed a little. Some people might accuse me of corruption, but if I was not corrupt, how could the issue of the Haozhou-Dengjiang Highway be addressed? …. So I dare to say: in Dengjiang city, I can be considered a good cadre!

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8 In the TV news magazine Xinwen 新闻 1+1 (News 1+1), screened on 2 December 2008 on CCTV-1, Chinese scholar Wang Xixin 王锡锌 revealed that the total spending on eating, travelling overseas and business cars with public funds by the government officials astonishingly reached RMB 900 billion per year which was 30% of the government’s expenditure. See the article Zhongguo guanyuan gongkuan chihe, chuguo he gongche yinian 9000 yi 中国官员公款吃喝, 出国和公车一年 9000 亿 (9000 billion official annual spending on eating, overseas travelling and business cars), available at http://www.8am.com.cn/show.php?tid=1674 (accessed 6 February 2009).
Qi’s claim points to the paradoxical situation in which public interest must be realized via corruption. Although Qi does not explain how he hosted Director Yu and made him change his mind, Qi explicitly acknowledges that he had deployed corrupt means. From Qi’s previously detailed description of hosting cadre guests, one wonders how much public money was abused in treating Director Yu, or how much gift money or how many precious gifts Yu received in exchange for his approval of the highway project. In this scene, corruption is fully exposed and nothing is left ambiguous. Moreover, the scene exposes the fact that corruption as a crime is so embedded in official practices that it goes unpunished. Xia does not send Qi to the police, even though he knows that Qi’s acts breach the law. Because Qi’s corrupt behavior is conducted on behalf of the government for the public good, the hero Xia is helpless to act. The message is that the law can punish individual evil, but it cannot restrict the government. Without effective monitoring and democratic restrictions, the Party-state can do anything it wants, even commit crimes.

As a stereotyped melodramatic villain, Qi persistently follows his personal ambition. Nothing can stop him. When his advancement comes to nothing, Qi turns to compete with Ma Weijin, the honest official, for the post of the director of the Municipal Party Committee Office. Qi dines with Ma to persuade him to voluntarily withdraw from the competition. In this scene, Qi performs once again in an exaggerated style and hysterically yells at Ma:

Director Ma, to be honest, I am not qualified to be the director of the office! But neither are you! You are not convinced, are you? What is the director’s responsibility? It is to serve the leaders. How to serve? …. Do you know why some leaders live so comfortably? They stay in luxury hotels, eat delicacies, smoke the soft Zhonghua 软中华 (Chinese),9 drink XO, go to saunas and have massages. Their wives rub their faces with Shiseido cream, spray their

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9 Chinese is a prestigious and expensive brand of tobacco in China.
bodies with Chanel. Their children drive Mercedes Benz and BMWs …. Why? Do you know why? It is because of people like me who serve them. Can you do the same? Do you know how to square accounts, how to balance the books, how to fabricate accounts, how to deal with audits? Do you know how to clean up an illegal account? Do you know where you can get money from? For instance, a leader gives you $50,000 of receipts for reimbursement, where do you reimburse them? How can you be a director without knowing these tricks?

This is a lesson that evil delivers to the good that legitimizes the existence of evil. The reasons why a criminal like Qi can hold a key post in the government and why an honest cadre like Ma cannot be promoted are all answered in Qi’s outburst: because the leaders are corrupt and greedy. These leaders and their subordinates consist of a degenerate power relation by which they rapaciously steal public wealth. In this dark political world, corrupt skills rather than morality become the qualification of a cadre. To reinforce Qi’s revelation, he is visually placed within a series of extreme wide-angle close-up shots. The wide-angle lens make Qi’s face warped and twisted. The extreme close-ups enhance Qi’s expression so that the innocent Ma is shaking, and completely shocked. The normally introverted, cautious Ma is out of control and shouts: “Stop, stop! Do you want me to die?” Ma commits suicide later because he desperately realizes that his integrity cannot help him find a place within the corrupt officialdom. Conversely, Qi not only survives, but is finally appointed as the director of the Office precisely because his immoral behavior is indeed of use-value for his bureaucratic class. In this respect, Qi’s criminal background is meaningful as it symbolizes the criminal nature of his class.

Perceiving the melodramatic excessive and emotional expressions negatively, Pickowicz (1993) states that in melodrama, “[i]t is not necessary [for the audience] to know precisely why evil has appeared on the scene and why it works the way it does”; “One does not learn much about how the system ‘really’ works by viewing films like
Unlike Pickowicz’s description, however, through the larger-than-life verbal excess, in Cadres, Qi indeed “tell(s) the audience what motivates evil” and allows the audience “to know precisely why evil has appeared on the scene and why it works the way it does”.

(2) Visual Excess and Social Space
Visual excess is another important feature of film and TV melodramas (Feuer 1984). It refers to excessive use of visual techniques, such as camera angle and movement, lighting, setting and colour, to construct a particular visual representation. Ang (1989, 78) argues that visual excess in TV melodramas not only function to support the narrative, but can also produce additional meanings. For example, the glamorous mise-en-scène in the American soap opera Dallas (e.g. the luxury swimming pool, the chic restaurant and elegant women and handsome men), creates a chronic contradiction between the optimistic images and the pessimistic world of soap opera which is fraught with tragic accidents (e.g. divorce, murder, injury, unemployment, betrayal, disease and conspiracy, etc.). Feuer (1984) similarly argues that, in Dynasty, the protagonist, a business tycoon, gives his wife a luxurious Rolls Royce car as she is giving him a child. The visual image of the car can be read as a comment on their marital relationship. As Feuer notes, “[t]his would seem to reduce their love to a financial contract, thus exposing its material basis” (14).

In a similar manner (producing additional meanings), Land and Cadres deliberately employ visual excess not only to support their main narratives but also develop less obvious and even more radically dissenting meanings. Specifically, the excessive visual representation in Land and Cadres articulates oppositional meanings via the visually contrasting to the social spaces of the bureaucrats and the unprivileged.

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10 Hibiscus Town is a political melodrama made in 1987 by Xie Jin, which depicts a romance between a prosecuted Rightist and a local widow in a small town during the Cultural Revolution. For studies on the film, see Brown 1994; Sibergeld 1999, 188-233.
For instance, in *Cadres*, to host government leaders, the villain Qi spends over one million RMB of public funds to renovate the guest room into a five-star lavish presidential suite. In the scene in which Qi guides his boss Wang in an inspection of the suite, the glamorous *mise-en-scène* shows a luxurious, large bright lounge plus another small private lounge, a splendid dining room, a study and a lavish sauna. Following the characters, the camera moves through the various rooms while Qi proudly explains to Wang that the bathroom facilities are imported from South Korea, mentions their high costs (several thousand Chinese dollars), points out that the expensive hi-fi audio system comes from England and that its cost is over 200,000 RMB. The camera movement visually presents the decorations of the suite in the foreground and displays in detail how luxurious the suite is. This visual excess metaphorically constructs a political world. This sumptuous world is built with public funds but does not belong to the public. It serves the privileged bureaucrats and thus becomes a visual index of corrupt political power. Comparable to the critical use of visual excess created by the Rolls Royce gift in *Dynasty*, which questions the nature of the marriage relationship, the out-of-place luxury of the public officials’ guest rooms also opens up a critical space in which Chinese political practice is shown as having a materialist basis.

Another example of visual excess is the banquet scene in *Cadres*. Banquets are one of the politicians’ main social and political activities in the show in particular, in reality in general, in which politicians and relevant parties enhance their political and economic ties. In many cases, taxpayers’ money is unduly consumed. As a political joke imitating an official proclaims:

> My chopsticks are sharp, my wine glass is round,
> I’ve eaten thousands of delicacies and drunk millions of glasses of good
> wine [without payment]. (Cited from Link & Zhou 2002, 96.)
There are numerous popular satirical sayings circulated in China to express popular resentment at the official corruption. One saying satirizes officials as various kinds of animals, who

… Fawn to superiors like Pekingese dogs …
Devour public banquets like hungry wolves,
Snatch small advantages with the quickness of a rabbit,
Perform their duties in the manner of a monkey,
Face difficulties with the courage of an earthworm. (95)

Within this context, restaurants and dining halls are constructed in Cadres as another political space in which bureaucrats’ deterioration and under-the-table trading are exposed. In the show, there are over ten different banquets in which we witness the same waste of public money highlighted in the scene with the over-the-top luxurious guest room. In one of these scenes, Vice-Secretary Wang invites the journalist Wu Shenyun 吴伸云 for a meal. The journalist has written an article about his wrongdoings and Wang is trying to get Wu on his side. In the scene, Wu is led to a lavish dining hall by a waitress. The hall is decorated in an ancient Chinese style with expensive antique furniture and artworks. The waitress lights sandalwood in an incense-burner on a low table in the middle of the hall. Wu attempts to escape and opens a door in the back. It shows a sauna bathroom. The waitress tells Wu that this hall is also attached to a massage room, dancing room, and karaoke room. The revelation overwhelms Wu. Then two waitresses enter and ask Wu to take a bath and wear traditional Chinese garments (Tang suit). They also tell Wu that the meal will follow in the ancient, aristocratic fashion and will last at least one day or could even take up three or four days. Wu is totally shocked and angrily wants to leave. At this moment, Secretary Wang and Qi appear dressed in Tang suits. The waitresses quickly put various dishes on a table. Wang pours the 1982-year Maotai 茅台 wine into Wu’s
Then Wang persuades Wu to withdraw his article in return for big favors for him and his family. In this scene, the grandiose *mise-en-scène* (e.g. splendid hall and sauna bathroom, antique furniture and artworks, dishes, and Tang suit, etc.) creates a symbolic location in which the Party officials are clearly depicted as the new, ruling, privileged caste who misuse their political power to maintain a corrupt and extravagant lifestyle.

In contrast with the political space of the bureaucrats, *Cadres* also shows the world of the common people: the low, old rural houses; the narrow crowded, dirt Red Flag Street and its residents’ dark, leaking homes; and the migrant workers’ primitive workplaces. Through setting, make-up, costume, camera techniques and lighting, the social inequality of their living conditions is emphasized. For instance, the sand-and-gravel factories where hundreds of migrant workers are working are open workplaces next to a riverbank. Because a huge amount of sand and gravel is taken away, the riverbank is bare, full of dust and big holes. The workers live in sheds constructed on the worksite. Their clothes are cheap; their bodies and faces are dirty since they have nowhere to take a shower. Their meals are cooked with rotten meat and thus cause serious health problems. The miserable visual presentation of the migrant workers, which is highlighted by gloomy color (the grey sky, the dark grey riverbank and the dark or grey clothes which the characters wear), and displays of the sad visual details (the dusty worksite, the migrant workers’ dirt cloths and wretched faces, the rotten food), sharply contrasts with the privileged bureaucrats’ happy world (stylish clothes, luxurious room and restaurants, delicious foods and wine). Significantly, all these factories are owned by officials and their relatives. These power-holders abuse their power to exploit the pitiful workers, to plunder the national natural resources. The ruined environment (the riverbank) therefore becomes the symbolic location for the opposition between the rich elites and the exploited workers:

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11 *Maotai* wine is the most prestigious Chinese brand of alcohol and worth several thousand Chinese dollars a bottle. It is generally consumed by the rich, celebrities and officials.
the lavish lives of the bureaucrats are built upon the suffering of common people and the destruction of the community.

Brooks (1976) states that melodrama “represents a democratisation” (44) for it refuses censorship and repression to allow the deep meaning to come out. In melodrama, characters achieve an expressive liberation to assert their wholeness without limitation (42). A similar “democratisation” takes place in Land and Cadres, “[t]he expressive language acts as carrier or conduit for the return of something repressed, articulating those very terms that cannot be used in normal, repressed psychic circumstances” (42). The verbal and visual excess in Land and Cadres expose and magnify the political and social issues that have indeed been repressed in the official discourse represented by main melody TV dramas. The movement towards the complete self-expression of the characters and visual representations is deliberately joined with the movement towards revelation of the truth and hidden meanings. Thus the shows become a drama of social totality or social totality of drama.

6.3 Beyond Melodrama: Defamiliarization

In his study on British critical realist drama, Caughie (2000, 147) argues that the realization of Trevor Griffiths’s critical realism relies on the re-articulation (defamiliarization) of familiar conventions of popular drama and on recognition of popular drama’s generic norms (including the melodramatic mode, such as the traditional British country-house drama). To explain Griffiths’s critical realist practice, Caughie writes: “he exploits popular form for the stories and conventions which made them popular, and, at the same time, he turns them against themselves to expose the meanings which the conventions have naturalized or concealed. He plays difference off against familiarity, placing political analysis in the gap between the two” (150). These descriptions, “re-articulation” and “against familiarity”, suggest a dialectic relation between Griffiths’s critical realist TV dramas and popular drama’s generic canons (in many cases, melodramatic ones). On the one level, they are closely tied to
generic forms, on the other level, to a certain degree, they transcend the parameter of the forms for articulation of different political meanings and values. For example, Griffiths’s *Country* ironically uses the form of British country-house melodrama to explore the British politics of the first postwar election in 1946. In this drama, the performance of the protagonist, Philip (the son of an aristocratic family), is highly stylized in a theatrical way. He “speak[s] highly literary lines” (149) written by the writer and thus is estranged from “the natural exchange of everyday, immediate discourse” (149) (natural acting), to which country-house drama is conventionally related. The actor’s theatrical acting leads to an ironic distance which “is designed to expose the real meaning of class which the country-house drama takes as natural” (150). Another example of defamiliarization is demonstrated through the character of Virginia (a radical socialist and the daughter of the family) along with filmic tactics: “Virginia is introduced taking photos of the Carlion estate, a device which establishes the idea of the families and their tribal rituals being dispassionately watched by the viewers” (149). Through the filmic device, a critical, ironic distance is created to invite the viewers to pay attention to the social references attached to the character.

Following the defamiliarizing tactic of Griffiths’s critical realism, *Land* and *Cadres* also critically appropriate melodramatic norms for sociological accuracy and realist complexity. I argue that *Land* and *Cadres*’s transformation of melodrama is demonstrated not only by their critical exploitation of melodramatic conventions, but also by defamiliarizing the conventions. The aim of *Land* and *Cadres*’s defamiliarization is to offer an analytical distance beyond the melodramatic norms. It is worth noting that defamiliarization in *Land* and *Cadres* is different from the radical transgression of melodramatic canons conducted by elitist avant-garde art (e.g. the Fifth Generation’s film in the early 1980s). It is not fundamentally free from melodramatic conventions, but semi-breaches or semi-departs from the latter. It does
not aim at producing exclusively what Bertolt Brecht describes as distanciation,\textsuperscript{12} but is a simultaneous critical distance and emotional engagement.

\textit{Middle Characters and Complexity}

As noted, characters in melodrama are polarized into good and evil and thus there is no middle ground on which characters can play. This polarized and simplistic portrayal of characters leads melodrama to lack subtlety, nuance and ambiguity (Brooks 1976; Silbergeld 1999). Since \textit{Land} and \textit{Cadres} intend to grasp the complexity of reality rather than simplify it, the middle characters are a crucial site for them to restore a nuance of the real. The way to construct middle characters in the shows is to defamiliarize the polarized and stereotypical description of characters by injecting the opposite elements, that is to say: showing the positive clean official heroes as having in fact a corrupt essence and victimizing the villains with a good nature. Through the defamiliarized transformation, the polarized “clean official” or villain characters turn to middle characters who bear realistic complexity and contradiction.

One such middle character in \textit{Land} is Provincial Governor Feng, who is described as a paradoxical “clean” official. He is materialistically incorruptible. He has never taken advantage of his power for personal economic gain. He even let his wife be laid off to maintain his clean image. He acts cautiously, hardly confronts the good, and is never involved in evil conspiracies. In this respect, Feng is indeed a clean official. However, \textit{Land} deconstructs Feng’s “clean” appearance by pointing out his corrupt essence: he ultimately weighs his political interest over the people’s interests and achieves his political ambition to be the next Provincial Party Secretary at the cost of others’. As

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Distanciation (Verfremdungseffekt) is a theatrical notion developed by Brecht, which “prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer” (Willett 1964, 91). For a study on Brechtian theory, see Willett 1964.}
analyzed in Chapter Three, he compels his subordinates to carry out the wrong policy of developing hi-tech zones, which results in the officials’ fabrication of achievement and consequently the farmers’ economic losses.

In his discussion of the late Qing chivalric and court-case novel *The Travels of Lao Can*, David Der-wei Wang (1997) points out that the clean official character Gangbi 刚弼, who is inspired by the historical Judge Bao, is “a most hideous paradox” (150). Because “he tries to maintain his clean image, he turns his virtue into a vice” (150).  
The author of *The Travels of Lao Can*, Liu E 刘鹗, made a very famous comment in the novel about Gangbi’s behavior:

> All men know that corrupt officials are bad, but few know that incorruptible officials are even worse. Whereas a corrupt official knows his own faults and dares not play the tyrant openly, an incorruptible official imagines that since he never takes bribes, he is free to do whatever he likes. Then self-confidence and personal prejudice may lead him to kill the innocent or even endanger the state … (cited from Wang D. 1997, 150-1.)

Like Gangbi, with the help of his incorruptible image and absolute power, Feng is free to do what he wants to achieve his political personal success. As a result, the original “clean” officials like Major Ma are forced to be “dirty” and the innocent farmers become the victims of his political ambitions. By defamiliarizing the clean official norm with an evil nature, *Land* transforms the incorruptible official (Feng), the symbol of justice in both the popular imagination and the official discourse, into “the

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13 In the novel, when Jia Wei is wrongly charged as a murderer, “her family follows the normal rules of the game by paying a sizeable sum of money to the court”. It makes Gangbi believe Jia’s conviction of the crime. “He tortures the woman with all kinds of penal instruments, forcing her to confess to the scenario he imagines most likely in the circumstances” (Wang D. 1997, 150).
Major Ma is another paradoxical character described as both evil and a victim. Ma was once an honest official but he has now become a corrupt cadre. The reason for his corruption is described not in terms of his individual decadence, but as being forcefully engendered by the vertical political system represented by Governor Feng. In this drama, Ma pleads with Luo on two occasions to explain his predicament: in such a system, it is not a matter of not recognizing what is right and wrong but the very matter that one is compelled to do wrong; it is not a matter of whether one is willing to do wrong, but a matter of one individual cadre having no way to escape from carrying the wrongs. By positioning a formerly upright cadre (Ma) within the context of a decayed political system and tracing the trajectory of his fall, *Land* offers an extremely pessimistic view of contemporary Chinese politics in which an individual’s morality is not sufficient to secure one’s justice and dignity, since the real world where we live is full of evil power, and morality alone cannot defeat it. This process of a clean official’s unwilling degeneration is vividly explained by the writers of *Land* as “a virgin compelled to be a whore” (*biliang weichang* 逼良为娼).

*Land* re-articulates the evil stereotype through victimization and allows evil to bear social significance, which implies a larger evil behind Ma’s actions. At the end of the drama, Ma dies from disease. Before his death, Ma finds his reward banner for his previous excellent performance as a magistrate and watches it with emotion. He then

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14 See *The Outline of the Main Characters* (personal collection, 2003). The writer Li admitted that the description of “compelling a virgin to be a whore” was inspired by the deviant novels about officialdom, *National Portrait* and *Deep Blue Breakers* (personal interview, 11 and 12 May, 2010). These two novels portray the progressive fall of two educated officials under the pressure of the corrupt officialdom. Through the portrayal of the two educated officials’ psychological and moral struggles, the two novels cynically depict a hopeless picture of the corrupt officialdom. For a study on *National Portrait* and *Deep Blue Breakers*, see Guan Z. 1995 and Tang C. 2007.
visits a peasant family which he once financially supported. He even goes to the office where he once worked as an excellent magistrate. Ma is looking for his honesty, dignity and the glorious past which has been gone for a long time. Ma is not the real evil but more precisely the victim of an evil political system. Ma dies with regret. His death elicits much more sympathy than resentment among viewers. The middle characters are detached from the melodramatic extreme characters and thus contain social contradiction, complexity and ambiguity.

Happy Ending and Rupture
One of the important imperatives of melodrama is a happy ending, in which virtue is confirmed through its victory over evil. For some scholars (e.g. Pickowicz 1993), this final reward of virtue and clear resolution represents the victory of the dominant ideology. By showing the permanence of unsolved contradictions, Land and Cadres attempt to undermine the melodramatic happy ending. The juxtaposition of the happy and unhappy problematizes the apparent affirmation of the dominant ideology.

Thomas Elsaesser (1992) points out the subversive possibility of a melodramatic resolution, which places a happy ending within a social context and in so doing, exposes the entrenched rupture between the seemingly happy ending and the deep social contradiction. Elsaesser explains: “Depending on whether the emphasis fell on the odyssey of suffering or the happy ending, on the place and context of rupture … that is to say, depending on what dramatic mileage [is] got out of the heroine’s perils before the ending … melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism—categories that are always relative to the given historical and social context” (516). Elsaesser’s claim highlights the important role of historical and social context in the subversive construction of melodramatic resolution.

In Land, a narrative “flaw” is purposely designed at deconstructing the happy ending. According to scriptwriter Li, the protagonist Secretary He’s behavior was depicted as contradicting the happy ending in the original story outline. Li recalled:
In our [the scriptwriters’] meeting with Zong [who wrote the story outline], we questioned his synopsis: He’s suppression of the dam investigation derived from his political experience—Luo’s father-in-law’s involvement in the dam scandal will affect Luo’s promotion [being the next provincial secretary]. It was to say that the Party’s promotion policies were practiced in a way that implicated nine generations of a family. However, in the end, Luo was promoted despite the fact that his father-in-law’s crime was exposed. Thus Secretary He’s anxiety and efforts to suppress the investigation proved meaningless, unnecessary and even wrong. But, as a veteran, experienced politician, Secretary He shouldn’t be portrayed as naive and ignorant. So the synopsis didn’t make sense.\footnote{Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.}

What Li tried to demonstrate is that there is a rupture between the real political context, in which Luo’s promotion most likely ends with failure, and the main melody style of a bright ending, in which the Party hero must be finally rewarded.\footnote{The writer Zong intended to create Land as an innovative main melody TV drama and thus wrote the happy ending accordingly. However, his intention was overthrown during the scriptwriting, in which Land was actually turned into a critical realist melodrama. I will examine this transforming process in Chapter Eight.} “To regard the rupture as problematic and unreasonable”, Li continued: “Zong hoped we would (the scriptwriters) suture the narrative flaw [in the subsequent scriptwriting]. Nevertheless, we deliberately kept the fissure as it satirized the superficial happy ending. We hoped that audiences would sense the contradiction since He’s distrust of the system actually puts a question mark on Luo’s cheerful finale”.\footnote{Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.}

In Land and Cadres, the victories are depicted as temporary and incomplete, and they
only happen at the personal level. At the social and institutional level, the biggest evil, e.g. Governor Feng in *Land*, is untouched, the social contradictions (political and economic repressions) remain unresolved; the root problem, the totalitarianism of the Party and the privileged bureaucratic class, is unaddressed. An inherent rupture appears between the personal happy ending and the social unsettlement. As Silbergeld (1999) comments on the rupture at the end of Xie Jin’s cinematic melodrama, *Hibiscus Town*, “[u]nvanquished, unresolved, the lingering threat to the ‘happy’ situation establish[s] at the end … like a spectre hovering over it: the audience’s catharsis is put on hold” (204).

In other words, a contemplative effect is expected to be provoked among viewers, just as what Liu Binyan (2006) tried to achieve in the finale of his investigative reportage, *People or Monsters?* To wrap up the reportage, Liu wrote: “The case of Wang Shouxin’s corruption has been cracked. But how many of the social conditions that gave rise to this case have really changed? Isn’t it true that Wang Shouxins of all shapes and sizes, in all corners of the land, are still in place?” (104) Liu warned his readers in the last sentence, “People, be on guard! It is still too early to be celebrating victories” (104). His warning is evidenced by the melodrama in the real world; in reality, the clean official Tian Fengshan, who was praised in Liu’s piece was ironically converted into another corrupted “Wang Shouxin” 25 years after Liu wrote the reportage. Tian’s corruption becomes another melodramatic story depicted in

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18 *Hibiscus Town* ends with the couple’s reunion after the Revolution but without successful solution. The evil Li returns as the new Party leader of the town. Another evil character Wang goes mad and strikingly announces in the last minute that another revolution is coming. Silbergeld (1999) argues that Xie’s semi-happy ending breaks the melodramatic paradigm and brings a certain realist quality to his melodrama.

19 In Liu’s reportage, Tian Fengshang was highly praised as a good cadre. He personally received “petitions from the masses and he personally took care of ten important unjust cases that had dragged on for many years. People would begin arriving at his door before he had even got out of bed. He
the anticorruption TV drama *Daxue wuhen* 大雪无痕 (Pure like Snow). Based on the real corruption case which Tian is involved in, the drama’s scriptwriter Lu Tianming boldly wrote Tian into the story as the character of Provincial Party Deputy Secretary Gu whose role in the corruption is explicitly implied (Bai R. 207, 74).

In contemporary China, politics is itself a melodrama. There are no guarantees the heroes Xia and Luo in *Cadres* and *Land* will not degenerate into another corrupt figure such as Tian, since the corrupt social and political conditions remain unchanged. Thus the essential rupture between personal reward and social unsettlement tears up the ideological closure which a melodramatic happy ending normally intends. Alarming questions are aroused. Like Liu Binyan, the authors of *Land* and *Cadres* alert their audiences, “People be on guard! It is still too early to be celebrating victories” (Liu B. 2006, 104).

**Irony and Emotional Engagement/ Critical Distance**

Melodrama is always accused of arousing audience’s emotion rather than critical rationality. When viewing a melodrama, Pickowicz (1993) notes that audiences are trapped by the melodramatic sensationalism and “don’t have to rack their brains to think” (323). Chuck Kleinhans (1994) and John (2001), in contrast, have demonstrated that melodramatic emotional engagement does not necessarily result in

would chew on dried grain as he listened to their complaints .... Having inquired into housing conditions, he lowered rent …” (Liu B. 2006, 46). However, 40 years later, Tian, the Governor of Heilongjiang province at that time, was involved in the corruption scandal of the first vice mayor of Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province. He was sentenced with life imprisonment in 2005. See Zou G. 2006.

Pickowicz (1993) observes that there is melodramatic sensationalism in Chinese politics, in which “Jiang Qing, Lin Bao, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping himself have all been cast, in turn, as agents of darkness. The names change, but the melodramatic conception of the workings of the Chinese universe remains the same” (326).
viewers being captive. Critical realist melodrama, for example Charles Dickens’ novels, as John states, can be emotionally affective, but at the same time integrally thoughtful. In the same fashion, Land and Cadres intends to attract the emotional engagement of audiences, which is associated with the affective melodramatic mode, simultaneously creating a critical distance. In doing so, audiences not only acquire pleasure through heightened emotional engagement but they are also intellectually engaged by this critical distance. One textual device to produce such emotional/critical effect by Land and Cadres is irony.

“The classic and simple definition of irony”, as Fiske (1993) explains, “is a statement that appears to say one thing while actually meaning another” (85). In this sense, irony always involves opposing discourses against each other and thus opens up space for viewers’ social exploration. For instance, in Land, the victim/villain characters Ma is ironic because he is evil and simultaneously a victim who suffers moral and psychological agony. His ironic quality of victim-villain might lead the viewer to think about what forces transform his innocence into evil. The problematic political system should be most blamed. Similarly, in Cadres, the melodramatic villain Qi is also an ironic character who is vicious but at the same time a “good” cadre who contributes greatly to the public through his corruption. This irony between Qi’s evil and good may also provoke viewers to inquire as to why public good is realized through corruption. Thus, these ironic depictions of characters cause opposite meanings to collide each with the other—evil versus victim, corruption versus the public good—and invite viewers’ critical contemplation.

In Land and Cadres, the narrative conflicts are also described in an ironic way. In the narrative regarding the dam investigation in Land, Secretary He’s self-sacrifice by which he intends to protect Luo’s promotion even at the price of his own political career (he resigns and takes the responsibility for blocking the dam investigation) moves audiences. However, as noted in Chapter Four, He’s morality is disturbed by the irony that his prevention of the investigation contradicts with his repeated claims
that he is concerned for the people’s interest. How can a person who regards
individual (Luo’s) political promotion as more important than social justice and the
public opinion be really concerned about the people? This ironic contradiction puts a
question mark on Party’s politics: can the Party really defend the people’s interests as
it claims?

The seemingly happy endings in Land and Cadres are also ironic since the personal
victories contradict the unresolved social crisis. For example, in Cadres, the defeat of
evil is realized in quite a paradoxical way, through Xia’s desperate political suicide
(his loss in the inter-Party election). Disappointing with the leaders’ hesitation to to
eliminate the privileged bureaucratic group, Xia despairingly decides to awaken the
people’s consciousness with his political tragedy. Thus, the conventional ending of the
main melody drama in which the final intervention from the senior Party leaders to
restore the situation is depicted in Cadres as ironic: it comes at the price of Xia’s
political failure. 21 This ironic intervention from above makes the defeat of evil fragile
and unstable. If Xia accepts the leaders’ suggestion to shift to another city, if the evils’
conspiracy to manipulate the election is not exposed to give the leaders an excuse to
intervene, if some of the senior leaders, who are connected with the privileged group
(e.g. Mayor Hua), strongly back up the group, the hero Xia’s final triumph might be
difficult to achieve. There are too many “ifs” which make the final victory unlikely.
To invoke emotional engagement and critical distance, Cadres juxtaposes Xia’s loss in
the election with another piece of sad news; Xia’s wife, who is shot and becomes
unconsciousness as a consequence of the privileged group taking revenge on him, is
on her deathbed in the hospital emergency department. Xia is helpless waiting outside
the department and in deep sadness. The accompanying sorrowful melody makes the

21 In her study of main melody anticorruption TV drama, Bai Ruoyun notes that one of formulaic
ingredients of anticorruption drama is that support from higher political authorities such as the Party’s
Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee arrives at a critical moment to help heroes defeat corrupt
evils; see Bai R. 2008, 75-76.
scene heart-wrenching. The more sympathetic and moved audiences are towards the tragic hero Xia, the more resentment and questions they might have towards the cruel bureaucratic class and the passive Party seniors. When audiences emotionally empathize with the character and narrative, they may simultaneously ask why such tragedies happen.

In other words, when viewing Land and Cadres, the audiences’ identification with the protagonists is interrupted. They need to rack their brain to think what is behind the ironies. In his discussion on the effect of irony in British art television drama (including Griffiths’s critical realist drama), Caughie (2000, 146) borrows a term, “bouncing” between complicity and distance from E. M. Forster. “The irony of ‘art television’”, Caughie says, “can best be conceived as a complex and variable relationship between complicit and distance, bouncing the viewer between the security of a superior ‘knowingness’ and the ‘difficulty’ of critical engagement” (46).

Arguably, critical distance and emotional involvement produced by Land and Cadres also results in the bouncing effect that results in complicated identification and contemplation in viewers. The ironies open a window of observation for viewers to link to social references in contemporary China: political corruptions, political and economic injustices, class struggle and problematic political authoritarianism. By the connection with social references, “the viewer may be intellectually or emotionally engaged; or better still may be intellectually and emotionally engaged” (151).

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Land and Cadres both utilize and reconstruct melodramatic norms with critical realism for subversive purposes. The two dramas, on the one hand, productively exploit the melodramatic mode to empower political expression, on the other hand, defamilialize melodramatic conventions in order to bring a critical contemplation to the melodramatic sentimentalism. Hence, Land and Cadres are emotional and lucid, thoughtful and critical. Land and Cadres both attempt
to establish an emotional engagement/critical distance viewing position, which provokes “an ironic contemplation shared between viewers and authors” (Caughie 2000, 145), and thus departs from the ideologized sentimentalist-audience position set up by main melody drama. The active engagement with the melodramatic mode shows the critical realism in Land and Cadres not only focusing on articulating criticism, but also concerned about delivering criticism in a non-radical/non-elitist way. Land and Cadres do not disdain popular taste and aesthetics, rather they regard the popularized melodramatic mode as being productive for cultural resistance. In this regard, Land and Cadres are politicalized in the particular way of mainstreaming resistance. It is the specific political dimension of non-radicalism and non-elitism, associated with the melodramatic critical realism in Land and Cadres, which I intend to investigate next.
Chapter Seven  The Politics of Melodramatic Critical Realism

As I argued earlier, *mainstreaming resistance* indicates a new intellectual adaptation/resistance tactic through which intellectual resistance departs from radicalism and elitism. It is developed via the transforming role of TV professionals, the transforming text (being actively involved in both main melody and popular cultural forms and discourses), as well as transformative industrial practices. Before I turn my exploration of *mainstreaming resistance* to the industrial dimension, in this chapter I will place *Land* and *Cadres* within the transforming context of Chinese intellectuals’ politics and examine the political implication of their melodramatic critical realism. Specifically, I argue that the melodramatic critical realism deployed by *Land* and *Cadres* continues the May Fourth intellectuals’ agenda of modernization towards a democratic nationhood, but turns the May Fourth elitism into populism\(^1\) to respond to the challenges of the new consumerist market society. This new popular intellectualism indicates a new political tactic by intellectuals during the post-Tiananmen period, which attempts to assert intellectual voices in a non-elitist, popular way. I will begin by investigating the relations between the different melodramatic realisms and agendas of modernization in the context of Chinese film and TV drama to identify what specific project of modernization *Land* and *Cadres* link to. Then I will examine the evolution of intellectual politics during the 1990s onwards, and its connection with the melodramatic critical realism in *Land* and *Cadres*.

\(^1\) The term populism has varying connotations, but my usage refers to the definition by *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, which means political ideas and activities that are intended to represent ordinary people's needs and wishes (as opposed to elitism). See http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/populism (accessed 16 November 2011).
7.1 Melodramatic Realism, Melodramatic Imagination, and Modernization

Melodramatic Realism and Modernization

In their study on realism in Chinese film, Berry and Farquhar (2006) argue that Chinese cinematic realism is always integrated with the melodramatic mode to relate to different agendas of Chinese modernity (the nationalist, reformist or revolutionary). They call this mixed mode “melodramatic realism” (76). I contend that the melodramatic realism of Chinese film and the imagination of modernity can be also applied to TV drama. Before discussing the televised melodramatic realism, it is useful to elaborate Berry and Farquhar’s argument further.

By perceiving realism and the melodramatic as shifting terms with multiple definitions in the context of Chinese film, Berry and Farquhar divide melodramatic realism into four types: (1) the melodramatic classic realist text of the 1910s to the 1930s which refers to commercial melodramas exemplified by *Huashen guniang* 化身姑娘 (Tomboy, 1936). It incarnates Hollywood family melodrama by taking a classic realist mode; (2) the left-wing melodrama of the 1930s and the 1940s represented by *Malu tianshi* 马路天使 (Street Angel, 1937), which synthesizes the left-wing realism with the Chinese melodramatic form (i.e. the traditional operas). It exposes the darkness of the society and challenges the *Guomindang*’s 国民党 (Nationalist Party) authority; (3) the (melodramatic) poetic realist text exemplified by *Xiaocheng zhichun* 小城之春 (Spring in a Small Town, 1948) and *Yellow Earth* (1984), which deploys the French poetic realist mode and is “often politically nonaligned, stylized, and imbued with poetic symbolism, fatalism, and a sense of

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2 Berry and Farquhar (2006) term left-wing realism as critical realism. Yet, the critical realism they use is different from the May Fourth critical realism and more associated with the Party’s ideological discourse as it connects with “a revolutionary aesthetic based on Marxism-Leninism and socialist nationhood” (78).
degeneration or death‖ (79); finally, the melodramatic socialist realist text represented by Zhufu (New Year’s Sacrifice, 1956), which adopts the socialist realist mode and promotes “a socialist nation-state, mass audience accessibility, idealized images of Chinese society, positive messages, and stereotyped class heroes or heroines” (78). Berry and Farquhar propose that Chinese melodramatic realism embodies what Brooks (1976) terms the “melodramatic imagination” in response to the Chinese history and society it resides in.

The melodramatic imagination, in Brooks’ (1973) account, is an imaginative attempt “to bring into the drama of man’s quotidian existence the higher drama of moral forces” (218). In other words, the melodramatic imagination derives from man’s dissatisfaction with the present, mundaneness of everyday life, and thus expresses a desire to transcend ordinariness to find a new future which is more significant and exciting. This imagination towards a new future and higher drama always contains a political implication justified by aspiration for a more proper order.

The birth of melodrama in the eighteenth century, as Brooks (1976) notes, also indicates the loss of the Sacred. The Christian sacred as “wholly other” (17) was scattered during the Renaissance and Enlightenment and could not serve as the basis for social bonds. Melodrama, Brooks concludes, “comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of the truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern” (15). In this respect, the melodramatic imagination contains a process which moves from desacralization of the Sacred to

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3 Arguably the relation between poetic realism and the melodramatic mode is much more complicated and unstable than other realist forms. For instance, the poetic realist film Yellow Earth is often regarded as avant-garde (symbolic and experimental) and anti-melodramatic (in contrast with Xie Jin’s melodramatic model); see Ni Z. 1993 and Zhang Y. 2004, 235-238. For this reason, I exclude melodramatic poetic realism from the following discussion of melodramatic realism.
resacralization of a new future. This movement is actually a reaction and reflection of the fragmented, modern society. For this reason, Brooks regards melodrama as “the mode of the modern imagination” (108).

In the same vein, Berry and Farquhar contend that Chinese realist melodramas frequently link to an imagination of modernization which is associated with different political agendas concerning what a modernized China should be. They state: “the utopian quest to make China a modern nation-state also impels cinematic realism to become a mixed mode (melodramatic realism)” (79). In these melodramatic realist films, the family-home (jia 家) is always allegorically connected with the nation (guo jia 国家), private life is linked to society, and happy endings always project different visions of the Chinese future (76). For example, the left-wing melodrama Street Angel ends with the death of the elder sister Xiao Yun who sacrifices her life to rescue her younger sister from being sold as a sex worker. In a dark room, Xiao Yun makes her deathbed accusation: “… we’re all just ants, ants …” The family tragedy symbolizes the tragedy of the country. Therefore a revolutionary call for a better society (the Party’s agenda of modernization to build towards a socialist China) is pronounced and recognized. In the classic realist melodrama Tomboy, the final reunion of the traditional Chinese wealthy family confirms the Guomindang version of national identity that holds Confucian values at the centre. Conversely, the socialist realist melodrama New Year’s Sacrifice explicitly attributes the protagonist family’s trauma to the darkness of Guomindang and functions to promote Maoist

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4 He Chungeng 何春耕 (2002) suggests that Chinese social and cultural structures are modeled on “family” kinship and constructed accordingly in an allegorical way. Therefore, Chinese cinematic melodrama continues this tradition to symbolically use family to reflect social and historical contexts. In other words, family becomes the allegory of nationhood (140-173). In his study on Xie Jin’s political melodrama, Nick Brown (1994) also argues that, in Chinese melodrama, family or private life always connects with the public, the political and thus becomes an expression of the society and the nation.
modernization for socialist reconstruction (Berry and Farquhar, 2006). After the Cultural Revolution, a new type of melodrama, what Nick Brown (1994) terms Chinese political melodrama, emerged to de-sacralize Moaist socialism.

In political melodrama of the 1980s represented by Xie Jin’s *Hibiscus Town*, Brown explains that “the political process is narrativised as a trial that occupies the thematic centre in the way the family conflict does in the family melodrama” (173). He points out that, in these political melodramas, political criticism of Maoist China via family disasters is related to the endorsement of the Party’s new project of economic modernization. For instance, in Xie Jin’s *Hibiscus Town*, the suffering and restoration of the victim-family affirms “the ideological task of negotiating and legitimating individual entrepreneurship” (178). What is re-sacralized is the Dengist marketized socialism, or socialism with Chinese characteristics. He Chungeng (2002) observes that Xie Jin’s political melodrama transforms into main melody melodrama after the 1990s. By injecting ethical emotion into ideological themes, main melody melodrama, such as the film *Kong Fansen* 孔繁森, serves to advocate the Party’s positive image and economic reform policy. We can find a similar melodramatic realism and imagination working in Chinese TV drama in response to social and historical transformations.

Scholars have demonstrated that Chinese TV drama as a popular cultural product is always associated with the melodramatic mode (Zhong X. 2010). For instance, Janice Hua Xu (2008) asserts that Chinese TV family saga serial dramas are also melodrama. Zhu Ying (2008) has demonstrated that Chinese historical drama is characterized by “dramatizing large historical narratives” (73), melodramatic acting and centered by political struggle between political figures.\(^5\) She also notes that Chinese idol drama is stylistically similar to East Asian “trendy” drama whose representation is closely

\(^5\) In her discussion of *Yongzheng Dynasty*, Zhu Ying (2008, 77) points out that some of the scenes in the drama resemble the ones from Xie Jin’s cinematic melodramas.
connected to melodrama. Arguably, by integrating with various realist approaches, Chinese TV melodrama is often “invoked to produce a national discourse about Chinese-style modernity” (Xu J. 2008, 34) as well. In these TV melodramas, the family-home situation similarly allegorizes the nation to embody different versions of modernization. Specifically, as Chinese TV drama deployed the socialist realist mode from its birth in 1958 to the early-1980s (Keane 2005), during this period, socialist realist TV melodrama served the Party as an instrument to support socialist construction. For example, the socialist realist TV melodrama *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake* (1958), by comparing the family’s predicament in the past with its happiness in the present, clearly confirms Maoist socialism. In the 1980s, scar TV drama, e.g. *Cuotuo suiyue* 蹉跎岁月 (The arduous years, 1982), and *Jinye you baofengxue* 今夜有暴风雪 (A snowstorm tonight, 1985), can be considered as political melodrama in Brown’s sense, as they follow Xie Jin’s fashion of exposing the cruelty of Maoist politics during the Cultural Revolution, and yearn for a benign, humanist socialism (Dengist socialism).

After the 1990s, popular drama and main melody drama began to emerge. Popular drama often adopts the melodramatic, classic realist mode to confirm the status quo (the Party’s marketized reform). For instance, Zhu (2008) argues that the historical drama *Hanwu dadi* 汉武大帝 (The Great Emperor Hanwu, 2004) aligns with Party president Hu Jintao’s 胡锦涛 “pledge for building a prosperous yet more egalitarian society predicated on the Confucian principle of harmony” (58) through allegorical eulogy of the great emperor Hanwu’s achievement. Similarly, the family saga drama *Dazhaimen* 大宅门 (Grand Mansion Gate, 2000) promotes “the state’s new goal of

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6 For a study of the melodramatic imperative of trendy drama or idol drama, see Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, “Made in Taiwan: An Analysis of Meteor Garden as an East Asian Idol Drama”, in Zhu & Berry 2009, 90-110.

7 Inspired by scar literature and scar film, scar TV drama focused on portraying the sufferings (scars) of ordinary people in the Cultural Revolution.
achieving economic growth and social harmony simultaneously” (84). As an official category, main melody TV melodrama such as Secretary undoubtedly aims at popularizing the Party’s initiative of national enterprise reform to build a socialist market economy.

In short, Chinese realist melodramas (in both film and TV drama) frequently link to different projects of modernization. Within these melodramatic imaginations, through de-sacralization of the unpleasant society, an imagined modern China is brought into existence. Thus, “melodramatic realism”, Berry and Farquhar (2006) conclude, “is the mixed mode of the national” (82). If we agree with Berry and Farquhar, we can ask: what kind of political project of modernity is the melodramatic critical realism in Land and Cadres connected to?

**Land and Cadres: Intellectualized Modernization**

As noted, the critical realism in Land and Cadres inherits the legacy of the May Fourth critical realism exemplified by Lu Xun’s works and thus demonstrates a political agenda distinct from melodramatic realisms discussed above. According to Anderson (1990) and Ted Huters (1993), May Fourth critical realism functions as the intellectuals’ means of social transformation. It firmly connects with the intellectuals’ enlightenment project to turn China into a westernized, democratic country. The May Fourth version of modernization is inherited by the intellectuals of the 1980s’ New Enlightenment Movement and is essentially divergent from the Party’s agenda. The Party’s version of modernization is only in terms of economic modernization but it politically remained authoritarian. The May Fourth version on the other hand emphasizes westernized democracy and advocates a complete modernization in terms of both the economic and political. The melodramatic critical realism in Land and Cadres is indeed embedded within the intellectuals’ modernized framework, but this is revitalized in order to respond to the new historical context of the 2000s.

China in the 2000s experienced a social crisis. The gap between the rich and the poor
is wide, and society is largely stratified. Zhang Taofu (2007, 10) provides a vivid picture of the inequality and unfairness within society today: high-end villas sharply contrast with simple, dark slums and this visual contrast becomes a normal landscape within cities. When the unemployed line up for miserable social welfare, the rich drive expensive cars, stay at lavish hotels and dine in expensive restaurants. When the rich spend a hundred thousand Chinese dollars per year to send their children to private schools, working families still struggle for a living. Discontent has emerged across society.

The intensified social tensions, injustice and rampant official corruption have threatened the legitimacy of the Party’s rule. The Party’s agenda of economic modernization is under attack since it “also creates astounding disparities in the distribution of wealth, placing China today among the most unequal nations in the world” (Zhang X. 2001, 10). He Qinglian (1997) rebukes the governmental model of modernity and describes it as a “trap of modernization” to guide China into an Italian-style “mafia model”. Wu Jinglian 吴敬琏, an economist at the State Council also warns that China is heading toward a “nepotistic capitalism” or “bureaucratic capitalism” in which few power-holders form a privileged social class to plunder public wealth with their unchecked power. The lack of political democracy and freedom makes people powerless to restrict power holders and defend their own interests. The Party’s economic developmentalism has thus no longer captured the

8 In 1998, the income of the richest group was 9.6 times higher than the poorest group. The situation in the 2000s has worsened (Zhang T. 2007, 12-14). The Gini coefficient increased dramatically from 0.16 in the pre-reform period to 0.46 in 2006 (Wu J. 2009, 11).

9 According to independent research by some scholars, the total official corrupt revenue holds 20 to 30% of GDP, which amounts 4 to 5 trillion RMB (Wu J. 2009, 11).

public interest and imagination about the nation and modernization. A new imagination beyond the official parameter of economic modernization is required.\textsuperscript{11}

To respond to this call for a new imagining of China, \textit{Land} and \textit{Cadres} express a strong yearning for a democratic nationhood in which people’s rights can be preserved. The two dramas utilize melodramatic conventions (i.e. the intensified narrative conflicts, the extravagant \textit{mise-en-scène}) for this new imagining. The victimization of the innocent and excessive exhibition of power abuse unmistakably enact the irremediable conflict between the power-holders and the common people. The registration of the emotional dimension correlates tightly with political criticism to point out that problematic political authoritarianism is the root of social illness. Thus the Sacred of the Party’s economic developmentalism is profaned through the call for political change and a more democratic society within which people can determine their own fate. This intellectual aspiration of political democracy is further expressed from the family-home/nation allegory built into these two dramas.

As noted before, in \textit{Land} and \textit{Cadres}, both the protagonists Xia’s and Luo’s families are experiencing a tragedy. Because of his involvement in politics, the hero Luo in \textit{Land} divorces his first wife Wei. His insistence on the investigation into the dam scandal causes his current father-in-law to commit suicide and his second wife Jiang to leave their home. Luo’s political victory is gained at the very high price of his family. Politics is explicitly described as the maker of the family’s catastrophe. In \textit{Cadres}, similar losses are emphasized. Xia’s only brother is imprisoned due to the political conspiracy. Because of rescuing people from the landslide during his working inspection, Xia is injured and his wife is shot as a consequence of political revenge. As a result, at the very end, the hero Xia and his wife are both dying in the hospital, leaving their little child outside the Emergency Department in tears. Politics again is blamed as the cause of the heart-breaking family tragedy.

\textsuperscript{11} For studies on Chinese contemporary social crisis, also see Li H. 1995; Wang X. 2003.
If family-home is an allegory of the nation in Chinese melodrama as Berry and Farquhar (2006), Brown (1994) and Silbergeld (1999) have shown, the family tragedies in *Land* and *Cadres* allegorize the current disastrous reality of Chinese society under the politics of one-party rule. To address the family’s misfortune it is necessary first to transform the problematic political system. In the end of *Land*, when Luo moves back to Xiakou city from Beijing where he is promoted to be the provincial secretary, he instructs his secretary Zhou to set up an agenda of political reform to change the system from catering for senior officials to genuinely serving the people. An intellectual’s plea for democratic politics is unambiguously announced. Next, Luo sees his departing wife Jiang standing beside the street. Luo steps out of his car. The last shot of the drama shows the couple silently looking at each other. The family reunion is suggested only after a hope of political reform is pronounced. The family restoration closely interrelates with the implication of political transformation. Therefore, unlike other Chinese melodramas (the classic realist, the socialist realist, political and main melody) associated with the modernized initiatives of political parties (e.g. Guomindang’s capitalist agenda, Maoist socialism, and Dengist socialism), *Land* and *Cadres* take an intellectual stance and challenge rather than align themselves with the Party’s reform project.

### 7.2 Melodramatic Politics and Populism

In the last section, I discussed the linkage of *Land* and *Cadres* with the May Fourth critical realist project of democratic modernization. I also noted that the critical realism in *Land* and *Cadres* is not a simple incarnation of May Fourth critical realism, but redefines the latter with the melodramatic mode to respond to the new market socialist context. In contrast with the May Fourth critical realism’s elitist gesture of enlightening the “masses”, the critical realism in *Land* and *Cadres* displays a populist stand to actively engage with audiences.
As noted, May Fourth critical realism is embedded within the May Fourth intellectuals’ Enlightenment Movement. This movement is built on a series of binaries: West versus China, Darwinism versus Confucianism, new versus old, and modernity versus tradition. For May Fourth intellectuals the binaries are absolute; there is no space for negotiation. In order to re-build a new culture and a new modernized nation it is necessary to completely overthrow traditional Confucianism and old culture altogether. This radical attitude of rejecting tradition leads May Fourth intellectual politics to an elitist stance in which intellectuals are positioned as hero, rescuer of the nation and enlightener of the “masses”, while the “mass” is positioned as a flock of ignorant, spiritual slaves.\(^{12}\) As the cultural practice of elitist politics, May Fourth critical realism discriminates against traditional cultural forms including Chinese melodramatic conventions (e.g. traditional operas and fictions) and thus departs from the ordinary uneducated “masses”. Huters (1993) observes that the readership of May Fourth realist literature is very narrowly constrained within an intellectual circle. The distance of May Fourth critical realism from people resulted in itself being incapable of coping with the revolutionary demand that Chinese society asked for from the late 1920s. It was gradually replaced by the rise of popularized revolutionary realism.\(^{13}\)

*Land* and *Cadres*, on the other hand, are placed within the populist politics of melodrama and thus oppose the elitism posed by May Fourth critical realism. It is this distinctive political imperative of melodrama I intend to discuss further. Melodrama, as John (2001) asserts, is inherently populist and anti-elitist, demonstrated by its populist aesthetics (emotionalism, simplification, externalization, etc.) and popularity

\(^{12}\) For discussions of May Fourth intellectuals and the movement, see Yu Y. 2006, also Schwarcz 1986.

\(^{13}\) The rise of revolutionary art, including left-wing melodramatic films, turned populist in order to mobilize the “masses” and achieve its ideological intention. For a study on the literal transition from the May Fourth critical realism to revolutionary realism, see Wen R. 2007. For a study on the transformation of the May Fourth literature, see Liu Z. 1994a.
among lower class audiences and readers. Guilbert de Pixérécourt, the generally acclaimed “father of le mélodrame” in the west, declared openly, “I am writing for those who cannot read” (cited from John 2001, 35). Because of its capacity to convey revolutionary sentiments to people, and its close connection to the oppressed, artists often seek melodrama as a populist means to “speak powerfully and directly of that which is unrepresented, misrepresented, and underrepresented in the dominant culture’s depiction of the exploited” (Kleinhans 1994, 163-164). In other words, melodramatic potentials of subversion and affection always connect this emotionalist mode with populist politics to provoke or mobilize the people. For example, Brooks (1976) has shown that, from its birth in the west, melodrama was exploited by the new capitalists in their agitation against feudalism. Felix Pyat, the nineteenth century French socialist Communard, “systematically cultivated a revolutionary brand of melodrama that may actually have influenced the course of political events and certainly helped to shape working-class consciousness of social injustice” (Gerould 1994, 187). The great British novelist Charles Dickens also employed the melodramatic mode in his novels to dramatize working-class concerns in keeping with his own anti-intellectualist politics (John 2001). Associated with the popularized melodramatic mode, the critical realism in Land and Cadres attempts to arouse audience’s self-reflection on reality via their emotional engagement and thus bears a populist imprint.

How can we understand Land and Cadres as redefining May Fourth critical realism from elitism to populism? What political implication can we gain from it? I argue that the melodramatic critical realism in Land and Cadres embodies a new cultural political tactic by intellectuals in the post-Tiananmen (1989) period, which turns elitism into populism. Before I address the issue, it will be useful to give a brief description on how intellectuals’ cultural politics has been changed before and after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre.

Intellectuals’ Politics: From Elitism to Populism
Sticking to May Fourth elitist political agenda of westernized modernization, the liberal intellectuals of the New Enlightenment resorted to high-brow modernism as their cultural form of elitist politics and rejected all cultures and values associated with socialism and traditional Confucianism. With such a radically elitist gesture, it was not surprising that the melodramatic mode was vehemently attacked. In the mid 1980s, Xie Jin’s film work, especially that of his melodramatic mode, was severely criticized by cultural elitists and the young film directors of the Fifth Generation. As Pickowicz (1993) comments: “To use the words of Shao Mujun, they [Xie’s films] ‘arouse emotions’. But it is exactly for this reason that Xie Jin has been attacked so vigorously by younger filmmakers who insist that it is time to move beyond sensational, melodramatic representation” (322). The young film critic Zhu Dake 朱大可, who initiated the debate, accused Xie’s melodrama as being stereotypical, politically conservative, patriarchal, and Confucian feudalist. He wrote: “Anyone with a bit of common sense will quickly discover that these [Xie’s films’] obsolete aesthetic ethics designed to manipulate emotions have much in common with the dissemination of religion in the Middle Ages” (cited from Silbergeld 1999, 199). For these critics and young filmmakers, the non-melodramatic and experimental was progressive and was thus approved of, whereas the melodramatic and popular was reactionary and consequently rejected.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre terminated the elitist cultural “Golden Age”. Under the pressure from the government and challenged by the rise of popular culture, elite culture quickly receded and no longer attracted the enthusiasm of society. Since the late 1980s and onwards, there had been an anti-elitist tendency in Chinese culture, demonstrated by Wang Shuo’s 王朔 “hooligan literature”. Wang publicly criticized elite culture and declared that he wrote for ordinary people. In his novels, “vulgar” hooligans become the centre, while intellectuals are teased and taunted.¹⁴ This

¹⁴ Barmé (1999) notes that Wang’s novels are associated with a liumang 流氓 (hooligan) culture, and represent “the spirit of the alienated, semicriminal fringe of Beijing youth culture and Chinese urban
anti-elitist trend was reinforced and intensified by the emergence of popular culture, most evidently, the rise of popular TV drama. In 1990, the Chinese mini-soap opera *Yearnings*, in which Wang Shuo was deeply involved in script creation, marked a starting point of Chinese popular TV drama epoch (Yin H. 2001). This drama adopted a melodramatic form emotionally depicting the conflict between a working-class family and an intellectual family during the Cultural Revolution and onwards. It situated the intellectual protagonists as villains and expressed a strong feeling of anti-intellectualism. As Wang Yi (1999) comments, “Described in the story as treacherous, selfish and unreasonable, Wang Husheng and Wang Yaru (two intellectual villains) serve as a sharp contrast to the kind-hearted working-class family of the Lius. They are contrasted strikingly—love and hatred, concern and apathy, kindness and enmity” (230).

This new marginalized situation and new marketized social condition forced intellectuals to reflect upon their cultural identity, politics and cultural tactics. Chinese intellectuals started to revaluate what is often regarded as “cheap and low” popular culture. In some Chinese literary critics’ eyes (e.g. Dai Jinhua, Chen Xiaoming and Wang Ning), popular culture can be “a democratizing, liberating development life in general” (79). For a discussion on the popularity of *liumang* in contemporary Chinese popular culture represented by Wang’s fiction, see Barmé 1999, 63-98. For studies on Wang Shuo’s novels, see also Ge & Zhu 2005; Huang Y. 2007, 63-104.

15 *Yearning* is regarded as a good example of official main melody drama (Zha 1995). Yet, because of its deliberate imitation of the Latin American telenovela, many scholars (e.g. Yin 2001) simultaneously regard the drama as the hallmark of Chinese popular drama. It indicates that the boundary between main melody drama and popular drama is thin and unclear. After *Yearnings*, a tide of popular dramas, such as *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories of the Editorial Board, 1991), *Ai ni mei shangliang* 爱你没商量 (Love you without condition, 1992), *Jingdu jishi* 京都纪事 (Stories of Beijing, 1994), *Haima gewuting* 海马歌舞厅 (Seahorse dancing hall, 1993), and *Beijingren zai Niuyue* 北京人在纽约 (Beingingers in New York, 1993), flooded onto the small screen. See Zeng Q. 2006, 23.
conducive to the building of a ‘popular memory’ free from elitist restraints and the division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures. This popular memory … would lead to a dynamic reconstruction of Chinese everyday life and would inspire a new dialectic between individuality, based on newfound freedom in the marketplace, and community; this new dialectic would define a new culture and social ethics of the collective” (Zhang X. 2001, 47).\(^\text{16}\) Popular culture is hence recognized by Chinese intellectuals as productive and useful for their politics.

In the 1990s, three leading directors of Fifth Generation film, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, all abandoned their previous avant-garde experimental style and adopted the melodramatic mode which they had strongly criticized in the 1980s. Their three films, *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994), and *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993) echoed Xie Jin’s political melodramas in many ways. They were all set in past traumatically political times, especially the Cultural Revolution and concentrated on the family sufferings generated by the brutal politics. Like Xie’s political melodrama, in the three melodramas, common people were portrayed as the victims of politics, constantly persecuted by political force, especially by the Party, through inhuman political events (i.e. the Cultural Revolution). However, differing from Xie’s political melodrama that was associated with the Party’s economic reform, the three films ultimately challenged the Party’s regime. As Zhang Xudong (2008) comments on the three melodramatic films: “Both the flamboyant exoticism and high stylistic mannerism in *Farewell My Concubine* and the deliberate blandness in *To Live* and *The Blue Kite* question the legitimacy of national sacrifice in the name of revolution ” (276).

As opposed to Chen’s, Zhang’s and Tian’s previous elitism, the melodramatic mode becomes a tactic in the three directors’ cultural politics. Their reflection of reality and

\(^{16}\) For a discussion on Chinese intellectuals’ reassessment of popular culture in the 1990s, see Chapter Two “Nationalism, Mass Culture, and Intellectual Strategies in the 1990s”, Zhang X. 2008.
political criticism are all vividly embodied and comprehended via a dramatized portrayal of trauma in a heightened melodrama form. Through the symbolic portrayal of family tragedies, the three films are “[saturated] with national imaginings” (276). “For such a project”, Zhang Xudong notes, “victimization and traumatisation are privileged modes of experience, which … must be understood literally, that is to say, allegorically, as a product of the general pessimism and sense of defeat permeating the post-Tiananmen liberal intellectual world” (276). In other words, the melodramatic mode as a new cultural tactic is re-recognized by the post-Tiananmen intellectuals.

Residing within both populist cultural political contexts of melodrama and the post-Tiananmen intellectuals, Land and Cadres manifest a gesture of anti-elitism and anti-radicalism. Although May Fourth critical realism and the melodramatic critical realism of Land and Cadres are all related to intellectuals’ politics and its agenda of modernity, the means to carry out the agenda are different. For the authors of Land and Cadres, intellectuals’ ambition for social reform and democratic modernity cannot be realized without the people’s passionate participation. The people’s active political participation cannot be stirred up without emotional engagement and imagination. From another angle, China is now a consumerist society. In the socialist market and multicultural context, intellectuals’ culture must be recognized by the market (the audience) so that it can get rid of its marginalized situation and re-influence society. In this light, the melodramatic critical realism taken by Land and

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17 For a study on the melodramatic features and dissenting political discourses of the three films, see Zhang X. 2008, 269-288.

18 In the interview, Li expressed a populist political belief and said: “I believe that reform cannot succeed if it merely relies on a few intellectual elites without peoples’ participation. Reform, especially political reform, should be mutually sought by both intellectuals and grassroots to force the government to reform” (11 and 12 May, 2010).
Cadres significantly breaks down the division between entertainment and art, pleasure and seriousness, and becomes an efficient means of communicating with people and popularizing intellectuals’ discourses.

Within populist politics, this means that the relationship between intellectuals and the “masses” should be reassessed and readjusted. Intellectuals are no longer the “hero” and “rescuer” of the nation, “enlightener” of the “masses”, but members of the populace (professionals). The people are no longer passive, spiritual slaves, but a force for creating history. As discussed in Chapter Four and Six, in Land, the issue of overtaxation of the farmers is described as being ultimately resolved by the farmers themselves not by the Party representative, Secretary He, or intellectual hero, Luo. Through self-organization and constant protest, the farmers finally compel the government to surrender. During the confrontation between the farmers and the government, the hero Luo is depicted as a failed mediator who is incapable of persuading both sides (the government and the farmers) to give up their interests. The people’s fate must be changed by their own hands.

This new intellectuals’ populist politics is also a means to rethink the radical revolutionary way to transform society through a large scale, violent mass movement. Zhang Xudong (2008) observes that Chinese intellectuals started rejecting radicalism in the late 1980s. In 1997, the leading scholars of the 1980s, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu (1997), proposed a slogan of “Farewell Revolution” to raise a gradual and reformist solution of democratic social transformation. The ultimate goal of Li and Liu’s proposal was not different from what liberal intellectuals pursued in the 1980s to establish a democratically modernized China. The difference between the formers’ and the latter’s thinking was that Li and Liu rejected the liberal intellectuals’ radical and revolutionary way of social change, and preferred the reformist model of the British “Glorious Revolution” in which the democratic system was achieved through peaceful social reform. By reflecting on modern Chinese history, they pointed out that revolution was a destructive force which did not provide a better structure after
smashing the old political rule and order. Comparatively, reform was a more productive and less costly way of social transformation. Their proposal was later characterized by the Chinese government as a counterrevolutionary conspiracy of “peaceful evolution” (heping yanbian 和平演变) (Zhang 2008, 273). The significance of Li and Liu’s proposal was that it opened up space for intellectuals to negotiate with the state. It did not view intellectuals as antithetic dissidents of the state. Instead, it dialectically encouraged intellectuals to resist and reform the state through cooperation.

The melodramatic imagination of Land and Cadres is embedded within the intellectual conceptualization of anti-radicalism that imagines the possibility of peaceful democratization. What is unspeakable or allegorical in Land and Cadres is the intellectuals’ utopia that aims to reform and reconstruct the Party from the inside so that a democratic nationhood can be realized. The emphasis on the virtue of Luo’s identity as an intellectual, the “otherness” of officialdom in Land, to a great degree turns the story into a political trial: an intellectual hero’s attempt to peacefully reform the Party by engaging with the Party’s politics. In the first three episodes, Luo, the Chancellor of Xiajiang Agricultural University, is facing the difficult option to continue his academic research or shift into politics. His first wife, Wei, strongly opposes Luo’s involvement in politics because she believes politics will either destroy or corrupt his personality as an intellectual. Regardless of his family’s reservations, Luo regards the post of Xiakou Party Secretary as a good opportunity for an intellectual to realize his ambition of political transformation. He says to Wei: “Facing various kinds of terrible situations in rural reality, how can I remain inactive on them?” Luo’s choice of engaging with politics results in his family’s separation. Experiencing family bitterness and political pressure, Luo carries out a difficult intellectual journey of political reform. The drama does not end with his success in transforming the system, but provides some hope. In the end, Luo still aligns with the intellectuals’ agenda which attempts to transform the arbitrary system into one which really works for the people.
As noted, in *Cadres*, the hero Xia is also emphatically portrayed as the representative of the people, a tragic intellectual-hero. Throughout the whole drama, Xia intends to awaken society with his political loss, as to how harmful the privileged bureaucratic class is. Despite the powerfulness of the class, Xia believes that constant fighting and sacrifice are necessary to change the corrupt system, the political soil on which the corrupt class relies. In this sense, *Land* and *Cadres* disseminate an arduous passage of political democratization. Modernizing China should firstly involve democratizing the Party. China needs its own Boris Yeltsin to turn the Party around.\(^\text{19}\) The projection of the intellectuals’ reform fantasy in *Land* and *Cadres* opens up a new imagining in which an alternative way of democratization, peaceful evolution rather than radical revolution is resacredized. Thus, the melodramatic imagination ignited by *Land* and *Cadres* through the identification with the scholarly knight-errants guides audiences to take an intellectual imagination from the unpleasant reality to the promising future (a democratic China).

7.3 Conclusion

Melodramatic realisms always associate with politics and can be employed for different political uses, at different times and in different places. *Land* and *Cadres* came at a time of social crisis, when the Party’s project of economic modernization had lost the status of the Sacred and no longer captured people’s imagination and zeal. The melodramatic critical realism of *Land* and *Cadres* continues the May Fourth intellectuals’ utopian search for democratic modernization and challenges the Party’s economic developmentalism. This populist politics not only realigns intellectuals’

\(^{19}\) Yeltsin, the former leader of the Soviet Communist Party, led the people to overthrow the dictatorship of the Party in 1991, and turned Russia into a “democratic” country. He was elected later as the first president of the “democratic” Russia. Though it is doubtful whether democracy is really realized in Russia under the current Putin-Medvedev’s rule, democratic elections have been achieved.
cultural and political tactics from elitism to populism, from radicalism to anti-radicalism, but also readjusts the intellectuals’ status in relation to the populace.

Equipped with one of the most affective artistic forms (melodrama) and conveyed through the most influential medium (television), the emergence of critical realist melodrama in TV drama in the 2000s is very significant. The significance lies in the fact that the intellectuals’ resistance posed and represented by *Land* and *Cadres* is consumed, reviewed and recognized by audiences in the largest domestic media market, thus having more influence on the audience and society. For the populist political project, the mainstream media and domestic market is more meaningful than the marginal media (e.g. movie bars) and offshore markets, because they can directly provoke the people’s consciousness. In the next two chapters, I will take *Land* as a case study to explore the relations and practices, which the TV drama professionals have and implement, to the industrial, market and censorship contexts.
Chapter Eight  Fruitful Land and Discursive Practices:

“Independent” Production, Creative Autonomy and Mediation

This chapter employs a contextual analysis of the production process of Land, and aims to explore the mediating tactics of TV drama professionals. As noted in the Introduction, professionals are a new kind of intellectual who functions within existing social structures. My claim is that mainstreaming resistance is not only about textual representation, but also a political practice, which professionals exercise not as a direct confrontation with authorities, but in the form of negotiated (tactical) resistance. As de Certeau (1984) and Scott (1990) have demonstrated, the dominant control is never absolute, but cracked; therefore subordinates can always exploit those cracks to wisely resist the established political order. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the professionals of Land play “arts of resistance” to seek “independent” expression through negotiation with the mainstream system.

After examining the transformation of Chinese TV drama industry in the new marketized context, I focus on two inter-related tactics through which the TV professionals achieve such resistance: the development of an autonomous space for oppositional meaning construction through alternative modes of production, and the mediation with different institutions.

8.1 Chinese TV Drama Production in Reform: Marketization and Privatization

The Chinese television industry operated under, what Pan Zhongdang and Joseph Man Chan (2000) call, the “party organ model” (256), between its birth in 1958 and the 1980s. In this model, the state firmly governed television through control over
funding, production, and distribution. Even television practitioners were all controlled by the Party (256) and defined as the Party’s propagandist workers.¹ In this context, TV drama production was planned, commissioned, funded, produced and distributed by state television networks according to the Party’s ideological initiatives. TV drama was thus regarded as an instrument to serve the Party’s political interest.

Since the marketization of the Chinese television drama industry in the mid-1980s, the state has started to reduce subsidies for television stations and their production units. As a result, national television networks and units have increasingly sought their own funding for producing and purchasing programs (Bai X. 2007, 103-107). To encourage multichannel competition, the state imposed the siji ban zhengce 四级办政策 (four-tier policy) which decentralized the previous two levels of television network (CCTV and the provincial) into four levels (the central, the provincial, the municipal, and the county). The number of terrestrial television stations dramatically increased from 52 in 1983 to 509 in 1990 (Bai R. 2007, 13), which led to a huge demand for TV drama since drama was the most profitable program for these stations attracting advertisers and audiences alike (Bai X. 2007, 104). Yet, due to the shortage of funding, state television production units could not meet the increasing demand of the market. Consequently, other national production institutions outside television networks, such as film studios and audio-video publishers, began to actively engage in TV drama production. These national institutions aimed at making money by selling their TV dramas to television stations (105).

With the accelerated marketization of the Chinese television industry in the 1990s, more and more private capital was drawn into TV drama production. For example, the

¹ In the socialist state-owned economy of socialist China, the state-party owns every economic entity and is the only employer of the country. As a result, TV professionals cannot change to another job without the Party’s consent. As the writer Gao Xingjian (2005) 高行健 describes, “During the years when Mao Zedong implemented total dictatorship even fleeing was not an option” (15).
private Film and Television Centre of Hairun International Advertising Company was established in 1994 and immediately engaged in TV drama making (Bai X. 2007, 105). Although state regulations prohibited the use of private capital in TV drama production, private capital was (illegally) involved in purchasing production licenses,\(^2\) as well as hiring equipment and paying TV drama makers from the national production units. In 1995, SARFT revised the *Regulations on Television Drama Production Licenses* and permitted private capital to be used in the production of TV drama under temporary licenses (Bai X. 2007, 105). With the involvement of private capital, and because of huge demand from the market, the annual output of Chinese TV drama production skyrocketed from 502 episodes in 1983 (Bai R. 2007, 13) to 9000 episodes in 2002 (China Television Drama Report, 2002-2003), an increase of almost 1800 percent in 19 years. Acknowledging private capital as a key player in the market, SARFT further revised regulations in 2003 to grant eight private TV drama production companies permanent licenses.\(^3\) The following year, other 16 private companies were also granted permanent licenses (Li & Zhang 2008). The statistics show that today around 80 percent of investment in TV drama production and 90 percent out of the 9000 episodes produced annually are funded through private capital

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\(^2\) Before 1995, the state administration adopted a production license policy, and only state-owned production units could be granted a production licence to legally produce TV drama. However, many state units leased their licenses to private capital as a means of resolving their financial problems. As a result, the state monopoly over TV drama production was actually broken. This illegal involvement of private capital under the help of the state institutions can be also read as evidence by which the state regulation on TV drama production was downplayed by market imperatives; see Bai X. 2007, 103-114.

\(^3\) The eight private TV drama production companies are Suzhou Funa Cultural and Technological Co., Ltd; Beijing Ying Clan Film and Television Co., Ltd; Pegasus Film & Television Production Co., Ltd; Hairun Film & Television Co., Ltd; Beijing Xinbaoyuan Movie & TV Investment Co., Ltd; Beijing Huayi Brothers and Taihe Film & Television Investment Co., Ltd; Beijing Chaoyong Eastern Film & Television Cultural Co., Ltd; and Beijing University and Huayi Film & Television Cultural Co., Ltd (Li & Zhang 2008, 2).
(Li & Zhang 2008, 3). In other words, Chinese TV drama production is now dominated by private capital rather than by the state.

The marketization and privatization of Chinese TV drama production has brought about three significant changes which undermine the state governance over TV drama. First, the involvement of private capital and the emphasis on economic profit complicate practices of Chinese TV drama production. The need to make profit not only dominates the practices of private companies but also impacts upon the state production units which now need to balance fulfilling their political obligations with obtaining economic benefits. As Lull (1991) notes, marketization encourages state TV officials “to take the interests and desires of their viewers more into account”, and thus creates “another institutional shift of emphasis away from the sanctity and uniformity of official positions” (213).

Market competition further intensifies tension between the state and capital’s profit-making within TV drama production. In her study on the deconstructive imperatives of Chinese adaptations of “Red Classics”, Qian Gong (2008) shows that the market impulse to capitalize “Red Classics” results in the demythologization of their sacred origins. She argues that the “TV production companies and scriptwriters mine the Red Classics, hoping to feed off the past and grab ratings …. What the TV producers see as potential audience-pleasures is quite often what the state wants to avoid. The process of how politics make room for the market is extremely complicated” (170). However, tension and contradiction is not the whole story of the relationship between the state and capital funding. Scholars (Bai X. 2007, Li & Zhang 2008) also point out other stories in which capital works well with the state within the market, to accommodate both political and economical initiatives.

Second, marketization and privatization have allowed for the development of alternative modalities of production that give relative autonomy to TV drama
professionals who can find possibilities for resistance. In his study on Third Cinema, Wayne (2001) notes that “although the production process does not offer any guarantees [of resistance], developing alternative modes of production remains an essential contribution to a broader democratic project” (48). It is similarly important for mainstreaming resistance to find its tactical articulation by developing alternative modes.

Third, marketization and privatization have also shifted TV drama professionals from state employment (propagandists) to multiple options of employment, especially freelance. Land’s screenwriter, Li Yanxiong, is an example of such a shift. Li had worked as a scriptwriter for the state-owned Pearl River Film Company since 1978. In the early 1990s, since the Company was facing economic difficulties as a result of the state cut in subsidies, he started to work for other commercial institutions (many of them were private-owned), even though he was still an employee of the state Company. He dissolved his employment contract with the Company in 2004 and has since become freelance. Li has noted that most TV drama professionals today are

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4 Third Cinema refers to “a cinema that awakens/clarifies and strengthens a revolutionary consciousness …. A cinema that is anti-bourgeois at a national level and anti-imperialist at an international level” (Wayne 2001, 6). It takes an oppositional stance towards commercial cinema (First Cinema) and art cinema (Second Cinema) in the Western capitalist world and attempts to enact socio-political changes within nations, especially those third world countries. For a study of Third Cinema, see Wayne 2001.

5 Li paid annual “laowufei 劳务费” (administrative fees) to his company. In return he could work for other employers on a contractual basis. Administrative fees were calculated by the salary, medical insurance and superannuation that the company paid for him, plus extra additional fees. Administrative fees were a common practice among national cultural institutions to temporarily solve the economic difficulties they faced during the 1990s. It forced the state cultural professionals to earn their living from the market. Therefore some of the economic burden of these institutions, such as salaries, could be relived (personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010).
freelance and no longer directly employed by the state (and therefore are no longer under direct control of the Party).

As freelance TV drama professionals, these individuals can freely choose who to work for, on what projects, and for what purpose. Relying on their “freedom” and cultural capital, they may have more advantage than state employees to develop a new, relative powerful, social and political status. Liu Yeyuan 刘晔原 (2006, 128-150) observes that some star professionals represented by the writers Zhou Meisen and Hai Yan 海岩 have become a market brand as they have great power over the industry with the successive success of their works in the market. Indeed, TV professionals’ power to manoeuvre TV drama production depends on many factors (i.e. political atmosphere, institutional intervention and reputation of professionals). For superstar professionals, such as Zhou Meisen and Hai Yan, this power may be much more than for newcomers. However, the “freedom” and power TV professionals gain does not necessarily lead them to resist state power. Instead in many cases status leads to the pursuit of personal profit (Zeng Q. 2006, 42-44).

Ibid.

In my interview, Gu Shiyang, the producer of *Land*, also acknowledged the vulnerability of investors when interacting with star professionals. In 2003, on behalf of the *Land* investors, he negotiated with a star director for the project. The star director raised three conditions: (1) he had the right to modify the script; (2) he had the right to employ his own crew and charge the production (including editing); (3) he had the right to employ his own executive producer to manage the schedule of production and the budget. In other words, the investors and producers would lose control over the production process (personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010).

In fact, market imperatives empower professionals both outside and inside of state institutions, even though their manipulative spaces may vary accordingly. For instance, Bai Ruoyun (2007, 64-65) observes that some influential writers in state television units, such as Lu Tianming (a writer in the China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV), also have power to lobby senior officials and production units so that they permit the production of controversial projects.
Despite the complexity which a market economy brings to TV drama production, arguably, these three significant changes (market motivation, alternative modes of production and relative independence of professionals) have greatly undermined the state’s tight control over TV drama production, and provided possibilities for professionals to exploit. Chinese TV drama no longer develops a single discourse, but multiple, including subversive, ones. The deviant historical drama *Republic* and the critical realist dramas *Land* and *Cadres*, are such instances of subversive discourses. In the next section, I will look specifically at the production of *Land*, to examine how the “independent” mode of production helps TV professionals to create a subversive space in which their cultural politics can be tactically carried out.

### 8.2 *Land* and “Independent” Mode of Production

*Land: Critical Intention and Playing an Edge Ball Game*

The drama *Land* was produced by Gu Shiyang. In 2003 when Gu worked as General Manager for the private Zhonglu Film & Television Co., Ltd (ZFTCL), he read the 5000-word synopsis *Shengwei jishi 省委纪事 (A Story of the provincial Party committee; later *Provincial Party Committee*)* written by Zong Fuxian, a famous dramatist and scriptwriter in Shanghai, and was intrigued. The story was about how a provincial party secretary obstructs the investigation of the collapse of a newly-constructed reservoir dam in order to protect an upright cadre’s promotion. When learning of his father-in-law’s involvement in the dam corruption, the cadre rejects the secretary’s protection and insists on restarting the investigation. The two provincial leaders clash with one another. Gu was very inspired by the synopsis’s bold description of a conflict between provincial party leaders. Although the synopsis was still main melody oriented, he realized that it could develop into a drama which seriously explored the political problems Chinese society was facing. As a graduate

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9 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
from Beijing Film Academy, Gu was looking for (or waiting for) a project which could accurately express intellectuals’ social commitment and concerns. Gu stated: “In China, most TV artists have an ambition to make TV dramas like *Marching Towards the Republic*, which authentically and seriously reflect reality and history. But not everybody can have such a chance to make a drama with one’s heart.”

When Gu first met the scriptwriters, he emphasized his intention to make a critical realist TV drama, defining critical realism as a mode that authentically reflects reality, adding that the main melody strategy was pseudo-realism (which functioned to whitewash reality). He thus distanced his project from main melody drama by clearly aligning it with the critical drama, *Republic*.

However, as a private company, ZFTCL was not enthusiastic about being involved in a production that commented on politics. Gu decided to leave the company and independently run the project. He borrowed money to purchase the copyright of the synopsis from the writer Zong, then handed the synopsis to Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙, the director of the state-owned Beijing Television Art Centre (BTAC). Zheng was also a famous Chinese TV drama director whose work, *A Beijinger in New York* (1993), was highly praised by both viewers and critics (Lu S. 2000). Zheng showed a great interest in this project.

BTAC was a remarkable and influential TV drama institution in China during the 1990s. Because of the operating independence granted under marketized reform, BTAC’s performance in the market was aggressive. It produced China’s first mini soap opera, *Yearnings* (1990), and the nation’s first sitcom, *Stories of the Editorial Board* (1991). Borrowing 1.5 million USD from the Bank of China, BTAC became the first production company in the history of Chinese TV drama to go to America to

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
make *Beijinger in New York* (Bai X. 2007, 109). With the triumph of three groundbreaking and provocative productions, BTAC’s reputation as an innovative production centre was established. Its success in both the market and critical circles even challenged the dominance of CCTV. Yet, since the 2000s, BTAC’s influence had dramatically declined since it made less acclaimed dramas, its programs almost disappearing from the most influential channel, CCTV-1. BTAC urgently wanted to make a significant drama to reconfirm its brand as a producer of high quality dramas.

According to Gu, he chose BTAC because: (1) Zheng, as a famous TV drama director, had also been a critical factor about the genesis of the project—both of them had previously attempted to produce innovative TV drama with sharply political criticism; (2) BTAC’s reputation as a well-known production company would be good in marketing the drama; and (3) BTAC was a subordinate unit of the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Television and Film (BMBRTF). Collaborating with BTAC might help the drama (*Land*) pass censorship restrictions within the BMBRTF. Therefore, Gu’s calculation was a tactic aiming at taking advantage of the state unit (BTAC) to address his market and censorship concerns.

Appreciating innovation and controversy as important components of a successful drama, BTAC responded positively to Gu’s critical orientation. In a meeting participated in by the scriptwriters, Gu, and the directors of BTAC, Zheng pointed out that *Provincial Party Committee* should be the first Chinese TV drama to truly

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13 For accounts for the BTAC’s influence in Chinese TV drama industry, see Zha 1995, 25-54; Bai R. 2007, 63; Zhu 2008, 6-7.

14 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.

15 Ibid. The censoring body at the BRTFB is responsible for censoring all TV dramas made by the Beijing production institutions. In other words, all dramas made by BTAC are censored by BTAC’s overseeing organisation BMBRTF.
embody the nature of officialdom. In doing so, the writers should learn what an official really looked like. It was not to say how an official apparently behaved, but to grasp the hidden principles that actually drove an official. Zheng took himself as an example. Before he took the post of the director of BTAC, he was a TV drama director who could behave at will, and say what he wanted. After being appointed as the head of the state-owned BTAC, he found that he had to hide and repress his emotions and feelings no matter whom he liked or disliked. In other words, officials are like puppets, manipulated by unspoken rules. Zheng’s statement about an exploration of “the official hidden principles” demonstrated that a strong critical voice still existed within the state institution. Lull (1991) has also observed in his analysis of 1980s’ TV productions, “[i]n fact, many ideological twists and turns that have come from the national government itself for the past several years in China have been influenced by nuances originating with workers in television and the other mass media who have dared to author unofficial ideas, accounts, and explanations” (213).

In the scriptwriter Li’s account, Gu’s highlight the breakthrough of the main melody drama’s parameter, and Zheng’s view on audaciously exposing the nature and hidden principles of officialdom actually encouraged the writers to “play an edge ball game” (da cabianqiu 打擦边球)—“a reference to the tactics employed by television professionals to test the boundaries of cultural policy” (Keane 1998, 475). “Edge ball” literally refers to the ping-pong ball that touches the edge of the table to win a point in a table tennis match. To borrow the term as a metaphor, Chinese TV drama practitioners describe a particular production practice in which professionals and investors expand their discursive space. “Playing edge ball” is an “art of the weak” by which professionals and investors disseminate their discourses and at the same time attempt to keep themselves within a safe distance. It is also a risky game, because the ball can be easily played out of bounds. However, high risk sometimes means high

16 Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.

17 Ibid.
returns, especially when audiences are tired of the available motifs of TV dramas and require something more exciting and innovative. For example, the 12-episode acclaimed drama *New Star* (1986) unprecedentedly touched the sensitive topic of political reform and thus provoked enthusiastic responses from critics and audiences. It not only won the national Flying Goddess Award, but also became one of the most influential Chinese TV dramas with an incredible 73.8 percent rating (Zhang F. 2003, 68). Likewise radically rewriting history and exploring the political taboo of democracy contributed to *Republic* being the most praised and influential drama of 2003 (its high viewing rating was up to 43%) (Müller 2007, 2). Although officials considered “playing edge ball” a serious problem and strongly discouraged it, those successful examples still inspired TV professionals and investors to follow this sort of tactical practice (Keane 1998, 498).

During my interview, I asked Gu whether he realized the danger and risk of tackling sensitive social issues, for example, the farmers’ protest and political struggle. He answered: “I didn’t think about risk at all at the beginning. What I wanted was to break through the pattern of the present drama, to cause a great sensation with controversy”. The eagerness for breakthrough and provoking controversy shared by Gu and BTAC led them tacitly to locate *Provincial Party Committee* within the “playing edge ball” game. This tactical practice intended to explore the boundary of exposing contemporary Chinese politics. However, the ultimate goals of Gu and BTAC were different. As a state-owned production unit, BTAC still hoped to move within or just touch the boundaries, but still produce a main melody drama. By contrast, Gu wanted to take *Provincial Party Committee* out of the parameters of main melody drama to make a critical realist drama, which questioned the official ideology.

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18 In a speech at the 16th annual Flying Goddess Award for television drama, Liu Xiliang 刘习良, the former vice-minister of SARFT, condemned “playing edge ball” practiced by practitioners and investors as an ideological problem. See Liu X. 1997.

19 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
Gu therefore resorted to an “independent” mode of production as a means to shift his critical ambition out of the influence of BTAC’s direct control.

The “Independent” Mode of Production and the Cultural Power of an “Independent” Producer

“Independent” TV drama production in the Western context generally refers to dramas made by production companies outside of television networks or major corporations (Dunleavy 134-135, 208-210; Caughie 2000, 191-194). For instance, in Britain, the BBC’s TV drama department and play department were the only drama suppliers for their parent television network in the past. This monopoly over production, circulation and broadcast by television networks was deconstructed from the 1980s onwards. When Channel Four launched in 1982, Caughie (2000) observed, “the independent sector [outside the television network] play[ed] an increasingly significant role in production” (188). Yet, those “independent” productions are not really independent; they have always affiliations with networks in terms of funding, distribution and transmission.

In the context of Chinese TV drama, “independent” production has different connotations. As noted, since the privatization of TV drama production, around 80 percent of TV dramas are produced outside state television stations by private capital. It means that almost all TV dramas in China are classified as “independent” according to the western definition. Additionally, the dominant role of the state in the TV drama industry complicates the Chinese experience of “independence”. Indeed, in the field of Chinese film studies, the term “independent” has created much debate. It often refers to alternative filmmaking outside the mainstream state system of funding, production and exhibition, “with reference to their lack of approval by the

20 For a discussion on the significance of British independent TV drama making, see Chapter Seven “Television Drama and the Art Film: The logic of Convergence”, Caughie 2000, 179-225.
government” (Zhang Y. 2006, 26). However, as a popular cultural product, Chinese TV drama closely interrelates with domestic institutions, market and networks for funding and transmission, therefore the above perspective to define “independence” as being separate from the state system cannot be applied to define an “independent mode of production” in TV drama.

Taking as case studies the Chinese independent documentarians Duan Jinchuan 段锦川 and Jiang Yue 蒋樾, who simultaneously work with state television networks (e.g. CCTV), Berry (2006) discovered a “negotiated relationship between the independent documentary filmmaker and the television stations, and also demonstrates the complexity of maintaining independence” (118). Duan and Jiang do not see their cooperation with CCTV as a backdown or compromise, but instead an opportunity to develop independent creation within the system. By drawing on a Foucauldian approach to power as positive, Berry (2006) argues that, in Duan’s and Jiang’s case, “‘independence’ is also ‘in dependence’” (111). For Foucault (1978), power does not work in one way from the top down, but can also work in the opposite direction from bottom to top (15-49). Thus, in the marketized Chinese context, Berry elaborates that “independence” can be also understood as filmmakers’ bottom-up power to initiate and control their works through “negotiations and relationships they have to develop with others in the matrix of power” (120), instead of something separate from the state system.

Gu Shiyang’s claim of “independence” in relation to Chinese TV drama justifies Berry’s argument. Gu defines the “independent mode of TV drama production” as an alternative approach by which a project is run by an “independent” producer, outside the direct control of all institutions (both the state and the private). Hence the “independent” producer becomes the key concept to understanding “independent”

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21 See also Pickowicz & Zhang 2006, ix; Johnson 2006.
production. Gu explained that an “independent” producer is a special professional who initiates a project (e.g. through purchasing copyright of a script), finds funding (from both state and private sources) for the project, and oversees the whole process of production including scriptwriting, shooting and editing, and even distribution in some cases. Gu’s definition stressed (1) the relative autonomy of “independent” production acquired by working outside the oppressive structures of state or private institutions despite dependence on institutional funding and other resources; and (2) the “independent” producer’s control over production, even though this control has to be mediated with the investors. Thus the “independent” mode of production is distinct from the commissioned or commercialized modes of production used by the state and large private institutions in which ideological or commercial principles and power structures dominate the production operation. Rather “independent” production should be understood in Berry’s sense, in that professionals’ freedom is “enabled and shaped by the changing power dynamics operating in the People’s Republic” (111).

Despite affiliation with institutions and the mainstream system, as Caughie (2000) points out, the “independent” mode of production offers an opportunity for professionals to go beyond the institutional production mechanism and exert their control over meaning construction, allowing “new voices to be heard and new kinds of programming to be seen on television” (188).

It is worth noting that I use professionals or professional intellectuals to name “independent” TV drama makers. As a new kind of intellectual, professionals’ position is neither the May Fourth-style of independent intellectuals (enlighteners and spokesmen of society), who seek their freedom and power outside the system, nor the Party propagandists. Rather they work for clients in the marketized context and bear a

22 In his study on the American Soap Opera Dynasty, Jostein Gripsrud (1995) also points out that the TV drama producer is a very special kind of artist. “He or she does have a central creative role, but this role … includes a financial responsibility and interest” (29).

23 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
fragmented position negotiating between intellectuals, entertainers and propagandists. They are what Yu Haiqing (2009) terms mediators, who tactically manifest the intellectual spirit via complex mediations between intellectuals’ logic, the Party logic, the market logic and the people’s logic. Yu argues that professionals as mediators do not entail passivity, but instead signal “both opposition in alliance and alliance in opposition” (143). Yu explains that mediation among different logics have been characteristics of Chinese intellectuals’ politics. “In producing the ‘unofficial’ and disguising it as the ‘official’, Chinese intellectuals are perfecting their craft as mediators” (143). In this sense, professionals as mediators can be “tacticians” and “artists” of resistance.

Arguably, the “independent” producer Gu Shiyang was such a tactician who artfully exploited the power gained from the marketplace to maintain his control over the production through negotiation. Discussing the project with BTAC, Gu asserted that Land had to operate within the “independent” mode of production so that the professionals could have the autonomy to create a ground-breaking drama.24 Zheng Xiaolong understood Gu’s concern and agreed with him that the “independent” mode of production, which could greatly reduce institutional restrictions, would encourage artistic creation and innovation.25 BTAC’s positive attitude towards the project Provincial Party Committee restored the interest of the ZFTCL. The two TV drama production companies (one state-owned, the other private) signed a contract with Gu on the project. The contract stipulated a partner relationship between BTAC, the ZFTCL and Gu. As an “independent” producer Gu was responsible for the investment of the script. If the completed script was approved by the two investors, they would purchase the copyright from Gu and Gu would continue to be in charge of production. BTAC as the investor was responsible for passing censorship, promotion and

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
distribution, while ZFTCL was only an investor and did not directly involve itself in the operation of the project.\textsuperscript{26}

Gu thought it important that “independent” producers own the copyright of their script. He said: “a good script which shows a bright market potential is a necessity for the ‘independent’ producer to attract other investors to join the project. If you have a copyright of a prosperous project, you have more counters to bargain with investors for more power over the project. Conversely, if you do not possess a copyright, the negotiating room may be much less”.\textsuperscript{27} Based on this view, Gu rejected two other investors’ financial backing of the scriptwriting in order to keep control of the project.\textsuperscript{28} Thus possession of script copyright and exploitation of the BTAC’s zeal for influential, innovative production became Gu’s tactics to maintain his power over Land’s production.

The “independent” mode granted Gu a greater autonomy over scriptwriting, selection of crew (i.e. director, actors etc.), set up and management of budget, shooting and editing. In the next section, I will examine how the “independent” mode helps professionals in the construction of oppositional meanings and preservation of the meanings through negotiation with investors.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} According to the contract, if BTAC and ZFTCL disagreed with the completed script, Gu had a right to terminate their collaboration to seek other business partners. Gu stated in the interview, if the copyright of the script was jointly held by him and the investors at the beginning, he would find it difficult to continue running the project if they disagreed over the script. The reason for BTAC and ZFTCL to approve Gu as the “independent” partner in charge of the project was mostly due to his possession of the copyright and partly to Zheng’s (as an artist) understanding that artistic creation should be given more freedom (personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010).
8.3 Scriptwriting: Construction and Negotiation of Intellectual Discourses

*Script and Hierarchy of Meaning Construction*

In the context of Chinese TV drama, scholars and practitioners all stress the importance of a well-developed script. For example, in his study on TV drama, Zeng Qingru 增庆瑞 (2006) concluded, “script, script, it is the essence of a drama” (79). Echoing Zeng’s view, the “independent” producer Gu also regarded script as the determinant force in market competition. He explains,

> A television drama is long, complex, episodic, multi-stranded narrative and is different from the two-hour-long format of a film. In making a film, the pace of shooting is much slower, less than twenty shots per day. But when making a TV drama, a director needs to complete over 100 shots per day. Basically the director does not have time for artistic refinement. Moreover, in common practice, the TV drama director does not write a shooting script that transforms the words of the script into design of shots and camera movement as film directors do. He/she decides the arrangement of shots, camera angles and movement on the shooting location. Under such intense working conditions, Chinese TV drama directors really rely on the script for their creativity….. It is a disaster for a producer to shoot a drama when the script is immature. It is costly and creates much more uncertainty over the quality of the drama when a producer is making a drama at the same time the script is constantly under modification. It is a better as well as a common practice to shoot a drama based on a refined and well-written script.29

Gu’s comments demonstrate how the script dominates the common practice of Chinese TV serial production. Meaning is firstly and foremost encoded and constructed during scriptwriting, and activated and animated during shooting and

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29 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
postproduction. In the following sections, I will explore the tactics taken in the
scriptwriting process of *Land* in relation to oppositional meaning construction.

*No-boundary Writing Approach: From Breakthrough to Resistance*

Given the importance of the script, when the writer Zong Fuxian was ill and incapable
of carrying on the scriptwriting, Gu selected two scriptwriters, myself (Ma Weijun)
and Li Yanxiong to take over the creation of the script. Gu sent Zong’s synopsis to
us. After reviewing the synopsis, we both agreed that Zong’s story had the potential to
develop a critical realist drama. During the initial script discussion, we decided to
extend the synopsis into a social analysis to tackle Chinese rural problems, and
decided to adopt the critical realist mode to make a drama which authentically
represented the situation from the perspective of the exploited.

In realizing the importance of creative autonomy in the creation of a subversive drama,
Gu emphasized to us: “you don’t need to consider censorship and any ideological
constraints when you write the script. Don’t wear a straitjacket, or dance in iron
chains. If you do this in this way, you would suppress your talents and capacity as
well. What you should consider is a breakthrough, a breakthrough …” As a result,
Gu gave the scriptwriters total freedom. This *wubianjie xiezuo* 无边界写作
(no-boundary writing) approach arguably even went beyond “playing an edge ball”
game. The most striking feature of the “*no-boundary writing*” approach was that it
created a non-institutional scriptwriting space in which only the “independent”

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30 Li’s *Qingman Zhujian* 情满珠江 (Romantic Pearl River, 1993) and my *Heroes Never Regret* won
the first prize for excellent TV serials at the prestigious national TV drama Flying Goddess Award in
1994 and 1996 respectively. We had thus established a reputation in scriptwriting circles.

31 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010; personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May,
2010.

32 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
producer Gu and the writers participated. To further support the scriptwriters’ personal creation and artistic pursuit, Gu encouraged us:

You can ignore any interruptions and treat others’, even my comments and suggestions, only as a reference. Write what you think may be useful for a breakthrough drama in terms of social and political criticism .... Self-censorship is a consideration at the next stage, not right now .... If the completed script were objected to by BTAC that showed a different initiative from ours, I could opt to dissolve my cooperation with it and find other adequate investors.33

By taking the “no-boundary writing” approach, we, as scriptwriters, researched Chinese rural society, economy and politics. Cao’s non-official sociological study on Henan rural problems (Yellow River) and Wang Yuewen’s and Yan Zhen’s novels about officialdom became important references. Based on these non-official resources and references, we modified Zong’s synopsis and transformed his innovative main melody drama into resistance.34

Zong’s invention was to develop (1) a drama revolving around a dramatic conflict between two good guys, Luo and He, instead of conventionally between good and evil; and (2) a drama in which a provincial Party secretary as the highest Party leader being allowed to appear in TV drama was seemingly “challenged” (“breaching” a political taboo). However, in Zong’s story, following the main melody convention, the dam event was isolated and disconnected from its social context. Therefore, the conflict between the two good guys was divorced from specific social relations, and was merely located at the abstract, ethical and individual level. The morally noble He sacrifices his personal political career to protect another upright cadre Luo for the

33 Ibid.

34 Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
sake of the public interest.\textsuperscript{35} He’s sacrifice for the public good ensured his morality and authority in the story. Thus the conflict did not pose a challenge to He, nor to the current political system behind He. The story cleverly lauded the two Party representatives through their collision. In this light, Zong’s invention was still within main melody parameters.

Conversely, Gu and the scriptwriters attempted to create instead a critical realist drama by making four fundamental changes to the synopsis. Firstly, we placed the dam event and the conflict between He and Luo within the particular social struggle between the farmers and the cadres. By aligning Luo with the farmers, He with the cadres, the conflict between the two thus turned into a social confrontation. The personalized and moral conflict between Luo and He was thus transformed into a challenge in which He’s political value and practice were questioned, and the hidden political principle of blind loyalty to the senior officials was violated. Furthermore, by repositioning the isolated dam event within the social context, the tragic consequences of the faulty dam construction and collapse became a metaphoric narrative to symbolize problematic Chinese reform under the arbitrary political system.\textsuperscript{36}

Secondly, we (the scriptwriters) added two additional dramatic events (conflicts) in the narrative structure: the farmers’ demonstration against the government’s overtaxation, as well as the governmental falsification of achievement. Aiming at implementing social inquiry, the farmers’ economic difficulties (over-taxed and illegal levies) were depicted as originating from political oppression (an over-sized bureaucracy and the government’s common practice of promoting false achievement). Therefore, the two social events attempted to reveal the real social contradiction, that

\textsuperscript{35} At the end of the synopsis, Secretary He forgave Luo’s offences and selflessly recommended Luo as his successor to the central government. See Zong’s synopsis (personal collection, 2000).

\textsuperscript{36} Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010. For analysis on the metaphor of the dam event, see Chapter Five.
is to say the class struggle between the under-privileged peasantry and the privileged ruling class.

Thirdly, by echoing the director of BTAC Zheng Xiaolong’s intention to uncover the nature of officialdom, the script pushed its social inquiry into Chinese politics. Inspired by deviant novels about officialdom (e.g. National Portrait and Waverling Water), the scriptwriters summarized the hidden principle of officialdom as “catering to seniors’ favor and sticking to their instructions.” (blind obedience to one’s superiors). By this hidden principle, the directives from those in charge were seen as being authoritarian law even when they were clearly wrong. Serving senior officials was prioritized ahead of serving the people. Therefore, political authoritarianism was seen as being responsible for the cadres’ corruption.37 The scriptwriter Li explained: “he (Ma Ming) is portrayed as a victim of the corrupt system as well. He is a kind of tragic figure, or in our design, ‘a virgin compelled to be a whore’”.38

Fourthly, as noted in Chapter Four, in Zong’s synopsis, Secretary He’s suppression of Luo’s investigation into the dam scandal is motivated by He wanting to protect Luo’s promotion. However, Luo’s father-in-law’s crime does not affect Luo’s advancement in the end as He believes. There is an obvious rupture between Secretary He’s action (terminating the dam investigation) and the happy ending (Luo’s promotion). Zong admitted that this inconsistency derived from the contradiction between his innovation (eulogizing two good Party high ranking cadres via a pseudo-challenge) and the main melody formula (i.e. a happy ending in which the Party hero must be rewarded). We deliberately kept this narrative flaw in our script so that the happy ending became problematic and less believable.39

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37 Ibid; also see the Outline of the Land’s Main Characters (personal collection, 2003).
38 Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
39 Ibid.
In short, embedded in the “no boundary writing” approach, the scriptwriters of Land reoriented Zong’s synopsis from being an innovative main melody drama into that of a critical realist drama. On the cover page of the modified episodic story outline, the scriptwriters wrote a short description of the drama: “A debate on the issue of ‘sannong’ in an agriculture province in central China is developed into a cruel political struggle among the number one, two, and three provincial leaders. This is the first Chinese political TV drama in a real sense that truly reflects politicians’ soul and innermost being.” This claim of the “first Chinese political TV drama” indicated the intent to build a new non-official genre (“that truly reflects politicians’ soul and innermost being”) in the name of an innovative main melody drama.

Mediation and Yin-Yang Face Tactic

The scriptwriters’ and Gu’s nonconformist orientation caused a certain amount of anxiety and fear amongst the investors. While acknowledging the novelty and boldness of the script, the investors worried that Land went too far and could have trouble with official censorship. Recognizing the political risk, the investor ZFTCL withdrew from the project. With some measure of caution, BTAC asked Gu to send the script to the Party’s Central Discipline Inspection Commission for approval. Gu and the scriptwriters needed to mediate their oppositional meanings with institutional interests. As discussed above, for TV professionals, negotiation was a tactic to secure the resistance needed to break through the industrial and administrative restraints, rather than settling for compromise.

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40 See the cover page of the revised episodic story outline (personal collection, 2003).

41 The writer Li defined political drama as deploying critical realism to explore the essential issues of the political system and politicians and asking for political transformation (personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010).
In his study on Chinese mediation journalism, Yu Haiqing (2009) also finds Chinese journalists have a *yin-yang* face. The concept of *yin-yang* face “refers to the pairing, mixing, and compromising of two different and opposing faces” (138). *Yin* means the identity of journalists as the propaganda workers of the Party, while *yang* refers to the identity of journalists as intellectuals. With the *yin-yang* face, journalists “function in [the] system, but with an outsider’s spirit” (136), showing “the contradictory manifestations of professionalism in Chinese journalism” (138). The switch between *yin* and *yang* is thus, as Yu illuminates, a media professionals’ tactic for mediating between the party line, the market line, and the intellectuals’ line, to facilitate their critical articulation at appropriate moments through appropriate venues. I argue that *yin-yang* face can also be an “art of the weak” by which media professionals manage to show their *yang* face to the public, disguising their legitimate *yin* face.

Gu and the scriptwriters of *Land* also utilized the *yin-yang* face tactic in order to resolve the contradiction between their critical purpose, the investors’ innovative main melody orientation, and state censorship. They talked themselves in *yang* face to stick to their critical intention, but appeared to the investors and administrators in *yin* face, by claiming that *Land* was indeed an innovative main melody drama. The *yin-yang* face tactic was deployed by Gu and the scriptwriters in two dimensions: at the operational level and at the scriptwriting level. At the operational level, Gu masked *Land* with a *yin* face (main melody drama), which consoled BTAC and the administrator, and in fact attracted a new investor. When the investor ZFTCL pulled out and BTAC worried about the potential political danger of the script, Gu negotiated with BTAC and promised: (1) that he would take responsibility for securing official permission of the project from SARFT instead of by CDIC. The reason behind Gu’s suggestion was to avoid double official examination. According to state regulations, the proposal and synopsis must be reviewed and approved by SARFT before a TV drama project begins production. Therefore, SARFT’s approval was compulsory but the CDIC’s was optional. For Gu, fewer official interventions would be less trouble; (2) he would find another investor to take the position vacated by ZFTCL; and (3) he
would adjust the script to reduce BTAC’s anxiety. BTAC agreed with Gu’s suggestions.42

Gu renamed the script with the main melody title *Fruitful Land*. The title suggested an optimistic hope and promise, and moreover it clearly indicated that the drama was a rural-themed drama (a genre consistently attractive to SARFT).43 He also asked the scriptwriters to write a main melody style 1000-word story synopsis for the SARFT review. In this short synopsis, the protagonist Luo was described as a scholarly Party cadre who sacrificed his family interests to find a successful way of solving Chinese rural difficulties. Through Luo’s deeds, the synopsis claimed that the drama embodied the Party’s concern for farmers and thus eulogized the Party’s thought of the “three represents”.44 Gu submitted this main melody synopsis to SARFT and it was understandably approved.45 The proposal review system established by SARFT was politically designed to guarantee that the sanctioned drama aligns with the state permitted paradigm (Bai X. 2007, 90-91). However, in this case, the review system was bypassed by submitting a “false” synopsis. Realizing its inefficiency, SARFT abolished the proposal review policy in 2006 (93). Within the context of marketization and privatization, TV professionals and investors always tried to play “art of the weak” to take advantage of administrative gaps to realize their various interests.

Gu’s *yin-yang* face tactic to repackage *Land* as an innovative, main melody drama also successfully attracted the interest of Shanghai 999 Entertainment Co., Ltd.

42 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.


44 See the 1000-word synopsis of *Land* (personal collection, 2003).

45 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
S999ECL was a private company which had made many successful, popular dramas. After a certain amount of commercial success, the company was looking for a quality drama project which could further elevate its reputation in the market. After examination of the script, they thought that *Land* was a groundbreaking drama that could attract a large amount of attention from audiences and critics. According to Gu, as a private company, S999ECL was more favorable to the script’s radical intention. The General Manager Yang and Deputy President of the Board Fang of the S999ECL were originally officials who realized the inappropriateness of the political system like Zheng. When they were in the system, they did not dare express their condemnation. After they were out of the system, they felt that it was time for them to point out the wrongs of Chinese politics to audiences. Based on this critical motivation and market estimation, S999ECL quickly joined the project and took over the marketing business of the project.

At the scriptwriting level, we modified the script by adopting a *yin-yang* face tactic which we termed as *sa gouxue* 洒狗血 (sprinkling doggy blood)—a writing practice that showers certain main melody components (doggy blood) within critical narrative. The purpose of “sprinkling doggy blood” was to confuse the investors and the prospective censors by mixing a small amount of typical main melody content within the drama. For example, to tackle the investors’ concerns about the FEA’s militant contradiction with the government, we “compromisingly” added a scene in which the farmers set up a CCP branch within the FEA which seemed to be under leadership of the Party. Yet, the CCP branch in the FEA had no narrative function. After mentioning this once in the drama, it never appeared again. In the legal fighting

46 Fang was once deputy director of the propaganda department of the CCP Shanghai Committee, while Yang was once the general manager of the state-owned Shanghai Paradise Corporation Co., LTD (SPCCL).

47 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.

48 Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
between the FEA and the government over the unlawful agriculture levies, the CCP branch did not help the government to dissolve the farmers’ resistance or play any role in negotiating between the farmers and officials. Thus, the FEA’s identity as a grassroots’ organization that challenged government wrongs and defended the farmers’ welfare remained unaffected. The principle of “sprinkling doggy blood” was to restrict the doggy bloods only as the face value, not to disturb the characters’ critical orientation, narrative progression, or intellectual articulation of the drama.49

The “sprinkling doggy blood” satisfied the investors. They sanctioned the revised script. However, when the director Fu Dongyu stepped in, he regarded these parts of “sprinkling doggy blood” as being redundant with no connection to the main storyline. From an aesthetic perspective, Fu strongly suggested cancelling or shortening them. Gu and the scriptwriters frankly argued that it was a masked tactic and an inevitable price to be paid for legitimizing their criticism.50

The Director’s Contribution to Scriptwriting: Intensification of Resistance

After approval of the modified script, Gu was “independently” in charge of the production and maintained his power over the project. Initially, BTAC strongly recommended its own director to direct the drama, but Gu worried that the involvement of BTAC’s director might interrupt his control over the production and stifle the critical realist orientation of Land. Therefore, he insisted on appointing his former working partner Fu Dongyu 傅东育 as director.51 Fu was a young director and once successfully collaborated with Gu on the drama Wutong Yu 梧桐雨 (Love of buttonwood).52 Since then they became close friends. They shared similar aesthetic

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
52 Love of Buttonwood is a mini-soap opera that depicts the ups and downs of a bourgeois Shanghai family in the 1930s. It was one of a few successful dramas in the market run by Gu in the ZFTCL. The
and political pursuits. Although Fu was not yet a big name in the industry, Gu was quite confident that Fu’s involvement would guarantee and reinforce the critical realist direction of the script, rather than distract or subvert it.\textsuperscript{53} Because General Manager Yang of S999ECL knew Gu and Fu through the successful production of the drama \textit{Love of Buttonwood}, he supported Gu’s decision. BTAC withdrew its recommendation of its own director.\textsuperscript{54}

After going through the script, Fu agreed that the script broke through the paradigms of previous dramas by unprecedentedly investigating the sensitive issue of political reform. The next stage would involve improving the script rather than radically changing it. In November 2003, Fu and Gu came to Guangzhou to meet with the scriptwriters. Fu expressed his opinions about improving the script during their three-day meeting. Since Fu had no problem with the noncomformist and provocative orientation of the drama, his opinions basically enhanced the oppositional discourses already established within the script.\textsuperscript{55} For example, in the “Xinglong falsification of achievement” narrative of the original script, Luo was portrayed as a hero who resolutely fought with Major Ma and Governor Feng against promoting the false Xinglong experience. Fu suggested that, in this narrative sequence, Luo’s intellectual weakness should be highlighted. Fu proposed: when facing Ma’s and Feng’s pressure, Luo was actually hesitant and silent in the end. Revealing the fabrication of the

\textsuperscript{53} In China, TV drama directors always revise scripts at their will and consequently may divert the completed dramas from the original script. For a discussion of the unbalanced power between a TV drama director and writer, see Li and Fan 2006, 43.

\textsuperscript{54} Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
Xinglong experience was eventually undertaken by Luo’s ex-wife Wei who told the truth to Secretary He. He severely condemned Luo’s vacillation.\textsuperscript{56}

Fu’s proposal contributed to the construction of Luo’s intellectualized image which separated Luo from the main melody, charismatic, clean official model. Luo’s weakness and hesitation to fight wrongdoings emphasized the determinant role of the people in social transformation as represented by Luo’s ex-wife Wei. In the scriptwriters’ belief, as the writer Li claimed, political and social reform must be carried out ultimately through mass participation instead of through intellectuals’ heroic feats.\textsuperscript{57}

There was some disagreement between us, the scriptwriters, and Fu. Fu insisted on rewriting the first episode. In the modified script, the drama opened with the farmers approaching the local government to protest against the overtaxation imposed by the local cadres. At that moment, the local leader was giving a report to the provincial working team led by Luo. The farmer’s radical action offends the leader and he orders local policemen to suppress the protest. The farmers show their anger by smashing a government sign. In the ensuing chaos, Luo is bullied by the angry farmers. Later, the furious farmers even occupy the railway station and force Provincial Secretary He to meet with them.\textsuperscript{58} What Li and I tried to do with the first episode was to maximize the farmers’ fury and objection against the government so that a solid foundation of social inquiry can be established. Fu worried that the strong and potentially subversive expression delivered in the first episode would encounter troubles during the censorship process. In the end, Gu supported the scriptwriters and vetoed Fu’s suggestion.\textsuperscript{59} This example indicates that the director Fu’s influence on the script was

\textsuperscript{56} Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} See the first episode of the modified script (personal collection, 2003).

\textsuperscript{59} Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010; interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
conditional. When his opinions supported the critical realist intention of Gu and the scriptwriters, they would be adopted. Otherwise, they would be rejected. The original provocative orientation of the scriptwriting was thus strengthened rather than threatened by Fu’s involvement.

*The Investors’ Final Examination and Alteration of the Script*

As noted, a script is always a site of symbolic struggle, in which professionals and institutions compete against each other for establishing their own discourses. From the economic perspective, modification of a script to adjust the “inappropriate” narratives is much cheaper than revising a completed drama. With such a view, after the scriptwriters modified the script again according to Fu’s suggestions, the investors of *Land* undertook a final examination of the revised script before the drama was shot.

The opinions from S999ECL focused on the hero Luo’s romance and family life. They thought that the dramatic portrayal of the love triangle between Luo, his ex-wife Wei and his subordinate Kong was unrealistic (too dramatic), and thus disturbed the seriousness of the drama. S999ECL had been never bothered by the script’s bold political criticism, but were only concerned about the artistic quality of the drama (that it be realistic rather than dramatic).\(^{60}\) However, BTAC and the new investor BMBRFT were more concerned about the political content.\(^{61}\) They worried that the ambiguous depictions of Secretary He and Luo might affect these two Party characters’ positive images. Also, the explicit portrayal of the political struggle between the three provincial leaders would cause some negative reactions amongst

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\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) According to Gu, BMBRFT joined the *Land* project just before the drama’s shooting, when BTAC was short of cash. After reviewing the script, BMBRFT decided to invest in the project, instead of lending capital to BTAC. Although BTAC actually did not invest money in *Land*, it was still involved in the project on behalf of BMBRFT (personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010).
viewers. The investors demanded a final script revision to tackle the issues raised. Although the investors’ intervention resulted in some reduction of critical articulation in the script, the impact was still limited due to Gu’s control over the script revision. Moreover, with Gu’s manipulation, the revisions, which were endangered by institutional interference, were carried out not only in a compromising way, but also in an intransigent way.

The final alteration of the script was conducted by Gu, Fu and a script assistant in Yunnan province during the shooting preparatory period. At that time, the crew had been organized. Gu and Fu selected the actors and shooting locations, and simultaneously worked on revising the script. Because of the closeness between script revision and shooting, the script was revised in a rush and did not aim at a huge change but at adjusting individual plotlines. According to the investors’ comments, the alteration focused on four aspects: (1) dissolving the triangular romantic relationship between Luo, his ex-wife Wei and his subordinate Kong; (2) weakening Wei’s and Kong’s question on Luo’s hesitation to fight with Secretary He regarding investigation of the dam scandal; (3) softening He’s disappointment with Luo after their argument and enhancing He’s consistent support for Luo; and (4) downplaying the political struggle between Secretary He, Governor Feng and Vice-Secretary Luo.

My aim now will be to evaluate the impact of these alterations on the construction of the critical meaning of the show.

62 Ibid.
63 According to the contract, once the script was approved in principle by the investors, Li’s and my job as scriptwriters was completed. For this reason, we did not participate in the final modification of the script (personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010).
64 My account of the alterations is based on my interviews with the producer Gu and my comparison of the last version of our script with the completed 24-episode drama. See the last version of script Land by the scriptwriters (personal collection 2003).
In our last version of the script, in the inception, Luo, and Wei, a painter, are a couple whose marriage is in crisis. Even though they try to mend the rupture between them, Luo’s career transformation from a chancellor of a university to a politician intensifies their family conflict. Luo’s opponents attempt to influence his political stance through the financial sponsorship of Wei’s personal painting exhibition. Luo points out to Wei that it is disguised bribery and asks her to cancel the exhibition. After a furious quarrel, Wei wraps up the preparation of her painting exhibition by rejecting the sponsor’s support, as well as her marital relationship with Luo. Soon after, she re-marries Kong, a subordinate of Luo and her childhood friend. The first five episodes of the script end at the dramatic moment when Luo is facing both his political (being removed from the post of the Xikou municipal Party secretary) and marital (divorce) failures while Wei and Kong are celebrating their wedding. A strong tragic feeling as a consequence of Luo’s involvement in politics is established. In the revision, the triangular romantic relationship between Luo, Wei and Kong disappeared. The relationship between Wei and Kong was that they were close friends. Two years after Wei separated from Luo, they started to develop a romantic relationship. For the investor S999ECL, it seemed to be too rushed and irrational for Wei to quickly remarry somebody just after a divorce. This opinion, which aimed to reduce the dramatization of the romantic portrayal of characters, had little impact on the original oppositional meaning construction. Luo was still kept as a tragic figure who suffered double (political and marital) failures from the start of the drama.

However, alteration 2 and 3, to a certain extent, affected the oppositional meaning. In the scriptwriters’ script, there are two scenes condemning Luo’s hesitation to take on the dam investigation. The first is aimed at Luo before he goes to He’s office to ask for the letter which accuses his father-in-law of a crime. His ex-wife Wei comes to Luo’s office building and shows him a photo, evidence of the dam’s poor quality. She angrily rebukes Luo’s hesitation to investigate the dam scandal, suggesting that he instead intends to protect his father-in-law. Wei contemptuously says to Luo: “If old
Kong and I emotionally owed you before, now, it is you, Luo Hansheng who owes us, to owe the 150,000 victims in the flooded area. You can never pay back this debt!" The second scene of condemnation is when Kong learns that Luo’s father-in-law is involved in the dam scandal, and Luo dissolves the municipal investigative team under pressure from He. Kong comes to see Luo at a municipal cadre meeting. He satirizes Luo: “How dare you say that your action is for the sake of the public interest if you are not clean?” Luo is irritated. When he is back upon the rostrum of the meeting and facing hundreds of his subordinates, he feels there is no room for him to retreat. In the next scene, Luo rings He to express his challenge by demanding to restart the investigation.

In the script, Luo’s challenge is explained not only in terms of his intellectuals’ stance for justice and truth, but more importantly from the pressure of people represented by Wei and Kong. This is evident from the narrative lay-out: (1) Secretary He rejects Luo’s request on the investigation—Luo’s inner struggle—Wei’s question for Luo—Luo’s furious argument with He; (2) Secretary He once again orders Luo to dissolve the municipal investigative team—Luo’s hesitation and agony—Kong’s denouncement of Luo—Luo’s break-up with He. Luo’s two challenges to He are connected to Wei and Kong’s critical stimulations. Luo is situated between the pressures generated by two irreconcilable forces: the people and the political authority. His inner conflict and sufferings are directly associated with the clashing social structure. Yet, in the drama, the scenes of Wei’s and Kong’s rebukes of Luo were omitted. As a result, the emphasis on the people’s role in driving Luo’s rebellion was

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65 In Li’s and my final version of the script, as I mentioned above, Wei marries Kong soon after she divorces Luo. Therefore, Wei feels apologetic to Luo all the time. But this romantic plot is cut off from the drama; see the script, personal collection 2003.

66 See the Episode 19 of the script, personal collection 2003, 8.

67 See the Episode 19 of the script, personal collection 2003, 12.

lessened. However, the plotlines in which Luo’s former secretary Chen and the journalist He privately investigate the dam corruption remain unchanged. Chen’s and He’s personal investigation provided the key evidence of the crimes involved in the dam construction, pushing Luo to resolutely fight Secretary He. As Liu Fusheng (2005) notes, the unlawful investigation of private eyes on official corruption explicitly demonstrates that it is an action of society (the people) against the state. It conveys a message that the state law enforcement is unreliable and untrustworthy (148). In this light, the people’s pressure on Luo and denouncement on the system represented by Chen’s and He’s private investigation are still solidly weaved into the narrative structure.

In similar reductionist terms, an important scene is also cut from the script. In the script, after Luo submits his resignation, Secretary He feels disappointed and comes to Xinglong Township. He encounters Luo in this scene and is surrounded by thousands of farmers who plead with He to keep Luo in his post. The number of farmers increasingly grows. Luo escorts He to his car. The script describes the scene as follows:

The car is slowly moving forward through the crowd. More and more farmers are coming. They silently give way. There are people on both sides of the road. One can strongly feel the public opinion and emotion. Luo is very moved and his eyes are full of tears, while He is shocked. The queue of the crowd on the both sides of the road is long and seems endless …

After this scene, He goes to Beijing to hand in his resignation to the central government and to recommend Luo to succeed to his position. It is clear from the above narrative configuration that He’s final choice of Luo is not only due to his morality and mercy but more importantly due to public will. Nevertheless, this scene

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was modified in the drama as: He accompanied the retired provincial secretary to Xinglong Township. The retired former secretary was commissioned by the central government to investigate the candidates for He’s successor. During this trip, He unmistakably expressed his preference for Luo, even though Luo challenged him not long before. Due to this alteration, He’s mercy and morality is increased whereas the ambivalence and ambiguity originally attached to the image of He by the scriptwriters is decreased.

However, because Gu supervised the alteration of the script, and only the director Fu and the script assistant helped, there was still a certain amount of room for these TV professionals to smuggle critical meanings into the script. This can be seen in alteration 4. In Li’s and my script, there is an intense political struggle between Secretary He, Governor Feng and Vice-Secretary Luo. The character Feng is depicted as a political conspirator who unscrupulously wants to be He’s successor at the price of the public good. Feng takes advantage of Luo’s father-in-law’s involvement in the dam scandal attempting to destroy his rival, Luo’s, political career. When his despicable attempt is opposed by Secretary He, Feng tries to eliminate He. In this sense, Feng is indeed a melodramatic villain.\(^7^0\)

To address the anxiety of the investor BMBRFT, generated by such an intensified portrayal of political struggles among such high rank Party leaders, Gu, Director Fu and the script assistant canceled all scenes depicting Feng’s direct attacks on Luo and He, and therefore dismantled the triangular relationship in the political struggle. This alteration brought two changes. Firstly, Feng was transformed from a villain into a self-interested but cautious middle character who was ambitious but continually placed outside of the conflict between Luo and He. Feng intends to exploit Luo’s father-in-law’s crime to achieve his personal political ambition, but never directly confronts Luo and He. Thus, the evil Feng turned out to be a more realistic,

\(^7^0\) See Li’s and my final version of script, personal collection 2003.
calculating politician, symbolizing the corrupt political system. The transformation of Feng from a stereotypical villain into a vague and treacherous middle character, as I have pointed in Chapter Six, eventually problematized the main melody, clean-official model. Secondly, by redefining Feng as a middle character, the dramatic and exaggerated tone of narrative in the script was largely lowered. The realist quality of the narrative was thus enhanced. This process of revisions demonstrates that the script alteration demanded by institutional interference can also be a practice to re-encode or re-produce the critical meanings in a productive way.

To sum up, due to his personal investment in the script (that is, his ownership of the copyright), Gu gained great power over the creative process of the script. Thus, the final script revision did not overthrow the critical-realistic orientation and social investigation, but merely offset the “stand-outs” to comfort the investors. Although the script needed to be negotiated with and approved by the two investors, negotiation was established by respecting Gu’s preference and orientation towards the script, otherwise investor cooperation would cease. Gu could find other investors for the project. Gu’s cultural power as an “independent” producer continued throughout the subsequent production stages of Land to once again provide creative autonomy for the professionals and guarantee that the making of Land remained critical.

8.4. Making Land: Intensification of Intellectual Discourse

According to the contract signed by Gu and the investors, Gu was not only responsible for scriptwriting, but also for production and postproduction. The “independent” mode of production granted Gu and the director Fu with great freedom during the production period. Gu and Fu organized their own crew, decided on the shooting location in Yunnan province, selected actors and made the shooting schedule. Gu handled the budget and negotiated with the investors. Once the budget and the timetable of spending had been approved, Gu and his crew worked on their own plan. Gu stayed with the crew through the whole production period and completely
controlled the process of shooting and editing. The investors, situated in Beijing and Shanghai respectively, did not interfere with Gu’s processes. Most of what the investors did during production was to transfer money to Gu’s bank account according to the timetable of spending. Occasionally they sent their representatives to the location to inspect the shooting progress and reviewed the completed rushes. The quality of the rushes satisfied the investors whose inspiration for an innovative, influential drama was further heightened.71

Without the investors’ intervention, Gu and the director Fu’s focus was on how to activate the oppositional meanings encoded in the script while making the drama compelling through audio-visual means. For example, in the scene of blowing up the dam, Fu superimposed He’s, Ma’s, Jiang’s and Li’s close-up shots over the image of the dam exploding to visually connect the three Party leaders (Secretary He, Mayor Ma, Deputy Chief Secretary of the provincial government, Li), the hydraulic expert Jiang and the dam collapse. Through this visual connection, Fu intended to encourage viewers’ analytical attention to consider the Party’s responsibility for the man-made flood. Thus, the allegorical narrative, in which the scriptwriters metaphorically used the dam event to symbolize the tragic consequence of the official modernization, was animated by the above meaningful, superimposed shot sequence.72

Oppositional meaning construction continued throughout the post-production of Land. Gu and Fu designed a meaningful shot in the title sequence, which printed two lines of Ai Qing’s famous poem “I Love This Land” on black background. The cited lines were:

Why are my eyes always brimming with tears?

71 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.

72 For an analysis on the critical use of superimposing shot and critical allegory of the dam event in Land, see Chapter Five.
Because I love this land so deeply … (Ai, 1999, 44)

Ai Qing wrote this famous poem in 1938 when China fought against the Japanese invasion. In the poem, Ai Qing expressed his intellectual anger and sacrificial spirit to rescue his motherland from crisis. The sharp contrast between the sad images of the intellectual “I” (bird, hoarse voice, death, rotting feather, tears) and the violent environment (storms, turbulent river, and angry wind) constructs a deep feeling of tragedy in which the weak “I” (the bird) fights the savage enemy (Japanese army) to death for his beloved land.

According to Gu, the motivation to cite Ai’s poem in the last shot of the title sequence was driven by the idea of reconstructing the main melody title *Fruitful Land* with an intellectual connotation. Following Ai Qing’s intellectual pursuit, the quotation suggests that the drama depicts an intellectual journey in which the scholarly knight-errant hero resists the brutal enemy (political authoritarianism) for his beloved land. This intellectual announcement, which repeats at the beginning of every episode,

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73 The whole poem “I Love This Land” is as follows:

If I were a bird,

I would sing with my hoarse voice

Of this land buffeted by storms,

Of this river turbulent with our grief,

Of these angry winds ceaselessly blowing,

And of the dawn, infinitely gentle over the woods …

—Then I would like to die

And even my feather would rot in the soil.

Why are my eyes always brimming with tears?

Because I love this land so deeply … (Ai 1999, 44)

74 For a study on the poem, see Yao J. 2006.
signals that *Land* is not a main melody drama, but a critically-oriented serious drama about intellectuals’ singing, grief and tears.\(^{75}\)

**8.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the production process of *Land* (scriptwriting, production and post-production) in relation to the TV professionals’ practices of resistance and their tactics: playing an edge ball game, the no-boundary writing mode, the *yin-yang* face and sprinkling doggy blood tactics. By exploiting the relative freedom granted by an “independent” mode of production, the TV professionals exercise, what de Certeau suggests, tactical resistance, in which they take a guerilla practice within textual warfare by taking advantage of the uncertain and ambiguous boundary of the official discourse and space. For them, the unclear, grey area within the official discourse and mainstream system is productive in manipulating critical articulation. Although their manipulation and autonomy needed to be mediated within institutional limitations, the TV professionals of *Land* indeed show the possibility that professionals’ cultural power and capital can lead them to brilliantly play the “arts of resistance” in mainstream media, to win the war. Resistance, as I have argued, does not merely mean radical confrontation between media professionals and the dominant power. There is significantly a mediated arena between direct conflict and submission for professionals to tactically speak social truth to public and power.

Having demonstrated professionals’ *mainstreaming resistance* in terms of mediation tactics (exercising resistance in negotiation) within the production process, in the next chapter, I will extend my examination to multiple resistances at different moments of the marketing, censorship, reception, broadcasting and distribution of *Land*.

\(^{75}\) Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
Chapter Nine  *Fruitful Land* and Popular Resistances: Marketing, Censorship, Broadcast, Audiences and Alternative Channels of Circulation

This chapter explores *Land*’s multiple resistances against the state’s control over TV drama at different moments of marketing, censorship, broadcasting, reception and alternative circulations. The power structure of the Chinese TV drama industry is two-way. On the one hand, the state attempts to manipulate content and audiences through regulation, censorship, and monopolizing the broadcast system. On the other hand TV professionals, capital in the form of investors and distributors, and audiences have their own power to resist state manipulation. It is the multi-faceted bottom-up power from professionals, investors, distributors, audiences and their various tactics that I wish to explore. I will first examine how the investors and professionals of *Land* deployed marketing tactics to successfully overcome state monopoly of the broadcast system in order to sell the drama to CCTV. I then explore how the producers took advantage of the many fissures existing within state censorship to bypass the censors’ scrutiny. Thirdly, I examine the sudden official interference with *Land*’s broadcast and how this event provoked the audience’s furious protest on the Sina.com forum. Although the authority was able to prevent *Land* from being transmitted through its domination of the broadcast system, alternative channels (DVDs and the internet) provided an unofficial space for *Land*’s circulation and therefore effectively undermined state control of the circulation of TV drama. Finally, I will also examine CCTV’s rescheduling and broadcasting of *Land* in order to accommodate the tension between the network’s own political commitment and its economic interests. CCTV’s rescheduling practice shows that state institutional practices may be much more problematic than one could imagine.
9.1 Market Tactic: Re-packaging *Land*

As noted earlier, state control of TV drama has been complicated by the commercialization and marketization of Chinese television since the 1980s. Pan and Chan (2000) argue that such marketized reforms resulted in the transformation of Chinese television networks from the previous party organ model to the current market-based party organ model. In this new model, Pan and Chan state: “television remains a party organ and at the same time it has to abide by the market logic and to strike a balance between ideological mission and profitability” (256). The tension between political logic and market logic not only complicates the practices of national television stations but also offers opportunities for TV drama investors and professionals to exploit the tension for their own advantage. As Scott (1990) correctly points out, there are numerous ways for subordinates to practice “arts of resistance”. Marketing tactics are one type of artful performance of the weak in which media professionals and investors manage to sell their deviant dramas within the state-controlled mainstream market.

The promotion and distribution of *Land* was planned and implemented by the investor, S999ECL.¹ Realizing the sensitivity of *Land*, the program’s marketing tactic aimed at repackaging the drama with a marketable image so as to address both the political line and marketing line of potential buyers (the national television stations). S999ECL’s promotional material diluted Gu and the scriptwriters’ subversive intention and instead emphasized the investors’ definition of an innovative “main melody” quality drama. To meet the expectation of national television networks, the material concentrated on these three aspects:

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¹ General Manager Yang of S999ECL, who once led the well-known SPCCL, not only maintains good connections with television networks nationwide, but also understands how these networks work and what they want (Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010).
(1) *Land* was a main melody and rural-themed drama that dealt with “sannong”, which had become the government’s fundamental concern. From 1982 to 2004, the successive six number 1 circulars annually issued by central government were all about dealing with the problems of agriculture, farmers and rural society.²

(2) In spite of the main melody, rural-themed claim, promotional material stressed that *Land* was a drama that directly and boldly tackled the problems that occur within rural society. *Land* thus appeared innovative and different from other main melody, rural-themed dramas, which simplistically portrayed rural life. The promotional material implied that *Land* was politically provocative in order to attract audience interest.³ Promotion highlighted the drama’s epic style and provocative features, describing *Land* as a drama that panoramically portrayed the cadres’ and people’s participation in systematic reforms;

(3) *Land* was a quality drama.⁴ In his empirical study of the Chinese TV drama market, Zeng Qingrui (2005, 426) observes that “quality” has become the foremost criterion that determines whether television networks purchase a TV drama. His survey shows that 85 percent of television stations prioritize quality in their purchase practices.⁵ Thus, this emphasis on “quality” by S999ECL aimed at

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³ The claim of being provocative was also part of marketing strategies of other main melody market hits, such as *Heaven Above*.

⁴ By comparing with the American MTM quality drama, Zhu Ying (2008, 73) defines Chinese quality drama as big budget, being made by veteran practitioners and stars, targeting blue-chip demographics, tending to be controversial, and winning awards and garnering critical acclaim.

⁵ Bai Xiaoyi has a similar observation; see Bai X. 2007, 123.
catering to the networks’ market concerns. In the promotional material, besides a long list of stars (i.e. Gao Ming 高明, Chen Xiaoyi 陈小艺 and Xie Yuan 谢园 etc.), it was also noted that the scriptwriting had lasted for two and half years and was revised four times. On the same line, promotional material emphasized the drama’s significant resources and cost. To convert the working dam into a fictional “newly constructed” one, the crew used nine tons of cement. To guarantee the quality of picture and synchronic recording, the crew spent 500,000 RMB to set up 11 interior scenes. To create an epic aesthetic, *Land* employed 6000 extras in total, and to depict an agricultural province panoramically, the shooting locations numbered 120 from village, township, county, from city to province. The numerous characters ranged from a provincial secretary to common farmers. Computer special effects were also deployed to reproduce the verisimilitude of the dam explosion and the consequent flood.  

The promotional material repackaged *Land* as a main melody, innovative, quality drama featuring the “*sannong*” theme, as S999ECL believed that this combination was attractive to the state-owned networks. The “main melody” claim aimed at meeting the political expectation in keeping with the networks’ political identity (as a Party organ), while innovative and quality promotion aimed to tackle economic concerns determined by their market identity (as a market player). With such market calculation, S999ECL circulated this compelling market image of *Land* amongst the media through a promotion campaign that featured behind-the-scenes reports, stories about the stars, interviews with the investors, news about marketing activity, and profiles of the crew. 

In May 2004, S999ECL took part in the Beijing International Broadcast and

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6 See the S999ECL’s promotional material (personal collection 2004).

7 For two examples of promotion material circulated among the media, see Ren N. 2004, and Yin Z. 2004.
Television Week (BIBTW) to market *Land*. BIBTW is one of the main trading platforms of Chinese TV drama and is jointly organized by SARFT and BMBRFT. S999ECL screened an eight minute 47 second trailer for the media and prospective buyers. An article on 16 May 2004 from the *Beijing yule xinbao* (Star Daily) described that, after watching the trailer, media journalists and television buyers “could not help but applaud” (Ren N. 2004).

Trailers are an important means of advertising and selling a TV drama. According to Gu, before the mid-1990s, television stations would often decide whether they would buy a TV drama by the strength of its trailer. Despite the fact that television networks have realized the risk of judging a multi-episode TV drama merely based on a trailer, it has remained the crucial means by which to garner network interest for a particular program. By recognizing the influence of trailers upon distribution, the trailer of *Land* was carefully edited under Gu’s supervision to reinforce its marketing image (a profitable, main melody drama), and to this end was structured in three parts:

1. Compelling narrative conflicts, pivoting on the farmers’ protest, falsifying political achievement and the dam events. A series of demonstrations, quarrels, condemnation and fighting between characters was carefully weave together to construct a series of dramatic climaxes;

2. Emotional conflicts and moving moments, for example, the argument between 

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8 The BIBTW, Shanghai International Television Festival and Sichuan International Television Festival, are three main TV drama trading platforms in China. According to Zeng Qingrui’s empirical research of the Chinese TV drama market, 76.6% of the TV drama production companies surveyed sell their programs through the three television festivals. In this sense, Zeng regards the three television festivals as the wind vane of the Chinese TV drama market (Zeng Q. 2005, 422).

Luo and his ex-wife and their divorce, and Ma’s last words on his deathbed to ask Luo to cover his body with the Party flag at his funeral;

(3) Stunning spectacles, for instance, the flood destroying houses and buildings (highlighting the special effects), and large numbers of demonstrating farmers struggling with military policemen as they attempt to board an arriving train.

In the trailer, bold criticism of rural reality was also emphasized to demonstrate Land’s inventiveness. This suggested that Land did not simply eulogize the Party’s agricultural policy but also depicted the dramatic urgency of many unsolved social and political problems. For instance, in the first part of the trailer, Kong and Luo were shown asking: why was our agricultural business so backward even though we had so many resources and our farmers were the most hardworking and kindest? Why did our cadres clearly know something was false and wrong but still did it? These shots were organized as two narrative climaxes in this first section, implying a serious exploration of social issues. Nevertheless, these critical inquiries were carefully placed within the main melody framework. After the shots of Kong’s and Luo’s questions, an outraged Secretary He was shown pointing out to the cadres that the root of problems lay with the individual cadres who did not take responsibility. Thus through the montage, which connected Kong’s, Luo’s and He’s shots together, an interactive question-answer relationship was constructed. Within the question-answer relationship, He’s interpretation attributed all faults to individual, corrupt cadres, seemingly answering Kong’s and Luo’s questions.

In the same fashion, in the third part of the trailer, after presenting the shocking scenes in which hundreds of protesting farmers struggled with military policemen on a railway platform, the trailer cut to a series of shots of beautiful land full of pretty crops, with Luo’s voice-over informing the viewer that we should lessen the farmers’ burden and allow them to recuperate and multiply on the land. The trailer here suggested that a severe farmers’ riot generated by the wrongs of individual cadres was
addressed through the party’s more benevolent policies, and consequently the land was full of vitality again. The trailer ended on a note of hope and promise.

The trailer, which Gu and his professional partners (i.e. the editor) made, was another evidence of their yin-yang face tactic by which professionals repackaged a collective hidden discourse in the guise of the dominant discourse. The marketing cooperation between the investors and professionals of Land proved successful. Land stood out from the hundreds of exhibited dramas at the BIBTW (Ren N. 2004). Many television stations including China International Television Corporation (CITVC), the subsidiary of CCTV, showed great interest in this drama (Yin Z. 2004). The director of BMBRFT, one of organizers of the BIBTW, Zhao Dongming 赵东鸣, noted that the reason for such interest was that Land met the needs of the market (Yin Z. 2004). He pointed out that, firstly, although the output of TV drama reached 10,300 episodes in 2003, quality dramas were few and Land was one of these few. Secondly, he continued, in recent years, Chinese TV drama mainly specialized in historical and idol dramas. The available themes and genres in the market were narrow and could not meet the multiple expectations of audiences. A drama about rural society like Land rarely appeared on television, but, Zhao predicted, this kind of drama would become popular since the issue of “sannong” had been much discussed in society (Yin Z. 2004). Zhao’s comments therefore showed that the S999ECL’s and Gu’s market tactics had been successful.

The CITVC of CCTV competed with provincial stations to buy Land.10 It consistently negotiated three times with S999ECL for the drama. Besides the marketing tactic, the market and censorship environments also contributed to the stations’ eagerness for Land.

Firstly, Chinese television was facing intense, multi-channel competition. In 2005,
besides the 16 national channels of CCTV, there were 50 provincial satellite television stations that could be accessed nationwide (Hong et al 2009, 46, 51). The battle for ratings and advertising share was fierce; even the largest network CCTV faced a crisis. In 1987, since CCTV was at that time the only national television network, Hongloumeng 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber) achieved over 70 percent of the rating when it screened on CCTV-1. However, Draw Your Sword, the reception champion of CCTV in 2005, gained merely 10.03 percent of the rating under multichannel competition (Yu Y. 2006, 15). The dramatic drop of reception indicates the huge market pressure suffered by CCTV. In the year 2000, CCTV’s primetime advertisement sales dropped nearly 30 percent compared with those in 1999 and 1998 (Chan J. 2003, 168). In contrast, the advertisement sales of local satellite stations increase significantly. For instance, in 2004 and 2005, Hunan Satellite Television copied the program format of American Idol to produce a market hit, Chaoji nüsheng 超级女生 (Super Girl). It attracted a massive audience and its commercials were charged at 112,500 RMB for a fifteen second slot, 2500 RMB higher than the equivalent slot at primetime on CCTV (Hong et al 2009). “Competition from other domestic television stations has ended CCTV’s long-standing monopoly in the domestic market and forced it to adapt to the new media environment” (Hong et al 2009, 50). Within this multichannel competition, every network, including CCTV, desperately sought good programs which could capture audiences, yet remain politically innocuous.

Secondly, as noted, in April 2004, SARFT took harsh measures to tighten the censorship on the “Red Classics” adaptations and remove all crime dramas including anticorruption and police dramas from primetime slots on all television networks. These measures severely affected the market. The market-oriented adaptations of the “Red Classics” and crime dramas, which were the two popular genres during 2002 to 2003, almost disappeared from primetime programs nationwide (Bai X. 2007, 91;
Qian G. 2008, 163). As a consequence, the average viewing rating nationwide dropped 4% in the first half of 2004. CCTV-1 and CCTV-8 ratings also declined dramatically. Under such tough conditions, television stations competed furiously for profitable dramas (Yin Z. 2004). In August 2004, in order to source good dramas, the Department of Film and TV Drama (DFTVD) of CCTV invited the directors and general managers from the 18 largest production companies for a meeting. General Manager Yang of the S999ECL participated in the meeting and CCTV once again showed great interest in *Land*, even though it was in postproduction at that moment (Hong W. 2004).

Television networks’ enthusiasm for the drama empowered *Land*’s investors during the selling negotiation. Considering that CCTV-1 was the most influential television channel in China, possessing a one billion viewership (Hong et al 2009, 52), S999ECL on behalf of other investors signed a sale contract with the CITVC (Yin Z. 2004). CITVC’s offer was generous. According to the contract, CITVC paid around 13 million RMB to purchase *Land*. The first half was paid before the broadcast and the second half should be paid after broadcast. Not only did this contract guarantee the investors of *Land* approximately 5.8 million RMB in profits (the cost of *Land* was 7.2 million RMB), but also promised to offer *Land* the primetime slot (from 20:00 to 21:30 pm) on CCTV-1 (Hong W. 2004). This arrangement enhanced the possibility of *Land* being an influential drama, which the investors and Gu were attempting to achieve.

The story of *Land*’s market triumph demonstrates that producers can have their own power to tactically manipulate the market to secure distribution of their works despite

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11 For example, the number of crime dramas held one third of total TV dramas broadcast during 2003 and 2004. It was the number one genre in terms of both quantity and economic gain in the market (Yu Y. 2006, 5-6).

12 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
the domination by the state over the broadcasting system. However, the state management of the market is not only accomplished via the control over the television networks, but also by censoring TV dramas. The *Land’s* game of the mouse-amusing-the-cat continued.

9.2 *Land* and Cracked Censorship

Censorship is the most important means of the state-party’s control over the television’s dissemination of information. According to the TV drama censoring regulations issued by SARFT in 2004, all TV dramas need to pass through censorship at a provincial or above level, and acquire a distribution certificate before they can be distributed, broadcast, exported or imported.\(^{13}\) Despite the Party’s ideological intention, I argue that the censoring system is not unified and monolithic, but cracked due to the commercialization of the television industry and decentralization of the system. As a consequence, TV professionals and production companies can utilize these fissures to allow their “inappropriate” dramas to bypass censorship.\(^ {14}\) After investigating the transformation of the censoring system in the marketized context, I examine how *Land’s* manipulative tactics and the new censoring contexts allowed the drama to get past censorship.

*Cracked Censorship*

In pre-reform China, in treating TV drama as a tool of propaganda, the Party had set up a centralized censoring system in which the censoring agency of central government was solely responsible for the business of TV drama censorship. This

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\(^{14}\) Lull (1991) has also demonstrated that, because of inefficiency of the state censorship, the politically provocative TV programs *New Star* and *River Elegy* could pass through censorship and were transmitted publicly.
centralized censoring system aimed to firmly control the industry; however, it became inappropriate in the marketized environment. Especially, when TV drama output reached a colossal number per year, e.g. 5000 episodes in 1990 (Bai R. 2007, 13), it was impossible for one agency to censor all TV dramas without affecting the normal operation of the market. As a result, in 1999, SARFT issued *Provisional Regulations on Television Drama Censorship*\(^{15}\) and decentralized the censoring system into two levels: SARFT and the provincial. According to the Regulations, the SARFT censoring body was responsible for censoring TV dramas made by central governmental or army production institutions. Provincial censoring bodies were responsible for censoring the TV dramas made by local production units and companies. In the context of marketization and decentralization of the TV drama industry, official censorship is no longer static and rigid. Rather it is, to a certain degree, flexible to negotiate with the changeable context and multiple interest conflicts inside and outside the censoring bodies.

Regarding the censoring criteria, Bai Xiaoyi (2007, 98) states that the state censoring regulations merely provide some abstract, general principles rather than precise guidelines. Therefore, it is difficult in practice to unify all censoring measures. The state censoring codes are mainly established in two regulations issued by SARFT: “*Provisional Regulations on Television Drama Censorship*” (1999) and “*Regulations on Television Drama Censorship*” (2004). In terms of censoring criteria, the 1999 Provisional Regulations prohibit the following contents: (1) endangering national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; (2) harming security, honour and interests of the state; (3) instigating ethnic separation, breaking ethnic solidarity; (4) leaking state secrets; (5) slandering and insulting others; (6) promoting obscenity, feudal superstition, or exaggerating violence; (7) propagating racial, gender and geographic discrimination; (8) other contents which violate the state’s laws and rules. Most of the

prohibitions are related to political matters. Another part of the criteria regulates the contents which should be excised or revised. They are: (1) erotic and obscene content; (2) murder and violent content; (3) a sequence and plot showing fortune-telling, geomancy, divination and other superstitious activities; (4) a plot to preach religion or images to excessively render a religious atmosphere; (5) a plot which has a bad impact on children and adolescents; (6) a plot that might stimulate international, ethic, and religious conflicts; (7) images that damage natural ecology, or hunt and capture endangered wild animals. The emphases of the above seven articles are moral, religious and ecological.  

Based on the 1999 Regulations, the 2004 Regulations revised and simplified the censoring criteria. The prohibition articles almost remained the same, but the articles about cancellation and modification completely disappeared. Bai Xiaoyi (2007) explains that the reasons for the relaxation of censoring codes are due to society’s increased openness to television content. For example, both the public and censors in 2004 were much more open-minded about sexual matters in TV drama (e.g. images of kissing) than in 1999. SARFT’s revisions were also responding to the market demand for entertainment. In this sense, censoring codes shifted to correspond to social and cultural transformations.

Bai Xiaoyi (2007) argues that these abstract and generalized rules create uncertainty and ambiguity of censoring criteria, thus resulting in inconsistency of censoring practices according to different times, different locations and different individual censors. He explains that the tightness or looseness of the state policies is not the same at different periods. For instance, when the state emphasizes the economic imperatives of the television industry, its censorship tends to be more relaxed. “Different locations” mean that the implementation of censoring criteria at different

16 Ibid.
local censoring agencies is always divergent. Lu Shanjia 陆善嘉, a veteran censor of CCTV, observed that the censorship at CCTV was the strictest, while the provincial satellite TV stations are second, and local terrestrial TV stations the loosest (Chai A. 2008). Bai Ruoyun (2007) also confirms the discrepancy within different censoring institutions. She notes that the writer Lu Tianming chose to work with the local media institutions for the project Pure as Snow because he would be less troubled by the censors at the local television station than at CCTV (74-75). In terms of individual censors, the difference between understanding and executing censoring codes could be wide (98). The divergence is partly owing to the ambiguous imperative of the censoring codes that may result in various interpretations among censors, partly owing to different censors’ divergent political, aesthetic capacities and knowledge that might lead censors to read a censored text differently.

Moreover, a TV serial consists of 20 or more episodes and lasts at least 16 hours long.\textsuperscript{17} The episodic and multiple narrative format of TV drama allows a much more complex configuration and organization of meaning and discourse, and thus creates obstacles for censors’ decoding. Chinese film director Zhang Yimou once explained how the massive number and long length of novels made censorship almost impossible:

In China today, novels surpass the level of films tremendously. This is because each year thousands of new novels and short stories are published, and no one can keep up with them, especially the government censors. Not even their subordinates in their offices can keep up, so they just give up trying. That’s why good novels get through the system, and that’s why Chinese writers look down on film-makers. (Yang M. 1993, 306-7)

\textsuperscript{17} Bai Ruoyun (2007) observes: “a typical drama serial [in China today] has 20 to 35 episodes of roughly 50 minutes each” (9).
Arguably, the large volume of TV drama output (around 10,000 episodes per year), and long episodic, complicated narrative format similarly make censorship much more difficult. In the normative pattern of censorship practice three to four censors watch a drama separately or collectively for several days, depending on how long it is. For example, at CCTV, the censoring team at the Chief Editorial Office (CEO) comprises 15 censors who are divided into four groups. Many of them are retired. When censoring a TV drama, the censors normally watch over ten episodes per day, 16 episodes at most. They censor four dramas per month (Chai A. 2008). The process of continuously long-time watching is physically, mentally and intellectually tiring. This time-consuming, intensive censoring pattern and the symbolic complexity of episodic TV drama may confuse or frustrate censors.

Finally, the pressures engendered by marketized reforms among censoring bodies and individual censors also undercut the efficiency of censoring practice. At the administrative level, local television stations or some national production units and the local provincial censoring agencies normally all belong to the local Radio, Television and Film Bureaus. In this respect, the political and economic interests of local national television institutions, censoring bodies and the local administrative agencies are bound together (Dai Q. 2004, 69). Because of the political and economic bond, the TV dramas made by local national television institutions are less troubled by local censorship. As a result, one practical tactic for TV drama professionals and investors to pass their sensitive dramas through censorship is to become a business partner with a local TV network. This intertwined relationship between the producers, the national institutions, and the censoring bodies muddles the censors’ neutrality.

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18 According to Li and Gu, many local censors previously worked at local television stations as editors or managers. They have close connections with local television networks (personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010; personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010).

19 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
Censors’ personal economic connections with production units also bring their identities as state-party bureaucrats into question. On 24 October 2004, Feng Ji, the former deputy director of DFTVD at CCTV, was tried by the First Intermediate Court of Beijing. Feng’s corruption was revealed during the trial. He was bribed with 600,000 RMB to allow two TV dramas to go through the departmental censorship and be screened on CCTV (Ling S. 2004). In 2007, the famous Chinese writer Wang Shuo accused Beijing TV drama censors of corruption via a post on his web blog. According to Wang, since 1997, TV drama producers had been forced to bribe censors in the name of “censoring fees”. The “censoring fees” reached 30,000 to 50,000 RMB per censoring, per censor. Furthermore, censorship was often held at luxury hotels. Producers had to pay for accommodation, lavish banquet, and entertainment for censors, even in some cases, pay for them to use sex workers. Wang linked the censors’ corruption to their absolute power: censors could determine a drama’s fate in the market by issuing or rejecting a distribution licence. Wang’s accusation was backed up by the director and producer Ye Jing, who was a victim of corruption. In my interview, Gu also noted that producers of a TV drama normally needed to give each censor 1000 to 2000 RMB before censorship, and then various other fees occurred during censorship (e.g. transportation, accommodation, meals, etc.). If a drama had obvious political problems or needed to go to SARFT for censoring, the producers’ spending would be much higher. In his research on corruption within the state broadcast and television sector, Cheng Gang (2008) echoes Wang’s account to describe officials’ (including censors) corruption in the

20 See the article, Wang Shuo jubao dianshiju shencha you heimu, daoyan Ye Jing ye rentong 王朔举报电视剧审查有黑幕，导演叶京也认同 (Wang Shuo exposés the inside story of TV drama censorship, the director Ye Jing confirms it), available at http://www.stnn.cc/ent_focus/200706/t20070612_556025.html (accessed 28 September 2010).

21 Ibid.

22 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
sector as power rent-seeking. An official leases his power to help renters avoid state regulatory control and censorship in exchange for his personal economic gain. In this light, corruption (bribery) can be read as a practical means of capital to exert its influence on censorship, to confront political restriction with its economic power.

In short, the previous monolithic censorship system has been fractured by decentralization and marketized reforms. Different censoring bodies and individual censors are no longer unified because of the ambiguity of censoring codes, individual censors’ different political and aesthetic competencies as well as personal and departmental conflicts of interest. In 2002, SARFT issued a circular about strengthening the censorship of TV drama. It explicitly pointed out that some provincial censoring agencies did not fulfil their duties in allowing dramas with serious political problems to pass through censorship to be transmitted.23 The case of Land shows how censorship, far from being a straightforward, clearly regulated and unified process, is a very complex and unpredictable matter, open to a number of possible negotiations and outcomes.

Land and Censorship: Uncertainty of Censorship and Tactic of Manipulation

As noted in Chapter Eight, the “independent” producer Gu chose to collaborate with BTAC in order to be in a better position when dealing with the censorship. BTAC was a subordinate TV drama production unit of BMBRFT, the local administrative authority that was also responsible for the censorship enterprise in Beijing. The connection between BTAC and BMBRFT would help Land pass the censorship in Beijing. With such a tactic in mind, when BMBRFT wanted to invest in the project and at the same time kept its hands out of the production process (BTAC represented it to monitor the production), Gu happily accepted it. Gu’s tactic was proven as workable. The censorship process for Land in Beijing was basically smooth as the

censorship authority, BMBRFT, was one of the investors in this show.

*Land* was, however, facing some troubles. The main problem was derived from the aggressive description of the farmers’ demonstrations in the first episode. In the first scene, when protesting farmers flooded into the local government courtyard, the local police attempted to stop them by firing into the sky. It irritated the farmers who then smashed the government sign and beat Luo who was trying to talk with them. The censors demanded cuts to all shots about police firing, farmers fighting and the scene in which Luo was being beaten. In the same fashion, all of the shots where the farmers rushed to an arriving train at the local railway station and struggled with military policemen, were gone. In spite of these limitations, the two farmers’ protest scenes remained but in a less militant manner (without the shots depicting the local police and military policemen’s suppression).

Another concern of the censors was the drama’s sympathetic description of the victim/villain Ma. In the original version, when Ma learnt that he had a fatal disease, he refused to be hospitalized. Ma went to the most difficult irrigation construction site and worked hard until falling unconscious. Before his death, Ma asked Luo if it was possible to place a party flag over his body at his funeral. Luo was speechless. The scriptwriter Li claimed that the sympathetic portrayal of Ma lay in the scriptwriters’ intention to locate Ma as a victim of the arbitrary political system rather than a stereotypical villain.\(^{24}\) Ma’s deathbed request to have a party flag covered on his body symbolized the problematic nature of the Party and implied that the majority of the Party cadres were similarly victim/villain as Ma was. The censors were anxious about the ambiguity which Ma expressed. As a result, Ma’s feat on the irrigation construction site was shortened; his deathbed words were omitted and redubbed with

\(^{24}\) Personal interview with Li, 11 and 12 May, 2010.
new lines of Ma’s confessing to his crimes.25

Despite the demanded changes to reduce the magnitude of the farmers’ demonstration and the ironic, vague depiction of the corrupt cadre, the cuts were limited and the adjusted version of Land after censorship remained at 24 episodes. The drama’s critical orientation, structure and content also remained unchanged. Because any substantial change in Land’s narrative and characters would lower its market value and ultimately impair the BMBRFT’s (one of investors) own economic interests, censorship was in fact purposefully contained. Thus, to an extent, the economic imperative overshadowed the censors’ political duty. It is worth noting that the censoring traces which redubbed new dialogues over Ma’s deathbed words are easily noticed in the adjusted (post-censorship) version. In these dialogues, the lips are out of sync; furthermore, a careful viewer should be able to notice that the content of the re-dubbed dialogues does not fit the general tone of the TV drama. Thus censorship can also create a contradictory space in which a sudden “odd” discrepancy attracts the viewer’s attention for further inquiry.

After passing censorship through the BMBRFT’s censoring agency, Land was granted a distribution license which allowed it to be legally distributed to television stations nationwide except via CCTV. As the only official national television station, CCTV has its own censoring body to examine all the selected TV dramas. According to Lu, the CCTV’s censor, there are two levels of internal censorships within CCTV. One is the preliminary censorship by the DFTVD. Another is the final censorship by the CEO (Chai 2008). Despite the stricter censorship at CCTV, the “independent” producer Gu said that the censoring process of Land in CCTV was surprisingly favorable. The censors at the DFTVD and the CEO highly praised Land as an

25 In the revised version, Ma’s redubbed new line becomes: “I am really guilty … I should be punished by law. It was me who killed Zheng Jianguo and others [in the flood].” See Episode 20, the final version of the script, p 14 (personal collection 2004); Episode 24 of the DVD.
inventive, excellent main melody drama.

There were four factors that contributed to the censors’ affirmative responses. Firstly, the censors’ expectation for innovation and something non-stereotypical and exciting led them to view *Land* positively. A censor from the CEO of CCTV said: they were surrounded by numerous boring, stereotypical, formulaic main melody dramas all the time and they felt sick. However, *Land* was different. He said that it was an exciting, innovative, main melody drama. The censors at the CEO really enjoyed watching it and praised *Land* as the most attractive main melody drama they had watched in recent years. The censor’s statement showed that the censors were similarly tired of banal, clichéd main melody dramas and *Land* met their eagerness for innovation.

Secondly, like the censoring codes, the notion of main melody is similarly ambiguous and invites multiple interpretations or even misunderstandings. In his study of Chinese main melody literature, Liu Fusheng (2005, 1) elaborates that main melody is not a concept with a definite connotation, but one with flexibility and vagueness. As noted in Chapter Two, to reject a narrow and rigid definition, the former General Secretary of the CCP Jiang Zemin advanced the concept of “encouraging diversity” (3) to endorse main melody works absorbing other cultural forms (e.g. popular cultural form) and alternative discourses (e.g. Confucianism). Liu comments that, through “encouraging diversity”, the state-party deliberately leaves the boundary of main melody unclear and elastic in order to keep the official genre’s innovative vitality and development (16). Because of this vagueness, like the differing interpretation of censorship codes, the understanding of main melody also varies according to different people, different times and different locations. Particularly innovative dramas play edge ball games to test the boundary of main melody and aim at engendering something new. They invite even wider and more divergent interpretations and confusion. Lull (1991), for example, pointed out that, when the politically-provocative

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26 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
drama *New Star* was aired, it stimulated controversy. Different officials “were divided in their view of the appropriateness of the program. Some were adamantly opposed to it” (103). Some supported it. Arguably, the censors in CCTV may have held a more open-minded view to favorably define *Land*’s critical articulation as main melody innovation.

Thirdly, the individual censors’ cultural capacity and background also influenced their decoding of the censored text and the concept of main melody. Some critical voices could even be heard from some censors, the censoring report from the DFTVD being an example. The report praised *Land* for its authenticity in describing social contradictions, its boldness of handling urgent issues of rural society, its truthful, non-stereotypical construction of characters, and its moving portrayal of the characters’ familial and romance relations. The report also praised the narrative conflicts of *Land*, such as the moments when Luo challenges his political mentor He for the sake of the farmers and when Governor Feng compels Ma to falsify political achievements. In conclusion, the report stated:

> The plot of the drama is clear and well-knitted. The set-up of the story was authentic and believable. The drama does not preoccupy itself with the subject to mechanically set up rural reform within the plot. Conversely, it is multifaceted and vividly reflects the images and feats of contemporary rural reformers. It objectively represents the contemporary ‘*samnong*’ issue. It does not evade and whitewash the contradiction between the local government and the farmers. It remarkably portrays different sorts of cadres. As a result, the creation of the drama is successful. *Land* is not the stereotypical main melody drama which straightforwardly illuminates the motif, [but an innovative main melody drama].

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27 See the censoring report (personal collection 2004).
The report clearly expressed the censor’s preference for authenticity over a preoccupation with theme and subject, objective representation of social issues and contradiction over mechanical whitewash, innovation over banality. The writer of the report was a young graduate from the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) and had worked on contract at CCTV for only three years. At CCTV, there are two types of employees: permanent employees and those on contract. “While the permanent staff are considered state employees, those on contract are attached indirectly to ‘state television’” (Pan & Chan 2000, 241). As a result, the contracted staff’s loyalty to CCTV would be much more complicated. In this sense, Pan and Chan (2000) conclude, “The party’s control over the staff of a TV station is thus weakened” (241). Because of the censor’s social status as both a young graduate of the BFA and a contracted staff member at CCTV, arguably his aesthetic preference and political inclination was closer to Gu and the scriptwriters who also graduated from the BFA. As a young sympathetic intellectual, it was not surprising that he prioritized authenticity, objectivity and innovation over political propaganda. Thus the cracked censorship system here allowed a certain critical judgment as well. My informant told me that the young censor wrote the report on behalf of the head of the DFTVD because the head was too busy to carefully censor Land. Thus this positive censoring report had a certain amount of authority.

Fourthly, as stated, when Land was being censored by CCTV in September 2004, CCTV was suffering huge audience erosion due to SARFT’s persecution for its profitable crime dramas and adaptation of “Red Classics”. CCTV urgently sought attractive dramas to elevate its ratings. Land was considered as having great potential for audience reception success by CCTV. Under extreme market pressure, the censors of CCTV may have been forced to tolerate Land’s boldness and unorthodoxy to meet audience expectation. In his study of the Chinese television audience, Zhang Tongdao (2009) discovers that viewers are not satisfied with the quality of television programs alone. “They expect to hear more stories about everyday people, as well as more exposés and critiques of social injustice” (174). Lull’s (1991) study of New Star and
Bai Ruoyun’s (2007) study of *Heaven Above* take controversy and social criticism as major contributors to the overwhelming popularity of these two dramas. In this light, *Land*’s boldness and critique could also be treated favorably “in the name of ‘improving audience appeal’ … or ‘getting closer to the audiences’” (Pan & Chan 2000, 244).

The zeal for innovation, certain critical voices, the ambiguity within the notion of main melody, and market considerations all contributed to the CCTV censors’ positive view of *Land*. With the favorable comments from CCTV’s censorship, *Land* was scheduled as the 2004 finale drama which would be screened at primetime, on 20 December 2004 on CCTV-1 (Wang 2004). In the CCTV-1 scheduling tradition, the opening TV drama (screened on 4 January) and the finale drama are regarded as the two most important dramas of the year. The schedule of a finale drama and the next year opening drama crosses the New Year holiday and links to the Chinese Spring Festival holiday. They are considered as the vital time slots to attract more audiences who have more leisure time during the holidays. To schedule *Land* as the finale drama therefore demonstrated the recognition of its quality by CCTV.

On 15 December, a news conference to promote *Land* was held by the DFTVD of CCTV in Beijing. Facing over one hundred media journalists, the director of DFTVD, Wang Guohui 汪国辉 declared that the drama *Land* would be broadcast on CCTV-1 at primetime (20:05-21:35pm) on 20 December. Media nationwide quickly spread the news. The scenario of the first 18 episodes of the show was published in *Zhongguo dianshi zhoubao* 中国电视周报 (Chinese Television Weekly) (on December 18 2004). A 30-second promotion trailer was repeatedly screened on CCTV-1, 2, 4 and 8 from 15 until 19 December. However, at the last minute before

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28 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.

29 Ibid.

30 See the two examples, Chen 2004 and Liu 2004.
Land was broadcast, it was suddenly pulled from the schedule by CCTV without publicity. According to Gu, some senior authority thought that Land was politically dangerous and problematic and ordered it be re-censored. This intervention did not mean the end of Land’s resistance, but elicited new resistances among audiences and alternative distributors (DVD and internet). To analyze the issue is the task of the next section.

9.3 Resistance against the Official Intervention: Online Audience Forum and Alternative Circulation

Intervention from the Top

The reason for the sudden withdrawal has never been publicly explained by CCTV. A short article cited an insider’s story which confirmed that the interference was motivated by Land’s sensitive content and theme (Wang 2004). Gu remembers that he was urgently called in by CCTV in the morning of 16 December 2004, and was told by CCTV censors that they were instructed from above that Land had serious problems and needed to be revised immediately before broadcast. The censors highlighted their seniors’ uneasiness about the drama, especially the first episode which directly depicted farmers protesting against the government, e.g. the characters crowding into Xinglong township government and occupying the local railway station. The censors demanded Gu cut all of the first episode and complete revision by 18 December, two days ahead of the screening schedule. Gu spent two days shortening the 24-episode version into a 23-episode one. However, he was officially told that

31 Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
32 According to Gu, there were two versions of stories about the sudden intervention. One story said that Hu Zhanfan, Vice-Minister of SARFT, watched Land before its screening and was offended by the drama’s subversive description. Another story said that it was Hu En 胡恩, Vice-Director of CCTV who detected the oppositional imperative of Land and he interfered with its transmission (personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010).
Land was pulled from the screening schedule on 19 December because the new version was still sensitive and inappropriate for transmission.

This intervention from the top signaled that Land had been redefined by the senior official(s) from an acclaimed innovative main melody, quality drama to a “notorious” and “problematic”, defiant drama. It once again verified there was indeed a gap between different censors, and between different censoring bodies who perceived the same drama quite distinctively. The question is: among the various official voices and definitions of a drama, which official voice and definition was more authoritative? Who had final power to determine whether a drama was subversive not?

Scholars (Liu F. 2005, 23; Li & Fan 2006, 110) have remarked that whether the innovation of a main melody work violates the boundary set by the dominant discourse ultimately depends on the authoritative agencies’ verdicts and public reactions. For instance, initial adaptations of “Red Classics” were considered as main melody dramas to promote the Party’s mythology. Even though the subversion of the original revolutionary legends became a trend in the genre in 2003 and 2004, provincial censors still gave a green light to these dramas. It was not until these dramas provoked severe public debates, that their subversive quality was then finally identified by SARFT. SARFT took harsh measures against these dramas’ violating practices to tighten censorship of the genre (Qian G. 2008). This showed that, to a certain extent, censorship was relative and reactive, rather than absolute and provocative.33

Ironically the official move against Land, motivated by the ideological intent to

33 Another example can be seen from the senior leaders’ intervention on the transmission of the drama Republic on CCTV. It was not until the show sparked a heated debate among audiences and scholars during the screening in 2003, senior officials then ordered a re-edit of the unscreened episodes and banned the drama from a second run; see Müller 2007, v-vi and 2-3.
control the audience, helped produce noncomformist audiences. Since the S999ECL’s and CCTV’s intense publicity of Land encouraged the audience’s high expectations, it was understandable that the senior officials’ unusual interference really offended audiences. On the Sina online forum dedicated to Land, for instance, CCTV’s sudden cancellation of Land’s transmission becomes a social event whereby participants’ discussion of the event turned into an aggressively political demonstration against the official Chinese media and the Party’s politics.

Land and Online Forum: Audiences’ Resistance

There are 165 postings in the Sina online forum to Land, dated from 12 December 2004 to 16 September 2008. Deducting repeated posts, there are 109 left. Among the 109 posts, there are 62 (56.9%) that directly respond to CCTV’s cancellation of the Land broadcast.34 Excepting two postings which regard the cancellation as just one promotion strategy of the CCTV and Land producers, the other 60 posts overwhelmingly express antagonism towards CCTV’s actions. Like a fuse, the officials’ intervention ignited the majority of the forum participants’ repressed anger at the Party and its policies. While these postings cannot be simply read as representative of public attitudes in general, they are still evidence of some resistance. The viewers, who post to support the TV drama and complain about its cancellation, are keen on producing, spreading and sharing their views with others. The 60 critical responses focus on two aspects: criticism of the Chinese media and the Party with a certain measure of resentment. Many participants interpret CCTV’s move against Land as evidence of the Chinese media’s counter-democracy and ideological

34 The rest of the 47 postings (43.1% out of 109 posts) comment on the drama Land concerning the authors, actors, narratives and relevant social meanings. 41 postings out of the 47 view Land positively for its audacious criticism of reality. For example, a participant wrote: “This drama is really remarkable and meanwhile very heavy as well. The unfolding of different sorts of sharp contradictions shocks audiences in a way which is even stronger than what has depicted in books and newspapers …” (Extract of Posting 51)
Nowadays CCTV is more and more disgusting! How could it (*Land*) be called sensitive? It merely tells some truths. What kind of television is CCTV!!! (Posting 61)

Isn’t there any media to transmit truth? Jia Zhangke [a film director of Sixth Generation] said that the reason for him to shoot *Xiao Wu* is the sad fact that there is nobody to make films to reflect reality! However, when a TV drama about reality is about to appear, it is suddenly removed like this … (Extract of Posting 89)

CCTV is perhaps least trustworthy. What it is doing is cheating! (Posting 58)

Since the issue of *sannong* has been raised [by the Party], why do they dare not face the issue? Is this media with Chinese characteristic? The media is indeed ‘the organ of the government’, not ‘the organ of the people’. (Posting 111)

The CCTV and the Chinese media are relentlessly denounced by the “netizens” as “disgusting”, “least trustworthy”, because they are “the organ of the government” which dare not tackle real social issues. These criticisms exhibit a popular demand for democratic communication, for alternative programs like *Land*, which authentically and seriously reflect reality.

Other forum participants, on the other hand, do not blame just the Chinese media. Instead they treat the CCTV’s cancellation as a larger political issue and propose radical political actions against the Party regime:
How can you [the Party] shout in your mouth to be true to facts all the day since you dare not air a drama to speak of a few words of truth, to portray several real issues and to shoot several authentic images? How can the issues of sannong become a sensitive topic and leaders dare not face it? Can you do something for the sake of the people? How can you claim to represent the people’s interests? Ha, ha …. Ridiculous! … I feel we are back to the day of the Cultural Revolution. (Posting 63)

An organization [the party] fears a TV drama. It indicates that it is so weak and dark. (Posting 83)

Are farmers foolish?! Do you treat farmers who provide you food as stupid?! A drama to reflect the difficulties of farmers has just been publicized to be broadcast, and then it is not permitted on air! Farmers were relied on during the war time [the Anti-Japanese War and Liberating War by the Party]. Can their predicaments be neglected since it has been in peace time? Where are our party and servants? Are you dead? Please, stand up to rebel! My peasant brother! I am on your side forever!!!!!!!! (Posting 4)

My peasant brothers, I want democracy and freedom! (Posting 68)

For these radical “netizens”, the issues of the farmers’ difficulties and the cancellation of Land would be not solved until a grassroots rebellion for democracy and freedom. The circulations, discussion, debates and reaction of these politically subversive meanings on the Land forum facilitate social interactions among the “netizens”. They turn individual meaning-production into collective responses, a public sharing of active political participation in social transformation.

Besides appealing for political protest, some forum members appeal to other viewers and ask them to use their audience power to resist the CCTV’s scheduling control.
All friends who bought *China Television Weekly* sue them [CCTV] in court. They changed [the publicized schedule arrangement] as they want. (Posting 66)

For this participant, the schedule arrangement, which was published in the newspaper *China Television Weekly*, is a “contract” between audience-consumers and CCTV. The change of schedule is a violation of audience-consumers’ rights. Another participant advances a more practical method of resistance associated with the power of a consumer:

Support piracy! Let’s buy pirated DVDs and watch the drama! Five yuan per disc, support! (Posting 85)

Audiences as customers have the right to choose which cultural product they want and in what way. They not only fully recognize the ideological manipulation of the Chinese media, but consciously seek ways of resisting it. Posting 85 shows the state’s control of TV content is far from being airtight. DVD and internet television constitute alternative channels for audiences to break through the official control of *Land*’s content and broadcast.

**DVDs and Internet Markets: Non-official Space and Democratic Way of Reception**

In a study of the Chinese TV drama audio-visual industry, which consists of a legal and a pirated market, Cai Rong (2008) observes that an alternative circulation system or non-official space has been constructed to allow government-prohibited productions to be distributed and consumed (141-142). She gives an example: after the controversial drama *Republic* was banned by state administrators from its second run, the serial was widely available on shelves in DVD shops and from pirated makeshift stalls on the street. Moreover, “the government ban promoted [the show to] those (many of them college professors and scholars) who normally did not watch TV
drama to buy the [VCDs or DVDs] to see what the fuss was and participate in the debates [on the drama]” (141). According to Müller (2007), the screening version of *Republic* consisted of 59 episodes. The contents of the last ten episodes were severely edited. Some episodes were even shortened (less than their original 47 minutes). Significantly, in the 60-episode DVD version, all the edited parts were recovered (v, 2).

In the same vein, when CCTV ordered *Land* be shortened to 23 episodes and then later withdrew it from the screening schedule, the 24-episode version on VCD and DVD immediately appeared in the market(s) (both the legal and pirated). The scriptwriter Li said that retailers exploited the CCTV’s mysterious withdrawal as a selling point to claim *Land* as a banned drama that was not allowed to be broadcast. Ironically again, the official intervention seemed to build audience enthusiasm for the show. The *Land* VCDs and DVDs became very popular in the markets. Li recalled that he went to a DVD shop near his home three times and finally bought the product. As the Chinese writer Han Han 韩寒 comments on the irony of the official censorship,35 “there is something that you [officials] really don’t want me to know, so now I really want to know” (Osnos 2011, 56). For many Chinese people, “whatever you’re trying to cover up becomes the truth” (56).

Cai (2008) ascribes the non-official space and alternative circulation system constructed through the VCD and DVD market mostly to the pirate market, beyond governmental control. The pirated market is approximately nine times larger than the legal market (134).36 Another factor contributing to the build-up of this non-official

35 Han is a Chinese cultural youth idol and a famous blogger, who actively criticizes the government in his books and blogs.

36 Cai Rong (2008) provides statistics that could give a glimpse of the scale of the unofficial pirated market: due to the impact from pirated DVDs, in 2003, “the legal sales of video products across the
space is the regulatory gap between the broadcast of TV dramas, and video (VCD and DVD) publication. According to *Regulations on Content Censorship on Audio-Visual Products*, issued by SARFT and Ministry of Culture (MOC) in 1996 and in 2007 respectively, the censorship of audio-visual products (including domestic VCDs and DVDs) is conducted by joint committees organized by SARFT and the MOC or their local branches.\(^{37}\) Despite state censorship of domestic TV drama VCDs and DVDs, there is no article in the regulations demanding that the VCD and DVD versions of a TV drama be compatible with the broadcast version. Because of this regulatory gap, many TV drama producers can legally make two versions of their dramas—one for public broadcast, and another for the VCD and DVD market. In the case of *Land*, the investors sold the VCD and DVD copyright (24-episode version) to the private Guangdong Face Audio & Visual Production Company (GFAVPC) after the drama acquired a distribution license from BMBRFT (before the CCTV’s scheduling). Even though *Land* was ordered by CCTV to be re-censored and reduced to 23 episodes, GFAVPC still released *Land* as 24 episodes in December 2004 to capitalize on the official persecution (the drama was promoted as a banned drama in the video market).\(^{38}\)

Finally, the bureaucratic gaps in the administration of video markets also undermine the efficiency of state control over content. To describe these gaps, Cai Rong (2008) writes:

> The Ministry of Culture and cultural administration departments of local governments are in charge of the wholesale, retail, renting, public projection, nation declined by 70-80 percent, an estimated loss of about RMB 100 million for China’s video manufacturers” (135).


\(^{38}\) Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
and import of audio-visual products, while oversight of publication, production, and reproduction of audio-visual products falls under the jurisdiction of the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and the press and publication administration departments of local governments. (130)

In other words, SARFT’s power concentrates on TV drama production and broadcasting, and thus has little impact on the VCD and DVD production and market. As a result, Cai (2008) concludes: “Video viewing subverts state restrictions, allowing viewers to choose ‘what to think about’. Many titles on ‘restricted topics’ were readily available in the video market. Official quotas apparently had no effect” (140).

SARFT’s control over TV drama content and broadcast is also frustrated by internet television, another alternative channel of TV drama circulation.39 The 24-episode version of Land can be accessed via the Baidu and Sogou websites. The nearly nine minute promotional trailer is available on many websites (e.g. the Sina website). Some prohibited content, e.g. the farmers’ struggling against military policemen at the local railway station and Ma’s deathbed request for a party flag to cover his body at his funeral, omitted after the first censorship by BMBRFT, still appear in the trailer. In this sense, the internet constitutes an even larger non-official space to allow various politically “sensitive”, “inappropriate” TV drama material (promotion, trailer, interviews and the drama itself) to bypass state censorship and be exhibited publicly.

39 The 28th Survey Report on Chinese Internet Network Development published by the China Internet Network Information Centre shows that the users of internet video reached 300 million in 2010. See the report, available at http://www.cnnic.net.cn/dygg/dygg/201107/t20110719_22132.html (accessed 22 July 2011). A survey conducted by the journalist Li Gu (2010) also confirms the fact that watching TV drama on the internet is becoming a new trend among viewers in China. The demography of internet viewers has been expanded from the age of 20s and 30s group to the 40s, and even the elderly.
Henry L. Hu (2011) details two ways in which the internet challenges SARFT’s regulations. First, “[t]he multiple online channels for videos broke the uniform authority of the SARFT” (533). The substantial numbers of internet television providers (ITPs) are private-owned or even foreign-capital-participated companies (e.g. Sina.com, Sohu.com and Baidu.com). Their engagement in internet television infringes upon SARFT’s monopoly over TV drama broadcasting. Consequently, “SARFT can only ask them (ITPs) to conduct self-censorship and hence it can only impose limited influence on them” (533). Second, although SARFT is in charge of controlling online information flow, internet television providers are mainly supervised by the Ministry of Industry and Information (MII). “Because the MII is not responsible for any content regulation and is mainly in charge of technological and business issues, it lacks the incentive to regulate the end users” (534). For example, some journalists observe that an alarming number of illegal shows circulate on the internet, even though state regulations stipulate that all video programs broadcast online have to be submitted to SARFT for approval. Internet television thus sets up a non-official alternative broadcast channel, by offering audiences more unofficial content than the dominant, state-owned television networks.

The significance of the new technologies (DVD and internet) lies not only in creating a non-official space, but also in creating a new mode of reception. Video and internet viewing allows viewers to establish their own timetable and pace of watching (Hu K. 2005, 182; Caughie 2000, 194-195). Cai (2008) points out that the TV schedule and broadcasting is the means of institutional control over viewers’ daily lives. These two aspects tie public space and private space together to ensure “the participation of the


whole population in national life” (142). Detached from a public timetable, video and internet broadcasts grant viewers the power to free themselves from state scheduling restrictions, permitting them to arrange their own leisure space and time. The survey carried out by Li Gu 李谷 (2010) shows that the main reason viewers choose to watch TV drama online is due to the fact that viewers can consume TV dramas according to their own schedule and be less interrupted by advertising. Moreover, video and internet viewing constructs a new pattern and experience of watching. It can allow viewers to watch a drama repeatedly, can permit them to stop or return to their favorite parts, to grasp more details of the drama. Video and internet viewing provides the possibility for viewers to deeply explore the drama they are watching. In the study on TV drama fan culture, Jenkins (1992) observes that video watching is an important means for TV fans to explore and understand their favorite text. Fans “may choose simply to review a favorite scene, to stop the tape and replay a difficult or significant bit of dialog, or trace the progression of a character’s costumes and hairstyle across a number of episodes, fastforwarding through the narrative to focus only on the elements of particular emphasis upon this viewing, facial expressions and body movements are scrutinized for subtle insights into the characters” (72). A retired researcher of Chinese traditional medicine told me in an interview that she watched Land on DVD three times. For the first two times, she concentrated on the narrative and actors’ performances. The third time, she repeatedly reviewed the farmers’ demonstration scenes in the first episode and flood scenes in episode 15 to compare the farmers’ anger and their misfortune, and tried to figure out the enigma of the farmers’ hardship.

In short, VCDs, DVDs and the internet constitute an alternative channel and offer a more democratic mode of reception. This distribution mechanism not only allows viewers to access prohibited content but also empowers them to structure their leisure time and encourage them to actively participate in meaning construction. As the state administration cannot stop the subversive practices of Land’s professionals and investors, similarly it cannot prevent DVD publishers, retail sellers, internet service
providers and audiences from exploiting administrative fissures for democratic communication and free expression. After exploring the various resistances in relation to industrial, marketing and reception practices, I will turn to an examination of CCTV’s rescheduling *Land*. This (re)scheduling practice shows CCTV’s political compromise to its economic interest, another example to demonstrate contradiction and discrepancy within national institutional practices.

### 9.4 Rescheduling *Land*: CCTV’s Compromise and Minimizing Reception

Although *Land* was shortened to 23 episodes by cutting many provocative and inflammatory scenes and shots, CCTV understood that the drama’s oppositional orientation mostly stayed unaffected. How to handle the drama became a dilemma for the CCTV. The simplest solution was to put *Land* in storage forever. Yet, CCTV had paid 13 million RMB to purchase the copyright of the drama.\(^{42}\) Suspension of *Land* from broadcast meant a huge economic loss for the CCTV. By contrast, from the economic perspective, the suspension and even cutting one episode did not affect the economic benefit of *Land*’s investors as they had already received money from CCTV on the basis of 24 episodes by contract.

By negotiating the contradiction between its political commitment and economic interests, CCTV delayed the broadcast of *Land* for over eight months, then rescheduled it from its most attentive primetime slot, in the end of 2004 on the flagship channel CCTV-1, to the relatively unpopular, non-prime time slot (from 22:30 to 24:00 pm) on the niche channel CCTV-8. CCTV-8 is the TV Drama Channel

\(^{42}\) According to the contract, the CITVC of CCTV had paid half of 13 million RMB to the investors of *Land* before the program was scheduled on 20 December 2004. Although the transmission was cancelled due to political reasons, CITVC still paid another half to investors on the contracted date due to the personal connection between General Manager of S999ECL, Yang, and the CITVC. Personal interview with Gu, 25 and 26 April, 2010.
which focuses on transmitting entertainment-oriented dramas. It is much less influential than CCTV-1 (Hong et al 2009). According to Du Jie 杜杰, the producer of the drama Chengjie sihan 成杰思汗 (Genghis Khan, 2004), CCTV-1 gained 13 percent of the overall viewership rating between January and September 2004, while CCTV-8 merely acquired 3 percent in the same period (Ling 2004). Due to its influence, CCTV-1 was considered as being of much higher status in terms of ideological importance than CCTV-8. Senior officials hardly watch CCTV-8, especially its non-prime time programs. The inferior status of CCTV-8 thus made it less monitored by authorities.43

By rescheduling Land on CCTV-8 at a non-primetime slot, CCTV could on the one hand gain profit through the attached commercials, and on the other hand minimize its reception and decrease the drama’s social impact. Controversy from the public and attention from senior officials could thus both be avoided. This scheduling practice which aims at returning rather than maximizing revenues is a particular broadcasting practice. It allows television networks to sometimes transmit politically deviant dramas at an unpopular time slot on niche channels to address their economic concerns and simultaneously keep the networks politically safe.

In his study of the Chinese newspaper media, He Zhou (2003) has discovered that state-owned newspapers deploy a strategy of “ideological separation”, which “separate[s] content loaded with Communist ideological values or rhetoric from other content” (205) to handle the tension between their political mission and economic interests. In practice, He explains that there are two types of “separation” in Chinese state-owned newspapers. One is to set up market-oriented newspapers, e.g. evening newspapers, to focus on the public-concerned content and segregate themselves from the heavy-duty propaganda of the Party newspapers. Another is to confine the overtly propagandist content to designated areas, mostly on the front page or important news

43 Ibid.
sections where the needs of political bureaucrats are unambiguously satisfied, while leaving the other areas to cater to the needs of customers (205). The rescheduling of  

*Land* by CCTV demonstrated a similar “ideological separation” strategy at work in Chinese television as well. It indicates that the programs screened on the flagship channel CCTV-1 tend to be more propagandistic and loaded than those on CCTV-8, and the programs screened in the primetime slot on CCTV-1 tend to be more politically oriented than those in the non-primetime slot. By the “ideological separation” (scheduling and rescheduling), the state-owned television networks can reduce incongruence between their ideological tasks and economic interests. The scheduling practice of “ideological separation” by national television networks undoubtedly further downplays the state’s content control over TV drama.

**9.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored multi-faceted power from below that works in the mainstream media milieu. As demonstrated, in the context of the commercialized Chinese TV drama industry, the state’s ideological control over TV drama encounters multiple resistances through every moment of production, marketing, censorship, broadcast, and alternative channels of distribution and reception. Although state monopolies control the broadcast system and set up censorship, professionals and market forces can actively exploit the gaps and ambiguity within state institutions, discourses and regulations to address market demands, bypass political censorship, and manage to broadcast their deviant dramas. Even though the state can ban, withdraw deviant dramas from broadcast, and edit out sensitive content from them with its regulatory power, DVDs and the internet construct a substantial non-official space to allow unofficial content to circulate among audiences. Finally, the state’s ideological intention to control audiences through the manipulation of information flows is also resisted by audiences themselves. Audiences, as a “netizen” asserts on the Sina online forum to *Land*, “are human beings, not your [the Party’s] machine” (Posting 98). They utilize media (e.g. internet forums) to extend the discussion of a
deviant drama (e.g. *Land*) to larger concerns about Chinese society and politics. The interrelation between *mainstreaming resistance* and popular resistances, between different media and channels, indicates a dynamic power from bottom to top at play. It shows a genuine desire for plurality, democracy and free expression at the bottom of the society against the state’s homogenization and centralization.
Conclusion  Mainstreaming Resistance and the Power of the Powerless

There are multiple ways and trajectories along which Chinese media professionals have imagined and practiced resistance. For decades, mainstream cultures (especially official culture) and the mainstream market have been considered as irrelevant to cultural resistance. The radical paradigm, which locates resistance narrowly within a few artists’ non-conformist, oppositional creations, has restricted cultural resistance to being located within strict boundaries. In this dissertation I have challenged those strict boundaries by examining one specific development in Chinese TV drama that points to the existence of a mainstreaming resistance. My two main case studies, Land and Cadres, show how TV drama professionals can carry on a guerilla war in the mainstream field at both the textual level (i.e. critical realism) and industrial level (e.g. “playing edge ball game” and yin-yang face tactic) against the Party’s ideological control. These TV dramas’ mainstreaming resistance highlights three theoretical issues concerning Chinese TV drama, media and cultural studies.

First, from Chapter One to Chapter Seven, by relating Land and Cadres’ critical realism to the May Fourth critical realist tradition, I aimed at complicating the debate about realism in Chinese media studies. Realism is an important critical term and artistic mode in Chinese art and it has been defined from a variety of perspectives via references to its social, critical, socialist, new and old qualities (Berry & Farquhar 2006, 75). My own perspective wishes to re-evaluate the influence that May Fourth critical realism has had on contemporary mainstream creation and, in doing so, to reassess the often overestimated dominant role played by socialist realism (and its main melody variation) over media (e.g. TV drama). Many scholars (Chen Y. 2007; Bai X. 2007; Pickowicz 1993) overlook the influence of May Fourth critical realism in shaping textual resistance in the mainstream location. Duke (1984) and Kinkley (2007), on the other hand, notice a return and continuity of the May Fourth critical
realism within mainstream fiction (e.g. Dai Qing’s *Bu! (No!)* and some anticorruption novels). For them, May Fourth critical realism is deliberately deployed by Chinese writers to resist official realism.

Agreeing with Duke’s and Kinkley’s views, I connect the TV dramas *Land* and *Cadres* to the May Fourth critical realist tradition. Rather than a mere replica of this tradition, these TV dramas hybridize May Fourth critical realism by also directly engaging with some elements of the official main melody strategy and the popularized melodramatic mode. One possible way to read this process of hybridization is—from a postmodern perspective—to see it as a deconstruction of modernist elite culture. However, I propose that, in postsocialist China, modernization, especially political modernization, is an unfinished task. Political democratization is still meaningful for China’s ongoing modernization today. This process of hybridization is therefore better understood as a negotiation and a critical reconstruction of the main melody strategy and melodramatic mode from a May Fourth critical realist perspective. By tracing the interaction between the three (May Fourth critical realism, main melody and the melodramatic mode), I hope to have shown the complexity of contemporary culture and politics and, more specifically, its dissenting practices.

Second, in Chapters Eight and Nine, by examining Chinese media production in relation to the state, to investment, and to professionals and audiences, my interest is in examining bottom-up dynamics and tactical practices in Chinese media. Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the top-down changes that have occurred in the Chinese media, which have been generated by marketized reform. Studies have focused on the impact of commercialization and marketization, particularly on

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1 By criticizing the Chinese discourse of postcolonialism, Xu Ben 徐贲 argues that fundamental oppression in China originates from the totalitarian power of the Party, not from the imperial West. Therefore a premodern/modern binary is more meaningful and relevant to Chinese reality today than an East-West opposition; see Xu B. 1995.
institutional operation and administrative policy: for example, the “propagandist/commercial model” (Zhao Y. 1998), the “marketized party organ model” (Pan & Chan 2000), the “two pillared cultural policy” (Bai R. 2007); and the “one arm’s length policy” (Keane 2005). All these studies point out that a significant space exists that allows media professionals, the state, private capital and audiences to negotiate and compete with each other (Bai R. 2007; Liu F. 2005). The Chinese media industry has become a site of cultural struggle. Yet, we still need to develop a perspective from below. For instance, how can tactical resistance be artfully developed against the state’s control within existing mainstream media power relations? What role do media professionals and audiences have in this struggle?

I have demonstrated that media professionals and market forces (e.g. investors and distributors) have relative autonomy. They are tacticians and artists of resistance, who can exploit extensive tactics (e.g. “playing edge ball”, “yin-yang face tactic”, “sprinkling doggy blood”, employing specific marketing tactics and exploiting the non-official space of DVD and internet markets) in oppositional meaning construction and in negotiation with institutional constraints. Their resistances occur through mediation. A recent example of such resistance is Live like a Worm (2009), a critical realist drama about the degradation of officials and the hardship of young university graduates in a big city. It managed to pass through censorship and provoked a heated debate among audiences and critics about its critical and pessimistic description of reality. A senior official of SARFT severely criticized the drama as excessively

_The News Channel of CCTV discussed the “phenomenon of Live like a Worm” in its two magazine programs (gongtong guanzhu 共同关注 and Xinwen zhiboshi 新闻直播室) from November 18 to 21, 2009. The discussed topics included “The popularity of Live like a Worm is stinging the nerves of house-slaves [mortgagees]”, “The drama Worm displays the white-collars’ painful experience of purchasing a house” and “The truth of Worm: house, house!” See the article “Woju” xianxiang touxi: baolu de fangshi yu rensheng 《蜗居》 现象透析: 暴露的房事与人生 (Dissecting the phenomenon of Live like a Worm: exposure of house/sexual issues and life), available at_
exposing official corruption and depicting sexual scandals and thus having a bad effect upon audiences. SARFT suspended its broadcast so it could be re-censored.\(^3\) Live like a Worm suggests that *mainstreaming resistance* is continuing in Chinese TV drama.

The perspective from below also includes an examination of the role played by the audience. In Chapter Nine, I have begun such an examination, but more substantial work needs to be done in this area. My preliminary examination of the audience through the context of the online forum for *Land* shows that there is a traceable interaction and a visible line of communication between audiences and the critical realist drama (text). Oppositional postings supporting the TV drama may be taken as evidence that the TV dramas and their producers’ *mainstream resistance* is indeed echoed in the audience’s own views. *Mainstreaming resistance* is not only a resistance by media professionals, but also a stimulus that invokes the audience’s popular resistances. As noted above, such popular resistances are expressed not only via the construction and voicing of oppositional meaning but also through marketing and purchasing choices. Further audience studies could document how resistances in mainstream media develop from production, and marketing (e.g. DVD and internet markets), through to reception itself.

Third, my exploration of TV professionals’ tactical resistance enables us to re-examine Chinese cultural resistance beyond the articulation of the “privileged” few heroic, intellectual dissidents. This elitist notion, in my view, underestimates the

\(^3\) See the article, Guangdian zongju guanyuan pi Woju: Kao guanchang, xinghuati chaozuo 广电总局官员批《蜗居》：靠官场，性话题炒作 (SARFT’s official rebuke of Live like a Worm: making a publicity stunt through the topics of official corruption and sexual scandal), *Huaxi dushi bao* 华西都市报. 11 December 2009. See also Ma 2009.
critical potential of mainstream media and cultures. In a totalitarian China, where oppositional political parties are not allowed to exist, free speech is suppressed and any public challenge to the Party is persecuted.\(^4\) Yu Haiqing (2008) observes that “political dissenters” “are either ousted or supervised closely by state authorities to ensure their voices are not heard by the majority of Chinese society” (136). Facing relentless political persecution and confinement, Chinese cultural elites seem to have very little space to express their views.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, when political and commercial pressures began to intensify, the operational space of Chinese cultural elites shrunk even further. Pessimism pervaded among intellectual elites (Liu F. 2005, 6). They lamented the fact that Chinese intellectuals seemed to have lost the rebellious “humanist spirit” and remained content to submit either to the state authority or to market imperatives. They furiously attacked popular culture as a vulgarization and corruption of Chinese culture and intellectuals’ commitment (Wang X. 1996; Cai et al 1994). Yet this study argues that some professional intellectuals have found an alternative space to tactically develop oppositional practices in the mainstream. Possibly, from an elitist perspective, mainstreaming resistance, which operates in the system, through negotiation rather than direct opposition, may appear to be too conservative to have a visibly changing effect upon society. However, resistance is not a simple matter and cannot be measured in the short term. As Havel (2009) comments regarding the everyday form of resistance (“living within the truth”) in the former socialist Czechoslovakia: “it is a complex, profound and long-term violation of society” (40), a breeding ground to cultivate a large political oppositional movement in the future. Drawing on Havel’s view, I want to emphasize that we must locate mainstreaming resistance within the specific sociopolitical and historical context of China, so that we can really understand the particularity, complexity as well as strength of this counter-hegemonic

\(^4\) For example, because of their active political challenge, Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 was sentenced to 11 years in prison, and Ai Weiwei 艾未未 was detained for eight months.
move, which I signaled in my Introduction.

In *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel (2009) argues that the Western perspective of political “dissent” in the former eastern European socialist regime (Havel defines the regime as a post-totalitarian society) is based on the western democratic political context, and therefore is inappropriate and misleading. Havel asks: what does “dissent” really mean in a post-totalitarian society? What is the potential of the “powerless” in society? What do the powerless really object to? These questions, which aim at examining the particularity of resistance in a specifically post-totalitarian context, are still pertinent to understanding the origin and strength of *mainstreaming resistance* in postsocialist, totalitarian China.

Havel states that the rule of the totalitarian regime is not merely maintained by political power, but more importantly by ideological control. Unlike in a democratic capitalist society, where ideology is naturalized as commonsense and accepted by people as something “neutral”, ideology in a post-totalitarian society is backed by political power to be exercised as something compulsory. Havel gives a vivid example. A manager of a fruit and vegetable shop puts a slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” in the shop window. The gesture does not show that the manager really believes the content of the slogan; he does it as he simply follows the instruction from the government to demonstrate: “I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace” (13). The people’s acceptance of ideology derives from pragmatism and self-protection as the ideology closely connects with their existence and vital interests. However, once people accept the ideology in order to adapt to the status quo, they “become an active component of that power” (16). Thus, Havel concludes that everybody in the regime helps produce the system and is therefore responsible for the existence of the totalitarian “monster”. In other words, people are both victim and supporter of the system. They are manipulated to maintain the system against their own interests.
By being manipulated by ideology, Havel sharply points out,

… life within the [post-totalitarian] system is so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies: government by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his or her ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available; the use of power is called observing the legal code; the repression of culture is called its development … the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom … (15)

People do not need to believe these falsifications, but they need to tolerate them or “they must live within a lie” (15). However, Havel argues that the humanity inside people determines their unwillingness to live within a lie, but instead they yearn to live with truth, with dignity, through an authentic existence. As a result, there is a fundamental contradiction within the post-totalitarian society between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life: “while life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, in short, towards the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline” (14).

Thus, Havel contends that, in a post-totalitarian society, any attempt to live within truth inevitably leads to a confrontation with the regime; an act of resistance, as the attempt rejects living within a lie and encourages others to depart from ideological control. If more and more people choose to live their life with dignity and truth, ideological manipulation becomes dysfunctional and unable to hold every component of the system together; the seemingly powerful regime will suddenly collapse from the inside. For this reason, Havel regards living within truth as “the primary breeding ground” (22) for political opposition, and as the potential power of the powerless. Hence, resistance in a post-totalitarian society finds its root in the pre-political area
(people’s everyday lives), not in the political area. Resistance can be taken in many forms, in many ways. It can be the grocery manager if one day he refuses to place a slogan in the window, or puts it upside-down to show his silent protest, or a TV drama producer who tells the truth in his/her works. Any person who chooses to live within truth is a dissident.

Havel’s rethinking of political opposition and dissent in communist post-totalitarian regimes is helpful for us to understand mainstreaming resistance in China. We have to acknowledge that the context of the Chinese post-socialist totalitarian society is different from the one which Havel analyzes. As discussed in Chapter Two, since economic reforms have given people some freedom, alternatives and choices, ideology in contemporary China is practiced in a more subtle and flexible way. However, Liu Binyan (1992) argues that Havel’s account of ideological control is still applicable to contemporary China where the one-party political system remains unchanged. The Party dominates the media similarly to allow its ideological lies to permeate every corner of the society: one-party totalitarianism is called Chinese-style democracy, political oppression over free speech is called maintaining social stability, economic exploitation over the underprivileged people is called representing the interests of the majority, and suppression of culture is described as “a hundred flowers blooming”. Totalitarian power is still firmly exercised in society. Any radical challenge against ideology is punished (e.g. by either banning a work from the market or stopping a creative career or even putting a person in prison).

In postsocialist totalitarian China, a paradoxical situation hence emerges: on the one hand, a certain space is created for alternative assertions; on the other hand, the state’s political persecution is even worse than in the former East European communist regimes. Compared to the less than five year prison term of political dissidents in the

5 Barmé vividly describes the Party’s governance in the post-Mao period as “an iron fist in a velvet glove” (20); see Barmé 1999, 20-37.
former Czechoslovakia, Liu Binyan (1992) contends that the Chinese government’s repression of political dissidents is much crueler. Dissidents are often sentenced to 15 years in prison. Liu blames people’s silence and tolerance as being partly responsible for the harsh political situation. Their adaption functions to empower the system. Therefore, in totalitarian China, people similarly have two kinds of lives: live within a lie to conform to the rule of ideology in reality and live within truth to pursue diversity, plurality, dignity and freedom in people’s consciences. The two lives are tightly woven together. When people choose to live within lies, in their consciousness, the humanist desire and motivation for living within truth disrupts and confronts their degenerated options. Once the repressed alternative life (living within truth) moves from the hidden sphere to the surface, resistance against the ideological lie is converted into action.

Mainstreaming resistance essentially comes from the concrete desire of intellectuals to live within truth. Since they are a part of the people, intellectuals long “for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence” (Havel 2009, 30). However, it is idealistic to think that living within truth can be totally separated and independent from living within a lie as the radical notion of resistance suggests. In postsocialist totalitarian China, ideology so powerfully penetrates society that it is difficult for people to totally get rid of it. Havel (2009) states: “This independent life is not separated from the rest of life (‘dependent life’) by some sharply defined line. Both types frequently coexist in the same people” (39). Mainstreaming resistance is therefore a process of overcoming “living within a lie” with “living within truth”, a dialectical transformation from the former into the latter.

In this light, intellectuals shift from the (elitist) role of spokespeople of society back to their own position, professionals, and to influence society through their professional lives. Instead of sticking to the singular intellectual identity by completely rejecting “living within a lie”, the term “professionals” suggests a fluid and shifting position by which they move between the realistic world (living within a
lie) and the idealized intellectuals’ world (living within truth). For example, the director Zhang Li 张黎 once made the commercialized popular drama *Jinyiwei* 锦衣卫 (Secret Service of the Imperial Court, 2007), the main melody drama *Junren jimi* 军人机密 (Soldiers’ secret, 2003), and the deviant drama *Republic*. The shifting position does not signal the disappearance of intellectual spirit or “loss of humanist spirit” among professionals. Rather they seek an independent life through a dependent life. The intellectual spirit is internalized, resides within them, and works to construct the mechanism and source of their resistance. Like a specter, the intellectuals’ spirit, consciously or unconsciously, directs professionals’ creative lives, and visibly or invisibly, influences their creations. When an appropriate time is reached, the repressed, hidden humanist spirit will suddenly manifest itself. The professionals’ rebellion described in the TV drama *Cell Phone* (2010) is such an example of an intellectual sensibility manifesting itself within the Chinese media. In this drama, the protagonist Yan Shouyi 严守一, a famous TV host on the television magazine show *Youyi shuoyi* 有一说一 (Saying what you want), is compelled to tell lies in his programs. He finds himself surrounded by lies, or precisely becomes a part of the lies. However, Yan has two faces that are explicitly illuminated in the scene in which he attends an entertaining TV show and is painted with a yin-yang face. Therefore, whenever he tells lies, he is tortured by his dignity and intellectual consciousness and his ears turn red. At the end of the serial, in a TV competition show designed to select Yan’s hostess partner, the professional judges conflict with the Party’s media leader and businessmen judges regarding the winner. Yan rebels against the leader’s manipulation to vote for the candidate favored by the professionals and audience, rather than by the leader and new capitalist. He finally accomplishes his desire to say what he wants publicly.

Yan’s rebellion shows us that an independent life can have many forms and

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6 The title and style of this magazine show obviously imitates and alludes to CCTV’s talk show, *Shihua shishuo* 实话实说 (Saying what you want).
expressions. “Political dissidents” resistance “may be the most visible and, at first glance, the most political (and most clearly articulated) expression of it” (39), but, as Havel argues, it is “far from necessarily being the most mature or even the most important, not only in the general social sense but even in terms of direct political influence” (39). Because those “dissidents” publicly conflict with the regime, they inevitably face the most severe suppression from the Party which possesses a huge, complex monitoring and repressive apparatus. Therefore, although their political opposition is really meaningful, it is doomed to be short-lived and unsustainable.

Mainstreaming resistance, on the other hand, may be “an optical and most positive program” (41) because it brings politics into the people’s everyday lives, which is the most essential area of ideological control within the totalitarian system. By mainstreaming resistance, media professionals express what people want to say, but cannot normally say through legal means. They tell everybody through mainstream media “that the emperor is naked …. because the emperor is in fact naked” (21). They encourage people (audiences or readers) to resist in their own ways. The strength of mainstreaming resistance is that it is tactical, flexible and unpredictable, and thus difficult for authority to control. A professional who previously works on commercial or main melody projects may suddenly make a deviant drama. Since everybody in post-socialist totalitarian China has two faces (two lives), nobody can speculate when and where s/he will change to yang face (living within truth) to resist ideological lies. In this regard, mainstreaming resistance is a sustainable and extensive resistance, upon which the Party attempts to crack down, but is incapable of doing so.

Although mainstreaming resistance operates within the system and through legitimate means, its social effect cannot be underestimated. Müller (2007) illuminates that the drama Republic attracted several hundred million viewers and provoked furious debate amongst the whole society. Numerous scholars, critics, and audiences
expressed their opinions in the media, and the debates were not only about the drama, but extended to sensitive topics (e.g. democracy and distortion of official historiography). Republic indeed provides an alternative angle for re-examining history and reality beyond the ideological framework. Another more striking example of mainstreaming resistance is Han Han’s internet blogging (Boke 博客—the Chinese version of Twitter). Through his blogs, Han, a Chinese cultural youth idol, plays the “edge ball game” to deal with “some of China’s most sensitive matters: Party corruption, censorship, the exploitation of young workers, pollution, the gap between the rich and the poor” (Osnos 2011, 51). Comparing his own methods to the tactics of the “political dissident” Ai Weiwei, Han says: “Ai’s criticism is more direct and he is more persistent on a single issue. For me, I criticize one thing, make them feel terrible, and if they [officials] ask me to stop talking about it, then I’ll criticize something else. We have a hundred things to talk about” (59). In response to Liu Xiaobo’s (the imprisoned Chinese writer) winning of Nobel Peace Prize, Han posted nothing but a pair of quotation marks. “The post drew one and a half million hits and more than twenty-eight thousand comments” (52). By attracting ten million blogging fans (55), Han’s mainstreaming resistance through legal means has possibly much more impact on society than that of cultural elites and political activists. As Ai Weiwei comments, “Han Han is more influential than Lu Xun, because his writing can reach more people” (cited from Osnos 2011, 57). In April 2010, Han was selected by Time magazine to be a candidate for the world’s most influential person. Han finds effective means and channels to tackle the Party’s censorship and communicate with common people.

Once, Han wrote in his blog: “We are just small characters beneath a spotlight on the stage. They [the power-holders] own the theatre, and they can always bring down the

7 In the Sina forum for Republic alone, there are more than 100,000 audience comments; see http://comment4.news.sina.com.cn/comment/skin/simple.html?channel=yl&newsid=28-3-139066&style=1 (accessed 16 September 2008).
curtain, turn off the lights, close the door, and turn the dogs loose” (56). Yet, “we”, the powerless, possess our own power, which derives from our “repressed longing for dignity and fundamental rights, for the realization of [our] real social and political interest” (Havel 2009, 23). Mainstreaming resistance is one manifestation of such power. The significance of mainstreaming resistance lies in its continuous, unremitting efforts to keep simulating people’s desire to live within truth, to threaten the foundation of the regime, and ideological control (“living within a lie”). Havel (2009) describes these hidden resistances, as a type of “bacteriological weapon” (23), which works inside the system. Once conditions are ripe, these “modest”, dispersive resistances will converge to break out, to issue forth a real political event, civil unrest, moving towards a genuine social transformation.

Just as a popular saying circulated in China brilliantly illuminates:

Youhua bushuo baibushuo, 有话不说白不说,
jiushi shuole yeibaishuo, 就是说了也白说,
baishuo yeyao shuo, 白说也要说,
shuo dao bubaishuo 说到不白说.

If you have something to say but do not say it, it will be in vain.
But if you say it, it will still be in vain.
Even in vain, you still want to say it,
Until it is not in vain. (Cited from Chu 2001, 57.)
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Appendix A: Filmography

1. *Aini mei shangliang* 爱你没商量 (Love you without condition, 1992)  
   Written by: Wang Shuo 王朔; Wang Hailing 王海鸰; Qiao Yu 乔瑜  
   Directed by: Zhang Yu 张羽  
   Starred by Song Dandan 宋丹丹; Xie Yuan 谢园; Ying Da 英达, etc.  
   Produced by Beijing Culture and Art Audio-visual Press, 41 episodes.

2. *Basang he tade dimeimen* 巴桑和他的弟妹们 (Basang, his brothers and sisters, 1984)  
   Written by Zhang Lu 张鲁 and Chen Junzhong 陈俊中  
   Directed by Pan Xiaoyang 潘小杨 and He Wei 何为  
   Starred by Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃  
   Produced by Chongqing Television, two episodes.

3. *Beijingren zai Niuyue* 北京人在纽约 (Bejingers in New York, 1993)  
   Written by Li Xiaoming 李晓明, Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙, Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚 and Li Gongda 李功达  
   Directed by Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 and Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚  
   Starred by Jiang Wen 姜文 and Wang Ji 王姬  
   Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre, 21 episodes.

4. *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (Stories of the Editorial Board, 1991)  
   Written by Ma Weidu 马未都, Wang Shuo 王朔 and Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚  
   Directed by Zhao Baogang 赵宝刚  
   Starred by Ge You 葛优 and Lü Liping 吕丽萍  
   Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre, 25 episodes.

5. *Cangtian zaishang* 苍天在上 (Heaven Above, 1995)  
   Written by Lu Tianming 陆天明
Directed by Zhou Huang 周寰
Starred by Li Ming 李鸣
Produced by China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, 17 episodes.

   Written by Wang Chaozhu 王朝柱
   Directed by Jin Tao 金韬 and Tang Guoqiang 唐国强
   Starred by Tang Guoqiang 唐国强, Liu Jin 刘劲 and Chen Daoming 陈道明
   Produced by China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, 24 episodes.

7. *Chengjie Sihan* 成杰思汗 (Genghis Khan, 2004)
   Written by Yu Zhixian 俞智先, Zhu Yaoting 朱耀廷
   Directed by Wang Wenjie 王文杰
   Starred by Ba Sen 巴森; Saren Gaowa 萨仁高娃
   Produced by Shangdong Film and Television Production Centre et al, 30 episodes.

8. *Chuang guandong* 闯关东 (Venturing out into the Northeast, 2008)
   Written by Gao Mantang 高满堂 and Sun Jianye 孙建业
   Directed by Zhang Xinjian 张新建 and Kong Sheng 孔笙
   Starred by Li Youbin 李幼斌 and Niu Li 牛莉
   Produced by Shangdong Film and Television Production Centre and Dalian Television, 52 episodes.

9. *Cuotuo suiyue* 蹉跎岁月 (The arduous years, 1982)
   Written by Ye Xin 叶辛
   Directed by Cai Xiaoqinng 蔡晓晴
   Starred by Guo Xuexin 郭旭新, Xiao Xiong 肖雄
   Produced by China Central Television, four episodes.
10. *Daming wangchao* 大明王朝 *(The Ming Dynasty, 2007)*
   Written by Liu Heping 刘和平
   Directed by Zhang Li 张黎
   Starred by Huang Zhizhong 黄志忠, Chen Baoguo 陈宝国
   Produced by Hunan Satellite Television and Haikou Television, 46 episodes.

11. *Daxue wuhen* 大雪无痕 *(Pure like Snow, 2001)*
   Written by Lu Tianming 陆天明
   Directed by Lei Xianhe 雷献禾
   Starred by Ren Chengwei 任程伟, He Zhengjun 何政军
   Produced by Siping Cable Television and CCTV et al, 20 episodes.

12. *Dazhaimen* 大宅门 *(Grand Mansion Gate, 2000)*
   Written and directed by Guo Baochang 郭宝昌
   Starred by Chen Baoguo 陈宝国, Siqin Gaowa 斯琴高娃
   Produced by CTV Media Limited Co., 40 episodes.

   Written by Zhao Qi 赵琪
   Directed by Su Zhou 苏舟
   Starred by Wang Zhiwen 王志文 and Wu Gang 巫刚
   Produced by Jufan Film and Television Company, 40 episodes.

14. *Haima gewuting* 海马歌舞厅 *(Haima dancing hall, 1993)*
   Written by Ma Weidu 马未都, Wang Shuo 王朔 and Hai Yan 海岩 etc.
   Directed by Sun Tie 孙铁 and Xie Xiaomei 谢晓嵋
   Starred by Liang Tian 梁天 and Zhang Guoli 张国立
   Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre, 40 episodes.
15. **Hanwu dadi** 汉武大帝 (The Great Emperor Hanwu, 2004)
   
   Written by Jiang Qitao 江奇涛  
   Directed by Hu Mei 胡玫  
   Starred by Chen Baoguo 陈宝国 and Jiao Huang 焦晃  
   Produced by China Film Group and Department of Film and TV Drama of CCTV, 58 episodes.

16. **Heidong** 黑洞 (Black Hole, 2002)
   
   Written by Zhang Chenggong 张成功 and Lu Chuan 陆川  
   Directed by Guan Hu 管虎  
   Starred by Chen Daoming 陈道明 and Tao Zeru 陶泽如  
   Produced by Pegasus Film & Television Production Co., Ltd, 31 episodes.

17. **Hongloumeng** 红楼梦 (Red Chamber, 1987)
   
   Written by Liu Genglu 刘耕路, Zhou Lei 周雷 and Zhou Ling 周岭  
   Directed by Wang Fulin 王扶林  
   Starred by Ouyang Fenqiang 欧阳奋强 and Chen Xiaoxu 陈晓旭  
   Produced by China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, 36 episodes.

18. **Jinyiwei** 锦衣卫 (Secret Service of Imperial Court, 2007)
   
   Written by Kuang Wenwei 邝文伟  
   Directed by Zhang Li 张黎  
   Starred by Tan Kai 谭凯 and Ma Yili 马伊俐  
   Produced by Teleplay Production Centre of Shanxi Television and Shanghai Film Group et al, 35 episodes.

19. **Jiefang** 解放 (Liberation, 2009)
   
   Written by Wang Chaozhu 王朝柱  
   Directed by Tang Guoqiang 唐国强 and Dong Yachun 董亚春
Starred by Tang Guoqiang 唐国强 and Liu Jin 刘劲
Produced by China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, The Eight One Film Studio and Tianjin Television, 50 episodes.

20. Jinye you bao Fengxue 今夜有暴风雪 (Snowstorm tonight, 1985)
Written by Li Deshun 李德顺 and Sun Zhou 孙周
Directed by Sun Zhou 孙周
Starred by Chen Daoming 陈道明, Ren Meng 任梦 and Lü Yi 吕毅
Produced by Shandong Television, four episodes.

21. Jingdu jishi 京都纪事 (Stories of Beijing, 1994)
Written by Li Xiaoming 李晓明 and Chen Yanmin 陈燕民
Directed by You Xiaogang 尤小刚 and Tao Lingling 陶玲玲
Starred by Liu Wei 刘威 and Li Yuanyuan 李媛媛
Produced by Beijing Zhongbei Television Art Centre , 100 episodes.

22. Juemi yayun 绝密押运 (The top-secret escort, 2008)
Written by Zhong Su 中夙, Yang Zi 阳子 and Wang Shen 王琛
Directed by Kong Sheng 孔笙
Starred by Wang ban 王斑 and Li Chen 李晨
Produced by Department of Film and TV Drama of CCTV and China International Television Corporation, 25 episodes.

Written by Hai Bo 海波
Directed by Zhang Li 张黎
Starred by Wang Xueqi 王学圻 and Liu Bei 刘蓓
Produced by Program Company, Hunan TV and Broadcast Intermediary Co. Ltd, 46 episodes.
   Written by Li Xiaoming 李晓明
   Directed by Lu Xiaowei 鲁晓威
   Starred by Zhang Kaili 张凯丽 and Sun Song 孙松
   Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre, 50 episodes.

   Written by Du Liang 都梁 and Jiang Qitao 江奇涛
   Directed by Zhang Qian 张前 and Chen Jian 陈健
   Starred by Li Youbin 李幼斌 and He Zhengjun 何政军
   Produced by Hairun Film & Television Co., Ltd and Shanghai Film Group, 30 episodes.

   Written by Zhou Qiyue 周七月
   Directed by Li Wenqi 李文岐
   Starred by Wang Luoyong 王洛勇 and Tong Yao 童谣
   Produced by Wanke Film and Television Co., Ltd et al, 30 episodes.

27. *Lishi de tiankong* (Brothers, 2004)
   Written by Jian Xiaoqin 蒋晓勤, Yao Yuan 姚远 and Deng Hainan 邓海南
   Directed by Gao Xixi 高希希
   Starred by Zhang Fengyi 张丰毅 and Li Xuejian 李雪健
   Produced by Shanghai Tianshi Cultural Media Co. Ltd and Beijing Galloping Horse Film and Television Culture Development, 36 episodes.

28. *Li Xaiolong chuanqi* (The Legend of Bruce Lee, 2008)
   Written by Qian Linsen 钱林森 and Zhang Jianguang 张健广
   Directed by Li Wenqi 李文岐
Starred by Chen Guokun 陈国坤 and Wang Luoyong 王洛勇
Produced by China International Television Corporation et al, 50 episodes.

Written by Liu Heng 刘恒
Directed by Shen Haofang 沈好放
Starred by Liang Guanhua 梁冠华 and Zhu Yuanyuan 朱媛媛
Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre et al, 20 episodes.

30. *Qinglingling de shui lanyingying de tian* 清凌凌的水 蓝莹莹的天 (The clear water, the blue sky, 2008)
Written by Gu Kai 谷凯
Directed by Pan Changjiang 潘长江 and Kang Ning 康宁
Starred by Pan Changjiang 潘长江 and Sun Ning 孙宁
Produced by Beijing Shining Film and Television Co., Ltd and Guangxi Television et al, 28 episodes.

31. *Qingman zhujiang* 情满珠江 (Romantic Pearl River, 1993)
Written by Liao Zhikai 廖志楷, Li Yanxiong 李彦雄 and Dai Peilin 戴沛霖
Directed by Wang Jin 王进 and Yuan Shiji 袁世纪
Starred by Zuo Ling 左翎 and Wei Zi 魏子
Produced by Pearl River Film Company and Guangdong Television et al, 35 episodes.

Written by Ge Fei 革非
Directed by Shen Haofang 沈好放
Starred by Liu Jia 刘佳
Produced by China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, 21 episodes.
33. *Renzhe wudi* 仁者无敌 (The benevolent are invincible, 2008)
   Written by Shi Xiaoke 石小克
   Directed by Chen Jian 陈健
   Starred by Li Youbin 李幼斌 and Zhang Guangbei 张光北
   Produced by Beijing Hauyi Allied Cultural and Media Investment Co., Ltd, 32 episodes.

34. *Richu* 日出 (Sunrise, 2002)
   Written by Wan Fang 万方
   Directed by Xie Fei 谢飞
   Starred by Xu Fan 徐帆 and Siqin Gaowa 斯琴高娃
   Produced by Shenzhen Wanke Film and Television Co., Ltd, 23 episodes.

35. *Shaoguotun de zhongsheng* 烧锅屯的钟声 (The Bell of Shaoguo village, 2003)
   Written by Xue Liye 薛立业
   Directed by Liu Jishu 刘继书
   Starred by Yu Xiaohui 于小慧
   Produced by Department of Film and TV Drama of CCTV et al, eight episodes.

36. *Shengwei shuji* 省委书记 (Provincial Party Secretary, 2002)
   Written by Lu Tianming 陆天明
   Directed by Su Zhou 苏舟
   Starred by Du Yulu 杜雨露 and Wu Gang 巫刚
   Produced by China Teleplay Production Centre of CCTV, 18 episodes.

37. *Shouji* 手机 (Cell phone, 2010)
   Written by Song Fangjin 宋方金
   Directed by Shen Yan 沈严 and Wang Lei 王雷
   Starred by Chen Daoming 陈道明 and Wang Zhiwen 王志文
   Produced by Beijing Television and Beijing Shang Pin’an Film and Television Culture
Co., Ltd, 36 episodes.

38. *Tuchu chongwei 突出重围 (Breakthrough, 2000)*
   Written by Qian Bin 钱宾
   Directed by Shu Chongfu 舒崇福
   Starred by Du Yulu 杜雨露 and Zheng Xiaoning 郑晓宁
   Produced by Department of Film and TV Drama of CCTV and Chongqing Television et al, 22 episodes.

39. *Woju 蜗居 (Living like a worm, 2009)*
   Written by Liu Liu 六六
   Directed by Teng Huatao 滕华涛
   Starred by Zhang Jiayi 张嘉译 and Hai Qing 海清
   Produced by Shanghai Media Group and Huayi Brothers Entertainment Investment Co., Ltd et al, 33 episodes.

40. *Wotu 沃土 (Fruitful land, 2004)*
   Written by Ma Weijun 马卫军, Li Yanxiong 李彦雄 and Zong Fuxian 宗福先
   Directed by Fu Dongyu 傅东育
   Starred by Zheng Xiaoning 郑晓宁 and Gao Ming 高明
   Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre and Shanghai 999 Entertainment Co., Ltd et al, 24 episodes.

41. *Wutong Yu 梧桐雨 (Love of buttonwood)*
   Written by Li Qingyu 李晴宇
   Directed by Fu Dongyu 傅东育
   Starred by Qiu Xinzhi 邱心志 and Li Zonghan 李宗翰
   Produced by Shanghai Paradise Corporation Co., Ltd and Zhonglu Film & Television Co., Ltd et al, 28 episodes.
42. Xiangcun aiqing (II) 乡村爱情 (Country love, 2008)
   Written by Zhang Ji 张继
   Directed by Zhao Benshan 赵本山
   Starred by Zhao Benshan 赵本山 and Fan Wei 范伟
   Produced Benshan Media et al, by 41 episodes.

43. Xibolakedi de shiyan 希伯拉克底的誓言 (Hippocratic Oath, 1985)
   Written by Zhang Lu 张鲁
   Directed by Wang Suyuan 王苏源 and Pan Xaoyang 潘小杨
   Starred by Zhang Tong 张瞳 and Xu Ye 许晔
   Produced by Chongqing Television and China Central Television et al, two episodes.

44. Xinxìng 新星 (New Star, 1986)
   Written and directed by Li Xin 李新
   Starred by Zhou Lijing 周里京
   Produced by Taiyuan Television and China Central Television, 12 episodes.

45. Yidì jimào 一地鸡毛 (A ground of chicken feathers, 1995)
   Written by Liu Zhenyun 刘震云
   Directed by Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚
   Starred by Chen Daoming 陈道明 and Xu Fan 徐帆
   Produced by Beijing Television Art Centre et al, 10 episodes.

46. Yikou caibingzi 一口菜饼子 (A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake, 1958)
   Written by Chen Geng 陈庚
   Directed by Hu Xu 胡旭 and Mei Cun 梅村
   Starred by Sun Peiyun 孙佩云 and Yu Lin 余琳
   Produced by Beijing Television (the predecessor of CCTV), one episode.
47. *Yingxiong wuhui*  英雄无悔  (Heroes never regret, 1995)

Written by He Mengfan  贺梦凡, Dengyuan 邓原, Ma Weijun 马卫军 and Zhang Xiaolong 章小龙
Directed by He Mengfan 贺梦凡, Dengyuan 邓原
Starred by Pu Cunxin 濮存昕 and Li Ting 李婷
Produced by Guangdong Television and Department of Film and TV Drama of CCTV et al, 38 episodes.

48. *Zhigao liyi*  至高利益  (The Supreme Interest)

Written by Zhou Meisen 周梅森
Directed by Ba Te’er 巴特尔
Starring: Zhang Xianheng 张先衡 and Sun Haiying 孙海英
Produced by China International Television Corporation et al, 20 episodes.

49. *Zouxiang gonghe*  走向共和  (Marching Towards the Republic, 2003)

Written by Sheng Heyü 盛和昱 and Zhang Jianwei 张建伟
Directed by Zhang Li 张黎
Starred by Wang Bing 王冰 and Sun Chun 孙淳
Produced by China Central Television et al, 60 episodes.
## Appendix B

### 一. Fruitful Land Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luo Hansheng</td>
<td>Chancellor of Xiajing Agricultural University (in the first three episodes), then Party Secretary of Xiakou City and heir of He Libin;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He Libin</td>
<td>Party Secretary of Xiajing Province;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feng Juanyi</td>
<td>Governor of Xiajing Province;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Ming</td>
<td>Mayor of Xiakou City;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiang Changlin</td>
<td>Quality Supervisor of the Xiakou Dam, Luo’s Father-in-Law;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei Qin</td>
<td>Luo’s ex-wife;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiang Wei</td>
<td>Luo’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Quan</td>
<td>Former Vice Head of Xinglong Township, Later Head of Farmers’ Economic Association;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kong Pingheng</td>
<td>Party Secretary of Xinglong Township;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhong Qiming</td>
<td>Head of Zhongpin County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 二. National Cadres Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xia Zhongmin</td>
<td>Deputy Mayor of Dengjiang City;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Zhengxiang</td>
<td>Party Secretary of Dengjiang City;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Siji</td>
<td>Deputy Party Secretary of Dengjiang City;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu Shibei</td>
<td>Retired Party Secretary of Dengjiang City and Director of Provincial High-tech Developmental Zone;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Weijin</td>
<td>Vice Director of Office of Dengjiang Municipal Party Committee (DMPC);</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qi Xiaoyong  Vice Director of Office of DMPC
Appendix C: Interviews

In April and May 2010, I conducted interviews with the producer of *Land*, Gu Shiyang 谷诗阳 and the writer, Li Yanxiong 李彦雄, in Beijing and Guangzhou respectively. My conversation with Gu Shiyang took place from the evening of 25 April to the morning of the next day. We mostly discussed *Land* but also touched upon a wide range of topics. For instance, Gu also shared his views on the role and significance of private capital in Chinese TV drama production and the transformation of Chinese media in the “socialist market”. The interview with writer Li Yanxiong was carried out in two separate occasions, each lasting for two hours (11 and 12 May 2010). Because Li had experiences working in both state enterprise (Pearl River Film Company) and as a freelance TV professional, our conversation went beyond his involvement with *Land* and expanded on broader issues concerning Chinese media politics and struggles between the state and media professionals. After I was back to New Zealand, I transcribed the interviews and emailed them to Gu and Li respectively in April and May 2011. In the emails, I also raised some new questions regarding *Land*’s creation and censorship. Gu and Li not only answered these questions, but also gave me permission to use the transcripts in my research.

It is worth noting that, because of my own involvement in the writing of *Land*, in the interviews, Gu and Li treated me as a workmate and friend. Thus, the stories, which I gained, are similar to what Scott (1990) describes as “hidden transcripts”. Scott (1990) elaborates that, as social actors, the subordinate perform differently in power relations according to different audiences. With the term “hidden transcript”, Scott refers to the “discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, beyond direct observation by powerholders” (4), while he uses “public transcript” to describe “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (2). In a public transcript the subordinate wears a sort of mask to disguise their real views and seem to act according to the
expectations of the dominant. Conversely, the hidden transcript more authentically represents the discourse of the weak. I argue that the inside stories I obtained are the “hidden transcript”, which reveals the undisclosed practices of the TV practitioners who want to resist the Party’s media control.

(一) Edited Interview with the “Independent” Producer of Fruitful Land, Gu Shiyang

(Changfeng Holiday Inn Hotel, Beijing, 25 and 26 April 2010)

1. Could you please tell me how the project Fruitful Land was initiated?

My initiation of Fruitful Land was driven by the desire to make a genuine realist drama, based on my personal social commitment and motivation to provoke society .... [At first,] Zong Fuxian [a Shanghai-based famous playwright and scriptwriter] contacted Chen Weigao 程维高 [former Provincial Secretary of Hebei province] [to write a TV drama about a provincial secretary]. His purpose [in writing a drama] was aimed at aligning with the authority and meanwhile carrying a certain social duty. Zong had a lot of experience getting along with officialdom and thus knew what officialdom really looked like, what officials were thinking about.

I was immediately attracted by the political struggle between two provincial leaders depicted in Zong’s synopsis. Though the synopsis was still main melody oriented, I believed that it could be developed into a drama like Marching towards the Republic, which embodied intellectual commitment. In China, most TV artists have an ambition to make TV dramas like Republic, which authentically and seriously reflect reality and history. But not everybody can have such a chance to make a drama with one’s heart. Relying on subverting the orthodox history, Republic became the most stirring drama in 2003. Through “rewriting” the reality, (I believed) this synopsis could also develop into an influential TV drama.

2. How did you operate the project?
Regarding operation, I worked at Zhonglu Film & Television Co., Ltd (ZFTCL) at that time. I advocated the project all the time, but Chen Rong 陈荣 [the boss of ZFTCL] had no response. I firmly believed that this project deserved to make it due to its realist potential. So I left ZFTCL and borrowed money to purchase Zong’s synopsis, and found other investment for this project.

3. Why did you decide to leave ZFTCL?

The fundamental reason was because Chen and I had different ideas when it came to running the business. We made six popular and main melody dramas, and lost several tens of millions RMB. After self-reflection, I attributed the losses to passively catering to the market trend and [the fact the projects] lacked militant innovation. I hoped to make changes, but the company had other thoughts.

4. Why did you find Beijing Television Art Centre (BTAC) as your partner for Land?

I had a contact with Zheng Xiaolong 郑晓龙 [the director of BTAC] through Li Xiaolong 李小龙 [a TV drama director within BTAC]. Li shot a drama for me and we had known each other well since then. After going through the synopsis, Zheng was interested in the project. BTAC was the model of the industry in the 1990s. Yet, BTAC’s influence had dramatically declined because of its market focus. Its programs had almost disappeared from the most influential channel, CCTV-1. BTAC urgently wanted to make influential dramas [to reconfirm its reputation]. Therefore, BTAC showed enthusiasm to cooperate [on the project]. BTAC’s involvement restored ZFTCL’s interest. So ZFTCL decided to join the project as well.

5. But actually ZFTCL did not invest in the project in the end ...

Because of the censorship risk, ZFTCL withdrew from the project later. I then sent the new, revised synopsis to General Manager Yang [of Shanghai 999 Entertainment Co., Ltd, later S999ECL]. Yang was once in the army, and was later transferred to [the state-owned] Shanghai Paradise Corporation Co., Ltd (SPCCL).
He worked in SPCCL from [the position of] a low ranking cadre until being finally promoted to General Manager. Yang had an initiative to make a drama reflecting the drawbacks of the [political] system, which he had deeply experienced. Fang Quanlin 方全林 [the former deputy head of the propaganda department of the CCP Shanghai Committee, the vice chairman of the board of S999ECL] also had a similar sentiment. When they were in the system, they dared not express their condemnation. But they thought this political issue deserved to be reflected publicly. Yang made Zhongcheng 忠诚 (Loyalty) at SPCCL, and the drama’s market return and social reaction were remarkably good. They believed that Land could follow Loyalty’s trend and become another influential work. They were in charge of S999ECL and had decision-making power. I had known them for a long time. We shared many similarities in our personal thinking and aesthetic taste. So S999ECL joined the project.

6. How much is the investment on Land?
We decided to make the drama for 20 episodes. It was 300,000 RMB per episode, and 6 million RMB in total. The actual investment exceeded the budget as it was 7.2 million. S999ECL and BTAC shared the investment. The budget was large compared with 250,000 RMB per episode for realistic drama on average at that time [2004].

7. What is the excessive 1.2 million for?
We spent the money on making special computer effects, which were not included in the original budget.

8. What is your mode of cooperation?
As an “independent” producer, I had a partner relationship with the investors. Because I invested in the scriptwriting, found the investors and communicated between them, I was not simply employed by them. We were partners.
My duty was to make the drama within the budget, to reach the quality standard and meet investors’ expectations. I was also responsible for completing the whole process of production until the drama passed through the final censorship.

General Manager Yang and Zheng Xiaolong were all the investors, but played different roles. Zheng Xiaolong focused on the script review and the censorship at the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Film and Television (BMBRFT). Yang focused on dealing with SARFT and the censorship body at CCTV, as well as concentrated on distribution and sale of the drama.

9. What do you mean by “independent” producer?
An “independent” producer is a special TV professional who initiates a project, finds funding for the project, and more importantly is in charge of the whole process of production including scriptwriting, shooting and editing and even distribution.

10. What is the relationship between an “independent” producer and “independent” production?
An “independent” TV drama production is a project run by an “independent” producer beyond the direct control of the investors. An “independent” producer has to be competent, experienced and have personal connections in the industry. Otherwise, the investors may want to run the project by themselves.

11. Did BTAC, S999ECL and you have the same goal regarding the drama Land?
Both the investors and I aimed at producing a high quality, influential and innovative drama. We didn’t want to make a conventional main melody drama. However, what I expected about the drama was distanced from what BTAC and S999ECL desired. I wanted to make a critical realist drama, but they aimed at a high quality main melody drama with a certain realistic criticism, or in other words, an innovative main melody [drama].
12. *What do you mean by “critical realist drama”?*

My orientation of the script was realist. It was to say to make a drama which truthfully reflected reality. It was not the main melody style of pseudo-realism which glorified the political establishment. When I read the synopsis you revised, I felt a breakthrough [of the main melody pattern] in it.

13. *Did you feel you wanted to take a risk?*

No. I didn’t think about risk at all at the beginning. What I wanted was to break through the pattern of the present drama, to cause a great sensation with controversy. I was pursuing a “stirring” effect .... I emphasized social commitment when shooting a critical realist drama for audiences, and spelled out the systematic problems. There is a critical realist tradition in Chinese art creation, like Du Fu’s 杜甫 realistic criticism. Intellectuals had also a critical tradition; writers like Lu Xun and Mao Dun inherited the tradition. Now critical realist works were less and less. The committed intellectuals were also less and less. People were more concerned with their materialist interests .... I proposed that this drama fundamentally dealt with the [political] system .... The system itself was much more dreadful. It was the origin of all evils.

14. *If other partners had a different view about the project from you, how did you handle this issue?*

The script of *Land* was invested in by me, [so I had a power for negotiation]. Comparatively, I pay more attention to scriptwriting. I always tell my cooperators that a script is the determinant force in market competition. It is especially true for an “independent” producer who does not have his/her own investment. Why do investors want to cooperate with you? Why do they put their money in your hand? The script is the key factor. A good script which shows good market potential is a necessity for the “independent” producer to attract other investors to join the project. If you have a copyright of a prosperous project, you have more counters to bargain with investors for more power over the project. Conversely, if you do
not possess a copyright, the negotiating room may be much less. That is why I rejected BTAC’s and ZFTCL’s investment in scriptwriting and instead used my own money. A good script is more convincing than any your own persuasion.

15. So you controlled the scriptwriting process ...
Of course, you know that.

16. But if the investors disagree with the script, what might happen?
According to our contract, if they disagree with the script, I can terminate our cooperation and find other investors. The possession of the [script] copyright secured my control over the project. If I allow BTAC and ZFTCL to invest in the scriptwriting, I would find it difficult to control the project if we have fundamental arguments. The main reason for BTAC to treat me as a partner is my possession of the “independent” mode of production for creating an innovative drama.

17. What else makes you highlight the important role of script?
The TV drama’s particularity also determines the importance of the script. A television drama is a long, complex, episodic, multi-stranded narrative and is different from the two-hour-long format of a film. In making a film, the pace of shooting is much slower; less than twenty shots per day. But when making a TV drama, a director needs to complete over 100 shots per day. Basically the director does not have time for artistic refinement. Moreover, in common practice, the TV drama director does not write a shooting script that transforms the words of the script into a design of the shots and camera movements as film directors do. He/she decides the arrangement of shots, camera angles and movement at the shooting location. Under such intense working conditions, Chinese TV drama directors really rely on the script for their creativity.

18. What are your comments on some dramas which were shot along with constant
revision of the scripts?

It is a disaster for a producer to shoot a drama when the script is immature. It is costly and creates much more uncertainty over the quality of the drama when a producer is making a drama at the same time the script is constantly under modification. It is a better as well as a common practice to shoot a drama based on a refined and well-written script.

19. Let’s talk about the scriptwriting. Despite my involvement in the process, I still want to know about the process from your perspective.

After reading Zong’s synopsis, I felt good. But Zong was unhealthy. Moreover, his idea was different from mine. I contacted you. You and Old Li were award-winning scriptwriters. I trusted your competence. I sent Zong’s synopsis to you. You and Li also felt that it could be developed into a critical realist drama on the ground of the synopsis to break through the main melody boundary …. As you know, the scriptwriting solely involved you two scriptwriters and me. I was responsible for operation [of scriptwriting], since the money was invested by me. BTAC was only engaged in reviewing the synopsis and script … I told them that we should give the scriptwriters total freedom if we wanted to break through [the main melody parameter]. They agreed with me. ZFTCL did not get involved [in the scriptwriting]. After the script came out, ZFTCL withdrew from the project as it sensed political danger [in the script].

20. I remember that the experience of writing Land was quite different from my previous work as you gave us a great deal of autonomy. Could you please talk about this further?

I remember that I came to Guangzhou to meet you at the peak time when SARS struck around Guangzhou …. We decided that the drama dealt with the “sannong” issue but ultimately targeted at reforming the political system. In my memory, I stayed in Guangzhou for three days. Before I left, I told you: “you don’t need to consider censorship and any ideological constraints when you write the script.
Don’t wear a straitjacket, or dance in iron chains. If you do this in this way, you would suppress your talents and capacity as well. What you should consider is a breakthrough, a breakthrough …. You can ignore any interruptions and treat others’, even my comments and suggestions, only as a reference. Write what you think may be useful for a breakthrough drama in terms of social and political criticism.” What else? I remember …. Self-censorship is a consideration at the next stage, not right now. I also told you: “if the completed script were objected to by BTAC that showed a different initiative from ours, I could opt to dissolve my cooperation with them and find other adequate investors. It did not matter. The key was to writing an excellent script. With the excellent script, we could easily find other partners.”

21. We did transcend the main melody boundary, but after examining the draft script, the investors felt that the script was politically risky. How did you handle the issue?

Yes. The investors felt the [political] sensitivity. ZFTCL pulled out. BTAC was anxious about the censorship and asked me to hand the script to the Party’s Central Discipline Inspection Commission for approval. It was absolutely a “kiss of death”. I negotiated with them and suggested instead to pass SARFT’s synopsis review. I told [the director of] BTAC: I was responsible for SARFT’s approval for the project and then found another investor to take the place left by ZFTCL. Thus S999ECL stepped in. I asked you to write a main melody style synopsis of around 1000 words. The synopsis was approved. As a popular saying says, despite the regulations set up by the powerful, the powerless can always find a way to deal with them [shang you zhengce, xiayou duice 上有政策，下有对策].

22. Why did you change the title from Provincial Party Committee to Fruitful Land?

I considered that Fruitful Land had a promise of hope and more importantly it directly told others that this was a rural-themed drama, which SARFT felt encouraged to produce. In order to pass SARFT’s synopsis review, I had to “feed”
their taste.

23. How did you appoint Dongyu as the director? He was not a big name, was he? Did other partners agree with your decision?

I knew Fu Dongyu quite early when he worked at Shanghai Film Studio. When I shot Love of Buttonwood [for ZFTCL], the first director was incompetent. So I substituted him with Dongyu. This drama was successful [in the market]. General Manager Yang representing SPCCL was another investor of the show. We were all happy about its market performance and built trust with each other. Actually, BTAC recommended An Zhanjun 安战军 [a TV drama director of BTAC] to direct Land. I did not think that An was a suitable candidate, so I rejected BTAC’s recommendation …. Later I made contact with a very famous director, but he was too demanding.

24. What happened?

He raised three conditions: (1) he had the right to modify the script; (2) he had the right to employ his own crew and charge the production, including editing; (3) he had the right to employ his own executive producer to manage the schedule of production and the budget. In other words, I would totally lose control over the production process. So facing those big names, producers are really vulnerable.

25. So you decided to employ Dongyu ...

Although Dongyu wasn’t a big name, he was young, energetic and enthusiastic. He had such a potential to make an excellent work. More importantly, we knew each other well. I knew that his involvement wouldn’t spoil our critical realist orientation, but instead strengthens it.

After reading the script, Dongyu felt excited. He believed that Land broke through the conventions used in TV dramas about officialdom. The script was solid and complete. The next step was to consolidate the script rather than radically revise it.
At the actual shooting, I gave great freedom to Fu’s creation. I didn’t pressure his shooting pace, or interfere with his shooting method. Fu also acknowledged that he gained a creative autonomy which was much more than that of his previous working experiences … Of course, even though Dongyu had other thoughts, I could handle them. Do you remember that you two scriptwriters and Fu had an argument regarding the first episode in Guangzhou? I told Dongyu that the consideration of censorship was my business, not his ….

26. What were the investors’ comments on our final script?
General Manager Yang didn’t have too many comments [he was basically satisfied]. Before shooting, BTAC and the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Television and Film (BMBRFT) expressed their anxiety about the political struggle between the number one, two and three provincial leaders. Another was about the depiction of He Libin’s regret in treating Luo Hansheng as his heir. They worried that such depiction might affect He’s positive image.

27. How did BMBRFT become the third investor of the project?
Before the drama’s shooting, BTAC was short of cash. It made a request to its senior institution BMBRFT to borrow money. After reviewing the script, BMBRFT decided to invest in the project, instead of lending capital to BTAC. My calculation was simple. BMBRFT’s involvement would facilitate our censorship in Beijing. For this reason, both the S999ECL and I agreed on BMBRFT’s involvement.

28. How did you deal with the comments made by BTAC and BMBRFT?
I adjusted the script. The adjustment was conducted in Yunnan province during the drama’s shooting preparation by Dongyu, a script assistant and me.

29. Can you give me some details how you implemented the adjustment?
We deleted the plot that Wei Qin married Kong Pinheng, but it was not due to censorship issues, but mainly altered for narrative rationality. General Manager
Yang and his staff thought that it was somehow too abrupt and unrealistic that Wei married Kong soon after her divorce …. BTAC and BMBRFT felt uneasy about the portrayal of the political struggle between the main three provincial party leaders. We made some changes. For instance, we canceled the scene in which Feng directly questioned He for his protection of Luo, and how he concealed the truth of the dam collapse. We softened Feng’s aggressive acts as much as we could and transformed him into a cadre in a real life with personal political ambition. I engaged in the whole process of script planning, orientation and discussion; I knew what the drama attempted to achieve. I couldn’t say that these changes didn’t affect the original script, but I kept the fundamental contents unchanged. The changes were merely minor adjustments, not aimed at subversion [of the original script]. So we didn’t spend too much time on script adjustment. After the adjustment, our focus was on how to exploit televsional and audio means to maximize the script’s criticism and potential.

30. *Did BTAC and S999ECL interfere with the shooting process?*

The division of work between the investors and me was clear. I was responsible for script and the whole process of production including post-production. Basically, I was in charge of the production from recruiting the crew, selecting shooting locations to making the shooting schedule. Of course, BTAC and General Manager Yang provided some advice, but the big decisions were still made by me. They [investors] seldom came to the shooting locations. Occasionally they visited us and reviewed the rushes we shot. They were satisfied with the quality [of the rushes] and felt that the rushes showed a potential that the drama may become an excellent work. Generally speaking, they trusted me and didn’t bother me at all.

31. *I find there are two verses from Ai Qing’s poem, I Love This Land, in the title sequence, which we (the scriptwriters) did not write in our script. Why did you add the verses?*

At the post-production stage, Dongyu and I felt that the title *Fruitful Land* was too
“main melody-like”. So we cited Ai Qing’s verses to re-interpret the title. The cited verses appeared on the last shot of the title sequence. The verses were very famous and indicated the self-reflectivity of modern intellectuals. The use of these verses was to highlight our social responsibility and [implying that] this drama was not a main melody work.

32. Did you face some trouble during production?
We encountered a lot of troubles. For example, during post-production, we were short of 1.2 million RMB for making special effects for the dam explosion and flooding. It was OK without it if you wanted to fool audiences. However, didn’t we attempt to produce a high quality masterpiece? So we couldn’t fool the audiences at all. But, BTAC refused to increase the budget. At last, S999ECL supported us and gave the money.

33. Could you please tell me something about the marketing of Land?
Marketing of Land was mainly carried out by S999ECL. S999ECL had a lot of experience in the market and knew how to effectively repackage a drama to attract television stations. I made a promotional trailer for S999ECL when they attended the Beijing International Broadcast and Television Week (BIBTW). It was well received [at the BIBTW]. China International Television Corporation (CITVC) competed with provincial stations to buy Land. It successively negotiated three times with S999ECL.

34. Is a promotional trailer really important for marketing?
It was crucial before the mid-1990s. At that time, television stations decided to buy a TV drama by largely relying on watching its trailer. Nowadays, television networks are clever and realize the risk of judging a TV drama merely based on a trailer. But, a trailer is still an important means to attract the stations’ interest in a particular program.
Let’s talk about censorship now. I hope you can honestly tell me what happened during the censoring process?

The censorship in Beijing was a bit fussy. The censors raised a lot of issues. These issues mainly targeted the first episode, particularly the farmers’ protest. As a result, the shots where the farmers beat Luo Hansheng, the police crack down on the protest, and the military police entangled with the farmers at the railway station, were all gone. However, I really knew that they wouldn’t make things too difficult for us since BMBRFT was also one of the investors …. Nowadays, exposure of the evil of officialdom is still a taboo, but Live like a Worm is a surprise. It shows that the critical realist creation hasn’t disappeared [from Chinese TV drama].

How about the censorship from CCTV?

It was a surprise for me that CCTV’s censorship went through quite smoothly. At first, General Manager Yang and I felt a little bit nervous when we saw the three censors constantly writing down their opinions. We learnt in the end that they not only wrote down “problems”, but also nice comments. The censors were excited and said to us that they hadn’t watched such an excellent drama for a long time. They commented that Land was the best main melody drama which they had watched in recent years. They thanked us for shooting an excellent drama for CCTV. They watched those stereotyped main melody dramas all day and so felt that Land was fresh and unique. The censorship at CCTV was smooth. So Land was scheduled as the finale drama of CCTV for 2004.

What does it mean that Land was scheduled as the finale drama?

In CCTV-1’s scheduling arrangement, the opening TV drama [screened on 4 January] and the finale drama [scheduled for 20 December] are regarded as the two most important dramas of the year. They [the schedule of a finale drama and the next year opening drama] are similar to Chinese film’s New Year celebration season and considered as the vital time slots to attract more audience numbers …
On 15 December, Wang Guohui 汪国辉 [the director of the DFTVD] hosted a news conference to promote *Land*. Over a hundred journalists attended the conference. Wang told them that *Land* would be broadcast on CCTV-1 at primetime [20:05-21:35pm] on 20 December.

38. *In your opinion, why was Land’s censorship in CCTV so smooth?*

On the one hand, the censors were aesthetically tired of main melody works, on the other hand, the viewing ratings dropped as the result of SARFT’s penalties on crime dramas and adapted “Red Classics” …. Thus they could tolerate the “main melody” innovation and exploration. Actually the definition of main melody is a somewhat ambiguous concept. Everybody has his/her own interpretation.

39. *But Land was suddenly withdrawn from CCTV’s schedule. What happened?*

I received a call from CCTV at 7am on 16 [December] to ask me to meet them immediately. I hurried to CCTV. The head of the CCTV censoring group told me that the seniors regarded the drama as being problematic. He stopped my defense and urged me to complete revision in two days so that the drama could be broadcast on 20 [December]. He told me the opinions regarding the revision and that the first episode was most problematic. I worked on revision for two days and re-cut almost the whole first episode. I sent the revised drama to CCTV on 18 [December], but *Land* was finally removed from the broadcast schedule. It was just like pouring a basin of cold water over me. But, the DVD publisher still distributed the drama with 24 episodes.

40. *How could the DVD publisher do that? Was it legal?*

It was legal. We obtained a distribution license with 24 episodes [after *Land* passed the censorship in Beijing]. So even though CCTV delayed *Land*’s transmission, the DVD publisher still released the drama in the end of 2004. Many DVD retailers promoted *Land* as a banned drama. The sales of the *Land* DVD were really good.
41. Do you have any information as to why CCTV suddenly changed its mind?

Somebody said that it was Vice-Minister of SARFT Hu Zhanfan [who interfered with the Land broadcast]. Others said that it was Hu En [vice-director of CCTV] who wanted to review Land just before its broadcast. Once Hu En watched the drama, he felt really offended. You know that the New Year was coming. The government is really anxious to emphasize social stability above other things. At this sensitive time, it was politically risky to broadcast a TV drama about farmers’ demonstration against the government on the national CCTV. This is just our analysis. There might be other reasons. Anyway, the senior officials certainly disapproved of the drama. Our intention was sensed by the Party at the last minute.

42. What are your feelings about the official censorship?

It is difficult to comment on censorship …. It is conducted differently at different censoring agencies. Generally speaking, the censorship at SARFT is the strictest and it may be stricter in the advanced coastal provinces than in the poor north-west provinces. It indeed has some manipulative spaces. For instance, there is a close relationship between provincial censors and the local television stations. Many censors previously worked as editors etc. for local television stations. They all belong to the national radio and television sector. So if you cooperate with local television stations, the close ties [between censors and local television stations] might play a favorable part in the censorship. That is one of reasons why I chose to cooperate with BTAC and BMBRFT.

43. Wang Shuo pointed out that there is corruption during censorship in his blog ...

There is indeed corruption during censorship. Usually, a TV producer needs to give each censor 1000 to 2000 RMB and various other fees for transportation, accommodation and meals. If a drama is problematic and needs to go to SARFT for censoring, the cost is even higher.
44. Land was rescheduled in non-primetime on CCTV-8 eight months later ...

Because CCTV-8 is TV drama channel, its social influence is much less than CCTV-1. Senior leaders hardly watch CCTV-8, especially those programs in its non-primetime slot ..... So this rescheduling is a good arrangement for CCTV both politically and economically.

45. Did CCTV’s rescheduling of Land cause the investors any financial loss?

Not at all. The CITVC of CCTV made a half of the payment to the investors before the CCTV’s broadcast schedule. Although the schedule was suddenly changed, CITVC still made another half payment to the investors according to the contract. General Manager Yang’s personal connection with CITVC facilitated the payment. Otherwise, the last half would be paid much later after the drama’s actual transmission. The final budget (of Land) was 7.2 million RMB. The sales almost reach 13 million RMB.

46. Can you briefly comment on the situation of Chinese TV drama production today?

The situation of Chinese TV drama today is unpleasant. Television stations are obsessed with the pursuit of viewing ratings .... The genuine realist dramas are fewer and fewer. This reflects the fact that, on the one hand, the government is unwilling to allow these kinds of drama to emerge, on the other hand, nobody is willing to invest in these kinds of drama. Another reason is that audiences, especially young viewers, may have no interest in watching them. In the long term, this would lead to a bad consequence: nobody would be socially responsible. Where will a country (Guojia 国家), which is full of people without social responsibilities, head to? Where will a nation (Minzu 民族), which is full of people without social responsibilities, head to?

Those pseudo-realist TV dramas avoid tackling social and human truths. Their falsifications and fabrications ultimately lead to the deception [of audiences]. It
precisely perpetuates the political tradition developed since ancient times: obscurantism (*Yümin zhengce* 愚民政策).
Edited Interview with the Scriptwriter of *Fruitful Land*, Li Yanxiong

(Zhuying Garden Hotel, Guangzhou, 11 and 12 May 2010)

1. As I told you, we are going to talk about the creation of Land today. Although I was involved in the creative process, I still hope that you can retell me the story from your perspective. Your statement will certainly inspire me to re-examine and re-think about the drama.

   It is no problem. We can recall [the creative process] together.

2. Firstly, Land is not our original work. Could you please talk about it in detail? *Fruitful Land* was developed from Zong Fuxian’s 5000-word synopsis which provided a platform for the drama. Unfortunately the content it offered was not enough to develop into 20 episodes, which were what the producers originally desired. Zong’s synopsis was only limited to develop into around eight episodes, which was far from 20 episodes. Another problem with the synopsis was that the central event of the dam collapse was presented as an isolated event, departing from the current Chinese social context. Therefore we decided to set the drama in the context of rural reform in order to delve more deeply into the issue of *sannong*. The reason for this decision came from two aspects: Lu Tianming’s *Provincial Secretary* had already dealt with industrial reform but failed to truthfully explore social issues. As a drama which similarly focused on provincial secretaries, we didn’t want to present similar content—that of industrial reform—in our program. Second, and more importantly, the issue of *sannong* had caused widespread concern among people and the authorities alike and no TV drama had really investigated the root of rural problems in any depth up till now. Therefore there was an opportunity for us to reveal the root cause of contemporary Chinese problems by way of exploration of peasant sufferings.
3. But, Zong’s synopsis had a problem and we had an argument with him in Shanghai ...

In our meeting with Zong in Shanghai, we questioned his synopsis: He’s suppression of the dam investigation derived from his political experience—Luo’s father-in-law’s involvement in the dam scandal will affect Luo’s promotion [being the next provincial secretary]. It was to say that the Party’s promotion policies were practiced in a way that implicated nine generations of a family. However, in the end, Luo was promoted despite the fact that his father-in-law’s crime was exposed. Thus Secretary He’s anxiety and efforts to suppress the investigation proved meaningless, unnecessary and even wrong. But, as a veteran, experienced politician, Secretary He shouldn’t be portrayed as naive and ignorant. So the synopsis didn’t make sense.

Zong acknowledged that he couldn’t justify the narrative at this point. In real life, we all knew that He’s experience was correct while Luo’s final triumph was unbelievable. Zong defended himself that it was necessary for a happy ending, otherwise the drama would encounter troubles in censorship. To regard the rupture as problematic and unreasonable, he hoped we would suture the narrative flaw. Nevertheless, we deliberately kept the fissure as it satirized the superficial happy ending. We hoped that audiences would sense the contradiction since He’s distrust of the system actually puts a question mark on Luo’s cheerful finale.

4. BTAC is a national-owned TV drama institution. Initially we worried about that it might be conservative toward political criticism. Could you please talk about BTAC’s views on Land?

When we first visited BTAC, Zheng Xiaolong emphasized that we should reflect the nature and hidden principles of officialdom. Actually Zheng’s claim was very close to the pursuit of Wang Yuewen’s and Yan Zhen’s officialdom exposure novels. I didn’t know whether Zheng read their novels before we met. But it was
obvious that Zheng wanted to make a TV drama which deeply explored the problems within officialdom. He took himself as an example. Before he took the post of the director of BTAC, he was a TV drama director who could behave according to his own will and say what he wanted. After being appointed as an official [the head of the state-owned BTAC], he found that he had to hide and repress his emotion and feelings no matter whom he liked or disliked. As Zheng was also a TV drama maker, his orientation of the drama was very close to our attempt at political criticism … Gu and Zheng’s emphasis on criticism and exposure actually encouraged us to play “an edge ball game”.

5. When I interviewed Gu Shiyang, he said that one of his considerations when cooperating with BTAC and BMBRFT was to facilitate the future censorship … The cooperation with BTAC and BMBRFT did facilitate the drama’s censorship. In fact, many provincial censors are staff working in the local state radio and television system, and some work in the administration side of local television stations. Thus they have a tie with the stations. So when censoring the programs made by the local television stations, the censors’ firm grip may considerably loosen.

6. How do you feel about our creative autonomy during the scriptwriting?

When we met with Gu, he firstly exhorted us: when conceiving and writing the script, you do not need to consider censorship and ideological constraints. Don’t wear a straightjacket. What you should think was how to break through. Shiyang had the same [critical] intent that we should go beyond the main melody pattern and shoot a critical realist drama. Gu gave us great freedom and led our creation to become no-boundary writing from the start.

7. What do you mean that Land is different from main melody drama?

The difference was that we placed all narrative events within social contradictions and struggle. For example, the dam event was positioned within the struggle between intellectuals and [political] authority. The two new added events [were in
the same fashion]. The farmers’ protest against overtaxation was placed within the struggle between the farmers and the privileged class; the falsification of political achievement was positioned within the internal contradiction of officialdom. It reinforced the drama’s criticism of reality, especially of the political system. Of course, we retained the compelling aspects of the script. We exploited the melodramatic mode. The melodramatic mode and expression is lucid and easy to understand. Thus it can maximally spread unofficial voices …. In other words, the attraction aimed at not only commercial purpose, but more importantly communication with audiences to allow our political criticism to be more easily accepted by audiences, to encourage audiences’ participation in political reform.

8. Can you explain a little bit more about this point?

I believe that reform cannot succeed if it merely relies on a few intellectual elite without peoples’ participation. Reforms, especially political reform, should be mutually sought by both intellectuals and the grassroots to force the government to reform. TV drama is a good medium of communicating this to audiences.

9. Can you talk about how the critical realist orientation was realized during the scriptwriting process?

The fundamental concern for us in the beginning was to identify and understand the key issues of contemporary Chinese rural society. What were the causes of such issues? We carried out systematic research in order to ‘dig up the truth’. We read the book, *China along the Yellow River*, written by Shanghai sociologist Cao Jingqin, and were inspired greatly by it. The book analyzes rural problems in Henan province from a sociological perspective. It was an outstanding piece of research and so insightful that we all agreed to base our ‘fictional rural world’ on Cao’s study. We followed Cao’s lead and investigated the issue of the farmers’ demonstration against over-taxation …. Many of Luo’s lines were inspired by Cao’s research, for example, Luo’s speech in a meeting, which pointed out the
ridiculous situation in setting up a Taiwan Affairs Office in the Xinglong Township Government ….

10. Let’s talk the scriptwriting more specifically. How about the two protagonists, Luo Hangsheng and He Libin?

The key point of the drama was placed on Luo’s challenge to He Libin’s authority. It was given shape in Zong’s synopsis. However, in Zong’s synopsis, it was portrayed as a conflict between two good guys based on different personalities, while we changed the conflict into a real challenge. It was sensitive in depicting a provincial party secretary negatively. It could encounter troubles during censorship. So we spent a lot of time to make the conflict apparently look like one occurring between two good guys, but essentially we set up Luo’s rebellion. During the script discussions, we consciously distinguished He from Luo in terms of different political views: clean official politics and intellectual peoples’ politics …. Inspired by the Bohai 2 tragic event, we portrayed He’s handling of the dam scandal as a problematic political practice of concealing the truth from the public. Also the dam event was turned to be a political allegory ….

11. So Luo is not an official in common parlance …

Eventually, we highlight Luo’s identity as a scholar who ultimately contradicts the officials. He was an “other” of officialdom who does not know the immensity of heaven and earth [of the political system] and strived to reform the rules of officialdom.

12. In other words, Land is about political reform …

We wrote on the front cover of our revised synopsis: [Land] was the first Chinese political TV drama in a real sense.

13. What is political TV drama, in your understanding?

Political TV drama means to adopt a critical realist mode, intending to explore the nature of the political system and politicians, and appealing for political reform. It
is just my own understanding. Such TV drama had not appeared in China before. *Republic* showed the tendency, but it criticizes the present politics through rewriting history. We attempted to go even further in this direction by directly dealing with contemporary political problems.

14. **Specifically, in your perspective, how did Land explore the nature of political systems and politicians?**

Let’s take the transitional scenes between Luo’s first and second visits of Xiakou as an example. Possibly in most TV drama professionals’ view, these two episodes should be cut down to 20 minutes because they slow down the whole plot, which means audiences would press the button of their remotes to change to another channel. However, our purpose is not to create an exciting and closed story full of the ups and downs of the characters. We sought to reveal deep social contradictions, purposefully creating a rupture in the narrative. In other words, the inclusion of these two episodes, which lack exciting plot twists, is a suitable tactic to deliver an important message to the audience.

15. **These transitional scenes revolve around the provincial economic conference which seems to be a minor scene ...**

The provincial economic conference seems to be minor and unnecessary. But it is a crucial scene for us. It emphasizes the process of how Ma Ming is compelled to be a “whore”. Feng Yuanyi constantly forces Ma to increase the economic target. Feng had a line: huge burdens are required to be carried by huge numbers of people; every shoulder has to carry its own share …. These words actually were said by Huang Yong (the General Manager) of our Pearl River Film Company, (when he set up the economic target of the Company). As you know, since Huang forced us to share the target, our laowupei 劳务费 (administrative fees) were increased dramatically.

16. **By the way, when did you join the [state-owned] Pearl River Film Company?**
I joined the Company in 1978. But since the 1990s, I was worked for other film and television institutions by paying administrative fees to the Company. In 2004, I resigned and became a freelance scriptwriter. Nowadays, most TV drama makers are freelance and free of direct control from the state.

17. Can you talk more about the idea “a virgin compelled to be a whore”, which you just used to describe the character, Ma Ming?

“A virgin compelled to be a whore” derives from our reading of fiction about officialdom. Basically our research focused on two aspects: (1) the issues of sannong; (2) the issues of officialdom. We read many novels about officialdom which were condemned by officials, such as Deep Blue Breakers and National Portrait. The most striking feature of those novels is [that they depict] how upright, incorruptible cadres are incapable of resisting the hidden principles of officialdom and ultimately become degenerated. We described this process as “a virgin compelled to be a whore”.

18. Can you explain what the hidden principle of officialdom is?

We once summarized the principle as serving seniors not the public, catering to seniors’ favor and sticking to their instructions.

19. In this sense, the character Mayor Ma Ming is not a stereotypical villain, but a ...

In our conception, Ma Ming was not a formulaic corrupt villain. Rather he was portrayed as a victim of the corrupt system as well. He is a kind of tragic figure, or in our design, “a virgin compelled to be a whore”. His image was close to the majority of the real middle and low ranking of cadres. Before his death, we wrote a scene: Ma requested Luo if it was possible to place a Party flag on his body at his funeral. He still believed he was a qualified Party member. In the scene, we showed more sympathy to Ma Ming. Why had the previous excellent county head degenerated in the end? This was a question encouraging us to think deeply.
20. Can you recall some difficulties we faced during our creation?

During the discussion about revising the script in Guangzhou, we had a debate with director Fu. He insisted on revising the first episode as he worried that the two intense portrayals of the farmers’ violent protest against the government would encounter troubles during censorship. Fu proposed we delete the two scenes or simply depict them with a fewer shots, and turn the direct depiction into an indirect suggestion .... We tried our best to defend ourselves. Gu Shiyang supported us. Basically we shared the same ground of critical realism with Gu. So if Fu’s suggestions reinforced the orientation, they would be adopted, otherwise they would be discharged. However, Fu’s suggestion of adding a description of Luo’s weakness during his actions against the falsification of political achievement was good in constructing the character. It not only set up a contrast with but also a foreshadowing of Luo’s later challenge to He.

21. Actually BTAC also worried about our description of the farmers’ demonstration and asked us to modify it ...

We sprinkled a few drops of doggy blood.

22. “Sprinkling doggy blood” was an interesting metaphor we used to deal with the investors’ reviews. Can you explain it further?

“Sprinkling doggy blood” means to shower certain main melody components into our narrative to confuse the investors and censors. For example, we added a scene in which the farmers set up a CCP branch within the Farmers’ Economic Association. But the branch appeared only once and had no narrative function. When the farmers fought the government, the branch did not play any part in the struggle at all. It was just written for relieving the investors’ anxiety. So director Fu felt this doggy blood was unnecessary and asked us to delete the scenes. But Fu’s suggestion was rejected by us and Gu, because this doggy blood was a mask and also a price that we paid to secure our criticism.
23. *We were not involved in the final alteration of the script. Did you think that it would affect our critical intention?*

I don’t think so. According to the contract, our job ended once the investors approved the script. The final alteration was carried out during the preparation of shooting. It signalled that the alteration was just minor. Otherwise, the investors would ask us to address the changes. More importantly, the alteration was supervised by Shiyang. He was on our side. I watched the completed 24-episode drama. Our critical intention is still well established.

24. *How do you feel about the CCTV’s sudden cancellation (of Land’s broadcast)?*

*There are a lot of protests against the move on the online forum …*

The protests are not limited on the Internet … CCTV’s sudden removal of *Land* from the finale drama slot provided a good business opportunity for DVD retailers as well. The owner of the DVD shop near my neighbourhood veggie market advertised *Land* as a CCTV banned drama. The advertisement produced huge sales for *Land* DVDs. The DVDs quickly sold out. I went to the shop three times and then finally bought the *Land* DVD. With the development of technologies, the government cannot totally control the broadcast of TV drama like before. Audiences can access what they want to watch from various channels. One cannot underestimate the audience power of free choice. It may have an incredible impact on the operation of Chinese media and the development of Chinese society.