

Propaganda and Pastiche

Visions of Mao in *Founding of a Republic, Beginning of the Great Revival, and Let the Bullets Fly*⁽¹⁾

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ABSTRACT: The two Mao films of 2009 and 2011 set a new standard in the confluence of commercial and propaganda productions in terms of sheer scale. While they are not fundamentally new in repackaging propaganda as entertainment, or even in co-opting parodic elements within official discourse, this essay argues that, viewed against the background of recent policy speeches, they contribute to defining the new “mainstream socialist culture” set out as a cultural policy goal by Hu Jintao. By the same thrust, they redefine the figure of Mao and the role of the CCP in an attempt to stake out a popular consensus on the contemporary Chinese polity.

KEYWORDS: Mao Zedong, red culture, propaganda, “Mainstream socialist culture”, cultural policy, main melody (*zhuxuanlü*), Hu Jintao.

It has often been underlined that the Chinese propaganda apparatus, whose existence remains solidly justified by its mission to provide the ideological underpinnings to the rule of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), has undergone major transformations in recent years. Several recent studies by Anne-Marie Brady and David Shambaugh have examined the structure of the propaganda apparatus and its institutional adaptability in the context of the authoritarian “resilience” of the Chinese regime. Responding to earlier studies questioning the Party’s capacity to maintain control over thought work,⁽²⁾ Anne-Marie Brady highlights that propaganda did not weaken after 1989; on the contrary, Jiang Zemin’s “two hands” (*liang shou*) theory emphasised the need to sustain both economic growth and political control. But, as Brady notes, the latter took a new turn towards what she terms “popular authoritarianism”: “In an extraordinary process of cultural exchange, China’s propaganda system has deliberately absorbed the methodology of political public relations, mass communications, and other modern methods of mass persuasion commonly used in Western democratic societies [...] slick advertising campaigns have replaced political campaigns.”⁽³⁾ A 2008 speech given by Hu Jintao for the 60th anniversary of *People’s Daily* illustrates this new strategy in the area of the media: building on Jiang Zemin’s concept of “correct public-opinion guidance,” Hu emphasises the need for a “new pattern of public opinion guidance” (*yulun yindao xin geju* 輿論引導新格局), which uses the “metropolitan media” (less directly under Party control and more subject to commercial demands) to “set the agenda” in a way that is more relevant to “public opinion.”⁽⁴⁾ Similarly, film and related productions remain subject to strong control through the censorship system under the auspices of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and the Propaganda Department under the Central Committee of the CCP, via its Leading Small Group (LSG) for Propaganda and Ideological Work.⁽⁵⁾ However, while institutional aspects and control of the media are well documented, less attention has been devoted, apart from Geremie Barmé’s seminal study *In the Red*, to the ideological nodes around which official discourse is structured and restructured, and to how the increasing commercialisation and entertainment culture highlighted by Brady has, since the mid 1990s, influenced the ideological content of propaganda discourse itself.

Two state-sponsored blockbusters of 2009 and 2011 represent a good opportunity to assess the de- or re-ideologisation of propaganda: neatly symmetrical in their Chinese titles, *Jian guo da ye* (The Founding of a Republic, 2009) and *Jian dang wei ye* (Beginning of the Great Revival; literally: The Founding of a Party, 2011) were both co-directed by Fifth Generation director Huang Jianxin and the colourful chairman of China Film Group (CFG), Han Sanping, who effectively embodies the link with the propaganda-ideological apparatus.⁽⁶⁾ China Film Group directly produced both of these films, although *Founding of a Republic* garnered more co-producers, including the notorious Hong Kong-based Emperor Entertainment Group, headed by tycoon Albert Yeung.⁽⁷⁾ Both films rely on the same formula of a star-studded cast of Chinese and more largely sinophone actors from around Asia, playing

1. The author is profoundly grateful to Geremie Barmé, Arif Dirlik, Christoph Steinhardt, Kristof Van den Troost, and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their attentive reading and invaluable comments.
2. See Daniel Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and “Thought Work” in Reformed China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999.
3. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, p. 3. The Party’s ability to produce more “savvy” propaganda has nonetheless also been questioned after a string of public relations disasters for the Chinese government over the last few years.
4. See the original speech and discussion in: David Bandurski, “Propaganda Leaders scurry off to carry out the ‘spirit’ of Hu Jintao’s ‘important’ media speech,” *China Media Project*, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2008/06/25/1079> (consulted on 22 May 2012). Hu’s policy is discussed in Christoph Steinhardt, *Speaking about the Unspeakable: The Evolution of Political Discourse on Popular Protest in Contemporary China*, PhD Dissertation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012, pp. 125-130.
5. See David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” *The China Journal*, no. 57, January 2007, pp. 25-58, p. 31. On LSGs, see also Alice Lyman Miller, “The CCP Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor* no. 26, 2008, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM26AM.pdf> (consulted on 2 May).
6. See for example his interview: “Han Sanping: Shuo Zhong Ying yizhiduda geng zhun que” (Han Sanping: It’s more exact to call CFG the biggest fish in the pond), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 10 September 2009, www.infzm.com/content/34410 (2 May). He has no qualms about his love for hero-figures: “I not only like reading books about Mao, I also like books about Stalin, Lenin, Qinshihuang, even Hitler, Chiang Kai-shek, these books are my first choice.” See: Yuan Lei, “Han Sanping qian zhuan” (Biography of Han Sanping), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 9 September 2009, www.infzm.com/content/34412 (consulted on 2 May).
7. On Albert Yeung, see: Thomas Crampton, “Allegations range from simple bribes to stock swindles,” *The New York Times*, 23 July 2003, www.nytimes.com/2003/07/23/news/23iht-pop.html; “Rigged music awards and bribery scandal linked to powerful and feared tycoon,” *Asian Pacific Post*, 24 July 2003, www.primetimecrime.com/APNS/20030724riggedawards.htm; Augustine Tan, “Mugabe’s Hong Kong hideaway,” *Asia Times*, 28 February 2009, www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KB28Ad01.html (consulted on 2 May).

cameo roles that guarantee a cabaret-like recognition effect for the audience.⁽⁸⁾ *Founding of a Republic* was a strong financial success, totalling 420 million *yuan* in the box-office (see boxed text: Top grossing Chinese films) for a reported cost of only 30 million *yuan*,⁽⁹⁾ while *Beginning of the Great Revival* fell short of expectations given its reported cost of approximately 100 million *yuan*, although its final income was perhaps not as low as suggested, with the help of grouped ticket sales to various state-owned or state-affiliated entities.⁽¹⁰⁾ Huang Jianxin described in an interview how *The Founding of a Republic* originated: "Last October [2008], SARFT gave Han Sanping an order: to shoot an all-encompassing, solid, documentary-coloured film that positively represents the establishment of the new China."⁽¹¹⁾ There is therefore not the slightest doubt about its top-down conception and approval at the highest level.

The two films are significant in that they mark a new will within the party-state: far from toning down or sublimating the great milestones in the history of the Party, it firmly intends to transform them into cultural and commercial icons around which to structure a national narrative that is based on a repackaged ideology. One might have thought that, in the ultra-capitalist China of the early 2010s, the foundation of the CCP by a small group of idealistic anarchist utopians in 1921 would seem irrelevant: on the contrary, the Party has made the wager that it can repackage historical events like this one to reformulate its claim to legitimacy in the new era. Yuezhi Zhao's observation remains valid, when she writes that "instead of bidding 'farewell to revolution,' the CCP, although embracing market reform, continues to selectively draw upon its revolutionary legacies to sustain its rule at both normative and tactical levels."⁽¹²⁾ Indeed, both films are very obviously structured around the figure of Mao Zedong, played in one case by famous Mao look-alike Tang Guoqiang, in the other by young heartthrob and erstwhile indie-actor Liu Ye, with moments of surprising physical resemblance to the young chairman. Three decades after his death and the historical verdict passed in the 1981 resolution, it is thus remarkable that Mao still remains the central figure of the main historical narrative of modern China presented by the Chinese government.

Repositioning Mao

What then is the image of Mao the Party wishes to present today? Firstly, it is significantly restricted in time. It should be noted here that the two films proceed backwards. The first one, released in 2009 for the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC), is set in the years of the Civil War, between 1945 and 1949, and culminates with the proclamation of the People's Republic and the establishment of its main institutions. The second one, released in 2011 for the 90th anniversary of the foundation of the CCP, covers the first decade of the Republic of China and ends with the establishment of the Communist Party in 1921. Paradoxically, though predictably, both films entirely sidestep any engagement with the history of the PRC after 1949, which would seem a natural subject for both commemorations. This deliberate avoidance can be traced, as I tried to argue previously, to the absence of a consensus on the interpretation of that segment of history even within the power apparatus, as was prominently displayed by a similar avoidance at the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which focused on the "four great inventions" and the cultural achievements of "China's" purportedly multi-millennial history.⁽¹³⁾

This approach is consistent with – though perhaps even more cautious than – the 1981 "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our

party," which distinguished between five periods: the pre-1949 and 1949-1956 periods, during which the line of the Party and Mao's leadership are deemed "correct"; the 1956-1966 decade, marked by some errors, the responsibility for which is shared by Mao and the collective leadership, and the "Cultural Revolution Decade" of 1966-1976, which is entirely condemned, including Mao's role. Finally, the post-Mao era was, unsurprisingly, endorsed. However, the Party's final judgment on Mao remained positive.⁽¹⁴⁾ It served, by and large, as the yardstick for a series of Mao-centred films re-counting officially-endorsed history throughout the 1980s, joined in the 1990s by a growing flow of television dramas, probably inspired by the Qing-court dramas that became more and more popular as television sets spread through the country.⁽¹⁵⁾ As noted by Anne-Marie Brady, the endorsement of Mao was reinforced by Jiang Zemin after the Tiananmen protests and in the run-up to the centenary of the Chairman's birth: "Jiang's speech [in November 1989] was full of Mao quotes and allusions to Maoist theories on propaganda work. In a backlash against the de-Maoization of the 1980s

8. These two films generated at least one spin-off: *1911 (Xinhai geming)*, also 2011, directed and co-produced by Jackie Chan, with support from some of the funders of the two previous official films (Shanghai Film Studio): it can be seen as a patriotic Hongkonger's contribution to and inflection of the official narrative that tries to deflect the focus away from the CCP and towards the less controversial, harmonious figure of Sun Yat-sen, the perhaps overly literary (*wen*) figure of the "father of the nation" (*guofu*, as he is known in Taiwan) and his more martial (*wu*) sidekick, Huang Xing, played by Jackie Chan. However, *1911* differs from the two mainland productions in that it lacks their cameo-structure, constructing a grand historical narrative around a few iconic figures. As a Cantonese-centred film, it severely criticises "Northerner" Yuan Shikai, who gets off rather lightly in *Beginning of the Great Revival*.
9. This figure is given in "Han Sanping: Shuo Zhong Ying yizhiduda geng zhunque," *art. cit.*
10. *The New York Times* estimates the production cost at US\$12M (Xiyun Yang, "People, You Will See this Film. Right Now," *The New York Times*, 24 June 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/06/25/movies/chinese-get-viewers-to-propaganda-film-beyond-the-great-revival.html, consulted on 2 May), whereas *Nanfang Zhoumo's* figure is 70 million *yuan*; see Yuan Lei, "Heibang pian, zhenglun pian, qingchun pian" (Mafia film, political theory film, youth film), 17 June 2011, <http://infzm.com/content/60462> (consulted on 2 May).
11. "Huang Jianxin: *Jian guo da ye jue bu shi xuanchuan pian*" (Huang Jianxin: *Founding of a Republic* is absolutely not a propaganda film), *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan*, 21 September 2009, www.infzm.com/content/34713 (consulted on 22 May 2012). He goes on to tell how Han summoned him to his office in January 2010, the film was shot in 120 days in the Spring and finished on July 3rd, after which it underwent "60 days of screenings and controls (*shen kan*) by experts in history, literature, and film."
12. Yuezhi Zhao, "Sustaining and Contesting Revolutionary Legacies in Media and Ideology," in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand*, Cambridge, Harvard Asia Centre, 2011, p. 208. Zhao's chapter is mainly devoted to the role of press and media.
13. On the opening ceremony, see Geremie Barmé, "China's Flat Earth: History and 8th August 2008," *China Quarterly*, vol. 197, 2009, pp. 64-86. For a similar discussion on the opening of the new National Museum in 2009, see Shelly Kraicer, "History in Progress, with Gaps: The National Museum of China," <http://dgeneratefilms.com/china-today/history-in-progress-with-gaps-the-national-museum-of-china-part-two> (consulted on 22 May 2012). See also my comment in "1911: The failed institutional revolution," *The China Beat*, 10 October 2011, www.thechinabeat.org/?p=3867 (consulted on 22 May 2012): "It took almost one century from the fall of the Bastille until French citizens of all political stripes could come together at the funeral of Republican icon Victor Hugo, a sign, according to historian François Furet's famous pronouncement, that 'Revolution had entered port.' [By contrast, the] absence of a minimal consensus on the nature of the Chinese polity speaks eloquently to the open legacy of 1911."
14. See "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China," www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm (consulted on 22 May 2012). The key assessment on Mao is in paragraph 18. For the Chinese original, see "Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi," http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-03/04/content_2543544.htm (consulted on 22 May 2012).
15. For a round-up and discussion of these films, see Chang Ping, "*Jian guo da ye zou xiang shijie*" (*Founding of a Republic* marches out to the world), originally published on FT Chinese, it has been reposted on various websites, for example: <http://fzbk77.blog.sohu.com/rss> (consulted on 22 May 2012). See also the well-documented resource site "History in Chinese Film and Television," www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/representations/index.html (consulted on 22 May 2012), and Matthias Niedenführ, "Revising and Televising the Past in East Asia: 'History Soaps' in Mainland China" in Steffi Richter (ed.), *Contested Views of a Common Past – Revisions of History in Contemporary East Asia*, Frankfurt-New York, Campus, 2008, pp. 351-370. For a television drama based on similar historical events as *Beginning of the Great Revival*, see *Kai Tian Pi Di* (Creating a new world), <http://tv.sogou.com/series/wxt4vu5644q17kwm5sy5tnoy.html> (consulted on 22 May 2012).

and the perceived damage that had been caused to Party prestige as a result of that process, Mao would again become a point of reference in propaganda and thought work in China throughout the 1990s and early twenty-first century. [...] In advertising terms, Mao Zedong is a powerful brand which the CCP can not afford to give up, no matter how much it has walked away from the principles he upheld."⁽¹⁶⁾ The two commemorative films may therefore be seen as marking a new climax in the "branding" effort that the Party continues to devote to Mao and the framing of the narrative of the Chinese Revolution.

Brady highlights an important shift, from Jiang's use of Mao as a weapon in an ideological struggle to a much looser instrumentalisation of Mao as a "brand," or vague symbol for anything ranging from social equality to strong leadership. In this sense, the use of Mao as a cultural commodity can be seen as one illustration of the more general contradiction inherent in the notion of a "socialist market economy," in which the Party to a large extent ends up marketing itself through a combination of commercial advertising techniques and political control or ideology.⁽¹⁷⁾ This kind of branding of course goes back to the 1990s and even the 1980s, when "pop art," mocking and re-appropriating propaganda, began to be absorbed back into the mainstream. It is ironic that Geremie Barmé should, in 1996, have mentioned Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident* (1985) as one of the films that prepared the "repackaging and commercialization of twentieth-century Chinese history along the general lines determined by a Party-defined nostalgia. These filmic reprises of party culture, albeit originally seditious if not tongue-in-cheek, have over the years aided and abetted in the reformulation and rebirth of party culture as part of mainstream Chinese culture, both on the mainland and in the Sino-Kong-Tai world."⁽¹⁸⁾ This framework remains highly relevant to the two films Huang co-directed a quarter of a century later. In a way, the two films may be seen as a climax – in terms of sheer scale – of this repackaging technique, which also heightens its inherent contradictions.

Various critics of different political stripes have noted a set of related trends in the Chinese intellectual debate throughout the 1990s and 2000s. While Geremie Barmé was the first to highlight the commodification of the icons of Chinese socialism and of the figure of Mao himself,⁽¹⁹⁾ Dai Jinhua provided an astute analysis of the de-politicisation of Red Nostalgia: how "red" culture came to be "relived" and subsequently theorised as an object of nostalgia distinct from the political arrangements that had originally allowed for its production in films like *Red Cherry* by Ye Daying (1995).⁽²⁰⁾ Dai's nostalgia was in this sense the opposite of the popular yearning for the era of "deeply stirred passions and beliefs firmly held"⁽²¹⁾ that Geremie Barmé termed "totalitarian nostalgia," and defined as "[not] merely a commodified social mood sated simply by the revenant Mao cult of the early 1990s or a crude retro Cultural Revolution longing that fed the success of works like Jiang Wen's 1995 film *Under the Radiant Sun*. Rather, it was a nostalgia for a style of thought and public discourse; it was a nostalgia for a language of denunciation that offered simple solutions to complex problems."⁽²²⁾ Finally, Wang Hui, in his more general perspective of drawing parallels between post-Mao China and the "post-modern West" has highlighted a concomitant "depoliticisation" in both places, which has contributed to emptying politics of debates and of policy choices, reducing politics to "governance" and a form of marketing, which translates into propaganda in China and into "branding" or "PR politics" in the West.⁽²³⁾ The present paper will draw on all three approaches to assess the complex interplay between political and marketing strategies and to question what, if any, new contribution is made by the two films.

Post-mainstream culture

It seems useful to situate the two Mao films more precisely within the Chinese context and to investigate the circumstances of their production and reception. Post-reform Chinese film production has been traditionally divided into the three categories of propaganda, commercial, and independent art film, but the first two have become increasingly blurred in recent years. While commercial blockbusters may seem unrelated to Party politics, it is true that even romantic comedies such as *If You Are the One* by Feng Xiaogang (*Fei cheng wu rao*, 2008 and 2010) or martial arts films set in the distant past, such as *Red Cliff* by John Woo (*Chi bi*, 2008 and 2009) or *Hero* by Zhang Yimou (*Yingxiong*, 2002), have their political twists. Other super-productions, however, fall much more squarely within the writ of the censorship commission, dealing with issues of contemporary political relevance, such as *Aftershock* by Feng Xiaogang (*Tangshan da dizhen*, 2010), an indirect grappling with the Sichuan earthquake that ends by extolling the government's response in Sichuan, or with historically sensitive subject-matter, such as *Assembly*, also by Feng Xiaogang (*Jijie hao*, 2007), a recollection of the forgotten martyrs of the civil war of 1946-1949.

Conversely, propaganda films, produced at the initiative of the propaganda and ideological organs of the Party, have increasingly resorted to the visual and narrative effects of commercial blockbusters, absorbing many characteristics of recent commercial films dedicated to subjects such as the 1911 Revolution or the Civil War. Indeed, the two categories are now often lumped together under the heading *zhuxuanlü* 主旋律 or "main melody" films. Most recently, the third category of independent film appears to have become increasingly attracted into the orbit of the "main melody": the critic Shelly Kraicer put forward the notion of "post-main melody film" when discussing Lu Chuan's *The City of Life and Death* (*Nanjing! Nanjing!*, 2007), a film devoted to a typical propaganda topic (the Nanjing massacre, already somewhat inflected by the 1980s production *One and Eight*), with a new independent angle (a "good" Japanese character as well as "indie" actor Liu Ye) and a strong commercial backing.⁽²⁴⁾ It should be noted that Lu Chuan also served as one of the assistant directors for the two Mao films that will

16. Anne-Marie Brady, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

17. Geremie Barmé builds on Mikhail Epstein's definition of "ideology" to unmask "socialist market economy" as "a term created to convey the extreme contradictions of contemporary economic realities and to allow for an ideological underpinning to what, superficially at least, appears to have been an example of the Party's retreat from its avowed Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideals." (*In the Red*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 327). Epstein defines ideology as "simply a habit of thinking, a manner of expression, the prism through which all views and expressions are refracted without depending on specific views and ideas." Quoted in G. Barmé, "New China Newspeak," *The China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 29, March 2012, www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/glossary.php?searchterm=029_xinhua.inc&issue=029 (consulted on 22 May 2012).

18. Geremie Barmé, *In the Red*, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

19. See in particular the following sections of *In the Red* (*op. cit.*): "Selling Socialism and Ideology in a Consumer's Market," pp. 115-122 and "CCP™ & AdCult PRC," pp. 235-254, where Barmé coins some of the classic concepts such as "Party Inc." or "Corporate communism." See also Geremie Barmé, "The Irresistible Fall and Rise of Mao Zedong," *Shades of Mao. The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, Armonk (NY), ME Sharpe, 1996, pp. 3-73.

20. Dai Jinhua, "Rewriting the Red Classics," in Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (eds.), *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture: Cannibalizations of the Canon*, NY, Routledge, 2009, pp. 151-178

21. G. Barmé, *ibid.*, p. 323.

22. Geremie Barmé, "Totalitarian nostalgia," *In the Red*, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

23. See Wang Hui, "Quzhengzhijia de zhengzhi, baquan de duochong goucheng yu 60 niandai de xi-aoshi" (Depoliticised politics, the multiple structures of hegemony and the vanishing of the 1960s), in *Quzhengzhijia de zhengzhi*, Beijing, Sanlian, 2008, pp. 1-57.

24. See Shelly Kraicer, "A Matter of Life and Death: Lu Chuan and Post-Zhuxuanlü Cinema," <http://cinema-scope.com/wordpress/web-archive-2/issue-41/features-a-matter-of-life-and-death-lu-chuan-and-post-zhuxuanlu-cinema-by-shelly-kraicer> (consulted on 22 May 2012).

Table 1 – Top grossing Chinese films

Title	Director	Year	Production companies	Production budget (CNY)	Box-office income (CNY)
Let the Bullets Fly	Jiang Wen	2010	Beijing Buyilehu; CFG; Emperor	150 million	730 million
Aftershock	Feng Xiaogang	2010	Tangshan City; CFG, Huayi Brothers	120 million	673 million
The Founding of a Republic	Han Sanping/ Huang Jianxin	2009	CFG	30 million	420 million
If You Are The One I	Feng Xiaogang	2008	Huayi Brothers; Media Asia		350 million
Red Cliff I	John Woo	2008	Beijing Film Studio, CFG, Lion Rock		321 million

Top grossing foreign movies in China include: *Avatar* (2010; 1.38 billion yuan); *2012* (2009; 466 million yuan); *Inception* (2010; 457 million yuan); *Transformers* (2009; 455 million yuan).

Sources: <http://soundingsblog.wordpress.com/2011/04/06/top-5-grossing-movies-in-mainland-china/> (consulted on 22 May 2012); <http://boxofficemojo.com>; www.imdb.com.

Zhongguo Dianyingjia xiehui chanye yanjiu zhongxin, 2011 *Zhongguo dianying chanye yanjiu baogao/The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry*, Beijing, Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2011.

be discussed in the essay. *City of Life and Death* can thus be seen as a har-binger of the increased blurring of boundaries between categories.

Against this background, the Mao films provide interesting insights into views held in the "Centre" about the Chinese film industry, which has been repeatedly called upon to liberalise, both from abroad by Hollywood lobbyists eager to enter the Chinese market, and from inside by independent directors requesting an easing of censorship. Hu Jintao's call during the 2011 Central Committee Plenum to lay the foundations of a new Chinese culture underpinning the contemporary polity effectively reconceptualised propaganda and censorship as a legitimate policy to ensure "equality of cultural content" in a situation of "Western strength and Chinese weakness" (*Xi qiang wo ruo* 西強我弱), and to safeguard the national cultural industries – including cinema – with their "special characteristics." In this way, propaganda and censorship can be usefully equated with protectionist cultural policies like those enforced in South Korea or France,⁽²⁵⁾ allowing the Centre to both maintain control over the cultural industries (and, crucially, the Internet) and justify this control in universal terms.⁽²⁶⁾ The official discourse on the Chinese film sector is phrased in terms of a need to "shield" a "fledgling" industry (Chinese state productions, which are "not yet" fully marketable) from more developed foreign competition, while at the same time insisting on its "great potential," making the case to investors that the more they invest in this "maturing" industry, the faster it will become viable and hence open to competition.⁽²⁷⁾ Similar arguments have been made recently to ban foreign (mainly Korean and Japanese) soap-operas from prime-time television and to justify the Green Dam Internet software limiting access to sensitive websites and thus ensuring that "Chinese content" is fairly represented on the "Chinese Internet" rather than letting it be overrun by "foreign" news and entertainment.⁽²⁸⁾

What is interesting is therefore not so much that mainstream Party culture is capable of absorbing ironic or parodic representations of itself, but rather that it cannot let go of the Revolution and of Mao, who need to be reinvented in order to fit into the new narrative. This essay will argue that the two Mao films, while undeniably marked by both commodification and

depoliticised red nostalgia, in fact try to reconstruct a consensual figure of Mao as the centrepiece of the emerging new national narrative of "the great revival of the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing*).⁽²⁹⁾ The aim remains, through a cultural policy that does not seek to hide the heavy hand of state involvement, to articulate a "main melody" discourse that "guides" and gives shape to a possible consensus on the foundations of the modern Chinese polity, underscoring that the CCP's legitimacy continues to remain rooted in the battle over history. As Hu Jintao wrote in the published version of his address to the 2011 Plenum of the Central Committee on cultural policy: "[We must] correctly handle the relationship between enhancing the main melody and advocating diversity, between educating the people and satisfying the people's need for a diverse spiritual culture

25. Needless to say, such an equation of course remains purely rhetorical, as in France and South Korea the state subsidises independent productions (including, in France, via the "Fonds Sud," many foreign-directed independent productions that meet certain post-production criteria in France) while CFG subsidises home-grown state-endorsed blockbusters.

26. See Hu Jintao, "Jianshe shehui zhuyi wenhua qiang guo" (Building a strong country with a socialist culture), *Qishi*, 1 January 2012. Similarly, in a special issue of *Modern China* devoted to the "Chongqing model," new-left film and media scholar Lü Xinyu extols the "public television" model that she sees as characteristic of Chongqing under Bo Xilai. See: "Government subsidies, Market Socialism, and the 'Public' character of Chinese Television: The Transformation of Chongqing Satellite TV," *Modern China*, vol. 37, no. 6, pp. 661-671.

27. For an overview, see: *Zhongguo dianying chanye yanjiu baogao* (Research report on the Chinese film industry), Beijing, Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2011. Triumphantism was perceptible when China's box-office reportedly overtook Japan for second place in the first quarter of 2012, see for example: Zheng Yangpeng, "China's movie sector becomes second-largest," *China Daily*, 13 April 2012, www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/13/content_150136361.htm (consulted on 22 May 2012). In addition to not quoting any figures for the first quarter, the article also uses a rather misleading title. In terms of number of films produced, China is currently in third place, behind India and the United States, with more than 500 films produced per year. See: Zhang Hong, "Make Way Hollywood?," www.chinatoday.com.cn/english/se/txt/2012-03/27/content_442597.htm (consulted on 22 May 2012). Another good resource site for official Chinese cinema is: www.chineseifilms.cn/index.htm (consulted on 22 May 2012).

28. On TV bans see: Andrew Jacobs, "China Limits Foreign Made TV Programs," *The New York Times*, 14 February 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/world/asia/censors-pull-reins-as-china-tv-chasing-profit-gets-racy.html?pagewanted=print (consulted on 22 May 2012). For a roundup on Green Dam, see David Bandurski, "ISC required members to 'actively' promote Green Dam last January," *China Media Project*, 16 June 2009, <http://cmpf.hku.hk/2009/06/16/1665> (consulted on 22 May 2012).

29. This phrase originated in the Jiang Zemin era but has become strongly associated with the Hu Jintao, who uses it frequently in his speeches (see G. Barné's article in the present issue, note 7).

[...] and unceasingly strengthen and expand mainstream socialist culture."⁽³⁰⁾

In order to illustrate better how propaganda redefined as a cultural policy tool retains a central, though not exclusive, position at the heart of this "mainstream socialist culture," the analysis of the two Mao films will be complemented by a brief allusion to a third film which, at first view, has no connection to Mao: Jiang Wen's *Let the Bullets Fly* (*Rang zidan fei*, 2010), reported to be China's highest grossing domestic film ever. The work of "Sixth Generation" independent-but-more-recently-mainstream actor and director Jiang Wen, it has been read as a veiled allegory of Mao and the CCP's rise to power, although it is set in Republican-era Sichuan. Reading it in conjunction with the two Mao films, this essay will argue that it wittily subverts the new "main melody" discourse on Mao and the Party's place in modern history while at the same time accepting and thus subtly legitimising the new cultural model. In this way, it represents exactly the tradition of "bankable dissent"⁽³¹⁾ that films like *Founding of a Republic* have been able to incorporate into the mainstream.

While on one level, it is easy to classify the two Mao films as propaganda on the basis of their production structure, in that they are top-down, state impelled and controlled projects, from the point of view of their intended audience, these films again seem to blur the boundaries between propaganda and other variants of "soft power" such as those developed in Hollywood or similar institutions around the world. The choice of actors, the structure of the films, and even many of the episodes – in particular those involving the KMT and Chiang Kai-shek – may be best understood as directed to a pan-Chinese and even international audience, as part of China's "soft power" push. While they may not be particularly innovative in terms of content alone, their positioning as pan-Chinese productions equally targeting the domestic market, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities, as well as the world at large as an articulation of Chinese state discourse, is quite unprecedented for this type of state production, and brings them close to Jiang Wen's *Bullets*.

The Founding of a Republic: Returning to Mao via New Democracy

Both films run to over two hours and rely heavily on voice-overs and text inserts. *The Founding of a Republic* may in fact first jar the Anglophone viewer's eye by the translation of its title. "Republic" is at best a somewhat expanded translation of *guo* in the Chinese title *Jian guo da ye* 建國大業 ("the great enterprise of founding a country/building a state"); undoubtedly the regime that was replaced by the People's Republic of China in 1949 was also a Republic, in addition to being a country endowed with a state, so that the Chinese and the English versions of the title each convey their distinct sense of hubris (*jian guo* being of course the official name enshrined in textbooks since 1949 for the "establishment of the new regime").⁽³²⁾ The film carries a liminal dedication to the 60th anniversary of the PRC and the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the constitutional assembly gathered by Mao in the lead-up to 1 October 1949. It begins with a text insert establishing the year as 1945, a time when China faced an "undetermined future," and ends with the original archival footage of Mao proclaiming the PRC on Tiananmen Gate on 1 October 1949, followed by Tiananmen today with the national flag floating in the wind. On the whole, little use is made of archives, with several large-scale battle scenes taken from earlier Chinese films⁽³³⁾ – a tacit acknowledgment of the

ways in which propaganda fiction and archival documentary have largely merged in the collective unconscious.

The film can be seen as the product of contending constraints. On the one hand, it seeks to provide a relatively linear narrative of the civil war, highlighting both historical and fictional episodes. Here, the film focuses on key moments such as Mao and Zhou Enlai's trip to Chongqing to meet Chiang Kai-shek, or Chiang Ching-kuo's attempt to curb inflation by cracking down on the black market in Shanghai, thwarted by the powerful Kung family. Fictional additions to this category include Mao's encounter with his cook (who dies in a KMT air raid on Yan'an aimed at Mao), designed to illustrate the great man's human side. On the other hand, the structure is something akin to a cabaret revue: cameo roles are built into the film so as to accommodate the great and good of today's Chinese film industry (more than 170 "stars" are billed as having worked on the production but only about 100 made the final cut). The number includes Hong Kong actors like Donnie Yen (as Tian Han), Leon Lai, Andy Lau and Jet Li (as KMT officers), and Jackie Chan and Tony Leung Ka-fai as respectively a Hong Kong reporter and a CCP member. These two structural threads in fact reflect the dual nature of the film both as historical narrative and as commercial entertainment; holding them together requires a constant flow of onscreen surtitles reminding viewers of the names of jostling historical figures (the actors' names are left for the audience to guess, in what is definitely part of the enjoyment). Yet this commercial conceit also carries with it an implied ideological message: history, thus invaded by the contemporary star system, is no longer the province of the anonymous proletariat; turning away from Marxist methodology, the film portrays the founding of the PRC as a succession of intrigues and strategic moves by a well-defined set of great men (and a few women) led by Mao. The rural masses are to all intents and purposes swept off the stage of history.⁽³⁴⁾

Perhaps the principles presiding over the new historical narrative can be located within the soul-searching that took place in the aftermath of 4 June 1989. In a text quoted by Anne-Marie Brady, first published in 1991 by the "Theory department" of the *China Youth Daily* (the organ of the China Youth League) under the title "Realistic responses and strategic choices for China after the coup in the Soviet Union," a call is made to "create a brand-new culture on the basis of Chinese tradition but with sufficient broadness. The Party's most urgent task is to accomplish the transformation from a revolutionary party to a party in power (*zhizheng dang*)."⁽³⁵⁾ This influential text is part of the larger theoretical background that has continued to infuse over the last two decades, and has led propaganda workers to define a more

30. Hu Jintao, *art. cit.*

31. See G. Barmé, *In the Red*, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-194.

32. G. Barmé notes that both *Jianguo* and *Daye* chime with names chosen by two emperors for their reigns. See "Editors note" to G. and M.E. Davies, "Filmed Founding Myths," *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 20, December 2009, http://chinaheritagequarterly.org/scholarship.php?searchterm=020_founding.inc&issue=020 (consulted on 2 May).

33. This was first noted in Zhu Dake, "Jian guo da ye he zhuanxing Zhongguo de wenhua luoji – yipian liuchan de Nanfang Zhoumo fangtan" (*Founding of a Republic and the cultural logic of the Chinese transition – an aborted interview with Southern Weekend*), October 2009, www.21ccom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article_201001204927.html (consulted on 1 May 2012).

34. Gloria and M.E. Davies, in their review of the film, also underline the disappearance of the proletariat in national narratives since the early 1990s: "Filmed Founding Myths," *art. cit.* Matthias Niedenführ draws the same conclusion about the return of "Great Men" in "Revising and Televising the Past in East Asia: 'History Soaps' in Mainland China," *art. cit.* p. 359.

35. Zhongguo Qingnianbao sixiang lilun bu, "Sulian zhengbian zhihou Zhongguo de xianshi yingdai yu zhanlue xuanze," 9 September 1991. An online version is available with a slight variant in the title (not uncommon for leaked internal documents) www.biblio.org/chinese-text/politics/China_Policy (consulted on 30 April 2012). See also, A-M Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, *op. cit.*, p. 47 and note 52, p. 62.



Chiang Kai-shek (Zhang Guoli) and Mao Zedong (Tang Guoqiang) meet in Chongqing at the beginning of *Founding of a Republic*.

© China Film Group/Emperor Classic Films, 2009.



Mao gestures with a hard-to-find cigarette as he begins discussing the place of private business in the Revolution with Ren Bishi (back), Zhu De and Liu Shaoqi in *Founding of a Republic*. © China Film Group/Emperor Classic Films, 2009.

"inclusive" rather than a "revolutionary" national narrative. However, inclusiveness has its limits. Highlighting the renewed wave of revolutionary music, films, and television programs in the early 1990s, Anne-Marie Brady writes: "Revolutionary symbolism from the CCP's past is still important however. [...] Such programs aimed to evoke the positive idealistic feelings of the Mao era and rework them for the purpose of the current period."⁽³⁶⁾ In 2012, the choice of Mao as the central figure of a more "inclusive" narrative of modern Chinese history can thus be interpreted as being the expression of a will both to preserve Mao as an icon of modern China and to "de-revolutionise" his historical meaning, with perhaps the ultimate goal of creating a consensual historical figure on the model of Sun Yat-sen. This strategy, no doubt the outcome of a lengthy process of internal screenings and discussions that itself would merit detailed research,⁽³⁷⁾ is pursued in various ways in *Founding of a Republic*. Three of these strategies will be detailed below: on the ideological, personal and historical levels.

In the area of ideology, *Founding* takes a step away from more orthodox Marxist concepts and towards what is termed "New Democracy" (*xin minzhu zhuyi*), the title of a major text by Mao written in 1940 in Yan'an,⁽³⁸⁾ arguing for the (temporary) necessity of a "third form" of "new-democratic republic," which is neither a republic under "bourgeois dictatorship" nor under the dictatorship of the proletariat, but is rather "under the joint dictatorship of several revolutionary classes." Mao saw this form of government as enshrined in the manifesto of the KMT's First National Congress in 1924 and encapsulated in the original meaning of Sun Yat-sen's "Three Principles." In this system, private ownership is permissible both in industry and in agriculture, an agenda that continued to be defended by Liu Shaoqi in the early 1950s until Mao officially discarded it.⁽³⁹⁾ This text has of course long proved useful to theorists attempting to reconcile Deng Xiaoping's market socialism with the theoretical tenets of Marxism and their "adaptation" to Chinese reality as expressed in Mao Zedong Thought. However, the recent surge of interest in New Democracy also points to the CCP's wish to theorise itself, after the fall of the Soviet model, as the expression of a "third way" that aspires to be more perennial than originally foreseen in Mao's conceptualisation of a transitional phase. While the film cannot be directly equated with the publication of theories such as organic intellectual Zhang Musheng's 2011 essay "Changing Our View of Cultural History" (*Gaizao women de wenhua lishi guan*), in which he proudly proclaimed: "Only the CCP can save China and only new democracy can save the CCP,"⁽⁴⁰⁾ it is part of a general trend to search for foundations of political consensus

within CCP history. Zhang Musheng's endorsement of New Democracy has been linked to the political ambitions of his patron, Liu Shaoqi's son Major-General Liu Yuan of the PLA Logistics Department (who is no doubt eager to promote a concept that his father defended in the early 1950s), and it comes as no surprise that Liu Shaoqi features prominently in *Founding*, for example when Mao, Liu, Zhou Enlai, and Ren Bishi get drunk together to celebrate the CCP victory on the Huai River. Mao is thus – rather paradoxically – reclaimed by the CCP as the incarnation of a political consensus, based on the guiding but not exclusive role of the CCP, the central but not exclusive role of the state-owned sector in the economy, and an ideological reconfiguration that begins to evacuate the reference to Marxism, which is somehow subsumed under the idea of "New Democracy."

The much-commented-on episode in the film that encapsulates this configuration takes place just before Mao enters Beijing, in Zhou County, Hebei, where he cannot buy cigarettes because all private shop-owners have fled the Communists. This in turn triggers a serious discussion during which Zhu De first stresses that the CCP does not know how to run the economy. Liu Shaoqi adds that capitalists cannot yet be exterminated because the CCP must take care in managing production, Mao asks how the economy can be developed if you cannot even buy cigarettes, and Zhou Enlai joins the table, concluding that democratic capitalists must be invited to run the country together with the CCP. While private merchants are viewed with benevolence, the "proletariat," whether rural or urban, remains absent from the film; similarly rural reforms in Yan'an are only briefly mentioned in a theoretical sequence. This is in keeping with a trend also noted by Anne-Marie Brady, according to which model figures such as Lei Feng may be used,

36. A-M Brady, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

37. See Huang Jianxin's description of this process quoted in note 11 above.

38. See Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989 pp. 77-80 and the introduction to Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949*, vol. VII: *New Democracy, 1939–1941*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2005, pp. xxxvii–lxxxii.

39. "The republic will neither confiscate capitalist private property in general nor forbid the development of such capitalist production as does not 'dominate the livelihood of the people.'" Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy," www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm (1 May 2012). On Liu's defence of New Democracy, see Roderick MacFarquhar, "Editorial Reflections: On Liberation", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 200, December 2009, pp. 891–894.

40. On Zhang Musheng, see "Zai ju xin minzhu zhuyi de daqi" (Raising once more the great flag of New Democracy), *Nanfāng renwu zhouban*, 31 October 2011, http://nfdaily.cn/nfrwzk/content/2011-10/31/content_32350892.htm; David Bandurski, "Turning back to 'new democracy'?", China Media Project, 19 May 2011, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/05/19/12486> (consulted on 2 May 2012).



Mao greets Zhang Lan (Wang Bing) before the opening of the first CCPPC in *Founding of a Republic*.

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but “no longer have to be perfect. A 1994 guideline advised against promoting extreme behavior in model figures [...] as ‘the masses will feel it is impossible to copy such behavior and it is hard to relate to.’”⁽⁴¹⁾ Mao is thus portrayed as a humanist, a man sympathetic to ordinary people, self-effacing in discussion, less interested in theoretical issues and class origins than in enjoying a good smoke. This figure, one might argue, is the on-screen, pop culture translation of the concept of New Democracy.

Ideology is in this way effectively reduced to a personality conflict, as shown by one of the main structural devices of the film: the game of chess played across the vast expanses of China between Mao and Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT as a party largely disappears as the Civil War is recast as little more than a conflict between two larger-than-life personalities, one as amenable and self-effacing as the other is overbearing and ambitious. However, as suggested by the opening episode of the film, the joint press conference held by Mao and Chiang in Chongqing, during which both wear symmetrical Sun Yat-sen suits (known internationally as “Mao suits”), they are defined by Mao as “two disciples of Mr. Sun” (*Sun xiansheng de dizi*). Chiang Kai-shek, though power-hungry and occasionally unscrupulous (when he lets Secret Service head Mao Renfeng, played by Jiang Wen, plot the elimination of Mao in a surprise bombing and the assassination of Zhang Lan, both of which are foiled), never swerves from his loyalty to Sun Yat-sen (in front of whose portrait he takes his presidential oath) and his dedication to national unity. Chiang not only refuses to encourage any attempt to split China, as proposed by Li Zongren, but also displays confidence that Mao will do the same, recognising him as his equal (“Mao will not divide China,” he opines to his son, and adds: “Would you?”). This is an episode that seems clearly designed for audiences outside mainland China sympathetic to the KMT, with the aim of promoting “reunification.”

There is no mention of his involvement of American forces, as in previous CCP historiography: the only contact with the United States is made by Chiang’s wife, Soong Mayling, who succeeds in garnering only the comment from the black guard at the White House: “She’s so hot, man!” The racist undertone in this portrayal underscores the general message that Americans were dazzled by Mayling’s allure; those who truly understood China, such as US ambassador John Leighton Stuart, are shown as secretly favouring the CCP.⁽⁴²⁾ Symmetrically, there is no mention of the slightest Soviet presence on Chinese soil or of Soviet advisors within the CCP; only a jovial Stalin briefly encourages Liu Shaoqi in Moscow to quickly proclaim a new Republic. The political and ideological struggles central to twentieth century world

history and also CCP historiography are thus erased in favour of a personal conflict between two proud men who share the same ideal of national unity. When Chiang Ching-kuo raises the question of American and Soviet involvement to his father, he is brushed off with “It’s not that complicated.” The Civil War thus almost becomes a by-product of both men’s impeccable patriotic credentials, a rather questionable portrayal in view of the larger forces at play.

Chiang Kai-shek is also shown as being personally exempt from corruption, and even as encouraging his son Chiang Ching-kuo to stamp out the inflation and trafficking associated with the Kung family in Shanghai. Ching-kuo, played by the dashing young actor Chen Kun, who takes up the role of Zhou Enlai in *Beginning of the Great Revival*, plays a pivotal role in conveying the message that there are idealistic patriots free from corruption on both sides of the civil war, who can work together. Given his role in the democratisation of the ROC on Taiwan almost 40 years later, there is certainly an implicit message concerning not only the CCP’s willingness to acknowledge the KMT’s place in history in exchange for a peaceful “reunification” with Taiwan, but perhaps even a veiled warning to the CCP that it is not the only party with a claim to represent the Chinese nation. The much-commented-on pronouncement attributed to Chiang Kai-shek, opining that fighting corruption risked destroying the Party, but not fighting it risked destroying the nation (*fan fu yao wang dang; bu fan yao wang guo* 反腐要亡黨，不反要亡國), provides both a neat explanation for the KMT’s defeat (an insoluble prisoner’s dilemma) and a warning to the CCP that it, too, could “perish by its own hand” (*bai zai ziji de shou li* 敗在自己的手裡), as Chiang concludes under the pouring tropical rain in Taipei. The KMT’s defeat is finally attributed to destiny and Chiang is raised to the rung of a tragic figure, in a reading of history that implicitly points back to the mandate of heaven⁽⁴³⁾ and its moral foundations.

Much commented upon also was the role of the so-called democratic parties, and in particular of the China Democratic League (CDL, *Minzhu lianmeng* or Minmeng) and its central figure, Zhang Lan, whose role in the film rivals that of Mao and Chiang. From the assassination of the poet Wen Yiduo in Kunming, to the insistent presence of Luo Longji (later purged as one of the main rightists in 1957), all the way to the triumphant personal welcome given to Zhang Lan by Mao, who salutes him as a great contributor to the cause of democracy in China (*guojia minzhu de gongchen* 國家民主的功臣) and the benefactor of the CCP (*dang de enren* 黨的恩人), Minmeng activists play a decisive role in the dramatic structure of the film. The spiriting away of Zhang Lan and Luo Longji by Communist agents to thwart a purported assassination order by Chiang Kai-shek is the most vivid dramatisation of the importance the CCP gave to the Minmeng. Zhang Lan and his party lend the legitimacy of historical continuity, from the student movements of the late Qing, through May Fourth and Republican politics, to the foundation of the PRC. In this way the historical narrative is recentred around democracy. Again, this is not entirely new, as the CCP has always claimed democracy for itself. However, to showcase the Minmeng as the pivotal force in defining this democracy is noteworthy, as even the 1981 resolution did not mention any of the democratic parties, upholding instead the idea that, as of its foundation in 1921, the CCP alone embodied democratic legitimacy in Republican China. One might argue that this represen-

41. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, op. cit. p. 76.

42. This portrayal is no doubt linked to the reburial of Leighton Stuart’s ashes in Hangzhou in 2008, finally authorised after several decades of complex negotiations.

43. See note 32 above for more dynastic allusions.

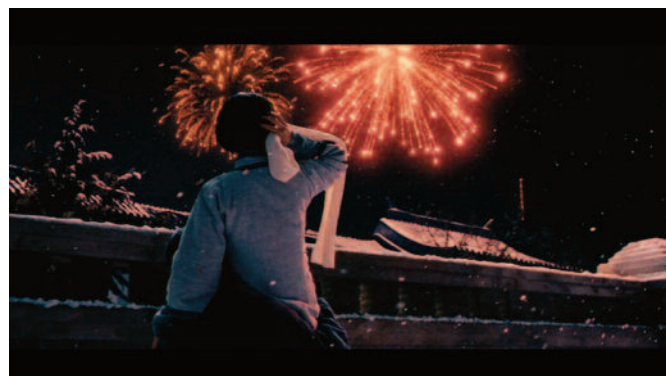
tation of the democratic parties points not so much to a possible role of the United Front parties as they are now (i.e. pure satellites of the CCP) as a tool for democratisation, but is perhaps meant to suggest that it is time to reverse the verdict on the Anti-Rightist movement of 1957, in which advocates for constitutional socialism such as Luo Longji and Zhang Bojun played an important role, which they themselves understood as loyal to CCP leadership.

In the film, the Revolutionary KMT under Li Jishen is also singled out for its contribution to establishing the new regime, although in a more tactical and less political manner than that used to depict the Minmeng. Li Jishen, who had been moving in and out of the KMT throughout the 1920s, is forgiven for "killing many Communists" by a mellow Mao who recognises his patriotic resolve in declining Li Zongren's proposal to partition China.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The message that past disagreements can be overlooked in the name of national unity can probably be seen as an implicit message to the present-day KMT in Taiwan that it may retain some kind of political role if it agrees to a reunification under the aegis of the CCP. National unity remains the bottom line (*dixian*) and ultimate political criterion in judging historical characters. The final part of the film is made in a more "traditional" propaganda style. It portrays a series of endless discussions, not over the projected constitution or the type of government that might be best for the new China, but rather over a set of symbols and icons designed for the new state such as the national flag and the anthem. Despite a surtitle that attempts to define the "Common program" (*gongtong gangling* 共同綱領) adopted by the new assembly as "in essence the Constitution of the new China" (*juyou xin Zhongguo xianfa xingzhi*), the limits of New Democracy are not extended to include a constitutional framework.

Beginning of the Great Revival: A charming but ubiquitous Mao

Jian dang wei ye was released two years after *Jian guo da ye*. Produced and directed by a similar team, it also featured cameo-roles (as with the earlier film, actors reportedly did not ask to be paid for their work; nevertheless, the filming on specially-built sets in Huairou – known in Chinese as Huai-lai-wu-de/Huai-lywood – made the film more costly than its predecessor). There are many similarities between the two productions, which do not require repetition here. However, there are also some differences that stem from the different historical subject matter they deal with, and which reflect the changes in the political situation in China between 2009, when the country was basking in post-Olympic glow, and 2011, when the build-up to the 18th Party Congress was beginning to increase the stakes of many internal debates, at the same time as Bo Xilai's red song movement gathered momentum.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The film's English title, which breaks the symmetry clearly palpable in the two Chinese titles, again refers to the phrase *Zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing*, the "great revival of the Chinese nation," which appeared in the text inserts of *Foundation*.

Made to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the foundation of the CCP in 1921, the film employs a similar approach in taking the commemorative date itself as the endpoint of its narrative and retraces the events leading up to this date. Similar to the endless committee and protocol discussions featured at the end of *Foundation*, complete with collective acclamations for the new symbols of state, *Beginning of the Great Revival* ends with a painstaking discussion surrounding the adoption of the statutes of the CCP. It was only natural, no doubt, that the Party should seek in this prequel to



On a snowy Beijing night, Yang Kaihui (Li Qin) watches the New Year's fireworks on Mao Zedong (Liu Ye)'s shoulders in *Beginning of the Great Revival*.

© China Film Group/Emperor Classic Films, 2011.

reinforce its historical legitimacy by fleshing out its original connection with May Fourth that can only be alluded to in *Foundation*. After all, in "New Democracy" Mao thus defined its significance: "After the May 4th Movement, the political leader of China's bourgeois-democratic revolution was no longer the bourgeoisie but the proletariat, although the national bourgeoisie continued to take part in the revolution."⁽⁴⁶⁾ It is a continuity emphasised episodically throughout the film, reflected in Zhu De's loyal service at the side of the rebellious general Cai E (played by Andy Lau). More surprising, especially in a context in which historiography was seen to be moving away from ideology since the 1990s, was the design to place Mao firmly at the centre of the action of the film, despite his secondary historical role during the May Fourth period in general and in preparations leading up to the congress in particular. The film not only predictably chooses the date of 1921, it does not even mention the first Communist cell meeting of May 1920 in Shanghai, at which Mao was not present and Chen Duxiu was named secretary of the provisional committee.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Preparations for the 90th anniversary of the Party (including post-production of the film) took place amid speculation about Mao's place in the commemoration. In the late winter and early spring of 2011, rumours began circulating on overseas websites, suggesting that a resolution had been passed by the Central Committee in the last days of December 2010, deciding to remove any reference to Mao from all Party documents, supposedly at the initiative of Wu Bangguo, a highly unlikely hypothesis, although the rumours may well have been planted to gain traction for such a proposal within the Party.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In April 2011, liberal economist Mao Yushi published a strident call to "return

44. The same idea applies to Fu Zuoyi, the KMT commander who surrendered Beijing.

45. On red songs and the Party anniversary, see D. Bandurski, "A Brief history of the Red Song," CMP, 10 June 2011, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/06/10/13105> (consulted on 2 May 2012).

46. Mao Zedong, "New Democracy," *art. cit.*

47. See for example Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, pp. 320-321. In the film, this episode is alluded to when Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao "divide" the country between them, Chen taking the South and Li the North, to create Party cells everywhere. For a detailed discussion, see the review by the Taiwanese scholar Qiu Shi-jie, "Jian dang wei ye beihou de Zhongguo yu shijie" (The situation of China and the world behind *Beginning of the Great Revival*), *Jinglüe*, no. 8, September 2011, <http://article.m4.cn/art/1125989.shtml> (consulted on 20 May 2012). Qiu's main quarrel with the film is also its minimisation of international factors in the founding of the Party.

48. This rumour seems to originate in various internet postings by retired Party historian Xin Ziling; for a recent summary of Xin's position, see: "Xin Ziling he Tie Liu de duihua: jie jue Wang-Bo wenti bixu jianli yi Hu Jintao wei hexin de dang zhongyang de quanwei" (Xin Ziling and Tie Liu in discussion: To solve the Wang Lijun-Bo Xilai problem we must establish the authority of Party Central with Hu Jintao as its core," 11 March 2012, www.canyu.org/n43494c6.aspx (consulted on 2 May 2012). The alleged "resolution" is designated as no. 179.



Mao Zedong (Liu Ye) harangues students during May Fourth demonstrations in Changsha in *Beginning of the Great Revival*. © China Film Group/Emperor Classic Films, 2009.



The First Congress of the PCC finally takes place on a boat on West Lake in *Beginning of the Great Revival*. At the front of the boat, Li Da's wife Wang Huiwu (Zhou Xun).

© China Film Group/Emperor Classic Films, 2009.

Mao to humanity," in reference to Xin Ziling's work *The Fall of the Red Sun* (*Hong taiyang de yunluo*).⁽⁴⁹⁾ There was a clear official rejoinder to the rumours, first floated by Vice-President Xi Jinping on 20 June at a research conference to commemorate the founding of the Party. In a wooden speech in which each sentence is repeated at least four times, Xi put forward one new concept: the "two great theoretical achievements" (*liang da lilun chengguo* 兩大理論成果) of the Party's 90-year history of "adapting the basic principles of Marxism to the concrete reality of China" and "sinicising Marxism." These two achievements are detailed as "Mao Zedong Thought and the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, encompassing Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important Three Represents Thought, and the concept of scientific development and other strategic thoughts."⁽⁵⁰⁾ This sentence reappeared almost identically, with a lengthy elaboration, in Hu Jintao's official speech for the Party anniversary. It constituted a rebuttal to the online (and possibly inner-Party) rumours about the removal of Mao's name and it once more affirmed Mao's place at the centre of Party history.⁽⁵¹⁾ Not only does Mao Thought make a striking comeback to the theoretical frontline, it overrides the reference to the three other leaders (Deng, Jiang, and Hu), who are grouped together under a depersonalised heading.

Similarly, in the film *Beginning of the Great Revival*, Mao is so prominent that he single-handedly binds the narrative of modern history together: while *Founding* was structured by balancing the figures of Mao and Chiang, in *Beginning*, Mao's youthful frolicking in Changsha, interpreting new words like "Republic" for the benefit of his more benighted companions, occupies as much time as the historical events of the Revolution and the New Culture Movement. Played by Liu Ye, who appeared briefly at the end of the first film as an ordinary soldier reporting to Mao in the name of the entire Red Army, Mao is portrayed as a romantic, wistful young man. All too human and impulsive, he falls in love with his teacher's beautiful daughter and frequently changes his political convictions. In turn, he advocates personal salvation through physical training, then Hunan independence, then study abroad. However, at the last moment, as he is boarding the boat, he decides to stay in China out of love, rationalising his impulsive decision in political terms by proclaiming: "Foreign solutions cannot be transposed to China!" (In reality it is thought that he did not have the money to go overseas with his friends). The film scholar Dai Jinhua's observation that the "rewriting red classics" movement in the 1990s tried to reconcile socialist nostalgia with romantic individualisation (for example by using images of the old Shanghai)⁽⁵²⁾ comes to mind during the dreamlike scene in the movie when Mao

watches the New Year's fireworks with Yang Kaihui on a snowy Beijing night. In the end he himself is illuminated, not by evanescent pyrotechnics, but by socialism, when Li Dazhao gives him the *Communist Manifesto* to read. Liu Ye's Mao – despite moments of physical resemblance, it is difficult to forget Liu Ye and focus on Mao – goes one step further than Tang Guoqiang's Mao impersonation in stripping the central figure of the narrative of any real political or ideological content and making him into a pop-culture icon; he becomes a romantic albeit somewhat vacuous young beau. Liu's Mao is surrounded by similarly dashing young men and women, with Zhou Enlai played by Chen Kun and Li Da's wife Wang Huiwu by Zhou Xun.

The political events of the young Republic and the intellectual debates of the May Fourth era that make up the core of the film seem by contrast rather pedestrian. Events surrounding 1911 are portrayed in a way that minimises the democratic dimension of the new Republic. The young Chiang Kai-shek (played by Chang Chen – the first Taiwanese actor to feature in a Han Sanping project) is shown to be plotting against democracy from the start: together with his mentor Chen Qimei, he masterminds the assassination of Tao Chengzhang in the first few minutes of the film. Song Jiaoren's assassination is misrepresented to give the impression that the country-wide legislative elections of 1913 (which Song had just won as head of the KMT) never took place (Song bids his companions farewell with the rather misleading words "We must conduct a democratic, non-violent election" *yao jianchi minzhu xuanju; fei baoli*). Although they do incorporate the debates at Peking University (with Daniel Wu as Hu Shi), the May Fourth episodes mainly focus on the violently patriotic demonstrations, with no mention of "Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy." Lu Xun makes no appearance, and even Chen Duxiu is depicted as a sympathetic but naïve intellectual requiring Li Dazhao's help and Marxist theory to understand what is really

49. Mao Yushi, "Ba Mao Zedong huanyuan cheng ren" (Return Mao to the world of humans), *Caixin*, 26 April 2011 (removed from Internet); English translation: "Judging Mao as a man," *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 July 2011.

50. Xi Jinping, "Buduan tuijin Makes zhuyi Zhongguohua, jianchi Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi daolu" (Unceasingly advance the Sinicisation of Marxism, stick to the road of Socialism with Chinese characteristics), *Renmin ribao*, 21 June 2011, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2011-06/21/nw.D110000renmrb_20110621_6-01.htm (consulted on 2 May 2012).

51. See "Hu Jintao '7.1' jianghua: san jian da shi yu san da chengjiu" (Hu Jintao's July 1st speech: Three great events and three great achievements), www.360doc.com/content/11/0705/11/1250031_131581571.shtml (consulted on 1 May 2012).

52. See Dai Jinhua, *art. cit.*, p. 158. As Dai argues, the television adaptation of *How Steel is Forged* "constituted not so much the return of an old-style hero, but rather a reminder of the disappearance of the hero, or at least of the socialist or revolutionary hero" (p. 159). The same might here be said for Mao.

going on. This is perhaps unsurprising if, as Huang Jianxin stated at a talk at the 2012 Hong Kong-Asia Film Financing Forum, the censors requested more than 400 cuts in the initial version of the film.

There are parodic moments similar to those in *Founding of a Republic*, such as when students hold up billboards with the character *yuan* (injustice), recalling modern-day petitioners; many Chinese viewers seem to have also made a connection with the student movement of 1989. However the grand finale is just as stilted as its congenital partner: following long-winded procedural deliberations and several relocations, the first Party Congress ends with the adoption of a charter, the election of a central committee, and all 12 delegates singing the *Internationale* on a boat. The text inserts that feature both at the beginning and at the end of the film locate the events depicted firmly within the accepted Party narrative: while the opening lines stress the semi-feudal, semi-colonial nature of pre-revolutionary society, bankrupted by Western aggression and corruption, the end marks the true beginning of China's "great revival":

The founding of the Chinese Communist Party entirely changed the face of the Chinese revolution. Under the leadership of the Party, China embarked on the glorious road of national independence, people's emancipation, wealth, and power. Ever since the Chinese nation cleared the way to its great revival, this venerable country with five thousand years of civilisation, adopted an entirely new posture, stands towering in the East of the world.⁽⁵³⁾

The film ends with the same image of the red flag over Tiananmen Gate as its predecessor.

Mainstream socialist culture

While *Beginning of the Great Revival* was deemed a critical and popular failure – there were reports of rigged ticket sales and mandatory screenings arranged by Party committees, as well as banned reviews on Douban and other social networks⁽⁵⁴⁾ – the reception of *Founding of a Republic* deserves a detailed discussion, given that it was seen by perhaps as many as one out of every five Chinese citizens,⁽⁵⁵⁾ for a time enjoying a reputation as the highest grossing Chinese film in history. On one level, this success is of course due to its incessant promotion by the state apparatus,⁽⁵⁶⁾ and in this sense it was very much part of the military parade held on 1 October 2009. Gloria and M.E. Davies have similarly emphasised the implicit nationalism that replaces the previous narrative centred on the proletariat, pointing to the portrayal of the loyal opposition of the KMT as a way of highlighting that "principled opposition and conflict resolution is, regardless of the political hue, innately Chinese."⁽⁵⁷⁾ This nationalism in turn gives hold to the sarcastic audience comments, such as those by the Shanghai writer Han Han, about "patriotic" actors who have adopted Singaporean or American nationality or Hong Kong permanent residency, or about how the communist ideals of the film might translate into today's world.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Chang Ping, the former editor of *Southern Weekend*, welcomed the wider foreign distribution of the film with the ironic remark that such works help foreigners learn how China sees itself. He endorsed the depiction of the democratic legitimacy enjoyed by the CCP in 1949 with a characteristic grain of salt:

Against the background of the current mainstream international discourse, the leftovers of its pro-democracy proselytising undoubtedly endow the state established by the Communist Party with a legitimate historical basis. However, the problem the film is unable to deal with is that the CCP's discourse at the time and the way it has acted

until today display considerable contradictions. At that time, among the communist rank and file, no one came forward to object that Chinese tradition had always preferred dictatorship, nor did anyone believe that the low "human quality" [*suzhi*] of the Chinese people did not make them suited for democracy and necessitated that they be "managed" [*guan yi guan*]. Surely we should not be led to believe that it is 60 years of dictatorship that have so drastically lowered the Chinese people's democratic quality?⁽⁵⁹⁾

This tongue-in-cheek critique highlights the limits of the contemporary Party-guided commercial repackaging of Chinese history.

On the contrary, US-based academic Xiaobing Tang takes issue with the representation of the film as "state-funded propaganda" in American reviews, accusing "trigger-happy Cold Warriors" of believing that "anything with government backing is an abomination and ought to be dismantled, from state-owned programming to state-run medical care, to state-sponsored film-making or cultural programming."⁽⁶⁰⁾ Tang, in a style of commentary that Geremie Barmé refers to in this issue as "arbitrage," highlights the reduction by foreigners of Chinese socialism to the Cultural Revolution, of Mao to a ruthless leader, and of modern Chinese history to a history of repression. One may note that the film's avoidance of the post-1949 years does little to dispel such an impression, implicitly recognising that institutional socialism in the form of PRC history remains too controversial for a mainstream narrative; however, Tang ignores this and concludes: "The making of the film *The Founding of a Republic* as well as its extraordinary box office success in 2009 underscores the convergence of the popular and the mainstream in contemporary Chinese culture. This robust mass culture, ever more integrated into the entertainment industry (especially TV programming), is not the subject of the many independent films that we are told we must see, but it reaches and entertains the general public, and generates its own star power."⁽⁶¹⁾

Whatever one may think of his gratuitous attack against independent films, Tang is right to underscore the distinctly new dimension achieved by *Founding of a Republic*, a viewpoint shared by a critic of different temper, Zhu Dake, who sees it as a turning point. Han Sanping's unabashed endorse-

53. My translation; the English subtitle in the film reads: "The founding of the Communist Party in China is a monumental event. It brings forth a new perspective for the Chinese revolution. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, China is well on her way to independence, liberation, power and wealth. As her people embarks on a historic journey of revival, an ancient civilization of 5000 years towers gloriously in the East."

54. See Michael Kan, "Web ratings disabled for CCP film," IDG News, 22 June 2011, www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/230858/web_ratings_disabled_for_chinese_communist_party_film.html (consulted on 2 May 2012). However, according to a reliable industry website, *Beginning* earned the equivalent of 364 million CNY in China; source: <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=findingofaparty.htm> (consulted on 2 May 2012).

55. Editor's foreword to G. and M.E. Davies, "Filmed Founding Myths," *art. cit.*

56. Shanghai cultural critic Zhu Dake also highlights the significance of grouped ticket sales to work units, while some commentators facetiously remarked that since the stars had acted in the film without pay, the audience should logically be able to watch it for free. Zhu Dake, *art. cit.*

57. G. and M.E. Davies, "Filmed Founding Myths," *art. cit.*

58. See Han Han, "Cankao xiaoxi" (Reference News), 20 September 2009, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4701280b0100ezrc.html (consulted on 2 May 2012).

59. Chang Ping, "Jian guo da ye zou xiang shijie," *art. cit.* The idea of being "managed" refers to comments by Jackie Chan made not long before.

60. Xiaobing Tang, "Why should 2009 make a difference? Reflections on a Chinese blockbuster," MCLC, p. 3, <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/tangxb.htm> (consulted on 2 May).

61. *Ibid.*, p. 7. Tang also ironically dismisses the political reading in *Time* magazine, which is derided for suggesting there is any connection between the film and the thinking of the Chinese leadership: this reveals what can only be a deliberate blindness to the production process of such a film (see note 11 above). On the other hand, Tang derides *Nanfang Zhoumo* for describing Han Sanping as harbouring a "deep Mao-era complex," which is perhaps unsurprising given his outspoken declarations (see note 6 above).

ment of a state-owned cultural apparatus that he believes can counter the influence of Hollywood and McDonald's⁽⁶²⁾ not only wins endorsement from Xiaobing Tang, it also tallies exactly with Hu Jintao's pronouncements on cultural specificity in the policy framework outlined in late 2011:

We must foster a backbone of strong, competitive cultural enterprises in order to raise the overall strength and competitiveness of our cultural industry, which should be structured on the base of state-ownership, developing together with various privately owned cultural enterprises. Whether they are public interest cultural institutions or cultural industries, both must maintain the advanced socialist culture as their leading direction and correctly handle the relationship between the interest of society and economic interest, while always placing society in the foremost position.⁽⁶³⁾

Hu underscores that even within the new commercial logic of fostering a "mainstream socialist culture" that is both financially viable domestically and potentially exportable to the world, the role of state-owned enterprises and state guidance remain paramount. These new forms of cultural production should not be seen as a concession to the commercial logic of profit, much less as comparable to state funding for independent productions (see note 25); rather they aim at co-opting the most outstanding representatives of commercial pop culture within the state-led cultural system and the narrative it tries to promote. An unmistakable sign of the "sleek" quality the Mao films seek to achieve is their excision of any form of dialect, which had characterised all previous official films featuring party-state leaders. Huang Jianxin attributes this to a changing view of "realism": as fewer people have first-hand knowledge of the older generation of cadres, they could accept hearing them speak unaccented standard Chinese.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The main reason, however, is very probably the desire to cater to a savvy urban generation that has grown up with the aseptic "Putonghua" of CCTV. The state-production system, endorsed on the highest level, is thus able to prove its attractiveness and its porosity with mainstream culture: the patriotic enthusiasm of almost 200 stars vying to perform for free reflects the power that the state apparatus has in shaping careers and providing access to markets.⁽⁶⁵⁾ At the same time, it allows the apparatus to continue to repackage itself (as it has done since the 1990s) as modern and un-ideological.⁽⁶⁶⁾

It is quite true that the huge success of *Founding* also hinges on subtle moments of irony aimed at the propaganda apparatus itself, which Zhu Dake calls the film's self-referential and self-ironic dimension.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The work of a seasoned Fifth Generation director who had authored several not uncritical films in the 1980s, *Founding* incorporates some irony into the mainstream narrative: Chiang Kai-shek's mention of "flower-vase political parties," his previously quoted *sententia* on corruption in the Party, Mao's pronouncement that the CCP needs to unite with capitalists, otherwise workers will be unemployed, and Song Qingling's rejoinder to Deng Yingchao's persistent efforts at bringing her to Beijing ("You Communists never stop before you reach your goal") are all such moments, as is the strangely theatrical convening of the second plenum of the 7th Central Committee with a sudden appearance by Xi Zhongxun, Xi Jinping's father. However, as Zhu Dake underlines: "I do not think that [laughter at ironic moments] is a form of resistance; on the contrary, it is a form of compromise, because mockery not only dissolves propaganda slogans, it also dissolves the will to resist. [...] In the 1980s, this kind of laughter was a clear challenge; now it is a completely inoffensive existential attitude." In this sense, the greater inclusiveness of *Founding* remains

profoundly ambivalent: "It can make the authority of the state softer and easier to accept, but at the same time it can also dissolve its dignity."⁽⁶⁸⁾ Indeed, the space for some self-deprecation only strengthens the film's most important message: the film's box office results are meant to stand for the popularity of the Party that is its subject. By making ideology into a cultural commodity, the film also attempts to reap the political benefits of its marketing strategy, as an intertitle makes clear: "Because it responded to popular opinion (*minyì*), the Party has been able to achieve its present-day results" (1:30). This explains the tense reports about ticket sales for *Beginning*, followed by the ban on online discussions: the number of viewers was meant to function as a kind of implicit referendum, in which both the revolutionary past and the chic trans-national sinophone stars contribute to buttressing the legitimacy of the state.

Conclusion: The legitimising power of parody

In the drive to forge a "mainstream socialist culture" – "guided" by the State but commercially viable – the two Mao films retain a structure centred on Mao as the central icon of the CCP epic, but at the same time subtly reshape the persona of the Chairman himself. Not the meanest of their feats is the ability to incorporate self-referentiality, in the form of the gallery of cameos, and even occasional self-mockery, when the films seem to poke fun at some of the official missions they have been entrusted with. The films not only aim to make propaganda more entertaining, but to reconceptualise propaganda as one with entertainment. Outraged reactions such as Xiaobing Tang's suggest that some viewers at least are prepared to accept that this kind of "mainstream socialist" culture can no longer be understood as propaganda. This does not mean, of course, that it has relinquished its political goals, or lost its efficacy; on the contrary, the popularity won through star power is meant to invest these films with a whole new legitimacy. By encompassing its own parody, state discourse reaches a new level of inclusiveness.

Jiang Wen's *Let the Bullets Fly*, an even greater box office hit than *Founding*, released in December 2010, may seem an unlikely proposition for a parallel discussion with the two Mao films. However, they share several prominent actors – Chen Kun (Chiang Ching-kuo and Zhou Enlai), Ge You (Red Army officer in *Founding of a Republic*), Chow Yun-fat (Yuan Shi-kai in *Beginning*), and not least Jiang Wen himself (Mao Renfeng, who plots to kill Mao in *Founding*), as well as the notorious Albert Yeung in the role of co-producer. Jiang Wen's film was also widely discussed – though perhaps not viewed by everyone – as a form of political allegory, with a heated discussion as to whether its loyalties tilted towards the regime or against it, to-

62. "I will not believe that 5,000 years of Chinese culture can simply be wiped out by a couple of Hollywood films! There are 1.3 billion Chinese people, so those stupid foreigners think China is great – if only 1 percent of the population goes to see their films, at 10 yuan a ticket, they will make 1.3 billion [sic] in the box-office. But I maintain that 1.3 billion people will not go to watch American films!" Han Sanping, *art. cit.*

63. Hu Jintao, "Jianshe shehui zhuyi wenhua qiang guo," *art. cit.*

64. "Huang Jianxin: *Jian guo da ye jue bu shi xuanchuan pian*," *art. cit.*

65. As Zhu Dake writes, regardless of their nationality, the actors who participated in the film were procuring themselves a free "*laissez-passer (tongxing zheng)*" to the Chinese market." Zhu Dake, *art. cit.* Huang Jianxin also quotes an episode in which Han Sanping convinces Zhang Guoli to agree to playing Chiang Kai-shek by comparing this gift to the nation to a birthday present for his mother, a rather loaded analogy with ominous undertones. See Huang Jianxin, *art. cit.*

66. Jackie Chan, in taking it upon himself to produce a spin-off film on his own, obviously took this proclivity to another level. But as Huang Jianxin recalls, the agents of all the actors were falling over each other making calls to ensure their champions would make the final cut. ("*Jian guo da ye jue bu shi xuanchuan pian*," *art. cit.*)

67. See Zhu Dake, *art. cit.*



Zhang Mazi (Jiang Wen, in the middle) surrounded by Ma Bangde (Ge You, on his left) and Huang Silang (Chow Yun-fat, on his right) haranguing the inhabitants of Goose Town against the background of the first Republican Flag in *Let the Bullets Fly*. © China Film Group, 2010.

wards the revolutionary left or the liberal right. In either case, its box office success alone makes it an interesting object of study for probing how far the “mainstream socialist culture” advocated by the Mao films can influence the real mainstream. The “indie” flavour brought into the film by Jiang Wen’s beginnings makes the mix only more potent.

The storyline is simple enough: Zhang Mazi (Jiang Wen), a Robin Hood-like bandit, and his six acolytes bent on justice ambush the incoming governor of E’cheng (Goose Town) and Zhang decides to take his place to take money from the local despot, Huang Silang (Chow Yun-fat). After several strategic confrontations, by mobilising the citizens of E’cheng (albeit with the help of a little deception), Zhang is able to confiscate Huang’s money, redistribute it to the people, and finally oust Huang himself. At this point, his comrades, tired of living in the “marshes,” decide to call it quits and head to Pudong to enjoy life.

As it was pointed out in a review by Wo Chung-hau, Jiang Wen has given his two main characters a distinctly democratic background: Zhang Mazi is a former revolutionary who fought with Cai E in 1911 (and through his love for Mozart is unmasked as a Western-influenced intellectual); Huang Silang, a former student in Japan who took part in the Wuchang Uprising, is also a former revolutionary, but who has turned Republican politics to his financial advantage. This political background did not appear in the original novel *Ye tan shi ji* (Ten evening talks; Beijing, Renmin wenxue, 1983) by Ma Shitu. In this way Jiang stages the main conflict not between revolution and counter-revolution but between two revolutionaries: one idealistic and one materialistic.⁽⁶⁹⁾ It seems safe to say that there is an echo between these two characters and the duel between Mao and Chiang Kai-shek in *Founding of a Republic*, where the two heirs of 1911 fight over the future of the revolution. The political speculation ignited by the film consequently revolved around the question of how to interpret Mazi’s victory: should it be seen as the defeat of capitalism or the defeat of a dictator? As a victory for a Chongqing-style anti-corruption “strike the black” campaign or on the contrary as a liberal emancipation allowing the bandits to recycle themselves as Shanghai entrepreneurs (the left-wing website Utopia extolled Jiang Wen as a “left hero” and Zhang Mazi as a precursor of Mao who remains in the “marshes” to maintain the revolutionary flame)? So deeply engrained is the tendency to political-allegorical readings fostered by years of propaganda, that the most far-fetched conclusions were drawn from random juxtapositions.⁽⁷⁰⁾

More important, perhaps, is the film’s aesthetic model. Beyond the “clear traces of revolutionary heroism” pinpointed by Wo lies a deeper cultural

logic. As noted by Kristof van den Troost, the film begins with an allusion to the struggle for the control of the land between peasant revolutionary Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, suggested just before the ambush by the sycophantic acolyte of the real governor of E’cheng, played in a cameo by Feng Xiaogang (Green Gang chief Du Yuesheng in *Founding of a Republic*). This comparison of Zhang Mazi to Liu Bang, and of Huang Silang to Xiang Yu informs the historical reading of the film, and chimes with the allusion to Mao and Chiang.⁽⁷¹⁾ At the end of the film, Mazi is able to secure victory by mobilising the inhabitants of E’cheng, but only by using a form of deceit: having first distributed money, which the frightened inhabitants return to Huang Silang, then guns, which they keep for themselves, Mazi, as a well-read proto-Maoist, thinks he can now take them to storm Huang’s *diaolou*,⁽⁷²⁾ but finds, upon reaching the gate, that only the geese that give the town its name have followed him. However, when he conjures up Huang’s double and executes him, the cowardly inhabitants are suddenly empowered to pillage Huang’s residence, hardly noticing that the real Huang is still alive. This is of course a comment on human nature and on the nature of political power. As the political scientist Zhang Ming underlined, Jiang narrates a revolution built exclusively on heroes and exceptional characters who, in the end, succeed only by manipulating the ordinary people, essentially in agreement with the Party’s new reading of history, in which revolution is defined as a top-down enterprise.⁽⁷³⁾ At the end of the day, Zhang Mazi shares the same contempt for the people as Huang Silang, despite his pithy pronouncement to Huang that what matters to him is “that there be no you.” In this sense, Jiang’s film is both a witty parody of the “subtle allusions” (*weiyán* 微言) practiced by the new style of propaganda film and a suave adaptation of the new *zhuxuanlǚ* aesthetics. History is, here too, decided in the absence of the ordinary people, represented by the geese that give E’cheng its name.

Parody, in Jiang’s film as in Han Sanping’s earlier endeavours, does not serve the critique of authority as much as it, too, is absorbed in the logic of commercialisation. It shows that the cultural model put forward by Han Sanping can in fact be adapted and exploited in a privately-funded production. In this manner, “bankable dissent” and main melody have become almost undistinguishable. By incorporating their own critique and making it toothless, these films unabashedly aim to win over the broad masses of the Chinese audience for their own reading of history. This strategy is not without danger. As Yuezhi Zhao writes – echoing previously quoted critics such as Chang Ping or Han Han – one may wonder whether it is “possible in the long run for the CCP to prolong its rule by drawing on the rhetoric and means of the Chinese revolution without being either forced to completely shed its revolutionary colour or being propelled to fulfil the revolution’s

68. Zhu Dake, *art. cit.*

69. See Wo Chung-hau, “*Rang zidan fei yinbao zhengzhi yinyu kuanghuan*” (*Let the Bullets Fly* unleashes a political-allegory craze), *Yazhou Zhoukan*, 9 January 2011.

70. Some highlighted a string of figures: in the eighth (8) Year of the Republic, wearing the nine-coin (9) mask, Zhang Mazi with six sworn brothers attacked Huang Si(4)-lang, which spells out the date of the Tiananmen crackdown: 89-64. Another episode that was submitted to subtle exegesis was when Six (6) opens up his stomach to prove he has only eaten one bowl of noodles – seen as an allusion to Zhang Haichao, a worker who had an operation performed to open his lungs, showing he suffered from a work-related disease.

71. See Kristof van den Troost, “Eastern Westerns,” paper presented at the ACSS Conference, 17-21 March 2012.

72. *Diaolou* are Western-inspired, typically three or four-storey works of architecture, built in the early twentieth century by Chinese emigrants returned from the West to the “Four Open Towns” in Guangdong that allowed emigration. Jiang Wen shot his film near Kaiping, on the western side of the Pearl River Delta.

73. Wo Chung-hau, *art. cit.*

74. Yuezhi Zhao, *art. cit.*, p. 204.

promises for an equal and just society.”⁽⁷⁴⁾ This, as of today, remains the last contradiction that is not entirely soluble in the slick new “mainstream” discourse actively promoted by the relevant organs hand-in-hand with the tycoons and stars of the new commercial culture.

Mao is and remains the visual symbol of the Party and will probably continue to espouse all the ideological metamorphoses the CCP may be subject to. In this sense, Mao has become a more vacuous and also more prosaic figure, even appearing as passably foolish in *Beginning of the Great Revival*.

While there is still a need to “guide” popular thinking about him, he seems to have lost a measure of the subversive force inherent even in the “totalitarian nostalgia” of the 1990s. However, the centrality of his role ensures that any critique of the present state of affairs that might venture to take propaganda discourse at its word remains framed within the limits of his all-encompassing and all-embracing persona.

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