

An active, resistant audience – but in whose interest? Online discussions on Chinese TV dramas as maintaining dominant ideology

Shangwei Wu,
Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Tabé Bergman,
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

Abstract:

Over the past few years, Chinese viewers have regularly mocked a popular genre of television dramas for overly heroic portrayals of the War of Resistance Against Japan. Charging the dramas with distorting history, the viewers nicknamed them ‘Mythic Plays’ and instigated a national discussion on the dramas’ representation of the war. This article analyzes the public controversy about Mythic Plays through a Critical Discourse Analysis of online comments. It examines viewers’ expectation of televisual representation of Chinese history and perception of their own position in the cultural ecology. On the one hand, this article proposes a revision to Hall’s encoding/decoding model. It points out that audience resistance to a text should not automatically be equated with resistance to dominant ideology, since the resistance can be the consequence of the producer-audience conflict over *how* certain ideological meanings, rather than which ideological meanings, are encoded into the text. Meanwhile, the meanings perceived and opposed by the audience may not be the meanings intended by producers, due to the polysemic nature of the text. On the other hand, this article reveals that in addition to actively interpreting texts, audience members also interpret the power relations between text producers, regulators, and themselves. We call upon audience researchers to include thorough analysis of the audience’s *perception* of these existing power relations.

Keywords: active audience; ideology; nationalism; online comments; popular culture; power relations

Introduction

In the past decade, conflict between China and Japan has intensified over (among other issues) the ownership of the island in the East China known as Diaoyu by the Chinese and Senkaku by the Japanese. Chinese nationalist sentiments have surged partly as a result of these conflicts. This has contributed to an expanding market for television dramas about the War of Resistance Against Japan (WRAJ), which was fought from 1937 to 1945. Viewed as a safe and profitable genre that aligns with nationalist themes favored by the censorship bureau, these dramas have attracted steady economic investment. However, many viewers took to the internet to mock some of these resisting-Japan dramas (抗日剧) for being unrealistic and full of anachronisms, nicknaming them Mythic Plays (抗日神剧). Indeed, the dramas show Chinese martial-arts warriors defeating Japanese soldiers using hand-to-hand combat against modern weaponry. In a well-known scene, a female archer, dressed in incongruously modern clothes, kills several Japanese soldiers at once with one shot of her bow shortly after being raped. Although derided by viewers and critics, Mythic Plays have drawn large audiences. *Legendary Warriors* (抗日奇侠), one of the most famous Mythic Plays, became a ratings winner. Reruns were sold for about \$300,000 each (Liu, 2013).

In 2013, when the production of resisting-Japan dramas peaked, they became the subject of a national debate. As the nickname Mythic Plays gained popularity online, authoritative state media began to pay attention, taking a patriotic stance against the unorthodox representation of the war. An anchor for China Central Television (CCTV) sternly commented: 'The War of Resistance Against Japan was a very painful experience in our national history. Therefore, it should not be interpreted playfully' (CCTV, 2013). The Communist Party's newspaper *People's Daily* also criticized Mythic Plays:

We won the war with huge sacrifice, and this should be our basic cognition when evaluating history... Nowadays, resisting-Japan dramas have abandoned their duty of propaganda and education, totally becoming entertainment products. This change is logically understandable. But the 'self-liberation' of the drama producers is so radical that even the basic cognition has been ignored... (Dong, 2013).

As a result of the controversy, the censorship bureau, then called the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), required that dramas about the WRAJ be reviewed again, announcing that those focusing too strongly on entertainment should be modified or even banned. An official from the censorship bureau declared that certain dramas showed no respect for history and exerted a negative effect on society (Watts, 2013). The official's statement seemed to disregard the fact that it was the viewers who first resisted the Mythic Plays, and for the very same reasons. This official was not

alone. China's media elites, in keeping with the ideology of the vanguard of the people, also ignored the fact that it was viewers who initiated the negative discussions about Mythic Plays, in support of patriotism and responsibility. Among many media outlets, CCTV in fact suggested that the production of Mythic Plays could be explained by viewers' yearning for amusement (CCTV, 2013). The censorship bureau's intervention, as well as the state media's condemnation, did not resolve the issue. Mythic Plays continued to trigger heated discussions. In 2015, a drama called *Fight Against the Devils Together* (一起打鬼子) became controversial for a sexually suggestive plotline and was banned (Wang, 2015).

In this article we explore viewers' ideological position in their active online discussions on Mythic Plays, as well as the theoretical implications of these online discussions for audience research. Our conceptual approach adopts Hall's encoding/decoding model and its later development, which addresses ideology in media consumption. Then we locate the ideological position of the producers of Mythic Plays through prior studies on television production in China and the literature on the dominant ideology in China: patriotism. Subsequently we explicate our methods and analyze the online discourse. We identify three main themes as characterizing the discourse and revealing the dominant-hegemonic position taken by viewers. We argue that online commenters embodied the hegemonic viewpoints of Chinese patriotism *despite* their resistance to the dramas. Our analysis leads us to draw two conclusions. First, audience resistance to media texts should never be unreflectively equated with resistance to the dominant ideology, since the resistance can be the consequence of the producer-audience conflict over how certain ideological meanings, rather than which ideological meanings, are encoded into the text. Meanwhile, the meanings perceived and opposed by the audience may not be the meanings intended by producers, due to the polysemic nature of the text. Second, in addition to actively interpreting texts, audience members also interpret the power relations among text producers, regulators, and themselves. We recommend that future research take the audience's perception of these relations more fully into account.

The encoding/decoding model revisited

The rise of new media has allowed for a reshaping of the role of the audience, affording audiences participation that is more active and counteracting linear accounts of media influence, which imagine the process as starting with the media institution and ending at the audience (Livingstone, 2015). The concept of the 'active audience' has been rejuvenated. The audience can now interact with the content by sharing videos, creating remixes, and commenting (Agirre, Arrizabalaga, & Espilla, 2016). Through a second-screen device (e.g., tablet, smartphone), viewers can chat with their co-viewers about content in real time (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; J. Lee & Choi, 2017). The aggregations of the audience online can draw attention from professional media producers, influence the media agenda, and affect the visibility of certain media content (Jiang & Huang, 2017; Malmelin & Villi, 2016; Singer, 2014). Assuming a more visible role, the audience has become more

active in 'the circuit of culture' (Livingstone, 2015, p. 442). Accordingly, the focus of active audience research seems to have shifted to the interactive forms of consumption practices online and away from ideologies and meaning making, which were discussed in the 1980s and 1990s. The discussions on meaning making examined the audience's positions in relation to the dominant ideology (e.g., Fiske, 1986; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1993; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983). With this shift in audience research, the critical perspective on ideology has been more or less shelved.

Nevertheless, the nationalist sentiments reflected in the online discussions on Mythic Plays remind us that a critical perspective on ideology is still relevant to audience research. To adopt such a perspective, we revisit Hall's encoding/decoding model, which inspired the discussions in the 1980s and 1990s, and review its subsequent development. Hall (1980) uses the concept of 'code' to refer to the correspondence between signs, visual or linguistic, and ideological meanings. As he argues, codes 'contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society' (Hall, 1980, p. 134). He frames media production, with TV news being his example, as a process of encoding, and media consumption as decoding. The professional broadcasters encode into content the hegemonic viewpoints that serve the current social order. However, viewers do not necessarily decode the message in the way intended by broadcasters. According to Hall, viewers may adopt three positions in relation to the hegemonic viewpoints encoded into the text: (1) the dominant-hegemonic position, where viewers decode the message the way it is encoded; (2) the negotiated position, where viewers accept the hegemonic viewpoint at a general level, but seek particular exceptions with regard to their own situations and thoughts; (3) the oppositional position, where viewers understand the intent of the encoders but decode the message in a contrary way (Hall, 1980).

This encoding/decoding model has left its proponents with three main problems to solve. The first problem concerns polysemy. The three positions of decoding proposed by Hall are based on the audience's conscious awareness of the *intended meanings* encoded into the text. In other words, these positions – agreement, negotiation, opposition – are in relation to the intended meaning. However, polysemy means that the audience may create new meanings out of the text. The audience's *perceived meanings* may not be intended by the producers. Therefore, 'polysemy' and 'opposition' should be seen as two analytically distinct processes, although they do interconnect in the overall reading process (Morley, 2006; Schrøder, 2000). The second problem relates to aesthetics. Researchers have noted that TV viewers may take an aesthetically critical stance towards the text, commenting on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic aspects of textual production (Michelle, 2007; Schrøder, 2000). Underlying this is the viewers' awareness of the 'constructedness' of the text, which is a different dimension from meaning making in the decoding process. The third problem addresses the positions of encoding. Hall's model does not differentiate the various positions media producers may take in relation to the dominant ideology. Instead, it assumes that encoding always takes place within a dominant-hegemonic position (Ross, 2011).

There have been attempts to develop Hall's model and solve the problems mentioned above. Schrøder (2000) focuses on the audience reception process, breaking it down into six dimensions: motivation, comprehension, (aesthetic) discrimination, position (in relation to the text), (political) evaluation, and implementation. Schrøder's model aims to address polysemy and the audience's awareness of 'constructedness' by addressing comprehension and discrimination. The division between position and evaluation also draws attention to the difference between readers' attitudes towards the text and their positions in relation to dominant ideology, given that the text does not necessarily take a dominant-hegemonic stance. Nevertheless, this model does not explain how these six dimensions interconnect and contribute to viewers' ideological position in their overall reading process.

Another attempt is Michelle's (2007) multi-dimensional model of modes of audience reception. Michelle differentiates between four modes of audience reception: (1) transparent mode: viewers are absorbed and engulfed by media texts, as they read the text *as* life; (2) referential mode: viewers perceive the text as *like* life, making comparisons and analogies between depicted reality and their own knowledge and experience; (3) mediated mode: viewers recognize the constructed nature of the text as a media *production*; (4) discursive mode: viewers perceive the text as a *message* and respond to its ideological connotations. Above these four modes lies viewers' evaluation of the text, which reveals their positions in relation to hegemonic discourses. Like Schrøder's model, this model leaves out the encoding process and therefore is rather one-sided. It fails to address how encoding itself, or how media producers' use of certain signs to convey meanings, may bring complexity to the possible readings of the audience.

In contrast, Ross (2011) addresses the variety of encoding positions. He maintains that there can be three positions in relation to the dominant ideology in the encoding process as well: dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. He further differentiates between the acceptance of the text and the acceptance of the dominant ideology, as can be seen in his text-relative encoding/decoding typology (**Figure 1**). Despite its strength in providing a more nuanced understanding of the encoding process, this typology does not clearly reflect the dimensions of polysemy and the audience's awareness of the 'constructedness' of the text. Besides, it does not address the difference between the code adopted by media producers, or the 'professional code' as Hall calls it (1980, p. 136), and the audience code. This difference entails that the same signs may have different connotations for producers and viewers. Additionally, each of these two parties is not monolithic and could be internally divided according to the codes. We argue that it is exactly the difference in codes that generates polysemy. To better elaborate this in our analysis, we conceptualize the adoption of certain codes by producers and viewers respectively as *encoding strategies* and *decoding strategies*. For producers, encoding strategies are partly influenced by their imagination of how the audience will decode their products (Matthews, 2007, 2008), which we conceptualize as the *imagined decoding strategies*. For viewers, their awareness of the 'constructedness' of the text means that from the text they also perceive, apart from its meaning, the encoding strategies, which are

not necessarily the same strategies adopted by producers. These *perceived encoding strategies* constitute an important dimension of the decoding process.

		Encoding Positions		
		Dominant-hegemonic encoding	Negotiated encoding (partly critical text)	Oppositional encoding (radical text)
Decoding Positions (text-relative)	Text-accepting position	Text-acceptance of dominant-hegemonic text	Text-acceptance of negotiated text	Text-acceptance of oppositional text
	Text-negotiation position	Negotiation of dominant-hegemonic text	Negotiation of negotiated text	Negotiation of oppositional text
	Text-oppositional position	Text-oppositional reading of dominant-hegemonic text	Text-oppositional reading of negotiated text	Text-oppositional reading of oppositional text

Figure 1: The text-relative version of the modified encoding/decoding typology proposed by Ross. Reprinted with permission from ‘The encoding/decoding model revisited’, by S. Ross (2011, p. 8).

In light of the above, we propose a revision to the encoding/decoding model (**Figure 2**). Based on their intended meanings and imagined decoding strategies, media producers execute certain encoding strategies and give a certain shape to the text. In the decoding process, viewers derive both perceived meanings and perceived encoding strategies from the text. From these two dimensions, viewers arrive at their evaluation of the text. This revised model admits the diversity of producers’ ideological positions in the encoding process. Clearly separating perceived meanings from intended meanings, it anticipates the situation of polysemy. By distinguishing between perceived meanings and perceived encoding strategies, it also gives space to audience’s awareness of the ‘constructedness’ of the text.

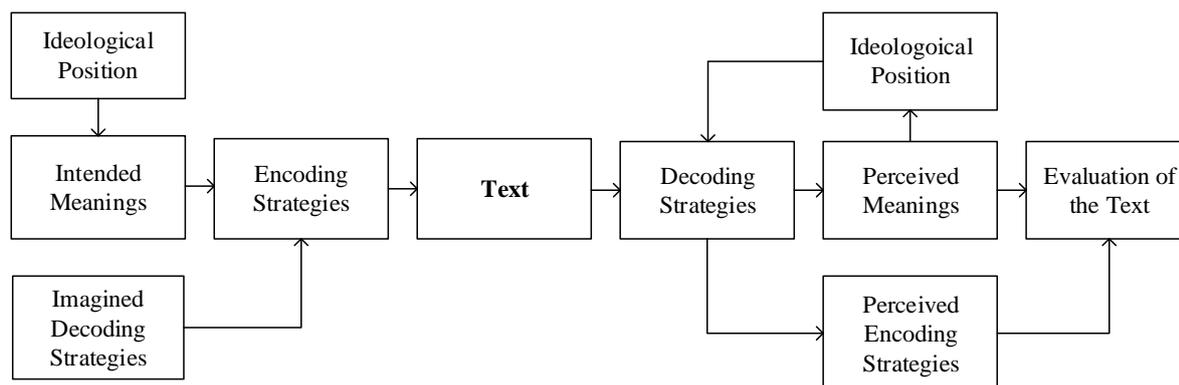


Figure 2: A revision of the encoding/decoding model.

This revised model enables us to capture the nuanced dynamics between media producers and viewers in the case of Mythic Plays. In our analysis, we first tackle the question that we are most interested in: what ideological position was taken by the Chinese viewers who resisted Mythic Plays? Then we discuss how both the perceived meanings and the perceived encoding strategies are entangled in these online discussions, and how viewers helped reproduce the power relations in the Chinese media ecology. To better understand what the viewers exactly resisted in the case of Mythic Plays, we first locate the ideological position of the producers of Mythic Plays by reviewing the literature on television production and the dominant ideology in China: patriotism.

Ideological position of producers

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been able to effectively control the production of media content, even after the introduction of the market-oriented reforms in the 1990s (Xu, 2015; Zhao, 2008). Many studies have shown that the commercial reform does not necessarily undermine the party's control over the media system and the content's ideological stance (Fung, 2008; Lee, He, & Huang, 2006; Ma, 2000; Zhao, 2000). In the Chinese television industry, content producers face strict and sometimes unpredictable censorship, as well as the risk of high financial costs resulting from failure to pass the censorship procedure (Xu, 2015; Zhao, 2008). To survive, they comply with the party-state's ideological guidelines rather than challenge them, thus participating in the maintenance of the ideological hegemony of the CCP (Bai, 2012; Xu, 2013, 2015; Zhao, 2008; Zhao & Guo, 2005). Therefore, there can be no doubt that TV content producers, especially the producers of mainstream genres, take the dominant-hegemonic encoding position (Cai, 2016a, 2016b). However, they also need to win over Chinese viewers, who are no longer satisfied with consuming overt, 'heavy' propaganda. Viewers prefer commercial-style TV programs (Xu, 2015; Zhao, 2008). The problem for producers is how to encode the dominant ideological viewpoints into the content in a way that is accepted by both the censors and the audience.

Producers of Mythic Plays face this dilemma. On the one hand, they can by no means choose an alternative to the dominant-hegemonic encoding position, especially given the

specific subject matter they are dealing with. The WRAJ is an important reference point of Chinese patriotism, an officially promoted form of nationalism, which constitutes the ideological foundation of the CCP's legitimacy after the withering away of communist ideology (Cao, 2005; Wang, 2008; Zhao, 1998; Zheng, 1999). Since the 1980s, the state has been trying to intensify people's love for the nation and exhort people to identify with the party-state, which claims to be the guardian of the nation (He, 2007; Zheng, 1999). The official discourse never separates love for the nation from love for the CCP (Fairbrother, 2003). Meanwhile, history education on China's resistance against foreign aggression has become a key aspect of the patriotic propaganda project (He, 2007). The Maoist 'victor narrative', which highlights the people's triumph over the feudal Qing Dynasty and western imperialism while leaving out the painful details of wars, has been replaced by a 'victimization narrative' that emphasizes national humiliation and blames 'the West', including Japan, for China's woes (Callahan, 2006; Gries, 2004). Accordingly, narratives about the WRAJ assume an indispensable role in the patriotic propaganda and therefore are closely scrutinized. Producers of Mythic Plays are only allowed to take the dominant-hegemonic encoding position.

On the other hand, the producers need to make their products attractive to viewers. Without changing the fundamental ideological message of patriotism, they need to tell appealing stories and create interesting characters. In that sense, their efforts are not made at the level of the ideological message, but the level of representation, or as we articulate, encoding strategies. These encoding strategies are partially based on the producers' imagination of the audience's taste, or the imagined decoding strategies. In Mythic Plays, the most prominent encoding strategy seems to be the commercial-style mixture of various elements of different television genres, such as romance, Kung Fu, comedy, and so on (Li, 2015). These elements seem to be the most controversial part according to the online discussion, making many Chinese viewers conclude that Mythic Plays are 'overly entertaining' and disrespecting of their country's history.

Methodology

In this article we employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine viewers' online comments. CDA concentrates on questions concerning the relationship between discourse and ideology (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1993). CDA may pay more attention to 'top-down relations of dominance than to bottom-up relations of resistance, compliance and acceptance', and prefer to focus on elites and their discursive strategies (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). Yet, we focus on the discourse of media consumers. We understand that analyzing the discourse of political elites and producers in the cultural industries could reveal how ideological propositions are disguised to appear natural, for the benefit of privileged groups. But we believe that by analyzing ordinary people's discourse we can contribute to knowledge of the complexity and interactivity in ideological articulation. Among the many aspects CDA examines, we focus on 'foregrounding/backgrounding' and 'presupposition' (Huckin, 1997) to see what Chinese viewers emphasize and take for granted when discussing

Mythic Plays.

We collected comments from Baidu Tieba, China's most popular bulletin board, and from Weibo, reported to host almost 70% of the 204 million Chinese microbloggers (China Internet Network, 2015). We also examined 87 comments on *Fight Against the Devils Together*, which was the most heavily discussed Mythic Play during the period of our data collection, on the review site Douban. Our data collection began on August 21, 2015. We started with Baidu Tieba, where we located the most popular post about Mythic Plays, which on October 13, 2016, had 7,550 comments,¹ as well as other posts with lots of comments. On September 2, 2015, we searched for 'Mythic Plays' on Weibo. We examined the first 1,000 search results, which were the ones most recently posted. Among these 1,000 results, some posts were comments on Mythic Plays themselves. Others were comments on a temporary ban on entertainment television programs issued by the SAPPRFT which, however, let resisting-Japan dramas pass. Although we did not expect the comments on the ban, they also helped us understand the discussions about Mythic Plays. Therefore, we analyzed these comments and discuss them in a separate section. After data collection, from September 2015 through March 2016 we made note of online posts about Mythic Plays. To systematically analyze the large amount of online comments, we first coded our data in an iterative way through constant comparisons (Hallberg, 2006). After reaching thematic saturation, we recorded major themes that emerged from the online comments. We then analyzed the tenets of patriotism encompassed in each theme and the discursive strategies used to naturalize these tenets. Following accepted procedures for a CDA analysis, we aim to demonstrate how hegemonic discourse was reproduced in the discussions on Mythic Plays. This means, among other things, that we do not make strong claims about the representativeness of the comments and opinions we highlight, but we do propose that comments in defense of hegemony were a clearly recognizable feature of the online utterances we examined. As Tonkiss notes:

As the primary interest which the discourse analyst has in personal accounts is not so much the views being expressed, but how different views are established and warranted, questions of representativeness are not so crucial. [...] As a discourse analyst [...] you are not necessarily aiming to give a representative overview of public attitudes towards immigration, for instance, but seeking to examine how particular attitudes are shaped, reproduced and legitimized through the use of language. (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 253)

It is no secret that the Chinese authorities employ online commenters, known as the fifty-cent party, to guide public opinion. According to the official press releases about the training for official online commenters (e.g. Chen, 2014; Gu, 2015; Huang, 2014; Pang, 2013), as well as a study based on emails leaked from the Internet Propaganda Office of a local government (King, Pan & Robert, 2017), it appears that the fifty-cent party mainly influences debates on emerging social events in which the state or certain government

agencies may be targeted, or on events that could cause social instability and the rise of collective movements. The fifty-cent party's strategy seems to be cheerleading for the CCP and distracting the public by changing the subject, rather than engaging in argument (King et al., 2017). Based on the existing research, then, it seems that the fifty-cent party was unlikely to be involved in the discussions about Mythic Plays. Nevertheless, even if it was involved, the comments of the fifty-cent party members should not be regarded as contaminant or foreign matter among the assumed genuine comments of viewers. We doubt if it is reasonable to draw a definite boundary between fifty-cent party members and ordinary viewers. The assumed genuine viewers actually consist of people from different social groups, including those whose perspective may not be so different from the fifty-cent party members, such as civil servants and party members of the CCP. Moreover, viewers by no means inhabit a pure and isolated environment where they form their opinions independently. In fact, their opinions are frequently the results of the constant shaping by the voices of different parties in the society, including the propagandist voice. If the fifty-cent party members were involved, their job would be amplifying the propagandist voices that already existed, rather than creating new voices. If there was significant schism between viewers' comments and the propagandist voice, we are confident we would have noticed this in our analysis. Therefore, we argue that the possible involvement of the fifty-cent party would not constitute a major concern for our analysis.

The online discourse on Mythic Plays

From the online discourse we extracted three themes, which we discuss in detail below. It should be noted that sometimes two or all three themes can be detected in one single comment. The themes interconnect and together constitute the discursive formation of Chinese patriotism regarding television production.

Mythic Plays distort history and mislead viewers

All historical dramas contain at least some factual flaws, distortion or implausibility. It might well depend in part on their quantity and the overall quality of a show whether and how strongly viewers take offense. In the case of Mythic Plays commenters pointed to perceived factual inaccuracies. Some remarked upon the weapons used, for instance: 'This type of gun belongs to the United States Marine Corps in the 1970s'² (Tieba.baidu.com, Mar 8, 2015). Such comments presuppose that resisting-Japan dramas should be consistent with 'the facts'. They naturalize the importance of factual accuracy, and promote the search for additional factual inaccuracies, thereby creating a vicious circle. Concerns centered not just on mere factual issues. Mythic Plays were blamed for creating a false impression of the war:

Nowadays Mythic Plays have seriously affected compatriots' knowledge of history. My aunt is 83 years old, and she told me that the Japanese didn't kill everyone they met, at least in the north of Henan province. The Japanese

always came to the village to catch chickens and pigs. In 1942 Henan province suffered a great famine. Once she was delivering a meal to her father and saw lots of dying people lying on the ground. I suggest facing up to the history and making fewer Mythic Plays. (Weibo.com, Mar 14, 2015)

We observed the third-person effect when viewers wrote about the threat Mythic Plays supposedly pose to people's understanding of history (Davison, 1983). Viewers tended to worry about the influence Mythic Plays might have on others, especially the young. One viewer wrote: 'Stop making Mythic Plays. You guys can only [negatively] affect children's knowledge of history and spoil the fruit of victory' (Weibo.com, Apr 8, 2015). Another comment read: 'It is irresponsible to history that some Mythic Plays producers transform the tragic resisting-Japan history into ridiculous comedies. It will affect teenagers' cognition of the war' (Weibo.com, Jul 12, 2015).

Viewers thus constructed an unequal relation between themselves and others. Underlying their discourse was a sense of superiority. Viewers did not regard others as smart, nor did they recall that they once were teenagers, too. Their self-identity as a guardian and their impulse to protect others from the harm Mythic Plays supposedly cause revealed their paternalism. They doubted that others can self-govern and thereby endorsed a rationale for censorship.

History constructs China's national identity

Viewers not only complained that Mythic Plays distort the historical record. The history of the war against Japan was foregrounded as a central component of China's national identity. Viewers thereby pronounced it something close to, if not actually, sacred. In other words, Mythic Plays were condemned not just for misrepresenting but even disrespecting the history of the war and therefore the Chinese nation. Some commenters posited that Mythic Plays disrespected history by the way they depict Chinese and Japanese soldiers:

I feel speechless about the Mythic Plays that keep popping up recently. They distort history and exaggerate [China's] combat power to satisfy the rising national vanity and heroism... Compared with the real battles, battle scenes in those dramas are nothing. [Scriptwriters are] a flock of literary pigs that have never experienced war. They know nothing about war. It is extremely disrespectful to the resisting-Japan martyrs who fought bloody battles! (Weibo.com, Sep 2, 2015)

By presenting images of unbeatable Chinese and weak Japanese soldiers, Mythic Plays contradict the official victimization narrative that the Chinese encounter in textbooks and the media. A victory against the Japanese that is not depicted as hard-won threatens a key component of their national pride. Other viewers argued that the disrespect derives from

treating the history of the war without the seriousness it deserves or even commands. They chided Mythic Plays for being primarily infotainment:

China always condemns the Japanese government for disrespecting the history, but do we respect the history? The fudged Mythic Plays are entertaining [sic] and consuming the history, and they are amusing and playing with the audience, showing no respect at all for the resisting-Japan heroes. We [Chinese] do not [get to] see the discrepancy in military power between the two countries at the time. (Weibo.com, Aug 15, 2015)

Viewers thus foregrounded 'history' and 'seriousness' at the expense of 'entertainment'. By insisting on the sacred nature of the history of the war against Japan, viewers upheld the authority of the official history. They constructed a hierarchical relation between the dramas and official history, in favor of the latter, rather than applying different sets of criteria for dramas, including Mythic Plays, on the one hand, and non-fiction fare on the other. Official history was seen as the suzerain and the television dramas as tributaries, with the latter having to pay tribute ('respect') to the former. In short, viewers supported the existing media ecology in which regulators impose ideological functions on cultural products.

Directors and scriptwriters should be reined in

Directors and scriptwriters were blamed for the historical inaccuracies and sensationalism of Mythic Plays. One viewer wrote:

I want to say to the Chinese directors that it's enough. Why cannot [the dramas] correspond to the real history? It's mental masturbation and you are making up historical stories. Chinese TV dramas have been disgraced! [...] You directors who make resisting-Japan [dramas] into science-fiction dramas should feel shame! (Tieba.baidu.com, Jan 17, 2015)

Another viewer added:

Mythic Plays absolutely insult the sacrificed resisting-Japan martyrs and underestimate the audience's IQ. They only pursue entertainment and totally ignore the hardness of the resistance war, and that's a big irony. Those directors' heads are filled with shit. (Tieba.baidu.com, Apr 2, 2015)

Viewers supposed that the low quality of Mythic Plays was due simply to a lack of personal ability on the part of their creators without mentioning that producers and writers are limited by the political and economic context in which they operate. Some viewers emphasized that a number of the directors originated from Hong Kong or Taiwan, thereby

absolving mainland directors from blame. One said: ‘Most directors of Mythic Plays are from Taiwan and Hong Kong. [...] They scapegoated mainland directors. Didn’t you detect the strong Kong-Tai (Hong Kong and Taiwan) flavor [in Mythic Plays]?’ (Tieba.baidu.com, Apr 8, 2015). Such comments set up the non-mainland directors as scapegoats, as the ‘internal other’ in the Chinese world, to relieve the tension Mythic Plays were felt to exert on viewers’ national identity and ‘Chineseness’.

Some viewers called for stricter censorship:

I request the SAPPRFT to ban the Mythic Plays that have been broadcast over and over again on TV. One arrow can kill a dozen [Japanese] devils, and one warrior can kill the devil bare-handed. [Those dramas] could seriously mislead not only teenagers but also middle-aged and elderly people. (Weibo.com, Apr 22, 2014)

Another comment read:

Mythic Plays mislead the compatriots. If it was so easy to defeat the Japanese devils, why did it cost eight years?³ Why so much blood and so many sacrifices? Why was an enormous amount of Chinese land burnt? Why has Japan always refused to apologize after the war and push the people all over the world to the limit? Could the truth be stuck to? Could the scriptwriters and directors have a basic sense of responsibility and conscience? The censorship officials only know to ban foreign dramas. Why are they absent when it comes to Mythic Plays? (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015)

In short, viewers defended the authority of the official history and called for a strengthening of the regulation of the dramas. They regarded the censorship bureau to have committed a dereliction of duty by not regulating Mythic Plays strictly enough. With their criticism viewers constructed a superior position over the censors, thereby inverting the real-life power relation between them. By calling the censors inefficient, viewers took the vantage point of a disappointed supervisor of supervisors. Instead of questioning the need for censors, viewers chose to provide them with guidance.⁴

Code-generated conflicts

Our analysis shows that the viewers who employed the above discourse in the discussions on Mythic Plays took the dominant-hegemonic position in relation to Chinese patriotism. That means the case of Mythic Plays presents us with a situation where producers and viewers may take the same ideological position but still clash over the text. In this situation, conflicts between producers and viewers are over their codes rather than their ideological positions. In fact, Hall (1980) long ago noted the possible conflicts between the codes of different groups – in his case, the professional code of TV producers and the dominant code

of ruling elites. As he argues: 'Of course, conflicts, contradictions and even misunderstandings regularly arise between the dominant and the professional significations and their signifying agencies' (Hall, 1980, p. 137). Similarly, we expect differences and even conflicts between the professional code and the audience code regarding the same hegemonic viewpoints.

In the case of *Mythic Plays*, conflicts between the professional code and the audience code concern two aspects. On the one hand, viewers' criticism was directly placed on the level of perceived encoding strategies. Viewers criticized a wide range of encoding strategies that were adopted to construct patriotic war stories, including but not limited to the usage of props, the arrangement of plots, and the characterization of roles. When viewers criticized that the props seemed anachronistic, the plots seemed unreasonable, and the roles seemed unconvincing, it means that all the signs pieced together in *Mythic Plays*, in their eyes, failed to convey the core meaning of patriotism that can only be conveyed by a convincing war story. Therefore, viewers partly based their opposition on what they considered inappropriate encoding strategies.

On the other hand, discordance between different codes generates polysemy, as the same sign may have different meanings in different codes. In the case of *Mythic Plays*, producers expected that the elements of commercial TV genres, which were part of their encoding strategies, would keep viewers immersed in the stories. However, viewers seemed to have decoded these elements in a way that was incongruent with the decoding strategies anticipated by the producers. Unexpected by producers, viewers created meanings which they deemed disrespectful to the sacred national history.

For instance, *Fight Against the Devils Together* has a scene in which a patriotic woman visits her jailed lover and invites him to fondle her breasts and crotch. The lover pulls a grenade from her pants. They perish together with the enemies. As the script writer Shi and the director Zhang explained in an interview, the flirtation of the couple was intended to distract the Japanese soldiers, and the vulgar language they used was intended to reflect the two patriots' identities: a bandit and a thief (Liu & Wu, 2015). Shi and Zhang's encoding strategies failed, as this scene became extremely controversial because of its sexual elements. News sites drew attention to the scene and many people rushed to review sites to give the drama a low rating. One viewer wrote: 'I admit that I specially watched the 29th episode [with the grenade scene]!! It created a new genre: resisting-Japan adult video!! I see hope for China's adult video industry!!' (Douban.com, May 18, 2015). Moreover, factors that were not included in the encoding strategies also played a part in the decoding process. For example, the actress that played in the grenade scene used to be the wife of national hero Liu Xiang, the first Chinese athlete to win an Olympic gold medal in track and field. One viewer suggested: 'That's why Liu Xiang divorced. He was afraid to be bombed' (Douban.com, Sep 12, 2015). This association between the grenade plot and Liu Xiang's divorce was unlikely to have been expected by Shi and Zhang in their encoding process.

Our revised encoding/decoding model is able to account for the nuanced dynamics between producers and viewers in the case of Mythic Plays (see **Figure 2**). Based on their intended meanings and imagined decoding strategies, which both cater to patriotism, producers of Mythic Plays executed certain encoding strategies and gave a certain shape to the text. In the decoding process, viewers derived both perceived meanings and perceived encoding strategies from the text. From these two dimensions, they arrived at their negative evaluation of Mythic Plays. Even though the two sides took the same ideological position, the discordance between the professional code and the audience code generated unpleasant polysemy and conflicts over encoding strategies, both of which eventually led to viewers' rejection of Mythic Plays.

Reproducing power relations

Our analysis shows that viewers' comments on Mythic Plays also reflect their perception of the power relations in the media ecology apart from their evaluation of the text. Many viewers were aware that censors have the arbitrary power to ban TV shows. Despising Mythic Plays, they called for stricter regulation and adopted the official discourse that legitimized censorship. Even when viewers doubted regulators' decisions related to resisting-Japan dramas, they did not consider fundamental change to the censorship system.

The online discussion involving Mythic Plays in the first five days of September, 2015, when China commemorated the victory against Japan, serves as an example. During this period the censorship bureau banned TV programs it deemed mere entertainment. Resisting-Japan dramas, war documentaries and other war-themed shows were broadcast. Considering the controversy of Mythic Plays, TV channels carefully selected the resisting-Japan dramas they broadcast (Zeng, 2015). Nevertheless, many viewers seemed to be bored with the flood of resisting-Japan dramas, as they still described these dramas as Mythic Plays. They doubted the regulators' decision to let pass a large number of war dramas. Some viewers expressed their rejection of the war dramas, but supported the ban on entertainment television programs in the name of patriotism. For instance, one viewer commented:

#entertainment programs banned for five days# I think the ban is quite good. But do these TV channels really have to broadcast Mythic Plays? I think it's good to broadcast interviews or documentaries. I guess in the following five days the corpses of Japanese devils will encircle the earth five times. (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015)

Another viewer wrote:

I think the ban is not something bad. There is no reason to be angry with the decision to use five days to commemorate those people who made it possible

for you to watch TV in a safe world. I only require that no more Mythic Plays are broadcast. Broadcast some meaningful documentaries please. (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015)

Although these two viewers situated non-fiction content, mainly the documentaries, in positive opposition to resisting-Japan dramas, we should not rush to the conclusion that they were objecting to fiction as an inappropriate genre in this context. After all, Mythic Plays gained their negative reputation not because they were fictional, but because they failed to tell intriguing and convincing stories. On these grounds some viewers distinguished the resisting-Japan dramas they liked from Mythic Plays. For instance, one said: 'There are no better resisting-Japan dramas than *Drawing Sword* (亮剑)! Present-day Mythic Plays should learn [from it]! It makes people laugh, but more often it makes people shed tears!' (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015). Another viewer wrote: 'I only hope that Mythic Plays are not broadcast in these five days when entertainment programs are banned. There are many good dramas after all... *Battle of Changsha* (战长沙)... *Warriors Marching Out of Sichuan* (壮士出川)... These can be broadcast' (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015). Nevertheless, such comments were exceptions. Most viewers indiscriminately rejected all resisting-Japan dramas and questioned the ban. Some viewers challenged the censorship bureau's definition of the word 'entertainment', arguing that the shown dramas were in fact entertainment:

Entertainment programs are to be banned for five days! Now we watch fighting against devils every day! Are you sure those Mythic Plays don't belong to entertainment? Fucking ridiculous! I shall stop talking and start my Zen meditation now! (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015)

Although viewers like this one expressed strong antipathy to resisting-Japan dramas, their engagement in the binary discourse of 'entertainment versus patriotism' prevented them from openly criticizing the ban. Others just voiced their disappointment, using the term Mythic Plays to describe the dramas that were nonetheless deemed serious by the censorship bureau. One viewer wrote: 'In recent days Mythic Plays have occupied every channel. I'm heartbroken when I turn on the TV' (Weibo.com, Sep 1, 2015). By referencing Mythic Plays, viewers ridiculed the allowed dramas and expressed their dissatisfaction with the ban. However, this dissatisfaction did not lead to a deeper reflection on the legitimacy of censorship. This was partly due to the fact that entertainment and patriotic education were not seen as mutually inclusive, a stance that affirmed the official binary of 'entertainment' and 'patriotic education'. Though some viewers used the word 'entertainment' as a discursive weapon to argue with the regulators, their understanding of the word still functioned to repress symbolic forms that offended official ideology, and to legitimate the regulators' duty of maintaining patriotism. By adopting the discourse of

‘entertainment versus patriotism’, viewers contributed to the reproduction of the current power relations among censors, producers, and viewers.

Conclusion

In the online discussions on Mythic Plays Chinese viewers demonstrated their agency in two main ways. First, viewers showed they can initiate large-scale online discussions that ultimately had an impact on content production. The online discussions not only influenced the agenda of state media, but eventually led to a reaction from the censorship bureau, which impacted the production of the dramas. Second, viewers showed their power over the texts by rejecting the ‘preferred readings’ (Hall, 1980, p. 134) intended by producers. Their comments suggest that they did not receive the texts passively. Their criticisms of the low qualities of the dramas show their media literacy.

Nevertheless, the audience’s agency has its limits. Though many researchers contend that different groups of viewers create divergent meanings (Fiske, 1986; Morley, 1980), we saw that viewers’ prominent interpretation of Mythic Plays revolved around patriotism. This may be due to the fact that national identity is constructed as an overarching category which covers all subgroups in a state. Viewers who flocked online to criticize Mythic Plays had already incorporated core ideas and assumptions of patriotism promoted by China’s ruling party. In the process of criticizing Mythic Plays, viewers became actively complicit with producers and censors in reinforcing those ideas and assumptions. The derogatory online comments on Mythic Plays reinforced hegemonic viewpoints, for instance by defending the official history. The reactions by state media and censors in 2013 illustrate that the maintenance of ideology, as Gramsci (2009) posited, results from negotiations between the dominant and subordinate forces in society. In this case, the latter provided the impetus for a strengthening – not a weakening – of the dominant ideology.

Viewers who adopted hegemonic discourse may have had a psychological motive of which they were perhaps only dimly aware or not at all. Patriotism functioned as a discursive weapon with which viewers expressed dislike of and boredom with Mythic Plays in ways that were politically acceptable. We would argue that Chinese patriotism functioned in a similar way as did ‘the ideology of mass culture’ for certain people who disliked the television show *Dallas*. As Ang has noted:

Apparently the ideology of mass culture has such a monopoly on the judging of a phenomenon like *Dallas* that it supplies ready-made conceptions, as it were, which sound self-evident and can be used without any strain or hesitation. The dominance of the ideology of mass culture apparently even extends to the common sense of everyday thinking: for ordinary people too it appears to offer a credible framework of interpretation for judging cultural forms like *Dallas*. (Ang, 1985, p. 95)

Almost automatically, then, some online commenters expressed their genuine dislike of

Mythic Plays in the language that they grew up with, still encounter every day, and therefore is most readily available to them: the language of Chinese patriotism.

Viewers went further than judging whether certain shows were patriotic or not. They also urged censors to react to Mythic Plays. Given the current power structure in China's media ecology, viewers perceived censorship as a weapon useful for wiping out what they disliked. They ignored China's strict censorship as a cause for the shows lacking in quality and creativity, and for the lack of diversity in the cultural industry. Moreover, they seemed to have neglected that they were the ones to be shepherded by censors as well. On the one hand, they constructed an active self-identity, trying to demonstrate that they themselves were free from the influence of the cheesy products of commercial culture. On the other hand, they often adopted a paternalistic attitude towards other viewers, especially teenagers. The lack of faith they exhibited in others' ability to self-govern positioned them as allies of authoritarianism and supporters of censorship. Accordingly, they gave pointers to the censors to do a more acceptable job, castigated the producers and directors of Mythic Plays for being irresponsible, and expressed concern for the well-being of youngsters watching Mythic Plays. Ironically, all this free online labor in service of hegemony, and arguably against the audience's own interest, did not affect the state media's stereotypical discourse on the audience. They continued to depict the audience as a passive, monolithic entity that requires guidance. For had not its lack of taste encouraged the production of Mythic Plays?

In light of our study we introduce two contributions to audience research. First, we propose a revision to Hall's encoding/decoding model, which allows researchers to capture more nuances in the producer-viewer dynamics by considering the diversity of producers' ideological positions, polysemy generated by the differences between the professional code and the audience code, and viewers' awareness of the 'constructedness' of the text. Specifically, we posit that rejecting the preferred readings intended by content producers is not by definition the same as resisting dominant ideology. Audience researchers cannot simply assume that media workers are all skilled encoders and always encode messages in conformity with the code that is widely accepted by the audience. Even when the producers and the audience take the same ideological position, conflicts over the codes can lead to the audience's opposition to the text. In the case of Mythic Plays, the professional code conflicted with the audience code. Viewers held the view that producers failed to encode programs in accordance with the dominant ideology. Therefore, we suggest that researchers conceptually separate two distinct dimensions in the audience's decoding process. One is the perceived meaning of the text, which is linked to the different positions the audience takes with regard to the hegemonic viewpoint, as discussed in the encoding/decoding model of Hall (1980). The other is the perceived encoding strategies, which are associated with the audience's evaluation of the professional code, or how professionals use certain signs to convey certain meanings. Future research may focus more on how the latter process unfolds and interacts with the former.

Our second theoretical contribution concerns viewers' perception of their position of power in the circuit of culture. To our knowledge this issue has not yet been discussed in audience studies. Nonetheless, we think it needs to be taken into account in any analysis, for the audience's reflections on media consumption involve not only the interpretation of content but also a consideration of the power relations among the main actors in the culture industries, including producers, regulators, and audience members. In this sense, audience research should not only examine how the audience interacts with the dominant ideology, but also scrutinize how the audience deals with the power structure in media production.

Biographical Notes:

Shangwei Wu is a PhD candidate in Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His research interests include mobile dating applications and TV audiences. Email: wu@eshcc.eur.nl.

Taber Bergman is a Lecturer in the School of Film and TV Arts at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China. His research interests include global journalism and propaganda. Email: Taber.Bergman@xjtlu.edu.cn.

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Notes:

¹ See: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2828024334> consulted on October 13, 2015.

² To protect the privacy of the online commenters we do not provide links to the original texts.

³ In 2017 China's government ordered that all Chinese history textbooks be rewritten to extend the second Sino-Japanese war by six years. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/13/china-rewrites-history-books-to-extend-sino-japanese-war-by-six-years> consulted on February 7, 2017.

⁴ An online survey by newspaper *China Youth Daily* confirms many of our judgments about prevalent opinions towards Mythic Plays. Sixty-one percent of about 2,000 people surveyed said Mythic Plays focus too much on providing entertainment; almost half blamed commercial needs. Close to 40 percent called Mythic Plays vulgar and cheesy and almost half worry that Mythic Plays give teenagers a wrong impression of history. Three out of four surveyed held the censorship bureau primarily responsible for the Mythic Plays. Seven in ten also held the producers responsible and almost three out of ten also blamed the broadcasters. The survey should be interpreted cautiously. The survey should be interpreted cautiously. One of its shortcomings is that the questions and answer options were formulated by the newspaper. For instance, the survey did not allow people to blame the central government or the CCP for Mythic Plays. In contrast, our research is grounded in

people's discursive environment. We examined viewers' spontaneous discourse and could pay attention to opinions that cannot be expressed in state media like *China Youth Daily*. See: http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2015-08/31/c_128182392.htm consulted on December 4, 2018.