Mainstream Culture Refocused
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Emperors are back, on television. In the last two decades, television dramas about China’s dynastic emperors have periodically received widespread popular and critical attention. Although a relatively recent addition, “emperor drama” has become an important subcategory of “history drama” on television. Why emperors? In the West, scholarly attention to this phenomenon has just begun. Ying Zhu’s studies on The Yongzheng Court (Yongzheng wangchao, 1998) (her translation Yongzheng Dynasty), for example, situates the making of the drama within the context of contemporary China, recognizing it as “political discourse” in relation to the role of intellectuals.¹ In China, most critics have dismissed the phenomenon as problematic, pointing out what they perceive as inaccurate representations of history or as reducing history to entertainment. Their dismissal, questioning the comeback of emperors, does not entail a clear understanding of the implications of the phenomenon. If “all history is contemporary,” the issue is not so much “history” per se as “historical consciousness,” a perennial Chinese modernity issue that not only continues to inspire intellectual discourse but also permeates popular culture’s representations of history and debates about them.² The dynamics between the two seemingly different—intellectual and popular—tracks in the consideration of “history” are characteristic of contemporary Chinese mainstream culture. The “triumphant return” of emperors in popular culture manifests the tensions, the changing dynamics, and the problematics within mainstream culture as China undergoes its latest round of social transformation.

The Rise of Emperor Dramas on Television and of History as Spectacle

The term “emperor drama” comes from two alternately used terms in Chinese, diwang ju or huangdi ju. It refers to a phenomenon that began to appear on
television in the early 1990s as part of the growing “history drama” subgenre. In the tradition of different forms of drama in Chinese theater, however, “history drama,” lishi ju in Chinese, is one of the most difficult genres to define. As a “modern” phenomenon, “history drama” existed long before television, mostly as cultural texts theatrically staged, sometimes filmically represented, and alternately identified under the even more all-encompassing genre guzhuang ju/xi, or costume drama. On television these dramas range from adaptations of classical novels and tales to adaptations of the modern writings of historical and legendary figures, and they can be either “comedies” or (serious) “dramas.” The distinction between history drama and costume drama may be tenuous, but in a narrow sense one can say that the former mainly pertains to narratives that not only have the appearance of China’s “premodern” past, but also the appearance of focusing on actual historical and legendary figures. When it comes to representing China’s emperors, additionally, the past three decades have seen transregional—including Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, and Korea—exchanges and influences that have contributed to the development of such dramas. Whether or not critics are willing to acknowledge anything “serious” in popular culture’s representations of “history,” the widespread presence and periodic success of history drama inevitably raise issues about historical imagination, historical consciousness, and historical uncertainty or amnesia.

Televisual representations of “Chinese history” started shortly after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), most notably with dramas imported from Hong Kong in the early 1980s. The Hong Kong martial arts dramas Huo Yuanjia (1983) and Chen Zhen (1984) are two memorable examples. When the former aired, people congregated night after night in places where there were television sets to watch this twenty-episode drama. Chen Zhen was aired on the heels of Huo Yuanjia’s success and was also popularly received. Their success was an early signal of change in postrevolution cultural production on the popular front that anticipated the return of China’s past, fictional or otherwise, as a rich source of narrative materials for televisual display.

With the popular reception of these imported dramas, television drama producers on the mainland turned to classical novels and well-known historical figures for dramatic material. Honglou meng (Dream of the red chamber), for example, was made into a thirty-six-episode television serial in 1987, followed by Xiyou ji (Journey to the west) also in 1987, with an alleged 81 percent viewing rate (both dramas continued to enjoy reruns as late as 2006). The cultural status of the novel Dream of the Red Chamber compelled the director and producers to treat the adaptation with such seriousness that, after they chose actors to play the major characters, they met in a secluded place where the cast read the original novel and discussed it with some of the best-known scholars of
the novel at the time. This artistic care manifested an elite's desire to own the interpretation of the classics. As time went on, such artistic care was less practiced, signaling a diversification of the forces that participate in the production of popular representations of the classics. With *Sanguo yanyi* (Romance of the three kingdoms), which came late in 1994 and was followed by *Shuihu zhuan* (Outlaws of the marsh) in 1996, television adaptations not only helped popularize traditional classics, but they also demonstrated the power and potential of television as a medium to represent the past in ways no other cultural form or medium had been capable of before.

It was not until 1991, when Taiwan and the mainland coproduced *Xishuo Qianlong* (Playfully told tales of Emperor Qianlong) was shown and popularly received on the mainland, that past emperors become a special category on television. *Playfully Told Tales of Qianlong*, much to the chagrin of scholars and critics, ushered in a new variety of “history drama” that was later identified as the “emperor drama.” The emperor drama did not quite solidify as a noted cultural phenomenon until the appearance of a series of dramas about emperors from the Han, Tang, Ming, and Qing dynasties, all made by mainland producers. Since then, Chinese viewers have periodically been given doses of an emperor drama, either in the *zheng shuo* style (seriously told, or serious style) or the *xi shuo* (playfully told, or playful style).

Representations of emperors, like no other history drama, involve acts of “(re-)collecting,” as defined by Susan Pearce, a range of historical and fictionalized figures and fake historical material objects to create a make-believe (but authentic-appearing to many viewers) dijective world within which “history” is projected “as if it really happened that way.” The popularity of these dramas indicates, in the words of one Chinese critic, “an enthrallment” with past emperors. Emperor drama evolved on television throughout the 1990s and beyond, becoming more and more spectacular.

Although this phenomenon has remained on the periphery of China studies in the West, within China numerous short essays have been written in response either to a single drama or to the phenomenon as a whole. They reflect a range of positions and, combined, manifest differences and contentions that exist within the community of critics. There is a journalistic immediacy to many of these critical responses, and they tend to emphasize errors in terms of historical accuracy, a lack of “seriousness” in the playful style, or some drama’s “unconventional” or unorthodox interpretations of an emperor. Many criticisms are expressed in familiar oppositional terms such as truth versus fiction, high culture versus low culture, avant-garde versus mainstream, elite culture versus popular culture, or historical memory versus historical amnesia. These dichotomies manifest a familiar tension in modern China on the issue of how to
understand and explain “tradition”—specifically China’s “premodern” history—within the “modern” context. They also indicate, I would argue, that “popular culture” is at the same time deeply entangled with the modern Chinese elite’s and intellectuals’ sense of uncertainty and crisis, and with a modern Chinese “historical consciousness” that is characterized by this sentiment of uncertainty and crisis (I will return to this point in the last section of the chapter).

In the next two sections, I examine “playfully told” and “seriously told” emperor dramas. The former variety reflects the influence of Hong Kong and Taiwan popular culture on mainland Chinese mainstream culture. Using two dramas, Kangxi weifu sifang ji (Emperor Kangxi traveling undercover) and Huanzhu gege (Princess Huanzhu) as examples, I speculate about how such influence helped produce a “cool” type of emperor within the larger context of the postrevolution era. In examining the “seriously told” category, I focus on two of the most celebrated and critically acclaimed emperor dramas, Yongzheng wangchao (The Yongzheng court, 1998) and Han wu da di (Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, 2004). Both dramas are directed by a woman director, Hu Mei. Although I do not delve into the gender aspects of the genre here, the fact that these two dramas are directed by a woman is worth exploring, both in the context of gender politics in general and in the context of the changing and changed role of women in cultural production in particular, in post-Mao and the post–women’s liberation contemporary China. Focusing on the narrative structure of these Hu Mei–directed emperor dramas, I examine the extent to which the representations of emperors as (tragic) “national heroes” are symptomatic of changing dynamics within mainstream culture in which “history” is reimagined through the reconstruction of (new) national myths. The melodramatic mode of heroism manifests what Ying Zhu identifies as a “totalitarian nostalgia,” to be sure, but, as I argue in this study, its “melodramatic politics” is informed by the inherent tensions in modern Chinese historical consciousness itself, an issue with far wider implications.

Who Is Afraid of Emperors, Whether Kangxi or Qianlong?

The first television drama about an emperor to be widely circulated and popularly received on the mainland was Playfully Told Tales of Qianlong, aired in 1991. The timing is worth noting. Similar to the importation of dramas like Huo Yuanjia and Chen Zhen from Hong Kong in the early 1980s, the making of Playfully Told Tales of Qianlong and Yearnings in the early 1990s signaled another moment of change, in this case from the Enlightenment-oriented jingying wenhua, or elite culture, of the 1980s to a culture dominated by popular cultural products, including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan.
sponded with underlying structural and ideological changes in the quick-paced economic reforms of the 1990s whose cultural manifestations and their implications have been the subject of heated intellectual debates in China. Indeed, a powerful cultural flow from these regions into the mainland, including Deng Lijun’s music (Deng Lijun was the most popular Taiwan/Hong Kong singer in mainland China in the 1980s), Jin Yong’s martial-arts novels, and Qiong Yao’s romantic fiction, heralded a “postmodern” taste for global, cosmopolitan entertainment with a preference for the cool and playful.

Television culture in the 1980s was still preoccupied with what might be identified as “serious” cultural issues largely defined by intellectuals. Dramas like Huo Yuanjia and Chen Zhen were well received for more than their entertaining martial arts intrigues. Their central themes—patriotism, righteousness, and (manly) heroism—were familiar ones to the mainland viewers, while their melodramatic codes were made afresh with stories that would not have been allowed to be told publicly during the Cultural Revolution. These popular dramas ran parallel with what Chinese writers, poets, filmmakers, and scholars were trying to do in the 1980s, namely, flooding China’s cultural scene not only with “new” ideas and artistic experimentations, but also with new entertainment products. These imported dramas helped bring back legendary historical figures who would not have fit the model of “revolutionary hero” during the Cultural Revolution but would be readily identified and celebrated as “national heroes” in the post-Mao era. The central themes of these imported popular dramas, in other words, corresponded well with the elite culture of the 1980s, which was itself filled with a (male) desire for “authentic” cultural roots, for “manly men,” and for a different type of hero.

The appearance of Playfully Told Tales of Qianlong shortly after the 1989 social upheaval and political and military crackdown, in contrast, coincided with the arrival of (1) an all-out economic development phase in the post-Mao reform era and (2) a change in the cultural scene that would decentralize intellectuals’ position in mainstream culture. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the success of Playfully Told Tales of Qianlong helped usher in an additional influx of Hong Kong and Taiwanese (as well as Japanese and Korean) popular cultural products in music, literature, film, and television. The influx of these products would play a role in the formation and production of a glamorized popular visual culture in China, adding yet another layer of difference and ambivalence to its mainstream culture. Signifying these changes, the image of a smiling (and even goofy) Qianlong corresponded with what can be identified as a depoliticization process in the contemporary mainstream culture. I use the notion of depoliticization here advisedly in the sense that Wang Hui discusses in his article “Depoliticized Politics: From East to West,” in which the seeming
depoliticization of the popular culture is in fact full of political implications. In the context of China's economic reforms of the last thirty years, the political implications of “depoliticization” reside in the coexistence of a collective retreat from the legacies of the twentieth-century Chinese revolution and a gravitation toward the “modernization imaginary” of the late-twentieth-century version, an imaginary that is largely contained within the logic of globalized commercial capitalism. The “transregional” flow of cultural products from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the mainland, to reiterate, took place within this larger cultural and political development. In many of these cultural products, certain melodramatic narrative codes—such as a strong pathos or overwrought emotions—are toned down and replaced with “postmodern” ones, including random use of dehistoricized time and space, a corresponding request for suspension of disbelief, and excessive play in turning “heroes” into “antiheroes,” all of which is geared toward an ahistorical playfulness. The return of emperors in playfully told tales was premised on related logic.

The notion of xishuo in Chinese implies not only comedy, but also “poetic license,” in this case license to render emperor stories without much historical basis. The poetic license employed in the playful tales does not lead to the creation of a trickster like Sun Wukong (the Monkey King) in Journey to the West through which the “sacred,” the powerful, and authority are all made fun of. Instead, the playful dramas, as it were, turn the emperor himself loose. In many cases, they freely deploy the emperor outside the court in disguise and turn him temporarily into someone else—a beggar, a shopkeeper, a passer-by, a father, or a son—to witness the “real” world and to set what is wrong out there right. In other cases, they create comical situations in which the emperor appears foolish, stubborn, loving, and therefore human all at the same time. Emperors are “re-collected” as a type of “cool” hero who is human and therefore prone to foolishness. Let me offer two textual examples.

Emperor Kangxi Traveling Undercover can be said to be the first major mainland Chinese version of the playful style of emperor drama. It consisted of five bu, or series, the first of which appeared in 1999 with a splash. It had thirty episodes within which there are four separate stories, each ranging from seven to nine episodes in length. This structural model was repeated in the following four series of Emperor Kangxi Traveling Undercover. Combined, the five series tell about twenty stories in which Emperor Kangxi disguises himself as someone else and travels to a particular place to investigate one thing or another. Within each of these smaller stories, the emperor almost always travels with his most trusted eunuch and favored concubine, and there is always an episode of romance (a comparison to James Bond comes to mind). Given that the emperor’s decision to travel in disguise is often prompted by news about corrupt local officials,
Kangxi in these serials is essentially turned into a detective of sorts. At the same time, because he is the one with ultimate power, his detective work, although full of twists and turns due to inevitable occurrences of misunderstanding, is always unequivocally triumphant. As a James Bond–like romance magnet, the emperor is also always placed in the position of the “knowing subject”—that is, he is never going to commit to the women who express interest in him and to whose interest the emperor does not hesitate to respond—a power position that answers to no one except, presumably, his own conscience.

Building the narrative structure of these serials around the idea of *weifu sifang* (meaning to pay a visit, to explore a situation, or to investigate undercover) by an emperor is reminiscent of a rather traditional ideal about an official’s willingness to *ticha minqing*, or experience the situation on the ground firsthand. Whether or not this ideal was practiced by any emperor in history, it is believed to have been practiced by some officials or legendary figures who are mythologized for their uprightness, sense of justice, and ability to solve crimes. Assigning Kangxi to about twenty undercover investigations (in a total of five series) is in essence the latest expansion of this cultural ideal.

From one story to the next, Kangxi travels at will from the south—Suzhou, Yixing, and Anqing—to the north—Shandong, Shanxi, and within Beijing itself—accompanied by only a handful who know who he is. The disguised emperor is put in a certain degree of danger—hence drama—such as being pursued by local thugs or their dogs, having to fight with local soldiers who take him for a criminal, becoming a coolie in a mine, where he is punished for wanting to help a “fellow coolie,” becoming a low-ranking local official having to deal with the local gangsters, or being put in jail by corrupt local officials (who do not know who he really is). As a melodrama would have it, he is always able to escape unscathed and, more important, triumphant, with “bad” people duly punished and “good” people duly rewarded. As such, Emperor Kangxi in these playfully told tales is not unlike modern Hollywood superheroes such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and 007. Most of them have “superhuman” powers that make them undefeatable. At the same time, they also have a “human” side with which they live a seemingly ordinary life. More often than not, there is romance on the side, even though most of the romances do not come to a good end. The popularity of such heroes, as critics have argued, manifests the modern-day human condition, which is marked, by a profound sense of uncertainty. As a type of Chinese modern-day *chuanqi*, or strange tale, playful Kangxi dramas echo the same sense of uncertainty and a similar desire for superhuman heroes, who, through some struggle, can always set things right. Issues of historical accuracy, as a result, do not apply. I will return to this comparison after I offer additional examples from the *Huanzhu gege* (Princess Huanzhu) serials.
Scripted by Qiong Yao, the best-known contemporary Taiwanese romance novelist, the first twenty-four-episode *Huanzhu gege* serial, a coproduction by Taiwan and the mainland, was aired on the mainland in 1998. By then Qiong Yao had long been a household name on the mainland. Throughout the 1980s, television dramas based on her novels, such as *Zai shui yi fang* (On one side of water), attracted widespread popular attention as soon as they were shown there. Ever since then, Qiong Yao’s novels and their film and television adaptations—always about romantic love and its impossibility and always represented in a unabashedly sentimental way—have exerted substantial influence on the mainland. Not directly about an emperor, *Huanzhu gege* belongs to the playfully told tales of emperors in that the protagonist, Xiao Yanzì (literally, Little Swallow), is placed in the Qianglong court, and her relationship with Qianlong constitutes the key component of the drama.

In the story, she is mistakenly taken to be Emperor Qianlong’s long lost (out of wedlock) daughter Xia Ziwei. Much of the rest of the story takes place inside the court with the emperor playing a major role in the dramatic evolution and resolution of this case of mistaken identity. What makes this serial (and the following two additional productions) “playful” is the character Xiao Yanzì, who is armed with funny lines in her conversations with the emperor and others, making her a favorite character among devoted viewers. Narratively, her loveliness—she is lively, cute, and articulate—is what makes her succeed in persuading the emperor that, despite the fact that she has deceived him by pretending to be his daughter, she deserves his understanding because she did not intend the mistaken identity to happen. Together with the next two serials

![Image](http://image.baidu.com)
of the same title, the theme of this drama hinges on how this unlikely heroine, Little Swallow, ultimately manages to “cleanse” the darkest human souls and to soften the most powerful human being, the emperor. Placing a number of additional good-hearted young individuals (who are unlikely characters to appear there) in an imperial court, Qiong Yao continues her style of modern-day sentimental “strange tales” and essentially creates Qianlong in the image of Kangxi in *Kangxi weifu sifang ji*: a humanized individual who nevertheless possesses larger-than-life power. Through Xiao Yanzi, additionally, Qianlong is represented as an emperor with feelings.

Qianlong, a grandson of Kangxi who became the fourth Qing dynasty emperor in history, returns again and again on television as the favorite emperor in playfully told dramas of emperors. Historically, as the Qing emperor with the longest reign (which lasted sixty years, after which he ceded the throne to his son in 1795 before he died in 1799), Qianlong presided over one of the most prosperous periods of the dynasty. But he is also known for his propensity to extravagance and for many controversial decisions, ranging from conducting a literary inquisition (*wenzi yu*) to promoting and protecting He Shen, a known corrupt official, to refusing Western demands for trade. In the playfully told dramas, however, his stature is significantly softened, and he becomes a loving father, a lustful man with power over any woman he wants, and a sometimes confused emperor who does not know how to distinguish between bad and good. Like many temporarily misguided father figures in typical Hollywood productions, Qianlong the emperor is able to learn lessons along the way and to acknowledge that he was wrong and to express willingness to mend his ways. At the same time, the

![Figure 2.2. Xiao Yanzi with Qianlong and others. Princess Huanzhu (http://image.baidu.com)](http://image.baidu.com)
emperor is always the one who not only ultimately rights the wrongs, but also grants “happiness” to the “good” people who deserve it. As a result, it goes without saying, these playfully told tales unfailingly end happily ever after.

Recall the point made earlier regarding the comparison between playful representations of emperors and characters such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and 007. The linkage between the two seemingly very different types of representations and characters is that, as heroes, they possess both superhuman and human qualities, and as a result they are always capable of saving the world from troubles or destruction, and doing so in a “cool” way. What is “cool” in playful dramas, specifically, is that they play with the “throne” by making it appear funny and quotidian, with desires, flaws, and faults not too different from those that most ordinary moderns are prone to. The emperor together with his idiosyncrasies is thus wrapped up under a cover that says “cool.” History does not quite apply. Making emperors in the image of contemporary “cool” culture not only succeeds in turning “history” into an infinite source of entertainment material but also succeeds in flattening history out into the latest version of a game show. As in a game show, history becomes a virtual world made up in any way the game players fancy. What kind of historical consciousness, if any, does all of this reflect?

The answer lies in the question of what informs such “playfulness.” Scholarly attention to Hong Kong and Taiwanese cultural influences (mostly in film) on the mainland tends to hail the transregional exchanges for injecting into Chinese mainstream culture large doses of “cultural difference.” Looking beyond a postmodern proclivity to celebrate difference merely for difference’s sake, one can infer from this celebration another one that celebrates “different” historical choices and experiences from regions or countries where revolution has always been a negative concept and where modernization is presumed to have been achieved without revolution. It is still fresh in our memory, for example, that throughout the 1980s and 1990s (until the “Asian meltdown” in 1997) the economic successes of the so-called four little dragons—Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea—were hailed as proof of the success of the “Confucian work ethic.” Underlying those celebrations was a devaluation of modern Chinese revolutionary historical choices and experiences, with a seemingly logical conclusion that the “backward” mainland Chinese ought to emulate those regions and countries not only economically but also culturally. This simplistic “better economy equals better culture” logic is buttressed by the flow of global capital and corresponds to the mainland Chinese desire to modernize and a willingness to downgrade their own historical choices and experiences. This ideological readiness deconstructs the modern Chinese trauma-oriented sense of history, while at the same time serving up another version of history in a
different pot labeled with the word “play.” To be willing to play in today’s world order and being “playful” according to its logic is “cool.”

Since being “cool” has become a major component of the postmodern logic in the latest round of globalizing capitalism, the global spread of the culture of the “cool” becomes a powerful informing force that, with a nod toward a depoliticizing (and dehistoricizing) “playful” irony, is license to deconstruct that which is “serious” or “traumatic.” In this context the “transregionally correct” playful representations of China’s past implicitly function to deconstruct the “trauma-oriented” mainstream Chinese intellectual and revolutionary traditions. The key action in this deconstruction game is to turn a negative historical symbol—the emperor—into a modern-day superhero. Ironically, however, the opposition of playful and serious styles that results helps reveal additional ideological tensions within contemporary Chinese mainstream culture in which the struggle between what is considered traditional and what is modern continues to remain a serious national preoccupation.

Re-collecting Emperors as National Heroes, Melodramatically and Ambivalently

In the zhengshuo, or serious, style, the creative impulses stem from the “old-fashioned” grand narrative from a “modern” perspective, treating emperors not as postmodern “cool” heroes but as modern national ones. Generally speaking, the serious style of emperor drama derives from the familiar narrative style found in adaptations of classical novels such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms and other kinds of so-called xinbian lishi ju (new history drama). Their creation may well have been inspired by the success of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which was shown on television in 1994. Based on the classical novel of the same title, the eighty-four-episode drama was shot on a scale unseen in any previous television drama regardless of genre. Though the drama is characterized by a crudely designed mise-en-scène, the feel of the large scale comes from the large collection of characters and the various battle scenes in the novel. Among the so-called four best-known classics (si da mingzhu), Romance of the Three Kingdoms is perhaps most closely related to events in history, specifically the historical period around the Three Kingdoms, the state of Wei (AD 220–265), the state of Shu (AD 221–263), and the state of Wu (AD 222–280). Although the period lasted less than one hundred years, it has left Chinese culture with numerous legendary historical figures, and their stories have continued (and will continue) to capture people’s imagination. As such, this eighty-four-episode television drama can be seen as a (melodramatic) prototype of the serious-style emperor drama in which themes such as heroism,
power struggles, good versus evil, and loyalty versus disloyalty loom large. In emperor dramas, dynastic emperors have become cultural icons and are represented in ways that are reminiscent and characteristic of the legendary figures in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, often as tragic heroes. What has followed in the making of serious-style emperor dramas, in other words, has not diverged far from the prototype. This continuity ensured additional melodramatic possibilities, in terms of both structure and content.

Narratively, almost all the serious-style emperor dramas begin in the later years of an old emperor in decline and tell of his passing along with the struggle that ensues in the consolidation of power by the young emperor. This narrative structure allows for considerable poetic license—for melodrama—in the focalization of characters and stories, arrangements of plots, and, above all, the imagined dialogues. In many of the melodramatic moments with regard to these characters there is a thinly disguised fascination with the power struggles waged within the logic of the political structure of the dynastic system. The narrative structure helps focus on the fate of the individuals who either actively or passively participate in such struggles. The relationship between the narrative structure and representations of characters is a key element in our understanding of the historical imagination manifested in these dramas. At the same time, the representations of the emperors as (male) individuals within a political power structure carry with them a projection of modern and contemporary ambivalence and desire that needs to be examined and understood.

Compared with such seriously told emperor dramas as *The Kangxi Court* (Kangxi wangchao) and *The Qianlong Court* (Qianlong wangchao), Hu Mei’s *The Yongzheng Court* (1998) generated heated debate, in part because this drama portrays Yongzheng as a sympathetic figure, which is different from the customary interpretation. Based on Eryuehe’s literary representation of Yongzheng in his novel *Yongzheng huangdi* (Emperor Yongzheng), the televisual representation of the emperor pushes the envelope in placing Yongzheng in a more sympathetic light. Instead of portraying him as a ruthless and brutal ruler suspected of gaining his position by altering his father Emperor Kangxi’s will, Hu Mei’s televisual version, following the original novel, portrays him as just the opposite: he is an upright individual who not only is favored by his father Emperor Kangxi and legitimately inherits the throne, but is also a hardworking emperor. Throughout the drama, additionally, Yongzheng is framed within a narrative structure that sets him up against the conspiracies of a number of his brothers, who constantly conspire to overthrow him. Above all, Yongzheng is represented as a tragic hero.

For example, as this forty-four-episode drama begins against the background of the last years of Kangxi’s reign, and power struggles are already taking place
oriented around the choice of the next emperor, the first episode shows Yongzheng as *si ah ge*, or the fourth son, of Emperor Kangxi, together with the thirteenth (younger) brother, on a mission ordered by the emperor to collect taxes in a province. Instead of placing them in an official mansion or governmental quarters, the drama shows them walking in the street, witnessing the cruel treatment of ordinary people by local officials. When they interfere, because no one knows who they are, they are rudely challenged and disregarded. With this scene setting the tone from the opening, the drama places Yongzheng in a positive light in direct contradiction to the customary belief that Yongzheng was a ruthless ruler. Indeed, how can a hardworking and sympathetic prince who tries to honestly carry out his duties not ultimately manage to win his father’s trust and subsequently his throne? Duty and honor are already written into the representation of the young prince.

It is along these lines that *The Yongzheng Court* differs from *The Kangxi Court*. While the latter focuses on many details on Kangxi’s relationships with his mother and some of his concubines, *The Yongzheng Court* offers little narrative space for significant female characters or for Yongzheng’s personal life. Instead, it stresses his “manly” stoicism by showing how he struggles against difficult odds, especially when shunned and isolated by most of his brothers, and by emphasizing that he lives a simple life without interest in material gain and that he is kind to individuals who work for him regardless of their family background. In the midst of all of this, however, he is also shown as a participant in a power struggle capable of acting decisively and ruthlessly when need be.
Chapter Two

The narrative focus on the transition of power from Kangxi to Yongzheng and the subsequent positive portrayal of the latter as emperor thus reveals an ambivalent awareness on the part of the producers of the drama. On the one hand, through all the major characters, whether sympathetically portrayed or not, the drama demonstrates how they are part of a political system within which they are constructed and conditioned and in which they carry out their beliefs and ideas. The system is shown to be cold and ruthless, a familiar perspective shared by most modern Chinese, who view the dynastic past critically. Yongzheng’s ascendance to the throne and his efforts to establish and maintain his legitimacy become the overall narrative focus of the serial that, along with the various plots and subplots focusing on the roles of different individuals in various power struggles, help foreground the workings of a system in which the motif of conspiracy looms large and in which power struggles are the major driving force that informs the behavior of individuals including the emperor.

On the other hand, the drama focuses on Yongzheng, offering a sympathetic representation of an emperor who has traditionally been portrayed as someone shrouded in suspicion. By placing him in the forefront of real sociopolitical issues that were reportedly plaguing the Kangxi court, the drama shows the “fourth son” to be someone who is willing to uphold principles regardless of whom he might offend. In this way, the drama sets up its value orientation when it comes to this controversial Qing emperor, suggesting that it is possible that history’s unkindness toward Yongzheng may have come about because he offended many in the power system. He is portrayed as a lonely monarch, an “individual,” who, faces the risk of being overthrown by his grudging brothers. The drama also sets him (and his thirteenth younger brother) apart from their gangster like siblings led by ba ah ge, Kangxi’s eighth son. By placing Yongzheng’s struggle with his brothers within the context of a real power struggle in which the former represents what is important for the empire at large and the latter are shown to be power hungry, the drama reverses traditional accusations against Yongzheng for, among other things, being cruel to his brothers and for driving some of them to an untimely death. The collection of individuals surrounding the emperor and the system within which the logic of their behavior is understood are represented in ways that support Yongzheng in what he has to do. The drama does not aim to show him as a kind-hearted emperor but, rather, as a tragic hero and individual who is subject to the limitations of the system in which he operates but who can nevertheless be understood through a different—more sympathetic—historical lens. The same melodramatic model of representation will be repeated in another one of Hu Mei’s emperor dramas, *Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty.*
While the majority of emperor dramas have taken place in the Qing court, *Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty* takes the viewers to a much early historical period (156–87 BCE). Structurally speaking, early parts of *Emperor Wu* also consist of stories of transition of power, from Emperor Jing of the Han (Han Jing Di) to his son Liu Che, who became Emperor Wu (Han Wu Di). There are numerous power struggles involving Emperor Jing’s mother, his brothers, his sister, his wives, and circles of individuals associated with these relatives of Emperor Jing. When Liu Che comes to power as the heir, he is too young to carry out his duties and much of the power to make decisions falls into the hands of his grandmother. In this drama, unlike in *The Yongzheng Court*, Hu Mei has added major narrative lines that involve female relatives of both emperors. The grandmother of Emperor Wu is particularly powerful, but female power is also represented as somewhat irrational. Everybody is involved in power struggles and risks punishment if not careful (and almost everybody, in effect, is punished). Once again, power struggles are fully employed narratively for melodrama and for us to explore their meanings further.

Using biographical clues from the *Historical Records* (*Shi ji*) and the *Book of Han* (*Han shu*), two of the most influential history books of all time, the producers of the drama focus the “great feats” of Emperor Wu mainly on his long-term efforts to defeat the Xiongnu (a nomadic tribe in the north and northwest who were a formidable force threatening the Han court), enhancing the heroic warrior image of the emperor. Against the historical background of war with the nomadic Xiongnu, this drama examines other historical figures and the significance of their roles. By dramatizing the difficulties Emperor Wu initially encounters because of philosophical differences with his grandmother on how to govern, the drama further weaves in the controversy for which the emperor is remembered, namely, his role in elevating Confucianism to the state ideology at the expense of other schools of thought. The matriarch is a faithful follower of Daoism and believes that the best way to govern is *wu wei er zhi*—governing through inaction. The young emperor, however, breaks away from the control of his grandmother and her ideas, and embarks on years of fighting with the Xiongnu and eventually succeeds in pushing them farther west. In the process, however, the young emperor grows into an angry old man alienated from just about everyone around him. He continues to dodge “bullets” from various directions, but as time goes on, he becomes the victim of his own power and its uncertainty, growing more isolated and lonely. Narratively framed in this way, this emperor is represented in the same vein as Yongzheng, namely, as a tragic figure both despite and because of his “great feats.” In both cases their “great feats” are accompanied by deadly power struggles and great sacrifices in terms of their humanity.
The drama’s unique beginning and ending further complicate the implications of the representations of Emperor Wu. The drama is bracketed with a repeated scene of a dialogue between the aged Emperor Wu and Sima Qian, a contemporary of the emperor and the author to whom the *Historical Records* is attributed.27 In the drama, the meeting takes place after Sima Qian has finished writing the *Historical Records*. Emperor Wu has read the text and is enraged by it. The repetition of the dialogue is intriguing.

The scene begins with an overview shot of the grand palace in which a tiny figure is seen walking with a cane toward a huge hall—someone has been summoned by the emperor. As he walks in, he kneels down in front of the emperor, reporting that “the guilty servant Sima Qian” has arrived. Thus begins the dialogue between the two, which I will quote in its entirety:

**Emperor Wu:** After reading your book, I fell ill. This experience has taken at least one year out of my earthly life. Aren’t you satisfied? You want me to have you killed, so that future generations can praise your loyalty and righteousness and curse me for being a tyrant. But I am most definitely not going to satisfy you in this way.

**Sima Qian:** Your Highness, your heart is as grand and deep as the oceans and cannot be fully understood by someone like me.

**Emperor:** You can have the books back, but there is no need for you to start another one. I have been advised to have the books burned, but I have rejected the idea. As far as I am concerned, even though they cannot be viewed as official historical records, they can be left behind as representing the views of one historian.

**Sima Qian:** Your Highness, you always take a long view and keep in mind the needs of generations to come. Your humaneness is not easily understood by ordinary souls; perhaps I simply do not have any right to comment on Your Highness.

**Emperor:** Do you think you truly understand me? Many things only heaven ultimately knows. Whatever has happened and whatever has not happened, I have no opportunity to change them nor can they be changed.28

This exchange can hardly be construed as a dialogue. The emperor’s wrath is aimed at what the historian has written, and yet the historian is shown to be somewhat apologetic for having written something that enraged the emperor. Sima Qian is made repeatedly to raise the possibility that he may have failed to truly understand the emperor.

Given that Sima Qian’s *Historical Records* has indeed become the “history” based on which various early historical figures have been remembered and understood (or not), this imagined dialogue between the emperor and his biographer seems to give the emperor an opportunity to have his say, or, more
accurately, gives the producers of the drama a chance to offer their views on historical judgments in relation to a figure like this emperor. With its emphasis on the question of whether or not history—as written by historians like Sima Qian—has truly understood someone like Emperor Wu (and, by extension, anyone like him), the drama appears to add a (postmodern) twist to such issues as history, historical writing, and historical recording. The wrath displayed by Emperor Wu toward Sima Qian brings to the fore issues regarding the role of historical recording and the act of reading (and, by extension, collecting and re-collecting) in response to “history.”

The uncertainty that Sima Qian expresses is also expressed in *The Yongzheng Court* in the song that accompanies the opening credits. Sung by the well-known contemporary pop singer Liu Huan, the song expresses uncertainty...
(about historical judgments) with a defiant sentiment: “When it comes to comment-
ing on the accomplishments and failures of heroes of the past, who really has the final say? Good or bad, let others judge; even though you work hard for the country, you cannot prevent bad names from being thrown at you after you are gone.” Even though no direct identification is made here, these lyrics put a philosophical spin on the drama’s representations of Emperor Yongzheng.

What does such articulated uncertainty mean? In the case of Emperor Wu, although the drama claims to be based on Sima Qian’s Historical Records and Ban Gu’s Book of Han, when it opens and ends with a dialogue between the emperor and the historian, the drama does not appear to identify with the historians’ representations but proceeds, instead, to represent the emperor in a more positive, if not also ambivalent and ambiguous, manner. On the one hand, by claiming that the drama is based on two well-known history books, the producers claim a degree of historical authenticity. On the other hand, by creating the dialogue between the emperor and Sima Qian, they seem to want to make the drama more than what the history books offer by adding their own interpretations of the relationship between historians and the historical figures they record.

Anyone familiar with Chinese history knows that Historical Records is consid-
ered to be the first Chinese history book written in a biographical style (ji zhuan ti), with many more to follow in later dynasties. History books from fairly early on, in other words, came to be mixed with historians’ decisions of what and whom to record and how to present history. In a sense, we can say that emperor dramas on television are modern popular culture’s parodies of such esteemed history books as Historical Records, with their own (re)interpretations and opinions written into narrative representations. Those familiar with Chinese history also know that Emperor Wu had Sima Qian castrated after the latter allegedly defended a general by the name of Li Ling, grandson of Li Guang, upon his arrest. Li Ling, who surrendered to the Xiongnu, was one of the best-known generals in Emperor Wu’s military. So, at the time of the dramatized meeting, Sima Qian would have lived through the consequences of his disagreement with the emperor; indeed, he is remembered as having decided to live on, despite the humiliation of his punishment, solely for the purpose of finishing what Sima Tan, his father, had started, namely, the book Historical Records. Throughout dynastic and modern Chinese history, Historical Records has enjoyed an esteem that few other history books have ever enjoyed. In this television drama, however, the usual esteem for the historian is questioned with the repetition of the scene in which the historian is made to appear uncertain about his own judgments.

By creating and repeating such a meeting and dialogue between the emperor and the historian, the drama, made in the early twenty-first century, puts the
historian in an ambivalent light while at the same time implicitly shedding a different light on history. It does so by evoking a familiar modern ambivalence toward China’s dynastic past but is unusual in the degree of sympathy directed toward Emperor Wu, showing him as a tragic hero who nevertheless was able to accomplish “great feats.” Throughout the drama, this theme is repeated both visually and verbally at the beginning of each episode, where superimposed on the image of Emperor Wu are the words “he established unprecedented honor for a country; he gave a people long-lasting self-confidence; his dynasty became the permanent name of a nationality.”

The images situate the man as the center of focus for the “moderns” to see, a lonely old man, the product of his own times, and yet living on through history. Right there on the screen, with words, image, and music, another emperor “hero” is added to the collection.

Implicit in this latest induction of emperors into the modern (myth-making) hall of fame of (tragic) heroes is an indication of the nature of depoliticized politics in the context of postrevolution China, where many modern (and revolutionary) “heroic” figures, real or fictional, have lost their appeal. Widespread ambivalence toward the People’s Republic of China’s official ideology (which still represents itself as “communist” and as a force to struggle for socialism) and its authority leaves today’s China’s “hall of fame” for heroes increasingly occupied by those who are neither “modern” nor “Chinese” along with such ancient emperors as Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty and Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty as its latest occupants. Even though it has become a cliché to state that “all history is contemporary,” when it comes to emperor dramas on television, the ambivalence identified here signifies that what is represented in these dramas indeed pertains more to the historical consciousness in contemporary China than to specific emperors. The ambivalence is the product of modern Chinese history, where experiences and the “modern” lens have fostered ambivalence toward so-called premodern (dynastic) history, revealing modern Chinese intellectuals’ anxiety over China’s national and cultural identities.

A New Collective Imagination? Contending “Historical Consciousness” in Contemporary China

The two different styles of emperor drama manifest changing dynamics in Chinese mainstream culture in relation to representations of history and, by extension, in relation to the issue of modern Chinese historical consciousness. The playful style lightens up the historical imagination by turning emperors into cool superhuman heroes capable of human feelings and of being good rulers. Its playfulness downplays the “burden of history” (lishi de fudan) and
deconstructs the trauma-oriented Chinese historical consciousness by playing up the postmodern sense of irony that renders that sense of history “uncool.” The serious style, in contrast, revisits “history” by focusing and shining a spotlight on a group of formerly “deposed” historical figures in an ambivalent (but far less negative) manner. These two types of emperor drama, each in its own way, have generated discussions and sparked debates on how to understand such “new” representations of “traditional” Chinese history and culture, and what it means when past emperors are “excavated” as main characters in contemporary popular televisual tales of “history.” Most of the popular and critical responses to these dramas in China, to echo an earlier point, further demonstrate entangled tensions and ideological struggles within mainstream culture, especially with regard to the question of historical consciousness, an issue to which I now turn.

Even though her discussion of the drama *The Yongzheng Court* does not focus on the drama itself, Ying Zhu’s discussion of the context in which the drama was made is on target. Her discussion points to the changing political and intellectual dynamics in post-1989 China as a way to understand this drama. I would like to expand the discussion by noting that the “triumphant” comeback that dynastic emperors have enjoyed in cultural representations is essentially a return to familiar tensions in modern Chinese historical consciousness vis-à-vis the enormously complex modern Chinese experience.31 The question of how to deal with “tradition” and “history” has continued to be an intrinsic part of being “modern” as a Chinese and also, as a result, has remained a recurrent issue for those who study modern China. In the past several decades, a Foucauldian-genealogy-informed historiography in the China field in the West has arisen to question the historical resources that informed “modern Chinese historical discourse,” treating that consciousness as no less than the mimicry of a West-originated Enlightenment-oriented grand narrative of history.32 Perceived from this perspective, history and emperor dramas of the serious style—especially given the ambivalence they exhibit—can appear problematic precisely because they continue to echo the trauma-oriented modern Chinese historical discourse. In response to the prevailing genealogy-informed historiography, Wang Ban argues for the need to distinguish “historical sense” and “sense of history.” Quoting Michael Roth, he states, “The historical sense aims at a relentless genealogical dismantling of the discourse-power nexus and takes sadistic delight in parading its contingent mechanisms and arbitrary violence. The sense of history, on the other hand, is ‘animated by a desire to give meaning and direction to the present by finding its development in the past.’”33 “A sense of history,” he further argues, “has to be based on an articulated unity, continuity, and solidarity of purpose—rearticulated in the genealogical ruins
of dismantled History. Thus the retreat from the political-ethical horizon is also a withdrawal from historical discourse. If all history lies in ruins, how are historical agents supposed to write alternative histories and act alternatively to change the repressive History?" If “the notion of history is bound up with modernity,” how do we understand the televisual representations of emperors within the context of contemporary China’s ongoing quest for modernity and, more important, in relation to the ongoing debates about “modern Chinese historical consciousness”?

With these questions in mind, let me now turn to one particular critic’s response to the phenomenon of the emperor drama, which I will treat as yet another cultural representation of the issue of historical consciousness. Let me preface the following discussion by pointing out that, while there has been criticism of emperor dramas in China, most critics tend to express their displeasure or criticism in short essays without fully analyzing the manifested sense of history in these dramas. The same is true of this critic except that his essay is a celebration of such dramas. And this critic’s celebration of the emperor drama exists alongside his recent dismissal of the importance of Lu Xun in contemporary China. Given that Lu Xun is arguably the most influential modern Chinese intellectual and that his sense of history remains an important point of reference in any discussion of “new (Chinese) historical consciousness,” and given also that debates about Lu Xun function as an important gauge for understanding changes, tensions, and problems within mainstream culture, the coexistence of the two critiques may not be coincidental.

In his comments on the 2004 hit Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, Zhang Yiwu, a Beijing-based scholar-critic hailed the series as symbolizing the beginning of a new Chinese historical consciousness. He is quoted as saying that “Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty shows that the imagination of emperors, which prevails in recent years, has not dried up. It is still an important part of the contemporary culture that cannot be parried.” After comparing the series with The Yongzheng Court by the same director (Hu Mei), Zhang states that Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty “speaks highly of his great feats… in a big way. This is very rare in China where individualism and heroism were absent for thousands of years.” This has come about, according to Zhang, as a “result of the fact that China is thriving and powerful.” Zhang continues: “People's enthrallment with Emperor Wu is actually their desire for a brand new century. The new development of Chinese history requires new collective imagination. This is the key issue that the television drama has highlighted.” Whether the critic is accurate in stating that “individualism and heroism were absent for thousands of years [in China],” he is presenting a contrast with his call for a “new collective imagination,” a new (Chinese) historical consciousness, which
he declares that the television drama Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty helps place in the foreground.

Rather than ambivalence, Zhang sees in this (and other similar) dramas something different and presumably new. According to the enthusiastic comments quoted above, what is new is what he identifies as a “new historical consciousness” or “new collective imagination.” Using a collection of words and phrases from Zhang’s comments—“individualism and heroism,” that China is “thriving and powerful,” and the Chinese people’s desire for a “brand new century”—this presumed new historical consciousness seems to be one that bursts with pride and confidence in the “feats,” “power,” and “grandeur” all symbolized by this emperor. For those who are familiar with modern Chinese history, however, none of this is particularly new. The hailed “new collective imagination” can be easily traced to the power-and-wealth-oriented “modernization” imaginary that has been promoted by generations of Chinese elites since the mid-nineteenth century. Comparatively speaking, what is new is the fact that today’s China is experiencing rapid economic growth, and the desire and imaginary of the earlier generations of Chinese elites for China to become strong and wealthy is becoming a more tangible reality. Historically speaking, therefore, in his celebration of this “new” reality, the critic is in fact echoing an “old” modern Chinese dream. Given that in Chinese intellectual and public discourses what is identified as new and what is old often carries a value implication, a more important question to ask is what is “old” in relation to what he celebrates as “new?” Not surprisingly, the critic is ready with an answer.

In arguing that current historical conditions in China require the Chinese to acquire a “new” historical consciousness, Zhang recommends a collective, or national, retreat from what he identifies as the trauma-oriented glorification of “tragic heroes” of the past. In citing a study by the Japanese China scholar Ozaki Fumiaki, he enthusiastically hails the supposed fact that, finally, young Chinese today are showing less interest in such pivotal modern intellectual figures as Lu Xun.41 Zhang celebrates this development as signifying that “Chinese modern consciousness” has turned a final corner at the turn of the new century. If Chinese (youth) are finally able to transcend Lu Xun and his legacy, he echoes, this would truly signal the beginning of a “new” Chinese historical consciousness. Without questioning whether the decreased interest in Lu Xun is based on an informed understanding of his legacy and whether it entails a collective transcendence beyond Lu Xun or, for that matter, whether a (supposed) lack of interest in Lu Xun among the Chinese young actually amounts to a kind of historical amnesia that indicates a decreased historical consciousness, Zhang enthusiastically embraces this “discovery.” He follows up by claim-
ing that it is time that Lu Xun, instead of being recognized as a living critical force that directly or indirectly informs modern Chinese historical consciousness, be rendered innocuous like such historical figures as Qu Yuan, Li Bai, and Du Fu.

The connection between the critic’s unqualified celebration of emperor dramas and the (supposed) marginalization of Lu Xun among the young suggests a contrast between “new” and “old”—emperor dramas represent what is new, whereas Lu Xun represents what is old. However, if we juxtapose the critic’s call for Lu Xun to be relegated to the ranks of such historical figures as Qu Yuan, Li Bai, and Du Fu with his celebration of the televisual representations of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty for manifesting a “new collective imagination,” we realize that, rather than anything actually new, Zhang’s call for a “new collective imagination” mainly pertains to a negative judgment of the “critical historical consciousness” represented by Lu Xun. What has “flared up” (to borrow the familiar term from Walter Benjamin) in this double celebration is, in effect, a reappearance of some of the issues of (Chinese) modernity that continue to dog contemporary Chinese intellectuals. What may indeed be new here is a blatant celebration of emperors and of daguo yishi (literally, “consciousness of a big nation”), or an empire mentality. But then again, if we recall what Yan Fu did at the end of his life—as someone who had translated major Western books on political theory at the turn of the twentieth century and had envisioned being modern in the image of the powerful and wealthy West—in turning to support Yuan Shikai’s failed attempt to become emperor shortly after the Republican revolution in 1916, we are actually confronted with a modern desire for power and wealth, which is at least more than one hundred years old. In this sense, the new/old dichotomy that the critic suggests does not quite apply; the real issue lies elsewhere.

As my previous discussion demonstrates, the seriously told emperor dramas so celebrated by Zhang Yiwu are actually still governed and informed in part by a sense of crisis and uncertainty. As my reading of the relationship between the political system and the emperor also indicates, there is a clear thread of ambivalence dominating the representations in these dramas. In celebrating the emperors’ accomplishments, the dramas struggle with details of the process through which these emperors are supposed to have achieved them. Those narrative details manifest a modern awareness that, either consciously or subconsciously, questions the structural reasons for the various plots and schemes staged by different groups of individuals and for the fate of those individuals, who are products of the system and whose fate, as a result, is inevitably tragic. As such, one can suggest that in these emperor dramas there continues to be something allegorical in their melodramatic representations: in essence
their stories keep returning to issues related to what is “traditional” and what is “modern.” As allegories, they simultaneously reveal the “dirty secrets” of the political system and function as an agency that at once questions and sustains a cultural/national identity via such revelation. They also manifest, in the words of Michael Herzfeld, a Chinese version of “cultural intimacy” resulting from China’s more than a century long struggle in coming to terms with modernity, a struggle that has been expressed mainly in an ambivalent manner. This ambivalence has continued to inform the tensions within Chinese mainstream culture between the power and wealth based modernization imaginary and the critical modern historical consciousness represented by Lu Xun, as seen in the case of emperor dramas.

Despite efforts from certain corners inside and outside the mainstream culture to retire Lu Xun and his legacy, Lu Xun’s sense of history continues to remain highly relevant. Indeed, given the structural problems of global capitalism becoming increasingly manifested in the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and ideological domains in China one decade into the twenty-first century, Lu Xun’s sense of history actually becomes more relevant and essential in China’s ongoing struggle to make sense of its modern experiences. Lu Xun’s critiques were relevant when China was subject to the abuses of colonial powers and continue to remain so when China is becoming stronger. For Lu Xun, the desired modern Chinese historical consciousness is not oriented around “power” but is self-aware and self-critical, capable of maintaining vigilance against the unquestioned acceptance of any seemingly new and fashionable slogans. That is why, while Zhang is in a hurry to retire Lu Xun, others insist on the importance and relevance of Lu Xun and on the need to revisit his “critical historical consciousness” in the hopes of better articulating issues and problems of the present.

It is in this sense that serious-style emperor dramas’ ambivalent representations of emperors in effect help continue to demonstrate the tensions and contradictions in modern Chinese historical consciousness and mainstream culture, especially when perceived in gendered, ideological, and social terms. The ambivalence may also be a sign of uncertainty about, or a blind spot in the understanding of, the significance of one’s own historical experiences and the nature of one’s own historical agency. Let me conclude by enumerating a few general observations about the problematics of the emperor drama phenomenon and its melodramatic politics (manifested by way of representing emperors as tragic but national heroes). First, these dramas tend to manifest a blatant masculinist subject position, in which male heroism is still “naturally” related to concerns of history and of the survival of the nation. Indeed, when the emperors are collected, framed, and represented as tragic heroes (here we can-
not but be reminded of Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* and the controversies surrounding the film), the historical consciousness manifested is nothing particularly new. What is new, if anything, is that it signifies a change in the mainstream culture from the besieged male mentality of the 1980s into a culture whose psychodynamic orientation is no longer dominated by a perceived “lack” (of male potency). Emperors represented as heroes have emerged to replace abject male characters, thereby masking the “lack” with powerful individuals. Thus, even though representations of emperors are highly ambivalent, the collection of emperors on television constitutes a cultural phenomenon that could not have been possible throughout much of the twentieth century (until the era of economic reform).

Second, in cultural terms, this ascending power-oriented vision and logic compel Zhang Yiwu, the critic in question, to dismiss Lu Xun’s critical historical consciousness and to conclude that Lu Xun’s critical spirit is outdated. This reevaluation of the re-collected historical figures, emperors on one side and Lu Xun on the other points to a number of underlying issues in the mainstream culture of postrevolution and market-reform China, including how to reevaluate such historical legacies as the May Fourth New Culture Movement and its leading intellectual representatives, the (Chinese Communist Party–led) revolution, and so-called traditional culture. In the history museum envisioned by the critic, emperors are re-collected and elevated to the major exhibition hall while intellectuals such as Lu Xun are packed in boxes to be stored in the basement. If this is what he envisions and celebrates as the “new historical consciousness” and “new collective imagination,” as I have just argued, there is nothing particularly new. This vision not only continues to manifest the tension within modern Chinese historical consciousness, in which the two dimensions, power and enlightenment, of the modernity imaginary are deeply intertwined. It is also indicative of the ideological repositioning among contemporary Chinese intellectuals in relation to their views of China’s modern historical choices, experiences, and legacies.

We now come to the third point: much is in flux but also at stake with regard to Chinese historical consciousness in the age of postrevolution market reform. The widespread cultural interest in emperor dramas is accompanied by a shadow process of re-collecting or “remembering” what are deemed to be important historical experiences. Closely examined, however, we find in Zhang’s celebration of the televisual “collection” of emperors not so much a new collective imagination as such but an ideological position toward which some elites have gravitated. In this sense, if we look again, we may come to realize that emperor dramas are actually the shadow images of a changing (changed?) historical consciousness informed by a depoliticized ideological position.
In the end, emperor dramas and critical responses to them are symptomatic of the changing and contradictory nature of contemporary Chinese mainstream culture, especially of its uncertainty about how to reaffirm China’s own historical agency, fully acknowledge its own historical choices, and examine their successes and failures without subscribing to either a postmodern nihilistic cynicism or a simple-minded nationalism. At the same time, emperor dramas, their popular reception, the debates about them, one representative critic’s contradictory responses, and various other related intellectual concerns continue to constitute the complexity of and agency within mainstream culture. In this sense, we can say that the emperor dramas, like the other subgenres I study in this book, function as “open-ended” texts that invite both cultural and historical readings not only into the texts themselves, but also out into the social, economic, cultural, and political realities of market-reform-era China.