
Propaganda: Party History Education in China

By Wenfang Tang

Party history education is a required subject in China's education system. It is embedded in the curricula of China's high schools and universities. At the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 1921-2021), the Chinese government promoted a new wave of party history education through nearly 100 TV shows.¹⁹⁰ Some of them cover the entire period from the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to the Korean War in the early 1950s, such as *The Glory and the Dream* (光荣与梦想). Others are about specific periods of the CCP's history, such as the introduction of Marxism and the founding of the CCP from 1919 to 1921 in *The Awakening Age* (觉醒年代) and the defeat of the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), from 1945 to 1949 in *The Great Duel* (大决战). These shows have made a dry scholarly subject more accessible to the general public.

These TV shows are intended to convey some of the key messages that the CCP wants the audience to remember. All of these messages have strong contemporary implications:

- 1) The CCP was victorious over the KMT because it represents ordinary people's interests and enjoys popular support. In this sense, the CCP is a populist democratic force.
- 2) The CCP has been victorious because of its members' firm belief in its cause and their total devotion to the Party.
- 3) The CCP has been victorious because it has talents and skills, particularly in military campaigns and mass political mobilizations.
- 4) The CCP paid a tremendous price for its victory. This is reflected in many bloody war scenes. Defending this victory in peacetime is necessary because these victories were achieved by the sacrifice of many CCP soldiers' lives, such as the battle of Jinan in episode 11 of *The Great Duel*.
- 5) The CCP stood up against the invasion and interference by Western nations portrayed as ganging up on China. Chinese nationalism (justice) finally defeated the Western imperialist invasion (an evil force).

Interestingly, though the CCP is celebrating its 100th anniversary, this wave of party history education does not cover the entire 100 years, and it does not talk much about the period since the

¹⁹⁰ "Nearly 100 Movies and TV Masterpieces to Celebrate the Theme of the 100th Anniversary of the Party's Founding Have Arrived! Brilliant and Cannot be Missed" [近百部庆祝建党 100 周年主题影视佳作来了! 精彩不容错过], China Jilin Net, March 21, 2021, <https://xw.qq.com/amhtml/20210321A07HGO00>.

Korean War. This is because of the CCP's challenges in recounting some of the controversial events during this period, including the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Tiananmen Protest and crackdown in the late 1980s. As described by Deng Xiaoping, these are potentially divisive topics and should be left for later generations to assess.¹⁹¹ At the core of this political taboo is the controversy surrounding Mao Zedong, particularly his radical egalitarian policies after 1949 that led to the suffering of many social and political elites. In 1981, the CCP issued the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China."¹⁹² The most important message in this 1981 Resolution was the recognition of Mao as a great leader, while denouncing the Cultural Revolution and other radical policies he launched. The purpose of this Resolution was to appease both Mao's supporters and his opponents so that China could focus on economic reform, and those who dwelt on these past issues faced the accusation of obstructing economic reform. These issues, however, are still alive in many people's memory and can flare up in the right political climate, such as when the CCP's political legitimacy is challenged by liberal democratic ideas.

Propaganda through Entertainment

The new wave of party history education can be described as propaganda through entertainment, or propatainment. Party history is the CCP's official way of interpreting modern history, and it provides intellectual justification for the CCP's rule. The CCP believes it is important to imprint this version of Chinese history in people's collective and individual memories. Yet party propaganda sounds boring to many Chinese. They get enough of it through their weekly political study sessions and the China Central Television (CCTV) evening news. As part of the new effort of propaganda through entertainment, the CCP has attempted to create renewed public interest in party history by storytelling, which goes side-by-side with Xi Jinping's recent call to "tell China's story well."¹⁹³ Many of the nearly 100 TV series, or "documentary" fictions, last for more than 30 episodes and cover important events in party history.¹⁹⁴ To keep an increasingly demanding audience from switching channels requires high quality production, script writing, and acting. These series are made by the National Radio and Television Administration, the CCP Propaganda Department, CCTV, and provincial TV stations. The amount of resources poured in is impressive if one takes a look at the shows that are produced.

¹⁹¹ "Political Wisdom of the CCP Central Committee in Resolving the Issue of Evaluating the 'Cultural Revolution' at the Beginning of Reform and Opening Up" [改革开放初党中央解决“文革”评价问题的政治智慧], *Qiushi*, January 8, 2019, http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2019-01/08/c_1123962603.htm.

¹⁹² "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," China.org.cn, October 29, 2018, http://www.china.org.cn/english/china_key_words/2018-10/29/content_68901667.htm.

¹⁹³ "Xi Jinping: Tell China's Story Well, Spread China's Voice Well" [习近平：讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音], *Qiushi*, June 2, 2021, http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanku/2021-06/02/c_1127522386.htm.

¹⁹⁴ "Nearly 100 Movies and TV Masterpieces to Celebrate the Theme of the 100th Anniversary of the Party's Founding Have Arrived! Brilliant and Cannot be Missed."

The CCP long ago realized the importance of propaainment— such as music, literature, movies, and TV series—as the easiest medium everyone can relate to, and through which people internalize the Party’s political messaging. This party-controlled entertainment angle of political mobilization is nothing new. Jiang Qing (江青), an actress and Mao Zedong’s last wife, created the so-called “model Peking operas” during the Cultural Revolution. These model operas influenced an entire generation of young people in the 1970s, who are still singing the songs from these operas today in China’s karaoke bars. It would not be surprising if Peng Liyuan (彭丽媛), Xi Jinping’s wife, and a popular singer, was also behind the current wave of propaainment. Hard evidence is difficult to find about Peng’s involvement. One indirect piece of evidence is that performing art as part of the Belt and Road Initiative is listed as a research topic in the National Natural Science Foundation of China’s annual call for proposals, which was unheard of under Xi’s predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

Authoritarian regimes are not the only ones that practice propaainment. Political messages can also be propagated in the market-driven entertainment world of democracies. One example is the rise of infotainment in the 1980s in the United States. Soft news with a strong element of entertainment replaced traditional journalism that tends to report hard news. Political messages are often blended into infotainment and the viewers’ opinions are more easily influenced in this process than in the traditional hard news approach. One difference between propaainment and infotainment is that the former is state-driven, and the latter is market-driven. In propaainment, the government does not hide its intention to educate the viewers, whereas in infotainment the political agenda is more hidden and subtle, and advertisers, not the state, determine the political agenda.

Techniques of Propaainment

Cynical observers would say propaainment amounts to old-style propaganda that no one would pay attention to. Yet this new effort seems to be effective. It is true that the CCP does not try to hide its propagandistic intent. For those who would never watch the genre, it is not effective. For others in the middle (the majority of China’s population) who don’t care about politics but are looking for entertainment, these shows are effective for several reasons.

First, they are freely accessible online, both in China and outside. For example, some of the most popular shows, including *The Awakening Age* (觉醒年代), *The Great Duel* (大决战), and *The Glory and the Dream* (光荣与梦想), are all freely available on YouTube.¹⁹⁵ Some of them even

¹⁹⁵ See, for example:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1jWWSnBYMY&list=PLa213RC5YYIwYGZg9_ffwmsQO_UiEhJxL;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSqBB3MGwz8>;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpYCtr88fPg&list=PL3RgL6OzNqihFMr6-yb43-C8vfQ790mWR>.

have machine-translated English subtitles (though these have many bugs). No subscription is required.

Another reason that these propaganda shows are watchable is their relative objectivity. Enemies are presented with decency (at least by Chinese standards), such as Chiang Kai-shek and other KMT officials; the Americans advising the KMT; and Lin Biao (林彪). Many viewers complimented the actor who played Chiang Kai-shek as accurate and handsome (see photo). The nuanced portrayal of Lin Biao is particularly interesting. Lin is a highly controversial figure in the history of the CCP. He was accused of launching a failed coup in the early 1970s and was killed when his plane crashed in Mongolia. In *The Great Duel*, Lin (played by Yu Hewei (于和伟), see photo), is portrayed as a military genius who played a key role in defeating the KMT, but also as eccentric and sometimes even neurotic.



The third reason for the watchability of this round of propaganda is its recruitment of popular actors in China's entertainment circles. In the past, politically-oriented entertainment shows relied heavily on impersonators of party leaders such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai (周恩来), Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇) and so on (see photo). These figures are well-known but often too rigid and unrelatable in their acting. For example, the actor Tang Guoqiang (唐国强), who plays Mao, has only 1.1 million followers on Weibo. In contrast, Yu Hewei, who plays Lin Biao but is not a traditional impersonator, has 10 times more followers (11 million). Liu Tao (刘涛), another very popular actress who plays Madame Chiang Kai-shek, has 45 million followers.¹⁹⁶ By recruiting these popular actors, propaganda achieves a much higher level of popularity.

¹⁹⁶ Tang Guoqiang Weibo, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E5%2594%2590%25E5%259B%25BD%25E5%25BC%25BA?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1>; Yu Hewei Weibo, https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%E4%BA%8E%E5%92%8C%E4%BC%9F&wvr=6&b=1&Refer=SWeibo_box; Liu Tao Weibo, https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%E5%88%98%E6%B6%9B&wvr=6&b=1&Refer=SWeibo_box.



Perhaps the CCP's biggest advantage in its Party History Study and Education Campaign is the fact that its story is an easy one to tell. The CCP has long cultivated an underdog narrative, a story about how a much smaller and weaker force defeated the KMT, a strong rival heavily supported by the United States. Who doesn't love an underdog story? In this narrative, the CCP's brilliant military operation led to many successful military campaigns. It would lure the KMT troops deeply into its base areas, divide them into smaller groups, and eliminate them one by one. It was often like a game of chess: there were risks, threats, temporary defeats, and then eventual victory. The happy ending makes the audience feel both satisfied and entertained. The final victory is a fact and the CCP does not have to convince people of what happened, even if they have to make up some details in the process.

CCP Policies through Propatainment

The new round of propatainment also attempts to educate the audience, inculcating them with important party policies and events in its history. These policies and events were traditionally taught at the university level, but propatainment makes the materials accessible to ordinary people through storytelling.

One notable example is land reform in the second half of the 1940s in northeastern China. It was party policy to distribute land to poor peasants so that they would join the CCP and fight the KMT. Traditionally this was a topic taught in party history courses. In one of the propatainment TV shows, *The Great Duel*, this event was portrayed through an interaction between a CCP cadre and a villager.

CCP Cadre (to villager): *Do you feed the landowner or does the landowner feed you?*

Villager: *Of course, the landowner feeds me.*

Cadre: *But the landowner doesn't do any work and keeps most of what you produce, and this is why the landowner gets richer and richer, but you stay poor forever.*

Villager: *Ah! You are right. I'm the one who feeds the landowner, but he's rich and I'm poor. This is unfair.*

By convincing farmers that they feed landowners but not *vice versa*, the CCP cleverly implants in people's minds the Marxist idea of class struggle. Through such simple dialogues, the CCP successfully mobilized peasants to join the land reform movement. Land ownership greatly promoted public support for the CCP in rural China. Mass political support, as portrayed in the propatainment shows, was a decisive factor in the CCP's defeat of the KMT.

Another example is the CCP's decision-making process, a topic that often attracts scholarly attention in the West. In the propatainment TV shows, the CCP's decision-making rule of democratic centralism is played out. For example, Lin Biao and another military commander held different opinions about whether to defend the city of Siping; both opinions were reported to the CCP's Central Military Committee (CMC), where different opinions are heard and the final decision is made collectively, not by Mao alone. Once the decision is made, no one argues.

Many people in China are familiar with a saying by Mao: "trade Yan'an for the entire country" (放弃延安，换来整个中国). This refers to an incident when Chiang Kai-shek's troops invaded Yan'an, a communist base area where the CCP headquarters was located in the 1940s. The CCP leaders were at times very close to being caught by the KMT, and finally decided to withdraw from Yan'an. This well-known event was played out in a propatainment show featuring many close calls and twists and turns, making the audience realize how dangerously close the CCP leaders came to being killed, and how calm they were when facing such danger.

One of the most helpful techniques used in the propatainment shows is subtitles with historical figures' names and titles. There are hundreds of important historical figures in the Party's history. These subtitles are thus particularly helpful for people who only know the top leaders like Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhu De (朱德), but are not familiar with lesser-known names. They play the role of informing the audience who is who in CCP history and what roles they played during the process—of course, according to the Party's official line.

The propatainment shows never forget to remind audiences how foreign governments tried to interfere with China's sovereignty. Of course, the audience is also reminded of some friendly Western names, such as Joseph Stilwell and Edgar Snow, but more often, they are reminded of Western nations' bullying of China. In one scene, a US Naval Commander tries to force Chiang Kai-shek to step down and replace him with another official. The general was portrayed as acting like a businessman, negotiating on behalf of the US government. This is perhaps an attempt by the CCP to remind viewers that the United States does the same thing today as it interferes with China's domestic concerns.

Finally, the propatainment campaign has not forgotten to mock the incompetence of the KMT. Everyone—including the United States government—knew that the KMT was corrupt. KMT officials embezzled large amounts of US aid to China while KMT soldiers were starving. In one of the propatainment shows (*The Great Duel*), a scene depicts KMT generals sitting together,

trying to figure out who among them is a communist spy. They decide to do it by looking at which one of them is not corrupt, because the communists do not live luxurious lifestyles. This serves as a reminder that the anti-corruption campaign under current leader Xi Jinping can be traced back to the Party's tradition of frugality.

Public Reaction to Propaganda

Some of the propaganda shows suffer from dragging midway into the show and from dry political speeches at times. Yet overall, they are entertaining enough to keep the audience tuned in because of their story lines, good acting, and their sense of political and historical significance. Some of them have even received high audience ratings. For example, among the five top-rated TV shows that received a Douban (China's Rotten Tomatoes) score of at least 9.0 by August 2021, one of the propaganda TV shows, *The Awakening Age*, is ranked the second highest on the list at 9.3.¹⁹⁷

It may be true that the CCP uses its propaganda machine to promote the propaganda shows, but the viewers are not forced to watch them. People are free to switch channels and find whatever they want to watch. Among the above-mentioned top five rated shows, only one is a propaganda show, and the others are contemporary rural and urban love stories, a crime investigation show, a costume drama, and an animated show. Competition also comes from foreign productions. Among foreign shows that are rated by at least 10,000 viewers and that received at least a 9.0 rating, the British TV series *Inside No. 9* (Season 6, rated 9.1) and the American show *Solar Opposites* (Season 2, rated 9.3) made the list. Perhaps, then, production quality rather than official promotion played a more important role in determining propaganda shows' ratings.

Each of the propaganda shows attracts many viewer ratings and comments. For example, *The Awakening Age* was rated 9.3 by 363,589 participants; *The Great Duel* was rated 7.8 by 16,069 viewers; and *The Glory and the Dream* was rated 7.7 by 20,182 people.¹⁹⁸ It would not be surprising if the government encouraged viewers to post positive feedback, yet many viewers did not hesitate to make negative comments. Below are some examples.

Too rigid. There are only gods, not real people.

Dialogues are too dry. Are they trying to memorize the history textbook?

¹⁹⁷ “2021 Douban List of TV Dramas with High Scores (8.5 Points and Above)” [2021 年豆瓣高分电视剧排行榜 (8.5 分及以上)], search1990.com, January 1, 2022, <https://www.search1990.com/202102271550.html>.

¹⁹⁸ “The Awakening Age (2021)” [觉醒年代 (2021)], Douban, https://movie.douban.com/subject/30228394/?dt_dapp=1; “The Great Duel (2021)” [大决战 (2021)], Douban, https://movie.douban.com/subject/35268507/?dt_dapp=1; “The Glory and the Dream (2021)” [光荣与梦想 (2021)], Douban, https://movie.douban.com/subject/35041927/?dt_dapp=1.

Unrealistic details, too artificial, too grandiose, detached from people and from real life.

The main story line lacks the female perspective.

Tang Guoqiang [who plays Mao Zedong] needs to make Mao not look like an emperor.

Too many insignificant characters. Most of them play uninteresting roles.

Revolution is like a bunch of gangsters fighting with each other.

The biggest mistake is to let Yu Hewei play Lin Biao.

Many more viewers left positive comments.

All I can say is that this is the best history lesson I have ever learned.

A few pages in the history textbook are the entire courageous lives of a group of dedicated people (tears, tears, tears).

Salute to the revolutionary ancestors!

Spent the whole day watching the show without eating. Its biggest problem is it takes too many tears to watch!

It should be incorporated into the nine-year compulsory education curriculum.

It shows the romantic side of the CCP.

I just realized that the stuff that was so hard to memorize for my graduate school exams are something these revolutionaries would sacrifice their life for.

I never liked mainstream propaganda shows. But this one makes me realize that they (CCP) are capable of making high quality stuff if they really want to.

No need to sensationalize. It is touching enough to just tell the real-life stories of these devoted revolutionaries. If political education is taught this way, no one would hate it anymore.

Chinese youth need a new awakening to see the ugly side of domestic capitalists and American and European imperialists.

Without small characters or ordinary people, there wouldn't be a CCP or its victory.

Chiang Kai-shek is played so well. It would be perfect if he had Chiang's accent.

Haven't watched propaganda for a long time. This one goes way beyond my expectations. I had to hold my tears many times.

The war scenes are so brutal.

Long live the Chinese Communist Party!

We need more high-quality shows like this.

The selling point is the KMT. No vilification. Strong characters. Chiang Kai-shek in particular shows a lot of sadness.

Conclusion

Some readers may have doubts about the positive feedback offered by viewers. They may think such viewers are self-selective due to the heavy promotion of propatainment by the Party, while many other viewers would never buy into the CCP's propaganda. This suspicion may be true for "other" viewers with predetermined anti-CCP sentiment. Yet propatainment may still be effective for the majority of ordinary folks who are not particularly tuned in to politics and who may not care much about the CCP. They are simply looking for quality entertainment to kill an evening at home, to get through long work days at a barber shop, or to ride on a long distance bus for hours. If propatainment shows can compete with other genres such as costume dramas or crime investigation shows, viewers are free to choose whichever ones that can grab their attention. The fact that some of the propatainment shows made it to the top-rated list suggests that these shows are fun for people to watch, not because of, but perhaps in addition to the political messages contained therein.

In China's populist authoritarian political culture, the CCP has been successful at directly reaching out to the public without a civil society or independent non-governmental organizations. In addition to actively using propatainment to gain political support, it also collects public opinion, tests new policies, and adjusts them based on public feedback. Consequently, national public opinion surveys have consistently shown high levels of political trust in China, no matter how it is measured, such as trust in the CCP, trust in the Chinese political system, trust in government institutions, trust in political leaders, levels of patriotism, or government responsiveness. For example, in Asian Barometer Surveys, about 70 percent of survey respondents in authoritarian China said that their government would respond to their needs, while only around 30 percent said the same in democratic Taiwan. Evidence shows that there is little social desirability effect that would exaggerate the level of political support among the Chinese survey respondents. These findings may provide additional evidence for the effectiveness of propatainment, together with the CCP's other methods of political mobilization.

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