CHAPTER ONE

MASCULINITIES ON TELEVISION

In today’s China, TV drama is arguably the most widely consumed and most influential cultural artifact. Roughly one billion Chinese have access to television. Among various types of programming, the TV drama series (dianshi lianxuju), normally a one-time production with a predetermined number of episodes (ranging from thirty to fifty episodes nowadays) and a continuing, integrated plot (which makes it more like an extended film), is the genre that attracts the largest audience and generates the most advertising revenue for TV stations, especially the provincial stations (C. Li 2006; Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008, 1). China ranks first in the world in TV drama production, with an annual output of over twelve thousand episodes in 2011 (Zhao and Su 2012). At the same time, although all TV drama series are intended for broadcast on television, in recent years there has been a conspicuous tendency for people, especially the younger generation, to watch TV dramas through other types of media, such as mobile phones, the Internet, and DVDs. This can be attributed to both the rapid development of new media and to the fact that the episodes produced every year far exceed the number that can be broadcast by “traditional” TV channels. TV drama has thus become a form of entertainment that exemplifies the convergence of media and enjoys sweeping popularity across all generations.1 The cultural impact of TV dramas on everyday life is so profound that after the nationwide broadcast of a popular serial, its lines and the names of its characters often become vogue words (Gan 2006a). During our interviews in China, the names of a number of male stars were repeatedly mentioned by respondents when talking about ideal masculinity.2 However, scholarly

1 According to Su Xiao, director of the Center of TV Dramas at Shanghai Media Group (SMG), surveys demonstrate that TV drama audiences are drawn from all age groups, but the two groups that watch the most dramas are “uncles and aunts,” i.e., retired people who are in their late fifties and sixties, and the “post-90s” youth; however, the latter seldom watch TV dramas on TV (Zhao and Su 2012).

2 A term that the informants frequently used when commenting on these actors is nan-ren wei’er (literally, “a flavor of man”). Stars who are praised for possessing this “flavor” are mainly a group of middle-aged men who are active on both the big and small screens, ranging from the “tough man” type exemplified by Zhang Fengyi, Chen Baoguo, and Hou Yong to the more scholarly type represented by Chen Daoming and Wang Zhiwen. They each archetypally represent a type of male image commonly seen on the screen. For more details, see
attention to this genre of popular entertainment has been far from adequate, despite the fact that television dramas “have generated widespread public attention and serious debate on a range of issues” (Zhong 2010, 1). Even less adequate are studies from a gendered perspective.3

TV Drama and Ideology

The development of Chinese television drama has been, in the words of Xueping Zhong (2010, 11), “explosive, unruly, and full of contradictions” in terms of ideology. To better understand the coexistence of and competition among a variety of discourses of masculinity in contemporary Chinese TV dramas, a brief analysis of the ideological features of this cultural form is in order.

As all TV stations and channels are state-owned in China, television has been and still is regarded by the Communist Party as an important tool for propaganda. Although commercialization and restructuring of media since the 1990s have put an end to the government monopoly on TV production (R. Bai 2005), the state has not fallen out of the picture but has “rejuvenated its capacity, via the market, to affect the agenda of popular culture, especially at the discursive level” (J. Wang 2001, 71). Although foreign investors are now allowed to own up to a 49 percent stake in television production companies, TV programs not in conformity with the ideological expectations of the authorities do not have a chance to be screened, and even overseas satellite TV companies have to kowtow to the Chinese government in order to obtain permission to land a signal in China. Censorship of TV programs, which is conducted by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and is directly under the control of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party, guarantees that television as a mass medium is “ethically inspiring and uplifting” and helps maintain an image of social stability and national harmony. Some sensitive

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3 For recent studies in English on TV drama in China, see Zhu 2008; Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008; and Zhong 2010. There are also a handful of journal articles and book chapters on the evolution and overall situation of TV drama in China: Lull 1991; Keane 2001; Yin 2002; Keane 2005. An international workshop entitled “Television, Power and Ideology in Post-socialist China” was organized by Geng Song and Ruoyun Bai at the Australian National University in March 2012. An edited volume based on the workshop papers is forthcoming. For a pioneering and thought-provoking study of the representation of transnational romances and the construction of Chinese masculinity through foreign women in Chinese “soap operas” of the 1990s, see S. Lu 2000.