

# The Politics and Poetics of Television Documentary in China

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## Abstract

Television documentary making in China first and foremost fulfils a political function<sup>1</sup>. From its emergence in 1958, TV documentary has been used as a propaganda tool for promulgating the political messages of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and disseminating its policies through the state broadcaster CCTV (China Central Television). After five and half decades' of development, this function has remained largely unchanged despite the rise of multiple voices and the diversification of subject matter. This chapter delineates the broad contours of TV documentary development in the PRC (People's Republic of China), focusing on its roles, functions and presentation styles, contextualised by contemporary Chinese sociopolitical transformations in recent decades. The chapter begins with an overview of TV documentary before moving to detail four phases of its development. This is followed by a case study of two documentary series – the controversial *He Shang* (River Elegy, 1988) and *Da Guo Jue Qi* (Rise of Great Powers, 2006), which illustrate the links between documentary filmmaking and its sociopolitical contexts. The chapter concludes with a critical assessment of the current dynamic situation of documentary films and their future development.

## Key words

Television documentary, new documentary movement, independent documentary, *He Shang*, *Da Guo Jue Qi*

## Introduction

The year 2011 has been deemed ‘documentary channel year’ (*jilupian yuan nian*) in China due largely to the rising market demand for documentary films and the launch of eight documentary channels by the end of that year<sup>2</sup>. Since 2011, harnessing new media technology such as the Internet and mobile phones, major internet companies including Sohu, Xinlang, TENGXUN, Aiyiqi, and China Online Television have started to host ‘documentary sites’ (Zhang and Hu, 2012). During 2012, 59,800 hours of documentary films were aired compared to 58,000 hours in 2011 whilst the revenue generated quadrupled between 2009 and 2012, reaching 1.5 billion RMB (£160 million). China is ranked No. 1 in the world in terms of annual production of documentaries. The CCTV documentary channel (CCTV9) gained a staggering 660 million audience within less than two years of its 2011 launch – testimony to the rising popularity of TV documentary. This market-driven surge reflects both socioeconomic transformations and the nature and mode of mass communication.

The roots of documentary film run deep in China’s political history. In 1958 documentary film in the PRC was conceived of as an effective propaganda tool and became the dominant mode of TV reporting in the 1960s and 1970s. Documentary making during this period was thus predominantly a political activity – its function being first and foremost to disseminate government policies and indoctrinate socialist ideologies in the minds of the masses. Yet, documentary’s political role originated in the Republican period (1911-1949), in particular when Chinese nationalists used it to mobilise public support for the war efforts against the Japanese invasion (1937-1945).

However, three and half decades of economic reform have significantly changed the mass media landscape. The commercialisation drive of the media industry in the 1990s dislodged documentary film from state monopoly. Since then it has expanded substantially in

function, subject matter, style and voice. The instances of top-down, unitary, stern-faced and closed ‘voice-of-God’ (to be discussed later) documentary have gradually been reduced amidst the rise of sociocultural documentaries made by a diverse array of producers with differing perspectives. The partial de-politicization of the media industry has released the pent-up creative energy of media professionals, in particular the younger generations, who see documentary films differently from their predecessors. The current popularity of TV documentary in its various modes, in contrast to the tired dogmatic propagandist films, signifies a structural change in political communication, in state-society relations and in the dynamics of sociopolitical transformations. Nonetheless, documentary films like all other forms of media are centrally controlled and subject to the direct administrative supervision of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). The market-driven rapid development has always had an uneasy tension with the CCP’s impulse for bureaucratic control, though such a control has proved to be increasingly challenging. ‘New documentary movement’ (to be discussed later) producers, for example, have constantly sought to push boundaries by tackling ‘sensitive topics’ such as the Aids pandemic, environment, migrant workers and dispossessed farmers in order to reflect new social realities in China.

On 7 February 2013, in an attempt to tighten its control of proliferating documentaries, the SARFT issued a new regulation centralising the management of documentary production through a system of publishing an officially proved list of documentary topics every six months. The same policy document also provides an official definition of documentary as ‘a television programme which represents the physical world and human society in a non-fictional approach and is broadcast in an open channel’ (SARFT, 2013). Such a definition apparently excludes independently produced documentaries that are often shown privately or in non-conventional forums such as university seminars. These developments reflect both the dynamic change of documentary making, and the evolving relationships between political

control, market forces and socioeconomic transformations. This chapter documents and discusses the development of television documentary in the PRC, through both a chronological and thematic account of the history, structure and key issues of documentary films. Throughout the chapter, emphasis is given to intrinsic linkages between TV documentaries, their roles and functions and the political, historical and cultural context. The chapter falls into three parts. The first part discusses the politics of documentary making in the PRC by examining four distinctive phases of documentary development. The second part considers the presentational style of documentary making that is itself a reflection of changed socioeconomic and political environment. The third part presents a case study of two documentary series to illustrate the extent to which documentary making is part and parcel of China's political change. But before looking at these issues, it is perhaps useful to have an overview of documentary films in China as an imported though very popular genre of television programme making.

### **Documentary films: a brief overview**

The term 'documentary' was first used by the pioneer filmmaker John Grierson in 1926 for his film *Moana* – a film about life on a South Sea Island. Though the term lacks precision and is subject to different interpretations, it is generally understood as a non-fictional film that attempts to record some aspects of 'reality' (Nichols, 1991:12-14; Renov, 1993:1-11). Following the introduction of cinematic film to China in 1896, the first Chinese documentary *War in Wuhan* (*Wuhan Zhanzheng*) was produced in 1911 by the magician Zhu Liankui in association with Meili Company to record the dramatic military uprising in Wuchang that toppled the Qing Dynasty. *War in Wuhan* proved immensely popular on its first showing in Shanghai on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1911. The sensation it caused was due as much to its technological novelty as to the information the audience gained about the momentous

Xinghai revolution that had shaken the country. The Chinese translation of ‘documentary’ is *jilupian*, meaning ‘record film’. From its earliest years, Chinese documentary filmmakers focused their attention on the major political developments of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, documenting such pivotal events as the 1913 ‘second revolution’<sup>3</sup> in *Shanghai Geming* (Shanghai Revolution) and the end of the World War I in *Ou zhan zhu sheng you xin* (Celebration Parade of the European War). Between 1922 and 1926, over 50 documentary films were produced, including the prominent *Guomin waijiao youxing dahui* (National protest on foreign policy issues) in 1923 on the government’s weak response to the Japanese ‘21 demands’. These drastic sociopolitical upheavals provided documentary makers with opportunities to not only document the tumults with a camera but to make political statements on sociopolitical issues. Various political forces also discovered the power of documentary films for their political ends and both the nationalist and communist parties exploited them to gain political legitimacy, in particular during the post-war period (1945-1949). To some extent, the perceived value of documentary films is related to construct political legitimacy within the Confucian tradition. The Confucian doctrine of *zhengmin* (legitimate position) asserts that the exercise of power must be seen as legitimate by the public. To achieve this legitimacy, moral authority has to be gained, recognised, circulated and secured. Moral leadership, according to Confucius, must be derived from the exemplary behaviour of a leader. In practice however the image of moral authority – a prerequisite for political legitimacy – must be constructed and communicated effectively to the public. Naturally, in the modern era, any mass communication tool is important for such a task, particularly in a country the size of China. Given the turbulent nature of Chinese sociopolitical transformations, it is not surprising that throughout its development, documentary film has attained a strong political colour.

Currently documentary as a genre has become a crucial part of China's television programming for over one billion viewers. Production is under the direct control of the Department of Radio, Film and Television of each province which in turn is responsible to the central government agency SARFT. Documentary films are normally grouped into four broad categories of subject matter: history and current affairs, science and nature, social issues, and archival. They have all flourished amidst the rapidly expanding air time on documentary channels. However, despite a newly established system of commissioning to independent companies, the large majority of documentary films are either produced in house or bought overseas. With a separation of production and broadcasting within television stations, production departments have gradually become independent and, as all television stations in China are state-owned, these 'marketised' production departments have formed self-supporting companies. Some, such as *Zhongyang xinying jituan* (Central New Film Group), remain in the state system. These companies have close ties with state broadcasters who have intimate knowledge of the official or 'bottom lines' of the CCP, and are therefore trusted to make major documentaries. Nonetheless, private companies with looser or no ties with broadcasters or government have also grown rapidly in recent years. Large private production companies include *Beijing Shangzao yingshi gongsi* (Beijing Shangzao Film and Television Company) and *Sanduo tang yingshi guanggao gongsi* (Sanduo tang Film, Television and Advertising Company) who have a total capital of nearly 100 million yuan (£10 million). They have expanded their operations from producing mainly TV advertisements to full documentary films including the high-profile *Sanduo tang* co-produced TV series *Rise of Great Powers*.

However, many 'new documentary movement' (also called 'independent documentary') filmmakers produce films largely outside the state system by raising capital privately and therefore do not go through the official procedures of planning and production

(Zhu and Mei, 2004; Berry *et al*; 2010; Robinson, 2012). Understandably such films are rarely distributed through the state broadcasting system and have to be screened either abroad or in small private or academic circles. If they are broadcast on state television channels, their heavily censored and much shorter versions become almost unrecognisable (Wang, 2010, 2011). These marginalised producers face problems of a lack of financial and policy support as well as having little prospect of commercial success. They often seek funding abroad and participate in international film festivals and therefore have a diverse audience across national boundaries.

### **The politics of documentary: four phases of development**

In the PRC, documentary films have been pivotal in mediating political, socioeconomic and cultural changes. Broadly speaking, documentaries have gone through four phases of development coinciding with China's major upheavals and transformations. The first phase (1958-1977) was characterised by its political function of ideological indoctrination during the Maoist era. The second phase (1978-1992) started with the Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and saw a flowering of 'humanistic documentaries' focusing on cultural traditions and national identities in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. The third phase (1993-1998) can be seen as a popularisation of documentary films amidst the momentous wave of media commercialisation following Deng Xiaoping's 1992 'southern tour talks'. The fourth phase (1999-present) is the more plural period in the post-Tiananmen age when increasing social as well as media spaces have opened up for a diverse range of producers making different types of documentaries. (He 2005:1; Xing, 2010:19-20).

#### *Political phase: 1958-1977*

TV documentary shares the same birthday as television itself in the PRC – on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1958 the first television station *Beijing Television* (changed to *China Central Television* on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1978) began broadcasting with a 10-minute documentary film produced by China Central News and Documentary Film Studio titled *Going to the Countryside* (*dao nongcun qu*). When first launched, the station had only thirty-four staff members and there were only 500 imported Russian black and white television sets in China - all concentrated in Beijing. These TV sets were owned by public institutions such as universities, the army, factories, communes and hospitals, though a few top leaders had them at home. During the initial 4-month trial period of the television station, a third of the programmes were documentaries. During the political period, or Mao's era, documentary films operated purely as a political instrument for building a 'socialist state' - the documentary topics being limited to 'socialist construction, achievements and heroes'. However, their impact was marginal due to the limited number of TV sets in China at that time.

During the political period, one primary function of documentary was external communication. Isolated in the depths of the Cold War, in what China saw as a western 'information blockage', the CCP regarded documentary film as an effective channel for external propaganda through news exchange programmes with 'moderate' western countries like the United Kingdom and Japan. Meanwhile, there was a strong desire in the west to know what was happening behind the 'bamboo curtain'. Seizing the opportunity, the CCP tried to project an image of a new socialist China to the outside world through documentary films. In 1960 China sent sixty-one documentary films to seven countries, and by 1965, had established a news film exchange with twenty-seven countries, growing to eighty-three by 1975. The documentary film exchange was seen by the CCP as an integral part of China's international diplomacy because it believed that these films presented a 'socialist image' and transmitted China's views on important international issues directly to a Western audience.

Due to their perceived importance, international news reports had to be approved by Premier Zhou Enlai personally before their overseas release.

Whether for internal or external propaganda, political correctness is paramount and a ‘*san tang hui shen*’ (a tripartite censor) censorship system was put in place for this purpose. *San tang hui shen* consisted of the then CCP Central Committee Radio Commission (*zhong yang guangbo shiye ju*), the TV station and its news department. The system brought top censors, TV station chiefs and programme operational staff together to scrutinize pre-broadcast films. Considered as the ultimate guarantee of political safety, the system worked well for the CCP and survived the post-Mao era into the reform period. *San tang hui shen* was instrumental in producing an institutional culture of ‘(political) safety first’ that filmmakers had to internalize. Such a culture impacted on the style and mode of documentary films as well as social relationships – how filmmakers see themselves and relate to their subjects. Filmmakers became part of a propaganda machine constructing patriotism, socialism and the so-called socialist heroism that had become the order of the day. Individuals who are filmed in the documentary served merely as a symbol of a new socialist state as reflected in such documentaries as *Tie guniang guo fenglian* (Iron Girl Guo Fenglian), *Tieren hai zai zhangdou* (The Iron Man is still fighting), *Ba qingchun xiangei nongcun* (Give Our Youth to the Countryside) and *Yingxiong de xinyang renmin* (the Heroic Xinyang People). These films project new socialist model workers in rural areas and the industrial heartland of northeast China. Many of those shown in these documentaries became well-known figures like Guo Fenglian (the iron girl) and Wang Jinxi (the iron man).

#### *Humanistic phase, 1978-1992*

The humanistic period was characterised by a rising interest in China’s national history and cultural heritage which, in Mao’s era, had been condemned as ‘feudal’ and

therefore 'backward'. Documentary film as a genre gained unprecedented prominence throughout the 1980s when it shifted its focus from state socialism and class struggle to economic development, national identities and 'liberating the mind'. Deng Xiaoping's reforms brought new impetus to documentary making as departure from Maoist dogma led to a relaxation of political control and a more liberal leadership. Marxist orthodoxy gave way to cultural nationalism in a new wave of 'national spirit' building documentary series that took centre stage in the 1980s.

For a number of reasons, TV documentaries became popular programmes enjoyed by millions in China. First, in the transition from a class-based struggle for revolution to an economic development-centred society, these documentaries played a central role in constructing a new vision of society, of cultural identity and of the future. Second, the artificial, crude and overtly propagandist films shown mostly in the cinema changed to a new and refreshing style that appealed to the audience's national sentiments and longing for a brighter future. Third, in the 1980s, due to a much improved national TV infrastructure and rising urban population income, television became affordable for most urban families, and watching it became a popular leisure activity. Fourth, documentary had been a major type of TV programme when there were few entertainment shows and limited channels before cable and satellite TVs became available and affordable to viewers in the 1990s.

Cultural tradition and national identity, often embodied in landscape documentaries, became prevailing themes. These films avoided political subjects and engaged the viewers in their common cultural heritage of the Chinese civilisation which had been attacked from the 1919 May Fourth Movement to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Deliberately shaking off the former proselytising presentation style, filmmakers approached their viewers as ordinary people and tried to tell 'a good story' through engaging narratives. *Huashuo Changjiang* (Yangtze River) is a typical example of this style. This 25-part CCTV

documentary series was produced in association with a Japanese company and broadcast in 1983. It became an instant hit with an audience share of 40%. The CCTV received over ten thousand letters from appreciative viewers. For the first time, on-screen presenters gave a fascinating account of national geography along the longest river in China. *Huashuo* means ‘talk about’ – a term often used in Chinese traditional storytelling in novels and teahouses. The novel and informal *huashuo* style of story-telling by on-screen presenters was followed by other documentaries. High-profile documentary series during this period included the 17-part *Sichou zhilu* (Silk Road, 1980), 35-part *Huashuo yunhe* (Grand Canal, 1986-87), 30-part *Huang He* (Yellow River, 1988), 6-part *He Shang* (River Elegy, 1988) and 12-part *Wang Changcheng* (the Great Wall, 1991).

Television – the newly emergent vehicle of mass communication – came to be an important medium by which the political elites communicated to the general public. The convergence of the reform-minded CCP leaders pushing for a new developmentalist policy and cultural elites promoting a liberal agenda created conditions for a flourishing of humanistic films, culminating in the 1988 controversial *He Shang* (River elegy) which became a defining moment in the documentary genre as well as in China’s modern intellectual history. *He Shang* was blamed later by the CCP leaders for stirring up the student protests in 1989 for a fairer, transparent and accountable government. These films also became part and parcel of the rise of ‘*wenhua re*’ (cultural fever) that swept across the country throughout the 1980s. *Wenhua re* refers to the rise of interest in Chinese culture, western culture and the future of China in the post-reform era. It includes the emergence of liberalism in academic and intellectual circles, criticisms on autocratic politics and advocating the protection of individual rights against the intrusion of arbitrary state power. Liberalism was the earliest and first non-official intellectual development in post-reform China that arose as a response to radical Maoism. Influential intellectual leaders like Jin

Guantao and Liu Fengqing not only wrote and edited books including the popular *Zuoxiang weilai congshu* (Toward the Future Series) but appeared in the high profile documentary series *He Shang*. The humanistic documentaries came to an end after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown when the liberal cultural environment gradually disappeared amidst rising political conservatism.

### *Popular phase, 1993-1998*

Moving away from the grand narrative of politics, economy and nation, filmmakers in the 1990s started to be drawn to ordinary people's lives in the 'popular phase', or *pingmin hua* (shift to the ordinary people). Individuals rather than abstract ideas became central to a series of highly innovative documentaries. Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern tour generated a fresh wave of economic growth that had a profound impact on society. Social life-based documentaries started to emerge that focused on people's lived experiences. Mao's communist utopia and the 1980s high-spirited liberal idealism gave way to a mundane social space wherein the 1990s filmmakers engaged with stories of individuals whose pent-up energy is largely directed to opportunities open to them to improve their lives. The marketization of documentary production amidst the commercialisation of the media industry fuelled a surge of documentary making. In 1993, a 'producer system' was established wherein filmmakers could sign a contract with the CCTV to produce documentaries. A portion of the 5-minute advertising revenue from each episode could be retained by the producer to fund new documentaries. This reform gave filmmakers considerable leverage, if not autonomy, in content, style and staffing that enabled them to cater to 'market demands'. In the same year two documentary series became immensely popular – Shanghai Television's *Jilupian bianjishi* (Documentary Editorial Room) and the CCTV *Dongfang Shikong* (Oriental Horizon). Both of these focused on ordinary people's lives and largely removed political

indoctrination as filmmakers began to treat their subjects as equals rather than as signs of an abstract ideology. In 1993, television replaced cinema as the dominant medium for documentary film and media marketization produced spaces for independent documentary making albeit in non-political spaces.

One of the most important developments during this phase was the emergence of the so-called *xin jilu yundong* (new documentary movement) that started in 1992 following an informal meeting by a group of young filmmakers frustrated by the sterile style and narrow focus of the dominant state system documentaries. They called their documentaries ‘new’ in an attempt to break away from the prevailing propaganda style of *zhuantipian* (special topic documentary) in documentary making and created a new way of documenting social life, in contrast to what they saw as ‘the fake, exaggerated, and empty characteristics of not only the old socialist realist documentaries but also the more recent special topic programme’ (Lu, 2010:17). *Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiang zhe* (Bumming in Beijing: the last dreamers) made in 1990 by Wu Wenguang is seen as the first and most successful *xin jilu yundong* documentary that tells the story of five ‘roaming’ artists pursuing their dreams in hardship outside the state system. For the first time, invisible, insignificant and marginalised people living in the shadow of a large metropolis became the protagonists of a documentary. This and other new movement documentaries – *1966, Wode hongweibing shidai* (1966: My Red Guard years), *Wo biye le* (I have graduated), *Tiananmen* and *Bi an* (The other side of the bank) - received critical acclaim in the media circles (Lu, 2010). The new documentary films shifted the focus from previous ‘public topics’ such as the nation, the state, culture and history to hitherto neglected private topics like family and emotional experiences taking place in private, domestic space. Nonetheless, this new documentary movement is better understood as a pluralisation rather than a break with the previous top-down documentaries. It extended rather than replaced the subject matter, presentation style and basic assumptions

of previous documentaries. Thus, despite its prominence and impact, the new documentary movement has more continuities than ruptures with the past.

### *Plural phase, 1999-present*

Toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when capitalism had taken root with ‘Chinese characteristics’, a variety of social issues such as the widening rich-poor gap arose and intensified. Taking notice of growing social strife amidst rapid economic growth, some documentary makers assumed the role of a ‘mediator’ in producing films highlighting these problems. In contrast to the 1990s’ tendency to recount individual lives which are at times isolated from the social environment, filmmakers in the new century have turned their attention to society as a whole and emphasise ‘social responsibility’ in documentary making. To redress the negative effects of market forces of the 1990s, documentary filmmakers highlight the nature of TV programmes as a public space, if not a ‘public sphere’, for social intervention through open discussions and debates (Berry and Rofel, 2010:136). Social space here refers to the space wherein people can express their views on important social issues like the plight of dispossessed peasants with little openly direct political intervention or retribution. However, such a social space is different from the Habermasian ‘public sphere’ that indicates a platform for political participation in a ‘civil society’ (Habermas, 1992). Social issues are discussed in new documentary movement films which take an interventionist approach as in *Sanxia Yimin* (Three Gorges Dam migration), *yige aizhibing huanzhe de mingyun* (Fate of an AIDS sufferer) and *Chunmin de xuanzhe* (Villagers’ choice). These documentaries deal with critical but controversial issues that are not normally shown on television such as mass migration, the Aids epidemic and village elections. Armed with the new technology of DV (digital video), independent documentary makers in the new century have become more self-conscious in producing social critiques. Their documentaries

are characterised by a change ‘... *from observation to participation, from spontaneous to inspirational filmmaking, from using descriptive to evaluative language, from documenting for history to filmmaking for social mobilisation*’ (Wang, 2010).

On the other hand, big-budget documentary series shown in the CCTV that focus once again on Chinese history and nation like *Fuxing zhilu* (Road to Revival, 2007) and *Yiheyuan* (Summer Palace, 2010) have also thrived. Increasingly documentary series on international topics such as *Daguo jueqi* (Rise of Great Powers, 2006), *Huaerjie* (The Wall Street, 2010), *Jinzhuan zhiguo* (BRICs Countries, 2011) and *Huobi* (money, 2012) have been produced as China’s international role has grown. These series return to the topics of modern history and national identity of the 1980s though with a rather different and more confident perspective (see case study below). The radical and critical views shown in *River Elegy* are largely absent from these documentaries despite a wider range of interpretations being offered within the officially-sanctioned boundaries. The parallel development of mainstream documentary series and independently produced documentary films shown largely outside the state system reflects the increasingly complex and diversified landscape of documentary making in China – a situation described as ‘polyphony’ compared to the previous three phases (Zhu,2007:26) detailed earlier.

The changing pattern of documentary making coincides with China’s shifting socioeconomic transformations. Each phase of documentary development is inherently linked to pivotal political developments – the Great Leap Forward in 1958 (Phase 1), the launch of economic reform in 1978 (Phase 2), Deng Xiaoping ‘south tour talks’ in 1992 (Phase 3), and emerging social tensions towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Phase 4). Despite the progressive changes made over these four phases, the media have always operated within the established perimeters of the party-state, though the situation has become more complex in

recent decades when market forces began to play an important role. The dominance of politics has gradually been weakened by a plethora of other forces such as the commercialised media environment, the advance of new information technology and the socioeconomic transformations of the society. The contextual background has changed rapidly - from Maoist socialism to Dengist developmentalism through to the current party-state capitalism. Correspondingly documentary's functions have shifted from being a pure propaganda tool to a political and intellectual elites' vehicle for political persuasion and then to a mediator of sociopolitical changes - though the party-state has maintained a hegemonic voice. Since the inauguration of the fifth generation of the CCP leadership, the Xi-Li (the CCP Party General Secretary Xi Jinping and the State Council Premier Li Keqiang) administration, came to power in the spring of 2013, there has been no indication that the CCP will loosen its control over the media. While the Chinese leaders have become more confident in dealing with international affairs, they are fully aware of domestic problems including government officials' corruption, environment pollution and extensive popular protests. The CCP has always believed that the mass media are at the forefront of the battle to maintain stability, so in order to control the grave situation, they cannot afford to leave any medium uncensored. The broad features of the four periods of documentary are summarised below:

| <i>Features</i>       | <i>1958-1977</i><br><b>Political</b> | <i>1978-1992</i><br><b>Humanistic</b>                   | <i>1993-1998</i><br><b>Popular</b>                   | <i>1999-present</i><br><b>Social</b>                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Context</b>        | Maoist socialism, Communist ideology | Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and opening             | Embracing global capitalism, media commercialisation | Growing social tensions                                       |
| <b>Discourse</b>      | Ideological                          | Intellectual  | Populist   | Plural  |
| <b>Function</b>       | State propaganda tool                | Political and cultural elites' vehicle of communication | Multiple roles including commercial profit           | Multiple roles including vehicle for social issues discussion |
| <b>Power relation</b> | State autocratic power               | Elitist, top-down                                       | Mediating between the state and market               | Increasing power  |

|                   |                              |                                       |   |   |
|-------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
|                   |                              |                                       |   | dispersion through negotiation                        |
| <b>Finance</b>    | State-funded                 | State-funded                          | State-owned but commercially operated                   | Diverse forms of financing, including private         |
| <b>Technology</b> | One TV channel, few TV sets, | Limited TV channels, but more TV sets | Diversification of TV channels; most homes have TV sets | Diverse forms of channels; nearly all homes have TVs. |
| <b>Voice</b>      | Homogeneous                  | Diverse voices                        | Heterogeneous   | Heterogeneous   |
| <b>Style</b>      | Indoctrinating, preaching    | Less political, more intellectual     | Engaging, entertaining,                                 | Diverse   |

Table 1: Features of TV documentaries in different periods (also see Xing 2010:19)

## The poetics of documentary making: evolving mode of presentation

### *Documentary modes*

Lyotard (1984) distinguishes two types of knowledge - scientific and narrative. The major difference between them is that narrative knowledge, unlike scientific knowledge, does not give priority to its own legitimization, but certifies itself in the *pragmatics* of its own transmission. Television documentary as a particular narrative genre has a type of ‘metadiscourse’ (Lyotard 1984: xxiii) as a legitimating system and constructs knowledge and truth in its own way. Its legitimization lies in the way in which it is presented - legitimization is enmeshed with a specific mode of representation. This can be understood as the ‘poetics’ of documentary making - ‘those principles of construction, function, and effect specific to nonfiction film and video’ (Renov, 1993:21). Indeed, such poetics is inherently linked to the use of language in all forms of presentation as Barthes (1989:172) argues: ‘... *poetics is therefore at once very old (linked to the whole rhetorical culture of our civilisation) and very new, insofar as it can today benefit from the important renewal of the sciences of language.*’ Thus, in a broad sense, addressing the question of *why*, the ‘politics’ of documentary, is concerned with sociopolitical contexts that give rise to a particular type of Chinese documentary, whereas ‘poetics’ is more concerned with the *how* question: *how* language

produces meaning in the service of interests. However, the poetics and politics are intricately linked as the former is the means through which the latter is realised. Therefore, documentaries do not simply 'record' social realities through narrative, they produce discourse: stories are told not only to generate meaning, but to construct knowledge in a matrix of relations of power.

Bill Nichols (1991:32-68) summarises four dominant modes of documentary representation - *expository*, *observational*, *interactive*, and *reflexive*. Each has its own distinct way of constructing authority and claiming truth. The *expository* mode addresses the viewer directly in advancing an argument about the historical world, often in a 'voice-of-God' commentary. It is considered as 'heavy' and the most 'authoritarian' type of documentary (Corner, 1996:30). The voice-of-God commentary refers to the early direct-address style in the Grierson tradition of documentary using an 'authoritarian' and presumptuous off-screen narration. Such an omniscient 'voice of god' dominates visuals that exist merely to advance the argument contained in the commentary. This commentary insistently encourages the viewer to read the images in a specific way. The *observational* mode arises from dissatisfaction with the moralising quality of *expository* documentary, and therefore attempts to record 'unobtrusively' what people do. The *interactive* and *reflexive* modes assume much less authority and engage in a process of meaning negotiation through interaction or reflection. Nichols (1991:33-4) argues:

A mode of representation involves issues of authority and the credibility of speech. Rather than standing as the idiosyncratic utterance of the individual filmmaker, the text demonstrates compliance with the norms and conventions governing a particular mode and, in turn, enjoys the prestige of tradition and the authority of a socially established and institutionally legitimate voice.

*Expository documentary: top-down communication*

Many documentaries in China, in particular those from the political and humanistic periods, predominantly use the classic *expository* mode. In the early years, the mouthpiece function required documentary films to convey the official CCP lines in a straightforward fashion. Documentaries are typically presented with a heavy ‘voice-of-God’ commentary. Using Kozloff’s term (1992:84), this ‘heterodiegetic’ voice’ addresses the audience with the highest degree of omniscience in a manipulation of the *mythic* and leaves much of the *mimetic* to the visuals. During much of the Mao era the visuals were carefully contrived. The 1953 *Weida de tudi gaige* (The Great Land Reform) documentary presents land reform as the only road to prosperity for the Chinese peasantry. The film shows how poverty was created by the ruthless exploitation of poor peasants by landlords. Throughout the film striking images are extensively employed showing denunciations of landlords’ crimes, happy faces of peasants gaining new lands, new local peasant representative conferences, and machinery used in the new socialist China. A range of documentaries produced in the 1960s and 1970s portray new socialist model workers and work units such as the 1964 *Dazai zhilu* (The Road of Dazai), 1965 *Ganxiang gangan de daqing ren* (Daqing People Dare to Think and Act) and 1970 *Hongqi Qu* (Red Flag Canal). These documentaries portray the single-minded determination of peasants and workers answering the call for a socialist cause, who meet challenges in difficult conditions. These *expository* documentaries deliver an unproblematic and ‘objective’ account and interpretation of various Maoist socialist campaigns. Voice-over as an extra-diegetic soundtrack acts in a similar way to the CCP newspaper editorials in a patriarchal, dominant and omniscient control over meaning. The prevalence of the *expository* mode reflects a Leninist tradition of seeing news reports as ‘visualization of politics’. Filmmakers were required to reflect socialist life through reporting ‘typical events and

activities of typical characters in a typical environment'. The CCP's political and aesthetic objective for documentary films was the so-called 'combination of revolutionary romanticism with revolutionary heroism'. It meant filmmakers needed to come up with ingenious ways of constructing, if not fabricating, a heroic and romanticized version of socialism through portraying 'typical individuals, events and environment'. One of the most successful documentaries *Shouzuyuan* (Tax collection house), produced in 1965, was repeated for eight years (1966-74). Its class struggle theme is presented through engaging artistic forms that include clay figures, popular tunes and personal narratives. This authoritarian style is 'dogmatic' in the sense that it is the unitary, top-down and monological voice of the official doctrine (Chu, 2007:26).

Such films were often produced in the *zhuantopian* (special topic documentaries) format related to the heyday of socialist cinema. Before television became the dominant medium of political communication, newsreels *Xinwen Jianbao* (News Clips) were shown in cinema before feature movies produced by Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio. Guided by 'socialist realism' aesthetics, such films portray socialist achievements through bright colours, cheerful music and imposing socialist heroes. The stage-managed images are presented on the principle of representing the 'real' through enhanced 'typical' new socialist men and women. The *expository* mode was however softened during the 1980s' humanistic phase when on-screen presenters and interviews were introduced, starting in 1983 with the 25-episode CCTV series *Huashuo Changjiang*. Though voiceover commentary remained the dominant style of narration, humanistic documentaries nonetheless created a presentation style, such as using informal interviews, that better engaged the audience. In particular, following the structure of well-known traditional novels and story-telling in teahouses, they presented each episode in a *zhanghui ti xiaoshuo* (chapter-based novel) format. It is notable that, despite the rise of popular documentaries and multi-voice in the post-Tiananmen period,

a moderate version of the *expository* mode has persisted as an important style in major documentary series in the 2000s. To some extent, such a heavy *expository* style is inevitable due to the nature of mainstream documentaries that present a closed, monological, single-dimensional but official version of the ‘realities’. One of the primary objectives of such documentaries is still ‘guiding public opinion’ though in a more subtle fashion than previously. The ‘mouthpiece’ role fits in naturally with the *expository* mode of presentation that imposes an official discourse on major developments on important domestic and international issues. Notwithstanding the proliferation and diversification of films in the 2000s, *expository* documentaries about the state, nation and history such as the CCTV series *Gugong* (Forbidden City, 2004), *Daguo Jueqi* (Rise of Great Powers, 2006) and *Fuxing zhilu* (Road to Revival, 2007), continue to flourish.

#### *Observational documentary: bottom-up perspectives*

It was not until the 1990s that other modes of presentation arose amidst the wave of the new documentary movement that actively sought to break the prevalent sterile *expository* style. New documentary films focusing on ordinary people’s lives in the ‘popular’ and ‘plural’ phases apply a combination of *observational* and *interactive* modes. Meanwhile, filmmakers became less intrusive in their approach to filming subjects. This change of style also reflected dissatisfaction with previous moralistic documentaries (Lu, 2003; Berry *et al*, 2010). Despite a shift to cultural and historical topics, the lecturing style in the 1980s was increasingly divorced from the changed post-reform social realities. Recognising the imperative of understanding social change in a bottom-up rather than top-down manner, independent filmmakers sought to reflect real life through experimenting with fresh modes of presentation. By emphasising the perspective of those affected by social change, the rebellious ‘bottom-up’ filmmakers attempted to create a link between documentaries and the

lives of ordinary people. In the new century, the composition of documentary makers has also changed. They not only come from the television sector, but from art circles, educational institutions, fine art and multimedia. Some focus on an experimental avant-garde style and an exploration of new film language. In presenting marginalised social groups like ethnic minorities, sex workers, low-income labourers and substance abusers, their documentaries are imbued with a resistant and subversive message in both form and content.

‘Bumming in Beijing’ is shot by a hand-held camera with synch sound but no artificial lighting. It is part of a new spontaneous mode of filmmaking called *jishi zhuyi* (on-the-spot realism) that documents life as it happens with minimal intervention from the filmmaker. Independent documentary makers try to present *yuan shengtai* (raw, pristine reality) using a combination of the *observational* and *reflexive* modes. *Yuan shengtai* documentaries contrast sharply with the often exaggerated ‘voice-of-god’, moralistic mainstream films. ‘New movement’ filmmakers including Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan and Zhang Yuan share a common objective of showing ‘real life’ China in a way that invites the audience to interpret their meanings.

In the late 1990s, the second wave of ‘new documentary movement’ arose with the introduction of mobile, unobtrusive and affordable digital video. A new generation of filmmakers growing up in a different environment started to experiment with avant-garde film techniques while continuing to focus on marginalized social groups. Other filmmakers however pursued dramatisation of engaging stories, largely to attract viewers’ attention and fuelled by a new wave of commercialization of TV documentaries competing with imported programmes such as those from the Discovery Channel. Digital video is suited for making documentaries on private lives; it also frees filmmakers from the state system. *Jishi zhuyi* documentary makers are drawn to the *cinema vérité* tradition of filmmaking. They produce novel documentaries that follow both the fly-on-the-wall style of American Direct Cinema

emphasizing objectivity, and the participatory style that reveals the filmmakers' presence. These *observational* and *reflexive* documentaries use minimal voiceover narration to make the meanings of their films deliberately ambiguous in order to avoid direct criticism of the state, as in the documentary *Out of Phoenix Bridge* and *Meishi Street*.

### **Case studies: from cultural critique to authoritarian statism**

#### *He Shang: a liberal challenge to the authoritarian state*

*He Shang* (River elegy) is a controversial CCTV six-part documentary made and broadcast in 1988 that critiques China's entrenched state-centric polity. It attributes the Chinese nation's decline in modern times to an autocratic political system that resists meaningful reforms. The Yellow River, the Great Wall and the dragon – traditional symbols of the Chinese nation – are used to signify the backwardness of this 'land-based' civilisation which needs to embrace Western maritime 'blue civilisation'. The documentary series caused widespread controversy and heated discussions with its daring declaration of the death of the mother river *Huang He* (Yellow River) – it is like asserting the death of God in the West. However, this iconoclastic attack on traditional Confucian culture is largely symbolic and was interpreted by the audience as a thinly veiled criticism of the current political system. The relevance of traditional autocratic rule to contemporary practice is laid bare when Liu Shaoqi, the president of China, is described in the documentary as being left to die on the floor of an empty room during the Cultural Revolution. The message for urgent political reform is made crystal clear. What is remarkable about the series is that it was produced and broadcast by the CCTV – China's pre-eminent mouthpiece of the CCP. The 'bold' move by the CCTV epitomised the newly emerging space in the mass media for alternative voices. It also indicated the modification of the role of media professionals in the reform age when the

‘people’s character’ of journalism started to expand, alongside with the dominant role of the ‘Party’s character’.

However, the significance of this ground-breaking series goes beyond the media – it represents the culmination of the liberal critique of the authoritarian state of the 1980s when liberal-minded intellectuals demystified the ‘holy trinity’ of the Chinese nation, state and the CCP constructed by the CCP. Locating the autocratic state as the main barrier to China’s search for a viable route to modernity, the documentary film reflects the unprecedented intellectual freedom of the 1980s when intellectuals engaged in debates about Chinese tradition, western culture and China’s future development. In making full use of the mass media, some filmmakers tried to disseminate liberal knowledge in an effort to ‘enlighten’ the general public. Nonetheless, *He Shang* adopts a primarily *expository* mode of presentation with a voiceover commentary and interviews with ‘experts’ - many being leading ‘cultural studies scholars’. Unlike the previous construction of truth and knowledge based on ‘unassailable’ Marxist and Maoist dogmas, *He Shang* presents an implicitly anti-establishment intellectual argument that derives its legitimacy and power from the authority of those ‘intellectuals’ who had gained much respect in the post-reform 1980s as ‘spokesmen’ of the nation and people. Rather than being the CCP’s mouthpiece, *He Shang* became the vehicle of the newly arisen intellectuals to spread the gospel of change. To some extent, these intellectuals resemble their predecessors in the May Fourth Movement in attacking Confucian tradition and advocating democracy as a remedy for China’s problems, though the latter could speak their mind freely.

Before its run was complete, *He Shang* had aroused so much controversy with the public and led to so many divided opinions among the top CCP leaders that the CCTV held internal meetings to discuss if broadcasting should be terminated. However, the series proved so popular that the CCTV repeated it though ‘sensitive’ parts of the original version were

removed in the second show. Less than a year after the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the associated crackdown, *He Shang* was banned and a nation-wide campaign was launched attacking the film as advocating a Western bourgeoisie liberalism that stirs up unrest. The political campaign silenced the intellectual debate on the provocative views the series presents. The dramatic ups and downs of this documentary series largely parallel the rise and fall of Chinese liberals both within and outside the establishment. No other documentary film in the PRC history has exerted such a powerful impact on political and intellectual development – even today *He Shang* is carefully avoided in open discussions though issues raised in the film are as pertinent and controversial today as they were in the 1980s.

*Da Guo Jue Qi: a conservative validation of an authoritarian state*

In contrast to *He Shang*'s liberal critique, *Da Guo Jue Qi* is a conservative though conditional endorsement of the authoritarian state. Its legitimacy however is drawn from a combination of Western legalism and Confucian *minben* ideology. The 12-part series, broadcast by the CCTV in November 2006, details the rise of nine 'world powers' since 1500 - Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the USA and Japan. The documentary aims, as a senior CCTV official put it, 'to provide historical and civilizational context to the discussion of China's national development issues' (Zhao, 2006: Preface). The issues raised in *Da Guo Jue Qi* nonetheless are different from *He Shang* – it explores what role the Chinese state needs to adopt on its road to a great power status.

In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following three decades of economic growth, and in contrast to the anxiety and acute awareness of its weakness in the 1980s, China had become more confident. Around mid-1990s, the post-Tiananmen political conservatism and perceived anti-China post-cold war international environment spurred on the rise of cultural nationalism. *Da Guo Jue Qi* reflects this change of mood in both the political and intellectual

life of China. It presents a broad assessment of the external world upon which the current pragmatic policies are based.

Ironically, however, the basic evaluations of the West made by *Da Guo Jue Qi* are similar to those of *He Shang* – both series portray a positive image of the West although for different reasons. The former emphasises the progressive role of Western national leaders and the legal framework within which they operate; the latter highlights the role of liberal democracy in driving Western progress, not only in terms of the wealth and power of industrialist modernity but in terms of the democracy, rule of law and human liberalism of humanist modernity. In affirming the crucial role of national leaders, the rule of law and science and technology, *Da Guo Jue Qi* naturalizes, legitimizes and reinforces authoritarian technocratic rule. Effectively *Da Guo Jue Qi* seeks consensual support from the audience and excludes potential or sublimated oppositional discourses that are unable to gain entry into the CCTV, at least not in the same radical form as *He Shang*. However, *Da Guo Jue Qi*'s stress on the rule of law is understood in the matrix of Chinese politics as a reminder of the limit to which the political elite exercises its power - the 'mandate of heaven' has changed to 'mandate of the people' - though how it works is left largely to viewers' imagination. Democracy is alluded to but carefully toned down. Nonetheless the film renounces any legitimizing cloak of a Marxist class struggle-based ideology despite the implicit industrialist modernity it invokes.

*Da Guo Jue Qi* has received positive reviews from mainstream commentators despite criticism from both liberals and new leftists. The term 'Chinese liberals' refers to those who see the Chinese future as adopting a liberal democratic polity; the new leftists are those who draw upon Western New Left theories to explain China's problems as being derived from the 'invasion' of global capitalism and who seek to solve these problems by returning to some Maoist practices. In criticising *Da Guo Jue Qi*, the liberals point to the documentary's failure

to highlight the role of democracy. The new leftists however accuse the series of glorifying jungle law capitalism. Nonetheless, unlike *He Shang*, which enjoyed political support from the top, *Da Guo Jue Qi*'s liberal and new left critics do not have political backing, though each group has gained extensive support among different sections of society. Though their radical faction was purged in the 1989 crackdown, Chinese liberals represent a steady force pushing for Chinese democratic change. Their support for property rights, rule of law and free competition has won new constituencies within an emerging middle class. Armed with Western New Left theories, China's new leftists present themselves as defenders of people's rights, and appeal to those who see China's problems as associated with global capitalism (Ma, 2012). Significantly, criticisms from the right and left turn *Da Guo Jue Qi* into a somewhat mainstream view echoing the policies of a Chinese leadership that is undemocratic but open to the world and ferociously focused on economic development. To some extent, the existence of the liberal and new left depends on the overlapping of their values with official policies. The liberals' support for full-scale reform, a market economy and external engagement is congruent with the CCP's embrace of the global capitalist economy. The new left's emphasis on social justice, equality and support for disadvantaged groups resonates with the official rhetoric of the Hu/Wen (President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao) 'harmonious society' and 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Xiao, 2012).

*Da Guo Jue Qi* indicates the position of a pragmatic political elite situated at the centre of a nationalist spectrum that counterbalances the liberal, pro-market right and anti-capitalist new left. Tolerance of these alternatives depends on a broad consensus at the top – a situation different from the 1980s when the CCP leadership was torn between a reformed socialist approach and a liberal market approach. Post-Deng leaderships reached a consensus that China should pursue a pragmatic developmentalist policy. Nonetheless, the political elite walk a tightrope between allowing alternative voices and containing them, so as not to

undermine their dominant position and domestic stability. Despite growing diversity in non-political areas, the CCTV as the primary state network maintains a tight editorial control. The domain of history, for example, remains firmly guarded by the CCP propaganda department. From *He Shang*'s liberal critique to *Da Guo Jue Qi*'s conditional endorsement of an authoritarian state, documentary film is intertwined with the political developments of the day. Despite complex and radical changes, TV documentary is still considered as an important tool of public communication and is therefore a preferred platform of the political and intellectual elites for shaping public opinion. Nonetheless, documentaries have become increasingly diverse in their roles, functions, content, audience and channels of dissemination.

### **Conclusions: documentaries between the mouthpiece and 'modern bard'**

The development of documentary films over the last five and half decades in the PRC reflects the evolution of the CCP's political power. Despite the hegemonic position the CCP holds in deciding what the viewers can see, the last two decades have seen an increasing space for discursive negotiations to take place in documentaries. In a post-socialist China, the political elite's power and legitimacy depends on their ability to provide social welfare, their capacity to change with time and their means of public communication. Change, however, is no longer brought about by a simple implementation of policies determined solely by the political elites. There is a growing tendency for various social actors to be engaged in a process of negotiation – documentary films provide this process with a genuine, though much restricted, platform. The increased space for alternative discourses poses a growing pressure on the political elites – that partially explains the constant effort made by the propaganda department in tightening controls. They have to use their dominant discursive position to cultivate a public attitude and knowledge congruent with their policies. The CCP's authoritarian power over documentary films like *Fuxing zhilu* helps achieve precisely that

objective. Nonetheless, changes in documentary film have been brought about primarily by a market-oriented reform that has enabled a progressive erosion of media control. Limited deregulation has led to a widening of participation and voice in a process of change described as moving ‘from dogma to polyphony’ (Chu, 2007), ‘from control to negotiation’ (Huang, 2007) and ‘from propaganda to hegemony’ (Zhang, 2011). The currently marginalised independent documentaries have taken root and are gradually sifting through society. The very existence of the new documentary movement speaks volumes of the need to produce documentaries that reflect genuinely people’s living conditions, thinking and aspirations.

Three types of documentary discourse can be discerned over the last half century – the official discourse dominating the political phase, the broadly intellectual discourse arising in the humanistic phase and the popular discourse emerging in the ‘popular’ phases. However, all three strands of discourse continue to develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, forming a plural picture. In a plural but official-dominated media space, documentary film has become somewhat fragmented. Amidst rising popular culture fuelled by media commercialisation, elitist documentaries no longer attract the extensive public attention as they did in the 1980s, and therefore are being marginalised and pushed to ‘narrowcasting’. On the other hand, official discourse is dominant in major TV series, ranging from history such as *Gugong* ‘Forbidden City’ (2004), *Fuxin zhilu* ‘Road to Revival’ (2007) and *Shijie lishi* (World History, 2008) to economy like *Gongsi de lilian* (Power of Business Corporations, 2009), *Hua er jie* (Wall Street, 2010) and *Jin zhuan zhi guo* (BRICs Countries, 2011). Vast resources and state media status make it possible for the CCTV to produce and broadcast major documentary series that highlight official discourse.

Nevertheless, official discourse has been subtly blended with intellectual input by academics involved in producing TV series as ‘subject experts’ from research institutions and universities. Despite the increasing diversity, the CCTV prioritises ‘mainstream’ (*zhu xuan lu*)

documentaries to fulfil its mouthpiece function. Yet, the mouthpiece has become keenly aware of the need to play a tune pleasant to public ears. The CCTV and other state media institutions are undergoing transformations whereby media professionals try to position themselves as the ‘modern bard’ (Fiske and Hartley, 1982) of the people whilst simultaneously retaining the mouthpiece function. The official discourse, mediated by academics and progressive media practitioners has created a new type of hybridity generating an innovative mode of discursive formation for producing meaning, constructing knowledge and changing power relations. Plurality is thus constituted by a media space wherein various documentaries can compete, though official hybridised discourses try to co-opt viewers to their dominant interpretations. Documentary films in their ambivalent negotiation between a CCP ‘mouthpiece’ and a ‘modern bard’ reveal the evolving roles of the mass media. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the official documentary discourse can hold its hegemonic position, but one thing is certain; due to the changed sociopolitical environment and a better informed public in an increasingly open society, there is no going back to the old heavy propagandist route in documentary films.

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank the British Academy for its support in the production of this article with a grant that enables the necessary fieldwork in China in 2012 and 2013.

<sup>2</sup> These eight channels are China Central Television Documentary Channel (*Zhonngyang dianshitai jilupian pindao*, or CCTV9), China Central Television Science and Education Channel (*Zhongyang dianshitai kejiao pindao*, or CCTV10), China Education Television Channel 3 (*Zhongguo jiaoyu dianshitai san pindao*), Beijing High Definition Documentary Channel (*Beijing gaoqing jishi pindao*), Shanghai Documentary Channel (*Shanghai jishii pindao*), Chongqing Science and Education Channel (*Chongqing kejiao pindao*), Hunan Golden Eagle Documentary Channel (*Hunan jinying jishi pindao*), and Liaoning North Channel (*Liaoning beifang pindao*).

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<sup>3</sup> It refers to the 1913 military campaign led by Sun Yat-sen against the Yuan Shikai government following the assassination of the Nationalist Party leader Song Jiaoren.