TRIAD DRAMAS AS COMMENTARIES, 2016
VOL. 40, NO. 1, 106–119
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2015.1124840

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Triad Dramas as Commentaries on Revolutionary Disharmony, Totalitarian Nostalgia, and a Yearning for Past Chivalry

Shenshen Cai

The University of Melbourne

ABSTRACT

In 2007, amateur on-line writer Kong Ergou's triad novel series, *Past Events of the Northeast: Twenty Years of the Triads*, became a hit as a piece of network original literature. Five years later, the first volume of the book series was adapted into a network television drama of the same title. Focusing on the television drama, this paper examines three interrelated "dimensions" of the text. The first "dimension" relates to the correspondence between the inception and development of underworld gangs, and the vicissitudes experienced by the Chinese people during the harsh and unprecedented economic and cultural conditions that were introduced during the post-Mao era. A second "dimension" of this dramatic text finds that the nostalgia for and admiration of totalitarian times, together with a postmodern parody and deconstruction of Maoist society and its ideology, are juxtaposed in contemporary popular cultural products such as *Past Events*, thus demonstrating the complex and obscure emotions of ordinary Chinese people in relation to socialist revolutionary times. The final "dimension" compares the chivalrous spirit espoused by the gangsters with the ever-deteriorating morality and ethical values prevalent in present-day China.

KEYWORDS

China; post-Mao; on-line novels; television; popular culture; triads; chivalry; totalitarian nostalgia; postmodern parody; traumatised persona

"Network original literature" refers to creative writing such as novels written by amateur writers and published in instalments via the internet. This literary subgenre – which according to Chen Cun signifies freedom, randomness, a non-utilitarian nature and a sense of utter innocence (cited in Hockx, 2005, p. 152) – emerged at the end of the 1990s and attracts a huge on-line readership. Some of the most popular network original literature pieces have subsequently been published in print or adapted into network TV series. Chinese web writer Kong Ergou's hit novel, *Dongbei wangshi: heidao fengyun ershinian* (*Past Events of the Northeast: Twenty Years of the Triads*, hereafter *Past Events*), was first published in the "tittle-tattle" column on the Tianya Club (one of China's most famous and popular virtual communities and social networks) in December 2007. Kong Ergou has penned several novels about the triad underworld, such as *Heidao beiqing* (*Pathos of the Underworld*) and *Bieyang de jianghu* (*Other Style Brotherhood*), but *Past Events* is the most popular. As his

CONTACT Shenshen Cai cais@unimelb.edu.au

family has some connections with the underworld of the triads in their local region, Kong has the opportunity to gain some insight into the lives of the gangsters; thus, most of his depictions in the novels are based on real life stories and actual gang figures (Kong Ergou, interview, 2010).

As a web-based author he attracted a huge readership, and five volumes of the novel that were originally released via the internet were published in print by the Chongqing Publishing House in 2009. In 2012 letv.com, one of the biggest and most successful Chinese entertainment video sites, produced a network TV series based on *Past Events* (dir. Li Yan, 2012).[1] Since the mid-1990s, the internet has played a significant role in the production and consumption of China's emerging culture industry, especially in literature. In 1999, after a competition organised by Rongshuxia Web,[2] original Chinese literature on the internet entered a period of surging development. Although the enthusiasm for web literature has experienced a downturn since 2001, the actual number of literary texts produced for the numerous on-line forums on a daily basis is still staggering (Hockx, 2005, p. 153). The majority of the web-based writers were amateurs, and the most frequent themes in their writing were history, time-travel, fantasy, the criminal underworld, officialdom, the military and love stories. Among the most popular literary works are *Mingchao naxiesher* (*Past Events*, *Those Matters of the Ming Dynasty*), and *Hou Weidong guanchang biji* (*Hou Weidong's Diary of Officialdom*), which received unprecedented recognition and were sought after by readers both on- and off-line (Zhang, 2014).

It is well known in China that netizens do not have full access to the internet given the effectiveness of state control over it (Hockx, 2005). Michel Hockx (2005, p. 150) also writes that "government repression will cause websites to disappear without warning … [and] such disappearances can be immediate and extensive". Monitoring and censorship of the internet and its literary creations had not yet begun in earnest between 1999 and 2004, but the short-lived freedom enjoyed by on-line amateur writers was cut short by a series of crackdowns from 2004. They were implemented by various official propaganda institutions and organs such as the National News Publication Bureau, which highlighted the continuous and firm grasp the CCP (the Chinese Communist Party) had on the cultural and media spheres. From these censorship experiences, more and more literature websites reoriented their focus to serialising novels with comparatively safe premises and content, as "the government policy of making service providers, forum moderators and chatroom operators legally responsible for any 'inappropriate content' appearing on their sites has obviously led to extensive self-regulation" (Hockx, 2005, p. 150). For example, the moderators of Chinese websites are responsible for removing any submissions that violate government censorship regulations (Hockx, 2005, p. 158), as "failure to remove such contributions in time might lead to a website being closed down" (Hockx, 2005, p. 163).

Consequently, history, fantasy, and spirits and demons remain the most prevalent and innocuous themes for cyber writers. In April 2014, a new "Clean Up the Web" (*jingwang yundong*) campaign was launched by the CCP propaganda branches. The object of this recent round of internet censorship is to crack down on unhealthy and harmful literary and cultural materials, such as pornography and extreme violence. The main goal of this campaign is to eliminate not only the vulgar and the vicious, but also any politically sensitive content. For example, fictional and visual works concerning Chinese officialdom and corruption, military exposés, thinly-veiled erotic love stories, and underworld themes have all been targeted by the campaign (Zhang, 2014). Unfortunately, the book series *Past Events* falls

squarely within the scope of the campaign, so the novel was doomed to be suppressed and the TV play also became a target for attack by the Clean Up the Web crusade.

Triads re-emerged in China soon after the implementation of the Opening Up policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping and his political colleagues. Paradoxically, triads are seen both as a public malaise and as a symbol of chivalry and courage, since they are purported to have originated during the Qing Dynasty as a patriotic underground organisation that was created to overthrow the Manchu conquerors and to restore the Han Chinese Ming Dynasty. For instance, in the classical novel *Shuihu* (*Water Margin*) by Shi Naian, written during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), 108 fighters, officials and commonfolk became outlaws after being wrongly persecuted and punished by the government. They raided and plundered houses, and committed murder and arson, all supposedly to help the disadvantaged, who were being bullied and exploited by the privileged and noble classes. These outlaws lived in an underworld, underpinned by brotherhood. We know them best from martial arts/kung fu movies and television serials where the heroic bandit figures extol benevolence and righteousness, fortified by Confucian thought and ethics. In more recent times, the triads have been accepted in some Chinese communities because they promised a degree of stability and protection in places where the police force was inadequate or corrupt. Similarly, in *Past Events*, the author Kong Ergou emphasises this chivalrous spirit of the knight-errant in traditional Chinese culture, and fashions his triad gang-member characters into warm-hearted and considerate bandit figures who are skilled at fighting but also possess wisdom and morality. Moreover, the influence of transregional and transnational popular culture products such as the Hong Kong gangster film *Yingxiongbense* (*A Better Tomorrow*, 1986) may have inspired the production of the story. According to Mayfair Yang (2002, p. 301), Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture led mainland Chinese to identify with Hong Kong and Taiwanese people, internalising a different kind of Chinese culture that was less affiliated to a statist imaginary. As noted by Bhabha (cited in Yang, 2002, p. 190), the mass media in China today has become "a more complex variegated process of eager accommodation, appropriation, and resistance to foreign cultures. This is now a culture more confidently and creatively constructing a 'third space'".

Apart from its stand-alone value as a literary creation, *Past Events* is a record of the social vicissitudes endured at the height of China's unparalleled economic transformation from the early 1980s to the beginning of the new millennium. Kong Ergou states that one of his main aims in writing the novel was to document the events and changes within Chinese society during this period of socioeconomic transition, and how they affected the life experiences and morals of the ordinary Chinese (Kong Ergou, interview, 2010). In doing so, the novel also functions as a social commentary and critical retrospection on the economic reformations and their social ramifications over the past thirty years in China. In this way, Kong's gangland characters are similar to the marginalised and disadvantaged figures in the so-called sixth-generation Chinese underground director Jia Zhangke's films. In filming the stories and depicting the boring and aimless living conditions of the victims of China's huge economic transformation, Jia aims to develop a documentary/fictional hybrid record of the rapid and drastic changes engulfing China (Cui, 2010; Lin, 2005). Through his calm and thought-provoking cinematic language, Jia embarks on the journey of a liberal intellectual in contemporary China, who offers his sharp observations and inspirational social comments about the ever-changing realities and problems of China under renovation. In particular, Kong Ergou's gangster characters resemble some of the characters in Jia Zhangke's

films, such as *Sanxiahaoren* (*Still Life*, 2007). *Still Life* similarly demonstrates the influence of Hong Kong gangster films on mainland movie and TV drama productions: one of the film's characters is inspired by John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and tragically attempts to model his behaviour on the gangster hero in the film starring the famous Hong Kong actor Chow Yun-fat. In *Past Events*, Zhao Hongbing and his triad brothers' performances are similar to the character in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* in terms of their "hooligan" behaviour and chivalrous personalities, as they try to copy the classical image and charisma of the Chow Yun-fat role in *A Better Tomorrow*.

In yet another parallel with Jia Zhangke's film creations, Kong Ergou's *Past Events* also acts as witness to the controversial and sometimes even damaging social changes China encountered in the epoch of transition from the closed China of Mao to the modern-day Opening Up experiment. The glaring divergence between the gang members' behaviour and outlook on life during the 1980s – a time when the Maoist revolutionary and collective value system arguably still made sense – and that in the 1990s and after – when a more individualist and money-oriented worldview dominate people's psyche – reveals the momentous transformation experienced by China and its people during those three turbulent decades. Kong also makes a clear demarcation between the content of each of the five volumes of *Past Events*. He labelled the first volume the "classical era of the gangs". This era spans from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, the embryonic period of China's market reforms, and an era where he highlights the chivalrous spirit of gang members where their actions remind him of the traditional hero-bandit and knight-errant characters in classic Chinese literary and movie pieces. The other four volumes focus mainly on the money-driven and pragmatic Chinese society to which the gang members adjusted their value system and expectations. As part of their adjustment, they discarded their magnanimous attitudes and fight only for profit and advantage. In this way, Kong Ergou shapes the correlation between the development of the gangs and their underworld and the general direction of Chinese society, using the former as a microscope to better see the latter.

Focusing on the network TV series, which is adapted from the first volume of Kong's novel, and the one that portrays the classical era of the gangs, this paper examines three interrelated themes in the novel and its TV adaptation. It is a reading of the novel and the TV drama narrative that takes three separate but related approaches. The first "dimension" focuses on the troubled minds of the "trouble(d)shooters", the first-generation gang members, as they emerged from the initial stage of post-Mao China. The texts suggest that the advent of the triads echoes the social unrest, mental anxiety and bewilderment that was rampant across China during these times of economic reconfiguration. Further, the spiritual disposition of the gang members, as embodied in their brutal street fighting, strikes a familiar chord in relation to the times of Mao and portrays a vision of how the Maoist revolution, with its cruelty and chaos, affected China through this period of transition. The second "dimension" is postmodern and sees the parodies of the official rhetoric and ideology of revolutionary China in the manners, conduct and beliefs of the gang members described in the novel and the TV drama. The postmodern stance reveals the complicated emotions of the Chinese people towards the Mao era and its revolutionary legacies entrenched in contemporary Chinese popular culture products. These paradoxical sentiments simultaneously show a bottom-up totalitarian nostalgia for the Maoist past and a postmodern cynical and deconstructive attitude towards the same dictatorial discourse. The chivalrous and classical spirit of the gang members is the focus of the last "dimension". The gang members

treasure the old-fashioned ethical virtues and collegial bonds of both ancient and Maoist China. They value brotherhood and help the weak and oppressed, which casts an obvious but contrasting shadow on the moral deterioration of current Chinese society, where all energy and enthusiasm is directed towards profit and material earnings. Here, the personal and social responsibility, and the high quality ethics embodied by the gang members, shine a satirical light on the unsympathetic and traumatised personality of present-day Chinese living in the competitive jungle that is modern society.

The Trouble(d)shooter/Gangster Youths of the Post-revolutionary Reform Era

The central figures in the "classical era" of the gangs, as depicted in the first volume of *Past Events* and its TV adaptation, bear an uncanny resemblance to the trouble(d)shooter characters in the works of Wang Shuo, the famed Beijing-based Hooligan Literature writer. At the end of the 1980s, Wang Shuo's Hooligan Literature began to enjoy high esteem among Chinese readers. He was especially appreciated by those chic and cynical youths living in the big cities, for his "shunning of loftiness" themes (Wang, 1993) and semantic features such as witty remarks and sharp satire as conveyed by the Beijing dialect. Those trouble(d) shooters that constitute the majority of Wang Shuo's characters are a group of youths who are discontented with the social reality but cannot find an outlet for their indignation (Yau, 1993; Mi, 1998). They therefore adopt a playful and cynical stance in order to articulate their frustration towards society. In other words, "troubleshooting" is understood as a spirit, a force and a kind of action art. With his pen, Wang Shuo delivers a ferocious attack on the bureaucratic and aloof manner of the CCP cadres and officials, and also on the hypocritical and idealised customs of the social elites and intellectuals.

In contrast to these people who sit on the upper rung of the sociocultural ladder and enjoy the privileges of the recent economic reforms, the trouble(d)shooters are side-lined and deprived during the economic renovations. These youths are often the non-conformist elements in their work units, which are run by the state and dominated by the conservative and crooked Party cadres. They are either pushed aside or forced to leave voluntarily due to their failure to endure the unpleasant environment and their colleagues in the work units. When they try to find new jobs they most often encounter setbacks due to their lack of qualifications and professional skills, so they become the victims of market competition and are scorned by their family members and ostracised by society. Thus, they develop a cynical attitude towards society and feel that they are victimised by the economic rectification project which has only benefited others. These trouble(d)shooter youths spent their formative years in Maoist China, where their individuality and freedom were exploited by the collective and its politics-driven ideology. Moreover, their opportunity to pursue higher education was interrupted by the irrational and radical campaigns and struggles of the time. Consequently, they do not have the knowledge and skills that would make them useful commodities in the intense market competition of the post-revolutionary epoch. The ideological brainwashing of the socialist collective and revolutionary dogmas leaves an imprint on the youths' personas. Their altruism and optimistic brashness cause them to be even more out of step with the pragmatic stance and philosophy of the capitalist market economic system.

Consequently, these banished youths adopt a "playful" outlook on life in terms of experimenting with "unconventional" professions and behaviours. For example, some of them become self-employed businessmen; some just spend all their spare time chasing girls; and some even engage in immoral or illegal conduct such as stealing and swindling.

Despite these "abnormal" acts, Wang Shuo's trouble(d)shooter characters do not intend any evil: they are just being playful. By portraying this dichotomy, Wang is reflecting the non-official world of China in transition; a world full of paradoxes, perplexities and uncertainties. The trouble(d)shooters actually want to help those in need. This motivation was explicated very clearly in a popular 1980s feature film, *Wanzhu* (*The Troubleshooters*, 1988), which was adapted from Wang Shuo's novel. In this film, three unemployed youths establish a company designed to solve the problems and difficulties of ordinary people. Although some of the film's storylines are bizarre or even farcical, it portrays the youths as generous, sympathetic, naïve and cynical, all at the same time.

In *Past Events*, Kong Ergou also depicts a group of unemployed youths who find themselves in a similar situation to those trouble(d)shooters in Wang Shuo's works. For example, Zhao Hongbing, the central character, is a demobilised serviceman of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Zhao is from a high-ranking Party official's family in a city in northeast China. He is assigned to a job as an assistant to a Party cadre at a local bank after his demobilisation. Yet Zhao's job is not one that requires any professional expertise and experience; it only requires him to carefully and diligently "wait on" his direct leader. Zhao, although lacking knowledge and competitiveness, is a hot-blooded youth who prides himself on his past role combating the Vietnamese enemy (during the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979), and his job soon bores him, leaving him discontented. This discontent becomes especially acute when he witnesses his leader continually using public money on personal entertainment. Unable to endure his leader's corrupt behaviour any longer, Zhao reacts violently and hits him, which results in his dismissal and a short stint in jail. Later, Zhao and his former comrade-in-arms during the Sino-Vietnamese War, Beijing native Xiao Shen, go into business together, opening a small motel in his local region.

Some of Zhao Hongbing's former comrades-in-arms also join the growing commercial trend and establish small-scale and often illegal businesses. The illicit nature of many of these business activities is a significant element of the stories, and is presented as an indication of the unstable and problematic social and economic dynamics of China's post-Mao reform period. Li Si, for example, opens an illegal gambling shop. Another friend, Xiao Ji, publicly runs a recycling centre and also secretly excavates ancient tombs for relics that he sells illegally. When jostling for a valuable historical relic with another grave robber, Xiao Ji is seriously injured, which leads to gang warfare. Later in the story yet another gang fight breaks out with a group that runs pornography and prostitution operations. In these scenes, the illegal conduct of Zhao Hongbing and his friends is portrayed more as a consequence of economic and social change than as personal decadence and vice. The transformation of Zhao Hongbing and his friends from unemployed, troubled youths into members of an organised gang is intended to reflect the economic insecurity, social conflict and emotional unease that dominated Chinese society during the early reform era.

The fighting between the different gangs in *Past Events* is also significant for its viciousness, and it serves as a reminder of the violence and chaos associated with the Red Guards in Mao's China. During the confusion and chaos of the Cultural Revolution, youths often became involved in street skirmishes ranging from small-scale confrontations to large-scale

urban warfare using ad hoc weapons (iron bars, knives, wooden clubs and big-buckled belts) to inflict often deadly force on the enemy – other youths. There are numerous scenes in the TV adaptation of *Past Events* that show two hostile gangs jostling for the dominant position in various disputes, and always willing and ready to spill each other's blood. The detailed fighting scenes, the close-up filming of the killing moments, the mortal wounds oozing blood, the blood that splashes onto the camera screen, the ear piercing screaming of the injured, all evoke curiosity, horror, fantasy and visual ecstasy among the audience. These brutal scenes of fighting amongst the gangsters were similar to the way in which disagreements were settled and revenge was taken during the Cultural Revolution. This social violence reflects the unscrupulous and outrageous conduct and reactions to "enemies" that were cultivated and promoted by the political and social movements and struggles during socialist revolutionary times. Even after the revolutionary era, when all the normal social routines, orders and morals were disrupted and crushed, people's behaviour still bears the scars of that tumultuous and disastrous era.

Moreover, the 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong tradition of gangster films, in particular the factional battles and bloody confrontations in Hong Kong films, obviously had an impact on the production of *Past Events*. The Hong Kongese director John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* can be regarded as the most representative and successful gangster movie of the 1980s and 1990s. In this movie, "traditional" Chinese values such as brotherhood and loyalty are acknowledged explicitly. Furthermore, the successful Hong Kong film series *Guhuozai* (*Young and Dangerous*) had a similar impact on *Past Events*, such as in the ferocious and bloody street fighting scenes among the young hooligans who brutally hack their enemies with machetes and choppers. Here, these highly popular Hong Kong gangster movies which achieved great popularity in mainland China via the black (pirated) market have inspired the creation and production of *Past Events*.

In a time when the previous outdated economy was being replaced by a new and emerging economic form, there were undoubtedly many problems and maladies to be overcome. Thus, given the underlying social malaise with all its associated challenges, it was extremely difficult for those troubled youths to overcome their inherited burden and survive and profit against such a complex socioeconomic backdrop. I believe here, in his gangster saga view of recent Chinese history, Kong Ergou has omitted a very crucial occurrence – the 1989 Tiananmen student democratic demonstration during which angry students aired their concerns about the ongoing corruption within official and economic circles since the economic reforms. Perhaps due to the consideration of government censorship of sensitive themes and topics, Kong Ergou intentionally avoided this being filtered out and blocked by the official discourse and media control devices.

A Satirical Reading of Revolutionary Discourse: Totalitarian Nostalgia vs Postmodern Deconstruction

In what is termed the "classical era of gangs" in the first volume of *Past Events* and its TV drama adaptation, Kong Ergou opens to view the formation of the criminal underworld immediately after the Opening Up reforms. At the intersection of the old social and ideological canons and the newly created economic and political conditions, the Chinese people experience a painful readjustment. Zhao Hongbing and his comrades-in-arms are examples of this excruciating transition. They were all passionate and heroic fighters in the

Sino-Vietnamese War, when they were also brainwashed by revolutionary dogmas, blind optimism and the cult of Mao. Mao's socialist directives dominated their behaviour and thinking for a long time. Maoist thought not only shaped their thinking during the revolutionary era, but also during their time in the underworld of crime and misdemeanour.

For instance, after every dispute or fight with another gang, Zhao Hongbing and his gang held a meeting where they would review their experiences in order to improve their performance in future encounters. As Kong Ergou comments: "They are good at generalising and summarising, and undertaking criticism and self-criticism. In this world, there is probably no other group of gangsters who organise a meeting to summarise their experience of fighting"[3] (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 3). An example of their self-critical reviews may be found when the Zhao Hongbing gang utilises a 4-point set of criteria from which to gauge the most important attributes of a good fighter. First, one must take the initiative to hit others; second, one must dare to risk his life in fighting; third, one must be well-versed in kung fu and have enormous fighting experience; and fourth and last, one must be a smart negotiator. The habit of critiquing and summarising using Mao's military thought and strategy is thus copied by the gang members in order to increase the efficacy of their fights (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 3). In another meeting, the gang members further develop their deeply self-critical attitude, when they believe that although they have won the current battle, there are too many strategic loopholes that they now need to fix, such as gathering more information about their rivals before engaging them in battle (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 2).

In addition to replicating and following Mao's thoughts and strategies, the gangsters imitate the speech and rhetoric of Mao. In one of their post-fight review meetings, Xiao Shen, Zhao's Beijing comrade-in-arms, argues that they must rely on savage fighting and careful calculation to consolidate their forces and have an impact in the local region. He draws on the famous sayings of Mao that "power grows from the barrel of the gun" and "to strategically take the enemy lightly and tactically take the enemy seriously" as evidence of his borrowed viewpoint. Mao Zedong thought and military strategy, and the blind faith in and admiration of them, reached their peak during the Cultural Revolution, but are revived here by the gangsters in both the novel and the show. As Xiao Shen explains:

> The most advanced thoughts in the world are the thoughts of Mao Zedong. People in the West believe in Christianity. The ancient Chinese have deep faith in Buddhism and the Confucian canons. People in the Middle East believe in the Koran. However, in socialist China, people believe in the thought of Mao Zedong, which is not something simple but an unfathomable philosophy. For example, we have eight people here in the room at the moment, what if, suddenly, thirty people rush in and intend to beat us up, what should we do? (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 8)

"Run away," another gangster replies. Then Xiao Shen continues:

> Of course we have to run, but you should learn what is meant by "retreat in order to advance", as running away is not our ultimate purpose. What we should do is wait until the strongest and most militant seven or eight of them bear down on us, then we hit them relentlessly and kill them with one volley. Then we should retreat and wait for the new round of strikes that will be launched by them, and then we hit them ferociously and retreat again. This is the admonishment of Chairman Mao to General Chen Yi. In other words, we should divide the enemy and destroy them separately. And these are the thoughts of Mao Zedong which can be used to guide any person and solve any matter even today; they are still the greatest thoughts that have ever existed. Therefore, long live the great and invincible thoughts of Mao!
>
> … Let's make a toast to the great thoughts of Mao Zedong!

Long live Chairman Mao! (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 8)

Here, the resurrection of and reverence for the icon that is Mao are reflected in contemporary Chinese popular culture products. This reveals an interesting cultural phenomenon that has been labelled "totalitarian nostalgia" (Lu, 2007). This nostalgia for the Maoist revolutionary past is a bottom-up sensation that is approved and endorsed by official ideology and is also manipulated and used by the consumer-led market to turn out profitable cultural commodities. From the political perspective, this totalitarian nostalgia occurs due to the negative consequences of the economic and social reforms in post-socialist, post-revolutionary China (Lu, 2007, p. 131). Therefore, nostalgia for the Mao era is fabricated to cater to the emotions of a contemporary Chinese audience who harbour a longing for the revolutionary past and its idealist spirits which are embedded in the nostalgic imagery. The revival of Mao's Little Red Books, his images and other symbolic items of the Cultural Revolution, and a "Red wave" of commercially packaged revolutionary songs, plays and films not only floods the market, but also feeds a certain yearning for the totalitarian past (Cui, 2003, p. 51; Ross, 2005, p. 6). This phenomenon is an oblique way of protesting the social stratification and related problems caused by the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping and his followers since the end of the Cultural Revolution (Honig, 2003, p. 175).

Alternately, from an economic viewpoint, this bottom-up totalitarian nostalgia is taken advantage of by the market to create profitable cultural products. Revolutionary nostalgia TV dramas are an example of a cultural upshot which has benefited from totalitarian nostalgia. They aggrandise the Chinese revolutionary memories, in particular the Cultural Revolution's "good old days", for example in the brutal street fighting scenes of the Red Guards and the ordinary confused and troubled youths. Embedded in these revolutionary nostalgia TV drama serials are the "historical facts" and the ideals of the Revolution that are labelled by Jameson (1991, p. 66) "stereotypes of historical realities", "spectacle" or "simulacrum". These so-called cultural "facts" do not adhere to their historical period, lack continuity and chronological veracity, and are manipulated for the contemporary Chinese consumer-led cultural market with the sole purpose of exploiting their charm and appeal. Another example that taps into very similar sentiments of "postmodern deconstruction" is Jiang Wen's 2010 film *Rang zidan fei* (*Let the Bullets Fly*, 2010), which deals with a heroic and "chivalrous" gang and its fight against an unscrupulous and tyrannical local businessman. The success of *Let the Bullets Fly* clarifies the popularity of the spirit of deconstruction, "rebelliousness" and "chivalry" within the domain of present-day Chinese media production.

The TV adaptation of the first volume of *Past Events* shares some features with revolution nostalgia plays. In the TV series, the group fighting scenes between different gangs, which are full of vindictiveness and malevolence, are depicted as something resistant, sacred, solemn and stirring. From the audience's perspective, the fighting is not the actions of felonious, misguided, unscrupulous youths, but gallant actions that should be commended and admired. Moreover, when the behaviour of the gangsters is interwoven with revolutionary routines, customs and rhetoric, the positive and chivalrous images of the gangsters are further emphasised. For example, when the gangsters bid each other farewell, they salute in military style, and in one scene, after a successful fight, they sing the military song of soldiers from the Mao era, "Coming Back after Target Practice" (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 4). Similarly, when describing the post-battle review meeting of the gangsters, Kong Ergou employs official language: "This is a conference that builds on the past and prepares for the future; it is not only a gathering of big and small gangsters, it is more a meeting which is

of significant importance to the livelihood of the people of the entire city. And it is also a meeting that concerns the fate of the gangs across the city" (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 14). Near the end of the first volume of *Past Events*, Kong writes (this is adapted into a voiceover in the last episode of the network TV play):

> This marks the end of the classical era of the gangs. It was an unforgettable period. People can say that it was a good time, or people may think that it was a time full of violence and cruelty. However, we have to admit that it was a time that is worth remembering by all men with courage. (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 23)

In these passages and scenes from the novel and the play, the revolutionary slogans and official rhetoric intermingle well with personal emotions and the development of the gang's underworld. Consequently, the actions and events that take place within the gang's underworld are driven by revolutionary ideals and mainstream ideology, and create the effect of a sacred atmosphere. The over-politicised behaviours that are inherited from the revolutionary era seem not to be viewed as unreasonable; on the contrary, they are idolised and sublimated. However, from a different perspective, these postmodern parodies of the revolutionary practices, mores and magniloquence of the gangsters also bear a canon-mocking imprint (Tao, 2007). As the revolutionary slogans are articulated by the gangsters, and the revolutionary ideology is made real by the gang fights, the ideational socialist revolutionary discourse is de-politicised and de-sublimated. The readers and viewers could easily detect the misalignment and discord between the orthodox and sacred official tutelage and the heterodox and dissident actions of the gangsters, which generates a humorous effect that caters to fun-seeking contemporary readers and viewers.

A Gang Revival of Chivalry in Early Post-Mao Society

Chivalry is a classical and eternal theme in the legends and literature of ancient China. It is also a spirit that is often found in martial arts novels in both traditional classics and contemporary popular works. For example, it is to be found in *Water Margin* and *Sanguoyanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), two of the four most famous classical Chinese novels, and also in a group of contemporary kung fu novels such as *Shediao yingxiongzhuan* (*The Legend of the Condor Heroes*) and *Shendiaoxialu* (*Divine Eagle Gallant Knight*), by the Hong Kong-based writer Jin Yong. In traditional Chinese culture, the chivalrous knight follows Confucian idealism and has a noble spirit and an allegiance to the motherland and the people. These figures sacrifice themselves to protect the small and weak; they punish the evil, assist the poor and restore justice for all; they are all martial arts masters with consummate and rare skills, who enjoy a prestigious reputation in the brotherhood; and they all cherish the ties of friendship.

In Chinese cultural works that deal with the social order of the brotherhood, the chivalrous knights were normally depicted as either outlaws who were wrongly punished by the government and resorted to the brotherhood of the underworld to seek righteousness (such as in the *Water Margin)*, or recluses who had seen through the veneer of corrupt officialdom and the worldly desires of ordinary human beings (such as the Li Mubai character in Ang Lee's Oscar-winning film *Wohucanglong*/*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*). These gallant martial artists have a common interest in fairness and justice, which wins them the respect of the audience. Similarly, in *Past Events* the chivalry and ethos of Zhao Hongbing and his peers are highlighted and applauded. Living in a derelict society which was ravaged

by a series of political and social upheavals and is now trying to cope with a newly adopted economic mechanism, Zhao Hongbing and his gang single-mindedly devote themselves to upholding justice and acting for Heaven to perform righteous deeds. These hot-blooded youths, besides fighting for survival, were also eager to maintain a just order within society, and when they saw no legal option for justice they resorted to the illegal underworld, where they hoped they would finally be able to realise their dreams. Thus, these first-generation gangsters of the classical era of gangs are portrayed more as idealistic vigilantes who seek higher morals and fairness than as underworld criminals trying to survive in a profit-driven society, which are attributes more suited to those second and third generations of gangsters of the 1990s and later.

Several scenes in the TV play show Zhao Hongbing and other gangsters at meetings where they exchange and summarise experiences and opinions. These meetings are reminiscent of the gathering of outlaw members at the Juyitang (literally the Hall of Get Together and Rise-up), which is the place where the desperado heroes in *Water Margin* congregate before and after they launch an action, and where they hold celebrations, meetings and farewells. In their sessions, the gangsters in *Past Events* regularly re-state their principal guidelines for action, which are to abide by their rules, to be loyal to friends, to be open and candid, to never play mean tricks, and to espouse righteousness on behalf of Heaven. One of their principal parameters is to "combat the strongest, the evil forces in society" (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 4). In this way, they differentiate themselves from those gangs that are just thieves, hooligans and lowbrows and who believe only themselves to be the best gang in the underworld. For example, Zhang Yue, a member of Zhao Hongbing's gang, kills a villain who has only recently been released from jail. This man is exceedingly sinister and is a criminal who cares little for his fellow citizens and is often cruel towards them (*Past Events*, 2012, episode 8). Although Zhang Yue is sentenced to prison for two years for the murder, he feels proud of himself rather than regretful about what he did. The Zhao Hongbing gang only befriend other gangsters who have a similar outlook, and who are always mindful to clearly distinguish between love and hate and to abhor evil.

Based on his own observations, Kong Ergou expresses in *Past Events* that the biggest difference between the gangsters of the 1980s and those of the 1990s is that the former stress morality, embody a chivalrous spirit, and fight for fairness and justice, whereas the latter only compete to see who is more evil and ruthless, and only go into combat for money and profit. This distinction between "classical gangsters" and "modern hooligans" verifies the sociocultural metamorphoses evoked by the economic changes in post-Mao China. In a time and world full of material desires and selfish pursuits, the philosophy and faith of the gangsters also degenerates and deteriorates. The once chivalrous ethos is replaced by egotistical and pragmatic calculations and tricks. Here, an interesting connection between the traditional values of *Water Margin* and the values of Maoist China is the praise the Communists (and Mao) had for this novel, as these Maoist soldiers and fighters compared themselves to the heroes of *Water Margin*. Thus, the conversion of the mentality of the gang members in the later volumes of *Past Events*, by way of a fictional account, faithfully represents the changes in morality and beliefs of contemporary Chinese people during this transformative period. The loss of chivalry by the gangs, as depicted in *Past Events*, serves as a metaphor for the widely perceived lack of morality in the present-day Chinese psyche. There are numerous examples of this, and most readers will already be aware of them, but for the sake of clarity and as a reminder, I provide the following example to expose the unsympathetic attitude

of ordinary Chinese people: in May 2014, when a young woman was beaten to death by a group of six people in a Macdonald's restaurant in Shandong province just because she refused to give her telephone number, no one intervened on her behalf. There were many onlookers in and outside the restaurant, including many men, but no one offered to help to save the life of the young woman.

After this incident, and a multitude of similar examples, many well-known Chinese social critics, hosts and celebrities, together with thousands of Chinese netizens, bemoaned the widely perceived loss of morality and compassion of the entire Chinese nation. There was criticism and self-analysis of the hibernating Chinese conscience, but most people also admitted that they too may have failed to help the victim in that case. My reading of the chivalrous spirit shown by Zhao Hongbing and other gangsters in both the novel and the TV drama might also strike a chord with many Chinese people in respect to how society has lost its sense of justice and lacks the courage to defend the weak and needy. Both the book and the TV play fulfil their function as social commentary and critique, as the communal obligations and high virtue epitomised by the gang members cast a satirical shadow over the insensitive and fractured nature of contemporary Chinese society.

Concluding Remarks

The underworld of criminal gangs in post-Mao China did not attract much attention from professional writers until the emergence of amateur cyber writers. The darkly anti-social iconoclastic characteristics attributed to this subgenre may be seen as too sensitive and taboo by the CCP propaganda institutions and organs. With the introduction and wide availability of the internet, alongside the "magic" of a consumer-led market economy, its "outing" as a topic was not only inevitable but also appreciated. As a literary phenomenon, gang novels have introduced many thought-provoking and inspirational ideas for readers to ponder. There are many "dimensions", such as those covered in the discussion of the text in this paper. There is, for example, the concurrence of the development of the gangs and the transformation and vicissitudes endured by Chinese society during the economic and cultural transitions of post-revolutionary China. This "dimension" uncovers the social unrest and psychological perplexity and confusion that overwhelmed the Chinese people. Another "dimension" shows how the legacies of Mao and his revolutionary discourse were adapted by the gangsters in resolving problems and disputes they encountered during the early epoch of the socioeconomic makeover. This "dimension" serves as a symbol of how the Maoist past and its rituals are remembered by contemporary Chinese people.

Another "dimension" sees the nostalgia and admiration for the totalitarian past, together with a postmodern parody and deconstruction of Maoist rhetoric, thought and ideology, juxtaposed in contemporary popular cultural products. This demonstrates a complex and obscure set of emotions held by ordinary Chinese towards socialist revolutionary memories. A paradoxical love/hate sentiment shows the Chinese people's criticism of the lofty and blind optimism and collectivism promoted by the Mao regime, and that their treasured youth and freedom have been wasted by the revolutionary discourse. It also expresses their protest and condemnation towards the social disparity and injustice resulting from the rapid and radical economic and social reconfiguration engendered by the Opening Up reforms. Moreover, the chivalrous spirit espoused by the gangsters living in the classical era of the gangs serves as a foil to the changing morality in present-day China as noticed by many contemporary

Chinese people. Here, if we take into consideration the specific historical context of the production, circulation and reception of *Past Events* (the years 2007, 2009 and 2012), the popularity of the text among Chinese netizens may also reflect the political atmosphere of the time and echo the Chinese government's attitudes towards Maoism. Apart from the government's attitude at the time, which was multifaceted and complex, there was also the popular nostalgia for the "good old days" against a socially unjust and morally deteriorating present. Thus, the social obligations and high morality exemplified by the gallant behaviour of the gangsters mock the widely-held traumatised persona of contemporary Chinese people who are trapped in a money-seeking society full of pragmatic ideas and no ideals. Thus, although *Past Events* was considered to be "unhealthy" by the government, it was also a good example of a story that fulfils a function in terms of offering social commentary and critique, and a tale that will likely strike a chord with many Chinese citizens.

Notes

1. Network TV dramas are normally produced by entertainment video sites and can only be viewed on-line. Episodes of these types of dramas are normally around 30 minutes and the actors are often amateurs.
2. Rongshuxia Web was one of the biggest Chinese cyber original literature sites and was later taken over by the Shengda Literature Group, the biggest network original literature website in present-day China.
3. All of the translations of Kong Ergou's original works that appear in this paper are the author's.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr William Lakos and two anonymous reviewers for *Asian Studies Review* for their helpful comments on this article.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London & New York: Routledge.

Cui, S. (2003). *Women through the lens: Gender and nation in a century of Chinese cinema*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Cui, S. (2010). Boundary shifting: New generation filmmaking and Jia Zhangke's films. In Y. Zhu & S. Rosen (Eds.), *Art, politics, and commerce in Chinese cinema* (pp. 175–194). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Hockx, M. (2005). Virtual Chinese literature: A comparative case study of online poetry communities. In M. Hockx & J. Strauss (Eds.), *Culture in the contemporary PRC* (pp. 148–169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Honig, E. (2003). Socialist sex: The Cultural Revolution revisited. *Modern China, 29*(2), 143–175.

Interview with Kong Ergou. *Sohu Talking*, 4 May 2010. Retrieved from http://cul.sohu.com/s2011/kongergou/

Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism: The cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jia, Z. (Dir.). (2007). *Sanxiahaoren*. Shanghai Film Studio et al.

Jiang, W. (Dir.). (2010). *Rang zidan fei*. Emperor Entertainment Group Limited & Emei Film Corporation.
Kong, E. (2007). *Dongbei wangshi: hendao fengyun ershi nian*. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House.
Lau, A. (Dir.). (1996). *Guhuozai*. Partners Company Limited.
Lee, A. (Dir.). (2000). *Wohucanglong*. Sony Pictures & Edko Film Limited.
Li, Y. (Dir.). (2012). *Dongbei wangshi: hendao fengyun ershi nian*. Released on letv.com
Lin, X. (2005). Jia Zhangke's cinematic trilogy: A journey across the ruins of post-Mao China. In S. H. Lu & E. Y.-Y. Yeh (Eds.), *Chinese language film: Historiography, poetics, politics* (pp. 186–209). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Lu, H. S. (2007). *Chinese modernity and global biopolitics: Studies in literature and visual culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Mi, J. (Dir.). (1988). *Wanzhu*. Emet Film Studio.
Mi, J. (1998). *Lunwanzhumen. Zhongguo jiaoyu yu shehui, 31*(1), 8–15.
Ross, A. (2005). Mao Zedong's impact on cultural politics in the West. *Cultural Politics, 1*(1), 5–22.
Shi, N. (2007). *Shuhuzhuan*. Beijing: People's Literature Press.
Tao, D. (2007). Making fun of the canon in contemporary China: Literature and cynicism in a post-totalitarian society. *Cultural Politics, 3*(2), 203–221.
Wang, M. (1993). Duobi conggao. *Dushu, 1*, 1–14.
Woo, J. (Dir.). (1986). *Yingxiongbense*. Cinema City Company Limited.
Yang, M. M.-h. (2002). Mass media and transnational subjectivity in Shanghai: Notes on (re)cosmopolitanism in a Chinese metropolis. In F. D. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod, & B. Larkin (Eds.), *Media worlds: Anthropology on new terrain* (pp. 189–210). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Yau, E. C. M. (1993). International fantasy and the 'New Chinese Cinema'. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 14*(3), 95–108.
Zhang, Y. (2014, 29 May). Bushi diyici, ye bushi zuihou yici: wangluo wenxue 'saohuangdafei' shinianji. *Southern Weekend*. Retrieved from http://www.infzm.com/content/101018