

### 3. The Politics of Fictional Medicine

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Entertainment, Propaganda, and Education in Chinese Medical Dramas in the Xi Era<sup>1</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

Based on the analysis of six TV series, this paper explores how Chinese medical drama embeds medical imagery with evolving ideological constructs representing the political orientation of contemporary China. A brief examination of the characteristics of Chinese medical drama genre, the healthcare system in the People's Republic of China, and the regulatory framework of C-drama will provide the background for the analysis of the representation of national and international politics in the corpus selected. The findings will show how Chinese medical TV series dramatize various key social relationships (e.g., doctor/patient, patient/family, family/society, society/nation, traditional/modern, national/international) and social changes (e.g., ethics, morality, wealth gaps, reforms) with the purpose of both problematizing the current issues China is facing and instructing the audiences on the path to be taken under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

#### KEYWORDS

Chinese medical drama; core values; Covid-19; PRC healthcare; TCM.

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## **Research Background and Design**

The article explores how different strands of ideological constructs and value systems are incorporated in a sample of contemporary Chinese TV series belonging to the medical drama genre. Current literature suggests that televised procedures and prognoses affect the viewers' health knowledge and behaviors (Kim and Kim 2019, Pilz et al. 2020, Bitter et al. 2021). In addition, through dramatization of key relationships in societies (i.e., Self/body, patient/doctor, physician/healthcare system), medical TV series influence the audiences' perceptions of hospitals, as well as the patients' trust in doctors (Chen 2019, Kohler et al. 2019, Tian and Yoo 2020). Studies mainly focus on popular American productions, with a subset devoted to analyses of series from other cultural and social contexts; notably scarce are analyses of the Chinese market (with exceptions such as He et al. 2018, Chen 2019, 2020, Li 2022).

Yet, 21<sup>st</sup>-century China is a prolific producer of TV series, able to compete, quantitatively and for audience size if not for outreach power, with other global players (Cai 2017), also with a growing production of indigenous medical drama. At the same time, the Chinese Party-State tightly controls audiovisual popular culture through regulation and supervision (Zhu 2022). Ideological and political considerations make medical drama fall within China's highly codified and increasingly explicit propagandistic and pedagogic mandate for TV entertainment (Cai 2016, Zou 2023). Moreover, medical figures have long enjoyed a privileged status in Chinese post-war culture; as Cai (2017: 45) writes: "in Maoist China, doctors were promoted as exemplary citizens who not only saved lives and helped the sick but also had many noble merits such as their complete and selfless devotion and sacrifice to their career and country".

Against this background, this paper investigates how entertainment, propaganda, and education intertwine in Chinese-produced medical TV

dramas in the era of Xi Jinping, the incumbent General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC). After providing an introduction to Chinese medical TV drama, the Chinese healthcare system, and the regulatory scaffolding of C-drama, the study focuses on six series from Mainland China: *Angel Heart* (*Xinshu* 心术, Dragon TV, 2012), *ER Doctors* (*Jizhen ke yisheng* 急诊科医生, Dragon TV, 2017), *Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine* (*Lao Zhongyi* 老中医, CCTV, 2018), *With You* (or *Together*, *Zai yiqi* 在一起, CCTV, 2020), *Ebola Fighters* (*Daguo dandang zhi Aibola qianxian* 大国担当之埃博拉前线, BTV & Online platforms, 2021), and *Dr. Tang* (*Guanyu Tang yisheng de yiqie* 关于唐医生的一切, iQiyi, 2022). The corpus has been selected based on the diachronic distribution across Xi's mandates (2012-2013 to today) and the relevance of these shows in terms of characteristics and popularity. To this sample we applied the tools of qualitative thematic analysis through collaborative coding, based on the work of Rocchi and Pescatore (2022), identifying recurring themes and topics. Two main foci will be discussed: fictional medicine and national politics and fictional medicine and international politics. Furthermore, to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on Chinese medical drama, some considerations will be dedicated to "fictional pandemic politics". The findings aim to contribute to the scholarship on the depiction in the entertainment media of various cultural, social, and political tensions by introducing case studies pertaining to non-Western contexts.

The genre of Chinese medical TV drama has been defined as "TV series with hospitals as the background and medical staff as the main characters, mainly depicting the work and life of healthcare workers and showcasing their daily treatment of patients" (Li Z. 2020: 61). Li Zunyi references real-life plots, a visual focus on medical procedures, and a narrative focus on doctor-patient relationships and the "psychological journey of the medical staff" as the lynchpins of the genre, which "trigger the audience not only to think deeply about real life, but also reflect on human choices, sense of morality, and social problems" (ibid.). Similarly, Lü Weiwei (2014, cited in Zhang 2021: 81) grounds medical drama in the depiction of social contradictions and conflicts, professional ethics and individual dilemmas, and discussions around the value of life.

Building on the codes of its Western counterpart, Chinese medical drama has developed its own characteristics both in terms of structure and content, becoming strongly allegorical of the social tensions and political orientation

of contemporary China. Since the first TV series featuring medical elements – *Doctor Xin and Doctor Chen* (*Xin daifu he Chen yisheng* 辛大夫和陈医生, CCTV, 1959) – there have been three stages in the localization of the genre: the origins (between 1959 and 1999); the development stage (from 1999 to 2010); and maturity (from 2010 to today) (An 2020, Li M. 2020, Nie and Chi 2021, Zhang 2021, Zhou 2019). Early dramas featured the medical component purely as a narrative element (Zhang 2021), but with *The Pediatrician* (*Er ke yisheng* 儿科医生, Da Yue Film, 1999), the genre began to pursue medical professionalism, embracing “the two Ps” – Professional & Personal – of the narrative mode of American medical dramas – while focusing on shaping the image of the medical staff (Zhou 2019). Progressively shedding the American and Japanese influence, maturity was reached with the success of *The Doctors* (*Yi zhe er xin* 医者仁心, CCTV, 2010), the first domestic medical TV series to fully reflect the doctors’ professional life and practical issues, followed by *Angel Heart*, which established the mix of genres as a defining characteristic of Chinese medical TV drama (ibid.).

Chinese experts and government policies agree in assigning medical drama important pedagogic responsibilities but how successful the genre is in fulfilling them depends on the product: for instance, commentators have recognized the effectiveness of *Angel Heart* in positively reshaping the doctor-patient relationship and emphasizing the virtues of model doctors and nurses with the aim of soothing the tension between the healthcare system and the patients – on the background of the wider political strategic goal of building a “harmonious society” pursued by Hu Jintao’s administration (2002-2012) (Cai 2017). At the same time, the genre has also been criticized for using such topics only superficially to attract audiences, often just “scratching the surface” of social issues (Zhang 2021). For instance, Zhou (2019: 76) argues that Chinese medical drama generally takes the medical aspect as complementary and the emotional one as substance: in fact, in *ER Doctors*, the various sentimental storylines portrayed have been found to disregard medical treatments and, although constituting important dramatic components, possibly weaken the discussion around the medical profession. The same can be said for the “love triangle” depicted in *Angel Heart*, with the clarification that, in this case, the plot serves the purpose of shedding light on the phenomenon of the so-called “leftover women”: urban, mature, and financially independent professional single women who, having missed their best chance to get married, suffer a social stigma in contemporary China (Cai 2017: 51-53).

To better understand core elements of Chinese medical drama, it is important to provide some background on how healthcare is provided in the PRC. The marketization reforms after 1978 saw a shrinking of the role of the State in healthcare financing (reduced to 15% in 2000) and a total collapse of rural communal health providers, generating a system in which patients across China paid directly for healthcare, and healthcare provision was dramatically fragmented and disintegrated, with quality varying substantially and the patients' experience being highly stressful (Millicent 2018). In absence of mature insurance schemes, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the quota of out-of-pocket expenditure on the total of the national healthcare costs increased from 20% in 1980 to 60% in 2000, when “the Ministry of Health warned that 25% of new cases of poverty could be attributed to medical expenses” (Daemmrlich 2013: 4). Moreover, hospitals could now draw profits from markups to medication and operations, leading to incentives to overprescribe and further increase expenditure (Fang 2021). In 2009, an ambitious reform plan attempted to address some of these issues, with initiatives including “increasing government health inputs, expanding health insurance, and reforming public hospitals and the pharmaceutical sector” aiming to “build a health system that would be accessible and affordable to all Chinese citizens by 2020” (Qian 2022: 167). Notably, in introducing the reforms, the State Council explicitly acknowledged the rising social tensions in relation to healthcare. Correspondingly, around the same time, Chinese popular culture started including in its storytelling issues of medical malpractice, social vulnerability tied to healthcare costs, and doctor-patient conflicts. A notable example is the 2010 best-selling novel *Angel Heart* by well-established novelist Liu Liu (pseudonym of Zhang Xin), which would later be adapted into the eponymous medical drama in our sample (co-written by Liu herself). The 2009 reforms are largely seen as successful in boosting the availability of health resources (Chen et al. 2021), bringing basic social insurance to 95% of the population and decreasing the total of out-of-pocket expenses to 27.7% of the total; yet, from a social standpoint, the core challenge of affordability and access have remained serious, alongside the corresponding social tensions (Qian 2022). Since 2018, under Xi, another round of reforms (with a new target of 2030) has been rolled out, further expanding public and private insurance schemes, promoting integration across the system, and boosting resilience to public health emergencies (on the heels of the dramatic experience of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2019-2021) (ibid.).

Last but not least, a further element relevant for our analysis is Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM, *Zhongyi* 中医), the broad set of indigenous medical knowledge and practices which has resisted assimilation into global medical frameworks (Liu 2019), remaining a distinct field of China's medical practice. TCM understands disease as unbalance between various principles and/or blockage of “vital energy” (*qi* 气) flowing through “meridians” in the body (*jingluo* 经络); adopts a functional understanding of body structure related to natural forces (*zangfu* 脏腑); conceptualizes diagnosis as individualized; and privileges apprenticeship over theoretical study. TCM has been widely criticized as pseudoscience both inside and outside of China; its effectiveness, when measured through randomized control trials, remains a controversial matter (Zhou et al. 2013). At the same time, it has been upheld since the Maoist era as vital to the health of rural and disadvantaged communities. To this day, it is practiced throughout Asia: the Chinese healthcare system includes TCM clinics and hospitals, as well as TCM universities training practitioners. TCM accepts the efficacy of modern medicine (MM) and frames itself as complementary. The clash and integration of MM – often referred to in China as Western medicine (*xiyi* 西医) – and TCM have been recurring motifs in Chinese literature and popular culture (Fang 2019), reflecting the cultural and ideological impact of the introduction of Western medical science to China (Liu 2023).

## **The Regulatory Framework of C-Drama**

The process of commercialization of television in the early 2000s led to a sharp increase in the production of Chinese TV drama, with claims that it had achieved, by 2007, the first spot in the world's ranking for production, broadcast, and audience size (Wu 2017: 25), while continuing being subject to tight control by the authorities (Chin 2017). The constant negotiation between producers and regulators (Wu 2017) is at the heart of the activities of the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), the department which manages the content, quality, and quantity of radio, television, and online audiovisual programs. Numerous policies dictate how TV series should follow the “correct orientation” in regard to politics, public opinion, aesthetics, values, and position towards the people. In 2010, for instance, article 4 of the TV Drama Content Management Regulations decreed that:

Television drama content creation and dissemination shall persist in the orientation of serving the people and serving socialism and the policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend,<sup>2</sup> persist in being close to reality, being close to life and being close to the masses,<sup>3</sup> persist in the principles of social interest first and the integration of social interest and economic interest, guaranteeing correct artistic orientation (SARFT 2010).

In February 2022, the NRTA's Chinese TV Drama Development Plan, targeting the development of TV drama in accordance with the PRC most recent plan for national economic and social development (the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan), equaled the production of high-quality TV series featuring the right topics and telling good stories<sup>4</sup> to a political responsibility and a cultural mission in the New (i.e., Xi's) era (NRTA 2022a). Accordingly, audiovisual programs, including radio, television, and online programs as well as their process of production and operators involved, should adhere to and promote the fundamental principles of contemporary Chinese socialism, or what are known as "core socialist values" (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观): wealth and power (*fuqiang* 富强), democracy (*minzhu* 民主), civility (*wenming* 文明), and harmony (*hexie* 和谐) at the national level; freedom (*ziyou* 自由), equality (*pingdeng* 平等), justice (*gongzheng* 公正), and the rule of law (*fazhi* 法治) at the social level; patriotism (*aiguo* 爱国), dedication to work (*jingye* 敬业), integrity (*chengxin* 诚信), and friendship (*youshan* 友善) at the individual level. In September 2022, the NRTA General Office carried out a selection of one hundred "excellent" online shows to be extensively promoted as "exemplary" on the basis of their (a) promotion of core socialist values and (b) contribution to what Xi, in 2012, had conceptualized as the "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to the 1956-1957 Maoist "Double-Hundred Policy" (*shuang bai fangzhen* 双百方针), known in the West as the "Hundred Flowers Campaign", with which the CCP promoted open criticism and debate in science and culture (Cheek 2016).

<sup>3</sup> This is an explicit reference to then-CCP secretary Hu Jintao's concept of the "three closes" (*san tiejin* 三贴近) regarding the position of media in society, formulated in 2003 to solve the problem of the media being disconnected from the masses and life (Zhonghua chuanmei wang 2006).

<sup>4</sup> This recalls the strategy, formally put forth by Xi Jinping at the beginning of his administration, to "tell the stories of China well, spread the voices of China well, and explain Chinese characteristics well" as a way to enhance China's cultural soft power and discourse power (Renmin Ribao 2014).

梦) (NRTA 2022b). The concept of the Chinese Dream represents one of the cores of Xi's ideological framework, known as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (Peters 2017), and builds on the idea of a collective national rejuvenation – a common goal of Chinese leaders after the chaos and upheaval of the "century of humiliation" between 1839 and 1949 (Kaufman 2010) – while recognizing individual aspirations and aiming for China to be a "moderately prosperous" civilization-state with strong international influence and military (Callahan 2016). As well, the Chinese Dream relies on a nostalgic reappraisal of China's past, its civilization, and its traditions as a site of resistance against cultural colonization (Carrai 2020), a point which is very relevant for our analysis.

### **Chinese Fictional Medicine and National Politics: Providing Guidance, Soothing Conflict**

All the shows selected for this analysis, in particular *ER Doctors* and *With You*, have been explicitly approved and commended by CCP-affiliated newspapers, which have defined them as "realistic works" loved by the Chinese audience precisely because of their rootedness in real life, incarnation of the trend of the times, reflection of people's concerns, embodiment of people's aspirations, and depiction of the "hope and dreams ahead" (Renmin Ribao 2020, 2022; Guangming Ribao 2022), the latter an evident reference to Xi's Chinese Dream. Realism here refers to the representation of topics that are generally cause of concern for the viewers (e.g., medical and old-age care, the doctor-patient relationship, employment, education) but also the capacity to showcase the human nature of doctors and nurses as well as the strong social responsibility that works with true-to-life themes have to give voice to the people's growing happiness (ibid.).

Hence, it appears that to fully reach their intended purpose, Chinese medical TV dramas must resonate with the audience on multiple levels: cognitive, sentimental, and moral. On a moral level, *Angel Heart* and *ER Doctors* attempt to rebuild the doctor's image as an "angel in white" after various scandals in the healthcare sector (Song 2018), showing how doctors and nurses can act as heroes who uphold strong ethics. Examples of bad behaviors and mistakes are shown to emphasize the superiority of a moral conduct. For instance, *Angel Heart* (episode 1) opens with Dr. Gu's storyline: Gu Chao-hua is a highly-skilled surgeon about to be promoted when his career takes an



opposite turn: trying to save a victim of a car accident, he performs surgery on the patient in the emergency room without his family's consent. Due to an unknown underlying heart condition, the man dies, a tragedy resulting in his family suing both Dr. Gu and the hospital. The latter, rather than defending his employee, admits that the operation was conducted without written consent and lets Dr. Gu take the blame, forcing him to resign.

To the moral level, an explicit pedagogic function can be identified. *ER Doctors*, for instance, features short medical lessons delivered by characters at the end of each episode, embodying the didactic purpose of the show and boosting its professionalism and credibility. Similarly, *With You*, which is set during the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, offers practical information on what one should or should not do during the pandemic. Consisting of a total of ten narrative units or independent stories divided into two parts, *With You* is indicative of the fine line between fiction and realism in Chinese medical TV drama. Indeed, the show is defined as a docudrama or, as reported by the NRTA Television Drama Department (2020), an “era reportage” dramatizing actual events and chronicling the struggles of doctors and nurses as well as other frontliners and ordinary people during the pandemic. Each two-episode story revolves around specific characters representing and celebrating every individual who fought the “people’s war” (Gallelli 2020) against the virus. Nevertheless, *With You* does not refrain from showing conflict: a young woman throwing a tantrum while being treated, an elderly woman resisting isolation in the hospital, a couple trying to escape the lockdown by jumping over a wall, an older man refusing to wear a mask, among other examples. Shortcomings are however promptly addressed by the hospital staff or community workers and counterbalanced by many inspiring cases, such as that of delivery driver Gu Yong, who delivers food and masks and transports healthcare workers, or that of young laboratory doctor Rong Yi, who wanting to join the frontline leaves her family during the holidays and embarks on a journey to Wuhan by bike and on foot. The series shows the ultimate triumph of China and the Chinese people over Covid-19 – a victory the PRC official media were quick to declare, fitting into the CCP’s narrative of the crisis. Within this frame, the stories of ordinary people becoming heroes serve the purpose of showing the audience how everyone, not only doctors and nurses, have the potential to become extraordinary citizens and contribute to building a better China.

This is where the aforementioned core socialist values come into play. The doctors and nurses are portrayed as highly-trained (see next section)

professionals who make life-or-death decisions; but they are also people facing challenging ethical dilemmas when being involved in situations exemplifying social issues. As such, they counterbalance uncivilized behaviors of “immoral” members of society. When dealing with the phenomenon of “healthcare disturbance” (*yinao* 医闹), that is a general mistrust towards hospitals and medical staff which can become violent, their actions show the benefits of adhering to socialist core values as well as ethics derived from Confucianism. For instance, the aforementioned storyline regarding Dr. Gu stresses how family members should be consulted prior, during, and after every medical procedure, and the course of action – including financial considerations – must be decided taking into consideration the needs of both patient and family, harkening to Confucian ethics extending the notion of “patient” and that of “doctor-patient communication” to the family (Chen 2019). At the same time, fictional doctors and nurses may foot the bill (e.g., *Angel Heart* episode 29: Dr. Huo inspires the team to collectively cover the fee of a young indigent patient suffering from a congenital disease) or provide shelter to the homeless (same episode: nurse Mei lets the patient’s father live in her house). Hamalainen et al. (2019: 227) stress how “traditionally, the Chinese family (and wider social and political) life is founded on duty-based ethical thinking in which family (and wider social and political) relationships are determined by sense of duty, obligations, and rules”. Confucian family values thus extend to relationships outside of the household to include friendship networks, the collective, and, ultimately, the nation. Correspondingly, doctors and nurses in Chinese medical dramas are moved by what can be perceived as a “sense of higher belonging” or an understanding of the country and the family as a coherent whole: “a combination of the well-being of the country and that of Chinese individuals and families, whose aspirations are intertwined with those of their country” (Zhang 2016: 135). The patriotic feeling that derives from this type of family-state relationships is part of the Chinese Dream and helps the ordinary Chinese people face several issues, including healthcare reform (ibid.).

Medical dramas tend to show hospitals as well-functioning communities, epitomizing a wider harmonious society built on the basis of every individual’s moral conduct. Social responsibility and duty come before family, and certainly before the single individual, while the community and the nation surpass the nuclear family and incorporate family values (Ma 2021, Varriano 2022). In this “big family” the Party and the government take on a metaphorical parental role. For instance, in *ER Doctors* (episode

12), a volunteer, raised as an orphan, explains that her surname is “*dang* 党” because in the orphanage “Party” was the surname attributed to girls, while boys were surnamed “*guo* 国” (Country). With the Party-State anthropomorphized as mother and father, social tensions, such as the economic issue of medical fees mentioned above, are reversed: in the dark times of the pandemic, financial support for Covid-19 patients and their families is covered by the Chinese government. “Our country will pay for our treatment”,<sup>5</sup> cheerfully says a patient in *With You* (episode 2).

Needless to say, the Party and the State are “watch words” or “watch signs” (Schneider 2019) for patriotism, national pride, and a sense of community, as are references to well-known communist heroes, such as Lei Feng. “What a living Lei Feng”,<sup>6</sup> comments a nurse when meeting the newly-appointed US-trained emergency physician Dr. Jiang Xiaoqi in the first episode of *ER Doctors*, after she offers to take care of the medical fees of a young thief who had collapsed while stealing her belongings. Lei Feng (1940-1962) was a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army who died prematurely in an accident and, in the history of the PRC, has been glorified, through various propaganda campaigns, as the archetypal “good soldier”, a role model incarnating the values of dedication, humility, sacrifice, altruism, and other virtues (Colville 2020). The most recent of these campaigns saw Wuhan doctors and nurses being praised by the official media as “living Lei Fengs” (*huo Lei Feng* 活雷锋) (ibid.). References to patriotic symbols feature extensively in the corpus analyzed. Taking the abovementioned storyline of the volunteer in *ER Doctors* as an example, her name is Dang Zhenni (Jenny), she was adopted by an American family and after studying TCM – which, as we will see in the next section, plays an important role as a repository of meaning in Xi’s China – she returned to the PRC to join the hospital. Throughout various episodes, she proves to be resourceful: when praised by her colleagues for knowing what to do in a typical Chinese occurrence of medical disturbance (episode 9), she happily defines herself as Chinese, even lovingly mocking the Beijing accent. As will be further discussed, this also implies the relevance of taking a “Chinese” approach to medical issues, both at a practical and a value level, a view which can even be applied to the appropriateness of the Chinese containment model during the Covid-19 outbreak publicized by *With You*.

<sup>5</sup> “*Guojia tao qian gei zanmen zhibing* 国家掏钱给咱们治病”.

<sup>6</sup> “*Jintian zhenshi jiandao huo Lei Feng le* 今天真是见到活雷锋了”.

Since Chinese medical dramas are required to fictionalize real issues, adding a moral and pedagogic value to entertainment, fictional doctors and nurses are both represented as ordinary people – with their own personal qualities and flaws – and, because of the skills required in their jobs, as heroes who care for their patients, each other, and society as whole, work hard and with integrity, respect the law, and advocate justice and equality. Through good deeds and a moral behavior, even during times of crisis, they show the audience how to aspire to a higher status, elevating themselves from the condition of ordinary people. Thus, healthcare workers take on the function of role models, first and foremost to both their peers and subordinates in the medical environment. However, as their place of work is in itself a family, a community, and an allegorical representation of society as a whole, they are role models for the rest of the Chinese people as well. In this sense, the political, propagandistic undertone appears in the alignment of the moral fiber of every individual with that of the Chinese nation: with every individual equipped with core socialist values, the Dream of a stronger, more prosperous, and harmonious China is achievable.

### **Chinese Fictional Medicine and International Politics: Reframing and Legitimizing Medical Identify**

We identify two main intertwined strands in the way global dynamics are incorporated into Chinese medical drama in our sample. The first is epistemic, and regards the field of medical knowledge and the processes of its construction and legitimation; the second is more political, and relates to China's position in a post-colonial world.

Defining what counts as “legitimate” medicine on the global scene has historically represented an important site of contention in terms of cultural politics. TCM has gone through cycles of legitimation and delegitimation, which have been reflected in medical drama: the tension between TCM and MM was already at the heart of the 1959 series *Doctor Xin and Doctor Chen*, humorously contrasting strict, modern medicine-trained Dr. Chen against human and understanding Dr. Yin, master of acupuncture. The Xi era stresses a re-evaluation of Chinese traditions, including TCM. Xi Jinping himself has underlined on numerous occasions the need to promote TCM to the same level of MM (Li and Zhou 2020): in an instruction published in 2018 he emphasized the need to “place the same importance” on Chinese

and Western medicine and on their complementarity in the project of building a “healthy China” (Xinhua 2018). This has been reflected in medical drama productions in which TCM is presented as a staple of Chinese culture facing various threats of extinction, giving rise to a sub-genre concerned with the preservation of TCM. Some of these series are set in the past and incorporate elements of the Chinese historical drama genre, which mostly deals with distant past and the struggle for independence. A case in our sample is *Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, set in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Shanghai, which portrays the struggles of a TCM practitioner in Qing China on the backdrop of the anti-Japanese war of resistance (to which the protagonist contributes), ending with the protagonist migrating to the US and spreading TCM there. The nationalistic undertones of TCM reappraisal have come to also involve medical dramas set in contemporary times. For instance, the 2023 series *Gen Z (Houlang 后浪 or “waves”)* tells the story of a TCM University and its students under the guidance of Professor Ren. TCM is presented as besieged by obtuse forces refusing to see its merits because of a lack of Chinese perspective. In episode 1, defending the need for funding an apprenticeship program, Professor Ren states: “If we teach our students the mindset of Western medicine, they will use that mindset to solve problems. What is [the mindset of] our TCM?”<sup>7</sup>

The same nationalistic undertones can be seen in the second dimension of the knowledge politics incorporated into contemporary Chinese medical drama, which regards the value of a global medical education in the Chinese medical system. Sending “overseas doctors” (*haiwai yisheng 海外医生*) abroad was strongly incentivized throughout the reform era. This was reflected in the few medical dramas produced before 2010, with foreign education presented as a mark of distinction for doctor characters. This is still present today: for instance, the core tension in the 2022 series *Dr Tang* is due to foreign-educated Dr. Jia being appointed as director of a struggling Chinese cardiac clinic and being perceived as an intruder. However, at the same time, medical drama in the Xi era appears to mark a shift in the value of American medical education for Chinese medical personnel. For instance, in episode 4 of the series *ER Doctors*, US-trained Dr. Jiang is scolded by her mentor because she prioritized saving a patient’s organ rather than his

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<sup>7</sup> “Women yong xiyi de siwei moshi lai jiao xuesheng, xuesheng yong zheyang de siwei lai jieju wenti. Women zhongyi shi shenme 我们用西医的思维模式来教学生，学生用这样的思维来解决问题。我们中医是什么?”

(and his family's) overall well-being, ending up with complications. "It is time to Sinicize your American thinking",<sup>8</sup> the mentor says. This echoes the *ti/yong* (体用, "Essence/Function") dynamic as framed by neoconfucian reformers of late 1800s-early 1900s. Within that framework, the reformers could promote the modernization of China through the incorporation of western knowledge and technology, which they saw as urgently needed after the catastrophic losses of the Opium Wars (Kwon and Woo 2019). The movement prescribed incorporating western advancements at the level of "function", leaving the fundamental "essence" of society steadily Confucian. Similarly, in medical dramas, western medical skills and knowledge must be incorporated into an understanding of the purpose and ultimate goal of medicine, which must remain Chinese.

Overall, at the epistemic level we can identify an explicit thematization of the need to develop a distinctly "Chinese" approach to medicine and a rejection of an alleged "global" medical knowledge applicable indistinctly across the world. The recovery of doctor's privileged status as an exemplary citizen appears based on an explicit "Sinicization" of medical thinking – a process which looks at TCM as a repository of meanings, while avoiding addressing issues of its efficacy explicitly.

Within this patriotic and nationalistic reframing of medical identity, knowledge, and values, the explicit staging of geopolitical dynamics is, at least in our sample, peripheral. This is not necessarily limited to Chinese medical drama: as the conflicts staged are primarily confined at the micro-level, medical drama generally avoids referring to conflicts between nation-states. However, this appears to be changing: one of the most evident cases is *Ebola Fighters* (2022), which dramatizes the 2014 Chinese aid campaign against the Ebola epidemic (Wang 2018). The series shows China respond to the WHO call for an international effort to combat the Ebola outbreak in the fictional African country of Cabalia and "stand with the African people",<sup>9</sup> as a university dean states in episode 2. This is presented as the continuation of a long-standing contribution by China towards global health: in episode 5, an entire three-minute scene (from minutes 3:03 to 6:04) is devoted to illustrating this endeavor through a speech given by the same dean, dating and quantifying the Chinese commitment.

<sup>8</sup> "Ba ni na Meiguo siwei ye gai Zhongguohua yixie le 把你那美国思维也该中国化一些了".

<sup>9</sup> "Zhongguo jiang he Feizhou renmin zhan zai yiqi 中国将和非洲人民站在一起".

This “international effort” is then jeopardized by the lack of international cooperation: the British, Cabalia’s former colonists, are shown as detached from the frontlines; the multinational task force employed by the Cabalia’s Ministry of Health is shown as initially distrusting the Chinese medical personnel; the only true ally in the fight against Ebola is NGO Doctors Without Borders. China’s loneliness is intensified by evil external forces represented as a multinational crew of arms and diamond smugglers, aided by corrupt double-agents inside Cabalia’s society, engaged in exploiting the country’s resources and perpetuating its state of civil war. Conversely, the Chinese presence is characterized as friendly, long-standing, and fruitful (as epitomized by the enlightened female vice-president of the country being fluent in Mandarin). “Africa is our good brother through thick and thin”,<sup>10</sup> a People Liberation Army’s officer states in episode 7. *Ebola Fighters* shares similarities with 2017’s Chinese action movie blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhan Lang 2 战狼2*) in the way it frames the Sino-African relationship as friendly and beneficial for the latter partner (Shi and Liu 2020) and fueled by the commitment of China towards a fair international order (pursued through defensive military means in *Wolf Warrior 2* and medical and journalistic tools in *Ebola Fighters*). A mark of the political-medical-historical imaginary depicted so far can be found in the figure of the leader of the rebel separatist army in *Ebola Fighters*. This character turns from villain to hero, accepting to help in the fight against Ebola, because his own biography (in a flashback, his mother is shown as having been previously cured by Chinese doctors) convinces him of the trustworthiness of the Chinese (eps. 18-20).

These geopolitical imaginaries also extend to the epistemic level discussed above. On the one hand, TCM is applied by the protagonists, shown as effective in providing palliative treatments for chronic pain, and confirmed more effective than indigenous traditional medicine (in one scene, TCM solves a painful urinary block which indigenous medicine could not heal). On the other hand, the series shows elite African doctors possessing prized foreign medical expertise acquired not in Europe or the United States, but in China. A notable example is the figure of a doctor (episode 1) who dies from Ebola before fulfilling his “dream” of going back to China to “see his old classmates again” (later in the series, his daughter decides to study medicine in China and continue in her father’s footsteps).

<sup>10</sup> “Feizhou shi women fengyutongzhou de hao xiongdi 非洲是我[ ]雨同舟的好兄弟”.

*Ebola Fighters* is also notable for staging the most explicit – albeit still metaphorical – references to the geopolitical dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic in our sample. China was repeatedly accused of being the origin of the pandemic and opaque in data-sharing; the country defended its actions multiple times in public arenas (Yu 2022, Papageorgiu and De Melo 2022). Therefore, omission of this dimension from medical drama appears striking: self-victimization in the face of perceived unjust accusations is absent across our entire sample. At the same time, *Ebola Fighters* stages a China not only sincerely committed to multipolar global health efforts (including the transparency dimension), but also willing and able to take the lead in crisis situations. The lack of global acknowledgment of this role for China seems to be taken for granted at this stage; the title of the drama could even be seen as an ironic reference to TIME Magazine cover of December 10, 2014, which declared “Ebola Fighters” as the “Persons of the Year” – without referencing, in the corresponding articles, the Chinese effort (Gibbs 2014, Von Dhrele 2014).

## Conclusions

Our analysis has begun to explore how contemporary Chinese medical drama incorporates several complex ideological constructs which are strongly aligned with the political framework of Xi Jinping’s mandate. Firstly, medical identity appears as a repository of meanings, both nationally and internationally, harkening back to an idealized role of healthcare professionals, which was also frequent in Maoist China. While neither plotlines nor characters emerge as stock propaganda items, with the latter being built as complex and multi-dimensional as in any of the best international productions, this lockstep between national discourse and popular culture is to be expected. Secondly, at the international level, Chinese medicine emerges as an allegory of desired geopolitical orders, at both the epistemic (with TCM) and political (with post-colonialism) dimensions. Thirdly, we identified a lack of the self-victimization discourse in Chinese medical dramas regarding the global spread of Covid-19 alongside a strong emphasis on the effectiveness of the Chinese response to the crisis. Fourthly, we observed how Chinese medical series do not eschew tackling critical challenges of the Chinese healthcare system, particularly in reference to social vulnerability. This should not be read as contradictory but as a normal component of the



centralization/decentralization dynamics of China, where the “center” puts pressure on the “periphery” (also through storytelling) to follow through with necessary reforms, in this case, the recovery of an increased role of the public sector (Qian 2022), in coherence with the overall politics of Xi, and a participation of society as a whole in the construction of an even better future China. As the Chinese healthcare system is in transition, medical drama is playing a role in justifying some of the reforms, while explaining them to the audiences through its prominent educational and didactic component.

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## THE POLITICS OF FICTIONAL MEDICINE: ENTERTAINMENT, PROPAGANDA, AND EDUCATION IN CHINESE MEDICAL DRAMAS IN THE XI ERA



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