



“Struggle Among People”: A Study of Contemporary China’s Cognition of Power Through Palace Fighting Dramas

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Abstract. This paper analyzes Chinese people’s views on power politics by studying the contemporary Chinese TV series “Palace Fighting Drama”. Different from the research of most Chinese scholars, this study starts from the individual and society, and explores the original source of Chinese people’s enthusiasm for “struggle”. Chinese people can get resonance from Gong Dou Opera because the core of Palace Fighting Drama is inseparable from China’s political culture, and this kind of political culture with strong Chinese characteristics is difficult to be understood by the international community, which is not conducive to China’s soft power in the world. Spread within the range.

Keywords: Cognition of power · China’s internal politics · palace fighting dramas · soft power

1 Introduction

This paper analyzes Chinese people’s views on power politics by studying the contemporary Chinese TV series “Palace Fighting Drama”. Palace fighting drama is a genre of Chinese popular culture that has arisen in recent ten years. It tells the story of the power and love struggle in ancient Chinese imperial palaces. Some observers believe that the narrative of power in palace fighting dramas meets the psychological needs of Chinese people: curiosity about history and resonance with reality. This shows that Chinese people have formed a fixed cognition of the power and survival law in China today. Although the plots presented in palace fighting dramas took place in the past (that is, ancient Chinese dynasties), they still have practical significance. Therefore, the study of palace fighting drama is an effective method to analyze the deconstruction of social politics and the content of political life in contemporary China. It is particularly important to study China’s role in international politics. Its significance is reflected in two aspects.

First of all, the concept of power is the core of political science [6] (Siavelis, 2012). China’s economic rise is extremely important for the development of the future international order. How the rise of China will change the future world order is also one of the focuses of international relations. Consequently, a careful analysis of China’s cognition

of rights and rules can not only help the world understand China’s internal politics, but also analyze China’s influence on the international order. It is also because foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics.

Second, its significance lies in understanding and predicting the influence of China’s soft power on the world. Cultural output has always been regarded as an important component of soft power. Japan and South Korea’s cultural exports in East Asia have already had relatively wide influence in the world. Japanese animation and Korean pop culture have a certain market in European and American countries. Compared with the first two, Chinese culture has entered overseas markets for a short time and has little promotion, so its influence is not prominent. In recent years, palace fighting drama, which is popular in China, has been introduced overseas as a traditional Chinese cultural symbol, and has gradually gained a part of the audience. So is it beneficial for the development of China’s soft power to export palace fighting drama as the representative of Chinese national culture overseas? This paper will also discuss the relationship between palace fighting dramas and China’s soft power from this perspective.

1.1 Background

In China, some scholars have studied the reasons for the popularity of Palace Fighting Dramas. For example, Li Rui summarized three social reasons for its popularity by analyzing two palace fighting dramas in “An Analysis of the Popularity of Palace Fighting Dramas of the Same Theme: ‘Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace’ and ‘Strategy of Yanxi Palace’” [4]; In “Why are Palace Fighting Dramas Prevalent in the Internet Context”, Yang Junlei mentioned the influence of Palace Fighting Dramas as cultural fast-selling products in the Internet environment. Some scholars have studied the influence of Palace Fighting Dramas on society and the future development direction [9]. For example, Zhang Xinrui and Wu Tao analyzed the development direction of Palace Fighting Dramas from the reasons and process in “Discussing the Core ‘struggle’ of Palace Fighting Dramas—Taking ‘Golden Branches Desire’ as an example” [10]; Gao Junmei and Niu Qianru in “Court Drama’s Orientation Analysis of Audience Values” study the values of Palace Fighting Drama communication from the perspective of market and audience demand [2]. There are many other studies like these, but most of them are from the perspective of Palace Fighting Dramas, exploring its composition and influence to match individuals and society. But this article, from the perspective of individuals and society, explores the source of Chinese people’s enthusiasm for “struggle”.

1.2 Theory and Methods

This paper takes the concept of political culture in political psychology as the theoretical basis. Political culture is the cognition, emotion, and attitude of the citizens of a country to the political system in their life and the political roles they play. It corresponds to the institutional structures such as the government and political organizations and becomes the subjective factor of the political system. This paper uses the psycho-cultural analysis method in political culture to study the political culture of the Chinese people from the core value of Palace Fighting Dramas. By introducing the background of Chinese reality, culture, and institutional tradition, this paper reveals the inner psychological power and

development root of political behavior, to find the location of Chinese political culture and explore its influence on the development of China's soft power.

The central argument of this paper is that power struggle is a form of social capital, which is very important for the embodiment of Chinese political identity. Firstly, modern Chinese society consists of a network of relationships at various levels of hierarchy. People position themselves and get to know each other through networks of relationships, so does the Chinese government. Secondly, the Chinese people often sum up their own history to guide the present and future, because they are proud of their long history and rich civilization. Finally, as one of China's soft power resources, the central idea of the palace fighting drama is hard to be generally accepted by the foreign countries, so the output of China's soft power will be a difficult and long process.

This paper will illustrate the above core ideas through three arguments. First, the core structure of palace fighting drama is grade. This shows that Chinese society understands the value of rights and the core of rule through the concept of hierarchy. Therefore, hierarchical system and power struggle are important components of building China's national identity. Second, the popularity of palace fighting drama also reflects Chinese people's love for history. Seeking answers from history is the inertia thinking of Chinese people, which is closely related to the linear historical view of modern China. Being keen to emphasize the splendid civilization of 5000 years and the glory of the past, today's China will focus on the close relationship between reality and history when constructing Chinese culture. Nevertheless, it also makes it difficult for China to break away from history to empower and rule new political concepts. Third, the relationship between palace fighting drama and cultural soft power deserves our attention. Palace fighting drama, as its name implies, takes place in the isolated harem, and "struggle" is the core plot and narrative center. In such a story, all the characters have no right or wrong or good or evil, only the level of means and stratagem. Because the so-called moral standards can't make people survive in the harem, "Losers are always in the wrong. "It is the only standard of belief in the harem. It can be said that palace fighting drama vividly embodies the jungle law of "survival of the fittest". This unconventional cultural output makes palace fighting drama always occupy a place and stand still in mainland China, which affects many people's imagination of history and cognition of reality.

2 Hierarchical Power Relations and Chinese Identity

The plot of the court fighting drama mainly centers on the emperor's favor and the struggle between the heirs to the throne. The focus of these two things is very clear, and the behavior logic of the characters is also obvious, that is, please the emperor, beware of other concubines and buy slaves. In addition to relying on the strength of their own families, they also use their own strategies and means. And these are actually corresponding in the modern workplace. First of all, the workplace revolves around the "preference" of leaders and the competition for positions. Secondly, people should not only pay attention to other colleagues, but also win over subordinates. Moreover, the core of film and television dramas is that power is the only goal and value of survival. For example, in the *Empresses in the Palace*, Betty Sun gradually became wily from the purity and yearning for beautiful love when she first entered the palace, and actively or passively

involved herself in the struggle for rights. This transformation also symbolizes the change of mentality of participants in Chinese officialdom and workplace. The step-by-step life after entering the harem is also the daily portrayal of professionals in reality.

In ancient China, the hierarchy was strict. Each class represented a different position, with a clear division of labor, and the superior had absolute leadership over the subordinate [8] (Song, 2012). The hierarchy runs through China’s political history and power struggle, from the system of “ten grades among people” implemented in the Spring and Autumn Period, the system of three officials and nine ministers in the Han Dynasty, to the nine ranks and thirty grades in the Tang Dynasty and the nine ranks and eighteen grades in the Qing Dynasty. Chinese people have a strong sense of identity in the hierarchy.

These hierarchies are also reflected in modern Chinese workplace life to a certain extent, among which the most representative ones are the job level (10 grades) and rank sequence (12 grades) of civil servants. In addition, the selection of the talent in our country’s workplace and officialdom is mostly internal recommendation system or recommendation system, which is directly decided by superiors, and it is a parasitic relationship, which is in sharp contrast with the employment relationship between superiors and subordinates generated by the electoral system in western countries. At the same time, there is a phenomenon of pleasing superior leaders in the workplace or officialdom culture, which will directly affect personal promotion, rewards and punishments. Consequently, the ultimate goal of what individuals does is to please or please, rather than the so-called responsibility. This leads people to fight for interests and status actively or passively in the workplace, which will inevitably aggravate people’s dissatisfaction with reality.

The palace fighting drama is a type of literary and artistic work. It is widely welcomed by Chinese people, mainly because it is highly consistent with the current workplace and official culture in China. Drama is a kind of imitation of reality, and its contradiction comes from the conflict of reality. Psychologists also show that drama is a realistic projection of people’s inner conflicts [5] (Mao, Liu and Qu 2021). Thus, by watching palace fighting dramas, people can release the inner depression caused by reality, and make them get a kind of spiritual satisfaction. This phenomenon shows that the core of Chinese workplace and officialdom culture is very consistent with the spirit of palace fighting drama. Studying palace fighting drama can better help us know Chinese people’s understanding and practice of power, which cannot be obtained by studying the official thoughts of the Chinese government.

3 Looking to the Past for Answers

Besides the restriction of hierarchy, Chinese Confucianism also influences Chinese people’s understanding of power.

In ancient China, Confucian ethics was a kind of national ethics which was built compared with family ethics, that is, “country” to “family”, “monarch” to “father” and “loyalty” to “filial piety”. This ethical order of Confucianism and the national system it supported made “superior” the natural leader. “Brother”, “parents” and even “emperor” are the people who make rules, so the whole society can form a complete system with strict hierarchy and clear respect and inferiority [1] (El Amine, 2015). Unless he is the

head of a family or a king of a country, any use of rights and control of property of an individual is invalid before the authority of his parents, and any hierarchy is invalid before his superiors. Consequently, this kind of system must be authoritarian. Then, because pleasing authority or even becoming authority can get huge benefits without being restrained, Chinese people influenced by Confucianism can't get along without the way of "monarch and minister" or "father and son". Therefore, the tactics of using unscrupulous means as the path came into being. And it is not surprising that this path became the mainstream.

Although China has entered the modern society, the core element of power has continued in China for thousands of years. Chinese people's understanding of power is based on "struggle among people". Palace TV series, especially the plot of palace fighting, obviously involves the related content of Machiavellian culture, which is reflected in the fight between people. Actually, this is related to China's feudal culture and current social state. Influenced by the bureaucratic nature of China and strict Confucian hierarchy, everyone is eager to improve their social class by being an official, so they must constantly struggle with others to achieve their goals.

At the same time, palace fighting drama also reflects contemporary Chinese people's recognition of thousands of years of history and culture in China and their understanding of Machiavellian culture. Chinese people are used to looking for answers from history. First of all, this is caused by the linear historical view systematically expressed by Sima Qian's Historical Records. Secondly, it is due to the Chinese people's psychology of being proud of 5000 years of civilization. Therefore, the overall consciousness of Chinese society will unconsciously emphasize the guidance and significance of history to reality. The consequences have both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that contemporary China can gain experience and lessons from history and sum up the mainstream values of "tit for tat is fair play", so that China can occupy a suitable position in the national game on the world stage; The downside is that it makes it difficult for China to look beyond the historical perspective, and this conceptual restriction makes it difficult for us to create new political concepts and ideas.

Although history can provide lessons for China's political development, the hierarchy and Confucian ethics still make the struggle for power run through ancient China. Up to now, the Machiavellian culture still permeates all aspects of Chinese politics, is deeply rooted, and it is difficult to create new political ideas.

4 The Power of Chinese Soft Power

Soft power refers to the third force of a country in international relations besides economy and military affairs, which is mainly influenced by the culture, values and ideology. China's soft power is weak in the world, which is not commensurate with its status as a rising power [7] (Siehr, 2005). Although the Chinese government has vigorously promoted the importance of soft power since 2017, Chinese people's understanding of it is basically based on history and culture. Specifically, the source of China's soft power lies in its long and splendid cultural tradition and long and fruitful achievements in civilization. But when reading Joseph Nye's triple (culture, value, and policy), it is difficult to define the source of its attraction. In other words, the attractiveness of Chinese

culture is still limited, and most of the people fail to accurately reflect its values. China’s foreign policy is regarded as skeptical at best and hegemonic at worst. This paper is closely related to the study of international relations. Its main research value lies in exploring the relationship between China’s rise and soft power. Is China’s core culture attractive to foreign countries? Can China’s soft power successfully export culture?

The only rule in palace fighting drama is “survival of the fittest”. This type of work is not uncommon, such as zombie films like the *Walking Dead*, and survival films like *Squid Game Round Six*, which have been popular all over the world recently. Since such works can be loved by people all over the world, it shows that they will not hinder the output of palace fighting dramas. Nevertheless, it has not been successfully exported, and the main reason is the cultural gap.

Taking Hollywood movies as an example, it has occupied an important position in the world since its birth. This kind of cultural products that conform to American values is popular all over the world and has been widely accepted and recognized. As one of the resources of China’s soft power, palace fighting drama cannot be as attractive to the outside world as Hollywood movies. Although it has had a few successful export cases, it has not formed a lasting attraction, and its influence is far from that of Hollywood movies. In addition to the gap in production and technology, the most important reason is the plot. The plot of Hollywood movies is universal and popular, which is easier to understand and accept by the audience. However, the content of Chinese palace fighting drama involves a wide range and deep connotation, which requires corresponding knowledge of Chinese history. This kind of plots is difficult for foreign audiences to understand and widely accepted. This is the most important point. And the cultural difference is often the deepest gap in the development of soft power [3] (Hong et al. 2003). Palace fighting drama can be regarded as the concentrated expression of Chinese traditional culture, so it is difficult for it to spread widely and attract people internationally.

At present, Japanese animation culture and Korean pop music already have a global presence, while that of Chinese culture is limited. In order to export works full of Chinese characteristics like palace fighting drama to the world, China must make some changes. This change may be enormous, and even completely deviate from Chinese tradition. Nevertheless, Chinese people are reluctant to accept this result because they have a strong sense of identity with their own culture. Therefore, for China today, cultural export needs to choose between giving up its traditional characteristics and gaining international universal attraction. This will be a difficult choice. Once the palace fighting dramas are successfully exported, it means that China has found a way to combine traditional culture with world culture. This will greatly influence and help the development of soft power and cultural output in the future, but it is still very difficult for China to achieve it at present.

5 Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that power struggle is a form of social capital, which is very important for the embodiment of Chinese political identity.

1. The relationship between politics and privilege reflected in palace fighting dramas widely exists in today’s Chinese society, which is also China’s political culture.

Therefore, Chinese people have gained resonance from palace fighting dramas. It is embodied in two levels. The first level is that Chinese people can get emotional release from the plot of palace fighting dramas. The second level is deeper, that is, the continuation of Chinese national identity. In order to prove the continuity of Chinese national identity, the content and spirit given by Chinese people to ancient palace fighting dramas are consistent with the political culture of Chinese families and society. This consistency that transcends and space is a bridge connecting the past, present and future.

2. The popularity of palace fighting dramas among the Chinese community at home and abroad is a relatively good option for China to build its soft power. However, at present, this choice is still faces a cultural gap, which is difficult to arouse a relatively large international response. From the analysis point of view of this paper, if China's soft power output is based on the core of palace fighting drama, it is less likely to be accepted by the rest of the world. This is because the core of the palace fighting drama is a power struggle. The Chinese style of power fighting is based on hierarchy and Confucianism. This is deeply rooted in China and at the same time difficult for foreigners to understand. This phenomenon can make it hard to export China's soft power. If this situation is to be improved, China needs to transform a strong Chinese political culture into something that is universally acceptable to the international public. The process of transformation will be difficult and painstaking.

Today, the ancient power struggle in palace fighting dramas continues in China in the form of contemporary mainstream values. This form of struggle with Chinese characteristics is the root of Chinese political culture, and has even penetrated into the foreign policy of China, affecting China's foreign political identity in the world, which will not be conducive to the spread of China's soft power world wide.

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