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Reading Round-Up, 1/31/2010

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January 31, 2010 in [movies](#), [The Five-List Plan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

1. While quite a few writers have discussed the *Avatar*-versus-*Confucius* battle currently going on in Chinese cinemas (*China Beat* posts on the subject can be found [here](#) and [here](#)), the December 2009 issue of *China Heritage Quarterly* includes [a piece by Gloria Davies and M.E. Davies](#) on another attention-getting film, *The Founding of a Republic*. The authors point out that the movie, released to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the PRC's founding, is notable for setting forth a new narrative about the events leading up to October 1, 1949:

It is a cliché to say that history is written by the victorious, but in this era of Party-generated harmony a corrective is necessary: never has history on film been so generous to the opponents of the winners. *The Founding of a Republic* offers a version of the bloody Chinese Civil War as little more than an ideological disagreement between otherwise noble Chinese antagonists—indeed it is hard to find a villain on either side of the conflict, rather just passionate Chinese patriots who disagreed to the point of armed conflict as to what political system was best for the country. Hence, Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (中正) and Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣经国 are both portrayed as valiant, principled and sincere men who simply chose the wrong path. Chiang Ching-kuo, in particular, is presented as behaving in a virtuous manner at all times. He is depicted as a paragon of unbending integrity in his confrontation with his corrupt cousin, David Kung (孔令侃). This humanistic rendering of the Chiangs, *père et fils*, in a film made to celebrate the founding of a socialist people's republic is evidence of a new foundation myth in the making. It also confirms in no uncertain terms that the worker-peasant-soldier dream, once the clarion truth and *raison d'être* of the People's Republic, has been consigned to the archives of irrelevance. It would appear that the new message is: although the Communists and Nationalists may have had their differences they have always been able to pursue their alternative visions in a principled manner. More to the point, principled opposition and conflict resolution is, regardless of the political hue, innately Chinese.

2. William Callahan, who previously contributed a piece to *China Beat* titled "[China: The Pessimist Nation](#)," now has a book by the same name. An excerpt from Callahan's book can be found at [Danwei](#).

3. The Winter 2009/2010 issue of *China Ethos* magazine is available online for free, and features articles on a wide array of topics. Jeffrey Wasserstrom offers "Five Things Worth Knowing About the 2010 Shanghai Expo"; Duncan Hewitt writes about "China's Feminism and Internet Activism"; and Paul French describes the "completely unqualified yet eminently readable" Peter Fleming, author of *One's Company* and *News From Tartary*, in "With Fleming to China."

4. At Global Voices Online, Andy Yee has a post on "[China's Orwellian Future](#)," which includes short translated excerpts from "China's dystopian novel," *The Fat Years, China, 2013*, by John Chan.

5. Finally, to end where we began, two interesting pieces about the continuing *Avatar* v. *Confucius* story. Sam Crane asks "[Confucius, the movie . . . where is the love?](#)" at his blog, *The Useless Tree*; "[Confucius vs. Avatar: And the Winner Is . . .](#)" by Mary Kay Magistad appears at YaleGlobal Online. Magistad writes of the lengths that state officials and movie promoters are going to in an effort to attract viewers to *Confucius*:

. . . state enterprises and government offices have been block-booking "Confucius" tickets for their employees. Some theaters are giving away free "Confucius" tickets with "Avatar" tickets. Others are enticing those who buy "Confucius" tickets with the opportunity to purchase much sought-after Avatar tickets.

A thought-provoking parallel between *The Founding of a Republic* and *Confucius* is that both Chiang Kai-shek and Confucius were figures vilified during the Mao era — meaning that the Chairman would certainly not look kindly on the sympathetic treatment that each receives in these two state-supported films.