

HOLDING UP HALF THE SKY:  
REVISITING “WOMAN” MESSAGES IN MODEL PLAYS DURING  
CHINA’S GREAT PROLETARIAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION  
1966-1976

by

YUAN ZHOU

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China (the Cultural Revolution) from 1966 to 1976 is considered an unprecedented political and social upheaval in Chinese modern history. Model Plays were produced as the core of the Cultural Revolutionary propaganda in an effort to promote a new discourse of political and cultural ideology of and for the worker-farmer-soldier class. As images of heroic proletarian revolutionary women were expansively represented onstage, conventional gender norms and boundaries were challenged. This paper assesses the “woman” messages carried by Model Plays and the vision of Chinese women’s liberation they depicted on the Cultural Revolutionary theatric stage.

By analyzing images of Model woman characters in Model Plays, the author argues that these model plays and operas offer an idealized vision of Chinese women’s emancipation and to certain extent serve as an empowering influence on women’s social practice in real life during the Cultural Revolution; on the other hand, however, they reveal a central tension in the Chinese revolutionary discourse with respect to gender: Women could be re-conceived as heroes, public actors fighting fearlessly for collective goals, yet these women heroes seemly could only take form in the absence of private ties: family bonds, marriage, and motherhood. So while there is something “new” and, perhaps, even liberating in these newly imagined women characters, the form they take falls short of truly reconfiguring gender relations in Chinese society.

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## DEDICATION

*TO MY MOTHER & MY CHILD*

*The drama of any culture or country vividly and sometimes violently reflects the ideas and ideals, the conflicts and complacencies, the struggles as well as the sterility of that society.<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China from 1966 to 1976 is an unprecedented political and social upheaval in Chinese modern history. Interpretations of the ultimate purpose of Mao Zedong in launching the Cultural Revolution differ widely among both Chinese and Western scholars. Some describe it as a ruthless power struggle between an aging Chairman Mao and his rivals within the Party; some see it as an idealistic experiment aimed at effecting certain socioeconomic transformations; others focus on the vision of the Cultural Revolution as a human tragedy, full of disillusion, sorrow and pain. For all its complexity, there is no doubt that, instead of merely a political happening, the Cultural Revolution was a revolution that touched Chinese people's souls [*chujī línghun de gémíng*]; as the revolutionary storm swept the entire nation, nearly every aspect of life for hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens was profoundly changed. The most popular slogans in the Cultural Revolution indicate the scope of social upheaval: "We are the critics of the old world; we are the builders of the new world"; "If we do not destroy the poisonous weeds of capitalism, the scented flowers of socialism cannot flourish"; "Smash the Four Old [*pō sì jiù*]: old culture, old customs, old habits, and old ideas of the exploiting class and establish the 'new world' of the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Meserve and Ruth I. Meserve, p1.



workers, peasants and soldiers”; “[i]conoclasm and the desire to make the world anew is at the heart of revolutionary zeal.”<sup>2</sup>

To turn the old order on its head, the Cultural Revolution presented a concerted and furious assault upon conventional discourses, including those deep-rooted norms, values, attitudes, and patterns of behavior that had long been embodied in Chinese public and private life. The open, often chaotic and at times violent struggle over “the Four Old” and “reactionary, decadent bourgeois and feudal influences” was considered necessary and encouraged in order to establish a new authoritative discourse of political and cultural ideology of and for the proletarian class. In doing so, conventional gender norms and boundaries were challenged and redefined.

The Cultural Revolutionary Model Plays (*wenhua geming yangbanxi*, Model Plays), a unique cultural and social phenomenon during the Cultural Revolution, serve as a lens through which to explore the new discourse on Chinese women’s role in society promoted during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>3</sup> These plays and operas offer an idealized vision of emancipated Chinese women and equalized gender status. On the other hand, they reveal a central tension in the Chinese revolutionary discourse with respect to gender: Women could be reconceived as heroes, public actors fighting fearlessly for collective goals, yet these women heroes seemingly could only take form in the absence of private ties—family bonds, marriage, and motherhood. So while there is something “new” and,

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<sup>2</sup> See “*Smash the Old World*” at <http://www.morningsun.org/smash/index.html>, and “Red Guards Destroy the Old and Establish the New”, *Beijing Review*, No. 36 (9/2/1966), p. 17. available at: [http://www.morningsun.org/smash/pr9\\_1966.html](http://www.morningsun.org/smash/pr9_1966.html)

<sup>3</sup> In this paper I use the term “Model Plays” to refer to model Beijing operas and model ballets, which do not include model music works created at the same time such as symphonies or piano concertos, which, due to limitation of equipment and facilities, were not as popular as model Beijing operas and ballets. Also, terms as “model theatre”, “model drama”, “Model Plays” are used interchangeably in this paper.

perhaps, even liberating in these newly imagined women characters, the form they take falls short of truly reconfiguring gender relations in Chinese society.

Three decades have now passed since the end of the Cultural Revolution. For various reasons, the post-Mao official Chinese discourse repudiates anything related to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>4</sup> This movement, which shook China during 1966-1976 and whose legacies endure into today's Chinese society, as a whole is carefully labeled as Chairman Mao's "leftist error" which was taken advantage of by the "counterrevolutionaries." It is also officially claimed that the Cultural Revolution caused "the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People's Republic."<sup>5</sup> With this view dominating the public rhetoric, scholarly examinations of many aspects of the Cultural Revolution remain limited. First, it is almost impossible to redress the injustices and damages done during the turbulent decade without jeopardizing the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and authority of the current government itself. In addition, most survivors of the Cultural Revolution find it as much emotionally disturbing as politically dangerous to reflect on their personal experiences during those ten years, because reminiscences of the "turbulent decade" [*shinian haojie*] often involve complex feelings

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, Jeremy "Putting Culture Back into the Cultural Revolution: Shifting Scholarly Views of Chinese Art and Culture, 1977-2002"

<sup>5</sup> MacFarquhar, Roderick, p391. The sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in June 1981 adopted the *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*. The *Resolution* officially repudiated the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which "was responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People's Republic"; and which "was initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong."

of pain, sorrow, guilt and disillusion. Hence, the Cultural Revolution has almost become a “forbidden zone” in current public discourses in mainland China.

Despite the tacit consent to steer away from a root-and-branch reassessment that may be too damaging for both the Party and individual survivors, memories of Cultural Revolutionary model works remain strong. Revolutionary modern ballet dramas *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl* are still performed by national and local ballet troops. Former stars of model Beijing operas like Yang Chunxia (Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountain*), Tong Xiangling (Yang Zirong in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*), Qian Haoliang (Li Yuhe in *The Red Lantern*) still enjoy much popularity among audiences. Qian Haoliang, for example, thanks to his success in starring in the model operas and close association with Jiang Qing, became a representative of the Ninth Chinese Communist Party Congress in April 1969 and even the vice minister of the Ministry of Culture in 1975. After the trial of Gang of Four, he was detained by the post-Maoist regime for a five-and-half-year investigation as having been a key follower of Jiang Qing in Cultural Revolutionary politics. With all these personal ups and downs during and after the Cultural Revolution, Qian hopes very much that audiences would have forgotten his association with Jiang Qing, and his performance and promotion of model theatre. Everytime he appears on stage, however, audiences still warmly urge him to perform “*Poor Children Learn to Work at an Early Age*” (“*Qiongren de haizi zao dangjia*”) from *The Red Lantern*.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising that in an era of consumptionism, traditional operatic art and ballet, along with a tinge of revolutionary idealism and heroism, retained their appeal to certain audiences in the post-Maoist China. Moreover, model works have become almost the only officially approved residence for the Maoist

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<sup>6</sup> Chen, Xiaomei, p73-74.

generation's nostalgic sentiment about their lost youth. In recent years, the domestic scholarship of traditional opera and theatre has seen growing interest in model theatre's contribution to modernization of Beijing opera. But, on the other hand, relative scarcity of scholarly analysis of other cultural and social aspects of Model Plays' influence, however, is still remarkable both in and outside of China. The cultural and social significance of Model Plays has been long ignored, even disparaged, given that the ideological mission of the Cultural Revolution has been criticized as "paternalistic", "restrictive", and "hyper-politicized." The ten years of the Cultural Revolution is described by many as a "cultural desert." Conveniently, the culture was taken out of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, more and more foreign and domestic scholars have recognized the multi-dimensional nature and complexity of the Cultural Revolution, and argue that "[l]ike all momentous events in human history, the Cultural Revolution demands constant restudy, reinterpretation, and reflection."<sup>8</sup> With my thesis—a revisiting of Model Plays four decades after their heyday—I hope to provide a window for both the survivors and future generations to gain a broader perspective and understanding that puts culture back to the Cultural Revolution, a decade of chaos and confusion.

## **Revolution through Art: The Cultural Revolution and Rise of Model Plays**

The Cultural Revolution, as its full official label "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" suggested, intimately linked the political with the cultural. As the theoretical basis guiding the direction of the Cultural Revolution, "*Chairman Mao's Five Militant Documents on Literature and Arts*" were republished and widely publicized. In these

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, Jeremy

<sup>8</sup> William A Joseph, Christine P.W. Wong, and David Zweig, p2.

documents, Mao criticized the old opera and all the old literature and art for being “divorced from the people” and presenting the people “as if they were dirt.” The stage was “dominated by lords and ladies and their pampered sons and daughters”, and so Mao asked for more plays and a “revolutionalization of the old opera.” According to Mao, “[p]roblems abound in all forms of art such as the drama, ballads, music, the fine arts, the dance, the cinema, poetry and literature”; “the social and economic base has changed, but the arts as part of the superstructure, which serve this base, still remain a serious problem” because feudal and capitalist art, but not socialist art is being promoted: art works “have not gone to the workers, peasants and soldiers and have not reflected the socialist revolution and socialist construction.” Hence, Mao, the Great Helmsman, instructed, “we should proceed with investigation and study and attend to this matter in earnest.”<sup>9</sup> These documents were quoted in articles, pamphlets, and talks over and over again to bolster favorable changes in the field of literature and art throughout the country. Under Mao’s instructions of revolutionizing the “superstructure” to conform to the already changed social and economic base, and producing literature and art works of and for the proletarian class, all cultural institutions were mobilized and fully engaged as “not only means of political expression but also embattled vanguard”<sup>10</sup> on the revolution front. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing was entrusted as “a sort of Commissar of Cultural”<sup>11</sup>, in charge of the work in literature and art, particularly reform of stage productions. Under the circumstances, the Revolutionary Model Plays came onstage.

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<sup>9</sup> Ebon, Martin, viii-x.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xi.

From 1967 to 1972, a collection of modern Beijing operas and revolutionary ballet dramas, whose creation and revision were closely overseen and directed by Jiang Qing, were promoted throughout the country as “Revolutionary Model Plays.” As “a powerful weapon to educate the people, and to indoctrinate them into a standardized view of revolutionary history and class struggle”<sup>12</sup>, Model Plays were organized around the central theme of eulogizing the victories of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led revolution and socialist construction. A group of idealized characters and idealized situations were created centered on the concept of the “three prominences” [*san tuchu*] – (1) among all the characters, give prominence to the positive characters, (2) among all the positive characters, give prominence to the heroic characters, and (3) among all the heroic characters, give prominence to the main heroic character – to trumpet the virtues of Chinese Communist ideology. While many Chinese and almost all western works, including literature, film, art, songs and music, were withdrawn from public circulation beginning in 1964, amidst increasingly vicious denunciations of intellectuals and artists, Model Plays achieved unprecedented prominence during the Cultural Revolution. They acted as “a major influence on the entire literary and artistic world” and served as “the artistic centerpiece of the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>13</sup> For the whole decade, these operas and ballet dramas dominated Chinese people’s cultural life.

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<sup>12</sup> Bai Di, P2

<sup>13</sup> Judd, Ellen R.(1991), P266.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Model Women in Model Plays

One of the most notable features of the model theatre is its portrayal of a series of heroic revolutionary women images. They are strong, independent, free of family obligations as wife or mother, and highly active in political activities, which makes them quite unique in Chinese literature and art history. As women warriors, women Party secretaries, women underground Communists, women model workers and peasants, etc. were continuously depicted onstage—a manifestation of Chinese women’s liberation that culminated in the Cultural Revolutionary propaganda—“the concept of Chinese women’s legendary equality with men was pushed to the extreme during the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>14</sup>

This thesis intends to examine this “woman discourse” produced by Model Plays during the Cultural Revolution. Instead of evaluating literary or aesthetic values of specific model plays or characters, I will focus on Model Plays’ cultural and social significance in terms of challenging conventional gender stereotypes and redefining Chinese womanhood. By analyzing women images on the Cultural Revolutionary theatrical stage, I attempt to assess the nature of “woman” messages carried by Model Plays, and explore the social context within which the ideal of new womanhood was developed and how this ideal affected Chinese women’s social and political life in reality during and after the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Chen, Xiaomei, p236.

At the time the Chinese Communist Party came to power, Chinese society had been dominated by Confucian orthodoxy for centuries. Confucian dictates preached a strictly structured hierarchical social order, under which a woman was supposed “to obey her father at home; to obey her husband after marriage; and to obey her eldest son as a widow.” The low status of women in traditional China, “whether in the patriarchal family or in society”, has become “proverbial.”<sup>15</sup> There is no denying that the role of Chinese women had undergone significant changes since the May Fourth Movement in 1921, especially during social movements and revolutions led by the Communist Party, who has held high the slogan of emancipating Chinese women since its establishment. After Liberation in 1949, upon the Party’s call for the masses to mobilize and participate in the socialist construction of the New China, Chinese society saw wider scale entry of women into the labor force. The official discourse encouraged women to step out of narrow domesticity and contribute to social production. However, old thoughts, customs, values and norms that have long oppressed women do not die easily either in the family or in society. The experiences of the land reform, marriage law campaigns and the Great Leap Forward (GLF) in the 1950’s showed that changes in the economic base and the creation of new social forms did not necessarily result in the adoption of new values and standards of behavior which are more favorable for women. The result of female labor participation outside the home was that women were given “two roles to play at the same time, the traditional one and the modern one, and each role is as demanding as the other.”<sup>16</sup> At home a woman was still expected to be the obedient wife and self-sacrificing mother. In the workplace she was expected to be as dedicated as her men colleagues, even if she was

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<sup>15</sup> Croll, Elisabeth, 1974, viii.

<sup>16</sup> Shen, Yichin, p47-68.



more likely to be assigned to do “women's work” or given a secondary role to play under male-dominated leadership. Elisabeth Croll observes, “it was not only the attitudes of male supremacy inherited by men which seemed to perpetuate the traditional structures, but women too colluded in their persistence by internalizing and perpetuating attitudes of inferiority, self-abasement and dependence.”<sup>17</sup>

However, the Cultural Revolution starting in 1966, which was designed to be an ideological revolution against feudal and capital vestiges affecting the socialist superstructure, and to prescribe specific modes of political thinking and action, consciously or not, integrated the demand for confronting the conventional gender norms and redefining women's social roles into its ambitious agenda of creating New Human Beings, New Culture, and New Society through a mass rebellion against the Old world. Under the waving banner, “it is right to rebel!” it was justified and legitimized to challenge the authoritative, traditional gender discourse and go beyond the long-established gendered boundaries. Model Plays' expansive representation of women heroes and leaders is a manifestation of this iconoclastic spirit.

Among the first seven revolutionary Model Plays officially promoted between spring and summer of 1967, four have female leads: Sister A Qing in modern Beijing opera *Shajiabang* is an underground Communist who sends eighteen wounded Communist soldiers through enemy lines during the Anti-Japanese War; Fang Haizhen, Party secretary in the Beijing opera *On the Docks*, leads the workers to crush the conspiracy of the class enemy and have food aid shipped out to African countries on time; Xi'er in the ballet drama the *White-Haired Girl*, once an enslaved peasant girl, runs away from the landlord's house to the mountain, later joins the Communist army and returns to

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<sup>17</sup> Croll, Elisabeth (1978): 289.

seek revenge against the evil landlord; and Wu Qinghua in revolutionary ballet *the Red Detachment of Women*, also a poor slave girl, makes her way to the camp of a women's fighting force of the CCP-led Red Army, learns the rationale of the revolution there and joins the detachment in fighting against the landlords. Women characters in other model works such as Grandma Li and Li Tiemei in *The Red Lantern* and Changbao in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* are also presented as heroic female revolutionaries and leave a fresh impression among audiences.

Following the success of the first seven Model Plays, Jiang Qing named another ten reformed plays and music works as revolutionary Model Works in the 1970s. Although the first group remained much more popular and influential, several plays of the second group became well known, including the Beijing opera, *Azalea Mountain (dujuan shan)*<sup>18</sup>. *Azalea Mountain* depicts Ke Xiang, a female Communist Party representative who reforms a peasants' self-defense unit into a revolutionary army and leads it to victory in its struggle against a local despot and Nationalist troops. Another Beijing opera, *Song of the Dragon River (Longjiang song)* depicts rural life in the 1960s: Jiang Shuiying, the female Communist Party secretary leads local peasants to constantly justify their continuing sacrifice of self interests for socialist construction. The expansive and vigorous visual representation of women leaders and heroes on theatrical stage during the Cultural Revolution is unprecedented in Chinese history of literature and art. From the late 1960's to present, both in Chinese and western scholarship, widely different views have developed regarding this unique feature of Model Plays.

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<sup>18</sup> Chen, Xiaomei, p75-77.

## Diverse Interpretations of “woman” messages Carried by Model Plays

Most research conducted from the 1970s to the end of 1980s tends to view model works as the dead-end of the Chinese Communist Party’s political and ideological appropriation of art, a weapon serving the Party’s or some power-obsessed leader’s propagandistic purposes. Model Plays are trashed as “artless, sterile, without depth, without truth, and without reality.”<sup>19</sup> In their 1970 book, Walter and Ruth Meserve describe, “the new Communist drama is...but an intriguing picture of society—a picture of red banners waving everywhere, of heroic deeds by workers, peasants, and soldiers (especially women), all of whom are armed with Mao Tse-tung’s thoughts on art and literature.”<sup>20</sup> Other authors who share this view stress Jiang Qing’s influence on the Chinese cultural scene during the Cultural Revolution and question her motives in reforming traditional Beijing opera, ballet, and film in particular. Ebon warns the Western audience of the “darkest shadows”—the hidden, ongoing power struggles behind the “brightest sunlight” on China’s Cultural Revolutionary stage.<sup>21</sup> Terrill’s criticisms that “the *Red Lantern* sprang forth to bore a generation of theatergoers” and that thanks to Jiang Qing’s drama reforms, “the minds of Chinese theatergoers were reduced to mashed potatoes” were typical in post-Maoist public discourse.<sup>22</sup> As a matter of fact, Terrill completely dismisses Jiang Qing’s leftist ideas on art reform and class struggle. According to him, from the beginning of her involvement in cultural policy in the 1950’s, Jiang Qing did not believe in, and probably did not even understand, the ideology she espoused. Terrill writes:

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<sup>19</sup> Meserve, Walter and Ruth Meserve, p1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ebon, Martin, xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Terrill, Ross, p 223, 226.

One can understand the “leftism” of Jiang Qing only by translating two key political concepts into the meaning they had within her personal universe: communism meant power; class struggle meant revenge.<sup>23</sup>

He then concludes that Jiang Qing’s “personal drama was the key to the Cultural Revolution”, and Jiang saw model opera as a “tool for her climb to power.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the only reason for the depiction of the prominence of women heroes and leaders in model theatre, according to Terrill, was to serve for Jiang Qing’s personal political ambition to ease her way for further success in single-minded power struggle.

This view is welcomed and seconded by many domestic scholars, who often personally experienced the ten-year turmoil. In *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao write:

“In the Cultural Revolution, both Lin Biao and Jiang Qing took advantage of the people’s ‘rebellious activities’ to fortify their own power and position... Aware that she was politically inferior to Lin Biao, Jiang Qing...made great efforts to expand her influence in the ideological and the cultural field with the help of the Beijing opera reform. She waved the banner of the ‘eight model dramas,’ which were also the result of the Beijing opera reform, hoping that people would gather around her banner and elevate her to the throne as the future queen of China.”<sup>25</sup>

Yan and Gao acknowledge the following facts: first, because “for a time, the ‘eight model dramas’ were the only forms of expression of Chinese literature and art”;

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<sup>23</sup> Terrill, Ross, 1999, p 177.

<sup>24</sup> Terrill, Ross, 1999, p219, 263n

<sup>25</sup> Yan, Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, translated and edited by D. W. Y. Kwok, University of Hawaii Press, p400.

“vast resources of both personnel and materials became available to concentrate on her [Jiang Qing’s] ‘model dramas’, and that every Model Plays were filmed; second, the films then distributed throughout the country, and all organizations and schools ordered to view the films”; “factories, enterprises (government agencies), public organizations, colleges, middle and primary schools, and residential districts were required to teach their employees, students, and residents to sing arias from those dramas.”<sup>26</sup> As predominant as Model Plays’ role was in Chinese people’s cultural and political life, when describing the audience’s perception of the plays, as well as the impact of model theatre on people’s everyday practice, however, Yan and Gao put it as simplistic as “although the ‘eight model dramas’ were of high artistic standard, audiences became bored seeing and listening to them only. What was more, they became disgusted with them.”<sup>27</sup>

These criticisms, from both inside and outside China, share an approach of macro-oriented analysis when assessing the model theatre. In other words, they focus on the historical and social context in which Model Plays were produced, and they emphasize power, revenge, and personal ambition as the decisive factors in the Cultural Revolution politics, which also determine the sterile nature of the model works. In the *Cambridge History of China (Volume 15): Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution 1966-1982*, MacFarquhar writes that “the fate of China was settled by the ambitions and intrigues of a very small group of desperate leaders and their families”<sup>28</sup>. Duowe Fokkema argues in a separate chapter that a struggle for power subsumed ideological reform in the field of literature and art during the Cultural Revolution, and that model theatre, like any other literary production during the Cultural Revolution, was “a

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<sup>26</sup> Yan, Jiaqi and Gao Gao, p401.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p402.

<sup>28</sup> MacFarquhar, Foderick, p326 fn.76.

consequence of political interference in the arts”<sup>29</sup>. This overall negative assessment of the Cultural Revolution’s ideological project is further reinforced by the Chinese Communist Party’s official repudiation of the Cultural Revolution since the late 1970s. In light of these arguments, it doesn’t seem that much scholarship would bother looking at a micro level, into either the texts or the conscious and unconscious cultural and social messages carried by Model Plays. The playwrights, actors and actresses, dancers, on-stage characters, and audiences of the once-prominent model theatre are treated as a victims’ collective, and rendered as agent-less and voice-less “others.” The thousands of people who threw themselves – for whatever reason – behind “ultra-left” policies, who worked seriously on model operas and ballets during the Cultural Revolution, and those “theatergoers” who loved and still love Model Plays are overlooked, or even scorned as being fooled or brain-washed. I would argue that this macro-oriented approach is misleading in assuming that Chinese literature and art field during the Cultural Revolution was a “cultural vacuum”, and that few really believed in or were influenced by what the official documents and artistic offerings eagerly espoused.

A counter-discourse is provided by a group of American scholars who visited China in 1971. They were pleasantly amazed by this creative popular cultural form, Model Plays, because “...for the first time in China’s history, all the people are integrated into the cultural and artistic life of the nation. Everywhere, traditional forms of art and culture have been revived and with the help of modern technology spread throughout the country.” They were particularly impressed by the Chinese women, young or old, in cities or in countryside, who watched, learned and acted in Model Plays with high

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<sup>29</sup> Fokkema, Douwe. p594-601.

enthusiasm. Seeing women also “working in the fields and operating machinery in factories”, and “middle-school girls shooting rifles in a militia drill”<sup>30</sup>, these American scholars concluded that the Cultural Revolution was an attack on all forms of privilege, including the status attained by intellectuals, bureaucrats, authority...and men. They believed that there would be “a totally new direction for cultural development” in socialist China, and such an impressive array of *prima facie* evidence convinced them that changes in the lives of women may be “one of the greatest miracles of the Chinese Revolution.”<sup>31</sup>

There is also a different perspective regarding Jiang Qing’s contribution to the creation of the model theatre and its promotion of the ideal of New womanhood in particular. For example, Roxane Witke, who wrote her book *Comrade Chiang Ching (Jiang Qing)* based on a week-long interview with Jiang Qing herself, believes ideological transformation was the purpose behind Jiang’s ambition. In other words, Jiang sought power not for power’s sake alone, but in order to be in a position to transform the superstructure through implementing her ideology in the arts.<sup>32</sup> In terms of women’s issues, Witke’s narrative indicates an evident feminist concern in Jiang Qing’s political ideology, which contradicts Terrill’s portrayal of Jiang in his *Madame Mao: the White-Boned Demon* as ignorant and single-mindedly power-driven. Jiang Qing told Witke that “her own contributions to China’s cultural world might ease the way for future generations of women.”<sup>33</sup> In Witke’s version of the story, therefore, the increasing prominence of women heroes in the model theatre can be understood as a manifestation

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<sup>30</sup> The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, p266.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p248-249.

<sup>32</sup> Witke, Roxane, p380, 384, 413.

<sup>33</sup> Ebon, Martin, pxiii.

of the fundamental revolutionary nature of Jiang Qing's actions, because conventionally actresses in China were generally considered morally suspect, and women characters on stage were appreciated only as entertainment. Moreover, in China, 'culture' was never a predominantly feminine sphere of responsibility. For centuries, men had dominated the theater as playwrights, directors, and musicians, and until recently had monopolized the stage. Witke's narrative, while not unassailable, does propose the possible existence of a feminist impulse, conscious or unconscious, in the production of the model theatre, which to a certain extent challenges the dominant view of the model theatre as an artless, culture-less weapon solely for sake of power struggle.

Instead of interpreting Model Plays as simply a product of power struggle within the Chinese leadership, some more recent scholars such as Chen Xiaomei, Bai Di, and Rosemary Roberts adopt a micro-oriented approach of text-based analysis in an attempt to re-assess the cultural and social significance of the model theatre. For instance, they have noticed that themes such as romance, love, marriage, and family which conventionally had been attached to female characters were repressed, and even eliminated, in Model Plays. Positive women characters in Model Plays were either unmarried (Xi'er, Wu Qinghua, Changbao, etc.), separated (Sister A Qing), or widowed (Ke Xiang, Grandma Sha, Grandma Li); the underlying idea is said to be that by freeing women from domestic obligations, they are in a better position to be altruistic and devote themselves entirely to the revolutionary cause. These women also possess a great deal of physical strength, are endowed with powerful constitutions, vigorous airs, and forceful voices, which are a manifestation of their inner "loftiness, greatness, and perfection" (*gao*



*da quan*). In addition, the physical features of positive women characters in model Beijing operas were highly stylized. The heroines were intentionally presented as having a strong physique, suntan, big and bright piercing eyes, an unaffected expression; they wore plain working clothes just like their male counterparts. As a result of the campaign to promote and popularize Model Plays, this routinized way of portraying heroines not only was copied in other literature and art works, including posters, paintings and films, but also helped shape people, especially women's participation in social life in reality: they wore plain and practical clothes just like the men, their hair is either cut short or worn long in two braids which were practical for work, they worked in the fields and operated machinery in factories, or practiced shooting rifles in a militia drill.<sup>34</sup> "Times have changed," as the slogan that dominated Party rhetoric on women during the Cultural Revolution put it, "women can do the same as men do."

Some researchers characterize Chinese society at the time as experiencing "the erasure of gender and sexuality" as all of society became "masculinized." Among them is Chen Xiaomei, currently a professor of literature at an American university, who grew up in Beijing surrounded by theatrical luminaries from Chinese theater's golden age of the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> In her book, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theatre and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*, Chen, with her personal insights and close relationships with top figures in the world of Chinese drama, argues that women characters in Model Plays, who were "portrayed strikingly as lacking families or any attraction for the opposite sex", and who were dramatically "transformed from oppressed women into revolutionary warriors and party leaders", were "deprived of womanhood, motherhood, and the

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<sup>34</sup> The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, p266-269.

<sup>35</sup> Chen's mother was a famous actress and her father an accomplished stage designer for the China Youth Art Theater.

intimacies of family life.”<sup>36</sup> During this period of “Cultural Revolutionary feminism”, according to Chen, Chinese women’s touted equality with men, popularized in model theatre, posters and other means of visual culture, were just what radicals used to “consolidate political and state power.” According to Chen, the “worker-peasant-soldier model women”—represented on stage so that they would be imitated in real life—were reduced to the status of “revolutionary masses”, whose only reason d’être was to celebrate the party and Chairman Mao.”<sup>37</sup> By analyzing such female characters as Sister A Qing and Ke Xiang in model Beijing operas, Chen argues that although female leads dominated the stage of Model Plays, and thematic concerns and story lines pushed to the extreme women’s role in the public domains, those women characters were depicted as totally lacking any acquaintance with motherhood and the intimacies of family life, and therefore, they were not treated as historical subjects, but rather as voiceless signifiers who spoke for the oppressed classes and their party. Chen argues that it is “...clear that the issue of gender was never taken seriously in model theatre. It was appropriated instead as an opportunity for ideological signification and power domination”<sup>38</sup>, and model theater “used the issue of women’s exploitation for its own purposes of political unification and conformity.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, women’s specific needs were submerged in the socialist state’s needs and were re-directed for the male-led Party’s political sake. There is no denying that the Cultural Revolution inherited the legacy of all the other CCP-led movements that integrates women’s liberation with the wider socialist revolutionary cause and that doesn’t treat pursuit of Chinese women for their equality

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<sup>36</sup> Chen, Xiaomei, p75.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid p117.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p109.

with men as a separate and organized feminist movement. In fact the term of feminism in the CCP's official rhetoric had become much more "a term of abuse" which refers to "those who exclusively pursue women's interests without regard for the forms which political and economic systems take."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Chen seems to neglect the rebellious nature of Cultural Revolution ideology under which Model Plays' women discourse was produced; neither does she treat Model Plays' audiences as interpreting and interacting agents—she "provides readers with hardly any information on how audiences actually viewed model theater during the Cultural Revolution,"<sup>41</sup> nor information on how the "woman" messages of Model Plays affected gender relations and Chinese women's life in reality. Rather, her overall arguments indicate a simplistic and essentialist understanding of femininity and womanhood in claiming that women lose their gender identity once they are detached from sexual love, wifehood, motherhood and family obligations. Although Chen does not rush to disparage Cultural Revolution art, in the end she still tends to share the view of Model Plays as a close-ended phenomenon. As Jeremy Brown comments, "it is difficult to see how *Acting the Right Part's* general assessment really differs from conventional elite readings of the Cultural Revolution."<sup>42</sup>

Also coming of age in the Cultural Revolution era, Bai Di holds a totally different interpretation of the deprivation of sexual love, wifehood, motherhood and family life from female characters in Model Plays. According to Bai, "as the praxis of the first wave of Chinese feminist reformation of culture, the text of Culture Revolution

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<sup>40</sup> Croll, Elisabeth (1978): 3.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, Jeremy, book review on Xiaomei Chen's *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*..

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

model theatre produced a women discourse which is against the Communist Party's consistent appropriation of women's liberation", and Model Plays distinguish themselves from their original (pre-Cultural Revolution) versions by their "conscious extraction of details in plots, traces in characters, and gestures in choreography that are associated with the domain of female sexuality."<sup>43</sup> Bai sees "the diminishing of traditional gender traces in model theater women's images is the salient character of its feminism[feminist nature]", and praises it for creating a "feminist" "utopia where cultural androgyny is predominant"<sup>44</sup>. Bai acknowledges the challenge that Model Plays' "woman" messages present against the traditional gender boundaries and the long established stereotypical roles assigned to Chinese women. Her points are certainly refreshing in viewing the model theatre as a feminist literary product in its cultural and social essence.

Bai's research, however, stops at the text-reading level and doesn't go further to question the limitations of Model Plays' way of approaching women problems—a way of empowering and liberating women through boldly eliminating their every involvement in the private domain and placing them right in the centre of the public sphere side by side or even above men. This approach cleverly and conveniently avoided the difficulty of confronting the realistic problem faced by Chinese women in the New China: how can a woman be a competitive socialist constructor while she is still expected to shoulder the domestic burdens and be a "virtuous wife and loving mother" at home? Bai Di uncritically embraces this idealist approach and fails to address such relevant questions as in what ways and to what extent the depiction of women heroes and leaders on theatric

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<sup>43</sup> Bai, Di, p99.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p99-100.

stage affect Chinese women's liberation not only in ideology but also in real life during and after the Cultural Revolution.

Different as their conclusions are, in terms of research methodology, both Chen and Bai adopt an approach of micro-oriented text analysis of women characters in Model Plays. At the theoretic level, by using such terms as “masculinized women”, “ungendered/ degendered women”, “gender-free objects”, and “androgyny”, they also seem to share the essentialist and dichotomist view that treats gender as “a collection of roles, symbols, and behaviors that are always attached to two incommensurable sexes” between which there is definite border lines.<sup>45</sup> In other words, both Chen and Bai interpret the model women characters in Model Plays as social and political beings without female gender. As a result, Chinese women are compelled into a place where they have to choose one way or the other; they are constantly confronted with a dilemma of choosing between their gender and their participation in the public sphere.

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<sup>45</sup> Brownell, Susan and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, i.

# RESEARCH STRATEGY

## Interpreting Gender/Womanhood/Femininity

The controversy in existing scholarly studies of the model theatre's "woman" messages reflects the complex and multidimensional nature of its gender discourse, which includes not only the text itself but also the particular social context in which the text was produced, perceived, and evaluated. Therefore, the model theatre's "woman" messages must be read against the specific historical background of Cultural Revolution era China and with the awareness of the unique social situation that Chinese women were in. Studies that fail to consider the interactions between the text and social context might not be able to adequately reflect the complexity of the issue and its enduring influence. In my thesis, I approach gender as a lived experience, a polymorphous phenomena, which "take[s] on varied contours over time, among different social groups, and ...put to divergent purposes."<sup>46</sup> There should be no universal definition of womanhood or manhood—the "anatomical details, behaviors, discussions, and ideas that make a woman into a woman and a man into a man" are constantly redefined and evolving<sup>47</sup>. Gender constructs differ from setting to setting, thus generate different ideals of femininities and masculinities in particular context. In the case of Model Plays, the unprecedented depiction of a group of charismatic female protagonists challenged the long-dominant confining stipulations for Chinese womanhood and femininity, obscured, even deconstructed conventional gendered boundaries, which doesn't mean that women, as a

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<sup>46</sup> Brownell, Susan and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, i.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p1.

gender category, was eliminated nor that women were somehow “made” into men. Instead, the ideas as to what makes a woman a woman were questioned and modified. Yet at the same time, at the practical level, the Cultural Revolution ideals of new womanhood failed to address the conflict between women’s domestic responsibilities and their involvement in the public sphere. Model Plays provided a rather surreal picture of gender equality, which was found liberating and empowering by many Chinese women who experienced their childhood and adolescent years during the Cultural Revolution. However it didn’t really redraw the contour for womanhood and femininity, nor did it prescribe any feasible solution for women problems in reality, which is why adult women, or girls who eventually reached their adulthood often felt disillusioned and realized that the vision of liberated women provided by Model Plays was too apart from their real life where it is difficult for them to avoid sexual love, marriage, motherhood, and family duties, and they often had to struggle between the ideals and reality.

### **Research Method: Critical Discourse Analysis**

The following section further clarifies how I define and use such concepts as “text”, “discourse”, and “discourse analysis.” Discourse is a difficult concept, largely because there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints. In my research, I adopt what Fairclough called the “multidimensional concept of discourse and discourse analysis”, which draws together language analysis with sociological theories based upon a combination of a more social-theoretical sense of ‘discourse’ with the “text-and-interaction’ sense in

linguistically-oriented discourse analysis.<sup>48</sup> According to Fairclough, this concept of discourse and discourse analysis is three dimensional: any instance of discourse is seen as being simultaneously (1) a piece of text, (2) an instance of discursive practice, and (3) an instance of social practice.<sup>49</sup> “Text” in this sense of discourse refers to the written or spoken ‘product’ of the process of text production; the text dimension attends to language analysis of texts—Fairclough also emphasizes the multi-semiotic character of texts and adds visual images and sound as other semiotic forms which may be simultaneously present in texts. The ‘discursive practice’ dimension is the link between text and social practice, which specifies the nature of the processes of text production and interpretation. The ‘social practice’ dimension attends to issues of concern in social analysis such as the institutional and organizational circumstances of the discursive event and how that shapes the nature of the discursive practice, and the constitutive or constructive effects of discourse referred to above.<sup>50</sup> Discourse Analysis means, therefore, the analysis of relationships between concrete language use and the wider social and cultural structures in which it happens. Fairclough’s three-dimensional concept of discourse and discourse analysis is illustrated as in Figure 1.<sup>51</sup>

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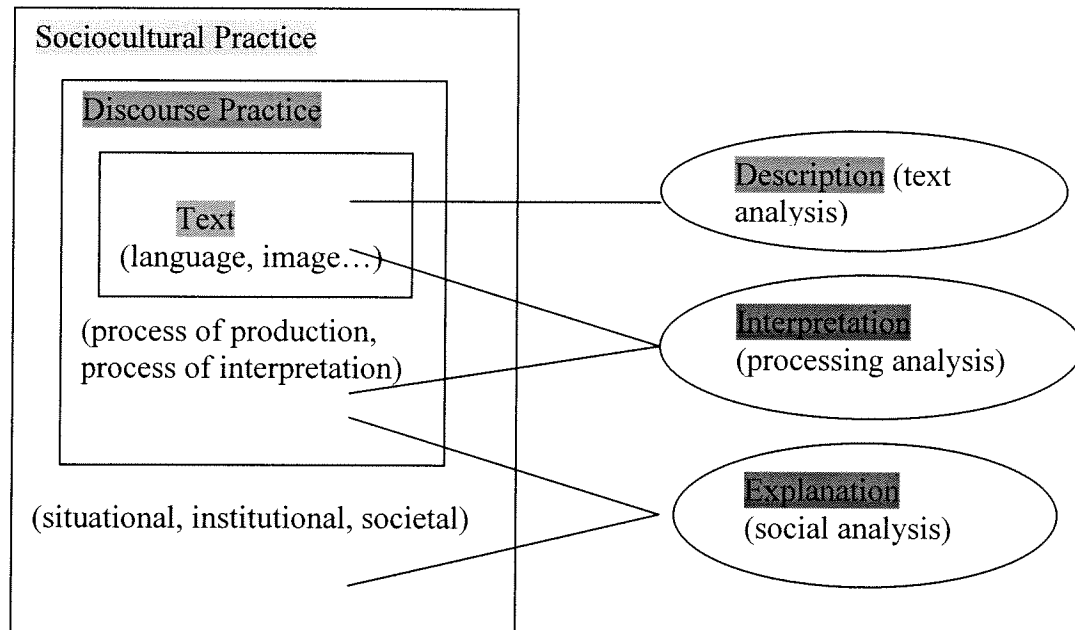
<sup>48</sup> Fairclough, Norman, p 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p1-11

<sup>50</sup> Titscher, Stefan, Michael Meyer, Ruth Wodak and Eva Vetter, p148-154.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p152.



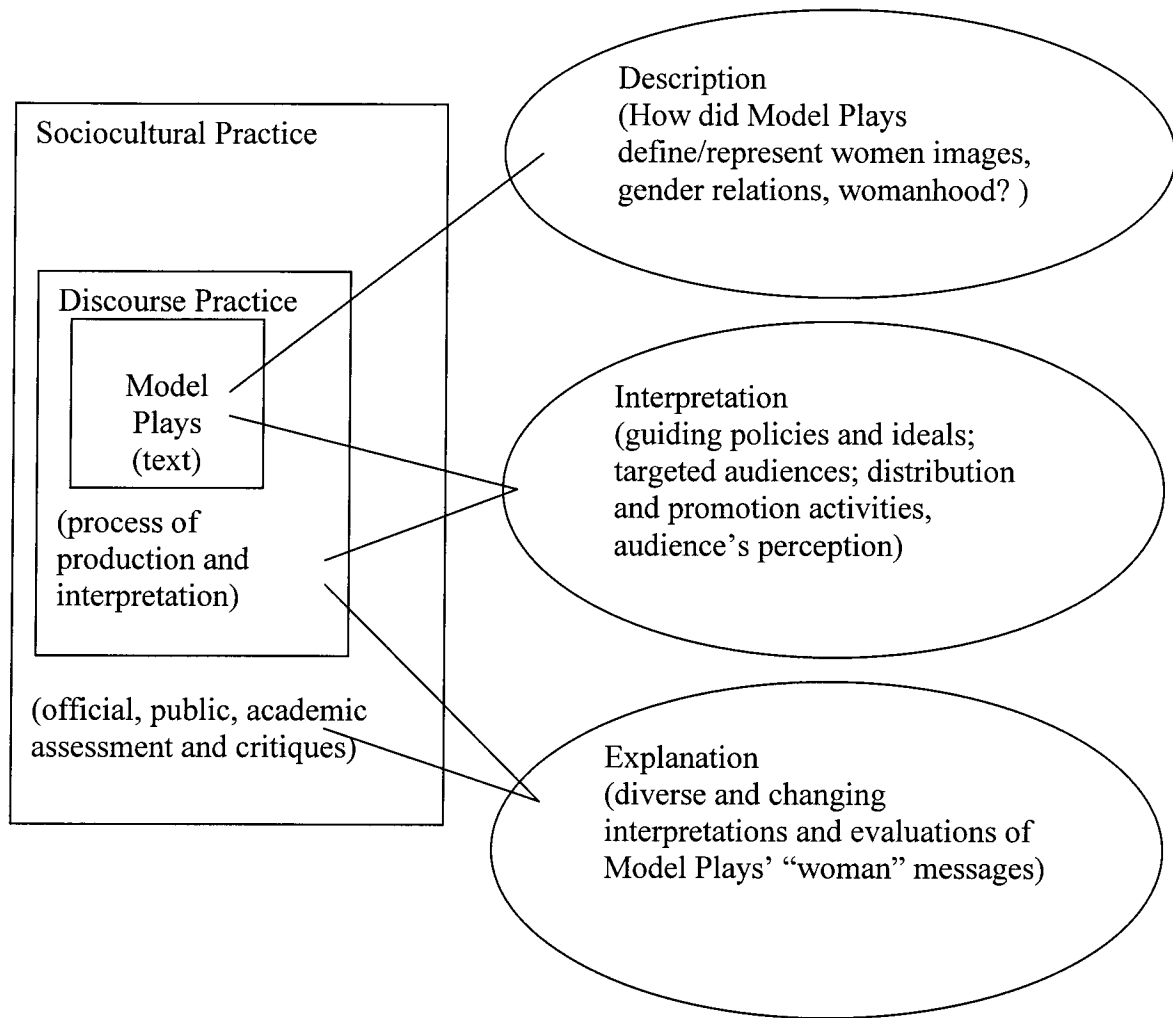


**Figure 1: Dimensions of Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

The analysis of the “woman” messages of Model Plays can serve as a precise case for the type of discourse analysis defined by Fairclough. Besides written texts—script, libretto, scores, etc.—the text of Model Plays also includes visual images and sound presented simultaneously on stage. However, due to the limited availability of original videos of Model Plays under study, the primary sources for my research are mainly scripts, stage photos, posters, and footage of film versions of Model Plays available on the Internet. My thesis focuses on examinations of components such as language use, visual images, overall depiction of characters, and the thematic plot of Model Plays in an attempt to understand the “woman” messages carried by Model Plays. Factors like stage lighting, music, and sound effects will not be discussed in this study.

The social and historical context in which Model Plays’ “woman” messages were produced and distributed is considered, for example, what were the official ideals

and policies that guided and framed the literature and art productions? What changes were made to the original stories and characters in order for them to become the “model”? In what ways were the women images different after revisions and what ideas of womanhood did these images reflect and advocate? My research is also conducted with awareness of the third dimension of the model theatre’s women discourse, its socio-cultural practice, which refers to the diverse and changing perceptions and evaluations of Model Plays’ “woman” messages by different groups and in different social and historical conditions, and the changing gender discourse and culture that were generated by certain interpretations. Figure 2 is the modified model of Fairclough’s three-dimensional discourse analysis which illustrates the methodological framework for my thesis.



**Figure 2: Three-Dimensional Analysis of Model Plays' Gender Discourse**

## CASE STUDIES

Having clarified the key concepts and research method I adopted in this study, the next section focuses its discussion on the women protagonists in the three most popular model plays during the Cultural Revolution: Xi'er in *The White-Haired Girl*, Wu Qinghua in *The Red Detachment of Women*, and Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountain*. By examining these three women characters and looking into the features and experiences they share, I attempt to discover and evaluate the “woman” messages carried by the Cultural Revolutionary Model Plays.

### Case Study A.

#### **The White-Haired Girl –Xi'er, a peasant daughter's road to liberation**

The modern revolutionary ballet<sup>52</sup> *The White-Haired Girl* was first performed by Shanghai Dance School in Shanghai in 1965 and made its Beijing debut on April 30, 1966 for the May Day (International Worker's Day) celebration. After continuous revising and rehearsing under the direct guidance of Jiang Qing, this ballet was promoted in 1967 as one of the first eight Cultural Revolutionary Model Works for revolutionizing the literature and art production to serve the interests of the proletarian class. The stage production was filmed in 1972 for wider distribution.

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<sup>52</sup> It was called “modern revolutionary” ballet because the work revolutionized classical ballet by combining it with traditional Chinese folk dance, Chinese opera and martial arts in an effort to use traditional and foreign art forms to serve China's proletarian class.

The ballet *The White-Haired Girl* is adapted from an opera of the same title, which was produced and premiered in Yan'an in 1945. The libretto is based on a folk story about a "white-haired goddess" popular in the northwestern part of Hebei province in 1940s.<sup>53</sup> During the anti-Japanese War (1937-45), in a North China village, poor tenant peasant Yang Bailao and his daughter, Xi'er are preparing for the coming Chinese New Year. The grasping landlord Huang Shiren, a traitor and despot, comes to collect the payment of grain rent. Yang, unable to pay the accumulated cash debt, is forced to sign a contract, which promises to give his daughter Xi'er to Huang as payment. Yang, in desperation, commits suicide; Xi'er is abducted and raped by the landlord. Filled with class hatred, her sweetheart Wang Dachun, a young neighbor of a poor peasant family, leaves the village to join the Eighth Route Army led by the Chinese Communist Party. Hearing that Huang is selling her to a brothel, Xi'er manages to flee into the mountains, where she survives on food that local villagers offer to the gods in a small temple. Her hair turns white after years of suffering. The villagers who sometimes see her taking food from the temple think she is a ghost and sacrifice to her. Dachun, returning to the village three years later as a cadre in the Eighth Route Army, discovers Xi'er and brings her back to the liberated village. The hated landlord Huang is executed, and the villagers celebrate their new life.

Based on the 1945 opera, the motion picture<sup>54</sup> *The White-Haired Girl* was made in 1950 soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China. "More than six million people watched the film in the first round of release in China" and it was

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<sup>53</sup> Martin, p29; also see Walter J. Meserve and Ruth I. Meserve, p7.

<sup>54</sup> The model ballet version of *the White Haired Girl* was made into film in 1972.

considered the “most outstanding representative film”<sup>55</sup> in the 1950s’ New China because of its success in highlighting the contrast between the two types of society—“the old society forced a person into a ghost and the new society turns the ghost back into a person.”<sup>56</sup>

From the original opera in the 1940s to the film in the 1950s and then to the model ballet in the 1960s, constant changes and revisions were made to the storyline of *The White-Haired Girl*, reflecting the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) agenda for not only art and literature production but also social and political change. The contrast between the image of Xi’er in the model ballet and that in the previous opera and film reveals the new ideal of the Chinese womanhood and femininity that was promoted by the Cultural Revolutionary cultural and ideological projects.

In both the 1945 opera and 1950 film, Xi’er is portrayed as sweet but naïve, weak and dependant, as a person who deserves sympathy and who needs to be protected and rescued, by men, apparently, be they father, lover, or the men-led Eighth Route Army. By contrast, in the model ballet, Xi’er turns into a courageous heroine who has a highly developed class consciousness and who always fearlessly resists the oppression by Huang Shiren on behalf of the exploited class. She is no longer a damsel in distress passively waiting to be rescued by knights in shining amour but the acting agent who fights for the liberation of herself and her class and who is thus worthy of emulation.

For example, in the opera, after Yang Bailao commits suicide, Huang Shiren’s running dog, Steward Mu comes to seize Xi’er. Xi’er is grieved, frightened and helpless. While Dachun and other villagers are arguing with Mu, all she does is cry and seek

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<sup>55</sup> chinaculture.org. *The White-Haired Girl*. China.org.cn. January 19, 2004. Retrieved December 18, 2007. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/film/85136.htm>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

protection from Dachun, elder people among the villagers, and even her dead father.

When Mu is pulling her away, she “cries bitterly”, “screams and struggles” with fright.<sup>57</sup>

The scene unfolds in a similar fashion in the 1950s film. When Xi’er hears that her dad has sold her to Huang Shiren, she throws herself on her father’s dead body, and helplessly begs Uncle Zhao and Auntie Wang to tell her what to do and to save her.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, the character of Xi’er in the model ballet is endowed with physical strength and high political consciousness. When Huang Shiren and his henchmen force Yang Bailao to sign Xi’er into servitude in return for unpaid grain rents, Yang Bailao, instead of performing a passive act of self-destruction, resists with determination and Xi’er bravely joins him in fighting the oppressor. The two of them put up a heroic fight with Huang Shiren and Steward Mu, who brandish wooden rods. When Yang is beaten to death, Xi’er doesn’t weep in grief or fear; on the contrary, she denounces Huang’s crime with deep indignation and swears to seek revenge.

A similar contrast can be seen from the scene where Xi’er is cruelly treated at Huang’s house. In the original opera and the 1950s film Xi’er is depicted as frightened, helpless and submissive. As Huang and his mother’s servant girl, Xi’er is constantly cursed and beaten. Feeling sorry for herself that the rich people treat her all the time like dirt, she passively resigns herself to fate, swallowing her tears and being more careful not to “annoy” the rich people.<sup>59</sup> When she breaks the pot and spills the broth by accident, she is so frightened and sings timidly:

...

Now I’ve done such a dreadful thing,

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<sup>57</sup> Ebon, Martin, p60.

<sup>58</sup> Nestor, Pete and Tom Moran.

<sup>59</sup> Ebon, Martin, p68.

I'm afraid I shan't escape with my life!  
Where can I hide myself?  
Oh, Heaven, save me!<sup>60</sup>

In the ballet, however, Xi'er is determined not to accept her fate of serving Huang and his family from the moment she steps into their house. She continues to put up firm resistance against the cruelty of the landlord and his mother. When they abuse her, she fights back bare-handed. Xi'er in the ballet always confronts the evil rich face to face. Unlike the weak and fragile girls in traditional literature and art works, she possesses a great deal of physical strength—she throws the landlord's henchmen away while fighting them. There is never fear in her expressions; she stares at the oppressors closely, her eyes bright and piercing, which signifies hatred towards the oppressing class and the spirit of revenge. She has such a vigorous air that she often induces fear in negative characters. Also, her dancing movements incorporate elements from traditional Peking opera and martial arts; the conventional soft ballet wrists are replaced by firm fists to indicate the attitude of heroic resistance and revolt. (See Photo. 1-4)

Another important revision to the character Xi'er as presented in the model ballet is that her being raped by Huang and getting pregnant is eliminated from the plot. In the 1945 opera, Xi'er was raped by Huang Shiren. Seven months pregnant, she was characterized as so naïve that she fails to view Huang as the evil oppressor and fantasizes that he might marry her. Later, after she escapes to the mountains, she gives birth to the child; both she and the child are rescued by Dachun and the Eighth Route Army in the end. In the 1950 film, however, Xi'er's hope of marrying Huang is gone, and the child dies at birth. In the model ballet further revision is made: the rape by the landlord, the

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<sup>60</sup> Martin, p72.



pregnancy and giving birth in the mountains are all omitted—Xi'er is brutally treated but not sexually assaulted by Huang. A more detailed discussion will be conducted regarding these revisions in order to illustrate the gender messages lying behind them.

In the opera, after Xi'er is raped by Huang, the strongest emotion she feels as is shame. Having lost her virginity, which in traditional Chinese culture represents an unmarried woman's chastity and loyalty to her future husband, she feels she's lost reason to live on. She sings in deep sorrow:

Heaven!  
You could kill me with a knife or axe,  
But you shouldn't have shamed me!  
...  
Mother bore me, Dad brought me up,  
Was it all for nothing?  
Now-how can I face people?  
How can I live on?  
Oh, Dad, Dad, I've let you down! Aunty Wang, Dachun, I can never  
face you again!<sup>61</sup>....

Xi'er decides to commit suicide and only changes her mind because she soon finds out she is pregnant. Despite that people laugh at her and despise her, as a mother-to-be, she chooses to "bear the shame" and "swallow" her tears and pride for the child. When she notices Huang's family is busy preparing for a wedding, she feels relieved with the idea that Huang is going to marry her, and she expresses willingness to sacrifice her own happiness to marry Huang just for the sake of the child<sup>62</sup>...

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<sup>61</sup> Martin, p74

<sup>62</sup> Martin, p74-79.

Xi'er's image here probably is considered more real in depicting a poor peasant's daughter with the "old" "feudal" ideas of chastity, fate, and female virtuous. However it was criticized for portraying "middle-of-the-road-characters" (*zhongjian renwu*, who were neither proletarian heroes nor bourgeois or counterrevolutionary) and obfuscating the class conflicts between the poor peasants and their oppressors.<sup>63</sup> The 1950 film, "progressive" in the way that the character of Xi'er has higher political and class consciousness, and without the part where Xi'er fails to realize Huang as class enemy and expects him to marry her after being raped by him, has more or less become a love story between two young proletarians, Xi'er and Dachun: The film starts on the Chinese New Year Eve, which is also the night before Dachun and Xi'er's wedding; later on in the film many close-ups are used to show the lovers' hopeless separation and their tearful reunion; and the film ends with the last shot showing Xi'er, with her hair done up—a sign of married status for women in northern China, working happily in the field together with Dachun's mother. The following scenes from the film most directly demonstrate this theme.

After Xi'er is forcibly taken to Huang's house on her and Dachun's wedding night, she makes clear her loyalty to Dachun by asking Aunt Zhang, who also works at Huang's house, to take a message to Dachun's mother, "...no matter what happens, I am part of her family now." Shots switch frequently between Xi'er and Dachun, both singing softly with deep feelings to express their love and longing for each other; then it is cut to scenes of Xi'er at Huang's house being whipped and poked with a needle by Huang's mother, and her kneeling and crying in front of a Buddhist shrine. In midst of all the

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<sup>63</sup> Chen Xiaomei, p81.

suffering though, Xi'er is still sewing shoes for Dachun, an indication that walls of Huang's mansion cannot separate her with Dachun; her heart is with him. Here Xi'er's love for and reliance on Dachun is depicted in order to show in contrast the cruelty and viciousness of the oppressive class. She is portrayed as "a lamb in a tiger's clutches" who is waiting to be saved by her loved one. This message is constantly reaffirmed as the film unfolds. For instance, after Xi'er is raped by Huang, same as in the opera, Xi'er's first thought is to "end it all" by killing herself; the change is though Xi'er is not pregnant with Huang's child. In this way, she doesn't have to bear the shame for the child, a descendant of the class enemy; here it is Dachun who is her reason and hope to live on—as Aunt Zhang tries to convince her not to commit suicide, Xi'er "sees the shoes she has been sewing for Dachun; she picks them up...starts to work on the shoes...." When she hears that Dachun, in grief and indignation, flees the village to join the Red Army, she sings "beseechingly", "heaven protect Dachun and see him safely across the river to the west. Send him back soon with the Red Army."<sup>64</sup>

As seen from the above, the revisions to Xi'er's character and the overall storyline made in the film version of *the White-Haired Girl* heighten her faithful and loyal love for Dachun, a young man who is also from a proletarian family, and Xi'er's liberation is depicted as being finally realized when she is rescued by Dachun and happily married to him. Consciously or not, this theme coincides with the Chinese Communist Party's official agenda for women's liberation as institutionalized by the Marriage Law, which was passed as the very first law of the New China in May 1950.<sup>65</sup> The Marriage

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<sup>64</sup>Nestor, Pete and Tom Moran.

<sup>65</sup> Bai Di, p66.

Law, for the first time in Chinese history, promoted and promised Chinese women their freedom in choosing their spouses: “the feudal marriage system which is based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements of parents, and the superiority of man over woman...shall be abolished”, and the “New-Democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes and on the protection of the lawful interests of women...shall be put into effect.”<sup>66</sup> While the significance of Marriage Law to Chinese women’s liberation is recognized, the message underlying the official gender discourse requires further examination: it is the reform of marriage and family, not the emancipation of women, that was viewed as a top priority of the new government. In other words, the presumption was Chinese women would automatically realize their emancipation through a heterosexual marriage at her free choice, within the proletarian class, of course. Similarly, underlying the depiction of the sorrows and joys of separation and reunion between Xi’er and Dachun in the film of the *White-Haired Girl* is the implication that the way for a Chinese woman to be free from oppressions and sufferings is to find the right man, a beloved and trustworthy proletarian husband to save her, get revenge for her and liberate her from the oppressive class. This message, popular in China’s public discourse in the 1950s was challenged by Xi’er’s image in the 1965 model ballet version of *the White-Haired Girl*.

As one of the most influential Model Plays during the Cultural Revolution, the model ballet *the White-Haired Girl* went through radical changes from the original opera and film version regarding Xi’er’s connections with Dachun and Huang Shiren in an attempt to give prominence to the class-struggle theme. Dachun is no longer described as

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<sup>66</sup> M.J. Meijer, p300.

Xi'er's fiancé as he was in earlier versions; instead of romantic sexual love, the ballet represents the love between the two as based on long years of enduring common hardships under the oppressive rule of the ruthless landlord and Dachun becomes just another of Xi'er's class brothers.<sup>67</sup> The rape and pregnancy by the landlord Huang Shiren both are eliminated from the plot; Xi'er is cruelly abused but not sexually assaulted by Huang. By eliminating sexual and romantic elements, Xi'er is no longer subjected to judgment based on the traditional restrictive norms for wife/wife-to-be and mother/mother-to-be. Thus, she is beyond the conventional confinement for women, the weak sex, who has to passively accept her fate as either being victimized or rescued by men, the strong sex. Her life and death is no longer decided by Dachun or Huang Shiren; and the value of her existence is not defined by her sexual functions; rather, she becomes the independent acting agent who fights for her own survival and liberation, moreover, in the epilogue of the film, she picks up a gun and joins the ranks of the Eighth Route Army in pursuit of the liberation of the whole proletarian class. As such she becomes a leadership figure who fits herself into the public cause and who thus provides an alternative role model for Chinese girls growing up in the Cultural Revolution.

In summary, in the opera and film versions of *The White-Haired Girl*, Xi'er's character is based on her relationship with male characters in the story, as daughter (of Yang), lover/fiancée (of Dachun), and victim (of Huang Shiren's abuse). Although her character seems to serve as the centre of the plot, the story is in fact "structured around the ownership of her."<sup>68</sup> In contrast, the model ballet version of *The White-Haired Girl* simplifies Xi'er's relation with male characters as either "revolutionary brothers" or

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<sup>67</sup> Bai Di, p111. Chen Xiaomei, p83, Martin, p32.

<sup>68</sup> Bai Di, p112.

“class enemies”, as a result, the character of Xi’er is much abstracted—she is not asked to be a lover, a wife, or a mother, roles that are traditionally attached to womanhood; in other words, she is depicted more as a proletarian class symbol than a sex object. By deleting her female body and eliminating sexual or romantic elements of the initial story, Xi’er naturally gains equality with the male members of her class, thus the more complex cause of Chinese women’s liberation is placed into an idealized situation, where to solve women’s problem equals fighting against class oppression. As Bai Di explains, only when Xi’er is disassociated from her sexualized body and the gendered functions derived from her body, she can overcome the multilayered constraints on Chinese women and be an acting agent to carry on the class struggle, rather than an objectified interface between male desire and class struggle. It is the abstraction, or “degenderization” that makes it possible for Xi’er to “take up the gun to fight for her own class instead of posing alongside Wang Dachun as a subordinate wife”<sup>69</sup>. Other Model Plays also carry out this theme and approach in creating their model women protagonists.

## **Case Study B.**

### **The Red Detachment of Women –Wu Qinghua, from a slave girl to a real communist soldier**

The model ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, premiered in Beijing in 1964, was adapted from a 1961 film of the same title. The model ballet was later adapted to a Beijing opera, and as the ballet itself, both stage and film versions were produced and widely distributed during the Cultural Revolution. One of the most popular model plays,

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<sup>69</sup> Bai Di, p113.

its music is familiar to almost every Chinese person who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. The story is about how a poor peasant girl becomes a staunch communist soldier. It sets in Yelin Village on Hainan Island in South China in the 1930s when the country was under Nationalist rule. The girl, Wu Qinghua, is enslaved as a bondmaid in the household of landlord Nan Batian (meaning “the tyrant of the south”). Several times she has run away but each time she has been captured, brought back and viciously beaten by the evil landlord and his “running dogs” (*zougou* in Chinese, mercenaries). She finally escapes and then encounters Hong Changqing, the Party Representative in the CCP-led Red Army. With Hong’s help, Wu Qinghua makes her way to the camp of a Red Army women’s fighting force, where she joins the Red Detachment of Women and is taught the rationale of the revolution. Under the Party’s education, Wu Qinghua finally becomes a conscious communist soldier who vows to fight for the liberation of the whole proletarian class. After Hong’s heroic death, Wu is appointed Party Representative of the Red Detachment of Women.

Similar to *The White-Haired Girl*, the storyline of *Red Detachment of Women* also went through drastic revisions when made into revolutionary model ballet. For example, the leading female character’s name in the original film was *Wu Qionghua*—an obvious name for girls, with *Qiong* meaning “beautiful jade” and *hua* meaning “flower.” In the model ballet version it was changed to *Wu Qinghua*—a rather gender neutral name, with *Qing* meaning “clean and pure” and *Hua* meaning “China”; the revolutionary overtone of the new name in the model ballet version was clear to most of the audience. In the original film, Wu Qionghua is rescued by Hong Changqing from the landlord Nan Batian’s water dungeon. Hong disguises himself as a wealthy businessman who resides

abroad and comes to do business with Nan. He “buys” Qionghua from Nan Batian to be his slave, thus saves her from the abyss of sufferings, and instructs her to join the Red Detachment of Women. In the model ballet, however, Wu Qinghua escapes Nan’s water dungeon with the help of another two peasant women who are also locked up by Nan because they have been unable to pay their land rent. Three of them bravely fight against the bailiff and a guard. “The two women throw themselves on him [the bailiff] and the guard and hold them fast”<sup>70</sup> and urge Wu to flee. When Wu again unfortunately falls into Nan Batian and his guards’ clutches after she runs into the coconut grove, she is savagely whipped by Nan; other bondmaids dance in deep sorrow: “the hearts of the bondmaids, who share the same suffering and hatred as Qinghua, burn like fire. They are torn by anxiety for her. The tearing cuts of the whips seem to be ripping their own flesh. If only they could save their class sister!”<sup>71</sup> Like in the model version of *The White-Haired Girl* where Xi’er doesn’t just passively wait to be saved by Dachun, here the story of Qinghua doesn’t either fall for the conventional pattern as shown in the film, in which a brave knight rescues a damsel in distress and the damsel falls in love with her savior. Instead, it presents onstage a refreshing scene that displays Chinese women’s strength, determination, bravery, their instinctive spirit to revolt and the selfless friendship between them. It praises sisterhood and proletarian women’s capability to fight for their own liberation.

In the model ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, proletarian women are born warriors, revolutionary soldiers, and army leaders. Instead of frail motions, they have strong arms and clenched fists and are not afraid of using them when confronted with

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<sup>70</sup> Ebon, Martin, P131.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p132.



enemy. For example, when in Nan's water dungeon, the bailiff threatens Wu Qinghua with his whip, Wu "seizes the whip and kicks him to the ground."<sup>72</sup> In the beginning of Scene One, after Wu flees Nan's household, she dashes out of a coconut grove, her pose is "fleeting but impressive, like a flash of lightning." Bumping into Nan's guards in the coconut grove, Wu again grapples in a desperate struggle against them. She "turns and jumps up. Flinging off his [Lao Szu, the bailiff's] arms, she swing one leg in a sweeping kick." When Lao Szu again grabs her left arm, she "angrily pushes down on him... fights fiercely." "You are coming back with me," as Lao Sze yells, Wu "furiously raises her head", "I will die first!." Lao Szu is weakening; her courage doubles, "she twists his arm, bites him fiercely and kicks him to the ground."<sup>73</sup> (See Photo 5-7) Another unique feature of the women images in *Red Detachment of Women* is, besides having strong and vigorous physical figures, they are clad in military uniforms with their hands firmly holding rifles and bayonets. The ballet includes numerous scenes of women soldiers performing rifle drill, sword dance, bayonet dance, and dagger dance. Unlike in traditional Chinese visual art works, in which women are always of smaller physical size, especially height, compared to men, correlating with their inferior social weight in terms of power and authority, in *Red Detachment of Women*, female characters are of similar height as their men counterparts; the heroine Wu Qinghua is even taller than Hong Changqing and most other male characters. (See Photo 5-10)

While the model ballet of *The White-Haired Girl* ends as Xi'er settles her personal grudge with Huang Shiren and enters the public sphere by joining the Eighth Route Army; *The Red Detachment of Women* goes further to show the winding path that

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. P131.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p132.

Wu Qinghua has to take to overcome naivety and narrow individualism and become mature socially and politically. Same as Xi'er, Wu has an innate hatred for the landlord and a passionate spirit of revolt. As shown in the Prologue, she was chained to a post so that she won't run away again from the landlord's household; she "stood with chest and head high; her eyes blazing with hatred. If only she could smash the bloody shackles which bond her and wreck the lair of these man-eating beasts!"<sup>74</sup> (See Photo 5) However, to become a real revolutionary and communist soldier, it takes more than just personal hatred towards the landlord and instinctive urge to fight back: When Wu Qinghua is sent on a scouting mission into the landlord's headquarters, she comes upon the hateful man, Nan Batian. Unable to control herself, she shoots him, prematurely giving her comrades the signal to attack, and as a result, the detachment fails to capture the landlord. Wu's pistol is taken away from her because of her rashness; she receives it back only when, after being taught the rationale of the revolution, she realizes that revolution means much more than settling personal scores and gaining freedom for oneself. Here Wu's sufferings caused by Nan Batian are depicted as a collective experience shared by many others, women in particular, who were under the ruthless oppression and exploitation of the landlord class, and therefore, "only by emancipating all humankind can the proletariat achieve its own final emancipation",<sup>75</sup> and again, the theoretical assumption is that once the whole proletarian class is emancipated, women's liberation is automatically achieved. Combining women's liberation with the broader revolutionary cause, this ideal legitimizes and motivates thousands of Chinese women to step out from their domestic life and enter into the public sphere. As the *March of the Women's Company* sings:

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<sup>74</sup> Martin Ebon, p130.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p141.

Forward, forward!  
Important the soldiers' task, deep the women's hatred.  
Smash your shackles, rise in revolution!  
We're the Women's Company, taking up arms for the people.  
Forward, forward!  
Important the soldiers' task, deep the women's hatred.  
Communism is the truth, the Party leads the way.  
Slaves will arise, slaves will arise!  
Forward, forward!...<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, women in the Red Army don't just fight for their own sake, rather they take up arms for the emancipation of the people, both women and men, which directly challenges the conventionally structured gender stereotype of women being petty, naïve, dependant, and convicted by narrow selves. In fact, in the original film there is one line in the lyrics of *March of the Women's Company*: "In old times Hua Mulan took her father's place in the army; nowadays Women's Company takes up arms for the People." In the model ballet even such a subtle correlation of the public cause to personal life was eliminated. It is not clear for what reason exactly this line was changed, but it suggests an interesting perspective to interpret the "woman" message carried by *The Red Detachment of Women* if comparing women soldiers in the Red Army with Mulan.

The story of Mulan originates from an ancient Chinese ballad, *The Mulan Rhyme* which was written during the period of the Northern Dynasties (420-589) and later collected in the *Music Bureau Collection (Yuefu)*, the Song Dynasty anthology of lyrics, songs, and poems. The heroine, Mulan disguised herself as a man to take her elderly

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<sup>76</sup> Martin, p135.

father's place in the all-male army so her father doesn't have to suffer from arduous journeys and army life at an old age. Her valor, fighting skills, and resourcefulness in military affairs win her success and respect in the battlefield; she is even offered a government post by the emperor himself after her service is up. However, unwilling to commit anymore to the forces, she turns down the position so she can reunite with her family. When her friends from the army visit her at home, they are shocked to see her as a pretty lady<sup>77</sup>. The image of Mulan, in some way similar to images of women soldiers in the *Red Detachment of Women*, seems anti-conventional in the art and literature history of China. Alien to the ideal of a gentle and graceful lady appreciated and praised by the Confucian literary tradition though, the poeticized legendary image of Mulan is in nature consistent with traditional Confucian norms and values. Central to the Confucian *three-principle doctrine* is the virtue of filial piety (*xiao*), for Confucianism regards the family as the foundational unit on which all social structures are anchored. In addition to a child's obedience to the parents, *xiao* also stresses the child's obligation to preserve the honor and continuity of the family. So essentially it is practice of *xiao* when Mulan joins the army so her elderly father can enjoy his retirement and her only younger brother can stay safe. She disguises herself as a man and gains honor for the family as a man; also, by avoiding association with male soldiers as a woman, she preserves her virginal purity as an unmarried woman, which embodies the third virtue central to the *three-principle doctrine*, chastity (*jie*). Therefore, Mulan's legendary deeds are not virtually in conflict with the traditional patriarchic values, which require women to remain within private family, rather, the story designates Mulan's heroism of maintaining her moral integrity in conformity with traditional virtues: It is made clear in *The Mulan Rhyme* that Mulan is

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<sup>77</sup> Ren, Tai.

only allowed to become a social being under unusual circumstances, and the precondition is that she participates in public activities as a man rather than a woman; she can only gain her success and social recognition as a man; once her mission is completed, she willingly gives up the opportunity to be further involved in state affairs and retreats to the domestic domain, resuming her “femininity” and “womanhood”:

I take it off, my wartime armour;  
I put it on, my old dress red  
Fronting the window I dress my hair;  
Facing the mirror, flower-yellow I spread...<sup>78</sup>

By contrast, Wu Qinghua in *The Red Detachment Women* represents millions of Chinese women who are cruelly exploited and oppressed in the old society. She is presented as a role model, who, educated by the Party, realizes that “only by emancipating all humankind can the proletariat achieve its own final emancipation,” and matures into a conscious Communist who is in the vanguard of the liberation of the poor people. The road she travels is claimed as the correct road for all exploited and oppressed women in pursuit of their emancipation. Therefore, not only their gender is fully acknowledged as Wu Qinghua and other women soldiers enter into the social and political sphere, but also the significance of their participation in the revolutionary cause is no longer defined as based on personal interests; rather, they are dedicated to the liberation of the whole proletarian class, including both women and men.

To reaffirm this theme is another major revision in the model ballet version of *The Red Detachment of Women*: the deletion of an important woman character in the original film, Hong Lian, whom Wu meets on her way to the red base areas. Hong Lian is

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<sup>78</sup> Ren, Tai. p5.

forced to marry a woodcut figure which symbolizes the long dead boy whom she was betrothed to. Breaking away from her arranged marriage, Hong Lian joined Wu Qionghua in finding the Red Army and becoming proud women soldiers. “This is my husband.” Hong Lian shows Wu the wooden figure when they first meet, “I got married when I was ten year old. Since then, I have been sleeping with this wooden corpse for ten years. Do I still count as a live woman?”<sup>79</sup> In the red base areas, Hong Lian unites with her lover of many years, Feng Ahgui, happily marries him, and gives birth to a baby girl right on the battlefield. Obviously the underlying message is that Hong Lian only becomes a woman when the Party helps her to marry the man she loves and when she becomes a content wife and mother. The couple wishes that their daughter will become a little Red Army soldier in the future, which, as Chen Xiaomen comments, “draws an optimistic picture of revolutionary women who, once freed from their oppressive domestic life, could embrace both a public career as soldiers and a private life as loving wives and mothers.”<sup>80</sup> Hong Lian’s liberation, as manifested in the film, is limited to the private sphere, in the form of resisting the arranged marriage, choosing her own husband and having children with her loved one. In this sense, a free marriage and happy family life is described as the primary motivation that drives Chinese women to join the revolution, and women’s commitment to marriage and reproduction is considered an essential part of womanhood. This message is shared by the 1950s’ film version of *The White-Haired Girl*, and is coherent to the CCP’s gender policy as formalized by the Marriage Law: ideally, a liberated woman is not only a revolutionary herself, but also the wife of a revolutionary and mother of a future revolutionary. This idealized vision of

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<sup>79</sup> Bai Di, p121.

<sup>80</sup> Chen, Xiaomei, p85.

combining personal love with revolution and private life with public cause disappeared in the model ballet version of *The Red Detachment of Women*. It is said that Jiang Qing instructed the deletion of the character Hong Lian on account of her “plainness of character” and not representing revolutionary women.<sup>81</sup>

By omitting Hong Lian’s story and distilling off personal or romantic elements from the original story, the Cultural Revolutionary ideal of the new womanhood as conveyed in *The Red Detachment of Women* is disassociated with conventional gender-related obligations of being wives and mothers.

While the model version of *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women* free women from sexual restrictions and domestic duties and position them in the center of the stage of social and political happenings, Model Plays such as *Azalea Mountain*, *On the Docks* and *Song of the Dragon River* eulogize women who take up leadership in war-time revolutions and socialist constructions of the New China.

### **Case Study C.**

#### **Azalea Mountain – Ke Xiang, a woman leader in the revolution**

The model opera, *Azalea Mountain*, was first produced in Beijing in 1973. Its script is set in the year 1928, right after Mao led the Autumn Harvest Uprising, organized the Red Army and set up the first revolutionary base in the Jinggang Mountains, following his strategy for the Chinese revolution—“building rural bases, surrounding the

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<sup>81</sup> Bai Di, p122.

cities by the countryside, and ultimately seizing the cities.”<sup>82</sup> In this context, the story of Azalea Mountain develops: Ke Xiang, a female communist in her early thirties, is sent by the Party to Azalea Mountain to help a peasants’ self-defense guards unit which rose in rebellion under the influence of the Autumn Harvest Uprising. She is arrested by the local counter-revolutionary armed force led by landlord tyrants. The self-defense unit, led by a young peasant, Lei Gang, is barely surviving attacks by the landlord tyrants’ armed force is eagerly seeking Communist Party leadership. They rescue Ke Xiang on the execution ground; Ke Xiang becomes the Party Representative of the unit. “She works hard to implement Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line and the Party’s policies and patiently teaches Lei Gang and other guards to distinguish friend from foe and treat correctly exploited class brothers, ordinary merchants and captives of the reactionary army.”<sup>83</sup> With the guidance of Ke Xiang on behalf of the Party, the masses are mobilized and the people’s militia expands. Ke Xiang leads the self-defense guards to correct their shortcomings, expose the hidden traitor, Wen Qijiu’s scheme, wipe out the enemy, and set out for the revolutionary base in the Jinggang Mountains.

*China Pictorial* (No. 1, 1974) stated that “the libretto [for Azalea Mountain] combines revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism and uses various artistic methods to emphasize the proletarian qualities of Ke Xiang”, while “the other characters all have their special traits and enhance, positively or by contrast, Ke Xiang’s leading role.”<sup>84</sup> As the *Peking Review* (January 25, 1974) summarized, the fundamental reason why the armed peasants led by Lei Gang did not repeat history’s tragedies was that Ke

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<sup>82</sup> Ebon, Martin, p265.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p266



Xiang, representing the Party's leadership, firmly implemented Chairman Mao's line in army building.<sup>85</sup> It was also confirmed by the western media that "the play was receiving wide publicity in the Chinese capital" and that "Azalea Mountain gave prominence to a woman" who, with her wisdom and talent, manages "to transform a disparate band of rebellious peasants into a disciplined combat unit that goes on to join the forces of 'Political Commissar Mao.'"<sup>86</sup> Ke Xiang's leadership role in *Azalea Mountain* embodies the Communist Party's prominence and its primacy over the army; in the meanwhile it also symbolizes Chinese women's full participation in the revolution and their equal status as their male counterparts.

Much like other model women characters such as Xi'er and Wu Qinghua, Ke Xiang is possessed of a fine physique and an impressive bearing. When Lei Gang and other peasants are about to rescue Ke Xiang from the execution site, they hesitate because they hear "it's a woman." However as soon as Ke Xiang makes her first appearance in Scene Two, her heroic image soon convinces people both on and off-stage that she is, despite her gender, a real Communist who "stands firm through wind and storm." In chains, her head high, striding out of the temple and turning to toss back her hair<sup>87</sup>, Ke Xiang's calm and proud air makes a sharp contrast to the enemy guards' nervous and timid manner. Ke Xiang "glares" at the guards with "flashing eyes" such that they "fall back in fear." With the guards aiming their bayonets at her, Ke Xiang "smoothes her hair, holds up her chain, and walks proudly down the steps." She is so perfectly calm and collected that her every turn or move makes the enemy "cower", and "raise their rifles and surround her" cautiously. When she finally gets tired of being followed by the

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<sup>85</sup> Martin, P267

<sup>86</sup> Martin, P 264

<sup>87</sup> P275

guards closely, “she thrusts aside the bayonets, strikes one guard with her chain”; “she turns, grasps at the bayonets...pushes aside the bayonets...” “She seizes their rifles and walks halfway round the stage, the guards falling back before her....Ke Xiang leads the guards round to the back of the stage, then whirls round and rushes forward. The guards hastily hem her in with their bayonets. Ke Xiang seizes two rifles and sweeps them aside, shakes the chain, and strikes a heroic pose...” Ke Xiang’s physical strength and spiritual power are vividly portrayed. (See Photo 11, 12)

However, Ke Xiang doesn’t gain trust and respect from the peasants without effort. From the time of her arrival at Azalea Mountain, she is treated with suspicion and contempt by Lei Gang and his followers because she is a woman. Because of local peasant soldiers’ traditional, stereotypical view of women, her “strategic skills, leadership capabilities and commitment to the interests of the local people are seriously questioned and challenged”, and her orders are “flagrantly disobeyed by her subordinates because they doubt her competence”<sup>88</sup>. In Scene Three, one of the peasants, Chiu, resentfully comments, “If women can lead troops, men will lose their authority.” He incites others to ignore Ke Xiang and not to obey her orders. He even attempts to tease Ke Xiang with his pistol, but only brings shame on himself:

Chiu [tipsily]: ha!  
A woman...Communist  
Lording it over us. [Draws his pistol.]  
Know what’s this?  
No needle for embroidery!

[Chiu rushes with his pistol at Ke Xiang. All are dismayed. Ke Xiang coolly steps forward and seizes Chiu’s wrist. He stands

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<sup>88</sup> Roberts, Rosemary, p409–410

motionless for a second, then starts to struggle; but she expertly wrenches the pistol from his grasp. Chiu staggers back, deflated, and drops on a bench.]

In this dramatic scene, Ke Xiang once again impresses the all-male Peasants' Self-Defense Guard unit with her physical strength, calm disposition, knowledge and capability as a wartime leader. In a more subtle way, Ke Xiang's experience in farm work is also hinted as she appears with "a smile on her face", "carrying two baskets of rice on a shoulder pole", and "deftly" stacking her baskets. Unlike those fragile and delicate beauties with sloping shoulders and soft hands, the subject of praise in traditional Chinese art and literature, Ke Xiang has "iron shoulders and horny hands" and what it takes both "in fighting and farming," which she's acquired from bitter life as a miner's daughter and years of rough revolutionary experience.<sup>89</sup>

Another quality that Ke Xiang shares in common with other woman protagonists is that she always prioritizes her public/political involvement over personal life. As Ke Xiang sings heroically in the beginning of the opera, "we [revolutionaries] shed our blood for the people's liberation, fearlessly fighting to the last, highhearted and undaunted", her character presents a direct and conscious challenge to traditional images of women whose experiences are confined to the private sphere. The lyrics make it clear that although her whole family was wiped out by "the blackhearted mine owners", Ke Xiang joins the revolution not to take personal revenge, but to "fight for the poor" and to win liberation for all the workers and peasants.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ebon, Martin, p281-282.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p282.

Moreover, in terms of gender (in)equality, the storyline of *Azalea Mt.*, with Ke Xiang taking center stage as hero who saves a desperate situation and leads the all-male Self-Defense unit to victory, confronts the stereotypical view that women are more politically backward and that men play the role of educators who lead women into public life. In the opera, the Viper, head of the counter-revolutionary armed force of the landlord tyrants, arrests Mother Tu and colludes with the hidden traitor, Wen Qijiu, in an attempt to lure the Self-Defense unit down the mountain into a trap. Lei Gang, blinded by a thirst for personal vengeance, turns a deaf ear to Ke Xiang's warning and rashly leads the militia force down the mountain. He is captured and thrown into prison. Ke Xiang "remains cool and calm." "Relying on the Party and the masses", she leads a daring raid at night and successfully rescues Lei Gang and Mother Tu. This proves her higher political consciousness and superior leadership skills, and completely wins over Lei Gang and his army. Ke Xiang's political quality is further enhanced when, towards the end of the opera, Mother Tu reveals to Lei Gang that Ke Xiang was originally sent to Azalea Mountain with another Communist, Chao, who was actually Ke Xiang's husband; both were captured by the Viper on the way; Ke Xiang was wounded, and Chao "died a hero's death." However, Ke Xiang "never breathed a word of this", because "she takes the Party's instructions to heart, swallows her own grief, and keeps the whole world in view." Here Ke Xiang's "suppressing her own hatred" and shouldering the public duties contrasts with Lei Gang's acting on impulse and ignoring larger issues. Not only is she not portrayed as "a loyal wife seeking revenge for a wronged husband", or according to Roberts, "a protector of the traditional Confucian moral and social (including gender)

order,”<sup>91</sup> but she is praised as a selfless proletarian leader, a role model, who prioritizes public responsibilities over personal loss, and who enlightens the peasants with revolutionary thoughts and leads them into the right direction. Therefore, Ke Xiang’s wartime leadership role doesn’t repeat the stories of the military heroines in traditional Chinese literature such as Hua Mulan, who joins the army for her father to show her *xiao* (filial piety), or women generals in Yang Jiajiang (The Yang Family Generals) who go into battles, motivated by loyalty and love to their husbands,<sup>92</sup> and that consequently deconstructs the traditional Confucian social and moral order regarding women. On the other hand, the brief revelation of Ke Xiang’s marriage follows Model Plays’ consistent approach of deleting women characters’ family ties so as to put them into an idealized situation where they are free of traditional marital or reproductive obligations which restrict women from participating in public activities.

Although Ke Xiang is one of few women heroines in Model Plays who are/were married, she is a character who lives completely in public sphere. In the whole opera, Ke Xiang’s husband, Chao, is only mentioned once which is by Mother Tu towards the end of the story; the only reason for revealing Chao’s death is to demonstrate Ke Xiang’s high political consciousness and selfless devotion to the people’s cause of revolution. However, unlike many post-Cultural Revolution studies claim, erasure of her marriage life from the scene doesn’t necessarily lead to erasure of her gender identity. In other words, not portraying Ke Xiang as a “virtuous wife and good mother” doesn’t “masculinize” or “degenderize” her by depriving of her womanhood or femininity. In *Azalea Mountain*, although Ke Xiang is endowed with many leadership qualities which

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<sup>91</sup> Rosemary Roberts, p409–410

<sup>92</sup> Edwards, Louise P, p87-112.

are traditionally assigned to men only: physical strength, calm disposition, courage and wisdom, and consideration for the public interests, etc., she is not presented as manly or gender-free. Both herself and others are fully aware of her gender, and her female attributes are manifested in her practice of leadership. Distinctive from male leaders, Ke Xiang is more observant, caring, and considerate. In Scene Four, Ke Xiang made a bundle of new straw sandals for the new recruits, which are “just what they need.” She even noticed Lei Gang’s sandals were worn out and made a pair fit his feet perfectly. Whenever free, she mends clothes for soldiers<sup>93</sup>... In contrast with women characters in traditional literature who focus on their personal life and make shoes or mend clothes for their lovers or husbands out of narrow romantic love, Ke Xiang shows a broad love to all her class brothers. Her womanhood is engaged to her revolutionary career and her femininity is displayed through her political involvement. In turn, what she gains from her male comrades is not romantic sexual love or their desire to protect her, but trust, respect, and political authority. Thus, the character of Ke Xiang presents a direct and powerful counter-discourse to the dominant traditional view of women as trivial, passive, politically backward and therefore unfit for politics and leadership.

As seen from the above three case studies, the Cultural Revolutionary Model Plays carries out a persistent and patterned strategy in creating numerous Model woman characters: First and most obvious, images of these revolutionary women have entirely discard the conventional markers of a “feminine” body, though still indisputably female, they are no longer depicted as physically confined by their sex. Second, they have

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<sup>93</sup> Martin, P291

crossed the boundaries of long-established institutional rules and routinized gender roles; they are as much involved as their male counterparts in the public cause as soldiers, underground workers, wartime army leaders, socialist constructors, and Party representatives; particularly, women leaders' courage, insight and skills are acknowledged and highly praised. Third, these Model woman characters' full participation in the revolution is only realized in an idealized situation created by Model Plays, where all sexual elements are eliminated and women are free of family ties. Thus, Model Plays's ideal of New women not only attacks the traditional Confucius gender orthodoxy that demands women to remain within the patriarchal family, but also presents a counter-discourse of CCP's pre-Cultural Revolution gender rhetoric which assumes wifedom and motherhood are essential for female gender, and a happy heterosexual marriage between two proletarians is the ultimate expression of a woman's liberation.

There is no denying that the highly abstracted and patterned characters and plots might have weakened the entertainment and aesthetic value of the Model theatre,<sup>94</sup> but denouncing it as nothing but a product of political propaganda is uncritical and misleading. This is particularly true when considering the "woman" messages it introduces to Chinese society and its significance in shaping Chinese women's perception of their gender identity and social roles. The dominant narratives both in and outside China in the post-Cultural Revolution years tended to view the Cultural Revolution as a "dark age" and criticize that the positive women images in the model works such as Xi'er, Wu Qinghua, Ke Xiang, were false, unnatural, and suppressive; the "worker-peasant-soldier model women" represented on stage were simply a manifestation of the Party

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<sup>94</sup> See Martin Ebon, R.G.Davis, Walter Meserve and Ruth Meserve.

leaders using the women issues to consolidate political and state power.<sup>95</sup> However, in recent years more differentiated memories and thoughtful reflections suggest there is “considerable evidence that many people, notably of the Red Guard generation, actually recall the Cultural Revolution as a time of exhilaration, experimentation, and freedom from parental constraints.”<sup>96</sup> The unprecedented opportunities for personal and professional development as well as social involvement that Model Plays-generated gender rhetoric offered to Chinese women are being recognized. Countless images were produced in the Cultural Revolutionary art works of “women steelworkers, farmers, parachutists, and political activists, robust and healthy, gaze into the distance, their eyes shining with revolutionary zeal.” In real life, as Evans and Donald recalled, a number of Chinese women have talked with them about the excitement of being independent and empowered as political subjects during the early years of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>97</sup> In *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, its contributors reflect on their experiences as girls coming of age during the Cultural Revolution: at school, girls and boys shared in all activities, including sports. Girls jumped and ran like boys. They got into fights with boys and won frequently. As Wang Zheng recalled, once she was riding on the wall of their backyard, her mother called, “Get down! How can you little girl climb the wall? What terrible manners!” Wang looked at her mother “without budging an inch”, retorting in her mind, “Mom is just feudal. Why can’t a little girl climb the wall?”—Evidently, girls didn’t feel being limited by their gender as much as their mother’s generation did, and they acknowledge many happy memories and empowering

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<sup>95</sup> Martin Ebon, Walter Meserve and Ruth Meserve, Xiaomei Chen p75, Yan Jiaqi & Gao Gao

<sup>96</sup> Evans, Harriet and Stephanie Donald, p15.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p16.



experiences of acting women revolutionaries in Model Plays.<sup>98</sup> Another interesting instance Wang mentions in her article indicates the powerful and enduring influence of the Model theatre's "woman" message on her perception of gender equality: when an American woman proudly told Wang that her daughter was a cheerleader and explained to her what kind of "leader" that was, Wang could not bring herself to present a compliment: "I just hoped that my eyes would not betray my disdain as I thought to myself, 'I guess this American woman has never dreamed of her daughter being a leader cheered by men.' I feel fortunate that I was 'brainwashed' to want to be a revolutionary instead of a cheerleader."<sup>99</sup>

Therefore, instead of questioning if the model women images are suppressive and limiting, it might be more relevant to ask: in a culture where the term for women, *funv*, traditionally invokes "the image of a married woman surrounded by pots and pans, diapers and bottles, sewing and knitting needles, and who hung around the neighborhood gossiping, and whose world is filled with "trivial" things"<sup>100</sup>..., is it more suppressive and limiting to promote strong and independent women images, gun in their hands, walking side by side with other revolutionaries than to stage naïve and delicate damsels or virtuous wives and loving mothers who cook in the kitchen or work in the fields beside her mother-in-law? Is it more false to "brainwash" girls with ideas of becoming revolutionaries and socialist constructors than to "brainwash" them into loyal wives and loving mothers, or innocent fiancée who constantly needs to be protected and rescued by her loved prince?

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<sup>98</sup> Wang, Zheng, p38, p165.

<sup>99</sup> Wang, Zheng, p36.

<sup>100</sup> Wang Zheng, p27.

However, as mentioned in earlier sections, the immediate overall denunciation of the Cultural Revolutionary ideology in late 1970s allowed little room for critical reflections, and the positive aspects of the Model theatre's "woman" messages were long ignored as the narratives that viewed the Cultural Revolution era as "dark age" or "cultural desert" dominated the public discourse in the late 1970s and 1980s (and beyond) both in and outside China. A call for the "refeminization of images of women" corresponds with both the attack on the "gender sameness" of the revolutionary years and the possibilities for individual expression and experimentation that the market economy has legitimized<sup>101</sup>. At the same time, marriage and motherhood resumed their essential and central position in defining the feminine ideal. As Evans observed, both popular magazines and academic publications advocated that a woman who was obedient to her husband, considerate of his needs, and gentle and soft in her approach had become the ideal of the post-Mao era, and the official acknowledgement that "men really do have more responsibilities than women" served to legitimize expectations of wifely service and support for her husband.<sup>102</sup> "In order to understand the gender rhetoric in the post-Cultural Revolutionary China's public discourse, the next case study examines women characters in Gu Hua's 1981 novel, *A Small Town Called Hibiscus*.

#### **Case Study D.**

#### **Women Characters in A Small Town Called Hibiscus—"woman" message in the mainstream Post-Cultural Revolution Rhetoric**

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<sup>101</sup> Evans, Harriet, p335.

<sup>102</sup> Evans, Harriet, p341.

Gu Hua's *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* (*Furong Zhen*, 1981), which won him the first Mao Dun Literary Award, the most prestigious award in China's post-Mao literature world, is considered one of the best novels of post-Cultural Revolution China. It was made into a prize-winning movie with the same title in 1983. Both the novel and film caused great sensation among the public. Set in a small mountain town in southern Hunan, the novel traces the lives of its central characters from 1963 to 1979 as political movement follows political movement. A young woman, Hu Yuyin, runs a beancurd stall with her husband, Li Guigui. Her good looks and pleasant personality attract many customers and also ensure support from the village officials, Li Mangeng and Gu Yanshan. Their business soon prospers. Li Guoxiang, the manageress of the state-run canteen is jealous of Yuyin's success and the affection she gets from men in the town. As the Cultural Revolution approaches Hibiscus town, Li Guoxiang comes into power while Hu Yuyin's patrons, Li Mangeng and Gu Yanshan, are disgraced. As the head of the work team, Li classifies Yuyin and Li Guigui as "new rich peasants." Their hard-earned new house is confiscated; in anger, Li Guigui commits suicide. Yuyin is sentenced to sweep the streets everyday together with the Rightist, Qin Shutian. Qin helps Yuyin to survive one political campaign after another during the Cultural Revolution and gradually they fall in love. However, their love only brings them more misfortunes: Li Guoxiang announces that their marriage is illegal; Qin is sent to a labor camp for ten years and Yuyin almost dies when she has a difficult labor. It is not until 1979, when mistakes in the Cultural Revolution are corrected, that life in Hibiscus town returns to normal.

One of the most interesting characters in the novel is Li Guoxiang, who represents in every way the opposite of the heroine, Hu Yuyin, a typical "virtuous wife

and good mother” [*xian qi liang mu*]. Hu is young, beautiful, happily married; she devotes herself fully to her husband and marriage life, and considers childbearing and motherhood essential for a woman. In contrast, Li Guoxiang is depicted as an unattractive, jealous and vicious woman obsessed with political ambition. She is promiscuous in her personal life and always dominant in her relationship with men, and she desperately takes a leading role in Hibiscus town’s political and social scene, which makes her one of those immoral and dangerous women “that has always existed in the male-centered Chinese literary tradition.”<sup>103</sup> In Li’s character, we can see “the shadow...of the two ‘notorious’ women in Chinese history, Empress Wu Zetian (624-705) and the Empress Dowager Ci Xi (1835-1908)”, even “a miniature reflection of Mao Zedong’s last wife, Jiang Qing,”<sup>104</sup> who was in charge of the reform of the literature and art field during the Cultural Revolution and who cast greedy eyes on the throne of the future queen of China.<sup>105</sup> Like these women who are considered invaders of “male territory”, Li violates traditional notions of womanhood and presents a threat to the patriarchal social order by entering the public sphere and, even worse, gaining political power over men. The negative depiction of Li Guoxiang, in sharp contrast to the character of the “good” woman Hu Yuyin, directly challenges the images of “New Women” promoted by Model Plays during the Cultural Revolution and represents the popular view in post-Cultural Revolution gender discourses which calls for the “refeminization” of Chinese women, in other words, restoration of the traditional male-centred notions of femininity and womanhood, which were attacked during the Cultural Revolution. In following paragraphs, I will compare the portrayal of Li Guoxiang and Hu Yuyin in *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* to positive

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<sup>103</sup> Shen, Yichin, p47-68.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid..

<sup>105</sup> Yan, Jiaqi and Gao Gao, P403-430.

women images in Model Plays in an attempt to reveal contrasting ideals regarding gender roles, and particularly different attitudes towards women participating in social and political activities, as reflected in the mainstream post-Cultural Revolution discourses and in the Cultural Revolution model plays.

Li Guoxiang makes her first appearance in the novel “like the old-style wife of a town head”, “thrust[ing] out her small breasts to make a tour of inspection of the market.”<sup>106</sup> She is thirty-two; her eyes are “dull” and “blood-flecked”, “with dark circles under them and crow’s-feet round them; her cheeks are “sallow and flaccid.” She is at a “difficult” age, according to the author, when a woman starts to lose her youthful beauty and is “left on the shelf”, in other words, “her chances of a good marriage are receding” because at this age she is “unfit to be the wife of a decent high official”, and she is too ambitious to “stoop to marrying a man in a low station.” Therefore, Li dearly envies women who are happily married, and desperately “sizes up” the Party members and cadres in town, hoping to discover an “eligible” husband who is “politically and financially up to par.”<sup>107</sup>

What makes Li even more undesirable for men is her promiscuous personal life. Traditionally a Chinese woman is supposed to be passive and obedient in her interactions with men, and maintain her virginity until the wedding night and remain faithful to her husband. Li has broken all these moral codes: “Her whole youth had been a series of frustrated love affairs”; “she had chased men like a monkey picking corn-cobs, dropping one after another”; in her relationship with men, she is always the initiator and in control--sitting at her uncle’s dinner table with Mangeng, a former soldier and

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<sup>106</sup> Gu Hua, p21

<sup>107</sup> Gu Hua, p25.

promising Party member, she shows off her feminine body and “her expressive eyes kept sweeping over Mangeng as if to suck out his soul”; she is only transferred to Hibiscus town because “word got out about her affair with an official in the county committee”; upon arriving Hibiscus, she tries to seduce Gu Yanshan, the manager of the grain depot, the only man she figures who meets her political and financial standards; later, she starts an affair with Wang Qiushe. Unmarried in her thirties, she’s even had one abortion.

Not only is Li by no means subservient to men in her private life, she also shows strong enthusiasm for taking the lead in the public sphere, which makes her an even more hateful and fearful character in the story. She is a woman by her sex, yet she refuses to play the role of “virtuous wife and good mother” traditionally assigned to women. She actively participates in politics; moreover, she challenges male power and authority by being in a position superior to men. Despite her involvement in the public sphere, the author constantly brings her back to the private sphere by interpreting her social activities as for personal sake, which reinforces the stereotypical gender notions that women are jealous, trivial, short-sighted and, therefore, belong to the domestic domain and are unfit for playing with politics. For example, Li has gained her political position only because her uncle is in charge of finance and trade in the county committee; what drives her to seek political power is personal benefit and desire for personal revenge—she uses her political power to make Hu Yuyin and all the men associated with Hu suffer because she is jealous of Hu Yuyin’s youthful beauty, her happy marriage, and the attention and protection she gets from men. For example, as Li notices Hu’s beancurd stall has lured away so many of her potential customers, she attributes it to Hu’s good looks: ‘Confounded men!’ she [Li] swore to herself. ‘They’re like greedy cats prowling

around that beancurd stall.”<sup>108</sup> As Gu made it clear she is not to his taste, Li furiously concluded that Old Gu snubbed her all because of the “Beancurd Beauty”, Hu Yuyin, which drives her to investigate the business between Gu and Hu Yuyin.<sup>109</sup>

The negative depiction of Li Guoxiang in *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* coincides with the popular evaluation of Jiang Qing after the Cultural Revolution, when Jiang Qing was demonized for disastrous moral conduct, personal pettiness, malevolence, political ambition, cruelty, and jealousy. In Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao’s 1996 book, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, the Cultural Revolution is described as a history of mainly personal antagonisms and Jiang Qing, portrayed as the “usurping concubine”<sup>110</sup> of Mao, manipulating him for her personal purposes.<sup>111</sup> This view is still widely held in today’s China and is acknowledged by both official and academic rhetoric. While recognizing that Mao’s initiating and leading role in the Cultural Revolution was of a “political” nature, Jiang Qing is criminalized because she “exploited the navigator’s error” and “utilized the Cultural Revolution to persecute as many people as she could to settle her personal accounts with enemies.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, Jiang Qing conveniently becomes “a linguistic equivalent for everything evil in the Cultural Revolution”, “the hated object” in which people, both victims and victimizers, can freely invest their “righteous” contempt for all that was done wrong during a whole decade. Just as Li Guoxiang has become the incarnation of a series of devastating political campaigns that broke the peace of Hibiscus Town, “‘wenge’[the Cultural Revolution] now is a metaphor for cultural rigidity and intellectual repression, political brutality, and cunning

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p21.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p27

<sup>110</sup> Bai Di, P 98

<sup>111</sup> Yan, Jiaqi and Gao Gao

<sup>112</sup> Bai Di, p97; also, *A Great Trial in Chinese History*, Pergamon Press, 1981, p 1-4.

manipulation of position and power by the demonized woman, Jiang Qing and her cronies.”<sup>113</sup>

In stark contrast to the image of Li Guoxiang, Hu Yuyin in Gu Hua’s story is endowed with all the traditional female virtues. She is young, pretty, and has a sweet personality. She has “black eyebrows, big eyes, face like a full moon, high breasts and graceful figure.” The customers who eat at her beancurd stall call her “Sister Hibiscus”, or even “Hibiscus Fairy.” According to Gu Yanshan, manager of the grain depot, “‘Sister Hibiscus’ flesh is as white and tender as the beancurd she sells.”<sup>114</sup> Men are attracted to her not only because of her good looks but also her weakness, passivity, obedience, dependence, and nurturing personality, which are conventionally appreciated as feminine attributes. In their relations with her, the four main male characters in the story all display their sense of responsibility and masculinity by willingly offering her love and protection. Mangeng, Party secretary of Hibiscus brigade, Hu’s first love, couldn’t marry her because of her “bad” family background, but swore to look after her as a younger sister as long as he lived.<sup>115</sup> “His visit to her stall each market-day to eat two free bowls of beancurd implied that this was a legitimate business, and showed all who came to the market that it had the support of the Party secretary.”<sup>116</sup> Gui Gui, Hu’s first husband, is so notoriously timid that “if he met a fierce looking water-buffalo or dog in the road he would tremble and step aside.”<sup>117</sup> As timid as he is, he swore that he would pick up his butcher’s knife and kill anybody who dares to spoil his wife’s well-being or happiness. Hu’s second husband, Qin Shutian, offered her his attention, sympathy, affection and love during the

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<sup>113</sup> Evan, Harriet and Stephanie Donald, p14.

<sup>114</sup> Gu Hua, p17.

<sup>115</sup> Gu Hua, p35.

<sup>116</sup> Gu Hua, p19.

<sup>117</sup> Gu Hua, p44.



most difficult period of her life. His coming into her life after Guigui's death was like a ray of sun that warmed her frozen heart, gave her courage and hope to live on. Then the fourth man, Gu Yanshan, plays different roles at different stages of Hu Yuyin's life. As the head of the grain depot, he becomes a patron of Hu Yuyin by providing her the rice to make the beancurd. He offers her his acknowledgement and support by being the only guest at Hu Yuyin and Qin Shutian's wedding dinner. After Qin is sent to the labour camp, Gu saves Hu Yuyin and her baby's life by being the only one to come to Hu's childbed and taking her to the hospital. After the baby's birth he plays the role of foster father and for many years does everything he can to help and protect the mother and child. As we can see from above, all these four men display the same qualities in their relationship with the heroine: sense of obligation to take care of her, because as a member of the weaker sex, she is "pathetic", "frail", "like the easily disturbed reflection of hibiscus in the water."<sup>118</sup> At the same time, Hu Yuyin willingly accepts being the weaker sex who devotes herself to family life and needs protection from men, the stronger sex. Although being loved by all the four male characters, she is always faithful to her husband and gives her husband all her affection, considering him more precious than her own life. At the beginning, "to her, Guigui was her husband, her brother, sometimes even her son"; she devotes to him all the motherly love that a woman is supposed to be born with. Later when she falls in love with Qin Shutian after Gui Gui's death, Qin becomes her patron, giving her strength and hope to survive the misfortunes. She waits for nine years for Qin to come back from the labour camp, and it's for him she has kept living. Unlike Li Guoxiang, she has strong maternal instincts, regarding childbearing and motherhood as a woman's first duty. She feels ashamed about having no child after eight

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p35.

years of marriage with Gui Gui, thinking of herself as “a hen that can’t lay eggs.” When she finally gets pregnant by Qin Shutian, she is all excited about her motherhood-to-be. Though they are not legally married and are still being politically persecuted, she “resolved to put up with any pains to have this child, even if it cost her life.”<sup>119</sup> Focusing on her husband, marriage and family well-being, Hu shows no interests in politics. When her new house is confiscated by the work team, she is lost in confusion. Desperately, she first runs to see Gu Yanshan, hoping he can explain to her what has happened, then she looks for Mangeng, thinking that he’d acknowledge her as his sister, so he would protect her and save her.<sup>120</sup> During the hard years in the Cultural Revolution whenever misfortunes come to her, she blames her ill fate. When Qin is finally cleared in 1979 and told to return to his old job, Yuyin doesn’t want him to take the offer for fear that the job “could so easily land him in trouble.” Years of victimization has left her more fearful and suspicious of politics. To her, the ideal life is that Qin stays in the village with her and looks after their son; they “can till their private plot, raise pigs and poultry and work in the brigade; spruce up their storeyed house and live in comfort...” Thus, in the private sphere, Hu Yuyin is depicted as a sexual being, a virtuous wife and good mother who is appreciated and loved; in the public sphere, she is an innocent follower, a passive victim and sufferer who needs to be guided, sympathized, protected and saved.

Therefore, what is being advocated in *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* is a return to an idealized version of the traditional pattern of gender relations, which are depicted as the relations between the stronger sex and the weaker sex, the public sphere and private sphere, the protector and the protected, and the patron and the patronized. In

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<sup>119</sup> Gu Hua p189.

<sup>120</sup> Gu Hua, p119-120.

this pattern, men and women are assigned to specific gender roles; they act according to a certain moral code, and do what they are supposed to do for the opposite sex. Hu Yuyin is considered the “good,” “desirable” woman and represents femininity, humanity and love because she willingly accepts the arrangement and follows the rules. In contrast, Li Guoxiang’s seeking political power and lording over men in Hibiscus town is considered breaking all the moral codes traditionally assigned to women, and thus she becomes the immoral woman, an incarnation of absurd political movements and twisted human nature.

As seen from the above, the post-Cultural Revolution gender discourse, as reflected in mainstream literature works such as *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* and the negative popular evaluation of Jiang Qing, implies that in order for the social system to operate in an “orderly” fashion, women should always be kept in the domestic domain and not be entrusted with political power. They are virtuous and lovable only when they remain in the private sphere of family life and play the traditional role of virtuous wife and good mother; once they enter the man's territory and get involved in politics they lose their virtue, femininity and even humanity, and it is dangerous and destructive to the society. Unlike the positive depiction of and enthusiastic praise for those women protagonists in the Cultural Revolutionary model plays such as Xi'er, Wu Qinghua and Ke Xiang, who are strong, independent, highly politically conscious, who prioritize public obligations over family life, and who shows willingness and capability to participate and even take lead in social activities, the dominant post-Cultural Revolution discourse demonizes politically active women such as Li Guoxiang and Jiang Qing. Public judgment of them is not based on the same criteria as what their male counterparts

are evaluated upon. In other words, they are either attacked for compromising their “essential femininity” and womanhood, or their actions are interpreted in “private” or “feminine” terms, “as motivated by sexuality, maternity, or feminine jealousy.”<sup>121</sup> Here the traditional gender discrimination inherent in patriarchal society is reinforced in that women belong to the private sphere and their intrinsic nature determines that they are unfit for attempting to gain or exercise power in the public sphere. Women who do not honor the sharp boundary between the public and the private realms, and cross over the gendered behavioral line, are considered “perversions of good women, as either domineering dowagers or scheming concubines.”<sup>122</sup> Therefore, the popular post-Cultural Revolution gender discourse presents a total counterpoint of the “woman” message as conveyed in Model Plays during the Cultural Revolution. It denies the Cultural Revolutionary ideals of the “liberated” and “empowered” women, and calls for depoliticizing and re-feminizing of Chinese women. The society’s reluctant and hostile attitude toward women’s participation in political life brings Chinese women back to the domestic setting and traditional restrictions of “essential” womanhood.

## CONCLUSION

The highly idealized model women characters on China’s Cultural Revolutionary theatric stage to some extent challenged the conventional gender stipulation that womanhood and femininities are defined by a series of innate and essential characteristics which are associated with certain attributes, behaviors, needs and

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<sup>121</sup> Garlick, Barbara, P6.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. P4-5.

capacities that naturally make women wives and mothers, “the second sex” who are unfit for the public sphere. In contrast, women revolutionaries and leaders in Model Plays take centre stage as dedicated social and political beings. It is true that encouragement and efforts for Chinese women to participate in social and political activities started long before the Cultural Revolution, however, it is in the Cultural Revolutionary model theatres that for the first time women are not compelled to struggle between requirements of commitment to their husbands and children on one hand, and duties to the state and public cause on the other hand. This tension was conveniently evaded by dissociating such sexual functions as wifedom and motherhood with central meanings of being a woman, and minimizing the importance attached to the subjective and affective aspects of the marital relationship in solving women problems.<sup>123</sup> Such an approach contributed to a more discursive and flexible social construction of the New womanhood both in theory and in reality during the Cultural Revolution—within powerfully restricted political boundaries, of course—it created legitimacy for women to cross conventionally defined gendered border lines and allows women more freedom in their personal fulfillment.

The expansive portrayal of the model women images in Model Plays certainly contributed to the destabilization of the conventional essentialist and dichotomist approach to gender. But, it is crucial to notice the shaky presumptions underlying Model Plays’ empowering “woman” messages: for Xi’er to achieve her heroic self-liberation, her love for Dachun has to be erased, and her being raped by the landlord and pregnant with the victimizer’s child has to be eliminated; for Ke Xiang to take leadership role in the revolution, her husband must disappear even before the curtain rises on Scene One. In other words, the glorious liberation of Chinese women and their equality with men as

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<sup>123</sup> Evans, Harriet, (2002) p336.

pictured by the Model theatre was based on imaginary absence of sexual elements and family ties; the fundamental conflict between the private commitment and the public engagement confronting Chinese women remained unresolved; as a result, the deep-rooted male-oriented social constructions in reality were not seriously destabilized, which partly explains why Model Plays' "woman" messages were so easy to cast aside in the post-Cultural Revolution era—little girls, who grew up watching, acting, and following the example of the Model women in Model Plays, became successors of the old sexual morality as easily as they became successors of the revolutionary ideals once they reached their adulthood.<sup>124</sup>

Moreover, the setback is reinforced by a shared sense of reminiscences for traditional femininities generated by representations and commendation of re-sexualized and de-politicalized women in both the popular press and academic publications in the post-Mao period. The ideas of women being obedient (*tinghua*), gentle and soft (*wenrou*), self-effacing and unassertive wives and mothers have become once again dominant in the Chinese gender rhetoric and practice, and this time "in ways that were much more apparent—because of the expansion of channels carrying public discourses"<sup>125</sup>. As a result, the collective-spirited, selfless, "androgynous", and non-family-oriented revolutionary model women were further disparaged, for they were considered "incomplete and unfulfilled" without wifedom and motherhood experiences. However, the end of the literary and artistic representation of model women characters doesn't necessarily pronounce an entire retreat to the conventional essentialist and dichotomist definition of womanhood and femininities. As discussed in this thesis, considerable

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<sup>124</sup> Wang Zheng, p40.

<sup>125</sup> Evans, *harriet*, p 342.

evidence indicates the complex nature and enduring influences of the Cultural Revolutionary woman discourse as carried by Model Plays. In *Some of Us*, a group of Chinese women intellectuals who personally experienced the Cultural Revolution, appeal for further exploration of the “female perceptions” and “female experiences” during the Cultural Revolution through their reflective writings.<sup>126</sup> I would like to end my thesis by quoting their argument: “...unless one is willing to give Chinese women’s experience the level of complexity it deserves to be recognized for, their actual experience will continue to be branded as either merely too enmeshed with the official rhetoric to be believed or too mundane to be taken seriously.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Zhong, Xueping, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, xx-xxvii.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. xxvi.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



**Photo 1 Xi'er and Yang Bailao's heroic fight against the landlord<sup>128</sup>**



**Photo 2 Xi'er 's spirit of revolt**

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<sup>128</sup> Photo 1-3 are stage photos of the 1972 film version of the model ballet *The White-haired Girl*. See [http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p5207\\_3](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p5207_3); [http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p5207\\_18](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p5207_18); [http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p5207\\_4](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p5207_4).





**Photo 3 Xi'er's revenge**



**Photo 4 Xi'er: from a peasant girl to a revolutionary soldier<sup>129</sup>**

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<sup>129</sup> See Julia Evergreen Keefer. "The Peking Revolutionary Opera"  
<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefertwenty/mao1.html>.



**Photo 5 Wu Qinghua: Filled with hatred<sup>130</sup>**



**Photo 6 Wu Qinghua: Flee the Tiger's Jaws**

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<sup>130</sup> Photo 5-10 are stage photos or posters of the 1971 film version of the model ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*. See [http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/list5202\\_1](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/list5202_1).



**Photo 7 Wu Qinghua's resistance makes the tyrant cower**



**Photo 8 Soldiers of the Woman's Company perform rifle drill**



**Photo 9 Woman soldiers perform sword dance**



**Photo 10 Wu Qinghua captures the Tyrant**



**Photo 11 Ke Xiang: A Communist stands firm through wind and storm<sup>131</sup>**



**Photo 12 Ke Xiang: "This execution ground is my battlefield"**

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<sup>131</sup> Photo 11-13 are stage photos of 1974 film version of the model Beijing opera, *Azalea Mountain*. See [http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p4983\\_4](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/p4983_4)



**Photo 13 Ke Xiang: planning a night surprise attack with the soldiers**

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## APPENDIX

### Selected Internet Sources for Model Plays' Visual Materials

#### A. The White-Haired Girl

1972 Film version of the stage product of the Model Ballet

Footage

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhGhKMd\\_Sg4&mode=related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhGhKMd_Sg4&mode=related&search=)

<http://www.hispeed.com.cn/Forum/ReadPost.asp?PostID=1216021>

Synopsis

<http://courses.washington.edu/asian204/Synopsis.htm>

Stage Photos

[http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/list5207\\_1](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/list5207_1)

1950 Film

Script

<http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/moran2.htm>

## B. Red Detachment of Women

1971 film version of the stage product of the Model Ballet

Footage

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6748109974167100270&q=red+detachment+of+women>

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4081455131757425665&q=red+detachment+of+women>

[http://www.archive.org/details/The\\_Red\\_Detachment\\_of\\_Women](http://www.archive.org/details/The_Red_Detachment_of_Women)

Stage Photos

[http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/list5202\\_1](http://www.cnmdb.com/photogallery/list5202_1)

<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/twenty/mao1.html>

[http://www.archive.org/movies/thumbnails.php?identifier=The\\_Red\\_Detachment\\_of\\_Women](http://www.archive.org/movies/thumbnails.php?identifier=The_Red_Detachment_of_Women)

1960 film

[http://www.morningsun.org/living/movies/red\\_detachment.html](http://www.morningsun.org/living/movies/red_detachment.html)