

Feminism in Revolutionary Model Ballets *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women*

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Revolutionary model theater (*geming yangbanxi*) first appeared in the Chinese cultural scene in 1966, the year the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution started. The term model theater was coined to describe, loosely, a collection of revised performing art productions guided by Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing (1914-1992). The earliest official source proclaiming the existence of the model theater was a special news report entitled "Carrying Out Chairman Mao's Line on Literature and Art: Brilliant Models." A short editorial on the same page celebrated the birth and significance of these works:

Since 1964, under the brilliant radiance of Chairman Mao's line on literature and art, the high-tide of revolutionary reform in the fields of Beijing opera, of ballet drama, and of symphonic music has swelled. The revolutionary model theater has been created, which consists of five Beijing operas: *Shajiabang*, *The Red Lantern*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *On the Docks*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*; two ballet dramas: *The White-Haired Girl*, *The Red Detachment of Women*, and the symphony *Shajiabang*. (*Renmin ribao*, December 6, 1966)

A news report from the government-run Xinhua News Agency (*Xinhuashe*) on July 16, 1967 set up an official tone to the evaluation of the model theater:

The eight model plays have prominently propagated the shining Mao Zedong Thought, prominently eulogized the workers, peasants and soldiers who are the masters of history. Threading through all the plays is Chairman Mao's revolutionary line of art and literature which stresses that literature serves the workers, peasants and soldiers, as well as proletarian politics. Model theater embodies the correct guiding principle of "letting one hundred flowers blossom" (*baihua qifang*), "rejecting the old and develop the new" (*tuichen chuxing*), and "making the past serve the present and foreign things serve China" (*gu wei jin yong, yang wei zhong yong*).

In the process of the development of the Cultural Revolution, the term model theater became a common designation for any Beijing opera or ballet production that had the exemplary qualities shown by the original eight. As the fame of the symphony *Shajiabang* faded, for it was not a theatrical piece in the first place, more popular new comers, such as the Beijing operas *Azalea Mountain* (Dujuan shan, 1973) and *The Song of the Dragon River* (Long jiang song, 1972), took its place as models.

The model theater dominated the Chinese cultural scene for more than a decade. From 1966 to 1976, it was adapted into various local theatric forms so that it was more accessible to larger audiences. "Singing model operas, becoming a revolutionary" (*chang yangbanxi, zuo*

geming ren) was arguably the most successful political campaign in the history of Chinese Communist Party to use literature and art to indoctrinate people into a standardized view of its revolutionary history and class struggle, as well as its moral and ethical standard.

In the years immediately after the Cultural Revolution to the mid 1990s, model theater was generally regarded as the dead-end of the Chinese Communist Party's political and ideological appropriation of art that began with Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (hereafter "Yan'an Talks") both inside and outside of China.¹ It was routinely trashed by its critics as "artless, sterile, without depth, without truth, and without reality."² As such, it did not deserve a place in the history of modern Chinese literature. Characteristic of this line of thinking is Joseph S. Lau and Howard Goldblatt's *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* which skips the Cultural Revolution period completely.³ Generally speaking, the existing scholarship in the West on model theater, whether descriptive or analytical, has fallen into two similar types. The first, as represented by Walter Meserve, views model theater primarily in terms of its political context, and consequently assumes that it has scant literary or dramatic value. The second kind of scholarship analyzes the literary-artistic value in model theater and largely restricts its focus to form. This approach is interested in how the work is constructed as popular art and how it is a product of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP)'s manipulation of mass performing art and popular culture. Bonnie S. McDougall's *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China 1949-1979* is one such study.⁴ In either case, when model theater is viewed solely as propaganda or as an artistic weapon for propagandistic purposes, its texts are seldom approached outside of the confinement of anti-Maoist interpretation.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the start of the relative liberalism of the post-Mao era, critics in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) had attacked model theater out of a shared sense of righteous opposition to what they saw as the evil products of a political and cultural disaster. The sole reason for the existence of model theater was to serve and satisfy Jiang Qing's evil personal ambition, according to these critics. Model theater is here viewed solely in terms of its political context, or as a part of that political context itself.⁵ In other words, it is not only regarded as the product of the political turmoil, but also as being partially responsible for that turmoil. As the core of Cultural Revolution "propaganda," the model theater has been ignored and thrown into critical oblivion. In Chen Sihe's highly regarded *Contemporary History of Chinese Literature* published in 1999, model theater is mentioned in one paragraph as is responsible for its "abominable effect" (*elie yingxiang*) on Chinese literary

¹ For an English translation of "Yan'an Talks," please see Chapter 54 in Kirk Denton ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought, Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 458-84.

² Walter Meserve. *Modern Drama from Communist China* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p.1.

³ Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, eds. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁴ Bonnie S. McDougall, ed. *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁵ Yan Jiaqi's opinion is representative in this regard: "She [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." In *Turbulent Decade, a History of the Cultural Revolution*. Trans. D.W.Y.Kwok (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), p. 400.

creativity.⁶ The reasons for erasing or belittling model theater in Chinese literature scholarship in this period differed from those of the West. While Western scholars usually took model theater as the pinnacle of Mao's "Yan'an Talks" and argued that "Jiang Qing's line on literature and art naturally met his [Mao's] requirements," the PRC scholars seldom admitted that model theater is the continuation of Mao's literary policy.⁷ Rather it is looked at as a deviation from the Party literary tradition.⁸

This paper aims to be a critical intervention that attempts to redefine model theater as it exists in the texts "The White-Haired Girl" and "The Red Detachment of Women." It is a study of the texts themselves which does not take anti-Mao or anti-Jiang Qing sentiment as its theoretical starting point. The goal is to reach a fresh understanding of model theater's position in the PRC's cultural history as well as to recognize its significance in subverting the hegemonic Party ideology. To achieve this end, it liberates the reading of model theater from the overarching political shackle that has denied its unique cultural incongruity within the CCP's literary tradition. This incongruity, I argue, arises from model theater's radical and thoroughgoing disruption of Chinese gender construction. Through close readings of the texts, this paper proposes that model theater is in its cultural essence feminist. Its feminism lies in its systematic construction of heroic women's images against the background of CCP history, and of their strategic appropriation of class and political identities in order to escape from subordinate gender identities. Within a discourse of class struggle, model theater creates a feminist utopia where androgyny and lesbianism, "the only social form in which we [women] can live freely," are very much prevalent.⁹ The feminism embedded in it which stresses degendering sets it apart from canonical CCP literature and accounts for its oft-noted and reviled extremes in character portraiture.

My rereading of model theater so as to elucidate and understand its disruption of Chinese gender construction is also a direct response to a troubling social phenomenon. It is the current cultural trend in post-Mao China to reestablish clear gender roles. In feminist gender theories, gender is a complex notion. Unlike naturally attributed sex, it is situationally accomplished. Learning to behave in accordance with one's gender identity is an indispensable stage in the early development of all men and women. The process of acquiring a gender identity is one of learning how a girl/woman or boy/man should feel, think and act in a social setting. Feminist gender theories make it clear that to dissolve rigid gender roles is one of the tasks of primary importance to women's liberation. Such gender-based feminist theories have been instrumental in developing my own conceptualizing of model theater as feminist. During the current economic reform and fervent globalization drive, official publications argue that the "responsibility system" and labor efficiency considerations justify women's return to the kitchen, resuming the

⁶ Chen Sihe. *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi (A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature)*. (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, September, 1999). Chapter 9.

⁷ Yu-sun Chou. "Change and Continuity in Communist Chinese Policy on Literature and Art." *Issues and Studies*, 22, No. 9 (Sept. 1986), 18.

⁸ See *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi (A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature)*. (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1982), and Wang Huazao et al eds. *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue jianshi (A Brief History of Contemporary Chinese Literature)* (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1985).

⁹ Monique Wittig, *Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 53.

role of “a virtuous wife and good mother.”¹⁰ As Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter have observed in their study of Chinese women in the early eighties, “public discussion in the 1980s was shaped by a decisive rejection of the experiences of the Cultural Revolution. The fervor and enthusiasm with which women beautified themselves, the wide-spread support for moving women back into ‘suitable’ lines of work, the discussions of womanly virtues in the press, must all be understood in part as a reaction to Cultural Revolution norms.”¹¹

If this widely recognized trend of Chinese women going back to their traditional gender roles is a backlash against women’s degendered image of “holding up half the sky” stressed in the Cultural Revolution period, then that degendering deserves closer critical attention. The issues that this paper tries to discuss are: why are the redomestication and regendering of women that are occurring as China transforms itself into a capitalist economy being seen as backlash against women’s images in the Cultural Revolution? In other words, what is there in the Cultural Revolution that stands so starkly as the antithesis to the current regendering of women?

The White-Haired Girl

The original play “The White-Haired Girl” that the Cultural Revolution model ballet is based upon, was first produced in 1945 by a group of CCP’s *wenyi gongzuozhe* (workers of literature and art) after Mao Zedong’s “Yan’an Talks” which set the tone for the official CCP’s policy on literature and art. The popular legend, or dramatized reality, underlying “The White-Haired Girl” was explained by one of its original writers, He Jingzhi. He Jingzhi recalled that stories about a “white-haired goddess” were making the rounds in the northwestern part of Hebei province in the 1940s, then under the control of the communist Eighth Route Army. That white-haired goddess turned out to be a poor peasant woman who had lost her family and had lived in the wilderness like an animal. She would come out of her hiding place at night searching for food. People who encountered her thought that she was a ghost. The Eighth Route Army found her and settled her down in her village. The play *The White-Haired Girl* was said to base on this true, real-life story.

Jack Belden gave a vivid account of his viewing of the play when he visited in spring of 1947 Pengcheng in Henan province the eighth Route Army controlled area. According to him

“White Haired Woman was a tragic melodrama. The heroine of the play is the daughter of a tenant farmer. Seized by the dog legs of the landlord when her father cannot pay his New Year’s debts, she is forced to become a maidservant in the landlord’s home. There she is constantly beaten by the landlord’s wife, a devout, but humorous old Buddhist, and finally raped on a dark night by the landlord’s son. Made pregnant she threatens to reveal her shame to the whole village. The landlord’s son, who is about to be married, and the

¹⁰ Xiaorong Li, “Gender Inequality in China and Cultural Relativism” in *Women, Culture, and Development*, eds. Martha Nussbaum & Jonathan Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 411. Li also points out that the change of women’s image in the media is buttressed by the social reality of increased gender disparity. For instance, the traditional business of selling women for marriage is coming back. “In 1990 alone, 18,692 cases were investigated by the authorities.” Also, the nation’s education system has given “first priority to males, and illiterates and school dropouts have been mainly female.” (408)

¹¹ Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices, Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p.7.

dog leg bind up the girl, throw her in a closet and make ready to murder her. An old woman servant, who many years ago had been brought to the landlord's home under much the same circumstances, releases the girl who flees in the night. The landlord's son and the dog leg pursue her into the mountains.

Wailing a defiant song, the girl evades capture by taking refuge in a rocky glen where she gives birth to a baby, her hair turning white in the process. She is adopted by guerrillas who eventually free her home village and bring the landlord's son before a Speak Bitterness Meeting. The villagers debate what to do with the son. The boy, showing repentance, however, is beaten. The land is divided, the girl gets her share and even the landlord his.¹²

In 1950, a film version of *White-Haired Girl* directed by Wang Bin and Shui Hua appeared. The plot is set in the latter half of the 1930s and relates the tragic story of a poor peasant girl, Xi'er. Her father, Yang Bailao, works for the vicious landlord Huang Shiren. Unable to pay his grain rent and an accumulated cash debt, Yang is forced in his confusion and bewilderment to sign a contract, promising to give his daughter to the Huang family as payment. Yang then commits suicide, whereupon Xi'er is forcibly taken away by the Huang family. Wang Dachun, Xi'er's betrothed, runs away and joins the Eighth Route Army led by the CCP. Xi'er is cruelly treated in the Huang family and is raped by Huang Shiren. Seven months later, after Xi'er has become pregnant, Huang decides to sell her to a brothel to the surprise of Xi'er who expects that Huang will marry her. On learning Huang's scheme at his wedding, she escapes from the landlord's household and flees to the wild mountains, where she gives birth to Huang's child who later dies. For more than two years, Xi'er exists like an animal in a mountain cave, hiding from human community. This hard life, and the lack of salt in her diet, turns her hair completely white. The villagers who encounter her take her to be an apparition. Finally a detachment of the Eighth Route Army led by Wang Dachun comes to her rescue. The village is liberated, the landlord is executed. Liberated Xi'er will marry Dachun, and they will live happily ever after. Always considered a masterpiece of "socialist realism," this 1951 film version vividly bring out the CCP's didactic message: "The old society forced human beings to turn into ghosts; the new society changes ghosts back into human beings."¹³

The first critique of the film WHG after the Cultural Revolution was by Meng Yue in her 1993 article "'The White-Haired Girl' and the Historical Complexity of 'Yan'an Literature.'" In her reading of the text and in her theorizing, Meng Yue goes beyond previous studies of WHG that have been trapped in narrow political frameworks. Building a three-stage historiography of WHG, Meng insightfully draws out the hidden cultural similarities between the CCP's class struggle rhetoric and traditional Chinese popular value systems. She demonstrates how the CCP appropriates the popular tradition to attain popular legitimacy that serves its own political ends. In the CCP's literary discourse, class is less a socioeconomic concept than a moral one. Class struggle, as Meng looks at it, is a direct adaptation of the traditional popular discourse of the struggle between the moral and the immoral. The disturbance of the moral order causes injustice and is the reason for social conflicts-class struggle in the CCP rhetoric.

¹² Belden, Jack. *China Shakes the World* (Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1970), pp209-210.

¹³ Meng Yue, p. 177.

The popular ideal of social and familial harmony presented in WHG permeates, for example, the relationships between father and daughter, between betrothed Xi'er and Wang Dachun. These relationships are naturally moral for they represent the ideal familial relations. The landlord, on the other hand, is mean and evil. An outsider to these harmonious relations, he breaks in, destroying the moral ideal. Thus, he is construed as a symbol of anti-order or disorder. A line demarcating classes is drawn and he becomes a class enemy. Meng Yue then goes on to conclude that the political discourse of class and class struggle in the "Yan'an Talks," as embodied in WHG is grounded in the traditional "popular moral order," *minjian lunli zhixu*.¹⁴ However, Meng Yue's account of WHG stops short, or further still, is uncritical of the nature of the traditional popular moral order and social justice. If we dissect moral justice, this seemingly impartial concept, we will find out that its very impartiality lies in biased concepts of justice paraphrased as "adjustment of conflicting claims."¹⁵ I would argue, that essentially speaking, this "popular moral order" is built upon as well as reflects the traditional Chinese notion of value. The traditional value system is an ideological derivation of Chinese traditional sex-gender system.

William Galston makes very explicit the logic of a rightfully or justifiably distributive understanding of justice. Justice, he says, "involves an ensemble of possession." That means that justice is not a mere abstract concept. It has its material base, and in this sense, "justice concerns the proper pattern of the allocation of entities" among people in any given society. Every society has its own pattern of distributing properties. The violation of the pattern will be considered unjust. He further clarifies that "the domain of entities may include objects, qualities, positions within a system, or even human beings."¹⁶

Galston's explanation of the nature of justice is very much in line with Gayle Rubin's thesis that patriarchal society has been built upon the traffic in women. My synthesis of the two theses reveals that the concept of social moral justice built upon so-called "morally proper distribution of benefit and wealth among society's members" has been primarily constructed on the fair distribution of women by men. Women and their bodies are a part of social wealth. The justice system has a set of rules to guarantee the fair transaction and rightful possession of women. People tend to presume that the units among which fair distribution take place are families. Thus by justifying the fairness in kinship and marital relations, people neglect issues of justice within families, thus neglect the issue of gender inequality.

In WHG, Xi'er is the center of the plot, but she is not the acting agent. The story is structured not around her, but around the ownership of her. The father is assumed to rightfully own the authority to distribute Xi'er. He is presented as being wrongly treated because his father's authority in his daughter has been violated. The ultimate guilt that drives him to suicide comes from his despair over his won failure as a father—including his inability to give the daughter away in marriage. He fails to live up to his contract with Wang Dachun. Thus, Yang Bailao's suicide does not only represent the social injustice, it is also a symbolic necessity in terms of his social-gender identity. As an actor in this dramatic conflict over the ownership of Xi'er, he is beaten.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.177.

¹⁵ This is one of the definitions of "justice" in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*.

¹⁶ William Galston. *Justice and the Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.112.

Wang Dachun's loss of Xi'er has more significance to the structure of the narrative than Yang Bailao's. That his claim over Xi'er is taken away not only means he has lost his love (possession), but more importantly, his manhood, a loss that nonetheless makes him a hero. His rancor toward Huang causes him to leave his native village to join the CCP. After years in the army, he returns home, settles his account with Huang, thus regaining possession of Xi'er. Wang gets back what is rightfully his and justice is restored. The morally sound class wins the class struggle. Huang's injustice in that he destabilizes the familial order; his destruction of the relations between father and daughter, between fiancé and fiancée, his interference with the transaction, and his rape of Xi'er are the ultimate violation of moral justice.

So in the narrative structure, Xi'er, or rather her body, becomes the carrier of social justice, the trigger of fierce social conflict, and a site on which the discourse of class struggle is constructed. Indeed, the fight over the control of a women's body and sexuality is enacted in the drama as a fierce class struggle.

The Cultural Revolution ballet version of WHG made its Beijing debut on April 30, 1966, for the May Day celebration. After more than two years of continuous revising and rehearsing under the direct guidance of Jiang Qing, this ballet was acclaimed a model for revolutionizing the foreign art form of ballet.¹⁷ The ballet keeps close to the original story line, but the plot is much thinner and the characters more abstract. The most obvious change is that Yang Bailao does not commit suicide, but in the spirit of revolt fights against his oppressors and is beaten to death. Similarly Xi'er is changed into an embodiment of hatred, the spirit of revenge. She is treated cruelly in the ballet but is not sexually assaulted. Wang Dachun's significance fades and he becomes just another of Xi'er's class brothers with no romantic attachment. In the epilogue, Xi'er picks up a gun and joins the ranks of the Eighth Route Army to carry on the eternal revolution of the proletariat. As such, she becomes a symbol of that class.

The simplification of the story, the "over politicization" of the theme, and particularly the abstraction of characters reveal the most dynamic concept contained in the ballet: class is the only social category within which people function. The class discourse overwhelms and replaces "non-politicized ethical concepts, moral principles," and consequently "the entertainment value."¹⁸ Class discourse coercively eliminates the authoritative status of the traditional popular culture of the original version. As we argued above, social, ethical, and moral values belong to the domain of the sex-gender system. Examining closely the original and ballet versions, we find that it is the traditional kinship relations that are eliminated in the latter. What is more dynamic is that the class excludes the sexual. Xi'er's previous vulnerability as a woman, a body, disappears. Her rape and pregnancy are excised. Sexual or simply romantic elements are eliminated. Xi'er is no longer a betrothed daughter to be raped, nor a mother giving birth to a dead child, nor a ghost waiting to be liberated. When a woman is disassociated from her sexualized body and the gendered functions derived from her body, she can be an agent. She is not a daughter, not a wife, not a mother, not a sex object, not an object of male desire. Woman as agent means the destruction of an active/passive heterosexual division of labor in the narrative structure of the play. Thus, it "disrupts the preexisting patterns of fascination of pleasure" which has been built

¹⁷ *Guangming ribao*, 4/30/1966, p.3.

¹⁸ Meng Yue, p. 186.

upon the sexualizing and victimizing of women. And deconstruction of pleasure is a radical weapon for feminism.¹⁹

The Red Detachment of Women

The ballet “The Red Detachment of Women” (hereafter RDW) reiterates the basic theme of WHG: how a poor peasant’s daughter becomes a staunch communist. While the ballet version of WHG dissolves the familial relations allowing woman to be an acting agent, RDW endeavors to present the ideal situation for girl’s maturation into social adulthood. The most popular among the model plays, RDW sets up a perfect model of experimentation in the combination of a foreign art form and the CCP’s ideology.

The ballet RDW was revised from a 1960 film. As the title suggests, the ballet deals with two themes overlapping with each other, that of class struggle – the color red represents the proletarian class—and that of women’s liberation. The plot involves a daughter of a poor peasant in the 1930s when China was under Nationalist rule. The girl, Wu Qinghua, is enslaved as a bond maid in the household of landlord Nan Batian. Viciously beaten by the evil landlord and his “running dogs” (his followers), she has tried several times to escape. Finally with the help of her friends, she succeeds in running away. On her way she encounters a man who turns out to be a political commissar in the CCP-led Red Army. The man shows great sympathy towards her and directs her to the camp of a Red Women’s fighting force. Wu Qinghua’s search for home and for liberation, for her utopian dreams, is fulfilled when she finally finds the red flag of the army. The climax scene of the play is very moving: “Red flag? Wu stares at the rippling banner with deep emotion.” Dressed in red herself, “Wu staggers forward and presses it against her cheek. Tears roll down her face. ‘Red flag, oh, red flag, today I’ve found you!’”²⁰ Joining the army marks a new life for her. Tempered by class struggle, full of fire and blood, Wu Qinghua finally becomes a conscious proletarian soldier; she becomes the Party representative with the women’s detachment.

For the most part, the characterization of the central heroine in the play, Wu Qinghua, resembles that of Xi’er in WHG. It reflects, I think, a high-level of feminist intervention in the artistic creation of a communist woman. Wu Qinghua is one of the laboring people who have suffered bitterly in the old society. Her sufferings caused by the landlord are portrayed as collective experience shared by other peasant women who are always at her side. Consequently, she has an instinctive drive to fight back. The ballet aims to “depict her resistance and struggles.”²¹ From the very beginning, Wu Qinghua emits a fighting spirit. 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

¹⁹ Laura Mulvey. *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.20.

²⁰ Martin Ebon, ed. *Five Chinese Communist Plays* (New York: The John Day Company, 1975), p. 137.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.126.

and wreck the lair of these man-eating beasts!”²² Her strong class feeling often makes her forget painful injuries, urging her to fight the tyrant to the end.

Unlike WHG, however, RDW does not let Wu’s militancy and fighting spirit go unexamined. While in WHG, Xi’er’s class hatred is treated as a liberating drive that prompts her to join the revolutionary army, here in RDW, Wu’s rashness and impetuosity as a revolutionary soldier are criticized and repudiated. The play presents the twisted path a woman soldier takes to become mature socially and politically.

After Wu joins the red army, she is sent on a scouting mission into the landlord’s headquarters, where she comes upon the hateful man. Unable to control herself, she shoots him, thus prematurely giving her comrades the signal to attack. Although victorious in the ensuing skirmish, the detachment fails to capture the landlord who, only wounded, makes his escape. To discipline her for her rashness, the heroine’s pistol is taken away; she receives it back only when she realizes that making revolution is much more than just settling personal scores.

The development of the character of the heroine suggests that simple aggressiveness does not necessarily lead to liberation. Her hatred towards her class enemies, which caused her desire to fight, is instinctive and immature. Success in class struggle lies in personal and political maturity. Joining the revolutionary army does not necessarily mean that Wu is already a mature revolutionary fighter; this is gained only after overcoming narrow individualism. After she is criticized for not being a conscious proletarian soldier, she comes to understand that “Only by emancipating all humankind can the proletariat achieve its on final emancipation.”²³ She vows that she will fight all her life for the liberation of humankind. From this point on she is redeemed and in future struggles and battles, she maintains proper discipline. The Red Army soon liberates all the oppressed peasants, and Wu personally kills the landlord and succeeds the dead hero, Hong Changqing, as party representative.

What seems to be a main theme of the play reveals itself through Wu’s process of political maturation: women’s true emancipation can only be achieved through taking part in the class struggle led by the Communist Party. Individuals should sacrifice themselves for the good of the communist course. With thousands and thousands of such self-sacrificing fighters, the communist cause will win in the end, benefiting both the working class and women. The male character Hong Changqing, the political commissar, is portrayed as politically perfect, in contrast to Wu’s naivete. After he is captured by the enemy as the result of Wu’s violation of discipline, he displays courage and heroism when he is burned to death by the class enemies. Something of a Christ figure, he dies in order to arouse followers.

This part of the plot and presentation in the play is most problematic for my feminist hermeneutics. The paradigm of the Party liberating women is certainly dominant here. On the surface it seems that RDW endorses the Party’s leadership in women’s emancipation. My argument here is that since ideology is socially and culturally determined, Chinese feminism in the ‘70s could not escape from the social discourse it was enmeshed in. However, we can argue that for liberation, they must enter into political where social power and agency lie. For women,

²² *Ibid.*, p.130.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.141

the means of entering into the political is degendering. Women have to be stripped off their socialized pettiness, naivete and their narrow selves to be recognized as politically mature. Only when those socially constricted attributes of femininity are eliminated, can women be treated as mature adults. The Party's role in women's liberation is modified here. The Party directs women into the public and the political, and women's entry into the political, in turn, enables them to be the representatives of the Party. This image of the Party is an ideal one for women, because it does not ask women to be revolutionaries and wives at the same time as the CCP did in reality.

The text's subversive feminist nature can also be seen when the Party's liberation of women scene in the ballet is set against the original cinematic version of the play. The ballet omits an important story line and an important woman character from the original.

There are two story lines in the film. One is about the main character Wu Qionghua, a slave girl about to be sold to a brothel by her master.²⁴ Qionghua manages to escape from the cell where she is being held with the help of a handsome man who later turns out to be the Party representative. The romantic attraction between the two grows as the story progresses.

The second plot line follows Hong Lian, a woman clad in men's clothes whom Wu Qionghua meets on her way to the red base areas. Hong Lian dresses herself as a man because she is afraid of sexual assault. She relates to Wu that she is about to escape from her in-laws' to the red base areas. Because of a long-ago arranged marriage, Hong was forced to marry a wooden figure symbolizing the dead boy she was betrothed to. "This is my husband." She shows the wooden figure to Wu. "I got married when I was ten years old. Since then, I have been sleeping with his wooden corpse for ten years. Do I still count as a live women?"²⁵ So both women, Wu suffering from physical and sexual oppression and Hong from an arranged marriage, have escaped and found the red base areas. It is there that Hong Lian unites with her lover of many years, Feng Ahgui, and happily marries him and eight months later gives birth to a girl. In the red base areas ruled by the CCP, Hong Lian becomes a woman. It is obvious that in the cinematic version, among various kinds of motivations that drive women to join the revolution, a happy marriage is one. So in this sense, as in the opera WHG, RDW depicts women's oppression that is, in my view, the most problematic.

Gender theory tells us that female sexuality in its different forms is one of the reasons for women's social subordination. So when women are looked at primarily as sexual and sexually subordinate, they are not liberated. The question here is not that women should not be represented as claiming their sexual freedom, only that before they do it, they must first destroy the traditional concept of the sexual. They have to break the shackle of the sexual to free themselves. Hong Lian's liberation, as the film shows, is in the sexual realm in the form of choosing her own husband. Hong Lian represents the ideal liberated woman the CCP's women's platform aims to constrict: she is revolutionary and feminine. The CCP has saved her from inhuman treatment resulting from her arranged marriage. In return, she becomes the wife of a

²⁴ In the original version, the given name of the main character is "Qionghua" meaning "beautiful jade flower," a very feminine name. It is changed, in the model ballet, into "Qinghua" a gender-neutral name with a lofty meaning, I think, of "purifying China."

²⁵ *Zhongguo dianying juban xuanji (Selected Scripts of Chinese Films)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1963), p. 104.

revolutionary and the mother of a future revolutionary. This revolutionary wife and mother Hong Lian disappears in the ballet. Jiang Qing was directly responsible for deleting this character on account of her “plainness of character.” So she cannot represent revolutionary women.²⁶ The omission of this character in the ballet more clearly delineates the relationship between the Party and women. In negotiating with the Party on the issue of the sphere for liberated women, RDW locates liberation in the public, in the political, not in reformed kinship or reformed marriage, which point to the redomestication of women, as in the film version.

In order to better understand the significance of the omission of Hong Lian, it is worthwhile to introduce Marxist literary theorist Pierre Macherey’s “symptomatic” approach to the literary text, which seeks to disclose the “lack” in the work. Macherey sees a text as composed of two parts: the explicit, which is what the work says, and the implicit, which is what the work cannot say or does not like to say. “The explicit requires the implicit,” Macherey says. That is “in order to say something, there are other things which must not be said.”²⁷ He continues to explain that “[s]peech eventually has nothing to tell us. We investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking.”²⁸ “Meaning,” continues Macherey, “is in the relation between the implicit and the explicit.”²⁹

In the ballet version of RDW, Wu Qinghua’s maturation under the guidance of the Party can be said to be the explicit, while Hong Lian’s story is the implicit that is silenced. Thus, according to Macherey’s dialectic, the omitted, the unarticulated, becomes the valuable means of detecting that which threatens and undermines the text’s overt project. By omitting Hong Lian’s story, the ballet interrogates the CCP ideology of women’s liberation by avoiding a direct challenge to that ideology. While the Party’s role in the political emancipation of women is recognized and praised, its roles of being wives and mothers becomes an unsaid in the text.

The revelation of the “unsaid” in texts is one of the purposes of feminist readings. The unsaid might be thought of as an unspoken subtext, “which by its very telling silence, interrogates and undermines that is represented by the dominant message of the text.”³⁰ To undo Hong Lian’s story is to interrogate the social context of the CCP’s women’s liberation platform.

In sum, both model ballets represent women’s appropriation of the political and historical moments when the overarching class discourse provided a window for them to get out of the social constructs of womanhood. Class struggle discourse, like the nationalist and humanist salvation discourses in the early modern era, opens a venue for women to their long-desired liberation from socially derogative categories of femininity. In a sense, class struggle is a shelter that facilitates women’s escape from their designated home and hearth. As a result, women are freed from their gendered obligations as daughters, wives and mothers. They become heroes in the public arena where all social values reside.

²⁶ See “Jiang Qing’s Directives on the Ballet Dance-drama ‘The Red Detachment of Women.’” In Chung Hwa-min. *Jiang Qing zhengzhuan* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1967), p. 109.

²⁷ Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁰ Sara Mills et al eds. *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 190.

However, model theater, like all artistic works, is an idealized fantasy. The Chinese feminism represented by model theater visualizes an ideal world where women's images can be reshaped and to reclaim women's social space of representation is only a possibility. Model theater is a feminist utopia. It suggests at once "the grandeur of striving to reach 'the good place' [*eutopia* in Greek] and the futility of searching for 'no place' [*outopia*]." ³¹

Surprisingly, from 1990s onto the present, China has experienced a renewed popular interest in the model theater. Referred to as the red classics (*hongse jingdian*), new productions of *The Red Lantern*, *Shajiabang*, and the two ballets have been commercial successes in spite of their obviously outdated political messages. In each year's celebration of the National Day on October 1 and of the Communist Party's birthday on July 1, these plays are regular encores. For instance, in July 2004, Poly Theater in Beijing ran the *Red Detachment of Women* for a week to capacity audience. The popularity of the model theater has been partially, arguably, responsible for the newly emerged serious re-readings of model theater in both Chinese and American academia. Hong Zicheng, a Beijing University professor has renamed the process of creating model theater as recanonization. ³² The impact of this recanonization of model theater on the general reevaluation of the modern Chinese literature remains a question. However, the women's utopia represented in the model theater may explain partially the theater's undying popularity.

³¹ Maurice Meisner. *Marxism, Maoism & Utopianism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p.3.

³² Hong Zicheng, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi*. (Beijing daxue chuban she, 1999), p.194.