

Jiang Qing, Seriously

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Taking Jiang Qing seriously is hard. She became *the* super-duper Cultural Revolution scapegoat: demonic, asexual, slutty, a usurper, a silly idiot, a housewife, an imperial faker, feudal maternalist, iron girl revolutionary, and so on. Adding the name Mao Zedong to the “Gang” cannot resolve the problem because Jiang Qing was a historical actor, no matter how married she was. Until recently she has had two important roles to play; first, to forever prove why socialism is unnatural and, second, to link Maoism to feudal womanhood. Everyone knows these are caricatures. Yet taking Jiang Qing seriously is absolutely necessary and one way to do that may mean asking how a dim-witted, obedient, vengeful, unnatural Jiang ended up running the state. In any case, it should no longer be possible to write entire books about the Cultural Revolution without ever disclosing Jiang’s standpoint or her thought or her political contributions. Now in the time of Trump we know that even idiots become heads of state, so credulity is at best understandable. But Jiang, like Wang Guangmei, and unlike Trump, was a career politician, and not a novice. What Jiang Qing thought about and particularly how she institutionalized her ideas are pertinent questions. I return to this problem below but here are some of the stakes. Jiang Qing was everywhere. One of four parts of the Gang of Four and a crucial member of the leadership, yet she has been made inessential historiographically. It is hard to think of another name so systemically power dwarfed and approached more anxiously as Jiang, almost as though taking this woman seriously makes the historian the idiot.

I have taken Jiang Qing dead seriously. Seriously, politically, because I have focused on a conflict that Jiang Qing staged between Kuai Dafu, Jiang’s ally and a Red Guard leader, and Comrade Wang Guangmei, revolutionary and wife of Liu Shaoqi, in 1966 and 1967. Philosophically, their conflict demonstrates how acts are thoughtful, both intentionally, institutionalizing ideas, and contingently, dealing with things close at hand. The unity of theory and practice is not a slogan. It is how professional revolutionaries like Jiang, Kuai, Wang, and others, thought in political, philosophic terms, and what motivated them to forward millenarian goals. As Gu Yizhong’s recently completed dissertation, “The Myth of Voluntary Death: The Representation of Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the Maoist Films (1949-1976)” notes, Jiang Qing strategically, aesthetically, carefully produced technical and critical means to communicate the revolutionary sublime during the Mao years.¹ Gu also notes that her thought is scattered and sometimes has to be read indirectly as commentary or oblique set of coherent ideas. Jiang’s fundamentalist views on martyrdom and the cultural theory of “The Three Prominences” are, according to Gu’s remarkable book, a significant contribution to Communist arts theory. The point is that Jiang Qing did think. No matter how scattered her written reflections or stage notes, they compile into coherent theories of the process Johanna Drucker calls

“graphesis”—meaning ways of communicating ideas and thoughts using drawings.²

My brush with the Jiang Qing problem ended up being the final chapter of a long monograph, *In the Event of Women* (Duke, 2018). The chapter shows how the Jiang Qing-Wang Guangmei theoretical struggle over feminine performance on the national stage originated in the early twentieth century. The trial of Wang Guangmei and her long imprisonment are part of a larger event of women. An event is a politically inspired action to install newly discovered truth. In this case, the new truth was physiological. Social evolutionary, utopian socialist, Marxist philosophy at the end of the nineteenth into the twentieth century all created social origin stories on the basis of human sexual reproduction. Founding Maoist Li Da, for instance, argued that women sexually select males to meet social evolutionary goals including primitive accumulation. Because human society organized itself around a female centered species, women is an evolutionary and sociological truth, and not an “other.” Philosophically revolutionary praxis in relation to the truth of women means that women’s liberation cannot be ignored.

The chapter claims that the Trial of Wang Guangmei is much more than a catfight or a smokescreen; it was an episodic part of the event of women. This is a meaningful point given the history of Chinese Marxist philosophy. The Maoists, Jiang Qing included, argued that women’s truth had yet to be resolved and required constant, political, philosophical reconsideration. A politics of the truth of women belonged in all socialist and communist revolutionary uprisings. Also, though China was the immediate concern, the universal truth of women was the larger stake. In China, the argument appears to go, Maoist women’s liberation strategy would reconstitute social relations on a historically progressive arc; in a sense, it would reboot dialectically healthy historical life. In this sense, the women question is a central component in all human social evolution. This makes the Jiang Qing group’s position foundational in a way that extends beyond bourgeois legal rights. While anarchist natural rights theories were folded into Maoist feminism, the truth of the origins of human social life in women’s reproductive power is a new truth. The Wang Guangmei-Kuai Dafu-Jiang Qing struggle illustrates how that truth of women becomes a strategic political problem in evolutionary social history.

And this is where taking Jiang Qing even more seriously might yield helpful results. The question is what they were fighting over. Ideas are not theorems or dogma, solution to already evident questions. Great struggles break out over truth itself. The second part of my analysis of the Trial of Wang Guangmei shows that each side promoted a foundationally different sense of womanhood. They shared a great deal in common, but several things differentiated their positions. Their common origin was the commercialization and commodifica-

tion of women’s sexuality during the high point of corporate imperialism in China. Graphic images of modern women in commercial ephemera gave people information about what women “really are” scientifically and linked female consumerism to modernizing life. The seamy details of the “trial” and cartoons in the Red Guard press mocking and disowning Wang Guangmei’s dresses and her bourgeois views are replete with references to commercial ephemera, commodity girls, and sold women.

Making Jiang Qing legible is how we take her seriously. Antonia Finnane’s history of the Jiang Qing dress, for instance comes at the question of Jiang’s political philosophy sideways. Finnane’s well known paper extracts from material evidence Jiang Qing’s ideas about the hybrid, Han-Tang Chinese, modernist, and to me strangely Japanized national dress. In Finnane’s study Jiang vilifies the *qipao* because to her any Chinese national dress had to be stripped of Qing feudalism as much as commoditized sexuality of Western imperialist consumer culture. One of Finnane’s implications is that Chinese nationalism was not simple for even the most committed to unravel.³ Jiang was trying to fuse a Tang period model and European school-girl uniforms. And this is partly because there was, in Jiang Qing’s interpretation, no historically clean or not toxic national dress for women in China. In the commercial ephemera, the emancipated Chinese woman appears in many styles, from Chinese Manchu and Chinese Han style lineages to Japanese modernist kimono and fusion clothing. Joan Judge’s in-depth study of the late nineteenth-century “republican women,” suggests that in the imagery of that time a girl with a braid down her back is a Han girl, and the Manchu robe wearing senior woman, familiar in so many commercial ad images, is part of the over-class.⁴ Graphesis creates a visual theory in which the national, liberated woman risks “foreign” colonialism on the one hand and pro-Manchism on the other.

Alain Badiou’s theory of the event inspired my focus. Commercial ephemera allowed me to show what the truth of women meant to non-Marxist philosophers and feminist advocates. It meant publically acknowledged sexual lives, educated views on reproductive physiology, dresses that showed anatomical females and in many ads, an association linking commodities and social advancement. This part of the argument played out ideologically and visually in the process of graphesis. The second part of my analysis developed Walter Benjamin’s immanent critique. Benjamin’s preoccupation with leftovers and remains suggested that concepts are immanently present in physical ephemera. Physical remains embed political theory. A Jazz Age *qipao* embodied modernist social science logic. That is what I found. The chapter then shows how iconography of the Red Guard movement retooled the truth of women. Where inter-war years’ ad cartoons associated commodity culture and women’s liberation, Red Guard cartoonists ridiculed and demonized these commercial visual ephemera. We know the story. Gentle ladies and sexy ladies drawn in *qipao* give way to athletic girls with highly defined arm muscles and cinched waist soldier girl suits.

Taking Jiang Qing seriously means going all out. The fact is that all Marxist theorists accept or struggle against social scientific logics. In practice, however, there are inbuilt double binds in the notion that women are half of society and without their equal participation race and social life get off track. For

instance, do clothes really make the woman? What does it mean to liberate women from body modification, i.e., foot binding, unhealthy make up, long hair, overly sexualized dresses, high heel, modern breast enhancement and the persistent association drawn between machine produced commodities and the fetishized female sexual body? How could this class stratified and commodity defined liberation ever address the need for race and social reconstruction? Given the fact that matriarchal stage of development preceded primitive accumulation and patriarchy, then not only were females present in society from the time of our human origins, women were actively sexually selecting for specific qualities in male partners. These are the conditions for thinking in 1966. It makes sense of the fact that a Maoist attack on the commodified female “look” was actually a coherent position. Jiang Qing’s forces were showing how the truth of women is violated in bourgeois society.

Theories of sexuality and sociality lie at center in both bourgeois sociology and the Marxian line of thinking about human origins and social relations of production. That is why Jiang Qing’s anti-Liunist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist women’s liberation theory made logical sense to people in the moment. Jiang Qing’s logic and her attack on Wang Guangmei make sense. One of the book’s basic arguments is that the Chinese Communist commitment to theories of patriarchy in evolutionary socialism means Mao theory has from the beginning situated sexual differentiation at the heart of revolutionary theory and practice. Theoretically, social reproduction, social relations of production, commodification of labor power are impossible to theorize in the absence of sexual evolution. Along with U.S., Japanese, German schools of humanist social theory, women like He Yin Zhen and men like Qu Qiubai and Li Da were forging a theory rooted in anarchist and Marxism, sexological theories they argued through Chinese material conditions.⁵

At the risk of sounding like an idiot, I want to take Jiang Qing even more seriously. Clarifying her political skills or tracking her accomplishments is not something I could do, but I still think it is important unwritten history. Possibly Jiang Qing had strategic gifts and was a member in good standing of the Gang of Four. Her Thought may not have been codified but she was too important and central to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to ignore. Gu Yizhong is among the first to take seriously what Jiang Qing wrote about and how she expressed intellectual positions. Gu makes clear that she expressed her vision in writing largely as a cultural critic and a cultural revolutionary in model opera.⁶ I did not push far enough. After I got my copy of Jiang Qing’s *Selected Works*, surreptitiously at the time since they had not yet appeared online, I just read the articles. Now I’m putting my money on aesthetics. Her terrain was culture. Gu’s, like Peter Button’s work on the socialist realist sublime in literature, approaches political aesthetics respectfully understanding that people labored over critique and theory and their work communicated truths, which readers and combatants took seriously.⁷ But for me the problem was fundamentally philosophical and political. If Marxist theory originates in the realization of social evolutionary sexuality, then Marxism is addressing women’s liberation from past constraints and bourgeois values. In the broad arc, in relation to the commodity form, future solutions to these questions are

going to be uncovered at conscious and no doubt unconscious levels, including the fantastic chimeras compiled in commercial ad ephemera.⁸ A final point: it seems to me that taking Jiang Qing seriously we can also take seriously the unfinished business of revolutionary feminism.

NOTES

¹ Gu Yizhong, “The Myth of Voluntary Death: The Representation of Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the Maoist Films (1949-1976)” (Ph.D Dissertation, University of Washington, 2017). For a different take on Jiang Qing, see Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State. A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), chapter 7.

² Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis, Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

³ Antonia Finnane, “Looking for the Jiang Qing Dress: Some Preliminary Findings,” *Fashion Theory* 9:1 (2005), 3-22. See also Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁴ Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

⁵ On He-Yin Zhen, see *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, eds. Lydia Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶ Gu Yizhong, “The Myth of Voluntary Death.”

⁷ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity* (Brill, 2009).

⁸ For the hilarious connection between advertisers and Freud, see Lisa Held, “Psychoanalysis shapes consumer culture: Or how Sigmund Freud, his nephew and a box of cigars forever changed American marketing,” <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/12/consumer.aspx>. Accessed September 4, 2017. Also see the famous reference in Freud’s to “Kontuszówka” brand Polish liquor and other ads that appeared as repressed materials in analysis and dreamscapes. See also Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (Picador, 2002) and the documentary by Adam Curtis, *The Century of the Self* (BBC, 2002).