

## What Do You Do with Cultural “Propaganda” of the Mao Era?

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Cultural texts from the Mao era, if taken seriously at all, have generally been seen through a purely political lens.

Mao era posters, Cultural Revolution model theater, the fiction of Hao Ran 浩然, revolutionary history films, etc. were nothing more than direct expressions of Maoist revolutionary politics or windows into socialist China. In more recent years, however, scholars have begun to look at these cultural texts more on their own terms (fig. 1). Xiaomei Chen (2002), Barbara Mittler (2012), Richard King (2013), Krista Van Fleit Hang (2013), Nicolai Volland (2017), Rosemary Roberts (2010), Laikwan Pang (2017), among others, have argued against conventional views of the Mao era—and of the Cultural Revolution in particular—as a cultural wasteland or as a cultural terrain consisting of nothing but formulaic texts whose content and style were dictated from above for purely political reasons. None of these scholars deny the political agenda driving these texts, but they seek to broaden the ways we look at them and to understand their place in the culture and society of Maoist China. Barbara Mittler, for instance, presents a view of the Cultural Revolution that belies the “wasteland” stereotype, which was forged as part of the post-Mao ideological landscape: it was a period of fervid cultural creativity; the Western influence never disappeared (e.g., music); traditional culture endured (e.g., Peking opera); and people were relatively free to read what they could get their hands on.

She writes: “Many propaganda campaigns . . . ended up not depriving but enriching people’s lived experience by offering access to new forms of art and knowledge” (Mittler 2012: 15). In a similar vein, Laikwan Pang (2017: 1) has written that the Cultural Revolution “offered a diversity of cultural experience and an obscure sense of freedom.” For her part, Van Fleit Hang (2013: 8-12) emphasizes the “experimentation” and “agency” of the writers of the early Maoist period who “negotiate[d] state ideology,” and Volland (2017) paints a picture of writers actively engaged in drawing from and

participating in a “socialist cosmopolitanism.”

Central to earlier depictions of Mao era culture was the term “propaganda”? In English, of course, the term propaganda has very negative connotations, although as Van Fleit Hang (2013: 10) points out that wasn’t always the case. In China, *xuanchuan* (宣传) is viewed rather more benignly, in part because there is a long tradition dating way back to the *Book of Songs* (诗经) of using cultural texts to influence people and their ethical behavior. Looking at socialist propaganda with this tradition in mind makes the Mao era look less anomalous and less nefarious. Note, however, that the Chinese government is conscious of the negative nuance of the English term “propaganda” and recently changed the official translation of *Xuanchuan bu* 宣传部 (Propaganda Department) to “Publicity Department.” The new scholarship on the Mao era culture tends to reject use of the term propaganda and instead treats Mao era texts as literature, or drama, or film, or art.

In the spring semester of 2018, I taught a graduate course on socialist and postsocialist literature in China. The first part of the course covered socialist literature—from the rise of leftist literature in the 1920s and 1930s to the Cultural Revolution—and the second on post-Mao literature. The structure of the course was meant to emphasize that socialist and postsocialist literature in China can only be understood in relation to each other. In the socialist section of the course, we read examples both of scholarly works about socialist culture and of exemplary primary texts, including short stories by Li Zhun 李准 and Hua Tong 华彤, excerpts from the full-length novels *Song of Youth* (青春之歌) and *Red Crag* (红岩) (fig. 2), and Cultural Revolution model drama. I tried to draw the student’s attention to different ways of looking at literature that might commonly be categorized as “propaganda.” I encouraged them to read texts in ways that avoid the binary of conformity/resistance—that is, to show how a text can both conform to formulaic political prescriptions and offer openings for alternative readings, or at least readings that expand the meanings of the text beyond the narrowly political.

One of the texts we discussed was *Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军; henceforth *Red Detachment*), one of the famous “model dramas” of the Cultural Revolution. I often use this text in undergraduate classes because, as a wordless ballet, it is much more accessible than the model operas, with

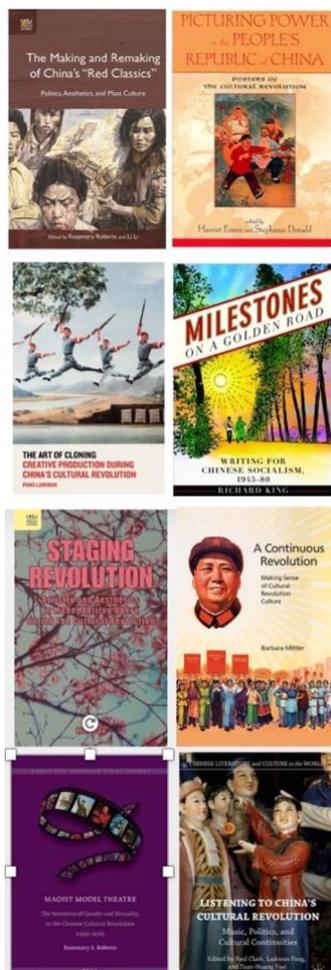


Fig. 1: Recent publications on Mao era culture.



Fig. 2: Cover of *Red Crag* (红岩) including short stories by Li Zhun (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian, 2004)

their arias and recitatives.<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of an eponymous film by Xie Jin 谢晋,<sup>2</sup> *Red Detachment* is the story of Wu Qinghua (吴清华), a bond servant in the household of the evil landlord Nan Batian (南霸天), who owns a coconut plantation on Hainan Island. Qinghua is abused by Nan and his henchmen (fig. 3). She manages to escape, but is beaten to near death, when she is found by a couple of Communist Party members who take her back to join the women's army detachment they lead. The detachment goes on a clandestine mission into Nan's compound. Unable to restrain her feelings of hatred, Qinghua disobeys orders and attacks Nan Batian, thus jeopardizing the mission and allowing Nan to escape. Qinghua is reprimanded and her gun taken away. Whereas she had up to this point always dressed in bright red

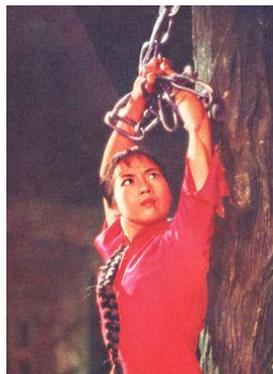


Fig. 3: Wu Qinghua chained to a tree at the beginning of *Red Detachment*. Source: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_45bb8ce70102wwme.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45bb8ce70102wwme.html)

shirt and trousers, her hair tied in a long braid, she now appears in a blue army uniform and her hair has been cut short. During a battle, Hong Changqing (洪常青), the troop commander, is captured by Nan and then burned at the base of a banyan tree in Nan's courtyard. On their final mission, Qinghua and the others soldiers attack the landlord's compound; she kills Nan, and in the rousing finale is given the job of replacing Hong to lead the women's detachment.

This ballet and all the other model dramas have been interpreted as pure embodiments of the radical Maoist ideology ascendant during the Cultural Revolution. Years ago, I wrote an essay analyzing the semiotic codes at play in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (智取威虎山), one of the model operas. My main argument in the essay is that the model drama functions like a "myth" and that it "avails itself of communicative codes to paint a reassuring and imposing picture of the Maoist ideology" (Denton 1987: 119). I drew out the political mythology of the opera in part by comparing it with *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (林海雪原, 1957), the novel on which it is based. (Kristine Harris (2010) does similar comparative work with *Red Detachment of Women* and Xie Jin's film.) In retrospect, I think the codes at play in model dramas are more complex and contradictory than I originally argued and that such politically charged texts should not be interpreted so narrowly. By reading the text itself against such interpretations, the students can see the inadequacy of interpretations to capture the complexities and ambiguities of even such apparently straightforward political works as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* or *Red Detachment*.

The crux of scholarly interpretations of *Red Detachment* has been the representation of the central female character, Wu Qinghua. Some scholars see her as desexualized and an "empty signifier" of the Maoist revolution.<sup>3</sup> In this reading, the patriarchal discourse of the revolution coopts the female image and uses it for its own purposes. Moreover, Qinghua's political "enlightenment"—her learning of the lesson that the

larger goals of the revolution supersede her personal desire for revenge—is arrived at only through the intervention of a male mentor, Hong Changqing. For other scholars, it is precisely in the desexualization that a kind of feminism emerges. "In a sense," writes Di Bai (2010: 201), "class struggle is a shelter that facilitates women's flight from their designated home and hearth. As a result, they are freed from their gendered obligations as daughters, wives, and mothers. They become heroes in the public arena where all social values reside. Thus, the model theatrical works present an idealized fantasy, a feminist utopia." Others, such as Rosemary Roberts (2006; 2010), find a latent sexuality in the cultural codes of this and other model dramas. Reading as she does against the grain, Roberts seeks to restore a fuller humanity to the female (and male) characters, thus making them less vacuous stereotypes for the propagation of a political message.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Roberts would see the sexual codes as the repressed rising up to subvert the drama's explicit intent, Bai Di would find feminist intent in that very repression. The fact that scholars disagree on how to understand the representation of women in this drama suggests a text that cannot be easily pigeonholed. In my teaching of this model drama, I emphasize these multiple readings so as to problematize the narrow political reading.

One of the most powerful scenes in the drama follows the successful siege of the compound and the killing of Nan Batian and his henchmen: the detachment pauses for a moment to commemorate the fallen hero Hong Changqing. Facing the banyan tree where Hong was burned to death, their backs turned to the audience, the soldiers bow their heads and pay respects to their martyred leader, the tune of the "Internationale" accompanying the solemn ceremony (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: The detachment memorializes the martyr Hong Changqing. Screen shot from film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHTPcs3IQPU>

This is a highly sacred moment in what is otherwise a secular political drama. The banyan tree (菩提树) is, of course, a religiously charged image in Buddhism—the Buddha is thought to have reached enlightenment under a banyan tree—and this cultural code invests in Hong's martyrdom a highly religious tone that, if not at odds with, then adds a hint of spiritual awakening to the drama's more explicit message of political awakening. The solemn ritual of remembering the fallen hero is a necessary step in Qinghua's assumption of the detachment's leadership. Such moments are cracks in the

drama's political façade for the student to open up and explore.

It should not be overlooked that this drama is in the ballet form. Given the iconoclastic and anti-Western tenor of the Cultural Revolution, the ballet form seems an odd choice, to say the least. What could be more bourgeois than ballet?<sup>5</sup> Although in its early formation in Europe, ballet was an artistic vehicle for male dancers and the expression of masculinity, with boys playing the female roles, by the nineteenth century, the ballerina as a feminine ideal came to dominate the ballet stage and ballet reinforced female gender norms of "lightness, grace, and ethereality" at a time of increasing commercialization (Karthas 2012: 963). How does that ideology of gender normativity play into the *Red Detachment*? And what happens when we juxtapose the balletic gender norm with the fact that Wu Qinghua is at the same time part of a long tradition in China of woman warriors (Hua Mulan 花木兰, Mu Guiying 穆桂英, etc.)? In terms of gender representation, then, we have at least two codes at play here: the femininity and grace of the Western ballet tradition and the woman warrior tradition in China. An interesting question to pose to students is: Does the ballet form undermine the woman warrior representation or vice versa?



Fig. 5: Hong Changqing and Wu Qinghua dance a *pas de deux* in Act 1. Screen shot from film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHTPc31QPU>

And how, moreover, do we interpret the choreographic interaction between Qinghua and Changqing in their long *pas de deux* in Act I (fig. 5)? Is this merely an expression of the class bond between the two, or is there a residue here from the earlier film version, in which the two have a love relationship? I encourage my students to ponder such questions, but to avoid either/or answers; instead, I want them to embrace the ambiguity and the multiple codes at play because it allows them to recognize that a cultural text, even a highly politicized one like *Red Detachment*, is not easily reducible to a single interpretation and takes on some of the complexity we associate with "serious" literature and culture, not propaganda.

One can approach *Red Detachment* from other perspectives as well. A reader reception approach would look not so much at the text itself and the messages it conveys, but the way actual spectators responded to it. One source of such "contemporary" readings is autobiographies and memoirs. In one such memoir, Xiaomei Chen (1999: 111) recalls the following: "My response to [my mother's] feminine body was

not unlike the ecstatic excitement I felt when, as a sixteen-year-old in the Northeastern Wilderness, I received from her the birthday gift of a photo album with stills from the revolutionary model ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. I was especially struck by a photo . . . that displayed the elegant and shapely body of Wu Qinghua . . . whose long, straight legs and graceful body had resisted a vicious, oppressive landlord." In this contemporary reception, Chen's attention to the aesthetics and sexuality of the female body seems to bump up somewhat uncomfortably with the drama's more sublime political messages and is interwoven with her very personal relations with her mother.

In her Cultural Revolution memoir *Red Azalea*, Anchee Min recalls the following conversation with her "Supervisor":

He asked again whether I liked the model operas. I replied again, How could anyone not like them? How could anyone dare not like something like that? He said, Can you explain? I said he would be bored with my answer. He said he preferred a personal one. He said that he himself was not satisfied with the operas. He said that he craved revolutionary passion and many of the operas lacked it. I said that I agreed with him and said that I would be interested in the private lives of the characters. I said that it was strange to me that the opera protagonists had no private lives. He said, You mean romance? I said, I didn't mean to say it, but yes, perhaps, that was it, all right, then, that is it" (Min 1994: 237-38).

Min's response to the model dramas is more subversive than Chen's, expressing a skepticism about cultural forms that presented the human mind "so free of deep emotions" (237). One wonders, given the Chinese associations of the operatic theatre with cross-dressing and homosexuality, if any contemporary spectators found homoeroticism in the same-sex bonding among "comrades" in the model theatre (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Male bonding in *Raid on White Tiger Regiment* (奇袭白虎团). Source: <https://photographyofchina.com/blog/zhang-yaxin>.

One can also situate Cultural Revolution texts in the context of their postsocialist afterlife, when they get invested with a nostalgic and commercial value. One example is the

Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Anren, Sichuan, a museum complex with multiple museums dedicated to the Cultural Revolution (Denton 2019). One of the museums that is part of the Jianchuan compound is devoted to Cultural Revolution porcelain, including numerous figurines of characters from the model dramas (fig. 7). I sometimes give students the assignment of exploring the museum website as a way of getting them to think about the relationship between the postsocialist, neoliberal present and the socialist past. The case of the Jianchuan Museum shows that, contrary to what we read in the Western media, there is space for attention to the Cultural Revolution in China today. But what kinds of representations fill that space?



Fig. 7: Porcelain figurines of characters from Cultural Revolution model dramas. Photo by the author.

Another pertinent example is the Red Detachment of Women Memorial Park in the province of Hainan, where the historical events related in *Red Detachment* took place in the 1930s (fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Front gate of the Red Detachment of Women Memorial Park, Hainan. Source: <https://touch.travel.qunar.com/comment/5791193>

A cross between a serious memorial site and a theme park, it capitalizes on the postsocialist nostalgia for the Maoist past. Students can take a virtual tour<sup>6</sup> of the site and explore its multilayered historical memory—that is, memory of the historical red detachment of women is filtered through Xie Jin’s filmic representation (one display hall screens his film), the Cultural Revolution ballet drama (an iconic shot of Qinghua *en pointe* graces the entranceway), and contemporary commercial and tourist culture. The ballet is still performed, including a 2015 iteration at the Lincoln Center, as part of the National Ballet of China repertoire.<sup>7</sup>

After *White-Haired Girl*, another well-known model drama, was revived in a 1995 production, two reporters from the *Beijing Youth Daily* (北京青年报) wrote a story about young people’s reactions to the drama. They quote one youth as saying that it is “right and proper” for Yang Bailao 杨白劳—who owes rent to the evil landlord, Huang Shiren 黄世仁, and has to give up his daughter Xi’er 喜儿—to have to pay his debts (Huang and Wang 1996). In 2009, another kerfuffle broke out in the Chinese media when Xiong Yuanyi 熊元义, editor of *Wenyi bao*, gave a talk at a university in Wuhan. In the course of the talk, Xiong mentioned the then-current fad among post-90s female college students to express their willingness to marry Huang Shiren. One student stood up and allegedly said: “If Huang Shiren were alive today, he is definitely somebody with excellent family conditions. He may also have handsome looks combined with elegance and refined taste. If he has the money as well, why not marry him? Even if he is a bit older, it does not matter.”<sup>8</sup> From a Maoist perspective, these youthful reactions to the model dramas are blasphemy; from the perspective of the post-90s generation, they are both a manifestation of their scorn for the tired tropes of Mao-era propaganda and of their indoctrination into a new ideology of neoliberalism. Again, the model dramas have a fascinating afterlife that keeps offering up rich material for class discussion.

Of course, none of the possible readings of *Red Detachment*, or Mao era culture more generally, deny the manifest political messages. But they do suggest that these texts were part of a vibrant culture that people enjoyed, learned from, actively engaged with, and maybe even subverted. The complexity of *Red Detachment of Women* shows us that Mao-era texts should not be corralled into tidy manifestations of Maoist ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1971 filmed version of the ballet can be seen in its entirety on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHTPcs3IQPU>

<sup>2</sup> The 1961 film can be seen in its entirety on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOPM9d18e9o>

<sup>3</sup> Although her focus is on the character Xi'er in the model ballet *The White-Haired Girl*, Yue Meng's comments are applicable to Wu Qinghua as well. Meng (1993: 122) concludes: "But the meaning each event communicates is about class struggle; and most importantly, meaning is *exclusively* about class struggle. The story, the drama, unfolds only at the political and public levels. The only code at work is the political code."

<sup>4</sup> Roberts writes (2006: 156): "The complexities of the manifestation of gender and sexuality in *yangbanxi* are perhaps best encapsulated in the contradictory figure of Wu Qinghua... Her red suit marks her as progressive and revolutionary, but simultaneously associates her with traditional femininity and the budding sexuality of a new bride. Her transformation to soldier costume is equally ambiguous. With its body-hugging tailoring and bared thighs, the stylized army uniform sexualizes and objectifies her. At the same time, the strength and health of the body it displays manifest her readiness to contribute to the project of revolution and modernization in roles unimaginable to women of the past."

<sup>5</sup> Ballet was appropriated by the Soviet Union for political uses and was thus a model for China (Mullis 2017: 54). But the use of ballet is also one of the many "contradictions" in the culture of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>6</sup> You can take a virtual tour of the site at: <http://36.101.208.227/>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.lincolncenter.org/video/572cb763a523e79b71171af4>

<sup>8</sup> Reported in the blog EastSouthWestNorth: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20091016\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20091016_1.htm)