

## DESIRES, BODILY RHETORIC AND MELODRAMATIC IMAGINATION: WOMEN IN THE MAKING OF REVOLUTIONARY MYTH IN THREE CHINESE FILMS OF THE SEVENTEEN YEARS\*

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### Introduction: Revolutionary Myth Making

Historian Margaret MacMillan argues that in our secular age of the nation-state, history has replaced religion as a means of “setting moral standards and transmitting values.” “History with a capital *H* is being called in to fill the void. It restores a sense not necessarily of a divine being but of something above and beyond human beings. It is our authority: it can vindicate us and judge us, and damn those who oppose us.”

<sup>1</sup> This conviction of the centrality of history in sustaining a modern state illuminates our understanding of that practice massively engaged in via the state-sanctioned main ideology after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Spanning the years from 1949-1966 and commonly referred to in contemporary Chinese history as The Seventeen Years, this nationwide practice of constructing revolutionary history mobilized the popular memory of the nation’s past largely for the purpose of legitimizing and securing the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, or Party) in mainland China.

Film as a mass medium occupies a prominent position in this nationwide myth-making practice in the Seventeen Years. Films of the period, as Dai Jinhua outlines, are generally based on two thematic categories: those that elaborate the revolutionary history and those that elevate revolutionary heroes.<sup>2</sup> Since the CCP considers itself to rule “on the basis of [its] appropriation of the Marxist teleological view of history as a dialectic movement toward Communism through class struggle,”<sup>3</sup> the first category of revolutionary literary works primarily supplies “proof of the historical predictability of the ultimate victory of Communism” primarily through telling about battles against “Guomindang reactionaries” and “Japanese imperialists” and by making those stories

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1 Margaret MacMillan. *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History*, New York: The Modern Library, 2008, p.20.

2 See Dai Jinhua’s “*Qingchun zhi ge: lishi shiyu zhong de chongdu*” (“*The Song of Youth: a re-read from a historical perspective*”) in Tang Xiaobin ed. *Zai jiedu (Re-interpretation)*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.147-48.

3 See Ma Ning’s “Symbolic representation and symbolic violence: Chinese family melodrama of the early 1980s” in Wimal Dissanayake ed. *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.31.

believable from that point of view.<sup>4</sup> The narrative structures of these war stories, mostly the legends of the famous battles fought and won by the communist armies, (usually comprised of the phases of combat, setback, life loss but, at last, triumph) signify “a single, multi-segmented episode in the saga of the broader revolutionary struggle”<sup>5</sup> toward the teleological goal of progressive history.

The second category further validates the alleged moral goal of the communist revolution, that is, “to emancipate” and “to enlighten” the politically repressed and economically exploited, namely, the proletarians or the People. This goal is achieved by revolutionary heroes who devote themselves to achieve the mission of liberation, despite hardships, sacrifice of family life and personal happiness, or, even at the cost of their own lives. Most of the “heroes” in this category of filmic presentations are, interestingly, female, and they fall into two types depending on their political maturity: the veteran revolutionaries and the revolutionaries-in-becoming. Zhao Yiman, the female military commissar of a regiment of the Northeast Anti-Japanese Alliance is the central character of a 1950 feature film that bears her name; Party secretary Wang Yumei in the 1958 production *Daughters of the Party* (*Dang de nüer*), and, Gao Shan, a woman-disguised-as-man platoon leader in *Youth in the Flames of War* (*Zhanhuo zhong de qingchun*), also produced in 1958, make up the gallery of over-determined, experienced revolutionary heroines or martyrs. The other heroines in this group are initially victims of the repressive social classes, but they eventually “come of age” via identifying themselves with and devoting themselves to the revolutionary cause. Such characters include Hu Xiuzhi in *Daughters of China* (*Zhonghua ernü*, 1949), Lin Daojing in *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge*, 1959), and Wu Qionghua in *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*, 1960). “*Daughters of China*” narrates the story of eight women, including protagonist Hu Xiuzhi, a newly enlisted young widow, who are fighting in the Anti-Japanese Alliance in the occupied Northeast, and ultimately make the choice to drown rather than be captured by the surrounding enemy. *The Song of Youth* tells how Lin Daojing, a despairing young girl student and a victim of old style marriage, politically matures and becomes a Communist Party member with the inspiration of veteran revolutionaries Lu Jiachuan and Jiang Hua, whom she encounters in the different stages of her journey to becoming a revolutionary. *Red Detachment of Women* is an engrossing depiction of how a slave girl, Wu Qionghua, becomes a revolutionary soldier under the tutelage of Party Secretary Hong Changqing, her savior and mentor.

This study will critically investigate these three films that feature victim-turned-revolutionary heroines. One of the reasons that inspire this investigation is that these three films enjoyed the most remarkable popularity among audiences with varied

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4 See Dai Jinhua’s “*Qingchun zhi ge: lishi shiyu zhong de chongdu*” (“*The Song of Youth: a re-read from a historical perspective*”) in Tang Xiaobin ed. *Zai jiedu (Re-interpretation)*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.148.

5 See Robert Hegel’s “Making the past serve the present in fiction and drama: from the Yan’an Forum to the Cultural Revolution” in Bonnie McDougall ed. *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p.217.

social interests and educational backgrounds during The Seventeen Years and beyond: *Daughters of China*, the earliest film made in Mao's China, not only enjoyed long box-office runs and was one of the earliest films to be selected for international film festivals, but has also inspired paintings and theatrical works in the post-Mao era.<sup>6</sup> The publication of *The Song of Youth* was a sensational event. From the end of 1958 to early 1960, in just over a year, 1,700,000 copies were published, and it was adapted into a major motion picture in 1960.<sup>7</sup> *The Red Detachment of Women* won the Best Film, Best Director and Best Actress categories of the very first *One Hundred Flowers* award—the only film award at the time and solely determined by the votes of viewers.

How could these films about coming-of-age heroines on the one hand exhibit a high standard of “revolutionary purity” in the state-sanctioned revolutionary mythmaking, and, on the other hand, enjoy the highest popularity among film viewers of various kinds? The intriguing double play of official propaganda and popular needs enacted in these films compels us to look into the complicit relationships between texts and readership, communist ideology and folk tradition in the long pre-communist era, and, in particular, gender as both a political category and a semiotic signifier in representations. What kinds of motifs, character traits and modes of representation are developed and manipulated in these films to evoke the multifarious imaginations of the viewers as they were toiling to reconfigure their lived experience in the past and the living reality under a new, monolithic political system?

The multi-dimensional and complex process of creating a revolutionary myth through telling and envisaging stories of victim-turned-revolutionary-heroine, I argue, is largely made possible by “the melodramatic imagination,” to borrow a concept that was initially proposed by Peter Brooks and widely applied to literary and film studies.<sup>8</sup> For many critics, melodrama is a modern form arising out of a particular historical conjuncture “where traditional imperatives of truth and morality had been violently questioned and yet in which there was still a need to forge some semblance of truth and morality.”<sup>9</sup> Melodrama is a convergence of psychoanalysis, “conceiving psychic conflict in melodramatic terms and acting out the recognition of the repressed, often with and

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6 Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1972, p.183.

7 Joe Huang, *Heroes and Villains in Communist China: The Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life*, London: C. Hurst & Company, 1973, p.72

8 In the field of Chinese film studies Nick Browne was probably the earliest critic to notice that though socialist realism was promoted as a principle method in literature and film production during the Seventeen Years, many influential works actually adopted melodramatic modes of creation. See his “Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama” in Nick Browne, Paul Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau eds. *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 40-54.

9 Linda Williams further develops Peter Brooks’ theorization of melodrama, highlighting its theatrical function as a quest for a hidden moral legibility. See her “Melodrama Revised” in Browne ed. *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 51.

on the body.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the body that offers a key emblem of that convergence is typically “a woman’s body, and indeed a victimized woman’s body, on which desire has inscribed an impossible history, a story of desire in an impasse.”<sup>11</sup> In view of melodrama as a basic mode of storytelling and its convergence with bodily desire to make sense of Chinese revolutionary experience, this study explores how the victimized female body as a site “for the inscription of highly emotional messages that cannot be written elsewhere” is enacted through inter-play with other melodramatic rhetorical mechanisms, such as hyperbolic expressions, binary thematic arrangement, dark plottings, and the polarization of good and evil. It is the “melodramatic imagination” that makes the hybrid forging of varied disparate elements, such as communist politics and universal eros, revolutionary ideologies and traditional morality, collective social ideals and personal sexual desire, operative and natural, thus rendering the hard-core, one-dimensional revolutionary myth as believable, non-ideologically “given” and, ultimately, consumable.

### Desire *en Impasse* and the Inevitability of Revolution

By extending an argument initially made by Max Webber with respect to the Chinese social context, critic Wang Hui notes that, “politics is first and foremost made of power relations of ‘order and service’... Though any form of political rule contains a certain level of voluntary obedience, this alone is not sufficient for ruling in a real sense. Ruling *de facto* must also require a ‘belief in the legitimacy’ of the ruling class or party.”<sup>12</sup> What is required for this identity-affirming revolutionary history making is “not compliance but a willingness to comply, not just control but a belief in the legitimacy of that control.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, to make the imagined revolutionary myth effective, nothing is probably more crucial than to articulate why revolution is required despite the violence, destruction, and loss of life it always brings along. What are the political, economic or moral urgencies that necessitated the Chinese revolution? What motivated the people to join the revolution? These are the key answers the producers of these films strive to provide via deployment of the stories of the protagonists.

In Chinese revolutionary discourse, emancipation of the repressed is presented as the exclusive goal, occupying a central place in revolutionary literature. It is often evoked by rebellion, a time-honored theme repeatedly appearing in the literature of the pre-communist era. For the revolutionary writers, the sole reason that makes Chinese revolution urgent and necessary is “the official compels; thus the people rebel (*guan bi*

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10 Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, p.22

11 *Ibid.*

12 See Wang Hui “Zhengzhi yu daode jiqi zhihuan de mimi: Xie Jin dianying fengxi (On politics, moral codes and the secrets of the switches in their positions: an analysis on Xie Jin’s films), in *Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui* (The Association of Chinese Film Makers) ed. *Lun Xie Jin dian ying* (On Xie Jin’s Films), Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1990, p. 178.

13 Robert Chi “The Red Detachment of Women: Resenting, Regendering, Remembering” in Chris Berry ed. *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, London: British Film Institute, 2003, p.155.

*min fan*)." This truism that people revolt only when they are forced by the repressive authorities into an impasse encapsulates "parallels in world view between past and present," as Robert Hegel rightly remarks, and this has long been a popular theme in Chinese traditional literature in various forms, including folk entertainments, regional dramas, vernacular fiction of the Ming and Qing dynasties and so on. At least in theory, "both traditional and revolutionary writers shared the social values of their respective readers and sought to confirm or to exemplify, rather than to impart, these values to them."<sup>14</sup> Mao, as one of the most important underwriters of this revolutionary discourse, serves as an excellent example of utilizing stories from popular folk culture to make the case for revolution. It is no secret that his favorite Chinese novel was *Water Margin* or *All Men are Brothers* (*Shuihu zhuan*), a Chinese Robin Hood saga about how one hundred and eight "good men" were "driven to join the rebels on Mt. Liang (*bi shang Liang shan*) by oppressive authorities of various kinds."<sup>15</sup> Another all-time favorite regional drama of Mao was *The Legend of the White Serpent* (*Bai she zhuan*), a mythic story about a serpent-woman's romance with a human being. This love is forbidden and punishable by the authorities because it crosses between the realms of the human and the demonic. The serpent-woman is eventually subdued by the spells of the Buddhist monk Fahai, and suppressed under a pagoda beside West Lake in Hangzhou. Reportedly, once, at a performance of this drama, on watching the scene in which White Serpent is buried under the pagoda, Mao was so emotionally charged that he couldn't help but shout out "How can it be that people will not rebel! How can it be there are no revolutions!"<sup>16</sup> This anecdote illuminates the sentiment of Mao seeing himself as a chosen leader of the Chinese revolution who has a historical mandate from the repressed people to liberate them. The establishment of the rationale for the communist revolution as a natural and inevitable result of *guan bi*- being driven by the ferocious authorities, be it the Japanese invaders or ruthless landlords and Guomindang reactionaries, is, therefore, the first and foremost task in creating the sublime discourse of Maoist revolutions.

As for the rebels in folk history, the relentless coercion of the inhuman forces that our fictional Maoist protagonists encountered pre-determined their fate of becoming revolutionary heroines. *Daughters of China*, sets up protocols and prototypes for the burgeoning revolutionary film industry in many ways, including an engrossing melodramatic presentation of why the protagonist has to rebel and join the revolution. The opening scene of the film is set on a pitch-dark night when the occupying Japanese army suddenly appear and burn down the small village in which the female protagonist

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14 See Robert Hegel's "Making the past serve the present in fiction and drama: from the Yan'an Forum to the Cultural Revolution" in Bonnie McDougall ed. *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p.202.

15 After seeing the Peking opera *Driven Up Mt. Liang*, a drama adopted from *Water Margin*, performed by Yan'an Drama Trope, Mao highly commended it as a watershed in the portrayal of history because it gave prominent social place to the people and people who dared to rebel.

16 See Quan Yanchi's *Zouxia shentan de Mao Zedong* (*Mao Zedong who had walked down the altar*). Beijing: Zhongwai wenhua chuban gongsi, 1989, pp.47-49.

Xiuzhi lives. As the villagers are escaping amid the horrifying scene of spreading fires, crying children, wailing old people, and gunfire, the desperate but helpless Xiuzhi can only hold tightly onto her sick, bedridden husband who is not able to walk. Not long afterwards, the Japanese soldiers rush in, grappling Xiuzhi from her husband's arms and setting fire to the shabby hut. Just at the moment when Xiuzhi is at bay before a would-be Japanese rapist, the army of the Anti-Japanese Alliance comes to the rescue. Despite its unsophisticated plot line and crude characterization, this film has been recognized by Western critics to be "unusually expressive, and the tragic climax is as cathartic as it should be,"<sup>17</sup> thanks to director Ling Zifeng's skillful use of the cinematic devices of melodrama such as night shooting, low-key lighting, sharp contrast of black and white, and the use of off-screen sounds of gun fire, shouts and cries to create the impression of a grotesque living hell under the Japanese occupancy. The combination of these technical devices effectively evokes a sense of urgency to fight against the forces of evil.

Xie Jin's *Red Detachment of Women*, shot almost ten years later, is a much more sophisticated piece of melodramatic work. The opening scene at the Guomindang-controlled Coconut Village in which the disguised communist representative Hong Changqing encounters the slave girl Wu Qionghua, is widely regarded as one of the most effective visual explications of 'why people have to rebel,' providing a melodramatic presentation in the service of validating a much-needed revolution in the victim-heroine's home village.<sup>18</sup> Coconut Village is presented as an inferno, controlled by dark forces, where the innocent are prosecuted and tortured in a dark dungeon. The sordid and abusive atmosphere is evoked by cinematic techniques similar to those employed in *Daughters of China*, such as night shooting, low-key lighting, off-screen sounds of flogging, and close-ups of female slaves being hung by their hands. It is against this background that Qionghua, who has attempted to escape but has fallen into "evil hands" once again, is first introduced to the audience. Captive and whipped, Qionghua is unyielding, shouting "I'll run again, as long as I've not been beaten to death!" Violent plotting, murky settings and suffering female victims, typically characteristic of melodrama, all contribute to building the revolutionary discourse of social repression, a discourse of ever-increasing, ruthless class repression, which could only be resolved by the immediate and inevitable revolution.

17 See Jay Leyda's *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1972, p.183.

18 There has been published a number of important essays on Xie Jin's films in 1980s and how do melodramatic modes help to shape his film in post-Mao era, but few have noticed that his earliest experiment in melodrama actually starts with shooting *The Red Detachment of Women*. Though "the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" is an artistic standard set up for all the literary works to follow at the time, *The Red Detachment of Women* is, as a matter of fact, a revolutionary melodrama. Paul Pickowicz points out that "although he is normally discussed within the framework of filmmaking in the socialist People's Republic, Xie received his basic training in stagecraft and filmmaking in the Republic forties." See Pickowicz's "Melodramatic Presentation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema" in Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang eds. *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 313.

*The Song of Youth* also starts with a highly inflated scene that illustrates the female protagonist Lin Daojing in despair: on a pitch-dark, windy night, she throws herself into the raging sea, then is miraculously rescued by an unknown secret admirer. This quintessentially melodramatic arrangement of suicide has dual purposes: to unfold the story and to impose a moral contingency upon viewers by asking: who compels this innocent girl to terminate her young life? We later know that the villains are her repressive landlord father and step-mother who had hounded Daojing's peasant birth-mother to death and who are driving Daojing to the end of her tether. This is a dramatic case of class struggle within the family instead of in society.

The beginning of each of these three films, though varied in their representations, straightforwardly puts into the foreground the imperative of the emancipation of the repressed and the inevitability of revolution. Yet, compared with other revolutionary stories of class struggles and social repression, these stories about young female protagonists seem to specially tickle the beholder's imagination and thus make the realization of social revolution even more urgent. This urgency is effectively brought to the fore by melodramatic imaginings: the sadistic threats of the fictional villains to the virginity, chastity, or bodily integrity of female protagonists. The virtuous wife Xiuzhi is rescued just at the moment when she is about to be violated by foreign intruders; Qionghua is liberated by the communist figure when she was about to be sold to serve as a sex slave. Similarly, the reason that impelled Daojing to attempt to end her life was not the never-ending conflicts with her landlord father, but that she had been sold by her vicious step-mother to be the concubine of Hu Meng'an, the evil department head at the Guomindang Peking municipal headquarters. Shuqin Cui has observed that the master narrative of revolution often "ensures that the female body presents the collective identity of an oppressed social class and precludes woman from representing her body as individual and sexual."<sup>19</sup> Here the semiotic linkage of women's bodily integrity and the pending threats against it is an effective melodramatic strategy, enacted by and for deep-seated, twisted patriarchal anxieties about female chastity originating in Confucian culture and reflected in the perverse male libidinal impulses expressed in popular literary culture. Here, the female body as a political category and as a semiotic category interplay in a manner that mutually subvert each other in one respect, and, mutually enhance each other in another.

The need for revolution demonstrated in these films accentuates and polarizes gender roles with moral meanings reversed from those that we commonly detect in popular melodramas: the villains, often powerful males, are not only politically aggressive and morally bad, but also sexually abusive, thus the spectator could readily identify them as both class enemies and sexual predators; whereas victims, always women, are virtuous and virgin-like, but socially mistreated and sexually abused. This rhetoric is evidently a political configuration of gender and classes in Chinese revolutionary discourse, because it illustrates that only those with power, such as oppressors, exploiters and foreign invaders would view things from a gendered perspective, viewing women

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19 See Shuqin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003, p.81



as sordid objects of their sexual desire and violence; and this political discourse was particularly audible during the periods of National Revolution and Wars of Resistance, as Dai Jinhua observes.<sup>20</sup> On these occasions, the representation of the revolutionary mission of liberation could hardly be effectively and affectively accomplished without the evocation of popular moral sentiments and melodramatic emotionalism.

The opening scenes of these three films are in no sense full-scale melodramas per se, but quintessential melodramatic devices. Different from full-length melodramas in which melodramatic devices gradually help to develop the story toward tragic denouements; the melodramatic devices deployed in these three films, while only briefly displayed with full intensity at the very beginning, drive the realization of potential tragic denouements in the early stages of these stories. The three women's tragic experiences are fundamentally identical in content: the "old society" under the rule of the villains, be it reactionary Guomindang, oppressive landlords, or ruthless Japanese imperialism, is a living hell for the Chinese people, represented by young Chinese women, who were repressed at the very bottom of the patriarchal society. It is this experience that brings intellectual enlightenment and bodily emancipation to the victim-heroines and thus motivates them to start their odysseys of becoming revolutionary heroines.

### Emotionalism and Hyperbolic "Speaking Bitterness"

One of the striking features of "the melodramatic imagination" is its high emotional charge. Emotionalism is not only expressed through hyperbolic expressions and extravagant description, but, more importantly, is identified with morality. As Brooks remarks, "ethical imperatives in the post-sacred universe have been sentimentalized, have come to be identified with emotional states and psychic relationships, so that the expression of emotion and moral integers is indistinguishable."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, melodrama's central effort to articulate moral values is largely realized by the suffering protagonist's emotional self-enunciation of their moral judgments of the world and, then, by hyperbolic expressions that bring along "the rhetorical breaking-through of repression." Hence, "melodramatic imagination" fuses sentiment and morality, because "morality is ultimately in the nature of affect, and strong emotion is in the realm of morality: for good and evil are moral feelings." The revolutionary film strives to offer its audience not only the spectacular revolutionary battles, but also articulation of the most basic moral sentiments."<sup>22</sup>

Arousing mass sympathy and tactfully deploying it for the support of the communist revolution was crucial in Mao's evolution as the leader of the CCP. As André Malraux records in one of his recollections about a conversation that he had with Mao, Mao believed "Everything arose out of a specific situation: we organized the peasant revolt,

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20 Dai Jinhua. *Shedu zhi zhou: xin shiqi Zhongguo nuxing xiezuo yu nuxing wenhua* (*A ferry: women's writings and women's culture in the new era*), p.6.

21 Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, p.42.

22 *Ibid.*, p.54.



we did not instigate it. Revolution is a drama of passion; we did not win the people over by appealing to reason, but by developing hope, trust and fraternity.”<sup>23</sup> To enact this “drama of passion,” in the early days of revolutionary organization the Communist Party honed and popularized a unique genre, named *suku*, which literally means “speaking bitterness.” It is by acknowledging its psychological effects and narrative qualities charged with emotion that one can begin to “grasp its powerful effectiveness and to draw out the similarities from what otherwise seems like disparate styles of political speech.”<sup>24</sup> *Suku*, so to speak, is the CCP’s unique version of melodrama that is geared to make sense of revolutionary experience and to forge a proletarian morality to represent. As part of this mass campaign against the “old society,” the “coming of age” stories of female protagonists’ presented in the three films under examination all start with an emotionally charged performance of “speaking bitterness.”

“Speaking bitterness” as a narrative, a plot, and a motif for expressing direct, strongly charged emotions is not wholly a Maoist literary invention; other forms can be found in many forms of traditional folk literature. The revolutionary culture, as Robert Hegel observes, attempted to “make the past serve the present,” by utilizing forms of traditional literature, such as “popular entertainments, theatricals (oral works), adventure fiction in simple classical prose, etc.”<sup>25</sup> The employment of the plot of “speaking bitterness” in narrating a story can be traced back to the first narrative poem *Kongque dongnan fei* (“Peacock Flying Southeast”) in the Nan-Bei Dynasty (386-589), which starts with the heroine Liu Lanzhi airing a grievance about the mistreatment she received from her mother-in-law while her husband Jiao Zhongqing was away on official service. Lanzhi’s tearful telling of the bitter life she had endured sets up the dramatic conflict between Zhongqing and his cold-hearted mother and results in the tragic double suicides of Langzhi and Zhongqing to show their rebellion against the evil mother figure. Another even more widely known example of “speaking bitterness” occurs in a set of popular regional dramas, with the title *The case of beheading Chen Shimei* (*Zhan Mei an*), using the name of the ‘hero’ Chen Shimei, or *Qin Xianglian*, adopting the name of the heroine in the same story. This household story is about Chen Shimei who abandoned his wife and children in the countryside after he succeeded at the highest level of the imperial examinations and became a high official. In order to marry the princess and get to the top of the official circle in the imperial capital, he hired a killer to assassinate his wife and children; but the plan failed. His wife Xianglian went before the famous Judge Bao, and spoke with extreme emotion of her years of hardship while raising two children and waiting on her ailing in-laws in Chen’s absence.

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23 See Andre Malraux’s “Man’s Fate” included in *Anti-Memories*, trans. Terence Kilmartin, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, p. 360.

24 See Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, p.49.

25 See Robert Hegel’s discussion of didacticism, polarization of good and evil in tradition literature in his “Making the past serve the present in fiction and drama: from Yan’an forum to the Cultural Revolution” in Bonnie McDougall ed. *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp.202-210.

Husband Chen Shimei was eventually executed despite an appeal by the empress and the princess. "Speaking bitterness" thus wins a moral victory, however fictional, over the powerful, but inhumane.

"Speaking bitterness" as a kind of popular melodramatic moral theater was largely utilized as, and transformed into, an act of political speech.<sup>26</sup> In the various periods of the history of the Party including Yan'an, Land reform, Cultural Revolution, and even in the post-Mao era it "entailed encouraging oppressed groups to tell stories of the bitterness they had eaten under the previous system," and, to a certain extent, to tell of the hardship that the revolutionaries endured and the sacrifices they made in their long struggle for liberation of the people, and, consequently, to warn of the imperative not to let the past repeat itself.<sup>27</sup> Though "speaking bitterness" as a political campaign drew the participation of both men and women, most of the best known literary texts feature female protagonists whose misfortunes are caused by the evildoers who are both political exploiters and sexual predators. Revolutionary films made under Maoism have a closer tie to a common genealogy and articulation with revolutionary myth-making than to conventional/previous cinematic practices, and "speaking bitterness" is a critical means of engaging the audience and motivating the character in the three films. In *Daughters of China*, after Xiuzhi followed her rescuers to the base, the first thing she did was to tell her team members the miserable story of being savaged by the Japanese and the unbearable hunger she and her fellow villagers had suffered since the invasion of the Japanese. The narration of Xiuzhi's suffering is rather straightforward, and the quality is close to the speeches people made in real life at the mass gatherings held at the time. In Xie Jin's film, however, "speaking bitterness" is coded into a much more sophisticated plotline. After slave girl Qionghua was "liberated" by Hong Changqing, she encountered another repressed woman, Honglian, who had been forced to "sleep" with a "husband" fashioned from a block of wood by her traditional patriarchal in-laws after their son's death. The two women decided to go to Red Stone County to join the Detachment of Women the next morning. Upon their arrival, they were asked about their class identity:

Head of the detachment: "Are you proletarians?"

Qionghua: "What do you mean (by proletarians)?"

One of the soldier: "That means whether you have land or not?"

Qionghua: "I was sold to be a maid. I have nothing!"

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Honglian: "I don't know what my family had, but I was sold to the other household when I was only ten years old."

Head of the attachment: "You both are, of course, proletarians; you are approved."

26 David Apter and Tony Saich. *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1994, p.225.

27 See Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Ne liberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, p.49.

Here, Qionghua and Honglian's "speaking bitterness" is coded in the dialogues, and the intensity of this telling is further evoked by the dramatic scene that follows when the head of the detachment asks Qionghua to explain her motivation for joining the army. Qionghua shouts in rage, pushing her way into the group of women soldiers: "Why am I here?! Is there any need to ask at all?" She tore open the side of her jacket, exposing fresh bruises on her chest: "It is for this: for rebellion! For revenge!" This scene provides feminist criticism with a quintessential case for putting forward the argument that "the film underlines gender in terms of the female body and male gaze."<sup>28</sup> True, Qionghua's body is exposed to the gaze of the male communist Hong Changqing, however here, the showing of the scarred body of a slave girl, I argue, is primarily designed to represent a class with an individual. This body is, to re-evoke Teresa de Lauretis' insight, "both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within society."<sup>29</sup> This scarred body of a desperate slave girl functions as an effective solicitation of anger toward the ruling class, an elicitation of public emotion that powerfully stimulates the spectators to social action. Intense visuality is a major means or even goal for the filmic presentation, but it can also be viewed in melodramatic terms here, namely as tableau. "In the stage tableau, the actor should move into a held 'picture,' sometimes self-consciously imitating existing paintings or engravings, sometimes striking conventional poses of grief, anger, threat, and so on."<sup>30</sup> The tableau of Qionghua's showing of her scar is a bodily expression of the suffering that her words fail to tell because it is too much to articulate, or too painful to express. Here, "speaking bitterness" is displayed, instead of told, as a bodily melodramatic writing of "a victimized woman's body, on which desire has inscribed an impossible history, a story of desire in an impasse."<sup>31</sup>

In the three films, though the victimization of the innocent female protagonist gains initial representation in the opening scenes, the "speaking of bitterness" of the protagonists amplifies the message of their victimization in the "old society," using a catchy term from the Maoist discourse of the time, and thus appeals directly for the empathy of the viewers. It also implies or imposes the demand for social justice from the revolutionary regime just as victim Xianglian was granted justice by Judge Bao in the imperial court. In addition to eliciting social sympathy, the articulations of their sufferings also interpellate the victim-heroines into an imagined version of the reality of their post-liberation new life and from there they begin their revolutionary "coming of the age."

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28 Shuqin Cui *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003, p.81.

29 See Teresa de Lauretis's *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, p.5.

30 See Linda Williams' "Melodrama Revised" in Nick Browne ed. *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p.66.

31 See Peter Brookes' "Melodrama, Body, Revolution" in Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill eds. *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, London: BFI Publishing, 1994, p. 22.

### Amorous Passion and the Romanticization of Revolution

Revolution is commonly understood as a radical and abrupt change in the course of history and, in the modern era is presented as a critical stage in the formation of modernity that is closely associated with bodily emancipation and fulfillment of the individual's needs, including carnal desires. In Chinese literature the exposition of libidinal impulse and sexual desires, however, has never been developed into a literary theme that holds any value for human social progress. This fact requires us to rethink the very nature of Chinese revolutions, especially communist revolutions. In her illuminating *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt argues that although liberation may be the condition of freedom, "the word 'revolutionary' can be applied only to revolutions whose name is freedom."<sup>32</sup> This is because "it is frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins."<sup>33</sup> It is indeed difficult to tell where "the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins" in the Chinese revolution, as the rebels-turned-authorities spared no pains in promoting themselves as the all-representative rulers of a new regime. To comply with the rule of the new regime, excessive desires had to be tamed, sexual impulses that privilege individual power over collective will had to be disciplined, voluntary obedience was required, and the belief in legitimacy of the ruling Party had to be consolidated by means of the creation of revolutionary myth.

Yet, could the revolutionary impulses cross with sexual impulses? Could a certain amorous passion be imbedded in the utopian social imaginaries? If yes, where could we locate it? In what sense we can talk about "the sexually-laden exposition of political ideas and the politically-oriented writing of sexual life?"<sup>34</sup> What are the different, even conflicting investments of state-power, producers and spectators? And, are those different investments clear cut or interwoven?

The critique that the revolutionary heroines are androgynous and de-sexualized as the result of the Party's rigid censorship has become a commonplace in studying literature produced during the Seventeen Years. A frequently cited example to support this argument is that Xie Jin was forced to cut the plot of romantic love between Changqing and Qionghua, so as to make the film represent pure fraternal love between people from the proletarian class within the revolutionary camp.<sup>35</sup> "The complete erasure of female identity and sexuality enables the political system to sustain its power and film representation to produce political allegories."<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, this forced cut doesn't seem to remove the intangible romantic aura of the film, and many viewers still detected the unmistakable *qing* (feeling, affection, sentiment, attachment, love etc.)

32 Hannah Arendt. *On Revolution*, New York: The Viking Press, 1965, p. 21.

33 *Ibid.* p.25.

34 See Yang Xiaobin's "Introduction" in Tao Dongfeng, Yang Xiaobin, Rosemary Roberts and Yang Ling eds. *Chinese Revolution and Chinese Literature*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. ix.

35 Xie Jing's note on how the script was forced to be modified.

36 Shuqin Cui *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003, p.90.

between the male and female protagonists. This leads us to further ask: how could a film without an explicit love plot function in the viewers' imagination as a revolutionary romance? What mechanism did the director manipulate to sustain viewers' expectations about the putative romance between the male and female protagonists?

In the years after 1956, as Paul Clark's *Chinese Cinema* indicates, a new type of feature film began to emerge as "the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism."<sup>37</sup> The newly emerging revolutionary romantic films "find their glamour less in exotic settings than in their central characters." The heroes in the revolutionary romantic films usually "share a righteous conviction that their cause will triumph, a belief that allows gestures of revolutionary nobility. Rhetorical flourishes from an otherwise stationary camera emphasize the heroism. What is lost in terms of subtlety and ambiguity is often compensated for by direct emotional power, particularly as Party martyrs march bravely to their deaths."<sup>38</sup> Remarkably, we also find, to use Stephanie Donald's words "socialist erotics" in "the revolutionary romantic fervors between girl acolyte and male Communist hero" in films such as *Red Detachment of Women* and *Song of Youth*.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, "if gaze originated as a description of a patriarchal impulse and set of techniques in classic Hollywood filmmaking, it is also useful for thinking about socialist-realist film, which has both a patriarchal impulse and an ideological motivation."<sup>40</sup> Romantic love in a typical Hollywood melodrama is primarily a semiotic designation furnishing the performance of the uncompromising moral conflicts of good and evil, and not an enunciation of Eros, fulfillment of sexual desire, or discharge of libidinal energy. "At its most ambitious, the melodramatic mode of conception and representation may appear to be the very process of reaching a fundamental drama of the moral life and finding the terms to express it."<sup>41</sup> In this light, the *qing* that the viewers "found" between Changqing and Qionghua is not determined by textual documentation that they ever had any of the intimate contact conventionally used to define a "love" relationship, but rather by the ethical qualities and moral sentiment that they embody and present to each other and to the viewers. The *qing* that the viewers detect is largely the feelings and attachment derived from the shared revolutionary moral sentiments of the two protagonists. This is probably one of the reasons why director Xie Jin's cut of the only "love scene" that depicted the male and female holding hands does not actually reduce the readability of the story.

Further, the effectiveness of maintaining the integral emotional attachment of the male and female protagonists and that of the viewers to the film comes largely from Xie Jin's masterful manipulation of melodramatic devices that can be understood through

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37 See Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.63.

38 *Ibid.*, p.101-102.

39 Stephanie Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2000, p.65.

40 *Ibid.*, p.65.

41 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, p.12.

a comparison of the plots of Changqing and Qionghua's relationship in the film and in the original script. My purpose, of course, is not to prove whether *Red Detachment of Women* is a love story or not, but to examine how the melodramatic mechanism contributes to the dual satisfaction of the effectiveness of revolutionary meaning-making and the accessibility of this film to the viewers from a wide range of social groups. According to Liang Xin, the screen writer of the film, there were three scenes in the original script that aimed at building the romantic connections between Changqing and Qionghua. The first is when Qionghua is in the probation room for disobeying orders and firing prematurely on the evil landlord Nanbatian, leading to his escape. Here she tells Honglian of her admiration for Changqing, but only by commending his personal qualities as a leader. "Secretary Changqing also taught me lessons, punished me, too; but he did it so persuasively, made me totally convinced." In the second scene, Qionghua encounters Changqing at the Dividing Ridge where Changqing had set her free and directed her to join the detachment of women a year ago. The script runs:

...Changqing signed emotionally: "Everything has changed!" [He meant that the Areas of the Red Army have been expanded and revolution is developing.]

Qionghua also signed emotionally: "People have also changed! The day when I left Nanbatian's Mansion seems to have been in a previous life. You know, at that time, I hated you and was very suspicious of you. It is really...", she made a gesture, "hard to explain!"

Changqing looked at her, asking with a smile: "how about now?"

"Now?" Qionghua raised her head, looking at Changqing with affection, and then lowered her gaze: "Now...it is still hard to explain..."

The third scene occurred when Changqing and Qionghua are attending Honglian and A Gui's wedding. Honglian approached Qionghua, offering her a cup of wine and encouraging her to "have a thorough talk with Comrade Changqing." Qionghua then approached Changqing and said loudly:

"Party Representative, I want to have a talk with you."

...They walked up hill, couples of lovers from the *Li* people passing them by. Songs floated over from the wedding party: "The forest of areca trees stretches ten *li*/ I send off my lover to join the Red Army. Areca has been the proof of love since the old days/ one areca is one warm heart." They look at each other, smiling at each other and saying simultaneously "beautiful song..." They sit down on a rock. Silence.

Qionghua asked "Do you like to bite areca?"

"I do."

"Then, this is for you..." Qionghua passed to Changqing a small bag of areca.

Changqing did not take it right away, saying with extreme appreciation: "In our hometown, one should not receive areca casually from a girl..."

"I'm not casual at all, Comrade Changqing! This is my first time!...It will also be the last time..." Changqing emotionally grasps Qionghua's hands.

The sound of music is heard in the distance"... Areca has been the proof of love since the old times, one areca is one warm heart."

The first plot highlights Changqing's nurturing characteristics, and persuasiveness in communication, and the second reminds the viewers of the virtue of the communist knight in shining armor who saved the proletarian "damsel in distress." Neither scene is explicit in showing the romantic feelings of the protagonists if one solely reads the text. The last and only explicit love scene is the third, and it was removed from the film. Then why do viewers still sense Changqing and Qionghua's emotional attachment? What is the semiotic space in the film that permits the viewer's own imagination to take off?

One main factor that ignites that imagination is the actor's performance. Film analysis may often focus on the text, but fail to consider the role of actors and the effect of their acting on the audience. "The reader cannot see and feel the beauty of the actors, nor the effect that such beauty has on audience's reception of the violence in the films."<sup>42</sup> Although a careful elucidation of filmic narrative is often effective in identifying the theme of a film, it cannot quite grasp the emotional force of the film or explain viewer interpretation. Furthermore, the emotional force may also derive from the screen presence of a particular actor/actress, his/her special attractiveness to the audience in a specific genre, at a specific time, or the effect that his/her personal charm has on an audience's reception of the film. Xie Jin notes in his "Director's Interpretation": "the entire film should be imbued with emotion, externally and internally."<sup>43</sup> To achieve the utmost emotional effect, "the actor's performance should not be natural; their characteristics, speech and actions should all be clear-cut and striking."<sup>44</sup> The employment of the melodramatic mechanics of being clear-cut, striking and intense was crucial in making affective connections with the audience. The inspirational effect of the film on the audience also derived from the performance of the first-time actress Zhu Xijuan, especially from her expressive eye contact with the other characters and the audience. Xie Jin notes that "when we were considering a leading actress, the first thing I considered is that she should have a 'pair of intense eyes'. Eyes should be a very important physical attribute of the actress who is going to play Qionghua."<sup>45</sup> Critics and audiences have particularly taken note of the two protagonists' expressive eye contact in the film. It is no exaggeration to say that it is from their intense gazes at each other that the viewers meet their own expectations for a love story.

In her study of the melodramatic mold, Maria La Place identifies romance as one of the privileged discourses in melodrama. Given that the melodrama is primarily

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42 Stephanie Donald. *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2000, p.2.

43 See Xie Jin's "Daoyan chanshu" ("The Director Interpretation") in *Hongse nianzijun: cong juben dao dianying*, Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1962, p. 258.

44 *Ibid.*

45 See Xie Jin's "*Hongse niangzijun daoyan chuangzuo zhajiji*" ("The Red Detachment of Women: the Working Notes of the Director") in *Hongse nianzijun: cong juben dao dianying*, Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1962, p.283.



about moral sentiment and moral feelings, a romantic relation is usually invented to hold the story that displays the ultimate triumph of virtue; and a romantic hero usually functions as an embodiment of moral power who ultimately saves the virtuous, yet suffering heroine. In melodrama, a romantic relationship is usually a relationship of Platonic “soul mates” with “perfect understanding” of each other and “mutual transparency.” The hero is a “maternal man,” for “caring and mutuality are part of this relation, as is admiration and respect on the part of the man for the woman.” Such a “maternal man” does not necessarily diminish the subjective position of woman in a relationship because he reflects women’s interests. Following this female convention, in the melodrama we can often find “a particular mise en scene of female desire that focuses on the lovers’ faces and, in particular, the eyes and mouth. The gaze, the kiss, the voice become the locus of eroticism.”<sup>46</sup> Changqing played by Wang Xingang fulfilled at its greatest capacity many Chinese female viewers’ subconscious desires for a nurturing and erotic figure. Wang has an appearance that is remarkably different from that of the other actors who play army leaders in other war films: the image of Party Secretary Hong Changqing that Wang portrayed is much closer to that of the traditional *caizi* (genteel scholar) than that of the typical peasant-worker-soldier revolutionaries.<sup>47</sup> Throughout the film, the intended (by both director and viewers) relationship between Changqing and Qionghua is inexplicitly yet suggestively constructed around a series of gazes exchanged between them. Their eye contacts are meaningful from their first encounter, but their second meeting at the Dividing Ridge scene, cited above, is the most important visual demonstration of their underlying attachment. As Qionghua is saying “...it is hard to explain,” vaguely and in a tender voice, Changqing maintains a warm and intense gaze at Qionghua that culminates in a medium close-up, asking “How about now?” Qionghua resists this long look, being only able to give Changqing a quick glance, lowering her head and replying “Now...it is still hard to explain...” Here, the activation of their underlying affection for each other is marked by the intensity and duration of their looking into each other’s eyes. The “looking at” each other’s eyes finally culminates in “looking into” each others’ heart as Changqing invites Qionghua to his office where he tells her of his own childhood suffering and sad family history, concluding weightily “the heart of each and every proletarian is soaking in tears.” To his statement “if one wants to burn away the old society, one must rely on the group, on the entire proletarian class,” Qionghua replies: “I’ve remembered every single word, now and forever.” This final message from Changqing to Qionghua thus transforms their intimate gaze to a “revolutionary romantic gaze” and defines

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46 Maria LaPlace’s “Producing and Consuming the Women’s Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager*” in Christine Gledhill ed. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women’s Film*, London: BFI Publishing, 1987, p.159.

47 Wang Xingang noted in a short article entitled “Banyan Hong Changqing de yixie ganshou” (My Thoughts on Acting Hong Changqing) that he was uncertain if he should portray Changqing as a military commander or a political instructor. He was concerned that his screen image resembled a scholar and that this would hinder him from successfully playing a military cadre. See *Hongse nianzijun: cong juben dao dianying*, Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1962, p.345.

their potential personal feeling to the uplifting relations of revolutionary “soul mates” highlighted by the political message and moral sentiment.

In *The Song of Youth*, the victim-heroine Daojing’s “coming of age” is arranged parallel to the love-triangle relationships with three men she encounters in the different stages of her life. After being rescued from a suicide attempt by Yu Yongze, Daojing co-habited with him in the fashion of the liberated woman of the May Fourth tradition. But before long, Daojing found that her white knight is a selfish person with no sympathy toward the poor people. A highly melodramatic scene is designed to show Yu’s ruthlessness. On the first New Year’s Eve they lived together, an ailing old tenant of Yu’s landlord father drops by, begging for some money to go back to his home village. Waiting for an honored guest who could be of help to secure a promising job, Yu anxiously orders the old man to leave, giving him one copper coin. In contrast, the compassionate Daojing catches up with the old man amid the driving snowflakes, giving him food and enough money for the trip. Daojing soon secretly falls in love with Lu Jiachuan, a devoted young revolutionary from Beijing University. In the novel, the author arranges a serial of details to show the contrast between Yu and Lu. One of these centres on the historically famous March-Eighteenth student protest. At Daojing’s request, Yu Yongze attends the gathering hesitantly, but is very nervous and worried. When the police come to the venue, dispersing the gathering and arresting student leaders, the fearful Yu runs away like a coward. Lu, in contrast, bravely risks his life to rescue a girl student from the hand of police. Interestingly, the polarization of Lu’s sacrificial act and Yu’s selfish nature is further highlighted by the physiognomic characteristics of the two. Yu is a fellow of low-morality, thus he is physically vulgar, undistinguished and with a pair of “dazzling small eyes”; by sharp contrast, the noble, sacrificing and devoting Lu has a “handsome face,” “kindly, brilliant eyes,” and “an ardent, radiant smile.” No wonder that, critic Joe Huang ponders “it is not at all clear whether it is Lu’s good looks or his revolutionary zeal which attracts Lin to him.”<sup>48</sup> By and large, the description of the physical appearance of revolutionary characters Lu Jiachuan and Hong Changqing as well as the appearances and manner of actors, Kang Tai and Wang Xingang, who played the respective leading male roles, are extremely similar, and both resonate strongly with the images of *caizi* (genteel scholars) in the popular “scholars and beauty romances” (*Caizi jia ren chuanqi*).

Daojing’s love for Lu does not go beyond that of Qionghua for Changqing, it too remains on the platonic level, for soon Lu is arrested by the Guomindang and executed. The third man in Daojing’s life, Jiang Hua, is also a communist leader. Jiang Hua is also a “maternal man,” who is patient, encouraging, and expressive about his feelings for Daojing. Yet for a long time in their relationship as co-workers Daojing has no romantic feelings towards Jiang Hua, though she feels guilty about this. This is a meaningful ambivalence that illuminates for us the woman author Yang Mo’s understanding about what romantic love means for the female character. On the one hand, it is at odds with the prevailing feminist argument that female revolutionaries are created by their male

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48 Joe Huang *Heroes and Villains in Communist China: The Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life*, London: C Hurst & Company, 1973, p.59.

counterparts: Daojing's resistance to an authoritative male revolutionary's affection towards her is obviously her personal choice. On the other hand, ironically, there is Daojing's incapability of accepting Jiang Hua because she is irresistibly drawn to Lu Jiachuan because of his scholarly style, knight-errant manner toward women, and his sophisticated demeanor. In terms of physiognomic characteristics, Jiang Hua shares some similarities with Lu Jiachuan: tall, with big shining eyes and a bright smile; in essence, however, he is but a simple, unsophisticated and uncultivated peasant type of revolutionary. Daojing's eventual cohabitation with Jiang Hua is merely a test of her revolutionary commitment and determination to transform herself into a true member of the proletarian class. If the removal of Qionghua and Changqing's physical touch could not take the romantic aura away from the *Red Detachment of Women*, neither does the physical union of Daojing and Jiang Hua indicate the fulfillment of the sexual desires of Daojing. The romanticization of revolutionary heroes and the illumination of the hidden romantic desires of the heroines achieved by melodramatic mechanics should not be entirely or primarily regarded as the degradation of women's subjectivity, because it also gives voice to the female protagonists in forging their desires and needs for their counterparts, however restrictive and fictional. The revolutionary fairy-tale nevertheless showcases an intriguing and complex negotiation between ruling ideology, the writer's intention for transgressing imposed boundaries and the reader/viewer's individualized interpretation, or "sexually-laden exposition of political ideas and the politically-oriented writing of sexual love." Unlike the many single-dimensional, hard core ideological works of the time, these films of revolutionary romanticism most effectively produce "a look, a feel, and a method of attraction, all of which combine in making space"<sup>49</sup> - a imaginary space that invites broader spectatorship, intermingles the state's political requirements and viewers' erotic impulses, collective and personal interests as well as ideological and market appeal. The enormous popularity of *Red Detachment of Women* and *The Song of the Youth* to a large extent suggests "a romantic return of the earlier intellectual fantasy about the revolution;" but their implication for a hybrid concept of revolution was considered a political threat in the more totalitarian environment of the Cultural Revolution.

## Conclusion

The foregoing investigation demonstrates that revolutionary myth-making during the "Seventeen Years" period in the PRC was made more effective and consumable by employing and deploying woman's body as both a political entity and a semiotic category. As a political entity, the repressed and enslaved bodies of Chinese women justify the violent revolutionary actions of social liberation and validate the CCP's political rule as the result of that revolution. The female body as a signifier, playing a key role in enacting melodramatic imaginations, makes possible a hybrid site of representation in which rigid revolutionary ideologies interplay with pre-revolutionary morality or folk mentality; the unconscious erotic desires of viewers negotiate state-

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49 Stephanie Donald. *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2000, p.3.

implemented political persuasion; mass sentimentality compromises the mission of enlightenment, and ultimately makes the ideological ambivalence and emotional contradictions consumable.

## Glossary

A Gui	阿贵	Ling Zifeng	凌子风
<i>Bai she zhuan</i>	白蛇传	Liang Xin	梁信
Bao	包	Liu Lanzhi	刘兰芝
bishang Liang shan	逼上梁山	Lu Jiachuan	卢嘉川
caizi	才子	Nanbatian	南霸天
caizi jiaren chuanqi	才子佳人传奇	NanBei chao	南北朝
Chen Shimei	陈世美	qing	情
Dai Jinhua	戴锦华	<i>Qingchun zhi ge</i>	青春之歌
<i>Dang de nuer</i>	党的女儿	Qin Xianglian	秦香莲
Gao Shan	高山	<i>Shuihu zhuan</i>	水浒传
guan bi min fan	官逼民反	suku	诉苦
Guomindang	国民党	Wang Hui	汪晖
Hangzhou	杭州	Wang Xingang	王心刚
Hong Changqing	洪常青	Wang Yumei	王玉梅
Honglian	红莲	Wu Qionghua	吴琼花
<i>Hongse niangzijun</i>	红色娘子军	Xie Jin	谢晋
Hu Meng'an	胡孟安	Yang Mo	杨沫
Hu Xiuzhi	胡秀芝	Yu Yongze	余永泽
Jiang Hua	江华	<i>Zhan Mei An</i>	斩美案
Jiao Zhongqin	焦仲卿	<i>Zhanhuo zhong de qingchun</i>	战火中的青春
Kang Tai	康泰	Zhao Yiman	赵一曼
“Kongque dongnan fei”	孔雀东南飞	<i>Zhonghua ernu</i>	中华儿女
Lin Daojing	林道静	Zhu Xijuan	祝希娟

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### **Biographical note**

Li Li was educated in China and the United States, received her doctoral degree from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2007, and is currently an assistant professor at the University of Denver. She has compiled and translated anthologies of women's poetry and published articles on gender and translation studies. Her current projects include translingual practice in the late Qing and representations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.