

## GENDER PSYCHOLOGY IN THE WOMEN OF *THE RED LANTERN* IN ITS EVOLUTION FROM MODEL OPERA TO SOAP OPERA

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The communist hero/heroine has been an important figure in mainstream Chinese culture throughout the period of Communist Party rule, functioning as both political and social model and as popular icon. The heroes and heroines of *The Red Lantern* have been some of the most enduring and best loved of these iconic figures with the story being reiterated in various forms over the last half century. Since these characters have held such a significant place in modern Chinese culture, from the point of view of gender studies it is interesting to consider how representations of gender have evolved in successive versions of the story. This paper uses the concept of gender psychology developed by Nielsen and Rudberg to trace the evolution of the heroines of *The Red Lantern* as an embodiment of changing gender psychology through a comparative analysis of one contemporary and two historical versions of this 'red classic': the 1962 film script, the revolutionary modern Beijing Opera film of 1969, and the 2007 novel based on the TV series. The paper considers how representations of female gender identity, gendered subjectivity and female sexuality in reiterations of the story have been adapted to dominant modes of popular entertainment and reception, and how they embody much underlying continuity as well as change and increasing complexity in social norms pertaining to gender and sexuality.

*The Red Lantern* is of particular significance to modern and contemporary Chinese culture because the story and its main characters have been cultural icons in mainland China for the last fifty years. The story represents mainstream popular culture, but simultaneously each version has had the approval of and even been directly managed by the communist authorities of the day. Despite the negation of the Maoist period and the Cultural Revolution, in the post-Mao period *The Red Lantern* has emerged as an important classic of communist literature and art whose cultural significance is indicated by the fact that it has been reworked several times over the last 50 years, and has remained popular with Chinese audiences. *The Red Lantern* has appeared in many forms including film, various forms of traditional Chinese opera, comic books, a novel and television series.

This paper will focus on three major versions of the work: the earliest version, the 1962 film script *There will be Successors* (自有后来人),<sup>1</sup> the 1970 film of the revolutionary modern Beijing Opera *The Red Lantern* (红灯记),<sup>2</sup> and the 2007 thirty episode television

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1 Shen Mojun and Luo Jing 自有后来人 [There will be successors], *Dianying wenxue*, September, 1962.

2 Cheng Yin (1970) *Hongdeng ji* [The red lantern] Bayi Dianying Zhipianchang [August First Film Studio].

series *The Red Lantern* (红灯记).<sup>3</sup> These represent the most significant versions culturally and socially and the greatest historical spread of texts, hence having the greatest potential for offering insights into social and cultural change and continuity. At the time of writing, the TV series itself was not available to me, so this paper draws its data from the thirty chapter novel – one chapter per episode – based on the TV series published in 2007 as well as stills from the series included in the novel and available on-line.<sup>4</sup>

The demands on plot of film, Beijing Opera and TV series are quite different; however, the basic plot has remained the same. The story is set in 1939 in a town in China's northeast under Japanese occupation. As the story begins a communist agent carrying secret codes that are critical to communist communications in the area leaps from a train to avoid capture and is badly injured. Railway switchman, Li Yuhe, his underground communist contact, finds him and receives the codes. Li's mission is to protect the codes and pass them on to the local guerrilla forces. Li's fellow communist Wang Lianju (Wang Jingwei in the early 1960s film) is caught by the Japanese who are searching for the codes and betrays Li to them. The central villain, Hatoyama, Chief of the Japanese Gendarmerie, had known Li Yuhe before the war (Li had once saved his life) and he now tries to win Li over at a private banquet. When Li refuses to cooperate, he is tortured but still refuses to talk. Hatoyama then arrests and tortures Li's mother, Granny Li and his seventeen year old daughter, Tiemei. The women also refuse to betray the cause. Li and his mother are executed by firing squad, but Tiemei is released – Hatoyama hopes she will lead them to the codes. Tiemei, however, eludes her tail and delivers the codes to a communist contact. As well as celebrating the heroism of Li Yuhe, the plot also presents the transition of Tiemei from carefree child to mature revolutionary. The importance of class feeling and class solidarity is emphasised through Granny Li's revelation to Tiemei that the Li family are actually three unrelated individuals brought together by class struggle: Tiemei's father and Granny Li's husband had been working-class labour activists murdered during strike action, and Li had taken them on as family in an act of class solidarity and respect for his fallen comrades. This knowledge is the catalyst for Tiemei's maturation into a staunch revolutionary committed to carrying the revolution through to victory.

### Origins of *The Red Lantern*

*There will be Successors* (自有后来人) began as a film script written by Shen Mojun (沈默君) and Luo Jing (罗静).<sup>5</sup> Shen had been involved in performing, writing and directing plays and operas since joining the communist New Fourth Army in 1938. After 1949 he took a leading role in script writing in the film industry in China's North-east, penning the scripts for such revolutionary classics as *Fighting North and South* (南征北战). *There will be Successors*, which, according to Shen, was based partly on historical

3 The Television series was produced by Li Long 李珑, directed by Zhang Jinbiao 张今标 and Liu Jin 刘进, Shangdong Maizhuang Television, 2007.

4 Yu Feng (于峰) and Wu Jianfeng (吴建峰), Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2007.

5 The filmscript had the alternative title 红灯志- The Record of the Red Lantern. Details of Luo Jing are not provided in historical notes on the film so it can be assumed that his role was secondary to that of Shen Mojun

material, was published in the September 1962 issue of *Film Literature* (电影文学).<sup>6</sup> The film, a modified version of the 1962 filmscript, directed by Yu Yanfu (于彦夫) was released by the Changchun Film Studio in 1963. The film was so popular that it was immediately adapted into two different forms of modern Chinese opera: The Harbin Beijing Opera Troupe adapted it to Beijing opera form under the name *The Revolution has Successors* (革命自有后来人), while the Shanghai Hu Opera Troupe adapted it to the local Shanghai 'hu' opera form. The following year it was performed at the Festival of Beijing Opera on Contemporary Themes under the name *The Red Lantern* (红灯记), a name which was retained in all subsequent adaptations of the work. During the Cultural Revolution *The Red Lantern* was selected as the first work to be developed as a national model for reform of the performing arts (*yangbanxi*), and was published and performed as a Beijing Opera.<sup>7</sup> It also became the first of the *yangbanxi* to be released as a film.<sup>8</sup> After the Cultural Revolution the *yangbanxi* fell out of favour and were not performed on stage for a number of years. In the 1990s however, they were revived and performed to sell-out houses in their original Cultural Revolution forms. The turn of the millennium brought a renewed interest in the revolutionary classics and a number of the old *yangbanxi* were converted to TV series including *The Red Detachment of Women* in twenty-one episodes and *Shajiabang* in thirty episodes. Work on a thirty episode series of *The Red Lantern* began in 2004, with filming commencing in 2006. A novel based on the series was published in 2007 (Yu and Wu 2007) and episodes went to air in China in 2008.

The social and political context of the production of the three works varied considerably: The filmscript was produced in the early 60s, when communist ideals of selfless service to the community and nation still dominated society. As Li Li has discussed in her paper in this special issue, the creation of a revolutionary mythology to validate the legitimacy of the communist regime was one of the key projects in the politico-cultural sphere during this period, and this story is a clear example of a work that supported that project. Shaped by Mao's literary directives to write about the lives of the proletariat in a positive way as the masters of the nation and the drivers of human progress, it was however, penned in a period of relative relaxation of left wing policies, so that authors and filmmakers had some leeway to explore complexities of character or theme.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Beijing Opera film version of 1970 was produced as a model for the extreme political and cultural policies of the Cultural Revolution

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6 Shen's claim that the characters in his filmscripts are all based on real people can be found in the picture book version of the model opera in a supplementary section at the end of the book (no page numbers provided). See *Hong Deng Ji*, Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2007.

7 The acclaimed director A Jia was responsible for much of the development of the Beijing Opera, though he was later dismissed from the project after clashes with Jiang Qing.

8 The film was directed by Cheng Yin and released by the August First Film Studio in 1970.

9 Mao had taken a back seat after attempts to force the pace of communism in the late 1950s through measures such as the Backyard Steel Campaign had failed, leading to or at least exacerbating widespread famine. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping took over, and wound back the more extreme left wing policies (most famously the communal kitchens), reintroducing 'capitalist' incentives such as private plots for peasants. Similarly, in the cultural arena the political demands on writers were softened a little, allowing greater freedom of choice in subject matter and literary style.

period. Each work had to focus on a group of heroic proletarian figures, and particularly highlight one central flawless communist hero. Any mention of love or romance was discouraged. Works had to end on a bright note foreshadowing the inevitable triumph of communism. At the time of the production of both the film and the Model Opera versions of the work, cultural production was not subjected to market forces, but was subject to approval by CCP-controlled government structures.

The social and political environment of the production of the TV series in 2006-7 was much more complex. By 2006 the whole Maoist cultural, social and economic project had long since been discredited and largely dismantled. Economic reform and social and ideological liberalisation had led to the creation both of enormous wealth and the re-emergence of exploited, underprivileged and underserved classes of urban and rural poor. The re-emergence of the *yangbanxi* in the form of TV series can be seen as a top-driven attempt to reassert the moral standing of the Communist party by reasserting the links between the party and the underprivileged class. It is also an attempt to re-promote the lofty communist values of the past to a society that seemed to have forgotten them. Both of these motives serve to legitimate and support the continued rule of the CCP. On the other hand, for the poor and exploited of today's China, the *yangbanxi* TV series valorise their interests against oppressive wealthy and powerful upper classes. How the analogy applies to contemporary society is ambiguous. Are the communist heroes identified as Maoists or the current CCP? and are the exploiting classes identified with the old capitalists and landlords or the current communist party? Commercialisation and globalisation have also created a major liberal shift in sexual and cultural mores in China, while also dictating that film and TV must be commercially viable and cater to mass consumer tastes.

## Gender Psychology and Social Change

In analysing gender change in relation to the advancement of women in modern (western) society, Nielsen and Rudberg (1993) suggest that the key to gender change is change in psychological gender.<sup>10</sup> They see psychological gender change as 'a complex phenomenon that involves both rapidly and slowly changing structures.' (p.44) 'The 'old' and 'new' can exist side by side, because change in all social phenomena is a process which lacks contemporaneity. They suggest that tension between three different factors which change at different rates stimulates change in gender psychology. These factors are gendered subjectivity, gender identity and cultural and social possibilities. Nielsen and Rudberg define the three factors as follows:

1. Gendered subjectivity is described as "gendered being-in-the-world," i.e. those gender-specific and often unconscious ways of relating to the world and oneself,' including sexuality, body and aggression.

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10 Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg, "Whatever happened to Gender? Female Subjectivity and Change in a Generational Context" in Janneke van Mens-Verhulst, Karlein Schreurs, Liesbeth Woertman (ed.) *Daughtering and Mothering: Female Subjectivity Reanalysed*, London: Routledge, 1993, pp.44-52.

2. Gender identity ‘refers to the personal construction of “what gender means to me”’ Gender identity is constructed on the basis of biological sex, as well as being constructed throughout life on the basis of both gendered subjectivity and the cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity that are available to us. It includes concepts of gender roles and involves the issue of what it means to the individual to be a grown woman or man, what desires can be accommodated and at what cost.
3. Cultural and social possibilities: This variable refers to gender-differentiated opportunities available to individuals or limitations placed on individuals by cultural or social norms and conventions.

This paper will examine each of the historical versions of *The Red Lantern* in terms of the concepts above, focussing on the key areas of sexuality, body, gender roles and aspirations and social and cultural opportunity. I will then use these findings to offer some conclusions about historical changes in gender psychology embodied within the three texts.

### **The film script *There will be Successors***

#### *Sexuality and body*

The film script of *There will be Successors* avoids all direct examination of sexuality as a form of gendered subjectivity. None of the characters have sexual relationships or express any form of sexual desire. All love and passion expressed is asexual family love between the three generations of the Li Family, Mother/Son, Grandmother / Granddaughter, and Father/daughter. This is not to say, however, that sex and sexuality are entirely absent from the film, particularly if one considers the way the film text positions the reader of the published script or audience of the film to ‘read’ the figure of Tiemei. The final scene of the original film script depicts Tiemei, having secretly handed the codes on to a fellow communist, turning herself into a human decoy and walking resolutely into the burning carriage of a train. As she walks, the script describes the reflection in a pool of water of her ‘well developed’ (丰满) body, her thick, soft braid, an ‘entrancing’ (动人) fringe over her elegant forehead, and eyes like two rounded almonds. Captivated by her own image, Tiemei’s ‘inherent female traits’ come into play and she adjusts her fringe before calmly walking to her death in the burning train carriage (p. 29). Tiemei’s action hints at an awakening sexuality manifested through the desire to be desirable. A stronger function of the text, however, is to offer Tiemei as an object for voyeuristic pleasure for the reader/viewer. Even the description of her after having been tortured is ambiguously eroticised: whereas Li Yuhe after intense torture is simply described as “pale faced and with clothes dishevelled” (面容憔悴, 衣衫褴褛) (p.18) description of Tiemei focuses on the exposure of bare skin: ‘the clothes on her body are ripped to shreds and the flesh is exposed in several places on her shoulders’ (身上衣服撕得破碎不堪, 肩上好几处露出肌肉) (p. 29). Roland Barthes has observed that the most erotic part of a body is where a garment gapes. “It is intermittence . . . which

is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two edges.”<sup>11</sup> The description of Tiemei turns her body into an object of desire, but this is a desire in which she cannot participate. The desirability of the body that is destroyed and its value in the traditional sexual economy – a beautiful virgin of marriageable age – are used to magnify the political capital to be gained from her sacrifice.

### *Gender roles and aspirations*

Gender roles in the filmscript *There will be Successors* are firmly anchored in conservative tradition. Women are all presented exclusively in domestic roles as wives or mothers. Wives are subordinated to the orders and fists of their husbands. Towards the end of the script, for example Tiemei locates her underground communist contact, Master Worker Zhou. He orders his wife to go off to bed with their child while he talks to Tiemei, (p.24) (那人把孩子往妇人怀里一塞，命令道：“带孩子上炕睡觉去！”) and when his wife cautions him about the danger, he berates her and threatens to slap her. (‘你再叨叨我给你一巴掌！说着真的举起了大巴掌。’) When his raised hand falls on her, however, he simply twists her around and sends her to bed, but the subordination of the wife is expressed clearly through the dominating language and enforced with the threat of physical violence. At times the text seems aware of its own gender bias at other times not. Although Zhou’s expression is described as ‘chauvinistic’ (一脸大男子主义) Tiemei seems to have little consciousness of his sexism. She reacts to the above scene with a smile that expresses ‘not so much her own longing for a happy domestic life as much as her cherishing the memory of her father and grandmother’ (p. 24) – and in fact Li Yuhe threatens her with a similar raised hand on two occasions in the text as well. Male violence and control of women is thus normalised by its treatment as either a joke or a sign of domestic happiness.

Although the wives in *There will be successors* take a subordinate, domestic role, Granny Li wields considerable power and authority in her role as mother and grandmother. She controls Li Yuhe’s drinking, and has the authority to order him to bed. At the same time her service role is frequently emphasised, with the motif of her repairing Li Yuhe’s clothing with needle and thread repeated throughout the film. Her authority is, however, clearly limited to domestic matters. She takes no part in political action outside the house and has no role in advising Li Yuhe on his underground work. Symbolically, her main role with the red lantern is constantly to be wiping and polishing it.

Only Tiemei challenges the traditional norms for female behaviour. When the film opens she has begun to run a few small errands in support of her father’s work for the revolution (against the wishes of her grandmother) without really understanding the significance of her work. After their arrest and execution, however, in the film script she rapidly develops the ability to act independently and decisively to complete her father’s mission. She goes and hides the codes and she also finds a way to go and retrieve them. She is now strongly conscious of the significance of her actions, taking pride in her own resourcefulness and independence. She is the only female in the film

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11 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans R. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 9-10.

script who aspires to step beyond traditional gender roles. In the film script this non-normative behaviour results in her death. Interestingly in the 1963 film produced from this script, Tiemei does not die, but the independence of her actions is also weakened. Instead of her taking the initiative to hide and then recover the secret codes and hand them on to the communist underground, she is shown being chaperoned to recover the codes by the male underground contact and then chaperoned to safety. It has been observed by feminist scholars in the past that it is common for literary plots to punish women who step outside their traditionally prescribed gender roles. The non-normative woman must die, while the one who lives must return to within more normative parameters for female behaviour. This appears to be the case with these early versions of *The Red Lantern*.

### *Cultural and Social Possibilities*

Although the film script seems to offer few cultural and social possibilities for women beyond a subordinate domestic role, Li Yuhe himself hints at other possibilities in future. On the execution ground he urges Tiemei: 'in future, you must make some time to learn to read and so on, if you can write and paint, in future you can make good' (p. 20). For the other women however, motherhood defines the boundaries of their possibilities and their desires. The narrator comments:

'Under heaven it is only mothers who at all times and in all places see, hear and think of their children's needs. Even things that the children themselves have not thought of in their whole lives, she has thought of before they were even born. She regards this as a kind of happiness and enjoyment. In order to achieve her goal she will not care what time it is or what place it is. She [Granny Li] silently opened her small bundle, took out a needle, pulled out a length of thread and flattened it between her lips, narrowed her eyes, focussed, and threaded the needle.' (p. 18)

In a prison cell awaiting execution, Granny Li's still feels the need to repair Li Yuhe's torn shirt. Her persistence in performing this minor domestic service for him provides comfort and stability in this situation of extreme crisis. As such it can be considered a mark of female strength and agency. At the same time, however, it delineates the narrow limits of her subjectivity.

### **The Model Opera (yangbanxi) *The Red Lantern***

The adaptation of *The Red Lantern* into Beijing opera form facilitated the popularisation of the story to the greatest possible degree throughout China. At the time cinema facilities were not widely available outside the urban areas, and traditional Chinese theatre remained one of the most popular forms of entertainment both to watch and to perform. Beijing opera was considered the pinnacle of traditional theatrical art, so it made sense for those who wished to promote new social values to select Beijing opera as their vehicle for dissemination. Beijing opera is a highly formalised and stylised art form that is not expected to vary from performance to performance, so we can



analyse the official text and film as representative of the performances performed and watched throughout China in the 1960 and 1970s.<sup>12</sup> The very nature of Beijing Opera with its focus on character type rather than psychological complexity, and its need to convey plot and character through a series of ‘snapshots’ rather than detailed continuous narrative, meant that the *yangbanxi* operas presented to the audience very densely focused stereotyped gender ideals of the time.<sup>13</sup>

### *Sexuality and body*

In keeping with the virtual taboo on depictions of love and sexuality in Cultural Revolution literature and art, the model opera version of *The Red Lantern*, like the filmscript, does not incorporate any love or romance into its plot. Whereas in the film script Tiemei’s budding sexuality was hinted at through scenes of her preening her hair and admiring her own reflection, such minor details have been eliminated from the *yangbanxi*. Similarly the film script included descriptions of her attractive body and beautiful face, but there are no such physical descriptions in the Beijing Opera libretto. The *yangbanxi* *The Red Lantern* does nonetheless offer visual erotic pleasure to the viewer. As I have noted in another study, through the stipulated colour and cut of their costumes, both Tiemei and Li Yuhe are semiotically represented as eroticised figures: Tiemei through the traditional association of her red suit with female beauty and sexual promise, and Li Yuhe through *his* costumes – first the close-fitting, well-tailored jacket and coat that are his stylised railway linesman’s uniform, and second though the torn and gaping shirt revealing bare skin at the neck and arms in which he appears after being tortured.<sup>14</sup>

### *Gender roles and aspirations*

The Cultural Revolution period was well known for promoting the rights of women as men’s equals in all areas of society, so it is not surprising that women are found in a wider range of roles in the *yangbanxi* version of *The Red Lantern*. None of the women are merely wives or mothers: women now take roles as food stall owners, and members of the guerrilla army. The roles of the Li’s two neighbours, Hui Lian and Aunt Tian, have shifted from being apathetic housewives reluctant to help Tiemei and Granny Li

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12 It is said that when the *yangbanxi* were re-performed in the early 1990s performers changed some of the words thinking them too political for the 1990s environment. Audiences however complained loudly forcing the performers to restore the original librettos. This is in keeping with traditional expectations for reception of Beijing Opera and also highlights the importance of the *yangbanxi* for expressing nostalgia for a bygone idealistic youthful era for many of China’s older citizens.

13 These were ideals that were aspired to and copied by women of the time see for example Chen Xiaomei’s reflections in “Growing up with posters in the Maoist era” in *Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, ed. Stephanie Donald and Harriet Evans, 101-37, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 1999.

14 Roberts, Rosemary A. (2010) *Maoist Model Theatre: The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 94-108.



to being active participants in the plan to get the secret codes to the guerrillas.<sup>15</sup> Granny Li has also shifted in role to being a more active behind the scenes collaborator in Li Yuhe's underground work. When he returns home from a failed attempt to deliver the codes in Scene 5, instead of silently performing domestic tasks as she does in the film, she questions him directly: "Have you got in touch with him?" "Where is the code?" showing her intimate knowledge of and concern for what he is doing. She also shows an awareness of Marxist class analysis in her explanation of the plight of her neighbours. Knowing he will be arrested, Li Yuhe passes the task of delivering the codes on to her instead of to Tiemei as occurs in the film script. Granny Li is thus much more of a staunch, capable and aware revolutionary than in earlier versions of the work, earning her the affectionate popular nickname of '*geming laotaitai* – revolutionary granny.' On the other hand Granny Li's domestic role is reduced and weakened. She still performs domestic services for Li, such as sewing, and providing food, drink, and clothing, but because his figure has been idealised, she no longer exerts her authority over him in the form of ordering him not to drink alcohol or ordering him to go to bed, hence this form of female power no longer gains such strong representation.

In many ways the model opera sees the weakening of Tiemei's role. Although she still completes the transition from child to revolutionary, she actually does little on her own initiative. It is no longer she who hides the codes but Li Yuhe, and when she decides to retrieve them after her father and grandmother are executed she almost storms out in an avenging rage which would surely have resulted in her arrest.<sup>16</sup> Her neighbour, Aunt Tian, stops her just in time and insists on her swapping clothes with Huilian who lures the spies away leaving the coast clear for Tiemei to pick up the codes and deliver them to the guerrillas. Revenge on the traitor Wang is also removed from Tiemei's hands: instead of clubbing him with a lump of coal as she does in the film script, she is chaperoned up the mountain by the guerrillas and Wang is shot by a male guerrilla leader.

Although the Cultural Revolution period was much more radical in its promotion of female equality than the early sixties had been – epitomised by the slogan 'Anything a man can do a woman can also do' – it is interesting that this classic of the period actually represents a retreat from female agency and assertiveness in its younger female characters and it is the older women who have made extraordinary leaps in these areas. This suggests that the promotion of gender equality in that period was subordinated to

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15 Of course the 'iron girl' model had been promoted in China since the 1950s so it is not the case that there had been no models of women venturing into wider society promoted before the Cultural Revolution, but was it chiefly films designed to promote that particular model that depicted women in new roles? Did films on other topics also show women in new roles or did they tend to portray women in more traditional domestic roles?

16 In the same scene in the 1964 Beijing opera script she makes the same heartbroken declaration of hatred, anger and revenge, but she picks up the lantern and polishes it, then continues in a calmer manner to promise the dead Li and Granny that she will carry on the cause (*Hong dengji* in *Juben*, 1964, November issue, No 155, p. 24). In the 1970 script this second, calmer part of her speech has been cut and replaced with just one word 'zou!' [go! i.e. 'I'm off!'] (p.56), indicating her overhastiness, her lack of control of her feelings and her immaturity.

broader political goals of two types. First, it was subordinated to the goal of promoting class politics and the class hero, Li Yuhe, as evidenced in the more dominant role that Li Yuhe plays in the *yangbanxi*. Second, the weakening of Li Tiemei's role while Granny Li's role is strengthened suggests that the promotion of female equality was subordinated to the political goal at the time of suppressing and discrediting the youthful generation who had run amuck as Red Guards in the first two years of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>17</sup> Work on revising the opera script for the film version began around the beginning of 1969<sup>18</sup> which was also precisely the time when Mao was suppressing the youth movement by calling upon high school graduates to go the countryside and into the factories to learn from the peasants, workers and soldiers. No longer were youth to rebel and take things into their own hands, now they were to recognise their limitations and humbly learn from the older generation of proletarians.<sup>19</sup> Revisions to the script of the opera closely reflect this switch in allegiance from the younger generation (Tiemei) back to supporting the authority of the older generations (Granny Li and Aunt Tian).

### *Social and Cultural Opportunities*

In respect of social and cultural opportunities for women, the *yangbanxi* offers women a wider range of possibilities than had the earlier film script and film. Women are depicted in a wider though still limited range of social occupations, not just as housewives but also as owners of small commercial enterprises and as guerrilla fighters. The way that women perform those roles has also changed considerably: those who are housewives are intelligent, resourceful and courageous and their role in providing domestic service for husbands and children is given little space in the plot. Relationships between men and women are less dictatorial though all positions of leadership are still held by men and overall the gender hierarchy remains intact.

### **The TV series *The Red Lantern***

The choice of TV series for the most recent version of *The Red Lantern* is highly rational if one considers that most households now own a television and traditional opera has a dwindling following, especially among the young. Just as Beijing Opera was the ideal medium for mass dissemination of social messages in the 1960s, so the TV soap opera could be seen as the ideal choice for the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the adaptation to TV series, the writers drew on both the Beijing opera and the earlier film script and film. To expand those works into thirty episodes, characters were amplified and many new characters were added along with subplots associated with them.

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17 Thanks to Louise Edwards for pointing out this function of the weakening of Tie Mei's role.

18 See Dai Jiafang (1995) *Yangbanxi de fengfeng yuyu*, [the turbulent history of the yangbanxi]. Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, p. 85.

19 See Liu Guokai (1987). *A Brief Analysis of the Cultural Revolution*. New York: ME Sharpe p. 128.

To attract contemporary audiences, plots were shaped around two major elements: the addition of love (情) and thriller (惊) elements.<sup>20</sup>

### *Sexuality and Body*

In the TV series, Granny Li remains an asexual figure in line with conventional Chinese norms for elderly women. Tiemei's budding sexuality, hinted at obliquely in both of the earlier productions, is, however, given recognition through her relationship with two new male characters: Li Yuhe's apprentice, Niu Feilong, and a mysterious dentist Ji Mingzhong, who turns out to be a double agent working for the communist underground. In both cases love remains unrealised. Niu pursues Tiemei in vain, while Ji appears to reciprocate Tiemei's feelings secretly but remains silent because circumstances make a relationship impossible. Tiemei therefore, while having her affections stirred, remains a pure, virginal character. If we look at this version of Tiemei in the context of the Chinese woman warrior tradition, we can see that she bears resemblance to the teenage magic swordswomen of traditional tales who remained chaste while fighting for a righteous moral or political cause.<sup>21</sup> It could be considered a mark of the sanctity of the characters of Tiemei and Granny Li that even in the era of the commercialisation of bodies (particularly women's) and globalised, more liberal attitudes to sex and sexuality, the representation of the two women still accords with traditional moral expectations of women. The loftiest heroines must still conform to traditional ideals of female chastity.

Narratives of sexuality and the body are chiefly carried by new characters and new plots: The role of Li's neighbour Huilian has been expanded, and she now has a passionate love for Li Yuhe. Wang Lianju, the traitor, has a new wife, Shi Yutang, and the injured communist agent, Gu Moran, who leapt from the train at the beginning of each version of *The Red Lantern*, has a Russian lover, Vera. It is interesting to consider how each of these women and their lovers relate to traditional discourses of male and female sexuality and chastity.

Huilian and Li Yuhe's suppressed desire finds expression in one passionate kiss (p. 162), after which Li breaks off with her because his work is too dangerous and he does not want to implicate her. Li Yuhe thus conforms to the tradition, identified by Louie in his work on Chinese masculinity, of the loftiest Chinese hero who controls his sexual desire and eschews sexual relationships in order to achieve his heroic mission: he is potent, but self-controlled.<sup>22</sup> Huilian in turn, transgresses traditional parameters for female

20 The series is much more than a propaganda piece. Actor Han Ying, famous for her role in the long running soap opera *Hope* 《渴望》, gives an indication of the emotion attached to the *Red Lantern* characters by many older mainland Chinese when, already retired and in her seventies, she leapt at the chance to play the iconic Granny Li. When offered the role, Han said in an interview: 'I am in my seventies and felt very tired. I had just intended to rest. But when the producers of *The Red Lantern* asked me to play the role of Granny Li, I felt unexpectedly excited. I haven't been that excited for many years. Without a moment's hesitation I answered them: I want to be in that production.' (quoted in Yu and Wu, fifth page of photographs).

21 These characters were analysed very ably in Edwards, Louise, *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in the Red Chamber Dream*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994, p. 99-105.

22 Louie, Kam. *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

virtue by boldly expressing her sexuality and pursuing Li, but ultimately also conforms to traditional discourses of female chastity. She remains devoted to Li, and after his death, takes her own life in an avenging suicide bombing which kills several Japanese soldiers (p. 309). Her suicide is both the ultimate act of exerting agency and a re-enactment of the virtues of faithfulness and chastity traditionally admired in a chaste widow.

Gu Moran, adopts a similar treatment of Vera. She is a beautiful blonde Russian doctor with whom he fell in love while studying in Moscow. Their feelings still remain, but Gu continues to refuse the relationship because of his underground work with the Communist Party. His character therefore repeats the traditional discourse of the self-disciplined hero who controls and denies his sexual desire in the interests of a higher moral cause. Unlike Huilian, Vera does not die, but ultimately joins the communist guerrillas. As a foreign woman, she functions very much as an eroticised other, an object of desire who is not constrained by conventional norms for depicting positive Chinese women. This eroticisation is evident in a scene in which the evil Japanese Hatoyama forces the Head of Vera's hospital, Dr Bai, to be a guinea pig for a vial of truth drugs he plans to use on Gu Moran to force him to reveal the location of the secret codes. To test if Bai is under the influence of the drug, Hatoyama asks him a series of questions: Is Vera is beautiful and sexy? He replies that she is. Are her breasts beautiful? Yes, they are beautiful and adorable. Have they been to bed together? (p. 218). The degrading questions are more acceptable and more titillating because Vera is not Chinese.

The figure of Vera cannot be seen as indicative of discourses of sexuality and body that are relevant for understanding the gender psychology of Chinese women, but coded into her body are discourses of gender and nation that were not present in the earlier versions of the work. That the Russian woman Vera is the devoted lover of the Chinese communist agent surely should be seen as a symbol of China's new confidence in its prowess as a nation and a symbolic assumption of primacy over their once communist neighbour. Vera, who is blonde, could also be seen to represent Western women in general and therefore be extended in metaphorical meaning to express China's sense of having the right to a position of dominance over the Western world.

Traditional discourses of women and desire also inform the relationship between Wang Lianju's and his wife. Shi Yutang is another heavily eroticised figure, whose physical beauty and sexual desirability are repeatedly emphasised throughout the text of the TV series. The most explicit love scenes in the series feature this couple. Shi Yutang, however, becomes the reason why Wang Lianju turns traitor: Hatoyama threatens to rape and torture her if Wang does not reveal his communist contacts, and Wang submits to save her. This accords with traditional discourses of the dangers to men of women, female sexuality and sexual desire. In contrast to Li Yuhe and Gu Moran, Wang Lianju has been unable to control his sexual desire and endangers the whole communist mission as well as causing the deaths of many people including himself. Shi Yutang is an ambiguous figure. Her beautiful body leads men to disaster, but when she discovers that Wang is a traitor she commits suicide in the best tradition of her virtuous forebears: through suicide, she clears her name of the shame of association with a traitor, while remaining faithful to the husband she still loves (p. 299). Her figure therefore evokes both the traditional fears of the destructive potential of women and their sexuality, and

the traditional approval for the chaste woman who suicides to preserve her honour. The patriarchal discourses of ideal womanhood that permeate the portrayal of this character are neatly encapsulated in the scene of her suicide: After Wang Lianju's treachery is revealed, Shi Yutang is persuaded by Ji Mingzhong (her cousin) to execute him. She tries, but cannot bring herself to pull the trigger and so turns the gun on herself instead. As she lies dying in Wang Lianju's arms they declare their love for each other and then Yutang gasps out her last words:

I, I've let you down too. I am pregnant, but I've deprived you of your right to fatherhood. I am taking him away. I'm afraid I'll be lonely in heaven by myself, so please let the child come with me... We... will... wait... for... you... there." As she spoke Shi Yutang slowly closed that pair of beautiful, big eyes (p. 299).

Shi Yutang's words and actions reveal her as faithful, constant, self-abnegating, retiring, timid, submissive to her husband's authority (she asks for consent to take the child with her), and a devoted mother. Notably she refers to her unborn child with the pronoun 'ta' which in the text is given the male form 'he' (他): traditionally women were expected to produce a boy to carry on the ancestral family line, so Shi Yutang has fulfilled her duty to her husband's family by producing the boy child, while simultaneously the loss of a *boy* makes Wang Lianju's symbolic punishment all the more severe. So morally Shi Yutang exhibits all the patriarchal ideals for chaste Confucian womanhood. At the same time, even when she is dying a morally elevated and tragic death, attention is still drawn to her body as a source of voyeuristic pleasure – the final sentence of the chapter ending with the reference to her big, beautiful eyes. Even in death she cannot escape sexual objectification.

From the representation of the heterosexual couples in *The Red Lantern*, it seems that the traditional link between heroism and asceticism is explicated through the series. In each case it is the woman who tempts the man with a sexual relationship and in each case it is he who accepts or refuses: those who refuse, Li Yuhe, Gu Moran and Ji Mingzhong are heroes while those who succumb to women are the villains. Besides Wang Lianju, one of the Japanese commanders is destroyed by his uncontrolled obsession with a prostitute, and the Japanese lackeys who tail Tiemei are also depicted with excessive, uncontrolled desire. Although the heroes control their desire, their sexuality remains important. In contrast to their self-discipline and self denial, it is revealed that the cruel and evil Japanese commander Hatoyama is completely void of sexual desire. His sexual abnormality thus functions as a further symbol of his evil nature.

#### *Gender roles and aspirations*

Changes in the representation of gender roles in the TV series are complex and sometimes contradictory. Taken overall one of the most noticeable changes is the quite extraordinary increase in female service roles which had almost disappeared from the *yangbanxi* version. Granny Li, Tiemei and Huilian are all repeatedly depicted performing service tasks for Li Yuhe, including feeding him, clothing him, brushing his hair, mending his clothes, washing his feet and so on. Shi Yutang similarly is

frequently depicted performing domestic service tasks for Wang Lianju. Shi is first introduced to readers/viewers at the gates of the college where she is a teacher, so she is an educated, professional woman, but from then on the TV series completely ignores her professional and social roles and dwells on her as a body and as a lover and wife. The Russian woman, Vera, similarly is a medical specialist, but attention is drawn more to her role as object of sexual desire, as lover and as mother, than as a highly qualified and competent professional woman. In her work she often challenges her superiors and is difficult to deal with – also reflecting traditional views of women and the traditional fear of educated and powerful women.

The representation of Tiemei and Granny Li also reflects this increased complexity and ambiguity of gender discourses. In the TV series, Granny Li's role as Li Yuhe's advisor and collaborator has been magnified even further, and she has been attributed with many years of experience as an underground communist activist in her own right. After Li Yuhe's death, Granny Li devises the plan which enables Tiemei to escape with the codes, and gives her life heroically to enable Tiemei to avoid capture. The heroism, courage, resourcefulness and intelligence of the Granny Li figure have therefore been magnified, but as noted, her service roles have also been expanded. For example she symbolically places herself in a subordinate position to Li Yuhe by humbly washing his feet – not a service an adult son would normally expect his parent to perform.

Granny Li in the TV series has also been given some ambiguous consciousness of gender issues. When Li Yuhe says to her that Tiemei must be kept out of revolutionary work and harm's way because she will need to marry, serve her parents-in-law and produce children, Granny rebukes him for being "Feudal". But Granny also sees the female role as secondary. She explains to Li Yuhe that she is training Tiemei in underground work because: "If you are walking at night, men carry the dog-beating stick, but the woman should also carry a rock. Sometimes the stick is too short, but the stone can fly a long way" (p. 19). Woman's role is to be back up and assistant, not that of an equal.

Tiemei is an increasingly assertive figure in the narrative, not afraid to ignore the demands of her family or authority figures such as Niu or Ji, and not afraid to devise and carry out her own plans, such as her covert spying on the Japanese headquarters. At the same time, however, as noted above she has a strong domestic service function, and there are constant reminders that her life and fate are in the hands of men. She is rescued from death, assault or rape on several occasions by Ji Mingzhong and Niu Feilong (p.146; 306), including a symbolic scene near the end of the series. Echoing the plot in the original film script, she has allowed herself to be captured by the Japanese to allow Niu Feilong to escape with the codes. She is walking towards the burning carriage in which she dies in the 1962 script when Niu Feilong returns with a train and rescues her, only to run out of fuel a short way down the track. As the Japanese close in on them in another train, she refuses to leave Niu, but he picks her up and throws her out of the train into the waiting arms of Ji Mingzhong, his rival in love, whom he instructs to take care of her. Niu then rams the oncoming Japanese train, killing many of the Japanese soldiers on board and dying a martyr's death. Tiemei is therefore been symbolically passed from one man to the other (p. 311).

Interestingly in this TV version, Tiemei is given the role of executing Hatoyama. He has been thrown out of the crashed train and is lying on the ground. Seeing that Tiemei and Ji Mingzhong are going to kill him, he begs Ji Mingzhong to do it because he doesn't want to die at the hands of a woman. Ji hands Tiemei the gun (a clear symbol of phallic power) and she shoots him twice. So the humiliation of the Japanese villain is made complete by a backhand denigration of women. Ji then grabs the gun back to fight off some Japanese soldiers, there is no doubt that he is in control and he decides when she will control the firearm (p.312). The woman only receives the symbol of phallic power temporarily in order to humiliate the enemy after which it is immediately removed from her.

Despite the discourses of patronage, control and possession of the female, however, in the very last scene, Ji is back undercover as a double agent and Tiemei is moving off with the guerrilla troop using her red lantern to light their way over some slippery rocks. She is no longer under any specific man's control and is more of a free agent than at any other time in the novel.

In general the historical development from filmscript through Beijing opera to soap opera sees Tiemei and Granny transition from passive to active, from supporting male action and being chaperoned through revolutionary acts to more independent revolutionary action, sometimes in defiance of male directives and sometimes even in order to save males. They gain agency but in a limited and ambiguous way. Women have moved out of the domestic sphere, but the text reassures the reader that despite the challenge that these character present to old parameters for female behaviour, male position and privilege has not been significantly eroded. Women acquire courage, intelligence and initiative but their role as providers to men of domestic services is not in the least diminished.

### *Social and Cultural Opportunities*

As the discussion above indicates, social and cultural opportunities for women are expanded significantly in the TV series. Women are not just mothers, wives and daughters, but educated professionals, teachers, doctors and union activists. Nonetheless, if we look at gender power structures represented in the series, all leading positions whether in the hospitals, police, military or underground are still held by men, and further, the significance of the expansion of women's roles represented is undercut by their professional roles being made less important than their roles as wives and mothers or their roles as objects of sexual desire for male characters and for viewers.

### **Conclusions**

Going back to our three components of gender psychology: gender subjectivity, gender identity and social and cultural opportunities, if we consider the findings on the three works, we can conclude that in the filmscript, female gender psychology is represented as stable: society only offers women subordinate, domestic roles, but women's conceptions of their own roles and ways of relating to the world do not exceed the bounds of those roles. In the film script it is significant that the only hint of broader



possibilities for women comes from the mouth of Li Yuhe as he exhorts Tiemei to educate herself so that she can have a better future. Women, as represented here, are and aspire only to be reproducers and service providers for men.

In the model opera, gender identities (in the form of the roles perceived as appropriate for women) and social and cultural opportunities have been expanded. Women can be not just mothers but guerrilla fighters, stall owners and underground resistance collaborators. With regard to gender subjectivity, female characters continue to identify their major mode of relating to the world as in a service role particularly for men and in roles of submission to (positive) male power and authority. However, at the same time they also manifest a much stronger orientation towards the outside world: Granny Li's questioning Li Yuhe about the codes indicates her sense of agency in participating in the secret mission. Similarly the sense of self manifest in the role of Aunt Tian, who prevents Tiemei from acting rashly and astutely arranges for her escape to deliver the codes, is a strong contrast with that manifested through the wife of the communist liaison officer in the earlier film script whose only role is to obey her husband's orders and look after the baby. The relatively short time between the production of the film and the production of the *yangbanxi* version of *The Red Lantern*, combined with the fact that the film script was written by two males while the *yangbanxi* was closely supervised by the female Jiang Qing and could be considered to reflect female subjectivity more closely, suggests that there was a destabilisation of gender psychology in this period as female gender identity and gender subjectivity outstripped the bounds male dominated culture had set for them.

The TV series represents a female gender psychology that has become even more complex, contradictory and unstable: taking Tiemei as our example, gender subjectivity has undergone significant change. Tiemei is constantly negotiating between independence and submission; she challenges and refuses male domination and direction in many cases, but is also often positioned as a possession for exchange by men, and clearly conceives her relationship to men to include as a major component the role of provider of domestic services. In terms of the second and third components of gender psychology, many different female roles – or possibilities for gender identities – are presented to Tiemei: mother, housewife, stall holder, prostitute, teacher, medical specialist and so on, but cultural possibilities are ambiguous. The figures of the Russian doctor, Vera, and the college teacher Shi Yutang indicate that even if women achieve elite professional positions in society, it is not those achievements and roles on which they will be judged: it is still the women's sexual attributes and their roles as lovers, wives and mothers which define them, determine their value and determine their fates.

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### Biographical note

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