

REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICISM AND EXCESS: TRANSFORMATION OF THE IDEALIZED FEMALE BODY IN *THE RED LANTERN* ON STAGE AND SCREEN

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Introduction

As unique artistic creations and a politico-cultural phenomenon associated with a turbulent and traumatic era in modern Chinese history — the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) — the revolutionary model works (*geming yangbanxi* 革命樣板戲)¹ and films based on these works have increasingly re-attracted both public and academic interest in recent years,² inspiring vehement debates among Chinese intellectuals.³ Whether considered as an infamous accomplice of totalitarianism or as highly refined formalistic artworks released from their controversial original context, the *yangbanxi* continue to arrest critical attention and exploration with their spectacular audiovisual appeal, utopian vision, and aesthetic vitality. Investigations into these characteristics benefit from historical and critical distance. Most previous research, however, works primarily to submit the *yangbanxi* to a political, ideological or narratological interpretation, and the autonomous power of its formal and aesthetic aspects has remained relatively overlooked.

In this paper, I take the revolutionary model Beijing Opera film *The Red Lantern* (*hongdengji* 紅燈記, 1970)⁴ as a case study, and explore the revolutionized modern Beijing Opera's assimilation and reinvention of traditional stage convention and

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- 1 The first group of eight revolutionary model plays include five modern revolutionary Peking Operas: *The Red Lantern* (*Hongdengji*/紅燈記), *Shajia Creek* (*Shajiabang*/沙家浜), *On The Docks* (*haigang*/海港), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu weihushan*/智取威虎山), *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*qixi baihutuan*/奇襲白虎團); two revolutionary ballets: *The White-Haired Girl* (*baimaonü*/白毛女) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (*hongse niangzijun*/紅色娘子軍); and one symphonic work.
 - 2 These performances and films were banned for some time after the Cultural Revolution due to their intimate links to the nation's and most people's harrowing memories of the period. The works have since reemerged on stage, on the screen, and on television in recent years, enjoying a broad popularity—they have been nostalgically labeled “Red Classics” (紅色經典). The complex and perplexing psychology behind the phenomenon invites further investigation.
 - 3 See Fu Jin (傅謹), “樣板戲現象平議”, in *京劇學前沿*, 文化藝術出版社, 2007. pp. 233-245.
 - 4 Directed by Cheng Yin (成蔭) and produced by “August First Film Studio,” under Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing's close supervision.

Western theatrical and musical elements.⁵ Specifically, I trace the representation of the female body and its surrounding space in its double transformation in the film— that is, its transformation from the traditional to the modern and revolutionary, and from the stage to the screen. The excessively formalistic expression in the modern work may appear entirely distinct from traditional practice, in terms of performance conventions, setting, costume, theme, and so forth; however, I will demonstrate that the two share fundamental characteristics and that Beijing Opera could indeed serve as an appropriate art form to enhance revolutionary ideology. Although it emerged under extreme social, political, and cultural circumstances, revolutionary model opera should not be regarded as an abrupt historical disruption or an isolated phenomenon, but as a continuation of an intention to reform and modernize traditional Chinese theater that had already begun in the early twentieth century⁶ and persists on the contemporary Beijing Opera stage.

The filmic version of *The Red Lantern* is based on an eponymous Beijing Opera stage production that had several precursors: a Shanghai Opera (huju/滬劇) version was derived from an earlier Beijing Opera version performed by the Ha'erbin Beijing Opera troupe and titled *The Revolution Has Successors* (geming ziyou houlairen 革命自有後來人); this was in turn adapted from the feature film *The Revolution Has Successors* (ziyou houlairen 自有後來人, 1963).⁷ Interestingly, the inspiration for the narrative setting also draws partly from the traditional Beijing Opera piece *The Orphan of the Zhao Family* (zhaoshi guer/趙氏孤兒), suggesting the original film's umbilical connection with traditional Chinese theatre. After numerous rounds of transplanting, translation and revision under Jiang Qing's close supervision, the tremendous critical and popular success of the official version of *The Red Lantern*⁸ established its model status as an example of how Chinese opera could be modernized and revolutionized.⁹ It thus experienced a process of mystification, idealization, and sublimation, achieving a kind of formal and ideological excess. Its creative energy and aesthetic values were integrated with a lofty ideological cause, marking a significant interpenetration of art and politics. *The Red Lantern* was, in 1970, one of the first of the models to be made into a film, in order to preserve and standardize the official version, to reach a broader audience, and to provide instruction for amateur performances and emulations.

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- 5 This innovation followed Mao Zedong's 1964 credo "employ the old for the present, utilize the Foreign for the Chinese (古為今用, 洋為中用)," which he articulated in a letter to a student of the Central Conservatory of China. This has become a key principle in attempts to assimilate elements from Chinese cultural heritage and foreign cultural influences.
- 6 For a detailed historical account, see Wan Qingrong (萬慶榮), "On the Aesthetics of the Bourgeois Drama Reform Movement (論資產階級戲曲改良運動的美學思想)," in "中國藝術研究院首屆研究生碩士學位論文集, 戲曲卷, 中國藝術研究院研究生部編," Beijing: 文化藝術出版社, 1985. pp. 373-400.
- 7 Directed by Yu Yanfu (于彥夫) and written by Shen Mojun (沈默君) and Luo Jing (羅靜), produced by Changchun Film Studio.
- 8 Weng Ouhong (翁偶虹) was commissioned to write it, and A Jia (阿甲) to direct it. Due to conflicts of opinion with Jiang Qing, they were dismissed during the Cultural Revolution and Jiang Qing took over. See Weng Ouhong, 翁偶虹編劇生涯, 同心出版社, 2008, pp. 390-402.
- 9 For more background information on *The Red Lantern*, see Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, Cambridge University Press, 2008. pp. 35-39.

The film *The Red Lantern*, however, is in no way a visual record or documentation of the stage performance.¹⁰ It conveys the qualities and spirit of the original work, and greatly heightens the grandeur and power already pervasive in the stage version by abundantly employing cinematic techniques such as indicative camera angles, fluent tracking shots, and the insertion of close-ups of faces, hands and objects in order to construct a plastic cinematic world. More significantly, the excessive revolutionary visual rhetoric presented by body movements, facial expressions and hand gestures, combined with the close-ups and the proximity between the camera and the human body, suggest a strong sense of the corporeality and materiality of the body on the screen.¹¹ Furthermore, the direct and intimate means of presenting the characters' loaded revolutionary passion and deep hatred towards the enemy make these emotions seem almost to penetrate the screen and impinge on the audience in an attempt to determine the spectator's bodily and sensory perception of the film. Consequently, I call the revolutionary model opera film a "body genre"—a term borrowed from Linda Williams.¹²

The Female Body in Temporal Journey: from the Traditional to the Modern and Model

Traditional Beijing Opera is an extremely stylized theatrical tradition and a synthesis of several arts, in which the synchronized elements of singing, dancing, pantomime, music and speech form an organic unity. In its extensive history, it has established a series of stereotyped patterns and modes of expression centering on the performer's elaborately choreographed movements—these appear as an ensemble in which the footwork, hand gestures, eye movements, arms, and water sleeves (*shuixiu*, 水袖)¹³ are all in rhythmic harmony. The performer's exquisite and flamboyant costume and movement arrest attention and paradoxically form both a contrast to and accordance with the abstract and symbolic environment—usually an austere stage with a backdrop and minimalist properties such as one table and two chairs. The abstract theatrical space stimulates the audience's imagination, facilitated by the narrative progression and the performer's gestures and oral

10 The slogan and principle guiding opera film productions based on stage versions was "Restoring the Stage, Beyond the Stage (huanyuan wutai, gaoyu wutai/ 還原舞臺, 高於舞臺)."

11 This sense of intimacy and physicality may diminish for a theater audience due to its distance from the stage, in spite of the actor's actual presence; on the screen, however, the illusion of corporality is intensified by the proximity of the camera (and thus the spectator) to the human body, despite its corporeal absence.

12 Williams names three sensational film body genres: pornography, horror and melodrama, imbued with excessive sex, violence and emotion, respectively. I find the term and the categories to be relevant to revolutionary model opera film, which teems with excessive coded gestures, body postures, and emotions. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, sixth edition, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 727-741.

13 An extra length of cloth that consist of long strips of white silk attached to the cuffs of a costume, reinforces the flowing beauty of the costume and body movement, as well as emotional expressivity and gesticulation conventions, such as sleeves quivering, throwing, wigwagging, casting, raising, swinging, tossing, whisking, rolling, folding, crossing and so on.

descriptions. The indefinite space is enhanced and defined by the performer's moving body in a free flow. In Elizabeth Wichmann's words, "the simple staging of traditional theater achieves its highly plastic nature through the use of conventions."¹⁴

The model opera's bold yet ingenious theatrical innovations, based on the attempt to modernize and revolutionize traditional theater, are associated with a certain realistic and naturalistic tendency that has been attributed to the influence of Western theatrical practice and techniques—specifically, that of the spoken drama (*huaju* 話劇).¹⁵ With a newly invented abundant and magnificent rhetoric of performance and stage setting derived yet distinct from traditional conventions, model opera defamiliarized traditional Beijing Opera and proved its uniqueness; in Constantine Tung's view, they "distinguished themselves as a new theater."¹⁶

Yet model opera may not be as distinct from the traditional theater as it may at first appear; there are, in fact, certain essential consistencies between the "new" and the old, the "modern" and the traditional. Taking *The Red Lantern* as an example, parallels and connections can be drawn: its subject, for instance, is a synthesis of the traditional dichotomy of civil themes (the Li family's struggle with the Japanese invaders) and martial matters (an intense combat scene and a spectacular display of acrobatics herald the victorious denouement). It also makes use of some of the same conventional methods of unfolding narrative and portraying character as its traditional counterpart: the antagonism (or theatrical conflicts) between the straightforwardly recognizable positive and negative characters results in the good triumphing over the evil. Further, model opera shares traditional opera's penchant for aestheticism and idealism on stage: in both, the primary concern of costume and movement is beauty and harmony rather

14 Elizabeth Wichmann, "Traditional Theater in Contemporary Chinese," in Colin Mackerras, ed. *Chinese Theater: From Its Origin to the Present Day*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983. p.186.

15 Clark, 12; 36; Zhang Lian (張連), *中國戲曲舞臺美術史論*, 文化藝術出版社, 2002. p.213. The influence of spoken drama can be roughly summarized as follow: (1) Replace a performer-oriented system with a writer-director-centered system, put more emphasis on standardized play texts and restrict the performer's improvisation (which was widely practiced in traditional Beijing Opera). (2) Strengthen and dramatize the traditional narrative structure, fostering a more deliberate movement towards a climax and denouement. (3) Borrow means of characterization and performance from spoken drama and emphasize deep emotion (Stanislavsky's "method acting" was influential in the Chinese theatrical world, including Beijing Opera circles – even Mei Lanfang gave lip service to it in the 1950s, although it is unlikely that he considered it to suit Beijing Opera). In typical traditional Beijing Opera performances, the performer distances him or herself from the role he or she is portraying; this method was one of the inspirations for Bertolt Brecht's famous concept of "alienation effect." (4) Divide the play into acts, localize and specify the spaces, and add naturalistic scenery and settings to the abstract stage space (in the 1950s, a curtain was added and the "property man" who rearranges the settings in the midst of the performance was abolished, in order to construct an illusion of enclosed narrative space). (5) Use more comprehensible colloquial speech (*jingbai*) rather than traditional rhythmic dialogues (*yunbai*).

16 Constantine Tung, "Introduction: Tradition and Experience of the Drama of the People's Republic of China," in Constantine Tung and Colin Mackerras, eds. *Drama in the People's Republic of China*, State University of New York Press, 1987. p. 13.

than realism.¹⁷ Although the model opera attempts to abolish the traditional “feudal” performer-centered system, stress the significance of the writer-director’s role and institutionalize modern Beijing Opera practice, the works’ idealized proletarian hero has been given extraordinary prominence on the stage: unsurprisingly, that aura attaches to the performers who portray the heroes as well.¹⁸ This substantiates and even enhances the unsurpassable position of the performance and the leading performer in the model opera. Finally, the highly stylized traditional conventions remain on the revolutionary stage in role categories, costume, setting, and performance, though with modifications and alterations. Through typification and repetition, new patterns and stereotypes are constructed and submitted to extreme revolutionary formalism and dogmatism.

There are four principal role categories in traditional Beijing Opera and numerous subcategories under each type: *sheng* (生), male roles;¹⁹ *dan* (旦), female roles;²⁰ *jing* (淨), male warriors or generals with a rough and uninhibited character; and *chou* (丑), comedians or clowns. The classification indicates the character’s gender, age, occupation, social status, and stereotyped temperament²¹ rather than addressing the psychology of the individual; it also designates the particular performing style, costume, and quality of singing voice. Because these roles were “developed to portray Confucian

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- 17 This is a well-established convention broadly accepted by Beijing Opera audiences. Here Elizabeth Wichmann’s description offers a useful demonstration: “everything on the stage, everything within the world of the play, must above all be beautiful... a beggar will be dressed in a black silk robe covered with multicolored silk patches, rather than in actually dirty or tattered clothes... the clothes of the poorest peasant are clean and neatly patched... marked by a few strategically placed tears and conventionally suggested blood stains on an otherwise crisp and clean uniform” (Wichmann, pp. 191). The convention can easily be seen in the characters’ costumes in *The Red Lantern* – their neatly patched clothes only symbolically indicate they are proletarians, and Li Yuhe’s neatly torn white clothes suggest that he has been brutally tortured by the Japanese.
- 18 Qian Haoliang (錢浩梁), who played Li Yuhe, Gao Yuqian (高玉倩), who played Granny Li, and Liu Changyu (劉長瑜), who portrays Li Tiemei, were all extremely popular during this time, and their popularity persists today. Their careers and personal lives have been inseparable from the characters of *The Red Lantern*, and their other repertoires were all overshadowed by this.
- 19 *Laosheng* (老生, middle-aged or old man with beard), *Xiaosheng* (小生, young scholars) and *Wusheng* (武生, man with martial skills) are the three main subcategories in the *sheng* type.
- 20 *Dan* can be divided into four main subcategories: *Qingyi* (青衣, gentle and virtuous young woman), *Huadan* (花旦, vivacious girl from an ordinary household or of extroverted disposition), *Laodan* (老旦, old female) and *Wudan* (武旦, female with martial skills). For a general introduction to Beijing Opera, see Xu Chengbei (徐城北), *Peking Opera*, trans. Chen Gengtao, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003.
- 21 For instance, in the category of “painted face” (*jing*/ 淨 or *hualian*/ 花臉), the elaborate, multicolored facial designs symbolize the personality and temperament of the character portrayed: white expresses cunning and treachery; black, integrity and straightforwardness; red, loyalty and courage; blue, ferocity and fearlessness; green, evil spirits or supernatural beings, and so on. See A. C. Scott, “The Performance of Classical Theater,” in Colin Mackerras, ed. *Chinese Theater: From Its Origin to the Present Day*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983. p. 139.

values and their resulting behavior patterns at different levels of social status,²² they are inappropriate for the portrayal of revolutionary workers, peasants and soldiers. The model operas, however, were never intended to erase all traces of traditional opera,²³ and they still adopt traditional role types and performing conventions. Efforts were made, however, to obscure, modify and blend the traditional roles into a new system of visual rhetoric according to the division between collective proletariat and the classes antagonistic to them. The newly incorporated role category system augments the stylization of characters and decreases the number of role types, while on other hand, it breaks the unification of character, role type and performer in traditional Beijing Opera.²⁴ Consequently, female protagonists in the model operas such as Li Tiemei (李鐵梅) in *The Red Lantern*, Sister Aqing (阿慶嫂) in *Shajia Creek* (*shajiabang* 沙家浜), Fang Haizhen (方海珍) in *On the Docks* (*haigang* 海港), Ke Xiang (柯湘) in *Azalea Mountains* (*dujuanshan* 杜鵑山) and Jiang Shuiying (江水英) in *Song of the Dragon River* (*longjiangsong* 龍江頌) are neither purely *qingyi* nor *huadan*, but revolutionary heroines with revolutionized body movements, gestures and rhetoric. All female characters adopt the hand gesture of “clenched fist,” for instance, which in traditional theatre is used only for *wusheng* (man with martial skills) or *wudan* (woman with martial skills), to display might and determination.²⁵

Nevertheless, the downplayed classical role types can still be identified based on the performance role and the background of the performers who interpret them; for example, the role of Li Yuhe in *The Red Lantern* can be classified as *wusheng*,²⁶ that of Li Tiemei as *huadan*,²⁷ and that of Granny Li as *laodan*.²⁸ *Wusheng* achieves an unprecedentedly privileged position on the revolutionary model opera stage and screen because its masculine and heroic body postures and movements provoke a strong sense of power, strength and magnificent heroism that the revolutionary ideology

22 Wichmann, p. 189.

23 It also would be impossible totally to forsake the tradition, if it is still in a certain sense “Beijing Opera.”

24 Yu Cong (余從) and Wang Ankui (王安葵), eds. 中國當代戲曲史, 學苑出版社, 2005. p.579.

25 I will elaborate on this point and on the debates surrounding gender issues based on this representation later in this article.

26 Qian Haoliang was already a promising *wusheng* performer appearing in a traditional repertoire before he portrayed Li Yuhe;

27 Liu Changyu was a *Xun* (Xun Huisheng/ 荀慧生) *pai* (school派) *huadan* performer. Xun Huisheng (1900-1968) was a well-known male performer of the *dan* category in twentieth century China, listed as one of the “four outstanding *dans*” along with Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳), Cheng Yanqiu (程硯秋) and Shang Xiaoyun (尚小雲). He was accomplished in the *huadan* repertoire. *Pai* describes an artistic performing method and tonal style.

28 Gao Yuqian’s case confirms efforts to break the barriers of role types. She was a well-established Mei (Lanfang) school *qingyi* performer, but transformed herself into a *laodan* role. She had to alter the conventions (such as posture, hand movements, and singing voice) of her category to adapt to the role of an old woman. She also had to wear a wig and make-up because she was portraying, in her forties, Granny Li, who is in her sixties or seventies.

favors and stresses.²⁹ The primary negative character in *The Red Lantern* is the Japanese commander Jiushan (鳩山), who can be roughly categorized as a modified version of the *jing* (painted-face) role.³⁰ The *jing* roles usually have a tempestuous nature and swaggering self-assertive manner, accompanied by a gruff bass voice. Jiushan's face would be painted white in traditional theater to signify cunning and treachery, but here the traditional *jing* role has been uglified and stupefied, and the original swashbuckling postures have been transposed into stooping and cowering stances.

In the film *The Red Lantern*, the hero Li Yuhe's mother, Granny Li, and daughter, Li Tiemei, are so-called secondary characters in model opera whose function was to act as a foil to highlight Li's heroism, in accordance with the principle of "three prominences" (三突出).³¹ Excessive close-ups of Li Yuhe's face have been abruptly and repeatedly inserted, regardless of their lack of narrative function or spatial continuity in the cinematic world. In comparison, there are far fewer inserted close-ups of Tiemei and Granny Li,³² and these have specific filmic functions. Nonetheless, they remain significant characters in model opera's revolutionary pantheon of heroes. Granny Li sacrifices her life for the lofty cause of revolution along with Li Yuhe, and Tiemei remains as the legitimate successor to the red lantern and thus to the utopian future. In this new context, Tiemei gains struggle experience, constantly heightens political consciousness, and transforms herself into one of the more mature and prominent figures, like Fang Haizhen in *On the Docks* and Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountains*, who come to occupy the central stage in later *yangbanxi*. Thus, female characters from different model operas suggest a certain continuity and intertextuality in the revolutionary narrative.

Named "Iron Plum," Tiemei is the burgeoning, iron-willed revolutionary heroine who partly preserves her *huadan* prototype's costume and stylized performance. In traditional theater, the vivacious, extroverted young woman of the *huadan* role is

29 Tong Xiangling (童祥苓), who portrayed the main hero Yang Zirong (楊子榮) in another model Beijing Opera, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, is a *laosheng* performer. He was appointed to the role by Jiang Qing because of his high-pitched heroic voice. He also performed some martial feats that were specially designed for the *wusheng* role to enhance the hero's dignified righteousness and statuesque postures.

30 Yuan Shihai (袁世海), who portrayed Jiushan, was an accomplished and well-known *jing* performer. Other negative *jing* roles in model operas include Hu Chuankui (胡傳魁) in *Shajia Creek* and Zuoshandiao (座山雕) in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. There are also positive characters in the *jing* role type, mainly oppressed men in need of political instruction under the Party's guidance, such as Li Yongqi (李勇齊) in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* and Lei Gang (雷剛) in *Azalea Mountain*. The *xiaosheng* (小生) role type was banished from the model opera stage because its genteel and effeminate manner and voice is meant to portray feudal scholars, which was incompatible with revolutionary ideology and aesthetics.

31 The principle of "Three Prominences": "of all characters, give prominence to the positive characters; of the positive characters, give prominence to heroes; and of the heroes, give prominence to the principal hero." Yu Huiyong (于會泳) first propounded this formulation in an article published on *wenhuibao* (文匯報) in 1968. The principle extended from stage placement to all aspects of model opera practice and filmmaking, including body movement, language, lighting, camera angle, composition, and so forth. See Clark, 46.

32 Mainly framed in a tracking shot.

commonly depicted as a maidservant of low social status—this coincides with Tiemei’s status. The traditional *huadan* usually wears brightly colored costumes that consist of a close-fitting blouse and wide trousers. Since the role type features abundant hand gestures, water sleeves are rarely used. There is not much of a discrepancy between the traditional *huadan* costume and Tiemei’s costume: wide trousers and a brightly colored coat without water sleeves.³³ Tiemei’s hand gestures and eye movements, however, appear less delicate and more simplified, focused, and solemn in directly expressing emotions compared with those of her traditionally extroverted and flirtatious counterpart. In a *huadan* convention, Tiemei sometimes walks with quick, minute steps, and she speaks and sings in a clear, piercing high falsetto. With the modest costume and body movements, femininity has been restrained and downplayed in an attempt to accentuate Tiemei’s revolutionary spirit. Yet Tiemei retains her feminine charm, particularly through her vivid, slightly mischievous facial expressions in the first thirty minutes of the film (before Li Yuhe is arrested by the Japanese and the family destroyed).

Granny Li appears as a dignified older woman with a strong character, in the convention of the *laodan*. In traditional theater, the *laodan* wears very light makeup and a costume that is more subdued in color and design. In addition, singing is prioritized and few body movements and hand gestures are required. These all find resonance in Granny Li’s costume, movements and singing, but a difference appears in the replacement of the long gown and water sleeves with Granny Li’s plain, grey, patched coat and trousers. In several scenes, however, she holds her right arm in front of her chest, as if the water sleeves were still there.

The austere contemporary wear and headdress of both Tiemei and Granny Li are devoid of the stage jewelry and artificial flowers that are used extensively in traditional theater but considered “gratuitous” decoration for proletarian women in model opera. However, the stage costumes never become authentic replicas of everyday dress, and certain aesthetic concerns inherited from traditional theater have been prioritized—the characters’ neatly patched clothes and scarf, for example.³⁴ In *The Red Lantern*, Li Yuhe and Granny Li never change their costumes, but Tiemei appears in three different coats at different stages of the opera: the first coat is red with opalescent plum blossom patterns (echoing her name), the second is blue with ivory-white flowery patterns, and the third is pure, bright red, matching the color of the string binding her braid. The three coats not only have a narrative function (Tiemei and neighbor Huilian 慧蓮 change clothes twice to outwit the watchful spies), but are also endowed with symbolic meaning and suggest Tiemei’s growth from an innocent and immature young girl to a competent, “red” successor of the revolution bearing a traumatic memory and a determination to avenge the martyrs’ blood.

Beyond the alteration of costume, the modification of stage setting and theatrical space in model opera also redefines the human body’s relationship to its surroundings. Because of the lack of scenery on the nearly-bare stage of traditional theater, there

33 Of course it is not a period costume and more subdued in material, color, and design, to accommodate Tiemei’s identity as a poor girl from a revolutionary worker’s family.

34 See note 16.

is much more scope for conveying a sense of space through body movements and gestures. For instance, with a pantomimic gesture of opening or closing a door, the theatrical space is automatically demarcated into inner and outer space in the spectator's imagination. Dancing in circles on the stage with a riding whip decorated with brightly-colored tassels signifies traveling thousands of miles on horseback. The introduction of realistic settings on the model opera's stage removes part of the expressive power of choreographic delineation and symbolic representation of the indefinite, flowing theatrical space. The resulting paradox is inevitable: the confined traditional stage space inspires the spectator's unbounded imagination and becomes a potentially limitless space because of its abstractness, while the specific space of modern and model opera enriches the visual but also restricts the power of imagination, thus restraining the pantomimic and suggestive aspect of performance.³⁵ In *The Red Lantern*, it would be redundant and clumsy to mime opening and closing a door because it is already visible on the stage. The walls and doors also physically obstruct the theatrical space, and these visible barriers impede bodies from traversing the space freely. On the other hand, due to the presence of realistic settings, the performer is relieved from describing the scenery and surroundings verbally and is able to focus on expressing emotion and inner experience.³⁶

The scenic devices introduced from spoken drama into modern model operas include multiple-set realistic scenery (such as the painted background of mountains outside the Li family's house), lighting (such as the symbolic red light emanating from the red lantern) and sound effects (such as gunshots), and special effects (such as smoke and flash pots). However, *The Red Lantern's* restrained use of scenery and stage furniture indicates that there is no intention to achieve a naturalistic effect, even though the narrative theoretically unfolds in the realistic milieu of the Japanese occupation. The interior spaces of the Li family home come close to maintaining the symbolic, minimalist quality of the stage, with one table and two chairs placed slightly right of the stage center (as well as a couple of other minor, unobtrusive small props like an oil-lamp and a broom to reflect the domestic atmosphere). The minimal stage properties help ensure the audience's attention to the performance itself. On the other hand, the setting's austerity can also be interpreted as a suggestion of poverty. Because of the cinema's indexical and photographic nature, the furniture and properties acquire a kind of materiality on the screen, with its rich color and texture. This materiality echoes the pictorial physicality of the human body as it interacts with its surroundings.

The door and window demarcating the room from the exterior mark the room as an enclosed space; the cinematic representation of the interior space, however, does not avoid a strong sense of theatricality, since the performers centered on the stage and in the frame act and sing in a presentative way, confronting the camera as a substitute

35 There are famous debates among Chinese scholars and audiences surrounding Yang Zirong's "horse dance" scene in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. The scene means to signify that he is riding a horse and going up to Tiger Mountain by deploying a riding whip on an abstract stage, but the realistic scenery which clearly defines the location and space means he is going round in circles in the same place, and makes the performance lose symbolic meaning. Zhang Lian, p. 214.

36 *Ibid.*, p.214.

for the theater audience. Furthermore, two panning shots deliberately reveal that the fourth wall is missing, breaking the illusion of an enclosed space and proclaiming its theatricality. The first such shot appears 10'14" into the film, when Li Yuhe carries the unconscious liaison man into the room on his back. The camera pans from the left following Li, revealing that the fourth wall is missing and placing the exterior and interior spaces into a single shot and a spatiotemporal continuum.³⁷ The second shot appears 106'40" into the film: here Huilian, wearing Tiemei's coat and Li Yuhe's scarf, goes out from the same door to distract the spies outside, and the camera follows her to the left. These two mobile shots in opposite directions emerge toward the beginning and the ending of the narrative respectively, and resonate with each other spatially. They also mark the transgression of two non-family members through the door, both for a lofty revolutionary cause—the secret code's safe transfer to its destination.

The domestic space of the Li family home would represent a confinement for a woman in the traditional theater, both in Beijing Opera and in Western theater. This incarceration of women also has temporal and spatial connotations. In Hanna Scolnicov's words, "her relative confinement in traditional societies to the seclusion of her home puts the onus of the action on the man, thus making him into an active agent of time, and her into an element of space."³⁸ Although Granny Li and Tiemei generally place themselves in a seemingly secluded space, in contrast to women in traditional theatre, they represent a new type of proletarian woman shouldering the responsibility for revolutionary action, struggling with the Japanese and attempting to safely transfer the secret code. Furthermore, the Li family's home is in fact not an everyday domestic space: it serves as an underground meeting place for Communist activists, and thus obscures the boundary between its private and public function. It is also a "didactic" space that allows Granny Li to recount the tragic "family" history to Tiemei and urge her to mature by gaining revolutionary experience and heightening political consciousness. Moreover, both Granny Li and Tiemei experience the expansion of space. The former sacrifices her life with Li Yuhe on the execution field, and the latter enters the public sphere of Baishan (柏山) and merges into the revolutionary masses of the guerilla force.

The ostensibly "everyday milieu" of the Li family does not actually bear an "everyday" quality; it is not fully in conflict with the aesthetically distanced and stylized modes of traditional performance, thus avoiding the tension between grandeur and the quotidian. There are almost no everyday interlocutions or activities in the room—all details relate closely to the oppression of the proletariat in an efficient functioning of revolutionary meta-rhetoric on narrative, formal and ideological levels. In this sense, revolution is deeply embedded in the everyday and the everyday has been ritualized. They

37 An almost identical shot appears in another model opera film *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, when the army leader examines a military map at his headquarters.

38 She demonstrates her argument by interpreting the Odysseus story: "while Penelope waits at home, freezing time by unraveling each day's work, Odysseus wends his way home, moving from one adventure to next." Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.1. There are similar popular narratives in traditional Beijing Opera repertoires about men adventuring and woman waiting, including *Wujiapo* (武家坡) and *Fenhewan* (汾河灣).

are in accordance with each other in the symbolic, revolutionary world. Nonetheless, certain traces of realistic acting can be found in *The Red Lantern*. Tiemei and Granny walk, for instance, in a naturalized manner and tears appear when they are emotional, which is usually forbidden on the traditional stage, where weeping can only be depicted symbolically (since real tears and emotion subdue the performers' vocal quality).

In accommodating the alterations of costume and setting, and foregrounding revolutionary discourse, model opera has engineered its own performing patterns and formulas from the materials of its traditional counterparts. Although retaining the traditional presentative quality of performance, as in Lie Tiemei's role, certain elaborate and delicate traditional conventions of performance are reduced and modified to serve the demands of the expression of proletarian character. One of the most conspicuous tensions and conflicts between traditional and model performing patterns is the discrepancy in attitude to the concepts of "roundness" and "straightness." In traditional Beijing Opera performance, as Elizabeth Wichmann writes,

The most basic physical, visually perceived characteristic of stylization in the performance is roundness. Roundness applies to posture and movement, both of various parts of the body in isolation and of the entire body in or through space. Straight lines and angles are to be avoided; positive aesthetic value is perceived in the presentation of a three-dimensional network of circles, arcs, and curved lines.³⁹

These multilayered circles echo and enhance each other: large, small, horizontal, vertical and zigzag circles create compelling harmony and symmetry⁴⁰ and add visual attraction to the gyrations and circumambulations on the stage.

Model opera performance both adopts and violates the traditional "roundness" rules. In traditional theater, the *sheng* roles usually have a slightly curved line at the back of the neck and the chest is held slightly in, for graceful movements cannot be made if the body is too straight and upright. With the slightly bent body, the performer's face can be seen more clearly by the audience and movements appear more refined.⁴¹ In *The Red Lantern*, however, Li Yuhe as a *wusheng* type always holds his towering frame straight and upright, and walks with a dignified strut (although without the aid of the thick-soled boots used in traditional theater) in order to accentuate the steadiness, poise, indomitable

39 Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1991. pp. 5. Also see Wang Yongjing (王永敬), "An Observation on the Theatrical Concept of the Chinese Traditional Opera (中國戲曲的戲劇觀初探)," in 中國藝術研究院首屆研究生碩士學位論文集, 戲曲卷, 中國藝術研究院研究生部編, Beijing: 文化藝術出版社, 1985, p. 471.

40 See Ding Daoxi (丁道希), "Conventions—the Fundamental Element of the Beauty of the Traditional Opera (程式——戲曲美的基本元素)," *Ibid*, p. 504.

41 Elizabeth Halson, *Peking Opera: A Short Guide*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1966. p.49.

courage and soaring spirit of the idealized and deified revolutionary hero.⁴² He is “on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life.”⁴³ On the other hand, a *jing* performer in traditional theater is required to hold straight and stiff postures to stress an aggressive and proud military manner.⁴⁴ In *The Red Lantern*, Jiushan’s body posture is cowering and cringing, because the *jing* performer Yuan Shihai is portraying the contemptible negative character of the Japanese invader. The female characters Tiemei and Granny Li adopt an upright body posture as well, but for the most part retain slightly naturalized and understated curved arm and hand gestures; their fingers are also moderately curved, but less delicate and feminized than in traditional theater. At 52’38” into the film, Tiemei, following traditional performing convention and enriching the mise-en-scene, quickly walks in a small circle (*paoyuanchang*/ 跑圓場) in the center of the stage, then holds up the red lantern with Granny Li; here their bodies stretch up and one arm is slightly curved to show their courage and strength. There is a certain boldness and a sudden explosive force in their movements and gestures expressing their strong emotion, their precision and straightforwardness, and the lack of nuance and ambiguity.

While postures and gestures with revolutionary distinctiveness are foregrounded in the model operas, a certain performance vocabulary is expanded, and the body’s expressive power has been greatly intensified; such emotions as grief, indignation, hatred, and fortitude are vividly conveyed by new formulaic conventions such as raising the head, clenching the fists, stretching the arms and widening the eyes.⁴⁵ These new formulas have been seen as “dry, strenuous and stiff” by some Chinese scholars.⁴⁶ Lacking in individuality and nuance and obscuring distinct role categories and gender differences, the mode of performance initiated by Tiemei and Granny Li culminated in the performance of the female heroines and Party leaders Fang Haizhen, Jiang Shuiying and Ke Xiang in other model operas. They employ forms of stage movement and posture usually associated with male roles in traditional opera, such as exaggerated steps and turning the body to show determination and strength.⁴⁷ Is the female body gradually masculinized or desexualized on the model opera stage? This seemingly obvious but essentially complicated question should not be oversimplified, and can be interpreted differently from different perspectives. Some Chinese scholars consider the heroines’ masculinized performance and singing style to deprive them of their feminine elegance

42 Jiang Qing was dissatisfied with Qian Haoliang’s slightly bent body posture, and demanded that he overcome his traditional Beijing Opera training and portray the proletarian hero upright.

43 The “Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy” Group of the Peking Opera Troupes of Shanghai, “Strive to Create the Brilliant Images of Proletarian Heroes—Appreciations in Creating the Heroic Images of Yang Tzu-jung and Other,” in *To Find Men Truly Great and Noble-Hearted We Must Look Here in the Present—In Praise of the Modern Revolutionary Peking Opera Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. Peking: Foreign Language Press. 1971. p. 4.

44 Halson, p. 49.

45 These typical revolutionary gestures, images and rhetoric prevailed during the Cultural Revolution in other visual media, such as poster, statue, revolutionary ballet, and so forth.

46 In Chinese: “干，強，硬，” Yu and Wang, p. 594.

47 Clark, p. 67.

and tenderness;⁴⁸ others believe that these new performance styles imbue the modern woman with a statuesque and vigorous beauty and emancipate the female body from the restraints of traditional representation that portray only docile, demure and fragile feudal beauties with downcast eyes and minute steps.⁴⁹

Like Tiemei and Granny Li, all the women on the model opera stage are positive characters; they are more or less liberated and enlightened by the Party's revolutionary activity and ideology. With growing revolutionary consciousness, these once deprived and oppressed yet witty and courageous women sustain a powerful image of the confident revolutionary woman fighting for the liberation of the people and the nation, shoulder to shoulder with her male comrades.⁵⁰ This image provides a sharp contrast to the passive, hapless female victims waiting to be saved by a powerful man portrayed in some traditional civil repertoires.⁵¹ In addition, like Tiemei and Granny Li, all the main female characters in model opera works are, in Xiaomei Chen's words, "deprived of womanhood, motherhood, and the intimacies of family life."⁵² Yet they are portrayed this way not because they are discriminated against as women, but because they are revolutionary heroes. Both male and female heroes are deprived of biological families and romantic relationships (they apparently sublimate these desires into a devotion to the revolutionary cause and a universal love of the oppressed proletariat); class identification and revolutionary family surpass biological ties.⁵³ The idealized and glorified heroes are in no way flesh and blood; they should not be distracted by individuality, domestic life, or trivial emotion. "They started the drama fully in command of the ideological resources and emotional discipline to tackle the challenges presented."⁵⁴ They are mature and immaculate, being objectified, as Paul Clark puts it, as "consummate statue[s]."⁵⁵ Only when distanced from secular and mundane experience can the hero be sanctified and worshiped. The desexualized and mystified heroes produced under the guidance of revolutionary idealism and

48 Ma Shaobo (馬少波), ed. *A History of Chinese Beijing Opera* (中國京劇史), Beijing: 中國戲劇出版社, p. 1982.

49 Yu and Wang, p. 591.

50 The appropriate examples would be the two female protagonists in two of the revolutionary ballets: Xi'er (喜兒) in *The White-Haired Girl* and Wu Qinghua (吳清華) in *The Red Detachment of Women*.

51 Such as Susan (蘇三) in the popular traditional opera *Yutangchun* (玉堂春).

52 Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002. p.75.

53 Zhang Chunqiao (張春橋), a high official during the Cultural Revolution and Jiang Qing's henchman, instructed the revolutionary model opera *Song of the Dragon River* group in 1968: "do not describe the hero's flaw, do not depict he has a family" (Ma, p. 1974). In *The Red Lantern*, Li Yuhe, Granny Li and Li Tiemei constitute a non-biological family; a similar comment made by Granny Li and Tiemei refers to their neighbors Huilian and her mother-in-law: "we are one family even though there is a wall between our houses." Another example is the surrogate family formed by Lei Gang (雷剛) and Mother Du (杜媽媽) in *Azalea Mountain*.

54 Clark, p. 53.

55 Ma, p. 1969.

aestheticism, however, create an intricate paradox with the autonomy of the characters and the stardom of the individual performers who portrayed these symbolic characters. The materiality that the film medium reveals through body images further complicates this contradiction and provokes a kind of abstract physicality.

The Female Body in Spatial Transfiguration: from the Stage to the Screen

In the transition from stage to screen space, the physical presence of the female body is converted into the cinematic image of the female body. Although preserving an inherent theatricality and remaining faithful to the spirit of the stage, the film *The Red Lantern* gains an evocative power by transposing and reinforcing the formalized revolutionary excesses of specific body movements (facial expression, hand gestures and eye movements) into a new realm—revolutionary aestheticism is introduced into cinematic space. The corporeality of the body is visually accentuated by the proximity between the camera and the performer's tangible body, despite its actual absence. The mechanical camera eye, with various (subjectively designated) shot ranges, camera angles and movements, underlines particular expressions of the body. Long, unbroken takes consisting of tracking shots depicting the female body preserve the continuity and fluidity of body movement and performance, as well as the continuity of space and time. The body and face have strengthened their expressive significance here, in the spatial instability of transformation.

The cinematic space frees the static, single-framed stage space from temporal and spatial contingencies not only through mobility, but also through flexibility. The space expands or contracts with outward or inward tracking shots; the performers' sweeping gazes and hand gestures confront the camera and reach out towards the spectator, delineating an imaginative arc that suggests the extension of space—the off-screen space behind the camera, and evoking a compelling sensory viewing experience. On the other hand, the combination of multi-angled shots and various viewpoints fragment the homogeneous theatrical space arbitrarily, alter the audience-stage relationship, and create what French film theorist André Bazin calls “a psychological heterogeneity and a material discontinuity.”⁵⁶ The film also enhances narrative conflict and rhythm through other cinematic means. The shifting of time and space in narration is represented by fades in and out, replacing the curtain that divides acts on the stage. A rhythm is created by the alternation of shots with diverse lengths and the intercutting of different scales of shots (long, medium shots and close-ups). This rhythm is further enriched by movements echoed between the body, eyes and the camera; for instance, camera movement is usually in harmony with the characters' body movement such as extensions of their arms during song, pulling back and revealing a larger space. Cutting and insertion of close-ups are generally executed during monologues, conversations, or dramatic moments, to avoid disrupting the continuity of performance and emotion as conveyed by fluid, mobile shots.

56 André Bazin, “Theater and Cinema,” Part One, in *What Is Cinema?* (Volume I), trans. Hugh Gray, University of California Press, 1967, p. 92.

The spatial transformation also adjusts the human body's relations to the setting. Although the performer is part of the ensemble in conventional Beijing Opera, he or she is the absolute focal point on stage, as Bazin notes, "dramaturgy is in its essence human. Man is at once its cause and its subject." On the screen, however, the portrayal of human character interacts with the décor and environment on a more equal footing: "man is no longer the focus of the drama, but will become eventually the center of the universe...the décor that surrounds him is part of the solidity of the world."⁵⁷ The essential photographic realism of the cinematic medium animates the décor and objects and imbues them with a significance nearly equivalent to that of human characters.⁵⁸ In *The Red Lantern*, the Li family's interaction with their environments (for example, their room or the execution field) and props such as the red lantern and grey scarf greatly intensify dramatic conflicts and increase the emotional expressivity of body language. Nevertheless, the primary heroes still maintain their priority over the décor and surroundings, because *The Red Lantern* is primarily a "Beijing Opera film" rather than a feature film—thus, the principle of "three prominences"⁵⁹ determines the human heroes' ascendant position.

The stage space is centripetal, in Bazin's view, because the actor is the center of the audience's attention, while the screen space is centrifugal due to the constant implications of the existence of an off-screen space.⁶⁰ In a model opera film like *The Red Lantern*, the screen space is a combination of centripetal and centrifugal space, and the two forces are in a perpetual evocative tension that is closely related to the tension between "stage framing" and "film framing." The traditional stage space of Beijing Opera is self-contained, self-defined, and automatically framed. When one actor is performing, he or she automatically becomes a close-up on the stage, since other performers freeze like waxwork or reduce themselves to props—they are automatically out of the narrative space in spite of their physical presence, in order to avoid distracting from the main actor's performance. Thus, the central performer is isolated spontaneously by the audience. Unlike this perceptual isolation, film framing literally separates the particular character from his or her surrounding, in Bazin's words, it "frame[s] the fleeting crystallization of a reality of whose environing presence one is ceaselessly aware."⁶¹ *The Red Lantern* deploys both stage and film techniques to perform this kind of framing when it features "solo" sequences. In the "gruel sequence," Li Yuhe soliloquizes among the customers of the gruel shed about ordinary people's suffering and about transferring the secret code. He is both in the center of the stage and is foregrounded and separated from his surroundings by a medium shot, therefore forming

57 *Ibid.*, p.106. Bazin's statement on Western theater is also applicable to traditional Chinese theater here.

58 French theorists of "photogénie" such as Jean Epstein and Luis Delluc also acknowledged the significance of objects in silent films. See Richard Abel, ed. *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/ Anthology*, Volume I: 1907-1929. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

59 For a detailed delineation of the "three prominences" principle, see footnote 30.

60 Bazin, p. 103-5.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

his own narrative space. At 27'30" into the film, after listening to Granny Li's story about the history of the red lantern, Tiemei expresses her thoughts with an aria. Granny Li retreats to the backroom in order to allow the spectator's attention to focus solely on Tiemei's singing and movement, and the tracking-in shot focusing on Tiemei's face intensifies this concentration. Immediately after her aria, Granny comes out, followed immediately by the neighbor, Huilian, knocking on the door— narrative compaction and efficiency has been ensured.

The tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces within the screen space appears in its most compelling form in the film's concluding long shot of the hero dominating the center of the frame, surrounded by less prominent positive characters. The primary heroes (Tiemei and the leader of the guerrillas) exert a strong sense of magnetism to attract the masses to lean toward or revolve around them,⁶² and this magnetism is fueled by the principle of "three prominences." At the same time, the well-formed crowd and their stretching limbs and searching eyes seem to project luminous rays in all directions, beyond the screen frame.

This statuesque, collective human formation is also a remnant from the stage, a modified version of a significant convention of traditional Beijing Opera: *liangxiang* (posturing, 亮相). In traditional theater, the performer may strike a magnificent pose in the central stage and hold it for a moment, with his or her body perfectly poised, before proceeding with the next set of movements⁶³—this functions both as a display of bravura and as a punctuation in performance, enriching the rhythm of performance by contrasting "movement" and "stillness."⁶⁴ The collective *liangxiang* in *The Red Lantern* and other model opera films is different from the traditional stage convention, and expands its function for an ideological purpose. Firstly, the model *liangxiang* not only appears during an individual actor's performance and resumes movement after a pause, but also concludes every act as a coda before the curtain falls⁶⁵— in the film the function of the curtain is superseded by that of a fade out. Secondly, it represents another effort to adapt different conventional role categories to the portrayal of proletarian heroes (especially women). Tiemei and Granny Li constantly employ *liangxiang* primarily associated with the role types of martial skills and spirit, such as *wusheng* and *wudan*, used in traditional theater to underscore vigor and strength. Finally, the collective *liangxiang* that is generally absent in traditional performance disciplines and unifies groups of human bodies of both genders, and invents a revolutionary spectacle

62 The composition was not invented by model opera films, but appeared in earlier revolutionary feature films. For example, similar body placement is used to depict the main hero Lu Jiachuan (盧嘉川) talking about revolution and surrounded by some young students in *Song of Youth* (qingchun zhige/ 青春之歌, directed Cui Wei and Chen Huai'ai, 1959).

63 Halson, p. 51.

64 It is also an eye-catching sign and a way of interacting with the audience; the audiences usually applaud when a performer effects a *liangxiang*, and the performer's popularity and the level of his or her technical competence can be judged by the rate of applause. *Liangxiang* in front of the camera loses this function.

65 Dividing the play by "acts" is also one of the results of "theater reform" after 1949; there is no division of acts in traditional Beijing Opera.

of heroic, statuesque beauty and splendor. It is not only a tableau with the illusion of spatial expansion, but also a construction immersed in a strong sense of temporal extension—the collective body's directivity indicates an abstract future prosperity.

Training body posture and controlling facial expression are crucial in traditional and model opera, though this is achieved through different means and with divergent concerns. As discussed above, traditional performing conventions generally require delicate, curved, or circular body postures and movements and subdued, nuanced eye movements, while revolutionary heroes in model operas adopt upright and unambiguous postures and keep their eyes wide open. To some extent, this conception of bodily and facial language has something in common with Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov's theory of training the actor's body to pose for the camera. In Kuleshov's view, cinematography should capture an organized human body based on 'precision in time,' 'precision in space,' and 'precision in organization.'⁶⁶ For Kuleshov, the ideal human body is like a machine that can expand and contract rhythmically (through the flexibility of arms and legs), become tense and relax in accordance with the director's aims,⁶⁷ and trace and reconstruct movement after pausing for a moment⁶⁸—all of which coincides with the *liangxiang* pattern in model opera. Kuleshov's emphasis on organizational precision and body mechanics developed within 1920s Soviet social and cultural contexts in which the fetishization of machinery and mechanical mobility prevailed among left-wing artists and filmmakers.⁶⁹ Yet the model opera performers' body postures and movements in *The Red Lantern* are not necessarily mechanized and machinelike, even though they are exaggerated, stylized, formulized, strictly disciplined and continuously in tension without ever relaxing. This convention-regulated performance, furthermore, is not posing for the camera; it retains, for the most part, its stage style, while emphasizing and elevating certain aspects of performance through filmic effects like montage, camera angle and movement. Nonetheless, the almost uniform revolutionary body postures of the various heroes (whether men or women) and their organized collectivization are

66 Lev Kuleshov, *Stat'I, Materialy*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979, p. 118, quoted in Mikhail Yampolsky, trans. Larry Joseph, "Mask Face and Machine Face," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994), p. 61. An appropriate example is the actors' grotesque performances in Kuleshov's film *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924).

67 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

68 Kuleshov, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol.1, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987, p. 366, in Yampolsky, p. 60. Yampolsky also notes that Richard Schechner suggested in a letter to him that a striking parallel exists between Kuleshov's observations about eye and arm and the technique of Beijing Opera, as exemplified in the work of the famous Mei Lanfang. Yampolsky points out that Kuleshov himself never mentions such parallels. Chinese performances strongly influenced Sergei Eisenstein, who wrote an excited analysis of Mei Lanfang's work in 1935 and later elaborated his own technique for the eye's movements (very expressive in *Ivan the Terrible*, 1945), consciously using the elements of oriental theater. See Yampolsky, note 4, p. 72

69 Among filmmakers, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein all expressed their interest and admiration for well-controlled and precise body mechanics, though with different theoretical nuances and concerns.

divorced from chance and unpredictability, making the revolutionary hero the new man of the Soviet utopia, “a hyper-rational being capable of total conscious control over his behavior”⁷⁰ and inscribing a new social order.

In contrast to the human body’s inexhaustible richness of mechanical possibility and organizational precision, the face, in Kuleshov’s view, is less subject to mechanization because it “expresses everything much less richly and vividly; it has too narrow a range, too few expressive combinations.”⁷¹ It cannot expand and contract over the same dynamic range as arms and legs, and the micro-movements of facial expressions are too insignificant to take into account.⁷² The significance of faciality in Kuleshov’s films (and in general), however, clearly contradicts his avowed mistrust of the face as an insufficiently expressive organ.⁷³ Fortunately, in a film like *The Red Lantern*, the expressive power of the face has been greatly accentuated by the sense of close proximity between the body and the film camera and by the compelling enlargement of faces in close-ups and medium shots that separate them from other parts of body and from their surroundings. In *The Red Lantern*, the rhythmicization of the performers’ facial expressions contributes significantly to the creation of a broad, effective revolutionary vocabulary of corporeality. For instance, Li Yuhe, Tiemei and Granny Li’s eye movements and overstated facial expressions are in concordance with and underline their exaggerated postures, hand gestures, and singing voices. Generally, eye widening in these model opera characters suggests constancy and anger, and eye narrowing implies contempt and disdain. Female roles such as Tiemei and Granny Li adopt the combination of wide open staring eyes, raised eyebrows, tightly clenched fists, and high-pitched tonalities; the result comes across as slightly masculine and is designated to express strong emotions such as indignation, hatred and determination. Here the face is no longer linked with the mysticism of psychologism and physiognomy, because these explicit designations and denotations eliminate all ambiguity and mystery.

In Kuleshov’s theory and the Russian theorist Mikhail Yampolsky’s interpretation of it, the performing face can be divided into two categories: the *mask face* and the *machine face*. The *mask face* is a calm and unexpressive composition that transforms the face into a mask—into an object. It is a way of giving the face the quality of a body, or likening the face to an object and the actor as a whole to an inanimate object. This unexpressive face presents itself as a mask that has not yet become facial in the human sense of the word, since the definitive characteristic of the face as such is precisely its ability to be expressive. In order to materialize, the expressive face must first work through the mask face.⁷⁴ The *machine face* refers to one that behaves according to the laws of the mechanized body of the actor, even though this behavior does not correspond to the anatomical norm for the face and lacks psychological motivation. It is in essence a face transformed into a ‘machine body.’ Each component feature of this kind of face

70 Yampolsky, p. 71.

71 Kuleshov, 1987, p. 110, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 61.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

is transformed into an independent mechanical organ.⁷⁵ The *mask face* and the *machine face* appear in Kuleshov's theory only in opposition to each other; in fact, though, both militate against the expression-face and the personality-face, and both are governed by the principle of transforming the face into a body. The machine face operates according to the laws of the body, whereas the mask face, while retaining its immobility, mirrors body movements.⁷⁶ The human face in *The Red Lantern* does not quite fit either of the categories, but it shares some characteristics with both to some extent. The painted-faces (especially in the *jing* and *chou* roles) that subdue authentic facial expression in traditional theater are derived from ancient totems and masks, and masks are used alongside painted faces in some repertoires from various Chinese theatrical traditions, including Beijing Opera.⁷⁷ In model opera, the literal "painted mask" has been replaced by the uniformed and stereotyped facial expressions of the revolutionary heroes, which function as figurative masks that separate the surface from the idiosyncratic, expressive personality-face beneath, thus achieving a kind of self-objectification by transforming the heroes into nonhuman or impersonal figures. Nevertheless, the vivid individual faces and eyes of distinctive performers like Qian Haoliang, Gao Yuqian and Liu Changyu in *The Red Lantern* create an evocative tension with the "mask face". The objectification of the expression-face is also achieved by the camera lens, which seems to project its force of objectification onto the face it is filming and give it a masklike character.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the formulaic facial expressions and eye movements of Li Yuhe, Tiemei and Granny Li are imbued with a kind of mechanical quality through exaggeration and repetition. In the moment of collective *liangxiang* (the frozen expressive poses) in the film, the mask face and the machine face are joined together in an extraordinary symbiosis: in Yampolsky's words, the mask face's "staticness and emptiness [are joined] with the dynamic imprint of the mechanical muscular movement of the machine face."⁷⁹

The instantly recognizable performance patterns and face types of Li Yuhe, Tiemei, Granny Li and other characters in *The Red Lantern* can be linked to the concept of "typage" elaborated by Kuleshov and Eisenstein. This is an approach to selecting and directing performers that involves the use of actors whose physical appearance conveys the spirit of a character.⁸⁰ The notions of *typage* were enunciated by Kuleshov in his 1929 *Art of the Cinema*, where he argues that "real things in real surroundings

75 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

77 Masks usually appear in repertoires about supernatural stories. Weng Ouhong (翁偶虹), 翁偶虹戲曲論文集, Shanghai: 上海文藝出版社, 1985, p. 471. Besides Beijing Opera, masks have been extensively used in Tibetan theater (藏戲) and other theaters such as *Nuoxi* (傩戲).

78 Yampolsky, p. 67.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

80 The original idea was to use non-actors who bear a resemblance in appearance to the characters to create a realist effect. Despite the fact that all the performers in *The Red Lantern* are well-trained, professional Beijing Opera performers and that this is an opera film rather than a feature film, here I emphasize their essential similarity: the performers' physical resemblances to ideal "revolutionary heroes" and enemies.

constitute cinematographic material.”⁸¹ Through the use of typeage, Eisenstein puts more emphasis on character types and instant recognizability than on realist effect. In his words, this method is “based on the need for presenting each new figure in our first glimpse of him so sharply and completely that further use of this figure may be as a known element. Thus new, immediate conventions are created.”⁸² Eisenstein’s concept of typeage is dialectical in its combination of the actuality of typecasting with the conventionality of stereotyping, and presents a perspective on character rather than an individualized psychology of character.⁸³ His interests in typeage may derive from his fascination with caricature, masked drama, *commedia dell’arte*, stereotype, and stock characters in culturally encoded forms and conventions—in all of these, character has been represented as typological rather than individual and reality has always already been interpreted and explicated.⁸⁴ As non-representational theater, both traditional and model opera share the distinctive feature of typecasting. In traditional theater, different painted facial colors in the *jing* role category determine whether the character is positive or negative, and generally denote the character’s temperament. As John D Mitchell and Donald Chang argue, “the Chinese audience for Peking Opera is not concerned with the plot but rather with the expertise of the acting, so too it is not interested in the subtlety of naturalistic individual characterization; stereotypes contribute to the immediate recognition of the role that the actor is playing in the story.”⁸⁵ Predictability of character has been enhanced and made more explicit in model opera in all aspects of stage and film production through, for example, the performers’ differing physical appearances, body postures, singing voices, and costumes, as well as through certain color tones and camera angles.⁸⁶ The traditional theater’s use of typification is judged by a strict moral sense (good versus evil), and the model opera adds another crucial layer: class division (proletariat versus imperialists, revolutionaries versus counterrevolutionaries, and so forth). The revolutionary heroes of both genders on the model opera stage and screen after 1949 are primarily actors with sturdy bodies, rosy round faces, and large round eyes, forming a sharp contrast with the delicate, classical beautiful figures of the traditional opera stage and pre-liberation screen. From the physiognomic viewpoint of the modern camera, the working class is an ideal type, distinctive for its physical power,

81 Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, translated and edited by Ronald Levaco, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, p. 56.

82 Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: essays in film theory*, ed. and tr. by Jay Leyda, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949, p. 8-9.

83 James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History*, University of Illinois Press, 1993, p. 71.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

85 John D. Mitchell and Donald Chang, “The Staging of Peking Opera,” in John D. Mitchell ed. *The Red Pear Garden: Three Great Dramas of Revolutionary China*. Boston: David R. Godine, 1973. p. 43.

86 Pamela Robertson Wojcik discusses using playback singers’ voices to match both the speaking voice and the personality of the actors in 1940’s Hindi cinema as “voice casting”, “Character and Type,” in *Movie Acting, the Film Reader*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik, London: Routledge, 2004. “Voice casting” in model operas means that a magnificent, high-pitched singing voice that matches the revolutionary hero’s stout physical appearance is praised. The *Xiaosheng* role type was banished from the model opera stage because of its feminized quality and association with the feudal scholar in both appearance and voice.

artlessness, and collective identity.⁸⁷ By contrast, enemies are satirized by every means available, including costume, posture, grotesque music, and so on.

The utilization of typage is a subjective vision and interpretation of the reality and characters within it, as opposed to a realist depiction. In the film *The Red Lantern*, the moralistic camera angles, lighting and framing enhance the subjective representation of the characters and of the female body, guiding and controlling the spectator's viewpoint. In the framework of the "three prominences," the camera rises and frames a high-angle, dimly-lit shot when framing negative characters such as the Japanese commander Jiushan and Chinese traitor Wang Lianju; when the heroes Li Yuhe, Tiemei and Granny Li appear, the camera lowers and frames a fully-lit, low-angle shot.⁸⁸ Heroes are always displayed on the central stage, frontally and fully lit, seemingly towering above their crouching enemies (who are seen sideways and poorly illuminated).⁸⁹ The camera angle also identifies with the main hero's point of view whenever he or she has a confrontation with the enemy—a high angle shot of the enemy suggests the hero's advantage and consequent defiance and disdain. Certain dogmatic principles help regulate the formulaic film language in model opera films, such as "make the revolutionary heroes look close, large and fully-lit and the enemies far away, small and dark."⁹⁰ In the representation of female characters such as Tiemei and Granny Li, the lighting and camera angle resist beautifying them as glamorous and refined women, but portray them strongly as working class revolutionary women with a plain and vivacious corporeality.

Conclusion

The image of the female body in *The Red Lantern* perfects itself through double transfigurations in the temporal and spatial journey from traditional theater to model opera, from the stage to the screen, under the guidance of revolutionary aestheticism and ideological idealism. In this film and in the subjective genre of "model opera film," women generally occupy less prominent positions than their male counterparts;⁹¹ however, their modified costumes, singing, postures, and powerful presence within the space of the revolutionary narrative provide significant and lasting power; in this, they achieve a revolutionary beauty and sublimity, equivalent to or even surpassing that of the male heroes, and are incorporated and inscribed into the visual culture and memory of the model opera.

87 Goodwin, p. 73.

88 Film director Cheng Yin and cinematographer Zhang Dongliang customized an elevator from a Beijing heavy machinery plant in order to shoot mobile long takes with different angles and height, and smooth tracking shots. See Zhai Jiannong (翟建農), *紅色往事：1966-1976 年的中國電影*, Beijing: 台海出版社, 2001, p. 107.

89 Clark, p. 125.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

91 In the first group of five "model opera works," only the protagonist Fang Haizhen in *On the Docks* is female. The main characters in previous operatic versions of *The Red Lantern* and *Shajia Creek* were women—Li Tiemei and Sister Aqing—but they had to give place to Li Yuhe and Guo Jianguang in model opera works. In later model opera works, Jiang Shuiying in *Song of the Dragon River* and Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountain* joined the female hero imagery.

Revolutionary model opera is grounded in the interaction between the demands of new socialist ideology and an ambivalent attitude towards traditional cultural forms,⁹² and in an intention to imbricate the social stage within the literal stage (or obscure the two). In practice, this has meant not simply elevating the proletariat in social dignity, but also developing new ways to represent it on an operatic stage which had been dominated by “emperors and ministers, scholars and beauties” in pre-liberation feudal society. *The Red Lantern* and most other model operas are self-affirmative, triumphant, retrospective narratives that reconstruct a revolutionary past. Consciously embodying ideological viewpoints and attitudes, the films are suffused with a sense of optimism, transcending everyday life, transgressing realism, and taking unlimited liberties in creating immaculate revolutionary heroes and idealizing the revolutionary human body. All the ideological values and ideals are made straightforward and overt, without regard for nuance and delicacy.

This extreme mode of ideological representation brings together the content and form of the work in a kind of monstrous or monumental unity most clearly reflected in the revolutionary human bodies on the screen. At the same time, *The Red Lantern* and other model opera films’ unique aesthetic vitality gives them an autonomous power in excess of their original political and social context. The creativity and artistry, innovation and experimentation of model opera film point to an aestheticist inclination (sometimes called “revolutionary romanticism”) that is generally associated with bourgeois aesthetics and even a type of classicism.⁹³

Model opera is also not a completely new theater; it is deeply rooted in traditional Beijing Opera and shares similar fundamental characteristics with it—crucially, both are non-realist and non-representational. Jiang Qing acknowledged the significance of respecting traditional Beijing Opera’s basic characteristics in modernizing and revolutionizing traditional theater by incorporating singing parts and acrobatics that follow specific traditional conventions.⁹⁴ Almost all model operas end with spectacular acrobatic routines and triumphant fighting sequences⁹⁵ meant to make the play both

92 On the one hand, the revolutionary ideology required the artworks to distance themselves from the “feudal” culture’s unhealthy influence; on the other hand, the revolutionary artworks cannot sever their umbilical connection with the traditional culture.

93 However, no one dared to point out its aestheticist propensity at that time, because these works were under Jiang Qing’s instruction and close supervision. The result may be strongly related to Jiang Qing’s own refined aesthetic taste (she favored foreign films with stunning visual language) and her proficiency in traditional Beijing Opera (she was a talented and trained performer), spoken drama, and film (she was a stage and film actress in 1930s Shanghai). It remains a question whether these model opera films provide continuity with the tradition of Chinese opera filmmaking that was promoted during the 1950’s and 1960’s.

94 Jiang Qing(江青), 談京劇革命 (“On Beijing Opera Reform”), in紅旗 (hongqi/ Red Flag), 1967年第六期. Jiang Qing ordered the famous *wusheng* performer Zhang Shilin to teach Qian Haoliang, who plays Li Yuhe in *The Red Lantern*, his unique skill of “*cuobu*” (蹉步), which is utilized in traditional repertoires such as *Tielongshan* (鐵籠山). Qian displays the techniques in his solo performance in the execution field sequence. Ma Shaobo, p. 1935.

95 Besides *The Red Lantern*, other model opera works such as *Shajia Creek*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *Azalea Mountain* and *Fight on the Plain* all conclude with a battle scene.

didactic and entertaining; these also display a gymnastic virtuosity that is frequently integrated into Western ballet and folk dance. Pistols, rifles, and broadswords have now replaced the spears and swords of the traditional opera. The revolutionary happy ending and formulaic statuesque final group posturing (*liangxiang*) embody a utopian vision and provoke a strong sense of optimism through temporal and spatial extension and mystification. Such tableaux invoke a perpetual symbolic future in a retrospective narrative, bright and tempting, but vague and probably unachievable. In the frozen frame of the present, is it offering us an idealized time and space, or non-time and non-space?

The explicitness and extremity of model opera films such as *The Red Lantern* can be related to the concept of cinematic excess that Kristin Thompson has articulated.⁹⁶ Primarily based on the analysis of Hollywood feature films, and following Stephen Heath, Roland Barthes and the Russian formalists, Thompson argues that filmic excess arises from the conflict between the *materiality* of a film and the unifying structures within it; this excess overflows narrative functions such as causality and motivation.⁹⁷ Outside of unifying narrative structures, Thompson's excess foregrounds stylistic devices to an unusual degree, necessarily calling attention to the materiality of the film.⁹⁸ Rick Altman argues further that: "unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles—these are the excesses in the classical narrative system that alert us to the existence of a competing logic, a second voice."⁹⁹ Although as a Chinese opera film rather than a Hollywood feature film, *The Red Lantern's* narrative structure is economical, straightforward and motivation-oriented; its stylistic elements (exaggerated postures and hand gestures which are accentuated by the camerawork; numerous tracking shots and close-ups; unusual camera angles and lighting techniques; a hybrid music style melding traditional Beijing Opera accompaniment and Western orchestration; visual symbols and rituals),¹⁰⁰ all connote an excessive quality. In Thompson's words, "excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film."¹⁰¹

The heightened materiality of the image of the human body and the cinematic body, together with a revolutionary visual rhetoric and the delivery of an ideological message, seeks to exert an intensive emotional and visceral impact on the spectator. The model opera film is a unique filmic mode (or genre) of stylistic, emotional, and bodily excess. Beijing Opera, as a body-centered theater, distinguishes itself with extraordinary singing, choreography and acrobatics; in model opera films, excessive

96 Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen Eds. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. sixth edition, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. pp. 513-24.

97 Thompson, p. 514.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 519.

99 Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 1988, p. 345-6.

100 Such as the excessive use of red in Tiemei's costume and the extradiegetic image of the red lantern overlapping the red flag, which fills the screen at the end of the film.

101 Thompson, p. 515.

performance and camera work have centered more directly upon the display of the human body. The emotional affectivity of *The Red Lantern* is created primarily by its female characters' passionate bodily performances and presences—their grief, anger, and determination; at times, Tiemei and Granny Li's breath seems almost visible through their undulating chests. For Linda Williams, the bodies of women as figured on the screen in the three “body genres”¹⁰² have functioned traditionally as a primary *embodiment* of pleasure, fear and pain.¹⁰³ The revolutionary women's pain and sorrow in *The Red Lantern* have been converted to strength and revolutionary fervor. The body genres, in Williams' perspective, seem to lack a proper aesthetic distance, generating a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion.¹⁰⁴ *The Red Lantern* and other model opera films diminish the alienating effects and aesthetic distance of traditional Beijing Opera performance through their explicitness and overtness, and significantly enhance their sensational and emotional engagement with the spectator.¹⁰⁵ The model opera is, in other words, a body genre.

I would like to thank Rosie Roberts and Li Li Peters for initiating the special issue and for their insightful editorial suggestions; my thanks also go to two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments. I am indebted to Jason McGrath, Miriam Hansen, Judith Zeitlin, Paola Iovene, Michael Raine, Fu Jin, and Reginald Jackson, whose insight and encouragement greatly contribute to the evolution of this essay and my study of Chinese opera film. I thank Li Chi, Max Bohnenkamp, Xu Peng, Anne Rebull, Adam Rzepka, and Jiyoung Kim for their perceptive advice and intellectual stimulation. I am grateful to the participants of “Art and Politics of East Asia” Workshop at the University of Chicago where I presented the paper. I also would like to extend my thanks to the participants of “Literature, Theater and Cultural History of China, 1500-Present” Workshop at the University of Chicago, with whom I enjoyed watching numerous Chinese opera films and having inspiring discussions.

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102 Pornography, horror film, and melodrama.

103 Williams, p. 730.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 730.

105 There were extensive reports in the 1960s and 1970s that *The Red Lantern* moved numerous audience members to tears, including Mao Zedong and Jiang Qing.

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