

# The Making and Remaking of China's "Red Classics"

Politics, Aesthetics, and Mass Culture

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# Introduction

Rosemary Roberts and Li Li

The term “red classics” first emerged in the early post-Mao period and became established in Chinese cultural discourse during the 1990s. Initially narrow in scope, at first the term referred to the widely popular major novels that were published in state-run publishing houses in the Seventeen Years between the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. These included a fixed core of eight novels consisting of Wu Qiang’s 吳強 *Red Sun* (*Hong ri* 紅日), Yang Yiyan 楊益言 and Luo Guangbin’s 羅廣斌 *Red Crag* (*Hong yan* 紅岩), Liang Bin’s 梁斌 *Genealogy of the Red Flag* (*Hongqi pu* 紅旗譜), Liu Qing’s 柳青 *The Builders* (*Chuangye shi* 創業史), Yang Mo’s 楊沫 *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge* 青春之歌), Zhou Libo’s 周立波 *Great Changes in a Mountain Village* (*Shanxiang jubian* 山鄉巨變), Du Pengcheng’s 杜鵬程 *Protect Yan’an* (*Baoweì Yan’an* 保衛延安), and Qu Bo’s 曲波 *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (*Linhai xueyuan* 林海雪原),<sup>1</sup> along with a less fixed set of secondary works that included novels such as Zhi Xia’s 知俠 *Railroad Guerillas* (*Tiedao youjidui* 鐵道游擊隊) and Zhou Erfu’s 周而復 *Morning in Shanghai* (*Shanghai de zaochen* 上海的早晨). These novels are characterized both by their thematic coherence and by their adherence to the requirements for literature set out in Mao’s 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Forum* and the principles of Revolutionary Realism, or their later replacements Socialist Realism, or the Combination of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism. Thematically they fall into two categories: historical tales of the exploits of the Communist heroes of the revolutionary war, and tales of the struggle to transform Chinese society through the socialist reform of agriculture and industry. In style, aesthetics, and ideological conception, the novels place workers, peasants, and soldiers at the forefront: as heroic protagonists, as drivers of the revolution and of social transformation, and as the readership whose standard of literacy and whose literary and aesthetic tastes had to be catered to so that literature could achieve the required

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1. Known together as “san hong yi chuàng, qing shan bao lin” (三紅一創，青山保林; three reds and one build, youth-mountain-protect-forest).

pedagogical function of fostering a new class and socialist consciousness. This meant that the novels adopted colloquial language, a lively style with entertaining fast-paced action, and a pantheon of larger-than-life heroes and villains.

After the emergence of this narrow but clearly defined concept of “red classics,” buoyed by the waves of revolutionary nostalgia that swept society and the surge in demand for “red” products, the term evolved into a more fluid concept that incorporated both a broader time frame and a greater range of forms and genres. The temporal scope of “red classics” expanded to include the whole of the period of Maoist ideological domination from the time of the Yan’an Talks in 1942 to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), incorporating works from the Communist “liberated areas” such as the stories of the “peasant” writer Zhao Shuli 趙樹理 and the fiction of the Cultural Revolution period novelist Hao Ran 浩然. The forms and media also expanded to include not just fiction but also popular and influential works in the fields of film, theater, sculpture, fine art, and picture storybooks as well as popular revolutionary songs and the major revolutionary modern operas and ballets, some of which were themselves adaptations of the earlier works.<sup>2</sup> Because Chinese socialist literature had developed within the genealogy of Soviet-style Socialist Realism, foreign fiction and films created under these principles were immensely popular in the Seventeen Years. Some of these also reappeared as “red classics” in reform-era China. Since it is this broader range of “red classics” that have been the target of reproduction and adaptation in reform-era China, it is this broadest understanding of the scope of the “red classics” that we adopt in this volume.

The creation of this body of literary and art works during the Maoist era reflected the results of a nationwide, state-sanctioned literary practice of constructing revolutionary myth to legitimize and secure the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in mainland China. At the same time the works demonstrate a wide-ranging social transformation by creating models of the socialist new person offering a vision of how the individual and collective should function in a more egalitarian, socially considerate, and selfless manner. While the thematic and stylistic potential initially demonstrated in the original forms of many of the “red classics” was rich and diverse, as the political climate in China changed, works were progressively made to fit into the CCP’s increasingly homogenized ideological system and literary and artistic framework through a complex process of appropriations and revisions. This process reached its extreme in the Cultural Revolution, during which the nation’s cultural landscape shrank into a single, narrow ideological mold dominated by class struggle and typified by the famous “model performances” (*yangbanxi* 樣板戲).

2. Most famously, Qu Bo’s *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* was adapted into film under the same name and during the Cultural Revolution was adapted into Revolutionary Modern Beijing Opera form as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqi Weihushan* 智取威虎山). It was also published in picture storybook (*lianhuanhua*) form.

It is no surprise that after the end of the Cultural Revolution, this body of Socialist Realist literature and art was quickly abandoned, together with Maoist ideology, as the Chinese people embraced the new era of reform. The ensuing 1980s saw a rapid economic expansion, a surge of new modes of literary and artistic experiments, and quickly shifting literary and artistic trends from modernism to postmodernism. In the 1990s and continuing into the new millennium, however, as the country's economic reforms continued to expand, new problems emerged, including the ever-greater disparity between rich and poor, and rampant official corruption. Paralleling this, a significant change occurred in China's cultural landscape—a change ironically marked by the return of the literary and cultural products of the Maoist era, now elevated to the status of “red classics.” The novels, short stories, films, and picture books first made famous in the Seventeen Years were put back onto the shelves of the now privately owned bookstores. Old films about revolutionary heroes and heroines were remastered or remade; the “red classic” ballets and operas were restaged along with theater adaptations of “red classic” literature; old revolutionary stories were adapted into household television dramas; and red songs sung by popular rock stars could be heard from government conference halls to restaurants, karaoke houses, and even in public parks. Though disparaged by literary and cultural critics in the West and among the post-Mao Chinese literati, the “red classics,” with their epic vision of a society united in a heroic struggle to progress toward an egalitarian, utopian future, on the one hand, offered a comforting and familiar refuge for individuals struggling to survive and find meaning in a fragmented society directed by the fickle demands of the market. On the other hand, they provided opportunities for creative juxtapositions of critiques against and parody, mockery, or satire of the myths and icons of the Communist Party. At the same time, the reappearance of the “red classics” offered an opportunity to the CCP to reaffirm its relevance and legitimate right to rule at the time when its political capital was at a dangerously low ebb, so government-controlled media and publishing houses, both central and provincial, played a supporting role to market demand in promoting a continuous stream of new adaptations of the old classics. Whatever the judgment on the literary quality or cultural value of the “red classics,” their continual reappearance in multiple forms at multiple points in China's recent history attests to their importance as a cultural phenomenon and their worthiness as a subject for focused analysis.

For a variety of mostly political and ideological reasons, the “red classics” have historically been neglected as a topic for research in both Chinese- and English-language scholarship. Recent years have, however, witnessed a gradual growth of critical attention to the field. To date studies have focused primarily on a single part of the Maoist period, and research has generally focused on a single genre.<sup>3</sup> Further, while the

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3. For primary publications on this topic consulted by the authors, see Bibliography.

reappearance of “red” culture and the “Mao craze” in the reform era have received some attention as a sociological and psychological phenomenon,<sup>4</sup> there has been no major study devoted to examining the reform-era adaptations of the “red classics” or their relationship with their predecessors. This current volume therefore seeks to address this lacuna in contemporary scholarship as the first full-length work to bring together research on the “red classics” from the Maoist era, including the Seventeen Years and the Cultural Revolution, to the reform era—across a representative range of literary and art forms and media, from novels and short stories to films, TV series, picture books (*lianhuanhua* 連環畫), cartoons, and traditional-style painting (*guohua* 國畫). It critically investigates the “red classics” in three key areas: their sociopolitical and ideological import, their aesthetic significance, and their function as a mass cultural phenomenon.

The book is organized in two parts in chronological order, covering the Maoist years to the end of the Cultural Revolution, and the reform era, respectively. While most of the chapters focus primarily on one of these two periods, many also follow the fate of their subject through both periods under consideration, creating overall a highly coherent overview of the changing phenomenon of the “red classics” over the seventy-five years since the Yan’an Forum, and in the process simultaneously tracing the changing dynamic between the CCP and its self-sanctioned narrative of the communist revolution.

Our first chapter introduces a question that is critical to the study of the “red classics” and illuminates the research in the remainder of the book: What determined what could become a “red classic” and what could not? Lianfen Yang’s study on the fate of Wang Lin’s 王林 novel of the Sino-Japanese War, *Hinterland* (*Fudi* 腹地), provides critical insight into the complexities around this issue through her exploration of the conundrum that *Hinterland* embodies: How could an experienced writer and staunch party member who had fought the Japanese from a CCP-controlled village behind enemy lines in accordance with Mao’s battle strategy of the time and then faithfully recorded his experience in a novel that achieved “brisk sales” on first publication fail to produce a “red classic” not once but twice? From Yang’s fascinating case study we can extrapolate that for a work to become a “red classic” it had simultaneously to satisfy four major criteria:

1. The writing (or art work) had to be an “authentic” representation of the lives of workers, soldiers, or peasants taking part in the struggle for Communist victory or for socialist transformation of the state. For this reason writers and artists were exhorted to go deeply into the lives of their subjects (*shenru shenghuo* 深入生活) before commencing their creative work. Richard King notes that this was a key to promotion

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4. Geremie Barmé, *In the Red* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Dai Jinhua, “Rewriting the Red Classics,” in *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture: Cannibalizations of the Canon*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).



of the “red classic” novels in the 1950s and early 1960s, and his chapter records that both Zhou Libo and Ding Ling spent many months embedded in rural villages before completing their novels of land reform and rural collectivization, while Kuiyi Shen’s chapter shows that long, state-sponsored trips to the countryside to sketch from real life were a powerful factor in the socialist transformation of traditional art in the 1950s. In the post-Mao era, adaptations of the “red classics” also took on the mission of affirming the authenticity of the “red classic” heroes themselves, as chapters by Rosemary Roberts and Qian Gong attest.

2. While literature and art had to faithfully reflect life, this had to be moderated to accord with the “historical truth” and the CCP’s political agenda of the time. What was “typical,” “authentic,” “real,” or “true” had to be understood and represented through the Marxist teleological view of history as inevitable progress under the leadership of the proletariat toward a Communist society. From this ideological viewpoint the portrayal of workers, soldiers, or peasants in anything other than a heroic light was not “typical” or “true,” and portrayal of authentic details from writers’ lived experience left them open to the accusation of “naturalism.” The contrasting cases of Wang Lin failing to make his real and authentic wartime experience into a “red classic,” and the authors of *Red Crag* succeeding in transforming their traumatic experiences of wartime incarceration into a prototypical “red classic” only after intense instruction from ideologically “enlightened” cultural officials (see Li Li’s chapter), are instructive in this respect. At the same time, a “red classic” had also to reflect current CCP policy in its subject matter. The local democratic elections in the Communist base area described in *Hinterland* were off the agenda in the new socialist state and not acceptable subject matter for the early 1950s. Yang also points out that while Wang Lin faithfully recorded Mao’s eminently wise strategy of not directly confronting a far more powerful enemy, after the Communist takeover this did not accord with the heroic mythology of the Communist state that the CCP then sought to establish. Our authors (Yang, King) demonstrate that geographical isolation and poor communication in the 1940s and 1950s sometimes meant that writers were unaware that the political ground had already shifted and thereby produced works that were already politically out of date when they reached their publishers. In the art world, similar vicissitudes of political life required artists to replace sections of works or produce new versions to reflect new power configurations. Most famously, Dong Xiwen’s (1953) oil painting *The Founding of the Nation*, portraying the CCP leadership and Mao proclaiming the foundation of the PRC from atop Tiananmen Gate in 1949, underwent modifications on multiple occasions (1955, 1972, 1980) to remove or restore political leaders (most notably Gao Gang and Liu Shaoqi) as they fell from or regained political favour.<sup>5</sup> Political change also led to the suppression of

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5. Gao Gang was removed from the painting after he fell from power in 1953, while Liu Shaoqi was removed from the painting after being disgraced during the Cultural Revolution. After Liu was rehabilitated post-Cultural

literature and art of the Seventeen Years during the Cultural Revolution and to the suppression of Cultural Revolution literary and art production and the reappearance of the works of the Seventeen Years in the early years of the reform era.

3. The work had to adopt the literary and artistic techniques that were deemed at that time to be able to represent the “real” and the “authentic” historical truth discussed above. Mao’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum* had demanded that literature and art should take a strong class stance and portray workers, soldiers, and peasants through “typical characters in typical circumstances.” The subsequent introduction of the policy of Socialist Realism and its later incarnation, the “Combination of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism,” with their demands to portray society in its higher, more ideal form, required writers and artists to negotiate a narrow and perilous path between representing a recognizable reality with realistic characters and representing the idealized version of reality with class-based character types. In this respect the Soviet Union provided important role models: King’s chapter notes the influence of M. A. Sholokhov on Zhou Libo as he pioneered the Chinese version of the Socialist Realist novel in *Hurricane*; while Shen’s chapter discusses the powerful impact of Soviet oil painting on new Chinese socialist art in the 1950s. Ironically, the influence of the classic Soviet Socialist Realist novel has outlasted the Soviet Union itself, as Frederick Green’s chapter shows through his study of the gradual Chinese indigenization of Ostrovskii’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* and its reappearance in new media forms in China in the new millennium.

During the Cultural Revolution period the “Three Prominences” (*Santuchu* 三突出)<sup>6</sup> that dominated literature and art production of the time took this tension between “reality” and “ideals” within the concept of “realism” to such an extreme that only portrayal of class stereotypes that verged on self-parody was acceptable. As several of the chapters of this volume demonstrate (Yang, King, Li Li, Shen, and Xiaofei Tian), in response to these tensions individual authors navigated complex processes of contestation, self-censorship, negotiation, and appropriation with cultural officials, editors, publishers, and critics in the making and remaking of their works. State control of publication and circulation meant that only works with state approval had the opportunity to be promoted and circulated nationally through mainstream channels and were therefore the only works that had the possibility of becoming “red classics.”

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Revolution, artists were instructed to reinsert him into the painting (Dong Xiwen was no longer alive to do it himself), but the painting had been so heavily modified to remove Liu that this was deemed impossible, and it was decided simply to create a copy of the original with Liu returned to his previous position.

6. The “Three Prominences” is one of core elements of Cultural Revolution literary theory, which requires that, among all characters, prominence is to be given to positive characters; among positive characters, prominence is to be given to heroic characters; and among heroic characters, prominence is to be given to a main heroic character.

4. The final criterion for a work to achieve the status of “red classic” was that it had to achieve widespread popularity among the nation’s readership or viewers, something that ideological correctness and political timeliness could not guarantee. Mao had been aware of the need for socialist literature and art to be popular if it were to be an effective tool for education and propaganda. In his *Yan’an Talks* he had advocated that writers and artists should draw on popular forms such as local art, drama, and songs to broaden the appeal of their work. While Yang’s study argues that Wang Lin’s attempts at making a “red classic” failed partly on account of anachronistic aesthetics—the 1950 attempt failing because of Wang’s adherence to the elite aesthetics of May Fourth era writers and the 1985 attempt failing because of his adherence to outdated Maoist literary dogma, other chapters in the volume demonstrate how the “red classics” drew on popular performance and visual art forms (King, Li Yang, Li Li, and Shen) and how their remakes have utilized new mass media forms such as the cartoon and TV series to achieve broad popularity and confirm their canonical status (Lara Vanderstaay, Gong, and Green).

The second chapter in Part I, King’s study of Zhou Libo’s *Great Changes in a Mountain Village*, complements Yang’s chapter by tracing the development of the literary debates over authenticity, realism, and the portrayal of “middle characters” that guided literary criticism from the early 1960s to the end of the Maoist era. Though these debates are often neglected by scholarly studies of Maoist period literature and art, in fact understanding these theoretical debates is critical to a deep understanding of how the historical milieu shaped the process of creation and critical fate of many of the works of the time. King’s case study illustrates just how national literary debate impacted writers’ lived experience, as Zhou’s adherence to truthfully representing the experience of collectivization in his home village at first brought praise but then brought condemnation as the political and literary climate changed. The chapter highlights the differentiation and slippage between realism and authenticity, the real and the fictional, author and protagonist, actor and stage character that red classic authors were required to confront and manage, often leading to their downfall as the political environment shifted.

The following three chapters illuminate issues of production management and aesthetic influences on the early period “red classics.” Li Li and Shen’s chapters show how production of the “red classics” was carefully managed by varied cultural organs of the party to create the new socialist literature and art respectively. Li Li’s chapter on *Red Crag* reveals the practical mechanics of the process by which the raw experience of life in a notorious Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party) concentration camp was continuously revised to produce a narrative that conformed to the teleological vision of the new Communist state, while Shen’s chapter throws similar light on the way established traditional painters and artists were managed and their art reshaped through the application of principles set down in the Yan’an Talks and a

deliberate “modernization” of traditional Chinese painting. Both authors also illuminate the aesthetic origins of the “red classics”: Li Li through discussion of melodrama and Shen through his explication of the Western and Soviet influence on art of the Seventeen Years.

Yang Li’s chapter on *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* takes up this issue of the aesthetic origins of the “red classics” in detail, convincingly demonstrating the indigenous folk-narrative origins of the three main character types found in the novel. Importantly, Yang Li’s study shows that while the adoption of traditional aesthetics and narrative techniques ensured the popularity of these stories of revolutionary heroes, at the same time they burdened the new narratives with cultural residues that undercut the modern ways of thinking and seeing the world that the stories were intended to impart. This highlights a complex question that faced the Communists in their efforts to reshape Chinese literature and art: if old forms are borrowed to express new content, in the end does it produce “new wine in old bottles” or “old wine in new bottles”? Our authors show that there is no simple answer: while Yang Li’s chapter argues that the old forms placed a conservative brake on new content in the case of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*, Shen, discussing the same conundrum in the art world concludes, that in the case of *guohua* the tension between modern ideologies and traditional forms was not just resolved but led to invigoration and innovation in the field and produced some of the greatest public artworks of the Maoist period.

King’s chapter, as discussed above, includes a critical analysis of the increasingly restrictive literary policies of the 1960s. The results of these policies are further examined in Tian’s nuanced study of the fiction of the most celebrated writer of the Cultural Revolution period, Hao Ran. Tian argues, through comparisons of Hao Ran’s early short stories written in the late fifties and early sixties with revised versions published in 1973, that the revisions and particularly the deletions constitute a symbolic “self-castration” as his work lost the raw sexuality, charm, simplicity, richness, and lyricism that had characterized his stories of peasant life in his early work. Tian’s chapter also echoes the findings of Yang on the fate of *Hinterland*, highlighting how self-censorship in response to real or perceived political demands (by the 1980s Wang Lin was no longer under any *external* pressure to revise *Hinterland* but continued to do so) functions to stifle both authenticity and creativity, leaving only formulaic and sterile political rhetoric.

After disappearing briefly, the “red classics” started to reemerge early in the reform era, first in the form of reprints of the best-loved works of the Seventeen Years and later also in the form of reproductions or adaptations of “red classics” from all periods including the Cultural Revolution. While reprints of “red classic” novels and remastered digital versions of “red classic” films chiefly function to evoke a memory of the past, adaptations, remakes, and spin-offs tend to speak more to the present, and it is on these new renditions of the “red classics” that we focus in Part II of this

book in order to understand the changing relationship among politics, aesthetics, and mass culture reflected in these new works. In each of the case studies presented, the new “red classics” seek in some way to stabilize or consolidate the relationship between audience or readership and the current regime. This is sometimes effected by using surviving “red classic” heroes to validate the current regime as the genuine inheritor of a pure revolutionary tradition: in Roberts’s chapter these heroes are the elderly “real” Red Sister-in-Law and the elderly Korean war hero, Li Yu’an, who are represented in new style *lianhuanhua* picture storybooks now aimed at a middle-class readership, while in Green’s chapter the heroes are manifested in a speaking tour of China by Ostrovskii’s wife in which she was curiously understood as, and herself took on the role of, a hybrid of the real and fictional worlds of the author and his famous characters. In other cases, rather than using the heroes of original stories to endorse the current regime’s revolutionary credentials, the stories themselves are reworked to change the nature of the revolutionary credentials to which the current leadership lays claim, bringing them into line with current social and political trends. Gong’s chapter illustrates how, in the TV series *Yimeng*, based on the Red Sister-in-Law stories, reference to class and class conflict has been replaced with Confucian “humanity” and harmony within a “natural” hierarchy that places the CCP, then and now, at the top of a ladder requiring loyalty and obedience to one’s superiors, a finding also echoed in Vanderstaay’s chapter on the new children’s animated cartoon version of *Tunnel Warfare*. A broader adaptation of the “red classic” heroes to the changing socioeconomic climate is also evident in Green’s chapter’s tracing of the historical evolution of the figure of Communist hero Pavel Korchagin in China over a period of several decades, from war hero and popular icon in the Maoist era to role model for pursuing individual choices and personal fulfillment in a Chinese TV series produced at the turn of the millennium.

Previous scholarship has tended to highlight the transformation of the “red classics” into cultural commodities that are caught, on one hand, between the commercial desire of publishers and producers to maximize market value by inserting titillating or sensational elements to attract readers and viewers and, on the other hand, restrictions imposed by the state to protect the sanctity of the red heroes. Our authors show that both production and reception of the “red classics” in the post-Mao era go beyond that model: *Yimeng* was a project of the local party committee designed both to preserve the local revolutionary heritage and to promote the commercial success of the *Yimeng* brand based on that historical reputation, while the TV industry was not solely seeking profit but sought also to create a quality product that would highlight the spirit of the local people. In the case of both *Yimeng* and Chen Li’s new fine art renderings of the stories of Red Sister-in-Law and Li Yu’an, producer and artist were initially charged with a political mission but found a new empathy and respect for their subjects that is tangibly expressed in the resulting cultural products—products

that then in turn did also become commercial successes, with *Yimeng* becoming one of the highest-rated TV shows at the time and Chen's evocative drawings for the new *lianhuanhua* attracting high prices for reproductions of individual plates marketed on the Internet.

Clearly the adaptation of the "red classics" is a highly complex and fluid process not adequately characterized by any single formulation. As stories already deeply embedded in the cultural psyche, they will no doubt continue to evolve and adapt to socio-economic and political change and continue to be a significant cultural phenomenon for many decades to come: on one hand, articulating Chinese nostalgic connections to their recent past and lived experience; and, on the other, demonstrating diversified attempts at departing from, transcending, and even rewriting that past.

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### 3

## How to Tell a Story of Imprisonment

### *Ideology, Truth, and Melodramatic Body in the Making of Red Crag*

Li Li

Historians have argued that, in the secular age, history has replaced religion as a primary means of making myth and of setting of moral standards for modern nation-states, often through “vindicating us and judging us, and damning those who oppose us.”<sup>1</sup> The large number of revolutionary historical novels produced, circulated, and consumed in China during the Seventeen Years (1949–1966) can be understood as precisely this kind of myth making by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through the evocation and articulation of key questions for its people—questions such as: What is the “truth” of the historical conditions surrounding the CCP-led revolution? What makes the CCP’s rule after 1949 justifiable? What moral standards do the revolutionaries set for their contemporaries and for later generations? As eminent revolutionary literary critic Shao Quanlin 邵荃麟 (1906–1971), reflected, in 1960, on the needs and mission of Chinese literature from 1949 to 1959, “During the period of reactionary rule in Nationalist-controlled areas, it was almost impossible [for themes of revolution] to be reflected in literary works. So, now we must fill this blank in literary history to allow our people to understand historically the connections between the course of the revolution and current reality, and [to allow them] to acquire even greater confidence and enthusiasm for the construction of socialism by being inspired by these heartrending, praiseworthy struggles.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, though Chinese revolutionary historical novels to some extent derive from past events, they are, most significantly, narrative configurations of revolutionary history that aim at both the legitimization of the rule of the CCP revolutionaries and the transmission of the revolutionary ideologies they embody for emulation by the people.

This leads to the question of how the authors of revolutionary historical novels, many of whom were participants in the real-life events described in their novels,

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1. Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Use and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 20.
  2. Shao Quanlin, “The Course of Ten Years of Literature,” in *Ten Years of Literature* (Beijing: Writer Publishing House, 1960), 37. The quotation is cited in Hong Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, trans. Michael Day (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 121.

translated “knowing” into “telling.” To be more specific, how did they translate what they personally experienced in specific events into texts with “conceptual contents” for readers who had had no similar life experience? History and narrative have long been considered completely separate. Whereas the former is generally viewed as what “really happened” in the past, the latter is considered fictional, based on imagination. Few people, however, question how an event that happened in the past becomes a historical account. Historian Hayden White, among others, has argued that any event that “really happened” in history does not offer itself in a narrative form in order to become history; it must be, and can only be, narrated into a historical account. Moreover, “the events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the employment of a novel or a play.”<sup>3</sup> In this process, “the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *prefigures* the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain ‘what was *really* happening’ in it.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of the above theorization of historical narrative, this chapter studies the representations of the historical events surrounding the incarceration of a few hundred inmates at the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (中美合作所; SACO) in Chongqing (Chongch'ing) 重慶, the Kuomintang's (KMT) temporary wartime capital.<sup>5</sup> SACO operated two concentration camps, one at Zhazidong (Chatzetung) 渣滓洞, the other at Bai Gongguan (Pai House) 白公館,<sup>6</sup> both located in the north-western part of Chongqing. On the evening of November 27, 1949, a few hours before the People's Liberation Army took over the city, the KMT's Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the Military Affairs Commission, commonly known as Juntong

3. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 84.

4. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), x. Emphasis original.

5. The full name of this organization was Sino-American Special Technical Cooperative Organization (Zhong-Mei tezhong jishu hezuosuo 中美特種技術合作所). For more information, see Frederic Wakeman's discussion in *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). The initial establishment of SACO during the Sino-Japanese War was to help the then “unified front” of the CCP and the KMT to resist Japanese aggression.

6. The translation of *Red Crag* was collectively produced and published, in 1978, by Foreign Languages Press, a primary state-run institute of translation and publication; yet the Chinese names of authors, characters, places, etc. were transcribed in Wade-Giles, instead of *pinyin*, though those names are normally in *pinyin* in most other historical and literary publications about the incident. In this chapter *pinyin* will be used for names of authors, characters, institutions, and places. For those names which are well-known in *pinyin* but also were transcribed in Wade-Giles in the English version of *Red Crag*, they will be marked in both *pinyin* and Wade-Giles when first appearing in this chapter. Wade-Giles, however, will be used in analysis when quotations from the English translation of *Red Crag* are under examination in this chapter.

軍統<sup>7</sup> ordered the massacre of all prisoners in both camps. Most were killed, with only a few dozen escaping. This chapter investigates how, and in whose terms, the meanings of incarceration and massacre were reconfigured and eventually transformed into a formidable narrative in the revolutionary historical novel *Red Crag* 紅岩? What made *Red Crag* the most popular contemporary Chinese novel in the Seventeen Years and beyond?

### From *The World of Imprisonment* to *Red Crag*: Data Selection, Truth, and Meaning

Within a couple of weeks of the massacres of November 27, 1949, a number of survivors and witnesses had begun individually to write recollections of the events and publish them in the local newspapers, recounting some of the horrifying murders and the life stories of victims. Luo Guangbin (Lo Kuang-pin) 羅廣斌, Yang Yiyan (Yang Yi-yen) 楊益言, and Liu Debin 劉德彬 soon achieved prominence among them and became responsible for numerous subsequent oral and written narratives about the incidents. One of the most important earliest narratives is written by Luo, entitled “Guanyu Chongqing zuzhi bei pohuai de jingguo he yuzhong qingxing baogao” 關於重慶組織被破壞的經過與獄中情形報告 (A report on the sabotage of Chongqing’s CCP underground organizations and the situation in the prison). This detailed report of more than 20,000 words meant to provide information about the CCP underground organizations and to call especially for the punishment of informants, some of whom were high-ranking local CCP officials.<sup>8</sup> Another important early narrative is a pamphlet written by Luo, Liu, and others, consisting of short biographies of the dead CCP members who had been ratified for the title of “revolutionary martyrs,” prepared for the public memorial service held on January 15, 1950. In the following years, in cooperation with the political campaigns on educating people about the sacrifices CCP members had made for the establishment of the New China, Luo, Yang, and Liu made scores of oral reports to audiences of tens of thousands in multiple cities, while annotating and publishing numerous narratives, including newspaper articles, pamphlets, reportages, and memoirs. To celebrate the twenty-ninth anniversary of the CCP on July 1, 1950, they were invited to collaborate, for the first time, in writing a reportage entitled *Shengjie de xuehua: Xian gei 97 ge yongsheng de Gongchandang yuan* 聖潔的血花——獻給九十七個永生的共產黨員 (Sacred

7. The full Chinese name for Juntong is Junshi weiyuanhui diaocha tongji ju 軍事委員會調查統計局。

8. Luo Guangbin’s report is only about Bai Gongguan, in which he himself was kept. This report of more than 20,000 words had five sections: “The Course of the Sabotage of the Chongqing CCP Underground Organization,” “Portraits of Traitors,” “Situation in the Camp,” “Information about Survivors,” and “Suggestions [for the improvement of the Chongqing CCP underground organization] from the Imprisoned CCP Members.” His primary concerns were identifying and applying discipline on the CCP informants, but his initial request was largely sidestepped.

blood-flowers: Dedicated to ninety-seven immortal CCP members). It was published shortly after it was completed.<sup>9</sup>

This first collaboration about the incident is but a hasty collage of some unpolished short pieces previously written by the three authors. The reportage assumes a collective narrator “we,” but this “we” was frequently split into multiple voices that simultaneously appeared in different locations. The adaptation of the voice of this collective “we,” nonetheless, filters heterogeneous, though often discrepant, data on the incident that had been found in earlier oral narratives. At the same time, this report on the massacre is filled with trivial, bloody, and gratuitously graphic descriptions, while stylistically it is riddled with irrelevant anecdotes, fragmented events, and inconsistent comments on characters and events described. Some of the central revolutionary characters later depicted in *Red Crag*, such as Chen Ran 陳然 (character Cheng Kang 成崗) and Jiang Zhuyun 江竹筠 (character Sister Chiang 江姐) are introduced, but the stories about them are concentrated on the occasions when they were tortured. Many well-known details, for instance, Sister Chiang’s suffering from the driving of bamboo needles into her fingers—a core “fact” in later versions of the story, which has elicited a great deal of emotion from millions of readers—are, however, absent from this founding version.

The publication of *Sacred Blood Flowers* brought nationwide acclaim to the three amateur authors. They were invited to deliver even more talks and also to revise data presented in *Sacred Blood Flowers* into two other forms of narrative. A memoir entitled *Cong liehuo zhong dedao yongsheng* 從烈火中得到永生 (Gaining immortality from roaring flames) was published in 1958 in *Hongqi piaopiao* 紅旗飄飄 (Red flag waving), then the most popular magazine for the publication of memoirs of revolutionaries, while an expanded version, *Zai liehuo zhong yongsheng* 在烈火中永生 (Immortality amid roaring flames), was published as a stand-alone book in 1959.<sup>10</sup> During the retelling and rewriting of these narratives, the three authors were inspired to flesh out some previously obscure characters, making them fuller, more heroic and dramatic, and a better fit with the audience’s expectations. A listener who remembers Luo as a great story teller, recalled that when Luo told the story of Little Turnip (Xiao Luobotou 小蘿蔔頭), the nickname of a young boy who was imprisoned with his

9. The final title for this reportage is *Shengjie de xuehua* 聖潔的血花 [Sacred blood-flowers] (Guangzhou: Xinhua shudian huanan fendian, 1950).

10. Both memoirs were published by China Youth Press, at the request of its editor Zhang Yu 張羽. The 1965 feature film *Liehuo zhong de yongsheng* 烈火中的永生 [Immortality amid roaring flames], dir. Shuihua 水華, starring Zhao Dan 趙丹 and Yu Lan 于藍, though sharing a similar title, is primarily based on the novel *Red Crag* in terms of theme, plot, and characterization, not these two documentary narratives. *Hongqi piaopiao* was published in May, 1957 by China Youth Press, with Zhang Yu and Huang Yi 黃伊 as its editors. For more discussion of the importance of *Hongqi piaopiao* and the state-sanctioned cultural production of “recollections of revolution,” see Cai Xiang 蔡翔, *Geming/xushu: Zhongguo shehui zhuyi wenxue—wenhua xiangxiang* (1949–1966) 革命/敘述：中國社會主義文學—文化想像 [Revolution/narration: Chinese socialist literature and its cultural imagination] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010), 206–8.

parents, “Each time it got richer, more concrete, and the details more vivid. It seemed that when he told the story, he wasn’t just searching his memory, but was continuously thinking it through, imagining himself in the position of the audience.”<sup>11</sup> It is apparent that direct audience feedback in the period when the authors were conceiving the novel was a unique factor in the eventual making of *Red Crag*.

Taken as a whole, the early narratives about the Zhazidong and Bai Gongguan primarily attempt to chronicle the events and document the victims and survivors, with emphasis on achieving punishment for the treason of CCP informants and condemning the atrocities of the KMT. In terms of style, the narratives primarily consist of data that are detail driven, often redundant and inconsistent, yet relatively multidimensional. They represent a primal desire to record this historical atrocity. To make a full-fledged revolutionary classic out of this sanguinary incident, raw, heterogeneous data had to be appropriated and formulated into a consistent narrative with more coherent plot arrangements; characters had to be made more heroic and more clear-cut, and, most importantly, unified ideological messages and symbolic meanings needed to be inscribed into the story. With the three inexperienced authors struggling to cope with the psychological and physical trauma of their imprisonment, who was to guide the further evolution of this story, and how?

In 1956, after years of delivering public lectures and writing “fact”-based reports, the three authors began to conceive a new version of the familiar story they had told a myriad times.<sup>12</sup> While still deciding whether the new project would be another piece of reportage, a memoir, or a fictional work, the three settled on a new title, *Gujin de shijie* 鋼禁的世界 (A world of imprisonment), but then struggled to work out how to push the project forward.<sup>13</sup> As they were searching for direction, Ren Baige 任白戈, then mayor of Chongqing, suggested to Yang that the projected book be called “Hong yan” (Red crag). Red Crag refers to Red Crag Village (Hong yan cun 紅岩村) on the south bank of the Jialing River 嘉陵江, which was, from 1939 to 1946, the public headquarters of the Eighth Route Army and the secret office of the Southern Bureau of the CCP Central Committee, which led Communist insurgencies

11. Hong, *History*, 128.

12. Yang Yiyang's older brother Yang Benquan 楊本泉 played an important role in encouraging Luo, Yang, and Liu continue to develop the project into a novel. Trained as a journalist, Yang Benquan had by then written a few literary pieces and had much more ambition toward literary creation. He urged Luo, Yang, and Liu to turn their material into a fictional work.

13. The authors initially considered using *Gujin de shijie* 《鋼禁的世界》, but eventually adopted *Jingde shijie* 《禁錮的世界》, the title of a section *Jingde shijie* 禁錮的世界 from revolutionary martyr Cai Weimeng's 蔡慰夢 series of poems “Heilao shipian” 黑牢詩篇 [Poems from a dark prison]. For more discussion, see Qian Zhenwen 錢振文, *Hong yan shi zengyang liancheng de?* 紅岩是怎樣煉成的 [How Red Crag is made?] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011), 64–65. See also Guo Jianmin 郭建敏, *Zhongguo dangdai hongse xushi de shengcheng jizhi yanjiu* 中國當代紅色敘事的生成機制研究 [Research on the production mechanism of Chinese contemporary red narrative] (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 2010), 106.

in the then-KMT-controlled areas.<sup>14</sup> “Red Crag” thus symbolizes CCP leadership, which was critical for the CCP’s ultimate goal of “liberating” the whole of China. For the three authors, the political implications of “Red Crag” were apparently beyond their grasp, because not only was Red Crag Village geographically far from the jails they knew about, but, more importantly, the theme of the story about imprisonment that they personally experienced bore no connection to narratives about Red Crag Village. As a result of authorial uncertainty and ambivalent approaches to the material, their first draft, which came out in mimeographed copies in 1957, had neither a title nor a distinct genre, clearly a result of their equivocation between the adaptation of Ren’s suggestion and staying with their original plan.

Obviously, Ren’s suggestion of “Red Crag” as the title of the new project was intended to urge the authors to change their perspective on the sociohistorical reality of China of the time from a narrow view through the optic of the jails to which they were confined to the broader world that had been or would soon be “liberated.” The authors, however, had difficulties in transcending the boundaries of the “facts” of their lived painful experience so as to embrace the political vision of CCP officials. They were incapable of transcending “what really happened” to them and embracing the potential “historical truth” hidden in the data under which they were still overwhelmingly buried. Instead, the three authors, who continued to suffer from the ongoing psychological trauma of being betrayed and tortured, added to the 1959 second revision of the manuscript even more descriptions of horrifying treatment in the concentration camps. This version, after being circulated among a small number of editors and local cultural officials, was repudiated as “piles of data,” “blood-drenched,” “too heavy, too depressing, a tear-jerker which would not give any encouragement at all to our people” in the New China.<sup>15</sup>

Seasoned revolutionary writer Ma Shitu 馬識途, who happened to be Luo’s long-time political mentor, suggested that Luo elevate the theme of the manuscript by situating the story against “the general political environment of the time and the CCP’s plans for liberating [the entire country].” The struggles in the concentration camps in the KMT-controlled areas should be treated only as “the second battlefield, not the front line [of the liberated areas]. There should be connections between those two, but the political reality in the liberated areas should be employed as the background of the second battle field,” because the front line was led by the CCP Central Committee in the Liberated Areas.<sup>16</sup> Sha Ting 沙汀 (1904–1992), another CCP revolutionary writer, then the chair of the Sichuan Writers’ Association, also remarked

14. Zhou Enlai 周恩來, Dong Biwu 董必武, and many other top CCP leaders worked in Red Crag Village and, in 1945, Mao Zedong 毛澤東 also stayed in the village for more than a month when he conducted negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek immediately after the end of the Sino-Japanese War.

15. Qian, *Hong yan*, 117.

16. *Ibid.*, 111.

that “the attention of the three authors is primarily on the world of imprisonment, losing sight of the promising political situation outside the walls of the prisons.”<sup>17</sup> The enemies were, on many occasions, described as a dominant power that always had their way, but “those executioners and captors are on the contrary the prisoners de facto.” Apparently, the failure of the second revision of the three authors was primarily due to their psychological adherence to the “facts”—the painful experiences they had been through. It was beyond their ability to fully translate their personal stories into a grand narrative about “what really happened”—the “historical truth” of Communist revolution that other seasoned CCP cultural officials, such as Ren, Ma, and Sha, had prefigured and anticipated from the project.

As the authors were struggling with how to elevate their story to meet higher expectations, the China Youth Press approached them, inviting them this time to make a fictional work out of the original material. At the suggestion of Sha, the China Youth Press arranged for Luo and Yang to travel to Beijing to visit the newly established Museum of the Chinese Military and the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, and study Mao Zedong’s works to understand the broader picture of the political situation prior to Liberation of the Chinese Mainland.<sup>18</sup> After this trip, Luo maintained that he had learned how to approach the material of his imprisonment from a new political perspective: “How to write? Chairman Mao told us: American Imperialism and all sorts of reactionaries are but paper tigers . . . [T]herefore, no matter how cruel and treacherous Xu Pengfei (Hsu Peng-fei) 徐鵬飛 was, he could not save himself from the fate of being eliminated, because this was determined by his class attribution.”<sup>19</sup> With their understanding elevated to the vantage point of “class attribution,” Luo and Yang started the third revision in October 1960 and had it completed in January 1961. Despite the new perspectives the authors had gained in Beijing giving impetus to their reorganization of the material, the third revision they completed was still far from achieving the symbolic power the cultural officials had expected, notwithstanding the direct and indirect help they received from Sha and many other professional writers and editors. In March, 1961 Luo and Yang were invited once again to Beijing to make

17. *Ibid.*, 119.

18. At this time, Liu Debin, having been accused of being a rightist in 1958, had been excluded from the group. There has been, however, an ongoing debate about whether Liu’s name should be listed as one of the authors. Supporters of Liu argue that he was an inseparable member of the group. See Yang Shiyuan 楊世元, “*Dashu bushi cong yaobu wang shang zhang de*” 大樹不是從腰部往上長的 [A big tree doesn’t grow from the middle] and Liu Debin’s *Huan lishi zhen mianmu* 還歷史真面目 [Returning to history its actual appearance], in Qian, *Hong yan*, Appendix III, 228–31, and IV, 232–45.

19. Hsu Peng-fei is a main character in *Red Crag*, whose image is based on Xu Yuanju 徐遠舉, the director of the Second Department (*Er chu*) of SACO, which was in charge of the operation of both Chazidong and Bai Gongguan.

further revisions; this time, by working personally with Zhang Yu 張羽 (1921–2004), who was a senior editor at the Chinese Youth Press.<sup>20</sup>

Zhang Yu was selected to finalize this “key book” (*zhongdian shu* 重點書) for many reasons. First, he had served as editor for the two nonfictional versions of the story and was familiar with the earlier data. Second, he was also the editor in chief of *Red Flag Waving*, which played a critical part in laying the foundations of the nationwide construction of CCP revolutionary myth. Third, Zhang had participated in CCP underground work in Shanghai and was a seasoned CCP activist in his own right. Hence, it was not surprising that Zhang quickly found many connections between Luo and Yang’s material and his own experience, and was able to identify the significance of the key characters where Luo and Yang had failed. For instance, he identified likenesses between some of the characters in *Red Crag* and the heroes he knew, commenting, in one case, “Xu Yunfeng (Hsu Yun-feng) 許雲峰 is a character who resembles Wang Xiaohé 王孝和 . . . the image of a leader of workers”; “Two-pistol Granny 雙槍老太婆, bears a resemblance to a mixture of five grannies in the Liberated Areas.” In addition, some of the most memorable punch lines in *Red Crag* were actually Zhang’s inventions. In one of his best, Sister Chiang declares, “The revolution will go on even if only the orphans and widows are left” (剩下孤兒寡婦，一樣鬧革命)，<sup>21</sup> to confirm her determination to carry on the revolution after she discovers her husband has been executed by the KMT. Zhang called this kind of technique “blood transfusion” and even wrote down the methods that made the blood transfusion successful: “[employment of one’s] life experience—comparing, making references, proving, supplementing, adding and deleting—[and thus achieving] blood transfusion.”<sup>22</sup> Zhang’s editing was no doubt most critical to the finalization of the manuscript. As revealed in his notes, Luo, Yang, and Zhang stayed in the same hotel and worked together daily, going through section by section, chapter by chapter. Normally, Yang made the first revisions, then passed the revised parts to Luo for further revisions; Luo then passed these on to Zhang to finalize changes. As a result, in the fourth revision about 33,000 words were cut from the original manuscript

20. It is well known that China Youth Press was the first publishing house that approached the three authors, and later also assigned half a dozen of its editors, including Wang Weiling 王維玲, Zhang Yu, and Jiang Xiaotian 江曉天, to work with the three authors at different stages of their writing of the novel. However, not until Zhang Yu had kept the publication of editorial documents as appendixes in Qian’s recent book did we learn the specific role that Zhang Yu played in shaping the manuscript into a major work in revolutionary literature, in terms of characterization, language, and symbolism. For these documents, see Appendix I, “*Hong yan chuban dashiji*” 《紅岩》出版大事記 [Important events in the publication of *Red Crag*]; Appendix V, “Tantan *Hong yan*—tanhua jilu” 談談《紅岩》 [About *Hong yan*—a record of an interview with Zhang Yu]; and Appendix VI, “Wo dang *Hong yan* zeren bianji shi teding de beijing” 我當《紅岩》責任編輯時特定的背景 [The social background of the time when I served as the editor of *Red Crag*], all in Qian, *Hong yan*, 214–19, 238–45, and 246–52, respectively.

21. Lo Kuang-pin and Yang Yi-yen, *Red Crag* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978), 86.

22. For Zhang’s notes, see Qian, *Hong yan*, 149.



and some 11,000 added, while in the fifth revision 20,600 words were dropped and 40,000 words rewritten, with Zhang adding at least 2,000 words of his own.<sup>23</sup> With multiple suggestions from cultural officials on how to express the lofty theme of the story, plus the help of more than a dozen editors and, in particular, Zhang's hands-on participation in writing the final version, *Red Crag* was eventually published at the end of 1961.

### In Search for Freedom: Making Sense of the CCP-Led Revolution

Acclaimed as “the most engrossing textbook of communism,”<sup>24</sup> *Red Crag* leads contemporary Chinese novels in popularity, with more than 10 million copies published in more than twenty reprints between the 1960s and early 1980.<sup>25</sup> The astronomical sales of *Red Crag* reflect its overwhelming acceptance not only by officialdom and mainstream intellectuals but also by the general reading community in Maoist China. How should we understand this phenomenon of its enormous popularity? Was it simply due to the general reading public's submission to the power of political propaganda, as conventionally argued? What thematic structure did the novelists and their editors set up based upon the selection of raw data discussed in the previous section, and how did the general reading public respond to this thematic structure?

For critic Wang Hui, “Politics is first and foremost made of power relations of ‘order and service.’ . . . Though any form of political rule contains a certain level of voluntary obedience, this alone is not sufficient for ruling in a real sense. Ruling *de facto* must also require a ‘belief in the legitimacy’ of the ruling class or party.”<sup>26</sup> It can be argued that, in modern times, belief in such legitimacy is often built upon the concept of freedom, so that the emancipation of the individual or nation from the fetters of despotism to become independent is the universal pursuit and lofty mission of modern people. As a collective social action fighting for the freedom of a

23. For Zhang's note on the differences between the fourth and fifth versions, see Qian, *Hong yan*, 151–53.

24. This quote is the title of Luo Sun's 羅蓀 book review of *Red Crag*, originally published in *Wenyi bao*, issue 3, 1962, and it is cited in Hong, *History*, 128.

25. Hong stated that it was reprinted many times before the Cultural Revolution and sold more than 4 million copies. By the 1980s, it had been reprinted more than twenty times and had sold more than 8 million copies. See *History*, 127.

26. See Wang Hui, “Zhengzhi yu daode jiqi zhihuan de mimi: Xie Jin dianying fenxi” 政治與道德及其置換的秘密：謝晉電影分析 [On politics, moral codes, and the secrets of their switches in positions: An analysis on Xie Jin's films], in Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui (Association of Chinese Film Makers), ed., *Lun Xie Jin dianying 論謝晉電影* [On Xie Jin's films] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1990), 178. Meng Yue 孟悅 also demonstrates in her article, “*Baimaonü* yanbian de qishi: Jianlun Yan'an wenyi de lishi duozhi xing” 《白毛女》演變的啟示——兼論延安文藝的歷史多質性 [Revelations from the variations of the story of *White-Haired Girl*: A popular folk story], how folk moral values are utilized by, and coded into, the emerging official ideology. See Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵編, ed., *Zai jiedu: Dazhong wenyi yu yishi xingtai* 再解讀：大眾文藝與意識形態 [Reinterpretation: Mass literature and ideology] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 68–89.

## The Politics and Aesthetics of Rediscovering Heroes of the “Red Classics” in *Lianhuanhua* of the Reform Era

Rosemary Roberts

*Lianhuanhua* 連環畫, or picture storybooks, were traditionally palm-sized books in which on each page two or three lines of text, usually at the bottom of the page, are accompanied by a hand-drawn illustration (or sometimes a still from a film) that link together to tell a story. *Lianhuanhua* became popular in China in the 1920s and 1930s and were promoted by left-wing intellectuals as a means of spreading revolutionary ideology to the lower classes and children because they were engaging and could reach people with low levels of literacy.<sup>1</sup> As such the new Communist government post-1949 strongly supported their production and distribution, leading to a golden age of *lianhuanhua* in the 1950s and early 1960s. Many of the major “red classics” of the Seventeen Years appeared in *lianhuanhua* form at this time, with the most common style featuring black-and-white line drawings derived from the pictorial conventions of traditional Chinese illustrations integrated with elements of folk and Western art, and featuring sturdy, handsome, idealized worker, peasant, and soldier images in accordance with Mao’s theories of socialist art. After briefly disappearing in the early part of the Cultural Revolution,<sup>2</sup> *lianhuanhua* reappeared in the 1970s and reached a peak of popularity in the early 1980s. By the mid-1980s however, television had become a common item in Chinese households, and Japanese manga and Western comics also flooded the Chinese market, diminishing the appeal of *lianhuanhua* as a form of entertainment, reducing its popularity and weakening its efficacy as a vehicle for propagating ideology. Publication of *lianhuanhua* dropped

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1. For a study of the origins of *lianhuanhua*, see Kuiyi Shen, “*Lianhuanhua* and *Manhua*: Picture Books and Comics in Old Shanghai,” in *Illustrating Asia*, ed. John A. Lent (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 100–21. For a general history of *lianhuanhua*, see John A. Lent, “Lianhuanhua,” *9a Arte Sao Paulo* 1, no. 2 (2012): 5–24.
  2. For a discussion of Cultural Revolution period *lianhuanhua*, see Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 331–70.

sharply, and they largely disappeared from the streets where they had previously been a feature of many roadside stalls.<sup>3</sup>

As the wave of red nostalgia hit China in the new millennium, however, along with the reprinting of “red classic” novels and reissuing of “red classic” films, *lianhuanhua* of the “red classics” reappeared, often as reprints of the earlier versions but sometimes in new versions with new illustrations and new story elements. This chapter presents a case study of two such new *lianhuanhua* versions of “red classics,” *Red Sister-in-Law* (*Hong Sao* 紅嫂) and *Who Are the Most Beloved People?* (*Shui shi zui kè'ài de rén?* 誰是最可愛的人?) published separately in *Lianhuanhua Bao* 連環畫報 in the early 1990s and then republished together in book form in 2008 and on sale in major bookstores in 2013.<sup>4</sup> In examining the phenomenon of the multiple reappearances of these *lianhuanhua* over a period of more than half a century, this chapter considers how socioeconomic change and changing political needs of the ruling party have reshaped each of these “red classic” *lianhuanhua* with respect to (1) the content of its textual component through the extension of the original story and (2) the graphic component through a changed aesthetics and politics of portraiture. It will consider the complex relationships between the original and the new versions of the stories, and their accompanying texts, in terms of issues of authenticity, truth, the role of the working class as hero, subject, and reader and the changing nature of propaganda. The study will adopt a framework based on “the dialogic approach to cultural forms” proposed by Martin Barker in his study of Western comics, which in turn draws on the work of the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp.

### *Red Sister-in-Law* and *Who Are the Most Beloved?* as “Red Classics”

The story of *Red Sister-in-Law* was first published in *Shandong Literature* (*Shandong wenxue* 山東文學) in 1961 in the form of a short story by Liu Zhixia 劉知俠 and reprinted in several collections over the next few years. From there it was adapted

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3. Several scholars have discussed the reasons for the decline of *lianhuanhua*, see, for example, Simran Kaur Khaira, “The Decline and Revival of Chinese Picture Books,” unpublished PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 2012; Minjie Chen, “Chinese *Lian Huan Hua* and Literacy: Popular Culture Meets Youth Literature,” in *Perspectives on Teaching and Learning Chinese Literacy in China*, ed. C. B. Leung and J. Ruan (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2012), 157–81, and Lent, “Lianhuanhua.”
  4. Li Chen 李晨. *Hong Sao* 紅嫂 [Red sister-in-law] (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2008). *Lianhuanhua* versions of other “red classics” also continue to appear on a regular basis: for example, a hardback version of *Baimaonü* 白毛女 published by Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe in 2007, with artwork by Hua Sanchuan, features full-color plates that use a modified traditional ink and wash style, displaying the influence of Western oil painting, socialist-era portraiture, and cinematic framing techniques. The story has been extended to include Xi'er and Da Chun's wedding after her rescue. *Lianhuanhua bao* 連環畫報 also published new versions of the *yangbanxi* classics *Shajia bang* 沙家幫 and *Hong deng ji* 紅燈記 [The red lantern] in its September 2015 issue. however, these works are beyond the scope of this present study and await further research.

into forms including Beijing Opera, dance drama, film, and *lianhuanhua*.<sup>5</sup> The earliest *lianhuanhua* version I have been able to identify was published with a print run of 100,000 copies in February 1963 by Hebei People’s Art Press, while a rival version was published by Shanghai People’s Art Press around the same time.<sup>6</sup> In 1977 a *lianhuanhua* version under the name *Red Cloud Ridge* (*Hong yun gang* 紅雲崗)—the name of the *yangbanxi* Beijing Opera based on the story—was published by Shandong People’s Press, and it is very likely that during the 1970s there were also *lianhuanhua* using film stills of the *yangbanxi* 樣板戲 performances in their Beijing Opera and ballet forms.<sup>7</sup> The Shanghai People’s Art Press version of the *lianhuanhua* was reprinted in 1984. The frequency of publication and the multiplicity of forms in which the story appeared attests to its importance within the “red classic” canon.

*Red Sister-in-Law* tells the story of a young married woman from a remote village in Shandong Province who comes upon a badly wounded Communist soldier in the mountains. She saves his life by feeding him her breast milk and then conceals him from the enemy while he recovers. Although impoverished and short of food, Red Sister-in-Law kills the family’s only remaining chicken to provide the soldier with nourishing chicken soup. While in the earliest *lianhuanhua* version of the story Red Sister-in-Law’s husband, Wu Er 吳二, is a backward, jealous, and incompetent peasant, by the time of the Cultural Revolution with its more extreme demands that literature portray peasants as proletarian heroes, he had transformed into a militia leader and staunch revolutionary. In both the 1963 and 1977 versions, the enemy are the Nationalist (KMT) army and KMT allies in the form of the Landlords’ Restitution Corps.<sup>8</sup> This original story celebrated the heroism of the ordinary country woman and the closeness of the relationship between the peasants and the army—the fish-water relationship discussed by Qian Gong in Chapter 10 of this book. In the 1991 version of *Red Sister-in-Law*, the ninety-seven plates of the 1963 version have been reduced to only ten and the wartime story is finished by Plate 6. The remainder of the *lianhuanhua* is now devoted to portraying the subsequent life of the real Red Sister-in-Law, Ming Deying 明德英, as a woman who consistently sent her children and

5. One reprint appeared in an anthology of Liu Zhixia’s stories entitled *Yimeng shan de gushi* 沂蒙山的故事 (1962) (reprinted in 1964 by Zuoqia Chubanshe in Beijing as *Yimeng gushiji* 沂蒙故事集) and a second appeared in an anthology of stories from *Shandong wenxue* (1960–1962) entitled *Hong Sao* 紅嫂, both published by Shandong Renmin Chubanshe.

6. The 1963 Hebei People’s Art Press (Hebei Renmin Meishu Chubanshe 河北人民美術出版社) version has text by Chen Pingfu 陳平夫 and drawings by Wang Li 王裏. The Shanghai People’s Art Press (Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe 上海人民美術出版社) version (precise date not known) was adapted by Lan Xiang 藍翔 and had drawings by Qian Guisun 錢貴孫.

7. The 1977 Shandong People’s Press (Shandong Renmin Chubanshe 山東人民出版社) version featured art by Wang Qimin 王啟民 and Yuan Dayi 袁大儀. The *yangbanxi* ballet version of the story was named *Ode to Yimeng* 沂蒙頌. I have seen film-still versions of many of the other *yangbanxi*, so it is reasonable to presume that they also existed for the two works that told the *Hong Sao* story.

8. “Huan xiang tuan” 還鄉團—small armed forces put together by local landlords allied with the KMT to seize back property and land that had been confiscated and distributed to the poor by the CCP.

then her grandchildren off to become soldiers and remained a loyal, undemanding supporter of the army and government throughout her life.

“Who Are the Most Beloved People?” was an essay written by Wei Wei 魏巍, veteran war correspondent and author of the novel *The East* (*Dongfang* 東方). Published in *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報) on April 11, 1951, the essay celebrated the courage and patriotism of Chinese volunteer troops fighting against the United States in Korea. Wei Wei listed the names of fourteen soldiers in particular who held a small hill against vastly superior enemy numbers to block the escape route of the enemy army. The essay described in graphic detail the struggle to the death of the fourteen men and appealed to civilians to appreciate that it was the heroic self-sacrifice of these ordinary soldiers in Korea that allowed them to go about their mundane everyday business in peace. The essay was publicly praised by Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai and ordered to be made compulsory reading in the national middle school curriculum.<sup>9</sup> The essay was credited with causing a significant shift in the attitude of the general population toward the army that saw the traditional disdain for soldiers replaced with a new admiration and respect. The term “the most beloved people” (*zui kè'ài de rén* 最可愛的人) became a new affectionate term for People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers. *Who Are the Most Beloved People?* was also published in an anthology of the same name by People’s Literature Press (Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe 人民文學出版社) in 1951, and by 1978 was into its third printing of the fourth edition. It was first published in *lianhuanhua* form by Qing Feng Shudian 青鋒書店 in 1951.<sup>10</sup> The *lianhuanhua* celebrated the compassion of the Chinese soldiers toward Korean civilians, showing a soldier rescuing a Korean child from a burning house, and celebrated their courage and sacrifice through pictures of soldiers in hand-to-hand combat with US troops. The front cover shows Chinese soldiers, having run out of ammunition, using their own burning bodies (set alight by US napalm attack), to burn their opponents to death.

As with the new story of Red Sister-in-Law, the 1991 version of the *lianhuanhua*, now named *You Will Always Be the Most Beloved* (*Ni yongyuan shi zui kè'ài de rén* 你永遠是最可愛的人), spends only five out of twenty-one plates on the war experience of one of the martyrs, Li Yu’an 李玉安, who it turned out had been living incognito for forty years after being the only survivor of a company of more than one hundred men. Once again the majority of the *lianhuanhua* depicts the life of the “living martyr” as a quiet, loyal supporter of the army and party who never wavered in living out the early Communist period ideal of the new socialist man.

9. See Qiang Shouyi 強守一, “2000 yuan de lao lianhuanhua *Shei shi zui kè'ài de rén*” 2000 元的老連環畫《誰是最可愛的人》. [http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2\\_7040161\\_1.html](http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2_7040161_1.html), accessed July 7, 2014. The website says middle school curriculum; however, a colleague born in the early 1960s recalls studying the text at primary school.

10. Adaptation by Feng Ming 馮明 and artwork by Wang Yiqiu 王亦秋.

The political function of the early “red classics” as narratives that established the foundation myths of the Communist Party and People’s Republic and gave the party’s monopoly of power moral validity and political legitimacy has been well established and will not be repeated here. What this chapter will focus on instead is the way in which these two “red classics” supported this function of literature through the particular literary genre of *lianhuanhua* and how this changed in the contemporary versions of the works. For this, a framework is necessary that will facilitate analysis of the functioning of each *lianhuanhua* within its historical context as well as in comparison across several decades of socialist and postsocialist society. Research into Western comics, a relatively new field of scholarship in itself, provides some useful guidance in this respect.

### Analyzing *Lianhuanhua*: A Dialogic Approach

Martin Barker’s 1989 study *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* puts forward principles for analyzing comics using a “dialogic approach to cultural forms” that I will draw on in discussion of the two *lianhuanhua* and their multiple historical remakes.<sup>11</sup> Put simply, Barker observes that in analyzing cultural forms it is useful to consider the nature of the typified readership (what Barker also calls “the natural audience”) that this form implies, how readers are positioned to respond to the story and characters, and the particular production histories that have produced those works.<sup>12</sup> Production history here includes both the producers (their purposes, institutional structures, external constraints, relations with creators, writers, artists, etc.), and their audiences (traditions of reading, definitions of the medium, etc.).

Following on from this, how then are readers positioned to respond to the *Red Sister-in-Law lianhuanhua* of the two periods, and who is the typified readership identified by the typified social experience sedimented within each form? I argue that the aesthetic forms of the artwork and nature of accompanying texts create two different positionings and implied readerships that constitute a synecdoche of the changing sociopolitical formations within Chinese society.

The early *lianhuanhua* project an imagined role for readers within general categories of “the people,” “the party,” “the Communist army,” and their wartime opposition and invite the readership to identify themselves with the proletariat, supporting the party and the revolutionary forces, and opposing the KMT and the US Army. What is invited is primarily a broad class identification.

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11. Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989). Barker acknowledges his debt to Vladimir Propp’s work on Russian folk stories in developing his ideas.

12. Barker uses the term “imaginative projection” to describe the response that is expected to be elicited in readers by the work. I borrow this term to discuss “imagined roles.”



5 赶到河边,红嫂把木板递给一位战士,心里又高兴又激动。原来她的娘家住在老革命根据地,解放军帮她翻了身,她永远也忘不了共产党的恩情!

Fig. 7.1

*Red Sister-in-Law* (1963), Plate 5.

Fig. 7.1 is Plate 5 from the 1963 *lianhuanhua* *Red Sister-in-Law*, showing a group of figures that have no particular distinguishable individuality and can chiefly be identified simply as “peasants” or “soldiers.” The caption carries an undisguised political propaganda message: “Red Sister-in-Law hurried to the river bank and gave the board to a soldier feeling happy and excited. Her native village was in an old revolutionary base area and the PLA had helped her to get free from the local landlord. She would never, ever forget the kindness of the Communist Party.” Notably, the support for the party is based on gratitude for tangible assistance the party had given her in the past.

In contrast, the 1991 versions of the two *lianhuanhua* invite the reader to establish a close personal relationship with two individual Communist proletarian heroes (whose stories as historical revolutionary heroes they already know); to understand and appreciate their honesty, generosity, loyalty, undemanding nature; and then to reflect on their own behavior, appreciate the army and party the same way these people do, and to remember and appreciate the current regime’s glorious past authenticated by these people. What is invited is a personal epiphany and renewed faith, an invitation that is encapsulated in the artist’s own narrative of his experience of being commissioned to create the new version of *Who Are the Most Beloved People?* The striking similarity between this response and that of Zhao Dongling 趙冬苓, the

director of the TV series *Yimeng*, quoted in Qian Gong’s chapter in this book, raises the question as to whether these contemporary intellectuals have genuinely rediscovered a respect for forgotten ordinary Communist heroes or whether this narrative is a form of trope in itself.<sup>13</sup>

When the Editorial board arranged for me to draw Li Yu’an, I only knew that he was a martyr that Wei Wei had written about who had turned out to be a “martyr” who was actually still alive today. To tell the truth, this did not arouse my creative urge [*jiqi wo de chuangzuo yu* 激起我的創作欲]. I only really wanted to draw him after I went to his hometown in Bachan County. At the township if you stop anyone on the street and ask them do they know Li Yu’an, they all answer in the affirmative. The little things they told me about him in casual conversation all moved me very deeply. The old man’s rich spiritual world formed such a contrast with the material and spiritual pursuits of today’s young people, that it shook me to the very soul. So I hid myself away in a quiet room and facing the canvas and manuscript paper expressed my heartfelt admiration and respect. I used my emotions to draw, and my heart to paint, for the sake of the last 40 years of the old hero, for the last 40 years of our republic and for the countless forty years of our generation and the generations to come.<sup>14</sup>

Correspondingly the typified readership has changed. The typified social experience sedimented within the form in the *lianhuanhua* from the early 1950s and early 1960s is that of the recent experience of national wars and the postwar effort to rebuild the nation in collective life under socialism. The typified readership were children and adults (civilian and PLA) with low levels of literacy (the greater part of the population at the time)—for whom the primary function of the simple line drawings was to enable them to comprehend the meaning of the text and accept its political and social messages. This readership is implicit, for example, in this panel from *Five Days and Nights on Flying Tiger Mountain* (*Feihushan shang wu zhouye* 飛虎山上五晝夜), a *lianhuanhua* of the Korean War contemporary with *Who Are the Most Beloved People?* (Fig. 7.2). The panel includes a double speech bubble, one with text, the other illustrating the content of the text, rendering the meaning comprehensible to the illiterate. (Their messenger reports discovering a Korean child crying in a ditch at the side of the road next to the dead body of its mother—killed in a US air strike.)

The typified social experience and typified readership sedimented into the form of the 1990s version of the two “red classics,” however, has changed: now the implicit social experience is that of individuals who were children in the collective era, who know the stories and feel nostalgic, but who relate to the lower-class characters as outsiders. The refined artwork of the panels, the perspectives and content of the pictures, and the accompanying artist’s notes on the creative experience, now bespeak

13. See Chapter 9 in this volume.

14. Li, Afterword to *Red Sister-in-Law*.





Fig. 7.2

*Five Days and Nights on Flying Tiger Mountain* (1953?), Plate 6, showing the use of the double speech bubble.

a middle-class intellectual readership who can appreciate the elevated artistry of the drawings and identify with the *lianhuanhua*'s narrative viewpoint of an outsider recalling the past beneficence of the masses, rediscovering their virtues and being elevated spiritually by the stories of their lives.

Before turning to a specific analysis of how the differences in the positioning of the readership of the *lianhuanhua* of the two periods are manifested in the changing treatment of artwork and text, I will first examine the production histories of the *lianhuanhua* of the two periods to establish the environments in which they were produced. During the period of the Sino-Japanese War, both the KMT and the Communist Party had used *lianhuanhua* to instill patriotism and inspire resistance to the invaders among the general population.<sup>15</sup> The efficacy of the literary form for political education was therefore well recognized before the Communist victory. Post-1949, needing to consolidate support for the Communist regime, Mao directed Zhou Yang, then vice minister for publicity, to set up a state publishing house for *lianhuanhua* because of their broad appeal and educative function. Popular Pictures

15. Lent, "Lianhuanhua," 7.

Press (Dazhong Tuhua Chubanshe 大眾圖畫出版社) was established, then in 1951 was merged with the People’s Art Press and began publishing the comic journal *Lianhuanhua bao*. Ideological control over *lianhuanhua* production was asserted by sending army cadres to supervise at the Shanghai *lianhuanhua* publishing houses and making artists undertake ideological education. The earlier convention of one person creating both text and drawing was replaced with a system under which *lianhuanhua* were split between artists and writers, so that the artists were now responsible only for creating drawings for texts that were provided to them. This professionalized both the writing and drawing and made state control of textual content more efficient.<sup>16</sup>

Content of the *lianhuanhua* was dictated by the criteria for socialist literature and art set by Mao’s 1942 *Yan’an Talks* as well as being constrained by the low literacy level of its intended readers and the simple aesthetic tastes of the lower classes and the young, so that the text was relatively simple and pictures had to be able to tell the story without requiring much reference to the text. The words therefore repeated the information that the pictures told, as exemplified in the *lianhuanhua* panel from the early 1950s incorporating the double speech bubble discussed above. The pictures themselves had to be in the style of Socialist Realist art that portrayed an optimistic outlook on the future of the revolution, and focused on positive heroic figures from among the peasants, workers, and soldiers. During the Cultural Revolution years, these ideological requirements were made even more extreme under the straightjacket of the “Three Prominences” theory; however, both of the early *lianhuanhua* discussed here were created prior to the Cultural Revolution, so the Three Prominences theory was not applied to either book. In fact, the drawings and text in *Red Sister-in-Law* contravene Cultural Revolution codes for literature and art in a number of ways. As mentioned earlier, Red Sister-in-Law’s husband, Wu Er, is portrayed as a weak and cowardly figure who only gradually acquires revolutionary consciousness and courage through learning from her example and the force of circumstance—thereby contravening Cultural Revolution requirements to portray all poor peasants as heroic characters. The text also contravenes the sexual mores of Cultural Revolution literature and art by directly confronting the sexual implications of a young woman breast-feeding an adult man: Red Sister-in-Law is described as blushing at the idea of breast-feeding the soldier, before overcoming her embarrassment in order to save his life (Plate 23), and Wu Er is shown getting into a rage of sexual jealousy and preparing to beat his wife when he discovers she is taking food to the soldier hidden nearby. Red Sister-in-Law is also portrayed deliberately flirting with the villain Diao Gui in order to extract her husband from his clutches (Plate 75) so that he then visits her for dinner expecting sex. Cultural Revolution prudery required all these scenes to be excised from *yangbanxi* versions of the works, with the crucial breast-feeding scene

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16. Julia Andrews, Jonathan Spence, and Shen Kuiyi, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 23.

dealt with by Red Sister-in-Law taking the soldier's canteen and disappearing behind a bush to appear moments later with the canteen now filled with expressed milk that she feeds him from the bottle. Pictorial conventions of the Cultural Revolution are also contravened in the 1963 *Red Sister-in-Law*: for example, in Plate 72 the villain can be seen foregrounded in relation to the peasant couple, appearing taller than them and being depicted slapping the passive, intimidated husband's face (see Fig. 7.3).



72 刁鬼冲上去,啪啪揍了吴二两个耳光,怒气冲冲地骂道:“混蛋!你还要我拿出证据来么!等我说出来你就完了。”

Fig. 7.3

*Red Sister-in-Law* (1963), Plate 72, showing the villain foregrounded and with dominating stance.

Actual drawing styles in the *lianhuanhua* of the 1950s and early 1960s were dictated by the need to be able to draw quickly and clearly and drew on traditional techniques of line drawing as well as borrowing techniques from Western art to achieve perspective and shading.<sup>17</sup> In the typical style of Socialist Realist art, positive human figures are drawn as sturdily built with firm, squared chins and vague though regular and quite attractive features. Emotion tends to be expressed through body stance more than through facial expressions, which are often given little detail. As McCloud points out, simpler, more symbolically abstract representations of people are easier for readers to identify with than are realistic drawings, because they allow audiences to imagine themselves in those roles more readily and then become absorbed in and participate in the fantasy more easily.<sup>18</sup> In the Chinese case it follows therefore that

17. The quite crude use of perspective in the drawing of the row of soldiers approaching from the left in Fig. 7.2 seems to illustrate that this was a new technique being learnt from Western art at the time.

18. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).

the simple outline figures found in early *lianhuanhua* such as the 1951 version of *Who Are the Most Beloved People?* or *Red Sister-in-Law* render political messages more effective by increasing the degree of identification between readers and the characters depicted.

Although, as in traditional *lianhuanhua* style, the two early *lianhuanhua* include only one picture per panel, the drawing of *Red Sister-in-Law* in particular does adopt some of the techniques of Western comic art to indicate motion through space. For example, as Wu Er rushes in to save his wife from the ravages of the villain, rapid motion is signaled by a series of curved parallel lines that start at Wu Er's back leg below the knee, cross the lower front leg, which is striding out in front of him, and project on forward in front of him. Similarly, dense lines circling Red Sister-in-Law and Diao Gui indicate that they are whirling around as she tries to hit him with the kitchen chopper. The action is neatly captured in four successive panels. In Panel 84, Diao Gui confronts Red Sister-in-Law, intending to molest her. She stands near the stove, her chopper on the chopping board next to her. In Panel 85 she is lunging toward him, the chopper now held high in her hand. His hat is falling from his head as he backs toward the dining table. In the next plate the circular lines show they are whirling around in a grim struggle, his hand grasping her wrist to stop her chopping at him, her other hand on his other wrist to stop him drawing his handgun. The stool by the table, upright in the previous panel, is now lying on the ground. In the next panel, from a viewpoint outside the house, we see through the open door that Diao Gui has wrestled Red Sister-in-Law onto her knees in front of him, while outside the house Wu Er is sprinting toward the door with fists clenched. The simple outline representation of the figures consistently viewed in long shot, the clear moral superiority of the central characters, and the satisfying resolution of the plot all encourage reader identification with the Communist heroes of the story. As was the intention with the *lianhuanhua* of this period, the story can be discerned quite clearly from the pictures alone. The text simply reiterates what is already shown in the pictures.

In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s when simple *lianhuanhua* were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in a society dominated by the working class and the “red classics” were a powerful propaganda tool to establish the foundational myths of the party and consolidate support for the new regime, the environment into which the remakes of *Red Sister-in-Law* and *Who Are the Most Beloved People?* were born in 1991 was a different world. Not only had Chinese society endured the Cultural Revolution, but, equally shocking in its ideological import, the 1989 student protests and Beijing massacre had deeply shaken the idea that this was a party and army that belonged to the people. One of the functions of reviving the “red classics” at this time, then, must be seen as the effort both to restore the credibility of the party through a revival of its glorious past and to reinstall the idea of the masses and the army being one family that had been damaged by recent events. The statement by the artist

Li Chen, quoted above, in which he records the fact that the project was assigned to him as an initially unenthusiastic participant, verifies that the institutional structures that assigned subject matter to *lianhuanhua* artists still bore some resemblance to those controlling the production of *lianhuanhua* in the earlier period. There are hints and signs in the artist's two afterwords that the publication was vetted in the same way as old *lianhuanhua*, with panels checked for approval by the party and army personnel. In notes on the production of *Red Sister-in-Law*, Li remarks that he was advised by a large group of people and speaks collectively of people looking over his material to help select characters and scenes for the panels. He also mentions help from Wang Shenglie 望盛烈, a prominent Socialist Realist ink painter of the 1950s. So the production process was a combination of official and group direction, input, and monitoring that kept the work within official paradigms while providing support from the artists representing the pinnacle of the socialist tradition. A photo even shows the artist showing Wei Wei the original large-sized drawings for the *lianhuanhua* and presumably seeking his approval.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, in an era in which the collective has been deemphasized and the individual celebrated, the individuality of the creative process is also emphasized by the artist himself through the afterwords following each of the two stories. These describe in detail the independent process by which the artist undertook the project and the way his style for the drawings grew out of introspection and experimentation in a “marvelous process” (*qimiao de guocheng* 奇妙的過程) that has come from life itself.<sup>20</sup> The individual nature of his art is emphasized: “Like writers, artists should be independent creators [*duli de zhizuo ren* 獨立的製作人], it is just that their tools and methods are different.” The afterword finishes, “When the time comes that, standing in front of your work, you can identify your own individual style, you are no longer just purely copying.” Implicit in these declarations of independence lies a tension between the commission for a political task and the independent creative drive of the artist.

The external environment was also one in which the government and major artists were seeking to find a new Chinese style of *lianhuanhua*/comic to push back against the tide of imported manga and Western comics that by the 1990s had garnered 90 percent of the Chinese comic market.<sup>21</sup> This concern led the General Administration of Press and Publication to implement the “5155 project” to construct five new Chinese major comic publishers within three years to establish fifteen series of comic books and five comic magazines.<sup>22</sup> According to Lent the strategy was to encourage

19. The association of Li Chen with these major figures of the literature and art world of the 1950s also symbolically marks him as one of their successors in the world of socialist culture.

20. Li, Afterword to *Ni yongyuan shi zui ke'ai de ren*, in *Red Sister-in-Law*.

21. Chen, “Chinese *Lian Huan Hua* and Literacy.”

22. Lent, “Lianhuanhua,” 13.

nonmanga styles and content that avoided “dull historical stories.”<sup>23</sup> *Lianhuanhua* was also treated as serious art and included in fine art publications and major art exhibitions. Some of the original drawings from Li Chen’s *You Will Always Be the Most Beloved* were taken into the collection of the China National Art Gallery and were awarded multiple national fine art prizes in the first decade of the new millennium, thereby giving official endorsement to this mode of experimentation with the *lianhuanhua* form.

### Politics through Aesthetics in the New “Red Classic” *Lianhuanhua*

The attempts to reinvigorate the indigenous *lianhuanhua* industry meant that in creating the new “red classic” *lianhuanhua*, Li Chen had considerable artistic freedom to convey his subject matter in new ways. Unlike earlier artists who simply had to replicate in visual form the texts provided to them, Li produced both text and artwork himself and was thus able, in his own words, to “free himself from the fetters of text.”<sup>24</sup> Below I shall discuss the most significant ways in which Li Chen’s aesthetic reworking of the “red classic” stories transforms their mode of functioning as *lianhuanhua* and as political propaganda and orients them toward an entirely new audience.

First, Li Chen’s work brings a transformation of the relationship between text and drawing. In contrast to the traditional *lianhuanhua* in which text and drawing maintain the fixed format of a large rectangular picture with two to four lines of text running along the length of one side, in Li Chen’s *lianhuanhua* the space given to each has been radically altered, with artwork spread across a two-page opening, leaving a narrow column on one side in which the text is minimized and confined to a small space at the bottom of the column (see, for example, Fig. 7.4 below). As Wolk observes, “Language conveys time, images convey space. So when there is little text, the reader has to stop and assess what exactly is happening and how long it is supposed to take.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the new format forces readers to focus their attention on the picture, derive their own meanings, and imagine the action that surrounds the particular instant portrayed. Li Chen’s style of intricate sometimes hyperrealist pencil drawings reinforces this effect by providing the reader with an extraordinary amount of fine detail to absorb and derive information from on every page. Most importantly for the functioning of the text as new propaganda, it forces the reader to absorb the extraordinarily expressive emotional dimension of the drawings. Without a single word of the explicit political rhetoric found in the Mao-era *lianhuanhua*, the tender

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23. Ibid.

24. Li, Afterword to *Red Sister-in-Law*.

25. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007), 130.



Fig. 7.4

*Red Sister-in-Law* (2008), Plate 3, Red Sister-in-Law tending the wounded soldier.

expression of *Red Sister-in-Law* and the vulnerability of the young soldier draw the reader into a position of empathy with the characters portrayed.

Also unlike the traditional *lianhuanhua*, text and picture now provide different information, and both are necessary to fully understand the narrative. The panel in Fig. 7.5, for example, would not be comprehensible without the text to inform us that the narrative has jumped from Red Sister-in-Law concealing information from Japanese soldiers to a scene of the villagers bidding farewell to the now-recovered soldier.



Fig. 7.5

*Red Sister-in-Law* (2008), Plate 6. Villagers bidding farewell to the soldier.

Layout has become more varied and draws on techniques from Japanese manga and Western cartoons, with some panels now split into multiple sections that show a set of related multiple events that take place within a short period of time, so that the visuals convey both a space and time dimension. Other techniques include the visual blending of the “present” and memories, or the overlaying around “the present” of the content of a narrative being related by one character to a group of others. A redesigned relationship between drawing and text forcing new modes of reader reception is therefore a striking and powerful feature of Li Chen’s new “red classics.”

Second, Li’s remade “red classic” *lianhuanhua* manifest a transformation of the relationship between panels. Scott McCloud refers to the process of imagining the relationship between the image in one panel and the image in the next as “closure.”<sup>26</sup> In traditional *lianhuanhua* the information needed to achieve closure is all contained within the panels themselves, as in the sequence of four panels depicting the fight between Red Sister-in-Law and Diao Gui described earlier: the upright stool in one panel followed by the stool overturned on the floor in the next easily produces the “closure” of visualizing the two combatants knocking over the stool as they struggle. In the Li Chen version of *Red Sister-in-Law*, however, closure is no longer possible simply by relying on the content provided in the panels themselves. Only with knowledge of the original stories that are being retold can the narrative gaps between successive panels be filled and closure be achieved. Li Chen does not depict Red Sister-in-Law risking her life by hiding the soldier and nursing him back to health or making him soup from her only chicken; rather, the panels jump from her breast-feeding him in the field, to a brief four-word exchange between her and two Japanese soldiers, and then jumps again to the panel depicting the villagers bidding the soldier farewell as he leaves. The effect of this gap in “closure” is to cause a knowledgeable readership (and here that is implicitly assumed) to recall the details of the heroic narratives of the past without having to directly mention them, and to allow those narratives to sit in the background as the story moves on to focus on Red Sister-in-Law’s life of quiet contribution over the subsequent fifty years, thereby creating layers of ideological education operating simultaneously within the narrative.

Third, the new works bring a transformation in the style and nature of *lianhuanhua* artwork and a consequent transformation in the relationship between the reader and the panels. The variety of sources of Li Chen’s aesthetic experimentation with viewpoint and technique evident in the *lianhuanhua* remakes of the “red classics” under analysis suggest that the artist was seeking ways to expand the limited aesthetic vocabulary of the traditional *lianhuanhua*, identified as one of the problems responsible for the decline of *lianhuanhua* in the mid-1980s. Here I will analyze just a few examples of innovative aesthetics to illustrate this variety and explore the way in which they contribute to a more subtle but still powerful medium for ideological persuasion. As Li Chen’s subject matter concerns narratives of wartime heroes, it is not surprising that some of his inspiration might be drawn from the Socialist Realist painting traditions of the 1950s—particularly when we recall that the painter Wang Shenglie was named as having been one of his mentors during the project. Panel 3 from *You Will Always Be the Most Beloved* shows the compositional influence of Socialist Realist art such as Zhan Jianjun’s 詹建俊 1959 painting of *Five Heroes of Mount Langya* (*Langyashan wu zhuangshi* 狼牙山五壯士) (see Fig. 7.6). The

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26. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*.



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