

## Words and Their Stories

# Handbook of Oriental Studies

Handbuch der Orientalistik

SECTION FOUR

China

*Edited by*

Stephen F. Teiser

Martin Kern

Timothy Brook

VOLUME 27

# Words and Their Stories

Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution

*Edited by*

Ban WANG



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON

2011

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Words and their stories : essays on the language of the Chinese revolution / [edited]  
by Wang Ban.

p. cm. — (Handbook of Oriental studies. Section four, China, ISSN 0169-9520 ;  
v. 27 = Handbuch der orientalistik)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-18860-0 (hard cover : alk. paper)

1. Revolutions—China—History—20th century—Terminology. 2. China—Politics  
and government—1949–1976—Terminology. 3. China—Politics and government—  
1912–1949—Terminology. 4. Revolutionaries—China—Language. 5. Political  
culture—China—History—20th century. 6. Literature and revolutions—China—  
History—20th century. 7. Politics and literature—China—History—20th century.  
8. Discourse analysis—Political aspects—China. I. Wang, Ban, 1957– II. Title.  
III. Series.

DS777.56.W67 2010

951.04'2—dc22

2010023733

ISSN 0169-9520

ISBN 978 90 04 18860 0

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## UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE REVOLUTION THROUGH WORDS: AN INTRODUCTION

Ban Wang

While we recognize that in the general development of history the material determines the mental and social being determines social consciousness, we also...recognize the reaction of the mental on material things, of social consciousness on social being, and of the superstructure on the economic base. This does not go against materialism; on the contrary, it avoids mechanical materialism and firmly upholds dialectical materialism.

Mao Zedong  
“On Contradictions”

When he returned from the Second World War to Cambridge, England, Raymond Williams was perplexed by a strange new environment. He found that people spoke a different language. This led him to ponder the nature of vocabulary change. The new language, as opposed to the pre-war one, had “different immediate values or different kinds of valuation.” Although it was the same English, he was acutely aware of “different formations and distributions of energy and interest.”<sup>1</sup> Usually, language changes took centuries, but the interwar years had changed English drastically.

This linguistic alienation motivated Williams to launch an investigation into keywords in the vocabulary of popular and intellectual discourse. One such word is “culture.” He noticed that in daily conversation, “culture” was often used to refer to social superiority and education, or to an artistic or media profession. More often the word refers to a general notion of society or even a way of life.

But in this linguistic disorientation, “culture” remains fraught with contradictory meanings. Williams became aware of the term’s connections with industry, democracy, and art. One day, as he casually

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 11.

looked up “culture” in the *Oxford New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, he had a shock of recognition. The changes, he realized, had begun in the nineteenth century. His explorations of interconnected meanings of keywords took on “not only an intellectual but an historical shape.”<sup>2</sup> *Culture* itself now has a different, though related history. Thus began an attempt to understand contemporary problems by trying to understanding tradition and by tracing words’ histories.

Raymond Williams’ focus on words and their histories is an inspiration for this book. Since China started economic reform, revolutionary language, invented by and built into the center of the Chinese Revolution, has experienced a sea change. Scholars and critics, in a grim mood of farewell to revolution, have tended to take a harsh view of the revolutionary experience from the early days through Mao’s era. The trashing of the revolution is manifest in such wildly popular books as Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* and *Mao: The Unknown Story*. The meanings of certain terms as building blocks of the revolution also underwent tremendous alteration. Critics in China, in an attempt to rewrite literary history, have attacked the Maoist style of discourse.

In her recent article “Reclaiming the Chinese Revolution,” Elizabeth Perry notes that the Chinese Revolution these days has few admirers. Historians like Joseph Esherick and Mark Selden, previously sympathizers, now think of the revolution not as liberation but as “the replacement of one form of domination with another,” not as inspiration but as forming an authoritarian state.<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Wasserstrom and associated scholars in the early 1990s undertook an important workshop project entitled “Language and Politics in Modern China.”<sup>4</sup> The participants looked into the ideological, historical, propagandist, and repressive functions of a number of keywords in revolutionary political culture. Of these studies, the essay by Tim Cheek stresses the centrality of language in shaping revolutionary personality, power, and reality. Focusing on the rectification campaign in Yan’an, Cheek seeks to understand the language of the Chinese Revolution, approaching

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Perry, “Reclaiming the Chinese Revolution,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 4 (November 2008): 1149.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Wasserstrom et al., *Indiana East Asian Working Papers Series on Language and Politics in Modern China (1993–1997)*, East Asian Studies Center, Indiana University (1994). Some papers or parts of them in this series have been published. This source is accessible with password through the Indiana University Library. I thank Professor Lin Zou for helping me access these papers.

the function of discourse as CCP cadres' top-down, authoritative dissemination of meanings. While he acknowledges that the party elite was not homogenous and was fraught with internal fissures, thus calling for sensitivity to the ways meanings are contested, his focus on power struggles among individuals, with their own personal traits and backgrounds, may have narrowed the historical horizon. A broad view would require a systematic analysis not of personalized and instituted power, but of power on political, national, populist, and international scales. Reading through the working papers of this group, I realized that as good historians they rightly put the words in their historical contexts and political environments, but most seemed to be writing in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution, whose catastrophes are implicitly traceable to the early revolutionary formations. Perry was a member of this working group. But in her 2008 article in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, she sees a change of mind in scholarship that calls for a new assessment. Despite her attempt to reclaim something precious from the revolution, however, she seems apologetic about this new turn, professing youthful idealism as a valid motivation.

In current scholarship, the Chinese Revolution is still viewed in the light of the dire consequences of the Cultural Revolution, or from the perspective of an all-controlling party apparatus. This is understandable in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and amid the widespread sentiment of "the end of history." In an age supposedly free from politics and ideology, revolutionary movements and activities are readily associated with terror, brutality, propaganda, and totalitarianism. Although Perry's study attempts to find certain redeeming themes of reform and democracy—in workers' education and reasoned dialogue between labor and capital in the Anyuan coal mine—it does not take into account the active forces within the sociopolitical realm as a whole: the imperialist powers, the parties, the warlord regime, and rising grassroots movements. All of these conflicted and interacted, demanding a total purview of the political landscape. Her retrieval of reasoned, civil discourse in the Anyuan mine implicitly shuns violence as an aberration in revolution. Thus the mine workers' "democratic" unionist activity signaled an untapped liberal potential. But if we imagine ourselves in the historical context, the violence and reason of the revolution cannot be so easily separated. Violence (or counter-violence) has reason, sometimes good reasons: there is method in madness. On the other hand, dialogue in normal "deliberative" politics or even litigation may be a medium of hidden or insidious violence, in

the way expressed by the Chinese phrase, “Murder without blood” (*sharen bu jian xue*). One can easily condemn a peasant uprising or armed struggle in Chinese history as violent, but how about the organized, sustained, banal violence inflicted by the ruling class in the guise of law and order; the invasions of imperialist powers in the name of international law; the rights and privileges, acquired at gunpoint, granted to territories and concessions; and bloody crackdowns on workers and peasants? To account for violence as historical vicissitudes and as political dynamics is not to endorse it. But to condemn all violence from a moralistic high ground recalls Hegel’s remark that in the dark of night all cows are black.

Violence was ubiquitous in the interstate conflict that gave rise to the Chinese Revolution. No moist-eyed historian on the lookout for a soft revolution can wish it away by favoring gentrified, conciliatory behavior. In response to Western critics’ complaints that Chinese revolutionaries “yield[ed] nothing to reason and everything to force,” C. P. Fitzgerald half a century ago wrote, “In the amoral field of international relations between sovereign states, it would be difficult to find an example of one nation yielding any substantial portion of its power or sovereignty to reason.” Western critics only have to look at their own historical records to see that violence is a fact of life in international and social conflict. Chinese revolutionaries also knew at what point they could yield to reason. If you find out what things “the Chinese might reasonably concede,” says Fitzgerald, the charge of violence is pointless.<sup>5</sup>

In their important work on Yan’an’s revolutionary movement, David Apter and Tony Saich examine the ways revolutionary language enabled the masses to comprehend the changing world and to connect with other participants in the revolution to become an effective force. At the heart of their study is the logocentric model of political culture, with a new focus on symbolic, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions of language. “Logocentric” entails a discourse-propelled mass movement, as opposed to normal deliberative politics of negotiation and compromise. Revolutionary discourse, both inspirational and realistic, provides the means and ends of a transformative politics, seeking “nothing less than to change the world by reinterpreting it.” Yan’an’s new culture proffers a good example of how a revolution

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<sup>5</sup> C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Birth of Communist China* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1964), 192.

based on symbols, words, and discourse can constantly work on and redefine itself and generate a language of hope and faith, bundling “it together with ideological, ethnic, religious, and linguistic strands.”<sup>6</sup> But like many contemporary critics, Apter and Saich give no more than an analytical and nostalgic value to their important study and seem apologetic about their interest in Yan’an, yearning only for some elements of puritanism in a more corrupt contemporary age.<sup>7</sup> This reluctance recalls Perry’s justification of her paper by an appeal to idealism, making the study of the revolution personal and academic and depriving it of relevance to the contemporary world.

This volume strives to continue these researches—without apology. To treat Chinese history seriously, the Chinese Revolution cannot be just a subject for antiquarian or academic study. The sea change that has eroded the revolutionary language need not be seen as final. Earlier meanings of words may persist in submerged status or coexist with non-revolutionary rivals. Recovery of the old words may suggest critical alternatives in which contemporary capitalist myths can be contested. The apologetic attitude reflects the current mind-set, forgetful of the revolution, signaling a China fraught with contradictions even when it seems to be burying the memory of revolution.

It has been thirty years since China’s market reform and twenty years since the so-called end of the Cold War. Starting in the 1990s, the euphoria of global capitalist modernity dispatched the Chinese revolutionary experience to the proverbial dustbin of history. In this atmosphere, modern Chinese history that really matters seems to be only thirty years young. The story of an inevitable historical telos has been told by transnational media and mainstream intellectuals: China has finally cut itself off from the erroneous revolutionary past. China is moving forward, albeit with growing pains, toward a future of wealth, power, and prestige. Dazzling are the images of a suddenly awakened giant that has been fulfilling its potential, thanks to the golden highway of global capitalism. Envidable is a rising middle class, whose wealth and glamour not only grace *Forbes* and the *New York Times* but also promise a greater openness of civil society and democratic politics. Beneath this golden arch are collectible relics of the dusty revolutionary

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<sup>6</sup> David Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

events, discarded, museumized, or put on display to ease the boredom of newly acquired luxury.

The verdict has come down roughly like this: Once upon a time there was a dominant revolutionary regime, starting in Yan'an and culminating in Beijing. The revolutionaries were power seekers and revolutionary history, for all its anti-imperialism, national independence drive and social transformations, is but a circulation (or circus) of power holders. The masses were duped and mindlessly led. Educated and enlightened writers were co-opted and complicit. From the barrel of a gun came the revolutionary state, which thrust the country into a dark, ever-tightening socialist era. No sooner was it on its feet than the New China began to sink quickly into the catastrophes and madness of the Anti-rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. These days an innocent bumping into talk shows, classrooms, or conferences may get an overwhelming sense that the entire history of modern China, prior to Deng Xiaoping's reform, was a vast, officially orchestrated deception or a mythical totem. A handful of monstrous figures behind the high walls of the imperial palace had been pulling the strings of a billion people of different ethnicities, interests, and aspirations, spread over a vast East Asian land mass. The socialist era is a record of conspiracy and manipulation or a trail of policy bungling and economic disasters. On this side of "post-socialism," many look back at this "Mao dynasty" with fear and trembling, as a past dark age, when people were duped, women subjugated, dissidents eradicated, everyday life stifled, laughter silenced, sex repressed, culture destroyed, private emotion cleansed, and minds administered.

But as China is joining the capitalist world economy and accumulating wealth and resources, the familiar problems of capitalist modernization are becoming pressing. The last two decades witnessed problems of social disintegration, class stratification, uneven development, erosion of the social fabric, and civil and ethnic strife. In dealing with and discussing the consequences of economic development, solved or unresolved problems of the revolution are resurfacing. In current opinion, critics focus on the present moment of growth, prosperity, and slowdown as if the present were all there is. The present has no past and will extend endlessly into the future. Many signs of economic, social, and political collapse in the contemporary world indicate, however, that it is by suppressing and forgetting past aspirations, struggles, and unfinished motifs that we enable the present to prevail.



Yet the forgotten keeps coming back. As in ancient China, far-sighted alarms are sounded first by the most sensitive gossip and forebodings. A recent film, *The Forest Ranger* (Tiangou, dir. Qi Jian, 2006), uncannily evokes a fight for social justice reminiscent of the revolutionary past. Set in the era of deepening reform and privatization in the early 1990s, the film depicts a lonely, tragic-heroic battle against the plundering of public property. Li Tiangou, a soldier and crippled military hero, comes to a village in Shaanxi province for a government job of protecting the forests. Three brothers of the village have built a business empire by plundering the forests for private gain. They are revered and feared as the “Three Dragons,” ruling over not only the market but also everybody’s livelihood. Their despotic control is absolute, a reincarnation of the exploitative autocracy of the landlord gentry in the past. Even the officials of the county government are in their service. Seeing Tiangou as a threat to their business, everyone, from ordinary villagers to the three “Dragons,” tries to buy him off by showering his family with gifts. Failing to dissuade him from his job, the gangster heads of the business cut off the family’s access to water and deploy many other tricks to make their survival impossible. The film depicts excruciatingly how the family struggles, and how the entire village is in the pay of the business to make them miserable, including by rape and the kidnapping of the child. Yet as a soldier, a public servant, Tiangou refuses to trade “one tree in exchange for one stalk of scallion,” state assets for life necessities. He refuses even to accept a stake in the company when the business chiefs make the offer. The conflict builds up to a final battle as the gangsters, the “security force” of the business, are trying to beat him to death. Wounded all over and grabbing a rifle (significantly, one made in 1938 and used by the Eighth Route Army in the War of Resistance against Japanese invasion), Tiangou crawls to the forest site, where the biggest trees are being felled by the “Three Dragons” according to plan. Surprised that he is still alive, they try to kill him, only to be shot, one after another, by Tiangou. The reality of this “murder” case comes to light only when the villagers, informed that the most feared third brother is dead, are relieved to tell the truth.

Neoliberal globalization, the financial crisis, and the emergent social movements of self-protection against the ravages of the blind market compel us to rethink the Chinese Revolution. That it arose as a national independence movement against imperialist encroachments has been largely forgotten. It could be said, for example, that the

Great Depression and the worldwide crisis of capitalism fueled Japanese imperialism in Asia. “The closing of Western markets to Japanese goods made Japan all the more intent on pressing a colonialist policy in its East Asia sphere of influence,” writes Joseph Esherick.<sup>8</sup> Although this view places the Chinese Revolution in a geopolitical context, we may further consider the revolution’s place in the long-term systematic expansion of global modernity, the imperialist aggression of globalization, and the ravages to native communities in the last 200 years. The revolution can be seen in this light as the struggle of ordinary people to protect their own interests, take control of their own land, and keep their community together. The revolution does not mean simply violent change, but the people rallying their energy and courage to fend for themselves in the face of chronic economic crisis and the imperialist dispossession of their land and community. This involves not just military struggle and radical institutional overhauls, but nation-building, attaining sovereignty, the making of a new culture, economic independence, and massive changes in social and gender relations. Its basic goal is to combat ruptures in the social fabric and to rebuild society. In this light, we can see the continuity of the revolution in the ongoing grassroots social movements in China and its relevance around the world. We can also understand why the advance of global capitalism, which includes “post-socialist” China as a major partner, is eager to eradicate progressive social movements along with their revolutionary predecessors.

The global environment is putting revolution in doubt and altering the language that informed it. We embarked on this project with the belief that linguistic changes are bound up with fundamental ruptures and continuity in the world. In commenting on Walter Benjamin’s work of memory, Hannah Arendt wrote that any period whose own past has become as questionable as ours “must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language.”<sup>9</sup> In the last century, the meaning of revolutionary language has undergone dislocations and breaks. To trace these ruptures is not to indulge in nostalgia, but to rethink history through sedimented layers of meaning and associations in words

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph W. Esherick, “Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution,” in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ed., *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 47.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Introduction,” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 49.

and discourse. It is far from our purpose to spell out the semantic and dictionary senses of words and phrases. We want to see how the words reflect social and political reality. But more importantly, we will follow Raymond Williams' advice and try

to show that some important social and historical process occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships are. New kinds of relationship, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways: in the invention of new terms (capitalism); in the adaptation and alteration (indeed at times reversal) of older terms (society or individual)... But also, as these examples should remind us, such changes are not always either simple or final. Earlier and later senses co-exist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than viewing language as simply mirroring reality, we can see its ruptures within a submerged continuity. Abuse and misuse of language imply there is a historically legitimate use and communication. That we can still communicate with the past and with those who disagree with us means there is some tenacious inner core of meaning. Thus the question of meaning cannot dissolve completely into historical context, into individual users, and much less into abusers. A context-bound view of language, in disregard of its enduring values, is historicist, not historical, and risks rendering discourse a mere function dependent on shifting seats of power. The meaning of a word always retains a residual, resilient, or normative sense: an aspiration, an intention or truth value. Despite all the distortions of politics and democracy in the modern world, the Greek *polis*, Arendt notes, will always exist at the bottom of sea change—for as long as we use the word “politics.”<sup>11</sup> This is so in liberal democracy. The same is true of the keywords of the Chinese Revolution.

Our departure from Williams is that we trace more the jagged lines in the political and literary itinerary of a word or phrase. Here is an example of how a word goes through historical vicissitudes but can be brought to the surface, radiant with renewable, essential potential. In this volume, *geming* 革命, the keyword of keywords, is examined closely by Jianhua Chen in its different layers of meaning and its checkered career in the twentieth century. Unraveling into different

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, “Introduction,” 49.

strands of politics, movement, schools of thought, and multicolored strata, *geming* offers a glimpse of what we mean by “Words and Their Stories” in the book’s title. It allows us to see how a word’s meanings derive from multiple stories and histories, dispelling the unthinking reflex of defining revolution as violence, terror, or monopoly of power. Pulling through historical ebbs and flows, through muddles and misuses, the term’s conceptual integrity, soundness, and legitimacy was compromised but never destroyed. Thus the word may resurface and becomes renewable.

The Chinese word *geming* originated in the *Yijing*, the *Book of Changes*. This classic Confucian notion denotes dynastic change in the name of heaven and on behalf of people. In this sense it denotes violent transformation of political rule with legitimate goals of redressing injustice. Yet the term was or quickly became suspect in the eyes of those in power, due to the word’s intrinsic demands for rights and transformation of the status quo. In the late Qing reform at the turn of the twentieth century, Liang Qichao and others used the term to denote social and cultural transformation. *Geming* was understood as reform, as in poetry revolution or fiction revolution. On the eve of the Republican Revolution, Sun Yat-sen also drew inspiration from the term’s justification of righteous rebellion for his anti-Manchu and nation-building activities. Between Liang and Sun, the term split to mean both nonviolent and violent strategies of revolutionary action. With the May Fourth movement *geming* became associated with the iconoclastic cultural revolution, militating against the feudal tradition and imperialist powers. After Chiang Kaishek’s massacre of the Communists and betrayal of the revolution in 1927, the word was radicalized, its meaning shifting, in literary circles for instance, from reformist revolution to revolutionary literature. But the term still retained its liberal reformist agenda as ideological transformation. In the 1930s left-wing writers were both soldiers and cultural workers. The emergent revolutionary literature aimed at mobilizing the masses in order to change Chinese society and build an independent nation-state. Left-wing writers experimented with a new popular language to help construct a new subjectivity among the peasants. In the cities, they evolved a variety of modern or modernist literary forms to win the support of urbanites. In this period the revolutionary tendencies were both militant and reformist, combining the May Fourth spirit with revolutionary armed struggle. These were crystallized in an emergent genre of revolution plus love, in which the private embrace of modern life negotiated and clashed with the need for deeper collective

involvement. After the victory of the revolution in 1949, the term kept being revised and reinvented. In Mao's era there was the motif of continuous revolution against bureaucracy, capitalism, and ossification of power—part of the drive for world revolution. Mao's interpretations of revolution entailed uses of the word contrary to his own thinking and to its essential meaning. The Cultural Revolution brought disasters but also exposed the problems of the post-revolutionary institutions that forgot the spirit of revolution. China might have been isolated at that time, but it was also vigorously pursuing international dreams and connecting with the third world as part of its revolutionary endeavor.

This sketch may offer a taste of what these collected essays try to do. I am not sure that they will uncover the hidden treasures of the Chinese revolution, and the political stances of the contributors may differ and contradict one another. Yet we share a desire to understand the revolution through its keywords. The essays take a close look at a select group of terms derived from the revolutionary and socialist experience. Far from a nostalgic backward glance, it is an attempt to rethink the present by looking into persistent motifs from the past. These terms, such as “socialist realism,” “revolution,” and “women's liberation,” have recently taken on a dusty, faded look. When they are evoked in current discussion, they are rarely meant to refer to the historical circumstances. They serve as evidence of an orthodoxy that ran bad, the sign of an always oppressive apparatus, the ideology and rhetoric of an always already constituted party-state. These words are used ideologically and at best serve as the whipping boy for affirming the ideology of the present. Used and understood in this way, they are detached from their history. Nietzsche said, “All concepts in which a whole process is summarized in signs escape definition; only that which is without history can be defined.”<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that back in the murky waters of the past, a word or phrase becomes transparent and definable. Rather it means the keywords came on the scene, were tested and contested in the struggle to define and shape reality, and got entrenched in discourse. Yet their meanings are not settled and final; this process will go on as reality changes. Thus the words have to be defined by their historical emergence, mutations, extensions, and varied uses. Words can be historically defined, and

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 60.

their meanings need to be assessed by their relation and tension with different historical junctures.

The essays in the volume trace the historical circumstances surrounding the varied uses of *geming* and other words, offering genealogical, conceptual, and narrative accounts of seventeen key words and phrases in Chinese revolutionary and socialist discourse. While there are other more important terms, and the contributors do not come to a consensus, the collection nevertheless represents a modest beginning. These are crucial concepts and phrases frequently used in Mao's writings, party documents, and discourse on culture, the arts, and literature. The assembled essays cover the various moments and circumstances associated with these words in modern Chinese history, from the nascent revolutionary period of the 1920s to the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

The words are key to the platform, discourse, concepts, theory, and practice of the Chinese Revolution. Some are also new inventions in the socialist continuation of the revolutionary legacy. Pivotal to the cultural, aesthetic, and literary components of revolutionary practice, phrases like the “literature and arts of workers, peasants, and soldiers” 工农兵文艺, “rectification” 整风, “use the past for the present; use the foreign for China” 古为今用, 洋为中用, and “socialist realism” 社会主义现实主义 structured and sustained a whole body of policy, perceptions, experience, and activity in the cultural realm. In recent scholarship, the privileged terms in revolutionary discourse are cast as ultra-leftist and condemned as ideological and propagandist. There has been little attempt to consider them in the context of the evolution of revolutionary and socialist experience and as products of a historical process. These terms arose as part of discursive and strategic responses to the exigencies of history and social upheavals. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the global expansion of capitalism, it has become important to ascertain the circumstances that gave rise to the impulses, aspirations, and strategy embedded in these words. Like the revolution, the terms arose as historical alternatives to capitalism and as vehicles of reform and renewal in the face of dire consequences of imperialism, colonialism, and a market-dominated society.

Each essay follows three lines of presentation. The genealogical analysis examines how a word or slogan sprang up from a specific circumstance; the ways it got reformulated, received, circulated, and spread. Genealogy examines the legitimacy, validity, and abuses of the words and their related practices. Looking into how language

becomes entangled with social forces and institutional powers, this analysis traces the mutation of words over time and in the context of political power and social movements. The second approach is conceptual clarification, identifying the relatively stable core of a word's meaning and motivation. The varied definitions of the words need not be relativistic, and will be balanced by different shades of meaning and interrelations with other discourses and schools of thought. Conceptual explanation will ascertain the presuppositions and imagination embedded in words and phrases. The third approach is narrative, and provides literary, textual analysis of how words and phrases unfold and unravel in fiction, drama, and personal narratives.

By unpacking these words in their histories, conceptualizations, and usages, we can find alternative and valid imaginaries that have been obscured by the selective forgetting and commodification of the Chinese Revolution in the era of reform and globalization. A more historically sensitive view will question the excessively traumatic and overwhelmingly negative interpretation of Chinese history. Some social democratic themes, of enlightenment, emancipation, and socialist reforms, can be revived and clarified by a reexamination of the legitimate pursuits of the Chinese Revolution.

In works by Mark Selden, Maurice Meisner, Stuart Schram, Arif Dirlik, and many others, the revolutionary discourse has been placed under serious scrutiny and historical analysis. While carrying on this historically sensitive approach to the Chinese Revolution, this volume gives a center of gravity to the cultural, aesthetic, and conceptual aspects of revolutionary discourse. The essays, written mostly by literary scholars, seek to retrieve the romantic, future-oriented desire, yearnings, and formulations embedded in these words, rather than their political, historical, or economic dimensions. This is a reexamination of the past in order to critique the present and to delineate alternative visions of a better world.

## WORKER-PEASANT-SOLDIER LITERATURE

Xiaomei Chen

The term “worker-peasant-soldier literature” 工农兵文学 refers to the literary movement that dominated the first seventeen years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, 1949–1966) and peaked during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1967). It was mainly inspired by a speech that Mao Zedong delivered in 1942 in Yan’an, the site of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) headquarters following the Red Army’s historic Long March and escape of encirclement by the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) troops in Jiangxi province. In a seminar on literature and art, Mao argued that both should be integrated into the revolutionary machine in such a way as to be made capable of uniting and educating the people as they faced their foes, the Japanese invaders and the KMT, enabling them to fight with one heart and one mind. To this end, Mao said, it was incumbent on writers and artists to adopt the perspectives of the CCP, the proletariat, and the masses. That is, they had to support the principle of exposing the enemy, promote the strategies of unity and criticism toward allies of the revolutionary forces in the United Front, and praise the people, the revolutionary army, and the CCP leadership. Mao advised Chinese writers to look to the masses for resources to reform their bourgeois ideology; only then, he declared, would they succeed in creating the kind of literary works that connected with and were appreciated by ordinary people.

The most significant aspect of Mao’s Yan’an speech on literature and art was his vision of a new socialist state in which the majority of the Chinese people would become masters of their own country. In that new nation-state, Mao gave a legitimate place to a worker-peasant-soldier literature. Rejecting the capitalist West for being imperialist, bourgeois, and decadent and celebrating the socialist East for its independence and freedom from oppression, he envisioned the nation bringing forth a literary landscape that was “fresh and lively” and that could readily be enjoyed by the masses for its “Chinese style and spirit” seldom seen in Chinese literary history.

However, looking past the revolutionary garb, one might discern that Mao’s assertion that “literature carries the Way” (*wen yi zai dao*



文以载道) was fundamentally Confucian in that it stressed literature's practical and ideological function of safeguarding traditional ethics. Nevertheless, despite its condemnation of Western capitalist culture, Mao's vision of socialist literature was truly "modern" insofar as it called for a break from traditional society and for promoting the spirit of the May Fourth literary movement.

The concept of using "worker-peasant-soldier literature" to build a new nation did not originate with Mao's Yan'an speech; his presentation was merely a timely exploration and summary of the literary theories and practices that had been developing since the May Fourth movement. In particular, Mao drew on the theoretical discussions in the leftist literary movements of the 1920s and 1930s, which debated such issues as "revolutionary literature" (*geming wenxue* 革命文学), "literary popularization" (*wenxue dazhong hua* 文学大众化), and "proletariat literature" (*puluo wenxue* 普罗文学). Moreover, major writers, confronted by foreign colonization, poverty, corruption, and internal strikes, had been concerned with the wretched fate of the Chinese masses since the beginning of the twentieth century. Lu Xun's short story "The New Year's Sacrifice" (Zhufu), for instance, depicted a poor countrywoman who blamed her disaster-filled life on her widowhood rather than awakening to the root cause of her sufferings. Even Shen Congwen, who later would characterize and reject as propaganda the political function of literature, achieved fame with his publication, in 1929, of "Xiaoxiao." In this masterpiece, he lyrically evoked the hard-won survival of a child wife in the patriarchal society of Hunan province, his hometown and the inspiration for his well-known "regional literature of Hunan."

In spite of these historical roots, the important moment in the history of contemporary Chinese literature was the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949, when workers, peasants, and soldiers were expected to become masters of socialist China and therefore the proper focus of literary and artistic representation. People from other social classes and ideological backgrounds were to be gradually excluded from consideration as subjects. The same year saw the premiere of a new patriotic play, *Growing up in the Battlefield* (Zhandou li chengzhang 战斗里成长), collectively written by Hu Ke 胡可 and other dramatists. Taking up the concerns of soldier literature of the early PRC period, the play relates the stories of the peasants, who had constituted the majority of the CCP army. Little known outside dramatic circles, *Growing up in the Battlefield* underscored the sufferings of the rural poor before 1949—a

preeminent theme in the literature of the PRC—and to a much lesser degree, during the Republican period. Set in a remote village in northern China, the play traces the fortunes of a family of three generations of peasants in the calamitous years from 1935 to 1945, and their trajectory from poverty-stricken country paupers to class-conscious soldiers fighting to bring equality, happiness, and prosperity to poor people. The play demonstrates the way the old society broke up a close-knit family, and how the revolutionary war against the Japanese invaders and the KMT army reunited father and son, who had joined in the battle against their class enemies, eventually liberating their hometown and getting there just in time to rescue the mother. Despite its class-struggle theme, however, the play used a melodramatic plot of “sorrowful separation and tearful reunion” inherited from traditional operas.

Via its accounts of home, family, motherhood, and local and collective communities, *Growing up in the Battlefield* reflected the place of the soldier’s play in shaping national identity. The war epic *Defending Yan’an* (Baowei Yan’an 保卫延安), written by Du Pengcheng 杜鹏程 and published in 1954, was a different type of work. With a retinue of characters, it unfurled a panoramic view of several major military campaigns in northwestern China. A reporter embedded in the army units defending Yan’an from ferocious KMT attacks, Du based his fiction on his own earlier news stories, his more extensive reportage, other prose, drama, and diaries that he had penned while living with soldiers and army commanders during the war. Like many writers of soldier literature or writing with “military themes” (*junshi ticaì wénxué* 军事题材文学), Du was spurred by his personal war experiences and an urge to mourn in writing lost friends and fallen soldiers who had fought for the new China they never had a chance to live in. He skillfully applied an intimate knowledge of military history, his personal memories, and the grace, poetry, vivid characters, and well-knit structure of his fiction as he focused on a remarkable turning point in the civil war, switching back and forth between depicting a heroic company that won several deadly battles and following the fortunes of several generals, such as Peng Dehuai. The heroic narrative centering on Peng Dehuai was the first time in PRC literary history that a high-ranking leader figured as a character in a work of fiction. The novelist, however, had cause to regret his innovation; after Peng was denounced in 1959 for openly criticizing Mao’s radical agricultural policies, known as the Great Leap Forward, Du fell under attack. In this case, the appeal of

class struggle inspired a writer to embrace the Communist cause and join the army. Ironically, however, it was under the same banner of class struggle that the writer suffered denunciation.

A similar military backdrop, along with the familiar theme of eulogizing the army and the party's heroic spirit, characterizes *The Red Sun* (Hongri 红日) by Wu Qiang 吴强. However, the novel is unique in that it looks objectively at CCP army officials and soldiers courageously doing battle for a new China while daring to criticize their "peasant mind-set." The vividly conveyed lack of awareness, drinking binges after winning a major battle, and implicit disrespect for the political leader with an intellectual bent did much to fill out the realistic dimensions of the novel and provided rich material for the popular movie adaptation.

Wu Qiang did not present the enemy commanders of the Seventy-Fourth Division as cowardly antagonists, in the stereotypical mode of war fiction; rather, they were shown to have real emotions, a resolute spirit, and, like their opponents, a firm belief in what they thought was right. Moreover, Wu Qiang deviated from the general practice of PRC literature's Cold War rhetoric by incorporating love stories and hospital scenes whose relatively peaceful, quotidian tone contrast with the harsh war material.<sup>1</sup> As the novel calls attention to the primitive aspects of many of the participants in the war who came from the peasant class, it suggests the subtle response of Chinese intellectuals to mainstream glorification of peasant-soldiers. These subtexts ensured that both the novel and the movie version of *The Red Sun* would be publically denounced at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, when it was branded as an antiparty work that had seriously tarnished the image of the people's superb army while exalting the enemy of the people.

Another departure, this time from fiction giving a panoramic view of military battles, is Ru Zhizhuan's 茹志鹃 short story "White Lilies" (Baihe hua 百合花), a cherished piece of soldier literature in the PRC. Distinguished by an exquisitely feminine voice, the first-person narrator tells a tale of instant bonding between a young soldier and a newlywed young woman. In a tender moment she lends him a quilt, which, a few hours later, she uses to cover his body. The only dowry a

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi jiaocheng* (History of contemporary Chinese literature: a textbook) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999), 63–64.

young wife from an indigent peasant family could hope to receive, the quilt has printed on it the image of white lilies, the symbol of purity and love. Set against the bloody war that had victimized the young and innocent, it could be seen as subverting the short story's apparent themes of soldierly heroic martial spirit and peasant support for the revolutionary war.

Paralleling the bonding between soldier and young wife is the narrator's own bonding with the young soldier, and her own lament for his sacrifice. Starting with the narrator's reminiscences of peaceful prewar days, the story moves to her first encounter with the soldier, when she learns that he hails from the region where she was born. The discovery touches off the nostalgic memory of a familiar scene in her home village: in her mind's eye, she sees a nineteen-year-old lad carrying bamboo poles and walking toward her in a green, misty forest. By midnight, however, the narrator has become anxious about imminent attacks from enemy troops and the terrible sacrifice that will be exacted from "our soldiers"; in her agitated state she comes to hate the bright moon in the night sky, since it can only benefit the enemy. Remembering that it was the mid-August moon festival when the moon shone brightest and her folks at home celebrated family reunions, she thinks of the young soldier at the front and wonders what has happened to him. These ruminations lead to the climactic scene, before the burial, in which the mourning young wife silently mends the hole in the young soldier's clothing. The ending encapsulates the awful losses inflicted by war—even a revolutionary war—that are shared by strangers whom these horrors have brought together. Small wonder, then, that Ru Zhizhuan's "White Lilies" could not get published until 1958, in an obscure literary journal in the northwest. Fortunately, it received high praise from Mao Dun, the Minister of Culture in the PRC and a major literary figure as of the May Fourth period; of the thousands of short stories published in recent years, it was one of the best that he had read, he said.

Contrasting with 1950s soldier plays that similarly revolved around war experience, *Soldiers Under Neon Lights* (Nihong deng xia de shao-bing 霓虹灯下的哨兵), written by Shen Ximeng 沈西蒙 et al. and premiered in 1962, reflects on the soldier's altered life in a "peaceful" China, when the call to the "battlefield" had been replaced by the call to resist the corruption of "bourgeois influence." Set in cosmopolitan Shanghai, the play directs its searchlight on the time period immediately after "liberation," around 1949. A company in the

People's Liberation Army is shown trying mightily to preserve its simple lifestyle and revolutionary spirit and to recoil from the temptations of materialism during patrols on Nanjing Road, at once the busiest commercial street in Shanghai and the stronghold of imperialist and bourgeois influence. However, among the various soldier characters on stage is Chunni, about to return brokenhearted to her home village after a brief reunion with her husband in the army unit. The letter she leaves behind for the company commander gives voice to her sadness about her husband's transformation from valiant revolutionary soldier to petty, weak man brought down by Shanghai's bourgeois lifestyle. Chunni's leave-taking, however, recalls the classics of socialist drama, in which a comparable departure suggested hope. Chunni can now look forward to recovering a sense of belonging in a new revolutionary family back home in the countryside.

Following the model of the foregoing soldier stories, peasant literature centering on true-to-life characters and their "heroic" feats in erecting a new, socialist China mushroomed. Zhou Libo's 周立波 *Great Changes in a Mountain Village* (Shanxiang juban 山乡巨变) is a paramount example of this development. First published in 1958 as a novel of more than 600 pages, it grew out of Zhou's own contacts with peasants of Hunan province during the national organization of the peasants into agricultural cooperatives. Throughout PRC literary history, *Great Changes* has been viewed as an important piece of socialist realist literature because of the light it shed on the difficult road along which peasants marched toward socialism under the CCP leadership.

Whereas his earlier work entitled *The Great Storm* (Baofeng zhouyu 暴风骤雨) had relied on class struggle theory to account for the hatred and confrontations among three generations of peasants and landlords and other members of the exploiting classes, Zhou's *Great Changes* more realistically examined the pain, sorrows, and hesitation of the peasants who, having just realized their centuries-long aspiration of owning their own land immediately after the land reform movement, were not inclined to relinquish the land as a precondition for joining the agricultural cooperatives across the countryside in the early 1950s. Even though with this later work Zhou Libo intended to promote the official socialist agenda for rural China, he was charged later, during the Cultural Revolution, with having written about characters who did not measure up to the selfless ideal of the new socialist peasant. Nevertheless, his realistic characters gave the novel a new life in the contemporary

era when scholars and readers re-read it as a “red classic” that reveals more about the grassroots sentiments and genuine humanity among the peasants than the radical official policies of the time.<sup>2</sup>

As alluded to before, worker literature, or “literature with an industrial theme” (*gongye tica* 工业题材), produced less successful works at first than those described as soldier and peasant literature. After all, as contemporary Chinese literary history has noted, China had been a mostly peasant country, led to socialism by a mostly peasant revolution, whose proletariat class had not yet matured in the classical Marxist sense of the word. In the 1950s and early 1960s, however, poetry—following the path blazed by fiction, drama, and film—expressed the pride of the emerging working class taking its place as new members of socialist China. Li Ji 李季, for example, was nicknamed the “petroleum poet” because of his poems about the aspirations and achievements of the petroleum workers in such works as *Collected Poems on Yumen* (Yumen shichao 玉門詩抄) and *Petroleum Poems* (Shiyou shi 石油詩). In his most representative poem, “Black Eyes” (Hei yanjing 黑眼睛), the first-person narrator tenderly asks why a pair of affectionate black eyes always follow him; is it because he has just received a medal for his outstanding work in the oil fields, or is it because the “black eyes” of the female character are drawn to the workers’ deeply felt pride? If she is interested in something else, the narrator says, he would like to tell her about a shepherd girl living at the foothills of the Qilian Mountains.<sup>3</sup> In this five-stanza poem marked by simple language and poetic imagery, Li Ji skillfully connects the pride of the petroleum worker, his love for the shepherd girl, and his affectionate attention to another girl, who is following his career with compassionate interest.

The love theme and family stories gradually shifted in the mid-1960s, as demonstrated by a popular worker play, *Never to Forget* (Qianwang bu yao wangji 千万不要忘記), written by Cong Shen 丛深. Premiered in 1964, the play was soon put on by numerous drama troupes throughout the country and was later turned into a popular film. The leading character is a young worker whose romantic sentiments

<sup>2</sup> Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi jiaocheng*, 38–40.

<sup>3</sup> Li Ji, “Hei yanjing” (Black eyes), in *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue zuoping xuan* (*Selected works of contemporary Chinese literature*), vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1998), 24–25.

and longing for a cozier material life with his family and his fiancée are held up for derision as a blatant example of a worker's family being "eroded" by bourgeois ideology. His purchase of a woollen suit that cost 148 *yuan* and his hunting for wild ducks on the weekends to improve his diet and to make extra money are taken as proof of his decadence. To contrast with this problematic worker, the play presents a model factory hand who spends all his free time in the factory's lab, treating his workplace as his real home and evincing no interest in having a family of his own. The message of the play is spelled out: the younger generation of workers must be educated "never to forget" the bitter life of the workers before liberation, the revolutionary heritage of the working class, and "the class struggle" that supposedly still must go on, to forestall a return to the capitalist past. In many ways, *Never to Forget* foreshadowed the model theater of the Cultural Revolution period, when most commended theatrical works dealt exclusively with workers, peasants, soldiers, and the revolutionary war experience, and their perfect protagonists were noticeably unencumbered by family history or love relationships.

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, when most of the literary and artistic works produced before 1966 were denounced as either feudalist or bourgeois and revisionist, worker-peasant-soldier literature and its typical concerns became the only legitimate subject of a small number of model theater plays, with a few radical films, novels, and short stories. In spite of the charge that the period did not produce any important works, several popular films released in the mid- to late 1970s explored visual images that audiences might have enjoyed as "works of art" or entertainment. While following the official dictate that artworks must be peopled by "tall, imposing, perfect versions" (*gao, da, quan* 高, 大, 全) of the proletariat, *The Pioneers* (Chuangye 创业) showcased handsome movie stars in powerful performances unseen since theaters and cinemas were shut down at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Set in the earlier 1960s against the backdrop of the break between the CCP and the USSR, the film depicts Zhou Tingshan 周挺杉, the leader of a flagship oil-drilling team that builds a first-rate oil field in the northeast. A coolie before 1949 and now a typical Maoist hero of the period, Zhou Tingshan molds his team into one of the industry's best and realizes his ambition, in the early 1960s, of ending China's reputation as "a country with poor oil reserves," a wrong verdict once imposed by U.S. imperialist scientists and statesmen, as the movie presents it.

This conventional anti-imperialist story line is overshadowed by the extraordinary star power of Zhang Lianwen 张连文, who plays the part of Zhou Tingshan, the model worker. In a blend of long and close-up shots that accentuate his beauty, charisma, and intellectual elite flair, he is shown walking and talking elegantly, and gazing at his friends and family with a magnetic depth of emotion. At the beginning of the movie, for example, the cinematography focuses on Zhou Tingshan riding alone in the Gobi Desert on a camel carrying supplies back to the Yumen oil field run by the KMT officials. A guard whips him when he stops to watch a police car transferring workers' strike leaders to prison. Several of the following close-up shots emphasize Zhou's angry but still handsome face and his bleeding clenched hand as he grabs hold of the oil field fence and watches the progress of a cart carrying corpses, the victims' relatives trailing behind. In the next fifteen minutes of the movie, Zhou utters only two short sentences during the following crucial events: his father is shot to death while trying to protect the oil field, which the KMT attempts to destroy before its retreat; Zhou calls off a workers' march to headquarters to avenge his father, the better to direct their efforts to protecting the oil fields. Hua Cheng 华程, an underground CCP leader, inspires Zhou to "bid farewell to the American adviser in his house," and to prevent him from taking away Chief Engineer Zhang and his geological data. Hua Cheng addresses Zhou by his formal name, which has never been used in the twenty-three years since Zhou's birth; as an indigent laborer without any individual identity, he was only known as "ten-pound boy" (Shijin Wa 十斤娃). Hua also educates Zhou about his political destiny: "to emulate the Communist Party in liberating the suffering people of the rest of the world, now that our Chinese working class is finally liberated." This scene is followed by a series of close-up shots of Zhou's tearful face and his gaze into the distance at the sublime mountain range "dancing" around him, echoing his excited voice: "We are liberated!" Notwithstanding the canonical ideological plot, the audience could, thanks to the scant verbal interference and the glamorous cinematic shots, enjoy ample views of a young, handsome man and his journey from nameless coolie to enlightened worker.

Equally fascinating to look at is the strikingly masculine and poetic Party Secretary Hua Cheng, played by Li Rentang 李仁堂. An intellectual who joined the Communist revolution at an early age, Hua Cheng is endowed with a manner, composure, and eloquence that made the audience forget the stereotype party bureaucrat they knew from real life or from other works of fiction and film. Another enjoyable



performance is that of Chen Ying 陈颖 as Chief Engineer Zhang, a patriotic scientist who learns to respect the wisdom of the workers. Zhang has refused to go to the West with his American boss, telling him that after graduating from college, he had traveled to Yumen on a camel, determined to use his knowledge in service to the coming strong, industrial China. Later in the movie, Zhang distinguishes himself as an upright, outspoken scientist who sets aside his professional opinions in order to carry out the Party Committee's ambitious plan of developing the entire oil field within a year.

Endorsement of an intellectual's integrity and honesty was rare in the literature and art of the Cultural Revolution, when workers and peasants in heroic roles dominated the stage and intellectuals and scientists appeared only marginally acceptable at best, if they appeared at all. As the leader and supporter of the workers, both Party Secretary Hua Cheng and Chief Engineer Zhang took center stage on the proletariat screen as brilliant intellectuals in a way seldom seen in the first seventeen years of PRC literary history since 1949, before the start of the Cultural Revolution. With the powerful performances of three male stars reappearing in Chinese cinema for the first time since the overhaul of feature film production in 1966, *The Pioneers* became a regular feature in the very limited schedule of television programs of the day. On small, black-and-white screens in some urban households, people (myself included) could enjoy the sexy, handsome film celebrities, since their personae validated the official promotion of the working-class spirit and heritage.

But the film's popularity came only after a series of setbacks following its release in 1975. It was banned by Jiang Qing 江青, Mao's wife, then in charge of Cultural Revolutionary affairs, especially in the spheres of literature and art. The ban accused the film of dealing with "real people and real events" (*zhen ren zhen shi* 真人真事), a taboo in socialist realist literature. Jiang Qing charged that several key lines spoken by Hua Cheng had been uttered by Yu Qiuli 余秋里 when he served as general director during the Daqing oil fields buildup in the early 1960s. Jiang's attack was driven by her anger at Yu Qiuli, who as deputy premier in 1975, had been entrusted by Premier Zhou Enlai with assisting Deng Xiaoping in reforming China's economy after the many years of chaos during the Cultural Revolution. Zhang Tianmin 張天民, screenwriter of *The Pioneers*, felt he had no choice but to send Mao Zedong a letter expressing his frustration. He granted that certain words had originally come from a certain leader, but these words were

also the received wisdom heard from the lips of ordinary workers, and still used by workers to the present day; how could they be put forth as excuses to ban the movie? Mao reportedly watched the film and was so moved that he shed tears during several parts of it. The upshot was that he criticized Jiang Qing and gave the film the green light. Thereafter its popularity surged, because now, besides being enjoyed and admired, it was playing a role in the unfolding political drama in which Jiang Qing and her “Gang of Four” were blamed for the radical policies of the Cultural Revolution. Although the film was itself a product of the Cultural Revolutionary period, coming out right before Jiang Qing and her radical policies were to be denounced, the off-stage drama lent it an extraordinary dimension that caused it to be viewed as one of the works criticizing Jiang’s radicalism and helped establish it as a classic.

From the feminist perspective, however, *The Pioneers* is glaringly weak in its treatment of women characters: both Zhou Tingshan’s wife and his mother, as well as a technician member of the oil-drilling team, are subordinated to their male family members or colleagues; they display no initiative of their own and thus form a striking contrast with the brilliant female leads of model theater. The Maoist upgrade of women’s social status and political impact, as reflected in model theater, was effected in the name of women’s liberation via the CCP, which stood to benefit from it. In spite of its limitations, however, *The Pioneers*, in my view, was one of the best achievements of worker’s literature and film to emerge between 1949 and the end of the Cultural Revolution. In fact, in post-Maoist China when film became a dominant art form of the literary and artistic renaissance, very few films about workers were successfully produced and widely seen. Popular fiction about workers was also lacking, with a few exceptions, notably the short story “The Story of Factory Head Qiao After He Resumed Office” (Qiao Changzhang shangren ji 乔厂长上任记) by Jiang Zilong 蒋子龙.

The power of a dominant male star to guarantee a movie’s success is also evident in *Unforgettable Battles* (Nanwang de zhandou 难忘的战斗, 1975). Da Shichang 达式常 was already known before the Cultural Revolution for his role in the popular film *The Young Generation* (Nianqing de yidai 年青的一代), about college graduates giving up their personal comfort to volunteer for work in a distant part of socialist China. In *Unforgettable Battles*, Da charmed his audiences as Tian Wenzhong 田文中, a brilliant military commander who combines the enterprising spirit of the proletariat with the refined, elegant bearing of

the intellectual. The narrative begins in 1949 as Tian has just returned from the battlefields where he has been involved in the struggle to liberate the rest of China; now on the civilian front he takes up the more difficult task of purchasing grain from local merchants and rich peasants for the CCP government's state reserve, while combating KMT agents who are attempting to stir up unrest by cutting off food supplies on the eve of liberation. Tian leads his team in the drive to mobilize the local peasants by exposing the KMT's trick of hoarding grain so as to starve the poor people.

Directed by Tang Xiaodan 湯小丹, a master filmmaker of war movies (*zhandou gushi pian* 战斗故事片) before 1966, *Unforgettable Battles* boasts battle scenes that draw on the same talent displayed in his pre-Cultural Revolution work, such as *The Red Sun*, based on the novel discussed above. To enhance the dramatic suspense and a tightly knit plot, *Unforgettable Battles* presents quick-paced shots such as a galloping cavalry shooting at its enemies to save a granary from destruction by the retreating KMT troops; the film thus adeptly combines the best features of the PRC "counterspy" movies (*fante gushi pian* 反特故事片), or "detective stories," with those of the soldier's film, serving them up along with a charismatic Tian, who accomplishes his mission with bravery, intelligence, and an engaging personality. The second part of the movie centers on Tian's effort to transport grain to other parts of China in support of the war of liberation. Tian outwits Chen Futang 陈福堂, a KMT agent, by leaking false intelligence to the KMT troops as to when and where Tian's grain-transport team will begin its journey. But old-hand agent Chen orders his troops to stop marching five miles before reaching their destination and not to proceed until they see a light in the window of a restaurant, where Chen will hold a farewell banquet—the signal to proceed—after he can ascertain that his intelligence is accurate. Tension grows as Tian tries to analyze why the enemy's troops have stopped moving. A waiter from the restaurant rushes over to report that for some unknown reason, the banquet room windows remain closed on this hot summer night when everyone in the room is sweating. Inviting himself to the banquet, Tian throws open the windows to expose the light, which instantly lures the enemy troops into his ambush. With such exploits, Tian evokes the popular legendary character Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 in the traditional fiction *The Three Kingdoms* (三国演义); a military strategist, Zhu was able, by virtue of his perspicacity and talent, to predict the enemy's moves, win

political allies, and become invincible in major battles leading to the establishment of a new kingdom.

To further justify the necessity of the Cultural Revolution, *Unforgettable Battles* created a “hidden enemy within the revolutionary ranks” in the person of a deputy district head named Liu Zhiren 刘志仁. Blackmailed by Chen Futang, who knows about his past liaison with the KMT, Liu agrees to send Chen intelligence about Tian’s grain-transportation schedule. Needing to outmaneuver both Liu and Chen turns Tian into a stunning James Bond figure and, in the process, transforms a heroic soldier’s story from the Cultural Revolution period into a kind of “superman” thriller. Explorations of traditional fiction like these, featuring popular figures culled from the literature, helped diminish the tedium of typical Cultural Revolution movies, which emphasized the need to wage “new battles” after the success of the Communist revolution. To highlight this theme, the movie ends with another moment of suspense: as Tian’s team celebrates the local masses and their victory, the camera shifts to Chen’s dimly lit grain shop and the lonely accountant working there; earlier on, he participated in the murder of one of the youngest and best soldiers on Tian’s team. The message seems clear: although Chen and his bandit troops have been apprehended, class enemies of socialist China remain hidden, quietly awaiting the return of the previous regime to “settle their accounts” with the CCP.

Although *Unforgettable Battles* resembles other movies of the period in its stereotypical portrayal of negative characters, it fares better in this regard than other films such as *Bright Sky* (Yanyangtian 艳阳天) and *Evergreen Ridge* (Qingsongling 青松岭), both released in 1973. These two movies’ one-dimensional class enemies seemed designed merely to illustrate Mao Zedong’s point that vigilance against the agents of the KMT was still essential many years after its retreat to Taiwan. By contrast, Chen Futang’s commitment to the KMT cause appears more complex and believable, since the story occurs in 1949, *right after* the KMT’s loss of power, when Chen, in addition to his political orientation, would still have had some stake in making a high profit from manipulating the black market for his grain-trading company. Furthermore, Chen is paired with an old landlord played by Chen Shu (陈述), a famous actor whose specialty had been playing the “enemy of the people” in movies made before the Cultural Revolution. He earned the nickname of “the head of the enemy’s intelligence bureau” (情报处长) from a role he had played in the stunning movie *Scouting*

*Across the River* (Dujiang zhencha ji 渡江侦察记) and his turn as the Japanese commander in *The Railroad Guerrillas* (Tiedao youji dui 铁道游击队). In 2006, upon hearing of his passing at age 85, netizens and other citizens shared their childhood memories of his roles: “During the Cultural Revolution when we were poor and lacked any luxury, Chen Shu provided us with laughter; all it took was hearing the line beginning ‘According to my intelligence...’ (*genju wo de qingbao 根据我的情报*) from *Scouting Across the River*. This was in the Mao era when entertainment was scarce, and he livened things up for us, when he said, for example, ‘Only the heaven, the earth, you, and I share this one secret’ (*zhe shi zhiyou tian zhi, di zhi, ni zhi, wo zhi 这事只有天知、地知、你知、我知*) in *Unforgettable Battles*. In the historical past when there was no one who could serve as our idol, Chen Shu was our superstar.”<sup>4</sup> In the slim years of the Cultural Revolution, soldier’s films did serve as popular entertainment, if only by creating negative characters—a development that certainly had not been intended by the PRC officials, who expected the exposure of class enemies in films to arouse popular hatred rather than hilarity.

As in *The Pioneers*, however, *Unforgettable Battles* gave its male characters the unquestionable edge over its several minor female characters, whose sole function it was to assist the heroic male soldiers. These problematic gender politics, however, were redressed by the peasant film *Young Shoots* (春苗), a popular work of 1975 about a barefoot female doctor in rural China. To bring basic medical care to the local peasants, the female lead, Chunmiao, must go up against Du Wenjie 杜文杰, the president of the hospital in the People’s Commune, and Qian Jiren 钱济仁, a “bourgeois doctor.” The new and beautiful young actress Li Xiuming 李秀明, who played the title role, joined the more established star Da Shichang as the charismatic doctor Fang Ming 方明. Chunmiao is schooled by Fang not only in medicine but also in Chairman Mao’s directive of “shifting the focus of medical care from the city to the rural areas” (*ba yiliao weisheng guozuo de zhongdian fangdao nongchun qu 把医疗卫生工作的重点放到农村去*).

<sup>4</sup> “Chen Shu sanbu laopian Yiangshi xiazhou liangbo” (“Remembering Chen Shu: three classic movies will be featured in CCTV” October 19, 2006, <http://yule.sohu.com/20061019/n245885075.shtml> (accessed May 9, 2007).

Although there was no intentional love angle to the film, the attraction between Chunmiao and Doctor Fang seemed palpable to many viewers, and seemed also suggested by the skillfully posed close-up shots and the lighting of the two stars' faces in their scenes together. The traditional pairing of "talented scholar and beautiful woman," in which the former rescues the latter at crucial moments, was another chord struck and enhanced by the movie's lyrical theme, "Young Shoots from the Earth Embracing the Morning Sun" (Chunmiao chutu ying zhaoyang 春苗出土迎朝阳). The film launched the song's independent popularity, at a time when popular tunes and music were just as strictly censored as literature and the other arts during the Cultural Revolution.

Although the more straightforward evocation of contemporary politics—for example, the class struggle waged within the CCP—rendered the film problematic in post-Maoist China, in hindsight *Young Shoots* is a particularly interesting film for the reality it reflects of the dire situation at that time, when farmlands were seized by greedy real estate developers who did not grant proper compensation and rural migrant workers were exploited as cheap labor in booming cities. Given this outcome, one wonders if the idealist vision (and the real practice, in some areas) of providing free medical care for the poor during the Maoist and Cultural Revolution period would be a welcome measure now, where some impoverished peasants cannot afford medical treatment. No wonder *Young Shoots* became a "nostalgic film" (*huai jiu pian* 怀旧片) in the "new era," a period when the term "worker-peasant-soldier" was no longer the source of pride and inspiration it had been. In that bygone age, workers, peasants, and soldiers had enjoyed the status of "masters of our socialist country," at least on a movie screen.

The films discussed above were claimed as products of the Cultural Revolution with the assigned function of negating the counterrevolutionary arts of the previous period. Yet they paradoxically tapped into the very cinematic style and resources of the first seventeen years of the PRC, from 1949 to 1966, by combining dogmatic political themes with visual effects and artistic conventions from both traditional and Western cultures. Compared to some of the worker-peasant-soldier movies made before the Cultural Revolution, they also exerted a

greater influence, because of the scarcity of other literary and artistic works during the period.

In post-Maoist China after the Cultural Revolution (1976 to the present), “worker-peasant-soldier literature” has gradually become obsolete except as an objectionable term associated with the Maoist literary policies that suppressed freedom of writing. Subsequent literary movements that attempted to reverse these policies paradoxically perpetuated, in many cases, the attention that had been given to the life experience of the peasants and soldiers; they did so, however, with a dramatic twist that proved that Mao’s Yan’an talk was more relevant to contemporary Chinese society than critics and scholars had acknowledged. Whereas Maoist works depicted the peasants and soldiers as happy, fulfilled members of the socialist country, these characters were portrayed in “root-seeking literature” (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学) and “reflection literature” (*fansi wenxue* 反思文学) as suffering subalterns who gave up love, family, and freedom in order to survive in a totalitarian society. The 1980 novella *The Story of Criminal Li Tongzhong* (Fanren Li Tongzhong de gushi 犯人李铜钟的故事) by Zhang Yigong 张一弓, for example, has the local Party Secretary Li Tongzhong, a thoughtful, courageous caretaker, provoking a confrontation with the authorities by opening up the grain reserves of the people’s commune to succor his starving villagers. Because of these “illegal,” “antiparty” activities, Li is arrested and tried, and in the end he dies in the “socialist countryside,” the setting for a cause in which he had once firmly believed. The symbolic meaning of Li’s name, “bronze bell” (铜钟), points to his intrepid resolve not to carry out the party’s policies with “iron fists” and blind faith, but rather to challenge it against all odds and at the expense of his own welfare and even his life.

Similar attention is paid to the disastrous fate of the peasants in a soldier’s story that has as its context the Sino-Vietnamese War of the 1980s. Unlike its literary predecessors, which depicted the People’s Liberation Army as pure, brave, and simply superior both morally and spiritually, Li Cunbao’s 李存葆 novella *Wreath at the Foothills of the Mountains* (Gaoshan xia de huahuan 高山下的花环, 1982) exposes corruption among high-ranking commanders. The commanders maneuver to have their children transferred from wartime battlefields to safe posts, while the soldiers from the poverty-stricken rural area are represented by one whose only belonging at the time of his death is a bloodstained list of debts he owes to other people, which he wants his family to pay. Again, contrasting with the 1960s theme of soldier plays that held up model units as being impervious to corruption, Mo

Yan 漠雁 and Xiao Yuping 肖玉萍 et al.'s *The Diary of Instructor Song* (Song Zhidaoyuan de riji 宋指导员的日记), a post-Maoist play that premiered in 1982, presents a dramatic eyewitness account of how much corruption really occurred within both the army and the party, as filtered through the diary of Instructor Song, who almost single-handedly takes on this scourge of corruption.

The appeal of the concept of literature for the masses, with its political and ideological implications, has nevertheless remained strong, as indicated by the term “red classics” (红色经典), which emerged in 1988 from discussions on the “rewriting of literary history.” Scholars and critics reexamined the impact of the previous seventeen years of literary production and reception of the major texts discussed above on the mind-set of the Chinese people. By exploring the subtexts, the middle-of-the-road characters, and the parts of the literary and artistic works that failed to implement the party’s policy—judging by the literary journals and criticisms of the period and the authors’ fates before, during, and after the Maoist era—critics and scholars arrived at new insights into revolutionary literature and its convergence with popular culture and traditional thinking, as well as its relevance to contemporary Chinese culture in the age of reform.

Very few people actually engaged in writing straightforward worker-peasant-soldier literature. Still, the constant warnings in Maoist literature against peaceful transformation from a socialist society to a capitalist and revisionist society give pause to those who resent the increasing gap between the rich and the poor in contemporary China. Economic progress and rising living standards aside, China’s current exploitation of workers and peasants no longer protected by a state-sponsored welfare system makes one reconsider whether Mao had a point after all in campaigning for “continued revolution” in socialist China. Once again, the question “Whom do we write for?” arises as writers and artists struggle to find a balance between representing their own selves and the majority of the Chinese people.

No wonder, then, that in April 2000, when the play *Che Guevara* 切·格瓦拉 opened, it was such a smash, primarily for its call to arms.<sup>5</sup> The play shows Che Guevara, military hero of the Cuban revolution at the height of the Cold War period, at the point when he

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<sup>5</sup> Huang Jisu et al., *Qie Gewala*, in Liu Zhifeng, ed., *Qie Gewala: fanying yu zhengming* (Che Guevara: reception and debate) (Beijing: Zhanguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), 13–69.



has given his entire life over to bringing justice and equality to poor peoples in other countries of the third world. To the many people in contemporary China victimized by party corruption and exploited by the newly rich class, *Che Guevara's* call for a new armed revolution directed at liberating the disadvantaged and poor struck a deep chord. In highly poetic language, the cast asks the audience a number of questions: Given that forty years ago, Che Guevara gave up his medical career to join the Cuban revolution, do you think he would have had any regrets, had he known that the socialist revolution for which he eventually died would “change its colors” by the end of the twentieth century? What would Che Guevara say about the increasing gulf between rich and poor in contemporary capitalist China, for instance? Had he known about the eventual collapse of the socialist bloc, would he have sacrificed personal happiness for the noble cause of the Cold War?

The cast's answers to these questions are eloquent and unhesitating: Che would have had no regrets, since he had always believed in a society that was equal and free from oppression and Western imperialist domination. Had he to do it all over again, he would still have embarked on a military career in order to liberate all the poor peoples in the world. The play and all the pop cultural fetishes accompanying it, such as Che-brand merchandise (T-shirts, biographies, souvenirs, and the like), made Che a new role model whose values overlapped with socialist China's “old-fashioned” values. Indeed, the play can be seen as delivering a harsh critique of post-Maoist society's materialist culture—its agendas of globalization and capitalization—and a sharp mockery of the intelligentsia's collaboration with the government, which has resulted in the betrayal of the poor. Paradoxically, however, the Che international soldier play also met the requirements of the status quo. Despite its attacks on party corruption, it could be interpreted as supporting the party's own campaign against corruption and its much-touted desire of helping the majority of poor Chinese to eventually “get rich,” once “a small number of people have gotten rich first.”

Just as Che declares on stage that, as long as oppression and exploitation persist, he will never put down his gun, so one might conclude that as long as the dream of equality persists, both inside and outside China, military heroes, peasant voices, workers' protests, and nostalgic literatures will continue to remind us of that dream. In bookstores, classroom textbooks, in DVD and VCD form, and as gift items, “red

classics” of the Maoist era with exemplary images of the common people survive and still sell well. They serve to recall the idealist dreams of Maoist China, a complex era whose memory and celebration of laboring peoples and their heroic, selfless spirit have come down to the Chinese people as both a remarkable heritage and a burden.