

“Playing in the Dirt”: Plays about Geologists and Memories of the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist Era

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Abstract

In contrast to modern Chinese drama in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when many performances heralded the national trend of reflecting on the woes and wrongs of the Cultural Revolution, some plays of the 1990s downplayed the stories of the Cultural Revolution. By discussing three geologist plays from the 1960s to 1990s, this paper examines the following questions: To what extent did theatre of the 1990s express a wish to return to the values and spirit of China before the Cultural Revolution? What is the relationship between the values and spirit of PRC society before and during the Cultural Revolution? Why did the theatre of the 1990s choose to “forget” the Cultural Revolution experience? What kind of nostalgia did the theatre of the 1990s express? What kind of “history” did it stage and to what end? This paper ultimately challenges the commonly-accepted divide between the Mao era, the Cultural Revolution era, and the post-Mao era. It explains what some of the dramas of the 1990s tell us about the dramatists’ reflections on social

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and spiritual changes brought about by the economic transformation from socialism to post-socialism. It argues that — regardless of its marginal position in scholarship and cultural life — modern drama still plays a significant role in our understanding of how Chinese people envision their history.

The view of the Cultural Revolution as a unique and historically isolated phenomenon (and hence a highly profitable one to be mined politically, commercially, and cross-culturally) is manifested in the popular imagination and in countless scholarly critiques of the time. This intense domestic and global interest in the Cultural Revolution illustrates an ironic fact: Although the Maoists and post-Maoists have diametrically opposed ideological stances, the post-Maoist depiction of the Cultural Revolution as “the ten-year long calamity” (*shinian haojie*) is paradoxically consonant with the clichéd Maoist assertion of its being “unprecedented” (*shiwu qianli*): that is, both emphasize the Cultural Revolution’s singularity as an occurrence in history that is independent of any continuities with the past, the present, and the future.

Some scholars have rightly criticized the thriving global market for memoirs of the Cultural Revolution in the post-Cold War era, remarking that such memoirs are apparently being written to validate the European and American perspective on Chinese literature. Shu-mei Shih, for example, critiques the “sensational trauma narratives about China’s Cultural Revolution that were written in English by first-generation immigrants” living in the West as “deliberate national allegorical narratives with an eye to the market,” asserting that they “collude with the production and reproduction of global capitalism.”¹ She argues that Gao Xingjian’s winning of the 2000 Nobel Prize was in part attributable to the “bitter insights” in his persecution stories about the Cultural Revolution, as attested to in the presentation speech by a Nobel Prize committee member. Gao capitalized on the particular history and politics of the Cultural Revolution to authenticate his search for the universal “meaning of human existence” and “the nature of literature.”² That is, the “exceptional particulars” of Gao’s tales of suffering during the Cultural Revolution, and his subsequent escape from oppression after this period, have been taken as establishing the “universality” of contemporary Chinese literature.³

To address the tendency toward isolating local history in an age of economic and cultural globalization, the following essay attempts to recover the indigenous voices and memories that challenge the

conventional views of the Cultural Revolution. It examines the intriguing near-disappearance of the vivid stories of the Cultural Revolution from the plots of 1990s theatre more than a decade after their dominant presence in early post-Maoist theatre. More specifically, I ask what some of the theatre artists were doing in the 1990s, when China's long-awaited transformation from socialism to modernity brought not only wealth and a higher living standard but also unfairness, inequality, and corruption. And I ponder what some of the 1990s plays tell us about the dramatists' reflections on the social, economic, and cultural changes wrought by economic developments. Did the dramatists of this period ally themselves with some of the cultural elites to embrace the new populist consumerism? Or did they adopt a more humanistic approach to depicting urban and rural life in contemporary China? To what extent did certain plays of the 1990s express a longing to return to the values and spirit of the 1950s and early 1960s, before the Cultural Revolution? Did they remember the Cultural Revolution differently from the way some of the theatre artists in the late 1970s and the early 1980s did? What kind of nostalgia did the theatre of the 1990s exhibit? What kind of history did it stage, and to what end?

What's Playing in the Early 1960s: Old Stories of Geologists in a Post-socialist Light

An examination of one distinctive theatre story of the early 1960s will help address these questions; it should also demonstrate the directions and collective values to which post-socialist plays returned in the 1990s. The conventional view is that Maoist theatre at its height, from 1949 to 1966, produced scarcely any noteworthy plays, owing to the plays' heavy ideological and political freight. However, I believe the 1963 play *The Young Generation* (*Nianqing de yidai*) has an important place in the history of modern Chinese drama. Anthologized as one of the best dramas in the People's Republic of China (PRC) period, the play succeeded in representing the historical contexts, cultural specificities, and the dreams and ideals of individuals in a utopian socialist state at its most ambitious and imaginative point.

In his *Chinese Modern*, Xiaobing Tang has insightfully studied *The Young Generation* as a typical example where "staging of the nation in the form of theatrical spectacle was a purposeful enterprise and a phenomenal success,"⁴ reflecting "an age of great passion and expectation" "in which the boldest dreams about human happiness were collectively dreamed, and

the most ordinary moments in life gloriously poeticized.”⁵ My reading below teases out further the play’s emphasis on the life of the geologists as a comparative point for later discussions on two plays about geologists in post-Mao China. *The Young Generation* depicts Lin Lan, a high school graduate who gives up a promising career in performing arts to settle down in an impoverished revolutionary base area from the civil war period, where she could help convert barren land into a prosperous socialist village. Lin Lan contrasts sharply with her brother, Lin Yusheng, who prefers to live in Shanghai after having worked briefly as a geologist in a remote, barren area of Qinghai province upon graduating from college. Lin Yusheng’s dream is more modest: Now that his doctor has allegedly provided a medical certificate stating that his legs could not endure Qinghai’s harsh climate, Lin Yusheng has a legitimate prospect of finding a job in Shanghai; the only question that remains for him is whether his fiancée, Xia Qianru, will find a research position in Shanghai upon her graduation. Shanghai is the ideal place for such work. Among other advantages, it boasts the most up-to-date research facilities and illustrious, much-sought-after experts to mentor someone in the field of geological research.⁶ Lin Yusheng has an ecstatic vision of the life he and his future wife could enjoy, working by day and appreciating music, fiction, poetry, movies, and friends in the evenings and at the weekends.⁷ However, the influence of classmates who have already volunteered to work in Tibet and other remote areas leads Xia Qianru to wonder whether she is too attached to Lin Yusheng — and to Shanghai — to come to a decision on her own. She feels guilty that she is forsaking her courageous classmates in their difficult, yet thrilling adventures; she experiences this doubt especially strongly when they gather joyfully together and sing “The Song of the Geologists.”

Complicating the relationship between the two siblings is Xiao Jiye, a former classmate and colleague of Lin Yusheng’s, who has also returned to Shanghai from Qinghai, in his case to find a cure for his injured legs in order to return to the frontier. He eventually exposes Lin Yusheng’s account of the medical certificate for the fabrication that it is, and persuades Xia Qianru to act on her wish to work in a remote area, thereby arousing Lin Yusheng’s jealousy of Xiao’s friendship with Xia. Central to the debate among the various characters is what Xiaobing Tang calls “the contrasting perceptions of happiness”:⁸ Lin Jian (Lin Lan’s father) and Xiao Jiye believe that “happiness” is intimately related to “hard work and struggle,” without which happiness cannot exist. Lin Yusheng, on the other

hand, takes “a good life” for granted: More than ten years after liberation, he wants to know why on earth members of the younger generation should have to return to the harsh conditions they lived under in the mountain areas during the war period. Doesn’t everybody work hard for a better life? he asks.⁹ Lin Yusheng’s question, which seems valid to us today, once more reflects the contradictory nature of Maoist ideology, whose promise of a better life in the new society did not prevent it, when the time came, from continuing to demand sacrifices from the haves for the sake of the have-nots. Maoist ideology, as reflected in Xiao Jiye’s loyal observance, gestures toward both “modernization” in the Chinese socialist context and a paradoxical rejection of it under the pretext that it is tainted by Western influence. Lin Yusheng finally returns to the frontier to continue his career as a geologist upon learning that his biological parents had been executed by the Kuomintang (KMT) twenty-four years before, leaving a will that passed on to their son their “ideals, hope, and the sense of an unfinished mission” to “build a Communist heaven” for all the poor peoples in the world.¹⁰ Thus, *The Young Generation* call for sustaining the revolution, so as to guarantee that a socialist country will not “change colour.” The play paved the way for the ideological landscape of the Cultural Revolution, contrary to the conventional belief that pre-Cultural Revolution theatre was radically different from the theatre of the Cultural Revolution period. The Cultural Revolution could not have been launched so smoothly without the theatre of the foregoing period and the work that came out of other fields of literature and art.

What Was Life Like Out There? New Stories of Geologists with “Old Outlooks” in the 1990s

It is natural to wonder how this 1963 story with its happy ending stood up to real life and to theatrical representation. What happened to Xiao Jiye, Lin Yusheng, and Xia Qianru, the three geologists in *The Young Generation* who settled in a remote area of China? What became of their aspirations, in both their professional and personal lives? Was Xiao Jiye able to persevere, despite his physical condition? Did Lin Yusheng begin to regret his second departure from Shanghai? How did Xia Qianru end up feeling — as a scientist and as a woman — about working in a faraway, isolated region of the country? Would she miss Shanghai at all? Did Lin Lan regret her decision to go down to the countryside? Unfortunately, the theatre of the period following the Cultural Revolution — that is, the late

1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s — addressed merely the last question. Several plays from that period, including Sha Yexin's *If I Were for Real* (*Jiaru woshi zhende*) and Li Longyun's *There Is a Small Courtyard* (*You zheyang yige xiaoyuanr*) and *Small Well Lane* (*Xiaojing hutong*) — follow the fortunes of urban middle-school and high school graduates who left for the countryside in large numbers during the Cultural Revolution, became unhappy with their lives, and then met with disappointment and frustration in their tenacious efforts to transfer back to their home cities. Based on these plays, one can infer Lin Lan's fate in the countryside and possibly her attempts to transfer back to Shanghai. Even if she did succeed in returning home, she might have been one of the tens of thousands of educated youth in the 1990s who found themselves “down-posted” (*xiagang*), or unemployed.

Interestingly, no play from the late 1970s or the entire decade of the 1980s depicts the life of geologists. Not until 1997, when Yang Limin's play *Geologists* (*Dizhishi*) was premiered by Daqing City Theatre to critical acclaim, were theatregoers reminded of this profession's much overlooked contributions to the realization of the socialist vision.¹¹ *Geologists* could also be read as a possible “sequel” to the seemingly unfinished story of *The Younger Generation*, that examines the “afterlife” of this revolutionary legacy and its impact on the lives of the young scientists in the next three decades. Although reading intertextually might not be within the purview of drama, it does appear that modern Chinese theatre has undertaken the unique role of providing alternative history and family saga on the public stage.

Geologists consists of four acts, each set in 1961, 1964, 1977, and 1994. Whereas the first two acts represents high Maoist culture of the 1960s, the last two indicate early post-Maoist life after 1976, and the Dengist period in the 1990s, which was characterized by rapid modernization and globalization. *Geologists* cleverly glosses over the most “disastrous” period of the Cultural Revolution as it attempts to track the spiritual roots and moral burdens of this young generation by asking: Where did they come from? What inspired them? What frustrated them? How did they become who they were? What were their dreams and regrets? What changes did their 1960s reflections on life and society undergo by the end of the play in the 1990s? These are questions that invite meditation on the values, pitfalls, and sorrows of idealism, socialism, utopianism, post-socialism, capitalism, modernism, and globalization in contemporary Chinese life.

Unlike the Shanghai play *The Young Generation*, *Geologists* is set in Beijing, the political, cultural, and ideological centre of the PRC. The play's single setting — an old scientist's home close to Beijing Railway Station in the heart of the nation's capital — features a magnificent clock on top of the station building that is seen through a window in the back of the apartment of the scientist's fourth-floor apartment.¹² The focal point of the sitting room is a large black-and-white photograph of an aged geologist standing in the desert by the side of a camel. This, we learn, is the deceased father who never returned from the desert, to which he travelled to determine whether there might be oil resources in 1959.¹³ His daughter, Lu Jing, who has resolutely decided to carry on her father's unfinished work, has just graduated from the Beijing Petroleum Institute with a major in petroleum prospecting.

Like Xia Qianru in *The Young Generation*, Lu Jing does not hesitate to leave Shanghai; rather, she acts like a female Xiao Jiye, impatient to leave Beijing to work in the wilderness of the Northeast, where new oil deposits have been discovered. Thus she is acutely disappointed on being assigned instead to join the faculty of her alma mater, where, because of her excellent academic achievements, she will train future geologists. Act I ends with Lu Jing's farewell party for her classmates, as together they heartily sing "The Song of the Geologists," with as much enthusiasm as the characters in *The Young Generation* displayed when they sang it under similar circumstances. But from that point the two plays diverge, since in *Geologists* the acts that follow take us from 1964 to 1994, three decades of hard times that starkly contrast the reality of the geologists' lives with their youthful hopes and expectations.

It is Lu Jing's classmates themselves who relate what has been happening to them as they periodically visit her in her Beijing apartment to recall the past, navigate the present, and hope for the future. Her former classmates' accounts allow Lu Jing to experience vicariously all that they have gone through in the wilderness, so that she can share their agony and their anxieties. Lu Jing also participates in the lives of others by virtue of her relationship to the two men between whom she is torn, and their experiences naturally affect her happiness, or lack of it. In *The Young Generation*, the story of Xia Qianru's divided affections for Lin Yusheng and Xiao Jiye is never developed, as opposed to the story of Lu Jing's feelings for the two men in her life, which drives much of the plot and character development of *Geologists*. In following this theme to its conclusion, the playwright leaves the audience with much to contemplate

with regard to the consequences of unrequited love, societal duties, and the authority of the state.

Lu Jing's first love is Luo Ming, who is known as "Camel," a nickname bestowed on him because of his way of immersing himself in his work without showing off his brilliance; like a camel, he shoulders a heavy load in the seemingly endless journey toward his destiny without complaint.¹⁴ He reminds Lu Jing of her father, especially the persevering spirit her father demonstrated in pursuing his career under inordinately arduous circumstances. Luo Ming's story recalls that of Xiao Jiye in *The Young Generation*. He is similarly intent on leaving for the wilderness, because it is the place where he expects to be able to do the most to advance his geological career. "We petroleum geologists are lucky to have a chance to work on a first-rate, world-class oil field — it's a dream come true for several generations of geologists," he says to Lu Jing.¹⁵ But Luo Ming pays a heavier price than does Xiao Jiye to realize his ambition. His health progressively deteriorates as the play unfolds, until at one point in the play he can no longer walk unaided.

Again, Luo Ming's story could easily function as a sequel to the brief account of Xiao Jiye's life. *The Young Generation* ends at the beginning of Xiao Jiye's career, when he is a young, vibrant idealist, whereas *Geologists* covers a time span of thirty years, an ample interval for audiences to witness, in the mirror story of Luo Ming, what Xiao Jiye's idealistic goals might very well have cost him. The question arises, however, as to whether Xiao Jiye would have been able to summon the kind of strength Luo Ming draws on to survive. The narratives by other characters in *Geologists* contribute other, objective perspectives on Luo Ming's heroic exploits, thereby dispensing with any necessity to rely on the subjective feelings of the protagonist and granting both narrator on stage and audiences off stage equal opportunities to comment on the events without requiring the protagonist to act them out.

Both Xiao Jiye and Luo Ming belong to the innocent, altruistic generation of the 1960s, but Luo Ming differs from Xiao Jiye in his steadfast pursuit of Lu Jing. Whereas Xiao Jiye denies Lin Yusheng's accusation that he is attracted to Xia Qianru, Luo Ming is quite open about his feelings for Lu Jing upon his return in 1964 to Beijing (Act II). He tells his competitor, Luo Dasheng, that the latter has not won Lu Jing's love, despite his tenacious efforts to court her. Luo Ming warns Luo Dasheng that he will not surrender his right to fight for her: "It is in our human nature to pursue happiness — I am willing to sacrifice my life for my

love,” Luo Ming says.¹⁶ When night falls, however, Luo Ming leaves Lu Jing without saying good-bye, having realized that he is destined to live and work in the wilderness and not wanting Lu Jing to have to contend with the hardships he has known and will continue to face. Perhaps this is what he meant when he spoke of his willingness to “sacrifice” his “life” for his “love” — that is, his lover’s happiness is more important to him than possessing her. Later, he marries a local technician who had rescued him from danger when they worked together; yet still he longs for Lu Jing, his ideal, unattainable love. Luo Ming — a stronger, more rounded character than either Lin Yusheng or Xiao Jiye — combines in his makeup an avidity for pursuing the collective ideal as well as personal fulfilment in a love relationship. That his devotion to a dual goal meets with such unhappy results implies that it cannot be achieved. It also by implication questions the rationality and humanity of any ideology that demands such a broad and profoundly painful sacrifice. From the perspective of the present, we can understand that this 1990s play was the product of a generation that had fully experienced the consequences of its idealism and had begun to have doubts about what was being demanded of it.

To explore these two plays from another angle, one notes an intriguing contrast between Luo Dasheng of the 1990s *Geologists* and Lin Yusheng of the 1960s *The Young Generation*. Like Lin in Shanghai, Luo in Beijing wants to gratify both his personal and professional aspirations. He would like to lead a comfortable life in Beijing, marry Lu Jing, and, ideally, live with her in the old geologist’s home near Beijing Railway Station. Unlike Lin Yusheng, however, Luo Dasheng first volunteers to go to the Northeast wilderness with Luo Ming. He is promoted and transferred back to Beijing three years later because of a scientific breakthrough, which had in fact resulted from Luo Ming’s work. His politically questionable family background causes Luo Ming to be sent further away to an ever more desolate area to work, from which he has even less hope than before of ever being reunited with Lu Jing. Over the years, Luo Ming holds on to the numerous letters he has written to Lu Jing, and he also keeps undisclosed in his heart his almost unbearable longing for her. He is aware that his life and career belong to the distant, great depths of the earth in remote regions of the country, since one cannot find oil deposits in prosperous cities. Referring to Luo Dasheng’s good fortune in being able to reside in Beijing, where he will be able to give Lu Jing the care she deserves, Luo Ming confesses during a 1964 visit, “Only Dasheng can make you happy; I cannot.” Luo Ming reiterates his earlier promise to follow the example set

by Lu Jing's father of "journeying through difficult and harsh conditions in order to appear" in her dreams.¹⁷ Having been transferred without recourse to faking a medical document, Luo Dasheng is a "luckier" Lin Yusheng; his "honourable discharge" simultaneously promotes his career and improves his prospects of winning Lu Jing's hand, if not her heart. However, both Dasheng ("grand life") and Yusheng ("nurturing life") belong to the city. They are passionate about its rich culture, colourful lights, magnificent architecture, and the possibility it offers of living a comfortable life, the kind of life they wish to provide for their spouses and offspring. Luo Ming and Xiao Jiye, on the other hand, must choose their revolutionary heritage, over personal happiness. Luo Ming's is the familiar, difficult, well-known choice of the title hero in Ethel Lillian Voynich's 1897 novel *The Gadfly*, in which the protagonist suppresses his profound love for his beloved in favour of his idealistic career.¹⁸ Luo Ming also reminds one of Lu Jiachuan, the communist underground leader who believes his revolutionary career to be more important than his love for Lin Daojing, while guiding her toward an enlightened path in the classic PRC novel *The Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge*), first published in 1958.¹⁹

What, then, about the chosen ones in these plays? How did the men's fate affect the portrayal of the women? Granted, Xia Qianru in *The Young Generation* is not given the central role that Lu Jing has in *Geologists*, so that we learn much less about her internal conflicts as Lin Yusheng's fiancée. Moreover, there is no telling how she would fare in remote Qinghai over the years, nor whether she would survive the harsh conditions there and also manage marriage to Lin Yusheng under these conditions. Nevertheless, Xia Qianru, on the face of it, makes more of a gesture than does Lu Jing toward social equality for women, albeit in a rather hesitant way. After all, she does demonstrate the courage to leave Shanghai along with her male peers for a rough, unpredictable career in the hinterland. Lu Jing, by comparison, seems rather weak and indecisive for her generation; it is true that she is assigned a teaching position in Beijing, but she could have insisted on joining Luo Ming and the others on their long voyage to the wilderness if she had really wanted to; both the history and literature of the period contain abundant precedents for such bold behaviour. In addition, the history of the period provides many examples of husbands and wives commuting to separate jobs — another option that Lu Jing passes up. Instead, she allows geography to determine who will be her life partner. Evidently, she does enjoy living comfortably in Beijing, content in the realization that her house is not the centre of action but rather a "way

station” where her friends can rest and rejuvenate themselves in the course of their exhausting journeys.

Clearly, the Beijing couple is fortunate in garnering the best of both worlds: They discuss their idealism as members of the self-denying generation, but do not experience much inconvenience in the process. Their regret over lost dreams cannot be accorded the same weight as the real sacrifice of their peers. While Lu Jing reveres her father’s aspirations, she lacks Luo Ming’s willpower to realize them. She is a city girl at heart, who fancies the romantic setting of the countryside but lacks the energy and determination to break out of the city to venture into the remote world. Like Ibsen’s Nora, instead of leaving home, she waits in vain for the right Torvald to put together a nest for her. In fact, Lu Jing calls to mind the women depicted by the May Fourth writers in the early Republican period, who struggled to leave the home of their parents or their husbands. She occupies her father’s old residence for thirty years, treasuring his memories and photographs, and then she invites her husband to live with her in the same place after their marriage. Despite being portrayed as naïve and one-dimensional, Lin Lan and Xia Qianru of *The Young Generation* at least embody the fearless, selfless spirit of Maoist women, who valued collective ideals more than they did their own happiness. Nor can Lu Jing claim the sort of bravery that certain post-Maoist women required when they chose to stay at home after rejecting the Maoist state feminist programme that, under the guise of granting women full equality with men, imposed on women the double burden of an overwhelming load of duties to society and a similarly daunting number of duties in maintaining the home. In short, Lu Jing is a complex woman who has the dreams of gender equality that the May Fourth movement instilled, the aspirations for a nation-state that the PRC contributed, the desire for material comfort that the post-Maoist period supported, and the frustration at having failed to draw on and promote all these objectives that the post-Deng era witnessed. She summarizes in herself the conflicts and concerns of women’s lives in the twentieth century. The new challenge for Lu Jing — and for Xia Qianru as well — resides in the tension between her willingness to settle in a desolate place, where poverty, wilderness, and extreme climate are constants, and her desire to seek fulfilment in love and a career. In dealing with such challenges, the influence of the patriarchal structure looms large, as manifested by Luo Ming and Luo Dasheng’s overprotectiveness toward Lu Jing. Why would both men feel it incumbent upon them to take care of Lu Jing and to judge what would be best for her? Are we no

further along in this respect than we were with the bewildered May Fourth male characters who guided their women's lives and careers (if they had any) by way of the dictates of their own self-image and patriarchal interests?

After considering these issues, I must suggest an alternate reading of the play that seems to have anticipated the above questions. For those who want to imagine what would have happened to Lu Jing had she linked her fate to that of the person she truly loves, the play presents two more female characters: Tie Ying, Luo Ming's wife, and Qu Dan, Lu Jing's college friend, who marries Liu Ren (from the same graduating class) in the Northeast oil field. As their life stories unfold, one wonders whether Lu Jing would have become another Tie Ying, taking in Luo Ming at the time of his greatest need, nurturing him back to health, and continuing to play the role of full-time nurse to him for the next twenty years. Would Lu Jing have had the courage and stamina to endure such hardship? Or would Lu Jing's life have looked more like Qu Dan's life? Qu Dan forfeits her own career as a promising geologist to tend to her husband, who lost both feet to frostbite in the 1960s in a temperature experiment that made it possible to transport petroleum successfully from the oil field to the outside world.²⁰ Given the unfortunate developments in her friends' lives, perhaps Lu Jing was luckiest of the three in being allowed to pursue a teacher's career in Beijing and not being required to relinquish much of what constitutes gratification in life for the sake of her husband. Yet matters are never simple, it seems, for her husband's career did not go far, so she had nobody or nothing to sacrifice for, even if she had wanted to. Unsuccessful but forever striving, Luo Dasheng possibly touches us more than does the eventually illustrious Luo Ming, since, while as talented as Luo Ming, he must cope with more familiar difficulties, such as the endless problems of state bureaucracy, administrative work, and his troubling sense of guilt at being the fortunate one who can reside in Beijing and marry Luo Jing. Always mindful that he does not inspire his wife's most profound feelings, Luo Dasheng experiences the sort of nagging insecurities that turn him into a "hero of one of us," or someone with a more believable, true-to-life character than some of his more "noble" peers.

In the end, none of the three couples in the play — Lu Jing/Luo Dasheng, Tie Ying/Luo Ming, and Qu Dan/Liu Ren — can be described as really happy and fulfilled. The women might be able to derive some satisfaction from being able to tell themselves that their sacrifices were vital to their husbands' welfare, but the sacrifices did not ensure success:

One man still could not come up with any achievement to boast of and the other two became either disabled or seriously ill in the remote oil fields. Given this plot, one might argue that no matter how much women characters work to achieve both their professional and personal goals, in the last instance women continue to represent the “moon,” or the passive, domestic other that merely reflects the light of the “sun,” which stands for the more socially acknowledged male contribution to society. However, at the same time, the play does give voice to the pain, sorrow, and suffering caused by a society that demands the unachievable from both men and women, making it equally impossible for them to leave or to stay. Neither the rural nor the urban arena offers the geologists a choice that is complete in itself. It appears that only love can survive this insoluble dilemma, as proven by Luo Ming’s lasting love for Lu Jing, Tie Ying’s self-effacing love for Luo Ming, Luo Dasheng’s unconditional love for Lu Jing, and Qu Dan’s magnanimous love for Liu Ren. Ultimately, these anguished love stories overpower the underlying theme of idealism that challenges, complicates, and glorifies love.

Earlier plays of the late 1970s and 1980s tended to foreground the Cultural Revolution, implicating it as the root cause of all problems and hardships. *Geologists* does not take this approach. Act III of the play, which is set in 1977, provides a convenient frame for the main characters quickly to report what happened to them during the interval of the Cultural Revolution, which had taken place since their 1964 gathering in Act II. The conversation between Lu Jing and Luo Dasheng reveals that Luo Dasheng, in his own words “saw through everything” — including his foiled dream of becoming a great geologist — during the “ten years of the great disaster.” He laments that he has accomplished so little of what he had hoped to do — a standard complaint of many people who felt that the Cultural Revolution wasted their time and energy. But in Luo Dasheng’s case, the Cultural Revolution is surely not the sole culprit, since he wrestles with his unrealized career ambition from the beginning to the end of the play.

After a quick accounting of the “mad” period of the Cultural Revolution, the play focuses again on Beijing, now bathed in “celebratory festivities” to “witness the people’s victory” against “the Gang of Four”; Beijing still remains “the happiest city” in the world.²¹ The experience of the Cultural Revolution has been narrated in dry terminology, using such official terms as “the people’s victory,” but the more vivid language associated with the pains, sacrifices, and regrets of the geologists continues

to evoke their lives, both in Beijing and in the wilderness, without noticeable interruption, and this is contrary to the typical accusation that the Cultural Revolution had “interrupted all normal life.” When, for instance, Liu Ren appears after a decade’s absence equipped with artificial feet, it is an image that merely evokes the similar story that the audience had been told in Act II, and that refers to a time before the Cultural Revolution. As in Act II, Liu Ren remains nostalgic for Beijing, and, disabled or not, he is eager to walk through the city and search out its new wonders.²² As before, he envies Lu Jing her good fortune in being a Beijing resident, which again positions him to strike a sharp contrast with Xiao Jiye in *The Young Generation*. Xiao Jiye conceives of Shanghai as a city of comfort that can minister to one’s needs for personal happiness. To Liu Ren this is no disadvantage; for him, every square foot of Beijing has its old charm and significance: “Tiananmen Square, the North Sea Park, the Summer Palace, and our alma mater.”²³ Beijing is also the city where a friendship between two former rivals is cemented by an act of compassion. On hearing from Liu Ren that Luo Ming’s health has been dangerously compromised by twelve harsh years of work in the remote oil fields, Luo Dasheng immediately summons Luo Ming to Beijing and helps him gain admission to an excellent hospital, where he will be treated by the best doctors in the capital. The persistent love demonstrated for the “new” Beijing (the capital of the PRC) and for the “old” Beijing (i.e., its traditions, college life, and material comforts) on the one hand confirms the post-Maoist official discourse heralding a “new birth” after the end of the Cultural Revolution, thus investing the play with the necessary political correctness; on the other hand, it foregrounds the anguish and long-lived nostalgia of those who are no longer able to make Beijing their home — as the result of a decision, however, that they had made before the Cultural Revolution.

After a lights-out on stage indicating the passage of seven days, Luo Ming returns to Lu Jing’s house, once again to stare at the photo of her father; he is at a loss for words as he sees, for the first time, the life that his former competitor enjoys with Lu Jing. Meanwhile Luo Dasheng wonders how differently each of their lives would have turned out if, back in 1964, it had been Luo Ming, rather than himself, who was transferred from the Northeast to Beijing. “People tend to forget things easily. In the years to come, who would have believed what we had to overcome there.... Nobody would believe what we went through.” Heartbroken, Luo Ming simply wants to sit among his friends, saying nothing. But suddenly he

utters a great wail, and his entire body shakes. If anything is clear at this moment it is that the characters' responses are only glancingly related to the experience of the Cultural Revolution; their pain and sorrow have deepened as they aged and moved through many of life's rites of passage and acquired hard-bought self-knowledge. They are intent on preserving the memories of their youthful sacrifices and dedication without regard to what happened during the Cultural Revolution, which in any case was a relatively short-lived event in the panorama of history.

Seventeen years have elapsed when Act IV begins. It is 1994 and Beijing is now a city of disco music, freshly-painted walls, outsize television screens, leather sofas, and a skyscraper-dominated skyline, all of them imprints of China's rapid advances in modernization and globalization. Lanlan, Luo Dasheng and Lu Jing's eighteen-year-old daughter, is preparing for her rigorous college entrance exam. There is little doubt that hers will be an entirely different major from the one that her parents chose, for her generation has an entirely different set of values and aspirations.

In the past seventeen years, her parents have heard nothing from Luo Ming, but one day there he is, on a national television programme entitled "Oriental Horizons" that interviews celebrities and stars. Now a world-class geologist, Luo Ming has written twenty-four scholarly books, and his scientific experiments have garnered him forty-eight awards, including two from a world petroleum organization. Still exhibiting the selfless spirit that animated his generation, Luo Ming credits his achievements to all the geologists with whom he studied and worked and who shared his dreams. Responding to the interviewer's observation that he is too "orthodox," Luo Ming confesses that he was "educated and fostered by the People's Republic" and that part of him will "never change."²⁴ His friend's success excites Luo Dasheng, but it also revives his regrets that he never finished the academic text that he had started in the 1960s. To finally confront Lu Jing with what he sees as her unhappiness in their marriage, Luo Dasheng tells her that the influential report he delivered in 1964 on oil explorations was mostly written by Luo Ming, who should therefore have been the one to win a transfer from the Northeast to Beijing. In a loving and forgiving manner, Lu Jing confesses, in turn, that she has waited thirty years for Luo's confession. "From this moment on, I am really falling in love with you...."²⁵ Here *Geologists* evokes the early post-Maoist theme that investigates loveless marriages that had come about because of political, ideological, and geographical reasons, but could be redeemed by honesty,

mutual understanding, and forgiveness. Yet in contrast to the message of certain early post-Mao love stories, the roots of Luo and Lu's unhappiness could not be entirely attributed to the start of the Cultural Revolution, which witnessed their sorrows but did not initiate them.

Two days later, on a rainy afternoon, as sad saxophone music plays "Homecoming" in the background, Luo Ming appears on the Beijing couple's doorstep. In the past seventeen years, he has often visited Beijing, and each time he looked from afar toward Lu Jing's apartment by the railway station, trying to image what Lu was doing at that moment. He misses the rainy autumn days in Beijing that remind him of his carefree college days. To Lu Jing he reveals that he is tied to his wife, Tie Ying, primarily by gratitude for her protective sheltering of him during the Cultural Revolution. He is also grateful for Luo Dasheng's help seventeen years ago; it was critical in enabling him to walk again. But when Lu Jing congratulates him on his extraordinary achievements, Luo Ming retorts bitterly: "To whom do I talk about all of these? My wife or my son?... Perhaps any insignificant achievement is made possible through time ... [in tears] I have only the two of you" for true friends.²⁶ His titles of president or board member of numerous research associations aside, Luo Ming has come to believe that in his inner being he is simply a geologist who belongs to the earth's "deep strata," and that he is destined to walk forever toward that "heavy world" without the benefits and rewards of worldly wishes and desires.²⁷

Another lights-out signals that it is two days later, when the three couples from the same 1964 graduating class gather for the third time in Lu Jing's home. In the meanwhile Liu Ren has had a near-fatal stroke and is now in a wheelchair, with his wife, Qu Dan, intent on spending the limited time they have left together to show him "the beautiful landscape of his motherland." Anxious to finish the shopping she has been assigned by her friends in the oil field, Tie Ying gives vent to her annoyance at their greed for Beijing commodities. She points out that their "oil city" of two million people now (compared to when they first set foot in the wilderness) has almost everything, including high-rise buildings, dance halls, bars, and highways. To everyone's surprise, Luo Dasheng then announces that he has accepted a job that will take him to an oil field in Xinjiang Autonomous Region; it is as if, three decades later, he still feels the need to compensate for his failure to stay in the wilderness with his former classmates. The play thus concludes with Lu Dasheng finally incarnating Lu Jing's father, who had disappeared in the Xinjiang desert many years ago, and simultaneously

replacing his idealist counterpart, Luo Ming, now too feeble to work in the field. To initiate his adventure, Lu Dasheng has, ironically, picked the time when China's modernization and globalization efforts are at their peak, when its petroleum industry faces the stiffest competition it has ever known in the world economy, and when many of his own generation of scientists and workers, who had built up the industry, are retiring or unemployed. His surprising declaration is followed by the solemn striking of the gigantic clock of Beijing Railway Station, a familiar sound that has not changed in the past thirty years, and at first by dead silence from his friends. "We will be parted again," Lu Jing then says, "and God knows when we will be together again." Echoing what they did in their get-together thirty years ago, they end by singing their favourite, "The Song of the Geologists." This time around, however, they succumb to tears, but when one person cannot complete the lyrics, the other takes over, amid the dimming of the stage lights.

The realities evolving from 1990s global capitalism, as depicted by the end of *Geologists*, is foreshadowed in Lin Jian's warning against a "capitalist restoration" in *The Young Generation*, or in Mao's warning that "a peaceful transformation" from a socialist China to a capitalist China had to be effected without the intrusion of the West and only with the certainty that the ideological battle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie had been successfully waged — a warning that was used to justify the launching of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the three couples' tireless efforts to realize the national dream of a strong China to counter Western influence far surpass the parental expectations of Lin Yusheng to commit himself to a life of sacrifice in order to attain a similar goal. Or, as alluded to before, we might say that *Geologists* presents dramatic characters who re-enact on stage the subsequent lives of Lin Yusheng, Xiao Jiye, and Xia Qianru from *The Young Generation*, involving them in the circumstances most favourable to highlighting their sorrows and achievements within the appropriate historical contexts. The playwright may not have attempted to explain why things happened as they did, but he did convey the depth of the protagonists' despair while also extolling their unselfish spirit, abiding love, and enduring, shared idealism. The play's most trenchant ideological criticism of the status quo is communicated by way of both the "glorification" and mockery of Beijing and what it stands for. At Beijing's centre is its railway station, toward which the youngsters go for inspiration, comfort and rejuvenation. But before long they are drawn back to the periphery and the desolate places where nothing like Beijing exists. If we

characterize the earlier play as “Farewell Shanghai” and the latter one as “Journey into Beijing,” we note that both plays evoke the powerful emotions of nostalgia, compassion, frustration, and forgiveness of an entire generation of Chinese scientists who made sacrifices largely without regret, and who dreamed a dream from which they never wanted to wake up. A subtext might be discerned here: the longing for some sort of spiritual wealth such as they had possessed under Maoist idealism, before it was marred by their experience of the Cultural Revolution; this longing and the life events associated with it became the memories that they clung to. Thus the Cultural Revolution was perceived as an integral part of their youthful experience of Maoist China, and as such it was not to be forgotten nor spoken of in dismissive, negative terms without acknowledging or understanding its historical complexities. These views of the playwright may be interpreted as a discourse meant to counter the discourse inspired by the dominant modes of globalization, which have flourished at the expense of local — that is, Chinese — interests and experience.²⁸

Can Geologists Really *Enjoy Hardships*? Returning to Shanghai in Search of a Hero in 1990s Theatre

Is it logical to ask what happens, then, to the next generation of these geologists? How do they relate to their parents’ generation and their lives, dreams, and sacrifices? *Geologists* briefly mentions Lu Jing and Luo Dasheng’s daughter, who wants nothing to do with her parents’ old values and careers. Nor does the play elaborate on what Luo Ming and Tie Ying’s son looks like in the “oil city.” It is left to another play, *Enjoy Hardships* (*Xiangshou jiannan*), written by Ouyang Yibing and premiered in 1998, to pick up where *Geologists* left off, with the protagonist, Han Huigu, the teenage son of a petroleum geologist couple who left Shanghai in the 1960s to work in the distant Ningxia Autonomous Region. Growing up on the “frontier” listening to his mother’s nostalgic songs about Shanghai, its beautiful Huangpu River, and the grand, resounding chimes of the gigantic clock on top of the Customs Building, Han Huigu has cherished since childhood the dream of returning to Shanghai to enrol in the same middle-school where his mother once studied. Family lore has it that his mother was the president of the student association of that well-known middle-school, the music director of its wind orchestra and the young person selected as the “model student” of the entire city of Shanghai.²⁹ Han Huigu’s mother could easily have evolved into another Xia Qianru from

The Young Generation, because of her love for Shanghai and its rich culture; or she could just as easily have turned into another Qu Dan, who renounces living in the city to pursue the national vision of building up the petroleum industry. Indeed, Han could even be seen as the “real” son of Tie Ying and Luo Ming, who certainly would want their son to have all the opportunities they had missed in the major city. However, Han’s mother dies while attempting to rescue other workers in an oil well accident. The same accident inflicts a severe leg injury on Han Huigu’s father, so that he must thereafter be confined to a wheelchair (an image that evokes Xiao Jiye, Liu Ren, and Luo Ming, all of whom suffer some kind of disabling leg injury).

When Han Huigu appears in Shanghai alone at the door of Li Mingyang, *Enjoy Hardships* echoes the theme in *Geologists* of the lasting bond between former college friends, but with a different twist. Li Mingyang is eager to proffer Han Huigu his help in starting a new life in Shanghai, partially to express his gratitude to Han’s father Han Muchun for taking his place in Ningxia Autonomous Region upon college graduation, at the time when Li Mingyang’s father was critically ill and needed his care in Shanghai. Li knows that the fortunes of the Li family and the Han family could easily have been reversed if Han’s father had not stepped in to relieve him. As the play unfolds, Li’s daughter becomes a strong advocate of Han’s cause to enrol in his mother’s alma mater, even at the moment when Han has almost lost faith in his own dream.

A striking point of contrast, also, is how hard Han Huigu must work to pass the demanding middle-school examination in 1990s Shanghai; it is clearly shown to be so much more rigorous than the comparable exam in 1960s Shanghai, when Lin Lan in *The Young Generation* passed up her second chance to take this test in order to work in the countryside as an ordinary peasant. Furthermore, 1990s Shanghai as depicted in *Enjoy Hardships* encapsulates a highly competitive capitalist society, the kind in which Li Mingyang’s wife works for a foreign company that will dock her a month’s pay if she is a mere minute late for work.³⁰ At one point, Li Mingyang is detained by the authorities when it is discovered that his assistant stole RMB10 million from his private company. Now Han Huigu’s father seizes the opportunity to help Li out: He draws on the patent income from his scientific experiments to pledge a large amount of money that will guarantee payment of Li Mingyang’s debt in the event the stolen money is not returned. In crises, friendship and family count, of course, but it is even more crucial apparently to have money at one’s disposal, a reality that is quite different from the one that obtained in the socialist era, when

money was deemed insignificant in terms of its impact on social influence and personal happiness.

Nevertheless, despite the dominant role of money in *Enjoy Hardships*, the play still exhibits the vestiges of the Maoist dilemma of striving for a modern society by means of socialist idealism, as seen in *The Young Generation*. Han Huigu seeks to claim his “birthright” to a Shanghai school in order to increase his chances of an auspicious future away from the “frontier,” yet at almost every dramatic turn, the play glorifies the old heroes and heroines of the 1960s, holding them up as the most precious family treasure, to be used as models to inspire and urge on the young protagonists. In Act IV, for instance, Han Huigu rents an attic in Shanghai where he will study for the entrance exam, and his ability to do this serves as a vivid reminder of what his father — and his counterparts Luo Ming and Liu Ren — have lost in their single-minded devotion to collective interests. However, Han Huigu’s wish to go back to Ningxia to care for his father illustrates the fact that the younger generation is equally prepared to take up their parents’ destiny and “enjoy hardships,” just as Lin Yusheng’s biological and adoptive parents expected him to do. The paradoxical title of the play, which calls upon the younger generation to “enjoy hardships,” expresses the determination of both the past and present generations to go forward with their “old-fashioned” dreams, despite their profound sense of hopelessness. The pathos of what has been lost is clear to many, yet the hope persists that the next generation will learn from the aspirations and mistakes of those who came before and will fare better. After all, Han Huigu is still searching for heroes in the course of the play, and he finds them right in his own family and among the family friends of his parents, all of whom cheer him on.

Finally, one must note that although *Enjoy Hardships* covers a time span of several decades, at no point does it invoke any memories of the Cultural Revolution, thus inviting ambiguous readings of what the Cultural Revolution did mean to the two generations represented in the play. Is it possible that what is left out yields more important matter to think on than what is presented? Or had the experience of the Cultural Revolution become entirely irrelevant to contemporary life in the 1990s? Or, again, was the Cultural Revolution associated with such idealistic bygone times that it became painfully complicated to represent the dire consequences of that idealism? Apparently no one wants to experience the Cultural Revolution again, either personally or collectively. Yet is it not possible that the goal of the Cultural Revolution — a perpetual socialist revolution

(with continued progress in achieving equality) so as to repel any return of a capitalist society — still matters? This question seems pertinent today, especially for those who are now unemployed, uninsured, and unprotected from “the rule of the jungle.” Refracted from the perspective of this ongoing global political agitation, the Cultural Revolution seems destined to be given an after-life which holds on to its original claim to radical democracy, mass participation, and people’s right to rebel against all normative or symbolic forms of law and *bürgerlicher Recht* and their attendant state bureaucracy.”³¹ The recent nostalgia for the Maoist era — as evidenced in frequent performances of songs and model theatrical works from the Cultural Revolution — gives us a different message about the memory of the Cultural Revolution from the messages provided by the mainstream ideology at home and popular and scholarly writers abroad.

These Chinese reflections on the Cultural Revolution should also be contextualized in the global confrontation between third-world countries and imperialist forces in the 1960s, as Xiao Xidong has already pointed out. In Xiao’s view, the 1960s witnessed the greatest upheaval in the history of the world revolution, which testified to Mao Zedong’s well-known assessment that “countries want independence, nationalities want liberation, and the people want revolution” (*Guojia yao duli, minzu yao jiefang, renmin yao geming*). One remembers Japanese protests against US military bases, the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movement in the US, the French student movement that culminated in the strike of a million workers in Paris in May 1968, the rise and fall of the communist movement in Indonesia that ended in the tragic massacre of 300,000 people, and the inspiring success of the Cuban Revolution and Che Guevara’s heroic guerrilla warfare against US imperialism and the “reactionary” governments of Latin American countries. These movements shared an anti-elitism, a core programme of the Cultural Revolution, the most *massive* “mass movement” in human history, to restore power to ordinary people. Combined with this anti-elitism was the anti-imperialist (in the Western and Asian/African/Latin American countries) and anti-socialist-imperialist (in the Eastern socialist bloc countries) aspirations of Mao Zedong, which sought to continue the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, to ensure that socialism in China would never be replaced by capitalist society. The success of the Chinese communist revolution in 1949 in an underdeveloped China, and its continuing revolution in the realms of culture and ideology of the 1960s, Xiao argues, have historically been regarded as the “most stunning revolutionary flag” both for the

peoples in many developed Western countries due to its spirit of anti-elitism, and for the peoples in the under-developed non-Western countries as a continuation of the more traditional kind of anti-imperialist revolution, thus making China, however temporarily, the “pioneer of social and cultural revolutions in the entire world.” With one fourth of the world’s population, Xiao further believes, China’s experience could not but affect the course of world affairs. The total rejection of the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s was related to the rightist conservatism that held sway in the age of Reagan and Thatcher.³²

I do not agree with all of Xiao’s analysis of the global politics of the 1960s, which were fundamentally conditioned by complex local circumstances in each country. I tend to concur, however, with his conclusion that as capitalism, Westernization, and globalization increasingly shape Chinese society and class formation, Mao’s theory of the Chinese revolution as an integral part of the world revolution and his efforts to prevent the restoration of a capitalist society should play a role in our reflections on the past century’s history.

Local Histories: The Socialist Icon of Geologists in the National Imagination

Finally, I will address the issue of why geologists were chosen for dramatization, rather than other kinds of scientists. To be sure, the twentieth-century Chinese theatre has portrayed other kinds of scientists, such as nautical engineers in the 1963 play *Second Spring* (*Di er ge chuntian*), nuclear scientists in the 1980 play *Atoms and Love* (*Yuanzi yu Aiqing*), hydraulic engineers in the 1993 play *The Yellow River Flows into the Sea* (*Huanghe ru hailiu*), and glaciologists in the 1994 play *The Light of the South Pole* (*Jiguang*). This short list of theatrical representations of scientists since 1949 suggests the underdog status of Chinese intellectuals, scientists, and to a lesser extent, engineers, in socialist China. They were expected to reform themselves ideologically before being fully accepted as productive members of society, unlike the workers, peasants, and soldiers who composed the majority of PRC protagonists. The appearance of two of the four plays in the 1990s, together with *Geologists* and *Enjoy Hardships*, illustrated the elevated status of scientists in post-Mao China, where they became appreciated as valuable human resources for economic development. Yet their representation still falls short in comparison with the still-numerous historical plays, family plays, peasant plays, and to a

lesser extent, soldier plays, and other genres in Maoist and post-Maoist theatre.

While sharing the same social and ideological status as their peers in other fields, geologists enjoyed a more intriguing profile in Maoist China. The familiar story of the founding of a “new China” features Li Siguang, a patriotic geologist who journeyed through England, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Hong Kong to return to Beijing in 1950, bringing invaluable ore and mineral samples and exploration equipment from the West to serve the motherland. He was immediately appointed as Director of the Research Institute of Geology and the Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.³³

The First Five-year Plan, approved in 1955, designated the development of “heavy industry” (*zhong gongye*) as a priority. Its 156 key industrial projects included 20 metallurgical projects and 52 energy resources projects, all of which required the rapid and solid training of geologists in the shortest period possible.³⁴ “One group after the other, geologists ‘eat in the wind and sleep in the dew’ (*fengcan lusu*), climb mountains and wade through rivers (*bashan sheshui*), arduously and tirelessly prospecting for ‘underground treasure’ (*kantan dixia baozang*); there is no doubt they deserve the honourable nickname of ‘trailblazers of national construction’ (*guojia jianshe de jianbing*),” say Pang Song and Chen Shu, in their *A Brief History of the People’s Republic of China*.³⁵

Hailed also as the “scouts of socialist construction” in publications of the 1950s and early 1960s, geologists enjoyed a certain role in the national imagination for their pioneering work to discover natural resources for producing steel, coal and oil, the lifelines of heavy industry, in order to compete with the imperialist West in the Cold War era. The national call to launch “a great advance toward modern science and technology” (*xiang xiandai kexue jishu da jinjun*) from Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai further promoted the Chinese determination to “change the backwardness of the economic, scientific, and cultural realms of China in order to catch up, in the next several decades, with the most advanced standards of the world.”³⁶ The summons to “advance toward Nature” (*xiang da ziran jinjun*) moved geologists one step closer to the heroic, hard-working image of the “new” peasants, who laboured in the open fields, battled challenging terrain, and endured countless difficulties in conquering Nature. Geologists were respected for venturing into the remote, barren frontiers, and travelling long distances in mountainous areas, which required unusual physical strength and extraordinary health,

thus setting them apart from scientists who worked in much greater comfort in indoor laboratories.

Most importantly, a good geologist embodied Mao Zedong's expectations for "model students" to achieve "the three excellences" (*sanhao*) as reflected in such slogans as "good academic achievement, good health, and good work ethics" (*xuexi hao, shengti hao, gongzuo hao*). Han Huigu's mother in *Enjoy Hardships*, therefore, has to be a city-wide "three-excellent student" in a Shanghai middle-school to prepare herself for the life of a geologist. Geologists best combined patriotic dedication, socialist consciousness, scientific knowledge and skills, traditional ethics, team spirit, perfect health and physical strength, making them icons of the new socialist man and woman (*shehui zhuyi xinren*), and hence as close an ideological equal to the workers, peasants, and soldiers as any scientist could ever get.³⁷

Such an equal emphasis on the mind, spirit, and body helps us understand why in all three plays discussed above, the most celebrated geologists, such as Xiao Jiye in *The Young Generation*, Luo Ming in *Geologists*, and Han Muchun in *Enjoy Hardships*, all have leg problems. Not being able to work in the field leaves them in great torment, and losing their health became tantamount to losing the most important part of their identity. The worsening of their health, in chronological order — from Xiao Jiye's recovery from leg surgery to Luo Ming's struggle from paralyzed body to walking with crutch, and finally to Han Muchun's appearing in a wheelchair on stage — expresses the heavier price to pay as one pursues idealistic dreams in increasingly difficult local and global environments from the 1960s to the 1990s. On the one hand, the "disabled" bodies in the last two plays of the 1990s highlight the unreachable noble goals of "the three excellences" of the high Mao period, and the inevitable destructive power of modernization and industrialization, which result in the alienation of human beings both in the West and in post-Mao China. On the other hand, however, the "disabled bodies" also call upon the Chinese people never to forget the spiritual heritage of an idealistic age, in which sacrifice and dedication were indeed valued high above material gain and personal happiness.

My interview with Yang Limin, the author of *Geologists*, testifies that the play faithfully recorded his own interactions with 15 geologists, who spent considerable time in the Daqing oilfield. Having moved to Daqing at 17 with his father to work at odd jobs, and having married a geologist himself, Yang Limin knew his subject intimately. He became a personal

friend of Wang Qimin, the real-life inspiration for the dramatic character Luo Ming in *Geologists*, and was deeply touched by his dedication to Daqing despite declining health. Yang was determined to present his life in the theatre long before Wang became a national hero.³⁸ Indeed, Wang Qimin was promoted in the post-Maoist official media as the scientist counterpart of the well-known Daqing model worker Wang Jinxi, who was credited with leading Daqing workers to construct one of the most productive oilfields in China. In fact, Mao Zedong's call for the "Chinese industries to learn from Daqing" (*gongye xue Daqing*) brought about a popular movie entitled *Pioneers (Chuangye)*, a rare event during the Cultural Revolution when few dramas, movies or other kinds of performative works were officially produced. In this movie, in keeping with the spirit of the radical 1970s, Zhou Tingshan, inspired by the real life story of Wang Jinxi, must fulfil the difficult task of "reforming" geologist-in-chief Zhang, the "bourgeois intellectual" who despite his patriotism and desire to serve his motherland, underestimates the potential of the oil deposits, and the talent and will-power of his workers. Interestingly, the heroic portrayal of Luo Ming, Liu Ren, and other geologists in Yang Limin's play rectified this distorted history by depicting the geologists' sacrifice as central to the construction of Daqing, and by extension, all oilfields in China.

Geologists from all over the country naturally responded to *Geologists* with enthusiasm upon its performance by Daqing City Theatre to celebrate the National Conference on the Petroleum Industry held in Daqing in 1998.³⁹ Many geologists told Yang Limin that they cried frequently upon hearing the repeated singing of *their* "The Song of Geologists," which had sustained them many years earlier. They were extremely grateful to the playwright for having recorded an entire generation's aspirations, dreams, sacrifices, and life journeys, in a way no other writer or genre had been able to achieve. Some even commented, as I did, that they, too, regarded *Geologists* as a sequel to *The Young Generation* of the 1960s, which had also inspired their own aspirations of living the life of Xiao Jiye and become "good sons and daughters wishing to devote themselves to work in the four corners of the world" (*hao ernü zhi zai xifang*).⁴⁰ In front of the geologists who served both as the inspiration for creating *Geologists* and as its most appreciative audience, Yang Limin felt rewarded for his career that had seen him write 16 plays about the oilfields, including three of his most celebrated plays, *Black Stone (Heise de shitou)*, *Geologists*, and *The Great Wilderness (Da Huangye)*. Although Yang Limin did not intend to write

about “the main melody” (*zhu xuanli*) of socialist China, or to sing praises of the official ideology, Hu Ke, a critic and playwright himself, believed that *Geologists* represents one of the best “main-melody” plays in contemporary China.⁴¹ The play also won numerous national prizes, such as the Cao Yu Drama Prize (*Cao Yu xiju jiang*) and Cultural China Prize (*Wenhua dajiang*) in 1997 for its artistic achievement. Though he intended merely to write about “a few living men and women of flesh and blood that represent the spirit and sorrows of an entire generation,”⁴² critics claimed that Yang Limin revived the socialist-realist tradition of Chinese drama, based on his own passion and his experience of living in the “rich, black soil” of Daqing, a soil that nurtured both a generation of geologists and his art.⁴³ A successful run of 168 performances in the lean years of modern Chinese theatre production earned RMB1.5 million during a “continuing crisis of modern drama” with decreasing audiences and diminishing state financial backing.⁴⁴

Although in terms of national visibility and box office profits, Ouyang Yibing’s *Enjoy Hardships* fell short of *Geologists*, as a children’s play, *Enjoy Hardships* found a warm reception among its intended audience, especially teenagers. Disturbed by the increasing teenage suicide rate, Ouyang wanted to emphasize that youngsters should not fear life’s difficulties. Asked why he chose a geologist’s son, Ouyang replied, “Xiaomei, you are a few years younger than me and perhaps do not remember as well as I do. In my formative years as a teenager, and as a college student, we heard so many enthusiastic lectures given by geologists working in the most remote and difficult parts of China. They inspired us to foster a fearless spirit to overcome hardships in life and give our best to the country and to the people. In 1959, the news of our discovery of Daqing oilfield, and the end of dependence on foreign oil, was as sensational as that of the successful explosion of our first atomic bomb, both real boosters of our patriotic feelings, national pride, and desire to give our all to our motherland. When you heard so many lectures given by Daqing people, you could not but want to write about them, since they represent the noblest and most respected people who persevered in difficult circumstances.”⁴⁵ Through the spirit of “enjoying hardships” as reflected in the life stories of the father and son, Ouyang wanted to tell his young audience that “hardships are the treasures of one’s life, whereas setbacks are turning points in one’s striking for a higher goal” (*Jiannan shi rensheng de caifu, cuozhe shi fendou de qiji*) — lines in the play that audiences seldom failed to respond to during the play’s performance.

In response to my reading of *Enjoy Hardships* as a sequel to *Geologists*, Ouyang Yibing confessed that he had never thought about them in this way, but that it made perfect sense, since his play appeared a little later than *Geologists* and focused on the next generation. That two playwrights simultaneously wrote about the same generation of geologists without consulting each other illustrated a common respect among contemporary artists and writers for this particular group of scientists. In addition, he was also moved by some of the disabled audience members who came up to him in wheelchairs after the play's performance, thanking him for having written a play for them, since Han Muchun, the father, appears on stage in a wheelchair. They interpreted this as celebrating the strong will of disabled people in overcoming obstacles.

In view of the settings of Shanghai and Ningxia in the play, Ouyang Yibing dedicated the play to the people of Shanghai, which in the Mao era was designated to send its residents to Ningxia. From the 1950s movement to "build up the frontier" (*zhibian*), to the 1960s and 1970s movement to send urban youth down to the countryside (*shangshan xiexiang*), college graduates such as Han Huigu's parents left their home city to provide Ningxia with tremendous scientific, technological, and managerial support. After its successful premiere in Shanghai, Ouyang Yibing revised the play to the setting of Beijing for subsequent Beijing performances, and concluded the play with a more open ending with regard to the fate of the protagonists, in order to highlight the vicissitudes of life. With regard to my reading the play's skipping of the Cultural Revolution period as a way of presenting the intellectuals' emotional and spiritual journey in the entire PRC period in a more coherent fashion, Ouyang Yibing believed that time was still not yet ripe to really understand what happened during the Cultural Revolution, let alone to represent it in the most profound and penetrating manner perceived in some of the Soviet masterpieces on World War II. We barely had enough time to ponder over our experience of the Cultural Revolution, before we were already rushed into a new age of "capital accumulation" in contemporary China. Thirty years after the Cultural Revolution, we still need more historical perspectives before we can gain real knowledge and penetrating insights.⁴⁶ What is clear in my interviews with both Ouyang Yibing and Yang Limin, it seems, is that their memories of growing up with the legends of geologists, and of living among them and sharing their songs and sorrows since the 1950s, overpowered any other memories — indeed they motivated the creation of these extraordinary plays depicting the country's brightest and best. Their

memories of the past and perceptions of the present have therefore bestowed upon us some valuable insights into the heritage of Maoist China and the diverse and complex lessons to be drawn from the Cultural Revolution experience.

Notes

1. Shu-mei Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (January 2004), pp. 16–30, p. 21.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 26
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.
4. Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 166.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
6. Chen Yun, *The Young Generation (Nianqing de yidai)*, in vol. 3, edited by Yu Lin and Shen Ling, pp. 355–432, p. 384, of Li Moran et al. (eds.), *Zhongguo huaaju wushi nian ju zuo xuan: 1949.10–1999.10* (An Anthology of Chinese Spoken Drama over Fifty Years: October 1949 – October 1999), 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2000). The play was premiered in 1963 by Teacher's Art Theatre of Shanghai Drama College and the script was first published in *Drama Script (Juben)*, No. 8 (1963), pp. 2–30. The play was revised and published as a separate book in 1964 by Zhongguo xiju chubanshe under the names of Chen Yun, Zhang Lihui, and Xu Jingxian.
7. Chen (Note 6), p. 369.
8. Tang (Note 4), p. 176.
9. Chen (Note 6), p. 407.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 415–16.
11. According to my interview with Yang Limin, *Geologists* was premiered by Daqing City Theatre in 1997 and its performance script was published in *Drama Script* in 1998.
12. Yang Limin, *Geologists (Dizhishi)*, in vol. 8, edited by Huang Weijun, pp. 91–159, p. 96 of Li et al. (eds.) (Note 6). Yang Limin got his inspiration for setting the play close to Beijing Railway Station from a college graduate of 1958, who remarked that from the original housing units for the employees of the former Minister of Geology, one could see the station and its grand clock. This fact was cited as an example of Yang Limin's "delving into life" and constantly getting to know the geologists he eventually described in his play. Yang revised the play 10 times to perfect its structure and characterizations. See Liu Yuqin and Du Yingzi, "Renwu chunqiu: heitudi shang bujuan de geren" (A Writer's Profile: A Tireless Singer from the Black Soil), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 22 July 2000, p. 5.

13. Ibid., p. 98.
14. My interview with Yang Limin, 10 September 2004.
15. Yang (Note 12), pp. 127–28.
16. Ibid., p. 128.
17. Ibid., p. 132.
18. Ethel Lillian Voynich, *The Gadfly* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1897).
19. Yang Mo, *Qingchun zhige* (The Song of Youth) (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1958).
20. According to my interview with Yang Limin, Liu Ren's story was based on a real-life story in the early years of the construction of Daqing oilfield.
21. Yang (Note 12), p. 135.
22. Ibid., p. 137.
23. Ibid., p. 138.
24. Ibid., p. 148.
25. Ibid., p. 151.
26. Ibid., p. 155.
27. Ibid., p. 155.
28. In my interviews with Yang Limin and Ouyang Yibing, they both agreed with my assessment that their plays were in large part a response to a global economy and a need to call back the idealist spirit of the Maoist generation in making personal sacrifices for a collective society.
29. Ouyang Yibing, *Enjoy Hardships* (*Xiangshou jiannan*), in vol. 8, edited by Huang (Note 12), pp. 457–521, p. 473 of Li et al. (eds.) (Note 6). The play was premiered in 1998 in Shanghai by China Charity Foundation Children's Art Theatre and the script had not been previously published until it was collected in the above-cited anthology.
30. Ouyang (Note 29), p. 463.
31. Zhang Xudong, Comments on papers delivered at Panel 60 entitled "Voices, Images, Sites and Bites: Mediating Memories of the Cultural Revolution," organized and chaired by Natascha Gentz, XVth Biennial Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies, Heidelberg, 25–29 August 2004.
32. Xiao Xidong, "Wenge suo chu de shijie he lishi shike" (The World of the Cultural Revolution and Its Historical Moment," in *Sichao: Zhongguo "xinzupai" jiqi yingxiang* (Trend of Thought: China's "New-Leftists" and Their Impact), edited by Gong Yang (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexu chubanshe, 2003), pp. 178–98, p. 197.
33. Liao Gailong and Zhuang Puming (eds.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo biannianshi* (Chronicle of the People's Republic of China) (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 2001), p. 22. Moreover, the Chinese government established the Beijing Institute of Geology (Beijing Dizhi Xueyuan) in 1952, as part of a comprehensive effort to develop national industries. Many universities established or expanded their geology departments to meet

increasing demand. In the early years after the founding of the PRC, for instance, seventeen teachers affiliated to the Department of Geology in Northwest University in Shaanxi province trained thousands of petroleum geologists, who subsequently became pioneers in major oil field construction in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the northeast provinces, the central plain, and along the southeast coast and other parts of China. According to one statistic in the 1980s, 13 geologists-in-chief and 8 directors of the 15 Provincial Geological Bureaus in China were graduates of the Department of Geology at Northwestern University, with 3 academicians from the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

34. According to Yang Shubiao and others, the official number of the significant industry projects in the First Five-year Plan was 156, when it was first announced by the Chinese government. In actuality, however, only 150 projects were initiated. See Yang Shubiao and others, *Dangdai Zhongguo shishi lüeshu* (A Survey of Contemporary Chinese Historical Events) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2003), pp. 226–27.
35. Pang Song and Chen Shu, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jianshi* (A Brief History of the People’s Republic of China) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1999), p. 114.
36. Liao and Zhuang (eds.) (Note 33), p. 140.
37. Xiaobing Tang has traced the metaphor of geologists as “the guerrillas for the period of peaceful construction” to Liu Shaoqi, then President of the PRC; Tang also rightly points out that this metaphor “calls forth a central myth of the lyrical age, namely, that peace is to be waged with the same intensity and devotion as war.” See Tang (Note 4), p. 182. It is interesting to point out that Wen Jiabao, the current Premier of the State Council, graduated from Beijing Institute of Geology with a major in geological structure in 1968; surely he would have read the script or seen the movie adapted from the play of *The Young Generation*. Like Xiao Jiye and Luo Ming, he might have treasured the upbeat lyrics and music of “The Song of Geologists.” In real life, however, he worked his way up as an engineer, an instructor, the head of Gansu Provincial Geological Bureau, and the Vice-minister of Geology and Mineral Resources, before he was promoted to various positions on the CCP’s Central Committee. One wonders what dramatic role would he have played and how would he reflect on his experience as the technician and political instructor of the Geomechanics Survey Team attached to the Gansu Provincial Geological Bureau, and head of its political section from 1968 to 1978 during the Cultural Revolution? How did he balance a demanding career and a family life without having to sacrifice his woman? Nevertheless, the fact that a national leader’s life journey coincides with that of our protagonists illustrates the significance socialist China attached to the profession and the recognition it generously renders to the best and the brightest of this group.

38. My interview with Yang Limin, 10 September 2004.
39. My interview with Yang Limin, 10 September 2004.
40. My interview with Yang Limin, 10 September 2004.
41. For an essay on the main melody movement in theatre, see Claire A. Conceison, "The Main Melody Campaign in Chinese Spoken Drama," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 190–212. Conceison notes: "Metaphorical in usage, the term 'main melody' refers to the part of a musical composition which is the primary theme of the piece and yet exists among other elements in harmony. The analogy implies that Chinese society consists of a cacophony of voices, but the loudest and clearest of these should be the CCP and socialism, just as a piece of music has many components but the most prevalent should be the main melody." (p. 191).
42. My interview with Yang Limin, 10 September 2004.
43. Liu and Du (Note 12).
44. My interview with Yang Limin, 10 September 2004.
45. My interview with Ouyang Yibing, 17 September 2004.
46. My interview with Ouyang Yibing, 17 September 2004.