

**Fifty Years of Staging A Founding Father:
Political Theater, Dramatic History and the Question of Representation**

(A Chapter in *Representing the Past: Essays on the Historiography of Performance*)

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On 1942, Chen Duxiu, a fifty-three year old man in poverty was buried in a lonely mount in a small town in Sichuan. Chen died of poisoning from Chinese herbs with which he had tried to treat his illness, without professional help and much money. By this side was his third wife, twenty years younger, who had followed him through his declining years. Judging from the small group of family members and friends, who donated a piece of land and a coffin for his burial, few people would know that this newly buried man was a founding father of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its first Secretary General from 1921 to 1927, who presided over the first five party congresses. During this period, the CCP grew from a small group of 57 intellectuals and students at its first party congress in 1921 to a major political actor in modern Chinese history. At the time, it was in alliance with the KMT (Kuomintang, established by Sun Yat-sen and later led by Chiang Kai-shek) to wage a nation-wide war against the Japanese army. In 1949, the CCP defeated the KMT and established the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This ordinary burial of an old man seemed insignificant at a time of an extraordinary national drama of resisting Japanese invaders in 1942. Chen Duxiu looms large, however, in the formation of the Chinese Communist revolutionary history both in the public memory and in theatrical representations to define political powers, construct party authorities, and connect a seemingly irrelevant past with the present in national and global contexts. Since the founding of the PRC, numerous publications of party history, textbooks, cinematic, dramatic and literary representations presented Chen Duxiu as a “rightist opportunist” (*Youqing jihui zhuyi zhe*)” in

the tragedy of the “grand revolution of 1927,” in which the CCP played a submissive role in its collaborations with the KMT. He therefore shouldered the blame for the failure of the Republican revolution (*Guomin geming*), the first major setback of the CCP.

This essay traces five “revolutionary epic” performances, which have explored the life stories of Chen Duxiu in plays, films, and a television drama series from 1964 to 2001, and the cultural anxiety in creating various types of villains and heroes as part of political culture. They are highly melodramatic, with stock characters such a villain to pose a threat, and a hero to eliminate the threat. One might argue that socialist China explored the didactic, moralistic, and ideological roles of traditional opera, which contain various types such as “loyal ministers and ardent men of worth,” “banished ministers and orphaned sons,” loyal men who “rebuke treachery and curse slander,” present “filiality and righteousness, incorruptibility, and integrity,” and express “grief and happiness at separation and reunion.”¹ To be sure, almost all these figures are present in our five performance texts, as I will show presently. But how did contemporary audiences of revolutionary epic theater stomach similar didactic and moralistic theater of the by-gone years? What were the cultural and ideological strategies that made the revolutionary epic performances extremely popular, with some even becoming “national treasures of state art”?

I argue that these “morality plays” answered a persistent need to find heroes and villains to embody the values of the revolution, arouse sympathy for the suffering poor, and a passion to sacrifice for the noble cause, qualities which they shared with Western counterparts. Yet unlike some Western melodramas, the stock character of Chen Duxiu embodied shifting, and even oppositional, identities between a villain and a hero that reflected drastically different national sentiments in the past half century. As the rest of the essay examines, Chen Duxiu was first portrayed as an arch villain in the high Mao culture in 1964 and remained as such during the

Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to extol Mao Zedong as the supreme hero. In early post-Mao China, previous villains, such as Liu Shaoqi, the former president of the PRC, was declared as a hero again, but Chen still remained a villain. The post-Mao regime would have rehabilitated Chen, but they needed a scapegoat to stage new heroes, for they could not attack Mao for the disasters and cruelties of the Cultural Revolution. It was not until the economic take-off, capitalization, and globalization in the 1990's that we finally witnessed a transformation of Chen into a complex and powerful figure, brilliant, far-sighted, and rebellious against the foreign interference in the early course of Chinese revolution. Such a discovery of a new hero works in multiple ways. His spirit could continue to inspire the Chinese people to stay on course to socialist China for equality, freedom, and prosperities envisioned by the early revolutionary leaders. It also fanned a deeply rooted Chinese nationalism: whatever went wrong in our party/nation's history, it was all the foreigners' faults. The party could not be wrong. We are all Chinese. By keeping the CCP political figures on the center stage, theatrical performance still matters in contemporary China, where capitalism has replaced socialism, communist idealism has become passé, and foreigners have been revered as successful entrepreneurs, much against the anti-imperialist agendas, with which Chen had inspired the Chinese people to pursue revolution in the early 1920s.

In the larger scheme of things, this essay investigates the problematic relationship of self, subject, agent, state-building, and national others in the production and reception of dramatic culture in contemporary China. It treats Chinese drama as an extended form of political theater, which engages critical issues in memory, commemoration, and contested party history narratives. The examination of the political theater of the revolution and its representations on stage within the four walls of theater space will help us reflect on the wide range of critical issues regarding

cultural performance, gender studies, and the re-thinking of the post-colonial paradigm in the representation of China in the post-cold war and post-socialist era. Dramatic cultural studies, therefore, can serve as an effective ways of understanding the theatrical nature of everyday life, both in the formation of political culture, and in the shaping of the personal experiences of the Chinese people. One would miss an important piece of history, I argue, without understanding the dramatic culture of modern China and a theater history that represents such complex history.

The Arch Villain in *The East is Red*: Revolutionary Epic Theater in Maoist China

One of the most influential representations of Chen Duxiu as a political villain on the twentieth-century Chinese stage can be found in a revolutionary dance and song epic entitled *The East is Red* (*Dongfang hong*), premiered in the Great Hall of the People in the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, on October 2 in 1964, under the direct supervisions of the Chinese state premier Zhou Enlai. No where else in world history, I gather, has one witnessed a similar theatrical event that was personally directed and supervised by a head of state! In fact, in the late evening of October 1, the National Day, Zhou Enlai received thousands of cast members of *The East is Red* in the Great Hall of the People to congratulate their artistic achievements, and to announce that the Chinese military scientists had just successfully carried out the first test on atomic bomb without assistance from any foreign countries. A local stage event thus became intricate part of the state politics and nation building to battle against Western imperialists and socialist bloc brother countries such as the Soviet Union, who had earlier on retrieved scientists from China on the ground of ideological differences in the early 1960s.

The Chinese national politics against the hegemony of the Soviet Union called for solidarities

with other Asian socialist countries such as North Korea, whose own political theater had inspired *The East is Red*. In 1960, Liu Yalou, the general commander of the Chinese Air Force, attended a similar epic entitled “Three Thousand Miles of Motherland” (*Sanqian li jiangshan*) in praise of Kim II Sung’s leadership of the Korean People’s Revolutionary army during his visit to the Korean army forces. Impressed by a cast of 3000 composed of soldier performers and staged in the army’s warehouse, Liu wondered: why couldn’t we Chinese explore popular revolutionary songs during the war to celebrate the wise leadership of our own party and leader? He therefore ordered the theater personnel from the song and dance ensemble attached to his air force (Kongzheng wengong tuan) to go back to the Red Soviet areas in Hunan and Jiangxi provinces to collect Red Army folk songs popular during the revolutionary war period from 1920s on. Three months later, Liu’s troupe presented a successful production of *A Song and Dance Ensemble of Revolutionary History Songs* (*Geming lishi gequ biao yan chang*), which was performed by 300 actors and actresses with much media fanfare in Shanghai and Beijing, where it caught the attention of Zhou Enlai.²

Realizing its extraordinary significance to turn an stage performance into a national celebration of the glorious Party, Zhou suggested producing an even larger scale epic that involved more than 3000 cast members with brilliant performers in singing, dancing, poetry recitation and acting from seventy professional performing troupes all over China. Later attended by Mao Zedong and other domestic and foreign leaders during the same national holiday season, and advertised as a major event to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1964, *The East is Red* was made into a film in 1965 to celebrate the sixteenth anniversary of the young republic. Most importantly, it was now available to reach millions of Chinese people without access to professional theater, especially in the vast and

remote rural areas.

The publications of several books and photo albums of *The East is Red* expanded these theatrical and cinematic spectacles into more local productions. From May 1965 to March 1966, for example, the Guangdong Province production of *The East is Red* gathered a cast of 1,300—from both professional and amateur performers—and staged 200 performances attended by 850,000 audience members. The process of rehearsing this epic indeed became a “party training school,” where the cast studied Chairman Mao’s seminal works and revolutionary histories in order to remold their outlooks, improve cooperative spirits, which enabled them to succeed in this collective production under challenging circumstances.³ Such everyday-life political performances were further dramatized in a book on the Guangzhou performance of *The East is Red*. In the audience seats, the book claimed, revolutionary war veterans re-lived their experiences through the relevant scenes in *East is Red*. A clerk from Argentina reported that, even though he had difficulties supporting his own family with his paychecks, he earned enough money as an actor to fulfill his long-harbored wish to visit “the great new China”; the revolutionary epic he attended in Guangzhou was not only “one of the best dance productions in the entire world,” but also provided with him a powerful lesson on the Chinese people’s glorious history and their great leader Chairman Mao.⁴ A Chinese maid from Malaysia, on the other hand, compared the miserable life of a Chinese peasant girl on sale to strangers in the first act of *The East is Red* to her own childhood experience, when her parents, out of poverty, had no choice but to sell her overseas; having experienced “the bitter past of the three dynasties—the Qing court, the Republican era, and the PRC new society”—the maid was quoted as having specially appreciated the new and happy life of contemporary China.⁵

A closer reading of the text and performance of *The East is Red* surely demonstrate how the

imaginary accounts of revolutionary history blended the past with the present, and manipulated historical “records” with ahistorical theater space. As an early attempt to construct a Mao cult, which reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution in 1966, *The East is Red* begins with a prologue entitled “Sunflower turning toward the sun,” in which seventy female dancers in long, blue silk dresses waved silk sunflower props to the musical tune of *The East is Red*: “The East is red/The sun has risen/ Mao Zedong has appeared in China/He is devoted to the people’s happiness for the Chinese people/He is the people’s great savior.” With grace and tenderness, they walked towards the radiant rising sun from the ocean, which was projected on the rear stage screen, symbolizing “the vivid image of sunflowers growing towards the sun while the masses follows the leadership of the CCP.”⁶

To elaborate the significance of the “rising sun” image of Mao, the subsequent six scenes highlighted the main episodes in the grand drama of the Chinese revolutionary history, all to present Mao as the indispensable leader. In Scene One entitled “Dawn in the East,” a narrator reminded its audiences “living in the magnificent era of Mao” never to forget how the poor people had suffered before liberation. With the projected image of an American battleship anchored in Shanghai harbor at the backdrop, the scene presented poor dock workers struggling with foreigners and their Chinese agents, who have lorded over the Chinese people in the “dark, old China.”⁷ The next song, entitled “The October Wind Comes from the North,” followed the narrator’s celebration of the Russian October Revolutions of 1917, “which spread Marxism and Leninism to China.” Whereas the May Fourth movement of 1919 “held the banner of anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist agenda and helped spread the Communist idealism, the great Chinese Communist Party came into being in 1921,” the narrator declared. Thanks to “Comrade Mao Zedong, who had “put the theories of Marxism and Leninism into the practice of Chinese

revolutionary experience,” the “brilliant truth finally lit up the road of the Chinese revolution.”⁸

Scene Two, entitled “The Spark that Sets the Prairie Afire” (*Xing huo lian yuan*), staged the sudden, tragic split between the KMT and the CCP, when the KMT “massacred” eight thousand workers, CCP members, and their sympathizers in Shanghai, on April 12, 1927. The narrator explained that “thanks to Chen Duxiu’s defeatist policies” toward the KMT, “the grand revolution failed.” To drive home the dire consequences of Chen’s mistakes, in the next and the most memorable scene on the PRC stage, revolutionary martyrs, now in chains, marched side by side, tragically and fearlessly, toward the execution ground, singing the “Internationale,” convinced that their deaths would awaken millions to follow their Communist cause. This famous scene has made its theme song, “The Song at the Execution Ground (*Jiuyi ge*),” extremely popular among the PRC audiences. Its first line, “Marching in the Long Street with Chains, I bid farewell to my fellow countrymen,” was frequently repeated in the mass performances of the period, and even re-enacted on stage by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, when the Red Guards performed their own revolutionary epic, entitled *The Militant Songs of the Red Guard* (*Hong weibing zhange*.)” In this epic, the Red Guards staged their own “Long March” toward the victory of defending Mao’s revolutionary lines, once again in chains, against the counter-revolutionary lines of Liu Shaoqi, the former president of the PRC. As the contemporary counterpart of Chen Duxiu, Liu Shaoqi was now denounced as the new enemy of the people, who had attempted to sabotage Mao’s “revolutionary lines.” As Liu Shaoqi died in prison, alone and without medical attention to his poor health, Chen Duxiu’s grave was destroyed by the Red Guards, with his verdict as the first opportunist in the party’s history frequently evoked in the Red Guard treatises and in the official publications to further prove Mao as the only correct leader, who had fought vigorously against all the opportunists and renegades.

Whereas this labeling of Chen Duxiu as the author of a national tragedy was not uncommon in the historical and literary representations, the lasting impact of *East is Red* drove home the image of Chen as a “rightist opportunist.” The contrast between Mao as the savior and Chen as the traitor was further developed in the next four scenes of *The East is Red*, which dramatized Mao Zedong’s leadership in the Autumn peasant uprisings to establish “the first Soviet basis” in the Jinggang Mountains in 1927, the Long March to break away from the KMT’s elimination campaigns (1935 to 1936), the anti-Japanese war period (1937-1945), and the civil war with the KMT (1945-1949). All these lead to the climatic festivity to celebrate the founding of the PRC by colorfully-dressed school children and dancers and singers from multi-ethnic backgrounds singing the “Internationale,” to be joined by the enthusiastic audiences.

The producers and theater historians insisted that the greatest appeal of *East is Red* resided in its faithful representations of modern Chinese history, but one glaring distortion of a key episode can be found in the scene entitled “Dawn in the East.” When the poetic narrator announced the founding of the CCP in 1921 under the influence of the October Revolution, the heads of Marx and Lenin were projected into the huge red background to the left of the back stage, together with two huge red flags, one with the head of Mao Zedong, and the other with the CCP party symbol of a hammer and a sickle, projected to the right side of the back stage. This single screen fundamentally “rewrote” modern Chinese revolutionary history. It erased the contributions of Chen Duxiu, who, together with Li Dazhao, co-founded the CCP, with the help of the Soviet agent sent by the Third Communist International (Comintern). Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, not Mao, should have paired the images of Marx and Lenin on the backdrop. As self-declared student of Chen and Li, Mao was one of the 11 members of the CCP present at the first party congress, but by no means its head. Seen in this light, *The East is Red* became a political theater

to construct stories of origins and teleology that had a tremendous impact on the 1960s China. It could be seen as a prologue to the dramatic events of the political theater of the Cultural Revolution, where the Mao cult performed in *The East is Red* became an essential part of everyday life from 1966 to 1976.

Still A Villain when Others were Not: Chen Duxiu in Early Post-Mao Revolutionary Hero Plays in the 1980s

If *The East is Red* represents an unfair representation of Chen in the first seventeen years of the PRC (1949-1966) and during the ensuing ten years of the Great Chinese Cultural Revolutionary period (1966-1976), Chen Duxiu should have enjoyed a “make-over” in early post-Cultural-Revolutionary China, when Mao’s absolute power was challenged and his political enemies such as Liu Shaoqi were rehabilitated in party narratives and theatrical re-presentations. But it did not happen. Chen remained a villain in the booming spoken drama in early post-Mao China. As I discussed elsewhere, an important part of the political campaign to restore the Chinese revolutionary leaders’ rightful places in history was indeed staged within the four walls of the theater, which witnessed a flourishing genre known as “revolutionary history plays.” After the 1976 arrest of the Gang of Four, revolutionary history plays attracted many people to theater, where audiences watched the downfall of new traitors on stage while celebrating the nation’s “second liberation” from the Gang of Four. The 1978 play *Newspaper Boys (Baotong)* depicted Zhou Enlai’s courage and wisdom in leading the CCP activities in Chongqing during the war, when he carried out the second CCP-KMT alliance to lead the national war against the Japanese invaders. *Eastward March (Dong jing, Dong jing!)*, premiered in 1978 and *Chen Yi Leaves the Mountain (Chen Yi chu shan)* premiered in 1979, dramatized the war legends surrounding the

generals of He Long and Chen Yi, both of whom were persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution.

Unfortunately, the redemption of tortured leaders of the CCP required the makings of more villains. In order to represent Zhou Enlai, He Long, and others as the courageous leaders, Chen Duxiu appeared on stage as a real historical figure in post-Mao plays and films, as compared with the more abstract mentioning of Chen in *The East is Red*, in order to contrast sharply with the political-correctness of the others. Depicted as an intimidated traitor without vision and wisdom, Chen had caused the setbacks of the revolutionary course and finally aroused those great leaders such as Zhou, He, and others to openly rebel against his directives before they could win major battles in the revolutionary warfare.

The 1981 play *A Generation of Heroes (Yi dai ying hao)* is a case in point. Set from the winter of 1926 to August 1, 1927, the play reenacted a crucial period of the Chinese communist revolution, with 34 historical characters such as Chen Duxiu, Zhang Guotao, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, He Long, Ye Ting, Song Qingling (wife of Sun Yat-sen), Chiang Kai-shek (the Commissar of the Northern Expedition Army), Song Meiling (Chiang's wife and Song Qingling's younger sister). Following the chronology of historical events, Act One staged Zhou Enlai's successful efforts in leading the Shanghai workers uprising in March 1927 to defeat the warlords in anticipation of the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition armies in Shanghai.

The play dramatized how, while greeting the jubilant workers--who celebrated their winning of political power—with promises and support, Chiang Kai-Shek forced the workers' militia to surrender their weapons and disperse their troops, massacred thousands of workers, CCP members and sympathizers, and forced the CCP into the underground as his arch enemy. To emphasize the relevance of the Chinese revolution in historical contexts, the play dramatized a

father-son relationship: as the leader of Shanghai workers' uprising, the father passionately believed in the CCP's call to fight for workers' equality and happiness by establishing the first democratic government of the masses, an appealing ideal for the poverty-stricken working class without any political representation. After the father's execution by the KMT, the son became an even more determined follower of the CCP to revenge for his own father and class. The son now left behind his newly widowed mother, to follow Zhou Enlai to their next battle against the KMT's oppressive regime.

After having driven home the dire consequences of this setback both on personal and national levels, a family romance unfolds. At the end of Act One, Deng Yinchao, Zhou Enlai's wife, bids farewell to Zhou upon his departure from Shanghai, which was now ruled by the "white terror" of the KMT; although she had just lost their first child at birth, she is much more concerned with the future cause of the CCP. "Have you considered that the CCP central committee might have made serious mistakes?" she asked Zhou. Zhou has already written to Chen Duxiu to request a reversal of his policies of relying heavily on the KMT to carry out the revolution. We must declare war on Chiang's reactionary troops and establish our own armies to fight against imperialists, warlords and other reactionary forces, Zhou declared.⁹

Set in the city of Wuhan in front of the workers' militia's headquarter in June of 1927, Act Two begins with political and military leaders such as Chen Yi mingled with actors and actresses who put on a political play to comment on the contemporary state affairs (*huobao ju*) entitled *Chiang Kai-shek, the Disciple of Yuan Shi-kai (Yuan Shikai de mentu Jiang Jieshi)*. Following a public speech delivered by Yun Daiying, the general instructor of the Central Military and Political Academy—another act of public theater—the play dramatized Chiang Kai-shek as a traitor of the Chinese people like Yuan Shikai, who farcically restored the imperial system and

crowned himself as the emperor in 1915. Yuan was forced to abdicate in disgrace in 1916 and died shortly afterwards.

Joined in this political theater were other political and literary actors such as the poet Guo Moruo, whose political treatise entitled “Please Look at the Chiang Kai-shek of Today” (*Qing kan jinri zhi Jiang Jieshi*) was being distributed to the Wuhai citizens to expose Chiang and to raise fund for the revolutionary army to wage war against him. Responding to the fans of his poems such as “The Goddess” (*Nushen*) in praise of nature, love, and the rebellion against the Confucian society, Guo Moruo rejected his call for “the age of the goddess” in order to herald “the era of revolution,” which should be characterized by “fire and sword to smash the old world, as so depicted in the works of Karl Marx.”¹⁰ Actors, literary figures, political activists and military leaders gathered in Wuhan to appeal to Wang Jingwei, the left-wing KMT leader, who had led anti-Chiang factions and pledged to ally with the CCP against the new and old warlords. They commented on Chen Duxiu’s lack of courage to stand up against Chiang Kai-shek and his submissive attitude toward Wang Jingwei, and warned that Chen placed too much trust in Wang, in the same way he had trusted Chiang. Ye Ting depicted Chen, his CCP general secretary, as “not even having the courage of a small child” since even children had already joined the workers and peasants militia to fight against Chiang.¹¹

The rest of Act Two staged the co-appearance of Chen Duxiu and Wang Jingwei to pledge their united front to carry out war against Chiang “under the leadership of Comrade Wang Jingwei” and his left-wing KMT supporters; this approach, Chen insists, is the only “correct way to save the revolution.” Ironically, even on the eve of Wang Jingwei’s move to eliminate CCP members from the KMT in the city of Wuhan, as Chiang had acted earlier in Shanghai, Chen Duxiu still promised Wang to disperse the worker’s militia and other mass organizations as a last

effort to avoid a split with KMT's left-wing faction, against the stern warnings of Zhou Enlai, He Long, Chen Geng and others. Chen Duxiu even boasted about his skills in successfully leading the past five party congresses despite criticisms from Qu Qiubai and Mao Zedong. "I would rather lose everything, even all the workers and peasants, than losing Wang Jingwei in order to maintain the current cooperation with the KMT." "Those who are against my policies are indeed against the policies set by the Comitern, which had decided on this course of action with me," Chen declared on stage, almost in the same stubborn spirit as the tragic and lonely King Lear.¹² It is here that the dramatic character of Chen Duxiu acted as a "historian," who recreated Chen as a despot, against his reputation as a great liberal, who had heralded the May Fourth movement in search for science and democracy. The subsequent two acts dramatized Chen as an irrational choice of the party leader, who had to be purged before Zhou Enlai, He Long, and Ye Ting could lead to success the 1927 military uprising in Nanchang, thus creating the first people's army under the CCP leadership.

Demonstrating the popularity of Zhou Enlai, the 1981 film *Nanchang Uprising* (*Nanchang qiyi*), based on a stage play entitled *The Storm of August First* (*Bayi fengbao*), became more popular thanks to the film's relatively easier access for more audiences than stage performance. *Nanchang Uprising* also benefited from the fame of its director Tang Xiaodan, who had made well-received feature movies on military battles before the Cultural Revolution. Chen Duxiu appeared only briefly in *Nanchang Uprising* as an antagonist to build up Zhou Enlai's credentials as the protagonist: Chen refuted Zhou's request to ask Wang Jingwei to fulfill his promise in providing 2,000 guns for the worker's militia on the ground that he did not want to provoke Wang. To persuade Wang to declare war on Chiang Kai-shek, Chen even suggested dismissing workers' militia and peasant movement against the rich landlords in rural China, whose interests

the KMT represented. Chen accused, in his second meeting with Zhou, Chinese peasants as being hooligans, mobs, and gangsters without any revolutionary qualifications, implying his firm belief in the Soviet experience that only a mature proletarian working class could be the main force of Communist movement.

Unlike *A Generation of Heroes*, with its national spectacles with numerous political and literary figures, *Nanchang Uprising* focused on a central issue in the Chinese revolution: with a weak working class in the semi-feudalist China, could the peasants become the main force of the “Chinese proletariat revolution,” against the teachings of Lenin and the experience of the Soviet socialist revolution? The film staged personal romances to further authenticate the peasants as the backbone of the Chinese revolution. Zhou Enlai, for instance, befriended a group of poor peasants from Hunan, who told him that the real leaders in the rural peasant movements were poor peasants such as themselves, not gangsters and thugs, as Chen Duxiu had alleged. Impressed by their passion for the proletarian revolution, Zhou Enlai encouraged them to join He Long’s division to fight for the collective interests of the peasants and workers. The rest of the movie focused on two parallel stories: Zhou’s efforts to guide and cooperate with He Long, Ye Jianying, and Liu Bocheng to organize the Nanchang uprising, which “fired the first shot against the KMT reactionary troops,” and subsequently became an important part of “the Chinese worker and peasant revolutionary army,” later known as the “red army.” This master narrative of the origin of the revolutionary army, moreover, calls for the dramatic presentations of two couple’s path to martyrdom. After a narrow escape from the massacre of the peasant leaders in Hunan province by the reactionary troops, a poor peasant wife joined him in He Long’s revolutionary army, fought side by side with her husband in the Nanchang uprising, only to lose him in the battlefields before victory was won. She had worked as a sympathetic maid for the

daughter of a rich landlord, who had run away from her patriarchal home to follow the KMT's revolutionary call. In the last few minutes of the fierce battle to seize the city of Nanchang, she had no choice but to gun down her former "Miss"—now fighting on the enemy side--to avenge for her husband's death, therefore dramatically reversing their previous master/servant relationship. Her transformation into a liberated, brave woman only after the awakening of her class consciousness by the CCP, ironically complicated gender/class relationships. As a maid, she was intrigued by her Miss's spirited rebellion against her own father's attempt to marry her off to a stranger, and even admired her feminist stance, as seen in an earlier scene where the maid helped her Miss to skip the study session of the "four classics" imposed by her Confucian tutor. When her role turned ceremonial in killing her Miss as class revenge, the newly liberated maid destroyed a female bondage. The rise of an enlightened woman from a lower social class came at the expense of the fall of another modern woman from a higher social class, therefore negating any gains achieved in gender equality. As we shall see, almost all revolutionary historical dramas, film, and television plays downplayed gender equality in praise of famous men.

Creating the New World: Party Literature, Revised History and the Emergence of a New Hero in the 1990s

It was not until 1991 that the first rehabilitation of the image of Chen Duxiu appeared in the film entitled *Creating the New World (Kai tian pi di)* in observation of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the CCP. In the ten years from 1981 to 1991, Chinese political, intellectual, literary, and artistic landscape underwent tremendous changes through post-Mao enlightenment and calls for more political pluralism, which challenged the dogmatic socialist legacy, especially the previously untouchable "CCP party narrative" (*dangshi*). In 1985, for instance, the CCP

official journal *Party History Newsletter* (*Dangshi tongxin*) published an essay, “On evaluating Chen Duxiu’s Life” (*Guanyu Chen Duxiu yisheng de pingjia*), which, for the first time in modern Chinese history, eliminated the previous four verdicts of Chen: “a Japanese collaborator,” “an opportunist when joining the revolution” (*touji geming*), “usurper of the position of the CCP Party General Secretary,” and “a KMT spy.” Although the essay retained the other familiar accusations of Chen as “a representative figure of the rightists,” “a defeatist,” and a “Trotskyist who had betrayed Marxism and Leninism”—which all would be dismissed later--this essay articulated a new official view of Chen’s life story by the collective wisdom of the Research Office of the CCP history under the jurisdiction of the CCP central committee (*Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiu shi*).¹³

This change in the appraisal of Chen, however, was not recorded without generating another event of political theater in subsequent years. In a 2001 memorial essay to celebrate the life achievements of Hu Yaobang, the first Party General Secretary in the new era of China’s reform of the 1980s, party historians recounted how Hu was not satisfied with the first draft of the above-mentioned essay. Hu called a meeting of the historians involved in drafting this essay and asked them to render a more rounded re-evaluation of Chen Duxiu’s achievements as the brilliant leader and key player of the “new cultural movement,” the May Fourth movement, and the founding of the CCP. The mistakes of the CCP in its early years, Hu argued, had more to do with the overpowering presence of the KMT, the impractical leadership of the Comintern from afar without understanding the Chinese reality, and the inexperience of the CCP as a budding political party than Chen’s leadership role. Hu’s guidance in the revision and publication of this essay paved the way for the subsequent reassessment of Chen more in line with history and truth.¹⁴ Hu’s leadership in rehabilitating hundreds of thousands of wrong verdicts, in speeding

up economic and political reform, and in supporting the intellectuals' demands for freedom of expression finally cost his resignation from his top position in 1987 and his sudden death, which triggered the 1989 student demonstration to protest the unfair treatment of him. As a leader presiding over the party's affairs in the first six years of the reform era from 1981 to 1987, Hu's career path ironically resembled Chen's role in the first seven years of the CCP's revolutionary activities in crucial historical moments. More strikingly, Hu's advocacy for democracy—both within and outside the party system--reminds one of Chen's call for democracy in the 1910s and 1920s, with the realization that seventy years later it only led to another unfair treatment of a party chief, whose rightful position in history, might be restored in the future by another man with an comparable historical insight and daring spirit.

The impact of the Hu-supervised article on Chen Duxiu, included the founding of Chen Duxiu Research Association (Chen Duxiu Yanjiu Xuehui) in 1989 and the numerous publications of essays, biographies, chronologies, critical studies, and memoirs of Chen's life and career in the 1990s. All these indicated the interest in Chen's rehabilitation as a political discourse to challenge the official narrative of the CCP's history, and as a new story for the entertainment industries and book and video market. Above all, re-dramatizing the life story of Chen helped boost the declining image of the Chinese regime, which had dressed up as both inheritor of the CCP's legacy to continue to represent the broad interests of the masses, and as a new generation of leaders radically different from their Maoist predecessors, who had wrongly accused former leaders to enhance themselves.

Unlike the theatrical representation of Chen Duxiu as an opportunist and traitor presented in *The East is Red, A Generation of Heroes*, and the *Nanchang Uprising, Creating the New World*, focuses on Chen's dramatic activities as a martyr, willing to die for the cause. Together with

Chen, numerous historical figures were staged to outline the difficult beginning years before and after the founding of the CCP and the personal sacrifices for their beliefs, in the same spirit as so expressed in the film's title phrase "*Kai tian pi di*," with a clear reference to the Chinese creation myth about the beginning of the universe. The myth narrates how the world came into being after Pan Gu separated earth from heaven, with his huge personal sacrifice, as he had no choice but to grow one yard per day for 18,000 years to be as tall as the sky so as to prevent it from collapsing. Upon his death from exhaustion after the heaven and the earth had become separated, his body grew to be integral part of the universe to benefit generations to come: his left eye turned into the sun; his right eye, the moon; his breaths, the winds and the clouds; his last utterance, the thunder; his hairs and beard, the stars; his head, arms and legs, the mountains and the four corners of the world; his blood, rivers and lakes; his muscles, fertile lands; his teeth and bones, gold, silver, copper, iron, jade and diamond deposits; and his sweat into rain and dew.

Despite the mythical differences between Pan Gu and the founding fathers of the CCP, *Creating the New World* is quintessentially a story of the beginning, or the new beginning to transform the old, dark universe into a brand new world according to the Communist ideal without countless sacrifices. In a blow-by-blow historical representation in a strictly chronological order, the film traced the very beginning of the revolutionary sentiments triggered by the nation-wide protest against the Shandong settlement in the 1919 Versailles conference.¹⁵ Among numerous historical figures in the film, Chen Duxiu emerged as a visionary and dynamic leader, who had supported the Beijing University students in the May Fourth movement, edited the seminal intellectual journal entitled *The New Youth*, and fought fearlessly against the warlord authorities, who had imprisoned him for anti-government activities. The subsequent nation-wide "rescuing-Chen" movement testified Chen's reputation as a national leader, as shown in the

efforts to free him on the part of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the President of the KMT. It was also during his 98-days imprisonment that Chen finally converted to Marxism and Leninism: he missed the most his close friend Li Dazhao, who had advocated to him the theories of Communist and socialist revolution already realized in the Soviet Union. After his release, Chen could not wait to inform Li Dazhao of his new faith in Marxism. In these scenes, the film character Chen Duxiu thoroughly enjoyed his role as an orator, speaking eloquently in front of audiences, either to the crowd outside the prison, or in the factories to the oppressed workers in the familiar image of Lenin addressing his workers and soldiers in the Soviet film *Lenin in October*, popular among 1960s and 1970s Chinese audiences. Even when he was supposed to be on the sidewalk to avoid persecution, he chose theater as his stage to perform his political drama: based on the real-life event, the film re-presented Chen's daring act in the upstairs balcony of a theater located in the New World Entertainment Center in Beijing to circulate his pamphlets against the government, which had caused his arrest in the first place.

Most dramatically and almost unimaginably in the past, the movie presented Mao Zedong as a faithful student and admirer of Chen Duxiu's revolutionary career. As the editor-in-chief of *The Xiang River Review* (*Xiangjiang pinglun*) in Changsha city in Hunan province, Mao protested the Beijing government's imprisonment of Chen Duxiu in 1919. "He is a brilliant and shining star in the cycles of the intellectuals"; "I wish a long, long life to the magnificent spirit of Mr. Chen!" (Chen Jun wan sui) Mao declared, in sharp contrast to the familiar slogan of "long live Chairman Mao" popular in heyday of Mao's regime. In his confrontation with a policeman, who has just beaten up a young man who was reading Mao's newspaper article about Chen's arrest, the dramatic character of Mao in *Creating the New World* argued: "there is nothing wrong for my newspaper to print this statement." "Rescuing Chen Duxiu means rescuing China!"

Another episode in *Greating the New World* presents Mao as a kind elementary school teacher instructing his pupils in Changsha: “It is Mr. Chen who has introduced to us Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. These two gentlemen are really great teachers.” Mao’s teaching to his elementary students about Chen as the master teacher was indeed shocking, given the numerous movies and plays portraying Mao himself as the great teacher. It was also refreshing to watch the episode which depicted Mao’s efforts to lead a delegation from Hunan province to petition to the central government in Beijing to fire Zhang Jingrao, the warlord and the head of Hunan province. He was enlightened by Li Dazhao, who told him that the expulsion of one warlord could not save Hunan, nor China as a whole, short of introducing the Soviet socialist model as the only way out, a phrase previously reserved for Mao’s wisdom. In this film, however, Mao accepted Li’s teaching after having compared Marxism with other approaches such as Bakunin’s anarchism and syndicalism. In another episode, Chen provided Mao with his galley proofs of the first complete Chinese translation of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* by the talented Chen Wangdao. Chen Duxiu told Mao that at the same young age as Mao, Chen he had also experimented with assassination of the Empress Dowager, studied abroad, edited newspapers, and served in prison until he finally discovered Marxism after seventeen years of searching for “truth.” After having read Chen’s copy of *Communist Manifesto* overnight, Mao was so excited that he was determined to bring Marxism to Hunan; he vowed to follow Chen’s teaching that only through class war could the laboring people seize the political power from the bourgeois. By placing Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu squarely above Mao as the real pioneers introducing socialism to early twentieth-century China, the film altered the powerful image of Mao, in *The East is Red*, as the sole pioneer, on par with Marx and Lenin.

Similar to the dramatic structure of *A Generation of Heroes* and *Nanchang Uprising*, however, *Creating the New World* inevitably requires melodramas to foreground selfhood, trauma, sentiments, and emotions. The movie depicts Chen Duxiu as a strict but loving father of two sons, who visited him in prison, pursued studies in France and were later elected members of the CCP central committee, and subsequently heads of the CCP provincial committees. Chen's two sons were murdered by the KMT in 1927 and 1928 after his exclusion from the CCP's leader. Chen's loss was particularly tragic since his two sons did not grow up with him, nor did they have a normal family life, after Chen had eloped with the younger sister of his wife (the mother of his two sons) as a protest against his first arranged marriage. The movie depicted how Chen's second wife—the two sons' aunt—tried to take care of her nephews despite Chen's wish to let his sons lead a challenging life to be tempered into staunch revolutionaries. The martyrdom of his two sons reminded the audiences in 1990s China that, despite the accusation of Chen as a traitor to the party, he had indeed endured great sacrifices in his own family, similar to Mao's loss of six family members for the revolutionary cause. Both Chen and Mao now resembled Pan Gu, the ancient hero in the creation myth, with their personal sacrifices.

No wonder *Creating the New World* caused quite a stir in China and in Hong Kong, where, among other things, Chen Duxiu's surviving son was reportedly excited by the very first positive account of his father in the Chinese media. Chinese internet also promoted the great performance skills of Shao Honglai, who had played the roles of Chen Duxiu in both *Nanchang Uprising* and in *Creating the New World*; Shao claimed that in order to faithfully re-create Chen in the second film, he had ploughed through historical archives to understand and portray a "real" Chen, a profound thinker, a masculine, courageous, and upright man with literary talents and real emotions.¹⁶ For obvious reasons, Shao did not mention his motivation and preparation

for acting Chen in the first movie in unfavorable light. Sentimental dramatic genres with their multiple perspectives from producing and receiving ends in performance art, therefore, reinforced the values of Chen much more powerfully than political treatises published in the party literature, which has in recent years deemed as increasingly irrelevant to the ordinary readers in contemporary China.

Greeting the New World, however, was not the only piece featuring Chen Duxiu in the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the CCP in 1991. *Li Dazhao*, a historical epic drama premiered in the same year in Beijing, complemented the new image of Chen with a different angle. Based on a lengthy biographical fiction by Wang Chaozhu, Yao Yuan, the playwright, adapted a symbolist techniques to outline the life stories of Li Dazhao from 1915, where he met Chen Duxiu for the first time in Japan, to 1927 in Beijing, at the execution ground of the warlord right before his martyrdom. It covered chronological events such as Li and Chen's teaching careers in Peking University, their leadership in founding the CCP, the rise and fall of the CCP-KMT collaboration, the worker's strike of 1927, and the personal friends of Li Dazhao, some of whom had parted with him, or even became his persecutor.

In the process of representing Li Dazhao's revolutionary life, the play inevitably contrasted Li with Chen, with the former at times looking up to Chen, at other moments, Li appears as nobler than Chen. Scene 8, for instance, staged Chen's imprisonment in Beijing at the center stage, but surrounded by his admiring colleagues carrying out imaginary dialogues with him from afar. Among them were Hu Shi, the liberal scholar who resented Chen's arrest, but could not give up his debate with Chen on his "misleading" orientations to lead the young people into politics rather than academic pursuits; Zhang Shizhao, the famous lawyer, who testified to Chen's talents,

spirit, and personality in legal proceedings to obtain his release; Mao Zedong, who recited his own essay to protest Chen's arrest, Cai Yuanpei, the president of Peking University, who had hoped for a "good government" to solve China's problem without violence or revolution; and Li Dazhao, who advised Chen that the proper name of their new party should not be "Socialist Party," but "Communist Party." Here in the limited space of a prison cell, the audiences witnessed the dramatic interactions between Chen and the imagined spectators of his imprisonment; as interlopers, supporters, or even opponents of his beliefs, they presented the odyssey of Chen through personal convictions expressed in real speeches and articles in Chen's defense from historical archives.

No revolutionary epic could attract contemporary Chinese audiences without romances and personal traumas, especially in the private lives of former revolutionary leaders. In *Li Dazhao*, the love story between Li and his illiterate wife through arranged marriage takes an interesting and even ironic tone. Although a modern-spirited man opposed to Confucian doctrines, Li Dazhao was admired for his adherence to the traditional values of taking care of his wife although he had never fallen in love with her. His wife's devotion to him could indeed be seen as the Confucian decree of obeying one's husband as the highest virtue of woman. Their imagined farewell dialogue in the last scene before Li's execution even rehearsed on stage the happiness the arranged marriage had brought them: upon Li's apology for having failed his duty as a husband and father, his wife thanked him nonetheless for not having looked down upon her as an unworthy wife and pledged to become a younger woman for him in the next life when they meet again. After Li recalled that, arranged by his father, he married her when he was 10 years old, and she 16, and that she had suffered a lot after bonding her fate with "a little boy," his wife tearfully blamed herself for having failed to take better care of him. She wished she could have

known how to read and write to please him as a more appropriate wife, and she would rather die in his place to win his freedom and happiness.

Such Confucian chastity and virtue from a founding father of the CCP, throughout the play, was intriguingly placed next to the modern romance of the first female student ever admitted into Peking University, who had followed a revolutionary career under the inspiration and guidance of Li Dazhao. She and her husband Zhao Erkang, a CCP leader of the worker's strike in 1927 (a real historical figure), died as martyrs for the CCP cause. Here we witness another irony: Zhao Erkang's wife, a quintessential "new woman" in the spirit of the May Fourth movement, followed her husband's footsteps and sacrificed herself, without being able to take care of her infant and pursue happiness as a free woman. The melodramatic stories of two couples—the Li's and the Zhao's—coming from different social and educational backgrounds and two generations apart, testified the contradictory claim to freedom and happiness by the traditional and the "new" culture, which affected the lives of revolutionary leaders and their followers. This self-reflection was expressed at the ending, when Chen Duxiu declared that although people talked about "Chen famous in the South and Li famous in the North" (*nan Chen bei Li*), "south Chen" amounts to nothing when compared with "north Li", "the North Star of the universe"! Chen's remarks, however, had to be capped with Mao Zedong's final words that praised Li as "the seed-spreader of Marxism," "whose brilliant light will guide the future journey of the CCP."¹⁷

The portrayal of Li Dazhao's loyalty to an illiterate wife implicitly criticized Chen's unstable relationships with four women, which was teased out by Yao Yuan, the playwright. Yao claimed that while writing this play he was particularly touched by Li's sacrificing spirit in his personal life. Li held high anti-Confucian and anti-feudalist banners while still providing love and dedication to his "child wife" from an arranged marriage. Chen Duxiu paled by comparison; it

was thus Li's moral strength, rather than his "ism," Yao asserted, that had touched him profoundly in writing the play.¹⁸

Situated in this context, one might appreciate a different perspective of Chen's personal life as presented in Sha Yexin's 2001 play *Lucky Encounter with Mr. Cai (Xing yu Cai Xiansheng)*. As a biography of Cai Yuanpei, the president of Peking University, Sha's play begins with the events from January of 1917, upon Cai's arrival in the university as its new president, to a few months later after the May Fourth student demonstration, when Cai struggled to win the release of his students imprisoned by the warlord government. Cai was portrayed as an enlightened and egalitarian leader, who attempted to reform Peking University into a first-rate campus with strict academic standards while at the same breath promoting night schools for the laboring people. In Act One, Cai addressed the faculty and students. After announcing his new principles of academic freedom to allow oppositional schools of thought, and of his determination to run the university without bureaucratic and political interferences (*xiaozhang zhi*), Cai introduced Chen Duxiu to stage as "General in Chief in the ideological campaign against the traditional culture," "the spiritual leader of the young people," and "the editor in chief of the *New Youth* journal," which Cai had encouraged Chen to move from Shanghai to Peking University to lure him to teach in Peking University.

When invited onto the center stage in the public forum with enthusiastic applause from the audiences, however, Chen Duxiu announced that he would stay in his position as the humanities' head for only three months. First, his ambition did not reside in the teaching profession of higher education, but in advocating revolution to benefit the society. Second, his rebellious and radical spirit might clash too often with the conservatives' agenda to work effectively as an administrator. Third, his "personal virtue (*side*)" was not up to the standards upheld by President

Cai,” who had just announced the banning of prostitution, gambling, and opium-smoking among faculty and students. Chen therefore highly recommended Hu Shi, now still completing his Ph.D. in Cornell University in America, to take over his duties as the humanities’ head upon his return, a radically unusual acknowledgment of Hu Shi on stage, who had so far been characterized in other films and plays as Chen’s deadly opponent. Although Chen had been criticized for alleged visits to brothels, Fu Sinian, a student leader in the May Fourth movement, still jumped up to the stage to welcome Chen as his admired teacher.¹⁹ In *Lucky Encounter with Mr. Cai*, therefore, Chen Duxiu openly spoke to a large audience about his problematic “personal virtue” and turned a private matter into a public defense against the conservative camp’s strategy to discredit his political orientations through personal attacks.

In contrast to the public space in Act Two, Act Three and Act Five switched to Cai Yuanpei’s humble dwelling, where, in poor health, he received visits from the common, poor people in search of basic education and admitted the first female student to the Peking University—and indeed the first female student in any public schools in the country--a similar story already dramatized in the play *Li Dazhao*, apparently based on the same event. To adhere to his new academic and ethical criterions, Cai fired two British faculty members for inadequate academic credentials, and a Chinese professor for his scandalous visits to the “eight lanes of prostitutes” (*ba da hutong*), a red-light district. Cai was therefore under tremendous pressures, on the one hand, from Wu Tingfang, the minister of foreign affairs, who appeared on stage to plead for Cai’s help to retain the two foreigners to ease the tense diplomatic relationship with Britain on the other hand, from the conservative faculty to fire Chen Duxiu for his rumored visit to brothels. Cai did not want to let go of Chen, since his departure would deal a devastating blow to the new cultural movement. In spite of Cai’s steady support, nevertheless, Chen resigned to clear the way

for Cai's university reform. In this act, Chen's public self to pursue the greater goods of the university and society overrode his inner urge to pursue sexual freedom, therefore allowing a divided Cai—who valued Chen's political leadership but wish he had had a more restrained personal life--to move on with his reform.

Similar to the play *Li Dazhao*, Chen's promiscuity is contrasted with Cai Yuanpei's own devotion to his wife, who, in spite of her modern education, admired Cai's filial piety to his mother. Cai once had cut a piece of his own flesh to make a soup to cure her illness, as done so often in dynastic China. Cai's wife wished that she could have done the same to cure Cai's own illness. Once again, we see an enlightened reformer paradoxically embodying the very Confucian doctrine he was fighting against. By contrast, the play portrays Chen Duxiu as a much more complex man with no fear in rebelling against any rules, traditional or modern, and without any family relationships. Sha Yexin's play therefore broke the new ground in directly confronting a problematic area of Chen Duxiu's life. Throughout the play, he acts as a brilliant thinker, honest man, and fierce fighter for his own beliefs.

Lucky Encounter with Mr. Cai did not choose the less dramatic, but more significant, episodes such as Chen Duxiu's tremendous achievements in spear-heading a reform in Peking University in his capacity as the head of humanities division from 1917 to 1919, when "the atmosphere of literary revolution, academic freedom began to prevail on campus," according to Cai Yuanpei's remembrance 20 years later. Nor did the play trace the lasting friendship between Chen and Cai, who had never failed in his painstaking efforts to rescue Chen during his four imprisonments, despite the fact that Cai later became an important figure in the KMT. It was therefore no wonder that upon hearing Cai's death in March 5, 1940, Chen, while suffering from poor health himself and close to the end of his own life journey, wrote an emotional essay to celebrate Cai's life and

its impact on the forty-years of social and political turmoil in modern China.²⁰ To echo Chen's remembrance of Cai 66 years later, Chinese historians in the twentieth-first century found themselves debating on the extraordinary place Cai has held in modern history: contrary to the conventional wisdom to evaluate him as an important representative of the Nationalists in the northern China, Cai was indeed as a "liberal intellectual" (*ziyou zhishi fenzi*), who firmly believed in education as an indispensable means of modernizing China; taking a different approach from that of Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi, Cai did not believe in carrying out cultural and ideological warfares for the sake of bringing about political changes, either in the form of socialism or of democratic system.²¹ Even though *Lucky Encounter with Mr. Cai* did not—and could not—elaborate on all these important acts of modern Chinese intellectual history, its very staging of Cai's life (the only one in modern China), Cai's "happy encounter" with Chen, and Chen's personal drama in the social and political contexts, proved to be a significant act of political theater in the twentieth-first China.

An Anti-Stalinist Hero Finally: Chen Duxiu in Television Drama *The Sun Rises from the East* in the Twentieth-first Century

Like the 1991 film *Creating the New World*, the 20-parts television series *The Sun Rises from the East* (*Ri chu dongfang*) in 2001 provided for contemporary audiences a "vivid history textbook through artistic media" to celebrate the official history and CCP.²² According to the critics, it presented "a touching" and "reflective" history of the CCP from 1920 to 1928, from its miraculous birth to the historical turning point when "the CCP finally found its own path to victory" "through armed struggles in the rural areas," a precious epic as "brilliant" as the mythical story of "creating the new world" and as "significant" to the Chinese people as "the sun

rises from the East.”²³ Depicting dozens of historical figures with a few fictional characters to link dramatic plots and narrative threads, the television drama documented events in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Changsha, Guangzhou, Moscow, Paris, and Berlin, where the first generation of Chinese Communists organized themselves to search for, debate, and experiment with the right path to lead China to prosperity.

The Run Rises from the East also benefited from the simultaneous release of the long novel of the same title by the same author, Huang Yazhou. Rather than adapting a television drama from a fiction, Huang Yazhou first scripted the dramatic script, which allowed him to choose the most theatrical episodes. In his subsequent fictional writing, he clearly benefited from the techniques of television script, such as “montage,” “fluidities in space and time,” and “the visualization of narrative language,”²⁴ to reach a wider readership, tapping into the surging interests in biographies and autobiographies of the revolutionary and the so-called “counter-revolutionary” historical figures, intellectuals, and scientists since the mid-1990s.

The most radical part of *The Run Rises from the East* resides in its total redemption of Chen Duxiu, who was now dramatized not merely as a founding father of the CCP, but a visionary hero who had rebelled against the totalitarian Stalinist regime and the hegemony of the Comintern, which dominated Communist movements on global stage without any real understanding of the historical, cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences between various countries and societies beyond Soviet borders. The “failure” of Chen Duxiu’s leadership—and by extension, the “failure” of the Chinese revolution leading up to the tragic events of 1927—proved the failure of Stalinism. For this purpose, the television drama focused on Chen Duxiu in the first ten episodes, providing adequate space and detailed information on the inside stories of the CCP, much of which was unknown to the Chinese public. In this regard, the television

drama functioned as a documentary series, possessing the qualities of both “the spirit and scope of the epic” and “irreplaceable archival significance.”²⁵

Chen’s doubts about foreign authority were staged in the first episode, which depicts the the May Fourth student demonstration and Li Dazhao’s conversion to Marxism, as expressed in his seminar essay “My Marxist View.” Reflecting on Li’s remarks that the Chinese society would undergo tremendous changes if only Chen would add the word “Marxism” to his popular banners of science and democracy, Chen wondered aloud, “why Soviet model for revolution? We are here in Beijing, in China!” With the rising background soundtrack to project his heroic image, Chen paused, meditated, and reflected, in his passionate and determined fashion: “I still believe that we should not limit ourselves to any kind of ‘isms’; the most urgent task for China is revolution.” When Li asked about his vision of a new China without a Marxist perspective, Chen replied, with confidence and enthusiasm: “The future new society should be honest, positive, progressive, free, equal, creative, peaceful, kind-hearted, harmonious, beautiful, loving, mutually beneficial, work-oriented, and happy for everyone in the entire society. I hope that we diminish and even eliminate those tendencies toward the hypocritical, negative, conservative, class-biased, restrictive, ugly, evil, lazy, depressive, war-ridden, and chaotic that served the interests of the minority!” This Chen Duxiu was reciting from his own famous essay published in *The New Youth* journal; this China he had envisioned differed from the *Communist Manifesto*, which advocated the proletarian dictatorship over the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes. The sheer passion of Chen’s belief in a free, egalitarian, and happy society for all, however, touched Li Dazhao, He Shi, and Chen’s wife, as seen in the close-ups of their admiring expressions, and reminded the audience of Chen’s original position as a liberal Chinese

intellectual, close to the spirit of Cai Yuanpei, and set Chen apart from the reluctant Stalinist he was to become.

In the subsequent key moments of Chinese revolution, Chen Duxiu continued to doubt and reject the foreign interference. In the third episode which depicted Chen's conversion to Marxism upon his release from prison, Li Dazhao told Chen that he had met with Grigory Voitinsky (Weijing siji), a Soviet representative sent by the Comintern, to help found the CCP. Voitinsky had suggested that they should pay attention to living conditions and revolutionary desires of the workers. Chen cautioned Li: "What does a foreigner know about Chinese society? We should guard ourselves against blindly following their footprints. You and me are the ones who understand China the best!" This statement proved prophetic: subsequent history would show that after having followed the Soviet model to rely on the urban working classes as the backbone of proletarian revolution, CCP leaders threw themselves into organizing worker strikes and even uprisings in the style of the Paris Commune of 1871 to seize the political power in the cities, only to meet with tragic defeats as seen in the three Shanghai workers uprisings led by Chen Duxiu, Zhou Enlai and others, the Beijing-Hankou railway workers strike in 1927, the Guangzhou uprisings, also in 1927, for which Zhang Tailei, an early seminal leader, lost his life in the battlefield. Only after the CCP rejected Stalin's directives and the Soviet approach of focusing on the urban centers, did the Chinese leaders establish a rural revolutionary basis by relying on the peasants as the backbone of the armed forces. On this last point, the television drama echoed the official CCP historical narrative, but shifted blame to the Soviet authorities to portray Chen as a hero to resist them.

For this purpose, the television series stressed the dramatic conflicts between Chen Duxiu and the Soviet agents. In the seventh episode set in 1921, for instance, Chen Duxiu accepted Li

Dazhao's suggestion to speed up their efforts to convene the first CCP congress in Shanghai against the increasing popularity of the anarchist activists, to whom they were losing membership. Upon hearing that Lenin sent Comintern agent Hendricus Sneevliet (known in China as Maring, or Malin) and Comintern bureau in Irkutsk sent Nikolsky (Nike'ersiji) to investigate the feasibilities of the CCP organization, Chen complained: "how could the CCP become a branch of the Comintern before it was even born!" In the eighth episode after the first CCP congress, Chen Duxiu argued fiercely against Sneevliet's assertion that all Bolshevik movements in the world should be led by the Comintern and China was no exception; Chen insisted that the first CCP congress did not discuss, nor approve, such a subordination. The CCP would accept guidance and suggestions, but not direct leadership.

In a similar fashion, the ninth episode further dramatized Chen's continued confrontation with Sneevliet. "Each country has its own circumstances. The Chinese revolution has its own characteristics and own trajectories. We must not blindly follow the Comintern," Chen declared. It was not until Sneevliet's timely efforts to rescue Chen from his arrest on October 4, 1921, in spite of their differences, that Chen became his grateful friend and agreed for the CCP to join the Comintern. Nevertheless, the ninth episode ends with the most dramatic, and deadly, directives from Sneevliet. After having met with Sun Yat-sen, Sneevliet proposed that the CCP join the Sun's KMT to reform it, since the KMT was a "revolutionary party in alliance with different social classes," which had supported the seamen's strikes in Guangzhou and Shantou. A small party such as the CCP with a few dozen members had no choice but to rely on the existing force of the KMT to advance its political agenda, Sneevliet insisted. Chen Duxiu was so furious that he broke his tea cup while yelling at Sneevliet: "as a veteran Bolshevik, you should know the crucial difference between the two parties. I do not allow you to look down upon us!"

Yet Chen Duxiu alone could not fend off the Soviet interference, even in his capacity as the General Secretary of the central committee of an independent party. To explain who was really responsible for the ill-fated KMT-CCP collaborations, the eleventh episode staged the CCP “Western Lake special session” (Xihu tibian huiyi) from August 29 to 30, 1922, in which Zhang Tailei conveyed the Comintern’s directives for the CCP to join the KMT with heated debates punctuated by Chen Duxiu’s fierce protest that this directive must have come from Sneevliet, not from the Comintern. In the third CCP congress from June 12 to 20, 1923, Chen Duxiu reluctantly agreed with Sneevliet but with one condition: CCP members would join the KMT only as individual members in order to promote the two-party collaborations if the KMT would carry out democratic reform. By dramatizing the CCP party congresses, the 1924 KMT congress presided by Sun Yat-sen to promote party reform and collaborations (an event which had never been staged in any other media before) and the dramatic activities behind them, the television series successfully highlighted the roles the Soviet agents and the problematic relations between the CCP and the Comintern. As the CCP party chief, Chen Duxiu fought repeatedly against the Soviet hegemony, only to be labeled as the chief architect of *its* “defeatist” and “opportunist” policies, and most absurdly, by the Soviet authority. In this regard, a Chinese critic was correct in observing that the portrayal of dramatic conflicts between Chen Duxiu and the Comintern in *The Run Rises from the East* broke new ground in a more truthful understanding of how Chen Duxiu had preserved “the independent status of the CCP.” This, the critic asserted, does not hurt the glorious images of the CCP. On the contrary, it testified to its courageous efforts to transform the Chinese revolution from infancy to adulthood, and from defeat to victory. The successful recreation of Chen Duxiu as the leader of the CCP in its early years, therefore, proved to be an important artistic achievement of *The Run Rises from the East*.²⁶

The television drama series *The Run Rises from the East* explored visual images as critiques, which, as Irit Rogoff pointed out, constitute “cultural meanings,” open up intertextualities, “influence style, determine consumption and mediate power relations.”²⁷ The series greatly expanded the audience far beyond the theater buildings with their prime time slots in central and local television stations. *The Run Rises from the East* also assimilated, in a subversive manner, the central image of the morning sun to contrast with the similar trope exclusively reserved for Mao in *The East is Red*. At the end of the first episode, Sun Yat-sen expressed his rage against the arrest of Chen Duxiu to the representative of the northern warlord government: “I dare you to execute Chen Duxiu! If you kill those folks, fifty or a hundred more will join them right away!”²⁸ The episode ends with images of wildfires spreading from the left corner of the screen to fill the screen, merging with brilliant morning clouds, from which the red sun jumped out in radiant orange and yellow colors. With a montage of previous scenes depicting the May Fourth student demonstration and Chen’s circulating pamphlets in a Peking theater, the theme song arose: “We gather under your great cape/we march toward our Mecca at heart.” Amidst the clips of Li Dazhao lecturing to college students in Tianjin, and of Li and Chen walking along the seashore to plan the CCP founding, the lyric highlighted their central roles in the revolutionary drama: “We look up at the North Star in the long night/ and watch the ocean waves surging forward to wash ashore sands.” With the shot of Li Dazhao’s determined facial expression and his blood-stained shirt before his execution, and that of first party congress, the lyric reminded the audiences of the “blood and tear” of the martyrs, when they “walked into the morning clouds from the East/ never slowed down their footsteps despite of countless hardships and obstacles/ the long road they had traveled dotted with colorful flowers,” the last sentence being accompanied with the image of Chen presiding over the CCP congress. Granted Mao’s images

were mixed with that of other leaders throughout the montage, it is still obvious that all leaders were credited according to their real contributions to the CCP cause, with a particular rectification of Chen as one of the first and indispensable leader.

Despite its radical departure from *The East is Red*, however, the *Sun Rises from the East* did not dominate the Chinese performance space. In fact, *The East is Red* made a surprising return to the Chinese stage in the twentieth-first century China, where capitalism and globalization brought worsening pollution and corruption. To express a nostalgia for a “cleaner” society in Maoist China, professional artists, amateur performance groups and retirees organized various reproductions of *The East is Red* from 2004 to 2007 in concert halls, parks, university campus, and even tourist spots as annual celebration events to mark the birthdays of the party, the army, and the nation. None of these performances, of course, mentioned Chen Duxiu as a villain. Many even skipped the narrator and the dance scenes to make *The East is Red* a mostly musical experience without intrusion of political discourse. Most interestingly, in the summer of 2006, unemployed workers and other citizens in Beijing gathered in the North Sea Park to sing the songs from *The East is Red* with new lyrics: “We present our songs to Mao Zedong/the savior of the mankind.” “Why are we looked down upon by others/ who would respect the suffering slaves?/ our life has become difficult without truth.” To express their protest, they scripted new narratives to articulate their nostalgia for a “peaceful, egalitarian, and selfless era,” in which the workers and peasants were “masters of a socialist society” without “corruption, bribery, and prostitution.” Ending their performance with the “Internationale,” the narrator evoked Lenin’s motto, “those who forget the past are traitors,” and called on the Chinese people never to forget revolutionary martyrs who had sacrificed everything for the founding of our socialist country. All in all, in the course of half of a century, Chinese performance culture have come to a full

cycle: to reclaim the original blueprints of the socialist state, which were once envisioned by both Mao and Chen, the much-missed leaders in the twentieth-first century in search of a new way to address China's predicament.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of the twelve types of characters in traditional opera enumerated by Zhu Quan of the Ming dynasty, see Wilt Idema and Stephen West, *Chinese theater, 1100-1450: A Source Book* (Wiesbaden : Steiner, 1982), 138.

³ *Dongfang hong* Guangdong sheng yanchu zhihuibu (The headquarters of Guangdong production of *East is Red*), "Paiyan yinyue wudao shishi *Dongfang hong* jiben jingyan" (Our experience in rehearsing sang and dance epic *East is Red*), in *Mao Zedong sixiang de songge* (The song of the Mao Zedong Thought) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin, 1966), 1-12, 1.

⁴ Huang Hua, "Xiang taiyang" (Toward the sun), in *Mao Zedong sixiang de songge* (The song of the Mao Zedong Thought) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin, 1966), 61-86, 64.

⁵ Huang Hua, "Xiang taiyang," 66-67.

⁶ "*Dongfang hong* yiyue ju" (The music drama *East is Red*), <http://lib.verycd.com/2005/02/08/0000038422.html>, last posted August 18, 2007.

⁷ *Dongfang hong* (East is Red). Hong Kong: Ta Kung Bao, 1966, 5.

⁸ *Dongfang hong*, 6.

⁹ Wang Jun, et al., *Yi dai ying hao* (A generation of heroes) *Juben* (Drama script) 1981 (8): 7-38, 14.

¹⁰ Wang Jun, et al., *Yi dai ying hao*, 15.

¹¹ Wang Jun, et al., *Yi dai ying hao*, 16.

¹² Wang Jun, et al., *Yi dai ying hao*, 24.

¹³ Qiu Guanjian and Jia Gangtao, "Ershi shiji jiushi niandai yilai Chen Duxiu wannian sixiang yanjiu zongshu" (A survey on the research since the 1990s on Chen Duxiu thoughts in his later years) *Guizhou Shifan Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of Guizhou Normal University; Social Science) 2005: (5): 71-76, 71.

¹⁴ Zhang Liqun, et al., eds., *Huai nian Yaobang* (Remembering Hu Yaobang), vol. 4 (Hong Kong: Yatai guoji chuban gongsi, 2001), 252-255.

¹⁵ For a concise account of the events surrounding the Versailles conference and the May Fourth movement it triggered, Jonathan Spense, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 310-319.

¹⁶ Lu Mingkang, "Zoujin mingren: Shao Honglai: 'ji guo-gong hezuo' yu yishen" (Approaching celebrities: Shao Honglai, the embodiment of the KMT and CCP collaborations," <http://www.slyswy.com/zjmr>. Last posted, 5/17/2006

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- ¹⁷ Yao Yuan, *Li Dazhao, Juben* (Drama script) 1993 (8): 2-24, 24.
- ¹⁸ Yao Yuan, “Guanyu *Li Dazhao*” (About the play *Li Dazhao*), *Juben* (Drama script) 1993 (8): 25.
- ¹⁹ Sha Yexin, *Xing yu Cai Xiansheng* (Lucky encounter with Mr. Cai Yuanpei). Manuscript, 13. I am grateful to Sha Yexin for providing me with this version.
- ²⁰ Zhang Jiakang, “Chen Duxiu yu Cai Yuanpei de jiaowang” (Chen Duxiu’s contacts with Cai Yuanpei), *Dangshi bo cai* (Extensive collection of the party history) 2004 (8): 24-27, 24.
- ²¹ Cui Zhihai, “Cai Yuanbei zai wusi xin wenhua yundong zhong de jiaose zai tantao” (A re-evaluation of the role of Cai Yuanbei in the May Fourth new cultural movement) *Shixue yuekan* (Journal of historical science) 2006 (1): 36-44, 37.
- ²² Zhang Dexiang, “Cangmang dadi juan julan” (The rolling waves on the boundless land) *Zhongguo dianshi* (Chinese television) 2001 (8): 5-6, p. 6.
- ²³ Zhang Dexiang, “Cangmang dadi juan julan,” 5.
- ²⁴ He Zhenbang, “Zhuangmei de gemin shishi, youyi de yishu tansuo” (Magnificent revolutionary epic and beneficial artistic experiment) *Xiaoshuo pinglun* (Fiction review) 2001 (6): 49-53, 51.
- ²⁵ He Zhenbang, “Zhuangmei de gemin shishi, youyi de yishu tansuo,” 49.
- ²⁶ He Zhenbang, “Zhuangmei de gemin shishi, youyi de yishu tansuo,” 50.
- ²⁷ Irit Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Cultural Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 14-49, 14-15.
- ²⁸ For a cross-reference of this scene in the fiction, see Huang Yazhou, “*Ri chu dongfang*” (*The Run Rises from the East*) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2001), 39.