SIX "TAIPING REBELLION" TRAGEDIES: HEROES, TRAITORS, AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE CHINESE REVOLUTION

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IN THE COMPLEX HISTORY OF TWENTIETH-CENtury Chinese theatre, allegorical interpretations of revolutionary leaders and peasant movements characterize core repertoires from the periods of Republican China (1911 to 1949) and the PRC (1949 to present) to the post-Mao and postsocialist China of today. At the same time that they threw themselves into various revolutionary movements in real life, numerous Chinese playwrights wrote into scripts their own visions of building a new, modern China free of imperialist domination and domestic oppression. For example, before and after the Republican revolution that overthrew the last imperial dynasty of the Qing empire, which was ruled by the Manchu ethnic minority group, several plays depicted anti-Qing heroes. One such hero was the female martyr Qiu Jin; another was Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the father of the KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party), celebrated for his tireless efforts leading to the founding of the Republic of China in 1911.

On the other hand, Tian Han's 1929 play, *Dr. Sun Yat-sen,* expressed a prosocialist and anti-KMT sentiment as it movingly depicted Sun's wish before his death for a Republican revolution that would not end until there was no more corruption and internal turmoil within the KMT Party.[1] It was during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45), moreover, that modern drama attained its "golden period," when it attracted to the theatre large audiences from all walks of life, saw during wartime the unprecedented publication of a thousand scripts, and, as literary historians have often noted, inspired theatre personnel to join the army and travel to the war front to offer their stunning performances for the sake of raising morale.

The marriage between war, revolution, and theatre finds its most illustrious example in the stage representations of the historic Taiping Rebellion. Lasting from 1851 to 1864, this rebellion has been viewed as a heroic peasant revolution whose semisocialist, utopian vision was to divide land equally among peasants, in response to the Qing Dynasty's brutal repression and foreign aggression that followed Chinese defeat in the Opium War (1839–42). Politicians and dramatists alike have explored the myth of the Taiping Rebellion in constructing a nationalist narrative that could promote other revolutions both within and outside China. As political lore would have it, for instance, Karl Marx was the first to hail the triumphant Taiping troops in 1853 as the beginning of a new China in the Orient. On the eve of the great social upheavals, Marx declared "the Chinese Revolution will throw the spark into the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the continent."[2] However, less than ten years later, in 1862, Marx was so disgusted by the violence of the rebellion that he declared that it had merely intended the "change of dynasty" without any "seeds for a renaissance."[3]

Similarly, Sun Yat-sen anticipated Mao Zedong and other political leaders in "discovering the history" of the Taiping Rebellion and calculating how it would fit into his Republican agenda of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty. Once describing himself as "Hong Xiuquan the second," Sun Yat-sen called on his fellow revolutionaries to learn from this "patriotic hero," known as "the heavenly king" of the Taipings.[4] Echoing Marx's divided view, Sun Yat-sen criticized the Taiping leaders for their lack of knowledge of democracy. Even if it had succeeded, the "Heavenly Kingdom" would have amounted to no more than another feudalist monarchy, claimed Sun, while advancing his own "Three People's Principles" of nationalism, democracy, and the people's livelihood as the elements of a superior blueprint.[5] In 1922, upon resigning as president of the Republic of China following Yuan Shikai's scheme to replace him, Sun reminded his followers that the Taiping leaders' bloody rivalries had brought about their own downfall.[6] Both Marx and Sun Yat-sen deployed the Taiping legend as "dramatic props" to play out conflicting dramatic roles while forming their own political theatres in either the Chinese or the European context.

Influenced by their national and international "father figures," both the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued to explore the political drama of the Taiping events. Whereas the KMT applauded the Taiping leaders as heroes of the "nationalist revolution," the CCP extolled them as champions of the peasant uprising and designated itself as their

sole successor in the unfinished mission of championing the interests of the poor peasants. One significant episode of this political theatre was illustrated in the sculptured relief on the Monument of the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square. Dedicated in 1949 and completed in 1958 to commemorate millions of revolutionary martyrs dating back to 1840, the monument includes eight reliefs of "major episodes" in chronological order: the Opium Wars, the Jintian Uprising of Taiping (1851), the May Fourth Movement (1919), and the guerrilla warfare in the Japanese-occupied areas (1937–45), to name a few. In Tiananmen Square on 30 September 1949, after Zhou Enlai had led 3,000 delegates of the First Conference of Chinese Political Consultation in breaking ground for the monument, Mao Zhedong read aloud the inscription for it, which was subsequently carved in Zhou Enlai's calligraphy. The heroic memory of the Taiping Rebellion was promoted as part of Chinese revolutionary history to millions of Chinese during their frequent visits to the monument that quickly became a popular educational and tourist attraction.

While selections of the reliefs by Liu Kaiqu and other oil paintings of the Jintian Uprising made their way into the Museum of Revolutionary History (Gemin lishi bowuguan), *The History of New Chinese Art (Xin Zhongguo meishu shi),* children's picture books, and theatrical productions of the PRC period continued to mine the narrative of this historical rebellion, as exemplified by *Jintian Uprising,* a recent Guangxi opera (*guiju*) production. The most stirring representations of the uprising, however, emerged in the spoken drama *Ten Thousand Rivers and Mountains (Wan shui qian shan),* which depicts the Long March of 1934–35. First scripted in 1953, the play survived five major revisions (1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, and 1976) and two film adaptations (in 1959 and in the 1970s) pursuant to the zigzag political movements of the PRC.

The play's first version of 1953 starts with a narrator's voice celebrating the "Taiping Revolution" as an important event in "the historical process of the revolutionary struggle of the Chinese people," which was unfortunately "suppressed by the ruling class and imperialists."[7] The Chinese people succeeded only when Chairman Mao Zedong had them raising "the red flags in the beautiful soil of the motherland, even as Marxism was spreading after the Russian October Revolution." The road to victory was, nevertheless, not secured until Mao assumed "the wise leadership" of the CCP during the Long March. To arrive at this point had necessitated his battling the "treacherous rightist, opportunist policy of Chen Duxiu" and the "leftist opportunists" who had waged erroneous military campaigns that caused them to lose vast Communist-occupied areas, and hence brought about the Red Army's Long March to break free of the KMT's siege.[8]

This narration changed history in two ways. First, it credited Mao with the founding of the CCP when Chen Duxiu was in fact the party's cofounder with Li Dazhao, in 1921. Moreover, Chen was unfairly blamed for the failure of the "Great Revolution of 1927," after which he was ousted and scapegoated for the defeatist Stalinist policies that initially set the course of the CCP.[9] Second, Mao was hailed as the one great leader to finally show the Chinese people how to achieve victory after one hundred years of revolutions dating back to the Taiping Rebellion, said to be the early inspiration for subsequent peasant movements. One of the first peasant uprisings credited to Mao was the one he headed in Hunan Province, in the fall of 1927, thereby establishing one of the first soviets to serve as a staging area for the armed struggle against the KMT.

Although evocation of the Taipings and the attack on Chen Duxiu in the prologue disappeared from the 1954 revision, one key episode—that of the Red Army's triumph in crossing the impossible Dadu River—remained in all the versions up to the Cultural Revolutionary period (1966–76). In this act, a Red Army commander wins over a local boatman by claiming that the Red Army would not fare as did Shi Dakai, who perished with hundreds of thousands of Taiping soldiers in his failed attempt to cross the Dadu River. For now it was the Red Army that was fighting Japanese imperialists and the KMT reactionaries under the leadership of the CCP and Chairman Mao.[10] In contrast to numerous plays banned during the Cultural Revolution, the 1976 version of the *Ten Thousand Rivers and Mountains* in effect became another "model play" without being officially "crowned" as such. According to one account, audiences responded warmly to the play because it evoked the heroic deeds of veteran revolutionary leaders, many of whom were persecuted by the Cultural Revolutionary radicals known as the Gang of Four.[11] This history illustrates the lasting appeal of the Taiping leader, who remained one of the few "valid" revolutionary leaders in the official discourse of the Cultural Revolution, at a time when many others were branded as "traitors," "conspirators," and "capitalist roaders." The "class struggle theme" in the Cultural Revolutionary discourse continuously exploited the danger of "hidden enemies" in socialist China as a means of validating their treating it as the central conflict of the time. Gradually, however, as the process of de-Maoization proceeded in the post-Mao period, the Taiping movement

was increasingly condemned as a "feudalist dynasty" as brutal as that of the Qing, and even worse than the Qing, owing to its destructive power and fake religious cult (*xiejiao*); had it succeeded, some even declared, Chinese society would have regressed to an earlier stage, when there was slavery. Seen in this light, it is apparent that the Taiping Rebellion has repeatedly functioned as a "stage prop" in forming political theatre outside the theatre space itself.

Contextualized in the political history of twentieth-century Chinese theatre, as briefly sketched above, this essay examines six historical plays that exclusively depict the Taiping Rebellion, and that have never been studied together either in Chinese or English. Astonishingly, four major playwrights from different parts of China concentrated their efforts in creating six plays in a matter of five years (1937 to 1941), during the traumatic War of Resistance against Japan. The six plays are (1) Chen Baichen's 1937 play, *Jintian Village (Jintian chun)*, which depicts the golden years of the Taiping Rebellion; (2) Yang Hansheng's 1941 play, *The Spring and Autumn of the Divine Kingdom (Tianguo chunqiu)*, which dramatizes the middle years of the Taipings, when power struggles weakened its reign; (3) Chen Baichen's 1942 play, *The Dadu River (Dadu he)*, which presents Shi Dakai's career after the internal murders among the Taiping leaders forced him to pursue his own Taiping vision; (4) Yang Hansheng's 1937 play, *The Death of Li Xiucheng (Li Xiucheng zhi si)* and (5) Ouyang Yuqian's 1941 play, *The Loyal King Li Xiucheng (Zhongwang Li Xiucheng)*, both portraying Li Xiucheng as the most loyal of kings, but doomed to failure because of the incompetence of his chief leader, Hong Xiuquan, and his corrupt relatives; and (6) A Ying's 1942 play, *Hong Xuanjiao*, which illuminates the title woman leader's disillusionment with the very revolution she helped to stage. The account of her jealousy, which resulted in murder, and her subsequent regrets revealed a culture reflecting on its own biases against women, especially women leaders in a revolutionary uprising.

I am intrigued by this fascination with the Taiping Rebellion and the high-quality productions of these plays, three of which appear in three separate PRC drama anthologies as representatives of a "golden period" of wartime plays written by left-wing dramatists.[12] The drama histories from the PRC have frequently claimed that the KMT government censored left-wing dramatists and forced them to retreat into the writing of history plays, which indirectly attacked the KMT's pacifying policy toward the Japanese in an effort to arouse the kind of patriotic feelings that animated the heroic spirits of the Taiping peasant uprising. We all think that the playwrights were marching in lockstep with the CCP, but the reality is much more complicated. Indeed, the six plays discussed here reveal a paradox: the chronological events in the plays conform with the established historical accounts, as recorded in Phillip Kuhn's chapter, "The Taiping Rebellion," in the *Cambridge History of China* and in numerous other works of Chinese scholarship.[13] The six plays therefore seem, at first sight, to have adhered to the fundamental purpose of history plays of delineating history as "accurately" as possible while re-creating the dramatic events to relate to contemporary reality. However, when it comes to the political exploitations of the Taipings, they turn out to be the most "creative," incoherent, and contradictory parts of the plays, deviating far from the "historical authenticity" of the past events. Thus, going beyond the teleological view of drama history, this essay examines the six plays as potentially challenging the very nature of revolutions—be they KMT republican revolution or the CCP socialist revolution—and their utopian vision, brutal betrayal, and traumatic disillusionment.

One key insight that transcends ideological boundaries relates to the dramatic treatment of the internal power struggles among revolutionary leaders, which was characterized by chaos and murder. Although suppression by Western imperialists of the Taiping Rebellion on stage invited connecting them, in real life of the 1930s and 1940s, to the Japanese invasion of China, the enemies inside the revolutionary movement were perceived to be more dangerous than foreigners. The prophetic power of this insight was ironically turned against the four playwrights twenty years later, after the socialist revolution was won, when, during the Cultural Revolution, all of them were persecuted as "counterrevolutionaries" in the very revolutionary society they had helped bring about. One might explain away their persecution by having recourse to the post-Mao and post-Cultural Revolutionary (1976–present) interpretation along the official lines, which habitually assailed the Gang of Four for the chaos and tragedy, since they were, precisely, "the enemies inside the revolutionary movement." This argument, however, glosses over the philosophical impact and paradoxical nature of these talented playwrights' work. Their problematic vision underscores theatre's complex role in predicting, even before the Chinese Communist revolution was realized, the failure of this revolution, which had begun with greater change and a seemingly brighter future than that of the Taiping Rebellion, but turned out to be equally tragic and disheartening.

Staged in 1937, *Jintian Village*, by Chen Baichen, depicts the success of the Jintian Uprising of 1851, the official beginnings of the Taipings in their

heyday, when Taiping leaders cooperated in trying to overthrow the Manchu rule. At this early stage, however, the Taiping movement suffered the loss in battle of Feng Yunshan, known as the Southern King, whose integrity had held the Taiping leaders together. It also lost in battle its most courageous leader, Xiao Chaogui, the Western King. *Jintian Village* ends with the other leaders' pledge to avenge Feng and Xiao, a promise delivered especially to Hong Xuanjiao, Xiao Chaogui's grief-stricken wife, herself a prominent leader in the Taiping movement.

In spite of adhering to the well-known chronology of the historical events, Chen's play portrays Hong Xiuquan, the Heavenly King, as a weak and impotent figurehead, and in so doing casts doubt on the characterization of this rebellion as one of the greatest revolutions in Chinese history. Philip A. Kuhn's classic narrative comments on the social message contained in Hong's writings and his belief that "men are, in some ultimate sense, equal before God," but Chen's play (and the other five as well) skip reference to Hong's writings and teaching.[14] On the contrary, at the outset of the play, a group of paupers—frequent gamblers and drunkards—jokingly recall that Hong Xiuquan claimed he had been received by Jesus Christ, given the title of his "Heavenly Brother," and empowered to eliminate all the evil spirits on earth, especially those Manchus and other rich people lording it over the poor Chinese.[15] Hong reveals his mandate from heaven only upon recovering, after forty days, from a serious illness brought on by failing miserably in the civil examinations he took to become a court official. The humiliation arouses hatred in him for the Confucian classics, which he now orders to be burned to ashes. Most significantly, Hong appears in the play to be exercising undeserved power that was handed him by Feng Yunshan, the talented organizer who had mobilized the local peasants and residents in Guangxi Province who in turn embraced Hong as their leader. When Feng was imprisoned, however, Hong rejected his subordinates' call to rescue him, and he failed to control the aggressive leaders who cast a jealous eye on his own central power. Chen's Taiping play thus focused on frail leadership, faithlessness, and betrayal, even at an early, presumably successful stage of the movement. Nevertheless, theatre historians describe the play as the first to dramatize a major peasant uprising famous for its progressive vision and socialist blueprint.

Yang Hansheng's *The Spring and Autumn of the Divine Kingdom,* which was performed in 1941 to much greater critical acclaim than that enjoyed by Chen, dramatizes the middle years of the Taiping Rebellion around 1856,

when fierce struggles among Taiping leaders were weakening their hold on power. In this play, Hong Xiuquan, alarmed that Yang Xiuqing, the Eastern King, had attempted to usurp his authority, orders Wei Changhui, the Northern King, to murder him. In response to the public outcry against his brutality, Hong Xiuquan then orders the murder of Wei Changhui, whereupon Shi Dakai, the Assistant King, flees for his life from the capital city. The play ends with Hong Xuanjiao regretting that out of jealousy of Yang Xiuqing's female companion, she took part in the conspiracies. Contemporary critics and later memoirs, commenting on the performances in 1941, remarked on the tremendous applause that erupted when Hong Xuanjiao spoke the following line: "Why are we so obsessed with slaughtering our own brothers when our kingdom is facing its fiercest enemies from the outside." The audiences took this line as a reference to the KMT's conflict with CCP at a time in the war when both should have joined forces to fight the Japanese.[16] While not rejecting an interpretation like this, influenced by the exigencies of wartime, I believe that the play's lasting appeal resides in its focus on the very brutality and bloodbath within the revolutionary regime, which challenged justification for any revolution, however noble its initial intentions. The love triangle meanwhile afforded the play the commercial packaging it needed to sell itself as a great tragedy, to appeal widely as popular culture in the urban space, and to inspire contemporary critics to compare it, on account of its great passion and ethos, with Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth*.[17]

In history and plot, Chen Baichen's *The Dadu River,* performed in 1942, reprises the mutual distrust between the Eastern King, Yang Xiuqing, and the Northern King, Wei Changhui, as well as the bloody murders, but from Shi Dakai's perspective. Concluding with Shi's single-handed military campaigns after he had broken away from Hong Xiuquan, Chen's play offers a unique reflection on the role of the scholarly elites—both their dreams and their failures—in the Taiping movement. A former Confucian scholar with a literary bent, who had donated his property and fortune to help the Taipings devise their idealist blueprints for social justice, Shi became increasingly outraged by the brutal treatment of the intellectuals. He challenged Yang Xiuqing, who justified the atrocious slaughter of scholars and intellectuals by attacking their "pursuit of personal fame" through a civil examination system that launched their official careers in "facilitating the Manchu court's 300 years of ruling the Han Chinese"; without such betrayals and collaborations, the Taiping movement would have more easily eliminated

the Manchu rulers, Yang argued against Shi.[18] The negative light in which this portrayal casts Yang contrasts with the more balanced view of Yang as a leader with "administrative brilliance and instinct for power centralization," without which "the Taiping movement would never have achieved as much as it did," and as a "faithless schemer."[19]

Paralleling his portrayal of Yang as coming from the poorest rural background and harboring anti-intellectual sentiments, Chen drew an equally derogative portrait of Wei Changhui, a former Confucian scholar from a family background of the "new rich." Equipped with a polished and sophisticated manner, Wei hid his true feelings about Yang, waiting for the right moment to murder him and his family, and eventually slaughtering Shi Dakai's family besides. As both defense and critique of intellectual types, moreover, Chen Baichen created Han Baoying, Shi's female student and elitist soul mate, who appreciates his poetry and music; however, Shi suppresses his desire to marry Han, for fear of being lumped in with the other kings, like Yang and Wei, and being accused of lusting after women while prohibiting married soldier couples from sleeping together. Subsequently married to another weak, but intellectual, man, Han eventually commits suicide in order to persuade Shi to escape the siege of the Qing troops to lead future Taiping campaigns. Beautiful, intelligent, and devoted, Han represents Chen's ideal and idealistic intellectual, the sort best suited to take the helm of the Taiping movement with its inherent weaknesses. This dramatic conflict between peasant and cultural elite foreshadows subsequent plays in the PRC in which class struggle became an increasingly central theme aimed at celebrating the subalterns, as well as the dramatic reversal of fate during the Cultural Revolution, when all four previously mentioned playwrights were persecuted for being bourgeois intellectuals who had failed to portray the proletariat on stage.

As the titles *The Death of Li Xiucheng* by Yang Hansheng and *The Loyal King Li Xiucheng* by Ouyang Yuqian suggest, these two plays depict the last three years of the Taiping movement, from 1863 to 1866, culminating with Li Xiucheng's heroic defense at the head of his Taiping troops of Nanjing (then named "Tianjing," or the "heavenly capital," by the Taiping government) under siege by the Qing army. Celebrated as the self-sacrificing "loyal king" by the broad masses longing for a just and strong leader, Li stood up against Hong Xiuquan's corrupt relatives, who spent their days slandering him and lining their pockets with the loot they stole from impoverished peasants. Most remarkably, Li refused to follow the example of Shi Dakai—

who had severed all connection with the corrupt regime to attain his Taiping goals on his own—choosing instead to offer himself up for the integrity of the Taiping cause, despite the advice of his own loyal followers that he spared his troops for a future comeback. Reluctantly forsaking his military strategy of winning victories elsewhere so as to lure the enemies away from Nanjing, Li rushed back to Nanjing upon Hong Xiuquan's repeated requests, knowing well that it was already too late to break the siege. His perseverance, integrity, and faith in the Taiping cause in the face of widespread corruption and disillusionment so toughened his last ten thousand soldiers' hearts that, after being captured, they preferred setting themselves afire and burning to death than surrendering to the enemy. Clearly, according to the playwrights of these two plays, the suppressive Qing regime and the Western imperialist powers were no less vicious enemies than the traitors and spies within the Taiping central power structure who "tore down the stage of our great drama."[20]

Both plays end in a prison scene in which Li refuses to surrender, while his loyal followers in the fallen city stage strikes and family mourning sessions to vent their grief over his impending execution. In Yang Hansheng's *The Death of Li Xiucheng,* a Qing official is ordered to talk Li Xiucheng into surrendering; remembering how Li had kindly released him from captivity three years before, and regretting having once more to serve the Qing Court, he denounces his own masters for being traitors to the Han Chinese and for collaborating with foreign invaders, both the Manchus and the Western powers.

This insistent antitraitor theme, however, turned out to be highly ironic, considering that when, in the PRC period, Chen Baichen was very excited to be invited by Shanghai Haiyan Studio to write a film script on the Taiping movement to commiserate the one hundredth anniversary of the Jintian Uprising. After having completed a detailed script outline with chronology, costume designs, leaders' legends, and even calendar comparisons between the Manchu and the Taiping governments based on elaborate and painstaking research, he was told that the film production could not proceed since Li Xiucheng was now viewed as a traitor.[21] The reason had to do with the then current discussion of the original version of Li Xiucheng's "self-narration"—written by him in his last few days in prison—which had triggered an accusation that Li flattered the Qing Court and criticized Hong Xiuquan and his incompetent leadership in hopes of sparing his own life. An estimated figure of more than 300 articles on Li's career and his "self-narration"

were published in the thirty years after the founding of the PRC, the majority of them appearing between 1964 and 1965, after Qi Benyu's initial attack on Li as a traitor. This number was the second highest, after those written on Sun Yat-sen, which numbered around 450 essays.[22] The emphasis on the treacherous nature of a peasant leader unfortunately brought about the denunciation of Qu Qiubai, the second key leader of the CCP after Chen Duxiu's ouster in 1927.[23] Even though celebrated as a martyr who died heroically on the KMT's execution ground in 1935, Qu had written a similar "Superfluous Word" *(Duoyu de hua)* questioning the value of his revolutionary career as CCP leader amid the complex politics within the CCP's top leadership, thereby recalling the manner in which Li Xiucheng had blamed Hong Xiuquan for his weak leadership.

The dual attacks against two "heroes turned traitors" who lived in two different historical periods, and subscribed to diverse ideologies, set the tragic tone for the Cultural Revolution, when countless seasoned PRC leaders and intellectuals, including Yang Hansheng and Chen Baichen, were persecuted as traitors. Falsely accused by a former associate, Yang was termed "an enemy of the people *(diwo maodun)*" for having written *The Death of Li Xiucheng,* supposedly at the bidding of the KMT government, which wanted to celebrate its defense of Nanjing (1937) at the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan. Another "crime" was even more absurd: Upon getting out of the KMT prison in 1935, Yang refused to join the KMT as a condition of his release. Since his true identity as a CCP member was concealed from the KMT, he covered himself by saying: "I do not want to associate myself with any political parties. I will not join the KMT, nor the CCP." "Not willing to join the CCP," therefore, became a piece of incriminating evidence with which to assail his loyalty to the CCP, in spite of his spotless history as a CCP veteran—he had joined the CCP as early as 1925 and participated in the Nanchang Uprising as the CCP representative in 1927, when the CCP established its first military force against the KMT.[24] Most intriguingly, his imprisonment by the KMT came about in the first place because of two traitors, who had held high-ranking positions as heads of the CCP Central Bureaus of Shanghai. This heartbreaking personal experience could have intensified Yang's resentment of the traitor within the revolution, which had already worked its way into his two Taiping plays.

With this perspective, the ending of Yang's *The Death of Li Xiucheng* seems at once tragic and ironic. Before his execution, Li Xiucheng poured three cups of wine on the ground as ablations for eulogizing three groups:

first, the "brave souls of the Taiping kings" who inspired us with the "victory of the Jintian Uprising to rescue the poor from the bitter sea and to drive away the Qing rulers and foreign invaders" and "build our own nation and state *(minzu guojia)*"; second, more than one million Taiping soldiers whose "hot blood" spread over sixteen provinces—brought down by enemies' bullets, severe weather, starvation, and countless sufferings—and "whose heroic, sacrificing spirit will forever live in our hearts"; and finally, his last ten thousand soldiers in captivity who refused to surrender. In tone and vocabulary, Li's poetic soliloquy resembles Mao Zedong's dedication to the Monument of People's Heroes commemorating the numerous Chinese martyrs who had given their lives for Chinese revolutions in the last hundred years, starting with the Taiping revolution. Most ironically, however, during the Cultural Revolution, Yang Hansheng's passionate, romantic lyrics depicting Li Xiucheng as a national hero in *The Death of Li Xiucheng* became the most damning evidence of his own sympathy for a traitor. But, paradoxically, it was Yang's historic role as a leader of the leftist literary and dramatic movement during the KMT reign, and his creative energies, that helped construct much of the Maoist discourse and the socialist art that he himself had pioneered.

If Yang Hansheng's play illustrates the importance of a traitor discourse within and outside the theatre, *Hong Xuanjiao* by A Ying, with its glorified portrait of a woman leader of the Taipings, offers a fascinating look at the complex relationships between history play and women's theatre. Unlike the other five plays, which were exclusively premiered in the "the areas unoccupied by the Japanese *(daboufang)*," A Ying's play was written and premiered in the partially Japanese-occupied Shanghai of 1941. In contrast to Yang Hansheng's *The Spring and Autumn of the Divine Kingdom,* which demonized Hong Xuejiao as a jealous woman collaborating in Wei Changhui's murder of Yang Xiuqing,[25] A Ying's play shows a courageous, thoughtful woman commander striving to prevent the slaughter of other leaders.

Divided in four acts, A Ying's play presents four crucial years in the Taiping movement with the woman leader at center stage doing her utmost to win a harsh war and to prevent tragedy from erupting within the Taiping movement. Set in 1851, act 1 begins with the Taiping leaders welcoming a triumphant Hong Xuanjiao. The commander of "the detachment of women" *(niangzi jun)* though still in her twenties, she has just captured Daozhou in Hunan Province, an enemy stronghold that male leaders in earlier attempts had failed to seize.[26] Finding herself in the middle of power struggles al-

ready emerging between leaders from the diverse backgrounds of poor peasants, rich landlords, and scholars, Hong Xuanjiao focuses her attention instead on the official writings of the Taiping history, which are to be preserved in "the archives of the new country's history (*Guoshi guan*)" for future generations, especially with regard to the biographies of Feng Yunshan and Xiao Chaogui. She argues that the writers should record the responsibilities for defeats as well as victories, such as Yang Xiuqing's failure to send his troops to rescue Xiao Chaogui and Feng Yunshan, who subsequently died in their campaigns to conquer Changsha and Quanzhou, respectively, two years before.[27]

In having a heroine paying close attention to how history is constructed, this scene invites comparison with the PRC and its subsequent obsession with writing and rewriting the official histories in order to glorify certain leaders such as Mao Zedong while demonizing others. More interesting, and in a way similar to the acclaim heaped on Mao as a means of pressing onward with the Communist revolution, is the way Hong Xuanjiao resents Yang Xiuqing's unwillingness to push on with the "Northern Expedition" to conquer Beijing (Yanjing), the capital city of the Qing Court, because he is addicted to his luxurious life in Nanjing.[28] Eventually, in act 3, set in the sixth year of the Taiping reign, Hong Xuanjiao must helplessly witness Wei Changhui murdering Yang Xiuqing, against her own and Shi Dakai's strong opposition.

Finally, act 4, set in 1864, dramatizes the months-long siege of Nanjing, with a frightened, morbid Hong Xiuquan rejecting Hong Xuejiao and Li Xiucheng's persistent plea that they give up Nanjing and retreat to Jiangxi and Wuhan to wait for the opportune time to renew their campaign. Hong Xuanjiao attempts, in vain, to steer the Taiping movement away from its final undoing, only to witness the tragic suicide of Hong Xiuquan. Hong Xuejiao similarly fights to the bitter end with Li Xiucheng, then loses her sanity after his capture, and the play concludes with her prophetic line: "Let us remember the blood-stained history of the fourteenth-year Taiping Kingdom so that our nation will have some hope of rejuvenation."[29] In his characterization of Hong as a female protagonist, A Ying—a key leader of the leftist dramatic movement—helped construct a socialist feminist tradition. That tradition would mature on the PRC stage, which upgraded women characters to embodiments of revolutionary idealism in the cause of the subalterns and the Chinese nation while simultaneously packaging them in commercial stories of passion and romance. In the course of portraying a woman leader, however, A Ying, like his fellow playwrights, revealed his suspicious view of the revolution, its peasant leaders, and women's predicament.

I hope the preceding brief account will help us understand two perspectives with regard to political theatre both within and outside the theatre space. First, I argue that these four playwrights expressed a dark view of the Taiping rebellion, using their ingenious dramatization of Taiping leaders' role-playing to expose their hypocrisy and ignorance. *Jintian Village,* for example, depicts a hallucinating, weak Hong Xiuquan, who, when challenged by other leaders' differing opinions, announces that his political decisions have been reached by his transforming himself into the "heavenly father." "Who am I?" he would ask his fellow leaders.[30] Realizing that Hong has entered a trance to become the "heavenly father" himself, fellow leaders piously accept his "arbitrary and absolutist political style."[31] When Hong Xuanjiao complains to Feng Yunshan about Hong Xiuquan's role-playing, Feng Yunshan convinces her to tolerate Hong's acting for the sake of the overall victory of the Taipings.[32] Both Feng Yunshan and Hong Xuanjiao thus become Hong Xiuquan's reluctant audience, accepting his demoralizing political performance, and even joining forces with him to convince the lower-rank followers that he indeed speaks as God himself.

An even better student of Hong Xiuquan, however, turns out to be Yang Xiuqing. In *Hong Xuanjiao,* for example, as his power struggle with Hong Xiuxuan heats up, Yang Xiuqing himself enters into a trance in the role of "heavenly father" in order to inflict beatings on Hong Xiuquan, whose subsequent despair almost drives him to suicide.[33] In *The Spring and Autumn of the Divine Kingdom,* Yang Xiuqing enters into another trance to force Hong Xuanjiao to confess her jealousy of his female companion. Hong Xuanjiao feels compelled to go along, as if she believed that God inhabited Yang's body, in spite of her disgust with Yang.[34] This unequal gender relationship further intersects with issues of class and educational background when Taiping leaders with scholarly backgrounds find this theatrical religious rite at "strategic moments" "distasteful to China's elite."[35] By dramatizing the theatricality of political life, these playwrights demystified the "heroic" myth of the Taiping leaders. They accidentally anticipated, however, a post-Mao reevaluation of Hong Xiuquan that saw him as an ignorant and powerless pioneer, the first leader to look toward the West for inspiration, but to find there, instead of democracy and science, a pseudoreligious cult.[36] Astonishingly, the playwrights in our inquiry disclosed their doubts and critiques of Taiping leaders seventy years earlier than their post-Mao counterparts.