

# Reconfiguring Red

Class discourses in the new millennium TV adaptation of *The Red Detachment of Women*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper uses a case study of the 2006 TV series remake of the Maoist classic *The Red Detachment of Women* to examine the way the reproduction of the Red Classics in the reform era has functioned to maintain Party foundation myths that validate and morally legitimise its continued rule while accommodating a major shift in class politics in Chinese society. By tracing the change in the identity of the central hero, Hong Changqing, from working class child labourer and son of an ordinary seaman to a middle class, wealthy, overseas Chinese with family origins in the local gentry, the paper argues that the TV series functions to consolidate the symbiotic relationship between the Party and China's new middle class, while promoting a consumer lifestyle and consigning the working class to the margins of social and political power.

**KEYWORDS:** Red Classics, *Red Detachment of Women*, Hong Changqing, China class discourse, China class politics, China working class.

The first decade of the new millennium was notable for the appearance of a series of remakes and adaptations of some of the most iconic Red Classics of the Maoist era. Works made famous in fiction and film of the "seventeen years" and in the model operas of the Cultural Revolution such as *Shajiang* (沙家浜), *The Red Detachment of Women* (Hongse niangzijun 红色娘子军) and *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (Lin Hai xueyuan 林海雪原)/*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (Zhiqu weihushan 智取威虎山) returned in small screen format in TV series running to 20 or 30 episodes. The reappearance of these works has been seen as a response to the failings of the reform process – a nostalgic yearning for a simpler, more idealistic, and more egalitarian past. The works are also significant because the relationship between the current Chinese Communist Party and its Maoist history is quite complex and problematic, raising interesting issues of self-representation for the current regime: on the one hand, the CCP's legitimacy as a ruling party is based on and tied to the Maoist cultural myths of lofty proletarian class heroes who liberated China that were propagated in these same works of classic communist fiction, film, and theatre in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Maintenance of these myths assists the current Party in discursively legitimating its continuing monopoly of political power in the country.

On the other hand, in the post-Mao era of economic reform, the current regime has also to validate its move away from communism towards a consumer capitalist society and distance itself from the excesses of Maoism. In Maoist culture, class was the key defining element of identity. Maoist revolutionary heroes were proletarians, while the villains belonged to the upper classes with the simple binary of proletarian/poor/good/revolutionary – ruling class/rich/evil/anti-revolutionary reflected through narrative supported discursively by multiple semiotic elements of the construction of characters in the Maoist classics. In reform era China, however, getting rich is now encouraged, and the communist leadership promotes the concept of "harmonious society" in place of Mao's class conflict. This raises the question: How have the Red Classics been adapted to enable the Party and regime to deal with these conflicting demands on self-representation in the contemporary era? And how have the foundational myths of the Party been reshaped to

suit the contemporary socio-economic structure of society? The TV adaptations of the Red Classics listed above may be instructive in this respect.

Research into TV adaptations of the Red Classics has seen them as "a conscious act on the part of the market to cash in on audience nostalgia for a collective cultural memory,"<sup>(1)</sup> and part of a "totalitarian nostalgia" evoked by disillusionment with the gaping inequalities and corruption of post-reform China.<sup>(2)</sup> Qian Gong argues that the remakes "aim to demythologize heroes, restore historicity and humanism, and subvert the overtly lofty image of the revolutionaries,"<sup>(3)</sup> while at the same time downplaying ideological issues such as class struggle, nationalism, and patriotism.<sup>(4)</sup> Romanticising relationships and humanising the heroes and villains are identified as the main narrative strategies deployed to attract audiences. In Gong's analysis, the state has chiefly played the role of attempting to limit subversion of the "revolutionary sublime" represented by plot and characters in the original works,<sup>(5)</sup> but the state also sees the remade classics as providing "the opportunity to reinstate socialist values."<sup>(6)</sup>

Gong's analysis sees the Red Classic remakes as the product of contest and compromise between state and commercial interests, and between ideology and the marketplace, in which "class" for both sides is no longer an area of significance and is indeed something that is to be downplayed. In this article I would like to look further into this aspect of the works and argue that while class struggle has indeed been downplayed, the treatment of class in the works is just as significant ideologically as it was in earlier versions.

1. Q. Gong, "A Trip Down Memory Lane: Remaking and Rereading the Red Classics," in Ying Zhu, Michael Keane and Ruoyun Bai (eds), *TV Drama in China*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2008, p. 159.
2. G. Barmé, *In the Red*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, Ch. 12.
3. Q. Gong, "A Trip Down Memory Lane: Remaking and Rereading the Red Classics," *art. cit.*, p. 163.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
6. Similarly, discussing *How the Steel is Forged*, Dai Jinhua saw the TV series as functioning as "a staging of commercial, official and market behaviour." See Dai Jinhua, "Rewriting the Red Classics," in Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin (eds), *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture: Cannibalizations of the Canon*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009.

This article adopts a case study approach focusing on *The Red Detachment of Women* to investigate how discourses of class identity and revolutionary status have been semiotically reshaped in three major areas: 1. Constitution of the revolutionary ranks; 2. Status of the “masses” and the proletariat; and 3. Nature of the enemy and the upper class. As the works under consideration are all visual art forms, this study will consider not just narrative and textual elements of the works, but also their visual elements, including the semiotic significance of costume, props, and other *mise en scène*.

## Background: Creation of The Red Detachment of Women

*The Red Detachment of Women* was first made famous in 1957 as a piece of reportage written by Liu Wenshao 刘文韶 based on interviews with Feng Zengmin 冯增敏, former Company Commander of the Women's Company of the Workers and Peasants Red Army operating in Qiong Yan, Hainan Island. The reportage was published in *PLA Literature and Art (Jiefangjun wenyi 解放军文艺)* in August 1957, and by March 1959 it had been reprinted twice in single copy form as well as in journals such as *China Youth (Zhongguo qingnian 中国青年)* and *Sparks Lighting a Prairie Fire (Xinghuo liaoyuan 星火燎原)*.<sup>(7)</sup> A number of film scripts were created, with the feature film adaptation finally being made by the August First Film Studio in 1960, using a script by Liang Xin 梁信 and directed by Xie Jin 谢晋. The story was turned into a ballet and later a Beijing opera during the Cultural Revolution and became famous in the West for its gun-toting ballerinas. The ballet was immortalised on film in 1971 and is now considered a foundational work of Chinese indigenous ballet. In 2006, at a time when the TV play had become the most influential genre in China's flourishing TV industry,<sup>(8)</sup> and the revival of the Red Classics was in full swing, *The Red Detachment of Women* was remade as a 21-episode TV series as a collaborative production of Hainan Radio and TV, Beijing TV, Beijing TV Arts Centre, and the Eastern Magic Dragon Film Company under the direction of Yuan Jun.

The basic plot of the film, ballet, and TV series remains the same in each work:<sup>(9)</sup> Wu Qionghua 吴琼花 (Qinghua 清华 in the Cultural Revolution productions), a village girl, is orphaned when the local tyrant Nan Batian 南霸天 (literally “Tyrant of the South”) kills her family and takes their home. She is captured and tortured by him but runs away repeatedly. A CCP cadre from the Red Army, Hong Changqing 洪常青 (whose role as central hero of the work is expanded in the ballet version) is on his way back to the local Red Army base in a communist Soviet disguised as a wealthy businessman and saves her. He sets her free and points her towards the women's Red Army base, where she joins the Red Detachment of Women (actually it is a company – *lian* 连), for which Hong is the Party representative. The plot follows Qionghua's gradual maturation under the guidance of Hong Changqing, from hot-headed girl bent on personal revenge to a cool, calm revolutionary who takes over Hong's leadership role after his heroic martyrdom.

## Refashioning class in the Red Classics

### 1. Constitution of the revolutionary ranks

In Maoist literary theory, “it is the basic task of socialist literature and art to create typical models of proletarian heroes.”<sup>(10)</sup> In the Red Classics of the

Maoist era, revolutionary heroes are either self-evidently proletarians (a term that in the Chinese context includes poor peasants) or their proletarian status is affirmed through careful explication of their proletarian origins. Both categories of hero have commonly experienced the cruel deaths of their families at the hands of landlords or capitalist bosses, thereby fuelling their intense class hatred against the wealthy ruling class. In the former category, Li Yuhe 李玉和, the hero of *The Red Lantern (Hongdengji 红灯记)*, is a railway signalman, while Xi'er 喜儿 in *The White-Haired Girl (Bai mao nü 白毛女)* and her lover Wang Dachun 王大春 are both poor peasants. Li Yuhe's fellow apprentice (father of his adopted daughter), along with their master (husband of Li's adopted mother) were killed in a union dispute with bosses, while Xi'er's father was beaten to death by a landlord's lackeys. In the category of heroes whose class background is not so evident, Party branch secretary Fang Haizhen 方海珍, from the model opera *On the Docks (Haigang 海港)*, is revealed to be the daughter of a stevedore, also killed during a union protest, while the heroine of another model opera, *Azalea Mountain (Dujuanshan 杜鹃山)*, Ke Xiang 柯湘, a Party representative sent to take charge of a band of partisans, is the daughter of a miner, whose family was burnt to death because of involvement in miners' strikes. If we look at the central heroic figures of the 1960 film version of *The Red Detachment of Women*, we find a similar representation of class status. Wu Qionghua is an illiterate, homeless poor peasant whose proletarian status is unquestionable. Hong Changqing's class status, however, is more ambiguous, as he is highly literate and has enough familiarity with the polite classical language and manners of the traditional gentry to fool the wily Nan Batian into believing he is a wealthy overseas Chinese businessman from Malaysia (a guise he has assumed in order to smuggle money donated by the Guangzhou unions through to the Red Army). The explanation for his literacy and explication of Hong's genuine proletarian status is, however, provided in a conversation between himself and Qionghua. He says:

When I was small I laboured with my father on oceangoing ships and I didn't go to school until I was over ten. The Guangzhou Seaman's Union paid my tuition fees. I wanted to continue on to upper-middle school, but the reactionaries wiped out the union in a bloodbath. My father was tied up in a sack and thrown into the Pearl River (...) I don't know what happened to my mother, she went blind after my father died. I only escaped from Guangzhou by faking a Hainan accent.

Hong is thus discursively established as a classic Maoist proletarian – a child labourer from a labourer's family, deprived of an education until it was provided with the help of an organisation heavily associated with the work-

7. Liu Wenshao, “Hongse niangzijun” (The Red Detachment of Women), *Jiefangjun wenyi* (PLA Literature and Art), No. 8, 1957, pp. 13-23.

8. Li Li, “The Television Play, Melodramatic Imagination and Envisioning the ‘Harmonious Society’ in Post-1989 China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 69, 2011, pp. 327-341.

9. The TV series includes some plot details that were not included in the film, but appear to be drawn from the original reportage by Liu Wenshao. This includes portrayal of the women soldiers' experience of surviving in the forest after losing contact with the rest of the army, and the emotional trauma they suffered when they lost several of their comrades-in-arms one by one. To put these experiences in context, according to Feng Zengmin's narrative as recorded by Liu, the soldiers of the women's army were mostly 16 and 17-year-olds. The youngest was just 15 and the oldest was 20. See Liu Wenshao, “Wo chuanguo ‘Hongse niangzijun’ de qianqianhouhou” (The whole story of my writing *The Red Detachment of Women*), *Huanqiu shiye* (Global View), 2013, [www.globalview.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=11774](http://www.globalview.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=11774) (accessed 3 January 2014). The TV series acknowledges that it is based on the 1960 film but does not acknowledge Liu's reportage.

10. Chu Lan, “Suzao wuchanjiuji yingxiang dianxing shi shehuizhuyi wenyi de genben renwu” (It is the basic task of socialist literature and art to create typical models of proletarian heroes), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 15 June 1974.

ing class, as well as a direct victim of the brutality of the capitalist class through the death of his father. Hong's class identity as a proletarian is reinforced in the Cultural Revolution ballet version of the work by his being costumed in the patched clothing of a poor peasant in his first appearance on stage, when he rescues Qionghua and famously points the way to the Red Army base and her future as a revolutionary.

In contrast, in the 2006 TV remake, the wealthy Malaysian Chinese identity that Hong feigns in the 1960 film in order to transport funds through Nan Batian's territory is gradually consolidated over several episodes of the series as his *actual* identity, in the process undermining Maoist assumptions about the relationship between wealth, class, and revolutionary status.

The first step in rewriting the class status of Hong Changqing occurs in Episode Three, as Nan Batian questions him, trying to ascertain who he is. Nan is reassured to discover that Hong is a descendent of a famous gentry figure he knew from Hong Family Village in a nearby county. Nan comments that he was famous for "being wealthy and upholding justice" (*wei fu xing yi* 为富行义). Hong Changqing's identity as a seaman's son and poor labourer is thus replaced with a wealthy scholar-gentry ancestry. It is possible that Hong is lying, though this ancestry is substantiated by his fine pocket watch, which he claims is a family heirloom.

Later in Episode Three, the reworked version of "Changqing points the way" further undermines the old class parameters for the revolutionary hero. In the 1960 film, Qionghua, believing Changqing to be a wealthy upper class young man, addresses him as "Shaoye" (少爷 Young sir). Pang 庞, Hong's "servant" (actually his army courier), finds this funny and asks rhetorically "What country do you think he is a 'shaoye' from?" in other words – he is no "shaoye," just an ordinary person. In the Maoist work, any association between wealth or higher class status and a revolutionary identity is not permissible. In the equivalent scene in the TV series, however, Qionghua expresses distrust for Changqing because he, like Nan Batian, is rich. In response, Changqing does not protest that he is not really wealthy as precedent might have predicted; rather, he says to her, "But not all wealthy people are bad people!" (*dan bushi suoyou de youqian ren dou shi huai ren* 但不是所有的有钱人都是坏人呢). Read as a form of intertextual dialogue with the earlier works, his response implies both that he is indeed wealthy and that, contrary to Maoist discourse, the wealthy have a valid place in the ranks of revolutionary heroes.

Episodes Four and Five further consolidate Hong Changqing's wealthy middle class status and also progressively establish his identity as overseas Chinese. In Episode Four, back at the Red Army base, we learn that Hong's smart business attire is not merely a *disguise*, as in the earlier works, but *his own clothing*. He hastens to change into his army uniform, grumbling gently: "These clothes really don't suit me anymore." The Division Commander responds: "You've only been back from Malaysia a few years and you're already not used to wearing your own wardrobe anymore!" The arrival in Episode Five of a wealthy young woman who was Changqing's neighbour in Malaysia and who, in her words, "grew up idolising" him (see the discussion following), further implicitly informs us that Changqing was a long-term resident of Malaysia who lived in a wealthy middle-class neighbourhood there. He later sits down with her and asks her about his family, from whom he has had no news for a long time. This completes the transformation of his class and social identity from impoverished, orphaned, downtrodden, proletarian mainlander to wealthy, middle-class, overseas Chinese businessman whose family lives in Malaysia and whose ancestors were wealthy rural gentry.

Given that Hong Changqing's revolutionary role in the narrative does not change, that is, he still leads the women's company in battle, sacrifices himself to allow the rest of the company to withdraw, and finally dies as a martyr shouting revolutionary slogans, the implications of his change in class status are that the revolution has been transformed into something that belongs not just to the proletariat but to a much broader section of society as well as the Chinese diaspora. The central hero of the revolution no longer belongs to the proletariat, but to the wealthy, educated middle class. Changqing's expressed new distaste for his business suit, and his preference for his army uniform, however, could be seen as a symbol of an ideological move away from the materialism of the middle class towards the more frugal, egalitarian ideals of the proletarian-centred revolution, and a hint of a personal transition towards identification with the working class.

The insertion into the narrative and cast of characters of Changqing's neighbour (mentioned above) takes this remoulding of the revolutionary ranks to its greatest ideological distance from its frugal Maoist origins. The neighbour, who is given the nickname Malaysia Girl (*Nanyangnü* 南洋女) and is a trained nurse, arrives with a doctor who is pursuing her affections and has accompanied her to temporarily indulge her whim of a romantic, exciting revolutionary adventure before taking her safely back home. In Episode Five, the pair arrive at the army base on horseback, the camera focusing on them as they approach the camp so that the first impression of the characters is built from the details of their appearance: Malaysia Girl is perfectly groomed with permed hair like a 1930s film star, a fashionably-cut, elegant white safari suit, and a frilly, white lace parasol to shade her from the sun – marking her as a middle or upper-class woman in contrast to the proletarian women soldiers from the local area. Malaysia Girl is assigned to stay with the Women's Company, and the narrative follows the women soldiers to the dormitory, where they watch in wonder as she unpacks her feminine accoutrements. The camera even provides a close-up of her toiletries bag, revealing luxury consumer items including an elegant lipstick (the gold and black case being a metonym for luxury and expense) and a porcelain jar with a finely moulded lid that could contain powder, face cream, or jewellery – a metonym for wealth and refined taste. Other unidentifiable items seem to be other cosmetics and items made from high-quality silken fabrics. The watching women comment, "You can see at a glance that she's a Miss from a rich family," and stare agog as she changes her shirt, revealing glimpses of a lacy bra. Malaysia Girl's costume and possessions therefore clearly connote a middle class consumer lifestyle, and an enjoyment of material wealth.

Malaysia Girl progresses rapidly from immature and spoilt little rich girl to mature revolutionary (symbolised by the approval of her application to join the Party), but her association with consumerism is never weakened. In Episode Eight, the girls are washing their uniforms in the river and so are dressed in a mixture of civilian clothes and uniforms. Malaysia Girl appears in a floral skirt and an intricately pin-tucked and embroidered blouse, the details of which are clearly shown in an upper body shot. As she passes, one girl calls out admiringly, "Malaysia Girl, your fancy shirt is really pretty." Malaysia Girl responds, "Thanks! Let me tell you all, though: I didn't even bring any of my really beautiful clothes with me!" (*wo haokan de yifu dou hai mei dailai ne* 我好看的衣服都还没带来呢). The light-hearted presentation of this scene is an implicit acceptance of the desire for and enjoyment of non-essential consumer commodities, an endorsement of a bourgeois lifestyle. In contrast to the frugal revolutionaries of old, who only own the patched clothing they are standing in, the new revolutionary has an elegant





**Image 1** – Villagers (1960). © August First Film Studio

travel kit and an extensive wardrobe of beautiful clothing waiting in her suburban home. Ann Anagnost has observed that in reform China, "Consumption is important both as a domain of subject construction and as the production of demand in a national economy plagued by overproduction and deflationary tendencies."<sup>(11)</sup> The refashioned Red Army women of the 2006 TV series fulfil and legitimate both of those functions.

This is not to say that Malaysia Girl lacks any of the traditional revolutionary spirit of the proletarian hero. In Episodes 14 and 15, she and the Doctor are captured by Nan Batian and are executed when they refuse to publicly denounce the Women's Army in exchange for their freedom. The trope of the revolutionary proving their true mettle by choosing death rather than betray the communist cause is hereby extended to the middle-class bourgeois heroine.

After the death of Malaysia Girl, the Red Army women pay their respects at her empty bed in their dormitory. While the women stand to attention in the background, Malaysia Girl's blue sheet is spread out on her bed in a further symbol of her bourgeois sensibilities: in the scene of Malaysia Girl's arrival at the dormitory discussed earlier, she had insisted on using this sheet she had brought with her instead of sleeping on the bare rush mat like the other women. Their respectful laying out of the sheet on top of which they place her army cap symbolises their acceptance of both her class difference and of her status as a revolutionary heroine. In the figures of Malaysia Girl, the Doctor, and the revised Hong Changqing we can see that the wealthy and the bourgeois, once automatically excluded from the ranks of the revolutionary heroes and automatically included in the ranks of the villains, can now be portrayed as leaders of the revolution and protectors of the proletariat.

## 2. The proletariat and class status of the "masses"

In the literature, film, and theatre of the Maoist era that created the foundation myths of the Communist Party as saviour of China and its people, the "masses" are proletarians – workers and peasants immediately identifiable by the patches on their clothes and the simple plain clothing and hairstyles of the poor. Often facing homelessness and starvation, they are nonetheless morally impeccable, selfless, and generous towards their class brothers and sisters, and unwavering supporters of the revolution. The more impoverished and down-trodden the character, the stronger his revolutionary character and credentials.

Image 1 is a still from the 1960 film version of *The Red Detachment of Women* showing typical images of proletarians from the Maoist era – in this frame, villagers from Coconut Grove Village, where Nan Batian's mansion is located. Here the patches on the men's clothes connote their poverty, which in turn denotes their proletarian identity. The ropes around their shoulders are a metonym for the oppression of the poor by the upper classes. Like all proletarians in the Maoist classics, they are bold, defiant, and unyielding. The lies and trickery of the rich villains never deceive them, and they never submit to tyranny or betray the communist cause. They are ordinary heroes, from whose ranks come the super heroes of the communist revolution. Fast-forwarding to the 2006 TV series, the relationship between poverty, virtue, and heroic stature has undergone significant change:

Image 2 shows the most impoverished of the characters in the series, whose costume carries the typical Maoist codes of proletarian heroism – heavy patches on his coarse cloth trousers and shirt. To further connote his poverty he is barefooted. Like a proletarian of the earlier narratives, he has been forced to borrow from the wealthy to buy a fishing boat to support his family, but that has been destroyed in a typhoon, leaving him in debt and his family without food. However, this is where the parallel with the earlier version of *The Red Detachment of Women* ends. This character, whose name, symbolically, is A Gou (阿狗 – Dog – I do not recall any proletarians in Maoist literature with such an uncomplimentary name), first appears downing alcohol and then, in a drunken rage, physically, verbally, and sexually abusing his wife and mistreating his children, so that his wife runs away to join the army. Stupidly naïve, he falls for the tricks of Nan Batian and ends up betraying the women's army and bringing about the death of his wife instead of getting her back. In this character we see a radical revision of class discourse concerning the proletariat. No longer a revolutionary hero, this poorest of the proletariat is a stupid, brutal animal, a bully, a drunkard, and a traitor to the revolution. The Maoist links between proletarian status, heroism, and ownership of the achievements and glory of the revolution have thus been radically destabilised.

At the same time, the 2006 series has undercut Maoist era discourse concerning the masses by largely eliminating the poorest of them from the screen. In Xie Jin's 1960 film, in the dusty, narrow streets of Coconut Grove Village the poor and destitute are in evidence everywhere. Other than the wealthy in their traditional silk garments, the people are dressed in shabby, faded, heavily-patched, simple clothing in plain cotton fabrics. As Hong Changqing leaves Nan Batian's mansion early in the film, a beggar girl chases a silk-clad woman in a rickshaw with hand outstretched, calling, "Pity me! Pity me!" She is ignored. Near a blockhouse, a soldier in KMT uniform beats a ragged coolie. Among the "masses" there is no sign of luxury or excess above the most basic of survival standards. In the TV series, by contrast, shots of the town do not show beggars on the street, and the villagers are no longer in ragged, patched clothes, but are neatly dressed. Short sleeved garments, particularly those of women, appear to be made of fine cottons and sometimes of plain silk. Villagers gossiping about the failed attempt to shoot Nan Batian are relaxing and drinking tea from blue and white porcelain in a neat, clean tea house.<sup>(12)</sup> They have the money and the time to

11. Ann Anagnost, "From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-Era China," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2008, pp. 497-519.

12. Not long after joining the women's army, Wu Qionghua jeopardises a communist mission by taking a shot at Nan Batian and wounding him in the arm. The incident functions in the narrative to illustrate that she is an immature revolutionary still motivated by personal revenge and not yet a mature revolutionary focused on the success of the broader revolutionary cause.



**Image 2** – The poor villager, A Gou (2006). © Hainan Radio and TV, Beijing TV, Beijing TV Arts Centre, Eastern Magic Dragon Film Company

enjoy idle leisure. Out on the orderly streets, neatly-dressed small traders sell fresh produce. Even the poor peasants appear comparatively well off, and Qionghua's family only meets disaster because Nan Batian's *fengshui* specialist happens to select their house and land for the site for the new ancestral temple. The general lack of extreme poverty, hardship, or exploitation means that class difference has been blurred and class antagonism ameliorated along with the extremes of class ideology embedded in the earlier works.

The glamorisation of the women's army for commercial appeal to contemporary TV audiences also contributes to a weakening of class differentiation. Before the shooting of the 1960 film, Xie Jin made his actors perform military drills for several months on location in Hainan, keeping their "guns" with them day and night and training in the sun so their skins became coarse and tanned and they gained a sense of the real experiences of the poor peasant women/soldiers they were to play.<sup>(13)</sup> In contrast, the actors in the TV series have the more fashionable delicate white skins of the non-labouring classes and a variety of quite fashionable versions of the short "Red Army" women's haircuts. Their class status as poor peasants is also thrown into question by the choice of perfect standard Mandarin as the accent for all characters in the series. Inevitably, the choice of standard Mandarin carries with it connotations of an educated middle-class speaker.<sup>(14)</sup>

The discussion above points to the conclusion that in the TV series remake, the proletariat's role as agents and heroes of the revolution has been weakened and the proletariat itself has been largely transformed into lower middle-class urbanites, small entrepreneurs, and landed peasants. It is ironic that in reform-era, post-millennium China, with its huge population of poor and underprivileged, the revolution that was supposed to belong to them has been largely erased of their presence.

### 3. The nature of the enemy and the upper classes

Discussion above has shown how the class identity of the heroes of the Mao era has been expanded in the TV series from the sole realm of the proletariat to incorporate elements from the wealthy middle class, intellectuals, and overseas Chinese. Similarly we see a blurring of the relationship between villainy and the upper class.

Whereas in the 1960 film and the Model Ballet, the upper class was a homogeneous group of heartless, oppressive, wealthy rural gentry steeped in

moribund Confucian tradition and united in support of Nan Batian, in the TV series, the corresponding group of local gentry are just as manipulated and exploited by Nan Batian as the general population. They are milked ruthlessly for funds for "welfare" and "defence," and are outraged at Nan Batian's hypocrisy and greed, but are helpless to protect themselves against him. Visually they do not display the excessive opulence and extravagance of the evil rural gentry of the Maoist era, but are dressed in traditional trousers and jackets of plain silk in conservative colours and have "normal" hairstyles. In a scene in which members of the local ruling gentry attend a meeting with Nan Batian, the group of four men display considerable variation in nature and appearance: a gentle, refined, elderly man seems to belong to the traditional scholarly elite, one middle-aged man appears to be a relatively more practical and modern village head, while one man appears a little dandified. One of the group is the rather uncouth, dull-witted, and sycophantic vice-mayor who clearly owes his position to Nan Batian, but who nonetheless sympathises with the complaints of the others when out of Nan Batian's earshot. There is no evidence presented of their acting oppressively towards the lower classes, other than that we know they are being forced to collect "contributions" to Nan Batian's schemes. On the contrary, they are shown to be concerned about the damage caused by a typhoon, and outraged that the money collected will line Nan Batian's pockets instead of going to the victims. In the TV series, then, the Maoist era negative, class-based stereotypes of the upper class have been discarded along with the class antagonism and oppression that was presented in earlier works as the basis for the need for class struggle. As the new Hong Changqing observed, "Not all wealthy people are evil."

The revision of this Red Classic has even seen the class basis removed from the conflict between the villain Nan Batian and Wu Qionghua and the image of the villain complexified. In the TV series, Nan Batian remains a staunch traditionalist, as reflected in his traditional mandarin-collar silk suits, his love of ancient calligraphies, and his exclusive use of traditional furnishings (other than a collection of clocks that symbolise his impending demise).<sup>(15)</sup> But he no longer wears the long silk gowns of his earlier incarnations except at a ceremony to celebrate the completion of his family ancestral temple. Interestingly in this case, the long traditional gown still does symbolise the evils of "cannibalistic" Confucianism, as the ceremony is to include a human sacrifice of either Qionghua or the baby of one of the Red Detachment women. As the central negative character in the series, Nan Batian is portrayed as a ruthless psychopath bent on expanding his own wealth and power who hides his greed behind high-sounding quotations from the Confucian classics. He is no longer presented as a typical example of the nature of a whole class, but as an evil individual who acts only to promote his own self-interest and who cannot abide any opposition. However, even he is permitted a softer side, as he is utterly devoted to his mother and is tormented by his failure to fulfil his filial duties to her and his ancestors – his failure to produce a son and complete the ancestral tem-

13. No author cited. "Stories Behind the Film," in *Hongse niangzijun* (Red Detachment of Women) (a film still *lianhuanhua* version of the story), Zhao Yunsheng and Liu Fenglu (eds), Beijing, China Film Press, 8th page of section.

14. The 1960 film was also in standard Mandarin, but Zhu Xijuan, who plays Wu Qionghua, speaks with a slight southern accent and in a slightly gravelly tone that is more suggestive of the regional dialect-speaking peasant she is playing.

15. Only in the guest room where Hong Changqing spends the night do we see Western furniture, in this case French period furniture, Western oil paintings, and a Western statuette. This could be seen to associate Hong with a cultured cosmopolitan international outlook (and hence enhance the character's appeal to a contemporary Chinese urban middle-class audience) in contrast to Nan Batian's narrow traditional outlook.

ple to ensure continuity of the family line and spiritual care of the ancestors. In fact, Nan Batian's conflict with Qionghua is now presented as based on her thwarting of both of these plans by refusing to become his concubine (and bear him a son) and by sabotaging the temple that is being built on the old site of her parents' home.<sup>(16)</sup> Nan Batian's mother dies before the temple is complete, escalating his desire for personal revenge to new heights. The importance of class in the construction of the central villain has thus been subordinated to personal antagonism deriving from Nan Batian's personality disorder and the burden of his attempts to fulfil the heavy expectations of Confucian tradition.

In line with the weakening of clear class-based identities, the language of Maoist class discourse has also been mostly dropped from the TV series. Words and phrases such as "class" and "class struggle" have largely disappeared, and "proletariat" is repeatedly replaced with the vague term "poor people" (*qiong ren* 穷人). For example, Changqing describes the Red Army as "an army of poor people" (*yizhi qiongren de duiwu* 一支穷人的队伍) when encouraging Qionghua to join. This is not to say that politics has disappeared, however, as discourses surrounding the Party have been preserved. Party membership continues to be promoted as both to be aspired to and not easily achieved. Both Qionghua and Malaysia Girl apply to join the Party but are not approved until they have proven their integrity and loyalty through extraordinary trials. When approval is finally given, Qionghua's swearing of the oath is presented as an intensely emotional, near religious experience. So too is the death of Hong Changqing, who recites the communist pledge as he walks onto his execution pyre. In this way the reworked foundation myth of the revolution continues to legitimise the Party and communism as having a sublime religious significance while drawing back from the class politics of the Maoist era.

### **Conclusions: The Red Classic remake as a symbol of the symbiotic relationship between the Party and the new middle class**

The changes in the representation of class in the 2006 TV series remake of *The Red Detachment of Women* can be summarised from the discussions above as follows:

1. The proletariat has been marginalised. The lowest rungs of society, the beggars, poorest peasants, and manual labourers receive little representation in the TV series, and the former association of the central hero, Hong Changqing, with the proletariat through his seaman and unionist father has been removed. Wu Qionghua is no longer a slave girl, and although she is the daughter of a poor (though landed) peasant family, her glamorised appearance and perfect standard Mandarin accent belie a proletarian status. The most proletarian of the characters, A Gou, is stupid, brutal, abusive and betrays the revolution, reflecting a downgrading of the status of the class and a negation of the former characterisation of the class as intrinsically revolutionary and noble in nature.
2. Upper class status and wealth are no longer inevitably associated with villainy.
3. Concepts of a fixed class nature are substantially undermined, and there is a blurring of class difference. As seen above, proletarians are no longer always revolutionary or even necessarily positive characters; the upper classes are not always evil and may ally themselves with the revolution. Characters of all classes are also seen to develop and shift their revolutionary status in the course of the narrative. Nan Batian's wife switches from an exploitative role on behalf of Nan Batian to supporting the revolution and playing a crucial role in the success of the Women's Army's final attack on Nan Batian's stronghold.
4. The ranks of revolutionaries have been expanded, with the middle class and bourgeoisie taking over the central roles in the revolution. Hong Changqing's shift from proletarian labourer to wealthy overseas businessman discursively includes both the middle class and Chinese from the diaspora in the revolutionary ranks.
5. Clothing styles, fabrics, and accessories associated with the middle and upper classes and an affluent consumer lifestyle are associated with revolutionary heroism. The remake implicitly endorses the revolutionary heroine Malaysia Girl's interest in fashion and her financial ability to purchase it, thus disassociating the Red Classics from Maoist puritanism and substituting and validating in its place the consumerism of the current age. Modern consumer capitalism symbolically replaces Maoist socialist frugality and egalitarianism in the foundation myths of the communist state.

Scholarly analysis has given us an understanding of remakes of the Red Classics as a product of the tension between politics and market demand: the state's desire to maintain the integrity of sacred Maoist mythology versus producers' desire to demythologise and humanise so as to appeal to audiences.<sup>(17)</sup> This understanding of the remakes emphasises them as points of resistance to and contest with the state. However, the analysis above suggests that the revised works also perform a function of endorsing and normalising changes in class power and structure that have taken place in China since the beginning of the reform era, in particular the rise of the new capitalist and middle classes. As sociological studies have shown, in China since the 1990s: "The emerging state-capitalist relation is characterised by the fusion of political capital of the cadres, the economic capital of the capitalists, and the social/network capital embedded in local society," creating "an all-powerful hybrid which can be called a 'cadre-capitalist' class."<sup>(18)</sup> Many new entrepreneurs emerged from within the Party-state, and where they did not they were rapidly incorporated into it.<sup>(19)</sup> The Party switched from banning entrepreneurs from acquiring membership to actively recruiting them into the Party.<sup>(20)</sup> At the same time, the middle class that emerged after 1989 had lost its interest in anti-state politics, and many saw joining the Party and bureaucratic employment as a channel for upward mobility.<sup>(21)</sup> This was a mutually beneficial relationship: the Party needed the middle class/entrepreneurs to create the wealth that would make their economic reforms a success and validate the Party's continuing existence, and given that the middle class/entrepreneurs were no longer interested in pursuing political change, they also needed the Party to recognise them, incorporate them into their symbolic system, and validate them. The remake of

16. Typically, Chinese culture associates negative characters with either sexual excess or sexual sterility. In this case it is revealed that although he and his mother blame his wife for the failure to produce a child, in fact it is Nan Batian who is infertile.

17. Q. Gong, "A Trip Down Memory Lane: Remaking and Rereading the Red Classics," *art. cit.*

18. A. Y. So, "The Changing Patterns of Classes and Class Conflict in China," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, No. 33, 2003, p. 369.

19. M. Chen and D. S. G. Goodman, "Introduction: Middle Class China – Discourse, Structure and Practice," in M. Chen and D. S. G. Goodman (eds), *Middle Class China: Identity and Behaviour*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

21. A. Y. So, "The Changing Patterns of Classes and Class Conflict in China," *art. cit.*, p. 371.

*The Red Detachment of Women* can be seen to fulfil these functions. For the Party, the Red Classic remake reaffirms the foundation myth of the regime and legitimises the continuation of its ruling position. For the middle-class, the remake gives them a place in the revolutionary pantheon, incorporating them into the foundation myths of the regime as the major agents of the victory of the revolution. At the same time, in keeping with the state drive for economic growth, the remake is an endorsement of middle-class consumption and a backwards projection of contemporary consumer culture onto the myths of the communist past. In the world of the 2006 revolutionary myth there is room within the revolution for people from all classes: a “harmonious society” to replace the strident class antagonisms of the Maoist era, where the role of the proletariat is now to admire the material possessions of the heroes who have displaced them and to aspire to eventually join them as part of the middle class.

In communist culture, the hand has always been a powerful symbol of the revolution. The powerful coarse hand of the worker or peasant featured

prominently in the visual culture of the Maoist era as a symbol of the dominant narrative of the power of the proletariat and their position as masters of the nation. This trope features clearly in Xie Jin’s film of 1960, where Qionghua’s fist – powerful, coarse, tanned, and dirty – symbolises her resolution to fight to the death for the communist victory. In the remake, the hand of the revolutionary has changed. As Malaysia Girl prepares to be martyred for the cause, there is a close-up of her hand: a clean, white, slender hand with perfectly manicured nails and even a layer of clear nail varnish. The proletariat has been ousted from the central role in the grand narrative of revolutionary mythology, and in their place are the middle class consumers of the bourgeoisie.

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