

Modernity Mythology: Reconstruction of Female's Narrative Associated with The Red Detachment of Women

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ABSTRACT

Revolutionary drama is not only a guiding star of Chinese drama revolution in the 20th century but also serves as a critical concept to explain the paradox between Chinese women's liberation and political revolution in the 20th century. In particular, *The Red Detachment of Women*, among the eight model operas, is a classic text with the greatest aesthetic value. Hence, this paper analyzes its creation process, plot patterns and narration strategies with an attempt to discuss how *The Red Detachment of Women* covers up the voice of grass-root women, which reminds people to abandon the linear theory of historical progress as well as to review and reconsider feminist revolution narrative from the perspectives of modernity discontinuity and shadow.

Keywords: *Red Detachment of Women, Modernity, Female*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will sort out and introduce the plot of *The Red Detachment of Women*, and analyze from the plot of *The Red Detachment of Women* that the elite narrative reflected in Wu Qionghua's rescue by Hong Changqing is a part of the national myth. Then, starting from the creation process of *the Red Detachment of Women*, the paper explains the relationship between the aphasia of the women in the lower class and the one-sided interview of female cadres. Finally, it points out the phellus worship and libido politics in the narrative strategy. These together constitute the modern myth of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the popularity of the ballet drama *The Red Detachment of Women*, there were few in-depth studies or analyses on it from the 1960s to the 1970s, due to the influence of campaigning-type governance of mainland China and long-term stagnancy of liberal arts. Due to the linguistic turn of cultural studies, an increasingly number of discussions on feminism and cultural anthropology took place since the 1990s and they reached the peak in the beginning of the 21st century. Existing studies might be divided into three categories

based on different approaches. Zhang Jingjing (2008) uses the close reading method to analyze the screenplay of *The Red Detachment of Women*, with an attempt of representing the creation process of the screenplay and interpreting it from the aesthetic perspective through the prism of the societies. The structuralism method was introduced to analyze the text making relation during the adaption process, just as Hu Xinmin wrote *The Path to the Classics: The Ballet Drama The Red Detachment of Women*. Also, The feminist method of the communication theory was employed to analyze how female's utterance was suppressed by revolutionary dramas, including Luo Changqing's *Female's Narrative during the Image-building of The Red Detachment of Women*. Despite the discussions, there are only a limited number of discussions on the reason why grass-root women were prevented from speaking out for themselves by using the language-cultural power method. Overseas scholar such as Emily Wilcox provides impressive arguments on related topics in her *Revolutionary Bodies*. Her work focus was on the display of the intertextuality of ethnic dance and national awareness. This paper will use close reading of the text to discuss the influence of the grass-root women from a feminist approach to reconstruct the female's narrative associated with *The Red Detachment of Women*.

This paper attempts to deconstruct *The Red Detachment of Women* as a modern myth by reading the symptoms on the basis of the close reading of the text. After the deconstruction of the myth, all solid things will melt away and the voices of the women of the lower classes will be heard.

3. MODERNITY NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY OF THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN

3.1 Modernity National Mythology: Background of the Story of *The Red Detachment of Women*

The Red Detachment of Women sheds light on a classic political story about women's revolt, dating back to the 1930s when the head of a mysterious social organization, Nan Batian had fun in bullying ordinary people and raping women on Hainan Island. Born and raised on Hainan Island, a girl from an impoverished peasant family called Wu Qionghua was forced to be a slavery of Nan Batian. One day, an overseas tycoon came and visited Nan Batian and Qionghua was taken to that "tycoon" as a gift. The tycoon set her free on his way back. Qionghua looked at such a young and handsome tycoon and was confused about his intention. Anyway, she trekked through the jungle as fast as she could on those rainy and stormy days to reach the revolutionary base area and get in touch with the Chinese Worker's and Peasants' Red Army. She joined a company composed of workwomen only - *The Red Detachment of Women*. When meeting the Party Representative Hong Changqing, she was surprised to find he was exactly the overseas tycoon who once saved her. It turned out Hong dressed up like an overseas tycoon to complete a secret mission. Qionghua hated Nan Batian very much. During a reconnaissance, she spotted Nan Batian, became angry and shot at him without approval. However, Qionghua missed a shot and Nan Batian had a chance to run away, which gave away her position and intention instead. Hong Changqing criticized her for improper acts and she learned a big lesson from it and had a stronger sense of mission. Later, Nan Batian colluded with the Army of Kuomintang to invade the base area. After successively blocking the enemies, Hong Changqing was wounded seriously to cover the retreat of his comrades. Unfortunately, he was captured and ended with a martyr's death. Soon after that, the Red Army liberated the Yelin Village and shot Nan Batian to death. Because Qionghua was brave in the battle, she was enrolled in the Communist Party of China and took over the position of Party Representative of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

This is a classic rebellious narrative following the style of Vladimir Propp, so it is sensible that this

screenplay won popularity among ordinary people and the leaders of the Communist Party of China. However, while reexamining the creation process of the screenplay, the design of female characters and positioning as well as narrative strategies, the readers might identify several uncoordinated elements. When it comes to this rebellious narrative, Wu Qionghua's character initiative came out of class narrative and revolutionary narrative. Wu Qionghua, who was from an impoverished peasant family of middle and lower classes on Hainan Island, fled away and met an elite gentleman. Politically enlightened by him, Wu Qionghua had her class subjectivity become evident. The Communist Party of China regarded women's liberation as important resources to justify its legalization establishment and development, and thus showcased *The Red Detachment of Women* to visualize the power. By constructing this sort of national mythology in all ranks and classes, the Communist Party of China could obtain the exclusive discourse power pertaining to women's liberation and women's movement and be close to political decision-making of characterizing the Party with its sole, thorough and actual revolution.

3.2 Modernity Discontinuity: Discourse Losing of Women of Middle and Lower Classes within the Context of Text Generation

In light of text generation, the communication theorist Harold Dwight Lasswell put forward the 5W Theory in his masterpiece *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, with a focus on "Who Is Saying". The screenplay creation of *The Red Detachment of Women* is reviewed again and the screenplay is found to have many creation sources: Liu Wenzhao, the author of the reportage; Wu Zhi, the screenwriter of Hainan operas, and Liang Xin, the producer of the film, and these people work together to build the storyline of this ballet drama *The Red Detachment of Women*. However, these creators had little knowledge about *The Red Detachment of Women* or any other women's special duty unit before they worked on the plot. Liu Wenzhao and Liang Xin are neither from Hainan nor served in the Army before; despite Wu Zhi is local, as a young man, he had to gain an understanding of the story through the interview with people [1]. Text creation requires some imagination space. A stream of imagination might lead to an in-depth understanding of the historical context. Whereas, according to some documents [2], these writers lacked a knowledge of such a women's special duty unit before creation, which means it is more like a product of political propaganda. What is more, these creators collected materials in the countryside as cadres, following a rule that political propaganda should be from top to bottom which has been inherited since ancient China. Some writers, who were actually

officials, collected materials all over the nation to praise the dynasty's greatness. For example, the renowned *The Book of Songs* includes a large number of "from top to bottom" documents. Although those writers asserted that they interviewed several members of the women's special duty unit, their focus was on the cadre Feng Zengmin and little attention was paid to ordinary female soldiers, which implies the lack of the voice from the women of middle and lower classes. It is questionable that whether ordinary female soldiers are allowed to speak out for themselves, just as the saying of Gayatri Spivak "Whether the voice of subalterns is heard".

3.3 Modernity's Libidinous Shadow: Phallic Adoration in Terms of Dramatic Mode

Phallic adoration is born out of the criticism of psychoanalytic feminism. In the view of scholars from the Lacan School, a baby finally grows into an independent individual after experiencing two stages. One stage is to shape the original self through the mirror stage; the other one is to go through a complete Phallic stage, which overcomes the Oedipus complex, a severe reliance on mother and recognizes the Phallic principle, and the matriarchal shortage. Clinical symptoms are described as: a period during which the baby gradually realizes that only a male has a penis. Nevertheless, there is a critical difference between infantile sexuality and adult sexuality. Even for children of the both sexes, the only thing that can draw their attention is the male's sexual organ. Hence, what has been exhibited is not the primacy of the sexual organ but rather the primacy of "Phallus". Due to the realization of the presence and absence of male sexual organ, children are made to recognize the difference between boys and girls. "Phallus", with the reference to the theory of the Lacan School, exists as a pure signifier, which is exactly privileged, instead of confusion with the male sexual organ. As Slavoj Žižek pointed out, if the society wants to regulate its realistic experience for a harmonious structure, there is a need to depress the internal conflict that can be critical [3]. However, in the model opera *The Red Detachment of Women*, the discontinuity of narrative subject brings out such a formula of sexuation as well.

The discontinuity of narrative subject in terms of plot mode leads to Phallic adoration consciously or unconsciously. In the model opera, Jiang Qing, the director of the ballet *Red Detachment of Women* and the senior cadre of China, largely modified the screenplay of the film *The Red Detachment of Women* to underscore the Party's pioneer-type leadership and Female's hardship narrative was replaced by stereotyped and masculine class attribute, which can be represented in naming. Naming is a general violence that cannot be argumentative. Naming-related discourse power is directly linked to political power. To be different from

the character prototype Wu Qionghua "who used to make a mistake", the heroine's name was changed to "Wu Qinghua". As for the standing of colleges and universities in Mainland China, Qinghua refers to a high level of red political implication and technicality. A lot of original background settings and plots were removed to adapt to the modified character, which caused the stylization and complanation. Different from the design of the original character who bore family hatred and nation misery, Wu Qinghua ran away several times to avoid the bullying of the despotic landlord in the model opera. After the blood feud of individual and her family was taken away, Wu Qinghua became a bare life and then the contradiction between Wu Qinghua and Nan Batian fell into the category of class struggle between proletariat and squirearchy. Such imagination or asexualization is not just the discontinuity caused by the politics book but also stands for the violence from the Real. The stereotyped Wu Qinghua is to give place to the Party Representative Hong Changqing. In the model opera, the image of Hong Changqing was changed from an overseas special agent to a spy dressing like a peasant. He said to Wu Qinghua, "Do not be afraid, we are poor people, nothing different from you". "We" hereby refers to the worker-peasant alliance, and also "the people" (the word people written in lower case) [4]. Giorgio Agamben argued that the people is just a subset that excludes all the fragmentary diversity other than the body because of poverty. On the one hand, it echoes the concept coming from Paul, who deems himself to have nothing but his body. On the other hand, it is a notion of exclusion, which brings no hope to people. This involves the entire sovereign stage and the integrated citizen entity, and it also implies the repulsion of the unfortunate, the oppressed and the conquered – whether this a court of miracles or an asylum. That is to say Hong Changqing took "We" as a redeemer. Wu Qinghua owns nothing but her own hardship, which symbolized the monopoly of every single possibility of redemption by the Party Representative of Worker-Peasant Alliance Hong Changqing. Mr. Li Yang used to point out "In a sense, this image implies the self-design and the self-recognition of a governing class" [5]. The elite of the vanguard not only mastered phellus, but also the naming rights of what was liberated, by whom, and how. Naming rights are a form of universal violence with no place for reparation. As the object of liberation, only through the admiration of the vanguard cadre Philes, can enter the court of miracles.

Such a from-top-to-bottom and vanguard-type redemption is also reflected the romantic relationship between Wu Qinghua and Hong Changqing – a kind of political metaphor. Wu Qinghua expressed her Phallic adoration to Hong Changqing to complete a historic prospect of women's liberation. In the film directed by Xie Jin, Wu Qionghua was a straightforward, tough and resilient woman from South China and a continuous

steam of life tension was seen in her eyes. Besides, in close-up shots, her growth and journey were placed within the complete context. When she was kept in the water dungeon and hung from the beam, the actress well delivered a mixed feeling of a young girl at her age, including fear and anger. When she ran into Nan Batian, her frown was attributed to inner hatred of Nan Batian, admiration of Hong Changqing and concern about the army's discipline. Such a way of treatment not just displayed vividly a girl's hatred of class enemies, but also exhibited all aspects of the character's psychology. Nevertheless, in the ballet opera *The Red Detachment of Women*, which was tailored by Jiang Qing, the personality and life experience of either Wu Qionghua or Wu Qinghua became stylized and lacked the detailed description of why she had a hatred of Nan Batian. Many close-up shots which showed complex human nature were deleted. The shortage of details in the description of Wu Qinghua was to demonstrate a filler of such ideologies represented by the Party Organization under the leadership of Nan Batian. Stylized Wu Qinghua was depicted as one of proletariat to be redeemed. On through the admiration of Hong Changqing and the loyalty to the organization, she could complete the transition from a non-citizen to a citizen and from non-human to human. Zizek pointed out, "when I reflected upon the implied irony from the Lacan's comments 'you will get there if you these revolutionaries want to be another master.' The need of another master still aims at the male standpoint within the psychoanalysis context and this is caught in Phallic force." [6] The character of Wu Qinghua is castrated, and she must lose her subjectivity through castrating, so as to establish women's identification with Phallus and liberation from the top down. This is also the gender shadow of the Chinese revolution in the 20th century.

4. CONCLUSION

The ballet opera *The Red Detachment of Women* revealed the spectacular history of the struggles of Chinese women's and particularly female special duties unit for liberation in a sense. However, *The Red Detachment of Women* was introduced to construct national mythology and discourse power of the Communist Party of China and the interview on female cadre rather than ordinary female soldiers was adopted during the process of screenwriting, which was one-sided. The heroine's activity was not subject to female's own revolutionary subjectivity but followed the Phallic principle. Women's discourse losing in *The Red Detachment of Women* could be a miniature of Chinese revolutionary women in the 20th century as National Mythology, Modernity Discontinuity and Modernity's Libidinous Shadow, reminding people to abandon the linear theory of historical progress as well as to review and reconsider feminist revolution narrative

from the perspectives of modernity discontinuity and shadow.

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