

A Revolutionary Ballet

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Last year, for the first time since the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, China released two feature films which have since been shown around the world, including the United States. One of them is the film version of *The Red Detachment of Women*, a modern revolutionary ballet. Although the film version was released only last year, the work has over the past seven years been the subject of 'struggle-criticism-transformation' involving the highest levels of the Party, with the direct participation of Chiang Ching.

The Red Detachment of Women was originally the theme of a feature film made in 1964 based on a story written by Liang Hsin. First drafted in 1958, it was written and revised in 1959 and 1960. The scenario of the film was written by Hsieh Chin, but this first film version contained a number of serious ideological errors. On the advice of Chiang Ching, *The Red Detachment of Women* was staged for the first time as a ballet in October 1964 during the celebrations of the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. At this time Chairman Mao attended its performance and declared that in this new version 'the orientation is correct, the revolutionisation successful, and the artistic quality good.' This was just the beginning, however, of a fierce struggle which was to take place between

two lines in the arts in general. *The Red Detachment of Women* was one of the centres of contention. Chou Yang, Vice-Director of the Propaganda Department of the Party Central Committee and Vice-Minister of Culture, leading the proponents of bourgeois art, opposed the new ballet version of *The Red Detachment of Women* and attempted to change its direction. Calling the work an 'ugly daughter-in-law' and 'crude stuff', they tried to keep Mao's instructions from the cast and continued to show their film version which was being screened as late as June 1966, when I saw it in Harbin.

The Red Detachment of Women is set in the Second Revolutionary Civil War Period (1927-1937) and is the story of a Red Army Women's Company operating on Hainan Island. Wu Ching-hua, a poor peasant's daughter, is a slave in the house of a despotic landlord, Tyrant of the South (Nan Pa-tien). The ballet opens with Ching-hua chained to a post in Tyrant's dungeon where she is being beaten for having attempted to escape. When she is unchained, she kicks over her captor and escapes into a near-by coconut grove. Hotly pursued, she is recaptured, badly beaten, and left for dead. Hung Chang-ching, the Party representative of the Red base area, and Pang, his messenger, passing through the area on a

scouting mission, come upon the barely revived Ching-hua. They listen to her story, and advise her to go to the Red base. Ching-hua arrives at the Red base while the Red Army men and civilians are celebrating the formation of the Red Army Women's Company. She is warmly received and accepted into their ranks. (The new version contrasts with the feature film in which her freedom is purchased from Tyrant by Hung Chang-ching, and Ching-hua lacks the defiance portrayed in the ballet.)

Tyrant of the South holds a grand party on his birthday. Hung Chang-ching, disguised as a wealthy overseas Chinese merchant, comes with Pang and others to offer his congratulations. After presenting a gift, he is invited to stay the night in the manor as the landlord's guest. Meanwhile, it has been planned that that night Hung will fire a signal shot for the Red Army to attack the manor, while he and his group strike from within. Wu Ching-hua, however, in disguise, has slipped into the house. Upon sighting Tyrant, she impulsively fires a shot at him. The Red Army men outside mistake this for Hung's signal and prematurely storm the manor. Tyrant and his chief henchmen Lao Szu escape in the confusion. After the stronghold is taken, the Red Army men distribute the stored grain to the local people who hold a celebration. However, Ching-hua's breach of discipline has upset the original plan. Her reckless action stemming from her purely personal desire for revenge becomes a lesson to the whole company to follow Chairman Mao's teaching: 'Only by emancipating all mankind can the proletariat achieve its own final emancipation.' Ching-hua begins to understand that she must fight for the emancipation of all mankind all her life.

The Company learns that reactionary Kuomintang troops are moving to attack the Red base. The Red Army, militiamen, and Red Guards immediately

go to intercept the enemy at a mountain pass. After bitter fighting Hung orders the men to move out, while he remains behind to delay the enemy. Seriously wounded and unconscious, he is taken prisoner by Tyrant and his men. Meanwhile, fresh Red Army units begin to move in against Tyrant's men. Tyrant, trying to save himself from total defeat, attempts to coerce an agreement from Hung who indignantly refuses. Fearless and heroic, Hung dies a martyr's death. When the Red Army arrives at Tyrant's manor, Ching-hua shoots the despotic landlord, killing him on the spot. Strengthened by more volunteers, the Red Army Women's Company marches forward.

The Red Detachment of Women was the first notable example of an art work carrying out Mao's concept of 'making foreign things serve China', and as such it is also the first example of Mao's thought being applied to remould ballet. The introduction of ballet into China dates back to the thirties when Russian émigrés started a ballet school in Shanghai, but it never got very far, most of the students being Europeans living in Shanghai. In 1954 the Peking Dancing Academy was founded; in 1957 a ballet department was set up. In 1959 the first experimental ballet troupe was organised. During this period full-length performances of *Vain Precautions*, *The Corsair*, *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, and *Notre Dame de Paris* as well as scenes from other ballets were given.

Historically, ballet has been a classical Western art form foreign to China and monopolised by the bourgeoisie. Mao's directive to 'make foreign things serve China' meant, however, that ballet was to 'serve' the proletariat, the workers, and the peasants rather than the bourgeoisie. Chou Yang and his followers, however, asserted that ballet must be 'thoroughly Western' and that it was the 'acme of art, something that cannot be surpassed.'

In terms of theme and presentation

this meant that aristocrats, swans, and immortals should be portrayed, not workers, peasants, and soldiers, that only so-called 'eternal themes' such as love, life and death, virtue and evil should be depicted, not the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat. They said that 'China's first ballet must be *Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai*', a Romeo and Juliet type story of love between a fair lady and a poor scholar in ancient China. In contrast, the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* has as its theme Mao's thesis of 'armed revolution to oppose armed counter-revolution.'

In form and content classical European ballets like *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* are essentially romantic. This imparts to their mode of dancing a distinctive style, an ethereal quality, often as if the dancers were floating in the air. With content and form closely linked, over the centuries ballet evolved an aesthetic theory and a whole set of conventions to express its romantic spirit.

Thus, when staging the revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, the old choreography was found to be far from adequate, and some dances completely unusable. As old characters were driven off the stage and replaced with workers, peasants, and soldiers, form too had to be changed accordingly. A new choreography had to be created which reflected the 'fresh, lively Chinese style and spirit which the common people of China love', and which followed as well Mao's directions that heroic figures be depicted 'on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life.'

Suitable features of Chinese drama and folk dance were adapted to a new ballet choreography. For instance, one characteristic feature of the new choreography is the *liang-hsiang*, a still statue-like pose taken from the conventions of Peking opera. The *liang-hsiang* is meant to reveal clearly the essence of a

character from his first appearance. Thus when Hung Chang-ching appears at Tyrant's manor, his radiant upright pose shines above the stooped decrepitude of Tyrant's henchmen, unmistakably identifying his heroic goodness. Conventional movements and gestures of Peking opera have also been adapted to the purposes of ballet. For example, in the ballet's final scene, Wu Ching-hua uses the 'reclining fish' movement of Peking opera as she leaps and kills the escaping Tyrant. The spinning somersaults she makes during her flogging in the first scene symbolise her fiery rebellious character, quite a different sort of heroic than is usually seen in the more demure females of classical ballet.

In classical ballet the corps de ballet, which in effect represent the masses, usually performs dances which have little or nothing to do with the main theme and plot of the ballet, being empty in content and mainly for decorative purposes. Lin Mo-han supported this view of the corps de ballet, and, in opposing Chiang Ching, asserted that ballet should 'concentrate on one individual and one action,' glorifying the bourgeois struggle of the individual rather than the collective struggles and experiences of the masses.

In *The Red Detachment of Women*, however, group dances have important dramatic functions. For example, in the first scene the dance of the four slave girls in sympathy with the suffering of Wu Ching-hua underscores how closely Ching-hua's fate is linked with others like her. In subsequent scenes such group dances as the bayonet dance, the shooting dance, the grenade-throwing dance, as well as the dagger dance, the litchi dance, and the straw hat dance, all take their motifs from the theme of the ballet, portraying in some dances the militancy of the Women's Detachment and in others the close ties between the army and the people.

The struggle over this ballet dealt with many questions, often seemingly

small details of form which implied much larger political meanings. In the scene 'Going to His Death', Hung Chang-ching executes a series of leaps while the stooped enemy appears like a gang of crawling, stray dogs, and the militant song 'Forward, Forward!' plays in the background—a very graphic composition of revolutionary romanticism. Lin Mo-han said, however, that since Hung is seriously wounded, it is not realistic for him to stand up chest high and head raised. This was in contradiction to Chiang Ching's instruction to portray the earlier generation of revolutionaries as splendid figures.

In another instance, Chiang Ching had urged the use of more folk music, but Lin Mo-han said that folk music was 'rather insipid', 'not very beautiful', and 'somewhat wooden'. In the second scene, however, young people perform the sword dance of the Li nationality; in the third scene Li girls dance a traditional dance, as do the guerillas and the people in the fourth scene.

In the initial planning for the ballet, Lin Mo-han said that the heroine should look sad and distressed, and that for her to lift a fist would not be appropriate to her character. This was how she was portrayed in the original feature film. However, Chiang Ching instructed that Wu Ching-hua's spirit of revolt should be strengthened. It was reported that after each meeting Chiang Ching had with the cast, Lin Mo-han called another meeting to oppose her views. Chou Yang and his followers resorted to many tactics in an attempt to destroy the revolutionary character of *The Red Detachment of Women*, even going to the extreme of drastically distorting Chiang Ching's views out of all recognition. This tactic of waving the red flag to oppose the red flag was often used during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Traditional ballet theory holds that choreography should be subordinate to the musical score which is the determining factor. In breaking with this dogma, the music of *The Red Detachment of Women* works to bring out the portrayal of proletarian heroes. It follows two principles: simplicity and clarity. These mean, in effect, that the melody must be appropriate to the content, be easily understood and remembered, and suit the dancing. To achieve a Chinese style and spirit, traditional Chinese instruments were added to the orchestra. Lin Mo-han opposed this development, saying that traditional instruments were capable of producing only 'a wooden sound'.

Although the Peking Film Studio had filmed many stage productions before the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, all too often these productions when adapted to the screen lacked the spirit of the original stage version. Either adding extra scenes in the hopes of smoothing the stage version, or, at the other extreme, just mechanically transplanting the stage version to the screen, the techniques for transferring stage productions to the screen were not successful.

As was discovered by film artists, however, through cinematographic technique film can recreate heroic images in a more impressive and poignant manner than the stage, which is bound by many limitations. Film artists discovered that to avoid the magnification of negative characters, to avoid giving them undue strength, or allowing them to overshadow positive characters, the proper choice of angles would bring the positive characters into prominence. When a character strikes a *liang-hsiang*, through the proper use of close-up shots facial expressions, particularly about the eyes, can be revealed with extreme clarity and detail. The heroes can be revealed in even bolder and greater relief than on the stage.