

RED

A Documentary Performance

Wen Hui and Living Dance Studio



<https://tinyurl.com/Wen-RED>

ENGLISH TRANSLATION FROM THE CHINESE Zhuang Jiayun

WITH Jiang Fan, Li Xinmin, Liu Zhuying, Wen Hui

CHOREOGRAPHER Wen Hui

DRAMATURGS Kai Tuchmann, Zhuang Jiayun

AUTHOR Zhuang Jiayun

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[Our performance is constituted by two elements: An ONSTAGE part, in which the performers act and an ONSCREEN part, in which we project the interviews that we conducted during our research process for this play.]

ACT ONE. MARCHING FORWARD¹

ONSCREEN. Seven interviewees are being asked to discuss their memories of The Red Detachment of Women. The interviewer, Wen Hui, is not present onscreen. Only her voice can be heard.

Interviewee 1: Liu Zhuying, former performer in The Red Detachment of Women, a retiree from the Kunming City Song and Dance Troupe.

WEN: Did you perform in *The Red Detachment of Women*?

LIU: Yes, I did.

WEN: When was that?

LIU: In 1970. We were recruited from the dance school to perform *The Red Detachment of Women*. I'd say this piece of ballet was a part of us while growing up.

Interviewee 2: Cui Weiping, Scholar from Beijing.

WEN: Did you perform in *The Red Detachment of Women*?

CUI: No. But I have always been a devoted attendee of performances of *The Red Detachment of Women*. I also believe I understand this piece of revolutionary model ballet completely.

Interviewee 3: Zhang Xian, Art Activist.

ZHANG: I didn't perform in the model ballet. When I was in the factory, I worked for the Propaganda Office. Part of our job was to promote this kind of performance.

1 Marching Forward, *Xiang Qianjin*, is the theme song of the 1961 film *The Red Detachment of Women*, directed by Xie Jin. The revolutionary model ballet under the same title was based on Xie Jin's film. The lyrics begin with: "Forward, forward. The responsibilities of the soldiers are heavy; the women's hatreds are deep."

Interviewee 4: Wang Huifen, former performer in The Red Detachment of Women; played the female protagonist—Wu Qinghua; a retiree from the Kunming City Song and Dance Troupe.

WANG: This character fits me well. She's wild. I took the role very seriously. I played "for real" and fought "for real" onstage at the time. On that kind of stage, under that kind of circumstances, that was how I portrayed the character.

Interviewee 5: Liang Xiaoyan, founder and advocate of an educational NGO.

LIANG: I studied the piece, but I can't remember if I got eliminated during the rehearsal process. But I indeed danced the part with "The River of 10,000 Springs" on stage. I remembered that! I was very familiar with all the music, to say the least.

Interviewee 6: Yue Gang, Associate Professor of the Department of Asian Studies, UNC Chapel Hill.

YUE: I never watched a complete production [of *The Red Detachment of Women*]. I saw parts of the production by the Qinghai Province Song and Dance Troupe. When I was serving in the General Logistics Department in the army, I also saw a few excerpts of the revolutionary model ballet performed by the army cultural work troupe.

Interviewee 7: Zhang Laishan, former performer in The Red Detachment of Women; played the male protagonist—Hong Changqing; a retiree from the Yunnan Province Song and Dance Troupe.

ZHANG: All the dancers were put in groups of three: A, B, and C. I was in Group A. Compared to other dancers, I participated in the most rehearsals and the most performances. I worked the hardest. Someone from the National Ballet of China ... Was it Li Chengxiang [one of the choreographers of *The Red Detachment of Women*]? I can't remember ... He came to Yunnan and watched my performance. Then he said, "This dancer looks exactly like Liu Qingtang [a household name during the Cultural Revolution because of his performance as the male lead in the model ballet]! His performance is so compelling!" That was the first time I ever got that kind of comment. The way he struck a post was exactly the same! Thanks to his comments, I was able to perform on the most important occasions. Perhaps I performed a couple of hundred times. I got to perform more than anyone else in my song and dance troupe.

ONSCREEN. A special edition hard copy of The Red Detachment of Women is shown. The audience can see the pages turning slowly, and the positive and negative characters from model opera are shown.

ONSTAGE. Wen Hui explains the principle of "The Three Prominences."

WEN: On May 23, 1968, in honor of the first anniversary of the establishment of the Revolutionary model opera, Yu Huiyong, a standing committee member of the Shanghai Municipal Revolutionary Committee, published an article in *The Wenhui Daily*, entitled "Let the Stage of Literature and the Arts Forever be a Battlefield for the Propagation of Mao Zedong Thought."

For the first time, he proposed the principle of "The Three Prominences." He argued, according to the instructions of Jiang Qing [Madame Mao], "The Three Prominences" should be regarded as one of the most important principles when creating characters. That is, among all characters, prominence is to be given to positive characters; among positive characters, prominence is to be given to heroic characters; and among heroic characters, prominence is to be given to a main heroic character. To sum up, the goal of the Revolutionary model opera is to create magnificent, fully developed, bright, and impeccable worker-peasant-soldier characters. This is the primary task of socialist arts.

Wen makes a gesture, indicating the start of the demonstration.

WEN: For example, in terms of staging techniques, positive characters should be placed at the center of the stage, given all the light possible, to bring out the stage effect of "Close, Big, Bright!" By contrast, negative characters should be placed near the corners of the stage and kept in the shadows for the most part, aiming at the stage effect of "Far, Small, and Dark." The principle of the "Three Prominences" was influenced by the principles of classical aesthetics, building up a hierarchy of characters. Hong Changqing—this is the leading heroic figure in *The Red Detachment of Women*. These heroic figures reflect the will and desire of the proletarians. They are meant to occupy the stage!

I started learning to dance in the 1970s, during which the Three Prominences dictated the artistic standards of the Culture Revolution. Twenty years later, in 1994, *Living Dance Studio* was born. We also have fundamental guiding principles when creating dance: we don't create characters, we don't play roles, and we don't need prominences. Each of us brings our own identity, memory, and personality onto the stage, and we share our experiences with the audience. In this particular space, each of us is an individual. We are all equal.

ONSCREEN. Wang Huifen's stage photos from the 1970s are shown. Wang shares her story about playing the role of Wu Qinghua.

WANG: I remember my energy and strength, and with that kind of pace! I wasn't trained to walk that way. Maybe I just got it from my character. They all said, "How come you walk so powerfully and so handsomely?" Yes, I still remember that clearly.

ONSCREEN. *Zhang Laishan's photos from the 1970s are shown. Zhang recalls how his performance was appreciated.*

WEN: Have you ever imagined yourself as Hong Changqing [the male protagonist]?

ZHANG: No. I have never thought of myself as him. But I followed the director's instructions to create such a heroic figure.

ONSCREEN. *Liu Zhuying's photos from the 1970s are shown.*

ONSTAGE. *Jiang Fan and Li Xinmin approach Liu's photos. Liu Zhuying begins her story about being Young Soldier No. 18.*

LIU: This photo was taken in January 1971, when we were at the Guizhou Province Song and Dance Troupe learning the model ballet—*The Red Detachment of Women*. I was selected among other members to play Wu Qinghua [the female protagonist]. I was very good at the character's movements and techniques, but I never got the chance to play the part on the stage. I was short and didn't grow much more. The principal characters of the Revolutionary model opera, for example, Wu Qinghua, Hong Changqing [the male protagonist], and the company commander [the second female protagonist], were supposed to be tall and good looking. Later, I always played minor roles, such as young soldiers, young slave girls, and young inmates.

I still remember, in Scene 2, the detachment of women formed a line on stage. The eighteen of us lined up according to our height. I was No. 18. As other dancers grew taller, they changed positions every few weeks or months. All of them were placed in a different position in the lineup. But I remained No. 18 and never changed.

ONSCREEN. *The pages from the special edition hard copy of The Red Detachment of Women are still turned slowly. A piece of blackboard is shown.*

ONSTAGE. *Li Xinmin tells a story about her schoolbag.*

LI: The other day, flipping through this book, I stopped when I saw the page with the blackboard on it. It reminded me of a time when I was in fourth grade. The year was 1999, when I was only 11 years old. I will never forget that afternoon, just two days before the final exam. After school, my teacher said to me, "Li Xinmin, go back home and talk to your parents. It's time for your tuition fee: 88 yuan, tomorrow." I still can remember how I felt at that moment, humiliated and ashamed, because the teacher said those words in front of the entire class. But I dared not speak a single word. After everyone else was gone, I sat in the classroom by myself. Moments later, I made a decision. I laid my cotton schoolbag on the desk; it was sewn by my mother. I took out all my books and pens, and left them in the drawer, one by one. Then, slowly, I folded my bag

into a tiny piece, as small as my palm. And, slowly, I walked out of the school and never returned.

ONSCREEN. *Liang Xiaoyan discusses the popularity of model opera works.*

LIANG: What impressed me most was that, back then, we could recite all eight revolutionary model plays, including every melodic passage from the beginning till the end. I could do that. You know why? It was because that the scripts of all these plays were published in *The Red Flag Magazine*, and at that time, we were required to study all of them. We learned by listening to the radio. Around that time, there was nothing else. And whenever the radio was turned on, there was at least one station that played the model plays repeatedly. You could learn the plays by heart. Children have excellent learning skills; they can remember everything simply by listening to it. Even when we were in our 40s or 50s, we could still sing all those parts one by one at our parties. You could tell the popularity of those model plays. But then, when we were young, our thirst for knowledge was misdirected toward learning these model plays.

ONSCREEN. *Wang Huifen introduces a photo of her dancing on the threshing ground.*

WEN: Which one are you?

WANG: This one!

WEN: Is it the one over here?

WANG: Yes.

WEN: When did you take this photo?

WANG: In 1971.

WEN: 1971?

WANG: Between 1970 and 1971.

WEN: Between 1970 and 1971?

WANG: During that period, I danced *The Red Detachment of Women* more than 200 times.

WEN: Where did you perform it?

WANG: In the theatres of Kunming, mainly in local theatres.

WEN: I see. In the theatres of Kunming?

WANG: We mainly performed in Kunming, but we also worked as a propaganda troupe and brought the theatre to the rural areas.

WEN: Did you also perform in the rural areas?

WANG: Yes, and when we danced on the threshing ground, we still needed to perform on tiptoes on the soft mud.

WEN: How did you dance on the threshing ground?

ONSTAGE. Liu Zhuoying demonstrates how she danced on the threshing ground.

LIU: Let me tell you how we stood on tiptoe. The woman in the video recording, Wang Huifen, and I were in the same troupe. Most of our productions of *The Red Detachment of Women* were staged in factories, military units, and rural areas. Wang just mentioned that we performed “more than 200 times.” We performed much more than that. In rural areas, we danced on the threshing ground. At that time, the ground was covered with mud instead of cement. Mud can be hard or soft. When the tips of your toes hit the soft mud, in scenes like *Dancing with Broadwords*, you can easily sprain your ankle. But we were young and full of energy. We just kept on going and never stopped. That was how we danced.

ONSCREEN. The pages from the special edition hard copy of The Red Detachment of Women are still being turned. Then, a blocking diagram of its choreography is shown.

ONSTAGE. Jiang Fan introduces a basic stage diagram.

JIANG: The diagram here shows the basic structure of a stage. The short line is the curtain line, and the long curve is the proscenium line. The part of the stage that extends out from the proscenium line is referred to as the apron. A removable deck can be built on the apron to reveal an area beneath stage level: the orchestra pit, which is usually used in productions that require music. Here, the four short lines refer to the stage's curtains: borders no. 1, no. 2, no. 3, and no. 4. The eight numbers outside the frame remind me of the folk dance lessons I took when I was little. The teacher told us that there were eight points in the room: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

For instance, when performing a traditional Mongolian dance and working on arm-swinging movements, the dancer moves their gaze from Point 2 to Point 8. Feeling surrounded by the vast prairie landscape, they return their

gaze from Point 8 back to Point 2, then face toward Point 1, move toward Point 3, jump to Point 8, and then look at Point 2. In ballet, when performing a port de bras, the dancer faces Point 2, intakes a breath, and turns their head toward Point 8. Then they turn toward Point 7, take a breath, and turn their head toward Point 1. The entire movement of port de bras ends at Point 1.

In *The Red Detachment of Women*, Wu Qinghua leans out of the trees, attentively, looking slowly from Point 8 to Point 2. Then she faces Point 3 and makes a forward lunge, with her right hand lifting the edge of her blouse and her left hand making a fist. Then she gazes from Point 3 to Point 8, and Point 3, and Point 8, and 3, 8, 3, 8, 3, 8, 3, 8 ... In modern dance, the stage has multiple points, just like the dust particles in the air. Multiple points ... Multiple points ... 1! Multiple points ... 3! Multiple points ... 7!

ACT TWO. GETTING INTERTWINED

ONSCREEN. The pages of the special edition hard copy are still slowly turned. The audience can see all kinds of fists are shown.

ONSTAGE. Wen explains “clenching the fist” as the theme movement.

WEN: In *The Red Detachment of Women*, “clenching the fist” is the most common stage action. In choreography, this is called the theme movement or the “seed.” When I interviewed Jiang Zuhui, one of the choreographers of *The Red Detachment of Women*, she told me that in the first version of the prologue, the hand movements of the two inmates of Wu Qinghua were quite relaxed. She told me: those women looked extremely elegant and sorrowful. They wanted to rush out of their confinement. They shouldered all the sufferings and were as deeply oppressed as is possible to be, but still yearned to stand up, get out, and become emancipated. But in the later version, the revolutionary model ballet, the women’s hand movements were all changed into fists: I want to break the chains, get rid of the oppression, and overthrow the regime! But how could that be possible?

ONSCREEN. The pages are turned slowly. The signature movement in the revolutionary ballet— “head-kick jeté” [or, the “Plisetskaya head-kick”]—is shown.

ONSCREEN. Cui Weiping, Zhang Xian, and Yue Gang discuss this particular “head-kick jeté,” in turn.

CUI: The movement left me with an unforgettable image: It is like fire dancing in the air. I think it symbolizes freedom.

ZHANG: That head-kick jeté! This highly skilled movement was captured and made into a staged photo, which was then widely circulated. In the live performance, the dancer was in the air, and it was over in the blink of an eye. In

the live situation, it's impossible for you to catch the moment and grasp the techniques. But the stage photos captured it and reminded you that it was all about dance skills and levels of difficulty.

YUE: The most classical movement! Well, there was a dancer on the poster. I still remember her name: Xue Jinghua. She completed a high head-kick in the air. That movement was circulated via posters. With that image in mind, when you had a chance to watch the model ballet, you would pay great attention to how the dancers unimaginably exceed the limits of the body. Their dance brings a form of exquisiteness—the beauty of pure space and pure form. It truly has nothing to do with the Revolution.

ONSCREEN. The pages are turned slowly. Props such as all kinds of swords are shown.

ONSTAGE. Liu Zhuyin and Li Xinmin share their stories about swords. Their stories are juxtaposed.

Liu tells a story about Dancing with Broadwords.

LIU: This broadsword was a prop for every soldier of the Red Army, male or female, in *The Red Detachment of Women*. The performer's body would be this long when extended with its grip (*gesturing*), with a piece of red silk hanging down from here. In Scene 2, Hong Changqing leads the female soldiers in broadsword practice. He does this, and the soldiers respond like this. He strikes a post like this, and the female soldiers clap. After demonstrating a few moves, Hong signals the women to begin the practice. Then we start dancing. During rehearsals, we were told to "be filled with affections of the proletariat," "to be filled with class hatred and national enmity ..."

Li Xinmin tells a story about the swords made by her father.

LI: My father was a blacksmith. When I was little, he made a sword this long, which was used to chop wood. At the ages of 12, 13, and 14, I did a lot of farm work with my mother. During those days when we went up to the mountains to chop wood, I liked those trees that were long and mighty. I was only this tall at that time, a tiny body with great ambition. However, I could only handle the trees that were as wide around as my arms. My father made another knife, about this long, which was used to kill the pigs. My mother kept this butcher knife under her pillow all year round. My father passed away young, leaving only women in the family—my mom, my elder sister, and me. It was not safe for us to stay in the village. I went home for the Lunar New Year last year; my mother and I still sleep together on the bed. My head felt something: my mother still keeps that butcher knife under her pillow.

ONSCREEN. *The footage from the 1961 film The Red Detachment of Women—a close-up of the female protagonist [Wu Qionghua, aka Wu Qinghua], played by Zhu Xijuan—is shown.*

ZHU (as Wu Qinghua): I run! I just run as long and as far as I can!

ONSCREEN. *Yue Gang, Liang Xiaoyan, and Cui Weiping discuss the image of Zhu and her performance.*

YUE: Of course, the most memorable part is Qionghua, the one who always tried to run away.

LIANG: Qionghua's eyes are unforgettable. Zhu Xijuan [the film actress] is not that beautiful, but her eyes are so piercing and bright. That left me with the strongest memory.

CUI: The totality of the character cannot be necessarily subsumed under the overarching film narrative. This character deeply touched the hearts of her audience. To me, Zhu Xijuan embodies a sense of wildness.

YUE: From the perspective of filmmaking, this part [Qionghua's constant running away] is most personal. It hasn't yet been integrated into the grand history of the Revolution. Each time she got caught and beaten, she tried to run away again. Later she finally made it and met Hong Changqing [the male protagonist]. At that point, the narrative about the Revolution began, and then the personal narrative was integrated into the grand narrative.

ONSCREEN. *The female protagonist in the filmic revolutionary model ballet is bound by chains and shackles.*

ONSCREEN. *Wang Huifen shares a story about her performing Wu Qinghua's escape.*

WANG: She was tied up to that pillar. Look at the hand gestures. She is struggling, stubborn, and persistent! "I will run away; even if you beat me to death, I will keep running away." My wrists and arms were all painted with scars. Yes, I was tied to the pillar and tried my hardest to escape. That's the feeling! I was doing my utmost to run away. The prison door was over there, so I was trying to get to that spot. This is the final posture! Yes, this is the one!

ONSCREEN. *In the filmic revolutionary model ballet, the ballerinas are in army uniforms and holding guns.*

ONSCREEN. *Yue Gang and Zhang Xian discuss the sexualized body images in the revolutionary model ballet.*

YUE: In the army, you can imagine that women were completely absent, except in the hospital. There were very few women until we moved to the city. You can argue that, in that particular historical condition, a unique visual window on females was opened up [through the model ballet]. For those young soldiers, the model ballet provided an entirely different kind of image, the one that had nothing to do with the Revolution. In a way, it is pretty pathetic. Too much effort was devoted to creating the Revolutionary model opera as a form of social mobilization, but the messages the audiences received were exactly the opposite.

ZHANG: The audiences needed to develop some visual interest in all those cultural products that were available during the Cultural Revolution. Ballerina soldiers in their shorts and leggings must have been one of the reasons the audiences became interested. Later, the audience watched *Lenin in October* and the ballet *Swan Lake* repeatedly, because there was nothing else to watch. No other possibilities at all!

WEN: How old were you at that time?

ZHANG: I should have been 17 by then.

WEN: This was during your adolescence then.

ZHANG: Yes. It's hard to say if I would do something at night because of the erotic imagery [from *The Red Detachment of Women*]. My memory is quite blurry now, but I think it could have been possible back then. You could get the vague idea that the staging could be perceived as a bit sexual. The handsome look of the [female] commander might have interested many female audiences ... As a matter of fact, they looked like celebrities. They represented a standard of beauty during the Maoist era: good-looking, muscular body, heavy eyebrows, and big eyes ... The male ballet stars were not quite the same as those male Peking Opera stars. It seems that they were somehow connected with body image. Even though it was about the representation of the Red Army, but the model ballet also provided you with the image of that female commander, a female commanding officer with masculine charm, forceful body, and a uniform that left her half-naked. This could be where audience's guilty pleasure came from.

ONSTAGE. *Li Xinmin plays with the fabric of the screen while Zhang Xian's interview is shown.*

ONSCREEN. *Wang Huifen recalls a story about weaning her baby.*

WANG: I have another story to share with you. I had just given birth less than a month before. We got a task to perform Act II of the ballet in the stadium. You

know I had just gone through pregnancy and had a baby, but I was asked to perform right after all this. I was breastfeeding at the time. Although I was pretty thin, I had a lot of milk. But the troupe official asked me to take some Chinese medicine and to have an injection that would help stop the milk. And I hadn't rehearsed for more than a year. The official said, "You must come back to rehearsal tomorrow; just get the injection." My teachers were afraid that the injection would hurt me. But the performance was approaching. What could you do? Whatever. I went to the rehearsal the next day. When we had a break during that first day of rehearsal, I saw that my milk had leaked onto the floor. The male dancers wondered why the floor was wet! I knew it was my milk. My clothes were completely wet too. But there was much less milk on the second day. After another full day of rehearsal, my milk was all gone on the third day. I'm not lying to you at all. I didn't even have the injection. Just imagine the extreme physical exhaustion dancers have to go through. This is indeed my personal experience.

ONSTAGE. In the meantime, Li Xinmin wraps herself in the fabric of the screen when Wang Huifen talks about her experience. Then, Wen and Jiang perform their "pas de deux."

ONSCREEN. The pages are turned slowly. A series of ballet movements are shown.

ONSTAGE. Jiang Fan explains the movement transformation from traditional Chinese dance to (model) ballet.

JIANG: When I was reading the special edition [of the hard copy of *The Red Detachment of Women*], I found the technical vocabulary fascinating. When I studied ballet at the conservatory, the instructors all used ballet terminology, such as *battement tendu*, *battement frappe*, *pas de bourrée*, *arabesque*. However, in this book, all the movements—such as *back golden-crown kick*, *crane-standing posture*, *crouching step*, *short quick steps with tiptoes*, and *the flag*—are described in the terminology of Chinese traditional dance. For example, over here, the No. 16 move—*crane-standing posture*—has four variants. The basics are: put your feet together, hold the supporting leg, draw the working leg tightly to the supporting leg (feel the inner thigh muscles), and point the toes up toward the calf. When facing Point 2, the two arms gesture to indicate a flag, and the fingers form a special gesture called the orchid fingers. The hand gesture of the orchid fingers involves lowering the middle finger in a circle to meet the thumb, with the other three fingers slightly turned up to indicate petals. Chinese traditional dance stresses the presentation of a twisted torso. To do this, one must stabilize the supporting leg, pull the lateral thigh of the working leg upward, and twist the crotch. Tilt the right side of the chest and pull the left shoulder back, then add *the flag* gesture with the arms and the orchid fingers with both hands. If you touch your toes with your fingers to form a half-moon shape, this is known as *crane-standing posture*. It is an *attitude* in ballet. The aesthetics of ballet require dancers "to open, stretch,

and straighten” both working and supporting legs, concentrate on the line from the top of the head straight down to the toes, and keep the body upright. *The flag* is transformed from the fifth position of the arms in ballet, with arms extended above the head, maintaining a gently curved line, as if a drop of water is dripping from the upper arm to the fingertips. This is an *attitude*.

In the model ballet, *crane-standing posture/attitude* integrates the arm movements of ballet with *the flag* from Chinese traditional dance. But the hand gestures, which seemed too feminine, were replaced by an extended palm gesture that presents masculinity. This movement is called *the crouching step*, one of the basic movements of Chinese Martial Art. Ms. Liu, what is the next move?

LIU: (*Demonstrating*) A crouching step followed by a crane-standing posture.

JIANG: When I watched the clips of the solo dance of Wu Qinghua, I noticed that her left hand is in the shape of the masculine palm gesture, whereas her left hand is presenting the orchid fingers ... A stage of unconsciousness, maybe?

ONSCREEN. *Wang Huifen tells a story about getting a divorce.*

WANG: I will share with you another story. My husband didn't support my dancing. I was selected to dance the lead part in *The Red Detachment of Women*. His colleagues joked about it, "look, your wife was taken by others." So he didn't support me performing the model ballet. I was very stressed out during the rehearsal because of the pressure he put on me. We fought constantly. One time he threw my bag and pointe shoes out of the window, and they got stuck hanging from a tree. A worker from the propaganda troupe helped me reach those things on the tree, so I could go to the rehearsal in Kunming.

Another time, my husband didn't allow me to go to rehearsal at all. I sneaked out while he was asleep. He woke up and ran after me without even putting his shoes on. And he blocked me on my way to the theatre. He simply didn't allow me to go to rehearsals. Our troupe official told me to divorce him. "He doesn't support your career; why would you want to stay with him? Just divorce him!" Then I drafted a divorce petition and gave it to the troupe official. Well, that surely scared him. He wrote a self-criticism letter. After that, he never stopped me from going to rehearsals and didn't interfere anymore. That's the story. Later I thought: I married you, but I didn't sell myself to you. The way he loved me was completely wrong.

ONSTAGE. *In the meantime, during Wang Huifen's story, Jiang Fan continues to perform the contradictory movements of the two hands.*

ONSTAGE. *Liu Zhuying tells a story about gauze and dancing en pointe.*

LIU: I still remember the days when we were trained in pointe technique. Back then, we didn't have any fancy stuff to wrap our toes. Each of us came up with different creative ways. Most of us just used gauze. Sooner than you might think, our toes became abraded. Gauze would get stuck on our skin with the blood from our toes. When we removed the gauze, we were pained to tears. However, at that time, we had a motto: "Perform the revolutionary plays and be the revolutionary people. Play the heroes and learn from them. Fear neither hardship nor death!"

She repeats slowly.

Fear neither hardship nor death ... fear neither hardship, nor death ... fear neither hardship, nor death ... (getting faster) fear neither hardship, nor death ... fear neither hardship, nor death ... The following day, everyone came back to rehearsal with their pointe shoes. We practiced nonstop until our entire bodies were sweaty. We stomped *en pointe*; stomped, stomped, stomped, stomped, and stomped ... until we began to feel numb. That was how we danced.

ONSTAGE. *In the meantime, other dancers exhaustively perform a series of movements in response to the slogan of "fear neither hardship nor death." Later, Liu Zhuying closes the curtain.*

ACT THREE. LOOKING BACK

ONSTAGE. *Dancers perform Wen Hui's choreography of "The Headless Us"; approaching the audience.*

ONSCREEN. *Interviewees give accounts of how "nostalgia" works. Again, Wen Hui, the interviewer, is not present onscreen. Only her voice can be heard.*

ZHANG: This is his first move. After he turns back, there is a jump ... oh I can't remember it.

WEN: Of course you can!

ZHANG: I don't remember those minor moves... then Hong Changqing pointed out the right direction [to the people]. He gave the silver dollar coins to the poor. "What happened to you guys? What happened to these people?" Liu Qingtang had a special move! ... Oh, I can't remember other moves.

LIANG: I had somewhat complicated feelings about the revival of *The Red Detachment of Women*. When I was offered the ticket to the revival, at first, I wanted to refuse, but then I wanted to give it a try. So I went to the theatre, and I got

a good seat, close to the stage. It must be ten years ago—I can't remember which year exactly. But I remember at one point, towards the end of the ballet, I began to feel very uncomfortable. I left before the end.

CUI: If you are open-minded about it and take it as one type of cultural phenomenon, one genre among many genres, I don't see any problems. I'd suggest that we don't simply throw them [the model plays] away altogether. They are more complex than the ideologically charged cultural products. It's much more complex ...

YUE: The complicated part of this period of history is that the people who experienced it, including me, are still full of confusion, affliction, and even humiliation. This is particularly so for the Chinese intellectuals. It is hard to imagine that anyone would genuinely celebrate that period. For a nation that went through such a disastrous event, it would be truly tragic if amnesia were to overtake things.

ONSCREEN. Zhang Laishan teaches the kindergarten kids how to dance.

ZHANG: One, two, and look at me! Smile and turn around. One, two, three, four, do a backbend; do the splits. Move, and move. Very Good. Go to your position. Don't move! Raise your head! Good! Smile, get ready! Music, please!

ONSTAGE. When the music of "The River of 10,000 Springs" rises, Liu Zhuying opens the front curtain. Jiang Fan stands still in between the curtains.

ONSCREEN. In the meantime, Zhang Laishan continues to teach the kids.

ZHANG: Pay attention to your facial expression. OK. Then smile, OK. Don't relax; keep your smile! Keep the legs straight! OK, your facial expression! Smile! Bid farewell to the Red Army! You must bend over quickly! Bend! Jump! Go! Move faster. Your facial expression! Come on!

ONSTAGE. Jiang Fan slowly moves away from the curtain, struggling to strip off any trace of discipline.

ONSCREEN. The pages from the special edition are turned slowly. Another blocking diagram is shown.

ONSTAGE. Wen explains a choreographic treatment entitled "The Stars over the Sky."

WEN: Here is the blocking diagram of *The Red Detachment of Women*. Look at those neat, orderly formations. This one is called "The Stars over the Sky." It's a kind of choreographic composition that is used to exhibit a festive and celebratory atmosphere. Such staging choices can be seen on any grand stage in China these days: the Olympic opening ceremony, the Spring Festival Gala, the

National Day TV Extravaganza, the May Labor Day Celebration, the June 1 Children's Day Celebration, the July 1 Communist Party Founding Day Celebration, etc. The choreographic treatment is quite similar in Act II of the model ballet, the part about celebrating the unity of the army and the people. I wonder if this has become a legacy that will pass effortlessly from one generation to the next.

How about we try it onstage.

ONSTAGE. Wen and Jiang demonstrate The Stars over the Sky. Other dancers gradually join them. The neat and orderly formations dissolve into chaos. Later, Wen starts talking about public square dancing (guangchang wu).²

WEN: When I interviewed the former dancers from *The Red Detachment of Women*, I found many of them have been quite active in public square dancing. This made me curious about what kind of connection there might be.

LIU: When I choreograph the public square dances, if those dancing grannies forget their moves, I ask them to dance them ten times.

ONSTAGE. Every woman raises her hand repeatedly.

LIU: If they still can't remember the moves. No more words, just do 20 more repetitions!

ONSCREEN. Cui Weiping discusses the phenomenon of public square dancing.

CUI: There could be some connection between the cultural activists back then and those in the present time. But I don't think you can argue that the emergence of public square dancing resulted from the contributions of the main players in the Cultural Revolution. I believe the people are the main force behind the public dancing activities. Yes, there might be some connections among those former rural mobile film projection activities, the model plays of the Cultural Revolution, and today's dancing in the public space. In the culture promoted by the communist party, the culture of the masses has always been regarded as a positive tradition. In other words, the culture of the masses has never been reduced to a joke. It is accepted, sanctioned, and even supported by all levels of the government.

2 Public square dancing (guangchang wu) is a community dance that is part of everyday life in China nowadays. Middle-aged and elderly Chinese women make up the majority of the dancers. They dance together in open-air public spaces to exercise or to further participate in dance competitions and performances. Some studies suggest that this kind of public dance can be read as a resurrection of Maoist collectivism.

ONSCREEN. Cui Weiping gives comments on discipline.

CUI: There are different types of disciplines, within which you find different cacophonies and sounds. But there is always spontaneity. When you think about it, the practice of discipline is either political, depoliticized, or commodified. Other activities, such as doing homework, can also be considered “discipline.” Or maybe you don’t move at all, which is also a form of discipline. These dialectic relationships between discipline and anti-discipline, and between the political and the anti-political, didn’t exist only during the Cultural Revolution. I think they exist in all times and all cultures. They have created the circumstances under which the body becomes the target for competition; it is a process in which the self is continuously transformed and moved to a new level.

ONSTAGE. In the meantime, the dancers’ movements gradually slow down. They slowly approach the screen.

ONSCREEN. Wang’s concluding reflection is presented.

WANG: Looking back, it was purely accidental for people like me to step into the art of dance. But then you began to experience all aspects of life. Thank you for offering me a chance to remember the past. Thank you for bringing back my memories. At this stage, what is left for us is memories. Recently, I have been spending days in the hospital with my husband. Looking at the people who reach the final stage of their lives. And today, I have a chance to remember the past. So, thank you for giving me a chance.

ONSTAGE. The dancers continue to approach the screen.

ONSCREEN. Liang Xiaoyan concludes her reflection.

LIANG: We argue that China needs nongovernmental power. This country needs more social subjects to contribute to the development of a good society. We went through the Cultural Revolution. How would you define the Cultural Revolution? The Cultural Revolution didn’t allow the existence of a society. We were a country in which society was absent. Except for the vertical, top-down administrative system, we didn’t have any horizontal connections. Every part of the society was subordinate to the hierarchical system. So the country was about dominating and being dominated, rather than fostering a society based on cooperation and facilitation. We need a society in which more people are engaged subjects, and we should walk away from a society of dominating and being dominated. We should enable more people to become the subjects of society and develop society, which enables us to grow. Therefore, we must make this society more dynamic, balanced, collaborative, and equal. These are not abstract ideas but need to be actualized through specific

social practices and actions. To accomplish these goals, more and more people have to get involved.

ONSTAGE. The dancers approach the audience when the chronology of the Revolutionary model opera is presented on the screen.

ONSCREEN. The chronology of the Revolutionary model opera and The Red Detachment of Women.

1963: Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's wife, began to take an interest in developing revolutionary plays that "help the masses to propel history forward."

1964, September 26 *The Red Detachment of Women* was premiered by the National Ballet of China at Beijing Tianqiao Theatre.

1965, March 6 The term Yangbanxi (model theatre) appeared in the Shanghai newspaper *Liberation Daily* to reference *The Legend of the Red Lantern*.

1965, November 10 Shanghai's *Wenhui Daily* published Yao Wenyuan's article, entitled "On the New Historical Drama 'Hai Rui Dismissed from Office.'" The production and publication of the article have been seen as marking the start of the Cultural Revolution.

1965, May To commemorate the 25 anniversary of Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," the eight model plays were staged in Beijing. For 37 days, 218 performances were given, with nearly 330,000 people in the audience.

1967, May 31 The entire repertoire was listed for the first time as "eight revolutionary model theatrical works (Geming Yangbanxi)" in an editorial entitled "Excellent Models for Revolutionary Art and Literature" in *The People's Daily*.

By 1967 Eight revolutionary model theatrical works were produced, including two ballets (*The Red Detachment of Women*, and *The White-Haired Girl*), five model operas (*The Legend of the Red Lantern*, *Shajiabang*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, *On the Dock*), and one revolutionary symphony *Shajiabang*.

- 1966–1976 During the Cultural Revolution, professional and amateur troupes and theatrical propaganda teams brought the revolutionary model plays to all levels of factories, villages, government institutions, schools, army units, etc.
- 1972, February 24 During his visit to China, Richard Nixon and Mrs. Nixon were accompanied by Jiang Qing and Zhou Enlai to the revolutionary model ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*.
- 1976–1992 From the end of the Cultural Revolution to 1992, *The Red Detachment of Women* disappeared from the stage.
- 1992, May 23 To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," The National Ballet of China revived *The Red Detachment of Women* based on its 1964 premiere version.
- 2014, September 23 To celebrate the 50 anniversary of the premiere of *The Red Detachment of Women*, The National Ballet of China held a commemorative performance at the Great Hall of the People. Since its debut, the ballet has been staged more than 3,800 times by the National Ballet of China.

The End