

# From the Red Detachment to the Women: A Postscript

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## Life and Dance

Most Chinese urban independent theatre and performance makers have been connected in some way to the Beijing-based *Caochangdi Workstation* (*Caochangdi Gongzuozhan*<sup>1</sup>) and the *Living Dance Studio*<sup>2</sup> (*Shenghuo Wudao Gongzuoshi*).<sup>3</sup> They attended the body workshops conducted by choreographer Wen Hui and borrowed the Workstation stage to rehearse their own projects. Some presented their earliest pieces at the festivals held at either the Workstation or the Young Choreographers' Project. I was probably the last one to enjoy the opportunity to work as an artist at Caochangdi and did so mainly in the summer of 2014, right before its demolition.<sup>4</sup> That was also my first collaboration with Wen Hui. Without a lived experience of working with the *Living Dance Studio*, I could not understand this kind of creative process, which bears all the marks of inspiration, rapture, and everyday triviality.

*Caochangdi Workstation*, a significant incubation site for innovations in unconventional theatre and performance in urban China, lives on in spirit. However, in the middle of our first round of rehearsals for *RED (HONG)*, its physical body

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1 Caochangdi is the name of a Beijing neighborhood.

2 A precise English translation of *Shenghuo Wudao*, would be Life Dance. The most accurate translation, however, shifts “life” into a present, continuous form; thus, Living Dance.

3 The definitions and issues surrounding “independence” have been thoroughly discussed in a few scholarly works. They are not the focus of this essay. *Caochangdi Workstation* was an arts organization founded in 2005 by documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang and choreographer Wen Hui. It later became the home base of the *Living Dance Studio*, cofounded by Wu and Wen.

4 Because of the accelerated urbanization and gentrification in Beijing, even in this alternative neighborhood near the North Fifth Ring Road—where artists, art dealers, students, and migrant workers are the main residents—*Caochangdi Workstation* eventually succumbed to rent increases. Dissolution was its only option.

ceased to exist. When I returned to Beijing in summer 2015 for the second round of rehearsals, the cast had changed, and the rehearsal space was Wen Hui's living room. New to the team were two women of the post-'80s generation: Jiang Fan and Li Xinmin.<sup>5</sup> Both have laughed and cried along with the ups and downs of China's market-oriented, commercialized system. But they know little, if anything, of the Cultural Revolution that dominated the mid-1960s to mid-1970s.

Wen Hui suggested: "Let's start all over again." That remark sparked my epiphany. Our living condition, the moment we found ourselves in, would determine the direction of the dance.

### **From the Red Detachment of Women**

The inspiration to create *RED* came from three sources. The first was a trove of documentary materials related to *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse Niangzi Jun*)—audiovisual clips, publications, memorabilia from the original revolutionary model ballet, interview footage. These were incorporated to evoke a special territory of memory and reactivate a living and lived archive within specific bodies: those of the performers and those of people who experienced the Cultural Revolution.

The second combined the desire to understand the complex feelings of people who experienced the politicized art and aestheticized politics that held sway during the Cultural Revolution, along with the desire to explore the in/congruity between the state's discourse and the everyday cultural lives of the people.

The third was the idea to use the dancers' bodies as a departure point. Varied connections with the original model ballet, in content and movement and staging, would allow *RED* to anatomize the original choreography and explore here-and-now experiences as dancers and survivors, together, revisit that turbulent decade. Tasks both new and stimulating befell me with the arrival of the two new members. *With its all-women ensemble*, *RED* could and should add another layer to the complexity of women's reality in China today. It should function as a way to reflect on how the socialist imagination prescribed gender equality and women's liberation, which were embedded in Maoist state feminism and disseminated through the revolutionary model opera. Accordingly, we played the collected documentary materials to the younger performers, pausing whenever they felt inclined to share their thoughts or express themselves through movement.<sup>6</sup> I also created a tabular list of the known past experiences and current realities of

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5 The other two performers are Liu Zhuying (b. 1955), a former performer in *The Red Detachment of Women* and a retiree from the *Kunming City Song and Dance Troupe*, and Wen Hui (b. 1960).

6 Jiang Fan also helped create a series of diagrams about the ways that Chinese classical dance, for training purposes, created a system of movement vocabulary that drew upon classic Western ballet as well as traditional Chinese opera and martial arts.

the two generations of female performers, including each of their distinct experiences with and understandings of *The Red Detachment of Women*.

Then we heard, quite by accident, that *United Heart Home of Hope* (*Tongxin Xiwang Jiayuan*), an NGO founded in 2003 with the goal of supporting women and children in the migrant communities on the outskirts of Beijing, was singing *Marching Forward* (*Xiang Qianjin*), the theme song from the 1961 film *The Red Detachment of Women*, at all of their meetings.<sup>7</sup> We immediately decided to interview Ma Xiaoduo, the organization's founder. Ma freely admitted that she did not remember much of the model ballet from seeing it in elementary school. But she recounted being exceptionally moved by a single occurrence in the plot: The female protagonist's change of fortune after she joined the Red Army-led women's detachment. To Ma, *The Red Detachment of Women* is about how women should transform themselves to free themselves from oppression and misery. *United Heart Home of Hope* was formed with exactly the same vision of self-salvation.<sup>8</sup>

The development of the script of *RED* in 2015 was strongly directed at and dedicated to women in general and the four female performers specifically. However, in addition to using the original model ballet to engage with the decade-long social and cultural chaos initiated by the Cultural Revolution and examining the cultural products praised by the revolutionary discourse of class struggle, I wonder how *RED* can reflect the ways that women in today's China face ideological orientations that are official, if different, and engage in new forms of political, social, and gender-specific struggle.

## Looking Back

Act Three, "Looking Back", aims to both show the past generation's reminiscences onscreen and to demonstrate, through four performers' current stories, their vibrant and tenacious presence onstage. My deepest regret is that this part could not be developed as planned due to inadequate initiatives, opportunity, budget, and rehearsal time. Since "the author is dead" and the performance text refuses further development, can only replace some of these current stories from the original script into a postscript.

Liu Zhuying could not care less if any connection exists between revolutionary model opera and *guangchang wu* (*public square dancing*).<sup>9</sup> To her, the latter is

7 The 1961 film, *The Red Detachment of Women*, was directed by Xie Jin. The revolutionary model ballet of the same title was actually based on this film.

8 *United Heart Home of Hope* includes numerous divisions such as a convenience store, a second-hand shop, a kindergarten, and others. Because of its complicated relationships with various neighborhood committees and local governments, the organization has been forced to relocate five times in 10 years.

9 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

neither a mobilization of mass culture in an era of depoliticization nor a cultural form of reconstruction of Maoist collectivism. She only complains that the middle-aged female dancers are not professional enough, in either spirit or technique. As a local official in charge of cultural activities, her main purpose in organizing large-scale public square-dancing activities is to maintain stability in sensitive times. This goal is best accomplished if public spaces are filled with energetic, if amateur, dancers.

Jiang Fan resigned her position as a choreographer and dancer at the *Shanghai Opera House Dance Troupe* in 2015 and moderately enjoys her freedom from the state-owned performing arts institutions and their suffocating leitmotif projects. She makes a living by choreographing musicals and has collaborated with *Shanghai International Dance Center* as an independent artist. During the creation of *RED*, she recognized the continuity between the revolutionary model opera of 50 years ago and today's leitmotif works that eulogize the Party's revolutionary history. The more artistically independent she becomes, the more she must think about how to balance the market, audience interests, and the degree to which the present can be transmitted through individualized artistic references.

Like Wu Qinghua, the female protagonist in the model ballet, Li Xinmin desperately fled her hometown (Huamulin, in rural Yunnan Province) to Kunming and then to Beijing. Since the demise of *Caochangdi Workstation*, when she lost her dwelling in the city, she continued to make documentary films, worked in an NGO for migrant domestic workers, sold fruit with friends, and, with her long-time artistic partner, created an autobiographical documentary theatre piece, *Timeline (Fanhui de Lu)*. However, unlike Wu Qinghua, she made peace with her past and decided to go back to Huamulin, where she is about to get married and is expecting her first child. She still thinks *The Red Detachment of Women* has little to do with her life and regrets spending so much energy on *RED*.

We see very little of Wen Hui's personal memories and narratives in *RED*. She keeps creating new pieces and touring old ones around Europe, the site of her "independence," and conducting workshops on the body as an archive in universities all over the world. In December 2018, she commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the independent theatre and performance movement in urban China with *Paper Tiger Studio Beijing (Beijing Zhilaohu Xiju Gongzuoshi)* and *Niao Collective* at the Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum. This work functions as a physical manifesto that echoes independent artists' ongoing rewriting of theatre and performance history in modern China. Nonetheless, even as she works with all forms of activity around the phenomenon of memorization, she chooses not to mention

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in dance competitions and performances. Some studies suggest that this kind of public dance can be read as a resurrection of Maoist collectivism. See Jayne, Mark, and Ho Hon Leung. "Embodying Chinese Urbanism." In *Chinese Urbanism: New Critical Perspectives*. Edited by Mark Jayne, 189–201. London, New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

in public two losses of her own: That of *Caochangdi Workstation* and that of Wu Wenguang, her artistic and life partner.

### A Nightmare

When *RED* was staged at the Asia Society in New York in November 2018, I moderated a pre-performance dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Some interview footage that was not included in the final documentary performance was shown to the audience. From this footage, I selected Ma Xiaoduo's recollection of her nightmare:

For years, I have had the same nightmare: I am in the middle of the bridge and cannot cross it. The bridge starts crumbling, and I have to hold tight. That kind of nightmare is a reflection of repression. Sometimes I feel like I am going to screw it. I need to bring it down. I want to be freed. *I feel* I am being repressed. It's like when the red light is on, you are stopped there and cannot move. Just because you are a rural woman, just because you are a woman, everyone can keep walking, but not you. I was blocked all the time. Anyone could do things, but not you. So this is a kind of battle. Whenever I listen to *Marching Forward*, I feel the power.

At the end of that footage, I also added a clip from the demonstrations by workers at Jasic Technology in Shenzhen on July 24, 2018, in which the female workers sing *Marching Forward*. It is in this kind of drastically urbanizing and industrializing Chinese society that we may better understand how the model ballet, albeit in a problematic way, can still serve as a form of feminist intervention—and, as such, how it can continue to inspire women to challenge their gender and socio-economic oppression.

### Bibliography

Jayne, Mark, and Ho Hon Leung. "Embodying Chinese Urbanism." In *Chinese Urbanism: New Critical Perspectives*. Edited by Mark Jayne, 189–201. London, New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Two distinguished scholars who personally experienced the Cultural Revolution, Chaohua Wang, an independent scholar majoring in modern Chinese literature and intellectual history, and Zhen Zhang, a poet, scholar and associate professor in Cinema Studies and History at New York University were the guest speakers at the dialogue.

