The Legend of the Red Lantern (红灯记, *Hongdeng ji*, 1970)

Shuangting Xiong

dir. Cheng Yin; screenplay China Peking Opera Company. color, 112 mins. August First Film Studio.

The revolutionary model opera *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was one of several model theatrical works, known as *yangbanxi*, produced during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), as part of the state-sponsored collective theatrical productions to answer Mao Zedong's call for continuous revolution. Due to its enormous critical and popular success, *The Legend of the Red Lantern* became the first model theatrical work to be made into a film for wider promulgation and emulation, being released in 1970. Set during the second Sino-Japanese War, the opera centers on a family of revolutionaries, the Li family, working with a network of underground communists to guard and pass on secret codes, using a red lantern, in order to win the fight against the Japanese. In the most dramatic moment, which occurs mid-narrative, the Li family is revealed to share no actual biological relation. After the father and grandmother are executed by Japanese forces, the granddaughter, who has now come to realize she is not related to them by blood, willingly chooses to carry on their fight and continues the revolution in their wake.

The Legend of the Red Lantern relies on many key aesthetic features of the melodramatic mode, including excessive emotionalism, familial intimacy, moral polarization, stylized performance, and the use of music to intensify emotions displayed both on stage and screen. Melodrama has held profound impact on Chinese cinema since its inception. Scholars have attributed the formation of early Chinese melodramatic films to both Hollywood melodrama and China's own melodramatic tradition, including traditional opera and popular romantic genres that flourished in urban areas in the early to mid-20th century (Berry and Farquhar; Zhang 2005, 2018). Once it had taken hold in Chinese culture, melodrama, and especially family melodrama, became highly adaptable across genres and media, and remained a central part of Chinese early

cinema in the 1920s, realist cinema in the 30s and 40s, and socialist realist cinema in the 50s and beyond. *The Legend of the Red Lantern* illustrates the culmination of what I call »revolutionary melodrama« in 20th century China—that is, melodramas that seek not to resolve social injustice at the level of personal or familial concerns but to rather effect social change.

The pairing of »revolution« with »melodrama« may seem paradoxical, because melodrama, as extensively theorized in Euro-American film studies, has been identified as a quintessentially bourgeois form—known for being particularly adept at capturing social injustices (e.g. of race, gender, class) produced by capitalist modernity but disinterested in changing the status quo (Williams 1998; Gledhill; Berlant). However, many scholars have also noticed the revolutionary potentialities of the melodramatic mode »to dichotomize swiftly, to identify targets, to encapsulate conflict,« as well as its affinity with leftist politics (Gaines 59; Anker; Gerould). The intensified suffering and victimhood of the oppressed and the innocent featured in melodrama make a moral imperative out of overthrowing the forces of oppression.

The revolutionary potentialities of melodrama were particularly pronounced in the case of 20th century China, given that the subjugation of the Chinese people under both Western and Japanese colonization and a traditional patriarchal system produced pervasive suffering and victimization. Even prior to a full-fledged and politically committed left-wing cinema movement, many progressive filmmakers in Shanghai in the 1920s and early 30s sought to use the medium of cinema for social reform as well as for the propagation of Enlightenment ideals of equality and freedom (Zhang 2018; Yeh). The left-wing cinema of the 30s was predominantly preoccupied with the representation of the suffering poor and marginalized in the semi-colonial metropole of Shanghai. Committed to the awakening of mass political consciousness, many of the iconic left-wing films experimented in various ways with montage to shore up the contrast between the innocent, yet powerless, oppressed class, and the evil and all-powerful oppressor. The political and affective effectiveness of the melodramatic form was duly noted by critics and dramatists during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), known in China as »the War of Resistance against Japan.« One dramatist has commented on the similarity of War of Resistance dramas to melodrama, stating that both maximize emotional appeal to a mass audience through moral polarization and typified characterization that »portrays two antagonistic sides as typical characters, one as the invincible ›hero,‹ and one as the evil ›villain‹« (Peng 138). In the many land reform dramas staged in Communist base areas in the late 1930s and 40s, the landlord replaces the Japanese as the embodiment of evil, and Manichean class struggles are fought and won by the persecuted peasantry. Revolutionary melodrama therefore takes »the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent« (Williams 62) a step further, to call for action, propel social change, and make revolution.

The moral fungibility of the melodramatic form, as noted by Christine Gledhill, that »*any* body can fill the place of victim and oppressor« (2018, xxii), makes this aesthetic form obtain a high level of adaptability and translatability to fit different revolutionary goals in changing historical conditions. *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, produced at the height of the Cultural Revolution, relied on similar moral polarization to achieve its political and affective efficacy. Moreover, the stylized performance and emotional intensity featured in the film functioned to move and transform its audiences, so that

they, too, would model themselves on these revolutionary heroes. The dramatic moment of revelation in the film presents a case in point.

The sudden revelation of the actual identity of this adopted family forms one of the film's most significant climaxes. The camera intercuts between Granny Li and Li Tiemei to highlight the strong emotional response of both characters, one telling and one learning the truth of how this family with no biological connection came to be formed. Granny Li reveals to Tiemei that the Li family's three generations are not related but have chosen to form an adopted family in the face of the extreme circumstances of a failed workers movement. Li Yuhe becomes the adopted son of Granny Li, whose husband is killed during the brutal suppression, and together they have saved and raised the orphaned Tiemei, whose biological parents were also massacred in the strike. What accompanies granddaughter Tiemei's transformation from an innocent child to a resolute revolutionary with proper class consciousness is the grandmother's constant touching and caressing; both function therapeutically to ease traumatic shock. Granny Li then sings an aria to urge Tiemei to carry on their family legacy and continue the revolution, a mission Tiemei gladly accepts. Affective bonds and intimacies between grandmother and granddaughter in the film's diegetic world are thereby vital to the continuation of the revolution.

In his insightful study on Cultural Revolutionary opera films and the realist tradition in Chinese cinema, Jason McGrath points out that the productions of these opera films marked the culmination of a formalist shift in Chinese cinema, in which highly stylized performance and melodramatic narrative modes replaced earlier mimetic cinematic realism. Both melodramatic performance style and the performance style of traditional Chinese operas are non-mimetic and non-realist, characterized by their punctuation of the flow of motion into discrete semantic units so that the audience can »read« it (McGrath 359-60). Granny Li and Tiemei's intimate gestures are posed and held for an extended period of time, allowing the audience ample time to read and appreciate their emotions and intimacies as something that contains meaning and truth, or, to use Peter Brooks' classic phrase, as »the true wrestled from the real« (2). It is this demand of the melodramatic mode »to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality« (Brooks 2), as McGrath points out, that resonates so perfectly with the Maoist aesthetics of a revolutionary romanticism that contends art should depart from surface reality to depict a higher, more idealized reality—to reveal the truth hidden beneath reality.

The revolutionary truth is revealed in *The Legend of the Red Lantern* as much through ideological indoctrination as it is through felt affect. Just as emotional bonds and intimacies between the grandmother and granddaughter ensure the continuation of the revolution in the film's diegetic world, the heightened affective power of revolutionary melodrama is supposed to mobilize the audience to model themselves on revolutionary heroes and to continue the revolution. Numerous reports in the 1970s of how *The Legend of the Red Lantern* moved to tears countless audience members, including Mao Zedong and his wife, Jiang Qing, may seem to have corroborated the affective and political usefulness of this specific opera film. Most importantly, time and again Chinese citizens have reenacted key moments from the opera, performing their parts as revolutionaries, and faithfully carrying out Mao's call to perpetuate the revolution. Identity, performance, and revolution thus become inseparable.

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