Dance Chronicle

ISSN: 0147-2526 (Print) 1532-4257 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ldnc20

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To cite this article: Eric Mullis (2017) Aesthetics, Ideology, and Ethics of Remembrance in *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse Niangzi Jun*, 红色娘子军), Dance Chronicle, 40:1, 53-73, DOI: 10.1080/01472526.2017.1272036

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2017.1272036

DANCE CHRONICLE
2017, VOL. 40, NO. 1, 53–73
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2017.1272036

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Aesthetics, Ideology, and Ethics of Remembrance in *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse Niangzi Jun*, 红色娘子军)

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ABSTRACT
The *Red Detachment of Women* is a ballet that was developed under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party in the period leading up to the Cultural Revolution. It features a distinctive approach to ideological content that draws on martial arts, folk dance, and Beijing Opera traditions, and continues to appeal to contemporary audiences in China. I consider the aesthetics of the weapon advanced by the ballet and the ethical and political implications of the National Ballet of China's continued performances of a ballet that celebrates a time of persecution of ordinary Chinese citizens.

KEYWORDS
Ballet; politics; Maoist ideology; ethics; social remembrance

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) developed the *Red Detachment of Women* (1964) shortly after its rise to power following the Chinese Civil War. Regularly performed domestically since the mid-1960s and internationally since the 1990s, the work presents a unique choreographic fusion of traditional ballet technique, acrobatic martial arts movement (*wushu*, 武术), and aspects of Beijing opera (*jingju*, 京剧).[1] This blend of movement traditions functions as a vehicle for the Maoist ideology that influenced a range of artistic and popular works produced by the CCP propaganda ministry in the 1960s and 1970s.[2]

In this essay I discuss the development and early reception of the ballet, focusing on the manner in which political ideology informed its casting, choreography, and costuming. The elements of the work cumulatively created a uniquely powerful gestalt, aspects of which were consistent with other revolutionary ballets that historically preceded *Red Detachment*. Most interesting among these was the aesthetics of the weapon characteristic of martial arts movement that informed the modification of ballet technique and contributed to the representations of political mobilization that the piece develops.

Because the work is currently regularly performed, I also consider what import it has for contemporary audiences—Chinese and non-Chinese. The ballet preserves a unique moment in China's history and arguably retains significant artistic value. However, appreciating *Red Detachment* for cultural or artistic reasons becomes problematic if one sufficiently acknowledges the history of the CCP. If

Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/ldnc.

Figure 1. Zhang Jian (left) as Qionghua and Zhu Yan (right) as Comrade in Arms in a scene from the Lincoln Center Festival presentation of The National Ballet of China performing *The Red Detachment of Women* at the David H. Koch Theater on July 11, 2015. Prelude and ballet in six scenes adapted from the film *The Red Detachment of Women*, with a screenplay by Liang Xin. Photo credit: Stephanie Berger, ©2016. Copyright belongs to Stephanie Berger. All rights reserved.

one takes into account historical social injustices characteristic of the Cultural Revolution, the ballet's Maoist ideology is troubling, and the work can produce a sense of irony for audiences aware of the current CCP's failures concerning political and socioeconomic equality. Further, if an ethics of remembrance for the victims of the Cultural Revolution is advanced, the ballet becomes a troublingly poignant reminder of the CCP's historical and contemporary censorship of its own history.[*]

History, narrative, and aesthetics of the weapon

The Red Detachment of Women was modeled on revolutionary works developed in Russia after the 1917 October Revolution—ballets designed to foster class consciousness by portraying struggle and uprising against oppressive ruling classes[3] (see Figure 1). Examples include Vasily Vainonen's *The Flames of Paris* (1933), Vassily Tikhomirov's *The Red Flower* (1957), and Sergei Prokofiev's rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* (1940) and his *Tale of the Stone Flower* (1954).

The story of the *Red Detachment* centers on a young heroine, Wu Qinghua, who escapes from a despotic landlord, notorious for imprisoning poor tenants unable to

[*] I viewed a live performance of *Red Detachment* by the National Ballet of China (NBC) in Beijing in the Summer of 2007 and, more recently, a feature film of the work available for streaming on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHTPcs3lQPU (accessed September 1, 2016).

pay their rent. After defiantly absconding and fleeing into the forest, Wu runs into a local Communist commissar, Hong Changqing, dedicated to the overthrow of aristocratic society, who aids her. Hong directs Wu to the camp of a women's fighting force in the Red Army. After training with them for some time, she goes on to assist them in an attempt to capture the landlord in his estate. On the night of the attack, Wu, in a fit of rage, tries to kill the villain on her own, before the supporting guerillas are prepared to attack, and he escapes. In turn, the landlord assembles a group of troops who attack the detachment, a fierce battle ensues, and Hong is killed. The Communists muster the strength to defeat the opposing force and Wu becomes their leader, taking Hong's place.

As musicologist Kristine Harris documents, the story is based on historical events that took place on the island of Hainan during the Chinese Civil War (1927–1950).[4] An all-female independent company of the Communist Red Army fiercely resisted Nationalist forces invading the island. The story developed into a popular regional opera and then circulated in comic book and film form throughout China. In time, the CCP transformed the narrative into a ballet that advanced the Marxist precept that common people must unite to overthrow the aristocracy that oppresses them; the ballet moreover champions the Maoist ideal of revolutionary action against traditional aspects of Chinese culture by young and idealistic individuals fiercely committed to creating a new and just society.

Red Detachment was one of the "Model Theatrical Works" (*yangbanxi*, 样板戏) developed under the supervision of Mao Zedong's wife—Jiang Qing—during the first three years of the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. This period marked the development of a sociopolitical movement in which Chairman Mao emphasized the preservation of the ideological gains of the Chinese Communist Revolution and resistance against both capitalism and traditional feudal elements of Chinese society.[5] The model theatrical works told stories of China's then-recent revolutionary struggles against foreign and class enemies, glorified the People's Liberation Army (PLA), celebrated the bravery of the common people, and embodied concepts characteristic of Maoist ideology.

Developed at the Beijing Ballet School, *Red Detachment* was regularly performed for audiences in regional cities and for peasants in the countryside.[*] Guest artists Li Chengxiang, Jiang Zuhui, and Wang Xixian jointly choreographed the ballet, which features dramatic solos for Wu, a *pas de deux* for Wu and Hong, group dances by members of the detachment, martial arts dances with broadswords and other weapons, stylized folk dances, a famous series of synchronized *grand jetés* with the dancers holding rifles, and a group dance and *tableau vivant* that concludes the piece. In order to increase access to the ballet, a filmic adaptation was created in 1970, which allowed the work to be viewed at film festivals, schools, and work units across China. The National Ballet of China now regularly performs the

[*] The Beijing Ballet School was established in 1954. Dai Ailan, who studied at the Jooss School of Ballet, was the school's first principal and former Kirov Ballet director Pyotr Gusev taught its first generation of ballet dancers.

ballet domestically and internationally—for example, at Lincoln Center in the United States as recently as the summer of 2015.[6]

Maoist ideology informs the ballet's story in several ways. The narrative presented in the regional opera and comic book, performed and published before the development of the ballet and the later feature film, includes a tragic romance between Wu and Hong. However, in *Red Detachment* the two characters develop a thin platonic friendship oriented toward the goals of the Communist Revolution. Creators likely altered the ballet in this way for two reasons. First, the early CCP generally downplayed artistic portrayals of romantic love common in Western ballet and film narratives, perceiving them as characteristic of leisurely and trivial bourgeoisie entertainment.* Second, in contrast to traditional Confucian social philosophy that stressed the primacy of the family, early Maoist thought emphasized that private or personal relationships should be redirected publicly to the realization of political revolution.[7] For these reasons, when Wu and Hong appear together in the ballet, they consistently orient themselves toward images symbolic of the aims of revolution standardized by the CCP propaganda machine: flags, groups of fellow soldiers, and the distant horizon symbolic of the future. Like other soldiers in the detachment, Wu and Hong focus their energies on their shared political ideals and do not express private passions or familial loyalty. Indeed, no familial relationships appear in the ballet. Historian Paul Clark notes that the heroes and heroines presented in *Red Detachment*, as in the other model theatrical works, are young and single and "have a substitute family in the form of their comrades-in-arms and a caring and supportive Communist Party."[8]

I mentioned another aspect of Maoist ideology apparent in the ballet's narrative a moment ago: the critique of traditional Chinese feudal culture. The landlord is portrayed as morally depraved not only because he makes licentious advances on young women, but also because he relishes the punishment of tenants who cannot afford their rent. His actions and lifestyle represent an oppressive feudal system that benefits the few and subjugates the many.[9] In contrast, the morally upright members of the detachment represent a more just Communist system; they have not been corrupted by wealth, greed, and power. The only instance in which one of them encounters an ethical struggle occurs when Wu's personal rage subverts the detachment's plan to catch the landlord. However, she quickly realizes the error of her ways and, after accepting blame and expressing remorse, commits to unified action against the enemy. This dynamic indicates the way that the ballet and the other model theatrical works present simplified characters fiercely loyal to rigorous, demanding, and possibly contentious political ideals.[10]

* Earlier, China's first ballet schools performed traditional Western classics such as *Swan Lake, Nutcracker*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. After watching a Beijing Ballet School performance of *Esmeralda*, then-Premier Zhou Enlai suggested that the school move beyond foreign ballets about "princes and fairies" and create something that contained revolutionary content. See Rosemary A. Roberts, *Maoist Model Theatre: The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 22.

As historians Di Bai and Rosemary Roberts separately argue, the ballet also embodies the early Maoist stance on gender equality.[11] In feudal Chinese culture Confucian gender roles specified that women generally had little to do with affairs outside the home. Alternatively, the early CCP emphasized a range of ways that women could practically contribute to the party and ultimately to the overthrow of feudal Confucian values. Empowering women pragmatically increased the number of individuals fighting Nationalist forces during the Chinese Civil War and contributed to the destabilization of traditional cultural values. The ballet exhibits such values in the protagonist's character as a fiercely determined woman who refuses the advances of the landlord, trains in order to overthrow him, and aims to subvert the culture he represents. Composed of similarly courageous and determined women, the regiment demonstrates its readiness to fight with swords, rifles, and hand grenades.*

Before leaving the narrative aspects of the ballet, one should note that the ideological downplay of romantic love and familial loyalty, the psychologically simple characters, and the critique of traditional gender roles mutually reinforce one another. Because Wu shows no clear allegiance to her family and since she remains uninterested in romantic love, she, like other members of the regiment, rejects traditional gender roles and adopts political values of cooperation, determination, and devotion. However, Wu's and her comrades' zealous devotion to ideals that may necessitate stoic self-sacrifice tempers their self-determination. Hence, the narrative of the ballet articulates a point of tension in Maoist gender politics, which on one hand emphasized new gender roles for women, but on the other hand viewed women as subservient to the ends of a rigorously Communist social system.

Non-narrative elements of the ballet embody Maoist ideology in several ways, including modification of traditional Russian ballet technique, costuming, and casting.

Dancer and choreographer Yu Ronglin imported ballet from Paris to the late Qing court in the early twentieth century; it began to flourish in Shanghai and Beijing in the 1950s.[12] Given ballet's status as an elite and Western cultural form, it seems puzzling that ballet technique would be used to advance the cause of the Communist Revolution.† One theoretical reason for its use centers on Mao's belief, articulated in the early essay *Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature* (1942), that artists should draw on traditional Chinese and non-Chinese art forms and incorporate innovations in order to advance Communist values.[13] Such a project would simultaneously draw attention to the working class and the poor, help to

* See Roberts, *Maoist Model Theatre*, 50–77, for a discussion of how the narrative supports the ideal of male-female social equality even while choreographic use of stage space and, in the case of the 1970 feature film, camera use and film editing undermine it.

† Another ballet and model theatrical work that similarly advances Communist ideology through choreographic hybridity is *The White-Haired Girl* (*bai mao nu*, 白毛女), which debuted in 1965. For a discussion of this work, see J. Norman Wilkinson "'The White-Haired Girl': From 'Yangko' to Revolutionary Modern Ballet," *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1974): 164–74. For a discussion of lesser works developed during the Cultural Revolution, see Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 158–75.

modernize traditional Chinese art forms, and diplomatically demonstrate China's capability in advancing Western art forms. Clear ideological content and accessibility to a broad range of Chinese citizenry could undermine ballet's nascent elitism in China. The widely popular narrative of *Red Detachment* left the choreographers free to consider how ballet technique itself could be modified in order to express the story's revolutionary content.

As a first solution, the creators modeled the choreography on the kinetic aesthetics of the weapon that characterizes Chinese martial arts choreography. The women of the detachment train and fight while holding rifles, pistols, and swords, and the forms of these weapons extend lines of energy articulated by the limbs. Moreover, the functions of the weapons inform the attack with which the dancers execute the ballet technique. This can be seen in the iconic sequence in which a seemingly endless stream of detachment members executes a series of *grand jetés* while firing rifles at the enemy. The rifle parallels the extended front leg, and the firing of the gun is timed to the apex of the leap. Similarly, the dancers brandish swords that parallel lines of energy created by the legs, and arm and leg movements powerfully slice through the air. The detachment women balance *en pointe* in many poses that also embody the aesthetics of the weapon. Pointe shoes and strong straight legs resonate with the characteristically precise architecture of the weapon that readily manifests intensely focused explosions of energy.[*]

These examples reveal how the ballet modified the traditionally refined movements and postures of Western ballet, so that the dancer's body could express the precise form and function of the weapon. In turn, this aesthetic approach increased in symbolic significance when the dancers used the clenched fist in movements and poses traditionally done with elegant and flowing hands. The fist simultaneously modified the dynamics of traditional ballet technique, even as it functioned as a symbol of political resistance in the model theatrical works. The aesthetics of the weapon indicated a broader militant resistance to the traditional class system and to any force perceived as threatening Communist ideals.

The modification of ballet movements and postures drew on the *wushu* (武术) tradition of Beijing Opera, which had adapted *gong fu* (功夫), or martial arts movement, originally developed for practical self-defense purposes, for the theater. Opera artists had stylized and standardized *gong fu* in a manner that rendered it both more acrobatic and increasingly capable of advancing narrative content. These stylized sequences—or *wushu* routines—would also be used in popular films such as *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967). *Red Detachment* exhibits several sequences in which men and women execute standard *wushu* routines as they train or fight. Viewers familiar with *wushu* can observe how the ballet draws on routines in which an individual executes a sequence of

[*] The aesthetics of the weapon and the relationship between this aesthetics and artistic and political revolution in the ballet are reminiscent of Marinetti's advocacy of Futurist, machine aesthetics in dance. See F. T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings: New Edition*, Günter Berghaus, ed., Doug Thompson, trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); also, Ted Merwin, "Loïe Fuller's Influence on F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Dance," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1998): 73–92.

movements demonstrating proficiency with the broadsword, straight sword, halberd, and spear. Each of these routines manifests a novel kinetic gestalt in which the functional characteristics of the weapon shape the performer's movement and movement quality. The weapon becomes a dynamic structural extension of the body.[14] In fusing this aspect of *wushu* performance with traditional ballet technique, the choreographers of *Red Detachment* simultaneously pushed the boundaries of traditional Western ballet and articulated a coherent movement vocabulary that would appeal to a domestic audience unfamiliar with ballet technique. Most Chinese audience members of the 1960s, though unfamiliar with Western ballet, would have been readily able to appreciate the work's narrative, its martial arts movement sequences, and the aesthetics of the weapon.*

Use of *wushu* movement guaranteed accessibility and popularity. In addition, *Red Detachment* incorporated brief segments of stylized folk dance and music intended to represent rural experience. The fusion of folk movement vocabularies in revolutionary Russian ballets established the historical precedent here, which would be adopted as well by the German Democratic Republic in the 1950s.[15] However, given China's long-lasting feudal class system, the CCP's use of folk dance necessarily differed from European approaches. In Europe, folk aesthetics often invoked feelings of authenticity, simplicity, and anti-elitism, but in China, agrarian life was closely intertwined with Confucian and Daoist ideology, which the CCP disdained.† Hence, the CCP considered agrarian values politically regressive. At the same time, peasants in the countryside had supported the party early on, during the civil war with Nationalist forces.‡ Empowered by the CCP's ideology of overthrowing the feudal system, peasants supported Communist soldiers and often fought against the Nationalists. As the CCP grew to power, a range of propaganda represented the experience of rural life, so that the professed inclusive ideals of the party would continue to generate loyalty. The peasants would be included in a revolution that would change all social classes.

As historian Hung Chang-tai and dance scholar Ellen Gerdes separately document, the CCP went beyond representing folk dance on stage; they used folk dance to advance Communist ideology in the countryside.[16] A well-documented example of this phenomenon is the party's use of agrarian *Yangge* (秧歌) folk dances originally used for communal celebrations of spring harvests. Local party representatives gave these dances political content by transforming them into dances of group solidarity that expressed commitment to Communist values and celebrated

* Both *wushu* and ballet movement require many years of rigorous training and manifest spectacular levels of physical virtuosity.

† The CCP criticized Daoist philosophy and religion for its unscientific worldview as well as its superstitions and archaic shamanistic religious practices. Confucian philosophy was criticized for its overt support of a feudal economy that benefited the aristocratic elite. For information on the CCP's stance on Chinese philosophy and religion, see Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

‡ Communist and Nationalist forces jointly resisted Japanese invasion in the period leading up to World War II. After the Japanese retreated, the two parties entered into a prolonged civil war, with the Communists taking power in 1950 and the Nationalists retreating to the island of Taiwan. For more on this subject, see Michael Lynch, *The Chinese Civil War 1945–49* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010).

the successes of the party. Hence, *Red Detachment* appropriated *Yangge*-style dances for the concert stage in order to supplement the ballet's depiction of the Communist Revolution and, at the same time, party officials staged folk dances to articulate Communism in the countryside.

Another aspect of the ballet that bears consideration concerns aesthetic features presented by the performers. In his early essay "A Study of Physical Education," Mao discussed traditional beliefs and practices involving the working body: "Our country has always stressed literary accomplishment. People blush to wear short clothes." He continued, "Flowing garments, a slow gait, a grave calm face—these constitute a fine deportment, respected by society. Why should one suddenly extend an arm or expose a leg, stretch and bend down?"[17] Mao criticized traditional Confucian formal etiquette, which emphasized physical ease within a rigid framework of sociopolitical ritual. This approach in turn created an aesthetic of self-presentation that emphasized social grace and downplayed physical vigor—an aesthetic that party advocates censured for its incipient critique of agrarian physical labor. Further, the early Communists and Nationalists agreed that the classical understanding of physical vigor constituted a component of China's then-longstanding political and military weakness in the face of colonizing forces. In contrast to the traditional view, Mao advocated exercising twice a day—upon getting up and before going to bed—and encouraged readers to exercise in the nude or in light clothes because clothing impeded movement.[18] This stridently revolutionary approach leads historian Tina Mai Chen to highlight the general manner in which Mao's China viewed "dress and body discourses as constituting fundamental components of a political-aesthetic ideal in which proletarian subjectivity became aestheticized, and identificatory signifiers internalized, desired, and displayed."[19]

The aestheticization of the proletarian body articulated by the CCP propaganda machine emphasized youth, hygiene, a strong and erect posture, and exposed muscular forearms and calves, all of which were framed by modern tailored uniforms. These values, culminating in an aesthetic of bodies ready and willing to work, can be seen in propaganda posters from the Cultural Revolution period. So, too, *Red Detachment* develops tableaux that function as living propaganda images. The detachment camp is clean and orderly and, in one sequence, preparation for military training includes efficient and swift ordering of objects in the camp. All of the soldiers wear clean uniforms with crisp hairdos, the men are clean-shaven, and men and women repeatedly display strong muscles through gestural poses. Further, all of the members of the regiment are young, healthy, and vibrant with the only exception being the clownish camp cook.

As mentioned, Mao wanted to undermine the traditional view, which linked the body conceptually to unrefined physical labor in order to celebrate the work necessary for political revolution. The CCP emphasized youth because the young more readily accepted new ideology and because their bodies did not signify cultural tradition and the past, as did those of their elders. They stressed hygiene because they viewed it as an index of modern society, influenced by scientific and technological

advances. (Both the early CCP and Nationalists wanted to cultivate domestic hygiene, so that the country would no longer be viewed as backward.)

The tailored military costumes worn by the men are fairly conventional in that they demonstrate modernity, strength, and cleanliness, and symbolize group solidarity. They are stylized versions of military uniforms worn by leaders of the CCP and soldiers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). However, the women's costumes differ in that they are distinct from uniforms worn by women in public; by Chinese cultural standards of the time, they are quite risqué. The uniforms of the CCP and PLA downplayed female gender, modeling women's uniforms on men's. However, the female dancers in the ballet wear color-coordinated tailored shorts, puttees, and pointe shoes that reveal the contours of the buttocks and legs, expose a large swathe of flesh on the upper thigh, and show more of the body than costumes worn by male characters. On the one hand, one can view the female uniform as manifesting Mao's progressive point about physical exercise and clothing; it allows for free movement and clearly shows ballet technique. The uniform optimizes vigorous movement that can be appreciated by the audience. On the other hand, as Roberts argues, because the male costumes manifestly do not adopt this strategy, the female costumes can be viewed in light of the association between performing woman and erotic spectacle.[20] Consequently, the subtle male-female hierarchy presented in the ballet conflicts with the gender egalitarianism that it otherwise champions.

Presenting uniform physical appearance consistent with specific political ideals, the ballet advances a clear stance on labor and political mobilization. More specifically, standards of physical appearance and costumes reveal the manner in which the surfaces of the body can be controlled to simultaneously resist traditional norms of feudal China and express personal allegiance to Communist values. Further, refined dance technique demonstrates control of the interior of the body grounded in systematic and demanding physical training. Such training symbolically expresses how the will of the individual can develop skills necessary for the Communist Revolution, as well as how individual ability increases when one works with others who share the same training. The members of the regiment exhibit the high degree of control of the surfaces and the depths of the body that is necessary for successful political revolution.[*]

Audience reception and engagement, past and present

Anthologies published by the CCP in the late 1960s celebrated *Red Detachment* for its effective fusion of movement styles and for its ability to move audiences.

[*] Two kinds of *mimesis* occur in the scenes in which the regiment trains with military drills. The exercises represent the concrete manner in which Communist soldiers prepare for battle, and the ballet technique undergirding the staged drills represents the way that dancers develop the facility that allows them to bodily express revolutionary content. This phenomenon also occurred in some agitprop dance pieces of the New Dance Group that utilized Graham technique and leftist political content. See Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928–1942* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 26–50.

Writers praised the many poses in the work for capturing a "passionate proletarian spirit of resistance" and for projecting "intensely and forcefully a character's spiritual outlook."[21] Art critic Hong Leping suggested that *Red Detachment* differed from Western ballets, which he judged as "already headed towards death," and he argued that "today, it is only in our country, under the revolutionary leadership of Chairman Mao, that the ancient foreign art form of dance drama, is able to experience a rebirth."[22]

Director Yuen Yanting's 2005 documentary, *Yang Ban Xi: The Eight Model Works*, includes interviews with musicians, composers, actors, and dancers who toured the ballets and operas domestically in the 1960s and early 1970s.[23] The artists emphasize the widespread popularity of the model works, as evidenced by their notoriety in Chinese society. They also note long distances that individuals living in the countryside would walk to see live performances and film screenings of the works.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, cultural theorist Barbara Mittler interviewed Chinese citizens from a range of backgrounds about Communist propaganda. The interviews revealed a hesitancy to criticize the model theatrical works outright; interviewees emphasized the pleasures that the works afforded.[24] Mittler writes that many interviewees "sang and performed for me extracts from the model works, revolutionary songs or so-called loyalty dances, with a smile, and hardly ever with irony, much less with contempt."[25] Propaganda art such as *Red Detachment* popularized artistic forms previously accessible only to elites in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Such art was successful largely because it "made the everyday cultural experience of the average 'comrade' more interesting, more exciting, even more cosmopolitan than ever before."[26]

Mittler's work calls into question the tendency to view the model works as brainwashing tools; instead, the interviews reveal a range of interpretations of ideological content. A telling example is a 2004 interview with an artistic couple in Beijing in which a man (born in 1954) disagrees with his female friend (born in 1959) about the effectiveness of reciting Mao's slogans. He remarks, "We would sing the quotation songs, 'Be Resolute,' for example. Everybody can sing this and everybody of course knows that it is taken from one of the 'Three Old Stories' by Mao." She replies, "But we did not quite believe what these stories told us, they did not really give us support." He retorts, "Yes, of course they did, for example, when I was performing the *Red Detachment* this quotation would keep me going when I was tired."[27] Similar interviews lead Mittler to conclude that "propaganda during the Cultural Revolution was neither simply received in a reflex reaction, nor only used parasitically. The audience responded as it did with all other art: reading and enjoying it in a critical as well as creative way."[28]

After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government issued a moratorium on performing the model theatrical works. *Red Detachment* disappeared from the stage from 1976 to 1992, when the National Ballet of China petitioned the Ministry of Culture to begin rehearsing it again.[29] Claire Eng observes that since then the ballet has

"undergone a radical transformation—from abandoned relic from an evil past to cherished representative of Chinese artistic achievement."[30] The fiftieth anniversary of the work was celebrated at a grand gala at the National Grand Theater in Beijing in 2014.

Rong Cai and Roberts separately argue that renewed interest in and support of the model theatrical works should be viewed in light of the "Red Classics Craze" (*hongse jingdian re*, 红色经典热), which began in the 1990s with state-sponsored popular television dramas that feature adaptations of stories from the Communist Revolution. The televised drama of *Red Detachment* offers intergenerational appeal since it has been modified to include romance and personal drama attractive to younger audiences. It also has the capacity to elicit nostalgic memories for older audiences who viewed the original model theatrical works in the 1960s and 1970s.[31] Given the ballet's role in the Cultural Revolution and its contemporary popularity in China and abroad, I would like to consider the artistic and historical value of the work, as well as how the current CCP uses it for nationalist purposes.*

Readers familiar with China's history will note that my discussion of *Red Detachment* takes a neutral stance on Maoist ideology, as I describe how Maoist concepts inform the ballet. This is indicative of an autonomist approach, which holds that art should be appreciated on its own terms, even if its content is ethically or politically troubling. Such an approach can be found in the writings of philosophers of art, artists, and art critics such as Immanuel Kant, Oscar Wilde, Clement Greenberg, and Clive Barnes. The autonomist thinker holds that, even though it is tempting to judge a work in light of ethical content, to do so would be to make a category mistake in which ethical values take precedence over artistic values.[32]

Two philosophical approaches differ from the autonomist one. "Ethicism" holds that ethical values should always inform art appreciation, and "moderate moralism" holds that some instances exist in which ethical considerations should be taken into account. Plato and Tolstoy offer examples of the former stance: they believe that art can significantly affect viewers, that art is instrumental for moral education, and that censorship is appropriate in certain circumstances.[33] Noël Carroll, among others, advances moderate moralism, arguing that ethical flaws can constitute artistic flaws.[34] For example, a tragic play with Adolf Hitler as its protagonist would be considered artistically poor because, given knowledge of the historical evils that he committed, it would be quite difficult to feel pity for him. Carroll notes that the play may aim to evoke feelings of pity, but such feelings would be undermined by a sense of retributive justice.[35]

From the autonomist perspective, the artistic value of *Red Detachment* is debatable. The work presents a unique fusion of ballet, martial arts, and folk traditions; features precise virtuosic dancing; and consistently advances Maoist

* The appeal of television adaptations arguably owes to their overlap with popular genres including "youth idol dramas" (*qingchun ouxiang ju*, 青春偶像剧) and martial arts dramas (*wu xia ju*, 武侠剧). For more on these topics see Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

ideology. However, the dance vocabulary is limited and becomes repetitious, the characters are flat, and the didactic political messaging is quite tedious.[36] Further, the narrative, characters, and scenic factors are formulaic, recurring again and again in the model works.[37] Historian Ross Terrill notes that, whereas Mao and the CCP's official publications publicly praised the merits of Jiang Qing's models, the mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen, asked, "What the hell are these models? I'm head of the arts in Beijing, and I know nothing of models." Then vice-chairman of the CCP Liu Shaoqi objected to the political heavy-handedness of the models when he noted that "audiences have the ability to judge things themselves." Future CCP chairman Deng Xiaoping quipped, "You just see a bunch of people running to and fro on the stage. Not a trace of art."[38] Hence, criticisms of Jiang Qing's model theatrical works from within the party questioned their didacticism.*

Contemporary Western dance critics often see *Red Detachment* as more spectacle than substance, while presenters stress cultural heritage, the innovative fusion of movement traditions, and appeal to popularity. In the program for the 2015 performance at Lincoln Center, seasonal house program coordinator Gabriel Mizrachi celebrates *Red Detachment* as the first original Chinese ballet, observes that it has been performed over 4,000 times, and claims that the ballet's use of folk dance and music "engendered a totally new ideological art form." National Ballet of China (NBC) deputy director Wang Quanxing observes that, while foreign audiences sometimes question the political implications of the ballet, one cannot dismiss its "superb choreography and enjoyable music." NBC artistic director Feng Ying underlines the ballet's function as a mainstay that helps to fund works less popular with Chinese audiences. Further, she remarks that, along with the patriotic *Yellow River* (1999) and the Qing dynasty–inspired *Peony Pavilion* (2008), *Red Detachment* helps to tell Chinese stories to contemporary audiences.[39]

However, the historical context of *Red Detachment* and the audience positioning that it invokes problematize an autonomist account of the ballet. Like Maoist propaganda posters, *Red Detachment* can be viewed as kitsch that harkens back to a time in which quaint imagery served to motivate the public to buy commodities or war bonds or to overthrow aristocratic oppressors. The ballet resembles mass-produced posters, stamps, and figurines—curious cultural relics from a unique historical moment in China's history. Since China is now a global power historically and culturally removed from Maoist ideology, whether one is Chinese or non-Chinese, the ballet's call to action

* Didacticism troubled party officials who wanted to cultivate a more thoroughly modernist approach to art. For more on the limitations of didactic political dance, see John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1974), 33–45; and Graff, *Stepping Left*, 9–25. For discussions of didactic art, see John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 234–50; and Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 134–51.

functions as a dead letter. Contemporary spectators may find it hard to identify with the audiences for which the ballet was originally intended.*

That said, *Red Detachment* evokes nostalgia for an idealized historical period. Mittler interviewed a musician (born 1942) who stated, "In Mao's time everybody was the same, everybody wore the same clothes. But now everybody is different, of course now everybody has a telephone, etc., but so many people now have much, much more than others, so those remakes of revolutionary songs in praise of Mao, for example, were in part nostalgic."[40] Chinese media scholar Qian Gong argues that widespread disillusionment with gaping socioeconomic inequalities and political corruption in the post-reform era summons this so-called contemporary totalitarian nostalgia.[41] Public outcry—at least from individuals who grew up with the model works—against television adaptations that significantly deviate from the originals, reinforces her point. Rong Cai observes, "The public's fascination with revolutionary history motivated the producers to launch Red memory projects, but diversified interests among the audiences also turned the TV adaptations into a highly contentious issue" because "views on love, class background and revolution in the adaptations do not always sync with the revolutionary orthodoxy of the original works."†

Even though the artistic value of *Red Detachment* as a dance drama is debatable, the ballet could be studied as kitsch, characteristic of a simpler time. However, the palpable disconnect between the content of the ballet and life in contemporary China produces a strong sense of irony for some contemporary Chinese audiences.‡ The idealism of Communist propaganda reads as quaint given increasing disparities between the rich and poor, rampant political corruption, lack of equal treatment for women and ethnic minority groups, an ineffective justice system, and environmental justice issues caused by lack of government regulation.[42] The promise of the Communist Revolution to remedy injustices of feudal aristocracy glaringly contrasts with contemporary social and political realities. Feudalism has been replaced not by an egalitarian Communist system, but by a unique form of capitalism that, at best, does not offset socioeconomic inequalities and, at worst,

* Artistic director of the Beijing Opera Theater in Shanghai, Li Zhongcheng, notes that, while the younger generation is curious about the model works, they "think that the political parts are ridiculous. They laugh out loud" (quoted in Sheila Melvin and Cai Jindong, "Why This Nostalgia for Fruits of Chaos?" *New York Times*, October 29, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/29/arts/why-this-nostalgia-for-fruits-of-chaos.html?pagewanted=all (accessed September 1, 2016). This reaction may be due to the fact that overt leftist messaging about class struggle, land reform, and collectivization has been removed from television adaptations with which Chinese citizens are familiar.

† Rong Cai, "Restaging the Revolution in Contemporary China: Memory of Politics and Politics of Memory," *The China Quarterly*, vol. 215 (2013): 672. Li Zhongcheng notes that older audiences would laugh at altered lyrics of leftist songs; "Leftist or not, the audience wants to hear the old words… . So now we sing the old words again" (quoted in Melvin and Cai, "Why This Nostalgia for Fruits of Chaos?").

‡ Artistic portrayals of the disconnect between political ideals and social realities include Zhang Yimou's film *Coming Home* (2014), which outlines a critical perspective of *Red Detachment*, and Beijing-based theater director Lin Zhahua's adaptations of *Hamlet* (1990) and *Romulus the Great* (1992), which were developed to present ideological disenchantment and cynicism in the political aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. See Anthony Carew, "Return of the Repressed: Zhang Yimou's *Coming Home*," *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, vol. 185 (2015): 82; and Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China* (New York: Seagull, 2012), 54–58.

exaggerates them. This sense of irony supports a moderate moralist critique of *Red Detachment*—one that emphasizes the disconnect between the revolution as portrayed in the ballet and the historical legacy of the CCP.

The Cultural Revolution began just two years after the premiere of the ballet, marking a historical period in which Chairman Mao grew increasingly paranoid about the infiltration of reactionary bourgeoisie elements in government and broader society. This paranoia fueled a destructive social campaign in which millions of Chinese citizens were persecuted in violent struggles that included public humiliation, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, seizure of property, and forcible displacement.[43] Produced by Jiang Qing and supported by the CCP, the ballet articulates propaganda that, in contemporary contexts, can be viewed as a deceptive representation of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, interviews in Yuen's documentary reveal that performing artists included in casts of the model theatrical works were often subject to the injustices of the Cultural Revolution. Opera singer Zhang Nanyun was blacklisted for becoming famous and powerful, which effectively ended her performing career. Conductor Huang Xiaotong was arrested for an artistic disagreement with Jiang Qing. Accused of participating in a "feudal faction," actor Tong Xiangling was forced to write a self-critical report, banned from the theater, and forced to do menial labor for a period of two years. After the fall of Jiang Qing and the "Gang of Four," *Red Detachment* star Xue Qinghua was banned from dancing, owing to what was judged as her close relationship with Jiang Qing.[*] These facts reveal significant discrepancies between egalitarian ideals portrayed in the model works by performing artists and the lives that they lived offstage.[†] The glaring disparity between representation and reality makes the ballet ethically troubling; in short, *Red Detachment* celebrates the ideology of a regime that embarked on a decade-long campaign of injustice. Furthermore, it seems morally untenable to view the ballet as ironic statement, or even mere kitsch, because the Chinese government continues to insufficiently address domestic instances of human rights abuses.

Is it then ethically wrong to celebrate *Red Detachment*? The autonomist position would hold that ethical concerns about the history of the Cultural Revolution should be bracketed, and aesthetic value should be considered in isolation from historical events. However, given that the ballet is based on historical events and portrays an idealized political future, this separation between art and life would seem tenuous. Moreover, one would have to ignore the fact that the

[*] After Mao's death in 1976, high-ranking party members blamed and punished Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four for the Cultural Revolution. Jiang was sentenced to life in prison and committed suicide in 1991. Although she was despised by the party and by Chinese citizenry, the ballet that she helped to create continues to be celebrated. For a fascinating biography of Jiang, see Ross Terrill, *Madame Mao: The White-Boned Demon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[†] Luo Zhengrong, a composer who worked with the model works group before the Cultural Revolution, said, "I don't want to watch them. … I don't want to hear them. But they were created well, and if they didn't have a political purpose, they wouldn't exist. The fact is, there's a market for them. If there wasn't a market, they wouldn't be performed" (quoted in Melvin and Cai, "Why This Nostalgia for Fruits of Chaos?").

ballet's creators intended it to convey political content that had significant historical impact.

The Chinese government currently takes an autonomist stance since it ignores the history of the Cultural Revolution and celebrates the ballet as a distinct artistic achievement. However, focusing on state-run media coverage of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the *Red Detachment*, scholar of Chinese media Michelle Yang observes that specific artistic strengths of the work are not discussed, nor is the lack of significant artistic innovation in Chinese ballet since the revival of the piece. Instead, the ballet is presented in media outlets simply as a positive cultural achievement produced by the CCP. Yang notes that this marks a political shift away from Marxist ideology, toward nationalism that aims to "encourage unity, promote stability, legitimize authority, and deflect attention from internal and external problems."[*] Ethical judgment informed by the history of the Cultural Revolution is suspended, not in order to assess the artistic value of the ballet, but, instead, to politically legitimize the CCP domestically and abroad.[†]

Another way to downplay ethical criticism would be to assert that *Red Detachment* was not created to cover up atrocities performed by the CCP. This line of thinking would hold that, because it was developed shortly before the Cultural Revolution, the ballet should not be viewed as intentionally misrepresenting history. However, the issue is not one of personal responsibility on the part of the authors, but rather the manner in which the ideology presented in *Red Detachment*, and other model works, was used by the CCP to inform the Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic uniformity, emphasis on youth, a vehement critique of traditional Chinese culture, and the desire to overthrow violently social forces that threatened the CCP all appear in the ballet. And it was precisely this platform of intolerance and violent ageism that was enacted during the Cultural Revolution. The wanton madness of young Red Guards who destroyed cultural relics and who humiliated and tortured those who appeared to criticize Mao could be viewed as the logical next step of the ideology represented by the ballet.[‡]

Bearing these limitations of the autonomist stance in mind, I would like to advance a moderate moralist stance on *Red Detachment* that draws on the ethics of cultural remembrance. My view is that the ballet is artistically and ethically flawed because it misrepresents history and eschews the obligation to remember

[*] Michelle Murray Yang, "Rhetorically Re-configuring China's Past and Present through Nostalgia: Chinese Media Coverage of the 50th Anniversary of *The Red Detachment of Women*," *China Media Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2016), 5. As an example of this nationalism, after viewing a 1992 restaging of the ballet, reporter Wei Liming wrote in the state-run *Beijing Review*, "Enthusiastic applause reverberated again and again when the modern ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* was restaged in Beijing in May. … It could not have attained popularity in China without artistic quality and a unique plot. Artistic works should neither be profusely praised nor put on ice for political reasons. Their real social impact can be judged from their reception by the public." "*The Red Detachment of Women* Restaged," *Beijing Review*, July 13, 1992, http://bjreview.com/cn/Cover_Story_Series_20190/201002/21/content_247607.htm (accessed September 1, 2016).

[†] For a thorough discussion of America's use of ballet as a form of diplomacy during the Cold War, see Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 35–65.

[‡] Slavoj Žižek argues that Maoist ideology logically entails a recurring violent process of political and cultural renewal. See *Mao: On Practice and Contradiction* (New York: Verso, 2007), 31–40.

victims of historical injustice. To fully articulate an ethics of cultural remembrance here would lead far afield of *Red Detachment*, but, briefly, such an ethics would argue that innocent victims of political atrocities ought to be remembered for two reasons: in order to rescue them from historical insignificance and to fulfill personal obligations to them.

Philosopher of memory Jeffrey Blustein observes that forgetting the dead concedes that death can render life insignificant. Such negligence is troubling because, on principle, human lives are intrinsically valuable and individuals, during their lifetimes, generally believe in the personal and social value of their lives. Blustein writes, "Remembering the dead serves as a way of acknowledging the significance of their lives … in a way that each of us can appreciate because it is natural for us to take ourselves seriously."[44] As we accumulate experience over time, we see our lives gaining in significance, and moral imagination allows us to appreciate other lives that, like our own, grow or grew in meaning. This is relevant for innocent victims of social injustice, not only because—qua human beings—they deserve to be rescued from insignificance, but also because their lives were prematurely ended by an unjust political regime.[*]

Further, personal relationships that have significant impact on our lives are characterized by certain ethical obligations. If I have a relationship with another characterized by strong emotional bonds, loyalty, trust, and intimacy, then my life is significantly intertwined with theirs, and it is incumbent on me to remember them while they are living and after they die. Indeed, if they consistently benefited me by providing emotional or financial support, I ought to remember them in a manner indicative of their caring for me. Blustein argues that "we fulfill duties of love and honor after a person has died by remembering him or her in ways that express our continuing love and honor"; moreover, even if the death of a person closes off some expressions of love and honor, "a formerly grounded duty does not suddenly become null and void merely because the person can no longer experience our concern."[45]

Such concerns are relevant for viewers of *Red Detachment* with relatives who suffered or died during the Cultural Revolution. For them, the ballet presents an ethical affront because it champions a political ideology that fueled injustices perpetrated on their loved ones. The misplaced nostalgia to which the ballet appeals represents an anathema to audience members who must recall the suffering that their loved ones endured. Innocent victims of the Cultural Revolution deserve cultural forms of remembrance that both rescue their lives from insignificance and sufficiently acknowledge their suffering. For example, after viewing *Red Detachment* at Lincoln Center in 2015, Chinese-American author Leo Timm argued that the ballet is an ethical affront to the memory of his grandfather, who died in the class struggle of the Cultural Revolution.[46]

[*] For a discussion of dance work that memorializes victims of the Holocaust, see Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–50.

Given that the Cultural Revolution affected many individuals and families in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the CCP's and the NBC's celebration of the ballet is ethically problematic. Nostalgia for an idealized past and nationalist sentiments do not outweigh the moral wrong of allowing the dead to become insignificant and the chance of offending survivors and surviving family members of the Cultural Revolution. In this sense, extolling the artistic virtues of *Red Detachment* trivializes the systematic human suffering perpetrated by the Chinese government.

In spite of the fact that the CCP supports the National Ballet of China, clearly, it would be unfair to place the responsibility for an ethics of cultural memory on one ballet or one ballet company. Moreover, one could argue that the moderate moralist stance requires a broader backdrop, taking into account the CCP's approach in general to memorializing atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. If the CCP consistently were to engage in acts of remembrance expressing remorse and sympathy for those it had persecuted, then the ethical implications of *Red Detachment* could be overlooked. While I agree with this argument, unfortunately, the CCP does not in practice advocate a robust ethics of cultural remembrance.

The CCP's official stance on the Cultural Revolution suggests that an aging Mao was manipulated by Jiang Qing and PLA general Lin Bao, who both encouraged the Chairman to begin a systematic process of cultural and political renewal.[47] The CCP officially condemns the Cultural Revolution, and requires school textbooks to espouse this view. But the party also controls the topic by prohibiting news organizations from reporting on the period, and by monitoring and censoring relevant Internet discussions. Further, the historical period is given only slight mention in the National Museum of China in Beijing.

Lack of access to quality information about the period has fueled international and domestic scholarly concerns that contemporary Chinese citizens and politicians dismiss the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution, and espouse the point of view that it was ultimately good for Chinese society.[48] Space does not allow me to fully discuss this debate here. Suffice it to say that *Red Detachment* is ethically problematic because it is indicative of a political system that advances censorship, allowing the victims of the Cultural Revolution to become historically insignificant. Indeed, it is unfair to put the full burden of an ethics of memory on one ballet, but, given the CCP's broader negligence of historical remembrance and its advocacy of nostalgia and nationalism, *Red Detachment* can justly be criticized on ethical grounds.*

Such criticism could support the position that the ballet should not be performed, but I do not think this measure is warranted. The obligation to remember the victims of the Cultural Revolution calls for ethical criticism of the ballet but, at

* Author and dance curator Phil Chan expresses reservations about the ballet in light of the struggles of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, "I wasn't sure about attending *The Red Detachment of Women*, a propaganda ballet from the Cultural Revolution that glamorizes the disastrous human conditions under that period. Having grown up in Hong Kong, I watch with great trepidation as democracy is slowly being dismantled from a society and micro-culture that has lived too many generations to function any other way," *Huffington Post*, July 15, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-chan/post_9782_b_7794940.html (accessed September 1, 2016).

the same time, a practical approach underlines the value of studying how dance and ideological content can be used to manipulate audiences. *Red Detachment* is historically valuable because it demonstrates how dance intertwines with representations of political mobilization and how art and artists can be co-opted for political ends in oppressive political climates.[*]

However, framing *Red Detachment* in sociopolitical historical context would require excavation of detailed knowledge of the history of the Cultural Revolution—knowledge that the Chinese government shows little interest in unearthing. Regardless, performances of the work should be curated in a manner that notes that the ballet's representation of the Communist Revolution is at odds with historical reality. This could be done by historically situating the ballet as I have done here, and by giving a detailed public account that justifies the work's continued inclusion in NBC's repertory.

Curating the ballet in this manner would significantly affect its reception and appreciation. Environmental philosopher Sheila Lintott makes a relevant point concerning the aesthetic appreciation of a sunset, which can be applied to *Red Detachment*.[49] Upon being told by a friend that the beautiful colors and textures were produced by sunlight hitting particulate air pollution emitted by a nearby factory, Lintott's experience of beauty shifted to dismay. The captivating shades of the sunset became ethically troubling as she realized that her aesthetic valuing of the sunset unknowingly sanctioned the air pollution. Just as scientific knowledge changed Lintott's experience, so awareness of the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution and its political legacy would provide the necessary historical backdrop to re-evaluate *Red Detachment*.[†] The ballet remains ethically disturbing because enjoying the artistic achievements celebrated by its advocates entails sanctioning a policy of historical misrepresentation that the CCP continues to advance.[‡]

Conclusion

In 2007, while studying Chinese martial arts and Mandarin Chinese at a school for international students in Beijing, I was taken to see a performance of *The Red Detachment of Women*. At that point in time, I had yet to begin dancing, and I knew little of

[*] For a comparative discussion of how German early modern dance was co-opted by the Nazi regime for propaganda purposes, see Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003).

[†] Can the aesthetic strengths of the ballet—such as the aesthetics of the weapon—be appreciated even though the work is ethically flawed? The moderate moralist would argue that this is possible only if one conceptually divorces a particular aspect of the work from the ballet as a whole. But, it is questionable to separate a particular aspect of the work from representations of political mobilization, group uniformity, gender politics, and the violent remaking of society that it coherently and repeatedly articulates. The rigorously consistent representation of political ideology characteristic of the model works makes it conceptually difficult to decontextualize their artistic achievements. Hence, the aesthetics of the weapon can be appreciated, but, in doing so, one adopts an autonomist position, which holds that art and ethics are distinct realms of value.

[‡] I do not take an ethicist position, which would hold that the ballet is inevitably ethically flawed. The CCP's stance on the ethical implications of the Cultural Revolution contextualizes the ethical judgment of the work. If the CCP were to advance a robust ethics of remembrance, then the ethical flaws of the work would no longer function as aesthetic flaws.

the history of Western ballet. Nevertheless, *Red Detachment* captivated me. I was fascinated because the work fused *wushu* movement with ballet technique, it used ballet as a political weapon, and the dancers performed with a focused intensity that energized the audience. Yet, at the same time, I felt uneasy because the political reality represented seemed to be simplistic and because the largely domestic Chinese audience that filled the concert hall, nevertheless, vigorously celebrated the work. I did not have detailed historical knowledge of the Cultural Revolution, but, after the concert, my friends and I discussed the eerie feeling produced by the ballet. It was reminiscent of our experience—just a few blocks from NBC's Tianqiao Theater, in the political heart of Beijing—of Tiananmen Square, with its public memorials fostering nationalist pride but occluding historical realities.

As a ballet *Red Detachment* is susceptible to ethical scrutiny in our time because it functions as nationalist propaganda in a political climate characterized by historical censorship and ongoing human rights issues. The CCP's failure to advance an adequate ethics of cultural remembrance renders the ballet an ethically irresponsible form of historical misrepresentation. In its current frame, oblivious to historical realities, *Red Detachment* demonstrates how dance intersects with political ideology past and present, and how dance work that aims to invoke nationalist sentiments can, via misrepresentation, ethically fail to honor individuals and families who were unjustly persecuted.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Amy Bagwell, Brent Bagwell, Sarah Griffith, Darci Wutz, the anonymous referees, and the editor of this journal for their insightful thoughts and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

Notes

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