

# Cross Dressing as (Wo)Men: The Implicit Male Gaze in a “Feminist” Ballet

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**Abstract.** The Red Detachment of Women is a Chinese revolutionary ballet that is often characterized as feminist based on its portrayal of female soldiers. This view is based on the incomprehensive view that the era of its production was devoid of desire, sex, and gender. This article, using the 1970 filmed version of the ballet, utilizes crossdressing as a lead and through an analysis of costumes, identifies the gender differences between the characters on stage. Furthermore, the article explores actor-audience interactions and argues that the gender difference is initiated by an implicit male gaze embedded within the production. The Red Detachment of Women is significant as a specimen of gender politics during the Cultural Revolution, as well as an example of undetected masculine view in popular culture production.

**Keywords:** The Red Detachment of Women; Crossdressing; Ballet; Male Gaze; Feminism.

## 1. Introduction

When Gia Kourlas, the dance critic of the *New York Times*, commented on the premier of the *Red Detachment of Women* in the United States in 2015, she seemed to be amazed by the aggressiveness of the movements in the ballet (Kourlas, 2015). “In ‘Red Detachment,’” she wrote, “tutus have no place; ballerinas wear military shorts, carry rifles and charge onward in jumps so heroic that you begin to imagine that Spartacus, the subject of that Soviet war horse, is just around the bend.”

Kourlas’s association of the ballet’s heroicness with Spartacus is not unfounded. After all, the “blitz of arabesques and indomitable leaps” which Kourlas marks as being “out for blood” poses a stark contrast to ballet’s conventional recognition as a graceful and mesmerizing artform. But I would also suggest that her awe with the *Red Detachment of Women*’s menacing energy is established on a backdrop of, quite literally, the absence of tutus.

To Kourlas and the average American theatergoer’s eyes, the usual ballerina resembles that of Odette in *Swan Lake*: exquisite, flashing, and full of female fanfare. The Chinese ballerinas in Bermuda shorts surely are peculiar beings in ballet, in which the usual femininity seems to be purposefully defied. Thus, Kourlas’s reference to Spartacus is understandable, as these Chinese ballerinas seem to have become manly figures, devoid of conventional feminine preoccupations. Nevertheless, Kourlas as a commentator embodies a lens on the Cultural Revolution that even many Chinese scholars and civilians alike (perhaps out of deliberate ignorance) have adopted: that the Revolution was a period devoid of romance and sex, and gender distinction (Roberts, 2004, p. 407-408). Therefore, as the quintessential offspring of the revolutionary stage, these audiences are inclined to state that they are free of the male gaze as the attention shifts from the grace and sexuality of a female dancer towards her uncommon unyieldingness.

This, of course, is not a comprehensive nor accurate description. Emily Honig’s influential investigation titled *Socialist Sex* readily reveals the general sexual promiscuity and even atrocities committed during the era (Honig, 2003, p. 171). Previous review of stageworks including the *Red Detachment of Women* conducted by Rosemary Roberts has also concluded that gender distinction is much present within these performances (Roberts, 2004, p. 419-420). However, even in this review, the exploration has mainly focused on the semiotics of the works instead of the social status and character-character or character-audience dynamics. Moreover, the ballet is, as in most cases, recognized as an anomaly in this study: a case in which the female representation accurately reflects the propagandist claims of the era.

As part of an attempt to debunk the propagandist residues of sexual suppression through the erasure of gender, one must return to the works created during that era. As sinologist Babara Mittler finds in

her studies, the ideological impacts of the era forcefully remain in various forms (Mittler, 2008, p. 487-489). In particular, the beliefs surrounding sex and gender were sustained parallelly: through portraying the past as a repressed era, or through reinterpreting past ideology as sensual and revolutionary erotic (Larson, 1999, p. 423-424). This duality, despite the difference, perpetuates popular belief and does not directly engage with work produced during the Revolution.

By engaging with the *Red Detachment of Women* directly and the gender dynamics - particularly the male gaze, this investigation tackles a creation that is at center stage. In particular, it aims to focus on *interactions*. Admittedly, interactions cannot exist independent of semiotics of historical context. Therefore, this inquiry will rely on crossdressing (and the crossdresser's social interactions) as a lead, and use a queer reading method to discuss the dynamics, especially the male gaze, that shaped this historical work. It will begin by establishing the context of the creation of the work, move on to an exploration of the relationship between clothes/accessories and social recognition/interaction, and derive the implicit male gaze from within this relationship.

## 2. The Cultural Revolution: A Feminist Revolution?

*The Red Detachment of Women* (RDW) is a ballet created in 1964, during the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Based on an eponymous movie filmed in 1962, the ballet is set during the Second Revolutionary Civil War (1927-1937) and chronicles the journey of the peasant girl Wu Qinghua (吴清华), who was initially subject to the abuse of the villain landlord Nan Batian (南霸天). After attempting to escape and beaten into a coma by Nan, Wu by chance, encounters the male protagonist, Hong Changqing (洪常青), the CCP's party representative in the Detachment. Hong directs her to the base of the Red Detachment of Women, where Wu enlists as a female soldier. After one of her early attempts to take down Nan goes awry, Wu was indoctrinated with Communist discipline and at the end of the story, is involved in the capture and execution of Nan. During the final battle, Hong sacrifices himself, and Wu assumes his position after his martyrdom.

*The Red Detachment of Women* was part of a series of stageworks produced under the general guidance of Jiang Qing, the fourth wife of Mao Zedong and adamant leader of the artistic sphere during the Revolution. These productions "have come to epitomize musical life and creative production during the Cultural Revolution" and "were omnipresent across all genres at the time" due to their successful reception (Mittler, 2010, p. 378). Abolishing traditional plotlines and librettos, Jiang, along with a team of artists, revised old artforms and instilled into them stories of "heroic workers, peasants, and soldiers" following Mao's guidance. The result were eight productions referred to as the Eight Model Stageworks, featuring five innovated traditional operas, two ballets, and one symphony.

The Model Stageworks were formulated at a time when women's social roles were under rapid shifts. Mao's slogans of complete eradication of gender differences such as "Women hold up half the sky" or "Any job a man can do, a woman can do" (Women Hold, n.d.) combined with the "sent-down youth" movement, which obscured the dichotomy of urban and rural societies, plucked women out of their usual social roles in a gender-binary sense. As Bret Hinsch duly notes, movements during the Revolution "directed the exigencies of filial piety away from the family and toward the party and its fatherly symbol" (Hinsch, 2013, p. 153). In this atmosphere, romantic relationships were officially condemned as "bourgeois" and even "pornographic" (Honig, 2003, p. 144) – obstructive to the revolutionary cause.

The attempts to disorientate women from homely life and devote their exertions to the collective cause is reflected in the Model Stageworks. However, the indestructibility of human familial bonds, which often have to be employed for plot development, came into conflict with the reimagining of women's roles, creating grotesque images that hover between conventional and revolutionary. For example, the Peking Opera *Red Lantern* presents a (dysfunctional) family of three in which the proclaimed grandmother, father, and daughter are unrelated by blood. Their bond replaces affection

with a platonic codependence that arises out of the fending against a common enemy. The ballet *White Haired Girl* cuts an organic romance short by imposing rape and miscarriage on the young woman. The final reunion between the couple, contrary to common expectation, does not end on the note of marriage but rather the eager enlistment of the woman. The opera *The Harbor* features a female lead who not only assumes the role of (and dresses like) a man, but also keeps her private life hidden from view.

In many ways, *The Red Detachment of Women* embodies the attributes of the above narratives. The protagonist, Wu, introduced as a sexual slave, is evidently devoid of family and relationships. Furthermore, the ballet extends the scope of revolutionary characteristics of women by introducing Wu to a collective group of women who are of the same status as her. Therefore, RDW serves as a good emblematic case of study for a general reading of female figures in art productions during the Cultural Revolution. The original plot of the ballet has been adapted into various artistic forms since the 1950s, including a novel in 1957, a Qiong Opera in 1959, a cinematic script in 1961 and lastly, a ballet by the Central Opera and Ballet Theater (中央歌劇舞劇院芭蕾舞團) in 1964. For the purposes of this study, I chose to use the 1970 filmed version of the ballet, closest to the 1964 original.

### 3. Do Clothes Make the Man?

“Clothes Make the Man.” This is the title of the introduction to Marjorie Garber’s book *Vested Interests*, in which she explores Western society’s fascination with the transvestite. At the end of this section, Garber makes a bold claim: “transvestism is...the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (Garber, 1992, p. 17). By asserting that “no society can exist without the transvestite,” Garber internalizes, and therefore normalizes the existence of the crossdresser as an element that despite being “the disruptive element,” upholds the binarism in gender.

The description of crossdressing as a “disruptive element” echoes scholar Adam Isaiah Green’s construction of queerness as a “performative failure,” during which one fails to align their behavior to the norms associated with their social category (Green, 2007, p. 33-34). While traditional “queer” investigations are bounded to inspecting characters, plots, or actions that may appear homosexual, limiting the scope of discussion to the “abnormalities” within sexuality particularly on the subjects of desire, Green’s structure provides a larger stage to play on. It takes into account of the queer forms of appearance, practices, and societal roles, like cross-dressing, that are conjoined with the variations to gendered and sexual elements. According to Green, gender is created through a process that relies on the iterations of individuals “doing” masculinity and femininity. Crossdressing as discussed by Garber therefore is etched into queerness through the (temporary) cessation of “doing” genders.

However, as Garber points out, society has long since rationalized the act of crossdressing by using it as a tool to uphold binarism in gender and the social dimensions surrounding it. This effect can be seen most prominently on stage, as in theatrical works, characters are in service of the plot and thus appeal strongly to stereotypes. Not only do the characters lack the lifespan of a human being in real life (they only survive for as long as they are put under the audience’s gaze, usually no more than a few hours), they are also devoid of the emotional depth that is built from layers of experiences and trauma, no matter how much background the playwright devotes to them.

The theaters of the Sino-cultural sphere, of course, are not exempt from the use of crossdressers. Females who disguise themselves as men are rationalized as long as their stories are tales of domestication: in the end, they must return to the strong arms of the patriarchy. The traditional crossdressing narratives of women in China can fall roughly into two categories: the literati (文官), women in academia/imperial courts and the warrior (武官), women in war (Xue & Yiu, 1996). While our investigated subject undoubtedly falls into the category of the warrior, briefly exploring the literati’s side of narrative could be useful as well. The two examples that are most common in reviews are the *Butterfly Lovers/Liangshanbo yu Zhuyingtai* (梁山伯与祝英台) and the Female Champion Scholar/Nü Zhuangyuan (女状元). Regardless of the differences in plotlines (the first one is a tragedy

often compared to that of Romeo and Juliet while the second one is a comedy), both stories end on the note of marriage resembling coalition.

The same trend can be spotted for the warrior's narrative as well. The most renowned female crossdresser in Chinese literature is probably Mulan, who substitutes her elderly father's place in the army and becomes a worthy soldier. However, Xue concludes that rather than praising the female warrior's bravery, the moral highlights feudalistic ideals of loyalty and filial piety. Through a reading of the original *Ballad of Mulan* written between the 4th and 6th centuries AD, one might also add onto Xue's conclusion that the destination to Mulan's gender-shifting journey remains to be marriage. Per the ballad, as soon as she arrives home, she sheds her wartime clothes and "Against the window, brushes [her] flowy hair/To the mirror, sticks golden embellishments onto [her] face," (当窗理云鬓, 对镜帖花黄) an obvious gesture to please her future husband. In a later rendition of the story written during the Ming dynasty, Mulan is seen worrying about losing her foot-bindings as it may affect how appealing she presents for engagement. In this version, her eventual wedlock with her husband is based on his admiration for her filial piety towards her father (Shi, 2012). As Joseph R. Allen insightfully points out, "the most recent and culturally most divergent versions are ultimately also tales of domestication" (Allen, 1996, p. 346).

If the Chinese theater falls so perfectly into Garber's assertion of the position of the transvestite, and only sustains Green's "performative failure" for the duration of the play, why is the RDW, apparently another female warrior narrative, worthy of exploration? For one, as will be discussed extensively in the following section, the RDW is created with the intention of *permanently* perpetuating the "performative failure," as in accordance with Mao's slogan. The second reason is that, despite its intentions, it does not fulfill its declared purpose. The stories of Mulan and other female-to-male crossdressers in theater point out that there are two facets to a woman-turned-man. There is the "garmented man," in which the way that a female dress would hide her true identity, and make her original gender unrecognizable. However, the garmented man serves as a foreground for the more dominating "social man" (Herdt, 1993, p. 244). Females dress up as males to be recognized, at least to cheat, the social position as a man. In ancient tales, the "garmented man" and the "social man" seem to be paired. One who dresses as a man must be recognized as a man, and the same is also true for that who dresses as a woman. As the garmented and the social man goes hand in hand, one cannot break the binary sexes. The warrior woman must at last, return home.

But what if there is a disparity between the garmented man and the social man? Is it possible for a person to be recognized as a "social man," but remain a "garmented woman?" When a woman apparently declares that she is going to cross over as a man, but fails to complete the task, is this a new, particular type of "performative failure?"

#### 4. Cross-Dressing as (Wo)Men

The ballet itself, and the deliberately dressed up characters within may present an answer to this question. "[T]he gender distinctions of the subjects [during the Cultural Revolution] were by and large erased over time. The physical differences between males and females practically disappeared – something that was also attempted in real life," claims *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, a book filled with collections of Mao era pictures, most notably working ladies donning pant suits, short hairs, and gripping intimidating industrial tools tightly in their hands. "Men and women alike had stereotypical, 'masculinized' bodies that made them look like Superpersons" (Min et al., 2008, p. 16).

Landsberger's claim of the erasure of gender distinctions appears to encompass both the garmented and social aspects of an individual. While he is careful in pointing out that total erasure was only "attempted" (not "achieved") in real life, his discussion of the posters can be generalized onto theatrical works as both fall under the category of visual representation of ideologies. Landsberger is not wrong about the eradication of social differences between the two sexes. The destination of the RDW, particularly Wu's journey, does not land on the note of marriage as its antecedents do. While it might be logical for the unsuspecting audience to expect that Wu and Hong would end up in

wedlock, this in fact is barred from happening through the action of Hong's self-sacrifice. The absence of Wu's romantic feelings for Hong is further exemplified through the mourning scene, when Wu engages in the mourning dance not by herself, but in duet with the Detachment's commander, substituting collective revolutionary reverence in the place of individual love. By physically putting on Hong's token – a leather messenger bag, Wu does not retreat from the role of the "social man," but rather perpetuates it.

However, when Landsberger's message is applied onto the garmented aspect of these female soldiers, it becomes paradoxical. He notes that a necessary condition of becoming a "Superperson" is possessing a "masculinized" body. Therefore, there is no "by and large" erasure as he claims. The physical impracticality of women possessing men's bodies in real life implies that regardless of what the Cultural Revolution's values may be, there is the acknowledgment that a female body is a disadvantage, and therefore a need for distinction between masculinity and femininity. The question then is, is the quandary in real life reflected in the staged plays? Can Wu and her companions supersede Mulan and become perpetually recognized as coherent males, in both garmented and social ways? And what implications does this have for the theater viewers and the society they represent?

A close read of the costumes in the *Red Detachment of Women* must first be done for the analysis that ensues. As a form of art that does not involve the active pronunciation of lines, ballets must rely on its costumes to indicate the power dynamics and social statuses of the characters. Costumes in the RDW can be roughly divided into three categories, that of the feminine/oppressed woman, the female soldier, and the male soldier/male oppressor. In the ballet, the three categories correspond to the three different combinations of the garmented and the social person: The garmented and social woman, the garmented woman and the social man, and the garmented and social man. To prove the status of the female soldier requires a close look at the other two types first.

The role of the feminine woman is made easily recognizable in the RDW by one key feature: a long hanging braid. The braid can be seen on characters such as enslaved women, maids, performers, and most importantly, on Wu throughout the first half of the ballet. That the braid represents a feminine woman could be justified by Wu's plotline. When she first enlisted to the detachment, she kept her long braid, standing out among her companions donning uniform, plain shirts. It is only after that Wu was sent on a mission to infiltrate the Nan residence in the middle of the ballet, misfired her pistol because she couldn't contain her rage for the villain (note the stereotypical vision of a woman being emotional and unfit for leadership here), letting Nan escape, and reeducated with Marxist thoughts that she appeared almost unrecognizably finally with military uniform and a bob cut, marking her acceptance as a proper "social man." It only gives more credit to consider the braid as symbolic of femininity when Wu was wearing it in two poignantly oppressive scenes: her chained in the dungeon and beaten up in the forest.

The male costume becomes divergent and hard to comprehend in one single model. On one hand, the costume that Hong, the male protagonist, and all other male Red Army members wear, falls perfectly in line with Landsberger's description of the regular Cultural Revolution's definition of male attire. With its drab navy color and leather belt around the middle of the torso, the inverted triangular frame of the body would cause any 70s audience to reminisce about the heroic figures that they encountered daily on newspapers and posters. Acknowledging this costume as the paradigmatic masculine dress is important, as it is a prototype for the female soldier attire.

On the other hand, one must not forget the costumes of the other male characters, the most prominent being the landlord villain, Nan, and his subordinates. While they are not dressed as members of the Red Army, they are also garment-wise and social-wise recognized as men by an important indicator – their paraphernalia, or part of the costume. Of course, in this discussion we are not questioning their absolute masculinity. It is both established by relations in the ballet itself and acknowledged in the audience that Nan and his cohorts are biological males. We are rather investigating with the purpose of identifying the comprehensive signifier for maleness in the ballet, and with the revelation, explicate why the female members of the RDW have failed to make the cross as complete men.

I have decided to locate the male signifier as the Freudian male phallus. The phallus here is not used in the sense of the physical male genitalia, but as an object with the extended attributes of the phallus - “intrusiveness, power, violence” (Gardiner, 2012). But perhaps more poignantly, on a social interactive level, the phallus should be recognized as an object of authority desired by both men and women alike. As Judith Kegan Gardiner concludes, popular theories about the phallus constructed by influentials like Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam “continue to naturalize connection between men, their penises, and social control.” She suggests that these theories, set in by psychoanalytic approach, presuppose that gaining social power for females must include a rejection of femininity. As will be acknowledged subsequently, the RDW inevitably adopts this predisposition. Therefore, a phallus in the terms of this ballet can be properly defined as an object that indicates dominance in the social hierarchy, and that is “inherently” owned by male characters since the opening of the ballet.

These phallic objects are commonly seen obtained by Nan and his subordinates. For example, Nan always appears with a walking stick. Though not usually associated with a weapon, but rather associated with old age and frailty, the stick functions as Nan’s “phallus.” In the first scene he is seen leaning on it, but scenes in succeeding acts shows that he is carrying it purely for show. He uses it to beat Wu, command his hitmen, and in the awe-inspiring birthday scene, draws out a shining sword from it, and performs robust fencing moves: fully flashing his pompousness and status. In this way, the stick clearly becomes an object capable of inducing violence, not to say that the performative act of carrying it demonstrates Nan’s self-assumed nobility and oppressiveness (in contrast with the feminine women’s state of being oppressed). Similarly, his hitmen carry items that are more obviously “phallic,” including whips, pikes – to dominate the nonresistant female slaves and performers – and even the lanterns and torches which one might argue have the ability to “penetrate” the darkness and reveal those in hiding. Of course, the phallic objects are also present among the male soldiers. The pistols, rifles, flags, and broadswords are the equivalent to those held by the villains.

The intermediary female soldier loses her femininity by reducing the braid to a bob cut. Simultaneously, she gains masculinity by adopting the costume worn by the male soldier, but with one important difference: while Hong and his male companions are dressed in trousers that cover the entirety of their legs, the female soldiers have in place rather revealing Bermuda shorts. This is a deliberate difference both as an attempt to separate the sexes and to honor the “masculinized body.” It also brings forth significant implication in terms of audience-actors relationship which will be discussed further below. The phallic object is not absent from the female soldier, and in fact, is an important symbolization of their growth, especially for Wu. When Wu makes the mistake of misfiring, her pistol was taken from her as a form of chastise. After being educated, Wu received her pistol from Hong as a symbol of regained trust. Her handling of a phallic object, on the social perspective, marks her crossing as a man. However, it is worthwhile contemplating whether the pistol is really an inherent part of her costume. She received the pistol from the most dominant male character in the ballet under certain conditions, leaning on it to prove her status. Therefore, when she carries the pistol, she carries the etchings of the patriarchy, which simultaneously marks her separations from masculinity as a woman.

## 5. The Male Gaze

Perhaps a more cogent argument regarding the female soldier’s garmented status could be derived from the effect of it. That is, whether her clothes are recognized as feminine under the male gaze and is presented as sexually attractive.

In the ballet, when the female soldier dresses in her attire, she fights alongside the male soldier without shame, nor worries of being unchaste. Their seemingly lack of sexual lure readily presents them the opportunity to avoid marriage and reproduction, giving her the opportunity to become a “social man.” As Gilbert Herdt notes, in societies where women are recognized as honorary men, they often vow to be virgins for life. (Herdt, 1993, p. 244) While it is cannot be told whether Wu is a virgin, the fact that she does not seem to be involved in any kind of romantic or sexual activities in

her army attire, and that she doesn't seem to be an object of sexual desire for Hong and other men suggests that she is consciously limiting her reproductive power while also at the same time, does not suffer from the spontaneous "male gaze." This evidence may suggest that at least on the stage, she has made the cross to a "garmented man."

But a quick recount of the story proves this claim invalid. Not only was Hong not attracted to Wu while she was dressed like a fighter, he was not attracted to her at all throughout the entire play, even when she was obviously a feminine woman when he rescued her in the forest, perhaps as an echo to the Cultural Revolution's proclaimed taboo over "bourgeois love." This is noteworthy as that Wu was clearly attractive to other men when she retained her braid and crimson clothes, as when we first saw her in that state she was being prepared to be sold as a sex slave. Therefore, Hong cannot suffice as a specimen, and the garmented identity of the female soldier in RDW remains ambiguous if only looking at the plotline on stage.

Therefore, one must turn to the other male gaze present in the theater: the male audiences. Siu Leung Li insightfully points out that in traditional Chinese theater (or any theater in that matter), "The female impersonation on stage is materialized by complex theatrical pacts of gender constructions that are 'differentiated citations and approximations called "feminine"' (Li, 2003, p. 181). Jin Liang's *Women Playing Men*, a book on the development of the female troupes for the traditional Yue Opera suggests that throughout the twentieth century, female performers are ideologically relegated to the ranks of prostitutes – the two both use their body to attract the (heterosexual) male view (Jin, 2009, p. 61-63). This of course can only be effectively done when the female performer is sustaining an obviously female role on stage: a process of make believe (it would not be expected, though entirely possible, that many men would develop strong sexual desires towards the Female Champion Scholar in her men's robes on stage). In this sense, the identities and social status of the actress and the character that she is portraying curiously overlaps for the duration of her onstage performance.

In the case of Wu and her comrade in arms, their transition from the feminine woman into the female soldier lifts the male gaze inside the ballet. Ideologically, this should also lift the gaze on the ballerinas' body in reality, no longer making them subjects of desire but rather guiding the audiences to focus on the revolutionary message. However, this may have been proven unsuccessful. In a survey conducted by Barbara Mittler on propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, "One artist...remembers how much he liked to watch the model ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, not for its political content, but because the women were wearing very, very short shorts, and he thought this extremely sexy" (Mittler, 2008, p. 482).

This artist realistically is aware of the fact that Wu is a woman throughout the play: he has seen Wu before and after her garment transition and acknowledges that this is the same biological female. However, the particular cusp of his sexual excitement did not happen when Wu was dressed as a woman who is supposed to attract, but rather at the point when she should have ceased to be the subject of the male gaze. It has been established that socially at this point, Wu has already made the cross as a man, so the artist's perceived femininity in Wu could only have come from what she was wearing. Indeed, it was the shorts that bared Wu's hidden femininity, and despite the facade that she has created through crossing socially, she was cut short by what she was wearing.

In this case, unlike Mulan and her contemporaries, Wu and her comrade in arms are not "women dressing/playing as men," but rather "women dressing/playing as women, who aim to be like men." The two states are infinitesimally similar, but one has made the cross, while one hovers on the edge. One is a "performative failure," while the other, poetically and ironically, is the "performative failure" of a "performative failure."

## 6. The Historical Stage

The failed attempt of *The Red Detachment of Women* in erasing the boundaries of gender can be traced to the other stage: the historical stage during the Cultural Revolution. After Mao's death in

1976, which marked the end of the Revolution, his wife Jiang Qing quickly fell out of power and was sentenced to lifelong prison. Outwardly, she was the hegemonic presence in the cultural sphere, the primary instigator of the Eight Model Stageworks, and a very influential guide in crafting *The Red Detachment of Women* (Kristoff, 1991). Following this narrative, Wu Qinghua may seem like a piece of Jiang herself. The multitude of power that Jiang wielded made her practically a “social man.” As a trusted wife and political follower of Mao, she gave orders of persecution, made verdicts, and planned schemes that directed the tides of the Revolution, presumably holding more influence than most male bureaucrats during the era.

However, how much substance Jiang actually contributed to the coinage and production of the Model Stageworks must be carefully analyzed. Despite presenting herself as an overarching conductor, Jiang tailored her creations to the general politics within culture at the time. Her proclaimed works share the common characteristics of the aesthetic principle of the “three emphasis”: To emphasize the positive characters within all characters; to emphasize the heroic character within all positive characters, and to emphasize the heroic protagonist within all heroic characters. Such artistic principles were closely tied with the Maoist sanctioned view that “all art should be subordinate to politics.” Jiang was an artistic director without artistic liberty, who was only capacitated with creating artistically orthodox products.

Moreover, while one might assume that Jiang’s presence introduces a female gaze in cultural works, one finds it absent. Jiang cultivated her proximity with Mao through beauty and sex as a young actress, embracing, and making peace with herself as the subject of male gaze. Jiang has also famously referred to herself as an adamant advocate of Mao’s values. “I was Chairman Mao’s dog,” she said, “Whomever he told me to bite, I bit” (Kristoff, 1991). She, despite her social status, was indeed the actual embodiment of the male gaze.

The artistic choice to glorify the martyrdom of Hong is an obvious manifestation to this embodiment. Tied to a towering banyan tree, Hong neither flinches nor blinks as he is engulfed by crimson lights signifying fire while *L’Internationale* blares in the background. In the succeeding scene, the army, with Wu in the lead, pays homage towards the exact spot – now empty – where Hong died. Though the physical character has disappeared, his weight is still much present: His absence set the condition for Wu to take his place, and his undeniable male gaze is perpetuated through Wu and her carrying out of his undone deeds. To contain the transgressive power of the female characters and to avoid being physically overthrown, the “Father” makes himself invisible, but in such a way paradoxically makes himself more dominant. (Li, 2003, p. 88) The same process is imposed on Jiang’s orchestration of the ballet. The absence of a male director, putting her under the spotlight, becomes an incentive for her to contain her femininity within the male gaze that surrounds her, as she is assuming the role that theoretically, belongs to a man.

## 7. Conclusion

When *The Red Detachment of Women* premiered in the Théâtre du Châtelet in 2013, the *Financial Times* said that it has a “more feminist vibe than narrative ballet has ever managed in the rest of the world, with an army of pointe-wearing, Amazon-like soldiers led by the female alter ego of Grigorovitch’s Spartacus” (Cappelle, 2013). The comment was perhaps correct in that the ballet do serve as a prototype of misshaped feminist work in China, a kind that pushed woman to be like the masculine Spartacus. However, there is one primary difference between Wu Qinghua and an Amazon warrior: while the Amazon warriors kill their sons, Wu received her pistol from a man. One kills the male gaze, while the other harbors it.

Though the ballet has long lost its political context, it continues to gain sweeping popularity within China and internationally in the modern era. Its given labels of feminism and unconventionalism, which dominates the eyes of audiences and critics actively disregard the implicit male gaze embedded within the ballet. The elusion of the gaze from detection in the RDW perhaps is a result of a persisting mischaracterization of the male gaze in cultural production. Edward Snow keenly notes that,



especially in a feminist sense, “Masculine vision is almost invariably characterized as patriarchal, ideological, and phallogocentric” while associated with the themes of “voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, [and] scopophilia” (Snow, 1989, p. 30). The apparent overthrowing of the conventional masculine vision (through the execution of Nan) and the lack of these themes in the ballet creates an illusion of the absence of the male gaze. This illusion is alarming, because it demonstrates that masculine view could lurk even behind products from an era that is supposedly the most sexually repressed and gender ambiguous. It highlights the significance of a continuous effort in unmasking and dismantling the implicit male gaze in cultural products – not only in terms of identifying overt “power, violence, and control,” but more importantly, in a way that uncovers whatever “the gaze *resists* being understood” (Snow, 1989, p. 31).

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