Introduction

WHY NOT MODERN CHINESE DRAMA?

This study is intended as a cultural history of Chinese theater (both *geming yangbanxi*, or revolutionary model theater, and *huaju*, hereafter understood to refer to modern Chinese drama) in contemporary China from 1966 to the early 1990s. Modern Chinese drama was introduced to the Chinese stage at the turn of the twentieth century in imitation of the plays in the Western Ibsenesque tradition. “Hua” simply means “spoken language” and “ju,” “drama,” but many May Fourth intellectuals promoted this dialogue-centered modern Chinese drama as a potent alternative to traditional operatic theater, which was performed with singing, dancing, and acrobats. To begin this cultural history, I shall focus first on one particular period—that of the Cultural Revolution and of the post-Maoist years (1976–present), a time characterized by intriguing continuities and dis-
continuities with the PRC era of the first seventeen years (1949–1966) and the preceding Republican period (1911–1949).

To my knowledge, there are very few book-length critical studies in English that deal exclusively with modern Chinese drama from its inception. Moreover, in Chinese most of the scholarly works on the subject either are historical surveys or else focus on a single playwright. It is my strategy therefore to situate this study of contemporary Chinese drama, first, in the context of modern Chinese literary and cultural history, and second, in the context of comparative drama and theater, cultural studies, and the critical issues relevant to discussing other national theaters. With both general readers and specialists in mind, I here explore the marginality of modern Chinese drama in relation to other genres, other periods, and other cultures. After a detour to examine the origin of modern Chinese drama at the turn of the century, I reflect on the problematics of canonicity and literary history in a cross-cultural context, especially as they relate to the history of East–West comparative theater. I then go on to delineate what I consider the critical issues for modern Chinese drama in current investigations into national identity, mass culture, ethnic studies, and the political nature of cultural discourse. Treating Chinese theater as a dynamic genre that both constitutes and reflects culture, and reproducing and interrogating the knowledge and social order that derive from it, I look upon contemporary Chinese drama as one of several subcultures within a distinct culture while refraining from ascribing hegemony to any single one of these subcultures.

Surviving at the Margins: A Stepchild of an Unhappy Family Romance

The marginality of modern Chinese drama studies strikes one as so obvious that it might not seem to need much documentation. Students of modern Chinese literature, for instance, are familiar with C. T. Hsia’s claim that fiction should be valued as “the most fruitful and important branch of modern Chinese literature,” whose pattern should be further tested against “the Communist idea of the modern Chinese literary tradition.” Modern Chinese drama, owing to its emphasis on audience and mass participation, was deemed too propagandist to count as serious literature. Recent scholarship on Chinese film radically redeems visual culture on the silver screen, thereby making available resources for the study of performance as visual text. As a result of dedicated efforts to bring Chi-
Chinese studies into the wider arena of a world audience through insightful, close readings of Chinese film, however, some Hollywood-like, exotic films about forbidden love affairs, patricide, and concubines in rural China—for example, Judou in 1990 and Raise the Red Lantern (Dahong denglóng gāogāo guā) in 1991—could perhaps partially explain the increasing presence of Chinese film in Western movie houses and in scholarly discourse. Compared to the way in which Chinese film has been laid open to the global gaze, modern Chinese drama (although initially formed from Western dramatic influences) has remained for the most part a native phenomenon addressing a local audience and a peculiar social and cultural institution that both patronizes and censors public performance. Despite steady attempts to engage the attention of the larger world, with which it has become increasingly familiar, modern Chinese drama, because it is by nature a staged performance, has not been able to shed its identity as a nonprofit, domestic commodity in the international market.

Furthermore, differing as it does from other genres such as ballet and opera by virtue of its heavy dependence on spoken language and indigenous culture, the content of modern Chinese drama is necessarily confined mostly to specific localities within the boundaries of China. In truth, one can often detect a conscious refusal on the part of Chinese dramatists to see their material universalized and applied to a global stage. Also still relevant today is the complicating factor alluded to by Hong Shen in 1935 with regard to the collective nature of dramatic art. In his study of modern Chinese drama’s first ten years (1917–1927), Hong Shen pointed out that the challenge of drama required the talents of a poet and a fiction writer, and much more. The finished script, which delineates the culmination of the poet’s and the fiction writer’s creative work, represents only one-third of the dramatist’s accomplishment. An even greater test of that accomplishment resides in the collaborative efforts with other artists to attain the other essential elements: directing, stage and costume designing, acting, and revising the script in response to perceptions of audience expectations and the dramatic criticism of ongoing performances. The ephemeral nature of all these components, moreover, would also ensure their precariousness insofar as the ability to record and preserve them for students of culture in future generations. Thus the localized and temporal aspects of Chinese drama (unlike films, which can be replayed to study their textual and visual implications) present unique difficulties for the student and scholar wishing to pursue sustained, innovative research into the genre.
A final, equally important impediment that must be addressed is the pronouncement that the PRC period produced no works of “literary excellence,” a dismissal generally accepted by students of modern Chinese literature and culture. Recently, some scholars have asserted that the exclusion of literary works of the earlier PRC period (1949–1976) from current anthologies of modern Chinese literature is unjustified and, among other things, necessarily distorts a historical treatment of the subject. Even more problematic is the fact that, for the rare PRC literary studies included in surveys of the post-Maoist period, the few years immediately following 1976 have been the least scrutinized and anthologized. And on the rare occasions when this early post-Maoist period was considered, crime fiction, love stories, and obscure poetry garnered the attention, while drama was ignored, despite being well supported by local audiences and followed closely by critics of the time.

This present study, therefore, is intended to help redress the threefold marginalization by (1) focusing on the cultural and social function of modern Chinese drama; (2) discussing it as a “cross-breed” of multiple traditions that paradoxically carried out the legacy promoted during the “seventeen years” of the PRC (1949–1966), a period of marginalization whose literary output deserves to be the subject of literary and cultural studies; and (3) treating it as a significant voice rescued from an even more marginalized era in literary studies—that of Cultural Revolutionary China and early post-Maoist China.

Compared with that of its European counterpart, the marginal position of modern Chinese drama was also related to an episode in the history of comparative literature, the enchantment with traditional Chinese operatic theater (xiqu) as an “exotic” other. A familiar example is that of the neoclassicists’ enduring fascination with such Chinese Yuan drama as The Orphan of Zhao (Zhaoshi gu’er), attributed to Ji Junxiang and first performed in China around the late thirteenth century. The reincarnation of Ji’s Yuan drama in French, English, German, Italian, and Russian versions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries testifies to the attraction of Asian theater. One thus detects some limited scholarship on East–West comparative drama that manifests Orientalist interests. The absence of scholarly work on modern Chinese drama, except for a few studies on its Western influences, may be attributed to its seeming more familiar and therefore less interesting to Westerners compared with traditional culture, which seemed more remote and, hence, captivating. An abetting factor was that the field of sinology on premodern literature also exhibited a bias.
— in this case toward traditional and classical poetry — with the result that drama was the subject least likely to receive scholarly scrutiny. Both the comparatists’ favoring of and the sinologists’ disinterest in traditional theater, as evinced by their respective discourses, pose challenging, perhaps contrary questions about power relations between East and West, performance and written texts, and tradition and its modern exegesis.

Exhibiting an equally problematic position, scholars from China tend to vaunt the superiority of traditional Chinese theater over its Western counterpart. In his study on Chinese–Western comparative drama, Lan Fan elaborates the several characteristics of Chinese theater that he believes render it more spiritual and “aesthetic” than Western theater. He asserts, for instance, that the emphasis in Western theater is on dramatic form, which exploits plot structure to snare the audience’s attention, whereas in Chinese operatic theater a “sense of aesthetic beauty” is cultivated in order to “touch the soul of the audience.” As to audience reception, Lan contends that, in the West, audience preoccupation centers around whether the characters on stage are positive or negative figures, whereas in China, audiences are more likely to be concerned with how realistically and artistically the actors project the emotions of the dramatic characters, whatever their moral cast. Referring to the theatrical space in dramatic art, Lan concludes that Western drama is an art in space and Chinese theater, an art of space.

Paradoxically, Lan’s essentialist analysis, which is based on binary oppositions between East and West, highlights at least one advantage of traditional Chinese theater: it can point to a tradition, which thus serves as a basis for comparison with other traditions. Modern Chinese drama, on the other hand, cannot lay claim to such an asset, having always been sustained by its existence at the margins of “great” cultures. Imported from the modern West at the turn of the century, it was discounted either for not being “Chinese” in origin or for being too “modern” to relate to a China with its own long-established cultural traditions. For traditionalists and Chinese-cultural essentialists alike, modern Chinese drama did not represent a plausible pathway for reviving traditional theater. Zhao Taimou epitomized the earliest expression of this attitude when, around 1926 during the Republican period, he argued against those who advocated a wholesale supplanting of “old theater” (jixu) with “new theater” (xinxi). The pro–old-theater group to which he belonged was divided into two camps: those who were for reforming the established theater and those who would have liked to see it preserved unaltered. The two factions, however,
were united by the conviction that the import from the West, modern Chinese drama, could never fill the place of the existing art derived from the indigenous culture. Modern Chinese drama, moreover, held no appeal for the audiences that operatic theater still drew, according to these traditionalists.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite being rebuffed as a foreign product, modern Chinese drama could not garner the respect of Chinese modernists either, because it failed to reflect European themes and strategies faithfully. It inspired not only a supposedly “correct understanding” of the nature of drama as performed and received in its original setting—that of the West—but at the same time was symptomatic of the frustration of first-generation Chinese dramatists, who had constantly to justify their efforts to introduce modern drama while attempting to maintain a delicate balance between its political and its artistic orientations. One of the earliest expressions of this concern is discernible in Yu Shangyuan’s call for a “national drama movement” (\textit{guoju yundong}) in the mid-1920s. Yu declared that Chinese dramatists’ imitation of the Ibsenesque drama was wrongheaded, issuing as it did from a misunderstanding of the Western “master’s” artistic essence. Instead of pluming the depths of the human heart to reveal the interrelationships of art and life, as Ibsen had done, Chinese dramatists, according to Yu, tended to regard dramatic art as a means of rectifying a faulty heart and thus improving one’s life. But as life grew increasingly complex, the Ibsenesque “social problems” ceased to exist, and consequently “real” drama, such as it was, departed from the Chinese stage. In Yu’s opinion, modern Chinese drama’s failure to achieve acceptance was attributable to this deviation from the “genuine art” of Ibsen.\textsuperscript{16}

The urge to cultivate “authentic” Western tastes proved so persistent that it led directly, in contemporary times, to Xiao Qian’s demand for an authentic production of Ibsen’s \textit{Peer Gynt} (\textit{Pi’er jinte}, 1984–1985) that would replicate its original Norwegian terms.\textsuperscript{17} Caught between the two opposing views throughout its history, modern drama forfeited any sense of belonging: it was perceived as neither modern nor traditional, neither Chinese nor Western. Thus one could say that modern Chinese drama became the neglected “stepchild” of an unhappy family romance, whose foreign genes caused its adoptive parents to feel frustrated and unfulfilled because they had not obtained the ideal child they wanted.

The neglect of modern Chinese drama presents an interesting parallel with the marginal status of European medieval drama, explored by Clifford C. Flanigan in his definitive article, “Comparative Literature and the
Study of Medieval Drama” (1986). Some of the reasons for that glaring omission in the field of comparative literature, Flanigan argued, resulted from the belief that “medieval drama fails as literature in that it lacks the marks of that institution as it was invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” under the strong influence of national consciousness and Kantian aesthetics. The so-called didactic nature of medieval drama was seen by historicists and formalists alike as being inconsistent with the disinterestedness and universality that Europeans believed typified the “‘higher’ realms of ‘art.’” Accordingly, French literary scholars canonized merely a few of the more “literary” medieval plays while dismissing other texts for their incompatibility with neoclassical or modernist standards. In a contrary vein, German scholars singled out the passed-over dramatic texts for canonical status precisely because they were not regarded as literary but rather as “popular, even ‘völkisch,’” and therefore lent themselves to overt political interpretations—as, in this case, expressing the kind of German national consciousness exalted under National Socialism. Why the study of medieval drama in Germany was subsequently quite neglected in the two decades after World War II may thus be easily understood. The foregoing examples underscore the problematic history of medieval drama, which was either disregarded for being nonliterary or was acclaimed for its very lack of literary values and its great political and national significance—an unfortunate fate not unlike that of modern Chinese drama. In Flanigan’s view, the neglect of the medieval drama by comparatists implicates “not the deficient qualities of that drama, but the deficient qualities of the discourse, as well as the related discourse on national literature.” This conclusion may be borrowed to characterize the marginal position of modern Chinese drama within both the narrower field of sinology and the broader inquiry of comparative literary and cultural studies.

Of course, at the core underlying biases against modern Chinese drama are the age-old diametrically opposed ways of seeing drama as either purely artistic practice or strictly ideological activity. Thus the audience-oriented properties of modern Chinese drama, and hence its potential appeal for a mass culture, have drawn the appreciative notice of literary historians, who applauded it for helping to raise people’s political consciousness in times of national crisis, such as the War of Resistance to Japan (1937–1945). However, in different contexts these very same attributes were construed as negative, and modern Chinese drama was then castigated as a literary creation whose overly ideological basis rendered it inhospitable to artistic
Chen Baichen and Dong Jian, for example, argue that dramatic literature during the the War of Resistance to Japan occupied a distinctive place at the forefront of literary production, surpassing poetic and fictional works, although the latter had seen a fuller development than dramatic works in the 1920s and 1930s. In the very same chapter, however, the authors criticize these plays, whose artistic depth they claim was adversely affected by the hasty way they were created in response to a national crisis.

China’s modern drama, whose marginal status has been reinforced by contradictory considerations of the political and aesthetic cultures, has continued to be vulnerable to the same currents in its most recent history, the early post-Maoist period. At a time when many “masterpieces” in fiction, poetry, and—later on—film were hailed as “real literature,” many dramatic works of substance were once again repudiated for being the least aesthetic genre in China’s literary output. Zhang Zhong and others, for instance, although crediting theater for serving from 1978 to 1980 as a “powerful weapon” against the Gang of Four and thereby forging a mutually gratifying tie with its audience of that period, in almost the same breath fault its supposed reliance on one-dimensional characters and stereotypes, which they see as responsible for the dearth in drama of “monumental works.” Other drama critics lamented the “crisis of drama” (xiju weiji) in 1984, when the fewest plays were staged since 1976. This reduced yield of a stagnant theater, another critic claimed, could not possibly meet the new criteria for artistic works and the changing requirements of audiences, especially of the younger generation, which had been gradually turning away from politically oriented theater. One should not forget, however, that 1979—the year that marked a renaissance of the drama—was once viewed by such critics as Dai Jinhua as crucial in the political and cultural history of early post-Maoist China. In 1979 Deng Xiaoping espoused the late Mao’s principle of “seeking truth from facts” (shishi qiushi) to challenge the legitimacy of the Cultural Revolution, thus precipitating a naive but singularly sincere surge of democracy, a flood of “wounded literature,” and a “dramatic art that addressed the politically forbidden area with unprecedented courage and insight.” All these developments required extraordinary daring from members of literary and artistic circles, whose freedom of expression was still hampered by traditional discourse and outmoded socialist-realist perspectives, Dai argued. As might be predicted from the foregoing, many of the plays (known as
“anti–Gang of Four plays”) issuing from this period were later given short shrift and deemed too political for canonization.

For my part, I have chosen to focus on these early post-Maoist texts precisely because I regard them—and many audiences’ warm receptions of them—as invaluable cultural keys to understanding a specific historical moment when drama played an indispensable role in constructing a new national discourse. As will be seen in Chapter 5, “Performing Tiananmen,” audience participation at the critical moment was capable of subverting some of the ideologically correct themes of anti–Gang of Four plays, in the process challenging the early post-Maoist regime that had previously endorsed the plays. Looking beyond the rhetorical eloquence of the theatrical event, one may detect clues in the guise of randomness, contingencies, and inversions that underline the deviations on stage from the written texts. Audience response in theater challenges or reinforces script, resists documentation, eludes political repercussions, and may sidestep the barbs of writing such as theater reviews, critical debate, and other forms of official censorship. It transgresses the boundaries separating individuals from their public role that the mainstream culture has seen fit to observe. These acts of what I call “border crossing” in theater encapsulated the specific cultural living conditions of Chinese dramatists and audiences, whose play writing and theater going in themselves constituted a playing out of dramatic roles and situations in their confined social and political circumstances.

Representing Cultural Revolution: Model Theater, Visual Art, and Popular Culture

The first part of this introduction addressed the question: Why not study modern Chinese drama in order to provide a historical context for studying contemporary theater? In the following section, I pose a parallel question: Why study the revolutionary model theater, promoted during “the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution”? Like modern drama and the performing arts, the Cultural Revolutionary theater as a literary and cultural topic has occupied a peripheral place in Chinese and Western scholarship. This neglect is understandable, as any serious study of model theater would affect the way in which the Cultural Revolution itself is remembered. PRC official culture would erase it as an essential part of the unprecedented “ten-year disaster.” It is this sort of willful amnesia that led to
the sealing off of forbidden areas of national and local libraries for classified documents issued by former leaders of the CCP during and after the Cultural Revolution.

Recent studies by scholars in China, in spite of their advertised challenges to this state of affairs, only seem to ratify the official view; that is, they call for a shift from focusing on political events and the power struggle within the party hierarchy to examining the problematic mentality of the masses who carried out the Cultural Revolution. It was the negative national characteristics of the Chinese people and of traditional Chinese culture, for these scholars, that touched off and intensified the massive violence, betrayal, cruelty, and indifference that characterized the Cultural Revolution. Other aspects of their inquiry, which emphasize the discursive strategy of political power, the traditional concept of “loyalty to the king” (zhongjun), and the national spirit of the Chinese, succeed in assuring that the Cultural Revolution will be remembered as a chaotic event, without agency and in which no subjects are to be held responsible. These views expunge the connection between earth-shaking events as they occur in history and the mystified participants and collaborators, who cede their authority as witnesses to and owners of that history. Some scholars, for instance, judiciously point out that the Cultural Revolution is selectively remembered in the memoirs of former Red Guards, whose narcissistic gaze effectively incriminated others as the criminals. In the process of explaining why they have “no regret for their lost youth” (qing-chun wuhui) and “no regrets about the Red Guard experience” (hong-weibing wuhui), they relegate the past to the past, present themselves as having sacrificed their adolescence on the altar of duty, and construct themselves as glorious and charismatic while portraying others as ignorant and reprehensible. Relaying this perspective from the vantage point of the present, they enjoy assuming the guise of innocent idealists in order to deny their own role as partial agents of the Cultural Revolution.

Writing Cultural Revolution in the Diaspora

It must be noted, however, that while scholarship on the Cultural Revolution was being marginalized within China, a select group of Chinese writers living in the West explored this historical period in the book markets and movie industries abroad as a means of representing China to the West. Increasingly, American and other international best-seller lists host Cul-
cultural Revolution memoirs—written in English and geared to the interests of English-speaking audiences—that proffer horror stories of Maoist China, in which the Orient is seen seeking salvation from the Occident. In many of them, one perceives a common pattern of the narrator portraying herself as the heroine while relegating others to the role of persecutor. Almost all of these works read like stories of survival, culminating in the obligatory happy ending in America or Europe. Predictably, the memoirs found great favor in America, where the authors’ cheerful view of their adoptive country through the lens of a miserable Asian other proved to be a financially rewarding formula, as attested by the profitable sale of best-sellers.

A case in point is Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1986), an early exponent of the genre that set the tone for those that followed. It begins with the author’s manipulation of two time frames, that of a horrific past in 1960s Cultural Revolutionary China and a peaceful present in North America, where she has “ample time again and again to recall scenes and conversations in a continuing effort to assess their significance.” She claims that she has set down “as nearly as possible a faithful account” of her experience, and this assertion is buttressed by the tone of calm reflection, in which she introduces herself as a privileged Chinese woman in postliberation Shanghai living in a luxurious house with her own maid and servant. Cheng lingers over this part of the story, evidently enjoying her reminiscences of the good life, during which she was the only agent in Shanghai working for the Shell Oil Company after 1949. However, it is this job that causes her and her colleagues to be branded “running dogs of the imperialist West” during the Cultural Revolution and to be thrown into prison. After having lost her only daughter to the ravages of the Red Guards and wasted six and a half years in prison, Cheng is aghast when she looks in the mirror and sees a colorless face and eyes “overbright from the need to be constantly on the alert.”

Succor comes in the form of Western Christianity and its gracious God, which allow her “to see the distant green hills on the horizon.” The memoir ends inevitably with a happy life for the author in America, where the “Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, persecuted dissidents from repressive regimes, boat people from Vietnam, and political refugees from tyranny” make her feel at home. It was while paying a visit to some friendly, curious Americans in a handsome California house adorned with Asian treasures that she was encouraged to tell the horrendous story...
of her life in China. Inspired by these Americans, she “felt a compulsion to speak out and let those who have the good fortune to live in freedom know what” it was like “during those dark days in Maoist China.”

Cheng’s book, in light of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s pioneering anthology of writings on women’s autobiography, can be explored as expressing the “colonial subject” in women’s autobiographies as a significant cultural and ideological site where gender, class, race, and nation “intersect and dissect one another” in cross-cultural contexts. Life and Death in Shanghai can therefore be fruitfully analyzed as an inquiry into the Chinese woman as an “autobiographical speaker,” or as an agent of “a conflicted history, inhabiting and transforming a complex social and cultural world” in the postcolonial era. One could also view Cheng’s English writing as harboring problematic and contradictory I-narrators: a privileged Shanghai woman, an imprisoned dissident, a loyal Confucian widow, a heartbroken mother, a pious Christian disciple, and a spirited China basher in the diaspora. My problem with Cheng’s version of the Cultural Revolution does not lie so much in her basic experience during the period as in her lack of critical reflection on her own subjective positions in a complex historical context. It is puzzling to read, for instance, how Cheng, as a privileged woman representing a Western business in the early 1950s, gave no thought to China’s Communist politics, only to undergo a sudden conversion into a martyr at the height of the “white terror” of 1966. Her open defense of Liu Shaoqi, the then imprisoned former president of the PRC, sounds unconvincing when many ardent Communists were shying away from political involvement.

Whereas in Nien Cheng’s story the narrator is presented as asexual, Anchee Min’s Red Azalea (1994) evokes a China whose politically demonic system apparently kindles a steamy homosexual encounter. Appearing eight years after Life and Death in Shanghai, Red Azalea had something new to offer Western readers in the way of Cultural Revolution horror stories. The homosexual experience depicted in Red Azalea, however, has less to do with alternative life-styles than with reduced choices in a land that forbade heterosexual love. It is important to note that Anchee Min (the I-narrator in Red Azalea) falls in love with Yan Sheng, her lesbian partner on the farm, only after Little Green, another farm worker, is captured hiding with her heterosexual lover. When her lover is convicted of rape, Little Green goes mad and drowns herself in the river. Only after realizing that heterosexual love is precluded does Min begin to acknowledge her heretofore suppressed sexual desires: “The body and the restlessness worked hand
in glove. They were screaming in me, breaking me in two.” So intense was the monster of desire that she “chased mosquitoes every night,” pinching them to death, playing with their long legs, and watching their insertion into her skin, feeling their bite. As an apparent aftermath to this experience, Min decides to seduce Yan, who is still maintaining the facade of a typical Maoist woman uninterested in sex. At the same time, she feels guilty for driving Little Green mad since, as the party secretary and commander of the company, she was responsible for capturing her and her lover on the spot. Banned heterosexual love is thus the instigator of the lesbian episode with Yan (they end by sleeping together under a mosquito net), but the prisonlike farm environment during the Cultural Revolution eventually drives the lesbian couple apart. Yan renounces Min’s love in order to facilitate her resolve to leave the farm, “escape from hell,” and forge a better life in the city. As Min puts it, when Yan “was not allowed to have a man to love,” she “had to pretend to be a man for her.”

This brief exposition may still give some sense of Red Azalea’s appeal to a cross-cultural readership, which depicts a Cultural Revolutionary China as politically horrific, culturally alien, and erotic. This combination elicited a warmer reception in the West than any of the book’s predecessors, with reviews touting it as “intensely moving and erotic” and “the most memorable.” While not doubting Min’s account of her basic experience in the countryside, I question her selective use of memories of the Cultural Revolution for different audiences. The author, in a 1997 speech to a Christian women’s group at a YWCA in Columbus, Ohio, omitted any mention of the sexy lesbian affair that made the book a smash, dwelling instead on the ways in which hatred of Americans was bred into her while she was growing up in China, and on her odyssey toward personal fulfillment in America. This points up the irony in the author’s intentional or unintentional expenditure of cultural and symbolic capital: namely, whereas the book’s sales benefited from an erotic lesbian tale that Americans could comfortably enjoy while simultaneously discounting it as an exotic experience of an other, the author, in her speech, honed in on a different exotic tale, to ensure that certain audiences would not be offended by the erotic content.

Of course, gender politics and eroticism are not the exclusive province of Chinese women memoirists. Guanlong Gao in fact outdid his female competitors with his erotic memories of childhood, The Attic: The Memoir of a Chinese Landlord’s Son (1996). In it he discloses that before the age of seven he shared his mother’s bed every night and was transported into a state of excitement by the sensations aroused by fondling her breasts and
pressing against her body from behind.\textsuperscript{43} The setting of these graphic, Oedipal reminiscences in an attic in Shanghai evokes the circumstances under which Anne Frank and many other Jews tried to survive the Holocaust. With its novel, provocative version of growing up in Cultural Revolutionary China, \textit{The Attic} outstripped earlier Cultural Revolution memoirs, which consisted of stories about Red Guards’ ransacking and general mayhem.

Unlike these three texts, which were originally written in English, \textit{Scarlet Memorial}, published in 1996, was an English translation; but, more important, it constituted a more sensational manifestation of exoticizing China. Its author, Zheng Yi, tells of cannibalism among the Zhuang ethnic minority in Guangxi Province during the Cultural Revolution, when many people were murdered and their bodies cut into pieces and eaten by rival factions of the Red Guards. Personal interviews and investigations would seem to support the author’s assertion that the book consists of factual, “authentic” tales. In determining how much credence to give such a claim, one might consider that Zheng Yi is also known among the Han majority for his erotic fiction, and that as far as the present work is concerned, he was the sole arbiter as to whom he interviewed, what questions he asked, and which materials he selected for inclusion in his book.

Given the complex racial diversities in China, it is not surprising that Zheng paid more attention to the historical roots of cannibalism, such as witchcraft and other folk customs among the Zhuang people, than to the immediate ideological context of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{44} That his work was criticized in China as possibly reflecting a Han chauvinistic view is also unsurprising, since upholding the reputations and rights of minority groups is an important part of official PRC rhetoric. The officials responsible for carrying out the ruling ideology, moreover, are supposed to recognize and weed out discrimination against ethnic groups. Such rhetoric in favor of the welfare of minorities would surely be a cause for celebration on the part of Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/Latina Americans, and other ethnic groups were it ever similarly institutionalized in the United States. However, once translated and promoted in the West as a “banned” book from China, Zheng’s work found favor as another proof of China’s much publicized dismal record on human rights, although it did not seem to occur to China’s critics that human rights include the rights of ethnic minority peoples anywhere in the world, not just in China. Thus the question posed
by a Peking University student to President Clinton in June 1998—whether racial conflicts with African Americans and other ethnic groups did not present a problem of human rights in the United States—was a valid one, especially in light of Clinton’s public debate with the president of the PRC, Jiang Zemin, on China’s Tibetan policy. This student made another telling point when he asked Clinton how much he knew about Chinese culture, and whether perhaps his knowledge was not based on the spate of Western-bound best-sellers about the Cultural Revolution.

In view of the complicated issues of race, gender, nation, and state raised by Zheng’s book, its subtitle, “Tales of Cannibalism in Modern China,” is certainly misleading. It suggests that cannibalism occurred not just in Guangxi Province but elsewhere in China, and not just among Zhuang people but also among other groups; it could lead readers with almost no knowledge of Chinese history to believe that the practice persists in China today. Nor have we evaluated the impact of the process of translation: the subjectivity of the translator—another implicit “I-narrator”—surely plays a significant part in the international “joint-business venture” of representing China, especially in an already exoticized minority tale such as this, whose sensational aspects are duly magnified through consumption by Westerners innocent of China’s culture and history.

All the works under discussion seek to certify the authenticity of the autobiographers and/or the disguised I-narrator. Yet is it conceivable that this self has “faithfully” reflected the self that lived through the Cultural Revolution all those years ago? Or are we dealing with a modified self, one that has been so re-created as to strike us almost as a free agent, detached from the principal events of the Cultural Revolution and nearly always innocent compared with its vicious and evil perpetrators? Is it plausible that the transformations of the Cultural Revolution could have been achieved in a country peopled by helpless victims and passive observers who were never, not even early on, captivated enough by the events to participate in them?

A brief account of my own actions during those times is relevant here. Around 1966, a proud young citizen of the PRC at the age of twelve, I responded with enthusiasm to the initial events of the Cultural Revolution, despite being precluded from joining the Red Guards by the ideological incorrectness of my family background. Rather than anger, I felt sorrow at being excluded from this paramilitary youth organization, and I would wistfully make my own band out of red cloth and follow the Red Guards
on their raids against the “bad elements” in my neighborhood. After my father’s denunciation as an enemy of the people for his affiliation before 1949 with a theater attached to the KMT government, I pleaded with him, in the timid tones of an adoring Chinese daughter, to make a clean breast of all his sins against the Chinese people and to repudiate the stage and costume designs that had served to promote Western, decadent, and bourgeois plays. I remember how guilty I felt afterward for not being harder on my father. Writing in my diary, I speculated as to whether I could be more severe and critical if I were confronting class enemies who were unrelated to me. Many were the chilly late November nights I waited in the Beijing train station to be first in line to obtain a standby ticket so I could travel by train anywhere outside Beijing and spread the revolutionary spirit to the rest of the country. At this early stage of the revolution, my rejection by the Red Guards and my politically undesirable lineage merely spurred me to exert myself all the more to prove that I was as militant as anybody else in rooting out our common class enemies.

I cannot know to what extent other people’s reactions resembled my own, but I am convinced of the necessity for each of us to acknowledge the inescapable fact that many of us were players in this national drama and to relate honestly the particulars of our participation, with the goal of arriving at some understanding of and tolerance for the way we lived our lives at that particular point in history.

In Ronald Harwood’s play Taking Sides, Major Arnold’s characterization of the Austrians’ post-Nazi mentality might just as well apply to a Chinese audience: “To think, a million of these people came out to welcome Adolf [Hitler] on the day he entered the city [of Vienna], a million of them,” and now look at them—they say they were “all at home hiding Jews in their attics”; “The point is they’re all full of shit.” One wonders whether the issues of accountability raised by this play do not constitute a political allegory for all traumatized peoples emerging from tumultuous eras, whatever their political stance, who, in vying to cleanse their pasts, completely exonerate themselves and fix the blame on predictable targets. One is moved, furthermore, to try to imagine what kind of documents would result if millions of Red Guards who ardently saluted their “great helmsman” Chairman Mao in Tiananmen Square at the peak of the Cultural Revolution were somehow granted a knowledge of English and the privilege of living among and writing “autobiographical” accounts or “factual reports based on personal experience” for readers from other cultures.
I have questioned the subject positions of writers in representing the Cultural Revolution in the diaspora and raised the issue of accountability for participation in the Cultural Revolution. I do not mean to argue, however, that Cultural Revolution memoirs do not have their own value if discussed in the complicated, local context of the period. Indeed, I want to draw attention to several accounts of the tremendous effects of model theater, the posters that represented such theater, and the mass performance related to it. Taking Anchee Min’s Red Azalea as a point of departure, I intend to discuss the interrelationship of model theater, revolutionary posters, and mass performance of the period as a dynamic and dialogic process in which visual culture, model theater, and other performance activities can be seen as integral parts of the political drama of the period. In this way, I hope to reveal various aspects of visual culture and examine it as an extended stage of the model theater, which did not cease when the curtain went down.

As is well known, from 1966 to 1967, when schools, libraries, and all other cultural institutions were closed in China, the purveyors of the Maoist official ideology started to promote what were known as the eight revolutionary model works, which consisted of five Peking operas (jingju, also known as Beijing opera), two modern ballets, and one symphonic work. The majority of the people were compelled to see these plays for the sake of their political education; sometimes performances preceded or came at the end of political meetings. Since the Cultural Revolution aimed to eliminate the “four olds” (thought, culture, customs, and habit), the masses were encouraged to imitate the protagonists of the model theater by watching and even performing model theatrical pieces themselves in order to become better revolutionaries.

For those who remember model theater, Anchee Min’s beginning paragraph sounds particularly familiar: “I was raised on the teachings of Mao and on the operas of Madam Mao, Comrade Jiang [Q]ing. I became a leader of the Little Red Guards in elementary school. This was during the Cultural Revolution when red was my color.” Min, of course, was not alone. Her neighbor downstairs “liked to chat, quarrel and sing Comrade Jiang [Q]ing, Madam Mao’s operas.” Like many people around her, Min became an opera fan, singing opera everywhere, on the radio and in school, during her meals and even in her sleep. She was so obsessed with
opera that she identified Yan Sheng, her company leader in the country-side, as the protagonist in the opera. In singing the opera, she sings “the song of Yan,” “the heroine in real life”; she wanted to “reach her, to become her,” and to “worship” her.50 At the end of a long day’s hard work—in which she persisted by singing Mao’s quotation song to fight off sleep—Min was elated to see Yan, her “sun,” appearing in the distance, wishing that she herself could be recognized as the same kind of strong-willed person as Yan. Her tears welled up when she saw Yan “pacing in the sun.”51 Gazing at Yan, Min sat back, “enjoying her happiness, sharing her pain,” when Yan conducted the young farmers in singing the model opera *The Red Lantern* at the study meeting. The reference to Yan as the “sun” reminds one of the numerous posters of the Cultural Revolutionary period that depicted Mao as the red sun rising from the east, dispensing brilliant sunshine to nurture all living creatures on the earth.

Whereas model theater permeated people’s lives, posters reinforced, recalled, talked back, and also constructed personal and collective identities during the Cultural Revolution. Where the model theater stopped on the radio, in the movie theaters, and within the four walls of the theater, the images of its revolutionary heroes and heroines printed on posters continued their gaze at their beholders, exhorting them to further revolutionary actions. Min depicted the dynamics between opera and poster: “I grew up with the operas. They became my cells. I decorated the porch with posters of my favorite opera heroines. I sang the operas wherever I went. My mother heard me singing in my dreams; she said that I was preserved by the operas.”52 Min’s narrative helps to explain the popularity of a poster entitled *Acting Revolutionary Opera and Becoming Revolutionary People* (*Yan geming xi, zuo geming ren*); (Plate 1) by Liu Chengqi. Displayed in the National Art Exhibition (Quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan-hui) to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1974, Liu’s *nianhua*-style painting was later printed as a poster in private and public space, as often happened to many pieces.53 It portraits a female worker, a member of the workers’ “propaganda team to spread Mao Zhedong Thought” (*Mao Zedong Sixiang xuanchuandui*, hereafter refered to as *xuanchuandui*), as indicated on a musical instrument case (most likely an accordion). She is helping to arrange the hair of a little girl who belongs to an elementary-school *xuanchuandui*, as suggested by the characters on the drum. Both of them are dressing to perform the same role of Li Tiemei, the heroine of the Peking opera *The Red Lantern (Hongdeng ji)*, the little girl wearing Li’s red, flower-printed jacket and her “big sister”
wearing Tiemei’s green striped pants. This frozen moment nevertheless suggests the fluidity of time, as one imagines that before long both “sisters” will have appeared as identical images of Li. Both of them, however, have already done their hair as Li and will use the red lantern prop, which is placed on the lefthand dresser when they alternate as Li on stage. This spirit of sisterhood backstage indeed reflects the central theme of the model opera. Just as the character Li is determined to carry out her father’s last wish to deliver secret codes to revolutionary soldiers fighting against the Japanese during the war period, so the little “sister” will carry on the task of performing model theater undertaken by the big “sister” when she grows up. In the act of learning to perform the model opera that depicted a revolutionary past, the younger generation was also expected to learn from their real-life role models such as this female worker, the so-called backbone of socialist China.

Model theater can also be found in New Creations (Chuxin) by He Shushui in his nianhua-style painting, another selected piece for the same 1974 National Art Exhibition (Plate 2). Reflecting the central aim of the Cultural Revolution to eliminate old cultures, this piece portrays a group of workers and artists gazing at the new porcelain products they have just created. A new design on a lamp cover depicts happy children singing and dancing to express their love for Tiananmen and for their great leader, Chairman Mao, a scene most probably staged by a children’s xuanchuadui. Next to it, one detects a design on a vase of a much celebrated scene from The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzijun), a revolutionary modern ballet. In this scene, known as Changqing Points the Way (Changqing zhilu), Hong Changqing, the CCP representative, guides Wu Qinghua, a slave just escaped from her oppressor, in her effort to join the Red Army during the war. This and other familiar images in the numerous posters made from the stills of model theatrical pieces could be found on many other objects, such as thermoses, postcards, stamps, and other gift items and necessities of daily life. In the poster entitled Martial Songs Raised Our Spirit While Carrying Our Guns for the People (Zhange gu douzhi, kangqiang wei renmin) by Gu Qing (Plate 3), for instance, a woman of the militia shares with her friends a poster of the film The Red Detachment of Women, which prints the same signature scene of Changqing Points the Way. The movie screen behind them and the movie projector standing next to the little boy suggest the happy occasion of a festive movie night that attracts villagers from miles away, a similar event I used to look forward to when working in the countryside during the Cultural
Revolution. The poster within a poster illustrates the popularity of the model theater and the posters that promoted it.

I still remember the excitement I felt when, as a sixteen-year-old in the northeast wilderness in Heilongjiang Province, I received from my mother the birthday gift of a photo album with stills from the revolutionary model ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. My mother knew of my desire to possess them before I went to the northeast, but I could not afford it because of its exquisite, expensive design and high-quality paper. I was especially struck by the photos (which had become very popular posters) of Wu Qinghua, the female revolutionary heroine whose long, straight legs and graceful body had resisted a vicious landlord. The example I chose for this introduction, however, reveals another aspect of the visual culture of the time. Entitled *Changqing Points the Way* (Fig. 11), it is an oil-painted version of the same image as that on the vase in He Shushui’s *nianhua*-style painting of *New Creations* and on the poster in Gu Qing’s *Martial Songs Raised Our Spirit*. As one can see more clearly in this oil painting, next to the dynamic and heroic image of Hong stands a beautiful Wu Qinghua, poised, balanced, supple, angular, and elegant. Her red costume embraces the “red” culture of the period; it also crosses the boundary of the revolutionary culture of the time, with its flowing and soft silk materials not commonly seen in everyday clothing.

For audiences in China in that period, however, these embodiments of youth, beauty, grace, passion, and energy on posters and other art works
were among one of the rare decorations to be seen in public spaces and private homes. As such they could be gazed on with the same intensity as images of Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe, accompanied by portraits of an attractive Chairman Mao. The combination of these two kinds of images, keeping each other solitary company, enticed countless masses of both men and women to join the Cultural Revolution. By means of this not-so-subtle exploitation of the erotic—rendered all the more powerful because other expressions of a romantic and sexual nature had been officially banned—patriotism was aroused, a crusade was launched, and a revolutionary dynasty was established. And a national discourse took root in both the conscious and unconscious of men and women alike.

Today, looking back, I am aware that my treasuring of these images was not unrelated to their voluptuous appeal, disguised though it was by the focus on an ideologically correct story and the endowment of the womanly body with a “manly spirit.” Thus the androgynous nature of model theater accounted, to some extent, for the appeal of the posters of the period. The posters conveyed their political messages through the written word in captions and titles, while model theater did the same through script, lyrics, and dialogue. However, in both forms the visual representation, comprised of body language, color, and light, might sometimes provide cues for other interpretations not necessarily endorsed by mainstream culture. The two forms also differed in that the shapely body of a female lead could be accentuated by elegant movement in model theater, especially in revolutionary ballet, whereas in posters, the female figure might be dressed in baggy clothing to hide its curves and, in any case, was fixed—a special feature of the art object—without benefit of the flow of movement, a property of performing art.

In the context of the comparison between different genres of visual art, moreover, it is perhaps interesting to mention in passing that the appearance of the oil paintings of Wu Qinghua and Hong Changqing indicated conscious attempts on the part of Chinese artists to integrate different art media in creating a new and revolutionary culture. As proclaimed in the preface to the collection of oil paintings of *The Red Detachment of Women* from which the above-mentioned picture was taken, forty paintings of the main scenes and characters from the ballet (ranging from 89 cm × 93 cm in size, as in Wu’s picture, to 233 cm × 127 cm, as in *Changqing Points the Way*) were completed within a short period of three months from June to September 1970, the result of the collective efforts by a group of painters determined to use this Western-imported media to re-present the revolu-
tionary model ballet (itself a Western medium). They were finally presented as gifts to an exhibition in Shanghai commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” thus providing useful models for worker/peasant/soldier amateur artists to imitate revolutionary art on canvas.

Whereas model theater on canvas celebrated the canonical text of the great CCP leader in 1970, He Shushui’s nianhua painting of New Creation expressed a similar passion to represent the familiar scene of Changqing Points the Way through a different art genre, thus qualifying his painting for the National Art Exhibition to commemorate the founding of the nation. New Creation, together with 109 other pieces, was hailed as “one of the most popular pieces welcomed by workers, peasants, and soldiers.” Here, art collection and museum culture carved out a niche of their own, constructing an image of the new revolutionary culture in their very act of reproducing the same scene from the performing art.

The canvas also reflected other crucial activities that took place during the Cultural Revolution as reflected in products of visual culture. Tang Jixiang’s Red Frontline (Hongse de zendi), another piece selected for the 1974 National Art Exhibition, portrays a worker getting “picture books” ready for the little Red Guards from an elementary school (Plate 4). The young amateur actors and actresses frequently performed The Red Lantern, as the stage prop of a red lantern on top of a bookshelf testifies. When the model theater performance was over in the school, images of the protagonists and their heroic actions remained in the reading room. The picture books include The Red Lantern, held in the worker’s hand, and Raid on the White Tiger Regiment (Qixi Baihutuan), another model Peking opera that depicted the heroic deeds of Chinese volunteer soldiers during the Korean war. Together with posters, these picture books functioned as another important aspect of visual culture that provided role models for young people as well as old. Children’s picture books could also further their understanding of model theater characters and improve the performance of the xuanchuandui, a frequent school event, as indicated by the red flag of the xuanchuandui and various musical instruments in the upper right corner.

The practice of children watching or playing model theater was also vividly recorded in a teenage girl’s painting clearly entitled Model Opera for Children (Fig. 12). In it, a group of young children are watching Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (Zhiqu Weihushan), with the image of
Yang Zirong, the protagonist, in the middle of the playground. To the right side of the picture, four girls are preparing to enact three other scenes from model operas. A teacher is applying makeup to a little girl who wears a sheepskin jacket, a sign of the role of Chang Bao in the same opera, who disguises herself as a boy to escape from a bandit’s persecution. Inspired by Yang Zirong, she joined the revolutionary army in order to liberate the rest of China. Two other girls, each dressed in the garb of Tiemei and her grandma, with a red lantern at their feet, are ready to perform the celebrated scene of “Listening to Grandma’s Story of the Red Lantern,” where Tiemei learns about her family history. Another girl next to her, holding a storefront sign for a teahouse, suggests the role of Sister A Qing. She is a protagonist in a model Peking opera entitled *Shajia*bang*, who, as an underground CCP member, risks her life to protect and take care of eighteen wounded soldiers. The red flag in the upper right corner,
which bears the characters “Little Red Guard Xuanchuandui,” drives home the message that model theater and xuanchuandui formed important parts of children’s play, sport, and theater.

The practice of xuanchuandui indeed dates back to before the Cultural Revolution, when professional artists followed Mao’s directions and went to the factories and the countryside in the remote areas of China to perform for workers, peasants, and soldiers. Xuanchuandui reached its heyday when amateurs joined professionals in performing model theater and other ensembles as part of the mass movement to learn from the revolutionary spirit of its dramatic characters. Peasant artist Shi Huifang’s nianhua-style painting, entitled An Evening at the Production Brigade (Dadui de yewan), vividly depicts a village xuanchuandui staging a show for its local peasants (Fig. 13). The amateur actor and actress in center stage are apparently performing a piece denouncing ex-landlords. They still harbored hopes of returning to the old society before 1949, as is shown in their effort to keep accounts of how much money the poor peasants owed them. Among those in the left corner waiting to perform the next piece, one can detect a woman with the costume and makeup of Xi’er, the protagonist of The White-Haired Girl (Baimao nü), a revolutionary modern ballet. Xi’er’s story forcefully demonstrates how miserable the old society was: as a daughter of a poor peasant who could not afford to pay his debts, Xi’er flees into the mountains to escape persecution. Her hair turns white from lack of salt. This portrayal of Xi’er’s bitter past life onstage within the picture frame invites one simultaneously to gaze at the heroine from model theater, the play re-enacted by members of the xuanchuadui, and the audience around them, with whom the beholders of this art work could identify.

These visual images suggest the degree to which model-theater characters were appropriated as models, not only to construct the individual’s relation to society and its revolutionary idealism, but also to structure the everyday life experience of those participating in xuanchuadui. I still remember the excitement I found in my own childhood experience of performance. After being rejected several times for membership in xuanchuandui due to my undesirable family background, I went home and organized my own troupe with the children who lived in my courtyard, where more than a dozen families working in the China Youth Art Theater resided. Ranging in age from six to thirteen, we presented a curious lineup of all sizes and shapes. What we had in common was the fact that at least one of our parents (who had been performing artists) was undergoing investigation. Without our realizing it, our performances, in addition to join-
ing in with the activities that supported the mass movement, probably expressed our personal desire to carry on the artistic tradition of our parents. To demonstrate our pride and passionate commitment to the movement, we made our own team flag by embroidering gold thread on a piece of red cloth. Joining the street theater of the Cultural Revolution, we were able to attract crowds to watch our ensemble, and no one ever questioned us about our family backgrounds or whether we were politically qualified to perform. Our popular performances undoubtedly benefited from the skills we had picked up and the abilities we had inherited from our families. At this time I had an intense desire to be on the stage, just like my mother, who at the time could not act because she was charged as being one of the “sanming” (three famous groups of actors and actresses, directors, and writers) and “sangao” (three “high” groups of professionals who were distinguished by their salaries, living standards, and symbols of royalty)—all remnants of the bourgeois culture and thus opposed to the interests of the common people. Walking on the street with my homemade xuan-chuandui, therefore, I felt relief and pride: I had my own team without having to be a Red Guard. It was not without a certain sense of being “celebrities” that we performed for the public, but as we had not been formally trained in the performing arts, we were not burdened, like our parents, with the professional artist’s fear of being criticized by the masses. I was

delighted to play the actress, and yet I did not have to be labeled as performing the wrong kind of art. The experience may have helped later when I auditioned successfully for the xuanchuandui in my middle school. Figure 14, another children’s painting, vividly portrays similar experiences in other parts of the country.

Because no serious learning took place in Chinese schools during the Cultural Revolution, I devoted most of my two years of middle school to the performing arts and consequently became almost a professional at it. We would perform in the street, on various stages in squares after public gatherings, and in rural areas not far from Beijing before local peasants and fellow students who had come to help with the autumn harvest. The New Ensembles from the Cultural Club (Wenhuashi de xin jiemu), (Fig. 15) by Wang Liping, another peasant artist, might easily be retitled The New Ensembles from a Beijing Middle School Xuanchuandui, recording our own performance for the local peasants.

Every time a new quotation of Chairman Mao regarding the Cultural Revolution was released, I would stay up all night with my teammates, writing scripts, adapting old songs to new lyrics, and producing new dances
and skits for it. We competed with other teams in these activities, anxious to be the first to give expression to the new idea in street parades and celebrations. Intent on being the best, we worked hard and played just as hard. In hindsight, I view my xuanchuandui days as one of the most exciting times of my adolescence, when fun and duty intertwined so well as to render perfectly natural my role of little player in the larger scheme of political theater. There was a tremendous sense of thrill and freedom in riding a bicycle to wherever my performing duty called me. For the first time in my life, I even had enough pocket money for snacks and cookies before and after performing.

In 1968, a remark of Chairman Mao’s radically changed the course of my adolescence and those of my peers. He proclaimed the countryside an enormous arena where educated youth from the city could fully tap their talents while being reeducated by local peasants. Joining the national movement of repairing to the countryside, my class of 1969 went to Beidahuang, the northeast wilderness bordering the Soviet Union, then regarded as a threat to the Chinese nation. The twin glories of defending the border while casting my lot with the peasants to reclaim the fertile land of the frontier appealed to me. Although I was one year younger than the
minimum age posted for these exploits and thus did not have to volunteer, I insisted on going. Before I left home, my sister, who had never had a chance to see me perform, asked me to do a xuanchuandai skit. I chose a dance called “A Red Army Soldier Misses Chairman Mao” (Hongjun zhanshi xiangnian Mao Zhuxi), which expressed a Red Army soldier’s longing for Mao Zedong during wartime. I performed the story of the protagonist who, during a trying period, beheld the twinkling northern star in the dark sky, which reminded her of the oil lamplight shining from Mao’s office in the Jingguangshan soviet area. Recalling the journey in which she had followed Mao from victory to victory, she was able to muster her spirit and march on. My sister praised my solo act and was glad to see me in high spirits, wearing my green xuanchuandui uniform with its red band on which was embroidered my team’s name in gold thread. I was ready to join my teammates in the Beijing train station and looked forward to our journey together to the wilderness to spread our performing tradition. Although I felt sad to be leaving my family, friends, and school, I was excited by the prospect of a new life in a faraway land where we would be adapting our performances to the local audiences. I wished to continue the work my parents had done in Xinjiang and Henan of serving the ordinary people.

At the Beijing train station, I was tearless as I waved to my family and friends. My mind was occupied with the tasks facing us: keeping up the morale of our schoolmates; helping the train attendants serve food and hot water and clean tables and floors; and pitching in as “little helpers” in whatever other ways needed. As members of xuanchuandui, we were supposed to do “good deeds” for the people around us and to spread Mao Zedong thought by our own good examples. We had even brought a medicine box in case of emergency. I hoped that, depending on the space available, we might also be able to perform, or at least conduct a few singing sessions when the time was right.

As soon as the train moved out of the station, however, something I had never anticipated happened. People around me began to sob loudly and I could not help but feel sad. My greatest despair, however, came with the sudden realization that my xuanchuandui had ceased to exist! We were not seated together, and I was not able to find our team leader, even after a frantic search for her. Finally, I was told that now that we were leaving Beijing, our middle school had lost its function as an organization. We were bingtuan zhanshi, or soldiers of the military farm—that is, adults waiting for orders from our work unit supervisors. In the face of this pro-