Restaging the Revolution in Contemporary China: Memory of Politics and Politics of Memory

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Abstract

This article focuses on the adaptation of the Red Classics – a collection of literary and cinematic works depicting the Communist armed struggle produced in the PRC between 1949 and 1966 – for contemporary Chinese television. Using the controversy over the remake of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (*Linhai xueyuan* 林海雪原) as a case study, it explores the complexity of restaging the Communist revolution in the post-Mao reform era. Competition in the media industry compels TV producers to re-package Communist history for fragmented contemporary audiences – those who are familiar with the original Red Classics as well as those who grew up in the reform era and who are far removed from the revolutionary legacy. Adaptation of the Red Classics is a sensitive issue. By focusing on the sexual desires and individual interests muted in the original Red Classics in order to cater for the tastes of younger viewers, the remakes offer alternative readings of history and have incurred government censorship. Opposition to the adaptations has also come from a distinct mnemonic community, the Red memory group, whose members came of age in either the 1960s or during the Cultural Revolution and who absorbed the Red Classics in their formative years. The interplay of state politics, collective memory and commercial imperatives ultimately makes the repackaging of the revolution for contemporary mass entertainment a multifaceted and highly contentious issue.

Keywords: Red Classics; revolutionary legacy; collective memory; adaptation; China

The Communist revolution is alive and well in Chinese popular culture in the post-Mao era. Communist history was a prominent and popular theme in mass entertainment in the 1990s,[1] and since 2000 there has been a proliferation of TV dramas adapted from the Red Classics on Chinese television, creating a "Red Classics Craze" (*hongse jingdian re* 红色经典热). The term Red Classics

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1 Meng 1997, 80–90.

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refers to a collection of literary and cinematic works produced in the PRC between 1949 and 1966, prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).[2] This state-backed canon has two salient characteristics. First, it focuses predominantly on armed struggle in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Second, during the 1950s and 1960s, it greatly influenced people's perceptions of their country's history and identity. A crucial part of the official nation building, the Red Classics constitute what Pierre Nora calls a "site of memory" that "by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."[3]

The role of the Red Classics in the political and cultural life of the PRC and the enduring power of revolutionary memories in the post-Mao era have not gone unnoticed. Since the 1990s, a number of studies have appeared in Chinese offering new perspectives on the ideological and aesthetic principles of the Red Classics and their role in socialist nation building.[4] The nostalgia for the Communist past and retrospective reflections on lived experience in the Mao era have also been the subject of several books in the English language.[5] Additional analyses of the aftermath of the Communist revolution are forthcoming in the wake of an interdisciplinary conference on the "Red Legacy in China," hosted at Harvard in April 2010.[6] Meanwhile, scholarship on post-Mao mass media has also begun to catch up. Owing to their accessibility and popularity, Chinese television and television drama, understudied areas a decade ago, have received special attention.[7] However, despite being broadcast on Chinese television for over a decade and having provoked censorship and heated discussions among Chinese scholars and audiences, the adaptations of the Red Classics have yet to be explored in Western scholarship. As a significant twist in the resurgence of revolutionary memories, they warrant attention.

The Red adaptations sit at a complex intersection of state politics, popular memory and market dynamics in a changing society. Unlike in the Maoist era when politics set the agenda, the reform era is dominated by the commercialized cultural market. Fierce competition in the media industry compels TV producers to pay close attention to popular tastes and preferences, and in order to boost ratings they are forced to introduce changes and re-package the Communist revolution for contemporary viewers. However, alternative readings of the Red Classics can have serious political ramifications and are therefore a sensitive issue. Re-packaging history can lead to multiple interpretations of the nation's past, weakening the Party's claim to rule. It also challenges the memories of a distinct

2 It is also often used loosely to include productions featuring the Communist history in other art forms, such as songs and paintings, published before and during the Cultural Revolution. I use the term "Red legacy" and "Red memories" when the discussion goes beyond literature and cinema.
3 Nora and Kritzman 1996, XVII.
4 Tang 1993; Huang 2001; Li 2002, 1993.
5 See e.g. Barmé 1999, 1996; Lee and Yang 2007.
6 For a report on this conference, see *China Heritage Quarterly* 2010.
7 For recent studies of the reform in the media industry, see Zhao, Yuezhi 2008; Keane 2007; Zhu, Ying and Berry 2009; Zhu, Ying, Keane and Bai 2008; Zhu, Ying 2008; Zhong, Xueping 2010.

mnemonic community, the Red memory group, whose members (aged 50 and over) came of age in either the socialist era or during the Cultural Revolution. This group share a collective cultural experience of absorbing the Red Classics in their formative years. The interweaving of the various factors – state politics, collective memory and market forces – makes adapting the Red Classics a complex and multifaceted process.

This article uses the remake of a well-known work from the Red Classics, *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (*Linhai xueyuan* 林海雪原), as a case study to explore how these factors interact in the contemporary drama of politics and memory. Often cited as the epitome of ill-advised adaptations, the new *Tracks* stirred up public controversy over whether new adaptations desecrate the Red Classic originals and misrepresent revolutionary history. It was also responsible for prompting the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) to take measures to regulate the Red adaptations, a new area of concern for SARFT brought about by the "Red Classics Craze." As the adaptations of the Red Classics involve multiple forces in popular culture, economics and politics, my discussion of the remake of *Tracks* blends various perspectives from cultural, media, memory and historical studies.

In this article, I explore how the adaptation of *Tracks* engages the Red Classics in today's new socio-historical conditions and renegotiates the meaning of revolution in the process. I examine the ways in which re-presentation challenges the official historiography of the Maoist era reified through the Red Classics, and what roles the various memory groups and market forces play in this contention. I approach these issues by focusing on the new narrative space created by this TV adaptation. I examine how this space is generated and filled to extend the reading of revolution beyond the Maoist confines. I argue that this newly available space originates in the human relationships and desires manipulated and muted in the Red Classics. By focusing on the sexual desires and private interests suppressed and masked in the original work, the remake of *Tracks* modifies the orthodox interpretation of the revolution, creating competing memories of the Communist legacy.

I also argue that fragmented memory groups among the audiences are at the heart of the controversy over the adaptations of the Red Classics works. The public's fascination with revolutionary history motivated the producers to launch the Red memory projects, but diversified interests among the audiences also turned the TV adaptions into a highly contentious issue. To put these adaptations into historical context, I start with a brief discussion of the post-Mao revival of the Red Classics and its social implications. I then highlight the differences between the new and classic versions of *Tracks* and analyse the significance of the changes. I conclude by examining audience responses to the remake, focusing in particular on the objections raised by the Red memory group. Examination of the deviations in the new *Tracks* and their repercussions will help understanding of both the formation of memory of politics in Mao's China and the intricate politics of memory in the reform era.

The "Red Storm" Then and Now

Revolutionary nostalgia thrived in the post-Mao era and contributed to the creation of a "red storm" in China's popular culture. Thanks to joint efforts by the state and the creative arts, works of revolutionary art and literature that were condemned and banned during the Cultural Revolution made a spectacular comeback in the everyday lives and leisure pursuits of the populace. In the 1980s, many literary works from the Red Classics were republished, after quiet revisions, and a large number of Communist films were re-released.[8] In an effort to rally public support after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, the government produced a dozen or so films in the early 1990s to commemorate eminent Communist leaders and important military victories in the Party's history.[9] In 1991, on the 98th anniversary of Mao's birth, an officially sponsored album entitled *The Red Sun: Odes to Mao Zedong* (*Hongtaiyang – Mao Zedong songge* 红太阳 – 毛泽东颂歌) hit the market and became an instant bestseller. Sales of the album totalled more than 5.5 million cassettes in the first six months. Popularity of the album soon led to the release of other revolutionary songs, generating handsome profits for the producers. A few years later in 1996, there was a further wave of the "red storm" caused by the restaging of the revolutionary ballets, *The White Haired Girl* (*Baimaonü* 白毛女) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun* 红色娘子军), in Beijing, and the release of *The Long March* (*Changzheng zuge* 长征组歌), a suite of songs celebrating the famous Communist retreat of the mid-1930s. The mid-1990s also saw a resurgence of revolutionary art in auction houses in mainland China and Hong Kong.[10]

This flurry of activity should not be seen as the mechanical duplication of revolutionary art. Red memories were reproduced and consumed in a different social context in the 1990s. As Barmé argues, resentment against government corruption, a sense of uncertainty about the country's transformation and nationalist fervour made people look to the past with a "pro-Mao nostalgia," because "the formulas of the Mao era … offered simple answers to complex questions: direct collective action over painful individual decisions, reliance on the state rather than a grinding struggle for the self, national pride as opposed to self-doubt."[11] Rather than a blind faith in the revolution, this glance to the past was triggered by a preoccupation with the present. Although the new Mao cult of the 1990s was a worrisome "totalitarian nostalgia" to China watchers abroad, it was no doubt also a public expression of frustration and discontent with the situation at that time.[12] Not only were social sentiments different in the 1990s, but the style of presentation had also changed, creating room for new

8 Dong 2002, 81.
9 Zhang 2002, 191–94.
10 Meng 1997, 82–89. Along with China's rise on the world stage, revolutionary art also sparked the interest of international collectors around 2005.
11 Barmé 1999, 321.
12 See e.g. Barmé 1999, 1996.

significations. For instance, revolutionary songs were sung in the soft Gang–Tai 港台 (Hong Kong and Taiwan) style. People could not but notice the dissonance between the radical Communist lyrics promoting class hatred and the soft Gang–Tai style deemed decadent and bourgeois in the Mao era. The Gang–Tai style took away the revolutionary fanaticism invested in the original versions, displacing the revolutionary fervour and making a mockery of the Maoist propaganda. Transformed into sounds without the fury that motivated them in the past, the songs became a commodity for leisure consumption.

The "red storm" of the 1990s was soon replaced by another wave in popular culture: television dramas adapted from the Red Classics. According to SARFT records, between January 2001 and January 2004, 41 dramas, totalling 886 episodes, obtained preproduction topic approval.[13] The producers tapped into every medium of the Red Classics works – spoken drama, model plays and films – in the race for new adaptations. However, while adapting a novel is relatively easy because of the narrative details in the original, stretching a two-hour movie or play into a multi-episode TV drama requires a great deal of imagination. New characters and fresh threads and subplots are needed to fill the narrative space for the new artistic medium.[14] However, the great potential opened up by this newly available space is matched by the many pitfalls it also creates.

Media companies and investors hope to maximize returns on the TV adaptations by attracting members of the Red memory group who may find pleasure in the familiar stories for nostalgic and sentimental reasons. At the same time, the producers have to compete with other TV programming and popular genres, such as dramas about corruption, family, crime and youth idols, for market share. In order to win this ratings game, the new versions must therefore also cater to the modern desires and tastes of younger audiences who, having no strong memories of the Red Classics and therefore no deep emotional attachment to them, expect entertainment more than anything else. Accommodating different audience groups with different tastes and expectations is no small task: today's popular desires and the priorities and moral values promoted in the Red Classics of the past are at considerable odds, as I discuss in the last section.

However, the TV adaptations of the Red Classics are not all about winning audiences; they also have political ramifications. Forcefully promoted by the state, the Red Classics involve collective and political memories. Admittedly, any adaptation has to deal with two texts and must grapple with the emerging kinship between the source text and the later version, but the Red Classics are no ordinary collection. Romanticizing and privileging the Communist revolution, the Red Classics are in fact a body of synergized scripts that collectively lead to a

13 Zhong, Xuanying 2004, 19. On official regulations on TV drama productions as of October 2004, see SARFT 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007.

14 According to the producers I interviewed, in order for a TV drama to be profitable, it must have at least 20 episodes, which explains why there are seldom any TV dramas with fewer than 20 episodes.

carefully choreographed drama depicting the origins of the nation. Focusing exclusively on the Communist past, they constitute the discursive foundation of a hegemonic reading of history. Tampering with the texts could introduce new interpretations of the revolution and potentially redefine history and the meaning of citizenship. Adaptation of a Red Classics work is therefore not just a simple commercial venture.

Revolution, Old and New

The TV adaptation of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* provides a good case study through which to examine the tensions created by the re-presentation of the revolution and how the adaptations of the Red Classics must negotiate between the past and present. The TV drama was based on the novel of the same name by Qu Bo 曲波, an amateur writer and Communist veteran. Published in 1957, the novel was extremely popular. It portrays the valiant efforts of a detachment of 36 soldiers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to wipe out remnant bandit gangs in the north-east in the late 1940s. A film version based on episodes of the book was produced by the PLA's August First Film Studio in 1960. Despite the novel being branded a "poisonous weed" and banned during the Cultural Revolution, the story of one of the protagonists, Yang Zirong 杨子荣, and his successful penetration of the bandit camp in Tiger Mountain was turned into a Peking opera, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu weihushan* 智取威虎山), in 1970. This famous spin-off made Yang Zirong one of the most loved Communist heroes in the collective memory of the 1960s and 1970s.[15]

The TV drama of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* was produced by the real estate giant, Vanke Company Ltd, and the Propaganda Department of Shenzhen Municipal Government. This partnership successfully pioneered the Red adaptation trend in 2000 with their production of *How Steel Was Tempered*, based on the Russian novel of the same title. However, the new *Tracks* raised a storm of protest when it was aired in March 2004. Yang Kewu 杨克武, the adopted son of the hero, Yang Zirong, threatened a defamation lawsuit in a letter to the producers. He also demanded compensation for his family for the emotional distress caused by the TV drama's distorted image of the hero and a formal apology to the people of Yang's hometown.[16] Qu Bo's wife and daughters joined the Yangs in expressing their strong displeasure over the liberties taken by the producers.[17] Viewers and critics also complained about the adaptation, which I discuss below.

15 Paul Clark's study on cultural production during the Cultural Revolution shows that there was much artistic creativity during the period. Innovative use of opera music and movements made this model play extremely popular. See Clark 2008, Ch. 2.

16 Zhu, Li 2004, 29.

17 www.xinhuanet.com. 2004. "Jingdian mingzhu yinping da "bianlian": *Linhai xueyuan* gaibian shou zhiyi" (Drastic changes to a canonic work on television: adaptation of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* raised questions), 16 March, http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2004-03/16/content_1368766.htm.

The outcry against *Tracks* sparked a round of criticisms of other Red adaptations, and it soon became clear that the complaints against *Tracks* were quite typical of those against the other "wanton" adaptations of the Red Classics in general. *Tracks* thus became a paradigmatic case of "irresponsible distortion." The detractors focused on two areas: the adulterated characterization of the hero, Yang Zirong, and the invention of new and complex personal relationships. Instead of being a mature and resourceful scout platoon leader, as he is portrayed in the novel and the model opera, Yang starts out as a petty and vindictive army cook. He slips herbal laxatives into the food of the soldiers who upset him. Unlike the staunch fighter of the original, Yang did not volunteer to join the detachment, but is recruited against his will because he is familiar with the area and bandits' argot. This Yang Zirong is a far cry from the one of popular memory.

The second criticism was aimed at the excessive romantic entanglements of the major Communist characters. The TV drama gives much more space than the original to the sexual attraction between Shao Jianbo 少剑波, the commander of the detachment, and Bai Ru 白茹, a female medical orderly deployed with the detachment. It also adds a foreign rival, creating a love triangle between Bai Ru, Shao Jianbo and a male Russian Red Army officer. In addition, there is an entirely new storyline created about Yang's past, adding a whole new dimension to the legendary hero's personal history. Yang now has a former lover, Huaihua 槐花. When Yang and Huaihua are reunited in the north-east, Huaihua is by then married and has a son by a member of a bandit group led by Zuoshandiao 座山雕. Zuoshandiao adopts Huaihua's son as his own against her will. Huaihua appeals to Yang for help, and Yang promises to get her son back for her. The personal entanglements do not stop there. The remake offers a novel twist to the famous battle of wits between Yang and Luan Ping 孪平, the bandit Yang impersonates, bringing personal feelings into the life and death struggle between the two men. Luan raped Huaihua years ago, so Luan's execution by Yang is also a settling of personal scores and the ultimate punishment of Luan for hurting Yang's masculine pride. In addition, to rack up sexual tension further, the adaptation has Yang repeatedly fending off the feminine wiles of Hudiemi 蝴蝶迷, the wife of a bandit chief, who ultimately fails miserably in her attempts to seduce him.

The addition of convoluted relationships is a common plot device used in many other remakes and is not unique to *Tracks*. *On Guard beneath the Neon Lights* (*Nihongdeng xia de shaobing* 霓虹灯下的哨兵, 2008), a TV adaptation of a spoken drama of the same title, is another example. The TV version weaves a complicated web of relationships between Lu Hua 路华, a political instructor in a PLA company stationed on the famous Nanjing Road, Mengyao 梦瑶, Lu's former girlfriend, and her husband, Luo Xiaoli 罗效礼, an elderly business tycoon and a potential ally for the new Communist government. Both Mengyao and Luo are new characters added to increase romantic tension.

Although both *Tracks* and *On Guard* introduced new characters and new relationships, *On Guard* managed to avoid public censure, as I discuss below.

However, the outcry against *Tracks* was so loud that it soon drew the attention of SARFT. On 9 April 2004, a month after *Tracks* was broadcast, SARFT issued a notice to redress "problematic adaptations." The notice enjoined media producers to adhere to the core spirit and ideological principles of the original work. It also required government agencies with oversight of media productions at various levels to exercise tighter control so as to ensure the healthy development of the adaptations of Red Classics works. "Whimsical and fallacious adaptation is prohibited," the notice declared, referring specifically to the liberties taken with romantic plot developments and grey areas in the characterization of both positive and negative characters. On 25 May, SARFT published a second notice which detailed review and approval procedures. The state agency announced that "violations will be dealt with in the most serious manner."[18]

It may be said that the SARFT reaction was excessive, after all playful portrayals of the nation's past were not new to contemporary Chinese television. What then explains the furore over *Tracks* and the Red remakes? A closer look at the re-imaginings and their subversive potential yields some answers. The TV remakes of *Tracks* and other Red Classics revisit a major taboo in the revolutionary imagination. They inflate and bring into the open sexual tensions dormant or absent in the original works. Studies of revolutionary literature and art from the Mao era reveal that the exaltation of the revolution and Communist fighters predicates on the suppression of secular desires and normal human emotions, and that such suppression is effected through certain common strategies. The absence of sexual relations is one of them. For example, the Communist protagonists in the model plays are either single or the spouse is absent owing to enemy atrocities or the oppressive old society.[19] However, the destruction of the natural family is compensated for by an artificial family whose members bond with one another through their devotion to the revolution.[20] In order to avert any potential sexual attraction between members of the opposite sex in a regrouped family where they work and live in close proximity, characters are made to belong to different generations, as in the model play, *Red Lantern*.[21] The father–daughter relationship in *Red Lantern* allows the Communist discourse to "activate the incest taboo, so that romantic interest and sexuality between man and woman are suppressed, while the generational subordination of the daughter to the parental party is foregrounded."[22]

When romance is a possibility, sexual desire and gratification are often delayed, sublimated or not infrequently thwarted by the death of one party. Hong Changqing 洪常青, the handsome Party representative in *The Red Detachment of Women,* dies at the hands of the enemy, ruling out the possibility of any romance between him and Wu Qionghua 吴琼花, the slave girl he saves.

18 Guojia guangbo dianshi dianying zongju 2004a, 2004b.
19 Zhao, Liancheng 2005, 13–19.
20 Tang 2000, 163–195; Chen 2002, 128.
21 Chen 2002, 128–137.
22 Yang 1999, 61.

As Mayfair Yang points out, "Wu Qionghua rechannels her libidinal energies from him to the larger male object of cathexis that he represents: the party and the nation-state."[23] This sublimation is also present in the original *Tracks*. Although a love relationship between Shao Jianbo and Bai Ru is openly established towards the end of the novel, the characters do not consummate their relationship. The story concludes with Shao Jianbo and his comrades-in-arms marching to the south to finish off the Nationalists. Sexual union and individual gratification are not to be granted until the final victory of the revolution. This common approach prevents any potential distraction, conflates individual desire with collective aspirations, and makes national ambition the climax of personal pleasure.

Many works in the Red Classics use the above devices to present the displacement of human sexual energy and private desires as a normal way of life and to legitimize it in the name of the nation. The revolutionary moral tales not only echo and reinforce each other, but the cross referencing of plots has also enabled them to accumulate and form part of collective memories. But, just as Diane Barthel argues, "Collective memory has always had its lapses and points of emphasis."[24] Suppression of the irregular is a prerequisite to forming a cohesive collective memory. It is the lapses – the chaotic and unruly sexual urges and relationships underrepresented and skipped over in the original Red Classics – that the adaptations seek to release and recast for contemporary audiences.

The TV adaptations inevitably create repercussions for the orthodox discourse of revolution and history. First, the adaptations secularize or dilute the myth of revolution, deflating the fiction that Communist revolution is purely an ideological undertaking motivated by collective goals. Whilst it is true that individual motives are not completely absent in revolutionary representations, just like sexual urges, they are to be subdued, given up or transformed in the process. Although personally-held grudges against the exploitative classes are necessary to draw a person into the revolution, they are often shown to interfere with the greater good and cause disruption and loss. Growth of the revolutionary hero comes with the progressive purges of his or her private needs. The TV adaptations draw a different picture. Yang Zirong in *Tracks* is by no means a selfless hero fighting all for the common good. He is wrapped up in his personal feelings and obligations. To him, Zuoshandiao is not just a class enemy who happens to be the bandit chief. His clash with Yang is given a pre-history, personal and private in nature. Zuoshandiao's seizure of Huaihua's son and Yang's promise to his former girlfriend complicate his motivation for defeating Zuoshandiao. After the detachment has successfully destroyed the bandit camp, Yang Zirong is not rejoicing with his comrades but is still trying to complete his personal mission by searching for the boy in the mountains. Similarly, Yang's battle with Luan

23 Ibid. 43.
24 Barthel 1996, 93.

Ping also takes on a personal aspect – to avenge Huaihua for her rape by the bandit. The TV version thus mixes personal motives with collective ventures, accentuating private factors as a legitimate part of the Communist struggle without fully subsuming them under the totalizing official rhetoric. This narrative move complicates the audience's understanding of the revolution, proving that the revolution is not just about collective heroics, but instead is a blend of individual schemes and communal endeavours.

Second, by enlarging on the romantic ties between characters rather than sublimating them, as in the case of Yang Zirong and Huaihua, the adaptations demonstrate that spontaneous sexual attraction is reason enough for being part of social history, and that romantic feelings can therefore be freestanding without a revolutionary prerogative and agenda. In addition, in the TV adaptations, affections between people with diverse class backgrounds are no longer problematic and a hindrance to the revolution. In the original *On Guard,* the close friendship between the working class Tong A'nan 童阿男 and Lin Yuanyuan 林媛媛, the daughter of a capitalist, is portrayed as a negative influence on Tong's development as a PLA soldier. At the end of the play, Tong renounces his relationship with Lin Yuanyuan to prove his ideological progress. The TV version removes the stigma from the relationship and paints it in a much more benign light. Thus, views on love, class background and revolution in the adaptations do not always sync with the revolutionary orthodoxy of the original works.

Third, by depicting what is muted in the orthodox discourse of revolution in colourful and vivid detail, the adaptations make those familiar with the Communist narratives in the past acutely aware of the glaring differences between the old and new Red Classics. The excavated and reconfigured personal space creates questions not only about what is remembered and what is cleansed from collective memory, but it also draws attention to how selective memories are engendered. In other words, it invites doubts about the authenticity of the unified history as well as the official historiography that censored and shaped such memories. The TV adaptations are not the first attempts at deconstructing the revolutionary orthodoxy in the post-Mao period: Chinese writers have engaged the question of official historiography directly or indirectly since the 1980s. They have explored aspects of the revolution previously untouched, or they have pointedly ignored Communist struggle and collective crisis as a prism through which to view the history of the Republican era, focusing instead on the little stories filtered out by the grand narrative of national salvation.[25] However, arguably, in a post-modern digital visual culture, TV dramas have far greater impact on the national consciousness than literature. What is more, by taking up the Red Classics and placing the adaptations in direct relation to the source texts as two facing mirrors, the new versions highlight representational

25 Qiao Liang's "Lingqi" (Streamers of mourning, 1986) and stories set in the Republican era by Su Tong and Ye Zhaoyan are some examples.

alternatives from within that very frame of remembrance, showing that both are constructions subject to selection, omission and manipulation.The question therefore is less about whether the adaptations have more truth claims and are more historically accurate and reliable; it is more about accentuating the discursive nature of represented history as renditions of the past, and as potential distortion mirrors.

To explore the subversive impact of restaging (and the re-staged) revolution in mass entertainment by regarding the narrative ploys primarily as acts of ideological intervention would be to over politicize the issue. Adaptation of the Red Classics for TV was not a purely sentimental affair. Besides the wish to win cultural capital, real capital was unmistakably a driving force, as in the first "red storm." TV producers were aware that audience identification with the well-known Red Classics would help to attract viewers and reduce promotional costs.[26] There is no denying that works from the Red Classics were appropriated because of their commercial potential. Nonetheless, economics and politics interlock in today's China. Commercial undertakings have political import, and political initiatives are not detached from economic concerns. Owing to the critical role the Red Classics played in the Communist nation building, and the sensitive nature of their reconfiguration, TV producers have to walk a fine line, "with state politics on one side and market pressure on the other."[27]

Memory Communities, Past and Present

State politics and the market share a common trait in that they both need an audience. Thus, the audience is a crucial third party in the controversy surrounding the TV adaptations. In this section, I address two key factors in the pull between politics and the market: audiences and pre-existing memories. To highlight the role of audience and memory in the Red adaptation controversy, I will first comment briefly on another case of historical revision on contemporary Chinese television, the so-called *Qinggongxi* 清宫戏 (Qing palace drama). Qing historical dramas gained popularity at approximately the same time as the Red adaptations, and they too generated debate and incurred government censorship.[28] The absence of a pre-existing memory group, however, made a notable difference in the reception of the Qing drama. Although the Qing dramas stirred up controversy over whether they presented a truthful history or a correct reading of the late Qing reformers such as Li Hongzhang 李鸿章 and Yuan Shikai 袁世凯, the discussions were largely among scholars and specialists. With no in-depth knowledge of the Qing dynasty and no basis on which to judge historical fidelity, the general public enjoyed the Qing dramas for their riveting stories, intriguing palace politics and customs, and anti-corruption messages that resonated with

26 Lu, Shaoyang and Zhang 2004, 59.
27 Tao 2004, 31.
28 See Zhu, Ying 2008, 22–62; Zhong, Xueping 2010, 47–72.

contemporary grievances against the official abuse of power. Historical authenticity was not a major concern with the majority of viewers, who did not mind the fictionalization of the past.[29] In contrast, memories of the Red Classics from the Mao era made the TV adaptations of those works a much more contentious issue.

An intriguing point about the contention surrounding the adaptations is that the backlash against *Tracks* and other remakes did not originate with SARFT. Rather, the state agency was reactive and its edicts were issued in response to viewers' complaints. Loud objections from the public and ensuing official restrictions in turn sparked debates among scholars. The public's role in the controversy presents an opportunity to explore how collective memories were forged and maintained in Mao's China and their impact even today. SARFT launched its criticism of "frivolous" adaptations by citing the protestations of "many viewers." Scholarly discussions also often referred to the dissatisfaction of "the viewers." Who are "the viewers"? An audience survey of *Tracks* shows that viewers' responses were mixed. Those aged 60 and above were enraged by the TV version and rejected it altogether. Those in their 50s, who grew up with the story and were familiar with the legend of the detachment, found that their nostalgia was ungratified because "remakes can never outperform the original." Viewers in the 30+ age group approached the new version in a light-hearted way. Drawn to artistic details, they made fun of the editing mistakes and inconsistencies in the TV drama. Those in their 20s were more or less indifferent to the subject matter of the Red Classics.[30] This audience makeup is quite representative of that of other adaptations.

Clearly, knowledge of the original Red Classics, or the lack thereof, led to different receptions, resulting in two audience groups: those who were upset with the changes and those who were indifferent. Those with strong objections – viewers born between the 1940s and early 1960s – belong to what I term the Red memory group. I give this term to the community of roughly two generations of people who had a common ideological and cultural experience in their adolescence and early adulthood in Mao's China. They consumed similar cultural products, the Red Classics in particular. They were exposed to similar collective events such as the founding of the PRC, the Korean War, and the socialist construction either through individual participation or through the Red Classics, and experienced the same nation building rituals such as the national parades and annual visits to the revolutionary martyrs' memorials.[31] People belonging to this Red generation engaged with the Communist legacy in three consecutive

29 For example, *Princess Huanzhu*, a totally fictionalized story about Emperor Qianlong and his love child Princess Huanzhu, enjoyed phenomenal success with viewers in both China and the diaspora. It was the winner of the Best TV series at the 1999 Jinying Television Arts Festival in China and reportedly has the highest ratings ever in Asia. See "Huanzhu gege" (Princess Huanzhu), http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%82%84%E7%8F%A0%E6%A0%BC%E6%A0%BC. Accessed 20 April 2013.

30 Sina.com.cn 2004.

31 On the parades and the discourse of revolutionary martyrs, see Hung, Chang-tai 2011, Ch. 2 and 5.

social periods: they were the original target audience of the Red Classics in the 1950s and 1960s; they consumed the model plays and other revolutionary performances on a daily basis during the Cultural Revolution; and they encountered the Red Classics again in the 1980s when they were re-published. In other words, their memories of the nation were both shaped and animated by the Red Classics.

In identifying the Red memory group as a community, I do not see it as a unified whole. Thirty years into post-Mao reforms, the life experiences of individual group members are as divergent as the rest of the society. Those lucky enough to get a college education fared much better in general than their peers who did not and who were laid-off in the reforms. The group's aversion to the "freewheeling" adaptations suggests, however, that the Red Classics had a lasting impact on this community's perception of the Communist struggle and pre-PRC history. In Foucault's words, "if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles."[32]

Ms Liu, a 65-year-old viewer from Beijing, told a reporter that she was "extremely upset" with the portrayal of Yang Zirong in the new *Tracks* because he was completely different from the image she remembered in earlier versions of the story such as the novel, the film and the model opera. "The mentality (*jingshen jingjie* 精神境界) of people then was totally different from that of people now," she opined.[33] Ms Liu's reasoning has a telling progression. She moved from the realm of art to that of history, equating her complaints against an unfaithful adaptation of an old artistic work with infidelity to social reality. Obviously, Yang Zirong was not merely a literary creation in Ms Liu's perception. Treating Yang's artistic image as authentic history, she measured historical truth against its construction in the Red Classics. This line of argument is by no means unique. In its notice issued on 9 April 2004, SARFT emphasized that the Red Classics were based on "true history" and that adaptations must respect audiences' "expectation and perception [of history]," thereby elevating the Red Classics to the status of actual history.[34] There were similar criticisms in the negative responses of scholars and the public.[35]

Viewers' pre-existing memories help to explain why the changes made to the images of Yang Zirong and another character, Lu Hua in *On Guard*, were received differently. Although *On Guard* was presumably also based on real events, Lu was a relatively minor character and on a different level to the fictionalized Yang who was elevated to Communist hero status. People could tolerate changes made to Lu's character as he remained obscure in popular memory, but could not stand to see their memories of a revered Communist fighter

32 Foucault 1989, 124.
33 Sina.com.cn 2004.
34 SARFT 2004b.
35 See e.g. Lu, Gaofeng 2004; People.com.cn. 2006. "Xiedu yingxiong jiushi xiedu lishi" (Desecration of heroes is desecration of history), 18 July, http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64103/4603058.html. Accessed 1 May 2010.

contradicted. The state was therefore not the only defender of the historical vision propagated by the Red Classics; the Red memory group became its ally in the controversies. According to Zhao Yong, through their reiteration, the Red Classics of the Mao years dominated their audiences' "political unconscious," turning those audiences into "revolutionary masses" whose identification with, and support for, the state was crucial to the regime.[36] However, while the state defended the Red Classics in order to maintain its control over history and consequently its legitimacy to rule, the older viewers were unwilling to accept the variations more for sentimental reasons.

To understand the nature of the Red Classics and how they informed the collective consciousness of the masses, it is necessary to look further at the Red collection. Huang Ziping 黄子平, a leading literary critic in China, calls the literature published between the 1950s and 1970s "revolutionary historical fiction" because it played a key function in creating and sustaining the myth of the Communist nation. "Emplotment" (to use Hayden White's term) offers explanatory and structured sketches of the past, and as such, this "revolutionary historical fiction" simultaneously constructed the past, legitimized the present, and projected the future for Chinese audiences.[37] A conscientiously staged and coherent "historical drama," the Red Classics had a crucial role in the grooming of the citizenry, providing a systematic and comprehensive training manual for the populace in the Mao era. The revolutionary narratives offered a steady supply of models for emulation as well as foils for condemnation, encouraging self-censorship among the audiences. The elaborate revolutionary "exemplary society," Børge Bakken argues, in fact harks back to the Confucian principle of ruling by virtuous models rather than by force so that social order and control can be exerted through imitation and self-regulation, even in the absence of surveillance. The CCP ruled by both ideology and force. Stories of real life Communist heroes and model workers were carefully constructed and paraded to "magnify the effect of exemplarity," and mechanisms of evaluation and punishment were established to ensure compliance.[38] The programming of the mind was relentless, with the help of both symbolic and material official "sites of memory." Not only were the Communist moral lessons regurgitated in different texts, but they were continually re-circulated via a variety of artistic mediums. Recycled versions of the same story appeared in film, opera, music, folk arts and the illustrated book, and were disseminated through every possible channel of leisure and political activities. Massive and routine "state spectacles" like the National Day and May Day parades were carefully controlled to maximize their visual and symbolic impact on the participants and spectators. Similarly, national landmarks of museums and memorials were meticulously conceptualized and constructed to ensure that they conveyed the supremacy of Mao and the Party to

36 Zhao, Yong 2005, 36–39.
37 Huang 2001, 4.
38 Bakken 2000.

the visitors.[39] These concerted efforts turned Communist struggles and heroes, real or imaginary, into what Patricia Leavy calls "iconic events" and "staples in a collective memory."[40] As acts of persuasion, all of these official mnemonic projects hailed and obligated the audience to participate in the state-defined nation building.

It should also be noted that if the official nation building during the Mao era was based on selective memories to begin with, the TV adaptations involved further selection. The remakes tapped into the more pleasant and appealing memories and buried those that would recall the pain and suffering endured under Mao's rule. Only the Red Classics works that featured the Communist armed struggle before the founding of the PRC were reintroduced on television, while the pieces glorifying the now discredited class struggle and radical socialist movements of land reform and collectivization were ignored. This self-selection was clearly necessary both politically and commercially. Politically, revisiting the mistakes the Party had admitted to in the making of PRC history via mass entertainment would be courting trouble at a time when the official slogan was "creating a harmonious society." Commercially, media companies could not afford to go against popular sentiments and desires. The original Red Classics works that highlighted sacrifice and legendary heroes therefore fitted quite nicely with the sentiments of the older generation, who used the Red collection to revisit their youth and distance themselves from the stress of the present. The adulterated Red adaptations were upsetting because they alienated the older viewers by corrupting the experiences they romanticized and idealized in their memories.

The older generation was not the only memory community concerned. The changes that angered older viewers were more or less added for the benefit of younger audiences who share a different taste and cultural experience. The younger viewing community – those in their 30s and early 40s – is made up of the "modern realists" and "global materialists" described by Kineta Hung and others in their study of the values and consumption behaviour of generation cohorts in China. The "modern realists" came of age during the economic reform period (1980–1991), and the "global materialists," born after the Cultural Revolution, came of age after 1992 amidst globalization.[41] Although it is not the remit of this article to deal with the shopping and consumption patterns of these groups, Kineta's study sheds light on how the younger generations' collective memory and cultural experiences differ from those of the Red memory group. Neither the "modern realists" nor the "global materialists" experienced the idealistic socialist era, nor do they have strong recollections of the Cultural Revolution. Their memories, instead, are dominated by the reform rhetoric and its emphasis on attention to individual needs, money making, consumer capitalism and globalization.

39 Hung, Chang-tai 2011.
40 Leavy 2007, 2.
41 Hung, Kineta H., Gu and Yim 2007.

Unlike the Red memory group, the "modern realists" and "global materialists" did not grow up on a uniform cultural diet. Fierce competition in the mass media and arts, the spread of popular cultures from the West and China's neighbours (Japan and Korea), and the development of digital media have given them a multitude of options for leisure activities. According to the 2011 report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 34.8 per cent of all net users in China are aged between 30 and 49. If those aged between 20 and 29 are added to the group, the total amounts to 75.6 per cent. Entertainment, for example listening to music, watching videos, playing internet games, is cited as one of the main reasons this group uses the internet.[42]

Although it is difficult to gather valid and reliable data on the viewing habits and preferences of the "modern realists" and "global materialists" with regard to TV dramas, the "youth idol dramas" (*qingchun ouxiang ju* 青春偶像剧) provide some clues. This major genre targets viewers in their 20s and 30s and features predominantly urban youths in pursuit of comfortable private lives, lucrative careers, love and meaningful relationships.[43] The type of revolutionary idealism, collectivism and sacrifice glorified in the Red Classics is far removed from the memories and concerns of the younger generations. Indeed, the Communist class struggle is alien to the consciousness and lived experience of those growing up in the reform era when being rich brought power, privilege and the envy of others.

Admittedly, revolutionary history has always been part of state-controlled formal education and nationalist sentiments are strong among Chinese youths. The younger generations, nonetheless, have no intimate knowledge of the Red Classics and less attachment to the Red memories they present. Although the Red adaptations can help to strengthen the Communist legacy among younger viewers, state authorities also worry that the "erroneously" modified versions could lead to the transmission of a different reading of history. Interestingly, while SARFT's notice of 9 April 2004 stipulated that the questionable adaptations "had misunderstood the masses," in the news report published on the official website of *People's Daily*, "misunderstood the masses" (*wuhui qunzhong* 误会群众) became "misled the masses" (*wudao qunzhong* 误导群众).[44] This is a significant variation. "Misunderstood the masses" implies that the producers misread the market; the more serious allegation that they had "misled the masses" hints at the more alarming consequences of generating misconceptions of history among audiences. SARFT is right in that the adaptations' revisions of the past could create dissonance and competing memories of the nation. As was the case for the original works of the Red Classics, with time consumption

42 Zhongguo hulian wangluo xinxi zhongxin 2011.

43 See Zhu, Ying 2008, Ch. 5; Zhong, Xueping 2010, Ch. 4.

44 www.people.com.cn. 2004. "Guangdian zongju jinzhi xishuo hongse jingdian; '*Linhai xueyuan*' deng zao dianming" (SARFT prohibits fictionalization of the Red Classics; *Tracks in the Snowy Forests* and others singled out for criticism), 21 April, http://www.people.com.cn/GB/yule/1081/2460526.html. Accessed 25 June 2009.

of the remakes could also produce another Red mnemonic community whose understanding of the revolution and nature of the modern nation could deviate from orthodox textbook rendition. This is a worrisome situation for authorities bent on preserving a cohesive collective memory.

Restaging the revolution in contemporary China is therefore a complicated dance between the state, the market and fragmented audiences. In an age of rapid social transformation, re-presenting the Communist legacy is a calculated matter, economically and politically. The Red Classics are a valuable resource for both state authorities and the market precisely because of their public nature and profound influence on the nation's historical consciousness. For this same reason, they are a double-edged sword. It is true that popular fascination with the "imagined community"[45] of the Red Classics and Communist past present convenient materials with which media companies were able to capture market share and profits. Successful appropriation of public memories, however, proved to be quite challenging. While romance, convoluted storylines and multidimensional characters helped the Red adaptations compete with other TV genres for younger audiences, they offended and risked losing members of the Red memory group. Similarly, while the adaptations were able to satisfy public interest in the collective past and boost patriotism, modified representations could also contest the hegemonic reading of the revolution and raise questions about the selective nature of the official historiography.

The medium used for the adaptations of the Red Classics further complicates matters. Broadcast on television, the most popular and accessible form of communication and entertainment, the new versions could have a greater impact on public consciousness than other media. The historical weight the Red Classics carry, the pre-existing memories they generated and the vast audience the remakes could reach all help to explain why the adaptations were not treated as flights of imagination for recreation as in the case of other revisions of history. But, in today's world when digital communication is redefining time, space, borders and spheres of authority, it is ever more difficult to regulate thought and the flow of information. TV dramas also circulate on legal and illegal disks and via the internet. Moreover, more people in China now turn to the web and mobile devices for information, entertainment and expression. According to official statistics, China had 0.889 billion mobile phone users at the end of the first quarter of 2011.[46] By June 2011, Chinese net users reached 0.485 billion. In the first half of 2011, the number of microblog users jumped from 63.11 million to 0.95 billion, a 208.9 per cent increase in just six months.[47] In this digital age when information can be transmitted instantly on a massive scale, there is no denying the impact of new media on the public's sense of citizenship and participation. As Henry

45 Anderson 2006.

46 People.com.cn. 2011. "Zhongguo shouji yonghu jiang po jiuyi" (Chinese cell phone users to exceed 0.9 billion), 5 May, http://tc.people.com.cn/GB/183743/190818/221469/221487/14649370.html. Accessed 3 September 2011.

47 Zhongguo hulian wangluo xinxi zhongxin 2011, 4–5.

Jenkins and David Thorburn argue, the diversification of communication channels is politically important because it ensures that "no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority."[48] In spite of censorship, no idea can be totally shielded from public scrutiny and discussion in the digital space, including that of Communist history and the revolutionary legacy.

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48 Jenkins and Thorburn 2003, 2.

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