Remaking *Yangbanxi*: Palimpsests of Revolutionary Memory and the Politics of Remembering

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I confirm that the work presented in the thesis is my own and all references are cited accordingly.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that works of *yangbanxi* (model theatre) are not mere relics of Maoist propaganda but contested battlegrounds where cultural and communicative memory collide and interpenetrate. It addresses a critical gap in *yangbanxi* studies by examining the overlooked role of their proliferating remakes, which have rarely been analysed as examples of memory politics. Building on Jan Assmann's concept of the 'floating gap' (2011), I investigate how the Chinese Communist Party's mechanisms of ideological reproduction recalibrate revolutionary memory, and how artists, even under constraint, exercise creative agency. Understanding remakes as palimpsests that retain traces of previous inscriptions while layering new meanings, the thesis explores how revolutionary memory is overwritten rather than replaced. Instead of tracing a linear retreat of state power, I examine how *yangbanxi* remakes reflect shifting boundaries of permissible expression under varying degrees of Party involvement. This analysis unfolds within a discursive environment shaped by democratic centralism, where dissent may only circulate indirectly (Berry, 2004). I begin with early remakes under the state-led assimilation of ethnic minorities into Han Chinese revolutionary culture, focusing on the Uyghur *Qizil Chiragh* (1975), where language recoding and dramaturgical shifts both serve assimilationist aims and enable vernacular resistance. Next, I examine postmillennial commercial remakes, analysing Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), which grafts class-struggle tropes onto genre hybridity and diasporic framings. Then I turn to non-state performance through Wen Hui's *Hong* (2016), an avant-garde reinterpretation of *The Red Detachment of Women*, developed from archival and bodily memory. Through my

practice-led interventions, I explore how adaptive performance resists re-traumatization through Brechtian and absurdist strategies. Across these sites, I argue that the mnemonic friction between the ideological archetype and its mutable iterations destabilizes Party efforts to sustain a hegemonic narrative and offer insights into how revolutionary histories are remembered, embodied, and contested.

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother and her generation, whose lives are marked by extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity. Their strength in navigating turbulent times, often with quiet dignity and unyielding perseverance, has been a constant source of inspiration.

May this work honour their struggles and illuminate the complexities of the histories they lived.

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Introduction: between model and remake

In 1967, a *People's Daily* editorial entitled 'Excellent Models of Revolutionary Literature and Art' designated eight theatrical, balletic, and symphonic productions as '*yangbanxi*'[1], or model works, consolidating them as the core repertoire of Maoist revolutionary culture during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The term '*yangban*', meaning 'model' or 'sample', carried a normative and pedagogical force. As Laikwan Pang articulates in *The Art of Cloning* (2017), during the Cultural Revolution, *yangbanxi* works were meticulously crafted and delivered to become perfect, worthy to be sanctified as the '*yangban*' for all thereafter cultural works to follow (20). They were templates to be studied, emulated, and reproduced across the country. Every stage direction, musical phrase, and costume detail was codified and enforced through mechanisms of aesthetic standardization, textual fixity, and political orthodoxy (Clark, 2008: 126). The result was a body of works that, as Laurence Coderre (2015: 116) observes, occupied a 'position of prominence in everyday life', a saturating presence that shaped how an entire society saw, felt, and remembered its revolutionary identity. Although additional works continued to receive the '*yangban*' label throughout the Cultural Revolution, the term *yangbanxi* retained a specific canonical reference to the initial eight (Xiao, 2025). These are the works that achieved the broadest cultural saturation and left the most enduring imprint on collective memory (Mittler, 2012: 3-5), and this thesis follows that usage.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, but *yangbanxi* did not. Its visual motifs, gestural vocabulary, musical language, and narrative arcs remain embedded in China's

[1] The eight works comprise five modernized *jingju* (Peking opera): *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, *Shajiabang*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, and *On the Docks*; two revolutionary ballets: *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl*; and the symphonic version of *Shajiabang*.

collective memory, not as inert relics but as forms that continue to be reproduced, adapted, and contested across shifting political and cultural conditions. Understanding this persistence requires attention to the structural transformation that have reshaped the landscape in which *yangbanxi* circulates. As Wei Yehua Dennis (2001: 7, 19) demonstrates, China's economic transition since the late 1970s has been characterized by 'triple processes of decentralization, marketization, and globalization' that have reconfigured the relationship between state, market, and cultural production. Where the Mao-era state exercised direct control over cultural production, the reform era introduced more complex mechanisms of governance operating through market forces and decentralized cultural production. The control and capacity of the central state declined dramatically, and local and global forces have emerged as important factors underlying regional development (Wei, 2001: 21). This economic restructuring has been accompanied by equally profound cultural transformations. The state's role has shifted from commanding the content of cultural works to managing the conditions under which culture is produced, circulated, and consumed. This shift from prescription to governance creates both new possibilities and new constraints.

Despite the ideological erosion and commodification of Maoist aesthetics within this transformed economic landscape, memory itself did not vanish but mutated. As Vincent K. L. Chang (2022) observes, what persisted was not the telos of revolution but its aesthetic and affective residues, which have been 'redeployed in service of national rejuvenation.' This has enabled the CCP to strategically reanimate revolutionary memory without returning to its original ideological substance. These efforts are most evident in the Party's contemporary strategy to channel Maoist iconography into campaigns for 'core socialist values.' As Ying Miao (2021) argues, the CCP 'romanticizes' the revolutionary past through political aesthetics such as the

'China Dream', in which Maoist symbols are reintegrated into a broader project of ideological legitimation under Xi Jinping.

This strategic reanimation of the revolutionary past operates within what Anne Cheng, in *The Future of Cultural Memory in an Amnesiac China* (2019:1), identifies as 'an extraordinary tension… between two contrary and contradictory movements.' On one side stands the weight of inheriting a civilization several millennia old. On the other stands the pressure of being slated to become the next dominant world power. Cheng argues that the reappropriation of the past now underway, and the invention of a discourse of 'Chinese characteristics' (Zhongguo tese), is in reality designed to perpetuate the forgetting of a recent past (2019: 2). The state's selective mobilization of revolutionary memory reveals the politics of memory not as a cultural afterthought but as a central axis of governance. It is a mechanism through which collective identities are constructed, political legitimacy is maintained, and the boundaries of permissible remembrance are policed.

It is within this contested field that *yangbanxi* continues to be remade. This thesis examines *yangbanxi* remakes spanning from Cultural Revolution-era regional transplantations to post-Mao reinterpretations across state revivals, commercial cinema, and independent dance-theatre. Whether through linguistic translation, genre hybridization, or embodied critique, these works expose the limits of ideological containment. The relationship between model and remake is neither one of compliance nor of resistance; it is an ongoing, friction-laden negotiation, which this thesis conceptualizes as 'mnemonic friction'. The term treats memory as an active process, through which cultural material is encoded, transmitted, and reactivated, and designates the productive tensions that arise when a cultural work carrying the imprint of a specific historical moment is remade under different temporal, institutional, and

performative conditions. This contact between inherited form and new condition generates interpretive, affective, and political energy that neither the source nor the receiving context could produce alone. This thesis investigates how mnemonic friction operates across different institutional contexts, examining the specific performative mechanisms through which revolutionary memory is reconstituted, contested, and transformed in the act of remaking.

Yangbanxi's discursive formation is structured by a series of tightly regulated correlations. These link class position to character typology, revolutionary temporality to narrative linearity, affective intensity to moral virtue, and aesthetic form to ideological function. These are not arbitrary choices but institutionalized constraints and rules of formation that determine the conditions under which revolutionary identity, history, and emotion can be enunciated. Recognizing this historically specific discursive logic is therefore essential to understanding how later remakes respond to *yangbanxi*'s normative authority, whether by reproducing, recontextualizing, or destabilizing the formal regularities through which revolutionary meaning was originally constituted.

Understanding *yangbanxi* as discursive practice enables its remakes to be situated within the broader cultural history of contemporary China. This is not a uniform trajectory from socialism to a more 'liberalized' present, but a layered and contested field in which revolutionary discourse is continually remembered, enacted, and reconfigured. This thesis argues that *yangbanxi* remakes constitute critical sites where the performative legacy of Maoist revolutionary culture is recoded under conditions of continued institutional constraint, which nonetheless permit, and indeed generate, significant interpretive friction.

Scholarship on *yangbanxi* and its remakes

Before examining the theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches that guide this study, it is necessary to locate this research within the existing body of scholarship on *yangbanxi* and related cultural phenomena. To avoid terminological ambiguity, this thesis employs Mandarin terminology transliterated via *pinyin* when referring to Chinese performance genres, including *yangbanxi*, *huaju* (spoken drama), and regional operatic forms such as *jingju* (Beijing Opera) and *yueju* (Cantonese opera). While *yangbanxi* is commonly translated as 'model opera', this translation obscures fundamental differences from Western operatic traditions. Unlike Western opera's emphasis on static vocal performance, *xiqu* (Chinese Opera) performers function as 'total actors', engaging audiences through an integrated synthesis of music (*chang*), stylized gestures (*zuo*), choreographed movement (*da*), expressive eye techniques (*yan*), and rhythmic speech (*nian*). This holistic theatrical language transcends mere musical delivery, representing a distinctly Chinese performative tradition that resists direct Western analogues, hence the importance of maintaining precise Chinese terminology throughout this study. A more detailed explanation of this aesthetic framework will be introduced in the following chapter.

The scope of this review encompasses three interconnected scholarly trajectories that together illuminate *yangbanxi*'s multifaceted cultural significance: institutional analyses of state-cultural governance, studies of dissemination and reception challenging assumptions of passive consumption, and examinations of post-Mao appropriations in contemporary China. These trajectories reveal *yangbanxi* as simultaneously aesthetic form and political technology, demonstrating how cultural production became inseparable from ideological control during the Cultural Revolution while continuing to shape contemporary Chinese culture.

The first trajectory examines *yangbanxi* as instruments of state-cultural governance, analysing the institutional mechanisms through which they were created and standardized. Paul Clark (2009) presents a nuanced reassessment of *yangbanxi* works, positioning them not merely as instruments of political propaganda but as complex cultural productions that exemplify both ideological control and aesthetic innovation. Clark traces their institutional evolution from Jiang Qing's 1964 speech on *xiqu* reform through their consolidation as the core repertoire of revolutionary culture. Clark emphasizes the careful formal construction of *yangbanxi* works, highlighting their hybridization of traditional performance techniques with cinematic and balletic elements, as well as their use of '*san tuchu* (three prominences)' to sculpt idealized proletarian heroes. While acknowledging the top-down nature of their production, Clark also attends to their wide dissemination and reception, arguing that *yangbanxi* generated new modes of participation and identification among ordinary audiences, particularly sent-down youth.

Specific institutional mechanisms underpinning *yangbanxi*'s creation and standardization have also been examined in detail. Liu Ning (2003) reveals how the CCP's promotion of 'revolutionary romanticism' simplified *jingju*'s intricate conventions in favour of direct political messaging, while Sun Mei (2006) analyses how state reorganization of performance troupes dismantled performers' improvisational autonomy, centralizing control in directors and bureaucratic committees. Linyu Wang's recent article (2023) extends this analysis by examining formal regulation of vocal styles, choreography, and set design, demonstrating how aesthetic standardization operated as an extension of ideological homogenization.

Xing Fan's study, *Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution* (2018), advances this trajectory by refuting the

notion that politically serving art is inherently devoid of artistic merit. Fan offers nuanced analysis of how model *jingju* achieved sophisticated aesthetic effects within stringent political constraints, tracing modern *jingju*'s gradual rise to the pinnacle of socialist culture construction, from the Communist base at Yan'an in the 1930s to the Cultural Revolution's end. This demonstrates how *yangbanxi*'s evolution involved complex negotiations between traditional aesthetic forms and revolutionary political content rather than a simple displacement of the former by the latter.

Wang Hui's discursive analysis in *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity* (2009) locates *yangbanxi* within the broader paradoxes of revolutionary modernity, showing how works aimed at liberating the masses through politicized art simultaneously imposed disciplinary structures constraining aesthetic and intellectual diversity. Wang's theoretical framework illuminates the contradictory nature of cultural productions during the Cultural Revolution, revealing how liberation and control operated as mutually reinforcing rather than opposing forces. These institutional analyses demonstrate that *yangbanxi* works were designed to make Maoist memory both legible and inescapable through what Wang describes as the convergence of art and governance, a process transforming aesthetic form into political infrastructure.

The second trajectory explores *yangbanxi*'s dissemination and uptake through a vast, meticulously organized apparatus permeating all domains of everyday life. This system, engineered by the state, extended across rural communes, industrial factories, military barracks, and educational institutions. It functioned as a mechanism of cultural governance, in which aesthetic production was mobilized to regulate social behaviour, ideological identification, and normative feeling. Theatrical troupes were established within numerous work units, where even individuals without professional

training were required to perform, sing, or recite revolutionary lines. These compulsory performances transformed artistic practice into a form of political discipline, where participation in the arts became a mode of ideological self-fashioning.

Yangbanxi's dissemination unfolded across a multimodal media ecology extending revolutionary aesthetics into everyday life. Chen Bo's documentation (2005) shows how films like *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (1970) were distributed nationwide via the Ministry of Culture's mobile projection units (*dianying fangying dui*), ensuring that revolutionary messages reached rural and urban populations alike. Laurence Coderre (2021) notes that *yangbanxi* soundtracks and narratives were broadcast through the Central People's Broadcasting Station (*Zhongyang Renmin Guangbo Diantai*), ensuring access across educational and geographic divide. Coderre argues that such media saturation was key to embedding revolutionary forms into the material infrastructure of daily life, facilitating their absorption not only as ideological content but as quotidian background (38). Perry Link also observes that this fusion of culture and technology aimed to 'collapse the distance between Party centre and populace,' rendering revolutionary culture both immediate and ubiquitous (2000: 39).

The ideological messaging of *yangbanxi* was further reinforced through visual ephemera: mass-produced posters, calendars, and postcards that reproduced iconic scenes and characters in domestic and everyday settings. As Shu-mei Shih argues, these material artefacts transformed the private sphere into a site of continuous political pedagogy, recoding kitchens, bedrooms, and classrooms as auxiliary stages for revolutionary rehearsal (25). These representational forms exemplify the Cultural Revolution's centralization of cultural production under state control, wherein aesthetics, media, and politics were tightly integrated functioning as a mechanism of immersive saturation. Through repetition, accessibility, and spatial diffusion,

yangbanxi became embedded in the mundane rhythms of daily life as a normalized, routinized presence. In this sense, *yangbanxi* operated as a total media system, not by producing spectacular moments of ideological persuasion, but by inscribing revolutionary culture into the banal, the habitual, and the infrastructural.

This dynamic challenges the assumption of a passive public subjected to top-down indoctrination. Luo Dongqing (2004) argues that propaganda should not be understood as a one-way imposition of meaning. Instead, Luo proposes a reception model grounded in negotiation and reinterpretation, where audiences engage with political aesthetics not merely as directives but as emotionally and symbolically charged materials open to appropriation and reframing. Luo maintains that *yangbanxi* did not simply broadcast political messages but invited audiences to engage emotionally, even creatively, by aligning aesthetic pleasure with ideological imperatives (137-43). Luo emphasizes how the visual and musical forms of *yangbanxi* harnessed beauty through heroic arias, rhythmic choreography, and stylized imagery as a tool for ideological seduction, shaping collective sentiment while allowing space for personal affective response.

Barbara Mittler (2008) extends this perspective by showing how Maoist propaganda mobilized familiar cultural idioms and aesthetic traditions, enabling affective resonance with the masses rather than alienating audiences. This affective embeddedness was reinforced through Mao-era campaigns such as *da ming da fang* (open airing of views), which ostensibly encouraged public expression and critique of the regime, and *shang shan xia xiang* (down to the countryside), which sent educated youth into rural areas to learn from peasants. These campaigns functioned as both ideological re-education and aesthetic resocialization. Similarly, *da chuan lian* (revolutionary tours), which enabled Red Guards to travel freely across the country,

facilitated grassroots artistic exchange and diffusion of revolutionary aesthetics. The initiatives created opportunities for grassroots artistic exchange and localized reinterpretations of revolutionary aesthetics. As Mittler argues, what emerged was not top-down indoctrination but a form of 'participatory propaganda', shaped by shared cultural vocabularies as much as by state agendas.

Laikwan Pang's *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution* (2017) extends this challenge to assumptions of cultural uniformity by examining how repetition and standardization paradoxically enabled creative agency during the Cultural Revolution. Pang argues that what appeared from the outside as 'a monotonous world, a place of endless repetition and imitation' concealed 'a range of cultural experiences' (21) that provided individuals with forms of autonomy within highly regulated cultural production. Pang's analysis of *yangbanxi* demonstrates how artists found spaces for creative expression through the very mechanisms of standardization, suggesting that repetition itself became a mode of innovation rather than mere replication. This framework reveals how the apparent rigidity of Cultural Revolution cultural forms masked more complex processes of negotiation and creative adaptation.

Yet this agentic quality should not be mistaken for ideological plurality. The same mechanisms that fostered emotional engagement also enabled cultural homogenization. As Richard Kraus (2004) argues, *yangbanxi* was central to Maoist cultural hegemony, designed to enforce political conformity and manufacture a homogenized civic identity. Kraus critiques the form's reductive dramaturgy, particularly its reliance on *san tuchu* (three prominences) principle, the hierarchical character typology privileging proletarian heroes, and exclusive elevation of class struggle as the sole creative engine (133). The tension between Pang's emphasis on

creative agency and Kraus's account of ideological homogenization reveals that *yangbanxi* was never the seamless ideological instrument the state claimed. This internal instability is what makes mnemonic friction possible: because the model works already carried tensions between creative agency and political control, each act of remaking activates and reconfigures those tensions under new conditions. It is this activation, and the interpretive, affective, and political tensions it generates across different contexts, that this thesis theorizes as mnemonic friction.

Xiaomei Chen's *Performing the 'Socialist State'* (2017) provides a further essential bridge between the second and third bodies of scholarship. Chen analyses how revolutionary cultural forms function as sites of 'propaganda memory' in postsocialist China, where performances serve as 'meticulously constructed collective memories of revolutionary sacrifice that both legitimize the contemporary regime and create spaces for critique of postsocialist betrayals of revolutionary ideals' (6). Chen's insight that propaganda operates as 'a complex, dialogic, and dialectical process in which multiple voices and opposing views collide, negotiate, and compromise,' and that revolutionary materials remain 'deeply lodged in personal memories and the nostalgia for a bygone past,' (1) provides crucial groundwork for this thesis's argument that *yangbanxi* remakes are neither simple reproductions nor straightforward acts of resistance but sites of ongoing negotiation. The concept of mnemonic friction extends Chen's framework by specifying the aesthetic and performative mechanisms through which this negotiation occurs in the remaking process itself.

The third trajectory tracks how *yangbanxi* motifs have been repurposed in reform-era revivals, commercial productions, and popular culture. The affective complexity of *yangbanxi*'s persistence is captured in dancer Wen Hui's recollection: 'rationally, I know that *yangbanxi* works were used for propaganda, and that they

provoked social-class hatred. But on the other hand, whenever I hear music from the *yangbanxi*, I get goosebumps and my body gets excited' (*Sixth Tone*, 2017). This paradox of emotional intensity coexisting with political critique speaks to the core dynamic this thesis investigates. Dai Jinhua develops the concept of 'spectral socialism' (2018) to understand *yangbanxi*'s contemporary persistence. Dai argues that Maoist remnants are not discarded but strategically revived, haunting the present as both cultural residue and political instrument. Through this lens, Hu Zhiyi (2008) documents how lyrics and imagery from *yangbanxi* resurface in grassroots theatre and online fan cultures, sometimes to critique neoliberal inequality, other times to evoke revolutionary idealism.

In the reform era, *yangbanxi* has resurfaced in *zhu xuanlü* (main melody) campaigns and state-sponsored 'red classics' revivals. Gong Qian (2008) offers a sustained analysis of this phenomenon, positioning contemporary remakings of red classics as a form of 'cultural archaeology' that operates across multiple dimensions: excavating not just source texts but the layered meanings they have accumulated across different historical periods. Through detailed analysis of television adaptations from the late 1990s and early 2000s, Gong identifies two primary narrative strategies: humanizing heroes and enemies and reconstructing romantic relationships. These strategies represent deliberate excavations of suppressed human elements that were ideologically constrained in the source works, revealing how contemporary society negotiates between commercial imperatives, state ideology, and individual memory.

Studies of specific remakes have examined how different media formats reshape revolutionary narratives. Kristine Harris (2010) analyses the transformation of *The Red Detachment of Women* between stage and screen, demonstrating how technical and aesthetic differences between theatrical and cinematic presentation

create distinct interpretive possibilities. Rosemary Roberts (2015) extends this to serialized television, examining how broadcasting formats modify the temporal experience of consuming revolutionary narratives. Lintao Qi (2023) studies the Japanese adaptation of *The White-Haired Girl* as an instance of 'ballet diplomacy', revealing how cross-cultural remaking involves negotiations of political agency and cultural memory that extend beyond national boundaries.

While these trajectories have made significant contributions to understanding the works' political, aesthetic, and cultural functions, a major gap persists: the lack of systematic analysis of remaking as a cultural practice with its own logic and effects, and a sustained strategy for mnemonic negotiation across diverse temporal and geographical contexts. One of the closest precedents appears in *Listening to China's Cultural Revolution: Music, Politics, and Cultural Continuities* (Clark et al. 2016), which includes three chapters examining the revolutionization of regional music forms through *yangbanxi* transplantation. While these case studies provide valuable insight into local musical integration and demonstrate how *yangbanxi* was adapted across different regional contexts, they approach the subject from an ethnomusicological perspective that emphasizes the technical adaptation of musical forms rather than the discursive implications of remaking as a practice of memory negotiation, and their temporal focus remains confined to the Cultural Revolution, rather than extending into the post-Mao era.

The research gap is threefold, with each dimension logically connected. At its foundation, remake has not been sufficiently theorized as a coherent analytical category within *yangbanxi* studies: individual remakes have been studied in isolation or absorbed into broader accounts of nostalgia or red culture revival, but the practice of remaking itself, with its own formal logic and mnemonic effects, remains

undertheorized. Two consequences follow from this absence. First, without remake as an established analytical category, existing scholarship lacks a comparative framework for illuminating how the same *yangbanxi* source material generates different modes of cultural memory work across different institutional contexts. Second, the specific performative mechanisms through which revolutionary memory is negotiated in the act of remaking have received little sustained attention. These interconnected gaps motivate the development of the concept of mnemonic friction, which addresses all three by theorizing remake as a structured practice, providing a comparative framework organized around institutional context, and specifying the performative mechanisms through which that practice operates.

Research inquiry

Addressing the identified research gaps, this section articulates the research questions that drive the investigation throughout the following chapters. The research inquiry is structured around one central question and three subsidiary questions that provide a cohesive framework for the case studies. The central question asks: How do *yangbanxi* remakes mediate the relationship between revolutionary memory and aesthetic form? This question stems from the recognition that these remakes neither simply reproduce nor flatly reject their source material. Instead, they actively negotiate the original works in ways such as softening revolutionary resolve, introducing affective complexity into formerly binary character types, reorienting gendered heroism. They further transform the material by recomposing the sonic landscape through local folk idioms or commercial pop conventions and shifting the scenographic register from theatrical excess to digital hyperrealism. Each aesthetic decision reflects and refracts broader shifts in ideological legibility, historical memory, and cultural authority. This study examines these negotiations to demonstrate how

remakes navigate the tension between repetition and reinvention, positing that the friction between the inherited form and new conditions is the primary driver of new mnemonic meaning.

The three subsidiary questions develop this central inquiry across distinct analytical registers, moving from form, to context, to embodied practice. First, what formal, narrative, or performance strategies do *yangbanxi* remakes deploy to engage the revolutionary past, and what modes of remembering or forgetting do these strategies activate? This question examines the aesthetic mechanisms through which remakes reconfigure their source material. Moving from text to context, the second question asks: how do diverse institutional frameworks condition the revolutionary memory work that *yangbanxi* remakes enact? Because remakes do not operate in a vacuum, the conditions of production, circulation, and reception determine what can be said, shown, felt, and remembered in any given context.

Finally, shifting from observation to intervention, the third question asks: how does practice-led creative engagement with *yangbanxi* materials test, extend, and challenge the analytical frameworks developed through critical analysis, and what does the experience of remaking reveal about the ethical and affective complexities of engaging with a difficult past? Critical analysis alone cannot fully account for the embodied, processual dimensions of mnemonic friction. Practice-led engagement is therefore not supplementary but constitutive, capable of surfacing tensions that textual inquiry can register but not reproduce. By positioning the researcher as both analyst and practitioner, the creative process becomes a site where theoretical claims about memory, ideology, and affect are pressure-tested through material negotiation. Here, *yangbanxi* legacies emerge not merely as objects of study but as live forces that shape and complicate the act of engagement itself.

Together, these questions generate a multidimensional account of *yangbanxi* remakes that moves beyond existing scholarship. Rather than framing these works within a binary rupture between Mao-era socialism and post-Mao reform culture, this thesis proposes that revolutionary forms are neither erased nor superseded by new conditions. Instead, they are overwritten in uneven and often contradictory ways, reappearing at specific sites of mnemonic friction where past and present cohabit uneasily, demanding a mode of analysis that accounts for both their aesthetic persistence and their ideological transformation. By addressing these frictions through both critical and creative registers, the investigation identifies how the revolutionary past continues to condition and contest the cultural authority of the present.

Defining the *yangbanxi* remake

At the core of this research inquiry is the question of what constitutes a *yangbanxi* remake. The conceptualization deployed here departs from the narrower, genre-specific definitions commonly found in film studies, where remakes are typically understood as updated versions of earlier films and adaptation is treated as the movement across media, as Dudley Andrew maintains in *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984). This definition, though helpful in providing analytical tools for comparing source texts with their derivatives, tends to privilege medium specificity and narrative fidelity while overlooking the broader cultural, ideological, and affective negotiations that remaking entails. Following Rüdiger Heinze and Lucia Krämer's expanded theorization in *Remakes and Remaking* (2015), I approach remaking as a historically situated and politically inflected practice which reactivates prior texts as contested sites of meaning-making. The emphasis thus shifts from questions of intra/cross-media transfer or fidelity to the source material to the processes through which remakes

engage, reframe, and rewrite inherited forms in response to new sociopolitical conditions.

The challenge of defining the *yangbanxi* remake stems from the tension between analytical specificity and cultural reality. Too narrow a definition risks excluding works that demonstrably engage *yangbanxi*'s legacy but do so through unconventional means. Too capacious a definition risks collapsing into meaninglessness, where any work referencing *yangbanxi* becomes a *yangbanxi* 'remake'. The concept must be distinguished from both replication on one side and wholly original creation on the other, without dissolving into a catch-all category that encompasses any creative engagement with a prior work.

To address this, I propose that a work qualifies as a *yangbanxi* remake if and only if it meets three interlocking criteria. Following Thomas M. Leitch (1990) and Constantine Verevis (1996), these criteria treat the remake not as a fixed generic property but as a relational and interpretive designation: where Leitch identifies four distinct rhetorical stances a remake can adopt toward its source, readaptation, update, homage, and true remake, each defined by a different relationship to the prior text (1990: 142), Verevis insists that the construction of an intertextual relation between a remake and its presumed original is always an act of interpretation rather than a property inherent to the work itself, determined in relation to a discursive field mediated by the authority of the filmic and literary canon (1996: 65). On these terms, the criteria below function as interpretive thresholds rather than checklist conditions.

First, a work must engage with a specific, identifiable *yangbanxi* work (or body of works) in a manner that is deliberate and constitutive, meaning that the dialogue with the prior work is not incidental but fundamental to the new work's aesthetic and conceptual design. In Linda Hutcheon's terms, a remake is 'an extended, deliberate,

announced revisitation of a particular work of art' rather than a passing allusion: 'allusions to and brief echoes of other works would not qualify as extended engagements' (2013: 9). This criterion distinguishes the remake from original creation, which may deploy revolutionary aesthetics, iconography, or cultural memory without anchoring that engagement to a particular *yangbanxi* text.

Second, it must maintain legible traces of the source material, whether narrative, choreographic, or musical, such that the relationship between the new work and its antecedent is recognizable to informed audiences. Gérard Genette's concept of the palimpsest is instructive here: the new text is written over the old without fully erasing it, preserving what he terms the hypotext as a structuring presence beneath the 'hypertext' (1997: 5). The recognizability must be substantive enough to activate mnemonic friction: the productive tension that arises when audiences perceive a familiar source being simultaneously invoked and transformed.

Third, it must transform the source through formal, contextual, or affective shifts that generate new meanings, what Hutcheon calls 'repetition with variation' (2013: 7). Leitch's taxonomy of remake types is useful here as a negative boundary: where his categories of 'homage' and 'readaptation' permit varying degrees of fidelity to a common source, the *yangbanxi* remake as defined here requires transformation sufficient to generate critical or affective distance from the original (1990: 142). This criterion distinguishes the remake from faithful replication, in which textual, aesthetic, and ideological elements are preserved as immutable. Together, these three criteria function as the threshold conditions for the category: a work that fails any one of them is not a *yangbanxi* remake in the sense this thesis deploys.

Within this bounded category, however, the concept is relational and scalar rather than uniform. Works that satisfy all three criteria do not do so to the same degree

or in the same register, and this variation is analytically significant (Hutcheon, 2013: 4; Verevis, 1996: 65). At one end of the spectrum, works such as the Uyghur-language *Qizil Chiragh* (1975), a transplantation of the model *jingju The Legend of the Red Lantern*, maintain close fidelity to the model while introducing variations through linguistic translation and regional performance idioms, satisfying all three criteria while remaining formally close to their source. At the other end, Wen Hui's dance-theatre piece *Hong* (Red, 2015) presents a more radical case that tests the criteria's limits. *Hong* does not reproduce the narrative arc of its source, the *yangbanxi* ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964), in any straightforward sense; instead, Wen uses autobiographical narration and bodily memory to excavate the lived experience of training in and performing the revolutionary ballet. *Hong* can reasonably be described as taking *The Red Detachment of Women* as its subject matter rather than its source text, and I acknowledge this tension openly.

Nevertheless, *Hong* satisfies all three criteria. First, the work is constitutively structured around the revolutionary ballet from its choreographic vocabulary and disciplinary regime to its gendered iconography to such a degree that it is unintelligible without reference to its predecessor (criterion one). Second, Wen deliberately restages fragments of the source choreography within a new affective and critical register; audiences read *Hong* as a palimpsestic text in which *The Red Detachment of Women* remains legible beneath Wen's autobiographical interventions (criterion two). Third, the transformation is radical: Wen foregrounds the contradictions faced by female performers whose bodies were caught between revolutionary idealism and gendered discipline (Wen and Cao 2015), displacing the source's ideological certainty with individual affect (criterion three). *Hong* therefore qualifies as a remake, but one that sits at the far end of the scalar spectrum from *Qizil Chiragh*, and it is at this limit that

the category's analytical value becomes apparent, revealing how revolutionary form persists even in works that appear to depart most radically from the model.

These threshold criteria, followed by a scalar range, become clear when set against a negative case. The '*kuso*' (internet spoof) videos circulating on social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter deploy *yangbanxi* elements for comedic and satirical purposes. GutImprov, Taiwan's first improvisation theatre company, has uploaded short videos in which performers caricature revolutionary heroes by singing *yangbanxi* librettos and striking *yangbanxi* postures. These videos fail the first criterion: they engage *yangbanxi* culture generally rather than anchoring their engagement to a particular *yangbanxi* work's narrative, musical, or choreographic structure. They therefore do not pass the threshold and are not *yangbanxi* remakes in this thesis's sense; they constitute satirical engagements with *yangbanxi* rather than remakes of specific works. The distinction matters analytically: *kuso* spoofs activate a general irreverence toward revolutionary authority but do not generate the specific mnemonic friction that arises from sustained engagement with a particular work's performance and affective architecture. No degree of scalar variation within the remake category can bridge this gap, because the *kuso* videos do not enter the category in the first place.

A narrower, medium-specific definition of remake would be inadequate for the cross-media, politically charged, and aesthetically heterogeneous practices through which *yangbanxi* have been reworked since the Cultural Revolution. *Yangbanxi* remakes traverse stage, film, dance, visual art, and digital media, ranging from state-sanctioned revivals to underground satire, and the scalar range of the category is what enables comparative analysis: it allows the thesis to trace how the same source material generates different outcomes depending on the remaker's strategies, positionality, and

historical moment, while the threshold criteria ensure that this diversity does not dissolve the category's analytical coherence.

These distinctions are not, however, historically stable. The boundary between replication and remake in particular proves far more porous than official doctrine intended, as the Cultural Revolution's own transplantation practices reveal. During the Cultural Revolution, *yangbanxi* performances were governed by a strict doctrine of replication. These works were conceived as politically correct 'models' (*yangban*), archetypes of revolutionary virtue to be reproduced without deviation. As Paul Clark (2008) details in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, the model works were 'meticulously staged' to ensure 'uniformity and perfection' (126). Every stage direction, gesture, movement, line, intonation, and costume design were codified and enforced through rigorous mechanisms of aesthetic standardization, textual fixity, and political orthodoxy, with the goal of maintaining a coherent, hegemonic revolutionary narrative. Replication functioned as a technology of control: the aesthetic form itself became a vehicle for doctrinal clarity, performative discipline, and ideological purity.

Yet this performative regime was never entirely stable. Even during the Cultural Revolution, replication fractured when transplanted into China's regional cultural contexts. Despite official insistence on uniformity, the process of linguistic translation, regional performance styles, and culturally specific modes of embodiment inevitably unsettled the ideal of aesthetic and ideological fixity. As Laikwan Pang (2016: 139-143) notes in her analysis of the Cantonese-language *Shajiabang* (1973), efforts to revolutionize local *yueju* (Cantonese opera) forms while maintaining strict fidelity to the *jingju* model led to significant tension: the Cantonese production followed the official script and music closely, yet it struggled to accommodate the tonal contours and vocal aesthetics of the Cantonese dialect, undermining its affective

clarity and performative fluency. However, as Rowan Pease (2016: 167-169) explains, in the Korean ethnic transplantation of *Ode to the Longjiang River* (1973), the ideological certainties of class struggle and proletarian heroism were refracted through *pansori*-influenced vocalizations that foregrounded personal sorrow and resilience, infusing the performance with a lyrical, almost elegiac tone that emphasized emotional resonance over revolutionary militancy. In the Uyghur transplantation of *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (1975), Chuen-Fung Wong (2016: 147-148) reveals how the Uyghur *Muqam* motifs and melodic formulas were woven into the performance, reconfiguring its sonic and affective texture.

Although the plot and revolutionary message of the model were preserved, these transplantations introduced expressive registers and embodied practices foreign to the Han-centric model, transforming what was officially intended as replication into a hybrid cultural artifact that bore the trace of both state ideological mandate and local aesthetic convention. The rigid affective mode of militant solemnity in the model, emphasized through sharp arm gestures, staccato rhythms, and declamatory vocal style, was softened by the incorporation of folk, more intimate, rhythmically loose, and culturally specific melodic ornamentation, subtly reorienting collective revolutionary narratives toward culturally resonant expressions of familial loyalty and moral endurance. Replication thus functioned less as a realized practice than as an ideological imperative that encountered its limits in the face of ethnic and cultural plurality and performative contingency. Difference emerged not as deviation but as the very condition of enactment.

In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the logic of replication gives way more clearly to the practices of remake, which exhibit increased openness to hermeneutic ambiguity, aesthetic experimentation, and critical engagement with revolutionary

legacies. The contemporary reimaginings subject the *yangbanxi* model to strategies that invoke, interrogate, and destabilize the ideological certainties embedded in the Maoist canon. These include reframing archetypes to foreground historically suppressed experiences, transposing revolutionary narratives into mundane, commercial, or surreal settings, and deploying irony or satire to expose the dissonance between revolutionary ideals and present realities. Jen Liu's *The Pink Detachment* (2015), a speculative video and watercolour project, exemplifies this tendency. Liu preserves fragments of the original choreography and music from *The Red Detachment of Women* but displaces the revolutionary narrative into a meat-processing plant, where female workers produce pink hot dogs instead of revolution. The transformation of 'red' into 'pink' figures a dilution or commodifies socialism, critiquing both the utopian promises of Mao-era ideology and their entanglement with contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

This distinction between remake and replication is crucial to understanding how revolutionary form persists through friction rather than fixity. In both the Cultural Revolution and post-Cultural Revolution contexts, the frictions between the model and remakes are especially pronounced when the latter challenge the structural limitations of the former, including its rigid gender norms, Han-centric narratives, and archetypes of revolutionary heroism. As Barbara Mittler observes, many post-Mao artists became 'inheritors of an enduring CR [Cultural Revolution] legacy', such that "the CR is not a thing of the past but remains a 'continuous revolution'" (2012: 12). Remakes neither erase the model's ideological charge nor submit to it entirely; instead, they engage its residual power through acts of aesthetic and emotional reworking. It is in these deviations that this thesis locates its core analytic interest: the ideological, aesthetic, and emotional negotiations embedded in the remaking of revolutionary form.

Yangbanxi remakes acquire further significance when situated within the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s enduring ideological architecture, under which cultural memory and performance are produced, circulated, and policed. This thesis acknowledges the presence of divergent political imaginaries within the PRC's cultural landscape. However, under the CCP's Leninist framework of democratic centralism, where limited internal consultation is permitted, but once a central decision is made, absolute obedience is mandated, such divergences are often pre-emptively silenced. Cultural production is tightly bound to state legitimacy; dissent, even when aesthetic rather than declarative, is frequently perceived as destabilizing. Hence, in the absence of sanctioned venues for critique, artistic forms like *yangbanxi* remakes become critical platforms for indirect political expression.

From the post-Mao period onwards, the oscillation between ideological tightening and loosening has produced a double bind. Deng Xiaoping's early reforms promised intellectual openness through initiatives such as the revival of the Hundred Flowers Campaign and the brief flourishing of the Democracy Wall. Yet these openings were quickly contained. The reaffirmation of the 'Four Cardinal Principles' in 1979, "upholding the socialist path, the people's democratic dictatorship, the leadership of the CCP, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought," reinstated firm boundaries around permissible speech, reasserting Party control over ideology. Within this context, *yangbanxi* remakes offer a strategic mode of engagement with historical memory and contemporary constraint. They operate as spaces of mnemonic friction: performance sites where official histories and private affect intersect.

These remakes employ narrative devices such as flashback, *jiegu fengjin* (to use the past to disparage the present), cyclical narrative structure, fantasy, and satire to disrupt linear revolutionary time and allow for alternative affective relations to the

past. These formal strategies mark out a zone of what may be called performance counter-memory. They do not simply retell Maoist stories but fracture them, refracting ideological clarity into ambiguity, irony, and ambivalence. This makes them particularly significant within a postsocialist condition, a term theorized by Arif Dirlik (1989), Chris Berry (2004), Sheldon Lu (2007), Zhang Xudong (2008), and Rossella Ferrari (2025) to describe the contradictions of China's hybrid system: politically authoritarian yet economically and culturally neoliberalized. Postsocialism is not a clean break but an uneven layering of past and present forms, in which revolutionary aesthetics persist even as their meanings shift.

Yangbanxi remakes function as rhizomatic practices within this condition. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome (2013), the thesis positions these remakes as nonlinear, non-hierarchical acts of cultural production that generate new meaning through multiplicity rather than unity. A remake may be loyal to revolutionary form while introducing folk traditions, commercial tropes, or global media references. These elements create what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight', channels through which centralized ideological authority is evaded or subverted. The rhizomatic structure resists containment; it proliferates meaning across nodes that cannot be totalized. Thus, each remake opens up a field of contested interpretation, permitting artists and audiences to inhabit revolutionary aesthetics without submitting fully to their original intent.

The palimpsest offers a complementary horizontal metaphor that deepens the account of temporal layering implicit in the rhizome. As established in criterion two above, Genette (1997) defines the palimpsest as 'literature in the second degree', a form that overwrites earlier texts while retaining visible traces of them (5). Extended to the cultural and collective register, Andreas Huyssen (1995) argues that each layer

of a palimpsestic structure carries ideological weight (1-35), and Selin Kalostyan (2018) theorizes the resulting experience as 'multitemporal': audiences read a performance as both contemporary and historical, both innovative and haunted by its revolutionary source (55). Kalostyan further argues that such layering introduces a 'radical alterity' into the present, puncturing its integrity with spectral residues of the past (80). By this logic, *yangbanxi* remakes are never neutral: even when authorized, they contain within their layers the possibility of dissent, nostalgia, or irony. The visible performance might align with state narratives but embedded within it are alternative memories and sensibilities that emerge through gesture, tone, and form.

This palimpsestic reading emphasizes how *yangbanxi* remakes operate as cultural texts in which memory is never singular. Each remake becomes a discursive site of revolutionary residue and affective excess, drawing attention to how state memory is never entirely stable or complete. Rather than functioning as monolithic instruments of propaganda, these remakes inhabit a threshold space, simultaneously inside and outside official discourse. They traverse both the Mao-era processes of regional transplantation and the more ambivalent structures of the post-Mao present, revealing how revolutionary form is continually reworked across temporal, spatial, and ideological registers. They are sites where ideological limits are stretched through performance, where past and present conjoin in complex, multitemporal arrangements, and where memory itself becomes an act of contested rewriting.

Mnemonic friction as interpretive framework

The previous section established that *yangbanxi* remakes generate frictions between the revolutionary memory encoded in inherited cultural forms and the new conditions into which those forms are transplanted. This section develops mnemonic friction into a full interpretive framework by grounding it in the theoretical resources

of memory studies. The term combines two ideas: the mnemonic, and friction. In its most common usage, a mnemonic is a device that helps one remember: a technique, a prompt, a structured aid to recall. As Frances Yates demonstrates in her study of the *ars memoriae*, mnemonic systems have from antiquity been understood as active, practicable techniques for organizing and transmitting knowledge rather than passive acts of preservation (1966: 1-4). The word choice of mnemonic over memorial is deliberate: where memorial connotes commemoration, the reverential marking of what is past and fixed, mnemonic connotes practice and transmission. Following Paul Connerton's account of memory as socially acquired and bodily enacted rather than naturally given (1989: 2-4), the mnemonic here designates memory as an action: something learned, rehearsed, and performed, encoded in bodies, institutions, aesthetic forms, and collective habits, and re-enacted under new conditions.

Friction is borrowed from physics, where it describes the resistance generated when two surfaces meet, but the term is used here in the sense developed by Anna Tsing (2005: 4-5), who argues that friction is not mere obstruction but a productive force: the awkward, unequal encounters through which new forms of meaning and power are generated. In *yangbanxi* remakes, the two surfaces are the revolutionary memory embedded in the source work and the new temporal, institutional, or performative context into which that work is transplanted. Where they meet, they neither fuse nor simply repel each other; instead, the contact produces interpretive, affective, and political energy that neither the source nor the new context could generate alone. Mnemonic friction names this point of productive resistance, where inherited form and new condition press against each other hard enough to generate new meaning.

The concept of mnemonic friction is built upon Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory (2011), which provides its structural foundation. Assmann distinguishes between two modes of collective remembrance. Communicative memory refers to the everyday recollections shared orally among living generations, spanning roughly eighty to one hundred years — generational memory that originates and disappears with its carriers. It constitutes a 'history from below' that resists official narratives (37). Cultural memory, in contrast, consists of formalized, mythic narratives preserved in fixed symbolic forms such as rituals, texts, and monuments. It anchors a society's origins and identity across extended temporal horizons (40). What counts for cultural memory is not factual but remembered history, narrated to illuminate the present from the standpoint of its origins. Through memory, history becomes myth.

At the core of Assmann's theory is the 'floating gap', the transitional zone between recent history and mythologized antiquity, which is too distant for living memory but not yet integrated into the mythic past. The gap is 'floating' because its duration shifts with each generation. As a community evolves, communicative memories are gradually absorbed into cultural memory, reinterpreted and sometimes mythologized in the process. Not all details survive this passage. Some are retained, others transformed, and many lost. The floating gap thus names the structural discontinuity at the heart of collective remembrance. Assmann underscores the political stakes of this process, arguing that power 'legitimizes itself retrospectively and immortalizes itself prospectively' (55). Rulers exploit the floating gap to construct origin myths that naturalize their authority, while inconvenient histories are subject to what Assmann calls 'structural amnesia': the suppression of counter-narratives before they can consolidate into the historical record (76). Yet under conditions of oppression,

communicative memory can become a form of resistance, preserving those counter-narratives that state-sanctioned histories seek to silence.

Yangbanxi occupies the floating gap with particular intensity. The Cultural Revolution is now more than five decades past, at the outer edge of communicative memory, as the generation that experienced it directly is ageing and diminishing. Yet the revolutionary narratives encoded in *yangbanxi* have not completed their passage into cultural memory in a settled or consensual form. They remain ideologically active, periodically reactivated by state-sponsored revivals, commercially exploited in popular media, and critically interrogated by independent artists. *Yangbanxi* thus inhabits the unstable transitional zone that Assmann describes: too politically charged and too intimately connected to living experience to be safely mythologized, yet too distant from the present to be maintained through everyday communicative exchange alone. During the Cultural Revolution itself, the CCP's saturation of public and private life with *yangbanxi* represented an attempt to collapse the floating gap, engineering a perpetual present in which the revolutionary past appeared as the only conceivable reality. The remakes examined in this thesis are the aftershocks of that attempt: each one reopens the gap, disturbing the settlement between communicative and cultural memory that the state has sought to impose.

Assmann's floating gap identifies where collective memory is contested, but it says less about what happens when a specific cultural work traverses that zone. His framework tends to emphasize the continuity of memory's passage from the everyday into institutionalized form, giving less attention to the turbulence of that passage, the moments when living memory and institutionalized memory collide and interpenetrate within the same cultural object. Mnemonic friction is designed to theorize these collisions. When Wen Hui incorporates *yangbanxi* choreography into her

autobiographical dance theatre, for example, the disciplined revolutionary body encoded by cultural memory meets the vulnerable, ageing body sustained by communicative memory, and neither subsumes the other. The floating gap identifies the structural site of this encounter; mnemonic friction describes what it produces.

Aleida Assmann's (2010) distinction between the 'canon' and the 'archive' extends this structural account by specifying the institutional mechanisms through which certain memories are kept in active circulation while others are allowed to fall out of use. The canon comprises cultural texts actively maintained and circulated by institutions to serve present needs; the archive holds the far larger reservoir of materials that have fallen out of active use but remain potentially recoverable. *Yangbanxi* remakes operate at this boundary, and it is here that mnemonic friction arises, when a remake draws on archived materials, affects, or experiences that the canon has excluded or suppressed.

Connerton (1989) locates the question in the body. He proposes the 'incorporating practices', the bodily habits through which cultural knowledge is transmitted independently of conscious recall, as the primary medium through which social memory is sustained across generations (72-73). Connerton's insight is essential for understanding *yangbanxi*, whose training regimes inscribed revolutionary ideology into the muscles, postures, and reflexes of performers, and whose audiences acquired habitual modes of response through repeated exposure. Mnemonic friction builds on this to ask what happens when those inscribed bodies encounter new performance conditions. Mnemonic friction is not only cognitive but somatic: it is felt in the body before it is understood by the mind.

The frameworks discussed so far account for the vertical dynamics of memory: its movement between generations, between bodies and institutions, between active

canon and latent archive. But *yangbanxi* remakes also generate friction laterally, across different memory formations and cultural locations, and three further frameworks address this horizontal axis. Michael Rothberg's (2009) theorization of 'multidirectional memory' argues that memories of otherwise separate historical experiences interact dynamically rather than competitively, producing unexpected alliances and tensions as they cross-reference one another in public discourse (3-5). This dimension is valuable for understanding remakes such as *Qizil Chiragh*, which activate not only memories of the Cultural Revolution but also adjacent and overlapping memory formations of ethnic minority experiences of assimilation. Astrid Erll's (2011) concept of 'travelling memory' extends this insight by attending to how memory acquires new meanings as it moves across media, genres, and national borders through remediation (11-15): a process central to *yangbanxi*'s trans-institutional afterlives. Ann Rigney's (2005) account of cultural remembrance adds a further recognition, that each new engagement with a prior text is simultaneously an act of reinforcement and potential revision, so that the accumulation of remakes reshapes what the source is understood to have meant (12-14).

Mnemonic friction builds on these insights while making two specific additions. First, mnemonic friction attends to the ways in which cultural forms can push back against the ideological work they are conscripted to perform, even in the absence of deliberate artistic resistance. For example, the Uyghur *Muqam* motifs woven into *Qizil Chiragh* were incorporated under state directive as instruments of ideological reach into non-Han communities, not as acts of creative dissent. Yet because *Muqam* arrived bearing its own performance history and affective charge, it introduced into the revolutionary form a surplus of meaning that the state's intentions neither authorized nor could contain. The friction here is involuntary and structural

rather than intentional, but it is no less constitutive for that. Mnemonic friction also tracks this excess: the tensions generated not by what a remake intends but by what its materials carry.

Second, mnemonic friction locates the specific performative forms through which this excess occurs. These forms**,** among them narrative structure, character typology, gestural codes, and vocal delivery, do not only represent revolutionary content but actively produce its meaning in the moment of execution. When such forms are transplanted into new conditions, the meaning they produce changes. For example, a revolutionary aria performed within a *wuxia* (martial arts and chivalry) film generates new affective possibilities that the Cultural Revolution stage foreclosed, because the genre conventions of *wuxia* cinema reroute its ideological certainty through spectacle, nostalgia, and bodily pleasure. Mnemonic friction names this process and insists on its consequences: each transformation reconstitutes the terms on which revolutionary memory operates, making mnemonic friction an analytical tool for reading not only how memory moves but also the material consequences of its moving.

Mnemonic friction's analytical power derives from its capacity to differentiate between registers of tension that cruder frameworks, in particular the binary of resistance versus compliance that has structured much scholarship on post-Mao cultural production (Barmé, 1999: xiv-xvi), collapse into a single category. This capacity follows from Tsing's insistence that friction is not a synonym for resistance: hegemony is made as well as unmade through the awkward, unequal, and creative qualities of encounter across difference, and the effects of such encounters can be as much compromising as empowering (2005: 4-5). As an analytical tool, mnemonic friction generates a spectrum of configurations defined by the degree to which the

makers of a remake are aware of, and deliberately engage with, the tensions their work produces. The attention this spectrum gives to the remaker's intentionality follows Hutcheon's argument that the creative motives and choices of remakers are legitimately relevant to the interpretation of remade works, however long suppressed by critical orthodoxy (2013: 105-111). At one end of the spectrum lies the involuntary friction described above, arising from the density of materials that exceed any single actor's purposes. At the other end, it is actively sought: the remake is conceived as a site of productive tension. Between these poles lie negotiated and autobiographical forms of friction: the former arises when a maker consciously navigates competing institutional or cultural demands, remaining aware of the tensions in play yet constrained in how directly they can be engaged (Hutcheon, 2013: 105-111); the latter, understood in Connerton's terms, emerges from the body's retention of culturally inscribed habits that surface under new performance conditions (1989: 72-73). Whether these configurations hold across the case studies, and what they reveal about the relationship between institutional context and the character of mnemonic friction, are questions the analysis pursues across the chapters that follow.

Research design

The theoretical framework of mnemonic friction provides the foundation for this thesis's methodological approach, which unfolds across two interconnected stages: performance analysis and practice-led intervention. This integrated methodology combines archival research, ethnographic inquiry, and practice-led research to examine how *yangbanxi* remakes function as sites of mnemonic friction within China's contested memory landscape. The research design recognizes that revolutionary memory operates not as a fixed historical record but as a dynamic,

performative process that requires both critical analysis and creative intervention to fully understand its contemporary operations.

The first stage, performance analysis, focuses on mapping the discursive transformations of *yangbanxi* across different institutional contexts. This thesis does not attempt an exhaustive survey of all *yangbanxi* remakes. Rather, it offers a focused selection of cases structured around the institutional context in which each remake was produced, circulated, and received. The theoretical frameworks established in the preceding section, in particular Assmann (2010)'s account of how institutional structures determine what is kept in active circulation and what is allowed to fall out of use, and Tsing (2005)'s argument that friction is always shaped by the specific conditions of encounter, give grounds for treating institutional context as a significant determinant of how mnemonic friction is configured. Each case therefore represents a distinct institutional mode of production: state-directed cultural engineering, commercial co-production, and independent avant-garde performance. By varying this factor systematically across cases, the analysis is able to examine how *yangbanxi* as source material generates different kinds of friction under different conditions.

These institutional criteria intersected with practical research constraints inherent in studying performance culture. Not all *yangbanxi* remakes are equally accessible: many Cultural Revolution–era provincial troupe transplantations survive only through fragmentary newspaper reviews and scattered script excerpts held in provincial archives. The selected cases represent works for which sufficient materials could be accessed through archival research, live performance viewing, or video documentation to enable the depth of analysis required. Accessibility thus functioned not as a primary selection criterion but as a necessary enabling condition for the detailed textual, performative, and ethnographic analysis that the theoretical

framework demands. Because each case foregrounds a different dimension of the relationship between model and remake, the analytical focus shifts across chapters as a deliberate response to the material, and the concept of mnemonic friction provides the connective thread that makes these different analytical registers commensurable.

Chapter One establishes the formal and ideological backdrop against which later remakes articulate their responses, detailing the discursive logic of *yangbanxi* at the height of its Maoist standardization. In this chapter, I examine how *yangbanxi* functioned as a tightly coordinated sensory and rhetorical apparatus for enacting Maoist ideology. The analysis reveals the patterned systems of meaning that governed what could be represented on stage and how political and moral intelligibility was distributed across bodies, images, sounds, and gestures. By establishing the formal regularities as historically specific 'rules of formation', the chapter provides the analytical framework necessary for understanding how later remakes respond to *yangbanxi*'s normative authority through strategies of reproduction, recontextualization, and destabilization. It also demonstrates that friction was already latent within the model's own history, since *yangbanxi* itself emerged from the appropriation and radical transformation of pre-existing *xiqu* traditions, carrying residual traces of the very aesthetic and cultural registers it sought to suppress.

Chapter Two examines the most constrained end of the institutional spectrum: a remake produced under full state direction. *Qizil Chiragh* (The Red Lantern, 1975), a Uyghur-language transplantation of the model *jingju The Legend of the Red Lantern* (1970), was created as an instrument of cultural policy aimed at integrating peripheral regions into a unified revolutionary culture. This choice emerged from consideration of several regional transplantations, including the Cantonese *Shajiabang* (1973) and the Korean *Ode to the Longjiang River* (1973). *Qizil Chiragh* presented several

distinctive attributes that made it particularly suited to examining mnemonic friction in state-directed cultural engineering. First, the Uyghur *Muqam* tradition stands in pronounced aesthetic and cultural distance from the Han-centred *yangbanxi* projects, intensifying the friction of adaptation. Second, by the mid-1960s, linguistic divisions were especially pronounced in Xinjiang, where many Uyghur speakers lacked command of Mandarin and the region's cultural milieu, steeped in Central Asian and Russian influences, retained characteristics that resisted easy assimilation into Han-centric revolutionary narratives (Millward, 2007: 175-230). Third, *Qizil Chiragh* is notable as one of only two regional transplantations filmed during the Cultural Revolution, the other being the Cantonese *Shajiabang*, suggesting the CCP's investment in showcasing this production as a model of ethnic minority cultural transformation. As Laikwan Pang observes, because the Uyghurs as an ethnic minority enjoyed a relatively larger degree of cultural freedom than was allowed in other Han regional cultures, the success of *Qizil Chiragh* remains an exception, exemplifying a rare instance where minority culture was granted sufficient autonomy to preserve a distinctive cultural voice within the standardized revolutionary framework (2017: 322). The full recording of *Qizil Chiragh* was accessible through the video platform *Bilibili*, supplemented by *Xinjiang Daily* documentation, enabling rigorous linguistic and performative analysis.

The analytical focus of Chapter Two is lexical transformation, the register in which the friction between Han-centric revolutionary form and Uyghur cultural production is immediately and materially audible. The transplantation of *yangbanxi* into the Uyghur *Muqam* framework entailed considerable aesthetic and political experimentation, yet the linguistic dimension, specifically the reconstitution of *Muqam* lyrics into accessible vernacular Uyghur, has received limited scholarly

attention. The linguistic reformation marked a decisive departure from earlier *Muqam* iterations associated with elitist and foreign influences, enabling both the CCP's political narrative advancement and an expansion of accessibility for local audiences. This dual character, simultaneously oppressive and enabling, makes *Qizil Chiragh* an ideal case for investigating how state-imposed transformations and ethnic cultural resilience exist in a fluid, interdependent relationship.

Chapter Three moves along the institutional spectrum to examine a remake shaped by commercial co-production. Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), a Hong Kong–Mainland co-production that reimagines *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (1967), was produced within the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) framework that enabled Hong Kong filmmakers to access mainland markets while subjecting their work to mainland censorship requirements and ideological expectations. This film was chosen as the first *yangbanxi* film remake co-written and directed by a Hong Kong filmmaker, representing a carefully negotiated experiment to separate *yangbanxi* from its propagandistic overtones while remaining commercially viable within Mainland censorship constraints. This positioning between two cultural and regulatory systems created a configuration of mnemonic friction that other remakes produced entirely within Mainland institutional frameworks could not generate.

Chapter Three's analytical focus is genre hybridization, the registers in which the film's mnemonic friction is visibly produced and directly traceable to its institutional position between two cultural systems. The film draws on elements of *zhu xuanlü* (main melody) cinema, Hong Kong *wuxia* film, and Hollywood-style blockbuster aesthetics to reconfigure state-authored revolutionary memory. By hybridizing these aesthetic and narrative conventions, the film destabilizes the CCP's

binary moral framework and reanimates the past through more ambiguous, affect-laden recollections. Framed through a diasporic perspective, the film's memory work becomes transgenerational and transregional, reflecting a longing to renegotiate what the past meant for those situated beyond the mainland.

Chapter Four examines a remake operating from the margins of PRC institutional frameworks. Wen Hui's *Hong* (2015) emerged from the Living Dance Studio, an independent space that has operated largely outside state-sanctioned cultural infrastructure while maintaining a precarious existence within Beijing's contemporary arts ecology. *Hong* engages with the 1964 revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* and proved particularly suited to examining how independent artists working negotiate revolutionary memory through embodied performance practice. As the first full-length ballet created by the National Ballet of China, *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964) holds canonical status as a work that synthesized Western classical ballet technique, Chinese classical dance vocabulary, and *xiqu* performance conventions within a socialist-realist revolutionary narrative framework. Its emphasis on female revolutionary heroism and military discipline foregrounds questions of gendered revolutionary subjectivity and corporeal transformation that became central to Wen Hui's critical intervention. *Hong*'s international touring circuit created accessibility for research: I attended the live performance at the Southbank Centre in 2018, enabling direct observation of spatial choreography and affective atmosphere that video documentation cannot fully capture. Wen Hui's published interviews and artistic statements provided crucial context for understanding her conceptual framework and intentionality. Moreover, her positioning as an independent artist with international art-world recognition but operating from within the Chinese cultural context, rather than as a diaspora artist working primarily for Western

audiences, created productive tension: a work that circulates transnationally while remaining anchored in specific Chinese historical experience and memory politics. The selection of the 2014 China Media Group (CMG) televised revival for *Chunwan* (Spring Festival Gala) as the comparative state-sanctioned case proves essential: *Chunwan* represents China's most-watched annual television event, and the decision to feature *The Red Detachment of Women* in 2014 signalled the CCP's strategic redeployment of *yangbanxi* aesthetics within contemporary patriotic education and cultural legitimation campaigns.

Chapter Four's analytical focus is embodied memory, the register in which Wen Hui's mnemonic friction is most intimately and irresolvably produced. Where Chapter Two attends to the auditory and Chapter Three to the visual, Chapter Four attends to the body: the kinaesthetic tension between the disciplined revolutionary gesture and the autobiographical body that now revisits it. I explore how the trained body becomes both a site of ideological inscription and a vehicle for embodied critique. The three-way comparative structure, model, state-sanctioned revival, independent remake, traces how embodied ideology evolves across distinct institutional contexts while examining the mnemonic frictions that emerge when the revolutionary body becomes an object of critical performance practice rather than an instrument of state propaganda.

Several significant *yangbanxi* remakes were considered but ultimately omitted; discussing them here clarifies the thesis's scope. *The Pink Detachment* (2015) by Jen Liu, a New York–based visual artist, offered a sophisticated critique of how revolutionary aesthetics relate to contemporary capitalist production. However, I maintained focus on works that engage directly with PRC memory politics rather than those for which *yangbanxi* circulates primarily as aesthetic resource within

international art circuits. Liu's positioning as a Chinese American artist based in New York, creating work that premiered at SomoS gallery in Berlin and circulates primarily through international contemporary art circuits, generates a different mode of cultural translation than works operating within or between Chinese institutional frameworks.

Similarly, the Matsuyama Ballet Theatre's production of *The White-Haired Girl* (*Hakumō-jo*) (1955) generates distinct mnemonic frictions as performers and audiences navigate relationships between Chinese revolutionary narrative, Japanese wartime aggression, and postwar leftist solidarity movements. However, its primary operation within Japanese cultural and political contexts would have required extensive engagement with Japanese theatre history, postwar leftist movements, and Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, expanding the thesis beyond its focus on how *yangbanxi* remakes function within PRC memory politics. Moreover, the work's status as a remake of a pre-*yangbanxi* film rather than of *yangbanxi* ballet itself introduces definitional complexity: it engages a revolutionary narrative that *yangbanxi* later canonized rather than *yangbanxi* aesthetic codes themselves. William Kentridge's *Notes Towards a Model Opera* (2015), developed through improvisational workshops with South African dancer Dada Masilo, similarly operates within international contemporary art circuits rather than the PRC cultural memory landscape.

These exclusions clarify the thesis's scope: while diaspora and international engagements with *yangbanxi* generate important questions about how revolutionary aesthetics circulate globally, this study maintains focus on remakes that engage directly with PRC memory politics. This delimitation enables sustained attention to how *yangbanxi* remakes participate in ongoing memory politics within the PRC cultural landscape, where revolutionary heritage remains politically charged, ideologically contested, and affectively fraught in ways distinct from the engagements

of artists such as Kentridge and Liu, for whom *yangbanxi* circulates primarily as aesthetic and historical resource within international contemporary art circuits.

The second stage of the research design marks a crucial methodological shift: from analysis to intervention. While critical analysis reveals the mnemonic frictions within *yangbanxi* and its remakes, it also risks fixing these works as static objects of ideological study, bypassing the affective dimensions of revolutionary memory that are crucial to mnemonic friction as a concept. Through practice-led research, I developed *The Ant* (2024), a short film built from interviews with former Red Guards, experimenting with *yangbanxi* through strategies of absurdity, irony, tenderness, and mourning. While *The Ant* was produced from outside PRC institutional frameworks, affording a degree of creative freedom unavailable within state-directed, commercial, or semi-tolerated independent contexts, its subject matter, interlocutors, and memory terrain remain centred on PRC cultural experience. This positioning is itself a condition that the thesis analyses: the distance from PRC institutional constraints shapes the character of the friction the work generates. These interventions do not aim to 'correct' the revolutionary past but to create conditions under which suppressed affects can emerge and dominant historical scripts can be unsettled. The creative process is documented through rehearsal recordings, reflective journals, and collaborative debriefs with workshop participants, generating process-based evidence that complements the textual and performance analysis of earlier chapters. This methodological turn is grounded in the conviction that memory is not only archival but performative: embodied practices can enact counter-memories and speculative futures, reclaiming agency from state-authored narratives. The creative interventions are positioned not as external commentaries but as situated acts within history: minor yet insistent gestures of resistance, remembrance, and repair.

The research design acknowledges the complex ethical terrain of engaging with Cultural Revolution materials, particularly given the ongoing political sensitivity surrounding this period in Chinese history. The methodology therefore emphasizes what I term 'caring criticism', an approach that remains analytically rigorous while recognizing the human costs embedded in these cultural forms. This involves treating *yangbanxi* not merely as aesthetic objects but as repositories of lived experience and collective memory that require careful handling. The integration of practice-led research serves multiple functions within this ethical framework: it provides a means of engaging with revolutionary materials through embodied experience rather than purely intellectual analysis; it creates opportunities for dialogue and collaborative meaning-making that can partially offset the isolating effects of academic research; and it offers a platform for developing alternative modes of remembrance that neither romanticize nor demonize the revolutionary past but create space for its complexity to emerge. Together, the two stages not only describe the afterlives of *yangbanxi* but also participate in them, treating this thesis as itself a form of remembrance: attentive to the costs of the revolutionary past, responsible to those who lived it, and open to what it has not yet been permitted to mean.

Chapter One. The mnemonic regime: eliminating friction in the construction of the revolutionary memory

This chapter examines *yangbanxi* as a paradigmatic case of how revolutionary cultural forms operate within the tension between aesthetic innovation and political instrumentalization. Through a comprehensive analysis spanning from the genre's ideological origins in the New Culture Movement[2] to its contemporary remakes, I investigate the mechanisms through which *yangbanxi* functions as institutionally maintained symbolic frameworks that encode political narratives into emotionally resonant aesthetic forms. The chapter unfolds in three analytical movements: first, I establish the historical trajectory that culminated in *yangbanxi*'s development, from early twentieth-century theatrical reform through the institutional restructuring of the *Xiqu* Reform movement to the Cultural Revolution's radical cultural purification. Second, I examine the aesthetic strategies through which *yangbanxi* reimagined traditional *jingju* conventions to create a hybridized mnemonic system that embedded revolutionary ideology within familiar performative structures. Finally, I analyse *yangbanxi*'s post-Mao rehabilitation and digital transformation, revealing how these works have been strategically repackaged to serve contemporary memory-making projects of national identity construction and soft power projection. This analysis establishes the foundational framework for understanding how revolutionary memory operates as a totalizing system before examining the mnemonic frictions that emerge when these forms encounter different cultural contexts, linguistic systems, and memories towards the revolutionary past in subsequent cross-cultural remakes.

[2] The New Culture Movement emerged as a modernizing intellectual and political campaign in early twentieth-century China, spanning the 1910s and 1920s. Its advocates systematically challenged established Chinese cultural traditions and social institutions, seeking to reconstruct Chinese civilization through the adoption of contemporary Western concepts of democratic participation and mass political engagement (Chow, 1960: 13)

The birth of *yangbanxi*

The ideological groundwork for *yangbanxi* can be traced to the New Culture Movement of the 1910s and 1920s, which first advocated for modernizing traditional *xiqu* as a medium of social transformation. Revolutionary theatre journals like *Twentieth Century Grand Stage* (*Er shi shi ji da wu tai*) called on artists to 'reform customs, enlighten the masses, and incite anti-Qing revolution,' establishing the precedent for using classical performance forms to deliver ideological messages (Chen and Wang, 1904: 2). This early movement demonstrated that traditional Chinese theatrical forms could be repurposed as vehicles for political and social reform, laying the conceptual foundation for later systematic appropriation of cultural practices by the CCP.

The CCP's first major effort to consolidate control over culture and link '*wenyi*' (literature and art) with political struggle came during the Yan'an Rectification Movement (*zheng feng yun dong*) from 1942 to 1944, which established the theoretical framework that would later shape *yangbanxi*. At the "Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942), Mao Zedong articulates the fundamental principles that would govern socialist cultural production for decades to come. Mao proposes the need for a 'cultural army' wielding pens and brushes alongside the military army, to serve the revolutionary cause. He asserts that all art should reflect the life of the working class and serve politics, or more specifically, the advancement of socialism:

> They [the proletariat] have remoulded themselves in struggles or are doing so, and our literature and art should depict this process… Our writings should help them unite, to make progress, to press ahead with one heart and mind, to discard what is backward and develop what is revolutionary and should certainly not do the opposite. (Mao, 1942: 440)

By calling for *wenyi* to depict the remoulding of the proletariat and to aid their unification and progress, Mao established a framework in which artists could be mobilized as 'cultural soldiers' in service of socialist transformation. Another point proposed in Mao's speech was crucial for the revolutionization of traditional *Xiqu* and Sinicization of Western ballet and Symphony. He suggested that Chinese artists should absorb the legacies of foreign art and culture and meanwhile ensure that the works are made relevant for the Chinese people 'we must take over all the fine things in our literary and artistic heritage, critically assimilate whatever is beneficial, and use them as models when we create works out of literary and artistic raw materials in the life of the people of our time and place' (Mao, 1942: 469). This principle of critical assimilation would prove crucial for the later development of *yangbanxi*, which would synthesize traditional Chinese theatrical forms with revolutionary content while incorporating elements from Western artistic traditions.

Following the establishment of the PRC, the government launched the *Xiqu* Reform movement to standardize and politicize over one hundred regional theatre genres, implementing the institutional transformations necessary for later cultural control. This period, as Siyuan Liu (2021) explains, saw the systematic dismantling of the *xiban* (theatre troupe) system—privately owned, star-centred troupes that had dominated pre-1949 theatrical production. These troupes, often organized around families or led by celebrated performers, functioned as self-managed enterprises in which the star actor exercised artistic, financial, and managerial authority. They selected repertoires, directed rehearsals, hired personnel, and negotiated contracts, with transmission of skills relying heavily on apprenticeship and personal charisma.

The PRC government condemned this structure as a feudal and bourgeois remnant, incompatible with socialist values. Under the *Xiqu* Reform, *xiban* were

dissolved and reorganized into state-owned, publicly funded ensembles. Control was transferred from individual artists to Party-appointed playwrights, directors, and administrators. In many cases, star-run troupes were merged into new provincial or municipal "People's *Xiqu*" companies. While prominent actors continued to perform, their former authority was eliminated: they became salaried employees within institutions now managed by state loyalists. This shift marked a decisive transition from individualist, market-oriented production to collectivized, ideologically governed cultural work. Creative leadership, once concentrated in the hands of performer-managers, was redistributed to cadres trained and vetted by the Party (Liu, 2021: 18). The reorganization effectively absorbed the resources and personnel of independent troupes into the state apparatus, ensuring that artistic decisions aligned with political mandates and that institutional power resided with those deemed ideologically trustworthy.

During the 'Seventeen Years' between the establishment of the PRC and the Cultural Revolution, Chinese revolutionary performance developed what Jessica Ka Yee Chan (2018) terms a 'revolutionary aesthetics of heroism' (20) through systematic aesthetic experiments that would later be codified in *yangbanxi*. Chan shows how the construction of revolutionary heroism evolved through films like *Lei Feng* (1964), which presented 'a perfectly self-disciplined socialist hero' (18) who embodied the socialist work ethic and declared that "the Party and Chairman Mao are my parents. The People's Commune is my family" (18). These films established key patterns for revolutionary cultural production: the appropriation of classical Hollywood narrative techniques and Soviet montage methods, the creation of pedagogical cinema that balanced education with entertainment, and the development of socialist star culture that packaged 'youth, beauty and femininity in socialist terms' (35).

Chan demonstrates that these aesthetic experiments were simultaneously 'national, international and socialist in style and scope' (20), creating what she calls an 'alternative aesthetic in world cinema' (21) that resisted Hollywood hegemony while selectively appropriating its conventions. Through political campaigns that doubled as aesthetic experiments, the state and artists collaboratively developed theoretical frameworks and practical methods for fusing propaganda with aesthetic sophistication. Mao's *People's Daily* editorial denouncing the film *The Life of Wu Xun* (1950) as 'politically misguided' (Mao 1951), illustrates this dynamic: by triggering a nationwide criticism campaign, it operated not only as an ideological directive but as a forceful intervention in aesthetic discourse. The frameworks consolidated through such campaigns would later be systematized in the Cultural Revolution model works.

Premier Zhou Enlai's official articulation of the 'Three Processes of Transformation' (*san hua*) in his 1964 article 'Cultural and Art Workers Must First Achieve Revolutionization' (866-867) provided the systematic framework for socialist art that *yangbanxi* would follow, crystallizing the collision of ideologies present in Mao's earlier proposals. The first process, 'revolutionize' (*geming hua*), echoes Mao's principles from the Yan'an Forum about the artists creating work of and for the revolution, ensuring that cultural production served the immediate political needs of the CCP. The second process, 'nationalize' (*minzu hua*), strategically urges the cultural army to speak to the understanding of the cultural heritage and traditions of *zhonghua minzu*, a term implying 'Chinese' as both nationality and ethnicity or even race. As such, foreign influence was widely discouraged. China is a vast and diverse country with 56 ethnic minorities, a great many different languages and ways of life. Promoting a unified vision of 'Chineseness' brought together different ethnic groups under the concept of 'nation'. The third process, 'popularize' (*qunzhong hua*),

mandates that socialist art be accessible and relevant to the masses and their everyday experiences, ensuring that revolutionary culture could penetrate all levels of society. This tripartite framework provides a coherent methodology for cultural transformation that would guide the development of *yangbanxi*.

The Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong to reinforce communist ideology by eliminating perceived bourgeois and feudal elements from Chinese society, created the political context for *yangbanxi*'s emergence as the sole acceptable form of artistic expression. The February 1966 'Minutes of the Symposium on Literary and Artistic Work in the Army' (*budui wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui jiyao*), also known as the 'February Minutes' (*eryue jiyao*), marked the emergence of strict rules for artistic creation. The 'February Minutes' criticized prevailing artistic trends at that time, including the emphasis on 'developing middle characters' and the adherence to 'narrow and superficial realism', and mandated a polarized approach to character design and narrative that was in strict service of CCP ideology of class struggle (Institute of Party History and Literature, 2011: 753-758).

Traditional cultural practices were systematically banned and violently suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. The 'Four Olds' (*po sijiu*) campaign, launched in 1966, targeted old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas as fundamental enemies of revolutionary progress (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006). Confucian values of filial piety and respect for elders were denounced as feudal remnants, leading to children being encouraged to inform on and publicly denounce their own parents and teachers. As documented by Gao Yuan (1987) in his memoir, students were systematically turned against their educators, with teachers subjected to public humiliation and physical violence for allegedly perpetuating 'bourgeois' educational practices. The campaign extended to everyday life, with traditional

clothing styles, hairstyles, and even architectural elements being attacked as symbols of the old order that needed to be completely eradicated to make way for the new socialist society. Red Guards and other revolutionary groups were mobilized to destroy temples, ancestral halls, and religious sites across China, with Wang Youqin (2004) documenting the destruction of over 4,900 of Beijing's 6,843 officially designated places of cultural or historical interest during this period. Ancient books, classical literature, and historical artifacts were burned in massive bonfires, while traditional art forms like *jingju* were replaced with revolutionary performances that glorified communist ideology. This decade-long movement led to widespread upheaval, during which intellectuals, artists, and perceived political opponents faced persecution, creating an environment where cultural conformity became essential for survival.

In this context, Maoist utopianism was consolidated into a uniform regime embodied in the eight revolutionary *yangbanxi* works. As a repertoire of modernized *jingju*, revolutionary ballet, and symphony designed to exemplify Maoist ideology, *yangbanxi* productions displaced traditional narratives and aesthetic conventions with standardized tropes of socialist realist performance, emphasizing class struggle, proletarian heroism, and the embodiment of collectivist virtue through choreographed ensembles and didactic staging. Emerging as a calculated instrument of ideological propagation, *yangbanxi* was meticulously crafted as an art form with a deliberately circumscribed thematic scope and stylized representational modes to advance the CCP's revolutionary narrative. Its canonical repertoire was enshrined as a paradigmatic 'revolutionary art model', designed for thematic imitation, artistic emulation, and cultural appropriation (Pang, 2017).

The development of *yangbanxi* was inextricably linked to the CCP's broader project of cultural reconfiguration, transcending mere artistic innovation to function as a tool of ideological indoctrination. Synthesizing diverse influences, including films, novels, folklore, *huaju* (spoken drama), and regional operatic forms, the genre coalesced into a hybridized art form that mirrored the exigencies of revolutionary ethos. This strategic eclecticism served to legitimize *yangbanxi* as an exemplary alternative to the pre-1966 traditional *xiqu* repertoire, which the CCP denounced as 'unhealthy' or 'anti-party' for its perceived 'feudal, bourgeois, and revisionist' themes centred on *diwang jiangxiang* (emperors, kings, generals, and chancellors), *caizi jiaren* (gifted scholars and beautiful ladies) (Mao, 1964).

As a modernized iteration of traditional *xiqu*, *yangbanxi* reconfigured conventional performance structures to embed political propaganda within its narrative and aesthetic frameworks (Fan, 2018: 1-15). By mediating between popular accessibility and elite cultural forms, it sought to disseminate Maoist ideology to a mass audience (Mittler, 2010: 377-380). The genre sanctifies the CCP's revolutionary past, from the Chinese Communist Revolution (1927-1949) to the Socialist Revolution (1949-1966); it elevates workers, peasants, and soldiers as archetypal heroes, valorizing the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) sacrifices and glorifying struggles of ordinary people against foreign imperialism and class oppression (Roberts, 2010: 12-25). While preserving traditional *jingju* techniques such as stylized movement, vocal modulation, and symbolic costuming, *yangbanxi* subordinated these elements to a homogenizing revolutionary aesthetic. This deliberate synthesis of inherited artistic methods with new ideological imperatives underscores the CCP's broader strategy: to harness cultural production as a mechanism for serving politics and consolidating proletarian power (Mao, 1942: 69). By repurposing, rather than discarding, traditional

forms, *yangbanxi* exemplified the Party's dual approach to cultural governance, simultaneously eradicating 'reactionary' content and co-opting performative conventions to forge a monolithic revolutionary identity (Clark, 2008: 26-43).

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the Introduction, *yangbanxi* works defied interpretive uniformity, encompassing diverse meanings and eliciting varied audience responses beneath their ostensibly standardized surface. Their life extended far beyond their initial purpose as instruments of political orthodoxy, occupying a volatile space between canonized historical narratives and affective, embodied remembrance. This bifurcation plays out in complex ways: on one hand, these works are preserved as didactic representations of Maoist history; on the other, they persist through emotional residues, intergenerational transmission, and cultural recontextualization. Artists, even under surveillance and ideological constraint, embedded moments of expressive deviation and aesthetic experimentation within these works. Likewise, audiences did not simply consume *yangbanxi* as coercive spectacle. Through local adaptations, mnemonic reinterpretation, and affective reinvestment, they transformed *yangbanxi* into emotionally resonant and socially adaptive forms of collective memory.

This systematic historical trajectory from the New Culture Movement's early calls for theatrical reform through the Yan'an Forum's theoretical framework, the institutional restructuring of the *xiqu* system, the aesthetic experiments of the 'Seventeen Years', and finally the Cultural Revolution's radical cultural purification, culminated in *yangbanxi* as both the product of decades of ideological development and a revolutionary rupture with China's theatrical past. The genre's emergence represents not merely a political appropriation of traditional forms, but a sophisticated aesthetic synthesis that required the complete reimagining of *jingju*'s fundamental principles. Having established the political and institutional conditions that made

yangbanxi possible, next I will examine how these revolutionary imperatives translated into concrete aesthetic strategies, transforming the very grammar of Chinese theatrical expression to serve the Party's ideological vision while maintaining sufficient cultural resonance to captivate mass audiences.

New wine in old bottles?

Yangbanxi's evolution inherited Mao's artistic principle of 'new wine in old bottles' (1937: 930), embodying a dialectical evolution within Chinese theatrical practice that synthesizes historical conventions of traditional *jingju*, such as *xieyi* (freehand expressionist), *chengshi hua* (conventionalization), and *li zhunao* (establishing the central spine), within a framework that was entirely reoriented toward revolutionary modernity. As enduring traditions within *jingju*, *xieyi* and *chengshi hua* constitute the aesthetic and performative bedrock of the genre. These principles not only define *jingju*'s artistic lexicon but also structure its reception, necessitating a dynamic symbiosis between performer and audience through codified abstraction and symbolic engagement. *Yangbanxi* does not simply transplant traditional aesthetics; it reinterprets them through new standards like *san tu-chu* (three prominences) and *gao da quan* (lofty, great, perfect), ensuring that every aspect of the performance is imbued with political significance.

Xieyi, literally 'writing ideas', originates in classical Chinese painting and denotes the transcendence of literal representation to distil the spiritual essence of its subject through stylized abstraction. As Huang Zuolin, the Chinese director who first formalized *xieyi* as a theatrical concept, argues, this artistic principle contrasts with Western realism's imperative to describe the literal: where the latter seeks to reproduce the external world, *xieyi* aspires to capture its inner spirit (Huang, 1990: 12-18). In *jingju*, this aesthetic permeates all performative dimensions, including vocal

delivery, choreographed movement, acrobatics, martial arts, costuming, makeup, and props (Wichmann, 1991: 2-6). Mirroring the interdisciplinary synthesis of poetry, calligraphy, and ink wash in traditional painting, *xieyi* transforms the actor into a 'living painting', where every gesture, vocal modulation, and costume detail contributes to a harmonious whole (Wang, 2000: 33-35). The stage, devoid of elaborate scenery, relies on metaphoric gestures, such as a whip evoking a galloping horse, and an oar suggesting a boat, to conjure imagined environments. This demands audiences actively participate in co-creating the narrative, bridging the gap between symbolic suggestion and lived reality. Emotional states, rather than being mimetic, are conveyed through stylized codes: a raised eyebrow signifies suspicion, and a flick of a water sleeve conveys sorrow (Wichmann, 1991: 45-60). Such abstraction aligns with classical Chinese aesthetics, which privilege *yijing* (artistic conception), the harmonization of implicit suggestion and evocative resonance, over explicit realism.

Chengshi hua, or conventionalization, systematizes *jingju*'s performative grammar through rigidly codified roles, movements, and visual semiotics. As illustrated in *Zhongguo xiqu tonglun* (A General Introduction to Traditional Chinese Theatre), *jingju* characters are categorized into four archetypal roles (*hangdang*): *sheng* (male roles, encompassing scholars, warriors, and emperors), *dan* (female roles, from virtuous maidens to martial heroines), *jing* (painted-face roles, denoting warriors or deities through chromatic symbolism), and *chou* (clowns, marked by a white nose patch and comic physicality) (Zhang et al., 1989: 420-25). Each role adheres to prescribed vocal techniques (e.g., *erhuang* and *xipi* melodic modes), kinetic patterns (e.g., the circular 'cloud-step' gait), and sartorial codes (Wichmann, 1991: 89-110). Facial makeup (*lianpu*) operates as a moral lexicon: crimson signifies loyalty (e.g., Guan Yu), black denotes integrity,

while white encodes treachery (e.g., Cao Cao). Costumes, such as the *mang* (dragon robe) for nobility or *kao* (armour) for generals, and accessories like *shuixiu* (water sleeves) amplify emotional expression through stylized movement (Bonds, 2008: 78-95). These conventions enable performers to transcend individuality, embodying universalized archetypes instantly legible to audiences

The non-realistic notation inherent to *jingju* necessitates audiences decode its symbolic lexicon. The proverb 'the actor carries the scene on their body' epitomizes how kinetic virtuosity, such as a performer circling the stage may traverse miles, and a raised leg suggests crossing a threshold, replaces literal staging (Huang 1962). Narratives, often drawn from popular tales and folklore like *The Legend of the White Snake*, are condensed into emblematic tableaux, requiring spectators to interpolate gaps through cultural familiarity (Zhang et al. 1989: 480). Audiences reciprocate by applauding technical mastery, such as a soaring vocal cadenza (*chang*) or a flawless aerial somersault, affirming a shared performative contract rooted in tradition. This interplay of abstraction and convention positions *jingju* as a living archive of Chinese aesthetic philosophy.

Yawen Ludden's (2013) conceptual framework of 'new conventionalization' offers a nuanced lens through which to examine *yangbanxi*'s complex relationship with traditional *xiqu*. This theoretical construct elucidates a dialectical process of cultural transformation, wherein *yangbanxi* simultaneously preserves and revolutionizes the conventions of *jingju* through dual mechanisms of compression and decompression. The compression mechanism involves a strategic distillation of *jingju*'s symbolic system, which for centuries had articulated moral and social hierarchies through highly codified performative elements. In traditional *jingju*, role types are defined by a highly codified system rooted in ethics, emphasizing

hierarchical relationships, moral didacticism, and the clear distinction between good and evil. *Yangbanxi*, while radically reorienting these conventions to serve Maoist ideology, retained this formalized approach to character construction. The fundamental shift lay in the criteria of moral judgment: rather than virtue being derived from Confucian ethics, it was now determined by one's revolutionary stance.

Meanwhile, *yangbanxi* 'decompresses' these conventions by transposing them into modern contexts, replacing tales of emperors and scholars with narratives of class struggle and socialist triumph. For instance, the intricate colour symbolism of traditional *lianpu* (where multiple hues might indicate complex personality traits) is simplified in *yangbanxi* to stark contrasts of red (representing revolutionary heroism) versus white (denouncing counter-revolutionary villainy). This de/compression process reflects the 'didactic imperative' of revolutionary art within authoritarian contexts. (Shimoniak, 1970), where ambiguity is sacrificed for ideological clarity. The formal structures and performative codes of traditional *jingju* are stripped of their original content, or so-called feudal associations, and re-imbued with socialist signification.

This dual process of compression and decompression reveals *yangbanxi*'s fundamental paradox: while it ostensibly breaks with feudal tradition, it nevertheless relies on traditional *xiqu*'s fundamental grammar of representation. As Mittler argues in *A Continuous Revolution* (2012), the very effectiveness of *yangbanxi* as propaganda derived from its ability to couch revolutionary content in familiar performative forms, situating the genre within a broader cultural continuity stretching from the late nineteenth century to the present rather than representing a decisive break from it (50-87). The implications of this 'new conventionalization' extend beyond mere artistic technique. It represents a conscious cultural strategy to negotiate China's transition

from traditional society to revolutionary modernity. This paradoxical quality helps explain *yangbanxi*'s enduring legacy in contemporary China, where it continues to serve as both a repository of cultural memory and a template for state-sponsored artistic production.

Regarding the 'new wine', *san tuchu* (three prominences) principle, as proposed by Yu Huiyong in the article 'Let the literature and art forever be the battlefield for promoting Mao Zedong thoughts', articulates a hierarchical framework for character portrayal. Yu stipulates that 'among all characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among the positive characters, give prominence to the main heroic characters; among the main characters, give prominence to the most important character, namely, the central character' (1968). This structure, as Sun Mei (2006) argues, did not emerge in an aesthetic vacuum but rather appropriated and reengineered Li Yu's (1670) classical *xiqu* theory of *li zhunao* (establishing the central spine). Li Yu's principle demanded that plays revolve around a central theme or protagonist, with all narrative elements subordinated to this core—a structural imperative aimed at ensuring moral and dramatic coherence in late imperial theatre. *Yangbanxi* transposed *li zhunao* from a dramaturgical technique to an ideological apparatus. Where Li Yu's framework allowed for nuanced interplay between main and subsidiary plots (e.g., the romantic subplots in *The Peony Pavilion*), *san tuchu* eradicated such complexity, reducing narratives to stark binaries of proletarian virtue and bourgeois/capitalist villainy.

The principle of '*gao da quan*' (lofty, great, perfect) characterization further codified this simplification by mandating that heroes embody unblemished perfection: physically imposing, morally infallible, and ideologically unwavering. Rooted in works centred on Mao Zedong, '*gao da quan*' demands that protagonists be flawless

exemplars, embodying perfection rather than humanity. Its name was literalized in the film *Jinguang dadao* [Golden Road], whose protagonist, Gao Daquan, carries the formula as a deliberate homophone in his own name (Chen, 2020). The *gao da quan* characterization stripped individuals of personal emotions, psychological complexity, and moral ambiguity, reducing them to class-based archetypes, and thus has been criticized by scholars such as Liu Ning (2003) for reducing narratives to agitprop tableaux. The creation of the *gao da quan* hero was not merely a byproduct of political didacticism but also an aesthetic strategy that aimed to cultivate a standardized revolutionary subjectivity. Such essentialization aligned with the ideological imperatives of the Cultural Revolution, reinforcing a binary worldview in which revolutionary virtue was absolute and class struggle was the defining moral compass.

The development of *yangbanxi* under the Maoist directive to 'make foreign things serve China' (*yang wei zhong yong*) (1964) precipitated a radical reconfiguration of traditional Chinese theatrical aesthetics through selective appropriation of Western artistic forms. This intercultural synthesis manifested most conspicuously in stage design, where *yangbanxi* creators systematically incorporated elements of Ibsenian dramatic realism (Liu, 2003), Western realist painting (Yi, 1998), and Hollywood cinematic spectacle (Chan, 2018). The resultant visual vocabulary represented a fundamental departure from *jingju*'s conventional *xieyi* aesthetic.

Traditional *jingju* privileged symbolic abstraction through minimalist staging, typically employing two-dimensional '*yizhuo eryi*' (one table and two chairs) arranged in varying configurations to suggest different settings (see Figure 1). The *yangbanxi* stages, by contrast, embraced a realist visual regime characterized by grandiose backdrops, intricate three-dimensional sets, and elaborate props (see Figure 2). This transformation reflected the deployment of opulent scenography to

materialize socialist modernity while simultaneously overwhelming spectators with sensory stimuli. For instance, *The Red Detachment of Women* featured detailed tropical landscapes, where the real story is set, and military encampments that would be unimaginable in traditional *jingju*, where a table stands for a mountain. This shift from suggestive minimalism to concrete representation paralleled the ideological imperative to make revolutionary narratives immediately legible to mass audiences.



Figure 1. Stage photo of a traditional jingju piece Muke Fortress. China National Peking Opera Company, 2016.



Figure 2. Stage photo of a yangbanxi reproduction, Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy. 2018, screenshot by author.

The linguistic transformation from traditional *jingju* to *yangbanxi* reflects the Chinese Communist Party's broader nation-building agenda, which aimed to unify China's linguistically diverse population under a common communicative framework. Yi Pingce's (1998) comparative analysis of *yangbanxi* and traditional *jingju* identifies fundamental differences in narrative structure, linguistic accessibility, and audience engagement, highlighting yangbanxi's modernist reconfiguration of traditional *xiqu*. Yi contends that *yangbanxi*'s storytelling mechanisms, particularly its *nian-bai* (spoken dialogue), represent a conscious departure from *jingju*'s established conventions. While traditional *jingju* relied heavily on classical Chinese and regional dialects, *yangbanxi* embraced standardized Mandarin (*Putonghua*), thereby enhancing both contemporary relevance and mass comprehensibility (1998: 117). In the early years of the PRC, the State Council's 1956 directive establishing Putonghua as the national standard had laid the institutional groundwork for linguistic unification, yet it was during the Cultural Revolution that this policy found its most aggressive implementation. Regional linguistic diversity became increasingly viewed as a barrier

to revolutionary consciousness and national unity (Chen, 1999: 191). *Yangbanxi* thus served as both artistic expression and political instrument, demonstrating how cultural forms could be mobilized to advance the state's linguistic standardization agenda.

Yangbanxi also incorporates colloquialisms and folk melodies, where proletarian protagonists use everyday vernacular to articulate class consciousness in a more accessible and widely transmittable form. Such innovations contrast with *jingju*'s poetic abstraction and literati tone, which often privileges aesthetic formalism over immediate relatability. Yi's analysis positions *yangbanxi* as a dialectical synthesis of elite tradition and populist modernity, designed to render revolutionary ideology both legible and visceral to 20th-century audiences. *Yangbanxi* stories focus on class struggle, national resistance, and socialist construction, deliberately abandoning the complex ethical conflicts, romantic tensions, and fate-driven plots characteristic of traditional *xiqu*. The narrative structure tends toward linearity, with event arrangements designed to prioritize educational impact, reinforce central themes, reduce conflict, and eliminate ambiguity to ensure the clear transmission of ideological messages.

This transformation in language and narrative represents a crucial aspect of the political function of *yangbanxi*. By rewriting spoken lines and arias in Standard Mandarin and replacing lyrical imagery with revolutionary slogans, *yangbanxi* works disrupt the aristocratic aesthetics of traditional *xiqu* and reposition the genre within the framework of state discourse. No longer merely a form of entertainment, they become powerful instruments of ideological indoctrination and mass mobilization. Through the integration of revolutionary and popular elements, *yangbanxi* works achieve a theatrical implantation of revolutionary discourse at the linguistic level, thereby establishing their status as state-endorsed artistic forms.

From a musicological perspective, Wei-Chung Yang and Chien-Gun Tsai (2011) argue that *yangbanxi*'s integration of Western symphonic orchestration represents a paradoxical yet significant artistic achievement. While critiquing the genre's 'thematic monstrosity', a reference to its rigid ideological frameworks and didactic narratives, they highlight how composers like Yu Huiyong innovatively blended traditional *xiqu* percussion (e.g., *ban* clappers and *luo* gongs) with Western harmonic structures and instrumentation (e.g., violins, brass), and this experimental audacity laid groundwork for later reforms. For instance, *The White-haired Girl* juxtaposes the pentatonic melodies of Shaanxi folk music with Wagnerian leitmotifs, creating a hybrid soundscape that amplifies emotional resonance while adhering to socialist realist aesthetics. This syncretic approach not only modernized *xiqu*'s acoustic palette but also facilitated its global circulation, as seen in the 1972 revolutionary ballet's reception during Nixon's China visit. However, Yang and Tsai (2011) caution that such innovations risked diluting *xiqu*'s distinct auditory identity, reducing its improvisational spontaneity to formulaic orchestration. By standardizing language and Westernizing music, the genre sought to reconcile Maoist revolutionary imperatives with the demands of cultural modernization, a tension that persists in contemporary debates over *xiqu*'s preservation and innovation.

Paradoxically, despite its claims of championing radical transformation, being committed to dismantling tradition and overthrowing the backward, *yangbanxi* during the Cultural Revolution was profoundly conservative in both aesthetic logic and ideological function. It in fact operated as instruments of political control that foreclosed critical engagement with Maoist ideology. Walter Benjamin's (1935) concept of the 'aestheticization of politics' provides a framework for understanding this conservative function. Benjamin warned that when politics becomes

aestheticized—when aesthetic beauty and emotional spectacle replace rational political analysis—the result is the naturalization of power relations and the suppression of critical thinking. *Yangbanxi* exemplifies this dangerous process: by channelling the aesthetic authority of traditional Chinese performance forms like *jingju* into ideological spectacle, these works transformed political doctrine into apparently timeless artistic truth.

This aestheticization process reveals the conservative core of *yangbanxi*'s cultural function. Rather than encouraging audiences to think critically about revolutionary politics, these performances used aesthetic sophistication, such as stylized movement, codified vocal techniques, and ritualized staging, to make Maoist ideology emotionally compelling and seemingly natural. This deployment of aesthetics serves a profoundly conservative function in Benjamin's terms: it preserves existing power structures by making them appear natural and beyond critique. Roland Barthes' (1972) theory of myth as a secondary semiotic system further illuminates this process, showing how *yangbanxi* transformed complex political realities into archetypal conflicts between heroic proletarians and villainous class enemies. The aesthetic sophistication of these performances, from technical mastery to emotional power, functioned as what Barthes would recognize as mythological naturalization, rendering Maoist ideology as both inevitable and morally absolute. The result was a form of cultural production that appeared revolutionary while actually serving the most conservative political function: the elimination of critical discourse through aesthetic seduction.

The conservative nature of *yangbanxi* thus emerges not from its preservation of traditional forms, but from its use of aesthetic beauty to foreclose political questioning. By transforming ideology into aesthetic experience, these performances

created what Benjamin feared most: a political culture where emotional response replaced rational analysis, where aesthetic pleasure became indistinguishable from ideological compliance. This represents the deepest form of conservatism, not the preservation of old content, but the preservation of authoritarian power relations through the suppression of critical consciousness.

This conservative function of *yangbanxi* extended beyond formal aesthetics to encompass profound philosophical continuities with traditional Chinese thought systems. Liu Yan (1996b) demonstrates that *yangbanxi*'s vision of revolutionary idealism and collective salvation draws directly from the Confucian-Mencian utopia of *da-tong* (The Great Unity), where moral and material equilibrium produces a harmonious society 'shared by all' (*tianxia weigong*). Rather than representing a radical break with China's philosophical past, *yangbanxi* repurposed this concept, which is historically central to imperial governance and literati ethics, by secularizing it into socialist futurism that legitimized class struggle as a moral path toward universal harmony. *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (1970) exemplifies this continuity: the protagonist Li Yuhe's martyrdom transcends personal sacrifice to symbolize the proletariat's historical mission to realize a *da-tong*-inspired socialist utopia. This transformation reveals how Marxist teleology functioned not as a rupture from China's past but as its spiritualized continuation, where revolutionary politics became an extension of Confucian ethical imperatives rather than their negation.

Yangbanxi's preference for harmonious resolution over ongoing struggle reveals its fundamental alignment with traditional Chinese philosophical frameworks. Liu Ning (2003) contends that *yangbanxi* represents a return to the long-established Confucian ideal of equilibrium and harmony. Liu argues that 'the expansion of ideality, the imposition of rationality and the exaggeration of class nature led to the

simplification of conflicts, the typification of characters, and the stereotypification of structures, alluding to traditional Chinese mentality, which favours harmony' (26). While such dramatic simplification ostensibly serves socialist-realist aesthetic demands, Liu Ning demonstrates that it reflects a deeper cultural epistemology that privileges *he* (balance) over dialectical tension, resonating with the Confucian *zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean). This philosophical conservatism explains why *yangbanxi* consistently resolves complex social contradictions through moral clarity rather than maintaining the dialectical complexity that genuine Marxist analysis would require, which prioritizes social stability over revolutionary transformation.

The conservative nature of *yangbanxi* becomes even more apparent when examined through Emile Durkheim's (1972) theory of ritual, which illuminates how these performances operated less as instruments of radical rupture than as secularized religious ceremonies. Durkheim's concept of 'collective effervescence', the mystical energy generated when communities participate in synchronized symbolic acts, provides a precise framework for understanding *yangbanxi*'s ideological function. Just as Red Guard rallies and public recitations of Mao's quotations created communal transcendence through ritualized participation, *yangbanxi* performances produced what Durkheim would recognize as sacred experience through emotionally charged aesthetic forms. The theatrical space became a temple where revolutionary doctrine was transformed into religious truth through collective participation in aesthetic ritual.

This ritualization process reveals the most conservative aspect of *yangbanxi*: its transformation of political ideology into sacred belief that transcends rational critique. Mao, though never physically portrayed onstage, maintains omnipresent symbolic authority through carefully orchestrated surrogates: his quotations function as talismanic keys to victory, the ubiquitous tune *Dong Fang Hong* (The East is Red)

serves as a revolutionary hymn, and the red sun motif orients the entire ideological universe around his absent but absolute presence. Through these symbolic mechanisms, audiences were inducted into what Durkheim would recognize as a sacred community of belief, where revolutionary truth was not reasoned but felt, not analysed but experienced through performative immersion in mystical atmosphere and affective resonance. This ritualized approach to political ideology represents the deepest form of conservatism: the preservation of authoritarian power through the transformation of political doctrine into religious experience that cannot be questioned without committing sacrilege.

This process of affective saturation fundamentally transformed *yangbanxi* from a potential site of political interrogation into a ritualistic mechanism for confirming Party legitimacy. By channelling emotional intensity toward predetermined conclusions, these performances ensured that aesthetic experience reinforced rather than questioned political orthodoxy. The genre's apparent radicalism thus concealed a profoundly conservative operation: instead of dismantling traditions, *yangbanxi* systematically transposed ritual structures and Confucian moral frameworks into the service of Maoist ideology. This cultural recycling aligns with Tu Wei-ming's (1985) observation that revolutionary movements in China often replicate the very epistemological patterns they claim to reject, revealing how the supposed rejection of 'feudal' pasts frequently reproduces inherited cultural logics under new ideological guises.

Yangbanxi's fundamentally liminal character, existing neither as fully traditional nor genuinely modern cultural production, was essential to this conservative function. As a mediating form that reconciled inherited epistemologies with revolutionary demands, the genre harnessed the emotional authority of traditional

performance to legitimate new political arrangements while maintaining recognizable cultural forms. This very liminality that enabled ideological control also created interpretive openings that would prove generative for future remakes. The genre's hybrid position—suspended between tradition and modernity, revolution and conservatism—embedded multiple layers of meaning within its formal structure, creating what would later become fertile ground for diverse reinterpretations. Contemporary artists would discover that *yangbanxi*'s fundamental contradictions, rather than weakening its cultural relevance, provided rich material for complex artistic negotiations with China's revolutionary past.

This liminality enabled a sophisticated cultural conservatism that preserved authoritarian power relations through the appearance of revolutionary transformation, systematically substituting critical political engagement with mythic emotional conformity under the spectacular aesthetics of progress. The result was a 'conservative revolution': a cultural form that appeared to break with the past while reinforcing the most authoritarian aspects of traditional Chinese political culture. By transforming political doctrine into aesthetic experience, *yangbanxi* demonstrated how aesthetic sophistication can serve as a vehicle for ideological control, making political submission appear as cultural participation and rendering critique impossible without rejecting the foundation of shared aesthetic experience.

Yet this very complexity of the genre's ability to simultaneously embody revolutionary aspirations and conservative structures would eventually provide the multilayered foundation upon which later remakes could build alternative interpretations, revealing meanings that neither wholly endorsed nor entirely rejected the revolutionary project. The genre's enduring significance lies not in its revolutionary content, but in its revelation of an insidious form of political

conservatism: the preservation of hierarchical power structures through the neutralization of critical consciousness, and in its inadvertent creation of interpretive spaces that would allow future generations to excavate suppressed contradictions and imagine different possibilities for engaging with China's revolutionary legacy

Yangbanxi's aesthetic lineage exemplifies the fundamental paradox of revolutionary cultural production, raising a question: does it represent 'new wine in old bottles' or 'old wine in new bottles'? This distinction proves crucial for understanding the genre's complex relationship to tradition and modernity. On the surface, *yangbanxi* appears to fulfil Mao's vision of 'new wine in old bottles': revolutionary content packaged within familiar performance conventions. The synthesis of Confucian moral philosophy, codified *jingju* techniques, and Western theatrical elements suggests strategic reappropriation of inherited forms to serve new political imperatives.

However, closer examination reveals a more troubling inversion: the genre's supposedly revolutionary content consistently reinforces traditional Chinese cultural patterns of moral absolutism, hierarchical authority, and ritualized conformity. The evidence for this conservative function is manifest across multiple dimensions of *yangbanxi*'s structure. Narratively, the works reproduce classical Chinese dramatic archetypes of virtuous heroes confronting corrupt villains, maintaining the traditional binary moral framework that leaves no space for ethical complexity or individual agency. Performatively, the emphasis on synchronized collective movement and prescribed emotional responses replicates Confucian ideals of social harmony achieved through ritualized compliance rather than democratic participation.

In this sense, I argue that *yangbanxi* functions more accurately as 'old wine in new bottles'—traditional Chinese authoritarian culture disguised through modernized

aesthetic forms. The formal innovations of *yangbanxi* constitute the most genuinely 'new' elements, representing significant departure from classical Chinese theatrical conventions through their integration of Western orchestral music, balletic choreography, and cinematic staging techniques. However, these formal modernizations serve primarily as vehicles for ideological content that remains fundamentally conservative in its epistemological foundations.

The genre's moral universe, with its clear distinctions between heroic protagonists and villainous antagonists, its emphasis on collective harmony over individual complexity, and its privileging of emotional conformity over critical engagement, replicates the very 'feudal' thought patterns that revolutionary ideology claimed to overcome. This conservative essence is further evidenced in the works' treatment of authority: protagonists invariably demonstrate their virtue through absolute loyalty to higher powers, whether represented by the Party, the people, or revolutionary ideals, reproducing traditional Chinese patterns of hierarchical deference under supposedly egalitarian rhetoric.

This paradox illuminates the deeper constraints of cultural transformation under Maoist governance. Rather than achieving a genuine revolutionary rupture, *yangbanxi* demonstrates how aesthetic innovation can serve conservative ideological functions, preserving hierarchical power structures through the appearance of radical transformation. The genre's hybridity of ritual form, moral absolutism, and sensory spectacle reveals not a successful cultural revolution but the persistence of traditional epistemological frameworks within modernized cultural production.

This fundamental contradiction between innovative form and conservative content explains both *yangbanxi*'s initial success and its subsequent repudiation in the post-Mao era. During the Cultural Revolution, the genre's formal sophistication and

emotional intensity masked its ideological conservatism, allowing audiences to experience the satisfaction of aesthetic innovation while remaining within familiar moral and political frameworks. However, as China's political landscape evolved and critical discourse became more permissible, audiences and critics increasingly recognized the genre's failure to deliver genuine cultural transformation, leading to widespread rejection of *yangbanxi* as both aesthetically stagnant and politically regressive.

Yet this apparent failure contains the seeds of its contemporary relevance. The genre's unresolved contradictions and liminal position between tradition and modernity created interpretive spaces that contemporary artists have discovered and exploited. Rather than representing a closed ideological system, *yangbanxi*'s hybrid nature offers multiple entry points for artistic intervention and reinterpretation, transforming what was once a mechanism of political control into a site of cultural negotiation and creative possibility.

Yangbanxi in post-Mao China

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in October 1976, marked by Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, *yangbanxi*, which had flourished as the flagship of Cultural Revolution theatre, was swiftly removed from stages and airwaves. Theatre practitioners and scholars, such as Wang Yuanhua (1988), Feng Yingzi (1986), and Ba Jin (1984), denounced *yangbanxi* as the epitome of ideological overreach, associating their formulaic narratives with the suppression of traditional aesthetics and artistic autonomy. By early 1977, local troupes had ceased performing *yangbanxi*, resulting in an effective hiatus of nearly a decade during which these works largely vanished from official repertoires. As Tarryn Li-Min Chun (2024) examines, theatre critics at that time pointed to *yangbanxi*'s emphasis on class struggle and personality

cults, displayed most notably in Jiang Qing's radical revisions of *jingju* as symptomatic of the broader politicization of art, calling instead for a revival of professional standards and thematic plurality (171-74). The withdrawal of *yangbanxi* from the theatre industry not only devalued this once-omnipresent genre but also catalyzed a critical reassessment of performance as a vehicle of collective memory, paving the way for its later rehabilitation under Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy, which reframed *yangbanxi* as cultural heritage rather than propaganda.

Despite being rejected by theatre practitioners and critics, the CCP initiated subtle efforts to decouple *yangbanxi* from its overtly politicized associations. This was because *yangbanxi* was not only an art form deeply imprinted with the ideological markers of the Cultural Revolution, but also a direct outcome of the *Xiqu* Reform, which, as Xing Fan (2018) notes, constituted one of the Party's first major cultural campaigns aimed at constructing a so-called 'new democratic culture' (28). Preserving the achievements of the *Xiqu* Reform thus carried significant cultural weight, and detaching *yangbanxi* from its revolutionary symbolism became a strategic move to salvage its artistic and institutional value while shielding the Party from broader historical accountability.

Central to this recalibration of *yangbanxi*'s political intentions was a calculated attempt to sever the association between *yangbanxi* and Jiang Qing. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang was vilified in *People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper, for 'stealing the fruit of the *Xiqu* Reform from the people' and 'exploiting the art form for personal political motives' (1977). This scapegoating of a single figure allowed the Party to offload historical blame onto Jiang while quietly rebranding *yangbanxi*. Far from a mere symbolic gesture, this top-down dissociation was a

necessary condition for rehabilitating *yangbanxi* as a cultural asset and soft-power tool, stripped of its propagandist excess yet conveniently purged of institutional culpability.

The revival of *yangbanxi* began after the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s. This resurgence was not a full-scale rehabilitation of Maoist cultural productions, nor was it merely an act of nostalgic remembrance. Rather, it marked a carefully managed reappropriation of revolutionary cultural symbols, aimed at reconciling the ideological legacy of the Cultural Revolution with the emerging values of the reform era. A pivotal moment occurred in 1986, when two selected *yangbanxi* librettos from *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, 'Children of the Poor Grow Up to Lead Early' and 'They All Have a Loyal Heart' (China Media Group, 1986), were reintroduced during *Chunwan* (China Central Television Spring Festival Gala), the state-curated television program and a major cultural event that commands an annual viewership of over one billion. A review of *Chunwan* programme records from 1986 to 2025 confirms that since this reintroduction, *yangbanxi* has made regular appearances in the Gala (China Media Group), signalling its reintegration into mainstream cultural discourse.

First launched in 1983, *Chunwan* stands as one of China's most influential television programs, garnering considerable recognition among both domestic and overseas Chinese communities. Geng Wenting (2003) argues that the Gala has permeated nearly all sectors of society, elevating it to the status of a national focal point and public event during the Chinese New Year (45-60). Criticism and debate surrounding *Chunwan* have not diminished its influence; on the contrary, they have contributed to its status as a site of cultural negotiation. Through its vast reach and commercial sophistication, *Chunwan* became a medium through which state narratives, modernity, unity, progress, and even 'sanitized' memories of socialism, were

recalibrated and disseminated in forms palatable to mass audiences (78-95). In this context, the return of *yangbanxi* to the national stage becomes emblematic not only of cultural recuperation but also of ideological reformatting.

The emergence of *Chunwan* in the early 1980s coincided with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of China's economic and ideological transformation. The gala was conceived not only as a space for public celebration, but also a platform to forge a new post-Mao identity, aligned with the reform-era vision of happiness, prosperity, and depoliticised entertainment. According to Wang Jingyu, host of the inaugural gala in 1982, the well-known comedian Ma Ji remarked at the 1983 event: 'Let us not talk about politicised terms during *Chunwan*. If the audience laughs heartily and enjoys the festival, *Chunwan* will be successful' (Wang 1999: 35).

This shift away from overtly political performance styles represented a break from Cultural Revolution aesthetics, where art was synonymous with ideology and joy and laughter were permissible only when tied to revolutionary purpose. Paradoxically, this new ethos of 'depoliticized' entertainment itself carried strong political implications. It signalled the legitimation of the 'Reform and Opening-up' agenda and marked the beginning of a state-sanctioned turn towards individualism, consumerism, and emotional expression.

Yet the ideological terrain of the 1980s remained far from settled. While economic liberalization was underway at the policy level, the cultural and political field still bore the deep imprint of socialist values. The reappearance of *yangbanxi* on *Chunwan* in a softened, repackaged, and aesthetically refined form offered a symbolic resolution to this tension. It allowed the state to reintegrate revolutionary culture into contemporary society without reactivating its radical politics. These performances served as palimpsests, retaining the discipline, aesthetic rigour, and heroic narratives

of *yangbanxi* while stripping them of their class-struggle imperative. Their presence on *Chunwan* thus functioned as a cultural compromise: a way to domesticate the memory of revolution, fold it into the story of national development, and present it as continuity rather than rupture. In this sense, the revival of *yangbanxi* on *Chunwan* reflects the state's broader strategy of symbolic reconciliation, allowing elements of Maoist performance to survive, albeit in a depoliticized form, within the shifting cultural and ideological landscape of post-Mao China.

The *Chunwan* performance of *The Legend of the Red Lantern* in 1986 provide compelling evidence of this palimpsestic quality, demonstrating how cultural artifacts laden with revolutionary significance could be systematically depoliticized and recontextualized as popular entertainment and cultural heritage. The musical transformation reveals the most immediate and striking aspect of this recontextualization process. Li Weikang's rendition of 'They All Have a Red Bright Heart' exemplifies this radical stylistic departure from the original revolutionary aesthetic. Where the original *yangbanxi* employed traditional percussion instruments and maintained the solemn, martial atmosphere befitting its narrative of underground Communist resistance, the 1986 performance incorporated bass drums, trumpets, bass guitars, and violins to create a pop rock music style. This instrumental transformation was further enhanced by the integration of cheerful *suona*[3] sounds, which introduced distinctly folk music elements that shifted the performance's emotional register from revolutionary gravitas to festive celebration. The musical recontextualization effectively neutralized the song's original function as a coded reference to Communist

[3] *Suona* is a conventional Chinese wind instrument featuring a double-reed construction.

Party networks during the anti-Japanese resistance, transforming it into a generalized expression of familial and patriotic sentiment.

The visual aesthetics of the 1986 performances provided equally compelling evidence of systematic depoliticization. Li Weikang's appearance marked a dramatic departure from the austere worker-peasant-soldier aesthetic that had defined Cultural Revolution performance standards. Adorned with gem necklaces and earrings, dressed in a printed sweater dress and high heels, and sporting fashionably permed hair, she presented the new consumer culture and aesthetic values of the reform era. This sartorial transformation carried profound symbolic weight, representing the evolution from revolutionary warrior to modern woman, from proletarian simplicity to bourgeois sophistication. Similarly, Liu Bin's styling for his performance of 'Poor Children Take Charge Early' demonstrated this balance between continuity and change, retaining military uniform elements while incorporating contemporary fashion touches such as permed hair. These visual choices signalled a fundamental shift in the cultural meaning of these performances, repositioning them within the emerging discourse of modernization and opening up rather than revolutionary struggle.

In China's postmillennial cultural landscape, especially the Olympic-era push for cultural diplomacy, *yangbanxi*, rebranded in a less political term, '*xiandai jingju*' (modern *jingju*), continues to function as a curated ideological apparatus. The origins of '*xiandai jingju*' date to the Ministry of Culture's 1958 national conference on *jingju* reform but its post-1976 revival shed the '*geming*' (revolutionary) and '*yangban*' (model) prefix of its Cultural Revolution iteration (Liu 12-35). For example, the China National Jingju Company's February 2001 staging of *The Legend of the Red Lantern* in Taiwan was billed as *xiandai jingju* instead of *yangbanxi*. This period coincided

with the emergence of a global discourse on the imagination of 'China as a great nation', shaped by accelerated globalization, rapid economic expansion, and the nation's ambitious efforts to reposition itself as a modern, technologically advanced global power. Within this narrative of a 'rising China', the revival and recontextualization of *yangbanxi* served a dual state agenda: cultural heritage preservation and soft power projection. Revolutionary aesthetics were carefully retained, while overt class struggle narratives and Maoist ideological markers were stripped away. The government's endorsement of *yangbanxi*, as Zhang Qingyan (2021) quotes, as 'politically correct and artistically accomplished', reflects this sophisticated repackaging, which positions *yangbanxi* as a culturally valuable yet ideologically neutralized legacy.

The institutionalisation of this strategy was epitomized by the Ministry of Education (MOE)'s 2008 mandate integrating *jingju* into the national compulsory curriculum, in which nine of the fifteen selected librettos were drawn directly from *yangbanxi* works (MOE, 2008). Framed as a project of 'national cultural rejuvenation' (*wen hua fu xing*), this initiative coincided with China's image-building campaigns leading up to and following the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The expansion of the curriculum from ten pilot cities to more than one hundred reflects the state's broader ideological investment: to leverage red classics as instruments for reinforcing national cohesion and moral discipline amid growing consumerism and individualism.

The educational institutionalization of *yangbanxi* operates as a potent mechanism of political socialization. As conceptualized by David Easton and Jack Dennis (1969), political socialization is a lifelong process through which individuals internalize the political knowledge, values, and behaviours required to function within and uphold a political system. Central to their framework is the role of formal

institutions, particularly schools, in transmitting norms of authority and legitimacy that shape the foundational relationship between citizen and state. This process is not limited to the dissemination of information but also entails the cultivation of specific civic dispositions. A key outcome is the promotion of a 'duty-based' citizenship (239) wherein individual aspirations are subordinated to collective ideals and loyalty to the nation becomes integral to one's identity.

Within this framework, the CCP's incorporation of *yangbanxi* into educational curricula transforms these works into tools of ideological formation. By embedding narratives of class struggle, heroic sacrifice, and proletarian unity into textbooks and classroom performances, the CCP leverages *yangbanxi* to dramatize its foundational myths. The ritualized repetition of signature arias and the close textual study of revolutionary characters exemplify what Easton and Dennis describe as the process by which 'operative social norms regarding politics are implanted, political roles institutionalized, and political consensus created' (27). Here, revolutionary art becomes not only an aesthetic experience but also a daily pedagogical practice that imprints Party-sanctioned historical memory onto the collective consciousness of the young. Through this synthesis of cultural form and educational function, *yangbanxi* is recast as a foundational device for constructing political subjectivities and legitimizing the CCP's enduring authority.

The resurgence of *yangbanxi* also forms part of the state's early-2000s campaign to mobilize 'red culture' and revive 'red classics' to buttress socialist values and shore up national identity against an influx of foreign media. The 'red classics', a term that became established in Chinese cultural discourse in the 1990s (Roberts and Li ix), is a corpus of cultural productions from the Maoist era spanning literature, theatre, film, and music originally designed to propagate revolutionary ideology and

socialist values, which have been strategically rehabilitated and strategically repackaged for the modern media landscape (Roberts and Li 1-20; Li and Zhang 1-22). As Roberts documents, the first decade of the new millennium was marked by a systematic wave of TV drama remakes of *yangbanxi* works to consolidate Party legitimacy under the conditions of reform-era class realignment (2015: 25).

In 2014, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) instituted a licensing regime that required all imported films and television series to secure official approval before broadcast. This regulation constrained the penetration of external cultural influences while prioritizing domestic narratives that conformed to Party ideology. Within this regulatory framework, *yangbanxi* remakes gained a privileged status as carriers of Party orthodoxy.

Television productions such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (2005), *Shajiabang* (2006), and *Azalea Mountain* (2009) exemplify how *yangbanxi* narratives have been reimagined to align with a post-Mao cultural logic. In these adaptations, the heroic exploits and collective ethos of the Cultural Revolution are reframed through high-definition cinematography, such as sweeping crane shots, dynamic camera movements, and meticulously graded colour palettes, to evoke both historical authenticity and contemporary visual sophistication.

Their narrative structures shift from the static, didactic scenes of the stage model to multi-episodic, character-driven arcs punctuated by cliffhangers and cross-cut editing to sustain viewer engagement across commercial breaks. Overlaying these formal innovations are modern soundscapes, including orchestral scores, ambient design, and intensified dialogue mixing, that mirror early-2000s prime-time pacing. This fusion of regulatory endorsement, aesthetic convention, and attention-economy logic exemplifies how revolutionary history has been actively recontextualized to

align with market-driven modernity and to reaffirm state-sanctioned values for contemporary audiences.

To take the 2006 televised adaptation of *Shajiabang* as an example, its narrative undergoes a profound reorientation through the reconception of its central figures. The 1971 *yangbanxi* foregrounded Guo Jianguang, a New Fourth Army political instructor emblematic of the unwavering revolutionary soldier, who is steadfast, transparent in motive, and ideologically immaculate. By contrast, the 2006 television series recasts the male lead as Diao Deyi, portrayed by Chen Daoming, a celebrity actor known for his sophisticated and often morally ambiguous characters. Diao Deyi is a Kuomintang secret agent and the son of a local landlord. Educated in Japan and driven by personal ambition, he embodies cunning and opportunism, committed to dismantling the Communist underground and subsuming local militias into Nationalist ranks. This inversion from hero to intricate antagonist injects psychological depth and moral complexity, aligning the story with contemporary narrative norms that valorize character-driven tension over archetypal didacticism.

Equally transformative is the reimagining of Diao Deyi's rapport with A-Qing Sao, portrayed by Xu Qing, another established star. In the original *yangbanxi*, their roles were pro-Communist and anti-Communist, respectively, each serving as a cipher for ideological purity or perfidy. The 2006 adaptation, however, complicates this dynamic by introducing emotional undercurrents between the two characters. Their exchanges are suffused with mutual respect, latent attraction, and conflicted loyalties. Chen Daoming's portrayal captures Diao Deyi's internal struggle, torn between his covert mission and an emergent empathy for his adversary, while Xu Qing tempers A-Qing Sao's revolutionary ardour with moments of compassion and vulnerability. This emotional ambivalence not only resonates with viewers accustomed to relational

intricacy but also exemplifies the mediatization of revolutionary iconography, wherein historical narratives are refashioned to meet the demand for empathic, psychologically nuanced storytelling. In this way, the series upholds the symbolic authority of the revolutionary canon while repurposing its affective power to secure ideological continuity amid China's rapid social and economic metamorphosis.

The mediated afterlives of *yangbanxi* function as active agents in the construction and negotiation of China's cultural memory, the process by which revolutionary artifacts are continuously recontextualized to serve evolving political and commercial imperatives. By reanimating iconic scenes, melodies, and archetypal figures, these productions create mnemonic anchors that link personal reminiscences with official narratives and bridge the experiential gap between past and present. For older viewers, these cues, including the familiar melodies and slogans, the stylized gestures of revolutionary heroism, the visual iconography of red flags and raised fists, resonate with lived or inherited memories of the Maoist period, triggering what Maurice Halbwachs termed 'collective memory' (1992) through embodied recognition. For younger audiences, these same elements offer mediated access to an imagined and politicized past, embedding revolutionary tropes within the visual grammar and emotional pacing of contemporary media. Both experiences are authentic; both serve the state's memory project, yet they produce fundamentally different relationships to revolutionary history. In this way, the adaptations do more than recall history; they reframe revolutionary memory within the affective economy of serialized television and digital platforms, actively participating in how the legacies of Maoist culture are remembered, contested, and transmitted across generations.

At the same time, these re/adaptations negotiate with globalized cultural markets. Revolutionary content is strategically repackaged through high-production

aesthetics, star-driven casting, and emotionally charged storytelling, aligning with the tastes of consumer-oriented viewership. This process introduces a paradox: while aiming to expand the appeal of *yangbanxi*, these stylistic choices often soften its original ideological edge and replacing class struggle with personal sacrifice or emphasizing romantic entanglements over collectivist solidarity.

Such concessions reflect a broader tension within Chinese cultural policy: the imperative to preserve Leninist orthodoxy coexists uneasily with the demands of a pluralistic and competitive global media environment. Although state censorship enforces ideological red lines, such as the CCP's historical triumph must be affirmed, revolutionary sacrifices must be honoured, and socialist values must be upheld, producers have become increasingly adept at innovating within, or subtly bending, these constraints. The result is a form of 'negotiated orthodoxy' where revolutionary content is preserved in form while being transformed in meaning. The emotional intensity that once served to mobilize class hatred now generates sympathy for complex characters; the aesthetic sophistication that once encoded ideological purity now creates space for moral ambiguity; the mnemonic power that once unified audiences around revolutionary certainties now produce multiple, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of the same cultural text.

The *yangbanxi* remakes become contested sites where artistic agency, commercial logics, and political authority converge in increasingly complex ways. Artists navigate between satisfying censors and engaging audiences, and viewers consume these works as entertainment while unconsciously absorbing their memory-making functions. Cultural memory, defined by Jan Assmann as the institutionally sustained, symbolic recoding of the past through texts, rituals, and monuments, is actively constructed by power structures that authorize certain histories while

marginalizing other (2008). While *yangbanxi* has long functioned as a state-curated mnemonic device, encoding revolutionary ideology into emotionally charged forms, its afterlives complicate this top-down narrative. The continual remaking of *yangbanxi* across media and generations transforms it into a battleground of cultural memory, where competing forces converge and contend.

Conclusion

The trajectory of *yangbanxi* from Cultural Revolution orthodoxy to contemporary cultural commodity illuminates the sophisticated mechanisms through which revolutionary aesthetics are transformed into cultural memory. Far from representing a simple resurrection of Maoist propaganda, this process reveals how post-Mao China has refined this systematic template for encoding political narratives into emotionally resonant, culturally legible forms that can adapt to changing historical circumstances while maintaining their capacity to generate collective identification. The aesthetic strategies pioneered in *yangbanxi*, including the synthesis of traditional and modern elements, the compression of moral complexity into archetypal characters, the deployment of spectacular staging to overwhelm critical faculties, have become foundational techniques for Chinese cultural production more broadly.

Yet this mechanism, precisely because of its sophistication and adaptability, reveals its own limitations when confronted with cultural difference. The success of *yangbanxi*'s memory-making project rested fundamentally on its ability to harness existing cultural frameworks and redirect them toward revolutionary ends. This process of cultural synthesis worked because it operated within a shared cultural matrix, drawing on common reference points and collective understandings that could be redirected but not fundamentally disrupted. The question that emerges from this analysis is what happens when this Han Chinese revolutionary memory system

encounters alternative cultural traditions, linguistic structures, and local memory practices.

The mnemonic stability achieved through *yangbanxi*'s aesthetic and ideological codification provides the foundation for understanding the complex dynamics that emerge when this framework is transplanted across ethnic-cultural boundaries. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter of the Uyghur transplantation *Qizil Chiragh* (1975), the attempt to reproduce *yangbanxi*'s mnemonic effects within a different cultural context reveals the inherent tensions between imposed cultural memory and indigenous communicative traditions, illuminating the fault lines where state-sponsored memory projects encounter resistance, adaptation, and the inevitable production of 'mnemonic frictions', the points of tension where competing memory systems meet, clash, and ultimately transform each other in unpredictable ways.

Chapter Two. Involuntary friction: *yangbanxi* transplantation and Uyghur cultural resilience in *Qizil Chiragh* (1975)

This chapter examines the state-led integration of Uyghur communities into the CCP's Han Chinese revolutionary culture through the transplantation of revolutionary *yangbanxi* into Xinjiang. The Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim minority of approximately 12 million people, constitute the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), China's westernmost province. Historically connected to Central Asian trade routes and Islamic civilization rather than Chinese imperial networks, Uyghur culture developed distinct linguistic, religious, and artistic traditions that fundamentally diverge from Han Chinese cultural patterns in their emphasis on Islamic spirituality, nomadic heritage, and Persianate literary influences (Millward, 2007). The region's strategic importance, bordering eight countries and containing significant oil and gas reserves, has made it a focal point of Chinese state-building efforts since the PRC's establishment in 1949, with cultural policy serving as a primary mechanism for integrating this geographically and culturally peripheral region into the centralized national framework.

The chapter focuses specifically on *Qizil Chiragh* (The Red Lantern, 1975), a Uyghur-language transplantation of the canonical model *jingju The Legend of the Red Lantern* (Hong Deng Ji, 1970), examining how the CCP's project of ideological consolidation operated through the strategic appropriation and reinterpretation of Uyghur cultural forms. This transplantation process involved the subordination of the traditional *Muqam*, a composite art form integrating songs, dances, storytelling, and instrumental music that serves as the cornerstone of Uyghur cultural identity, to the formal and ideological requirements of Han Chinese revolutionary theatre. The encounter between different worldviews, aesthetic systems, and historical memories constitutes more than linguistic translation: Islamic-influenced Uyghur artistic

traditions were reconstituted to serve Marxist-Leninist political narratives, yet the process also generated unexpected forms of cultural resilience and renewal.

This chapter contributes to the thesis's spectrum of mnemonic frictions by examining how a state-sponsored *yangbanxi* remake generates unexpected forms of resistance even within ostensibly successful projects of cultural integration. As established in the Introduction, mnemonic friction refers to the productive tensions that arise when a cultural work carrying the imprint of a specific historical moment is remade under different conditions. *Qizil Chiragh* was produced under conditions of full state direction during the Cultural Revolution, when the transplantation of *yangbanxi* into ethnic minority forms served as an instrument of cultural policy aimed at integrating peripheral regions into a unified revolutionary culture. In *Qizil Chiragh*, these frictions are generated not by deliberate artistic resistance but by the irreducible density of the Uyghur musical, linguistic, and performative materials grafted onto the *yangbanxi* form. The *Muqam* tradition arrived bearing Uyghur collective memory, and because this memory could not be entirely evacuated in the act of transplantation, it introduced into the revolutionary form a surplus of meaning that the state's intentions neither authorized nor could contain. Under these conditions, friction was not sought or intended but was generated by the structural impossibility of fully absorbing Uyghur performative practice into a Han-centric ideological framework. It is in this involuntary friction, arising at the point where the discursive logic of *yangbanxi* encounters a cultural tradition whose own aesthetic density resists seamless incorporation, that the chapter locates its central analytical interest.

The transplantation of *yangbanxi* into the Uyghur *Muqam* framework entailed considerable aesthetic and political experimentation, yet it has received only limited scholarly attention. The most substantial contribution is Chuen-Fung Wong's 2016

article, which documents the systematic incorporation of Uyghur musical elements into the adapted work (147-165). Wong contends that the production of *Qizil Chiragh* constituted a critical opportunity for Uyghur artists and musicians to safeguard and perpetuate their national performing arts after years of systematic suppression. Nevertheless, the linguistic transformation inherent in this process, specifically, the reconstitution of *Muqam* lyrics into a more accessible vernacular Uyghur, remains underexplored. This chapter aims to redress this gap by expanding the understanding of *Qizil Chiragh* as a pivotal moment not only of ideological transplantation but also of linguistic renewal in the continuity and resilience of Uyghur culture.

The analysis is anchored in three theoretical frameworks: Bourdieu's symbolic power (1991) to articulate the state's monopolization of cultural capital; Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf's theory of social mimesis (1995) to theorize the embodied internalization of ideological norms; and Maoist class struggle discourse (qtd. in Huang, 2003) to frame the CCP's construction of proletarian unity across ethnic lines. Together, these frameworks illuminate how state cultural policy operated simultaneously through institutional coercion, embodied discipline, and discursive reframing, dimensions that converge in the transplantation process. Methodologically, the chapter combines historical analysis of Uyghur linguistic evolution, specifically, the transition from a Chagatai-inflected elite lexicon to a vernacularized register under state language reforms, with archival research into the institutional training regimes that moulded performers into bio-ideological subjects. Through close dramaturgical analysis of *Qizil Chiragh* and ethnographic insights into its reception, the chapter demonstrates how state-mandated cultural production became a contested terrain.

To substantiate its argument, the chapter is structured in four sections. First, I establish the broader context of the CCP's revolutionary cultural engineering project,

examining the contradictions inherent in the *yangbanxi* phenomenon, particularly the tension between its function as a unifying national culture and its need for regional adaptation to achieve ideological penetration. Second, I provide a detailed analysis of the linguistic landscape that shaped *Qizil Chiragh*'s production and examine how successive script reforms and the vernacularisation of *Muqam* lyrics functioned as instruments of both symbolic violence and cultural renewal. Third, I analyse the specific mechanisms through which *Qizil Chiragh* operated as a vehicle for revolutionary subjectification. Drawing on archival materials from performer training programmes and production records to examine how the adaptation process required Uyghur artists to embody revolutionary characters while maintaining authentic cultural expression. Finally, I investigate how Uyghur communities received and interpreted *Qizil Chiragh*, revealing the complex negotiations between state intentions and local meanings.

Yangbanxi transplantation projects

The relationship between performance and identity formation in Mao's China was fundamentally transformative rather than merely representational. As a 1970 *Renmin Ribao* commentary asserted the imperative for all citizens to master *yangbanxi*, proclaiming: 'Learn to sing *yangbanxi*, and learn to be a revolutionary' (*xuechang yangbanxi, xuezuo gemingren*). This directive revealed the fundamental relationship between singing and being within the *yangbanxi* system. The masses were not positioned as passive spectators of these theatrical works; rather, they were compelled to actively sing and impersonate the *yangban* (model) characters. The *yangbanxi* project's essential mechanism was precisely this process of impersonation: a radical cultural experiment designed to construct revolutionary identity and subjectivity through the transformative power of performance itself.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's (2004) social identity theory helps explain how individuals derive self-concept through group belonging and seek to affirm the distinctiveness of their in-group. *Yangbanxi* provided emotionally charged scripts, characters, and narratives through which audiences could identify with the victorious proletarian 'we'. Its repetitive narratives, ritualized gestures, and formalized aesthetics created a shared symbolic universe, where revolutionary pasts were made emotionally legible. In this world, the aesthetic rhythms of *yangbanxi* from its songs and poses to its heroes became the affective infrastructure of national belonging, naturalizing the Party's authority as both emotional and historical truth.

A practical challenge inherent in this overarching project was the disparate capacity of China's culturally and linguistically heterogeneous populace possessed disparate capacities to appreciate and perform these works. Although promoted as the ultimate expression of the revolutionary spirit, *yangbanxi*'s cultural specificity meant that its reception was inevitably mediated by preexisting local contexts. As Richard Kraus (2012:57) notes, 'the propaganda culture deliberately suppressed regional tensions because the regime wished to offer a unified image of the country and the people.'

This challenge proved particularly acute in regions like Xinjiang, where many residents during the Cultural Revolution lacked proficiency in Mandarin, severely undermining centralized propaganda efforts. The Jiang Qing regime recognized from the outset a fundamental limitation in their cultural strategy: the few *yangbanxi* pieces performed by major groups in Beijing and Shanghai had too limited a repertoire to reach all parts of China's vast and linguistically diverse territory (*Renmin Ribao*, 1967). As Philip Huang (1995) demonstrates, the CCP's campaigns often imposed centrally designed ideological models onto local communities in ways that diverged

significantly from objective social realities, with class enemies and revolutionary fervour sometimes manufactured to meet representational expectations rather than emerging organically from lived conditions.

Confronting this governance crisis, the central government launched the 'popularization of revolutionary *yangbanxi*' campaign in 1970 (*People's Daily*, 1970), initiating a series of transplantation projects specifically designed to deliver *yangbanxi* to populations who preferred their native languages. The political significance of this cultural mission became explicit in early 1972, when Premier Zhou Enlai emphasized to Saifuddin Azizi, Chairman of the XUAR, the strategic importance of disseminating revolutionary *yangbanxi* throughout Xinjiang as a mechanism of ideological integration.

The selection of Azizi as the primary implementer of this cultural policy reveals the sophisticated nature of the CCP's co-optation strategies. Azizi (1915-2003), an ethnic Uyghur politician who would later occupy top positions in the PRC government including Vice Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, served as the inaugural chairman of the XUAR government. Most significantly for understanding the political dynamics at work, Azizi had been a key leader of the Ili Rebellion prior to the PRC's establishment in 1949—a Soviet-backed movement that actively sought to establish an independent East Turkestan state. His transformation from separatist leader to cultural assimilation architect exemplifies the CCP's strategy of neutralizing potential opposition through institutional incorporation, while simultaneously lending indigenous legitimacy to Han Chinese cultural imperatives.

Premier Zhou Enlai strategically prioritized what became known as the 'two Reds': the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, and the *jingju The Legend of the Red*

Lantern, both of which had achieved widespread popularity across Han Chinese audiences and epitomized the era's revolutionary aesthetics. Under Azizi's administrative direction, the development of a Uyghur transplantation of *The Legend of the Red Lantern* commenced, involving extensive collaboration between Beijing-based *yangbanxi* specialists and Xinjiang cultural workers. The resulting Uyghur-language opera *Qizil Chiragh* premiered in Beijing in 1975 to considerable official fanfare and was subsequently adapted into a colour film by August First Film Studio within the same year, ensuring maximum distribution across both urban and rural Xinjiang. Together with the Cantonese transplantation of *Shajiabang*, *Qizil Chiragh* established the authoritative template for regional transplantation of revolutionary *yangbanxi* sanctioned by the central government.

A fundamental paradox emerged in the *yangbanxi* project regarding whether it reflected an already unified national culture or served as a mechanism to forge such unity. The CCP promulgated both interpretations, albeit with a revealing temporal disjunction between the idealized performance and lived social reality. In Jiang Qing's June 1964 keynote at the Modern *Jingju* Trial Performance Convention, she lauded revolutionary *xiqu* for their capacity to 'reflect modern Chinese society and the lives of the working class' (Jiang, 1968:3), framing them as a descriptive mirror of an emergent proletarian ethos rather than a top-down imposition.

Yet only three years later, at the outset of the Cultural Revolution in 1967, Jiang Qing decreed that the *yangbanxi* works were the sole legitimate repertoire for revolutionary drama, transforming *yangbanxi* into a prescriptive apparatus for unifying and educating the masses (Jiang, 1968:7). This shift from descriptive to prescriptive function reveals the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the *yangbanxi* project: the simultaneous claim to authentically represent an already-

existing revolutionary culture while serving as the primary mechanism for creating that very culture.

The policy of transplanting the revolutionary *yangbanxi* into regional theatrical forms (*yizhi geming yangbanxi*), officially announced in 1967, can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the incomplete realization of a unified national culture. This strategy functioned as a rational component of a coercive cultural program. While the production and viewing of *yangbanxi* were mandated nationwide, the state concurrently recognized the distinct cultural specificities of various regions. Genuine national cultural unification, it seemed, necessitated that the universal revolutionary spirit be articulated through localized cultural expressions.

The CCP weaponized the adaptability of *yangbanxi* by engineering its dissemination across China through strategic regionalization. This involved transplanting standardized *yangbanxi* narratives into regional dialects and theatrical traditions to maximize ideological reach. For instance, *Shajiabang* was adapted into *yueju* (Cantonese Opera) in 1973, merging southern linguistic and musical traditions with Maoist themes. In 1974, *Ode to the Dragon River* was recast in Korean *Changgeuk*, targeting ethnic Korean audiences in China's Northeast border regions. in 1975, *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was transplanted into Uyghur *Muqam*, a traditional Central Asian musical style, to align Maoist ideology with Xinjiang's ethnic cultural practices. These transplantations were not incidental cultural experiments but were centrally orchestrated through national tours, curricular standardization, and multi-platform media production, forming part of a broader project to fuse ideological uniformity with cultural specificity. However, significant tensions emerged between the official revolutionary templates and their regional

adaptations, as the Jiang Qing regime insisted on strict fidelity to the original models—a requirement that was inherently unfeasible.

Drawing on Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2008) notion of the collective dimension of identity, these performances can be read as attempts to mobilize shared symbolic repertoires to build a unified socialist citizenry. Yet, as Edward Said (1994:62) warns in his critique of 'imagined geographies', such projects often operate through a logic of appropriation, selectively incorporating cultural difference to reinforce hegemonic norms. In this context, regional remakes of *yangbanxi* did not celebrate ethnic pluralism as an end in itself. Rather, they instrumentalized minority traditions to project a façade of harmonious multiculturalism, while subsuming them into a Han-centric revolutionary framework. Through this aesthetic incorporation, the CCP legitimized its ideological messaging by embedding it within familiar regional forms, thereby narrowing the space for cultural autonomy even as it purported to recognize diversity. The result was a cultural engineering project that simultaneously acknowledged difference and worked to eliminate it: a contradiction that would prove particularly acute in ethnic minority regions like Xinjiang.

The transplantation strategy represented both the pinnacle of the CCP's cultural engineering ambitions and an implicit acknowledgement of their limitations. While *yangbanxi* functioned as a disciplinary tool to homogenize socialist identity, audiences and performers in minority regions found ways to subversively reinscribe these works with vernacular meanings, transforming them into sites of cultural endurance rather than mere vehicles of assimilation. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the case of Xinjiang, where the deployment of *yangbanxi* functioned as both a mechanism of state control and a space for negotiating Uyghur identity within the paradoxes of socialist modernity. The resulting cultural productions,

such as *Qizil Chiragh*, emerged from this tension between authoritarian cultural engineering and the irreducible agency of marginalized communities in redefining ideological impositions. The Xinjiang case thus serves as both exception and exemplar: exceptional in the degree of cultural autonomy granted to minority adaptation, yet exemplary of the broader contradictions inherent in the *yangbanxi* project. These contradictions between unification and regionalization, between prescription and description, between appropriation and authenticity would shape not only the immediate reception of revolutionary culture but also the long-term trajectory of ethnic relations in the PRC.

The tensions inherent in the *yangbanxi* transplantation project cannot be understood in isolation from the broader linguistic transformations that preceded and accompanied these cultural interventions. The CCP's attempts to create revolutionary unity through performance intersected with equally complex processes of linguistic standardization and script reform, both of which reflected the state's dual imperative to incorporate minority cultures while simultaneously transforming them. Just as *yangbanxi* transplantation revealed the limits of cultural homogenization, the evolution of Uyghur written language exposed the contested nature of linguistic sovereignty in multiethnic socialist China. The script reforms that preceded the Cultural Revolution had already begun reshaping the symbolic foundations of Uyghur cultural identity, creating the linguistic conditions within which revolutionary performances would be received, interpreted, and potentially subverted.

Scripts of memory

The Uyghur language has long developed at the crossroads of empire, religion, and cultural exchange, shaped by successive transformations in both spoken and written form. Before the 20th century, Uyghur linguistic expression spanned a wide

spectrum from oral Turkic dialects rooted in Central Asian tribal vernaculars to high literary registers such as Chagatai, which emerged during the Timurid era. These early Turkic dialects were primarily oral and localized, serving as the everyday medium of communication among Uyghur communities and preserving linguistic continuities with the pre-Islamic Old Turkic spoken in the region during the era of the Uyghur Khaganate (8th–9th centuries).

As Islam spread into Central Asia from the 10th century onwards, particularly under the Kara-Khanid dynasty, the language began to absorb Arabic religious terminology and Persian literary aesthetics, laying the groundwork for a diglossic structure that would define Uyghur linguistic practice for centuries. This linguistic stratification culminated in the rise of Chagatai, a Turkic literary language enriched with Perso-Arabic vocabulary. Flourishing between the 13th and 16th centuries, the Chagatai language served as the administrative and literary lingua franca of the Turko-Persianate world, including the Timurid, Mughal, and Ottoman realms, linking Uyghur intellectual elites to broader transregional currents across Central and South Asia. As the language of Sufi hagiographies, philosophical treatises, and courtly poetry, Chagatai played a central role in producing a written Uyghur cultural heritage. Yet this prestige came at the cost of popular accessibility. The high-register Chagatai lexicon, saturated with Persian metaphors and Arabic abstract nouns, grew increasingly opaque to the general populace, whose spoken Turkic dialects remained comparatively unaffected by these cosmopolitan overlays. These dialects later evolved into modern languages like Uzbek and Uyghur and maintained linguistic continuity with pre-Islamic Turkic traditions.

As Bourdieu (1991) argues, such linguistic bifurcation exemplifies how symbolic capital is unevenly distributed within a linguistic field. Chagatai, imbued

with religious and literary authority, constituted what Bourdieu calls a 'legitimate language', one that accumulated symbolic power through its association with scriptural knowledge, political office, and cultural sophistication. Conversely, the spoken vernaculars, despite their role in daily life, held little institutional legitimacy and were excluded from formal arenas of writing and governance. This unequal distribution of linguistic capital created what Bourdieu terms a 'market of linguistic exchanges', in which access to the dominant code conferred power, while exclusion from it enforced social hierarchy.

The transition into the 20th century brought this dynamic into sharper relief. Although the Perso-Arabic abjad had been the long-standing writing system for both Chagatai and vernacular Uyghur writing, it remained structurally ill-suited to Turkic phonology. Its abjad system omitted vowel distinctions critical for meaning in agglutinative Turkic languages. As Robert Barkley Shaw (1878) observed, the script's vowel suppression, particularly its failure to distinguish long/short vowels, generated orthographic chaos, leaving Turki speakers 'uncertain whether to read *bār* (exist) or *bär* (go)' (13). This orthographic crisis reflected deeper tensions between inherited Islamic textual traditions and the practical requirements of modern linguistic standardization. The inadequacy of the Arabic script for Turkic languages was not merely technical but symbolic, representing the broader challenge of reconciling Islamic civilizational identity with emerging nationalist and modernist imperatives.

Early 20th-century modernization efforts sought to address these orthographic limitations through radical script reform. Soviet-aligned Cyrillization in 1937 introduced vowel demarcation while advancing Moscow's cultural hegemony through linguistic standardization. This reform was catalyzed by geopolitical dynamics—

Xinjiang's proximity to Soviet Central Asia, coupled with the region's strategic role as a critical supply corridor during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). As the primary land route for Soviet materiel to reach Chinese forces resisting Japanese invasion, Xinjiang's logistical indispensability deepened Soviet political and cultural influence. Under Sheng Shicai's pro-Moscow regime (1933–1944), language policy became a tool for ideological consolidation. Sheng Shicai (1895–1970), a Manchurian-born Han Chinese warlord educated in Shanghai and Japan, was a self-avowed Marxist who reportedly joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at Joseph Stalin's request in August 1938. His rise to power through military prowess and ability to capitalize on geopolitical opportunities enabled him to secure Xinjiang as part of the Republic of China even amid extremely challenging circumstances (Millward 175-230). Under his administration, the Cyrillic script, already imposed on Turkic-speaking Soviet republics like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, was extended to Uyghur as part of a broader Soviet project to sever historical ties to Islamo-Persianate civilizational spheres and redirect cultural affinities toward Moscow.

This techno-political engineering underwent a sinicized recalibration following the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1950s. The ideological rupture began with Khrushchev's secret speech on February 25, 1956, delivered to a closed session of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which denounced Stalin's cult of personality (Lenman et al., 2000: 769). This created serious domestic problems for Mao, who had supported many of Stalin's policies and modelled his own after them, leading to Chinese condemnation of Khrushchev's policies as 'revisionist' (Lüthi, 2008: 66-102). The resulting geopolitical realignment necessitated cultural decolonization from Soviet influence, manifesting in linguistic policy reform: the Cyrillic-based Uyghur script, adopted in part to facilitate the import of Soviet

educational materials, was abandoned in favour of a Latin-based system following the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations, effecting an orthographic severance from the Soviet sphere (Dwyer, 2005: 18-22).

The 1958 Latin-based Uyghur New Script (yëngi yëziqi), modelled on the *Pinyin* system used for Standard Chinese, was ostensibly designed to achieve grapho-phonemic precision and computational adaptability—an alignment with globalizing technolinguistic standards (Zhou, 2003:166; Benson and Svanberg, 1998:174). However, this reform represented far more than technical optimization. According to Bourdieu (1991), language is not only a medium for communication but also a vehicle for symbolic violence, a form of power that is often exerted invisibly, through the legitimate imposition of specific linguistic forms over others (170). By imposing the *Pinyin*-inspired script, the state sought to reconfigure the symbolic capital of the Uyghur language, shifting its value away from Chagatai-derived lexical and orthographic architectures, which had long anchored Uyghur cultural prestige, toward a state-sanctioned form aligned with Mandarin-centric governance.

In Bourdieu's terms, the Perso-Arabic and Cyrillic scripts historically embodied Uyghur 'linguistic legitimacy' (69), tied to Islamic scholastic traditions and Soviet modernity, respectively. Their replacement with a *Pinyin*-inspired orthography severed these transregional civilizational claims, effectively devaluing Uyghur's existing symbolic capital while centralizing its legitimacy within the state-controlled linguistic market. Far from neutral modernization, these interventions exemplify Foucault's concept of 'governmentality through grammar' (1991: 87), script reforms as apparatuses of territorialized linguistic sovereignty, diluting historic-cultural pluralism while naturalizing the Mandarin-mediated imaginary of the Chinese nation-state. The Latinization project thus functioned as a biopolitical lever, transforming

Uyghur into a derivative of Mandarin's logocentric order, a manoeuvre that not only optimized communicative efficiency but also reconstituted the language's symbolic hierarchy.

The transformation of Uyghur's orthographic foundations created new possibilities and constraints for cultural expression, setting the stage for equally complex negotiations over traditional artistic forms. While script reforms reshaped the surface structures of linguistic representation, deeper questions remained about how classical Uyghur cultural traditions would be preserved, interpreted, and mobilized within the new socialist framework. The Uyghur *Muqam*'s fate illustrates how the state's linguistic interventions intersected with broader cultural preservation projects, revealing whether the democratization of script could successfully bridge the gap between cosmopolitan cultural heritage and mass accessibility, or whether the transformation of linguistic capital would fundamentally alter the nature of cultural transmission itself.

***Muqam*'s vernacular evolution**

The Uyghur *Muqam* exemplifies the complex interplay between various languages and scripts that characterized Xinjiang's cultural landscape, reflecting the persistent tension between the elite, foreign-influenced written registers and the vernacular Turkic dialects spoken by the general Uyghur populace. The *Muqam*'s early foundations emerged from pre-Islamic Turkic oral epics, composed and transmitted in vernacular dialects that drew on native narrative structures and linguistic rhythms deeply embedded in the everyday cultural worlds of ordinary Uyghur speakers (Light, 2008: 45-62). However, as Xinjiang became a cultural crossroads, successive waves of external influence, first Buddhist and Chinese, later Islamic and Persianate, gradually introduced multilingual entanglements into *Muqam*

practice. The Islamicization of the region under the Kara-Khanids initiated a steady incorporation of Arabic terms, especially in moral, philosophical, and theological domains. This lexical layering intensified during the Chagatai period, when the *Muqam*'s codification into twelve monumental suites was accompanied by its entextualization in Chagatai, a Turkicized literary language densely interwoven with Persian and Arabic loanwords (Harris, 2008: 81-86; Light, 2008: 200-206).

The very term '*Muqam*', borrowed from the Arabic word *maqām* (مقام), which means 'position' or 'rank' and later extended to denote musical 'scale' or 'melody', entered the Uyghur lexicon in the 13th century (Turson, 1992:25). This etymology reveals the linguistic transformations that accompanied the tradition's development. The Chagatai period marked a crucial bifurcation in the *Muqam*'s linguistic structure: while the musical and narrative architectures retained Turkic oral foundations, their expression increasingly depended on the elite scriptural prestige of Chagatai. As Han Ziyong (2011: 42) observes, the *Muqam* 'originates among the ordinary people but later becomes caviar to them.' The *Muqam* thus became linguistically estranged from its vernacular roots. Chagatai's lexical density, syntactic complexity, and script rendered the lyrics and commentaries largely opaque to non-literate audiences. This stratification created a linguistic hierarchy that mirrored broader social distinctions between urban elites and rural villagers, between religious scholars and folk performers, between the custodians of manuscript culture and the bearers of oral tradition.

By the early 20th century, this bifurcated tradition faced collapse. The transmission of the *Muqam* had long relied on the intimate, non-textual 'master-disciple' system, which proved fragile in the face of cultural dislocation and linguistic alienation. The genre's vast structural complexity, archaic lyrical vocabulary, intricate

musical forms, and rigid performative protocols rendered it inaccessible to a dwindling number of performers. When Tuerdi Ahong was identified as the last living master capable of performing the complete *Twelve Muqam*, the canonical compendium of Uyghur classical music comprising twelve monumental suites that epitomize the genre's artistic and spiritual zenith, the urgency of preservation became existential (Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2012: 7).

This moment coincided with broader pressures of linguistic homogenization, as Uyghur dialects and classical registers alike were subordinated to Mandarin Chinese under the expanding cultural policies of the PRC. The 1950 launch of the '*Twelve Muqam* Collection and Compilation Task Force' thus represented more than a cultural salvage operation; it initiated a paradigmatic shift in the linguistic politics of the *Muqam*. Under its auspices, Tuerdi Ahong undertook the painstaking process of orally documenting the entire *Twelve Muqam* corpus using rudimentary wire-recording technology, a project spanning several years. This raw archival material was subsequently refined over six years by teams of ethnomusicologists and literary scholars, who systematized the notation, lyrics, and performative nuances into a standardized written format (Kadir, 2012: 8). The *Twelve Muqam*'s codification not only rescued a vanishing oral tradition but also reified its status as the definitive textual and performative authority within Uyghur musical practice, a transformation that shifted the *Muqam* from lived oral artistry to institutionalized cultural patrimony.

Meanwhile, Azizi championed a dual-pronged linguistic reconfiguration of the Uyghur *Muqam* tradition. He advocated not only for divesting the repertoire of its Chagatai-language archaisms but also for re-encoding it through the modern Uyghur vernacular—a manoeuvre he framed as 'democratizing cultural memory' (Azizi, 1994: 23). This linguistic reform transcended philological precision; it constituted

a politicized reclamation project aimed at wresting the Uyghur *Muqam* from elite custodianship and repositioning it as mass-mediated ethnical heritage. Azizi's linguistic policy can be understood within what Pierre Bourdieu terms the 'linguistic market' (1991:18), a field in which languages and dialects acquire symbolic value based on their association with power and legitimacy. In this market, the Uyghur *Muqam*'s classical Chagatai register, once a marker of cosmopolitan prestige, now symbolized obsolescence and inaccessibility. By contrast, the vernacular Uyghur promoted by the state gained value as a politically sanctioned medium of socialist communication (Dwyer, 2005: 18-22). The re-encoding of *Muqam* in this vernacular form was not simply a linguistic update; it was a symbolic act of national integration (Gladney 2004: 209-210), aligning Uyghur cultural heritage with the linguistic and ideological norms of the PRC.

The transformative linguistic interventions that reshaped the Uyghur *Muqam* during the 1950s established a precedent for more radical cultural engineering projects that would emerge during the Cultural Revolution. While the *Muqam*'s vernacularization represented a strategic repositioning of elite cultural forms within socialist discourse, the creation of *Qizil Chiragh* marked a qualitatively different phase of linguistic intervention, which sought not merely to democratize traditional culture but to fundamentally reconstruct Uyghur identity through revolutionary dramaturgy. The transition from preserving and adapting existing cultural forms to creating new ones reflected the Chinese state's growing confidence in its capacity to reshape minority consciousness through strategic cultural production.

Mnemonic frictions in *Qizil Chiragh*

Qizil Chiragh, transplanted from the revolutionary model *jingju*, *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (Hong Deng Ji) (1970), follows the same plot of underground

resistance during the Japanese occupation of Northeast China in 1939. *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was adapted from the 1963 black-and-white film *There Will Be Followers*, which is based on a true story of communist undercover agents who, during the Japanese invasion, risked their lives to send encrypted messages to the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army. The protagonists of this story, Li Yuhe, Granny Li, and Tiemei, are not related by blood but are united by their dedication to the revolutionary cause. The story begins with Li Yuhe, a railway switchman and member of the CCP secretly engaged in underground communist activities, being arrested by Wang Lien-chu, a puppet police officer and sentenced to death by Jiu-shan (Hatoyama), chief of the Japanese gendarmerie. His martyrdom, followed by the death of Granny Li, sets the stage for Tiemei's transformation from daughter to revolutionary heir. In the wake of these sacrifices, Tiemei steps into her place, ultimately succeeding in delivering a crucial encrypted message to the guerrilla fighters. Her act signals not only the survival of the revolutionary network but the symbolic triumph of socialist values over imperialist oppression.

Lexical substitution

The linguistic reform of the Uyghur *Muqam* reached its apex during the Cultural Revolution, when the *Muqam*, alongside all cultural forms, was repurposed as a vehicle for proletarian nationalism. *Qizil Chiragh*, in this context, functioned as a cultural artifact that mediated between Uyghur linguistic identity and the state's ideological imperatives. Traditional Uyghur script, written from right to left, contrasts with the left-to-right orientation of musical scores. To address this practical challenge, the newly introduced 'Uyghur New Script' was employed for the lyrics. *Qizil Chiragh*'s adoption of vernacular speech over Chagatai's elite lexicon (Harris, 2008: 81-86) and its documentation in the Uyghur New Script was not merely a neutral

linguistic shift but a politically charged act that sought to disrupt both Islamic civilizational ties and class-based cultural hierarchies (Dwyer, 2005: 18-22; Lüthi, 2008: 66-102). The precise representation of Uyghur sounds in the Uyghur New Script, aligning with contemporary linguistic principles, made it an efficient tool for *yangbanxi* campaigns, particularly when the culture of 'model' was increasingly prioritized.

The linguistic substitutions in *Qizil Chiragh* illustrate this ideological overhaul. For instance, in the script of *Qizil Chiragh*, the Chagatai word *heqiqet* (حقيقت, truth), derived from the Arabic *ḥaqīqah* (حقيقة, truth), is replaced with *rastliq* (*rast*, meaning 'true' or 'straight' in modern Uyghur), reflecting a deliberate shift to a Turkic root to supplant Arabic loans. Similarly, *adalet* (عدالت, justice), derived from the Arabic loanword *adāla* (عدالة, justice), which encompasses both legal and divine justice of God in an Islamic context, is replaced with *tögrächilik*, a neologism formed from the Turkic root *tögre*, meaning 'straight', 'correct', or 'right' in modern Uyghur, and the abstract noun suffix *-chilik*. While *tögrächilik* is Turkic in form, its semantic association with 'justice' is newly constructed and ideologically loaded. The substitution reflects a deliberate state-orchestrated effort to sever ties with Islamic legal and ethical traditions embedded in Arabic-derived vocabulary. In place of divinely grounded concepts like *adalet*, *tögrächilik* reframes 'justice' through the lens of moral correctness and ideological alignment with secular, socialist values. Rather than referencing divine fairness, it invokes a sense of political rectitude and behavioural conformity, embodying the linguistic engineering central to the cultural and ideological remapping of Uyghur discourse under state socialism. These changes reflect a broader campaign to dismantle the symbolic capital of Islamic linguistic heritage.

In *Qizil Chiragh*, the Arabic loanwords in the traditional Uyghur *Muqam* are replaced with CCP revolutionary jargons, such as *Mao zhuxi* (Chairman Mao), *gongchan dang* (Communist Party), and *mi dian ma* (cypher code). This lexical grafting served a dual purpose: it appropriated the *Muqam*'s cultural resonance to propagate socialist dogma while displacing its Islamic epistemic foundations. By replacing terms laden with religious and philosophical weight with communist neologisms, the state sought to reconfigure Uyghur identity within a secular, socialist framework.

Rachel Harris (2005)'s ethnomusicological work on minority communities in Xinjiang provides crucial insight into this linguistic engineering process. In this comprehensive study of the Sibe community, Harris demonstrates how Chinese language policies systematically targeted Arabo-Persian loans across multiple ethnic groups to atomize their cultural memory from transregional Islamic heritage. Harris argues that this linguistic intervention was not merely administrative but represented a deliberate strategy to sever the intellectual and spiritual connections that bound Uyghur culture to the broader Islamic world. Her analysis reveals how traditional musical forms like the *Muqam* served as repositories of cultural knowledge, making their linguistic transformation particularly significant for reshaping collective identity. Applied to *Qizil Chiragh*, Harris's framework illuminates how the replacement of Arabic theological terminology with revolutionary vocabulary constituted an assault on the very foundations of Uyghur cultural epistemology, forcing communities to articulate their most sacred concepts through the linguistic apparatus of state socialism.

This process exemplifies what David Scott (1999) theorizes as 'colonial governmentality', which extends Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality to analyse how colonial and postcolonial states reshape populations through the strategic

management of knowledge, discourse, and subjectivity. In Scott's framework, colonial governmentality operates not merely through direct coercion but through the subtle reconfiguration of the conceptual frameworks through which colonized peoples understand themselves and their world. Scott argues that this form of power works by 'refashioning the very ground of criticism itself', transforming the terms through which resistance can be articulated and understood.

However, Scott's colonial framework requires careful calibration when applied to the Chinese context, since his theorization emerged from Caribbean postcolonial experience rather than the complex dynamics of multi-ethnic empire and socialist transformation. Scott defines colonialism primarily through the lens of European overseas expansion and its aftermath, focusing on how colonial powers restructured subject populations through new forms of knowledge production and governance. The Chinese case presents both parallels and divergences: while the PRC's treatment of Xinjiang exhibits clear patterns of cultural imperialism and demographic colonization through Han settlement policies, it also operates within a socialist ideological framework that officially celebrates ethnic diversity while pursuing practical homogenization.

This contradiction between socialist internationalism and Han cultural hegemony creates what might be better understood through Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, developed in *Prison Notebooks* (1992). Gramsci's revolutionary insight was that capitalism-maintained control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became the 'common sense' (382) values of all. For Gramsci, hegemony operates through what he termed the 'equilibrium of force and consent' (409), where dominant groups secure power not

merely through coercive state apparatus but by achieving intellectual and moral leadership that makes their worldview appear natural and inevitable. This process requires building consent across civil society before taking formal power, understanding that while coercion might still be necessary, its status is diminished in modern states where ideological control proves more effective and durable. Unlike traditional Marxist emphases on economic determinism, Gramsci's 'historical bloc' (337) concept recognizes how cultural institutions—schools, media, religious organizations, and artistic forms—serve as crucial sites for reproducing dominant ideologies and manufacturing popular consent.

The historical layering of imperial projects in Xinjiang exemplifies this complex hegemonic process, where each successive dominant power has sought to achieve not just political control but cultural-ideological leadership. According to Millward's documentation in *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (2007), the region's Islamic cultural formation was itself the product of earlier Arab and Persian cultural imperialism during the medieval period, which displaced earlier Buddhist and shamanistic traditions through both conquest and the gradual establishment of Islamic educational, legal, and artistic institutions that made Islamic worldviews appear natural and universal. Qing dynasty's conquest and administration of Xinjiang (1759-1912) represented another layer of imperial control that operated through strategic accommodation of local elites and selective incorporation of Islamic administrative practices, demonstrating early forms of hegemonic governance. The PRC's policies continue this pattern through different ideological and technological means, utilizing modern institutions like schools, media, and cultural organizations to establish Han Chinese socialist values as the new 'common sense'. The PRC's strategic embrace of Islamic civilizational connections until the mid-20th century, evident in its support for

Muslim communities and cultivation of ties with Islamic nations during the early Cold War (Lipman, 1997: 167-211), further demonstrates the contingent nature of cultural policies in service of state objectives, revealing how hegemonic projects adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances.

In the context of *Qizil Chiragh*, this Gramscian framework illuminates how linguistic engineering becomes a sophisticated tool for establishing cultural hegemony rather than mere colonial domination. The replacement of Islamic terminology with revolutionary jargon operates not simply as censorship but as what Gramsci would recognize as a fundamental restructuring of the conceptual apparatus through which Uyghur communities understand themselves and their world. By embedding Maoist vocabulary within the *Muqam* tradition, the state transforms cultural forms that once served as repositories of Islamic knowledge into vehicles for socialist indoctrination, achieving the hegemonic goal of making revolutionary consciousness appear to emerge organically from Uyghur cultural tradition itself. This process exemplifies Gramsci's insight that effective hegemony works by incorporating and transforming oppositional cultural elements rather than simply suppressing them, creating what appears to be voluntary participation in one's own cultural transformation while systematically undermining the conditions for autonomous cultural reproduction.

A particularly revealing example of linguistic transition in *Qizil Chiragh* as ideological metamorphosis is the strategic appellation shift of an intelligence operative, from '*Yurtdax*' (compatriot or fellow villager) to '*Yoldax*' (comrade) (People's Music Publishing House, 1976: 10), reflecting a performative reconfiguration of identity from ethnic-regional solidarity to revolutionary class solidarity. This transition enacts a microcosm of socialist modernization—a discursive allegory for the subordination of Uyghur cultural sovereignty to the CCP's ideological imperatives. Before code

exchange to verify the identity of the intelligence operative, Granny Li's use of '*Yurtdax*' (yurt, يۇرت, meaning 'homeland' in Turkish; *-dax*, -داخ, meaning 'companion' in Turkish) with the intelligencer roots the interaction in vernacular Uyghur sociability. The term invokes kinship-like ties based on shared geography, historically central to Uyghur communal identity. It frames the relationship within a pre-socialist moral economy where trust derives from ethno-regional belonging rather than political ideology. By initiating contact with '*Yurtdax*', the script acknowledges (yet subtly co-opts) Uyghur cultural codes to authenticate the narrative.

This linguistic strategy mirrors what Gardner Bovingdon (2010) identifies as the CCP's early reliance on ethnic intermediaries to legitimize socialist reforms in Xinjiang. In his analysis of Uyghur political experience, Bovingdon argues that the Chinese state's approach to minority governance has consistently involved a complex negotiation between accommodation and assimilation. He demonstrates how the CCP initially sought to win Uyghur support by working through traditional cultural frameworks and local leaders, a strategy he terms 'ethnic brokerage'. Bovingdon's research reveals that this approach was designed to create a veneer of cultural continuity while fundamentally transforming the underlying political structures. Ganny Li's use of '*Yurtdax*' represents precisely this kind of cultural appropriation—the state borrows the emotional resonance of traditional kinship terminology to legitimize revolutionary authority, even as it works to undermine the social foundations upon which such terminology depends. Bovingdon's analysis helps explain why the script begins with familiar cultural codes before transitioning to revolutionary language: this progression enacts the very process of political transformation that the CCP sought to achieve throughout Xinjiang.

Li Yuhe's shift to '*Yoldax*' after the code's verification linguistically transmutes ethnic-regional bonds into revolutionary camaraderie. Derived from *yol* ('path' in Turkish) and *-dax* ('companion'), '*Yoldax*' originally denotes 'fellow traveller' in Uyghur and broader Turkic linguistic traditions, then was strategically repurposed as a lexical borrowing of the Russian word 'товарищ' (*tovarishch*), meaning 'comrade', to align with socialist political discourse. By the late 20th century, as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and China's socialist fervour waned, '*Yoldax*' gradually receded from official discourse, replaced by the Mandarin-derived term '*tongzhi*'. Yet, its historical usage remains a testament to the ideological engineering of language—a process where lexicons are weaponized to consolidate state power and reconfigure collective identities. The shift displaces Islamic conceptions of community (أُمَّة, *Ummah*) with Marxist-Leninist historicity, wherein shared class struggle replaces shared faith as the basis of solidarity. Language becomes a technology of governance, where even kinship terminologies become sites of ideological contestation.

Granny Li's use of '*Yurtdax*' versus Li Yuhe's '*Yoldax*' constructs a generational dialectic: the older generation's ethno-cultural loyalty is subordinated to the younger generation's revolutionary fervour. This hierarchy reinforces the socialist teleology of 'progress' from 'backward' ethnic consciousness to 'advanced' class consciousness. This progression aligns with what Trevor Cliff (2016) analyses as the CCP's spatial-temporal reordering of Xinjiang from a 'peripheral borderland' to a 'vanguard of socialist construction'. In his ethnographic study of Han settlers in Xinjiang, Cliff examines how Chinese state discourse has consistently framed the region's development in terms of linear progress from traditional backwardness to modern advancement. Cliff's analysis reveals how this temporal narrative serves to

justify cultural transformation by positioning traditional Uyghur practices as obstacles to modernization rather than as legitimate alternatives to socialist modernity. His work demonstrates how spatial metaphors of centre and periphery become temporalized, with Xinjiang's 'peripheral' status serving as evidence of its need for revolutionary transformation. Applied to the linguistic shift in *Qizil Chiragh*, Cliff's framework illuminates how the transition from '*Yurtdax*' to '*Yoldax*' enacts this broader narrative of progressive development, suggesting that ethnic solidarity represents a primitive stage that must be transcended through revolutionary consciousness.

Despite these top-down interventions, Uyghur linguistic practices have consistently demonstrated resilience and agency in the face of competing imperial and ideological pressures. The Perso-Arabic script had been embedded in Uyghur identity for centuries, serving not only as a means of written communication but also as a cultural and religious marker connecting Uyghur communities to broader Islamic civilizational networks. Arienne M. Dwyer (2005)'s analysis of Uyghur language policy provides crucial insight into this cultural resilience. Through studying the Xinjiang conflict, Dwyer argues that script choice represents far more than a technical decision about writing systems; it constitutes a fundamental assertion of cultural identity and political allegiance. Her research demonstrates that 'nearly all Uyghurs favour the Arabic script for reasons of practicality, aesthetics, and group identity,' (19) with this preference reflecting deep-seated connections to Islamic civilization and centuries of literary tradition.

Dwyer's analysis reveals how the Arabic script functions as what she terms a 'cultural anchor', providing continuity with historical identity even as political circumstances change dramatically. Her work shows that Uyghur attachment to the Arabic script cannot be understood purely in terms of cultural nostalgia but must be

seen as part of a sophisticated strategy of resistance that draws selectively on multiple sources of power and legitimacy. Uyghur linguistic practices demonstrate a strategic positioning to balance competing forces and create spaces of cultural autonomy within constraining political circumstances. This approach reflects a pragmatic understanding that, in the face of domination from one bloc of power, survival and resistance sometimes require drawing strategically on alternative sources of authority and cultural capital, whether Islamic civilizational networks, Soviet-influenced modernization projects, or transregional Turkic connections.

Dwyer's work identifies Chinese Inner Asia as a language convergence area (*Sprachbund*), where she argues that social and linguistic convergence do not necessarily correspond to political economic dominance. This insight proves particularly relevant for understanding how Uyghur communities have historically navigated multiple imperial projects by maintaining what she describes as 'a common grammar of linguistic and cultural practices' that transcends political boundaries. Such strategic cultural positioning challenges oversimplified narratives that present minority communities as passive victims choosing between predetermined ideological options in a vacuum. Instead, Dwyer's ethnographic work reveals how Uyghur linguistic practices represent active attempts to maintain cultural sovereignty through selective appropriation and strategic resistance—creating hybrid forms of identity that neither fully conform to state requirements nor completely reject modernization but rather forge alternative pathways that preserve essential cultural continuities while adapting to changing political realities.

The New Script (1958-1982), by contrast, lacked the historical and cultural resonance of the Arabic-based system, leading to resistance among the Uyghur population. The PRC's script reform efforts thus confronted a challenge: while the

New Script was intended to facilitate literacy and modernization, its implementation inadvertently alienated Uyghur populations by marginalizing a cornerstone of their identity. This tension culminated in the Xinjiang People's Congress's 1982 reinstatement of the Perso-Arabic script—a policy reversal that tacitly acknowledged the script's indispensable role in preserving Uyghur linguistic and cultural integrity. Far from a mere administrative adjustment, this decision reflected the state's concession to the tenacity of Uyghur collective memory and the limits of top-down linguistic engineering. The reinstatement not only reaffirmed the script's symbolic capital but also highlighted the resilience of minority cultural practices in negotiating state hegemony. Dwyer's analysis suggests that this policy reversal represented a rare moment when Uyghur cultural resistance successfully challenged state linguistic engineering, demonstrating that even under conditions of political subordination, minority communities retain the capacity to defend crucial aspects of their cultural identity.

The reinstatement of the Arabic script not only marginalized the brief, experimental period of the Uyghur New Script, rendering texts such as *Qizil Chiragh* historical anomalies, but also reinstated a linguistic continuity that resonated with traditional cultural practices. Whereas literary works composed in the enduring Uyghur Arabic script continued to circulate widely, those produced in the New Script gradually fell out of favour in educational and public domains. This deliberate reversion to the Arabic script effectively erased the ephemeral legacy of a modernizing initiative, leaving *Qizil Chiragh* as a singular testament to a specific linguistic and political moment—a work intrinsically linked to its time yet ultimately disconnected from the subsequent dominant cultural trajectory. It is against this complex backdrop that the following dramaturgical analysis interrogates how *Qizil Chiragh* reveals the

tensions between the standardized revolutionary discourse of the CCP and the diverse, localized experiences of Xinjiang's Uyghur community.

Revolutionary iconography

According to a 1969 *Renmin Ribao* directive, the stringent requirements for *yangbanxi* transplantation demanded that all troupes maintain strict fidelity to the model productions, encompassing every detail from dialogue delivery and choreographed movements to stage lighting and even the mended patches on characters' costumes (Zhe, 1969). While *Qizil Chiragh* employed Uyghur actors performing in the Uyghur language and incorporating Uyghur *Muqam* musical traditions, the narrative structure and visual design remained closely aligned with the *jingju* model.

Both works adhere to a unified visual and performative framework: the protagonists, Li Yuhe, Granny Li, and Tiemei, are rendered with near-identical hairstyles, facial makeup, and costumes, alongside meticulously choreographed gestural lexicons. These elements transcend linguistic limitations, functioning as visual shorthand to signify their roles as revolutionary martyrs. Tiemei's postures and facial expressions, marked by a fusion of vitality, youthful vigour, and an audacious, occasionally playful demeanour (see Figure 3), embody the traditional *jingju* character archetype of the *huadan* (flowery female), a vivacious young female character aged 12–16 (see Figure 4). Her braided hair and vibrant red jacket accentuate her youthful energy, aligning with the *huadan*'s signature aesthetic of short blouses paired with skirts or trousers. Similarly, Li Yuhe's portrayal in *Qizil Chiragh* synthesizes traditional and model *jingju* conventions, notably through his attire and gestures. His *hukou* (tiger-mouth) hand gesture at his side (see Figure 5) evokes the *wusheng* (martial male) role's physicality, blending tradition with contextual

adaptation. Granny Li's muted, patched attire and clenched-fist gestures (see Figure 6) visually codify her steadfast revolutionary resolve, a motif consistent across both versions.



Figure 3. Tiemei in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.



Figure 4. Huadan character. Mei Ying (played by Wang Meng) in the jingju piece Sell Water (Mai Shui), Jixiang Theatre, 2024.



Figure 5. Li Yuhe in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.



Figure 6. Granny Li in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

Even the blocking is replicated with precision. For example, in an early scene, Tiemei draping a scarf over Li Yuhe (see Figure 7) introduces the main characters and their relationships, metaphorizing the transfer of revolutionary ideals. This meticulous preservation of visual and performative codes constructs a translatable semiotic system that foregrounds the narrative's ideological core.



Figure 7. Tiemei draping a scarf over Li Yuhe in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

Across both versions, the antagonist Jiushan (Hatoyama), chief of the Japanese gendarmerie, is rendered with meticulous iconographic coherence, his visual design functioning as a semiotic anchor to reinforce his role as the embodiment of ideological antagonism. Whether wearing a kimono or military regalia, Jiushan's performative aesthetics adhere to a rigid visual grammar that transcends costume changes to project a unified, ideologically charged identity. In kimono, Jiushan's physicality is marked by a forward-leaning posture and the rhythmic clatter of wooden *geta* clogs, a calculated choreography that juxtaposes cultural signifiers (Japanese tradition) with predatory intent (see Figure 8). When transitioning to military attire, his corporeal rhetoric shifts: the adoption of polished riding boots and a taut uniform amplifies his authoritarian presence, with an exaggerated heel strike and elevated stride height symbolizing martial dominance (see Figure 9). Crucially, the invariant physiognomic traits persist: a shaved scalp, circular wire-frame spectacles, and a thinly groomed moustache. These features operate as a transposable semiotic code, ensuring immediate recognizability while transcending cultural or sartorial context. The baldness evokes tropes of hypermasculine villainy; the spectacles refract

intellectualized malice; the moustache, minimally styled, signals a deliberate rejection of flamboyance in favour of bureaucratic austerity.



Figure 8. Jiushan in Japanese Kimono in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.



Figure 9. Jiushan in military attire in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

This iconographic template established by Jiushan's character design became the archetypal visual representation of the villainous Japanese military officer, a formulaic image that would proliferate throughout subsequent mainland Chinese *zhu xuanlü* (main melody) films and television dramas. The persistence of this visual stereotype can be observed in numerous productions: the Japanese commander

Yamada in the film *Tunnel Warfare* (1965) and Yoshio Shinozuka in the television series *Bright Sword* (2005). These characters invariably replicate the core physiognomic elements, shaved heads, wire-rimmed spectacles, and sparse facial hair, establishing a visual shorthand that renders the Japanese military antagonist immediately recognizable across decades of Chinese war cinema. This standardization of the enemy's appearance reflects broader patterns in socialist realist aesthetics, where ideological clarity supersedes individual characterization, transforming historical adversaries into archetypal symbols of foreign aggression.

Despite the rigid concept of 'model' in the transplantation project, *Qizil Chiragh* distinguishes from its *jingju* predecessor through deliberate infusions of quotidian realism and localized symbolism, thereby enhancing its 'human touch' and cinematic sensibility while retaining its ideological scaffolding. Unlike the overt Maoist spectacle of the model *jingju*, epitomized by opening dedications to *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, *Qizil Chiragh* omits this explicit Maoist iconography, redirecting audience engagement from centralized political dogma to localized historical memory. Where the model *jingju* deployed monochromatic red-flag backdrops to allegorize revolutionary fervour while the credits rolling, *Qizil Chiragh* adopts a muted brown palette overlaid with Uyghur *gül* (گۈل, floral) and *shani* (شەنى, geometric) motifs (see Figure 10). These patterns, drawn from Xinjiang's textile traditions, embed the narrative within a material historiography of Silk Road artisanal heritage.

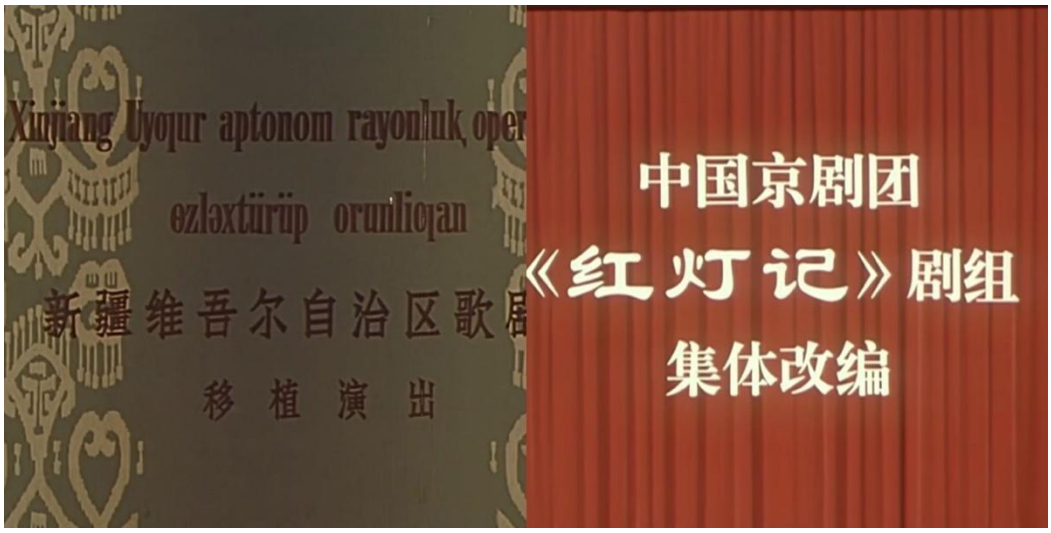


Figure 10. The opening credits rolling in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

Such design choices do not merely aestheticize ethnicity but reclaim cultural semiosis from the homogenizing impulses of socialist realism, reconfiguring Uyghur identity as both historically continuous and politically legible. By interlacing socialist allegory with ethnographic authenticity, the film negotiates what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms a 'third space' of cultural production: a liminal zone that ostensibly complies with state directives while subtly recentring Uyghur agency. This duality reflects the broader paradox of post-Mao minority cultural policy: the state's co-option of ethnic 'flavour' to perform pluralism, even as such representations remain circumscribed by Han-centric narratives of national unity.

Another marked absence in the Uyghur version is the highly stylized acrobatics and martial arts integral to its predecessor, replaced instead by a significantly scaled-down performance idiom that, while retaining theatrical elements, operates at a fundamentally different level of stylization than the rigorously codified *jingju* tradition. This shift reflects a deliberate reimagining of narrative form that creates a distinct performative register, which diverges sharply from the virtuosic demands of traditional *jingju* while maintaining its own mode of dramatic expression. The

wusheng (male martial roles) in traditional *jingju* epitomize a rigorously codified aesthetic, demanding years of specialized training in acrobatics and weaponry choreography. The 1970 model *jingju* film exemplifies this tradition: Li Yuhe's defiance is articulated through virtuosic movements such as aerial somersaults, *xitui* (crane-leg stances), and *zouma* (horse-riding pantomime), all executed with the precision emblematic of *wusheng* performance (see Figure 11). These stylized gestures, amplified by the synchronized acrobatics of supporting characters (e.g., the knife sharpener, PLA ensembles), transcend mere physicality to symbolize ideological resistance, as a hallmark of *yangbanxi*'s revolutionary semiotics.

In contrast, *Qizil Chiragh* operates within a markedly reduced stylistic register that strips away the acrobatic virtuosity while preserving only the most essential theatrical gestures. The Uyghur performers, untrained in the *jingju*'s kinetic lexicon, develop an alternative performative vocabulary that represents a dramatic departure from the precedent's aesthetic complexity. As evident in the comparison, while Li Yuhe's defiant stance retains basic dramatic elements, such as the raised fist, the confrontational positioning, it lacks entirely the acrobatic sophistication and codified precision of the *jingju* tradition. This represents not merely a modification, but a fundamental reconceptualization of how revolutionary defiance is embodied and expressed. The remake creates a distinct cinematic language by simplifying the performance idiom while maintaining core gestural signifiers (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. Li Yuhe on the execution ground, in the Uyghur film, Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and the model jingju film, The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

Cinematic innovation

A pivotal distinction between the model *jingju* tradition and *Qizil Chiragh* lies in their antithetical approaches to visual storytelling, epitomizing the dialectic between theatrical monumentalism and cinematic modernism. The model *jingju* film relies on proscenium-inspired techniques, such as frontal mise-en-scène, uniform backlighting, and unbroken long takes to preserve theatrical spatial unity, as documented in Jay Leyda's study of Chinese cinema, *Dianying/Electric Shadows* (1972:143), which chronicles how early Chinese film adaptations of traditional *xiqu* maintained stage-like visual conventions rather than embracing cinematic techniques. In contrast, *Qizil Chiragh* embraces montage as a tool for ideological articulation, synthesizing revolutionary pathos through the collision of images. This approach echoes Sergei Eisenstein's concept of intellectual montage, which creates abstract meaning through the dialectical collision of images, moving beyond narrative continuity to generate new ideological concepts (Eisenstein, 2010: 228). Eisenstein's maxim that montage 'is not an idea composed of shots, but an idea derived from collisions between shots' (2010: 241) explains the theoretical foundation for the film's visual strategy.

Li Yuhe's execution sequence exemplifies this montage-driven approach, deploying intellectual montage to transmute individual martyrdom into a collective utopian vision. The sequence's symbolic crescendo begins with rapid intercutting between Li Yuhe's stoic gaze and close-ups of roses—crimson, blush, white—petals unfurling in synchronicity with the lyric 'hundred flowers blooming' (see Figure 12). This botanical metaphor, evoking Mao's abortive Hundred Flowers Campaign[4], signifies both organic revolutionary renewal and state-controlled pluralism. As the chorus swells with 'New China shines like the morning sun', the frame dissolves into a seascape where a solar disk ascends behind storm clouds (see Figure 13), its amber rays fracturing the gloom as a visual allegory of Marxist historical inevitability—the dialectical materialist doctrine that socialism's triumph over capitalism represents not merely a political possibility but an inescapable consequence of historical forces and class struggle, with the sun's inexorable rise through darkness symbolizing how revolutionary victory emerges necessarily from the contradictions of the old order. Subsequent shots of scarlet banners rippling *en masse* during the lyrics 'Red flags everywhere' (see Figure 14) interposed with Li's execution, operationalize dialectical montage. In Eisenstein's theory, montage operates through dialectical collision: individual shots function as thesis and antithesis, opposing forces that generate new meaning through their conflict. Here, the clash between mortal sacrifice (thesis) and collective triumph (antithesis) resolves into a synthesis of transcendent revolutionary continuity.

[4] The Hundred Flowers Campaign, initiated by Mao Zedong between 1956 and 1957, encouraged citizens to openly critique and suggest improvements for the Chinese Communist Party's policies, aiming to reduce bureaucratic tendencies. However, the campaign led to widespread criticism, prompting a subsequent crackdown known as the Anti-Rightist Movement, which persecuted many intellectuals and dissenters. See Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Chinese Intellectuals* (Praeger, 1960) and *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, vol. 1* (Columbia UP, 1974), pp. 273-301.



Figure 12. Rose petals unfurling with the lyrics 'hundred flowers blooming', in Qizil Chiragh (1975). Screenshot by author.



Figure 13. The seascape with the lyrics 'New China shines like the morning sun', in Qizil Chiragh (1975). Screenshot by author.

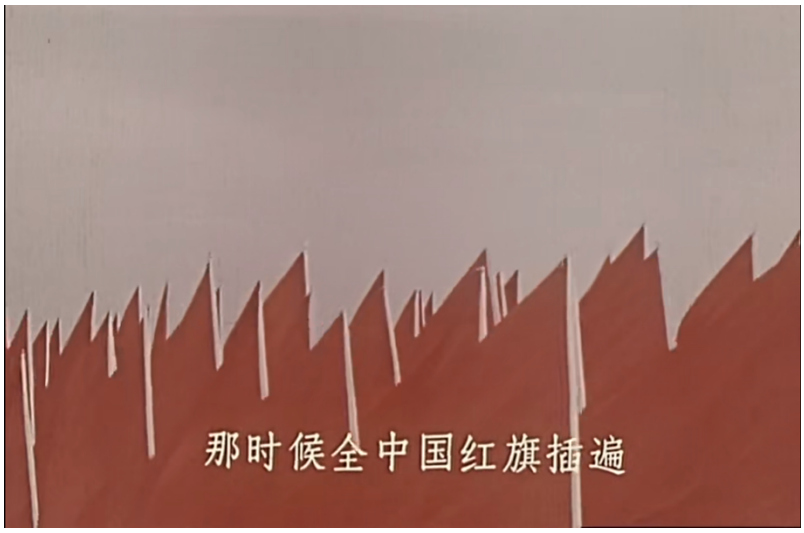


Figure 14. The scarlet banners rippling during the lyrics 'Red flags everywhere', in Qizil Chiragh (1975). Screenshot by author.

Post-execution, the montage escalates into abstraction. Following Li Yuhe's martyrdom, turbulent waves eroding coastal bedrock are juxtaposed with a mountain scene where the sun rises behind peaks (see Figure 15), their collision engendering what Eisenstein terms 'a third idea'—a conceptual meaning that emerges from the dialectical synthesis of opposing images rather than from either shot independently (2010: 235). The erosive waves signify the solemn and stirring nature of Li Yuhe's death, while the sun rising over mountains denotes the bright future of China's revolution. This collision produces the paradox of destruction as regeneration, transforming personal tragedy into collective hope through the very process of montage itself.

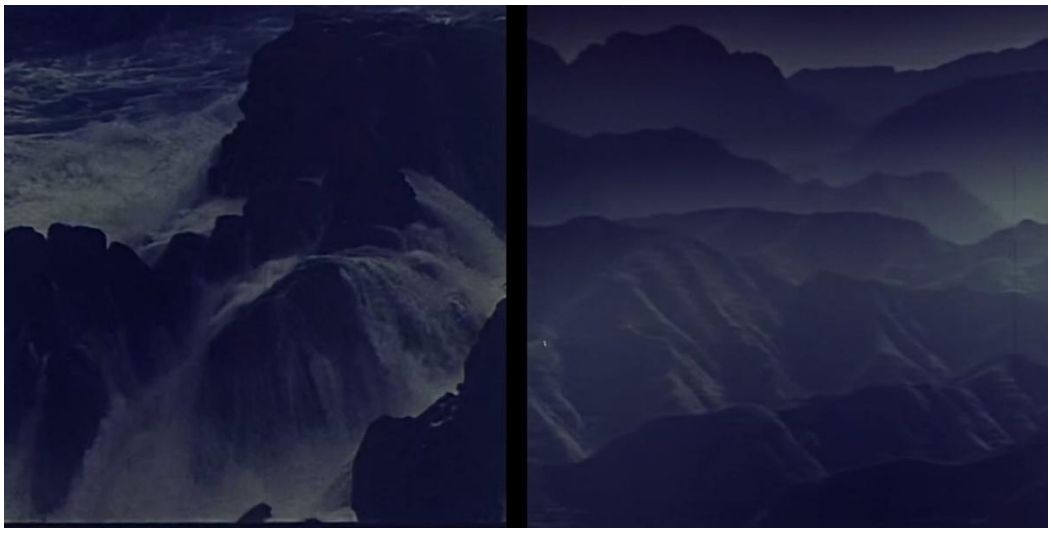


Figure 15. Post-execution scene, in Qizil Chiragh (1975). Screenshot by author.

Material culture and domestic realism

Other nuanced deviations of *Qizil Chiragh* from the *yangbanxi* aesthetic manifest in its meticulous reconfiguration of mise-en-scène, replacing the revolutionary minimalism of its predecessor with vernacular materialism, an attentiveness to quotidian objects and textures that privilege material realism over ideological abstraction. For example, Jiushan's office, a site of colonial authority, is stripped of the *jingju*'s metaphorical staging. Departing from the chiaroscuro lighting typical of *jingju* moral binaries, it features a desk lamp (see Figure 16), its pragmatic functionality underscoring the film's commitment to diegetic authenticity. Notably, the tonal palette also shifts: the crimson hues in the model *jingju* associated with revolutionary fervour give way to warm umber and ochre tones in domestic spaces (see Figure 17), evoking the sunbaked adobe vernacular of Xinjiang architecture.



Figure 16. Jiushan's office in Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), and in The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.



Figure 17. The tonal palette of Li's home in Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left) and in The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

Qizil Chiragh anchors its narrative in the tactile realities of domestic and communal life. Yet this atmospheric specificity is undermined by a visual vocabulary that remains deeply Han-centred. For example, the butterfly-shaped papercut on Li Yuhe's window, a motif widely recognized in Han folk tradition rather than Uyghur cultural practice, functions less as a localized emblem than as generic domestic décor (see Figure 18). Its later removal by Tiemei becomes a conventional visual cue

signalling the arrival of a Japanese spy masquerading as a CCP underground operative—not an instance of cultural specificity but a cinematic trope.



Figure 18. The close-up of the butterfly papercut, in Qizil Chiragh (1975). Screenshot by author.

Further embedding the story in Han-culture materiality, the film introduces props absent in the original *jingju*: a potted 'lucky bamboo' (Dracaena sanderiana) in Li's home (see Figure 19) and a bustling marketplace teeming with groceries, ceramics, textiles, and most importantly, a birdcage (see Figure 20). They are all visual tropes widely associated with Han Chinese domestic aesthetics, particularly urban locales like Beijing, rather than with Uyghur folk botany or market culture.



Figure 19. An extra 'lucky bamboo' in Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), compared with the same scene in The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.



Figure 20. The market scene in Qizil Chiragh (1975) (left), compared with the same scene in The Legend of the Red Lantern (1970) (right). Screenshot by author.

Qizil Chiragh situates its narrative in everyday domestic materiality yet remains visually mediated through a Han-centric lexicon, using motifs such as the butterfly papercut, lucky bamboo, and birdcage as symbolic markers of warmth and intimacy. Though these objects suggest lived realism, they do not reflect Uyghur lifeworlds; instead, they operate within Han visual idioms. As Vanessa Frangville and Jean-Yves Heurtebise (2020) notes, state-produced ethnic cinema in China tends to employ generic tropes, festive costumes, scenic landscapes, folkloric music,

promoting national unity while eliding cultural specificity and complexity. The film thus constructs a sensory portrait of Uyghur life that is made legible through dominant cultural codes rather than grounded in ethnic specificity. This aligns with broader *yangbanxi* logic, wherein difference is sanctioned only when encoded, sanitized, and flattened into a unified revolutionary realism.

Qizil Chiragh orchestrates a dialectical synthesis of ideological fidelity and cultural nuance, negotiating the fraught terrain of state-mandated socialist realism through a strategic reimagining of *yangbanxi* conventions. It retains core visual elements from the model *jingju* while integrating nuanced differences, ranging from detailed prop usage and colour modulation to montage techniques. This dual strategy aligns with Louisa Schein's concept of 'internal orientalism' (1997), whereby the state selectively appropriates minority cultural aesthetics to project the image of ethnic pluralism while reinforcing Han hegemony. Yet the film's subtextual layering, substituting Maoist hymns with *Muqam*-inflected chorales or diluting the *jingju*'s acrobatic spectacle into restrained realistic gestures, betrays an insurgent cultural agency. It operates as a counter-archive, materializing Uyghur's presence within a genre historically designed to diminish it. This aesthetic resistance, while circumscribed by state mandates, exemplifies the fraught agency of minority cultural production under authoritarian cultural policies. By privileging affective immediacy over didacticism, *Qizil Chiragh* reconstitutes revolutionary pedagogy as embodied memory, aligning ideological transmission with Uyghur sensory and spatial epistemologies. Thus, the film occupies an interstitial space within China's ethnic performance canon: neither fully assimilated into the *yangbanxi*'s monologic nationalism nor wholly autonomous in its cultural expression. Its significance lies

precisely in this ambivalence—a testament to the precarious agency of minority artists navigating the dual imperatives of state compliance and ethnic preservation.

Historical displacement

However, it's important to note that *Qizil Chiragh*, for all its use of realist aesthetic strategies, fails to engage with the distinct historical realities of Xinjiang during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Its predecessor is rooted in the North China Plain's resistance milieu, depicting underground Communist struggles against Japanese occupation in regions like Manchuria, where class antagonisms and guerrilla warfare defined daily life. In contrast, Xinjiang's wartime experience diverged markedly due to its geopolitical remoteness, Soviet-aligned warlord governance under Sheng Shicai from 1933 to 1944, and tenuous ties to the Nanjing-based Kuomintang regime.

As James Millward (2006) underscores, Xinjiang remained peripheral to the 'central plains-centric' resistance narrative, with its political dynamics shaped less by anti-Japanese fervour than by Soviet patronage, regional power struggles, and nascent Uyghur nationalist movements (212-215). While Uyghur resistance to external and internal domination was significant, evidenced by the Ili Rebellion (1944-1949) and anti-Sheng Shicai uprisings, it operated within a fragmented landscape of competing loyalties: pan-Turkic aspirations, Soviet socialist influence, and pragmatic engagements with the Chinese central state (Brophy, 2016: 103).

Qizil Chiragh's portrayal of a unified, class-based struggle against a singular foreign adversary (Japan) simplifies this multidimensional reality, eliding Xinjiang's interstitial status as a Soviet-Chinese buffer zone and site of cross-border ideological contestation. This temporal displacement constitutes one of the most important registers of involuntary mnemonic friction: the revolutionary narrative's linear

temporality, which as Chapter One established as linking revolutionary progress to a singular teleological arc, collides with Xinjiang's distinct wartime realities, producing a disjunction between the remembered past the *yangbanxi* encodes and the collective memory the Uyghur context carries. The film's inability to reconcile its borrowed revolutionary template with Xinjiang's lived historicity reveals the limits of state-sponsored multiculturalism. It exemplifies how ethnic minority cultures are conscripted into a Han-centric resistance narrative; their distinct struggles reframed as peripheral footnotes to the 'grand saga' of national salvation.

The downplaying or glossing over of Xinjiang's ethnic complexities in *Qizil Chiragh* demonstrates the CCP's conceptual framework of 'class as the underlying essence of ethnic issues', a notion that became central during the early socialist transition. In 1958, the CCP Central Committee articulated in its directives that 'in a class society, the essence of the ethnic question is the class question' (Huang, 2003: 18). This perspective was further reinforced by a *Renmin Ribao* article on July 2, 1964, which cited Mao Zedong's August 1963 remark in support of the African American struggle, stating that 'at its core, ethnic struggle is a class struggle.' It argued that, in a class society every ethnic group is a composite of multiple classes; thus, the true nature of ethnic conflict lies not in inherent cultural differences but in class antagonisms. Lenin's assertion that 'in every modern nation, there are two nations' (1995: 344), one comprising the ruling, exploiting class and the other the exploited working masses, provides a theoretical backdrop for understanding the transplantation choices of *Qizil Chiragh*. Its narrative, centred on underground resistance and personal sacrifice, portrays a heroic proletariat uniting disparate individuals across ethnic lines under a common revolutionary struggle. This emphasis on class struggle as the fundamental driver of ethnic relations compelled a reimagining of Uyghur cultural

expressions as an instrument of statecraft to construct a hegemonic memory of heroic resistance against foreign invaders—a cornerstone of the CCP's nation-building ideology

While *Qizil Chiragh* instrumentalized Uyghur culture to serve revolutionary dogma, it inadvertently safeguarded the near-extinct *Muqam* tradition from oblivion. By transposing classical *Twelve Muqam* melodies into a socialist realist framework, the film archived a disappearing oral heritage, albeit in a refracted form, ensuring its survival amidst aggressive modernization campaigns. This tension between appropriation and preservation underscores the fraught agency of Uyghur cultural forms under authoritarian cultural policies. Despite its statist agenda, *Qizil Chiragh* resonated with Uyghur audiences, who embraced it not merely as revolutionary pedagogy but as a rare platform for ethnic visibility. Its popularity reveals how state narratives can be locally reimagined as vehicles of cultural pride. This reception paradox, where ideological co-option coexists with communal affirmation, necessitates a closer examination of social mimesis: the process by which audiences reinterpret state-mandated symbols through vernacular sensibilities.

The following section interrogates this duality through the lens of social mimesis, exploring the dynamic interplay between state-imposed cultural forms and grassroots reinterpretation. By analysing how Uyghur performers and audiences negotiated *Qizil Chiragh*'s hybrid aesthetics, we uncover the subversive potential of performative compliance: a space where revolutionary pageantry is repurposed to remould ethnic identity. The film's warm reception, far from passive acquiescence, signals a mimetic resistance that transforms ideological tools into sites of cultural endurance.

Embodied ideology

The performers of *Qizil Chiragh* underwent a transformative process of social mimesis, wherein rigorous technical training and ideological indoctrination converged to produce living embodiments of the CCP's vision of a unified proletarian identity. As Heytäm Hüsäyin and Abdulemît Shadıq, actors who portrayed Li Yuhe, reflected in 1975, 'Performing revolutionary *yangbanxi* first requires being a revolutionary.' This assertion mirrors the 1970 *Renmin Ribao* directive, 'Learn to sing *yangbanxi*, and learn to be a revolutionary,' encapsulating the dual mandate of mastering both artistic technique and ideological orthodoxy. At the age of fourteen, Heytäm was selected from the Yining County Song and Dance Ensemble for the inaugural 'Xinjiang Ethnic Class' and subsequently dispatched to the Central Academy of Drama for intensive training. This state-sponsored education was characterized by exhaustive rehearsals focused on mastering precise gestures, vocal intonations, and emotional registers, while also instilling Marxist–Leninist principles through dedicated study sessions and political lectures.

As Gebauer and Wulf (1995) argue, social mimesis involves the processes of acquisition, articulation, imitation, and transformation within social practice. In *Qizil Chiragh*, this concept is vividly realized as performers internalized and re-enacted revolutionary ideology, transforming not only their stagecraft but also their very subjectivities. Heytäm Hüsäyin (1975) recalls that during rehearsals of *Qizil Chiragh*, "we ate, slept, and breathed Li Yuhe's defiance." In addition to studying archival materials on the model *jingju* troupe's portrayal of Li Yuhe, the Uyghur troupe routinely invited veteran cadres and comrades, many of whom had actively participated in the War of Resistance Against Japan, to share their harrowing personal experiences. These detailed recollections of hardship and sacrifice, including first-

hand narratives of life under brutal occupation and the subsequent struggles for liberation, served as potent educational resources and to bridge the gap between historical memory and lived reality. They not only enriched the performers' understanding of the multi-generational revolutionary saga of Li Yuhe's family but also accelerated the assimilation of the revolutionary *yangbanxi* into their own expressive repertoires. As Michael Dutton reminds us, Chinese revolutionary subjects were conjured up primarily by appeals to the senses through shared culture, history, and memory; this is distinctly different from the stress on rationality and constructivism in Western modernity. It was the rigorous training the performers went through that most effectively shaped their subjectivities (2012: 110). The intensive and repetitive training thus not only honed their artistic capabilities but also sculpted their subjectivities into the ideal Maoist model.

The imperative to continuously perform the revolutionary spirit was central to the Cultural Revolution's propagandistic strategy. As John A. Crespi (2009:142-167) notes, the person who performed this spirit would always be caught between being themselves and being a tool of the spirit. The Maoist performers tried to demonstrate their truthful and spontaneous outbursts of personal affection and emotion, but at the same time, they had to be at one with the dominant spirit. Individuals identified with Mao and revolution, both truthfully and mechanically: these performers were the 'singular' Maoist subject *par excellence*. On the one hand, they were given material support and were fed idealistic aesthetics that convinced them they were truly liberated. On the other, they were constantly reminded of their status as mere vehicles of the revolution. Once the revolution ended, their art lost all meaning. This is not unique to the Cultural Revolution; in all propaganda culture, performers had to trust and distrust their spontaneous feelings to achieve the self-contradictory stage in which performers

were required to demonstrate both their autonomy and their discipline. As Clark (2008: 102-103) observes, this paradox was sustained by relentless rehearsal and repetition, where emotional authenticity was drilled into muscle memory through standardized gestures, stylized vocal inflection, and ideological study. Such training ensured that performers internalized revolutionary affects until they could perform them reflexively: feeling and performing became indistinguishable through ideological conditioning.

Nonetheless, many performers of *Qizil Chiragh* have come to cherish their intensive institutional training for the very flexibility it afforded them in the realm of artistic innovation. They have adeptly blended traditional regional elements, such as the performance techniques of the Uyghur *Muqam*, with Western musical instruments (Harris, 2005: 81-86). These hybrid practices have enabled them to confront new challenges and sustain the vibrancy of their art in an era of rapid modernization. Rather than viewing the Cultural Revolution as a cataclysmic rupture with tradition, these artists perceive it as an opportunity opening up alternative avenues for the rejuvenation of regional operatic forms to rejuvenate itself through absorption and assimilation (Wong; 2016: 147-65). In this sense, *Qizil Chiragh* demonstrates a dynamic interplay between ideological instruction and artistic innovation, continuously redefined in response to both historical imperatives and regional exigencies.

Situated at the intersection of the transplanted *yangbanxi* tradition and the lived revolutionary realities of Xinjiang, the performers of *Qizil Chiragh* embodied the CCP's dictum that 'ethnic issues are fundamentally class issues.' Heytäm Hüsäyin acknowledged a disjunction between his personal experiences and the historical context depicted in the opera, particularly the Han Chinese struggles during the anti-Japanese war. Yet, he asserted a sense of class solidarity: 'We came from Uyghur

working-class families, and our fathers' generation had suffered exploitation and oppression under landlords and capitalists. Our shared experiences as children of workers endowed us with a unique sensitivity in shaping Li Yuhe's proletarian character, ideology, and emotions' (1975: 59-62).

Audiences reciprocated this class-first hermeneutic. Elderly viewers, drawing parallels to their own subjugation under pre-revolutionary hierarchies, reportedly approached Hüsäyin post-performance, declaring that they 'connected their own experiences of suffering under exploitation to the struggles of Li Yuhe's family' (ibid). Meanwhile, adolescent audiences, particularly girls, idolized the heroine Tiemei, vowing to emulate her defiance. This dynamic reveals a dialectical mimesis wherein performers and audiences collaboratively reinscribed revolutionary archetypes with lived experience. Far from passive replication, the process transformed ideological abstractions into visceral, cross-generational narratives of resistance—a testament to the interplay between state pedagogy and grassroots reinterpretation.

The overwhelming reception of *Qizil Chiragh* in Xinjiang demonstrates how a politically mandated work evolved into a deeply resonant cultural phenomenon. Utilizing traditional Uyghur *Muqam* as its foundation and incorporating Western symphonic elements, *Qizil Chiragh* forged an innovative aesthetic hybridity that captivated local audiences. According to archival reports from *Xinjiang Daily* (May 24, 1975, Issue No. 2447; May 30, 1975, Issue No. 2453; May 31, 1975, Issue No. 2454), the tour across various Xinjiang regions achieved unprecedented success. Despite severe logistical constraints, such as improvised outdoor stages, minimal technical equipment, and arduous travel conditions, local audiences flocked in large numbers, often travelling for days on foot to witness performances. During its performance in Korla, the passageways of the venues were so densely crowded that

spectators climbed walls and trees in their eagerness to witness the show firsthand. Despite this, several hundred people still could not gain entry and were forced to listen to the performance through loudspeakers from outside. In the particularly impoverished Shache County, local Uyghur villagers, unable to afford tickets, exchanged whatever scant foodstuffs they had, such as a bucket of oil or a basket of eggs, for admission. The gathering of ticket-seekers at the venue entrance resembled a bustling market. Attending a performance of *Qizil Chiragh* was such a momentous and prideful occasion that many newborns at the time were named *Mädəniyät* ('culture' in Uyghur) to commemorate the experience.

Over time, the political connotations of the transplanted *yangbanxi* were overshadowed by the cultural significance it held for the Uyghur people. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent shift in national political dynamics, both the opera and its film version ceased to be performed and screened. However, the musical repertoire of *Qizil Chiragh* persists as a living tradition. As Wang Mei (2014: 141) notes, its melodies remain integral to today's Uyghur oral culture, sung in households and repurposed as audition pieces for the Xinjiang Opera Troupe, as a testament to its enduring legacy. This trajectory underscores the duality of *Qizil Chiragh*: a state-mandated ideological instrument that inadvertently became a site of cultural preservation and communal pride. Its longevity resides not in revolutionary dogma but in its capacity to articulate Uyghur identity through a syncretic aesthetic, bridging political imperatives and cultural memories.

This public enthusiasm illustrates how *yangbanxi* transplantations were not merely vehicles of ideological transmission but also sites of negotiation where political imperatives intersected with local aesthetic and affective engagements. While *Qizil Chiragh* was crafted to reinforce the CCP's vision of class struggle as the primary

lens for understanding history and ethnic relations, its reception suggests a more layered process of meaning-making. Audiences did not passively absorb the intended political message but engaged with the work through their own cultural frameworks, and revolutionary art, despite its prescriptive intent, could take on a life of its own, fostering connections that extended beyond the ideological boundaries set by the state. *Qizil Chiragh*, therefore, embodies a complex interplay between top-down cultural discipline and bottom-up cultural resilience, reinforcing the CCP's assertion that the essence of ethnic issues is fundamentally a class issue, while simultaneously providing a platform for local identity and cultural pride.

Conclusion

The case of *Qizil Chiragh* illuminates the fraught interplay between authoritarian cultural engineering and ethnic resilience during the Cultural Revolutioon, providing a sustained demonstration of how mnemonic friction operates within a specific *yangbanxi* remake. In *Qizil Chiragh*, the two surfaces that meet, the revolutionary memory encoded in the *yangbanxi* model and the Uyghur linguistic and cultural context into which it is transplanted, generate friction that is involuntary and structural rather than intentional. The *Muqam* tradition, Uyghur vernacular speech, and Xinjiang's distinct historical memory were incorporated under state directive as instruments of ideological reach into non-Han communities, not as acts of creative dissent. Yet because these materials arrived bearing their own performance histories and affective charges, they introduced into the revolutionary form a surplus of meaning that the state's intentions neither authorized nor could contain.

The mnemonic frictions evident in *Qizil Chiragh* operate across multiple registers that together reveal how the *yangbanxi*'s discursive logic encounters its limits when transplanted across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. Formally, the tension

between standardized *yangbanxi* dramaturgy and the *Muqam*'s modal complexity generates a sonic friction in which the revolutionary narrative's affective certainty is refracted through melodic structures that foreground emotional registers foreign to the Han-centric model. Linguistically, the gap between Maoist rhetoric and Uyghur vernacular expression produces friction at the level of the word itself: the replacement of Chagatai and Arabic loans with Turkic neologisms and revolutionary jargon does not merely translate meaning but reconstitutes it, introducing semantic residues that exceed the state's discursive intentions. Temporally, the collision between the revolutionary historical narrative and Xinjiang's wartime realities exposes how *yangbanxi*'s linear revolutionary temporality cannot accommodate the multidirectional memories of a region whose historical experience diverges fundamentally from the Han-centric resistance narrative the model encodes.

These frictions are not merely oppositional; they prove ambivalent and generative, creating spaces where revolutionary memory is overwritten rather than replaced. As the Introduction theorized through the metaphor of the palimpsest, *Qizil Chiragh* functions as a cultural text in which the original *yangbanxi* remains legible beneath the Uyghur remake, producing a dual temporality in which audiences read the performance as both revolutionary and ethnically resonant, both ideologically compliant and culturally distinctive. While the work functioned as a disciplinary tool to homogenize socialist identity, Uyghur audiences and performers subversively reinscribed it with vernacular meanings, transforming it into a site of cultural endurance. The endurance of *Qizil Chiragh*'s melodies in Uyghur oral traditions, long after its political utility faded, and the grassroots reclamation of its aesthetics as markers of ethnic pride, demonstrate how revolutionary histories are remembered, embodied, and contested through the material practices of performance.

This dynamic of overwriting and persistence exemplifies how *yangbanxi* remakes function as palimpsests that destabilize Party efforts to sustain a hegemonic narrative. *Qizil Chiragh*'s legacy resides not in its success as a vehicle for socialist unity, but in its capacity to generate vernacular resistance: forms of cultural agency that emerge through language recoding and dramaturgical shifts that simultaneously accommodate and exceed state directives. The linguistic shifts from Chagatai to vernacular Uyghur, the vernacularization of Maoist rhetoric, and the persistence of *Muqam* motifs all testify to how revolutionary memory is a contested terrain where ideological archetype encounters its mutable iterations. This duality underscores a broader paradox of authoritarian cultural governance: the state's capacity to impose narratives is perpetually undermined by the irreducible agency of marginalized communities. While the CCP's project sought to erase difference under the banner of class solidarity, Uyghur audiences and performers reinscribed the remake with meanings that affirmed, rather than effaced, their distinct identity. *Qizil Chiragh* inhabits the floating gap between communicative and cultural memory with particular intensity: the revolutionary narrative the state sought to install as settled cultural memory encountered, and could not extinguish, the communicative memories of Uyghur communities whose own histories of resistance, faith, and kinship persisted in the very linguistic and musical materials conscripted to serve the revolutionary cause.

The involuntary character of mnemonic friction in *Qizil Chiragh* establishes the foundation for understanding the more deliberate forms of friction that emerge in later *yangbanxi* remakes. Where the Uyghur transplantation generates friction involuntarily through the irreducible density of cultural materials that resist seamless absorption into the revolutionary model, the post-Mao remakes examined in subsequent chapters operate under conditions in which the floating gap has widened,

the institutional constraints have shifted, and the relationship between model and remake is increasingly self-conscious. The analysis of *Qizil Chiragh* provides essential context for tracing how the same revolutionary source material generates different modes of mnemonic friction across different institutional contexts. What remains constant across these configurations is the thesis's central argument that the ideological structures, embodied codes, and affective registers of revolutionary memory do not transfer seamlessly into new conditions, and it is the friction generated by this encounter that constitutes the productive and politically significant afterlives of *yangbanxi*.

Chapter Three. Negotiated friction: genre hybridization and revolutionary memory in Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014)

Moving beyond the state-directed remakes analysed in the previous chapter, this chapter examines how commercial imperatives and cross-border co-production generate a different configuration of mnemonic friction. Following the 2003 Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), the integration of Hong Kong's media industry into the PRC's cultural economy intensified, blurring the lines between ideological production and commercial entertainment (Curtin, 2007: 109-32). For the Hong Kong film industry, which had undergone a prolonged downturn since the early 1990s, CEPA's preferential access to the mainland market represented an opportunity to revive and extend the signature creative strategies of Hong Kong cinema. This revival, however, came at the cost of navigating increasingly complex cultural negotiations through co-production arrangements that advanced the 're-sinicization' of Hong Kong, with increasingly blurred boundaries between the two industries.

In this context, Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), a Hong Kong-Mainland co-produced remake of the 1970 *yangbanxi* film *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, marked a crucial moment in Hong Kong's cultural engagement with post-Mao China. As the first *yangbanxi* film remake co-written and directed by a Hong Kong filmmaker, the film brought a *wuxia* sensibility to revolutionary material, combining the imaginative storytelling and moral ambiguity characteristic of Hong Kong martial arts cinema with the ideological gravitas of *yangbanxi*. The resulting cross-border institutional arrangement, enabling access to mainland markets while subjecting Hong Kong filmmakers to mainland censorship requirements and ideological expectations, generated a mode of friction distinct from that of state-

directed remakes: friction arising not from cultural incommensurability but from the competing demands of commercial viability, genre convention, and political acceptability.

This chapter argues that the genre frictions operating in the film are not only stylistic but mnemonic: they transform how revolutionary memory is received, transmitted, and experienced. By hybridizing *yangbanxi* with *wuxia* (martial arts and chivalry) and *zhu xuanlü* (main melody) filmmaking conventions, Tsui's remake does not simply update the revolutionary narrative but reconstitutes the mode of remembering it. Through the concept of mnemonic friction, the chapter traces how this reconstitution operates across multiple registers: the collision between *yangbanxi*'s didactic certainty and *wuxia*'s moral ambiguity; the tension between revolutionary collectivism and commercial individualism; and the negotiation between mainland audiences' nostalgic investment in *yangbanxi* and Hong Kong filmmakers' more distanced relationship to the CCP's revolutionary culture. The effect is to replace *yangbanxi*'s prescriptive, ideologically certain memory with a layered, ambiguous, and affect-laden recollection, one shaped as much by the institutional conditions of co-production as by Tsui's individual artistic choices.

The mnemonic history of *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014)

To understand the mnemonic stakes of Tsui's remake, it is first necessary to establish what is being remembered. Both the 1970 and 2014 film versions of *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* are based on Qu Bo's novel *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (1957). The narrative centres on Yang Zirong, a PLA reconnaissance soldier who infiltrates a bandit gang by disguising himself as the outlaw Hu Biao. Set during the Chinese Civil War, the story follows the PLA's campaign to eliminate a gang led by Lord Hawk (Zuo Shandiao), who claims Kuomintang affiliation and terrorizes the

local population. Initially hostile towards the Communists, the villagers, worn down by bandit violence, gradually align with the PLA, and their support proves decisive in Yang's mission. This narrative framework centring on ideological conversion, heroic infiltration, and collective liberation, provides the foundation for subsequent remakes.

The source novel, *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*, was based on the author Qu Bo's firsthand experience of the PLA's campaigns against warlords in Northeastern China (1946-1947). The novel, translated into English in 1962, gained immense popularity, selling over 1.56 million copies by 1964 (Yuan, 2021). In 1957, the Beijing People's Art Theatre adapted it into a *huaju* (spoken drama) work titled *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, which inspired the 1958 modernized *jingju* version created by the China National Peking Opera Company and the 1960 film adaptation by August First Film Studio. The 1958 modernized *jingju* was revised multiple times and became one of the *yangbanxi* works during the Cultural Revolution, with its final form adapted into a *yangbanxi* film with the same cast in 1970. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, *yangbanxi*, regarded as a symbol of extreme leftist ideology, was removed from public life. However, in 1986, with the reform and opening-up policy, selected *yangbanxi* librettos resurfaced during *Chunwan* (Geng, 2003). Since then, the narrative of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* has been repeatedly re/adapted into various media, including three TV series (1986, 2004, 2017), a video game (2006), and an animated film (2011). Tsui's 2014 blockbuster represents the most significant commercial reinterpretation under CEPA policy, marking both a continuation of the novel's multimedia legacy and a departure from its propagandistic origins. The re/adaptation highlights the tensions between the CCP's top-down strategies for shaping artistic production and the bottom-up responses from Sinophone artists to these directives, illustrating a complex interplay of compliance and resistance.

This trajectory of remakes is itself a mnemonic history. Each iteration represents not merely a new version of the same story but a reconfiguration of the terms on which the revolutionary past is recalled. The novel's communicative memory (Qu Bo's firsthand experience) was progressively formalized through institutional codification: first into spoken drama, then modernized *jingju*, and finally *yangbanxi* and its film adaptation. At each stage, the memory became more fixed, canonical, and tightly governed by the state's mnemonic regime. The *yangbanxi* version represents the apex of this canonization process, the point at which the narrative was absorbed into what Aleida Assmann (2010) terms the 'canon': the repertoire of cultural texts maintained and circulated by institutions to serve present needs. The post-Cultural Revolution remakes trace a different movement: the gradual return of elements that canonization had suppressed, which Assmann (2010) would locate in the 'archive', the reservoir of materials that have fallen out of active use but remain potentially recoverable. Tsui's 2014 remake draws on this archive, recovering narrative complexity, moral ambiguity, and individual interiority that the *yangbanxi*'s mnemonic apparatus had excluded. This trajectory reveals how revolutionary memory persists not only through ideological continuity but also through formal and affective residues remarkably adaptable to changing cultural and commercial conditions.

The cultural-political conditions shaping Tsui's remake are inseparable from Hong Kong's post-handover transformation. Since 1997, Hong Kong has undergone a process of 're-sinification' (Chan, 2013), with increasingly blurred boundaries between itself and mainland China. As Chu Yiu-Wai notes, "With Hong Kong's increasing dependence on mainland China, not just in politics but also in economic and cultural markets, it becomes ever more challenging for Hong Kong to maintain its cultural pluralities" (2022: 2). This highlights the pressing need to reconsider how

Hong Kong's cultural identity is inherited and transmitted. Sylvia Yau (2019) suggests that 'The seesaw battle between political correctness and market reality as evinced by new *zhu xuanlü* films provided an arena for Hong Kong filmmakers to develop their mainland ventures and retain Hong Kong's characteristics given its inevitable integration into the mainland.' David Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong* (2000) further underscores the hybrid nature of contemporary Hong Kong cinema, noting how filmmakers like Tsui Hark often transform traditional Chinese narratives through innovative storytelling techniques to engage both local and global audiences. Tsui's works, characterized by cultural syncretism and genre fusion, have been analysed by Stephen Teo (2001) and Tan See Kam (2016), who explore his postcolonial Sinophone perspective and how his films challenge traditional notions of Chinese identity through transnational aesthetics. Yet, many Hong Kong-Mainland coproductions have left behind local sensibilities, leading to what Esther CM Yau describes as the era of 'post-Hong Kong cinema', where the challenge lies in uncovering the 'hidden currents' or 'traces of the preceding vibrant Hong Kong cinema in coproduced films' (2015:18).

As a Hong Kong-Mainland coproduction, *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014) is inevitably connected to the propagandistic origins of *yangbanxi*. Yet under Tsui's direction, the film transcends those roots by incorporating elements of *wuxia*, Hong Kong cinematic traditions, and commercial blockbuster strategies. Rather than viewing the film solely as a resurgence of state-driven propaganda, this chapter argues that *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* perpetuates CEPA policies to safeguard Hong Kong-trademarked film genres while engaging in worldmaking to address historical dislocations. The following sections investigates how this remake reinterprets the politically charged *yangbanxi* genre, blending action and spectacle to engage contemporary viewers while responding to the ideological framework of the premade

work. By analysing Tsui's creative strategies in remaking *yangbanxi*, this chapter offers insights into how Sinophone artists can maintain an authorial voice even within a politically charged narrative and resist the constraints of the 'mainland model', characterized by meticulous regulatory standards, cumbersome bureaucratic processes, and stringent censorship (Chu 2022).

The mnemonic architecture of genres

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'genre memory' provides a useful framework here: genres, he argues, are 'representative of creative memory in the process of literary development…capable of guaranteeing the unity and uninterrupted continuity of this development' (1984: 106), embodying the voices of both past and present and thus serving as crucial sites for negotiating social contexts and cultural dialogues. This insight acquires particular force when applied to *yangbanxi* remakes, because in this context the 'memory' that genres carry is not merely aesthetic but ideological and mnemonic. To understand *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, it is necessary to approach the genres it draws upon both as stylistic traditions and as distinct memory practices, each encoding a specific relationship to revolutionary history and prescribing not only how stories are told but how the past is to be structured, transmitted, and felt.

Three genres are especially pertinent. *Yangbanxi* demands that the past be remembered as a morally unambiguous class struggle resolved by collective revolutionary action. *Wuxia*, by contrast, invites remembrance through individual heroic agency, ethical ambiguity, and the pleasures of embodied spectacle. *Zhu xuanlü* mediates remembrance through patriotic affect domesticated for commercial consumption. When these modes of remembering collide in a single text, they press against each other, transforming not only what audiences are invited to remember

about the revolutionary past but how they are invited to feel about it—a transformation of memory's substance and affect that constitutes the thesis's central concern.

Yangbanxi as Mnemonic Regime

As detailed in Chapter One, *yangbanxi* constitutes a systematically organized apparatus for prescribing how revolution should be remembered. Its discursive formation is structured by a series of tightly regulated correlations that function not merely as performance conventions but as institutionalized memory technologies. The most consequential of these is the principle of the 'three prominences' (*san tuchu*): all positive characters must be subordinated to the heroic protagonist, and all heroic qualities to be subordinated to a single dominant trait. This principle dictates not only how revolutionary heroes appear on stage but how revolution itself is to be recalled as the triumph of undivided proletarian virtue over unambiguous class enemies.

Applied to Yang Zirong, this principle produces a figure stripped of interiority. Yang is inscribed from the outset as an unwaveringly 'lofty, great, perfect' (*gao, da, quan*) hero, and nothing he subsequently encounters is permitted to disturb that image. Even while disguised as a bandit, Yang maintains the same proletariat language, communist values, and actions of *liangxiang* (striking a pose), accompanied by the makeup of bushy eyebrows and ruddy cheeks, that is often applied to the most heroic protagonist. In scene six "Into the Bandits' Lair", upon entering Tiger Hall as a disguised bandit for the first time, Yang still behaves like a proletariat hero, singing a Communist anthem: "Though I've come alone to the tiger's den, millions of class brothers are by my side. Let Vulture spew flames ten thousand leagues high. For the people, I'll fearlessly take this monster on." The scene is structurally primed for dramatic tension with identity concealment, power negotiation, the constant risk of exposure, but the 'three prominences' principle forecloses that potential. The double-

agent narrative demands a character capable of dissembling, of being genuinely other than he appears; the *yangbanxi* framework makes such ambiguity ideologically impermissible. The result is not merely a flattened protagonist but the effacement of the character arc altogether. Despite his passage through several testing encounters, including protecting villagers and surviving Lord Hawk's loyalty trials, Yang undergoes no psychological or moral transformation. He arrives complete and departs unchanged. In mnemonic terms, this is the point: a hero who changes cannot serve as a fixed memorial object.

The 1970 *yangbanxi* film's tripartite classification of characters into the PLA, the villagers, and the bandits, extends this logic from the individual to the collective. Yang is the quintessential 'heroic character', while the other PLA soldiers and villagers are 'positive characters', united under the revolutionary cause. The bandits, on the other hand, serve as 'negative characters', representing counterrevolutionary forces. This is not simply a narrative convenience but a deliberate act of de-individualization. Characters are essentialized into class functions, their particularity dissolved into categorical identity. Their purpose is thus explicitly mnemonic: they exist to be remembered as irredeemably heroic or irredeemably corrupt, thereby furnishing retrospective justification for revolutionary violence.

Narrative structure is enlisted in the same service. The film leaves conspicuous explanatory gaps, such as how Yang relays intelligence to the PLA, why the experienced Lord Hawk extends such ready trust to a stranger, that would, in any other register, constitute serious dramatic liabilities. These gaps are not oversights but symptoms of the *yangbanxi*'s priorities: where narrative logic might generate ambiguity, ideological resolution takes precedence, with the authority of Chairman Mao functioning as a kind of *deus ex machina* to dissolve dramatic tension before it

can accumulate. The memory of revolution, in this framework, must remain uncluttered by the complications of individual psychology or strategic contingency, for it is those complications that ideology requires forgetting.

Wuxia as counter-memory

In contrast to *yangbanxi*'s prescribed mode of remembering, the *wuxia* genre carries what might be termed a counter-mnemonic tradition: an alternative set of prescriptions for how the Chinese past should be recalled, rooted in values that the CCP's revolutionary memory apparatus systematically suppressed. Where *yangbanxi* remembers the past through collective class identity and institutional authority, *wuxia* remembers it through individual moral agency and personal bonds. Where *yangbanxi*'s temporality is teleological that revolution marching inexorably toward socialist triumph, *wuxia*'s temporality is cyclical, populated by recurring patterns of tyranny, resistance, and moral reckoning that resist any ideology's claim to historical finality. The *xia*'s code of honour preserves a pre-socialist ethical vocabulary, including Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist, that *yangbanxi*'s mnemonic regime sought to eradicate. They constitute a different memory practice, whose incompatibility with the CCP's revolutionary narrative led the Party to restrict *wuxia* in Mainland China until 1978.

Drawing on Stephen Teo (2009)'s account of the *wuxia* genre, its counter-mnemonic character is rooted in the figure of '*xia*' (heroic protagonist): typically a wandering knight-errant who rejects feudal authority, masters martial arts through trials and tribulations, and adheres to a code of honour combining Confucian values, such as *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *zhong* (loyalty), *yong* (courage), *li* (chivalry), with an ethos of individualism, *jieyi* (brotherhood), and resistance against oppression. Emerging alongside the anti-imperialist New Culture Movement (1915-

1923), the modern *wuxia* genre was from the outset invested in questioning authority including feudal, imperial, and later colonial, and it was these qualities that made the *xia* an unsuitable vehicle for the CCP's revolutionary memory. Where *yangbanxi* requires a protagonist subsumed into collective class identity, the *xia* is constitutively individual: their authority derives from personal virtue and physical mastery, not from institutional affiliation. To graft *wuxia* conventions onto a *yangbanxi* narrative is therefore not to perform a stylistic hybrid but to set two incompatible memory practices in collision.

This counter-mnemonic tradition was sustained and elaborated across the golden age of Hong Kong *wuxia* cinema from the 1960s to the 1980s, as the genre flourished in the spaces from which the CCP had expelled it. Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), the first Hong Kong film to gross HK$1 million at the box office, established a template of masculine sacrifice and lone heroism that centred individual suffering as the motor of narrative (Teo 2009: 93). King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and *Dragon Inn* (1967) brought a new level of choreographic and narrative sophistication to the genre, developing its capacity for spatial and political allegory (Teo 2009: 117–29). These films collectively elaborated a mnemonic repertoire, including landscapes of moral ambiguity, protagonists formed by personal ordeal, and loyalties defined by ethical code rather than class position, that stood in implicit opposition to the revolutionary memory being institutionalized on the mainland.

It was within this tradition that Tsui Hark emerged as a leading figure of the Hong Kong New Wave. *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983) transformed *wuxia*'s inherited vocabulary through fantasy and cutting-edge special effects, while the *Once Upon a Time in China* series, beginning in 1991, used the historical figure

of Wong Fei-hung to stage questions of cultural identity, national pride, and resistance to foreign encroachment that resonated directly with Hong Kong's anxieties about its own future (Teo 2009: 162). Tsui's *wuxia* films are characterized by intricate plotting, morally complex protagonists, and a persistent concern with what it means to be Chinese in the absence of any stable political or territorial anchor. Born in Vietnam, shaped by Hong Kong, and working across transnational circuits, Tsui occupies what Stephen Teo (2001: 148) identifies as a postcolonial Sinophone position: a 'third space' in which the demands of political China can be met with what Tsui himself describes as the recognition that the 'motherland' is, for those who have left, 'an illusion that exists only in memory' (2002, 195). This is both biographical context and epistemological condition that makes Tsui's engagement with *yangbanxi*, and the mnemonic regime of political China par excellence, so charged.

When *wuxia* conventions are grafted onto a *yangbanxi* narrative, the past cannot simultaneously be remembered as the triumphant march of class struggle and as a morally ambiguous landscape navigated by individual ethical agents. This collision between a memory practice that insists on collective teleology and one rooted in personal contingency generates the mnemonic friction that is central to this chapter's analysis of Tsui's 2014 remake.

Zhu xuanlü as memory management

The genre of *zhu xuanlü* (main melody) films occupies a third mnemonic position: neither the prescriptive regime of *yangbanxi* nor the counter-mnemonic tradition of *wuxia*, but a mode of memory management that seeks to channel revolutionary memory into commercially viable and ideologically acceptable forms. Where *yangbanxi* prescribed how revolution should be remembered, *zhu xuanlü* manages the conditions under which revolutionary memory circulates, operating

through commercial incentives, censorship parameters, and genre conventions rather than through direct aesthetic dictation. It represents the state's post-Mao recognition that the specific mnemonic technologies of the Cultural Revolution, such as rigid characterization, saturating repetition, compulsory collective performance, are no longer viable in a marketized cultural economy, while the ideological need to govern how revolution is remembered remains.

The term '*zhu xuanlü*' emerged in March 1987, when Teng Jinxian, then Head of the National Film Bureau, urged studio managers to 'foreground *zhu xuanlü* while encouraging diversity'. By the term, Teng meant films that 'embody patriotism, socialism, and collectivism; resolutely resist money worship, hedonism, and excessive individualism; and unshakably oppose capitalism, and all corrupt, exploitative trends' (qtd. in Su, 2016: 20-21). Derived from the musical concept of 'leitmotif', *zhu xuanlü* connotes both 'keynote' (Davis, 2014: 201) and 'state-sponsored' directive (Noble, 2008: 37): the state would set the ideological pitch, but the genre would no longer specify the precise formal means by which that pitch was to be sustained. This shift was itself a response to dual pressures: the domestic transition from Maoist cultural policy to a socialist market economy, and the growing influence of Hollywood and liberal ideology in mainland China (Vogel, 2011: 450-77). The political urgency intensified after Tiananmen Square Incident, when the state moved to deploy film systematically in restoring public faith in the Party, by monopolizing, as Rui Zhang notes, every aspect of the *zhu xuanlü* film 'from the recruitment of filmmakers to the exhibition of the films' (2008: 40). As a mnemonic strategy, this represented a significant recalibration: the state retained control over which memories of revolution were to circulate, but ceded control over specific forms through which they circulated.

The ‘blockbusterisation’ of *zhu xuanlü* films from the early 2000s onward marks the genre’s consequential transformation. Where early *zhu xuanlü* films had addressed their audiences as ideological subjects to be instructed, blockbuster *zhu xuanlü* addressed them as consumers to be attracted: revolutionary memory was no longer imposed but sold. Adopting Hollywood production values such as spectacle, intense plotting, and high-concept marketing, films such as *Assembly* (2007), *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), and *The Message* (2009) overcame earlier criticisms of the genre as ideologically ‘boring’ (Chen 2016: 85) by packaging revolutionary memory as entertainment. Deploying casts of hundreds of popular stars, these productions simultaneously attracted younger audiences and lent the films a heightened aesthetic appeal. While early *zhu xuanlü* films primarily appealed to older generations nostalgic for the revolutionary years, newer blockbusters have drawn younger viewers “with stars in every scene, high production values, and humanized portrayals of leaders, including those of the CCP’s historical enemies, the Guomindang” (Davis, 2014: 205). Thematic diversification accompanied this demographic shift. Rather than sustaining the grand revolutionary narratives and patriotic-collectivist frameworks of their predecessors, the blockbusters began channelling state messages through the everyday experiences of ordinary people, absorbing the narrative strategies of commercial cinema and responding to audiences increasingly shaped by global cultural exchange. Later productions such as *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *The Wandering Earth* (2019) extended this logic further, amplifying the genre’s commercial register while remaining within the censorship parameters that kept revolutionary memory ideologically bounded.

Since the implementation of the CEPA in 2003, the mode of Hong Kong-Mainland coproduction started to experiment with making *zhu xuanlü* more appealing and enhancing commercial competitiveness. The strategic 'blockbusterisation' of *zhu xuanlü* films has facilitated successful Hong Kong-Mainland coproductions, wherein Hong Kong filmmakers have adeptly navigated mainland criteria for marketability. For example, *Operation Red Sea* (2018), as an CEPA-enabled coproduction, was directed by Dante Lam, a Hong Kong filmmaker. This collaboration reflects a broader initiative to integrate Hong Kong's cultural identity within the mainland's overarching national narrative, thereby amplifying the social impact of *zhu xuanlü* films across both regions.

With the architecture of genres established, I turn to the film's genre hybridization, where its mnemonic friction is most visibly produced. As Chu argues, Tsui's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* 'introduced a paradigm shift into commercial, high-concept main melody blockbusters, finding a workable formula for an effective crossover of main melody films and commercial blockbusters for Chinese cinema' (2022: 45). Yet the film does more than blend commercial and patriotic elements: it forces three distinct memory practices: *yangbanxi*'s prescriptive regime, *wuxia*'s counter-memory, and *zhu xuanlü*'s managed memory, into friction with one another. The analysis that follows traces how each major formal decision reconstitutes the terms on which revolutionary memory operates: what can be remembered, through what affective register, and in whose name.

Characterization: from prescription to ambiguity

The most immediately visible transformation in Tsui's remake is the reconstitution of Yang Zirong from an instrument of *yangbanxi*'s mnemonic regime into a figure of mnemonic ambiguity. The remake challenges the rigid character

archetypes by introducing more nuanced and multifaceted characterizations. Tsui reshapes Yang Zirong as a morally ambiguous, relatable figure, moving away from the flat, one-dimensional hero of the 1970 version. The film humanizes Yang by presenting him with dishevelled hair, a stubbly chin, a menacing expression, and a commanding voice. His proficiency in bandit jargon and talent for singing *errenzhuan* (Northeast folk songs), along with the PLA commander's continuous distrust of him, raise suspicions that he might be a double agent for the bandits. Unlike the class-based identity of the premake, Yang in the 2014 remake is portrayed as an 'anti-hero' with attributes of a 'modern spy', akin to Chan Wing Yan, the undercover police officer in the classical Hong Kong police film *Infernal Affairs* (2002). Both characters appear to have been dismissed for disciplinary violations, but they were secretly chosen by high-ranking officials to infiltrate organized crime as undercover agents. Yang arrives in the village alone, never fully earning the trust of the PLA commander, who initially suspects him of being an enemy and even sets an ambush to attack him.

When Tsui replaces hagiographic certainty with moral ambiguity and the Infernal Affairs-style double agent, he transforms the mode through which revolution is recalled. Revolution is now remembered through suspicion, interiority, and ethical compromise rather than through devotion and transparency. The friction is mnemonic because it produces a different affective relationship to revolutionary memory: one mediated by doubt rather than devotion. The audience can no longer simply emulate or admire the revolutionary hero as the *yangbanxi* regime prescribed; instead, they must navigate the uncertain territory of a protagonist whose revolutionary commitment is inseparable from deception, manipulation, and moral compromise. The film showcases Yang's deceptive and ruthless actions, such as when he manipulates Lord Hawk by framing Brother Four, a fellow bandit, leading to his unjust execution.

This act underscores Yang's willingness to achieve his goals by any means necessary, regardless of ethical considerations. This act introduces into the revolutionary narrative a moral register that *yangbanxi*'s memory apparatus excluded: the memory of revolution as ethically costly, involving compromises that cannot be accommodated within the binary of proletarian virtue and counterrevolutionary evil.

Beyond resisting the *yangbanxi*'s characterization principles, *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* draws on *wuxia* narratives of anarchism, personal agency, and the intricacies of human relationships, thereby challenging the ideological rigidity of the 1970 *yangbanxi* version. The characterization of Yang Zirong as a master of disguise and deception mirrors the classical *wuxia* character Fan Yao, the Bright Right Messenger from Jin Yong's novel *Heavenly Sword and Dragon Slaying Sabre* (1963). Fan Yao's ability to infiltrate enemy ranks under various guises, ultimately advancing the Ming Cult's resistance against Mongol rule, embodies the quintessential *wuxia* values of loyalty, resistance, and the fight against tyranny. Similarly, Yang Zirong's performance as a rogue bandit, crucial to infiltrating Lord Hawk's stronghold, reflects these same values, albeit within the context of the Communist revolution. This connection underscores the film's departure from the *yangbanxi* tradition, which typically eschews individual heroism in favour of collective identity and class-based narratives.

The mnemonic friction generated by characterization extends beyond Yang to other characters, particularly in its recovery of elements that *yangbanxi*'s canonization process had relegated to the 'archive' (Assmann, 2010), the reservoir of suppressed or dormant materials that the active canon excludes. The 2014 remake introduces two characters that did not exist in the 1970 *yangbanxi* film: Qinglian, a woman kidnapped by Lord Hawk, and her nine-year-old son Xiao Shuanzi, who believes his mother to

be dead. Yang Zirong's daring mission to rescue Qinglian and restore familial unity echoes the classic *wuxia* scenario of 'the hero rescuing the damsel in distress' (*yingxiong jiumei*), a staple of the genre that highlights *wuxia* values of *ren*, benevolence and compassion, and the defence of the innocent. For example, in Jin Yong's *Heavenly Sword and Dragon Slaying Sabre* (1963), Duan Yu, a prince of Dali, undergoes a transformative journey into heroism through selfless acts of bravery, such as rescuing Zhong Ling's mother from peril and enabling the family reunion.

These subplots not only reinforce the *wuxia* tradition of valour and moral integrity but also recover an affective dimension that the 1970 film's mnemonic regime had systematically suppressed. The *yangbanxi* canon permits only class solidarity as a form of affective bond and excludes the familial, romantic, and personal attachments that structure much of human emotional life. By introducing Qinglian and Xiao Shuanzi, Tsui draws on what the canonization process excluded: the memory of revolution as it is experienced by families torn apart, by women subjected to violence, and by children separated from parents. These are the human costs that the 1970 film's mnemonic regime could not acknowledge without undermining its ideological clarity. The *wuxia* elements thus do more than offer 'alternative values'; they restore archived affects and narrative possibilities that the canon had foreclosed. The friction arises because these materials, including familial love, romantic vulnerability and individual moral agency, cannot be smoothly integrated into the canonical framework. They press against it, generating tension between two competing memories of revolution: one as class triumph, the other as human experience.

The film's treatment of the bandit group introduces a further dimension of mnemonic friction by displacing *yangbanxi*'s class-based collective identity with *jieyi*, the *wuxia* ethic of sworn brotherhood in which bonds between comrades can transcend

blood, hierarchy, and ideology alike (Hamm, 2005: 3). As analysed above, the 1970 film classifies characters into morally transparent collectives defined by class position, requiring that the bandits be remembered as evil: this is how the mnemonic regime retrospectively justifies revolutionary violence and installs class struggle as history's organizing force. Individual interiority, moral ambiguity, or affective depth among the enemy would corrode the clarity on which that frame depends.

Tsui's remake dismantles this mnemonic frame by giving the bandit characters individual complexity, moral ambiguity, and interpersonal bonds. Brotherhood is manifested in the interplay between the bandit leaders. For instance, Brother One, although brave, lacks the strategic thinking necessary for leadership, creating an underlying tension with the other brothers. In contrast, Brother Two is sly and considers himself the mastermind, yet his constant failures at undermining Yang expose the fragility and competition within the brotherhood. These flaws reflect the contradictions of *jieyi*, where loyalty is expected, but individual ambition sometimes fractures the unity. Brother Seven, on the other hand, provides a sense of comic relief with his exaggerated righteousness, representing the archetype of a well-intentioned but naive figure. Brother Eight's childlike innocence and trust in others highlight how, despite the corrupt world he inhabits, the value of brotherhood still offers moments of pure human connection and vulnerability. His trust, though ill-placed in some moments, mirrors the underlying tenets of loyalty in *wuxia* tradition, where brotherhood remains sacred despite moral ambiguities. What emerges is not a unified class enemy but a community structured by *jieyi*: loyalty that is chosen, morally ambiguous, and perpetually strained by individual desire.

The affective structure through which audiences are invited to recall revolutionary community changes: the warm certainty of class belonging is

overwritten by the complex, contingent bonds of chosen allegiance. The friction arises between the two memory practices: one admits only collective, ideologically sanctioned feeling; the other insists on the irreducibility of the personal. *Jieyi* also introduces a temporal dimension to this friction. As a Confucian-inflected ethical formation, it carries within it a memory of pre-revolutionary China, which is the very world that the Communist revolution claimed to have superseded. Inserting *wuxia* brotherhood into a revolutionary narrative reactivates a layer of cultural memory that *yangbanxi* had sought to overwrite, inviting audiences to experience revolution not as a clean historical break but as continuous with older traditions of honour, loyalty, and personal obligation.

The mnemonic friction generated by characterization reaches its most significant expression in the film's treatment of its archvillain, Lord Hawk. In *yangbanxi*'s mnemonic regime, the flat villain serves a specific function: the enemy must be remembered as irredeemably evil to justify revolutionary violence. The binary moral framework functions as a memory technology that produces a particular affective relationship to the past, in which revolutionary violence appears not as a historical choice requiring ethical justification but as a natural, inevitable response to unambiguous evil. Unlike the flat, one-dimensional antagonists often seen in *yangbanxi*, Lord Hawk, played by acclaimed Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Ka-fai, is depicted as a multifaceted leader with political aspirations that extend beyond mere banditry. His ambition to 'command Peony River' and 'become the king of Northeast China' adds a layer of political intrigue to his character, aligning his character with the sophisticated, strategic villains commonly found in *wuxia* narratives. His leadership is marked by both cruelty and charm, as the film delves into his twisted charisma and ability to maintain a hold over his gang. Further complicating his

character is Lord Hawk's relationship with his concubine, Qinglian. His jealousy and affection for her reveal a more human, albeit flawed, side to his persona, adding emotional complexity to his ruthless exterior. This depth is further enhanced by the inclusion of comedic elements, such as his love for performing *errenzhuan* and his peculiar speech habit of saying 'one word', followed by several more. These traits introduce moments of levity and make him more relatable, contrasting sharply with his violent nature.

If the enemy can be remembered as human, who is charming, funny, capable of love, the moral architecture through which the revolutionary past justifies itself is destabilized. The revolutionary violence can no longer be recalled as a simple moral necessity but be remembered as a historical choice made against human beings rather than abstractions of evil. This does not necessarily delegitimize revolution, but it transforms the affective register through which it is recalled, introducing moral complexity into a memory that the *yangbanxi* regime had engineered.

Narrative strategies: the absence of history

To transcend genre boundaries, *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* also employs narrative strategies, such as metafiction and cyclical narrative structure, opening an imagined, heterogeneous space that blends past and present, reality and imagination. The narrative framework through which Tsui structures the audience's relationship to revolutionary memory is where the film's mnemonic stakes are explicitly articulated. The story of Yang Zirong taking Tiger Mountain is framed through the perspective of Jimmy, an ethnic Chinese residing in New York who decides to return to China for the Spring Festival. During a taxi ride to the airport, Jimmy watches the 1970 *yangbanxi* film *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. Through Jimmy's recollections

and imagination, the 2014 remake weaves together fact and fiction, recontextualising *yangbanxi* within the realms of memory and spectatorship.

Jimmy embodies the floating gap where mnemonic friction occurs. As the grandson of Xiao Shuanzi, a war survivor, he stands at the outer limit of communicative memory: the revolutionary events of 1946 are too distant for his own lived experience yet intimately present through his grandfather's testimony. At this threshold, where oral recollections shared among living generations begin to lose their carriers, the past occupies an unstable zone, which is too politically charged and too anchored in living experience to be safely mythologized, yet too remote from Jimmy's present to be sustained through everyday communicative exchange alone.

Jimmy's diasporic location compounds this liminality. Residing in New York, he is geographically removed from the PRC's institutional memory regime. His access to the revolutionary past is already remediated: he first encounters it through the karaoke screen showing the 1970 *yangbanxi* film. This mediated encounter dramatizes the condition of revolutionary memory at the present historical moment, no longer transmitted through direct bodily experience or communal performance (as during the Cultural Revolution's saturation of public life) but encountered through technological reproduction, at a remove that introduces both critical distance and nostalgic longing.

By positioning Jimmy as the lens through which the audience experiences the narrative, the film lets the audience know that they are watching something 'imagined', emphasizing the fluidity of memory and the subjective nature of historical interpretation. What follows is not the revolutionary past itself but a specific act of remembering, conditioned by generational distance, diasporic displacement, and the mediation of competing cultural forms. The audience watches a character who is also watching and reimagining, a film about revolution. This layered spectatorship is a

mnemonic operation: it makes visible the processes through which revolutionary memory is constructed, transmitted, and transformed, rather than presenting that memory as transparent, self-evident, or ideologically natural. This metafictional approach, as Patricia Waugh (1984) argues, self-consciously draws attention to the film's status as a constructed artefact, thereby posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. This strategy makes the construction of revolutionary memory visible, resisting *yangbanxi*'s mnemonic regime by concealing its own constructedness. By foregrounding the act of remembering, Tsui's film denaturalizes state memory, exposing it as one possible construction among others.

This denaturalization is further emphasized in the film's surrealistic battle scenes. The PLA soldiers are depicted as skilled marksmen, never missing a shot, and when confronted with enemy grenades, they throw them back with precise timing, resulting in massive explosions that decimate the enemy. These scenes, while unrealistic, are justified within the narrative as the reminiscence of a war survivor, where Jimmy's admiration for the PLA reconciles these illogical plots with the harsh realities of warfare. The hyperbolism is not simply commercial spectacle; it is the specific texture of memory at the edge of the floating gap, where the grandfather's testimony becomes the grandson's fantasy.

The film culminates in a fantastical sequence where Jimmy imagines meeting his grandfather and the PLA heroes at the New Year dinner table. His monologue, 'Grandfather mentioned a secret airstrip in Tiger Mountain. So, in my imagination, there is another version of the ending', provides a further interpretation of the reminiscing nature of the narrative. Consequently, the audience is treated to a surreal aerial battle, showcasing the fusion of ancestral storytelling with the descendant's imagination. This layering of narratives creates a repeated engagement with the same

story from different angles. The mise-en-scène of this final scene reflects Tsui's cinematic signature of grand, sweeping shots, enhanced CGI effects, and a focus on elaborate set pieces, particularly in the action scenes. As Dai Jinhua comments, 'The final scene featuring a Captain America-style helicopter fight serves as evidence of the absence of history. When that history and its narrative logic have dissipated, everything becomes reasonable, and anything is possible' (qtd. in Xu, 2015).

This 'absence of history' occurs when communicative memory can no longer sustain itself. When Jimmy can no longer access the revolutionary past through his grandfather's living testimony, he mythologizes it, but in a personal, familial, imaginative direction rather than in the state-authorized direction. His fantasy ending represents what happens when revolutionary memory passes beyond the reach of communicative exchange and enters a zone of creative reconstruction. The mnemonic friction here is between the state's claim to determine how revolution is canonically remembered and the individual's insistence on constructing a personal, affectively charged relationship to that past. Jimmy's imagined aerial battle between Yang Zirong and Lord Hawk is not a reproduction of state memory but an alternative mnemonic act, which recalls revolution through familial intimacy, blockbuster spectacle, and imaginative speculation rather than ideological prescription.

The film's cyclical narrative structure, illustrated by the repetition of the opening scene at the end, reinforces the idea that history is not a linear progression but rather a series of recurring motifs and narratives that are continually reinterpreted and reimagined. This structure parallels the non-linear, culturally specific narratives that resist the CCP's teleological narrative of revolutionary progress and traditional Chinese-centric interpretations of history. As the end credits begin to roll, the audience is presented with a scene in which Jimmy is seated at a New Year's Eve dinner table

with his elderly, real-life grandmother and the imagined figures of his late grandfather (depicted as a nine-year-old Xiao Shuanzi) alongside the revolutionary heroes from 1946. On the television in the background, the 1970 *yangbanxi* film *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* is playing, showing the very scene of Yang Zirong's ascent of Tiger Mountain, which opened the 2014 film (see Figure 21). It loops the 2014 film remake's ending to the start of the 1970 *yangbanxi* film, creating a circular narrative structure that fuses the plot and the story and that defers narrative closure. This refusal of closure keeps the revolutionary past in the floating gap, preventing it from settling into either the state's cultural memory or the amnesia of complete forgetting. The loop suggests that revolutionary memory is not yet finished or safely deposited in the settled history, but is continually re-entered, re-imagined, and re-contested with each new act of remembering.



Figure 21. A still from The Taking of Tiger Mountain (2014), directed by Tsui Hark. Screenshot by author.

Visual motifs are also repeated to reinforce the cyclical nature of history and memory, through which historical hindsight and its attendant insights permeate the narrative, fostering extratextual dialogues about China's historical trajectory. The film transits between 1946 and 2015, using recurring pencil sketches of 1946 scenes by

Yang Zirong (see Figure 22) and segments from the 1970 *yangbanxi* film (see Figure 23) to evoke both historical and fictional extradiegetic sources. This establishes a symbolic conduit that connects China's past, present, and future within a combined historical-fictional timeframe. Through this conduit, the film becomes a space where historical narratives are not just retold but are actively reinterpreted, critiqued, and reimagined.

The pencil paintings and *yangbanxi* librettos, disconnected from the spatiotemporal narrative in the main story, become 'disembodied' fragments of revolutionary memory that have detached from their original context and now circulate freely within the film's heterogeneous mnemonic space. Their remediation from stage performance to film to pencil sketch to digital cinema traces the path of revolutionary memory as it travels across media, accumulating new meanings at each point of transit while retaining traces of its prior contexts. By blending these mediations, the film creates a palimpsestic experience where multiple temporal layers coexist without resolution, utilizing this temporal 'mash-up' to reject traditional narrative conventions and foreground the impossibility of accessing 'a true past'.



Figure 22. A still from The Taking of Tiger Mountain (2014), directed by Tsui Hark. Screenshot by author.



Figure 23. A still from The Taking of Tiger Mountain (2014), directed by Tsui Hark. Screenshot by author.

The cyclical structure thus generates mnemonic friction at the level of narrative temporality. *Yangbanxi*'s revolutionary memory operates through linear teleology: the narrative moves inexorably from oppression through struggle to liberation, encoding history as a progressive trajectory culminating in the Communist victory. The loop between the 2014 Jimmy's imagination, the 1970 *yangbanxi* film, and the 1946 Yang Zirong taking the Tiger Mountain, where the ending of one becomes the beginning of the other, disrupts this teleological structure, replacing it with a recursive temporality in which the past is never settled but continually revisited and reimagined. This narrative temporality literalizes the floating gap that Jan Assmann identifies as the contested zone between communicative and cultural memory. Jimmy's transgenerational act of remembering, mediated through both the *yangbanxi* film and his own imagination, occupies this transitional zone: too distant for direct experience, yet too intimate for settled mythologization.

The film also adopts the *jiegu fengjin* (employs the past to comment on or lampoon the present) mode of literary/political criticism as a critique of official state narratives, particularly in the context of contemporary political uncertainties in Hong

Kong. Translated literally as 'borrowing from the past to criticise the present', *jiegu fengjin* encourages 'allegorical' readings of history to fiction and vice versa, generating off-screen and extratextual conversations, interpretations, and deconstructions. Tsui's penchant for narrating troubled times, embodying anarchism, and highlighting the significance of human agency in navigating political complexities is evident in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*. The *jiegu fengjin* mode of narration in this film is significant in its ability to intertwine a spatiotemporal imaginary in the context of Hong Kong's socio-political landscape, connecting the past (the civil war between the CCP and the Kuomintang) with the present (political uncertainties in post-handover Hong Kong), while also projecting forward to the future (Hong Kong electoral reforms). Despite the readiness of many Hong Kong artists to engage with the mainland market, the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests underscore ongoing mistrust and concerns among local Hong Kong residents regarding heightened political ties with Beijing authorities. The interplay between past and present in *jiegu fengjin* narratives invites viewers to reconsider their understanding of history and its relevance to current societal challenges, thereby enriching the discourse around political engagement in *yangban-xi* remakes.

The Taking of Tiger Mountain contains various structures with conflicting political messages and acts as a 'powerful agent for political change' (Grochala, 2017: 58), counteracting the dominant state-endorsed rhetoric, while occasionally aligning with it. It demonstrates how *zhu xuanlü* films, inscribed with 'genre memory' (Bakhtin, 1984: 106), remake the core ideological functions of *yangbanxi*, reinforcing state narratives and national identity, to a commercial and globally influenced context. It recontextualizes elements of *yangbanxi* to subtly critique or distance itself from the overt political messages of the premade, thereby reflecting the complex cultural

dynamics between Hong Kong and mainland China. The interplay of these genres not only illustrates the fluid nature of history and memory but also demonstrates how Hong Kong filmmakers navigate and resist the state forces through their creative work.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014) functions as a site of negotiated mnemonic friction, where Hong Kong's commercial cinematic sensibilities encounter the mainland's revolutionary past within the complex terrain of the post-handover, post-CEPA era. By exemplifying the cultural nuances and specificities of *yangbanxi* remakes, this chapter broadens the scope of *yangbanxi* studies in understanding how dominant narratives can be engaged with and meanwhile, subverted. Each generic element in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, including the propagandistic *yangbanxi* and *zhu xuanlü* traditions, and the more rebellious, freedom-oriented *wuxia* genre, carries its own prescriptions for how the revolution should be recalled, and when these prescriptions collide within the same text, they reconstitute the terms on which revolutionary memory operates. Through genre hybridization and narrative structures of metafiction, narrative repetition, and *jiegu fengjin*, the film recontextualized the core ideological functions of *yangbanxi*, resisting the overt political messages of the premade while also aligning with the *zhu xuanlü*'s patriotic themes and *wuxia*'s anarchism and knightly virtues. This trinity allows the film remake to serve as a cultural battleground where various recollections towards the revolutionary past, are resisted, reasserted, and reinterpreted.

Identifying these mnemonic frictions reveals the underlying mechanism through which revolutionary memory is reconfigured and sustained in post-Mao commercial culture. Because *yangbanxi* encodes a particular mode of remembering the revolutionary past, and because *wuxia* and *zhu xuanlü* encode alternative modes,

the hybridization produces a different kind of memory. By filtering the revolutionary past through individual affect, transgenerational imagination, and diasporic longing, Tsui's film transcends the rigid prescriptions of the *yangbanxi*. These layers of meaning demand an analytical framework that goes beyond genre alone. Mnemonic friction explains what the remake produces: a new version of the old story and, more importantly, a new mode of remembering it.

This chapter advances the thesis's investigation of *yangbanxi* remakes by examining how market-driven cultural production intersects with state ideological imperatives within the PRC. It reinforces the broader argument that *yangbanxi* remakes constitute crucial sites for examining how revolutionary discourse is continually remembered, enacted, and reconfigured in response to changing political and commercial conditions. The film's negotiation between mainland audiences' nostalgic investment in *yangbanxi* and Hong Kong artists' more distanced relationship to CCP revolutionary culture demonstrates how the floating gap enables alternative articulations of revolutionary memory that resist both China-centric hegemony and complete assimilation. By maintaining the formal afterlives of Maoist revolutionary culture while adapting to the contingencies of the post-Mao present, such works demonstrate the remarkable persistence and adaptability of revolutionary forms in contemporary Chinese cultural production. In doing so, they reveal how cultural memory functions as dynamic reconstruction that remains vital to understanding the evolving landscape of *yangbanxi* and its role in articulating new forms of cultural identity and belonging.

The following chapter shifts focus from the commercial cinema screen to the independent avant-garde stage. Where this chapter has traced negotiated friction through the strategic choices of a Hong Kong filmmaker operating within state

constraints, the next chapter traces autobiographical friction, in which the performing body itself becomes the site where personal and collective memory physically press against each other. This transition from screen to stage, from commercial to experimental, reveals the diverse pathways through which *yangbanxi* materials continue to generate new forms of cultural meaning and political possibility across different performative contexts and institutional frameworks.

Chapter Four. Autobiographical friction: revolutionary discipline and embodied critique in Wen Hui's *Hong* (2015)

This chapter investigates how independent artist Wen Hui's avant-garde dance theatre *Hong* (2015) functions as a deconstructive counter-text to the 1964 revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* and its subsequent institutional restagings. The work emerged from Wen Hui's Living Dance Studio, an independent space founded in Beijing in the 1990s that has operated largely outside state-sanctioned cultural infrastructure while maintaining a precarious, semi-tolerated existence within the city's contemporary arts ecology (Seetoo, 2021: 276). The Studio's sustained practice of integrating documentary investigation with embodied performance (ibid.) established the methodological and institutional conditions from which *Hong* emerged. This institutional positioning, neither fully supported nor explicitly suppressed, is constitutive of the mode of friction the chapter analyses: it enabled a form of autobiographical, body-centred inquiry into revolutionary memory that could not have been produced under conditions of either full state direction or commercial co-production. Rather than constituting a remake that reproduces source material with artistic modifications, *Hong* operates as what I term a 'critical counter-remake': a work that takes a canonical original as its subject and point of departure, dismantling its disciplinary structures through documentary investigation, somatic archaeology, and embodied reflexivity.

Through comparative analysis of three pivotal iterations of *The Red Detachment of Women*, the chapter traces how embodied ideology is recalibrated across distinct historical and performance contexts: the original *yangbanxi* ballet (1964), its televised revival by China Media Group (CMG) for *Chunwan* (Spring Festival Gala) (2014), and Wen Hui's *Hong*, a multimedia dance-theatre work that premiered in Shanghai in 2015 before touring internationally, including at London's

Southbank Centre as part of Dance Umbrella 2018. The *Chunwan* restaging and *Hong* represent contrasting strategies for remaking *yangbanxi*. The former operates through what I call 'frictionless remaking', in which the memory contradictions, gendered violence, and historical trauma embedded in the source material are smoothed over to produce a palatable spectacle of national unity. The latter practices 'friction-foregrounding remaking', in which those contradictions become the very substance of its artistic inquiry, rendering visible the disciplinary inscriptions and suppressed experiences that official memory seeks to efface. This chapter contributes to the thesis's argument that remaking *yangbanxi* operates along a spectrum: from institutional reproductions that reinforce ideological continuity and suppress historical contradictions to independent artistic interventions that excavate and expose the embodied tensions concealed within official cultural memory.

The central argument is that Wen Hui's *Hong* reframes the revolutionary body through practices of somatic remembering, destabilizing official iconographies while creating alternative spaces for mnemonic engagement and embodied resistance. By foregrounding the tensions between institutional memory and personal experience, *Hong* reveals how the body serves as both archive and agent of cultural transformation in contemporary China. Central to this investigation is what this chapter terms the dramaturgy of the body: the body as repository, document, presence, and living archive, through which Chinese revolutionary aesthetics and cultural memory are deconstructed and reimagined. However, this investigation also confronts an ethical dilemma: the act of somatic re-engagement with previously painful disciplinary experiences, while potentially reparative, risks reactivating the very traumas it seeks to address. This tension between reparative possibility and retraumatization runs

through the chapter's analysis and connects it to the practice-led inquiry of Chapter Five.

Situating this analysis within the transformation of the Maoist body from collectivist instrument to aesthetic symbol and commodified spectacle, I examine how bodily discipline operates simultaneously as ideological medium and site of resistance. Drawing on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory (2011) and Walter Benjamin's concept of mechanical reproduction (1935), the chapter explores how the performing body has been mobilized to transmit and contest ideological meaning across shifting political landscapes. The theoretical framework further incorporates Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the docile body (1977) to illuminate how corporeal presentation in social space both reflects and reinforces broader classificatory systems, and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (1935) to examine the micro-performative dimensions through which individual performers internalize, enact, and subvert the ideologies encoded within their physical training and performance regimes.

The Maoist body

During the Maoist period (1949-76), the body was envisioned as a revolutionary tool, integral to the CCP's prospect of societal transformation. The Maoist body was not merely a biological entity but a disciplined, ideological construct, embodying collectivist ideals and national rejuvenation. Jörg Huber (2013) notes that the Maoist body is 'a schematic adjunct of religious, cultural, and social exigency' (7), which aligns with Susan Brownell's (1995) assertion that Maoist ideology was inscribed on the physical body, emphasizing militarism, egalitarianism, and collectivism. Brownell argues that the CCP has employed bodily performances to contribute towards abolishing and converting outdated thinking and creating new consciousness. The body in the mass-swimming craze propelled by Mao's keenness

in swimming (Poon 2019), the 'quotation gymnastics', where practitioners acted out Mao's quotations through gymnastic movements (Leese 2011), and the 'loyalty dance', where people danced in front of a portrait of Mao while positioning their arms and legs to show the Chinese character 'loyalty' (*zhong*) (Lu 2004) became physical demonstrations of loyalty through rituals of political mobilization and activism.

As Mao articulated in *A Study of Physical Education* (1917), the physical body needed strengthening as a preparatory step for national defence. This call emerged from China's historical struggles, such as the Qing dynasty's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), which left the nation vulnerable to imperialist forces and branded the Chinese as the 'Sick Man of East Asia'. Mao proposed that physical education was key to expunging this humiliating label and rehabilitating the nation into a powerful socialist state. This ideal found its clearest expressions in the regimented physicality of organized labour, military drills, and mass rallies. Mao framed revolutionary transformation as a process involving the body and mind, emphasizing the integration of individual labour into collective production as essential for a socialist state. He wrote in *On New Democracy*, 'Every person must contribute, for every drop of sweat serves the revolution' (1940: 317-362). This collectivization sought to erase class distinctions and personal ambitions, aligning all efforts toward shared revolutionary goals of 'great unity' and 'universal participation'.

Maoist body culture constructs fit bodies through a burgeoning physical culture to discipline the society, create moral citizens, and serve as a sifting mechanism for finding those with the character to rule over others. As Mao states, 'physical practice suggests not only strength but also an ability to transcend everyday desires, endure hardship, and demonstrate a heartfelt commitment to the revolutionary cause' (1917), physical practice is interrelated with the cultivation of morality; it suggests not

only physical and mental strength but also an ability to transcend everyday bodily desires of the undisciplined and to endure sacrifice and hardship to demonstrate a heartfelt commitment to the revolutionary cause. The ideal body, as Mao described, was 'indestructible like steel' (1944), a metaphorical call to forge not only resilient individuals but also a resilient nation. Mao highlights the importance of self-discipline, which is a matter for the individual, of 'self-consciousness', 'perseverance' and 'concentration'; 'when we speak of physical education, we should begin with individual initiative' (1917: 155).

Mao's emphasis on self-discipline within the overarching structural discourse of Maoist ideology echoes Foucault's notion that the individual self-regulates their behaviour within the structure of the institution and submits to the disciplinary techniques enacted on themselves in creating a 'docile body' (2012: 239-42). Yet, Foucault's contribution to body theory goes further than merely describing how institutions shape bodies; he argues that the body itself is not a pre-social, biological constant but rather a historically contingent construction produced through discourse. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault traces the historical shift from sovereign power, where punishment was exercised violently on the flesh, to disciplinary power, where control is internalized by the subject through surveillance, routine, and institutional training. He writes in *Power/Knowledge* that modern disciplinary techniques aim to produce a body that is 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (1980: 198). Importantly, this transformation is not merely imposed from above, but is facilitated by individuals themselves, who internalize these regulatory regimes and come to govern their own bodies. In this model, the body is not a passive recipient of discipline, but rather the very site through which power is enacted and sustained.

Foucault's understanding of the body as a product of discourse, rather than a stable, biological given, resonates deeply with the Maoist project. As Foucault explains, discourses are not simply ways of speaking about the body but are active in constituting what the body is; they shape the 'nature' of subjectivity, including its physical and emotional life (Weedon, 1987: 108). The Maoist emphasis on physical culture through regimented gymnastics, military drills, and the highly stylized forms of *yangbanxi* can thus be understood as an apparatus for producing new kinds of political subjects, rather than simply strengthening existing bodies. As Dreyfus and Rabinow argue, for Foucault, the body is a 'surface of inscription' upon which the state, through discourse, writes its norms, its hierarchies, and its modes of self-regulation (1982: 183).

The ideal Maoist body, resilient, ascetic, emotionally restrained, and morally upright, is, therefore, not an autonomous or liberated entity, but a politically saturated artefact of bio-power. This is especially evident in Mao's writings on physical education, where he insists that 'when we speak of physical education, we should begin with individual initiative' (1917: 155). While this call for self-discipline appears to empower the individual, it paradoxically functions as a technique of control: the responsibility for ideological conformity and bodily regulation is transferred to the subject, who becomes complicit in their own subjugation. This aligns with Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, where the efficiency of power lies in its invisibility and its capacity to induce self-surveillance (1977: 200-209). In the Maoist context, the *yangbanxi* dancer, whose every gesture is scrutinized under institutional surveillance, mirrors the inmate of the Panopticon, internalising the gaze and transforming strength into an expression of political submission.

The paradox, then, lies in the way Maoist physical culture constructs a body that is both visibly powerful and profoundly compliant. It is a body that appears indestructible, 'like steel' (Mao, 1944) yet is entirely subject to institutional control. The metaphor of steel, often interpreted as an emblem of strength, can also be read as a symbol of homogeneity and standardisation: a forged product, not a living, autonomous being. The Maoist body is powerful not because it resists, but because it embodies the capacity to endure, conform, and discipline itself. Its strength is measured not in opposition to power, but in its ability to *absorb* and *reproduce* power. As Bartky (1990) notes in her feminist expansion of Foucauldian theory, 'a docile body is, by definition, one that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (65). The Maoist body is thus a triumph of disciplinary modernity: an aesthetic of vitality masking the interiorisation of control.

In this light, the Maoist strong-yet-docile body does not resolve the paradox between power and submission; rather, it reconfigures the very terms of that contradiction. Drawing on Foucault, one might argue that the body's strength is the very medium through which its docility is realized. The Maoist body is not just a metaphor of national fortitude; it is an ideological technology, a corporeal archive of power's circulation through affect, posture, gesture, and self-restraint.

Maoist body culture can be productively understood through the lens of 'somatic nationalism', a term coined by Alter (2000) to describe how the disciplined and spectacularized body becomes central to the articulation of nationalist ideologies. In this framework, the trained body, whether of the athlete, dancer, or soldier, does not merely perform physical feats, but becomes a symbolic embodiment of collective identity, discipline, and ideological purity. The Maoist regime's emphasis on revolutionary fitness, martial arts, and model performances exemplifies this. Here, the

body is not only shaped by political discourse but serves as a medium through which the state performs its ideological vision.

Cheng Yinghong (2009), in his comparative study of China, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, reinforces this view by arguing that physical culture in communist states was not simply about health or productivity, but about constructing and projecting revolutionary consciousness through somatic discipline. In such regimes, the body is simultaneously a site of training, display, and political inscription. The goal is not just to create healthy citizens, but to mould exemplary bodies that visually and affectively index the moral and political strength of the state. The Maoist body becomes both a spectacle and a substrate, meticulously regulated and endlessly interpreted.

This form of somatic nationalism operates through an affective and symbolic reordering of corporeal ownership. One powerful expression of this is found in the Mao-era slogans documented by Everett Yuehong Zhang (2005), such as ‘My life belongs to the Party’ and ‘My mother only gives my body, but the glory of the Party shines through my heart’ (6). These phrases function not merely as rhetorical flourishes, but as mechanisms of ideological embodiment. As Zhang observes, they reveal a metaphysical division between the biological origin of the body, credited to the family, and its political destiny, governed by the Party. The Party assumes not just stewardship over the subject’s life, but ownership over their embodied subjectivity. The ‘heart’ becomes a metonym for revolutionary conviction, devotion, and affective alignment with Maoist ideals, while the ‘body’ is framed as the inert vessel upon which these ideals are enacted.

This symbolic privileging of the ‘heart’ over the body is deeply Foucauldian in structure. It signals a transfer of authority from the private and biological to the public and ideological, from the familial to the state. Under such a regime, the

individual no longer owns their own body; rather, the body is reconstituted as a node in a larger collective organism, an extension of the Maoist state. Foucault's conception of the body as both the object and instrument of disciplinary power is directly relevant here. The Maoist subject, formed through the intersecting forces of ideological education, ritualized performance, and self-surveillance, is the ultimate 'docile body' one that not only acts in accordance with the Party's will, but desires to do so. As Cheng (2009) points out, the cultivation of revolutionary consciousness in such regimes does not occur in the abstract; it is enacted and rehearsed on and through the body.

In this light, Maoist somatic nationalism emerges as a particularly vivid manifestation of biopolitical control: a system in which bodies are not only trained but re-signified, rewritten, and repurposed as ideological instruments. The aestheticization of strength, discipline, and sacrifice in Maoist visual and performative culture conceals a deeper logic of subjugation, where physical excellence is inseparable from political obedience. The Maoist body is strong, not as a marker of autonomy, but as a testament to its successful surrender to the collective. It is in this contradiction, between outward vitality and inward subservience, that the ideological potency of somatic nationalism fully unfolds.

Embodied discipline

The Maoist ideal of a disciplined and self-sacrificing body was reinforced through revolutionary propaganda by celebrating workers, farmers, and soldiers as paragons of physical vigour and ideological commitment. This narrative created templates for the Maoist body, which shaped public perception and behaviour and became a canvas upon which the Party inscribed its vision of a socialist utopia—the body not only represented the revolution but also became a primary site of its

enactment. Heroic depictions of physical labour became ubiquitous, celebrating the transformative potential of collective effort.

At the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao underscored the necessity of a 'cultural army' to complement military forces, asserting that art should reflect the lives of the working class and advance socialism (440). A second point proposed was crucial for the revolutionization of ballet, suggesting that Chinese artists should absorb legacies of foreign art and culture and ensure that the works are made relevant for the Chinese people (469). Mao's political rhetoric set the stage for Premier Zhou Enlai's 1963 model of the 'Three Processes of Transformation', a tripartite guideline for socialist art: 'to revolutionize, nationalize, and popularize'[5] (Chen 1995). The first pillar, 'to revolutionize', echoed Mao's directives from the Yan'an Forum, mandating that art serve the revolution by depicting proletarian struggles and advancing socialist ideals. The second, 'to nationalize', integrated China's cultural heritage into artistic practices, promoting traditions of *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation)—a term unifying China's multiethnic society under a shared national identity. This process sought to minimize foreign influence and reinforce the concept of 'Chineseness' across linguistic and cultural diversity. Finally, 'to popularize' aimed to make art accessible and relatable to the masses, particularly through non-verbal forms like dance. These principles ensured that artistic expression resonated with the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens while conveying revolutionary values.

This ideological framework was exemplified in the 1964 *yangbanxi* ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, the first production by the National Ballet of China. The story, based on the Communist revolution of a real unit of female soldiers in the 1930s

[5] For more detailed explanation for the 'Three Processes of Transformation', see Chapter One, pp.55-56.

in Hainan, China's most southern province, had already achieved national success in the earlier feature film directed by Xie Jin in 1961. The film is known for its portrayal of strong female characters and its celebration of the Communist revolution in China. Audiences were familiar with its characters, the theme music 'The Song of the Detachment', and the narrative's concentration on Communist revolution, thus becoming a suitable subject for a new, substantial, and ideologically acceptable 'Chinese ballet'.

The ballet is set during the Second Revolutionary Civil War (1927-1937), fought between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Kuomintang and the Chinese communists. The protagonist, Wu Qinghua, is a maidservant who escapes from the oppression of a brutal landlord, Nan Batian, with the aid of Communist officer, Hong Changqing. She undergoes military training and becomes part of an all-female detachment. The film follows their struggles against Nationalist forces and their fight for justice and equality. Through patient guidance by Hong, Wu becomes a disciplined, skilled and conscious proletarian soldier, subordinating her personal grievance against the landlord into the larger class struggle. After Hong being captured and killed by the landlord's militia, Wu kills the autocrat and pledges to continue Hong's fight. The climactic scene of the ballet is very moving, as Wu, dressed in red stands before a rippling, red flag, tears streaming down her face. She presses the flag to her cheek, 'red flag, oh red flag, today I've found you'. Tempered by class struggle, the peasant women who have been set free by the Red Detachment join the army and fight in the revolution.

At the beginning of 1964, the Ministry of Culture organized a *Red Detachment* creative group, which was based at the Central Ballet company but also included experts from Chinese folk dance (particularly the dances of Li ethnic minority group

of Hainan), *gudianwu* (Chinese classical dance), *xiqu*, martial arts, music, lighting and set, as well as Liang Xin, the established screenwriter of the earlier film (Qiao, 2021). The dancers trained their bodies by learning the postures of a soldier and improving their military bearing so that they could convincingly handle and wield weapons. In an interview with Bai Shuxiang, the principal dancer playing the protagonist Wu Qinghua in the first cast of the ballet, she recalled a critique from leaders of the Beijing Military Region during a dress rehearsal, 'you look like ladies, not soldiers.' In response, the whole company went to Datong military camp in Shanxi province to train with the army. "We did everything together [with the soldiers]. We learnt to walk, goosestep, stand, count, and also assassinate and shoot–standing, lying, kneeling, all kinds of shooting posture practice. We also had to answer 'emergency call'–practicing without warning in the middle of the night, for an invasion. It was very hard. We'd learn the drills of the soldier" (ibid.).

The dancers' army training is underpinned by the CCP's strategic deployment of the dancers' body during the Maoist era, paralleling Foucault's analysis of the creation of docile bodies (1977). The manipulation of the dancers' body presents how control and mobilization of the virtuosic body becomes a locus of control in top-down enactment of power. Mental docility enables dancers to become state ideological machines, subjected to technologies of discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault comments on the training of soldiers to highlight the malleability of the body:

> The solider has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inept body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint run slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the

> automatism of habit; in short, one has 'got rid of the peasant' and given him 'the air of a soldier'. (1977: 135)

This process describes a body so deeply shaped by discipline that it performs movements with the precision and predictability of a machine. Foucault's metaphor of the 'automata' further underscores this point: 'A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. The celebrated automata… were also political puppets, small-scale models of power' (136). Here, 'automata' serve as metaphorical models—bodies rendered predictable and governable by institutional control, not mechanical devices but disciplined subjects who internalize authority.

Dancers under Maoist training regimes exemplify this: selected from a young age, rigorously trained in ballet and revolutionary aesthetics within state-run institutions, their bodies were not only instruments of performance but also embodiments of state ideology. They became ideal 'docile bodies', trained to execute movements with absolute precision and to suppress individuality in favour of collective expression and ideological function. The stage became an extension of the disciplinary regime where virtuosic movement expressed not personal creativity but state-sanctioned narratives.

This process of shaping dancers into ideological instruments resonates with Foucault's claim that "discipline 'makes' individuals; it is a specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise." (1977: 170) Eriksen and Nielsen (2001) similarly draw on Foucault and Bourdieu to conceptualize discipline as akin to 'habitus' a socially embedded structure that imprints power relations onto the body as enduring dispositions (130). This notion of embodied permanence suggests that the physical regimentation of ballet and military drills had long-lasting effects on both the bodies and psyches of *yangbanxi* dancers,

producing subjects who unconsciously carried and reproduced the Maoist ideological order through each controlled gesture.

The dancers experienced not only physical transformation through military training but also profound psychological and affective shifts. Bai Shuxiang described this process as one of being 'reborn', suggesting a total remoulding of the self. She recalled:

> We went to Datong not only to experience the army's life, but also to visit the countless 'mass graves' of revolutionaries, to receive profound historical and revolutionary education, so that we were tempered from body to heart, and returned to the creation of a completely different understanding and a new look… so that the aesthetics of a red classic can be fully reflected. (qtd. in Qiao, 2021)

This statement reveals how revolutionary ideology was not simply imposed upon the body but internalized through affective and bodily experiences. The phrase 'tempered from body to heart' signals a full-spectrum transformation, in which physical discipline fuses with emotional conviction, allowing the revolutionary spirit, what might be called the 'heart' or the 'soul' of the dancer, to animate the body's movements.

This totalizing process exemplifies what Foucault (1977) describes as the effectiveness of disciplinary power: not just through overt coercion, but by cultivating self-regulation within the subject. The dancers began to internalize the state's ideological imperatives; the regulation of movement became habitual, voluntary, and affectively charged. Rather than requiring constant external enforcement, the Maoist body, a 'body infused by the heart', performed ideological loyalty instinctively, as if the political content of *yangbanxi* emanated from within.

The dancers thus became agents of ideological transmission—bodies reshaped in such a way that their artistic expression was inseparable from their political formation. This kind of self-discipline had lasting effects beyond the training period; it reshaped the dancer's entire sensorium. Movements honed under military discipline were no longer mechanically executed but emotionally inhabited. This enduring alignment of aesthetic form, embodied memory, and political belief helped to crystallize a new artistic mode in *yangbanxi*, in which discipline is aestheticized and revolutionary ideology is felt through the body. Through this fusion of physical and emotional training, dancers became revolutionary subjects whose bodies, animated by a 'revolutionary heart', could sustain and transmit the CCP's ideological project well beyond the stage.

The *yangbanxi* dances

Although no complete video recording of the 1964 performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* has survived, substantial archival materials exist that allow for analysis of its aesthetic and ideological development. These include official rehearsal photographs, production stills, costume and set designs, scripts, contemporary reviews in newspapers such as *Renmin Ribao*, and later film adaptations, particularly the 1971 filmed version overseen by Jiang Qing. Moreover, the ballet has been repeatedly restaged and revised by the National Ballet of China, often with careful preservation of the premade choreographic structures and ideological symbols, which provide a rich comparative archive. As the first full-length ballet created by the National Ballet of China, *The Red Detachment of Women* has become a canonical work that reflects the Maoist project of aesthetic indigenisation, recasting Western classical ballet, *zhongguo gudianwu* (Chinese classical dance), and *xiqu* through the lens of socialist

realism and revolutionary narrative. The disciplined Maoist body, virtuosic, militarized, and emotionally regulated, became the centrepiece of this transformation.

In 2024, the National Ballet of China launched a national tour to mark the 60th anniversary of the ballet's premiere, beginning in Hainan, the historical base of the real Women's Detachment. I watched the commemorative performance at Beijing's Tianqiao Theatre. In what follows, I offer a close analysis of this restaged production to reveal how the ballet physically inscribes the ideological structure of Maoism into the dancers' bodies. I analyse how the choreography negotiates and reforms Western classical ballet through Chinese revolutionary values, while also challenging and reorienting the movement grammar of *zhongguo gudianwu* and *xiqu*. This analysis foregrounds how embodied discipline, through line, posture, gesture, and repetition, became a primary medium for political expression and national form during the Cultural Revolution and continues to echo in contemporary performance.

At the opening, the choreography integrates stylized gestures drawn from *jingju* with classical ballet vocabulary, creating a dynamic fusion of traditions. The protagonist, Wu Qinghua is imprisoned by the landlord Nan, standing in *fifth position en pointe* with her arms raised and bound above her head. Wu's eyes dart from side to side in quick repetition (see Figure 24). This rapid and deliberate use of the eyes is a conventional feature of *jingju*, but uncommon in classical ballet, where the phrase 'eyeline' typically denotes a graceful projection of the eyes, head, and chest into space, often along the arm line. The choreography directs Wu's gaze towards the landlord, underscoring her anger and defiance. In *jingju*, such deliberate and exaggerated gestures used to convey emotion are referred to as *liangxiang* (tableau vivant), highlighting the communicative power of the body.



Figure 24. A stage photo for The Red Detachment of Women (2024). National Ballet of China, 2024.

Later in the first act, Wu, seeking to escape from the landlord's house, executes movements that reimagine classical ballet arm positions by incorporating elements of *jingju* and *gudianwu*. The conventional *fifth position* is transformed as Wu crosses her arms overhead, clenching her fists in a gesture of defiance (see Figure 25). Similarly, the *third position* is inverted, with one arm placed behind her body to create an 'S' curve (see Figure 26), echoing the rounded form of the *ba zi yuan* (character-eight circle) found in *gudian wu* (see Figure 27). Then *first arabesque* features her arm bent at a 90-degree angle at the elbow, with her fist clenched to signify combat readiness (see Figure 28). Moving toward the upstage left corner, she forgoes traditional *posé pirouettes* and instead employs *chuan fan shen* (travelling windmill), a rotational step from *jingju*. This sequence involves off-axis, diagonal turns with her body slightly pitched forward, arms extended in a wide *second position*, and her focus directed

downward to the floor. Travelling to the downstage right, she maintains her body in parallel alignment, moving rapidly in a grounded yet dynamic way.



Figure 25. Oil painting The Red Detachment of Women, Shanghai People's Press, 1972.



Figure 26. Oil painting The Red Detachment of Women, Shanghai People's Press, 1972.



Figure 27. Ba zi yuan, YouTube, Amy's Folk Dancing Club, 2024

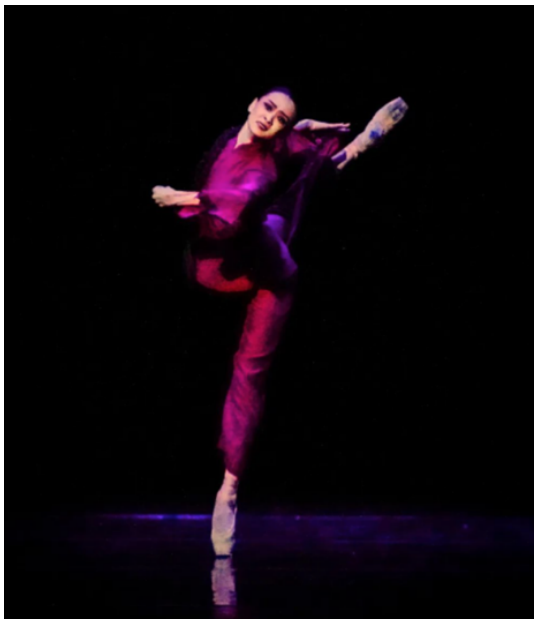


Figure 28. A stage photo for The Red Detachment of Women a National Ballet of China, 2024.

In the fourth act, Wu joins the detachment and learns to shoot. In contrast to traditional Western ballet, where the *corps de ballet* typically wear romantic tutus and perform as ethereal, hyper-feminized figures, here the ensemble is dressed in military fatigues, jackets, shorts, and knee-high socks, paired with pointe shoes. Wu moves across the stage wielding a rifle with precision and poise. She performs an *arabesque* lifting the weapon high above her head and moves forward with her feet and knees aligned in parallel, slightly bent at the knees. Her transition to an upstage position involving small, quick steps, which is characterized by the stillness of her upper body as her feet scuttle rapidly along the floor, draws directly from *jingju*'s *pao yuan chang*, a step that resembles the ethereal glide of the classical ballet *bourrée en couru*. Both techniques share a dynamic, floating quality achieved through swift, light footwork. By substituting ballet steps with analogous movements from traditional Chinese performance genres, yet preserving the dynamic integrity of classical form, the choreography achieves a hybrid vocabulary. This syncretism not only maintains the

aesthetic coherence of ballet but also anchors it in culturally familiar gestures, making the art form more resonant and acceptable for a Chinese audience.

In classical Western ballets, the final act typically concludes with a celebratory grand divertissement, symbolizing triumph and resolution. *The Red Detachment of Women* adopts this tradition in its fourth act, presenting a stylized, balleticized version of a traditional Hainan Li ethnic dance. Costumed in bright Li blouses and skirts, dancers representing the Li ethnic minority perform alongside the Red Army to symbolize the solidarity of China's diverse peoples in the revolutionary struggle (see Figure 29). Choreographically, the ensemble performs predominantly on *demi-pointe*, reserving the more virtuosic *en pointe* technique for the central soloist, Wu. This distribution of physical technique is not merely a practical staging device but closely aligns with the Maoist aesthetic doctrine of *san tuchu* (three prominences), which dictated that revolutionary works must foreground (1) the positive characters, (2) the heroic protagonists, and (3) the most exemplary figures among those heroes.



Figure 29. A stage photo for The Red Detachment of Women (2024). National Ballet of China, 2024

In this context, Wu's exclusive use of *en pointe* technique symbolically and visually elevates her above the ensemble, marking her as the ideological and choreographic centre of the scene. Her bodily height, line, and technical difficulty serve to emphasize her role as the revolutionary model. Meanwhile, the ensemble's use of *demi-pointe* allows for a grounding of movement more closely aligned with the Li folk dance idiom, facilitating the fusion of ballet and ethnic dance in a way that preserves local aesthetic codes while integrating them into the ballet structure. This hybridization is further reinforced through symmetrical floor patterns and ensemble formations reminiscent of proscenium-based ballet staging, thus marrying Western ballet's spatial logic with indigenous motifs. The use of *demi-pointe* for the collective and *en pointe* for the heroic individual functions as a choreographic embodiment of ideological hierarchy, with virtuosity used not for abstraction but for revolutionary signification.

Wu's movement vocabulary is described as embodying 'fiery revolt, rough-hewn ardour and revolutionary explosive force' (Liu, 2010: 445). This characterization reflects the creative team's intention to present the ballet as an artistic distillation of the struggles of workers, peasants, and soldiers, encapsulated within a proletarian aesthetic. The production sought to depict the spiritual and ideological transformation of its characters, celebrating the labouring masses as the vanguard of the new era under Maoist Thought (ibid.). Wu's journey serves as an allegorical representation of the collective national experience. Introduced as a destitute labourer, her condition mirrors the plight of a beleaguered China—weak and oppressed. Her tattered clothing and physical scars on her body convey her suffering under the feudal class structure.

Wu's personal revolutionary narrative is an allegory for a collective national experience. She is oppressed in a class struggle, educated, enlightened and eventually emancipated. Hong Changqing is the brave and paternal face of the state, who sacrifices himself for the revolutionary cause. Wu joins the revolution to defeat both her specific enemy, the landlord Nan, and the enemy of communist ideation. The individual's fate is inextricably bonded with the fate of the state; a fate which will eventually be successful if the moral and ideological codes are strictly followed. Liang Xin described this overarching narrative as 'revolutionary romanticism' (qtd. in Harris, 2010: 322), meaning that the leading heroic characters of the ballet are faultless, fearless and selfless. The enemies, by contrast are entirely and exclusively evil.

Significant praise and attention were given to the ballet following its premiere indicating that the project of revolutionizing art had been fruitful. In 1970 Shan Hua commented on *Renmin Ribao*, 'a dance formula has been created which has clear characteristics of ballet but is also steeped in the atmosphere of the times and has a unique national style' (qtd. in Liu 2010: 445). Jiang Qing was subsequently extolled for having 'successfully stormed the most stubborn fortress of art till then so tightly controlled by the Western bourgeoisie' (Wu, 1969: 5). The ballet was seen as a successful experiment in both the indigenisation of a Western form, but also the first steps in revolutionising all art, even beyond China's borders, using Maoist ideology, "The choice of ballet as a first target of attack in carrying out the policy of 'making foreign things serve China' is a significant beginning in the remoulding of the world's theatrical stage with the thought of Mao Zedong" (ibid.). The *Red Detachment* 'has completely swept away the formalist, aestheticist, naturalistic rotten art of the bourgeoisie and opened up a new road for the development of the art of proletarian ballet' (Shan, 1970, qtd. in Liu 2010: 445). Ballet was the first Western form to be

remoulded, and shortly following, there was a revolutionized symphony *Shajiabang* (1971). Through revolutionizing these genres, with their longstanding bourgeois connection, they symbolize a hope that in the real world, as in *yangbanxi*, the proletariat and revolutionary ideology can overcome class oppression.

Yet this triumphal narrative conceals a conflict that the ballet's aesthetic achievement was inseparable from the physical and psychological subjugation of its performers, and its celebration of 'liberation' coexisted with the erasure of individuality, gendered autonomy, and personal suffering. It is these suppressed frictions between revolutionary idealism and embodied coercion, between collective triumph and individual pain that subsequent remakings must either confront or conceal.

The female body

The alteration of classical ballet, *gudian wu*, and *xiqu* gestures also embody the reconstruction of gender performance in Chinese socialist revolutionary ideology: women came to adopt militant and masculine qualities for the way they 'hold up half the sky' as famously pronounced in 1968 by Chairman Mao in promoting the ideology of gender egalitarianism (qtd. in Li, 2000: 33). For example, in the instructional book of the premade choreography, the protagonist is instructed to perform the *xiqu* gesture of *heli shi* (crane stance), which has similar use of muscles and angles of the shape as the pose *attitude* in ballet, with the hands in the *shunfeng qi* (flag flowing along the wind) position. However, the hand gesture of the 'flag' position is altered from the *lanhua* (orchid, see Figure 30) for female roles to *hukou* (tiger mouth, see Figure 31) that denotes the martial and the masculine in *xiqu*. However, at one moment, Wu Qinghua has her right hand in *hukou* while her left in a loose *lanhua*—a subtle slip that shows the endurance of her previous disciplinary inculcation (see Figure 32).



Figure 30. Lanhua gesture for female roles, Mei Lanfang playing the character of Han Yuniang in the jingju film A Wedding in the Dream, Yihua Film Company, 1948.



Figure 31. Hukou gesture for male martial roles, Zhou Enxu playing the character of Zhao Yun in the jingju Battle of Changban, Chang'an Grand Theatre, 2022.



Figure 32. A stage photo for The Red Detachment of Women. National Ballet of China, 1970.

The Red Detachment of Women reveals how the female body became a politically coded site during the Maoist era. Through the militarization of movement, the erasure of traditional femininity, and the aestheticization of strength, the ballet

reconfigured gender identity in line with state ideology. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, women were incorporated into the public sphere primarily as labouring bodies contributing to socialist construction, under slogans such as ‘equal pay for equal work’ (Li, 2000: 33). While this policy promised formal equality, it masked a deeper ideological operation: the effacement of sexual difference in the name of class struggle. The ‘iron girl’ figure, popularized during the Cultural Revolution, embodied this state-imposed androgyny, women who could perform physically demanding labour tasks traditionally reserved for men (Jin, Manning, and Chu, 2006: 613) (see Figure 33).

Yangbanxi visually and kinaesthetically rewrote womanhood, erasing softness, sensuality, or domesticity in favour of hardness, discipline, and revolutionary resolve. These women, unlike the glamorous ‘modern girls’ of Republican-era Shanghai advertisements (see Figure 34), were desexualized and ideologically weaponized. Their bodies, stripped of ‘flesh’ and affect, were mobilized as pure political symbols. Julia Kristeva’s notion of the ‘corps propre’, the body inscribed with ideology (1982: 3), is helpful here. The bodies of *yangbanxi* heroines were not autonomous expressions of identity but vessels through which political narratives were projected. They were objectified not in a conventional patriarchal sense, but through a gender-neutralizing logic of ultra-leftist discourse, which equated equality with sameness.



Figure 33. A Cultural Revolution poster reading 'A thorough criticism of the landlord and bourgeois theory of human nature'. https://chineseposters.net/



Figure 34. Earth Brand Fly and Insect Spray c. 1930s. https://chineseposters.net/

Thus, female revolutionary subjects achieved political recognition by approximating masculinity, not only in physicality but also in consciousness. This process of 'equality-through-masculinisation' enacted a form of ideological colonization in which the gendered self was overwritten by state demands. Gender discourse was subordinated to class discourse, individuality dissolved into collectivism, and personal agency constrained within the parameters of nationalist and statist expectations. The female revolutionary body in *yangbanxi* was, therefore, a

product of layered ideological operations that simultaneously elevated and erased women.

This reconfiguration of gender under Maoist aesthetics establishes a critical fault line of unresolved frictions between liberation and subjugation, empowerment and erasure, that subsequent remakings of the ballet must negotiate. The *Chunwan* restaging and Wen Hui's *Hong* represent diametrically opposed responses to this inheritance. By analysing how *The Red Detachment of Women* is restaged and referenced in the 2014 *Chunwan* performances, we can trace how gender, discipline, and state power are renegotiated in post-Mao popular culture and how the frictions of the *yangbanxi* ballet are systematically neutralized. The transition from *yangbanxi* to *Chunwan* reveals both continuity and rupture: while the revolutionary female body was once defined by militant uniformity, contemporary representations oscillate between nostalgic reverence and commercialized spectacle.

The performance on *Chunwan*

Chunwan[6], as a kind of ritualized festival with abundant sign systems, occupies a pivotal position in contemporary Chinese popular culture. It is intuitive, emotionally resonant, and serves as a platform where dominant ideology and popular sentiment converge. It is both a gathering place and a stage for diverse cultural forces to inscribe their meanings onto the body. In 2014, *The Red Detachment of Women* was remade on the stage of *Chunwan*, marking its return to prominence after five decades, by the National Ballet of China, the only national-level ballet company of the PRC. Despite of the same company that premiered the revolutionary ballet in 1964, the context and framing of the performance marked a significant departure from its Mao-era

[6] For a more detailed analysis of *Chunwan*, see Chapter One, pp. 79-82.

counterpart. While the choreography of the group 'military training dance' closely replicated the visual vocabulary of the premade *yangbanxi* production, its symbolic charge was fundamentally altered by the aesthetics of the Gala.

In this re-mediated version, the revolutionary ballet was recontextualized within a celebratory, consumer-oriented televised spectacle. Following the group dance, pop singer Sun Nan, born in 1969 and himself a product of the reform-era cultural environment, performed a sentimental rendition of the *yangbanxi* aria 'The Party Fosters Heroes: Army and People Are United as One'. The transition from ballet to pop, from militant to melodious, signals not only a genre shift but an ideological reframing: revolutionary struggle is domesticated into harmonious unity, militarism softened into patriotic nostalgia. Unlike the 1964 version, which was embedded in the political didacticism of the Cultural Revolution, the 2014 *Chunwan* remake serves a more symbolic, depoliticized function, retaining the aesthetic forms of *yangbanxi* while recoding them to affirm continuity with the Party's historical legacy in a palatable, emotionally unifying spectacle.

In *Chunwan*, dance serves as a fundamental mode of body display, imbued with significant ideological meaning. While solo performances may struggle to convey themes of 'great unity', 'mass participation', and 'universal joy', central to *Chunwan*, collective dance becomes the primary medium for expressing these ideas. Through synchronized group movements, *Chunwan* constructs the idealized image of 'people around the world sharing a moment' (Xie, 2012:33). Since the 1980s, *Chunwan* has evolved into a central platform for the dominant ideological production in China, shifting away from Maoist rhetoric such as political quotations and slogans and instead focusing on entertainment to promote new concepts and lifestyles. As a form of media spectacle, *Chunwan* aligns with Benjamin's concept that artworks no

longer revered as sacred or authoritative, become mass-produced commodities (2018). Benjamin suggests that this mechanization of reproduction can have dual political effects: while it can democratize access to culture and diminish traditional power hierarchies, it can also be exploited by those in power as a tool for mass propaganda. In this sense, *Chunwan*'s entertainment culture, while seemingly apolitical, functions as a powerful instrument of ideological control, reshaping public attitudes and everyday life.

Another symbol for the body display is clothing, which also has political connotations. Zhu Jun, the host of this performance wears a Mao suit (see Figure 35), the modern Chinese tunic suit symbolizing revolution and tradition while the singer, Sun Nan, wears a Western suit (see Figure 36), representing openness and globalization. Moreover, the selected libretto sung by Sun Nan, 'The Party Fosters Heroes: Army and People Are United as One' is the most peaceful and harmonious song in the radical, violent, and revengeful 1964 *yangban- xi* ballet. Having a pop singer in fashionable attire singing a familiar song of unity and peace, *Chunwan* attempted to redefine *yangbanxi* as 'popular music', neutralizing the propagandistic components of revolutionary narratives in *yangbanxi*, thus dissociating them from the violence and trauma of the Cultural Revolution and replacing them with a comforting sense of pleasure from the lively atmosphere of universal joy and prosperity.

The selection of this aria is a friction-smoothing strategy: by extracting the single most harmonious musical element from a ballet saturated with revolutionary violence, class vengeance, and militarized femininity, *Chunwan* preserved only those elements that can be safely absorbed into the Gala's discourse of national celebration. The frictions of the source material, such as the protagonist's scars, the landlord's cruelty, and the dancers' military subjugation, are simply absent, replaced by spectacle.

This process constitutes what I term ‘frictionless remaking’: a mode of reproduction that preserves the surface aesthetics of the source material while systematically excising the contradictions underlying its creation and ideological function. Rather than engaging with the tensions embedded in the source material, the *Chunwan* restaging works actively to smooth them over, producing a seamless spectacle of national pride in which revolutionary struggle is rendered safe, nostalgic, and consumable. In this way, the state maintains the imagination of national identity and constructs the ‘structural amnesia’ of oral traditions, as Assmann states, ‘Events and the intrusions of chance cannot be eliminated, but what can be prevented is their consolidation into history’ (76).



Figure 35. The host Zhu Jun on CMG New Year’s Gala 2014, screenshot by author.



Figure 36. The singer Sun Nan on CMG New Year's Gala 2014, screenshot by author.

Chunwan's remake of *yangbanxi* becomes a point of contact and representation with the historical transformation of social structures and dominant discourses. The metamorphotic memories need ceremony, something to take out of the daily routine, as a means of communication and a forming influence. Through fixed objectification and sign systems, *Chunwan* becomes a kind of ritualized festival, building a connection to the revolutionary past, providing a basis for the identity of the remembering group, and constructing 'cultural memory' (Assmann 2011). What counts for cultural memory is not factual but remembered history that is narrated to illuminate the present from the standpoint of its origins. Through memory, history becomes myth, making it a lasting, normative, and formative power. Yet the cultural memory constructed by *Chunwan* is a selective one: it remembers the revolutionary aesthetic while forgetting the revolutionary cost. It is against this mode of institutional amnesia that Wen Hui's *Hong* positions itself.

The avant-garde dance theatre

The complex arena of post-revolutionary *yangbanxi* is never a simply one-way ideological indoctrination. Wen Hui's *Hong* (2015) is a form of recalling that resists

social amnesia, even under oppression. It takes *The Red Detachment of Women* as its subject and point of departure, not to reproduce its aesthetic but to dismantle its disciplinary structures. *Hong* is not a remake in the conventional sense of restaging a work with updated production values; it is what I term a 'critical counter-remake', that returns to a canonical original not to celebrate or perpetuate it, but to excavate the embodied experiences it conceals, to surface the frictions that institutional remakings labour to suppress, and to reclaim the performing body as a site of individual testimony and historical reckoning. Where *Chunwan* smooths over the contradictions between revolutionary liberation and bodily subjugation, *Hong* makes those contradictions its central material, working through them rather than around it.

In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese theatre practitioners embarked on a journey of finding themselves and redefining their role and function as professional, independent artists within the triangle of art, life, and the public arena (Ferrari, 2012). This period saw a transition from the body as a tool of collective ideology to the body as a 'self-contained entity' capable of self-determination. As Rossella Ferrari (2019: 42-60) notes, corporeal discourses in East Asian experimental performance became the primary means of navigating identity amidst shifting sociopolitical sands. The body became more than a vessel; it became an arena of social experience. By the mid-1990s, as the cultural landscape became increasingly commercialized, experimental practitioners transformed their marginality into spaces of resistance. Here, the body is the medium through which art pushes contradictory trends to their extremes through a physical aesthetics of transgression. This mirrors Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008) theorization of 'boundary-crossing,' where the artist's real bodily actions resist being reduced to mere symbols. Whether it is Zhang Huan using his skin as a canvas for political critique (Gu, 2013: 68-76) or female performers

using their bodies to challenge both revolutionary ideals and emerging patriarchal norms (Chen, 2002: 261-290), the flesh has become a primary site of protest.

Against such a backdrop, Wen Hui came up with the idea of using the human body as both a prop and a theme for her politically potent drama. She, with the Living Dance Studio, premiered *Hong* in Shanghai in 2015 and performed at the Southbank Centre, London as part of Dance Umbrella 2018. This work takes *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964), as a highly influential political-aesthetic piece through which she confronts and reflects on its disciplinary power and complex personal attachment/detachment from different individual and generational perspectives. *Hong* is consciously framed as and took up the methods of documentary theatre, involving more meticulous archival research, interviews, and reflection on personal memories of the collaborators on the premade ballet. What stands out from this work is the centrality of the 'body' and its extension into the representational and felt dimensions of society and history, engaging sensual and intellectual dimensions, and bringing insight into the investigation of memory, history, and historiography.

In Wen's praxis, through the body, memory is repeatedly felt, processed, and reflected on, as it stretches between the past, the present, and the immediate relational now upon live performance. It also shuttles between the individual and the collective, the personal and the social. This layered temporal-spatial navigation aligns with Foucault's notion of discourse, where memory and bodily practice are not merely representations but active reproductions of historically located grids of meaning. Continuing the engagement with the 'red memory' of Mao and the Cultural Revolution era, *Hong* moves from the meditative room-making for memory to active recall and analysis of the embodied experience and 'repertoire' stored in the body—with *yangbanxi*, the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* as the subject and point of

departure. The falling back is needed before a more proactive, conscious, and critical engagement is made; and memory needs critical processing and reflection for attaining historical value and responsibility, which is a politics that Wen Hui and the Living Dance Studio hold. Where *Chunwan*'s frictionless remaking offers closure and celebration, smoothing over the contradictions between revolutionary liberation and bodily subjugation, *Hong* makes those contradictions its central material, working through them rather than around them. Its friction-foregrounding approach insists on remaining open, unresolved, and uncomfortable, grounded in the conviction that memory requires critical processing and reflection before it can attain historical value and responsibility.

In collaboration with three other women of different generations (Liu Zhuying [b. 1955], Jiang Fan [b. 1988], Li Xinmin [b. 1988], see Figure 37), the development of the project involved interviews, collection and analysis of relevant documents, and personal reflections on the complex range of associations and sentiments that the ballet induces. The interviews were conducted with people involved in the creation of the premade ballet, as well as those who have been through the era of the Cultural Revolution and acculturated with the revolutionary repertoire, which ranged from acts in everyday life to the officially sanctioned *yangbanxi*. One of the main documents that feature in the performance of *Hong* is a book of instructional manuals for producing the ballet. Also of importance is the narrative film version of *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), from which the ballet was adapted. Besides dance and physical movement, the work involves a great deal of verbal explanation, description, self-exposure, and reflexive analysis about the experience of the ballet and its choreography, interspersed with the projection of select documentary footage of the interviews.

Beyond the disciplinary gaze, however, Wen also draws attention to the body's capacity for reflexivity and negotiation, aligning with Goffman (1959)'s dramaturgical model of social interaction. The live performance structures itself around the stories of the four women, whose embodied memories are shaped not only by institutional training but also by the performative management of self. For Goffman, the body is a tool in the staging of identity, that responds to cultural scripts but also makes selective choices in presentation. As the performers recount their stories while interacting with documents and projections, they perform their bodily selves in ways that highlight both conformity and deviation from official choreography. Their gestural vocabulary, sometimes precise, sometimes idiosyncratic, illustrates how even heavily encoded bodily idioms can be re-embodied and re-signified.



Figure 37. Hong (2015). Left to right: Jiang Fan, Li Xinmin, Wen Hui, and Liu Zhuying. Photo by Richy Wong.

Particularly striking is the interplay between the dancers' bodies and the large white elastic fabric onto which documentary footage is projected. At times, the performers would manipulate or press against the fabric with different body parts

while the projection was on, disrupting the clean surface of the image and introducing a kind of embodied interference (see Figure 38). This physical disruption of the projected image serves as a powerful metaphor for *Hong*'s dramaturgical method: where the *Chunwan* restaging presents the revolutionary ballet as a polished spectacle for mass consumption, Wen Hui's performers literally press their bodies against and through the archived image, creating wrinkles, distortions, and interruptions that make visible the frictions between lived experience and official representation. Compelling visual effects are thus formed between the live body and the projection, creating intricate dialogical relationships between the projected documents, interview footage, and live performance. This creates what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) would call a *habitus*-in-conflict: a moment when internalized dispositions meet a visual archive of socialized norms. The *habitus*, understood as a system of embodied dispositions formed by class, training, and historical experience, becomes visible here as tension: the body pushes against not only the screen but also the performative legacies that have shaped it.



Figure 38. Hong (2015). Jiang Fan and the white elastic fabric. Photo by Richy Wong.

The live performance part is structured around the stories and perspectives of the four women, the variety of which, in conjunction with the interviews, forms revealing counterpoints for re-engaging the collective memory of *The Red Detachment of Women* and the Cultural Revolution. Some of them had lived through the turbulent era with a certain age difference (Liu Zhuying and Wen Hui), while others were born afterwards, receiving the era's differing residual effects from family, institution, and the strata of the society they inhabit (Li Xinmin and Jiang Fan). Each relates their personal story with certain sections or pages from the official instructional manual of making *The Red Detachment of Women* that provoke feelings and reflections in them.

The eldest performer, Liu Zhuying, owns the original instructional manual and treats it with reverence. Having danced the *corps de ballet* role of Xiao Zhanshi (little female soldier), Liu exemplifies a generation whose bodies were disciplined through rigorous repetition and hierarchical evaluation. Her petite frame limited her progression within the troupe, reminding us that even within a seemingly collectivist form, the body is ranked and measured, partitioned by norms of visual symmetry and ideological correctness. Yet when she dances in *Red*, her pride and the emotional techniques cultivated during that era still shine (see Figure 39). Her body is not simply a vessel of imposed memory, but a site where symbolic capital, discipline, grace, revolutionary fervour, has been sedimented and can now be reactivated. Liu's performance exemplifies the ethical complexity of friction-foregrounding remaking: her visible pride in executing these movements coexists with the knowledge, made explicit through the documentary framework, that this pride was itself a product of disciplinary conditioning. The friction here is not between resistance and compliance, but within compliance itself: Liu's body demonstrates both the achievements and the

costs of *yangbanxi*'s disciplinary apparatus, and *Hong* refuses to resolve this tension into either celebration or condemnation.



Figure 39. Hong (2015). Left to right: Wen Hui, Li Xinmin, and Liu Zhuying. Photo by Richy Wong.

Wen Hui, born in 1960, did not perform *yangbanxi* herself, but, as a professionally trained choreographer, recognizes in the ballet manual the same choreographic conventions taught at state institutions. She critically notes how these formulaic gestures persist in contemporary state spectacles, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the annual *Chunwan* gala. This continuity underscores Bourdieu's argument that embodied practices are both durable and transmissible; the bodily *habitus* trained in one era can resurface in another, often unconsciously. These enduring gestural logics serve as a conduit through which ideology is reproduced via the body. Wen's choreography, by contrast, insists on rupturing these inherited grammars.

The story of Li Xinmin, the only non-professional performer, offers a counterpoint. With no formal dance training and a background of rural precarity, Li

lacks institutional cultural capital. Yet her affective response to archival images—the female soldiers receiving instruction under a blackboard, or the knife used as a prop in the ballet—reanimates her own family's history. Li, growing up in the countryside and dropping out of school in her teens for lack of funds to pay tuition, was first drawn to the photo of the women soldiers sitting in front of the blackboard receiving the teaching of revolutionary doctrine by the detachment commanders. In another section, against the projection of the pages showing the design and measurement of the prop knife that the women soldiers wield in the ballet, Li recounts the story of her mother's need to place a knife, skilfully forged by her late father, under the pillow for self-protection at night, revealing the harsh reality of women's questionable safety in the villages of today's China. Wen Hui said that Li Xinmin had a characteristic that modern dancers could only achieve through rigorous training: a very low centre of gravity, giving a sense of strength close to the ground on stage. After visiting Li Xinmin's hometown, Wen Hui discovered, "It turns out that her family lives on a very steep hillside. Whenever they go out, it's either uphill or downhill, so instinctively, the body stays close to the ground when walking" (Wen, 2015). Li's presence in *Hong* introduces a friction that institutional remakings cannot accommodate: her untrained body, shaped by material hardship rather than state ideology, disrupts the polished aesthetic of both the *yangbanxi* ballet and the *Chunwan* restaging, gesturing toward the lived realities that revolutionary spectacle rendered invisible. Her story of her mother's knife as a real weapon for real self-protection, set against the ballet's prop knife wielded in choreographed triumph, crystallizes the gap between revolutionary idealism and everyday experience that *Hong* insists on making visible.

Jiang Fan, being the youngest and another institutionally trained dancer, discovers the aesthetic and ideological disciplinary inheritance in her body traceable

to the revolutionary repertoire. She liked experimental dance but disliked *The Red Detachment of Women* and the system it represented—she had also been part of it. While watching a documentary about the Central Ballet of China, she was most touched seeing dancers backstage, with heavy makeup, doing leg stretches, and warming up, getting ready to go on stage. She felt sad; this is her life, where individuals are insignificant in the grand scenes on stage. To this day, they still live in this system. Embracing modern and contemporary dance approaches, regarded as permissive of individualism and a much broader freedom of possibilities, Jiang Fan reveals the embodied conflicts between her dance inheritance and self-aspiration.

Hong exposes embodied discipline through meticulous focus and analysis of certain techniques or gestures, a sort of 'micro-dissection' that sheds light on the 'macro-construction' of the revolutionary repertoire. In a way, it mimics and critically subverts the approach of the instructional manual, as detailed instruction for constructing the ballet is met with a detailed dissection of the components by each performer's personal reflection. On stage, the pages of the instructional book projected on the backdrop are enlarged to the point that it can visually contain a real human figure. In one section, Jiang Fan examines the instructional break-down of the ballet shown on the projected pages, which consists of still-shots of key poses, textual description that strings together nomenclatures of bodily positions, gestures, and steps, and the points and pathways on stage in a floorplan-like illustration. She proceeds to dance and speak her thoughts aloud to the audience (see Figure 40).

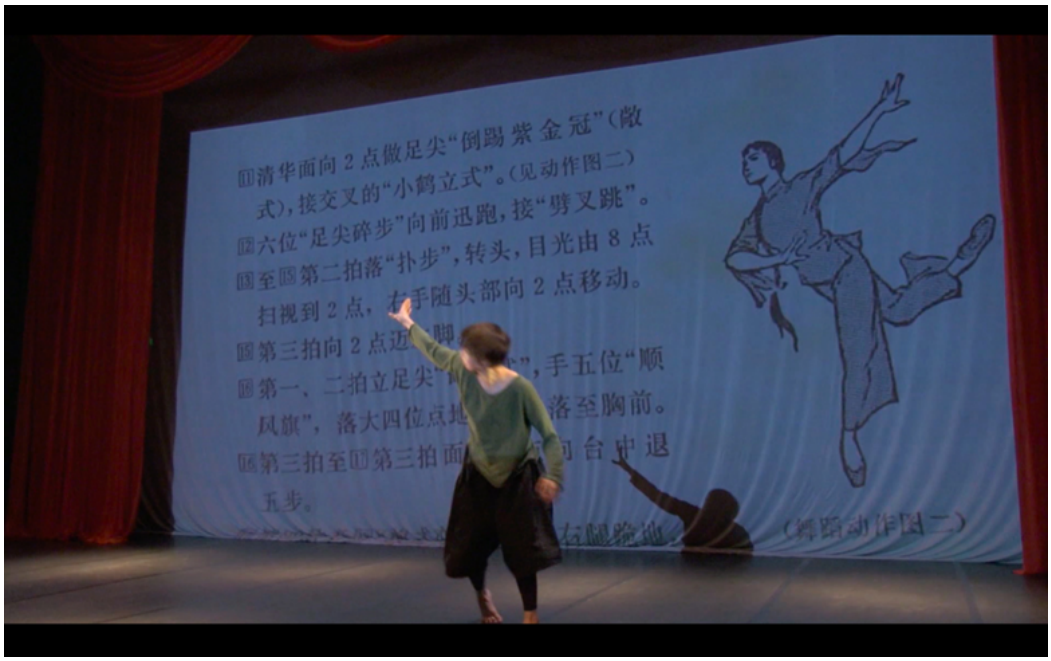


Figure 40. Hong (2015). Jiang Fan and the instructional breakdown of the ballet. Photo by Richy Wong.

First, she reflects on the 'eight points' she was taught in formal dance lessons. The 'eight points' evenly divide the 360-degree of a person's surroundings into distinct points of reference for a dancer to position and present herself to the audience, counting clockwise starting from one's frontal point followed by each point at every 45-degree angle, with the audience presumed to be viewing from her front. Jiang Fan recalls how she has been instructed to look back and forth between point 2 and point 8 when performing the arm-waves of Mongolian Dance (see Figure 41). The same directional points of reference recur in her ballet class as well as a sequence of *The Red Detachment of Women* in which the heroine Wu Qinghua performs her first solo upon fleeing her master's house. The 'eight points', visible and traceable in the dance repertoire that Jiang learns and inherits, is thus made obvious as a disciplinary tool that organizes, recognizes, and confines embodied movement into legitimate 'dance'. Though Jiang Fan has not experienced the revolution, *yangbanxi* dance has also

become a routine for her. Whenever the *yangbanxi* music plays, she instinctively moves and then feels distressed.

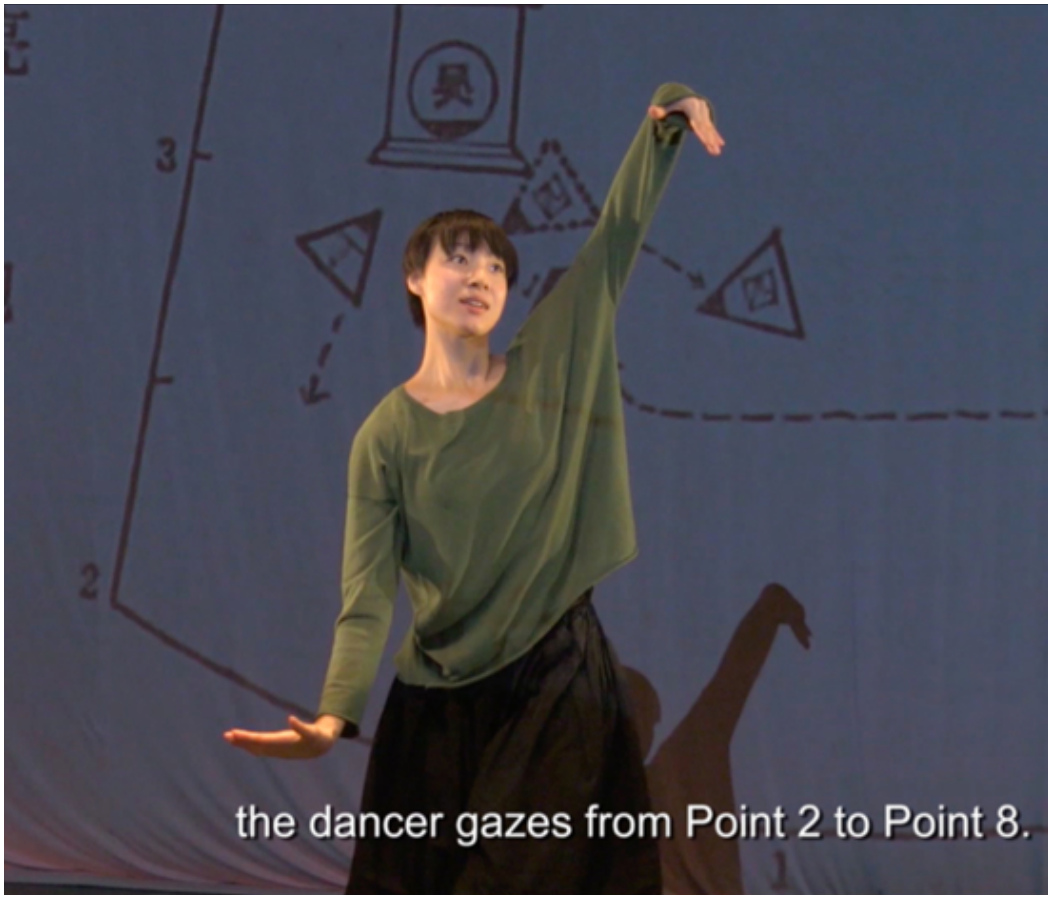


Figure 41. Hong (2015). Jiang Fan looks back and forth between point 2 and point 8. Photo by Richy Wong.

Later, Jiang Fan figures it out. She cannot turn back into a blank slate and must accept this while also breaking through again to find stronger expressive power. Jiang mimics the posture in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964) and repeats the back-and-forth looks between the two points; she speeds up the repetition until it becomes unbearably rapid, before breaking away from such a mind-body codification and exhaustion into a freer and more fluid stream of dancing, in which points in space are seen as multiple, capable of being referenced simultaneously, organized, and shifted in idiosyncratic ways. This sequence powerfully dramatizes the process of working through embodied friction rather than smoothing it over. Jiang Fan's accelerating

repetition reveals the disciplinary machinery within the movement, pushing it to the point of physical and psychological crisis before breaking through into something new. This is a critical transformation of revolutionary memory: the disciplinary inscription remains, but its hold over the body is loosened through deliberate, painful re-engagement. Here, the ethical dilemma of somatic re-engagement becomes viscerally apparent: Jiang must feel the friction in her body by submitting herself to the distressing reactivation of inherited corporeal patterns before she can move beyond them. In the final scene, Jiang Fan carries Wen Hui, who raises her fist like taking an oath, on her back, and walks from one side of the stage to the other. Is she carrying the weight of history or the rigid rules of art? Whether it's history or the rules of art, they are embodied in living individuals. Jiang Fan hunches her back, taking slow, almost faltering steps, but she still manages to complete the journey (see Figure 42).



Figure 42. Hong (2015). Jiang Fan carries Wen Hui. Photo by Richy Wong.

The dramaturgy of the body in *Hong* is rooted in memory, emotion, and expressions (both the physical and the linguistic) that connect and investigate the

personal and the socio-historical. An important dimension and approach of Wen Hui's dramaturgy of the body, alongside interviewing other people's experiences, lies in self-excavation and self-reflection. Dance training and choreography aside, one of the interviews with another dancer unravels the intertwinement of the dance and her life experience in vivid details, revealing the contradiction of revolutionary corporeality in which onstage performance and offstage experience align as well as depart. Wang Huifen, the principal dancer of Kunming City Song and Dance Troupe who played the heroine Wu Qinghua, recounted her 'liberation' from her husband's disapproval of her dance career (making a scene by throwing her bag of rehearsal clothes and pointe shoes out of the window), by threatening to divorce him as advised by the leader of her dance troupe/work unit. However, she was also forced to take an injection to stop her breast milk in two days for a sudden performance assignment soon after she gave birth to her first child. "Women's liberation", paradoxically, was accompanied by the impossibility of autonomy over their own bodies. Wang's testimony surfaces the material, gendered costs of revolutionary performance, the way that the *yangbanxi* ballet's celebration of female empowerment coexisted with the institutional control of women's reproductive bodies. By incorporating such testimonies, *Hong* refuses the frictionless narrative of revolutionary progress and insists on holding together the contradictory dimensions of this history.

Memory, and the experience and process of remembering, are thus important means and reservoirs for Wen Hui's pursuit of the reality of embodied experience, which is both central to her concern and a touchstone for more profound sociohistorical interrogation. The attendance to memory began as an intuitive quest pressed by the urge to understand her own becoming, shuttling between personal sentiment and social subjectification, as a Chinese woman groomed in a certain

sociohistorical context. This quest has evolved into a praxis guided by her confirmed belief in how personal memory embeds sociohistorical processes, and that the excavation of personal memory may bring revelatory insight to society and to the way 'history' has been narrated and experienced.

To the extent of relating personal memory to wider socio-historical circumstances, Wen Hui conceptualized her research into the body as an archive: 'Bodily memory is a kind of living library and archive, and I try to touch the history and feel the reality with my body. It is a good opportunity for me to re-examine myself and reflect on my past work' (Wen, 2015). Diana Taylor has pointed out that 'archive' is the place/thing/ practice of 'authority', with a reference to Foucault that archive functions not only as a space of enunciation but primarily as 'the law of what can be said' (Foucault, 1972: 129; Taylor, 2003: 5). To frame bodily memory in terms of 'archive' appropriates such a 'legitimating epistemic system' (Taylor, 2003: 5).

However, I would suggest that such a framing is more of a reflexive appropriation of, rather than submission to, such an epistemology. 'Body (as) archive' reminds people of the body's historiographical potency and recognizes the body as an important site for generating, transmitting, and storing cultural practices and social history. However, it comes with an emphasis on the sensory way of knowing, as history and reality are 'touched' and 'felt' alongside scrutiny and organization of records and evidence associated with 'archive'. Wen Hui's 'body archive' privileges the 'repeated sensing and awareness' of 'bodily memory [that] is an entity without actual form' (Wen, 2016). It exemplifies how repertoire is reembodied and reengaged in ways that expose its disciplinary techniques and effects.

The 'body archive' as Wen Hui's praxis elaborates, straddles the personal and the social, the sensory and the evidential, the emotional and the reflexive; individual,

personal embodied memory offers access to, sheds light on the official, the known, as well as the under-written and even wilfully forsaken stories and experiences in public spheres and grand narratives. In the context of contemporary China, where forward movement occupy mainstream discourse and consciousness, recalling takes on a political significance, which concerns motioning inward and backwards as if being on a lone, meditative journey, in contrast to outward, forward, ostensibly festive expansion at full charge. This contrast between recalling and advancing maps onto the distinction between the two modes of remaking analysed in this chapter: the *Chunwan* restaging embodies the forward-facing, celebratory trajectory of mainstream Chinese culture, while *Hong*'s meditative, inward-turning practice of somatic archaeology moves against this current, insisting that critical engagement with the past, however uncomfortable, is a necessary condition for genuine cultural transformation. It is critical to move forward, by way of reengaging with the past.

Ethical tensions in embodied memories

This investigation of embodied memory and corporeal resistance reveals a crucial tension: while such practices offer valuable opportunities for historical reckoning and cultural transformation, they also risk reproducing the very traumas they seek to address. The body's capacity to store and reactivate memory, so powerfully demonstrated in works like *Hong*, raises questions about the ethics of artistic intervention in traumatic histories. This section examines the ethical complexities that arise when dance is understood simultaneously as disciplining of the body and as a potential site of liberation from that discipline.

The fundamental paradox inherent in embodied memory work lies in its therapeutic potential being inextricably linked to its capacity for harm. When performers re-enter the disciplinary choreographies of *yangbanxi*, they re-experience

them somatically, reactivating the muscular patterns and affective responses that were originally cultivated under conditions of institutional coercion. As Cathy Caruth argues, traumatic memory exists in a state of perpetual return, where 'the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time' (1996: 7). When artists like Wen Hui deliberately reactivate the bodily repertoires of *yangbanxi*, they engage with what Caruth identifies as trauma's compulsive repetition, a process that can be simultaneously healing and destructive.

This tension manifests in *Hong* through the performers' different somatic relationship to *yangbanxi*'s disciplinary apparatus. Liu Zhuying's reverent handling of the instructional manual and her reactivation of disciplined movements from her youth exemplifies how somatic archaeology can unlock suppressed memories and foster critical reflection. Yet her visible emotional responses during performance, the way her 'pride and the emotional techniques cultivated during that era still shine', also suggest the reactivation of affective structures that may be both empowering and potentially destabilizing. The very precision with which she executes these movements indicates that her body has retained not merely choreographic information, but the entire apparatus of discipline, hierarchy, and ideological investment that originally shaped these gestures. For Liu, somatic re-engagement means returning to a body-state in which discipline was experienced as fulfilment, a state whose complexity *Hong* makes visible without resolving. This contrasts with the *Chunwan* restaging, where dancers perform the same choreography without any framework for acknowledging these embodied complexities; the Gala's frictionless surface offers no space for such ethical reckoning.

Jiang Fan's experience foregrounds the ethical dilemma of somatic re-engagement with particular urgency. Her visceral, involuntary response to *yangbanxi* music reveals how deeply the disciplinary apparatus has inscribed itself in her body, persisting as an unwanted somatic reflex even in a performer who consciously rejects the system that produced it. Her breakthrough sequence in *Hong*, in which she accelerates the repetition of prescribed movements to the point of crisis before breaking into freer dancing, dramatizes the painful process of working through embodied discipline. Yet this process requires her to deliberately re-enter a state of distress to feel the disciplinary inscriptions pressing against her expressive desires as a precondition for transformation. The ethical question is whether this constitutes therapeutic 'working through' or potentially harmful re-traumatization, and whether the distinction can be reliably maintained within the pressures of live performance.

The international circulation of *Hong*, from Shanghai to London's Southbank Centre, introduces additional ethical complexities around the commodification of traumatic memory. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital becomes particularly relevant here, as the work's aesthetic sophistication and conceptual complexity enable its consumption by international audiences who may lack the historical and cultural literacy necessary for responsible engagement (1986). The risk emerges not merely of oversimplification, but of what Susan Sontag identifies as the 'aestheticization of suffering', where traumatic experience becomes transformed into consumable spectacle divorced from its material consequences (2003: 102).

This commodification risk illuminates a further dimension of the contrast between frictionless and friction-foregrounding remaking. Paradoxically, the very elements that distinguish *Hong* from the *Chunwan* restaging, its commitment to surfacing embodied contradictions, its intimate personal testimonies, its refusal of

celebratory closure, may also be what makes it compelling to international audiences as aesthetic experience. The projection of instructional manual pages enlarged to 'visually contain a real human figure' creates striking visual metaphors that function effectively for international audiences, yet this very aesthetic power risks working against the work's critical intentions: the stronger the visual impact, the more likely international audiences are to appreciate the image as compelling stage design rather than to feel the disciplinary violence it documents. Where the *Chunwan* restaging smooths frictions for domestic consumption, international touring risks transforming *Hong*'s deliberate frictions into a different kind of consumable: the aestheticized spectacle of Chinese political trauma consumed by Western audiences lacking the embodied, cultural, and historical knowledge to engage with its full implications.

The intergenerational structure of *Hong*'s cast illuminates another dimension of ethical complexity. The presence of performers spanning different historical relationships to the Cultural Revolution, from Liu Zhuying's direct experience to Li Xinmin and Jiang Fan's inherited legacies, creates what Marianne Hirsch terms 'postmemory', where trauma is transmitted across generational boundaries through affective and embodied channels rather than direct experience (2012). While this transmission can facilitate historical understanding and empathy, it also risks what Hirsch identifies as 'vicarious traumatization', where subsequent generations become burdened by traumas they did not directly experience.

The distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma, as theorized by Dominick LaCapra (2001), provides a useful framework for evaluating *Hong*'s ethical positioning. LaCapra argues that artistic practices which merely repeat traumatic patterns without achieving critical distance, which she terms 'acting out', risk perpetuating rather than resolving traumatic fixation. *Hong*'s documentary

methodology and reflexive framework suggest a deliberate effort to facilitate 'working through' rather than mere 'acting out': the performers subject the *yangbanxi* choreography to analysis, narration, and critical commentary as they physically re-enter its movements. Yet the question remains whether embodied reactivation of disciplinary repertoires can ever fully escape the compulsive repetition that characterizes traumatic response, whether the body, once it re-enters the postures and rhythms of its training, can maintain the critical distance that the mind intends. This uncertainty is itself a form of friction that *Hong* productively inhabits, distinguishing it from both the *Chunwan* restaging's refusal to acknowledge any difficulty and from a hypothetical therapeutic intervention designed to resolve discomfort. *Hong* occupies an uncomfortable middle ground: it 'works through' trauma without claiming to cure it, surfaces frictions without pretending to smooth them, and insists on the ethical necessity of somatic re-engagement while acknowledging its risks.

Drawing from Judith Herman (2015)'s work on trauma recovery, we might identify criteria for distinguishing between reparative and potentially harmful artistic interventions. Herman's emphasis on survivor agency, community support, and gradual exposure suggests that ethical embodied memory work must prioritize participant consent, provide adequate support systems, and maintain sensitivity to individual thresholds of tolerance. *Hong*'s collaborative development process involving extensive interviews, personal reflection, and the agency of each performer in selecting which aspects of the archive to engage with appears to honour these principles, though the pressures of public performance inevitably introduce variables that cannot be fully controlled. The international circulation of trauma-based artworks also demands consideration of representational ethics, frameworks for

ensuring that cultural trauma is not reduced to exotic spectacle by decontextualized reception. The responsibility extends beyond individual artists to encompass institutions, curators, audiences, and the broader cultural apparatus that supports and circulates such works.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how the revolutionary transformation of classical ballet within China's socialist ideological framework reveals the body as a contested site of collective memory, political inscription, and disciplinary power. Through examining the 1964 *yangbanxi* ballet, the 2014 *Chunwan* restaging, and Wen Hui's *Hong* (2015), I have argued that these three iterations represent different modes of engagement with the embodied legacy of revolutionary performance. The *yangbanxi* ballet established a disciplinary apparatus in which dancers' bodies were systematically reshaped to serve state ideology, creating what Foucault would recognize as 'docile bodies' whose virtuosity masked their subjugation. Through this mobilization of the dancers' physical forms to serve state objectives, these disciplined bodies became not only vessels of revolutionary ideals but dynamic archives where memory is materially inscribed, affectively transmitted, and perpetually reactivated through embodied performance. The choreographed gestures of *yangbanxi* thus function not simply as representations of sanctioned historical narratives, but as living repositories where cultural memory persists through repetition, discipline, and corporeal practice.

The analysis of *yangbanxi* as a model of socialist aesthetics reveals its fundamental paradox: while exemplifying the state's disciplinary apparatus and ideological control, it simultaneously creates an unstable terrain where memory becomes vulnerable to contestation and reinterpretation. The performing body

emerges as a complex palimpsest of revolutionary history, bearing traces of both triumphant narratives and suppressed contradictions. The body operates not as a passive medium of transmission but as an active site where historical tensions are negotiated, where official memory encounters its own fissures and blind spots.

In this context, *Chunwan* restaging and Wen Hui's *Hong* represent diametrically opposed strategies for negotiating this palimpsest, which I have characterized as 'frictionless remaking' and 'friction-foregrounding remaking' respectively. The *Chunwan* restaging exemplifies institutional reproduction that preserves the aesthetic surface of *yangbanxi* while systematically excising its contradictions, such as the individual suffering masked by collective triumph. By embedding the ballet within a celebratory televised spectacle, selecting its most harmonious musical element, and framing it through pop entertainment, the Gala constructs what Assmann terms 'structural amnesia', a cultural memory that remembers selectively, preserving revolutionary aesthetics while forgetting revolutionary costs. This is remaking in the service of ideological continuity: the body on the *Chunwan* stage performs its disciplined choreography without any framework for acknowledging what that discipline entailed.

Wen Hui's *Hong*, by contrast, operates as a 'critical counter-remake' that takes the *yangbanxi* ballet as its subject matter to expose the frictions that institutional remakings suppress. By positioning herself at the periphery of institutional authority, Wen Hui reclaims corporeal agency while engaging critically with the residual grammars of revolutionary performance. Her practice constitutes a form of somatic archaeology, excavating the layered inscriptions of *yangbanxi* to expose its ideological contradictions and mnemonic instabilities. Through documentary investigation and the embodied testimonies of four women spanning different generational relationships

to the Cultural Revolution, *Hong* insists on holding together the contradictory dimensions of *yangbanxi*'s legacy: pride and subjugation, aesthetic achievement and physical coercion, collective identity and individual erasure, women's 'liberation' and the institutional control of their bodies. By foregrounding the tensions between institutional memory and lived experience, personal narrative and collective mythology, her work reveals the body as both an archive and agent of cultural transformation. Her dramaturgy creates space for alternative modes of remembering that are affectively complex, historically nuanced, and politically unresolved, resisting the closure of official narrative while remaining accountable to the material traces of the past. Where *Chunwan* offers closure and celebration, *Hong* remains open, unresolved, and uncomfortable, treating the frictions of revolutionary culture not as problems to be solved but as the material conditions of historical truth.

However, this chapter has also confronted the ethical dilemma inherent in friction-foregrounding remaking. The practice of somatic re-engagement carries risks that cannot be fully mitigated by critical framing alone. When Jiang Fan accelerates her repetition of prescribed movements to the point of crisis, when Liu Zhuying reactivates the pride cultivated through ideological conditioning, when Li Xinmin's untrained body encounters the archive of revolutionary spectacle, these performers are not only representing trauma but re-entering it somatically, with consequences that the documentary framework can acknowledge but cannot entirely control. The distinction between reparative 'working through' and potentially harmful 'acting out' remains unstable in live performance, and the international circulation of such work introduces further ethical complexities around the commodification of political trauma.

These tensions do not diminish *Hong*'s significance; rather, they constitute part of its critical contribution. Through this investigation, I argue that the body in post-

revolutionary China functions as a critical site where the legacies of socialism are neither simply preserved nor entirely discarded but continuously reworked through practices of embodied memory. In the hands of independent artists, the revolutionary body becomes a medium through which the past is not merely recalled but radically reauthored, opening possibilities for historical engagement that transcend the binary of celebration and condemnation. By inhabiting the uncomfortable space between reparation and re-traumatisation, between remembering and reliving, *Hong* offers a mode of cultural engagement that refuses both the amnesia of frictionless remaking and the fantasy of painless historical reckoning. In the context of this thesis's investigation of *yangbanxi* remakes, this chapter demonstrates that the spectrum of remaking practices, from institutional reproduction to independent deconstruction, is organized around one question of friction: whether the embodied contradictions of revolutionary memory are smoothed over or surfaced, suppressed or examined, consumed as spectacle or worked through as material for critical transformation.

This recognition of both the transformative potential and ethical complexity inherent in remaking *yangbanxi* necessitates a shift from theoretical analysis to practical engagement. The next chapter therefore moves from investigation to practice-led research, using creative intervention as both method and object of inquiry. Through examining the process of writing and workshopping *yangbanxi* remakes, the following chapter interrogates how artists can navigate the delicate balance between remembering difficult pasts and avoiding harm, exploring whether reparative aesthetics can foster healing while minimizing the exploitation of trauma or oversimplification of historical complexity. This methodological shift from embodied critique to creative practice reveals how artistic intervention itself becomes a site where ethical responsibility and affective care must be continuously negotiated, where

the questions that emerge from this research must be lived through rather than simply analysed.

Chapter Five. Reparative friction: practice-led remaking and the limits of repair in *The Ant* (2024)

Moving from analysis to practice, this chapter extends the thesis's framework of mnemonic friction from within the remaking process itself. To do so, I created a short film, *The Ant* (2024), built from interviews with former Red Guards, to investigate whether *yangbanxi* remakes can facilitate ethical engagement with Cultural Revolution memory, specifically Red Guard complicity, without reproducing the punitive frameworks that have historically governed how that complicity is remembered. The preceding chapters have demonstrated that institutional context is constitutive of the friction each remake generates, with each of the three case studies produced within or in direct negotiation with PRC institutional frameworks that shaped and constrained the friction it could generate. *The Ant* extends this inquiry from a position outside those frameworks, operating with a greater degree of creative freedom but also at a greater distance from the communities and cultural contexts in which *yangbanxi* memory remains a living force. In doing so, it generates a different kind of knowledge: what happens when mnemonic friction is deliberately mobilized for reparative purposes from beyond the institutional terrain in which that memory is most actively contested.

The chapter addresses what Maria M. Delgado, Michal Kobialka and Bryce Lease term 'difficult pasts': historical periods that are 'confrontational, antagonistic towards existing social myths, and difficult to assimilate in grand or heroic narratives' (2023: 7). This framework is particularly apt for the Cultural Revolution, whose legacies resist easy commemoration and remain politically contentious in contemporary China. While *yangbanxi* works have been extensively studied as propaganda artifacts, scholars have given less attention to how contemporary remakes navigate the ethical challenges of representing difficult pasts for present-day audiences.

This gap is significant because *yangbanxi* remakes occupy a unique position in China's cultural landscape: they simultaneously invoke revolutionary nostalgia and confront the violence embedded within these works. As performative interventions operating within what Diana Taylor terms the 'repertoire' of embodied cultural knowledge (2003), they face distinct epistemological challenges that are absent from conventional historical research, functioning as artistic works requiring aesthetic coherence, memorial practices demanding ethical accountability to survivors, and cultural texts operating within contemporary political constraints around Cultural Revolution representation.

The central argument of this chapter is that practice-led research can generate knowledge about mnemonic friction that is inaccessible through critical analysis alone, but that such knowledge includes the knowledge of failure. *The Ant* draws from both autobiographical reflections and interviews with former Red Guards who continue to navigate the tension between personal memory and official history, constructing a protagonist who confronts her buried past through a fractured dialogue between her elderly self and her internalized Red Guard persona. Through this psychological fragmentation, the film attempts to move beyond the rigid victim-perpetrator binaries that have characterized both *yangbanxi*'s original propaganda and subsequent responses to it. Yet the film's trajectory, from an initial focus on guilt and confrontational aesthetics toward a reparative framework and the partial failure of that reparative turn in reception, reveals that formal intervention alone cannot compensate for retributive narrative architecture. Audience responses demonstrate that the film's aesthetic strategies, while generating sophisticated engagement with revolutionary memory, reinforce rather than challenge punitive approaches to historical accountability. This chapter therefore treats the encounter between reparative intention

and its partial failure as itself a source of insight into how the conditions and structures of cultural production shape the possibilities of mnemonic friction.

To structure this practice-led inquiry, I employ Lawrence Halprin's RSVP Cycles (1970) as a methodological framework for ethical creative practice. The RSVP process, moving through Resources, Score, Valuaction, and Performance, provides a structured approach to reparative aesthetics that prioritizes iterative reflection, embedding values-based decision-making at each stage of the creative process. Crucially, the methodology functions as a continuous loop rather than a linear sequence: *The Ant*'s Valuaction phase, in which cross-group audience analysis exposes the structural limitations of confrontational aesthetics, generates new resources for subsequent creative cycles rather than terminating in a fixed conclusion. Through this framework, the creation of *The Ant* generates 'complementary knowledge' (Nelson, 2013), which emerges from the intersection of making and reflecting and cannot be accessed through purely theoretical or historical approaches. The chapter thus offers what Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt identify as 'materializing thinking': embodied knowledge production that 'cannot be understood as separate from the material processes of creative practice' (2007: 2).

The chapter proceeds through three main sections. I begin by situating *yangbanxi* within broader debates about Cultural Revolution memory, drawing on Ba Jin's account of the enduring traumatic resonance of *yangbanxi* (1984) and developing criteria for ethical representation of difficult pasts through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative reading (2003), Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (1991), and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through (2001). I then present a detailed case study of *The Ant*'s creative process, tracing how interviews with former Red Guards informed the construction of fractured subjectivity and how the film's

aesthetic strategies, including minimalist staging, temporal disruption, and the juxtaposition of *yangbanxi* arias with contemporary soundscapes, attempt to destabilise *yangbanxi*'s propagandistic apparatus. Finally, I examine audience reception through cross-group interviews with Cultural Revolution descendants, academic researchers, and political theatre practitioners, assessing where the film's reparative strategies succeed in generating ethical engagement and where its retributive narrative architecture undermines those aspirations.

The affective remains of *yangbanxi*

The Cultural Revolution remains one of the most significant yet contested chapters in modern Chinese history, characterized by what historians estimate as the persecution of over 100 million people and the deaths of between 1.5 to 2 million individuals (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006). For those born in the post-Mao era, the Cultural Revolution represents inherited trauma transmitted across generational lines through fragments, silences, and cultural artifacts rather than direct experience. Yet paradoxically, as Yang Jisheng documents (2021), the Cultural Revolution remains a 'forbidden zone' in public discourse, subject to state censorship and collective avoidance. This creates what Assmann describes as 'latent' cultural memory that exists in the collective unconscious but lacks institutional channels for processing (2011: 138).

Ba Jin's essay collection *Random Thoughts* (Sui Xiang Lu, 1984) captured this paradox. As one of China's most significant 20th-century intellectuals, Ba Jin had experienced persecution during the Cultural Revolution and later became a leading advocate for confronting its trauma; he wrote about the continuing psychological impact of *yangbanxi*:

> For many years, I stopped listening to *yangbanxi*, and it seemed as if I had forgotten them. However, during the Spring Festival, I unexpectedly heard someone singing *yangbanxi*–it was gruesome. For several consecutive days, I had nightmares, the kind of nightmares I was all too familiar with during a particular period in the past. These nightmares seemed closely tied to *yangbanxi*–for me, the two are inseparable. I fear nightmares, and therefore, I fear *yangbanxi*. Now I realize the imprint these *yangbanxi* left on my heart cannot be erased. It is from this imprint that my nightmares arise.

Ba Jin's statement reveals what Caruth identifies as the 'unclaimed experience' (1991) of historical trauma, which are memories that return unbidden because they were never fully processed. Ba Jin's decades-long silence about the Cultural Revolution did not erase the psychological impact of those years; instead, it created a reservoir of unprocessed experience that would later manifest in unexpected and involuntary ways. The *yangbanxi* performances that trigger Ba Jin's visceral responses function as *lieux de mémoire*, where collective memory takes material form surviving when, or perhaps especially when, official discourse attempts to erase or reframe historical experience (Nora and Kritzman, 1996). The melodies and theatrical conventions of *yangbanxi* thus serve as vessels carrying forward not just aesthetic traditions, but the emotional and psychological residues of the entire historical period.

As mentioned in the Introduction[7], the existing scholarship on *yangbanxi* remakes has focused primarily on their propagandistic value (Linyu Wang, 2023), socialist commodification (Laurence Coderre, 2015), and aesthetic revolutionization (John Winzenburg, 2016; Yawen Ludden, 2013; Emily Wilcox, 2018). However, little

[7] For a literature review on *yangbanxi* studies, see Introduction, pp.20-34.

research has explored how these remakes unfold in private, everyday contexts, often taking subtle or concealed forms as cultural icons and symbols. This scholarly gap reflects a broader reluctance to confront the Cultural Revolution's legacy, which is shaped by both state censorship and personal voluntariness. The CCP has deliberately downplayed this period, referring to it as a 'mistake' in the search for a true socialist and communist ideal while urging the population to 'look forward for stability and unity' (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). This official stance combines with voluntary forgetting among survivors to create what amounts to enforced silence. During the Cultural Revolution, *wenyi* (literature and art) was limited to political propaganda, and 'intellectual freedom was virtually non-existent' (Liang and Shapiro, 1984: 3). Under such oppression, theatre-making became desperate, and artists suffered profoundly. The emotional resonance of these experiences serves as both reminder of the era's oppressive cultural apparatus and testament to enduring, unhealed trauma.

Consequently, *yangbanxi* has received limited scholarly attention despite its significance as a cultural symbol of this period. For decades, official discourse has relegated these works to the status of kitsch artefacts of propaganda, with scholarly engagement often mirroring this dismissive stance. Research into *yangbanxi* remakes therefore seems to be an unpleasant, unwanted and perhaps even taboo subject with only a handful of productions to study. This very tension between enforced silence and the need for representation underscores the importance of understanding how performance might mediate memory and difficult pasts.

As art form manipulated for political ends, *yangbanxi* represents a unique, and often unsettling, intersection of culture and propaganda. Though no longer politically obligated, their legacy endures through highly codified structures and emotional expressions. As analysed in Chapter One, *yangbanxi*'s formulaic characterization

promotes singular views of social relations, elevating revolutionary figures while reducing others to archetypes. Its one-dimensional emotional portrayal, with hatred as the dominant emotional driver of every narrative, contributes to its mechanical, almost lifeless quality, reflecting the Cultural Revolution's radical polarization of Chinese society into rigid categories of 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. Moreover, *yangbanxi*'s portrayal of emotion was one-dimensional, with hatred serving as the dominant emotional driver of every narrative. Such narrow emotional expression, which left little room for more nuanced human experiences like love or familial bonds, contributed to the mechanical, almost lifeless quality of the art form.

Due to its propagandistic nature, *yangbanxi* works were reduced to homogenized negative stereotypes after the Cultural Revolution, mirroring a broader societal reaction where revolutionary fervour gave way to equally fervent anti-revolutionary sentiment. This created what Liu Kang describes as an 'iconoclastic turn' (2000) in Chinese cultural production, characterized by wholesale rejection of revolutionary aesthetics. Yet *yangbanxi* continues to hold potential for reparative storytelling, as its very structure and content offer opportunities to subvert or reimagine these rigid emotional and ideological frameworks. Exploring the reparative potentials of *yangbanxi* allows engagement with complex historical and emotional legacy, providing space to rework emotional dimensions and ethical implications in ways that challenge the dominant narratives they once served. Through such a process, *yangbanxi* can transform from instruments of ideological control into sites of critical reflection and emotional restoration.

To achieve this transformation, *yangbanxi* remakes should move beyond simplistic dichotomies of innocent victims and monstrous oppressors and explore the complexity and nuance often overshadowed by polarized narratives. This aim

informs my creative journey with *The Ant*, a *yangbanxi* remake that delves into the fractured consciousness of Su, a 72-year-old former Red Guard confronting her haunting past. The work draws from both autobiographical reflections and interviews with former Red Guards who continue grappling with their choices and enduring legacies. Performative writing enables exploration of these complexities—their messiness, contradictions, and emotional weight—where empathy and identification become possible not as excuses for the historical violence, but as a means of understanding the human beings who were swept up in it.

Towards reparative aesthetics

Despite the reluctance to revisit *yangbanxi*, a growing body of scholarship has explored the emotional significance of engaging with difficult histories in other cultural contexts, which provides a theoretical framework for my practice-led methodology that can navigate the ethical complexities of representing Red Guard experience without reproducing historical violence. Building on Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2020)'s concept of the 'reparative quest', I approach *yangbanxi* remakes not as attempts to heal Cultural Revolution trauma, but as ongoing dialogic engagements that can transform traumatic legacy into what they term 'responsive and relational forms of memory' (45) that support accountability without re-traumatization.

Sedgwick (2003)'s theory of 'reparative reading' provides the foundational framework for this approach. Her distinction between paranoid reading strategies (focused on uncovering hidden harm) and reparative approaches proves essential for my work because *yangbanxi*'s primary function was precisely to generate paranoid affect, such as hatred, suspicion, dehumanization of class enemies. Sedgwick's insight that reparative reading "is motivated by the hope that the 'culture of hatred' might be transformed" (123) informs my central research question: how can contemporary

performance transform *yangbanxi*'s hatred-dominated emotional landscape into spaces for more complex moral engagement? This is not about redemption or forgiveness, but about creating what Sedgwick calls 'room for the unexpected' (24) within familiar forms.

However, this transformation requires careful navigation of significant ethical risks. Cathy Caruth's warning against imposing closure on traumatic memory proves crucial for my approach to Red Guard narratives, as they argue that trauma 'returns to haunt the survivor' precisely because of 'its very unassimilated nature' (1996: 4). This insight directly shapes my decision to structure both remakes around Su's fragmented, non-linear recollections rather than providing coherent redemption narratives. LaCapra's distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma becomes essential, as they warn that 'acting out is related to repetition, and even the compulsion to repeat' (2001: 142), which is the danger inherent in *yangbanxi* remakes that might simply re-perform the works' violence. By contrast, 'working through' is 'a slow process in which preconscious and unconscious material is made accessible to consciousness' through 'the painful confrontation with reality' (26-27). For my *yangbanxi* remakes, this translates into Su's gradual recognition of her complicity, not through dramatic revelation but through accumulating details that resist denial. LaCapra's argument that successful 'working through' requires 'the capacity to experience guilt without being destroyed by it' (42) informs my aesthetic strategy of using humour and absurdity to create psychological distance that prevents what LaCapra terms 'full identification' with traumatic experiences and enables moral recognition without psychological collapse, allowing audiences to engage with Red Guard violence empathetically rather than defensively.

Performative writing serves as my primary methodological solution to these ethical complexities, offering a form that embraces the fragmented, non-linear nature of Red Guard memory without imposing false coherence. Della Pollock's insight that performative writing 'evokes worlds that might be, worlds in the subjunctive mood' (2014: 80) informs my approach to Su's fractured recollections in both remakes, where memory exists in conditional tenses, such as 'what if I had…' 'perhaps I could have…, rather than declarative statements that would claim authoritative knowledge of the past. This subjunctive quality proves essential for *yangbanxi* remakes because it allows exploration of moral complexity without the false resolution that Caruth warns against. Pollock's emphasis on performative writing as 'citational and iterative' (2014: 73) provides the structural foundation for my RSVP Cycles methodology, where each iteration of the performance generates new possibilities for understanding rather than moving toward definitive conclusions.

These theoretical frameworks converge in my practice-led methodology, where *yangbanxi* remakes become sites for what I term 'embodied historical inquiry', using performance to explore ethical questions that cannot be resolved through archival research alone. The central challenge my work addresses is how to honour Ba Jin's traumatic relationship to *yangbanxi* while creating new affective possibilities that neither silence his pain nor trap audiences in cycles of re-traumatization. Through Su's fragmented narrative, the remake investigates specific aspects of Red Guard complicity: fidelity (how faithful can contemporary artists be to traumatic source material without reproducing harm), agency (what authority do post-Mao artists have to reimagine Red Guard experience), and cultural negotiation (how can performance create dialogue between survivors' testimony and contemporary audiences' need for understanding). Rather than resolving these tensions theoretically, my RSVP Cycles

methodology uses iterative performance to generate the 'complementary knowledge' (Nelson, 2013: 37)—embodied insights that emerge only through the doing and cannot be accessed through purely analytical approaches. The goal is not to heal Cultural Revolution trauma but to create sustainable forms of engagement that enable ongoing dialogue with difficult pasts without reproducing their violence.

Jiang Qing and the Red Guards

The first seeds of remaking *yangbanxi* came from the 1980 televised trial of Jiang Qing, where Mao Zedong's widow, a prominent figure of the Cultural Revolution, and the engineer of the *yangbanxi* project, faced charges for her role in orchestrating purges and persecutions as a leading member of the 'Gang of Four'. This trial relied on curated evidence and the rule of people and exemplified the arbitrary and often theatrical nature of authoritarian justice during and after the Cultural Revolution, where the principle of law was systematically undermined by the dominance of personal and political vendettas. Jerome A. Cohen's analysis of this trial as 'deeply flawed' and conducted under a legal framework that 'had only recently been re-established' and 'lacked fundamental protections of due process' (2010: 45) illuminates a paradox that informs my dramaturgy: the trial was simultaneously an attempt to restore the rule of law and moral order and a reproduction of the very arbitrary justice it claimed to reject. Cohen's critique reveals how post-Mao China perpetuated the Cultural Revolution's subordination of legal principles to political expedience, merely shifting the target from class enemies to convenient scapegoats. The trial's logic, which substitutes theatrical performance for genuine accountability, inspires the narrative arc of my *yangbanxi* remake.

I extend Cohen's analysis beyond its focus on legal frameworks to examine how this theatrical justice functions as cultural trauma. While Cohen emphasizes the

trial's failure to establish rule of law, I argue that its success lay precisely in its spectacle, creating what Susan Sontag names 'pedagogical suffering' (2019) that teaches audiences how to process collective guilt through individualized blame. The state-controlled media's sensationalization of Jiang Qing's confrontational outbursts, such as her refusal to admit guilt and her denunciations of the trial as a 'sham' (Lifton and Wu, 1986), served not merely to demonize her, but to model the emotional responses deemed appropriate for engaging with Cultural Revolution memory. Elizabeth J. Perry's observation that 'public trials often serve as instruments of political theatre' (2002: 89) underscores the sophistication of this process. These trials don't simply manipulate justice but actively construct the affective frameworks through which citizens understand historical responsibility. The trial's theatrical excess succeeded in establishing cultural legitimacy by providing a cathartic narrative that enabled collective forgetting.

The sentence handed down to Jiang Qing was emblematic of the regime's retributive, rather than restorative, approach to justice. She was initially condemned to death with a two-year reprieve, which was later commuted to life imprisonment. Jiang was isolated, barred from receiving visitors, including her only daughter, Li Na, and denied meaningful interaction with the outside world. She committed suicide in 1991 by hanging herself in a hospital bathroom. I felt choked when I watched the televised trial of Jiang Qing, as I wrestled with the layers of her story, not merely as a political figure, but as a person, a woman, a wife, a mother, and, ultimately, a fractured individual shaped by and trapped within the machinery of history. Her public defiance, with her isolation and tragic end, underscored the devastating interplay between personal agency and collective power. Jiang Qing became both a symbol and a

scapegoat, shouldering the blame for the violence of an era that was far larger than any single individual.

Jiang Qing's trial testimony reveals the productive potential of fractured self-presentation as a form of resistance to simplified historical narratives. Her declaration "I was Chairman Mao's dog. Whomever he asked me to bite, I bit" (qtd. in Yang, 2021) functions as both self-abasement and accusation, personal confession and political indictment. This statement refuses the court's demand for individual accountability by insisting on her complete subjugation to Mao's authority yet paradoxically asserts agency through the very act of defiant testimony. Her insistence that 'When you vilify me, you are vilifying Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution in which millions of people participated' (ibid.) similarly fractures the prosecution's attempt to isolate her responsibility, forcing recognition of the systemic nature of Cultural Revolution violence while simultaneously claiming victimhood and complicity.

My decision to conduct interviews with former Red Guards grows from Jiang Qing's performance in the 1980 trial. While archival footage and secondary accounts reveal the theatricality of Jiang Qing's courtroom presence, it is difficult to convey how such fractures are lived, embodied, and remembered by those who once occupied similar ideological positions. Former Red Guards carry within their bodies the aftershocks of revolutionary zeal, the moral compromises of participation, and the silences enforced by decades of shifting political climates. Engaging with them is therefore not an exercise in gathering factual testimony but an inquiry into the performative strategies through which they navigate the ongoing tension between personal memory and official history. These interviews become a living resource that complements the trial footage, allowing me to transpose historical spectacle into

contemporary performance while grounding Su's psychological fragmentation in real, observed modes of remembering and forgetting.

Engaging with former Red Guards raises distinct ethical considerations that extend beyond procedural compliance. Interview testimonies are not simply a matter of recall, but an act negotiated between personal conscience, collective responsibility, and the potential risk of political exposure. All interview participants are anonymized using alphabetical designations (A, B, C), with identifying details removed from transcripts and research outputs, to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality. Informed consent is obtained after providing clear explanations of the project's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any point. Interviews are conducted in secure, private settings, and recordings are encrypted to minimize the risk of state surveillance or third-party access.

Yet such safeguards cannot neutralize the deeper ethical tensions inherent in this work. Discussing acts of violence, complicity, or remorse can trigger feelings of shame, defensiveness, or self-censorship. Participants may withhold, distort, or strategically frame their accounts, not merely to protect themselves but also to preserve a particular self-image formed through decades of ideological alignment. In this sense, silences, hesitations, and narrative detours are not simply gaps to be filled but evidence of mnemonic frictions: the dissonances that arise when embodied memories of revolutionary participation collide with contemporary frameworks of cultural remembrance. Respecting these frictions means refraining from pressing for disclosure when participants resist or deflect, recognizing that what is unsaid may carry as much weight as what is articulated.

By linking these ethical considerations to the study's conceptual framework, I treat each interview not as a neutral exchange of information but as a site where the

politics of memory, the aesthetics of self-presentation, and the ethics of representation intersect. The floating gap amplifies the stakes of such encounters: memories are too close to be forgotten and too dangerous to be fully spoken. Within this tension, the ethical task is to document not only what can be expressed but also how expression is shaped by decades of ideological conditioning, cultural censorship, and personal negotiation. In this way, the interviews become both archival and performative repositories of contested memory and active enactments of its ongoing negotiation, making them central to understanding how mnemonic frictions are lived, embodied, and performed.

The interviews consistently demonstrate how silence functions as an active choice rather than mere absence of speech. When asked about Cultural Revolution memories, all interviewees deployed strategic pauses that lasted 10-30 seconds, followed by deflections that redirected conversation toward safer topics. This pattern emerges most clearly in the responses from Participant A, a former propaganda team performer from an educated urban family, whose responses to inquiries about her participation in denunciation sessions exemplify what I call ‘deflective recitation’. When talked about her role in denunciation campaigns, Participant A responded with a composed, almost theatrical monologue that quoted directly from Mao’s *Little Red Book/ Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*: ‘Our duty is to hold ourselves responsible to the people. Every word, every act, and every policy must conform to the interests of the people’ (Mao, 1967: 325). This strategic citation employs official discourse to circumvent personal testimony while maintaining the appearance of cooperation. Participant A’s response demonstrates how revolutionary slogans become embodied scripts that persist decades beyond their immediate political necessity.

Participant A's speech weaves Maoist rhetoric with contemporary propaganda, 'Chairman Mao made great sacrifices for us. Look at us now; we have peace, prosperity, and happiness' (Interview 1, 2024). This unconscious merging of past ideological training with present political requirements reveals the enduring power of revolutionary discourse to shape narrative structures. While she avoided discussing her participation in violent campaigns, Participant A eagerly recounted her journey to Beijing to see Chairman Mao: 'We travelled for free, train tickets, accommodation, food, all provided—only Chairman Mao could make such things happen. I saw him twice at Tiananmen Square' (ibid.). These recollections, suffused with pride and nostalgia, conspicuously omit references to the era's darker realities—the public denunciations and violence she witnessed. Instead, Participant A deployed various evasive formulas: "I was too young, I don't remember," "It's better to look forwards, not backwards. The past is gone," "Chairman Mao's achievements outweigh his mistakes," and "What happened then was necessary for China's progress" (ibid.). These responses mirror the precise rhetorical structure of contemporary Party discourse on the Cultural Revolution, making it nearly impossible to discern where state-approved narratives end, and where personal recollections begin.

For Participant A, performing *yangbanxi* as a propaganda team member was not only a duty but a defining part of her identity as a Red Guard. 'For us, *yangbanxi* was the pinnacle of artistic expression,' she explains. "It wasn't just political; it was beautiful. The choreography, the costumes, the music—everything was meticulously crafted. It was a privilege to perform it" (ibid.). Participant A believes that she was contributing to the revolution in a way that transcended the battlefield. Coming from a more intellectual, urban background, Participant A regards performing *yangbanxi* as an opportunity to use her talents for a higher purpose. 'We

were told we were part of a cultural vanguard,' she recalls, 'We were bringing revolutionary ideals to the people, using art to awaken their consciousness' (ibid.). This statement illuminates a crucial contradiction: how individuals could experience genuine artistic fulfilment while participating in systematic dehumanization. This paradox becomes central to Su's internal dialogue in *The Ant*, revealing the complex psychological terrain where aesthetic pleasure intersects with political violence.

For Participant A, who spent her formative years immersed in *yangbanxi*, music and performance were never merely forms of entertainment, but instruments of education, mobilization, and moral instruction, intertwined with the political objectives of the state. This framing of art as a tool for collective transformation remains a central reference point for her, even decades later. Now 75, Participant A finds herself questioning contemporary popular music against the politically charged artistic productions of her youth. Watching today's music programs on television, she often remarks with confusion and nostalgia, "What is the meaning of this song? The lyrics seem to say nothing at all. Do today's songs no longer need to carry any political significance?" (ibid.)

Participant A's critique underscores the ideological vacuum she perceives in contemporary Chinese society. Having lived through a period when every artistic creation was imbued with political meaning, she struggles to reconcile the seeming lack of purpose in today's cultural expressions with her early understanding of art's role in shaping social consciousness. For Participant A, *yangbanxi* represented not merely propagandistic tools but also moments of cultural coherence and shared meaning. In critiquing modern songs as 'meaningless', she expresses longing for the sense of purpose and unity that characterized the revolutionary culture of her youth.

Another interviewee, Participant B's narrative provides a counterpoint to urban Red Guards like Participant A, revealing how rural Red Guards experienced *yangbanxi* through identificatory contradiction, simultaneously finding personal meaning in performances that fundamentally misrepresented their lived reality. As a farmer's daughter, Participant B's exposure to *yangbanxi* was shaped not by education or artistic aspiration, but by the revolutionary fervour imposed on her village and the profound gap between the urban elite's narratives and the reality of rural life.

Participant B's first encounter with *yangbanxi* establishes the foundation for her subsequent paradoxical relationship with these works—experiencing genuine artistic impact while gradually recognizing their ideological distortions. 'The first time I saw *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was when a travelling propaganda team came to our commune. They set up a makeshift stage in the field, and we all gathered to watch' (Interview 2, 2024). For Participant B, the performance was mesmerizing. "It was unlike anything I'd ever seen". Her initial identification with the characters of the oppressed reveals how *yangbanxi* functioned as both mirror and mirage for rural audiences: "We were told these operas were about us—about the struggles of farmers and workers. Xi'er was supposed to be someone like me: a peasant girl fighting against oppression. I believed it completely" (ibid.).

However, Participant B's statements reveal the productive tension between identificatory desire and empirical contradiction that these performances generated. While *yangbanxi* promised to represent rural experience authentically, her lived reality consistently contradicted these narratives: 'In the stories, the peasants always won. But in real life, we were struggling just to survive. The land reforms and collectivization had left many families worse off, including mine.' This disconnect extends to the works' moral simplification: "The landlords in the stories were always

villains. But in my village, things weren't so black and white. Some landlords had been kind to us, and some peasants had taken advantage of the land reforms to settle personal grudges" (ibid.).

Most significantly for my dramaturgical approach, Participant B articulates the conscious maintenance of contradictory beliefs that characterizes Red Guard psychology: "Even when I started questioning the message, I couldn't help but be moved by the music and the stories. We all know that *yangbanxi* stories were not true, but we still chose to believe that." This statement reveals a kind of wilful contradiction, the simultaneous knowledge of *yangbanxi*'s falsity and emotional investment in its promises. 'We were so isolated from the rest of the world [urban China during the Cultural Revolution]. *Yangbanxi* made us feel like we were part of something bigger,' reveals how these performances function as lifelines to imagined political community even as they misrepresent conditions of rural life. Her continued identification with Xi'er despite recognizing the character's unreality, "I wanted to be like her, to stand up for myself and my family. Watching *yangbanxi* made me feel strong for a little while" (ibid.), demonstrates how individuals can derive authentic empowerment from acknowledged fiction.

The conversations with another interviewee, Participant C, a former Red Guard from a working-class urban family who participated in factory takeovers during the Cultural Revolution, reveal the paradoxical continuity of faith structures across seemingly contradictory belief systems. Now a devout Christian, Participant C's narrative demonstrates how revolutionary fervour and religious conviction operate through identical psychological mechanisms while maintaining opposite ideological content. This paradox illuminates the theoretical foundation for Su's fractured

relationship with her Red Guard identity in *The Ant*, where ideological conditioning persists even after its political content has been rejected.

Participant C articulates the structural similarities between his Maoist and Christian devotions: ‘We sang songs of devotion. We carried his *Little Red Book* like a Bible. We believed in Mao as fervently as I now believe in Jesus. Mao was our saviour. He promised us liberation, equality, and a society where the downtrodden would rise’ (Interview 3, 2024). This statement reveals the persistence of faith-based cognition across radically different belief systems, suggesting that devotional capacity itself remains constant even as its objects transform.

When asked how to reconcile these contradictory commitments, Participant C refuses synthesis: “You don’t reconcile them. You can’t. Chairman Mao once said, ‘Struggle is the highest form of love.’ Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ They are opposites. And yet, both are about transformation: turning the old world into something new’ (ibid.). This conscious maintenance of contradiction provides the psychological foundation for Su’s internal dialogue in *The Ant*. Like Participant C, Su cannot resolve the tension between her continued emotional attachment to revolutionary ideals and her recognition of their destructive consequences.

Participant C’s most revealing insight emerges in his distinction between devotional mechanism and devotional object: ‘Mao taught me how to believe. Jesus taught me what to believe.’ This formulation illuminates the separation between faith structure and faith content that becomes central to my dramaturgical approach. The capacity for total commitment, what Participant C describes as dedicating ‘your life to something bigger than yourself’ (ibid.), operates independently of its ideological direction.

This psychological architecture allows former Red Guards to maintain pride in their devotional capacity while acknowledging the destructive content of their former beliefs. When asked whether he regretted his faith in Mao, Participant C responds immediately: 'Regret? No. Mao taught me the power of belief. He showed me what it meant to dedicate your life to something bigger than yourself. Without that, I might never have understood what it means to believe in Jesus' (ibid.). This structure of preserving faith mechanisms while transforming faith objects becomes the formal foundation for Su's relationship with her Red Guard persona, where revolutionary conditioning persists as embodied knowledge even after its political context has collapsed.

Participant C's recollections of *yangbanxi* reveal how aesthetic experience mediates ideological transformation. As a teenager, he experienced *yangbanxi* not as artistic representation but as moral instruction: "When I first watched *The White-Haired Girl*, I didn't see it as art. I saw it as truth. It was the truth we were told to believe, the truth that framed our lives. Xi'er wasn't just a character; she was an ideal. Her transformation from victim to revolutionary hero embodied everything we aspired to be" (ibid.).

His retrospective analysis demonstrates how former devotional frameworks can be reinterpreted through new ideological lenses while maintaining their structural function. Now, as a Christian, Participant C draws explicit parallels between revolutionary and biblical narratives: "Xi'er's suffering and her triumph remind me of the story of Job. In Mao's world, salvation comes through struggle. In Jesus' world, it comes through forgiveness." This comparative framework allows him to preserve the emotional significance of his revolutionary experience while rejecting its political content. The transformation extends to his understanding of justice itself: "For years,

I thought justice meant punishing the enemy. That's what Xi'er taught me. But now I see that justice without mercy is hollow. It only destroys" (ibid.). This shift from punitive to redemptive justice illustrates how faith structures can accommodate radically different moral content while maintaining their organizing function in personal identity.

The conversations with Participant C demonstrate that ideological conversion does not eliminate previous belief structures but rather redirects them toward new objects. His conversion experience, 'I wept for hours. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was confessing to someone who truly heard me. I felt peace' (ibid.), occurred during a period of personal crisis, suggesting that the capacity for devotional transformation remains available even after ideological disillusionment. This psychological continuity becomes crucial for understanding how Su maintains her revolutionary conditioning as embodied knowledge while intellectually rejecting its political implications, providing the dramatic tension that drives her internal conflict in *The Ant*.

Narrative structure

The Ant[8] opens with the story of a 72-year-old woman, Su, who is hospitalized for unexplained injuries—bruises across her body and a deep facial cut. After a series of failure to find out the perpetrator, her family discovers the shocking truth: Su has been harming herself, especially while playing the piano. These self-inflicted wounds trigger an investigation that uncovers a buried history. During the Cultural Revolution, Su, as a young Red Guard, denounced her family of pianists for refusing to play *yangbanxi*, labelling them 'counter-revolutionary'. This act led to her mother's

[8] For the script, see Appendix 1, pp.339-341.

execution, her teacher (and lover)'s death, and the accidental trampling of her three-year-old daughter, Mei, during a public trial. Su's past lay dormant for decades until the pandemic lockdown in 2021, marked by state control, collective fear, and public purging, rekindled her trauma. Playing the piano, a symbol of her family's resistance, awakened suppressed memories. Her internalized ideological zeal manifested as 'Red', a split personality that punishes her elder self through physical and psychological abuse.

The core narrative operates through karmic retribution made literal through self-harm and schizophrenia: every act of violence reverberates through time, returning to inhabit and destroy the body that once enacted it. Su's psychological fracture embodies the principle that historical violence will not remain externalized, but inevitably return to claim its perpetrators. Her elder self becomes the target of her younger Red Guard persona's ideological fury, as Red systematically inflicts upon Su the same physical and psychological violence she once directed toward her family. This karmic return aims to transform Su's body into both the site of original violence and its ultimate destination, suggesting that revolutionary brutality creates an inescapable cycle where perpetrators become their own victims. I aim to use the self-harm sequences to literalize this temporal collapse, as Su's current suffering becomes the direct consequence of her past actions with her divided consciousness enacting revenge upon itself through the very mechanisms of violence she once wielded against others.

The title '*The Ant*', reflects both the anonymity of individuals caught in the machinery of history and their quiet resilience in the face of overwhelming ideological forces. In Su, I seek to capture this tension between her private anguish and the public narratives imposed upon her, while exploring how the violence of historical complicity

becomes an internal haunting that demands payment. Her psychological fracture mirrors the suffocating helplessness Jiang Qing represented during her trial: a woman reduced to a pawn in a grander historical and political game, yet still undeniably human in her suffering and defiance. The trial's televised nature, with its theatricality and deliberate framing, inspires the visual and emotional language of *The Ant*, particularly its exploration of how individuals navigate, resist, or succumb to the overwhelming force of collective regimes through the internalization of their own violent histories.

This narrative engages my research question of how *yangbanxi* remakes can navigate the productive tensions between revolutionary models and their contemporary recontextualization to sustain engagement with Cultural Revolution memory without reproducing its ideological violence. Su's self-harm and fragmented psychology, split between her elderly self and her Red Guard persona Red, challenges conventional victim-perpetrator binaries. Using Su's embodied relationship to music as a testing ground, it investigates whether returning to *yangbanxi* can honour people, like Ba Jin's traumatic relationship to it while creating new affective possibilities.

The conceptual framework for Su's fractured psyche in *The Ant* emerged from recognizing how fracturing and contradiction function as formal elements that can reveal the psychological complexity obscured by propagandistic narratives. Rather than presenting characters as coherent ideological subjects, this approach positions fractured subjectivity as a dramaturgical strategy that can expose the contradictions inherent in revolutionary identity. This contradictory self-positioning becomes the formal foundation for Su's internal dialogue with Red. Like Jiang Qing, Su is simultaneously perpetrator and victim, ideological zealot and traumatized survivor, guilty party and scapegoat. Jiang Qing's courtroom 'outbursts' where she "regularly

defied and cursed the judges, laughed off charges against her and vilified state witnesses as 'traitors and bastards'" (Weisskopf, 1983) provides a model for how fractured subjectivity can resist closure while maintaining ethical complexity. Su's self-harm similarly functions as both karmic punishment and systemic indictment, punishing her elder self while indicting the ideological system that created her Red Guard identity. This fracturing technique allows the performance to hold multiple contradictory truths simultaneously: Su's genuine guilt for her family's destruction, the karmic logic that demands her suffering, the systemic coercion that shaped her choices, and the ongoing trauma that prevents resolution through punishment alone.

The dramaturgical techniques I employ in *The Ant*, particularly the use of long silences, emotional deflection, and performative speech, emerge from structural patterns I identified in testimonies gathered through interviews with former Red Guards. These statements, marked by a blend of pride, evasion, and unconscious gestures, reveal how individuals navigate the paradox between state-sanctioned forgetting and personal remembering through specific narrative strategies that function as unconscious performance techniques. The interviews themselves become performances, shaped by decades of ideological conditioning and the lingering fear of political repercussions. This dynamic compels me to explore not only the intellectual dimensions of difficult pasts but also their embodied manifestations—how they reside in gestures, silences, and physical movements. Through identifying these patterns, I develop formal methods for representing fractured Red Guard subjectivity that honour the complexity of traumatic memory without demanding false resolution.

The interviews reveal a disconnect between the Red Guards' private emotional relationships with revolutionary experience and the public discourse demanding historical amnesia. This disconnect becomes the structural foundation for *The Ant*,

where Su's fragmented psychology embodies the impossible position of individuals caught between lived memory and enforced forgetting. The interviews demonstrate this disconnect through three specific patterns that directly informed Su's characterization. First, all three interviewees employed temporal dissociation, speaking about their Red Guard activities as if performed by different people. This pattern becomes Su's split into her elderly self and her internalized Red Guard persona 'Red', where temporal dissociation operates as literal character fragmentation. Second, the interviews reveal continued emotional investment in revolutionary ideals despite intellectual rejection of their political content. Participant C's refusal to regret his Maoist devotion while embracing Christianity demonstrates how revolutionary conditioning survives ideological transformation. Su's self-harm while playing piano operationalizes this persistence by simultaneously punishing herself for Red Guard actions while unconsciously reproducing their logic of spectacular justice. Third, the interviewees demonstrated identificatory contradiction, which becomes the structural foundation for Su's dialogue with Red, where she recognizes the destructive nature of revolutionary ideology while remaining emotionally attached to its empowering promises.

Participant A's description of how 'a dust of history falling onto a person becomes a mountain' (Interview 1, 2024) provides the metaphorical framework for Su's characterization as both individual and national allegory. I structure Su's age at 72 in the year 2021 to mirror the People's Republic of China's founding in 1949, making her personal timeline correspond to the nation's revolutionary arc. Her Red Guard activities during adolescence parallel China's Cultural Revolution phase, her decades of silence mirror the reform era's historical amnesia, and her recent psychological breakdown corresponds to contemporary struggles over revolutionary

memory. However, this allegorical structure operates through psychological realism rather than symbolic abstraction. Su's trauma manifests through specific, embodied responses, such as self-harm triggered by piano playing, fragmented dialogue with her internalized Red Guard persona, that honour the complexity of individual experience while illuminating broader patterns of collective memory formation.

The performative nature of the interviewees' testimonies reveals a fundamental duality that becomes the structural foundation for Su's split personality in *The Ant*. All three interviews demonstrate performative fracturing in the moments where rehearsed ideological narratives collapsed into unguarded vulnerability, creating visible splits in the speakers' self-presentation that I could translate into theatrical form. Participant A's testimony exemplifies this pattern most clearly. When discussing her propaganda team performances, she maintained confident posture and steady eye contact, stating: "*Yangbanxi*…wasn't just political; it was beautiful." However, when asked about her knowledge of denunciation sessions in her commune, she broke eye contact, and after a long silence, deflected with: "I was too young, I don't remember" (ibid.). This transition from confident performance to visible distress reveals the psychological fracture that I dramatize through Su's dialogue with Red.

The interviews also reveal how revolutionary conditioning persists not only through speech but extends into embodied gesture long after its political context has disappeared. Participant B unconsciously adopted *yangbanxi* pointing gestures when describing her identification with Xi'er, extending her arm with the rigid precision characteristic of *yangbanxi* while stating: 'I wanted to be like her, to stand up for myself and my family' (Interview 2, 2024). Participant C similarly straightened his posture and raised his chin when reciting Maoist slogans, physically embodying the authoritarian confidence these phrases still generated. These unconscious physical

performances inform my decision to have Red strike *yangbanxi* poses while taunting Su, making visible the continued embodied presence of revolutionary conditioning.

I construct Su's fractured dialogue to reproduce this performative duality, using the interviewees' defensive strategies as dramatic technique. When Red emerges during Su playing piano, denouncing her with '*Geming wuzui, zaofan youli* (Revolution is no crime, to rebel is justified),' these phrases echo Participant A's deflective use of revolutionary slogans to avoid personal accountability. Su's physical collapse while attempting to escape Red's violence mirrors the visible breakdown I observed when interviewees' performative defences failed under questioning about the ethical complicity of the Cultural Revolution.

This character construction serves my research question of whether *yangbanxi* remakes can create spaces for moral complexity beyond the premade works' rigid polarization. By making Su's performative defences visible through her dialogue with Red, I aim to enable audiences to recognize similar patterns in contemporary engagements with difficult histories without demanding confessional resolution. The goal is not therapeutic healing but ethical recognition, creating space for audiences to acknowledge the persistence of ideological conditioning without requiring either condemnation or forgiveness.

I deploy Silvan Tomkins' concept of 'monopolistic affect' (qtd. in Frank and Wilson, 2020: 96) as a practical dramaturgical tool, using his insight that unresolved affective experiences can dominate cognitive and emotional existence to structure Su's psychological landscape. According to Tomkins, severe psychological dysfunctions, such as schizophrenia, emerge when a single affect, like guilt, shame, or fear, monopolizes emotional life, creating a worldview filtered entirely through that lens (379). Su embodies this concept through unresolved shame tied to her revolutionary

past. The character Red personifies her monopolistic shame, functioning as the externalized voice of ideological zeal that relentlessly accuses Su of ‘moral failure’. Red’s denunciatory rhetoric replicates revolutionary campaign language, transforming internalized shame into self-directed political abuse.

This monopolistic structure prevents Su from integrating contradictory experiences: her revolutionary idealism, her family’s destruction, and her ongoing attachment to playing piano. Rather than treating this as pathology requiring resolution, I use Tomkins’ framework to justify her structural inability to synthesize these contradictions. The performance can thus hold multiple truths simultaneously without forcing narrative closure. The dramaturgical advantage lies in resisting redemptive arcs. Su’s inability to achieve coherent self-narrative becomes not a problem to solve but the generative source of the performance’s structure. Her monopolistic shame operates as internalized residue of collective historical violence, making her personal fragmentation representative of broader social dynamics while preventing the integration necessary for conventional resolution.

My choice of setting the story in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown serves a dramaturgical function: creating temporal resonance between past and present authoritarianism that justifies Su’s psychological breakdown in the contemporary moment. The lockdown’s emphasis on collective sacrifice, surveillance, and public shaming provides experiential access for contemporary audiences to the psychological dynamics of Cultural Revolution participation. This contemporary parallel enables audiences to recognize their own susceptibility to ideological manipulation without requiring direct identification with Red Guard violence, addressing my research question of how performance can facilitate engagement with difficult pasts without reproducing their trauma.

I structure *The Ant* around Tomkins' observation that psychological dysfunctions cycle through the construction, breakdown, and reassembly of emotional defences, with Su creating Red as a defence mechanism to externalize her monopolistic guilt, only to become trapped in a relentless loop of self-punishment and collapse. The transformation begins with the red armband triggering memories of Su's revolutionary past, and the *yangbanxi* aria *Song of the Red Detachment of Women* awakening her younger, ideologically fervent self. Red emerges through march sequences and slogan-chanting, '*Geming wuzui, zaofan youli*,' escalating accusations that amplify Su's internal conflict while seemingly protecting her from direct confrontation with guilt.

The climactic collapse occurs when Su attempts to play on the piano *Song of the Red Detachment of Women*, leading to the complete collapse of her defences. Red's physical assaults, intensified by the aria's revolutionary symbolism, shatter Su's psychological barriers, with the broken mirror reflecting her fractured identity and monopolistic guilt. The blood imagery aims to illustrate her inescapable shame: washing her hands only multiplies the blood, symbolizing her remorse consuming her entirely and blocking reconciliation with her past.

Fleeting moments of reconstruction emerge through Red's hesitation and armband removal, but these prove temporary. Red reasserts control via the belt-tightening sequence, channelling Su's self-punishment into new, distorted defences that perpetuate rather than resolve the cycle. Su's final collapse, accompanied by the fading *yangbanxi* aria 'North Wind Blow' (*Bei feng chui*), demonstrates her inability to escape this cycle of defence and breakdown. Her feeble movements reflect the enduring grip of monopolistic guilt. The sparse dialogue and reliance on physicality and sound create experiential rather than explanatory engagement, leaving audiences

to inhabit Su's anguish rather than be told its causes. This structure resists therapeutic resolution by making the cycle itself the dramatic content, honouring the persistence of historical trauma without offering false integration.

Aesthetic strategy

I adopt symbolism and abstraction as primary aesthetic strategies to investigate how *yangbanxi*'s tightly regulated correlations between form and ideological function can be dismantled and reconstructed. This minimalist framework inverts *yangbanxi*'s aesthetic logic. Where the model works deploy theatrical excess, including realistic costumes, orchestrated choreography, and coordinated ensemble performance, to reinforce ideological coherence, *The Ant* uses material scarcity to explore what happens when revolutionary form loses its institutional moorings. This approach serves as a practical method for exploring mnemonic frictions—the interpretive and formal dissonances that emerge when revolutionary performance codes encounter new contexts of remembrance.

By reducing the physical environment to essential elements (a single chair, small table, and mirror), I create conditions where *yangbanxi*'s tightly coordinated sensory and rhetorical structure must operate through absence rather than presence. This reduction forces attention onto the residual power of revolutionary symbols when stripped of their institutional support systems. The red armband, for instance, becomes a potent symbol of ideological entrapment, serving as the trigger for Su's transformation into her younger self. The mirror, which shatters during Red's violent outburst, embodies Su's fractured identity and offers a visual moment when Red sees Su's tortured reflection in its shards, literalizing the breakdown of *yangbanxi*'s binary character typology. This aesthetic choice responds not only to budgetary constraints but also to research questions about how remakes navigate the 'palimpsestic nature of

revolutionary memory'. By embracing abstraction, I investigate whether revolutionary affect can persist independently of its original material conditions. The sparse staging creates an affective archaeology excavating the emotional residues of revolutionary performance from beneath layers of subsequent historical experience.

The minimalist approach also functions as a practical response to conditions of cultural production in post-Mao China, 'a place that can conform and dissent at once' (Berry, 2004: 21). Abstraction becomes both analytical method and protective strategy, allowing exploration of revolutionary memory's persistence while avoiding direct confrontation with state-sanctioned historical narratives. The constraints force me to find innovative ways to convey meaning, which ultimately adds a layer of meta-commentary on the struggle for artistic freedom. This use of abstraction to avoid systematic punishment itself becomes a reflection of the censorship imposed by external forces. The very need to obscure and generalize the film's content highlights the pervasive influence of censorship on artistic expression. In this way, the film not only tells a story within its narrative but also comments on the broader context of creative suppression.

This aesthetic strategy tests whether *yangbanxi*'s institutionalized constraints and rules of formation retain their organizing power when transplanted into radically different material conditions. By creating performance conditions that approximate the generality and invisibility of affect, as described in Tomkins' theory, the minimalist staging aims to investigate how revolutionary conditioning operates as embodied rather than conscious knowledge. The dreamlike atmosphere generated by material reduction mirrors the way traumatic memory surfaces through fragments rather than coherent narrative reconstruction. These creative decisions enrich the film,

allowing it to communicate profound emotional and political ideas within the constraints I face.

Visual design

I use the black box space to test my research hypothesis: can *yangbanxi* remakes create temporal fluidity that enables audiences to experience the non-linear nature of traumatic memory without becoming overwhelmed by fragmentation? The black box acts as a liminal, undefined space where the performer could move between various emotional and temporal dimensions. The bare environment also functions as a research instrument, investigating whether undefined spaces can facilitate audience engagement with psychological complexity by removing literal referents that might trigger defensive interpretation. This spatial choice tests Caruth's insight that trauma returns to haunt through unexpected temporal disruptions (1991). I investigate whether audiences can tolerate disorienting environments that mirror the temporal collapse characteristic of Red Guard testimony without requiring narrative coherence for psychological safety.

My selection of specific affects—political zeal, violence, ambition, belief, confusion, fear, sympathy, grief, guilt, shame, evasion, comfort, and collapse—emerges from contradictions I identified in the Red Guard interviews. These terms represent emotional patterns that interviewees displayed but could not consciously articulate: simultaneous pride and shame, continued belief alongside recognition of destructive consequences, defensive evasion with moments of vulnerability. Working with other performers, we choreograph these affects as testing mechanisms for audience recognition, investigating whether viewers can identify similar emotional contradictions in their own experience without requiring resolution into coherent psychological narrative. Each affect receives specific movement vocabulary to test

interpretive responses rather than convey predetermined meanings. Red's political zeal manifests through clenched fists and controlled steps to investigate whether audiences will read these gestures as authoritarian control or revolutionary hope. Su's confusion and fear appear through hesitant, broken movements to test whether viewers interpret fragmentation as psychological dysfunction requiring repair or as productive resistance to totalizing ideological demands.

I integrate two *yangbanxi* postures to test whether revolutionary gestures can be transformed from instruments of propaganda into sites of critical recognition (see Figure 43). The *liang-xiang* (frozen pose) from *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), where Wu Qinghua stands with arms crossed overhead in chains, investigates whether familiar revolutionary iconography can generate embodied remembering (see Figure 43, right side). Rather than assuming this posture communicates female suffering, I use it to test whether contemporary viewers will experience recognition, resistance, or indifference when confronted with Cultural Revolution body language. The second posture, arm bent 90 degrees with clenched fist, aims to test the audience interpretation of revolutionary semiotics (see Figure 43, left side). My preliminary research suggests this gesture, in contrast to the first one, carries associations with defiance, political zeal and revolutionary hope, but I deploy it to generate interpretive responses that reveal audience relationships to revolutionary aesthetics rather than reproducing fixed historical meanings.



Figure 43. The Ant (2024). Directed by Maya Yocali.

The directional mapping of space and lighting tests whether audiences can engage with temporal disruption as a productive analytical tool rather than overwhelming confusion, investigating LaCapra's distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma (2001). Moving clockwise, bathed in soft, diffused light, the characters journeyed through a chronological sequence, from the light of early revolutionary promise into the shadows of violence and disillusionment. The counterclockwise motion reversed time, shrouded in dim, fragmented lighting, as a visual representation of memories, regrets, and revisitation of past actions, blurring the line between perpetrator and victim.

The directional symbolism tests my hypothesis about karmic return, whether audiences will understand that every act of violence reverberates, returning to the body that enacts it. The collapse in a hug serves as my primary test for reparative possibility, investigating whether audiences interpret this moment as genuine comfort, false reconciliation, or ongoing ethical responsibility. Rather than assuming it achieves catharsis, I use this gesture to generate data about viewer expectations for resolution

when confronting difficult pasts, testing whether contemporary audiences require narrative closure or can sustain the kind of unresolved ethical engagement my theoretical framework suggests is necessary for productive historical dialogue.

Auditory design

I collaborated with composers to develop a soundtrack for *The Ant* that would test the auditory perspective of my research hypothesis: can remakes transform *yangbanxi*'s propagandistic soundscape into spaces for critical engagement with Cultural Revolution memory? We selected two atmospheric references, 'Off the Road' by Abel Korzeniowski and 'Mémoires du futur 1' by René Aubry, which are abstract and surreal, blending electronic instrumentation with acoustic sounds, to investigate whether minimalist, emotionally ambiguous soundscapes can create psychological space for audiences to engage with traumatic material without being overwhelmed by its intensity, testing alternatives to *yangbanxi*'s emotionally coercive sonic strategies.

To open the film, I use rapid, sharp cadences from traditional *jingju* as a structural and thematic device of this research's reflection on historical continuity, theatricality, and cultural memory. By beginning with traditional *jingju* percussions, the film situates the audience within a cultural lineage that is soon disrupted by the imposition of revolutionary art, marking the collision between artistic heritage and political propaganda. This also aims to offer a rhythmic intensity that mirrors the inner turmoil and chaos within Su's memories and the socio-political struggles of the Cultural Revolution.

I deploy *jingju* percussions to test whether Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) can function in contemporary *yangbanxi* remakes. Specifically, I investigate whether the inherent theatricality of traditional *jingju* percussion will remind audiences that they are witnessing performance rather than reality, preventing

the kind of identificatory response that might lead to 'acting out' traumatic material. The percussive rhythms test whether deliberate artificiality can create productive critical distance from Su's psychological collapse. By employing *jingju*'s intrinsic theatricality, the film aims to draw attention to the constructedness of both its narrative and the broader historical events it seeks to interrogate.

Verfremdungseffekt reaches its peak at the film's conclusion, where *jingju* beats return intertwined with invisible audience applause and cheers, the *yangbanxi* arias 'North Wind Blows', and Su collapsing on the floor. These sounds aim to mimic the theatricality of the public trial of Jiang Qing, which transformed the courtroom into a stage for political spectacle, blurring the boundaries between personal tragedy and public performance. The applause, seemingly incongruous in the context of Su's story, aims to underscore the irony of how personal suffering becomes a consumable spectacle within the grand narrative of history, drawing parallels to Jiang Qing's public trial where the boundaries between justice and theatricality collapsed. The invisible audience sounds test viewer self-awareness about historical spectatorship and whether the sonic parallel between Su's fictional suffering and Jiang Qing's public trial will generate ethical reflection about the consumption of others' pain.

The final auditory sequence tests my hypothesis about transforming passive audiences into ethical participants. I investigate whether the blurred line between observer and actor will prompt reflection on viewing ethics, or whether audiences will reject this positioning as manipulative rather than illuminating. These sonic strategies generate data about contemporary audience relationships to historical representation, testing whether my aesthetic techniques successfully create the kind of ongoing ethical engagement my theoretical framework requires or produce different responses that would necessitate revision of my research approach.

My selection of two *yangbanxi* pieces, 'Detachment of Women Song (Niang zi jun lian ge)' from *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) and 'North Wind Blows (Bei feng chui)' from *The White-Haired Girl* (1965), tests the persistence of revolutionary conditioning across generations. I chose these specific arias because my preliminary research suggested their melodies remain recognizable even to post-Mao audiences, but I use them to investigate whether familiarity generates nostalgia, resistance, or indifference. This choice tests Ba Jin's claim that *yangbanxi* melodies can trigger involuntary traumatic responses, investigating whether contemporary audiences will experience similar visceral reactions or remain emotionally detached.

The lyrics and tone of these two iconic *yangbanxi* pieces align with Su's journey, creating a melodic framework for the film. 'Detachment of Women Song' parallels Su's initial hope and determination to break free from her past because its lyrics, "Forward, forward! Important the soldiers' task, deep the women's hatred" (China Ballet Troupe, 1972: 16) resonate not only as a revolutionary anthem from her youth but also as a desperate personal mantra, symbolizing her attempt to 'to move forward' from her personal guilt and grief. This duality mirrors Su's psychological journey: she clings to the song's promise of forward momentum as she attempts to escape the traumatic grip of her revolutionary past. The manipulation of these phrases through sound effects, such as overdrive, pitch shift, and time stretching, acts as an auditory metaphor for Su's emotional distortion, as if she is trying to escape her past but finds herself trapped in a cycle. Instead of finding solace, the manipulated melody traps Su in an endless cycle of self-recrimination and unresolved trauma.

Ending the film with 'North Wind Blows' introduces a layer of irony by juxtaposing its opening imagery of tranquillity, 'The north wind blows, the snowflakes whirl. A flurry of snow brings in New Year' (Ho and Ting, 1954: 1) with the deeper

sorrow embedded in the song's narrative. For audiences unfamiliar with the lyrics or its historical context, the serene melody and festival imagery evoke an atmosphere of calmness and peace, seemingly signalling reconciliation between Su and Red. However, the peace is an illusion. The lyrics that follow in the song, which are stopped short in the film, "Dad's been hiding a week because of his debts. Though it's New Year's Eve, he's still not back" (ibid.) reveal a tragic reality. Although the film omits these lyrics, their emotional weight lingers, especially for audiences familiar with the song. This latent sorrow aims to mirror the unresolved tension in Su's narrative: while her apparent reconciliation with Red suggests a surface-level closure, deeper shadows of trauma and guilt remain intact.

Ending the film with the Chinese New Year atmosphere in 'North Wind Blows' was influenced by a traditional Chinese aesthetic technique *lejing aiqing* (joyful scenes, sorrowful emotions), which was discussed by a Qing dynasty scholar Wang Fuzhi in his work *Jiangzhai shihua*, as 'To depict sorrow through joyful imagery, or joy through sorrowful imagery, greatly enhances the emotional resonance of both' (2016). The festive imagery of the Chinese New Year and soothing melody suggest harmony, yet Su's feeble movements and emotional breakdown reveal the unresolved trauma lurking underneath. This technique could be seen as a contrapuntal sound, where contrasts between external circumstances and internal emotions are used to evoke complex affective responses. By employing *lejing aiqing*, the film deepens the emotional impact and critiques the revolutionary rhetoric that often-masked suffering with idealized visions of progress. This dramaturgical approach aligns with the broader thematic exploration of the tension between personal grief and collective memory, further amplifying the film's emotional and intellectual resonance.

By blending these revolutionary melodies into the composition, I test whether *yangbanxi*'s sound world can be transformed from tool of ideological coercion into medium for critical reflection. The mixture of serene atmospheres, *jingju* percussion, and *yangbanxi* arias creates a sonic contradiction that investigates audience capacity for holding multiple emotional responses, from aesthetic appreciation, historical recognition, to ethical discomfort. I use these sonic choices to generate interpretive responses through post-performance discussions integrated into my RSVP Cycles methodology. The revolutionary songs carry what I hypothesize is 'immense historical weight', but I deploy them to test whether contemporary audiences will access this weight through lived cultural transmission or experience it as distant historical artifact, investigating the persistence of cultural memory across generational boundaries and political transformation.

Audience interview

The Ant is designed to test my research hypotheses with specific audience segments whose responses can provide evidence for whether and how *yangbanxi* remakes can navigate 'mnemonic frictions'—the productive tensions that arise when residual revolutionary forms encounter new cultural contexts. After screening *The Ant*, I conducted one-on-one interviews with ten participants, using numerical designations (1-10), to investigate whether my aesthetic strategies for destabilizing *yangbanxi*'s tightly regulated correlations generate the kind of critical engagement my theoretical framework predicts.

Five descendants of Cultural Revolution survivors (Participants 1-5) provide the largest sample because they embody Assmann's concept of the 'floating gap', occupying the temporal space where Cultural Revolution memories are too distant for direct communicative memory but not yet crystallized into the state's mythic cultural

memory of revolutionary heritage. This positioning makes them ideal subjects for investigating how *yangbanxi* remakes function as sites of memory work that negotiate inherited family narratives and official historical discourse. I investigate whether these viewers will experience what Chen Xiaomei describes as recognition of revolutionary materials that remain 'deeply lodged in personal memories' (2017:1), testing my research question about how *yangbanxi* remakes can 'navigate the palimpsestic nature of revolutionary memory'. I investigate whether descendants will interpret Su's fragmented psychology as recognizable representation of inherited trauma, or whether they will distance themselves from Red Guard complicity through moral superiority. Their responses provide evidence for how remakes participate in the ongoing struggle over how the revolutionary past will be remembered, mythologized, or forgotten.

Three academics specializing in theatre and performance (Participants 6-8), without personal ties to Chinese history, constitute my second testing group, chosen to investigate whether my integration of archival research with creative practice generates 'complementary knowledge' (Nelson, 2013) that cannot be accessed through purely analytical approaches. I use their feedback to assess whether the film's formal strategies for softening revolutionary resolve and introducing affective complexity into previously binary character types function as effective alternatives to *yangbanxi*'s ideological apparatus.

Two political theatre artists without Chinese cultural background (Participants 9-10) form my third testing audience, selected to investigate whether my formal innovations provide transferable methodologies for what my research inquiry describes as 'aesthetic disruption to question ideological norms'. Their responses test whether the piece's approach to revolutionary aesthetics offers practical frameworks

for engaging difficult histories in other contexts, or whether my strategies remain specific to Chinese Cultural Revolution representation.

This distribution provides preliminary evidence for how *The Ant* functions across different interpretive frameworks rather than definitive proof of its effectiveness. The sample size acknowledges the limitations of practice-led research while generating sufficient qualitative data to assess whether my hypothesis about mnemonic frictions as a productive site for historical engagement holds initial validity. These responses will inform both future creative work and broader conclusions about whether and how *yangbanxi* remakes can operate as generative sites for rethinking the affective and formal afterlives of revolutionary culture.

The interview design for *The Ant* is shaped by the central conceptual framework of this thesis: mnemonic frictions. I use this term to describe the interpretive, formal, and affective dissonances that arise when residual revolutionary performance codes are transplanted into new cultural contexts. These frictions emerge at the intersection of aesthetic form and collective memory, as both artists and audiences grapple with *yangbanxi*'s historically specific conventions, including musical motifs, choreographic patterns, and narrative trajectories, that remain politically charged and emotionally fraught. In my practice, I aim to activate such frictions in ways that are not merely oppositional but potentially ambivalent, reparative, or generative, depending on how audiences respond to the destabilization of familiar forms.

In *The Ant*, the interview questions are designed to test whether these mnemonic frictions are perceptible, intelligible, and productive for audiences, and whether they operate differently across interpretive frameworks. Drawing on Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann's (2014) balance between predetermined objectives and

openness to emergent insights, the interviews combine shared questions for all participants with tailored questions for three specific groups. This structure enables a consistent basis for cross-group comparison while probing how lived experience, disciplinary training, and artistic practice shape the recognition, negotiation, or resistance to mnemonic frictions.

The first thematic cluster tests whether mnemonic frictions are perceptible to audiences across different interpretive frameworks. This cluster investigates whether participants identify *yangbanxi* elements in the film and experience embodied responses to familiar revolutionary forms placed in unfamiliar contexts. Questions probe the physical and emotional recognition of musical motifs, choreographic patterns, and visual aesthetics, examining whether audiences experience what might be characterized as 'cultural muscle memory' when confronted with residual revolutionary codes. The aim is to determine whether the remake successfully generates interpretive instability through the juxtaposition of recognizable and altered elements, and whether this perceptibility varies based on participants' cultural proximity to the premade forms. If mnemonic frictions operate as theorized, recognition should trigger simultaneous awareness of continuity and rupture, manifesting through both cognitive identification and somatic response that signals the activation of inherited cultural memory.

The second thematic cluster examines whether mnemonic frictions are intelligible, whether audiences can articulate and interpret the significance of their perceptual experiences. This cluster focuses on participants' capacity to understand and explain the effects of transforming *yangbanxi*'s spectacular apparatus into minimalist aesthetic strategies. Questions explore how audiences interpret the relationship between reduced scenography, altered lighting, narrative fragmentation,

and the juxtaposition of traditional *jingju* percussion with contemporary sound design. The aim is to assess whether participants can recognize these formal shifts as deliberate disruptions of revolutionary aesthetics rather than arbitrary artistic choices, and whether they understand how these modifications create new interpretive possibilities. This cluster tests whether audiences across different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds can understand how aesthetic disruption functions as historical intervention, examining whether intelligibility requires specific cultural knowledge or can emerge through sustained engagement with unfamiliar forms.

The third thematic cluster investigates whether mnemonic frictions are productive, whether they generate sustained critical engagement that moves beyond initial recognition toward transformative historical understanding. This cluster probes whether participants' engagement with Su's psychological fragmentation leads to reparative rather than punitive interpretations of historical complicity, and whether this engagement facilitates broader reflection on contemporary parallels and ethical responsibilities. The aim is to determine whether mnemonic frictions can generate what might be characterized as 'ethical spectatorship' that emphasizes healing and complex responsibility over moral judgment and karmic balance. This cluster assesses whether the productive potential of mnemonic frictions varies across interpretive frameworks, examining whether sustained engagement requires cultural connection, disciplinary training, or can emerge through aesthetic encounter alone.

Group-specific questions refine these three dimensions of mnemonic friction for each audience category, recognizing that perceptibility, intelligibility, and productivity operate through different mechanisms across interpretive frameworks. Cultural Revolution descendants are invited to explore how inherited cultural codes shape their perceptual recognition of revolutionary aesthetics, whether family memory

dynamics enhance or complicate their capacity to interpret aesthetic disruptions, and whether embodied responses to *yangbanxi* elements generate productive reflection on intergenerational trauma and contemporary complicity. Academic researchers are asked to examine how disciplinary training influences their perception of formal innovations, whether existing scholarship on *yangbanxi* and trauma representation provides frameworks for interpreting the film's aesthetic strategies, and whether sustained analytical engagement produces new theoretical insights that could advance scholarly understanding of revolutionary cultural forms. Political theatre artists are prompted to consider how they interpret the relationship between formal innovation and ethical responsibility when reworking politically charged historical materials, and whether engagement with the film produces transferable methodologies that could prove productive in their own cultural contexts.

Follow-up probes throughout the interviews are designed to trace the progression from perceptible response through intelligible interpretation to productive engagement, encouraging participants to articulate not only what they recognize and how they understand it, but whether and how this understanding transforms their relationship to revolutionary memory. These probes ensure that responses move beyond surface identification of *yangbanxi* elements to reveal the complex interpretive processes through which mnemonic frictions are registered, negotiated, and potentially integrated into new frameworks for historical understanding. By encouraging clarification, elaboration, and consideration of alternative perspectives, the interview structure tests whether sustained engagement with aesthetic disruption can generate a shift in how audiences relate to inherited cultural forms and the historical violence they encode.

These interviews function as a targeted practice-led inquiry that aligns each question cluster with specific hypotheses about how perceptibility, intelligibility, and productivity function differently across audience categories. They examine whether *The Ant*'s reworking of *yangbanxi*'s formal codes successfully activates sustainable historical engagement: a mode of cultural memory work that remains ethically accountable to historical violence while resisting the reactivation of revolutionary aesthetics' coercive apparatus. The framework recognizes that mnemonic frictions may prove perceptible to some audiences but not intelligible, or intelligible but not productive, requiring careful attention to how different interpretive frameworks enable or constrain the full activation of aesthetic disruption as historical intervention.

As in all aspects of this research, ethical considerations are foregrounded throughout: all participants are anonymized, provided with full informed consent information, and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time, with particular attention paid to the potential for inherited trauma to intensify responses in ways that could prove overwhelming rather than transformative.

Group 1

The first-group participants' responses reveal a paradox between the film's theoretical aspirations and its practical effects. All five participants identify *yangbanxi* elements, with their embodied reactions exposing the persistence of revolutionary conditioning across generational lines. Three participants (1, 2, and 5) report involuntary physical responses, such as marching impulses, automatic pointing gestures, and what Participant 5 describes as 'muscle memory from school music lessons' (Interview 8, 2024). This confirms that revolutionary aesthetic forms retain their disciplinary power decades after their original deployment, supporting the

theoretical framework of mnemonic frictions while revealing the ethical risks of reactivating such embodied memories.

The participants' evolving sympathy for Su's character demonstrates the film's capacity to generate complex moral reasoning. Four participants report shifting from initial confusion/anger toward empathetic recognition, with Participant 3 stating that "at first, I was angry at her—how could she hurt people? But later you realize she's just caught up in something bigger" (Interview 6, 2024), and Participant 5 observing that 'the film shows how normal people can do terrible things under pressure' (Interview 8, 2024). This suggests that aesthetic disruption can facilitate nuanced historical understanding, moving beyond binary frameworks of perpetrator and victim toward recognition of systemic complicity.

Yet this apparent success is undermined by the film's underlying retributive structure. Despite participants' sophisticated moral reasoning about historical complexity, their interpretation of Su's psychological suffering reveals the persistence of punishment-based frameworks. When asked about the relationship between Su's Red Guard actions and her current mental state, the responses expose a critical contradiction: while participants intellectually reject simple moral condemnation, they consistently interpret her schizophrenia and self-harm as consequences of historical guilt. Participant 1's observation that 'part of me wants her to suffer because of what people like her did to my family' (Interview 4, 2024) exemplifies this tension between inherited trauma and ethical reflection. Even when participants recognize retributive desires as problematic, the film's narrative structure reinforces such interpretations by presenting psychological breakdown as the inevitable result of moral failure. This creates what amounts to a supernatural framework of historical justice, where past violence returns to destroy the perpetrator's mind.

Revealing evidence emerges from responses to the sequence of Su's suffering. Rather than interpreting this moment as self-recognition or psychological complexity, participants consistently read it as self-punishment. Participant 3's description of feeling 'complicit in her pain just by watching' (Interview 6, 2024) reveals how the film's confrontational aesthetics reproduce rather than transform the dynamics of historical spectatorship. The close-up cinematography, intended to create intimate psychological portraiture, instead functions as voyeuristic witnessing of deserved suffering, as described by them as 'the way the camera lingers on her face while she hurts herself feels exploitative' (ibid.). Participant 2 also reports discomfort but remains engaged: 'I feel suffocated during those scenes, but I understand why they are necessary. It shows the weight of what she is carrying' (Interview 5, 2024). Participants 1, 4, and 5 describe the self-harm sequences as 'difficult but important' without reporting overwhelming distress.

This retributive interpretation is particularly problematic for participants with inherited trauma connections. Participant 3's extreme distress, describing the viewing experience as 'violating' and "as if I am being raped and forced to witness something I shouldn't see" (Interview 6, 2024), demonstrates how confrontational aesthetics can reactivate rather than heal historical wounds. The participant's inherited family trauma, as described 'my grandmother was tortured by the Red Guards and had nightmares until she died' (ibid.), becomes entangled with the film's punitive narrative, creating a viewing experience that reproduces traumatic dynamics rather than facilitating reparative engagement.

The variation in responses within this single demographic group indicates that 'Cultural Revolution descendants' cannot be treated as a homogeneous audience category. Individual trauma histories, psychological resilience, and family narratives

significantly influence reception, suggesting that ethical practice requires more nuanced understanding of how inherited memory shapes contemporary engagement with difficult histories. This necessitates revision of my aesthetic approach for the second remake, particularly regarding the duration and framing of traumatic content, to maintain ethical engagement without risking psychological harm to audiences with inherited trauma connections.

Group 2

The second-group participants' responses provide suggestive, though limited, evidence for the film's capacity to generate affective engagement across cultural boundaries. Participant 8 describes specific moments where the protagonist's internal conflict triggers what they call 'sticky emotions' (Interview 11, 2024): heightened tension, anxiety, and physical discomfort that linger after viewing. They mention that this bodily response aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorization of how affects 'stick' to objects and circulate between bodies, creating emotional atmospheres that exceed individual psychological states. The participant's embodied engagement suggests that aesthetic forms, when stripped of their original ideological context, can generate new affective meanings that operate through formal recognition rather than historical specificity, though this process raises questions about the relationship between aesthetic accessibility and historical accountability.

However, this masks deeper interpretive problems that mirror the retributive issues identified in Group 1 responses. While academic participants demonstrate sophisticated analytical frameworks, referencing trauma theory, affect studies, and postcolonial criticism, their interpretation of Su's psychological state reveals similar punishment-based assumptions operating at a more intellectualized level. Participant 7's observation that Su's suffering represents 'acknowledgment of the inescapable

consequences of violence' (Interview 10, 2024) exemplifies this problem. Despite the theoretical sophistication of invoking Susan Sontag's concept of 'regarding the pain of others' (2019), the interpretation still frames psychological breakdown as inevitable consequence rather than contingent historical outcome. This suggests that the film's retributive narrative structure operates across different levels of cultural and theoretical literacy, reinforcing deterministic assumptions about the relationship between historical violence and individual fate.

The academic participants' cultural distance facilitates what appears to be reparative reading while actually enabling a more subtle form of retributive interpretation. Their ability to articulate 'systematic violence' and 'collective responsibility' provides intellectual frameworks that obscure rather than resolve the film's underlying punishment logic. Participant 6's sophisticated analysis of 'systemic forces that produced her actions' (Interview 9, 2024) maintains the causal relationship between historical participation and psychological breakdown, simply displacing individual moral judgment onto systemic analysis.

Moreover, the film's emotional accessibility across cultural contexts also generates interpretive risks that warrant critical attention. Participant 7's fascination with *yangbanxi* as a vehicle for experiencing what they describe as 'Asian sentiments' (Interview 10, 2024) reveals a potential orientalist reception that could reduce the historical and ideological complexities of revolutionary performance to simplified cultural difference. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1978) describes how Western discourses construct 'the East' as an exotic object of knowledge and desire, often obscuring the political contexts and internal complexities of non-Western cultural forms. In this case, the participant's response suggests that the film's aesthetic strategies, while successful in generating cross-cultural engagement, may

inadvertently facilitate a mode of cultural consumption that seeks authentic otherness while remaining external to historical and political forces that shape cultural production.

This interpretive tension reflects a broader challenge identified by scholars working at the intersection of postcolonial theory and memory studies. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) argues in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', the translation of subaltern experiences into globally accessible aesthetic forms often requires a process of 'epistemic violence' that renders complex historical realities comprehensible to audiences who lack the cultural and political frameworks necessary for full understanding. The second-group participants' responses suggest that while *The Ant*'s emotive power facilitates broader engagement with difficult pasts, there remains a risk that aesthetic accessibility could neutralize the historical and political weight of revolutionary cultural forms, transforming them into depoliticized objects of cross-cultural empathy rather than sites of critical historical engagement.

This reveals a crucial limitation in the film's approach: aesthetic sophistication and theoretical complexity cannot compensate for retributive narrative structure. The second-group participants' responses demonstrate that intellectualized frameworks can perpetuate punitive assumptions while appearing to transcend them, suggesting that the problem lies not in audience interpretation but in the film's fundamental ideological architecture. These findings inform both the theoretical framework of this research and the practical considerations that will shape subsequent *yangbanxi* remakes in the future.

Group 3

The third-group participants' recognition of the film's formal innovations as potentially useful for their practice confirms that aesthetic disruption can generate

productive tensions across different political contexts. Participant 9's observation that the fragmented narrative structure embodies 'the non-linear and cyclical nature of trauma' (Interview 12, 2024) demonstrates translation of aesthetic strategies beyond their specific cultural origin. Their observation that juxtaposing the protagonist's younger and older selves 'literalizes the internal conflict between complicity and remorse' (ibid.) suggests that the film's formal approach to destabilizing binary character types offers transferable insights for political art-making.

Their responses also reveal sensitivity to the ethical implications of representing historical perpetrators. Both participants connect Su's portrayal to broader questions about how political art should address complicity and accountability. Participant 9 states: 'calling someone evil and walking away is the easy option. The harder work is understanding how ordinary people become complicit in systems of violence' (ibid.). However, this exposes the retributive assumptions operating in the other groups but articulated through the lens of artistic ethics rather than personal trauma or academic theory. Their praise for the film's refusal to 'call someone evil and walk away' appears to embrace complexity, but their interpretation of Su's psychological state as evidence of 'how ordinary people become complicit in systems of violence' (ibid.) maintains the deterministic relationship between historical participation and individual destruction.

Participant 10's observation that "political theatre shouldn't be about making audiences feel superior to historical actors" (Interview 13, 2024) articulates a sophisticated ethical position, yet their interpretation of Su's suffering as necessary for recognizing "our own capacity for complicity" (ibid.) transforms individual punishment into pedagogical tool. This suggests that even politically conscious artistic

practice can reproduce retributive assumptions when narrative structure reinforces rather than challenges such frameworks.

The political theatre participants' preference for 'more dynamic and interactive approaches' provides insights into the limitations of *The Ant*'s confrontational methodology. Their recognition that the film positions audiences as 'critical observers rather than active collaborators' (ibid.) identifies a fundamental problem: the retributive narrative structure creates spectatorial distance that prevents genuine engagement with historical complexity.

Cross-group analysis

The comparative analysis across three participant groups confirms that aesthetic strategies for destabilizing *yangbanxi*'s regulated correlations can provoke critical engagement across cultural boundaries and interpretive frameworks. However, the pattern of responses also exposes a persistent limitation: while formal disruption elicits recognition, it does not reliably produce reparative understanding. The audience most capable of embodied recognition, Cultural Revolution descendants, are simultaneously most vulnerable to being traumatically overwhelmed, while groups with successful cross-cultural translation risk orientalist reception that depoliticizes the historical material.

The interview testimony demonstrates that this retributive problem operates across different interpretive frameworks, suggesting that the issue lies in the film's structural logic rather than audience reception. Cultural Revolution descendants, academic researchers, and political theatre artists all interpret Su's psychological suffering as consequence of her Red Guard participation, despite their varying levels of cultural connection, theoretical sophistication, and political consciousness. This consistency reveals the inadequacy of focusing solely on aesthetic disruption without

addressing underlying narrative ideology. The film's minimalist staging, fragmented timeline, and confrontational cinematography function effectively to generate affective engagement and cultural recognition, but these formal strategies cannot compensate for a story structure that reinforces rather than challenges punitive approaches to historical accountability.

Further analysis of the film's sequencing and representational choices shows how this happens. Specific narrative elements, such as the graphic sequence of self-harm, the alternating timeline that repeatedly juxtaposes past action and present suffering, and the depiction of psychiatric disturbance as a direct manifestation of historical guilt, function together to literalize punishment. These devices instantiate a quasi-supernatural economy of karmic justice: past violence returns inevitably to consume the supposed perpetrator. Such a composition collapses structural complexity into moral determinism, converting social and institutional causality into individualized ethical fate. As a result, audiences who might otherwise articulate systemic explanations or nuanced ethical judgment instead arrive at a perpetrator–victim logic.

This is not to deny that Brechtian distancing and other disruptive strategies have value. The *Verfremdungseffekt* can, and does, interrupt empathic sedation and open space for critique. Yet the evidence here demonstrates that form alone is insufficient. When distancing techniques are not embedded within a narrative architecture that reconfigures causality and responsibility, they risk amplifying the very punitive conclusions they aim to unsettle. Audiences will use whatever narrative grammar remains to make sense of events; if that grammar privileges individual culpability and metaphysical retribution, the interpretive work of spectators will tend toward condemnation rather than contextual understanding.

Importantly, the interviews also reveal audiences' latent capacities for complex moral reasoning. Participants connect individual behaviour to broader political dynamics; they are able to recognize coercive institutional pressures, ambiguous complicities, and the contingency of choice under duress. These capacities suggest significant potential: *yangbanxi* remakes can be generative sites for rethinking revolutionary culture, if and only if the dramaturgy intentionally channels spectators away from moral determinism and toward structural analysis and ethical pluralism.

Accordingly, the research implication is clear. The core problem is not the use of disruptive aesthetics per se but the play's ideological architecture. Future remakes must move beyond refining formal techniques and toward fundamental narrative restructuring. Practically, this means designing stories that decouple individual suffering from simplistic karmic resolution, that distribute agency and responsibility across institutions and social systems, and that foreground restorative practices rather than punishment. The question then becomes: what specific aesthetic strategies can accomplish this transformation while maintaining emotional engagement and historical authenticity?

Reparative strategies

The RSVP Cycles methodology, as enacted through *The Ant* and evaluated through the cross-group analysis, has generated crucial understanding of both the possibilities and constraints of reparative aesthetics when engaging with Cultural Revolution memory through *yangbanxi* remakes. The cycle moves through Resources (archival materials, theoretical frameworks, participant interviews), Score (confrontational aesthetic strategies, minimalist staging, fragmented narrative), Valuaction (cross-group analysis revealing both productive engagement and traumatic risk), to Performance (the completed film). Crucially, rather than terminating at

Performance, this methodology functions as a continuous loop wherein each completed work generates new empirical and theoretical resources for subsequent investigative cycles. The Valuaction phase, in particular, has reshaped the Score for future cycles by exposing the structural limitations of confrontational aesthetics and clarifying the conditions under which reparative engagement becomes possible.

The research confirms that specific aesthetic strategies can successfully activate what this study terms 'mnemonic frictions'—productive tensions between revolutionary forms and contemporary interpretive contexts. *The Ant* demonstrates that the strategic deployment of minimalist staging, fragmented narrative structure, and the juxtaposition of *yangbanxi* musical elements with contemporary sound design can generate embodied recognition across generational and cultural boundaries. Significantly, participants across all three groups exhibit involuntary somatic responses to revolutionary aesthetic codes, suggesting that such forms retain disciplinary efficacy decades beyond their original institutional deployment. This finding not only validates the theoretical framework but reveals the persistent inscription of revolutionary conditioning within embodied memory systems.

The implementation of temporal disruption and character fragmentation proves particularly effective for destabilizing *yangbanxi*'s rigid binary character typology in both works. Su's psychological bifurcation between her elderly contemporary self and her internalized Red Guard persona 'Red' creates a dramaturgical space wherein audiences can engage with perpetrator psychology without requiring identificatory resolution or moral closure. This aesthetic approach successfully divorces revolutionary performance from its institutional moorings, establishing conditions where audiences must confront residual revolutionary affect independently of its original propagandistic apparatus.

Cross-cultural engagement emerges as a substantial finding, with both academic and political theatre participants demonstrating sophisticated capacity to translate formal innovations into their own cultural and political contexts. This suggests that reparative strategies developed through *yangbanxi* remakes offer methodologically transferable approaches for engaging difficult histories beyond the Chinese Cultural Revolution, particularly through techniques of aesthetic disruption, temporal fragmentation, and character complexity that resist simplistic moral categorization.

Despite these productive outcomes, the Valuaction phase exposes fundamental structural limitations that actively undermine reparative potential. The most significant discovery is that formal innovation alone cannot compensate for retributive narrative architecture. While confrontational aesthetics generate mnemonic frictions and stimulate critical engagement, they simultaneously risk reactivating traumatic dynamics for the audiences most capable of embodied recognition: Cultural Revolution descendants with inherited family trauma.

The systematic interview analysis reveals a troubling consistency: audiences across all interpretive frameworks, regardless of their varying levels of cultural connection, theoretical sophistication, or political consciousness, consistently interpret Su's psychological suffering as the inevitable consequence of her Red Guard participation. This interpretive uniformity demonstrates that the film's structural logic reinforces punishment-based frameworks to historical accountability rather than facilitating genuinely reparative understanding. Specific narrative elements, such as graphic self-harm sequences, alternating timelines that juxtapose past violence with present suffering, and psychiatric disturbance as the corporeal inscription of historical complicity, function together to literalize karmic justice.

The research identifies a critical paradox: those most capable of embodied recognition (Cultural Revolution descendants) are simultaneously most vulnerable to traumatic overwhelm, while groups with successful cross-cultural engagement risk orientalist reception that depoliticizes historical material through aesthetic consumption. This discovery reveals the inadequacy of treating audience categories as homogeneous entities and necessitates more nuanced understanding of how inherited memory shapes contemporary engagement with difficult histories. This paradox extends beyond simple demographic categorization to encompass the capacity to engage with traumatic material without either defensive disengagement or overwhelming activation. The research suggests that those with the greatest cultural and historical proximity to the material possess both the highest interpretive sophistication and the greatest vulnerability to retraumatization, creating an ethical double-bind for practitioners attempting reparative intervention.

These findings necessitate fundamental revision of aesthetic approaches for future *yangbanxi* remakes. Reparative storytelling must move beyond 'exposing' historical violence toward 'holding' its complexities in ways that enable sustained ethical reflection without reproducing traumatic dynamics. The theoretical resources marshalled throughout this thesis point toward what such an approach would require: narrative architectures that decouple individual suffering from simplistic karmic resolution, distribute agency across institutional and social systems rather than individual moral actors, and foreground restorative rather than punitive practices. Where *The Ant*'s confrontational strategy inadvertently reproduced the very retributive logic it sought to critique, the RSVP Cycles methodology ensures that this recognition becomes a generative resource for subsequent creative work rather than a terminal failure.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined *yangbanxi* remakes through practice-led research to investigate creative intervention as a site of cultural reparation, revealing both transformative potential and critical constraints within performance-based approaches to difficult histories. Through *The Ant* and its systematic evaluation via the RSVP Cycles methodology, the research demonstrates that while aesthetic innovation can generate sophisticated forms of memory engagement, the specific nature of that innovation fundamentally determines whether it serves reparative or retributive functions. The chapter's findings constitute another configuration of mnemonic friction traced across the thesis: mobilized friction, in which tension between revolutionary memory and new conditions is actively sought to generate new possibilities of engagement with the Cultural Revolution's legacy.

The investigation provides empirical validation that *yangbanxi* remakes can function as 'living sites of counter-memory' that resist both revolutionary nostalgia and historical amnesia through the strategic activation of mnemonic frictions. The research offers concrete evidence that aesthetic disruption generates embodied recognition, stimulates sophisticated moral reasoning, and produces transferable insights across cultural boundaries and interpretive frameworks. Minimalist staging, temporal fragmentation, and character complexity emerge as effective strategies for destabilizing *yangbanxi*'s propagandistic apparatus while maintaining ethical engagement with historical material.

However, the cross-group analysis reveals that formal strategies alone cannot determine reparative outcomes. The crucial factor lies in the underlying narrative architecture that shapes how audiences interpret and integrate their aesthetic experience. While *The Ant*'s formal innovations successfully destabilize revolutionary

memory at the level of form, its retributive narrative structure systematically undermines reparative potential by positioning audiences as witnesses to deserved suffering. This proves particularly problematic for Cultural Revolution descendants with inherited trauma connections, creating the paradox that those most capable of sophisticated cultural engagement are simultaneously most vulnerable to retraumatization.

The findings from *The Ant*, read against the mnemonic frictions analysed across the preceding chapters, suggest principles for overcoming these limitations. The thesis has demonstrated that mnemonic friction operates as a scalar and multidimensional phenomenon: from involuntary, negotiated, autobiographical, to actively sought. What distinguishes the most productive configurations of friction is not the intensity of confrontation but the capacity of the narrative and performative architecture to sustain ambiguity, distribute responsibility across systemic rather than individual registers, and create space for reparative rather than paranoid engagement.

This chapter contributes to broader memory studies scholarship by revealing both the transformative potential and specific limitations of performance-based approaches to historical reparation while identifying concrete strategies for achieving genuinely reparative outcomes. The challenge for *yangbanxi* remakes lies not in perfecting techniques of aesthetic disruption but in developing collaborative storytelling practices that honour the complexity of traumatic memory while creating sustainable frameworks for ongoing ethical engagement.

Through systematic documentation of creative process, audience reception, and critical reflection, this practice-led research generates ‘complementary knowledge’ that emerges from the intersection of making and thinking but cannot be accessed through purely theoretical approaches. The RSVP Cycles methodology offers

transferable frameworks for artists and scholars working at the intersection of memory studies, performance practice, and postcolonial theory, demonstrating how performance can serve as both analytical tool and ethical intervention when guided by appropriate narrative architectures.

This chapter's methodological contribution extends beyond the specific case of *yangbanxi* remakes to offer a replicable framework for investigating the reparative potential of cultural intervention more broadly. By combining systematic aesthetic analysis with empirical audience research, comparative analysis with successful models, and critical reflection on ethical outcomes, the RSVP Cycles approach provides a model for practice-led research that maintains both artistic integrity and scholarly rigour while prioritizing the wellbeing of affected communities.

Conclusion: unfinished acts of repair

This thesis has argued that *yangbanxi* remakes are not residual echoes of a completed revolutionary project but active sites where revolutionary memory is reconstituted, contested, and transformed through what I have termed 'mnemonic friction'. Rather than tracing a linear retreat of state power from cultural production, the thesis has examined how varying degrees of Party involvement produce distinct configurations of this friction, shaping what can be remembered, how it is performed, and what tensions the encounter between inherited form and new conditions generates. Across three case studies spanning state-directed transplantation, commercial co-production, and independent avant-garde performance, and through a practice-led intervention that tests and extends the analytical framework from within the remaking process itself, the thesis has demonstrated that mnemonic friction operates as a consistent dynamic whose character is determined by each remake's institutional setting, temporal distance, and performative strategies.

The thesis has traced a spectrum of these configurations, from structurally involuntary friction through negotiated and autobiographical forms to friction that is deliberately sought for reparative purposes. Across this spectrum, the character of friction is determined not by individual artistic choices alone but by the institutional conditions under which remaking occurs. While the four cases examined in this thesis do not exhaust the possible forms such friction can take, they were selected to substantiate this claim across a range of institutional contexts. All case studies engage directly with PRC memory politics, though from different institutional positions, and it is the varying character of that positioning that determines which dimensions of the source material are activated and which registers of friction are produced.

In the Uyghur transplantation of *Qizil Chiragh*, friction was structurally involuntary, arising from the irreducible difference between Han-centric revolutionary form and Uyghur musical and performative tradition under conditions of full state direction. Friction was not sought or intended but was generated by the structural impossibility of fully absorbing Uyghur performative practice into a Han-centric ideological framework. In Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, friction was negotiated across genres, producing a commercially viable text whose revolutionary content is simultaneously honoured and destabilized by *wuxia* spectacle. The CEPA co-production framework that shaped the film generated friction from the competing demands of commercial viability, genre convention, and political acceptability. In Wen Hui's *Hong*, friction was autobiographical, lodged in the performing body's unresolved tension between revolutionary discipline and embodied critique. The Living Dance Studio's positioning enabled a mode of friction that could not have been produced under conditions of either full state direction or commercial co-production. These three works operated within or in direct negotiation with PRC institutional frameworks.

The Ant extends this inquiry from beyond that institutional terrain, engaging directly with PRC memory politics but from a position that afforded creative autonomy unavailable within PRC institutional frameworks, while also entailing a greater distance from the lived contexts in which Cultural Revolution memory carries its most immediate force. The short film sought to use *yangbanxi*'s aesthetic codes to open space for ethical engagement with Red Guard complicity, yet its confrontational aesthetics and narrative structured around karmic retribution produced the opposite of its reparative intentions: audiences consistently read Su's psychological disintegration as deserved punishment rather than as an invitation to complex moral reasoning. This

productive gap between aspiration and outcome reveals that the reparative capacity of mnemonic friction depends not only on the institutional conditions of production but on the narrative architecture through which friction is dramaturgically organized.

The concept of mnemonic friction contributes to *yangbanxi* studies by reorienting the field away from *yangbanxi* as historical artefacts and toward their proliferating remakes. By demonstrating that every instance of remaking generates friction at the point where inherited revolutionary form encounters new conditions, the thesis establishes that remakes are not derivative phenomena but the primary site at which *yangbanxi*'s cultural and political significance is now produced and contested. The scalar model of mnemonic friction, ranging from involuntary through negotiated and autobiographical to deliberately sought, provides the analytical means for pursuing this question across the spectrum of *yangbanxi* remakes. At the same time, by insisting that mnemonic friction can be registered in and through the performing body, the thesis brings *yangbanxi* studies into closer dialogue with the embodied and affective turns in performance studies, extending Diana Taylor's theorization of the repertoire (2003) into the terrain of post-Mao Chinese cultural production. The thesis thereby challenges the implicit textualism that has characterized much *yangbanxi* scholarship: revolutionary memory cannot be adequately understood through analysis of scripts, scores, and policy documents alone but requires attention to the material practices through which that memory is embodied, transmitted, and contested.

The complexity of *yangbanxi* remakes, spanning decades of Chinese history, vast geographic and cultural distances, and different institutional configurations, demands that scholars approach each instance of remaking on its own terms. What this thesis demonstrates is that *yangbanxi* remakes cannot be adequately explained by any single logic of translation, adaptation, or re-enactment. Each remake activates

different dimensions of the source, generates different resistances, and registers friction through different formal and affective channels depending on the specific conditions of its production. This insistence that each remake must be understood through its own institutional conditions and performative strategies constitutes both a finding and a methodological challenge: it asks scholars working on *yangbanxi* and on analogous phenomena in other cultural contexts to resist the temptation of generalizing frameworks that smooth over the frictions that make these works significant.

This disposition proves relevant beyond *yangbanxi* studies. In the interdisciplinary field of remake studies, the thesis's core insight, that every act of remaking generates tension at the point where inherited form encounters new conditions, applies to any cultural form whose remaking involves the reactivation of politically or affectively charged material under changed circumstances. The analytical focus extends beyond questions of fidelity to what the encounter between source and remake produces: what resistances and transformations are generated and how these are registered formally, affectively, and institutionally. The thesis also insists that institutional context is a constitutive factor in the character of remaking. This institutional sensitivity proves particularly valuable for studying remakes produced under conditions of censorship or ideological pressure, where the dynamics of power between source and remake are not symmetrical.

Beyond *yangbanxi* and remake studies, the thesis contributes to memory studies by extending Assmann's concept of the floating gap (2011) from a descriptive model of temporal transition to a performative one. The floating gap identifies the liminal zone where memories are too distant for everyday communicative exchange but not yet crystallized into myth. This thesis proposes that this zone is also a

performative terrain where memory is materially contested and transformed through the act of remaking. Mnemonic friction reorients the floating gap toward performance, asking what happens when cultural works actively traverse this liminal zone: what formal, affective, and embodied tensions are generated when inherited revolutionary form is re-enacted under changed conditions.

Methodologically, the thesis has insisted on the epistemological value of integrating textual and archival research with creative practice. Practice-led research, framed through the RSVP Cycles, enables a self-reflexive inquiry that foregrounds the emotional and ethical stakes of working with politically sensitive material through caring criticism. The inclusion of *The Ant* represents a methodological contribution in itself: it demonstrates that practice-led research can contribute to knowledge not only through successful artistic outcomes but through the analysis of what goes wrong when theoretical frameworks developed through analysis confront the contingencies of production and reception. *The Ant*'s finding that formal interventions cannot compensate for retributive narrative architecture emerged only through the practice of making and testing; it could not have been reached through critical analysis alone.

This thesis has focused on *yangbanxi* remakes that engage with PRC memory politics, and this delimitation is both a strength and a constraint. Several works, such as Jen Liu's *The Pink Detachment*, The Matsuyama Ballet Theatre's *The White-Haired Girl*, and William Kentridge's *Notes Towards a Model Opera*, were excluded because they circulate primarily within international art circuits where *yangbanxi* functions as aesthetic resource rather than as contested cultural memory. But their existence suggests that mnemonic friction is not confined to the PRC case. A comparative study extending the framework to other postsocialist contexts, such as Soviet-era ballets or East German political theatre, would test whether mnemonic friction has explanatory

power beyond its conditions of origin. It would also illuminate what is distinctive about China. Unlike the Soviet Union or East Germany, where regime change led to the thorough repudiation or ironization of revolutionary cultural forms, *yangbanxi* remakes operate within a continuity of political authority in which the ruling party recalibrates rather than repudiates its revolutionary heritage. This political continuity fundamentally shapes the character of the resulting mnemonic frictions, producing dynamics that a comparative framework would render analytically visible.

A second direction concerns digital memory ecologies. Social media platforms such as *Bilibili* and *Xiaohongshu* have become sites where younger users without lived experience of the Cultural Revolution encounter, remix, and recontextualise *yangbanxi* materials through memes, fan edits, video essays, and ironic commentary. Digital remakes generate a distinct mode of memory practice: they capture revolutionary materials in considerable visual and sonic detail, archiving fragments of performance with a specificity that oral transmission cannot match, yet they also produce new gaps and absences. What is preserved is shaped by platform algorithms and content moderation rather than by institutional cultural policy, and what is omitted, whether through censorship, algorithmic suppression, or the ephemeral nature of participatory engagement, constitutes its own form of structured forgetting. These digital remakes generate forms of mnemonic friction that differ from those analysed in this thesis: the temporal distance is greater, the institutional constraints are of a very different kind, and the mode of engagement is often playful, fragmentary, and participatory rather than sustained and deliberate. Investigating whether mnemonic friction holds in networked digital environments, or whether entirely new configurations emerge, would test the concept's analytical range and potentially reveal

how revolutionary memory is being transmitted to generations for whom the floating gap has widened into what may be an almost unbridgeable distance.

A third direction concerns community-engaged methodologies. Chapter Five's analysis of *The Ant*'s partial failure pointed toward a specific finding: that reparative aesthetics require collaborative storytelling practices in which affected communities participate as co-creators rather than as spectators. This is not merely a desirable extension of the thesis's methodology but the logical implication of its central finding about *The Ant*: that individual artistic practice, however formally innovative, reaches the limits of its reparative capacity when it operates without sustained community collaboration. Future research could develop and test community-engaged remakes of *yangbanxi*, extending the reparative framework toward collective processes of intergenerational memory transmission. Such work would need to navigate the continuing political sensitivity surrounding Cultural Revolution memory in the PRC, requiring the caring criticism that this thesis has advocated: analytical rigour combined with recognition of the human costs embedded in these cultural forms.

If *yangbanxi* once served to compress history into ideological spectacle, its contemporary afterlives unravel that spectacle into a web of contradictions, half-memories, and creative interventions. Mnemonic friction has provided a framework for understanding *yangbanxi* remakes as expressions of a shared dynamic: the encounter between revolutionary memory and the changed conditions under which it is reactivated. That encounter reveals *yangbanxi* as a force for both ideological reproduction and creative resistance. This thesis contends that the task of remembering is not to re-stage past certainties but to confront the historical sediment that clings to performative forms and to remake them through ongoing processes of reckoning, dialogue, and creative reimagining. The future of *yangbanxi* lies not in its revival as

museum artefact or nostalgic commodity but in its continued capacity to generate mnemonic frictions that open space for alternative ways of inhabiting revolutionary memory.

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Appendix 1: The Script of *The Ant*

A minimalist space with a single chair, a small table with a glass of water and a mirror. The lighting is dynamic, shifting to indicate changes in time and mood.

Harsh fluorescent lights. Rapid cadences of *jingju* percussion play.

SU, a frightened seventy-year-old woman, enters hurriedly, looking over her shoulder as if chased. Her face and clothes are stained with blood, her mind fraught with pain and panic. Everything she wears is tattered and torn, except for her bright red neckerchief, pristine and almost brand-new.

SU is pushed down and beaten, her clothes stripped, her neckerchief ripped off, her hair half-shaved, and her face painted. She cries, screams, struggles, and fights back but ultimately succumbs, lying prone without moving.

Rapid cadences fade out. Lights dim down.

SU limps towards the chair and sits down heavily. She pauses, and looks at the audience, holding back tears and managing a weak smile.

The silence is profound, every small noise startling her.

After a deep breath, SU reaches for the glass of water on the table, drinks, and then splashes some on her face, trying to clean the blood.

She picks up the red neckerchief from the floor, dusts it off, and examines it closely-it is actually an armband.

SU puts the armband around her arm. She starts to hum a tune from the popular *yangbanxi* aria ‘Song of The Red Detachment of Women’.

In her hums, SU transforms into **RED**, her younger self during the Cultural Revolution.

RED stands up and marches with determination, her face filled with youthful idealism and extremism. She waves an imaginary red flag and chants slogans, feeling like a hero. The atmosphere is charged with revolutionary zeal.

RED: (fervently) Ge ming wu zui, zao fan you li (Revolution is no crime, to rebel is justified)!

RED unbuckles her belt and starts to whip an unseen figure with rage and vengeance. Her movements echo SU's earlier ones when SU was beaten.

The stage resounds with sighs, screams, cries, and laments from every corner. The *yangbanxi* aria 'Song of The Red Detachment of Women' continues to linger.

RED's movements grow more aggressive and fiercer.

SU's groans of pain are heard. The mirror on the table is knocked over by RED's belt; it shatters.

All the sounds suddenly stop, making RED's heavy breathing loud in this silence.

Seeing the broken mirror, RED throws away the belt and stands frozen.

RED kneels and picks up a piece of the mirror. In it, she sees the tortured face of seventy-year-old SU: bloodied, wealed neck, half-shaved hair, and a painful expression. The woman in the mirror flinches at the sight of RED, apparently startled.

RED is scared; she throws the piece away, which breaks into smaller pieces.

In every shard, she sees SU's face, all of them crying, screaming, and fighting back simultaneously. RED hurriedly rips off the red armband, picks up the belt from the floor and puts it back around her waist.

SU gains control over RED's psyche; she sits back down and slashing water from the glass onto her hand, trying to tidy the blood on it.

However, the more she washes with water, the more blood appears on her palms. Blood/water flows down from her palms and covers her whole body. She sinks down the chair with fear and shame.

The belt tightens, suffocating SU. The choreography intensifies, depicting the brutality and anguish of SU's self-inflicted pain.

SU's movements become aimless and feeble, lost in the labyrinth of her mind.

At her last gasp, SU collapses on the floor and curls into a ball. Another popular *yangbanxi* aria 'North Wind Blows' fades in.

Hearing the melody, SU raises her head and looks in distance.