UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

ETHICAL EXEMPLARITY AND HISTORICAL HERMENEUTICS IN THE EARLY PRC

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Lennet Daigle

June 2022

The Dissertation of Lennet Daigle is approved:

_____
Professor Chris Connery, chair

_____
Professor Gail Hershatter

_____
Professor Rob Wilson

_____
Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Ethical Exemplarity and Historical Hermeneutics in the Early PRC

Lennet Daigle

The controversy over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* is typically situated at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and remembered as a catalyst for the power struggles and mass mobilizations that followed. Such approaches, while not amiss, tend to foreground its socio-political repercussions at the expense of the content — theoretical, historiographic, polemical — of the texts in which this controversy developed. This dissertation examines *Hai Rui* in relation to what came before, situating it instead at the end of a sequence of debates over historical drama and traditional morality that began in 1951 with a similar controversy over *The Life of Wu Xun*. This shift in historical perspective opens a different vista on the history of the PRC prior to the Cultural Revolution, a period bookended by the emergence and reemergence of a set of questions for which the dominant theoretical discourse had no answers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my committee members Chris Connery, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig and Rob Wilson for their guidance and forbearance, and to Janina Larenas for help with the bureaucracy.

Special thanks to my family — to Lucy and Adrian for their encouragement and abiding good humor, and especially to my mother Amy Daigle for supporting me in so many ways through all that has happened over the past few years. I dedicate these pages, with love and gratitude, to her.

Introduction: Regulating Creativity and Creating Regulations in Yan'an

Raymond Williams opens the concluding chapter of his *Marxism and Literature* (206) with these reflections on Marxism and creativity:

> At the very centre of Marxism is an extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation. Extraordinary because most of the systems with which it contends stress the derivation of most human activity from an external cause: from God, from an abstracted Nature or human nature, from permanent instinctual systems, or from an animal inheritance. The notion of self creation, extended to civil society and to language by pre-Marxist thinkers, was radically extended by Marxism to the basic work processes and thence to a deeply (creatively) altered physical world and a self-created humanity.[1]

This radically extended potential for self creation suffuses the intellectual life of the early People's Republic of China. It is evident not merely in the seemingly incessant campaigns and calls to action coming from the center, but also in the textual details — in the sense of purpose and urgency animating otherwise academic discussions among specialists. At a time when policies of all kinds were being collectively

[1] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1977), 206.

invented, reinvented, or rethought, guided (at least in theory) by the mass line principle of "from the masses, to the masses," theory and practice could converge in ways unthinkable in, for example, our own corporate bureaucratic neoliberal state.

This was true despite the well documented persecution — even eradication — of intellectuals under the CCP. As one such documenter puts it:

> Yet party policy toward the intellectuals has not been simply one of repression. Because the Communist regime is determined to build an industrialized society, it is on guard against producing an atmosphere which might permanently stifle the initiative and creativity of the intellectuals who are needed to modernize China. Therefore, the party has carried out a contradictory policy. On the one hand, it has compelled thinking intellectuals to a strict orthodoxy, and, on the other it has tried to stimulate them to carry on creatively and productively with their work. This contradictory approach has resulted in a policy toward the intellectuals which has oscillated between pressure and relaxation.[2]

---

[2] Merle Goldman. *Intellectual Dissent in Communist China.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1. See also the similar conclusion by Eddy U in *Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), xv: "The main message that runs through this book is the mutually constitutive relationship between the intellectual and Chinese Communism—that is, their power to influence politics and governance, work and leisure, association and identity, and other aspects of life through influencing each other."

The suffering of intellectuals under the CCP must be acknowledged, and any examination of the creativity permitted to or demanded of them, including my own, is a supplement to this documentary history rather than a rebuttal.

Creativity in this Marxist sense, as Williams points out, far exceeds the narrow bounds of art. It is a creativity of which the arts as traditionally construed constitute only one part, and to which individual acts of creation, artistic or otherwise, must be subordinated. Hence the need, felt early on, to both encourage and regulate artistic creativity, in order to ensure that particular creative acts were contributing to the overall goal of creating a new, equitable society, one that improved on the old society in every way.

Looming over or lurking within this creation, however — among all these "new things," Mao's *xinsheng shiwu* — was the question of what to do with old things. Certain material things could be reused, or repurposed, or symbolically destroyed; and economic or organizational models associated with the old regime

could be surreptitiously adopted or contemptuously abandoned.[3] But combatting, displacing, or transforming old ways of thinking to make room for new ones can be more difficult, and must often await the death of old minds and the education of new ones. In the push to create China anew, it is perhaps unsurprising that this question loomed most menacingly over historians, theorists of history, and creators of historical fiction (poets, playwrights, novelists but also performers, film and theatre workers etc. involved in historical drama), those tasked most directly with remaking the past and thus somehow changing what by definition cannot be changed; the people for whom the raw materials of creation are always necessarily old — old histories and heroes and villains, old stories and legends. These things had sufficed for most of China's pre-socialist past, but could they be repurposed for new creative work(s), and find a place in the creation of New China? In the early years of the PRC the answer to this question was not at all clear, and various interest groups — dramatists, historians, officials, culture industry workers — often found themselves in

---

[3] The extent of abandonment, particularly in the era of New Democracy and cooperation between classes, is a matter of debate. See Julia Strauss, “Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and after, 1949-1956.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 188 (2006): 891–912, which stresses continuity with the past, including material and ideological continuity with the KMT era. Strauss pushes back against both what she sees as the overly affirmative view of the early PRC (everything was great until Mao messed it all up with the Great Leap Forward) and the opposite tendency to find in the early PRC the seeds of ruin. Hers is an anti-teleological analysis that acknowledges "messiness and contingency" without foreclosing possibilities.

conflict. This thesis examines one such site of conflict, centered on the depiction of feudal-era historical figures in socialist-era historical fictions.

Underlying this particular conflict was a more general question of how best to both exploit and regulate artistic creativity in a socialist society. Leftists flocked to the CCP and later to the base areas but often found themselves uncertain, unappreciated, or unsatisfied.[4] Some diagnosed their plight as a problem with the Party; the Party leadership, however, diagnosed it as ideological confusion. Clearing up this ideological confusion in cultural circles was the goal of a series of speeches Mao gave in 1942 to audiences of literature and arts workers in Yan'an, the center of the primary CCP controlled territory during the Japanese invasion and later civil war. It was in Yan'an that the CCP worked out many of its earliest policies and gained experience in large-scale social organization and control, making it in many ways a trial run for the post-liberation PRC. And part of this comprehensive, if geographically limited, experiment in socialist living involved determining the role of literature and arts (*wenyi*) workers. Later collected and published as *The Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature*, these talks were organized in response to what Bonnie McDougall

[4] For intellectuals in Yan'an see Eddy U, *Creating the Intellectual,* chapter 3 "Visible Subjects in the Countryside."

describes as a kind of precursor of the Hundred Flowers Campaign.[5] When prompted to think critically about life in Yan'an, an invitation intended to evoke reflection and self-criticism, intellectuals and artists living there instead brought their crucial faculties to bear on the party leadership. "After two months of their forthright attacks in Yan'an newspapers, a meeting of writers, intellectuals, and leading party cadres was convened."[6] In a series of meetings spanning three weeks, participants discussed a variety of issues relating to arts work both inside and outside of the Yan'an base area, with Mao giving the opening and closing addresses. Today *The Yan'an Talks* refers to these two speeches by Mao that bookended the conference, and primarily to the second and longer one in which Mao takes up the question of "for whom are we writing?" His answer — the peasants, workers and soldiers that constitute The People or masses (*renmin dazhong*) — seeks to accomplish, in theory, two great reversals: of writer and audience (reversal in importance, even prestige) and bourgeoisie and

---

[5] In 1956, in a sequence that encapsulates Goldman's contradictory policy toward intellectuals, the Party leadership encouraged people to speak their minds freely and let "a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred voices contend." The response from was deemed overly critical and this brief period of liberalization was followed by increased restrictions and eventually the Anti-Rightist Campaign against rightist intellectuals.

[6] Bonnie McDougall, "Introduction: The Yan'an Talks as Literary Theory," in *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art: a Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary,* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan: 1980), 10.

proletariat (the educator must be educated). The writer/intellectual[7] must serve the needs of the working class rather than, as in the past, writing for other intellectuals. And writers must abandon their feelings of superiority and strive instead to learn both about and from their audience, the masses. Mao ends his second address urging his listeners to "thoroughly resolve the relationship between the individual and the masses,"[8] or writer and audience, and to work tirelessly in their service. Ellen Judd distills the *Talks* to Mao's insistence that in order to fulfill their revolutionary potential writers must "submerge themselves in the ordinary life of the countryside in order to become different people in the course of living altered lives."[9] Note that this is a complete inversion of the assumption guiding the consumption of texts in a bourgeois individualist society, according to which the reading public (masses) turns to individual authors to be enlightened and changed. Stated somewhat differently, "It was not the party that was to judge the revolutionary actions of the peasantry, but rather it was the peasants who were to judge the revolutionary sufficiency of the party." This early statement of Mao's faith in the peasantry was later to become

---

[7] "Intellectuals" in Yan'an referred primarily to what Judd calls "ideological intellectuals" — artists, writers, scholars — rather than technical (scientists, engineers etc.); though the level of education necessary to be classified as an intellectual was flexible and often relatively low, and may not have exceeded basic literacy; see Ellen R. Judd, "Prelude to the 'Yan'an Talks': Problems in Transforming a Literary Intelligentsia," *Modern China* 11, no. 3 (1985): 379 - 380.

[8] McDougall, *Talks*, 85.

[9] Judd, "Prelude," 377.

doctrine,[10] but was never clarified in practice. The struggle to do so would develop in and as the red vs. expert debate to be discussed briefly in the next chapter.

The Yan'an Talks have traditionally been understood as disciplinary in nature, and as marking an intensification in the subordination of art to politics.[11] But as Judd points out, it was far from being a mere matter of imposition of party discipline. Instead the *Talks* were an intervention in an ongoing discussion — a forceful one to be sure, but nothing like a surprise attack. The writers assembled in Yan'an were there by choice after all, ostensibly at least to be part of the creation of a new society and ready to accept party guidance; and their criticisms reflected both frustrations with and also deep concern for the Yan'an project.[12] Judd calls Mao's talks "a policy statement by the highest Party leadership on problems about which the leadership and writers and artists were jointly concerned but had so far failed to solve."[13] So though

---

[10] Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 49.

[11] See for example, with typical hyperbole, Merle Goldman, *Intellectual Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 34ff: "Mao's 'Talks' signaled an all-out campaign against the authors who had published critical articles about the party." For a more balanced account, one that still takes the side of the *Talks*' audience but as artists rather than dissidents, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Literary trends: the road to revolution 1927—1949" in John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker eds. *The Cambridge History of China: Vol 13 Republican China 1912-1949*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 475 - 485.

[12] Or, in Goldman's reading, they were expressing feelings of "betrayal by a movement to which they had given themselves in misunderstanding." Goldman, *Intellectual Dissent,* 21.

[13] Judd cites evidence that the convening of the *Talks* was requested by writers rather than party bureaucrats. See Judd, "Prelude," 397.

writers were shown their place within the revolutionary movement, it was a move that had ambiguous consequences: on the one hand writers were shown their place in a broadly disciplinary sense, within the hierarchy of the revolution, effectively disavowing any possibility of art or artists occupying a critical role outside of this movement; but on the other, writers were given a place (within the movement) from which, in the view of China's most powerful writer-intellectual, they could have real and immediate impact. In some instances the writers' criticisms of the regime were turned back against them: Just as some writers and artists accused the party of living apart from and indifferent to the people, Mao accused writers of doing the same, by failing to understand or take an interest in the masses. Look first at yourselves, says Mao.[14]

The *Talks* were shaped not only by the theoretical disagreements between artists and party leaders in Yan'an, but by a specific and unique historical and geographical situation. A study of the origins of the German Communist Party diagnoses the forces at work linking mass parties to their geographical and spatial origins inside literal or figurative enemy territory:

> [German] Communists did not operate in conditions of their own choosing, and central to the following study is a spatial argument: the character of mass

---

[14] Goldman, *Intellectual Dissent,* 27. According to Goldman, Wang Shi-wei would argue specifically in favor of the preservation of this space outside of, and at a critical distance from, the actually existing revolutionary movement.

> parties and movements is shaped not only by their ideologies and the social background of the members—important as these elements certainly are—but also by the political spaces within which they operate. Factories and mines, neighborhood streets, city plazas and markets, households, battlefields, communal administrations, and national legislatures all constitute realms of political engagement and conflict. Parties and movements may choose to operate in any number of these spaces. But at least as often, they are driven into a particular configuration of spaces because of the larger political and social constellation and the unintended outcomes of political conflict. Unwittingly, the places of engagement shape the movement's political culture.[15]

A detailed analysis of the geospatial origins of the CCP would be far beyond the scope of this study; I bring them up merely to remind readers of the contingency at the heart of what so often strives towards or would be taken as necessity in the following debates. Like its counterpart in Germany, the CCP was "driven into," and expanded out of, "a particular configuration of spaces" that left a mark. One of the great sources of value and contemporary relevance of the debates over history and morality discussed below lies in their striving toward generality. Yet the discourses in

---

[15] Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism 1890 - 1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State,"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

which the debates were conducted were shaped by very specific and contingent histories that must be borne in mind.[16]

Though they were later abstracted and elevated to the place of doctrine — "enshrined" is McDougall's term[17] — the Talks were the product of a unusual period in the CCP's history during the Second United Front that saw the CCP joining the KMT and other reactionary forces to fight Japanese occupation.[18] It was thus a time of overt engagement with one enemy, concurrent with explicit tolerance of, and alliance with, groups and individuals who would later no longer be tolerated, a difficult but necessary state of affairs discussed in the texts themselves. It turned out

---

[16] The remainder of the paragraph from which the above excerpt was taken is also relevant to the Chinese revolution: "Movements that arise within existing democratic structures have an array of spaces open to them, which may serve to absorb and moderate even the most militant-sounding group. Dictatorships, in contrast, severely constrict the range of political space, and even movements most committed to democracy will reproduce some of the authoritarian traits of their oppressors when they are forced to operate conspiratorially and clandestinely." p 6

The origins of the two parties couldn't be more different: the Chinese party began in reading groups then gained strength in the countryside and Yan'an, while the German party was born in violent urban confrontation. But both were deeply marked by their surroundings.

[17] McDougall, *Talks at the Yan'an Conference,* 9.

[18] The specificity and importance of the geopolitical circumstances of the Talks is foregrounded by several authors. See Wang Xiaoping, "Re-integration of Culture and Politics: A Re-interpretation of Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks", *Critique*, 45:3, 387-407; and Zhang Xudong, "Reflections on the Historical Context and Political Philosophical Implications of Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China,* no. 1 (2019): 122–146; and the Introduction,"The Yan'an Talks as Literary Theory" in Bonnie McDougall, *Talks at the Yan'an Conference,* 3 - 41.

to be, however, a state of affairs that would give rise to Maoist scripture[19] — texts that would be applied (remain applicable) to changing circumstances and come to the fore once again prior to the Cultural Revolution, at the opening of a new period resembling in some ways the old. Thinking of the Talks this way, less as a generalized theoretical intervention and more as a response to a specific set of problems, helps, among other things, to clarify the temporal and spatial working of the texts themselves and allows them to be approached as a response to a specific set of challenges.

That these texts went on to become Maoist scripture suggests that this was a historical setting (time and place) in which conceptual distinctions and social configurations of lasting importance appeared particularly clearly: divisions between us and them and within the "us"; the need to work with and borrow from the enemy; the risks and rewards of nationalism and its value for the party; the gradations of friend and enemy.[20]

---

[19] Andrew Walder's anti-Mao polemic "Actually Existing Maoism," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 18 (Jul 1987), 155-166, attempts to expose Mao as little more than a particularly ruthless Stalinist; but it does point out that it was in part the aphoristic and non-systematic nature of so-called Mao Thought that allowed it to play the role of scripture, understood as texts to be endlessly interpreted but never questioned. See 157 ff.

[20] For a summary of the economic and administrative aspects of what would become known as the Yan'an Way — the replicable aspects of Yan'an society, as they were adopted or adapted in other parts of the country — see chapter 6 "The Yenan Way" in Mark Selden, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971): 208 - 276.

The *Talks* are the product of a specific time and place and were written not for canonization but in response to the current situation — as proclaimed in the title, they were first spoken to a group of arts workers. And true to their origins, rather than being purely theoretical reflections on the political role of art and literature, they open with a summary of the "objectively existing facts" (*keguan cunzai de shishi*) with which the group must contend. Beginning general or abstract discussions with a consideration of the current factual situation rather than with definitions is, in fact, one of the abstract principles Mao recommends. The facts of the situation as Mao sees them were, in order: the war against Japan, now in its fifth year; the global struggle against Fascism; continuing conflict with Chinese landowners and bourgeoisie, with whom the CCP has allied in a united front against the Japanese; the achievements and the flaws the May 4th revolutionary movement, now in its second decade; the great many arts workers in the base areas working with the various CCP military forces; the very different circumstances faced by these workers and those in the KMT controlled "general rear;" and finally "the various arts related debates that have already occurred in Yan'an and the other bases."

Another aspect of the Talk's context or setting was the Yan'an rectification campaign of 1942-43, a precursor of the rectification campaign of the late 1950s and by extension of the GPCR, the biggest and least civil rectification campaign of them

all.[21] Though not overtly or directly accusatory, the Talks are nevertheless disciplinary in that they are concerned with imposing a way of thought and practice for literature and arts workers, and they proceed in places by enumerating and analyzing deviations from the Maoist ideal. These then are the circumstances in which what would persist as CCP arts policy arose: the united front in the face of foreign aggression and the need to enforce discipline among *wenyi* workers, to enable but also contain these workers within their proper place in the overall revolutionary project. Over time these two demands would morph but not disappear,[22] and their transmutations constitute a helpful guiding thread in arts debates during the socialist period.[23]

The implications of the former — the geopolitical fragmentation of China and the united front — are seen in the discussion that opens the concluding talk, a

---

[21] Though it began outside of the exiting Party hierarchy and what it sought to rectify was the party itself. "Rectification" in this case takes on a more cosmic significance, Confucian even in its overtones.

[22] One can for example read the red vs. expert conflict as an internalized, mutated version of the united front with the KMT.

[23] Judd also reminds us that something very similar was happening at the other end of the Eurasian landmass: "At about the same time as Mao was castigating leftist writers in Yan'an, Walter Benjamin was bitterly denouncing leftist writers in Germany for work that appeared revolutionary-in text-but was actually essentially nonrevolutionary because of the conditions of artistic production-in which the works were created and the failure to transform those conditions. Benjamin was especially critical of writers who turned human misery into literary 'consumer goods' that they peddled to further their careers. Only through struggle to transform the process of artistic production could this subversion of revolutionary writing be rooted out." Judd, "Prelude," 398.

response to the question of audience — who is *wenyi* work for?[24] The question of "for whom we are writing" is immediately given a geo-spatial dimension: the problem and therefore the answer varies depending on whether we have in mind the CCP base areas or the KMT controlled "general rear." In the latter, the KMT having "kept workers peasants and soldiers away from revolutionary literature and art," the audience for revolutionary *wenyi* is fairly small, consisting primarily of "students, office workers and shop assistants;" whereas in the base areas workers, peasants and soldiers expand this audience considerably. The general rear that can be defined spatially based on military battle lines (and not just administrative boundaries), this other China, is also the CCP's past, the setting of its birth and formation as an illegal opposition party, as well as its future, in that it is what remains to be conquered before victory can be proclaimed — before the CCP can mature and be what it aims to be.

In all these ways the *Talks* carry with them their origins. To promulgate these *Talks* outside of Yan'an and the CCP controlled areas, and outside of the period of the united front, is to conflate the pre-liberation base areas with the post-liberation PRC, and to treat the latter as if it were embattled, compromised, and surrounded by enemies. And in a sense it was. But the striving for something different is precisely the striving to overcome these origins. The Yan'an CCP is thus in a strange temporal predicament as well — confined to a small, somewhat utopian present, surrounded

---

[24] this is the 3rd of 5 issues listed in the opening talk but the first addressed in the conclusion and the one from which the rest of the talk follows etc.

by an inhospitable territory representing both its past and future — the place and time from which it came and to which it must return, victoriously, if it is to survive at all. The campaign against Wu Xun discussed in Chapter 1 can be understood as part of this victorious return of the communists, and communism, from Yan'an and the other base areas to the rest of China.

While the CCP was drawing up plans for the creation of something new, elsewhere in China life went on as it had before, to the extent that anything like normality persisted during these years of internal and external conflict. Artists outside of the base areas in particular continued making art for commercial, spiritual, and/or ideological reasons inside (or outside) of existing institutional frameworks, and were not at all necessarily familiar with the *Talks* or the CCP's arts policy. This meant that during the earliest years of the PRC the lessons of the *Talks* needed to be both promulgated to and adapted to the remainder of Chinese society outside the communist base areas. The first chapter covers one of the earliest and most important of such attempts at extending and applying the *Talks*, a controversy and subsequent campaign centered on the film *The Life of Wu Xun.* This film, a fictionalized biography of the mid-19th century philanthropist and educational reformer Wu Xun, exposed some of the primary difficulties facing these early attempts at depicting China's pre-socialist past.

Yet the complexities of *wenyi* work did not allow for a simple solution by campaign. The second chapter untangles some of these complexities and unravels

problems left unsolved by the clear policies and worldview of the *Talks*. The above-mentioned rethinking of historical fiction that engaged both historians and literary writers took place against the backdrop of a much more general rethinking of historiography, salient aspects of which included consideration of the relative value of historical records and Marxist theory, and the effort to create a conclusive periodization of China's long history. These discussions entered a new phase in 1960 with the publication of an article by Wu Han questioning the meaning and use of the term "historical drama." The discussion Wu's article generated expanded into a broader discussion on the continued relevance of traditional morality prompted by the reassessment of historical figures in new works of historical fiction.

Chapter Three examines in some detail the reemergence of these debates at the center of the 'opening act' of the Cultural Revolution, the controversy surrounding the history play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office,* and offers a reading of this event as an inconclusive but final contribution to a series of discussions that began a decade and a half prior. Despite the lack of answers it did mark an end, or as close to an end as an intellectual history can hope for, if only because after the Cultural Revolution there was no possibility of the same issues being discussed in the same way again. Even when not central to the social or political life of the period, as was the case with the Hai Rui affair, these debates are symptomatic of a theoretical problem that exceeded the reach of the discourses available to the participants. Acknowledging this allows us to pose different questions about the early PRC and to look for answers

elsewhere than in the personalities of leading figures or the relative power of different factions.

I. The Life of Wu Xun

On May 20, 1951 *People's Daily* published an unsigned editorial sharply criticizing the film *The Life of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan*) and calling on readers to "revisit the discussion" of the film. On its release the previous year this fictionalized retelling of the life of Qing Dynasty philanthropist and educational reformer Wu Xun had been widely praised and even selected as one of the top ten films of the year by *Dazhong Dianying* (Film for the Masses) magazine[1]. In March of 1951, however, articles began appearing in various papers that contradicted previous assessments and questioned both the political value of the film and the integrity of historical figure on whom it was based.[2] In retrospect these articles were signs that something much bigger was afoot;[3] yet at the time they seem to have had little impact, leaving even media industry insiders utterly unprepared for the *People's Daily* editorial. A contemporary account published in the memoirs of Yuan Ying, then working as an editor at the *Liberation Daily* in Shanghai, gives some sense of this:

---

[1] Yin Hong and Ling Yan, *Xin Zhongguo dianying shi* [A History of Chinese Cinema: 1949-2000] (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2002), 11.

[2] Xiao Jin, "*Xin shidai ruhe xuxie 'jiu gushi' — dui dianying Wu Xun zhuan jiqi pipan de zai shenshi"* [Rewriting 'Old Stories' for a New Era — a Reappraisal of the Film *The Life of Wu Xun* and its Criticism], *Dagndai Wentan*, no. 4 (2012): 28.

[3] The campaign against Wu Xun would be the first major cultural campaign since the founding of the PRC, and would also lead to major shifts in film production and (self) censorship, see below.

Fifty five years ago, on the afternoon of May 20th, 1951, I was working the night shift in the Shanghai office of the *Liberation Daily*, editing the news for the front page. It was a Sunday so there wasn't any big news, and we also didn't have our regular 4:00 PM editor's meeting. I was sorting the wires from Xinhua and choosing the news to be published that evening when I came across an editorial sent over earlier the same day from the *People's Daily* titled "We Must Revisit the Discussion on The Life of Wu Xun." It was part of a big stack of papers with a big word count.

I'd been editing front page news for over a year and I'd seen many People's Daily editorials on major domestic and international issues that local papers were required to reprint; but for the *People's Daily* to weigh in on a movie was unprecedented. I was surprised, and I read it carefully right away.

[Here Yuan reprints the editorial and notes the inclusion in the items received by the *Liberation Daily* of a "very long list" of 43 articles, 47 authors and 3 book titles deemed complicit in the celebration of Wu Xun.]

When I finished I read it again, my heart racing: this was something utterly unlike any of the other *People's Daily* editorials I'd seen or anything that had been sent to us by Xinhua. I was familiar with the rousing and inspiring tone of editorials about the war in Korea or other international affairs, and with the ponderously political tone of editorials on the domestic economy or legislative matters. But this editorial was making a huge issue out

> of a movie, and in such severe language: "Ought we to praise such disgusting behavior?" "How can we tolerate this kind of thing?" "Where on earth is the Marxism which certain communists claim to have grasped?" The tone of these extremely serious accusations seemed very out of place in an editorial, and the condemnation of so many authors and their works by name was even more astonishing. I wondered, is it because the *People's Daily* is the central Party's newspaper that it could use this tone in an editorial? The more I read, the more confused I got and the more nervous I got. Even though I didn't really understand what was going on, one thing was certain: this was a very important editorial and an extremely serious matter.[4]

Prior to mentioning anything of substance about the film itself or the objections raised by the article, Yuan's account registers a sense of bewilderment, and one coming from a place (a news desk) we might not expect to find it: why was the Party leadership talking about a movie? And in such harsh language?[5] In what follows

---

[4] Yuan Ying, *Fengyun ceji: wo zai Renmin ribao fukan de suiyue* [Notes from Stormy Times: My Life at the People's Daily Supplement] (Beijing: Zhongguo dang'an chubanshe, 2006), 72 - 73.

[5] Playwright and later Deputy Minister of Culture Xia Yan echoes this surprise at the beginning of his article "*Cong Wu Xun Zhuan de pipan jiantao wo zai Shanghai wenhua yishu jie de gongzuo*" [Reflections on the Criticism of *Wu Xun Zhuan* and my Work in the Shanghai Arts Community] (*Renmin ribao* Aug. 27, 1951). He had just arrived back from Europe when the People's Daily editorial was published and was so shocked by the uproar, he says, that he "let out a cry" (*da he yisheng*).

I will primarily be concerned with the elaboration of this substance, the filmic and written representations, claims, and conflicts that constitute what we might call the Wu Xun Affair; but part of what makes it an affair, an event, a thing of importance then and now, is precisely this uncomprehending sense of shock, a mental but also a physical reaction — lack of comprehension but also bodily tension and a racing heartbeat — to a situation for which both mind and body were unprepared.

Taking Yuan's account at face value, there are three things that surprised him. First, that the *People's Daily*, the central party paper, would intervene directly in the reception of a movie, something unprecedented at the time; next the tone of the article, the severity of which Yuan had only seen before in articles on much more obviously weighty topics; and finally the naming and shaming of individuals accused of propagating irresponsibly favorable assessments of Wu Xun and the film.[6] That an aggressive intervention by the central authorities in the reception of a film could still be surprising to a newspaper editor in 1951 may, in retrospect, seem surprising to us, and can be taken as an indicator of the prevailing political climate in Shanghai at the time. In Yuan's mental model of the New China, and thus presumably for many other people as well, the highest echelons of the leadership had better things to do than worry about movies. There was still a perceived distinction between matters to be

---

[6] According to Pang Laikwan, "listing such a long inventory of purgation targets in a People's Daily editorial was unprecedented, unseen even during the Cultural Revolution." See "Between Will and Negotiation: Film Policy in the First Three Years of the People's Republic of China," *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas,* ed. Carlos Rojas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 481.

subject to painstaking and public political analysis — economic and industrial policy, international affairs, land reform — and something like this piece of ostensibly wholesome entertainment. This would of course change: by the late 1960s the very notion of seemingly wholesome entertainment that needn't be painstakingly and publicly interrogated might in itself seem bizarre. The present study concerns itself, then, with a period during which a certain kind of shift occurred, the first outlines of which appear here: a shift from a socio-political environment in which an editor at a major newspaper in Shanghai could be surprised that the Party was intervening forcefully in the public discussion of a film, to one in which such things would not in themselves seem unusual. This type of politicization, which so often proceeds under the veil of other practices — aestheticization or naturalization within some ideological discourse — is here explicitly and purely discursive in its mechanism, and it appears that one of the ways Chinese society became politicized during the early PRC is simply that the discourse used for obviously and traditionally political topics (diplomatic, military etc.) was extended or expanded and applied to other topics; and moreover that these discussions were assumed to be no less important and of no less general public interest.[7] Politics was already center stage in many ways of course in this newly constituted polity, and by 1951 there had already been campaigns and

---

[7] By "politicization" I refer here simply to the explicit linking of some topic to the contestation of power. Another conflicting sense of politicization characterized by mass involvement, multiplication and diversification of political channels, and decentralization of power will be discussed below.

purges; but these were limited in scope both organizationally and geographically, confined to groups and regions over which the CCP had power. What appeared as a qualitative expansion in politicization from the point of view of someone in the former KMT controlled areas might appear to cadres or residents of the CCP controlled areas simply as geographical expansion. As Pang Laikwan puts it, "the real significance of the film resides in the national cultural criticism apparatus that was established along with it; or, the film was chosen largely to substantiate a new criticism culture."[8] Here it is the scope of the existing "criticism culture" that was being expanded: films such as this will also be subject to critique, says the editorial. Part of the 'eventfulness' of this event might have been a feeling of the invasiveness or impingement of an expanding criticism culture on everyday life. Our first indication of this expanding politicization is the surprise registered in Yuan's plaint: it is just a film, so why all the fuss?

Yuan also says that the tone or *kouqi* of the article set it apart from other editorials and signaled the importance of the issues being raised. Wars and matters of national pride or state policy were spoken of this way in the Chinese press, but up until this point not films. What constitutes a *kouqi*? In this case Yuan notes a severity and intensity in the language that seems out of place in an editorial (*tide name gao, name yanli* "so intense, so harsh"), one apparent in the three rhetorical questions he provides as examples: Ought we to praise this film? How can we tolerate it? Where is

---

[8] Pang, "Between Will and Negotiation," 481.

the Marxism these people profess? This alone — noticed by someone alert to nuances in tone — would be enough to mark this editorial as unusual, but the questions themselves tell us more. Two of these questions appeal to an "us," the judging and judgmental majority, and the other to a "them" in the form of "some communists" (a few, *yixie*, as opposed to the majority). Outside of, and prior to, the objections it makes to the content of the film (the objective or objectionable content), and also quite apart from the *kouqi*, this editorial is divisive in a quite literal sense, in that it uses language that calls into being an us and a them. The naming of authors and offending works accomplishes the same division even more explicitly. We might try to understand Yuan's shock more precisely as a sudden awareness of a gap where one was not expected, an antagonistic division where there was thought to be unity. Where was this division though, and what did it separate? Had this "them" not been eliminated or at least identified by now? The Nationalists, the landlords, the Americans… were these not the 'thems' opposed to this recently constituted new 'us'? Given assumptions like these, the appearance of this new 'them' — one living

unnoticed among 'us' — might well be confusing and unsettling;[9] more so when the new 'them' was found lurking in and speaking through so seemingly innocuous a film. What distinguishes this split from others is its proximity to everyday life: this was not an easily clarified and easily theorized distinction between exploiter and exploited or invader and defender of the kind that had driven politics up to this point. Nor — and this is what Yuan's account makes especially clear — was it a distinction heretofore recognized in news reporting or didactic editorials in the Party-controlled press. This new enemy, or the old enemy in some new disguise, was speaking directly to audiences via an officially sanctioned film.

Wu Xun Depicted

The use of language heretofore reserved for weighty military or governmental matters in the discussion of a film would seem to mark an escalation in the

---

[9] The logical and indeed chronological relationship between the tone of the article — its hyperbole and divisiveness — and the socio-political division to which it refers is of theoretical interest but impossible to ascertain empirically. Does this new "them" exist independent of and prior to being brought into being by and within the discourse? Are "they" real, or are they imagined into being? These questions restate, or pre-state, the question haunting the Cultural Revolution, which could be productively read as a desperate attempt to discern us from them, or to find a them to blame for the problems besetting us.

For a nuanced analysis of a different but analogous search for a capitalist "them" within an socialist "us," see Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to 'Holocaust'," *New German Critique*, (Winter, 1980), pp. 97-115. The isolation, in both contexts, of (good) industrial capitalist practices from (bad) finance and rentier capitalism is worth noting.

politicization of an already highly politicized society, one astir with a new kind of politics. In China in the early 1950s politics was being utterly reconfigured from a private concern, a way for the traditional elite to preserve and further their own interests, into a public, participatory activity. What prompted such an escalation however was not in any way an obvious attack on the new society or its leaders, but rather a seemingly innocuous biographical film.

The Life of Wu Xun depicts the struggles and achievements of nineteenth-century Qing Dynasty philanthropist and educational reformer Wu Xun (1838 - 1896), a self-made man who founded and funded free schools for children too poor to afford traditional schooling.[10] Wu was born into a poor family and was himself one of those children when he was young, but he eventually assembled enough of a fortune to help the poor living in his area. In the film he accomplishes this both by both begging and by working indefatigably, manically at times, driven by his determination to establish free schools (*gao yixue*). The phrase is repeated endlessly throughout the film, on its own or as part of rhymes Wu Xun sings to himself while he is working or begging, as if it functions for him as a kind of mantra. His is a single-minded determination to help poor children receive the education that he did not, so that they may avoid the abuse, exploitation, and humiliation he suffers in the film; and likewise the film is single-minded in its portrayal of this aspect of Wu Xun's

[10] As of May 2022 the entire film is available, with Chinese subtitles, on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEj44Ki-LOE

story. From the very beginning of the film, in the early scenes of the young Wu Xun with his mother, literacy and education are the dominant themes, and the family's poverty and mistreatment at the hands of wealthier people is explicitly linked to their lack of education. Repeatedly it is made clear that he is being taken advantage of not only because he is by nature kind and trusting but because he cannot read. "Only education can keep you from being taken advantage of. Only education makes life better," Wu's mother tells him, a few scenes before dying and leaving him orphaned. The naive child visits a school with money he has collected from begging and asks to be admitted, only to be robbed and mocked before being roughly ejected. So end his efforts to secure an education for himself, though it is not until later in the film after being repeatedly abused and cheated because he cannot read that he makes it his life work to establish free schools for others. After begging and working for decades and slowly saving money, Wu, still in beggar's rags, finally has enough to fund the construction of a school, which he does with the assistance of the local gentry.

Wu Xun had come to public attention largely through the work of Republican-era educational reformer Tao Xingzhi, a US educated disciple of Dewey who returned to China and ultimately devoted himself to promoting rural education and literacy by both formal and informal means. He also became a leading ambassador of the "spirit of Wu Xun," which Suzanne Pepper describes as "a willingness to strive, against overwhelming odds, to promote the cause of education for those in humble

circumstances."[11] Tao himself came from a rural, though not impoverished, family, and after his return from the US "reported a reawakening to his own peasant roots," a transformation that may have intensified his fondness for Wu Xun.[12] Tao was also directly responsible for inspiring the film by presenting its director Sun Yu with a copy of *The Illustrated Life of Wu Xun (Wu Xun xiansheng huazhuan)*[13], a book authored and first published in 1938 by military officer turned philanthropist Duan Chengze[14] and subsequently kept in print by Tao. The *Illustrated Life* tells Wu's story in 103 brief vignettes written in simple vernacular language, each accompanied by an ink drawing. The film follows the book fairly closely in terms of narrative, themes (characterization) and even visual style.[15] In the book as in the film Wu Xun is

---

[11] Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism and Educational Reform in 20th Century China: The Search for an Ideal Development Model,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 167.

[12] Hubert O. Brown, "Tao Xingzhi: Progressive Educator in Republican China" *Biography* 13, no. 1 (1990): 33.

[13] Xiao, "*Xin shidai,*" 26. An article titled *Yizhang lixiang de jiaoyu pian* [An ideal educational film] in *Yingyi* magazine [Film Arts] (vol 4, 1949), p. 3 notes the inadequacies and limitations of the previous attempt to film Wu Xun's life in 1944 and looks forward to the meticulously researched new version, which will be the "ideal educational film," also the title of the article. Part of what would set this film apart, according to the article, was its grounding in history, or at least in historical documents. But this would later be exposed as a weakness: this is what history looks like when it gets made according to historical documents.

[14] For a brief biography see Duan's entry on Baidu at https://baike.baidu.com/item/段承泽/7538348

[15] As of May 2022 scanned images of the entire book are available online at https://www.sohu.com/a/325017529_99991909

depicted as a pure-hearted innocent who is repeatedly taken advantage of but never forsakes his optimism or his determination to help poor children avoid his fate. He is also tireless in pursuit of this goal and willing to do anything to earn money, whether laboring or begging/performing.

The People's Daily Critique

"Wu Hsun (1838-96), born in Tangyi, Shantung Province, was originally a vagrant. Using the slogan of 'schools through alms', he went about cheating people out of their money, bought land and lent money and eventually became a big landlord and usurer. He ganged up with despotic landlords to set up a few so-called "tuition-free schools", in which he fanatically spread feudal culture and trained lackeys for the exploiting class, thus winning praise from reactionary rulers of successive regimes."

(Biographical footnote to Mao's "Pay Serious Attention")

The primary objections to the film are summarized in the People's Daily editorial, later revealed to have been written by Mao himself and printed in the English version of his *Selected Works* under the English title "Pay Serious Attention to the Discussion of the Film *The Life of Wu Hsun.*"[16] The editorial paints a very different picture of the simple, hardworking hero portrayed in the film. Instead, Wu is depicted as a conservative progressive whose charity shores up feudal domination and

---

[16] The objections appear in even more compact form in the biographical footnote that opens this section. See Mao Zedong, "Pay Serious Attention to the Discussion of the Film The Life of Wu Hsun," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 57 - 58.

ultimately does more harm than good, not least by distracting him from the much more urgent class and national struggles already underway:

> A fellow like Wu Hsun, living as he did towards the end of the Ching Dynasty in an era of great struggle by the Chinese people against foreign aggressors and domestic reactionary feudal rulers, did not lift a finger against the feudal economic base or its superstructure; on the contrary, he strove fanatically to spread feudal culture and, in order to gain a position for this purpose previously beyond his reach, he fawned in every way on the reactionary feudal rulers — ought we to praise such disgusting behavior?[17]

Wu's fanatical devotion to free education for the poor is also, unknowingly for him but obviously for anyone schooled in historical materialism, a fanatical striving to spread feudal culture. During the film he seems to take no interest in the content of the education he's seeking to make possible. He fails to make the connection that Mao has made: feudal schools spread feudal culture, and poor children sent to these schools will absorb it, i.e. that education has class content, both in its organization (its form, hierarchies, privileging of certain styles of instruction and media) and in the content of its knowledge and themes (subjects of study). The great task of Wu's generation, says Mao, was struggle against the Qing, and in the film Wu is quite

---

[17] Mao, "Pay Serious Attention," 57.

explicitly given the opportunity to struggle directly against the Qing, as he is repeatedly invited to join a group of Taiping rebels led by a friend and fellow laborer Zhou Da; but he chooses instead to beg and work within the feudal socio-economic system, in order to give poor children the opportunity to more fully integrate themselves into this system.

The first of the three rhetorical questions that struck Yuan Ying as excessive, "Ought we to praise such disgusting behavior?" refers to Wu Xun's support for feudal culture and subservience to feudal power holders. Yet the film itself blunts the force of this hyperbole. "Disgusting" (*chou'e*) is a descriptor that comes to mind naturally for other aspects of the film — the abuse suffered by Wu and the other laborers, the conditions in which they are made to live — all of which serve to further ennoble Wu Xun by contrast. Using it to describe one of the less obviously disgusting aspects of a movie full of disgusting behavior and events creates an equivalence that is difficult to sustain, and one that exemplifies the nature of the challenges facing anyone who would disparage Wu Xun. Is his fawning and flattery and uncritical embrace of feudal education as disgusting as the oppression against which he undoubtedly struggles? Naturally the film is heavy on scenes of Wu Xun suffering and caring for others and very light on scenes of his maneuvering within and on behalf of the feudal order. But even explicit depictions of such actions would be ambiguous at best. There is no excuse for the exploitation and brutality depicted in the film; but there are excuses for Wu Xun's collaboration with the feudal economic and/or political ruling class, namely

the nobility of his goal — education for poor children — one that the CPC shared.[18] Mao would denigrate his goal and condemn his collaboration with the enemy. But how does a thoroughly pragmatic party as compromised by collaboration as the CPC was make this argument convincingly?[19] In attempting to essentially reverse the verdict on Wu Xun, Mao is up against not only a seemingly admirable historical figure but a filmic depiction — evocative images, dramatic vignettes, abstract values and ideals (courage, charity, persistence) embodied on screen — that are difficult to nullify with argument.

---

[18] On rural literacy work in the early PRC see Di Luo, "Learning the New Culture: Rural Literacy Education in Shanxi in the 1930s and 1940s" in *The Routledge Handbook of Revolutionary China,* ed. Alan Baumler (London: Routledge, 2020), 185 - 201. Luo clarifies a key difference between traditional literacy education, of the kind pursued by Wu Xun, and the communists aims: "While scholars committed to making people literate by mastering certain numbers of characters, local cadres and villagers in wartime Shanxi were not much bothered by the question of what counted as literate. Instead, to local cadres, it was more important to teach villagers how to conceptualize the world through reading written texts, to exercise this worldview orally in conversations and to reproduce it in writing to a certain extent. To villagers, mastery of the vocabulary sanctioned by political authorities, either verbally, visually in reading or in writing, helped them communicate their requests in a legitimate way. Literacy learning provided a meeting ground for the local cadres and villagers to negotiate their relations."

For a discussion of literacy work in the context of The *Talks* and their legacy see Robert J. Irving. "Implementation of Mao Zedong's Yan'an "Talks" in the *Subei* Base Area – The Chen Dengke Phenomenon", *Asian Studies Review*, (40:3), 360-376.

[19] I hope my analysis will show that it doesn't. For an overview of the compromises in effect at the time — collaboration with so-called "national bourgeoisie" and local elites in occupied regions among other things — see the chapter "New Democracy and the Making of New China (1949 - 1952)," in Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949 - 1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). From one perspective, "New Democracy" is little more than a euphemism for compromise.

For Mao it is a question of sustaining or breaking with feudal society, of preserving the old or insisting on the new, and the terms in which Mao diagnoses the theoretical problems underlying the incorrect assessment of Wu Xun are unequivocal: "In the view of many writers, history proceeds not by the new superseding the old, but by preserving the old from extinction through all kinds of exertion."[20] This is unacceptable because in New China the new has superseded the old, progress has been made, and it is the job of China's many intellectual workers — including academic historians and historiographers of other types as well as writers of historical fiction — to make clear this supersession and not, instead, to show or tell about the preservation of the old. In this most undialectical logic, the preservation of the old works against the superseding of the old, a claim grounded in an opposition between new and old. This is Mao philosophizing with a hammer, a Mao somewhat at odds with the patient dialectician of *On Contradiction* and *On the Handling of Contradictions within the People.* Here the words themselves are doing the work: the commonsensical material distinction between 'new' things and 'old' things is carried over into the realm of social relations and the old is assumed to be something that can or must be discarded when the new has arrived. There is no acknowledgement here that 'new' (*xin shiwu*) and 'old' (*jiu shiwu*) as applied to social 'things' are vague and difficult to distinguish, and particularly so during the 1950s, a time of upheaval and

---

[20] Mao, "Pay Serious Attention," 58.

reversal[21] when campaigns and policy initiatives proclaimed changes that would only be realized gradually if at all.

How then are we to know the new from the old? Mao goes on to explain more explicitly, in class terms. For these "many," history proceeds "not by waging class struggle to overthrow the reactionary feudal rulers who ought to be overthrown, but by negating the class struggle of the oppressed and submitting to these rulers in the manner of Wu Hsun."[22] In this translation into the discourse of class, the new supersedes the old via class struggle of the oppressed against the rulers; while the preservation of the old occurs via the negating of class struggle and submission to the feudal regime. It would appear that the original opposition is merely restated in class language, with "old" mapped to feudal-era rulers and "new" to oppressed. The new society established to serve the oppressed has claim to the present and future, just as the feudal ruling class laid claim to the past.

Yet this mapping is vague, and it disavows the many ways that new and old interpenetrate. It is and will continue to be problematic; so much so that the debates surrounding the reappraisal of historical figures running through the 1950s and up to Hai Rui can be read as an unspooling of the problems it generates, an attempt to untangle or at least discern new from old. Among the questions that themselves

---

[21] cf. the many compounds using *fan* (to turn over, topple, reverse) used in writing from and about this era: *tuifan* (to topple a system, regime), *fan'an* (to reverse a verdict) etc.

[22] Mao, "Pay Serious Attention," 58.

become tangled up with this attempt: Is there anything worthy of admiration or emulation in the life a figure such as Wu Xun? Are there areas of overlap between the old, Confucian and feudal value system and the new socialist one? Are there old values, virtues, or admirable behaviors that should be preserved? Is there such a thing as class-independent morality? Is support for a reactionary regime ever excusable or necessary? Should historical fiction — an explicit making new of the old — measure itself against old texts (for historical accuracy)? or new (for Marxist-Maoist theoretical correctness)? In all of these examples new and old refuse to come into focus, and the words themselves seem inadequate to the challenges at hand.

If Mao claims that new and old can be easily distinguished, and that the only options are class struggle or the negation of class struggle, then the film suggests otherwise. Wu is of the lowest social class, an outcast. So he is not of the class for whom the New China was made - the workers, soldiers, peasants, the productive classes. In this sense his entire life is class struggle, the struggle to enter one of the officially recognized classes. The class that he sees himself a part of is not one of the recognized Marxist classes, but only "the poor," and his struggle is explicitly framed as a struggle for recognition: "poor people are people too", he says (*qiongren yiyang shi ren*). In this sense his struggle is prior to class struggle: to be recognized as human. The importance of recognition extends to the theoretical issues raised in the debate surrounding the film, during which Wu will be classified not as a member of the working class but as a "vagrant" (*liumang*), someone outside the class system

proper. Marxist terminology - class discourse - would seem to be inapplicable here, but to the detriment of the discourse, not the film or its hero. Such questions of revolutionary subjectivity will be discussed in more detail below.

Yet in many ways the film seems to invite the criticisms made by Mao. It is a shamelessly tendentious glorification of Wu Xun, who is depicted as wholly altruistic and morally pure, childlike into his old age. A running reminder of this is Wu's *budaoweng*, a conical rag doll weighted at the bottom and therefore impossible to topple. He is shown with such a doll throughout the film, first with his mother as a child and at various points thereafter. It serves to link Wu both to childhood and to his childlike refusal to give up in the face of adversity, and to emphasize that his story, and his struggle, is a personal, moral struggle: to help poor children regardless of the setbacks and opposition he must confront. And where the editorial attacks, the film evades: it shows only his begging and labor and his ultimate charity work, skipping the landlord/financier phase in which his wealth accumulation accelerates. The film is forced to evade, and it does this plainly, mechanically: by not showing the things that might be offensive.

On Contradiction

In *On Contradiction* (1937) Mao had warned that internal contradictions are not only unavoidable but ontologically necessary (in the sense of being characteristic

of a "thing" in the broadest sense), so careful readers of Mao should not perhaps be too surprised to find division where none was previously suspected. "There is internal contradiction in every single thing (*renhe shiwu*), hence its motion and development."[23] Contradiction itself then is not a problem, since "contradictoriness within a thing is the fundamental cause of its development, while its interrelations and interactions with other things are secondary causes."[24] This claim grounds the ensuing distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic social contradictions, the former existing between the people and its other (the enemies of the people) and the latter existing within the people and presumably the very source of its development (*fazhan*), a word as vague in the original as it is in translation). These non-antagonistic contradictions drive development and thus must be handled in a way that "gives the comrades who have committed errors ample opportunity to wake up. This being the case, excessive struggle is obviously inappropriate."[25] What Yuan notices in the editorial is precisely the apparent excess of struggle surrounding Wu Xun, making it unlikely to be a matter of non-antagonistic contradiction.

For Mao contradiction is both necessary and problematic; and since contradictions do not go away not going away it is important to classify them first before determining how to deal with them. The following hypothesis may help us

---

[23] Mao Zedong, "On Contradiction," in *On Practice and Contradiction*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso, 2007), 69.

[24] Mao, "On Contradiction," 69.

[25] Mao, "On Contradiction," 100.

understand how discourse is changing during this period: in the Maoist or leftist discourse that would dominate the Cultural Revolution, all antagonistic contradiction is class contradiction. This is not a claim I will try to prove, more of a lens that brings certain things into focus. What does it mean if taken seriously? This evolving discourse, which originated in the Yan'an rectifications and would become widespread during the Cultural Revolution, is class discourse taken to its extreme. Over the course of the 17 years in China class gets into everything. Many of the debates leading up to the Cultural Revolution, including those examined here and below, were of this form, with conscientious intellectuals on both sides debating whether or not class struggle permeates every aspect of human existence. Moreover, class gets into things in ways that cannot be predicted in advance, that cannot be reduced to algorithm.[26] Mao goes a long way towards substantiating our hypothesis in *On Contradiction:* "As already mentioned," he says, "so long as classes exist, contradictions between correct and incorrect ideas in the Communist Party are reflections within the Party of class contradictions."[27] If correct and incorrect ideas within the party, the arbiter of correctness, are reflections of class contradictions, then

---

[26] The model here is psychoanalysis, in which every analytic situation is absolutely unique and insights develop slowly via dialogue over months and years. Freud et al. have given us concepts, frameworks and the like but no step by step method in the scientific sense (not that the scientific method is all that methodical, if you talk to scientists). I like this formulation because it provides no shelter: class does get into everything, but figuring out how can be devilishly difficult, and the answer isn't always what you (or Marx, or Mao) want it to be.

[27] Mao, "On Contradiction," 100.

all other matters of right and wrong are as well. Good and bad classes map directly onto right and wrong, and by extension to the distinction between the people and the enemies of the people. And in the rather loose associative logic at work in this discourse, it is only a short step from 'every antagonistic contradiction is class based' to 'every class based contradiction is antagonistic.' An ambiguous border case like Wu Xun's is exactly where we could expect this latter claim to be applied, by way of clarification. The need for clarification, and the confusion it presupposes, suggests that even so politically aware an observer as an editor at *The Liberation Daily* may have never considered the possibility of such a division.[28]

The Wu Xun campaign represents a break, a jolt, something new: a forceful and very public intervention by central authorities aimed not only at shaping popular culture but at correcting a deviation, and as such suggestive of a heretofore unnoticed rift within the new 'us.' In such situations, paradoxically, the specificity of the event can recede, even if only temporarily, in the face of the opening up or stirring up of possibilities — be they disquieting, comforting, incomprehensible — arising from the "eventfulness" of the event rather than its substance, i.e. "not what happens, not why

---

[28] Campaigns calling into question the integrity or loyalty of party members wouldn't have begun in 1951, and likely not until the Anti-Rightist campaign that began in 1956 in the wake of the 100 Flowers movement would such a thing become familiar enough to no longer elicit surprise. See Tsai Wen-hui, "Mass Mobilization Campaigns in Mao's China," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 21-48.

it happens, but that it happens, and what does 'happening' mean".[29] Of course there were any number of unexpected things to occur during the period under consideration, the 17 years between 1949 and 1966. Nor was this event of paramount importance; it was one among many, but like all of them, still unique and consequential.[30] I draw attention to this particular historical occurrence as "event" for two reasons: first to single it out (or just keep it from getting lost) among the many other events, reversals, campaigns, and conflicts of all types during a very eventful 17 years; and second because a very similar event would reoccur, symmetrically as it were, at the very end of the period, one that will directly hasten this end. The Wu Xun affair is an event with a double, and the Hai Rui affair beginning in late 1965 an objective case of deja vu. Making this connection between what are in some ways very dissimilar happenings, choosing to understand these occurrences as a case of repetition, focuses our attention on what was similar — the surprising and ominous newspaper article, the disagreement surrounding the moral/political assessment of a

---

[29] François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 1.

[30] i.e. "A pure and simple return to a previous situation was no longer possible." Russo's characterization of the 'event nature' of the January Storm in Shanghai characterizes all events: "With all these paradoxes, and above all the insurmountable difficulty of setting it within an acquired conceptual framework, the January Storm was a crucial turning point in the changes looming before the contemporary Chinese state. In the following years, any effort at reorganization could not avoid dealing with the true root causes of that event. A pure and simple return to a previous situation was no longer possible." See Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 251.

historical figure, the centrality of a historical drama — and allows us to define and understand the first event retrospectively with respect to the second, and both in relation to one another. Alternatively, it also invites us to think of these two events as merely two moments of a single event; that is, to indulge (for better or worse) our compulsion to periodize and to think of the 17 years in China, those years in which socialism was both a reality and a possibility, as somehow bounded by this repetitive, insistent event; or as characterized by the repeated failure to clear up, both theoretically and practically, the problems brought to light during the struggles against these historical dramas and the ghosts of their protagonists.

Thinking in a more abstract way about the campaign against Wu Xun as a rupture or event, and about events in general, is also a way of estranging or disrupting narratives that become restrictively familiar, and of enriching our understanding of this period by taking into account the reactions of more or less ordinary people — trying to imagine these events from the point of view of someone living through it, linking them to ordinary concerns. This in turn pushes back against power struggles as an explanatory framework. These struggles were often far removed from everyday life;[31] and even when they weren't, they were mixed with other more familiar problems, or phrased in more familiar terms, e.g. the moral assessment of familiar

---

[31] Oral histories from the early PRC reveal just how different political campaigns looked from the point of view of ordinary citizens busy with day to day life. See for example Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*: *Rural Women and China's Collective Past,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

historical figures. This suggests a use of history as a reserve of tools for thinking with, thinking in terms of. In this case a representation of the past, in the form of a biographical film, revealed an unexpected disagreement within the leadership and within society, over whether or not Wu Xun, and by extension other similar feudal era philanthropists and self-made men, are worthy or admiration and emulation.

If nothing else, thinking in terms of events reminds us that the experience of an event, of its eventfulness, is part of the event. In this case what I'm attentive to is a rupture that is moral in nature: the feeling of the moral system shifting, via an attack on the past, an enemy that can't defend itself. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici asks in her study of events, "What does it mean to be taken by surprise? Perceptual, cognitive, and causal disjunctures characterize the movement from ground to rupture. How, then, do we capture historical agents' and analysts' experiences of ruptures that become events — in real time?"[32] Yuan Ying gives us a vivid, visceral even, account of the rupture occasioned by Mao's attack on Wu Xun, its effect on his body and mind and his sense of socio-political orientation.

History of the Film

---

[32] Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *What is an Event?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 63.

In many senses the film would seem to already be compliant with the principles of Yan'an *Talks*, as discussed in the previous chapter: it is after all very much a film about the masses, made for their consumption and edification. Yet it also reveals some of the dangers hidden within Mao's invitation to artists to "submerge themselves in the ordinary life of the countryside." This ordinary life included not only recognized and organized workers but other ordinary people like Wu Xun who were undisciplined by an organized work life and prone to wild ideas. The problems with this "social stratum" of *liudong renkou* "floating populace" or vagrants, will be discussed below.

In his book *Chinese Cinema* Paul Clark devotes a chapter to the earliest CPC involvement with film, beginning in Yan'an in the 1930s and shifting after 1949 to Shanghai, which had historically been the seat of mainland China's film industry.[33] The initial work of establishing organizations and policies to govern the industry were still very much under way during the production and release of *The Life of Wu Xun*, including the establishment of the national Film Workers Association in 1949 and

---

[33] For an overview of the transition from private to nationalized film industry, see chapter 1 "From The Life of Wu Xun to the Career of Song Jingshi: Adapting Private Studio Filmmaking Legacy for a Nationalized Cinema, 1951–1957," in Wang Zhouyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951 - 1979* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2014), 25 - 44. The CCP realized early on the value of film as a propaganda tool but also the know-how necessary to make effective film, and hence the need to deal carefully with the technicians who made them. see also Wang's Introduction, p 8ff.

regulations for licensing and approval of films in 1950.[34] Private studios continued to exist through 1953, and western, including American, films were still being shown at cinemas, though they were gradually being replaced with dubbed versions of films from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.[35] Clark surmises that at the time Shanghai's filmmakers "had little direct experience with the Communist Party,"[36] and tells the story of *The Life of Wu Xun* and its aftermath as the inevitable conflict between "the Yan'an outlook and the Shanghai heritage." In other words it was part of the process of (re)educating bourgeois artists about the new demands of the new era, or, in spatiotemporal terms, of both passing on (inheriting) temporally and disseminating spatially the lessons of the Yan'an *Talks*. Xiao Jin, for example, in "*Rewriting Old Stories: Reconsidering The Life of Wu Xun and its Criticism*[37] reads *The Life of Wu Xun* as a transitional (*guodu fengge*) film in more ways than one — temporally, ideologically, and spatially as well: not only because of production took place from 1948 - 1951, but also because it reflects the persistence, in New China, of artistic sensibilities prevalent in the old Nationalist controlled areas ("Free China"). Such work was characterized, for Xiao, by lack of familiarity or only a superficial familiarity with the Yan'an *Talks*. This narrative is echoed by other scholars both

---

[34] Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 34.

[35] Clark, *Chinese* Cinema, 40 - 42.

[36] Clark, *Chinese Cinema,* 35.

[37] Xiao, "*Xin shidai,*" 26.

inside and outside of China.[38] In addition, along with the ideological motivations for criticism of the film there were also more practical ones. He and Wang in "From Wu Xun to Lu Xun"[39] (2021) suggest that the campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun* had largely economic rather than political aims, i.e. it was an excuse to nationalize Shanghai's film industry, which was still largely private at the time. This is why criticism and punishment was directed at the critics praising the film rather than the film industry workers who created the film and who would be needed to create more. The experts were not yet red enough and the reds not expert enough to keep the film industry relevant, so accommodation was needed. As Xia Yan put it succinctly in his memoirs: "People who understood peasants, workers and soldiers couldn't write screenplays; and people who could write screenplays didn't understand peasants, workers and soldiers."[40] The prehistory of the film is discussed below, including the writer-director's reservations about the film and his discussions with party officials. Economic motivations, however, seem unlikely, given the impact that the campaign

---

[38] see for example Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism*, 165, where the campaign to criticize Wu Xun is described as nothing less than a sort of Yan'an bootcamp for intellectuals from former KMT controlled areas. Xiao is explicit about the conjoined spatial, temporal and ideological aspects of the situation: artists from the former g*uo tong qu* (Free China) not yet fully schooled in the lessons of the Yan'an *Talks* were still "using old artistic sensibilities to deal with a new ideological situation," 26. See also Pang Laikwan in "Between Will and Negotiation," 482: "This incident indicated that Mao was determined to shape up the cultural elites before a new socialist culture, as he believed, could come into being."

[39] He Qiliang and Wang Meng, "From Wu Xun to Lu Xun: Film, Stardom, and Subjectivity in Mao's China (1949–1976)", *Modern China*. April 2021: 6.

[40] Xia Yan, cited in Xiao, "*Xin shidai,*" 27.

had on production. It was, after all, only in the wake of the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956 that the number of films released annually in the PRC returned to the level of 1950. As one commentator put it, the campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun* "sent chills through the film world" and put filmmakers off "sensitive imperial-era topics."[41]

Work on the script began in 1944 and filming began in Nanjing in July of 1948. By November of that year, with filming 1/3 complete, money ran out and the rights and exposed film were purchased by Shanghai based Kunlun Studios. Even during production potential objections to the film weren't unanticipated. After experimenting with stricter censorship in areas under their control, the CPC had formally decided in 1948 on a policy of political leniency with respect to films, "on the assumption that exerting harsh control over socialist filmmaking would give old and harmful films room to succeed in the market."[42] The Party adopted what was in effect a negative approach to film approval, allowing any films as long as they were not explicitly anti-socialist. This resulted in relatively lax official (administrative, bureaucratic) censorship, with all the attendant possibilities and pitfalls.[43] In its place,

---

[41] Paul Picowicz, *China on Film: a Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*, (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2012), 197.

[42] "as long as they are not harmful to our propaganda, and have artistic values;" Pang, "Between Will and Negotiation," 479.

[43] Pang, "Between Will and Negotiation," 480. Pang emphasizes the continuity with the GMD era. "Although left-wing filmmakers and critics applauded the dawn of the new age in 1949 and urged that a brand-new film policy replace GMD oppressing censorship, in reality nothing drastically different was introduced legally."

however, arose what Pang calls "a national but evanescent ideological apparatus"[44] relying on informal relationships meant to encourage self-censorship among film industry workers. Given the uncertainties, after the relocation to Shanghai there were concerns among those involved that the film and its gentle hard-working hero would be out of step with the revolutionary spirit of the times. In July 1949 at the First National Literature and Arts Conference, the director Sun Yu spoke with Zhou Enlai and others about his doubts concerning the movie, noting that the "individualistic, tragic resistance" depicted in the film clashed with the revolutionary fervor of a newly liberated China, and that perhaps filming should not be resumed.[45] Sun recalls that the discussion with Zhou were brief and equivocal,[46] but apparently not discouraging. The director nevertheless again considered calling off the shoot and decided to proceed only after revising the script based on suggestions from Shanghai's arts authorities and being assured that the results would be acceptable.[47] The film was completed in 1950 and on its release it was roundly praised, and even selected as one of the top ten films of the year by *Dazhong Dianying* magazine. Mao's article in May of 1951 reversed this assessment, and the ensuing movement to rectify the film

---

[44] Pang, "Between Will and Negotiation," 480.

[45] Yin Hong and Ling Yan, *Xin Zhongguo dianying shi* [A History of Chinese Cinema: 1949-2000] (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2002), 11.

[46] Yin and Ling, *Xin Zhongguo*, 16.

[47] Sun Yu, "*Wo biandao dianying Wuxun Zhuan de jingguo"* [My experiences writing and directing *The Life of Wu Xun*] *Wu Han Wenshi Ziliao*, vol. 4 (2011): 14 - 20.

industry brought an end to the flourishing film industry of the earliest years of the PRC, as "people in the industry started worrying about their lack of political awareness, while at the same time political oversight of the industry tightened."[48] Whatever the reason for the attack on the film, it altered the course of cultural production and debate for years to come. The shock Yuan Ying felt in 1951 is confirmed in retrospect by film historians Yin Hong and Ling Yan:

> Of course during this period the biggest shock to the film world was the criticism of the film *The Life of Wu Xun* (directed by Sun Yan for Kun Lun Studios) written by the highest ranking member of the CCP. This film review was developed directly into a huge political campaign. This method of denouncing a movie in order to make political struggle was retained and expanded in subsequent years, and its impact on the development of Chinese film was far-reaching.[49]

The Life of Wu Xun was among the last mainland Chinese films that was a product of the old society not only organizationally (i.e. of a private studio) but, if its critics are to be believed, ideologically as well. Whether or not the director can be blamed for creating bourgeois art in disguise, the film occupies a unique transitional

---

[48] Yin and Ling, *Xin Zhongguo,* 12.

[49] Yin Hong and Ling Yan, *Xin Zhongguo,* 11.

role, in part due to the criticism it attracted. Yet the film began responding to this criticism even before it came into being as a film, during the earliest stages of production. Our primary source here is an article written by the film's director Sun Yu and published in 1995, titled "My Experiences Writing and Directing *The Life of Wu Xun.*" Sun depicts the entire creative and production process — his internal as well as external struggles — with an equanimity very unlike the shock registered by Yuan at the outbreak of the campaign. I make no claims about the accuracy of his account, but note that it does reflect a censorship apparatus that was relatively unobtrusive and consensual rather than coercive, as described above. The very different tone coloring Sun's remembrance creates a very different view of this event. As Pang mentions, Sun himself was treated with leniency during and after the campaign against the film, which targeted critics rather than industry personnel. He was even warned well in advance about the coming criticisms and invited to discuss them with the Party leadership.[50]

Sun's doubts about the film began, he says, after the aforementioned conference at which he informed Zhou Enlai about his intention to film Wu Xun's story. The conversation, such as it was, took place at a busy conference and Zhou's only response before turning his attention to one of the many other people trying to speak with him was that he'd heard that Wu Xun had opened three free schools, but

---

[50] Pang, "Between Will and Negotiation," 482.

that subsequently all three had been taken over by landlords.[51] This ambivalence was enough to make Sun question himself and his film, and he and his colleagues returned to Shanghai "with a giant question floating in our heads: what was Wu Xun really like?"[52] At subsequent discussions within the studio it was pointed out that establishing free schools was good, but it was not the equivalent of seizing political power, and this needed to be emphasized in the film. It was even suggested that the intentions of the filmmakers should be singled by renaming the film *A Critical Biography of Wu Xun.*[53] The script was revised to make Wu Xun into a tragic character, struggling in vain against the ruling class determination not to let poor children be educated. Nonetheless Sun was no less determined to show his admiration for Wu's persistence in his struggle. The new script was discussed with 3 officials from the Shanghai Film Industry Management Office (*Shanghai dianying shiye guanli chu*), all of whom still had reservations.[54] One of them thought that the film's themes were too far removed from the current reality to be relevant. The CPC had already created widespread opportunities for the poor of all ages to receive an education, and the people had responded enthusiastically; so why go on about failed

---

[51] Sun, "*Wo biandao,*" 16.

[52] Sun's phrasing of this question "*Wu Xun qiren qishi zenyang*" echoes the title of the report on Jiang Qing et al.'s investigation into Wu Xun, titled *Wu Xun qiren qishi*.

[53] Sun, "*Wo biandao,*" 17.

[54] Sun, "*Wo biandao,*" 17. One of these was Xia Yan, who would later publish a self-criticism during the subsequent campaign against the film.

attempts to do so during the Qing, and during the Taiping uprising no less? But Wu's persistence and sacrifices in the cause of rural education were still deemed to be admirable and inspirational, so production proceeded. It was decided that the story's relevance for the present be made explicit by framing Wu Xun's story with scenes from a present day ceremony in his honor held in his native Shandong, and adding the character of a young cadre who explains both why Wu Xun is deserving of admiration and how his efforts to educate the poor could only be brought to completion by the CPC's political revolution.

Aside from this framing within the present, the other major point of discussion was the character Zhou Da, the co-worker and friend of Wu Xun who goes on to become leader of a band of Taiping rebels. Like Wu, Zhou is compassionate and passionate and single-minded in pursuit of his goals; but in every other way he is Wu's opposite, his alter ego. Zhou is physically powerful and prone to (righteous) rage rather than meekness and humility. He abuses his abusers and leaves the city for the countryside to fight with the Taiping. If the cadre schoolteacher and her commentary attempt to situate Wu's "person and acts" (*qiren qishi*) historically, to see him in context and from the outside, then his relationship with Zhou is a dramatized depiction of what might or should be going on within, his psychological/moral struggles and failings.[55] Zhou's subplot was intended as a parallel and complement to

---

[55] Sun speaks of attempting during rewrites to "explore his inner world;" Sun, "*Wo biandao,*" 19.

Wu's, the *wu* (here referring to military struggle) to Wu's *wen* (referring to writing and culture). "You *wu* and I'll *wen*" Wu says after one of his talks with Zhou, making the film's dual allegiances as explicit as possible.

Wu's struggle concerns not necessarily whether or not to join Zhou Da, something that is never presented as a real possibility given the way he has been depicted — gentle, childlike, kind. Indeed this depiction wards off any possibility that Wu might be an effective warrior, and insists, on the contrary, that different people are suited for different forms of activism (to use a contemporary term for it). The film dramatizes a psychological model and gives us two opposing types suited for the two poles of revolutionary praxis, implying that Zhou's obvious talents at the *wu* side of things are matched by Wu's on the *wen* side.[56]Yet according to the logic of the Mao's critique of the film it is at best an imbalanced analogy, deceptive since Zhou's struggle is revolutionary in both form and content, whereas education often inculcates resistance to change.

"A strong blast of Yan'an inspired Party condemnation"[57]

---

[56] It also dramatizes Liu Shaoqi's internal class struggle model of morality as set forth in his *How to be a Good Communist*. See Liu Shaoqi, *Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi*, vol. 1, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1984), 107 - 168.

[57] Clark, *Chinese Cinema,* 38.

"Why do we still need to still need to criticize Wu Xun today?", some might have wondered in 1951 in response to the publication of Mao's editorial. Ten answers, or one ten-part answer, are given in an article titled "Why We Still Need to Criticize Wu Xun Today,"[58] published in 1951 during the campaign against the film by Lin Handa. Lin's list of ten parallel claims — "We criticize Wu Xun, because…" — begins with the claim that contains all the others, namely "… because that capitulationist Wu Xun hasn't died, he still lives among us, continuing to make mischief (*zuoguai*), corrupt our spirit, and weaken our revolutionary resolve."[59] Those who would accept foreign assistance developing education, healthcare, or the economy, even if it means working with the enemy (point 2), or who think that education is for the benefit of the individual (point 6) are modern day Wu Xun's living among us, disguised not in beggar's rags but "wearing the hat of Mao Zedong thought" (point 10). That Wu Xun lives among us today in spirit is an accusation the film walks right into by both beginning and ending with images of the embodied spirit of Wu Xun looking down from the skies, smiling on the modern day (mid-20th c.) people's republic, set to lush and sentimental orchestral music.[60] The question

---

[58] Lin Handa, *Weishenme jintian haiyao piping wuxun* [Why we still need to criticize Wu Xun today], *Renmin Jiaoyu*, no. 7 (1951): 27.

[59] Lin, *Weishenme*, 27.

[60] Even the film's soundtrack would come under criticism for helping to glorify Wu Xun and not doing enough to glorify Zhou Da and the Taiping rebels. See He Shide, "*Dianying wuxun zhuan de yinyue tongyang yingshou piping* [The music for the film *The life of Wu Xun* should also be criticized], *Renmin Ribao*, July 6, 1951.

raised by this specter, however, is complicated by the film's depiction of its hero. Is it such a bad thing that Wu Xun lives among us still? audiences might have found themselves asking. The answer depends on which Wu Xun is meant, a question at the core of the conflict over the film. It is quite simply a matter of reference: does "Wu Xun" refer to a man passionate about giving poor children access to education? Or to a class traitor passionate about spreading feudal ideals and values? What does this disembodied, and therefore moveable, spirit of Wu Xun represent?

Lin's was one of a great many articles denouncing both Wu Xun and the film of his life that appeared following the publication of Mao's editorial, echoing and/or developing Mao's critique. One of the articles[61] presaging the attack on the film was written by educational and cultural cadre Xu Liqun (writing as Yang Er) and republished in People's Daily the week before Mao's editorial. Titled "Does Tao Xingzhi's Praise of the 'Wu Xun Spirit' have any Positive Value?" [*Tao Xingzhi xiansheng biaoyang Wu Xun jingshen you jiji zuoyong ma?*][62], it questioned the value of Wu Xun's reformism in an age of peasant uprising, albeit in less extreme language

---

[61] for a discussion of how the campaign unfolded in its early stages, including a chronology of what we might call the preparatory publications leading up to Mao's editorial, see Yang Jun, "Guanyu fadong pipan dianyin 'Wu Xun zhuan' yun dong juece guocheng de kaosuo" [On the Policy Considerations Motivating the Campaign to Criticize the Film 'The Life of Wu Xun'] *Ershiyi shiji*, (71) Feb 2008.

[62] Yang Er. "Does Tao Xingzhi's Praise of the 'Wu Xun Spirit' have any Positive Value?" [*Tao Xingzhi xiansheng biaoyang Wu Xun jingshen you jiji zuoyong ma?*]. Renmin Ribao, May 16 1951.

than Mao used, and by extension the wisdom and value of Tao Xingzhi's reformist project as well.

Another article published around the same time and referenced frequently both during the campaign and in more recent scholarship develops a pun on Wu Xun's name to portray a "Wu Xun Not Worthy of Emulation" [*Buzuweixun de Wuxun*].[63] Though not raising any substantially new objections, it does make explicit a claim taken for granted elsewhere, namely that "the meaning and value of *The Life of Wu Xun*, both for history and for the present, depends primarily on the meaning and value of the depiction of the overall character, thoughts and actions of its main character Wu Xun." It is a reasonable, even indisputable claim for its time, or any time; but its assumptions are nonetheless worth briefly unpacking. What it reveals is a common-sense and therefore unspoken approach to film but also more generally to texts and in an even broader sense aesthetic objects, what we might call the tendency to thematize or to extract a content. The form opposed to this content, the aesthetic packaging, is identified during this process of extraction as what is no longer necessary. In this case the film is reduced to "the thoughts and actions of its main character," and discussion of the film can proceed as discussion of the character. It is what I would call allegory, in its original and most basic sense: a speaking about something else.[64] Instead of

---

[63] Ji Jia, "*Buzuweixun de Wu Xun*" [A Wu Xun Not Worthy of Emulation], *Renmin ribao*, May 17, 1951.

[64] cf https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=allegory

speaking about the film we are speaking about its main character; and instead of speaking about this character as depicted in the film we find ourselves speaking about the historical Wu Xun on whom this character is somehow modeled; and instead of speaking about this historical figure we are speaking about his moral character. This is a habit by no means unique to the early PRC or to societies under regimes with totalitarian ambitions. The obviousness of the claim in this instance, its dumb simplicity — of course the portrayal of the main character is the most important thing about a biographical film — makes it even more worth bearing in mind, because it reveals this practice at its most basic, and therefore least apparent. It is important for what follows — both regarding this campaign and further discussions, up through the Hai Rui campaign — because what I characterized above as extraction (of content) is also the ignoring of everything else, this other of content, what is known by the shorthand of literary or aesthetic form. This isolation of Wu from the rest of the film is in turn countered by the film itself, which embeds him in society in a way that emphasizes at every turn his powerlessness and the precarity of his situation. Twice Wu is cheated out of all of his money and has to start again.

Yang Er's article goes on to take up the issue of what can be expected from people who lived in the past, what standards should apply. It is clear that from a Marxist perspective, Wu Xun "took the wrong path," says Yang. Yet the reception of this film suggests that despite this failing, he should still be praised for his "spirit," something apparently detachable from his actions. It was this spirit that early

reviewers of the film found praiseworthy, and on the basis of which they assessed him. "When we evaluate historical figures," says Yang, "we cannot judge them by contemporary standards, but neither can we judge them based on abstract spiritual strengths or weaknesses. The correct historical perspective involves looking at their actions and thoughts and asking whether they work for or against the progress of society, whether they advance the development of productive forces or hinder this advance." Problems seem to arise then when these abstract spiritual categories (values) are removed from their historical setting, as understood here and in other texts from this period, according to the dialectical materialist periodization scheme. In Yang's reductionist ethics, rightness would seem to consist in being an instrument of history. He gives two examples: Mo Zi, he says, is to be admired not just for his selflessness, but because he put this virtue to use in his "war against oppression." The founder of the Tang, Li Shimin, is to be admired not just for his willingness to accept criticism and admit his failings, but because his dynasty "advanced China's social and economic development." By this logic Wu Xun's struggle would have been noble if the Qing at the time could be deemed responsible for advancing productive forces. Yet such a thing could never be the case in a dynasty so obviously in decline, under attack from within as from without.

Countering Incorrect Ideas

Another article published in late May 1951 and written by Xiong Baishi, a professor at the Central Academy for Marxism-Leninism, is typical in its claims and exemplary in its cogency, and gives a clear, stepwise overview of the questions stirred up by Mao's critique. Entitled "On Several Incorrect Ideas about Wu Xun" [*Guanyu Wu Xun de jizhong cuowu guandian*][65] it analyzes four different errors that people are making in their understanding of Wu Xun and of the film, drawing on a report on the actual historical Wu Xun titled "Wu Xun: the Man and his Life" [*Wuxun qiren qishi*] that had been published shortly after Mao's editorial in *The People's Daily.*[66] The first misconception concerns Wu Xun's own class standing and class loyalties. The records published in the *People's Daily* indicate that Wu Xun was not a worker (or peasant, or soldier), at least not as an adult. He was born into a peasant family, but at 21 chose to become a beggar ("a parasite"), after which as he gained wealth he became a "high interest money lender" and finally a large landholder with over 200 mu in

---

[65] Xiong Baishi. "*Guanyu Wu Xun de jizhong cuowu guandian*" [On Several Incorrect Ideas about Wu Xu," *Guangming ribao,* May 31, 1951. 16 - 17.

On Xiong Baishi, professor at the Central Academy for Marxism-Leninism see the Baidu entry at https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%86%8A%E7%99%BD%E6%96%BD/8166467

[66] as Xiao Tianzhi says in *Wu Xun lishi diaocha ji yu xin shixue* [The Historical Investigation on Wu Xun and the new historiography], *Lishi jiaoxue xiaban yuekan*, vol. 10 (1951): 116, limiting discussion to the film alone was "not enough to destroy the fortress of old ways of thinking."

production.[67] He himself is a landlord, his school is established with the help of local gentry, the teachers are degree holders, and the texts studied are the traditional classics. Xiong clearly thinks that Wu's class loyalties lay elsewhere, with the landlords and merchants and moneylenders, and that it was his absolute disconnection from the working class that blinded him to the content of the education he aimed to make available. This is the same accusation Mao leveled at literature and arts workers in Yan'an: you are not among the masses, so you are unable to see the inadequacy for the purposes of revolution of the bourgeois art you are producing. Xiong is countering what he sees as the film's implicit and deceptive claim that "Wu Xun is one of us," i.e. of the (revolutionary) working class. In the film after all he undoubtedly spends his time dressed in rags and surrounded by poverty and the impoverished, and he is certainly shown working hard. He is visually depicted as a worker. But the film is very selective in what it shows, essentially skipping over the period during when Wu Xun lends and invests the money he has saved from begging and labor and accumulates enough wealth to finally fund a school. When the aged and now wealthy Wu Xun appears in the latter part of the film, his portrayal is still as the same half-crazed beggar in rags. The film insists, visually, that wealth has not changed him at all. He is the same indefatigable and indefatigably modest worker, and is shown helping (manually and enthusiastically) with the construction work on the first school

---

[67] "Vagrancy" and the problems it causes for Marxist class typology are discussed below.

and also a few scenes later reluctantly accepting a commendation from the throne. It is a shameless evasion on the point of the film and Xiong is right to challenge it. The implications of this class positioning of Wu Xun, however, are left unexamined.

Xiong, echoing Mao, gives us a Wu Xun who, when of age and given a choice, chose to be parasitical on the working class, first by begging, then by directly exploiting them. The class status of the land-owning, money-lending later Wu Xun is clear; but the class status of beggars and vagrants is complex, something acknowledged even at the time. In "Vagrant as Revolutionary: On Vagrancy and Related Research"[68] He Chengyun surveys CPC thinking on vagrants since the early 20th century in order to understand the bidirectional "drift" (*youdong*) or potential associated with this "social stratum" (*shehui jieceng*): on the one hand their potential for revolutionary mobilization, and on the other for counter-revolutionary reaction. This latter has historically made them easy recruits for criminal gangs involved in "smuggling (salt or more recently opium), gambling, human trafficking, kidnapping etc.," as well as for cults of various kinds, all of which, generally speaking, are no less enemies of the people than of the state, and equally despised by both;[69] except, that is, when one of these anti-social organizations ends up fulfilling a world historical role in weakening or toppling a reactionary regime, as happened in the late Qing with

---

[68] He Chengyun, "*Liudong de gemingxing: lun 20 shiji yilai shehui bianqian zhong de youmin jieceng jiqi yanjiu*" [Vagrant as revolutionary: on vagrancy and related reserarch]," *Shanghai dangshi yu dangjian*, June 2020: 36 - 41.

[69] He, "*Liudong*," 37.

what He calls the "spiritualization" of revolution (*shenshenghua*) under the Taiping and other groups. Shortly after these rebellions however the counterrevolutionary potential of the vagrant stratum was utilized with devastating effectiveness by the KMT against the CPC.[70] Vagrants, without ties to land or a workplace (neither peasant nor worker) are volatile, and only a benefit to society when such volatility can be harnessed for revolutionary ends. *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,* a textbook written by Mao and others in Yan'an in the late 30s, summarizes the situation:

This social stratum is unstable; while some are apt to be bought over by the reactionary forces, others may join the revolution. These people lack constructive qualities and are given to destruction rather than construction; after joining the revolution, they become a source of roving-rebel and anarchist ideology in the revolutionary ranks. Therefore, we should know how to remold them and guard against their destructiveness. [71] He goes on to trace the ever-shifting but always ambivalent discourse on vagrancy up to the 21st century, from a group in need of reform and reeducation, to object of social and political control, to symptom of social disfunction and reminder of the social responsibilities of the privileged. In a family of discourses full of binaries — revolutionary vs. counterrevolutionary, people vs.

---

[70] He, "*Liudong*," 37.

[71] Quoted in He, "*Liudong*," 37. See also https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_23.htm.

enemies of the people, new vs. old, harmony vs. struggle — the *liudong renkou* is unclassifiable and therefore difficult to effectively govern, and Wu Xun is a peculiar case that nonetheless exemplifies this difficulty. He is not at all "given to destruction rather than construction," quite the contrary; and he is "brought over by reactionary forces" not by being recruited into a criminal gang but by himself becoming a landlord and moneylender and philanthropist. Wu is a class shifter for whom vagrancy was a transitional status between peasant and landlord, a trajectory understandably undertheorized in the existing texts.[72] The film emphasizes his life as a beggar while downplaying his time as a landlord and moneylender. But it also shows that begging was both financially and physically safer for Wu Xun because he gets his money directly and can cut out the employer, and because he's spared the physical abuse of his employers henchmen. What the film does show is why Wu Xun would want to be no part of the working class: employment for his kind — desperate and illiterate — was financially precarious and utterly without protection. In the film his "work" is little better than slavery, and the CCP's glorification of work and the working class is undermined here.

If the first of Xiong's misconceptions relates to Wu Xun's class standing, the second, third, and fourth misconceptions relate to the moral assessment of Wu Xun,

---

[72] Wu Xun's vagrancy will also be invoked late in the Cultural Revolution decade as one of many things linking him with Confucius and therefore drawing him into the campaign against Confucius and Lin Biao, one of the very last of Mao's campaigns. See Zeng, "*Shehui zhuyi*," 82.

and can be understood as three increasingly abstract attempts by Wu's supporters to frame his actions as moral; or, from a different angle, as three possible ways of thinking morality and class together. The second is the claim that Wu Xun's noble intentions are praiseworthy regardless of the ultimate impact of his efforts. For Xiong, Wu's shortsightedness — his inability to see that what he was doing was not promoting "universal education" but rather helping educate people to serve the feudal regime — precludes any sympathy for him. Imperialists are also happy to "promote universal education," Xiong reminds us, and have opened schools all over China to educate obedient subjects of imperialism. Wu Xun was doing nothing more than helping "train flunkeys and lackeys." Such are the dangers of attempting to transcend the class viewpoint.

The second misconception concedes the consequences but tries to rescue Wu Xun for the good guys based on his intentions. The third concedes both. Leaving the intentions/consequences debate behind, this point concerns the possibility of abstract moral values independent not only of class but of intention and consequence as well. Some commentators, he points out, are saying that even if Wu Xun's intentions and the outcome of his actions are both questionable, he is still worthy of esteem for his hard work and perseverance, qualities that are obviously necessary in New China as well. Xiong's framing of the problem, as a decoupling of actions from both intentions and consequences, gives us a glimpse of what is at stake within the Marxist-Maoist discourse. Class-independent moral values wreak havoc with crucial distinctions,

"and as a result we are incapable of distinguishing true from false (*shifei*) and friend from enemy."[73] If we acknowledge the existence of class-independent values, Xiong points out, we would even start finding things to like about Chiang Kai-shek, which amounts within Chinese Marxist discourse to an automatic reductio ad absurdum.

The fourth and final misconception relinquishes the possibility of abstract moral values as well, and of finding some positive moral good in Wu Xun at all; rather it would rescue him from demonization: even if there is nothing good about Wu Xun, some say, we shouldn't be so hard on him because he "was limited by historical conditions." He might not deserve praise but neither does he deserve blame. Xiong again pushes this line of thinking to its absurd conclusions, pointing out that "historical limitations" can be used to excuse most anything.[74] But more importantly this leniency towards the past is itself misguided. Pardoning of historical figures deemed to be victims of their times may seem to be a historically informed standpoint — historical relativism in the positive sense, but it is actually the opposite: an imposition of contemporary values onto the past and a blindness to actual historical conditions.[75] This claim, that this sort of historically informed leniency is actually anti-historicist, is a counterintuitive but theoretically pivotal link between morality and historiography worth examining in more detail. "We know," he says by way of

---

[73] Xiong, "*Guanyu Wu Xun,*" 16.

[74] Xiong, "*Guanyu Wu Xun,*" 17.

[75] Xiong, "*Guanyu Wu Xun,*" 17.

explanation, after making the above claim without substantiation, "that the correct (*zhengque*) standard to use when assessing (*hengliang*) a historical figure is the following: if they promote the development (*fazhan*) of society, if they promote the advancement (*jinbu*) of society, then they are advanced (*jinbu de*) people who should be commended." If on the other hand they hinder (*zu'ai*) the development of society they are not and should not. The "we know…" signals that "we," the readers, are inside a specific discourse, but one in which the issues under consideration are not doctrinally clear, hence the confusion over *The Life of Wu Xun.* A true historicism, for Xiong, steers a middle path:

> If we try to evaluate a historical figure without a detailed analysis of prevailing social conditions and people's needs (*yaoqiu*), but instead start from our own needs and in so doing completely obliterate all historical figures (*ba yiqie lishi renwu yigai mosha*), then we are committing a leftist deviation. If on the other hand we indiscriminately praise historical figures or attempt to defend them because of their "historical limitations," then we are committing a rightist deviation.

A leftist deviation ignores (obliterates) what is particular in history. It imposes contemporary Marxist demands on the past and ignores mitigating historical conditions. A rightist deviation gives excess weight to historical conditions, to the

extent of allowing them to blind us to the truths of Marxist theory. And it is precisely these two deviations that are anti-historicist, says Xiong.[76] Xiong's argument in defense of the claim that historical figures can't be let off the hook because they lived in unenlightened (pre-socialist) times hinges on and generates a definition of historicism that seems quite unlike our own. We must adopt a historical standpoint, everyone seems to agree; but what does that mean? As in our own day, "historicism" in the early PRC was a vague term indicative of a general dispensation toward the past, or rather an opinion about the appropriate use of history in the present. Consciously or unconsciously reflecting this ambiguity, the negative definition of historicism arising from Xiong's characterization of anti-historicism is itself generated via negation: historicism is precisely the avoidance of both rightist and leftist historicist deviations.[77] Xiong follows with a brief statement of the facts of Wu Xun's historical situation, i.e. that he lived in the late Qing at a time of increasingly acute conflict and contradiction, as made apparent by the appearance of the Taipings.

---

[76] As William A. Joseph points out in *The Critique of Ultra-Leftism in China, 1958 - 1981* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), for Mao left and right deviationism always have a temporal aspect: lagging behind or running ahead of the actual (scientific) situation. Ultraleftism is too soon, rightism too late, and science is right on time. See p. 40ff.

[77] This double negative model is helpful in understanding other such slippery terms as well. Some elements of early PRC discourses are hard to pin down because they are ultimately defined not positively but negatively, as being neither rightist nor leftist deviations. And theoretical debates often hinge on identifying what exactly constitutes rightist and leftist deviations, and then finding ways to occupy this (negative) space in between.

Failing to involve himself in active resistance could be forgiven as lack of class consciousness had he not actively involved himself in propping up the reactionary regime. So Xiong avoids the leftist deviation by detailing class relations and what constituted historical progress during Wu Xun's era, creating a basis for a (moral) assessment; and likewise he avoids the rightist deviation by judging him according to the aforementioned basis.

Xiong ends by warning against taking Wu Xun to be a tragic figure, one whose well-intentioned life's work was turned to the benefit of the feudal regime under which he had suffered so acutely, since by the end of his life he was already fully integrated into the regime. He had, so to speak, joined his abusers, something that a bit of theory driven historical research makes clear. In *Wu Xun lishi diaochaji yu xin shixue,*[78] Xiao Tianzhi explains in simple terms how the Maoist critique of Wu Xun exemplifies this new approach to historiography (*xin shixue*) by bringing class struggle to the fore. The historical investigation of the title was an investigation led by Jiang Qing into the historical sources surrounding Wu Xun to uncover the truth

[78] Xiao Tianzhi, "*Wu Xun lishi diaocha ji yu xin shixue"* [The Historical Investigation on Wu Xun and the new historiography], *Lishi jiaoxue xiaban yuekan*, vol. 10 (1951): 115.

about his life, and included fact finding missions to his native Shandong.[79] The lesson to be learned from Mao's editorial and the ensuing critique, says Xiao, is that history is the history of class struggle, and must be analyzed, from the present and by the standards of the present, in terms of the conflict between classes.[80] And not only the broad outlines of history, but lives and events. In this form of historical analysis, class clings tenaciously to any object of historical enquiry and interferes with any attempt to dehistoricize and generalize. The only suitable framework within which anything can be abstracted (from history i.e. the history of class struggle) is the one that is already maximally suffused with class. The old guideline was to "use history as a mirror" to discern right and wrong, good and bad. Now in New China there is a new rule: use Marxism-Leninism as a mirror to discern what is right and wrong in history. This approach to historiography amounts to taking literally Marx's claim that history

---

[79] For a narrative description see Roxanne Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), 238ff. Witke's scholarly but nonetheless friendly biographical account, based partly on multiple interviews with Jiang conducted in the early 1970s, casts Jiang as the hero of her own blockbuster. The Wu Hsun affair is described as an important early step on her rise to stardom: "[Jiang] strove to gain a foothold in the party apparatus, but to stand securely at the center she had first to prove herself among the masses and the leaders of the outside world. To that end she took leave of the palace and journeyed to the countryside, where she led the controversial Wu Hsun investigation and participated — against the will of the leaders, her husband sometimes included — in the two great revolutionary movements of the early 1950s: land reform and marriage reform." 224.

[80] Xiao, "*Wu Xun lishi*," 115.

is the history of class struggle,[81] and Xiong's article invites us to imagine an approach to the past in which nothing is not class struggle.

The *Yan'an Talks*-inspired critique of Wu Xun that followed on Mao's article developed the logic of the initial condemnation, but in doing so raised or became entangled in other more complex questions it was not prepared to answer, questions that exceeded the original disciplinary/didactic aim. From the correct theorization of vagrants as a social strata and the mechanisms of the survival of the past in the present, to practical issues of how to depict, in both historiography and fiction, pre-socialist people and society, these were issues that that would not be clarified even by the outpouring of condemnation of filmic or historical Wu Xun. If uncritical praise for Wu Xun reflects a blindness to class realities or a refusal to confront the complexities of historical class analysis, then the condemnation that fuels Mao's editorial and its many echoes reflects a blindness to the complexities of confronting moral tradition, as embodied for example in folk heroes like Wu Xun and later Hai Rui.

---

[81] from the first chapter of the communist manifesto, see https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm

II. Historical Fiction and Ethical Exemplarity

The early 1960s in China was a time between two Greats — after the Great Leap Forward (1958 – 1960) and before the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) — and as such it can be thought of as a middle or a transitional period. But it can also be thought of as an end, namely the end of what is referred to as "the 17 years" between the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 and the beginning of the GPCR in 1966.[1] And, in hindsight, it is also a beginning, insofar as it is the period that witnessed the emergence of the conflict whose victors and political descendants remain in power in the PRC today; or more cynically, it was the beginning of the end of Chinese socialism.[2] These overlapping periodizations suggest why these years are particularly worthy of attention and why an analysis of discourse might be a particularly good place to start. Looking back, we see that ideological differences were emerging and taking on linguistic form in a social and political environment that was tolerant to some degree of plurality, and relatively stable, if only because it was in a kind of lull between upheavals: the ideological strictures and socioeconomic disruptions of the GLF and Anti-Rightist Campaign were in the past and those

---

[1] All of these dates are approximate, and many are contestable. Yao Wenyuan's essay, introduced below as the essay that started the GPCR, was published in November 1965; but the term GPCR was not used publicly until 1966.

[2] A greatly simplified account but not without some heuristic value, if you're willing to trace the ideological rift to the fallout from the GLF.

associated with the GPCR still to come.[3] Ideological change – differentiation, contestation – coupled with relative socio-political stasis meant that tensions and conflicts that might otherwise be contested politically or physically were contested more or less openly in words. We can contrast with this the relatively univocal discourse of the Anti-Rightist Campaign,[4] and also that of the GPCR period when disagreements might more quickly be settled by coercive rather than discursive means.

This chapter begins in the late 1950s around the time of the Anti Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward. My treatment is of necessity very selective, and aims to suggest certain continuities while not excluding the possibility of others. As shown in the last chapter, *The Life of Wu Xun* raised questions about China's relationship to the past that were not only epistemic and hermeneutic in nature but moral: what kind of moral judgements can be made, or should be made, about China's past? These issues were debated in public forums and in study groups during the campaign against the film, but were also subject to a more intense scrutiny by scholars over the remainder of the decade and into the 1960s. The popular debate took place against the backdrop of a thorough rethinking of historiography by historians and other intellectuals, which was in turn shaped by the shifting — or vacillating —

---

[3] Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (London: Columbia University Press, 1974); especially Part IV "The Anti-Rightist Campaign"

[4] See Zhou Yang's "Major Controversy" below.

political climate of the time, some sense of which can be gained from the discussion below of two very different policy statements written by Zhou Yang.

History vs. Theory

Among professional historians the rethinking of historiography took the form of increasingly polarized debates about the relative merit of (old) historical records and (new) Marxist theory. They asked, are the answers to our historical questions to be found by careful interpretation of old texts and artifacts, the historian's traditional occupation, or through a more perfect understanding of texts by Marx and Engels and Mao? Can we understand history without learning about history as it has traditionally been taught? As might be apparent already, far from being merely academic, these debates were also driven by class and generational conflict, and, as with similar debates in other fields, riven by the conflicting demands of professionalization and revolutionary politics, the so-called red vs. expert problem. Recent work by China historians, discussed below, has greatly clarified the many competing interests at work in the historical debates of this period and will help situate the work of Wu Han, the figure who will dominate the remainder of this study. Wu was a prominent historian and public intellectual deeply involved in all of these debates, and was ultimately perhaps more involved than he would have liked in the earliest events of the Cultural Revolution. His theoretical writings on the nature and role of historical

fiction would spark another debate that would later be reignited and intensified by his own first attempt at historical fiction, the play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office.* Wu typified the concerns of the old-society leftist intellectuals whose critique of tradition was grounded in a deep knowledge and long engagement with the historiographic building blocks of tradition, making him a target for younger revolutionary followers of Mao who questioned his class loyalties and perhaps resented his prestige.

Below I discuss two separate but related debates opened by Wu Han's writings. The two develop logically if not always strictly chronologically from an initial consideration of the nature of historical drama towards a focus on its use and political implications. Wu opens the first debate by asking, what is this thing called historical drama, and how do we distinguish historical drama, or historical fiction more broadly, from historiography on the one hand and purely imaginative fiction on the other? Wu's first essay on the topic, discussed in detail below, was prompted by a series of popular historical plays that didn't meet his standards for historical accuracy. The initial question is one of naming: why bother calling them history plays if they get the history all wrong? It is a very productive question that leads inexorably to broader questions of why we study history and what we hope to learn from it. Is there anything of value in the traditional stories about the feudal past? Anything of positive value? What, if anything, is to be our inheritance from this feudal past? This is a much more polarizing question, and spawned another debate conducted under the rubric of China's "moral inheritance" (*daode jicheng*). Wu's questions elicited

uncompromising responses from younger scholars, one of which is covered in some detail below. It was this question of moral inheritance and the moral uses of historical fiction that Wu Han would explore in greater detail in his study of Hai Rui, a Ming Dynasty official and folk hero known for his honesty and integrity, and the historical drama that grew out of his research.

The policy reversals and generalized easing that followed the Great Leap Forward extended to literature and the arts as well.[5] The nature and extent of the changes can be seen by comparing two official statements on cultural policy published four years apart, both written by Central Propaganda Department Deputy Director Zhou Yang. The earlier text from 1958, titled "A Major Controversy on the Arts and Literature Front," is very much a product of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. It opens by announcing the "struggle over right and wrong" currently underway between "the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the socialist road and the capitalist road" in literary and art circles, a confrontation Zhou examines in detail in a section headed "Two Incompatible Worldviews."[6] Zhou discusses the so-called Ding Ling, Chen Qixia and Feng Xuefeng anti-party clique[7] as a kind of case study of writers gone

---

[5] Hong Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 207.

[6] Zhou Yang, "Wenyi zhanxian shang de yichang da bianlun"[A Major Controversy on the Arts and Literature Front] *Renmin wang,* Feb. 11, 2016. http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/8090/8092/20020515/729155.html

[7] Ding, Chen, and Feng were well-known creative writers who occupied various high-profile leadership roles in cultural-political organizations.

astray. They are accused, among other things, of putting Marxism in service of rather than in control of the creative process; of trying to transform the masses rather than letting their art be transformed by the masses; of rejecting the collective in the favor of bourgeoisie individualism; and of "surrendering to bourgeois idealism." These errors are ascribed in part to family trees containing "declining feudal gentry and other exploiting classes." The confrontational, class-based language and fixation on class background is very much like what would reappear during the GPCR.

In contrast, Zhou's 1962 policy statement "Draft Proposals Concerning Some Current Problems in Literary and Art Work" is remarkably self-reflective and conciliatory, even apologetic.[8] After pointing to the "huge achievements" (*juda chengjiu*) in literature and the arts since 1949 as evidence that "the vast majority of literary and arts workers are enthusiastically working for socialism," Zhou admits that

> Nevertheless, in recent years numerous mistakes have been made in literary and arts work. Some leading literature and arts authorities and leading literature and arts cadres have failed to correctly understand and conscientiously enact the Hundred Flowers policy, and have responded to certain literary and artistic projects with crude criticism and restrictions or

---

[8]Ministry of Culture Party Committee and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Party Committee, "Guanyu dangqian wenxue yishu gongzuo ruogan wenti de yijian" [Draft Proposals Concerning Some Current Problems in Literary and Art Work], *Communist Party of China*, Feb. 11, 2016. http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66669/4493568.html

> inappropriate interference, thereby impairing lively artistic creation and free academic investigation… In handling literature and arts issues, some cadres in charge of literature and arts work have both failed to respect the opinions of the masses and failed to work closely with writers and artists; and their dictatorial methods and haughty demeanors have negatively affected the party's leadership in literature and arts matters. Responsibility for these shortcomings and errors lies with the cultural leadership, and foremost with the Party Committee of the Ministry of Culture.[9]

The about-face continues in the proposals themselves, apparently designed to reassure artists and intellectuals that the party is not the enemy. They assert the continued importance of the Hundred Flowers policy and also affirm the value of thematic diversity, artistic freedom, and pre-socialist art.

The situation in the field of history was similar. After a decade or more of historiography in service of the "class viewpoint" characterized by rigid application of Marxist categories and much hair-splitting over period boundaries, discussed briefly below, in the early 1960s new debates arose on the assessment of historical figures and peasant rebellions, as well as more theoretical questions on navigating historicist

---

[9] Ministry of Culture, "Guanyu dangqian." The translation is mine.

relativism and Marxist universalism.[10] There was also evidence of a greater tolerance for nationalism in contrast with or opposition to Marxist universalism, perhaps in response to worsening relations with the USSR in the years leading up to the Sino-Soviet split.[11] Underlying these historiographic debates, according to Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, was a disagreement on the relative importance of *shi* (history), and *lun* (theory/interpretation). Whereas public debates like the proper assessment of peasant revolts, at least as conducted in the early 60s, reflected relationships between historians and their patrons,[12] methodological debates like the question of *shi* vs. *lun* reflect intradisciplinary relationships among historians themselves. This does not mean the debates were not themselves politicized, but it does mean that they are not reducible to politics, and it situates them in a gap between other disciplines: not thoroughly political enough for political scientists and too political for historians to

---

[10] See Tom Fisher, "The Play's the Thing," in Jonathan Unger ed. *Using the Past to Serve the Present* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 40; and Arif Dirlik, "The Problem of Class Viewpoint versus Historicism in Chinese Historiography," *Modern China* 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1977): 465-488.

[11] Harold Kahn and Albert Feuerwerker, "The Ideology of Scholarship: China's New Historiography," in *History in Communist China,* ed. Albert Feuerwerker (Cambridge, The M.I.T. Press, 1968), 1 – 13. See also the subsection "Growing Nationalism" in A.F.P Hulswe, "Origins and Foundation of the The Chinese Empire" p. 122 in the same volume.

[12] Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "History and Truth in Chinese Marxist Historiography," in *Historical Truth Historical Criticism and Ideology*: *Chinese Historiography And Historical Culture From A New Comparative Perspective,* ed. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag, and Jörn Rüsen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 421 - 464. I take this to refer to party or factional loyalty networks as well as more personal patronage relationships

consider a matter of theoretical interest rather than a matter of merely historical interest..[13] Hence the relative lack of interest among scholars, something Weigelin-Schwiedrzik sets out to correct in two related articles, "On Shi and Lun: Toward a Typology of Historiography in the PRC" (1996) and "History and Truth in Chinese Marxist Historiography" (2005), both of which cover the period from 1949 to the present. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik identifies three different conceptions of the relationship between *shi* and *lun* common in the early 1960s, as distilled in three slogans: theory in command over history (*yi lun dai shi*), history and theory united (*shi lun jiehe*) and theory arises from history (*lun cong shi chu*). Of these the first gives greatest weight to Marxist historical materialism (at the expense of historical records) and the last to China's historical records (at the expanse of Marxist theory), while the middle one can be understood as a refusal to publicly commit to either of the two extremes. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik says it is the emphasis given to theory during the first decade of CCP rule that represents the aberration within the history of Chinese historiography, and that the re-elevation of *shi* was a reaction against this. She explains it as a matter of which comes first, the questions or the answers. At the first extreme historical records are consulted for confirmation of theoretical truths: "For those historians who believe that history should be written under theoretical guidance it is quite clear that historians have to know the answers before they work

---

[13] See Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "On Shi and Lun: Toward a Typology of Historiography in the PRC," *History and Theory* 35.4 (1996): 74–95.

on the material and data from history."[14] The answers supplied by Marxist historical materialism are confirmed by questions taken from Chinese history, and Chinese history is made to fit a Marxist mold. At the other extreme questions come first, as historians seek "answers to questions arising in the present by consulting the past;" answers still expected to accord with approved theory. These answers, synthesized from historical data, may in turn be used to enrich or refine the (Marxist) interpretive framework.

It is worth noting that the two extremes here are not that far apart. Despite the very real disagreements among historians over these issues, there was also very real agreement on the basic theoretical and political orientation. No one was openly questioning Marxist-Leninist-Maoist historical materialism, however that was understood, or the basic Stalinist periodization scheme. Given the impossibility of going radically off-script in these texts published in sanctioned newspapers and journals — abandoning Marxism-Leninism-Maoism for example, and opting for some other explanatory framework — one might wonder what exactly does progress in historical understanding look like? If our understanding of history is to change for the better, where does this change occur? If a perfect - or at least unquestionable - and thus basically static theory is taken as the starting point, then change must take place on the *shi* side, in our understanding of the facts themselves: theory illuminates or brings order to fact. If, however, we start with facts assumed to be unchanging, and a

---

[14] Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "On Shi and Lun," 91.

stable understanding of these facts, then change must take place elsewhere, somewhere on the theory side; and this applies not just to Marxist historiography but to any theoretically self-aware historiography.[15] In both cases there are texts taken as givens: the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist canon, or the pre-socialist historiographic canon.

Periodization and Disciplinization

In *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing*, Li Huaiyin examines the political and disciplinary context of the *shi* vs. *lun* debate. Li is very clear about his assumptions and his targets: most history writing in China was done not by historians as scholars but as agents of ideology: "history writing, in other words, turned out to be the most effective and powerful means in the production and reification of a political ideology. The primary goal of their historiography was not to faithfully reconstruct the past, but to use the past to

[15] That this debate is occurring at all shows the participants to be critically self-aware. Indeed, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's discussion of these historiographic debates reveals the participants to be extraordinarily aware of their own ideological framework and its limitations. Weigelin-Schweidrzik's ultimate aim is comparative; she wants to "integrate Chinese historiography into the international debate on comparative history writing." She makes Chinese historiography comparative by bracketing its "political agenda" and focusing on its "philosophical dimension."

legitimate present-day action."[16] Despite the underlying polemic, Li draws attention to two important shifts in historiography in the early PRC and the controversies that provoked them. The first came in the wake of a debate among historians and theorists on how best to periodize modern Chinese history[17] that began in 1954 and that produced three plausible principles of differentiating periods and corresponding periodization schemes.[18] The first (chronologically) took class struggle as the fundamental principle of historical progress and revolutionary movements (Taiping, Boxer, and Xinhai) as period markers. This scheme was criticized for borrowing too heavily on Soviet formulations and therefore obscuring what was unique about China[19] and countered with what Li calls the principal contradiction thesis, which emphasized external factors on China's development and only secondarily class

---

[16] Or more bluntly: "to write about modern China was primarily to trace the historical roots of the country's current problems in order to legitimize their solutions rather than a truth-seeking process or the reconstruction of the past as it actually happened." It is a claim I would not dispute, but one Li still grounds in a narrowly tendentious conception of "political ideology" that presupposes the existence of a purer approach free from ideological distortion. Within a broader conception in which ideology is pervasive and inescapable, the claim that historiography is a powerful means for producing ideology dissolves into tautology.

[17] For a fascinating account of how the problem of periodization was confronted by Chinese historians writing long before liberation and even prior to the arrival of Marxism, in the late 19th and early 20th century, see Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China Through History: the May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 78ff.

[18] Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 112.

[19] Li, *Reinventing*, 114.

struggle, resulting in a periodization acknowledging the primary role of British aggression in the mid-19th century and Japanese aggression beginning in the late 19th century. The other periodizing principle under consideration focused on economic factors and the nature of the means of production, things that were more difficult to specify precisely and that raised uncomfortable questions about the relationship between economic changes and class struggle (e.g. the possibility of both increasing wealth disparity and decreasing class struggle). These periodizations situate China very differently within global historiographies of class struggle, international conflict/ cooperation, and economic development. The class conflict thesis was both victorious and officially adopted in textbooks, marking an official end to the debate and the emergence of a "new orthodoxy" beginning in 1957.[20] Two things in particular are to be noted. First, this debate began after the Wu Xun affair, which was conducted before history was fully disciplinized, when it could still "be freely interpreted to serve the changing needs of the Party,"[21] and before the Hai Rui affair. And second, it ended with a collective decision — but not a consensus — given coercive force by the state. Li insists that the outcome of the debate was not the result of external Party pressure, but also notes that support for the class struggle thesis was by no means unanimous.[22] So the disagreements would linger and inform debates to follow.

---

[20] The chapter devoted to this debate is called "The Making of a New Orthodoxy."

[21] Li, *Reinventing*, 111.

[22] Li, *Reinventing*, 124.

The implications of periodization for our purposes can be seen for example in conflicting analyses of *The Life of Wu Xun.* A periodization emphasizing means of production might lead us to question if there was some larger force at work creating people like Wu Xun, disconnected from the land or any other stable workplace. Such an analysis is outlined in Arif Dirlik's "Chinese Historians and the Marxist Concept of Capitalism: A Critical Examination" which recounts debates surrounding the claim that capitalism had "sprouted" in China beginning in the late 16th c. during the Ming.[23] Commodity production increased (silk, cotton, pottery and metals in particular), agricultural crops were increasingly commercialized, and as a result land ownership was increasingly centralized. All these were supported with statistics by proponents of this view. This "explosion of commercial activity" led to a concentration of all types of property, including land, in the hands of those controlling capital leading to expropriation of the peasantry and the creation of a mobile population of workers and non-workers who became "laborers in industrial enterprises, small businessmen (such as peddlers) or, at worst, vagabonds."[24] Even pursuing the analysis only this far complicates the assessment of Wu Xun, who can now be made to appear less an accomplice of feudalism than a victim of capitalism.

---

[23] i.e. during the lifetime of Hai Rui; this coincidence will be discussed further in Chapter 4. See Arif Dirlik, "Chinese Historians and the Marxist Concept of Capitalism: A Critical Examination," *Modern China*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Jan 1982), 105-132.

[24] Dirlik, "Chinese Historians," 112

Rather than destroying existing class relations, this nascent capitalism was incorporated into them and harnessed to consolidate the power of local elites. Within such an analytical framework Wu Xun's struggle to educate the poor could then be seen as an attempt to break the class boundaries that this weakened capitalism could not; that is, to promote a more comprehensive and more orthodox capitalist revolution, putting him (back) on the right side of history.

Following the impact of disciplinization and the rethinking of periodization, a second shift traces a dialectical countermovement, one that lasted from the late 1950s through 1961.[25] What Li calls the historiographical revolution of the late 1950s began along with and as part of the Great Leap Forward, and comprises the disciplinary conflicts of which the *shi* vs. *lun* debate was one part. Whether or not it was as "an attempt by party leaders to manipulate history for political purposes,"[26] it resembled other contemporaneous transformations driven by a mixture of generational conflict, class resentment, and frustrations with bureaucracy. The adoption of the class struggle thesis described above was part of process of professionalization and standardization of history teaching and scholarship, similar to efforts in many other fields,[27] and it provoked a similar response. The standardization and institutionalization of class

---

[25] Li, *Reinventing*, 141.

[26] Li, *Reinventing*, 134.

[27] For an incisive overview, see Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), chap. 2 "Cultural Foundations of Class Power."

struggle was a tortured and self-contradictory process. Professionalization after all favored professionals — with training, experience, networks and know-how both technical and social. All these traits made such professionals useful in administering the state, but less so in advancing Mao's remaining revolutionary aims. The historiographical revolution was meant to ensure that these intellectuals trained in the old society and often abroad remained focused on present day political goals rather than intellectual production for its own sake. In the case of the historical profession this meant quite literally keeping the focus on the present rather than the past, by foregrounding present day political needs, frameworks, campaigns etc. in historiographic work. It also meant writing history not only of but for the people; so getting out of the university, out among the people and compiling histories of mass organizations and movements from the mass perspective: the lessons of the Yan'an *Talks* for historians.[28] What Li captures well is the equivocations of senior historians like Jian Bozan and Wu Han who were forced to defend their revolutionary credentials while also defending their careers; that is, both to criticize and defend, often in the same text, historical investigations as traditionally construed, and the value of detailed study of the ancient past.[29] These establishment historians were challenged by younger colleagues with fewer links to the non-socialist past who were

---

[28] Li, *Reinventing*, 134.

[29] Li, *Reinventing*, 136.

eager to embrace the new campaign if it meant career advancement. We will see below how one historian attempts to deal with these contradictory demands.

Li identifies the contradictory forces at work in historiography in the early PRC: on the one hand historiography was subordinated to political ends and brought under party and bureaucratic control within universities and research institutes; on the other, "disciplinization" inevitably resulted in an emphasis on professional training in the field and objectivity in research, which functioned to resist and correct the ideological twisting of history." It seems that the problems inherent in establishing a workforce that was both politically reliable and professionally competent, both red and expert, were no less vexing in historiography than in scientific and technological fields, even if they took different forms.

Wu at Nankai: On the Evaluation of Historical Figures

In a talk given at Nankai University in 1959 and published as "A Few Preliminary Remarks on the Evaluation of Historical Figures," Wu Han reflected on some of these historiographical challenges, in particular the reevaluation of historical figures in the light of Marxist historiography, and acknowledged the continuing difficulties they posed to both historians and literary critics.[30] A decade into the New

---

[30] Tom Fisher gives a brief outline of this talk in "The Play's the Thing," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 7 (Jan. 1982), 15.

Society and nearly four decades after the founding of the Party, Wu could still say, on behalf of other Chinese intellectuals, that "with some historical figures it is difficult to say if we should be commending them or condemning them." The bulk of Wu's talk was devoted to the specific problems of assessing four different historical figures - Cao Cao, Wu Zetian, Hai Rui, and Ming Dynasty historian Tan Qian - after which he summarized his ideas in eight principles that clarify some of the problems, even as they do little to clarify potential solutions. Read in order, they trace an arc of equivocation if not confusion, each one standing in contradiction to one or more of the others and/or to itself, and they anticipate the problems in the later reassessment of Hai Rui.

First, Wu argued, in evaluating historical figures we must start by (*cong*... *chufa*) considering how their actions affected the welfare of the people at the given historical place and time, both directly and indirectly, for example by stimulating progress in production or culture. This also means not subjecting them to modern (Marxist) standards, which would greatly impoverish the entirety of Chinese history and leave little to celebrate. "Among our ancestors are many people worthy of our respect, our nation (*minzu*) is a great nation." The two escalating appeals to nationalistic sentiment in this claim attempt to limit class-based condemnation of the ancestors, effectively defining an "us" that includes all Chinese people past and present, as problematic a notion as that is. Implicit and unexamined in this first principle is the extent to which the Chinese Communist revolution is both communist

(universal) and Chinese (national). This was a national revolution as well, necessitating in its earlier stages collaboration with a Chinese enemy against a foreign enemy. The anxieties motivating these reminders that there is much to be salvaged in Chinese history — who are we? can we be communists and still Chinese? — recall what Dirlik says of the historiographic obsessions of Liang Qichao and other late Qing reformers: "the Chinese people had to see themselves in the mirror of history so as to feel Chinese in the first place."[31]

Second, Wu observed, we must critically evaluate the judgements of previous generations and commentators, distinguishing majority from minority views, and take into account the (class) standpoint of those doing the judging. We must be aware, that is, of the historicity of historiography. Historians should draw on contemporary accounts and should respect the views of the majority rather than minority or dissenting voices. Yet historians must also be aware that assessments change over time, and sometimes previous assessments need to be overturned (*tuifan*). We should not, for example, listen to the Ming Dynasty landlords who despised Hai Rui or the present day right opportunists who oppose collectivization.

---

[31] Arif Dirlik, "Marxism and Social History," in *Transforming History: the Making of a Modern Academic Discipline in Twentieth Century China*, ed. Brian Moloughney and Peter Zarrow (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), 376.
See also Stuart Schram's discussion of 'culturalist' vs. 'nationalist' currents in modern Chinese intellectual history, in *The Political Though of Mao Tse-Tung,* 18ff.

Third, class background is not the only criterion to be used in assessing historical figures, because people can change.[32] Wu also reminds listeners that only people from bad class backgrounds had the opportunity to receive an education; so that all of China's pre-Liberation officials, poets, intellectuals and most artists besides would be condemned out of hand based on their class background. But neither can we say that class background is unimportant. Here again Wu Han is unwilling or unable to detail the dialectic at work.

Fourth, evaluations should be based on political or public acts rather than private life. There are suggestions that Hai Rui may have abused his wife (Wu notes that there is no evidence to go on, only descriptions of his home life as "unhappy") but quibbles like these must be considered secondary and not mistaken for what is truly important, a person's impact on society and historical progress; though neither can private life be disregarded completely. Here again Wu leaves judgement suspended.

Fifth, we must not impose current values and views on people who lived in the past. Wu is referring here to moral standards (*daode biaozhun*) in particular, which shift from generation to generation but more obviously as China has evolved from a slave to feudal to socialist society.

---

[32] Hai Rui is used as an example. The controversy surrounding Wu Han's play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* is the topic of the following chapter.

Nevertheless, Wu's sixth point is that we must "seek truth from facts, and avoid exaggeration," an injunction containing three different conduits for "current values and views," viz. what counts as "truth" and "fact," and what constitutes the norm against which exaggeration is to be measured. The latter is characterized as that which "does not conform to objective reality," (another normative notion) as when "a person who was only 50 or 60% good (*wu liu fen hao*) is described as 80 or 100% good." This principle is an appeal for detailed but honest historical research and recreation of "the past as it actually existed," gaps and all. Gaps make people uncomfortable but we must not rush to judgement or pretend to know what we do not, just as museums can display only those artifacts that they have, whether people like it or not.

Seventh, history is the history of production struggle and class struggle and the struggle against nature, and these should be the focus of our evaluations of our ancestors. In the course of these struggles they gained valuable experience that we can learn from. This for Wu is the meaning of "the ancients serving the moderns" and "the past serving the present," leaving open the possibility that we can learn as much from their mistakes as from their successes.

Eighth, the evaluation of historical figures starts with an assessment of a particular place and time, but must also "start with the entirety of historical development" and take into account "the entire several thousand year history of our multi-ethnic family." So decisions that might have been costly or unpopular at the

time — Wu mentions the building of the grand canal and the great wall — proved beneficial in the long run.

Wu starts with one starting point and ends at another starting point, not only different from but opposed to the first, from historical specificity to historical totality; ready to begin again, but different this time. It is an unconvincing hermeneutic short circuit; but this felt imperative to be both situated in history and at a critical and theoretical distance, one that allows an understanding of both the several thousand years of the multi-ethnic family that is the contemporary PRC and of all of its parts and periods, reflects the impossible demands posed by the reassessment of historical figures from within the new political environment.

Historical Fact vs. Historical Truth

> *JOHNSON. 'We must consider how very little history there is; I mean real authentick history. That certain Kings reigned, and certain battles were fought, we can depend upon as true; but all the colouring, all the philosophy of history is conjecture.' BOSWELL. 'Then, Sir, you would reduce all history to no better than an almanack, a mere chronological series of remarkable events.'*
>
> Boswell, *Life of Johnson*

The topics addressed in the lecture at Nankai would be developed in published exchanges in the years to come. Anchoring and motivating these discussions was an important text by Wu Han from late 1960 titled "On Historical Drama." Less than five

years separate Wu's initial essay on historical drama and Yao's critique of *Hai Rui*, yet the two texts clearly belong to different eras. For Yao the historical drama of the day is full of ideological pitfalls and class treachery, as if the theorization of historical drama were very much a matter of life and death.[33] Wu's essay, on the other hand, is all conciliation and compromise, and is presented as a modest proposal concerning theatrical nomenclature. If, Wu says in "On Historical Drama," a play set in the past does not reflect history as recorded in the historical records; if, that is, instead of being about real (documented) people and events it depicts fictional people and fictional events, then perhaps it should not be referred to as a history play, lest the audience be confused.[34] Most of what he says will strike 21st century Anglophone readers as utterly reasonable; indeed the most unusual thing about the essay might be how sensible it all sounds. Yet these same claims and the controversies they generated chart a direct path to the "opening salvos" of the GPCR. The innocuousness of the essay, in contrast with the anything but innocuous repercussions of the events of late 1965 and early 1966, should give us pause: A search for the headwaters of the GPCR brings us here?[35] To a brief essay suggesting that maybe we should stop referring to

---

[33] For some it was. Wu was removed from office in June 1966 and died in jail in 1969.

[34] Wu Han, "Tan lishiju," [On Historical Drama], Republished in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962): 267.

[35] It was, as Russo says, "a prologue decidedly unusual for a revolution." Russo, *Cultural Revolution*, 11.

plays featuring fictional characters and events as history plays? This feeling of puzzlement[36] should be allowed to linger, and in what follows I will do my best to preserve it as I look more carefully at Wu's essay and several early responses to it.[37]It is within this post-GLF pre-GPCR intellectual environment that these discussions of historical drama took place. They begin,[38] as noted above, with an essay by Wu Han titled "On Historical Drama" and published in the Shanghai daily *Wenhui bao* on December 25, 1960.[39] Wu was at the time Vice-mayor of Beijing in charge of cultural and educational affairs, but he first made a name for himself before 1949 as a scholar and professor specializing in Ming Dynasty history. He also frequently wrote for the general public on various topics of cultural interest, and like many of his other

---

[36] A similar feeling is invoked at the beginning of a recent (2013) Chinese reassessment of the Hai Rui controversy: "The Cultural Revolution was an unprecedented political movement, 'the purpose of which was the rectification of those within the party taking the capitalist road.' But *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* is just an ordinary play. So why would Mao Zedong choose to use the criticism of *Hai Rui* to launch the Cultural Revolution?" See Xie Changyu, "Mao Zedong weishenme xuanze dui *Hai Rui Baguan* de pipan zuowei fadong wenhua dageming de tupokou" [Why did Mao Zedong choose the criticism of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* to launch the Cultural Revolution?], *Zhonggong Hangzhou shiwei dangxuexiao bao* (6.2013) 83-88.

[37] Wu's essay is in this sense the opposite of Mao's shocking intervention in the Wu Xun debate. It is a genealogical precursor to a shocking event (the shocking attack on *Hai Rui Dismissed* and its author) but its publication was utterly uneventlike.

[38] Wu's essay was not the first on the topic but seems to mark an intensification of debate, and is the best place to start tracing the development of the debate that leads to Yao's essay.

[39] Republished in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962).

writings the essay on historical drama brings together his academic, professional (political) and more public concerns.[40]

Wu opens by praising several recent works of historical drama for their uplifting stories and heroes, among them a number of liberated women, and their success inspiring patriotism and revolutionary fervor. They are entertaining and deservedly popular, he says, and he likes them as much as anyone. He admits, though, to balking when being asked by a publisher to comment on the plays from a historian's point of view, a request which leads him to reflect on historical drama and to the question that inspired the essay: What is historical drama? Whatever it is, he tells us, these plays aren't it; and neither are the vast majority of other plays classified as historical drama.[41] In almost every case, the characters and/or events depicted in them have been invented by the playwright and "have no basis in history."[42] To avoid confusing people and decreasing the educational value of genuine historical drama these plays should be reclassified and referred to as fictional drama (*gushi ju*), or when the subject matter is drawn from myth, as mythical drama (*shenhua ju*). The closest he comes to answering his own question is his negative definition of historical drama: "If there is no [historical] evidence for the characters and no evidence for the

---

[40] See Mary Mazur, *Wu Han, Historian: Son of China's Times* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), esp. ch 8 "Academics and Activism"

[41] 95% or more in one case; see Wu, "Tan lishiju," 268.

[42] "*zai lishishang zhaobudao genju*"

events, how can we call it historical drama?" He acknowledges, however, that not everyone agrees with these views and ends by calling for further public debate.

One of the earliest and most critical responses to Wu's essay came in "A Brief Discussion of Historical Drama"[43] by young literary scholar and recent Fudan graduate Xin Xianxi, published in the same newspaper less than a month later on January 20, 1961. Xin summarizes his objections to Wu's essay in two points.[44] First, historical drama in compliance with Wu's criteria will be grounded in historical fact (*lishi shishi*) and historical records (*lishi jizai*) rather than in "rich, vibrant historical life" (*fengfu shengdongde lishi shenghuo*). And second, such plays will be shaped by historical fact and historical conditions rather than by the author's worldview; that is, playwrights will be limited by historical records rather than liberated by their Marxist worldview. These objections also outline in the negative a very different vision of what a history play should be: instead of a repackaging of historical fact, a history play should shine the light of Marxist historical materialism on life itself, here life as lived in the past. What makes a play historical for Xin is that it "reflects the social life of the past" (*fanying guoqi shidai de shehui shenghuo*) and "depicts the truth of history" (*lishi de zhenshi*)[45] This latter is a term not used by Wu in his first essay, and

---

[43] Xin Xianxi, "Jiantan lishiju" [A Brief Discussion of Historical Drama], reprinted in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962): 271 - 275.

[44] Xin, "Jiantan," 271-272.

[45] Xin, "Jiantan," 272.

it is used here by Xin in opposition to historical fact (*lishi shishi*). This is evident in his first objection, where he lumps historical fact and historical records together and distinguishes them both from historical life.[46] His choice of descriptors suggests that in comparison to rich, vibrant historical life, historical facts and records are depleted and moribund. His second objection develops this opposition by indicating that it is author's worldview that gives access to the living rather than the dead past, suggesting that limiting (*xianzhi*) oneself only to what historical fact allows (*xuke*) is also limiting oneself to dead rather than living history.

Both of Xin's objections raise the issue of mediation, and in so doing make more visible the seeming absence of any notion of mediation in Wu's essay. In distinguishing between historical facts and records on the one hand and historical life on the other, Xin calls attention to the difference between life in its fullness and the relative poverty of what can be captured in a factual text. Such an understanding of history locates behind the lifeless historiographic text the rich fullness of historical life itself; meaning that this text is not, as Wu would have it, the end or foundation but only the middle, a mediation between past and present, and one that is reductive and deadening. For Xin there is something more important and more fundamental than the text. Wu by contrast does not seem to make any such distinction, instead using

---

[46] Or "life in the past," the focus on life being key.

"history" in the uncritical, common-sense way described by Koselleck as a conflation of history as event and representation.[47]

A closer look at Wu's use of the word "history" confirms this. The first thing to note is his willingness to use the word on its own, as an unmodified and non-modifying substantive.[48] In a sentence important enough to be its own paragraph, Wu declares that "There are connections between historical drama and history, but also differences."[49] Reading this sentence for what it tells us about Wu's understanding of the term, we find that history is something that can be connected to historical drama, a literary genre or textual practice, and moreover it is closely enough connected to drama that Wu must remind us that there are differences, as if there is danger of confusing the two. History here appears to be a categorically similar genre or textual practice – history as historiography. This would in turn make historical drama a kind of rewriting, at its limit little more than an embellishment of historical records.[50] A

---

[47] In *Futures Past:on the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) Koselleck traces the history of these two meanings of "history" in the co-evolution of the German Geschichte and the French Histoire. See esp. Ch. 1 "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity" and Ch. 2 "Historia Magistra Vitae."

[48] As opposed for example to modifying it, "Chinese history", using its adjectival form, "historical records" or using it to delimit or modify "the actuality of history" etc.

[49] Wu, "Tan lishiju," 267. "*Lishiju he lishi you guanxi, ye you qubie,*" unsatisfying to be sure, but the only other real candidate for Wu's answer to his own question "What is historical drama?"

[50] This is a criticism that we find in the reviews of Wu's first and last attempt at historical drama.

second use of "history" on its own comes a few lines later in Wu's demand that historical drama "reflect the actual conditions of history,"[51] rather than, presumably, distorting these actual conditions as do the non-historical history plays he's criticizing. The difference between actual and non-actual is the difference between historical and fictional drama. Here history is not strictly a text; but Wu leaves us no way to approach "actual" history other than by way of the evidence found in historiographic texts. So the possibility of an ontological distinction (history as different from historiography) is negated by an epistemological convergence (actual history can only be made known by historiography). History that differs from historiography turns out to be false history or fiction. If Wu wavers, as convenient, between history as humanity's past and history as historiography – or masks his reduction of history to historiography with occasional and unconvincing references to history as something else – Xin relies solely on the former. The repetition of the term "social life" (*shehui shenghuo*) throughout the article gives a good indication of what Xin finds important, and what he thinks Wu's notion of history overlooks.

Truth for Xin resides not in historical fact but in this much more ambiguous term, so a different epistemology is needed, a different access to truth. Xin's second objection raises the issue of mediation by worldview, or the mediating role of the subject, here the playwright. If Xin's first objection locates historical life behind the historical record, his second places the playwright's worldview between history and

---

[51] "*fanying lishi de shiji qingkuang*"

art. This latter is another mediation unacknowledged by Wu, for whom adherence to the historical records and a moderate amount of artistic embellishment, carefully limited in scope and kind, are enough to produce valid and valuable historical drama. For Wu historical facts don't need to be transformed so much as reproduced or represented, and the playwright is subordinate to the historian; for Xin, on the other hand, dead historical facts are generally best discarded, as they tend to hinder the access to living history provided not by what lies outside the human mind but what lies inside, in the internalized truths of the Marxist worldview. Where then does worldview come into play for Wu? His first essay gives no indication; though it seems remarkable in hindsight that it contains not one mention of Marx. His only reference to what we would think of as ideology is in his claim that the duty of the history play is to "provide people a historical [or historicist], patriotic education."[52]

Xin's conflation, mentioned above, of historical fact and historical records raises the question of just what these terms refer to and if there is indeed any difference. Wu gives little indication, preferring the term "evidence/basis" (*genju*), which remains undefined here but in a later essay (a response to the first round of responses) is itself lumped with "historical records" and clearly described as textual in

---

[52] "*dui guangda renmin jinxing lishizhuyi aiguozhuyi jiaoyu*" a strange formulation that does nothing to explain the relationship between historicism and patriotism.

nature.[53] The evidence, for Wu, is in the text.[54] In "On Historical Drama" Wu does appeal to historical fact in his summary of the duties of historical drama: "Put simply, historical drama must reflect the actual truth of history (*lishi shiji de zhenshi*),[55] and must also apply artistic embellishment to historical fact, increasing its intensity and emotional appeal." He goes on to assure his readers that "As historical conditions permit, playwrights have the right to invent certain stories, and of course they also have the right to omit certain historical facts." Facts here are things that are present one place (in the historical records) but that need not always be present in toto in the rewriting of historiography into historical drama. Historical fact must be embellished and can be used selectively; that is, historical drama need not be identical to and coextensive with historiography. But this is as far as Wu seems to be willing to go in differentiating the two. The playwright may select historical facts and embellish them with artistic flourishes[56] but may not substantially alter or negate historical evidence. Xin's understanding of the two terms (historical facts and historical records) is

---

[53] Humorously even, something not uncommon in his writing. Confronted with another writer claiming, like Xin, that historical drama could arrive at historical truth without relying on the kind of historical evidence found in history books, Wu proposes that "if writers don't need historical records or historical evidence let's just get rid of all the records and the evidence. That will save some time if nothing else. No need to read books."

[54] Presumably also in non-textual artifacts too, though he doesn't mention them here.

[55] Or "truth of historical actuality"?

[56] Wu mentions a few techniques: embellishment, exaggeration, emphasis, concentration, omission.

clarified somewhat in his objection to the reliance on fact and records when he explains that "Historical facts and records are only one type of material the writer uses to understand and represent (*fanying*) the social life of past times. And historical records (*jizai*) are only a partial record (*jilu*) of the social life of past times, far removed from the richness, correctness, vibrancy of this social life." Here facts, like records, are materials (*cailiao*), presumably again textual or at least textualizable. What is absent in Xin's article is any attempt to separate fact from historiography or lay claim to fact on behalf of dialectical materialism-fueled creative reflection. He seems willing to leave fact to the historians, and to focus instead on "attaining historical truth." His term for historical truth is not the expected "*lishi zhenshi*" but the slightly more verbose "*lishi de zhenshi,*" roughly equivalent to the distinction in English between "historical truth" and "the truth of history." The first juxtaposes two substantives *lishi* (history) and *zhenshi* (truth) presumably modifying the latter with the former to arrive at a new substantive and a new kind of truth. The second leaves truth unchanged in itself, indicating perhaps the aspect of history that partakes of truth; or that truth remains greater than history.

Despite what seems to be a basic agreement on the textual nature of historical facts and records, there are at work here two very different ideas of what they are and what they do, shaping two very different understandings of historical drama. For Wu, evidence consisting of facts taken from books *is* the history in history plays; it is what makes historical drama historical, and is coextensive with knowable history: history

as historiography. To the extent that history differs from historiography, it is non-history or fiction. For Xin, on the other hand, the focus is on what exceeds facts and records, the richness and vigor of human social existence made visible in retrospect by the truths of Marxism. The primary opposition between these two writers seems to lie in the two undefined terms "evidence/basis" (Wu) and "social life" (Xin).

The real problem with facts and records, Xin reminds us, is that they were created by and for the ruling class, and what little information they contain about the working class is distorted or erroneous. And so precisely contrary to Wu's claims, "it is unimaginable that genuine historical drama, historical drama for the masses, could be created based solely on historical materials contained in books."[57] This objection and several others are addressed in Wu's second essay on the topic, titled "More on Historical Drama"[58] and published less than six months later on May 3, 1961, again in *Wenhui bao*. This longer, more strident essay responds to the first round of responses to "On Historical Drama" but continues to insist on historiographic evidence as the fundamental criterion for historical drama worthy of the name. "Which book did you see them in?" Wu asks of a critic defending a so-called history play featuring fictional characters. "Who recorded them? And where are these records?" In response to Xin, Wu concedes that pre-socialist historiographies contain little on the working classes

---

[57] Xin, "Jiantan," 274.

[58] Wu Han, "Zaitan lishiju" [More on Historical Drama], reprinted in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962): 276 - 288.

and what they do contain is distorted. He refuses, however, to conclude that they cannot or should not be used as the basis for historical drama, or that Marxist historical materialism allows playwrights to "fabricate or create historical fact based on theory or present day life experience."[59] The answer, Wu says, is not an outright rejection of historical materials but rather meticulous and meticulously critical engagement with these materials, guided by the tenets of historical materialism; that is, grounded in "the step by step work of analysis, research, and synthesis, working from what is extrinsic to what is intrinsic, extracting what is of value and discarding what is not." The answer for the playwright lies, in other words, in adopting the methodology of the well-trained, conscientious historian. "Even for an isolated historical event," Wu tells playwrights, "one must collect abundant quantities of historical materials…"[60] In passages like this we seem to be moving beyond epistemological and ontological disputes into what looks much more like disciplinary disputes and much more like (disciplinary) politics. Historical truths begin to look like esoteric truths accessible only to the historian, especially, Wu seems to say, when dealing with records that yield so little truth – "abundant quantities" are needed to learn anything of value about even a single event. Wu begins to look less like a humanist and official defending public interest as he understands it, and more like a historian defending his disciplinary turf, and disciplinary politics comes to look more

---

[59] Wu, "Zaitan," 279.

[60] Wu, "Zaitan," 282.

and more like a skeleton key to Wu's writings on historical drama. In the first essay Wu seems to be avoiding the notion of "historical truth" altogether despite its currency in related scholarship, and focusing instead on historical fact and historical evidence. He only mentions historical truth once, in the passage cited above, and then only in the phrase "the actual truth of history," with "actual" guarding against non-actual or imagined truths. In the second essay "More on Historical Drama," historical truth is mentioned in a positive rather than derogatory sense only as the outcome of the meticulous historical scholarship, to be distilled from the abundant quantities of historiographic material. The sentence continues, "Even for an isolated historical event one must collect abundant quantities of historical materials, examine them carefully and make them intelligible in order to obtain historical truth, the truth about people, and the truth about typical conditions."[61]

In "More on Historical Drama," before responding to Xin Xianxi, Wu first turned his attention to Zhang Fei, who in a separate article had argued, like Xin, that historical drama could arrive at historical truth without relying on the kind of historical evidence found in history books; rather the proper (Marxist-Leninist) standpoint (*lichang*) and viewpoint (*guandian*) would suffice to allow the playwright to "create characters in accordance with the potentiality of historical development,[62] and by so doing to arrive at historical truth. Wu says that if playwrights want to write

---

[61] Wu, "Zaitan," 282.

[62] *lishi fazhan de kenengxing*

history plays they need to know their history; Zhang says all they need is Marxism and a good imagination. Wu tries and fails to make sense of Zhang's claims, asking repeatedly where these imaginative recreations and knowledge of historical development can possibly come from if not ultimately from the historical records Zhang dismisses. He caps off his rejoinder with a parable drawn from the life of Ming Dynasty philosopher Wang Yangming:

> There once was a scholar who undertook to investigate the properties of bamboo, to which end he sat himself down in a bamboo grove and spent the next several days thinking. But his investigations came to naught, and in the end all he got out of it was sick. This scholar had his standpoint and viewpoint, and unlike Zhang Fei he even had a patch of bamboo; but nonetheless in the end he was unable to discover their laws of development.[63]

It is a crudely drawn comparison but one that is in some ways a distillation of the initial moment of this controversy and an example of its origins in discourse; or, put another way, an example of people talking past each other. In this parable Zhang, Xin and those like them who think historical truth can be attained without recourse to historical documents are likened to the ancient scholar trying to understand bamboo by sitting beneath it and thinking – by inward directed reflection rather than outward

---

[63] Wu Han, "More on Historical Drama," 281.

directed observation. For Wu there doesn't seem to be a categorical difference between the historiographic evidence that helps us reconstruct the past and the sensory evidence that helps us understand nature, if only because for all their shortcomings they are all we have. We can no more understand history by sitting and thinking than we can understand bamboo by sitting and thinking about it. The analogy between history and bamboo is revealing. If you want to understand history, Wu seems to be saying, stop your dialectical materialist speculations and just open your eyes, history is right there in front of you: in the libraries, in the annals and gazetteers, in the writings of the historians. But this only makes sense for someone surrounded by books, and it reveals the extent to which history, for Wu, is historiography. The other option, that history is somehow present around us in contemporary life or that we can grasp historical truth "based on present day life experience" is one that Wu will dismiss later in the same essay as dangerously subjective. "Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought teach us that theory is linked to praxis," say Wu, whereas in any attempt to discern historical truth from personal experience, "the formula becomes theory is linked to the self." The inaccessibility of history to the senses sends these two thinkers in very different directions: Zhang toward the need for reflection, even at the risk of subjective error, and Wu toward earlier historiography. To clarify somewhat the nature of this impasse it is enough to return to the fundamental opposition mentioned above between evidence and social life, or more precisely between "historical evidence" (*lishi genju*) and "social life of past times" (*guoqu*

shidai de shehui shenghuo), and to note their categorical incompatibility: we are not dealing here with two types of the same thing but with two different kinds of things. Evidence is evidence for or evidence of; it points elsewhere, or to a whole of which it is a part. Social life can be situated chronologically ("…of past times") but does not point outside itself; it is the origin and end of reference, the whole of which pieces of evidence are the parts. Wu appeals to evidence, which is of value because of what it tells us about that we cannot access directly, while Xin appeals to a social whole that cannot be accessed in its essentials by anything Wu counts as evidence.

The Problem with Historical Drama

The various positions taken in this debate over historical drama were described by the editors of *Xiju bao* [Drama Journal] in a two part series published in 1961 and republished in full in February 1962.[64] The four main points of contention, as summarized at the beginning of the report, are indeed "relatively broad" as the article puts it, giving some indication of how this controversy over historical drama might mutate and drift to other disciplinary territory. These points belong to political praxis (how the past may be put in service of the present), the philosophy of history

---

[64] Lu Mei, *Guanyu lishiju wenti de zhengming* [The Debate over Historical Drama], in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962), 85 - 95.
On Lu Mei, attributed author of the report and editor at Xi Ju bao, see https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%B2%81%E7%85%A4/5773747

and of art ("historical truth and aesthetic truth"), moral philosophy ("how to assess historical figures") and Marxist theory ("how to depict the role the masses in history"). A summary of the brief summary given in this article will help characterize this debate.

The first problem, "the past serving the present in historical drama," is introduced as a matter of what comes first: "Many comrades think that in order to make the past serve the present, one must select historical materials based on the current needs of the people, and approach all problems from the point of view of historical materialism, thereby uniting the practical educational value of historical drama with historical reality (*he lishi de zhenshi tongyi qilai*)."[65] The key here is that historians only decide what to study and what kind of information is needed after evaluating current needs, as if the past is a source of help for present day problems. This would rule out historical research done according to traditional, non-critical methods that prioritize past over present. It is the difference between listening to whatever the historical records have to tell us and looking to these records to help guide (or confirm) modern-day Chinese Marxist praxis. The article also notes a unanimous opposition to using historical fiction for satirical purposes, which was appropriate during previous periods when the powers that be needed roasting, but no longer. Here and elsewhere in these texts, satire (*jie gu feng jin,* using the past to mock the present) is deemed inappropriate, among other things because it "doesn't

---

[65] Lu, *Guanyu Lishiju*, 85.

rely on historical materialism for its educational value, but rather on metaphysics," in that it ignores the historical specificity of the two periods joined in any historical fiction (the setting in the past and the present day of the audience). Satire was appropriate during other periods, under KMT rule for example;[66] but mocking of the PRC is ruled out not only as unproductive but impossible: "A story can only depict one era, one type of society, and can never depict two eras or two kinds of society."[67] Seemingly obvious counterexamples aside, this seems to be an appeal to some notion of narrative unity. A play meant to satirize life under the KMT might be set in the distant past, but because it depicts an unjust and exploitative society like the one being satirized, would not fall afoul of this prohibition on depicting more than one type of society. It is as if social organizations deemed exploitative by the CCP are transhistorical, or ontologically identical, and therefore exist in the same abstract temporal period, extending across different historical eras. It appears that it is the fight against metaphysics that takes us deepest into metaphysics, which seems to be a broad term of abuse for anything deemed insufficiently dialectical and/or materialist.

The controversy over the relationship between historical truth and artistic truth centers on identifying what constitutes truth(s) and how much of a given sort is needed, or how much falsity can be tolerated in the name of art. "Everyone agrees

---

[66] Guo Moruo's *Qu Yuan* is cited as an example.

[67] Lu, *Guanyu Lishiju*, 86.

that historical fiction must have historical truthfulness,"[68] but everyone also agrees that artistic works must be given leeway to "imagine, fabricate, concentrate, outline and create" their characters. Some want to limit the use of "historical drama" to plays that analyze historical figures and events from a Marxist perspective, i.e. as embedded in a Marxist periodization scheme. Lacking this, historical fiction is effectively unmoored from history and stuck retelling stories that could occur and recur at any period.

The problem of how to assess feudal-era ruling-class heroes was one that was "particularly divisive." Some, like Wu Han thought that isolable virtues (patriotism, loyalty, courage etc.) were enough to make certain historical figures worthy of admiration and emulation regardless of circumstances. Others thought that assessment of historical figures should be based not on any personal qualities but on whether or not they "advanced social and historical progress," even if what constitutes historical progress was itself a matter of much debate among theorists, and could depend on fairly precise dating of events. An act on behalf of a polity (e.g. dynasty) deemed to be advancing the development of forces of production could be considered admirable (morally, politically) while the same act would be censurable once the dynasty had entered decline and begun to represent a reactionary force. These two views occupy

---

[68] "*lishiju bixu juyou lishi de zhenshixing*"; it is a strange and difficult-to-translate formulation that uses a nominalized adjective *zhenshixing* "truthfulness" instead of *zhenshi* which is commonly used on its own as a noun in these texts: "historical drama must possess the truthfulness of history."

the extremes at which on the one hand the entire focus is on the individual, independent of historical context, and on the other context completely engulfs the individual and wholly determines judgement. This problem of historical figures was also discussed in terms of understanding and depicting their limitations, and what indeed constitutes a limitation. This was an important part of awarding (moral) credit and blame: external limitations on the consciousness or actions of historical figures could potentially absolve them from blame or make them worthy of praise, e.g. for acts they thought at the time were justifiable and/or admirable. This is the question taken up in the debate over Wu Xun and also later in the debate over Hai Rui. These debates then can be situated squarely, without any awkward discursive angularity, within the theoretical and generational conflicts that characterized the historiographic revolution. But they also contain the seeds — logical if not always chronological — of the ensuing shift in the conversation towards matters of moral values and the value of the moral tradition.

The assessment of historical figures was discussed in numerous articles of the period and acknowledged to be "a particularly complex issue."[69] In an article from 1964, Wang Sizhi emphasizes the structural origins and role of honest feudal officials such as Hai Rui, who could be counted on to appear when the abuses inherent in

---

[69] Wang Sizhi, "Tanlun fengjian shehui de 'qingguan,' 'haoguan'" [On feudal era 'honest officials' and 'good officials'], originally printed in *Guangming ribao*, June 3, 1964; reprinted in *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966), 174.

feudal society became severe enough to threaten the stability of the social hierarchy. These officials helped mitigate conflicts, but in a way that was always consciously or unconsciously limited by their feudal worldviews, and ultimately could only help shore up imperial power.[70] Their talent lay in recognizing when the short term interests of the ruling elite (to extract as much as possible as quickly as possible from the peasantry), were coming into conflict with their own long term interests (to maximize extraction over the long term, something that required a measure of stability and longevity). Wang's point is that to praise officials like Hai Rui is to overlook both their structural origins and their ultimately conservative aims, a thinly veiled criticism of Wu Han's treatment of Hai Rui. Honest or upright officials could also be construed as epiphenomena of conflicts within the ruling class, making them little more than illusions.[71] In such a view the seemingly benevolent acts of a good official might be nothing but attempts to gain the upper hand for some faction within the court. Such views negate or explain away the apparent goodness or honesty of these representatives of the feudal ruling class, and stand in opposition to attempts by Wu Han and others to analyze history on the basis of something other than just class.

---

[70] Wang, "Tanlun fengjian," 178.

[71] Ma Lianliang, "Cong Hai Rui tandao 'qingguan' xi" [On Hai Rui and 'Honest Official' Plays], originally published in *Beijing wanbao*, June 23, 1961; reprinted reprinted in *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966), 84.

Constructing and Critiquing Ethical Exemplars

While this conversation on historical fiction arising from one of Wu Han's essays was going on, another closely related conversation about moral values, their class character and their continued relevance was opened by another of his essays. Similar topics had been discussed for similar reasons since at least the late 19th century, when the sclerosis of the Qing and the obsolescence of the entire imperial system and way of life it had organized for so long became increasingly evident and intellectuals of all types realized that only fundamental change could save China. In retrospect this other text, entitled "On Morality" (*Shuo daode*) and published in the party journal *Qian Xian* (Front Lines) in October 1962, is a nearly perfect argument starter: short, tendentious, and by no means thoroughly thought through, it reads almost as if it were designed to incite a backlash. [72]

It starts with a question — "Is morality eternal, conclusive, unchanging, the same throughout history?"[73] — which is quickly answered in the negative with the following quotation from Engels's *Anti-Duhring*,:

---

[72] Wu Han, "Shuo daode" [On Morality], in *Guanyu daode wenti de taolun* [The Debate over Moral Issues], Sanlian Shudian, 1965: 315 - 317.
The titles of these two texts by Wu are identical in translation but slightly different in Chinese: *Tan lishiju* vs. *Shuo daode*, both *tan* and *shuo* meaning "to talk about." Both titles suggest that the texts be read as an invitation to conversation.

[73] Wu Han, "Shuo daode," 315.

> We maintain on the contrary that all moral theories have been hitherto the product, in the last analysis, of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality has always been class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or ever since the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed. (pt. 1 chap. 9)

"So-called class morality," Wu concludes, "is nothing more than ruling class morality" and is wielded for the benefit of the ruling class. He supports this with another quotation from *The German Ideology*:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so

> that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.[74]

Far from being unchanging then, morality is a product of a specific history, the history of class society; and as a product of class society is used for the benefit of the ruling class.[75] Morality is historical, not eternal. So far so orthodox. "The question," Wu says, "is whether or not there are certain aspects (*mouxie bufen*) of feudal morality that are worth adopting today (*zhide jinren xiqu*)."[76] Wu thinks there are. "The proletariat can still incorporate elements of both feudal morality and bourgeois

---

[74] It is this passage that gives rise to what Abercrombie et al. call, in their book of the same name, the dominant ideology thesis. They propose two conflicting and equally plausible interpretations of the passage giving rise to a weak and a strong version of the thesis. In the weak version the subordinated classes possess their own culture, but due to the control of means of cultural expression and dissemination by the ruling class this working class culture remains largely invisible to external observers. In the strong interpretation the culture of subordinated classes is itself suppressed or absent, and the culture of the working classes is just the dominant culture in disguise. The dominant culture incorporates any other culture that might otherwise exist independently. The authors argue both that Marx and Engels, in their other work, rejected this stronger notion of incorporation, and that based on their own empirical research, both versions of the thesis are empirically false. They believe on the contrary that the role of ideology in unification and perpetuation of class society has been greatly exaggerated at the expense of what they call, quoting Marx, "the dull compulsion of economic relationships." For a summary, see Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis,* (London: Routledge, 2015), ″Forward" and "Introduction."

[75] There is much more to Engel's thinking on morality than is brought out in these debates. See Nielson 1983 for an overview of Engels on morality, with emphasis on *Anti-Dühring.*

[76] Wu Han, "Shuo daode," 316.

morality and by fundamentally transforming them, put them to use in service of proletariat politics and production." The traditional Chinese notion of loyalty for example, namely loyalty to the sovereign, is still present in New China as loyalty to the people and to socialism. Likewise, much of what came under the notion most commonly translated "filial piety" (*xiao*) is still important, claims Wu, like the need to be good to one's parents and take care of them when they are old. Even bourgeois values like financial fastidiousness and alertness to financial opportunities can be usefully incorporated into socialist management practices. Thus socialist values are "fundamentally different," yet somehow still the same.

This is a difficult position to maintain, and the details of Wu's fundamental transformation (*benzhi bianhua*) are left vague. All we learn from the first article is that it is this transformation that allows feudal morals to be put to use in service of working class governance and production. The next article, "More on Morality" (*Zai shuo* daode), clarifies somewhat.[77] First, Wu explains that when he advocates "carrying over" (*jicheng*) feudal morality he has in mind a critical carrying-over (*pipan de jicheng*), one that leaves out the exploitation and oppression that characterizes the landlord class. But it is a kind of critical carrying-on that is a necessity, not an option. The good bits of ruling class morality are lumped here with other "good things" (*youliang de dongxi*) that the working class can and must inherit

---

[77] Wu Han, "Zai shuo daode" [More on Morality], in *Guanyu daode wenti de taolun* [The Debate over Moral Issues], (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1965): 318 - 320.

from the ruling class if it is to avoid having to rely solely on the very limited material and cultural endowment of the old working class or on inventing everything anew. This reflects a deep acceptance of morality as a product of society, culture, the superstructure. We take lots of things from the past, knowledge and technology; artistic forms and techniques; not to mention material cultures and artifacts. Morality is merely one among them. This material and moral bricolage sounds like the kind of approach to historical objects and historical continuity that might appeal not only to historian but also to a practical revolutionary. Why not draw judiciously, critically on China's extraordinarily rich tradition of moral teaching, repurpose traditional moral principles, values, pedagogical methods to advance the cause of socialist revolution? We do the same with feudal or capitalist weaponry; we just point the business end at the exploiters rather than the exploited. Wu gives as an example the Great Man (*da zhangfu*) in Mencius who embodies feudal virtues that sound much like socialist virtues. He quotes: "..if you attain your ambitions for office, and then share your goodness with the people—or, not attaining your ambitions for office and walking alone on your own Path; if wealth and honor do not dissipate you, poverty and low status do not make you move from your principles; authority and might do not distort you: Then you can be called a "great man."[78] But Mencius' great man is great in the

---

[78] Wu Han, "Zai shuo," 319. Translation from http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/mencius.html

service of the feudal order; how then can these same virtues be adopted and adapted by communist revolutionaries whose aim is precisely the toppling of this order?

This critical "carrying over" is what he will try to do in his depiction of Hai Rui; but it is done by merely selecting the good and leaving out the questionable, and his play will come under attack among other things for beautifying (*meihua*) Hai Rui. This is accomplished in part by using the limitations of the stage and the aesthetic object to exclude complexities. It is discussed elsewhere in relation to the reassessment of Confucius himself in the early PRC. Confucius was appropriated by the CCP during the first decades of the PRC in various ways, sometimes approvingly — as an exemplar of order and self-cultivation — but more often as a sort of metonym for everything negative about old China.

> The communist establishment, assuming power in 1949, was simultaneously drawn to Confucius because his memory legitimated its hegemony and repelled by Confucius because his ideals opposed its revolution. This dilemma was resolved by "critical inheritance"—a form of collective memory that has no close Western counterpart. The term "critical inheritance" appears mainly in political and academic discourse, but it is universally understood to mean a deliberative process wherein both positive and negative aspects of historic figures are recognized. Critical inheritance upholds traditional authority because it sustains the dignity of the past while recognizing the need of

> successive generations to reevaluate it. Thus, Confucius can be revered—must be revered—by the institutions and individuals that reject his political convictions.[79]

What looks to Zhang and Schwartz like "collective memory" looks from the point of view of the 1960s like a hard fought and increasingly embattled theoretical position that was demolished in late 1965 as a going concern. How exactly to sustain the dignity of the past, and what that might mean in New China were two of the questions around which these controversies revolved.

Wu's approach has been to assume that moral values exist and have meaning and are knowable, and subsequently to ask how these values can be transformed to suit the needs of various social classes, i.e. used for or against certain things. We get a different perspective, however, if we ask the following: if these definable (isolable, nameable) moral values can be "fundamentally transformed" and used to destroy the order they were formulated to help protect, then what does this tell us about the nature of these moral values? And what does it tell us about the nature of these two seemingly antithetical social orders? Rephrasing the first question, what is this "morality" (*daode*) as it is constructed in these texts? Disregarding for the moment

---

[79] Tony Zhang and Barry Schwartz, "Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1997): 107.

previous conceptions of morality in China and elsewhere, what conception of morality emerges here?

These are the questions that come to the fore if this problem is approached instead as an encounter with the limits of class analysis. That the same moral principles/values can assist with the enrichment or the exploitation of a given social class — pointed in different directions — as Wu believes, means that they are not in fact class-dependent, or that their "class nature" (*jiejixing*) is fundamentally null. What Wu is left with is something distinctly human (in the most reviled sense of "humanism"), arising in class society but without class nature. Such things exist, of course, and like the aforementioned weaponry are appropriated willingly in the revolutionary struggle. But they are material things or organizational principles, institutions, strategies etc. and not strictly speaking matters of consciousness. Moral values on the other hand, going back to Kant, are the purest type of consciousness, the moral realm being the realm in which humanity achieves true freedom. Allowing the possibility of pure consciousness that is not class dependent, while not necessarily objectionable, raises problems that are very difficult to solve within the confines of a still fairly rigid base-superstructure worldview.

The alternative is to insist that morals are always and necessarily class dependent, and by extension that regardless of how similar they might appear, feudal loyalty (*zhong*) to the emperor is in fact fundamentally different from socialist loyalty to the party and people. But this kind of relativism makes it difficult to compare

different historical eras or to learn from history, and raises doubts about the possibility of historiography itself. The conclusions I seek will emerge only with the contextualized reading of Yao's essay in the following chapter. This chapter I hope has made the path from a quibble about performing arts nomenclature to the open conflicts of the early Cultural Revolution a little less puzzling. At stake was not just a generic designation potentially misleading to theatergoers, or a pedantic historian's wounded professional pride, but pressing issues of state legitimacy and cultural integrity, the meaning of morality, what could be salvaged from the past, and what it means to be Chinese. If China is to be a Marxist-Leninist state, must all that is not recognizably Marxist-Leninist in Chinese history be discarded? Can China be Marxist and still Chinese? These are questions that would persist into the GPCR and beyond.

III. Hai Rui

This study began as an investigation into the origins of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976), a period/movement/campaign/revolutionary sequence/outburst/debacle/series of events that has for various reasons remained intractable and under-studied.[1] The slashes suggest one reason: what exactly are we studying? How are we to categorize it? My project is interpretive rather than historiographic in nature, focusing on a clarification of categories and principles, discursive invariants, the shifting of ideological-tectonic plates etc., through a reading of published texts.[2] Finding a starting point was not difficult, since it has become customary to trace the beginning of the GPCR to a piece of literary criticism. Often

---

[1] These include of course restrictions on research and publication in the PRC, but also, throughout the world, uncertainty about how best to study the period,. This extends to the popular media as well, viz. an article from the Guardian (May 11, 2016) titled "The Cultural Revolution: all you need to know about China's political convulsion" that opened: "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a decade-long period of political and social chaos caused by Mao Zedong's bid to use the Chinese masses to reassert his control over the Communist party. Its bewildering complexity and almost unfathomable brutality was such that to this day historians struggle to make sense of everything that occurred during the period." See also the first chapter "An Enigmatic Upheaval" in Walder's *Agents of Disorder*.

[2] Even though the same impulse might push other people in the opposite direction — away from the past and the text, and towards subsequent events as they unfolded, with a minimum of textual mediation.

described as something like the "first shot fired in the Cultural Revolution,"[3] Yao Wenyuan's essay "On the New Historical Drama *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office,*" published on November 10 1965, was a critique of a history play by Wu Han, who in addition to being a prominent scholar and first-time playwright was also Vice-Mayor of Beijing in charge of cultural affairs. For Yao, Wu's play and other plays like it were "poisonous weeds" and evidence of the lingering bourgeois tendencies threatening the New China. It was Yao's open attack on a high-ranking official and his play that set in motion the chain of dismissals, new appointments and power shifts within the upper reaches of the party that led to the declaration in May 1966 of a cultural revolution targeting the "large number of counterrevolutionary revisionists … inside the party, government, military and various cultural spheres."

In existing studies, these power shifts and the disruptions they made possible have tended to obscure what was at issue in this initial incendiary debate. In earlier chapters, I elaborated the discursive characteristics of debates on historical drama and, by extension, the evaluation of historical figures. We see in this debate that the political stakes have become much higher. The play itself, *Hai Rui Dismissed from*

---

[3] Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama* (Berkeley: Univesity of California Press, 1990), 236. See also Luke Kai-hsin Chin, *The Politics of Drama Reform in China* (Ph.D diss., New York University, New York, 1980), 2; Tom Fisher, "The Play's the Thing: Wu Han and Hai Rui Revisited", in Jonathan Unger ed. *Using the Past to Serve the Present* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993) 9; Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoennhals *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press), ch. 1 "First Salvos." Eschewing military metaphor, Benjamin Schwartz calls it "the direct antecedent,"*China and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 238.

Office, is a melodrama about a virtuous Ming dynasty official and folk hero Hai Rui and his efforts on behalf of the commoners of a small village to bring the rapacious local gentry to justice. Hai Rui eventually succeeds, but his new enemies have enough influence within the central government to get him removed from his post, and the final scene ends with both the execution of one of the worst of the local tyrants and the departure of Hai Rui. The play was well received at the time of its release in 1961, even by Mao. Nonetheless in his critique of the play, written four years later, Yao is highly critical of the author's ideological wrongheadedness and the play's many errors, among which he counts Wu's sympathetic depiction of a feudal official and his portrayal of a peasantry that is powerless and in need of salvation. Yao's article is, among other things, one of the earlier examples of an aggressively class-based discourse that would become widespread during the GPCR, when politics would permeate everyday life to an even greater extent than before in the PRC.[4] In that sense it points forward, towards the future. It also, however, points backwards, with references to earlier critiques of Wu's play and to some of Wu's own theoretical and historical writing. The trail of citations linking text to text leads us back to the series of scholarly conversations in the late 1950s and early 1960s on the same issues Yao raises: the duty of the playwright, the relationship between feudal and socialist values, and the portrayal of peasants and workers, as discussed in the previous chapter.

---

[4] Yao's article "quickly became a basic manual for the prosecution of the CR and was probably the most widely quoted document in China during 1966." See Ansley, *Heresy*, 90.

Hundreds of Flowers and One Poisonous Weed

When Yao's essay started getting republished in other newspapers — when people knew something was afoot but not exactly what, much less which way the wind would eventually blow — it was often prefaced by a brief introduction in which the editors attempted to remain equally non-committal with respect both to the article's explosive claims and the equally explosive counterclaims sure to follow. One of these introductions summarizes the article as follows: "This article raises fundamental theoretical questions about whether or not historical materialism and class analysis should be used to judge historical figures and investigate historical events, things worth thinking seriously about."[5] What stands out in this otherwise typical appeal to the spirit of the Hundred Flowers is the "or not" — whether "or not" historical materialism and class analysis should be used (*yao bu yao yunyong*), as if there is some question about whether or not they are the best option or as if there were some other option. In retrospect it might seem somewhat surprising that such a possibility could still be raised as late as 1965. Another thing that stands out is that as a summary of the article's claims it is utterly untrue. The "or not" is in fact not a possibility that Yao is in any way willing to countenance, and the article itself raises

---

[5] *Guangming Ribao* editor's note, reprinted in *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966), 53.

no such questions; it only answers, unrelentingly, in the affirmative, in favor of class analysis. For Yao there is no analysis but class analysis; and literary analysis, for him, was class analysis of literary texts.[6] It would seem then that Yao is firmly on the red side of the red vs. expert debate, and the *lun* side of the *shi* vs. *lun* debate;[7] and yet, as we will see below, he engages with the historiographic tradition in ways that implicitly acknowledge the value of both the old texts and the expertise needed to interpret them.

The play at the center of this controversy was in many ways deceptively simple. The character types and outlines of the plot of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* will be familiar to anyone familiar with cowboy movies: the beleaguered residents of a small town are exploited and abused by wealthy landowners with political connections, until a new sheriff arrives to set things right. Wu Han was the first, but not the last, to admit that he was no playwright and that people seeking literary sophistication should look elsewhere. The characters are for the most part one-dimensional, the melodrama stark and relentless. The play opens, for example, with peasant woman Hong A-lan sweeping the grave of her recently deceased husband

---

[6] This is very clear from earlier writings like the "Ai Qing's Path," a political reading of Ai's poems spanning his entire career, showing him to be a bourgeois individualist through and through. See "Ai Qing de daolu — cong minzhu zhuyi dao fan shehui zhuyi" [Ai Qing's Path — From Nationalist to Anti-Socialist], *Xueshu yueqi*, May 5, 1958.

[7] For discussions of both see Chapter 2.

who died of a broken spirit while trying to reclaim land stolen from him by the Xu family. Hong sings:

"Your family depended solely on you
to sow the grain and plough the fields
by stars of morning and by moon at night,
rising early and retiring late,
raising cattle, tending mulberry and hemp,
slaving the year long,
paying exorbitant taxes, living a hard life,
enduring all kinds of harassment.
As things progressed in this way,
the sky suddenly fell in on us.
The Xu family back-dated the mortgage on our land.
They seized our crops and produce
and still demanded taxes on our land.
We wore our shoes out going to the magistrate
and pleading with the gentry.
You were so angry you spat blood
and fell sick from bitter hatred.
In just a few months you died.

We buried you before the mountain.[8]

As she is sweeping and singing, a particularly reprehensible son of the Xu family named Xu Ying appears and offers to take in both Hung Alan and her daughter Zhao Shaolan as concubines. Zhao Yushan, father of the deceased and grandfather of Shaolan, refuses. Not accustomed to being denied what he wants, Xu carries Shaolan off anyway, and his lackeys badly beat Zhao Yushan. Bystanders urge him to file suit and bring the Xu family to justice. The play's two central themes, the return of land and the suppression of local tyrants, are thus immediately present and intertwined from the beginning.

The scene shifts from the graveyard directly to the courthouse, where the corrupt local magistrate Wang Mingyu frets over the number of complaints people are making about the Xu family and worries that he's running out of ways to protect them. He is delighted, however, by the amount of money the Xu family has given him to prosecute the case in their favor. The trial of Xu Ying for the kidnapping of Shaolan ends with her grandfather Yushan instead being accused of giving false testimony and held in contempt of court, for which he is taken outside and beaten. He ends up dying from his wounds. The scene ends with a messenger announcing that Hai Rui has been appointed the new governor of the region. Hai Rui's reputation as a

---

[8] All translations from Clive Ansley, *The Heresy of Wu Han: His Play 'Hai Jui's Dismissal' and its Role in China's Cultural Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

virtuous official and enemy of graft is widespread, and his appointment is very unwelcome news for Wang and his associates.

During the third scene, Hai Rui appears in the town dressed as a commoner in order to mingle with the people and better understand the local situation. He hears from Hong A-lan about recent events and also of the high esteem in which he is held. His reputation has given the people hope and he is emboldened to fulfill his life's ambition and bring the wicked to justice:

> As governor of Jiang'nan, Hai Rui
> will nourish and protect
> the interests of the masses.
> I shall sweep
> all these evil officials away,
> repress the sinister, support the virtuous.
> In a word:
> I shall restore the fabric
> of our society and destroy the tyrants.
> I shall fulfill the ambitions I have cherished
> through my entire life.[9]

[9] Ansley, *Heresy*, 35.

This he does swiftly: the case against Xu is retried, Zhao is posthumously exonerated and Xu sentenced to death. In addition, Hai Rui decrees that all 200,000 mu of land taken from peasants by the Xu family must be returned.

In the meantime we learn that Hai Rui is old friends with the Xu family patriarch Xu Jie, a retired official who was a patron of sorts to a young Hai Rui, and who had interceded on his behalf once before when Hai's rigid and outspoken integrity angered the emperor. Xu's appeals to friendship and plea for leniency for his son are rebuffed:

> Xu Jie: Lord Hai, you really will not take our old friendship into consideration?
>
> Hai Rui: I administer the law of the emperor. I could not think of letting personal considerations take precedence over the public good!
>
> Xu: You cannot reduce Xu Ying's sentence?
>
> Hai: The Grand Tutor has said that I should uphold the law and maintain balance, treating princes and paupers absolutely alike! "If there was proof of the crime," it was to be handled "according to the law."
>
> Xu: There is no way that the return of the land can be avoided?
>
> Hai: Usurping land belonging to the people is absolutely repugnant to reason or emotion. Certainly it shall be returned!
>
> Xu: You cannot compromise even a little bit?

Hai: When it comes to upholding the law, I am absolutely implacable. I cannot compromise even one iota![10]

Hai's unwillingness to compromise incites Xu to hatred and revenge, and a plan is concocted to appeal directly, but clandestinely, to the highest levels of officialdom and accuse Hai Rui of oppressing the gentry, stirring up resentment among the peasantry and generally making a hash of things. The plan succeeds and Hai Rui's replacement, a former student of Xu Jie's and a friend to the gentry named Tai Fengxiang arrives in the town, ordering the execution of Xu Ying to be stopped. Hai protests:

Hai: The greatest evil in Jiang'nan is the gentry,
who seize the people's land,
make agriculture difficult.
These injuries must be corrected.
Only the land's return can keep the peace.
Tai: Silence! It is precisely because you have oppressed the gentry by making them give back land, terrorized the common people, and badly mistreated the gentry, that the Emperor has dismissed you.
(sings)

[10] Ansley, *Heresy*, 65-66.

One's relative rank or status in life

is a predestined matter.

It is entirely appropriate

that the masses should have a bitter time.

The distinction between good and bad

is precisely that between manual and mental labor.

You have studied the sacred books of Confucius:

that you should tyrannize the common folk

and treat a man with cruelty,

and even oppress the gentry,

is very wrong.

Hai: Who is wrong?

Tai: You are the one.

Hai: Silence!

(sings)

You say the common people are tyrannized,

but do you know the gentry injures them?

Much is made at court of the gentry's oppression,

but do you know of the poverty

endured by the common people?

You pay lip service to the principle

that the people are the roots of the state.

But officials still oppress the masses

while pretending to be virtuous men.

They act wildly as tigers

and deceive the emperor.

If you conscience bothers you,

you know no peace by day or night.[11]

The climax and end of the play sees Hai Rui refusing to complete the official transfer of power to Tai Fengxiang before Xu is executed, and the play ends with Xu dead and Hai Rui leaving office and leaving town.

The simplicity that makes the play fairly uninteresting from a literary point of view — nine sequential scenes with no subplots or digressions; static, easily identifiable character types (little character development or transformation); predictable clashing of good and evil — make it an effective conversation starter. Early responses were mostly positive, as Yao notes in his essay, and Mao himself was said to have congratulated Wu on his achievement as a first time playwright. One of the essays that Yao will cites applauds the play's balanced portrayal of Hai Rui[12] and

---

[11] Ansley, *Heresy*, 75-76.

[12] Deng Yunjian, "Ping 'Hai Rui ba guan'" [On *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], originally published in *Beijing Wenyi*, March 1961; republished *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966), 79.

its effectiveness as drama, lamenting only that the villains aren't quite villainous enough. Another[13] applauds the play's depiction of Hai Rui as a figure worthy of admiration.

The play was performed from February 1961 through September 1962 to general acclaim or at least approval. Among the earliest dissenting voices was that of Jiang Qing, who was working towards reforming Chinese theater and replacing art about feudal nobles and officials with art about the masses. Jiang may have had a hand in bringing the play's successful run to a close.[14] Wu Han continued to write about Hai Rui in the context of the debates covered in the previous chapter, but little else seems to have been said about the play itself until the publication of Yao's article in late 1965.

Much more complex than the play itself are the issues it raises and the claims that it makes, explicitly and implicitly. Most obviously, it is a play that presents the admirable actions of an admirable historical figure for the edification of the audience. It is curious, though, that despite the contemporary public discussion carried out by Wu Han and others on the evaluation of feudal officials, and whether or not there was anything worthy of admiration in their actions, and despite Wu Han's insistence that

---

[13] Qu Liuyi, "*Xiu wei gancao ji, gan zuo nan Baogong*" [Be Ashamed To Be Licorice Root, Dare To Assume the Role of Lord Pao of the South], originally published in *Beijing Wenyi*, March 1961; republished *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966), 80.

[14] Mazur, *Wu Han,* 306; see also Fisher, "The Play's," 7.

any such moral inheritance must take a critical view of what is being inherited, the play is utterly uncritical in its approach to Hai Rui. To someone familiar with the debates covered in the previous chapter, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* reads like an extended illustration of Wu's arguments that certain feudal values are worthy of continued esteem and that we have much to learn from upright feudal subjects, but without any of the argumentative detail of Wu's prose writings, and without any preemptive response to potential objections. And perhaps most importantly, with very little approaching the 'critical' pole of 'critical inheritance.'

The Origin and Impact of Yao's Article

Wu's play is a continuation of his involvement in the theoretical debates covered in previous chapters, one that shows rather than tells; but the show is not terribly convincing, and Hai Rui would become an easy target for people unsatisfied with Wu's championing not only of individual feudal era heroes but of the continued importance of learning from China's pre-socialist past. The est known among these dissenting voices was Yao Wenyuan. Like the article by Mao that began the discussion of *The Life of Wu Xun*, Yao's article on Hai Rui seemed, to most, to appear out of nowhere.[15] In the previous two chapters I have shown that it can in fact be understood as a somewhat belated contribution to a much longer debate comprising

[15] As did its author; see the excerpt from Liu Gengsheng below.

not only the more narrowly focused debates on historical fiction and traditional morality, but the debates over *The Life of Wu Xun* as well.

Recent Chinese research on Hai Rui includes the results of an oral history project undertaken by a group of professors in Shanghai,[16] among which is an engrossing account of the writing of Yao Wenyuan's article by Zhu Yongjia, who at the time was a young history professor at Fudan specializing in Ming history and a member of a historiography working group organized by the Shanghai Municipal Committee. Beginning in early 1965 Zhu helped Yao with historical research and analysis, but didn't know until he was shown the eighth and penultimate draft of Yao's essay that it was a criticism of Wu Han's *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office.* He describes Yao as always serious, almost cold, and strictly focused on the task at hand;[17] but nevertheless unsure until after the publication of his own article what exactly Mao intended it to accomplish. Information from other oral histories[18] and newly discovered documents related to the publication of Yao's article are concisely

---

[16] Summarized by one of the investigators Sun Luyao in *1965 pi Hai Rui baguan shijian yanjiu* [Research on the 1965 Criticism of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], *Shilin* (B11.2012) 47-52. Sun also reflects briefly on the nature and challenges of oral history in this context and the role of domestic research in global Cultural Revolution studies.

[17] He is also described as solitary to the point of being antisocial, unconcerned about personal appearance and hygiene, and a "purely political person," with a fondness, when not engaged in politics, for reading popular science and science fiction, including the novels of Jules Verne. See Li Xun, "Previously Unknown," 30.

[18] See Zhu Yongjia, "'*Ping xin lishiju Hai Rui baguan' fabiao qianho"* [The Creation and Publication of "On the New Historical Drama Hai Rui Dismissed from Office"], *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (6.2011), 29-35.

presented by Li Xun in "Previously Unknown Facts about *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*"[19] and at greater length in *The Age of Revolutionary Rebellion: A Draft History of Shanghai's Cultural Revolution Movement*.[20]

It is uncertain to what extent these oral histories produced four decades after the events themselves reflect the various narratives that have emerged in the meantime, and this is not a question I will take up — to what extent, for example, they consciously or unconsciously reflect the ongoing demonization of the Gang of Four, especially Jiang Qing, and the negation of what Russo et al. call the political innovations of the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, the outline of events that emerges from them is as follows. Jiang Qing (everything starts, logically if not chronologically, with Jiang Qing) first discussed the Hai Rui article with Yao Wenyuan in February of 1965 after determining that Li Xifan, Yao's counterpart in Beijing, was not up to the task — his proclivities were altogether too literary and Jiang wanted an uncompromisingly political critique.[21] Li and Yao are described as Mao's northern and southern "minions" (*xiao renwu*) respectively, and Yao is also described, here and elsewhere, as Mao's "golden cudgel." Mao was either aware of and involved in the writing process from the beginning — says Jiang Qing — or not

---

[19] Li Xun, *Hai Rui baguan: shangwei polu de shishi* ["Previously Unknown Facts about *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*"] *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (3.2010), 28 - 33.

[20] Li Xun, *Geming zaofan niandai: Shanghai wenge yundong shigao* [The Age of Revolutionary Rebellion: A Draft History of Shanghai's Cultural Revolution Movement], (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[21] Zhu, "Ping xin," 29.

— says Mao himself.[22] No one disputes that Zhang Chunqiao, the Shanghai Municipal Committee Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs, was involved from the beginning. Yao's first draft was finished in June of 1965 but was judged by Jiang Qing to lack depth and so was revised according to suggestions provided by Jiang and Zhang. This occurred repeatedly over the next several months, with copies of the article sent back and forth via airplane concealed in boxes of film reels. Zhang and Jiang used their open collaboration on the reform of Chinese opera as a cover for their work with Yao. The whole process was conducted with utmost secrecy, and the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee was not made aware of the essay until the seventh draft. On November 5 and 7, Zhang convened two meetings of scholars to discuss Hai Rui and Wu Han and share Yao's article, and discovered that most attendees were sympathetic to Wu and thought Yao's criticisms were too harsh. On November 8 the article was discussed by the full Municipal Committee in a meeting Zhu describes as relaxed to the point of being disorganized. Apparently many in the Shanghai leadership didn't expect the article's publication to have much impact: "The leading cadres in the Municipal Committee thought Yao was just critiquing the script of Wu's play. They had seen countless such criticisms since 1949 and especially since 1960 … They might have thought that this criticism was going to be the same as all the others: you criticize for a while, find a different job for the accused, and then

---

[22] Li Xun, "Hai Rui," 31.

you're finished."[23] But Mao had already decided that the article would be published, so even if they did have reservations, there was nothing that could be done. On the eve of publication there was much talk within the Municipal Committee about whether they should officially notify their counterparts in Beijing, but Zhang Chunqiao prevented that from happening. Zhang, however, did warn one of his old friends working as a secretary within the central party secretariat, "otherwise he would think I wasn't a good friend."[24]

The history of Yao's article is of interest here not primarily for the riveting behind the scenes intrigue, but rather what it suggests about the persistent and explosive relevance of the debates this study has examined. Among the things that made Wu Han a good target for this political offensive was his entanglement in these controversies that had proven so difficult to resolve.[25] The analogy implicit in the ensuing campaign links Wu Han, the traitor hidden in plain sight (and later, by extension, Peng Zhen and Liu Shaoqi) with Hai Rui. Such traitors can only stay hidden when their cover is deep — when there are excuses and rationalizations for their actions that allow them to operate without detection. The machinations required to produce Yao's article, here shown to be a collaborative effort involving policy makers and experts of various kinds, reveal the robustness not only of the power

---

[23] Li Xun, "Hai Rui," 32 - 33.

[24] Li Xun, "Hai Rui," 32.

[25] For details on these difficulties see the discussion of Wagner and Russo below.

networks in which Wu Han was protected, but also his own theoretical defenses. Recall that the play itself, subsequently designated as a poisonous weed, was also hidden in plain sight for years, disguised by general public approval and its own apparent innocuousness. This repeated failure by party leaders to recognize the enemy (Wu Xun, Hai Rui, Wu Han…) can be taken as evidence of the latter's insidiousness, but also of serious flaws in these leaders' powers of discernment or in the discursive framework they used to think through such issues. At any rate, the questions raised by *The Life of Wu Xun* had survived to 1965 as "matters for debate," even if the debate seemed to have stalled or reached a point of impasse. The ultimately successful campaign against the film announced that they were no longer up for debate.

Yao's article was published on November 10, 1965 and elicited a response similar in some ways to that engendered by Mao's article on Wu Xun over a decade earlier. A monograph on Hai Rui and Wu Han published in Taiwan in 2001 gives some idea of its effect on readers. The monograph's author Liu Gengsheng was a student in Beijing in the early 1960s when Wu Han visited his university for a guest lecture, and would later become a historian specializing in the Qing dynasty in Taiwanese universities. Among his many publications is a book titled *Hai Rui and the Cultural Revolution* that is both an explicit defense of Wu Han and an introduction to

the Hai Rui affair and mainland society for 21st century Taiwanese college students.[26] In the introduction he recalls what the beginning of the Hai Rui affair looked like to him and his classmates:

> In November 1965 I was in my fourth year at university and along with my classmates had just finished with the so-called Four Clean-ups movement (a political movement launched by Mao Zedong that turned out to be a preview of the Cultural Revolution, and that was later abandoned when the Cultural Revolution began) and returned to campus. It was six months to graduation and we were all busy writing our final theses. It was around this time that *Wenhui Bao* in Shanghai published Yao Wen-yuan's article "On the New Historical Drama *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office.*" Most students didn't read *Wenhui* so at first we didn't even know about the article; and besides we were using every spare moment to write our theses and not paying much attention to anything else.
>
> On November 29 in the library's reading room we discovered that all the major Beijing newspapers had rushed to reprint Yao's article, like a bunch of horses under the whip charging out of the starting gate. It was only then we

---

[26] Earlier in the introduction Liu makes his intentions even clearer: "I was compelled to investigate this instance of injustice [against Wu Han] by my own personal feelings. Like Wu Han, an upright man, I too may be misunderstood at times by the ignorant; but with the advance of history people will understand his greatness and brilliance and rue their own stupidity."

found out that Wu Han was being criticized. Since 1950, newspapers had regularly published articles critical of some authority figure or other — today the newspapers were expected to attack this scholar, tomorrow that professor. So we were used to these kinds of things and failed at first to appreciate how serious and how unique the present situation was.[27] In addition all the major Beijing papers were prefacing Yao's article with "Editor's Notes" emphasizing that this was an "academic debate," and that "everyone is equal before the truth," so most of my classmates assumed it was an academic discussion about upright officials and didn't pay it much attention.

But I liked history and I admired Wu Han so I did take an interest, and I read Yao's article carefully, every detail. It felt like a savage attack, not at all like an academic article. Yao Wenyuan? Where did he come from? I'd never heard of him; how dare he take this tone? "Yao Wenyuan" didn't sound like the pen name of some powerful figure. At that time high ranking officials pandered to their audiences with pen names like Wei Dong (i.e. protect *wei* Mao Zedong) or Xue Qing (learn from *xue* Jiang Qing). And this "Yao Wenyuan" was attacking someone like Wu Han!

---

[27] See Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 15: "Had Wu Han been a run-of-the-mill academic, a public campaign to attack him would have been a step with which intellectuals were by now all too familiar. All attacks by name on intellectuals as senior as Wu Han were supposed to be officially sanctioned by Peng Zhen's Group of Five. Since Peng Zhen was also the party first secretary and mayor of the capital, Wu Han as a vice mayor was doubly under his protection."

> Before the Cultural Revolution the people singled out for attack by Mao were specialized scholars like Zhou Gucheng, Shao Quanlin, Luo Ergang, and Ma Yinchu. But without exception, Communist Party officials were never publicly criticized, regardless of the severity of their crimes. Yet now this Yao Wenyuan, this unknown, was calling out the right honorable Vice Mayor of Beijing, cursing him right to his face. It was unprecedented. We went back to the dormitory to try to figure out what was going on but couldn't come up with any answers. We asked our professors and they didn't have any either. A mere six months before all the papers had been praising Wu Han and *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, these very same papers. How could they turn on him so suddenly?[28]

Like Yuan's remembrance of the beginning of the Wu Xun controversy, this was published — and presumably written — only many decades later, which must be borne in mind. But this should not diminish its value as a record of shock and rupture. That is, if we are reading it specifically for what it can tell us about the nature of the disruption arising from/linked to the events in question, then it is a kind of emotional accuracy we are interested in, and accuracy in the sense of accordance with verifiable facts is of secondary importance. It is discord — or disruption, a sense that something

---

[28] Liu Geng-sheng, *Hai Rui baguan yu wenge* [Hai Rui Dismissed from Office and the Cultural Revolution], (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing, 2011), 10 - 11.

momentous is happening — and not accord that we're after here; and Liu provides valuable clues.

The responses that Yao's article elicited were strikingly similar in some ways to those elicited 14 years prior by Mao's article on Wu Xun. But important differences are immediately apparent, as indicated by Liu. In the former case no name was given but none was needed since the editorial was backed by the unquestioned authority of the *Renmin ribao*, the party's central paper. It might have been any one of a number of high-ranking officials who wrote or instigated or approved the text, and even now it doesn't really matter if it was actually Mao's hand writing the words. But who, Liu keeps asking, is this Yao Wenyuan? What voice is this, where is it coming from? The question I've translated "Where did he come from?" (*hefang renshi*?) can, and I think should, be be understood both literally and figuratively. It is a classical or mock-classical formulation meant to express both genuine ignorance but also the irrelevance of any possible answer; not just "who is this guy?" but "who does he think he is?" Liu, and presumably many others, had never heard of Yao and certainly did not know about his connections to Jiang and Mao. In addition, the text originated in a Shanghai (not Beijing) based newspaper known for reporting on literary and cultural affairs and not from one of the larger and more obviously authoritative presses. Readers of *Wenhui* or followers of politically engaged literary criticism might have recognized Yao's name, but he was obviously not well known among the general public.

The campaign against Hai Rui also came out of nowhere, but in a very different way from the campaign against Wu Xun. In the earlier case, the occurrence was unexpected but the agent was known: geographically, politically, and ultimately personally. The attack on Hai Rui reversed the previous situation: instead of an authoritative voice from the center of power this was an unknown and unfamiliar voice from south of the Yangtze. How dare he? Liu's first reaction seemed to be defensive, of Wu and Hai Rui and the (revolutionary) authorities. Yao's article was paradoxically both shocking and familiar. We were used to these kinds of things, says Liu; scholars were being attacked in the press all the time. Wu was of course no ordinary scholar but it still could plausibly have been a merely academic matter; and Beijing's newspaper editors were trying hard to convince people it was just that, in order to stifle an inchoate event and preserve the status quo.

Hai Rui as Allegory and Theoretical Impasse

In contrast to the controversies examined in the two previous chapters, much has been written in English about Wu Han and Hai Rui. This section briefly surveys and summarizes this material, which tends to use the play and the ensuing controversy as a window on China's domestic political scene. One of the earliest and most typical of such studies was Clive Ansley's *The Heresy of Wu Han: His Play 'Hai*

Jui's Dismissal' and its Role in China's Cultural Revolution, published in 1971.[29] A useful survey of the basic facts about the composition and reception of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, with attention to chronology, can be found in the chapter "The Charges" (i.e. the charges against Wu Han advanced in Yao's article). This chronology is all the more valuable for having been written a half decade or less after the article's publication, even if it is generally hostile towards Mao and Yao. Ansley's analysis of these charges in the following chapter focuses on Wu Han's allegorical intent: that is, if and how Wu intended Hai Rui to be a play about Peng Dehuai and collectivization. Ansley finds scant evidence that it was not, and his analysis is a good example of the way Hai Rui has usually been discussed in the intervening decades. Much is made, for example, of Wu Han's association with Deng Tuo and Liao Mosha, two other writers whose work was harshly criticized just prior to the Cultural Revolution. The three had collaborated on a series of short newspaper columns entitled "Three Family Village" which were widely considered to have been satirical criticisms of Mao's policies and the China they had created.[30] Ansley acknowledges their satirical nature and places them in a tradition of Chinese satirical writing, while rejecting some of the more outlandish claims made against them once the Hai Rui controversy brought

---

[29] Clive Ansley *The Heresy of Wu Han: His Play 'Hai Jui's Dismissal' and its Role in China's Cultural Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971)

[30] MacFarquhar is skeptical about both the satirical intent and the contemporary impact of these articles. See Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Volume III The Coming Cataclysm*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 249.

them into the spotlight, e.g. that they were evidence of sympathy for Soviet revisionism, or collusion with foreign powers or "Chiang family monarchists."[31]

To a moderate degree in Ansley's book, and elsewhere much more completely, the analysis of the controversy surrounding Wu Han hinges on the creation of timelines and the determination of who said (or read) what when in order to establish plausible allegorical intent. So, for example, the timing and themes of Wu Han's articles on Hai Rui can be correlated to meetings and writings involving Peng Dehuai in such a way that they appear to be a (critical) commentary on current events. And this holds true to some extent for Wu's other writings as well. Ansley's undertaking is in this sense empirical in nature, as are other similar studies: "As one proceeds with an examination of the writings of Three Family Village however," he says, "the number of occasions on which articles with possible double meaning coincide with major political events is seen greatly to exceed the laws of chance." [32]

As for the other charges, Ansley appreciates the subtlety and incision of Yao's historical arguments but raises the question of their effect on the audience. Yao devotes much of the article to the details of Ming Dynasty socio-economics, and his arguments are convincing, but what good would they be to the average theater-goer?

---

[31] Ansley, *Heresy*, 104.

[32] Ansley, *Heresy*, 107. An unembellished chronology and contextualization of Wu Han's work on Hai Rui, not limited to *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, can be found in Tom Fisher, "The Play's the Thing: Wu Han and Hai Rui Revisited: *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 7 (1982), pp. 1- 35.

Here Ansley raises an important question, that of the relationship between the historical and fictional Hai Rui. Yao goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Wu has whitewashed Hai Rui; but even if that is true, what difference does it make? "The absurdity" of Yao's argument is demonstrated with reference to a character more familiar to western audiences.

> Suppose a North American social critic, perhaps motivated by disgust with the inequities of distribution on this continent, were to produce a play about the exploits of Robin Hood in befriending the poor and protecting them against their oppressors. Let us then suppose further that after the play has been produced, the author is subjected to attack by a political enemy who accuses him of falsifying history and "whitewashing" the character of Robin Hood. Contrary to the popular conception, says the playwright's attacker, the real Robin Hood wad a vicious thief who preyed on the public at large and was actually a lackey of the Sheriff of Nottingham. Therefore, by glorifying the character of Robin Hood, the author is actually subtly advocating the abuse of the poor. Yet if the conception the audience had of the historical Robin Hood derived entirely from the play they were watching, what possible relevance could the facts of history have for the author's political intentions? The critic

> in this hypothetical case would be making almost exactly the same charge that Yao Wenyuan is making against Wu Han.[33]

Ansley correctly points out that we must also take into consideration the effect that any of these disputes over historical hermeneutics would have had on audiences. If Wu Han is to be accused of whitewashing Hai Rui for his own political or pedagogical ends, it should be determined whether this whitewashing, even if convincingly carried out, would make any difference to audiences. "It seems that the key factor in this case would be the historical awareness of the audience watching the play. If those who saw a performance of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* were fully aware of the details of Hai's life, the requirements for satire would be fulfilled, and Yao Wen-yuan's accusation of falsifying history would have some meaning."[34] Ansley thinks that audiences were by no means aware enough for Yao's accusations to matter, and that Wu should not be held responsible for advocating dismantling of the communes and return of the land in the contemporary PRC (i.e. Wu's "satire"). Yao's 'charge' that Wu misrepresents, even misunderstands, Ming Dynasty history is a serious professional matter for a historian, but irrelevant for lay audiences with little detailed knowledge of the period.

---

[33] Ansley, *Heresy*, 102.

[34] Ansley, *Heresy*, 101.

This is true to some extent; but we can also understand this relevance not as missing altogether, just displaced: historical accuracy — not just factual but interpretive accuracy — is a minor problem with respect to audience reception but a major problem for generic attribution. If Wu Han, historian and sometime theorist of historical fiction, is calling his play a historical drama, then audiences can reasonably expect to have their historical awareness augmented by the performance rather than taxed or challenged. Ansley forgets, or fails to account for, the extent to which historical awareness is a product of just such entertainments as Wu's *Hai Rui*. A similar play about a similar but imaginary official presented as pure fiction might avoid such difficulties.

Wu Han and Hai Rui are mentioned and sometimes discussed in many other texts, but usually only in passing — often quite literally as a passageway into the Cultural Revolution period. So, for example, in *A Social History of Maoist China:*

> It is striking how many prominent critics of the Great Leap lost their lives to the Cultural Revolution. The first targets of the campaign against the cultural elite were Wu Han and Deng Tuo, both of whom fitted into this category. Wu's play, The Dismissal of Hai Rui from Office, and Deng's series of newspaper articles, "Night Talks in Yanshan," were read by many as references to Mao's failure to respond to the famine. Deng, the former editor-in-chief of the

> People's Daily, committed suicide on May 18, 1966, while Wu, the former Vice-Mayor of Beijing, killed himself in prison in 1969.[35]

This is the only mention of Wu Han or Hai Rui in a chapter on the early Cultural Revolution, where it serves as an almost parenthetical gloss on the violent reprisals that linked the Great Leap and Cultural Revolution. As such it is a highly compressed but still recognizable version of the most commonly encountered analysis of the Hai Rui controversy. A fuller version can be found in what is now a standard text on the era, MacFarquhar and Schoenhal's *Mao's Last Revolution.*[36] The section "The Campaign against Wu Han" opens the chapter titled "The First Salvos" and is followed by a section titled "Heads Begin to Roll." Over the course of four pages the play itself is only mentioned once in a highly condensed account that moves from the earliest origins of Mao's interest in Hai Rui to the "unleashing" of Mao's attack dog Jiang Qing:

> During the Great Leap Forward, frustrated by dishonest reporting of output figures, Mao had called on party cadres to emulate a forthright Ming official called Hai Rui and tell the truth. One of Mao's secretaries called on Wu Han to

---

[35] Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and China 1949 - 1976* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), 221.

[36] Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006) 15 - 19.

> write articles explaining just who Hai Rui was and what he had done. Among Wu's writings on the subject was a play commissioned by a Beijing Opera company, performed in early 1961 under the title *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. Mao expressed approval of the play at the time and later that year honored the author with an autographed copy of the latest volume of his Selected Works. But Jiang Qing had always argued that the play was in fact an attack on the Chairman's policies. Now at last, Mao had unleashed her to arrange a counterattack on Wu Han.

The remainder of the section is about the secret maneuvering that went into getting Yao's article written, the circumstances of its publication, and brief introductory portraits of Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan. More ink is spilled over the secret transporting of drafts of Yao's article back and forth between Beijing and Shanghai than about the play itself.[37]

Contemporary Chinese scholarship has also attempted to situate the controversy historically and socially. Xie Changyu, a professor from Anhui and author of "Why did Mao Zedong choose the criticism of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* to launch the Cultural Revolution"[38] thinks Wu's allegorical intent is clear and

---

[37] Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 17.

[38] Xie Changyu, "*Maozedong weishenme xuanze pipan Hai Rui Ba Guan zuowei wenhua dageming de qidian*" [Why did Mao Zedong choose the criticism of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* to launch the Cultural Revolution?] *Zhonggong Hangzhou shiwei dangxuexiao bao* (6.2013) 83-88.

situates Hai Rui as a literary intervention in the debate over the household responsibility system (*baochan daohu*). He says it wasn't until after Yao's article and Wu Han's response a week later pointing out the "logical loopholes" in Yao's argument (*luoji loudong*) (apparently reported in the *Guangming Ribao*) that Mao decided to intervene to keep the criticism of Hai Rui from derailing, and shifted the focus from Yao's literary and historical critique to "dismissal," with *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* an allegory of the fallout of the Great Leap. The importance of chronology for such arguments is apparent here as well: appended to the bottom of the first page of Xie's article as a footnote to the first mention of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* is an excerpt from the most recent edition of the official party history (*Zhongguo gongchandang lishi*, published by Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe), indicating that Wu only began writing about Hai Rui after he was encouraged to do so by Hu Qiaomu in 1959, and began *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* only after encouragement from a theater director in 1960.

Liu Fangzheng claims that the characters in *Hai Rui* are stereotypical to the point of being cartoonish (135): Wu Han was not kidding when he said he "doesn't understand theatre."[39] Liu is critical of the overall literary quality of the play, calling it quite dull, and specifically of the language and the implausibility of the play's

---

[39] Liu Fangzheng, "Xiju yishu de zijue yu juyu — Hai Rui Ba Guan de chuangzuo guocheng jiqi chanshi" [Self Consciousness and Discord in Dramatic Arts — The Creation and Interpretation of Hai Rui Dismissed from Office], *Lu Xun Journal*, (4.2018), 135.

chronology. The article also documents the efforts of the actors and directors involved with the production in shifting the focus of the play from land rights (*tui tian*), a potentially contentious issue, to the struggle against local tyrants, which effectively recentered the plot on Hai Rui's struggle to bring a rapist to justice. The latter was of greater appeal to audiences as it moved the narrative away from political and legal issues to a moral struggle between good and evil. Liu also points out that in opposing the land grabs of the local aristocracy Hai Rui was also quite obviously working in the interests of the central government, which was losing tax revenue, while intervention in the rape of a peasant woman was much less socially destabilizing and much more obviously a moral issue.

A departure from what I have outlined above as the typical approach to the play can be found in Rudolf Wagner's *Contemporary Chinese Drama: Four Studies*, which is a study not only of *Hai Rui* but of other historical drama from the period. Wagner situates Wu Han's *Hai Rui* within a new type of historical drama that arose after the Hundred Flowers and Anti-Rightist movements, one that both breaks with and returns to earlier traditions. These two movements disciplined if not eliminated many artists and intellectuals, and led to the future-focused realist literature of the early 50s being replaced in the late 1950s and early 1960s by historical drama;[40] but

---

[40] For a discussion of just such a future-focused realist novel, see Jen Macasek, "Collectivity as form in Zhao Shuli's Sanliwan Village," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Santa Cruz 2022) about "a model hero who valiantly struggles to bring his entire community into the socialist future."

this new drama was not, as with the previous socialist realist fiction, drama doing battle with the past in order to triumph over it and leave it behind. Instead these new dramas arose from "the insight that radical revolution and renaming has only obfuscated the continuity of the past,"[41] and as such was a return to what looked like older popular melodrama, with good guys and bad guys and little in between. The struggle for both internal and external transformation of the self and of the world that characterized social realist fiction of the 1950s was replaced by changeless characters colliding in easily understandable conflicts, and in which "reformers in the ranks of the ruling class at best obfuscate the fundamental antagonism."[42] These dramas, like *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, typically revolved around the public lives and/or private intrigues of officials and royalty rather than commoners, and were as likely to be sympathetic as condemnatory towards the feudal ruling classes; i.e. the class standing of the good guys and bad guys mattered less than their goodness or badness.

Wagner's diagnosis of how "the structure of the problem" changes with this shift from old realist prose fiction to new historical drama is worth quoting at length for the way it resonates — one of his key analytical terms — with the larger discursive breakdown Russo (see below) is trying to theorize:

---

[41] Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990: 240.

[42] Cf. the difficulties making accusations stick to Wu Xun, as discussed in the previous chapter.

> In the new historical drama, the emphasis on rationality, implied in the earlier prose texts as the binding code for all, has disappeared. In its view, the political center is occupied by politicians who spend their lives in power intrigues. The heroes entering this dark realm have to deal with its intricacies. Characters no longer change in the new historical drama; they constantly say and act out their very essence. If they are villains, they are so throughout, and the same is true for the heroes, the weaklings, the emperors. They are engaged in a power battle where no one is ever convinced by facts and arguments. Instead, the opponent is routinely executed, tortured, poisoned, slaughtered, or helped to the other world by some other means. This implies that the inherent Marxism of the authorial voice is abandoned as being inappropriate for the handling of both the very dark and the very bright sides of human behavior. It also means that the common argumentative code and institutional structure that Marxism-Leninism and the Leninist party doctrine had imparted to protagonists in earlier texts have disappeared.[43]

What Wagner is charting here is a breakdown (disappearance) of political rationality, or the unifying and unified Marxist Leninist discourse that prevailed in the early 50s prior to the Anti-Rightist campaign, and the return to internal (to the polity but also to the discourse) power struggle. The internal stasis and external clashes of the

---

[43] Wagner, Contemporary, 242.

characters who people the world of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* couldn't be further from the internalization of external struggles and transformations typical of the socialist realist novels of the earlier period, which present social conflict — between urban and rural, old and young, new and old ways of production and life — as what they were: crises of the self. Among many other things this shift might help explain, and perhaps excuse, the relative one-dimensionality of the characters and simple conflicts of the plot.

The implications of this breakdown are traced in more detail in Alessandro Russo's recent intervention in the study of the Hai Rui controversy contained in his *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, the culmination of several decades of sociological and theoretical work on the Cultural Revolution. The GPCR ended in what Russo calls an impasse: the innovations of the "active phase" (1966 - 68) were abortive but never aborted, and they lingered into the revolution's long and difficult-to-classify "tail end" (1969 - 76), during which other innovations of various sorts appeared and mass campaigns continued, albeit under the watch of omnipresent military officials intent on not letting things get out of hand again, and against the

indistinct but nevertheless looming backdrop,[44] more clearly visible in retrospect, of the rise of Deng's pragmatist faction bent on reaction and revenge. The most pressing theoretical problem facing Mao and his allies during what would be the last few years of his life was to figure out how and why things went the way they did — not completely wrong but certainly not right either. According to Russo the difficulty at the time was primarily a discursive one: "The main obstacle … was that the impasse remained inexplicable within the cultural horizon of the politics in which it had taken place."[45] Words and ideas were not up to the task of (re)inscribing events into even a generously enlarged Marxist discourse with Chinese characteristics. Russo is referring for example to the 'inconceivable' rise of workers' organizations independent of both state and party. Given that the party was explicitly a worker's party, "the very idea of workers forming autonomous organizations that could express their own political propositions outside the party was thus inconceivable." Theoretical and practical innovations like these raise the question of what exactly a dictatorship of the proletariat is meant to look like, and raise the prospect that it could look less like

---

[44] Nothing looms like capitalism. See the work of Mark Fisher for a variety of metaphors capturing the pervasive discomfort of life corralled by capital. E.g. "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity." Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 11.
This is something Mao saw all too clearly as well, as the looming probability — not just possibility — of revolutionary failure; cf. Alessandro Russo, "The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Positions* 6:1 (1998): 179 - 202.

[45] Russo, *Cultural Revolution,* 239.

workers loyal to a party-state and more like a party and state subordinated to the will of workers councils.[46]

For Russo this is an impasse that is still with us. In practical and tactical terms it may not be the same impasse faced by Mao and his followers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it shares a common ancestor. Reflecting on the relative lack of progress in coming to terms with the GPCR even at the end of the 20th century, Russo is led to conclude that "the epicenter of this predicament … is our present impasse in the 'historical understanding' of the Cultural Revolution."[47] Historical understanding here refers less to a chronological sequencing of events and establishment of chains of causation — difficult enough under the circumstances, then as now — but to a broader understanding of socio-political change, what he refers to as "a certain familiar relationship between history and politics."[48] It was this familiar relationship that was severed, or whose severance was first noticed, during the GPCR. Neither the Marxist theory and practice of class struggle and dictatorship of the proletariat nor the capitalist narrative of democracy, modernization and globalization seem adequate to the task of explaining the Chinese 1960s. There seems

---

[46] Which sounds, not coincidentally, much like Lenin's original and short-lived sales pitch for Soviet communism. These questions were to be addressed explicitly in the last campaign of the GPCR and of Mao's life, the "movement to study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat." For details see Russo, *Cultural Revolution,* Chapter 9, esp. 246 ff.

[47] Russo, "Probable Defeat," 181.

[48] Russo, "Probable Defeat," 179.

to be, in other words, a vague but unmistakable disconnect between what we know, or what we can say, about a future-focused politics and what we know about the past. Discourse breaks down, has broken, is breaking. It is a useful metaphor and a familiar feeling for anyone trying to explain things in words. But how exactly does this breakage occur? What breaks?

The impasse encountered in the debate over Hai Rui, says Russo, "coincided … with the opening of a divide between the political and historiographical discourses that was destined to deepen in the following debate."[49] At the core of this impasse was the political status and agency of the peasantry, an age old problem given new urgency with the end of the military struggles resulting in the foundation of the PRC. The People's Liberation Army was not only a fighting force but a new form of political and social organization that gave peasants a political existence that they had lacked. With the demobilization that followed the victory of the CCP in 1949 it was thus the continued political existence of the peasantry that was at stake in sequences as varied as the historiographic controversies over the depiction of peasant rebellion and the role of peasants in historical progress, the clash between Mao and Peng at Lushan, and the controversy over Hai Rui.[50] All of these Russo reads as symptoms of this problem of the peasantry, referring to the (transhistorical) question of the political

---

[49] Russo, *Cultural Revolution*, 24.

[50] Russo, *Cultural Revolution*, 37.

role of the peasant in both imperial and socialist China.[51] Linking the two, for our purposes, are the implications for socialist policy of the historiographic interpretation of peasant political agency (i.e. peasant uprisings). Russo discusses these implications in the context of an exchange between Jian Bozan and Qi Benyu on the role of the peasantry in historical progress and Jian's "policy of concessions," a debate that continued in some of the responses to *Hai Rui*.[52] Briefly, Jian's assessment of the role of peasants was a centrist position between those, like Wu Han, who either had little interest in the issue or who denied to the peasants any role as agents of historical progress; and, on the other hand, those who would put them at the vanguard of progress, despite their own lack of political (class) consciousness. Jian's own view was that peasant revolts did stimulate historical progress but only indirectly, by eliciting concessions or reforms on the part of the ruling class. Russo's conclusion, however, is that all of these positions were equally limited in that they "shared the idea that the logic of history decided the day over politics."[53] This is a backwards looking politics, in the worst possible way; worse even than "history for the sake of history." When Russo says "[Yao's article] brought to the fore thorny and unresolved political and historiographical issues of China in the early sixties," it is these issues to which he is referring. Ultimately historical materialism as understood in China at the

---

[51] See all of chapter 2 but especially 38 ff.

[52] Russo, *Cultural Revolution,* 39ff.

[53] Russo, *Cultural Revolution,* 46.

time was incapable of dealing with these problems, and their reemergence just prior to the Cultural Revolution is for Russo symptomatic of the former's inadequacies: "Historical materialism proved incapable of dealing with the dilemma posed by the political role of the peasants under socialism, as it did with the political significance of—the value judgment to be accorded to—peasant revolts in the history of China proper."[54]

If this is true, if the political existence of the peasantry is at the root of these controversies, it is not generally speaking at all obvious from the debates themselves.[55] To read the intellectual history of this period as emanating from and returning to the problem of the peasantry, or as somehow structured by this problem, is to read it as something that, except in cases like the debate over peasant agency outlined above, it is not. And this in itself is an example of the tendency illustrated

---

[54] Russo, *Cultural Revolution*, 46.

[55] The egalitarianism experienced by the soldiers in the PLA notwithstanding, the efforts during these years to nurture or liberate the political existence of the peasantry were often not appreciated by the peasants themselves, or were experienced as a kind of hardship if not punishment. Russo is an apologist for the grand political experiment that was the Great Leap Forward, during which peasants were given unprecedented chances for involvement but also squeezed harder than they ever had been before, and this in a society built upon a squeezed peasantry. Oral histories suggest that many peasants would have been happy to forgo political existence of this sort if meant they could have their kitchens back. Paradoxically then, Russo's attempts to put the problem of the political existence of peasants at the center of the theoretical impasse faced by early PRC intellectuals and policy makers blind us, in certain ways, to the (existential) experiences of the peasants themselves. And these latter, which so easily vanish in theoretical debate, are what often surface in the creation and reception of popular art forms.

earlier in this chapter to read Chinese texts allegorically; to uncover or invent something else to explain what is going on rather than posing this question to the texts themselves. If, as I suspect, the discursive breakdown that Russo finds at work in the discussion of the peasantry is the same one I see arising from the discussion of historiography and traditional morality, and that Wagner finds reflected in the changing nature of historical drama, then the problem of the peasantry is no more fundamental relative to this breakdown than any of the other specific debates in which it makes itself felt. There is a way of reading the various impasses (one of Russo's key terms) of the early PRC that acknowledges the importance of the issue of the political role of the peasant while also acknowledging the importance of other issues, both politically and historically. For example, Russo is rightly dismissive of many of the appeals to moral considerations, often part of "smokescreens"[56] meant to deflect from more pressing and properly political questions. This has, after all, always been a key function of moral discourse in China and elsewhere: it can be used to draw our attention away from the concrete towards the abstract, from the secular toward the eternal, always away from the political. Yet he also acknowledges immediately after that morality was "the most slippery terrain of the entire class-based conceptual framework." This is a very precise formulation ("most slippery") that deserves to be read quite literally: morality is a slippery terrain because things don't stick to it, they tend to slide around or off. What makes morality useful as a smokescreen is the

---

[56] Russo, *Cultural Revolution*, 59.

ability of moral discourse to transform current objective social and political problems into abstract subjective problems. So instead of discussing the political role of the peasants we find ourselves discussing greed, honor, courage etc. and concluding, perhaps, that the problem is a lack of virtue(s), making morality in some cases a false problem. Russo examines in detail one such use of morality as a diversionary tactic in an article written by Wu's colleague and ally Deng Tuo after the publication of Yao's article, meant to provide support to Wu Han by criticizing him on his treatment of issues that can be constrained to doctrinal quibbles over morality.[57]

But not every appeal to moral discourse is an evasion. The 'slippery' and de-historicizing nature of moral discourse allows links to be made between, for example, matters of grave concern for the fate of the nation (e.g. Russo's 'problem of the peasantry') and the lives of ordinary people; or a nascent political movement and the intellectual/political/moral authority of a universally respected critical intellectual (cf. the CCP's desperate attempts to appropriate the cultural prestige of Lu Xun, discussed below). The controversy surrounding Hai Rui can be read as many things, often reductively; and Russo gives us yet another way to understand what was going on behind the scenes (i.e. the struggle over the political existence of the peasantry). But the questions posed by the texts themselves, even those functioning as smokescreens, often give us clearer statements of other problems: what is to be our relationship to the past? what are we to make of yesterday's heroes? These are not questions for

---

[57] Russo, *Cultural Revolution*, 60.

which answers were, or have been, found; but they are not questions that should be dismissed or allegorized away.

Yao on Hai Rui: The Substance of the Critique

Given what it is or has become, how it has come to be spoken about, and what many people think it is, Yao's article is also remarkable for what it is not. It is not a character assassination, and it does not foreground the allegorical reading of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* that is often assumed to be its focus and goal.[58] Nor is it in any sense a rant or an appeal to emotion. Yao is nothing if not thorough and methodical, and his critique of Hai Rui is carefully structured, with a brief introduction followed by four named and thematically focused subsections.

Early in his article, Yao announces that the contest will be waged in large part on Wu's terrain, in the field of historical fact: "We are not historians," he says at the beginning of the second section, entitled A False Hai Rui (*yige jia Hai Rui*). "But," he continues, "from what we've read, the historical contradictions described in the play and Hai Rui's class standpoint in dealing with these contradictions are not consistent with historical truth [*lishi zhenshi*]." This might be surprising to those who know of

---

[58] In this reading, mentioned by Yao but only at the end of his article, Hai Rui's stand against the local tyrants for swindling or bullying the villagers out of their land echoes Peng Dehuai's opposition to Mao and the rapid collectivization during the Great Leap Forward. Like Peng, Hai Rui is brave enough to speak truth to power, and like Peng he is relieved of his duties for doing so.

this text only as a political assassination in prose and who might thereby be lead to expect a condemnation of Wu's play on doctrinal grounds. Instead what we get is immanent critique in a deep sense: not only does he let Wu's writing speak for itself, juxtaposing what it claims to be doing with what it accomplishes, he also confronts Wu Han in the field of his own expertise. In doing so he passes up several other more obvious and more direct means of undermining or demonizing Wu. The most common and most damning of these draws parallels between land reform in the Ming and land reform in the PRC and between Hai Rui and Peng Dehuai, the upright official deposed for opposing Mao before, during and after the Great Leap Forward, which entailed among other things an ill-conceived and unsuccessful acceleration of agricultural collectivization. In this reading Wu Han's play is an indirect but still fairly overt show of support for Peng and by extension a challenge to Mao's authority. This angle is mentioned only briefly by Yao at the end of the article.

He begins instead by noting the many writings Wu has produced praising and promoting the practical value of imitating Hai Rui and the overwhelmingly positive response the play has been met with in the press, even quoting one critic who likens the effect of Wu's depiction of Hai Rui on contemporary officials to that of a "big character poster," a wakeup call of sorts. Given all the fuss over the play Yao thinks we would be amiss not to look at it a bit more closely (*buneng bu renzhende jinxing*

yici yanjiu)[59]. Based on this short introduction alone, those unfamiliar with Yao's earlier work might not suspect the tenor of what is to follow, beginning with the first subsection titled "How does *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* Depict Hai Rui"? Like two of the remaining three section headings, this one poses the question to which Yao will respond, here in the first sentence. Quoting one of Wu's earlier writings on Hai Rui, Yao starts of the section claiming that "in this play, Comrade Wu Han gives us a Hai Rui who is completely perfect, completely noble and 'always thinking of the common people,' someone who 'is the savior of the oppressed, exploited, and downtrodden.'"[60] Damning criticism to be sure, that will be repeated and developed in what follows. This Hai Rui is so perfect that not only is he held up as the savior of the Ming dynasty masses but as a model for PRC cadres.[61] The perfection is not accidental, it was "meticulously planned" by the author, who uses the first three parts of this nine part work depicting the misery and desperation of the local peasantry, the better to set the scene for the arrival of the savior, disguised in plain clothes so that he can mingle with the people and listen both to their complaints and their anxious expectation of his arrival.[62] He is also the only hero in the story, and is surrounded by

---

[59] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian lishiju *Hai Rui baguan,*" (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1965), 1.

[60] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 2.

[61] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 2.

[62] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 2.

people who either hate him or don't believe in him,[63] while the peasants are depicted as passive and needy. The messianism is not lost on Yao, and is subject to thorough criticism.

The plot, according to Yao, revolves around the return of land swindled or otherwise stolen from its former owners. This is not an uncontroversial claim, since Wu himself had claimed in the introduction to the published version that the primary theme was the fight against the local tyrants; even though, as Yao points out, within the play the conflicts between the peasants and the tyrants — local gentry, primarily retired officials — center on land. Wu knows to be cautious when talking about confiscation and return of land since these had been contentious topics during the Great Leap Forward, and has detailed in his introduction the process of revision during which he shifted the focus, to his own satisfaction at least, away from the issue of land and toward that of the tyrants themselves. It is an unconvincing defense and Yao is not convinced. He clarifies the class stakes of this conflict over land by pointing out that it is a struggle between tenant farmers who have had their land stolen and the new, aristocratic owners; and in this fight "Hai Rui is completely on the side of the tenants," and will be the one to resolve the conflict in their favor, after which Wu will make it seem as though "all of a sudden this sharp class contradiction no longer exists," a claim he supports by quoting the joyful cries of the masses after

---

[63] With the exception, as Yao notes, of his mother, one of two characters, along with Xu Jie, who rise above melodrama.

the return of the land: "A brighter future lies ahead for us poor folk!" The plot ends with Hai Rui being dismissed, but not until one of the worst of the local tyrant princelings, the rapacious son of a retired official, is executed for his crimes, something with no basis in historical records but something that allows Hai Rui to leave town "head held high."

The claims made in section three, "What is *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* Arguing For?" and section four, "What is *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* Trying to Teach Us?" follow naturally from the analysis here in the first section: Wu creates an idealized, individual hero to act as savior to the common people (section one), suggesting (section three) that feudal officials are capable of thinking and working across class lines, on behalf of and in the interests of the working class; and (section four) that there is much to be learned from such an upright official in his fight against injustice. All of which is problematic, as we have seen from the discussions in the previous chapters of the debates on morality and history that preceded Yao's article — and to which this can now be read as a contribution — and all of which will be thoroughly negated by Yao.

Yao responds with familiar claims. "We know," he says at the beginning of section three, "that states are tools for class struggle, a means for one class to oppress another class. There are no classless states or states that transcend class."[64] This is fundamental to Marxism-Leninism, and as Marxist-Leninists "we must admit that the

---

[64] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 12.

feudal regime, including the officials who make it work, are tools of class struggle in the interests of the dictatorship of the landlord class." This is less an argument than an appeal to familiar authorities. He does acknowledge the existence of divisions within the ruling class and that especially during conflicts between "good officials" and "bad officials" (the quotation marks are Yao's) it can appear as though certain officials are working on behalf of the masses; but this is just an illusion "that has confused many peasants without experience in political struggle." He even cites Ming Dynasty sources documenting "good officials"[65] being sent to appease restive peasants as a prelude to more violent oppression. By depicting what is intra-class conflict between officials as inter-class conflict between landlords and peasants, Wu is masking the real contradiction and presenting what is merely an unintended consequence of this intra-class struggle, namely any benefits to the peasantry, as an end in itself. Paradoxically, in this view it is the "bad officials" who are on the side of history, since by sharpening inequality and class conflict they are doing more to hasten the downfall of the regime.[66]

The answer to the question posed in the section heading comes at the beginning of the following paragraph. When faced with these truths, "*Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* says to us: No! 'Good officials' are not instruments of the

---

[65] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 13.

[66] This is perhaps hinted at, unknowingly, in a play like this in which the villains are much more interesting than the hero.

dictatorship of the landed class, rather they work to serve the peasants." The depiction of Hai Rui described in the first section — a flawless savior for a passive and benighted peasantry — makes this clear. The implications for historical materialism more broadly are dire as well. "In *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* it is not class struggle that drives historical progress but 'good officials' that drive historical progress."[67] The temporality, or the historical stakes, of morality appear quite clearly here. If class independent virtues are accessible to the enemies of the working class, and allow them to further their own interests by occasionally and to a limited extent helping the working class, then we leave open the possibility that Yao correctly identifies here as the replacement of class struggle by the benevolence of some dead aristocrat.

By arguing that the play is about land and about class struggle — struggle between classes rather than struggle within a class — Yao is leaving open the possibility that Wu intended it as a rebuke to Mao for the treatment of Peng Dehuai and for the Great Leap Forward more generally; but he is also preparing the ground for section two, the only section not titled with a question, and the one hardest to reconcile with common interpretations of this article. It is not clear at first how section two, titled "A False Hai Rui," fits in, since as shown above the article seems to be complete without it. Yao has made his points, well within the framework of the debates analyzed in previous chapters, that is within the framework of early PRC

---

[67] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 14.

theoretical discourse and also within the framework of the play. These chapters form a concise but penetrating immanent critique: when held up to the truths of Marxism-Leninism, this Hai Rui is false. Feudal officials don't serve the people, they only serve the feudal regime. What looks like concern for the masses, a sense of true justice, benevolence etc. is an illusion.

It is a different kind of falsity that the second section demonstrates. "We are not historians," it begins. What follows is a very different kind of critique employing a very different rhetorical strategy, one much bolder in some ways than the critique that extends across the other three sections, trenchant as it is, because it purports to show that not only does Wu Han's play get politics wrong but history as well. Yao is challenging the historical analyses of one of China's most prominent historians. In the text the transition is motivated by the last paragraph in section one, here quoted in full:

> After watching this play, people have a strong impression that Comrade Wu Han has created a heroic figure that is far loftier (*gao da*) than those found in the many other plays and stories from the past that also extol Hai Rui. Comrade Wu Han has written a historical introduction to accompany the published version of the play and has provided copious historical evidence relating to the events surrounding Hai Rui's dismissal in an attempt to give people the impression that he has written his play in strict accordance with

> historical fact; nonetheless, one can't help wondering — could a hero like this really emerge from the feudal ruling class? Is this "Honorable Hai Rui" an artistic portrayal of the real historical Hai Rui, or is he someone that Comrade Wu Han has concocted out of his own imagination?"[68]

In this section it will be historical truth that is contested rather than doctrinal correctness; that is, the correspondence between the claims made about Hai Rui and the historical records rather than the correspondence with the truths of Marxism-Leninism. The analyses in sections 1, 3 and 4 leave unquestioned the correspondence between the staged Hai Rui and the historical Hai Rui. Even assuming that Wu's Hai Rui is an accurate reflection of the historical Hai Rui — his character, his motivations, his goals — this is a distortion of reality as understood by Marxists.

"We are not historians, but based on the materials we've read, the historical contradictions described in the play and the class standpoint adopted by Hai Rui in dealing with these contradictions is not in accordance with historical truth." In the analysis outside of section 2 the historical reliability of Wu's presentation of Hai Rui is unquestioned. It is the appearances themselves which are being examined and judged. But a different kind of falsity raises the possibility of a different kind of truth, not something that every ideology is comfortable with. If there are falsehoods other than Marxist falsehoods, are there then truths other than Marxist truths? This second

---

[68] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 4.

section, “A False Hai Rui," brings historical records to bear on the depiction described in section 1, showing the discrepancies between the staged Hai Rui and the historical Hai Rui. Ming Dynasty records, including writing by Hai Rui himself, are cited to show that: 1. Hai Rui did not in fact succeed in getting land returned to peasants, the most downtrodden segment of society, but merely to smaller landlords, small and medium sized land owners and rich peasants, all of whom either rented to or employed the peasants who worked the land; 2. He did not seek as his goal any kind of liberation for the local peasants; rather he was trying to stabilize the community and stem further unrest; 3. He was not acting on behalf of the people in his land policies, but rather on behalf of the regime and the enforcement of long-standing laws; 4. His opposition to predatory lending practices by local aristocracy was not out of concern for the poor but for imperial tax revenue; the more that peasants owe to private lenders the less they can give to the state; and since the lenders in this case were also often the tax collectors as well, conflicts of interest arise and prioritizing the collection of personal rather than public debts further eroded tax revenue; 5. His fight against local tyrants — proclaimed by Wu to be the central theme of the play — was not as successful as depicted in the play, and Yao suggests it wasn't ultimately successful at all, given that everything returned to normal after he was dismissed; and 6. Hai Rui was not "democratic" (*minzhu*), referring here in a general sense to sympathy with the masses. Yao quotes numerous texts written by Hai

Rui in which he complains about the backwardness, waywardness and dishonesty of the "knavish and rascally" local peasants.

Yao presents ample evidence from Hai Rui's own writings that it was stabilization rather than reform of the political order that Hai Rui was after.[69] To establish this Yao cites Ming dynasty land use and taxation data showing that only a small percentage of the population owned land — meaning that most farming was done on rented land — and that because of Ming Dynasty tax structure and the tax benefits given to former officials, this concentration of land in their hands was seriously impacting tax revenues. The evidence he presents is maximally damaging: Hai Rui is not a hero of the people, nor is he a fan of Southerners. Instead he thinks that the "crafty and fraudulent" people of Jiangnan are clogging up the legal system with frivolous lawsuits and should be taught a lesson with "seven or eight" of the crafty devils responsible executed publicly in front of the courthouse. And in legal cases spanning class lines that prove hard to adjudicate, the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the wealthy party: "When it is a matter of saving face, rather than offending local gentry I choose to offend against the common people, in order to preserve the hierarchy (*cun ti*)."

Wu's Hai Rui, says Yao, is a fabrication utterly unlike the real Hai Rui as we can know him from historical records. This fabrication was necessary because the real Hai Rui was nothing like the well-intentioned savior of the masses that we see on

---

[69] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 5 ff.

stage. Even so, the fabrication is itself objectionable, since it depicts a passive peasantry awaiting a savior and a feudal official seemingly taking the side of the working class.

We can understand "A False Hai Rui" in two ways: to mean that the Hai Rui in Wu Han's play is not an accurate depiction of the historical Hai Rui, and/or that the historical Hai Rui is not as he seemed to be. Yao gives his readers reason to believe that both claims are true, citing authoritative historical documents that depict the historical Hai Rui as very different from Wu Han's theatrical Hai Rui, and also as no real friend of the people. He is, Yao demonstrates, exactly what we would expect: as a human, conflicted and fallible; and as a high ranking government official, primarily concerned with order and the functioning of the state. As such he was not as bad as many officials, but neither was he a model of socialist virtues.

Whether or not Yao's arguments are convincing to China historians is another matter, one I am not qualified to judge. The important point is that in this section the argument is shifted into an entirely different terrain, that of the professional historian, and Yao is taking on Wu Han in the latter's own area of expertise, attempting to demonstrate that without the correct Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective not only will the politics turn out wrong, the history will too. Only from the proper class standpoint can the historical truth be revealed, the truth contained in, or concealed in, the facts themselves. Yao starts with facts that Wu must also have known and draws very different, and convincing, conclusions, backed up with data on Ming Dynasty

taxation and land ownership. Yao's claims exemplify the insights to be gained from class analysis of historical records and the obfuscatory effects of a concern with morality in the abstract. Wu Han has not given us a historical Hai Rui, as we might expect from a historian, but an updated retelling of the Hai Rui legend, a morality play to inspire and instruct. And in doing so, he has violated his own injunction on grossly falsifying history. One of Yao's examples suffices, and it is one of the biggest departures from accepted historical fact. In Wu's play the local tyrant princeling Xu Ying is executed at the order of Hai Rui, while in the historical records Xu was merely banished, and not even by Hai Rui but by a different official, a political enemy of Xu Jie.[70] Such falsifications, along with the misleading depiction of the effects of land redistribution, are very damaging to Wu's attempts to show that Hai Rui was morally admirable and that his moral actions made an impact. More important, however, is Yao's demonstration, rather than just assertion, that redness can conquer expertise. In this section Yao (with help from his support team) outmaneuvers an academic expert on his own terrain, relying on class analysis and what might be called a Marxist hermeneutics of suspicion.

The distinction between the first and third sections on the one hand and the second on the other is marked, if not explained, by the very first sentence of the third section, which stands alone as its own paragraph: "Even though this is a false Hai Rui, let's take a look (*women jiu kan yi kan*) at what this artistic depiction is telling

---

[70] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 9.

us."[71] After the historical discussion we are back to the play itself for the remainder of section three. Section 4, "What is Hai Rui Dismissed from Office Trying to Teach Us?," is distinctive in bringing together these two strands of argument. For an idea of what remains to be done, in Yao's estimation, we turn to the last paragraph of the preceding section: "We hope that Comrade Wu will take his depiction of Hai Rui and the principles that it embodies and assess them on the basis of the Marxist-Leninist principles that Comrade Mao Zedong has clarified for us again and again, and will discover thereby that Comrade Wu Han has actually substituted a landlord and bourgeois worldview for a Marxist-Leninist worldview, and has substituted class reconciliation for class struggle." Wu has gone overboard. His Hai Rui is too perfect and too lofty; not though, in comparison with the historical Hai Rui but only with the Hai Rui people are used to, in stories and on stage. Throughout this section Yao emphasizes the overwhelming and seemingly unattainable moral purity of Wu's Hai Rui, something characteristic of melodrama, here meaning simply any story with exaggerated moral or affective oppositions. Yet if Yao is right, and if the stories to which he refers were also melodramatic, as some of them must have been, and Wu's Hai Rui really does stand out for his virtuousness, one can only wonder why. Why not opt for a slightly more balanced portrayal? In his self-criticism Wu seems to be trying to shift some of the blame to the feudal historians whose work he has uncritically appropriated: "In order to make the character of Hai Rui more emphatic I took all the

---

[71] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 12.

things that the historians of the feudal ruling class had written in praise of Hai Rui and, without careful analysis, transposed them intact to my own writings about Hai Rui, including my play."[72] This is no excuse, he realizes, and he takes responsibility for "sitting at the same table with feudal historians." It is a surprisingly naive and very damaging admission, and this paragraph suggests that if Wu's Hai Rui weren't so perfect and lofty then maybe people would not have these doubts.

Yao on Mao on Lu Xun

I conclude by examining a short and generally overlooked section toward the end of Yao's article, and in so doing take up a thread that will be developed for the remainder of this chapter. Anticipating Wu Han's objections to the claims he has made thus far, Yao speculates:

> Perhaps Comrade Wu Han would say: Granted it is wrong to learn Hai Rui's return of land or redressing of grievances, we can at least learn his spirit as "a great man" who "stands on the earth with his head reaching to the sky," and to "oppose today's bureaucratism as he opposed the hypocrites in old days."[73]

---

[72] Wu Han, "Guanyu Hai Rui Baguan de ziwo piping" [Self-criticism on *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], *Beijing ribao*, Dec 12, 1965.

[73] Yao Wenyuan, "Ping xinpian," 20. Translation modified from https://www.marxists.org/archive/yao-wenyuan/1965/november/10.htm.

After acknowledging the validity of such objections and that bureaucratism must still be opposed, Yao takes up the Hai Rui's other virtues:

> As to Hai Rui's "uprightness," "heroism" "masculine virtue" and "opposition to the hypocrites," it is first necessary to determine their class content—for what class do they work and against what class are they directed. These concepts are interpreted by different classes in different ways, and we cannot discard their class content and regard them in the abstract. "Uprightness" or "heroism" have specific class meaning, and are fundamentally incompatible with the revolutionary or militant character of the proletariat. We want to quote once again the statement made by Comrade Mao Tse-tung to explain a couplet from a poem by Lu Hsun:
>
> Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers
>
> Head-bowed, like a willing ox I serve the children.
>
> Comrade Mao Tse-tung said: "The 'thousand pointing fingers' are our enemies, and we will never yield to them, no matter how ferocious. The 'children' here symbolize the proletariat and the masses." We must face the enemies with "a scornful frown," but serve the children with heads bowed like a willing ox. If we depart from so definite a class standpoint or class

> viewpoint today, describe "uprightness" and "great man" in the abstract, even call those who "serve the children with the head bowed like a willing ox" the "hypocrites" and those, who coolly defy with a scornful frown the proletariat and the working people, "upright" persons and use such "self-respect" to demand a "return land," a "redress of grievances," an "opposition to today's bureaucratism," and a "dismissal of officials" for the sake of the working people—then where shall we lead people to?

Yao is finally taking up here the starkest form of the question fueling the debates covered in the previous two chapters: are there class independent moral virtues? He answers immediately in the negative: the first thing we must do when considering these or any other virtues is to determine their class content, something they always already possess. To do otherwise, to discard their class content, would be to make them abstract. Class content here is taken to be what makes them concrete or linked to actual class-riven society, and to remove them from their class context is to make them abstract. Yao uses the term "abstract" in the sense here explicitly of unmoored from the correct class standpoint, or from any class standpoint; but the two converge — there is no legitimate class standpoint other than the CCP's.

What follows though is not a theoretical engagement with this question or gesture toward the preceding debates, but an evasion. The issue is being sidestepped, but in a specific and telling way. Yao states an uncontroversial, orthodox view — that

moral virtues always have a class character — then appeals to Mao, or rather to Mao's reading of one of Lu Xun's poems. Yet Mao's reading does explicitly what Yao says must not and cannot be done: it abstracts moral virtues, removing them from their sociopolitical framework, uncritically adapting and adopting them for a very different struggle. This is seen more clearly in the source of Yao's citation, the penultimate paragraph of the published version of the Yan'an Talks, here in McDougall's translation:

> Since we must join in the new era of the masses, we must thoroughly resolve the question of the relationship between the individual and the masses. Lu Xun's couplet,
>
> > Stern browed I coolly face the fingers of a thousand men,
> > Head bowed I'm glad to be an ox for little children.
>
> should become our motto. The "thousand men" are the enemy, we will never submit to any enemy no matter how ferocious. The "children" are the proletariat and the popular masses. All Communist Party members, all revolutionaries, and all revolutionary workers in literature and art should follow Lu Xun's example and be an ox for the proletariat and the popular masses, wearing themselves out in their service with no release until death. The intelligentsia must join in with the masses and serve them; this process

can and definitely will involve a great many trials and hardships, but as long as we are resolute, these demands are within our grasp.

Without even knowing anything else about Lu Xun's lines — neither Mao nor Yao gives us any further information — it is clear that they could as readily be given a reactionary reading, or a completely depoliticized reading, or any number of other readings. Mao's reading hinges on a fairly simplistic allegorical substitution that is made possible by Lu Xun's text, but only along with a number of other readings. "In this couplet, the writer juxtaposes two identities, his public persona as a fearsome critic and his private role as a devoted father absorbed in child's play, to suggest that these conflicting identities were equally parts of him."[74] An examination of the rest of the poem from which this couplet has been extracted confirms this possibility.[75] Regardless, Yao's "definite class standpoint" exists only in Mao's reading, and only as a result of the abstraction made possible by the class independent values/virtues

---

[74] Gloria Davies, "Lu Xun in 1966: On Valuing a Maoist Icon," *Critical Inquiry* 46 (spring 2020), 515 - 535.

[75] Born under a bad sign, what can I do?
I have my head knocked before I dare even roll over in bed
With a worn hat shading my face I pass through downtown,
Carrying wine in a leaky boat.
Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers,
Head-bowed , like a willing ox I serve the youngsters
Hiding myself in this world of my small attic,
Why should I care about the cycling of seasons!

translation adapted from Huang Hsin-chyu ed. *Poems of Lu Hsun* (Hong Kong: Joing Publishing, 1979), 17.

depicted in the verse, broadly a resoluteness in the face of criticism and willingness to debase oneself in service to others, or just a gentle-hearted fondness for children.[76] As is well known Lu Xun's relationship with the Party was complex, and there is nothing about Lu Xun's class loyalties that is clear from an orthodox Marxist point of view.[77] Indeed at times it seems as if Lu Xun was an ally only in the sense that my enemy's enemy is my friend.

Mao's reading is a simple allegory — a substitution, "enemies" and "the masses" substituted for "men" and "children," not only depicting the speaker an adult protecting and serving children but duplicating the powerful/powerless dynamic of Wu Han's play. That is, when used as a Communist slogan, as they often were,[78] these lines effectively place the speaker (here Mao) in the place of Hai Rui. What brings clarity to this ambivalent poem by an ambivalent thinker is Mao's simplifying reading, a simple allegory with its dual metaphorical substitutions, one made possible by the existence of the very thing, class independent virtues, it is meant to refute. It is a strange choice of literary example in these two texts (Mao's and Yao's) that are otherwise so aware of political implications; strange moments of blindness among

---

[76] Davies gives reason to believe that "children" here is not meant to be read figuratively or allegorically at all, but may refer to Lu Xun's child and his playmates. See Davies, "Lu Xun," 530, footnote 63.

[77] See for example the introduction "The Sage of Modern China" in Gloria Davies, *Lu Xun's Revolution: Writing in a Time of Violence*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1 - 21.

[78] Davies, "Lu Xun," 530.

insights; and it suggests another allegorical reading of Wu Han's play and of the entire Hai Rui affair, one in which the party is indeed the savior of the people. Lu Xun's commitment to the communist cause is a major article of faith in contemporary China, as it was in the early PRC and before. Mao's reductive allegorical reading of the poem is more than just an appropriation of its themes, an abstraction of an idea; it is a way of creating a link with a historical figure, modern China's most important and most incisive culture critic; or of importing the values for which he stood across political-economic boundaries.

Yao's argument thus ends with a refusal to confront directly the issue of class-independent moral values. This is made more explicit shortly after:

> Comrade Wu Han has stubbornly publicized the theory that historical plays must bring the "good virtues" of some characters of the feudal age "deep into people's hearts to form a component of socialist and communist morality." We are not going to discuss here the problem of morality (which is also a problem much confused by the bourgeois scholars, writers, and philosophers). But if the thoughts and deeds of Hai Jui are considered as "components" of communist morality as *The Dismissal of Hai Jui* preaches, what then is the use of studying the thought of Mao Tse-tung; ideological remolding; becoming one with the workers, peasants, and soldiers; revolutionization; and labor transformation?

If, Yao says, we can learn all we need to know from studying feudal history, do we even need Marxism at all? New China (*xinhua*), so it was claimed, has broken with the past in the every important way, and there exists a fundamental incompatibility between old and new, marked by the words themselves: what we call old is what we reject, and what we call new is not like the old. Yao's dismantling of Wu's positions on history and morality leave little of traditional historical hermeneutics intact. History is henceforth to be read, suggests Yao, in order to understand ruling class deception and recognize the enemy in the guise of friend; to understand and draw inspiration from the suffering of the masses; and for the occasional evidence of resistance and revolt.

Is there any use for the past other than as a negative example? Mao himself was known to be a student of classical historiography and literature; but he was also (at times) a dialectician, able to see not only actualities but positive and negative potentials. Yao's analysis of Wu's play proceeds in a most undialectical way via accumulation of evidence, like the criminal proceeding that it is, with the defendant in absentia. Wu Han's fabrications and misinterpretations and Hai Rui's failures and shortcomings are presented as final and factual, rather than part of a global and national history that developed according to dialectical laws, in which the old is present within rather than replaced by the new. In suggesting that communist morality is incomplete without the best elements of feudal morality Wu Han is also guilty of

neglecting the dialectic in favor of transhistorical transmission of reified values, isolated from their social context. The attack on Wu Han resolves, if at all, only into these two poles of yet another opposition.

In the debates that followed the publication of Yao's essay, what emerged asYao's most damaging claim was that Wu's play was a veiled commentary on collectivization, the Great Leap Forward and the dismissal of Peng Dehuai. In that context, the moral, historiographical, and textual issues raised in this dissertation become secondary if not irrelevant.

As Liu Gengsheng's reaction to the publication of Yao's essay showed, the latter's impact would have been felt even by people uninterested in any of the issues under discussion, be they historiographical, moral, political. The most urgent question at first might have been simply, as Liu said, who does this guy think he is? The event that was the Hai Rui affair began as a series of very serious accusations aimed at the center by an unknown voice apparently outside the center, revealing to casual readers and politicos alike that all was not as it seemed. The appearances — of consensus, unity, stability — that the regime had tried to maintain in the wake of the Great Leap were merely appearances, and something was amiss. What exactly that was no one knew in late 1965.

Yao's attack is devastating, and it devastated. Read as a belated intervention in previous debates it is a very efficient take down of one attempted redemption of a feudal era hero. But we search Yao's essay in vain for answers to the questions that

lingered after the previous debates on historical fiction and traditional morality and that linger still, albeit inverted by the contemporary situation. In today's China Yao, Jiang Qing, the rest of the Gang of Four and the faction they led in the 1960s and 1970s have been thoroughly refuted, negated, and demonized. Their class militancy and intransigence in the face of reformism are most unwelcome within China's new harmonious society and rightly considered incompatible with the Chinese Dream, an unimaginative marketing campaign for authoritarian neoliberalism. Yet there is much to learn from their lives and their work, including values that if appropriated critically and separated from their own historical limitations might still have value for us.

Bibliography

Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner. *The Dominant Ideology Thesis.* London: Routledge, 2015.

Andreas, Joel. *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Ansley, Clive. *The Heresy of Wu Han: His Play 'Hai Jui's Dismissal' and its Role in China's Cultural Revolution.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971.

Besio, Kimberly. "Gender, Loyalty, and the Reproduction of the Wang Zhaojun Legend: Some SocialRamifications of Drama in the Late Ming." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 40.2 (1997): 251-282.

Brodsky, Claudia J. *The Imposition of Form: Studies in Narrative Representation of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Brown, Hubert. "Tao Xingzhi: Progressive Educator in Republican China." *Biography* 13, no. 1 (1990): 21-42.

Bulag, Uradyn. *The Mongols at China's Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

Chin, Luke Kai-hsin. *The Politics of Drama Reform in China after 1949: Elite Strategy of Resocialization*. Diss. New York University, 1980.

Clark, Paul. *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Coombs, Nathan. *History and Event from Marxism to Contemporary French Theory.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Davies, Gloria. "Lu Xun in 1966: On Valuing a Maoist Icon," *Critical Inquiry* 46 (spring 2020): 515 - 535.

Davies, Gloria. *Lu Xun's Revolution: Writing in a Time of Violence.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Dirlik, Arif. "Chinese Historians and the Marxist Concept of Capitalism: A Critical Examination." *Modern China* 8, no. 1 (Jan. 1982), 105-132.

Dirlik, Arif, "The Problem of Class Viewpoint versus Historicism in Chinese Historiography." *Modern China* 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1977): 465-488.

Eoyang, Eugene. "The Wang Chao-chün Legend: Configurations of the Classic," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 4.1 (1982), 3-22.

Edmunds, Clifford. “The Politics of Historiography: Jian Bozan’s Historicism.” In *Chinese Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship*, edited by Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek and Carlo Lee Hamrin, 65-108. Cambridge: Harvard Universtiy Press, 1987.

Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie.* London: Repeater Books, 2016.

Fisher, Tom, "The Play's the Thing," in Jonathan Unger ed. *Using the Past to Serve the Present.* Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.

Goldman, Merle. *Intellectual Dissent in Communist China.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

He Chengyun, "*Liudong de gemingxing: lun 20 shiji yilai shehui bianqian zhong de youmin jieceng jiqi yanjiu*" [Revolutionary Vagrancy: Vagrancy amidst Social Change in the 20th Century]," *Shanghai dangshi yu dangjian*, June 2020: 36 - 41.

He Qiliang and Wang Meng. "From Wu Xun to Lu Xun: Film, Stardom, and Subjectivity in Mao's China (1949–1976)." *Modern China,* April 2021: 1 - 26.

He Shide. "*Dianying wuxun zhuan de yinyue tongyang yingshou piping* [The music for the film *The Life of Wu Xun* should also be criticized]. *Renmin Ribao*, July 6, 1951.

Holm, David. *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Hong Zicheng. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature.* Leiden: Brill, 2007.

Huang Hsin-chyu ed. *Poems of Lu Hsun.* Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1979.

Hulswe, A.F.P. "Origins and Foundation of the The Chinese Empire" in Harold Kahn and Albert Feuerwerker, *The Ideology of Scholarship: China's New Historiography.* Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1968.

Irving Robert J. "Implementation of Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks" the *Subei* Base Area – The Chen Dengke Phenomenon", *Asian Studies Review*, 40:3, 360-376.

Jian Bozan. “Cong Xi Han de heqin zhengce shuodao Wang Zhaojun chusai” [From Western Han Marital Alliance to Wang Zhaojun’s Departure for the Frontier]. Guangming Ribao, Feb. 5, 1961.

Joseph, William A. *The Critique of Ultra-Leftism in China, 1958 - 1981.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984.

Judd, Ellen R. "Prelude to the 'Yan' an Talks': Problems in Transforming a Literary Intelligentsia." *Modern China* 11, no. 3 (1985): 377–408.

Kahn, Harold and Albert Feuerwerker, "The Ideology of Scholarship: China's New Historiography." Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968.

Koselleck, Reinhart. Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985.

Lee, Leo Ou-fan. "Literary trends: the road to revolution 1927—1949," in *The Cambridge History of China: Vol 13 Republican China 1912-1949*, edited by John K. Fairbank and Alber Feuerwerker, 421 - 491. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Lei, Daphne P. *Uncrossing the Borders: Performing Chinese in Gendered (Trans)nationalism.* Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 2019.

Li Huaiyin. *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

Lin Handa. "*Weishenme jintian haiyao piping wuxun"* [Why we still need to criticize Wu Xun today], *Renmin Jiaoyu*, no. 7 (1951): 26 - 29.

Liu Fangzheng. "Xiju yishu de zijue yu juyu — Hai Rui Ba Guan de chuangzuo guocheng jiqi chanshi" [Self Consciousness and Discord in Dramatic Arts — The Creation and Interpretation of Hai Rui Dismissed from Office]. *Lu Xun Journal*, (4.2018), 133-137.

Liu Zhijian. “Guanyu Hanguan Qiu de pingjia wenti: yu Jian Bozan tongzhi shangque” [On the Assessment of Hanguan Qiu: a Response to Commrade Jian Bozan]. *Guangming Ribao*, May 7, 1961.

Lu Mei, *Guanyu lishiju wenti de zhengming* [The Debate over Historical Drama], in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962. 85 - 95.

Luo Di. "Learning the New Culture: Rural Literacy Education in Shanxi in the 1930s and 1940s." In *The Routledge Handbook of Revolutionary China,* edited by Alan Baumler, 185 - 201. London: Routledge, 2020.

Ma Lianliang, "Cong Hai Rui tandao 'qingguan' xi" [On Hai Rui and 'Honest Official' Plays], originally published in Beijing wanbao, June 23, 1961; reprinted reprinted in *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966), 84.

MacFarquhar, Roderick. *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vols. 1-3*. London: Columbia University Press, 1974.

MacFarquhar, Roderick and John K. Fairbanks eds. *The Cambridge History of China: The People's Republic. Volume 14 Part 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

MacFarquhar, Roderick, and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008.

Mao Zedong. "On Contradiction." In *On Practice and Contradiction*, edited by Slavoj Zizek, 67 - 102. London: Verso, 2007.

Mao Zedong, "Pay Serious Attention to the Discussion of the Film The Life of Wu Hsun," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 57 - 58.

Mazur, Mary G. *Wu Han, Historian: Son of China's Times*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2009.

McDougall, Bonnie. *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art: a Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary.* Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan: 1980.

Meisner, Maurice. *Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

Ministry of Culture Party Committee and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Party Committee, "Guanyu dangqian wenxue yishu gongzuo ruogan wenti de yijian" (Draft Proposals Concerning Some Current Problems in Literary and Art Work) *Communist Party of China*, Feb. 11, 2016. http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66669/4493568.html

Pang, Laikwan. "Between Will and Negotiation: Film Policy in the First Three Years of the People's Republic of China." In *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas,* edited by Carlos Rojas, 472 - 489. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Pepper, Suzanne. *Radicalism and Educational Reform in 20th Century China: The Search for an Ideal Development Model.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Picowicz, Paul. *China on Film: a Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy.* Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2012.

Postone, Moishe. "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to 'Holocaust'." *New German Critique* (Winter 1980), pp. 97-115.

Raffoul, François. *Thinking the Event.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.

Rosen, Michael. “The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology.” in *Morality, Reflection and Ideology.* ed. Edward Harcourt, 21- 43.

Russo, Alessandro. *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Russo, Alessandro. “How did the Cultural Revolution End? The Last Dispute between Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, 1975.” *Modern China*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (May 2013): 239-279.

Russo, Alessandro. "The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Positions* 6:1, 1998. 179 - 202.

Schram, Stuart. *The Political Though of Mao Tse-Tung.* New York: Praeger, 1963.

Schwartz, Benjamin. *China and Other Matters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Selden, Mark. *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Strauss, Julia. “Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and after, 1949-1956.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 188 (2006): 891–912.

Sun, William H., and Faye C. Fei. "Rewriting History on China's Stage in an Intercultural Context." *Modern Drama* 35, no. 1 (1992): 65-71.

Sun Yu, "*Wo biandao dianying Wuxun Zhuan de jingguo"* [My experiences writing and directing *The Life of Wu Xun*] *Wu Han Wenshi Ziliao,* 2011 vol. 4: 14 - 20.

Tsai Wen-hui. "Mass Mobilization Campaigns in Mao's China." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 21- 48.

Wagner, Rudolf G. *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. *What is an Event?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Walder, Andrew. "Actually Existing Maoism," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 18 (Jul 1987), 155-166.

Walder, Andrew. *Agents of Disorder.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019.

Wang, Q. Edward. *Inventing China Through History: the May Fourth Approach to Historiography.* Albany: State University of New York Press: 2001.

Wang Sizhi, "Tanlun fengjian shehui de 'qingguan,' 'haoguan'" [On feudal era 'honest officials' and 'good officials'], originally printed in Guangming Ribao, June 3, 1964; reprinted in *Guanyu Hai Rui baguan de taolun cankao ziliao* [Reference materials on the debate over *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*]. Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue, 1966.

Wang Xiaoping. "Re-integration of Culture and Politics: A Re-interpretation of Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks." *Critique*, 45:3, 387-407.

Wang Zhouyi. *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951 - 1979.* New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2014.

Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Susanne. "On Shi and Lun: Toward a Typology of Historiography in the PRC," *History and Theory* 35.4 (1996): 74–95.

Weitz, Eric D. *Creating German Communism 1890 - 1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State."* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Wemheuer, Felix. *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949 - 1976.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

White, Hayden. “Marx: The Philosophical Defense of History in the Metonymical Mode.” in *Aesthetic Marx*. London: Bloomsbury 2017.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Witke, Roxanne. *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977.

Wittvogel, Karl. "The Marxist View of China" *The China Quarterly*, No. 11 (Jul - Sep 1962), 1 - 20 and 12 (October–December 1962) :154–169.

Wu Han “*Guanyu pingjia lishi renwu de yixie chubu yijian"* [A Few Preliminary Remarks on the Evaulation of Historical Figures], reprinted in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962. 125- 132.

Wu Han, "Tan lishiju," [On Historical Drama], Republished in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962. 265 - 270.

Wu Han, "Zaitan lishiju" [More on Historical Drama], reprinted in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962. 276 - 288.

Wu Xiaoru. "Xuexi Wang Zhaojun de dushu zhaji" [Reading Notes on the Wang Zhaojun Question]. *Guangming ribao*, June 9, 1961.

Xia Yan. "*Cong Wu Xun Zhuan de pipan jiantao wo zai Shanghai wenhua yishu jie de gongzuo*" [Reflections on the Criticism of *Wu Xun Zhuan* and my Work in the Shanghai Arts Community]. *Renmin ribao,* Aug. 27, 1951.

Xiao Jin. "*Xin shidai ruhe xuxie 'jiu gushi' — dui dianying Wu Xun Zhuan jiqi pipan de zai shenshi"* [Rewriting 'Old Stories' for a New Era — a Reappraisal of the Film *The Life of Wu Xun* and its Criticism]. *Dagndai Wentan*, no. 4 (2012): 26 - 31.

Xiao Tianzhi, "*Wu Xun lishi diaocha ji yu xin shixue"* [The Historical Investigation on Wu Xun and the new historiography], *Lishi jiaoxue xiaban yuekan*, vol. 10 (1951): 114 - 116.

Xie Changyu, "Mao Zedong weishenme xuanze dui *Hai Rui Baguan* de pipan zuowei fadong wenhua dageming de tupokou" [Why did Mao Zedong choose the criticism of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* to launch the Cultural Revolution?], *Zhonggong Hangzhou shiwei dangxuexiao bao* (6.2013) 83-88.

Xin Xianxi, "Jiantan lishiju" [A Brief Discussion of Historical Drama], reprinted in *Lishiju lunji: diyi ji* [The Historical Drama Debates], ed. Xi Ju Bao Editorial Board. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962. 271 - 275.

Xiong Baishi. "*Guanyu Wu Xun de jizhong cuowu guandian*" [On Several Incorrect Ideas about Wu Xu"

Yang Er. "Does Tao Xingzhi's Praise of the 'Wu Xun Spirit' have any Positive Value?" [*Tao Xingzhi xiansheng biaoyang Wu Xun jingshen you jiji zuoyong ma?*]. *Renmin ibao,* May 16 1951.

Yang Jun, "Guanyu fadong pipan dianyin 'Wu Xun zhuan' yun dong juece guocheng

de kaosuo" [On the Policy Considerations Motivating the Campaign to Criticize the Film 'The Life of Wu Xun'] *Ershiyi shiji*, (71) Feb 2008.

Yao Wenyuan, *Ping xinpian lishiju Hai Rui baguan.* Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1965.

Yin Hong and Ling Yan, *Xin Zhongguo dianying shi* [A History of Chinese Cinema: 1949-2000] Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2002.

Yuan Ying. *Fengyun Ceji: Wo zai Renmin Ribao fukan de suiyue* [Notes from Stormy Times: My Life at the People's Daily Supplement]. Beijing: Zhongguo dang'an chubanshe, 2006.

Zhang, Tony and Barry Schwartz. "Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1997): 189 - 212.

Zhang, Ailing, and Andrew F Jones. "A Chronicle of Changing Clothes." *positions: east asia cultures critique,* 11, no. 2 (2003): 427-441.

Zhang Xudong. "Reflections on the Historical Context and Political Philosophical Implications of Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art." *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China,* no. 1 (2019): 122–146.

Zhou Jianren. “Xianshuo Zhaojun Chusai” [Reflections on Zhaojun Chusai]. *Donghai*, Vol. 11, 1961.

Zhou Yang, "Wenyi zhanxian shang de yichang da bianlun" [A Major Controversy on the Arts and Literature Front] *Renmin wang* Feb. 11, 2016. http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/8090/8092/20020515/729155.htm

Zhu Yongjia, "'*Ping xin lishiju Hai Rui baguan' fabiao qianho"* [The Creation and Publication of "On the New Historical Drama Hai Rui Dismissed from Office"], *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (6.2011), 29-35.