

Propaganda/Seduction and Narrative/Dancing in Adaptations of a Popular Chinese Tale, *The White-Haired Girl (Baimao Nü)*

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1.

The White-Haired Girl (Baimao Nü) is one of the most well-known tales in the PRC, but there are just three primary versions. One is the village opera created in Yan'an and first performed in 1945. Another is the feature film made in 1950, one year after the establishment of the PRC. The third is a ballet version that was recorded and released as a film in 1972, and which was wildly popular during the Cultural Revolution. However, even before the village opera version was made in 1945, *The White-Haired Girl* had circulated widely as a legend in northern China, which means that we can probably say there are really four versions of this popular tale.

The village opera version of *The White-Haired Girl* tells the story of Xi'er, a country girl who must endure a miserable life. On the eve of the Chinese New Year, Xi'er's father, an honest but weak man, commits suicide after unwillingly sealing a contract that allows Xi'er to serve at the landlord's estate. She is taken by force by the landlord and his followers, is raped, and becomes pregnant. Meanwhile, Dachun, Xi'er's fiancé, is driven out of the village. Xi'er manages to escape from the landlord's estate and goes to live deep in the mountains for years, where she bears the landlord's child. It is during this long period in the mountains that her hair becomes white. Dachun, who has left the village and become a Communist soldier, returns, retrieves Xi'er from a cave, and overthrows the landlord. Xi'er, who had become a white-haired 'ghost', becomes 'human' again.

Scholars have long discussed differences among adaptations of *The White-Haired Girl*, with most concentrating on the role of Communist propaganda and the ideological changes that appear in the story. For example, the heroine's changing from a white-haired 'ghost' in the 'old society' before Communist rule into a 'human' in the 'new society' under Communism was absent in the primitive legend. It was added by Communist artists when they produced the village opera version in Yan'an. Moreover, in the village opera version, Xi'er believes at first that she will marry the landlord who raped her, but this part was cut from the film version because her trust in the landlord did not reflect the 'class struggle'. In the ballet version, this part, including her bearing of the landlord's child, was completely deleted; Xi'er is strong enough to never be raped by the landlord and of course has no wish to marry him. The transition toward 'class struggle' can be seen in Xi'er's father, too. No longer a weak man, his death in the ballet version was rewritten to emphasise that he died fighting tooth and nail against the landlord and his followers.

Here, I would like to spotlight a different approach to adaptations of *The White-Haired Girl*. Meng Yue suggests that we focus on changes in the tale's narrative rhetoric rather than on its content. It is indeed important for us to examine the politics-oriented changes among adaptations, but Meng urges us to direct our attention to the parts relating to what she calls 'civilian ethics' or 'apolitical practice'. For instance, in the village opera, the death of Xi'er's father was set on Chinese New Year's Eve, which had not been specified in the folk legend. The despotic landlord's decision to collect debts on New Year's Eve is unforgivable, and does not follow common practice. Through this rhetorical change, the landlord is positioned as an enemy of the people and 'civilian ethics' before he is an enemy of Communist forces. Another rhetorical change is that Xi'er is violated before the Buddhist altar of the landlord's estate, which shows the landlord to be guilty ethically rather than politically; that is to say, he is an enemy of the people's ethics, and so naturally, he becomes an enemy to Communist forces as well (Meng 1993).

2.

The above approaches share the same frame of reference in that they focus on the ideological and political effects that result from changes among adaptations of this tale. Meng's sharp-eyed viewpoint lays special emphasis on the rhetorical aspects of the changes, but since these changes are consciously made by Communist artists, Meng's analysis does not escape from an ideology-/politics-oriented frame of reference.

Instead, I would like to emphasise the differences in genre that emerge within the adaptations. Village opera, known as *xin geju* in Chinese, which translates as 'new opera', is a complex mix of modern Chinese new drama (*Huaju*), local Chinese songs and melodies, and Western music. This means that the village opera version of *The White-Haired Girl* contains both the local (popular story, songs, melodies) and the Western (new drama, orchestra music), or we may say it contains both popular and high art. But first, let us turn our attention to the connection between narrative and genre. In addition to blending local and Western, village opera blends elements of reality, what we might call 'narrative', with musical elements, which we might call 'non-narrative'. The film and ballet adaptations tend to emphasise one or the other. Whereas the film is a realistic portrayal that calls attention to the story's narrative qualities, the ballet is musical and highly stylised, spotlighting its anti-realistic aspects. I would now like to discuss both the film and ballet versions to illustrate this point.

As a feature film, *The White-Haired Girl*, made in 1950, is inevitably bound up with the norms and rules of classic cinema that asserts its rights to 'reality'. Wang Bin, one of the film's two directors and the man primarily responsible for this work, refused to use the actress that portrayed Xi'er in the village opera version. Instead, Wang Bin chose Tian Hua, who was born and raised in the countryside, to be the film's heroine. She was a raw recruit, completely new to movies and acting. Moreover, Wang Bin shot on location in the villages of Ping Shan in northern China, where the folk legend had been circulating. It is clear that Wang Bin intended to make a feature that adhered to the standards of the day, namely natural performances, continuity from shot

to shot, and rational narrative development. All of these rules governed this film.

However, if we watch the ballet version after Wang Bin's feature film, we will certainly be surprised by the sharp transformation in style. Beyond the obvious difference in form between film and ballet, there is a change from provincialism to modern mode. Xi'er, who is characterised in the feature film as an unrefined country girl, becomes a prima ballerina who must dance strictly according to ballet's highly refined norms and techniques. The story in the film was already considered 'revolutionary', and the ballet version was even more so due to the way it emphasised 'class struggle'. In addition, the changes from film to ballet concern movement from unrefined to refined, from a realism-oriented country girl to a prima ballerina who first of all belongs to 'high art', to the category of the Western and the modern. Yes, Xi'er is still a country girl in character, but when we witness Xi'er and her fiancé Dachun dance together on New Year's Eve soon after Dachun visits the shabby house where Xi'er and her father live, how can we stop ourselves from humming along? There is nothing that conveys Communist dogma as the screen is dominated by the norms of ballet. We see the ballerina's long legs, her steps defined by accuracy and grace, the elegant curved lines that trace from her neck to her hands raised aloft, her stretched body, her feet, and even her tiptoes. Though the characters are a poor country boy and girl oppressed by the 'old society', this couple has become the prince and princess on the ballet stage. It may be argued that the ballet version of *The White-Haired Girl* has two aspects, one of which is concerned with Communist ideology and the story of 'revolution' and 'class struggle', while the other is concerned only with the beauty and aesthetic norms of ballet. To some extent, the latter makes an exhibition of sexuality in the time of the Cultural Revolution.

When public performance of the ballet began in the 1950s in the PRC, the Chinese proletarian audience complained that watching a stage full of bare legs was unbearable for workers, peasants, and soldiers (Wu 1993). However, by the time that the ballet version of *The White-Haired Girl* appeared in the 1970s, the proletarian audience had become at least somewhat familiar with the style of ballet. However, the dissonance between the concept of 'class struggle' and the sight of bodies could not allow the audience to accept Communist propaganda as they did when watching Wang Bin's feature film version in the 1950s. The ballet version was perhaps more successful as a seduction than as Communist Party propaganda.

3.

However, we need to examine the ballet version in terms of narrative. In order to make a comparison with the film adaptation, let us first consider the kinds of images that compose the



Figure 1 This couple has become the prince and princess on the ballet stage.

narrative in cinema. Gilles Deleuze suggests that sensor-motor connections are composed of three kinds of image: perception, affection, and action (Deleuze 1986). For example, a lady sees that a man is just about to pull his pistol; this is perception-image. Then, her face turns white with fear as she wonders what to do; this is affection-image. She then screams for help and runs away; this is action-image. Deleuze's conception of cinematic images organised in sensor-motor connections shows a diegetic world where the characters' movements develop at an actual and rational level. We understand the reasons and aims of any action taken by the characters. If a man steps on a banana peel, he slips and falls down.

At the same time, Deleuze asks, what would happen if the man slipped not because he stepped on a banana peel, but because the road he was walking on had itself moved (1989, p.56), as might happen in an earthquake? In this case, the man's movements are attributed to something beyond the diegesis, which is what we see in the ballet version of *The White-Haired Girl*. Deleuze says of musical movies:

We might present the case in two ways. On one hand we think that musical comedy gives us in the first place ordinary sensory-motor images, where the characters find themselves in situations to which they will respond through their actions, but that more or less progressively their personal actions and movements are transformed by dance into movement of world which goes beyond the motor situation, only to return to it, etc. Or we suppose, on the other hand, that the point of departure only gave the appearance of being a sensory-motor situation: at a deeper level it was a pure optical and sound situation which had already lost its motor extension; it was a pure description which had already replaced its object, a film set pure and simple. (1989: 59)

To demonstrate this difference in narrative style, I would like to compare the way a particular scene is shown in Wang Bin's 1950 film and the ballet version that was later recorded and released as a film. I am interested in the part of the story where Xi'er is carried off by the landlord and his followers, which is presented through different visions even as they share the same part of the narrative. The reason they differ is not simply due to adaptation, but because the action is *danced* in the ballet version. The action in Wang Bin's film can be thought of as a sensory-motor situation, presented realistically. In contrast, the action presented as a ballet dance deviates from this realistic



Figure 2 Xi'er's being carried off in the film version — 'moving' in the diegetic world.

situation. Due to the special movement of ballet, Xi'er and her attackers 'move' not only in the diegetic world but also in another world where the character's movements are in reaction to an anonymous force. Xi'er resists being carried off by her opponents in the narrative, but at the same time, she resists by moving her body gracefully in dance. It could even be said that her stretched body and beautiful gestures are the true focus of this scene. Therefore, her movements are not in response to a narrative situation, but derive

from outside, just as in Deleuze's example when a man slips not because he stepped on a banana peel, but because an earthquake caused the road to shift.

In this dance, action is extended and the narration is eroded. The rational continuity of action and reaction between the characters, between two classes, or good and evil, is replaced by the aesthetic beauty of ballet. In place of narrative is the interplay of straight and curved lines, of gentle and steep inclinations that the body traces as a result of the non-diegetic requirements of ballet. We may even be able to say that the diegesis is interrupted by the ballerina's movements and gestures, re-orienting the viewer's attention toward movement. However, her movement is not composed of perception-, affection-, and action-images, nor is it determined only by the diegesis; rather, it is the movement of aesthetic and narrative styles which is, in the words of Deleuze, nothing less than "a movement of world" (Deleuze 1989: 58).



Figure 3 Xi'er's being carried off in the ballet version —'moving' in reaction to an anonymous force.

4.

Thus far, I have used the term 'movement' in three ways. Firstly, 'movement' indicates sensor-motor responses in the diegetic world, which is composed of three images as defined by Deleuze: perception, affection, and action. The second type of 'movement' is a reaction to an outside, anonymous, worldwide stimulus. And finally, the third type of 'movement' refers to the development of *The White-Haired Girl* as it has been adapted from folk legend to village opera to cinema to ballet. It is in this third type of movement that we see a paradoxical transition. A tale with local origins transformed: on the one hand, it assumed Western, modern forms, and on the other hand, the narrative was given more and more 'revolutionary' significance. Nevertheless, at the very point when the story was supposed to have reached its most 'revolutionary' level, the most seductive version was produced, and the link to 'revolutionary' messages was broken, short-circuited by the contradictions in genre and style. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution reproduced a discourse on 'revolution' *and* its opposite at the same time.

References

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For more about the theme explored here please see Section 3, Chapter 4 in Ying Xiong, ed., *Chugoku eiga no mikata* (Tokyo: Daishukan-shoten, 2010) 応雄編著『中国映画のみかた』(大修館書店、2010年7月)