

# Les Chinois à Paris: The Red Detachment of Women and French Maoism in the Mid-1970s

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**ABSTRACT:** Existing scholarship on the Chinese revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964) typically adopts a Sinocentric perspective, overlooking the ballet's significance as part of international Cold War cultural politics rather than an isolated ideological project of Maoist China. To address this shortcoming, this essay argues that the historical production of *The Red Detachment* was in dialogic relations with other foreign performing works produced in different yet overlapping cultural-political contexts. That is, the meaning of the ballet is not just located within the performing "text" itself or its immediate context, but also in the dialogic space between "texts." To demonstrate this, the essay examines the "intertextuality" between *The Red Detachment* and a French satirical comedy *The Chinese in Paris* (*Les Chinois à Paris*, 1974) in relation to French Maoism in the early to mid-1970s.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Red Detachment of Women*, Cold War, Cultural Revolution, *Les Chinois à Paris*, French Maoism, *Tel quel*.

The ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun* 紅色娘子軍, 1964; hereafter, *The Red Detachment*), one of the eight model plays (*yangban xi* 樣板戲) of the Cultural Revolution, remains arguably the most famous and influential Chinese dance work today. It tells a melodramatic story of how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) frees a peasant-slave girl, Wu Qinghua 吳清華, from the abuse of a pro-Nationalist landlord, nicknamed Nanbatian (南霸天, Tyrant of the southern skies), and further enlightens and transforms her into a Red Army soldier who not only avenges herself by killing the evil Nanbatian but also devotes herself to the greater cause of liberating the entire proletarian class. Although the ballet bears a conspicuous mark of Party-controlled artistic production at its acme, its popularity has outlived the revolutionary ideology that gave rise to its creation. It has remained in the core repertoire of the National Ballet of China and has been performed frequently both at home and abroad.

Due to its peculiar status as a revolutionary classic widely popular in the post-Cold War era, the ballet has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention both in and outside of China. China-based dance scholars' attitudes towards this dance drama tend to be equivocal. On the one hand, they typically acknowledge the significance of its ground-breaking formal innovations in both choreographic vocabulary and dance-driven narrative devices; on the other hand, they treat the ballet as a symptom of cultural authoritarianism, which distorted and disrupted the "normal" development of Chinese dance during the Cultural Revolution (e.g., Wang and Long 1999: 278-80, 314-8).

In contrast to this view of Cultural Revolution particularism, Western scholarship on *The Red Detachment* tends to argue that the ballet, and model plays in general, is part of the continued effort of China to achieve "cultural modernity," which bridges, rather than interrupts, such continuity between the pre-Cultural Revolution/pre-socialist periods and the post-socialist era (Zheng 2007; Clark 2008; Roberts 2009; Mittler 2013). Some research further debunks

the ideological "myth" embodied by the ballet through tracing its transmedia genealogy and exposing the problematics and paradoxes inherent in its formal eclecticism and melodramatic narrative that are central to this transmediation (Clark 2008; McGrath 2009, 2010; Harris 2010; Pang 2017).

Despite their differences in argument, both China- and West-based scholars employ a more or less China-centred approach to this ballet. One consequence of this approach is overlooking the ballet's significance as part of international Cold War cultural politics, rather than just an isolated ideological project of socialist China. Remnants of the ballet's Cold War connotation are still evident in its contemporary Western reception, which keeps evoking cultural-political symbols, tropes, rhetoric, and sentiments related to the Cold War era, against the backdrop of China's unsettling rise as a global superpower and fear of the resurgence of Maoism in China.

For example, during the ballet's 2013 performance at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, four years after its sensational staging at the Palais Garnier, the host theatre staff were dressed as Red Guards and erected a mammoth statue of Mao in the grand foyer, which seemed to uncannily remind the Parisian audience of their own turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The Ballet's 2015 performance at the Lincoln Center in New York received considerable media coverage, with one review in *The New York Times* commenting that the work is "both spectacular (as a relic of Communist kitsch) and scary (for pretty much the same reason)."<sup>2</sup> The 2017 premiere of the ballet in Melbourne provoked protests from Asian immigrant groups who

1. Laura Cappelle, "The Red Detachment of Women, Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris – review," *Financial Times*, 2 October 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/083075c2-2b48-11e3-a1b7-00144feab7de> (accessed on 9 January 2020).

2. Gia Kourlas, "Review: 'The Red Detachment of Women,' by the National Ballet of China, Soldiers On," *The New York Times*, 13 July 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/arts/dance/review-the-red-detachment-of-women-by-the-national-ballet-of-china-soldiers-on.html> (accessed on 9 January 2020).

accused the ballet of a “fascist” nature; an Australian professor linked its frequent international performance to China’s claims to the South China Sea, as Hainan Island, where the story of the ballet unfolds, hosts major Chinese military bases dominating the disputed waters and atolls.<sup>3</sup> To better understand the ballet’s unfailing ability to conjure up Cold War apparitions in the contemporary world, it is necessary to re-examine its embroilment in Cold War cultural politics. Such embroilment, as shown by the above examples, can be easily retooled and transposed to adapt to the ever-shifting contemporary international politics.

Revolutionary ballets such as *The Red Detachment* were not just the CCP’s propagandistic instruments mainly targeting domestic mass audiences in China; they also served as a vehicle for exporting “China’s revolutionary culture to the West, entertaining foreign guests and promoting international collaboration” during the Cold War, due to the “universal” code of ballet’s bodily language (Pang 2017: 168-9). Shortly after its premiere in 1964, *The Red Detachment* was put into diplomatic service: one of the major choreographers of the ballet went to Albania to help the socialist ally stage its own production of *The Red Detachment*. In the February of 1972, during President Richard Nixon’s historic ice-thawing visit to China, the presidential couple and Dr. Henry Kissinger watched *The Red Detachment* at the Great Hall of People, in the company of Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 and “Madam Mao” Jiang Qing 江青. The Nixon’s experience of watching the ballet was televised and broadcast live to the United States and the rest of the world, which helped *The Red Detachment* gain global fame (Tyler 1999: 136). The revolutionary ballets also became a frequent item in the itineraries of Western intellectuals who came to China for “revolutionary tourism” during the Cold War Détente in the first half of the 1970s (Macciocchi 1972; Hollander 1981).

These international cultural-political contacts embedded *The Red Detachment* into dialogic relations with foreign performing works. The very creation of *The Red Detachment* was in some sense a dialogic response to several famous propagandistic ballets of the Soviet Union, and the Chinese ballet also stimulated multiple responses from foreign performing works produced in different yet overlapping contexts in the Cold War era (Ma 2020). Therefore, I argue that the meaning of the ballet is not just located within the performing “text” itself or its immediate Chinese context, but also in the international dialogic space between “texts.” Furthermore, this “intertextuality” formed between performing works – through the means of replacement, displacement, adaptation, or parody – was constantly shaped by (and shaping) the discursive field of Cold War cultural politics.

The meaning of the term “intertextuality” in this essay follows from Julia Kristeva (1986: 34-61; 2002: 446), who was a Parisian “Maoist” in the early to mid-1970s and is a major intellectual under critical discussion in this essay. Derived from Kristeva’s reading of Mikhail Bakhtin’s formalist literary theory, intertextuality refers to the idea that since the writing of any text can be considered “a reading of the anterior literary corpus,” the text can be seen as a mosaic quotation, absorption, and transformation of, and a reply to, other texts. Therefore, the meaning of any text cannot be found or determined within the text itself as a closed meaning system but is generated through the intersection and interplay between different texts as multiple, open meaning systems in a dialogic relation.<sup>4</sup>

To fully explore the extensive Cold War “intertextual” history of *The Red Detachment* is beyond the scope of this essay and thus left for another project (Ma 2020). The task here is more limited: to examine the intertextuality between *The Red Detachment* and a Cold War film, the French political-satirical comedy *The Chinese in Paris* (*Les Chinois à Paris*, 1974), in relation to French Maoism in the early to mid-1970s. In so doing, I aim to show how an intertextual analysis may shed new light on some important facets of both the ballet classic and

the French film, and reveal meanings residing in the dialogue between the “texts” (performed or written) – meanings otherwise invisible in single-text analysis. The rest of the essay is organised into three sections. Section One first contextualises *The Chinese in Paris* and its adaptation of *The Red Detachment* within the historical and intellectual background of French Maoism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It then goes on to argue that the film may be seen as a serious critique of some major theoretical claims about Maoist China made by several famous French leftist intellectuals and literary theorists (e.g., Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes); the film especially undermines the assumption of the West/China binary underlying their theoretical and political agenda. Section Two demonstrates the central role of the parodic adaptation of *The Red Detachment* in this critical project of the film, showing how the adaptation forges an intertextual dialogic relation among the Chinese revolutionary ballet, the French classical opera *Carmen*, and the theoretical engagement of the French intellectuals. Through this hybridising strategy, the parody self-reflexively deconstructs the West/China conceptual divide. Section Three concludes by situating this essay within the recent and bigger academic endeavour of rewriting a Cold War history of “global Maoism.”

## The Chinese in Paris and the Parisians in China

In February 1974, *The Chinese in Paris* caused a diplomatic crisis between China and France, the country that had maintained the most amicable diplomatic relationship with China among major Western European states during the Cold War. The Chinese government “demanded that the French government ban *Les Chinois à Paris* or suffer the consequences” and complained that “[o]ur modern theatre, one of the products of the Cultural Revolution, is made to look ridiculous.”<sup>5</sup> The “modern theatre” referred to here is *The Red Detachment*. The film also engendered a domestic boycott by French Maoists, who even threw jets of paint on the screens in several theatres (Bourseiller 1996: 274-5).<sup>6</sup>

Directed by Jean Yanne and based loosely on the 1966 fiction *When the Chinese... (Quand les Chinois...)* by Robert Beauvais, *The Chinese in Paris* is a hypothetical story about what would happen if France were under Chinese occupation during the Cultural Revolution: a Chinese army invades and occupies France without firing a single shot, since the French president flees to the U.S. upon hearing the news of the invasion. Many French leave their homes in panic, trying to escape, but end up killing each other on the jammed highways littered with deserted cars, blood, and dead bodies. The French people staying behind quickly learn how to opportunistically cooperate,

3. Antonia Finnane, “The Red Detachment of Women Marches Forward – But to Where?” *The Conversation*, 16 February 2017, <https://theconversation.com/the-red-detachment-of-women-marches-forward-but-to-where-73124> (accessed on 9 January 2020).

4. By referring to ballet and other performing works as “texts,” I do not imply that these bodily performances are reducible to texts proper. Rather, it means that performances can be subjected to “textual” analysis. In fact, Kristeva’s conception of intertextuality has an obvious performative dimension. Her discussion of the Bakhtinian “carnival” or “carnavalesque structure,” which characterises the intertextuality of the polyphonic novel and poetic discourse, is based on the duality of the text “as theater and as reading” (1986: 56, italics in original). As she observes, “[t]he scene of the carnival (...) is thus both stage and life, game and dream, discourse and spectacle (...) it is proffered as the only space in which language escapes linearity (law) to live as drama in three dimensions. At a deeper level, this also signifies the contrary: drama becomes located in language (...) all poetic discourse is dramatization (...)” (1986: 49).

5. “Diplomacy: Peking’s Pique,” *Time*, 11 March 1974, [content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601740311,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601740311,00.html) (accessed on 9 January 2020); Richard Breeze, “China Raps Paris for Film ‘Insult,’” *The Age*, 27 February 1974, 4, quoted in Leung (2014: 193).

6. See also “Polémiques autour des ‘Chinois à Paris,’ Le film de Jean Yanne divise l’opinion” (Polemics around the “Chinese in Paris,” the film of Jean Yanne divides the opinion), *Le Monde*, 7 March 1974, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1974/03/07/polemiques-autour-des-chinois-a-paris-le-film-de-jean-yanne-divise-l-opinion\\_3086444\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1974/03/07/polemiques-autour-des-chinois-a-paris-le-film-de-jean-yanne-divise-l-opinion_3086444_1819218.html) (accessed on 9 January 2020).

collaborate, and cohabitate with the peaceful, civil, and disciplined Chinese occupiers. While the Chinese are restructuring the French political-economic systems and everyday life according to the Maoist ideal, many French people are busy with secretly finding ways back to the decadent bourgeois life and pursuing their own petty individual interest. Dissatisfied with the sabotaging bourgeois mentality of the French, the Chinese authorities decide to use model plays to reform the "French psyche," including a revolutionary ballet explicitly quoting *The Red Detachment*. However, the model play is consumed by French audiences as pure entertainment, further releasing their repressed bourgeois vices, which also infect and corrupt the Chinese occupiers. In the meantime, the French extremist-saboteurs previously sent to China to receive "thought reform" return to Paris as rigid Maoists, only to disappointedly find out that the Chinese occupiers have become decadent Frenchmen. These newly converted French hard-line "Maoists" take up arms and become the "Résistance." Seeing the situation spiralling out of control, the Chinese authorities have to order a full retreat, and the French have their triumph of "resistance." Clearly alluding to the Yellow Peril and the Nazi Occupation, in the eyes of the Chinese government, the film draws "an unacceptable parallel between socialist China and fascist Germany."<sup>7</sup>

Seen as a "gaudy, commercial, and vulgar" comedy, the once popular film remains on the margins of academic attention (Krauss 2011; Bloom 2016: 18-9). Existing scholarship typically sees the comedy as belonging with a group of 1970s French "historical revisionist" films characterised by a new bourgeois cynicism toward the once dominant heroic and nationalist narrative of the French Resistance. This official narrative had been promoted by the Gaullist regime since the end of the Second World War, but lost currency after the May 1968 events (Foucault 2000; Bloom 2016).<sup>8</sup> Another line of research points out the thematic connection between the film and the influence of Maoism in 1960s and 1970s France (Zhang 2009; Leung 2014: 191-217).<sup>9</sup> This essay extends the second line of research. I argue that the unapologetic racial and gender stereotyping in the film is not so much a result of the comedy's "Orientalist" misrepresentation of the Chinese as it is a mockery of the Orientalist assumptions underlying the French Left's theoretical imagination of Maoist China (despite the French leftists' anti-imperialist and anti-colonial stance). In particular, the film seems to critically assess several typical claims of China made by French leftists, especially Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and their fellow "Maoists" on the editorial board of the literary-theoretical journal *Tel quel*, which was at the centre of post-war intellectual life in France (Marx-Scouras 1996).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the adaptation of *The Red Detachment* in the film is central to this appraisal.

One-and-a-half months after the release of the film, from 11 April to 3 May 1974, Kristeva, Barthes, and several other high-profile "Telquelians" travelled around China under the close direction of Party-minded Chinese tour guides and interpreters (Kristeva 1977; Hayot 2012: 170; Barthes 2012). As explained later in this essay, the experiences of these "Parisians in China" turned out to uncannily resonate with *The Chinese in Paris*, even though the Telquelians accused the film of invoking the Yellow Peril, which is symptomatic of the imperialist myth of Eurocentric supremacy (Leung 2014: 194).<sup>11</sup> The Telquelians' China visit during the final years of the Cultural Revolution registered the last high point in the intellectual-political history of Maoism's influence on the French Left since the 1960s, as both the Cultural Revolution and French Maoism had passed their heyday (Hayot 2012: 149).

Disillusioned with the repressive Gaullist regime, ossified communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the conservative dogmatic French Communist Party (FCP), many French students and intellectuals in the 1960s turned to Maoism as a promising alternative in both theory and practice

(Alexander 2001: 67-78; Wolin 2010; Bourq 2014; Lovell 2019: 272-305). Knowing little about what was really happening in Cultural Revolutionary China, many of the French Left were fascinated by Mao's idea of a "continuous revolution" that was spearheaded by young "vanguard" students (the Red Guards) to break down the hierarchical boundaries between government bureaucrats and the masses, intellectuals and manual laborers, art and politics, and ideology and revolution. For them, "the Cultural Revolution seemed to strike all the right chords" (Wolin 2010: 126). This general cultural and political climate created an ideological and cultural link between Maoist China and the historic student uprising of May 1968 (Reader and Wadia 1993; Quattrocchi and Nairn 1998; Ross 2002: 97-8; Bourq 2007: 52-3; Jackson, Milne, and Williams 2011; Reynolds 2011).<sup>12</sup>

However, the Telquelians largely missed out on May 1968 because of their close affiliation with the FCP, which kept its distance from the student revolt (Lowe 1991: 174-86; Kauppi 1994: 149-66). To make up for this strategic mistake, *Tel quel* jumped on the Maoist bandwagon in 1971, in a somewhat opportunistic manner (Poel 1998: 203-4; Wolin 2010: 270-2). In 1974, to affirm their intellectual loyalty to Maoism – untimely against the ebbing of the French Left's "uncritical Sinophilia" due to the gradual exposure of the Cultural Revolution's atrocities to the West – the Telquelians set off for China in an ill-fated case of "revolutionary tourism." They would have to embarrassingly renounce this experience after Mao's death in 1976 (Hollander 1981; Wolin 2010: 278, 281; Hayot 2012: 148-9).

Both Kristeva and Barthes were less concerned about the significance of China in its materiality or the *realpolitik* than its theoretical value as an epistemological construct that could facilitate or refute their own modes of theorisation (Lowe 1991; Poel 1998; Hayot 2012). During their China visit, the Telquelians paid particular attention to the model plays they watched, including at least one of the two ballets *The Red Detachment* and *The White-haired Girl* (*Bai mao nǚ* 白毛女) (Hayot 2012: 131). However, they had little interest in the narratives or the intended political messages of the plays. Rather, what grabbed the theoretical attention of Kristeva and Barthes were the seemingly "absolutely asexual" figure of the young girl in the model plays, who carries "none of the trappings of the Freudian family," and the exaggerated "unrealistic" acting/dancing behind a Stanislavskian facade that could afford an opposite Brechtian reading (ibid. 137-50).<sup>13</sup> That is, despite their

7. "Diplomacy: Peking's Pique," *Time*, 11 March 1974, [content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601740311,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601740311,00.html) (accessed on 9 January 2020).
8. In Foucault's criticism, the common "sceptical or cynical" message shared by these films is: "Well, just look at what happened. Did you see any struggles? Can you see anyone rebelling, taking up arms?" (2000: 162).
9. See also Pierre Haski, "Une réhabilitation de Jean Yanne et de ses « Chinois à Paris »" (A rehabilitation of Jean Yanne and his «Chinese in Paris»), *Rue 89*, 4 September 2007, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-chine/20070904.RUE1581/une-rehabilitation-de-jean-yanne-et-de-ses-chinois-a-paris.html> (accessed on 9 January 2020).
10. There were many famous French intellectual-scholars who contributed to *Tel quel*, such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan, in addition to Kristeva and Barthes (Ffrench and Lack 1998). See also Dora Zhang, "The Sideways Gaze: Roland Barthes's Travels in China," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 June 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-sideways-gaze-roland-barthes-travels-in-china#> (accessed on 9 January 2020).
11. "Éditorial: Nouvelles contradictions, nouvelles luttes" (New contradictions, new struggles), *Tel Quel* 58, Summer, 1974, 4.
12. Note that this is only a highly simplified summary of the complex history surrounding the May 1968 events and various French Maoist groups. Despite this ideological and cultural link between Maoist China and the student uprising in France, the French Maoists themselves were absent at the beginning of the student movement of May 1968, though they participated later (Bourseiller 1996; Wolin 2010).
13. As opposed to the "realistic" Stanislavskian theatre, which invites the audience to emotionally identify themselves with the characters or the acting on stage, Brechtian theatre, which itself was partly inspired by traditional Chinese theatre, deliberately creates a psychological distance between the audience and the performance so that it provokes the audience to self-reflect and critically assess what happens on the stage (Hayot 2012: 54-102). Brechtian theatre had been a preoccupation of the French theorists.



genuine anti-imperialist stance and self-reflective criticality, the Telquelians to some extent fell into the trap of Orientalism, essentialising China as "a fiction of absolute cultural and sexual difference from the West" (Lowe 1991: 186; Chow 1993: 10).

This can be best illustrated by Kristeva's description of her first encounter with a crowd of Chinese peasants during her visit:

An enormous crowd is sitting in the sun: they wait for us wordlessly, perfectly still. Calm eyes, not even curious, but slightly amused or anxious: in any case, piercing, and certain of belonging to a community with which we will never have anything to do. They don't distinguish among us man or woman, blonde or brunette, this or that feature of face or body. As though they were discovering some weird and peculiar animals, harmless but insane. Unaggressive, but on the far side of the abyss of time and space. "A species – what they see in us is a different species," says one of our group (...) I feel like an ape, a martian, an other. Three hours later (...) they are still there, sitting in the sun – amused or anxious? – calm, distant, piercing, silent, gently releasing us into our strangeness. (Kristeva 1977: 11-2)

Kristeva renders the crowd as a distant featureless lump, silently facing the foreign strangers as their "other." The crowd's aggregated gaze seems undifferentiating, the result of the very fact that they seem undifferentiable in the eyes of the foreigners. The Chinese crowd and their "piercing" gaze act as a huge reflective mirror, by gazing at which the foreigners see nothing but the foreignness, otherness, and strangeness within themselves (Lowe 1991: 186-7).<sup>14</sup> In this incident, the Western foreigners' gaze loses its "colonial" superiority and "exotic" curiosity; instead, it is frustrated, overwhelmed, and bounced back, seeing themselves as inferior "animals." The sheer size of the crowd matters, and compounded with its silent and organised nature, it constantly suggests an explosive potentiality to the foreigners. In Kristeva's later account of this experience, China itself is referred to as "the atomic bomb of demography, the genetic Hiroshima in the twenty-first century" (1990: 196). Despite her pro-China stance, by inadvertently invoking a "nuclearized" version of the Yellow Peril, Kristeva brings sexual and aggressive connotations back into her "asexual" and "peaceful" image of China.

Uncannily, these experiences of the Sinophile Parisians in China, especially those of Kristeva – the strangeness within "ourselves," the silent, gentle, yet

piercing, reflective collective gaze of the Chinese, the sexual aggressiveness of the asexual peaceful Chinese, the fascination with the model play ballets, and political opportunism – are all captured in the "Sinophobic" *The Chinese in Paris*, even before the Telquelians' China visit. This unlikely anachronistic correspondence suggests that the Chinese and the China Kristeva and the Telquelians perceived during their 1974 visit was filtered by a pre-existing theoretical lens typical of the French Left; they brought that lens to China, and thus saw the image of China they had wanted to see. The film mischievously plays with the same lens and thus generates similarly distorted imagery. By uncovering the connections between the film and the French theorists' China experiences, this essay next examines some problematics inherent in the "optics" of French Maoism and the important role of model plays, especially *The Red Detachment*, within it.

The parallel starts from the title of the film. As Kristeva points out, the adjective "Chinese" in French has the connotation of "bizarre, aberrant, and lunatic" (1990: 196) (a pun already exploited by Jean-Luc Godard's 1966 film *La Chinoise*, about a group of young French Maoists). The "Chinese in Paris" can therefore be read as the "strangeness in Parisians" (the "foreigner in ourselves"). For French Maoists, as Rey Chow (1993: 12) critiques, the Chinese were "a puritanical alternative to the West in human form – a dream come true." Yet the film forces the "Chinese" – the externalised "human form" of the repressed Western intellectual desires – back into the dreamworld of the cinematic optics. Therefore, the film is not mainly about the "real" or imagined Chinese or China, but an inward scrutiny of the repressed strangeness within the "French psyche."

This is most forcefully demonstrated by the first encounter between the French and the occupying Chinese in the film. At the headquarters of the French nuclear force, the French generals are blaming and fighting with each other in a hectic search for the key to the nuclear missile launch button, in the hope of deterring the Chinese invasion. They all suddenly stop, quickly step backwards into the left side corner of the room with both hands above their heads (figure 1). A closeup captures their gaze in astonishment at the right side of the room beyond the screen. Then, the camera, aligning with the viewpoint of the audience, executes a fast near-180-degree pan sweeping from left to right and stops, facing the other end of the room. At this point, the camera assumes the viewpoint of both the generals and the audience. Pressing against the large grid window from outside stands a wall of Chinese soldiers in undifferentiable green military uniforms, gazing silently, peacefully, yet



Figure 1. The mutual gaze between the French generals and the Chinese soldiers in *Les Chinois à Paris* (1974), Jean Yanne, Ciné qua non, Productions 2000, and Produzioni Europee Associati. Credit: Screenshots provided by the author.



14. Kristeva later developed this experience in China into her theory of estrangement in *Strangers to Ourselves* (Hayot 2012: 149).

piercingly into the room, supposedly at the French generals (and the audience), as if looking at some “peculiar animals” in a zoo. The camera then starts a slow reverse pan sweeping the room, revealing that there are more Chinese soldiers projecting the same gaze from outside of other windows, and eventually returns to the bewildered gaze of the French generals. At this point, the camera takes on the viewpoint of both the Chinese and the audience.

This scene depicting the mutual gaze between the Parisians and the Chinese is strikingly similar to Kristeva’s account of her own experience of self-estrangement in China quoted above. Instead of employing the shot-reverse-shot technique, the film uses a 40-second long take combined with a quick pan and a slow reverse pan to generate a self-alienating effect – similar to what Kristeva experienced – among the audience. It is in the “reflective mirror” of the Chinese occupiers’ collective gaze that the French audiences see the “stranger” within themselves, be it the “Vichy collaborator” or the “Maoist.”

The paradoxical coexistence of the sexually aggressive and asexually peaceful aspects of Kristeva’s China is also reflected in the film. On the one hand, the film’s predominant portrayal of the Chinese occupying troops is characterised by weaponless, silent, civil, and disciplined soldiers in green uniform marching in gentle lockstep, like pre-programmed, sexless, Maoist robots without clear signs of masculinity. On the other hand, the sexually aggressive potential of the Chinese occupiers is hinted at from the beginning of the movie: a panicking young Frenchwoman is afraid of the excessive sexual demands that the invading Chinese troops would impose upon French women. She complains that there are 700 million of them – the total population of China at that time, as if all the Chinese are of the same sex (and thus sexless among themselves?). The comment resonates with Kristeva’s China as “the atomic bomb of demography, the genetic Hiroshima.” This paradoxical conception of Chinese (a)sexuality echoes that of the French leftists, who imagined that the Chinese represent a particular kind of sexuality absolutely different from that of the West, but nevertheless from a Western perspective (Chow 1991: 7). Therefore, the fundamental irony is: in order to use “China” or the “Chinese” as a theoretical alternative to dismantle the Western sexual binary, the French leftists had to maintain the West/China binary.

The film works diligently to sabotage this logic. Where Kristeva sees “asexuality” in the Chinese, the film sees ascetism with repressed sexual desires not very different from those in the West. For example, in the film, the Chinese occupiers decide to choose the famous department store Galeries Lafayette as their headquarters, a symbolic gesture demonstrating their confidence and determination in thoroughly reforming the capitalist economy and culture. In a well-orchestrated manner, the Chinese soldiers clear out all the apparel (all are women’s clothing) and naked female-shaped mannequins that represent sex-based Western consumerist culture.

Yet in a following scene inside the Galeries Lafayette, several Chinese soldiers sit in a circle on the almost emptied floor, eating and drinking against the walls newly decorated with typical Cultural Revolutionary propaganda murals featuring fierce warriors with guns (all the Chinese soldiers in the movie are unarmed). Surrounding the eating soldiers are broken limbs from the “female” mannequins in groups of three (figure 2). In each group, the limbs stand leaning against each other to form the shape of a triangular pyramid, resembling the way in which soldiers would put their rifles. This scene may be seen as the Chinese being successful in transforming sexist Western consumerism into asexual, puritanical, and militant Maoism. However, an opposite interpretation is possible: the configuration of the limbs, like postmodernist art, suggests sexist cannibalism, symptomatic of the repressed sexual desires of the soldiers. In the context of the film, the second interpretation turns out to be true. Instead of being the absolute

other of the West and reforming capitalism and dismantling Western binaries, the Chinese soldiers in the film are similar enough to the French that they are eventually corrupted by capitalism and consumed by Western binaries. That is, the Chinese “other” has become the French “self” – the film dissolves the West/China binary underlying the Telquelians’ theorisation.



Figure 2. Chinese soldiers drinking and eating among the broken mannequin limbs in the Galeries Lafayette in *Les Chinois à Paris* (1974). Credit: Screenshot provided by the author.

## The Red Detachment and Carmen

The model-play revolutionary ballet plays a crucial role in this transformation of the Chinese in the film and also in the film’s overall critical agenda. Frustrated by the stubborn bourgeois vices in the “French psyche,” the Chinese authorities decide to follow the advice given by a Frenchman, an opportunistic profiteer in disguise (played by the director himself). The Frenchman suggests that they blend “Chinese art” (revolutionary ballet) with “traditional French opera” as a means to instil revolutionary ideology into the French minds, seemingly referring to how the Chinese had combined Russian ballet (which itself had a French lineage) with Peking opera to create model plays as a tool for mass propaganda. In the film, the product of the project is a revolutionary ballet with the story of the French opera *Carmen* told in the form of *The Red Detachment*. The ballet in the film is staged at the Palais Garnier (where the National Ballet of China would perform an “authentic” production twenty-five years later). Under a banner hanging above the entrance showing the slogan “Culture is a powerful weapon of the revolution for the popular masses” in both Chinese and French, a poster announces “*Carmen*: Revolutionary opera with a democratic and contemporary theme.”

Here, the film refers to two major claims about China made by the French Maoists. First, the Cultural Revolution provides a viable approach to bring down the boundaries between art and politics, and between the avant-garde and mass culture, as evidenced in the slogan on the banner. Second, the ideogrammatic Chinese writing system, perceived as absolutely different from the Western counterpart, supposedly combines the signifier and the referent, and thus promises to break down the binary between “text” and “reality” (Hayot 2012: 128). The title “*Carmen*” is deliberately made different from both the original “*Carmen*” and the romanisation of the Chinese transliteration “*Kamen*” 卡門. The purpose of adding a letter “g” could be to ideogrammatically represent the image of the girl Wu Qinghua in *The Red Detachment* with an iconic long braid, or the racial-stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese man of the Qing dynasty. The famous Chinese writer-intellectual Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) had exploited the ideogrammatic potential of Western letters in his fiction *The True Story of Ah Q* (A Q zheng zhuan 阿Q正



傳), with the letter “Q” representing the male protagonist Ah Q’s head with a queue. As early as in 1926, *The True Story of Ah Q* was translated into French, and Romain Rolland (1866–1944), the prominent French Nobel laureate for literature, had praised the work (Foster 2001; Chen 2006: 278). The Telquelians had been fascinated with Chinese ideograms and familiar with Lu Xun’s works (Kauppi 1994: 338; Hayot 2012: 114). In this context, the subtle message in adding a “g” to “Carmen” could be the film’s critique of the French leftists’ appropriation of Maoism and Chinese culture for their theoretical aspirations having its own implicit sexual and racial biases.<sup>15</sup>

The ballet episode *Carmeng* adopts a hybridising strategy of structural replacement. The main characters and the story line of *The Red Detachment* are substituted with those of the French opera *Carmen*: the girl Wu Qinghua is replaced with the “*femme fatale*” Carmen (as Carmeng in the ballet), the Party representative Hong Changqing with the gullible and impetuous soldier Don José (as Don-cho-sey in the ballet), and the original music with Georges Bizet’s tunes from *Carmen*. Moreover, the Nationalist villains in *The Red Detachment* and the smugglers in *Carmen* are both replaced with a band of “capitalist-imperialist” American soldiers. Through this series of structural replacement, the sexual theme of seduction and unrequited love and the political theme of anti-Americanism – both more or less repressed in *The Red Detachment* – are brought back in full in *Carmeng*.

In the film, *Carmeng* is in the form of a play within a play, performed by professional French ballet dancers and being watched by a theatre full of French sitting alongside Chinese occupiers. The stage design, costume, props, makeup, part of the choreographic vocabulary, and some of the scenes follow *The Red Detachment* to a considerable extent, with non-diegetic subtitles explaining the plot to the film spectators. Compared with the original, the choreography in *Carmeng* is characterised by a more mechanical and punctuated style, which, accompanied by the humorous tunes adapted from *Carmen*, generates a caricature-like comic effect.

The six-minute long ballet episode opens with an adaptation of a scene from *The Red Detachment*, “The dance of the female soldiers and the captain of the mess” (*Nü zhanshi he chuishi banzhang de wudao 女战士和炊事班长的舞蹈*), though here the characters are all civilian-villagers. The subtitles explain that the villagers dance and sing to express the “revolutionary joy of Marxist-Leninist thought” (a theme explored elsewhere in the film). A villager interrupts and brings the news from the village committee that the patrol led by Don-cho-sey has destroyed a company of American “imperialist devils.” Next, Don-cho-sey in the Red Army uniform makes his entrance in a triumphant mood, holding a chain with the other end binding the hands of his captive Carmeng in the iconic red costume of Wu Qinghua with a long black braid. Carmeng, supposedly a local village girl, was found intermingling with the American “paper-tiger rotten imperialists” and thus is deemed a traitor. The villagers circle Carmeng and start beating her, but Don-cho-sey stops them, insisting that for her crime against the ideology, she be tried by the People’s Army Court. Don-cho-sey leads Carmeng away from the village. When they are alone, Carmeng pretends that she is willing to repent and make self-criticism. Don-cho-sey is convinced and tries to re-educate her with revolutionary ideology. Showing “the bright future of revolution,” the two dancers replicate the iconic tableau of “Changqing pointing the way” (*Changqing zhi lu 常青指路*) from *The Red Detachment*. Yet, while in the original the two dancers keep a certain distance between themselves and Hong only touches the shoulder of Wu to give minimum support for her *arabesque*, here the two dancers are leaning their bodies against each other, with Don-cho-sey’s hand holding Carmeng’s waist and Carmeng holding the chain and circling it around Don-cho-sey’s waist (figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. The iconic tableau of “Changqing pointing the way” in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1970), Beijing Film Studio. Credit: Screenshot provided by the author.



Figure 4. The iconic tableau of “Changqing pointing the way” in *Les Chinois à Paris* (1974). Credit: Screenshot provided by the author.

The following *pas de deux* fully reveals the sexual energy between the two. With his guard let down, Don-cho-sey unties Carmeng, and Carmeng begins to seduce him. This scene of seduction is choreographed through a sequence of intimate dance moves: Carmeng leans her front body with full weight on Don-cho-sey’s back, sits on his thighs, and lets him lift her up by holding her thigh and waist. By mesmerising Don-cho-sey, Carmeng finds a chance to escape. Again, where Kristeva sees the “asexuality” of the girl in the model plays, the film sees sexual energy repressed by ideology and returns the repressed by merging the “upright” *The Red Detachment* (and Wu Qinghua) with the “seductive” *Carmen* (and Carmeng).

Don-cho-sey is demoted by his unit for letting Carmeng escape. To redeem himself, Don-cho-sey pursues Carmeng secretly. He eventually reaches the camp of American soldiers, with crates of bottled Coca-Cola and its catchy red logo in the background, representing capitalist consumerism. He finds Carmeng there, dancing, flirting, kissing, and drinking Coca-Cola with the American “devils.” Don-cho-sey tries to persuade her to leave with him, but Carmeng refuses. He leaves alone, returns to his unit, and reports to the commander

15. The letter “g” could also stand for the French “*gauche*,” or “left,” referring to the French Left. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possible layer of connotation.

the enemies' whereabouts. The commander orders a drill to prepare for an attack, which replicates the women soldiers' "machete dance" in the original. The next scene is an adaptation of the famous mesmerising original in which women soldiers, in a single line, charge toward the enemy camp in *grand jeté* in unison, holding and driving rifles forward during the jumps, but now with machetes instead. The American devils are killed, and Carmeng is taken captive. Before Carmeng tries to seduce him again, Don-cho-sey thrusts a knife into her abdomen, re-enacting the finale of *Carmen*.

The curtain call is choreographed as a celebration scene, in which all the villagers and male and female soldiers dance in mechanical movements and formations, waving machetes, rifles, and red flags. At this point, the stage floor starts to rotate continuously, letting the (ballet and film) spectators view the formation of dancers from different angles, and the colourful foot lights lining the front of the stage appear on the screen for the first time. This scene may be interpreted as the film's Brechtian moment, revealing the intended artificiality of the show, which resonates with Kristeva and Barthes' Brechtian reading of the model-play ballets they would soon watch in China. The difference is that while the French theorists see this Brechtian artificiality of the model plays in a relatively positive light, the film's comment has a clear satirical tone.

The show ends with a replica of the final scene in *The Red Detachment*. A big red banner in the background shows in both Chinese and French the key slogan in the original ballet, "Only by liberating the whole of humanity can the proletarian class liberate themselves," while the accompanying music transits from a variation of the prelude in the first act of *Carmen* to "The Internationale." A major change made here is that at the very front of the stage, Don-cho-sey raises a female soldier up high by holding one of her legs, like holding a flagpole. The female soldier in air is in *arabesque*, with two hands holding a red flag of the Red Army, showing to the audience the profile of herself and the flag against the slogan in the background. The message here is clear: the girl in model plays is no more than a prop – a flag, a weapon, or a slogan – for propaganda. This is again to be echoed by Barthes' comment on the model plays he would watch in China: "It is always Woman who receives the task of making the body rear up on its political high horse" (1975: 119). Moreover, it is possible that this posture in *Carmeng* is a direct quotation of a similar one in the Soviet ballet *Flames of Paris* (with the theme being the French Revolution), though in the latter the ballerina is not in arabesque, and in her hands is a French national flag and in the background the Arc de Triomphe instead. If this is true, what the film may imply is that *The Red Detachment* as a tool for propaganda is not fundamentally different from Soviet ballets, and by extension, Maoism in the Cultural Revolution is not so different from Stalinism (*Flames of Paris* was Stalin's favourite Soviet ballet; see Morrison 2016: 299).

For Barthes (who maintained a certain intellectual distance from his fellow Sinophile Telquelians and had his own reservations about Cultural Revolutionary China), despite the artificiality of propaganda, he still believed that the model plays were a good thing, because they helped confine "hysteria" within the realm of theatre to maintain a "normal" everyday life "without theatrics, without commotion, without striking poses" for the ordinary Chinese outside the theatre (Barthes 1975: 119). Paradoxically, as a French "leftist" who fought against the boundaries between art, politics, and reality, Barthes had to reinforce these binaries in the case of model plays due to the destructive potential of "hysteria" contained within them. This seems even more ironic considering that Barthes should have known that the Cultural Revolution itself was a drama no less hysterical than the model plays.

Of course, what Barthes had hoped for is not what happens in the film (or in the real China). The boundary between "art" and "reality" is irreversibly broken

down after the performance of *Carmeng*, and the "hysteria" unstoppably erupts. On the surface, the narrative of *Carmeng* seems to suggest the triumph of the revolutionary soldier Don-cho-sey, his comrades, and the proletarian masses over the licentious Carmeng and the American capitalist-imperialists. Yet the converse is true: by simply contacting or watching the sexual, seductive, and hedonistic consumerist elements in the ballet, the Chinese occupiers among the French audience become corrupted. Or more precisely, their repressed sexual and hedonistic desires are awakened. Soon after watching the show, the commander-in-chief of the Chinese occupying forces (the equivalent of Don-cho-sey) loses his virginity to a beautiful French girl (the equivalent of Carmeng), symbolising his final fall into the binary of Western sexuality. This starts an inevitable downward spiral among the Chinese occupiers, who quickly succumb to the bourgeois vices of the Parisians, which eventually leads to their demise. The propagandistic function of the "revolutionary" theatre turns out to be quite effective in the film, though opposite to the intended goal. Therefore, *Carmeng*, as a play within a play, occupies a central role in the greater scheme of the film, serving as both a metaphor for and the turning point of the entire film.

Unlike the "French Maoists" in the film, who return from China brainwashed yet luckily snatch the victory of the "resistance," the Telquelians' 1974 trip to China "works, in the history of *Tel quel*, as the 'damned spot' which nothing can ever erase" (Forest 1995: 483). Soon after their return to Paris, the *Tel quel* abandoned Maoism and embraced American liberalism. This, once again, was foreshadowed by *Carmeng*, the treacherous bourgeois in disguise of a proletarian girl, which uncannily reflects the opportunistic aspect of the Telquelians' theoretical and political ambitions (Wolin 2010: 281-3).

## Conclusion

By triangulating the relationship among *The Chinese in Paris*, *The Red Detachment*, and the Telquelians' China experiences, this essay casts new light on a particular facet of the connection between Maoist Cultural Revolutionary China and the French intellectual and artistic field in the early to mid-1970s. This intertextual analysis demonstrates that *The Chinese in Paris* is not simply a "gaudy" and "vulgar" comedy that offers a cynical revisionist allegory of the French Resistance and Vichy Collaboration during the Second World War. The other side of the story is a serious, though comic in tone, critique of "French Maoism" in the Cold War as represented by the Telquelians. Just like Kristeva, the film uses the imagined Chinese (invaders) as a distorting mirror of the "other" to reveal to the audience the repressed otherness/strangeness within the French "self." Yet the film goes further to deconstruct the "mirror of the other" itself by showing that the imagined Chinese Maoist "other" is not fundamentally different from the French bourgeois "self." In so doing, it challenges the China/West binary that underlies the Telquelians' theoretical imagination.

The analysis also shows that *The Red Detachment* was not just a propagandistic instrument under full control of the CCP, intended solely for the domestic masses. Driven by the CCP's goal of using the "universal" language of ballet to export China's Maoist revolutionary ideals and practices to the rest of the Cold War world, *The Red Detachment* entered dialogues with other foreign performing and written texts. However, in this transnational intertextual space of cultural politics, the CCP lost control of the meaning-making process around the ballet, as evidenced by "Beijing's pique" stimulated by the parodic adaptation of the ballet in *The Chinese in Paris*. The comedy enmeshes the Chinese ballet into an intertextual web with the French classical opera *Carmen*, the Russian Soviet Ballet *Flames of Paris*, Brechtian theatre, the Telquelians'

theoretical engagement, and the alternative histories of WWII and the Cold War, as best represented by the promiscuous *Carmeng* episode in the film, a play within a play.

The resulting amalgam is not a “Frankenstein” that makes a freakish revelry out of various text-parts forcibly cobbled together. Rather, it reveals the logic based on which those text-parts could fit with each other into an intertextual jigsaw puzzle. For instance, as the compound name “Carmeng” (Carmen-g) may suggest, the “treacherous” Carmen could be a proletarian girl of subversive potentiality, while the proletarian warrior Wu Qinghua may well be a *femme fatale* (at least in the eyes of the Nationalists) connected intertextually to Western operatic and literary *topoi* – they are just the two sides of a coin, under the same gendered hierarchy of representation. Thus, the meaning of *The Red Detachment* can no longer be contained within the ballet or its immediate Chinese context; instead, once released into the transnational dialogic space between texts, the ballet obtains its own life as a piece within a big, dynamic, and ever-growing intertextual puzzle, of which this essay illuminates only a small portion.

Therefore, this study joins forces with the recent academic endeavour of rewriting the “isolationist” history of Cultural-Revolutionary China and Maoism into a transnational and even global one (e.g., Chen 2001; Westad 2005, 2017; Cook 2014; Lovell 2019). Cook (2014) traces the worldwide dissemination and enduring presence of Mao’s *Little Red Book* (or *Quotations from Chairman Mao*) in various forms – such as translation, art, song, talisman, and badge – as a global historical phenomenon during the Cold War. Lovell (2019) further argues for a “global Maoism,” emphasising the fact that Maoism was a crucial motor of the Cold War, having deep repercussions around the globe and leaving widespread legacies still relevant to the contemporary world.

However, this existing scholarship focuses mainly on the global circulation of Maoism through the medium of translated works (books or words inscribed on other mediums). As Lovell (2019: 26) puts it, the worldwide dissemination of Maoism “has been a revolution spread through books.” To complement this word-centred approach, this essay adds a corporeal dimension to the big picture through the “universal” body language of ballet (as represented by *The Red Detachment*), which needs little translation and makes transnational intertextual appropriation convenient.

If the nuclear bomb is the ultimate physical symbol for the Cold War, and Mao’s *Little Red Book* the “spiritual atom bomb” (Cook 2014: 1-22), then the Chinese revolutionary ballet and its transnational theatrical and cinematic adaptations would be an able corporeal representation of Kristeva’s China as “the atomic bomb of demography, the genetic Hiroshima in the twenty-first century.” As a *New York Times* reviewer comments on the final scene in the 2015 Lincoln Center performance of *The Red Detachment*, in which a “Red Army” assembles on the stage, “[i]n the end, holding an assortment of weapons and singing ‘The Internationale,’ they inched menacingly toward the front of the stage as if they were coming to get us: Mess with us, and you’ll get the hammer and sickle.”<sup>16</sup>

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16. See footnote 2.

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