

The Shopfloor as Stage

Production competition, democracy, and the unfulfilled promise of *Red Flag Song*

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I read the play *Red Flag Song* (1948) as a window into a moment of missed opportunity in China's revolution, when the Party's re-engagement with the urban working class could have strengthened democratic tendencies within the Party, and when China's critical realist literary tradition could have grounded Chinese socialism in the real-life experiences and aspirations of the grass-roots. Written at a time when the Party's control of both industrial and literary productions had begun to tighten, *Red Flag Song* registered compromise as well as defiance on the shopfloor, and foregrounded two issues as deeply related and fundamental to the making of a New China: work-place democracy as the basis for making China's working class, and realist literature as a means of understanding complexities and pluralities in social upheavals, and of ensuring a humane and democratic socialism. Unfortunately, the visions *Red Flag Song* carried were never realised in the following years. They remain unfulfilled promises of the Chinese revolution.

KEYWORDS: Workplace democracy, critical realism, working class, production competition.

In November 1947, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) took over its first major industrial city, Shijiazhuang (石家莊). Lu Mei (魯煤), a recent graduate of the literature department of North China United University (*Huabei lianhe daxue* 華北聯合大學), joined a group of cadres to take over one of the key industrial establishments in the city, the Daxing Cotton Mill (*Daxing shachang* 大興紗廠). From the shopfloor, Lu wrote a series of reportage, poems, short stories, and plays, including a four-act play, *Red Flag Song* (*Hong qi ge* 紅旗歌), which he began to write in November 1948, a year after he arrived at the factory. A culmination of Lu's year-long observation and participation in the take-over process, this play built its drama on the divisions and conflicts among the workers as the new CCP management launched a "work competition" campaign (*laodong jingsai* 勞動競賽) to raise productivity. Giving centre stage to a "backward" worker who openly resisted the competition, this play exposed some of the campaign's most harmful impacts, especially its divisiveness among the workers, and explored critical questions facing the workplace at the time: what should New China's workplace look like? To what extent were the workers able to own and manage the factory? And how could workers from diverse backgrounds and with different interests come together to form a coherent working class that the CCP could rely on to run the country?

These questions were particularly salient to the CCP, in theory a proletarian party, but one that had been largely separated from its working class base for the previous two decades. In its early years, the CCP had worked closely with the urban working class, yet the defeat of the armed uprisings in 1927 forced the bulk of Party operations into rural areas. While underground party cells continued to operate on a small scale in the cities, it was the Party's experience in rural areas and with military campaigns that shaped its revolutionary culture and organisational expertise. In 1947, when the PLA took over the City of Shijiazhuang, the Party had not yet moved from a strategy of "villages surrounding the cities" to that of "cities leading the villages": this shift in focus was announced by Mao Zedong a few years later, in March 1949. Therefore, as the first industrial powerhouse under CCP control, Shijiazhuang was an important testing ground

for the Party to work out how industries should be run and how cities should be governed.

Penned on Shijiazhuang's shopfloor, by a writer serving simultaneously as a critical observer and a dedicated implementer of CCP policies, *Red Flag Song* reflected the aspirations, contradictions, and compromises during this critical period of the Chinese revolution, both on the shopfloor and in the field of literary production. Even though as a cultural cadre, Lu Mei wrote the play under the Party's supervision and for the purpose of propagating Party policies, as a writer Lu's adherence to the critical realist tradition and immersion in the factory environment allowed him to observe and register workers' lived experiences and struggles first-hand. Taking the working class not as a given, abstract concept, but as a collective and subjective experience constantly made and re-made through conflicts, deliberations, and workers' self-management, the play put forth bold political inquiries in workers' own language and revealed serious problems on the ground, even when it followed a Party-sanctioned narrative with a positive ending. After its enthusiastic reception in Shijiazhuang just months before the founding of the PRC, *Red Flag Song* went on to be staged in more than 30 cities in the first few years of the PRC, conveying to China's urban residents how Communism might operate in their workplaces. At the time, *Red Flag Song's* fame was comparable to that of *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü* 白毛女). Both were considered exemplary works of political theatre from the Liberated Areas, with the latter representing the sufferings and revolutionary zeal in the Party's rural bases, and the former depicting the Party's reengagement with China's proletariat in the industrial cities.⁽¹⁾

While *The White-Haired Girl* has remained canonical in China's revolutionary theatre, *Red Flag Song* has long been forgotten. Lu Mei was sidelined in the late 1950s for his association with the writer Hu Feng (胡風), whose theory on critical realism impacted Lu greatly as a young writer in the early 1940s. As Lu stopped publishing in the late 1950s, and disappeared into

1. Wei Yang, "Hongqi ge de quzhe jingli" (The tortuous experience of *Red Flag Song*), *Shanghai Xijiu* (Shanghai Theatre), No. 2, 2008, p. 35.

prison and labour camps during the Cultural Revolution, the play vanished with him and has not been restaged since. At present, only a small number of articles on the play can be found in Chinese, including passing mentions or short treatments in survey histories of Chinese drama and literature, a few memoir articles written by the author, and a longer essay by the literary scholar Chen on the play and its utopian visions of workers' self-management.⁽²⁾ As far as I am aware, there is no secondary literature in English.

This paper situates this play and its writer in the dual politics of labour and literature in the transitional period between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, when the Party's control of both industrial and literary productions had begun to tighten. I begin by examining the particular revolutionary environment that gave rise to the play, paying attention to the playwright Lu Mei's dual status as a writer and cadre working for the Party at the factory, and the political changes taking place around the workers' unions at the time. I then delve into a close reading of the play itself, paying attention to its representation of workers' varied subjective positions on the shopfloor, and its changing receptions through the 1950s. I argue that reading the play in context foregrounds two deeply related practices fundamental to the building of a new China: workplace democracy and critical realist literature, both means of registering grassroots subjective experiences and nurturing emergent class consciousness. In a sense, *Red Flag Song* marked a moment of missed opportunity in China's turbulent revolution, when the Party's re-engagement with the urban working class could have strengthened democratic tendencies within the Party, and when China's critical realist literary tradition could have grounded Chinese socialism in the real-life subjectivities of the grassroots. Unfortunately, the visions *Red Flag Song* carried were never realised in the following years. They remained unfulfilled promises of the Chinese revolution.

Writing from the shopfloor: Lu Mei as cadre and writer

Born in Hebei in 1923, Lu Mei began his journey as a revolutionary writer in 1944 when he went to Chongqing to attend the National Art Academy. There Lu became involved in Anti-Kuomintang (KMT) student democratic movements, and began to write and publish poetry. Influenced by the writer Hu Feng's theoretical writings on critical realism, Lu submitted articles to the literary journal *Hope* (*Xiwang* 希望), which Hu edited, and became acquainted with Hu and his literary circle. In 1946, at the age of 23, Lu Mei left the KMT-controlled Chongqing for Zhangjiakou, capital of the CCP-controlled Jinchaji Liberated Area (*Jinchaji jiefang qu* 晉察冀解放區), to take part in the revolution and study politics and literature at North China United University (NCUU). Inspired by the new people and the new world he encountered in the Liberated Area, he continued to write poetry and was quickly noticed by the poet Ai Qing (艾青), who served as vice president of NCUU's literary institute and recommended Lu's work to the CCP newspaper *Jinchaji Daily*.⁽³⁾

In November 1947, three days after the PLA took over Shijiazhuang, Lu Mei carried his blanket bundle and moved into the Daxing Cotton Mill with a group of cadres assigned with the task of restoring production and establishing CCP control in the factory. Lu stayed there for more than a year, and participated in all kinds of activities, including registering and collecting confessions from workers who had been KMT members, re-organising the trade-union, teaching literacy in workers' night classes, and dismantling machinery and moving it to safety in anticipation of KMT raids. These were no small tasks in a volatile war-time environment, when the CCP's hold on the

city had not yet been consolidated. In his memoir, Lu recalls that the struggles within the factory were fierce, and confusion and fear loomed large, particularly among workers who had joined the KMT when the factory was under KMT control. These workers were now under suspicion and faced purges from the new CCP management. As a cadre Lu worked hard to subdue "suspicious elements" within the factory. Once, when failing to exact a worker's confession of membership in the KMT, the agitated young cadre jumped up and slapped the worker on the face, upon which the worker fell off his chair, knelt, and cried out, "High officer, I confess, I have crimes."⁽⁴⁾

While as a cadre Lu worked at the frontline of the CCP's takeover, sometimes even resorting to violent means, as a writer Lu worked hard to report from the shopfloor, publishing a large number of dispatches in *Shijiazhuang Daily*, a newspaper founded immediately after the CCP's takeover of the city. He also continued to write poetry, this time as song lyrics to be used immediately on the shopfloor. By then, many other cultural workers had moved into the factory and had begun to mobilise workers with cultural activities. The cultural troupe from the NCUU, for example, had arrived at the factory to live with the workers. They performed and taught revolutionary songs freshly written by Lu and others in order to create a festive atmosphere in the otherwise anxiety-ridden workplace and help workers understand the changes happening around them. While songs could create atmosphere and propagate slogans, drama was a much better medium to explicate policy and explore its implications in context. It was in this whirlwind of cultural activity that Lu began to try his hand at writing drama. His first two plays were one-act plays, written in collaboration with Chen Miao (陳淼), a colleague from the NCUU. The first one, "Opposing Three-hander" (*fandui sanzhihou* 反對三隻手), dealt with the theft of factory property by workers, not an uncommon phenomenon in this time of chaotic transition. The second one, "Inside and Outside Unions" (*liwai gonghui* 裡外工會), alleged previous trade unions' collaboration with the capitalist management, paving the way for CCP reorganisation.

Needless to say, Lu Mei's writing from the shopfloor was politically driven: it was part of the Party's operations in the factory, and was meant to propagate Party policies and carry out "thought work" on the workers. However, as a realist writer Lu could not have simply followed directives from above; he was committed to a literature that critically observed and reflected social realities. As the most substantial writing out of Lu's stay at the factory, *Red Flag Song* was a critical and compromised work, embodying precisely the contradiction between loyalty to the Party and commitment to realism over which many a revolutionary writer in China had stumbled.

Does the factory belong to workers: Conflicts and confusion during work competitions

Red Flag Song was a serious undertaking. It had four acts and 30-plus characters, about ten of whom had well-developed personalities and sig-

2. Chen Sihe, "Ruhe dangjia? Zenyang zuozhu? – Chongdu Lu Mei zhibi de huaju 'hongqige'" (How to become the master? How to manage the home? Rereading Lu Mei's play *Red Flag Song*), *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu congkan*, No. 4, 2011, pp. 31-42.

3. Lu Mei, "Cong Shijiazhuang chufa, 'dazhe hongqi jin Beiping!' – Huiyi 'hongqige' chuanguo de qianqian houhou" (Xia) (Starting from Shijiazhuang, "entering Beiping with the red flag," remembering the whole story of the creation of *Red Flag Song*), *Xin wenxue shiliao* (New literary documents), No. 2, 1998, p. 36.

4. Lu Mei, "Cong Shijiazhuang chufa, 'dazhe hongqi jin Beiping!' – Huiyi 'hongqige' chuanguo de qianqian houhou" (Shang) (Starting from Shijiazhuang...), *Xin wenxue shiliao*, No. 1, 1998, p. 48.

nificant dramatic function. Despite the length and scale, the play was tightly focused on a single issue – the production competition and the new relationships, divisions, conflicts, and consciousness it fostered among workers.

Before I venture into a close reading of the play, a brief discussion on the “production competition” is useful here to provide background. Inspired by practices in the Soviet Union, and with precedents in production campaigns during the Yan’an era, production competition was used by the CCP during the final years of the Chinese Civil War to achieve the dual aims of raising production levels and exerting tighter control over the workers’ union. Simultaneous to the CCP’s launching of a “production competition” campaign in 1948 was a wave of criticism targeting trade unionists for their so-called “Left-leaning adventurism” (*zuozheng maoxian zhuyi* 左傾冒險主義), or in simpler words, their “over-emphasis” on promoting workers’ welfare. A *People’s Daily* editorial published in February 1948 criticised trade unionists for their “myopic and narrow” focus on workers’ welfare, arguing that in wartime, production, rather than workers’ welfare, should be the central concern of the trade unions. “We need to explain to the workers that building industry is critical to winning the war and building a new democratic socialist society (...) Workers must work hard, learn from model workers, and (...) work ten-hour days rather than eight during the war,” stated the editorial.⁽⁵⁾ In the following months, many unionists were pressed to make self-criticism and pledge to place production as the first priority.

The industrial city of Shijiazhuang had its share of these self-criticism sessions by unionists. Chen Baoyu (陳寶玉), leader of the Central Hebei (*Jizhong* 冀中) District Union overseeing union work in areas including Shijiazhuang, conducted an extensive self-criticism at a meeting in May 1948. Admitting that the union under his leadership was dominated by “Left-leaning adventurism,” Chen denounced the labour protection law, passed before the CCP take-over at the district workers’ congress in October 1945, for its unreasonably high wage demands and work protection measures. Chen observed that the unionists’ partial and myopic focus on “workers’ immediate benefits, such as work uniforms and facial masks” hindered them from thinking about industrial development and cooperating with the Party to improve production. To combat this “incorrect” tendency, Chen urged cadres and unionists to work together to “enlighten and organise all workers through production competitions,” treating this as “the most important task facing the union at the time.”⁽⁶⁾

Lu Mei and his collaborators, Chen Miao and Xin Daming (辛大明), wrote the first draft of *Red Flag Song* between November 1947 and December 1948, a crucial period in which production competition went from a relatively spontaneous and voluntary activity to becoming the officially endorsed focus of union work in the Liberated Areas. This explains why Lu Mei and his collaborators chose to focus exclusively on factory life around the production competition, even though other events with more dramatic potential had happened to the factory during the period, such as two attempts by the KMT to take back the city in April and October 1948. In his memoir, Lu Mei explained that this choice was deliberate, as he had wanted to write a “universally applicable” story relevant to China’s socialist future, rather than a narrative meaningful only in a time of crisis.⁽⁷⁾ The author’s intuition was correct. Production competition turned out to be much more than a wartime measure: it continued to operate as a regular method of mobilising and shaping the working class after the founding of the PRC. The year 1950 saw numerous newspaper articles advising unionists on “how to regularly organise production competitions.”⁽⁸⁾ As workers’ strikes proliferated in the first years of the 1950s, production competition was promoted by the All-

China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) as a means of disciplining and reforming workers, so that China’s working class would eliminate “non-working-class mentalities” from within and become worthy of their new responsibilities as the “master” of the proletarian party state. According to a 1954 ACFTU directive to launch nationwide production competitions, these competitions were “the concrete manifestation of a Communist attitude to work (...) It can fundamentally change perceptions of labour and convey the idea that in the new society, labour is glorious, uplifting, and an act of bravery.”⁽⁹⁾

How did production competition impact the shopfloor? What might be some of the potential risks involved in this campaign? How should the workplace be organised to combat these risks and foster solidarity among the workers? These are questions *Red Flag Song* attempted to explore.

The play builds its drama around a “backward” worker, Sister Mafen (*Mafen jie* 馬芬姐), who openly resists the production competition and the peer pressure it has brought. Having lost her father to illness and poverty at an early age, Mafen was brought up by her mother, who in her old age relies on Mafen for her livelihood. Before the Communist take-over, Mafen had often been abused by factory managers. She was fired twice for trivial matters, and both times had to buy expensive gifts and kneel before managers before she could be admitted to the factory again. Like many workers at the time, Mafen employed many tactics to resist the management, such as taking frequent toilet breaks from work and stealing products from the factory. After the CCP took over the factory, Mafen continued to use these tactics, even though workers were told that the factory now belonged to the workers themselves, and the management now promoted workers’ interests. What aggravates her distrust towards the factory is that Wan Guoying, a young, male engineer who served in the previous management, has stayed on to be the assistant manager of Mafen’s workshop. When the factory expelled Mafen in the past, Wan was the person carrying out the orders. With Wan continuing to occupy an important position in the factory, Mafen remains antagonistic towards the new management, regarding it as just as bad as the previous one.

Mafen’s distrust of the CCP management and her continued acts of resistance would not have resulted in conflict with her peers if her workshop had not launched a “Red Flag production competition.” The goal of the competition, set by the workers themselves under the leadership of the new CCP management, is to exceed the factory’s pre-liberation productivity by 8%.⁽¹⁰⁾ This productivity increase is seen as a theoretical certainty after a proletarian revolution: as workers became owners of the means of production and are no longer alienated from their work, productivity will necessarily increase. However, this revolutionary unleashing of productivity

5. “Jianchi gongyun zhengque luxian, fandui zuozheng maoxian zhuyi” (Persist in the correct path of workers’ movement and against Leftist adventurism), *Renmin Ribao*, 8 February 1948, p. 1.
6. “Zuzhi gongren shengchan jingsai shi dangqian gongren de yaowu” (Organising workers’ production competitions is the key task of present-day workers), *Renmin Ribao*, 1 May 1948, p. 1.
7. Lu Mei, “Cong Shijiazhuang chufa...” (Shang) (Starting from Shijiazhuang...), *art. cit.*
8. “Dalian jixie gongchang kaizhan jingchangxing shengchan jingsai” (Dalian’s machinery factories launch regular production competitions), *Renmin Ribao*, 16 August 1950, p. 2; Zhang Shangju, “Zenyang lingdao jing changxing de shengchan jingsai” (How to lead regular production competitions), *Renmin Ribao*, 24 August 1950, p. 2, etc.
9. Quanguo zong gonghui (ACFTU), “Guanyu zai guoying changkuang qiye zhong jinyibu kaizhan laodong jingsai de zhishi” (On further developing instructions about worker competitions in state-owned factories and mine companies) (1954), *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* (Selection of important documents since 1949), Vol. 5, Beijing, Renmin chubanshe, 1993, p. 64.
10. Liu Canglang, Lu Mei, Chen Huaikai, Chen Miao, Xin Daming, and Liu Muduo, *Hongqige* (Red Flag Song), Xinhua Book Store, 1949, first edition, p. 11.

doesn't happen to Mafen, whose shirking now creates problems for her colleagues. With four workers grouped into each competition unit, Mafen's group fails week after week to produce beyond pre-liberation level, unable to reap the revolution's benefits.

One of Mafen's group-mates, Damei (大梅), a young and enthusiastic worker activist, becomes increasingly frustrated as the group fails to receive the red flag week after week, and seeks to expel Mafen and her associate, a young worker nicknamed Little Mushroom, from the group and the factory. Worried that Damei and the management might find an excuse to expel them, Mafen and Little Mushroom secretly dump the excessive cotton waste their delinquency has caused in another group's work area. The play at this point turns into a detective story as workers and cadres race to find out who did the dumping. Initial conflicting testimonies wrongly implicate the Communist worker Jinfang. Soon, however, as more evidence emerges and witnesses come forward, it becomes clear that Mafen and Little Mushroom are responsible. During a climactic confrontation, the assistant manager, Wan Guoying, does what he did in the old regime: he expels Mafen from the factory. Throughout these conflicts, two Communist party members – Peng Gang, the workshop manager, and Jinfang, a worker in Mafen and Damei's work group – have been acting as voices of reason and have attempted to mediate between Mafen, Damei, and Wan Guoying. It is these two CCP members who bring the play to its reconciliatory closure. Workers led by the CCP management criticise the rash behaviour of Damei and Wan Guoying, collectively reverse Wan's decision, and bring Mafen back to the factory. Now convinced that the factory "truly belongs to the workers," Mafen throws herself into her work. Her group fulfils its production target and receives the red flag, under which the workers become more united than ever.

The play's triumphant ending and its portrayal of wise and effective Party members were undoubtedly formulaic. The author himself admitted that the two Communist characters were the weakest in the play. While Lu created characters such as Sister Mafen and Damei based on the real people he met at the Daxing Cotton Mill, he deemed the Communist cadres at the factory "too ordinary, (...) not glorious or great enough" to serve as models for Communist characters in the play. Instead, he modelled characters such as Peng Gang and Jinfang on his idealised visions of what a Communist should be. In the 1990s, Lu Mei in his memoir expressed regrets over how he had made these characters half a century earlier. "I was unable to feel Peng Gang's inner world. I could only make him say the right words, do the right things, without any inner life," recalled the writer, who admitted that these characters were "conceptual characters lacking in vitality and personality."⁽¹¹⁾

In contrast to the flat Communist figures, however, the play created a large number of worker characters with credible actions and complex inner lives. The most remarkable character was, of course, the central character, Sister Mafen, who professed her suspicion of the new management and outspoken opposition to the production competition and with persuasive power. In heated arguments between Mafen and Damei, one gets a clear sense of the division created by the production competition among workers. Mafen and Damei's first confrontation occurs about ten minutes into the play, with Jinfang, the Communist worker, trying in vain to mediate:

Damei (calling Mafen by her nickname): "Bee Hive," let's settle accounts! Our team is unlucky to have a shameless retrograde like you! For two weeks, we were exhausted from work and still couldn't get the red flag and reach the target. Eighteen days of our work and sweat – how are you going to pay us back?

Mafen (angry but holding herself back): Zhang Damei, listen, I don't like to make trouble. But if you press me too hard, I won't be afraid to fight back!

Damei: I don't want to hear all this nonsense. You give us back our work! Give it back!

Mafen (losing control and yelling): Give it back? What the fuck! You want to settle accounts with me? Ok, let's settle accounts. Zhang Damei, answer me, who proposed this production competition?

Damei (confidently): We, we proposed it, so what?

Mafen: So, it was you who wanted to work more for the factory, not me! You can't ask me to abide your competition rules. You wanted to look good and stand out, not me. Now you can't get the red flag; that's you slapping your own face, not my problem. I haven't spit in your face, so why do you seek trouble with me?

Damei: "Bee Hive," you stubborn retrograde!

Jinfang (stopping them): Damei! – Sister Mafen!

Mafen: Jinfang, you have to let me speak, otherwise you're not being fair! – Zhang Damei, since you've mentioned the competition, I tell you, on this you are my biggest enemy! Before, we workers were good sisters to each other. We did our own work, earned our own money, and didn't have to find problems with each other. But you activists, you like to kiss the ass of the factory. You began some competition, and broke people apart into those who are activists and those who are backward elements. You keep one inside the wall, and push the other one outside...

For Mafen, the Red Flag competition is nothing more than a trick to lull workers into working longer hours and more intensively for the factory, meanwhile creating divisions and resentment between workers. In her eyes, those who were thus tricked are utterly naïve. To a younger worker Xianni, who learned to read in workers' night schools and whole-heartedly adopted the language of the revolution, Mafen asks, "If the factory is ours, how come they won't let us take a bundle of cotton threads when we want to? How come they won't let workers rest a bit longer? How come they won't allow us to dismantle our machines and take them home?"⁽¹²⁾ Xianni is dumbfounded by Mafen's questions, unable to reason her way out of this seeming contradiction.

Other workers have more arguments than Xianni to defend the new CCP management against Mafen's suspicions. The most frequently made argument is that workers receive more benefits than before, such as vouchers to buy basic foodstuffs at a discount rate. Yet Mafen in counter-argument points at all the other tasks workers have been given.⁽¹³⁾ Besides working at their day jobs, workers are also encouraged to make care packages for PLA soldiers fighting at the front. Not only do they have to spend time making womanly

11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

embroideries on the cover of the care package, they also have to use their income to buy the gifts included in the package, such as pencils, towels, canned food, and biscuits. While most other workers happily make theirs and even mobilise their mothers to do the job, Mafen refuses to take it on. "Didn't you say our production was to support the war? Then it's already enough that we work every day. Why do we have to do all these other chores?"

Mafen's hostility towards the new initiatives at the factory is exacerbated when her colleagues and former friends criticise her as "backward" and "stubborn," and she blames the competition for breaking solidarity apart. "The competition has gone on for less than two weeks, yet I already have no place to stand, no place to hide, no place to escape (...) You treat me like a load of shit, as if I smelled everywhere I go and everyone is afraid of coming close to me. Even Yuexiang, who was close to me, now has gone away from me."⁽¹⁴⁾ The label of a backward worker carried with it such shame that those who were deemed backward experienced an existential anxiety. Ostensibly speaking to Little Mushroom but in reality addressing herself, Mafen contemplates aloud, "Look, you're so reactionary – how can you be so shameless as to be still alive?"⁽¹⁵⁾

Such a "retrograde worker" would not have gotten a place to vent all her "poisonous words" in literature and drama in later years; she would soon be denied existence as the rules governing socialist literature tightened and ideas became reified in a regime focused on disciplining rather than empowering the workers. Yet in 1948, she was still able to expound her views loudly as the lead character in a revolutionary play. Another character, Wan Guochun, the foreign-trained engineer and assistant manager, was also given a significant voice in the play despite his problematic background of having previously worked for the capitalist management. Wan is patriotic and eager to contribute to the industrial development of his country. Finding the CCP more effective and less corrupt than the KMT, Wan hopes that under CCP rule he can finally realise his aspirations for a stronger China. An earnest and responsible manager, Wan nevertheless shares the elitism of a managerial class and is distrustful of workers' capacities for self-government. In his opinion, the management and the workers are by nature oppositional to each other, and the former must discipline the latter as it sees fit. Because of his heavy-handed disciplinary acts, the workers dislike Wan and repeatedly issue complaints about him, while Wan becomes increasingly frustrated by the production competition and its effects on the shopfloor. To Old Liu, head of the workers' union branch in Mafen's workshop, Wan complains, "These women workers with their nails and fists on each other just for a red flag – you consider that proletarian consciousness? What nonsense! (...) If you really want to increase production and reach the production target, you have to make plans, give commands, be powerful and confident when monitoring them (...) Otherwise, you see, they just dump waste on each other and endlessly quarrel."⁽¹⁶⁾ While Wan's viewpoints are criticised in the end, he is in no way demonised. Instead, he is portrayed as a responsible manager acting on his conscience. When criticised by workers, Wan vows not to succumb to pressure and fail his responsibilities as a manager. "I definitely would not relax my standards at work. If in an effort to avoid workers' criticism, I just put my hands in my sleeves and stand by without correcting what's wrong, my conscience won't allow it! Then I would truly be failing in my responsibilities, as they've accused me of doing!"⁽¹⁷⁾ Neither is his opposition to the work competition entirely groundless – after all, conflicts do frequently flare up on the shopfloor.

While the play gave centre stage and moral validity to backward elements such as Mafen and Wan Guochun, it also presented a critical portrait of the

worker activist Damei, whose intolerance and impatience with Mafen led to a cascade of events resulting in Mafen's dismissal from the factory. Damei is an enthusiastic and valuable worker activist, the kind that the CCP relied upon in the early years of transition. She works hard and is eager to receive the red flag for her group. Because of this eagerness to get ahead and prove herself as a worthy worker activist, she becomes increasingly hostile to Mafen, whose stubborn lack of cooperation becomes a hindrance to her group's success in the work competition, and she ultimately wants to remove Mafen once and for all from the factory. Speaking in the name of the workers as a whole, Damei declares to Mafen and Little Mushroom, "You two are expelled!" When asked who made the decision to expel the two, Damei answers, "We, we expel you."⁽¹⁸⁾

In the play, one witnesses how a worker activist and valued member of the revolution grows increasingly hostile towards a fellow worker, to the point of rallying other workers against Mafen and expelling her from the factory in the name of the collective "we." Compared to Mafen, Damei is a less sympathetic character in the play – she is portrayed as aggressive, temperamental, and lacking understanding of the consequences of her own actions. Even though Mafen and Little Mushroom are the ones who dump cotton waste in other groups' work areas, the play gives Mafen the centre stage to argue that the activist Damei is also responsible: it was the threat of being expelled that led to their deceptive actions. As workers converse among themselves to work out the causal relations in the chain of events, even the young worker Xianni begins to contemplate the damage done by unthinking ultra-radicalism. Timidly offering advice to Damei, Xianni says, "Sometimes I think that if you don't change your bullish temper, if one day you become a cadre, you'll be as bureaucratic as the assistant manager [Wan Guochun]!"⁽¹⁹⁾ Xianni's observation was spot on: both Damei and Wan Guochun approach the workplace with authoritarian impulses, despite their class and ideological differences.

It would be an exaggeration to say that this play articulates a democratic workplace. The management of the factory is not elected. The resolution of the conflict relies on two Communist Party members – the manager Peng Gang and the worker Jinfang. Mafen is portrayed as an exception and lone voice, while the majority of workers quickly adopt revolutionary language, and express no opposition to how the production and the factory are organised. Many questions that Mafen raises are not solved in the end: who decides on how much to produce, who decides on workers' welfare, how a worker with different views of the production competition could opt out of the ostensibly "voluntary" competition.

Despite these limitations, the play exposes a large number of problems associated with the production competition, and alerts the audience to the campaign's potential to add to workers' workload, divide the shopfloor, create a category of backward workers, and exclude them from the community that had once been theirs. Indeed, the production competition at the level of the shopfloor was meant to create peer pressure on the "backward" workers. As Peng Gang explains to the activist Damei, "Every team has backward elements, and you have to try to reform them as well as reform yourself (...). If all workers in the factory were as progressive as you, it would be un-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 47. *Italics mine.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

necessary to begin the competition at the first place, wouldn't it?"⁽²⁰⁾ In the play, one can also sense different layers of worker discipline taking place at the factory, from the omnipresent bulletin board registering workers' behavioural problems, to the workers' night school curriculum focusing on enforcing discipline. Xianni, the eager student at the workers' night school, is seen studying her characters at the beginning of the play. Able to recognise most, she nevertheless gets stuck on the character "discipline" (*lǜ* 律).

By contrasting the different consequences of authoritarian discipline and democratic deliberation, the play unequivocally points to workplace democracy as the foundation for potential solutions. Even though Communist leadership was crucial to the resolution of the conflicts, even more important was workers' ability to express different opinions and argue them out on the shopfloor without fear of punishment.

Does Sister Mafen exist – Staging Red Flag Song in New China

In December 1948, just when the PLA was on its way to liberate Beijing (Beijing), Tianjin, Nanjing, Shanghai, and other major cities, the first draft of *Red Flag Song* was completed. Initially meant for the local audience at the factory and in Shijiazhuang, the play quickly caught the attention of Zhou Yang (周揚), writer and propaganda chief of the North China Bureau, who read the draft and saw in the play a valuable opportunity to communicate with the large number of anxious urban residents newly incorporated into the Communist regime. Most literature and theatre from the Liberated Areas centred on rural life. Few depicted factories and workers in transition into a new society, let alone such a vibrant play addressing real worries and sentiments. Zhou encouraged Lu Mei and his collaborators to stage the play not only in Shijiazhuang but also in Beijing and other cities as the New China came into existence, and took it upon himself to suggest ideas for revision. Originally in the play, the activist Damei had a father who had worked as a foreman for the factory's previous capitalist management. Zhou Yang suggested dropping this detail, conveniently avoiding the thorny issue of a worker's mixed and thus suspicious class background, exactly what had motivated purges on the Daxing shopfloor. He also suggested enhancing the Communist characters and letting them assume bigger roles in leading the production competition and resolving the conflict.⁽²¹⁾

The revised play was staged in Shijiazhuang during the Chinese New Year in 1949. After the performance, Lu Mei and his co-authors invited the three directors who directed the Shijiazhuang staging, Liu Canglang (劉滄浪), Chen Huaikai (陳懷鰲), and Liu Muduo (劉木鐸), to work collectively on another round of revisions based on what they learned from the actual performance. The final version of the play was staged in Beijing on 1 May 1949, International Labour Day, and again in July to the First National Congress of Cultural Workers as one of the exemplary works from the Liberated Areas. The Congress of Cultural Workers was the best place to showcase the play, resulting in great interest from dramatists who attended the Congress. Two editions of the play were subsequently published in Tianjin and Shanghai in September and November 1949. Soon the play was being rehearsed and staged in more than 30 cities nationwide, including a long and popular run in China's largest industrial city, Shanghai, between February and May 1950. In the summary report of the staging in Shanghai, the Shanghai dramatists Shen Fu (沈浮) and Huang Zongying (黃宗英) recounted the play's extraordinary appeal to the Shanghai audience: "Within three hours, all seats for 40 performances were sold out, a record." In the end, Shanghai's *art deco* Lyceum

Theatre (*Lanxin daxiyuan* 蘭心大戲院) was packed to capacity for three months, with two performances daily, and a total of 125,000 viewers attended the performances. It was in the context of this play that Shanghai's most prized theatre and film actors appeared *en masse* for the first time since the CCP take-over, now in their new, proletarian roles.⁽²²⁾ Shen and Huang in their report observed, "This play's performance uplifted the low spirit of Shanghai's drama scene since Liberation, and propelled the new dramatic movement a step forward."⁽²³⁾

Controversy soon arose. In February 1950, two articles by Xiao Yin (蕭殷) and Cai Tianxin (蔡天心) appeared in the leading literary newspaper *Wenyi Bao*. Both articles found fault in the main character, Sister Mafen. A backward character like Mafen could not have existed in a factory that had been under CCP management for half a year already, wrote Xiao, and therefore the play misrepresented the reality of the working class. Cai further criticised the play as showcasing petty bourgeois pursuit of extreme freedom and democracy while opposing the organisation and discipline of the proletariat. Mafen's stubborn opposition to the production competition manifested her hostility towards the CCP and the New China. Therefore, she should be criticised and punished, and should not command any sympathy from the audience.⁽²⁴⁾ However, these negative responses did not succeed in derailing the play. Dramatists and writers in Shanghai immediately organised a meeting to discuss and defend the play, and transcripts of the speeches at the meeting were published in two instalments in Shanghai's *Wenhui Bao*, all testifying to the prevalence of workers such as Sister Mafen, and praising the play for its realist portrayal of contemporary social conditions.⁽²⁵⁾ The unequivocal defence and the play's continuing success demonstrated popular endorsement of the play's portrayal of plurality within the working class, and celebration of a workplace where a wide range of viewpoints could be expressed and contested.

Subjectivity, democracy and the unfulfilled promise of Red Flag Song

In 1950, Xiao Yin and Cai Tianxin's attacks on Lu Mei were part of a plan to continue to sideline the writer Hu Feng and the critical realist tradition he promoted.⁽²⁶⁾ As mentioned before, since his student years in Chongqing, Lu Mei had been influenced by and associated with Hu Feng, a prominent Leftist theorist and writer who had been at odds with the CCP's literary policy and ideology since the mid-1930s. While there is little scholarship on Lu Mei in English, there are a handful of English-language studies on Hu Feng, whose writings, according to Theodore Hutters, "chronicle[d] the internal dynamics of the leftist literary scene itself."⁽²⁷⁾ Studies on Hu Feng by Liu Kang and Kirk Denton both point to Hu's com-

20. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

21. Lu Mei, "Cong Shijiazhuang chufa..." (Shang) (Starting from Shijiazhuang...), *art. cit.*, p. 48.

22. Lu Mei, "Hongqige, cong jiefangqu dao quanguo" (*Red Flag Song*, from the liberated areas to the entire country), *Wenyi lilun yu piping*, No. 4, 2001, p. 87.

23. Wei Yang, "Hongqige de quzhe jingli" (The tortuous experience of *Red Flag Song*), *Shanghai Xijiu*, No. 2, 2008, p. 36.

24. Xiao Yin, "Ping Hongqige jiqi chuanguo fangfa" (Commenting *Red Flag Song* and its creation methods); and Cai Tianxin, "Hongqige de zhuti sixiang" (*Red Flag Song's* main ideology), *Wenyi Bao*, No. 11, Vol. 1, February 1950.

25. "Hongqige zuotan" (A discussion on *Red Flag Song*), *Wenhui Bao*, 5 April 1950, p. 5.

26. Zhao Xinxian, "Lu Mei juzuo Hongqige wenxue yuedu de meixue jiazhi" (The artistic value of Lu Mei's play *Red Flag Song*), *Xinan minzu daxue xuebao* (Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities), No. 1, 2011, pp. 192–195, p. 193.

27. Theodore Hutters, "Hu Feng and the Critical Legacy of Lu Xun," in Leo Ou-fan Lee (ed.), *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p. 142.



Image 1 – *Red Flag Song* premiered in Shijiazhuang in February 1949, staged by the Third Cultural Work Troupe of North China United University.

Source: Huo Dashou, "Huainian 'Hongqi'" (Remembering *Red Flag Song*), *Zhongguo xiju* (Chinese Theatre), No. 6, 2002, p. 56.

mitment to a critical realism rooted in subjective, historical experiences of everyday life, and his advocacy for the writer's autonomous agency for social observation and counter-hegemonic critique.⁽²⁸⁾ Subjectivity, whether of the writer or of the people in the revolutionary process, was at the centre of Hu's thinking. For Hu, the revolution was driven by real people and must be answerable to real people's needs and aspirations. "These are living, acting, conscious people. They follow reflections and passions conditioned by various incentives and manage their lives according to their goals. Their reflections and passions are connected variously with the driving forces of history. They are shaped by history, but also impact and create history."⁽²⁹⁾ Hu had persistently cautioned against "subjective formulaism" and "dogmatism," tendencies that led literature away from the experiential and the empirical, and argued for a realist literature committed to registering people's subjective experiences and embodied struggles. While Mao Zedong viewed urban intellectuals as *petit bourgeois*, and urged them to go through thought reform and learn from the proletarian masses, Hu placed faith in the subjective experiences of intellectuals as well, arguing that China's specific historical conditions and the May Fourth Movement had already led many urban intellectuals through a process of radicalisation and proletarianisation, merging them into a broader urban working class with clear class consciousness.⁽³⁰⁾ Therefore, instead of subjecting these intellectuals to endless thought reform, Hu argued for allowing them agency for social observation and counter-hegemonic cultural critique.

By the time Lu Mei met Hu Feng in Chongqing in 1944, CCP-sanctioned literary practices had already been moving in the directions Hu had criticised, and the rift between Hu and the CCP literary establishment had widened. In Yan'an, the Rectification Campaign had been launched in 1942 to bring urban intellectuals and cultural production under CCP ideological leadership and shun critical writings on the party. Writers such as Wang Shiwei, Ding Ling, and Ai Qing had been humiliated and forced to reform themselves (the latter two did, and the unrepentant Wang was ultimately executed). Rectification also spread to KMT-controlled areas such as Chongqing.⁽³¹⁾ Subject to intense criticism, Hu Feng nevertheless resisted changing his ways. For Hu, adherence to realism was not only a literary matter, but was at the core of a larger "struggle for democracy" and "human liberation."⁽³²⁾ Literature should not sing eulogies to the revolution or the

Party. Hu was adamantly against this instrumental use of literature, warning that it would lead to an impoverishment of literature, an endorsement of dishonesty, and a strangling of the spirit of realism.⁽³³⁾ True realist literature, according to Hu, can only be generated in a dialectic process where individual subjectivities and class consciousnesses, constantly shaped and reshaped by changing social and historical formations in a revolution, come to struggle, overcome, and transform each other. It is in this engaged process that the writer achieves an honest portrayal of true political reality and lived experience, and enters into communion with the revolutionary world and the people who move it.⁽³⁴⁾

Hu's theory of realism and its position in the revolution deeply influenced Lu Mei, who in an interview attributed *Red Flag Song's* success partly to influence from Hu Feng's writings on realism.⁽³⁵⁾ Despite his compromised position as a promoter of Party policies, Lu Mei nevertheless wrote *Red Flag Song* to tackle what he observed to be the most important issues on the shopfloor, and considered it a genuine service to the revolution. In a memoir written in 1995, Lu again defended Mafen as a credible and representative character at the time. "In the cotton mill, half a year after liberation, such 'backward' characters existed on a large scale, either hidden or manifested, all with different backgrounds and reasons for their behaviours... I chose this kind of character from the depth of life, and never thought about whether 'backward' characters could be featured as main characters in the play or not. I just believed what I saw as real life."⁽³⁶⁾

In the anti-Hu Feng campaign in 1955, Lu Mei was identified as a member of the "Hu Feng counter-revolutionary clique." No longer able to publish, he did menial work in reform camps, and was imprisoned for more than ten years during the Cultural Revolution. *Red Flag Song* lasted somewhat longer, thanks to the endorsement by Zhou Yang, vice-minister of propaganda and Hu Feng's arch-enemy, who had discovered the play's potential and supervised its revision along Party-sanctioned lines in 1949. In 1950, when *Red Flag* was under attack by Xiao Yin and Cai Tianyi, Zhou came to its rescue by publishing a long review in *People's Daily* affirming the play's revolutionary nature.⁽³⁷⁾ In 1955, while orchestrating the anti-Hu Feng campaign, Zhou Yang still sought to keep *Red Flag Song* within the ranks of revolutionary literature. Zhou's endorsement of the play further testified to the volatility and complexity of China's literary field at the time, where amongst factional fighting and political struggles occasionally a bit of room would emerge to accommodate a somewhat critical work. Of course, such accommodation soon

28. Kang Liu, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000; Kirk Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998.

29. Hu Feng, *Pinglun Ji* (Hu Feng's Essays), Vol. 2, Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984, p. 324.

30. Kang Liu, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries*, op. cit., pp. 97-98.

31. Kirk Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, op. cit., p. 87.

32. Hu Feng, *Pinglun Ji* (Hu Feng's Essays), Vol. 3, Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984, p. 19.

33. Kirk Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, op. cit., p. 87.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-103.

35. "Jiemi Zhongguo wentan diyi da yuan'an" (Uncovering the first great injustice of China's literary scene), History Channel, Phoenix TV, http://news.ifeng.com/history/phtv/wdtx/detail_2012_01/16/12004069_3.shtml (accessed on 15 October 2014).

36. Lu Mei, "Hongqi, cong jiefangqu dao quanguo" (*Red Flag Song*, from the liberated areas to the entire country), op. cit., p. 89.

37. Zhou Yang, "Lun Hongqi" (On *Red Flag Song*), *Renmin Ribao*, 8 May 1950.

disappeared. The play went through a reprint in 1959, although Lu Mei's name no longer appeared anywhere in the book, and disappeared soon afterwards.

In this paper, I re-read *Red Flag Song* as a window into the struggles and compromises on the shopfloor and in the literary field in a critical period in China's revolution, and foreground workplace democracy and realist literature as two profoundly related aspirations simultaneously suppressed as the CCP proceeded to exert tighter and more violent control over industrial and literary workers. Turning the shopfloor into a stage, *Red Flag Song* showcased a flourishing of subjective positions to challenge and transform each other, leading to grassroots expressions of working class

consciousness and interest. Performed all over New China's major industrial cities, this play highlighted workplace democracy and literary realism as two practices that could ground Chinese socialism in the lived reality of the people. Unfortunately, although discussions on subjectivity, realism, and grassroots agency revived in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution,⁽³⁸⁾ issues so powerfully raised by Sister Mafen in 1947 and 1948 have remained unresolved to this day.

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38. Kang Liu, "Subjectivity, Marxism and Cultural Theory in China," in Kang Liu and Tang Xiaobing (eds), *Politics, Ideology and Literary Discourse in Modern China*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 23-55.