From Zheng Qiang to Jiang Shuiying: The Feminization of a Revolutionary Hero in Maoist Theatre’s Song of the Dragon River

Rosemary Roberts

Since the 1980s, analysis of the representation of women in Maoist theatre has argued that the heroines of the Cultural Revolution “model works” (yangbanxi) were “genderless revolutionaries” “erased” of anything feminine. This article challenges such a view through a case study of Song of the Dragon River in which the male hero of the 1964 spoken drama version was changed to a female in the 1972 yangbanxi adaptation. Evidence is presented that the characterization of the heroine in the latter work conforms closely not only with traditional beliefs in innate female characteristics but also with current Chinese beliefs in the characteristics of successful women in leadership.

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Post Maoist research in both China and the West has tended to be highly critical of the Maoist state for what it terms the “erasure of gender and sexuality” from public and cultural space (xingbie mosha) as class became the only category that mattered (Cui 2003: 79; Dai 2002: 103; Li 1998; Yang 1999: 41). As part of this analysis, the revolutionary heroine who featured prominently in Maoist theatre and cinema, and dominated the model works (yangbanxi) of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was reassessed and found to be not a progressive model of female equality, but merely a class symbol “emptied of female sig-
nifiers” (Li 1998: 5), a “woman in male masquerade who does not signify female subjectivity because her entrance into the collective sphere depends exactly on the erasure of anything that is feminine” (Cui 2003: 87), a “genderless revolutionary” (Huang 2004: 34). As such she is seen as a dangerous impediment to women’s achievement of a genuine gender equality that fully acknowledges gender difference (Meng and Dai 1989). These scholars rightly highlight the very limited nature of the representation of women in Maoist theatre; nevertheless, the extreme conclusions drawn suggest that such arguments belong to the body of scholarship, which for political or other reasons adopts a stance of total negation of everything from the socialist period to 1976. Such views may be an oversimplification of the representation of gender in theatre of the time, but they have gained such acceptance that they are now taken as established fact in peripheral studies (e.g., Baranovitch 2003: 108–109, 147). It is therefore timely to retest their conclusions. Taking as a case study the 1964 spoken drama Song of the Dragon River and its 1972 adaptation to Revolutionary Modern jingju form (one of the famous yangbanxi model works), this study uses the framework of semiotics of the theatre to compare various aspects of the gender construction of the central heroic characters of the two works. It suggests that gender models of the time showed far more continuity with both traditional and contemporary beliefs in gender difference than has commonly been acknowledged.

The Creation of Song of the Dragon River

The particular history of the creation of Song of the Dragon River (Long jiang song) provides a unique opportunity to examine representations of gender difference in Maoist theatre. Song of the Dragon River began as a play of the same name, written in 1963 by Jiang Wen and Chen Shu and published in the journal Juben (Plays) (Jiang and Chen 1964). Its inspiration was the true story of a commune brigade in Longhai County, Fujian Province, which agreed to the flooding of a considerable area of its farmland in the interests of providing a permanent water supply to drought-stricken neighboring areas. The play rose to national prominence and was performed in Beijing in 1964, where it was looked on very favorably by the top leadership. As a tale of socialist altruism and proletarian (peasant) class solidarity, it was an ideal candidate for development into a model work. Work began on the adaptation to jingju (Peking opera) form in 1967 and the official text and film version of the stage performance were released in 1972 (Xie 1972; Shanghaishi [Long jiang song] juzutuan 1972). The process of revision of the work involved a key change in characters, which is the
focus of interest of this study; that is, the central heroic character was changed from the male Brigade Party Branch Secretary Zheng Qiang in the spoken drama version to the female Brigade Party Branch Secretary Jiang Shuiying in the *yangbanxi* version. This raises the questions, what changes were made to the male character to turn it into a woman? Is this Maoist heroine indeed just a woman in male masquerade erased of anything that is feminine as Cui argues?

**Major Characters and the Plot of *Song of the Dragon River***

The adaptation of *Song of the Dragon River* to *yangbanxi* form included adjustments to both the *dramatis personae* and the relationships between them, including name changes for most of the characters. The changes of significance to this study are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Spoken Drama Version (1964)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Yangbanxi Version (1972)</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zheng Qiang, Deputy Commune Director and Long Jiang Brigade Party Branch Secretary, male, returned serviceman, 35</td>
<td>Jiang Shuiying, Long Jiang Brigade Party Branch Secretary, wife of a serviceman who is absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin Liben, Long Jiang Brigade Leader, brother of Zheng Qiang (adopted), Party Member, 50</td>
<td>Li Zhitian, Long Jiang Brigade Leader, Party Committee Member, male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kushui (bitter water) Mother, Lin Liben’s mother, Zheng Qiang’s adopted mother, a poor peasant, 58</td>
<td>Deleted from cast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng Jian, Director of the Long Jiang Brigade Poor and Lower Middle Peasant Association, Second Production Team Leader, male in his 60s</td>
<td>Ajian Bo (Uncle Ajian), Fourth Production Team Leader, Party Branch Committee Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in cast</td>
<td>Huang Guozhong, whose real name is Wang Guolu, a class enemy who tries to sabotage the construction of the dike, male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in cast</td>
<td>Pan Shui Ma, (Mother Water-Seeker), an old woman from a neighboring drought-stricken commune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng Abai, Fourth Production Team Leader</td>
<td>Ageng, Eighth Production Team Leader</td>
</tr>
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</table>
In the original play Zheng Qiang and Lin Liben are brothers by adoption, both of whom are single and live with their mother, Mother Bitter Water. In the yangbanxi version, Jiang Shuiying and Li Zhitian are unrelated, and both are married, though their spouses are absent. In line with the Cultural Revolution emphasis on class struggle, minor negative characters, and associated plot lines were eliminated from the play version and replaced in the yangbanxi with the character of Huang Guozhong whose attempts at sabotage function to bring elements of class struggle to the plot. In both the play and the jingju, the main plot line follows the central character as he or she first wins the support of reluctant subordinates and then leads the brigade to implement the plan to flood their farmland. Heroic leadership is therefore a focus of both works. A breach in the dike is repaired through further selfless sacrifice, and both play and jingju conclude with the members of all the brigades involved in the project celebrating bumper harvests.

**Semiotic Systems as a Framework for Analysis**

The theatrical complexity and highly symbolic nature of jingju suggest that the analysis of character this study seeks to undertake could usefully borrow methodological tools from the field of semiotics. The concept of dramatic and theatrical systems, on which the performance text is dependent for its encoding and decoding of meaning, is particularly useful to this study, as it offers a means of categorizing different aspects of performance. Kowzan (1968) identifies thirteen basic theatrical systems including language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, makeup, hairstyle, costume, props, décor, lighting, music, and sound effects—a list that incorporates the major elements of traditional Chinese xiqu and specifically jingju (Xiang and Shao 2003: 3–4; Zhang 2000: 38–40). Such an approach should therefore be considered valid for analysis of both the spoken drama and the yangbanxi versions of Song of the Dragon River in this study. Restrictions on data available to this study, however, mean that not all systems can be investigated. Whereas an official published text, a film, and still photographs are drawn on for analysis of the 1972 yangbanxi, data for the spoken drama is restricted to the text published in Juben in March 1964, and a limited number of still photographs of the performance also from the early 1960s. Analysis will therefore necessarily be focused primarily on elements of the works accessible through the written texts. Before analysis can be undertaken, however, it is first necessary to set out the criteria against which femininity or masculinity will be measured.
Femininity, Masculinity, and Leadership in Chinese Culture

In testing the femininity of the characters in *Song of the Dragon River* it is necessary not only to look at the qualities stereotypically attributed to “woman” in traditional Chinese thought, but also to consider what traits are regarded as culturally appropriate for women in leadership in modern Chinese culture. Traditionally a woman is gentle, modest, introverted, sensitive, good at perceptual thinking, and sympathetic, as well as timid, weak, and indecisive (Min 1995: 587). Recent research has shown that although effective managers in China are expected to display capability, ambition, assertiveness, self-confidence, compatibility, and aggressiveness—traditionally associated with masculinity in Chinese culture (Ebrahimi, Young, and Luk 2001: 434–436)—female managers are considered more likely to succeed if they can downplay “masculine” qualities and instead bring “feminine” qualities to their leadership style. Such qualities are understood to include the ability to listen well and to “operate in a ‘woman’s way’ including having intuition, an eye for details, smooth communication, and a tendency to be altruistic, less confrontational, and less prone to risk-taking” (Liu, Comer, and Dubinsky 2001: 5). A 1994 article in the mainland journal *Leadership Science* (Lingdao kexue) describes the path to success for the Chinese woman leader as follows:

Women who have had outstanding success in their official careers have used their emotional sensitivity and democratic work style to their advantage. They have the ability to promptly discern the mood of every member of the leadership team, and blend a more emotional element into promoting group cohesiveness and motivating group members. . . . Motherly love is the greatest love that exists in human-kind, and the most important component of motherly love is self-sacrifice. If women cadres can carry this spirit into the political arena, they will have an inspirational and cohesive power that men cannot match. (Zhang 1994: 87)

The current study will try to ascertain whether and to what degree the change from Zheng Qiang to Jiang Shuiying involved the reduction of culturally understood “male” traits and the addition of the culturally understood “female” qualities described above.

**Hairstyle and Costume**

Semiotic systems such as costume and hairstyle can be regarded as “deep surface” phenomena that manifest the unconscious through
seemingly superficial activities and need to be understood as carrying significant cultural meaning (Warwick and Cavallaro 1998: xxii). This understanding is particularly applicable to the study of jingju in which the outward appearance of the performer was traditionally a key component of articulating a role (Riley 1997: 54). Viewed in this light, the costume and hairstyle chosen for Jiang Shuiying can be analyzed in terms of the cultural messages about gender and sexuality encoded into them. Jiang Shuiying appears in variety of costumes in the opera all comprising long trousers and mandarin-collared jackets or blouses. The trousers are based on the loose garment traditionally worn by rural women in Fujian Province, where the story is set, however Jiang’s costumes are much more closely shaped to the body than either the real-life originals or the women’s costumes in the earlier play. The jackets and blouses likewise are tailored to show off the female body and come in a variety of styles that immediately identify the wearer as female. These include a plain red jacket, a red jacket with a check pattern and white cuffs with large printed flowers, and a white blouse printed with large red flowers (see Roberts 2006). This last costume is the one worn throughout most of the performance. Its appearance varies however: in scene 2 warm-toned lighting makes it appear pink, while in scene 5 the tailoring of the shirt is accentuated by a red belt tied around the waist. It must therefore be concluded that Jiang Shuiying’s costumes all contribute to the creation of a distinctly feminine appearance—not, of course, the femininity of the city woman, but the femininity of a rural woman involved in manual agricultural work on a daily basis.

Jiang Shuiying’s hairstyle, with its fine fringe and straight hair smoothed behind the ears and cut straight at the nape of the neck, also needs to be read in social and historical context. Although plain compared to the styles and perms of today, it originated in the May Fourth period as a rebellion against the long hair that women traditionally wore in a braid when single or a bun when married. At the time it was a symbol of progressive womanhood and was considered to enhance feminine beauty (Finnane 1999: 15). The style subsequently became part of what Ip has identified as the revolutionary aesthetic principles of frugality that were followed by progressive women from film star Bai Yang to Song Qingling, wife of Sun Yatsen (Ip 2003: 348). As it appears on Jiang Shuiying, therefore, the hairstyle needs to be understood as representing the simple, restrained beauty of the progressive woman who has rejected the constraints of traditional culture and seeks to contribute to the creation of a new society. As with costume, therefore, Jiang Shuiying’s hairstyle contributes clearly identifiable feminine elements to her appearance.
Verbal Linguistic Systems

Verbal linguistic systems can convey messages about gender in numerous different ways ranging from the gendered meaning of names to the cultural understanding of language use as either more feminine or more masculine. A clear example of the former occurs in *Song of the Dragon River*: Zheng Qiang, the name of the hero of the play, is a homonym for “strive for the upper hand” or “strive for power” (see glossary for characters). As such it carries connotations of many of the stereotypical male attributes of a successful leader, that is, capability, ambition, assertiveness, self-confidence, and aggressiveness. The name chosen for the female lead of the *jingju*, however, has lost most of these masculine connotations. Jiang (river) and shui (water), the first two elements, are both strongly associated with the feminine through traditional cosmology in which water (shui) is the female element. The third element, ying, means “heroic person” and hence carries more masculine connotations, but also has the meaning “flower” (see glossary for characters). The name given to the new protagonist therefore clearly reflects the change from masculine to feminine gender that has occurred.

Gender, Authority, and Forms of Address

My previous study on the positive women characters in the *yangbanxi* compared the forms of address used for Jiang Shuiying and Li Zhitan in the 1972 version of *Song of the Dragon River* (Roberts 2004: 413–414). That study found that Li Zhitian, the male Brigade Leader, was always addressed by his subordinates as Duizhang (Brigade Leader), a title that fully acknowledged his superior status and authority and to which he had no objection. In contrast, Brigade Party Branch Secretary Jiang Shuiying, who was at least his equal in political and social rank, was addressed respectfully as Shuji (Secretary) only once, and, on that occasion, she immediately indicated her discomfort and insisted on being addressed by her personal name. She was most commonly addressed by subordinates in terms that identified her as a close friend or family member (Shuiying or Shuiying Jie [Sister Shuiying]) or implied comradely equality (Shuiying Tongzhi [Comrade Shuiying])—in other words, terms that conceptually limited her chiefly to the types of relationships that women were restricted to in traditional society. Hence it seemed that whereas the male cadre was addressed in terms that gave full acknowledgement of his social power and status, the female cadre was addressed in terms that downplayed hers. My study, however, left unanswered the question as to whether the difference might be not one of gender but rather of social/political roles:
whereas Li Zhitian leads practical work, Jiang Shuiying is primarily a political leader. Her role therefore also carries the political message of the time, that the party and the people are one big family. It is significant therefore to compare the forms of address used for Jiang Shuiying with those used for Zheng Qiang in the earlier play. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 reveals that significant changes were made in the use of forms of address in the process of changing the male Zheng Qiang into the female Jiang Shuiying. If we first compare the forms of address used by fellow cadres, it is clear that for both characters the most commonly used form is a familiar form of the personal name: Aqiang and Shuiying, respectively. This form implies friendly, egalitarian relations, so it can be concluded that in this respect the gender change of the central character has made no difference. However it is significant to note that Jiang’s fellow cadres also address her as Haizi (Child)—a term that is affectionate but downgrades her status and authority (see the following discussion). They also use a sarcastic title, “My Dear Party Branch

Table 2. A Comparison of Forms of Address for Jiang Shuiying and Zheng Qiang

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of address used</th>
<th>By team or brigade leaders</th>
<th>By subordinates</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ZHENG QIANG (male)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng Shuji (Secretary Zheng)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqiang</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqiang Ge (Brother Aqiang)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqiang Tongzhi (Comrade Aqiang)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haizi (Child)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wo de shuji (My [Dear] Secretary!)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JIANG SHUIYING (female)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiang Shuji (Secretary Jiang)</td>
<td>1 (outsider)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuiying</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuiying Jie (Sister Shuiying)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuiying Tongzhi (Comrade Shuiying)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayi (Auntie)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haizi (Child)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wo de zhibu shuji (My [Dear] Party Branch Secretary!)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Secretary.” Zheng Qiang, in comparison, while also being addressed using the sarcastic term, is in addition addressed or referred to four times by fellow cadres as Zheng Shuji (Secretary Zheng), the term that fully acknowledges superior power and authority.

Even greater differences can be seen in the way the two characters are addressed by subordinates. As noted above, Jiang Shuiying is addressed only once as Jiang Shuji (Secretary Jiang), and in that instance immediately insists on being addressed as Shuiying instead. In contrast, Zheng Qiang’s subordinates use Zheng Shuji (Secretary Zheng) as the most common form of address (eleven times). There is never any indication that he feels uncomfortable with the title. Conversely, forms of address that indicate a kinship-style or egalitarian relationship are much more predominantly applied to the woman. Zheng Qiang is addressed as Aqiang Ge (Brother Aqiang) only once and Aqiang Tongzhi (Comrade Aqiang) only twice, compared to Jiang Shuiying’s Shuiying Jie (Sister Shuiying) eight times, Shuiying Tongzhi (Comrade Shuiying) nine times, and Ayi (Auntie) once. Both Zheng Qiang and Jiang Shuiying are addressed as Child (Haizi), but even here there are significant contextual differences: Zheng is addressed as Child only by the woman who adopted him as a small child, whereas Jiang is called Child by an elderly woman from a neighboring commune. The former simply reflects the actual kinship relation, while the latter functions to represent the nature of the relationship between this powerful communist cadre and the ordinary peasant woman.

Further, the earlier study noted that Jiang Shuiying always uses the polite form of you, nin, to address Uncle Ajian, who is a generation older than she but holds a lower cadre rank. This use of nin symbolically places her in a position of lower status than he, reinforced by his also once addressing her as Child. In the play, in contrast, Zheng Qiang simply addresses him as ni (“you,” which carries no connotation of respect) and Uncle Ajian, though still a generation older than Zheng, does not address him as Child, but does refer to him as Secretary Zheng. In Zheng Qiang’s case the relationship with Ajian confirms his superior status and authority, and traditional age hierarchies are not linguistically evoked, whereas in Jiang Shuiying’s case the relationship undermines her status and authority by continually linguistically evoking the traditional hierarchy of age.

The discussion above leads to the conclusion that the process of changing Zheng Qiang into Jiang Shuiying included changes in forms of address that deemphasized the status and power of the central figure and modified relations between the central character and other characters in the work by reducing their authoritarian and hierarchical elements. On one hand these changes function to downgrade
Jiang to a position that echoes the subordinate status of women in traditional society, but on the other hand they are in keeping with the beliefs noted earlier that a successful female leadership style is more democratic, sensitive, caring, and modest.

**Gender Differences in Relationship Management**

Research into gender differences in leadership has shown that an important area in which women are both believed and expected to behave differently from men is in their management of interpersonal relations with colleagues and subordinates (Sinclair 1998: 108–111). Hence in this study the way each of the central characters manages conflict with subordinates is instructive.

In the 1964 play, Lin Liben (brigade leader) and Zheng Abai (team leader) both oppose the dam project out of concern for the interests of their smaller collective units (brigade and team). In bringing the two men around to positions of support, Zheng Qiang’s approach is to use strategically planned guidance and rational argument. However, the men’s understanding and acceptance is often spurred on by aggressive language that derides or castigates them and implicitly but clearly positions Zheng as a superior in a hierarchical structure of power and authority. In scene 1, for example, in leading up to proposing building the dike, Zheng Qiang shows Lin Liben withered wheat from the drought-affected area and states that the neighboring commune needs their support. However, when Lin enthusiastically offers to work for a bumper harvest and send them the surplus, Zheng responds with cutting sarcasm: “You! Your thinking is so simplistic! Just think about how many tens of thousands of mu are drought-affected. Even if this brigade produces the bumper harvest of all bumper harvests, it is not going to solve the problem” (Jiang and Chen 1964: 11).

Later, when Lin Liben continues to have reservations about the losses to their own brigade, Zheng curtly tells him, “Ay! Broaden your thinking a bit!” (Jiang and Chen 1964: 15 and 28), and directly criticizes him: “Liben, this sulking of yours is out of line” (15). Still not getting far with high-pressure persuasion, he loses his temper: “You! . . . You are really are thick! (ni ni zhen hutu)” (16). When a breach occurs in the dike, materials are needed urgently for repair work. Lin, however, is reluctant to contribute straw and wooden beams that his brigade has just collected to fire a kiln of bricks. The bricks were to be sold to supplement crop losses from the flooded farmland. Zheng Qiang combines vigorous persuasion with jibes at Lin’s pride and masculinity and direct commands to pressure him into compliance:
zheng qiang: Liben, what’s up?
lin liben: Aqiang, We’ve taken the stabbing and now we’re being beaten with a stick as well!
zheng qiang: But it’s plainly for the greater good! It’s just as Uncle Ajian said, “Give up a pawn to save a rook.”
lin liben: Give up a pawn to save a rook? Three hundred mu of wheat and now a whole kiln of bricks! Those are not small losses!
[. . .]
zheng qiang: It’s true. The burden gets heavier and heavier, but we still have to shoulder it! (Passes lin liben a wooden beam to carry.) Come on, if you can’t manage it, we’ll carry it together.
(lin liben still agonizing, stands up, leans on the beam, and sighs.)
lin liben: Help me? No, I’m fine.
zheng qiang: Then put your back into it! (Jiang and Chen 1964: 32)

Zheng Qiang’s criticism of Zheng Abai is even more confrontational as he dresses him down in public for resisting the dike construction:

zheng qiang: Comrade, you are a cadre, you should lead the masses from the front instead of lagging behind them. Even less should you be wrangling with people . . . you need to have a good think about things. Get your arse sitting straight and sort out your thinking.
zheng abai: Get my arse sitting straight?
zheng qiang: Right, it’s a bit crooked at the moment. (Jiang and Chen 1964: 24)

In the 1972 jingju, in spite of the obvious greater politicization of the plot and the condensation of plot and dialogue necessitated by the change of genre, differences in the way Jiang Shuiying handles dissent and conflict in relationships are readily evident. As in the play, in scene 1 she guides the brigade cadres to consider various options for assisting the drought-stricken neighbors. Instead of an extended dialogue with Li Zhitian, this has become a group interaction with three of the brigade cadres. It is notable, however, that even though Jiang refutes each suggestion they make, she does so briskly but without the ridicule and belittling evident in Zheng Qiang’s responses to Lin Liben. As Jiang delivers the news that the river will be dammed at that very spot, Li Zhitian indicates his dissent through gesture and
facial mime, highlighted on the film with close-up shots. The jingju
continues as follows:

(Everyone falls into a long silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts. JIANG
SHUIYING observes everyone’s mood and walks towards LI ZHITIAN.)

JIANG SHUIYING: Zhitian, what do you think?
LI ZHITIAN: If we dam the river outside the dike and raise the water
level so it flows to the drought area, won’t these 300 mu of fine
crops all be submerged?
JIANG SHUIYING: The saying goes: sugar cane is not sweet at both
ends. We ought to make the necessary sacrifice.
LI ZHITIAN: How are we going to convince the masses?
JIANG SHUIYING: The key lies with us cadres.
UNCLE AJIAN: (Already decided.) The county party committee has
already made the decision, we should resolutely implement it.
LI ZHITIAN: . . .
JIANG SHUIYING: We’ll hold a branch meeting shortly and study the
report of the 8th plenum again to unify our thinking.
LI ZHITIAN: (Forcing himself.) Okay. (Shanghai shi [long jiang song]
Juzutuan 1972: 10–11)

In this scene the aggressive verbal sparring and jockeying for psycho-
logical advantage found between the two men in the play have disap-
peared. A close-up of shot of Jiang in the film as she observes every-
one’s mood shows her with a gentle smile and mild, empathetic
manner. She continues to smile and speak gently and tactfully
throughout the dialogue. Having observed Li Zhitian’s repressed
anger and frustration, she then seeks him out at home to resolve the
issue in a direct one-on-one dialogue. Here again the manner forms a
stark contrast to the style of Zheng Qiang. Instead of the scathing crit-
icism we saw above, Jiang Shuiying begins by establishing her concern
for Li’s personal welfare by encouraging to him to eat and then raises
her concern for the state of his thinking with an earnest appeal:

JIANG SHUIYING: Zhitian, you haven’t eaten yet? Is your wife around?
LI ZHITIAN: She’s at a meeting.
JIANG SHUIYING: Quickly get on with your meal!
LI ZHITIAN: I’ve no appetite at the moment. (Earnestly) Shuiying,
how about we report our difficulties to the County Committee?
JIANG SHUIYING: (With a smile) At Dragon River Brigade we have
never passed our difficulties higher up.
LI ZHITIAN: . . . (Sits down.)
JIANG SHUIYING: You are such a firebrand, how come you were so
quiet at the branch meeting today?
Li Zhitian: I...

Jiang Shuiying: I am really worried, if we have doubts in our own minds, how can we lead the fight to win this battle? (Jiang and Chen 1964: 14–15)

She goes on to succeed in changing his mind through an emotional appeal to his sympathy for the peasants of neighboring communes who have experienced much more devastating losses because of the drought. The only time she adopts an authoritarian tone and issues a sharp command ironically serves to highlight the fundamentally feminine style of her leadership. Li Zhitian gets up to leave:

Jiang Shuiying: Where are you going?
Li Zhitian: To find Ageng and organize tasks.
Jiang Shuiying: First complete the task here.
Li Zhitian: What task?
Jiang Shuiying: Eat—your—dinner!
Li Zhitian: Ha ha ha!
Jiang Shuiying: (Feels his bowl of food.) Oh, your food’s gone cold. I’ll warm it up for you. (Picks up the bowl and exits.) (Jiang and Chen 1964: 17–18)

In all of these interactions, in contrast to the leadership style of Zheng Qiang, we can see that Jiang Shuiying’s style conforms with many of the attributes identified as appropriate to a female style of leadership; that is, she is warm in personal interactions, highly sensitive to the emotional responses of her subordinates, smooth in communication, and altruistic. She is clearly less confrontational than her male predecessor.

This change in interpersonal style cannot simply be attributed to the extreme ideological demands on the yangbanxi genre to present the party and socialist society in idealized “friendly” form. Although in the jingju Jiang’s leadership style has changed from that of Zheng Qiang, it is significant that there has been no change in the stereotypically male way in which the male brigade leader deals with his male subordinates. In both the play and the yangbanxi, after learning about the proposed dam, this character vents his anger and frustration on his subordinate barking commands at him in an irritable, authoritarian manner. In the jingju the subordinate (Ageng) has been leading the task of adding extra fertilizer to the land, which Brigade Leader Li now knows will be flooded:

Li Zhitian: Stop the work.
Ageng: Why should we stop?
LI ZHITIAN: If I tell you to stop then you stop.
AGENG: Huh? Just now you told us to put on another five catties, but now . . .
LI ZHITIAN: Just now was just now. Now is now. (Shanghai shi [Long jiang song] juzutuan 1972: 11)

Later, after having his own views changed by Jiang Shuiying only after a long and difficult process of persuasion, Li assumes an attitude of impatient superiority when repeating identical arguments to persuade Ageng. In the jingju this latter scene follows on without break from the scene with Li and Jiang quoted above; Ageng appears as Jiang Shuiying disappears into Li Zhitian’s house to warm up his food. This juxtaposition of sharply contrasting leadership styles further highlights the feminine gendering of Jiang Shuiying’s role.

Nonverbal Language Systems

Because analysis of the spoken drama form of Song of the Dragon River has to be based primarily on the published text, information about nonverbal communication systems is necessarily quite limited. Nonetheless some stills of the early 1960s productions of the play are available and can contribute to our understanding of subtle changes in the characterization of the central character in systems such as the use of body language and personal space. Figures 1 and 2 are stills taken from the play and the jingju, respectively, and posted on the Longhai County government website as the photographs representing those two works.6 The focus of both works is imaging the persuasive, capable leader. It is therefore interesting to analyze differences in nonverbal language use in each photograph and consider their gender implications.

In semiotic dramatic theory, the use of space in theatre is neither casual nor merely functional, but is a semiotically-loaded choice, subject to powerful rules which generate a range of connotative cultural units (Elam 2002: 52 and 56). The positioning of each character on stage and in relation to other characters incorporates important semantic messages about the relative power and status of each character. Western research into nonverbal communication has shown that “dominant individuals and those in positions of authority may use cues related to height as a symbol of superiority” (Henley 1997: 128). In Chinese culture, differences in elevation carry similar connotations: in the performance of the kow-tow, for example, the adoption of a low elevation in relation to a superior is an important symbol of the subordinate’s deference to the superior’s authority and status. Applying this understanding to the two photographs, we can see that in Figure 1
Zheng Qiang and Lin Liben are positioned so that Zheng towers over Lin in a dominating stance, clearly signaling the hierarchical nature of the relationship between them. In Figure 2, in contrast, Jiang Shuiying and Li Zhitian have been positioned at roughly equal heights, which indicates a much more egalitarian relationship.

Other aspects of body language also point to fundamentally different types of personal interaction between the two characters. In Figure 1, Zheng Qiang adopts an expansive gesture, holding up and pointing to the flask of water he has brought back from the drought-stricken neighboring commune. Such poses convey power by extending the individual’s spatial sphere of control (Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall 1996: 315). His gaze is fixed on Lin, a slightly contemptuous smile on his face reinforcing the dismissive tone of his words cited above and asserting his domination. On the other hand, Lin Liben’s unsmiling face, “set” mouth, staring eyes, and raised chin are classic indicators of hostility (Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall 1996: 329–330). Extended elbows indicate that he is attempting to express his dominance, but the forearm curled back across his chest also suggests defensiveness. Although the men are positioned close together, their raised

![Figure 1. Zheng Qiang (at left, holding a flask of bitter water from the drought-affected neighboring commune) persuades Lin Liben to “give up a pawn to save a rook.” (Photo: Longhai City People’s Government)](image-url)
elbows create a double barrier between them, and they are slightly
turned away from each other. There is no sense of empathy or con-
nectionedness.

Figure 2 presents very different nonverbal cues. Dominance/
subordination is still present: Jiang indicates her dominance through
her direct gaze at Li Zhitian with her chin raised. Li shows his defer-
ence by averting his eyes and lowering his chin with his head slightly
cocked. However, in this case Jiang exhibits an open posture, sympa-
thetic gesture, and gentle smile, which are classic signs of “warmth.”
Jiang and Li’s bodies are oriented toward each other, with the raised
arms this time creating a connection instead of a barrier between them.
The almost perfect mirroring of posture is also usually understood as
indicating that positive feelings exist between people (Burgoon, Buller,
and Woodall 1996: 328).

Nonverbal cues in the two photographs indicate that whereas
Zheng Qiang exhibits stereotypically “masculine” qualities in his inter-
action with Lin Liben—aggression, competitiveness, assertiveness and
insensitivity—Jiang Shuiying exhibits stereotypically “feminine” quali-
ties in her interaction with Li Zhitian. Aggression and confrontation
are downplayed in place of gentleness, sensitivity, and cooperation. In
other parts of the jingju Jiang Shuiying does, of course, also exhibit
identifiably “male” body language in the form of poses she adopts to
show her courage and resolution when rallying the masses, making

![Figure 2. Jiang Shuiying encourages Li Zhitian to take a broader view in the jingju version. (Photo: Longhai City People's Government)](image-url)
politicized statements, or interacting with the villain, the “class enemy” Huang Guozhong. However, the contrast between such poses and the manner in which she interacts on a one-to-one basis with other positive characters is marked.

**Props**

Changes in the use of props by the central characters also designate a shift from masculine in the spoken drama toward feminine in the revolutionary modern jingju. In the 1964 script of the play, we find Zheng Qiang scraping up fertilizer with his hands, holding a manure basket, and carrying a water flask, a hoe, withered wheat from the drought-stricken area, and a red flag. He lights lanterns, carries sacks on a shoulder pole, moves wooden beams with Lin, and uses a telephone. Although Jiang Shuiying also uses most of these props with minor variations such as replacing the hoe with a spade, those props that represent the heaviest work—sacks on a shoulder pole and wooden beams—have been removed, and several props representing traditionally female domestic service tasks have been added. These include a pair of shoes, which she stitches while talking to Li Zhitian; Li Zhitian’s bowl of food, which she takes and warms up for him; a domestic cleaning cloth; a flask and cup from which she serves the child Xiao Hong water; a bowl of soup she declines; and a cup of tea she accepts. The props employed in the two works thus point indexically to a change in the role of the central character from undertaking middle and heavy weight laboring tasks to middle weight labor and light domestic service—a change that of course directly reflects traditional beliefs in what work is both natural and appropriate for men and women, respectively, beliefs that are still held today (Pan 1993: 45). Contrary to the impression given by contemporary scholarship (Jiang 2000; Yang 1999), this suggests that by the early 1970s the “iron woman” who does everything a man does, including the heaviest physical labor, was not the model promoted in the most significant official cultural productions. Party mouthpieces of the time also published articles specifically emphasizing the need for recognition of gender differences in the allocation of agricultural work, as in this article from *Red Flag* in 1973:

Women have women’s own special characteristics. The allocation of agricultural labor according to these characteristics will mean both that the work can be done well, and that women’s physical health can be protected. . . . Women have their own biological characteristics. During menstruation, pregnancy and breast-feeding, as far as possible they should be allocated light work close to home. In particular they cannot do work spraying agricultural chemicals, transplanting
rice seedlings, or carrying heavy loads. Men and women should share housework, but some domestic tasks such as looking after children and sewing and mending clothes, are still undertaken mainly by women. So once a particular stage of work is finished in the busy season, as well as on wet days and in the winter, time must be set aside to allow women to do these necessary domestic tasks (Qidong County Revolutionary Committee Survey Team 1973: 43–44).

While the article above obliquely points to the existence of the practice it seeks to counter—that is, the physical overtaxing of women in the name of gender equality—it shows that these gender issues were being raised publicly in the official media well before the Cultural Revolution ended with the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976. This constitutes a further challenge to the characterization of the entire Cultural Revolution period 1966–1976 as being an undifferentiated period of state denial of gender difference.

Sexuality, Motherhood, and Female Leadership in a Masculine Environment

If sexuality is understood narrowly to mean an individual’s sense and expression of himself or herself as a desiring sexual being (this is the meaning I understand to be used by Cui 2003, Chen 2002, and Yang 1999), then it is true that there is no exploration of the sexuality of either the male or the female protagonist under discussion. We learn nothing about their private sexual feelings and relationships. This is one of the many limitations of Maoist literature and the yang-banxi in particular. This is not to say, however, that sexuality is altogether absent from Song of the Dragon River. Elsewhere it has been argued that sexuality is utilized broadly in the creation of the yang-banxi, in areas such as costume and dance choreography to enhance the audience reception of the political messages (Roberts 2004: 416–417, 420; Chen 2002: 115). Although the dramatic characters are seldom represented as desiring subjects, they do become objects of public desire.

Scholars such as Cui, Dai, Meng, and Yang suggest that because female heroic characters in Maoist culture do not express female subjectivity and sexuality, their effect on the position of women in Chinese society has been merely to create a “mythical trap” of genderless equality that delays women’s necessary transit through a stage of asserting gender difference before they can achieve true gender-differentiated equality (Meng and Dai 1989; Yang 1999; Cui 2003). In the context of female leadership, however, experience in other cultures suggests that the “masculinized” women leaders of Maoist culture might themselves represent a stage in the historical entry of women into leadership posi-
tions that actually expedite the subsequent achievement of gender-differentiated equality.

Sinclair’s research into female leadership in Australia shows that in order to succeed in the aggressively masculine environment of Australian business culture, women have commonly had no choice but to go through a stage of suppression of their femininity and sexuality. Such a stage functions to disassociate women from stereotypes that cast them as weak, incompetent, and primarily to be regarded as sex objects (Sinclair 1998: 163–169). The women surveyed believed that if they were to be regarded as serious and committed to the job they had to avoid a “feminine” appearance or manner, any kind of sexually provocative behavior, and even any mention of family or children while at work. Sinclair identified commonly adopted roles as “principled ‘schoolmarm’ (who shades into mother),” “thoroughly business-like specialist,” “dutiful daughter,” and “tomboy kid-sister.” Only when women had established themselves as proven leaders and moved into higher positions of power were they once again able to express their sexuality in ways such as adopting a more feminine appearance or by allowing their children to visit the office (168–170).

In Maoist China women seeking to enter leadership positions also faced cultural traditions that barred women from holding public office and stereotyped them as suited only to domestic tasks and childbearing. In the words of an old maxim, “men do not rule inside the house; women do not rule outside the house.” In the countryside, women—particularly single women who participated in social and political activities outside the home—were also susceptible to damaging rumors of sexual impropriety (Kuo and Chou 1966). Further, sexualized, powerful women were culturally stereotyped as dangerous, capricious, and vicious, capable of draining men of their sexual energy, and credited with the downfall of many individual men as well as kingdoms and dynasties. The only power a woman could acceptably wield over men in traditional China was as wise mother or as family matriarch.

In creating new models of a female leadership that would be broadly acceptable, therefore, writers and artists were both constrained by and working against these cultural traditions. The model represented by the socialist heroines of the yangbanxi offers a form of female leadership that broadly parallels the roles initially assumed by the Australian women entering leadership positions discussed above. In the case of Jiang Shuiying, the avoidance of issues of love and sexuality disassociates her from traditional stereotypes of women as dependent domestic creatures. It assuages the traditional terror of a powerful female sexuality, and permits a focus on establishing conceptually the
competence of women as leaders. In addition, it conforms with the Chinese cultural tradition that the warrior hero figure was characterized by his abstention from sex and his rejection of romantic desire (Louie 2002: 19). Cultural history and international experience therefore suggest that initially excluding considerations of female sexuality from the new models of female leaders was in practice a step forward in promoting the acceptance of female leadership in Chinese society.

At the same time the model of Jiang Shuiying uses the traditional respect for and power of mothers by incorporating stereotypically motherly qualities (caring, firm, sensitive, self-sacrificing) to create a more familiar and therefore more acceptable model of female authority. Jiang’s role in looking after Li Zhitian’s dinner, discussed above, was in fact taken over from the role of Lin Liben’s mother, who was deleted from the cast in the adaptation to yangbanxi form. Jiang’s role in enlightening commune members, through guiding their study of Mao’s essay on Norman Bethune in scene 6, is also aptly encapsulated by Sinclair’s term “schoolmarm who shades into mother” (see Fig. 3). The spirit of motherly self-sacrifice is also evident in the yangbanxi, seen, for example, in Jiang assisting other villagers to move while water floods her own home. As discussed above, this spirit of motherly self-sacrifice was still being strongly promoted in the 1990s as the most powerful female attribute of the modern woman cadre.

Figure 3. Jiang Shuiying in a schoolmarm role persuading brigade members to display a spirit of altruism. (Photo: Longhai City People’s Government)
The “dutiful daughter” role identified by Sinclair also has parallels in Jiang Shuiying’s relationship with elderly characters in the opera, including Mother Water-Seeker and Uncle Ajian, toward whom she is caring, respectful, and open to guidance. As noted earlier, both of these characters reinforce this role by affectionately addressing her as Child.

Conclusions

The discussion above has provided considerable evidence that the process of changing the central character of Song of the Dragon River from a male to a female involved far more than the substitution of a female body for a male one, and, in fact, incorporated a multifaceted feminization of the revolutionary hero incorporating costume, action, verbal and nonverbal language use, character attributes, modes of interaction with other characters, and use of props. Although Jiang Shuiying is partially masculinized merely by the fact that she takes on a challenging leadership role traditionally unavailable to women, the evidence has shown that the way she carries out that role is, nonetheless, identifiably feminine in the Chinese cultural context. Many of the qualities she exhibits continue to be listed as the characteristics of a successful female manager in post-Maoist society. These include emotional sensitivity and responsiveness; the ability to listen and communicate well; friendliness and warmth; a nonconfrontational, democratic approach; altruism; modesty; and a spirit of motherly self-sacrifice. It must therefore be concluded that although Jiang possesses some traditionally masculine qualities, she is clearly gendered “feminine.” Although Western readers might find these qualities oppressive in their stereotypical femininity, the yangbanxi heroines have been criticized in post-Mao China only for their lack of femininity and not for any failure to challenge beliefs in inherent female attributes. The incorporation of these traits into the yangbanxi heroines, in my view, is not so much a result of Maoist attempts to keep women in subordinate roles (which would imply an awareness that these traits were artificial gender constructs), but more a reflection of the fact that traditional beliefs in the inherent characteristics of women remained deeply entrenched in Chinese culture even during the Cultural Revolution.

This study recognizes the validity in this case of the claim that issues of sexuality are rarely explored in Maoist culture. The taboo on depiction of love and sex in Cultural Revolution literature and art had the negative effect of forcing the neglect of an important aspect of human life. The avoidance of representation of family and sexual relationships resulted in a failure to explore issues of gender inequalities in intimate relations or to offer models for a new style of intimate rela-
tionship, thereby leaving one of the bases of gender inequality in society unquestioned. Women whose interests and aspirations centered on home and family were marginalized by the exclusive focus on woman as revolutionary activist, and in this respect the model can be considered as constraining as the traditional model of the “virtuous wife and good mother” that it replaced. Nevertheless, international experience of the initial stage of the entry of women leaders into a male dominated environment suggests that there might also have been some indirect positive outcomes for women.

First, Maoist models disassociated women from traditional stereotypes of women as timid, dependent, weak, and generally unsuitable for leadership and offered a new model of woman as competent leader. Second, the models disassociated women from the image of the sexualized, powerful woman as destructive and threatening. The experience of Australian women in leadership suggests that such disassociation enables women to enter leadership roles in a male environment and be judged on their capabilities, not on their sexual attributes or by gender stereotype. Third, the model incorporated feminine qualities that were admired in mothers, the only powerful females broadly legitimated in Chinese tradition, whose qualities are still believed to be inherent in women in contemporary culture and valuable to a successful leadership style. All these factors work to expand the roles society could envisage for women and the roles women could envisage for themselves in the sphere of public leadership. Evidence from memoirs, diary notes, and personal communications attests to this role in the formation of a new subjectivity for girls and women (Zhang 2003: 349; Wang 2001: 19; Chen 2002: 40).13

If the parallels with the experience of Australian women in leadership have any validity, the reclamation of a more feminine and sexualized identity for women in the post-Mao era should not be seen as a return to the beginning of a necessary stage of gender differentiation and inequality delayed by the Maoist era, but as a return to a feminine identity on the basis of significant social gains made by women during the Maoist era.14 Despite the slide in women’s status at the beginning of the reform period, few would argue that women ever returned to the position from which they started in 1949.

NOTES

1. In the world of theatre, a limited range of foreign and traditional works were allowed to be staged in Communist China up until the early 1960s. However, in 1964, in response to the expressed concerns of Mao himself that theatre did not portray the new proletarian masters of society nor their pro-
gressive ideology, all traditional works about “ghosts, emperors, generals and ‘scholars and beauties’ were banned from the stage” (Jiang Qing 1964). Consequently, from the time of the staging of the Festival of Jingju on Contemporary Themes in June and July 1964, no traditional xiqu, even in revised form, were staged in public until 1977 (Mackerras 1983: 167). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) earlier communist works were also banned. They were replaced exclusively with Revolutionary Modern Model Works (geming xiandai yangbanxi), most based on heavily reworked sections taken from plays, novels, and films created in the late 1950s and early 1960s, reflecting the lives of worker, peasant, and soldier heroes. An initial group of eight works (five jingju [Peking operas], two model ballets, and one symphony) was slowly expanded to around eighteen works by 1976 (McDougall 1984: 292). The theory behind the creation of these works derived from Mao’s 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.” Art and literature were to serve politics. The model works were to illustrate the class struggle and depict heroic proletarian images unequivocally on the side of the masses and hostile to the bourgeoisie. Protagonists were created according to the “three prominences theory” (santuchu), that is, “Among all characters give prominence to positive characters; among positive characters give prominence to heroic characters; among heroic characters give prominence to the main heroic character” (Mackerras 1983: 167). Whereas the women in traditional xiqu tended to be either languishing beauties, shrewish wives, or virtuous Confucian daughters, wives, and mothers (the traditional woman warrior image typified by Mulan fits within the latter category), the female protagonists of the Model Works are Party officials in civilian leadership positions in works depicting socialist society, or Party/military leaders and resistance fighters in works depicting civil war themes. (See Roberts 2004: 409 for a more detailed analysis of their roles). The banning of traditional xiqu, therefore, led to the disappearance of the traditional range of female role types and its replacement with the new but limited role for female characters.

2. All translations of Chinese language material in this article are my own.

3. Extensive information and photographs of the people involved and the dike are available on the Longhai City People’s Government website (http://www.lh.gov.cn/ljfg/0100.htm).

4. An earlier jingju adaptation was created and performed in 1965, but this version was abandoned and the yangbanxi version redeveloped separately (Dai Jiafang 1995: 192).

5. Keir Elam assesses the applicability of semiotic analysis as follows: semiotic analysis favored certain kinds of director’s and choreographer’s theatre that was decidedly authorial and in a sense “textual”; that is, where the performance was conceived as a coherent and well-controlled mode of discourse and could thus be read as a text (Elam 2002). The yangbanxi were precisely this type of theatre with performances so tightly controlled that the stage performance handbooks (ju zhao) of the time included photographs of every move of every character, and performance art was controlled down to the exact placement of patches on model costumes.

7. For an explanation of how body language is used in defining and managing relationships see Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall 1996: 308–315.

8. There is also a gendered division of labor among minor characters. In scenes where commune members are moving earth, rocks, and stone building blocks, smaller rocks are carried by women in wheelbarrows and on shoulder poles whereas the very large stone blocks are carried on a shoulder pole only between two men. So while it is true that women are depicted sharing the physical labor, the heaviest tasks are performed exclusively by men.

9. Sinclair (1998: 157–158) draws on the work of Juliet Mitchell and others to suggest that a much broader understanding of sexuality is helpful in understanding the way male or female sexuality is expressed through manner of leadership. This could be a fruitful approach to considering issues of female sexuality in the yangbanxi, but is beyond the scope of this current study.

10. Chen Xiaomei also argues that bodies in the model works were displayed for sexual titillation, though she also holds the view that the “narratives deprived women of their gender and sexuality” (Chen 2002: 115).

11. I would argue that there are exceptions in Xi’er and Da Chun in The White Haired Girl, and also Wu Qinghua and Hong Changqing in The Red Detachment of Women, albeit the latter only tenuously through intertextual reference back to the film version in which the mutual attraction is made clear though not stated. It must be noted that neither of these couples is recognized as desiring subjects in current scholarly analysis of the yangbanxi; in fact, Xi’er and Wu Qinghua are used by Meng (1993) and Cui (2003), respectively, to support their arguments that gender and sexuality were erased from Maoist culture. The contentious nature of the issue places full discussion outside the scope of this current study; however, the issue is examined further in research currently being undertaken by the author.

12. Gender concerns were not originally behind the banning of love and sex from Cultural Revolution culture. The original motivation was the intention to highlight the characters’ commitment to ideological concerns, but this does not alter the effect the ban had on gender.

13. Chen Xiaomei, for example, talks of the excitement she experienced in performing the roles of yangbanxi characters that “were appropriated as models, not only to construct the individual’s relation to society and its revolutionary idealism, but also to structure the everyday life experience of those participating” (2002: 40). Zhang’s diary also records the inspiration she drew from the heroes of the yangbanxi (2003: 349). A colleague recalls the excitement she experienced as a child in the early 1970s modeling herself on the heroine of the film Hong hu chiwei dui (The Red Guards of Hong Lake), the female leader of a wartime guerilla group.

14. The situation also seems to parallel that of Western women who have returned to a more feminine identity since the days of the women’s liberation movement, but whose position has been fundamentally changed by that movement.
CHINESE GLOSSARY

Zheng Qiang (name) 郑强
Zheng qiang (strive for power) 争强
Jiang Shuiying (name) 江水英

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Pan Jingtang. 1993. “Shidai bu tongle, nan nü haishi bu yiyang” (Times Have Changed,


