

Images of Theatre and Theatricality in Anchee Min's Works

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ABSTRACT

To date there has been very little criticism on theatricality in fiction in Chinese culture, and on its relation with gender, despite abundant examples of play-acting in works of all periods. This essay aims to fill such a void in literary criticism by examining three of Anchee Min's works: *Red Azalea*, *Becoming Madame Mao*, and *Empress Orchid*. It also aims to enrich existing Western criticism, which tends to conflate performativity and theatricality, by historicising and contextualising Min's examples and referencing various dramatic forms, from traditional Peking opera and revolutionary model opera, to realist speech drama, Brechtian epic theatre and postmodernist theatre, all registering the socio-political and economic changes of different periods of Chinese history. As such, the essay will probe the power they offer women in transgressing the patriarchal society, as well as their varying limitations.

Key Words: theatricality, performativity, gender, sexuality, transgression

In the past two decades, a number of Chinese diaspora writers have sparked the interest of historians, literary critics and readers in general. Gao Xingjian, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000, is one; many more of these writers are women who write in English. A famous example is Jung Chang, author of the best-selling memoir, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, and most recently, the controversial *Mao: The Unknown Story*, her collaboration with her husband. Anchee Min, also born in the 1950s, a survivor of the Cultural Revolution and later an emigrant to the West, is another. Quite unlike her fellow Chinese who still live in China, and much against the wishes of her own

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mother (Sanders 2000), she has not tried to bury the Cultural Revolution, but instead has continued to write about it long after she has settled in the U.S. because, as she claims, she “didn’t have anything else.” (Farmanfarmaian 66)

A number of Min’s works, including her memoir *Red Azalea* (1994) and her novel *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), stirred controversy when they were published: the former due to its portrayal of a homosexual relationship between two women, and the latter, because of its relatively positive treatment of Jiang Ching, wife of Mao Zedong. Arousing controversy is definitely not rare for diaspora writers; more interesting is an observation made by A.O. Scott during her interview with Min, which is on the author’s relation with opera. Despite the thirty intervening years between the revolution and the interview, the waning of Maoist fever and Min’s emigration to the U.S., revolutionary operas still loom large in the author’s daily life. Examples include “a sheaf of mint-condition opera postcards which depict scenes that look like military campaigns adapted by Rodgers and Hammerstein” and “an impressive collection of vintage red Mao buttons,” as well as the trading of revolutionary arias and “Chinese folk songs celebrating the beauty of nature” between Min and her daughter (Scott 44). Scott contends that Min has derived “a sense of herself” from operas: “Anchee’s sense of her own life, as recalled in her memoir and in conversation, sometimes takes on operatic qualities as well” (44).

Scott’s observation is premised on her knowledge that Min was educated at the Shanghai Film Studio in her late teens, and later she was even chosen to play the leading role in one of those operatic films as part of the national propaganda project during the later years of the Cultural Revolution, which was only abandoned due to Mao’s death and Jiang Ching’s subsequent downfall. This essay will not probe the author’s life as Scott does; rather, it will turn to what Scott calls “operatic” qualities, or more precisely, the dimension of theatricality in her fictional works.

Theatricality and Female Empowerment

The mere mention of theatre in literature immediately evokes an abundance of conventional and popular images. A good example is found in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where the tragic hero murders the King to take his place, only to suffer terrible consequences: he finally realises that his life is like an actor’s, as he is doomed to finish his last line in no time and become forgotten, a predicament that renders his struggle futile and reduces his life to nothingness (5.5:24–9). Chinese culture does not provide an exact equivalent to this theatrical image, but

two of the most cited proverbs, "Life is like drama, and drama is like life" (Rensheng ru xi; xi ru rensheg), and "Life is but a dream" (Rensheng ru meng), similarly stress the theatrical, dreamlike aspects of life, hence adopting a nihilistic stance towards it. What, then, have literary critics said about images of theatre and theatricality in fiction? Do their observations conflict with these familiar images?

Numerous Western critics have discussed images of theatre in fiction, as well as their close relation with feminism. Terry Castle in *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-century Culture and Fiction* contends that the masquerade in eighteenth-century fiction was a positive site for the reversal of hierarchies: some of the very strict societal rules regarding sex and sexuality were stripped away in the masquerade ballroom, where masks enabled a detachment from everyday identity and traditional morality, not to mention, as in novels by Samuel Richardson and others, that prostitutes were common there and promiscuity among women was also common, even though it only involved fondling and flirting (39–41). Mary Anne Schofield notices that the masquerade was the only place, other than church, where a woman could go unattended (26), and these women could, under disguise, act "aggressive, domineering, and controlling" (36). Other critics however regard it as a step backwards in women's emancipation, pointing out that the facial mask hid the eyes, hence the soul, and transformed the woman into a mere sexual object (Munns 147)—when a woman becomes a spectacle, her freedom is arguably even more inhibited than if she does not (Craft-Fairchild 53).

While eighteenth-century novels frequently feature the masquerade scene, it is nineteenth-century novels which establish an intimate and much more immediate relationship with their readers. Renata Kobetts Miller, in her "Imagined Audiences: The Novelist and the Stage," quotes Charles Dickens to state that "every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage," and she notes that two of the most widely read Victorian novels, William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, liken fiction to theatrical performance (207–8). Yet it is Joseph Litvak's *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century English Novel* which ambitiously engages with how Victorian novelists Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Henry James enact theatrical performances. He quotes Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to suggest that our society "is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance" (217), an idea that is true also in the nineteenth century. Though appearing "less showy" than the eighteenth-century counterparts and describing personalised worlds of domesticity and sub-

jectivity, Victorian novels “unsettle the distinction between a society of spectacle and a society of surveillance” and implicate “in a widespread social network of vigilance and visibility” which make them “inherently, if covertly, theatrical” (Litvak ix). Nonetheless, theatricality, being “a set of shifting, contradictory energies,” is able to resist the “fixity” of theatre and the “circumscription” that comes along with it, against the “domestic” and “domesticating closure” of the nineteenth century and the “coherent, stable subjectivity for protagonists and readers” of that age (Ibid xi-xii). Hence theatricality enforces social norms, yet introduces opportunities to resist them, to the effect that what gets performed is a complex disruption of the patriarchal narrative enterprise in which the authors are otherwise engaged.

To Victorian writers, the relationship among theatre, theatricality and female resistance is therefore promising, but ambivalent. David Marshall, in *The Figure of Theatre: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot*, uses Eliot’s Daniel Deronda to demonstrate how the character Gwendolen’s social life is an ongoing theatrical performance in which she performs, often self-consciously, her expected roles (196-8). But as Miller argues, Eliot indicates that the stage enabled actresses to establish a relationship with public audiences, which is an empowering alternative to domestic life. Whereas Gwendolen can perform only in social circles, Alcharisi, Daniel’s mother, has the talent to act professionally and claims that her career has allowed her to escape a confining domestic sphere and participate in the public world (Miller 213-4). Miller further brings in Charles Dickens, who is confident in the theatre as an educational tool, hence in its potential in morally influencing the audience. In *Great Expectations*, Wopsle turns his audience into a spectacle, claiming that his Hamlet “is a little classic and thoughtful for them here, but they (the audience) will improve, they will improve” (Chapter 31) (Ibid 210-1). Though Miller does not go so far as to suggest that theatre might well function as a tool to educate its audience about feminism, such a possibility is nonetheless implied.

The above critics indeed identify images of theatre and theatricality in fiction, fleshing out their relation with female agency and empowerment, though they tend to conflate play-acting and performativity with theatricality, focusing almost exclusively on the former, while seemingly ignoring the fact that the latter is much more encompassing as a concept and its presence in fiction in fact merits far more meticulous and historicised discussions. Curiously enough, to date no criticism has been documented on performativity and theatricality in fiction in the Chinese culture, whether traditional, modern or contemporary, though examples of characters (un)consciously play-acting and other dimensions

of theatricality are definitely not rare. This essay therefore aims to fill such a void in literary criticism, by examining three of Anchee Min's works: the aforementioned *Red Azalea* and *Becoming Madame Mao*, and her latest novel, *Empress Orchid* (2004). Inspired by Miller, Litvak and others, who all perceive the transgressive power offered to actresses and female audiences by the theatre and play-acting, the essay will study Min's works in their reversed chronological order and show that they are pervaded by images of the theatre. Discovering the trope of theatricality in Min's works, the essay will attempt to historicise and contextualise such examples by referencing various dramatic forms, from traditional Peking opera and revolutionary model opera, to realist speech drama, Brechtian epic theatre and postmodernist theatre, all registering the socio-political and economic changes of the Chinese society throughout the years. As such, the essay will probe their transgressive power and limitations as they appear in Min's works.

Empress Orchid: Imperial Palace and Peking Opera

Empress Orchid does not chronicle the whole life of the Empress Cixi of the Qing Dynasty, known by her true name Orchid, from childhood to old age and death (1835-1908); it only covers the period of 1852-1861, from her adolescence up to the time her son, young Emperor Tungzhi (spelt as Tung Chih in Min's novel) was five years old, to whom she acted as the regent with Empress Xi'an (known as Nuharoo), the first wife of the deceased Emperor Xianfeng (spelt as Hsien Feng).¹ When Orchid is seventeen, her father—a low-ranking district official—dies, and she competes to be one of the Emperor's wives, in order to rescue her

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1. The two Empresses, counseled by the late Emperor's brother, maintained their regency until 1873 when Tungzhi came of age. Two years later, the young man died, and Cixi violated the normal succession by having her three-year-old nephew as the new heir, Emperor Guangxu. When Ci'an died in 1881, Cixi became the de facto ruler of China. Guangxu implemented many reforms after China lost the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) in what came to be known as the "Hundred Days of Reform," while Cixi, apparently retired, worked with the military and conservative forces to stage a coup, confining the emperor to his palace. Soon, Cixi even supported the forces behind the Boxer Rebellion, which was anti-reform and anti-foreign. When foreign troops retaliated by entering the Forbidden City and capturing Beijing, Cixi eventually implemented reforms and continued to rule, with her power much diminished, until her death in 1908. Emperor Guangxu died as she was dying, and there were rumors that he was poisoned at her direction. Rumors also speculated that Ci'an was killed by her in revenge for her execution of Cixi's favourite enunch An Dehai (known as An-te-hai in Min's novel), but such claims were never substantiated.

family from poverty. She manages to get herself chosen as the concubine of the fourth rank in the Forbidden City, where she finds out that that life is not as glamorous and comfortable as she has thought. Against a background of the Opium Wars and foreign invasion, and being watched all the time by powerful eunuchs, all concubines stoop to any length to bear the son of the Emperor. Orchid trains herself in the art of pleasuring a man, bribes her way into Hsien Feng's bed and even becomes the only one who bears him a son; yet she fails to capture his exclusive interest and because of her meddling with state affairs, she almost gets murdered by powerful officials. When her son is still young, the Emperor dies, and she develops secret affection for both An-te-hai, her beloved eunuch, and Yung Lu, the attractive chief commander of the Imperial Guards. At the burial of the deceased emperor, she fancies staying with her dead husband in the tomb, but as she meets Yung Lu there, she changes her mind and confesses her affection for him. Despite all these, she is reluctantly beckoned back to her role as the mother and regent of the child Emperor.

Although the book skips much of the Empress's life, especially the later part of it which makes her a highly controversial figure in Chinese history, Min indeed attempted to give a faithful account of her younger life as evidenced by the thoroughness of her research and her adherence to historical facts. While some critics feel that her story reads like a "melodrama" and is at times "surreal" (See), others have found her research "impressive" and her prose and rendering of the historical period "immediate" (Freeman). As much as it tells a historical story, its rich similes and metaphors also uncover the human condition (McElhatton). Min invites the reader to probe the ethical questions to which Orchid is subject, such as whether it is indeed a weakness to yearn for individual happiness when duty and sacrifice are regarded as ideals, and she never ceases to evoke "the pendulum of duty and personal longing swinging over her heroine's head" (Carter).

In the novel, Orchid is not portrayed as a femme fatale guilty for the fall of the Qing Dynasty,² but as a concubine-turned-Empress who, despite her knowledge that it will fall very soon, struggles to uphold it by her perseverance and wisdom. Having Orchid point out that Confucianism, the state religion of Imperial China as early as the Han Dynasty, is shown to be "flawed" by the near

2. In her epigraph to her novel, the author sets out several contrasting stakes about the Empress. One is the criticism by Dr. George Ernest Morrison, London Times correspondent, "One of the ancient sages of China foretold that 'China will be destroyed by a woman.' That prophecy is approaching fulfilment." This is echoed by Su Shun (273), head of the Grand Council, who attempts to kill Orchid, but fails, and is later beheaded by her.

defeat of the country (xii),³ Min also subtly criticises the subordination of women in Confucian thoughts, and prepares the portrayal of Orchid as an aspiring feminist. The author tinges the novel with two other major religions, not so much to indicate that they offer solutions to China's defeat or to Orchid's dilemma, but rather to complicate her situation and add depth to her character. As a young girl, she was introduced by her mother to Taoist ideas,⁴ one example being the concept "yuan," that she should follow her destiny and remember "the importance of being obedient and of learning how to swallow the spit of others when necessary." (24) At times Orchid's tone is also strongly Buddhist,⁵ as she describes the glory of the Forbidden City, but only to deny it afterwards. Sister Fann, who once served as the maid of one of the Emperor's concubines, claims that those 2604 dragons on the ceiling of the Hall of Heavenly Harmony signify "imperial glory," but Orchid, in retrospect, says: "when I sat on the throne and was the dragon, I was very much afraid that people would find out that there was nothing to the images." (10)

It is in conjunction with Buddhist thinking that Orchid makes an early comparison between herself and the actress, and between the Forbidden City itself and the stage. Not only she, but all those emperors who have gone before her, have been able to see through its lack of substance: "Like my predecessors, I hid my face behind the gorgeous carvings of dragons and prayed that my costumes and props would help me play the part right." (10) Ironically enough, the court officials apparently do not see through the emptiness of imperial glory, but take the fake as genuine:

It surprises me that no one realizes that our attitude toward the end is comical in its absurdity. During the last audience I couldn't help but yell, "I am the only one who knows that my hair is white and thin!"

The court refused to hear me. My ministers saw the French dye and my finely

3. Confucianism, an ethical and philosophical system originally developed from the teachings of the early Chinese sage Confucius, was the "state religion" of Imperial China. It has continued to exert tremendous influence on the history of Chinese civilization down to the twenty-first century, except in the early and mid-twentieth century when it was vigorously repressed by Chinese Communism.

4. *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, key texts in Taoism, emphasize "nonaction" (wu wei), emptiness, detachment, receptiveness, spontaneity, the relativism of human values and the pursuit of a long life.

5. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are as follows: Dukkha, that to live is to suffer; Samudaya, that the cause of suffering lies in attachment or desire rooted in ignorance; Nirodha, stating Nirvana as the end of suffering; Maggo, that the path that leads out of suffering is known as the Noble Eightfold Path.

arranged hairstyle as real. Knocking their heads on the ground, they sang, "Heaven's grace! Ten thousand years of health! Long live Your Majesty!" (xiii)

Notwithstanding such nihilistic images, Orchid does appreciate the opera and fancies being an actress. She recalls that she has been "crazy" about Peking operas since she was a child. When she was twelve, a local troupe performed Hua Mulan at her house in celebration of the Chinese New Year, and she fell so much in love with the woman warrior that after the show she went to the back of the stage and tipped the actress, who let her try on her costume and taught her the aria "Goodbye, My Dress," which the child Orchid sang for the rest of the month (5).

Orchid's confession of her passion for the Peking opera offers new insights on the trope of theatricality in the novel in relation to this particular theatrical form, which gradually came into being after 1790, when the four famous opera troupes from Anhui came to Beijing, and underwent fast development under imperial patron from the reign of Emperor Qianlong onwards. Collin Mackerras notes that until the twentieth century there was no such thing as a "spoken play," as all Chinese dramas consisted of sung verses or "arias," interspersed with percussion-accompanied sections of stylized chanting in prose and spoken dialogue (1975: 11). In traditional Peking opera, action is portrayed by a complicated set of formal, symbolic gestures and portable objects,⁶ and the categorization of the actors, costumes, make-up, gestures and facial expressions are highly visual, symbolic and complicated: the four character types of sheng (male characters), dan (female characters), jing (painted-face male characters) and chou (clowns or jesters, who are usually male) are further divisible into civilian and martial types; of the dan character, the wudan or daomadan (warrior woman) is a good fighter, the qingyi is typically a demure wife or virtuous daughter, and the huadan, a young concubine, maid or charming servant girl, who wears colourful costumes and acts flirtatiously (Ibid 24-5; Wichmann-Walczak 136-7). Wichmann-Walczak stresses that the performer's display of the four skills: song, speech, dance-acting and combat, is not an end in itself, as it aims to pursue the three aesthetic principles of "synthesis," "stylization" and "convention," hence

6. For example, carrying an oar indicates that the actor is in a boat, and a special jumping and swaying movement shows that he is going on board; riding a whip with heavy silk tassels indicates that he is on a horse, and a formal upward kick represents mounting (Mackerras 1975:23); the act of walking in a large circle connotes travelling in a considerable distance, and the straightening of costume and headdress parts upon entrance to signal the presence of an important character who is about to speak (Wichmann-Walczak 134).

refining the daily into the theatrical (130-4). Roger Howard confirms the rigid categorisation of character types and other theatrical conventions, stating that the audience applauds the performer's "success in merging with, and not standing out from the whole performance" (11), and owing to such "conventional conservatism," the performer's expressiveness and opportunities for innovation are very limited (12).

Quite ironically, therefore, one of the most vibrant Chinese art forms is also seen as rigid and confining to the performers. Most performers have specialised in the performance of only one role type, and even in only one particular sub-category (Wichmann-Walczak 134). Back in the early days, women were not allowed to take part in the performance: in the Qing Dynasty, all female roles were performed by actors, and the original meaning of "dan" was "female impersonator" (Wichmann-Walczak 134). While this tradition is by no means culturally specific, what is more startling was that women were excluded from attending the theatre during that time:⁷ exceptions were the operas performed at private family gatherings, which were often put on by female companies, as well as some rather expensive and infrequent performances at Inner City temples, and it was after the 1911 Revolution that women were allowed into the theatre.⁸ Discussing the marginalisation (if not exclusion) of women in Peking opera of that time, it should perhaps be added that in the period leading up to the Tung Chih Restoration, to cater to the patriotic sentiment of the audience, heroic drama became hugely popular, as were a number of Loasheng (old male) actors,⁹ meaning that romance stories, female characters, as well as actors for these characters, were relegated to much less significant statuses.

It now appears significant that Orchid was initiated into the theatre by an actress at a family performance of *Hua Mulan*, the renowned tale of the woman warrior dressing as a male soldier to take over her father's role and to help defend her country against barbaric invaders—or that she should have the privilege or luck to watch the opera in the first place. It offers her the promise of emancipation in the deeply patriarchal society, and belies her hope of such.

7. While no direct proclamation appears to have been issued against the attendance of women, late in the eighteenth century a painter called Lang Pao-ch'en suggested to the Emperor that the theatres be closed to women and his proposal was accepted (Mackerras 1972:214).

8. Even so, they were at first obliged to sit in a different area from the men. These practices are perhaps indicative of the rigid separation of the sexes which had been a characteristic of the Qing period (Mackerras 1972:214-5).

9. Colin Mackerras describes three of these actors, all considered magnificent and versatile performers as well as patriotic countrymen (Mackerras 1972:184, 190; 1975:38).

However, the relatively private space offered by her family, where she fulfils her forbidden desires to watch the opera, and the even more private space of the backstage, where she is allowed both to perform and to impersonate a man, soon disappear. Her first official role is an Imperial consort, who not only has to fight with her beauty, but has to do so under perpetual surveillance most, if not all of the time. After she has entered the Forbidden City, she acts and speaks in manners that are prescribed by the Imperial court. Most ironically, the formality of court life, everything from rituals, conversations to costumes, resonate strongly with the formal conventions of the Peking opera of which she is a devoted fan:

We were led to a side room and given a few moments to freshen our appearance. Inside the hall His Majesty and Her Majesty were said to be sitting. When Shim went in and announced our arrival, the air around the girls intensified. Our small movements made our jewelry clatter like poorly made wind chimes. I felt a slight dizziness.

I heard Chief Eunuch Shim's voice, but was too nervous to figure out what he was announcing. His syllables sounded distorted, like those of an opera singer playing a ghost, speaking in a stylized tone. (33).

Nuharoo, equipped by her parents and tutors at a very young age with knowledge of the Imperial household as well as the court customs (32), gets herself chosen as the first wife, in a way not unlike the actors who rose to stardom after years of formal training. Without such training, Orchid's performance only enables her to be chosen as concubine of the fourth rank, her Imperial title "Lady of the Greatest Virtue." The role brings her family out of poverty, but it leads herself into further entrapment: enslaved by the court and having to share her husband with other women, she has entered a life drama that she did not expect.

The novel does offer role-playing with transgressive potential, as long as it is carried out in a space either outside, or atypical of the Imperial Court, which in itself has become the stage of the Peking opera. Indeed, after the backstage which she has privately resisted her society as a child, Orchid arguably manages to re-open a space where she can violate the conventions that have circumscribed her, and such is constituted by the whorehouse and the bedroom. In the hope of getting close to Hsien Feng and possibly bearing him a child, she sneaks out of the palace and follows Sister Fann to pay a visit to the prostitutes, from whom she learns the tricks of pleasing a man both sexually and emotionally. The first night she spends with the Emperor is described vividly in theatrical terms, but this drama is immensely different from the traditional Peking opera.

In the bedroom, the royal costumes are discarded, a fact emphasised by the author as she describes, via the eyes of Orchid, the Emperor's naked body. It is true that she initially recites what she has been taught to say, which makes the Emperor shout out of boredom:

"May his Majesty live for many many years and may your descendants be counted in hundreds." I recited what I had been instructed to say.

"Another parrot!" He turned away and rubbed his face with both of his hands.

"Parrots all trained by the same eunuch . . . You all bore me to death." (115-6)

Then she truly reveals her thoughts, and in doing so, excites him and wins his affection. First, as she expects punishment for having fallen asleep in his bed before making love with him, she boldly cries to him that she pities him despite his power, as he has to pick "a defenceless slave" to punish (118-9); then, she reveals to him how she has managed to get into his bed:

"I am not afraid to stick up my behind." My voice demanded me to release it. "I am here to be your lover. I have paid for this moment dearly. It has not only cost me my *ruyi* and hairpin, but has also taken me from my family." My tears came and I had no desire to hold them back. "I haven't allowed myself to miss my mother and my siblings, but I do now, terribly! I haven't cried despite the fact that I've had to spend my days in loneliness, but I do now. I might be selfish, but I am not greedy or a bloodsucking wolf. I am after nobody's essence, but I *am* hungry for affection!"

"You . . ." He came closer and gently pulled me toward him. "These are not the official lines. Who prepared the lines for you? You did? Yourself? Do you have more?" (127)

Though she appears not to have given much thought to her words, they might well have been inspired by her visit to the whorehouse where she learned that the best way to excite a man is to offer him novelties. It is no surprise that later she also discards the official address, "Your Majesty," and calls the Emperor "love"—which she learned at the whorehouse—and treats him as a "friend" at other times (128, 129). After she has transgressed her role as an obedient but boring concubine, she even serves as the "unofficial secretary" of the Emperor by disguising herself as an ink boy (145)—by literally transforming into a man, she seems to prove that gender, as Judith Butler suggests, is performative even in the Imperial court.

Has Orchid managed to appropriate her private space from the bedroom and the whorehouse and expanded it to the other part of the Imperial Palace? Is

it true that she has appropriated the stifling theatrical conventions for her very own life drama, to regain her agency, even to the effect of empowering herself? The sceptical reader might not read it this way. Notwithstanding her boldness and rebelliousness, she in fact caters to the Emperor's whimsy on their first night and her life is dependent on his favour, like a prostitute desperate to please her clients all the time, regardless of how empowering her sexuality appears to be. As such, she follows the teachings of her mother and acts "like a river flowing through the rocks," contending with her role as a river and regarding the Emperor as one of the largest rocks. Her being a concubine is moreover compared to the peacocks that she has kept in her palace, which her eunuch unintentionally, yet ironically calls "Imperial ladies" (130). Though the peacocks only open their "dresses" when they are in the mood to do so, they are in fact locked up in the palace and treated as pets. As Orchid becomes more powerful with the birth of her son, she only feels more frustrated and tired—she fails to blend into her theatrical role, glamorous and enviable as it seems, and instead realizes a split between her public, theatrical self and her private, individual self:

I felt that I was two different characters. One was sane. This mind believed that there was a price to pay for being where I was, and that I should suffer my widowhood secretly until I died. This character tries to convince me that being the ruler of China should bring its own satisfaction. The other, insane character disagreed. She felt utterly trapped. She regarded me as the most deprived woman in China, poorer than a peasant. (328)

Like an opera actor who has never liked his profession, and who only hate it more as time passes, Orchid fancies leaving the Forbidden City as the novel draws to its close. As she is spending her last moment with her dead husband in the tomb, she realizes that to be genuinely free, she would have to stay in the tomb and never go out again. The tomb seemingly offers her another private space, where she confesses her fear and longing without formalities and pretentiousness:

At noon the door to the outside world would shut permanently. Interestingly my fear was gone now. There was a strange kind of peace here, cozy and warm like a mother's womb. It brought me relief to think that all my troubles would be at an end if I stayed here. I would no longer struggle in my dreams and wake up only to hear An-ti-hai report that I had cried. I wouldn't have to degrade myself by relying on a eunuch for comfort. I could say goodbye to Yung Lu right here in the tomb and be done with the pain and agony. I could turn tragedy into comedy. There would be nothing anyone could do to make me suffer again.

The comic part would be that I would be honoured or voluntarily accompanying Emperor Hsien Feng to the next world. (334)

There is an alternative to death, which is to elope with Yung Lu, whom she secretly admires. Ironically enough, she is forced¹⁰ back into her motherhood and widowhood by no one but Yung Lu himself. By calling her "Your Majesty," he re-establishes her "superior," public self, and reclaims the tomb as part of the public opera stage that she has loathed. Indeed, as Orchid walks out of the tomb she realizes that her previous escape from the stage is only illusory: the tomb has never materialised into a private theatrical space—not even before Yung Lu's appearance—because even though she was invisible, her absence was watched by her people, who interpret her stay in the tomb as a gesture of loyalty to her husband:

The moment I appeared in front of the crowd, the ministers threw themselves down on their knees and knocked their foreheads madly on the ground. They cheered my name in unison. Thousands of men spread out like a giant fan half a mile long. They had mistaken my effort to remain inside as a gesture of loyalty toward His Majesty Emperor Hsien Feng. They were in awe of my virtue. (336)

The officials feel happy that the Empress has observed the customs of the Imperial court and abided her role as a loyal wife, just like the audience would applaud as the performers in the Peking opera merge harmoniously with the whole performance. Whatever agency Orchid might have gained—or the illusion of such—is now brought to nought.

The formal display of respect by the officials brings the reader back to the novel's beginning, where the Empress honestly reflects on her life and her ambiguous situation:

In front of me is a gauze curtain—a translucent screen symbolically separating the female from the male. Guarding myself from criticism, I listen but speak little. Thoroughly schooled in the sensitivity of men, I understand that a simple look of cunning would disturb the counsellors and ministers. To them the idea of a woman as the monarch is frightening, jealous princes prey on ancient fears of women meddling in politics. When my husband died and I became the acting

10. Refer to Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 50–8.

regent for our five-year-old son, Tung Chih, I satisfied the court by emphasizing in my decree that it was Tung Chih, the young Emperor, who would remain the ruler, not his mother. (xi).

The gauze curtain urges us to see Orchid's disguise as an ink boy in a more sceptical light: while it seems to indicate that gender is performative, it also subordinates the performer to a eunuch, whose penis has been cut and who therefore remains to be deprived all his life. Hence Orchid never performs a truly male role, let alone assumes the power of the Emperor. Needless to say, the curtain reminds us of the theatre curtain, and the very fact that the curtain in the Peking opera never draws until the whole performance, be it one-act or multi-scene, has finished (Wichmann-Walczak 145); such a reminder loads the gauze curtain at the Imperial Palace with more irony—separating the female from the male, it is nonetheless penetrable by the male gaze and the public gaze, to which the Empress is forever subject.

Becoming Madame Mao: Model Opera and Realist Drama

"It is the Chinese tradition that every dynasty's downfall is the concubine's fault," says Min in one of her interviews discussing *Becoming Madame Mao*, which echoes with her sympathy with Cixi in *Empress Orchid*, and reveals her agenda in writing about Jiang Qing. True enough, in China, attitudes to Mao Zedong (spelt as Mao Tse-tung in the novel) are largely ambiguous, but his wife Jiang Ching (1913–1991) has mostly been demonized. As for people outside China, most Americans know little about Jiang Ching beyond her unflattering nickname, "the white-boned demon,"¹¹ and her status as leader of the so-called "Gang of Four" (Higgins). Min defends her, "To them, this woman is evil. How could evil possibly be in love, or know love the way we humans do?" (Farley)

It is for the sake of showing that Madame Mao is a human that Min set out to write a biographical novel of her. First known as Yunhe (1919–1933), Madame Mao escapes from her rural village and forced marriage, and later

11. The nickname comes from Ross Terrill's book, *The White-boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong*, which was first published by William Morrow & Company in New York in 1984. Based on first-person interviews with Jiang Ching in jail, as much as on historical research, it is regarded as one of the most authoritative accounts of her life. Though the nickname, which is that of a famous villain in the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*), sounds very derogatory, Terrill does take a rather sympathetic stance towards her.

marries Yu Qiwei, student leader and secretary of the underground Communist Party at Shan-dong University. Changing her name to Lan Ping (1934–1937), she becomes a second-rate film actress in Shanghai and marries Tang Nah, a key writer for *Dagongbao*. Finally, she comes to Yenan, joins the Red Army, becomes Mao Tse-tung's fourth wife, and renames herself Jiang Ching (1938–1991). Tormented by Mao's loss of interest in her and her exclusion from the male-dominated official party, Jiang Qing becomes irrational and vindictive, takes morphine and spies on her husband. Later, she manages to exploit Mao's insecurity to become his right-hand person, abuses her power and takes revenge, during the Cultural Revolution, on people whom she considers to have been bad to her throughout her life. Shortly after Mao's death, she is tried as a member of the Gang of Four, sentenced to life imprisonment, and finally commits suicide.

Xiaomei Chen observes that in contemporary China, the "theatre is political and politics is theatrical," meaning that political figures recognize themselves as actors who must scramble to perform the "right" parts in order to ensure their survival (74–5). That Jiang Ching was an actress before she became Mao's wife therefore should not be the only legitimate factor for the trope of theatre and theatricality in the novel. Conventional images abound, as the ugly side of the profession and the superficiality of play-acting are revealed. A good example is the leading actress in the small troupe which Jiang Ching joined as an adolescent: despite her glamour, the actress moonlights as a prostitute, and looks prematurely old once she is stripped of her makeup and costumes (29). As in *Empress Orchid*, the theatre serves as a metaphor for illusion, to which disillusioned people resort in order to insulate themselves from pain—Jiang Qing later realizes that her ancestors loved performances because through it they could "re-live China's past splendour" and thereby "fool themselves" (31). Nonetheless, performativity is much more strongly portrayed as a means of empowerment, as indicated by the protagonist's conscious name-changing which, though faithful to history, is given a lot of emphasis in the novel. In her struggle to be a better actress and to be recognized, she changes her name both to follow the trend and to improve her self-image:

A new name symbolizes new life. I want the name to ring my character too. Besides, changing one's name is fashionable in Shanghai. It helps one to get noticed. Some people cut out their last name so that there are two syllables instead of the traditional three. This is considered an act of rebellion. The sounds stand out by themselves. (57)

In Shanghai, she discards her name Yunhe and calls herself Lan Ping (blue apple),

owing to its evocation of images of sky, ink and myth and its associations of harvest, ripeness, fruitful future (58). Accordingly, she later changes her name to Jiang Ching (river green), to signify that she has bettered her old self: "I have parted from my old role. I come out of the blue and enter the richer color green. I am a butterfly out of the cocoon, spring belongs to me" (151).

A stylistic feature of *Becoming Madame Mao*, which hits the reader right on the first page, is the leaving out of quotation marks even for direct conversations among characters, which creates an alternation between the first person and the third person: sometimes the protagonist speaks in the first person, but at other times an omniscient narrator takes over and Madame Mao is referred to as "she." Gary Krist contends that such a "kaleidoscopic narrative method," meaning the alternation between "subjective first-person and more objective third-person sections," "may help to deepen the psychological portrait of Madame Mao," but it has only led to "a choppy and remote reading experience." Yet I contend that not only does this narrative method add dimension to the portrait, but it inspires identification with her by encouraging the reader to see from her perspective. In addition, the narrative that swims from "I" to "she" refers us back to the word "becoming" in the book title and fleshes out the theme of play-acting—the process by which an ordinary girl from a rural village transforms into an actress, and from a second-rate actress into the most powerful woman of China.

Sol W. Sanders criticizes Min's sympathetic portrayal of Jiang Qing as an aspiring feminist, pointing out that she never tried to find out what happened to her own mother, nor did she take up the cause of China's abused women, as her admirers in the West have sometimes claimed. Higgins contends that calling Jiang Ching "an early feminist" is like calling Hitler a patriot, "a small truth overshadowed by a monstrous reality," as even Madame Mao the fictional character is apparently driven by little more than her pain and her desire to be famous and recognized. Yet the book obviously tackles the difficult task to open the soul of Jiang Ching for all to see, and "gives voice to a conflicted, impassioned woman who has been rubbed out of history" (Ibid).¹² Aside from

12. Among all references the author claims to have used are Lin Qing-shan's *The Red Demon* (1997), *Biography of Mao Tse-tung* (1996), Ross Terrill's *The White-Boned Demon* (1984) and *Mao—A Biography* (1980), Roxane Witke's *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (1977) and Dr. Li Zhi-sui's *The Private Life and Chairman Mao* (1994). She has, as she claims in her note to her novel, tried her best to mirror the facts of history, and every character existed in real life; even letters, poems, and extended quotations have been translated from original documents.

the conscious or unconscious play-acting described, there is even more straightforward evidence throughout the book. For example, she refuses to have her feet bound like the other girls do, and cannot forget the pain she suffered as a child when her mother tried to bind her feet, calling this the "evidence of the crimes of feudalism" (21). This she later rehearses in her revolutionary operas and ballets, such as "The Women of the Red Detachment" and "The White-Haired Girl," even to the extent of believing that "the pain she suffered gives her the right to lead the nation" (21). As a child and adolescent, she fantasizes about the strong, liberated women in Chinese operas, claiming that being an actress not only enables her to satisfy her dream to perform, but allows her to participate vicariously in the heroines' battles, hence to be happy and free:

I watch operas and copy the arias. The Legend of Huoxiao Yu and Story of the West Chamber: I dream about the characters in the ancient tales, the rebellious heroines, women who fight fiercely for their happiness and get it. I decide that I shall be an opera actress so I will get to live a heroine's life on stage. (29)

Her fantasy of these well-known stories, juxtaposed with revolutionary opera that she advocated many years later as the only correct type of opera, deserves our attention, as it not only points to the changes in the Chinese theatre in Communist China and during the Cultural Revolution, but indicates the conflicts in those changes, as well as the conflicts which they ignited in performers and audiences. To fully understand such conflicts, and how they constitute part of the novel's narrative, a brief detour into China's art scene after the setting up of the Communist regime and during the Cultural Revolution is necessary.

Mao's "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and the Arts" in 1942, one of the key sources of the correct Communist Chinese view of drama, claims that arts and literature must gear towards the political end of supporting Communism in a way that is aesthetically stimulating (135-41), hence no such thing as "art-for-art's-sake," and no room for personal expression. Heralding the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing delivered a public speech on 28 November 1966, claiming that the world of literature and arts had hitherto produced an atmosphere that favored the past over the present, foreign over native, dead over the living, to the extent that it had failed to adapt to the current socialist economic base; in order to "weed through the old to bring for the new (tuichen chuxin)" she waged a campaign to "revolutionalize" the Peking opera, calling for the replacement of "ghost plays" which revolve around emperors, generals, ministers, gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, with modern works on contemporary themes (Jiang 167). As she believed that "a good theme alone does not make a good

opera,” from 1969 to 1976, all the model productions observed the principle of “The three prominences” or “triple emphasis”—“among all characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among them, give prominence to the heroic characters; and among the heroic characters, give prominence to the principal hero,” convinced that these characters, representing the good attitudes and behavior of workers and peasants in a “concentrated, summarized and typified” form, would accordingly influence the conduct of the people (Howard 57).¹³

Revolutionary operas,¹⁴ the only operas performed from 1964–1977, is a model full of contradictions and paradoxes, especially in view of the general hostility towards the past and the foreign, and the advocacy of equality between the sexes in the Communist regime. Anti-Western in sentiments, this theatrical form does make use of the Western ballet form, hence heavily dependent on their genres and techniques (Chen 88–9). Keen on doing away with old stories and characters, it nonetheless evokes the memory of a past revolution in order to continue the revolution in post-1949 China, so as to divert the attention of the populace from their severe poverty and the chaos in their country, and to charge them with the energy required to defend a hard-won revolution (Ibid 75–76). Though female leads apparently dominate the stage, their gender identity is submerged in the collective identity of the revolutionary army and the national agenda (Ibid 109–110); despite that their family and love relationships are eliminated, as are their sexualities, the theatrical representation uses their female bodies for the purpose of “sexual titillation” (Ibid 115): those constant references to scars and wounds that emphasise their sacrifice to Mao are eroticised through objectification and ennoblement (Ibid 116), and despite the discouragement of sexual attraction between individuals, the operatic representation of actresses’ bodies and movements does encourage audiences to fantasise them as sexual objects in the dark theatre, or “allow themselves to be further seduced by the ego ideal in a forbidden, private and necessarily one-sided love” (Ibid 117).

Indeed, aside from the above conflicts, the model opera, regardless of how revolutionary it was intended, is confining in terms of its themes and characteri-

13. *NCNA Bulletin*, 24 May 1974; *Peking Review*, 2 August 1974.

14. As Chen Xiaomei notes, however, recent literary history gives credit to Zhou Enlai, not Jiang Qing, as the first state leader who came up with the idea of using the Western form of ballet to create theatrical works that represent the revolutionary experience for the masses—back in 1963, inspired by his watching *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* performed by the ballet troupe of the Beijing Ballet School, he urged them to adopt this Western style to perform a Chinese story, leading to the very successful performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* in late 1964. (85–6)

zation. After Jiang Qing's downfall, her theory of model opera was readily refuted: according to *People's Daily* of 18 May 1977, it was "a theory of creativity that caused works to distort life and become stereotypes," and the new "correct" position would be to create characters which "truthfully reflect typical examples of the relations between classes in real life in thousands of ways and a variety of forms" (Howard 57). A.C. Scott's judgment that the Peking opera actor does not create individual characters so much as personality types representing "abstractions of human attributes" is as true of modern revolutionary opera as of the old feudal opera, despite the abandonment of painted faces and the use of more naturalistic dialogue (Howard 12-3). As would be expected, not all actors favored what she advocated: for instance, on 20 June 1963 the *Canton Evening News* wrote that the opera troupes tried to avoid performing them as often as required, indicating a strong resistance to the plays from professional actors themselves (Mackerras 1975:175).

The conflicts in the model opera are reflected in the narrative of Min's novel, quite despite the brimming confidence of the protagonist. A good example is the staging of the "Ren-ren-guo-guan," described exactly as a theatre performance, but one in which the audiences are eager to embarrass the performers and want to see them fail. Translated as "a critical juncture everyone has to pass," it formed the most important part of "Rectify the Style of Work," a routine political examination which later turned into terror by allowing people both to prove that they are "hard-core leftwingers" and "true Communists" and to exterminate their enemies by labelling them as "traitors," "reactionaries" and "right-wingers" (158). Like others, Madame Mao gets attacked by her "audience," and she panics when interrogated about the gap in her life history—the time she spent in a Shanghai prison, where she signed a document denouncing the Communist Party and denying that she was a member in order to get released:

Suddenly she panics and turns defensive. Her lines become messy and words disconnected. What's the point? I have to produce a witness! Why? Are you saying that I am making up my story? How can I do this? I have been a revolutionary. And I will not be afraid of you!

For a while there is silence, but it is clear what is on everyone's mind. There is a desire to see the actress fail. To trip over herself, break a prop and fall off the stage. Soon the crowd begins to attack in one voice. (159)

Her panic arises from the demand that true communists must be infallible, just like the most outstanding of the heroes in the model opera. She is only able to

save herself with the help of the “master actor” who intrudes to defend her: “The central bureau of security has already investigated the matter, Kang Sheng begins. The conclusion is positive.” (159) Hereafter Madame Mao does not suffer from a split between her public and private selves in a way Empress Orchid does: she has proven to be a loyal and zealous Communist by acting as one—with the help of the master actor—and she blends readily into her roles as “the red-flag bearer” and “the guardian force of Maoism.”¹⁵ Accordingly, she recites her script with such fluency that she becomes exactly what she is trying to perform:

The drum beats. The actress warms up to her role. Setting out to influence others, she is unaware how susceptible she is to her own propaganda. She has never lacked for passion. She begins to sound her role in daily life. It becomes her style to open her speeches with these words: Sometimes I feel too weak to hold the sky of Chairman Mao, but I force myself to stand up, because to sustain Mao is to sustain China; to die for Mao is to die for China.

The more she speaks, the faster she blends into her role. Soon there is no difference. (208)

The narrative nonetheless continues to mirror the conflicts of the revolutionary opera. After Jiang Qing has set up the Red Guards, and is being surrounded by an ocean of red flags at Tiananmen Square with Mao, she feels like a star actress—a glory that never came to her when she was in profession—but she quite ironically mediates her success through references to the ancient stories that she has banned:

I feel that my life is so complete that I can die in happiness. The crowd pushes us like morning tides. It is my first time being seen in public with Mao shoulder to shoulder. The king and his lady. We are wrapped by the waves of sound. Long live Chairman Mao and salute to Comrade Jiang Ching! (234)

While the references to “the king and his lady” might not be strong indicators of those so-called evils banned in the model opera, much more obvious are the moments when she gets so carried away by her relationship with Mao that she fantasizes herself as heroines in famous tragedies. As a devoted fan of the opera *Farewell My Concubine*, she sees Mao as the modern King of Shang and

15. These are the titles given to her by the chief editor of Shanghai newspaper *Wenhui*, whose help she has solicited to establish her power in the party. (207)

she his lover, Lady Yuji,¹⁶ and particularly envisages the moment when Yuji stabs herself before the king to prove her love (134). She also admits that she enjoys playing Lady Yang of “The Long Separation” (252), hence imagining herself as concubine Yang and Mao as Tang Emperor Xuanzong.¹⁷ Krist observes that Jiang Ching is “a consummate actress who [has] spent her entire life looking for the role that would define her, all the while being tossed about on the conflicting tides of politics and her own ambition, insecurity and romantic yearnings,” and these examples might illustrate her obsession as well as confusion. As the model opera, with its strong female roles, still caters to the male gaze, the third-person narrator, at a time when Madame Mao has risen to power, states that “the Cultural Revolution is a breathing stage” and Mao is Jiang Ching’s “playwright” (259). Jiang Qing is therefore not so much an agent, as an actress acting out the script that Mao has prescribed for her.

Jiang Ching’s narrative mirrors the paradox of the model opera—that the powerful female is subject to the male national agenda—also in a meta-theatrical way. Like her self-fantasies as those heroines in tragedies, the roles on which she prides herself are all the wives of powerful men. She thinks to herself that if Yu Qiwei, her first husband, “represents the conscience of China,” than “so does she”; after she has become Mao’s wife, she accordingly thinks in the same logic, that “if Mao is the soul of China, so is she” (43). The only exception is her relationship with Tang Nah, in which she feels superior, as she believes that “to Yu Qiwei she was a star in his universe, to Tang Nah she is the universe” (68). Nonetheless, Tang Nah soon loses his job, becomes an alcoholic and womanizer and even attempts suicide, which makes Jiang Ching decide to split with him, envisioning their last meeting as a farewell scene on stage, “a heartbreaking but liberating act” (79). Whether such a farewell scene would have been welcome in the model of the revolutionary opera is unclear, as it is reminiscent of those romantic tragedies and smacks of bourgeois ideology; what is definite is that after the split she soon marries Mao and sinks back into a

16. *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang Bie Ji*), set against the end of the Qin Dynasty in ancient China, tells of warlord Xiang Yu, on the brink of defeat by Liu Beng who later became the first Emperor of the Han Dynasty. He drinks with his favorite concubine Yuji for the last time, and Yuji, after performing a sword dance for him, cuts her own throat with his sword. After all his men have fallen, Xiang Yu takes his own life.

17. Lady Yang (also known as Yang Guifei) is the beloved concubine of Tang Emperor, Xuanzong. In the aftermath of the Anshi Rebellion, Xuanzong made his escape to Chengdu. At Mawei Relay Stop, the soldiers accompanying the Imperial party, who believed that the Yang family were responsible for the country’s upheaval, demanded the death of Lady Yang and her brother. Yang finally hanged herself (or was hanged by Gao Lishi).

subordinate position, tormented by his negligence and promiscuity and does not feel truly liberated after all.

The paradoxes in the revolutionary opera arouse our interest in the abundant theatrical forms in the golden age of Chinese theatre in the 1950s, some of which are described in the novel, and our speculation of whether they generated more empowering representations of women and offer better alternatives to both performers and audiences. Interestingly enough, the novel devotes the whole of chapter five to how Jiang Qing auditions and performs in the interpretive rendition of Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, at a local theatre troupe in Shanghai. Most significantly, the director of the play is Zhang Min, a Russian-trained theatre master, and Jiang Qing performs Nora's story in the form of speech drama (huaqu) in the Russian realist tradition. The realist tradition is significant to the development of contemporary Chinese theatre, as it enables women to perform women's roles, hence freeing them from the formalism invented by men which are encoded in the performances of female impersonators (Martin 233). The Russian tradition also brings to mind the Stanislavsky system¹⁸ which requires performers to get as close as possible to their characters and the stage actions to replicate faithfully those actions in real life, all in a very well-defined and specific given situation, to such an extent that the audience would feel "as if they were peeping at people's life through the invisible fourth wall" (Sun 171-2). The performers are required to draw upon their "emotion memory," that is, to remember experiences in their own lives similar to those the characters are going through, to deepen their own feelings and reactions towards the roles; as the situations take on a reality, and the borderline between them and the characters is blurred, they reach the state called "I am Being" (Benedetti 8-9). In the later stage, life experience and imagination, physical characterization and written script combine together to form the "Third Being," or the "actor/ role" (Ibid 10).

Stanislavsky's method was later rejected by radicals, who attacked the idea that the self is the repository of character and contains "the germs of all the

18. The realist theatre, or illusionist theatre, reached its apex in nineteenth-century realistic and naturalist theatre of Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg. The Stanislavsky system, also known as "Sitanni tixi" and based on a theory of acting developed and practised by the Russian Konstantin Stanislavsky, helped to establish realist theatre on the Chinese stage, with the result that it became predominant dramatic genre in modern China; it was even promoted in the People's Republic of China, before the onset of the Cultural Revolution, as the form most closely conforming to the Maoist theory of literature. According to Liu Housheng, during 1949-1966, about 99% of dramatic productions exhibited a marked influence of this method (Chen 292-3).

human vices and virtues,”¹⁹ claiming that they could not proceed from the “self” of bourgeois intellectuals to portray the workers, peasants and soldiers (Howard 92-3). Nonetheless, the performance of Nora’s story in the realist mode does enable Jiang Qing to translate her past experience, especially her enslavement, into Nora’s character. Indeed, it is almost as if Stanislavsky’s method can be peeped from the narrative: as Zhang Min tells Jiang Qing that Nora is a traditional Western housewife and mother of three children, and is thought of as enjoying a good life by her husband and friends, Jiang Qing immediately jumps on these facts and readily associates Nora with her mother, though the former obviously led a much more comfortable life than the latter:

She is not allowed to make decisions about the house, her children or her own activity. She is a wing-clipped bird, kept in an invisible cage. She is a concubine, a foot warmer and a slave. She is a prisoner. I was a prisoner. I know what it’s like to be a prisoner. (60)

The “Third Being,” or the “actor/ role” emerges as she uses her imagination and experience to recite her script: “On stage she lives out her eternal despair. Nora’s lines fall from her lips like words of her own. I’ve lived by performing tricks, Torvald, and I can bear it no more.” (63) This performance is much more inspiring for her audiences and arguably more empowering for herself than her later role as Madame Mao.

In fact, Jiang Qing’s identification with Nora, who refuses to be a pampered doll and a slave to her husband, has been emphasized in a lot of operas about this famous Chinese woman,²⁰ but the book includes yet another anecdote in her life near the end which has not received as much attention to date. The third-person narrator informs the reader that in Qin-Cheng national prison, the elderly Jiang Ching is ordered to make dolls for export during the period from 1976-1991. Her knack for self-expression probably compels her to embroider her name, Jiang Ching, onto the inner edge of the dresses of the dolls, and such an act is strongly reminiscent of her calligraphy on the armband of the Red Guards, a stamp of her power and ingenuity (234). Nonetheless, in doing so she also labels the dolls as Jiang Ching and thereby turns herself into a doll. It would be wrong to see her as an un-enlightened and un-rebellious Nora who stays in the house to

19. From Roger Howard’s *On Stanislavsky’s “System”*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1969.

20. Besides Ross Terrill’s *The White-Boned Demon*, a good example is Bright Sheng’s opera which was seen in its world premiere at Santa Fe.

be pampered by her husband; it would be too much to see her even as Nora in Fairlynn's²¹ novel *The New Nora*, which is about how the wife walks out of house number one and, failing to support herself, enters house number two (154). Through the third-person narrator's speculation that the dolls might land in a child's forgotten bin or a display window, the author indicates that Jiang Qing's ambitions were unfortunately thwarted by history, as well as by her madness and lack of self-awareness.

Before turning to Madame Mao's suicide, the essay first probes the suicide of Shang-guan Yun-zhu, another actress. The novel describes her as Mao's mistress who left her own husband and gave up her career, and who later kills herself because her dream of becoming the second Madame Mao has vanished, and a life of perpetual confinement is not bearable.²² Interestingly, Min chooses not to be faithful to the record of how she committed suicide in real life, and instead describes how she takes her life in her bedroom, as well as her mental state, in such a detailed manner that it looks as if the whole thing has been taken from the script of a realist drama:

She looks around. Two windows facing east stand symmetrically like giant eyes without eyeballs. The dark gray scrolled-up curtains look like two bushy eyebrows. A redwood ceiling-high closet stands between the windows. The floor is covered with a noodle-colored carpet. The room makes her think of Mao's face.

.....

She takes out a glass and a bottle of half-finished shaoju from the cupboard and mixes the liquor with the pills. She stirs and grinds, and takes time with her act. Afterwards she goes back to her bedroom and remakes her bed. She smooths every wrinkle from the sheet. From underneath the bed she pulls out a black suitcase and takes out a set of dresses and a pair of shoes. She changes her blouse into a peach-colored dress—a gift from Mao. Then changes her mind. She takes off the dress and replaces it with a navy blue garment which she bought from a nun on location near Tai Mountain. She changes her slippers into a pair of black cotton sandals. She puts the peach dress and the slippers into the suitcase and pushes it back under the bed. (275)

21. Fairlynn is a star feminist and liberalist in Yenan, a published essayist and novelist idolized by China's youths (153). Despite her utterly unfeminine appearance, she is also one of Madame Mao's competitors for Mao's affection.

22. Shuang-guan Yunzhu (1930-1968) was a famous film and drama actress. Circumstances surrounding her suicide have been controversial, but in real life she killed herself by jumping off a building, not taking poison, as the novel describes.

.....

Shang-guan gulps the drink down. There is no hesitation. She washes her hands and rinses her mouth. She then goes to lie down on her bed, spreading her limbs evenly. (276)

By dressing herself in the garment bought from the nun, she casts an ironic light on the "peace" she attains, because going into nunnery, which is said to guarantee a life of peace, also indicates the tremendous difficulty in leaving behind the past altogether. Despite her peaceful feeling, the bedroom and its curtains are reminiscent of Mao's face that has kept her under surveillance even to the moment of her death. The bedroom becomes a stage which confines rather than liberates, and even though the episode is reminiscent of a realist drama, Shang-guan is a far cry from Nora.

Madame Mao commits suicide, but does it under different circumstances: she manages to collect enough handkerchiefs to make a rope in jail; addressing her people, she speaks like an actress who eagerly anticipates her upcoming performance and her audience's reactions:

Tomorrow you will read about me in the news: Madame Mao Jiang Ching committed suicide by hanging. The day to mark is May 14, 1991. Am I sad? Not really. I have lived an extraordinary life. The great moments . . . Now as I think about them for the last time, they still make my heart hammer with excitement . . . (18)

In the farewell speech that draws the novel to a close, she sounds like she has taken control of her life. Once the most powerful woman of China, she now provides foresight which as we know can only be accurate, and which makes her an omnipresent figure:

It is time to empty the stage. Remember, you will always come across me in the books about China. Don't be surprised to see my name smeared. There is nothing more they can do to me. And don't forget that I was an actress, a great actress. I acted with passion. For those who are fascinated by me you owe me applause, and for those who are disgusted you may spit.

I thank you all for coming. (305).

Do the above self-gratifying words reflect the pomposity of the speaker, or are they self-comforting words from a dying woman? As the novel has detailed all that she has suffered since childhood, Madame Mao at her death speaks with more dignity than she ever enjoyed. Her grandfather told her that she was born to be a "peacock among hens," an allusion remembered and made use of by Jiang

Ching all her life (26, 36). If the comparison of Orchid to peacock indicates that the empress is forever subject to the public gaze and therefore disempowered, and Jiang Ching's self-allusion is not too empowering either, by fulfilling all the roles: scriptwriter, director, actress, and audience, she nonetheless becomes the looker, as much as the one being looked. In her dying words she finally renounces her model opera and reverts to realist drama, hence getting rid of all the paradoxes and confusion of the former; as such, she is able to speak with the determination of Nora and reclaims her agency, albeit a limited and confined one.

Red Azalea: From Brechtian to the Postmodernist

In *Red Azalea*, Min writes about her own life in China from the early 1950s up to the time she left for the U.S. in 1984. The author-narrator begins by describing her childhood in Shanghai, revolving around the teachings of Chairman Mao and the operas of Jiang Ching. Having served as the model student and leader of the Red Guard, at seventeen she is sent to Red Fire Farm, a labor collective near the East China Sea. She cultivates a very intimate relationship with Yan, the Company Commander, as she writes love letters for her to Leopard Lee, a young man at another communal farm, who initially does not reciprocate her affection. The relationship of the two women borders on the erotic, as they guard themselves against the jealousy and suspicion of the Vice-Commander Lu, but ends when the narrator is recruited by the Shanghai Film Studio and selected to compete for the leading role in *Red Azalea*, a filmic opera of Jiang Ching's life. Having learnt that Yan has started an affair with Leopard, she becomes involved, both professionally and romantically, with the mysterious, androgynous Supervisor who is responsible for directing the film. With his help, she manages to win the leading role of *Red Azalea*, but the project is soon abandoned due to Mao's death and Jiang Ching's subsequent downfall. The aspiring actress is disgraced and has to work as a menial clerk at the studio, where she bemoans the departure of Yan and Supervisor from her life. As she says in the epilogue, with the help of her actress friend Joan Chen, she finally left China for the U.S.

According to Wenying Xu, Chinese writers who lived through the Cultural Revolution and later emigrated to foreign countries typically experience crises in reconstituting their identities, but *Red Azalea* illustrates how the empowerment of these new immigrants in the West is dependent upon their reconstruction of their subject positions in the old country. Because the author does not focus

exclusively on her victimization, but acknowledges her responsibility and guilt, she is able to “resist the double marginalization of a native informant and a permanent stranger” (205-6). Roxane Farmanfarmaian concurs with Xu, claiming that Min “defiantly takes responsibility for who she is, refusing to put the blame on the Cultural Revolution, party bosses or any of the other scapegoats” so as to explain away the corruption of her soul, and therefore “has emerged from the morass of Maoism cleansed, able to feel and express enormous innocence” (66-7).

Ben Xu nonetheless implies that Min's incrimination cannot be taken too seriously, advocating a “symptomatic reading” of the book which aims to discover what the text does not say, uncovers the narrator's unconscious cooperation with the totalitarian regime, and undermines her autonomy as a subject (157-8). Xu pays special attention to the “operatic qualities” of the staged persona, contending that under her “lofty Cultural Revolutionary idealism” hides a “dark, twisted and restrained mindset” (159-160). For instance, her intimate friendship with Yan is highly “utilitarian” (161), and her relationship with the Supervisor can even be understood in terms of “sodomasochism,” which Erich Fromm conceptualizes as “a means of escaping, through identification with absolute power, from the helplessness which absolute power inflicts on the isolated individual.” The narrator submits to “masochism” by soliciting torture from Supervisor, and in doing so, she merges with his all-powerful authority and exercises “sadism” on others (164).²³ Xu further adds that even though the author had long emigrated to the U.S. by the time she wrote the book, she may not be much wiser than the narrator in her understanding of the Cultural Revolution. In the epilogue the narrator and the author become indistinguishable, and the author-narrator's loneliness and sadness for having to leave for the U.S. show that she is “numb and hypnotized,” still “spell-bound” by the role of the political activist and the aspiring actress, hence “not coming awake to the realization that our acceptance of the totalitarian way of thinking would be tantamount to our entrapment in the irrational, obsessive dishonesty and self-deception.” (165-6)

Ben Xu's criticism obviously carries its weight, as not long after the opening of *Red Azalea*, the narrator describes how Jiang Ching's revolutionary operas have become an essential part of her life, to the extent that she imagines herself as an opera actress:

23. Erich Fromm's concept is found in his *Escape from Freedom*, New York: Avon, 1965, 163-201.

The operas were taught on radio and in school and were promoted by the neighbourhood organizations. For ten years. The same operas. I listened to the operas when I ate, walked and slept. I grew up with the opera. They became my cells. I decorated the porch with posters of my favourite opera heroines. I sang the operas wherever I went. My mother heard me singing in my dreams, she said that I was pickled in the operas. It was true. I could not go on a day without listening to the operas. I pasted my ear close to the radio, figuring out the singer's breaths. I imitated her. (22)

By the time she has to leave her family to go to the Red Fire Farm, it suddenly dawns on her that she has seldom, or never, thought of what she has been singing ("I realized at that moment that it was much too easy to sing 'I'll go where Chairman Mao's finger points'. I remembered how I sang that song. I never realized what I was singing until that day." 42) Hence even at the beginning of the book, the theatre becomes synonymous with state control, and images of theatre also smack of emptiness and superficiality. These are carried onto the Red Fire Farm, where play-acting is portrayed vividly as a power machine for obtaining approval from the Party and reverence from one's fellow communists. The narrator gives speeches in every night's self-confession and criticism meeting, stressing that "the class struggle must be talked about every day, every month and every year, said Mao." (54) At the same time, she is aware that Lu, the Vice-Commander is keen on becoming a "living opera heroine"—despite her enthusiasm, the narrator does not see her as such:

Lu continued speaking. It was like a theatrical performance. As a daughter of a revolutionary martyr, I'll never forget how my forefathers shed their blood and lay down their lives for the victory of the revolution, said Lu. I'll never fail to live up to their expectations. I hope that all of you, my comrades-in-arms, will supervise my behaviour. I welcome any criticism you have for me in the future. The Party is my mother and you're all my family.

She tried to be a living opera heroine, but I would never see her that way. (71)

Xiaomei Chen's contention that it is important to "play the right parts" is therefore fully illustrated here. As the narrator reflects, she gets noticed by Jiang Qing's associates not so much for her beauty, as for her possession of the "correct" and "proletarian" kind of look, which is useful for promoting revolutionary ideals (118, 124), but which does not make her genuinely more "correct" and "proletarian" than others. During the acting lessons, she is keenly aware of the need to hide her "true" self and follow stage directions, to the extent of being

exaggerating and funny, if not downright ridiculous:

In the class, I was instructed to carry a plastic bag, pretending it was a heavy stone. I was described as having a plain background—that is, no one in my family had been an actor—but being quick in responding to instructions.

In another acting exercise, I was asked to drink a cup of water. The instructor stopped me and said, No, no, no. You are not drinking the water right. He said I had two problems. He said that a person from the proletarian class would never hold a cup in such a superficial manner—using three fingers on the handle. He instructed me to grab the cup with my hand. He pointed out that a proletarian person would never drink water sip by sip like a Miss Bourgeois with tons of spare time. He showed me how to drink down the water fast in one gulp and wipe my mouth with my sleeve. (124)

It is no surprise that Cheering Spear becomes the narrator's strongest rival by her ability to recite "dry, slogan-like lines" with real passion and her being "a big tear-machine" that can "make the right amount of tears at the right moment," but "without dragging out the snot" (153). Indeed, she initially manages to win over the leading role of Red Azalea by claiming that she is preparing for a scene at the coming audition that requires no talent at all and by persuading the narrator to do their rehearsals together (176–8); having watched the narrator's rehearsal and stolen her ideas, she then performs exactly the same scene, but does an even better job (179–181). In other words, she wins by being a better and slyer actress.

Revolving around Jiang Qing's operas and later, the rehearsal of *Red Azalea*, the memoir nonetheless critiques the revolutionary opera and its ideology, first by portraying Lu's hypocrisy (and unfeminine appearance) which make her a far cry from the idealised woman warrior; then by the madness and death of Little Green, who is caught having a romance with a young man at another communal farm; and later, by the dramatisation of the artificiality of those rehearsals, hence the model opera itself. Unlike *Becoming Madame Mao*, moreover, these critiques are much more explicit and no longer appear in the form of contradictions and ruptures in the narrative. Nonetheless, to focus exclusively on how play-acting has become a powerful means to move up the political ladder is to overlook its more positive dimension, which lies in its association with sexual liberation and feminist emancipation, and moreover, overlook other theatrical forms which only begin to emerge in the later parts of the book.

Wendy Somerson contends that the memoir is less about totalitarian China than about female sexuality, which resists both the Chinese Communist dis-

course that denies women their bodies and the Western Orientalist view of women as weak and repressed. Forged in official revolutionary discourse, Min's admiration for Yan and her desire to be her is partially produced by the rhetoric of strong, revolutionary, sexless women modeled after Iron Plum; yet such desire reinterprets the official discourse when it later turns into sexual desire for Yan, and the mosquito net, where they play out their desires unnoticed by outsiders, becomes a space of resistance (Somerson 111-2). Though the Supervisor has practically been a mouthpiece for the official male discourse, he is an ambiguous figure that expresses desire and, as such, enables resistance to government ideology. Indeed, gender identities become performative for the narrator²⁴ when she takes over Leopard's role in her love-making with Yan, and such flexibility pervades the Supervisor's character: he is a feminine male, at times even an androgynous character. When he and the narrator become intimate at the Peace Park in Shanghai, it becomes unclear whether two women's bodies or a woman and a man's body come together. Their intimacy both "disrupts the connection of active and passive positions corresponding to male and female," and "dislodges gender and sexuality from their traditional ontological configurations." (Somerson 113)

Wendy Larson likewise discusses desire, but focuses on "cultural Maoism" which, in contrast with "political Maoism" that suppresses sexual desire, gives way to it, enabling the individual to resist state control and achieve personal fulfilment and liberation (426). She argues that Min's memoir depicts the Cultural Revolution as "a time of simultaneous repression and extensively, if secretly, expressed sexual desire" (Larson 433), and "Red Azalea," being not merely the title of the book and the revolutionary film, but the main character in the film and a reference to Jiang Qing, stands for the "symbol for the transformation of revolutionary passion into erotic passion or for the purposeful conflation of the two." (Ibid 439) The Supervisor's androgynous nature makes him strongly reminiscent of Jiang Qing, and he functions as Min's "abstract and nameless unifier of revolutionary and erotic passion." (Ibid 441) The message is that although the Cultural Revolution's organizational structure may be flawed, it contains "a pure flame of desire," which would re-ignite "Chinese "creative forces," though as the end of the novel implies, these forces can possibly move

24. Though Somerson does not mention Judith Butler's concept of performativity in her essay, her analysis of the narrator's subversive actions, and later the Supervisor's, is clearly allusive to Butler's idea.

onward and outward only outside the "limiting confinement of China" (Ibid 441-442, 445).

Yan's staged sexual performance with Leopard merits a lot of attention. She visits the narrator who has gone home with the intention of seeing her again, but giving her the bad news that she is already engaged in a relationship with Leopard. The narrator sends her father away, in order to allow Yan to make love with Leopard at her house, and Yan, by asking the narrator to guard against intruders behind the draperies, allows—indeed encourages—the narrator to watch them in secret:

I tried to stop my desire. The desire to watch them. The desire to watch my other self—Yan. I felt as if I had never left the porch. I was in Yan. It was three instead of two people on the porch. My curiosity swelled. My lust was irresistible. Yan knew I was guarding her. She knew I was behind the draperies. She wanted me to participate in this, didn't she? I could not help but want to see the way her lips would crack open and her breath heat up. I could feel arms around my shoulders. The snake-like arms that wrapped me up. I could not tell whether they were Yan's or Leopard's or both. I wanted to feel Leopard's body. I wanted to have the three of us connected like electrical wires. (181)

A very fine example of how characters do not abide by the dictates of communism but transgress the sexless-ness that has been inflicted upon them, the scene is both real and theatrical: while it resembles the illusionist theatre owing to its reality, the invisible fourth wall does not exist, meaning that the love-making is even closer to reality; nonetheless, the love-making is so deliberate that it has an air of unreality and becomes alienating.

To fully appreciate the impact and significance of this episode, it is necessary to introduce another dramatic genre and its intersection with the feminist motif. In the post-Mao era, a great many dramatists articulated the concerns of women as women, without subjecting them to national building projects. The revolutionary model opera was abandoned, and keen on introducing new drama forms, many dramatists were fascinated by the offer to effect social changes in Brecht's epic theatre (Chen 303), though the repertoire of dramas still fell within the illusionist tradition (Ibid 311). In Brechtian epic drama, the stage took on the role of the narrator, such as with the help of large screens that comment on what happens on stage, and actors no longer throw themselves completely into their roles, but maintain a certain distance from the characters performed by them, even distinctly inviting criticism, so as to expose the subject matter and stage happenings to a process of "defamiliarization" (Brecht 24-5). As the epic

form presupposes a powerful social movement, the narrative stage and the distancing actors turn the audience into active observers, arousing them and compelling them to make decisions (Ibid 30). Karen Laughlin further argues that owing to its emphasis on historical contexts and its epic structuring of dramatic narratives, the Brechtian theatre is crucial to the development of a theatre for women (Martin 234).

The sexual performance of Yan and Leopard resembles the Brechtian theatre not only because of its deliberate nature, which serves to defamiliarize love-making, but also because of its effect on the narrator: she is immensely moved—overwhelmed by jealousy and feels “betrayed” (182, 183)—as she watches the woman whom she has loved having sex with her male lover:

She was doing it to me. I could feel my heart laid bare on the ground, being stepped on, like the hen Big Beard’s egg. I did not close the draperies. I forced myself to face Yan, to experience the death of my love for her, to accept what was given to me by fate. (184)

On the other hand, its staged nature enables her to distance herself from the scene, to such an extent that she could comment on it and her feelings, and later such feelings of jealousy and betrayal urge her to get over her passion for Yan and transfer it to the Supervisor. Indeed, in a way not unlike what Miller suggests, the theatre becomes educational, as the love-making between Leopard and Yan arguably inspires and compels the narrator to actively seduce the Supervisor at the Peace Park, until the latter is no longer a substitute for Yan, but a “he”:

My arms went around him. I felt, as I felt him, Yan’s skin. I touched him and said, I am at your service. He quivered like a young tree in a storm. He embraced me. He said softly, Let me have it, let me have you. (215)

Another example of a Brechtian-like episode also takes place at the Peace Park, where lonely people gather to masturbate, and passionate couples make love in the dark. The fact that it is nighttime means that the activities are not easily detectable and in some way “secret,” yet the venue makes them open to public surveillance, and the danger of being caught is indicated not merely by the patrol, but by the standing bulletin boards with pictures of “criminals, thieves, men and women caught in the act of infidelity” (215). Despite his proclamation of the orthodox communist beliefs that a person must rule out romances in his life, the Supervisor tempts the narrator to watch the scene and experience its beauty and passion, all the more beautiful and passionate because the acts are

forbidden and the people are acting like there is no tomorrow:

Oh, how grand a scene! I wish our greatest Chairman could see it. He would be shocked but impressed. Oh, now I know, this is a place where lonely men and women gather each night to experience the essence of drama. They meet their gods and goddesses here. They carry the spirit of the dead whose flesh has just been cremated. They masturbate and ejaculate their passion with criminal guilt. Calm down, my little friend, look at the gigantic chimney of the Dragon Sight Crematorium, look at the red smoke it sends to Heaven, look how it wafts away, look how it ascends. You must not close your eyes, you must watch, you must learn to appreciate the beauty given by nature. Watch with me, feel me in you, the excitement is far from over. The lonely ones are making their moves with us, struggling with a fright that is so deep it has blinded their inner-sight. They know they will be shot if caught, so do we. They regard this moment as their last performance, so do we. The fright sweetens the mood. We are near to death as well as to heaven. Do you feel it? (218)

The Supervisor particularly resembles the protagonist-narrator in the Brechtian theatre, as he defamiliarizes the scene and mediates between the mass orgy (drama) and the narrator (real life), aiming to revolutionize her thinking. Needless to say, both he and the narrator have just done what the people are doing, and therefore are actors as much as they are audience—both critical in their attitudes.

The narrator's conscious effort to solicit the Supervisor's attention and finally win his affection, as well as the leading role of the film, certainly refers the reader back to Ben Xu's criticism that she seeks to merge with the powerful Supervisor and inflicts her (their) power upon others. Xu particularly criticizes her self-absorption and apparent indifference to the boredom experienced by a theatre troupe who have rehearsed the same opera endlessly, but have never been given a chance to perform in actuality (230). However, her excitement arguably stems from her being given the chance to play Red Azalea, and her aspiration for the liberation and emancipation carried in the role, as much as from the relief that a life of menial labour is over. There is evidence that earlier on, at the Shanghai Film Studio, she has already established a firm belief in Red Azalea and its significant feminist implications: "The story of Red Azalea was a story of passion in the midst of gunfire. It was about how a woman should live, about a proletarian love unto death." (147) Later, when conversing with the Supervisor about public criticism of Jiang Qing, she concurs with him, saying that it is unfair and has been borne out of the traditional, chauvinist

mindset:

The Supervisor asked me if I was surprised. I said, with five thousand years of tradition I am not surprised. Ah, yes, history, he said. All the wisdom is man's wisdom. That's Chinese history. The fall of a kingdom is always the fault of the concubine. What could be more truthful? Why should Comrade Jiang Ching be an exception? (206)

Her being the audience and participant in the Peace Park scene makes her believe all the more strongly that Red Azalea will open "a new world," "a world where being born female merits celebration and salute. A world where a woman who is forced to marry a pig can have an affair" (233). It is only natural that such a conviction leads her to ignore the boredom suffered by those in the theatre troupe.

While the Brechtian mode is engaging to the narrator, and perhaps the reader, when the narrator fantasises herself as Red Azalea near the end of the novel, something even more remarkable goes on, which interestingly parallels a new theatrical form—the postmodernist theatre—in the post-1978 era and particularly since the late 1980s. An attempt to break away from the Aristotelian theatre which stipulates a reality that can be imitated, the postmodernist theatre is concerned with the practices of representation. It is self-referential, meaning that its significance does not lie in any external referent, but in itself; and self-reflexive, questioning the existence of reality, and the relation between reality and representation (Tam 202). Its "poetics of unmaking" deconstructs the world into "a world in the making," in which the human subject also unfolds into a process of subjectivity (Ibid 203). Ready examples include Sha Yexin's *Xunzhao nanzihan* [*In search of masculine man*, 1986], which questions the social foundation of political patriarchy in China; his *Yeshu, Kongzi, pitoushi Leinong* [*Jesus, Confucius and John Lennon*, 1987] even engages the postmodernist technique of collage, juxtaposing different spatial and temporal dimensions into a new contradictory space (Ibid 206–7).

During the time when the drama scene was very much steered by socialist ideology, Gao Xingjian was one of the pioneers of the postmodernist theatre, believing that the "self" worshipped as "god" in realist drama must be subject to vigorous questioning. He is particularly interested in the primordial mode of existence, or the "self in chaos," which is a state of non-distinction between subject and object, self and other, male and female, mind and body, and he stresses the role played by language in the formation of the self (Yip & Tam 7). In *Shengsijie* [*Between life and death*, 1991], *Duihua yu fanjie* [*Dialogue and rebut-*

tal, 1992], and *Yeyoushen* [*Nocturnal wanderer*, 1993] he sets out to deconstruct gendered subjectivity: as multiple facets of the self are registered by different pronouns, I, you, he and she, the self is deconstructed as linguistic constitution (Ibid 218). In his *Monologue*, there is even an interchange of subjectivities, as the actor not only takes on multiple roles as director and character, but his speeches fluctuate among “I,” “You” and “s/he,” until all these split selves merge to constitute the “we” (Lai 144).

If the alternation between “I” and “she” in Min’s *Becoming Madame Mao* already signifies such an interchange of selves, and even serves to tempt the reader/ audience to involve in Madame Mao’s performances, then such an interchange is much more impressive near the end of *Red Azalea*, where it fully dramatizes the empowerment of the narrator. The interchange of subjectivities is inspired by the Brechtian-like paragraphs of the love-making between Yan and Leopard, and of the mass orgy at the Peace Park. Most importantly, it characterizes the Supervisor’s vivid description of Red Azalea’s story, and his demand that the narrator “resurrect” the character. However, as the transparent fourth wall continues to be pulled down, the dramatic form changes from the Brechtian to the postmodernist: the Supervisor shifts from the perspective of “We” (he and the narrator), to “she” (Jiang Qing), and then to “you” (the narrator), thereby collapsing the boundaries among them:

It must happen her way, for the people, the Supervisor said. Mao is over eighty-three. The mud is reaching his neck. His lower jaw hangs and his hands shake. We do not have any time. We must hurry. Comrade Jiang Ching is in a hurry. She must relieve the pain of her love for the people. We must lose no time. We must resurrect Red Azalea. You. The heroine. The fearless, the diabolical, the lustful, the obscene heroine, Red Azalea. (243-4)

The Supervisor’s call registers the change from Brechtian to postmodernist form, but the narrator’s internal monologue is fully postmodernist, as it shows that there is no boundary between Jiang Qing and herself: she is not like Madame Mao—she is Madame Mao:

In her Red Army cap. Spicy Eyes. Equipped. Perfectly in control. She carried Yan’s determination and the Supervisor’s spirit. I believed my make-up. I believed that I was whom I was supposed to be. I was creating history. I am Comrade Jiang Ching and the Supervisor’s physical substance. I display their thoughts. I am my ambition. There is an energy that comes from heaven and earth and unites in me.

Tomorrow the name Red Azalea will be on the mouth of every person.

I am the embodiment of Red Azalea. I am my role. (244-5)

It should be noted that all dialogues between the narrator and the Supervisor are never put within quotation marks, unlike the rest of the memoir, such as when the narrator is conversing with other characters. Such a technique prepares for the interchange of subjectivities, which becomes the most effective in the two citations above. Interestingly, as different pronouns crowd Supervisor's speeches and the narrator's monologues, the Supervisor, Jiang Qing and the narrator become one person—gender arguably becomes deconstructed, and both the narrator and Red Azalea are no more confined by their female-ness.

If the end of *Red Azalea* is indeed full of disappointment, as Ben Xu suggests, it is not because the author-narrator is trapped in her totalitarian way of thinking: it rather owes to her despair that her dream of becoming Red Azalea is thwarted. If Min is still “spell-bound” at the time she wrote the memoir, I would contend that the spell comes from her self-fantasy as Red Azalea, which has indeed pushed beyond the revolutionary model opera; it has also pushed beyond the realist drama, which rests on a restrictive concept of the self. The narrative of her fantasy is comparable to a world of no boundaries made possible by the postmodernist stage. To borrow Litvak's words, it resists and destabilizes the “fixity” and “circumscription” of the patriarchy in a much more efficient manner than other theatrical forms (xi).

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A.O. Scott's remark on the prominence of opera in Anchee Min's life therefore opens up an interesting way of approaching her works, in which the trope of theatricality can be identified, along with images of the theatre. Upon a close study of her works, various theatrical forms can be further uncovered, which enrich the Western criticism of theatricality and its relation with female agency and empowerment. In *Empress Orchid*, the Imperial Palace virtually turns into the stage of the Peking opera, where the young empress is under perpetual surveillance and any attempt to carve a temporary private space to destabilize the patriarchy fails. *Becoming Madame Mao* reflects the paradoxes and restrictions in revolutionary model opera, the dramatic genre promulgated by its very protagonist; by contrast, the realist drama, which she performed as a young actress, is more empowering, and the ending turns to a narrative mode resembling the realist drama, which enables her to reclaim some kind of agency and engage with her audience.

Red Azalea revolves around Jiang Qing's model operas, which have formed a significant part of the author-narrator's life. Ironically, the memoir critiques

such a dramatic genre in a far more direct method, and through the staged sexual performances which are both absorbing and alienating, it points to the Brechtian theatre as a much more influential and empowering model not merely to performers, but audience. As the Brechtian theatre has been regarded as a precursor to postmodernist theatre (and is considered quite postmodernist itself), the blurring of the boundary between the Supervisor and Red Azalea, followed by the narrator's self-fantasy as Red Azalea near the end, manifest the postmodernist interchange of subjectivities. What impresses us is the way gender is deconstructed, as well as the narrator/actress's full identification with the legendary character.

Despite the author-narrator's (hence Min's) despair at not being given the chance to perform the film opera for which she has rehearsed, as she says in her memoir, she manages to get out of China and emigrate to the U.S.; in the U.S., as we all know, she has been offered the freedom to reflect on her life as well as to write about different women in Chinese history, and her works have appealed to both Chinese and Western readers. In this sense, the end of the memoir, despite despairing anti-climax, indeed carries a spirit that is strongly reminiscent of the freedom entailed by the postmodernist theatre.

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閔安琪作品的劇場意象和劇場性

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摘 要

不同時代有關中國的文學作品中，劇場性現象極為常見，至今卻鮮有針對中國文學中劇場性、及其跟性別之關係的研究。本文探討旅美華裔作家閔安琪以英文書寫的三本作品：《紅杜鵑》、《升格為毛夫人》和《蘭花皇后》，為了豐富西方文學批評往往將表演性跟劇場性兩者混而為一的不足，於是引用京劇、革命劇、現實主義話劇、布萊希特史詩劇場和後現代劇場各傳統，跟它們本身的時代性、社會性，來深入分析閔作品裡眾多劇場性例子。就閔作品描述，本文除分析不同劇場性之呈現外，更討論其挑戰父權社會的能力、以至不同程度之限制。

關鍵詞：劇場性，表演性，性別，性，超越

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