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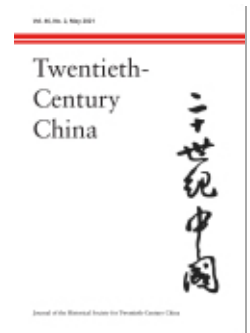
Militiawomen, Red Guards, and Images of Female Militancy in Maoist China

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Twentieth-Century China, Volume 46, Number 2, May 2021, pp. 153-180 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2021.0013>



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MILITIAWOMEN, RED GUARDS, AND IMAGES OF FEMALE MILITANCY IN MAOIST CHINA

JULIANE NOTH

Photographs and paintings of “iron girls,” militia members, and other women performing hard labor are frequently discussed with regard to gender roles and gendered representation in Maoist China. This article sheds new light on the workings of Maoist-period propaganda images in general and photography in particular by showing how pictures of militant women such as female militia and Red Guards not only conveyed new gender models and norms but also functioned as allegories of class and the socialist nation. The female gender and the beauty of the depicted women were essential to this function. The images turned the harsh realities of revolutionary struggle and military conflict into aesthetic experiences that were consumed by female and male audiences alike. By unpacking the personal histories of some of the women in the photographs, I draw attention to the experiences, desires, and conflicts subsumed in the propagandistic function of the images.

KEYWORDS: fashion, gender, militia, photography, propaganda, Red Guards

A poem by Mao Zedong, “Militia Women, Inscription on a Photograph—a *jueju*” (七绝·为女民兵题照 “Qijue: Wei nüminbing tizhao”) is to the present day the most frequently cited source to describe the Maoist ideal of femininity:

飒爽英姿五尺枪
曙光初照演兵场
中华儿女多奇志
不爱红装爱武装

How bright and brave they look, shouldering five-foot rifles
On the parade ground lit up by the first gleams of day
China's daughters have high-aspiring minds,
They love their battle array, not silks and satins¹

1 The translation and translated title (with romanization adapted to pinyin) are after the bilingual edition of Mao's poems. Mao Zedong, “Militia Women: Inscription on a Photograph—a *chueh-chu*” [“Qijue: Wei nüminbing tizhao”], in Mao Zedong [Mao Tse-tung], *Mao Zedong shici (ying han duizhao)* [Mao Tse-tung Poems] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1976), 76.

The concluding line of the poem in particular has become a trope for a new concept of female dress and behavior. *Bu ai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang* (不爱红装爱武装) literally translates as “They don’t love red garments, but military uniforms,” and the shift from *hong* (红), the color red that denotes feminine beauty with erotic connotations but also marital happiness, to *wu* (武), meaning both weaponry and militancy, marks a shift from conventional and sexualized notions of female beauty (“red garments”/“silks and satins”) toward a militant interpretation of femininity.² The verse seemingly subsumes in one phrase what has been described as the “masculinization” or “defeminization” of the socialist woman through a discourse that linked femininity to feudalism and capitalism.³ The “androgyny of the Cultural Revolution,”⁴ when female (and male) Red Guards donned army uniforms, then appears to be the ultimate realization of this Maoist ideal.

Scholarship on women’s histories and gender in China has been revolving around the tension between the state-sponsored discourse of women’s liberation—encapsulated in the phrases “Women can uphold half of heaven” and “The times have changed, men and women are the same”—and the more than incomplete achievement of gender equality in the years between 1949 and 1976. Studies by Emily Honig, Tina Mai Chen, Suzy Kim, and others have served to demonstrate the complex uses of gendered representations, sartorial choices, and female agency.⁵ In discussions of the sartorial aspects of gender discourse, especially of the replacement of “silks and satins” with less heavily gendered garments, the question of how these are to be evaluated from a feminist point of view nonetheless takes center stage. Tina Mai Chen has succinctly phrased the dilemma: “When women wore [the People’s Liberation Army] uniform, did they extend the parameters of female fashion, undermine male dominance of the uniform, subject women to masculinization, or a combination of these?”⁶

2 Tina Mai Chen, “They Love Battle Array, Not Silks and Satins,” in Ban Wang, ed., *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 264.

3 Chen, “They Love Battle Array,” 272. The theory of a masculinization and even desexualization of women during the Maoist period was first proposed by Chinese critics. See Li Xiaojiang, *Xiawa de tansuo* [Eve’s exploration] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988); Dai Jinhua, “Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women’s Film,” *positions: asia culture critique* 3, no. 1 (1995): 255–80, esp. 257–59; Meng Yue, “Female Images and National Myth,” in Tani Barlow, ed., *Gender Politics in Modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 118–36, esp. 118–19. For a critique of this position, see Rosemary Roberts, *Maoist Model Theatre: Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 17–23; Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 228–39.

4 Paul J. Bailey, *Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century China* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 122.

5 Emily Honig, “Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards,” in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, eds., *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 255–68; Tina Mai Chen, “Dressing for the Party: Clothing, Citizenship, and Gender-Formation in Mao’s China,” *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 2 (2001): 143–71; Suzy Kim, “From Violated Girl to Revolutionary Woman: The Politics of Sexual Difference from China to North Korea,” *positions: asia critique* 28, no. 3 (August 2020): 631–57; Li Li, “Uniformed Rebellion, Fabricated Identity: A Study of Social History of Red Guards in Military Uniforms during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Beyond,” *Fashion Theory* 14, no. 4 (2010): 439–69.

6 Chen, “Dressing for the Party,” 162–63.

The complex issues surrounding representations of socialist femininity have to date been tackled only insufficiently by scholars of art and visual culture; the same is true of propaganda art and photography in socialist China in general.⁷ Historians of gender or literature direct the focus of their inquiry toward the relation between the depicted ideal and social reality without taking into full account the complexities of visual representation. Several authors explicitly or implicitly assume that the numerous pictures of women working in previously male domains address a female audience and that they visualize models (模范 *mofan*) of socialist behavior to be emulated.⁸ They highlight either the normative and repressive functions of these images or their failure to represent either true gender equality or a society where this equality is not achieved.⁹ Images distributed through the state media of socialist China are thus treated as transparent mediators of explicit political norms and messages that shape their own reception by (female) audiences or that fail to do so. What remains to be fully assessed are the multilayered functions of visual representation, as well as the formal and artistic strategies employed in these pictures, including the straightforwardly propagandistic ones.

The formulation of a new ideal of socialist personhood and its propagation to the people is but one function assigned to images and texts created during the Maoist era. It is crucial to differentiate carefully between the various circumstances that governed the production, reproduction, textual framings, and reception of images. And although propaganda posters, artworks conforming to the ideological framework outlined by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and news photography were produced within the same discourse of socialist construction and were subject to the same tight ideological control, they were each assigned different functions that have to be taken into consideration. These different types of images have in common that they participate in the conventions of their respective genres and in established idioms to convey meaning or create new expressions. Moreover, they are contingent on the moments of their production and publication as well as on the subjectivities of their authors and the circumstances of their reception.

This article therefore proposes that photographs and other images from the Maoist period should not be measured against a state-sponsored political discourse, on the one hand, and social realities, on the other. Instead, these images have to be regarded as

7 English-language scholarship by art historians on the visual and textual strategies of propaganda art includes: Francesca Dal Lago, "Activating Images: The Ideological Use of Metapictures and Visualized Metatexts in the Iconography of the Cultural Revolution," *Modern Chinese History and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 167–97; Craig Clunas, "The Politics of Inscription in Modern Chinese Art," *Art History* 41, no. 1 (February 2018): 132–53. On posters, see Kuiyi Shen, "Propaganda Posters and Art during the Cultural Revolution," in Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian, eds., *Art and China's Revolution*, exhibition catalog (New York: Asia Society: 2008), 149–63. On photography in socialist China, see Claire Roberts, *Photography and China* (London: Reaktion, 2013), 102–20.

8 Laikwan Pang, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's Cultural Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), 84–91.

9 Harriet Evans, "'Comrade Sisters': Gendered Bodies and Spaces," in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds., *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 63–78; Linda Jean Pittwood, "Visualizing Biopower, Discipline and the Female Body in Mid-Twentieth Century China," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 4, nos. 2/3 (2017): 203–20; Elizabeth J. Perry, *Patrolling the Revolution: Worker Militias, Citizenship, and the Modern Chinese State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 223–25.

performative and as actively shaping discourses, gendered behavior, and social norms.¹⁰ Artists, photographers, and editors relied on various pictorial strategies, an important one being the use of allegory. The questions of whether or not representations of women active in male-dominated domains testify to achievements or failures in gender equality and whether they reflect new or conventional gender norms address but one aspect targeted by these images, and arguably not always the most important one. Most of the images of militiawomen and hard-working “iron girls” should be read not as a documentation of social facts but as allegories of class and nation. For the persuasiveness of these allegories and their attractiveness to female as well as male audiences, the female gender and even sexual attractiveness of the depicted women is as quintessential as their class identity, as I will show below.

My article presents as a case study a brief history of one particular genre in the visual culture of socialist China, a genre that sparked Mao Zedong’s famous verse and thus seems to epitomize the new ideal of a militant woman: the images of militiawomen that proliferated in Chinese media between 1958 and 1976.¹¹ Furthermore, I probe into the connection between these models of female militancy and the military apparel and militant behavior of female Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, likewise often described with the phrase *bu ai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang*. The formation of the Red Guards in 1966 was, inter alia, an outcome of the militarization of Chinese society up to the mid-1960s, which was visually accompanied by an increasing number of militiawomen pictures.¹² Therefore, I will, in a second line of inquiry, discuss images of Red Guards from 1966 and their figurations of an urban, adolescent female militancy.

The images under discussion here, mostly photographs, were published in *Renmin huabao* (人民画报 *China Pictorial*), a pictorial published in Chinese as well as multiple foreign languages that shaped the image that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) presented to the world; *Zhongguo funü* (中国妇女 *Women of China*), the journal of the All-China Women’s Federation, which addressed a female readership and promoted what Wang Zheng has described as state feminism;¹³ and *Zhongguo sheying* (中国摄影 *Photography in China*), the journal of the Chinese Photographer’s Association that was crucial in shaping the aesthetic and ideological standards of photography in socialist China. Although directed at different audiences, the three journals often published the same photographs. More importantly, they participated in the formation of a common visual language and aesthetic ideals in the representation of the socialist woman.

The medium of photography is particularly convincing in conveying social and gender norms as well as in serving allegorical purposes due to its presumed indexicality,

10 Matthias Weiß, “Vermessen – fotografische ‘Menscheninventare’ vor und nach der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus,” in Ingeborg Reichle and Steffen Siegel, eds., *Maßlose Bilder: Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 367.

11 *Bu ai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang* became a standard title for publications related to female militia: for example, in an anthology of stories about militiawomen—*Bu ai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang* [They love battle array, not silks and satins] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1965)—or a catalog of paintings made by a militia battalion from Beibuwan—Beibuwan pan nūminbing lianzu, *Bu ai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang* (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1972).

12 On the role of women warrior myths in the militarization of a society, see Louise Edwards, *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1–16.

13 Wang Zheng, *Finding Women*, 7–8.

i.e., that as a semiotic sign, according to Charles S. Peirce, it refers to its signified via a physical connection.¹⁴ In Rosalind Krauss's words, "Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object."¹⁵ The assumption that what a photograph shows was actually there at the moment of exposure—what Tom Gunning has called photography's "truth claim"¹⁶—ties the allegorical image and the normative ideal to living persons. Like socialist realist paintings, photographs from the Maoist period show an ideal reality, promoting a society as it should be. The claim to visual truthfulness associated with photography presents this ideal as already realized. The tightly controlled arrangement of the photographs and their highly standardized iconography supersede the particularity of the individual and transform it into an idealized image of class and nation. As Matthias Weiß has noted with regard to portrait series from national socialist Germany, such photographs do not work in the mode of Roland Barthes's "That-has-been"¹⁷ but instead propagate an unattainable "That-will-be."¹⁸

On the other hand, the fact that these photographs depict actual living women can help to undermine the projection of an ideal socialist subject, to trace the constructions of such idealized images, and to better understand how political movements and everyday experiences were transformed into coherent visual representations of women and men embodying the norms of socialist society. Therefore, in this article, I not only analyze how the photographs of young militiawomen or Red Guards were put to allegorical use in the years between 1958 and 1976, in order to exemplify the workings of visual propaganda, but I also draw attention to the historical and personal contingencies behind those photographs and shed light on the personal histories, experiences, desires, and conflicts that were subsumed in the images of Maoist femininity.

THE SHAPING OF AN ICONOGRAPHY

A personal relationship also underlay Mao Zedong's poem "Militiawomen." Mao wrote it for Li Yuanhui (李原慧 1934–), a confidential secretary working at the Party Central Office who also accompanied him on a tour through the Yangzi provinces in 1960. Several versions of the story of how Mao came to write this poem exist, but apparently he asked Li, during an informal chat with staff members during this tour, whether she had participated in militia training. She affirmed that she had, showing

14 Charles S. Peirce, "What Is a Sign?," *Pierce Edition Project*, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://peirce.sitehost.iu.edu/ep/ep2/ep2book/ch02/ep2ch2.htm>. Peirce particularly mentions photography as an example of an index.

15 Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 75. For a critical discussion of the concept of photography's indexicality, see Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* nos. 1/2 (2004): 39–49. Gunning (p. 40) notes succinctly that "the indexicality of a traditional photograph inheres in the effect of light on chemicals, not in the picture it produces."

16 Gunning, "What's the Point," 39, 41–42.

17 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 177.

18 Weiß, "Vermessen," 377.

him a photograph of herself in militia dress that she had taken after her participation in the 1959 National Day parade. The versions of the story differ as to whether Mao instantly wrote the poem with a pencil on a blank page of a book he was reading or whether he asked Li for the photograph and brushed the poem onto *xuan* paper (宣纸) in his characteristic calligraphy in February 1961, after his return to Beijing.¹⁹ In any case, the poem was written for a specific, private photograph and in the context of a personal relationship between the chairman and the young secretary. These personal connotations were shed when the poem was introduced to a nationwide readership with its publication in the *Poems of Chairman Mao* in December 1963 and on the first page of the *People's Daily* (人民日报 *Renmin ribao*) on January 4, 1964.²⁰ The two dimensions of authorship and audience that meet in the poem—the subtle flirtation between a senior man and a young female subordinate, on the one hand, and the relationship between the chairman of the CCP and the “daughters [and sons] of China,” on the other—are characteristic of many representations of militiawomen that combine individuality, locality, and nationhood.

Unlike Mao Zedong's poem, the photograph of Li Yuanhui as a militiawoman was apparently never published. This gap can be filled by the numerous pictures of militiawomen that appeared in Chinese journals, magazines, and newspapers in the years before and after the publication of Mao's poem; the poem participated in the codification of an iconography that had been taking shape since the onset of the Everyone a Soldier (全民皆兵 *quanmin jie bing*) campaign in 1958.

During the early years of the PRC, the primary tasks of the militia were providing reserves for the army and activists for social reforms such as the land reform movement, suppressing bandits, protecting crops, and maintaining communications.²¹ In 1958, the militia was considerably expanded when the Everyone a Soldier campaign aimed to include in it “all able-bodied citizens of both sexes between the ages of 16 and 50.”²² By January 1959, the number of men and women in the militia was said to have reached 220 million. Launched in the wake of the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958 and in the context of the Great Leap Forward, the Everyone a Soldier movement was to introduce military organization and discipline into people's daily lives, with the militia leading “the masses” in various production tasks, such as fighting drought and producing iron and steel. In an updated concept of the People's War, the militia was also to serve as a grassroots defense

19 For the pencil version of the story, see Li Shushan, “Mao Zedong tixie ‘Qijue: Wei nüminbing tizhao’ de qianqian houhou” [The context of Mao Zedong inscribing “Militia Women, Inscription on a Photograph—a jueju], *Dangshi bocai*, no. 5 (1996): 41; Tan Bo, “Mao Zedong ‘Wei nüminbing tizhao’ qi ren qi shi” [The person and the circumstances behind Mao Zedong's “Militia Women, Inscription on a Photograph”], *Xiangchao*, no. 5 (2009): 40–41. For the calligraphy brush version, see Wu Xiong and Chen Yiqin, eds., *Mao Zedong shici jijie* [Collected interpretations of the poems of Mao Zedong] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1998), 334–35; Qi Ming, “Mao Zedong ‘Wei nüminbing tizhao’ yi shi de youlai” [The origins of Mao Zedong's poem “Militia Women, Inscription on a Photograph”], *Lantai neiwai*, no. 3 (2012): 14.

20 Mao Zedong, *Mao Zhuxi shici sanshiqi shou* [Thirty-seven poems by Chairman Mao] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1963), 17r; Mao Zedong, “Shici shi shou” [Ten poems], *Renmin ribao*, January 4, 1964, 1.

21 John Gittings, “China's Militia,” *China Quarterly* 18 (April–June 1964): 102.

22 Gittings, “China's Militia,” 109.

organization against a technically more advanced enemy equipped with nuclear weapons.²³ Only a limited number of the militia members received formal military training, and the movement subsided with the catastrophic failure of the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing famine. After 1961, militia work was concentrated on strategic points such as railways, communications, seacoasts, and frontiers.²⁴

The militia's function in coastal and frontier defense shaped the iconography of the militiawoman from the outset. When armed female civilians made their first appearance in *Zhongguo funü* in November 1958, they were not denominated as militiawomen; they were introduced as "the young women from the islands along the Fujian coast" who actively supported the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the militia in coastal defense by patrolling day and night. The corresponding photograph showed a group of young women carrying rifles and walking barefoot along the sandy beach, their silhouettes dark against the light of the setting sun reflected in the sea.²⁵ Whereas this photograph evokes aesthetic pleasure in the seaside at sunset and the slender figures of young women rather than military prowess, the next image, that of a militiawoman from Nanri Island (南日島) in Fujian Province presented to the readership on the cover of *Zhongguo funü* two issues later, already conformed to what was to become a standardized iconography for female militia (Figure 1). The hand-colored photograph by Yang Minghui (杨明辉 ca. 1935–1980) and Guo Kezhen (郭可震 dates unknown) shows a young woman with short hair and a healthy reddish complexion shot from a low angle. She is carrying a mobile barricade made of a net between bamboo poles over her right shoulder, and she turns her head slightly to the left as she gazes toward the horizon, her brows knit against the sunlight and in an expression of stern determination. Over her pink cotton blouse patterned with a floral motif, she wears an ammunition belt made of green cloth, which is in turn covered by the leather belt of her rifle. A ridgeline of dunes in the background serves to identify the location at the seaside. The militia is thus characterized as young, able-bodied, determined to fight the enemy, living at the maritime frontier, belonging to the peasant class (as evidenced by her robust complexion as well as her colorful blouse), and female.

It is no surprise that the cover image of *Zhongguo funü* showed a woman, as, in fact, every cover of the journal before the Cultural Revolution did so. And, indeed, it took until 1960 for the first photographs of militiawomen to appear in *Renmin huabao* and *Zhongguo sheying*. But in the following years, these two publications also featured multiple images of female militia members, whereas their male comrades appeared only in the background, if at all. But in contrast to their strong representation in photographs, discussions of the Everyone a Soldier movement made no mention of a particularly strong involvement of women. Given the militia's historical background as a reserve for the PLA and a task force in social movements, it is unlikely that women provided the backbone of militia work. Tellingly, the earliest representations of militia in *Zhongguo sheying* in

23 Gittings, "China's Militia," 104–9; June Teufel Dreyer, "The Chinese Militia: Citizen-Soldiers and Civil-Military Relations in the People's Republic of China," *Armed Forces and Society* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 72.

24 Gittings, "China's Militia," 111–14.

25 Xinhuashe, "Fujian sheng yanhai daoyu de qingnian funü" [Young women from the islands along the Fujian coast], *Zhongguo funü*, no. 15 (November 1, 1958), inner back cover.



Figure 1. Yang Minghui and Guo Kezhen, *Fujian Nanridao de nūminbing* [A militiawoman from Nanri Island, Fujian Province], *Zhongguo funü*, no. 17 (1958), cover image.

1960 showed only men.²⁶ And Guo Moruo, in his article on Mao's poem and the militia for the *People's Daily*, went to great lengths to argue that the poem referred not only to its female members but to men as well. He pointed out that the phrase *Zhongguo ernü*

²⁶ Meng Zhaorui, *Haian shang de lianfangshao* [Defense post at the seacoast], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 4 (1960): 11; Li Fupei, *Shike zhunbeizhe, baowei zuguo, jiefang Taiwan!* [Always being prepared to defend the motherland and liberate Taiwan!], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 4 (1960): 14–15.

(中国儿女) in the third line refers to both sons and daughters of China.²⁷ It is very evident from his article that he did not regard the militia as an organization dominated by women.

The many women in militia images do not indicate that women represented a majority within the militia. Rather, their function was primarily symbolic. On the one hand, the female militia, like female tractor drivers, train drivers, or steel workers, were what Tina Mai Chen has described as female icons that functioned as “bearers of modernity, socialism, national autonomy and gender equality,” as well as role models for other women in socialist society.²⁸ On the other hand, the images of armed women represented the militia as a whole—and by extension the Chinese nation—by feeding on a transnational iconography of allegories.

THE MILITIAWOMAN AS ALLEGORY OF CLASS AND NATION

The militia’s representation as female follows one of the most foundational allegories in socialist art. Because it was closely connected to the establishment of communes in the countryside, the militia of the Everyone a Soldier campaign was basically a rural phenomenon and shaped by peasants. In Maoist China, the revolutionary masses that formed the subject of the socialist state were identified as the “workers, peasants, and soldiers.” In idealized representations of this trinity, workers and soldiers are represented by male figures, whereas the peasantry is gendered female, following Soviet conventions. These are epitomized in the monumental sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* by Vera Mukhina (1889–1953), originally made for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 World Expo in Paris and reintroduced to Chinese audiences in the early 1950s.²⁹ A male worker and a female peasant as allegories of their respective classes raise their arms to cross hammer and sickle, the symbols of the Soviet state.³⁰ Such gendered representations of class are also reflected in images showing PLA soldiers and militia members side by side: here the militia, as the civil and peasantry-based organization that was subordinate to the PLA in the military structure of Maoist China,³¹ is identified as female, reflecting both the iconographic conventions for class distinction as well as predominant gender hierarchies. Thus, photographs showing PLA and militia members training together predominantly depict male soldiers in uniform next to peasant women in civilian dress with an ammunition belt, a rifle, and an occasional straw hat as their accoutrements (Figure 2). Peasant women with rifles denoted the militia as an organization that was mainly formed by

27 Guo Moruo, “Bu ai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang” [They love their battle array, not silks and satins], *Renmin ribao*, April 25, 1964, 7.

28 Tina Mai Chen, “Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Female Agency in 1950s China,” *Gender and History* 15, no. 3 (August 2003): 273.

29 For example, drawings of the sculpture were published in Luyi meishubu, ed., *Jianyi meishu gongzuo shouce* [Concise handbook for art work] (Shenyang: Xinhua shudian, 1950). I am grateful to Christine I. Ho for providing this reference.

30 Bettina Jungen, *Kunstpolitik versus Kunst: Leben und Werk der Bildhauerin Vera Muchina (1889–1953)* (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2005), 157–68.

31 The militia was originally under the command of the PLA, but in 1958, control of the militia was transferred to the CCP, to be shifted back to the army in 1962 and again to the party from 1973 to 1976. Teufel Dreyer, “Chinese Militia,” 66–70.



Figure 2. Wu Zhenchao, People's Liberation Army soldiers and militiawomen exercising to destroy the enemy in a photograph published in *China im Bild* [German edition of *Renmin huabao*], no. 11 (1970): 47.

peasantry, but in addition the growing number of such images served to identify the peasantry with the militia, visually underscoring the aim of the Everyone a Soldier campaign. The image of the militiawoman thus also expressed the entire nation's capacity to defend itself in case of war.

The image of the militiawoman that symbolically represents the whole nation draws on an even older type of gendered representation in classical European art, namely the allegories of nations, continents, and abstract concepts as young women. Allegorical figures are typically adorned with attributes that refer to characteristic costumes, products, and artifacts of the continents, countries, or concepts in question. Sigrid Schade, Monika Wagner, and Sigrid Weigel have pointed out that the female personification of such concepts and ideals serves to naturalize and legitimize them.³² In times of conflict, allegorical figures were also shown in arms. The representations of Chinese militiawomen draw on such allegories of nations ready to go battle as the sword-brandishing *Germania* painted by Friedrich August von Kaulbach (1850–1920) in August 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War or *Liberty Leading the People* and carrying a rifle with a bayonet, created during the French Revolution of 1830 by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863).³³ An

32 Sigrid Schade, Monika Wagner, and Sigrid Weigel, "Allegorien und Geschlechterdifferenz: Zur Einführung," in Sigrid Schade, Monika Wagner, and Sigrid Weigel, eds., *Allegorien und Geschlechterdifferenz* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994), 2.

33 Studies of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* are too numerous to be cited in their entirety here. They include, among others, the exhibition catalog Hélène Toussaint, ed., *La Liberté guidant le peuple de Delacroix* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1982); Monika Wagner, "Freiheitswunsch und Frauenbild: Die 'Liberté' zwischen 1789 und 1730," in Inge Stephan and Sigrid Weigel, eds., *Die Marseillaise der Weiber: Frauen, die Französische Revolution und ihre Rezeption* (Hamburg: Argument, 1989), 7–14; Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Die Freiheit führt das Volk von Eugène Delacroix: Sinn und Gegensinn*, trans. Gisela Kubel (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1991).

early adaptation of this iconography of belligerent allegories in the medium of photography is the picture of Marina Ginestà i Coloma (1919–2014) standing on the roof of the Hotel Colon in Barcelona, taken by Juan Guzmán (Hans Gutmann; 1911–1982) in July 1936. It depicts the reporter and member of the Socialist Youth shouldering a rifle and smiling self-confidently into the camera, the cityscape of Barcelona in the background. Ginestà is thus shown as representative not only of the many women who fought on the Republican side during the first months of the Spanish Civil War but also of the entire city's struggle against fascism.³⁴

Several photographs published in *Zhongguo sheying* and *Renmin huabao* during the 1960s introduced socialist nations or countries where the PRC supported revolutionary struggles via images of armed women: *Zhongguo sheying* featured photographs of a woman standing guard in Cuba, militiawomen taking part in target practice in Mali, and Vietnamese militiawomen.³⁵ *Renmin huabao* printed photographs of female partisans from Thailand and Palestine, alongside numerous illustrations of militiawomen from Vietnam.³⁶ Coverage of mass rallies against US imperialism and in support of Cuba or Congo (Léopoldville) invariably included photographs of female militia who underscored their resistance to imperialism by carrying their weapons, while their male comrades occupied the background.

Militiawomen thus became emblems of international solidarity; this is very straightforwardly rendered on another cover of *Zhongguo funü*, for the March 1965 issue that coincided with International Women's Day (Figure 3). The cover was graced with a poster by Hao Zhan (郝站 dates unknown) depicting three young women with rifles behind a bed of roses: an African woman in a brightly colored dress, a Cuban in uniform, and a Chinese woman characterized by her blue blouse and white kerchief as a peasant from Northern China. Together they represent the trinity of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, three continents that are, as the title of the painting claims, *United in Battle* (团结战斗 *Tuanjie zhandou*). The depiction of the Chinese peasant also exemplifies the new ideal of beauty that was shaped through this and many other images of armed women, the main features of which were round faces and large eyes, tanned skin, and strong bodies. In other words, the ideal expressed in these images is of healthy, robust women who are capable of conducting manual labor. These images do not erase but redefine femininity: traditional attributes of femininity that carry associations of frail beauty subjected to male desire were

34 The photograph was only rediscovered in 2002. Jacinto Antón, "Marina Ginestà, la joven y desafiante miliciana del fusil," *El País*, January 6, 2014, accessed September 23, 2019, https://elpais.com/cultura/2014/01/06/actualidad/1389047015_066499.html.

35 See the photograph by a Vietnamese photographer whose name was transcribed as Du Shenjing. Du Shenjing, *Nüminbing* [Militiawoman], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 4 (1961): 43. See also Liu Dong'ao, *Shouwei* (*she yu Guba*) [Standing on guard (taken in Cuba)], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 2 (1962): 41; Meng Xianquan, *Mali minbing* [Militia in Mali], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 6 (1962): 12.

36 "Kämpferinnen der Volksstreitkräfte Thailands beim Studium der Werke des Vorsitzenden Mao" [Female fighters of the People's Armed Forces of Thailand studying the works of Chairman Mao], *China im Bild*, no. 8 (1970): 43; "Palästinensische Partisaninnen üben hartnäckig die Fertigkeit zur Vernichtung des Feindes" [Palestinian female partisans relentlessly train their ability to destroy the enemy], *China im Bild*, no. 9 (1970): 62. The numerous images of Vietnamese militiawomen include a photograph by Tamura Shigeru, correspondent of *Akahata*, the mouthpiece of the Japanese Communist Party, which was reproduced in *Renmin huabao*, no. 11 (1965): 34, as well as in *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 4 (1965): 42.

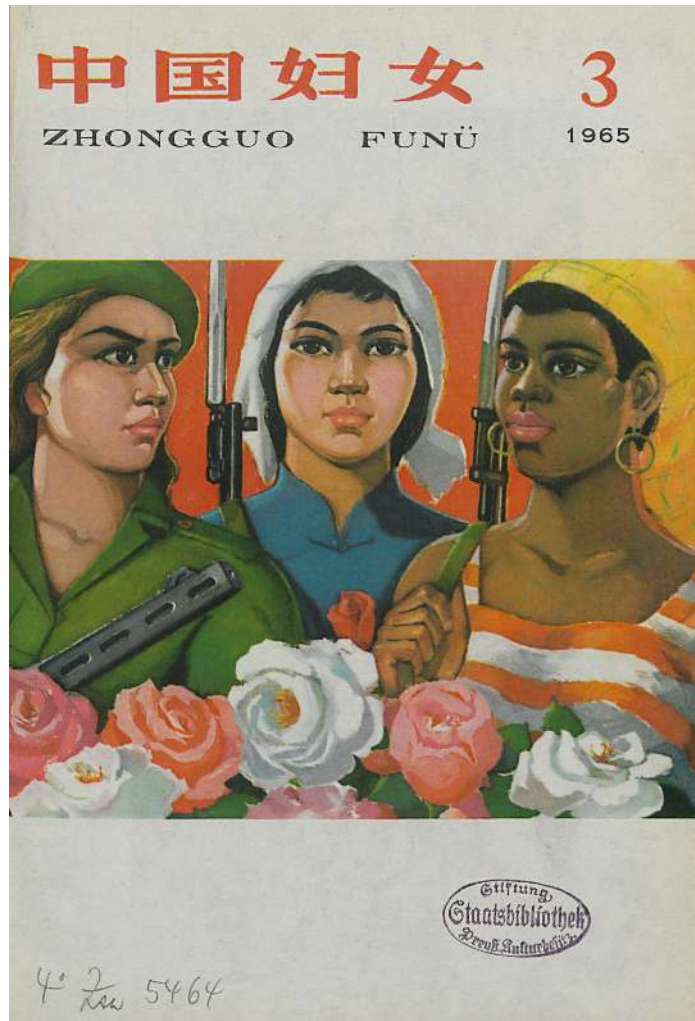


Figure 3. Hao Zhan, *Tuanjie zhandou* [United in battle], gouache on paper, dimensions unknown, *Zhongguo funü*, no. 3 (1965), cover image.

replaced by markers of physical vigor associated with the peasant and working classes. Masculinity likewise was recoded from the ideal of the soft-bodied literatus abstaining from manual labor to representations of physical strength, square faces, and large eyes.

This new ideal meant a redefinition of gender roles and, more importantly, a fundamental reevaluation of class status. It did not imply a complete desexualization.³⁷ Arguably,

37 Suzy Kim argues with reference to the revolutionary model ballet *The White-Haired Girl* that “the most visible strategies developed by communist feminism was the *desexualization* of female subjects to counter their representation as sex objects to *regender* the trope of the violated girl into a revolutionary woman.” Kim, “From Violated Girl to Revolutionary Woman,” 634, italics original. In this understanding of (de)sexualization, female sexuality is seen as passive and prone to victimization. I would argue instead that in the course of regendering, female sexuality is also recoded as more active and self-determined, albeit confined by the general suppression of expressions of sexuality.

images of young women wielding phallic symbols such as rifles had erotic connotations that contributed considerably to the visual attractiveness of these pictures. In fact, this attractiveness is crucial to their propagandistic function. Although overt displays of sexuality or eroticism were inconceivable in the visual culture of Maoist China, female beauty and sexual attractiveness were still depicted to convey political messages, and they served to visually equate revolutionary fervor with romantic feelings and libidinal desire. It is the militiawomen's femininity, their youth and beauty, that underscores the pervasiveness of military training and the readiness of the entire nation to defend the country—down to those groups within the population that according to more conventional notions of gender relations would be those to be defended.³⁸

It is not incidental that, according to one version of the story describing how Mao Zedong wrote his poem for Li Yuanhui, he added the most conventional and ubiquitous trope about armed women: “You young people should be courageous, you should not emulate Lin Daiyu [the tragic and frail heroine of *Honglou meng* (红楼梦 *Dream of the red chamber*)], but Hua Mulan and Mu Guiying.”³⁹ The latter two legendary women warriors entered the army in their father's and husband's stead; Louise Edwards has shown that the literary figure of Hua Mulan actually worked to stabilize rather than disrupt the patriarchal system.⁴⁰ The images of militiawomen served a similar stabilizing and defensive function for the socialist Chinese nation.

Through the medium of photography, the allegorical representations were projected onto the bodies and faces of real women, in countless photographs of women serving in the militia or undergoing military training. The militia members portrayed were named and their stories were written down in order to tie the ideal of the militant nation, epitomized by its armed daughters, to real life. Readers were thus introduced to Wang Xiuju (王秀菊 dates unknown), a militia battalion commander from the Yongxing Commune in Weishi County (尉氏县), Henan Province,⁴¹ and to Hong Xiucong (洪秀儼 ca. 1933–) from Little Deng Island (小嶝岛) in Fujian Province.

Hong Xiucong, a former child bride turned cadre-activist, started her political career as a vice village head in 1952 and eventually became a member of the Third National People's Congress in 1964 and of the Revolutionary Committee of Fujian Province in 1968. She was perhaps the most widely published militiawoman; she was portrayed on a cover of *Zhongguo funü* (Figure 4), among others. In this slightly unconventional photograph by Zhou Xiao (周虢 dates unknown), Hong is shown in a printed blouse and khaki trousers, holding a pistol against a belt that accentuates her slender waist. With her other hand, she is pushing back her hair in the wind in a gesture reminiscent of the sensual pose struck by the Shanghainese ladies in Republican-period calendar posters and advertisements.⁴²

38 Edwards, *Women Warriors*, 7.

39 Qi, “Mao Zedong ‘Wei nūminbing tizhao,’” 14.

40 Edwards, *Women Warriors*, 17–39, esp. 29.

41 “Geming de nū zhanshi” [Revolutionary women fighters], supplement, *Zhongguo funü*, no. 10 (1964).

42 Francesca Dal Lago, “Crossed Legs in 1930s Shanghai: How ‘Modern’ the Modern Woman?,” *East Asian History*, no. 19 (June 2000): 103–44; Ellen Johnston Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 44, 149–50.



Figure 4. Zhou Xiao, *Haifang qianxian nüminbing—Hong Xiucong* [A militia-woman on the seacoast frontier—Hong Xiucong], *Zhongguo funü*, nos. 14/15 (1960), cover image.

Standing in the dunes and looking toward the horizon with a happy smile on her face, she is presented as a self-confident and carefree young woman ready to shoot. Hong was also featured in several anthologies about coastal defense, in which she is portrayed as a tireless and ardent organizer and supporter of the military activities along the Taiwan Strait, one who never failed to consult her male superiors before going into action.⁴³ Apparently her

43 Ye Dakai, “Nü fuxiangzhang Hong Xiucong” [Female vice village head Hong Xiucong], in *Haifang qianshao* [Front post at the coastal border] (Shanghai: Xin wenyi chubanshe, 1955), 203–6; Zhou Tingnan, “Haidao nüer Hong Xiucong” [Island daughter Hong Xiucong], in *Donghai kaige* [Triumphal song of the Eastern Sea] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1959), 270–80; Ji Yin, photogr., *Nüminbing yingxiong Hong Xiucong* [Female militia hero Hong Xiucong], *Zhongguo funü*, no. 5 (1965): 8.

main occupation was that of a party cadre, but the epithet “militiawoman” had become the standard denomination for young female activists from the countryside, and the gun had become a compulsory attribute in their photographs.

The allegorical function and the actual performance of living women were thus blended in images that embodied norms of behavior both for citizens of the Chinese nation in general and for individual women in particular. These women were exemplary members of Maoist society who embodied abstract notions such as nation and class as well as the determination to fight and kill any enemy; they thus became models of ideal behavior that encouraged others to transform themselves according to their model.⁴⁴ It is therefore important that these women were not emerging from allegorical paintings but were actual living persons who were indexically represented in the medium of photography. The fact that in many cases their names are documented underscores the truth claim of the images. The establishment of such models that embody highly symbolic qualities while representing the people also required that their female gender was clearly recognizable. Their attractiveness and the attributes of their femininity—printed blouses, red aprons, straw hats with colored ribbons, and, in the case of members from ethnic minorities, traditional costumes including elaborate headdresses—although certainly not very practical for actual military training or even fighting, were crucial as markers of their militancy for conveying the message of the images.

The model function that points to the conception of the individual socialist citizen, on the one hand, and that stands for the nation as a whole, on the other, is also reflected in the small number of images that portray individual militiamen: these men are mostly members ethnic minorities, identified as such by their costumes. A photograph by Gao Fan (高帆 1922–2004) portrays from a low angle a Tibetan militiaman whose name is transcribed as Qunpeng (群朋), together with his horse; in the accompanying text, he is described as “mightily standing on the grassland like a marble statue.”⁴⁵ Baomu (包木), a Hani from the border region in Yunnan Province, is doubly objectified by his ethnic costume (Figure 5), which marks his exotic otherness, and the photograph’s title that likens him to an eagle. Both Qunpeng and Baomu are introduced as former serfs who were liberated by the Communist revolution and now enthusiastically serve the socialist motherland.⁴⁶ Like the militiawomen, these minority counterparts denote the militia as the Other of the PLA, which is defined as male and, by virtue of its ethnically neutral uniforms, as composed of the Han majority.⁴⁷ As inhabitants of contested regions and frontier areas, they also signify the unity and defense preparedness of the Chinese nation, including its civilians, women, and ethnic minorities.⁴⁸

44 Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 84–90; Chen, “Female Icons,” 270.

45 Gao Fan, photogr., *Zangzu minbing* [Tibetan militiaman], *Renmin huabao*, no. 3 (1962): 21; repr. *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 3 (1963): 29, 56 (annotation).

46 Gao, *Zangzu minbing* (1963), 56; Zhou Ziyu, photogr., *Bianjiang xiong ying* (Hanzi minbing Baomu) [Majestic eagle of the frontier region (the Hani militiaman Baomu)], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 4 (1965): 31, 56–57 (annotation).

47 On the representation of ethnic minorities as constituting the identity of the Han majority, see Dru Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 93–95.

48 According to Yingjin Zhang, “cinematic representation [in minority films] serves to contain the alien and potentially subversive elements in the frontier regions.” Yingjin Zhang, “From ‘Minority

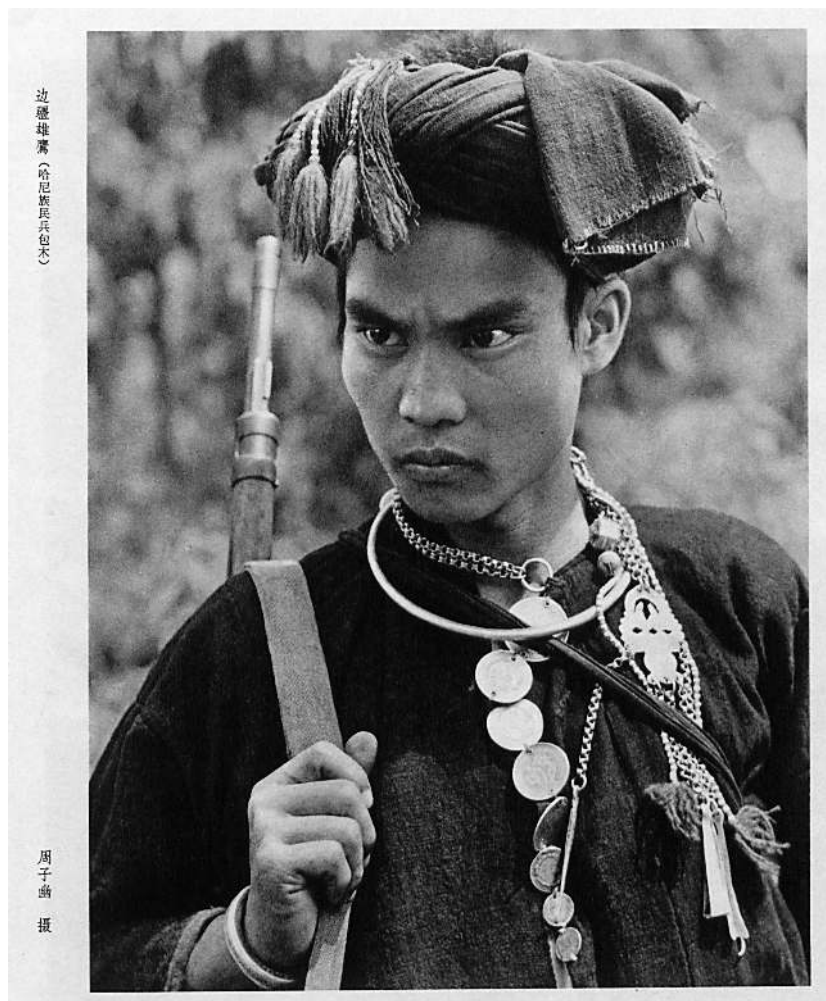


Figure 5. Zhou Ziyu, *Bianjiangxiongying (Hanizu minbing Baomu)* [Majestic eagle of the frontier region (the Hani militiaman Baomu)], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 4 (1965): 31.

THE MILITIA AS FISHERWOMAN FROM HAINAN

The number of images of militiawomen in Chinese media peaked in 1965, due to at least two factors. One aspect was the renewed importance accorded to the militia with the arrival of the Socialist Education Movement in 1964 and the concept of the People's War propounded in an essay published by Lin Biao in September 1965;⁴⁹ these developments were accompanied by a reinterpretation of the role of the PLA that included the abolition of the military rank system in 1965 and a stronger

Film' to 'Minority Discourse': Questions of Nationhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 80.

49 Lin Biao, *Long Live the People's War: In Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of Victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japan* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965).

emphasis on ideological work.⁵⁰ The second and more important factor was the escalation of the Vietnam War and the stepping up of Chinese military support for North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front.⁵¹ This was accompanied in the media by numerous images of beautiful Vietnamese peasant women engaged in various forms of patrolling, guerrilla warfare, or writing reports, their rifles always at hand.⁵² The young militiawomen with cotton blouses, long braids, and conic straw hats became emblematic of the Vietnamese people's resistance against US aggression in an allegorical manner.

The threat that the war in Vietnam might expand to South China led not only to an increasing number of militia images as signs of militant vigilance but also to a geographical shift in focus from the Fujian coast and the Taiwan Strait to Hainan Island and the South China Sea. In the course of this shift, the iconography of the militiawoman was adjusted accordingly. Beginning in 1965, the militia was mostly represented by fisherwomen from Hainan. Their characteristic attributes can all be discerned in the most iconic of all militia photographs: Jiang Qing's *How Bright and Brave* (飒爽英姿 *Sashuang yingzi*) (Figure 6), which derives its title from the first line of the poem on militiawomen by Jiang's husband, Mao Zedong. Jiang portrays the young woman in a more static manner than the professional photographers, concentrating on her face and the upper part of her body, which is presented frontally to the viewer; the background is made up largely of a blue sky and the blurred surface of a sandy beach. The model wears a plain blue cotton blouse, a red apron with a black border under her ammunition belt, and a rattan hat, the same regional costume also worn by the militiawomen in Figure 2 and numerous other photographs. Of course, she is also shouldering the quintessential attribute of the militiawoman, a rifle with a mounted bayonet.

Jiang Qing's *How Bright and Brave* was part of a series of photographs that derived its title, "For Truly Great Men, Look to This Age Alone," from another of Mao Zedong's poems, "Snow" (沁园春·雪 "Qinyuanchun: Xue"), from 1936.⁵³ The series was published under the pseudonym Junling (峻岭) and appeared simultaneously in *Renmin huabao* and *Jiefangjun huabao* in 1971.⁵⁴ It comprised 10 pages of color reproductions plus the inner sides of both front and back covers. The back cover itself was graced with another photograph by Jiang, published under the pseudonym Li Jin (李进), *The Fairy Cave on Lushan* (庐山仙人洞 *Lushan xianrendong*), on which Mao had written a poem in 1961.⁵⁵ That a single artist was given such an exposure is a singular phenomenon in the publishing history of *Renmin huabao* and can only be explained by Jiang Qing's powerful position as a

50 Teufel Dreyer, "Chinese Militia," 73–74.

51 John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 232–58.

52 For example, "Nanfang laixin (banhua)" [Letters from the south (prints)], *Renmin huabao*, no. 4 (1965): 22–23; Hong Lu and Dong Chensheng, "Yuenan beifang suxie" [Sketches from Northern Vietnam], *Renmin huabao*, no. 2 (1966): 28–29; Feng Zhidan, "Yingxiong de renmin, zhandou de tudi" [Heroic people, fighting land], *Renmin huabao*, no. 5 (1966): 36–38. See also fn35 and fn36 in this article.

53 Mao Zedong, "Qinyuanchun: Xue" ["Snow"], in Mao, *Mao Zedong shici (ying han duizhao)*, 46.

54 Jiang Qing [pseud. Junling], photogr., "Shu fengliu renwu kan jinchao" [For truly great men, look to this age alone], *Renmin huabao*, nos. 7/8 (1971): 12–21 and inner covers.

55 Mao Zedong, "Qijue: Wei Li Jin tongzhi ti suoshe Lushan Xianrendong zhao" ["The Fairy Cave, Written on a Picture Taken by Comrade Li Chin"], in Mao, *Mao Zedong shici (ying han duizhao)*, 80.



Figure 6. Jiang Qing [pseud. Junling], *Sashuang yingzi* [How bright and brave], in “Shu fengliu renwu kan jinchao” [For truly great men, look to this age alone], *Renmin huabao*, nos. 7/8 (1971), inner back cover.

radical leader during the Cultural Revolution and her personal connection to Mao Zedong. Her photographs are not particularly accomplished in either technical or artistic terms, but, by virtue of its wide dissemination, straightforward composition, and the prominence of the photographer and her spouse, *How Bright and Brave* has become one of the most widely known photographs from the Maoist period. With this photograph and its reference to Mao’s poem, the militant ideal of femininity formulated in the latter became even more firmly linked to the image of the peasant or fishing village militiawoman.

THE RED GUARDS AND URBAN MILITANCY

As noted above, Mao Zedong wrote his poem not for a member of a rural commune or a young woman defending the seacoast, but for an urban woman from his own staff who had her photograph taken after participating in the National Day parade and who was dressed like the militiawomen in a *Renmin huabao* photograph of such a parade (Figure 7): she had bobbed hair and wore a white blouse and wide-cut blue trousers.⁵⁶ Indeed, Mao Zedong's poem departs significantly from the iconography established in the photographs of militiawomen. Whereas the photographs feed on the tension between the signifiers of female beauty as well as regional and class identity, on the one hand, and weapons that are commonly regarded as markers of masculinity, on the other, the last line of the poem dismisses traditional attributes of femininity and romantic relations in favor of pure militancy. And while the images for the most part show peasant women from the countryside, the seacoast, or remote border regions, Mao refers to all daughters of China.

It is difficult to trace how women in the cities or the countryside responded to the *mofan* of the militiawoman that was so carefully crafted and circulated via the media. But by 1966, the militarization of society had reached the point that, when the Cultural Revolution was launched, students from high schools and universities donned army uniforms and called themselves the Red Guards.⁵⁷

The Red Guard movement of 1966 to 1968 can be described as the most radical response to the new gender roles propounded in Mao's poem.⁵⁸ As has been variously noted, the dress code for male and female members was the same, resulting in the "androgyny" of the Red Guards. They wore army uniforms, the most valuable ones being those that had actually been worn by family members during the revolutionary wars. Less privileged students had to improvise with self-made attire.⁵⁹ The uniforms were combined with heavy belts, a cap with a red star and an armband with the characters for "Red Guard" (紅衛兵 Hongweibing) in Mao's expressive calligraphy. Several scholars have noted that the "young rebels were enacting a revolutionary drama."⁶⁰ However, as Guobin Yang has pointed out, this does not imply a lack of authenticity. Quite to the contrary, in their sartorial style as well as in their violent actions, they realized, in a radical manner, the ideals of revolutionary behavior that had suffused their education.⁶¹ Moreover, the young

56 Wu and Chen, *Mao Zedong shici jijie*, 334.

57 See also Orna Naftali, "Chinese Childhood in Conflict: Children, Gender, and Violence in China during the 'Cultural Revolution' Period (1966–1976)," *Oriens Extremus* 53 (2014): 84–91.

58 Honig, "Maoist Mappings of Gender," 263; Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 231; Li Li, "Uniformed Rebellion," 449.

59 Finnane, *Changing Clothes*, 234–38; Iris Hopf, *Uniform in der Kulturrevolution? Über den Zusammenhang von Schnitttechnik und Ideologie im China der 1960er und 1970er Jahre* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2011), 91–94.

60 Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 45. See also Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 207–19; Tuo Wang, *The Cultural Revolution and Overacting: Dynamics between Politics and Performance* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014).

61 Yang, *Red Guard Generation*, 61.



Figure 7. Unknown *Renmin huabao* reporter, *Mit kraftvollen Schritten ziehen die Reihen der Volksmiliz dahin* [The rows of the people's militia are vigorously marching forward], *China im Bild*, no. 12 (1970), inner front cover.

women who dressed in “battle array” enacted Mao’s poem, expressing their “high-aspiring minds.” Because of the stark contrast between the “battle array” of the Red Guards and the “silks and satins” associated with traditional notions of femininity, the young girls in uniforms were more easily identified than their male schoolmates as personifying the revolutionary transformation of the younger generation.

Tellingly, typological representations of the Red Guards often foregrounded girls. These were characterized as pretty and lovable youth expressing righteous revolutionary fervor. The role that the Red Guard generation envisioned for themselves is visualized in “Persist in Handling Affairs According to the Sixteen Points,” a woodblock print credited to the Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Figure 8). The image



Figure 8. Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, *Jianchi an shiliu tiao banshi* [Persist in handling affairs according to the Sixteen Points], woodblock print, *Zhongguo funü*, no. 12 (1966), inner front cover.

is a reconfiguration of the socialist class triad of worker, peasant, and soldier. The peasant, in general represented as a woman, is here replaced by a young girl in the uniform of the Red Guards. Moreover, whereas the peasant is, as a rule, placed behind the worker and the soldier, the Red Guard is placed in the center of the image, holding up a radiant copy of the “Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” commonly referred to as the Sixteen Points.⁶² The worker, soldier, and other onlookers form a passive background in darker clothes that serve to highlight

62 Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 92–94.

the washed army uniform of the girl. The Red Guards are thus represented as the driving force in “handling affairs according to the Sixteen Points.”

One photograph (Figure 9) captures the identification of the young generation with Mao Zedong and the radical politics of the Cultural Revolution via sartorial insignia particularly well. Published in *Renmin huabao* as early as September 1966, when the first pictures of the initial Red Guard rally on Tiananmen Square on August 18 were introduced to the pictorial’s international readership, it shows the young student Song Binbin (宋彬彬 1949–) attaching a Red Guard armband to the chairman’s sleeve. She was not identified by name in the caption of this photograph but only as a representative of the Red Guard movement: “A Red Guard fighter presents a Red Guard arm band to the most most respected and beloved great leader Chairman Mao to express to him the Red Guard fighters’ boundless love for, boundless faith in, boundless adoration for and boundless loyalty to Chairman Mao.”⁶³ Although scripted and generic, the breathless exaltation of this declaration of love conforms with the mass euphoria that took hold of the crowd on the square. It also confirms the analysis by Ban Wang, who has described the Red Guard rallies on Tiananmen Square as an instant and powerful release of libidinal energy “upon seeing the loved object, the figure of Mao.”⁶⁴ This libidinal relationship between the chairman and the Red Guards was, inter alia, expressed through the army uniform—not only did the Red Guards express their revolutionary fervor and militancy by putting on military garb, but Mao Zedong likewise donned an army uniform for the occasion of the rallies, making the identification between himself and the Red Guards complete.

According to Song Binbin’s own account, the decision that it would be she who would give the armband to Mao was made ad hoc and almost incidentally, because a schoolmate had given her a particularly well-written armband, and because she happened to stand next to the Minister of Public Security, General Xie Fuzhi (谢富治 1909–1972), whom she knew through her father, General Song Renqiong (宋任穷 1909–2005). Xie arranged that she could hand over the armband.⁶⁵ In other words, it was her biographical background as the daughter of a revolutionary veteran and member of the Central Committee and as a representative of the prestigious Girl’s Middle School of Beijing Normal University, a school attended by many daughters of high-ranking politicians, that enabled her to approach Mao Zedong.

It is certainly not incidental that this particular photograph was featured to symbolize the political union between the chairman and the Red Guards. For the propagandistic message of the image, Song Binbin’s gender was quintessential. In her uniform, she embodied Mao Zedong’s recoding of ideal femininity from loving *hongzhuang* “silks and satins” to *wuzhuang* “battle array.” What might have been a flirtation between Mao and his secretary Li Yuanhui that was expressed in poetry was transposed into a relationship of (at least on the symbolic level) a mutual revolutionary dedication between the “most most respected and beloved great leader Chairman Mao” and the adolescents of the Red Guard generation.

63 Translation adapted with revisions from *China Pictorial* [English edition of *Renmin huabao*], no. 9 (1966): 29 and from *Chinese Literature*, no. 11 (1966): plate section.

64 Ban Wang, *Sublime Figure of History*, 203. On the rally, see Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 130–32.

65 Song Binbin, “Sishi duo nian lai wo yizhi xiang shuo de hua” [Something I’ve been wanting to say for more than 40 years], *Remembrance*, no. 80 (January 31, 2012): 10.



Figure 9. Unknown photographer, Song Binbin presenting a Red Guard armband to Mao Zedong in a photograph published in *Renmin huabao*, no. 9 (1966): 29.

An episode surrounding the encounter between Mao Zedong and Song Binbin can also be read as a condensed and radicalized restatement of the “Militia Women” poem. Mao engaged in a brief dialogue with Song, inquiring about her name. When she answered that she was called Song Binbin, he asked whether the characters for Binbin were the same characters as in *wenzhi binbin* (文质彬彬), an expression describing the Confucian ideal of polite comportment.⁶⁶ When she confirmed this, he replied, “You should be

⁶⁶ This expression originates in the *Lunyu*, where it describes the ideal *junzi* (man of virtue). James Legge renders it as “when the accomplishments and solid qualities are equally blended.” James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 3rd ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), vol. 1, 190. In a contemporary translation of the dialogue between Mao Zedong and Song Binbin it is rendered as “soft and gentle.” Sung Yao-wu, “I Put a Red Arm Band on Chairman Mao,” *Chinese Literature*, no. 11 (1966): 24.

militant!” (要武嘛 *yao wu ma*).⁶⁷ In this dialogue, the focus is not on the semantics of attire as in the “Militia Women” poem but on ethics and behavior. Mao Zedong endorsed the shedding of Confucian politeness and self-restraint (expressed in the name Binbin) in favor of militancy and revolutionary violence. Two days after the rally of August 18, an article appeared in *Guangming Daily* (光明日报 *Guangming ribao*) that was reprinted in *People’s Daily* the following day and then translated for the November issue of the English-language journal *Chinese Literature*. It was titled “I Put a Red Arm Band on Chairman Mao” and credited to “Song Yaowu (Song Binbin), ‘Red Guard’ of the Girl’s Middle School of Beijing Normal University,”⁶⁸ but, according to Song’s later account of the events, it was written without her previous knowledge or consent.⁶⁹ In this article, the author’s purported name change from Binbin to Yaowu (“Be militant”) was directly linked to an exhortation to revolutionary violence. In connection with this article published in her name, the photograph of Song Binbin became an emblem for the legitimization by Mao of the Red Guards as well as of Red Guard violence.

That Song Binbin/Yaowu became a symbol for Red Guard militancy can also serve to explain why her name became attached to the killing of her school’s vice principal, Bian Zhongyun (卞仲耘 1916–1966), on August 5, 1966.⁷⁰ Song, who claims that she witnessed the abuse of the teacher but was not involved personally,⁷¹ writes of “Song Binbin” as a double persona, one being opposed to violence, the other being the Song Yaowu who became a cipher for militancy and excessive violence.⁷² Whatever her responsibility in the events that took place at her school, her personality was superseded by the powerful public persona of Song Yaowu that epitomized the ideal of militant femininity expressed in the term *wu* (武).

The Red Guards were not just the signifiers of Maoist concepts; their movement was a moment of self-empowerment and a rebellion against the power structure within the PRC. The wearing of military outfits and the militant violence of the female Red Guards were also acts of self-empowerment and a rebellion against conventional gender roles. By putting on uniforms, by participating in violent attacks on real or imagined representatives of “feudalism, capitalism, revisionism,” but also by engaging in theatrical performances and reenactments of the Long March, they became the subjects of a revolutionary culture that had been a privilege of the elder generation, and of men.⁷³ When the Red Guards and rebels (造反派 *zaofanpai*) were dissolved in 1968 and high-school graduates were sent to the countryside to work in agriculture, the militancy and the political power of urban youth was repressed, removed to the rural periphery, and dispersed.

67 Song Binbin, “Sishi duo nian lai,” 10.

68 Song Yaowu, “Wo gei Mao Zhuxi daishangle hong xiuzhang,” *Guangming ribao*, August 20, 1966, 3; repr. *Renmin ribao*, August 21, 1966, 2; Sung, “I Put a Red Arm Band,” 23–26.

69 Song Binbin, “Sishi duo nian lai,” 10.

70 In English-language scholarship, this connection has been made by Emily Honig (Honig, “Maoist Mappings of Gender,” 259) but later revoked. See Susan Brownell, Emily Honig, Thomas Lacqueur, and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “An Apology to Song Binbin,” *Asian Studies Newsletter* 48, no. 2 (2003): 38.

71 Song Binbin, “Sishi duo nian lai,” 8–9. See also Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui Jin-ke, “Whodunnit? Memory and Politics before the 50th Anniversary of the Cultural Revolution,” *China Quarterly* 227 (September 2016): 734–51.

72 Song Binbin, “Wo de fansi” [My self-reflection], *Remembrance*, no. 80 (January 15, 2014): 31.

73 Ban Wang, *Sublime Figure of History*, 204; Li Li, “Uniformed Rebellion,” 450–52.

THE HAINAN FISHERWOMAN, EXOTICISM, AND DESIRE

The image of the militiawoman remained largely unaffected by the turbulence of the early Cultural Revolution. Although the number of militia images decreased after the reestablishment of contacts between China and the United States in 1972 and after the end of the Vietnam War, they had become a regular feature of Chinese visual culture with the distinct iconography seen in Jiang Qing's *How Bright and Brave*: a militia member was a fisherwoman from Hainan Island, wearing a straw hat, a red apron over a printed blouse, and a rifle.

Beyond the martial symbolism of the militiawomen as embodiments of defense-preparedness, these images of women from the remote coast of the southern sea also served as a rare outlet of sexual desire in a time of almost all-encompassing suppression of romance and sexuality in the public sphere. The images of the militiawomen from Hainan resonate with the story of the *Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军 *Hongse niangzijun*), which was based on historical events on the island, where a women's spy brigade was formed in 1931.⁷⁴ A film with this title was directed by Xie Jin (谢晋 1923–2008) in 1960, followed in 1964 by a ballet version that became one of the eight model stage works produced under the aegis of Jiang Qing.⁷⁵ A film version of the ballet was shot in 1970. The story of Wu Qionghua (吴琼花), or Wu Qinghua (吴清华) in the ballet version, who is liberated from enslavement to become a member of the Red Detachment of Women, is visualized in the ballet as a story of the transformation of a victimized woman dressed in red (*hongzhuang*) to a revolutionary woman in uniform (*wuzhuang*) who is “red” in the political sense of the word.⁷⁶ The stage design locates the narrative in a picturesque southern landscape with palm trees, mangroves, and sandy shores. Several accounts of the viewing experience bear witness to the erotic impression that the ballet made on male viewers. Two aspects are repeatedly mentioned—the short trousers that are part of the detachment members' uniform, and the acrobatic leap performed by the heroine in a bright red silk suit. A still photo of this leap was widely sold as a poster (Figure 10).⁷⁷ The motif of the photograph by Shi Shaohua (石少华 1918–1998) is reduced to the figure of the dancer, Xue Jinghua (薛菁华 1945–), the physical vigor of her technically difficult leap, and the intense red color of her costume.⁷⁸ Without the context of the narrative of which it is part, it became probably the least politically explicit and one of the most purely aesthetic and corporeal images produced within the cultural apparatus of the Cultural Revolution era.

The exoticizing imaginations and erotic desires attached to the *Red Detachment of Women* also fed into the images of contemporary fisherwomen from Hainan and account for their continuous popularity throughout the 1970s: they were shown patrolling the beach by sunset, setting out in their boats, blowing bugles, engaging in target practice, or just

74 Edwards, *Women Warriors*, 202. Edwards also stresses the sexualization of the woman warrior in *The Red Detachment of Women*. Edwards, *Women Warriors*, 200–206.

75 Rosemary Roberts, *Maoist Model Theatre*, 11.

76 *Red Detachment of Women: A Modern Revolutionary Ballet*, revised collectively by the China Ballet Troupe (May 1970 script) (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1972).

77 Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166–67; Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 180–81.

78 For a detailed discussion of this scene, the leap, and its reception, see Pang, *Art of Cloning*, 173–79.



Figure 10. Shi Shaohua, “Mit Riesensprüngen verschwindet Tjing-hua rasch in die Tiefe des Kokospalmenhains” [With giant leaps, Qinghua escapes into the depths of the coconut grove], in “Sonderausgabe zu dem revolutionären modernen Tanzdrama ‘Die rote Frauenkompanie’” [Special issue on the revolutionary modern dance drama *The Red Detachment of Women*], supplement, *China im Bild*, no. 10 (1970): 6.

chatting while mending their nets beneath palm trees (Figure 11). They are immersed in their activities, seemingly oblivious of potential onlookers or the camera viewer. Men are rarely seen in these later photographs, allowing the (implicitly male) viewer to project his gaze onto the young women. By the 1970s, the fisherwomen from the southern sea had become firmly identified as members of the militia. In other words, not only was the militia imagined as fisherwomen, but the female inhabitants of fishing villages were represented as militiawomen by default. The obligatory rifle was no longer a token of militancy and national defense but had become a standard attribute of a southern fisherwoman, just like the straw hat and the fishing equipment.

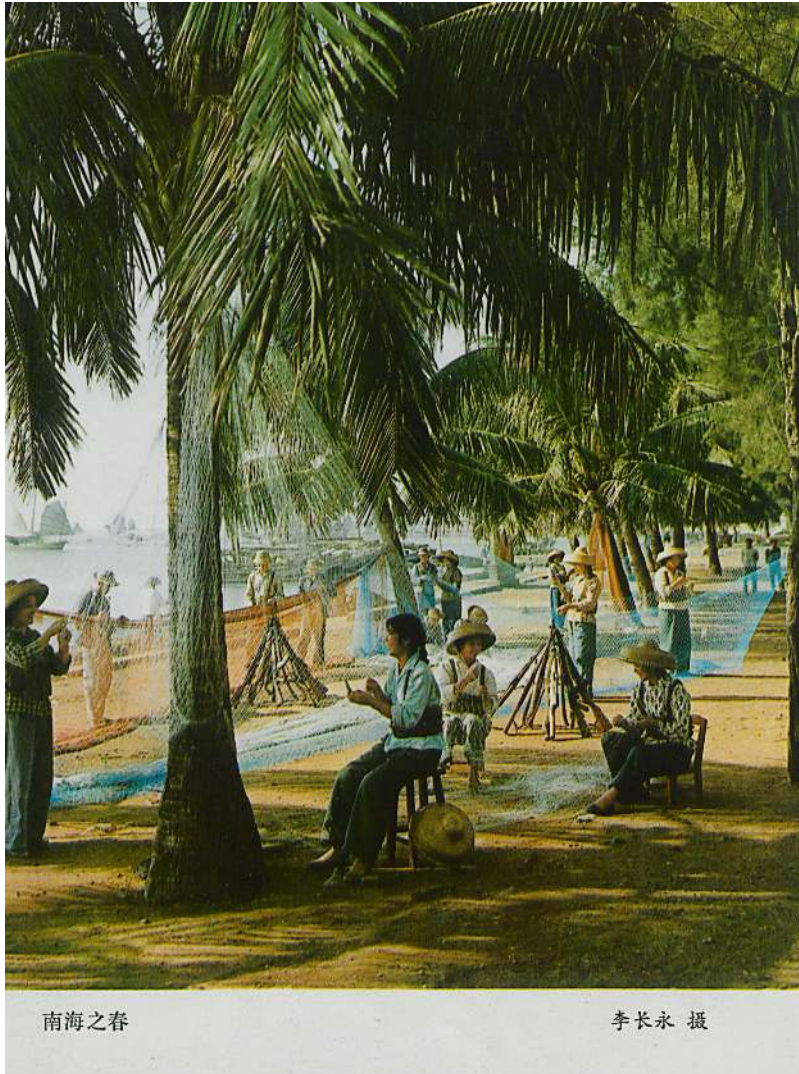


Figure 11. Li Changyong, *Nanhai zhi chun* [Spring on the southern sea], *Zhongguo sheying*, no. 5 (1976): 36.

CONCLUSION

The presence of militia and of firearms on Hainan Island was deeply embedded in the villages, as an episode related by June Teufel Dreyer showed: “For example, in 1979 a dispute between the children of neighboring villages on Hainan Island escalated into a serious altercation between their elders. The respective village party secretaries authorized the use of militia personnel and weapons against each other and a battle involving almost 700 persons ensued, with six people killed and extensive property damage.”⁷⁹ This violent episode unveils the effects of the thorough militarization of

79 Teufel Dreyer, “Chinese Militia,” 80–81.

society in which the militia played a crucial role. The photographs of beautiful fisherwomen from Hainan, who always have their rifles at hand, and the dramatic leaps of Wu Qinghua, who sheds her identity as a sexually exploited slave dressed in red to become a member of the Red Detachment of Women, turned the harsh realities of revolutionary struggle, military conflict, and Cold War threats into aesthetic experiences that were consumed by female and male audiences all over China. Likewise, the scornful yet sweet faces of young Red Guards served to naturalize the excessive violence that girls and boys enacted in the name of the revolution. The idealized images conveyed through the state media did not directly elicit these violent acts, but as allegories of a nation that regarded revolutionary violence as legitimate, they helped shape an ideal of feminine militancy that eventually embraced armed struggle during the Cultural Revolution. The discrepancy between the tightly controlled iconography distributed in photographs and propaganda paintings during the Maoist period and the barely controlled outbreaks of actual violence also reminds us of the messy, contingent, and quotidian experiences in between these two extremes that made up the lives of most of the women and men who looked at the images, those who produced them, and even of those depicted in them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research for this article was enabled by a research grant from the Gerda Henkel Foundation and a Heisenberg Grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG). I am grateful to Christine I. Ho, Gao Chu, and Matthias Weiß for inspiring discussions on the subject and to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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