The previous chapter concluded with the moment of transition from the Republican era to the Mao era in China. Lasting from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until the death of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and the subsequent fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, the Mao era generally is subdivided into the Seventeen Years (1949–66), during which the transition from capitalism to state socialism was consolidated and various experiments in the name of Communism were carried out, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76), a period that began with renewed revolutionary activity and intense grassroots struggle but later settled into a more doctrinaire, top-down political and cultural situation. The end of the Cultural Revolution was soon followed by the beginning of the era of “reform and opening” that was launched in the late 1970s and would set the course of the PRC for the following decades.

Discussions of Mao-era cinema, particularly those which treat it only briefly as a point of comparison to what came before or after, often dismiss it as political propaganda—as if the fact that its aesthetic was guided by politics (in accordance with the tenets of socialist realism) disqualifies it from having either a political message or an aesthetic form worthy of serious consideration. This betrays an overall resistance to taking socialist realist art seriously or, as Barbara Foley has put it in the case of proletarian literature, on its own terms. Of the films of the Seventeen Years that have been regarded as most worthy of serious study by scholars in the West, some—including The Unfinished Comedies (Meiyou
wancheng de xiju 没有完成的喜剧; Lü Ban 吕班, 1957), *Early Spring in February* (Zaochun eryue 早春二月; Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, 1963), and *Stage Sisters* (Wutai jiemei 舞台姐妹; Xie Jin 谢晋, 1965)—hardly had a theatrical run for Chinese audiences of their time due to being pulled from circulation for their ostensible ideological errors or screened only for the purposes of criticism. The Cultural Revolution is commonly looked upon as even more of a wasteland for cinema. Its early, chaotic stages resulted in the complete cessation of feature film production from 1966 to 1970, and after filmmaking returned, initially it consisted only of film adaptations of the yangbanxi 样板戏 or model stage performances—revolutionary operas or ballets that were committed to film only after first being performed onstage. Later, beginning in 1973, regular fiction film production resumed, but a significant number of the new films were remakes of revolutionary films from before the Cultural Revolution that were updated from black and white to color with minor script changes.

This and the following chapter consider as the main touchstones of cinema of this period, not the artistically intriguing but politically marginalized films mentioned in the preceding paragraph but rather more mainstream hits, such as *The White-Haired Girl* (Bai mao nü 白毛女; Shui Hua 水华 and Wang Bin 王滨, 1950) and *The Song of Youth* (Qingchun zhi ge 青春之歌; Cui Wei 崔嵬 and Chen Huaikai 陈怀皑, 1959). Of particular interest are two titles that each had three different versions filmed over the course of the Mao era, allowing us to track changes in cinematic aesthetics in films retelling the same stories. This chapter begins to discuss *Red Detachment of Women* (Hongse niangzijun 红色娘子军), first made as a fiction film directed by Xie Jin in 1960 and released in 1961, then remade during the Cultural Revolution as a revolutionary model ballet film (Pan Wenzhan 潘文展 and Fu Jie 傅杰, 1970), and finally once more as a revolutionary model opera film (Cheng Yin 成荫, 1972). The next chapter considers also *Guerrillas on the Plain* (Pingyuan youjidui 平原游击队), which appeared first as a generic war film in 1955 (Su Li 苏里 and Wu Zhaodi 武兆堤) and then reappeared in 1974 as both a revolutionary model opera film (renamed *Fighting on the Plain* [Pingyuan zuozhan 平原作战; Cui Wei 崔嵬 and Chen Huai’ai 陈怀皑]) and a color remake of the original fiction film (Wu Zhaodi [again] and Chang Zhenhua 常甄华).
These films provide examples of Chinese revolutionary cinema’s countless reiterations of founding, legitimating myths of the PRC as a party-led state, including the Communist insurgency’s victory over the semifeudal, semicapitalist social order and the Communist army’s victory over the Japanese invaders during World War II. Calling these stories myths does not mean they are false; it means that, like the myths promulgated by American westerns as analyzed by Gilberto Perez, these stories have a “rhetorical value” and “social function . . . in shaping the imagination of a people and holding a polity together.” One thing I will try to trace is the complicated relationship between realism and myth, or the ways in which fictionalized historical stories can either reinforce a particular view of reality or sometimes become so obviously rhetorical that their own formal devices become foregrounded at the expense of their ostensible historical referents.

In these chapters, I follow Ban Wang and Jessica Ka Yee Chan in referring to “revolutionary cinema” rather than simply “Mao-era cinema” in recognition that cinema of that period had far greater generic diversity than is often acknowledged.3 For the purposes of this book’s tracing of various claims to realism in the history of mainland Chinese cinema, I limit my discussion largely to dramatic films with revolutionary historical stories, leaving aside other genres of this period, such as comedies, ethnic minority films, musicals, traditional opera films, and so on, all of which are equally deserving of close study in other contexts.

Under Communist rule, including in liberated areas, such as Yan’an, during the civil war and the war of resistance against Japan, the official formula for cultural production was variously called proletarian realism (in Chinese Communist writings during the civil war), socialist realism (for a few years in the 1950s, before the Sino-Soviet split), and finally a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism (a formula first promulgated by Mao in 1958). In practice, the films of the Seventeen Years mostly followed the rules of Eastern bloc socialist realism—which is to say, they employed classical Hollywood narration, often in a melodramatic mode, but with occasional formal flourishes reminiscent of early Soviet montage cinema, all in support of a more explicitly political message than one usually finds in classical Hollywood (though the formula
also was nativized in various ways, such as through the use of Chinese folk music). Such labels do not suffice to tell us how the cinema of the Seventeen Years worked on the levels of affect and entertainment rather than just ideological education and, most important how these different levels were articulated together and whether they worked together or potentially at cross-purposes.

I reconsider Mao-era cinema partly by reframing its mode of address in a broader way than is suggested by terms like *proletarian realism*, *socialist realism*, or even *combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism*. Instead, I categorize these films under the more general term *prescriptive realism* to refer to the intention to represent not only reality as it now appears but an ostensibly truer reality that lies beneath the surface or is yet to be fully realized. A film in this mode encourages the awareness or realization of that deeper or projected future reality by representing it in an at least somewhat abstracted form. As noted in my introduction of this idea in the introduction, in choosing the term *prescriptive*, I suggest an analogy with what is known in linguistics as prescriptive grammar—which aims to describe how people *should* talk according to the supposed inner logic or “rules” of a language, as opposed to *descriptive* grammar, which describes how people actually *do* talk.

The latter would correspond more to a mode of verisimilar critical or social realism, a style of literature praised by Karl Marx as early as 1854 for its ability to expose the ugly realities of life under bourgeois hegemony. Such a realism was recognized by Mao in his 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” when he acknowledged the need to “expose” social ills through realist art. At the same time, however, social realism potentially abstracts from surface appearances to try to show social reality’s deep structure, as Georg Lukács as well as many Chinese critics argued (as was discussed in chapter 3, particularly in the case of the transitional film *Crows and Sparrows*). This is the moment when a social realist mode begins to become prescriptive, insofar as a formal idea or argument of some kind is emphasized, potentially at the expense of surface-level verisimilitude, and with Mao’s insistence that artists not only “expose” social ills but also “extol” the revolutionary future in progress, the narrative mode decisively shifts from verisimilar or descriptive social
realism to prescriptive socialist realism. It is this hopeful look to the future—the utopian element that is intrinsic to Maoism and Communism more generally—that calls for a prescriptive mode of realism. As Maurice Meisner has written, “utopian conceptions of the world as it should be clash with the world as it is to generate a sense of tension between what Max Weber termed ‘the actually existent and the ideal,’ and at the same time generate a sense of hope for the future.”

**FILM STEREOTYPES**

I will begin with some analytical concepts that allow for a more rigorous description of the mode of narration and audience address that I am calling prescriptive realism. In particular, we need a more meticulous approach to the study of conventions like character stereotypes and narrative scenarios in Mao-era socialist cinema, because it is through such repeated conventions that prescriptive realism builds a rapport with its audience. For example, in a chapter defining the “classical” paradigm of “pedagogical cinema” in the PRC, Chris Berry identifies “didactic” scenarios—the “meeting scene,” for instance—that are regularly presented to the “pupil-spectator” in that cinema. Berry’s outline of the Mao-era classical paradigm is quite useful, but its use of terms like didactic, pedagogical, and pupil-spectator reinforce what arguably is a frequent overstatement of the difference between classical Hollywood and Mao-era cinema. As Berry himself emphasizes, the Maoist cinema he analyzes presents “a variation on the classical cinematic mode particularly associated with Hollywood during the studio era.” Often elided when discussing socialist realism in contrast with Hollywood are not just the degree to which socialist realism borrows from Hollywood but also the extent to which Hollywood or global entertainment cinema itself is what Francesco Casetti has called “a veritable drill ground”—in the sense “that a film somehow indicates the presence of its spectator, that it assigns this spectator a precise place, and finally, that the spectator must complete a genuine trajectory.” Casetti’s language here may evoke the ideological “interpellation” model of bygone “apparatus” film theory, but his semiotic/narratological approach describes not so much a process of ideological subject formation as an
understanding between filmmaker and spectator based on shared codes. In fact, the seemingly endless repetition, with slight variations, of character stereotypes, narrative scenarios, and story trajectories that may strike a contemporary viewer as didactic in Maoist cinema is really not so formally different from the formulaic nature of Hollywood’s genre cinema.

Therefore, in analyzing the way such a cinema addresses the spectator, we need not necessarily resort to theories of propaganda or ideology before first studying the phenomenon with more general tools of film analysis. For that purpose, I return to a work already cited in the introduction and chapter 2, Jörg Schweinitz’s *Film and Stereotype*, a study of the way semantic conventions are used in popular cinema. Schweinitz defines *stereotypes* as “conventionalized representational patterns shared and accepted by artists and viewers within a given period.” He compares conventional film stereotypes to linguistic idioms, in that they serve as shortcuts to meaning for a particular community or audience, and refers to the process of conventionalization as “standardization or codification in an intersubjective field,” with the implication that “stereotypes form and structure the intersubjective imaginary world of our time.”

Recalling Perez’s assertion, referenced earlier, of cinema’s power to uphold the myths that shape people’s imagination and hold polities together, it becomes obvious that film conventions or stereotypes are its fundamental tools for building and reinforcing those myths. Needless to say, these include the myths of Communism—hence Vladimir Lenin’s famous assertion in 1922 that “of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema” for the purposes of building a Communist society in the new Soviet Union.

Schweinitz writes of Western, mostly Hollywood film, but these concepts allow us to reconceive the history of Chinese revolutionary cinema in a way that avoids othering socialist realist cinema as mere propaganda and thus reinforcing the demonization of Maoism in Western discourse on China. His approach instead allows us to conceive of Maoist film stereotypes or conventions not simply as didactic but as facilitating meaning among a particular cultural community in the way that all “classical” cinema has done. As Schweinitz puts it, “the repetition of highly conspicuous forms within a specific narrative context, which is then gradually subsumed by those forms (in the audience’s perception),” allows for a more efficient
narration, in that soon “it suffices to only show the conspicuous form, in order to summon the standard context, even in absentia.” This is not so much a technique of propaganda as what Schweinitz calls “a fundamental mechanism of sign formation and language acquisition.” For one quick example, consider the stereotypical landlord character in Mao-era cinema. In countless films of the Seventeen Years—including classics like *The White-Haired Girl, Third-Sister Liu* (*Liu sanjie* 刘三姐; *Su Li* 苏里, 1960), and *The Red Detachment of Women*, to name only a few—the cinematic stereotype of the villainous evil landlord became so well established that such a character alone could signify for audiences the entire system of semicapitalist feudal exploitation in the countryside during the Republican era. Moreover, in what Schweinitz labeled “secondary semantization,” in the post-Mao era, such a character could signify not the historical “reality” of landlord exploitation but instead the very film tradition in which the character stereotype had been established and thereby the Mao era as a whole. Thus a properly costumed “feudal” landlord figure would become an automatically recognizable gag in parodic films like *The Troubleshooters* (*Wanzhu* 顽主, or literally *Masters of Mischief*; *Mi Jiashan* 米家山, 1988) or *Party A, Party B* (*Jiafang yifang* 甲方乙方, aka *Dream Factory*; Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, 1997). The character types in Maoist cinema thus function in the same way as, for example, the stereotype of the scrappy female newspaper reporter in a 1930s Hollywood screwball comedy, the development of which Schweinitz traces in one of his chapters. Such a character not only quickly became a Hollywood cliche that signified in shorthand a host of ideas relating to changing gender roles and social cynicism under capitalist urban modernity; it also became available to much later filmmakers to cite in parodic fashion and thereby signify the whole ethos of classical Hollywood in the early sound period.

FROM REVOLUTIONARY REALISM TO REVOLUTIONARY ROMANTICISM: MAOIST MELODRAMA

How can Communist art and literature actually reach and inspire the potentially revolutionary masses? One of the first Chinese cultural critics to consider this question was Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, an early Communist
partisan who had studied Marxism with Li Dazhao 李大钊 and a young Mao Zedong at Beijing University in the early 1920s, before spending time in Moscow and serving briefly in the late 1920s as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In a series of essays in the early 1930s, while he was a leader of the Shanghai League of Left-Wing Writers, Qu identified a problematic gap between the ostensibly progressive literature being written by the May Fourth generation of intellectuals, on one hand, and the masses of laboring people who should be carrying out the revolution, on the other. In 1932 he argued that “the May Fourth New Culture Movement has had almost no impact on the masses,” partly because the vernacular literature movement favored a form of Westernized Chinese writing that was not intelligible to ordinary Chinese people.\(^{20}\) In fact, Qu believed that even “traditional” Chinese vernacular literature was a better stylistic model for revolutionary writers, because it was at least comprehensible and enjoyable to the Chinese masses when read aloud. Qu concluded that “revolutionary popular literature and art must begin by utilizing the strong points of traditional forms—things the people are accustomed to reading or viewing such as fiction, lyrics or drama—gradually adding new ingredients and cultivating new habits among the people, so that by working together with the people the level of art will be raised.”\(^{21}\) Ten years later, Mao’s famous 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” which laid out the theories of correct Communist cultural practice that would guide China for decades to come, directly addressed the tension between the artists’ and intellectuals’ desires to “raise standards” of artistic excellence in China and the question of “popularization,” or reaching the masses. He firmly gave priority to the latter, arguing by means of the vivid metaphor of lifting a bucket of water: “Where is it to be raised from if not the ground? From mid-air?”\(^{22}\) Making art according to the standards of petit bourgeois intellectuals would be the equivalent of trying to raise a bucket from midair; only by beginning with the tastes of workers, peasants, and soldiers could the bucket be raised from where it is, on the ground.

Here we find one obvious reason why ostensibly realist art might deploy forms ranging from Chinese folk singing to cinematic melodrama: those forms were already popular with the masses. It also shows, however,
that a new vision of realism, heavily indebted to the theories of socialist realism that were consolidated in the USSR in the early 1930s, was being very self-consciously developed and promoted by Chinese leftists in the 1930s and 1940s. In an essay from 1936, the Communist literary theorist and future vice-minister of culture Zhou Yang 周扬 followed Maxim Gorky in calling nineteenth-century literary realism “critical realism” and contrasting this “old-style realism” with a “new realism” that in fact finds a deeper, truer “reality.” Zhou called on this new realism to avoid “sinking intoxicated into the minutiae of ‘microscopic realism’”—that is, pursuing a bourgeois naturalism that merely empirically observes the present reality. Instead, artists should be “remolding themselves” and “moving towards reality’s future.”

This key diachronic move gives artists possessed of the “correct” knowledge of the objective laws of history—meaning, according to Marxist orthodoxy, the inexorable progress toward a Communist utopia—authorization to supplement in their artworks the objective reality of the present with the projected reality of the future.

Second, in a synchronic sense, Zhou argued that artists must go beyond the surface of reality to uncover its underlying truths: “On the surface, all objective phenomena appear jumbled and difficult to fathom. Only by penetrating their outer layer and probing to the very heart of objective reality can we temper and substantiate our subjectivity, and only then will we acquire the ability to grasp the ordered nature of objectivity.”

In sum, artists must not just reflect the world they perceive immediately around them but grasp both “reality’s essence” and “its direction and future prospects,” and this is how the “new” realism would distinguish itself from the “old” realism.

In his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum” six years later, Mao referred to the “new realism” as “proletarian realism,” but it clearly amounted to the Chinese version of socialist realism—the model of artistic production that had been promulgated as the official line in the Soviet Union beginning in 1933. When a new edition of Mao’s talks at Yan’an was published in 1953 after the establishment of the PRC, the term “proletarian realism” was in fact changed to “socialist realism,” and, as mentioned earlier, that appellation was favored for five years, until it was supplanted by the formula of “combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.”
Whatever it is called, how did the new prescriptive form of realism advocated by the CCP differ on a textual level from the critical realism of, for example, the progressive films of the Republican era? As a quick example of the new aesthetic, let us consider a sequence in the 1950 film *The White-Haired Girl*, based on the popular revolutionary play about oppressed peasants who eventually rise up against their landlord with the aid of the Communist army. In this sequence, the young peasant Wang Dachun, his fiancée having been enslaved and raped by their evil landlord, flees across the Yellow River to the Communist-controlled region of Shanxi with the intention of joining the Red Army. Although the film contains elements of descriptive social realism in a general sense—it includes, for example, a number of what would later be called “middle characters” (characters who are not depicted unfavorably but also are not heroic—that is, believably ordinary people)—there is nonetheless much evidence of what separates the new prescriptive realism from the preceding aesthetic of social realism. The Communist guerrilla soldiers who Wang Dachun finds at the top of the river bluff are subtly idealized—dressed in what appear to be brand-new, sparkling clean uniforms and shot in a low-angle composition in which they loom heroically against the sky in the manner of Soviet cinema of the time. Most notable of all in terms of film style is a dissolve to an extradiegetic shot of the Communist flag to drive home the ideological import of Wang Dachun’s union, and, by implication, that of the Chinese peasantry in general, with the Red Army. With this flag montage, the film veers briefly but obviously from any semblance of realism toward something more like formalism, as the viewer’s diegetic immersion is at least partially disrupted by the self-consciousness of the film’s political rhetoric as manifested in the nondiegetic, ideologically encumbered insertion of the flag.

Finally, with another dissolve from the flag to the last shot of the sequence (Figure 18), we apparently leap into the future to see that Wang Dachun has joined the ranks of the heroic Red Army soldiers. He is now also framed valiantly against the sky, and in his look to the horizon, we can even detect an early form of what Stephanie Donald has labeled the “socialist realist gaze.” Tracing the history of this gaze to the countless images in Soviet cinema of “faces staring exultantly off screen,” Donald
argues that “in these shots the romanticism of socialist realism is very clear. The gaze off screen is a fixed stare out to a horizon, beyond the diegetic world, and apparently also beyond the world of the audience.”

She describes this gaze as “quintessentially anti-individual,” belonging either to great leaders or to “representatives of collective action”—as Wang Dachun becomes in this film when, for example, he finally returns to his home village and helps to administer Communist rent reforms and struggle sessions against the landlord class.

Zhou and Mao would not have quibbled with Donald’s discovery of a romanticist element in socialist realism. In fact, even in its original Soviet formulation in the early 1930s, Andrei Zhdanov and Gorky had inscribed what already had been labeled “revolutionary romanticism” into the socialist realist formula. As early as 1933, Zhou himself had published an article titled “On ‘Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism’” in the Shanghai modernist periodical Les Contemporains. At the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Zhdanov declared that “our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a material basis,
cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism”—thus already implying that socialist realism would be precisely a combination of realism (“with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life”) and romanticism. Gorky as well wrote that while the basic method of realism was “to extract from the totality of real existence its basic idea and to embody this in an image,” “if to the idea extracted from the real we add the desirable and the potential and if the image is thereby supplemented, we obtain that romanticism which lies at the basis of myth and which is very useful in that it facilitates the arousing of a revolutionary attitude towards reality.” Indeed, the Soviet discourse of “revolutionary romanticism” that in 1934 got incorporated into the official formulation of “socialist realism” had already made an impact on Chinese filmmakers before that time; Yizhong Gu notes that by 1932, Sun Yu, possibly the greatest Chinese director of the 1930s, “regarded revolutionary romanticism as his major artistic principle” after having read about Gorky’s ideas on the topic.

Two years after the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, Zhou argued that “in the history of literature, realism has generally been understood as the opposite of romanticism. This distinction is rigid and inaccurate. In fact, these two currents often intertwine, permeate each other, even fuse together.” As for the Chinese-style socialist realism he was now attempting to formulate, Zhou wrote that “the new realism not only does not reject romanticism but in fact requires it as one of its intrinsic elements.” Zhou closely followed the lead of Zhdanov and Gorky when he asserted that romanticism gives a narrative the power of myth necessary to inspire readers and audiences to achieve the future utopian reality indicated by the revolutionary realist work of art; that is, the romanticist element helps make its realism prescriptive. The embrace of romanticism, therefore, was inseparable from the call for the new realism both to project the present into the revolutionary future and to pierce the surface of reality to reveal its underlying essence. As Mao put it in his talks at Yan’an, people need art in addition to their everyday lives precisely because, “although both are beautiful, life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life.”
Sixteen years later, in 1958, at the launch of the Great Leap Forward, Mao made this romanticist element explicit with the further shift in official terminology from “socialist realism” to “combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.”

In practice revolutionary romanticism contained a strong element of melodrama. This is not at all surprising when one considers how closely the role of melodrama in the West had in fact anticipated the truth function of socialist art as defined by the critics mentioned earlier in both the USSR and China. In his classic study of Western melodrama, Peter Brooks described its subject as “the true wrested from the real”; that is, the melodramatic work tries “to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality.” What Brooks labeled the “moral occult” — or “the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality” and which melodrama serves to locate and articulate — is a place taken in Mao-era art by the moral universe of class struggle, including both the horrible suffering of the masses and their eventual, inevitable victory over the forces of oppression through the leadership of the Communist Party.

If revolutionary romanticism, and the melodrama that it employs, sought to wrest the true from the real, it is not surprising that, in terms of film aesthetics, socialist realism in general could regularly depart from what we normally think of as cinematic realism to indulge briefly in formalism, particularly in its most ideologically loaded “epiphanic” moments aimed at driving home a higher, more abstract truth. That is, referring back to the preceding quotation of Mao, taking a film’s story from “actual everyday life” to a “higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal,” often was accomplished through some foregrounded cinematic technique that clearly marked an abstraction from everyday reality. Two common instances of this are what we have already seen in the sequence from The White-Haired Girl: montage insertions of extradiegetic ideological symbols and the socialist realist gaze itself, the representation of which became increasingly stylized during the cinematic history of the Mao era (a point taken up again in the next chapter).

More examples of these are found in one of the cinematic masterpieces of revolutionary romanticism, the previously mentioned epic three-hour
film *The Song of Youth*, adapted in 1959 from the wildly popular novel by Yang Mo 杨沫. The story is a bildungsroman set in the Republican era in which the female protagonist, Lin Daojing, goes from being a lonely and suicidally depressed intellectual to eventually joining the Communist Party and helping to lead mass protest rallies against the Japanese incursion into Manchuria. The plot follows closely the narrative arc that Katerina Clark has described in the case of Soviet fiction, in which the protagonist typically progresses from a state of “spontaneity” to one of “consciousness” as he is guided by paternalistic elders within the Communist Party. In the early stages of this progression, the protagonist may instinctively identify with the struggles of the proletariat or peasant, but he must learn the truths of Marxism–Leninism before bringing those tendencies to fruition in full awareness of the laws of historical materialism.

In *The Song of Youth*, this coming to consciousness of the heroine is evident, for example, in a shot in the film’s penultimate sequence, in which Lin Daojing—having undergone such trials as working for Communist sleeper cells in Beijing, helping to organize peasants in the countryside, and being imprisoned and tortured by the Nationalists for her activities—has, through her personal sacrifice and tireless learning from her Communist mentors, finally applied and been admitted as a party member, meriting an initiation ceremony filmed as a moment of near rapture (Figure 19). Chris Berry follows Ma Ning in labeling this kind of shot “epiphanic.” An epiphanic shot usually occurs at the end of a scene and consists of a moment in which the character or characters on-screen suddenly become stationary and silent as a significant meaning, usually with strong ideological import, is meant to dawn on the audience through the characters’ frozen poses and expressions. Berry lists the epiphanic shot as one instance of what he calls “heightened engagement” of the “pupil-spectator,” moments that “simultaneously enhance identification with character emotions and thoughts and, by virtue of their very heightening quality, draw attention to themselves and so promote conscious reflection on the part of the pupil-spectator.” Here again, the terminology emphasizes the difference of “didactic” Maoist classical cinema with merely entertaining classical cinema from the West (which is driven, as Berry notes, primarily by the profit motive). However, in his study of
emotion in American film, Carl Plantinga similarly identifies “elevation” as a type of emotion often evoked by Hollywood, particularly at climactic moments. (This was discussed in chapter 2 in the context of *Street Angel*.) Following psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Plantinga defines *elevation* as “the opposite of social disgust, triggered by the witnessing of acts of human beauty or virtue” and drawing its “power from a desire for moral betterment.” The epiphanic shot in Chinese socialist realist cinema would seem to be a particular convention used to generate such moments of “elevation.” In Plantinga’s view, “elevation quite aptly describes the sort of emotional response generated by many narratives of the melodramatic variety,” so it is not surprising that epiphanic shots aiming for an affect of elevation would characterize moments of revolutionary romanticism in Mao-era films.

Clearly what Stephanie Donald calls the socialist realist gaze is an example of the epiphanic shot described by Berry and Ma, and the shot of Lin Daojing at the end of her party induction ceremony is an exemplary instance of both. The shot begins with her looking almost directly to the
camera, which, through the editing pattern already set up, we interpret as a look directed at the cadre performing the ceremony. As the shot progresses, Lin slowly and steadily turns her head and redirects her gaze to a seemingly transcendent off-screen space. As Jessica Ka Yee Chan has detailed with reference to notes from the filmmakers, to appear actually to be seeing the ideological truths relayed by the socialist realist gaze, Xie Fang 谢芳, the actor playing Lin Daojing, reported that in performing the shot, she made herself think of fantastical images of red flags, a rainbow, a golden gate, and the congratulatory visages of her character’s fictional mentors in the film so that her gaze would not appear “blank.”

Her efforts in performing such a moment are not surprising, because the socialist realist gaze paradoxically must have no clear diegetic object while also seeming to behold a resplendent Truth. In fact, Lin’s induction into the party apparently empowers her with this gaze, indicating to spectators her ability to perceive sublime ideological truths to which they have only secondary access through imaginary identification with her character. With this moment that relays our gaze through her own, attaching our desire to her visual possession of a transcendent off-screen ideological space, the narrative pauses to allow for maximum emotional and rhetorical impact. As Stephanie Donald puts it, “the socialist-realist gaze freezes the narrative while producing for the narration a sublime and completely bogus moment of completion. Present, past, and future lock together on screen and off in a moment of ecstatic communion.”

The account of such a gaze “freezing” the narrative is similar to Berry’s description of the epiphanic shot as “frozen,” thus allowing the viewer a moment to fully grasp and appreciate the deeper ideological lesson at such a narrative high point. (The next chapter has much more to say about the effects of depicting ideological consummation through “frozen” shots.)

Although the socialist realist gaze suggests an ideological truth to which the spectator has only secondary access through the heroic character’s off-screen look, we have already seen, in the case of The White-Haired Girl, that a somewhat discontinuous cutaway to a seemingly nondiegetic object is one possibility in Mao-era prescriptive realism. In that case, the film cut from a waving Communist flag to Wang Dachun as a new recruit of the Communist army, seemingly looking intently at a distant horizon.
Figure 20. a, Flag cutaway and, b, Lin Daojing’s gaze in The Song of Youth (1959).
Although the flag makes no literal claim to having been in the same setting as Wang Dachun but rather fills the screen for a purely symbolic purpose, it nonetheless appears rhetorically as a kind of reverse eyeline match, in that it represents the ideal on which the peasant-turned-revolutionary-soldier is now fixated. The induction scene in *Song of Youth* has a similar and even more direct false eyeline match: Lin Daojing’s gaze after taking her party oath is followed by a cutaway to a Communist flag (Figure 20a), which is further sutured into the narrative by a cut back to Lin’s frozen gaze, now in extreme close-up (Figure 20b). Although a flag might normally be present at a party swearing-in ceremony, the flag in this shot is unfurled and flapping dramatically in a wind that could not exist in the room in which Lin is standing. This gives it a clear nondiegetic quality similar to the flag cutaway in *The White-Haired Girl*, making it more a rhetorical insert than an actual prop in the story.\(^47\)

The flag functions as a powerful metonym to attach both the character and the viewer to the Communist movement through one of its core signifiers in a way that momentarily halts the progression of the narrative to indulge in a moment of ideological epiphany; the formalist film language of revolutionary romanticism thus produces an underlying Truth that an aesthetic of social realism could not achieve. In chapter 2, we saw how some Chinese films of the 1930s Left-Wing Film Movement, while engaging in both Hollywood-style entertainment and harsh critical realism, also gestured toward a seemingly inaccessible revolutionary real indirectly—or, as I put it, apophatically—not giving it any kind of positive configuration. In Mao-era prescriptive realism, such an ideal is no longer represented indirectly by an absence but rather is invoked and imbued with affect more concretely, as when the socialist realist gaze is supplemented by the cutaway to a flag. At the same time, insertions of such symbolically laden images at moments of epiphany or elevation also have their own apohatic or indirect quality, insofar as the motifs function in a fetishistic manner, standing in for something still impossible to present directly and fully, the transcendent Truth available only to the party (which itself has a fetishistic function insofar as it claims to be the very embodiment of the will of the people—the workers, peasants, and soldiers)—or, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, in a sense available fully only to Mao himself.\(^48\)
Epiphanic moments like the socialist realist gaze rely on audiences investing fully in their semantic power. Donald shows how the socialist realist gaze need only be displaced to a different historical moment and tweaked slightly in its representation to suddenly appear “powerfully ironic,” revealing that its sense of sublime completion all along was “bogus.”49 In Schweinitz’s terms, such film stereotypes can easily be “derealized” and satirized by later film audiences who recognize them as clichés. In their time, though, how did these films accumulate affective force sufficient to power such moments of ecstatic ideological communion in a way the audience would accept? One way that has been suggested is through the dynamics of sublimation, in which libidinal or romantic impulses are awakened only to have their energy channeled into revolutionary zeal.

**SUBLIMATION: GENRE, SEX, AND DEATH**

A key way that Mao-era films differed from classical Hollywood, at least according to conventional historiographical wisdom and a certain strain of post-Mao feminist scholarship, was in their relative suppression of romantic love as a central plot element and an accompanying denial of both gender difference and sexuality. It is precisely the ostensible *replacement* of private libidinal desire with the appeal of a revolutionary sublime, to which Communist film protagonists directed their longing, that has led to a conception of revolutionary narration as a process of sublimation. To my knowledge, in the study of Chinese revolutionary cinema, the sublimation thesis was first advanced by Chris Berry in his analysis of the Republican-era classic *Big Road* (*Da lu* 大路; Sun Yu, 1934), which, in Berry’s reading, “attempts to arouse revolutionary ardor by the arousal of libidinal drives and their redirection towards the object of revolution.”50 Later, Ban Wang developed the sublimation thesis with a view to explaining how Mao-era revolutionary films provided pleasure for spectators:

Far from repressing the individual’s psychic and emotional energy in a puritanical fashion, Communism is quite inclined to display it—with a political sleight of hand. It recycles the energy, as if it were waste products or superfluous material lying outside the purposive march of history, by
rechanneling it into transforming the old and making the new individual. This method launches individuals on the way to a more passionate and often ecstatic state of mind and experience.\textsuperscript{51}

Consequently, argues Wang, “an intense emotional exuberance marks Communist culture,” and instead of seeing the sublimation process as “the dreaded ‘collectivization of the self’” of Cold War caricature, we should acknowledge that in revolutionary films of the Mao era (as no doubt was the case for many in the revolution itself), it is precisely through collective action that the individual finds the greatest meaning and fulfillment.\textsuperscript{52}

One of Wang’s primary examples is the aforementioned transformation of the heroine of \textit{Song of Youth}, Lin Daojing, from lonely and depressed young woman to Communist Party member fully and exuberantly engaged in the mass opposition to Japanese imperialism. Along the way, she experiences a number of potential or actual romantic attachments but ends up committed first and foremost to the revolutionary struggle itself.\textsuperscript{53} In the film’s finale, occurring just after her party induction imbues her with the socialist realist gaze, Daojing helps to lead an anti-Japanese protest march in 1935, bravely persevering in the face of police swords and water hoses. The exciting sequence conveys not only the revolutionary potential of the masses but, just as importantly, the deep personal fulfillment that she has gained by joining the collective struggle; Communism has brought her happiness as well as purpose.

The libidinal sublimation that, according to Wang, facilitates both aesthetic pleasure and ideological messaging in these films often plays out by way of an implied romance between the protagonist and an attractive Communist who acts as a mentor. Both \textit{Song of Youth} and \textit{Red Detachment of Women} follow this pattern: in the former, Daojing develops emotional attachments to a series of Communist Party members, two of whom become martyrs in the course of the film; in the latter, the slave-girl-turned-revolutionary Wu Qionghua is romantically linked, albeit only implicitly, with the Communist Party commissar in the Women’s Detachment, Hong Changqing, the handsome young cadre who liberates her from bondage and teaches her about Marxist revolution. In both cases, the shift in the object of cathexis suggested by the sublimation thesis, from another person as sexual/romantic object to the party as sublime object, is facilitated
by the depiction of party members as robustly attractive, physically and socially, and the eroticization of the party by means of these characters is often surprisingly direct.

An example of this dynamic in *Song of Youth* comes when Daojing’s husband mistakenly accuses her of adultery. The husband, Yu Yongze, depicted as a student of the reform-minded scholar Hu Shi (who would be villainized under Communism), had seduced her with his liberal-bourgeois romantic outlook after saving her from her suicide attempt in the film’s opening sequence. However, during their marriage in Beijing, she becomes increasingly disenchanted by his lack of revolutionary consciousness while being drawn to Lu Jiachuan, the handsome cadre who first teaches her about Marxism–Leninism. One night, Daojing daringly stays out all night posting Communist agitprop fliers while disguised as a bourgeois “new woman” of the jazz age out for a night on the town—dressed in a fashionable cheongsam accessorized with jewelry and high heels. When she returns home in the morning thus attired—and with a glow of sated pleasure about her as well (Figure 21)—her husband flies
into a jealous rage and accuses her of having an affair. On the denotative level, of course, his accusation is false and only serves to increase the distance between them and accentuate his own lack of understanding of the revolutionary cause to which she has committed herself. The real problem with his accusation, however, is of course not that it is false but rather that it is absolutely true at a deeper level: Daojing has been swept away by the party, which, by way of its attractive representative Jiachuan, has completely replaced Yongze as the object of Daojing’s desire.

This, then, is the sublimation thesis, which these revolutionary films basically bear out in their overall narrative trajectories: structured as revolutionary bildungsromans, the films trace their protagonists’ progression from ideological ignorance to enlightenment by means of an attractive Communist Party member whose charm is coded at least partially as heteroromantic. The romantic relationships are not consummated, however, and by the end of the film, it is the heroine’s passionate commitment to revolution that is highlighted. If sexuality or romantic love is thereby sublimated, it is nonetheless worth analyzing what specific conventions present it for the purposes of sublimation in the first place, as that will lead us to yet another way in which Maoist films of the Seventeen Years vary less from the classical Hollywood model than we might have thought. In fact, not only is sublimation achieved in part through the deployment of classical Hollywood conventions but, insofar as those make their appearance, the repressed actually returns, or rather turns out never to have been effaced in the first place—or at least to have been so in a way that is different from Hollywood only in degree rather than in kind.

In sum, the ostensibly repressed theme of romantic love can only be sublimated if it is at first made present, which is done in the form of narrative conventions—classical Hollywood stereotypes that are borrowed but then ultimately belied by the overall narrative of the film. In this analysis, sublimation is not conceived only in terms of drives or desires within the libidinal economy of the films’ fictional protagonists (a character desires sex but settles instead for revolution), nor in terms of similar desires in the viewing audience, for whom the film functions as dream work or fantasy to structure desire through a narrative vector (a spectator hopes to see sexualized romance but settles instead for political victory). We can only
speculate about those effects if the ostensibly sublimated libidinal content is “there” in the first place, and film conventions make it so. Narrative elements from previous modes of filmmaking—elements that formerly had served as textual dominants in heteronormative Hollywood romance conventions—appear in the new context as visual subtexts destined to be ultimately suppressed within the new narrative system, which (and this is, of course, key to the sublimation dynamic) does not simply obliterate them but rather steers their affective power to its own ends.

_Song of Youth_ and _Red Detachment of Women_ both redirect conventions of classical Hollywood romance through scenes that, in the script at least, seem to be all about the growing bond between the female protagonist and the Communist cause but, in the visual elements of their mise-en-scène and editing patterns, unmistakably deploy classical Hollywood conventions for depicting heteronormative romance. For example, in _Red Detachment_, when now woman-soldier Qionghua reunites after a period of separation with Changqing, the cadre who had saved her from slavery, the scene may be read as the growing comradeship between an aspiring Communist Party member and her mentor, but the use of shot/reverse-shot editing, close-ups, and nonverbal performance cues leads us to a much more personal conclusion. The first romantic cue in the scene is the speed and excitement with which Qionghua and Changqing rush to seize this unexpected opportunity to share a moment together when they encounter each other on a country road. When they come face-to-face, their expressions and body language even suggest that it is with some restraint that they only salute and take each other’s hand in greeting. She smiles bashfully when he suggests they sit down to talk away from the others and chivalrously relieves her of her backpack. As the scene progresses, with Qionghua reminiscing about the last time they had been at the same location, when he had liberated her from slavery and directed her toward the women’s revolutionary unit, the editing pattern hews closely to classical Hollywood depictions of romantic couples. The camera tracks in from a two-shot of both of them (Figure 22a) to a close-up of Qionghua abashedly describing her initial feelings of suspicion and hatred for Changqing (in disguise as a rich capitalist at the time)—and, by implication, how much they have changed. She directs a broad smile at him (Figure 22b), and Changqing
Figure 22. Amorous reunion of Wu Qionghua and Hong Changqing in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), from, a, two-shot of both to, b, close-up of Qionghua, c, reverse close-up of Changqing, and, d, two-shot with a look of love.
smiles just as warmly back at her in a reverse-shot close-up (Figures 22). This cuts back to a medium shot of both of them as Qionghua continues her narrative of her changed feelings, without explicitly stating the end result but just concluding with “But it’s really, it’s really interesting.” She does not say precisely what is so interesting, and there really is no need to, because her following smile says it all: this, by all appearances, is a woman in love (Figure 22d). A brief ellipsis and wipe cut bring us to the same couple now walking together on a bridge, and the next line of dialogue is again Qionghua, now saying, “There’s something I hardly dare to tell you,” a line that could easily be interpreted as a dialogue hook continuing from her observation of how “interesting” her feelings for Changqing had become, but after he encourages her to tell him what is on her mind, she instead offers a rough plan for her to personally assassinate her hated enemy, the landlord Nan Batian. Thus, despite the strong intimations of romantic love in the shots just moments earlier, Qionghua herself leads the process of sublimation by moving on to the topic of the class enemy whom they both hate. The lesson in sublimation is made explicit when Changqing critiques Qionghua’s plan and seizes the chance to deliver, in the immediately following scene, what amounts to a lecture on the necessity of sacrificing personal desires to the larger struggle—although in this case, what is to be sacrificed is the desire for personal vengeance.

To position the chance reencounter of Qionghua and Changqing, including the sexual tension implicit in it, vis-à-vis the classical Hollywood model from which it seems to draw its visual language, we can compare briefly a similar scene in the roughly contemporaneous Hollywood film The Bravados (Henry King, 1958), a western starring Gregory Peck as a man who shows up as a stranger in a small American town near the Mexican border. As he checks himself into the local hotel, a woman (played by Joan Collins) suddenly appears and greets him warmly. They are, it turns out, former lovers now separated for four years, and the restraint with which she (only) shakes hands with him upon this unexpected meeting is similar to that of the reunited Qionghua and Changqing. Like the latter couple, they immediately take the opportunity to sit and have a brief conversation to get reacquainted, a conversation that includes reminiscences about their previous time together. The editing goes from a long shot of the
two entering the hotel’s saloon and sitting down to a medium two-shot of the couple to medium close-ups of each in a shot/reverse shot pattern as they continue talking, then back to the medium two-shot. The body language and facial expressions of the woman in particular show the same kind of bridled affection for the man that Qionghua seems to have for Changqing in *Red Detachment*, but, like the Chinese couple, the American one will end their conversation after a few minutes and suppress, for the moment at least, any lingering romantic longing for each other. In other words, even in the Hollywood film, the sexual romance is suppressed in the content of their conversation but conveyed mainly by visual conventions. The difference is that the same couple in *The Bravados* will end the film united into a family unit, whereas Qionghua’s apparent yearning for Changqing will of course be thoroughly sublimated to her devotion to the broader Communist cause. Still, even with this example, we see that the differences between the two are not as stark as the stereotypical notions of Hollywood’s ostensible sexual forwardness versus puritanical Communist sublimation would imply.

Similar examples of barely sublimated cinematic conventions of romance occur in *Song of Youth*. Most notable is the scene immediately preceding the party initiation ceremony scene described earlier. Daojing, the protagonist, meets with Jiang Hua, the last in the series of party mentors in her story and someone who appears to be a potential romantic partner (and in fact *is* in the popular novel on which the film was based).54 They row a boat on Beijing’s famous Beihai Lake in a quintessentially romantic setting—whether the precedent is traditional Chinese drama and fiction, in which the garden often serves as the site of a romantic liaison, or Hollywood, where a couple on a rowboat floating among the weeping willows is a long-standing trope.55 In the scene in *Song of Youth*, here again the editing pattern—from establishing shot (Figure 23a) to shot/reverse shot (Figures 23b and 23c)—the framing (ever closer as the scene progresses), and the performances (shy smiling and sharing of intimate moments) closely follow the conventions of Hollywood romance. In fact, reading the scene only visually and out of context, one would guess that the gentle yet confident man is finally making a marriage proposal to the shy yet overjoyed woman, the scene ending with a close-up of her happy
Figure 23. Lin Daojing and Jiang Hua meeting on Beihai Lake in *The Song of Youth* (1959): *a*, establishing shot; *b*, shot and *c*, reverse shot; and, *d*, close-up of Daojing’s tears of joy.
smile and a tear of pleasure in her eye (Figure 23d). The impression would seem to be borne out by the cut to the following scene, in which Daojing stands next to Jiang Hua to make a solemn oath. Of course, this visual reading is belied by the actual film script: what really has played out on the lake is that Jiang Hua informed her that she was at long last being admitted to the Communist Party, the following scene being the induction ceremony discussed earlier.

Here again, then, the genre conventions of Hollywood romance are deployed in a way that would seem to facilitate sublimation. Given that the implied romances do not actually occur, the conventions of classical Hollywood romance appear here as a kind of generic residue—leftovers from an earlier mode of narration that survive because Chinese cinematic “revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism,” like the broader category of transnational socialist realism of which it is a variety, is in fact highly dependent on classical Hollywood narration in its stylistic details. At the same time, it is precisely through these generic signifiers of Hollywood-style romance, though now apparently loosened from their original signifieds (modern heteronormative love), that sublimation is carried out on the textual level, with the romantic genre cues now redirected toward the Communist cause rather than a sexual pairing of characters (thus constituting a specific example of the “political sleight of hand” described by Ban Wang in the passage quoted earlier). The sublimation thesis thus holds that spectators cued by conventions to invest their desire in romantic love through identification with characters have their cathexis gingerly shifted from the sexual bond to the political, in theory losing little of its libidinal intensity.

Yet, if this is how the sublimation process plays out through the details of cinematic narration, we may speculate whether contemporary audiences necessarily experienced the films this way. Did the political meanings inscribed in the film scripts in the end necessarily thoroughly sublimate the romantic implications of the Hollywood conventions deployed? Might audiences not have consciously and fully enjoyed a sort of alternative narrative provided by the visual text, without necessarily having that pleasure rechanneled into the political cathexis? As John Mullarkey puts it, “the art of cinema involves a fabulation of images, a narrative of images
that may well (indeed, will) ‘thwart’ the textual narrative, interrupting it, contradicting it.”57 In fact, it is a privileging of the written script over the visual text that would create an opening for post–socialist realist filmmakers of the early reform era—particularly Fifth Generation innovators in the 1980s, such as Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 and Zhang Yimou 张艺谋—to surreptitiously subvert revolutionary film conventions just by virtue of tweaking the imagery in various subtle ways, while using scripts that were relatively uncontroversial (a phenomenon considered in chapter 6).58 In the case of the revolutionary films examined here, we can and should analyze the textual practices through which the sublimation process was mapped out, but we also should recognize the possibility that audiences may have enjoyed reading the visual cues of Hollywood romance according to their “original,” unsublimated meanings and taken pleasure in the implied love stories featuring attractive actors, whether or not the political meanings had much effect on them. Indeed, in the form of visual conventions and genre cues, the “repressed” libidinal content turns out not so much to return as to have remained there on the surface all along.

And yet, we should perhaps also be wary of stopping at this alternative reading, in which the sublimation process is potentially unsuccessful and the implicit “original” libidinal meaning subverts the political master narrative that is supposed to subdue and sublimate it. The idea of audiences reading the visual texts against the grain of the more didactically political screenplays, producing a “subversive” reading in which Hollywood triumphs after all and libido is not repressed by politics, may seem academically appealing for its deconstructive virtue, but it also arguably bolsters a facile Western liberal fantasy of oppressed subjects under Communism yearning to be free and thus undertaking whatever furtive acts of individual rebellion are available to them. Films in the revolutionary bildungsroman genre we have examined here undoubtedly place a priority on the narratives of political awakening rather than romantic love, yet it is far from true that romantic sexual love is absent in these films, and even less in many other films that represent other genres of the Seventeen Years. Not only could romantic love be evident in performances in ways not reflected in the screenplay—Zhu Xijuan 祝希娟, the actor playing Qionghua in Red Detachment of Women, has stated
that she saw her character as having fallen in love with Changqing, for example—but aside from the moments of sublimated romance analyzed earlier, there are other instances of straightforward love and marriage in the same films. In Red Detachment, Qionghua’s best friend, with whom she flees the Nationalist area to join the Red Army, is thereby able to consummate a marriage of choice with her childhood sweetheart, and by the end of the film, the two have had a baby, all of which—the romance, the wedding, the childbirth—are foregrounded by the film and celebrated as among the fruits of liberation. Many other films of the time featured romance as a dominant narrative strain, with political messages bolstering the romance rather than the other way around. This is true not simply of a minority comedy musical romance like Five Golden Flowers (Wu duo jinhua 五朵金花; Wang Jiayi 王家乙, 1959) but also of Xie Jin’s earlier dramatic film Woman Basketball Player No. 5 (Nǚ lan wuhao 女篮五号; 1957).

One final necessary qualification regarding the sublimation thesis comes from the fact that the elliptical presentation of sexual love in these films is really only an extension or exaggeration of the discretion shown by classical Hollywood itself. As was mentioned in the last chapter, in her study Screening Sex, Linda Williams details how in Hollywood’s golden age, the sexual act was only represented indirectly, for example, by a kiss followed by a telling ellipsis. In this sense, the repression of the libidinal drive and its representation only through coy subterfuge is not so much a corruption of Hollywood codes by the political demands of the socialist realist aesthetic as it is a continuation of Hollywood’s own practices, but now in the service of making revolution rather than making money. This brings us back to the point that prescriptive realism is not limited to socialist realist cinemas; in countless Hollywood action thrillers or superhero films, a heterosexual romance subplot adds a deeper affective investment to the mission that constitutes the main plot of the film, in which heroic deeds serve to model ideal moral behavior and often are rewarded in part by romantic union.

The difference in the revolutionary films we are examining is that the happiness of romantic coupling is generally reserved for secondary characters; the main characters usually fully sublimate any romantic longings they had into the revolutionary cause itself. Indeed, the depth
of their commitment often is demonstrated by a more extreme form of sublimation: the heroes’ sacrifice of their bodies or even life itself to the revolutionary cause. It is no exaggeration to say that these revolutionary films often stage veritable orgies of ecstatic masochism, in which the protagonists’ commitment to revolution is manifested bodily in injuries, mutilation, and sometimes death, filmed in a way that makes these sufferings appear transcendent. Often the pain endured by heroic figures is part of the overall pattern of melodrama; as Linda Williams puts it, “if virtue is not obvious, suffering—often depicted as the literal suffering of the body—is.” The display of a wounded or suffering body thus is often deployed in service of “the mute pathos inherent to melodrama.”

A key moment of _Red Detachment of Women_ occurs when Qionghua has first made her way to the liberated area where the women’s revolutionary army detachment trains. When the female commanding officer tells Qionghua and her friend that they will have to explain why they wish to join the fighting force, Qionghua steps forward, dramatically rips her top aside to reveal welts left by a whip on her upper chest and shoulders, and shouts, “Just for this!” Such a display of wounds by an abused woman to garner sympathy in a key moment was a long-standing classical cinema convention, in many cases, as in _Red Detachment_, being explicitly linked to the desire for vengeance.

In fact, _Red Detachment of Women_ is at its core a sometimes lurid revenge fantasy. Early scenes show Qionghua’s bound and partially clothed body hanging and being whipped in the dungeon of Nan Batian, the landlord who had enslaved her, and she joins the women’s detachment partly just to get revenge, as her display of scars vividly illustrates. After joining the Communist struggle, she seizes the first chance she gets to attempt to assassinate her former master, after which she is scolded by her superiors and told that her personal desire for revenge must be subordinated to the national struggle for liberation through revolution. In the scene mentioned earlier that follows Qionghua’s semi-romantic meeting with Changqing at the crossroads, he delivers a veritable lecture on the necessity of sublimation, using a map to convince her that their local struggle is but a microscopic piece of a nationwide movement, so her personal desire for vengeance must not result in rash individual action but instead must
be folded into the collective struggle. A key point, however, is that after Qionghua has succeeded in learning revolutionary discipline, after she has been admitted as a party member and become the party representative for the women’s detachment, she is in fact rewarded in the narrative by getting the opportunity to kill her nemesis when Nan Batian suddenly lunges for a knife to attack her after being captured. Quickly seizing her opportunity, Qionghua shoots him, not once but three times—presumably first to kill him, and twice more for the sheer pleasure of it. Thus, despite all the political messaging, Red Detachment of Women functions in part as a pleasurable revenge flick with a plot structure not unlike the salacious Hong Kong female revenge fantasy Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan (Ai nu 爱奴; Chor Yuen 楚原, 1972).

Aside from the display of bodily wounds and torture, films of the Seventeen Years very often featured revolutionary martyrdom in which Communist protagonists either were executed or otherwise intentionally sacrificed their lives for the cause, encouraging a masochistic longing for ultimate self-negation in service of the revolutionary sublime. These include the two main films we have been discussing, Song of Youth and Red Detachment of Women, in addition to Zhao Yiman 赵一曼 (Sha Meng 沙蒙, 1950), Dong Cunrui 董存瑞 (Guo Wei 郭维, 1955), Undying Wave (Yong bu xiaoshi de dianbo 永不消逝的电波; Wang Ping 王苹, 1958), There Will Be Followers (Zi you houlai ren 自有后来人; Yu Yanfu 于彦夫, 1963), and Living Forever in Burning Flames (Liehuo zhong yongsheng 烈火中永生; Shui Hua 水华, 1965), to name only a few. In both Song of Youth and Red Detachment of Women, the main heroines gain additional revolutionary resolve in the course of watching their now captured Communist mentors bravely go to their execution by the enemy in ultimate sacrifice to the cause. In the case of Red Detachment, the scene is particularly devastating given that Hong Changqing, now in enemy custody, had been not only Qionghua’s mentor but her potential love interest. She sneaks up and watches from a hill above just at the moment he is about to be executed by being tied to a tree and then set afire as an example to the local villagers. A series of eyeline match cuts guides the viewer into the extreme drama of the situation as he literally burns before her eyes. The final shot of him tracks in to a close-up of his face as he defiantly shouts the obligatory last
words “Long live the Chinese Communist Party!” as flames rise to cover his face, whereupon the film cuts to an extreme close-up of Qionghua’s anguished face looking on from afar as the nondiegetic soundtrack surges. The moment implicitly represents a double sublimation, in that while he gives his life for the revolutionary sublime, she simultaneously sees the object of her private libidinal desire immolated, transforming that desire into intense dedication only to the revolution for which he had sacrificed his life.

**FLAG ELEVATIONS**

Instances like these, including the emotional excess of such an ultimate sacrifice and the formalist flourishes in film style (such as extreme close-ups) that help to elicit a strong affective response, are the sorts of moments that strike noncontemporary audiences as departing far from anything that should be called “realism” and instead appearing rather blatantly as propagandistic manipulation. Here at least, does Chinese “revolutionary romanticism,” with its melodramatic extremes and its shift to a more formalist film style in its most “epiphanic” moments of maximum ideological import, become incompatible with Hollywood-style classical cinema? In fact, that is not the case, and I will argue in the following chapter that it is only with the formally experimental *yangbanxi* or model stage performance films that Chinese revolutionary cinema genuinely departs from Hollywood’s classical style, narrative principles, and fictional realism. To illustrate the similarity between Chinese socialist realism and Hollywood, let us examine, as one example, the pivotal scene in *Red Detachment of Women* that immediately precedes the execution scene, followed by a similar scene in the Hollywood World War II film *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949).

In the scene leading to his execution, Hong Changqing has been captured in battle and, now injured, fallen into the custody of the villainous landlord Nan Batian. The order to execute him is given only after he refuses to sign a written confession that will betray his cause. The confession refusal scene is lifted to a heroic, romanticized plane by the now familiar pattern of the epiphanic socialist realist gaze. We already have seen how
such a gaze might be provided with an apparent object of vision through editing—an object that may be represented in a symbolic sense through a false eyeline match, as was the case with the cuts between heroic Communist figures and apparently nondiegetic waving of Communist flags in *The White-Haired Girl* and *Song of Youth*. In those cases, the flag is a montage insertion that stands, in a metonymic or even fetishistic sense, for the unrepresentable ideological Truth to which the characters presumably gain access when they join the army or party. In the case of the confession rejection scene in *Red Detachment of Women*, the beaten-down Changqing grasps a writing brush over the blank paper provided for his confession, but then he hesitates and looks around the room, which still bears the marks of a brief period when the residence, along with the rest of the town, had been seized by the Communist guerrillas. As the soundtrack swells, eyeline matches provide the hero’s gaze with actual diegetic objects in the form of pro-Communist graffiti left on the landlord’s wall during the occupation of his village. (Such lingering revolutionary graffiti in an area retaken by Nationalist forces was an established trope in historical civil war films of the Seventeen Years, having appeared, for example, in the classic *Fighting North and South* [*Nanzheng beizhan* 南征北战; Cheng Yin 成荫 and Tang Xiaodan 汤晓丹, 1952; also known in English as *From Victory to Victory*].) In the series of eyeline matches in *Red Detachment*, the shot distances get progressively shorter, from shots of Hong Changqing from the shoulders up when he first notices the graffiti (Figure 24a) to an extreme close-up of his rapturous face when he focuses on a Communist flag (Figure 24b). In between, the shots of the wall progress from a longer shot showing the enlightened messages of graffiti left by the Communists, such as *nannü pingdeng* 男女平等 (gender equality), to a closer shot panning from right to left across the slogan *Gongchandang wansui* 共产党万岁 (Long live the Communist Party) with the small Communist flag pasted next to it (Figure 24c). This flag, though clearly located in the actual fictional space of the scene, is nonetheless elevated to a more abstract level of meaning through editing and framing, particularly in a final extreme close-up of the flag, now suddenly appearing epic in scale, upon which, after a moment, is superimposed a final extreme close-up of the hero’s face, at an even closer distance than before (Figure 24d).
Thus, although the flag in this case is diegetic rather than a purely rhetorical insert, the montage’s conclusion, with the superimposed extreme close-ups of hero and flag and nothing else visible in the frame, functions much like the instances of nondiegetic flags in *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Song of Youth*. Rather than a mere piece of colored paper stuck to a wall, the flag becomes a master signifier of the hero’s (and the film’s) entire system of meaning, and the denotative meaning of the sequence of shots—Changqing sees the flag on the wall—pales in comparison with its connotative meaning: Changqing’s consciousness and the Communist movement represented by the flag have become unified in a singular will destined for final victory (and you, the spectator, should aspire to similar sublime ecstasies of devotion). Having started the scene as an injured prisoner weakened by torture, Changqing consequently ends it—writing a defiant note rather than a confession on the piece of paper after his spiritual union with the flag on the wall—as a heroic figure who gladly

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**Figure 24.** Hong Changqing reacting to graffiti and a flag on the wall in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961): *a*, noticing the graffiti; *b*, close-up of his rapturous face; *c*, graffiti and flag; *d*, superimposed extreme close-ups of the flag and face.
accepts death in the name of a revolution through which he will continue to live, insofar as his very subjectivity is now fused with the collective cause. Such, apparently, is the metonymic power of a small flag decal on a wall for a Communist hero endowed with the socialist realist gaze.

The scene clearly enacts the tension between realism and romanticism in Chinese socialist realism. In the early shots in the realistic diegetic space of a landlord’s house that has recently changed hands in armed struggle, Changqing, just captured in a military battle, appears believably sweaty, dirty, and clearly injured, with a stooped posture and a look of doubt or even defeat on his face, but in the course of the scene, this verisimilar realism gives way to the more clearly prescriptive realism that foregrounds his heroism and the abstract ideals for which he will sacrifice his life. This prescriptive mode shifts the film’s style more toward formalism with the employment of montage, superimposition, and extreme close-ups.

Audiences today will quickly identify the scene as Communist propaganda, but in fact such toggling between a more verisimilar and a more prescriptive realism (or between realism and romanticism) can easily be found in classical Hollywood films. The narratively and stylistically parallel scene in *Sands of Iwo Jima* occurs at the end of the film, when a group of American Marines watch the famous raising of the American flag on Mount Suribachi after defeating Japanese forces in the Battle of Iwo Jima in February 1945 (a moment captured in the iconic photograph by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal). In the fictional film, at the Marines’ feet is the body of Marine Sergeant John Stryker, the film’s hero, played by John Wayne. Stryker has just been killed by a Japanese soldier who had remained hidden after the battle, and now his men stand witness simultaneously to his corpse on the battlefield and the flag being raised on the hill above them. Accompanied by a dramatic orchestral soundtrack, the film cuts from the flag raising to increasingly tightly framed close-ups of each of the five remaining Marines in the squad gazing up at it before looking down again at Stryker’s prone corpse, now also in close-up, with his name visible on his uniform. Meanwhile, the soundtrack has switched from a generic orchestral score to the Marines’ “Halls of Montezuma” hymn. At the conclusion of this deeply moving—and deeply ideological—moment, the remaining squad members march off to finish the war, and
the film ends. The images—faces in close-up, flag—and the ways they are presented, with repeated eyeline match cuts between flags and faces, extreme close-ups, and a surging emotional soundtrack, are really not so different, and no less affectively manipulative, than those in the scene in *Red Detachment of Women*, and they serve equally to glorify a sublime cause so great that people should be willing to die for it, even if that cause can only be represented metonymically, in the form of a flag. Even in Hollywood, then, particularly at moments of affective “elevation,” films might veer from devices, such as “invisible editing,” that promote diegetic immersion and fictional realism and instead become both more formalist and more clearly rhetorical and prescriptive. If Chinese socialist realism differs in this regard, it is again a matter of degree rather than of kind.

Let us review briefly what this chapter has argued about Chinese revolutionary cinema during the Seventeen Years, pending the expansion of the argument into the Cultural Revolution in the next chapter. First, we have found that the Chinese variant of socialist realism, whether it is called that or revolutionary realism combined with revolutionary romanticism, may be understood as an example of the broader category of *prescriptive* realism, meaning a mode of realism that prioritizes the depiction of ideological truths or projected future modes of being (like the heroic “new socialist human”) rather than mirroring the surface-level reality of the present. It does so largely through the propagation of conventions like character stereotypes, repeated plot scenarios, and other genre conventions in a narrative mode similar to classical Hollywood cinema. Like the latter, it frequently employs melodrama, which is not surprising because it prioritizes an underlying truth over surface verisimilitude. It is precisely at moments of “epiphanic” ideological impact that these films are likely to shift from the diegetic immersion of classical-style fictional realism to more narrative self-consciousness through formalist techniques like extreme close-ups, superimposed shots, and montage. Through these repeated conventions, prescriptive realism achieves the “sublimation” of affective energies, including the attractions of romantic or sexual desires and the extreme emotions of violent heroic deaths, into the political message and revolutionary cause itself.
My main engagement with the sublimation thesis has been not to challenge it but to show its mechanics in terms of film form, including genre stereotypes and visual citations of the conventions of classical Hollywood romance. However, I have also suggested that viewers may watch films for their own purposes, and it is quite possible to enjoy the ostensibly “sublimated” material as still very much available for consumption and enjoyment on its own terms. Indeed, in her important study of Chinese film spectatorship during the socialist era, informed by dozens of ethnographic interviews, Chenshu Zhou finds that many remember enjoying moviegoing during the Mao era in completely apolitical ways. The point is not to choose whether we should consider Mao-era films as successful exercises in sublimation and thus public political indoctrination or as opportunities for “subversive” readings for private enjoyment but rather to acknowledge that as John Mullarkey puts it, “film cannot be one object of reflection at all”; rather, “the impact of film is not located solely in the film, but in the multiple processes of film viewing.” Just as we found in chapter 3, that, in some cases, we cannot necessarily say for certain whether social realism is placed in the service of melodrama or vice versa, we likewise cannot treat any Mao-era film as having a singular meaning or impact, even for its contemporary audience, no matter how utilitarian the intention may have been for art to serve politics.

Beyond the questions of sublimation and aesthetics—whether realist, formalist, or romanticist—the prescriptive mode of filmmaking of the Seventeen Years serves also as an index of the progression of revolution itself. As we saw in chapter 2, revolution in the early to mid-1930s appeared in cinema more as a signifying absence, an anticipation, than as something with concrete narrative formulation. By the last film examined in chapter 3 (Crows and Sparrows), revolution appeared in the narrative with the profound eventness of a moment-in-progress. With cinema of the Seventeen Years, however, revolution needed to be depicted not as future or present but as both past and ongoing—past because its heroes needed commemoration and ongoing because once a revolution is finished, which is to say, once it is conventionalized—it may indeed be finished, as the next chapter explores in detail.