



“The Red Detachment of Women”— China’s First Revolutionary Ballet

The Red Detachment of Women was the first revolutionary ballet to be created under the inspiration of Mao Tse-tung’s brilliant thought and under the direct guidance of Comrade Chiang Ching. Born in the midst of the fierce struggle against the biggest capitalist roader in the Party and the pernicious revisionist line which he backed in art and literature, it was an epoch-making event in the history of ballet. Its successful presentation marked the birth of a proletarian ballet art which serves the workers, peasants and soldiers, and the rejuvenation in China of a classical art form which is decaying in the Western world.

Produced by Peking’s Worker, Peasant and Soldier Ballet Troupe, *The Red Detachment of Women* tells of the growth of a unit of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army fighting on Hainan Island under the leadership of the Communist Party during the Second Revolutionary Civil War (1927-37).

Wu Ching-hua, a slave-girl of a tyrant landlord on the island, flees when she is about to be sold by the landlord, and later joins a fighting detachment of women under the leadership of the Communist Party.

Some months later, the Red Army plans to destroy the armed guards of the landlord during his birthday party. On the crucial night, Wu Ching-hua on the army’s instructions steals into the manor house but, on seeing the landlord, thoughts of vengeance overpower her and she fires at him. This untimely act exposes and disrupts the Red Army’s plan. When its main force storms the house, the alerted landlord and

his henchmen escape through a tunnel.

Later, back in camp, educated by the Party, Ching-hua comes to understand that making revolution is not for the sake of personal vengeance, but to emancipate all the labouring people by crushing all the reactionaries. From spontaneous resistance she gradually develops into a conscious proletarian revolutionary fighter. Later, when Hung Chang-ching, the Party representative in the detachment, in a successful operation to cover the movements of the main Red Army forces, is wounded, captured and killed by the enemy, she becomes the Party representative. She vows to hold aloft the red banner handed on by the martyrs and carry the revolution through to the end.

The outstanding achievement of *The Red Detachment of Women* lies, first of all, in the bold breakthrough it has made in bourgeois ballet conventions to make ballet, as Chairman Mao teaches, “fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, . . . operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and . . . help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.” Chairman Mao’s thinking on armed struggle, and on people’s war is woven well into the ballet and it fully reflects the truth that the oppressed people can obtain political power only by taking up arms. It warmly praises the revolutionary heroism and revolutionary rebel spirit of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army and the masses.

Another marked achievement of the ballet is its successful portrayal of proletarian revolutionary fighters

like Wu Ching-hua and the Party representative Hung Chang-ching. Wu Ching-hua has the revolutionary rebel spirit. When, after fleeing from the landlord to the revolutionary base, she sees the red flag flying, she takes it into her arms. Her eyes brim over with warm, excited tears just as if she were embracing her own father or mother. In this scene, Wu Ching-hua’s dances denouncing the crimes of the landlord and expressing her determination to be avenged are most effective. When she tells how she was beaten, her hearers echo her movements, reflecting the fact that her bitter experiences have aroused their deep sympathy, and that her grief and hatred are the class grief and hatred of all the labouring people. When she is enrolled in the women’s detachment and is given a gun, her feelings soar. A lively portrayal of her character is given in this scene.

The noble qualities of a proletarian revolutionary fighter are epitomized in the Party representative Hung Chang-ching: a selfless and dauntless spirit, a clear-cut class standpoint, stern towards the enemy and warm towards comrades, with a fine style of work of complete solidarity with the masses. When he is captured and the frightened enemy tries to force him to write a letter ordering his men to retreat, he rebuffs and denounces the enemy’s vile attempt. He rends the paper and throws its pieces into the enemy’s face. To bring out Hung Chang-ching’s lofty integrity, the choreographers give him powerful, vigorous leaps and turns to perform in sharp contrast with the crouching, embarrassed movements of the landlord’s bullies with their trailing weapons. His dances in this scene effectively bring out the

revolutionary heroism of the Red Army which is determined "to vanquish all enemies and never to yield."

In its choreography, *The Red Detachment of Women* has swept away the decadent, ethereal, fairy-like poses of the old ballet. It suitably weaves elements of the Chinese classical dance and folk dances into the ballet style; and on a realistic basis, creates new ballet movements. Its music is militant with its emphasis on the portrayal of the characters. Expressing the bravery of the women soldiers, the melody of the theme song of the women's detachment runs through the whole ballet with variations reflecting different stages in the development of the story. The composers have used a great deal of Hainan folk song rich in local colour. Thus transformed, the ballet art which was once exclusively in the service of the foreign feudal and bourgeois lords has become an art imbued with the "fresh, lively Chinese style and spirit which

the common people of China love."

The Red Detachment of Women was born in a fierce struggle. Ballet has a history of less than 20 years in China. When the ballet troupe was dominated by the counter-revolutionary revisionist line in art and literature, it did exact what troupes in capitalist and modern revisionist countries have done. It put on ballets like *Swan Lake*, *The Corsair*, *Giselle* and *Notre-Dame de Paris (Esmeralda)*. The revolutionary members of the troupe finally refused to tolerate this any longer and rose to make a revolution in their art. Yet the top Party capitalist roader pontificated: "The reflection of contemporary life cannot be forced. It is not certain whether the ballet and foreign opera can reflect it." In 1964, he even raised the cry that ballet should not be reformed and must remain a completely Western form. Comrade Chiang Ching sharply rebutted these reactionary fallacies. She said: Ballet has been performed in foreign countries for several hundred years. But

now Western ballet is decaying and dying. It falls to us to raise and carry the red banner of revolution in the ballet. She encouraged the members of the troupe to serve, not a handful of persons, but the entire country as well as the revolutionary peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

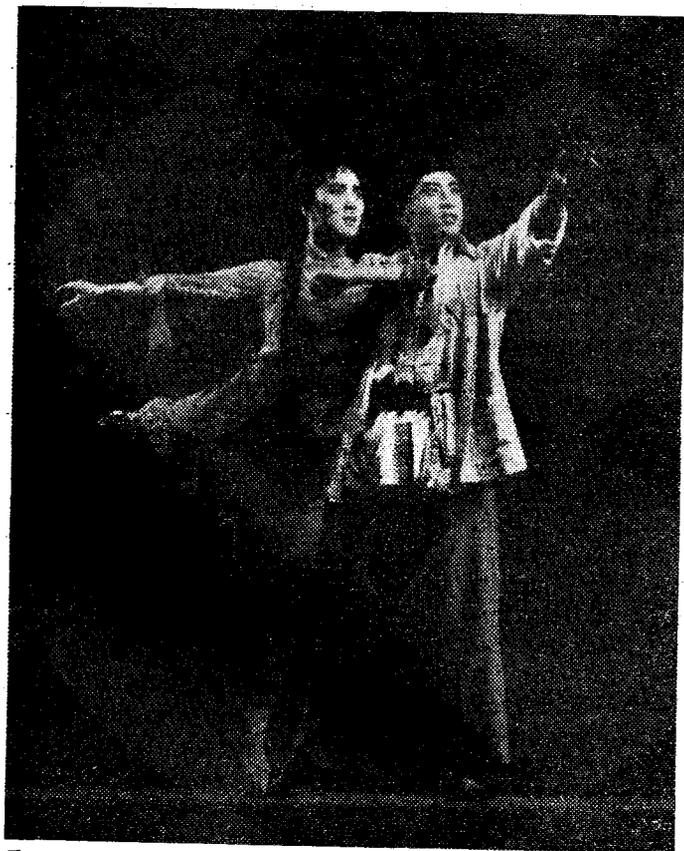
The success or failure of the first new ballet was of vital importance as the first step in the revolution of the ballet. And a key to success lay in choosing the right theme.

In discussions on this subject, a counter-revolutionary revisionist then in authority in a vain attempt to lead the revolution in ballet astray, immediately recommended a story lauding bourgeois humanism. Holding firmly to the revolutionary line, however, Comrade Chiang Ching resolutely decided to start work on *The Red Detachment of Women* which embodies Chairman Mao's thinking on people's war.

Wu Ching-hua is one of the labouring people who suffered bitterly in the old society. It stands to reason that the ballet should depict her resistance and struggles and how she matures under the Party's leadership. But the capitalist roaders in the troupe wanted to base the presentation of this character on Zarema, the feudal court favourite in the ballet *Fountain of Bakhchisarai!* They wanted to impose on her movements of the "spirit," sentiments of "pity and weariness, sadness and grief." This was simply an attempt to frustrate the transformation of ballet.

In accordance with Chairman Mao's teachings, Comrade Chiang Ching arranged for members of the troupe to visit Hainan Island to live and work among the workers and peasants, drill with the P.L.A., and conduct systematic investigations. Profoundly educated by the struggle in real life, the artists began to appreciate the noble qualities of the workers, peasants and soldiers, and determined to sing their praises on the stage. This gave both choreographers and dancers a firm ideological basis in creating the heroic images of the ballet.

On October 8, 1964, our beloved and revered leader Chairman Mao attended a performance of *The Red Detachment of Women*. Of this newly born ballet he said: "The orientation is correct, the revolutionization successful and the artistic quality good." Chairman Mao's teachings light the way for the revolution in ballet. China's first revolutionary modern ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* broke through all obstacles to success. It is now one of the eight brilliant model theatrical works renowned throughout the land.



Expressing the deep proletarian class feeling, the Party representative shows the slave girl Wu Ching-hua the way to join the Red Army