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The Social Construction and Deconstruction of Evil Landlords in Contemporary Chinese Fiction, Art, and Collective Memory[†]

Guo Wu

The Chinese Revolution can be described as a series of aesthetic experiences and activities that not only produced sublime images of heroism and martyrdom, but also portrayed the evil of the exploitative classes.¹ The landlord—perhaps the most important cultural icon of villainy and victimization—dominated the Mao-era imagination of society before 1949. Beginning in the late 1940s, party- and state-sponsored historiography, fiction, film, and art portrayed landlords as a class that inflicted suffering, pain, and trauma on the peasants, and individual landlords became the personification of the “evil old society.” The best-known Chinese landlords, some fictional and others historical, included: Huang Shiren in *White-Haired Girl* (Baimao nü), an opera and later a film and a ballet; Nan Batian, in *Red Detachment of Women* (Hongse niangzi jun), a film and a ballet; Zhou Bapi, in the semifictional personal memoir *Gao Yubao*; and Liu Wencai, a real person who died in 1949, and who then went through a long process of demonization and, more recently, attempts at rectification. The names of these landlords, as archetypes, pervaded the political vocabulary and

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¹ For a discussion of villains in Chinese socialist literature, see Huang 1971. Huang points out that a man can become a villain if he betrays his kinsman; in other cases, a villain's behavior becomes an ingredient in class warfare. In traditional Chinese fiction, villains are people who do damage to the country or corrupt the emperor (Ma 1975), or who bully a woman and her relatively powerless male family members (as in the *Water Margin*

[Shuihu zhuan], in which the butcher, Zheng, abuses a young woman and her father and is punched to death by the hero, Lu Da. Another villain in the same novel, Gao Qiu, attempts to murder Lin Chong and to take his wife).

historical imagination of the Mao era, so much so that Chinese who grew up after 1949 easily refer to these names when they think of the terms “landlord” and “old society.” Villainous landlords not only appeared in novels published between 1958 and 1963 (Huang 1971: 332), but also were prominent in visual media: operas, films, ballets, children’s comic books, puppet shows, and sculptures—because the Communists knew that history “was best told visually” (Hung 2011: 13).

Focusing on the most notorious villains who brought suffering to the people in fiction as well as in reality, this essay follows the method the sociologist Gary Alan Fine (2001) outlines in his *Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept, and Controversial*. I examine the continuous and complex process of historical “reputation building” of a few landlord archetypes as part of the larger discourse of class oppression and emancipation and address the following issues: (1) How did propaganda officials and artists construct this hostile imagination and its negative reputations of landlords? (2) How have these images evolved or been modified over time, and what were the motivations behind later modifications? (3) How did audiences accept these villainous images in the Mao era, and how have they contested them in recent years? At the same time, I consider the uniqueness of the Chinese creation of bad reputations in the context of state propaganda as a multidimensional “project” (Cheek 1997: 13–18). In other words, evil landlords were part of a comprehensive system of state propaganda. I contextualize and historicize this process and engage in textual analysis of the changing narrative strategy of the stories and their implications. In the case of Liu Wencai, I also make use of 2011 on-site fieldwork at the Liu Wencai Landlord Manor and interviews with Liu’s grandson Liu Xiaofei in 2011.

Constructing the Archetype of the Evil Landlord in Theater: The Case of Huang Shiren

The Chinese Communists attacked landlords as a class as early as 1922, but

tolerated them during the 1920s and 1930s and especially during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945).² With a blueprint for social and psychological revolution, as well as a need for winning the support of the peasants to join the revolution and overthrow the Nationalist government after the end of the war, the CCP promulgated the May Fourth Directive in 1947, which laid down the principle of all-around land redistribution and the elimination of landlords as a class. Although the CCP's official policy emphasized that landlords should be politically wiped out as a class but not mistreated as individuals, the land-reform work teams and the new state tolerated the abuse of landlords and their families as a natural outcome of the indignation of the masses. For work teams, most peasants were not adequately aware of the source of their suffering and thus needed to be educated through open struggle and "speaking bitterness" (*suku*) sessions, where they were empowered to confront landlords.³ In this sense, the Party directly fomented the violence.

It is in the context of promoting peasants' hatred of landlords that the image of the landlord Huang Shiren (literally and ironically meaning "Huang who has been benevolent for an era") was created. According to He Jingzhi, one of the authors of the earliest versions of the opera, the story about a "white-haired goddess" spread in the Communist border region in northwest Hebei in 1940, and the living "goddess," who was worshipped by local villagers, was later found out by an inquisitive communist cadre to be a peasant girl with a bitter past. Around 1931, a wicked landlord drove the girl's father to commit suicide on the pretext of collecting rent, and he carried off the girl and raped her. Learning that the girl was pregnant, the landlord planned to kill her so he could take another woman as his official wife. With the help of a kindhearted maidservant, the girl fled and hid in a mountain cave, where she gave birth. Because she was often hungry and cold and was seldom in the sun, the girl's hair turned white, He Jingzhi continues, and the villagers sacrificed to her because they thought she was a goddess. Finally, the seemingly anonymous but deeply moved

² The Communist Peng Pai started to organize peasants against landlords in Haifeng of Guangdong in July 1922; see Marks 1984: 174–219. Mao Zedong endorsed the radicalism among Hunan peasants in attacking local elites in his famous Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan based on his fieldwork in 1927; see Guillerma 1972: 115–120. Mao fully discussed the issues of unequal rural land distribution and class relations in his *Report from Xunwu*, written around 1930; see Mao 1990.

³ For land reform and mobilization of peasants, see Hinton 1966; Crook/Crook 1979; and Pepper 1978.

⁴ Cheng Yinghong (1999) challenges the authenticity of the original story as told by He Jingzhi, arguing that the cult of the white-haired goddess was deeply rooted in local folklore that was at odds with the political meanings called for by the Communists. So He Jingzhi and the other writers fabricated the story first to attack superstition, and then to promote the theme of class struggle. That said, we should keep in mind that since the May Fourth Movement, dramas had often drawn from current events to create a sense of authenticity (Lean 2007: 66–67). It is plausible to read *White-Haired Girl* and its claim of authenticity in the same light.

⁵ See Anonymous 1954: 51. In spite of this rhetoric of collectivity, scholars also point out the elitist status of intellectuals as leaders who evaluated and incorporated opinions from the masses in the process of revising *The White Haired Girl* (Ip 2010: 186).

⁶ In fact, it is culturally almost impossible for anyone to visit another family for any reason on New Year's Eve in China. Debts should be settled by the end of the year but not right on New Year's Eve.

cadre brought the girl out of the mountains and helped her start a new life.⁴ After initially pondering whether to turn the story into a libretto with an antisuperstition theme, the communist writers He Jingzhi and Ding Yi focused instead on the story's character as a superb folktale and on a political message that contrasts the suffering of the peasants in old China with their salvation in new China. In the preface to the English translation of the libretto, He Jingzhi emphasizes that the opera was actually a collective effort, with input from drama experts, artists, and peasants, all of whom enthusiastically watched rehearsals and made "excellent suggestions" during two major revisions in 1947 and 1949.⁵ The opera effectively aroused people's hatred of landlords. Once staged in Yan'an in 1945, *White-Haired Girl* became an immediate success, and peasants who watched it shouted: "Landlord Huang, you bad egg!" (Ho/Ting 1954: x).

Whereas Meng Yue (1993: 119–124) focuses on the changing image and sexuality of Xi'er, the daughter of Yang Bailao (literally meaning "Yang labors in vain") and the abused "white-haired girl" in the opera, I draw attention to Landlord Huang Shiren and examine his image and how it was modified over time. In the libretto of the five-act opera, which won a Stalin Prize in 1951, Huang Shiren is a landlord in his thirties and a widower who lost his wife the previous year. He is under pressure from his mother to remarry, but feels freer without a wife at home. He is convinced that "women are cheap as dirt." Huang is not only sexist but also cruel, because he forces Yang Bailao to pay rent by midnight on New Year's Eve, a particularly odious demand, given that New Year's is a precious time for family reunions, to highlight or exaggerate the brutality of the landlord in breaking social norms.⁶ Huang dispatches the family steward, Mu, to bring Yang to see him just as Yang returns after days of hiding to join his daughter for the evening celebrations. Yang is caught when he is preparing dinner, and Mu forces him to put his fingerprint on a prepared contract that gives his daughter up to offset the debt. Huang not only takes the daughter away from her father, he also robs Xi'er from her sweetheart, a

poor peasant youth named Dachun. The vicious nature of the landlord is thus twofold: he disrupts the father-daughter bond and undermines the traditional value of filial piety, and he severs the amorous bond between Xi'er and Dachun. In one scenario, when the steward Mu confronts Dachun, he boldly announces that "Hsi-erh [Xi'er] was promised to you before, but she belongs to our Landlord Huang now" (Ho/Ting 1954: 38).

Here the important message is that Landlord Huang not only exacts land rent from the peasant, but also severs family ties and deprives people of their basic rights to marriage and sex. The portrayal of the love between the virgin Xi'er and Dachun, followed by Huang Shiren's abduction and rape, might have stimulated deep agony and hatred among younger male peasants, who would easily identify with Dachun. Thus, Huang Shiren is not just "licentious and money-grubbing" (Wilkinson 1974: 169) in a general sense, but is also particularly evil in denying Dachun the basic right to sex by becoming a privileged competitor for Xi'er's body and chastity. At the end of the play, when Xi'er is rescued by Dachun, salvation is achieved on both levels. On the public and political level, Dachun, as a Communist army soldier and thus the embodiment of the Party, rescues an abused peasant girl; on the private and personal level, he liberates his own fiancée and redeems his own sin of being unable to help Xi'er when she was taken away. When Dachun presides over the public trial and, in later versions of the story, the execution of Huang Shiren, it should be natural that his public and private emotions are blended. This is exactly what the Land Reform Campaign and public struggle meetings aimed to do.

Yet, Huang Shiren is a complex character in the five-act opera. J. Norman Wilkinson correctly points out that Huang Shiren was not merely a stereotypical villain; he was given life. He sings and boasts, and he "preens himself on his ways with women, and on how easy it is to arrange to have any woman he fancies" (Wilkinson 1974: 169). He Jingzhi further complicated the image of Huang Shiren by mirroring the father-daughter relationship of Xi'er and Yang Bailao with the mother-son relationship of

Huang Shiren and his mother. Mrs. Huang is a stereotypical female landlord, a matriarch who is extremely demanding and abusive to Xi'er. The opera portrays Huang Shiren, however, as a typical dutiful son who is submissive to his mother. He attends to his mother's health, comforts her, and follows her instructions on how to deal with the pregnant Xi'er. Although Huang Shiren says in private that he would rather sleep around than get married, he never defies his mother when she pushes him into a second marriage, which he finally accepts. In terms of treating their widowed parents, Xi'er and Huang Shiren both live up to the cultural expectations of dutiful children. At the same time, Huang Shiren seems very concerned about how his friends and the bride's family respond to his relationship with Xi'er. Regarding Xi'er's pregnancy, Huang says to his mother: "If outsiders hear of this, it will be too bad," and Mrs. Huang replies, "If the bride's family hears of it we will be in an awkward position" (Ho/Ting 1954: 57). This conversation ironically suggests that impregnating a poor peasant girl and housemaid is far from an accepted norm among Chinese rural elites, and it is as scandalous among landlords as it is among peasants.

The theme that the landlord undermines the marriage of Xi'er and Dachun is only hinted at in the opera in the revised 1949 script; however, in the 1950 feature film *White-Haired Girl*, the mutual love and upcoming marriage between Xi'er and Dachun are enhanced. Unlike the opera, which starts with the depiction of the father-daughter relationship, the film starts by demonstrating the close relationship between Xi'er, Dachun, and parents on both sides: Xi'er's widower father and Dachun's apparently widowed mother. The film portrays the two families laboring together in the field, helping each other. The conversation among the two adults and a concerned neighbor, Old Zhao, is dotted with references to "wedding cake" and comments such as "Xi'er can't go wrong getting married to him [Dachun]." The film even goes so far as to suggest that Xi'er is taken away one day before her own wedding. Whereas the opera mentions only that Yang Bailao brings his daughter a red ribbon to tie her hair on New

Year's Eve, the film shows Dachun visiting Xi'er that night and giving her a hairpin and a velvet flower. Xi'er sings that "Rich people dress up when they marry. My father has no money to buy nice clothes."⁷ Yet, in the earlier, opera version, there is no mention of Xi'er's upcoming wedding. As already mentioned, the film's emphasis on Huang Shiren, a bald, middle-aged man, destroying the happy wedlock of Xi'er and Dachun in a village where men are so poor that they often stay single into their fifties makes Huang's image much more deplorable than that of a landlord who only violates the subsistence ethic in the landowner-tenant relationship.

The opera *White-Haired Girl* was first adapted for ballet in 1958, when it was used at a reception to entertain a visiting Japanese ballet troupe. In 1965, it became a revolutionary modern ballet (Wilkinson 1974: 171–172), and that ballet version was filmed in 1972 (Clark 1987: 165). The image of Huang Shiren becomes even worse in the ballet: now he and his bailiff, Mu, kill Yang Bailao when he tries to resist and protect his daughter, whereas in the opera and the feature film, Yang kills himself out of desperation. This narrative modification has two advantages: it further demonizes Huang Shiren as a murderer, and it makes Yang more heroic. But another modification is curious: Xi'er is not raped in the ballet. From the point of view of giving prominence to the peasant spirit of rebellion and struggle, it seems wise not to show Xi'er as a victim of sexual assault. Yet, this censoring seems to have equally sacrificed the symbolic power of rape, which can be understood as a violation of female chastity and male sexual rights.

Wilkinson reminds us that letting a seven months' pregnant woman dance ballet is technically awkward and problematic (Wilkinson 1974: 172). Rosemary A. Roberts argues that the elimination of the rape in the ballet version of *White-Haired Girl* suggests a loss of male potency in Landlord Huang as "counterrevolutionary," while Xi'er is increasingly empowered and masculinized and now represents "the revolution" (Roberts 2010: 253). I argue that the erasure of rape does not mean that Huang Shiren loses his male potency, because in fact he gets more violent than in earlier

⁷ The translation here is adopted from *White-Haired Girl—Film Script*, translated by Pete Nestor and Tom Moran, published by MCLC Resource Center, 2006.

versions by directly killing Yang Bailao. A more plausible explanation here lies in the narrative transition from the old model of landlord as victimizer and peasant as victim in the opera and the film, to a new model in which, as Roberts suggests, the confrontation is between revolution and counterrevolution—or to use Joe C. Huang's terminology, it was a shift of focus from "social" dimension to "ideological" standard in the portrayal of landlord (Huang 1971:349). It is acceptable for counterrevolutionaries to torture or murder, but not to rape a revolutionary, because rape is considered more humiliating than physical violence in Chinese culture. In the process of Xi'er's rising empowerment, she also increasingly safeguards her own chastity and loyalty (Meng 1993: 284). Indeed, both the opera and the feature film often portray Xi'er and Yang Bailao as scared, trembling, crying, and confused in front of the threat of Huang, Mu, and Huang's mother. Yet in the ballet, the image of intimidated peasants is replaced by images of rebellion and struggle. As Joe C. Huang correctly points out, the portrayal of villainous landlords must tread a fine line: if they are too powerful or too cunning, then they might appear to overpower the heroes and thus become "antiheroes" in the eyes of the audience (Huang 1973: 47). Moreover, the censure of rape is a convenient technique of narrative. When the story reaches its happy ending with Dachun and Xi'er starting their new life, Xi'er is still a virgin, and the revengeful Dachun does not have to face the awkward situation of raising Huang Shiren and Xi'er's illegitimate child.⁸

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House published a series of children's comic book (*lianhuanhua*) adaptations of the stories from the model operas.⁹ The 196-page comic book *White-Haired Girl* is adapted from the ballet version of the story (Benshe 2010). The comic book portrays the bond between Xi'er and Dachun as centered on class feelings, but also suggests that they are two youths who "share breath and destiny" and "look forward to the beautiful future." Rather than dispatch his bailiff, Mu, to talk to Yang Bailao on New

⁸ I disagree with Meng Yue's (1993: 343) analogy of Xi'er's salvation to the story to Cinderella. In the Cinderella story, the prince as the rescuer is not related to the past of Cinderella, and they do not know each other before the ballroom party. Yet, Dachun is in a relationship with Xi'er. He fails to even help her, but comes back as a hero with a mixed mission of seeking reunion, avenging her suffering, and redeeming his own inability. Perhaps Dachun is closer to Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

⁹ It is noteworthy that they were reprinted in 2010 as "Reader of Outstanding Chinese Comic Books" without any modification to their content or artistic style.

and comic book versions. Huang transforms from a landlord who exploits tenants, takes away a tenant's daughter, indirectly causes the suicide of the father, and rapes the girl to a landlord who undermines the marriage and chastity of the peasant girl, and finally is portrayed as a clumsy molester and brutal murderer—a caricature to showcase the stupidity and cruelty of the landlord class. At the same time, Yang Bailao and Xi'er become heroic fighters by eliminating their former timidity under the terrorization of the tyrant. The official propaganda, and authors such as He Jingzhi, place a special emphasis on the "collective" character of *White-Haired Girl* and its nature as a work of the "Chinese people themselves"; however, the delineation described here demonstrates an implicit but clear scheme of propaganda workers such as He Jingzhi, Ding Yi, and the directors of the film and the ballet in continuously demonizing the image of a fictional tyrant-landlord.

Museum, Sculptures, and the Imagination of Class Oppression: The Case of Liu Wencai

Another important figure created by cultural and propaganda workers in China is the notorious Liu Wencai (1887–1949), a landlord in western Sichuan whose luxurious manor and "water dungeon" (in which he locked up tenants who failed to pay rent) were made nationally famous through a sculptural display entitled the "Rent-Collection Courtyard." Unlike the fictional Huang Shiren, Liu Wencai was a historical figure, a wealthy and powerful landowner, merchant, and local aristocrat in Dayi County, Sichuan. In July 1957, while the Anti-Rightist Movement was under way, Mao initiated a socialist education campaign to address the peasants' resistance to rapid collectivization. A formal directive was issued in August of that year, requiring a "large-scale socialist education campaign targeting the rural population" (Vogel 1969: 205). Between August and September of 1958, the central government's Ministry of Culture convened two conferences on antiquities and museums in Zhengzhou and Hefei; the resolution

passed in the conferences called for campaigns of "establishing museums in every county" and "establishing an exhibit room in every village." The Bureau of Culture of Sichuan Province, in its own directive, decided that because the big landlord Liu Wencai of Dayi County was very prominent in exploiting and oppressing peasants, his manor should be preserved and transformed into a museum. In October of that year, the Party Committee of Dayi announced the formation of a preparatory committee to construct the museum, with members coming from the Propaganda Department of the County Party Committee, Rural Work Department, Industrial Bureau, and the Bureau of Culture, Education, and Health (Xiaoshu 2008: 4).

The propaganda upsurge of 1958 corresponded to the beginning of a widespread famine caused largely by the high level of state procurement of grain from local communes. In Anren Commune of Dayi County (the former Anren Town, where Liu Wencai lived), three fourths of the agricultural output was taken away by the state in 1958, and by February 1959, even the grain stored for household consumption was seized. Starting from the spring of 1959, peasants of the Western Sichuan Plain (where Dayi is located), which had long been known as the agricultural breadbasket of Sichuan, witnessed waves of starving refugees fleeing to cities.¹⁰ There is a clear correlation between the famine, on the one hand, and the enhanced propaganda and boom in the construction of museums, on the other hand: the state needed to convince resentful peasants that the years before 1949 were much worse than the present and that they should not lose confidence in the essential rightness of socialism and collectivization. The past was reconstructed to legitimize the present, and to reassure peasants, and the cultural producers themselves, of the superiority of socialism. The reconstruction of the Liu Wencai Manor must be seen in this context.

During the Chinese New Year of 1959, the preparatory committee held an unofficial but open exhibition of objects and property formerly belonging to the manor. The artifacts, which had been taken from the manor and divided among the peasants during land reform, were collected

¹⁰ See Dongfu 2008: 140, 188. A chart of Sichuan's grain output and demography shows 1958 as the first year that saw a decrease in the Sichuan population. The population reduction continued into 1961 (Dongfu 2008: 370).

and registered for the exhibition. The trial exhibition had nineteen exhibition halls, organized into three main categories: Liu's luxurious life; his complex social network, which involved officialdom, bandits, warlords, and a secret society; and the instruments he used to torture the laboring people. In 1960, the local government designated the exhibition in the Liu Wencai manor as a site for class education, and wax figures were introduced to showcase his crimes. The seventeen dioramas of wax figures were life-sized and showed how Liu Wencai and his bodyguards beat peasants and jailed them in a water dungeon, raped women, killed babies, and forced peasants to mourn the death of Liu's dog. The museum gazetteer admits that these exhibits "concentrate many landlords' crimes and are presented artistically" (Xiaoshu 2008: 11). In that same year, one cultural official from Chengdu questioned the emphasis on Liu Wencai's extravagant lifestyle, because it might only make the audience envy his lifestyle and not stimulate their class hatred; instead, the exhibit should shift its focus to the horror and cruelty of the landlord (Xiaoshu 2008:18). After Mao issued his warning to "never forget class struggle" in 1962, the manor underwent a new round of additions, which were completed in 1964 at the climax of the Socialist Education campaign, a prelude to the Cultural Revolution. The main change this time was to add dioramas that depicted the rebellion of the tenants, a change that is analogous to the empowerment of Yang Bailao and Xi'er in later versions of *White-Haired Girl*. The museum and its visualization, as with other war and revolution-related museums in China, played an important role in creating a discourse of victimization.¹¹

In November 1963, a pocket-sized picture album was published to present the story of Liu Wencai to readers. Titled "The Evil Manor of a Landlord," the album, which reached 730,000 copies by 1965, calls Liu Wencai a "living king of Hell" and offers photos and cartoons that illustrate his extravagant lifestyle and cruel exploitation of tenants. The album stresses that Liu Wencai had a water dungeon, with an iron cage full of knives and iron thorns, built behind his Buddha shrine; after the

¹¹ For a discussion of post-Mao museums that emphasize Japanese atrocities and commemorate Chinese resistance, see Denton 2007: 248.

dungeon was finished, all the peasants who were forced to build it were murdered.¹² The water dungeon myth was further enhanced by the public sharing of Leng Yueying's life stories. She was said to have been jailed in the water dungeon a few days after she gave birth because her family failed to pay its rent. Born in 1911, the peasant woman Leng Yueying was sold into a landlord's house as a servant girl at eight and became a beggar at ten. During the Land Reform campaign, Leng became an activist who participated in the local anti-banditry and anti-tyrant campaigns, and was recognized by the government as a model. As a party member and activist in the collectivization campaign, Leng led a mutual aid group and was awarded the prize of "outstanding worker." From the 1960s to the 1970s, Leng made numerous reports to the masses and students, accusing Liu Wencai of putting her into the water dungeon inside his manor. Post-Cultural Revolution biographical accounts of Leng have drawn attention to the politically motivated fabrication of the water dungeon. Xiaoshu (2008), for instance, points out that Leng Yueying once mentioned, around 1951, that she had been locked up by Liu Wencai's nephew, Liu Bohua, but to present a more "concentrated" version of that reality, the nephew's basement was changed to Liu Wencai's water dungeon. In 1958, a basement room in Liu's manor was filled with water, and Leng Yueying told an audience that she was thrown into the water dungeon for seven days because she owed grain to Liu. In 1962, work of investigative journalism about Leng Yueying, titled "The Person Who Survived the Water Dungeon," was published in the most influential literary magazine in China, *People's Literature*. Leng Yueying was invited to become a main speaker at numerous "Recalling Bitterness, Pondering Sweetness" (*yiku sitian*) meetings, and her story was also incorporated into high school textbooks.

In a 1967 version of Leng Yueying's report at a recalling bitterness meeting, she told the story of how Liu Wencai's bodyguards grabbed grain from her home and forced her to see Liu a day after she gave birth to her second child:

¹² See Sichuan sheng wenhua ju meishi gongzuoshi 1965: 27.

After I was dragged into Liu Wencai's manor, I made a few turns and walked down a few steps, and then I smelt a bad, bloody odor . . . the water was as high as my waist. What kind of water was this? It was icy cold and so smelly that I wanted to throw up. I fell down, and caught a human bone with one hand and stepped on a human skull. The running dog of Liu Wencai used a stick to push me into an iron cage. I lost consciousness. . . . I woke up because of the pain . . . there was one time I opened my eyes and with the dim light I saw something in the water dungeon: the bones of dead men were everywhere; iron nails stuck out at the top and bottom of the iron cage that made it impossible for you to sit. I was inside the cage, and outside it I saw three men, sitting and soaked in water. One of them died the next day. (Xiaoshu 2008: 31)

After this sensational description, Leng Yueying explained how she was able to survive such a hellish place. She went on to say that her husband borrowed money at a high interest to secure her release, and Liu Wencai also thought it inauspicious to let a woman who had just given birth die inside his manor (Xiaoshu 2008: 29–31).

The water dungeon myth has been questioned for decades. As early as 1964, one former friend of Liu Wencai, Wang Anmao, who had been to Liu's manor more than ten times, denied the existence of the water dungeon. Wang asserted that Liu had an opium storage room, which burned down in 1945, and that it was only then that he built a basement in the same space; Leng Yueying's stories about being imprisoned in 1937 (sometimes 1943) were not just inconsistent, they were impossible. One of Liu Wencai's concubines confirmed that the room later presented as a water dungeon was just a basement; it was built to collect underground water during the summer and the residents inside the manor seldom went there (Xiaoshu 2008: 36–37). In 1981, a staff member of the Liu Wencai Manor museum visited Leng Yueying to verify her water dungeon stories. At the age of seventy-two, Leng said she had forgotten how old she was when she was jailed, and she could not remember if she was thrown into an iron cage.

During my own visit to Liu's manor in the summer of 2011, I saw that the basement now carries a new plate that identifies it as "Opium Storehouse" (fig.2). When I interviewed Liu Xiaofei, Liu Wencai's grandson, he said it was not even an opium storage room—just a basement. Liu Xiaofei also said it was absurd to think that a landlord would bring a woman who had just given birth into his own manor, because postpartum women were considered unclean and were supposed to be isolated for their recuperation period. Finally, Leng Yueying admitted that everything she said had been prepared by the Dayi County's Party Committee (Xiaoshu 2008: 38–39). When I visited the Liu manor in 2011, the museum's guide explained to visitors that Leng Yueying finally admitted that the Party Committee told her what to say, and I heard remarks from visitors such as: "Lying! She was lying!" On a plaque on the wall, the introduction about Leng Yueying

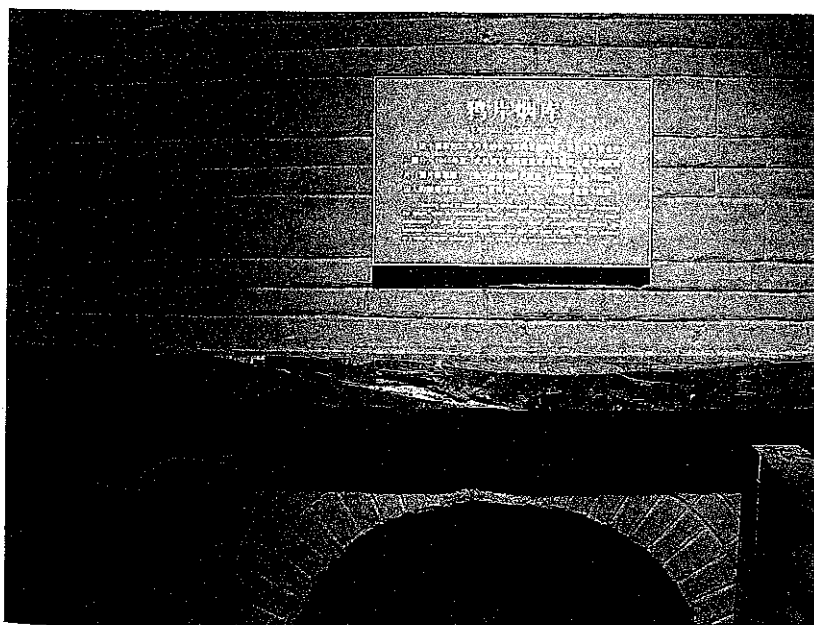


Figure 2: The former water dungeon is now called Opium Storehouse. Author's photo.

deleted any mention of the water dungeon experience; instead, it says that her story was well known in that "unusual" historical time period.

Leng Yueying was a real person who told a fabricated story, whereas the Rent Collection Courtyard sculptures were a work of art aimed at condensing the entire story of the "old society" into the story of Liu Wencai and his notorious manor. In 1964, the director of the exhibition hall at the manor proposed the creation of clay sculptures to represent scenes of peasants' payment of rent before 1949, after realizing that merely displaying several objects of rent collecting was not engaging enough. The Propaganda Department of the Prefectural Party Committee approved the idea and dispatched investigative teams to villages to collect materials. The team interviewed a folk artist named Cai, who was famous for making clay figures, met with former tenants of Liu Wencai, and visited Buddhist temples to draw inspiration from the sculptures of arhats. The team also invited actors and actresses from a Sichuan Opera troupe to perform (in Wang Guanyi 2011). After three revisions, the work team changed the focus from one family paying rent to multiple families paying rent so as to "jump out of a narrow circle and to analyze and to display the contradiction and struggle between rural landlord class and rural peasant class in the semi-feudal, semi-colonial society" (Xiaoshu 2008: 44). To accomplish this ambitious project, the exhibition hall sought help in 1965 from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, and some faculty members and students joined the project, along with the staff of the exhibition hall and local folk artists. Though with all these people collaborating on the project it is difficult to attribute the resulting sculptures to any single artist, the propaganda workers set the goal and the standard. The Sichuan Provincial Culture Bureau laid down the principles of artistic creation: the sculptures should represent the miserable life of the peasants, but also their unyielding rebellion; they should demonstrate the viciousness and cruelty of landlords, but also their fears and vulnerabilities; class struggle in the old society should be the thematic keynote (Xiaoshu 2008: 44-45). When

completed and open to the public, the Rent Collection Courtyard was an immediate success. It was praised by an editor of *People's Daily*, the famous cartoonist Hua Junwu, and a leading scholar of aesthetics, Wang Zhaowen, both of whom made special tours from Beijing to Dayi to visit. In his article, Hua Junwu called the Rent Collection Courtyard a "Great Revolution of the Sculpture Circles" (in Wang Guanyi 2011). Replica sculptures, which were made to meet the demands of audiences outside of Sichuan, were then exhibited in Beijing in December 1965 at the National Art Museum of China, and the cultural bureaucrat, historian, poet, and philologist Guo Moruo wrote a poem about them. Zhou Yang, a leading cultural bureaucrat, saw in the sculptures a new direction for contemporary Chinese art that emphasized concreteness, vividness, and emotion. He also commented that the success of the Rent Collection Courtyard changed his stereotypical view that Chinese sculpture is ideologically backward and incomprehensible to the masses. Peng Zhen, the Party boss of Beijing and a member of the Politburo, said that the two works that best represented the landlord's oppression of peasants were *White-Haired Girl* and Rent Collection Courtyard because they revealed the truth of history by undermining the old pattern of beautifying the landlord class (Xiaoshu 2008: 49–52).

The finished group of sculptures features 114 life-sized figures under five main themes that follow a narrative of paying the rent, checking the rent grain, settling accounts, forcing rent, and rebellion. Though the figures are made of clay, the eyes are made with glass to enhance their real-life effect. To appeal to the audience's family values, the Rent Collection Courtyard sculpture places special emphasis on how peasant family bonds are severed. The English-language propaganda book titled *Rent Collection Courtyard: Sculptures of Oppression and Revolt*, first published in 1968, used the following caption to win the sympathy of the audience: "This exhausted woman with her children, all skin and bones, brings her last half bag of grain to pay the rent." Mortgaging her child to clear the debt, the same theme of *White-Haired Girl*, recurs in one sculpture where a blind old

man has to sell his granddaughter to the Lius as a bondmaid in lieu of the rent he owes, even though the girl is his only living relative. One mother is portrayed as gripping the fence while her children cry. Another woman is separated from her baby and her mother-in-law because she had to feed Liu Wencai with her milk, because Liu has to "drink fresh human milk every day," according to the propaganda book. That Liu Wencai had to be fed human milk is likely another myth, much like the water dungeon. According to the tour guide's script in the 1960s, a local peasant woman named Luo Erniang breast-fed Liu Wencai; the bitter story was used to appeal to the emotional bonds between parents and children:

At that time, Luo Erniang was dragged in just like that because she was not able to pay rent, and her own child was starving to death. In the beginning, Liu Wencai let Luo Erniang squeeze several cups of her milk every day. Later he asked Luo Erniang to breast-feed him directly. Once, Luo Erniang just finished feeding her own starving child, and Liu Wencai wanted milk, so Luo Erniang sent her nipple into the mosquito net. Liu Wencai sucked it and there was no milk, so he bit hard. Immediately, fresh blood gushed. Luo Erniang was so hurt that she rolled over on the floor and the scar is still there on her nipple. It records the deep hatred of the laboring people! Comrades, who does not have parents? Who does not have families? Who was not born to a mother? If your mom suffered like this, how would you feel? (in Liu Xiaofei 2011).

In various speaking bitterness meetings, the peasant woman, Luo Erniang, repeated the story of how she breast-fed Liu Wencai and how her nipple was bitten. She even said that Liu attempted to rape her. In an article written by Liu Wencai's grandson, Liu Xiaofei, who has spent the past twenty years trying to clear his grandfather's name, describes how Luo Erniang's narration uses licentious language to describe the sexual harassment. The audience so despised her narrative that her own son also criticized her for being too graphic. According to Liu Xiaofei, Luo's nephew told him that she never set foot in the manor. The nephew also said that Luo

Erniang did not mention things such as breast-feeding until the Socialist Education Campaign of the 1960s, and that she obviously did it under the guidance of a work team member, Zhu Binkang, a female vice director of the Organization Department of the county, who lived in the home of Luo Erniang for a few months during the campaign.

Luo Erniang's story differs from Leng Yueying's in that it shows that Liu Wencai was not just brutal and sadistic toward his tenants, but also was a sexual pervert. None of the materials explains why exactly an adult man such as Liu Wencai thinks he needs to be breast-fed every day.¹³ Propaganda workers, very likely including the female cadre who lived in the home of Luo Erniang, are convinced that adults drinking fresh human milk is a powerful symbol of extravagance and decadence undertaken at the cost of Luo's own child's needs. The sense of deprivation and competition here is similar to Xi'er being taken away from Dachun. However, the added twist of Liu Wencai sucking Luo Erniang's nipple and biting it when there's no milk compromises his male potency by making him infantile, though, as with Huang Shiren, Liu is a balding older man. Luo Erniang did not say that Liu actually raped her, so she preserved her chastity, but Liu does violate her body by injuring it. Another interesting phenomenon is the open and public description of breast-feeding and biting by the woman herself. If it is true, as Liu Xiaofei learns from the interviews he conducted, that Luo had never been to the Liu Wencai manor and was not an attractive woman, and if she was "the ugliest and the most unclean" (Liu Xiaofei 2011) woman in town, then her repeated narration is a kind of sexual fantasy for Luo Erniang, who subconsciously desired Liu Wencai's attention or an opportunity to gain the political limelight.

A television documentary produced by Beijing Television Station in 1966, titled *Rent Collection Courtyard*, demonstrates the ideological manipulation of the sculptures and how bitterness stories, as told through the sculptures, were interpreted politically and emotionally. The documentary opens with a voiceover narrator reciting a quotation from

¹³ The drinking of human milk by adult landlords was already something of a trope in leftist literature in Republican China. In Wu Zuxiang's 1932 story "Young Master Gets His Tonic" (Guanguan de bupin), the young master of a landlord family who is recovering from a car accident drinks the milk of a local peasant woman.

¹⁴ This is a quote from Mao's article "Abandon Fantasy; Be Prepared for Struggle" (Diudiao huanxiang, zhunbei douzheng), written in 1949, right before the full-scale Communist triumph against the Nationalist Party.

Mao Zedong: "The existence of class and class struggle is a fact; some people deny this fact and deny the existence of class struggle. This is wrong. The theory that attempts to deny the existence of class struggle is a totally erroneous theory."¹⁴ The documentary moves on to footage showing how the peasants of Dayi work happily and diligently to build socialism under the leadership of the CCP. The narrator stresses that the proletariat must seize the gun and the official seal to safeguard the good life. In contrast with the "sweetness" in the new society, the camera first shoots a recalling bitterness session, in which Leng Yueying tells her story of being jailed by Liu Wencai for seven days and seven nights as tearful spectators listen. The documentary then highlights Liu's luxurious life, his extravagant bedroom and consumption of opium, his "violation" of more than five hundred women, and his killing of innocent peasants. Many stories in the Rent Collection Courtyard are centered on family separation. It is true, as Ban Wang puts it (1997: 203), that "one salient feature of political culture is the subtle way it draws on the individual's infantile emotional dependence on parents and the libidinal need for a love-subject." In commenting on a desperate mother who has to pay her last bag of grain to Liu, the female voiceover states: "Look at this widow with her son and daughter! They eat wild vegetables all year long and nearly starve to death. The little daughter carried on the back can no longer suck mom's milk! She is not able to cry or to move." The camera then moves to the older son. The voiceover goes on: "How can a kid know the bitterness of mom? Mom, I am hungry! I am hungry!" Sorrowful music begins as the camera zooms in on a close-up of the woman's face.

The exhibition at the Liu Wencai manor and the accompanying Rent Collection Courtyard sculptures are just as powerful as the writing and performances of *White-Haired Girl*. Many visitors shed tears and shouted slogans while touring the manor. As with *White-Haired Girl*, the sculptures went through a process of state-manipulated modification, which added to the horrific and scary atmosphere at the manor-museum. But the

additions to the Liu Wencai myth are more prominent because Liu was explicitly made to serve as an archetype of the whole landlord class, or, as the 1966 TV documentary calls him, a “four-in-one: landlord, bureaucrat, warlord, and bandit.” Whereas the Huang Shiren story follows a relatively simple plotline of forcing rent, killing a tenant, and attempting to rape a peasant girl, all of the imaginable evils of the exploitative class—from locking up and beating people, forcing rent payment, separating families, drinking human milk, and sexual harassment to its connection with the Nationalist government, warlords, and secret societies—were “concentrated” in the figure of Liu Wencai. From the very beginning, the Rent Collection Courtyard sculptures highlighted the theme of rebellion, a theme that was gradually inserted into later versions of *White-Haired Girl*. Rent Collection Courtyard gains authenticity through its sophisticated and realistic depiction of the rent payment procedures, such as checking the quality of the grain by winnowing. It also tells multiple stories, which sends a strong message that there was not just one family, but a whole class, that suffered in the old society. More important, with the real Liu Wencai out of the picture and his manor and its artifacts still present as a testament, fabrications about his life and the atrocities he committed were easily accepted and internalized as historical truth. In the 1970s, state propaganda even went so far as to portray Liu as a preacher and guardian of the Way of Confucius and Mencius, along with Lin Biao.¹⁵

Assessing the responses of audiences to the cultural production of Maoist China can be difficult.¹⁶ The fictionalization of Liu Wencai as a political symbol of the evil landlord class was reinforced through horrific museum displays, sensational narrations, vivid sculptures, speaking bitterness presentations based on “real” experiences, documentaries, and textbooks and eventually became one of the most enduring and influential socialist myths. That mythic representation is conveyed nicely in a conversation between a journalist and a fifth-grade student after a “Recalling Bitterness, Pondering Sweetness” meeting held in the manor:

¹⁵ Sichuan sheng Dayi jieji jiaoyu zhanlanguan 1974: 24.

¹⁶ Paul Clark has noticed this difficulty in study of the Cultural Revolution. See Clark 2008: 3–4.

Q: What is the landlord class?

A: Liu Wencai.

Q: What is called exploitation and oppression?

A: Liu Wencai means exploitation and oppression.

Q: Why was there a Liu Wencai before Liberation?

A: Because he was rich.

Q: Then why did the Communist Party lead the people to overthrow the old society?

A: To knock down Liu Wencai. (Xiaoshu 2008: 61)

My own 2011 interview with a man in Anren Town, where the Liu Wencai manor is located, reveals different attitudes of the local people. When I asked Mr. Yue, the owner of a family-run teahouse, about Liu Wencai, he said he was a middle school student in the 1960s and heard the report of Leng Yueying and the water dungeon. I asked him if he believed it, and he replied, "How can you not believe it? I did not grow up in the old society, and so of course would believe what she said." "But it has been denied now," I pressed. Mr. Yue was not surprised. He said, with a touch of cynicism: "They said there was such a thing, and then there was. If now they say there is not, then there is not. That's the Party!" Also during my visit to the Anren Town and the Rent Collection Courtyard, I noticed that the number of dioramas today has shrunk, and the statues that emphasize the collective rebellion and revolution are no longer on display. In his email to me in 2013, Liu Xiaofei confirmed that the figures emphasizing class struggle were removed in 1985 on the order of the Sichuan Cultural Bureau chief. Given the increasingly tense conflict between the post-Mao neoliberal state of China and society today, the government had reason to worry that the propaganda about revolt might backfire.¹⁷

Liu Wencai's bad reputation has recently been challenged by historians, journalists, and, more important, his grandson, Liu Xiaofei, who was born in 1946 and has never married because of his terrible family background and his lifelong obsession with contesting the bad reputation imposed on his grandfather. These efforts have had some effect: the influential

¹⁷ When I visited the manor, the tour guide working for the manor-museum jokingly made an analogy between Liu's appropriation of tenants' property and the violent demolition of houses in today's China.

liberal newspaper *Southern Metropolis* published an article on March 2, 2011 that depicts Liu Wencai as a rich but benevolent local gentry elite and philanthropist who founded the famous private Wencai Middle School in 1947 and donated personal funds to road construction and water projects (Han 2011). Located in the town where Liu lived, this middle school was the most prestigious in the county, largely because of Liu Wencai's generous investments and dedicated, successful management. In my 2011 visit to the town, I found that the middle school now has only a front gate and empty buildings. It was renamed "Anren Middle School" to avoid mentioning the name of Liu Wencai, but on a plaque by the front gate, there is a fair assessment of Liu Wencai's contribution to the founding of the school (fig.3).

Contesting the Bad Reputation: The Case of Zhou Bapi

Rape and threats to motherhood are common tropes in propaganda depictions of "enemies,"¹⁸ as we have seen in the preceding discussions of Huang Shiren and Liu Wencai. The case of Zhou Bapi, another notorious, semifictional landlord, reveals how a bad reputation could be constructed in a more comical way. That image of Zhou Bapi was then contested in the 1990s, with its climate of pluralism and historical revisionism, as part of a wave of disenchantment with the state's control of collective memory and the production of official historical narratives, initiated and supported mainly by people outside the state apparatus. I choose to analyze Zhou Bapi as a distinctive case (literally, "Zhou who rips off your skin"—his real name was Zhou Chunfu) for the following reasons. First, Zhou is not as brutal as either Huang Shiren or Liu Wencai; instead, he acts, as I discuss here, in silly, comedic ways to exploit the peasants. Second, the relationship between Landlord Zhou and the peasants is not tenancy, as in the two previously discussed examples, but employment between landlord and hired laborers. Third, the man who tells the story of Zhou Bapi, the grandson of the prototype of Zhou Bapi, has published a book to contest the official memory. Fourth, the representation of Zhou Bapi's story is as comic as the

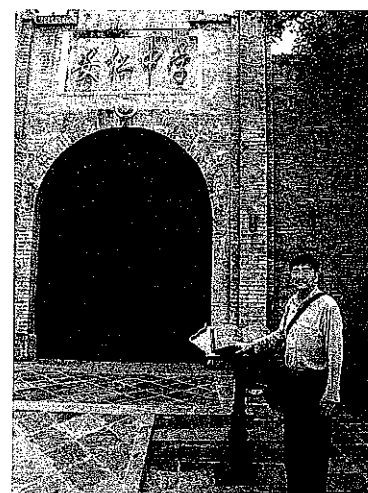


Figure 3: Liu Xiaofei standing in front of the Middle School founded by Liu Wencai. Author's photo.

¹⁸ For an analysis of propaganda art and the pattern of portraying the enemy, see Keen 1986.

story itself: it was later transformed into a puppet show targeting children.

Zhou Bapi appears in another modern myth, known as "Rooster Crowing at Midnight," (Banye jijiao) originally a chapter in the semi-autobiographical account of Gao Yubao, a self-educated former laborer who joined the PLA and later became a writer. In the postscript of the second version of the book, titled *Gao Yubao*, Gao recounts how he started to write about his past. He was an orphan from Liaoning who lost his parents and younger brother because of exploitation and abuse at the hands of the Japanese army and Chinese traitors. To survive, Gao became a child laborer at age nine. On November 19, 1947, he joined the PLA when it was carrying out its New-Style Army Organization, which used the approach of "speaking bitterness" and self-examination to promote the morale of the soldiers. Gao asserts that it was this campaign that helped him make the decision to write his bitter past and accuse the evil old society. His superiors and comrades supported his decision and helped him become literate. Gao Yubao had the life experience and desire to write, but his writing was also improved by "experts" and remolded into fiction through "editing" and "concentration." Gao also started to use imagination after he realized that "*xiaoshuo*" (novel) legitimized his fictionalization, and inserted political content voluntarily, very likely under the direct guidance of his collaborators and copy editors, to serve the agenda of Party propaganda. However, because the book's title is also the name of the author, and the story is told in the first person, the fictional *Gao Yubao* appears to be an autobiography based on fact.

That the whole story is fictional provides a different perspective to revisit the famous anecdote called "rooster crowing at midnight." As Gao tells it (1972: 93–96), the hired laborers are confused about why, as soon as they fall asleep, the landlord's rooster crows and then Zhou Bapi drives them up onto the mountain to work in the dark. One night, because of diarrhea, Gao Yubao visits the outhouse frequently. Suddenly, he sees a suspicious man approaching the chicken coop. He wonders who is stealing

chickens, but thinks that it wouldn't be such a bad thing for the annoying rooster to be stolen. To his surprise, Yubao witnesses the thief mimicking the sound of a rooster crowing, which provokes all roosters in the coop to crow. Yubao sees that the "thief" is Zhou Bapi, but does not say anything. After a while, Zhou shouts, "Hurry up and go up to the mountain! The rooster has crowed!" Yubao relates what he saw to the adults, who go to the mountains but do not work. The author, Gao Yubao, explains that Zhou uses this method, a unique skill passed down to him from several generations, to exhaust and frustrate his laborers so they will quit without receiving their yearly pay. Although the adults are infuriated that they cannot come up with a good way to deal with Zhou, the young Yubao has an idea. He asks all his fellow workers to prepare sticks. The next night, they ambush Zhou when he sneaks into the coop and beat him as if they are beating a real thief. One laborer asks mischievously: We thought it was thief. You are our boss. Why do you come to catch chickens at midnight? " Zhou almost weeps, saying, "Don't mention it. I was sleeping in my room, and I have no idea what drew me here."

Zhou Bapi has the stereotypical bad qualities of an evil landlord, but he is not particularly bright nor as cruel as Huang Shiren or Liu Wencai. The story is entertaining for at least two reasons. First, the image of Zhou Bapi working so hard to mimic the crowing of a rooster is funny and ridiculous. Second, there is the contrast between the silly landlord and the clever child whose wisdom surpasses the landlord (not to mention the adult workers), who can do nothing in the face of his trickery. The authenticity of the story, however, is obviously problematic, because a rooster will not crow in response to a human call. The book never explains what sort of agreement Zhou has with his laborers, when their working day begins, what sort of work the laborers would be doing at the middle of the night, and who their field supervisor (who would also presumably have to get up after the rooster's crowing) is. All these problems notwithstanding, the story was accepted widely in China, and was included in textbooks and made into a

puppet show, which was filmed in 1964.

The fictionalization of the prototype of Zhou Bapi through Gao Yubao's writing, as well as later artistic creations, had the same detrimental effect on Zhou's own reputation and his descendants as the Rent Collection Courtyard had on Liu Wencai and Liu's children and grandchildren. In the book *No Rooster Crows at Midnight: Revealing the True Face of Landlord Zhou Bapi*, Zhou Chunfu's great-grandson, Meng Lingqian, details his family history, the fabrication of the Zhou Bapi story, and his face-to-face meeting and conversation with Gao Yubao. According to Meng, who based his book on archival research, interviews, and personal memories, his great-grandfather was a self-made man who accumulated one hundred mu of land through his own hard work and careful management, until he died in 1947 during land reform. Zhou Chunfu was harsh to his sons, but polite to his hired laborers. Meng questions the historicity of the Zhou Bapi story by raising the following issues. First, his interviews with some old men who had worked for the Zhou family show that Gao Yubao was never hired by Zhou Chunfu, so Gao could not have firsthand experience about how Zhou treated his workers. Meng's grandfather provided a testimonial that Gao Yubao visited the village in 1963, telling everyone that "Zhou Bapi" actually means "all landlords in the whole country," and he urged villagers not to deny the existence of such a person and the stories he wrote (Meng 2011: 35). Second, he argues that Gao Yubao did not actually write the novel. Gao's reminiscences in the 1990s state that he was illiterate until 1948, yet a mere three years later he magically published his autobiographical account of 200,000 Chinese characters; for Meng, this was far-fetched. More important, Meng found, in 2008, that the book purportedly written by Gao was actually written by another PLA writer, Guo Yongjiang (a.k.a. Huangcao), who was the associate editor-in-chief of *PLA Literature* in the early 1950s. Guo retired in 1956 when he was forty because of poor health, and also permanently lost any opportunity of claiming his coauthorship as a collaborator of Gao Yubao. His account of the process of writing the

story corresponds to Gao's own memory in a way: both admit that Gao was at first worried about the authenticity of the story, though he later accepted the notion that the book was written to educate the people and that absolute authenticity was not essential (Meng 2011: 196, 205). Third, Meng consulted an expert on husbandry who confirmed that crowing is a signal of a rooster's sexual maturity and the response of the optic nerve to the dim light of the early morning; in other words, a rooster will not crow in the middle of the night just to respond to the sound of a human mimicker (Meng 2011: 303–304). Meng Lingqian might sound overfastidious in defending his great-grandfather, but the Zhou Bapi story was a great trauma in his childhood. When he was a fourth-grade student, the inclusion of the story in his Chinese textbook humiliated him greatly: the teacher asked Meng to read the text; he stood up and did so, trembling, and with tears in his eyes, while his classmates giggled.¹⁹

Conclusion

Constructing a collective memory and social imagination of preliberation China has been a critical part of party-state propaganda since at least the 1950s. Academic historiography boosted the status of peasant uprisings in Chinese history and adhered to a Maoist paradigm of revolution and rebellion. But the memory was also shaped through a complex process of visualization and storytelling that created villains in film, opera, ballet, museums, cartoons, and puppet shows. To some extent, it was these fictional villains, and other people with bad reputations, who shaped the Chinese imagination of the past: a bitter, old society where the poor people were exploited, abused, and dehumanized. As one former Red Guard, who herself had beaten people during the Cultural Revolution, recounts in her memoir: "These are class enemies and bad people. Before Liberation they lived a decadent life, sucking the blood of the working people and treating our revolutionary martyrs brutally" (Zhai 1992: 96). Motivated by ideologies of class struggle and the need to prevent revisionism, the state

¹⁹ See Meng 2011: 219–220. When I interviewed Liu Xiaofei in June 2011, he told a similar story about how he was humiliated and tormented by the Liu Wencai stories taught in his elementary school.

mobilized writers, artists, filmmakers, and performing artists to visualize the old society, its bitterness, and its liberation from its shackles. One of the most influential landlords, the fictional Huang Shiren, was portrayed as greedy, cruel, and licentious, and the later revisions of the figure in different art forms gradually reduced him from a bad landlord to a caricature. The case of Liu Wencai shows, first, how the state orchestrated the creation of a museum and sculptures in Dayi County, using the name Liu Wencai to embody the whole landlord class; second, how the Rent Collection Courtyard sculptures appealed to a subtle dimension of Chinese political culture—specifically, family and the bond between parents and children—and third, how the oral testimonials of Leng Yueying and Luo Erniang, the two living female victims of Liu Wencai, were fabricated, and how their stories were later contested. The third story shows another unique case in which a real landlord was demonized by an illiterate soldier and his ghost writer assigned by the state, as well as how the rooster-crowing myth has been systematically and decisively challenged by the great-grandson of the accused landlord, Zhou Chunfu.

The process of creating, revising, and contesting images of landlords with bad reputations in contemporary Chinese revolutionary art and literature reminds us of the Chinese revolution's character as an aesthetic movement, of a state-controlled network of cultural production, distribution, education, museumification, and of its foreign propaganda. It also helps us rethink definitions of "history," "literature," and "art" in China. The Zhou Bapi story uses the real names of the laborer-author, the village, and the landlord, but tells a far-fetched story of a rooster crowing at midnight imbued with an implicit revolutionary aesthetics. The point is that details and concrete plots can be fabricated as long as they are essentially true in revealing historical exploitation and oppression; these stories were valued because they could educate younger generations by provoking and perpetuating class feelings. But a cultural war is going on in postsocialist China with a gradual de-emphasis on class struggle and an

erosion of state-controlled ideology and media.²⁰ Liu Xiaofei is persistent in interviewing villagers to testify as to the good heart and reputation of Liu Wencai and in telling visitors to the manor about the "true story" of his grandfather, and Meng Lingqian has invalidated the Zhou Bapi myth through what he has called a form of "archaeology" (*kaogu*).²¹ Here we see that "historical consciousness that critiques the engrained historical narrative via memory will keep alive unfinished possibilities and unfulfilled dreams," as Ban Wang puts it (2004: 3). In Mo Yan's (2006) novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Out* (Shengsi pilao), Ximen Nao, a wealthy thirty-year-old landlord in Gaomi County, is shot during the violent class struggle of the land-reform movement; his various reincarnations, mostly in the form of animals, narrate a highly cynical account of the history of the PRC from 1950 through 2000. China's younger generation, born in the 1980s, is also concerned about the archetype of the landlord, and there is online debate among female high school students about whether Xi'er should have married Huang Shiren, with many arguing that she should have, so as to enjoy a comfortable life as the wife of a wealthy landlord. This online discussion opens with a brief yet provocative foreword: "In fact, Huang Shiren is merely a literary persona, but we very often perceive literary works as historical truth."²² This statement implicitly reflects on the long-term effects of the Chinese "propaganda state" (Hung 2011: 17–21). The construction of the image of the evil landlord in socialist China includes mass-based articulation, repeated state-orchestrated storytelling, collaborative visualization, creations of archetypes, and most important, a deeply entrenched historical imagination, which will take a long time to be demythologized.

²⁰ Meng Lingqian expressed his skepticism of the Zhou Bapi story on the Internet. He published his book in mainland China, and it was soon banned; the version I refer to was published in Taiwan. For the post-Mao preservation of the class ideology and its dilution, see Misra 1998, 129–143.

²¹ Yet this archaeology is different from Foucault's, which examines the representations of the past through symbols, images, and rhetoric. What Zhou did was excavate "facts," at least as he defined his agenda as such. Zhou's archaeology might be better understood as "reconstruction." For this difference, see Hutton 1993: 149.

²² <http://news.ifeng.com/opinion/topic/huangshiren/>

Glossary

Anren	安仁
Baimao nǚ	白毛女
Banye jijiao	半夜鸡叫
Dachun	大春
Dayi	大邑
Gao Yubao	高玉宝
Guo Moruo	郭沫若
Guo Yongjiang	郭永江
He Jingzhi	贺敬之
Hongse niangzijun	红色娘子军
Hua Junwu	华君武
Huang Shiren	黄世仁
Huangcao	荒草
kaogu	考古
Leng Yueying	冷月英
Lianhuanhua	连环画
Lin Biao	林彪
Liu Wencai	刘文彩
Liu Xiaofei	刘小飞
Luo Erniang	罗二娘
Meng Lingqian	孟令騫
Mo Yan	莫言
Nan Batian	南霸天
Peng Zhen	彭真
Shengsi pilao	生死疲劳
Shuihu zhuan	水浒传
suku	诉苦
Wang Anmao	王安懋
Xi'er	喜儿
xiaoshuo	小说
Ximen Nao	西门闹
Yang Bailao	杨白劳
Zhou Bapi	周扒皮
Zhou Chunfu	周春富
Zhou Yang	周扬
Zhu Binkang	朱宾康

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