
Ugly Intellectuals Everywhere

During the early 1960s, the musical drama *Third Sister Liu* (*Liu Sanjie*) took China's cultural scene by storm. The musical was created in Guangxi Province, far removed from the PRC capital at Beijing. It drew on the folklore of Third Sister Liu, whose legend has permeated South China since the Tang dynasty (618–907). The performance features a peasant heroine of Zhuang minority origin using her ingenuity in singing and improvising mountain folksongs (*shan'ge*) to help poor villagers fight against predatory landlords and their hangers-on. The musical was staged in Beijing between July and September 1960, including four times inside the official compound of Zhongnanhai, where Chairman Mao and other CCP leaders worked and lived. After receiving praise from the leaders, the troupe toured no fewer than thirteen provinces and regions and some twenty cities, many of which staged their own productions of the play.¹ By January 1961, radio and television stations nationwide were playing excerpts of the musical to ring in the Western and the Chinese New Year; gramophone recordings of the musical were available for sale and distribution. Later that year, Changchun Film Studio (*Changchun dianying zhipian chang*), one of the biggest in China, released *Third Sister Liu* as a musical feature film set along the banks of the Li River in spectacular Guilin in Guangxi. With an impressive score, witty lines, memorable characters, and superior cinematography, the movie was an instant hit. Productions of colored pictures of the actresses and actors as well as sheet music and artwork related to the movie followed, just in time for another New Year celebration. By the fall of 1962, the New China Bookstore, which was founded by the CCP when it was headquartered in Yan'an, had begun national sale of a ninety-page illustrated storybook on Third Sister Liu, an ideal keepsake for the family.²

Any mature audience member who watched *Third Sister Liu* then would recognize that it contained a severe rebuke of intellectuals by the state, thanks to the musical's most famous and entertaining scene—the singing competition (*duige*). In the movie, the scene lasts for twenty minutes. It shows Liu, a talented, adorable young woman with an angelic voice, in a contest of improvised singing on the river

bank. The narrative tension of the contest is intensified by Liu's pledge to cease singing should she be beaten in her art. Her rival, the wicked local landlord, has hired three Confucian literati from nearby areas to handle the competition. These self-proclaimed "highly regarded scholars" arrive at the showdown with a boatful of songbooks and the intent of crushing a lowly woman. They are joined by two dozen sycophantic literati, some of whom are mostly attracted to the food and drink served by the landlord. On the other side, hundreds of villagers, including some from distant places, show up to support Liu. They are heartily amused by the literati's failure to match her quick wit and artistry. They sing with her to expose the scholars' ignorance of the simplest of agricultural labors. When the literati feel pressured during the competition, they state that they are followers of "ancient sages and virtuous men" and experts in Chinese classics, and try to abuse their opponents for lacking education. But Liu hits back every time when they boast of their achievements, criticizing further the uselessness of their learning, to the peasants' delight. The singing competition is magnificent theater.

In this chapter I use theater and cinema as a window on the mutual constitution of the intellectual and Chinese Communism during the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Since the revolutionary project entered its Yan'an phase, the CCP leadership had portrayed "intellectuals" mainly as petty-bourgeois but usable subjects. Ideological reeducation was considered essential to helping these otherwise self-serving persons recognize the virtues of Chinese Communism and overcome their shortcomings. A champion of this view, Mao began to question it after the party encountered a deluge of complaints against its policies, practices, and personnel during the 1957 Rectification Campaign. The official representation of the intellectual as a former accomplice in class oppression and an enduring threat to Chinese Communism gathered strength afterward, epitomized by Mao's revised claim that all intellectuals were "bourgeois intellectuals,"³ and by official punishment of critics with demotion, labor reform, and other measures during the Antirightist Movement. The state promoted further negative assessments of intellectuals during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) to spark "the enthusiasm and creativity of the masses" on behalf of the national production campaign.⁴ Sciences and other academic disciplines were neglected. Party cadres, professors, journalists, and others were sent to the countryside to be taught "proletarian virtues" by peasants.⁵ *Third Sister Liu* turned this heightened official disparagement of the intellectual, or the redrawing of the symbolic boundaries involving the subject, into popular entertainment. The musical reinforced the descent of Chinese Communism into what Andrew Walder calls "a centrally planned depression"⁶ that cost tens of millions of lives.

I use the production of *Third Sister Liu* to illustrate how the Mao regime mobilized local populations to create, circulate, and consume degrading ideas, images,

and idioms about intellectuals. Well before the Leap, the state had gained control over theater and cinema. To put socialist development on an anti-intellectual path, the state, ironically, relied on educated CCP cadres, scriptwriters, and other professional workers, or those classified or classifiable as intellectuals, to organize the performances, because these kinds of persons had the literary, artistic, technical, and organizational skills to deliver impactful works. Meanwhile, top-down mobilization of society to support the Leap absorbed many others into the productions. As state and society partook in denouncing intellectuals, tensions and resentment between party cadres and ordinary professional workers deepened. To escape the growing stigma attached to the intellectual marker, cadres who oversaw the productions presented themselves as superior to the professional workers who wrote, adapted, or staged the musical. To cope with their amplified humiliation by the state, some artists, critics, and even cadres contested in subtle fashions the official condemnation of intellectuals. In other words, as Chinese Communism featured the intellectual as a dangerous subject with limited use value during the Leap, the rift between educated party cadres and ordinary educated people, or the discreditable and the discredited, widened.

I then turn to *Early Spring in February* (*Zaochun eryue*) to illustrate the increasingly strident struggle to redefine the intellectual and Chinese Communism before murder, corporal punishment, and other forms of abuse descended upon many identified as intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution. A star-studded film produced in 1963 under tight official control, *Early Spring* epitomized the post-Leap efforts of some of the CCP leaders to reemphasize the importance of intellectuals to socialist development. The movie features an educated couple in a small town during the 1920s coping with local poverty and parochialism amid their budding romance. They appear thoughtful and progressive compared with other educated people in their lives; they are willing to make sacrifices to help the poor and potentially for revolutionary struggles to improve Chinese society. The film is the ideological antithesis of *Third Sister Liu*. It challenged the Leap's denigration of intellectuals and even the Yan'an depiction of the subjects as selfish and untrustworthy. Even before *Early Spring* was released, it became a target of official attacks. Mao and his supporters were regaining control over the direction of Chinese Communism. They stressed vigilance against capitalist restoration, especially efforts waged by "bourgeois intellectuals" within state and society. The film was spotlighted as a "poisonous weed" which glorified "bourgeois thinking" and "bourgeois intellectuals." Another layer of virulent ideas, idioms, and imageries about the intellectual saturated the nation as the Cultural Revolution approached. Many movie audiences in Shanghai, however, rejected the official interpretation of the film, which prompted the state to reach deep into society, again, to propagate official denunciations of the intellectual.

STAGING *THIRD SISTER LIU* NATIONALLY

In the scene of the “singing competition,” the literati each wore an operatic makeup of an animal: one was a pig, another a dog, and the last one a fox. These men of letters had retractable necks [like turtles]; they bent and twisted their bodies and sang and spoke in a pretentious manner, behaving disgustingly on stage.

—AN OBSERVATION ON A LOCAL PERFORMANCE OF *THIRD SISTER LIU*⁷

In 1958, as CCP officials across China began to prepare for the tenth anniversary celebration of the PRC, the proposal to stage the folktale of Third Sister Liu surfaced in the city of Liuzhou in Guangxi Province in a meeting between party cadres and artists arranged by the local CCP department of propaganda.⁸ Although theater scripts and performances about Liu had been available, much work would be needed before a socialist rendition of her legend would emerge.⁹ In retrospect, the proposal was an ingenious idea. It suggests the cadres’ and artists’ astute understanding of art policy under the Great Leap Forward and capacity to bring together tradition, art, and politics to serve the state. For one thing, the state had initiated a mass campaign to collect and publicize folksongs, folktales, and folk poetry to extol the hard work, creativity, and artistry of peasants and workers on behalf of the Leap’s anti-intellectual approach to production.¹⁰ Liu’s legend as a “singing immortal” of folksongs was a potentially rich resource for such propaganda. Second, the plan to use stories and songs related to Liu, many of them passed down from imperial times, fit perfectly with another decision of the Mao regime to rehabilitate theatrical and literary heritage to help popularize official ideas.¹¹ Third, the state had been seeking to showcase the national minorities in the performing arts for political and educational purposes—and Liu’s legend was strongly rooted in the Zhuang population in Guangxi.¹² Most important for our purposes, Liu’s legend features literati as central figures. These characters or, from the state’s perspective, models of intellectuals of the bygone era could be rewritten to lend support to the Leap’s anti-intellectualism.

After the musical drama was proposed, Liuzhou’s authorities organized artists, workers, and others to travel across the province to speak with peasants and folksingers as well as hold forums to collect stories about Third Sister Liu and her songs. The travelers brought back some 20,000 folksongs, more than 200 folktales, and many types of folk tunes.¹³ According to S.H. Chen, the gathering of folk poetry and songs during the Leap often went beyond existing material, or those rooted in the local population. The collectors included local schoolteachers, college graduates, and others whose education impressed villagers and was vital to documenting their mostly oral testimonials. Channeling the lofty goals and rhetoric of the state, the collectors lauded the CCP’s revolutionary vision and achievements, paid homage to “labor heroes” and “model workers,” and praised activities in the locality, before rousing villagers into “a festive mood” of singing

and improvisation. New songs and poetry were invented and old ones collected or altered to suit the Leap's purposes.¹⁴ Still, the stories, songs, and poetry about Third Sister Liu gathered from peasants and other sources reflected a central characteristic of folklore. The content as a whole was full of inconsistencies and contradictions, or diverse meanings and values from the contexts in which the legend was remembered, retold, or reinvented.¹⁵

The material places Liu in different dynasties, but mainly in Tang times. Some have her from a well-to-do family and well-versed in the classics and history from a young age. Some indicate that she was a loafer with many romantic affairs. Some see her as a poor village laborer. Some suggest that she was murdered by her brother. There are even debates about her ethnicity and provincial origin. Many accounts are essentially love stories or fairy tales.¹⁶ A principal aspect of the accounts is that Liu is involved in singing competitions with literati. In one well-known version, the contender is her admirer, a young and handsome scholar, and they sing for seven days and nights without producing a winner, before both turning into stone. In another version, they finally sing with one heart and voice and rise to heaven as immortals. In other versions, literati come from different places to challenge Liu but are all beaten by her majestic singing.¹⁷ None of the well-known versions depicts literati colluding with landlords to stop Liu from stirring up local peasants. The version closest to this soon-to-appear revolutionary theme has a powerful magistrate hiring four scholars to take on Liu in a singing contest. They arrive with a boatload of books, and she is obliged to marry him if she loses the competition. The accounts show Liu as bantering with her opponents and asserting her independence as a woman. She is polite, addressing the scholars as "gentlemen" (*xiansheng*) and "elder brothers" (*age*).¹⁸

Under official supervision and "repeated discussion and informal deliberation,"¹⁹ Liuzhou's scriptwriters and art workers produced a socialist rendition of the legend of Third Sister Liu. Liu appears as a feisty, sharp-witted peasant woman who fights with her musical talent against depraved landlords and slavish scholars. The work was staged as a *caidiao* opera in a province-wide theater event in April 1959. The authorities were so pleased with the performance that they sponsored further research on the folklore and revisions of the musical drama. The authoritative script appeared a few months later. The singing competition scene was excerpted in the nationwide journal *Scripts (Juben)* in September 1959. Meanwhile, two companies performed the musical under official auspices at various locations across Guangxi and received praise and support from local party leaders.²⁰ By year-end, more than sixty professional and amateur companies had staged the performance across the province. The success prompted the Guangxi government to sponsor a festival of *Third Sister Liu* performances at the capital of Nanning, the location where Mao had first pressured his colleagues to accept the Leap as a national development project.²¹ During the festival, more than 1,400 people from all over the province performed the drama in eleven genres of traditional Chinese theater.

By then, some 1,200 “cultural work units” and almost 60,000 performers, some of whom were peasants and workers, had reportedly staged the play for 12 million people, or 60 percent of Guangxi’s population.²² After the festival, the scriptwriters and artists deliberated about the variations that they had seen across performances and polished the script further under official instructions and guidance, especially from the Guangxi Bureau of Culture and the Guangxi CCP Department of Culture and Education.²³ A complete script was printed in *Scripts* in mid-1960 and later by the Chinese Theater Press. The Guangxi Folk Song and Dance Theater was officially established to take the play to Beijing and around the country.²⁴

While *Third Sister Liu* was staged in Beijing, Wu Jinnan (1909–1999), the CCP secretary of Guangxi Province, stated in a *People’s Daily* article that tight official supervision had led to the production’s success.

The [Guangxi section of the] party not only supported this production; it provided frequent, detailed, and strong guidance on creative thinking, staffing, and material resources as well as on the script, music, and stage design and on the performances. The comrades in charge of the Guangxi Party Commission and other county, city, and district party commissions watched the performances repeatedly and offered ideas for improvement. Some district commissions organized special discussions of the script and the performances, to the extent of going over every song, every line of the lyrics, and every costume. Some members of the commissions even performed on stage and directed the production. The party commissions assumed leadership in tackling many problems of the performances. Under the uniform leadership of the commissions, various districts and departments as well as cultural and art organizations implemented mutual cooperation that guaranteed the smooth progress of the [Third Sister Liu artistic] movement and the ceaselessly improving quality of the performances.²⁵

Wu was undoubtedly blowing his own trumpet, or that of the Guangxi’s party cadres for how well they had served the state during the Leap. Nonetheless, the cadres did combine organization and representation successfully to produce and promote the musical drama, which Mao declared “a revolutionary play” after watching it.²⁶ The success of *Third Sister Liu* in Beijing and the publicity garnered by the performance prompted authorities elsewhere to remount the production and organize related events to demonstrate local support of the Leap and its anti-intellectualism.

Table 3 is a schedule of theater performances, television screenings, and radio broadcasts of *Third Sister Liu* in Shanghai between late 1960 and mid-1962, based on announcements from two major local newspapers. As the right-hand column shows, the singing competition was the first scene to be showcased on television. Unlike radio, television was not a common household possession. Only the privileged, which included party and state officials, had access to a family television. The early broadcast of the scene to this population suggests that the Shanghai authorities supported the Leap’s denigration of intellectuals. The schedule of

theater productions confirms the intensity with which the play was promoted. By February 1961, seven months after *Third Sister Liu* debuted in Beijing, at least eight Shanghai companies had staged the musical in six genres of traditional theater. We do not know how many performances the companies put on altogether. What the Shanghai Academy of Experimental Opera went through before staging *Third Sister Liu* suggests that the companies performed the play numerous times in a wide range of venues. Since the Antirightist Movement, the academy had been pressured by the government to perform more than usual. Its performances had jumped from an average of 170 per year to 1,100 in 1958. Many of these performances were staged inside factories or military compounds or before village crowds.²⁷

Information on the role of CCP cadres in organizing or supervising the Shanghai productions is not available, but the productions' timing and the timeliness of related events suggest strong official intervention. The height of the 1961 productions coincided with New Year celebrations in both the Western and the Chinese calendar, excellent occasions for state propaganda. The musical was promoted in newspapers as actively as other cultural events sponsored by the local authorities, such as movies and exhibitions. The performances were staged in main theaters and local playhouses and in the city center as well as in workers' neighborhoods. In other words, Shanghai virtually hosted its own *Third Sister Liu* performance festival. The climax of the events was the performance by the touring Guangxi Folk Song and Dance Theater. The company debuted in Shanghai on January 27, 1961. The same day, China's preeminent Peking Opera singer Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) published a cheerful poem about Third Sister Liu in a major local newspaper, lauding her artistry, courage, and class consciousness—as well as the Leap.²⁸ The following night, the performance was aired on prime time television.²⁹

In Shanghai, a host of cultural activities supporting the musical appeared and spread its images of dimwitted, shameless, and sycophantic literati, language of class struggle, and ideological support of the Leap. The most obvious of such activities were newspaper articles that introduced the play and the performing troupes. Once the performance began, congratulatory commentaries flourished, pictures and drawings of the characters were published, and actors and actresses wrote in the newspapers about the play and their participation in it. The Shanghai branch of the China Record Company produced gramophone records of *Third Sister Liu* to coincide with the productions. The album quickly became a bestseller, with the songs being played in bookstores.³⁰ Images from the performances were included in photograph exhibitions. At Tongji University, students apparently performed scenes from *Third Sister Liu*, paradoxically enough, as part of the 1961 commemoration of the May Fourth movement as well as created art works based on the newly minted socialist legend of the female singer.³¹

After three months of intense programming, the productions and broadcasts of *Third Sister Liu* began to peter out. This was not because the play had run its

TABLE 3 *Third Sister Liu* Performances in Shanghai, 1960–1962

Date	Activities	Performing Organizations	Remarks
1. <i>The Western and Chinese New Year period, 1961</i>			
November– December 1960	Theater	1. Shanghai Academy of Experimental Opera 2. Jiading <i>Xi</i> Theater Company	
December 20, 1960	Television broadcast	Jiading <i>Xi</i> Theater Company	“Singing competition”
December 31, 1960	Television broadcast	People’s <i>Hu</i> Theater Company	“Singing competition”
January 1961	Theater	1. Chuxin <i>Yue</i> Theater Company 2. Qunyi <i>Hu</i> Theater Company 3. Guangxi Folk Song and Dance Theater Company 4. Shanghai <i>Yue</i> Theater Company	
January 1, 1961	Radio Broadcast	Jiading <i>Xi</i> Theater Company	Songs from the play
January 28, 1961	Television broadcast	Guangxi Folk Song and Dance Theater Company	
February 1961	Theater	1. Haiyang Comedy Theater Company 2. Fenghuo <i>Huai</i> Theater Company 3. Shanghai Academy of Experimental Opera	“Singing competition”
February 13, 1961	Radio broadcast	Singers of <i>Huangmei</i> theater	Two days before Chinese New Year’s Day; “singing competition”
2. <i>Mid-1961</i>			
April 1961	Theater	People’s <i>Hu</i> Theater Company	
April 1, 1961	Television broadcast	Shanghai Academy of Experimental Opera	
May 4, 1961	Theater	Fudan and other universities	May Fourth commemoration
July 1, 1961	Radio broadcast	Singers of <i>Hu</i> Theater	Songs from the play
August 1961	Theater	Jiangsu <i>Huai</i> Theater Company	

Date	Activities	Performing Organizations	Remarks
3. <i>The Western and Chinese New Year period, 1962</i>			
January 1962	Theater	Shanghai Academy of Experimental Opera	
January–February 1962	Movie shows in cinemas	Feature film <i>Third Sister Liu</i>	
February 7, 1962	Television broadcast	Feature film <i>Third Sister Liu</i>	Two days after Chinese New Year's Day
4. <i>Mid-1962</i>			
April 12, 1962	Television broadcast	Unknown	
August 1962	Theater	Ningxia Yue Theater Company	

SOURCES: Electronic databases of *Wenhui bao* and *Xinmin wanbao* at Shanghai Municipal Library.

course as popular entertainment. With its size and rich history in the performing arts, the city had a huge audience for theater. Even before the performances began, the Leap was coming to an end. Against Mao and other leaders whose political position had been weakened by the production campaign's failure, Premiers Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) and Chen Yi (1901–1972) and other officials had been pushing for renewal of official cooperation with “intellectuals” to improve national economic performance.³² Full-fledged support of the anti-intellectual musical by the Shanghai authorities was probably withdrawn as soon as news of top-level policy and attitudinal change was confirmed in the city. Put differently, the Shanghai performances mentioned above revealed that the authorities there, too, had impressive capacity to combine organization and representation to serve the state.

When the movie *Third Sister Liu* was shown in Shanghai in 1962, screening was mainly organized by the municipal government and workplaces. The picture was quickly scheduled for television release, and mobile projection teams brought the film to rural Shanghai for viewing by peasants.³³ Two reasons explain why the authorities continued to promote the musical and hence ideas, images, and idioms disparaging to the educated to an even broader audience. First, as Lydia Liu suggests, the artistic achievement of the production “seemed to lift the work above official propaganda and made it appealing to both children and grownups.”³⁴ Second, there was a soon-to-be-exposed, deep disagreement about the relations between the intellectual and Chinese Communism at the highest level of the state.

REPRESENTING INTELLECTUALS IN CINEMA

In a reflection written some years later on the highly successful movie *Third Sister Liu*, an audience member aptly summarized the appearance of the three literati hired by the wicked landlord to compete with Liu in the singing competition: they look like a thug, a halfwit, and a whoremonger.³⁵ Shortly after the Mao regime took power, cinema, like theater, became a primary medium of official propaganda. Characters based on the official view of class struggle dominated feature films, some of which featured educated people and their responses to war and revolution and played an important role in the objectification of the intellectual. Compared with the theater performances of *Third Sister Liu* in Guangxi, Shanghai, or elsewhere, the movie version leaves behind an enduring record of the representations of the literati in the musical drama, or how the state used it to inscribe further negative meanings on the intellectual. Let us review some of the noteworthy portrayals of educated persons in postrevolutionary cinema and how the representations reflected and reinforced the development of Chinese Communism, before returning to the characterization of literati in the national hit.

The March of Democratic Youth (*Minzhu qingnian jinxingqu*) (1950), one of the first notable works of the state-controlled Beijing Film Studio, was completed during the beginning of what has been officially termed the New Democracy period (1949–1953). A theme of official governance then was cross-class cooperation under CCP rule to rebuild and reform China. Notable scholars and other educated persons who had supported the 1949 revolution became CPPCC members and were appointed to ministerial positions, while the Mao regime criticized the politics and beliefs of the educated population.³⁶ The state, as chapters 4 and 5 have suggested, expended large amounts of symbolic and material resources to establish political control mechanisms in workplaces and local neighborhoods, including the assignment of educated party cadres to positions of authority. Under these circumstances, *The March* presented many faces of educated people in its depiction of student protest at Peking University on the eve of the revolution. In it, there are patient and understanding underground CCP members and a mixture of levelheaded, impulsive, muscular, frail, hard-working, and hedonistic students. Some students are economically privileged; others struggle to get by; a few are thuggish Guomindang agents in disguise. The film narrates the transformation of a handsome, stylish man from a diligent but politically indifferent student into a staunch supporter of the protest and then of the new republic. The movie also paid homage to those whom the state regarded as progressive intellectuals. The moral authority on screen is not so much the handful of indefatigable CCP members as an elderly professor, a participant in the May Fourth movement. In an early scene, this hoary, bespectacled scholar energizes student protest with an inspirational speech that attacks the Guomindang and the United States. *The March* captured

the optimism-cum-unease that made up the Yan'an approach to intellectuals of the Mao regime as well as its efforts to coopt well-known figures in academic, art, journalism, and other circles.

When the Mao regime launched Thought Reform of Intellectuals and then denounced Yu Pingbo (1900–1990), Liang Shuming (1893–1988), Hu Feng, and other notable writers for their “petty-bourgeois” and “bourgeois” thinking and characters, cinematic criticism of intellectuals intensified.³⁷ Yet, the Yan'an representation of the subjects as politically improvable and usable to the socialist project remained a staple in films, just as the assumption continued to inform everyday organization under CCP rule. *The Diary of a Nurse* (*Hushi riji*) (1957) is typical in these respects. The timing of the film, however, would earn it condemnations during the Antirightist Movement for exaggerating the significance of intellectuals to Chinese Communism. The movie features a good-looking nursing school graduate in Shanghai, Jian Suhua, who chooses to serve the socialist project by relocating to a remote and barren construction site, while most of her classmates long and fight for choice assignments within the city. Her lover, an ambitious and successful young surgeon, does not understand her selflessness, let alone the construction workers' dedication to their work. Her supervising doctor is disagreeable, too: a womanizer who provides perfunctory care to the workers. In the end, her lover leaves her for his career, but her boss turns over a new leaf. This tripartite statement on intellectuals—the good, the bad, and the improvable—resembles the representation in *The March* with one important exception: none of the educated people featured in *The Diary* have moral authority in their own right. Jian is commendable because she does not act like her peers or other petty-bourgeois intellectuals, but possesses worker-like altruism.³⁸

Products of the ill-fated political thaw sanctioned by the state that culminated in the 1957 Rectification Campaign, *The Man Unconcerned with Details* (*Buju xiaojie de ren*) (1956) and *Unfinished Comedy* (*Wei wancheng de xiju*) (1957) are unusual political satires in the history of cinema in the Mao era. Director Lü Ban (1913–1967) did not use his works to repeat the official interpretation of intellectuals as usable but unreliable subjects. Instead, he took aim at CCP policies and authorities in the artistic circles and portrayed ordinary educated people as reasonable and hard-working. In *The Man Unconcerned with Details*, the object of ridicule is an accomplished writer and advocate of satire who tours and lectures on its importance for art and literature. He is extremely self-absorbed and inconsiderate (and probably a party member, from the deference that he is shown to command from his hosts). He litters in public, picks flowers in a park, smokes in a library, and talks loudly during a theater performance. Everyone else behaves properly.³⁹ In *Unfinished Comedy*, the spoof goes even further. Lü's target is an unkempt middle-aged man with absurdly thick glasses who is described as an

authority in literary and art criticism. This is a thinly disguised caricature of CCP cadres from rural areas (or perhaps even Yan'an revolutionaries). The man uses high-sounding political jargon and rhetoric, quotes Mao and Stalin, and speaks condescendingly to the film crew that receives him. He rejects out of hand any experimentation that deviates from the dogma articulated by Mao in the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art.⁴⁰ Both of these films were denounced during the Antirightist Movement. *Unfinished Comedy* was branded as "poisonous weed" and banned from release. Lü was sentenced to labor reform as a rightist.⁴¹ The authorities in charge of cinema, however, did not discard the techniques of caricature and ridicule of educated people along with political satire. Instead, the techniques were redeployed to support CCP rule.⁴² Its incorporation in *Third Sister Liu* would take the attack against intellectuals in PRC cinema to a new height.

Singing competitions, the activity in the most memorable scene of *Third Sister Liu*, are a popular pastime in southern, southwest, and northwest China. During such a contest, the participants take turns to ask and answer questions using folk-style singing. Because the subject matter is virtually unlimited, excellent knowledge and improvisational skill are necessary for maintaining superiority.⁴³ In the movie, the thug, the halfwit and the whoremonger each have physical and intellectual characteristics spotlighted to insinuate the ugliness of intellectuals in the history of class struggle in China. The thug, the leader among the three, is played by a middle-aged, homely man with unusually high cheek bones and a mouthful of crooked and discolored teeth, an actor who specialized in playing dubious characters. He serves as the adviser of the wicked landlord and plots with him to use violence and other means to control Liu and dominate the villagers. The whoremonger, a pale, skinny man with a salacious grin, was cast to stress that literati lived off the labor of others and had decadent lifestyles. He acts condescendingly toward the villagers and disrespects women publicly. The halfwit is a comedic figure. His sincerity toward Liu does not help to conceal his stupidity, which he does not recognize. He stutters and moves awkwardly and depends on songbooks to compete with her. Even the landlord and other literati are embarrassed by his performance (see figure 4).

In the singing competition scene, mutual antagonism between the competing parties in relation to the meaning of knowledge is obvious. Liu mocks the uselessness of the literati's training in Confucian classics; the literati defend their education as morally superior and look down upon their opponents. She derides them as imbeciles and tell them they are confused and deranged; they call her crazy and disrespectful. But there is no doubt who wins the contest. During part of the competition, the literati merely sing against villagers who are there to support Liu. The villagers hold their own against these men and even trip them up with simple riddles about agriculture. The film's attack against the literati and their education reaches a climax when Liu responds after the landlord angrily snatches a songbook from the humiliated scholars and throws it into the river. She sings:



FIGURE 4. The three literati in the film *Third Sister Liu*. From left to right: the “whoremonger” (played by Xu Juntai), the “thug” (played by Ma Biao), and the “halfwit” (played by Li Wancheng).

This river is pure and clean,
Your songbook reeks.
Do not ditch your stinking book here,
For fear that it will soil the river.

Unable to tame Liu through the contest, the landlord kidnaps her afterward and tries to force her to become his concubine, all the while receiving support and advice from the literati, especially the thug. In the end, the villagers storm the landlord’s estate and rescue her so that she and her lover can leave the area.

Compared to the other films mentioned above, in *Third Sister Liu* three representations of educated people have conspicuously vanished. First, the movie does not contain any educated person who is remotely decent: every literati portrayed is reprehensible or dishonorable in one way or another. Second, not one of the literati becomes a better person as the plot unfolds. Third, the value of formal education is not highlighted anywhere. Whereas Liuzhou’s and Guangxi’s authorities had skillfully staged and reinforced the Leap’s devaluation of education and suspicion

toward intellectuals by reorganizing Liu's legend into a musical drama, the movie brought to a national audience theatrical images that suggested such people were slavish, scheming, and useless. In the process, the filmmakers had made changes to the musical drama. Specific phrases that Mao used to ridicule intellectuals and popularized during the Leap, such as "lazy bones" and "incapable of telling the five grains apart," were inserted into the singing contest. And Liu's imprisonment by the landlord with support from the literati was added to the movie to highlight their complicity in class oppression.⁴⁴

CADRES' AND ART WORKERS' REACTIONS TO THE MUSICAL

Tight supervision, multilayered organization, skillful storytelling, and ingenious artistic techniques orchestrated by the CCP transformed the folklore of Third Sister Liu into theatrical and cinematic representations that reinforced the anti-intellectualism of the Great Leap Forward. Resistance to the official denigration of the intellectual, however, persisted throughout the creative process as well as the staging and screening of the performances, just as reinterpretations and manipulations of the classification occurred amid its objectification under the CCP. Like their peers in science, education, or industry, the party cadres who oversaw the musical's production in Liuzhou and Guangxi were generally classifiable as intellectuals according to official definition. In fact, some were assigned to the production because of their educational achievements and artistic or literary knowledge. How did such cadres navigate between their classification as intellectuals and the production's anti-intellectualism? The above-mentioned newspaper article by Wu Jinnan suggests that some cadres sought to redefine the official meaning of intellectuals through finger-pointing. The latter, as chapters 3 and 5 have shown, involved party cadres exploiting their political and management authority to portray themselves as dependable revolutionaries and stigmatize other educated people as unreliable intellectuals. Wu's conduct was an excellent example. According to him, the cadres in charge of *Third Sister Liu* insisted that scriptwriters and artists follow the principles on art and literature articulated by Mao in Yan'an—or "using the past to serve the present" and "politics first, art second"—and highlight class struggle and restore the character of the legendary folksinger to a "spokesperson" against class oppression. The cadres preached the use of "historical materialism" to remove "slanders" and "distortions" against Third Sister Liu based on "feudalist" and "bourgeois" thinking as well as "the large amounts of rubbish" in her folklore. The cadres, Wu reported, found out that the production teams tried to inject into the production "every hue of the thinking of the capitalist class." The scriptwriters and artists focused on aesthetics, splendor, sentimentality, and other stage qualities. They drew on the "backward and conservative" features of the folktales and even argued that popular folksongs "lacked good taste" to be used

in a major performance. Some of the scriptwriters' and artists' ideas were probably attempts to rein in the production's emerging and thinly disguised vilifications of intellectuals under the PRC. The cadres apparently rejected the ideas one after another, because their implementation would "water down the educational effect" of the musical drama.⁴⁵ In short, Wu presented the cadres as revolutionaries who thwarted intellectuals from using Liu's folklore to engage in class struggle on behalf of former exploiting classes.

This does not mean that the CCP cadres who supervised the production of *Third Sister Liu* were equally comfortable with its denigration of intellectuals. Although public condemnation of the production would have invited harsh punishment under the Leap's severe political climate, tacit criticism remained an option. A writer and party member, Qiao Yu (1927–), went to Liuzhou in the fall of 1959 with a music composer and a theater director under the auspices of the National Federation of Playwrights and the Central Academy of Experimental Opera to assist in the production of the musical drama.⁴⁶ Qiao would turn the script into the movie's screenplay. As the Guangxi Folksong and Dance Theater was touring the country, he penned a review of *Third Sister Liu* in the authoritative *Literature and Art Gazette* (*Wenyi bao*). After a ritualistic glowing assessment of the theme of class struggle and other aspects of the play, he suggested that the singing competition scene had no historical basis and that the contest had been inserted into the performance to highlight Liu as a peasant heroine.

Although there are many stories about singing competitions in the folklore, these accounts mainly convey Third Sister Liu's wisdom and musical talent, and the fact that her opponents were motivated by their unwillingness to admit that they were inferior. Compared to these original stories, the singing competition was handled very differently in the musical drama, almost a change in essence . . . If we look at how life was lived, [we will recognize that] there were actually not that many literati who also liked to sing folksongs. Literati and folksongs were parts of two different worlds. I met a schoolteacher who has lived in the heart of folk singing in Guangxi for sixty to seventy years. When I mentioned folksongs to him, he was stunned and speechless, apparently not knowing that there are folksongs around . . . In the singing competition scene, the literati unexpectedly sang many folksongs. Even though the songs were of laughably inferior quality, they nonetheless did it. This was something almost impossible in reality, but it was made to be very believable in art.⁴⁷

Qiao's thinly veiled opposition to *Third Sister Liu's* denigration of intellectuals was an exception. Rather than applauding or criticizing the singing competition scene, which would have respectively endorsed the Leap's anti-intellectualism or put one's career and safety at risk, other critics focused on the composition of other scenes, scene transitions, and musical arrangement and lyrics. Liu's character received profuse attention and approbation and even minor complaints. Yet, a recurring

theme in the laudatory commentaries is their emphasis on the fictional nature of the musical, which can be understood as a form of subtle rejection of the production's vilification of intellectuals. In his review of the performance in *Literary Review* (*Wenxue pinglun*), He Qifang, a writer and party member whom we met in chapter 3, expressed approval of the modifications of Liu's legend by Guangxi's theater crews. But he underlined that the "theme [of class struggle] and the rich and dramatic elements of the plot have required many decisions and deletions as well as much imagination and fabrication." In contrast to Wu Jinnan, who claimed that the production recovered the historically accurate and revolutionary character of Liu, He Qifang stated that *Third Sister Liu* is "an original piece of creation built on the foundation of the folklore."⁴⁸ Cai Yi (1906–1992), a literary theorist and another party member, went even further in stressing the production's fictional nature. He argued that *White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü*), which portrays the cruelty of rural landlords, was the first milestone of PRC musical theater, and *Third Sister Liu* was the second one. Neither of the musicals would have made much sense if they were produced in the reverse order. Both productions reflected "the spirit of the time" and fulfilled their "historical missions."⁴⁹ In other words, they were timely products of CCP propaganda.

When the feature film *Third Sister Liu* was released in late 1961, the Leap had collapsed for all intents and purposes. The CCP leadership had readopted practical economic measures and checked the virulent anti-intellectualism in official ideology. By April 1962, the state had issued new policies on science, higher education, literature, art, and theater and cinema to promote local cooperation with scholars, teachers, scientists, and artists.⁵⁰ This high-level change of heart about the role of intellectuals under Chinese Communism emboldened critics of the musical. They deployed their knowledge of art, literature, and history as well as their argumentative skills further to undermine the revolutionary interpretation of the legend of Third Sister Liu, using in particular the well-known magazine *Popular Cinema* (*Dazhong dianying*) as a channel. The major criticism received by the film, the content of which closely resembled the Guangxi musical drama, was that Liu had been turned inappropriately from a mythical folk figure into an idealized contemporary revolutionary. The playwrights and screenwriters had imposed on the folksinger class consciousness, leadership skills, knowledge of political struggle, and other characteristics typical of someone wanting to lead a proletarian revolution. Such "modernizing" (*xiandaihua*) of Liu, some critics argued, made her look like a member of the Chinese Communist Youth League. The movie thus stripped from her folklore the multifaceted expressions of hope and pain, joy and anger, and ideas and ideals as well as the interlaced practical and magical qualities that were part of the stories. The critics claimed that such sentiments and thoughts not only reflected the past conditions of the laboring masses, but also served to produce

and reproduce the legend of Liu and enhance its popularity over time.⁵¹ One critic aptly summarized the complaints about the artistic approach in the production: “In the search for the truth [about Third Sister Liu], what is true [about Chinese history and society] is left out.”⁵²

Although the critics did not mention any CCP cadres or offices by name, the ultimate targets of the criticism were those who sanctioned and controlled the production of *Third Sister Liu*, and even the underlying Yan’an principles of art and literature promoted by the state. One critic stated that “using the past to serve the present” in the art was necessary, but “under no circumstances should [China’s] historical legacies be handled crudely and brutally” (*cubao*) by producers.⁵³ The use of the term *cubao*, which signals vicious, rude, and even violent behavior, was especially poignant. The term had been used by scholars, schoolteachers, and others during the 1957 Rectification Campaign to criticize the behavior of party cadres toward colleagues outside the party. Here *cubao* conjures up the image of the party authorities violating history. Even Mao’s homage to the musical for being an emblem of the Chinese socialist revolution was no longer unassailable. One critic wrote that Liu “was a singing immortal and an idealized creation of the laboring masses—not a leader of peasant revolutions.”⁵⁴ Another indicated that historical materialism, the approach to knowledge sanctioned by the state for comprehending class struggle, was ignored completely in the production: the movie “confounds the past and present and turns them upside down, and thus possesses no basic historical value.”⁵⁵ The scathing criticisms of the film put the folktale of Third Sister Liu back on its feet. Their publication was evidence of political change since the musical drama debuted in Beijing two years before.

Despite such intense criticism of *Third Sister Liu*, there is no evidence that any critic confronted the vehement anti-intellectualism of the musical head-on. As before, the singing competition scene and its caricature of the literati occupy a negligible part in the commentaries. Why did critics not dispute the musical’s disparagement of intellectuals? Did they not want to speak out for themselves and all those regarded as intellectuals within state and society? The silence suggests that speaking on behalf of these people without official sanction was widely understood to be risky business, given what had happened to those who tried during the Rectification Campaign. As we shall see, when prodded by higher authorities, some writers and artists did seek to represent the category of intellectuals in a favorable light. Before we move on, it is necessary to note that little evidence exists with regard to how ordinary theater or cinema audience members responded to the denigration of intellectuals in the musical drama. If what we discuss below offers any indication, it is that even when the state monopolized representations of the intellectual in theater, cinema, and other media, it had limited control over how ordinary people interpreted the ideas, images, or languages.

PRODUCING AND DENOUNCING
EARLY SPRING IN FEBRUARY

Some leaders running the [state's] film production departments [who are veteran CCP members] nonetheless approved the movie script and even spent much public money and used five-color film to shoot the picture. They artfully repackaged, promoted, and peddled as "artistic" mistaken thoughts and values that ought to be exposed and subjected to criticism. What did they want to achieve by doing so?

—A REVIEW OF *EARLY SPRING IN FEBRUARY* IN *PEOPLE'S DAILY*⁵⁶

Research has described the power struggle within the CCP leadership and important policy changes in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. For our purposes, the accounts show that the intellectual and Chinese Communism continued to constitute each other at multiple levels of Chinese society with twists and turns. On the one hand, President Liu Shaoqi, Premier Zhou Enlai, and other party leaders (and even Chairman Mao to some extent) reaffirmed the importance of the intellectual to socialist development. The state advanced measures to relax political control over the work of scientists, journalists, and other professional workers and to reintroduce rational economic planning. Under this climate, writers and artists close to the leadership produced works that criticized the Leap and even Mao. In art and literature, depictions of various kinds of social experience other than those constantly repeated in the official narrative of class struggle appeared.⁵⁷ On the other hand, some party leaders held fast to the notion of class struggle and, before long, Mao reverted to promoting the view that intellectuals were real as well as potential enemies of Chinese Communism. Mao broadened the term "bourgeois intellectuals" popularized during the Antirightist Movement to include scientists, schoolteachers, and others who were trained under the PRC but who purportedly subscribed to values and beliefs promoted by the previous exploiting classes. Newly trained intellectuals, he believed, were often corrupted by the old ones, who continued to dominate education, art, and other sectors and even hold important positions within the party and the state. For Mao and his supporters, it was necessary to redeploy intense labor reeducation, political study, and rectification campaigns against intellectuals to protect and further the revolutionary project.⁵⁸

What happened to the movie *Early Spring in February* captures the dynamics of this volatile phase in the struggle to define the intellectual and Chinese Communism. In the film, Xiao Jianqiu, a teachers' college graduate and a former May Fourth student activist, withdraws to a small town to teach in a friend's school during the mid-1920s. He is a passionate reader of philosophy and literature and he dresses well and plays the piano, all of which are symbols of a privileged upbringing. He meets his friend's educated, elegant, and unorthodox sister Tao Lan and

introduces her to all kinds of writings, including the journal *New Youth*, which was then published by the CCP to promote Marxist and Leninist thought. Upon learning that a former classmate has died as a soldier and left behind a widow and two small children in dire poverty, Xiao supports her financially, takes her daughter to school, and helps the poor family in other ways. Led by a teacher who wants to marry Tao, Xiao's colleagues spread rumors that he seeks a romantic relationship with her and at the same time fornicates with the widow behind everyone's back. In a desperate move to save the widow from committing suicide after her son passes away from illness, Xiao offers to marry her even though he is attracted to Tao. The widow hangs herself, leaving behind her daughter, for whom Tao and her family now take responsibility. Fed up with the town's parochialism, tragedies, and inequalities, Xiao apparently decides to devote himself to revolution. The film ends with Tao learning of his departure and dashing out to find Xiao, implying that she might follow his path (see figure 5).

Like *Third Sister Liu*, *Early Spring* was produced under tight official supervision, this time in Beijing. The production received support from two deputy ministers of culture of the PRC: Xia Yan (1900–1995) and Chen Huangmei (1913–1996). A successful playwright, screenwriter, and essayist, Xia had participated in the May Fourth movement and joined the CCP in 1927. Similarly accomplished, Chen doubled as the chief of the ministry's film bureau. After the Leap, Xia, like Zhou Enlai, proclaimed that there was no need to be suspicious of intellectuals anymore.⁵⁹ Chen “carefully read” the novel from which the film was adapted and approved its production. Xia and Chen suggested revisions to the movie script and held “serious discussions” with the film crew. Xia even revised the shot-sequence script “in over one hundred places” to achieve the effects that he wanted.⁶⁰ Consequently, the film's portrayal of intellectuals is completely different from the thinly veiled attack on them in *Third Sister Liu*. Xiao Jianqiu and Tao Lan are played by a famous and conventionally good-looking actor and actress. They are kind and thoughtful. They are torn between tradition and ideals and dissatisfied with the status quo. They use their education to teach and nurture schoolchildren and make sacrifices to improve the lives of poor people. They wrestle with quandaries and controversies that have no perfect solutions. The widow and other poor people in the film are significant only to the extent that they are examples of dispiriting poverty in Chinese society and the distance to which Xiao and Tao would go to help the underprivileged. True, Xiao's and Tao's colleagues are less than admirable: these intellectuals mock and sabotage Xiao as well as gossip and spread rumors about his relationship with Tao and his interaction with the widow. However, none of these characters are shown to be using their knowledge or status to help the political or economic elites to exploit, dominate, or terrify the poor.

During the fall of 1964, *Early Spring* was screened nationwide, not as an updated view of what the intellectual meant to Chinese Communism, but as a “poisonous



FIGURE 5. Xiao Jianqiu (played by Sun Daolin) and Tao Lan (played by Xie Fang) in *Early Spring in February*.

weed” denounced by the state. When the film underwent official inspection in the previous November, Minister of Culture Mao Dun and other officials expressed excitement and appreciation after the screening. However, Deputy Minister of Culture Zhou Yang (1907–1989) reacted differently. Zhou, who was also vice director of the CCP’s Department of Propaganda, was the “chief guardian and top enforcer of the party’s cultural line.”⁶¹ He criticized *Early Spring* sternly for promoting “humanitarianism of the petty bourgeoisie and the capitalist class.” The film buried the cruel and exploitative conduct of these classes of people by depicting what seemed to be acts of kindness of a few of their members. Zhou’s criticism prompted Mao Dun and Chen Huangmei to introduce revisions to the film. By then, Chairman Mao and his high-level supporters had already decided to initiate another round of rectification to address what they saw as extensive political and ideological problems in art and literature circles. The Department of Propaganda

suspended proposed changes to *Early Spring* and included it along with other films for public screening and scathing criticism.⁶² In June 1964, Mao openly criticized veteran revolutionaries and party cadres in the circles for failing to implement CCP policies, “acting like bureaucrats and overlords” (*zuoguan dang laoye*) and teetering on “the edge of revisionism.”⁶³ Official objections to *Early Spring* became a major vehicle deployed by the state to attack intellectuals.

Between mid-September and mid-November 1964, *People's Daily* published 18 essays that denounced *Early Spring*, while newspapers around the country followed suit. In a nutshell, the criticism stressed that the film, through its positive representations of the values, beliefs, and behavior of Xiao Jianqiu and Tao Lanqua intellectuals, promoted “bourgeois individualism,” “bourgeois humanitarianism,” “bourgeois doctrine of class harmony,” and other objectionable views to life and politics that undercut the importance of class struggle in Chinese society. First, the production pays no attention to the uprisings of workers, peasants, and students against class exploitation and their sacrifices during the 1920s, let alone the resulting ascent of the CCP. Second, while the film depicts economic inequality and poverty, there is no indication that class exploitation is the source of the problem. Third, even though the political choices of Xiao and Tao and their treatment of the poor as well as their romance, joy, and despair reveal self-absorption, indecisiveness, conceitedness, cowardice, and other shortcomings typical of intellectuals then and later, the production highlights kindness, decency, learnedness, and other apparently admirable qualities of the two characters. The mere fact that some playwrights, novelists, directors, and artists are CCP members, the first criticism of *Early Spring* in *People's Daily* stated bluntly, does not mean that they would necessarily produce “proletarian” works; to the contrary, some of the works of these people are imbued with elements of bourgeois ideology.⁶⁴ In other words, unreformed intellectuals had been working within the party to undermine Chinese Communism. Within a few months, Xia Yan and Chen Huangmei were removed from their positions. Chen was forced to admit that under his supervision “a complete and systematic anti-Party, antisocialist, and revisionist line” had taken shape in the film industry.⁶⁵ The intense attack against *Early Spring* and its sponsors by the state proved that the critics of *Third Sister Liu* had been right about their muted resistance to the official denigration of intellectuals—speaking out for this category of people was dangerous, even for those who held high positions within the party or the state.

While the official denunciation of *Early Spring* signaled to state and society that bourgeois intellectuals had been dominating the film industry and, for that matter, other areas of the socialist political economy, screenings of the film showed that the struggle to define the intellectual and Chinese Communism, like before, reached deep into urban neighborhoods and everyday life, sometimes with results unpredictable to the authorities. In Shanghai, *Early Spring* was released on September 15, 1964, the same day when *People's Daily* published the first of its criticisms of the

movie. Few people showed up at any of the six cinemas carrying the film. Thanks to the official condemnation of the movie, things changed completely the following day. Even before the box office opened at Huaihai Cinema at 9 a.m., many people had queued up for tickets. At Grand Shanghai Cinema, 800 people had arrived by 9 a.m. Another 2,000 people, some of whom were scalpers, gathered in front of the cinema the following morning. Determined to control how the film would be understood, the municipal authorities in charge of propaganda quickly decided that tickets would not be sold to individuals, even though the original plan was to allot half of the tickets for such sale. Screening, instead, would be arranged by official agencies working together with workplaces and other organizations. After the cinemas posted the official decision in front of their establishments in the evening, the crowd did not disperse. Some demanded explanations from the staff; others asked that they be allowed to purchase tickets because of lack of official affiliation with any organizations. By the following morning, 400 to 500 people were still in front of Huaihai Cinema. Some stated they would “hold on to the end” and pressured the staff to sell them tickets. At 9 a.m., the crowd increased to more than 1,000 people. No amount of explanation from the staff could calm some of these people down. The cinema called the police for help, who arrived shortly and detained five “unemployed youths” who were allegedly leaders of the agitated crowd.⁶⁶

If unanticipated audience enthusiasm toward *Early Spring* indicated to the Shanghai authorities that many people would not accept the official interpretation of the film, initial reactions to the screenings confirmed that the authorities would need to do more than simply sponsor or publish criticisms of the film. Some audience members who had read the *People's Daily* review stated that the movie was not as objectionable as depicted by the official organ. Some who had queued for hours to obtain tickets were disappointed at how unremarkable the film was. Others noted that there was nothing wrong with the movie.⁶⁷ Even CCP cadres had difficulty grasping the denunciations leveled against *Early Spring*. A week after the film's release, the authorities in charge of propaganda organized a screening for party cadres. The event was followed by a meeting during which the cadres worked together to summarize how the film spread bourgeois thought as well as disguised and distorted class struggle. Some cadres reported that the collaboration helped them reflect on their lack of political vigilance, as they had not paid sufficient attention to ideological messages promoted in films, novels, and other works.⁶⁸ The Leap and *Third Sister Liu* had put down intellectuals for all to see, but even party cadres needed official explanations before recognizing why the leadership regarded *Early Spring* as dangerous propaganda promoted by bourgeois intellectuals inside and outside the party. Although the Shanghai CCP Department of Propaganda would arrange further screenings for party cadres, it decided that professional workers in art, literature, cinema, and other media as well as college students in art and humanities would be the primary audience of the movie.⁶⁹

Through their work these “intellectuals” had or would have access to their own audiences. They needed to understand the objectionable messages and representations in the film and, more generally, examine their own beliefs, ideas, and works with the perspective set down by the state.

Between September and October 1964, Shanghai cinemas screened *Early Spring* for a total of 364 times to an audience of 420,000 people. At least twelve universities and hospitals and other organizations also showed the movie to staff members and students. As the screenings proceeded, the authorities developed what they called “decontamination” (*xiaodu*) work to help the audience understand the film according to the official interpretation. Before the show, the authorities arranged for the audience to listen to reports from the Department of Propaganda and read official assessments of the movie. After the show, some audience members were required to participate in one or two one-hour sessions of follow-up discussion, or occasions that allowed the authorities to promote official views further and gauge individual responses. Despite the intervention, disagreements with the official interpretation of the film and the condemnation of the main characters as objectionable intellectuals persisted. At Jiaotong University, a Chinese Communist Youth League member reportedly argued that *Early Spring* was not a poisonous weed, because what Xiao and Tao did in the movie was appropriate under the political climate of the 1920s, when the Chinese socialist revolution was merely a budding project and genuine understanding of Marxist thought was rare. At Shanghai People’s Number One Hospital, a student contended that the film’s director, contrary to the official attack against him, was critical of Xiao’s and Tao’s bourgeois humanitarianism and actually showed its futility as a means to protect the poor. Others stated that the film opposed China’s “feudalist traditions” and was therefore politically progressive. At Shanghai Girls Secondary School Number Six, some students questioned why the denouncement of the behavior of Xiao was so intense even if it was improper. They reasoned that he was not a member of the CCP or its youth league and thus naturally did not have the political training to do the right things. At East China Normal University, some students allegedly focused on the performance of the actress who played Tao and her attractive appearance. At Shongshan Secondary School, even students who had not seen the film began to talk about it, with some wanting to watch the performance of the movie stars and their beautiful costumes.⁷⁰ In other words, these young men and women did not believe that people like Xiao and Tao, still less the producers and directors of the film, were bourgeois intellectuals intending to undermine Chinese Communism, as the state indicated—or they simply did not care about the state’s interpretation of the movie.

Third Sister Liu and *Early Spring in February* were prominent signposts of the mutual constitution of the intellectual and Chinese Communism under the PRC.

The works each brought to the surface of official discourse disturbing meanings that the state invested in the classification. The propagation of each set of meanings coincided with a severe phase of the revolutionary project. From the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, the Yan'an understanding of intellectuals dominated CCP thinking of this social category. Intellectuals were mainly usable but unreliable professional workers; they were not intransigent class enemies as some party leaders had implied earlier. During the late 1950s, *Third Sister Liu* suggested that intellectuals had been slavish and even criminal sidekicks of the exploiting classes with knowledge and skills worthless for actual production activities. The view reflected and reinforced the Great Leap Forward's disregard of rational planning and scientific knowledge which ultimately led to widespread famine. A few years later, the official condemnation of *Early Spring* hinted that an assault on intellectuals working within the party, the state, and other establishments would be necessary for saving Chinese Communism from a capitalist counterrevolution. Unreformed intellectuals purportedly had been using their knowledge and authority as well as access to resources and opportunities to promote bourgeois values, beliefs, and behavior. Shortly afterward, Mao and his deputies marched China into the Cultural Revolution. From the production of *Third Sister Liu* to the denunciation of *Early Spring*, the official assessment of intellectuals had gone from class enemies of the past with feeble influence on the present to a powerful and imminent threat to China's socialist development.

This is not to say that the increasingly severe official rebuke of intellectuals caused the abuse of writers, scientists, journalists, and other educated people during the Cultural Revolution, still less the murders of party cadres like Bian Zhongyun, the Beijing school principal who was beaten to death shortly after the campaign began. As we have seen, the official representations of intellectuals in *Third Sister Liu* and *Early Spring* elicited resistance, redirection, skepticism, confusion, and disbelief at various levels of state and society, or multivalent responses that had always accompanied the objectification of the intellectual under Chinese Communism. At the same time, however, the productions, performances, and reviews of *Third Sister Liu* and the screenings, denunciations, and audience workshops tied to *Early Spring* demonstrate that combustible conditions involving the objectification continued to build up between the Great Leap Forward and the eve of the Cultural Revolution. For one thing, state and society participated in the officially orchestrated creation, circulation, and consumption of yet further layers of ideas, images, and idioms that attacked intellectuals. Second, even as educated party leaders and cadres were implicated by the intensifying official attacks, they continued to target others whom they denounced as untrustworthy intellectuals. Third, amid the growing assault, the boundaries of the population of intellectuals were not any clearer than they had been since the inception of Chinese Communism, even though professors, writers, scientists, and others were widely regarded as intellectuals across state and society.

In other words, after four decades of the objectification of the intellectual under Chinese Communism, intellectuals were locatable virtually everywhere under the PRC. To be sure, what they stood for, who they were, and how they should be treated remained debatable. Yet, this objectified population was connected more than ever to a vitriolic rhetoric of blame and betrayal, a multipronged system of official domination, and a variety of tactics and strategies of stigma management. That is to say, repertoires of violence in the forms of political ideas, administrative measures, and internecine struggle were abundantly available to be set ablaze by Mao and his supporters on behalf of their political vision and political gains.