Liangxiang: The Propagandistic Function of the “Frozen Pose” during the Cultural Revolution

Alice Fritz

Abstract
The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Chairman Mao Zedong controlled every segment of the performing arts in order to cultivate a mass internalization of the Party’s ideology. Any possible channel for the dissemination of propaganda was fully utilized to promote the CCP. The following paper uses fantasy theme analysis to examine how pro-Party messages were circulated via certain dance poses, and the resulting effect on audiences. The historical context is carefully considered as part of the analytical process. The author concludes that the rhetorical attempts were largely successful in China, where many, particularly the young, deeply internalized the perspectives of the ruling party.

During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government employed various media to foster positive attitudes towards the ruling political party, including such seemingly “innocuous” mediums as music and dance. The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) comprehensive utilization of all available means of propaganda allowed them to influence the Weltanschauung of a nation of 800 million people. Jacques Ellul defined propaganda as “a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization” (61). Those who try to impress their political views onto the general public have frequently embedded their propagandistic messages in visual mediums.

Olson has noted that rhetoric can take any form of symbolic action, and does not necessarily have to be a verbal message (333–4). Visual rhetoric uses images and other visual signs and symbols to convey messages. Since 1970, rhetorical critics have recognized visual images as an important area of study; this importance is further highlighted in view of the opportunities images offer the political propagandist to advocate certain perspectives. Visual mediums may be particularly effective for the transmission of ideologies and other messages involving power, since they can potentially bypass the more critical cognitive
processes that audiences tend to reserve for more text-based artifacts. Ott and Dickinson have identified three principles that characterize visual rhetoric: 1) Visual rhetoric is a meaningful set of visible signs and therefore a mode of communication; 2) it is fundamentally an optical process, although that process is registered viscerally by the body as well as symbolically by the mind; and 3) while the forms of visual rhetoric vary widely, from paintings and photographs to sculptures and buildings to films and television, they are human constructions and indulgences (392).

During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (approximately 1966–1976) in China, the Chinese Communist Party under Chairman Mao Zedong relied heavily on propaganda to instill the desired attitudes and beliefs in the masses. To promote pro-Party sentiment, the Maoist government circulated Mao’s Little Red Book and used political posters (Dazibao, “big-character poster”), but besides such written texts, pro-Party messages were embedded in other mediums as well. The transmission of propagandistic messages from a multitude of channels may have helped to instill a notion in the people’s minds of an omniscient, Foucauldian center of authority that is present in all aspects of people’s daily lives; even an evening spent at the theatre watching Beijing opera would be spent under the watchful eye and enlightened guidance of Chairman Mao. Given the then fervent distrust of intellectual activity of any kind, it is not surprising that the Chinese government would turn to mediums that did not demand much or even any reading on the part of the audience, such as music (Beijing opera, revolutionary songs, etc.), comic books, paintings, ceramic figurines, and dance. Songwriters did not hold back in their encomiastic praise of Mao, and the messages conveyed by the figurines from that period were not very subtle either. One common theme depicted by these figurines would show a bespectacled (eyeglasses being the trademark of the intellectual) man about to be executed by two Red Guards grinning happily as they tower above his kneeling form. Such unconcealed glorification of the bloodshed and violence that accompanied the revolution may fan the already warm pro-Party fervor of some audiences, but for others, propaganda of this kind may only serve to invite oppositional readings. Perhaps taking this into account, the Maoist government supplemented the more overt propaganda with less “obvious” mediums as well, such as the performing arts, to transmit their propagandist messages.

All artistic production during the time of the Cultural Revolution was subject to government scrutiny, and was required to incorporate pro-Party messages. For example, the revolutionary songs often took their lyrics directly from Mao’s Little Red Book. The distinguishing feature of dance performances from the
same period was that they would invariably incorporate, into every choreography, frozen poses (liangxiang) or gestures that the audiences for those dance performances would immediately recognize as narratives alluding to Mao’s leadership. Those dances were, in essence, epideictic rhetorical texts, to use Aristotle’s classification, in that they persuaded their audiences to feel a certain way about their present situation. Specifically, the messages found within those dances attempted to stimulate feelings of admiration for Mao, satisfaction with the status quo, and optimism towards the future. Since the significant movements/poses all served to remind the audience of Mao’s wise leadership and helped build up his status as a hero, fantasy theme analysis would be an appropriate methodology for studying the rhetorical effects of the frozen poses.

Inspired by the work of Robert Bales in small group behavior, Ernest Bormann developed fantasy theme analysis in 1972 as an analytical tool for exploring “how dramatizing communication creates social reality for groups of people” (396). Fantasy theme analysis is a methodology that looks at the stories that are popular among and frequently recounted by a group of people in order to gain insight into “the group’s culture, motivation, emotional style, and cohesion” (396). A simple dance pose would immediately bring to the minds of the audience members, all of whom have heard the same stories told over and over again, some one or another of Mao’s heroic feats or attributes. Fantasy themes, according to Bormann, are dramatized stories about people, whether real or fictitious, which are narrated and repeated by different people. These oft-repeated stories revolving around one particular heroic central persona (in this case, Mao) are circulated so frequently within that society that they mature into a fantasy type, which in turn influence the worldview of the people in that society. The “cult of Mao” was built upon the vigorous propagandistic efforts of the CCP to chain-out particular narratives among the Chinese people.

The word “propaganda” may immediately call to mind for many the posters and films produced and circulated by the Allied and Axis governments during WWII; a connection is not often made, however, between the concept of propaganda and the infinitude of commercials, billboards, political campaign ads, even magazine or newspaper editorials, with which we are constantly besieged. “Because it surrounds us, propaganda goes undetected, especially when we imagine that we (need not) control it. In the ‘free world,’ political, economic and commercial propaganda are relatively unrestricted. This makes them infinitely more sinister than their gauche counterparts in Cuba, China or the USSR” (Rohatyn 80). The fact that propaganda is still very much a part of the
everyday lives of every individual points to the need for more thoughtful examination of this category of rhetoric. Insights gained from the close examination of propaganda campaigns could help us better understand the persuasive processes at work. The present paper aims at a better understanding of how propaganda is produced and disseminated by looking at how pro-Party messages were disseminated via the frozen poses in China in the Cultural Revolution era. Using fantasy theme analysis, the present essay will show how the various narratives conveyed through the familiar dance poses were calculated to increase group cohesion among the audience members, to promote homogeneity among the people, and silence voices of dissent. After all, when one expresses an opinion dissimilar to that upheld by everyone around him or her, the individual is immediately singled out as an outsider based on that difference of opinion. In a collectivist culture such as that of the Chinese, this would doubtless be perceived as an unenviable position to be in. The constant reminders, not just through dances but from a multitude of sources, of the many inspirational sayings and accomplishments of Chairman Mao, served to keep his admirable qualities always foremost in the minds of the populace.

Context and Framework of Analysis
While in his landmark 1972 essay, Bormann described the process by which a fantasy theme is “caught up” by an audience, and then “chained out” through its members. These shared narratives serve to “sustain the members’ sense of community, to impel them strongly to action (which raises the question of motivation), and to provide them with a social reality filled with heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes” (398). A dramatization that falls flat upon its initial iteration will not chain out through the rest of the audience. On the other hand, one that does will create a sense of community among group members, as they will become so familiar with the story that even superficial allusions to it will produce recognition and a sense of community akin to that shared between participants who are “in on” an inside joke. The CCP under Mao was certainly successful in creating dramatizations that referenced both Communist ideals and the persona of Mao himself that were chained out among the people and ultimately developed into the rhetorical vision of the time. Bormann defines rhetorical vision as “the composite dramas which catch up large groups of people in a symbolic reality” (398). It is the result of a successful persuasive campaign.

A fantasy theme analysis would prove a useful framework for the rhetorical scholar investigating how rhetorical vision operated during the Cultural
Revolution to influence public opinion and generate support for their political leader. Williams identifies a list of questions a scholar embarking on such an investigation using fantasy theme analysis may seek to address: “The dramatis personae, motives, attitudes, values, settings, behavior, emotions, etc. that are contained in the fantasy theme(s) in question” (15). Seeking, Williams asserts, to fill in gaps generated by what the author refers to as vagueness on Bormann’s part, Williams mapped out a more concrete set of instructions on how to use fantasy theme analysis as an analytical tool. According to Williams, one should start by identifying the dramatizations and by reconstructing the resultant rhetorical vision. Then, the audience should be identified. A discussion of audience reaction is also appropriate. Evidence should then be presented that the fantasy theme has indeed been caught up and chained out. Finally, the critic gets to the ultimate goal of fantasy theme analysis: to assess the motivating effect of the rhetorical vision. “By discussing the ways in which participation in the dramas serves to create for the participants a social reality, the critic may be able to explain certain behaviors and possibly predict others” (19).

Similarly, Foss has explicated the procedure involved in using fantasy theme analysis as an analytical tool. Foss identified the two major assumptions of symbolic convergence theory (the theory accompanying the fantasy theme method of rhetorical criticism): communication creates reality, and the realities created by individuals using symbols/language can converge to form a shared reality for all members of the group (122). In their fantasy theme analysis of the 2004 mockumentary A Day Without a Mexican, Marambio and Tew similarly stress the focus on how audiences respond to the communicator’s message. The communicator’s goal, according to Marambio and Tew, is to use fantasy themes to “unify audiences around the political, economic, and social issues of concern to the targeted audiences” (479).

In building up his cult of personality, Mao Zedong was essentially engaged in an extended political campaign; although he was not running in an election against an opponent, Mao and the Chinese Communist Party under him had to constantly remind the masses of why he was their ideal leader, so that the notion of searching for an alternative to Mao would not even enter their minds. Clark has observed that the Cultural Revolution “saw a nation of 800 million people apparently respond to the whims of one man” (1). This was the result of ceaseless efforts on the part of the CCP to promote the cult of Mao. Hence, all the propagandistic activities during the Cultural Revolution could be compared to those conducted during a campaign. Employing fantasy theme analysis to examine the 1972 U.S. presidential campaign, Bormann observed that a
compelling drama, one that had a better chance of being chained out through the public, must possess “plausibility, action, suspense, and sympathetic characters” (152). A fantasy theme usually stresses one or two of those elements. In his analysis of that campaign, Bormann discovered that the fantasy themes the McGovern campaign emphasized “tended to be character sketches which stressed the moral superiority of the heroes and the evil nature of the villains” (145); on the other hand, the Nixon campaign tried to downplay his persona from their rhetoric. Like McGovern’s campaign, the fantasy themes that were chained out among the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution stressed the sagacity and heroic qualities of Mao and the other heroes of the revolution, while denouncing the enemies of Communist values. As previous scholarship has not turned its attention towards a critical analysis of the “cult of Mao” using a fantasy theme analysis approach, the present paper will seek to address this gap.

The analysis of the visual rhetoric within Chinese dance poses in the pages that follow will look at five frozen poses as the fantasy themes, the basic units that combine to comprise a broader myth, the rhetorical vision. There were other fantasy themes that were circulated (chained out) during the Cultural Revolution; however, the present essay will focus upon the fantasy themes conveyed through the frozen poses. All the circulated narratives shared certain similar elements, including an emphasis on character. The rhetorical vision that resulted from the combined repetition of all those fantasy themes informed the way the Chinese people of that era interpreted their reality. Data on the Chinese dances was collected through an interview with a professional dancer who performed in China during the Revolution years, and for several years afterwards. The five particular poses were chosen for analysis based upon the frequency with which they appeared in dance performances as reported by the interview subject. These poses were then coded to determine the dominant themes that emerged; whether the emphasis was on setting, characters, or actions.

Dance in Cultural Revolution-era China
The goal of entertainment in China during the years of the Cultural Revolution was not so much to entertain as it was to educate. The Chinese Communist Party saw mediums of popular culture such as the opera and other performances as opportunities to spread pro-Party messages to the “broad masses.” They oversaw the production of all artistic performances. Though the CCP focused their propagandistic efforts on the Chinese opera, dance was
another medium that was a target of close governmental scrutiny and control. In fact, of the eight “model performances” (yangbanxi), two were ballets. Ballet was an import from China’s neighbor and political mentor, the Soviet Union, and the fact that the Chinese government made attempts to popularize this art form “indicated the modernizing and internationalizing ambitions of cultural practice in the Cultural Revolution” (Clark 158). The inclusion of The White-Haired Girl (Baimaonu) and The Red Detachment of Women into the Communist cannon of “model works” “ranked dance as close to equal with the relatively ancient performing art of Chinese opera” (Clark 158).

To gain a deeper insight into the cultural life of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution, the author conducted an interview with one who had experienced that era in Chinese history firsthand. Mia Z., who had been a professional dancer in China during the years of the Cultural Revolution and for several years afterwards, recalls the cultural production and consumption during that period in Chinese history. Chinese opera, she recalls, was the most popular form of entertainment among the people. Despite the limited choices, audiences still enjoyed going to those shows. The audience for dance performances was considerably less, and some of the smaller dance troupes struggled to sell tickets. This was never a concern, however, for Mia’s own dance company: She belonged to a company that performed exclusively for the armed forces. Mia estimates that her company would be on the road six months out of the year to travel to different army or naval bases and perform for large audiences comprised of soldiers, for whom attendance at those performances was mandatory.

Mia explains that there really is not a dance form that is truly indigenous to China. Due to its geographical proximity and political ties to China, the Soviet Union influenced several areas of Chinese life, including the performing arts. In addition to the Soviet import of ballet, which was being incorporated into Chinese cultural life, a new form of dance was being developed in China in the years leading up to and during the Cultural Revolution. In the development of this new dance form, certain elements of Russian dance were incorporated, as well as some elements of Chinese folk dances, and even martial arts. The folk dances have their origins in the celebratory rituals of peasant farmers during times of harvest, and they may just as well have been called traditional Chinese dances, if not for the Cultural Revolution-era abhorrence of the word “traditional.” Hence, they were referred to as “folk dances (minzu wu).” The hybridity that resulted from merging Russian dance styles and Chinese folk
dances was a modern dance-like art form that began to be taught in dance departments in Chinese Universities.

Mia herself first began to receive formal instruction in dance at Heilongjiang University, where she studied for six years before transferring to Harbin Normal University, where she continued her dance education for another two years. Prior to her formal dance education at those two universities, Mia recalls participating in informal dancing in the streets of her hometown during the pro-Party parades that were regularly held. Attendance at those parades was not an optional matter. Mia was a young child at the time, but she can still recall men and women sporting the red armbands attached to their sleeves (the emblem of the CCP) visiting each house in the neighborhood as they performed the watchdog duty of ensuring that no one stayed indoors during a parade. While they were in your homes, these party watchdogs would also take the opportunity to inspect your house for signs of recalcitrant tendencies. The obligatory portrait of Mao hung at a negligent angle, for instance, would be grounds for a charge of treasonous intent. Leese provided several accounts of persons receiving severe punishment for absurdly trivial transgressions that were interpreted as counterrevolutionary behaviors, including a peasant who was executed in 1970 “for having claimed not to have had space in his small hut to put up a Mao poster” (174). In addition, “everyone who, intentionally or not, failed to partake in the cult rituals, misspelled Mao quotations, or vilified cult symbols faced being sentenced as an ‘active counterrevolutionary’ by the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] military control commissions that had come to assume legal power in most parts of China by 1968” (207).

This kind of “penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power” (Foucault 198) instilled the appropriate amount of fear and uncertainty into the hearts of the people, and ensured that even when Party watchdogs were not watching, the “docile bodies” the populace had become were still behaving and thinking in a Party-approved manner. While the younger generation was exceptionally susceptible to the Party-generated fantasy themes and willingly embraced the cult of Mao, fear was the CCP’s weapon of choice when it came to controlling the older members of the population.

Coming to age in and then attending dance school under such a politically oppressive environment, Mia reveals that it was not until she came to the United States that she realized, for the first time in her life, that art can be imaginative and free. Creative freedom was something performers and
choreographers did not even dare aspire to in Communist-rulled China—it was simply taken for granted that any artistic effort had to follow Party guidelines and its content had to be Party approved. Mia recalls the tedious process of trying to put on a dance performance during those years: The choreographer would first describe his or her vision for the show to the appropriate cultural committee. Once the committee was satisfied that the proposed dance seemed to feature the proper pro-Party messages and no insurrectionary sentiments, the choreographer was given the go-ahead to start rehearsals for the project.

Before the show could be presented, however, official cultural monitors had to preview the show; additional modifications may be prescribed at this stage. Only when the cultural committees were completely satisfied that a given show espoused the proper pro-Party spirit and affirmed the proper values and heroic figures would the show be allowed to be performed for the general public, for whom it would purportedly have an uplifting, edifying effect. Mia, however, has a different take on the real goal behind all those Party-approved artistic performances: “The goal was to spread the Party’s agenda through art.”

Foss has advised the critic employing the analytical tool of fantasy themes to look for evidence early on in the research process that a series of fantasy themes has indeed been shared and symbolic convergence has occurred (127). There is no question that by the 1960s, the fantasy themes that built up Mao (and a few other war heroes) as an exemplar of right-thinking, self-sacrificing hero of the masses had already been widely “chained out,” though this was not always enacted voluntarily by the participants. The CCP had been engaged in a massive public relations campaign since 1943 to boost “the image of Mao Zedong as supreme party leader and eminent Marxist-Leninist theoretician” (Leese 11); the goal was to make him into a compelling symbol that the party could rally around and attract followers away from the representative of the opposing Guomindang Party, Chiang Kai-shek. Mao’s popularity among the peasants gave him an advantage, and the CCP emphasized his identification with the peasant class into which Mao himself was born.

The media campaign to solidify Mao’s Messianic image was redoubled in 1966 upon his return to politics following a four-year forced hiatus necessitated by the failure of his Great Leap Forward (1958–60). The CCP targeted its propagandistic efforts at the younger generation, and quickly won their wildly enthusiastic support. “Mao exploited the passion of the young people,” recalls Mia. “It was madness. Do you know how big Tiananmen Square is? Standing in the middle of it, you cannot even see the edge. As big as it was, when Mao gave a speech there, the young people who came to hear him filled the entire square
to capacity.” His youthful supporters became Mao’s Red Guards, and they supported his goal of purging the country of such “undesirables” as the urban intelligentsia who had previously criticized him. Many of those intellectuals were persecuted and sentenced; others were sent to the countryside to be “re-educated” through hard manual labor and by learning to live as the peasants do. Schools were closed and traditional, “bourgeois” values were vehemently denounced; in some instances, elderly citizens were harassed simply because of their ties to the past. In place of the rejected values, Mao’s government promoted the values of dedication to political work, military training, and good work ethic. The military, agricultural, and industrial spheres were privileged above others.

Foss defines character themes as a fantasy theme type that describes “the agents or actors in the drama, ascribes qualities to them, assigns motives to them, and portrays them as having certain characteristics” (123). The fantasy themes that were circulated in Cultural Revolution-era China were stories that emphasized the characters. Some were portrayed as heroes and given prominence, while the villains were portrayed as either dim-witted stooges or simply bland and uninteresting. Given the aforementioned privileging by the CCP of the military, farming, and industries (steel, oil, etc.), it is not surprising that the “young soldier/farmer/industrial worker who sacrifices himself for the good of China” featured so prominently in most of those fantasies.

One of the most iconic heroic figures was that of Yang Zirong, who became “one of the most widely recognized and enduring heroes in modern Chinese drama” (Clark 27). A member of the Red Army brigade during the Chinese civil war in the late 1940s, Yang Zirong disguised himself as a bandit in order to infiltrate a bandit gang that was associated with the Guomindang Army. After gaining their trust, Yang Zirong led his comrades in a victorious ambush upon the pro-Guomindang bandits. His story, that of a brave and resourceful fighter for the Communist cause who outwits the capitalistic enemies with his ingenuity, is typical of many of the fantasy themes of the Cultural Revolution.

Not that the heroes of those fantasies were always male; Chinese women experienced a raise in societal status due to the egalitarian beliefs encouraged by Mao. In contrast to the hyper-feminine female characters in traditional Chinese opera, the female characters featured in the model operas and other fantasies during the Cultural Revolution were just as strong and resourceful as their male counterparts. Instead of flirting demurely with the male protagonist, the female lead of a model opera could be seen performing physical labor in red, gender-neutral Communist Party attire or outwitting enemies of the revolution.
Whether male or female, the protagonists of those fantasies were invariably young, brave, clever, politically right-thinking heroes and heroines who were never shown to have either families (in terms of blood relatives) or love interests—the implication being that their family was the collective family of the Chinese populace, and their love was solely reserved for the Chinese Communist Party. Clark summarized the basic mythology that formed the basis of the model operas, ballets, films, etc.: “God-like main heroes came down to often remote earthly situations, showed the way forward for other heroes, and sometimes died in the process” (54). Portrayals of these fantasies in opera, films, dance, and other mediums endeavored to establish and/or strengthen the bonds between audience members as they were presented with a perspective they were invited to share.

Model operas afforded actors numerous opportunities throughout the show for sweeping gestures and striking a pose. These poses were often the same ones used in dance performances as well. There were a number of frozen poses that choreographers were expected to incorporate into their dances and that dancers like Mia were expected to assume at strategic points during any given show. Five of those frozen poses are discussed here. As we will see, these poses all suggest strength, power, youthful energy, leadership, and joy. They are synecdoches that are associated with an entire story or series of stories for their audiences.

In one of those frozen poses, (see Figure 1) the performer assumes a powerful forward lunge position. The back is straight, the head is held high, and one bended arm is held before the dancer’s chest. The positioning of the bended arm reflects the influence of Russian folk dance. The presence of the Russian influence as evidenced by the positioning of the arm held in front may hint at internationalism and may be a reminder of the Soviet-inspired policies of the CCP. The positioning of the legs may reflect a martial arts influence. In publicity stills for the model performances from that period, one can often see this particular pose assumed by the characters playing the soldiers. For audiences familiar with these publicity stills, the pose will further carry the connotation of being “ready for battle;” a readiness to defend one’s country, to fight whatever enemies may threaten one’s homeland. To convince people they must be in a constant state of alertness and readiness for battle, you must instill in them the belief that there is a perpetual threat. One common element of the fantasy themes during that time was that the bourgeoisie was ready to seize any opportunity to once again hold dominion over the proletariat. Hence, the model
Chinese citizen was one who was constantly on the lookout for counter-revolutionaries and special agents working to dismantle the Communist Party.

The major themes that can be detected in this pose are that of character and action. The affirmation of the stock character of the fearless soldier fighting to defend the proletariat against those who would threaten the egalitarian society of the New China is suggested by this powerful pose. Action is the second prominent theme that could be derived from this pose, namely the act of fighting as a member of the People’s Liberation Army, or as a member of the other paramilitary units that supported the CCP.

A variation of this pose is shown in Figure 2. The figure is still in a slight lunge, but now the arm held in front seems to be clutching a bugle, and the performer seems not so much about to break into a run as s/he is preparing to sound the clarion call announcing the arrival of an important VIP, or signaling the dawn of a new age. The dominant code that emerges from this pose is that of action. The figure seems to be announcing the dawn of a new age (a New China); the message here is one of “out with the old, in with the new,” or “let’s rejoice for a new world order is finally here.”
The energy in Figure 3 hearkens back to the intensity in the stance shown in Figure 1. Here, one arm is still held defiantly in front, but the figure is no longer in a lunge; instead, the back leg is raised. The elevated leg and the arm held behind is reminiscent of an arabesque, showing the influence of ballet on these
frozen poses. The hand held in front is in roughly the same position as that shown in Figure 1. It is a gesture suggestive of readiness and purpose; a viewer senses the kinetic energy that is building up and expects the performer to spring into action at any moment. The dominant theme that emerges from this pose is that of action. The pose suggests a readiness to spring into immediate action in response to the Party’s call. The government’s stress on the proper attitude towards work and physical labor (i.e., alacrity and enthusiasm) is alluded to through this pose.

A publicity still for the model opera *Shajiabang* (1971) shows the hero, army general and political instructor Guo Jianguang, prominently featured center-stage and striking the same pose as that shown in Figure 4: one hand rests on either the waist or thigh (in the publicity still Guo Jianguang’s hand is clutching a pistol), and the other arm is raised above the head, as if the actor were about to make some momentous announcement. The raised hand could also be seen as drawing the viewer’s attention to what lies in the immediate environment or just slightly ahead, as if to say, “Look, we have arrived!” Another connotative implication suggested by this pose is that the person is a fearless and decisive leader, one whom others can rely on to lead them in the right direction, and that the person is about to march purposefully into a bright future. This connotation also carries with it the associated ideas of progress and modernity.
Two themes emerge from this pose. The most prominent emphasis is given to that of character. This pose can arguably be seen as shorthand for any number of hero narratives with which audiences would have been very familiar, including, of course, the fantasy theme surrounding the persona of Mao Zedong himself. The mere sight of this allusive pose would have conjured in the minds of audiences many different fantasy themes that feature the same archetypal hero, someone who fought hard and overcame enormous obstacles and dangers to lead his people to a promised land of equality for all. A secondary theme that emerges from this pose is that of setting. The placement of the arm suggests that the person is presenting the immediate environment to an audience. The implication is that the participants in this fantasy theme have arrived at a new land of equality, a new world order in which the bourgeoisie are no longer in charge and where the proletariat has triumphed.

The last pose, shown in Figure 5, is the most blatantly adulatory. Both arms are raised in a presentational (or panegyrical) manner towards some invisible (or sometimes, not so invisible) object of worship. The climax of a dance show, according to Mia, would sometimes involve one dancer going onstage carrying a portrait of Mao Zedong. The other dancers would gradually gather around the one carrying the picture. As the music reached a dramatic crescendo, all the other dancers would suddenly freeze into some variation of this reverent pose,
facing the portrait. This outright display of Mao worship is not so surprising given that the CCP’s propagandizing emphasized the persona of their chairman. The dominant theme that emerges from this pose could be either action (praising Mao) or character; however, it is the argument of the present analysis that the emphasis is actually placed on character, i.e., the almost saint-like portrayal of Mao.

The frozen poses achieved their suasory effect in several ways. One can argue that the main goal of the ruling party at the time was to create a profound sense of community and communal identity in the people. Not everyone agreed with the tenets and actions of the Communist Party under Mao, and some people were still reeling from the horrors of harassment and persecution at the hands of the Red Guards. Many people lost or were separated from family members who were labeled as belonging to the “Five Black Categories” (property owners, wealthy farmers, counter-revolutionaries, “bad elements,” and political Conservatives). A primary goal for the Maoist government, then, was to instill a sense of unity in the citizens, to make them feel deeply connected to their comrades so that they would begin to think of themselves as an extended family, with the same goals and the same enemies. That these dances were a public cultural event was itself a suasive tactic: the people who gathered on any given occasion to watch one of these dance performances were immediately identified as a group that shared something in common—that of spectators to a show. This sense of community was further enhanced when, throughout the performance, they could detect, and make sense of, the various meaningful gestures/poses incorporated into the choreography. These meaningful poses featured in dance performances correspond to what Roland Barthes designated as condensed codes, and they are semiotic movements that are intelligible only to their intended audience (the Chinese population at the time). That is, a visiting American watching these dance performances may have been witnessing the same chain of signs, but would probably not have been able to decipher them in the way the Chinese would. This shared familiarity with the messages conveyed by the frozen poses in the program generated a sense of community and kinship.

Proletarian themes were affirmed in every Party-approved performance and other cultural products. As Deputy Director of the Cultural Revolution Group, Mao’s wife Jiang Qing was in charge of the arts and “oversaw the total suppression of a wide variety of traditional cultural activities during the decade of the revolution” (Jiang Qing). Instead, Jiang enforced uniformity in the artistic production of the time both in terms of content and theme. Expounding on the
ideological goals of paintings, Jiang insisted that “They must serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. The workers, peasants, and soldiers should occupy that battle front. The central ideological theme of what is painted must be quite clear, the composition must be quite simple, and the central theme must be pronounced” (qtd. in Schoenhals 198). The same motto guided production of all other artistic expression as well. The dance performances all tended to tell the same story revolving around the same heroes and affirming the same ideologically “correct” themes. The frozen poses assumed at strategic points within those performances served a synecdochic function: The sight of a familiar pose would immediately remind audiences of entire stories (fantasy themes).

The audience’s familiarity with these poses and the meanings and stories associated with them contributed to a sense of shared knowledge, which in turn led to a strengthened bond between members. The protagonists of those legends were often based upon actual martyrs from the wars the Chinese had been fighting in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution (e.g., Yang Zirong, etc.). The “Us versus Them” mentality that such narratives created also contributed to enhanced group cohesion among the Chinese people. Other stories featured heroes from the world of agriculture, such as Chen Yonggui, who turned the Shanxi village of Dazhai from a community of barren farmlands into one that yielded decent amounts of grain, fruits, and nuts (it was common for a choreographed piece to be given a title that had the phrase “Learn from Dazhai” somehow incorporated into it. For example, Mia remembers her first major performance as a dancer in a frenetically-paced piece entitled “You Chase I Run Let’s Learn from Dazhai”—the resulting title did not necessarily have to make a lot of sense; the important thing was to remind audiences of Dazhai’s successful example of what can be accomplished when hard-working farmers labored tirelessly for the good of Party and country). Exactly which individual hero was featured was beside the point; the protagonist of those performances was an amalgamation of the ideals upheld by the Party. Whether male or female, the protagonist was invariably a young person who had no interest in either romantic or familial relationships; rather, it was someone who dedicated him- or herself to advancing the goals of the New China, often by sacrificing his or her own life in pursuit of the collective good.

Finally, and most importantly, the protagonist had to exhibit complete compliance with Mao Zedong Thought; his or her words, actions, and behavior needed to reflect this conformity to the “correct” ideology and perhaps show the appropriate degree of reverence for Mao Zedong himself as well. S/he worked with his or her hands or otherwise performed hard physical labor,
whether in an agricultural, industrial, or military capacity. The audience was invited to identify themselves with this hero of the Cultural Revolution, sometimes quite explicitly. One publicity poster for the model opera *The Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji*) shows the heroine in Party uniform, reverently clutching the Little Red Book in one hand, and a rifle in the other. The subject has a determined expression upon her face, and her upward gaze falls upon the image of another woman raising high a red lantern. The caption accompanying this image reads: “Be this kind of person—carry out the revolution to the end.”

The powerful, defiant frozen poses are a synecdochic symbol for the hero who bravely fights the bourgeoisie, for the benefit of all Chinese workers. The objective of the Cultural Revolution, as stated in the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, is to “Contest and crush the capitalist-roaders in power, criticizing and repudiating the reactionary bourgeois academic ‘authorities’ as well as the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes.” This battle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is reflected in the dominant fantasy themes told through the dances and the frozen poses. The poses are strong and energetic; even the female dancers display the same level of strength and intensity as their male counterparts. There is no hint of softness or sensuality in these poses. The protagonist of these fantasy themes are never shown as having either a family (blood relations) or love interests.

An important binary that underpinned Maoist philosophy was that of private interests vs. public good. The absence of romantic elements within these fantasy themes demonstrates a rejection of desire and self-interest while privileging dedication to furthering communal interests, such as increasing agricultural and industrial production, and protecting the country and Party from counter-revolutionary traitors. Wang Min’an has suggested that the real target of the Cultural Revolution was in fact *personal desire*. “The reason capitalism is what it is, or, the capitalist roaders are who they are, is all because they are fully possessed by private desires. Personal desires are the seeds of evils of capitalism, including private ownership, lust for profits, excessive indulgence in pleasure and comfort, pursuit for sensual pleasure, sundry techniques of oppression and containment, and social inequality and injustice” (1). The frozen poses strip the dancers of sexual differentiation; the characters are no longer “men” and “women” with personal desires. They are all warriors and heroes whose only passion is for the collective well-being.

The protagonist’s lack of parents or other blood relatives suggests s/he embraces his or her community as an extended family. In addition, Mao Zedong
is seen as a parental figure replacing one’s biological father. The absence of family ties in these stories connects as well to another binary within Maoist ideology, that of tradition/past vs. modern. The “four olds” that the Cultural Revolution targeted were the old ideas, old cultures, old customs, and old habits. The past and everything related to it is suspect, including the Confucian ideals of filial piety. Filial duty is no longer owed one’s parents; instead, devotion is to be re-directed toward the communal “father” embodied by Chairman Mao. The energetic dances and powerful poses suggest the youthfulness of the dancers; this again was an affirmation of the young/new over the old/past. Mao’s laudation of the young proved a shrewd political strategy, as many of the young people, galvanized by his rhetoric, became the paramilitary units known as Mao’s Red Guards and helped Mao regain his position as leader of the CCP following the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

Rhetorical Vision of the Chinese Cultural Revolution

After coding the fantasy theme types that emerge from the five frozen poses, a heavy emphasis on the theme of character can be observed. This is congruent with the philosophy that guided the presentation of protagonists of the model performances, explicitly designated as the principle of the “three prominences” (san tuchu). Protagonists were to be featured in exceptionally prominent and flattering ways. Specifically, the principle stated, “Among all the characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among the positive characters, give prominence to the main heroic characters; and among the heroes give prominence to the central character” (Clark 46).

The individual fantasy themes that were chained out during the Cultural Revolution resulted in a rhetorical vision that was shared by many in China during that period. It was a highly melodramatic myth of the existence of an intrepid, self-sacrificing leader that the people could place their trust in, someone who constituted the only safeguard against the resurgence of the exploiting classes to oppress the simple, hard-working proletariat. The enemy of the people was identified as members of the bourgeoisie, or anyone who desired to restore political power to the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the persona of Mao was emphasized as an infallibly wise leader. In the sycophantic rhetoric of Lin Biao (Mao’s right-hand-man), we see how the CCP attempted to promote the persona of Mao: “We should do as Chairman Mao does. In both theory and practice, and both in Marxist theory as well as in his personal talents, Chairman Mao is not only superior to us in all respects, but he is also the world’s greatest contemporary Marxist-Leninist. We must use Chairman Mao’s example
as our measuring stock and attempt to catch up with, emulate, and learn from him” (qtd. in Schoenhals 20).

The resultant shared reality from the ubiquitous repetition of fantasy themes that emphasized Mao’s persona in turn became the social glue that united Mao’s followers together so strongly. People were so determined to stay on the “Us” side of an “Us/Them” dichotomy created by the Party’s polarizing rhetoric that they would often go to great lengths to demonstrate their right to be included within the privileged “Us” group. Many volunteered to spy on neighbors, friends, and even family to uncover revisionist or counter-revolutionary tendencies. It was not unheard of at that time for someone to report his or her own relative to authorities for suspected disloyalty toward the Party. Such actions could be justified because the shared reality of the people was one in which love for family members was subordinate to devotion to the Party and Mao’s political vision. The vision evoked strong emotions in participants, exciting a passionate determination to protect and defend the established government against those portrayed as dangerous villains.

As successful as the CCP’s propaganda campaign was, propaganda is not mass hypnosis, and though a large majority of the Chinese people fell under the spell of “Mao Zedong Thought,” there were inevitably some who did not embrace it wholeheartedly, or at all. “The notion of convergence emphasizes the audience as a critical element in the rhetorical process” (Foss 123). Although there were those who remained unmoved (and kept their oppositional opinions a secret) by the propagandistic rhetoric with which they were constantly bombarded, the rhetors who produced the persuasive texts during the Cultural Revolution were largely successful in achieving their goals, as much of the public responded to the texts in the way the producers intended.

Conclusion
An analysis of the visual persuasion used by the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution yielded some interesting findings on how entire narratives and ideologies could be conveyed using the synecdochic symbol of the frozen pose. As many in China at the time were successfully persuaded by the government’s zealous propaganda campaign, the evidence suggests that the fantasy themes circulated in China at the time (through a multitude of channels, of which dance is but one) were effective at creating a collective reality for the Chinese people. People’s familiarity with those stories was a commonality between them, which served as a form of social cohesion.
At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao claimed that “In this movement, Chairman Mao’s thoughts have been extensively propagated and popularized. They have become deeply engraved in the minds of people and have exerted a tremendous didactic impact upon the young and upon society in general” (qtd. in Schoenhals 10–11). The ten years following Biao’s proclamation proved how right he was. That Mao’s government was able to kindle such a fierce loyalty in the people demonstrates the ingenuity of the CCP in making theirs a cultural revolution: their propagandistic messages were so compelling because they permeated people’s cultural lives, and the fantasy themes were so potent because they were spread via the performing arts and other popular cultural products.

Looking back upon this notorious period in their history, many Chinese still shudder at the extremes to which people at the time, most notably Mao’s Red Guards, resorted in their eager determination to achieve Party objectives. Their sometimes shocking behavior, including the harassment, humiliation, or even beating or killing of anyone classified as a member of the Five Black Categories, can be explained only by taking into account the prevailing dramas that shaped the reality of those people. In one of the most impressive displays of the power of propaganda the world had ever seen, the CCP’s effective propagandistic efforts resulted in a rhetorical vision that convinced the people that any act of aggression executed in the name of the Party, however atrocious, was justified.

Works Cited


