Women’s Liberation and Anti-Superstition in Wartime Communist Propaganda, 1943-1950

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Abstract

This article seeks to bridge the hitherto disconnected studies of the “woman question” and “religious question” in the twentieth-century Chinese revolution. It focuses on the issues of women’s liberation and anti-superstition in Communist propaganda through Xiao Erhei jiehun (Young Blackie gets married), a popular novel by the Communist writer Zhao Shuli (1906-70) published in 1943, and examines its impact in comparative context in wartime Communist base areas. Drawing on the religious culture of the author’s native southern Shanxi, this revolutionary classic promoted freedom of marriage through attacking “feudal superstition.” The article compares wartime religious and revolutionary culture in Zhao’s rural Shanxi with the CCP’s cultural and political agendas in its headquarters of Yan’an. Despite its immense success, the novel’s original messages of women’s liberation and anti-superstition gradually became marginal in the early PRC years – both discourses gave way to the party-state’s higher ideological goal of class struggle, and were subsumed into the metanarrative celebrating the absolute leadership of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong.

Keywords

women’s liberation – anti-superstition – spirit mediums – Communist revolution – Zhao Shuli

Introduction

Over the last several decades, the rising tide of scholarly inquiries into the separate realms of the “woman question” and the “religious question” has greatly
enriched our understanding of twentieth-century Chinese modernity. The relationship and intersection of these two critical questions, however, are still largely uncharted territory. In particular, other than the black-and-white story of hostility and suppression, few scholars have explored the complex ways in which the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter referred as CCP) used the modernist categorizations of religion and superstition to fashion a new revolutionary culture for China's vast rural population, a culture in which “new men” and “new women” would prosper and thrive. This study, which represents a modest start at addressing this lacuna, focuses on the issues of women's liberation and anti-superstition as reflected in *Xiao Erhei jiehun* 小二黑結婚 (Young Blackie gets married), a popular novel written by the Communist writer Zhao Shuli 趙樹理 (1906-70) and published in 1943. In this novel, Zhao Shuli employed colloquial peasant language as well as traditional storytelling and dramatic narratives to tell a “popular story” (*tongsu gushi* 通俗故事), and by doing so, successfully integrated peasant culture into the Communist political discourse of revolution. Long hailed as a “victory in creative practice of Mao Zedong's ideas on literature and art,” the novel launched Zhao Shuli on a celebrated career as a “peasant writer” (*nongmin zuojia* 農民作家). The novel


underwent many different textual, musical and theatrical adaptations, and enjoyed immense popularity over several generations of rural and urban Chinese during the Maoist period.

Scholars of modern Chinese literature have written extensively on Zhao Shuli, often with a special focus on the uneasy balance he strikes between the Party’s ideological program and the agency of peasants in the Communist revolution.5 This study seeks to expand the scope of these earlier literary studies by bringing the Communist reconstruction of both the “new woman” and of religion/superstition into the conversation. The CCP followed the prevalent anti-superstition discourse of the early twentieth century that rejected traditional links between the state and a greater cosmic power and, between individual religious experience and supernatural intervention. Like their May Fourth and Nationalist predecessors, the CCP denounced traditional religious practices and communal ritual life as irrational “superstitions” that were obstacles to modernity.6 This anti-superstition discourse had profound gender implications. The May Fourth trope of “traditional woman” was usually identified with rural and uneducated women who passively submitted to the exploitation of both the Confucian patriarchal system and “feudal superstitions.” The elite discourse of modernity in general also served to increasingly feminize communal religions as well as ritual specialists, which meant that rural women were regarded as purveyors as well as victims of superstition.7 In this context, the modern “new woman” became the opposite of the “traditional woman.”


7 Nedostup, Superstitious Regime, 222-24; Shuk-wah Poon, Negotiating Religion in Modern China: State and Common People in Guangzhou, 1900-1937 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011), 140-41; Kang, “Women and the Religious Question,” 502-06.
The former was an urban and modern citizen who embodied the May Fourth values of science, reason, and secular worldviews, and who in defiance of the Confucian patriarchal family system, rejected arranged marriage and bravely pursued true love and the freedom to choose her own marriage partner.8

However, the CCP’s commitment to the fight against superstition and to women’s liberation also differed from its modernist predecessors. On the one hand, Marxist principles of class antagonism shaped the CCP’s theoretical foundation about both religion and women. Religion, which the CCP often did not distinguish from “superstition,” was condemned as the “opiate of the masses” and a tool of class suppression over the working class. It would fade away naturally as soon as science, reason, and democracy triumphed.9 In the same vein, women were not regarded as constituents of a separate social and political category, but rather as members of different classes who shared the interests of the men of their own class.10 However, as the CCP was forced to shifted its revolutionary base to rural areas, and to face the expedient needs of wartime survival, it was forced to adopt more pragmatic policies. It extended the anti-Japanese United Front to include both religious institutions (especially those of ethnic minorities and of foreign origin) and religious sects such as

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the *Gelaohui* 哥老會 (Elder Brothers Society). The CCP policies also prioritized rural women's economic production in support of the Communist war efforts, but fell short in the pursuit of full gender equality that had been formulated in the May Fourth era. While CCP legal authorities had written freedom of marriage into its laws from the Jiangxi 江西 Soviet period through the Yan’an 延安 -based ShaanGanNing 陝甘寧 government to the establishment of the PRC, the enforcement of these laws was often compromised to the benefit of male farmer-soldiers in the military. Nevertheless, the CCP also implemented the laws more pragmatically at a local level in response to specific cultural and political conditions, and many rural women did take advantage of the marriage laws and creatively used them in ways unexpected by state initiatives.

Zhao Shuli’s *Xiao Erhei jiehun* tackles the problem of religion/superstition that was so deeply embedded in the lives of peasants and their traditional ways of thinking. In the novel, elderly peasant women such as San Xiangu 三仙姑 (Third Fairy Auntie) rely on the practice of spirit possession to protest against arranged marriages. In contrast, the “free-choice marriage” promoted by the Communist government helps young peasant women like Xiaoqin 小芹, San Xiangu’s daughter, free themselves from the shackles of “feudal superstition” and enjoy true love and happy marriages. The different ways in which the female body, age, sexuality and marriage are represented in the novel served as powerful propaganda tools to link the CCP anti-superstition campaign with rural women’s liberation.


It is noteworthy that even though *Xiao Erhei jiehun* brought Zhao Shuli renown throughout the Communist base areas as a “peasant writer,” Zhao Shuli was in fact a native of rural southern Shanxi who never even set foot in Yan’an and the ShaanGanNing Border Region. As this study will show, although some of Zhao Shuli’s writings were very popular, even beyond the Communist base areas, his different understandings of “superstition” must be viewed primarily in the context of wartime religious and revolutionary culture in rural Shanxi. Moreover, despite their initial popularity and success, Zhao Shuli’s original messages of anti-superstition and women’s liberation gradually gave way to the party-state’s higher ideological goal of class struggle in the PRC. They would be subsumed into the metanarrative celebrating the absolute leadership of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong.

**A Brief History of Xiao Erhei jiehun**

*Xiao Erhei jiehun* features four major characters: Xiao Erhei, his lover Xiaoqin, his father Er Zhuge 二諸葛 (Second Zhuge), and Xiaoqin’s mother San Xiangu. Er Zhuge, who does everything according to his almanac and divination books, opposes the marriage of Xiao Erhei and Xiaoqin because of a negative reading of their *mingxiang* 命相 (horoscopes). He purchases a child bride for his son instead. The elderly San Xiangu is a spirit medium who has a long history of wantonly consorting with men and, because she herself is sexually interested in the handsome Xiao Erhei, she tries to get her daughter Xiaoqin to marry a much older and wealthy man. In the meantime, an abusive village cadre makes sexual advances to Xiaoqin. When she rejects him, he has his men ambush the young couple, accusing them of sexual misconduct, and sends them to be punished by the county chief. However, the county chief takes the side of the young couple, and calls a mass meeting the purpose of which is to accuse the cadre. He also lectures Er Zhuge and San Xiangu, who subsequently give their consent to the marriage and change their misguided ways. By the end of the novel, Xiao Erhei and Xiaoqin are happily married and praised by all as a model “new” couple.

*Xiao Erhei jiehun* was published in September 1943. The novel, as well as two subsequent longer pieces of fiction, initially received lukewarm responses from the literary circle in the Communist base areas. Zhao Shuli’s manuscript was kept in the dark for five months by the official press of Xinhua shudian

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14 The other longer writings are *Li Youcai banhua* 李有才板話 and *Lijiazhuang de bianqian* 李家莊的變遷. Shi Jiyan 史紀言, “Zhao Shuli tongzhi shengping jilüe” 趙樹理同志生平
新華書店 (New China bookstore) and was published only after the press had received a positive note from the Communist general Peng Dehuai 彭德懷 (1898-1974): “It is rare to see such a popular story that comes from the masses” (Xiang zhezhong cong quanzhong diaocha yanjiu zhong xiechulai de tongsu zuo-pin hai bu duojian 像這種從群眾調 查 研究中寫出來的通俗作品還不多見).15 Even then many intellectuals in the Taihang 太行 base area publicly ridiculed the novel as a “low-class vulgar story” (diji de tongsu gushi 低級的通俗故事). A positive review of the novel on a literary journal invoked harsh criticisms from the more authoritative newspaper of Xinhua ribao 新華日報 (New China daily): “Our current task is to fight against the Japanese. What is the significance of writing about love and romance?”16 Subsequently, all other papers and journals in the base areas remained silent with regard to the novel. In contrast, the novel became instantly popular among the rural population in the Mount Taihang region. Within just seven months, forty thousand copies of Xiao Erhei jiehun were printed and reprinted. It was also quickly adapted and made into local operas and plays that were performed throughout the Communist base in Shanxi.17 In 1946, the popularity of Zhao Shuli’s works finally received recognition from the top Communist propaganda leader Zhou Yang 周揚 (1908-89) in Yan’an, followed by established leftist writers such as Guo Morou 郭沫若 (1892-1978) in Nationalist Shanghai and Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981) in Hong Kong, where Xiao Erhei jiehun was performed in the form of kuaiban 快板 (rapid rapping) and huaju 話劇 (spoken drama), and was even made into a film.18 The propaganda effect among the rural readers was so impressive that the CCP later

15 Dai Guangzhong 戴光中, Zhao Shuli zhuan 趙樹理傳 (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1987), 187.
17 Zhao Shuli’s novel was turned into a local opera and performed by two village opera troops the same year when it was published. See David L. Holm, “Local Color and Popularization of Literature of the Wartime Border Regions,” Modern Chinese Literature and Culture 2.1 (1986): 7-20, see page 14.
18 On the rise of Zhao Shuli’s status in the Communist literary circle, see He Guimei, Zhuanzhe de shidai, 301-8. On the spread of Xiao Erhei jiehun, see Yu Xiaowei 喻曉薇, “Yongbu diaoxie de shanhua: Xiao Erhei jiehun chuangzuo yingxiang shihu” 永不凋謝的山花: 《小二黑結婚》創作, 影響史話, in Fan Xing 樊星, ed., Yongyuan de hongse jingdian – hongse jingdian chuangzuo yingxiang shihu 永遠的紅色經典－紅色經典創作影響史話 (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2008), 1-41.
ordered Zhao Shuli’s works to be distributed as Party guide books for local cadres to learn how to work with the peasants. From 1946 to 1953, Zhao Shuli’s works were held up as perfect combinations of political propaganda and popular entertainment: “The masses love to read them and politically they make an impact” (laobaixing xihuan kan, zhengzhi shang qi zuoyong 老百姓喜歡看, 政治上起作用).

19 Communist writers and artists were called upon to stride in the “Zhao Shuli direction.”

20 In 1947, Jack Belden (1910-89), a visiting American journalist, even commented that Zhao Shuli was “possibly – outside of Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong) and Chu Teh (Zhu De) – the most famous man in Communist areas” and, in fact, “well-known all over China.”

In 1952, the students of the newly founded Central Opera House in Beijing turned Xiao Erhei jiehun into a five-act “new opera.” Some of the songs became instant hits. The story and the songs remained popular even after the “Zhao Shuli direction” fell out of favor with the Party in the late 1950s, and in 1964, the Beijing Film Studio made the story into a film. By this time Zhao Shuli already had experienced several rounds of ups-and-downs over successive political campaigns, and was being criticized for constantly writing “in-the-middle” peasant characters (zhongjian renwu 中間人物) that “defied the most important and most central task of socialist literary creation – the task to create heroes.”

21 In February 1965 Zhao Shuli was expelled from Beijing and sent back to Shanxi. Brutally persecuted and tortured, he died on September 23, 1970 at the age of 64. The popularity of Xiao Erhei jiehun, however, continued unabated. From its inception in 1943 to 1979, Zhao Shuli’s original work was reprinted 26 times by nineteen different presses, often in inexpensive illustrated editions aimed at rural readers. The story also exists in more than ten different types of local operas and plays, performed by many well-known artists.

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19 Chen Huangmei 陳荒煤, “Xiang Zhao Shuli fangxiang maijin” 向趙樹理方向邁進, Renmin ribao 人民日報, August 10, 1947, collected in Fudan daxue zhongwenxi, Zhao Shuli zhuanji, 202.


22 “Xie ‘zhongjian renwu shi zichan jieji de wenxue zhuzhang’ 写‘中間人物’是資產階級的文學主張, Wenyi bao 文藝報 (1964), vols. 8-9, cited in Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuan, 446.

23 Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuan, 426-449, 471-98.

24 “Zhao Shuli zuopin xinian” 趙樹理作品系年, in Fudan daxue zhongwenxi, Zhao Shuli zhuanji, 512-13; Huang Xiuji, ed., Zhao Shuli yanjiu ziliao, 634-37; 701-703.
Zhao Shuli and the Religious Culture in Wartime Rural Shanxi

It is only recently that Zhao Shuli’s works have been considered worthy of study in Western scholarship. In his seminal book on modern Chinese fiction, C.T. Hsia found it “impossible to discover any merit” in Zhao Shuli’s early stories, and claimed that Zhao Shuli’s “clumsy and clownish style is utterly incompetent to serve the purposes of narration.”\(^{25}\) Hsia’s comments resonate with the initial lukewarm responses from the Communist intellectuals mentioned above, who valued the Western techniques of fictional writing that Zhao Shuli shunned. Jack Belden, who translated four of Zhao Shuli’s works and apologized for his possible ethnocentric bias, also confessed that he was “disappointed” with Zhao Shuli’s writings.\(^ {26}\)

Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker provides a more sophisticated and sympathetic view of Zhao Shuli’s works. She points out that they embody the perpetual predicament of a Communist propagandist literature that revolved around Mao Zedong’s ideology of a peasant-based revolution: the literature “must be based on life (\textit{cong shenghuo chufa 從生活出發}) and yet meet a priori ideological requirements.”\(^ {27}\) Zhao Shuli as a Communist propagandist had very little freedom to write outside of the party line.

More recently, literary scholars in both China and the West have begun to question the earlier Communist acclaims of Zhao Shuli as a mere success of overcoming Western cultural influence with “native peasant traditions.” They focus on Zhao Shuli’s simultaneous, and often times paradoxical commitment to the “new, modern” and the “old peasant” literature, and mark Zhao Shuli’s works as a radical departure from the May Fourth New Literature. He Guimei 賀桂梅, for example, points out that Zhao Shuli posed himself as a “writer for street market” (\textit{wentan wenxuejia 文攤文學家}) against a “writer of the literary field (\textit{wentan wenxuejia 文壇文學家})”: the former abandoned the May Fourth direction of the latter and resorted to reformed folk literary traditions to create a new and modern form of Chinese literature.\(^ {28}\) Hui Jiang places Zhao Shuli’s literary creation directly in opposition to the masterpieces of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), the most representative figure of May Fourth literature. Jiang recognizes

\(^{25}\) C.T. Hsia, \textit{A History of Modern Chinese Fiction} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 482.
\(^{26}\) Belden, \textit{China Shakes the World}, 96.
\(^{27}\) Feuerwerker, \textit{Ideology, Power, Text}, 118.
the extent to which Zhao Shuli managed to employ an agency independent of the Party line. He argues that Zhao Shuli rejected the May Fourth writers' tendency to always look down on the peasants and to construct them as the embodiment of something abstract, such as humanity or national characters. In Zhao Shuli's storytelling narrative, the peasants “can talk because they can think, understand, communicate and make judgments about their own affairs, and they demonstrate thereby that they are the masters of their own worlds.”29 Xiaoping Wang's argument follows a similar line, but also points out one of the problems related to Zhao Shuli's identification with peasant culture: although he was successful in overcoming the shortcomings of May Fourth literature by allowing peasants to speak for themselves, he failed to awaken their class consciousness and mobilize them to “enter into a higher ethical-moral, to participate in building a new society or constructing an ’alternative modernity.’”30

A deeper exploration of the social and historical context of Zhao Shuli's life can help us better understand Zhao Shuli's agency as a “peasant writer” and, in particular, his literary representations of religion and women in Xiao Erhei jie-hun. Despite later claims of Zhao Shuli having come from a “poor peasant” family – the most respected category in the Communist class classification system and the one that best qualified him for the title of “peasant writer,” Zhao Shuli in fact grew up in a declining gentry family from rural Shanxi where “superstitions prevailed” and “sects and secret societies were as numerous as an ox’s hair.”31 An expert in farm work and proficient in reading and writing classical Chinese, Zhao Shuli’s father owned sixteen mu of land, which he himself worked all year round. For three generations, Zhao Shuli’s family had also been followers of various sectarian religions: his paternal grandparents and father followed the Sanshengjiao daohui (Three sages’ teaching society), and his mother and her well-to-do family belonged to a group called the Qingcha jiao (Pure tea teaching). Zhao Shuli’s childhood education began with his grandfather’s popular scriptures from the Sanshengjiao daohui and his father’s rich collection of divination books, and he practiced the Sanshengjiao daohui’s rituals of vegetarianism, incense offerings, prayers and

30 Wang Xiaoping, “Problem Stories,” 228.
31 Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuan, 8 and 14. Zhao Shuli was said to have come from a “poor peasant” family in 1949, when the land reform was underway in the “liberated areas,” and when he was celebrated as a “peasant writer.” Wang Chun 王春, “Zhao Shuli shi zenyang chengwei zuojia de” 趙樹理是怎樣成為作家的, Renmin ribao, January 16, 1949, in Fudan daxue zhongwenxi, Zhao Shuli zhuanji, 30.
incantations. He was also actively involved in the village musical band, enjoyed storytelling, and developed a lifelong passion for the local opera, Shangdang bangzi 上黨梆子. At age 19, Zhao enrolled at the provincial normal school in Changzhi 長治, a mid-sized regional town in southern Shanxi. Here he devoured whatever literature he could get his hands on, from ancient poetry to Ming-Qing vernacular fiction, from Lu Xun to Ibsen and Turgenev. He was deeply drawn to the May Fourth ideals, and especially to the works of Lu Xun. Under the influence of a close classmate, he denounced all the “superstitious” practices he had grown up with, including, at the age of twenty-one, breaking the Sanshengjiao daohui’s vegetarian vows for the first time in his life. It was around this time as well that he possibly became exposed to Communist ideas.32

Zhao Shuli first wrote several pieces of May Fourth-style “new fiction” but found that his village audience continued to be more interested in traditional popular stories. It was precisely because Zhao Shuli knew how deeply traditional Chinese religions were ingrained in rural life that he began to understand the necessity of using “old literary forms” to encourage new social and political changes. In 1937, Zhao Shuli joined the Communist-led Ximenghui 犧盟會 (Sacrifice league), and in 1939 became a Communist cultural worker in the Eighth Route Army. By then Zhao Shuli had already begun using all kinds of “old forms” such as rapid rapping, local operas and popular plays to produce wartime propaganda. He proclaimed that he had no interest in writing for fame, but took pride in writing inexpensive propaganda pamphlets that could be sold in street markets along with popular versions of folk plays and stories.33

Zhao Shuli’s exceptional success with Xiao Erhei jiehun coincided with changes in the Party’s cultural policy that took place in the early 1940s. As David Holm has demonstrated, Communist intellectuals and artists had been debating on the “national form” since the late 1930s: the cultural populists supported the use of “old forms” to educate the Chinese populace, and the other group, many from Yan’an’s Lu Xun yishu wenxue yuan 魯迅藝術文學院

32 Belden, China Shakes the World, 91; Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuan 4-20, 23-7, 50-2; Andrienne Montani, “Zhao Shuli and Socialist Realism,” Journal of South Asian Literature 27.2 (1992): 41-65, see pages 41-42; Feuerwerker, Ideology, Power, Text, 114-16. These sources differ in the timing of Zhao Shuli’s joining the Communist Party. Dai Guangzhong states that Zhao Shuli secretly joined the Communist Party in 1927 but remained ideologically “confused” during this period. Montani, follows Belden, states that Zhao Shuli “was totally ignorant of what a Communist was” and became a Communist sympathizer only after having served jail time in 1927 when he was falsely accused of being a Communist. Montani, “Zhao Shuli and Socialist Realism,” 45-46.

33 Belden, China Shakes the World, 94-95; Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuan, 44-45, 104; Montani, “Zhao Shuli and Socialist Realism,” 45-46.
(Lu Xun Academy of Art and Literature, commonly known as Luyi 魯藝), which mostly comprised Western and urban trained intellectuals, believed in expressing Chinese content in the new, Western forms. Zhao Shuli was based in the Taihang region of Shanxi and therefore relatively distant from the Yan’an debate. It remains unclear whether Zhao Shuli wrote *Xiao Erhei jiehun* before or after Mao Zedong’s Talks at the Yan’an Forum. Nevertheless, his personal experience with, and later renunciation of, traditional religious practices and rituals resonated with Mao Zedong’s vision of a scientific mass culture that “opposed to all feudal and superstitious ideas.”

Anti-superstition was also closely connected with Communist wartime survival in Shanxi. In 1941, a rebellion broke out in Licheng 黎城, a rich rural town in the Communist-controlled Taihang Base Area of southern Shanxi. About 400 to 500 local peasants joined the rebellion as members of the *Liguadao* 離卦道 (Way of Li trigram). They allegedly drank charm water in the hopes of becoming invisible “iron arhats” and “female iron soldiers,” and attacked the Communist county government which they characterized as “demon headquarters.” The rebellion was quickly put down. Although the CCP’s post-rebellion investigation acknowledged the widespread discontent against CCP’s tax policies and local cadres’ abuse of power, it still concluded that the rebellion had been instigated by the Japanese and their collaborators, namely, the local sectarian organizations.

The investigation discovered that the *Liguadao* was only one of the many sectarian organizations active in an area where “everyone over thirty partici-


35 Mao Zedong’s Talks were delivered in 1942, and *Xiao Erhei jiehun* was written in May 1943. However, the CCP did not publish Mao’s Talks until October 1943 (Holm, *Art and Ideology*, 92). Some Communist sources, such as Shi Jiyan, “Zhao Shuli tongzhi shengping jilue,” emphasize Mao’s leadership role by saying that Zhao Shuli’s work was inspired by Mao’s Talks. Others remain vague, saying that after first reading Mao’s Talks, Zhao Shuli was very excited, because he confirmed that the direction he had taken was now officially granted. This suggests that Zhao Shuli read Mao’s Talks only after he finished *Xiao Erhei jiehun*. Dai Guangzhong, *Zhao Shuli zhuoan*, 190-2. Hui Jiang states that both *Xiao Erhei jiehun* and *Li Youcai banhua* were published shortly before Zhao Shuli had read Mao’s Talks. See Hui Jiang “From Lu Xun to Zhao Shuli,” 104. See also He Guimei, “Zhao Shuli wenxue de xiandaixing wenti,” 98.

36 Holm, *Art and Ideology*, 74-75.
pated to some extent in one or another religious organization.”37 Some sect members were also members of the local CCP, making it even more difficult for the CCP to reorganize Party meetings after the rebellion. Such a pervasive presence of sectarian organizations challenged the CCP’s survival and success on several counts. First, the sectarian groups such as the Liguadao often rivaled the CCP in their tight organizational structure. In 1941, the sect had a large following of more than 3000 people and over 120 villages in the Licheng area, mainly through a lineage-controlled hierarchical structure modeled after both the Nationalist and Communist administrative system, with ranks from capital to provincial, prefecture, county and then village level.38 Second, the Liguadao advocated self-cultivation, spiritual healing, and the unity of the Three Teachings (Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian). It also preached the imminent descent of the Nanfang Ligong toutian zhenren Gao laoye 南方離宮透天真人郜老爺 (Heaven penetrating perfected master Gao of the Li palace of the south), and its emphasis on the end-of-the-world suffering was a direct criticism of the new order brought by the CCP.39 Third, contrary to the common assumption of sectarian appeals to the poor, the Liguadao members were mostly well-to-do and young, and half of them were women. The CCP investigation concluded that young women joined the sect primarily because it promised gender equality among the members, and provided opportunities for them to pursue free choice in marriage as well as work outside of the home.40

38 Goodman, based on the CCP post-rebellion investigation, states that the Liguadao was founded in 1936 and only expanded quickly in the region in 1940 and 1941. Goodman, “Licheng Rebellion,” 219. Yet the sect seems to have a much longer history in north China. 39 Gao laoye was Gao Shengwen 郜生文, a native of Henan and presumed founder of the Liguadao. He was executed by the Qing court in 1771, and was often associated with the White Lotus, the Boxers and the various sectarian organizations in north China in late Qing and early Republican sources. The Gao family had been following the teachings of the Liguadao for generations by the eighteenth century. The sect had spread to Shandong, Henan, and central Shanxi, under the names of Xiantiandao 先天道 (Way of anterior heaven) and Dachengdao 大乘道 (Way of great vehicle), was led by leaders of different surnames, and suffered Qing persecution in the early nineteenth century. See Pingshan Zhou 平山周 (Hirayama Shu), Zhongguo mimi shehui shi 中國秘密社會史 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1990), 7; Susan Naquin, Millenarian Rebellion in China: the Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 55-60.
Anti-superstition and women's liberation became important concerns in the CCP's post-rebellion settlement. Immediately after the rebellion, in January 1942, the Party called a special meeting of over 400 cultural workers, local gentry representatives and leaders of the Eighth Route Army in the Taihang and Hebei region. The central task of the meeting was to encourage these people to focus on the education and cultural transformation of the masses at the village level. In the Party newspaper coverage of the meeting, sectarian activities were explicitly linked to Japanese enemies, their spies and collaborators. Branded as superstition, these activities were accused of being both contrary to the anti-resistance war and anti-government. All cultural workers were urged to pay attention to this “serious practical problem” and to work hard on providing guidance to “our compatriots in the sects.” Zhao Shuli rose to the occasion. He reiterated his belief that “the dominant culture of the masses” was in the popular stories, scriptures and plays that could be found in nearly every rural household and that served to poison the minds of the people. Only through utilizing language and formats which were familiar to the peasants would the Communists be able to wage a winning battle against the old culture. Shortly after the January 1942 meeting, Zhao Shuli wrote two anti-superstition pieces designed particularly for the purpose of educating sect members. The two pieces provided the prototypes of the main characters in *Xiao Erhei jiehun*.43

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41 Sun Jiang argues that the rebellion never happened but was only "constructed" retrospectively by the Communist investigation group to justify the CCP’s policy failure and its suppression of the rising popularity of sectarian organizations in the region. While sectarian groups in Shanxi took different sides and some indeed collaborated with the Japanese, in the case of Liguadao, it could very well be that the Communist army attacked the group's ritual gatherings first, forced the group to counterattack, and with some members of the group fleeing to the Japanese side out of self-preservation. Sun Jiang, “Wenben zhong de xugou: guanyu ‘Licheng Liguadao shijian diaocha baogao’ zhi yuedu” 文本中的虛構: 關於黎城‘離卦道事件調查報告’之閱讀, *Kaifang shidai* 開放世代 4 (2011): 5-27.

42 Dai Guangzhong, *Zhao Shuli zhuan*, 158-64.

43 The two parental characters, Er Zhuge and San Xiangu, and their “superstitious practices,” were reportedly based on two of Zhao Shuli’s works of this time: *Shenxian shijie* 神仙世界 (The realm of gods and immortals) and *Wanxiang lou* 萬象樓 (Tower of myriad forms). *Shenxian shijie* was incomplete and Zhao Shuli finished it in 1943 under the new title of *Xiao Erhei jiehun*. Shi Jiyan, “Zhao Shuli tongzhi shengping jilue,” 12. See also Zhao Shuli, “Yunyong chuantong xingshi xie xiandaixi de jidian tihui” 運用傳統形式寫現代戲的幾點體會. It was written in 1963 and collected in *Zhao Shuli wenji* 趙樹理文集.
On the issue of women, the CCP discredited the sect’s strict rules of sexual abstinence and moral cultivation by attacking the sexual impropriety of sect leaders and members, a diatribe against women’s participation in popular religion and sectarian movements that had been used since late imperial times. It further aimed to pull women out of the sect by promoting free choice of marriage and women’s participation in politics. Coincidently, in July 1941, the Communist government of the JinChaji 翔察冀 Border Region, following the 1939 example of the Yan’an CCP headquarters, issued “JinChaji bianqu hunyin tiaoli” 翔察冀邊區婚姻條例 (Marriage regulations of the JinChaji border region). The new marriage regulations began by stipulating that “a marriage between man and woman has to be consummated by both partners freely, independently, and voluntarily. Third parties cannot intervene. All evil customs of coerced, arranged marriages and marriages involving the purchase [of any partner] are to be abolished.” It went on to ban the practice of child daughters-in-law, early-age marriages and concubinage, and to ensure that marriage should be strictly monogamous.44 In early 1943, a revised version of the marriage regulations was issued, followed by further regulations designed to enforce them, with a special focus on those who interfered with the free-choice of marriage either by coercion, involuntary arrangement or by monetary transaction.45

Zhao Shuli was himself a witness of the effects of these new marriage regulations when, in the spring of 1943, he was sent to Liaoxian county 郇縣 (today’s Zuo Quan xian 左權縣, renamed after the Communist General who was killed here in a Japanese bombing raid in May 1942). There he met an old peasant who had come to the Communist county government headquarters to press charges against some village cadres whom he accused of having murdered his nephew, Yue Dongzhi 岳冬至, a nineteen-year-old militia hero. Zhao Shuli listened as the old peasant recounted how his nephew had fallen in love with a beautiful girl from his village by the name of Zhi Yingxiang 智英祥 (or Zhi Yingxian 智英賢 or Zhi Eryin 智二銀 in various versions). When Zhi Yingxiang’s mother joined a local sect, which forbade conjugal life, Zhi Yingxiang’s

45 JinChaji Beiyoue qu funü kangRi douzheng shiliao bianjizu, comp., JinChaji Beiyoue qu funü kangRi douzheng shiliao, 205-7; Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuang, 176-77.
disgruntled father left home. The mother often had conflicts with her three adult children thereafter, and in despair over her family situation, she committed suicide, leaving her daughter without any parental supervision. Taking advantage of this relative freedom, Zhi Yingxiang went out with a number of different men before settling on the handsome Yue Dongzhi. The other men, all village cadres, were unhappy with her decision and one night they beat Yue Dongzhi to death when he refused to break up with Zhi Yingxiang. Although the men tried to disguise the murder as suicide, the county government investigated the case and brought the cadres to justice: four cadres implicated in the case were sentenced to one to five years in prison respectively and required to pay funeral costs and financial compensation to Yue Dongzhi’s family. Zhi Yingxiang’s mother committed suicide soon after. Zhi Yingxiang left the village and got married in Manchuria. The case was closed.46

This tragic story inspired Zhao Shuli to connect the anti-superstition message with women’s free choice of marriage in *Xiao Erhei jiehun*. Zhao Shuli followed the county official into the village to investigate the case. He was troubled

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46 Dong Junlun 董均倫, “Zhao Shuli zenyang chuli *Xiao Erhei jiehun* de cailliao” 趙樹理怎樣處理《小二黑結婚》的材料, in Fuadan daxue zhongwenxì, *Zhao Shuli zhuanji*, 335-38. See also Zhao Jin’ao 趙晉鏖, “Yue Dongzhi zhi si yu *Xiao Erhei jiehun*” 岳冬至之死與《小二黑結婚》, in *Zuo Quan xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui* 《左權縣志》編纂委員會, *Zuo Quan xianzhi* 左權縣志 (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 700-01. In 2006, the original copy of the county court verdict appeared on the auction market and drew new media attention to the case. The last surviving cadre of the four was reported to have confessed in 2005, shortly before his death, that they did not commit the crime. They pleaded guilty after days of being kept in the unbearable conditions of an abandoned mine pit, and they arranged to escape the death penalty by convincing the youngest of them, then a 17 year-old minor who would not be subject to adult court justice, to claim the death blow against Yue Dongzhi. They and their supporters in the village suspected that the real killer was one of Zhi Yingxiang’s brothers, who had been complaining about Yue Dongzhi’s relation with his sister and had motive, time and right location to confront Yue Dongzhi, perhaps violently enough to cause Yue Dongzhi’s accidental death. It is telling that up until 1990s, the village had shunned *Xiao Erhei jiehun*. By 2006, however, all four cadres and most of their generation had died out, and the village has moved to use the publicity of Xiao Erhei and Zhao Shuli to promote tourism and to get out poverty. Zhang Lu 張鷺, “Xiao Erhei de shuangchong mingyun” 小二黑的雙重命運, *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* 中國新聞週刊 12.2 (2008):76-78; Yuan Ling 袁凌, "1954: Gaobie Xiao Erhei de mubei" 告別小二黑的墓碑, *Liaowang dongfang zhoukan* 瞭望東方周刊, April 13, 2009 <http://news.sohu.com/20090413/n263365046.shtml>, accessed September 25, 2016; Yan Wenshi 閻文水, “Xiao Erhei benshi” 小二黑本事, *Shanxi qingnian* 山西青年 2.15 (2012), 124-25; Anonymous, “’Xiao Erhei’ men huhuan Zhao Shuli” 小二黑們呼喚趙樹理, July 27, 2006, *Shanxi xinwenwang* 山西新聞網 <http://jconline.cn/Contents/Channel_17150/2010/0331/1308028/content_1308028.htm>, accessed September 30, 2016.
by the fact that despite the new marriage regulations promoting “free choice of marriage,” sectarian religions, as the Licheng case demonstrated, still held a strong appeal for young women. In the case of Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang, Zhao Shuli found it particularly problematic that the public did not react to Yue Dongzhi’s death and the village cadres’ brutal violation of the Marriage Regulations as he had expected: Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang’s love affair was so unconventional that it was considered morally inappropriate and elicited more criticism than sympathy from their families and fellow villagers. In writing *Xiao Erhei jiehun*, inspired in large part by the story of Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang, Zhao Shuli sought to explore the “feudal mentality” that continued, despite laws and regulations, to obstruct the “free choice of marriage.”

**Gender, Sexuality and the Contrast between the Old and New Rural Woman**

In the original case of Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang, religion was only a minor issue: Zhi Yingxiang’s mother happened to be a sectarian member. In Zhao Shuli’s novel, however, anti-superstition becomes the central theme. The character of Er Zhuge was based on Zhao Shuli’s own father, who did not make any decision without first consulting his divination manuals. San Xiangu was modeled after a female medium from Zhi Yingxiang’s village, whom Zhao Shuli believed to be more representative of rural women than Zhi Yingxiang’s mother.47 As many critics have noted, these two semi-comical characters are so vividly created that they become the real protagonists of the story. The story opens by introducing them as follows:

Liu Family Valley has two *shenxian*, and they are well known to everyone in the neighboring villages: one is Er Zhuge from the front hamlet, and the other is San Xiangu from the rear hamlet. Er Zhuge was originally called Liu Xiude. He was once a small time merchant, and he never makes a move without consulting *yinyang*, the Eight Trigrams, or checking the

47 Zhao Shuli, “Yesuan jingyan” 也算經驗, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, vol. 4, 1591. One wonders, however, whether Zhao Shuli would still have modeled the comical Er Zhuge on his father had he known about how his father had died before writing the novel. Zhao Shuli had left home in 1937 and, it was not until his return in 1945 that he learnt his father had been brutally killed by the Japanese in 1943, shortly after *Xiao Erhei jiehun* was published. Even worse, his father might have escaped death had he not delayed leaving town on a trip because he consulted his divination books and found the date inauspicious for travel. Dai Guangzhong, *Zhao Shuli zhuan*, 215-18.
auspicious and inauspicious divinations on the almanac. San Xiangu is the wife of rear hamlet’s Yu Fu. On every first and fifteenth of the month she would always drape a red cloth over her head and strut about masquerading as a celestial spirit.

劉家峧有兩個神仙，鄰近各村無人不曉：一個是前莊上的二諸葛，一個是後莊上的三仙姑。二諸葛原來叫劉修德，當年做過生意，擡腳動手都要論一論陰陽八卦，看一看黃道黑道。三仙姑是後莊于福的老婆，每月初一十五都要頂著紅布搖搖擺擺裝扮天神。48

Here, Zhao Shuli turns the tragedy of Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang into a comedy. He singles out a diviner and a spirit medium to represent village superstitions. Historically these two kinds of people had always been held in contempt by the cultural elite, who saw them as illegitimate competitors for divine powers and mantic efficacy.49 The Republican reformers not only looked down on them, but also regarded them as the virtual embodiment of the superstition that obstructed modernity and science.50 The status of these ritual specialists in their own rural village communities, however, was more ambiguous: the gods and spirits that they worked with were respected for their ling (efficacy), even as they themselves were sometimes despised and their mantic powers questioned.

Zhao Shuli builds upon the traditional bias against these two types of religious specialists by discrediting their efficacy. Er Zhuge, for example, forbade his family to plant the spring crops because according to the almanac, the time was “not right for sowing.” When the “right day” finally arrived, it was already too late to plant and as a result the family suffered. As for San Xiangu, while in a supposed trance during a healing ritual, her mind was fixed on the question whether her daughter had forgotten the rice on the stove. Instead of speaking to the descending spirit, she hissed at her daughter, “The rice is overdone!”51

The two phrases illustrate how these “superstitious” beliefs prevented men from planting the crops on time and women from cooking properly—the very basics of a rural household’s routine. They mock the ritual specialists’ efficacy


and reduce the long tradition of fortune-telling and spirit mediumship to mere shams.

San Xiangu would become one of the most well-known images of female mediums in twentieth-century Chinese literature. In his novel, Zhao Shuli says little about Er Zhuge’s training and practice but goes into considerable detail about San Xiangu’s background. She is described as having been a spirit medium for thirty years, having begun when she was only fifteen years old. She had been the prettiest girl of the village, but she was forced against her will to marry Yu Fu, an honest but slow-witted and dull fellow who lived with his widowed father. Later, whenever she was alone at home, the young men of the village would come to visit her, and the house would be filled with laughter. Her father-in-law was furious when he found out about this, but when he barred the men from visiting, the young woman became hysterical:

The bride weeps day and night, neither combing her hair nor washing her face. She wouldn’t eat. She just lies in bed and refuses to get up. Father and son are helpless. An old woman neighbor invites a female spirit on her behalf, and the spirit descends to her house once, claiming to be the “Third Fairy Auntie.” She herself moans and mutters as the spirit. Thereafter, on the first and fifteenth of each month the spirit would enter her body. People burn incense before her and beg her for cures and fortunes. The incense table of San Xiangu is then established.

Indeed, after she becomes “Third Fairy Auntie,” she gains freedom to socialize with men, who now flock to her and admire her beauty in the name of “consulting the spirit.” San Xiangu is fully aware of why these men are there, and she always “dresses more attractively, combs her hair more smoothly, wears her jewelry more brightly, and applies facial powders more evenly. It isn’t long before she has all the young men wrapped around her little finger.” Her sexual charms, however, decline as she grows older and the young men who once came to visit her become fathers with wives and children to worry about. Nevertheless, San Xiangu at age forty-five “continues to wear embroidered shoes and trousers with fancy cuffs. The front of her head is bald, but she

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covers this with a black kerchief. Unfortunately, powder cannot smooth over her wrinkled face. It only makes it like a frosted donkey turd.”

Literary critics have taken Zhao Shuli’s portrayal of San Xiangu as a reflection of his sexual bias against women and, by extension, the Communist’s indifference to the “masculine hegemony in rural China.” This may indeed be the case, although it is important to note that Zhao Shuli’s sexual bias was in large part conditioned by his personal life experiences. Zhao Shuli associates Er Zhuge’s superstitious activities with the male-dominated textual tradition and mocks his divination practices. Nevertheless, partially out of his loving memories of his own father, he presents a rather sympathetic image of Er Zhuge, who as a responsible and proud father, teaches Xiao Erhei to read when the boy is six years old and enjoys showing off his son’s talent. It is also important to note that Er Zhuge’s preoccupation with matching horoscopes for his son and future daughter-in-law would also have been regarded as a legitimate fatherly concern in rural society. When the evil cadres frame Xiao Erhei and cart him off to the county court, Er Zhuge worries through a sleepless night and before dawn rushes off to the district office determined to do everything he can to protect and defend his son.

In contrast, the criticism of San Xiangu focuses on her body, her age, her uncontrolled sexuality, and most of all, her failed motherhood. She is the center of male attention, and her physical appearance, garish makeup and sexual behavior are all described as being contrary to proper female virtues. Sexual debauchery has always been an integral part of elite denunciation of female medium initiation stories. Young women, especially daughters-in-law, customarily used spirit possession as a weapon to fight against patriarchal authority and to negotiate their otherwise suppressed interests and desires. In traditional literati anecdotes, however, the link between the two – spirit initiation

55 Zhao Shuli recalled his father very fondly in his later writings, where he remarks on how much he had learned from his father’s expert farming skills, love for folk art and music, work ethics, and even his folk medicine, geomancy and fortune-telling knowledge. He also acknowledged rather positively how much he had been influenced by his family’s sectarian backgrounds in his early years. It is also worth noticing that by the time he wrote *Xiao Erhei jiehun*, Zhao Shuli had left home and not seen his parents for six years. See Dai Guangzhong, *Zhao Shuli zhuan*, 22-33.
and young women's protests – was always hinted at rather than explicitly described, and female sexual debauchery was traditionally ascribed to the spirits, and rarely to real extramarital flirtations and affairs. In his novel, Zhao Shuli makes use of many of these same traditional motifs, but from a “secular” point of view. He exposes San Xiangu’s connections with the spirit as nothing but a screen for a young daughter-in-law’s pursuit of sexual interests outside her unhappy marriage, thus nullifying traditional beliefs in the mantic power of the spirits as well as the rationale for the initiation of female spirit mediums. Zhao Shuli also deprives San Xiangu of any claim to being a good mother. She sees her own daughter as a rival for male attention, and she arranges her daughter’s marriage not out of her motherly duty, but because of sexual jealousy.

Consideration of southern Shanxi’s village culture and wartime propaganda may also place the issue of sexism and San Xiangu in a different light. In both the original story of Yue Dongzhi/Zhi Yingxiang and Zhao Shuli’s fictional Xiao Erhei jiehun, women seem to have more decision-making power than their husbands. It is the religious commitment of Zhi Yingxiang’s mother that drives the father out of the house, and she is the one who arranges Zhi Yingxiang’s marriage and controls the family coffers. San Xiangu’s husband has no voice in the story, and her father-in-law is silenced after she takes up the spirit mediumship. She also arranges Xiaqin’s marriage without consulting her husband. Er Zhuge’s wife is described as openly criticizing her husband’s divination practices: “Get rid of your lousy Eight Trigrams!... All your life you’ve never even broken wind without first consulting them, what use have they ever had?”

Given that Zhao Shuli modeled Er Zhuge on his father, one might wonder why in creating San Xiangu, Zhao Shuli did not rely on what he knew about the Sanshengjiao daohui, which was practiced by both his own family and Zhi Yingxiang’s mother. Zhao Shuli’s biographer Dai Guangzhong summarizes Zhao Shuli’s recollection of the Sanshengjiao daohui as follows:

[The Sanshengjiao daohui] was a branch of the White Lotus Teaching. It once organized a peasant rebellion that was suppressed by the government, so it changed to the current name and teachings. The sect’s essential teachings were a hybrid of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist ideas. It believed that “Confucianism emphasizes zhongshu 忠恕 (loyalty and reciprocity), Buddhism emphasizes cibei 慈悲 (compassion), and Daoism emphasizes ganying 感應 (cosmic correspondence).” The sect promoted the unity of the Three Teachings and encouraged people to do good. Its rituals required the disciples to make Nine Mansions on the table, to

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make incense offerings four times a day, to be lifelong vegetarians and
avoid meat and alcohol. Otherwise they would be cursed and punished.

Zhao Shuli’s Sanshengjiao daohui shared common features and teachings
with many other popular sects and redemptive societies active in rural Shanxi
during Republican times. Its emphasis on the unity of the Three Teachings and
on the ritual arrangement of the Nine Mansions suggests some affiliation with
the much larger Jiugongdao 九宮道 (Way of nine mansions), and with Baguadao
八卦道 (Way of eight trigrams) whose networks spread throughout Shanxi,
Hebei, Henan 河南, Shandong 山東 and beyond.59 Another powerful redemptive
society, the Yiguandao 一貫道 (Way of penetrating unity), went by a similar
name of the Sanshengdao 三聖道 (Way of three sages) in many parts of
Shanxi.60 As mentioned above, the CCP considered various sectarian groups in
Shanxi, such as the Liguadao, to be Japanese collaborators who posed not only
a cultural, but also a serious political and military threat to the new govern-
ment. In contrast, although diviners and spirit mediums were deeply ingrained
in village life, their practices were too discursive and spontaneous to become
an organizational threat to the Communist establishment. Zhao Shuli’s por-
trayal of Er Zhuge and San Xiangu reflects his views of feudal superstition in
rural communities and his support of Communist social reform programs that

58 Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuoan, 8.
59 According to Naquin, the Jiugong (Nine mansions) are “astrological divisions of the sky
which, like the eight trigrams, had become associated in popular religion – the White
Tradition in particular – with an array of colors, gods, directions of the compass, ele-
ments, numbers, animals, and symbols and objects of all sorts.” Many religious sects in
north China used Jiugong and/or Bagua as a sect name. Naquin, Millennium Rebellion,
especially 18, 84, 89-90, 348 n71. See also the spread of the Jiugongdajao and similar sects
throughout north China in Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao zhiliao jicheng bianzuan weiyanhui
中國會道門史料集成編纂委員會, comp., Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao jicheng: jinbai-
nianlai huidaomen de zuishi yufenbu 中國會道門史料集成：近百年來會道門的組織
與分佈 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004), vol. 1, passim, especially 150-
51, 156-57, 160, 163-64.
60 Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao jicheng bianzuan weiyanhui, comp., Zhongguo huida-
omen shiliao jicheng, vol. 1, 149-201, especially 150 and 197.
aimed to educate and enlighten, rather than to destroy and eliminate, the fathers and mothers of people like Zhao Shuli himself.

Ethically, the Sanshengjiao daohui emphasized vegetarianism, sexual abstinence and other forms of ritual purity, all of which were largely acceptable. Female mediums, however, belonged to the traditional category of “three aunties and six grannies” (sangu liupo 三姑六婆), who were often accused of transgressing proper moral boundaries and inducing young girls and wives into inappropriate sexual encounters with men – an aspect well captured in San Xiangu’s career. It is no surprise then that Zhao Shuli chose a female medium over a sectarian member as the counterpart of a male diviner in representing village superstitions. In the interest of conveying his anti-superstition message, Zhao Shuli first and foremost played on the moral ambiguity of female mediums in rural communities at large, and steered away from the competing appeal of sectarian organizations to women.

Local opera culture may have also informed Zhao Shuli’s portrayal of San Xiangu. David Johnson has made a powerful argument about the importance of operatic rituals in village life of Zhao Shuli’s home region, the Changzhi area of southern Shanxi. David Holm’s research points out that clown characters are usually the main characters of folk performance, and that the figure of chou poniang 丑婆娘 (old woman clown) was popular throughout northern China. Even in the new yangge 秧歌 plays performed by the Communist troupes, it was common to have a man dressed up as an old woman clown who either “wears great ancient-style clothing, brightly [colored] makeup, and wears two large chili peppers from his ears,” or “had his hair combed into an elaborate bun fully a foot long, at the very end of which he tucked in a red flower.” These costumes and makeup easily remind us of the comical appearances of San Xiangu. Holm further notes that sexuality is a common theme in many forms of local operas in rural northern China. The lascivious behaviors on stage, often enacted by clown characters who were marginal members of Chinese society, could be considered as “a form of resistance to the lack of ‘marital freedom’ in the traditional rural society.” In wartime Communist areas, they were condemned as being “inappropriate” and in need of being

61 The “three aunties and six grannies” refer to the Daoist and Buddhist nuns, female diviners, brokers, matchmakers, spirit mediums/healers, procurers of brothels, midwives and medicine women. See Victoria B. Cass, Dangerous Women: Warriors, Grannies, and Geishas of the Ming (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 47-64.

62 David Johnson, Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundation of Village Life in North China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2010), especially 51-68.

63 Cited in Holm, Art and Ideology, 220-21.
eradicated as part of the promotion of the “free choice of marriage” under the new marriage regulations.64

Er Zhuge and San Xiangu appear as a pair of clown figures who create a “dramatic effect” similar to that of local operas, yangge and other folk plays. Together they represent two of the most important features of the traditional marriage system that stand in the way of “free choice of marriage”: the matching of horoscopes by divination and parental arrangements. Like many mothers in the old system of arranged marriage, San Xiangu is simultaneously a victim and an enforcer of the parental authority. Her sexuality, which defies traditional moral norms, would be familiar to the rural population through spirit medium practices as well as popular novels and plays. Unlike in the old system, however, where age usually grants mothers more respect and authority, San Xiangu’s uncontrolled sexuality under the pretense of spirit mediumship is portrayed, just like her clownish dresses and costumes, as outdated, inappropriate, and ridiculous. Zhao Shuli cleverly deploys the traditional bias against the “three aunties and six grannies,” particularly against their old age and alleged associations with sexual transgressions, to deride San Xiangu’s failed motherhood and feeble parental authority.

In contrast, Xiaoqin represents the “new” woman who pursues love and marriage very differently. Like her mother when she was young, Xiaoqin is a pretty girl who attracts the attention of the village’s young men. But unlike her mother, she is loyal to her lover once she has committed herself to him, which is why she rejects the sexual advances of the married village cadre. The most important difference between Xiaoqin and her mother is that Xiaoqin chooses the best possible match for herself: Xiao Erhei is so handsome that everywhere he goes, “women could not take their eyes off him.”65 He also demonstrates an exemplary masculine quality: he has received a “Sharpshooter” medal for having killed two enemies in battle, and is a military hero. Together Xiao Erhei’s heroic masculinity and Xiaoqin’s feminine beauty make them a perfect union of “caizi jiaren” (the talented man and the female beauty), a popular motif in traditional folk entertainment culture.

It is worth remarking that both Xiaoqin and Xiao Erhei are described in the novel as having been favorably predisposed to their parents’ “superstitious practices” when they were young: the nine-year-old Xiaoqin is so entranced by her mother’s pleasant chanting that she forgets to tend the rice on the stove.

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64 Holm, Art and Ideology, 121-2, 179-81. Holm notes that the explicit obscenity was somehow acceptable because the female roles were always played by men dressed in female clothing.

65 Zhao Shuli, Xiao Erhei jiehun, 8.
Xiao Erhei, like the author himself, begins at age six to learn about the Ten Heavenly Branches, the Twelve Earthly Stems, the Five Phases, the Eight Tri-grams, almanacs and divination manuals. And he masters them so quickly and so well that his proud father often shows off his son's divination skills to the villagers. As they grow older, however, both Xiaoqin and Xiao Erhei reject their parents’ practices, which have become obstacles to their “free choice of marriage.” They also contest the village cadre’s accusations of their love affair as “sexual corruption,” a view shared by many of the “feudal minded” peasants in the legal case involving Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang. Xiaoqin and Xiao Erhei’s insistence on free choice of marriage results in both a new morality of romance and marriage and the regulation of female sexuality. Most importantly of all, it is the Communist government, rather than spirits, gods or predesti-nated fates, that emerges as the defender of the free choice of marriage and ensures a happy outcome.

The educational effect of Xiao Erhei jiehun cannot be overestimated. Zhao Shuli intentionally wrote the novel in simple, colloquial language, making use of old storytelling techniques and making sure that it was published in inexpensive editions that were easily available to rural audiences and could be read aloud by the moderately educated and even semi-illiterate. The novel's rapid adaptations into local operas ensured that the story would reach thousands of ordinary peasants, many of whom watched the performance time and time again. It would appear that the story had a particular appeal to women: “Even old women, young girls and wives holding babies who lived ten and twenty li away would light torches and travel over mountains and valleys in order to catch a glimpse of the great performance of Xiao Erhei.” After reading, listening or watching Xiao Erhei jiehun, some village mediums and fortunetellers were filled with remorse and “rectified” their behaviors, some parents stopped forcing marriage upon their grown-up children, and some young men and women who were secretly in love were emboldened to marry without seeking parental permission. For millions of peasant men and women in the Communist base areas, Xiao Erhei jiejun succeeded in using familiar language,

66 Zhao Shuli, Xiao Erhei jiehun, in “The Marriage of Young Blacky,” 87, 92-93.
67 Holm rightly points out that Zhao Shuli's success, especially his Xiao Erhei jiehun, was largely due to the fact that he combined “prose fiction with performing arts,” and, because his works could be recited, they were able to reach a wider audience. Holm, “Local Color,” 14.
68 Dai Guangzhong, Zhao Shuli zhuan, 182-83; Yu Xiaowei, “Yongbu diaoxie de shanhua,” 15-16.
69 Miao Peishi 苗培時, “Xiao Erhei jiehun zai Taihang shan” 《小二黑結婚》在太行山, Beijing ribao 北京日報, May 23, 1957; Ding Ning 丁寧, “Dashu bicheng senlin: huuiyi Zhao
forms and cultural tropes to deliver new messages. It provided new role models for them to break away from feudal superstitions and fight for the free choice of marriage.

Yan’an: Different Directions

Zhao Shuli understood Mao Zedong’s proclamation that “art and literature should serve the people” in his own terms. His works are known for being “problem-oriented” and, as Hui Jiang demonstrates, “audience-oriented.”70 His peasant characters did not fit into the May Fourth narrative of urban-based modern citizens; instead, they spoke the language of the peasant and sought to solve particular problems faced by the peasant. Zhao Shuli believed that only through solving real problems in everyday peasant life would the Communist social reform succeed. The tremendous popularity of Xiao Erhei jiehun demonstrates the success of Zhao Shuli’s messages of anti-superstition and free choice of marriage among the peasants in rural north China both during and after the anti-Japanese war.

When placing Zhao Shuli’s work in the larger context of CCP’s anti-superstition campaign and the propaganda works that were produced by the urban, Western-trained cultural workers in Yan’an around the same time, however, significant differences emerge. Anti-superstition and women’s liberation, particularly free choice of marriage, had been key components of Chinese modernization since the May Fourth period, and they were also key items on the agendas of both the Nationalist and Communist governments. In Yan’an, however, the two issues remained largely disconnected. The concerns for economic and military survival, rather than the transformation of peasant “superstitious” mentality per se, resulted in the CCP’s handling of each issue separately.

The CCP’s call for women’s liberation in the Yan’an based ShaanGanNing Border Region focused mostly on women’s participation in the war effort, especially in economic production. Despite the hyperbolic slogans advocating freedom of marriage and divorce, the extreme shortage of women in the Border Region created different social issues for both local women and the more educated female population who came to Yan’an to join the revolution.71 The

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70 Jiang, “From Lu Xun to Zhao Shuli,” 187-188.
71 Cong Xiaoping states that the ShaanGanNing Border Region’s male and female sex ratio was 53-55% to 45-47% in pre-Communist times. The gap grew to 30:1 in 1938, 18:1 in 1942,
party allocated young educated women as wives for high-ranking party leaders and cadres, often without taking into consideration these women’s personal desires. In the meantime, it promoted the ideal of “wise mothers and good wives” among the peasants. Peasant women were in fact discouraged from divorce in the interest of maintaining the family stability of men in the army. Traditional marriage practices persisted at the village level, even among grassroots cadres. The gender imbalance also drove up bride prices, which often caused young men of poor families to lose “both women and property,” and trapped young women in unhappy marriages arranged by parental authorities seeking to obtain greater profits. Accordingly, the Border Region government began to advocate not “freedom of marriage” but rather “self-determination,” in the attempt to help rural women gain more autonomy in matters of marriage and divorce.

The CCP’s anti-superstition campaign was also a byproduct of its concern with wartime survival and more specifically, with deploying natural science to boost the human and material resources for the ShaanGanNing Border Region. There were early calls for fighting superstition in Yan’an, particularly when the ShaanGanNing bianqu ziran kexue yanjiuhui (ShaanGanNing border region natural science research association) was established in 1940, but it was not until 1944, when the Border Region had survived the economic blockade by both the Japanese and the Nationalist, that the CCP was able to devote resources to social and cultural reforms in rural areas. It then mobilized intense campaigns against “superstitions, unhygienic habits, and illiteracy,” which it identified as the three major characteristics of peasant

and 3:1 in 1944. Stranahan states that in 1930-31, the region’s male to female ratio was 135:100. Cong, “From ‘Freedom of Marriage’ to ‘Self-Determined Marriage,’” 197, note 41; Stranahan, Yan’an Women, 28.

72 Stranahan, Yan’an Women, 49-86, 104-109; Johnson, Women, the Family, 63-83. Hershatter surmises that “free-choice marriage” has been a major theme for women’s liberation since the New Culture Movement, but resistance to it in rural China persisted well into the era of the PRC. Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century, 15-17.

73 Cong “From ‘Freedom of Marriage’ to ‘Self-Determined Marriage’,” 184-209.

74 The official declaration of the Association states that one of its chief missions was to disseminate scientific knowledge, eradicate superstition, and oppose feudal remnants of old ideas and practices. See “ShaanGanNing bianqu ziran kexue yanjiuhui xuanxian” 陝甘寧邊區自然科學研究會宣言, in Jiefang 解放 6.103 (1940): 83. See also Qiaomu 喬木 and Xiaoping 肖平, “Fan mixin tigang” 反迷信提綱, in Zhongguo qingnian 中國青年, 2.11 (1940): 689-94.
The anti-superstition campaign targeted especially male spirit mediums and for the most part, ignored female mediums. The central concern with the malpractices of the male spirit mediums lay in the waste of monetary and human resources and the damages caused by their ritual healing practices. Through the campaign, the party sought to transform these “unproductive” mediums into productive workers in the ongoing Great Production Movement. The Party newspaper coverage of the campaign often set up two masculine forces against each other: with the spirit mediums whose healing rituals destroyed lives and extorted money from rural families on one side, and the doctors from government hospitals who practiced modern medicine and saved lives and protected family resources on the other. Women were presented as mere victims of the former and objects to be saved by the latter. Along with an educational campaign about hygienic practices and a midwifery reform designed to improve women's health and fertility rate, the gender focus of Yan'an's campaign against spirit mediums would have an immediate impact on improving the Border Region's human and financial resources.

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77 This is also familiar rhetoric in Nationalist campaigns. See Nedostup, Superstitious Regime, 194-206.
78 For a detailed study of Yan'an anti-superstition campaign, see Xiaofei Kang, "The Gender of Superstition: Revolutionizing Masculinities in Yan’an’s Anti-Spirit Medium Propa-
It is not that there was a lack of women and anti-superstition material that cultural workers in Yan'an could have used for propaganda purposes. The reason they did not do so was because their political goals were different. These differences are best illustrated by comparing *Xiao Erhei jiehun* with the immensely popular opera *Baimaonü* 白毛女 (White-haired girl). Like *Xiao Erhei jiehun, Baimaonü* was presumably based on a true story from northern Hebei and had undergone many adaptations by grassroots propaganda workers in Hebei and Shanxi before reaching Yan'an in 1943. The Yan'an cultural workers recognized that all of the earlier versions of this story contained clear messages about anti-superstition and women's liberation. The basic plot of the story focuses on a poor peasant girl who is sexually abused by a landlord. After giving birth to a baby girl, the landlord kicks her out of the house and she flees into the mountains. The local people believe she is a “white-haired goddess,” and provide her with offerings on which she is able to survive until she is finally rescued by the Communist Army. Interestingly, however, when the *Baimaonü* opera was collectively created in 1944, during the height of Yan'an's anti-superstition campaign, the Yan'an cultural workers decided to bypass the clear “anti-superstition” theme found in the original story and reframed it to reflect instead “the contrast between the old and the new society and the *fan-shen*翻身 (liberation) of the people.” The opera debuted in Yan'an in 1945 as a tribute to the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party. It was highly praised by CCP leaders and soon spread throughout the Communist areas in northern China.

Both the anti-superstition campaign and the production of *Baimaonü* took place in 1944 and 1945, as the anti-Japanese war was drawing to an end, and the

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80 He Jingzhi 賀敬之, “*Baimaonü* de chuangzuo yu yanchu”《白毛女》的創作與演出, in Yan'an Lu Xun yishu wenxue yuan 延安魯迅藝術文學院 comp., *Baimaonü* 白毛女 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1953), 249-61, see page 253.
CCP’s land reform was beginning in the base areas, with class struggle resurfacing in the CCP’s political agenda. If the anti-superstition campaign had aimed to maximize the financial and human resources of the ShaanGanNing Border Region at the end of the war, propaganda works such as Baimaonü foreshadowed a new post-war direction for the CCP. In Baimaonü, traditional religion and “superstition” were not presented as a “problem” of the peasants, but rather as the evil of the landlord class. Moreover, it was no longer about women’s liberation. Instead, the ghostly features and bitter suffering of the main protagonist, Xi’er 喜兒, became emblematic of the peasant class living in the historical darkness imposed by the landlord class but now ready for rescue by the CCP. The opera sought to provide the masses with a renewed ethical and cosmological rationale for Communist leadership in the land reform and the vision of a new nation-state. Ironically, it did so by reinforcing old traditional gender hierarchies: the peasant girl could only be saved by her lover, Dachun 大春, a young Communist soldier, who brought her out of the dark mountain cave to a new life under the sun – the cosmic yang force representing the CCP and Mao. The gender symbolism in the opera was powerful enough to mobilize the peasants in the base areas and later the entire Chinese people to join the CCP’s revolution, but it had also strayed far away from the story’s original concern with superstition and the everyday problems of rural women.81

Conclusion

Xiao Erhei jiehun made peasants laugh, whereas Baimaonü made them cry. Both were created by male Communist cultural workers and gave little to no voice to women themselves. Nevertheless, the two works reflect the CCP’s parallel approaches to religion and superstition in rural China during the 1940s: Zhao Shuli, by using peasant language and traditions to instill new social and political ideas, saw village superstitions as an obstacle to Communist social reforms purported to provide Chinese peasants with a secular, modern, and therefore happier life. His “problem-oriented” novels facilitated the work of Communist cadres in rural communities and provided peasants with the knowledge they needed to tackle particular issues like the “free choice of marriage.” Women’s issues, as embodied by San Xiangu and Xiaoqin, revolved around family and marriage and were perceived as part of the larger question of “anti-superstition.” Baimaonü, on the other hand, rejected the anti-superstition theme because it aimed at establishing the CCP as the savior of the

81 Kang, “Revisiting the White-haired Girl.”
peasants and the leader of the Chinese peasant revolution. In the meantime, the anti-superstition campaign in Yan’an gave priority to wartime economic and military concerns and omitted the issue of women’s liberation altogether. The popularity of both works and their rapid spread beyond the Communist base areas in the 1940s speaks to the extraordinary depth and sophistication of the Communist propaganda power, which far surpassed that of the Nationalists when it came to mass mobilization in the Chinese countryside. These two works penetrated deeply into the lives and minds of millions in rural north China, both ideologically and pragmatically, and in doing so considerably extended the supporting base of the Communist revolution during the Civil War (1946-1949).

After the Yan’an period, class struggles and the Mao cult gradually became the dominant theme of Communist propaganda. “Feudal superstitions” and old marriage practices persisted in rural areas, and the educational functions of Zhao Shuli’s work continued to be relevant. However, these old practices came to be increasingly cast in terms of class struggle rather than real life peasant problems. The ups and downs of Zhao Shuli’s writing career since the 1950s and his eventual demise were largely caused by his failure to turn his peasant characters into idealized heroes who served the larger ideological goals of the party and the nation. The anti-superstition campaigns of the 1950s, a topic that remains to be studied in greater depth, was also framed in the language of class struggle and often associated with either fandong huidaomen (counterrevolutionary sects) whose members needed to be hunted down, or feudal remnants whose purveyors need to be educated and reformed.

The continuing revisions of both Xiao Erhei jiehun and Baimaozu since the 1950s reflect the gradual switch of party propaganda to the radical line of class

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83 Feuerwerker, He Guimei and Xiaoping Wang make similar observations on Zhao’s works from different angles. Feuerwerker, Ideology, Power, Text, 100-145; He Guimei, Zhuanzhe de shidai, 31-25; Wang, “Problem Stories.”

struggle and the building of the Mao cult. In the changing ballet editions of Baimaonü from the 1960s and 1970s, all of the traditional religious elements disappear, and the language of devotion and exorcism is used to highlight the fighting spirit of the peasant and the absolute leadership of Mao Zedong. The same process characterized the subsequent operatic and film revisions of Zhao Shuli’s work. In the new opera version of Xiao Erhei jiehun that appeared in 1953, the comical behaviors of Er Zhuge and San Xiangu were toned down, as were the latter’s sexual antics. Xiaoqin becomes the main protagonist, fighting for freedom of marriage along with Xiao Erhei. Moreover, the ultimate power that guarantees their marriage is President Mao and the Communist Party, rather than the county chief in Zhao Shuli’s original novel. In the 1964 film, when Xiaoqin hears about her mother’s plan to marry her off, she runs for help to Xiao Erhei, a militia hero and a military cadre of the party, and pleads with him saying: “Please take me with you wherever you go.” Here Xiaoqin has become another White-haired Girl, a victimized female waiting to be saved by a male hero who represents the Party. The hooligan cadres are now described as being henchmen for an invisible “Second Uncle” who orders them to sabotage village politics on behalf of “Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 and the Nationalist Reactionaries.” In this way, the conflicts between the young couple and the hooligans, and between the old and new peasants’ marriage practices in Zhao Shuli’s story, are transformed into class struggles between the Communists and the Nationalists in the film.

The changing representations of religion, superstition and gender in popular propaganda works such as Xiao Erhei jiehun as well as Baimaonü demonstrate an increasing tendency to both feminize and victimize the image of the peasants and the “Chinese people” in general, in order to persuade people to embrace the Party and Mao as the omnipresent and omnipotent savior – Da-jiuxing 大救星. The CCP’s early commitment to enlightening the Chinese peasants through anti-superstition and women’s liberation was now sidelined by its revolutionary mission to lead a class war under Mao. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there was a great proliferation of CCP propaganda works along the lines of class struggle, ranging from literature and films to local operas and folk arts. Not only did they contribute significantly to the rise of the cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution, but they continue to be influential even to this day.85 Further inquiries into the interconnected relationship between the “woman question” and “religious question” in these productions will most certainly

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85 See, for example, Jie Li and Enhua Zhang, eds., Red Legacies: Cultural Afterlives of the Cultural Revolution (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).
offer invaluable new insights into the Chinese revolution and Chinese modernity.

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