THE THREE PROMINENCES

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The political-aesthetic principle of the “three prominences” (三突出) was the formula foremost in governing proletarian literature and art during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) (hereafter CR). In May 1968, Yu Huiyong 于会泳 initially proposed and defined the principle in this way:

Among all characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among the positive characters, give prominence to the main heroic characters; among the main characters, give prominence to the most important character, namely, the central character.2

As the main composer of the Revolutionary Model Plays, Yu Huiyong had gone through a number of ups and downs in the official hierarchy before finally receiving favor from Jiang Qing 江青, wife of Mao Zedong. Yu collected plenty of Jiang Qing’s concrete but scattered directions on the Model Plays and tried to summarize them in an abstract and formulaic pronouncement. The principle of three prominances was supposed to be applicable to all the Model Plays and thus give guidance for the creation of future proletarian artworks. Summarizing the gist of Jiang’s instruction, Yu observed, “Comrade Jiang Qing lays strong emphasis on the characterization of heroic figures,” and therefore, “according to Comrade Jiang Qing’s directions, we generalize the ‘three prominences’ as an important principle upon which to build and characterize figures.”3

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2 Yu Huiyong, “Rang wenyi wutai yongyuan chengwei xuanchuan maozedong sixiang de zhendi” (Let the stage of art be the everlasting front to propagate the thought of Mao Zedong), Wenhui Bao (Wenhui daily) (May 23, 1968). Translation (with my revision) refers to Lan Yang, Chinese Fiction of the Cultural Revolution (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), 29. All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise indicated.

3 Ibid. For the detailed autobiography and historical evaluation of Yu Huiyong, see Dai Jiafang, Wenge wenhua buzhang Yu Huiyong chenfulu (The rise and fall of Yu Huiyong,
In November 1969, Yao Wenyuan, then a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, revised and officially standardized the definition of the principle:

Among all characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among the positive characters, give prominence to the heroic characters; among the heroic characters, give prominence to the main heroic character.4

In the same article, Yao noted, “Using the negative characters, the other positive characters and stage settings to serve as foils, in order to give prominence to the main heroic character—this is the principle that all the proletarian literature and art must follow.”5 Yao’s statement elevated the “three prominences” from an “important principle” (in Yu’s definition) to a fundamentally indispensable principle, thus indicating its absolute dicta over all proletarian literature and art until the fall of the “Gang of Four” in October 1976.

I consider the “three prominences” as a political-aesthetic principle because of its dual attributes. As an aesthetic principle, it organized the narrative structure of the CR narrative arts (literature, drama, and cinema) and shaped the composition of the plastic arts (painting and sculpture). As a political standard, it provided an approach through which mass audiences formed a mutual proletarian consciousness of a society characterized by endless class struggle. During the Cultural Revolution, the “three prominences” was cherished as an infallible

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4 Shanghai Jingju tuan “Zhiqu weihushan” Juzu (The Performing Group of Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy of Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe), “Nuli suzao wuchang-jiej yiingxiang renwu de guanghui xingxiang” (Strive to create dazzlingly brilliant proletarian heroic images), in Jingju geming shinian (Ten years of the Revolution in Beijing Opera) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1974), 69. Although the writing credit was to a group rather than an individual, this article was mainly composed by Yao Wenyuan. Translation refers to Lan Yang’s version with modification. Yang’s translation is “give prominence to the main heroic characters” (29). I will argue, however, that CR official discourse could not allow “prominence” to be equally given to two or more characters. Xin Wentong noted: “There is only one central character in a play or a film. Two or more central characters are not allowed, multicenters are equal to noncenter” (Xin Wentong, “Rang gongnongbing yingxiong renwu laogu zhanling yinmu” (Make heroic characters of workers, peasants and soldiers take possession of the cinema screen firmly), in Renmin Dianying (People’s film) 1976:3. Although it is theoretically feasible to give prominence to “only one central character,” I will analyze the difficulty and complexity of such centralization in practice.

5 Ibid., 68.