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ARTICLE

"Never Abandon, Never Give Up": *Soldiers Sortie* as a New Red Classic of the Reform Era

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At the height of the socialist era, China produced decidedly influential revolutionary subjects, generating a legacy that is a source of vibrant cultural production in the reform era. This article explains the success of the popular TV drama series *Soldiers Sortie* (Shibing tuji, 2007) by contextualizing its reworking of core social values through re-fashioning socialist heroic subjects. This revision conjoins the collectivism of a socialist past with the individualism of a capitalist economy in order to promote a new Chinese identity. This adaptation of Chinese personhood keeps the revolutionary spirit alive by erasing historical specificity in order to develop group and individual identity without neglecting the reality of incomplete revolution and uneven development in China.

Keywords: *Soldiers Sortie*; New Red Classics; Socialist Legacy; Personhood; Uneven Development

Introduction

China's 60th anniversary gala on October 1, 2009, opened with the song "My Motherland" (*Wo de zuguo*), a classic theme song from the film *Shangganling* (*The Battle of Triangle Hill*, dir. Sha Meng, 1956). The film dramatizes a decisive battle during the Korean War in 1952, particularly a moment when the UN allied troops cut off the Chinese troops' food and water supply. In the film, the Chinese soldiers are slowly weakened by starvation and dehydration while holding fast to the strategic point they are guarding. Confronted by the setback, a woman soldier sings the gentle but determined song, "My Motherland," which surveys the landscape of the new China, admiring peaceful everyday life, acknowledging the disruption brought about by successive external powers, and alluding to socialist China's important irrigation projects and extensive nation-building efforts. The song concludes with an expression of the singer's love for her homeland and determination to defend it against foreign invasion.

When the young boy at the 60th National Day ceremony played the song on his trumpet, the message of sublime revolutionary struggle against imperialism was coded in the melody and resonated with generations of Chinese citizens.¹ The significance of the piece in this context is particularly complex: some see it as a nod to the power of the oppressed; some take it as a reminder of the price paid for the nation's self-sufficiency and independence; others regard it as a symbol for all the good and bad China has been through; and for still others, particularly the Western mainstream media, the song and the entire gala are seen as little more than pompous spectacles and flexing of muscles. One thing is clear: the so-called red classics, such as the song "My Motherland" and *Shangganling* the movie, have been and still are part of a cultural tradition that has been under-studied and under-taught outside of China. In countries that have a strong anti-socialist legacy, not understanding

¹ It is worth noting that the most militant lyrics of the original song were abridged in this performance, a telling example of how red classics are being appropriated in changed social contexts.

and duly appreciating these crucial Chinese cultural allusions can easily breed grave transnational misunderstandings.²

To many Chinese citizens, the historical moment of the Shangganling battle in 1952 evoked by the song "My Motherland" at the 60th National Day ceremony was a defining moment of collective self-making, a turning point for the Chinese people as they came to recognize the power of the downtrodden. To them, the Korean War proved that the wisdom and collaboration of the weak could overcome insurmountable obstacles and achieve self-determination. The moment is marked by historical specificities, but is also timeless. It is historically specific in the sense that, in the early 1950s, immediately after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Korean War was just one of many defensive wars China had to fight, including the wars against Japanese invasion and a century of foreign imperial scrambling for Chinese territory. To the Chinese then and thereafter, the battle of Shangganling in 1952 gave rise to a collective self. The collective self, with the courage to face the darkest moment and still strive against all odds, transcends its own historical specificity and resembles a kind of national spirit. It is a national spirit that one cannot openly speak about, however, because post-structuralist theorists have rendered such a framework suspicious and would probably call it a myth created by the ruling class as one of the ideological state apparatuses for domination and control. On the other end of the political spectrum, proponents of neo-liberal globalization prophesied the dismantling of national boundaries and also trivialize the existence of a national spirit. I argue, however, that it is this very national spirit that not only defined a national collective, but also nurtured individuals who saw themselves as key members of this collective. This communal self-identity has been passed down through generations in China and persists to this day, even as political ideology has shifted away from it.

The most popular TV drama in China in 2007, *Soldiers Sortie* (Shibing tuji), illustrates this national spirit and its content, and articulates the way in which it gives

² For instance, Paul G. Pickowicz has written on the diplomatic fallout within both China and the U.S. following the famous Chinese pianist Lang Lang's performance of "My Motherland" at a White House state dinner in honor of President Hu Jintao's visit on January 19, 2011.

rise to a new mode of personhood in the reform era. This essay seeks to explain *Soldiers Sortie's* immense appeal to the Chinese public by analyzing how the drama reworks core values of China's socialist legacy and shapes new subjectivities by conjoining the collectivism of a socialist past with the individualism of a capitalist economy, all while keeping the revolutionary spirit alive by erasing its historical specificity and embracing modernization and development. The drama carries the weight of an incomplete realization of socialism despite decades of revolution, and acknowledges the remains of uneven distribution despite capital's purported universal reach. To support such a reading, I will begin by explaining what constitutes a "red classic." Then, I will contextualize *Soldiers Sortie*, a textual example of the new red classics, within the tradition of red classics proper. Finally, I will provide a textual analysis of the TV drama with a plot overview and four subsections of deeper analysis. To put the analysis of Chinese national spirit and mainstream culture into a larger context, I will also offer a means to remove the conceptual baggage that has led to insufficient attention to mainstream Chinese culture outside of China.

Red Classics and New Red Classics

China's high socialist era (1949–1960s) generated influential literary, cinematic, and artistic productions (including music, songs, and artwork) commonly known as "red classics." According to the literary critic Cai Rong, a red classic has two important characteristics: "First, it focuses predominantly on armed struggle in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Second, during the 1950s and 1960s, it greatly influenced people's perceptions of their country's history and identity" (2013, 664). As a major cultural tradition in its own right, literary and cultural productions of the socialist era erected many fictional revolutionary heroes and heroines, such as those memorable characters Wang Cheng and Wu Qionghua, in addition to artistically refashioned real-life martyrs of revolutionary struggles, such as Yang Zirong, Huang Jiguang, and Lei Feng. These best-known soldier-heroes are the ideological embodiment of the Mao era, and served to shape young people's image of themselves as "revolutionary youth" (*geming de qingchun*), which, to put it in Zhong Xueping's words, "comprised a mixture of heroism, revolutionary ideals, and revolutionary values that were translated into such virtues as altruism, bravery,

and a willingness to 'serve the people' (*wei renmin fuwu*) and to sacrifice oneself for the greater good" (2010, 120).

The reception and treatment of red classics in China has never been consistent. Many of these works enjoyed popularity prior to the mid-1960s, but during the Cultural Revolution years (1966–1976), when ultra-leftist practices dominated literary and artistic realms, most of what we now think of as red classics were deemed problematic, some even to the point of being labeled "poisonous weeds." In the immediate years following Mao's death and the start of economic reform, these works were rehabilitated and regained popularity for several years, before new artistic genres grew to be strong competitors. From the 1990s onward, however, China not only saw commercial success of many adaptations of established revolutionary stories, but also the emergence of what I call the new red classics, which are new cultural productions drawing on the socialist cultural legacy and reworking the revolutionary spirit to inform new social contexts. *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (Zhiqu Weihushan, dir. Tsui Hark, 2015) is a good example of a commercialized red classic, while *Lurk* (Qianfu, dir. Jiang Wei, 2008) and *Soldiers Sortie* constitute new narratives, and are thus new red classics. At the beginning of this revival, commercialized red classics were examined by critics for their co-optation of capitalist ideology, their function as markers of the culture industry, their existence as a kind of nostalgia for Mao's time,³ and as the afterlife of spiritual Maoism.⁴ Now that we are fast approaching our third decade in the twenty-first century, however, it is time to go beyond equating the revival of red classics with kitsch, nostalgia, depoliticized consumption of a socialist legacy, or embittered critiques of capitalism. It is time to recognize the coherence of the socialist cultural tradition and its existence as a vibrant mainstream culture. We can do so by turning attention to the second type of red classics—new red classics.

³ For further discussions of these aspects, see Gong Qian's essay "A Trip Down Memory Lane: Remaking and Rereading the Red Classics," Willy Lam's "The Maoist Revival and the Conservative Turn in Chinese Politics," and Rosemary Roberts' "Reconfiguring Red: Class Discourses in the New Millennium TV Adaptation of *The Red Detachment of Women*."

⁴ Wendy Larson creatively uses the term "spiritual Maoism" to differentiate the revolutionary spirit from "political Maoism," which is defunct in post-Mao China, while spiritual Maoism is productive and constructive for the present and future.

These are cultural productions that seek to revive the revolutionary spirit and engender new subjects for the changing times.

Plot Overview of *Soldiers Sortie*

An important example of the new red classics, *Soldiers Sortie* is a 30-episode TV drama directed by Kang Honglei.⁵ It has won numerous awards since its release, and its ratings have been consistently above those of any other TV drama series shown during the same period. In China's most popular search engine, Baidu, the drama's main character, Xu Sanduo, was the most searched name of 2007. Discussion posts in Baidu concerning the drama have exceeded eight million, a number rarely surpassed even to this day.⁶ Its continued circulation in different forms and its ranking among the most rescreened TV dramas on national and provincial television channels testify to *Soldiers Sortie's* enduring popularity. A decade after its release, the cultural importance of the show is still validated by the many awards it received from various sectors in China, and by being listed among the 100 most outstanding cultural works by China's Ministry of Education in 2013. Its importance is also illustrated in the continued attention it attracts in Chinese language scholarship, as well as its continued appeal to common people across different social classes.⁷

Released a year before Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympics, at a time when China was immensely interested in self-searching and self-narrating, this popular TV drama can be read as an allegory of a China in transition. While *Soldiers Sortie* appears to

⁵ *Soldiers Sortie* was co-produced in 2006 by the August First Film Studio, Chengdu Military Region Television Arts Center, Yunnan TV, and Huayi Brothers Film Investment Co. Ltd and aired in 2007. It was scripted by Lan Xiaolong, who authored the novel of the same name.

⁶ See <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=士兵突击>.

⁷ This article does not focus on the controversies and debates surrounding this TV drama, which, though they do exist, are not overwhelming. Some critics accuse the drama of idealizing soldiers' mundane lives and of emphasizing moral virtue as a feasible device to bridge the gap in upward social mobility. Qiao Huanjiang's article "Spiritual 'Sortie' or 'Suture'—The Textual Strategy and Cultural Meaning of *Soldiers Sortie*" is representative of this line of thinking. The TV drama certainly has inherent contradictions to sew up, but one may also argue in a different direction: creating this semi-utopian military space on the TV screen reflects as well as satisfies the emotional need to relocate certainties in everyday life in a society that has drastically transformed itself from a socialist working space to a culture increasingly obsessed with competition and material success.

be the story of Xu Sanduo, a simple-minded and timid rural youth, and his fellow villager Cheng Cai, a cunning, ambitious social climber, the narrative turns out *not* to be a Bildungsroman celebrating the triumph of possessive individualists.⁸ Instead, the TV drama presents a process of search and growth for all its characters by aligning them with a military unit, the Steel Seventh Company (SSC). Over the course of the series, Xu Sanduo and his military friends from the SSC, particularly the self-minded Cheng Cai, discover that it is their company's legacy and their friendship with one another that gives their life its deepest meaning, regardless of changing external circumstances.

The story starts with Officer Shi Jin recruiting Cheng Cai and Xu Sanduo. In the case of the latter, pity is the major motivating factor. As the plot pushes forward, the melodic leitmotif "bu paoqi, bu fangqi" ("Never Abandon, Never Give Up") increasingly becomes linked to the characters' fortitude in the face of adversity and setbacks. During the new recruit training period, despite having many reasons to give up on Xu Sanduo as a hopeless case, Shi Jin instead takes the young man under his wing. Despite Shi Jin's efforts to include Xu in the selective SSC, Xu's lackluster performance does not qualify him. Instead, Xu is stationed in a remote post with nothing to do. While his fellow comrades are consumed by dejection at their own purposelessness, Xu maintains the rigorous schedule and disciplinary rules taught to him by his recruiter and mentor Shi Jin, even when no one else cares if these rules are followed or not. At the do-nothing post, Xu sets out to build a road in the middle of nowhere and going nowhere, all by himself. But when the road catches the

⁸ Michael B. Griffiths and Jesper Zeuthen acknowledge *Soldiers Sortie's* individualizing tendency, given the emphasis on seeing Xu Sanduo as the protagonist. However, these scholars also recognize that the drama "promotes a particular kind of individuality, very different from the popular struggle to realise fame and celebrity status" (145). The latter kind of individualism bears a similarity to what C.B. Macpherson called "possessive individualism." To Macpherson, seventeenth century British individualism sees "the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them" (3). Following this definition, Macpherson emphasizes that "The individual is seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. Man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person" (270). Macpherson's possessive individualism is a particularly useful analytical tool in describing the way personhood becomes overdetermined by market forces.

military's attention from an aerial view, it comes to be regarded as an inspirational image. The road-building project demonstrates Xu's steel-like fortitude and leads to his admission into the prestigious SSC.

Xu Sanduo's process of self-discovery as he becomes a real member of the SSC is a dialectical one, in which he overcomes self-doubt and finds the true meaning of existence. The SSC is a much-honored (fictional) military unit of the People's Liberation Army. The company has tough standards and a glorious history of sacrifice during the Korean War (1950–1953). The SSC's motto—"Never Abandon, Never Give Up"—also serves as the main thesis of the drama itself. When Xu joins the unit he is overjoyed to reunite with his mentor, Shi Jin, and his village friend Cheng Cai, and to have the opportunity to improve his skills as a modern military man. However, three events that occur shortly thereafter complicate Xu's happiness. First, Cheng Cai decides to leave the SSC for his own advancement. Then, Shi Jin decides it is time to retire. Finally, the SSC is disbanded entirely. These three events erase the historically specific attraction Xu Sanduo may have harbored toward the military group. The undoing of these connections, to the point that even the SSC itself is dissolved, pushes Xu Sanduo's existential reliance on his community to the limit. Halfway into the drama, he has to figure out how to rely on himself as the embodiment of the SSC's motto "Never Abandon, Never Give Up."

After the disbanding of the SSC, the narrative focuses on Xu Sanduo's admission to and participation in special force Unit A, another ultra-elite unit of the military, as well as his search for comrades from the SSC. As Xu competes with other soldiers for admission to Unit A, the drama displays a vertical ranking of values: military skills and expert knowledge cannot rival the importance of adhering to the motto "Never Abandon, Never Give Up." In this context, the slogan means keeping the greater good in mind, loyalty to and trust of others, and strong belief in oneself. In this part of the drama, Xu Sanduo's continued process of self-searching deliberately exposes the incompleteness of revolution and of capitalism's uneven development.

While on active duty in Unit A, Xu experiences an existential crisis after killing a woman drug-smuggler. The audience is prompted by this crisis to ask a series of questions along with Xu: Does one have the right to kill in the name of the greater

good? Does a noble heir of socialist revolutionary legacy have a place in the whirlstorm of the metropolitan space? The TV drama prompts further questions with images of Xu sitting in his civilian clothes on the busy streets, finding no place for a rural young man who is not a part of the military. Can Xu belong to the military forever?, the drama asks. Xu searches but cannot find his SSC comrades again, except for those he carries in his own memory. The unit no longer exists and his comrades are scattered in different units and in all walks of life. Nothing is permanent, except for his experience and his memory of the company and the rural China he left behind. Eventually, the dire economic needs of Xu's family bring him out of his dejection and back to practicality. When he receives a phone call from his army supervisor about his family in trouble, Xu is awakened from his gloom. His father and brother mishandled some mining dynamite that was supposed to be used for the family's quarry. The explosion destroys their home and injures the neighbors. Xu goes back to his village to find his father being put in jail and his brother in despair. The TV drama thus brings the audience back to the yet-to-be-redeemed countryside in order to explore questions of responsibility, debt, and the role of the rural in China's current market reform.

Rather than a linear plot structure merely focusing on Xu's success, the narrative of *Soldiers Sortie* is a kind of spiral, with multiple openings that invite the past to connect with the present. It presents many moments pregnant with signifying intensity. One example is the recruitment scene, which establishes the dual meaning of the rural as a space left behind by development and one that gives birth to socialist revolution. Another example is the loose, parallel development of Xu Sanduo and Cheng Cai. Still another example is the SSC as a symbol of China and its socialist legacy in modernization.

Uneven Development and Incomplete Revolution

Soldiers Sortie opens *en medias res*, in the midst of an intense crossfire; then a flashback quickly brings the story to rural China. This move establishes a parallel between the chronological beginning of the story—downtrodden Xu Sanduo's recruitment to the army—and that of the nation, the revolutionary past of the countryside as the cradle

of Chinese revolution. In the eyes of the recruiter Shi Jin, whose name literally means "history and now," we see that poverty persists in the countryside and rural youth are still in search of viable routes to dignity. While revolution began in the countryside long ago, the drama makes clear that it has not completed the work it set out to do.

Xu Sanduo's name literally means "perhaps the redundant third," and he first appears to the audience as a timid, awkward coward with a simple, naïve kindness about him. His greatest strength is running: he is running away from the harsh blows his father is about to land on his body when the recruiting officer Shi Jin pledges to make him a good soldier because Shi Jin, he says, will not give up or abandon what progress and development has left behind. Xu Sanduo's timid appearance makes him the embodiment of that which is abandoned by history and modernization, while his heartwarming naivety represents his timeless connection to the soil. It is this curious mixture that attracts Shi Jin, who comes from the same legacy of rural poverty. Xu Sanduo inhabits the contradiction as well as the deep energy that gave birth to modern socialist China. As the son of the soil—the persistently abandoned Other of history and progress—Xu represents those whose bodies await the actualization of the spirit. Such a figure symbolizes not only the ordinary man, but also everything that one hates and loves about oneself as an underdog. His unique qualities allow him to function as a vanishing mediator for the transformative experience that he, his comrades, and the audience will go through together. Such a structure makes watching *Soldiers Sortie* an intersubjective experience.

Throughout the series, the audience continues to see from the viewpoint of Shi Jin, who views becoming a member of the People's Liberation Army as a complicated necessity in rural China. As exemplified in Cheng Cai's eloquent speech in the first episode, the official narrative about the glory of soldiers in rural China continues to impart an air of the sublime, but in *Soldiers Sortie* the sublime is made mundane by the fact that joining the army is a means of upward social mobility and economic survival against the backdrop of rural underdevelopment. Hence, in a condensed way, rural China works as both the background and the reference point for the TV drama. By starting from the rural, *Soldiers Sortie* connects the current moment of modernization and marketization to the timelessness of the country's founding

myth—one that continues to proclaim its rural areas as the cradle of the people's revolution, and the seemingly backward and self-denying rural peasants the backbone of the nation. The rural poverty on view in the drama, however, exposes the incompleteness of that revolution, and the ways in which rural spaces continue to suffer as sites of capitalism's uneven development. As embodied by Xu, China's rural youth's needs and longing for self-actualization define the trajectory of development China should pursue.

Conjoining Individualism with Collectivism

The limit of possessive individualism is crystallized in the character of Cheng Cai, a rural youth with good looks, talent, and a cutthroat eagerness to get ahead. Cheng Cai knows how to drum the party lines, curry favor from his supervisors, and advance himself by means of his outstanding gunmanship. Whereas characters like Cheng Cai are often celebrated in corporate culture and commercial media in the glamorous figure of the "self-made man" or "successful tycoon," the audience of *Soldiers Sortie* is instead made to witness the crisis of individualism in Cheng Cai: although he says all the right things, it is clear he has no conviction in his own words; while loved by his supervisors, he does not respect them in return; though he dutifully spends time with his peers, he expresses no real concern for anyone but himself. Essentially, Cheng Cai represents an isolated individual without conviction. There is neither a reciprocal relationship between his self and his own words, nor a mutual recognition between himself and others. Hence, as a person, Cheng Cai is in fact alienated and defined by his gunmanship alone. Therefore, by laying bare the hollowness of Cheng's person, the TV drama offers a critique of possessive individualism.

Cheng Cai's lack of conviction reflects the general socio-cultural condition of China in the reform era, an era in which many complain of "spiritual vacancy." As Zhong Xueping points out, "televisual representations of youth in contemporary Chinese mainstream culture are symptomatic of the ideological uncertainties in the postrevolutionary era" (2010, 122). For many critics and cultural commentators, "spiritual vacuum" and "absence of faith" are labels that define China after marketization. These epithets are often used to explain a wide range of issues, such as why aestheticism suddenly captivated the entire Chinese intelligentsia

in the 1980s, how Christianity spread like wildfire at the turn of the twenty-first century, and why suicide rates are currently on the rise in a modern world defined by boredom and alienation. In the case of Cheng Cai, the spiritual vacuum is coupled with a materialistic attitude toward life. Over the course of the series, Cheng Cai, together with the audience, is made to learn the values of down-to-earth patience, hard work, and, above all, camaraderie.

In comparison with Cheng Cai, Xu Sanduo is physically unattractive, timid, simple-minded, and low skilled. His plainness and slowness put the audience's patience to a test. However, as the story goes on, viewers cease looking down upon him for his failures and shortcomings and start to recognize his quiet strength and resilience. It is Xu's naive insistence, for example, that allows him to succeed in building his "road to nowhere." His determination allows peers to realize their own cynicism and self-centeredness, and then reactivate themselves. Yet, even in his success, Xu attributes nothing to himself. While other members of his crew fight for the limelight, Xu's artless mind does not permit him to garner attention. The viewers, like Xu's comrades, are made to realize over the course of the series that the ideology of the market economy is such that principled people end up looking foolish. In other words, the market economy has taken dignity out of rectitude; hence, trivial existence, such as playing cards, escaping work, seeking appearance without substance, and being self-serving, have been mistaken for living authentically. Through the transformative figure of Xu Sanduo, *Soldiers Sortie* is able to show that the attitudes of a capitalistic culture are not self-affirming, but actually self-denying. This awakening is brought about not through top-down moralization, but through the bottom-up practices of a seemingly insignificant person's actions and search for meaning.

Just because it criticizes possessive individualism does not mean that the drama rejects individualism and development powered by the individual's drive for change. The two mantras that organize the plot and direct Xu Sanduo's quest are statements about pursuing development, but development *through* confluence and interconnectedness. The first is a mantra Xu learned from his father and reiterates faithfully: "To do meaningful things is to live well, and good life is doing lots and lots of meaningful things." The second is the motto of the SSC: "Bu paoqi, bu fangqi" ("Never

abandon [others], never give up [yourself]"). Taken together, the two statements work toward a new kind of personhood, one that bridges the revolutionary collective struggles of the past with the modern-day neo-liberal quest for self-actualization and individual success. In this conjoined twin of socialism and liberalism, collectivism and individualism, we see a new humanism that unites development with what is left behind as a means to chart a course of progress. Likewise, the plot testifies to the co-development of Cheng Cai and Xu Sanduo, foregrounding the need to seek balance between individualism and collectivism.

Individuals In-Between the Rural and the Urban

The reform era's new person—i.e. Xu Sanduo and the reformed Cheng Cai at the end of the story—is an individual in an intersubjective web. Young people like Xu and Cheng foreground the *interconnectedness of rural/urban space* that often makes isolated celebration of economic success or personal success difficult. Within the TV drama, the modernization of the military represents the force of global metropolitan modernity defined by technology and elite-training. Xu's eventual success in the military symbolizes his entrance into the metropolitan space governed by abstract rationality, computerized technology, and expert knowledge. However, his country bumpkin personality speaks to the reality that the line between rural and urban can never really be clearly drawn. Within the realm of practical experience, a person can be rural and urban at the same time. Because individuals move back and forth between these two realms, the boundaries are far more blurry than what is usually acknowledged. People and communities are not broken up by the division of social domains such as the rural and urban; instead, personhood operates in an intersubjective web. Xu's economically dysfunctional but emotionally rewarding family needs him for monetary and social support. Likewise, the rural does not stand outside of modernity or the market economy. Township enterprises connect rural labor and capital with domestic and international consumers. China's economy continues to be supported and expanded as much by the ingenuities of township enterprises as by urban enterprises and transnational corporations' recruitment of migrant workers, the amazingly industrious but under-rewarded labor power.

Though the country and the city suffer uneven development, rural youth such as Cheng Cai and Xu Sanduo bring the countryside to the city—and if they return home, they bring the city, the state, and the global metropolis back to the rural area. The nature of this trafficking can come in the form of goods, mentalities, and tactical understandings and protocols. This exchange is also an essential factor in making the countryside—rather than the city as many would assume—a volatile “contact zone,” to use the words of Mary Louise Pratt (1991, 33). The precedence of the countryside over the city is reminiscent of the Chinese revolution that relied on the strategy of encircling the cities from the rural areas. In this sense, “Never Abandon” means never abandon the rural people and their significant role in the socialist revolution and construction of a new China. Even as market forces push workers, like Xu Sanduo and everyone else in *Soldiers Sortie*, to become economic migrants, communal bonds and social relations remain significant aspects of personhood. The mantra “Never Abandon” signifies that the reform era’s new subject shall not only remain loyal to his comrades in arms, but also to the historical reality that encompasses the rural family, the socialist narrative, and, to some extent, the incomplete revolution itself.

A Leaner, More “Downloadable” Legacy

In *Soldiers Sortie* we perceive a restaging of the revolutionary past with a vision to revive it in a leaner (i.e. less historically specific) and context-free way, so as to refashion subjects for the consumerist age. As an outcome, the entire socialist legacy is distilled into the powerful mantra of “Never Abandon, Never Give Up,” internalized by Xu Sanduo over the course of the series. Fully imbibing of the spirit of the time, this rallying cry and the brotherhood it calls for legitimate Xu as an Other of progress who must eventually go on a journey of development.

As the series goes on, *Soldiers Sortie* turns China’s socialist revolutionary past into a single symbol—the Steel Seventh Company. The SSC is a stand-in for modern socialist China at its most defining moment in history. The company initiates each new member with a highly significant ritual, a performance that condenses Chinese revolutionary history in order to create a transformative myth sparkling with significance. The audience is made to witness such a ritual many times over the course of the drama. Viewers hear, along with Xu Sanduo, the pronouncement:

Private Xu Sanduo! You must keep in your mind: you are the 4956th soldier of the SSC. Some companies take pride in having a combat hero; other companies celebrate having a general out of its ranks; yet the pride of the SSC is the most sacred among all military men. We take pride in the men and women sacrificed during the hundreds of battles in the company's history. Private Xu Sanduo! Being a soldier of the SSC, you must remember the sacrifice of our predecessors in the 51 years of our history: During the Korean War, the loss of the SSC was so severe that its unit designation was almost canceled. Only three young soldiers, covered by the entire company, had a narrow escape. They brought back the final will of the 107 martyrs. The will is, on the basis of the three youngsters with an average age of 17, to rebuild the SSC. Since then, the SSC and those that have died in the war have lived on. Private Xu Sanduo! In this sense, the soldiers of the SSC are living on the wish and honor of our predecessors' noble sacrifices. (Episode 8)

The story the SSC tells through its initiation ritual is not only about heroism in war, but about the responsibility of the living, whose survival is indebted to those who died sacrificing their own lives to save the revolutionary successors. The story defines the revolutionary past in a forward-looking way, through its future members. The story of the SSC's past is further condensed into the slogan "Never Abandon, Never Give Up." This distillation allows the army unit to transcend its historical specificity. In a similar kind of signifying process, China's socialist past, too, continues to live on as stories. In *Soldiers Sortie* we see this process of story-making happening on both the diegetic and the extra-diegetic level, in the story's most condensed form, as belief or spirit of a people. In the case of the downtrodden, like Xu Sanduo, it is a belief in oneself as a person unwilling to abandon the Other of profit-driven progress.

Instead of a Hegelian dialectical history of the spirit ending in abstract romantic music, the history retold here is notably without melody. Everyone who knows how to sing the original anthem of the SSC has perished in battle; the three surviving young soldiers remember only the lyrics, but cannot recall the melody. Hence, the history as expressed in *Soldiers Sortie* is not one that dwells on the past or merely moves on, but a history that carries within it memories of dead brothers, sisters, fathers, and

mothers. If "moving on" means singing the same heroic war song again, then the successors in this drama do not sing. Instead they read the rescued fragments of the old song, word by word, mourning the loss of music. They assign each new member of the unit a number, as if the new members are directly taking the place of the dead. Body and body, they add on to a tradition of paying the debt of life forward, matching the dead's life-giving heroism with new heroic deeds. Such a movement of history is mindful of the debt each of us owes for our life. Such a progression of history searches for development without being dictated by developmentalism.

Despite the SSC's glorious revolutionary tradition, it cannot survive modernization without going through a drastic change itself; and so, the entire company has to be finally disbanded. The breaking up of the group is poignant because this is a company that embodies the nation's spirit, diegetically serving as the spiritual wellspring for the self-growth of its members, and extradiegetically functioning as the locus of the TV drama. The SSC's destiny in the whirlpool of military modernization mirrors China's transition from planned economy to market economy, or as some scholars read it, from socialism to capitalism. If we go back to the beginning of this essay, to the PRC's 60th anniversary and its evocation of a decisive battle in the Korean War, we see that the SSC functions within *Soldiers Sortie* as the founding story of the nation. Despite the unit's dissolution, its members never cease to see themselves as belonging to the SSC. Even Cheng Cai, the only deserter who initially moves on to a more promising unit, eventually recognizes that he will always view himself as part of the SSC, even after that group has ceased to exist. The TV drama's depiction of the intersubjective personhood formation process invites the audience to recognize their own indebtedness and to become one of the young "revolutionary successors" despite being born and living in an era of commercialist comfort.

Conclusion: Youth Responsibility and Historical Understanding of Progress

It is important to recognize how the Chinese socialist legacy modernizes itself and galvanizes new generations of youth. My analysis of *Soldiers Sortie* has illustrated that a new mode of personhood is engendered by recognizing the individual's drive for self-actualization and affirming the need for progress without simply

casting aside historical struggles such as the complex interconnection of poverty and development, and the deep fabric of kinship and communal relationships that continue to connect the Chinese people. This new personhood finds meaning in doing good and living well by continuing to ask questions about what gives meaning and what constitutes goodness. It is a personhood that never gives up on moving ahead and never abandons what is left behind in the uneven development.

Such a new subjectivity is not a mere show; it is realized in the very social activism it inspires. For example, the statement "Never Abandon, Never Give Up" takes on a life of its own beyond the TV drama and has indeed had a tremendous social impact. In the coverage of the May 12, 2008, mega-earthquake in Sichuan that took the lives of more than 80,000 people, news anchors from China Central Television (CCTV) repeatedly made use of the slogan in an attempt to unite the nation in the face of a grave natural disaster. Volunteers, made up primarily of post-1980s generations, even chanted the slogan during the rescue effort. Not willing to allow this demonstration of social engagement to be reduced to the stereotype of Chinese youth being programmed as a collective entity, cultural critic Liu Kang commented on the origin of such unprecedented levels of public volunteerism: "[It was], in large measure, aroused by a historical sense of responsibility, not imposed by the CCP propaganda departments or by the schools, but by a volunteerism with a historical understanding of progress" (2012, 931). I understand Liu's phrase "historical understanding of progress" to mean the quest for progress beyond those visions defined by developmentalism and modernization narratives. Such a quest connects the before and after of socialist revolution—i.e. the long history of uneven development and incomplete revolution. A spirit of social engagement coupled with a historical understanding of progress unifies individual aspirations and communal concerns with the collective greater good. It embodies the socialist legacy and seeks to modernize and actualize it in new social circumstances.

To students, teachers, and scholars of modern and contemporary Chinese culture, China's social, economic, and cultural transitions from the socialist era to the era of economic reform are topics of great interest and challenge. To study China at all, students and scholars must be ready to set out on the path of overcoming the

long shadow of the Cold War power structure, which includes the capitalist camp's collective desire to celebrate its victory over a China cast as always and negatively communist. The neo-imperialist relationship between the developed global north and the developing global south adds to the challenge of understanding, and is further complicated by changes triggered by neo-liberal globalization. Yet, due to the residues of these complex structural issues and compounded by the real and prescribed differences in life experience between students of China and the West, texts that may be considered mainstream and well-liked by people in China tend not to be the ones chosen by instructors and enjoyed by students in the U.S. The TV drama *Soldiers Sortie* falls into this category. The same fate is shared by the cultural sources the drama depends on, such as the film *Shangganling* and the song "My Motherland." To promote cross-cultural understanding, however, it is important to take a China-centered approach and avoid what scholar Tang Xiaobing has called the "dissidence hypothesis," a false understanding that gives rise to the tendency for studies of China to value the voices of dissidence over the mainstream culture that most common Chinese people share (2015, 178). By explaining the vibrant socialist legacy and its contemporary relevance as shown through *Soldiers Sortie*, this essay showcases the value of such an empathetic, China-centered approach that reads with the grain.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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