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## Persistent Girl as National Propaganda: Storytelling and the Emulation of Ethnic Model in *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland*

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### Introduction

“Can you persist, little sister?” Longmei asks, concerned. “Yes, I can!” Yurong replies affirmatively. The blizzard is roaring, and the frightened sheep are running around. The little sisters have walked a long way in the freezing temperature and brutal wind, doing their best to protect the sheep owned by the commune. As coldness, hunger and exhaustion continue to test their physical limits, they hold hands and look resolutely at each other, believing that they would and should persist to the last minute to protect the commune property (00:17:29–00:17:38).

This is a scene in the 1965 animated film *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan yingxiong xiaojiemei*), produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio and adapted from the allegedly true story of the heroic Mongol sisters Longmei and Yurong. On February 9, 1964, an unexpected blizzard hit eleven-year-old Longmei and nine-year-old Yurong, who were herding a flock of sheep for the commune. To protect the sheep from dying in the storm, the girls chased after the flock in the blistering cold for a day and a night. After walking thirty-five kilometers and overcoming many difficulties, they were finally rescued and sent to the hospital. Due to severe frostbite, Longmei lost her left toe, and Yurong’s left foot and right leg were amputated. Only two out of 382 sheep died.

On the eve of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Longmei and Yurong were celebrated as national exemplars for their persistence, willpower, and sense of responsibility in protecting the collective property. One month after the incident, their story graced *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*),<sup>1</sup> which reported their heroic deeds in a commentary titled “A day and a night in the blizzard” (*Baofengxuezhong yizhouye*): “The two little girls received collectivist education and dared to sacrifice themselves for the public good. They demonstrated extraordinary bravery. Their compelling heroic deeds

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<sup>1</sup>The mouthpiece of the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

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were widely spread on the grassland” (Zhao 2). As other state-run media reprinted the story, Longmei’s and Yurong’s selfless persistence went beyond the grassland and was emulated all over China. Since then, the incident has become an inspirational source for different creative adaptations, ranging from literature to music. Many of the adaptations target children and are compiled into children’s story books, strip comics, and even textbooks and pedagogical materials.

Persistence and willpower, among others, are reiterating themes in these different cultural productions, highlighted as a spirit of not giving up in the harsh natural condition. As Malqinhuu, a famous Mongol writer, renders in the reportage “The brightest flowers” (*Zui xianyan de huaduo*), Longmei and Yurong “persisted with unimaginable willpower” as they “exhausted their strengths in the combat with the blizzard” (Malqinhuu 6). Such militant tone and the emphasis on the undefeatable persistence in the face of nature echo a firm belief in the era dominated by class struggle: “man must conquer nature” (*ren ding sheng tian*).<sup>2</sup> Mao Zedong and his followers conflated the attitude toward nature with that toward class enemies, seeing nature, society, and people all bendable to human will through a class struggle spirit (Liebman 539). The willpower against nature was then an ideological metaphor and crafted as a narrative of class struggle. Therefore, Longmei and Yurong’s persistence in the blizzard was interpreted not only as the willpower to combat the wind and snow, but also as an uncompromising mentality in fighting the class enemies (Bulag, “Models and Moralities” 36). In the project to make them an exemplar, their persistence was purposely praised to forge them as young, enthusiastic participants of class struggle.

While class struggle was the biggest social theme of the time in China, other aspects of identity – such as ethnicity or gender – appeared to be disregarded by the state and the dominant groups in society. In 1963, commenting on the Civil Rights movement in the US, Mao Zedong said that ethnicity struggle is ultimately an issue of class struggle (qtd. in “Ping suowei ‘minzuwenti’”). Gender issues, too, were muted and overshadowed by the keen interests in class struggle (Hershatter and Honig 3). The image of “iron girls” was embraced. A predominant female image in propagandistic materials during the Cultural Revolution, “iron girls” were portrayed as strong and masculinized women workers who were capable of doing heavy labor just like men. “Cloaked by a desire for revolutionary purity” (Pei and Ho 63), their feminine features were hidden, and their working-class socialist identities foregrounded. In a similar vein, children were seen to be political agents with a socialist aim. As the *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming Ribao*), mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), stated in the editorial of June 1, 1966,

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<sup>2</sup>I am referring to Judith Shapiro’s translation of *ren ding sheng tian* in her book *Mao’s War against Nature*.

Some people are afraid that teenagers and children, being young, not well-educated and inexperienced, cannot take part in the cultural revolution, which is a class struggle in the ideological sphere. This viewpoint is incorrect. The great socialist cultural revolution is of vital significance to the tempering and growth of teenagers and children. (“Actively Guide” 15)

Several studies have captured the intricacies hidden behind the uniform pursuit of a pure class identity. Such scholars as Meng Yue, Emily Honig, and Orna Naftali have pointed out that gender, among other layers of identities, did not simply evaporate. Examining the famous story of class liberation in the Mao-era, “The White-haired Girl” (*Baimao nü*), Meng Yue argues that gender and sexuality are appropriated to fuel a discourse of class struggle, which in turn renders gender an empty signifier. Emily Honig probes into the violence in Red Guards movements, revealing that revolutionary progressiveness was associated with acting like a man instead of behaving like a woman. Orna Naftali scrutinizes how gender and child identities interact with each other in the children’s magazine “Little Red Guard” (*hong xiaobing*). She raises that boys established manhood by the act of killing, while “a shred of their childhood innocence” were allowed for girl characters, side by side with a level of “‘traditional’ feminine passivity” (103). Building on this group of works, my study adds a new dimension to the intricate articulation of gender in the Mao-era by connecting it with ethnicity and childhood.

In the story of the heroic little sisters, being an ethnic minority, a woman, or a child, was each secondary to being a proletariat and a socialist, which nevertheless cannot erase the existence and reformulation of these layers of identities. Although most of the adaptations and media coverage from the 1960s to the present day are explicitly propagandistic and prioritize socialist values and proletariat identities above all else, less straightforward yet equally important are the ways they mobilize the layers of identities of Longmei and Yurong. As girls, children, Mongols, shepherds, sisters, and parts of the collective community, all of Longmei’s and Yurong’s identities are captured in different narratives and turned into political capital. Most importantly, none of these stories were written by the sisters themselves. As Yurong once recalled, “We were only publicized and made to be the heroes of the time” (Kong 63). Similarly, Longmei’s name was originally “Longyi.” The journalist who first reported the story might have made a mistake, but it was never corrected. This small detail is symbolic of how the little sisters were turned into images of persistence and revolutionary progressiveness, their identities claimed and assigned by political leaders while their own voices were lost.

This paper aims to rediscover the story of Longmei and Yurong by tracing the historical facts behind their becoming exemplars and comparing these facts against a textual analysis of the 1965 animation, *Heroic Sisters of the Grassland*. I ask: Who has been writing stories about the persistent girls? For whom and for what did the little sisters persist? How were their identities as girls, children, or Mongols used yet paradoxically marginalized to create

a story of young persistent socialists? How do the representations of girls' persistence reveal an imbalanced power of discourse in relation to identities?

As intersectional feminist bell hooks proposes, "Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression" (31). This paper thus invites readers to take an intersectional approach to the emulation and representations of the heroic little sisters, taking their gender, age, ethnicity, class, and other experiences into consideration. I argue that the making of the heroic little sisters has been a constant appropriation of narrative that excludes the voices of the heroines. Such appropriation is built upon "interlocking webs of oppression" (Biana 13), involving hierarchies not only between men and women, but also between adults and children, between ethnic majorities and minorities, and between political elites and shepherds. The production of these young, persistent, ethnic minority girl exemplars has been dominated by the male leaders, those that have access to the media, and those with their own political agenda.

I will first trace the journey of how the little sisters were forged into national heroes, unfurling the ethnic and political tensions and stakeholders involved in the establishment of the girl exemplars. This part of analysis explains the silencing of the girls' voice from a historical perspective. I will then proceed with a closing reading of the 1965 animated film, explaining how the image of the little girls was appropriated and manipulated in a representational dimension. This will be followed by an analysis of a 2021 documentary on the story and a biography of the sisters, revealing how the appropriation of the girls' voices, images, and identities have continued in the post-Mao era and the gap between these representations and their real life.

### **"Learn from the heroic little sisters"**

The little sisters were made to be worshipped by political powers including the Mongol authorities and the nexus of power of the Communist Party in Beijing, instead of acting out of their own will. Calling herself lucky, Yurong said in an interview that what they did was actually very common (Kong 63). Many other herders also tried their best to protect the sheep in extreme weather, and some were injured or even disabled because of it. Longmei and Yurong were singled out and "made by the time" (63). It is thus natural to ask, why were the little sisters selected?

Behind the dissemination and emulation of the little sisters' heroic deeds is a story of political wrestling. The Mongol authorities played an essential role in the making of the persistent girl heroes at that time. Specifically, Ulanhu,<sup>3</sup> then the founding Chairman of China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region

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<sup>3</sup>Ulanhu was a CCP member and an influential Mongol ethnic leader who pushed the law of the nationality regional autonomy to be integrated into the Chinese constitution. His stint involved efforts to negotiate the ethnic autonomous rights and increase the representation of ethnic minorities within the Chinese state mechanism.

and a leader of Mongol ethnicity, showed great interest in the little sisters. Immediately after *People's Daily* reported the story, Ulanhu visited the sisters at the hospital and wrote a message for the front page of the March 14, 1964 issue of the *Inner Mongolia Daily*:

The little sisters Longmei and Yurong are revolutionary successors educated by and growing up under Mao Zedong Thought. Youngsters of all ethnicities in our Region should learn from their exemplary behaviors and noble qualities. (Ulanhu, "Epigraph")

Here, as in many versions of the story, Longmei and Yurong are described as young Mongol girls nurtured by Mao Zedong though, which leads them toward the role of a qualified socialist successor (*shehuizhuyi jiebanren*). Their story sets an example to mobilize "youngsters of all ethnicities" and prescribes the ethnic youngsters a direction of self-identification. Longmei and Yurong are built into the narrative that highlights the loyalty of ethnic groups toward the Mao regime. According to anthropologist Uradyn E Bulag, the incident was appropriated to deliver three distinct implied messages: Firstly, "the Mongols, even children like the two young sisters, were devoting their life to the socialist cause" ("Models and Moralities" 28). Secondly, it is evidence of "inter-nationality friendship" (28) embodied by how Han people helped save the two little sisters. Finally, the incident implied that the ultimate threat to socialism is class enemies.

The effort to reconcile ethnic groups with socialist mobilization and class struggle undeniably reflects the Mongolian authorities' concerns in the face of an unbalanced power relationship between the ethnic minorities and the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu*). Ulanhu's enthusiasm in setting Longmei and Yurong as exemplars can be seen as one of the strategies to ensure "he himself and the minority people he represented could be accommodated in China without being overwhelmed" (Bulag, "The Cult of Ulanhu" 11). In this sense, it is understandable to read the little sisters' story as a product of Han domination and socialist assimilation. Yet, it would be reductive to only see the tensions between the ethnic minority and majority, and between the Mongol autonomy and the central political regime. As Dru C. Gladney notes, "the 'minority' in China reflects the objectivizing of a 'majority' nationality discourse that parallels the valorization of gender and political hierarchies" (93). The making of the heroic sisters exemplifies not only the hierarchical dichotomies between the minority and the majority, between female and male, between objects and subjects, under the framework of Mongol versus Han, but also the parallel hierarchies and dichotomies within the Mongol community itself.

Longmei and Yurong were not the only Mongol exemplars Ulanhu and the Region authorities tried to establish. Boroldai, "a Mongol woman who cleared poisonous weeds and planted bushes on the desert" (Bulag, "Models

and Moralities” 29), for example, was the other model that Ulanhu widely promoted. As noted by Uradyn E Bulag, these major Mongol icons were female, “while the Chinese models were almost exclusively male” (29). He interprets this as a political strategy of Mongols to show a friendly, no-harm gesture toward the Han Chinese, acknowledging the feminization of ethnic minority by the Han community. The little sisters were therefore perfect campaign material because their identity – as young women and children – posted no threat to the Han Chinese. Also, as mentioned earlier, their young age can be an expressive tool in demonstrating how thoroughly the socialist spirit has infiltrated the Mongol community. For a newly founded nation state, children can “express the new *beginning* that is a centerpiece of the ideology of nationalist movements” (Alryyes 74; emphasis original).

The enthusiastic promotion of the little sisters as a national exemplar is, as demonstrated above, a strategic and careful move by the Mongol leaders. Bulag appears to see the Mongol authorities’ strategy as “resistance-within-collaboration” (29), a way to find agency and a voice for the Mongols in the domination of the Han and the CCP. Yet such claim of Mongol agency is endorsing and even enforcing the loss of Mongol women and children’s voices, while they are represented by high rank Mongol male officials and appropriated as an image. Thus, the Mongol agency here is questionable: Whose agency is it? Does it speak for Mongol women and children, and those not a political elite? If the proactive creation of Mongol’s own icons can be regarded as an effort to claim agency for the ethnic community and resist the grip of Beijing, it is led and dominated by the Mongol male leaders. As political and cultural elites, as male adults, Mongol leaders create meanings, while the pastoral Mongol women and children, who are less privileged and lack resources, are pawns in the meaning-making.

In having his message printed on the front page of the official newspaper of Inner Mongolia, Ulanhu demonstrated his power in navigating discourse and creating meanings, a power the little sisters did not have. Following the message, more authorities and media joined in praising the sisters. The CCP Committee of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region awarded Longmei and Yurong the title “Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland” (*Caoyuan yingxiong xiaojiemei*). Composer Delongxi included Ulanhu’s message in the lyrics of a song, titled “Learn from the Heroic Little Sisters” (*Xuexi yingxiong xiaozimei*) and broadcasted on Inner Mongolia People’s Broadcaster from 16 to 21 March. On 20 March, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League published an open letter, commending the sisters’ persistence and congratulating them on joining the Young Pioneers. In the end, the Mongol and Central leaders jointly created a model for emulation. In the meantime, they created an identity for Longmei and Yurong, telling the girls and the public who they are. In this way, the

leaders demonstrated how authoritative power monopolizes self-identities by representing those without power.

It is also worth noting that Longmei and Yurong could not speak Chinese well during this time, because they, like the major population in their living area, were Mongol-speaking. Yet literacy in Chinese is central to the making and emulation of the heroic sisters, as it was the main language used in disseminating their story. According to Foucault, the strategies of discourse are composed by language and are closely connected to the way that power operates. Foucault acknowledges that language has the “power to designate, to name, to show, to reveal, to be the place of meaning or truth” (111). In the making of the heroic little sisters, Chinese, instead of Mongol, is where the “place of meaning or truth” is. Longmei and Yurong did not participate in or have the linguistic ability to understand the truth-making about their own image. In the 1965 animated film, the two Mongol speaking girls were represented by animated characters speaking fluent Chinese. A voice was assigned, before they mastered a new language and had a chance to speak. The use of Chinese, while again demonstrating the dominance of Han Chinese in the form of language, also reflects Longmei and Yurong’s marginal position in the creation of a discourse.

Apart from the political elites, equally enthusiastic were those that claimed to have saved the little girls. This led to a debate over the truth of the savior. In the earliest reports, it was Comrade Wang, a train worker of Han ethnicity who first discovered and saved Longmei and Yurong. Wang was recognized as a “Glorious Model of National Unity” (*Minzu tuanjie guanghui bangyang*) and received a substantial pay rise. On several occasions, Wang firmly claimed that he was the one who saved the sisters. Yet in 1978, *People’s Daily* published an article revealing that it was actually Haschuluu, a Mongol shepherd, who, together with his son, rescued the sisters in the first place. Haschuluu was discredited because he was a “class enemy under surveillance” (Geng). Haschuluu was originally an editor at Inner Mongolia People’s Publishing House. Due to a disagreement with a senior at work, he was sent to a pastoral commune for reeducation. The article published by *People’s Daily* was a compilation of Haschuluu’s appeal letters over the years to the government. As Bulag states, “The Mongol authorities installed a Han as the savior of the Mongol girls, in full knowledge that it was a fabrication, and the Mongol savior was exorcised lest he ruin the tale’s message” (“Models and Moralities” 36). The side story reflects who determines what is recorded in what way, and what is deemed as truth. As the little sisters were emulated, they also turned into a coveted political resource.

In different versions of storytelling and the so-called truth-finding quest, Longmei and Yurong are present as an image, yet absent as a subject. While they did benefit from the emulation campaign, gaining respect and opportunities, they have been presented and represented only as political and



ideological symbols. Along with the emulation is the reality of being gazed at as a sign, a spectacle, and a resource. Their images were printed on posters, used in films in the 1960s, turned into exhibits, and choreographed into dance performances in the post-Mao era.

The story is still being told in various genres and forms. In the post-Mao era, while the socialist propagandistic hues seem to have slightly faded, the image of the heroic sisters has been incorporated into a capitalist system of ethnic tourism. The dance dramas adapted from their story became a part of the tourist economy of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. In September 2021, a new version of the dance drama was co-produced by the Culture and Tourism Bureau of the Region (*Heroic Little Sisters*). Incorporating Mongolian dance, music, costumes and aesthetics in the stage performances, the drama uses the incident as the raw material that blends ethnic culture and socialist ideology while creating a spectacle. There was also a museum, Exhibition Hall of The Heroic Little Sisters (*caoyuan yingxiong xiaojiemei shiji zhanlanguan*), built in 2007 by the Baotou City Government to display objects, photos, comic books and audio-visual productions about the deeds of the heroic sisters. It has become a tourism site and a “Headquarter for Patriotic Education” (*aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu jidi*) for schools to arrange field trips. In Gladney’s words, “The commodification of minorities is accomplished through the representing, packaging, and selling of their images, artworks, and ‘costumes’ in the many pictorial gazetteers . . . as well as in museum displays . . .” (97). This, she suggests, not only provides the state with “hard currency, but also important symbolic capital” (95) that underlines China’s national identity and state power.

From the first news report praising their proletariat persistence to the latest dance drama production, Longmei and Yurong might have been a central image, but they were not given the opportunity to speak. Their image has been produced and reproduced, their multiple identities captured and formulated, to frame narratives with political or economic purposes. Despite the accumulation of representations of Longmei and Yurong, not much is known about them when they are not the “Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland.”

### **“Chairman Mao’s good children”**

Celebrated and emulated, the heroic sisters can be seen as one of the most widespread and influential images for children that was interwoven into political discourses during the Cultural Revolution. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, children were always depicted as consciously ideological agents in China, and childhood a process that prepares them to be ready socialist successors (Robinson 427; Nafati, 85; Xu 382). In this context, “[c]hildren’s literature was developed on the conviction that its task was to train

a new generation, who would ultimately improve society” (Bi and Fang 55). “Class struggle,” “catching spies” and “little heroes” were the common themes in children’s story books, comic books, and animations (Wang 128). The distinction between children’s literature and adult literature appeared to be minimal. As Jean-Pierre Diény commented, “In China . . . there is no break in continuity between the literature for children, adolescents and adults. All three, being three branches on the single trunk of the official ideology resemble each other: China treats children as adults and adults as children” (qtd. in Farquhar 3). In representations as such, children do not seem to need adults’ protection or attention but are instead active participants of a political life (Robinson 430).

Likewise, echoing Mao’s slogan “[t]he times have changed, men and women are the same” (qtd. in “Mao zhuxi”), teenage girl Red Guards, emulating gender-neutral styles and plunging in the waves of class struggle, “cut their hair short (or more daringly, shaved their heads), donned army clothes, and marched barefoot through city streets” (Honig 255). Girls in literature, arts, and films are portrayed as devoted revolutionaries and combatants from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. At first sight, boys and girls as militant protagonists look equally belligerent in children’s magazines (Nafati 92).

While *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland* does share some general features of children’s literature and representations of girls in the 1960s and the 1970s, it does not seamlessly fit into the stylistic paradigm wherein there is no distinction between children and adults, or no distinction between women and men. Rather, the animation purposely formulates the girls’ age, gender, ethnicity and physicality, and uses these elements to build up implied hierarchies and the affectivity of their proletariat persistence. The animated characters are depicted as inexperienced, childlike, yet also politically conscious little girls. They are persistent yet vulnerable, in need of help and guidance from the adults, the males, the Party, and the Han Chinese.

The film’s plot is simple, and the narrative matches the story already widely spread. The film opens with serene pastoral scenes of vast grasslands, sheep flock, and herders, then cuts to a domestic setting, a bedroom with a Mao poster in the middle of a wall, and a poster of a group of Young Pioneers at the edge of the wall. The stern political leader gazes ahead at the audience, as two toddlers, preoccupied by a toy sheep, are sitting and playing under the poster. The perspective then moves, bringing audiences to the window, through which we see Longmei and Yurong hopping and playing. The sisters do not look militant at all. They play around, chase the sheep, and read picture books. Henry Jenkins, in discussing a modern American perception of childhood, points out that the “dominant conception of childhood innocence presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political; we imagine them to be noncombatants whom we protect from the

harsh realities of the adult world, including the mud splattering of partisan politics” (2). The opening scene, however, presents a seemingly paradoxical relationship in which childhood innocence exists within a political space filled with partisan propaganda. While together the movements of the toddlers playing with a toy and the lively body language of Longmei and Yurong deliver a carefree, innocent, and childlike atmosphere, political signs hover around the space they inhabit. The positioning of the Mao poster, the toddlers, and the sisters suggests a specific relationship between the images and the audience. Watching over the audience, the political leader’s gaze is ubiquitous, while the toddlers and the sisters are positioned as objects of the audience’s gaze.

In the meantime, the song “Ode to the Grassland” (*Caoyuan zange*) loops in the background. In a celebrative and spirited tone, a chorus of women and children sings:

Dear Chairman Mao, ah Chairman Mao,  
The grassland prospers in your sunlight;  
Dear Communist Party, ah Communist Party,  
Little herders grow up under your guidance.

The lyrics straightforwardly prescribe the relationship between the Mongols, the children, and the political leaders. The serene, prosperous pastoral scenery and the happy children are nourished by the “sunlight” of the political icon and the Party. Not just gaining a central position on the wall, Mao and his ideology are central to the verbal and visual narrative of the film. While the little sisters are the protagonists in the story, they do not lead the plot, but are constantly “under guidance.” Opening with a representation of carefree Mongol children, the narrative suggests that such joyful childhood (as well as Mongols generally) benefit from – and therefore should be guided by – Mao and the Party’s leadership.

Throughout the film, we can see how the “guidance” infiltrates every aspect of the sisters’ daily life. The collectivist, proletariat ideology is not necessarily delivered in a highly political discourse. Longmei recalls that Father once told her to find a missing sheep, because “Ah Ba said, no sheep of the commune can be lost.” They decided to look after the sheep and feed them well, “so Ah Ba will be happy.” The idea of collectivism is naturally embedded in an everyday conversation, in the form of home education. The father figure is important as he connects the public, political field with the domestic space, channeling the ideology coming from the political center into the most granular component of the ethnic community. Also, his instruction became a strong motivation to push Longmei and Yurong to persist in protecting the sheep. Their obedience to the paternal authority is conflated with the compliance with central ideology. Moreover,

the absence of Longmei and Yurong's mother suggests that female figures play no part in building the girls' political awareness, and that the formation and dissemination of ideological discourse is dominated by male figures.

The other key figure that guides the girls is Lei Feng, who, in the propaganda campaigns, was portrayed to be a selfless soldier in the People's Liberation Army, and a diligent learner of Mao Zedong thoughts (Funari and Mees 247). Lei Feng has been the most influential and well-known exemplar in China. His diary, *Lei Feng's Diary*, recorded the good deeds he had done and his resolution in devoting himself to socialist causes. In 1963, Mao Zedong encouraged the whole nation to emulate him with the slogan "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng." "Lei Feng Spirit" was coined to promote his "clear-cut class position" and "Communist character of selflessness" (Zhou, "Epigraph"). The film showcases a few scenes in which the Mongol sisters read his diary or recall the moving deeds of Lei Feng to gain energy to persist in the harsh conditions. Thinking of Lei Feng sending an old lady home in a cold, rainy night, young Longmei and Yurong shake off their tiredness and go back to the sheep flock. As Xu Xu points out, in China, children emulating adult exemplars can "function as an ideal model of citizenship" (Xu, "Chairman Mao's Child" 384). Thus, the scenes of the little sisters admiring "Lei Feng Spirit" function as a validation of them being role models for other citizens. Also, since Mao was a leading figure in propagating Lei Feng, the emulation of Lei Feng suggests a belief in the Mao Zedong Thought. Two Mongol girls worshipping a Han exemplar, again, embody a clear mapping of the margin, the Mongol ethnic minority, and the center of Han, in the ethnic relations.

From Chairman Mao, Ah Ba (father), to Lei Feng, all the figures that mentor, guide, or instruct the little girls are adult and male. Whenever the sisters need to make a decision, they refer to one of the three figures. The recurring Mao posters and Lei Feng's story imply the causality of Longmei and Yurong's behavior – they are persistent and selfless because they have absorbed the Mao thoughts and proletariat values. Longmei and Yurong worship Lei Feng who was inspired by Mao Zedong Thought, thus presenting an explicit hierarchy of emulation. In the three key mentors, we see the conflation of the masculine, the patriarchal, the older, the ideologically dominant, and the more powerful. By contrast, Longmei and Yurong represent the feminine, the younger, the more vulnerable, and the ones that need guidance.

Inspired by Chairman Mao and Lei Feng, the little sisters persist, going "out to face the world and brave the storm" ("Use Mao Tse-tung's Thought" 24). Although there seems to be no emphasis on their gender, their girl identity is embedded in the portrayal of the animated characters, and suggests their limited herding experience and physical strength. Both animated characters wear Mongol costumes and have round facial features and body

forms. Longmei wears two braids, and Yurong has a short bob with bangs, both of which are common hairstyles for girls. Both characters are given high-pitched voices. Their costumes, features, and physical forms deliver clear visual messages regarding their gender, age, and ethnicity. In contrast with the masculinized, stern looking “Iron Girls,” Longmei and Yurong appear to be soft, vulnerable, joyful, and childlike. These features, as the plot rolls out, emerge as a powerful narrative tool in presenting the girls’ strong will and persistence. The contrast between their small body and the vast landscape, between the limitation of their physical strength and the uncertain, overpowering blizzard, dramatizes the power of perseverance.

About nine minutes into the film, a blizzard descends. The sisters march and persist until the thirty-fourth minute, when Longmei, carrying Yurong on her back, faints in the snow. In the forty-minute animation, twenty-five minutes is given to portray how strenuously the sisters combat the blizzard. There are lengthy scenes showing the little girls running and struggling, emphasizing the vulnerability of their bodies (for example, 00:12:52–00:19:33). In the roaring wind and snow, they try to pull the sheep back into the flock, even though they are almost blown away (00:25:58–00:26:22). In a few long shots, their small forms make a stark contrast against the boundless snowfield.

Despite suffering from cold, hunger and pain, the sisters overcome the temptation to rest by their strong will to emulate Lei Feng and protect the sheep. Yurong loses a boot, and her foot is frozen and covered in ice, yet the girl is unaware. All she cares about is the safety of sheep. The “vulnerable, fragile bodies are engaged in affective political mobilization” (Knudsen and Stage 1), making them a powerful socialist exemplar to be emulated.

Apart from dramatizing their persistence, their youth and physical limitations suggest the necessity of help from adults, and in this animation, male adults. One of the commune members looking for the sisters says to his colleague, “The blizzard is so harsh, and there are more than 300 sheep. Even adults can’t look after the flock, not to mention the *haizi*.” The wording *haizi* (children) suggests a different view from seeing children as political agents that do not need adults’ protection. Instead of falling into any solid stances of perceiving children as political or apolitical subjects, the portrayal of Longmei and Yurong incorporates other aspects of their identity – they are female Mongol children from a shepherd family and a time glorifying class struggle. This intersectional specificity is captured to endorse hierarchies and to write a story with assigned purposes.

Discussing masculinized female icons during the Cultural Revolution, Tina Mai Chen states that “Individual models represented metonymically the new Chinese body politic while the phenomena of emulation campaigns simultaneously worked to transcend the specificities of individual bodies” (270). While the specificities of the little sisters were essential to storytellers in

building crafted political messages, they are flattened and cloaked by the tag of socialist exemplar.

At the end of the film, the heroic sisters run around happily, chasing the sheep flock dear to their heart. They are called “Chairman Mao’s good children” and worshipped as the exemplary children by other peers, who wave flags and give them presents (00:37:19–00:37:31). This is another moment that sends a reminder of the distance between the animated characters and Longmei and Yurong in real life. The ending seems to imply that the sisters suffered no physical harm, as they are dancing and running energetically. In reality, Longmei and Yurong are disabled and are forced to combat, not only with the blizzard, but also the pain their bodies experience.

### “Daughters of the Party” and painful bodies

Fifty-seven years after the incident, the story was told once again in a documentary series, *Daughters of the Party* (Dang de nüer), a co-production by Mango TV, All-China Women’s Federation<sup>4</sup> and Xinhua News Agency for the one-hundred-year anniversary of the founding of the CCP. Premiering in July 2021, the series contains 100 episodes, each featuring an important female CCP member throughout the “100-year history of the Party” (Mango TV). It includes the stories of Xiang Jingyu, a founding member of the CCP; Liu Qingyang, the founder of the first women’s newspaper in China; Jin Qingmin, the first female scientist to venture to the South Pole; and many other prominent female figures who have made great contributions to society. While each episode is titled by the protagonist’s name, all the women are included under the umbrella of “daughters of the Party.” Longmei and Yurong are featured in Episode 18.

Episode 18 opens with a long shot of the Baotou Bayan Obo Mongolia Nationality School. In the background we hear students reading the story of Longmei and Yurong out loud. Cutting to the classroom, students wearing red scarves and track suit uniforms were sitting upright, waiting for their special guests, the heroic little sisters. Welcomed by the applause of the students, Longmei and Yurong walk into the classroom in Mongolian costumes. Addressed by the children as Grandma Longmei and Grandma Yurong, the sisters recall what happened when they were just little girls. “At that time, we were around the same age as you today . . .” Yet their voice fades and gives way to the “reproduction of the scene” (*qingjing zaixian*). A narrator, instead, guides the audiences while the scenes have actors

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<sup>4</sup>Originally called the All-China Democratic Women’s Federation, the All-China Women’s Federation (ACFW) was established on March 24, 1949 to promote women’s rights and government policies on women. Having led important women’s movements in China, the organization nevertheless has an intricate relationship with the CCP and has to keep a safe distance from feminism.

performing as Longmei and Yurong, acting out how they protected the sheep and persisted in the harsh environment (00:02:21–00:04:07).

Although the documentary series seems to target a wider audience than children, the setting in schools and classrooms suggests that these materials are typically used for educational purposes. In an episode lasting just over seven minutes, representations of Longmei and Yurong from performances, news coverage and picture books are edited to form the main body of the storytelling. Images of the now aged Longmei and Yurong appear only briefly, in which they say a few sentences to add to the already choreographed narrative. The school setting implies that the little sisters are still seen as important models for children nowadays. Though told in different times and forms, the narrative of the story has remained the same. On some occasions, Longmei and Yurong even repeat lines that are identical to those found in other cultural productions.

The constant reproduction of the young Longmei and Yurong creates bodies distinct from the actual physicality of the now-adult women. They are simply there to prove that the story actually happened, adding to the body of work about the young sisters. Their girlhood persists and overwrites the voices of the present Longmei and Yurong. Or rather, the Longmei and Yurong of the present turn into representations of the heroic little sisters from the past.

Compared with the 11-year-old and the 9-year-old sisters' heroic deeds, Longmei and Yurong's life story is not as widely spread. They have always been remembered as the heroic little sisters living on the grassland. Yet the story of persistence actually extends beyond that day one night in the blizzard. The brave, heroic march not only brought them the recognition as model children, but also painful bodies with which they had to cope throughout the rest of their girlhoods and adulthoods. Apart from their roles as girls, Mongols, proletariats, shepherds, and exemplars, far less is known about their disabilities, or how their physical challenges changed their senses of identity. Also, they are remembered as "sisters," as "one," instead of as two individual women, each with her own life struggles.

In a biography<sup>5</sup> about Longmei and Yurong, a short chapter is given to the physical pains they experienced. Growing up, Yurong had to change and adapt to new prosthetic devices as her body developed.

When I was young, my body continued to grow, so I had to change the prosthetic devices every year. Every time, my legs got scratched and bled a lot . . . It was really painful. The wound was cut open again and again, until the skin was thick enough. It wasn't until my early twenties when it got stable. (Kong 56)

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<sup>5</sup>The biography belongs to the book series called "100 Figures that Inspired Chinese since the Founding of New China" (yibaiwei xinzhongguo chengli yilai gandongzhongguo renwu), a project providing models in a less propagandistic way in a post-socialist context. Although the narrative holds an explicit political stance and some disturbing perceptions about women, it provides a more detailed record of Longmei and Yurong's life, where they are not the heroic sisters. The book is categorized as a "youth reading" (qingnian duwu) and "teens reading" (shaonian duwu) nonfiction.

This short paragraph gives us a glimpse of Yurong's girlhood outside of her heroic sister image. Again, persistence and willpower emerge as a theme in the episode of Yurong's life, one that last years, much longer than the 35 kilometers she once marched. A disabled body not only brought her physical pain, but also self-doubt (Kong 43), impacting her decisions in relationships. The biography mentions how disability made Yurong reluctant to show her affection to a boy she liked: "I asked Chaoke to carefully consider my disability. I don't want to force him to make any decisions" (Kong 45). Apparently, physical issues have given Yurong heavy burdens and a sense of inferiority. They also imply a disturbed recognition of Yurong's womanhood as projected by how she deals with romantic relationship.

Deborah Stienstra mentions how disability is normally foregrounded while other experiences are silenced: "We know little about the intersections of being a child, a girl, and disabled, let alone what it is like in the global South, being Indigenous, or coming from a racialized minority" (Stienstra 54). Understanding disability here, however, is not an attempt to take the disabled body as an overarching theme, but to discover Yurong and Longmei as their own subjects instead of symbolic representations of an ideology. By telling and un-telling specific persistence, the storytellers present certain structures of recognizing persistence, deeming what story is worth spreading and what is not. In this context, recognizing disabled girlhood is a channel to challenge that narrative structure and to acknowledge Longmei and Yurong's own voice as women living prosperous lives and intersections of identities.

## Conclusion

From "heroic sisters of the grassland" to "daughters of the Party," Longmei and Yurong's stories have been told for decades. In 2008, Longmei and Yurong were selected as the torch bearers for the Beijing Olympics. In photos capturing their torch-bearing moment, viewers can see them running in the middle of flowers, crowds, and applause, just like their animated girl counterparts at the end of the 1965 animated film (Man, "Xiri").

By tracing the making of the exemplary sisters and analyzing representations of their story, this paper has attempted to rediscover the story and to discuss the power relationships embedded in its telling. By looking at the history behind the "heroic little sisters" and the 1965 animated film, this paper has explored how persistence as a celebrated trait in propagandistic discourse interacts with the sisters' image as two young girls of ethnic minority background. The story of the heroic little sisters sets an example of what an ideal citizen should be like in the era of the Cultural Revolution. Incorporating Longmei's and Yurong's heroic deeds into children's books and animations certainly serves to cultivate the next generation to fit into a similarly selfless mold. Within these texts, persistence is highlighted not as



a trait that brings individual benefits, but as something contributing to the collective good; or rather, that benefits the nation.

The adaptation and dissemination of the story reflects how the labels of marginal, female, child, and racial minority are recruited by the dominant, patriarchal, Han chauvinistic national narrative. The sisters' young age, female identity, and Mongolian ethnicity are amplified implicitly to contrast the greatness of their achievement. Dominating the storytelling, the Mongol and central political elites dictated the definition of girlhood and Mongolian identity. While Longmei and Yurong were turned into a heroic image, the reality of their physical damage and suffering slips out of attention, or is simply seen as the proof of their persistence.

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