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THE YANGBANXI OR CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY OPERAS

Abstract: The effort undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party to control the arts following its rise to power ultimately reached its peak in the writing of a series of revolutionary operas presented during the 1960s. The only means the Party had to educate the largely illiterate rural and industrial masses was through a form of semiotic art that was not alien to them, as it had been part of their cultural heritage for centuries. In this way, entire theatre companies were organized with the mission of visiting even the most remote areas of the country, repeatedly performing the same works so that every Chinese citizen might understand the new political precepts of the state. What China achieved within a single decade still resonates culturally and thematically in the generation that lived through that period.

Keywords: Revolutionary literature, Peking opera, yangbanxi, socialism, propaganda.

1. A historical perspective

Opera is China's great semiological art form, both cultured and popular, which has transcended social and historical barriers and reached all strata of society. For millennia, this performing art has captivated emperors, writers, the people and anyone who has dared to let themselves be seduced by it. Since its origins, Chinese opera has attracted everyone's attention, fascinating and enchanting entire generations of Chinese people who have seen the reflection of their lives, their inner stories and their problems in the plots of the operas.

For all these reasons, when the Communists came to power, they soon realised that if they really wanted to re-educate a largely illiterate population politically and ideologically, it could only be through theatrical performance. Their leaders quickly understood that the best and most effective way to educate the people in the new Marxist art was to put on stage the precepts they wanted the people to understand

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and copy, so that they could then apply them to their lives. This consolidated what had been happening since ancient times: theatre as the engine of social change in a China that wanted to find itself and did so in the new by using the old theatrical wineskins.

The People's Republic of China was founded on 1st October 1949. The founding of New China marked the birth of a society led by the Chinese Communist Party. In the following lines, we will analyse how the Party promoted a great propaganda effort of ideology through the so-called 'model revolutionary operas' and how it exercised iron-fisted control over the performing arts throughout the territory under its command. Thus, *ab initio*, one of the most clear-cut policies of the Communist government was to control opera and theatre production in order to educate and guide the masses in Marxist ideals, in the words of the Ministry of Culture itself: 'To consolidate and develop mass spare-time artistic activity in the rural villages and the factories' (Mackerras, 1984:p.160). To this end, the Central Government created rural associations whose purpose was to guide and teach existing theatre companies. To get an idea of the popularity of opera in the 1960s, we should remember that there were around 244,000 companies throughout the country, with a total of eight million members (Ibid:p.161); and this idea would not disappear with Mao's death, as years later, at the Fifth National People's Congress, it was stated that 'we should be active in organising cultural centres, film projection teams and various forms of spare-time cultural activity for the masses' (Ibid:p.161).

The central idea was simply that every individual involved in theatre should be a source of ideological influence for the Party, particularly in rural areas, where resistance to the implementation of new policies was strongest (Idema, in Mair et al., 2001:p.846). Mao's own dissertations on the arts in general, and theatre in particular, formed the basis for state policy and sentiment. Using the slogan 小型多样² (*xiaoxing duoyang*), or "small in scale, rich in variety", the Central Government attempted to turn the thousands of amateur companies into faithful reflections of communist ideology, providing them with the necessary training to eventually become more stable companies, considerably lengthening the plays, concentrating the themes on a closed list, adding devotion to the performance, standardising the processes and establishing control committees. In the 1930s, the Red Army Military Academy organised its own department to deal with opera and theatre matters (Tung et al., 1987:p.13). However, these amateur actors had jobs outside the opera, so they were never able to devote all their time to such pursuits.

²The slogan 小型多样 (*xiaoxing duoyang*) soon became popular throughout the country and still today serves as a reminder of the Central Government's efforts to reach the masses through theatrical performances.

Meanwhile, urban theatre companies, professional and dedicated body and soul to performance, toured cities, towns and villages to spread these ideas, making these groups even more effective. The central government soon realised that the masses were not coming to see the performances, so it devised a way to reach them: performances were held outdoors, during breaks in factories, in rural areas... wherever there were people. Professionals were encouraged to be attentive to the tastes of the masses and to report on those preferences so that in future performances, the points that were most popular could be intensified: everything was carefully observed and studied with the ultimate goal of finding what the audience liked. In doing so, they found two ways to reach the public even better: first, 'they fitted the content of the dramas to the current work of the audience' and second, 'they were careful to choose appropriate times and places, suitable not for themselves but for their audiences' (Mackerras, 1984:p.164). These campaigns intensified even further after the victory of the Hundred Flowers Movement, known in Chinese as 百花运动 (*Baihua yundong*), taking its name from Mao's famous phrase: "Allowing a hundred flowers to bloom and a hundred schools of thought to contend is the policy of promoting progress in the arts and sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land". This phrase, which at first glance may seem to have profound democratic implications, led to total disappointment for the president, who received only criticism for almost all of his policies. Mao was so disappointed with this small democratic experiment that he would never again consult the people, so as not to face such great public ridicule. As a result, the Ministry of Culture issued a public statement asserting that:

1. For urban troupes to go to the countryside and perform for the peasants could consolidate and strengthen the 'worker-peasant alliance' and at the same time carry on socialist education among the peasantry.
2. It would encourage production activism among the peasantry and speed up socialist construction in the new peasant villages.
3. Through artistic instruction, it would be able to give impetus to the development of amateur mass cultural life in the peasant villages." (Mackerras, 1984:p.165)

All this frenetic mobilisation of drama was related to the emergence of a new political movement, known as the 'Down to the Countryside Movement', which led to the displacement of millions of young people suspected of being pro-bourgeois from urban to rural areas (Huang, 2014:pp.100–101). Known in Chinese as 上山下乡运动 (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong*), which literally translates as "up to the

mountains and down to the countryside”, it involved the mobilisation of more than 17 million young people from urban centres in the 1960s. The premise was that these young people should learn the true essence of communism from farmers, and since cultural teachings did not seem to be enough, it was decided that this was the best way to show them. In these regions now filled with so many urban youths, the performances of state companies regained unparalleled strength, as their work was now not to show the benefits of communism, but to re-educate them in it.

With Inner Mongolia as the backdrop, the first focus that would later spread to the rest of the country, the Beijing government ordered the creation of travelling companies, whose mission was to reach those places that, due to their remote location or insignificance in size, prevented the establishment of stable companies. Professional theatre companies came to be held in such high esteem that 刘少奇³ (Liu Shaoqi) himself, president of the Politburo from 1959 to 1968, exempted them from having to work in agriculture with the other peasants and workers, so that they could devote themselves entirely to opera and theatre.

In the 1940s, there were still some companies interested in foreign 话剧⁴ (*huaju*), far removed from the mass performances that were all the rage in the country (Tung et al., 1987:p.15), but this situation would prove unsustainable in the long run, so each one of these companies either disappeared or accepted the new performance patterns. To this end, the Party paid special attention to amateur companies, which could be re-educated and provided a unique opportunity to reach the most remote areas of the country. To this end, the Central Government coordinated the activities of the different agricultural stations with the core activities of the theatre companies, which performed everything from colourful and lively 秧歌⁵ (*yangge*) to themes against Japan, against sabotage campaigns, and even on agricultural production in other regions of the country. When the fighting against

³ 刘少奇 Liu Shaoqi, born in Hunan in 1898, was one of the most intelligent and astute Chinese politicians of the 20th century. He was involved in practically all of the early revolutionary governments, although his popularity declined during the Cultural Revolution when he was accused of being a capitalist and a traitor to his country. After Mao's first presidency, Shaoqi presided over the Politburo from 1959 to 1968. He died in Henan in 1969, and many claim that this was due to the ill-treatment he suffered in prison. After Deng Xiaoping came to power, his figure was recovered from the forgotten annals and restored as a preeminence of Chinese Communism (Gernet, 2005:p.591).

⁴ 话剧 (*huaju*) or “spoken theatre” is a form of Chinese theatre that emerged among intellectuals during the Republican Era (1912-1949) and was influenced by the West, becoming popular in the country's urban centres.

⁵ 秧歌 Yangge is a style of dance that emerged during the Song dynasty in the Shaanxi province, very popular among the working classes and older members of the population. Some of the *yangge* produced during the People's Republic Era, on a large scale and for large audiences, include *The Great Yangge of the People's Long Life* (in Chinese 人民胜利万岁大歌舞 *Renmin shengli wansui da gewu*)

the enemy, the Nationalist Party or Guomindang, intensified, the Combat Theatre Society —or 战斗剧社⁶ (Zhandou Jushe)— was founded, whose purpose was to travel the country with messages of land reform and fiery proclamations against the feudal decadence of the enemy. Many of the members of this society died heroically during the final stages of the struggle against the Guomindang, when every able-bodied man was called to arms, and they were recruited for this purpose. Without much military preparation or training, most of them gave their lives for socialist ideals.

During the turbulent decades in which China was at war, and more specifically since the rise of the Communist Party, its leaders focused their attention on exercising total control over opera and theatre production in the areas under their power. It is particularly interesting that one of the country's most politically unstable periods gave rise to a period of maturation and establishment of a new operatic style, which would unquestionably define its union with revolutionary ideas (Tang, 1993:p.62). However, with the establishment of peace, cities such as Beijing and Shanghai soon realised the ineffectiveness of this type of rural theatre, and from 1949 onwards there were tensions in urban centres between writers and the government (Tung et al., 1987:p.20). The end of the war was seen by writers and theatre artists as an opportunity to develop their personal potential and creative autonomy, but the communist authorities did not have the same plans for opera.

Reports made in 1953 by 田汉⁷ (Tian Han), president of the Chinese Playwrights Association, show the magnitude of the communist project: state theatre companies gave more than 41,000 performances to an audience of over 45 million people from factories, mines, agricultural areas and soldiers (Tung et al., 1987:p.21). Just one year later, the total number of spectators rose to 62 million nationwide, an increase of 37% in just one year, a figure of enormous mobilisation by the standards of the time. This considerable increase in the use of theatre in the Party's propaganda efforts led the Central Government to quickly copy the Stanislavski system (Tung et al., 1987:p.7) and introduce it in theatres across the country. This method is

or *The Great Yangge of Building the Motherland* (in Chinese 建设祖国大秧歌 *Jianshe zuguo da yangge*).

⁶ The 战斗剧社 (Zhandou Jushe) had its beginnings in the early 1930s, when, after military manoeuvres in Xi'an, the Red Army suffered a series of setbacks. The Party's propaganda machine soon sprang into action and, as a result, the society emerged.

⁷ The revolutionary author 田汉 (Tian Han) was born in 1898 and soon moved to Japan to pursue university studies. Upon his return, together with some intellectuals of the time, he founded anti-feudalist associations and soon specialised in theatre as a way of reaching the people with his messages. He is the author of 义勇军进行曲 (*Yiyongjun jinxingqu*), or *The March of the Volunteers*, although due to certain criticisms during the Cultural Revolution, he died in prison in 1968.

based on the so-called “art of experiencing”, with conscious thought and will as the backdrop against which less voluntary psychological processes, such as emotional experience and subconscious behaviour, take place.

From the 1960s onwards, the entire theatre scene was controlled by Mao's wife, 江青⁸ (Jiang Qing), who suspended performances of traditional plays and called for the establishment of theatres focused solely and exclusively on modern plays with contemporary themes (Mackerras, 1984:p.167). She is the architect who established the concept of “model operas” —or 样板戏 (*yangbanxi*)— that reflect class struggle, the heroism of the proletariat, the unequivocal images of the Party among the people and hostility towards the bourgeoisie. She also established a hierarchy of importance among the characters in the works; thus, the heroic characters were the most important and their roles had to stand out above the others, followed by the positive characters, after which the rest of the characters in the work were amalgamated (Leiberthal, in MacFarquhar et al., 2011:p.135). In this way, the first of the eight new-style operatic works that followed these model patterns began to emerge.

1.1. The Yan'an Forum

In May 1942, a forum of all communist intellectuals was held in the city of Yan'an, in northern Shaanxi province, where 毛泽东⁹ (Mao Zedong) laid out the general guidelines for action in the field of literature and the arts (Anderson, 1990:p.72). The Maoist attempt to reformulate the country's artistic guidelines shaped literary

⁸ 江青 Jiang Qing, also known as Madame Mao, was born in 1914 and died in 1991. She was one of the most powerful figures during Mao's final years and consolidated her power in the so-called Gang of Four, controlling all artistic and cultural production in China during the Cultural Revolution. She was a member of the Communist Party Politburo from 1969 and was Chairman Mao's fourth wife. Almost all current scholars recognise that Jiang Qing was probably the person who controlled the country in the last years of Mao's life (Leiberthal, in MacFarquhar et al., 2011:p.131).

⁹ 毛泽东 Mao Zedong is one of the most famous figures in history, having served as President of the People's Republic of China after its establishment in 1949. He was born in Hunan Province in 1893 into a peasant family and died in the country's capital in 1976. He was one of the co-founders of the Communist Party, along with Chen Duxiu, Zhou Enlai, and Li Dazhao. Under his leadership, the Party took control of the country, imposing an authoritarian regime that, with variations and adjustments, has managed to survive to this day. Ideologically, Mao accepted Marxist-Leninist precepts applied and adapted to the characteristics required by China, especially regarding the peasantry, which was the country's main social sector at the time. He developed a strong cult of personality around himself, which in some respects has survived to this day. After his death, the Party decided to publish a series of controversial Maoist decisions with which the new executive did not agree, thus undermining many of his social and economic policies, although his historical importance has never been questioned (Gernet, 2005:p.563-564).

and dramatic production for the next thirty years, effectively ending the debate that had raged in previous years about what a good writer concerned with the social environment around them should write about. All his stylistic and content-related thinking on the subject is compiled in *Speeches at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature — 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话 (Zai Yan'an Wenyi Zuotanhui shang de Jianghua)*— and for decades it was considered the bible that should guide writers and artists throughout the country (Moreno-Arrones, 2024:p.48). In this way, the whole underlying problem that had arisen years earlier in the League of Leftist Writers¹⁰ was settled by the revolutionary leader, who provided simple and decisive solutions to all the theoretical questions in the artistic fields.

For years, Mao had been talking in his speeches about the need to adjust Marxist precepts to the characteristics of the country, moving away from foreign obscurantism and showing fresh and vivid forms of the style and manners of the Chinese masses (Mao, 2021:p.328). Broadly speaking, the expression 'national forms' emerged, which at first did not refer specifically to the literary field, but was an extension to all the arts and was linked to 'international content', as it is clear that the revolutionary forms themselves were not of Chinese origin, although he always stressed the importance of moving away from the bourgeois pedantry of the outside world with its urban and cosmopolitan overtones. In this way, Mao called for a redefinition of New Literature, outlined years earlier with the contributions of a multitude of intellectuals, to frame it within an eminently revolutionary space that would break with the feudal and stagnant forms of the imperial past. Among those attending the forum, some sectors were totally opposed to foreign influence in form and content, while others advocated a purification of foreign elements in order to take advantage of what was beneficial to the revolution.

Mao gave a speech that was not intended to open a debate on the issue, but rather to close it to all writers who wanted to place themselves under the satellite of the revolution, since the ultimate goal of all works is none other than to guide, educate and expose the masses to the ideals of the movement (Mao, 2021:p.327). This speech took place on 2nd May, and twenty-one days later, at the closing session of

¹⁰ League of Leftist Writers (in Chinese 中国左派作家联盟 Zhongguo Zuoyi Zuojia Lianmeng), commonly abbreviated as 作联 (Zuo Lian), was formed in Shanghai on 2 March 1930 under the leadership of Lu Xun. From its inception, it sought to embody socialist realism in its works in order to support the revolutionary ideas that were emerging among left-wing intellectuals, with the goal of uniting opinions. Its members came from other pre-existing organisations. The organisation was quickly banned by the Nanjing government, and its members were persecuted, including some executions, who would soon come to be known as martyrs of the League. The League was dissolved a few months before the Japanese invasion.

the forum, he once again made very similar remarks, demonstrating to his audience that the forum was merely an informative event about the chosen path, not a true space for sharing ideas and opinions. The question that the leader poses to writers from all corners of the country is clear: how can literature and art serve the masses? Any work that answers this question will be valid in Mao's eyes, but those that only seek to reflect love, delight or entertainment will have no place in this new era that is now beginning, for art must 'fuse their thoughts and feelings with those of the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers' (Lee, in Twitchett & Fairbank, 1983:p.479). Mao's subordinates' interpretation of his words took a clear turn, meaning that censorship was imposed and no writer could deviate from the line dictated by the Party, so from that moment on, the purges against intellectuals did not cease (Creel, 1976:p.294).

In addition, many writers attempted to put new wine into old wineskins (Mao, 2021:p.332), as in the case of opera, which led to serious problems of form, since those responsible for reviewing the works were often mere bureaucrats who understood little or nothing about art, beyond stereotypical expressions such as "socialist realism", 'party spirit', "ideology" or 'national character' (Anderson, 1990:p.16), terms taken from Mao's own readings of Soviet models. The reaction to Mao's interventions was swift in all cultural spheres, including theatre, which was now loaded with audiovisual effects aimed at the masses: production began with the use of *yangge*, which quickly became popular in areas under Communist control (Tang, 1993:p.465). The propaganda potential of these *yangge* was immense, and all that was needed was to change the content by adding a series of steps in combination with new costumes to give it a more revolutionary air (Tang, 1993:p.466).

Experimentation also began to adapt traditional operas to the new forms, although playwrights soon realised that the forms and structures of traditional opera were difficult to adapt to these new themes without modification, as the feudal organisation of the country had made opera a rigid genre with fixed structures. It would be several years before this new literature began to take on acceptable forms that resulted in operas that were both attractive and revolutionary for the public (Tang, 1993:p.472); we will discuss this phenomenon below.

On 19 July 1949, the First National Congress of Workers' Art and Literature was held in Beijing, led by Mao Zedong and 周恩来¹¹ (Zhou Enlai) themselves, with the

¹¹ 周恩来 Zhou Enlai was born in 1898 in Jiangsu province and participated in revolts in Paris, where he was closely linked to the French Communist Party, before dying in Beijing in 1976. He was always linked to the communist revolutionary movement and took part in the May Fourth revolts. He joined the Long March alongside Mao Zedong, which made him an influential figure in the Party's organisational politics. He held various positions within the Party organisation —he was vice-

aim of establishing new socialist foundations for everything related to art: ‘cinema, music, dance, fine arts, performing literature, folk literature, children's literature, and circus’ (Birch, in Roderick and Fairbank, 1987:p.743). This congress would be held regularly in the following years, specialising mainly in opera and propaganda literature, organising the Chinese Writers Association¹² with the playwright 郭沫若 (Guo Moruo) at the head of all disciplines, a fact that already hints at the cornerstone importance that the Party gave to this art.

The task was to reinterpret and reprint all theatre produced prior to 1949, applying a Marxist reading of class struggle at all levels. The curious thing about these beginnings is that most of the Communist leaders —Mao himself, Zhou Enlai and, of course, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing— were avid consumers of Peking opera. The first reform they attempted to carry out was against the “superstitious or feudal” content present in some works.

2. Research Methodology

In order to frame methodologically this approach to the study of Chinese revolutionary operas, we shall focus exclusively on the eight works produced during the Cultural Revolution under the direction of Jiang Qing, Mao's fourth wife: *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *Red Detachment of Women*, *The White Haired Girl*, *The Harbor*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, *The Red Lantern*, and *Shajiabang* —a title encompassing both an opera and a symphony. This corpus may be understood as closed and canonical, since these were the only works authorised for performance by the Chinese intelligentsia during the 1960s and 1970s. Although certain aesthetic aspects of these works will inevitably be mentioned, the study aims to focus specifically on their plot and origins dimension, its influences, development and impact.

We shall examine in depth the elements of these operas in order to understand how the fusion of purely Eastern and Western elements produced a result never before seen in the Asian country. Particular attention will also be paid to the semiotic dimension of the text, since, ultimately, this opera was produced exclusively

chairman on several occasions— and also in government, becoming the first Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China (Gernet, 2005:p.563).

¹² In Chinese, it is known as 中国作家协会 (Zhongguo Zuojia Xiehui) and was established a few months before the proclamation of New China, demonstrating the paramount importance that communist leaders placed on their aesthetic concepts when governing the country. Although it has undergone various name changes and historical processes, the organisation continues to exist today, with almost 9,000 members in its ranks.

to convey a political message associated with its characters and heroes —something entirely novel in Chinese operatic tradition (Russo, 2020:p.56).

Taruskin has pointed out that when music is used for political purposes, its autonomy may be diminished, but its power and effectiveness increase (2005:p.473); this principle will therefore be considered in order to understand how the Chinese government approached this use of music. Throughout the study, a direct connection between art and propaganda will be established, since it is undeniable that these operas were conceived with a clearly propagandistic purpose, without losing sight of the fact that art can become ideology the moment it is used as an instrument of domination (Adorno, 1983:p.34). This was undoubtedly the way in which the Communist Party conceived it, and this conception is clearly reflected in the revolutionary operas.

Thus, the scope of the research will be centred on the Cultural Revolution¹³, although some of the operas began to take shape earlier, specifically from the 1950s onwards. Although the main centres of operatic production were Beijing and Shanghai, performances eventually spread throughout the entire country, reaching even the most remote areas, and the impact was therefore total. Likewise, the study will draw on written sources, namely the original librettos of the operas, in order to understand the political dimension of revolutionary opera in all its facets.

3. The *yangbanxi* or Chinese Revolutionary Operas

In July 1964, Jiang Qing and the so-called Gang of Four¹⁴, made up of politician and mayor of Shanghai Zhang Chunqiao, literary critic 姚文元 (Yao Wen Yuan) and young Red Guard 王洪文 (Wang Hongwen), organised an opera festival in the city of Shanghai with the ultimate aim of presenting Mao and his inner circle with a series of works in keeping with the new times and respectful of the aesthetic precepts established at the Yan'an Forum a couple of decades earlier. This event was the seed of what years later would come to be known in communist circles as the “three exaltations” —三突出 (*santuchu*)—. Following this logic of the *santuchu*,

¹³The 无产阶级文化大革命 (Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming), or the Cultural Revolution in Spanish, was one of the most convulsive and tragic moments in modern Chinese history. It is generally dated from 1966, when the then Chairman Mao issued a call to the populace to struggle against those political, cultural and historical elements that in some way conflicted with the idea of revolution. This appeal drove certain sectors of the population into a frenzy of action that plunged the country into hunger, backwardness and indiscriminate persecution. Even today, the total number of deaths caused by this movement remains uncertain. The Cultural Revolution came to an end with Mao's death in 1976.

¹⁴Known as the 四人帮 (*si ren bang*), literally the “Gang of Four”.

the Party recommended first, among all the characters, to extol the most positive ones; second, among the positive ones, to extol the heroic ones; and, finally, among the latter, to choose and exalt the main hero. It was established that, even while recalling traditional movements and forms, socialist realism should prevail in the works and, unlike in the past, the sets would now gain in profusion and richness. Traditional clothing would no longer have a place in this new aesthetic conception, but the instruments that mark the tempos, rhythms, songs, and entrances and exits of characters would remain crucial. This created a mixture of the old —refined and at the service of the revolution— with the new —created specifically to indoctrinate the masses (Mao, 2021:p.326). Such was the degree of aesthetic involvement of the Party that from the celebration of the Festival and during the following years, nothing else was heard but the set of eight revolutionary works chosen by Jiang Qing and her Gang. Between 1966 and 1976, the Chinese population knew no other opera, hummed no other music, and attended no other performances: the eight works were repeated over and over again in every theatre in the country *ad nauseam*.

One of the first to see the light of day was *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (智取威虎山, 1970), which recounts the heroic struggle of a communist battalion in the north of the country, attacked by a group of bandits whom they finally defeated by infiltrating a mole into their ranks (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.874). Its original title 智取威虎山 (*Zhiqu Weihushan*) tells the story of a real soldier, 杨子荣 (Yang Zirong), who had to infiltrate a group of bandits to thwart their plans and defeat this pocket of resistance.

During this period, it is difficult to establish the authorship of many of the model works, since a review and adaptation committee was responsible for writing the scenes, dialogues, plot, etc., so it was not the work of a single individual, but rather a group. The play is set in the northern part of the country during the civil war between the Communist Party and the Guomindang, in whose mountains there were still feudal pockets of anti-revolutionary resistance. The play was written around 1958 and rewritten several times before its final version was released during the Shanghai Festival. The events it narrates took place during the winter of 1946, when a handful of men launched an attack on the enemy positions of the Guomindang to achieve an unprecedented victory; during the skirmishes, nationalist bandits and looters burned fields, raped women and robbed the revolutionary army (Mittler, 2003:p.57).

The *Red Detachment of Women* —红色娘子军 (*Hongse niangzi jun*)— is another of the model works included in the list drawn up by Jiang Qing herself, with a final script from 1958 (红色娘子军, 1970). It is a revolutionary ballet adapted from a 1961 film of the same name by film director 谢晋 (Xie Jin), for

which he won the 大众电影百花奖 (*Dazhong Dianying Baihua Jiang*) award for best director. It was not strictly speaking an opera, but rather a ballet and, unusually, was based on the film. The plot is set on the island of Hainan in 1931, where a communist detachment of women has been established and certain poor, abused or widowed women wish to join the communist fighting force. After various missions, in which the protagonists overcome dangers, deceit and assassination attempts, the detachment decides to flee to the mountains to seek refuge from the attacks of the Guomindang. After a series of heroic manoeuvres and battles, they manage to recapture the base from the invading forces and eagerly await the final victory of the Communist Party in the rest of the country.

The story also recounts the personal experience of a girl abused by the Hainan nationalists who sees her present improve thanks to the help of revolutionary groups that rescue her from her miserable existence of debt and capitalist payments. The work emphasises that the ultimate mission is not to seek revenge, but to bring equality to all peasants who suffer from the same problems as the protagonist.

Another ballet piece, *The White Haired Girl* —白毛女 (*Bai Mao Nü*)—, is included in the model list of revolutionary operas, one of the first to be written in its entirety, in 1945 just after the Yan'an Forum, although it was also rewritten in 1958 for the upcoming Festival (白毛女, 1964). In the organisation and typological classification of operas that we have been looking at, this should be included in the 歌剧 (*geju*) category, that is, a kind of danced and sung opera. It was originally a ballet written by 严金萱 (*Yan Jinxuan*) for performance in 1945, for which he won the Shanghai Dance Academy Award in 1965.

The initiative to make the operatic version, also dated 1945, came from the politician 贺敬之 (*He Jingzhi*), who held the position of Minister of Culture. The original story is inspired by the communist ranks fighting in the north of the country in the 1930s and tells the story of a handful of women suffering the misery of the last Qing dynasty administration, although it is embellished with large doses of communist heroism that never actually took place (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.865). The idea behind this particular work is to show a feminine ideal of communist beauty oppressed by the bourgeois landowner, whose goal is to teach how communist morals and values can overthrow the old ruling class. The plot mixes new communist themes with traditional practices and celebrations, which made it very appealing to the people from the outset. The protagonist of the story, whose hair has turned white from all the hardships she has suffered in life, fights against her oppressors, flees, battles wild beasts, takes refuge and prevails. The ending shows the communist army victorious against the Japanese invaders, liberating the

area from the oppressive bourgeois yoke, so that the protagonist can dream again and manage the land (Tang, 1993:pp.467–471).

The Harbor —海港 (*Haigang*)— is another of the *yangbanxi* of this revolutionary stage, often attributed to Jiang Qing herself, who surely played a very important role in the writing and staging of this work, which would see the light of day at the festival itself (海港: 1970). Sometimes also translated as *On the Docks*, it reflects Mao's own ideas that workers and peasants should also take part in the heroic armed struggle. The opera is directly inspired by Mao's words in Yan'an, and much of the music and dialogue is attributed to his wife Jiang Qing. Xie Jin was again responsible for bringing this opera to the cinema in the early 1960s. In an atmosphere reminiscent of a crime novel, the plot unfolds in the port of Shanghai at the beginning of the decade, from where a shipment of wheat is to be sent by sea to Africa to supply the revolutionary movements. While the ship is being loaded, a counter-revolutionary attempts to sabotage the shipment by replacing the wheat with synthetic particles that look similar and also tries to get the freighter to set sail by concealing information about a typhoon. Once again, the ending is resolved heroically by the workers themselves who, during the night, realise the deception, replace the cargo and change the departure plans.

The political messages implicit in the work are more than obvious: prosperous China shipping entire cargoes of food to another continent, the working people united to fight against bourgeois ideas of sabotage, the kindness of the Chinese people who altruistically share with the world, and the heroism of some of its characters (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.871).

Another of these operas is *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* —奇袭白虎团 (*Qixi Baihu Tuan*)— which narrates the struggle the Chinese army had to wage in order to defend itself against attacks by Korea and the United States in 1953 (奇袭白虎团, 1968). Its historical basis lies in a series of military reports and certain headlines from revolutionary newspapers that recounted the story of the volunteer soldiers who assisted North Korea in defending itself against United States attacks around 1958; the work was premiered the following year in Beijing. In 1970, the opera was adapted for the cinema by the directors 苏里 (Su Li) and 王炎 (Wang Yan).

This opera not only displays the revolutionary Chinese heroism discussed above, but also an international playing field in which the communist revolution must not be understood in terms of borders, and in which the good revolutionary is expected to come to the aid of his brothers—in this case, the North Koreans. In this sense, the work exhibits a marked internationalist spirit, very similar to that of the Soviet

Union in its early years. One of the most striking features of this opera is the skill and refinement with which traditional martial arts are portrayed, now placed at the service of the revolutionary movement. The opera depicts the real historical episode of the night of 13 June 1953, during which the Chinese Volunteer Battalion broke through United States lines in the North Korean capital, thereby liberating the city. Beyond heroic operatic narration, the reality is that the operation was a remarkable feat, as a group of Chinese soldiers disguised as Korean advisers managed to cross the defensive lines, penetrate South Korean territory, and cut communications between the United States and South Korea for several hours—an action that afforded them an unparalleled advantage in the ensuing battle (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.874). It is from this event that the opera takes its title, since, although they were the party under attack, they gained the upper hand through infiltration and ultimately emerged victorious from an initially unfavourable situation, seizing as booty an enemy flag bearing the emblem of a white tiger.

The penultimate of the eight revolutionary model works is *The Red Lantern* (红灯记, 1970), which recounts the story of a Chinese revolutionary family during the 1920s, that is, the period of Japanese occupation. It is known in Chinese as 红灯记 (*Hongdeng ji*) and was adapted for the opera in the mid-1960s, having originated in a novel, 革命自有后来人 (*Geming zi you houlai ren*), that is, *The Children of the Revolution*, written by 钱道源 (Qian Daoyuan) in 1958. Following the printed version, it was adapted for the cinema in 1963, achieving only moderate success. Thus, the operatic version represents the final stage and, without doubt, the one that attained the greatest success of all. The work portrays three generations of revolutionaries—the grandmother, the son and the granddaughter—custodians of a red lantern, a symbol of the revolution. With the death or fall from grace of each generation, the next generation feels a moral duty to continue bearing that light in order to guide the people through the darkness (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.871). The Japanese invader appears as the origin and explanation of all the evils that beset the protagonists, the source of the misfortunes of the Chinese people who go hungry and suffer, while Hatoyama's platoon indulges in banquets and festivities at which meat, drink and music are in plentiful supply. The work was one of the most acclaimed by the masses during the Cultural Revolution, and even today, in many rural areas of the country, local inhabitants still hum its melodies.

In Jiangsu Province there is a small town, the setting of the following opera, 沙家浜 (*Shajiabang*). It is an opera based on the memoirs of 刘飞 (Liu Fei), one of the combatants in the Jiangsu campaign. In 1959, 文牧 (Wen Mu), a scriptwriter with the Shanghai People Opera Company, after reading Liu's writings, decided to

revise and adapt them for the operatic stage (沙家浜, 1970). It was first performed in Hangzhou in 1960. Originally it was entitled 芦荡火种 (*Ludang Huozhong*), that is, *The Spark of Ludang*.

The work sets its narrative in the late 1930s, when the revolutionary volunteer forces had been formed and were ready to expel the Japanese invader once and for all. The New Fourth Army marched from the south of the province towards Shajiabang, liberating camps of captives held by the Japanese and thereby swelling its ranks as it advanced. The wounded who emerged from the fighting were sent to the hospital camp in the town that gives the opera its name. After their recovery, they went on to form a special platoon for infiltration behind enemy lines, which soon became known as the “Shajiabang Company” (King et al., 2010:p.175), originally composed of only a handful of men. This provided the perfect breeding ground on which to build the foundations of a heroic opera.

The work was eventually seen by Mao himself around 1964, who suggested changing the title to its definitive form, *Shajiabang*, and offered high praise for the heroic role of the main characters. He also proposed modifying some of the original violent content in favour of more dialogue-driven scenes, in which revolutionary workers and peasants would be presented as models of civic virtue and good conduct (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.874).

It was so successful from its very first performances that it subsequently gave rise to the composition of a homonymous symphony, which came to constitute the rhythmic foundation of the later model operas; indeed, “Shajiabang appeared in a Cantonese opera (*yueju*) version and in a so-called Uighur opera version” (King et al., 2010:p.180). 沙家浜交响乐 (*Shajiabang Jiaoxiangyue*), literally *The Shajiabang Symphony*, was created by the Beijing Central Orchestra at the request of the Ministry of Culture, conducted by 李德伦 (Li Delun), and served as the rhythmic basis for the rest of the model operas.

At the Festival, these works were performed by various companies aligned with the Party, and more than a thousand traditional operas were banned for failing to conform to revolutionary thought (Tung et al., 1987:p.9). Many contemporary scholars view this Festival as the original seed of the Cultural Revolution that was yet to come. Commander 陈毅¹⁵ (Chen Yi) soon raised his voice against these abuses, opposing the curtailment of free and individual operatic creation, and consistently

¹⁵ 陈毅 (Chen Yi) was a Chinese military and political figure originating from the Sichuan region. He was born in 1901 and died in 1972 in Beijing, where his tomb can still be found. He took part in the wars against the Japanese invader and against the Guomindang. He rose to the rank of Marshal of the Red Army and served as Mayor of Shanghai; however, during the period of the Cultural Revolution he was removed from power because of his disagreements with the course of events.

sought in his public interventions to denounce the Party's interference in matters of literary creation —interference that was by no means beneficial. From his perspective, the intrusion of Jiang Qing and her committee did nothing but worsen the literary quality of the works, while indiscriminately accusing many writers of being rightists or pro-capitalist. He publicly defended creative autonomy, the individuality of writers and, above all, the literary and artistic quality of the works.

From the very outset of this sweeping theatrical reform there were detractors who argued for a return to classical theatre, but Jiang Qing and her Gang of Four were determined to change the course of operatic history (Witke, 1977:p.421), maintaining that both literature and the arts should be subordinated to politics, a point Mao had stated publicly in Yan'an. Some media outlets that reported on this controversy even went so far as to suggest that the arts and literature were no longer conceived as paradigms of creation and beauty, but rather as mere tools for mass control and education. Undoubtedly, the Party was quick to recognise the political significance of opera, for unlike radio or later television, opera formed part of the country's cultural identity; using it to serve its own interests was therefore far more effective, as it appealed directly to the emotions of the audience. Moreover, the Party possessed extensive experience acquired during the period of Japanese occupation; all that was now required was to set that entire apparatus in motion —this time not against a common enemy, but with the ultimate aim of uniting the country's minorities under a single socialist banner (Chen, in Mair et al., 2001:p.849).

4. Interpretation

In light of all that has been discussed in the preceding pages, it may be affirmed that the implementation of the new revolutionary aesthetic in China, materialized through the *yangbanxi*, did not respond to a desire on the part of the Communist Party to innovate in literary terms, but rather to the aim of creating and shaping an ideological framework that could be assimilated in a natural and gradual manner by the country's less educated social strata. In this way, the most popular classes of soldiers, industrial workers, and peasants —together with the group of women, who increasingly gained weight within Chinese society— were the primary recipients selected by the Party to accept the legitimization of communist power and of its entire ideological apparatus. The reason why this group was key to the Party's consolidation in power is evident: in the mid-twentieth century China had a predominantly rural population, poorly educated or entirely illiterate, while only

a small minority lived in large cities and was formally educated; convincing the former was therefore vital to the Party's establishment and continued hold on power.

Thus, we have proceeded to set out each of the works that communist power used to disseminate revolutionary ideas, through exemplification, heroism, the creation of national myths, and the entire range of detailed strategies that turned the *yangbanxi* into the preferred instrument of indoctrination employed by Jiang Qing and her Gang.

At no point has there been any intention to denigrate the propagandistic work of the movement in the country; quite the contrary, since the task of reworking the operatic tradition and all the elements that compose it was unassailable. Rather, the aim has been to offer a brief illustration of what a government with absolute control over literary production can accomplish for the sole purpose of winning adherents to its cause. Even today, Chinese propaganda remains one of the most effective machines for persuading its citizens in all aspects of thought, order, and belief. In its origins this was achieved especially through opera, later through the press, social networks, and modern technology. It would not be until the era of 邓小平 (Deng Xiaoping) that state control over theatres began to be ceded to provincial authorities or independent groups of actors, almost forty years after the words Mao had pronounced on art and opera in Yan'an.

Although China's process of opening up was gradual yet unstoppable after Mao's death, the Beijing government never looked favourably upon relinquishing such a profitable propagandistic market as that provided by the country's operatic production and control. For this reason, "it was not only until 2001, however, that the Central Party called explicitly for opera company marketization. Central funding [...] was cut, and funding responsibility was transferred from the central to the regional government" (Ma, 2015:p.2), at which point many provincial governments also began to divest themselves of operatic and theatrical sponsorships and monopolies, initiating a race to transfer performance responsibilities to private companies.

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样板戏

摘要

中国共产党自执政以来在艺术控制方面所作出的努力，最终在20世纪60年代创作并上演的一系列革命歌剧中达到顶峰。党用以教育以农民和工人为主体、且大多不识字的群众的唯一方式，是借助一种他们并不陌生的符号化艺术形式，因为这种艺术已作为其文化传统的一部分延续了数百年。为此，国家组织了整建制的戏剧团体，肩负起深入全国最偏远地区反复演出同一批作品的使命，旨在使每一位中国公民都能理解国家新的政治准则。中国在短短十年间所取得的成果，至今仍在经历过那个年代的一代人身上保留着文化和主题上的回响。

► **关键词:** 革命文学；京剧；样板戏；社会主义；宣传。

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YANGBANXI ILI KINESKE REVOLUCIONARNE OPERE

Rezime

Napori Komunističke partije Kine od dolaska na vlast da kontroliše umjetnost kulminirali su pojavom niza revolucionarnih opera stvorenih i izvedenih 1960-ih godina. Jedini način na koji je Partija mogla da obrazuje svoje pretežno nepismeno seljačko i radničko stanovništvo ostvarivao se upravo putem simboličke umjetničke forme koja im je bila poznata, i to one koja je vijekovima bila dio njihove kulturne tradicije. U tom cilju država je organizovala čitave pozorišne trupe koje su u najudaljenijim dijelovima zemlje više puta izvodile ista djela kako bi se osiguralo da svaki kineski građanin razumije nove političke norme. Dostignuća koja je Kina postigla za samo jednu deceniju i dalje kulturno i tematski odjekuju kod onih koji su živjeli u toj eri.

► **Ključne riječi:** revolucionarna literatura, pekinška opera, yangbanxi, socijalizam, propaganda.