

The paradox of the Model Operas: to what extent was there a 'cultural' revolution in China between 1966-1976?

On 12th September, 1973, the Philadelphia Orchestra touched down in Shanghai. They had travelled seven and a half thousand miles, stopping in California, Hawaii and Japan along the way¹. The trip was one of international significance. Undertaken just two years after Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing, it was the sign of a changing China. Nixon's administration was optimistic that China, who for decades had been firmly occupied with domestic turmoil, might finally open up to the Western world. But China was still in the midst of its Cultural Revolution – an era that only concluded with Mao's death in 1976. When the Philadelphia Orchestra left Shanghai, the 'campaign against music without titles' began², with Western opera being vehemently criticised. But this criticism was not a truthful reflection of how the opera was perceived. Whilst China was adamant in its rejection of Western ideas, this was merely a matter of political semantics. In truth, the Cultural Revolution utilised Western operatic tools to proclaim the advantages of a socialist regime. The Model Operas were a manifestation of this fact. Known as the *yangbanxi*, these were a set of eight model works consisting of five operas, two ballets and one symphony³. They were tools for propaganda, born out of the necessity to assert the revolutionary doctrine of Mao Zedong thought. But upon closer inspection, they were greatly influenced by both Western and imperial artistic practices. Their message was revolutionary, but their composition was revisionist. The *yangbanxi* were a cultural phenomenon, and in the mind of Chairman Mao it was only through a revolution of culture that Maoism could succeed. But despite Mao's greatest efforts, the *yangbanxi* failed to impart their ideological message, leaving Chinese culture materially Westernised whilst lacking the concepts of socialist orthodoxy.

Often credited as the creation of Jiang Qing, the *yangbanxi* were developed at the peak of political turmoil during the epoch of the Cultural Revolution. Whilst Jiang was instrumental in producing the *yangbanxi*, she relied on the artistic skill and sophistication of Yu Huiyong to execute her vision of revolutionary theatre⁴. Although Yu and Jiang were the immediate administrators of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) theatrical division, as with all aspects of cultural and political livelihood, the overarching direction was forged by Mao Zedong. To understand the *yangbanxi* one must first understand Mao.

Through Mao's Yan'an talks of 2nd-23rd May 1942⁵, Chinese operas were instructed to create communist heroes who would "serve the masses of the people"⁶. Mao's message seemed clear at first: artistic expression was for perpetuating a socialist ideology that uplifted the proletariat. He understood that culture was critical as it "prepares the ground ideologically before revolution comes"⁷. However, in 1964, Mao conceded that in order to achieve revolution China had to "use

¹ Carter, J., 2022. *In 1973, the Philadelphia Orchestra did its part to kickstart modern U.S.-China relations – SupChina*. [online] SupChina. Available at: <<https://supchina.com/2021/09/15/in-1973-the-philadelphia-orchestra-visited-china/>> [Accessed 28 July 2022].

² Kraus, R., 1991. Arts Policies of the Cultural Revolution: The Rise and Fall of Culture Minister Yu Huiyong. In: W. Joseph, C. Wong and D. Zweig, ed., *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution*, 1st ed. Harvard University Asia Center, pp.219-241.

³ Mittler, B., 2010. "Eight Stage Works for 800 Million People": The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in Music--A View from Revolutionary Opera. *The Opera Quarterly*, 26(2-3), pp.377-401.

⁴ Ludden, Y., 2012. Making Politics Serve Music: Yu Huiyong, Composer and Minister of Culture. *TDR/The Drama Review*, 56(2), pp.152-168.

⁵ Wilkinson, J., 1974. "The White-Haired Girl": From "Yangko" to Revolutionary Modern Ballet. *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26(2), pp.164.

⁶ *Beijing Review*, 1972. About "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art." (20), pp.10-12.

⁷ Mao, Z., 1960. "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art". In: *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 3, pp. 863.

the old to create the new and use the foreign to create a Chinese national art”⁸. Mao understood that only good art could be an effective propagator of his political message. He was determined to make the *yangbanxi* progressive, exciting pieces of art that were accomplished technically as well as ideologically – even if that necessitated using foreign Western art.

Mao needed to ground this strategy with an indubitably pro-communist doctrine. To legitimise the new synthesis of Western literature and art, Mao stressed the importance of idealism in a socialist context. In 1958, he advocated two new concepts called Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism⁹. The concepts of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism stemmed from the broader notion of Socialist Realism⁹. This was a key tenet of Soviet artistic expression, prescribing that art should be valued insofar that it could be considered a true depiction of life. This mandate for art, however, worried Mao. Socialist Realism asserted that socialism ought to be depicted with realistic expectations. Stalin was confident that operas could positively portray a socialist society whilst maintaining truthful to reality. Yet, Mao feared that as a ‘true’ depiction of socialism, Socialist Realism could be exploited to also highlight the adverse features of such a society. Mao therefore decreed that “works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane”¹⁰. This concept of the modern operas depicting ‘life on a higher plane’ solved the inadequacies of Socialist Realism. In Mao’s view, since China accommodated an idealised version of communist life, a romanticised depiction of China via theatre would be a closer reflection to the ‘truth’ – otherwise known as literary *zhenshi*⁹. The movement towards Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism was thus designed to neutralise artistic resistance to the CCP by declaring that a negative portrayal of socialism was untruthful to reality. This approach by Mao to adopting Western tools of romanticism for achieving socialist aims presents an irrefutable paradox of the Model Operas. Their purpose was to promote socialist principles, but the means by which this was achieved contradicted the message. Then, to what extent did the utilisation of these Western tools truly undermine the ideology of a socialist idyll? This can be understood through an analysis of how Western culture was assimilated into the Model Operas.

The use of Western operatic practices in the *yangbanxi* can be described as ‘Pentatonic Romanticism’¹¹. This is a reference to the mixture of the pentatonic scale system used in Chinese music and the use of romantic harmonies in Western music. The Model Operas demonstrated Pentatonic Romanticism on multiple levels, showing elements of Western influence in the music, costumes and portrayal of characters. Many of these innovations were engineered by the meticulous work of Yu Huiyong and Jiang Qing⁴. One demonstration of this was the 4-3-2-1-1 principle¹². This ensured that the number of Western string instruments was limited to four first violins, three second violins, two violas, one cello and one double bass. Restricting the influence of these Western tools allowed their Chinese counterparts to continue flourishing, with the *jinghu*, *jing’erhu* and the *yueqin* all maintaining prominent roles in the Model Operas¹². Further innovations included installing glass screens around the Chinese percussion section – known as The Four Major Instruments – to reduce their volume and create a balance with the newly adopted Western sounds¹³. Furthermore, the stage itself was greatly influenced by Western artistic practices. In

⁸ Mao, Z., 1964. “Guanyu Dui *Zhongyang yinyue xueyuan yijian de piyu*” [Remarks on Suggestions to the Central Conservatory of Music]. In: *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong Wengao* [Collected works of Mao Zedong since 1949].

⁹ Lan, Y., 1996. ‘Socialist Realism’ versus ‘Revolutionary Realism plus Revolutionary Romanticism’. In: H. Chung, ed., *In The Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China (Critical Studies)*. Brill Rodopi, pp.88-106.

¹⁰ Mao, Z., 1960. *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 2, pp. 382.

¹¹ Mittler, B., 2003. Cultural Revolution Model Works and the Politics of Modernization in China: An Analysis of “Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy.” *The World of Music*, 45(2), pp.53-81.

¹² Rao, N., 2017. Chinese Opera Percussion from Model Opera to Tan Dun. In: Y. Hon-Lun and M. Saffle, ed., *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*. University of Michigan Press, pp.163-185.

¹³ Jiafang, D., 2016. A Diachronic Study of Jingju Yangbanxi Model Peking Opera Music. In: P. Clark, L. Pang and T. Tsai, ed., *Listening to China's Cultural Revolution*. Palgrave Macmillan US, pp.12-35.

traditional Chinese opera, props and scenery were scarcely utilised in theatres. Conversely, the Model Operas had exuberantly decorated stages with real props being used to better illustrate the revolutionary messages. For example, actors would use authentic swords and weapons when depicting scenes which involved combat¹⁴. Hence, Western influence permeated throughout the Chinese Model Operas, being present in almost all aspects of the Cultural Revolution's stage productions.

However, this influence was not absolute. Yu and Jiang were careful to restrict the application of romantic Western music and their reforms were tailored towards a positive depiction of the proletariat. The use of Western tools is not a contradiction that wholly undermines the influence of socialism on the Model Operas. But Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution embodied more than just an attack on the West, it was also an affront on 'The Four Olds': old customs, culture, ideas and habits¹⁵. As with the ideological opposition to Western culture, a denouncement of The Four Olds was not enough to prevent them influencing the Model Operas for a number of reasons.

The use of traditional operatic conventions in the Model Operas was even more subtle than the assimilation of Western tools. On the surface, a substantial effort had been made to remove traditional Chinese influence from the operas. A new concept called 'The Three Prominences' was applied to the revolutionary theatre. This declared that 'positive' characters should be given prominence over 'negative' or 'middle' characters, heroic characters should be given prominence over 'positive' characters, and that the main character should be given absolute prominence¹¹. Through a hierarchy of prominence, the Model Operas glorified proletarian heroes whilst removing the 'middle' bourgeoisie and the 'negative' imperialists from the socialist depiction of life entirely. However, Mao was once again tormented by the desire to produce effective propaganda. He was aware that the operas needed to be relatable to the audience for the political messages to be transferred. This understanding led to traditional Chinese operatic practises influencing the *yangbanxi*.

The opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* aptly encapsulates the methods through which the revisionist-branded art of old seeped into the *yangbanxi*. The story was a shortened version of a book by Qu Bo from 1957, which tells of a People's Liberation Army (PLA) platoon leader – Yang Zirong – who must venture into the lair of bandits who have captured innocent villagers¹¹. The composition of the plot itself portrayed similarities with traditional Chinese operatic customs. As with the Model Operas, traditional Chinese productions used longer samples of literature or theatrical writing to derive a new piece. The new work, although isolated from the rest of the story, would be adapted to stress certain messages or values given the audience's knowledge of the wider context¹¹. To illustrate this, one can analyse a scene in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* whereby Zang Zirong must defend himself from a tiger. In the original text, it takes Zang multiple shots of his gun to kill the tiger, with Zang being depicted as beaten and worn by the end of the encounter. In the Model Opera, Zang takes one shot, kills the tiger and shows no sign of fear throughout. The audience, being aware of the original text, are meant to interpret Zang as even more heroic and brave as a result. Moreover, this new sense of heroism is transferred to an image of the CCP given Zang's role as a PLA member. However, the process by which this approach to plot composition was achieved – through exploiting the audience's knowledge of the original story – was the same as that used in imperial theatre.

This method of plot composition was also enhanced through the use of overdetermination in the *yangbanxi*³. Overdetermination is attained through repeating the key ideological message over numerous semantic aspects of an opera, such as with makeup, costumes and music. Utilising overdetermination through both the tangible aspects of theatre and the storyline itself is something

¹⁴ Chu, G. and Cheng, P., 1978. Revolutionary Opera: An Instrument for Cultural Change. In: G. Chu, ed., *Popular media in China: shaping new cultural patterns*. University Press of Hawaii, pp.73-103.

¹⁵ Luo, M., 2016. Cultural policy and revolutionary music during China's Cultural Revolution: the case of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 24(4), pp.431-450.

that was also requisite of any traditional Chinese opera. Whilst it is true that the Model Operas were far more advanced in their use of stage props and settings, they maintained the use of basic symbolism seen in traditional theatre. For example, red colours were still used to depict good characters, and green was used to portray bad ones³. Although the message of the *yangbanxi* differed from that of the imperial operas, a continuity in the *modus operandi* of theatrical production further undermines the extent to which Chinese culture can be considered to have been 'revolutionised' during the Cultural Revolution.

The roles of Western culture and traditional theatre in the *yangbanxi* were not only applied separately, but also worked in tandem to enhance the Model Operas. This can be seen through the depiction of heroes in the *yangbanxi*. In traditional operas, heroes were often depicted as individualistic. To portray heroes as independent, free thinkers was a thoroughly revisionist idea that contradicted the Communist Party line of subordination to the state. Furthermore, as in a modern-day Hollywood film, the heroes of traditional Chinese opera obtained their valorous qualities through a "transcendent source of power"¹⁶. Surely a crucial feature of revolutionary theatre would be the depiction of natural collective heroism, rather than something so closely corresponding to the divine religious empowerment of an individual?

However, the Model Operas actually embraced the traditional concept of individualistic heroism. Using musical iconography in arias¹⁷, the unique characteristics of heroes were further developed, making them more distinctive as individuals and role models¹³. This was achieved through an innovative application of musical melodies. In the old operas, the *erhuang* melody was used to denote a pensive mood whilst a *xipi* melody showed a more excited mood¹¹. They were always used separately and never in the same aria¹⁸. In the new style *yangbanxi*, they were used interchangeably within arias. To achieve this, Western woodwind and string instruments were often employed, demonstrating the importance of Western influence in enhancing the use of *erhuang* and *xipi*¹¹. As a result, music better reflected the thoughts and feelings of the heroes, accentuating their distinctive messages. The emphasis on the individualism of heroes can be defended given that the 'transcendent' power being depicted was the Communist Party itself. In all the *yangbanxi*, whilst the protagonist acted upon their own accord, they were always guided by the principles set forth by Mao. The Communist Party is used to replace the mythical spirit that traditionally endowed upon the protagonist a superior set of moral values and skills. On the other hand, despite being used to support the philosophy of Mao, individualistic heroism was a principal characteristic of conventional Chinese opera whilst, as with almost every aspect of the *yangbanxi*, Western tools were vital for successfully propagating the underlying socialist message. Thus, the individualism of heroes is another example of how the *yangbanxi* produced a socio-cultural paradox.

Thus, the *yangbanxi* were not entirely revolutionary in their composition. A countless number of both Western and traditional operatic elements were incorporated into them. Nevertheless, one can still argue for their revolutionary status by asserting that they caused a breach in the natural development of Chinese opera. As shown by the persecution of playwrights such as Wu Han¹⁹, the nationalisation of opera through the *yangbanxi* caused a disruption in the timeline of theatrical evolution. If the era of the *yangbanxi* did indeed alter the trend of operatic progression, is this reason for them to be considered revolutionary as intended by Mao?

¹⁶ Judd, E., 1991. Dramas of Passion: Heroism in the Cultural Revolution's Model Operas. In: W. Joseph, C. Wong and D. Zweig, ed., *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution*, 1st ed. Harvard University Asia Center, pp.265-282.

¹⁷ An aria is a solo song to be performed with an accompaniment.

¹⁸ Yang, D., 1969. Peking Drama with Contemporary Themes. *The Drama Review*, 13(4), pp.167-180.

¹⁹ Fisher, T., 1982. 'The Play's the Thing': Wu Han and Hai Rui Revisited. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 7, pp.1-35. Wu Han was a playwright whose persecution is widely considered the first of the Cultural Revolution. His play, *The Dismissal of Hai Rui from Office*, was perceived as an allegory of Mao's dismissal of Peng Dehuai. His imprisonment sparked uncertainty over the future of artistic expression in Mao's China.

There are numerous criteria to gauge whether the *yangbanxi* altered the continuity and progression of Chinese opera, of which two are most prominent when assessing the Model Opera paradox. The first is to analyse the way in which opera is used. Were the *yangbanxi* unique in being exploited for the purpose of ideological indoctrination? Although the politicisation of operas was much enhanced during the Cultural Revolution, this still followed historical trends. Mao's conviction of using music to denounce the Four Olds was paradoxically inspired by Confucian thinking²⁰. The Chairman stated himself that "Confucius was an educator and a musician. He ranked music second among the 'six courses'"²¹. Mao's own belief in the political power of operas stemmed from his studies of Confucius – the main scapegoat of imperialism and revisionist thought. Therefore, the *yangbanxi* were no different in their purpose from traditional opera. Opera had always been a means to educate the masses in values, beliefs and ideology.

Another way to assess continuity is through examining whether the *yangbanxi* demonstrated a new revolutionary attitude towards Western culture. The *yangbanxi* were clearly a manifestation of Western theatrical concepts, contradicting with the traditional Chinese philosophy of isolationism. China has historically been engulfed in the belief of their own pre-eminence. For example, their nautical strength exceeded that of any empire for many centuries, and yet they were unconcerned with territorial expansion. When Zheng He embarked on the Ming Treasure Voyages, he proclaimed the greatness of the emperor and invited other states to visit the Middle Kingdom – he had little interest in what they might offer China²². To adopt Western tools as a means of enhancing China's own culture was an affront on the ancient philosophy of Chinese pre-eminence. Through demonstrating an approval of Western opera's artistic qualities, China accepted their cultural insufficiency. Therefore, there was a great change during the Cultural Revolution, and one that might be considered a revolutionary disruption in the progression of operatic development. China had uprooted its long-standing concept of pre-eminence, replacing it with a subtle humility. However, through doing so, Mao disproved his professed resentment of Western culture. China may have departed from the old, but in its place, it still flirted with the concepts of bourgeois capitalism. The extent to which discontinuity can be considered revolutionary is thus diminished.

A revolution is successful when a new society – one built in the image of the revolutionaries – emerges. Mao accepted the requirement of Western tools for his revolution to succeed, but always upheld an ideological loyalty to socialism. He was adamant that he would achieve a communist utopia – no matter the means. However, a brief look at modern day China would surely disappoint the Chairman's grand vision. Today, the *yangbanxi* are still admired by many. They are viewed as literary masterpieces, developed at a time when artistic expression was widely prohibited. The dearth of cultural enrichment made the *yangbanxi* an oasis – the only form of nourishment for China's greatest artistic minds¹². But what of Mao's socialist principles? Maoism died ungraciously with the arrest of the Gang of Four. In its place stood Deng Xiaoping: a unifier and a pragmatist. Deng embodied China's gradual assimilation of not just Western tools, but of Western ideology. Under his leadership, the People's Republic embarked on achieving 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'²², a statement of intent for abandoning the confines of a Marxist economic doctrine.

Mao believed that through Westernisation and a preservation of traditional themes the *yangbanxi* would be an infallible vessel for his communist creed. Perhaps all he needed was time. The cult of Mao could last no longer than the man himself, handing a premature death to his ideologies in 1976. But it would be untrue to state that there was no revolution in culture at all. Indeed, the revolution was not one that Mao had intended. The *yangbanxi* failed to transfer socialist concepts into the beliefs of its audience. As Peng Chen observed in 1964 "Their [the Chinese people's] bodies have moved into a socialist society, but their heads still remain in the feudalistic or

²⁰ Perris, A., 1983. Music as Propaganda: Art at the Command of Doctrine in the People's Republic of China. *Ethnomusicology*, 27(1), pp.1.

²¹ *Beijing Review*, 1979. A Talk to Music Workers (August 24, 1956) - Mao Zedong. (37), pp.9-15.

²² Kissinger, H., 2012. *On China*. London: Penguin Books, pp.8-9.

capitalistic society”²³. This was still the case in 1976 and remains so in contemporary China today. If the transmission of ideology into the operas did not occur, then all that remained was the operas in their own artistic right. Only the material quality of the *yangbanxi* retains relevance in the culture of modern China, and the *yangbanxi* were materially Western and revisionist. Therefore, there was a ‘cultural’ revolution in China between 1966-1976. But it was not a revolution as Mao had envisioned. It was a Western revolution, propagating ‘anti-revolutionary’ tools and concepts that continue to be deployed as a template for Chinese operas today.

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²³ Peng, C., 1964. “Speech at Festival of Peking Opera on Contemporary Themes,”. *Qu Yi* 63, pp. 12.

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