

10-30-2012

Revolutionary Peking Opera: A Cast of Contradictions

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Madara, Jayson. "Revolutionary Peking Opera: A Cast of Contradictions." Student essay. Saint Joseph's University, 2012. Print.

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Asian History Seminar

Revolutionary Peking Opera: A Cast of Contradictions

Chinese culture enjoys a long period of documentation. Because of the exemplary detail in Chinese record-keeping, historians today are blessed with a plethora of knowledge on all sorts of Chinese history. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that took place between 1966 and 1976 threatened to change all that. The Cultural Revolution took place during a period of intense isolation for China. It was distanced from the West, and even the Soviet Union. The Cultural Revolution was in part Chairman Mao's last desperate ploy to maintain power. The other part was supposed to be a transformation of Chinese cultural institutions. Since it was a time when the rules of society were so confused, it is little wonder that people find shocking what went on behind the Great Wall during those years. There is no question that China emerged from the Cultural Revolution an entirely different country. The real issue is meshing out what actually happened. The political realm exerted a great deal of pressure on the culture and arts of China, which were once so diverse. The "Eliminate the Four Olds" campaign caused the destruction of numerous Chinese art forms and priceless works. So why today can a person living in China still experience traditional Peking Opera forms that existed hundreds of years ago? The ideals of the Cultural Revolution had the potential to

eliminate many of the things we know of as 'typically Chinese.' Peking Opera, however, remained relatively unscathed.

A.C. Scott sums up the casual Peking Opera performance atmosphere in a beautifully composed passage that plainly emphasizes the nature of Peking Opera.

“People arrived and departed during a performance as fancy took them, drank tea, cracked melon seeds, or moved over to chat with an acquaintance suddenly spotted across the aisles. Babies slumbered in family servants’ arms, since everyone went along to see the show- or maybe a group of wondering children gathered to stare at two irate adults holding tickets for the same seat. Through it all the clang and clash of the percussion in the stage orchestra added to the general hubbub, while the actors made their entrances and exits across the uncurtained stage like figures set in motion to continue imperturbably throughout time.”¹

Based on the scene above, Peking Opera was a phenomenon dedicated to the masses. Certainly the Imperial Family was free to patronize the opera if it so chose, but the primary participant in Peking Opera was the average man who wanted to get away from his troubles. It was almost as if the actors were the audience to the drama of everyday life. It was this aspect of the theater that the Cultural Revolution changed the most. The Communists saw Peking Opera as a feudal institution that catered exclusively to the whims of the Imperial Court. The Communists overlooked the human side of Peking Opera, which was located in the audience. The humanity that was being put into the revolutionary model operas was transplanted from the audience to the stage. The result

¹ A.C. Scott, *Actors are Madmen: Notebook of a Theatregoer in China* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 4.

was not what Communist leaders would have expected. The revolutionary model operas sought to change Peking Opera into art for the masses. But the masses did not go to the opera to see portrayals of their own way of life. They flocked to the opera to catch a glimpse of long distant courtly life, the mystique of dramas that took place in the Forbidden City, or the exploits of mythical heroes who saved China. ‘Nobodies’ were portrayed onstage for the first time in Peking Opera history. But the ‘nobodies’ weren’t in the audience. By attempting to de-feudalize Peking Opera, the Communist Party drove away the very fan base that they were trying to market revolutionary operas to. Peking Opera went from being a high-class art for the citizen to a low class art for the governing.

Peking Opera started out as a confluence of styles from Anhui, Hebei, Shaanxi, and Hubei provinces.² The story goes that the Qianlong Emperor, on one of his tours of the countryside, was so impressed with local performances that he brought the entire troupe back to Beijing. Since then, Beijing served as the primary destination for both entertainers and audience members. It was during this period that Peking Opera as a popular art form took off. Opera continued to flourish in the capital throughout the Qing Dynasty, interrupted at times by the various rebellions and strife that occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It often relied on the patronage of the Imperial Family to generate appeal.

Peking Opera reached its height of popularity in the early twentieth century, through the work of celebrated actor Mei Lanfang and others of his time. Mei was known for playing female roles, because just as in early Western Opera, men and women were not to be seen on stage together. Mei was responsible for the intense popularity this type

² Richard F.S. Yang, “Behind the Bamboo Curtain: What the Communists Did to the Peking Opera,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 21 No. 1 (Mar. 1969): 60

of role gained in the period. After the Communists took over, many things began to change. Female impersonation disappeared almost entirely. Part of the Communists' rise to power included women as a support base, which resulted in increased opportunities for women in all fields of society after 1949. However, even before this, the Communists were taking steps to alter Peking Opera to fit the goals of the propaganda machine. Women's roles were just the start of the transformation. Soon after taking power, the Communists set about editing or banning many old works that were considered improper. This gradual paring down culminated in the Cultural Revolution, which left a select few so-called revolutionary model operas available to the performers of Peking Opera.

One of the first aspects of Peking Opera the Communists set out to change was subject matter. For centuries, Peking Opera repertoire was based entirely on stories that had been passed down from thousands of years ago. Everything was free game for a writer, from local village folk tales, to anything from China's vast historical records. Popular subjects included historical fiction, like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, or *The Marshes of Mount Liang (Water Margin)*. In the folk tale genre, *Journey to the West* was especially popular. Since these stories were quite long, and the majority of Peking Operas were quite short, many totally unrelated operas could derive from the same source. The librettos for these operas made few changes from the original story, so they were quite accessible to all Chinese people, these being stories that every single person in China would be familiar with in some capacity. It was the overwhelming popularity and knowledge of these traditional stories that allowed the environment described in Scott's quote above to exist. None of the material presented in Peking Operas was new, and this allowed people to make going to the opera a unique and personal experience.

Starting in 1950, the Communist party began to change all of this. Serious reform began in 1952, as part of the Hundred Flowers campaign. The first National Exhibit of operas, held in Beijing, included over twenty different regional operas, and over a hundred different plays.³ Of course, the Hundred Flowers movement ended in criticism for the many scholars who criticized the government, and in censorship for a great number of Peking Operas. However, Rome was not built in a day, and neither could Peking Opera be reformed overnight, so instead of simply eliminating all objectionable operas, the Communists settled for simple revisions. One of the revised plays was called “Disturbances in the Palace of Heaven”, a story from *Journey to the West*. In this episode, the Monkey King reaches the Palace of Heaven, and challenges the power of the Jade Emperor. In the end, the Monkey King defeats all of Heaven’s warriors, and the Jade Emperor calls on the Buddha, who comes to calm the Monkey King. This ending was not in line with the views of the reformers, who “certainly could not buy such nonsense; to them religion is the opium of the people. So they eliminated the last scene from the story and made the monkey ever-victorious, a hero of the people.”⁴ This alteration changed the storyline, but not enough that people would be perturbed. In 1954 there was a conference held on the subject of reforming Peking Opera. There were a number of important people present, but none so eminent as Mei Lanfang himself. He was in favor of reform, but only to a certain extent. He mentions the use of masks as an issue in reform:

“One of the chief difficulties lies in the fact that certain ‘faces’ in an opera, such as the faces of Cao Cao, Zhang Fei and Guan Yu have long become ‘recognized and accepted’ faces to the audience. So when these characters appear on the stage,

³ ibid 62

⁴ ibid 63

even without the necessary ‘self-introduction’ they can immediately be recognized by the audience.”⁵

Mei, as a well-known and knowledgeable performer of Peking Opera was in the perfect position to make statements regarding reform. He above all would know how to make opera the most accessible to the audience, which, according to what Mao Zedong said in his Little Red Book, “What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form,”⁶ should have resulted in a unified Peking Opera that held fast to long established artistic norms, while providing new outlets for the government to send its message to the people. Despite all the talk of reform, especially quality reform, many revisions were poorly executed, such as a humorous passage in “Fisherman’s Revenge” in which all trace of anything funny was removed. The text was rewritten rather grotesquely, the new passage now discussing killing corrupt officials.⁷ Certainly this revision was not conducted with a mind to preserving the artistic integrity of the piece. Mei Lanfang would have been outraged. In addition to these lame revisions, many plays were outright banned, often for spurious reasons. “Ssu-lang Visited his Mother” is a good example of this. This work recounted the story of the Yang family, a patriotic bunch from the Northern Song dynasty. The fourth son, Yen-hui, was captured in a battle with the Liao state. “In order to save his life, he had to conceal his identity. So he changed his

⁵ Richard FS Yang, “The Reform of Peking Opera under the Communists” *The China Quarterly* 11 No. 11 (Jul.-Sep. 1962): 130

⁶ Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1972), 302

⁷ Richard Yang, “Reform of Peking Opera” 132

name (Ssu-lang), and later even married a Liao princess.”⁸ The main action of the story occurred when his mother volunteered during an attack on Liao fourteen years later. Ssu-lang’s wife helped him to reunite with his mother, but the Empress Dowager of Liao discovered his motives, and almost put him to death, but his wife saved his life by securing a pardon. The Communists viewed this seemingly innocuous story as objectionable, “because the hero in this play was nothing but a coward, a turncoat, a traitor, and a man who placed loyalty to his family above that to his country.”⁹ The popularity of this opera before the Communist takeover led to many people questioning the methods used by the reformers. Writer and composer An O attempted to save the play in an article published in 1956:

“Can this play be allowed to be performed on the stage? My own opinion is that if the audience can understand the motives of the playwright and the harmful implications of this play, it can be staged and viewed as a human drama depicting the sorrow of separation and the joy of reunion. Furthermore, if the audience can critically judge and evaluate the main character, performance of the play should even be encouraged. Thus the question whether to sympathize with or to condemn Ssu-lang would be left entirely to the audience to decide. This being the case the audience alone should decide whether this play should be allowed to be shown or not.”¹⁰

⁸ *ibid* 135

⁹ *ibid* 135

¹⁰ *ibid* 135-6

Unfortunately, An O's attempt at reason failed, and the Communists continued to undermine Peking Opera as an institution by passing arbitrary judgment on the morality of Peking Operas.

Besides plot and text, there are a few other important aspects of traditional Peking Opera to consider. Costumes and props have a unique and important function in Peking Opera, again exemplary of the subtlety associated with the form as a whole. Since nearly all of the traditional plays take place in some distant historical period, all costumes mimic the styles of the Ming and Qing dynasty. In addition to this more obvious function, the color of the costumes and make-up was designed to impart a consciousness of the character's status and personality. "Red indicates loyalty, sincerity, and bravery. Purple does the same but to less degree. Black signifies a good, vigorous character, though it may border on the coarse or even rude. Blue symbolizes savageness and fierceness, but it may also indicate characteristics like arrogance."¹¹ Both in addition to and in contrast to these colors are the indicator colors of costumes.

"There are strict conventions for colors and styles corresponding to the status of the person: yellow for the imperial family, red for the aristocracy, and also for upstanding characters of high rank. Dark crimson is the hue for usurpers of the throne and barbarian generals... White is used for the aged but also for very young men. Black for men may indicate aggressiveness and brutality or straightforwardness and brusqueness; for women, however, it suggests honesty and modesty. Pale pink and turquoise are used for both extremes in age."¹²

¹¹ Marie-Luise Latsch, *Peking Opera as a European Sees It* (Beijing: New World Press, 1980): 21

¹² Ibid. 25

These demarcations, along with the widely known historical interpretations of the characters, would show to the audience everything they would have needed to know in order to understand the character and their motivations. This goes back to the ad hoc nature of opera performances. Since the art form developed out of traveling theater companies that performed at temple festivals, there was a need for small, light props. In addition, without the benefit of stage lighting, other techniques needed to be used to illustrate time. This is how the unlighted candle came to represent early evening.¹³ The subtlety of props and actions are legendary in Peking Opera. There are at least twenty different kinds of laughter. As for physical pantomiming, because of the relative absence of props, what little there is has to be used to great effect. A good example of this is the horse. A riding-whip serves the physical representation of the horse on stage. The performer is responsible for mimicking the actions appropriate to riding a horse.¹⁴

In light of this new understanding of what was to come of Peking Operas, the Communists forged ahead with their ambitious plans to eliminate all traditional operas. Mei Lanfang's death lost the moderate reformers their most vocal proponent. In 1955, the Ministry of Culture put forth an order to create new schools with the purpose of training young Peking Opera performers. It had six main objectives, of which the last was the most important: "to raise the cultural and artistic standards of the performers through education."¹⁵ The clear goal of this school was to filter the techniques that were being passed down from the old masters. Mei Lanfang, in his early days of learning opera, had been apprenticed to a master performer from a young age, which was customary for

¹³ *ibid.* 25

¹⁴ *ibid.* 29

¹⁵ Richard Yang, "Reform of Peking Opera" 137

young people aspiring to be performers. By eliminating the traditional inheritance of techniques, the Communists were now able to directly control new students.

This was the start of the 'lost generation.' The manner in which the Communists vigorously eliminated thoroughly appreciated and understood aspects of Peking Opera and replaced them meant that the older generation of observers was not obligated to pass on their knowledge of Peking Opera culture to the next generation. Especially for young Chinese born and raised during the Cultural Revolution, there was little to no exposure to the old form of Peking Opera. This meant that when the Revolution ended and the old forms returned they were not easily understood by that generation.

Now that traditional Peking Operas have been discussed, it is time to examine the revolutionary model operas, and see how they differ from their forebears. The revolutionary model operas differ most greatly in plot, but in more substantive matters, they also eliminated much of the subtle artistry that had been present in older Peking Operas. One of the first of these model operas was "The Red Lantern:" A railway switchman is presented with a secret code to be passed on to further Communist guerillas. He is betrayed and captured by the Japanese. The Japanese commander kills him and his foster mother, but his foster daughter is freed and dutifully passes on the code to the proper channels, fulfilling her father's task and proving the heroics of the Communist party.¹⁶ This was one of the first operas that had Western instruments added to the traditional orchestra.

As contemporary themes were introduced, the necessity for props increased, as there was no way to illustrate them in the traditional style. This resulted in a lack of

¹⁶ Philip H. Cheng, "The Function of Chinese Opera in Social Control and Change" (PhD. Diss., Southern Illinois University, 1974). 52-3.

artistry on the part of the actors. The contemporary themes also eliminated the color indicators. The main characters primarily wore the universal Mao suit, meaning that the audience had to pay greater attention if they were to learn how to distinguish the character's personality or rank. Since the revolutionary model operas were not focused on famous historical Chinese figures, another result of the modernization was that the people were forced to watch the whole opera to understand whom the character was. This lack of prior knowledge or the intrinsic ability to interpret the patterns on stage was what detached the human element from Peking Opera. Through this curious blend of Western influences and Chinese techniques, the Chinese people were expected to sit quietly and learn from what was being presented. But based on A.C. Scott's quote, this was not what Peking Opera was all about. It was a social experience, not a political one.

Therefore, audience input was very important to the Communists. They made many revisions of the revolutionary model operas based on audience reaction. In "Red Youth," the young shepherd boy Chang dies, and the audience reaction against this was so strong that he survives in the final version.¹⁷ In some ways, the Chinese people were intractable. This is partially due to the Chinese tendency to avoid violence at any cost. This belief is reflected in many traditional Peking Operas. In a manner most contrary to the Communist operation in China, "the Chinese do not offer a facile answer in the affirmative or in the negative. They generally search for a middle ground. For example, life and death decisions are made slowly and only after much time and trouble has been taken to look at many sides of an issue."¹⁸ The opera in question here is "Conquered Tan

¹⁷ Ibid. 99

¹⁸ John D. Mitchell and Emanuel K. Schwartz, "A Psychosocial Approach to the Peking Opera," *Leonardo* 7 No.2 (Spring 1974): 137

Jyou City,” in it, the son of a general is condemned to death for interfering in a duel, but his father spares his life in a highly emotional scene.¹⁹ The traditional operas show a wide array of happy endings, with very few resulting in a negative outcome for the main character. This reflects a Chinese dislike of operas with sad endings. The revolutionary model operas were the first to challenge this preference, and while some, like “Red Youth” succumbed to public pressure, “The Red Lantern’s” ending remained unchanged. Chairman Mao’s idea behind taking the public’s opinion in mind was that “We should go to the masses, and learn from them, synthesize their experience into better, articulated principles and methods, then do propaganda among the masses, and call upon them to put these principles and methods into practice so as to solve their problems and help them achieve liberation and happiness.”²⁰ Unfortunately for Mao, he would not live to see the final application of this belief on Peking Opera.

So how were these reformed Peking Operas received? What was their effect? Most of the operas were not well received. For many ordinary Chinese, the opera served as an escape. They could go and listen to familiar, yet distant music and at the same time catch up with dear friends. The new operas were too bland. While these operas were ‘modern’, they still took place in the past. “On the Docks,” one of the revolutionary model operas, was situated in 1960s Shanghai. In contrast to the operas depicting the distant past, “for many Chinese viewers, ‘On the Docks’ was the least interesting of the model theatrical works; its setting and story were far too familiar.”²¹ Compared to the wartime setting of the other revolutionary model works, “On the Docks” was too simple

¹⁹ *ibid* 134

²⁰ Cheng, “Function of Peking Opera” 102

²¹ Paul Clark, “Model Theatrical Works and the Remodelling of the Cultural Revolution” in *Art in Turmoil*, ed. Richard King et al. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010): 173

to provide the same level of entertainment. The success of the revolutionary model operas was primarily due to a system that had been implemented in the west for many years. Patrons, like Jiang Qing, were responsible for much of the opera's success. Jiang's attachment to the revolutionary model operas was also a primary reason for their downfall following the death of Mao Zedong: "She was described as encouraging certain members of the troupes involved to undermine the ideas and experiments of men and women she distrusted or disliked."²² Jiang Qing may not have been responsible for initiating the reform in Peking Opera, but she certainly made it her own.

Jiang Qing's role in the saga of Peking Opera reform started rather suddenly, in 1964, on the occasion of her giving a speech on the subject of "The Revolution in Peking Opera." She made a number of points in this speech that direct attention toward aspects of the future model operas.

"An opera must have a clear-cut theme with a tightly knit structure and striking characters. It must never arise that, in order for a few principal performers to have star parts, the whole opera is made diffuse and flat...we should place the emphasis on creating artistic images of advanced revolutionaries so as to educate and inspire the people and lead them forward."²³

Jiang Qing had clear ideas about how model operas should be, which can be seen in some of the criticisms of her input. Some of her methods to prevent blandness in opera failed outright, however.

²² *ibid* 174

²³ Jiang Qing, "On Revolution of Peking Opera" in *Madame Mao: A Profile of Jiang Qing* by Hua-min Chung and Arthur C. Miller. (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1968): 192-3

“The essence of the ‘models’ was that every action, every word, and every bar of music must dramatize the class struggle, taking the side of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. One of the main means of doing this was through a careful portrayal of characters. She [Jiang] developed a complex theory of characterization according to which every person on stage must be depicted according to rigid class stereotypes, so that the heroic images had no weakness, the villains no redeeming features. The hero must be fully integrated with the masses and boundlessly loyal to Chairman Mao and the CPC.”²⁴

This rings of the old role types from traditional Peking Opera. Unfortunately for Jiang Qing though, the old roles, when combined with the vast number of characters in China’s lengthy recorded history, provided enough differentiation that people would not be bored by seeing plays with repetitive role types. With the extremely limited number of revolutionary model operas, Jiang’s theory devolved into a bland mélange of trite and forgettable characters with stereotyped, formulized plots. Jiang was also prone to nitpicking, as shown by her notes on the first rehearsals of “Shajiabang,” another one of the model works. “I feel something is not quite right in rhythm. The singing does not come on the right note. The singer does not open his or her mouth at the right time and his or her voice is not in harmony with the music.”²⁵ Jiang Qing came from the film industry, as such her skill and knowledge of music is questionable, and her notes on many aspects of “Shajiabang” are of questionable value.

²⁴ Colin Mackerras, *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey* (Beijing: New World Press, 1990): 167

²⁵ Jiang in Chung and Miller, *Madame Mao*: 198

Fortunately for Peking Opera, there were those higher up in the Ministry of Culture who were in a position to oppose Jiang Qing's incessant meddling. Zhou Yang, the minister of culture, was foremost among the opposition. Peng Chen was another opponent. Jiang came into conflict with him when she submitted a revision of "Shajiabang," placing greater emphasis on the armed battle at the end than the subversion that characterized much of the original plot. "Peng Chen banned the staging of this adapted play because it had been rewritten rather 'crudely and at random.'"²⁶ Peng's real conflict was political. Despite Jiang's extensive means of writing and creating her plays, Peng, Zhou, and others at the Ministry of Culture "still did not approve of Jiang Qing's innovation and characterized her 'model plays' as uninteresting- like 'plain boiled water.'"²⁷

Ultimately, the response to many of these plays was negative. This was because the people expected the revolutionary model operas to be entertaining, and to fill the position that traditional Peking Opera once held. The Communist Party intended for them to be politically educational. "If any revolutionary model work troupe was engaged to perform anywhere, all leaders of the local administration had to attend the performance in order to show their loyalty to Mao's 'revolutionary line.' The more the CCP leaders flattered revolutionary model works, the more effectively could they brainwash the people."²⁸ Since the new operas were not meant to be entertaining, according to Communist standards they were a total success. By creating works that were only meant

²⁶ Byung-joon Ahn, "The Politics of Peking Opera 1962-1965," *Asian Survey* 12 No. 12 (Dec. 1972): 1074

²⁷ *ibid* 1075

²⁸ Guang Lu and Xiaoyu Xiao "Beijing Opera During the Cultural Revolution: The Rhetoric of Ideological Conflicts" in *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication* ed. D. Ray Heisey (Stamford: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 2000): 241

for political education, the Communists further dehumanized their base, implying that elders needed to be reeducated, and young people taught a false message of what it meant to be Chinese.²⁹ This notion of the function of Peking Opera ignored the traditional emotive aspect of the opera. Revolutionary model opera served as a vehicle for supplying thoughts that should be developed on an individual basis.

Based on the way the revolutionary model operas were spread, there was plenty for people to be tired of. Their presence in the popular consciousness was dependent on the ever-fluctuating political climate of the Cultural Revolution. Whenever Jiang Qing and her cronies were in power, there was more exposure for the model works. “Strident emphasis on models and the Cultural Revolution conventionality was not a sign of strength: more often, it was an indicator of the sense of threat felt by this faction at a given time.”³⁰ By 1972, even Mao and Zhou Enlai were tiring of the same tired cultural outlets. Re-adapted movies were by now diverting attention away from the heroes of the revolutionary model works. “As this suggests, by the mid-1970s, mass cynicism regarding the rhetorical hyperbole surrounding the model theatrical works was widespread.”³¹ The culmination of this tiresome ordeal came in 1974, when “Boulder Bay” was released to public audience: “For many Chinese viewers, “Boulder Bay” was laughable: the surrealism of the scenes, including fighting underwater, took the kitsch qualities of the model operas to new levels of excess. This attempt at modernizing Chinese culture seemed to have reached a dead end.”³²

²⁹ *ibid* 241

³⁰ Clark, “Model Theatrical Works” in King 181

³¹ *ibid* 185

³² *ibid* 187

The most unfortunate impact of the Cultural Revolution opera reforms, and the most dehumanizing is the decline in appreciation for Peking Opera as a whole. Despite the fact that after Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four's arrest in 1976, many traditional Peking Operas immediately returned to the stage with aplomb, there was now a significant gulf between people who knew about the complex symbolism behind the traditional operas, and people born and raised during the Cultural Revolution who had had little to no exposure to the traditional styles. They were embracing the global style of the 1980s, flocking to all things Western and leaving their traditional roots in the dust. Some scholars fear that the damage is irreparable, and that Peking Opera will inevitably fall into obscurity. However, there are positive signs that all is not lost for this venerable institution. In 1980, Daniel S.P. Yang observed restored traditional art forms and noted that he "was surprised (and much delighted) to find that the damage of the Cultural Revolution was not especially evident in the seventeen Beijing opera performances"³³ that he saw during his time in China. What does become clear is that many of the most celebrated performers are quite getting on in age. However, there are many people in their forties who were able to preserve their skills during the Cultural Revolution, and it is these people who make up the bulk of the quality performers.³⁴ Yang did note two negative phenomena in Chinese theater. First, the audience was dwindling. The audiences he did observe were mostly older people, showing that attracting younger folk to shows is necessary for Peking Opera's continued longevity. Second, young people are not drawn

³³Daniel S.P. Yang, "Theatre in Post Cultural Revolution China: A Report Based on Field Research in the Fall and Winter of 1981," *Asian Theatre Journal* 1 No. 1 (Spring 1984): 94

³⁴ *ibid* 96

to performance careers because of the low wages.³⁵ This has been true of acting in China since the inception of Peking Opera, and it seems unlikely that this is going to change any time soon.

Marie-Luise Latsch further expounds on the problem with youths connecting to Peking Opera by calling it a crisis.

“Upon inquiry, one will learn that people in their twenties and thirties prefer Chinese and foreign films, dance dramas and plays, and go seldom or not at all to Peking Opera. They say they cannot understand the arias or recitations of Peking operas; the traditional pronunciation in regional dialect is difficult to understand for Peking operas originating in Anhui or Hubei provinces; they can’t catch the meaning of the pantomime and gestures. Besides, they say the themes have little to do with present-day life and don’t reflect today’s problems. They say the operas are tedious for younger people who don’t know them from childhood or youth. Here Chinese youth have a point in common with foreigners in China—neither understand nor feel related to Peking Opera.”³⁶

For Latsch, the crisis obviously lies with educating young people about Peking Opera.

Writing more recently than both Yang and Latsch, Colin Mackerras in the 1990s, wrote that “It is also very clear that Peking Opera professionals and lovers, with strong government support, are determined not to let this art die.”³⁷ It appears from this statement that the government is making an attempt to atone for its actions during the Cultural Revolution. It is doubtless that Peking Opera would not survive without

³⁵ *ibid* 102

³⁶ Latsch “Peking Opera as a European Sees It”, 41-2

³⁷ Colin Mackerras, *Peking Opera* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997): 62

government support. In addition to the government's action, young intellectuals also feel passionately about Peking Opera. They view it through the lens of latter-day nationalism. These people have said that they will encourage their children to see it as "an important part of China's traditional cultural heritage."³⁸

The nadir of the dehumanization of Peking Opera would be if the art form were lost as a result of the detachment of young people from its underlying symbols. Between reducing the skill required of the actors to portray it, altering the motivations of the people to experience it, and eliminating the ability of young people to understand it, the Communist party certainly did a number on Peking Opera during the Cultural Revolution. "If the Communist party embargo against the past remains unrelenting, it would be difficult to see how the old culture could survive very long while linkages with the past are severed one after another."³⁹ Hopefully the trend that shows young Chinese people becoming detached from their traditional cultural roots can be reversed before Peking Opera is lost to the dehumanizing experience of the Cultural Revolution.

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³⁸ *ibid* 63

³⁹ Cheng, "The Function of Chinese Opera" 116

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