

## Chapter 7: East Asia – China

### Site: Revolutionary Beijing Opera (*Yangbanxi*)

**First Impressions.** Were you able to see a live performance of what is translated as “Revolutionary Peking (Beijing) Opera,” (or *yangbanxi* in Chinese), you would be struck by a host of differences between this form and traditional *jingju* (Beijing Opera). First, in *yangbanxi* the actors and actresses wear modern costumes, including military uniforms. Second, the stage is much more realistic looking, because it features props and background scenery. Third, frequently some or even all of the instruments used are Western, and even when the instruments are all or mostly Chinese, the music is arranged and often uses Western harmony. Some of the elements of *yangbanxi* may be reminiscent of *jingju*, especially the use of percussion and the sound of most voices, but unlike the fanciful stories found in *jingju*, in *yangbanxi* the story clearly has political ramifications. Indeed, even without knowing Chinese you can easily differentiate the “good guys” from the “bad guys.” The former stand nobly tall, have determined looks, and are well lighted with healthy-looking skin, while the latter are often hunched, even cowering, have unhealthy greenish-looking skin, and are dimly lit. Invariably, the “good guys” are the followers of Chairman Mao, while the “bad guys” are variously the Nationalist Chinese led by General Chiang Kai-Shek, the Japanese, evil Chinese landowners, or even, in one opera, American soldiers.

**Aural Analysis.** During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a number of “modernized” Peking Operas were made into political (that is, “revolutionary”) works. Some of them, including our example, the 1967 work *On the Docks*, were held up as models to represent Communist ideals. Although *On the Docks* was not the most satisfactory revolutionary opera in terms of its dramatic effectiveness, it was considered the most politically progressive of all. Mao’s wife insisted on a revision of the work in 1972, and this revised version is heard on the recording we have selected. Originally recorded by the “On the Docks” Group of the Peking Opera Troupe of Shanghai, the opera combines Western orchestral instruments with certain traditional Chinese instruments, including the *jinghu* fiddle and the percussion section.

The music of revolutionary opera, depending on version, may preserve many or just a few sounds of traditional *jingju*; whatever the case, it is played from a completely written-out score. More like film music than old-style Chinese music, it creates dramatic shifts of mood. Those versions that were most modernized also use many Western orchestral instruments, and the scores include other Western features such as harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration. Excerpts from the one-page

#### YANGBANXI

Literally, “model revolutionary [Beijing] Opera,” the Chinese term for Beijing Operas infused with communist and nationalist political messages during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

English synopsis included with the Chinese-language libretto give an idea of the opera's political goals:

“On the Docks” depicts the spirit of patriotism and internationalism of the Chinese working class. The time is early summer in 1963. The place, a dock in Shanghai. FH, secretary of the Communist Party branch of a dockers’ brigade, and KC, are Communist team leaders, who are leading the dockers in a rush job before the coming of a typhoon. They have to finish the loading of a big batch of rice seeds for shipment to Africa so as to support the anti-imperialist struggle of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples. [Wheat sacks left out must also be moved.]

During the rush young docker HH, who looks down on his work and is absent-minded, accidentally spills a sack of wheat. ... Pretending to help sweep up the spilled wheat, C seizes the chance to pour the fiberglass in his dustbin into the wheat sack [and mixes it with the other sacks meant for export.]

FH, working closely with her mates, discovers the incident of the spilled sack. What happened? With this problem in mind, she re-reads the Communiqué of the Tenth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. [Eventually] H awakens to his mistake and exposes C’s criminal activities. The enemy is completely revealed and the dockers fulfill their aid mission with flying colors.

Red flags fly over the rippling waters and in the morning sun the Shanghai dockers march on with revolutionary militancy toward the great goal of communism.”

**Cultural Considerations.** Music and politics have long been intertwined in China as they have sometimes been in the West as well. From the time of Kong Fuzi (Confucius, d. 479 B.C.), music was viewed as having ethical power—that is, the ability to influence people’s thinking. Right music led to right thinking and right behavior. Confucianism has continued to underlie much of Chinese culture to the present, requiring restraint, balance, and non-individuality. But China underwent severe disruption to its traditional society in the twentieth century. In the 1920s a civil war broke out between the Communists under Mao Zedong and the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek, which led, after the defeat of Chiang in 1949, to the founding of the People’s Republic of China, while the Nationalists fled to Taiwan where the Republic of China continues to this day.

Chairman Mao Zedong, leader of China’s Communist Party from 1920 to 1976, understood the power of music and theater and used them as his most potent weapons both to fight his enemies and to influence and control his subjects. It was actually one of Mao’s wives, former actress Jiang Qing, who supervised the politicization of *jingju*, primarily during the Cultural Revolution, a period of top-down revolution and chaos in China during which “traditional” culture, including Beijing Opera, was prohibited.

During the years from 1966 to 1976 the Chinese people were subjected to nonstop propaganda, much of it in the form of artistic productions (including music, dance, spoken theater, opera, art, and literature). Jiang Qing oversaw the creation of the “Eight Model Works”: five Revolutionary Beijing Operas, two Revolutionary Ballets, and one Revolutionary Symphony. When President Richard Nixon surprised the world with his visit to China in 1972 at the height of the Cultural Revolution, he witnessed a performance of *The Red Detachment of Women*, one of the Revolutionary Ballets, an event that is central to John Adams’ 1987 opera *Nixon in China*.

Besides the Revolutionary stage works, there was an abundance of new music written with socialist themes, mostly played by new sorts of ensembles (with or without vocalists), which used full orchestrations and harmony. These works varied from settings of Chairman Mao’s words to music (e.g., the song “A Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party”), to music praising Chairman Mao (e.g., “Chairman Mao’s Love for Us Is Deeper Than the Ocean”), to music calling for revolutionary action (e.g., “The People in Taiwan Long for Liberation”) or extolling the Communist work ethic (e.g., “Driving Tractors in Dazhai-Type Fields”).

Because Chinese people heard so much revolutionary music and opera during the Cultural Revolution, you might be surprised to learn that record companies have released karaoke versions of the operas, and new VCD (video compact disc) versions of the films have been reissued to feed a nostalgic appreciation for the music of that period. The younger generations of Chinese, however, were nearly all born after the Cultural Revolution and only know the economically liberalized nation of today. For them, popular music is virtually the only music that they are exposed to, and as the government releases its grip on culture, there is more and more of it. Forty years ago Chinese traditional artists had to struggle against government controls to be heard, but now they struggle against the near total dominance of popular music, both local and imported from the West as well as from nearby countries.