Chinese Operas on Stage and Screen: A Short Introduction

During the final week of the Olympics in August 2008, a friend in Beijing invited me for dumplings at her parents’ place. When we got there, the television was turned to CCTV-11, the Chinese Central Television opera channel. My friend’s mother was busy cooking and did not seem to mind when her daughter suggested that it would be more entertaining to watch the Olympics instead. When I asked them about the film just being broadcast, they explained that it was an old Ping opera film, of which they both were fond. In the 1980s many such films were shown in cinemas and on television, so my friend had grown up watching them. Opera films had then enjoyed a period of renaissance: those made in the 1950s and 1960s were shown again, and many new ones were produced, refreshing older viewers’ memories of a variety of regional operas and introducing them to the younger generation.

The Chinese opera films that are the subject of this special issue of Opera Quarterly brought to the screen the folktales, novels, and historical narratives that had long enlivened the opera stage. In China there are more than two hundred regional operatic forms, collectively known as xiqu, which differ from one another in language, basic melodies, style of singing, and, to a lesser degree, in gestures, costumes, and makeup. Some of these operas have a history of centuries, while others were codified as distinct local forms only in the 1950s. Among them, Peking opera has enjoyed the highest prestige throughout the twentieth century and has most often been filmed. Its origins are traced back to Hui opera from Anhui, in the southeast of China, which was first brought to Beijing on the occasion of the eightieth birthday of the emperor Qianlong in 1790. Many other regional troupes were invited to perform in his honor at that time, but the Anhui opera troupes enjoyed the greatest success and settled in the capital soon thereafter, enriching their performances and blending with various other regional styles. This process of assimilation was to continue uninterrupted over the next couple of centuries—notably, as discussed in Xinyu Dong’s essay in this issue, when the famous actor Mei Lanfang and his collaborator Qi Rushan introduced...
many of the southern Kun opera gestures and singing styles into Peking opera in the 1920s. The Shanghai-based, all-female-troupe Yue opera was also popular in the mid-twentieth century, as was Ping opera, a genre that thrived in northern and northeastern China.² At the lowest end of the spectrum of geographical diffusion we find local operas performed in small regional areas or villages; often considered vulgar and unrefined by fans and practitioners of the major genres, they have hardly ever made it to the silver screen.

Overall, Chinese opera is a rich and diverse field, characterized by uneven cultural prestige among rural and urban genres and also by an ongoing history of mutual contaminations. Adored by emperors and commoners alike but feared by authorities as a source of social unrest—performances considered obscene or violent were often subjected to censorship in late imperial times—opera became the topic of inflamed debates among intellectuals, who, from the last decade of the nineteenth century on, emphasized the social impact and pedagogic potential of popular cultural forms.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a time in which the survival of China appeared threatened by economic and sociopolitical crisis from within and imperialist aggression from without, many reformers and revolutionaries turned to opera and fiction to awaken the people to the predicament of the country. As the soon-to-be Communist leader Chen Duxiu put it in an essay written in 1904, opera houses were “schools for the masses, and the actors their great teachers.” Opera’s popular appeal—Chen referred in particular to xipi and erhuang, the two main melodies of Peking opera—made it an ideal tool to educate the people and spark political change. But to be truly beneficial to all and appreciated by those who still dismissed it as a vulgar pastime, it had to undergo a thorough process of reform. To fit the needs of the times, Chen Duxiu suggested that the heroic characters of old operas become the protagonists of new scripts that would emphasize loyalty to the nation, filial piety, and justice; longer recitative sections should be introduced and experiments be made with optical and electric tricks, so that spectators would be initiated to new technologies and subjects of knowledge. Finally, operas on ghosts, monsters, and all kinds of supernatural beings, as well as plays with sexual content, had to be forbidden.

As Judith Zeitlin’s article in this issue illustrates, the featuring of ghostly roles on stage and screen was to remain a problematic issue well into the 1970s. Ghosts and spirits, Chen Duxiu explained, were “hazy things” that fooled audiences, making them believe in “unreasonable” things. The Boxers, whose rebellion against the foreign presence at the turn of the century had resulted in humiliating sanctions for China, were precisely people who had wanted to imitate the heavenly warriors of the operas of the past. Works with sexual content, on the other hand, offended public decency: at a time in which more and more women went to the theater, Chen argued, it was offensive for them to attend
such obscene spectacles, whether performed by male actors or by “shameless” actresses. Such plays provided ammunition for those who wanted to abolish all opera: if only for this, they had to be forbidden. Finally, Chen claimed that it was because of the Chinese people’s obsession with personal fame that the country was weak. Any opera that glorified riches, honor, and personal wealth was therefore also to be eliminated. Once it was reformed along these guidelines, Chen concluded, who could still claim that opera was useless? At a time of national crisis, intellectuals were seeking all sorts of methods to “open the minds” of the people, but any method that presupposed literacy was bound to be too slow. Opera was the only medium with universal appeal, which “even the deaf could watch and the blind could listen to.”

As Chen Duxiu’s commentary suggests, the call for opera reform was part of the larger movement for cultural and social transformation that shook the Chinese cultural world in the early twentieth century. It was believed to be particularly urgent precisely because opera was considered the most effective medium to reach those who could not read or write. By the early 1920s, intellectuals’ positions on opera had become quite polarized: some continued to advance proposals to modernize it, others suggested that it be abolished, and yet others began to elaborate on its aesthetic achievements in comparison with foreign-inspired forms. Indeed, within a context of growing interest in folklore, traditional opera also came to be seen as an authentic expression of the national soul, an aspect of popular culture that needed to be preserved and further disseminated. Meanwhile, opera houses were slowly becoming spaces exclusively devoted to the enjoyment of the performance rather than to chatting and tea sipping, and new technologies, more realistic settings, contemporary costumes, and special visual effects were introduced, some of which were inspired by newly emergent dramatic genres as well as by cinema and photography.

The discussions that took place in the early twentieth century largely set the terms for the debates on opera film in the 1950s and 1960s, and the changes in operatic performance on the stages back in the 1920s anticipated the contamination between media that the genre of opera film would come to epitomize. As for the repertoires, although they were enlarged to include new works, old scripts were never fully replaced. Repeatedly revised, proscribed in varying numbers and with uneven rigor, operas from the traditional repertoires only briefly disappeared from the Chinese stages in the late 1960s—and even then, not everywhere. As all the articles in this issue demonstrate, narrative, performative, and musical conventions underwent constant transformation, and many operas migrated or reappeared in revised fashion in various other new forms and media, including “civilized plays” (wenming xi), “modern plays” (xiandai xi), opera films (xiqu dianying), and “model works” (yangban xi). Even though “traditional plays” (chuantong xi) generally meant the works that were in performance before the twentieth century, the boundary of what was embraced or condemned as “traditional”
within all these other different forms was constantly shifting; by “traditional,” therefore, one can only mean whatever was identified as such at particular points in time.9

If a large number of new operas on historical and current events were written in the first half of the twentieth century, initially only a few of them were staged, and even fewer met with audiences’ approval. The reasons for this limited immediate success are complex and certainly exceed the simple fact that audiences liked to see and listen to the stories they already knew. After all, in an operatic system mostly revolving around star actors and actresses, the main attraction drawing people to teahouses and theaters was the possibility of seeing and hearing their favorite performers, not the stories per se. Yet many lamented that the new scripts did not display the literary refinement of the old ones. According to some, the insertion of long spoken sections at the expense of singing and music denaturalized the form of opera itself and made it too similar to the newly emergent, Western-inspired “spoken drama” (huaju).10 Finally, actors found it difficult to adapt their fixed roles and performing conventions to the new characters. The problem of how to purge opera of its allegedly corrupting elements without depriving it of its popular appeal thus remained at the core of innumerable reform attempts, some of which were initiated by prominent performers themselves, and it presented itself still unresolved to the cultural authorities of the new communist state in 1949.

**Opéra Reform in the 1950s–1960s: Policies, Bans, Debates**

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first attempted to reform Peking opera and to create a new song-and-dance theater based on folk materials (yanggeju) in the early 1940s in their wartime base at Yan’an in northern China.11 A basic layout for opera reform was presented in the People’s Daily (the official newspaper of the CCP) on November 23, 1948, in an editorial titled “Carrying Out Old Opera Reform in a Planned and Gradual Fashion.”12 The formal establishment of the National Opera Reform Committee (Zhonghua quanguo xiqu gaige weiyuanhui) on October 2, 1949—just one day after the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China—testifies to the importance that the new government continued to attach to the task. By the early years of the People’s Republic, the scope of the reform had extended well beyond the mere revision of scripts, affecting all aspects of theater life from acting styles to the structure of theatrical organizations. A large segment of opera personnel underwent political training, troupes were reorganized and partly nationalized, and works considered harmful were forbidden. The writing of new scripts was strongly encouraged, but initially their actual staging remained rare: at the First National Trial Performance Convention (Diyijie quanguo xiqu guanmo yanchu dahui) in 1952, in which actors, musicians, and
writers gathered to watch performances, discuss, and receive further training, less than 10 percent of the performed operas were newly written works. The national tenth anniversary celebrations in October 1959 included performances of revised traditional operas, but new ones were hardly seen.13

It was only at the five-week-long Modern Peking Opera Trial Performance Convention (Jingju xiandai xi guanmo yanchu dahui) held in Beijing in 1964 that an overwhelmingly large number of modern plays were performed. Set in the twentieth century and featuring characters in everyday clothing, less intrusive makeup, and an updated musical and gestural vocabulary, these contemporary operas were enormously successful with young audiences, for whom the old xiqu was a relic of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. By 1964, in sum, modern operas dominated the Chinese stages, and soon also the screens.

Overall, the opera reform was a far from linear process, and it involved a series of backtracks and negotiations that often saw the central government countering the overzealous attempts by local governments to completely ban traditional works. Indeed, if the general idea of a need for reform was easily propagated across all government levels and actively embraced by many artists, the criteria for distinguishing the beneficial from the harmful remained hazy. The CCP tried to rally artists by exerting various kinds of institutional and social pressure, ranging from critical debates and the awarding of prizes to attacks against individual works, actors, or playwrights, but it rarely drew precise guidelines or banned a whole set or category of works. At least until 1957, this left the door open for a relatively wide range of interpretations, but it also encouraged various modes of self-censorship.14

Already from 1948 through 1950, partly responding to the People’s Daily editorial and probably as a way to show their commitment to the CCP, local governments in the north and northeast prohibited an extremely high number of operas. This led to clashes between the population and the local administrators, creating such uproar that the Ministry of Culture had to intervene in March 1950 to prevent all theatrical entertainment from coming to a complete stop.15 As suggested by the oft-repeated slogan “Let a hundred flowers bloom, weed out the old to let sprout the new,” the CCP was at least theoretically committed to the flourishing of diverse regional operas.16 The Ministry of Culture banned twenty-six traditional operas between 1950 and 1952, but more than anything else this was an attempt to prevent local governments from censoring “indiscriminately” and to claim for the ministry the power to assess the people’s entertainment needs. Local governments, however, who were officially in charge of all revisions, still preferred to “suspend” the staging of a large number of works, most likely to avoid running into trouble for not having revised them appropriately, often claiming that local artists had refused to perform them. Therefore, even operas that only needed minor revisions were shelved, causing a drastic reduction of
performable pieces. The only way to counter this shortage was to transplant works that were endorsed by the central authorities from one regional form to the other, which toward the end of the 1950s led to an excessive repetition of a small number of works.  

In an attempt to solve these problems, in the midst of the liberal Hundred Flowers Campaign in May 1957, the Ministry of Culture announced that the bans on the twenty-six operas had been an obstacle to the development of opera and lifted them. Individual troupes now had the autonomy to decide, on the basis of local circumstances, whether they wanted to perform them according to the original scripts or after undertaking revisions; they could also decide whether to first have in-house trial performances or bring them directly to the stage. Less than a month later, however, the People’s Daily published a series of negative reviews of Retribution for Killing One’s Son (Sha zi bao) and Lady Huang Travels to Hell (Huangshi nü you yin), two previously banned operas that Ping opera troupes mounted in Tianjin and Beijing immediately after the lifting of the ban.

Retribution for Killing One’s Son, which had already been made into a film back in 1908 and then in 1913 with the alternate title of Blood in the Family (Jiating xue), was played in several regional repertories and had also been adapted into a popular wenming xi in the 1940s. The opera had already been prohibited in late imperial and Republican times for being violent and obscene, but many troupes had continued performing it, simply changing its name. The story explored the horrific consequences of illicit female desire: a merchant’s widow with a son and a daughter starts an affair with a monk who had come to her home for her husband’s funeral. When her ten-year-old son finds out, the woman decapitates the boy with a kitchen knife, chops up his body, and puts the pieces into a jar that she hides under his bed. The woman and the monk continue their affair, but eventually the local magistrate discovers the murder and orders their execution.

The first 1957 review of Retribution that appeared in the People’s Daily, signed by the playwright and film director Wu Zuguang, lamented that the performance was filled with excessively gruesome details, with the protagonist appearing onstage with her face covered in blood and a bloody knife clenched between her teeth—a detail that had also horrified Republican censors. By the time the wretched mother was brought to justice, Wu observed, most of the audience would no longer pay attention to her because they were too busy taking care of children who were crying from fear. Lady Huang Travels to Hell was also purportedly unwatchable because it showed all kinds of corporal punishments and propagated a fatalistic view of the world. This was not what the Chinese people should be made to see: “operas like these are absolutely harmful to the people and apart from pornography, violence, brutality, and reactionary thought they have absolutely nothing to offer . . . . To say that the Ministry of Culture from now
on will never again forbid any opera is nonsense; operas like these, I think, will in all cases have to be forbidden in our country.” Wu emphasized that people went to the opera to receive spiritual nourishment and to be educated, not “anaesthetized and poisoned” as in the old society and in capitalist countries such as the United States. In sum, even though all the opera bans had been lifted, it was up to the artists to remain attentive, for, after all, “the Ministry of Culture’s ban on a few operas in the past and its lifting of the ban today only have a symbolic meaning.” Moreover, “if a foreign friend comes to Beijing and sees operas like Retribution and Lady Huang Travels to Hell…he will have plenty of reasons to conclude that ours is a backward, uncivilized, and ignorant country.”

Wu’s review was followed by a series of articles by actors and playwrights reiterating that such operas as Retribution were “poisonous,” and that the main significance of the lifting of the ban was that now the government trusted that artists were able to make the right choices—a belief that the staging of these particular operas blatantly disproved. It is likely that these articles reflected the artists’ worry about new censorial interventions by the government, but it might also be that some of those who wrote really found that these operas were too sensational and did not constitute the height of Chinese operatic arts. On July 21, 1957, all the most prominent opera actors, including Mei Lanfang and Zhou Xinfang (who by now served as delegates to the National People’s Congress), made a public announcement urging their colleagues to refrain from performing “bad operas” (huai xi). By the end of July, calls to “struggle against poisonous weeds” had multiplied.

In the meantime, the same Wu Zuguang who had signed the negative review of Retribution became involved in a debate that went far beyond the twenty-six banned operas, touching on such issues as the training of new talents and compensation of performers, the restructuring of opera organizations, the relationship between the central government and local troupes, and more generally the political authorities’ control over the dramatic arts. In an article significantly titled “On the Problem of Leaders in Theater Work,” Wu lamented that drama reform had given excessive authority to political leaders who were no experts and who assigned tasks and roles without taking individual talents into account: “Administrative leaders have become omnipotent—they are now the leaders of everything.” At the same time, quite in contradiction to his review of Retribution, Wu criticized the political authorities for forcing didactic materials down the throats of the people, without any consideration for what they liked. Finally, he lamented the unfair treatment received by troupes based outside of Beijing, especially the smaller ones that had not been nationalized. Because of this article, Wu Zuguang came under attack in late June 1957; labeled as a rightist, he was repeatedly criticized in the anti-rightist campaign during the whole month of July and was then sent off for reeducation through labor in the “Great
Northern Wilderness” (Beidahuang, in northeastern China) for about three years. The editorial board of the journal in which his article had been published was also harshly criticized.

The anti-rightist campaign put an end to a period of lively discussions, and in the following years the scope of the debate narrowed considerably. Much emphasis was put on the policy of “walking on two legs” (a phrase borrowed from the contemporaneous Great Leap Forward in industry and agriculture), proposed by Zhou Yang in April 1958, according to which equal attention should be paid to the composition of modern operas and to the reform of the old. Subsequent interventions seemed aimed at balancing the precarious equilibrium between old and new: a strong push toward the composition of new operas that would “reflect modern life” predominated in the second half of 1958, and, in tune with other Great Leap Forward policies, precise quotas to be fulfilled within three years were announced.24 But, as an article by Mei Lanfang reveals, many still believed that the modern works were not as compelling as the traditional operas. In order to present new characters in a convincing manner, Mei suggested, actors and writers had to continue to draw on traditional performance techniques. At the turn of the decade, around the time of the Sino-Soviet split, the word “tradition” appeared with unusual frequency, and an insistent emphasis was put on using Chinese “national forms” to represent contemporary issues and characters in drama, film, and fiction.25

Around that time, several works were written that drew on historical accounts and legends. Among these, Meng Chao’s Li Huiniang, a new Kun opera adapted from a Ming drama about a concubine who was killed and turned into a ghost, was performed all over China under the blessing of Premier Zhou Enlai. In early 1963 it was given a special performance in Zhongnanhai (the central CCP headquarters in Beijing) by order of Mao Zedong himself. In March 1963, however, the same opera was singled out as an example of the deplorable trend of new “ghost plays” in a report issued by the party committee of the Ministry of Culture, and criticized by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing a month later, who noted that the work was not only harmful because it featured a ghost but also because it could be read as a critique of the Great Leap Forward.26 By this time, it was mainly the newly written historical works that had come under attack. In the years that followed, and particularly during the period of the Cultural Revolution proper (1966–69), most regional operas were suppressed, while the musical, gestural, and singing features of Peking opera were integrated into the new model works, so called because they were to function as models for works in other artistic and regional forms.27

Most of the model works told stories of wartime heroism and sacrifice, depicting how the Chinese people had resisted the Japanese, fought against the Nationalist troops, and liberated themselves from class oppression under the
guidance of the Communist Party. As argued by Barbara Mittler’s article in this issue, these model works were the results of a long-term process of hybridization that preserved both Western classical music and Peking opera performance, while sublating them within a revolutionary operatic language that was no less stylized than its predecessors but expressive of the new revolutionary moral order.\textsuperscript{28} In the early 1970s, under the supervision of Jiang Qing, several of these model works were made into films, which granted Peking opera a diffusion that it had never enjoyed before; indeed, it is mainly thanks to itinerant projectionists who brought cinema to the most remote corners of the Chinese countryside that Peking opera became a truly popular and national art.

In sum, opera policies and debates in the early PRC displayed several elements of continuity with the censorial practices of late imperial times as well as with the reformist impulses of Chen Duxiu and other intellectuals of the Republican era. In the 1950s and 1960s, the diverse exigencies of valorizing the national popular heritage (although in a “revolutionized” fashion), while at the same time meeting the entertainment needs of audiences in different localities and promoting a new culture that would best serve the central government’s political agenda, translated into a series of twists and turns that, according to some drama scholars, negatively affected opera as a whole. On one hand, it is recognized that the drive to collect and systematize the operatic heritage led to the writing down and editing of many important scripts, some of which are performed to this day. This achievement was no doubt facilitated by a centralized institutional effort and mobilization of resources. But, on the other hand, the ideological constraints that regulated the process of writing and revising led to a severe shrinking of the number of works in circulation and dramatically impoverished local performing practices.\textsuperscript{29}

Especially in the case of smaller regional operas, then, it is tempting to see any intervention of the central state as undue interference into local ecologies that would have thrived if left alone to cultivate their art and their audiences. But it would be simplistic to translate this into a clear-cut opposition between government and artistic world, or between central state and local society, as attested to by the often ambivalent positions of prominent artists and playwrights who were somehow squeezed between the government, the contrasting needs of their heterogeneous professional worlds, and Chinese audiences at large. Many elements intervened to mediate between policies and their implementation. Among these, the emergence among the youth of an ethos of antagonism against anything “traditional” by the mid-1960s, the rise of new media and forms of entertainment, and a general drive to “modernize” in the late 1970s and 1980s all affected the development of regional operas and further transformed their styles and repertoires. And if current critical debates on Chinese opera are dominated by a sense of crisis and the perception of an irreversible decline (due, among other things,
to a shrinking and aging audience), it might help to keep in mind that such processes are never linear or inevitable. The diffusion of television in the 1980s, for instance, often blamed for depriving opera of audiences and practitioners, might have in small part contributed to a revival of interest in both opera and opera film, helping to maintain a sense of continuity and perhaps even to revitalize some of these forms.30

**Filmic Remediation**

What did cinema and opera gain from each other within the particular context of Socialist China in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and what kinds of problems did filmmakers encounter when they brought the stage to the screen? The essays in this special issue provide different perspectives on these questions. In a way, the filmic “remediation” of Chinese operas was not too different from their rewriting for the stage; scriptwriters and filmmakers actively participated in the opera reform and eventually influenced the theatrical performances themselves, as many of the solutions adopted onscreen were later introduced onstage.31

The debates on opera film that involved Chinese dramatists, filmmakers, and critics in the 1950s and early 1960s—and the plurality of labels that they proposed, ranging from “opera art film” to “stage art documentary”—not only reflect their different understandings of their own tasks and their uneven commitment to inventing a new hybrid genre, but also reveal how compelling theorizations of what distinguished cinema from theater emerged exactly when the relationship between these forms was at its most intense.32 The reciprocal mirroring of these cognate media, Weihong Bao and Ling Hon Lam’s essays in this issue suggest, inspired reflections on their specificity, which mostly crystallized around an understanding of opera and cinema as “expressive” and “realistic” arts, respectively. But while thus reifying the division of labor between the arts, opera film also opened up the possibility for spectatorial modes that were more alert to the reality of performance and to the mediated substance of any gesture of mimetic inscription—be it of text or of image—within the medium of cinema itself.
the dynamics of movement and gesture that characterized particular operatic genres—in other words, by initiating the camera itself into the operatic arts. That this process of initiation had already begun long before and was even intrinsic to the history of Chinese cinema did not make it less novel to individual filmmakers, many of whom were opera fans but not necessarily familiar with the regional operatic genres they were asked to bring to the screen.33

Cross-fertilizations between film and opera have indeed been omnipresent in the plural beginnings of cinema in China, as every “first” of Chinese cinema had something to do with opera. Dingjun Mountain (Dingjun shan, 1905), the first Chinese film, featured the famous performer Tan Xinpei in an act from a Peking opera; the Sing-song Girl Red Peony (Genü Hong Mudan, 1931), the first Chinese sound film, focused on the life of a sing-song girl and included several Peking opera arias; Remorse at Death (Shengsi hen, 1948), the first Chinese color film, starred Mei Lanfang in a Peking opera set in the Song dynasty; and the first color film production of the PRC, The Butterfly Lovers (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai, 1954), brought to the screen one of the most popular Yue operas, which had already been made into a film back in the 1930s.34

Chinese filmmakers have often represented this fascination with opera as an attempt to “familiarize” and “indigenize” the foreign medium of film,35 but as Zhen Zhang has observed, their “theatrical proclivity by no means signifies ‘tradition’ in a rigid sense.”36 Continual processes of cultural, institutional, and ultimately political negotiations had already unsettled any fixed notion of Chinese theatricality long before any of these “first” intermedial encounters took place. At the time the Yue opera film The Butterfly Lovers was made, for instance, the film industry had just undergone a radical restructuring, and most of the private film studios had been nationalized; but Yue opera had also gone through a process of reform that had transformed it, over a couple of decades, from a regional form popular in rural areas into one of the favorite genres among Shanghai urbanites.

The producer Xu Sangchu recalls in his autobiography how the campaign against the film The Life of Wu Xun (Wu Xun zhuan) in 1951 intimidated scriptwriters so much that it brought the industry to a virtual standstill.37 The only movie to come out of the state film studios in 1952 was Fighting North and South (Nan zheng bei zhan), a film about the civil war. At this point the State Council called for a greater diversity of themes, styles, and forms, encouraging scriptwriters and filmmakers to work on adaptations of classical and modern literary works. It was following this appeal that the Shanghai Film Studio where Xu Sangchu worked decided to make the opera film The Butterfly Lovers, played by the Yue opera actresses Yuan Xuefen and Fan Ruijuan. In addition to the difficulty in finding good scripts on contemporary topics, Xu recalls that an important reason for making this film was the popularity of the play, particularly in its Yue opera version. When they performed it on the Shanghai stage, Yuan Xuefen and
the other actresses had created a sensation. Cinema would have brought this important work to those audiences that had not yet had the opportunity to see it onstage. What Xu does not mention is that the script had already been revised and had received an important prize at the First National Trial Performance Convention in 1952. In this respect, the “traditional” and “popular” appeal of the play was already partly the product of a complex institutional apparatus that embraced both theater and film. Finally, Xu also mentions the encouragement that the studio received from Zhou Enlai, who was then premier and foreign minister. In the summer of 1954, Zhou took a copy of the film to an international conference in Geneva and asked Yuan Xuefen and Fan Ruijuan to join the Chinese delegation. At a special screening in Geneva, seeing that the translator was at a loss on how to render its title, Zhou suggested that it should be introduced as “the Chinese Romeo and Juliet,” which reportedly much intrigued the delegates from other nations.

Zhou Enlai’s support for this film and his performance as a translator may be partly fictional, but they exemplify how opera film was seen at the time as an eminently translatable product—as a genre that could best showcase the achievements of Chinese national cinema to international audiences, because it conveyed the unique character of Chinese culture as well as the modern technological apparatus needed to make it visually compelling. Perhaps this is the most tangible legacy of opera film in the present, as increasing numbers of Sinophone films distributed globally draw on the operatic arts.

To this day, the “operatic mode” remains a crucial if little-explored aspect of Sinophone cinema. Any definition of what the operatic mode entails will need to remain open to accommodate diverse historical understandings of the encounter between opera and cinema, which hopefully will enrich and connect in different ways the very concepts of performance, mimesis, realism, and expressivity that our definitional attempts tend to take for granted. Only tentatively, then, it can be seen as a mode characterized by an intense focus on the spectacle of performance; by a rhythm that reproduces and reinvents operatic conventions and that boldly disconnects cinematic time from the exigencies of a mimetic representation of everyday routines; by the centrality it grants to the virtuoso body of the actor; and by an enhanced expressivity in which acting, sound, and mise-en-scène are closely integrated within a relation of synchronous reverberation. These traits are all the more intensified in the model opera films. As the articles by Kristine Harris, Nicole Huang, and Jason McGrath illustrate, the filmed versions of the model works signified a particular stage in the evolution of the Chinese film language, one in which all aspects of cinematic performance were in perfect sync with one another in the attempt to eliminate all dissonance and possible randomness.

Chinese opera films, including the Cultural Revolution model operas, were at the center of a visual and aural culture that embraced a broad variety of genres.
and media. Taken together, the essays in this special issue illustrate important continuities not only from the 1950s to the late 1970s but also with previous decades of the twentieth century. Back in 1904, Chen Duxiu had his reasons to focus on opera as a means of nation building. Village opera was indeed a crucial aspect of the religious and social life of late imperial China, and its importance for the Boxer uprising cannot be overemphasized, as virtually all the gods that inspired the Boxers were borrowed from the stage.\textsuperscript{42} The CCP’s efforts to reform opera and its support for opera film were related to its attempts to mobilize the population and to legitimize its own power by invoking “tradition,” while at the same time emptying it of its threatening aspects. However counterintuitive it might sound, opera film was ultimately one of the genres through which the Communist Party mobilized “tradition” to forge a “new humanity.”

But opera films were also the result of collaborations among dramatists, filmmakers, and performers who were devoted to their profession and committed to producing visually and aurally attractive works. Their rediscovery today is a timely reminder of the ways in which the “impure” art of cinema has always defined itself—and might continue to do so—in the encounter with, quotation of, and contamination by other arts.\textsuperscript{43} Finally, the appeal of Sinophone opera film extended far beyond the borders of mainland China, playing an important role in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and in the Southeast Asian regions where they were exported or locally produced.\textsuperscript{44} But that is a topic—one of the many—that will have to be explored further elsewhere.

\section*{Notes}

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Thanks to Edward Gunn and to the \textit{Opera Quarterly} reviewer for their helpful comments on a previous version of this essay, and to my coeditor Judith Zeitlin for her careful reading and many inspiring conversations.


2. Yue opera was a relatively new genre. When it first emerged in the rural areas of Zhejiang it was played only by male actors, but in the 1930s it became popular in Shanghai as an all-female operatic form. By this time, its aesthetics were influenced by film and spoken drama. See Jin Jiang, Women Playing Men. See also Judith Zeitlin’s article in this issue.

3. In late imperial times women were generally not allowed into opera houses but saw theatrical performances at ritual celebrations at home or in temples. Shanghai opera houses did admit some women, mostly prostitutes and courtesans. In Beijing the first theater to officially open its doors to women was the Civilized Teahouse (Wenming chayuan) in 1907; it demanded, however, that women sit in a separate area. Theaters in other cities had more liberal policies: in Tianjin, for instance, mixed-sex seating had already been introduced at the turn of the century. By the 1920s segregated seating had become untenable and women soon became a large part of opera audiences. See Joshua Goldstein, Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 62, 80, 83–84; and Laikwan Pang, The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 141.

4. San Ai (Chen Duxiu), “Lun xiqu” [On drama], originally in Anhui suhuabao 11 (September 10, 1904) and reprinted in Chen Duxiu, Chen Duxiu zhuozuo xuan [Selected important works by Chen Duxiu] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1993), 1:86–90.


6. Proposals for opera reform focused on purging ideological aspects considered backward and introducing longer recitative sections on themes relevant to the times. For instance, filial piety, which in 1904 Chen Duxiu still considered a value to be upheld, was severely attacked as one of the causes of China’s backwardness by Chen himself as well as by other intellectuals in the late 1910s. See Chen Baocheng, “Lun wusi xin wenhua yundong dui Zhongguo ‘jiu xi’ de pipan” [On the critique of Chinese old opera in the May Fourth New Culture Movement], Zhengzhou daxue xuebao, no. 3 (1991): 17–22, 28; Goldstein, Drama Kings, 145–76.

7. Goldstein, Drama Kings, 55–133; Laikwan Pang, The Distorting Mirror, 133–63.

8. In the mountainous regions of Zhejiang and Fujian some artists ended up in jail because they performed traditional operas. This suggests that such performances had not completely disappeared, though they had become an extremely risky venture. See Fu Jin, “Zhongguo: ‘jinxì’ wushi nian” [China: fifty years of banned operas], Xiaoshuojia, no. 3 (1999): 153.

9. Wenming xi was a hybrid theatrical form that flourished in the 1910s. Inspired by Western and Japanese theaters, based on traditional opera but with contemporary costumes and longer recitative sections, it was criticized as a primitive, backward form by 1920s drama reformers but remained popular with audiences both in urban and in rural areas well into the 1940s. Modern plays (xiandai xi), one of the categories promoted in the early 1950s, referred to works that represented the political struggles of the twentieth century; they also adapted some of the conventions of Peking opera. On wenming xi, see Goldstein, Drama Kings, 98–144; Siyuan Liu, “The Impact of Shinpa on Early Chinese Huaju,” Asian Theatre Journal 23, no. 2 (2006): 342–55. On the various opera genres in the second half of the twentieth century, see Elizabeth Wichmann, Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991), 14–15.

10. The relationship between spoken drama and traditional opera was much discussed in the 1930s and early 1940s. These debates present intriguing parallels with those on the relationship between opera and cinema in the 1950s. Spoken drama writers drew on opera to attract audiences. Indeed, one of the most successful spoken dramas in 1943 was Autumn Quince (Qiu Haiyang), a melodrama on the private lives of Peking opera stars that included a brief excerpt from a Peking opera. The endurance of traditional opera can be ascribed to its appeal as a complex art form, which was often contrasted with the alleged lack of technique of spoken drama, to its importance as a social ritual (traditional operas were often performed in public and private festivals), and to its psychological and cultural function of connecting the audience with an idealized past. See Edward Gunn, “Shanghai’s ‘Orphan Island’ and the Development of Modern Drama,” in McDougall, Popular Chinese Literature, 36–53 (esp. 48–50).
and used a full range of traditional techniques, which were set in a historical or legendary past newly written historical plays (written works included two kinds of pieces: the 3; and Paul Clark, performing techniques.

in the twentieth century and used more hybrid as Censorship, 1948. See also Fu Jin, Movement in Yan Yangge gairen, gaizhi repertories, artists, and organizations the theater world to – 406. 3 (2009): 387 “China in the Early 1950s, Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in

gradual fashion], jihua you buzhoude jinxing jiuju gaige gongzuo that point had only been transmitted orally. and cataloguing of regional operas that up to

forbidden. The article also urged the recording that ought to be either thoroughly revised or

were singled out as examples of harmful works

promoted feudalism, slave mentality, and opposed feudal oppression and corrupt

three categories: (1) beneficial operas, i.e., those that opposed feudalism, slave mentality, superstition, and lewd behavior. Only five operas were singled out as examples of harmful works that ought to be either thoroughly revised or forbidden. The article also urged the recording and cataloguing of regional operas that up to that point had only been transmitted orally. “You jihua you buzhoudie jinxing jiujia gongguo” [Carrying out old opera reform in a planned and

13. A much quoted directive of the time urged the theater world to “reform dramatic repertories, artists, and organizations” (gaixi, gaien, gaizhi). See Siyuan Liu, “Theatre Reform as Censorship,” 391; Xiaomei Chen, Acting the Right Part, 102–3; and Paul Clark, The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12–17. Newly written works included two kinds of pieces: the newly written historical plays (xinpian lishi xi), which were set in a historical or legendary past and used a full range of traditional techniques, and the modern plays (xianpai xi), which were set in the twentieth century and used more hybrid performing techniques.

14. What made it so hard for the local authorities and opera troupes to detect clear guidelines was the ambivalent rhetoric that characterized many CCP directives in cultural matters. See, for instance, Zhou Yang, “Guanyu difang xiqu de diaocha yanjiu gongzuoz—Zhi Cheng Yanqiu xiansheng de yifeng xin” [On the work of surveying and studying regional operas— a letter to Cheng Yanqiu, Renmin Ribao, February 26, 1950, and “Gaige he fazhan minzu xiqu yishu—Yijiuxuwenmian shiyiyue shisiri zai dijiye quanguo xiqi guanmo dahui shangde zongjie baoqiao” [Reforming and developing the national operatic arts—the conclusive talk delivered at the First National Trial Performance Convention on November 14, 1952], Renmin Ribao, December 27, 1952.

15. On the social tensions created by the local banning of operas, see Fu Jin, “Zhongguo: ‘jinxin wushi nian,” 146.

16. Mao Zedong wrote the sentence “Let a hundred flowers bloom, weed out the old to let sprout the new” (Baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin) in a piece of calligraphy that he presented to the Academy for Chinese Opera Research (Zhongguo xiqu yanjuuyuan) shortly before its opening. The slogan was read aloud during the opening ceremonies on April 3, 1951, and was thereafter considered the guiding principle of CCP’s policies on opera. The writing of inscriptions for newly opened institutions and of newspaper nameplates was common practice among prominent politicians of Mao’s generation. On the art and political functions of calligraphy in twentieth-century China, see Richard Curt Kraus, Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

17. The State Council’s “Directive on Opera Reform” (May 5, 1951), which codified the official policy to reform repertories, artists, and organizations, also emphasized the central government’s authority in any banning decision. There were, however, significant regional differences in the eagerness of local governments in prohibiting traditional opera. In Shanghai, for instance, no opera was banned in 1950. The ban on the twenty-six operas was reiterated in 1950 and officially only lifted in 2007, even though in the meantime many of them had been brought back to the stage. See Siyuan Liu, “Theatre Reform as Censorship,” 391–96; Fu Jin, “Zhongguo: ‘jinxin wushi nian,” 146.

18. “Wenhuabu guanyu kaifang jinxin de tongzhi” [Ministry of Culture’s notice on lifting the opera ban], in Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guowuyuan gongbao 21 (1957): 394; “Wenhuabu fachu
tongling, jinyan xiqu jiemu quanbu jiejin, You Cuihua zuowan chuyan Ma Siyuan” [The Ministry of Culture issues a general order, the ban on operas is completely lifted, You Cuihua performed in the performance of Ma Siyuan last night], Renmin ribao, May 18, 1957. Some of the debates at this time focused on the difficult situation in which Kun opera found itself. Kun opera troupes had not participated in the First National Trial Performance Convention in 1952 because Kunqu was not considered a “regional” genre. See Han Shichang, “Kunqu xuyao fuchi” [Kun opera needs support], Renmin ribao, May 30, 1957.

19. The 1913 film version had been directed by Zhang Shichuan for the Asia Film Company. See Jubin Hu, Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema before 1949 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 43. In the early 1950s only the Peking opera version had been officially forbidden, but as a consequence its performance in other regional styles was probably also suspended. On the wenming xi version, see Xu Ruying, “Jiefang qian wuju yan Sha zi bao” [Retribution for Killing One’s Son in Wu opera before liberation], Xiwen, no. 3 (2005): 76. On the Sichuan opera version, see Deng Xuelian, “Chuantong chuanju Sha zi bao zhong de san zhu” [“Three Attempts” in the traditional Sichuan opera Retribution for Killing One’s Son], Sichuan xiju, no. 1 (1996): 18. See also Di Wang, The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900–1950 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 146.


22. Xinhua she [Xinhua News Agency], “Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Yuan Xuefen, Chang Xiangyu, Chen Shufang, Lang Xianfen jianyi xiqu jiemo yan huai xi” [Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Yuan Xuefen, Chang Xiangyu, Chen Shufang, Lang Xianfen urge the opera world not to perform bad plays], Renmin ribao, July 24, 1957. Mei Lanfang reiterated his opposition to “bad plays” also in “Tan tan bu yan huai xi he fan youpai douzheng wenti” [On the problems of not performing bad plays and the anti-rightist struggle], Renmin ribao, September 25, 1957.


24. “Xiqu gongzuo zhengyi weisheng zhongguo xiju shenghuo er nuli” [Opera workers have to strive to reflect modern life], Renmin ribao, August 7, 1958.

25. Stalin had coined the phrase “national in form, socialist in content” in 1934. By emphasizing “national forms,” the CCP could insist on its independence from the USSR and show itself to be more Stalinist than Khrushchev. Articles emphasizing “tradition” included Mei Lanfang, “Yunyong chuantong jiqiao kehua xian dai renwu—Cong Liang Qiu yan tandao xian dai xi de biaoyan” [Using traditional techniques to portray modern characters—Liang Qiu yan and performance in modern opera], Renmin ribao, December 10, 1958; Yi Bing, “Shi chuantong jiu he xian dai ji xiang de yishan” [Letting the traditional and modern opera benefit from each other], Renmin ribao, January 6, 1959; and Hong Xiannu, “Wo dui yunyong chuantong yishu jiqiao de kanfa” [My opinions on using traditional art techniques], Renmin ribao, February 17, 1959. See also Lu Tian’s interesting essay on mise-en-scène, “Xue chuantong, mo guilu, zai jin yibu—xiqu wutai meishu zatan” [Studying tradition, sounding out the rules, going a step forward—random talk on opera stage art], Renmin ribao, June 16, 1959. What exactly these authors meant by “tradition,” however, is a question that will have to be explored in detail elsewhere.


27. It has now become customary to refer to ten years (1966–76) of the Cultural Revolution, even though Mao declared its end in 1969.

28. In addition to ten “revolutionary modern Peking operas” (geming xiandai jingju), the model works included four ballets, two symphonies, and two piano pieces, which all represented the culmination of reforms initiated in the early twentieth century. A first group of eight model works was promoted in 1967, and a second group of ten was put together in the 1970s. See Barbara Mittler, “Cultural Revolution Model Works and the Politics of Modernization in China: An Analysis of Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy,” The World of Music 45, no. 2 (2003): 53–81; and Xiaomei Chen, Acting the Right Part, 73–78.

29. Siyuan Liu, “Theatre Reform as Censorship,” and Fu Jin, “‘Baihua qifang’ yu ‘tuichen chuxin’—20 shiji 50 niandai Zhongguo xiju zhengzheng de zhongxin pinggou” [“Letting a hundred flowers bloom” and “weeding out the old
33. Shi Hui, “Tiexian pei daoyan shoujii” [Notes about directing Married to a Heavenly Immortal], originally published in Dianying yishu, no. 5 (1957), and reprinted in Shi Hui tanyi lu [Shi Hui’s talks on art], ed. Wei Shaochang (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982), 242–53. See Wilt Idema’s translation in this issue. Thanks to Professor Idema for bringing this essay and other related materials to our attention.
37. Shi Chuan, ed., Tabian qingshan ren weilao: Xu Songchu koushu zizhuan [Not yet old after crossing all these green mountains: The oral autobiography of Xu Songchu] (Beijing: Zhongguo yinyue chubanshe, 2006), 135–38. Wu Xun, a historical figure of the nineteenth century, lived many years as a beggar but eventually bought land, became a moneylender, and established a charity school for the education of poor children in Shandong. By the mid-twentieth century he had become a sort of popular hero, but the CCP Propaganda Department found that his ambiguous class status made him a relic of “feudal society” and hence an inadequate character for a film in 1951. On the various implications of the campaign against the film, see Paul Clark, Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 45–54.
39. Later Zhou Enlai also showed the film to Charlie Chaplin, who was reportedly very moved by it. According to Gao Xiaojian, however, it was Chaplin who called the film the “Chinese Romeo and Juliet,” not Zhou Enlai. Gao Xiaojian, Zhongguo xiqu dianying shi, 122.
40. In addition to breaking box-office records in Hong Kong, The Butterfly Lovers won the prize for the best musical at the Eighth Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in the Czech Republic in 1954 and a prize at the Edinburgh International Film Festival a year later. The appeal of the Yue opera film was also related to its music. In 1959 two students of the Shanghai Conservatory, He Zhanhao and Chen Gang, composed a violin concerto inspired by the opera’s chief theme, which was acclaimed as a successful “nationalization” (minzuhua) of symphonic music and sold many records in China, Hong Kong, and among Chinese communities overseas. At the outset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the concerto was criticized by Red Guards at the conservatory as a “big poisonous weed,” an obscene work, and an instance of national betrayal. See “Gong nong bing pipan da ducao Liang Zhu” [Workers, peasants, and soldiers criticize the big poisonous weed Liang and Zhu], Wenyi zhanbao, May 2, 1967, reprinted in Xin bian hongweibing ziliao [A New Collection of Red Guard Publications], part 1: Newspapers, ed. Zhou Yuan (Oakton, VA: Center for Chinese Research Materials, 1999), 14: 6734–35.
41. For the notion of “oparatic mode,” see Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, China on Screen: Cinema and Nation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 47–74. On rhythm, mise-en-scène, and the actor’s performance, see WeiHong Bao’s essay in this issue.
43. Thanks to Tom Gunning for bringing up André Bazin’s notion of “impure cinema” during
his intervention at the symposium “Chinese Opera Films after 1949.”


**Glossary**

Baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin 百花齐放, 推陈出新
Chen Duxiu 陈独秀
chuantong xi 传统戏
Dingjun shan 定军山
Diyijie quanguo xiqu guanmo yanchu dahui 第一届全国戏曲观摩演出大会
erhuang 二黄
Fan Ruijuan 范瑞娟
gaixi, gaires, gaizhi 改戏, 改人, 改制
geming xiandai jingju 革命现代京剧
Genü Hong Mudan 歌女红牡丹
huai xi 坏戏
huaju 话剧
Huangshi nü you yin 黄氏女游阴
Huiju 徽剧
Jiating xue 家庭血
jingju 京剧
Jingju xiandai xi guanmo yanchu dahui 京剧现代戏曲观摩演出大会
Kunqu 昆曲
Li Huiniang 李慧娘
Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯与祝英台
Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳
Meng Chao 孟超
Nan zheng bei zhan 南征北战
Pingju 评剧
Sha zi bao 杀子报
Shengsi hen
Tan Xinpei
wenming xi
Wu Xun zhuan
Wu Zuguang
xian dai xi
xin bian lishi xi
xipi
xiqu
xiqu dianying
Xu Sangchu
yangbanxi
Yanggeju
Yuan Xuefen
Yueju
Zhongguo xiqu yan jiuyuan
Zhonghua quanguo xiqu gaige
weiyuanhui
Zhou Xinfang

生死恨
谭鑫培
文明戏
武训传
吴祖光
现代戏
新编历史戏
西皮
戏曲
戏曲电影
徐桑楚
样板戏
秧歌剧
袁雪芬
越剧
中国戏曲研究院
中华全国戏曲改革委员会

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