

ON THE REVOLUTION OF PEKING OPERA

—Speech Made in July 1964 at the Forum
of Theatrical Workers Participating
in the Festival of Peking Opera
on Contemporary Themes

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I offer you my congratulations on the festival, for which you have worked so hard. This is the first campaign in the revolution of Peking opera. It has achieved promising results and will have relatively far-reaching influence.

Peking opera on revolutionary contemporary themes has now been staged. But do we all look at it in the same way? I don't think we can say so just yet.

We must have unshakable confidence in the staging of Peking opera on revolutionary contemporary themes. It is inconceivable that, in our socialist country led by the Communist Party, the dominant position on the stage is not occupied by the workers, peasants and soldiers, who are the real creators of history and the true masters of our country. We should create literature and art which protect our socialist economic base. When we are not clear about our orientation, we should try our best to become so. Here

I would like to give two groups of figures for your reference. These figures strike me as shocking.

Here is the first group: according to a rough estimate, there are 3,000 theatrical companies in the country (not including amateur troupes and unlicensed companies). Of these, around 90 are professional modern drama companies, 80 odd are cultural troupes, and the rest, over 2,800, are companies staging various kinds of operas and balladry. Our operatic stage is occupied by emperors, princes, generals, ministers, scholars and beauties, and, on top of these, ghosts and monsters. As for those 90 modern drama companies, they don't necessarily all depict the workers, peasants and soldiers either. They, too, lay stress on staging full-length plays, foreign plays and plays on ancient themes. So we can say that the modern drama stage is also occupied by ancient Chinese and foreign figures. Theatres are places in which to educate the people, but at present the stage is dominated by emperors, princes, generals, ministers, scholars and beauties — by feudal and bourgeois stuff. This state of affairs cannot serve to protect but will undermine our economic base.

And here is the second group of figures: there are well over 600 million workers, peasants and soldiers in our country, whereas there is only a handful of landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, Rightists and bourgeois elements. Shall we serve this handful, or the 600 million? This question calls for consideration not only by Communists but also by all those literary and art workers who love their country. The grain we eat is grown by the peasants, the clothes we wear and the houses we live in are all made by the workers, and the People's Liberation Army stands guard at the fronts of national defence for us and yet we do not portray them on the stage. May I ask which class stand you artists do take? And where is the artists' "conscience" you always talk about?

For Peking opera to present revolutionary contemporary themes will not be all plain sailing. There will be reverses, but if you consider carefully the two groups of figures I have mentioned above, there may be no reverses, or at least fewer of them. Even if there are reverses, it won't matter. History always goes forward on a zigzag course but its wheels can never be turned backwards. We stress operas on revolutionary contemporary themes which reflect real life in the fifteen years since the founding of the Chinese People's Republic and which create images of contemporary revolutionary heroes on our operatic stage. This is our foremost task. Not that we don't want historical operas. Revolutionary historical operas have formed no small proportion of the programme of the present festival. Historical operas portraying the life and struggles of the people before our Party came into being are also needed. Moreover, we need to foster some pace-setters, to produce some historical operas which are really written from the standpoint of historical materialism and which can make the past serve the present. Of course, we should take up historical operas only on the condition that the carrying out of the main task (that of portraying contemporary life and creating images of workers, peasants and soldiers) is not impeded. Not that we don't want any traditional operas either. Except for those about ghosts and those extolling capitulation and betrayal, all good traditional operas can be staged. But these traditional operas will have no audience worth mentioning unless they are carefully re-edited and revised. I have made systematic visits to theatres for more than two years and my observation of both actors and audiences led me to this conclusion. In future, the re-editing and revising of traditional operas is necessary, but this work must not replace our foremost task.

I will next discuss the question of where to make a start.

I think the key question is that you must have the plays. If you have only directors and actors and no plays there is nothing to

be directed or acted. People say that plays form the basis of theatrical productions. I think that is quite true. Therefore attention must be devoted to creative writing.

In the last few years the writing of new plays has lagged far behind real life. This is even more true in the case of Peking opera. Playwrights are few and they lack experience of life. So it is only natural that no good plays are being created. The key to tackling the problem of creative writing is the formation of a three-way combination of the leadership, the playwrights and the masses. Recently, I studied the way in which the play *Great Wall Along the Southern Sea* was created and I found that they did it exactly like this. First the leadership set the theme. Then the playwrights went three times to acquire experience of life, even taking part in a military operation to round up enemy spies. When the play was written, many leading members of the Kwangchow military command took part in discussions on it, and after it had been rehearsed, opinions were widely canvassed and revisions made. In this way, as a result of constantly asking for opinions and constantly making revisions they succeeded in turning out in a fairly short time a good topical play reflecting a real life struggle.

In the case of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee it was Comrade Ko Ching-shih himself who came to grips with the problem of creative writing. All localities must appoint competent cadres to handle this problem.

It will be difficult for some time yet to write plays specially for Peking opera. Nevertheless, people have to be appointed right now to do the job. They must first be given some special training and then go out to attain experience of life. They can begin by writing short plays and gradually work out full-length operas. It is also good to have short works, if well written.

In creative writing, new forces must be cultivated. Send them to work at the grass roots level and in three to five years they will blossom and bear fruit.

Another good way to get plays is by adaptation.

Theatrical items for adaptation must be carefully chosen. First, we must see whether or not they are good politically and secondly, whether or not they suit the conditions of the company concerned. Serious analysis of the original must be made when adapting it, its good points must be affirmed and kept intact, while its weak points must be remedied. In adapting for Peking opera attention must be paid to two aspects: on the one hand, the adaptations must be in keeping with the characteristics of Peking opera, having singing and acrobatics, and words must fit the melodies in Peking opera singing. The language used must be that of Peking opera. Otherwise the performers will not be able to sing. On the other hand, excessive compromises should not be made with the performers. An opera must have a clear-cut theme with a tightly knit structure and striking characters. In no case should the whole opera be allowed to become diffuse and flat in order to provide a few principal performers with star parts.

Peking opera uses artistic exaggeration. At the same time, it has always depicted ancient times and people belonging to those times. Therefore, it is comparatively easy for Peking opera to portray negative characters and this is what some people like about it so much. On the other hand, it is very difficult to create positive characters, and yet we must build up characters of advanced revolutionary heroes. In the original version of the opera *Taking the Bandits' Stronghold* produced by Shanghai the negative characters appeared to be overpowering, while the positive characters looked quite wizened. Since the leadership gave direct guidance, this opera has been positively improved. Now, the scene about the Taoist Ting Ho has been cut, whereas the part of Eagle—nickname of the bandit leader—has been only slightly altered (the actor who plays the part acts very well). But since the roles of the People's Liberation Army men Yang Tzu-jung and Shao Chien-po have been made more prominent, the images of those negative charac-

ters have paled by comparison. It has been said that there are different views on this opera. Debates can be held on this subject. You must consider which side you stand on. Should you stand on the side of the positive characters or on the side of the negative characters? It has been said that there are still people who oppose writing about positive characters. This is wrong. Good people are always the great majority. This is true not only in our socialist countries, but even in imperialist countries, where the overwhelming majority are labouring people. In revisionist countries, the revisionists are only a minority. We should place the emphasis on creating artistic images of advanced revolutionaries so as to educate and inspire the people and lead them forward. Our purpose in producing operas on revolutionary contemporary themes is mainly to exalt the positive characters. The opera *Little Heroic Sisters on the Grassland* performed by the Peking Opera Troupe of the Inner Mongolian Art Theatre is very good. The playwrights wrote the script for this opera with their revolutionary feeling, inspired by the outstanding deeds of the two little heroines. The middle section of the opera is very moving. It was only because the playwrights still lacked experience of real life, worked in haste and had no time for careful polishing that the beginning and the end of the opera are not so good. As it is now, it looks like a fine painting placed in a crude old frame. In this opera there is one more point worth noticing: it is a Peking opera composed for our children. In short, this opera has a firm foundation and is good. I hope that the playwrights will go back to experience the life of the people more deeply and do their best to perfect their script. In my opinion, we should treasure the fruits of our labour, and should not scrap them lightly. Some comrades are unwilling to revise works they have done, but this prevents them from making bigger achievements. In this respect, Shanghai has set us a good example. Because the Shanghai artists have been willing to polish their scripts over and over again, they have succeeded in improv-

ing *Taking the Bandits' Stronghold* to what it is today. All the items in the repertory of the present festival should be given further polishing when you return home. The items which have already been set on their feet should not be let fall lightly.

Finally, I hope that you will spend some energy on learning from one another's presentations so that audiences throughout the country will be able to see this festival's achievements.