

China's Modern Opera: Its Achievements and Future

BY

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OPERA occupies an especially important place in China's ancient cultural heritage. Traditional Chinese opera is generally known as *hsichu* (singing drama). It has its own characteristic artistic conventions and forms of expression with a style that is strongly national and realist in tradition; it enjoys nationwide popularity and is a powerful form of recreation and education for the people.

During the past 200 years, however, when the nations of the West entered a new stage of historical development, violent social changes took place which left the traditional Chinese *hsichu* lagging far behind. Meanwhile, as a result of the introduction of Western culture to China, some people felt that our traditional culture was out of step with that of the advanced nations of the world and so began to seek new channels of expression. It was in these historical conditions that the new, modern style opera was born. These same conditions also determined the fact that the creation of the new opera could not ignore or simply inherit the traditions of the old *hsichu*. Neither could it refuse to learn from nor simply imitate Western-style opera. In short, modern opera is a new form of China's national art. While it has not yet attained full maturity, it has already developed characteristics of its own. It is very difficult for us to understand it simply with the concepts of Chinese *hsichu* or European grand operas in mind.

Operas for Children

Attempts to create modern Chinese opera began after the new cultural upsurge of the May 4 Movement in 1919, which ushered in a period of literary renaissance in China. The pioneer in this field was Li Chin-huei who wrote over eight operas for children which gained widespread popularity. These works drew their inspiration from the lives of children and fairy tales. They opposed the old feudal

education of children and advocated training in accordance with the child's natural talents, the development of his or her own individual personality and a knowledge of nature. They popularised the ideas of humanism, peace, mutual help and sympathy with democracy as a leading theme. They were quite progressive for their period. In form, they adopted Chinese folk-songs (also a few foreign ones) and traditional operatic melodies. These were adapted and reconstituted to meet the requirements of dramatic development. At the same time, they also adopted the traditional form of expression of Chinese opera, i.e., singing combined with dancing. Therefore, they very quickly became popular.

Later, during the period of the second revolutionary war, (1927-1937), short song and dance items and operas were popular in the revolutionary bases. These were adapted by the entertainment units of the Red Army and the people from popular revolutionary songs (quite a few of them of Soviet origin) and folk melodies of the villages and cities. Their content reflected the current political tasks. By presenting an episode such as "Sending My Sweetheart off to the Red Army", they attained the required results as works of propaganda. Due to the fierce and protracted armed struggles and the lack of experienced literary and art workers in the revolutionary bases, there was no opportunity for the short-length song and dance dramas to achieve further development. But in reflecting the new realities of life and in serving the cause of revolutionary struggle, they formed a new tradition for later works.

Early Stages

Just prior to the outbreak of the war of resistance to Japanese aggression and during its early stages, (1935-1939), a number of experienced dramatists and musicians composed

several operas such as "Storm Over the Yangtze" (libretto by Tien Han; music by Nieh Erh), "Song of the Countryside" (libretto by Li Po-Chao; music by Lu Chi and Hsiang Yu), "March of the Army and the People" (libretto by T'ien Lan; music by Hsien Hsing-hai), "Chig Tzu" (music by Huang Yuan-lo), etc. These works, without exception, drew their inspiration from the everyday life of the people in their struggles for liberation and in the war of resistance to Japanese aggression. Their music drew upon Chinese folk-songs and revolutionary songs and adopted the techniques and methods of expression of Western songs.

It is true to say that, because of their writers' inexperience, these works are not artistically mature. Some of them drew from modern drama, so their music is, therefore, not complete. Others adopted the recitative, aria, duet, overture, chorus, and other techniques of Western opera but these were not well combined with the traditional melodies and so are not always pleasing to the ear. Still others drew from folk-songs and developed them by using specialised techniques but left many unsolved problems in musical dramatisation and characterisation. Despite their shortcomings, however, these works when originally presented, were welcomed by the masses and played an educational role in the revolutionary struggle.

In 1942, Comrade Mao Tse-tung published his famous "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Art and Literature" which gave invaluable guidance to Chinese writers and artists. After seriously studying this document, Chinese revolutionary writers examined their own thoughts, feelings, and standpoint and understood more clearly the task of literature in serving the workers, peasants and soldiers. It helped them to rectify their attitude towards the proper relationships between popularisation and higher quality and of learning from the West while developing the national tradition.

New Art

The "New Yangko Movement" originated during the spring of 1943 and marked a victory of the new art and literary movement. "Yangko" is a popular form of song and dance among the Chinese people. It expresses the cheerful, humorous, courageous and virile character of the people. Its music is bright and cheerful and includes not only the mediums



A scene from "The White-Haired Girl".

of song and dance to express the feelings of the masses but also uses the techniques of solo singing and unison dancing to portray the daily lives of the people.

The re-arrangements and creative works carried out by professional art and literary workers on this basis enabled the "Yangko" to attain new life. At first, the writers composed about 100 short and medium-length "Yangko operas". After accumulating some experience, they produced a number of major works such as "The White-Haired Girl". This is a great development on the old "Yangko" form.

"The White-Haired Girl"

"The White-Haired Girl" (play by Ho Ghing-chih and Ting I; music by Chang Lu, Chu Wei, and Ma K'o) is based on a contemporary folk-tale. It sums up an historical period. It has a grand theme with many characters. So, the authors sought inspiration from many fields in order to express the content better. Roughly speaking, in the creation of musical imagery, "The White-Haired Girl" drew on melodies from Chinese



A scene from "La Traviata".

national and operatic music for its basis; and in the structure of the whole work it adopted the style of Chinese opera. (It has singing and dialogue but it also closely combines poetry, music and dancing). Its style is, therefore, not entirely the same as that of Western "light opera" but in developing the theme it adopts the technique of "Leitmotiv" of Western opera so that the music associated with each character may have its own distinct personality.

Works of Higher Quality

There had also been much experimentation and valuable experience gained in previous creative works in the use of harmony, counterpoint, and Western musical instruments and in the combination of duets, choruses with the style of traditional opera. "The White-Haired Girl" also inherited and developed these experiences. Of course, "The White-Haired Girl" is not completely successful in solving these problems. Defects such as immaturity and disunity in artistic form, and lack of depth in characterisation still exist. But at any rate, it is a further advance in national artistic style and popularisation.

Since the establishment of New China, modern opera has been faced with the task of raising artistic quality, establishing theatre art, and mobilising the broad masses of the audience to serve the socialist construction. The past several years have also seen some works of higher quality. Among these are "Wang Kuei and Li Hsiang-hsiang" (libretto by Yu Lin; music by Liang Hanguang), "The Long March" (libretto by Li Pao-chao; music by Liang Han-Kuang and Ho-Lu-ting), and "The Spark" (libretto by Lu Peng; music by Chieh Fu) which portray the struggles of the Chinese people against the internal reactionary clique and the Japanese aggressors during the second revolutionary war; "Tung Chun-Jui" (libretto by Chen Chi-t'ung; music by Tung Ko) and "Liu Hu-lan" (libretto by Lu Shu and Hai Hsiao; music by Chen Tzu) which portray the immortal hero and heroine of the third revolutionary war. (This refers to the war of liberation against the reactionary Kuomintang government. It lasted from 1947 up to the founding of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949); "The Song of the Steppe" (libretto by Wu Ping; music by Lo Chung-hsien) which portrays the life of the Tibetan people; and the comic opera "The Marriage of Little Erh Hei" (libretto by Tien Chuan and Yang Lan-chun; music by Ma K'o and Chiao Ku), etc. These are richer and broader in scope than previous works as regards the theme, artistic form, style, method of presentation and technique. Their achievements in inheriting the national musical tradition and especially in learning from European operas have been greater than those of previous works. In general, the creative aspect of modern operas is continuing to develop along a healthy road.

History of Modern Opera

Modern Chinese opera has a history of only 37 years but it has grown in Chinese soil and travelled its own peculiar road of development which is not the same as that of Italian or Russian opera. In the first place, it is a product of China's revolutionary struggle and so reflects this together with the realities of contemporary life. It exposes the enemy and the darkness of the old society while portraying the misery of the oppressed people and expressing their hatred and fierce struggle. It pays tribute to the heroes, expresses the feelings of the masses and has a strong spirit of the present era with an intense class feeling.

In those difficult years modern opera became a powerful weapon for raising the people's militant spirit and their self-education. Due to this peculiarity, modern opera has been closely united with the people from the very beginning and has sought the forms of expression which were most popular with them. During the early period some writers advocated an "art for art's sake" policy and attempted some works but these soon proved a failure. Subsequently, nearly all works, especially those following the launching of the new "Yangko" movement, expressed the popular qualities and national form which the writers consciously strove for in their artistic creation.

'Singing Drama'

In order to enrich their own method of expression, writers of modern Chinese opera derived much valuable material from the rich heritage of national music, from folk-songs, recitative music, dance music and especially from the music of "singing drama". They combined the traditions of national drama with modern opera while also absorbing many good things from the Western opera. Although Western opera has not made a deep impression on Chinese audiences as a whole, it has produced a positive influence on Chinese writers and composers. (Early last year "La Traviata" was staged in Peking by a Chinese cast, this being the first Western opera formally presented by Chinese artists).

Since 1956 when the Communist Party of China advocated the principle of "Let a hundred flowers blossom and diverse schools of thought contend" in cultural and ideological works, a lively and flourishing atmosphere has appeared in the fields of art and literature. Although the influence of modern opera has not yet manifested itself in creative works, it was obvious during the discussion in "Problems of Modern Opera" held last February under the auspices of the Association of Chinese Musicians and the Association of Dramatists that all writers and composers actively expressed their views and debated the subject warmly. There is no doubt that the discussion will contribute much towards the development of our modern opera.

Subject Matter of Modern Opera

Firstly, as regards the subject matter of modern opera, was it a correct trend that in

the past it expressed mainly contemporary life and struggles? Should the creative themes be broader in scope in future? On this question, most writers and composers gave an affirmative answer while some emphasised the tremendous effect of contemporary life themes on the people's ideological education, others stressed the difficulties encountered by these themes as regards the form of expression and urged that creation should be attempted from many aspects.

In my opinion, the subject matter of modern opera should be broadened in scope and it is not necessary to impose many arbitrary rules on it. In its role of educating the people, the choice of contemporary or non-contemporary themes is by no means decisive; different themes have their own peculiar problems of artistic form which have to be solved; and the choice of themes must be determined by writers on the basis of their past experience in life, their artistic training and their personal interests. Of course, the requirements of the people and their growing appreciation of art cannot but influence the decisions of writers and composers. Judging from the present situation, the people not only want operas with contemporary themes but also welcome those based on non-contemporary ones, especially historical or legendary themes. It is just this that the works of modern opera lack. But in both Chinese and Western opera, there have been some excellent traditions established and rich experiences gained in this respect.

In Chinese opera especially, striking roles such as those of ancient philosophers, statesmen, poets, national heroes, and leaders of peasant uprisings have been created. Operas with themes based on legends and fairy tales such as "Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai", "The Story of the White Snake", etc., have been presented by various local dramatic companies. Such themes could be revised and reconstituted so that they can be staged as modern opera.

Form of Expression

Next, what should be the form of expression of modern Chinese opera? Should it be given a criterion? On this question the opinions of many writers also vary. Some people are of the opinion that modern Chinese opera should take "Glinka's road", that it should be expressed in the form of continuous music

from start to finish, and that the chief aim should be the creation of music. Others think that modern opera should be more like traditional opera, that it should draw its methods of expression from traditional opera.

It is my opinion that these two opinions should be complementary to each other. Of course, it is not fitting to raise the question of "Glinka's road". We respect Glinka for his work in establishing Russian opera and should learn from his creative spirit but this is not the same as saying that we want Chinese composers to take Glinka's road.

Historical Experience

Meanwhile, in addition to Glinka all the masters of European opera should be our teachers. If we say that historical experience in regard to the creation of modern opera has proved that Chinese composers have learned much from European opera, we should henceforth intensify our efforts in this respect.

If a composer understands fully the life and feelings of the people and their musical language, it is not a bad thing for him to adopt the forms of expression of European opera and to stress the role of music in portraying the character images in the way that grand opera has done in the past. Judging from the warm reception given to "La Traviata", "The Storm", and "Eugene Onegin" (the latter two were presented in Peking in 1955 by the Moscow Music Theatre) by Chinese audiences, they apparently find the forms of expression of European opera quite acceptable. Of course, no promising Chinese composer would blindly imitate European operas. Even when they adopt the forms of expression of European opera, they should do it in a creative way and still maintain their own national characteristics.

Traditional Opera

Should modern Chinese opera be more like traditional opera? Of course it can and should be. This question may not exist in a country where there is no operatic tradition. Under those circumstances, the creation of a national opera may possibly be achieved on the basis of arranging folk-songs in the same form as foreign operas but the long tradition

of Chinese opera has had a deep-rooted influence on the people and its form of expression has developed as a complete system. Can new operas be created on the basis of the traditional form? If composers understand the people's life and feelings and creatively use the various methods of expression of traditional opera, they can likewise create modern operas. These modern operas will be farther removed from the style of European opera and more closely related to the traditional type and this in itself is not a bad thing.

Does this mean that henceforth, modern Chinese opera should be created in accordance with the two models, *i.e.*, European opera and traditional opera? I think that the question is by no means so simple. The problems of artistic creation are complex ones. With regard to the forms of expression and style, especially, it would not do to set down a few basic rules as do workers in making a machine to conform with a blueprint. In forms of expression, the composers may base their works on European grand or light opera. They may even refuse to take any existing form as a basis but create and draw upon past experiences in a broader way. Only by so doing can they meet the people's broad interests and requirements in artistic appreciation; can the creative talents of composers possessed of different artistic viewpoints and technical knowledge be brought into full play; can the audience have a basis for comparison and choice and can artists become fully tempered through a broad road of creation?

National Form

In the past, the composers of modern Chinese opera observed the principles of socialist realism and the maintenance of national form in their work of artistic creation. I believe that the great majority of them would not relinquish these principles. However, if some writers do not wish to create in accordance with these principles, they should be permitted to do so. We should have faith in the power of appreciation of the masses and respect the labours of writers and composers in bringing their latent potentialities into full play. I have no doubt that if we observe the principle of "Let a hundred flowers blossom" in the field of artistic creation, modern Chinese opera will flourish, become enriched and take on a new look.