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978-1-107-07632-7 - Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution

Brian James DeMare

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Introduction

Performing Mao's revolution

In the spring of 1947, the Combat Dramatic Society premiered its latest creation, a tragic drama laden with revolutionary concepts closely related to the two all-encompassing campaigns then shaking the Chinese countryside. The first, a military campaign, was the Chinese Civil War, a brutal conflict that pitted soldiers under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party against the forces of its longtime rival the Guomindang. When not performing for war-weary soldiers, the Combat Dramatic Society toured in support of the second campaign, land reform, which promised to tear down and transform rural China through the introduction of class labels, violent class struggle, and the subsequent redistribution of village property. Like most of the cultural performance units then under Communist direction, the Combat Dramatic Society was a motley mixture of urban intellectuals and rural artists brought together to inspire revolutionary action among soldiers and citizens alike. The troubadours of the revolution and the centerpiece of Mao Zedong's "cultural army," drama troupes represented the vanguard of revolutionary culture, yet were often held in suspicion by the military and political leaders whose causes they ceaselessly promoted.

On one particular spring night in 1947, the Combat Dramatic Society staged what would quickly become its most famous creation, a "land reform opera" that the troupe hoped would inspire audiences to dramatic acts of violence against the agents of counter-revolution, be they landlords or Guomindang soldiers. The troupe named its "true life" show *Liu Hulan* after the story's heroine, a young peasant woman who devoted her short life to supporting the Communists and their armed forces, only recently renamed the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In *Liu Hulan*, the titular character's ties to the Communists and her participation in land reform enraged her village landlord, who conspired with enemy soldiers under the notorious "Big Beard" to capture and terrorize Liu, eventually beheading the peasant girl on the village threshing grounds. The Combat Dramatic Society staged this cruel tale of class struggle with the intention of mobilizing soldiers to strike at the enemy,

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but the audience instead attacked the troupe's own actors. During the scene depicting the execution of Liu Hulan, the dénouement of the show, the audience grew incensed. The result, according to one local gazetteer, was a near-murderous scene:

During the first performance, many cadres and soldiers were so touched that tears streamed down their faces. Some soldiers were so moved they forgot they were watching a drama and started throwing rocks and firing their guns at [the villainous and evil bandit] "Big Beard."¹

During future performances of *Liu Hulan*, the Combat Dramatic Society banned live ammunition and required soldiers to sit on their bags instead of on rocks, which could be used as lethal weapons. Furthermore, three squads were to patrol the crowd to maintain order and ensure the safety of actors, lest the audience once again confuse on-stage drama for off-stage revolution.

Five years later, the Liucao Village Drama Troupe similarly took to the stage to bring the revolution to its audience, and once again the lines between reality and performance blurred in unexpected ways. While this drama troupe was staffed by amateur actors and mostly performed in its native Hubei village, the outfit had striking commonalities with the Combat Dramatic Society. Grassroots soldiers in Mao's cultural army, the troupe was a mixture of diverse artists brought on stage to present the perceived truths of the revolution to a crowd that was expected to internalize this vision before bringing rural revolution to fruition. As had been the case with professional PLA troupes, the professed importance of these amateur actors to the revolution lay in sharp contrast to the limited support they received from their leaders. But much had changed. Formed after the successful establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which allowed the Communist Party unfettered access to villages throughout Mao's "New China," amateur troupes were composed of an uneasy alliance of poor peasant activists, rural schoolteachers, and local artists. As amateurs, they often clashed with PRC cultural policies, especially when actors put entertainment and opportunities for profit before the political and economic priorities of the young state.

The competing agendas of amateur actors and the state could thus become touchstones for political conflict, a problem evident in the incident surrounding the Liucao Village Drama Troupe and its original production, *New People*. Created and staged during the height of land reform in Hubei, *New People* offered what might be seen as a refreshing

¹ *Shanxi tongzhi di sishi juan: wenhua yishu zhi* [Shanxi General Gazetteer #40: Culture and Art Gazetteer] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 157.

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take on the problem of class division. According to the show's narrative, the arrival of the PLA in Liucao provided an unexpected solution to class conflict. As performed on its village stage, the magnanimous nature of the PLA had transformed the landlords of Liucao into loyal citizens, ready to stand with the peasant masses. Land reform, the drama further explained, could conclude without violent class struggle and the ritualistic humiliation of "class enemies," who were now in fact the "new people" of the show's title. Tellingly, the Liucao Village Drama Troupe entered the historical record as one of many troupes criticized by Hubei's cultural authorities for falling under the sway of landlords and other class enemies, who used their mastery of culture to take over village troupes. Once in charge of cultural production, critics charged, these "class enemies" forced peasants to act out counterrevolutionary scripts, with the goal of using the power of the stage to whitewash their crimes against the masses. For provincial cultural authorities, *New People* was "sheer nonsense,"² but the show's rejection of party policy was no laughing matter.

The performances of *Liu Hulan* and *New People* are just two instances of the staging of revolutionary drama in the Chinese countryside, where Mao's revolution took root and grew to fruition.³ With Mao repeatedly insisting on drama as the most effective way to disseminate policy, instigate political action, and transform the Chinese people, the staging and reception of these works in the countryside offer true insight into the culture of Maoist revolution and state-building. Scholars have long recognized that the success of the Chinese Communists must be in part due to their distinctive approach to culture. Most recently, Elizabeth Perry has argued that Mao and other top leaders' use of symbolic resources ("religion, ritual, rhetoric, dress, drama, art, and so on") allowed mass acceptance of the revolution.⁴ While Perry is certainly right to highlight the role of culture in the Chinese revolution, her focus on a handful of top political leaders in a single mining town demonstrates the need to broaden the scale of inquiry and capture the wide range of cultural interactions that occurred across rural China during the course of the

² "Nongcun jutuan yao xuanchuan Mao Zedong sixiang, jianjue fandui fengjian sixiang" [Rural drama troupes must propagate Mao Zedong ideology, resolutely oppose feudal ideology] HBWY #13 (1952), 4–5.

³ Recent scholarship has reconfirmed the primacy of the countryside in understanding the rise of the Chinese Communists to power. Odd Westad, for example, has argued that deft and numerous compromises with rural populations gave the party a decisive edge over its rivals. See Odd Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 107.

⁴ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 4.

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Communist revolution. Any attempt to understand what Maoist culture meant for the revolution and everyday life under Communist rule must fully engage the Chinese countryside, where the vast majority of Chinese citizens lived during the tumultuous twentieth century.

Investigation into the drama troupes and propaganda teams of Mao's cultural army over the long course of the revolution reveals China's rural revolution as a participatory political performance highly informed by the cultural performances staged by Communist directed actors. After the arrival of Communist power, villagers had to actively take part in rural revolution, which meant imbibing and performing Maoist political culture. For most rural Chinese, this was a process that included taking on the identity of "peasant" (*nongmin*), a new concept in the countryside.⁵ Less fortunate villagers were forced to accept class identities that would mark them as enemies of the people, most commonly "landlord" (*dizhu*), a role the Communists would force unlucky village households to play for generations. Frank Dikötter, emphasizing the novelty of the term, has gone as far as to suggest that the idea of China having a "dominant class" of landlords was pure fiction.⁶ Dikötter's claim is part of his recasting of Communist "liberation" as "tragedy," and while this approach may overshadow the real class inequalities that existed in parts of rural China, his rhetorical choices also reveal how the theatricality of China's revolution had real consequences for political participants.

Rural audiences saw powerful examples of new class identities on Communist stages, but they did not passively accept the messages and ideas imbedded in revolutionary dramas – as noted in recent studies of Chinese culture during the revolution, audience reception is difficult to gauge, especially in light of the autonomous power of audiences to reject or interpret cultural productions.⁷ But even when rural audiences did not become Maoist true believers, they learned new skills essential for life

⁵ The term *nongmin* was a Japanese creation based on classical Chinese, where it meant "country folk." For classical examples, see Luo Zhufeng, ed., *Hanyu Da Cidian* [Comprehensive Chinese dictionary] (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1997), 5919. For more on the modern creation of the Chinese peasant, see Myron Cohen, "Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese Peasant," *Daedalus* 122, No. 2 (1993).

⁶ Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 70. Dikötter's claim is partly based on the discussion of class labels found in my dissertation. See Brian James DeMare, "Turning Bodies and Turning Minds: Land Reform and Chinese Political Culture, 1946–1952" (doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), 152–153.

⁷ For example, see Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3. Also Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 12–13.

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under Communist rule. For these newly created peasants, performing Maoist political culture was the true meaning of the revolution on an experiential level. Drama troupes served as the mainstay of Mao's cultural army because their staging of the revolution could be re-performed by rural audiences during mass campaigns and in their everyday lives under Communist rule.

This was particularly true during the land reform era of 1945–1952, roughly bookended by the performances of the Combat Dramatic Society and the Liucuo Village Drama Troupe. The combination of all-out warfare, radical agrarian revolution, and intensive state-building between 1946 and 1952 enabled the full development of new dramatic organizations and new forms of cultural performance. Mobilized on an ever-greater scale, propaganda teams and drama troupes continually brought land reform operas, charged with a radical political culture built around Maoist rhetoric and ritual, ever deeper into the countryside. The Combat Dramatic Society represented one of the finest examples of the professional revolutionary drama troupe, a highly mobile unit staging powerful shows that drew their power from their “real-life” backgrounds, deft use of gender tropes, and malleable folk forms that could be adapted by troupes throughout the Chinese countryside. The Liucuo Village Drama Troupe, meanwhile, demonstrates the full flowering of revolutionary drama made possible by land reform and other state-building campaigns in the early PRC era. In a few short years, the PRC state mobilized tens of thousands of amateur drama troupes throughout rural China, performing in popular local styles while directing land reform and related mass campaigns at the local level. At no other time would Mao's cultural army have such a direct impact on the course of the Communist revolution.

The experiences of these two divergent troupes, however, also suggest the limits of revolutionary drama as staged by professional and amateur performers. As Paul Clark has noted, live performances, unlike film, must rely on distant and thus difficult-to-control performers as intermediaries between producers and viewers, greatly complicating the dissemination of party messages.⁸ Adapting to local cultural tastes, meanwhile, was a lengthy and difficult process. The Combat Dramatic Society, for example, only created its signature drama after troupe members spent years searching for the right mixture of traditional culture and revolutionary politics. Even at the height of their fame, these actors struggled for the respect and pay given to their peers working outside

⁸ Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2.

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of the cultural realm. And while performances of *Liu Hulan* evoked passionate responses from audiences, villagers were often equally passionate in rejecting revolutionary works and demanding traditional operas. In an environment where the stage became an accepted voice for party policy and a mirror for village society, controlling cultural performances assumed critical importance.

This was still true after the Communists turned from military conquest to state-building in the 1950s. Traversing the 1949 divide, this study explores the staging of revolutionary drama in the PRC countryside and finds a rich assortment of drama troupes caught between audience expectations and the directives of the young state. With Maoist political culture in continual need of reinforcement, the Communists assigned their cultural army the difficult task of promoting mass campaigns and creating socialist peasants. But drama troupes, now mostly operating outside of the military structures that had informed the early development of Mao's cultural army, could scarcely ignore the fact that rural audiences, free from decades of endemic warfare, were eager to get politics off stage and demanded a return to traditional opera. The resulting and seemingly endless series of interventions by the PRC state into the dramatic realm never overcame audience preference for traditional opera. Despite their usefulness as performers of Maoist political culture, drama troupes were never an easy fit with the Communist Party or the PRC state, and their need to please audiences ensured the PRC dramatic world was a contested realm. Frustration with the inability to control troupes would eventually culminate in the failed attempt by Jiang Qing and like-minded cultural critics to finally and fully tame drama during the Cultural Revolution.⁹

The constant campaigns to control drama troupes serve as important reminders that, while always an unruly force, the importance of these troupes in performing political culture during mass campaigns and in everyday life ensured the continued prominence of Mao's cultural army. The dramatic quality of Maoist revolution, furthermore, had a powerful legacy for the PRC era, ensuring that political life in Mao's China was profoundly theatrical. From the parading of landlords donning dunce caps in land reform, to the public denunciations of "rightists" during the 1950s, and peaking in the highly staged "struggle" sessions (from the Chinese *douzhenhui*, a gathering to denounce class enemies or other hostile elements), political life in Mao's China can be characterized as a unique mode of mass participatory theater. As Barbara Mittler has

⁹ Even the most paradigmatic Cultural Revolution dramas could not overcome the tensions inherent in the dramatic world. See Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 108.

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recently argued for the Cultural Revolution, propaganda art was “not just received and reacted to, but was formed and enacted by its audience.”¹⁰ While most identified with mass campaigns during the Cultural Revolution, the performance of politics has outlived Mao. One of the most influential interpretations of the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests, for example, classified the event as an instance of political street theater.¹¹ Politically charged acting was an essential facet of life even before the founding of the PRC, and drama troupes paved the way in turning all Chinese citizens into political actors. During the early stages of the revolution, long before film and radio were ubiquitous, drama troupes provided essential models of cultural and political performances.

The analysis of drama troupes during the Chinese revolution requires the mobilization of a diverse set of sources in order to access the daily lives of drama troupe members and recreate their unique mode of revolutionary practice, but these sources present unique challenges to historians. Dramatist memoirs, typically created in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, reveal the mundane details of staging revolutionary dramas, even as their authors used discursive strategies to reclaim the mantle of revolutionary culture from Jiang Qing and her radical allies. Contemporary documents issued by the Communist Party and the PRC state explicate official policy, but often overstate the power and reach of the Communist cultural infrastructure. First-hand reports by educated artists and other intellectuals contain a wealth of information concerning the successes and failures of cultural work in the countryside, although this information is often colored by the ulterior motives of authors, particularly when these documents were attempts to lay claim to revolutionary authority.

Contemporary accounts penned by Western observers contain a rare combination of criticism of the Communists and the drive to record details of dramatic performances that often seemed commonplace to Chinese audiences. These outsiders tended to accept the basic assumptions of their Communist hosts, including the inevitability of class struggle in rural society. Cultural handbooks and literary journals bring to light the workings of mass cultural campaigns at the local level, but while they were often forthcoming with the difficulties of rural cultural work, these authors shared their own set of preconceived truths regarding the power of culture and the correctness of the revolution. Provincial and

¹⁰ Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 14.

¹¹ Joseph Esherick and Jeffery Wasserstrom, “Acting out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (November 1990).

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county archival sources offer insights into the tensions between the state and the dramatic realm, yet tend to present artists as either loyal cultural workers or deviant hooligans. Even revolutionary drama scripts, subject to revision over time and space as they were performed by successive drama troupes in an ever-diversifying set of local styles, must be used with caution.

When deployed carefully and in tandem, these sources reveal revolutionary drama – which Mao Zedong promoted as the most effective propaganda weapon in the arsenal of the Communists' cultural army – as a decidedly difficult weapon to wield. Communist-directed drama troupes spent decades searching for the correct formula for drawing rural audiences, only finding success after making significant concessions to local cultural traditions. During the early years of revolutionary drama, troupes struggled to provide a meaningful role beyond entertaining party leaders and providing some measure of relaxation and motivation to weary soldiers. And while the Anti-Japanese War is often seen as the golden age of revolutionary drama, it was not until the land reform era that cultural work truly came into its own. Drama troupes staged land reform operas to inculcate audiences in the radical political culture that informed the Civil War, agrarian reform, and early PRC mass campaigns. To be sure, village audiences never forgot their deep preference for traditional opera, but the arrival of land reform gave modern shows a unique relevancy in the countryside. Adapting traditional cultural forms to help draw audiences, actors staged performances using new rhetoric and new ritual, teaching audiences the very political culture that was needed to navigate life under Communist rule. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of political culture in the Chinese revolution, and this study further demonstrates that the symbolic power of Maoist language and politically charged behaviors, the core of drama troupe performances, were the defining characteristics of the Chinese revolution.¹²

¹² James Gao, for example, has explored how the Communist Party used “cultural weapons” to consolidate the PRC regime in urban areas, arguing that the party excelled at embedding meaningful symbols in ritual performances, especially the political meeting. Daniel Leese has similarly argued for the importance of rhetoric and ritual for the development of the Maoist cult during the Cultural Revolution. Chang-tai Hung, meanwhile, has noted that the “creation of a series of novel political-cultural forms” in the 1950s helped consolidate the PRC regime and inculcate a socialist culture in China. See James. Z. Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou: The Transformation of City and Cadre, 1949–1954* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 3; Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 2.

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This study situates Mao's cultural army within the context of the long ties between political and cultural performances in China. Reformers and revolutionaries consistently used drama to promote social change and national issues throughout the twentieth century. In this regard, Chinese dramatists and political leaders, as well as historians interested in Chinese drama, accept a direct correlation between dramatic acting and political action. May Fourth iconoclast and pioneering Chinese Marxist Chen Duxiu succinctly summed up the revolutionary implications of drama *vis-à-vis* literature in 1904:

Some are promoting social reform by writing new novels or publishing their own newspapers, but they have no impact on the illiterate. Only the theater, through reform, can excite and change the whole society – the deaf can see it, and the blind can hear it. There is no better vehicle for social reform than the theater.¹³

Qu Qiubai would succeed Chen as the leader of the Communist Party, only to take the blame for the party's subsequent failures and be pushed into cultural work. But in this capacity, Qu firmly established the concept of drama as the preeminent form of Communist propaganda. After helping to found the Communists' first drama academy in 1934, he insisted on sending units to tour villages and the frontlines.¹⁴ By the land reform era, political activists accepted drama as a powerful medium that could not only mobilize audiences for political action, but fundamentally transform the audiences' views as well. Thus, at the outset of Hubei's land reform, one literary journal announced that drama was the primary component of the literature and arts propaganda "weapon" that would enlighten and mobilize the peasantry for the campaigns.¹⁵ It was not just cultural elites positing a firm connection between viewing dramas and personal transformation. One village leader, noting that his wife was fed up with his activism to the point of halting her housework and threatening him with violence, pleaded for a cultural work team to come to his village so that it might "perform shows and help change the thinking of such people."¹⁶

¹³ Chen Duxiu, "On Theater," in *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present*, ed. Faye Chunfang Fei (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 120.

¹⁴ Chen Baichen and Dong Jian, eds., *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao: 1899–1949*. [Chinese modern drama draft history: 1899–1949] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2008), 451.

¹⁵ "Yingjie di er ge fanshen nian" [Welcoming the second year of fanshen] HBWY 3.1 (1951), 11.

¹⁶ "Nongmin daibiao tan wenyi" [Peasant representatives discuss literature and arts] HBWY 1.5 (1950), 9.

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Historians, following the lead of artists and political activists, have also believed in the power of drama to influence Chinese audiences.¹⁷ While this is particularly true for historians working within the PRC, Western historians have expanded the linkages between theater and politics, arguing that Chinese drama has promoted political and religious messages since at least the Yuan dynasty, with later dynasties practicing censorship while also hoping to influence audiences through drama. This perspective was initially popularized by Colin Mackerras, a pioneer in the academic study of Chinese drama, who argued that drama played a decisive role in the downfall of the imperial system as well as the rise of the Communists to power.¹⁸ More recent studies have confirmed Mackerras's conviction that politicized dramas provided one of the keys to Communist success. Chang-tai Hung stressed how the Communists' mastery of popular culture, including the party's development of new dramatic forms, helped ensure its victory over the Guomindang.¹⁹ Investigating the formation of these new dramatic forms, David Holm similarly argued that during the Civil War:

the drama movement was undoubtedly one of the most powerful propaganda weapons in the Communists' arsenal, and one which gave them a considerable advantage with their rivals when it came to communicating with the civilian peasant population and with their own troops.²⁰

Exploring theater in the Cultural Revolution era, Xiaomei Chen suggested that even when far removed from times of war, drama still held immense power over its audiences, shaping personal and national identities.²¹

¹⁷ For example, see Deng Bangyu, ed., *Jiefangjun xiju shi* [A history of PLA drama] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2004), 5; Chen Baichen and Dong Jian, eds., *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao: 1899–1949*, 449.

¹⁸ Looking at the Qing dynasty, Mackerras emphasized the strong link between politics and the theater; according to Mackerras the politicization of drama, the best way to reach the masses, helped bring about the downfall of the dynasty as well as the imperial model. Turning to the revolutionary era, Mackerras argued that theater was driven ever closer to the masses as activists performed propaganda that was simple and direct, and thus effective. Just as politicized theater had contributed to the downfall of the Qing state, so too does Mackerras suggest that the Communist Party's ability to use theater as a "political weapon was one factor leading to its victory" over the Guomindang. See Colin Mackerras, "The Drama of the Qing Dynasty," in *Chinese Theater: From its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Colin Mackerras (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 114. Colin Mackerras, "Theater and the Masses," in *Chinese Theater: From its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Colin Mackerras (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 159.

¹⁹ Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 271.

²⁰ David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 319.

²¹ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 74.