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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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## Mao's Cultural Army

Charting their training, travels, and performances, this innovative study explores the role of the artists that roamed the Chinese countryside in support of Mao Zedong's communist revolution. DeMare traces the development of Mao's "cultural army" from its genesis in Red Army propaganda teams to its full development as a largely civilian force composed of amateur and professional drama troupes in the early years of the PRC. Drawing from memoirs, artistic handbooks, and rare archival sources, *Mao's Cultural Army* uncovers the arduous and complex process of creating revolutionary dramas that would appeal to China's all-important rural audiences. The Communists strived for a disciplined cultural army to promote party policies, but audiences often shunned modern and didactic shows, and instead clamored for traditional works. DeMare illustrates how drama troupes, caught between the party and their audiences, did their best to resist the ever-growing reach of the PRC state.

BRIAN JAMES DEMARE is an Assistant Professor at the Department of History, Tulane University, where he teaches courses on modern Chinese history.

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*Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution*

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Brian James DeMare

*Tulane University*



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## Preface and acknowledgements

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Nearly a decade later, I can still recall with the utmost clarity the endless bus rides, freezing cold showers, uncomfortable beds, and bureaucratic red tape. Nothing can quite compare to conducting research in rural China. It was the summer of 2005, and I had joined up with two fellow UCLA graduate students to venture out into the North China countryside. Having spent the past few years in Beijing crafting my dissertation on rural political culture during land reform, I was determined to investigate what had emerged as the most intriguing yet elusive aspect of my research: revolutionary drama in the countryside.

Working in tandem to make the most of our time in the countryside, the three of us dined with local academics, interviewed villagers, and did our best to charm suspicious archivists. The trip was grueling, but to borrow an oft-used phrase from the land reform era, the harvest from our time in the countryside was indeed bountiful. We befriended new colleagues and unearthed surprising finds in sweltering archives. Most vivid are the memories of the many times we were welcomed into the homes of villagers to hear their stories of rural life in Mao's China.

The stories and documents I discovered on that 2005 trip inspired return visits and ultimately this book. Meeting with amateur and professional dramatists, musicians, and actors, I encountered a vibrant cultural scene that was a comfortable mixture of the traditional and the modern. In Ding County, drinking fizzy warm beer and listening to what can only be described as an evening roadside jam session, I recognized Yan'an era revolutionary classics. In the Changzhi countryside, I took in an open-air performance by a professional rural drama troupe. The show, which stretched on for well over three hours, was a traditional number featuring scholars and maidens. Yet the troupe also put on modern and didactic works, and in private conversations, older actors even waxed nostalgic for the good old days, when their revolutionary works were often the only shows around. These experiences inspired me to get past scripts and capture the performances of these dramas during the formative stages of Mao's rise to power. It was time to put the spotlight on drama troupes

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and question their role in the revolution, as well as what their shows meant for the nature of the Communists' great enterprise.

A trip to the countryside inspired this book, but that trip only took place because I was lucky enough to study history with Philip Huang. His belief in the importance of rural culture to the Chinese revolution inspired the direction of my research, and his careful reading of my work pushed me to become a better scholar. Kathryn Bernhardt held up the other half of the sky at UCLA. Her nuanced approach to the issue of gender in Chinese history has profoundly influenced my teaching and research. I also had the great fortune to study with Lynn Hunt, and my determination to investigate rural China from a cultural perspective owes much to her guidance. Fred Notehelfer's infectious joy for studying Japanese history, meanwhile, provided the final essential piece to my education at UCLA.

Professors Huang and Bernhardt trained several generations of talented historians at UCLA, and I am very proud to count myself as a member of their final cohort of students. Four of my UCLA classmates warrant special mention. Thomas Dubois helped me navigate the minefield of early career academia with equal parts wit and wisdom. Zhang Jiayan generously offered his understanding of rural China as he read through this entire manuscript. Byungil Ahn has proven a capable research partner and done much to make my time in the countryside both productive and enjoyable. Norm Apter, whose untimely passing we are still mourning, kept me closely tied to the UCLA program even when I found myself in the farthest reaches of China.

As years of research slowly grew into this manuscript, many gifted scholars have read and commented on my work. Neil Diamant, Yang Kuisong, Julia Strauss, Li Huaiyin, Jacob Eyerth, and Carma Hinton all commented on various conference papers. Zhang Xiaojun provided much inspiration as we chatted over pumpkin cakes and dark beer at Qinghua University. Many other scholars have contributed to this work, and even if they were not aware they were providing help, Marc Matten, Margherita Zanasi, Felix Wemheuer, and Hauke Neddermann were among the many that shaped this project along the way. Matthew Johnson, who has been a friend and colleague for over a dozen years, generously provided his insightful comments into every chapter of this book.

I offer sincere thanks to the scholars at the Chinese Social History Research Center run by Professor Xing Long. Xing Long and his students at Shanxi University, most importantly Ma Weiqiang and Deng Hongqin, were instrumental in helping me access the Shanxi countryside, as well as the province's notoriously bureaucratic archives. Han Yanke, Shen Maqun, Zhang Fuqing, Wei Bao'en, and Han Tiansheng



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all helped introduce me to a vibrant rural cultural scene. And a most heartfelt thanks goes out to Wang Jinhong, longtime village leader of Longbow Village, where William Hinton researched his study of land reform in rural Shanxi. "Secretary Wang" welcomed me into his home and provided me with contacts, introductions, and so many bowls of noodles that I feared for my life. Wang, referencing his good friend from the West, even called me "the next Hinton." While I suspect I am only one of many to receive this title, I count it among my most treasured accomplishments.

Research and writing were supported by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award and a National Security Education Program David L. Boren Fellowship. Additional funds were provided by a Peking University Harvard-Yenching Fellowship, a UCLA Center for Chinese Studies Grant, and multiple Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowships. Tulane University has also generously supported my work by providing funds and an indispensable network of colleagues. Deepest thanks to everyone in my department, including George Bernstein, Jana Lipman, Thomas Luongo, Elisabeth McMahon, Linda Pollock, Patrice Downs, Samuel Ramer, Randy Sparks, Karissa Haugeberg, and Donna Denneen. My students have been a great source of inspiration, and special thanks goes to those students who braved their way through this book to offer an undergraduate perspective: Spencer Karr, Jane Hayashi, Travis Tessnow, and Anna Gaca.

Further thanks are due to the teachers and directors at the Inter-University Program based out of Qinghua University, where I spent two years studying Chinese. My classmates and friends from these years remain incredibly dear to my heart. Keefer Douglas, Robert Hoppens, Matt Furchen, Brent Haas, Salena Chow, Jenifer Bubel, Bryan Withall, and John Furman all went through the crucible of IUP with me, honing our language skills with late night cram sessions at the Hidden Tree. Cao Jian, A Jian, Li Ailing, Scott Harold, and Bradley Murg also helped make Beijing special.

Seeing this book published through Cambridge University Press has brought me immense satisfaction. The support of Lucy Rhymer, my editor, proved essential for this first time author. Thanks are also due to Joanna Breeze, Amanda George, Trevor Matthews, and Anne Valentine for their help in moving this book into production. And I would be remiss if I did not express my debts to the editors of the Cambridge Studies in the History of the People's Republic of China, especially Jeremy Brown and Michael Schoenhals, who both read and commented on the manuscript. I am thrilled that my book is the first in this new series and look forward to future publications.

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My son Miles came into this world just as I was finishing this book, greatly complicating my life in a most wonderful way and reminding me of the importance of family. This book would not exist without the love and support I received from my wife Nina. Nor would I be the person I am today without my three older siblings. Pamela provided my early music education and the important lesson that feminism is cool. Jeffery served as my role model, for better or worse but mostly better. Tracey never forgot to be a friend as well as a sister.

In closing, I must admit that I was not always the most filial of sons. Confucius would have surely disapproved of my decision to spend so many years on the other side of the globe. But I have always deeply appreciated the affection and wisdom my parents, Paul and Maggie, have given me over the years. This book is dedicated to them.

# Abbreviations for archives, serials, and collections

BLZK	<i>Balujun lao zhanshi koushu shilu</i> [Oral history records from old Eighth Route Army soldiers]. Zhang Junfeng, ed. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2005.
HBTX	<i>Hubei wenhua tongxun</i> [Hubei cultural newsletter]: Hubei: Hubei sheng renmin zhengfu suo wenhua shiye guanli ju.
HBWY	<i>Hubei wenyi</i> [Hubei literature and arts]. Wuhan: Hubei sheng wenlian.
HJSQ	<i>Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wenyi shiliao xuanbian: hongjun shiqi</i> [PLA literature and arts historical materials: Red Army era]. 2 vols. Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1986.
HPA	Hubei provincial archives (Wuhan).
JCJX	<i>Jin-Cha-Ji cun jutuan juben xuan</i> [Selected plays from Jin-Cha-Ji village drama troupes]. Zhang Xuexin, ed. Jin-Cha-Ji wenyi yanjiu hui: 2002.
JZSQ	<i>Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wenyi shiliao xuanbian: jiefang zhanzheng shiqi</i> [PLA literature and arts historical materials: War of Liberation era]. 2 vols. Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1989.
LCA	Lucheng County archives (Lucheng, Shanxi).
THFY	<i>Taihang fengyu: Taihangshan jutuan tuanshi</i> [The storms of Taihang: troupe history of the Taihang Mountains Drama Troupe]. Zhao Luofang, ed. Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2001.
SGWZ	<i>Shanxi geming genjudi wenyi ziliao</i> [Literature and arts historical materials from the Shanxi Revolutionary Base Area]. Two vols. Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1987.
SPA	Shanxi provincial archive (Taiyuan).
SXWY	<i>Shanxi wenyi</i> [Shanxi literature and arts]. Taiyuan: Shanxi sheng wenlian.
WZCT	<i>Wenyei gongzuozhe zenyang canjia tугai</i> [How cultural workers should take part in land reform]. Hunan wenlian chou wei hui bian. Hunan: Xinhua shudian, 1950.

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ZWGD      *Zhonghua quanguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe daibiao dahui wenji* [Collected literature from the All-China Literature and Arts Worker Representative Congress]. Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 1950.