INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Some Chinese Entertainments.

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
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366 Madison Avenue,
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Although foreign visitors to China meet plenty of Chinese, and see many more, opportunities to merge with the broad masses and participate in Chinese life are few - in effect they are virtually limited to visits to the opera and other similar amusements. In a darkened auditorium, once the curtain goes up or the film begins, the exotic sight of a foreigner is forgotten by all but the most inquisitive souls (such as two teenage girls who sat immediately in front of me in the Soochow opera house and turned to scrutinize me about every two minutes) and he can watch the performance - and the audience - more or less unnoticed. Whether he can do so unselfconsciously is another matter, particularly if he has been shown ostentatiously into the best seats in the house, or even into a seat with several vacant rows immediately in front of him, as was my experience in Wusih; to my relief and delight, a small boy more than once defied the ushers and sat out in front all by himself, in an even better seat than mine.

The sense of being inside rather than out in front of a Chinese crowd would itself be a good reason for going to these events. The various entertainments to which I was treated all had an intrinsic interest of their own, however. The evening of volley-ball in a large stadium was chiefly interesting to me as my first experience of the game. The series of inter-provincial matches for men's and women's teams drew a large and enthusiastic audience such as one might see anywhere in the world; but it is worth remembering that mass interest in sports is a relatively new feature of Chinese life. Of the three acrobatic shows I saw, two - those at Canton and Shanghai - were of quite outstanding quality, while the one at Wusih contained several good acts. Acrobatics, conjuring, clowning, juggling, tumbling and contortion are all arts that are dying out in the West; in China they are flourishing with a naive exuberance that seemed to belong to a very traditional sector of

the culture. Turns which stood out particularly for one reason or another were those of a boy in Canton who juggled with an enormous and clearly very heavy porcelain vase, and a clown-cum-contortionist and an unexpectedly glamorous, cheongsam-clad lady illusionist, complete with "Chinese boxes", both in Shanghai.

Of the seven operas I saw, four were modern and three classical. I shall devote the rest of this Newsletter to my impressions of them. The history of opera in China since 1949 has been varied: in the early days there was a considerable revival of traditional opera, indeed some of the provincial forms were probably saved from complete extinction at this time. As time went on, the role of the opera in the transmission of the new values of a communist society was more and more emphasized. Classical operas were carefully scrutinized for their "positive" or "negative" political content; regardless of their popularity, some were rejected altogether, while others were substantially re-written and modernized. New operas were introduced which developed revolutionary themes, and as the repertoire of these was enlarged, the traditional opera, despite its well known popularity, came to be less and less performed. When I went to China, in the spring of 1965, classical opera was already confined to two weeks a year, one around May Day, the other around October the First. Mr. Hu, my guide in Peking, told me that I was very lucky to be there at one of those times, but I was in fact luckier than he or I could have known, for there have been no performances of classical opera at all since May, 1965. While the Peking Opera Company still performs the classics during its rare tours abroad (and thus, one can only hope, has an interest in maintaining the great tradition) it is quite possible that it has been officially decided that classical opera should be entirely abolished. As Premier Chou En-lai said recently in Bucharest, when speaking of the current "cultural revolution":

> "Through this great cultural revolution we want to thoroughly demolish all the old ideology and culture and all the old customs and habits, which, fostered by the exploiting classes, have poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years, and to create and foster among the broad masses of the people a new ideology and culture and new customs and habits - those of the proletariat."

My own introduction to the new Chinese opera was in Hangchow. In the euphoria which followed a most

magnificent and unproletarian dinner of local fresh-water shrimps and lake fish, I was taken by my guide, Mr. Huang, to see Hung-hua-tien - The Song of the Red Flower - in some ways the most interesting of all the operas I was to see. The story is set in a cotton mill during an emulation campaign. The principal character was a woman "leader of production", the best worker in the mill. Largely due to her skill and leadership the Hsinhua mill regularly wins red banners for productivity; as a result she has grown rather conceited and complacent, and it would be appropriate (and would lend a fittingly Bunyanesque tone) to call her "Proud". Then there is the director of the mill; his part was apparently a semi-comic one, or at least he was much laughed at. Also the secretary of the mill's Party group, a male worker with short-cropped, iron grey hair and a lined, humorous but rugged face, a thoroughly reassuring, down-to-earth figure; Proud's former apprentice, now an advanced level worker herself; an old worker who remembers the hardships of the days before liberation; a production leader from the rival Hsinhsin mill, her apprentice, etc.

At the beginning, the two workers from the Hsinhsin mill arrive at Hsinhua to learn about the latter's advanced production techniques. (This underlines an important objective of the emulation campaigns - to encourage the exchange of technical information in an effort to break the strong Chinese tradition of secrecy about such matters, as well as raising productivity based on hard work alone.) On meeting, the two production leaders recognize each other as old friends, a good augury for their cooperation. In the second scene a month has elapsed, during which the exchange of technical information has gone very well. As the time comes for the two to leave, the Hsinhua girls present them each with a red flower, the symbol of the mill's ésprit de corps, and there is a choral dance which depicts the learning campaign in cotton weaving. The festivities are heightened by the announcement that for a whole month the mill has accomplished the feat of producing only first-class cloth; not a piece has been downgraded. Just as the visitors are to depart, however, there comes sad news: a bad fault in a piece of cloth has just been discovered, and traced to Proud's machine. There is general consternation among the workers, and the director is aghast; Proud admits her faults and runs off in despair, pursued by the director. The whole of this situation produced a good deal of prolonged laughter in the audience, presumably at Proud's expense.

The second half of the opera starts with more recriminations among the workers and management, which grow stronger when it is announced that the Hsinhsin mill has beaten Hsinhua in the contest for the red banner, something hitherto unthinkable. It is at this stage, when morale is at its lowest, that the Party secretary comes into his own. He first points out that the object of the contest is not just to get the prize, but to get all the mills taking part to raise their standards and output, and thus to help build a stronger country. The old worker points out that she has been advocating more stringent self-criticism on the part of everyone at the mill for a long time. Several of the girls think that the whole problem is a technical one; could they not regain their position by going to Hsinhsin in their turn and learning from work of others in their turn? The secretary says that of course there is a technical aspect to the problem, and they must indeed make technical improvements, but primarily the problem is an ideological one. He is to blame, he says more than once, and he takes upon himself the responsibility for allowing such a feeling of complacency to develop.

Proud is not present during this scene, but her former apprentice goes in search of her. In the next scene we find her in her flat, where she is practising making joints in the yarn, while her young daughter reads aloud a passage from her school book about the difference between modesty and pride. The former pupil arrives with two pieces of cloth, and they have a long discussion, which includes a "recalling bitterness" passage in which the hardships of former days are remembered. Proud admits and criticizes her complacency in a long monologue the details of which escaped me; during this session, her level of ideological consciousness was rising - almost visibly, I think, to cognoscenti like Mr. Huang. In the final scene, which takes place a month later, Proud and her former pupil return from a month of emulation study at Hsinhsin. They are accompanied by two of the Hsinhsin girls, who bring greetings and a return gift of red flowers, which they distribute amid a lusty reprise of the Red Flower Song; someone brings in a flag, essential ingredient for the grand finale.

The opera, it turned out, was written in 1964 as the dramatized account of an actual incident in an emulation campaign. It was performed on this occasion in Wusih style by a company from that city, which, like Hangchow, is a textile centre. The style calls for

frequent arias, interspersed with plain dialogue, most of which is unaccompanied. Although the music is written by the members of the orchestra, a score is closely adhered to, and there is no room for improvisation. The orchestra was kept hard at it throughout the long performance. Two players, whom I could see to the side of the stage, seemed to be the mainstay of the whole opera. Clearly a father and son, one played a two stringed fiddle, while the other played a multi-stringed lute known as a pi-pa.

I had no way of judging what was to me a new style of singing. The words of the songs, flashed onto screens at the side of the proscenium, were easier to follow than the Wusih dialect of the ordinary speech.

The decor was interesting, particularly the scene which showed Proud's flat. It may be taken to be a model of what is now thought to be suitable accomodation for a model worker. It was simply furnished, with a plain table, chairs and a dresser, on which were a bowl of flowers, a thermos flask and glasses. When the former apprentice arrived Proud, with commendable frugality, poured her a glass of "white tea" (plain hot water) from the thermos. On the other hand Proud and her daughter had the luxury of a separate bedroom, which was probably not the case with a majority of the audience. On her wall was a big picture of Chairman Mao, and there was a coat on a hanger by the door. Outside the window (which was lit by an apocalyptic red glow when Proud's friend said to her "the East is red") there were mountains, with a pagoda perched rather incongruously on the top of one peak. The other scenes were perhaps less interesting; the outside of the mill, with great banners reading "Develop the Emulation Campaign", the interior of a workers' dormitory, the railway station, and the interior of the director's office, notable for a row of commendatory banners and certificates, as well as two graphs with steeply rising curves, on the wall.

The director wore a fly-fronted jacket in the first scene, of a pattern that I later came to suspect was rather "fashionable", if such a term can ever be used in modern China. In the next scene he changed into a grey cadre's suit of the usual kind. The Party secretary wore rather simpler clothes - in one scene a surprisingly old-fashioned jacket, perhaps, again, to demonstrate frugality. The girls all wore coloured trousers and quite gaily-printed blouses, with aprons and caps when at work. For travelling, some of them

carried plastic bags of a kind that I saw in the best department store in Shanghai; again, it seems probable that the opera has a function in the promotion of new approved styles as and when new products come on the market.

The opera was well attended and quite well applauded, with one curtain call. I was left in some doubt, though, whether the opera achieved all that was clearly expected of it. I was not able to judge the expectations of a Chinese opera audience, of course. But there were a number of guffaws and a lot of tittering during the performance. I think these were directed at Proud, as Mr. Huang said, for she must have cut a rather ridiculous figure, particularly to an audience possibly rather too familiar with advanced workers. The director and the Party secretary also came in for some laughter. While impressions are very subjective in such circumstances, I find it hard to believe that some of the laughter was not cynical. This would not necessarily be inconsistent with Mr. Huang's statement that the people liked to go to these modern operas, which related to the life they themselves led. Unfortunately, none of the other operas I saw dealt with everyday life of this sort.

My next exposure came a few days later in Shanghai, when I saw an opera called Hung-teng-chi, or the Story of the Red Lamp. The subject was a dramatic one - heroism and martyrdom in the Anti-Japanese War. Although very well performed, it does not call for very detailed discussion here. The three heroes, a railway signalman, an old woman, and her adopted daughter, are all communists, but the plot has such strong patriotic appeal that the propaganda element is for once not overstated. Significantly, a film version of this story (without singing) has become quite popular in Hong Kong. Both opera and film have some very moving passages, and I have seen men in both Hong Kong and Shanghai in tears as they watched it. The opera was in a local style, relying largely on accompanied recitativo with fewer arias than in the Wusih style; as a result it moved faster. Particularly striking was the use of comedy to give occasional relief from the dramatic tension; for example, the Japanese commander, though the arch-villain, was allowed to cut quite an absurd figure. Even the heroes were not without their humorous moments.

In Soochow I was taken to Sister Chiang, an opera about a woman member of the Chungking committee

of the Communist Party in the period just before liberation. Sent back to the countryside to arouse the peasants, she arrives to find her communist, schoolteacher husband's head displayed on a pole. Her determination hardened, she continues the struggle, to be betrayed eventually to the Kuomintang police by an informer. In the end, after several long haranguing matches with her captors, she is shot within the sound of the guns of the advancing People's Liberation Army.

Although Sister Chiang was not so appealing that I could accept an offer to see it again the next night in Wusih, it had some interesting features. For the first time I saw a chorus used dramatically to narrate part of the story, instead of just singing set pieces. It was rather effective, and in my view a useful stiffening for the rather watery half Western, half Chinese music. I unfortunately did not ask whether it was a special characteristic of the Soochow style. The best passage from an operatic point of view, though, was a trio in which the heroine (a rather graceless woman more in the diva tradition than most Chinese singers), the traitor (an exceptionally good tenor) and another communist all sang their thoughts aloud - each unheard by the others.

Following the old tradition, the two sides were easily distinguished by their make-up. The goodies all had red faces, glowing with health and virtue, while the baddies had complexions ranging from grey to white, with the exception of the traitor. Despite his red face, however, his unreliability might have been guessed from his old-style elegance - a long, cream-coloured summer gown and a large black fan. The male hero was a bucolic peasant with a beard, who might have played Henry VIII. The two girls in front of me were, I think, quite taken with the heroine's cheongsam, a great rarity in modern China, even on the stage.

The blackest enemy in the operas seems always to be a crafty, subtle, gentle-mannered yet ruthless villain - here the chief of police, in Hung-teng-chi the Japanese officer with his off-duty silk kimono and his genteel drinking manners. Their devious arguments are always in striking contrast with the plain outspokenness of the communists, though the latter never have any difficulty in triumphing morally in such a way as to make their captors wilt visibly. In both of these pieces the hero or heroine struck a particularly erect pose to deliver the final speech of defiance, while the villain,

although on the point of having his enemy shot, cowers down. The lesser evildoers - police henchmen or Japanese soldiers - are the source of comic relief, usually with a twist. One such buffoon in Sister Chiang, for instance, has to borrow money to buy himself a drink in a wine-shop from one of the communist peasants, so overdue is his pay and so inflated the currency. With an opposition of this kind, there can be little doubt where the sympathies of the audience lay, but to drive the point home, Chiang appeared after her death transfigured in a red glow, while the chorus sang a finale. (Such a scene would not have quite the religious overtones it would have in the West.)

Sister Chiang's final sufferings were at the hands of sinister, shadowy figures with the letters "U.S." painted on their helmets; to see Americans in all their evil glory on the stage, however, I had to wait until I saw The Raid on the White Tiger Regiment in Nanking. This was a Peking opera about the cooperation between Chinese and North Korean troops in an attack on a crack unit of the South Korean army. With its rather modernized music and a lot of falsetto singing, it was performed by an obviously first-rate company with the greatest élan. The fighting scenes, which used traditional choreography - or rather acrobatics - were particularly spectacular, and there was excellent mime throughout. I learned that the hero was well-known in former times for his performance in the classical part of the Monkey King - one of the most physically demanding of all roles in Chinese opera, as those who have read of Monkey's battles with the warriors of Heaven might imagine.

The performance was introduced by a prologue spoken by an apparently very young girl who was not, I think, part of the company. She told us of the relevance of what we were about to see to the war in Vietnam. Another woman repeated this exhortation in the form of a typically Chinese half-sung recitation accompanied by bamboo castanets.

The first scene showed a gathering of (red-faced) Chinese volunteers, North Korean troops, and their enthusiastic supporters, the Korean peasants. There was a discussion of the pending truce talks at Panmunjom, which ended when a messenger announced the news of their sabotage by the Americans. The visual highlight of the scene was a rather uninteresting "solidarity dance", which contrasted poorly with the fighting scenes.

Scene Two showed the unsavoury antics of the loud-mouthed officers of the White Tiger Regiment and their stupid men, and introduced an American adviser and his gum-chewing sergeant. (It ought in all fairness to be said that the Chinese themselves now use gum, or at least market it.) Both had rather grotesque features, anachronistically long blonde hair and sunglasses, and they wore their ranks in large letters on their clothes. (I wondered whether anyone else was reminded of the much despised troops of the old empire, with a large character for "soldier" embroidered on their back and front.) In all, the Americans were quite amiably ludicrous characters, though they took part in some unconscionable goings-on, such as the burning of farmers' houses for no good cause and the shooting of a defiant old peasant.

The third scene took place in the combined Chinese and North Korean headquarters, where, after the appearance of a (Chinese) political commissar, who comes "to help the commander", as I was told, a plan is quickly devised to send a mixed platoon behind the enemy lines, wearing South Korean uniforms, to attack the White Tiger Regiment's command post. Scene Four showed the early stages of this plan being carried out with the capture of a very jittery sentry who is easily scared into betraying the password.

After an interval, the fifth scene opened with a lament about the horrors of war sung by a peasant girl. Surprised by some White Tigers, she is chased away. She runs into the arms of the heroes, whom she eventually recognizes through their disguise, agreeing to help them by guiding them through a minefield and other traps. In Scene Six the heroes encounter and overwhelm enemy outposts under the command of a subordinate officer who wore a huge, floppy, American cap which must have been the pride of the wardrobe-master. In the next scene they finally break into the White Tigers' headquarters. Besides the Korean officers, in their various stages of decadence, the Americans are again present, including this time among their number a girl secretary or telephonist (had the librettist read Catch 22?). The acrobatics in this fighting scene were splendid, particularly the antics of the villains; the audience got the greatest amusement from the American sergeant's last desperate resort to Western-style boxing, which was parodied with much humour. This action would have made a good climax to the opera, but not surprisingly there was a finale in which the commander and the political commissar arrived to share with the actual combatants the adulation of the flag-carrying peasants.

An interesting feature of the plot, it seemed to me, was that it celebrated the use of cunning in a way that is foreign to most Western war stories (excluding the exploits of spies, who act very much as heroic individuals and belong to a rather special tradition). Dressing up in enemy uniforms is the sort of trick which in the West is usually attributed to the other side, and successfully foiled.

The next opera I saw was a classical one, but by coincidence it dealt with exactly the same theme of skilful tactics. In fact, as Mr. Hu told me, Chairman Mao himself had advocated Five Assaults on the Tsu Village as a parable in strategy and tactics, and in learning from experience. It is an operatic account of an episode from the famous novel Shui-hu, or the Water Margin, in which several samurai-like heroes take up the cause of some oppressed peasants against the tyrannical Tsu family, led by a father, his three sons and their formidable fencing master. The opera was performed in traditional style, with excellent acrobatic fights and plenty of heroes and generals. There was also a comic scene with an almost Shakespearean drunken gatekeeper. However, there had clearly been some considerable modifications. The script had been rewritten into ordinary speech, and the opportunity had been taken to give much greater emphasis to the part played by the peasants and their fighting spirit. There was also a good deal of realistic scenery, which is unknown to the traditional theatre.

Two other evenings of opera in Peking consisted of mixed programmes of short pieces, mostly excerpts from the classics. On both occasions there was one piece which was devoted largely to fighting - one being the famous passage of arms between an innkeeper and his guest in a supposedly pitch-dark room, the stage in fact being lit. Other pieces were more serious, such as a rather touching scene of a girl heartbroken because her parents will not allow her to marry the man she loves. A suitably "anti-feudal" topic, be it noted. Another concerned a fisherman, formerly a gentleman but now in straightened circumstances, and his fight with a heartless landlord, which he only wins by resort to self-help of the most drastic kind - murder. In the course of his struggle he goes to the local magistrate's "yamen" or office to present a petition, but instead of redress he gets a beating.

Another plot was a little kinder to the traditional legal system, for it represented an episode in the semi-

legendary career of Pao Kung, a well-known and upright judge. The passage was a dialogue between Pao and the mother of a relative of his whom he has condemned to death for corruption. Pao tells her that the law is the law, and to be respected, and finally so convinces her that, to show her compliance, she serves him with a cup of wine - a poignant moment that one might have thought more in the Roman than the Chinese tradition. However, it is clearly an acceptable theme these days. The singing was very impressive, and the piece was clearly rather a tour de force for the two performers. Pao, a magnificent figure with a deep plum-coloured face and a superb gold-embroidered robe of black silk, received applause almost every time he opened his mouth, being a particularly popular singer.

Watching the audiences at these performances, it was quite clear that the classical opera is immensely popular in Peking. Near me, on one occasion, there sat a small girl, enthralled by the movement and colour of what is by any standards a fine spectacle. On her sleeve were three red stripes that indicated the highest possible rank in the Young Pioneers. Her excitement, with after-effects that might take months or years of ideological bombardment to efface, is the obvious, and quite plausible reason for the decision to suppress the old opera.

Chao Chen-ti, a Shanghai woman textile worker, recently wrote to the papers complaining about "...those plays which show ancient and foreign figures... old plays, ghost plays and foreign plays, fulsomely eulogizing emperors and kings, generals and prime ministers, scholars and beauties...". "We workers, peasants and soldiers do not need them", said she; but I doubt whether many people in China would, in their hearts, agree with her.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony R. Dicks

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