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CHGO-46
Entertainment and Politics
in China

27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

January 25, 1965.

Mr. R.H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y.,
U. S. A..

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Whenever my Chinese hosts ran into an impasse in our discussions, or encountered something they could not accept at face value, they always invoked their cliché: "We must ask the real reason ..." They would then invent a reason compatible with their outlook -- as happened for example, in our discussion on the U.S.A. Peace Corps.

This approach of seeking an underlying political motive to almost every action can quite readily be used to advantage on the Chinese themselves, and it yields most interesting results when applied to a study of Chinese entertainment. To some extent, visits to communes, schools, and factories, can be stage-managed to impress the foreign guest. But entertainment is primarily for the consumption of the Chinese people and provides a foreigner with many clues to otherwise undiscussed ideas and events.

During the past three years in Hong Kong I have seen about a dozen Mainland Chinese films. These, coupled with an almost nightly diet of entertainment in China, lead me to believe that a careful study of entertainment themes provides a sensitive indicator of Chinese political conditions. Provided, of course, that we seek "the real reason" for the particular entertainment.

If one accepts this hypothesis, some interesting observations can be made about the Chinese scene. The first, and most apparent, is that the Chinese policy makers are worried that a complacency and sense of self-satisfaction is setting in among the Chinese people. China has weathered a series of crises caused by a combination of natural calamities and internal bungling, but these have been survived and everyone is agreed that the country is once again making progress. However, a sense of achievement remains. (One Western observer who spent several months in China in 1963 likened the atmosphere to that in Britain just after Dunkerque -- a feeling of relief at having averted a major disaster coupled with a realization that a long struggle lies ahead.)

The Chinese leaders consider this feeling of self-satisfaction deleterious, and are trying to rouse the people to greater efforts.

One technique they are using is to mount a massive entertainment campaign to remind the people of the tribulations of "Pre-Liberation" days, of the epic struggle of the Communist Party, of the corruption and cruelty of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (K.M.T.), of the evils of imperialism, etc., etc.. There have been two major manifestations of this campaign so far. The first is the almost complete abandonment of traditional Chinese opera and its replacement by a new form of opera with contemporary themes.

The second is the most spectacular and fantastic show, "The East is Red," first staged on October 2, 1964 in connection with the fifteenth anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Peoples' Republic. I saw it performed in Peking in the Great Hall of the People, where the vast auditorium was packed to capacity by an invited audience of 10.000. This "extravaganza" was performed by 3,000 people, including a thousand-voice choir, and the amount of effort which went into staging it is perhaps a measure of the concern felt for the present lack of revolutionary fervour, and the need for a reminder of the struggles of the Communist Party. For the Dong Fang Horng (The East is Red) is precisely that, a cavalcade or history of the struggles of the Communist Party in China from its inception in 1921 to the present day. All the highlights were presented: the Anyuan railway and mine workers' strike of 1922; the Autumn Harvest uprising of 1927; the Long March; the Tsunyi Conference; Yenan; the war against Japan; the capture of Nanking from the Nationalists; the 1949 celebrations at the founding of the Peoples' Republic; Korea; the "liberation" of Tibet; the deification of Mao; and the unification of the peoples of the world. It was a swirling spectacular of color and movement, rousing songs, magnificent dancing, stirring music -- all guaranteed to ignite the patriotic timber of any (non-K.M.T.) Chinese.

I am less certain of the success achieved by the replacement of traditional opera by contemporary theme opera. It is true that at the theaters I visited in Shanghai and Peking the operas were played to capacity audiences, but in Soochow the theater was half empty. And the applause definitely lacked the great enthusiasm I have always heard given to traditional opera performed by Mainland Chinese troupes in Hong Kong. The contemporary operas have retained some of the elements of traditional opera. The music, and style of singing was similar, and in some dance sequences there was a resemblance to the traditional pattern. But much was gone. There were no gloriously painted faces or magnificent costumes, none of the artistry that lovers of traditional opera associate with the manipulation of sleeves, none of the grandly exaggerated foot movements, or the magic of the symbolism.

The actors now wear contemporary costumes, and the themes, as implicit in the name, are also contemporary. Those operas I saw had several elements in common, elements which almost certainly have political significance. For example, all the operas played heavily on the misfortunes of the peasants in "Pre-Liberation" days, either through vivid portrayals of Tibetan peasants staggering under heavy loads, beaten by cruel overseers: Soochong opera, "The man who was not allowed to be born". (Yet it was a common sight everywhere I went to see Chinese carrying and pulling comparable loads).

Or through the technique of flash-back, when an old peasant woman recalled the miseries and hardships of the old days: Peking opera, "The Spark among the Reeds". Or some pathetic story such as the one of a starving couple, almost frozen to death, and with a baby desperately ill. They believe the last straw has come when a group of soldiers arrives at their mountain cabin. Previous experience with K.M.T. troops suggests that the last remaining grain they had saved for the sick child would be taken away. But the arrivals are soldiers of the Peoples' Liberation Army. They give food to the family, hastily summon the army doctor, save the life of the child, and bring joy and gratefulness for evermore: Soochow opera, "A Ruse Captures the Snowy Mountains".

It was also interesting that the K.M.T. troops were always portrayed as buffoons. In "The Spark among the Reeds" for example, the K.M.T. general was a fat old blunderer who really didn't have much idea about what was going on. He collaborated with the Japanese (who were made to look like the cartoon characters of Japanese officers in the Western press during the War), stole from the villagers, and partook in every kind of bribery and corruption. The K.M.T. soldiers always wore dishevelled uniforms, dragged their guns on the floor when on duty, wiped their noses on their sleeves, and went to sleep on duty. But the characterization was one of fools and not of evil persons. The response of the audience was to laugh, not to hate. This was equally true of K.M.T. characterization in "A Ruse Captures the Snowy Mountains".

A third element common to the operas was that priests, both Taoist and Buddhist, were always portrayed as wrong-doers. There was no humor about them, they were basically bad. They were spies, or in collusion with the enemy, or they were in league with the aristocratic landowners.

It is interesting to speculate on what is the "real reason" behind these characterizations. Are religious groups gaining strength, or perhaps not petering out fast enough for the Communists' liking? Does the portrayal of the K.M.T. as quite likeable comedians portend a coming rapprochement?

Two of the films I saw also gave some interesting insights into life in contemporary China. One, called "The Serfs", was about Tibet, and the other, called "The Red Blossom on the Tienshan Mountains", was about a sheep commune in Sinkiang. The Tibetan film had the by now familiar theme: bitter life and unbelievable cruelties under the old society with an equally unbelievably good Peoples' Liberation Army finally bringing "liberation". The question arises as to why it was necessary to pay so much attention to Tibet, why it was necessary to remind the Tibetans (and both the film and opera were shown in Lhasa) of their recent history. One explanation is that it indicates unrest and a need for propaganda. The same explanation may also apply to the real significance of the film about Sinkiang. It is perhaps necessary to show the National Minority groups in Sinkiang that they have much to be grateful for to Chairman Mao and their Han "liberators". That there may be some truth to these speculations was born out subsequently when both

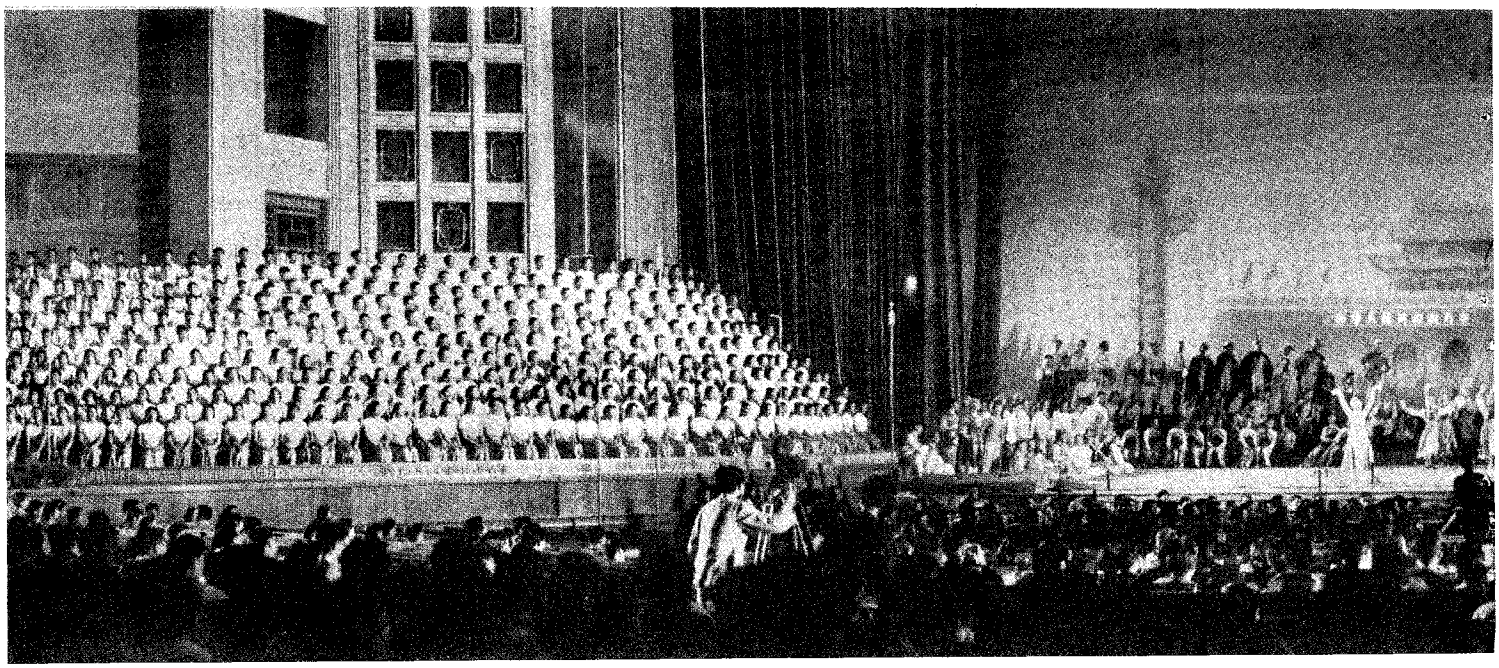
Tibet and Sinkiang were in the news. In Tibet the Panchen Lama was, in effect, defrocked, and in a speech to the National Peoples' Congress last month, Chou En-lai talked of "rebellions in Sinkiang".

The Sinkiang film also gave a vivid portrayal of the process of thought reform. The story is about a woman who is elected as brigade leader. Her husband objects to this on the grounds that she becomes too preoccupied with commune affairs to the detriment of home affairs. He makes a big scene about this and puts the wife in a predicament -- is her prime duty to society, or to her husband? Through a series of close-ups, we follow her mental struggle and her gaze as she looks back and forth towards a bust of Chairman Mao and her beloved husband. There is no need to say who won, and the unfortunate husband ran away. Various friends talked to him, but could not persuade him to go back. Finally the Party Secretary caught up with him and explained why it was so important that the wife should carry out her job, and how much better it would be for the society if he helped instead of opposed her .. "think of others instead of yourself". The husband gradually weakened under the pressure of this reasoning, this detailed, fascinating and fearsome process of "remoulding", until eventually he was left alone in the countryside to work things out for himself. He went through long agonies of soul-searching and indecision, until finally -- after a fit of physical abandon when he dashed madly through streams and woods -- mentally and bodily battered, he was "remoulded".

The dance drama which I saw in Nanking and described in CHGO-37 also portrayed the thought reform process, and both this and the Sinkiang film indicated the important role played by the Communist Party secretaries in the running of a commune.

The only time I saw Americans featured in entertainment was at the Children's Theater in Shanghai. Ostensibly the purpose

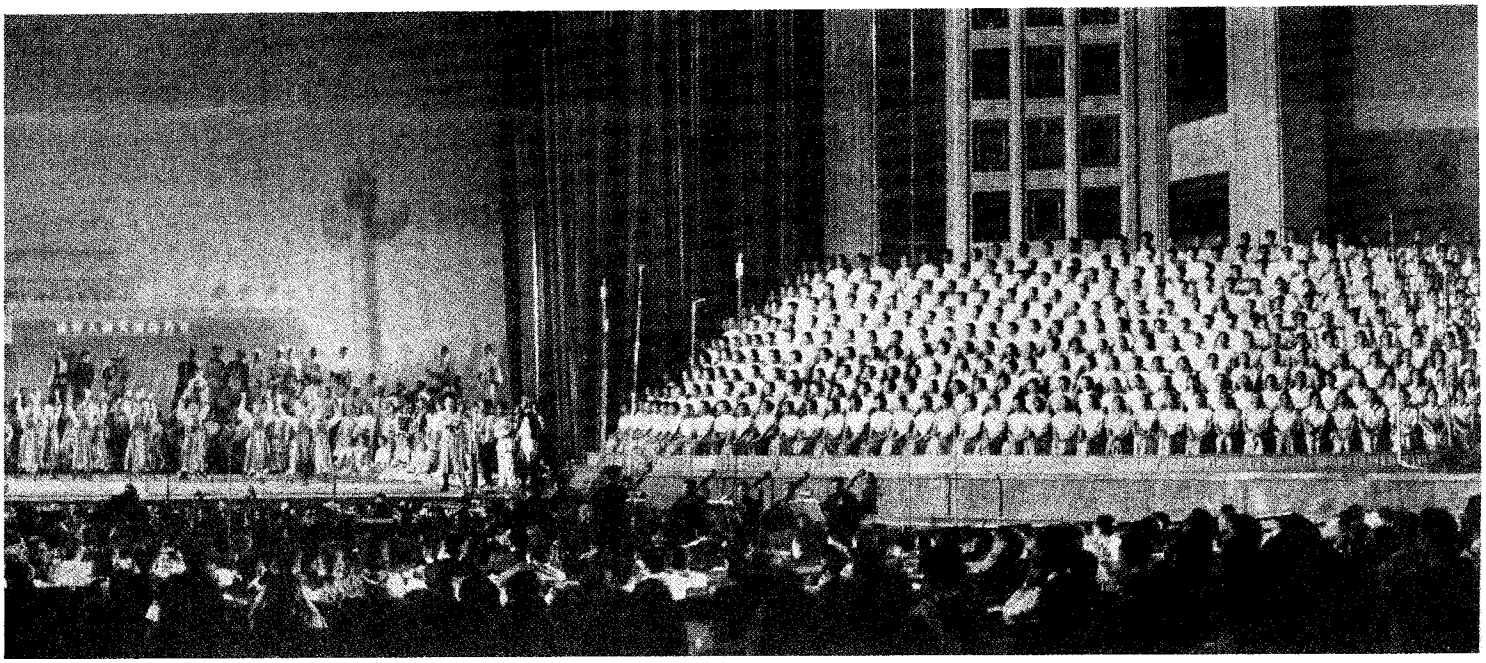
DONG FANG HORNG



of this theater was to give children an opportunity to hear "good music, and see good dancing". Professionally speaking the children got both, the music provided by a 35 piece orchestra was excellent and the dancing performances were also good. The highlight for me, was an entertaining story about a little girl who looked after sheep in a commune in Inner Mongolia, which was set to music in the manner of "Peter and the Wolf".

However it was not long after the commencement of the show that the "real reason" for the staging of the performance was apparent. It was clearly part of the political indoctrination campaign and most of the dance routines had anti-American themes. The main one depicted five Panamanians carrying out a raid on an American base in Panama. The American sentry and his officer were mockingly portrayed as slovenly cowards, and the latter as cruel and ineffectual. Both were stabbed in the back by the Panamanians, the base was destroyed, the American flag hauled down and dragged through the dust, and the red flag hoisted. I regret to say that the children loved it. This particular act aroused the biggest cheer of the show. What ultimate effect will such a bitter hate campaign have on this generation of Chinese children?

Indicative of a more relaxed atmosphere in East China generally are two of the Mainland Chinese films I have seen in Hong Kong. They were both comedies, and in both, the makers poked fun at attitudes in China today. One was a delightfully lighthearted story of a lady who secretly learnt to be a barber, in Shanghai. But she was fearful that her husband would discover the nature of her job because she knew he would consider it menial. Through an inevitable series of mishaps the denouement is reached with the equally inevitable realization on the part of the husband that his wife is excelling in a noble profession -- serving the people.



The other film was about a waiter in Soochow. He was lazy, late, and insolent -- all the things in fact that a waiter should never be. The rest of the staff set out to "remould" him and the ensuing scenes were frequently quite hilarious. On one occasion he rides his bicycle, carelessly and fast, through a gaggle of geese .. and lands in their midst. The person in charge of the geese tells the waiter he needs to have his thoughts remoulded. "It's not me," exclaims the waiter, "it's these so and so geese that need remoulding!" It is significant and welcome that the stage has been reached when the Chinese can laugh at themselves and poke fun at their political campaigns.

I cannot leave this discussion of entertainment without a mention of the Bulgarian folk-song and dance group which I saw perform in Hangchow. They were amateurs from a workers' cultural palace in Sofia and put on a good lively performance. After three and a half weeks of solidly poltical entertainment it was a breath of fresh air to see the Bulgarians caper across the stage in a largely non-political show. One scene was supposedly a day in the life of a village. It was gay and relaxed, with one man in tight-fitting jeans and multi-colored shirt playing practical jokes on all and sundry, and he once actually began to dance the Twist. It must surely have been one of the first times the Twist has been performed publicly in China! Eventually however, the other villagers good-naturedly persuaded him to discard his vivid shirt and to join them with the harvesting.

The following day I chatted with one of the secretaries from the Bulgarian Embassy in Peking who was accompanying the troupe on its tour. I said how much I had enjoyed the show with its refreshing lack of politics. He laughed and apologized for the fact they had reformed the practical joker, saying, "We thought that we had better do so, here in China!"

Yours sincerely,

C.H.G. Oldham

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Photographs of "The East is Red" from China Pictorial.