

# Eight Revolutionary Model Dramas

## Bā gè Gémìngyàngbǎnxì 八个革命样板戏

**The eight revolutionary model dramas 革命样板戏, consisting of five Beijing Operas, two ballet dance dramas, and one symphonic work, were composed during the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966–1976). Under the supervision of Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing, these eight pieces were transformed into a vehicle for propagating Maoist ideology.**

**T**raditional Beijing Opera, since it began in the late eighteenth century, evolved naturally, its development little affected by political changes. However, this state of affairs was not to last. Although some people called for its reform during the May Fourth Movement (an intellectual movement that swept through China between 1915 and 1923), only after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 did this artistic genre undergo the most radical transformation in its history. This transformation came about because Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) wanted literature and art to serve political goals. Beijing Opera was not fit to perform this function with its age-old stage conventions and its repertoire of stories about ancient emperors and generals, scholars and beautiful ladies. During the Cultural Revolution Jiang Qing 江青 seized this opportunity to remake Beijing Opera to serve a political purpose. The results were the so-called eight revolutionary model dramas (*geming yangbanxi* 革命样板戏).

### Synopses

The eight model dramas consist of the following pieces: (1) *On the Docks* (*Hai gang* 海港) portrays a group of dockworkers rushing to load grain bound for Africa before an approaching typhoon. The good workers, armed with Mao Zedong's thought and the proletarian internationalist spirit, expose a dispatcher's sabotage. (2) *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi Baihu Tuan* 奇袭白虎团) depicts how a unit of the Chinese People's Volunteers wipes out a South Korean regiment and captures its U.S. advisors during the Korean War. (3) *Shajiabang* 沙家浜 was adapted from the Shanghai Opera *Sparks amid the Reeds* (*Ludang huozhong* 芦塘火种). It describes how the soldiers of the New Fourth Army smash the encirclement campaigns of the Japanese invaders and their Chinese puppets with the help of a clever teahouse proprietress, who is an underground Communist Party member. (4) *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu Weihushan* 智取威虎山) was based on Qu Bo's 曲波 well-known novel, *An Ocean of Forest and a Plain of Snow* (*Linhai xueyuan* 林海雪原). This opera depicts a battle during the Chinese civil war in which the Communist forces wipe out a bandit chieftain and Guomindang 国民党 (Chinese Nationalist Party) brigadier in his mountain stronghold in northeast China. In (5) *The Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji* 红灯记) a railroad worker tries to deliver a secret code to the Communist guerrillas in the mountains. He and his mother are arrested by the Japanese police and executed, but his daughter succeeds in delivering the code. The red lantern is used as a signal

by the Communist underground and is also a symbol of revolutionary spirit. (6) Set on Hainan Island 海南岛 in the 1930s, the ballet *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun* 红色娘子军) dramatizes how a group of peasant women defeats a local despot and joins the Communist army. (7) The ballet *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bamao nu* 白毛女) was adapted from a well-known opera of the same name with lyrics by the poet He Jingzhi 贺敬之. He based his opera on a folk story about a peasant girl who flees from an evil landlord to a mountain and after living in a cave for several years has her hair turn white. She is finally rescued by the Eighth Route Army that liberated her village. (8) The symphonic work included in the group is also called *Shajiabang*.

## Themes and Theories

As can be seen from the synopses, most of these model dramas deal with wars (the War of Resistance Against Japan, the Chinese civil war, the Korean War). Closely related to the war theme is the theme of class struggle between oppressive landlords and poor peasants. To enact past wars and struggles is to spur the Chinese people to continue revolution in the present. In *On the Docks* (1963), the only opera not set in wartime, class struggle is broadened into a global power struggle between East and West in which China supports Third World countries in their struggles against imperialists. The dispatcher, who tries to prevent a shipment of seed rice to Africa, is an agent of the imperialists, who do not want the African people to become self-sufficient in food supplies. Another characteristic of the model dramas is the prominence of women characters, who are portrayed as loyal and capable party members (Sister A-qing 阿庆嫂 in *Shajiabang*, Fang Haizhen 方海珍 in *On the Docks*) or as oppressed peasants transformed into revolutionary warriors (Xi'er 喜儿 in *The White-Haired Girl*, Wu Qinghua 吴清华 in *Red Detachment of Women*). However, women's gains in social status are achieved at the loss of their feminine attributes. These women characters have no husband, no family, and no intimate relationships. The budding love between Xi'er and the PLA soldier who rescued her, the affection between Wu Qinghua and a leader of the militia, and the love affair between

a regimental chief of staff and an army nurse (*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*) in the original sources were all eliminated in the adaptations to emphasize class struggle and revolution. In the model dramas there is no room for love except love for the Communist Party and Chairman Mao. The traditional Chinese family is also conspicuously absent. The only family that appears in these works is the surrogate family in *The Red Lantern*. The three members of the railroad worker LI Yuhe's 李玉和 family (Li and his adopted mother and daughter) are not related by blood ties but rather by their shared belief in the Communist revolution. Likewise, Sister A-Qing and the eighteen wounded soldiers from the New Fourth Army form a revolutionary family. Even grandmothers (Grandma Li in *The Red Lantern*, Auntie Sha in *Shajiabang*, the Korean woman Auntie Choe in *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*) actively support the revolution.

The content and composition of the model dramas were guided by Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942), which Jiang Qing claimed to be her source of authority. To implement Mao's guidelines, she formed a "tri-unification" (*san jie he* 三结合) work team: party leadership, professional personnel, and the masses. As a representative of the party, she set the themes and guided the selection and revision of the texts for use. A team of playwrights, composers, and performers then produced the operas and ballets, which presumably reflected the revolutionary experiences of the masses (workers, peasants, and soldiers). The masses were invited to offer their opinions for any revisions, but the final decision rested with the party leadership. In addition to this tripartite production team, the principle of "three prominences" (*san tuchu* 三突出) was adopted and resulted in this formula: Give prominence to positive characters, heroic characters, and the main heroic character, in ascending order. As a result of this principle, the main heroes appear as superhumans without any blemishes. On the opposite spectrum the negative characters are all stupid, cowardly, and ugly. Both the heroes and villains are cardboard figures without any depth. This kind of stereotypical characterization conformed to another ideal of Mao, that is, revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. This ideal means that literature and art should not passively reflect reality but rather should actively impel reality forward



**A scene from the ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, performed at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing and attended by President and Mrs. Nixon during their trip to China, 22 February 1972. U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES.**

and transform it. In other words, the characters in the model dramas are not found in real life; they are found only in theory and concepts. Another slogan that was applied to the production of these dramas was “Make the ancient serve the present, the foreign serve the Chinese.” Jiang Qing’s model works employed an old art form (the Beijing Opera) and Western art forms (ballet and symphony) to launch the Cultural Revolution.

## Impact and Influence

During the Cultural Revolution model dramas dominated the Chinese stage because all other forms of performance were banned and actors of the old school persecuted. The saying “eight model dramas for 800 million people” aptly described the cultural situation at the time. Not only

Beijing Opera troupes were required to perform these operas; regional theater troupes throughout the country also were required to do the same. Minority peoples’ theaters were no exception, either. For example, in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Uygur actors translated *Red Lantern* into their language and set their traditional music to it. As the power of the original eight model dramas reached a peak, several revolutionary operas were created in the early 1970s, such as *Azalea Mountain* (*Dujuanshan* 杜鹃山), *Song of the Dragon River* (*Longjiang song* 龙江颂), and *Fighting in the Plain* (*Pingyuan zuozhan* 平原作战). However, the fortune of the model dramas changed with the end of the Cultural Revolution; their decline came as quickly as their ascendance. The new party leadership declared the Cultural Revolution a national disaster and distanced itself from anything that evoked the memory of that period. In recent years, as the Cultural

Revolution has receded into history, the model dramas have become popular again, and some of them have been restaged. This renewed interest reflects the Chinese people's desire to preserve these dramas as a part of their cultural memory, now that they can enjoy them from a safe distance. The experiments of the model dramas, minus the political propaganda, can also be useful in producing new operas on contemporary themes in order to make the old drama more relevant to contemporary audiences.

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You won't help the new plants grow  
by pulling them up higher.

揠苗助长

Yà miáo zhù zhǎng