

TIAN Han

Tián Hàn 田汉

1898–1968 Dramatist

Tian Han was a founder of the Chinese spoken drama (*huaju* 话剧) and a prolific writer who produced a large body of plays, operas, and film scripts. His death during the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966–1976) represented the tragic fate of many Chinese intellectuals caught up in this political upheaval.

Tian Han 田汉 was a founder of the Chinese spoken drama (*huaju* 话剧) movement, a reformer of traditional Chinese opera, and a playwright with more than sixty spoken dramas and twenty operas to his credit. He was also a pioneer in China's film industry as well as a poet, best remembered for the lyrics he wrote to *March of the Volunteers*, which became the national anthem of the People's Republic of China.

A native of Hunan Province, Tian Han followed the trend of his time to study in Japan. During his stay in Japan from 1916 to 1921 Tian discovered the works of many Western dramatists, which inspired him to devote his life to drama. In 1921 he and his fellow students, Guo Moruo 郭沫若 and Yu Dafu 郁达夫, established the Creation Society (*Chuangzao She* 创造社) to promote romanticism in literature and the arts.

His Early Plays: In Search of the Self

After his return to Shanghai in 1922, Tian Han organized the Southern Drama Society (*Nanguo She* 南国社), which

became an important training school for actors as well as a production company for the performance of modern plays, including Tian's own works. Representative plays of his early period, *Night in a Café* (*Kafei dian zhi yiye*, 咖啡店之夜, 1922), *The Night a Tiger Was Captured* (*Huo hu zhi ye*, 获虎之夜, 1924), and *Death of a Famous Artist* (*Mingyou zhi si* 名优之死, 1927), all deal with adverse effects of social environment on love and artistic fulfillment. They also reflect Tian's own search for the meaning of life and art.

His Proletarian Dramas: Art to Serve Politics

His agonized search ended in 1930 with publication of his article "Our Self-Criticism" (*Women de ziwo piping* 我们的自我批评), in which he criticizes the petty bourgeois sentiments in his and other dramatists' writings. In the same year he joined the League of Left Wing Writers. These events marked a turning point in his career. The romantic tone of his early plays would be replaced by realism; his belief in art for art's sake would shift to that of art serving political goals; and his Southern Drama Society would henceforth produce proletarian dramas. During the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945, known outside of China as the Second Sino-Japanese War and fought in the context of World War II) Tian Han wrote a number of patriotic plays such as *The Song of Beautiful Women* (*Liren xing* 丽人行, 1947), which depicts the suffering of the Chinese people under Japanese occupation. He also tried to reform traditional opera by incorporating

modern stage techniques and injecting new meaning into old plays. In his Beijing Opera (Jingju, a style of opera known for its spare stage sets evoking the Ming dynasty) adaptation of *The Legend of the White Snake* (*Baishe zhuan* 白蛇传, 1950), for example, the “snake monster” is transformed into a brave young woman who fights for her right to love and happiness.

His Historical Plays: Using the Past to Criticize the Present

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Tian Han’s creative output decreased, but he did produce two historical dramas worthy of note: the spoken drama *Guan Hanqing* 关汉卿 (1958) and the Beijing Opera *Xie Yaohuan* 谢瑶环 (1961). The first play tells the story of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) dramatist Guan Hanqing, who wrote the play *Injustice Done to Dou E* (*Dou E yuan* 窦娥怨) about a young woman wrongly accused of murder by corrupt officials. The courageous Guan who spoke out for the people could be Tian Han’s self-image, and the oppressive rule of the Mongols depicted in the play could also be a reflection of the current situation in China. In *Xie Yaohuan*, Tian Han created another character who dared to speak out for the people—a woman official in the court of Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

Tian Han’s use of the past to criticize the present (*jie gu feng jin* 借古讽今) was, of course, recognized by the authorities. After the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a political campaign launched by Mao Zedong against his enemies, Tian was arrested and died in prison in 1968. Like many other writers and artists who perished during this upheaval, Tian Han became a victim

of the Communist revolution that he had supported for forty years.

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