

# *The Development of Chinese Opera during the First Seven Years (1949-1956)*

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on the policy on Chinese opera from 1949 to 1956. It first examines detailed policies, such as the three-reform policy, policy on repertoires, from the two-pronged approach to three-parallel, etc. Then points out that the development of Chinese opera in the first seven years had a far-reaching influence on contemporary opera. Chinese opera during this period had *a high degree of unity in ideology, a high degree of organization in teamwork, and a high degree of standardization in art*. In the end, this paper tried to make a conclusion, that is the general characteristics of the opera policy in the first seven years (1949-1956) are reflected in the following three aspects. Firstly, policy in this period has obvious historical and cultural characteristics. Secondly, the Party's guidance of the development of opera during this period was not always smooth, and there were repetitions in the opera policy and its implementation, with difficult explorations in some major opera policies. Thirdly, the Party's policy on Chinese opera has a deep influence than before.

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese opera, from 1949 to 1956, under the guidance of the general policy *letting a hundred flowers bloom, weeding through the old and bringing forth the new*, has various detailed policies. For repertoires, the policy has gone through different a period, that is from the evolution of the *three changes*, the *two-pronged approach* to *three-parallel*, which also has experienced a tortuous process of development in practice.

The development of Chinese opera in the first seven years, after the found of the Republic of China, has a far-reaching influence on contemporary opera. Some scholars have argued that there are three conventions of opera, namely, “the tradition of classical theatre which has been formed in the first millennium from the Song and Yuan dynasties, the modern theatre type that was formed in the urban theatre performances in the first half of the twentieth century, and the contemporary theatre tradition that was formed between 1949 and 1966, which saw the formation of contemporary theatre traditions” [1]. It can be seen that the practice of Chinese opera leading by policy in the first seven years of new China had an important historical role.

## 2. Background of the Policy on Chinese Opera

Many Chinese opera policies were issued during this period (1949-1956): including Mao Zedong's Theory of New Democracy, Speech at the Yan'an Literary and Artistic Symposium, both of which pointed out the direction of Chinese opera policy during the New Democratic Revolution, especially in 1942, Mao Zedong proposed the slogan *pushing out the old and bringing in the new*, showing the directional instructions for the reform of Chinese opera during this period.

In November 1948, the *Planned and Step-by-Step Reform of Old Operas* set the standards for the validation of the new Chinese opera repertoire. At the beginning of the New China, the Ministry of Culture made notices one after another, such as the policy on the banning of theatre in July 1950, which put forward that *the old theatre in general should not be banned explicitly* [2].

In terms of organizations, specialized agencies in charge of opera reform were set up consistently, from the Central Committee of the Party to the local government, which gradually formed a scientific system from top to bottom.

Firstly, a special government agency was established. On November 3, 1949, with the approval of the Cultural and Educational Committee of the State Council, a leading agency for the management of national opera reform—the Opera Improvement Bureau—was established in the Ministry of Culture. This demonstrated the government's extraordinary emphasis on traditional opera. The main tasks of the Improvement Bureau are to formulate opera policies, organize people to adapt and create plays; unite and transform opera artists; reform the opera troupe system, etc. In early 1950, the *Northeast Opera Improvement Association* was established in the Northeast region, other provinces and cities also successively established drama reform offices and departments.

Secondly, the special advisory organization was established. On July 11, 1950, the Ministry of Culture established the Opera Improvement Committee, the highest advisory section, and founded the *New Chinese Opera Weekly*, whose main task is to make suggestions to the Ministry of Culture on Chinese opera reform policies. Local governments also followed this approach and successively established relevant institutions, selecting officials to drama troupes to promote opera improvement work. After the establishment of the Opera Improvement Committee, 12 plays were banned, namely: *The Murderer, Slick Oil Mountain, Nine Watching Days, Double Spike, The Strange Wrongful Report, Haihui Temple, Exploring Yinshan Mountain, Guan Gong's Appearance, Daxiang Mountain, Iron Rooster, Shuangsha River and Capturing Sanlang Alive*.

Finally, research institutions were established. On April 3, 1951, the Chinese Opera Research Institute was established. Its basic task was to conduct focused and systematic research in the art of opera. Subsequently, the East China Opera Research Institute and the Southwest Research Institute were successively established. By then, opera reform institutions at different levels and functions have been established one after another, the formation of an organizational system was completed: from the central to local governments, and from the government to the private sector, providing organizational guarantee for the future formulation and implementation of the party's opera policies.

From November to December 1950, the Ministry of Culture held a national opera work conference in Beijing. Tian Han made a report on *Struggle for Patriotic People's Opera*, in-depth expounding on the key points of opera reform, artists' united learning. Representatives of the National Opera Work Conference had a debate on the issue of which should be given priority, Peking Opera or local opera? During the discussion, some people proposed the concept of *letting a hundred flowers bloom*. The results of conference are reflected in the Recommendations of the National Opera Work Conference to the Ministry of Culture on the Improvement of Opera. The meeting also discussed the issue of the system reform, as the editorial of the seventh issue of *Drama News* pointed out reforming the system is a prerequisite for reforming people, and also pointed out some problems in drama reform in the early days of New China, which were specifically reflected

in: lack of standards in banning dramas, and prohibiting bans through administrative means. In terms of drama reform, there are some mistakes, such as to treat myths as superstition, to eliminate love as lust, and to use simple methods on artists cultivation.

In April 1951, the Opera Research Institute was established. At the request of Mr. Mei Lanfang, Mao Zedong wrote an inscription for it *letting a hundred flowers bloom, wiping out the old and bringing out the new*. Which formed the policy that opera workers have always followed ever since. It generally required all artists adhering to the inheritance of tradition first, then innovation is carried out on the basis of culture, it also pointed out that various drama types should promote each other in free competition.

On 5 May 1951, the State Council, the nation's highest administrative authority, issued its *Directive on Dramatic Reform*. Signed by the Prime Minister, Zhou Enlai. This official document, often referred to as the *Five-five Instruction* (Wuwu zhishi) due to its release date, This instruction clearly instructed: The primary task of opera should be to carry forward the people's new spirit of patriotism and inspire the people's heroism. Any opera that promotes resistance to aggression and oppression, love for the motherland, freedom and diligence, descriptions of people's justice and virtues should be encouraged and promoted; on the contrary, any opera that advocates feudalism, terrorism or obscene, as well as insulting laboring people should be opposed. Cultural and educational institutions from central to local must be responsible for the censorship of Chinese opera according to the above standards. We should adopt an active reform policy. The heritage of Chinese opera has been partially exploited by the feudalistic rulers as a tool of lulling people into a false ideology and poisoning the minds of people. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the good and get rid of the bad, and reform and develop Chinese opera on a new basis in line with the interests of the state and the people.

It emphasized that Operas which are seriously harmful to the people must be banned, but this should be handled by the Central Ministry of Culture. Local governments should not banned at their own wills. The *Instructions* proposed that free competition in various forms of opera should be encouraged to promote the 'letting of a hundred flowers bloom' in the art of opera. The Instruction concludes with the following: "Chinese opera performers have the responsibility of entertaining and educating the masses. They should improve themselves through learning in the field of politics, cultivation and professions", Certain irrational regulations in the old theatre troupes, such as the apprentice system, the raising daughters, system and the 'Jinglike', all of which seriously infringed on human rights and the welfare of artists. So they should be reformed in a systematic manner, and such reforms must rely mainly on the conscious and voluntary efforts of the artistes' masses [3].

Directive on Dramatic Reform, as an extent of *Letting a hundred flowers blossom, pushing forward the new*, it provides clear policy provisions for the directive codified the official three-pronged policy for reforming xiqu repertoire, artists, and organization (gaixi, gairen, gaizhi). The policy on the validation of repertoire was clearly defined, with specific and authoritative explanations and interpretations. In 1951, the Ministry of Culture issued three notices banning performances, including stop performance of *The Great Split Coffin* (dapiguan) (7 June 1951); stop performance of *Zhongkui* (act of Marrying Sister) and other six plays were banned.

From 1949 to 1951, the Chinese opera policy was made through many aspects. There are organizational structures to make the policy of opera, as well as the specific policy of opera are highly centralized and unified. It began to carry out the policy step-by-step. Under the management of theatre organizations at all levels, with guidance of *letting a hundred flowers bloom, pushing out the old and the new* and the *Five-Five Instructions*. *Three Reforms* policy on reforming the theatre, people and system was on its way.

### 3. Full Implementation of “The Three-Pronged Reform of Xiqu Repertoire, Artists, and Organization” Policy

The three-pronged reform policy is a comprehensive improvement of the drama, artists and structure. Among them, Reform of repertoire is to eliminate the harmful factors of scripts and stage existed before 1949; Reform of Artists is to help them to improve thoughts, political awareness and cultural professional level; Reform of Organization is to eliminate the unreasonable regulations in the old troupes.

The focus of renovating plays is to censor old plays so as to standardize the stage performance. As Zhou Yang said that “The Chinese people are the most loyal to our own nation. Especially considering position of China in the world today, we should love and respect our motherland. Any performance that hurts our self-esteem, self-confidence and patriotism will not be tolerated. Anything in xiqu that are decadent and backward must be resolved with determination [3]”.

On July 11, 1950, the Opera Improvement Committee of the Ministry of Culture held its first meeting after being formed. It explained the repertoire review work and proposed that three categories of plays should be revised, the performances must be suspended: (1) Feudal dramas that promote narcosis and intimidate the people; (2) dramas that promote adultery, poison, rape and murder; (3) words and actions that vilify and insult the working people [4].

After this meeting, between April 1951 and March 1952, the Ministry of Culture released 5 notices to suspend the performance of 14 plays, such as *The Great Coffin* on June 7, 1951, On July 12, 1951, The Central Ministry of Culture banned the performance of Peking Opera *Zhong Kui*, and Kun Opera *Married Sister* was retained. etc. Consequently, a forty-three-member Xiqu Improvement Commission (*Xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui*)—the supreme consulting body on the task of dramatic reform—issued a list of twelve banned jingju plays as a result of careful deliberation on every play petitioned for censorship by regional authorities. This was, in fact, the only official list issued in the name of the commission, although during the following two years, the Cultural Ministry banned an additional fourteen plays, all except one of which as a result of regional petitions. These were the infamous twenty-six plays whose censorship was reiterated repeatedly during the following decades. Most of these twenty-six plays were jingju, except for six pingju and two Sichuan opera (*chuanju*) plays.

It can be seen that the fundamental starting point of revamping the opera is to eliminate the feudal and anti-patriotic ideas on the stage and clean up the dust. Under the guidance of the Communist Party of China's opera reformation policy, great achievements were made in revising old scripts. On December 1, 1950, Tian Han pointed out in his report at the National Opera Work Conference: “In the past year, Beijing has adapted more than 100 Peking operas and Ping operas, There are 412 kinds of Peking opera adaptations and 642 kinds of Pingju operas in Northeast China; 119 kinds of scripts have been adapted in Wuhan; 70 kinds of scripts have been modified in Xi'an and Lanzhou; more than 10 kinds of Sichuan opera have been adapted in Chongqing etc., the number is quite considerable [5].”

While revising the drama scripts, the central government began to clarify the stage images. At the National Opera Work Conference, Zhou Yang pointed out that some performances really have bad influences on national self-esteem and people's patriotism, which must be changed. After Zhou Yang's speech, there were hot discussions throughout China in all aspects, including many newspapers and periodicals such as *Xiqu News*, *People's Drama*, *Wen Hui News*, etc, all of these newspapers published editorials on clearing stage image. In addition to adapting old plays, the policy of adapting plays also includes writing and performing new plays, including modern plays and new historical plays. According to statistics, from 1950 to 1951, during the war to resist U.S. aggression and aid North Korea, in order to support land reform movement, the national opera

choreographed and performed at least 3,000 dramas in various styles. Among those plays, a number of relatively good plays appeared, including the Yue opera *Father and Son* and Ping opera *By the Yalu River*; with the theme of resisting U.S. aggression and aiding North Korea, the Han Opera *Blood Debt Repaid with Blood* and the Shanghai Opera *Flowers Bloom Everywhere*.

According to data provided by Tian Han in his report at the National Opera Work Conference, during this period, 49 new operas were created in Tianjin, 149 in Hebei, 470 in Northeast China, 37 in Xi'an and Lanzhou, and 55 in Kunming. With the joint efforts of the government and opera artists, the first National Opera Performance Conference was held in 1952, in which 23 operas, 37 troupes and more than 1,600 actors participated. Among them, there are 63 traditional plays, 11 new historical dramas, and 8 modern theatre. Mao Zedong watched the performance, Zhou Enlai delivered an important speech at the closing ceremony, pointing out that this performance of opera season was very successful, considering it was an unprecedented victory. He also elaborated in depth on *letting a hundred flowers bloom, weeding out the old and bringing forth the new*, popularization and improvement, political standards and artistic standards, unity and transformation, overcoming difficulties and welcoming victory and other issues [6].

The policy of reforming traditional performers refers to the education artists on politics and morals, which transformed the old performers, and through the renewal of this, making opera achieved the goal, that is to educate people, so as to ultimately foster a new generation of people with socialist ideological consciousness. This policy was also reflected in the encouragement of representative artists to participate in the management of the country, such as: representatives of the first National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC): Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Cheng Yanqiu and Yuan Xuefen; and seven representatives of the first National People's Congress (NPC): Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Chang Xiangyu, Chen Shufang, and Lang Xianfen. Tian Han once reported that theatre should help the country to educate the people with patriotic, democratic and socialist ideas, and to disseminate good social trends as well. The ideals of the new artists were "not only for the sake of one person's life, but for the betterment of the people, and to help bring people to consciousness through the art of theatre, to make them truly free from bullying, oppression, and exploitation, and to truly stand up, this is the ideals of the new artists. From policies implanted all over the country at this period, educating the people was the essence of the opera reform at that time, and the purpose of the opera reform was to eliminate the exploiting ideology still existing in opera, to enlighten the consciousness through the artistic images, and to educate the masses on the concept of socialism.

On 3 April 1951, Zhou Enlai gave an inscription to the Chinese Academy of Opera: "Attention and reform, unity and education, both are indispensable [3]" which had directional opinions on how to treat opera artists, clearly stating that the Party's basic requirements for opera workers are attention and transformation, unity and education, and proposing that no matter what form of opera art, in the melting pot of socialist transformation, it should be continuously transformed, and unity should be reflected. After *the Five-Five Instruction*, many local governments began to organize artists to participate in various short-term classes: generally adopting the methods of listening to lectures in large classes and group discussions; combining the principles of self-education and collective study to learn cultural knowledge, policies and regulations. Through a series of studies, the political consciousness of artists was generally advanced, their love for the socialist system was strengthened, literacy classes were held to eliminate illiteracy and increase their enthusiasm for participating in the work of opera reform. Three types of plays were banned: plays promoting feudalistic morals and feudalistic superstitions, plays promoting illicit sexual relationships and murderous adulteries, and plays containing language and performances that defamed the laboring people (State Council of the Central Government 1951).

The system reform policy refers to eliminate irrational systems, including three aspects: the

structure of the theater troupe, the construction of the art system and changes on theater management. The reform of the theater troupe means the abolition of unreasonable systems in opera troupes such as the old apprenticeship system and other remnants of feudal production relations, so as to establish a new efficient system.

Through gradual efforts, the ownership of the theater was transformed from the master-owned to people-owned, that is, the theatre should be operated by a majority of artists, under the indirect guidance or direct leadership of the government. When Liu Shaoqi reported on the work of the Party Group of the Ministry of Culture, he clearly pointed out that it is necessary to study whether the folk professional theatre troupes should be converted into state-run ones, and that we can first engage in the cooperative nature, and that we have to through material benefits to promote their willing to work, to take the method of contract, for good actors should be paid higher wages, while for the bad ones, wages can be lower. He also suggested that state-run and folk theatre troupes should compete with each other to see which one has a large audience and can win the people's affection as well [3].

On 26 May 1954, the Ministry of Culture pointed out the various drawbacks of the co-owned system in its Instructions on Strengthening the Leadership and Management of Folk Professional Theatre Troupes, and put forward reforming folk theatre troupes step by step in a focused manner. The reform of the art system is the reform of art institutions. For example, the Institute of Peking Opera of the Opera Reform Bureau adopted the directing system, and Shang Xiaoyun Troupe broke the directing system and presented the stage from the aspect of artistic integrity. Theatre management reform, that is, theatre unified management, reform the old system, and establish a new system. For example, the introduction of a new accounting system, the abolition of tea and tipping, etc. these regulations exploit and affect the order of the performance. The original business model was basically abolished with the boycott of the “Economic Encouragement Section”.

#### 4. The Adjustment between “Three Reforms” Policy and Practice

In the early 1950s, the Opera Reform was not carried out smoothly. Among the various deviations in the three reforms, the most important one was the working style, which reflected the incomplete implementation of the policy on opera. For example, before the National Conference on Opera, the banning of unhealthy ideology operas was implemented in most areas. The *Five-Five Instruction*, the Central Government's policy on opera was very clear, i.e., it did not ban opera simply, but to modify opera at first. But, when this policy was putting into practice, it was divided into two tendencies.

Firstly, the misunderstanding ideas that the operas which are poisonous to the people should be banned by the Central Government, the local government just follow the instructions, people with this idea think that all the so-called poisonous play should dealt with by the central government, the locals do not have responsibility to ban any opera. Because of this misunderstanding, the once banned plays were began to perform without any modification, such as the *Guan Gong Xiansheng* (Shanghai) and *shazibao* (Harbin).

Secondly, some local governments did not pay any attention on the policy of the central government at all. They still continue to adopt the policy of banning performances according to their own subjective wills. For example, due to the mechanism of mythological and superstitious plays, after the central government recognized *The Legend of the White Snake* as a mythological play, because of the serpentine shape on the stage, it was considered to be the promotion of feudal superstition. The leaders of the county party committee ordered that the performance be stopped immediately. The result of the combined reforms of repertoire, practitioner, and organization was a shortage of plays for the xiqu stage. This shortage was a national concern, because a few successful

plays became seriously over-exposed through their adaptations by many other genres.

This situation is best illustrated by what came to be known as the *Fifteen Strings of Cash phenomenon*. In April 1956, the Zhejiang Kunqu Company brought their adaptation of a classic kunqu (the oldest existing xiqu genre) play, *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (Shiwu guan), to Beijing to wide acclaim. After watching the play in Beijing on 17 April 1956, Mao Zedong praised its adaptation and performance, recommended its dissemination through adaptation into other genres, and proposed rewarding the company. Zhou Enlai watched it twice and echoed Tian Han's proclamation that one play has saved a whole genre. On 12 May, the Cultural Ministry officially urged "all xiqu troupes throughout the country to adapt and stage [the play] to the best of their ability" [7]. Such play that "rich in people's nature and quite high in artistry", "it not only makes the classical art of kunqu put on a new luster, but also shows that historical dramas can be equally good at playing a realistic educational role". These two speeches of Premier Zhou to a certain extent elucidated the Party's basic attitude towards traditional theatre and eliminate some wrong ideas. It can be said that the success of Shiwu Guan is not accidental, since under the guidance of the policy of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and pushing out the old and the new", the success of it is a deemed tendency, which proved to be a correct path for the development of traditional repertoire.

## 5. Conclusion

Academics have paid particular attention to the study of literature and art in the first 7 years. Some scholars have examined the process of constructing policy in this period, and have paid attention to the impact of policy on practice from three aspects: social, political and cultural, they made a conclusion that Chinese opera during this period had "a high degree of unity in ideology, a high degree of organization in teamwork, and a high degree of standardization in art". In my opinion, the general characteristics of the opera policy in the first seven years (1949-1956) are reflected in the following three aspects:

Firstly, policy in this period has obvious historical and cultural characteristics. Its basic features are roughly summarized as the implementation of the "two directions" established by Mao Zedong in his speech in 1942, namely, that literature and art should serve proletarian politics and workers, peasants, and soldiers; the first Literature Congress determined the main spirit of the Party's formulation of the opera policy; and the *Five-Five Instruction* of 1951 clarified the opera policy. Mao Zedong's inscription for the Chinese Academy of Theatre Arts, *Let a hundred flowers blossom, push forward and innovate* explained the fundamental approach of the theatre arts policy; in 1956, *Let a hundred flowers blossom, a hundred schools of thought contend* set the main tone of the development of the theatre arts. In 1956, "A hundred flowers blossom, a hundred schools of thought contend" set the main tone for the development of opera; the above representative major policy events and texts have achieved important results. On the whole, the guiding ideology of the theatre policy in the first seven years of the new China basically followed the guiding ideology of the theatre policy during the New Democratic Revolution.

Secondly, the Party's guidance of the development of opera during this period was not always smooth, and there were repetitions in the opera policy and its implementation, with difficult explorations in some major opera policies. This exploration was both in the fundamental direction of opera work and in the method of opera reform. In the midst of complex social relations and contradictions, the majority of opera workers, under the leadership of the CPC, endeavored to overcome the difficulties and shortcomings in their work and to promote the development of opera.

Thirdly, the function of the Party's policy on opera in this period was more obvious than before. On the one hand, the Party attached great importance to the work of the opera and incorporated it into the overall objectives of the revolution and construction, taking the opera and other forms of

literature and art as an important front for the whole revolutionary cause. On the other hand, based on the construction of the regime, the Party established a unified national leadership and organizational structure for opera, put forward a unified policy on opera, and carried out unified planning and management, which provided unparalleled conditions for the development of opera in the past.

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