

Music, Politics and Modernisation in China: An Analysis of 'Red Detachment of Women'

Authors : Lei Ping

Abstract : The Western discourse of 'modernity' along with its objects, ideologies, and culture are brought to Imperial China by force of arms which confronted Chinese traditions. The struggle and conflicts between 'Zhong' (Chinese) and 'Wai' (foreign), 'Jiu'(Old) and 'Xin'(New) are continuous during the turbulent times of 19th Century China. Since the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, China has gone through radical social, economic and cultural reform under the Communist Party's highly centralised and autocratic political regime. The regime and Chairman Mao's eagerness to identify the new China and establish a revolutionary mono-culture have increased political influence on the modernisation process. The ten years of Cultural Revolution (1966-76) have commonly been neglected and separated from China's modern history due to its political, emotional and various other associations. Its cultural productions which dictated the Chinese stages during this period, namely the yangbanxi (Model Works), are largely viewed as political propaganda material with little or no artistic value in the nation's cultural development. This paper argues that far from being anti modernisation of culture, the yangbanxi carry continuities that originate from before the cultural revolution and influence later cultural productions up till today. The focus of the paper is on Hongse Niangzijun (The Red Detachment of Women), a ballet yangbanxi (Model Works) which was performed to President Nixon during his visit to China in 1972. It depicts the female soldier Wu Qionghua's life story: a transformation from a peasant girl to a mature communist soldier. The first part of the paper begins with an introduction to the cultural, social and political contexts under which the ballet was created and made a yangbanxi (Model work). The second part examines the application of musical devices (e.g. instrumentation, leitmotif), ranging from typical Western techniques to Chinese musical and theatrical traditions. By analysing, connecting and comparing these musical devices of various origins, the paper illustrates that the yangbanxi (Model Works) largely contributes to the ever-present, continuing and evolving modernisation of contemporary Chinese culture.

Keywords : cultural revolution, Hongse Niangzijun (Red Detachment of Women), modern China, music, Yangbanxi (model works)

Conference Title : ICPM 2018 : International Conference on Philosophy and Music

Conference Location : Mumbai, India

Conference Dates : February 22-23, 2018