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*Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing  
Opera during the Cultural Revolution* by Xing Fan (review)

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provides rich first-hand knowledge about Taiwanese literature with a personal touch.

The autobiography is highly readable, with all the historical ups and downs delivered in a clear, calm, and sensitive voice. John Balcom, a seasoned and award-winning translator of Chinese literature, has rendered the original text in an elegant flow of English with his own creative touch. This authentic and powerful biography will be a good read for any scholar or general reader who is interested in modern East Asian history, literature and culture, or women's experience in a non-Western context. Scholars who work on the Chinese Northeast, the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party, or modern Taiwanese history and literature will find the book particularly helpful. In addition, the book or excerpted chapters would be useful as an assigned text for classes on modern East Asia.

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Xing Fan. *Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018. xiii, 288 pp. Hardcover \$65.00, ISBN 978-988-8455-81-2.

The slogan “Eight works for eight hundred million people” is often used to describe the tight political control over the performing arts during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. This catchphrase refers to the eight model operas, developed during the early 1960s, that were believed to embody Chairman Mao’s dictum that art should serve politics. These model operas were indeed elaborate works of propaganda, but their artistic value was also quite high. No discussion of the Cultural Revolution is complete without consideration of model opera, yet until recently coverage of its evolution from traditional Beijing opera has been fragmentary. This lacuna in the literature of model opera has now been filled by Xing Fan’s new book, *Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution*.

Fan divides the book into two parts. Part 1 traces the history of model opera from the Communist base at Yan’an in the 1930s to the end of the

Cultural Revolution in 1974. Fan uses the term “traditional Beijing opera” to refer to early attempts to infuse revolutionary content into traditional forms. The use of this term is perhaps infelicitous, in that it is more likely to bring to mind the classical style of Beijing opera during its nineteenth-century heyday. Indeed, the author includes little discussion at all of traditional Beijing opera in this sense. Rather, she starts with what would perhaps be better termed “revolutionary Beijing opera.”

According to Fan, model opera began its path toward maturity during the first decades after Liberation. During the early years of the People’s Republic, the Chinese Communist Party aimed to implement the “unity of politics and art” that Mao had called for in his famous Yan’an Talks in 1942. However, it struggled for a clear vision of what a revolutionary Beijing opera recast in the mold of socialist realism would look like. Fan then marks the birth of model opera as the 1964 Beijing Opera Festival, in which several works supervised by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing were highly acclaimed as “models” of what a truly revolutionary Beijing opera should look like.

Part 2 is the heart of the book, in which Fan makes significant contributions to the literature. Here, she takes a closer look inside model opera, analyzing it from the five aspects of playwriting, acting, music, design, and directing. In each chapter, she compares traditional Beijing opera and model opera with regard to one of these aspects, discussing reasons why changes were needed and how they were implemented. Her discussion is informed by numerous interviews with people who were involved in the original model opera productions. Furthermore, she is careful to integrate diverse viewpoints in order to create a balanced perspective on the transformation process from traditional Beijing opera to model opera.

The challenge was to produce works of art that maintained the essence of Beijing opera while creating a vibrant theatrical experience with appeal to mid-twentieth-century Chinese audiences. To achieve this goal, the entire approach to opera creation was revamped. Traditionally, new Beijing operas were developed as masters fleshed out themes or plot ideas in rehearsal. As a general rule, no script was prepared in advance, and no single person played the role of director. This practice reflects Beijing opera’s roots in folk opera, and it worked well as long as new works were based on traditional stories. In the new socialist order, however, opera needed to reflect the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers, particularly showcasing their heroic efforts at helping to create a communist state. As vehicles of propaganda, the model operas had important messages to convey, and so every word had to be precisely crafted. For this reason, scripts were painstakingly crafted by playwrights, and the action on stage was meticulously honed by directors. Furthermore, performers who had been trained in traditional Beijing opera techniques had to learn a new style of acting in line with the tenets of social realism.

The chapter on music is by far the longest, and rightfully so, as it is in this respect that model opera differs most from its traditional roots. For example, females in traditional Beijing opera often sang in a falsetto voice, but this was deemed inappropriate for the new socialist woman. Likewise, the traditional orchestra was rather small, but in model opera it was greatly expanded to include Western instruments. Much of the work in developing a combined Chinese-Western orchestra was done under the direction of musicologist Yu Huiyong. Several facts attest to the success of this integration. First, model opera music is still a favorite in karaoke bars and on gala TV spectacles. And second, an integration of Chinese and Western instruments is still widely employed in contemporary Chinese theater music.

Other changes in music were necessitated by revisions to the stage art. Traditional Beijing opera was performed on a bare stage with few props, such as a table and a chair, which often took on symbolic meanings. Changes in scene were marked by the entrance or exit of a major figure, always accompanied by percussion. In the name of socialist realism, however, model opera made extensive use of stage art, including elegantly painted backdrops and realistic props. Since this stage art had to be changed between scenes, there had to be curtain closings, so instrumental music during these interludes was needed. This particular aspect of model opera distinguishes it from the traditional form and makes it more like musical dramas in the West.

Although the Cultural Revolution was largely dismissed as a “decade of disaster” after the death of Chairman Mao, in recent years there has been a revived interest in the artistic endeavors of that time period. [Richard Kraus’s \*The Party and the Arty in China\*](#) blazed the path for research on model opera. In more recent years, [Barbara Mittler’s \*A Continuous Revolution\*](#) and [Pang Laikwan’s \*The Art of Cloning\*](#) have furthered our understanding of the role that model opera has played in the shaping of modern Chinese culture. Fan’s analysis of model Beijing opera based on the five aspects of playwriting, acting, music, design, and directing is without doubt the most extensive and informative in the literature. For this reason alone, *Staging Revolution* will become a classic in the field.

Fan is to be commended for her descriptive synopses and detailed portrayals of the work behind the scenes in creating these masterpieces. She understands the essence of model opera firsthand from her own experiences observing recreations of the original operas for modern audiences. This scholarship is then fleshed out with numerous interviews with the performers who were involved in the original productions. If there is any weakness in this analysis, it is in the fact that we hardly get to know the people who played such important roles in creating model opera. Many people are named and quoted, but we learn little about their personalities or their psychological motivations. Perhaps, then, this is the topic for another book.

In sum, Xing Fan has made an important contribution to the growing literature on the Chinese Cultural Revolution in general and model Beijing opera in particular. It is a must read for any scholar who is interested in Chinese culture, and even the historian of modern China can gain a deeper understanding of the time period by a perusal of *Staging Revolution*.

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Ge Zhaoguang. *What Is China? Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History*. Translated by Michael Gibbs Hill. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. xv, 201 pp. Hardcover \$39.95, ISBN 978-0-674-73714-3.

In *What Is China?* Chinese historian Ge Zhaoguang sets out to challenge the conceptual understanding of nations and nation-states as relatively recent political formations bound to the period of modernity in Europe. Ge posits that the Han Chinese have constituted a nation since the Qin dynasty, and that the territory which they inhabited—the nine central imperial provinces—can and should be understood as a kind of a nation-state. Ge questions the idea that following the Xinhai Revolution the imperial era in China came to an end, with a modern Chinese state built out of the imperial ruins. Instead, he suggests that today's China is to a certain extent still an empire and, moreover, that the pre-1911 empires had a lot in common with what historians understand as a modern nation-state. While the argument in the book is not always coherent, the author generally posits that because a nation-state emerged in