Article:
Li, R. (2001) Sino the Times: three spoken drama productions on the Beijing stage. TDR / The Drama Review, 45 (2). pp. 129-144. ISSN 1054-2043

https://doi.org/10.1162/105420402760157727

Sino the Times

Three Spoken Drama Productions on the Beijing Stage

Li Ruru

In May 2000 I saw three productions in Beijing, the only spoken drama performances running then.[1] They were: *Qinchai dachen* (*The Inspector General*) by Nikolai Gogol, produced by Zhongguo qingnian yishu juyuan (The China Youth Art Theatre [CYAT]), *Fengyue wubian* (Boundless Love), a new play, produced by Beijing renmin yishu juyuan (Beijing People's Art Theatre [BPAT]), and *Qie Gewala* (Che Guevara), an experimental production by a group of artists from different institutions, working together under the aegis of the Zhongyang xiju xuyuan, yishu yanjiusuo (Research Institute of the Central Academy of Drama). Each work is interesting on its own, but the three become more meaningful when considered together. On the one hand they demonstrate considerable qualities as theatre, spotlighting emerging new ideas and new talents. On the other hand, they show weaknesses—both residual influences of earlier spoken drama practices and styles, and new problems deriving from the uncertainties of a society undergoing continuing change and major challenges. These productions reveal a lot about contemporary mentalities during what is perhaps the most intriguing transitional period in Chinese history. The government's dual-track system—referred to in blunt Marxist terms as "the market economy base and the communist ideological superstructure"[2] and in euphemistic shorthand as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Deng 1992)[3] has introduced confusion, conflict, and resentment, which are reflected in the three productions.

The Inspector General

The theme of Gogol's classic Russian satire—the exposure of a rotten, corrupt system—is extremely topical in today's China. There are reports almost daily in the national and local media of flagrant cases of corruption. Frequently, high-ranking officials who have taken huge sums in bribes are executed. Ordinary Chinese are no longer shocked to hear, for example, that in one notorious smuggling case, a deputy mayor of Zhanjiang, who was heading the anti-smuggling team, and senior customs officials were all major criminals in the case (Wei 2000). Everyone in China talks about how bad corruption is,[4] and every-

The Drama Review 45, 2 (T170), Summer 2001.

1. A relief of Gogol (downstage left) watches over Qinchai dachen *(*The Inspector General, *2000). A third staircase is out of view in the right corner. (Photo by Cao Zhigang; courtesy of The China Youth Art Theatre)*

one hates it, though ironically, most people seem to contribute to it, by using the "art of connections" (Yang 1994) to obtain goods, services, or positions. It was alleged that Zhu Rongji, the current premier, once said that when he retires, he hopes only to be acknowledged as a *qingguan*, an honest and upright official. It might sound ridiculous that the premier of China should have such modest aspirations, but this illustrates how dire the situation is.

Thus at this particular historical moment, *The Inspector General* "made us think of ourselves and of our society" (Qiao 2000:10). Gogol's satirical-allegorical story of greed, fear, pride, incomprehension, and the need for a confession by municipal officials of a Russian provincial town in the 19th century cleverly mirrors today's China. The program note explicitly draws the analogy:

> Today, the *troïka,* drawn by three horses, comes onto the Chinese stage again carrying the true/false inspectors. The heavy noise of the hoofs attacks Chinese audience's hearts. Once again, laughter echoes in the auditorium. But this time, it is black laughter. (CYAT 2000)

But the producers were cautious with how they presented their views in the program. Instead of the usual practice of printing the director's words, the program contained comments by the performers, turning individual responsibility into collective responsibility.

The play was staged in a small studio in central Beijing because CYAT's own theatre was being refurbished. On entering the studio, the basilica dominating the set symbolically proclaimed, "this is Russia." A huge relief sculpture of a smiling Gogol was hung on the wall at the back of the stage. The set, the period costumes, and the blocking indicated that Chen Yong,[5] the director, wanted the mise-en-scène to place the production in the Russia of the 19th century. No matter, the contemporary relevance of the production was lost to no one.

The performance space was a single, large, raked stage with the audience on three sides. Three long staircases leading from the stage through the audience enlarged the performance area, giving more places for entrances and exits and allowing some brief episodes to take place among the audience (plate 1). The audience felt that they were in the same space as the characters, reducing tem-

poral and geographical differences between 21st-century China and 19th-century Russia.

The clockwork ending of the production is perhaps the best example of Chen's approach to the play. In the text, Gogol gave a detailed suggestion for a tableau. In addition to the vivid description of gestures, body movements, and stage positions, Gogol specified the duration of the tableau: "All the characters, thus petrified, retain their positions for almost a minute and a half (slow curtain)" (Gogol 1966:409–10). Chen Yong kept this tableau for a minute. She also skillfully integrated a voice-over, a passage from the end of chapter XI of *Dead Souls*:

> Is it not thus, like the bold troïka which cannot be overtaken, that thou art dashing along, O Russia, my country? [...] Yes, on the troïka flies, inspired by God! O Russia, whither art thou dashing? Reply! But she replies not; the horses' bells break into a wondrous sound; the shattered air becomes a tempest, and the thunder growls; Russia flies past everything else upon earth; and other peoples, kingdoms, and empires gaze askance as they stand aside to make way for her! (Gogol 1915:195–96)

The voice expressing Gogol's romantic and idealistic hopes for Russia's future was an evocative and humorous contrast to the tableau of fools and villains to whom that future was entrusted. Although Chinese audiences may not understand the clever intertextual approach to this particular scene, since most of them were not familiar with Gogol's writing, they did have a perfect sense of the humor produced by this contrast. "Russia" could be easily replaced by "China," rendering quite unmistakable the director's patriotic feelings and her strong dislike of present ills. As Zhong Yibing, a retired critic, pointed out, "The play is shocking for Chinese audiences. It was written 165 years ago, but it sharply reflects contemporary Chinese reality. The Tsarist officialdom of the play is dwarfed by our own" (in Qiao Zongyu 2000:11).

The significance of putting on *The Inspector General* at this particular time is clear. As far as the acting and staging are concerned, I was astonished by its stale style. There were obvious efforts to play "Russian" and "period" (plate 2). The actors tended to overact, displaying little sincerity and unconvincing character portrayals. The minutes of a Beijing symposium on this production

2. In The Inspector General*, the wife and daughter of the Mayor are introduced to Khlestakov. (Photo by Cao Zhigang; courtesy of The China Youth Art Theatre)*

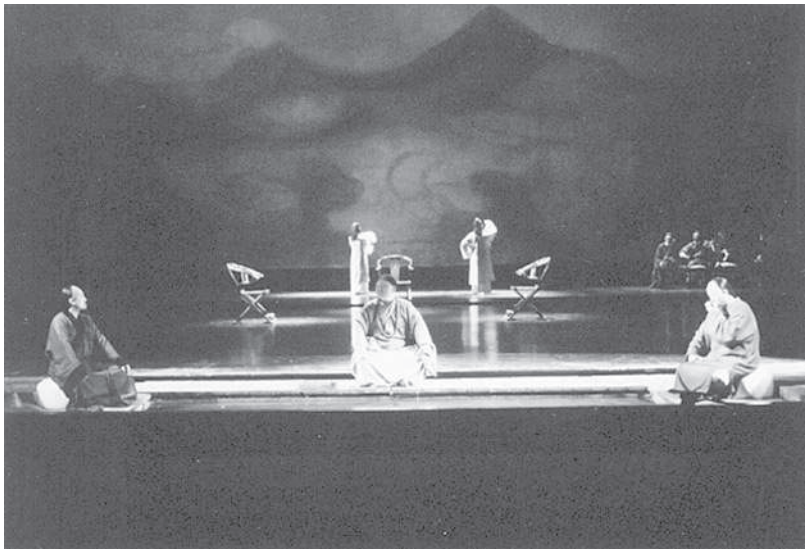
indicate that Chen wanted to adhere to the intention of the original text (in Qiao Zongyu 2000:12). She does, however, seem to have ignored Gogol's instructions, particularly where Ivan Khlestakov is concerned, that "the more ingenuousness and simplicity the actor evinces in this role the more successful he will be" (1966:314). Though Lin Xiyue,[6] the young actor who played Khlestakov, had some sparkling moments, he was too often superficial, playing the villain with too much relish, losing the trust audiences otherwise may have placed in him. Fortunately, nobody in this production wore a prosthetic nose, as was once the norm in China when playing a "foreigner." Tong Daoming, a famous translator of Russian drama and a scholar of Russian theatre, commented that, "It is clear that the actors have been much influenced by the Russian film *The Inspector General*. [...] The arrangements for the entrance and exit of servants who rush in and out well represented the acting style of Russian comedies" (in Qiao Zongyu 2000:10). Following a cinematic blueprint is in keeping with the conventions of spoken drama when staging a foreign play. My own experience of this about 12 years ago[7] was that the first few rehearsals were always scheduled for viewing foreign films, and it was compulsory for everyone to attend—the director, stage crew, and performers. Everyone enthusiastically welcomed the rare opportunity to watch Western films. The films were ideally adaptations of the play to be staged (as in the case of *The Inspector General*), or of works by the same playwright. The aim for the actors was to "look like" foreigners, achieved through caricatured body language such as shrugging, quick movements of the hands, and eyes rolled in exasperation. This acting style appeared even more inappropriate when experienced up close in the small studio.

Director Chen, trained in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, is apparently still committed to socialist ideals; she was brought out of retirement at the age of 70 to stage Gogol's play: Maybe her conventional production values were a very deliberate choice—making sure that this piece of "critical realism" would only use standard techniques of staging and acting in Chinese spoken drama. Perhaps the production expresses Chen's criticism of how Chinese theatre is developing under the influence of new ideas brought into China by recent, radical political reform. Or it may be that the "unreformed" production was not so much a deliberate political attack, as a conscious homage to Sun Weishi,[8] the director of the 1952 production. It may be that the conventional production was chosen by default—because there was no other plausible choice.

Boundless Love

This play is about Li Yu, an eminent drama theorist and playwright of the mid-17th century, near the end of the Ming dynasty and the rise of the Qing. Li Yu has had a mixed reception among scholars in China since 1949 because, unlike some other playwrights of his time, he did not attempt to deal with social problems, being content with light-hearted romances. Contemporary scholars still frequently quote his theoretical writing, but his plays are no longer staged. *Boundless Love* (literally translated as Endless Moon and Wind) was criticized for its presentation of the historical figure, with such claims as, for example: "Li Yu was a complicated character, but this play fails to show us his depressions, anxieties, and the complexities of an intellectual living under the political and cultural pressures at the turning point between the Ming and Qing dynasties"[9] (Jia 2000:13).

My impression, however, is that playwright Jin Yun[10] did not intend to represent a truthful history in the play. He was more interested in focusing on one psychological aspect of Li Yu—his strategy for survival by smiling: "In this world, there are always things that you have to do. If we can do them with a



3. A traditional painting of misty hills functions as a permanent backdrop on the set of Fengyue wubian *(Boundless Love, 2000). In the opening scene, Li Yu chats with his friends at the front of the stage. Behind them, a rehearsal, accompanied by a live orchestra, provides background music. The meta-theatrical atmosphere is created from the moment the curtain is first drawn. (Photo by Su Dexin)*

smile, why should we do them crying?" (Jin 2000). Smiling seems to be the only weapon that Li Yu, and maybe Jin Yun himself, had at his disposal. Of great interest is the meta-theatrical aspect of *Boundless Love.* The play deals with a playwright and his troupe, and includes a play within the play—which invites the audience to look at the theatre in a wider social context (plate 3). The audience is constantly reminded of contemporary actors' lives—the pressures to perform, competition from rival companies, and how actors have to subsidize their income with other work such as "weeping at funerals"[11] in order to earn a living. *Boundless Love* is a fine illustration of market forces in action.

As David Jiang discusses in his article "Shanghai Revisited: Chinese Theatre and the Forces of the Market" (1994:2), state subsidies for drama have declined drastically. Theatre companies have had to find new ways to survive. The money crunch has had both healthy and unhealthy results for contemporary theatre. Theatres often make their money by going on tour to country towns and even small farmers' villages. Theatre is reaching out to wider and newer audiences. With permission to seek sources of private funding, producers now have some freedom to choose the plays they wish to stage. A number of independent drama workshops have appeared since the late 1980s. These have seen some very interesting productions. *Che Guevara*, the third play I will discuss, is one such production.

The flip side of financial freedom, however, is that the low pay for acting in live theatre results in the reluctance of many actors to work in the theatre at all, preferring much more lucrative film or television work. This artistic drain is stemmed to some extent by the requirement of each company that actors meet a performance "quota" before they can do any other work. Actors are obliged to contribute a proportion of their earnings from film and television to the theatre company to which they are attached. Still, the box office is now the top priority.

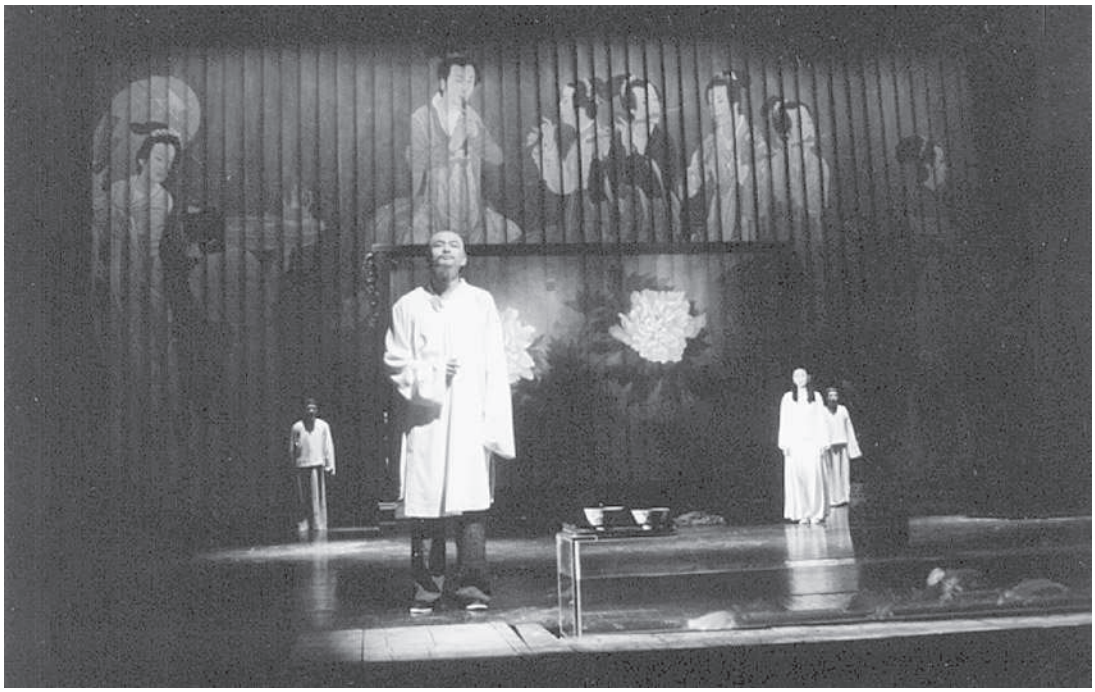
Boundless Love has had tremendous box office success. In its first week, the *Beijing wanbao* (Beijing Evening Post) reported that the production had already "raked in one million yuan!" (U.S.$125,000) (Yu 2000:25). Even the most conservative estimates put sales at $410,000 for 51 performances, with an outlay of around $40,000. The Capital Theatre is self-financing, taking 30 percent of the box office gross.[12]

Ticket prices range from 60 yuan ($7) to 160 yuan ($20), which in Chinese terms are far from cheap; the average monthly wage for a factory worker is $95, while a lecturer in higher education can earn from $150 to $230 per month.[13] Six years ago, the BPAT's financial situation was dire:

> Almost all of China's theatre companies are in a financial crisis. The state-supported Beijing People's Art Theatre, China's top-rate modern company, cannot operate the way it did even in the mid-1980s. Even with a large subsidy, it needs at least one million yuan ($170,000) more a year in order to operate. A program called "Who Can Give a Hand to the Beijing People's Art Theatre?" was broadcast nationally on TV. (Jiang 1994:2, 72)

Thanks to skillful management, the theatre's financial situation has now been transformed.

Making box-office draw a priority inevitably influences artistic decisions. *Boundless Love* and the previous works of playwright Jin Yun and director Lin Zhaohua show very clearly how much market forces have wrought change within Chinese theatre. Jin Yun's first play, *Gouerye niepan* (Uncle Doggie's Nirvana, 1986), established him as one of China's leading playwrights, with both the theme and the artistic treatment shocking theatrical circles. It was the first time on the Chinese stage that a peasant had dared to voice his real unhappiness about the political campaigns launched by the government.[14] Since then Jin Yun has written a number of plays, though his themes have changed. His strong political commitment, his reflections on the past and anxiety about the present, have been diluted. Jin Yun's shift of interest seems to echo a Chinese theatre that has been blasted by the market economy. Jia Fu wrote in his article, "at least Jin Yun is still writing scripts for spoken drama. Are there not too many playwrights who made great contributions to modern theatre in the



4. When the blinds that form the backdrop in Fengyue wubian *(2000) are closed, the audience sees a copy of a famous painting,* Han Xizai's Dinner Party, *which reflects the scene onstage. In front of the blinds, a movable screen is painted with two peonies. A fish tank with carp sits in the corner, downstage left. (Photo by Su Dexin)*

5. In Fengyue wubian *(2000), Li Yu goes back to his home village with two young actresses to mourn at his wife's grave. Through the open blinds, the audience can see the distant hills shrouded in mist, painted in traditional style. (Photo by Su Dexin)*

1980s but have already thrown their pens away?" (2000:14).

Lin Zhaohua has become China's most controversial director since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. In the 1980s, he and Gao Xingjian, a playwright who has now emigrated to France and was named the 2000 Nobel laureate for literature, staged highly controversial productions including *Juedui xinhao* (Alarm Signal, 1983), *Chezhan* (Bus Stop, 1984), and *Yeren* (Wildman, 1986). *Bus Stop*, an example of the Chinese Beckettian theatre of the absurd, was banned after 10 performances, and declared "seriously flawed" (Yan 1998:xvi). While some praised the play for its modernity, others criticized it because it "contained a basic questioning if not a fundamental negation of the organization of contemporary Chinese society, a condescending attitude towards the deluded pitiable multitude, and an elitist and individualistic impulse" (Yan 1998:xvi). Later, economic reforms gave Lin an opportunity to organize his own workshop.

In *Boundless Love*, the protagonist, Li Yu, cannot get a proper official post, so he turns his energies to the theatre. He writes plays and runs a theatrical troupe, which plays both in public and in private for wealthy families. Often

6. Liang Guanha, as the fat monk in Fengyue wubian*, stands with folded hands, his smiling face reminisent of a statue in a Buddhist temple. (Photo by Su Dexin)*

in a tight financial squeeze, Li Yu allows his actresses to subsidize themselves by "weeping" at funerals, while he supports himself with well-remunerated epitaph writing. He has affairs with his actresses and seems to enjoy most of all looking at women's bound feet. He describes his feelings toward young women to his housekeeper, one of his former mistresses:

> [Looking at these girls] I have a feeling that's difficult to describe. As if a layer of tiny, tender, green grass was growing in my heart. [...] My blood circulates faster, prolific ideas for writing come from nowhere, and I run more quickly. [...] Tell me, would I die more quickly, too? (Jin 2000)

However, Li Yu never sincerely involves himself in any of the love affairs. His flippant attitude and particularly toward Xue'er, the heroine in the play, indicates how Chinese men of letters traditionally exploited women. They appreciated women's beauty, wrote gracefully about women, and their relationships with women were seen as tokens of their appreciation of culture, but in all this, women were little more than playthings. With so much emphasis on Li Yu's capacity for resigned and accepting "smiling," this aspect of traditional culture appears to be appreciated rather than criticized in the play.

The love affairs, the poetic atmosphere, and the picturesque scenes were all effectively emphasized by director Lin Zhaohua. With a plot concentrating on a theatre troupe, the performance successfully included a live *kunju* orchestra with a *di* (a bamboo flute), a *sheng* (a reed pipe), a *sanxian* (a three-stringed plucked instrument), and drum (plate 3). The main function of the orchestra was to play the music for rehearsals that were a part of the plot in the play-within-the-play, but it also gave this spoken drama production a tinge of exotic color.

The stage design also won good reviews. Yi Liming, the designer, successfully worked out the expression of a river, one of the key features of the set. The orchestra pit was filled with water, and illuminated with six strong spotlights. The reflection of the water was projected onto the ceiling of the auditorium and the stage backdrop, on which hills were painted in a traditional style. Plate four illustrates some details of the set: A big fish tank (5m x 4.5m) with live carp was placed at the front of the stage. The modern tank and real water were awkwardly incongruent as they contrasted with the set which was reminiscent of a traditional, nonrealistic Chinese water-ink painting. However the vertical blinds that separated the stage from the permanent backdrop were very clever. When they were shut a famous traditional painting of a group of women, *Han Xizai's Dinner Party* was revealed, reflecting the life of Li Yu and his mistresses. When the blinds were open, the audience could see through to misty hills in the distance (plate 5). The BPAT used its best actors for *Boundless Love*, and they were a huge draw. Li Yu was played by Pu Cunxin, the son of a long-standing and celebrated BPAT member. Pu now appears in a leading role in almost every production. The fat monk, with a smiling face reminiscent of a statue in a Buddhist temple, was played by Liang Guanhua, a rising television comedian. His acting was absolutely sincere. He made no apparent effort to play the role comically, yet still made the audience laugh from the heart. I shall long remember his skillful way of waving his big sleeves (plate 6).

Having seen the earlier works of Jin Yun and Lin Zhaohua, *Boundless Love* seems entirely different both in theme and artistic form. This is indicative of a general trend in spoken drama to divest itself of its "militant" tradition (Ge 1990), a characteristic with which the modern theatre was born at the turn of the 20th century. It might also be argued that this change is indicative of the influence of the market economy on these two formerly committed dramatists, who are in a sense escaping their conscience. Li Yu's attitude—"in this world, there are always things that you have to do. If we can do them with a

smile, why should we do them crying?"—could be interpreted as Jin Yun's own view of life. In a similar vein, Lin Zhaohua has said that with *Boundless Love* he wanted to stage a play that does not have too many dramatic conflicts.[15] He is vague about the ideas he wants to convey in the play, but was impressed by the production's appeal and its ability to draw a large audience (Lin 2000). For me, the question remains "What does the play want to tell us?" That this is a question, however, might be my problem, and a problem of my generation, who were brought up in an environment where theatre should always have a meaningful message—and here, it seems, meaninglessness itself is the message of the production.

Che Guevara

Che Guevara is a new play staged in a small theatre just next door to BPAT's Capital Theatre. Completely different in style from *Boundless Love*, *Che Guevara* is similar to a *huo bao ju* ("living newspaper"), a topical, politically orientated modern genre usually performed in the open air. Unlike the orchestra and aria singing in *Boundless Love,* which only work for certain parts in the plot, the songs and disco music of *Che* are integrated with the text, with a band and a pop singer accompanying the production. The score was not original Argentinean music, but composed with a strong influence from Latin America. Most of the performers were involved in the creation process, including the composition of the music. Zhang Guangtian (plate 7)—who was the singer, composer, and one of the directors—explains how the music was created: "We discussed what kind of music we needed on the basis of the text. When certain points were agreed on, I went away to write the music. When the score was ready, it was given to the band and the performers for feedback. I then revised it" (in He 2000).

There are no characters in the play, but rather "signals" or "mouthpieces" of certain concepts. Che Guevara does not appear on stage at all, though from time to time his voice is heard. One group of actors plays positive roles ("goodies"), and another group negative roles ("baddies"). It is worth noting that all the goodies are played by men (plate 8), while all the baddies are women (plate 9). At the post-performance discussions between the audience and company, nobody, it seems, ever questioned this arrangement.[16] Perhaps many Chinese still believe that, as the popular expression goes, "women are like a disastrous flood." Or perhaps it is just because many Chinese tend to accept what they have been told without challenge.

Although the plot is based on the life of the legendary hero, contemporary Chinese life has been cleverly interwoven in the story. Scenes flash between 1950s Latin America and contemporary Beijing. The latter scenes are highly political and quite open in their criticism of contemporary values. For example, in one scene a man runs onto the stage waving a copy of the *Beijing qingnianbao* (Beijing Youth News) shouting, "Someone has fallen in the river!" Actor A from the positive group (positive actor A, PAA) tries to take off his clothes to jump in and rescue the person, but he is stopped by the negative group (NG), all of whom hold abacuses in their hands (plate 9). An actress from the negative group (NAA) opens the scene:

NAA: Who's fallen into the water?

PAA: A girl.

NG: Add two points.

NAA: How old is she?

7. The singer Zhang Guangtian, was both the composer for Qie Gewala *(Che Guevara, 2000) and one of the directors. (Photo courtesy of Li Ruru)*

8. The postive group, the "goodies," in Qie Gewala *(2000) is comprised solely of men. (Photo courtesy of Li Ruru)*

9. Qie Gewala*'s negative group, "the baddies," are played solely by women. Here, they challenge a would-be rescuer with abacuses in hand: "Stop, will you? I need to calculate you." (Photo courtesy of Li Ruru)*

PAA: Five or six years old.

NG: Minus two.

NAA: What is her IQ? Must be fairly low. She fell into the water instead of pushing other people in!

NG: Minus three.

NAA: What does she look like?

PAA: Big eyes and a round face.

NG: Add five.

NAA: If she'd had an oval face, she could have had more points. What do her parents do?

PAA: Peasants.

NAA: Minus two. That makes seven. *(To Positive Actor A who is about to jump into the river)* Stop, will you? I need to calculate you. Age? Eighteen. Have you been to University? Wow, Peking University! What subject? Biology! Have you taken the TOEFL English test? You have, excellent! Parental occupation? Entrepreneurs! And you are so handsome...and extremely eloquent...and so very brave... Grand total: 180 points. Quick! Put your clothes back on! Get back to where you have come from. Be extremely careful when you cross the road! The product is worth 7 points, but the capital is worth 180. That's a huge deficit. Simply an economic crime. Nowadays, we don't go in for economic planning. Now, the market is all and beneficial results are the number-one priority! *(To the other young man)* It will be a loss if you go. *(To a third one)* Certainly not to your advantage to jump either!... *(Suddenly seeing an old man who is not on the stage)* What is your venerable age? Eighty-four? The best age to jump into the water! Have you cancer or something? You have, and at a late stage! You're not a top official, are you?... Off you jump into the water. We will look after your clothes, and we will send them back to your relatives with a prize for "fighting for a just cause" (Huang et al. 2000).

The play is full of episodes like this. For a Chinese audience, this goes far beyond, or simply is not at all, "what a play should be." *Che* is a performance of witty and relevant songs, discos, and paradoxical speeches dealing with a wide range of contemporary social problems. For example, the American rocket attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade is dealt with. On 8 May 2000, the first anniversary of the incident, American embassy staff were invited to see the play. Three seats were kept for them with signs that read, in huge characters, "Reserved for the American Embassy." Nobody turned up. The invitation letter was then read out at the end of the show and was greeted by a storm of applause (He 2000).

Che is a play that vents anger at U.S. imperialism, at ageism, at elitism and sycophantism, and at the prevailing reverence for wealth at the expense of human beings. It laments the lack of revolutionary spirit and ideals. The cast consisted mainly of students and some young staff from the Central Academy of Drama. Lines were recited in an exaggerated way and were actually often shouted out. Choreographed body movements and gestures, accompanied by strong music were stylized. Performers expressed energy and enthusiasm with a frenzy that was reminiscent of the variety shows of the Cultural Revolution. Had arms been available, it seemed not beyond the bounds of imagination that the company would have taken their weapons onto the streets. At the end of the show on 9 May, a young man from the audience ran onto the stage, grabbed the red flag from an actor, and waved it with passion. The song, "Mao

Zedong, Mao Zedong, we will follow you in a hail of bullets and shells..." caused a vast upsurge of public feeling in the auditorium (Hong 2000).

Audiences were invited to stay after the performance, to have an informal conversation with the *Che Guevara* performers, stage designer, scriptwriters, and directors. These discussions were not that deep, but the fact that a discussion was held at all was an innovation in China. The following is from the article "Selection of Notes of Dialogues with the Audience":

AUDIENCE: So far you have done over 20 performances. What is the audience feedback?

CHE GUEVARA GROUP: We have kept a record of our discussions with audiences. The audience reaction falls into four main groups. Group 1 absolutely agreed with what we expressed in the production. Group 2 thought that Che Guevara was a romantic revolutionary. Group 3 were those who were real enthusiasts for Che Guevara, and the hero in their hearts was therefore completely different from what we depicted in the production. Group 4 said that they were extremely excited while sitting in the auditorium, but as soon as they stepped out of the gate, they felt that words by the Negative Group were correct in reality.

AUDIENCE: You have invited the American Ambassador to come to see the play. What do you think of his absence today?

CHE GUEVARA GROUP: The real purpose behind the invitation was to express our thanks to the United States. Without their bombing of the Chinese Embassy, we would have not been able to do this show. Chinese intellectuals once hoped that problems could be solved by looking outside of China. However, this dream was smashed by the bombshells. [...] After all, it is the people we can depend on. [...] This is the first time a show such as this has been staged in the last 20 years or more. The auditorium may have only 300 seats, but audiences' ideas as well as our own reflect what the masses want to say from the bottom of their hearts. American imperialists feel self-important, but they deceive both themselves and others. They are pleased with themselves, believing that people around the world look to them for salvation. They miscalculate. We didn't expect the American embassy to send people to the show. When the seats are empty, they are more eye-catching. Even in court, you can have a trial without the defendant *(storm of applause from the auditorium).* (He 2000)

On the night I saw the performance, a 50-year-old man began his contribution to the discussion, but after two or three sentences, burst into tears, and was so choked that he could not continue his speech. He finally managed to say that he was deeply moved by the play and thought it was a wonderful production. He was from a revolutionary family and he felt that the revolution his parents carried out had "completely failed." His opinion immediately invited more comments. Some felt that the economic reforms have produced certain side effects, but should not take all the blame for social problems. Some felt strongly that it was not a bad thing if some "old cadres" lost the privileges they used to enjoy under the old system.

The production was clearly powerful and thought provoking. Audiences were sincere and dared say what they thought. This is something that could not have happened during the last few decades. It is also very interesting to see what a great impact the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade has had on Chinese people, especially the youth in Beijing. I did, however, feel uncomfortable with the over-simplifications of the play, which seems to have forgotten what a disaster the "revolution" was for many people. Problems

were attacked, but no new solutions were offered. Instead, there was a nostalgic return to old icons like Mao and Che and "revolution."

The *Che Guevara* group has been accused of hypocrisy for selling tickets, and Che T-shirts and CDs. One university student wrote:

> I was absolutely touched by the production. When I stepped out of the auditorium, I saw the Che Guevara T-shirts and CDs, and was in awe. No sooner had I picked up a CD than I heard a shout, "Give me the money!" "Didn't they take the capitalists to task for making dirty money from the likeness of revolutionaries?" I asked. Her face dropped, and she grabbed the CD from my hands. A girl next to me said timidly, "Students can get a discount, can't they? I forgot to bring my student card with me, though. Could I still buy a copy of the book, please?" A man wearing a Che T-shirt retorted furiously: "How do I know that you are student without any proof? No way!"
>
> And then I realized that the show was over. (Hong 2000)

I am sympathetic with both sides. The students had more than enough reason to feel unhappy about the conflict between what was presented in the production and reality, while the *Che Guevara* group had to commercialize its production in order to survive. However, the problem here lies in the manner in which products were sold. The staff were horribly rude. If they had been polite and called everyone *tongzhi* ("comrade," in Chinese on the mainland), I'm sure there would have been no accusations of "commercialization" or "hypocrisy." Instead theirs would have been seen as laudable political work.

Concluding Thoughts

The Inspector General, *Boundless Love,* and *Che Guevara* demonstrate a number of things about contemporary Chinese theatre. First, the political and cultural climate is more relaxed than ever before. In earlier times, audiences were simply the passive recipients of whatever the performers did under instruction from their patrons, the Chinese authorities. With the market economy, this has changed, and both theatre workers and audiences feel less restrained in expressing themselves. Second, more financial resources have become available, resulting in an increase in independent productions, and theatres now have the chance for commercial success, impossible just a few years ago. Third, new ideas and talents are emerging, and themes are being dealt with in new ways. These may not always win universal appreciation, but if nothing else, there is now greater variety in Chinese theatre than ever before.

Finally, arts like spoken drama, classical music, and ballet, have made a comeback. The theatre scene seems less bleak than that described by Jiang more than six years ago (Jiang 1994), although the "stormy time" for the theatrical environment has not yet passed. Indeed, those strong gusts have brought new questions: What is theatre for? Who is the audience for today's theatre? Where will theatre go? The confusion I felt after seeing these three productions reflects the confusion the whole nation feels in this particular transitional period, as the state attempts the curious feat of binding a communist ideology to a capitalist economy.

Notes

1. In the past, the 1 May holiday, International Labor Day, was a flourishing time for theatre. This year, however, the government extended the holiday to an entire week, to encourage people to spend money traveling either within China or abroad, and the result was a rather thin theatrical program.

2. The orthodox Chinese Marxist believes that each society is based on the dialectical unity of the economic base and the superstructure: "the economic base decides the superstructure, while the latter reflects the former" (*Cihai* 1979:1167).
   Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
3. In 1992 during his famous visit in the south, Deng Xiaoping coined this slogan in his aim to shift China from the central government's command economy to the market.
4. More facts regarding the corruption: According to *Jiefangribao* (The Liberation Daily, 2000a), the National Disciplinary Examination Committee in 1999 investigated 130,000 cases regarding official corruption, an increase of 8.2 percent over the prior year. Among the people who were involved in these cases, more than 132,000 were disciplined by either the Party or by the Government rulings, and it was 6 percent more than the same period in the previous year: 4,092 were officials at the county level, 327 were at the district level, and 17 were officials at the province or ministry level. Some received criminal sanction. Hu Changqing, the deputy governor of Jiangxi province, a country boy born in 1948, was executed in April 2000 for taking huge sums in bribes. The sum of the bribes that Cheng Kejie, the Deputy Standing Committee Head of the National People's Congress, and his mistress, Li Ping, took totaled tens of millions of Chinese *yuan* (*Jiefangribao* 2000b).
5. Chen Yong studied directing in the USSR, and graduated from the Lunacharsky Institute of Theatrical Arts in Moscow in 1954.
6. A graduate of the Acting Department, the Central Academy of Drama, Lin Xiyue is the son of Lin Zhaohua, one of the most controversial directors in contemporary China, and the director of *Fengyue wubian* (Boundless Love).
7. I studied and worked in Chinese theatre circles from 1976 to 1988.
8. *The Inspector General* was premiered by CYAT in 1952 by Sun Weishi, the daughter of two Communist martyrs. After her parents were executed by the National Government, she was sent first to Yan'an and then to the Soviet Union by Zhou Enlai to study drama and theatre from 1939 to 1944. Sun later committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution (some people believed that she was tortured to death).
9. The ruler of the Ming dynasty was Han, the dominating race in China, while the ruler of the Qing was Manchu, a minority race originally from the northeast. The new Manchu ruler was regarded as a foreign invader. Many people from the Han gentry, of which Li Yu was a member, committed suicide to show their allegiance to the Ming empire.
10. Jin Yun is the pen name for Liu Jinyun.
11. In old China, each village had one or two people (usually elderly female) who took "crying" at funerals as their profession. While weeping, they also used existing tunes to sing about the life of the deceased. It is said that such customs have come back in many areas.
12. Companies other than the BPAT can rent the theatre for around U.S.$1,200 to $1,300 per performance.
13. There is now a large yuppie class in China, especially in big cities, mainly comprising those who work for joint-venture enterprises. Most of them are single and earn excellent salaries. Spoken drama performed by the Beijing People's Art Theatre is regarded as highbrow art, and is popular among this group.
14. The following dialogue from scene 12 between Uncle Doggy and Li Wanjiang, the leader of the production brigade, is a typical example. Uncle Doggy has been almost out of his mind since his land and mule, which had been given to him by the land reform of the early 1950s, were taken away by the People's Commune. However, he can at least console himself as long as he is working on his small plot of land for personal needs. Now the Cultural Revolution has started, and his small plot is going to be taken away again:

    UNCLE DOGGY: Stop it! You know what I'm thinking? Life today is worse than before the liberation!
    LI WANJIANG: *(Stunned)* What are you saying? How dare you!
    UNCLE DOGGY: In those days, when the landlords' militia got too tough, we could always run to the Communists. Who can I turn to now? (Jin 1999:160–61)

15. The term "dramatic conflict" was introduced into Chinese theatre circles through William Archer's *Play-making: A Manual of Craftsmanship* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1913), and it became a golden rule in plot structure. During the Cultural Revolution, when the class struggle and the fight between two political roads were the only themes in drama, this theory was ever to the fore. I studied playwriting from 1978 to 1982 at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, and this term was hammered into us.

16. I arrived at this conclusion after examining the notes from all of the post-performance discussions (see He 2000).

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