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# NIXON, KISSINGER AND MUSICAL DIPLOMACY IN THE OPENING OF CHINA, 1971-1973

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President Nixon: "I think the Prime Minister [Zhou] has outlined  
a very satisfactory and workable process, and as our  
Foreign Ministers discuss the problems of normalization of contacts, or  
trade...

Premier Minister Zhou: Culture...

President Nixon: Culture...."<sup>1</sup>

## Music and Diplomacy

Richard Nixon was indeed correct when he wrote that the Chinese leadership "consider[ed] every act purposeful and every event symbolic."<sup>2</sup> As the cultural battlefield of the Cold War unfolded, ceremony remained an essential element in Chinese statecraft.<sup>3</sup> In dealing with the Chinese, Nixon himself remarked that "atmospherics" were often "more important than any day-to-day substance," making cultural exchange all the more potent of an instrument for breaking down the wall of mistrust between the PRC and USA.<sup>4</sup>

1 Memorandum of Conversation between President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State Rogers, and Zhou Enlai, et. al., Beijing, Feb 21, 1972, 9. National Security Archive.

2 Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 869.

3 Chris Tudda, *The Truth is Our Weapon: The Rhetorical Diplomacy of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange & the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

4 Handwritten note from Nixon to Kissinger, written on Kissinger's June 27, 1972 memo to Nixon entitled "Atmospherics of My Visit to Peking," National Archives, National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Box 97 Folder "CHINA - Dr. Kissinger June 1972 Visit."



## Jiang Qing

Nixon and his cohort clearly took cognizance of the woman at the heart of the Cultural Revolution and its attendant musical debates, Jiang Qing. Materials vetted by Kissinger and prepared for Nixon's wife, Patricia, would deal most expressly with her role as part of the normal raft of "first lady" activities. Among the briefing materials included in February 1972 for Mrs. Nixon was the full text of Jiang Qing's 1964 speech on reform of Peking Opera.<sup>5</sup> Only permitted by Mao to become a public and political figure via the arts after 1962, Jiang Qing seized and wielded great power in the cultural sphere. Under her influence, institutions of music higher education benefited tremendously, receiving generous food subsidies at a time when rations were scarce.<sup>6</sup> Jiang Qing initiated the reform of the conservatory from a Western music – a Soviet model – into an institution more geared toward Chinese folk music.

However, she was not entirely hostile toward Western instruments and in fact was fascinated by the mobilizing power of music. Jiang Qing's interest in Western music was that of a dilettante aspiring to be beyond reproach in her choices. In her quest to reinforce the genius of Mao Zedong Thought, Jiang Qing listened repeatedly to forbidden Western music, including Brahms' Hungarian Rhapsodies for orchestra. Using the techniques gleaned from the West, Jiang Qing wanted to strengthen the artistic and ideological effectiveness of her own vehicle to power: the musical and dramatic arts. The resultant products, such as the anthem *The East is Red*, showed clearly the influence of Beethoven's Ninth (and perhaps Shostakovich's Second) symphony. She also clearly influenced Kim Jong-il in his growing grasp and understanding of the power of the North Korean cultural apparatus.<sup>7</sup>

In keeping with her adversarial nature and the series of devastating purges of the Central Committee since 1966, the preparations for Nixon's visits were caught up in cultural struggles between Jiang Qing and her least favorite of

5 John H. Holdridge to Kissinger, NSC document, "Background Memorandum for Mrs. Nixon on Her Participation in the Trip to the People's Republic of China." National Security Council Files. Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Box 91. [Folder: PRC/Briefing Papers Sent to President, February 1972, Folder 1 of 2]. (Jiang Qing's speeches of April 1967 speech to military commission and March 24, 1968 speech were also included, as was Deng Yingqui's speech (Zhou's wife) for balance on the life styles of women in China.

6 Interviews with Cultural Revolution-era China Central Conservatory students, Beijing, July 2006.

7 For obvious echoes of Jiang Qing's 1964 talks, see Kim Jong Il, "On the Direction which Musical Creation Should Take," in *Kim Jong Il Selected Works Vol. 1* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Press, 1992), 390-397.

Mao's retainers, Zhou Enlai. Zhou was ascendant in early 1972, benefiting from the turbulence of the Lin Biao affair and the subsequent power vacuum and climate of uncertainty in the Central Committee (which is to say Mao's mind). The whole notion of an opening to the United States, China's great enemy since the Angus Ward affair of 1948, was looked down upon by Jiang Qing, who viewed the flirtations with Nixon as the affair of Zhou Enlai. Zhou, in her view, was seeking to break the dominance of the Lin Biao faction over Chairman Mao. Jiang had long been wary of Zhou Enlai, who was himself expert in the opera, having played female roles in the past, and having had experience directing propaganda troupes since the 1920s in mobilization campaigns in southern China.<sup>8</sup> The internal divisions within the Chinese Communist Party lent importance and extreme symbolic emphasis on the musical choices made for Kissinger and Nixon. Repertoire choices, like every other detail for these visits, received close personal attention of the leaders and were subject to internal debate.

### The Americans Are Coming

In preparation for Kissinger's second visit to Beijing, Zhou Enlai arranged for German music to be performed for the envoy. In this request, Zhou was treading on difficult ground, for his prior request to prepare a Central Philharmonic program of European music in honor of the West German foreign minister had been denied by Jiang Qing's coterie of cultural advisors. Yu Huiyong, who controlled China's most prominent orchestra, had "refused to give the Central Philharmonic any time to rehearse."<sup>9</sup>

Li Delun, the director of the Central Philharmonic and close to Zhou Enlai, was at the epicenter of the struggles over the musical preparations for Kissinger and Nixon. Li Delun, in a later interview, said that orchestra was decided upon as entertainment because orchestral music lacked the problems of ballet. Drama, with its scripts, was too specific. According to Li, Zhou Enlai very carefully selected a Beethoven symphony appropriate for Kissinger, asking Li to provide programmatic information for each of the symphonies. Reflecting the potentially "reactionary" label that might be applied to such materials, the

8 Ross Terrill, *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), 166, 322-325.

9 Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai, *Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music Became Chinese* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 266.



Premier asked that Li Delun leave the study materials at Zhou's private office at the State Council, rather than the more standard drop-off at the Western gate of the leadership compound at Zhongnanhai.

The Central Philharmonic would perform for Kissinger, but which Beethoven symphony they would play for him had not yet been determined. Li Delun was called in for a meeting with Jiang Qing about the matter, and his suggestions to play Beethoven's Fifth (whose fatalism contravened Marxism's teleological bent) and Beethoven's Third (Napoleon being a bourgeois figure). Ultimately the Sixth Symphony, *The Pastoral*, was decided upon.<sup>10</sup>

However, the unorthodox programming of the Beethoven symphony was balanced by its juxtaposition with standard revolutionary opera. Kissinger thus attended a well publicized show *The White Haired Girl*, a revolutionary ballet performed by the Central Ballet Company of China.<sup>11</sup> *The White Haired Girl* (Bai Mao Nü) tells the story of the suffering life of a peasant girl who is saved from a life of servitude by the revolutionary leader.<sup>12</sup> This sought-after story had been portrayed in the movie before the ballet and was extremely effective in provoking feelings of hatred to the old system.<sup>13</sup> The government was impressed by the impact of the movie, and like many others, the CCP artists sought to transform this most moving story into the other artistic sphere of ballet.

As Kissinger later noted: "On the evening of October 22 we were taken to the Great Hall of the People to see a 'revolutionary' Peking opera—an art form of truly stupefying boredom in which villains were the incarnation of evil and wore black, good guys wore red, and as far as I could make out the girl fell in love with a tractor."<sup>14</sup> Kissinger's brusque dismissal in his memoirs is belied in his briefing notes for Nixon on this very opera, which the National Security Advisor called "a command performance," noting that the length of

10 Luo Yunyun, *Li Delun Zhuan* (Biography of Li Delun), (Beijing: Zuoja Chubanshe, 2001), 406-407.

11 Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai assert that Kissinger attended *The Red Detachment of Women*, but are erroneous.

12 For critical perspectives on Bai Mao Nu, see Zhang Lianjun, Guan Daxin, Wang Shuyan, *Dongsansheng Geming Wenhua Shi 1919.5.4-1949.10.1* (History of Revolutionary Culture in the Three Northeastern Provinces, 1919-1949) (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2003); Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979); Guo Jianmin, *Ershi shiji eishi-liushi niandai de zhongguo geju biao'yan yishu* ("Representative 20th-century Chinese Operas from the 1920s to the 1960s") *Yinyue Yanjiu* (Music Research) 2002, March, vol. 1.

13 He Jingzhi, Zhang Songru, words, and Cui Wei, Zhang Lu, and Ma Ke, music, Bai Mao Nü

14 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), 779.



applause was the important thing and to be noted.<sup>15</sup> The opera, *Shijiabang*, had been attended by Kissinger's whole group, hosted by Marshal Ye Jianying in small auditorium in the Great Hall of the People (Renmin Dahuitang).<sup>16</sup>

When Nixon was in China, Kissinger showed his awareness that the cultural events masked behind-the-scenes preparations for further discussions, developing ideas at previous sessions. "Slip me a note at the gymnastics," he said to Vice Minister Qiao Guanhua.<sup>17</sup>

Various scenarios had been contemplated for the first meeting, and the role of music played in virtually every one. One early draft noted "POSSIBLE CROWD SITUATION" on the 40 minute drive from Arrival Ceremony in Peking at 11:30 am to residence.<sup>18</sup> On schedule marked "Departure for Guam for Shanghai and Peking, China," Nixon is warned that upon passing through Tiananmen Square on the way from the airport, "There is a possibility the motorcade may stop in the Square so that you may observe some folk dancing." Previewing his itinerary for February 22, Nixon saw that "It is anticipated that the Cultural event will be an opera," for which he was given an attached document entitled "Background on Revolutionized Chinese Opera." "It is anticipated," read a subsequent draft, "that the opera will be *Red Detachment of Women*." It is interesting that Nixon took such careful note of the content of the performance, even though his main object was likely his plan to retreat at intermission to meet with Zhou Enlai. At the same time, Nixon was aware that extracts of the performance would be aired live in the United States – raising the question of which type of music was influencing whom and more—and wished to assess the potential impact.<sup>19</sup>

15 Handwritten note from Nixon to Kissinger, written on Kissinger's June 27, 1972 memo to Nixon entitled "Atmospherics of My Visit to Peking," National Archives, National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Box 97 Folder "CHINA – Dr. Kissinger June 1972 Visit."

16 National Security Council Files. Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Box 90, Folder "China Visit Record of Previous Visits Arranged by Subject Matter, Book I Feb. 1972 TS Folder 1 of 2." The following Monday night, Oct. 25, the entertainment was everyone, minus Kissinger, going to Guest House "for showing film of July trip followed by movie of the ballet, *Red Detachment of Women*." National Security Council Files. Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Box 90, Folder "China Visit Record of Previous Visits Arranged by Subject Matter, Book I Feb. 1972 TS Folder 1 of 2."

17 Henry Kissinger, Memorandum of Conversation with Zhou Enlai, Qiao Guanhua, et. al., February 23, 1972, reproduced by National Security Archive, 21, [http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC\\_readers/kissinger/nixzhou/13-01.htm](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC_readers/kissinger/nixzhou/13-01.htm).

18 ROUGH PRESIDENTIAL SCHEDULE For THE TRIP TO CHINA, Dec. 23, 1971, White House Central Files, Box 60, Folder 2.

19 White House Central Files, Subject Files, Trips, Box 60, Folder 6, EX TR 24 China, People's Republic of (Red China) Proposed 1972, Beginning – 7/28/71).



For Nixon's visit, the Chinese leadership again bent the harsh musical protocols of the Cultural Revolution in order to accommodate their foreign guests. Greeting Nixon at the opening banquet at the Great Hall of the People on the night of his arrival was a band playing "Home on the Range." (Playing songs known to be presidential favorites was to become a tradition, but the band mistakenly played the University of Michigan fight song for President Gerald Ford in 1975 when Michigan State was in fact the President's alma mater.) It is not known if the Chinese made a piano available for President Nixon to use in accompanying the group.

Nixon's response to the U.S. national anthem landed him into some domestic problems. The White House received a slew of letters about, in the words of one citizen, "why the president did not place his hand over his heart when the Chinese played the National Anthem of the United States of America." Gulley says "The President is well aware of the protocol and custom pertaining to saluting the flag when it is on display during the playing of our National Anthem. Because the flag was a considerable distance from him, the President felt it would be more appropriate for him to face in the direction of the music and stand at attention. I can assure you the President feels the greatest respect for our flag and his demeanor was not only proper but clearly the most appropriate action under the circumstances." And this was the form response to many complaint letters in the same folder. Ravenswood, WV, even wrote about it in the paper.<sup>20</sup>

Nixon's speech at the banquet not only conquered the hasty preparations for it, but also directly echoed media calls in the US for an intensified cultural engagement with China.<sup>21</sup> The extent to which Chinese people were impacted by the music played for Nixon must remain speculative, although one can speculate by discussing media depictions of the trip. While the Americans hailed the advent of satellite television, few Chinese watched the event live. However, for the musicians involved, the opportunity to play Beethoven and

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20 W.L. Gulley replies to Mrs. Magaret Von Nostrand of East Rockaway, NY White House Central Files, Subject Files, Trips, Box 73, Folder 1, EX TR 24 China, People's Republic of (Red China) Proposed 1972, Beginning - 7/28/71

21 President Nixon's notes on WGN Editorial from Chicago from which he appropriated "the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step" The April 1971 editorial stated that "the logic proceeds that if we can get along over a ping-pong table, maybe we can get along on other levels." White House Central Files, Subject Files, Trips, Box 59, Folder 1, EX TR 24 China, People's Republic of (Red China) Proposed 1972, Beginning - 7/28/71.





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Western songs was savored.

Richard Nixon's attendance at a performance of the revolutionary opera *Red Detachment of Women* marked the closest encounter of the American leader with the Maoist personality cult. The selection of the ballet *Red Detachment of Women* (Hong Ce Niang Zi Jun) was not coincidental.<sup>22</sup> Of the eight model works (yang ban xi), it appeared to the Chinese leadership the most appropriate performance for the occasion. As a ballet, *Red Detachment* had decided advantages: bereft of text, it was performance ready. In 1971, the ballet had been performed for the state visit of North Vietnamese leaders.<sup>23</sup> Most importantly, the ballet conveyed a message highly pertinent to Taiwan, the foremost concern of Chinese leaders during the Nixon summit. Unlike *The White Haired Girl*, *Red Detachment* took place not in the arid ancestral northwestern revolutionary heartland of Shanxi, but on the southernmost island, Hainan. The setting on Hainan, along with the militant brigades of guerilla fighters organized on stage, was intended to remind Nixon not only of the strength of the people's war, but also of the CCP's determination to consolidate that other questionable island—Taiwan—under the red banner. Nixon, in an interview two days later with an American correspondent, indicated a level of discomfort with the performance, saying "of course it had its message," but then went on to praise the opera effusively.<sup>24</sup>

22 Philip Hui-ho Cheng, "The Function of Chinese Opera in Social Control and Change," Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 1974.

23 Roxanne Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1977).

24 Nixon interview with NPR Correspondent Tom Jarrils, quoted in Beijing Waiyu Guangbo, "Ni'kesong fang Hua: jizhetuan beihou de gu shi (Nixon's Trip to China: The Behind-the-Scenes Story of the Reporter's Group)," A.M. 774.com [http://am774.rbc.cn/netfm/english\\_service/movie/201202/t20120222\\_678266.htm](http://am774.rbc.cn/netfm/english_service/movie/201202/t20120222_678266.htm).





6:30 p.m.	Arrive residence. <i>Personal Dinner</i>
8:15 p.m.	Depart en route Opera. (Driving time: 15 mins.)
8:30 p.m.	Arrive Opera. ( <i>Great Hall of the People</i> ) Attend Opera.
<del>10:30</del> p.m.	Opera concludes. Depart en route residence.
<del>11:15</del> p.m.	Arrive residence.
	OVERNIGHT

The performance of Red Detachment of Women was, internally, a concession to Jiang Qing and marked her ability to intercede in foreign relations. As a preface to a conversation that ranged from Taiwan to Tokyo, Zhou hinted at the awkwardness and imbalance of Jiang Qing's chosen art form. "[Zhou Enlai] remarked that none of those on the US side smoked. He said that Madame Mao would attend the ballet that evening and noted that it was difficult to combine classical ballet with revolutionary themes."<sup>25</sup> The internal divisions within the Chinese Communist Party lent importance and extreme symbolic emphasis on the musical choices made for Kissinger and Nixon. Repertoire choices, like every other detail for these visits, received close personal attention of the leaders and were undoubtedly subject to internal debate.

On the Nixon trip to China, cultural components wove their way through virtually every interaction, a good example being the veering into poetry and its interpretation during the discussions between Nixon, Zhou Enlai and Kissinger.<sup>26</sup> The importance of culture as public symbology was made again clear when Zhou Enlai referred to his toast of the night before in a conversation about the Taiwan problem.<sup>27</sup> First Lady Patricia Nixon made a trip to a people's

25 Memorandum of Conversation between President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Zhou Enlai, et. al., in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, Feb 22, 1972, 1.

26 Ibid.

27 Memorandum of Conversation, Feb. 24, 1972, Great Hall of the People, Beijing, National Security Archive, 6.

commune outside of Beijing, where she was regaled with the opera Xia Jia Bang. Showing the attentiveness of the Americans to the choice, Mrs. Nixon had been briefed by State Department officials about the content of the opera with a one-page memo.<sup>28</sup>

The musical diplomacy continued as important people-to-people contact, but it also revealed fissures within Zhongnanhai, and reflected the difficulties of Zhou Enlai's position within the Chinese leadership. Kissinger went on to sign the Shanghai Communique, enshrining the need for more "people to people contacts" in scientific, athletic, and cultural realms, and, even through the period of leadership transition from 1976-1978, these continued.<sup>29</sup>

By 1979, Deng Xiaoping would shoulder his way forward into China's prime political position, and open his arms to performances by American artists like John Denver. From the Chinese point of view, the musical opening to the West ultimately resulted in tremendous public relations benefits, a prime example being Shirley MacLaine's enthusiastic work as filmmaker, memoirist, and singer to assure mass audiences of Americans that China's culture was to be admired.<sup>30</sup>

Nixon's trip was significant for more specific reasons that lie at the core of this study. Nixon personally brought with him the beginning of the end to the musical hegemony, the cult of the revolutionary opera, that was stifling Chinese music, and brought with him Western music that would lead the way forward to today's thriving Western music scene in cities like Beijing.<sup>31</sup> **PEAR**

28 John H. Holdridge to Kissinger, NSC document, "Background Memorandum for Mrs. Nixon on Her Participation in the Trip to the People's Republic of China." National Security Council Files. Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Box 91, Folder: PRC/Briefing Papers Sent to President, February 1972, Folder 1 of 2; see also Nell Yates to Chapin, Jan. 11, 1972, White House Central Files, Box 60, Folder 3; White House Central Files, Subject Files, Trips, Box 61, Folder 1, EX TR 24 China, People's Republic of (Red China) Proposed 1972, Beginning - 7/28/71.

29 Adam Cathcart, Review of Jeffrey A. Engel, ed., *The China Diary of George H.W. Bush: The Making of a Global President*, for H-Diplo Reviews Roundtable, Vol. X, No. 18 (June), <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-X-18.pdf>.

30 Shirley MacLaine, *You Can Get There From Here* (New York: Norton, 1975). Franz Bleeker is thanked for alerting the author to this often jarring, but never less than revealing, source.

31 Nick Frisch, "A Brief History of Classical Music in China," lecture at TEDx Conference, Beijing, China, November 13, 2010, <http://tedxbeijing.com/2010/11/tedxbeijing-2010-nick-frisch-video/>.