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'YELLOW MUSIC': forty years on

Peter Evans

The cellophane-wrapped books and mags of Britain's porn center have almost been eradicated from one Soho street, by a festival not of light but of tinsel and strange vegetables. The Gerrard Street area supplies Chinese restauranteers with food and their waiters and families with culture. Look around: you could be in Hong Kong, almost. Posters advertise Shaw Brothers' latest epic of heroism and plastic blood, while the fairytale window of Hong Kong Culture and Services displays beautiful girls smiling at you distantly - from record sleeves printed a thousand kilometers away.

The music on these records (for instance Songs of Stella Chee, no. LSR1002; and 趙曉君: 梨山痴情花 (Tang Shiao Jen: 'Pear Mountain's Affectionate flower') no. LFLP180; Life Records, £1,75 each) is certainly western. The voice is backed by strings, bass and guitar, but its odd projection stops westernization short: here's why.

Chinese speech tones impose an 'orientalism' at least to the melodic line. Each Chinese monosyllabic word or word-component has a fixed intonation: high and level, falling and dying away, and so forth. This characteristic must be shown for the meaning to be retained, for the relatively low number of possible morphemes means that an imprecise or wrong meaning is likely to result from bad intonation. Harmonic correctness and meaningful emphasis are no longer the only essentials of a vocal line. Also correct pronunciation requires more control of consonant aspiration, overlooked in English. (Compare the "pin patch" and "dispatch") Singing in Chinese exhibits what one notices when hearing a tape of western vocal music played backwards.

Fortunately this is not the only eastern influence. Though some tunes are second-rate western - with an amusing "yeah, yeah, yeah!" thrown in - others are not at all: 送君情淚 on Stella Chee's album is very strange. The solo girl singer is the most popular Hong Kong product and their styles are different; Tang Shiao Jen has a very attractive voice. There are happy songs and sad songs, light tracks and heavy ones. What the instrumental writing lacks in imagination it has in color and stereo-spread. Being from Hong Kong the recording is impeccable, and played loud these records should fascinate you, amaze your friends and alienate your neighbors.

From the missionaries' introduction of the harmonium and choir into China, the Chinese people have accepted western music in its simpler forms. During the Anti-Japanese War, there were Saturday-night dances at Yen-an, capital of China's communist border region. Divers instruments played old ballads and western dances, and the dancers sometimes included Mao Tse-Tung himself. (1) That music merely boosted morale and provided relaxation for the people's war.

That was not to be music's only important function. As areas were liberated from the Japanese and the Kuomintang, the peasants were at first cautious of dispossessing the landlords, fearing the reprisals which would follow a return of their oppressors' forces. Theater and opera had to go out to the villages and serve the people by depicting their struggle and its objects, thereby giving them confidence. In chapter 34 of Manshen there is an American's account of such a performance and its remarkable audience reaction. (2) Current drama and musical drama is modeled on that of the 1940s, indeed the White-Haired Girl, first written as a play in 1944 was made into a ballet by a Japanese company) and into an opera, and is still popular today.

The White-Haired Girl is based on true events of the Anti-Japanese War. The girl Hsi-erh was abducted by a landlord from her peasant father who owed him money. After some time, during which the landlord raped her, she escapes to the mountains where physical deprivation makes her hair turn white. After Liberation the landlord is denounced and Hsi-erh is reunited with her fiancé. The music of the ballet is often good, and only occasionally sugary in a way more suited to the nonsense ballets still performed in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Much is brassy, loud and lively, and when this tires there are some solo breaks by instruments such as the Chinese flute and erhu. The singer once sounds rather embarrassing when she bursts into tears, but perhaps this would not be so for those understanding the words. A new recording has just been released (three 12 inch records, nos. DM 6175-7, £3), with a vocal score in sol-fa.

The White-Haired Girl appeals because it is designed to do so. In the talks at the Peking Forum on Art and Literature (1942) Mao described the function of Chinese artists and writers;

'A thing is good only when it brings real benefit to the masses of the people. Your work may be as good as The Spring Snow but if for the time being it caters only for the few and the masses are still singing the Song of the Rustic Poor you will get nowhere by simply scolding them instead of trying to raise their level. The question now is to bring about a unity between The Spring Snow and the Song of the Rustic Poor, between higher standards and popularization. Without such a unity, the highest art of any expert cannot help being utilitarian in the narrowest sense; you may call this art "pure and lofty" but that is merely your own name for it which the masses will not endorse.'*

Mao has also stressed that artistic forms should be changeable:

'Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred thoughts contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land. Different forms and styles in art should develop freely. We think that it is harmful to the growth of art and science if administrative measures are used to impose one particular style of art or school of thought and to ban another.' (3)

Two schools of thought might be these of the Chinese-style and the western-style. Mao has described, in a characteristic way, how western culture should be 'digested' to retain whatever is to China's advantage.(4). The Chinese element, 'a splendid old culture' is to be treated in a similar way, and he stated: 'To advocate "wholesale westernisation" is wrong' But these ideas were contradicted by the statements of Chou Yang, one-time party spokesman on culture, 'a man who never did anything creative in his life'(5), who made the aesthetic component of the people's culture follow western ideals.

Chou's statements have only recently been denounced in China (6), and there is now more chance of furthering indigenous music. One record with a title-track translating as The Poor Peasant tells his Family History (10 inch, no. M 753, £1) contains music of a more eastern flavor. One track contains film-music-type singing strings, while others alternate eastern instruments and style with western instruments and style in a way that is fascinating, or alarming. Even when Chou Yang was powerful, researchers were studying folk music, and a documentary history of the classical music has just been published.

A hundred flowers are in bud.

* Song titles refer to a classical story of the Chu Kingdom, 3rd century B.C.

(1) Harrison Forman: 'Report from Red China', 1945, pp.96-7 (2) William Hinton: 'Fanshen: a Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village' Monthly Review Press, New York, 1966 (3) 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People', 1957 (4) 'On New Democracy', 1940 (5) A.C. Scott: 'Literature and the Arts in Twentieth-Century China' (6) 'To Trumpet Bourgeois Literature and Art is to restore Capitalism' (booklet) 1971

THE RECORDS: Hong Kong records are sold by Chinese stores in and around Gerrard Street. Chinese Art and Craft, and Hong Kong Culture and Services, have a large selection. Each shop may only sell certain labels. Records from China mentioned above are available from East-Asia Books and Arts, 277 Eversholt Street, London NW1, as are: 'Yellow River Concerto'(piano and orch.), 'The Red Lantern'(opera exc., piano acc.) (both 10 inch, £1 each) and 'The Red Detachment of Women'(revolutionary ballet) (three 12 inch, £3,25). Add 10% for postage.

What makes music?

drama?

How

Do the two fit together?

Words, incidental

opera, oratorio?