

## Correctly Approaching the Operatic Heritage of the Motherland

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The first National Opera Observation and Performance Conference, organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Central People's Government, lasted for more than a month and successfully concluded on the 14th of this month. The conference showcased many outstanding programs from 23 different operatic genres popular among the people throughout the country. It created an arena of friendly competition among various forms of opera, and gave opera workers from different regions an opportunity to learn from one another. The conference awarded prizes to excellent plays and performers and also examined the implementation of the Party's opera reform policy across the regions during the past three years. These achievements will strongly promote future work in opera reform.

This opera conference once again demonstrated the richness of China's operatic heritage. Most of our operatic art was created by the people, maintains a long and close connection with the people, and carries strong qualities of popular character and a spirit of realism. Many of the traditional works staged at the conference reflected the lives and struggles of the people under the weight of the feudal system, giving expression to their thoughts, feelings, aspirations, and demands, all through artistic forms they enjoyed and readily understood. This is their popular character (or democratic nature).

Artistically, they often closely combined with real life, skillfully capturing contradictions and conflicts within daily experience. Their portrayals of human relationships and social realities in feudal society often reached a level of extraordinary detail and accuracy. At the same time, through concise techniques and appropriate artistic exaggeration, they vividly expressed the diligence, courage, wisdom, and kindness of China's working people, directly or indirectly reflecting the irreconcilable contradiction between the oppressed and their oppressors. This constitutes the \*spirit of realism\* in our operatic tradition.

That the people of earlier times were able to create such a rich operatic heritage and valuable artistic tradition, which continues to survive and develop among the masses to this day, is something worthy of our fullest attention. At the same time, these operas emerged within feudal society, and many works contain feudal elements or non-realist aspects; the performing arts themselves also retain backward features that must be reformed. The urgent issue today is how opera can correctly and truthfully reflect modern life. Therefore, we must adopt a correct attitude toward our operatic heritage. On the one hand, we should sort out and preserve the excellent traditional works and outstanding performance skills; on the other, we must make great efforts to organize playwrights, poets, and musicians to create new operas, based on national traditions, that the people enjoy and that possess greater expressive power—following Chairman Mao's policy of "let a hundred flowers bloom, weed through the old to bring forth the new." Such work accords with the interests and demands of the people.

In the past three years, opera reform has already achieved notable results. Thanks to the efforts of cultural authorities at all levels and opera workers nationwide, feudal content and certain degrading performance methods in traditional operas are being gradually eliminated, and the operatic stage has taken on a new look. As this opera conference showed, genres with greater influence among the people have generally been supported and developed; initial results have been achieved in collating excellent traditional works; and some local operas have made significant attempts to portray modern life. All of this represents achievements gained by treating heritage and tradition correctly and applying proper reform methods, and should be affirmed.

Nevertheless, over the past three years, central, regional, and provincial cultural authorities have not earnestly or thoroughly conveyed the Party's opera reform policy, nor have they consistently educated opera workers in the policy. As a result, implementation remains unsatisfactory. The most serious shortcomings today stem from two incorrect attitudes toward operatic heritage: one is a crude and destructive attitude, the other is a conservative and overly cautious one. Both are major obstacles to the progress of opera reform and must be firmly opposed.

Some cadres have worked well, cooperating closely with local performers and approaching heritage with the right attitude. But others, failing to improve their political understanding, ideological level, or cultural cultivation, continue to treat the operatic legacy with intolerable crudeness. They fail to appreciate the strengths of the tradition, its popular character, and its realist spirit. Instead, they dismiss works outright on the grounds that they contain feudal elements. Some have even openly violated the State Council's "Directive on Opera Reform" by arbitrarily banning performances or imposing disguised bans without approval, thereby jeopardizing performers' livelihoods and provoking public dissatisfaction. When revising or adapting scripts, they have not worked carefully with performers but instead acted subjectively and rashly, altering historical stories and folk legends at will. As a result, they have often committed errors against both history and art, undermining authenticity and integrity.

In crudely destroying the operatic heritage, such cadres have also treated performers with bureaucratic harshness—failing to regard them as part of the working people, as guardians and inheritors of operatic traditions. They ignore the great improvement in performers' political consciousness and patriotism over the past three years, emphasize only their backwardness, and fail to help them advance patiently and sincerely. Instead, they belittle or even oppress them as former rulers once did. At the opera conference, performers from many regions exposed such unreasonable practices, and the Ministry of Culture will take firm action to correct them. This is entirely necessary.

At the other extreme, a conservative and stagnant attitude is also harmful. This arises from failure to recognize that much in traditional opera, both ideologically and artistically, is feudal and backward, and must be reformed to preserve vitality and meet the needs of today's people. Over the past three years, the cultural authorities have done far too little in vetting and revising old plays or organizing new scriptwriting, leaving chaotic performance schedules unaddressed. This is now an urgent problem.

In reforming operatic art, besides removing grotesque stage images and improving performance techniques, special importance must be attached to musical reform. While Chinese operatic music has a vivid popular and national character, it is often monotonous and lacks richness of expression—an aspect that must be improved.

For local and folk operas, presenting modern life and current struggles is an especially important task. The results at this conference show that this is entirely possible and already yielding early success. Yet most operas about modern life still suffer from excessive abstraction. They often substitute subjective invention for objective reality, fail to create vivid characters, and instead deliver lifeless didactic messages, thus lacking emotional impact. To overcome this, creators must strengthen their ideological training and life experience, seriously learn from the realist strengths of traditional opera, and the relevant creative authorities must take responsibility for guiding modern-themed creations, in order to gradually improve their quality.

Opera reform must be carried out with the concern and support of the entire literary and artistic community. Experts in literature, drama, and music should closely cooperate with performers, actively participating in opera reform, so as to advance China's national opera toward a new stage of prosperity.