CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND THE MODEL WORKS

The Cultural Revolution and the Yangbanxi

The yangbanxi or ‘model works’ were a small group of visually exciting, artistically innovative and ideologically extreme modernised Beijing operas, ballets and symphonies, that dominated mainland Chinese public culture in the radical Maoist years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).\(^1\) Best known in the West for the gun-wielding soldier ballerinas of The Red Detachment of Women,\(^2\) the first group of eight yangbanxi, designated as models by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing in 1967, was comprised of five modernised Beijing operas: Shajiabang, The Red Lantern (Hong deng ji), On the Docks (Haigang), Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (Zhiqu Weihushan), and Raid on White Tiger Regiment (Qixi Baihutuan); two ballets: The White-haired Girl (Bai mao nü) and The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzi jun), and the symphonic suite Shajiabang. A second group of works were named in 1972 including the model operas Azalea Mountain (Dujuan Shan), and Song of the Dragon River (Long jiang song). Those two works along with the operas and ballets of the first group—nine works in all—constitute the core of the yangbanxi classics, and are the works on which I will focus in this book. In the early 1970s further additions to the model works included the operas Fighting on the Plains (Pingyuan zuo zhan), Boulder Bay (Panshi wan), Red Cloud Mountain (Hongyun gang), and an opera version of The Red Detachment of Women, as well as the ballets Sons and Daughters of the Grassland (Caoyuan ernü) and

\(^1\) In this book, for the Chinese term jingju I use the most commonly adopted translation “Beijing Opera” (earlier known as Peking Opera). However it is important to note that Chinese traditional “opera” and Western classical opera are very different, the Western form focusing chiefly on vocal performance while the Chinese traditional opera emphasises the harmonious integration of highly formalised components including movement, gesture, facial expression, voice, orchestra, and so on.

\(^2\) For convenience I refer to the works by the English translation of their names throughout the book. Synopses of the operas and ballets can be found between the chapters of this book as indicated in the Contents.
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Ode to Yimeng (Yimeng song). These latter works, however, did not achieve the high artistic standard or broad popularity of their predecessors. Film versions of all the major yangbanxi were made between 1969 and 1974 and shown all over the country, with mobile film projection teams carrying these definitive versions of the works to even the remote countryside.

The yangbanxi were uniquely representative of the dominant cultural discourse of their time. Each work had to be approved by Jiang Qing herself before it could go to public performance, and hence was part of a heavily politically-controlled official discourse. Despite the model works having been imposed from above, however, they were chosen for development by Jiang Qing from a selection of modern works that had already proven themselves successful locally or nationally, so they also had roots in popular culture, were generally well-received and enjoyed genuine popularity. The characters, songs and spoken lines became part of the popular culture of the nation. As such, the model operas and ballets, in particular, can be considered to reflect not only the official discourse, but to a significant extent also the popular discourse of the period.

Origins of the Yangbanxi

The emergence of the yangbanxi can be traced back to multiple sources including long-term literary and cultural trends, short-term policy initiatives, political contingency, ideological convictions and even the personal tastes and background of Chairman Mao Zedong and his wife Jiang Qing who were both lovers of traditional opera. Although a thorough examination of the development of the works is not

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4 For example, The Red Lantern and The Red Detachment of Women both developed from films that were very popular in the early 1960s, while the precursor of Shajiabang was a popular Shanghai Opera Sparks among the Reeds [Lu dang huo zhong].