

**Rosemary A. Roberts. *Maoist Model Theatre. The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76)*, Leiden: Brill, 2010. 224 pp. ISBN-10: 90 04 17744 2 (hardback).**

This book is a careful, thorough, well-informed and historically-grounded study of Maoist Model Theatre, the infamous *yangbanxi*, a selection of 18 pieces, operas, ballets and symphonic compositions, which are commonly associated with the cultural policies of the Cultural Revolution under Mao's wife Jiang Qing but remain enormously popular today. The dual association of the *yangbanxi* with Cultural Revolution political extremism and the reviled figure of Jiang Qing has had a significant effect on both Chinese and Anglophone scholarship related to these works whose social and aesthetic value has only recently been rediscovered. Setting the *yangbanxi* within the larger context of their ideological as well as artistic genealogies (which, in many cases, explain their popularity then as well as now), the book is much more than merely a study of the *yangbanxi*: it makes significant points about the importance of cultural memory with regard to the Cultural Revolution and about the reinventing of gender roles in post-Mao China.

Chapter 1 introduces the state of the art with regard to gender and Cultural Revolution culture more generally, and the *yangbanxi* in particular. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 Roberts engages in semiotic analysis of different theatrical systems at work in the *yangbanxi* including those of role assignment, costume, props, kinesics and linguistics. It is especially laudable that the ballets, seldom the focus of research, are studied so thoroughly here. Chapters 5 and 6 introduce concepts of female leadership in the *yangbanxi* probing into the historical tradition of the woman warrior, Chapter 7 discusses the feminisation of villainy and the final chapter (8) gives an overview of the importance of the *yangbanxi* in the making of gender identities today. Throughout, Roberts illustrates admirably how the construction of gender in the *yangbanxi* made use of multiple discourses and models, traditional and modern, Chinese and foreign, all at the same time, always to convey the same political message. She thus echoes the overdetermination thesis already proffered elsewhere, but exemplifies it on many more levels.<sup>1</sup> By studying the importance of popular symbolism and Beijing operatic

<sup>1</sup> Kirk Denton. "Model Drama as Myth: A Semiotic Analysis of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*". *Drama in the People's Republic of China*. Ed. Constantine Tung et al. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987. 119-136; Barbara Mittler. "Cultural Revolution Model Works and the Politics of Modernization in China: An Analysis of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*". *The World of Music* 45:2 (2003): 53-81.

practice, European classical ballet narrative and technique and Chinese myth (i.e. the figure of the woman warrior), among others, Roberts uncovers the “cultural memories” that went into the making and the reception of the *yangbanxi* and thus lays bare the contemporary mindmaps created through them. It is important that she is considering not just high artistic but also “deep surface” phenomena such as costume and hairstyle and their significance, as they manifest the unconscious and thus need to be understood as carrying significant cultural meaning. Previous studies have rarely attempted to link *yangbanxi* heroines with pre-communist or non-Chinese cultural traditions, many preferring to regard these figures as cultural products peculiar to the “xenophobic” Maoist era. By tracing the organic and long-lived structures and elements that went into the making of the *yangbanxi*, Roberts shows that Cultural Revolution culture is by no means an exception, as is officially contended, but more the rule in the development of Chinese revolutionary (and popular) culture. This lack of disruption to conventional aesthetic norms can be considered one of the reasons why the *yangbanxi* continue to be popular long after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

One of the book’s contentions is the fact that the “gender erasure” model proposed by so many writers on Cultural Revolution culture does not help to explain some of the great difficulties for both men and women in finding their place in the post-Cultural Revolution society of the 1980s. The book argues that rather than being “erased” in the discourse of the time, gender was resituated along political lines, with the parameters for “the revolution” at the masculine end of the gender continuum, and the parameters for the “counterrevolution” at the feminine end. In the *yangbanxi*, the coding of good women was masculine and evil men feminine, which had significant implications for the development of new female and male identities in the post-Mao years. Men’s identity was catapulted into crisis by the almost exclusive experience of male (and emasculate) villains in the *yangbanxi*, and the need, therefore, to assert a potent masculinity. For China’s women, the reconsideration of their own femininity in the 1980s was also much more complex than merely starting anew from the blank slate of an erased gender identity. Through her careful analysis of gendering in the *yangbanxi* Roberts argues forcefully that women could not simply resume some female identity that had been shelved for a decade and could be slipped back into like a familiar dress. Instead, this identity had to be “reclaimed from the counterrevolutionary, step by step, through the normalisation of almost everything

feminine, from skirts” showing their tender and slight figure, to perms “and make-up” (Roberts 2010:264). The mentalities which the *yangbanxi* helped create, had made it reasonable to consider feminine women inferior and potentially disruptive beings to be kept under control. The *yangbanxi* can thus be seen contributing directly to the renewed flourishing of traditional prejudices against women evident in the 1980s. On the other hand, the *yangbanxi* had also changed the self-image and the social expectations of women: masculinisation allowed the creation of a model of female leadership, authoritative for men, while allowing women to function freely without being regarded primarily as sexual objects. This image, too, finds its embodiment in China’s contemporary realities.

This book leaves room for nothing more than minor quibbles. The synopses of selected *yangbanxi* could have been placed more strategically, i.e. closer to those chapters that actually focus on these particular pieces. It is sad that a book so meticulous about unravelling the many different levels of signification in gesture, costume, and colour should contain only black and white illustrations. Chinese characters, too, are sorely missed. But all of these are negligible in view of the significance of this study which lies in Roberts’s uncovering of the importance of the *yangbanxi* in the making of contemporary Chinese mindsets through her semiotic reading of them as *the* key product of Cultural Revolution culture. As such, her book not only complicates the question of the erasure of gender during this period but also the question of the erasure of this (crucial) period itself in official histories of the People’s Republic of China.

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