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Rural Migrants: On the Fringe of the City, a Bridge to the Countryside

Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*

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Gina Marchetti

1 Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 352 pp.

2 In this fascinating book, Paul Clark goes against the grain of mainstream English-language scholarship and puts the “culture” back into the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR, 1966-76). Rather than divide the movement into a series of public demonstrations, factional battles, political proclamations, and government initiatives, Clark explores the last decade of the Mao era through the arts by organising his study around those forms used to critique the old and attempt to establish a new revolutionary culture; namely, Chinese opera/model opera, film, dance, music, drama, the fine arts, architecture, and literature. He sets out with three goals in mind: “...to offer a history of culture during the Cultural Revolution; to provide more insight into life beyond the political or social elites during these years; and to place this decade more firmly into its twentieth-century Chinese context” (p. 2). He accomplishes all these things and more through the course of his study, and the book shows that “culture” was crucial to many caught up in the movement beyond Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, the putative head of the “Gang of Four.”

Clark goes further, however, by placing what is often seen as an insular and peculiarly Chinese political movement into the context of global cultural and aesthetic history. Culture, during the GPCR, was not just about “Chinese” culture, but about Mao’s place and the Chinese revolution’s position within world art, politics, and ideology. More specifically, it was a continuation of China’s attempt to enter the modern world on its own terms. Culture provided the yardstick to measure the nation’s and the revolution’s progress. Clark, in fact, is at the forefront of re-examination of the Cultural Revolution as a world event as indicated by conferences such as *China and the World in Mao’s Last Decade, 1966-1976* (University of Hong Kong, January 2009), which included several panels exploring the relationship between aesthetics and ideology during the GPCR. Ballet, for example, may have had Russian/Soviet roots, but the way

in which *The White Haired Girl* or *The Red Detachment of Women* blended Western dance with Chinese folk and minority forms created a modern, distinctly Chinese performance style. These characteristically Chinese ballets then became ambassadors for the Cultural Revolution as troupes toured outside the PRC's borders.

Clark, of course, is the ideal scholar for this project, since it extends his research in post-1949 Chinese film history¹ and provides more information on a period that marked a low point in film production but a time of enormous political and aesthetic debate within film circles. It was also a formative moment for the “sent-down youth,” later known as the Fifth Generation, who established their reputations in films critical of the GPCR. Mao’s “continuous revolution” may be dead in its tracks, but the impact of the Cultural Revolution on all aspects of Chinese society—including the arts—is still very much with us.

In this assiduously researched study, Clark excavates the roots of each model opera and ballet performed during the Cultural Revolution. In fact, each work tells a different “story”—not only of revolutionary heroism but also of the Herculean efforts that went into every production. What emerges is a picture of meticulous preparations, professional determination, cascading revisions, expanding versions across media, and the transplanting of national forms into regional and local vernaculars. Clark shows that creativity and commitment belie the notion that there was no “culture” to be found during the period. He begins each chapter with a brief profile of a cultural figure, and these individuals help bring a human face to works that are often regarded as “anonymous” or “collective” political exercises.

Reading Clark’s account is genuinely eye-opening, since the model operas often spurred creativity, and the firm hand of Jiang Qing was not as keenly felt as the craftsmanship of composers, writers, and directors who had the green light to “modernise” and experiment as well as politicise the opera stage. What emerged was arguably a national “model” with very distinct regional, local, and ethnic accents, and the limitations of the form could also stimulate creativity, cutting through old methods, encouraging hybrid versions, and crafting a mass art out of indigenous as well as foreign aesthetic elements. The relative autonomy of many local troupes, the discretion they had in redesigning model works, as well as their ability to negotiate the terms of their dissolution in some cases, eliminated many misconceptions I had about the apparent chaos of the reorganisation and centralisation of the arts industries during the period. While the model performances put off many, the GPCR’s ideological commitment to workers, peasants, and soldiers also provided a protected cultural space for amateurs, and some were able to enter the cultural arenas with a DIY approach and politically correct attitude—further shaking up the old order and opening up some new opportunities.

However, Clark balances the opportunities some enjoyed with the hardships faced by many other cultural leaders, artists, and intellectuals. Film was hit particularly hard during the GPCR, and the chapter devoted to that medium stands out as one of the most informative in the book. In 1966, Jiang Qing criticised 54 PRC films, and in the following years, production of most feature films halted, foreign films dubbed in Chinese were pulled from distribution, and many films labelled as “poisonous weeds” were summarily recalled. However, motion picture professionals still had a vital role to play in producing films that would become the definitive versions of the model operas and ballets. How Xie Tieli, for example, was brought back from the “cowsheds” to make

a film version of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* provides some fascinating insights into how politics and personalities chafed against each other at the time. As Clark points out, the films did, indeed, move Chinese theatrical films in a new direction: “They captured the forceful and theatrical nature of the originals with remarkable felicity. Yang Zirong [the hero of *Taking Tiger Mountain*], with his tiger-skin waistcoat, beams his proletarian determination into the lens and the world can be set right, at least on the silver screen” (p. 126). Xie Tieli in fact went on to direct several other model opera films, including *On the Docks* in collaboration with Xie Jin, another noted film director who had made features, such as *Two Stage Sisters*, that were banned at the advent of the GPCR.

It was not until 1974 that new features not based on model performances again appeared on Chinese screens. However, documentary production, the development of new film equipment and colour stock, as well as training (political and otherwise) for film personnel did continue. Also, foreign films — primarily from North Korea, Albania, and North Vietnam — continued to be shown. Clark decisively demonstrates throughout the book that cultural production across the arts — not just in the realm of the model opera or filmed performances—took place during the GPCR, and often in unlikely places. The line between underground and agitprop blurred as Red Guards battled for aesthetic as well as ideological space and took their militant forms of amateur cultural expression to the countryside. Moving from the unofficial to the subversive, literature, in particular, saw the mimeograph machine as a tool of not only political propaganda but also romance novellas, porn, autobiographical accounts, and translations of foreign works.

Rather than heaping opprobrium on the model operas, films, and other cultural products of the Cultural Revolution, Clark takes these works seriously, tracing the roots of each in earlier works, and pointing to the creative input of the professional and amateur artists involved. In fact, this book begs for others to go a step further and look even more closely at individual texts for further insight into the ways in which these works made—and continue to make—waves aesthetically as well as politically. Clark has opened the door and put “culture” back on the agenda for scholars still struggling to come to grips with the domestic as well as international impact of the GPCR.

- 10 1. Clark has written two books on film in the PRC. See my review of the first: Gina Marchetti, “Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Spring 1990), pp. 54-7.