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THE CHINESE THEATRE/

by

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THE
YANGKO
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A STUDY OF THE Chinese Yangko Theatre is a study of the development of a modern theatrical art form out of a primitive folk art within the space of the last few years. In 1938—ten years ago—Yangko dancing was a folk art curiosity in North-west China's Shensi Province. Today it has spread in its modern form of Yangko drama dealing with the most complex contemporary subjects, all over North and North-east China. In the wake of the revolutionary People's Armies it is conquering the imaginations of the people of Central China. In parts of Shensi—notably the famous Yen-an Border Region on the verges of Shensi, Kansu and Ninghsia—one out of every twelve people enjoy the pleasures of a Yangko dance as a regular feature of their life.

Shensi Province is bounded by the great U-shaped bend of the Yellow River. It is one of the cradles of Chinese civilisation and therefore one of the sources of the classical Chinese theatre. Down to this day you can find here survivals of the primitive folk rituals from which the classical theatre sprang. Such a survival is the original Yangko. It is a folk song and dance performed at the time of field labour; a fertility rite danced by youths and maidens. As performed in the recent past it was a group dance with some twenty or thirty dancers to a group. The leader held an open umbrella or a metal rod and he sang the theme of the play while the chorus chanted in answer. Male and female dancers faced each other in opposite lines. In later days, however, the female parts

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were, as in the classical theatre, played by boys. The songs are mostly in the form of questions and answers between the men and women, love themes or congratulatory addresses. The basic dance movement is a vigorous advance of three steps forward followed by one swinging step backwards and sideways. This movement sets the rhythm for entrance and exit of the troupe. In between, there are many variations of rhythm, step and gesture corresponding to the characters the dancers personify, but usually, as befits the central theme of the rite, the swaying, swinging movements are suggestive of sex.



Two Yangko Dancers

I had always thought that the mincing steps, the paper umbrellas and fans, the peculiar way in which ballerinas of the classical Western ballet in 'Chinese transformation scenes' dance with the index finger of both hands pointing upwards before them, was entirely make-believe 'Chinoiserie', but I found that this style of representing Chinese dancing is quite authentic. These are the very steps and gestures that one sees in Shensi Yangko dancing. In addition to the solos of the principal characters there are

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group movements in which the lines of the dancers weave fanciful patterns on the ground to the accompaniment of the rhythmic beats of the drums, the gongs, the punctuating or exciting clash of the cymbals and the melodious line of the *Hu Ch'in* violin. Commentators note that the leading musical role was played by the percussion. The strings and wind instruments are a later addition. Not infrequently a clown appeared as a separate character. It is abundantly clear that Yangko was essentially an out-of-doors spectacle since it was of two main types: 'A story on the ground' performed on foot, or, 'a story on horseback', in which latter case the theme of the dance drama was usually an heroic historical one like the famous combat between the General Lu Pu of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.) and the Three Heroes.

Such was Yangko when the Communist-led People's Armies first arrived in Shensi Province in 1934.

It was in 1937, at the start of the full-scale struggle against the Japanese invasion, that the local Communist propaganda groups began to make creative use of the ancient Yangko traditions. In the first typical new Yangko, the leader, instead of an umbrella, carried a rifle or a farming tool or other symbol and the line of dancers or chorus, instead of acting like men and women courting, dressed themselves as farmers, students, workers, soldiers or merchants and represented the people of all classes united in the struggle against the invader. The new theme songs expressed various new social and political ideas. The clown was now often dressed like a Japanese or a quisling. Yet, few intellectuals even then thought of Yangko as an art with great possibilities, though the new Yangko became more and more popular among the peasants. It was in fact a farmer, Liu Chi-jen of the Yen-an Region who further developed the new Yangko in 1937, by incorporating a short dramatic action as an extension of the theme song and dance. Liu Chi-jen's group produced Yangko dance dramas whose names are self-explanatory: 'Public Food Reserves for

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National Salvation', 'The People's Defence Corps on Guard'. Yangko now took hold of the popular imagination as it had never before done when it was merely a seasonal fertility rite rooted in mystical superstition.

Yangko evenings were more and more frequently arranged in villages, in market towns, in school yards or village meeting-halls. First, the clangorous instruments summon the people with their vigorous dance rhythm in typical and unmistakably Yangko style. The expectant crowd forms a big open circle. The leaders set the theme of the spectacle in a ballad and the chorus, dressed as farmers, follows them in the opening dance. Three steps forward, a sweeping sidestep back. Soon the 'audience' too joins in the general round dance. There is all the merriment of a village fête the world over as the young entice the oldsters to unloosen their feet, forget their dignity for the moment and join in the dance. At Yangko evenings in Yen-an I have seen the leading officials of the government and the Communist Party dragged into the laughing circle, though General Chu Teh, Commander-in-Chief of the People's Armies, never needs a second invitation. Finally, the music reaches a climax of speed and drum beats. Inside the circle that is then formed by the public, the leaders perform a simple play in song and verse, dialogue and dance. A young brother and sister are turning up virgin soil to help increase production for the national war effort. The brother teases his sister by pretending to be lazy. The girl gets very indignant and tries to persuade him to reform. She uses all the well-tried arguments of the propagandists, but the boy seems to take no notice at all, till with a great laugh he gives up the joke just as his sister is reduced to tears. The happy ending leads to general rejoicing and merrymaking. The chorus starts the round dance till once again it becomes general. Often two or three plays will follow in quick succession.

'The villains', writes Guenther Stein in his *Challenge of Red*

A Shensi "Yangko" Melody



Theme in "Brother and Sister Cultivating Virgin Soil"

A musical score for a single melodic line in treble clef. The piece is in 2/4 time and consists of ten staves of music. The melody features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth, sixteenth, and triplet notes. The score includes first and second endings, indicated by '1' and '2' above the final staff. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

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China, 'are either Japanese soldiers and Chinese traitors or witch doctors, loafers and other anti-social elements who hamper the war effort, the increase of production, or the march of political and social progress. The heroes and heroines are Eighth Route Army (People's Army) soldiers, militiamen, or simple pioneers of class unity and mutual aid; fighters against superstition, illiteracy, dirt and disease; or model workers in villages, factories, co-operatives and government offices whose individual action has aroused the initiative of the masses.'

By 1944, at the height of the struggle against the Japanese invasion, the intellectuals in these Communist-led areas of the great Resistance Movement became convinced that hitherto they had circumscribed their activities too much within their own intimate circles and interests, that to broaden their outlook and the scope of their work they must, as Chou Erh-fu, who has himself produced several successful Yangko, writes, 'really grasp the spirit and feelings of the Chinese people, go out to the villages and live with them, learn their language, how they express their feelings in their own art. Encouraged by talks with Mao Tze-tung, the Communist Party leader, it was then that the intellectuals joined in the Yangko activities with a new zest and injected fresh inspiration into this newest art form. 'They discarded their former prejudice against Yangko as 'lowbrow' entertainment or as a remnant of feudal art that in itself bore poisonous elements of feudal ideas, superstition and sexuality. They ceased their literary attacks on Yangko, and became its most sympathetic supporters and enthusiastic participants!'

Yangko began to develop along more complex lines as the two streams of culture from the peasants and the modern intellectuals met and joined. Today, some performances like that of the *White Haired Woman* and *Chou Tsi-shan* last for four or five hours, with many scenes and with an action spread over many years. In some of the more elaborate performances produced on stages by

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the students of the Liberated Area Universities, one can trace the influence of the classical theatre and also of the Western theatre of the most advanced type. In their acting of certain types they adapt many of the 'gesture patterns' of the classical theatre.

Thus a new theatrical form has arisen that is remarkable for its great vitality and potentialities. It stands close to the springs of national art. Through the intellectuals it is able to draw on all the accumulated stores of cultural wealth of both China and the West. It has spread rapidly throughout the Liberated Areas that have been freed from the Chiang Kai-shek dictatorship and advances as the popular revolution advances, taking on ever new aspects as it is enriched by the inspiration of various, more local, cultures.

In many villages of these regions Yangko has become a regular weekly event. One of the *Ten Small Points* that the People's Government has widely proclaimed and encouraged for the improvement of village life, calls for the establishment of at least one Yangko group in every community. Guenther Stein in his book on the new China writes: 'The Chinese country and small town folk love entertainment and are starved for it. The Yangko has acted on them like rain on parched earth. It has brought them not only theatre, but theatre they can easily understand. For it deals with matters close to their own lives—instead of putting before them the kings, queens, and concubines, the feudal warriors, courtiers, ghosts, and jesters which dominated their ancestors' imaginations in ages long gone by when Chinese art became formal and stagnant.'

Nothing can remain static in the marvellous epoch of change that China has entered upon, and least of all the Theatre—that synthesis of all the imaginative arts. Classical Style Theatre, Western Style Theatre and Yangko will all, that is certain, have great new developments to show even while this book is being printed, so we will attempt no final judgement.