

Qing gong yuan (Injustice in the Qing Palace) 1962 清宮冤

original play: Yao Ke (alt. Yao Xinnong; d. 1991); this is an operatic adaptation of a "spoken play" (huaju) which follows many of the conventions of traditional Peking opera. In a sense, it is "contemporary" Peking opera.

Defeated by the West in the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860), weakened by civil war (the Taiping rebellion of 1851-1864), humiliated by Japan in 1895 and hard-pressed by the Western powers for trade and territorial concessions, China has needed reform for decades. But the conservatives within and without the Qing/Ch'ing ruling house have rallied around the person of the empress dowager to resist those who advocate anything but minor changes. Finally a young emperor comes to age and assumes the throne. A series of measures called the wuxu bianfa (1898 Reforms) are enacted by the young Guangxu emperor, with the support of his loyal, reform-minded tutors and advisors, Weng Tonghe, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong and his beloved consort Zhen Fei (the "Pearl Concubine").

The conservatives convince Cixi, the empress dowager, that the reforms are aimed at her. She orders Rong Lu, her most trusted minister, to suppress them. The young emperor, upon learning that the conservative faction plans to move against him, awards Yuan Shikai, general of a modern-style foreign-drilled arm, the honor of supreme command to defend the emperor and his palace, the Forbidden City, against the impending coup and gives Yuan a silver arrow as a token to show that whatever Yuan does is by special permission of the emperor. But rather than moving to check the conservatives, Yuan goes directly to the Yiheyuan Summer Palace, where the empress dowager is living in "retirement" and informs her. When she sees the silver arrow the emperor has given Yuan, she orders that he command his troops to move against the emperor, which he does.

The empress dowager, who looks a bit like Chairman Mao in this film version of the play, orders the emperor under house arrest for life, beheads those among his loyal advisors who can be captured (including Tan Sitong and Kang Youwei's younger brother) and has the Pearl Concubine tortured to death for daring to talk back to her. This is the yuan (injustice/wrongful verdict referred to in the title).

questions:

1. The text of the play was seen by radical critics as an historical allegory criticizing Mao Zedong. Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?
2. Yao Ke was a student of Lu Xun's. Do you detect any influence from Lu Xun on him?
3. Is there any irony in the use of Peking Opera to present this theme? Why do you think Yao Ke's original spoken drama was adapted to a more traditional form?