

BOOK REVIEW
Brian James DeMare,
*Mao's Cultural Army:
Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Liang Luo, University of Kentucky

In his thoroughly-researched and eloquently-written *Mao's Cultural Army*, sprinkled with punch lines to offer comedic relief to accounts of life and death, Brian James DeMare reveals China's rural revolution as a participatory political performance, in which rural audiences reenact on-stage cultural performances off-stage, during mass campaigns and in their everyday lives. In DeMare's own words, "drama troupes paved the way in turning all Chinese citizens into political actors" (7).

DeMare is not alone in driving home such a powerful message. He is joined by scholars in film and performance studies, in particular, Xiaomei Chen and Xing Fan, whose works highlight the pedagogical qualities of on-stage performances in making revolution off-stage, albeit with a focus on the aesthetics of performance during the Cultural Revolution and in its afterlives.¹ Similarly, Weihong Bao's *Fiery Cinema* opens with a scene where performances on screen and on stage came alive to produce real-life political actions, making the audience and the public active participants in what she calls the "affective medium" of cinema and mass politics.²

Reviewing a work of history as a scholar of performance, I am keenly aware of DeMare's significant contribution to the field of Chinese Studies as a historian sensitive to the role of narrative and performance in shaping historical processes. DeMare continues with this approach in his forthcoming *Land Wars*, which "powerfully highlights the often devastating role of fiction in determining history."³ Guided by this innovative approach, DeMare makes a number of important contributions to the field of historical and performance studies in *Mao's Cultural Army*, by revealing the tensions between the "vanguard" identity of drama troupes in revolutionary rhetoric and their poor treatment in real life, and between audience expectations for entertainment and the directives of the state for propaganda.

DeMare's most ingenious contribution to the field, as far as this reviewer is concerned, lies in his interdisciplinary approach to his sources: as a historian doing archival work, as a participant observer in the style of an anthropologist, and as a sensitive and discerning reader of contemporary performance texts and records in relation to memoirs and accounts written decades after. As a result, *Mao's Cultural Army* offers readers a much-needed window to access the daily lives of rural drama troupe members, a significant contribution in a field still largely

dominated by studies of urban centers with better documented sources. It is no surprise that most reviewers in the field of Chinese history highlight DeMare's ability to delve into rural subjects, rural experiences, and rural sources, as it is in its meticulous excavating of performance details in the field and at the local level that DeMare joins Jeremy Brown and a few others in distinguishing themselves as historians of contemporary China with an eye on the margins and the grassroots.⁴ As I have discussed in my previous work, the multilayered and interconnected discourse regarding "the people" is at the heart of Chinese intellectual endeavors.⁵ Unlike past studies' focusing on urban intellectuals' "going to the people," *Mao's Cultural Army* finally puts peasants on stage.

Chapter 1, "The revolution will be dramatized: Red Drama troupes," draws on dramatic memoirs to effectively trace the creation of Red Army propaganda teams in the Jiangxi Soviet and to carefully investigate the experiences of three drama troupes during the Long March. Chapter 2, "Acting against Japan: Drama troupes in North China," paints a complex picture of drama troupe activities during the wartime through three meticulous case studies on the Taihang Mountains Drama Troupe, the Xiangyuan Rural Drama Troupe, and the High Street Village Drama Troupe, each representing the big, the professional, and the amateur drama troupes. Chapter 3, "Playing soldiers and peasants: Civil War and agrarian reform," again takes a trifold approach to include sections on military revolution, civilian rural revolution, and urban revolution, and thoughtfully examines how drama troupes helped herald a new era in cultural work for the PRC, especially by facilitating the completion of land reform. In DeMare's words, "During land reform and in everyday life in the PRC, villagers would be expected to perform new roles as socialist peasants. With the ties between cultural and political performances growing ever stronger, drama troupes would remain an essential element of land reform and rural revolution" (112).

Chapter 4, "Staging rural revolution: Land reform operas," continues with this thoughtful trifold approach to reveal three important case studies: "The party school paradigm: the creation of *The White-Haired Girl*," "The PLA's land reform opera: the creation of *Liu Hulan*," and "Penned by a party intellectual: the creation of *Red Leaf River*." In the last case study, DeMare sets out to use "archival sources to reveal the

true story behind the single most famous staging of a land reform opera: the 1948 performance of *Red Leaf River* in Longbow Village, recorded by William Hinton in *Fanshen*" (115). In addition, he does an admirable job in distilling five "character archetypes" in land reform operas: the abused peasant girl, the emasculated young peasant male, helpless or absent peasant elders, the evil landlord, and the revolutionary woman (125-134).

Chapter 5, "Stage agents and local actors: Cultural work in the early PRC," again masterfully reveals the multi-layered dynamics among the center, the field, and the villagers in the practice of rural cultural work in the early PRC. DeMare highlights the messiness of the situation and the discrepancies and diverging concerns of top cultural leaders, regional party leaders, cultural workers, village artists, and peasants themselves (178). Chapter 6, "Peasants on the stage: Amateur actors in socialist China," zooms in to examine cultural infrastructure, traditional art and artists, and cultural workers and work teams in Hubei, with a case study on the model drama troupe of Caodian Village. DeMare delineates the trajectory from the rural Amateur Drama Troupe Campaign (1950-1951) to the rectification of rural drama troupes (1951-1953), and reveals the tensions between the directive to educate and the desire to be entertained (207).

Chapter 7, "Tradition in conflict: Professional drama troupes and the PRC state," takes Shanxi as its site of investigation and examines cultural organizations and private drama troupes in Shanxi at the dawn of the PRC. DeMare carefully combs through drama troupe histories and archival sources to reveal that "audience expectations shaped performance choices and empowered traditionally trained artists," and that "audiences were willing to take violent action to ensure their expectations were met" (227). In his conclusion to the book, DeMare consolidates his consistent emphasis on rural audience's preference of local operas, in his words, "Mao may have been successful in taming his cultural army, but he was powerless in the face of rural audiences" (241).

All good books provoke new questions as yet unanswered, as Gail Hershatter writes in her review essay on a recent Chinese-language study on 1950s' Shanghai.⁶ My first question to DeMare similarly rises from the areas he made the most contributions to. In particular, Hershatter raises the issue of the promises and limitations of archival research in the study of 1950s' China, "The archives are a record of the state talking to itself. So if we stay with archival documents, it is difficult to escape the framework of what we might summarize as 'the state tries this policy, and here is what it encounters in the way of local response'."⁷

This is relevant for our discussion of DeMare's approach to archival sources in *Mao's Cultural Army*, as although using archival materials to reveal how the local dissented from the center is extremely valuable, it cannot be granted truth value unreflectively (115), neither can it go beyond the state-centered approach to reveal what the state was not interested in at the time. Granted that DeMare's interdisciplinary and inclusive approach helped to diversify his sources, I would still like to

hear him reflecting on his use of archival materials, especially regarding his use of the directive issued by Lucheng County government and the report filed by the Popular Drama Troupe (137-140), in the same way as he has carefully reflected on his use of other sources such as published memoirs and historical accounts.

Similarly, DeMare's extensive use of Chinese-language secondary sources could be double-edged: he should be commended for his impressive command of contemporary Chinese scholarship, at the same time, it would have been helpful to carefully reflect on such scholarship, including *Hongse ruijin* published in 2010, in the same way as he did for his primary sources (32). Staying on the issue of sources, the fourteen illustrations brought the narrative of the book to life in many key moments, but the reviewer could not locate any source information after a few searches throughout the book. It would be very helpful for students and scholars of modern China to be able to trace the origins of these illustrations for future research.

My second question has to do with emphasizing intersections and continuities rather than dichotomies and ruptures. In tracing rural drama troupe activities from the late 1920s to the early 1950s, DeMare's book joins recent scholarship in complicating the narrative of treating the political shift in 1949 as a cultural rupture in Chinese history. Still, with its narrative focus centering on a series of ironic relationships between the state and the audience, and between propaganda and entertainment, *Mao's Cultural Army* in effect reinforced such dichotomies throughout its account of state prescriptions and local resistances.

If, as DeMare convincingly argues in Chapter 4, the use of folk music created a bridge between Western narrative and Communist ideology (117), and cultural workers translated the propaganda needs of the party into dramatic works that rural audiences could find entertaining and compelling (142), would it be possible that such grassroots drama practices in fact produced a genuinely popular propaganda culture, one that could provoke sincere emotional identifications from on-stage amateur performers and off-stage audiences alike?

I am asking this question because I can see myself emotionally identify with the on-stage performances and empathize with the plight of the women and children on and off stage in those village drama performances. In a review of Xiaomei Chen's *Staging Chinese Revolution*,⁸ I discussed Chen's courageous and sensitive personal reflections of China in the late 1960s. Illuminating in their honesty and reflectiveness, these reflections offer readers clues to appreciate the complexities and dynamics of grassroots participation in such grand political theaters as the Cultural Revolution, helping us to understand it "within its own historical conditions rather than claiming it as merely the result of one man's will ruthlessly imposed on his people."⁹ Both Chen's and DeMare's approaches are extremely valuable and seem to me mutually complimentary. In the end, DeMare's sensitive, interdisciplinary approach to his sources make *Mao's Cultural Army* a must read for anyone interested in understanding drama troupes in China's rural revolution

from the field and on the ground, especially regarding the importance of rural audiences in shaping drama performances of the time.

¹ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*, University of Hawaii Press, 2002; Xiaomei Chen, *Staging Chinese Revolution: Theater, Film, and the Afterlives of Propaganda*, Columbia University Press, 2016; and Xing Fan, *Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution*, Hong Kong University Press, 2018.

² Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: the Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 6-7.

³ Brian James DeMare, *Land Wars*, forthcoming from Stanford University Press, <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=30630>, accessed May 27, 2019.

⁴ Jeremy Brown, *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide*, Cambridge University Press, 2012; and Alexander F. Day, *The Peasant in Postsocialist China: History, Politics, and Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

⁵ Liang Luo, "The Avant-Garde and the People," in *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics*, University of Michigan Press, 2014, 107-114.

⁶ Zhang Jishun 张济顺. *Yuanqu de dushi: 1950 niandai de Shanghai 远去的都市: 1950年代的上海 (A City Displaced: Shanghai in the 1950s)*. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2015.

⁷ Gail Hershatter, "Notes from the alleyway: Zhang Jishun's *A City Displaced* and the promise of archival research," *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 2016, 10:1, 106-112, DOI: 10.1080/17535654.2016.1168171.

⁸ Liang Luo, "Review of Xiaomei Chen, *Staging Chinese Revolution: Theater, Film, and the Afterlives of Propaganda* (Columbia University Press, 2016)," in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, No. 40 (December 2018), 249-252.

⁹ Chen, *Staging Chinese Revolution*, 72.

Response to Liang Luo's Review

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Revisiting *Mao's Cultural Army*, from inception to production and reception, has been a voyage equal parts nostalgic and enjoyable.¹ That said, in my recollection, writing the book was a long and unforgiving process. The project was first conceived during the years I spent in China conducting dissertation research. Mostly working in Beijing, I traversed many miles to archives and collections in Shanxi, Hebei, Hubei, and Hong Kong. Fieldwork eventually gave way to writing, which in turn gave way to rewriting and revising. The many hours I spent laboring on the project, however, did eventually pay off.²

While researching the book, I discovered that cadres in the Chinese Communist Party made a fundamental distinction between political and cultural work. So perhaps it is fitting that while *Mao's Cultural Army* is equally concerned with politics and culture, the response to the book was initially uneven: the book, I believe, found a much more welcoming reception among colleagues working on cultural topics.³ Scholars working in cultural fields have been among the most careful readers of *Mao's Cultural Army*, and I must include Liang Luo in this group. In her review she cuts to the heart of the project, rightfully focusing on the implications of the party's massive effort to control drama troupes for China's rural revolution. She also notes how many of the ideas that emerge in the book can be found in studies of Chinese theater. Once again the divide between political and cultural studies of China looms large; while Luo does not directly phrase this as a criticism of the book, I would venture that one of the most glaring shortcomings of *Mao's Cultural Army* is its incomplete engagement with theater studies.⁴

Luo raises several important questions concerning the book, two of which strike me as particularly meaningful: issues of archives and narratives. As a historian I am obligated by my training to start from the archives. It is no secret that as an academic discipline, history is passionate about archival research. For historians of China, particularly those working on the PRC, passion has long turned into fetish. Access to PRC archives is notoriously limited, and as a result the documents locked away by zealous archivists have seemingly achieved mystical power.⁵ The first draft of *Mao's Cultural Army* had, in fact, no archival source base. When I was a graduate student writing a dissertation on land reform, I sadly discovered that PRC archivists have no interest in sharing documents on land reform to foreign scholars. As a result, access to archives has profoundly shaped my career. My dissertation focused on land reform political culture largely because I was forced to rely on published sources. The decision to shift to drama troupes was partly made under the assumption that I could sell an opera project to Chinese archivists. And my forthcoming book on land reform was only made possible by finally gaining access

to the kinds of archival documents that I had longed for as a graduate student.

The first draft of *Mao's Cultural Army* was unpublishable without a stronger source base. Luckily, or perhaps logically, my guess that I could actually obtain archival sources on drama troupes turned out to be quite accurate. Documents from Shanxi allowed a new perspective on drama troupes at the provincial level.⁶ In her review, Luo singled out the archival report regarding drama troupe activity in Lucheng County, which is not surprising: more than one reader has pointed to this find as the highlight of the book. This is in part because the report simultaneously confirms and debunks the account of revolutionary opera in Long Bow Village. Because that account is found in William Hinton's widely read *Fanshen*, it is almost certainly the most well-known telling of dramatic performance during the formative years of China's rural revolution. As I discovered while reading a report drafted by cadres overseeing the drama troupe, the actors had indeed performed revolutionary operas for Hinton. But only weeks later, angry villagers had demanded a halt to these modern performances in favor of older classics. One village had even gone as far as using land reform struggle to force the troupe to perform traditional operas.

This report can be found in the Lucheng County Archives. Unmentioned in *Mao's Cultural Army* is the fact that I did not find the document myself. Having spent time in and around Long Bow, I of course made multiple visits to the archive, dreaming of finding such a document. Or any document at all! I arrived in Lucheng clutching my cherished letter of introduction from Qinghua University, replete with its official stamp, only to be skillfully rebuffed by archivists and government officials at every turn. Months if not years later, well into the process of writing the book, a local friend emailed me the document, asking if it might be of interest. There are many thanks given in the preface of the book, but this friend, who provided the most important archival source for *Mao's Cultural Army*, is never mentioned. As I have learned, access to sources is highly contingent on chance and contacts. Furthermore, it is sadly necessary to occasionally obscure the origins of these sources lest our colleagues, friends, and informants find themselves in hot water with censors insisting on controlling representations of Chinese history.

Delving deeper into the problem of archival sources, I fully concur with the review's discussion of the importance of problematizing the truth value that scholars, including myself, have attributed to these documents. This is a concern for all the archival elements underpinning *Mao's Cultural Army*, but I will again focus on the Lucheng County materials. I find much truth in these documents, especially in the light they shed on Hinton's

account, which now needs to be properly understood as one of the most effective weapons in the arsenal of Communist Party propagandists. Hinton presented revolutionary opera as innately popular, and never hinted that rural audiences might still prefer traditional works. The sharp juxtaposition between his rosy account and the immediate fate of the troupe that performed for one of China's first foreign friends corrects one of the biggest misunderstandings about rural performance.

At the same time, the truth found in these sources is profoundly shaped by their authors, all agents of the Communist Party or its newly formed government. Having spent years reading these documents, I can make a few generalizations about the authors behind my archival sources. By and large, they had little to no interest in artistic matters. Like most idealistic youth who joined the party, they had hoped to focus on political work; shunted into the cultural realm, they carried with them a host of prejudices concerning actors trained in traditional forms of entertainment. Their view of artists as being apolitical and concerned with fame and fortune over revolutionary art, and thus in dire need of stronger supervision and control, appears throughout the documents they penned. While far from invalidating these documents, closer attention to the ubiquitous state voice and its assumptions is always a good idea.

Luo's second question centers on the use of narrative in *Mao's Cultural Army*, in particular how the book emphasizes continuities over disruptions and disjunctions. To be asked this question is, in a way, a tremendous compliment. Researching the book, I often felt that all I found were disruptions and disjunctions. Drama troupes were being constantly formed, renamed, split up, disbanded, and regrouped. Trying to follow the career of a prominent member of the party's cultural army entailed hours of detective work and far too many dead ends. This was further complicated by the geographic shifts in the book, which follow the Communist Party's own wanderings over decades of civil war and state building.

Mao's Cultural Army, for these reasons, is a necessarily flawed narrative. But I fully concede that from a thematic perspective, the tensions between entertainment and propaganda, between state demands and audience expectations, pervade the book.

¹ Much thanks to Yidi Wu for initiating this forum and Liang Luo for penning her insightful review.

² To graduate students and recent PhDs, I am pleased to report that the moment in which you first pick up the published book with your own hands is indeed as surreal and magical as you dare imagine. In my experience it does not quite compare with holding a newborn child for the first time, but at least with a book the crap lies in the past, not in the future.

³ This claim is admittedly highly subjective, and in part based on the simple fact that the Library of Congress categorized the book as a drama study.

⁴ Writing the book, I always took refuge in the notion that my investigation was into drama troupes, not their art. But having

This was by design. Having spent time in the countryside chatting with elderly artists and the peasants that once formed their audiences, I knew that these tensions were a fundamental aspect of drama troupe life. At the same time, the experiences of drama troupes and their rural audiences were incredibly diverse, in ways that are immensely complicated by the historical record. If any peasants wrote memoirs about their thoughts on revolutionary dramas in the 1950s, I have yet to discover them. Sources penned by artists reify their performances; documents authored by cadres disdain artists and audiences alike.

Individual experiences tend to fall through the cracks. There is no doubt in my mind that many villagers, like Luo, felt deep empathy for the women and children portrayed on Communist stages. I would further argue that the party was able to create an effective propaganda culture that aided the implementation of policies, most notably land reform. Because of my sources and experiences in the countryside, I have always tended to focus on the ingrained preferences for traditional forms of performance, but in light of Luo's thoughtful question I must also emphasize the broad diversity of experiences, both among performers and audiences.

This was all made quite clear to me while attending a conference shortly after the publication of *Mao's Cultural Army*. Listening to a paper about an obscure revolutionary opera, my mind drifted to the problem of audience reception. How many people, I wondered, had actually seen one of these performances, let alone been truly affected by the show? Surely the presenter needed to rethink the impact and importance of this work, and I was eager to express the wisdom I had accumulated over my years of research. Before I had a chance, one of the scholars in attendance stood up and perfectly belted out one of the songs featured in the opera. As the song came to a close, the entire room burst into a thunderous round of applause. The lesson, I now suspect, is to never assume anything when it comes to a performance or its audience.

learned so much about opera from my new colleagues in the past few years, I do believe the book would have been stronger if I had been pushed out of my comfort zone as a historian.

⁵ In my experience there is much truth to the power of archives. They might not reveal a flawless recreation of the past, but perhaps they will get your book published and grant you tenure.

⁶ Later, documents from the Hubei Provincial Archive formed the basis for an article on drama troupes in the early 1960s. See Brian DeMare, "Blacklisting Tradition: Political Campaigns and Cultural Markets in Hubei, 1958-1964," *Twentieth Century China*, Vol. 42, #2 (Spring 2017).