

## The Sound of Revolution

by Karen Shih

It felt like the end of the world in China. Many could only wait to die. Their wails soared above tall bamboo shoots and snaked through columns of the Forbidden City. Their cries slammed against the country's Great Wall. Following the Yangtze River, they idled past temples and palaces, finally emptying in the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Only silent pleas remained. The previous year was the year of the snake; but this year belonged to the revolutionaries. Nineteen sixty six belonged to the students, to the proletariat, and to the People's Republic of China. Nineteen sixty six belonged to Mao Zedong.

China's Cultural Revolution began as a mass campaign to remedy the problems of a socialist system that Mao himself established in 1949. Sensing great dissatisfaction toward the urban bureaucratic elite, Mao ordered the purge of "four olds" from the country. Nobody should accept old thoughts, old culture, old customs and old habits any longer. Nobody should belong to an upper social class, for everybody was equal-- under the threat of knives and gunfire. The Chinese people rallied around Mao in the name of social justice. The urban youth rallied with excitement, aiming to suspend their exams and shut down schools. More than ever, Mao and his cadre of Red Guards challenged authority figures. Professors, doctors, and writers keeled over on the street from their beatings. Red Guards dragged these intellectuals out of their ransacked houses, as public life adulterated the private. In a society of 800 million, one was either a member of the revolutionary masses or an enemy of the people. Who were the victims? Who was free?

At age 26, professional singer Yin Hua Wang felt the Cultural Revolution crouch at her door. China's socio-political climate disrupted her studies at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. A member of the prestigious Shanghai Folk Ensemble, Yin Hua now had to perform on behalf of Mao's government. Mao controlled various media outlets, using them to spread and secure the Revolution. "Carry the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the End" declared the *People's Daily* magazine and the *Red Flag* publication. Mao installed 70 million loudspeakers in school playgrounds, factories, rice paddies, and rural villages to ensure that the whole nation listened to one voice. Art was no exception and musicians literally became Mao's political instruments. So while Yin Hua sang, Shanghai's bourgeoisie jumped out of windows and hung themselves. While she sang, the Red Guards beat childless couples until their mouths were toothless and full of blood. All around her, students burned textbooks, their faces smeared with ashes. Trucks crashed because of punctured tires. Dead bodies contaminated the streets, preyed upon first by people, then by the birds. Still, Yin Hua sang on behalf of the Revolution. Yet she could not forget the government's injustices toward her own family from years before. She offered musical propaganda with her lips, but in her heart, she sang for herself.

Yin Hua never intended to be a performer. Born in 1940, she was the second child of five. Her father was both a medical doctor and a literature teacher, her mother, a homemaker. They were an affluent family that dined on delicacies with silver-gilded chopsticks. But the Wangs did not only entertain dinner guests at their house in Shanghai. Their home became the village clinic, where Dr. Wang treated over a hundred neighbors, all free of charge. Even if they sought him in the middle of the night, Dr. Wang rushed to patients' houses, curing illnesses and saving lives. When somebody in town had a medical emergency, he knew simply to rap on Dr.

Wang's door to find a savior. After all, many of Dr. Wang's patients could not afford to go to the hospital, so they came directly to the Wangs' free clinic. Never once did Dr. Wang expect any money in return.

While Dr. Wang worked, Yin Hua's mother took her to singing and dancing lessons of diverse styles. Like her mother, Yin Hua relished the velvet voices and lush instrumental melodies. By the time Yin Hua entered high school at age 15, she had sung and danced on various stages in Shanghai. Her mathematics skills were equally stellar, and so, Yin Hua also participated in multiple math competitions. But this lifestyle could not continue forever. In December of 1955, the People's Republic of China captured and imprisoned Dr. Wang for being an influential member of society. Mao and the Republic could not afford to have a traditional, right-wing intellectual affect the masses.

Yin Hua took the matter to court days after Dr. Wang's arrest. At age 15, she waited in line for one day and night outside the Supreme People's Court to buy a Notice of Appeal for 10 US cents. In the notice, Yin Hua begged the government to free her father. She circled her village to gather support and prove that her father was a good man. She knocked on the doors of each and every house in her neighborhood. Luckily, the neighbors responded. They remembered Dr. Wang's treatment and care at his free clinic. By the end of two days, Yin Hua had collected more than 100 signatures. Yet the People's Republic of China did not waver. Dr. Wang remained in jail.

Months later, Yin Hua and her family sold all of Dr. Wang's tuxedos. They peddled Mrs. Wang's jewelry along with their furniture. As a last resort, they scraped the silver-gilded chopsticks that once held Chinese delicacies so that they could put food on the table. Mrs. Wang had no choice but to find a job at the end of 1956. The following year, in 1957, the government

finally released Dr. Wang from prison. The consequences of his arrest, however, followed Yin Hua a year later, when she entered Shanghai's prestigious Tongji University to study architecture and mathematics.

The government had blacklisted Dr. Wang as a counterrevolutionary. All throughout China, Mao and the government had done the same to landlords and capitalists. In just one decade of the 1950s, Red Guards had quickly persuaded workers to rebel against their employers. They pitted friends against friends; they encouraged spouses to accuse each other. Like many students, Yin Hua's Tongji school officials harangued her to denounce her parents. Her parents were wrong; they were traitors. They were enemies, ones who used to be good but now had changed. Her parents were too opinionated, too vocal. Hadn't Yin Hua seen counterrevolutionaries in the movies? She needed to make a clean break from them. Time and time again, the school and government officials called Yin Hua out of class to heckle her. Slowly, they suspended her from school field trips and sports games. Officials also told her that whatever she sang in the university choir group was incorrect and out-of-tune. But Yin Hua refused to sever her family ties. She would rather withdraw from the school than to disown her own parents and shed her own principles. By the end of her sophomore year, in June of 1960, Tongji University forced Yin Hua to resign from their school. They refused to educate someone who did not support Mao Zedong.

On the surface, Yin Hua's resignation letter looked like she had chosen to quit school. In reality, she could no longer bear to continue her education under such oppression. So, she returned her books, her dorm key and her meal card to the school. The process of returning materials gave Yin Hua time to decide where to go next. She certainly could not return home to her father and mother, for Dr. Wang wouldn't have been afraid to criticize the government a

second time. Dr. Wang had an unabashed personality, and Yin Hua did not want him to go to prison again. As Yin Hua roamed through her dormitory to pack her belongings, she noticed an advertisement for the Shanghai Folk Ensemble. The distinguished song and dance troupe was holding auditions for singers and performers. Immediately, Yin Hua knew that the Folk Ensemble was her next destination.

The Shanghai Folk Ensemble had already heard about Yin Hua even before she auditioned for the troupe that June. They had seen her sing and dance in regional folk productions as a teenager. They remembered her extensive performance background. The majority of performers who entered the Ensemble had graduated from music schools all over the world. Yin Hua, however, possessed a natural talent to sing. Her skill matched the Ensemble's standards, so they made some exceptions, waived some prerequisites, and recruited her into their troupe. Yin Hua never thought that she'd be a part of such a nationally renowned touring group. She had gone to Tongji University with the dream of becoming a successful architect; now, music became her profession, giving her a place to live and food to eat. Now, music literally became her life.

The Ensemble's performances reached the corners of the nation, and soon gained national renown. As a tour group, it had the potential to influence the masses. Naturally, Mao chose the Shanghai Folk Ensemble to represent his regime. He accepted certain performing arts organizations as long as they operated in the name of the revolution. If Mao couldn't reach the nation through his loudspeakers, he spent money on musicians so that they could be his voice. With the Ensemble, Yin Hua sang national anthems speckled with subliminal messages and propaganda. Freedom will make you proud, she declared. I shall not follow my own concepts or else my conscience will curse me, the Ensemble sang in harmony. At age 21, though, Yin Hua

thought little of this. After all, she saw the music bring peace and harmony among all the people. Singing on stage, Yin Hua peered down on a unified crowd that had left their guns and knives behind to enjoy some music, if only for one night.

Since the government held a fund for performing arts students, Yin Hua received a full graduate fellowship to attend the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1961. Her Ensemble director encouraged her to apply to the Conservatory, because all the best singers in the nation were educated there. The Conservatory was highly selective. It turned down many great performers and only accepted the exceptional ones. As a reputable institution, the Conservatory invited famous musicians and professors from all over the nation to teach their students in master classes and seminars. In her freshmen year at the Conservatory, Yin Hua and her classmates learned the characteristics of more than 100 different instruments. Strings, winds, brass, and percussion. Violins, snare drums, *dihus*, and *pipas*. Yin Hua learned Western and Eastern instruments alike. It wasn't enough that the students could identify the various names of instruments. They had to recognize the different sounds each made, the tones each emitted, in which tune, and with what kind of timbre. Yin Hua's Conducting major consisted of a 20-course program. By the end of freshmen year, she had read through 60 chapters in her music theory textbook. It was now time for her to apply all that knowledge.

At age 22, Yin Hua began training in the theories and mechanics of symphonic harmony. Every Wednesday, Yin Hua stayed past midnight to complete her Harmony homework. Each homework page had one line of melody and Yin Hua had to fill in the subsequent, parallel lines with harmony. If the teacher specified that she had to compose a song for a choral group, then Yin Hua had to write out and match the remaining mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts to the given line of melody. If she was to compose a piece for a symphony orchestra, she'd figure

out the notation for all instruments. Like a grid, Yin Hua had to progress a melody horizontally across the page, while matching the different notes and instruments vertically so that everything harmonized. One line was for the wind instruments, one line for the brass, and the same with percussion, and strings. Not only did Yin Hua have to notate each instrumental section, but she needed to break down each section and write for individual instruments. The percussion section alone contained over 35 different instruments, if Yin Hua used both Western and Eastern Folk percussion. Harmonies, countermelodies, and interludes; rhythm, length, and volume-- Yin Hua had to arrange it all. She did this in her head. The Conservatory did not provide school housing, so none of the students stayed on campus for too long. They could not rent their instruments out of the classroom, and even if they could, it was impossible to bring home all the symphonic instruments. About 90% of Conservatory students could not afford their own piano or drum set, either, so they had to remember what they learned in freshmen year and understand the instruments thoroughly. Like Yin Hua, 90% of the Conducting majors composed their homework by memory.

The Harmony course had both a lecture and a discussion section. Students convened in one big class to learn about the technicalities of harmony, and then broke off into discussions at a 1:1 teacher-to-student ratio. There were enough Harmony teachers to provide such personal training, and even if there wasn't, the nature of the course demanded a 1:1 ratio anyway. Each teacher corrected a student's composition according to the student's personal style. Each teacher adjusted his student's composition according to the emotions the student wanted to express and elicit with the piece. No student could receive 100% on an assignment, then, because there was no rule about how to harmonize a symphonic or choral piece. There was no such thing as standardization in musical composition. Yin Hua could have harmonized and notated everything

correctly when it came to technicality, but her piece still could have sounded cacophonous. Since music is all subjective, teachers did not simply pass or fail a composition. They could only help students refine them.

Yin Hua lived four miles away from her harmony teacher's home. Once she finished her composition, she'd walk 40-minutes in the middle of the night to deliver her homework, rolling it up and wedging it in the crack of his front door. Later in the week, both Yin Hua and her teacher mulled over what she had composed, aiming to re-write and improve her piece. Did Yin Hua want to leave space between her octaves, or fill those octaves with notes? Did she want her piece to elicit a hollow, empty feeling or create a grand, fuller quality? Would she be able to resonate that feeling if she moved this note here, instead of leave it there? In every session, Yin Hua's teacher drew upon his expertise and suggested methods to make Yin Hua's piece more effective. He showed her through technical details how to beautify the piece musically.

Yin Hua studied Harmony while simultaneously taking lessons in conducting. She took one class after another, since the government paid for everything. As another required course for her major, the Conservatory assigned five teachers to each Conducting major -- 5:1 teacher-to-student ratio of the best conducting professors in the nation. Only a government-funded institution could have such luxury. They didn't teach Yin-Hua in a small classroom, but in a large concert hall. Yin Hua stood on stage and conducted four of the teachers, as each played on a grand piano. The fifth teacher sat below in the audience and directed Yin Hua, correcting her if she made a mistake. When Yin Hua conducted something too slowly, the teachers at the piano purposely played slowly to emphasize her mistake. If Yin Hua conducted too quickly, the teachers also followed along, to demonstrate how the piece sounded with all the errors. That was not right. This shouldn't be conducted that way. Start over again.

If Yin Hua didn't have a class at the Conservatory that day, she'd take the bus to work and rehearse for a Folk Ensemble production. The Ensemble always wrote their rehearsal and production schedule on a blackboard a week in advance. Ensemble performers always started rehearsals at 8 AM, and often, they would have assignments to go out of Shanghai to perform. Otherwise, Yin Hua and her fellow Ensemble members rehearsed in quartets, or spent the day in a private vocal lesson, which the government also funded. The government further trained their musical products by sending them to study in various regions of the country. Since the Folk Ensemble was the government's vehicle to the people, the Ensemble would learn songs of various regional dialects. They'd learn the defining characteristics of each region to please the local residents. Yin Hua learned quick, jumpy songs in Zhenjiang. She felt the calming flow, as notes glided up and down the scale, in regions south of Shanghai. For Yunnan songs, Yin Hua sang slant-ing, fall-ing eighth-notes.

But, in a heartbeat, all education stopped. At age 24, Yin Hua could no longer study dialects, harmony, vocals, and conducting. It was 1964; Mao began to sow the seeds of the Cultural Revolution. Even though the Conservatory was a government ventricle, Red Guards started to harass its professors, questioning if they were secretly spreading Rightist ideas to their students. By 1966, the Red Guards were cross-examining each professor, so that teaching ceased altogether. They dragged "problematic instructors" onto a stage to be criticized, splashing their heads with glue and mounting them with tall paper hats. In truth, many people grew excited about what was happening. Some honestly felt justified by such actions because one class could finally overthrow the other. Day after day, revolutionaries settled hundreds of old scores. Thousands of young students discovered that they had enormous power to attack without danger. With Mao dismissing half a dozen university professors, Yin Hua had to teach herself now.

Luckily, she still had the Folk Ensemble group. Unlike most musicians, the government continued to pay the Folk Ensemble members and Yin Hua never stopped performing throughout the Revolution. Still, shows weren't the same. They did not flow like they used to. The Revolution had disrupted the Ensemble's performance schedule and robbed them of their normal routine.

In 1974, Premier Zhou Enlai and a Mr. Deng Xiaoping gained control of the Central Committee of the government. Seeing the chaos and violence of Mao's regime, they slowly began to supplant Mao, making inroads against left-wing revolutionaries. Zhou and Deng's policies also returned the Folk Ensemble to a consistent performance schedule. Yin Hua again learned to sing various folksongs from all over the country. At a Peking Opera performance, the Ensemble not only sang according to specific Peking traits, but also rehearsed Peking dance and choreography. Wearing beautiful blue costumes of nylon and wool, Yin Hua glided lightly on the balls of her feet to the music of stringed instruments. Besides Peking Opera, the Shanghai Folk Ensemble distinguished itself by playing Chinese instruments for both Eastern and Western songs. Whereas all the other orchestras and performance groups in China used instruments that were no different from the West, the Ensemble adopted novel practices. When the Ensemble played folksongs with Chinese instruments, the music sounded localized to a specific region in China. When they used these instruments to perform Western music, however, they added an Oriental flavor to their songs. Highly regarded and unique, the Ensemble always performed for Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai whenever they visited Shanghai. Mao and Zhou rarely favored any other performance group.

Every year, the Folk Ensemble participated in China's annual National Day Reception, an event that brought the entire country together to sing national songs and anthems. In the year 1975, the government auditioned over 2000 singers from various ensembles for a chance to sing solo at the reception. Having seen Yin Hua in past performances, the government encouraged her to try out. From 2000 singers, judges called back 10 women and 10 men to audition again. Yin Hua was among the 20 singers. Finally, it was down to Yin Hua and another male singer. Having auditioned numerous times already, Yin Hua let the familiar lull of her voice carry away her nerves. She nailed the audition. The solo spot was hers! To prepare for the reception, Yin Hua kept her voice in prime condition: she restrained from eating certain foods, she drank plenty of water, and got plenty of rest. On the actual reception day, Yin Hua stood on the center of a round stage, wearing an elegant white dress. Over 800 people sang behind her as she carried the dominant melody:

*Five-Starred Red Flag is fluttering in the wind,  
Bright is our song of victory;  
Sing a song of praise for our dear motherland,  
Toward prosperity and a strong nation.  
Sing a song of praise for our dear motherland,  
Toward prosperity and a strong nation.*

Behind Yin Hua were students, laborers, doctors, professional performers, and even different religious groups. Bathed in the spotlight, Yin Hua's voice echoed off the acoustics of a dome-shaped concert hall. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai watched her from the VIP balcony. The advocate of Communism, Mao wore a high-collared suit that buttoned up to one's jawbone. Yin Hua saw that Zhou wore the same traditional suit; though having been a renowned diplomat, it was no secret that he favored a more liberal China.

The political chasm between Mao and Zhou eventually brought the Cultural Revolution to its much anticipated demise in 1978. After Zhou's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping pushed to reform China, to bring it back to an economically healthy state. Deng removed the word "rightist" from the record of half a million party members; he also blotted out epithets of "landlord," "counterrevolutionary," and "bad element" from people's dossiers. Yin Hua's family was no longer blacklisted. By February 1978, Yin Hua and the people elected Deng Xiaoping as the chairman of China. Deng ignited hope for China's stability and welfare, once again.

By the summer of 1978, Yin Hua had received her master's degree in Conducting from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. A year later, at age 39, she had her own choir to conduct, her own music classes to teach. Until this point, Yin Hua had sung and heard a myriad of notes in her lifetime. High notes, low notes, major and minor—each note was beautiful. Every note contributed to a beautiful symphony that melted away her troubles. Now, it was Yin Hua's turn to share this life symphony with China's next generation.

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