

# YANG BAN XI: THE EIGHT MODEL WORKS



**History can be rewritten, especially in song and dance**

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90 Minutes

**Yang Ban Xi**  
A FILM BY YAN TING YUEN



**CREDITS**

Title in English: YANG BAN XI- The Eight Model Works

Director: YAN TING YUEN

Produced by: HETTY NAAJKENS-RETEL HELMRICH  
FOR SCARABEEFILMS

Line-producer China: BARBIE TUNG

Country and  
year of production: NETHERLANDS, 2005

Theatrical release: Mar. 29, 2006

Scriptwriter: YAN TING YUEN

Editor: STEFAN KAMP

Photography: EDWIN VERSTEGEN

Sound: BERT VAN DEN DUNGEN  
BOUWE MULDER

Sound design: RANKO PAUKOVIC

Music composer: ZHAO WEI

Language of dialogue: MANDARIJN

Language of subtitles: ENGLISH

Principal cast:  
XUE QING HUA  
TONG XIANG LING  
XU YI HUI  
JIN YONG QING  
ZHANG NAN YUN  
ZHAO WEI

Running time: 90 minutes



## Yang Ban Xi



### SYNOPSIS

History changes all the time. What is good today can be considered bad tomorrow. During the ten years of Cultural Revolution, traditional opera was banned by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, and replaced by a new kind of art in which the world was presented in a much simpler way: all the good guys were farmers and revolutionary soldiers, always singing and dancing in the broad spotlight. All the bad guys were landlords and anti revolutionaries, who wore dark make-up and were poorly lit. Pure propaganda told in beautiful images and stories, in an innovative way incorporating the most modern techniques of cinematography, song, and dance, thus becoming a new art form in Chinese culture: Revolutionary model opera – the Yang Ban Xi.

More than 13 were created, but 8 of these carefully crafted model works were most popular and went into history as 'the 8 Model works'. They were filmed in bright Technicolor and Scope, and were the only kind of entertainment allowed in the theatres, on television and radio. Their influence was beyond measurement. The main performing characters became instant stars, revered in every household. Then, the storm of the Cultural Revolution subsided. Jiang Qing was convicted as member of the Gang of Four, accepted scapegoats for everything that went wrong during the revolution. Intertwined with Jiang Qing, the propaganda operas spun into a downfall, reviled as despicable art for a long period.



The rise and fall of the propaganda opera is reflected by those who performed in it. Ten years of unimaginable fame, after which some were left to a destiny of sweeping stage floors. All of them have one thing in common: whatever happened to them afterwards, they all look back at the propaganda operas as a stressful, but great time of their lives, a time in which they actually believed, desperately wanted to believe, that Mao and his communist party held the key to a righteous world with equal opportunities for every person. However, history can be rewritten. Nowadays the Yang Ban Xi's have regained popularity and are performed for delighted audiences consisting of the now middle-aged Chinese who were teenagers during the heyday of the propaganda opera, taking along their children to watch.

The story of the 8 model works is told us in Yang Ban Xi by the imagined voice of Jiang Qing, whose subjective point of view questions the notions of good and bad, and builds up the dramatic intensity of this piece of Chinese history. As a matter of fact, the 8 model works are an undeniable phenomenon in Chinese history, a history that can be easily moulded in the hands of those with power. What is true and what is false, what is reality and what is propaganda? The dust, drenched in blood, raised by the Cultural Revolution seems to have subsided. Now the ordinary Chinese citizen can decide for him or herself what to forget, but also what to remember from that period. In addition, if there is anything to remember, why not those cheerful, happy, colourful, campy and nowadays, even hip yang ban xi's, a most marvellous mixture of high and low culture?

# Yang Ban Xi

A FILM BY YAN TING YUEN

## STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR

I don't exactly remember when I saw a yangban xi on film for the first time. What I do remember is that its colours and cinematography blew me away. The style and camerawork reminded me of the great Hollywood musicals of the '40's and '50s, that I loved to watch as a little girl. Singin' in the Rain, The Sound of Music, My Fair Lady, Hello Dolly, Oliver, I've seen them all and I could sing along with every song. Watching that first yangban xi I thought it simply had to be a Chinese musical, and I thought it looked wonderful, even though technically they weren't as advanced as the western ones. Only years later did I understand the propaganda purposes of these films and all the bad associations attached to them. It was simply not done to just 'like' the yang ban xi's. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that nowadays yang ban xi's are embraced as a specific art by intellectuals and non-intellectuals, in China and abroad. Just one year ago, Heidelberg even harboured an international symposium about the yangbanxi.



Yan Ting Yuen in front of a Yang Ban Xi decor

There are two things I'd like to state upfront about this film. First, is my intention to make a cheerful film, like the yang ban xi films were. So many documentaries that cover the Cultural Revolution as main or side topics display the horrors of the revolution. These are facts that are undeniable and cannot be ignored or taken lightly. I have no intention of doing so at all. However, what I do want is to approach this subject and its period, like the Chinese people do in the year 2005, with a great sense of humour and irony. This is something that may be imbedded in the Chinese national character. Not everything was as bad as the western media usually emphasizes, a tendency that irritates many Chinese.

Quite often, I have noticed that the Chinese and Chinese culture are mystified in the west. China seems to be a country that is made of cliché images and cliché topics here. Who doesn't know the images of the round hills of Guilin, surrounded by low hanging clouds? Who has never seen the images of the Chinese farmer women with pointed reed hats, who harvest rice in the wet fields, accompanied by a Chinese flute in the pentatonic tone system? Or Chinese on bicycles at the same time crossing an enormous traffic crossing, ringing a cacaphony of bells? The following topics still attract the most attention in western media: Human rights, Falun gong, one-child policy.

A correspondent I spoke to in Beijing told me that a topic such as 'fat children that get sent to weight loss farms at the coast' doesn't sell because it simply doesn't fit in the way the West perceives China. A befriended Dutch-Chinese Sinologist even put it more strongly: 'The worst that could happen for western media is if China would ever become democratic, the media wouldn't know anymore what to write about.'

Secondly, I wish to state that I hope to create another image, that of an urbane culture in a modern China. A China that has won the Olympic Games of 2008 (and is tearing down all the old housing districts in the capital to present a clean and modern capital to the world). A China in which virtually all the teenage girls and boys drink Starbucks coffee on every street corner at a hefty price (because as an only child, they each receive considerable allowances from the incomes of not only their father and mother, but also that of two pairs of grandfathers and grandmothers). A China in which nothing is allowed, but therefore everything is allowed (as long as you know the right way of getting it). A China filled with contradictions, which tries to unite the old with the new and therefore, pragmatic as it is, has to rewrite history again.

In the end, the film is about a specific period of Chinese history. However, by incorporating the stories of the people in their daily lives, I hope that the film is also about the lives of the people in the present in the cities of contemporary China, a China on the eve of complete participation in the Western world.



### **About the style:**

I see Yang Ban Xi, the 8 model works as a hybrid form of documentary which mixes Direct Cinema, traditional interviews, and musical. I wanted to create a different kind of documentary and mix all of the above elements together to create a film that would keep you on your toes all—well hopefully most—of the time. That you would never know what to expect and be thrown off guard.

### **About the content:**

The film starts and ends with the voice of Madame Mao, who trumpets the fact that 'her' yang ban xi are not forgotten. Throughout the film she gives commentary on the real people in the documentary, her own life and history in general. In the documentary she is a fictional character with fictional comments, her comments are slightly based on real facts of her life. Since her comments are fictional, she is as you can say in a scenario: an unreliable voice-over. We the audience can see that some of what she says is distilled with jealousy or revolutionary zest, and therefore not trustworthy.

The film has a couple of story lines of people, for example:

Mr. And Mrs. Tong: Mr. Tong who made it through the yang ban xi, while his wife was denied her stage career because of the yang ban xi.

Xue Qing Hua, the ballet dancer who despite all the trouble at least found her

Madame Mao herself who ultimately became the scapegoat of the entire Cultural Revolution, and lived her life under house arrest until her suicide in 1991, just after she had seen the yang ban xi on national television again.

Xu Yihui, who still is inspired by Mao and the Cultural Revolution in his works of art and used to be sexually aroused by the legs shown in Hongse niang ze jun.

It was my intention not to create a dull history lesson, but to make a film about the people who lived through it and their lives now in modern China.

### **Function of the musical scenes:**

These are supposed to throw you off guard and also seduce you in kind of way that the original yang ban xi used to do. Young beautiful people dancing against a house version of The Red Women's Detachment. Who can resist that? It's fun, it's joyful, it's laughter. It should seduce you but also make you feel uncomfortable (especially in the last scene at the lake). So at times the documentary even takes the form of its subject: the propaganda film.

Of course at the end of the film, the young artists says something very important: that art is supposed to make reality tolerable.

### **My intention:**

I hope that when audiences have seen the film, they will have 'actually' experienced the revolutionary zest of that time, that it was and still is so easy to be seduced by propaganda and that they will have learned a bit about a special art form in a special time of the volatile history of China. I hope they will also see the resilience of the Chinese people in the next stage of their volatile history. I mean where else could only 30 years after a dark period in time the art form of that period become popular again.... despite everything that happened the Chinese have never lost their great sense of humour!

## Cast Biographies

### **Xue Qinghua, The Ballet Dancer**

Xue Qing Hua was trained in western classical ballet. At the age of 18 she was chosen to play the lead in The Red Women's Detachment (hong se niang zi jun). The role would make her immortal; Red Women's Detachment is still one of the most popular Yang Ban Xi's. Even today people still know her name. Xue describes this moment as the most fun but also most stressed of her life. After the Cultural Revolution she worked as a seamstress, forbidden to dance because of her attachment to the Yang Ban Xi. Xue married and followed her husband to Hong Kong where she occasionally still teaches ballet groups.

### **Tong Xiangling: The Actor**

Tong Xiang Ling was a classical Beijing Opera singer and actor when he was chosen to play the lead in Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (Zhihuweihushan). He was extremely popular among the audience and even today he still gives out interviews about Taking Tiger. While his fame grew larger everyday because of the Yang Ban Xi during the Cultural Revolution, his wife's career was denied because of the same Yang Ban Xi.

### **Zhang Nanyun: The Opera Actress**

While Zhang's husband Tong Xiang Ling became a star because of the Yang Ban Xi, her own career stopped because of the same Yang Ban Xi. Before the Cultural Revolution she was a successful, talented Beijing Opera singer and actress. Her fame was rising until Madame Mao and her lot, for no apparent reason, denounced her : well perhaps because she was too beautiful. She was degraded to a 'black object' and was never to see the stage again, which she still regrets. After many hardships, nowadays she and Tong live happily in Shanghai.

### **Jin Yong Qin-The Scriptwriter**

Jin was the notulist of the director when he was suddenly promoted to scriptwriter of Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy which starred Tong Xiang Ling. It was an existing 4 hour Yang Ban Xi play, which he turned into a 1 1/2 hour yang ban xi movie, all, of course, under the scrutinous eyes of Madame Mao. He thinks of the yang ban xi as pieces of unique art. Even if you have the freedom to write what you want nowadays, it still doesn't mean you write something lasting and good. Jin now lives in a small flat in Shanghai and writes television plays.

### **Zhao Wei-The Guitar Player**

Zhao Wei plays the guitar in one of those many Beijing Rock Bands that spurred up in the 90's. He used to be in the People's Republic Army and enjoyed the yang ban xi very much when he was a kid.

### **Huang Xiao Tong-The Conductor**

Huang is Zhao Wei's favorite uncle, a retired famous ex-conductor. Being part of the old establishment during the Cultural Revolution he was locked up in a stable and forbidden to practice his art form. He tells his story without bitterness, almost cheerful, as an anecdote. It's clear he has dealt with history and lives his life peacefully and happy in Shanghai.

### **Xu Yi Hui-The Artist & Fan**

Xu is a conceptual modern artist in Beijing whose work is often exhibited in China and the West. His work includes porcelain Little Red Books, exhibited as porcelain kitsch, turning it into pop art, depicting the shifting values in modern China. When growing up he used to be a huge fan of the Yang Ban Xi and reveals to us what the youth really thought of The Red Women's Detachment.

## Director's Biography

**Surname** Yuen  
**First name** Yan Ting  
**Birthplace** Hong Kong, China

Yan Ting Yuen was born in Hong Kong, China. At the age of 5 her parents moved to Europe, where she grew up and received her education. She graduated from the University of Amsterdam with a masters degree in Communication Sciences.

After assisting in several film and television productions, Yuen made her director's debut in 2001 with the short documentary 'Chin.Ind.: Life behind the serving hatch' which was nominated for the National Dutch Film Award. Her second film is the feature documentary 'Yang Ban Xi, the 8 model works', which premiered at the Sundance Film festival 2005, in the world documentary competition.

Yuen is always searching for new ways of telling stories using and mixing different genres of film, documentary and beyond. She finds a lot of her inspiration in the diversity of Asian cultures.

- 2005 In production: **Searching for Murakami**  
50 minute documentary on Haruki Murakami in Tokyo  
Shooting scheduled for April 2006.
- 2005 **Yang Ban Xi, the 8 model works**  
90 Min.  
selection of festivals:  
Sundance Film festival  
Tel Aviv Doc film festival  
Seattle international documentary festival  
Tai Pei international Filmfestival  
Maine Film Festival  
Berlin Asia pacific film festival  
Leipzig International Documentary film festival  
Melbourne international Film festival  
Rome Pan Asia film festival
- 2004 **La Trappe**  
5 x 15 seconds, 35 mm.  
Commercials for La Trappe beer  
Nomination Golden Effie 2004
- 2003 **Urbania**  
10 x 30 minutes, digibeta  
10 part series for Dutch television. Portraits of the city life of people in the larger cities of the Netherlands.

2001

**Chin.Ind.: Life behind the serving hatch**

50', 16 mm.

Nomination National Dutch Film Award, Netherlands

Jury prize Maremma Doc Filmfestival, Italy