Three Revolutionary Epics in Socialist China (1964-2006): Red Legend, Grey Performance, or Black Restoration to Capitalism

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This power-point presentation examines the images and messages of three “song and dance revolutionary epics” in the PRC from 1964 to 2009. First, it examines the impact of The East is Red, which showcased some of the best talents in performing arts in the first seventeen years after the founding of the PRC from 1949 to 1966. Still treasured with fond memories in post-Mao China, The East is Red became a model for the creation of The Song of the Chinese Revolution premiered in 1984, a so-called “sister performance” to The East is Red, to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Having inherited the “red legend” of the The East is Red, The Song of the Chinese Revolution, nevertheless challenged the one-sided historical narratives of the CCP history as the result of having incorporated new research on revolutionary histories in the fields of modern Chinese history and the CCP historiography. The 2009 performance of The Road to Prosperity to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, however, departed from its two precursor texts by highlighting post-Mao political regimes and its “capitalist” approach to rescue China from national disasters to the road to prosperity. Justifying its drive to capitalism with “Chinese socialist characteristics,” The Road to Prosperity demonstrates, once again, the enduring power of revolutionary epic performance that manipulates historical narrative, political orientation, star and popular culture, and nationalistic sentiments, which embody shifting and complex identities in the formation of the new red legend in contemporary China.

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Xiaomei Chen is professor and chair of Performance Studies Graduate Group at University of California at Davis. She is the author of Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China (Oxford University Press, 1995; second and expanded edition, Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), and Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China (University of Hawai'i Press, 2002). She is the co-editor, with Claire Sponsler, of East of West: Cross-Cultural Performances and the Staging of Difference (Palgrave, 2000)." She is the editor of Reading the Right Texts (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), and Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama (Columbia University Press, 2010, abridged edition, 2012). This talk is part of her forthcoming book from Columbia University Press, entitled Theater and Revolutions: Founding Fathers, National Stage, And Revisionist Histories in Twentieth-century China.