

NIXON IN CHINA



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AN OPERA IN TWO ACTS

Music by John Adams

Libretto by Alice Goodman

*Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera,
The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts,
and the Brooklyn Academy of Music*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Richard Nixon, President of the United States	Baritone	
Pat Nixon, his wife	Soprano	
Premier Chou En-lai	Baritone	
Chairman Mao Tse-tung	Tenor	
Chiang Ch'ing (Madame Mao)	Soprano	
Henry Kissinger	Bass	
First Secretary to Chairman Mao	} also called "3 Contraltos" {	Mezzo-Soprano
Second Secretary to Chairman Mao		Mezzo-Soprano
Third Secretary to Chairman Mao		Contralto
Wu Ching-hua		Female dancer
Hung Chang-ching		Male dancer
Chorus		

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Act I

- scene 1: The airport outside Peking (Nixon's arrival)
- scene 2: The Imperial city (meeting with Mao)
- scene 3: The Great Hall of the People (the first banquet)

Act II

- scene 1: Mrs. Nixon views China
- scene 2: The Peking Opera ("The Red Detachment of Women")
- scene 3: Last night in Peking

Note: Bracketed ("["") passages in this libretto will not be sung.

NIXON IN CHINA

Act I, scene 1

The airfield outside Peking. It is a very cold, clear, dry morning; Monday, February 21, 1972; the air is full of static electricity. No airplanes are arriving; there is the odd note of birdsong. Finally, from behind some buildings, come the sounds of troops marching. Contingents of army, navy, and air force — 120 men of each service — circle the field and begin to sing "The Three Main Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points of Attention".

Chorus: Soldiers of heaven hold the sky
The morning breaks and shadows fly
Follow the orders of the poor
Your master is the laborer
Who rules the world with truth and grace
Deal with him justly, face to face
Pay a fair price for all you buy
Pay to replace what you destroy
Divide the landlord's property
Take nothing from the tenantry
Do not mistreat the captive foe
Respect women, it is their due
Replace doors when you leave a house
Roll up straw matting after use

The people are the heroes now
Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow
When we look up, the fields are white
With harvest in the morning light
And mountain ranges one by one
Rise red beneath the harvest moon

A jet is heard approaching, touching down, and taxiing across the runway. As *The Spirit of '76* comes into view, slowing to a stop, Premier Chou En-lai and a small group of officials stroll out to meet it, casting long shadows in the pale yellow light. A ramp is drawn up to the hatchway. After a pause the door opens and President Nixon stands in the opening for an instant, then begins to descend the ramp, closely followed by the First Lady in her scarlet coat. When the President reaches the middle of the ramp, Premier Chou begins to clap and the President stops short and returns the gesture, according to the Chinese custom. He reaches the bottom step and extends his right hand as he walks towards the Premier. They shake hands.

Chou: Your flight was smooth, I hope?

Nixon: Oh yes,
Smoother than usual I guess.
Yes, it was very pleasant. We
Stopped in Hawaii for a day
And Guam, to catch up on the time
It's easier that way. The Prime
Minister knows about that. He
Is such a traveller.

Chou: No, not I
But as a traveller come home
For good to China, one for whom
All travel is a penance now
I am most proud to welcome you.

As the rest of the American party disembarks, the band strikes up. The Premier introduces the President to the Chinese official entourage, and together they review the massed ranks of the honor guard. All heads turn as they pass. While the introductions are beginning, the President begins to sing, and, as he sings, the joy of anticipated triumph becomes the terrible expectation of failure. The Chinese and American official parties in due course leave the stage. The brilliant sunshine dwindles to the light of incandescent lamps. A telephone rings twice offstage, is picked up offstage. In a moment Henry Kissinger interrupts the President to tell him that Chairman Mao wishes to meet with him.

Nixon: News has a kind of mystery:
When I shook hands with Chou En-lai
On this bare field outside Peking
Just now, the world was listening.

Chou: May I —

Nixon: Though we spoke quietly
The eyes and ears of history
Caught every gesture —

Chou: — introduce —

Nixon: And every word, transforming us
As we, transfixed, —

Chou: — the Deputy
Minister of Security.

Nixon: Made history. [Our shaking hands
Were shaping time. Each moment stands
Out sharp and clear.

Chou: — Army.] May I —

Nixon: On our flight over from Shanghai

Chou: The Minister —

Nixon: — the countryside
Looked drab and gray. "Brueghel", Pat said.
"We came in peace for all mankind"
I said, and I was put in mind
Of our Apollo astronauts
Simply —

Chou: — of the United States

Nixon: Achieving a great human dream.
We live in an unsettled time.
Who are our enemies? Who are
Our friends? The Eastern Hemisphere
Beckoned to us, and we have flown
East of the sun, west of the moon
Across an ocean of distrust
Filled with the bodies of our lost;
The earth's Sea of Tranquillity.
It's prime time in the U.S.A.
Yesterday night. They watch us now;
The three main networks' colors glow
Livid through drapes onto the lawn.
Dishes are washed and homework done,
The dog and grandma fall asleep,
A car roars past playing loud pop,
Is gone. As I look down the road
I know America is good
At heart. An old cold warrior
Piloting towards an unknown shore

Through shoals. The rats begin to chew
The sheets. There's murmuring below.
Now there's ingratitude! My hand
Is steady as a rock. A sound
Like mourning doves reaches my ears,
Nobody is a friend of ours.

[Let's face it. If we don't succeed
On this summit, our name is mud.
We're not out of the woods, not yet.
The nation's heartland skips a beat
As our hands shield the spinning globe
From the flame-throwers of the mob.
We must press on. We know we want —
What? — Oh yes —

Kissinger:

Mr. President —

Act I, scene 2

The incandescent lamps are the lamps of Chairman Mao's study. They are old-fashioned standard lamps with tasselled shades. Books lie open everywhere, face down or face up. The walls are filled with books, most of them stuffed with long paper bookmarks. Chairman Mao Tse-tung is seated on one of several overstuffed brown slipcovered armchairs arranged in a semi-circle. Several Chinese photographers slip into the room, then President Nixon, Premier Chou En-lai, and Dr. Kissinger make their entrance. A girl secretary (one of three who will sit on straight chairs behind Mao and sing back-up) takes the Chairman's arm and he hoists himself out of the chair and advances to shake hands.

Mao: I can't talk very well. My throat —

Nixon: I'm nearly speechless with delight
Just to be here.

Mao: We're even then.
That is the right way to begin.
Our common old friend Chiang Kai-shek
With all his virtues would not look
Too kindly on all this. We seem
To be beneath the likes of him.
You've seen his latest speech?

Nixon: You bet.
It was a scorcher. Still, he's spit
Into the wind before, and will
Again. That puts it into scale.
You shouldn't despise Chiang.

Mao: No fear
Of that. We've followed his career
For generations. There's not much
Beneath our notice.

Chou: We will touch
On this in our communiqué.

They sit down, and the photographers who have snapped the handshakes continue to photograph them. The Chairman and the President sit next to one another at the center of the semi-circle while the Premier sits next to the Chairman and Dr. Kissinger sits next to the President, facing each other, at its ends. The secretaries take their seats behind the Chairman.

Mao: Ah, the philosopher! I see
Paris can spare you then.

Kissinger: The Chair-
Man may be gratified to hear
He's read at Harvard. I assign
All four volumes.

Mao: Those books of mine
Aren't anything. Incorporate
Their words within a people's thought
As poor men's common sense and try
Their strength on women's nerves, then say
They live.

Nixon: The Chairman's books enthralled
A nation, and have changed the world.

Mao: I could not change it. I'd be glad
To think that in the neighborhood
Of Peking something will remain.

Nixon: Let us turn our talk towards Taiwan,
Vietnam and the problems there,
Japan —

Mao: Save that for the Premier.
My business is philosophy.
Now Doctor Kissinger —

Kissinger: Who me?

Mao: — Has made his reputation in
Foreign affairs.

Nixon: My right hand man.
You'd never think to look at him
That he's James Bond.

Chou: And all the time
He's doing undercover work.

Kissinger: I had a cover.

Mao: In the dark
All diplomats are gray.

Chou: Or *gris*
When their work takes them to *Paris*.

Kissinger: I pull the wool over their —

Nixon: Stop!

Mao: He pulls the wool over their lap.

Nixon: He's a consummate diplomat.
Girls think he's lukewarm when he's hot.

Mao: You also dally with your girls?

Nixon: His girls, not mine.

Kissinger: He never tells.

Chou: And this is an election year.

The photographers have finished; Chou ushers them out into the hall. When he returns he sits a little straighter, as do the President and Dr. Kissinger. Only Chairman Mao continues to lean back, his arms over the chair's arms, as the conversation moves on.

Mao: You know we'll meet with your confrere
The Democratic candidate
If he should win.

Nixon: That is a fate
We hope you won't have to endure.
I'd like to make another tour
As President.

Mao: You've got my vote.
I back the man who's on the right.

Kissinger: Who's in the right you mean.

Mao: No, no.

Nixon: What they put forward we put through.

Mao: I like right-wingers: Nixon, Heath —

Nixon: De Gaulle.

Mao: No, not De Gaulle. I'm loath
To file him in that pigeonhole.

Kissinger: But Germany's another tale.

Mao: We've more than once led the right wing
Forward while text-book cadres swung
Back into goose-step, home at last.
How your most rigid theorist
Revises as he goes along!

Nixon: Now you're referring to Wang Ming,
Chiang, Chang Kuo-tao and Li Li-san.

Mao: I spoke generally. The line
We take now is a paradox.
Among the followers of Marx
The extreme left, the doctrinaire,
Tend to be fascist.

Nixon: And the far
Right?

Mao: True Marxism is called that by
The extreme left. Occasionally
The true left calls a spade a spade
And tells the left it's right.

Chou: You've said
That there's a certain well-known tree
That grows from nothing in a day,
Lives only as a sapling, dies
Just at its prime, when good men raise
It as their idol.

Nixon: Not the cross?

Mao: The Liberty Tree. Let it pass.
It was a riddle, not a test.
The revolution does not last.
It is duration — the regime
Survives in that, and not in time.
While it is young in us it lives;
We can save it, it never saves.

Kissinger: And yours will last a thousand years.

Mao: Founders come first, then profiteers.

Nixon: Capitalists?

Mao: Fishers of men.
An organized oblivion.

Nixon: The crane —

Mao: Let us not be misled.

Nixon: The Yellow Crane has flown abroad.
Think of what we have lost and gained
Since forty-nine.

Chou: The current trend
Suggests that China's future might —

Nixon: Might break the Futures Market.

Mao: That
Would be a break. No doubt our plunge
Into the New York Stock Exchange
Will line some pockets here and there.
Will these investments be secure?
No. Not precisely.

Nixon: There's the catch.
You don't want China to be rich.

Mao: You want to bring your boys back home.

Nixon: What if we do? Is that a crime?

Mao: Our armies do not go abroad.
Why should they? We have all we need:
New missionaries, businesslike,
Survey the field and then attack,
Promise to change our rice to bread,
And wash us in our brothers' blood,
[And give us beads,] and crucify
Us on a cross of usury.
After them come the Green Berets,
Insuring their securities.

Nixon: Where is the Chinese people's faith?

Mao: The people's faith? Another myth
To sell bonds. It's worked well for you.
The people are determined to
Divide the land and to make it whole.
Piecing the broken Golden Bowl
The world to come has come, is theirs.
We cried "Long live the Ancestors!"
Once, it's "Long live the Living!" now.

Nixon: History holds her breath.

Mao: We know
The great silent majority
Will bide its time.

Kissinger: There you've got me.
I'm lost.

Chou: The Chairman means the dead.

Nixon: Confucius —

Mao: We no longer need
Confucius. Let him rot — no curse —
Words decompose to feed their source —
Old leaves absorbed into the tree
To grow again as branches. They
Sprang from the land, they are alike
Its food and dung. Upon a rock
You may well build your tomb, but give
Us the earth, and we'll dig a grave.
A hundred years, and ears may press
Hard to the ground to hear his voice.
Platonic men freed from the caves
Of Pao An want to spend their lives
In the daylight, to hear the sound
Of industry borne on the wind:
The plow breaking the furrow, cloth
Pierced by the needle, giant earth-
Movers, and these men want to work,
Not turn back, dazzled, to the dark —
Echoes, shadows, and chains. Such men
Will drive away the Yellow Crane
At last, to harness the Yangtze.
Another generation may
Turn up Confucius' china guard
Waiting in bunkers for their lord.

Nixon: Like the Ming Tombs. I think this leap
Forward to light is the first step
Of all our youth, all nations' youth;
Our duty is to show them both
Their future and our past, the fire
And the noon glare. How they inspire
Our poor dry bones, put us in mind
Of our forgotten dreams! We send
Children on our crusades, we bring
Children our countries, right or wrong.
Then we retire. Fathers and sons,
Let us join hands, make peace for once.
History is our mother, we
Best do her honor in this way.

Mao: History is a dirty sow:
If we by chance escape her maw
She overlies us.

Nixon: That's true, sure,
And yet we still must seize the hour
And seize the day.

Chou: You overlook
The fact that hands are raised to strike,
Hands are stretched out to seize their kill.
Here where we stand, beyond the pale,
Your outstretched hand, the Russian's wave,
Appear ambiguous. Forgive
My bluntness.

Nixon: There's no reason why
You should trust us. I'll never say
I'll do something I cannot do,
And I'll do more than you can know.
But since you do not know me, please
Don't trust me. Wait. These may be lies.

Kissinger: I can vouch for the President.

The Premier has been discreetly glancing at his watch for some time. Now he stands up, and the President and Dr. Kissinger follow his example. Chairman Mao is assisted by his secretaries as he hauls himself up. Walking slowly and talking, they take their leave.

Mao: I'm growing old and soft, and won't
Demand your overthrow.

Nixon: Your life
Is known to all. It's a relief
To think I may be spared.

Mao: I thought
You might be overwhelmed!

Nixon: My feet
Are firmly planted on the ground,
Like yours, like you I take my stand
Among poor people. We can talk.

Mao: *Six Crises* isn't a bad book.

Nixon: He reads too much.

Chou: Ah, who can say?

Nixon: Has study given Chairman Mao
An iron constitution?

Mao: No.

The Chairman sees his visitors offstage and shuffles back to his books.

Mao: Founders come first, then profiteers.

Secretaries: Founders come first, then profiteers.

They write it down.

Act I, scene 3

It is the evening of the first day. The Americans are being fêted in the Great Hall of the People. Outside, the roof is outlined by strings of lights, inside there are tables set for nine hundred. Against the far wall a small dais supports a bank of microphones. The American and Chinese flags are pinned against that wall. The President and the First Lady sit on either side of the Premier, their backs to the flags, and gaze across a snowy field of table linen. There is their party, there the newsmen, there the important Chinese. In the distance the vision begins to blur. The atmosphere is convivial; in that huge hall the President feels strangely joyful and lightheaded, as if this were the evening of arrival in heaven. And so the conversation rises and falls throughout the courses of the banquet.

Nixon: The night is young.

Pat: A long, long trail
Unwinding towards my dreams, uphill
Right to the very last frontier,
And then we're home. I love you dear.

Nixon: You must be worn out.

Pat: No, I washed
And rested, so I feel refreshed.
But you —

Nixon: This air agrees with me.
Wish we could send some to D.C.
I've never felt so good.

Pat: I saw
A snow moon on our way here. Snow!
Snow over China! Think of that!
It makes me shiver.

Nixon: Just you wait
Until the toasting starts. Between
The booze and praise you'll warm up then.

Pat: It may go to my head.

Nixon: It may,
And I might be a Russian spy.

Pat: Seriously —

Nixon: You saw the moon
In clouds and forecast snow. Go on.

Pat: Be a peacemaker, Premier Chou.

Chou: All Mrs. Nixon says is true
Enough. The pressure's falling fast.
I feel it in my bones.

Nixon: At least
This Great Hall of the People stands
Like a fortress against the winds
Whatever their direction. Yet
The west wind heralds spring.

Chou: I doubt
That spring has come.

Pat: Take a deep breath
And you can taste it. It's the truth.
Although there's more snow still to fall
The spring's as good as here.

Kissinger: Meanwhile
We sit together in the cold.

Chou: Huddled for warmth you mean? But could
We not take some encouragement
From this appearance of détente?

Nixon: He can't hear you. He's miles away.
A Frenchman once observed to me
"At the edge of the Rubicon
Men don't go fishing". I know one
Statesman who thinks a fishing trip
Will help him land the Great White Hope.

Chou: Intelligence is no bad thing.

Nixon: It's Henry's trump card. This stuff's strong
Poison.

Chou: A universal cure,
Or so we call it over here.

After the third course is finished, Premier Chou rises to toast his American guests.

Chorus: Shh, shh.

Chou: Ladies and gentlemen,
Comrades and friends, we have begun
To celebrate the different ways
That led us to this mountain pass,
This summit where we stand. Look down
And think what we have undergone.
Future and past lie far below
Half-visible. We marvel now
That we survived those battles, took
Those shifting paths, blasted that rock
To lay those rails. Through the cold night
Uncompromising lines of thought
Attempted to find common ground
Where their militias might contend,
Confident that the day would come
For 'shadow-boxers to strike home.
We saw by the first light of dawn
The outlined cities of the plain,
And see them still, surrounded by
The pastures of their tenantry.
On land we have not taken yet
Innumerable blades of wheat
Salute the sun. Our children race
Downhill unflustered into peace.
We will not sow their fields with salt
Or burn their standing crop. We built
These terraces for them alone.
The virtuous American
And the Chinese make manifest
Their destinies in time. We toast
That endless province whose frontier
We occupy from hour to hour,
Holding in perpetuity
The ground our people won today
From vision to inheritance.
All patriots were brothers once:
Let us drink to the time when they
Shall be brothers again. *Gam bei!*

President Nixon rises to respond.

Nixon: Mr. Premier, distinguished guests,
I have attended many feasts
But never have I so enjoyed
A dinner, nor have I heard played
Better the music that I love
Outside America. I move
A vote of thanks to one and all
Whose efforts made this possible.
No one who heard could but admire
Your eloquent remarks, Premier,
And millions more hear what we say
Through satellite technology
Than ever heard a public speech
Before. No one is out of touch.
Telecommunication has

Broadcast your message into space.
Yet soon our words won't be recalled
While what we do can change the world.
We have at times been enemies,
We still have differences, God knows.
But let us, in these next five days
Start a long march on new highways,
In different lanes, but parallel
And heading for a single goal.
The world watches and listens. We
Must seize the hour and seize the day.

President Nixon and Premier Chou toast each other, then Mrs. Nixon. Caught up in the spirit of friendship, the banqueters go from table to table toasting one another while the band plays old favorites. The banquet has become something very like a square dance.

Nixon: This is the hour!

Chou: Your health!

Pat: And yours!

Chou: To Doctor Kissinger!

Nixon: Cheers!

Kissinger: Cheers!
New friends and present company!

Nixon: To Chairman Mao!

Chou: The U.S.A!

Pat: Have you forgotten Washington?

Chou: Washington's birthday!

Nixon: Everyone
Listen, just let me say one thing.
I opposed China. I was wrong.

Kissinger: Bottoms up, Mr. President.

Pat: What did you say, Sweetheart? I can't
Catch every word in all this noise.

1 Chorus: We have at times been enemies.

2 Chorus: The Chinese people are renowned.

Nixon: Ideas we have entertained —

Pat: "America the Beautiful"!

1 Chorus: We must broadcast seeds of goodwill.

2 Chorus: Comrades and friends —

Nixon: —in former years
Grow in a night to touch the stars.

Chorus: Look down and think what the Chinese
People have done to earn this praise.

Kissinger: You won't believe how moved I am.

Chorus: We marvel now.

Nixon: It's like a dream.

End of Act I

Act II, scene 1

It is the morning of February 22, another cold day. Although it is snowing, the First Lady wears no protection for her blonde hair. She has gone off on her own for a sight-seeing trip. Anti-American posters have been torn off walls, market stalls are piled with goods, children in snowsuits wave the flag. Mrs. Nixon is "loving every minute of it". She has just shaken hands with many of the one hundred and fifteen kitchen workers at the Peking Hotel. Ahead on her schedule are the Evergreen People's Commune, the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs. In the evening there will be the opera. The citizens of Peking, seconded from their factories to clear the streets, look up and smile as the knot of guides and reporters pauses in its progress.

Pat: I don't daydream and don't look back,
In this world you can't count on luck.
I think what is to be will be
In spite of us. I treat each day
Like Christmas. Never have I cared
For trivialities. Good Lord!
Trivial things are not for me,
I come from a poor family.
This little elephant in glass
Brings back so many memories.
The symbol of our party, prize
Of our success, our sacred cow
Surrounded by blind Brahmins, slow
Musclebound, well-dressed, half-awake,
With Liberty upon her back.
Tell me, is it one of a kind?

Chorus: It has been carefully designed
(3 Contraltos) By workers at this factory.
They can make hundreds every day.

Pat: Wonderful!

Chorus: Look down at the earth,
Look down, look down; down from the north
The snowstorm comes. Mile after mile
On each side of the ice-locked wall
Vanishes. Far as you can see
You cannot see the land or sky.
A living current moves beneath
Rivers caught in the hand of death,
Serpentine mountains cross the plain
To bask in an uncertain sun,
And elephantine hills rejoice
Advancing towards a sky of ice.
This country is so beautiful;
One fine day you will see it all.

The tour moves away; it is time the First Lady saw the Evergreen People's Commune and its model swine-rearing facilities, People's Clinic, recreation building, and school.

Chorus: This is the People's Clinic.
(3 Contraltos)

Pat: Ouch!
I think it's sort of rude to watch.

Chorus: "Do not distress yourself", she begs.
(3 Contraltos) She will get well. Come see the pigs.

Pat: I once raised a red-ribbon boar.

Chorus: Do you think you could scratch his ear?

(as the press)

Thank you.

Pat:

And how was that?

Chorus:

Just fine.

Chorus:

Here are some children having fun.

(3 Contraltos)

Pat:

The children in the U.S.A.
All say hello. I used to be
A teacher many years ago
And now I'm here to learn from you.

Smiling and waving, Mrs. Nixon and her entourage leave the commune and proceed to the next stop on her tour: the Summer Palace where she is photographed strolling through the Hall of Benevolence and Longevity, the Hall of Happiness in Longevity, the Hall of Dispelling the Clouds, and the Pavillion of the Fragrance of Buddha. She pauses in the gate of Longevity and Good Will to sing:

Pat:

This is prophetic! I foresee
A time will come when luxury
Dissolves into the atmosphere
Like a perfume, and everywhere
The simple virtues root and branch
And leaf and flower. On that bench
There we'll relax and taste the fruit
Of all our actions. Why regret
Life which is so much like a dream?
Let the eternal plan resume:
In the bedroom communities
Let us be taken by surprise;
Yes! Let the band play on and on;
Let the stand-up comedian
Finish his act, let Gypsy Rose
Kick off her high-heeled party shoes;
Let interested businessmen
Speculate further, let routine
Dull the edge of mortality.
Let days grow imperceptibly
Longer, let the sun set in cloud;
Let lonely drivers on the road
Pull over for a bite to eat,
Let the farmer switch on the light
Over the porch, let passersby
Look in at the large family
Around the table, let them pass.
Let the expression on the face
Of the Statue of Liberty
Change just a little, let her see
What lies inland: across the plain
One man is marching — the Unknown
Soldier has risen from his tomb;
Let him be recognized at home.
The Prodigal. Give him his share:
The eagle nailed to the barn door.
Let him be quick. The sirens wail
As bride and groom kiss through the veil.
Bless this union with all its might,
Let it remain inviolate.

There is some clapping, then the First Lady is ushered into the limousine for the ride to the Ming Tombs, where ancient Chinese emperors were laid to rest. It is about four o'clock in the afternoon and the warm-colored light which precedes sunset in the very early spring illuminates the limestone statues. Or are they sandstone? The First Lady pats the pockmarked leg of an archaic elephant. She has put on her mink hat during the drive. She revels in the quiet — no traffic, no airplanes, no loudspeakers, only the sound of the human voice and the sound of footsteps on flagstones and new snow.

Pat: At last the weather's warming up.
Look! The sky's clear now.

Chorus: Watch your step.

Pat: I said it would, remember?

Chorus: Please,
Mrs. Nixon, watch —

Pat: Oh yes.
And look! Another elephant!
Why hello, Jumbo! I was meant
To come here. What a lovely park!
Time for a picnic?

1 Chorus: They could work
Stone in those days.

2 Chorus: Labor was cheap.

1 Chorus: Men dug their own graves.

2 Chorus: They rose up
Like statues covered in the dust
Of their creation.

1 Chorus: Communist
Elements!

2 Chorus: Men like these behold
Each revolution of the world.

1 Chorus: Swimming through space as fish swim through
The sea.

2 Chorus: Resting in currents.

1 Chorus: Though
They got two bowls of rice a day,

2 Chorus: The salt was black.

1 Chorus: They drank white tea.

Pat: It sounds like you remember them.

Chorus: We should go back now.

Pat: What a shame!

The First Lady takes the arm of her interpreter — a friendly gesture — as the group turns back towards the limousine whose engine has been running for some time. The sun is setting, the west is red, and the moon is clearly visible. Mrs. Nixon may be supposed to be thinking about her bath and the outfit she will wear to the ballet.

Act II, scene 2

The curtain rises to reveal an audience. Madame Mao, in a dark Sun Yatsen suit and black-rimmed men's glasses, sits between the President and Mrs. Nixon, Mrs. Nixon, who has changed her scarlet costume for a pastel-colored one, has been exchanging small talk with the Premier, who sits on her other side. We have only a few seconds to grasp these details before another curtain rises onstage. Three beautiful young women are chained to posts. The First Lady sits forward a little, as, indeed, does the President. The young women wear rags — and defiantly new ballet shoes. This is the opening of *The Red Detachment of Women*. The dancer in the center, the proudest one, the one most heavily laden with chains, is Wu Ching-hua, the heroine. We understand that they are in the lock-up of an estate on a tropical island. Two women step from their posts and begin a furious dance. Ching-hua stands stock-still. Three contraltos from the chorus sing:

Chorus: Young as we are
(3 Contraltos) We expect fear,
Every year
More of us bow
Beneath the shadow
Of the next blow.
Down on all fours
Our grandfathers
Swallow abuse
As if by choice
The humble flesh
Kisses the lash,
Spit and polish,
Polish and spit
Blacken the boot
And they submit,
Embrace the foot,
Cushion the kick:
Rabbit and snake
Dance cheek to cheek.
We are awake,
We know these matters,
How the poor debtors
Still sell their daughters,
How in the drought
Men still grow fat
On the profit
Won grain by grain
From other men
Caught in the famine
Who trade their oxen
For a day's ration;
Then the plow goes,
Then tools, then clothes,
At last the land.
Where is he bound,
Naked and stunned?
Hand over hand
He drags his skin.
Look at him grin
He can't complain
Look at that thing
That was his tongue
He won't be long.

Lao Szu, the landlord's factotum, enters, accompanied by a guard. Singing to himself, he fumbles with his keys and Ching-hua's shackles.

Kissinger: Oh what a day!
(as Lao Szu) I thought I'd die!
That luscious thigh
That swelling breast
Scented and greased,
A sacrifice
Running with juice
At my caress.
She was so hot
I was hard-put
To be polite
When the first cut
— Come on you slut! —
Scored her brown skin
I started in,
Man upon hen!

Ching-hua embraces the other women. They dance while the women in the chorus sing:

Chorus: How thin you are!
(as Ching-hua) If every scar
On this poor back
Could only speak
These walls would crack
This thick-walled heart
Cast in the dirt
Would raise the cry
"Hate Tyranny!"

Suddenly she seizes the whip from Lao Szu's hand, brandishes it, and kicks him to the ground. Just as the guard lays hands on her, the two women fling themselves on the guard and Lao Szu. Ching-hua escapes.

Chorus: The land outside
(as Ching-hua) This cell is red,
Running with blood,
Hot in the sun
We have not seen
Not until now.
Now let me through!

Pat: Doesn't he look like you-know-who!

At once the scene changes to the coconut grove. Mercenaries in battle-dress run, crouching slightly, through the clearing. Ching-hua enters, dancing. She is quick and wary and eludes the dispersing troops.

Chorus: Can't find the path —
(as Ching-hua) Must find the path —

She collides with Lao Szu. They struggle. The mercenaries re-enter and subdue her. The landlord enters, leaning on his cane. He torments her with the cane.

Kissinger: Whip her to death!
(as Lao Szu)

Pat: They can't do that!

Nixon: It's just a play.
She'll get up afterwards, you'll see.
Easy there, Hon.

Kissinger: Whip her to death!
(as Lao Szu)

Pat: It's terrible! I hate you both!
Make them stop, make them stop!

Nixon:

Sweetheart,

Leave them alone, you might get hurt.

The First Lady rushes onstage. The President, who has reluctantly followed her, holds her by the shoulders as Ching-hua is beaten insensible. She has resisted to the last.

Kissinger: This is the fate
(as Lao Szu) Of all who set
Small against great.
Leave it to rot.

The sky looks ominous. Tyrant, factotum and mercenaries all retreat in the face of a tropical storm. Rain pelts down. The coconut palms bow like grass. The President and the First Lady stand onstage with the body of Ching-hua, the recumbent dancer. He is stunned, she is rapt, they are both soaked to the skin.

[**Nixon:** There there, there there. Jesus it's wet.
What would I do without you, Pat?

As quickly as it rose the wind dies down and with it the rain. Party Representative Hung Chang-ching enters on a scouting mission. Together he and Mrs. Nixon raise Ching-hua to her feet.

Pat: Thank God you came. Just look at this!
Poor thing! It's simply barbarous!
"Whip her to death!" he said. I'd like
To give his God-damned whip a crack!
Oh Dick! You're sopping!

Hung is filled with deep proletarian feelings for this peasant's daughter who has suffered so bitterly. He offers her a glass of orange juice. It is the first act of kindness she has ever known. Trembling, she raises the glass with both hands and drinks. Then the clouds part, the sky is filled with a blaze of light, and the full detachment of the Red Women's Militia enters in formation and unfurls its banners. *Entry March of the Women's Company.* Hung points to the company and to the flags waving in the rain-washed air, inviting Ching-hua to join her fellow workers and peasants in the People's Army. Everyone cheers as Hung presents her with a rifle and she joins her comrades in a spirited drill. *Target Practice and Bayonet Dance.*

Chorus: Flesh rebels
(as Militia) The body pulls
Those inflamed souls
That mark its trials
Into the war.
Arm this soldier!
Rise up in arms!
Tropical storms
Uproot the palms
Ending their sway.
The Red Army
Showed us the way.
From the scorched earth
People step forth
Over dead wood
And over the dead:
Follow their lead.
The hand grenade
Beats in the chest
Let the heart burst,
Let the clenched fist
Strike the first blow
For Chairman Mao
And overthrow
The tyrant, and
Share out the land.
Share out the land,
Unclench the fist,
Let the heart burst
And sow broadcast

The dragon's teeth
Your kin and kith
Seed of your seed
Your flesh and blood.

The scene changes to the courtyard of the tyrant's mansion. Sleek Kuomintang officers, political bosses and well-fed farmers celebrate their host's birthday. Waiters pour wine as the guards display their military training. *Dance of the Mercenaries*. Hung enters, dressed as a foreign merchant. He is accompanied by the President, who presents the doorman with a red-and-gilt card. Lao Szu rushes to greet these exotic guests.

Kissinger: I have my brief
(as Lao Szu) I flatter myself
I know my man
the *sine qua non*
The face on the coin
You see what I mean
The empire builder
The man with his shoulder
Against the roulette wheel:
He stands like a stone wall
And stinks of success.
I'm here to liaise
With the backroom boys
Who know how to live.
And me, I contrive
To catch a few crumbs —
The ringleaders' names
The gist of their schemes —
Loose change.

Nixon: Here friend, something for you.
You're talking like a real pro.

The President hands a few coins to Lao Szu and Hung tosses a handful of small change to the guards, who scramble on the ground and fight among themselves. Embarrassed, Lao Szu orders his men to fetch the entertainment. A number of serving girls enter, dressed mostly in flowers. They are members of the Red Women's Militia. The guards compel them to dance. Grimly the girls begin to execute a colorful *Li Nationality Dance*.

Chorus: It seems so strange
(as Ching-hua) To take revenge
After so long
To find the wrong
Can be undone.
The silent gun
Warms in my hand
Salving the wound
Made by the men
It will gun down
All in good time
I shall kill them
Yes, every one
Revenge is mine.

Chiang Ch'ing: That is your cue.

Ching-hua produces an automatic pistol and fires two shots. But it was not her cue. The company is stunned.

Pat: She's started shooting, Dick.

Nixon: I know.

Chorus: Oh no!

Chiang Ch'ing: What are you gaping at?
Forward Red Troupe! Annihilate
This tyrant and his running dogs!

Nixon: Oh no!

Chiang Ch'ing: Throw off those stupid rags!
Advance and fire! Fix bayonets!
The worms are hungry! Must the fruits
Of victory rot on the vine?

Offering only a token resistance, the mercenaries break and scatter, throwing aside their weapons as they run. The red flag rises over the mansion. Peasants push through the broken gates, weeping for joy.

[**Pat:** Is Henry okay?

Nixon: Christ he's gone.

The granary has been opened. The President takes on the task of distributing grain to the hungry peasants. Meanwhile, the company, led by Hung severely rebukes Ching-hua and disarms her. She is deeply distressed. For a moment Madame Mao, standing in their midst, seems almost left out. Then she begins to sing.

Chorus: Are you one of us?
You are what you choose.
Your paradise
Begins and ends
In open wounds
And self-abuse
Where your heart is.
Your sacred heart
Is rotten meat;
Your little treasure
Your precious flower
Your sweet revenge.
Nothing can change
Without discipline
Give me that gun.

Chiang Ch'ing: I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung
Who raised the weak above the strong
When I appear the people hang
Upon my words, and for his sake
Whose wreaths are heavy round my neck
I speak according to the book.
When did the Chinese people last
Expose its daughters? At the breast
Of history I sucked and pissed,
Thoughtless and heartless, red and blind,
I cut my teeth upon the land
And when I walked my feet were bound
On revolution. Let me be
A grain of sand in heaven's eye
And I shall taste eternal joy.

The people express their bitterness against counter-revolutionary elements.

Act II, scene 3

It is the last night in Peking.

Kissinger: Some men you cannot satisfy.

Nixon: That's what I tell them.

Kissinger: They can't say
You didn't tell them.

Nixon: It's no good.
All that I say is misconstrued.
Your lipstick's crooked.

Pat: Is it? Oh.
There isn't much that I can do,
Is there? Who's seen my handkerchief?

Chou: Please accept mine.

Chiang Ch'ing: I've heard enough.
Who chose these numbers?

Kissinger: All of us.
Doesn't she like the people's choice?

Nixon: Now for a solo on the spoons!

Pat: I like it when they play our tunes.

Chiang Ch'ing: This should be better. Hit it, boys!

Pat: Oh! California! Hold me close.

Mao: I am no one.

Chou: We fight, we die,
And if we do not fight we die.

Kissinger: That's how it goes.

Mao: I am unknown.
Give me a cigarette.

Chiang Ch'ing: Come down.
Give me your hand, old man.

Mao: Why not?

Chiang Ch'ing: Let's dance.

Mao: Give me a cigarette.

Chou: And to what end? Tell me.

Kissinger: Premier,
Please, where's the toilet?

Chou: Through that door.

Kissinger: Excuse me for one moment, please.

Chou: We saw our parents' nakedness;
Rivers of blood will be required
To cover them. Rivers of blood.

Pat: I squeezed your paycheck till it screamed,
There was the rent, there were those damned
Slipcovers, and the groceries.

Nixon: You made that place a home.

[

Pat: That place
Was heaven next to this.

Nixon: You should
Think positive. Try not to brood.

Pat: The trouble was, we moved too much.
We should have stayed put, Dick.

Chiang Ch'ing: We'll teach
These motherfuckers how to dance!

Chou: It makes me sick.

Mao: We did this once
Before.

Chiang Ch'ing: Oh? When?

Mao: It was the time
That tasty little starlet came
To infiltrate my headquarters.

Chiang Ch'ing: Go on!

Pat: I thank my lucky stars
I kept those letters that you wrote
From the Pacific. Seems like that
Was the best time of all; you had
My picture, and each night I read
Your mind.

Nixon: What an idealist.

Chou: A bankrupt people repossessed
The ciphers of its history
And not one character could say
Whether the war was over yet
Or if they'd written off the debt.

Mao: What did she call herself? Lan P'ing?

Chiang Ch'ing: You named me. I was very young.

Nixon: There was so much I couldn't tell.

Pat: Such as?

Mao: You were a little fool.

Chiang Ch'ing: And your best pupil.

Chou: In Yenan
We were just boys.

Mao: Revolution
Is a boys' game.

Chou: I have grown old
And done no more work than a child.

Nixon: Sitting around the radio
With the enlisted men, I knew
My time had come. The signal cleared
Transmitting nothing like a word.
There was a cross round one guy's neck.
I noticed that.

Pat: You told me, Dick.

Nixon: The corrugated metal roof
Shook in the rain. The men were safe.
I said goodbye to you then, Pat.

Pat: Did you?

Nixon: Then I began to wait.

Nixon: The rain seeped in under the door.
The lights went out.

Pat: You told me, dear.

Nixon: That was the time I should have died.

Mao: Let us examine what you did.
We led a quiet life, we grew
Stronger, we walked behind the plow,
And as we worked year after year
The yellow dust that filled the air
Softened the Buddha's well-known face
And made him seem like one of us.

Chiang Ch'ing: We ate wild apricots.

Chou: The taste
Is in my mouth.

Chiang Ch'ing: Once we had roast
Chicken with peppers.

Mao: And a light
Film of dust settled on each plate.

Mao: Your few subjectivist mistakes —

Chiang Ch'ing: Small lizards basked among the rocks,
Warm as your hand.

Mao: Only confirm
Mythology's eternal charm;
Roused from a state of seeming rest
Its landscape offers up the ghost,
An ancient tactical retreat,
Retrenched in the inanimate.
These things were men.

Nixon: When I woke up
I dimly realized the Jap
Bombers had given us a miss —
[It was the weather I suppose.]

Pat: Thank heaven for that.

Nixon: Then I went out.
Already it was getting hot,
A cloud of steam rose from the base
Just like a Roman sacrifice.

Pat: I never doubted you'd come back.
I always knew.

Nixon: I felt so weak
With disappointment and relief
Everything seemed larger than life.

Chou: I have no offspring. In my dreams
The peasants with their hundred names,
Unnamed children and nameless wives
Deaden my footsteps like dead leaves;
No one I killed, but those I saw
Starved to death.

Mao: Saved from our decay.
Admire that perfect skeleton,
Those veins, that skin like cellophane.
Take them and press them in a book.
Dare we behave as if the meek
Will mark the places of the wise?

Chiang Ch'ing: The masses stride ahead of us.
We follow.

Chou: Only they can tell
How the land lies, where the pitfall
Was excavated, the mines laid —

Mao: The instant before bombs explode
Intricate struggles coexist
Within an entity, embraced
Till they ignite.

Chiang Ch'ing: I can keep still,
I can say nothing for a while,
While the sparks die high in the air
The sun moves on. Nothing I fear
Has ever harmed me, why should you?
Marshal your forces, I'll lie low
The drought has made me thin and strong.
When they took off their coats and hung
Them over branches, and the pick
Scraped this eroded ground, I shook
With pure excitement.

Nixon: After that —

Pat: A penny for your thoughts.

Nixon: The sweat
Had soaked my uniform, [my hair
Dripped down my forehead —]

Pat: Did it dear?
You've always suffered terribly
From nervous perspiration.

Nixon: I
Began to take in all the sights.
Picture a thousand coconuts
Like mandrills' heads or native masks,
Milk oozing from their broken husks,
The flooded rib of a palm frond
Where several centipedes had drowned,
Unsanded wood that smelled like meat —
Jesus, it grabbed you by the throat.

Pat: Wonder what I was doing then?
Dressing up as if you'd walk in
At any moment. Go on, dear.
Don't let me interrupt.

Nixon: The war
Was dislocated. Hold a shell
Up to your ear. Guadalcanal
Sounds distant, roughly like the sea.

Mao: As they advance we melt away
Into the underbrush; we strike
While they're asleep, a single spark
Sets them alight. Cast the net wide
And draw it in.

Chou: The east is red;
As we ride eastwards to Peking
Preoccupied with our last long
Triumphal march, the early light
Embalms each soldier on the route.

[**Mao:** Well said!]

Chiang Ch'ing: Peking watches the stars,
Nanking sleeps naked. Murderers
Stretch out in doorways in Shanghai.
Chungking's old-fashioned armory
Lies undefended. Yenan rests
Like a wise virgin. All the coasts
Are clear, and all the oceans still
As we ride eastwards.

Mao: We recoil
From victory and all its works.
What do you think of that, Karl Marx?
Speak up!

Chiang Ch'ing: We should go underground.
The revolution must not end.

Mao: As we ride eastwards to Peking
I shut my eyes and, listening
Hard, hear the old harmonium
We left behind. I-I-I dream
That shoals of small transparent fish
Race down a shallow river.

Chiang Ch'ing: Hush.

Pat: You won at poker.

Nixon: I sure did.
I had a system. Five-card stud
Taught me a lot about mankind.
Speak softly and don't show your hand
Became my motto.

Pat: Tell me more.

Nixon: Well, the Pacific theater
Was not much to write home about.

Pat: Yes, dear. I think you told me that.
I read it while I did my hair
And put it in my stocking drawer
With all the others.

Nixon: I was "Nick".
I must have told you that.

Pat: Yes, Dick.

Nixon: Christ, it was beautiful. I swapped
Spam for hamburger meat and roped
In a few men to rig a stand.
They called it "Nick's Snack Shack". I found
The smell of burgers on the grill
Made strong men cry. Now, Bougainville
Was a refuelling stop —

Pat: I know.
Each fighter pilot that came through
Got a free burger and a beer.

Nixon: Done to a turn: [medium-rare,]
Rare, medium, well-done, anything
You say. The Customer is King.
Sorry we're low on relish. Drinks?
This is my way of saying thanks.

Chou: I am old and I cannot sleep
Forever, like the young, nor hope
That death will be a novelty
But endless wakefulness when I
Put down my work and go to bed.
How much of what we did was good?
Everything seems to move beyond
Our remedy. Come, heal this wound.
At this hour nothing can be done.
Just before dawn the birds begin,
The warblers who prefer the dark,
The cage-birds answering. To work!
Outside this room the chill of grace
Lies heavy on the morning grass.

