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Author

Tang, Xiaobing

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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Street Theater and Subject Formation in Wartime China: Toward a New Form of Public Art

Xiaobing Tang, University of Michigan

Abstract

Based on archival research, this article presents a succinct history of the street theater movement in China through the 1930s. It examines how complex discourses and competing visions, as well as historical events and practices—in particular the War of Resistance against Japan—both shaped and propelled the movement. The author focuses on theoretical and practical issues that promoters and practitioners of street theater dealt with and reflected on in three succeeding stages. Observing that the street theater movement hastened the formation of a modern national imagination, the author argues that the movement presented a paradigmatic development as it foregrounded the imperative to engage rural China as well as the need for participants to acquire new subject positions.

Keywords: street theater, public culture, subjectivity, avant-garde, spoken drama, Xiong Foxi, Tian Han, Sino-Japanese War, modern China

Street theater (*jietou ju*), which comprised dramatic skits that took place in public venues and sought to rally general support for the war effort, was one of the many new art forms and practices that flourished in the early stage of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945). A more inclusive term for such performances was “mobile theater” (*yidong yanju*), the idea of which was to bring dramatized presentations on current events close to the public by staging them on a street corner or in a marketplace, teahouse, village temple, or schoolyard. When the war broke out, street theater was enthusiastically embraced as an effective means for educating and mobilizing the nation. Its passionate practitioners, most of them trained in modern Western-style drama (known as “spoken drama” in contradistinction to traditional operas) and based in

urban centers, took their creations to villages and small towns across the country, bringing a new theatrical experience to as well as rousing patriotic sentiments among rural and culturally distant communities. In the process, the most successful street theater opened up an interactive space in which a national public could be called forth and a collective identity openly pledged. Theater itself was profoundly transformed as well and contributed to an emerging political culture (figure 1).



Figure 1. This publication describes “street theater” in four languages. *Source: Jinri Zhongguo* (China today) 1 (3): 23 (Hong Kong, September 1939). Image courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

The significance of street theater in the history of modern Chinese drama and, more broadly, modern Chinese culture has been long appreciated by scholars and historians. In 1947, Hong Shen (1894–1955), a leading dramatist, undertook to assess the developments in dramatic arts over the past decade and devoted much space to discussing mobile theater. Decades later, in a general study of “popular culture forms” developed during the Sino-Japanese War, historian Chang-tai Hung observed that street theater, by removing the boundary between art and life, or between stage and audience, “redefined the meaning of Chinese spoken drama in a time of national crisis” (1994, 57). A comprehensive history of modern Chinese drama written in 2008

describes the war period as a moment when theatrical performances moved from the indoor stage to an open square, and the much-desired objective of forging a “public theater” became reality. Through extensive experiments in form and theoretical debates, the field of drama gained rich experiences and moved even closer to creating a public theater that was also national (Tian et al. 2008, 279–290). More recently, historian Brian DeMare (2015) has demonstrated the crucial function of drama troupes in the success of the Communist revolution in rural China. While he does not use the term “street theater” or limit his scope to the war period, his study underscores the contributions of mobile theater to a modern political culture or, indeed, politics as theatricality.

Various studies and narratives help us see different aspects of the street theater movement. Nonetheless, some dimensions of its development and ramifications deserve further investigation. They are underexplored not so much because of a lack of attention or documentation as because of approaches that may overlook connections or complexities. In his influential study, Chang-tai Hung observed insightfully that street plays had an enormous impact in rural areas, providing a novel experience “as important for the dramatists as for the peasants they performed for” (1994, 62). Yet by confining street theater to an account of modern spoken drama and to the condition ushered in by the outbreak of the war, his narrative does not fully register, in my view, the rich intellectual and institutional forces that sustained this new form of public theater, even though he does refer to earlier efforts at popularization and education. More generally, I believe that the movement’s relation to the war and beyond calls for closer consideration, especially with regard to its impact on the formation of a new public culture.

In this article, I examine the multiple discourses, events, and practices—in particular the War of Resistance—that shaped and propelled the street theater movement. My focus here is not so much on specific plays or scripts as it is on reflections and writings about street theater as an art form, practice, and movement.¹ In tracing this complex history, I extend my narrative to the late 1920s to acknowledge international sources for the emerging movement. It should be noted that by “wartime,” I mean not merely the final outbreak of the war in 1937, but also the growing popular mobilization in the wake of Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931.

A central goal of this study is to understand the “novel experience” brought by street theater to its audience as well as to its practitioners. A better grasp of this new experience will, I hope, help us overcome the reductive but prevalent view that sees little more than political instrumentalism in such artistic practices.² As an innovative form of public art, street theater in a moment of national crisis sought to raise consciousness, disseminate fresh expressions, and inspire new imaginings. Much more effectively than print culture, it hastened the formation of a modern national imagination. At the same time, its young practitioners would often proudly compare themselves to an expedient guerrilla force in the war effort. Such a comparison underscored the self-positioning of an artistic avant-garde, distinguished by its tactical adaptability as much as by its fundamental commitment to a symbiotic, rather than antagonistic, relationship to a national community it strove to call forth. What we witness in this brief history, I argue, is a course of development with paradigmatic significance for our study of modern Chinese artistic and political culture.

Divergent Visions of a Public Theater

In a recent study of the theater movement in areas controlled by the governing Nationalist Party (Guomindang) in wartime China, literary scholar Fu Xuemin calls our attention to the important part played by street theater in awakening and instilling a national consciousness in the general public. Drawing on an anthropological notion of ritual performance, she points out that street theater functioned as a teaching session where “the bottom strata of the populace received a political baptizing” (2010, 36), through which symbolic enactments of a national community were performed. Fu also comments on the dearth of in-depth studies of this form of political theater and proposes that we understand the historic impact of street theater as the result of efforts made by many constituents, from government agencies to cultural workers to the general public. According to Fu, two wings to the movement for a public theater existed in the early 1930s, but it was the War of Resistance that brought the movement to fruition. The first was the left-wing theater movement pursued by cultural radicals, mostly in Shanghai; the second was the

“new peasant theater” experiment undertaken by the American-educated dramatist Xiong Foxi and his colleagues in Ding County in north China (Fu 2010, 19).³

We may trace the conceptual origin of the left-wing theater movement in Shanghai to the heated “revolutionary literature” debate that at once energized and divided the nascent cultural left in the late 1920s, especially after the Northern Expedition ended in a bloody anti-Communist purge by the right-wing Nationalist Party in 1927. The debate erupted as a generation of students, most of them trained in Japan, returned to Shanghai and called for a radical critique of existing cultural practices and institutions (Tang 2008, 43–72). These spirited critics denounced the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth tradition as an outdated liberal humanist program, and they theorized the necessity of a revolutionary culture against the reality of a violently aborted political revolution. Between 1928 and 1930, a group of these politically committed theorists addressed the urgent need to develop a proletarian theater. They argued that theater is by far the most effective art (weapon, in fact) for mobilizing and organizing the proletariat, and that as the most comprehensive and socially engaged form of art, it was also the one best suited for a new collective life. To create a proletarian theater, they proposed at once a resolute rooting out of old theater and a jettisoning of modern bourgeois theater.

One main source for this vision was the people’s theater movement in the Soviet Union. In elaborating on the meaning of the new theater movement, for instance, Shen Qiyu (1903–1970) referred to a 1920 manifesto issued by the Theatrical Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment. He also reproduced a statement by the French dramatist Romain Rolland on the need for public holidays and spectacles. For the group of Chinese critics, the Soviet experience was an inspiration, as it illustrated how a progressive and universally resonant culture had been built in what they admired as a politically advanced nation. They called attention to agitprop performances and mobile theater. Shen wrote especially to introduce the “transformed *mélodrame [sic]*” of agitprop skits, which would often culminate in viewers singing revolutionary songs along with the actors (1928, 29).

For Ye Yichen (Shen Xiling, 1904–1940), who studied stage design in Japan, the first step toward a proletarian theater was to develop a “mobile theater in the street.” His discussion

of the new theater movement was particularly productive and prophetic, as he touched on several issues that were to confront subsequent efforts at creating a public theater. To the question of how to make theater a meaningful part of people's lives, Ye observed that it had to begin with changing the mode of theatrical production. A proletarian mode of theatrical production would require that everyone contributing to the process acquire a "proletarian ideology." Furthermore, given that its intended audience was an "uneducated, underdeveloped, and absolute proletariat," the new theater must adopt the form of realism in order to be effective—not a classical bourgeois realism of passive representation, but an active and passionate realism informed by a proletarian consciousness (1929, 33). Also, recognizing that dialects would present a serious challenge in "a country without linguistic unity" such as China, Ye proposed a pragmatic two-pronged approach: standard speech for developed urban areas, local dialects for the countryside.

In late 1929, this group of young theorists decided to put into practice their proposals by forming an Art Theater Society in Shanghai. The few plays the Art Theater Society produced in the early 1930s were mostly adaptations of works by left-leaning European and American playwrights, such as Romain Rolland and Upton Sinclair. A notable exception was a single-act play, written by the poet Feng Naichao (1901–1983), about textile workers in Shanghai. Within a few months of opening, however, the society was shut down by the authorities. In reviewing the efforts of the youthful group, Tian Han (1898–1968), a prominent dramatist deeply sympathetic to the emerging cultural left, would see but a "wishful proletarian theater" in what the Art Theater Society as well as his own Southern Drama Society was attempting to deliver. It was a largely foreign theater that failed to speak to ordinary urbanites, let alone factory workers (Tian Han 1932).

In September 1931, the newly formed League of Left-Wing Dramatists, in which Tian Han played a leading role and of which Ye Yichen, Shen Qiyu, and others were members, issued a program for action. (A similar mission statement would come from the more influential League of Left-Wing Writers two months later.) The first task for the left-wing dramatists, according to the program, was to go among the urban working class and actively guide a proletarian theater movement. The program stressed the importance of winning the support of young students and

city dwellers, and of approaching peasants and raising their consciousness. Most notably, the program addressed the question of form. “Besides striving to develop proletarian realism in Chinese theater, we should make full but critical use of currently popular forms, such as variety shows” (“Zhongguo zuoyi” 1958, 305). In order to attract rural audiences, performances could take the form of either new theater or traditional folk theater. Furthermore, while forming mobile theaters with worker associations, league members were encouraged to organize itinerant entertainers for more extensive engagement with the working class.

These policy statements indicate a significant rethinking of what would constitute a theater of and for the industrial working class. They also reflect the extended discussion among the cultural left around 1930 of issues and challenges in creating a public-oriented literature and art. A few months after publishing its program, the League of Left-Wing Dramatists helped factory workers in Shanghai organize the Blue Shirt Theater Group, which would incorporate into its performances songs and games familiar to fellow workers (Tian Han 1932, 84).

On New Year’s Day 1932, dramatist Xiong Foxi (1900–1965) arrived in Ding County in Hebei (north of Shanghai) to start his experiment of bringing modern theater to the rural population. This “new peasant theater” experiment had the support of the National Association of Mass Education Movement, founded in 1923 by the Yale-educated Y. C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu, 1890–1990) with the goal of improving the daily life of the nation through literacy campaigns and elementary education. The experiment also reflected Xiong Foxi’s own dissatisfaction with the then-trendy slogan of a “public theater.”

Xiong Foxi wrote and published a detailed report on his experiment in 1937. He observed that traditional theater, ranging from various local operas to folk songs and dances, had failed to respond to the rapidly changing times of the twentieth century. However, new theater, which to him included the crude and often burlesque “civilized play” of the 1900s, an amateur-based “student theater” of the May Fourth era, an elitist “art theater” of the late 1920s, had failed to establish any meaningful connection with the general public. (In terms of audience preferences, the crowd-pleasing “civilized play” was far more popular than its more serious successors, but to Xiong such popularity was unfortunate and detrimental.) To the key question of “Who is the

general public in China today?” he had a clear answer: the peasants that constituted over 85 percent of the Chinese population. A truly public theater would therefore mean a theater responsive to peasant needs and preferences. To achieve his goal of creating such a theater, Xiong and his colleagues adopted two basic principles: no holding on to tradition, and no mimicking the West (1937, 16–18).

Given the context, Xiong’s experiment was a revolutionary one, as he resolutely shifted the attention from educated city dwellers to the vast rural population. Yet unlike his contemporary left-wing dramatists, Xiong did not seek to alter radically the social system or power structure of the countryside. On the contrary, he and his colleagues took a pragmatic approach to all aspects of promoting a new theater in a village setting. They began by performing for the villagers but ended with encouraging villagers to act and perform for themselves. Based on their experience, they found an open-air theater to be the most conducive venue; they also came to regard the entire theater ground as a stage open to communal participation. One way to turn spectators into participants, remarked Xiong in his 1937 report, was to make theater a mobile event, one that audiences could follow and take part in on the street or in the village square, just as with itinerant opera troupes during fairs and festivals (1937, 95–99).

It is important to note at this point that the proponents of a proletarian theater and those of a new peasant theater all spoke of a “public theater” (*dazhong xiju*) in the early 1930s. The “public” in the first case was an explicitly political concept and pointed to a social alliance yet to be forged; in the second, it acknowledged a cultural and sociological condition to be ameliorated through general enlightenment. Evoked in twentieth-century China by many an art and literature movement in its claim to social relevance and cultural modernity, if also political legitimacy, the concept of the “public” (*dazhong*) has generated a cluster of cognate variations, such as *minzhong*, *gongnong dazhong*, and eventually *qunzhong*. Sorting out what this concept implies and how it functions is a useful way to assess and compare the self-positioning of a given conception of art or literature. The street theater movement is significant in this regard because its unfolding in one short decade illustrates how different projections of the public emerged, overlapped, and then converged.

It so happened that, in 1932, government officials in charge of cultural policies also turned their attention to popular cultural forms as a means of disseminating the Nationalist agenda of social reconstruction and modernization. Guidelines for a “popular literature and art campaign” were widely distributed to local party offices, requesting that greater efforts be made to improve cultural life in rural areas. “Popular literature and art” (*tongsu wenyi*) in this context meant readily accessible and familiar forms, grouped into two categories: literary (novels, spoken drama, song lyrics, etc.) and pictorial (painting and photography) (“Tongsu wenyi” 1994, 321). One objective of the campaign was to counteract the cultural left and the Communist movement, but its broader agenda was to cultivate a national consciousness and morality among the populace. In terms of using popular culture to advocate their respective political ideologies, as literary scholar Ni Wei observes in an informative study, the Nationalists and the Communists had much in common. They shared the same Enlightenment desire to reform and update indigenous cultural practices that they regarded as backward, even medieval (Ni 2003, 198–218).

Yet the Nationalist-sponsored campaign was less than successful in generating results. One reason for its ineffectiveness was that the forms it promoted were still too literary or too highbrow for the rural population. Traditional theater, for instance, was widely disparaged and not regarded as salvageable until two years after the campaign had been launched.⁴ The campaign was ultimately a top-down initiative that had little interest in turning villagers into active participants or creators of a new culture. Its organizers did not see the need to interact with audiences in the same way as Xiong Foxi and his colleagues did with their peasants. Nor was the campaign motivated by a desire to sympathize with and speak for an emerging social group, as was theorized by the advocates of a political theater. For promoters of a “popular literature and art,” the goal was to disseminate modern values through familiar forms, or to package new wine into old bottles, as the process came to be known.

Each of these programs unfolding around the same time harbored a distinct understanding of the nation in its pursuit. Each entailed a separate political vision as well and led to various experimentations. The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 brought an extraordinary moment of unity among these different camps. The widespread appeal of street theater in the

early years of the war had been prepared, in both theory and practice, by the spirited cultural left in particular. As Tian Han saw it, the proletarian theater movement was revitalized, even justified, as a truly public theater movement amid growing agitation for resistance after the Manchurian Incident of 1931, in which Japan seized control of northeast China (1932).

Moving from Stage to Street

In the few short years before the final outbreak of the war, the cultural left undertook to develop a public theater for the cause of resistance, often in alliance with an increasingly vocal student movement in major cities that demanded a more assertive government policy against an expansionist Japan. However, as the Nanjing government took measures to suppress agitation by the left and to promote its idea of a nationalist literature and art, open discussions of a public theater were increasingly curtailed (Ma 1934). Modern spoken drama, nonetheless, flourished in cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing, in part because it was perceived as embodying a modern and cosmopolitan culture.

As large-scale productions of spoken drama grew technically more sophisticated and attracted attention, street theater with a resistance theme, largely a preoccupation of left-wing dramatists, persisted and reached beyond an urban audience. A good example of this latter development is the street play *Put Down Your Whip*. In 1928, Tian Han wrote a one-act play for his Southern Drama Society, drawing on an episode from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.⁵ The short play climaxes when a compassionate young man stands up to protect a girl named Mei (Mignon) from her abusive father. Three years later, the aspiring playwright Chen Liting (1910–2013) rewrote Tian Han's play and made it about the suffering of flood victims in the contemporary period. He also gave the new play a more provocative title: *Put Down Your Whip*.

When Cui Wei (1912–1979), a drama student who in 1932 had joined a group to take new-style theater to rural villages, saw the revised script, he was immediately drawn to it. In 1936, he updated it again, turning it into a street play about resisting Japanese aggression. He also became best known for playing the role of the father, who, as a refugee from occupied

Manchuria, is reduced to collecting alms while his daughter sings as a street performer. The young man who stops the father from venting his frustration on the daughter is now a young worker who tells everyone present that they should unite and turn their weapon against the invaders.⁶ The transformation of the play, which Tian Han described as a continual process of making the plot speak to the Chinese people (1958, 7), encapsulates the evolution of the left-wing theater movement, especially in terms of its changing thematic concerns—from humanist compassion to social criticism to national resistance.

Central to the continuing appeal of *Put Down Your Whip* are the different moments of recognition that it dramatizes. In the 1936 version, when the girl tells the intervening young man that the ill-tempered old man is in fact her loving father, the audience, along with the young man, learns that she and her father have lost their family and home in occupied Manchuria. The knowledge of them being a loving family is followed by the realization that their grievous fate is tied with their being Chinese, or members of the nation as a family. It is this assumption of an injured but shared national identity that the play works toward and that would bring an audience in the 1930s together as an awakened collective. Watching the play on the street or in a village square, therefore, was never meant to be a solitary or entertaining experience. On the contrary, the audience was to become part of the action and, in joining the impassioned singing or chanting at the end, to publicly perform its national allegiance.

This is apparently what happened in spring 1937, when Cui Wei and his traveling troupe took the play to north China, where the Japanese army, already in control of Manchuria in the northeast, had asserted its presence. On April 4, the group performed for hundreds of college students west of the city of Beiping (as Beijing was then known). The event, organized by a multi-college student union, took place under close police supervision. By the time the performance began in a square in mid-afternoon, students had gathered in a circle, watched several skits, and done much singing. To forestall likely police intervention, organizers did not announce the play as part of the program and led the police to think the actors, when they made their entrance, were local entertainers trying to earn a living. For an eyewitness to the scene, the most powerful moment was when everyone watching the play joined the action and shouted, in

unison, “Put down your whip!” (Pucheng 1937). Even the police chief could not help being moved (You 1937, 190). When the play came to an end, students burst out singing. This time it was “March of the Volunteers,” the bestirring theme song of the popular 1935 film *Young People in a Stormy Age*.⁷

Thanks to events like this, *Put Down Your Whip* became the best-known street play in the country by early 1937.⁸ Many mainstream journals and pictorials, such as *Eastern Miscellany* and *The Shenbao Weekly Supplement*, published photographs of troupes performing for soldiers in north China (figure 2). Chen Boer (1910–1951), a rising film star in Shanghai and erstwhile member of the Art Theater Society, attracted much media attention for her performance as the daughter. She embodied, according to a report in *The Shenbao*, a new femininity in fulfilling her responsibility as a national citizen (“Chen Boer huilai la” 1937).

In July 1937, *Illumination*, a major left-leaning culture journal in Shanghai with Hong Shen and Shen Qiyu as its chief editors, devoted a special issue to “the mobile theater movement,” thereby putting the topic of public theater back on the agenda for left-wing drama theorists and practitioners. Earlier, the journal had endorsed a new theater movement spearheaded by college students in Beijing. Student performances of the street play *Fight Our Way Back Home* in rural villages in 1936, according to a commentator, marked the true beginning of a “national defense theater” (Zhang Geng 1936).

Among dramatists active in Shanghai, there were widespread expectations that 1937 was going to be a remarkable “year of the theater.” Some took note of the unprecedented number of theater companies producing technically demanding multi-act plays on diverse subjects; some anticipated the bustling field to continue transitioning from amateurism to professionalization; some were heartened by the growing popularity of spoken drama, with the Carlton Theater in downtown Shanghai becoming a regular venue. There was also talk about organizing a first-ever national theater festival.

This general excitement was captured in *The Age of Theater*, a journal launched in May 1937 and intended as a forum for theater practitioners of all political persuasions. First among the pressing issues the editorial board wished to address, against the “increasingly dangerous

storm gathering over the Pacific,” was how to create a national resistance theater and to search for new forms for it (“Xiju shidai” 1937). For several contributors to the inaugural issue, the imminent danger of Japanese aggression called for further action in taking theater to the public. One specific form of public theater should be street plays, because, as one commentator put it, when (not if!) the “war of self-defense” breaks out, “the plays that the general public needs are not necessarily what is staged in a palatial theater, but in every desolate square and every dark trench” (Yi 1937).

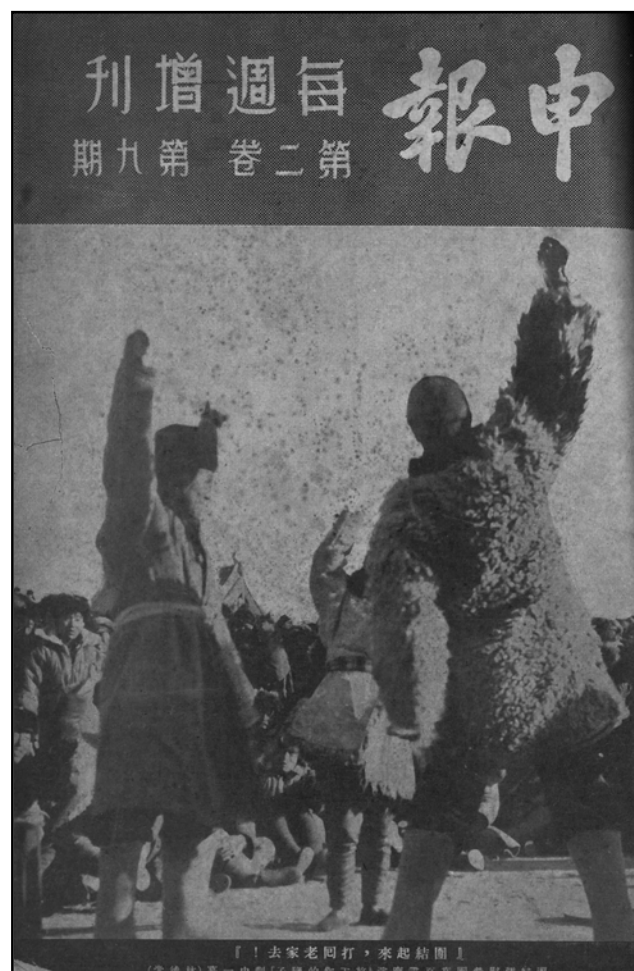


Figure 2. Cover of *The Shenbao Weekly Supplement*, March 7, 1937. The caption reads: “‘Let’s unite and fight our way back home!’ A scene from *Put Down Your Whip* performed by the Shanghai Women and Children Supporting Our Troop Group at the Hundred-Spirit Temple.” Image courtesy of the University of Michigan Library.

In light of these discussions, the July 1937 issue of *Illumination* was organized less for presenting further justifications than for addressing concrete challenges to the practice of street theater. Contributors found it lamentable that spoken drama could hardly compete with itinerant folk performers in attracting peasant viewers. (In May, the journal had featured a report on the theater scene in the Communist-controlled Yan'an, giving special attention to “living newspaper” performances. The reporter explained that the staging of a “living newspaper” had first developed in the Soviet Union but seemed to be an ideal form for the peasant theater that Xiong Foxi had been promoting in China [Ren 1937].)

At the center of the special issue was a roundtable discussion, in which Cui Wei and others shared their experiences in performing for peasants, soldiers, factory workers, and students. Discussants emphasized the importance of developing scripts in tune with different audience expectations and settings. They discussed how accepted gestures in traditional opera could be incorporated to indicate movements and spatial configurations in a street performance. Such techniques, remarked Cui Wei, would help relocate theater to an open space and break down the presumed fourth wall in modern drama. Other issues brought up in the discussion included the difficulty of speaking different dialects in order to be intelligible to regional audiences and the need to respect local customs. (A recent performance of *Put Down Your Whip* outside Shanghai had to be interpreted for villagers so they could understand the northern accent-based “national tongue” spoken by the actors [Jiang (1937)].⁹) Finally, as a practical guide, the discussants offered an organizational chart that would enable a traveling troupe to operate efficiently.

Concrete suggestions aside, the special issue underscored the need to take the mobile theater movement to the countryside, addressing several points that would have far-reaching implications. First, there was a conscious shift toward regarding street performances as an effective means to inform the public and to boost national unity and willpower. This was a notable reorientation, as most of those involved in street theater had been associated with the cultural left. It reflected the growing consensus for a national defense theater and, more generally, the idea of forming a popular front against Fascism. An essay in the special issue even attributed

the enthusiasm demonstrated by young organizers of village-bound theater troupes to Chiang Kai-shek's teaching that the best way to defend the nation was to offer one's service in the countryside (Liu 1937).

A second point was the need to continue searching for a theatrical language that rural viewers could understand and appreciate. A rural village was obviously far less adequately equipped to support modern theater than a city, but it had "the material conditions necessary for rural theater." A "rural theater worker" therefore should know what forms the local audience would be receptive to, how to produce a "rural script," which methods of production to adopt, and also how to overcome the "toxic elements" of old theater (Xu 1937). This recognition of underdeveloped and yet self-perpetuating cultural conditions in the Chinese countryside had underlain the "new peasant theater" experiment pursued by Xiong Foxi, albeit for a different cultural and social agenda.¹⁰

The growing appreciation of traditional theater as a useful resource prompted further thinking over how best to synthesize old forms and new contents. As one contributor, Liu Feizhang (1909–2006), formulated it in his article for the special *Illumination* issue, "the adoption from old theater of certain forms and of its methods of staging a show, along with the infusion of new, meaningful contents, is an effective, necessary approach during the transitional period for spoken drama to go to the rural area" (1937, 197). In a separate article, Xu Qing further distinguished "old theater" (*jiuxi*) from "native theater" (*tuxi*) and called on rural theater workers to integrate both with modern spoken drama, for the purpose of "changing the contents of native theater, keeping the good and discarding the bad" (1937, 199).

Finally, a third topic in the discussion that was to gain increasing relevance was the status, or subject position, of mobile theater practitioners in the countryside. Those engaged in rural theater, according to Xu Qing, should not form a separate and isolated group as their counterparts in urban centers had done. "Ideal rural theater workers are not people dispatched from the city, but rather 'natives' [*tuzhu*] of the villages" (Xu 1937, 199). This expectation echoed closely Xiong Foxi's aspiration of enabling peasants to change themselves from spectators into participants and eventually into performers. It reflected the wish to see not only

theater as an integral part of an enriched communal life but also theater practitioners as organic cultural makers in a rural community. Such rooted practitioners, observed Xu Qing in 1937, were urgently needed in the rural theater movement.

The Nation as Stage and Spectacle

The special issue of *Illumination* on a mobile theater movement was prepared on the eve of the July 7, 1937, Marco Polo Bridge Incident outside Beijing, in which Chinese and Japanese troops exchanged fire and a seemingly accidental skirmish led to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. When news of fighting broke out, public opinion in China was resolutely supportive of the troops that put up a fight; it also welcomed the event as a long-awaited historical turning point. Like their counterparts at scores of similar publications across the country, the editors of *Illumination* issued two manifestos in the July 25 issue of the journal and called on the entire nation to unite and participate in a revolutionary war. They pointed out that, against a much better-equipped and financed enemy, “our most powerful weapon in resistance” as well as “our most reliable strategy for victory” was a well-organized people (“Women” 1937).

The sudden onset of the war brought the already vociferous resistance movement to an even higher pitch. It also meant that mobilization efforts, until now not openly allowed by the Nationalist government, could be coordinated more systematically. Patriotic passion, or what the literary theorist Hu Feng (1902–1986) would describe as a “primitive excitement” (1940), electrified the nation as the war suddenly threw everything into painfully sharp relief. A “comprehensive wartime mobilization of literature and art,” declared the poet and playwright Guang Weiran (1903–2002), was in order. Guang saw the national War of Resistance as a time when “realistic, robust, and combative” works of art were needed. The war demanded expedient and uplifting reportage, just as it called for catchy and heartening songs in the battlefield. Of the greatest impact and reach, asserted Guang, was theater, especially mobile troupes that operated like guerrilla forces (1937).

It is also true that, as the critic Zheng Boqi (1895–1979) observed later, the cultural field—in particular its left wing—had long been dedicated to the cause of resistance and was at

the ready when the war finally came (1940). Within days of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, dramatists in Shanghai formed a new organization better to coordinate contributions to the war effort. On August 7, efforts by some sixteen scriptwriters, nineteen directors, and over a hundred actors resulted in the rousing premiere of *Defend the Marco Polo Bridge*, a spoken drama containing three independent one-act plays. Coincidentally, soon after in Nanjing, Tian Han finished a script called *Marco Polo Bridge*, a four-act play about a student theater troupe trying to rally Chinese soldiers and villagers with speeches and songs. As Liang Luo points out, its self-referential play-about-a-play structure renders this work “a model of guerrilla drama warfare in the style of a Brechtian *Lehrstücke*, or ‘teaching play’” (2014, 123).

By the end of August 1937, the newly formed Shanghai Dramatist Association for National Resistance had organized thirteen performance groups to be dispatched to the interior. Ten such teams eventually left Shanghai before the Japanese occupation of the city in November, taking mobile theater as well as many key participants in the modern theater movement onto a far broader national stage (Hong 1948, 5–6).

Most of the ten Shanghai-originated theater troupes were active in cities across the east and southeast parts of the country, and many would soon find their way to the historic tri-city of Wuhan in central China, which, writes historian Stephen MacKinnon, served from January to October 1938 as “the staging ground and logistics base for two million Chinese troops defending the central Yangzi region against Japanese attacks” (2008, 11). Wuhan was where most of China’s prominent artists and intellectuals converged as well. By the end of 1937, with the fall of the capital city of Nanjing, almost all the groups engaged in modern theater across the country had arrived in Wuhan.¹¹

It was in Wuhan that an All-China Theater Association for Resistance was created to promote a united front. The organization was the first of its kind to have a truly national reach, as it included representatives from a broad range of theatrical traditions and genres from different regions, in addition to modern spoken drama. It also brought together dramatists of different political affiliations, such as Tian Han, Hong Shen, Xiong Foxi, and Zhang Daofan (1897–1968), the last being a major figure overseeing the cultural policies of the Nationalist government. For

the common cause of resistance, the entrenched rift between left and right was temporarily put aside, and “the most divisive field of spoken drama,” as one contemporary commentator saw it, had finally formed a unified force (Yang 1938).

On January 1, 1938, the newly formed national theater association published its manifesto in *War of Resistance Theater*, a biweekly that Tian Han and others had started two months earlier. Convinced that theater was the most effective instrument for mobilizing the nation, the new collective saw the war as ushering in a new condition for the development of theater. It saw the need for dedicated formal innovations as well:

With regard to form, we have resolutely departed the grey stage in the city and moved into the sunshine, to the countryside, and onto the national battleground of fierce fighting; this change in stage, combined with the demands of audiences engaged in the War of Resistance, will necessarily bring a new life to our theater art. (“Zhonghua quanguo” 1938, 151)

This historic transition from city to countryside and battleground also meant redoubled efforts to engage in street theater. Over its short existence of several months, *War of Resistance Theater* devoted many pages to reporting on performances or activities by various troupes in different locations. It published scripts of one-act plays and carried discussions of how best to stage mobile theater. In the meantime, the Nationalist government had officially endorsed many theater troupes, thereby securing them support from local Nationalist party branches as well as government offices. As a result, interest in and coverage of mobile theater was no longer limited to left-leaning journals and newspapers (figure 3). By May 1938, even the *Central Daily*, the organ of the Nationalist Party, began promoting street plays as an indispensable component of the war efforts (Wu 1938).

Gaining ever-wider currency in general discourse, as troupes were formed and dispatched across the country, was the idea that mobile theater would function as an expedient guerrilla force. Just as prevalent was the idea of a street play serving as a “living newspaper” explaining current events to the largely illiterate rural population. This was how actor Liu Baoluo (1907–1941), for instance, approached extemporaneous script writing when he led a twenty-member

team in conducting, in his words, a “guerrilla war by means of theater” in Zhejiang Province in late 1937.¹²



Figure 3. Pictorial insert of *Zhonghua huabao* (The China pictorial), July 1938 (67: 20). The lower Chinese caption reads: “Theater workers in Guangzhou perform a resistance play *Put Down Your Whip* in street.” Image courtesy of Shanghai Library.

The fact was that mobile theater remained the best and only reliable means of mass communication when radio broadcast and cinema, although available technically, were confined to urban areas and severely constrained by the war condition. It would be hopeless, as Chen Boer remarked, to wait for the screening of a newsreel about the current war, given the time and technology it took to make it happen (1937). Yet the traveling theater troupes delivered more than just news updates. As dedicated agents of a national cause, these dramatists, most of them in

their early twenties, brought to rural villagers new ideas, songs, and languages, as well as new emotions, expressions, and understandings. They embodied a refreshing set of modern values, while they also came into direct contact with many social strata of Chinese society, encountering complex, uneven, and perplexing realities that tested their resolve and extended their understanding of art as well as their nation.

For instance, when Hong Shen and his fourteen-member troupe left Shanghai in August 1937, their primary objective was to facilitate communication between the front and the hinterland, while providing support to wounded soldiers. They would also perform songs and plays to inspire patriotism among the general public (“Yidong yanju chufa” 1937). In early September, they reached Xuzhou (a city hundreds of kilometers northwest of Shanghai) and were invited to a nearby village. There, the spirited young actors found themselves warmly welcomed by a regiment of Chinese soldiers as well as wide-eyed schoolchildren. Amid applause, singing, and speeches, they performed on a makeshift stage flanked by machine guns. The final play was an updated version of *Put Down Your Whip*, adapted to the new locale (Bai 1937). Many years later, one of the team members recalled fondly how they would, in subsequent stops, recruit local residents as extras for the play *Defend the Marco Polo Bridge*, and how the composer Xian Xinghai (1905–1945) would go in front of the curtains between plays and teach the audience new songs (Yan 1985).

Yet when the team went farther northwest and arrived in Luoyang in Henan Province, they found a sleepy town hardly touched by the ongoing war or recent history. At their next stop, they became even more disappointed because their local hosts turned out to be deceitful and corrupt, treating the theater troupe as upscale entertainment for their relatives. This unpleasant experience reminded the group from Shanghai that, “besides resisting an external enemy, there are many more struggles we cannot give up” (Zhang Jichun 1937, 47). An even more thought-provoking report came from the team that was active mostly in rural Anhui from September 1937 to early 1938. In reviewing the group’s experience over five months, Cheng Mo was forthright with issues that needed attention. One central problem, in his view, was that the team had set out with inadequate theories and expectations:

As soon as we reached the hinterland and began to work under altered circumstances, those theoretical principles ran into new realities. We began to understand the complexity of the rural situation deep inside China, and the differences in living conditions, customs, and mores from one place to another.... Such discoveries made us realize that we need to adapt theater creatively to different environments, and employ different methods accordingly. (1938, 249)

The reason for the inadequacy of those earlier theories, Cheng suggested, was because they were based either on partial evidence or a lack of actual experience. In the remote countryside, even a street play could be too novel and too demanding a form to local residents. The most serious challenge, however, was that theater alone was not sufficient. A play might rouse a community and stoke its patriotic pride, but to organize and educate the public, there had to be local centers. Cheng considered the phase for mobile theater to be practically over, as a new stage in the War of Resistance had already set in. The time had come to send theater workers to every corner of the country to foster a broader wartime theater.

The idea of theater playing a role in organizing a national public, of theater troupes acting as a task force in wartime mobilization was, as we have seen, far from new. Editors of the Shanghai-based journal *Illumination* had advocated such an approach since the outbreak of the war. For editors of the Wuhan-based *War of Resistance Theater*, one important, explicit mission of theater during the war was to organize the public into effective units of resistance. They believed the success of a public-oriented theater should be measured by the extent of the action undertaken by its audience (“Chuangkan ci” 1937). In short, street theater had to go beyond theater and theatricality in order to be truly meaningful.

In January 1938, Wang Pingling (1898–1964), an influential editor of *The Central Daily* and a board member of the All-China Theater Association for Resistance, wrote to stress the importance of theater workers going one step further in creating local organizations and providing practical guidance *after* staging a performance. Only then, he argued, would it be possible to sustain the impact of mobile theater, and to enable the public to take action on its own. For this reason, Wang stated, it was imperative for those committed to resistance theater to prepare themselves through a systematic self-critique and study.

The expectation of theater, or specifically mobile theater, to deliver more than rousing feelings and to participate directly in cultural and social organization would soon receive a significant institutional boost when an emergency national congress of the Nationalist Party convened in Wuhan and adopted, on April 1, 1938, the twin agenda of “armed resistance and national reconstruction” as the basic policy of the wartime government (“Zhongguo Guomindang” 1994). On the same day, also in Wuhan, the Ministry of Political Affairs under the National Military Council established a Third Department to oversee public education and international communication. The new department, just like the ministry itself, was formed with cooperation between the Nationalists and the Communists. Guo Moruo (1892–1978), a prominent Communist writer who had at one point been hunted by the Nationalist government, was appointed its head, and Tian Han, a much-respected figure in the field of theater, was put in charge of its arts section.



Figure 4. Photograph showing a public performance of *Put Down Your Whip*. Source: *Jinri Zhongguo* (China today) 1 (3): 24 (Hong Kong, September 1939). Image courtesy of Shanghai Library.

In the following months, the arts section organized ten theater troupes, along with four public education teams and four film projection teams. (The theater troupes were largely based on the teams that had arrived from Shanghai.) In September, after a brief military training, the ten troupes left Wuhan for different combat zones (Tian Han 1942). On seeing the teams off, Tian Han penned a poem to express his vision for the wartime theater movement: “With four hundred million actors / Across a ten-thousand-mile battle front / A grand epic drama we create / As the entire globe beholds the spectacle” (Song 2013, 211) (figure 4).

Conclusion: A Paradigmatic Course of Action

The dispatching of ten theater troupes to the battleground in September 1938 was a high point of the campaign, coordinated by the All-China Association of Writers and Artists for Resistance (formed in March 1938), to take literature and theater to the countryside and among the soldiers. Within weeks, however, the tri-city of Wuhan fell to the advancing Japanese army. By then the Nationalist government had moved its wartime capital farther inland to the city of Chongqing. The relocation not only brought government agencies, personnel, and resources deep into southwest China, but also exposed many cultural figures and institutions to an interior hardly touched by the modernization drive in the coastal regions during the previous decade. As the sobering prospect of a bitter and protracted war sank in, the mobile theater movement also gradually lost its momentum.

The passing of what a playwright would in late 1940 describe as an “excessive excitement and excessive optimism” in the early stage of the war led to critical reflections on the impact and achievements of street theater (“Yijiu siyi” 1941, 4–6). While hardly anyone questioned the sincerity and dedication of the troupes, or the patriotic passion aroused during many of the public performances, critics as well as practitioners began to observe a formulaic approach, vacuous sloganeering, and stunted creativity. “The more cultured segment of the audience,” as Chang-tai Hung sees it, would find less satisfaction and might even feel “an implicit yet unmistakable hostility toward literature and words” in street theater (1994, 62).

Complicating the familiar issue of how to make theater accessible and engaging to the public was the question of what would constitute a desirable national form for the new theater. The question was not easy to answer, as it was predicated on how the nation itself was imagined under the condition of war. Furthermore, as emergency turned into routine, it became increasingly clear to writers and commentators that the reality of war was far more complex and exasperating than first anticipated, and that fresh forms of engagement had to be developed. Routinization of war steadily led the unity and heroism evident at the beginning to give way to inertia and factionalism. The year 1941, according to one postwar account, marked a turning point for the mobile theater movement because it saw a notable reduction in battlefield performances, the rise of commercial theater in the interior, as well as more severe censorship imposed by the Nationalist government (Tian Jin 1946). Also in this year, the Nationalist-Communist coalition began to unravel as hostilities broke out between troops controlled by the two political parties vying for power and control.

The turning point reached in the early 1940s did not mean an end to street performances, however, or an abandonment of the long-cherished goal of creating a public theater. On the contrary, mobile theatrical performances as a versatile, politically charged art form would continue and thrive in the border regions administered by the Communists. There, many dramatists active in Shanghai in the first half of the 1930s joined forces with Communist theater workers who had survived the Long March and developed their own troupes and repertoire.¹³ Together, they would carry on a concerted search for public theater in markedly different circumstances. Soon, they would turn street plays, along with other expressive forms such as street poetry, *yangge* dance, and collective singing, into a significant aspect of a resolutely public-oriented social life in what were called “liberated areas,” especially in Yan’an. They would also help develop a set of techniques for implementing radical social programs through theatrical performances and spectacles. Revolution as public theater was to become a powerful and well-practiced technology. The most salient example of such political theatricality would be the peasant population’s acquisition of a new public role and self-consciousness through speeches and actions during the Communist-led land reform from the late 1940s to the early

1950s (DeMare 2015, 113–143). The Cultural Revolution that persisted into the 1970s, too, saw continued efforts, first by the radical Red Guard movement and then by state cultural organizations, to keep alive the practice of street theater and performances as a revolutionary heritage.

For this long and eventful historical process, through which public theater emerged as an integral part of modern Chinese political culture, the street theater movement at once provided a steady impetus and served as a forerunner. It spearheaded an effective way of rallying and organizing a local community. Always an artistic practice seeking public engagement and social impact, street theater can hardly be understood or appreciated in isolation from the collective experience of war and revolution in twentieth-century China. At the same time, the street theater movement illustrates concretely why the creation of a new art form in modern China has always had to address the need to posit and engage the public, the imperative for an artist to understand and relate to his/her audience, and the desire for an eclectic national form at once new and familiar.

One particularly significant dimension of the street theater movement, in hindsight, is the growing realization among its practitioners that, in order to speak to and for their rural audience, they had to adapt, organize, and educate themselves. An integral part of Hong Shen's 1948 assessment of the achievements of wartime theater, for instance, is a rich literature on the "self-education of theater workers" (81–124). Just like the peasant spectators they wished to awaken as self-conscious members of a national community, the artists themselves needed to undergo self-transformation so as to acquire and articulate, along with their audience, a new voice and subject position. A street performance could be viewed as a teaching session, a modern-day ritual, or even a conversion process, but it was ultimately a communal experience affecting and bringing together both performer and spectator. A fundamental commitment to the nation in crisis thus underlay the street theater movement and many other artistic activities during this historical period. This commitment also determined that a genuine artistic avant-garde in modern China must aspire to transform its audience as well as its practitioners through the same dynamic creative process.

Xiaobing Tang is Helmut F. Stern Professor of Modern Chinese Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. He thanks Emily Wilcox, Wang Zheng, Man He, and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on earlier versions of the paper. He is also grateful to Liangyu Fu and Yucong Hao for their assistance with research.

Notes

- 1 For a pertinent and broader discussion of the formal features of wartime literature, see Gunn (1992).
- 2 DeMare's approach in *Mao's Cultural Army*, for instance, reinforces this instrumentalist understanding: "The Chinese revolution is an opportune forum for investigation into the relationship between drama and politics, as propaganda teams and drama troupes staged dramas from the late 1920s to the Cultural Revolution and beyond in the hope of influencing their audiences" (2015, 14).
- 3 The 2010 study by Fu Xuemin does not address the active promotion of theater in the Communist Red Army in the Jiangxi Soviet from the late 1920s until 1934. There, drama troupes, following the Soviet example, were organized to educate and entertain a mostly military audience. This article will not delve into that lively but contained scene either, except to note toward the end that a historic convergence between Communist theater workers and practitioners of street theater would occur in Yan'an and other regions in the late 1930s.
- 4 The Nationalist government in the early 1930s continued to view traditional or old theater with the same suspicion that prominent figures from the turn of the twentieth century through the late 1920s expressed on numerous occasions. Zhou Zuoren, for instance, argued that "Chinese old theater has no value" and should be discarded (1918).
- 5 See Kaulbach (2001, 150–151) and Hung (1994, 57–61) for more information on the play and its transformations.
- 6 See *Fangxia* (1936). "A group of dramatists" is credited as the author of this version. A note at the end says that the play had been produced many times, each time leading to further revisions. Two years later, in 1938, *Zhanshi qingnian* (Wartime youth 9: 11–18) published another version, with Chen Liting credited as the author. In this version, the young intervener becomes a farmer.
- 7 For an account of the popularity of this song and its rich history, see Luo (2014, 145–176).
- 8 According to one contemporary account, the play attracted tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of viewers (Liu 1937).
- 9 The same event is also recounted in the June 1937 issue of *Guangming* [Illuminations] (3 [3]: 62–66).
- 10 Xiong's account of his experiment was promptly reviewed in *The Age of Theater*. The reviewer warmly applauded the playwright's commitment but questioned his reformist beliefs (Yin 1937).

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- 11 According to a contemporary report, eighteen theater groups, or over 95 percent of those involved in the theater profession, gathered in Wuhan (Qiu 1938).
 - 12 According to Liu Baoluo, his theater troupe put on fifty-seven performances in fifteen locations over a forty-four-day period in Zhejiang in September–October 1937, for a total of 30,150 viewers. They staged over 140 one-act plays (Baoluo 1937).
 - 13 In May 1938, Zhang Jichun, a member of the second troupe led by Hong Shen, joined an impromptu performance at a temple fair in Yan’an (Zhang Jichun 1939).

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Abbreviations

CZYK: *Chuangzao yuekan* [Creation monthly]

GM: *Guangming* [Illuminations]

KZXJ: *Kangzhan xiju* [War of resistance theater]

XJSD: *Xiju shidai* [The age of theater]

ZGHJ: *Zhongguo huaju yundong wushinian shiliao ji* [Historical documents from the fifty years of the spoken drama movement in China]

ZHMGS: *Zhonghua minguoshi dang'an ziliao huibian* [Compendium of archival materials from the history of the Republic of China]

ZSWH: *Zhong Su wenhua: Kagnzha sanzhounian jinian tekan* [Sino–Soviet cultures: Special commemorative issue on the third anniversary of the war of resistance]

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