

Wartime Mobilization and “Improvised” Performance: A Discussion of the Drama Revolution of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps

Gao Ming

Abstract

After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Ding Ling and others formed the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps and assumed the important responsibility of wartime mobilization. Amongst all literary and artistic forms, the drama became Ding Ling’s preferred form of propaganda because of its “immense power to induce and incite the people.” In order to adapt to the performance space, audience seating, and stage conditions, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps adopted the “improvised” method in creating, rehearsing, and performing, to great results. However, the “improvised” performance also encountered problems with regards to public propaganda, art consumption, and alteration of traditional Chinese theater. In fact, the “improvised” performance touched on the crux of “improvised” art and its deep predicament.

About the author

Gao Ming (高明): Received a Ph.D. from Shanghai University in Literature. Now serves as Assistant Professor at Yangze Normal University, as well as a Postdoctoral Fellow at East China Normal university. Main area of research is currently Yan’an literature and art.

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In order to respond to the national crisis in the wake of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, on August 15,

1937, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee passed a decision stating that China had entered “the stage of carrying out the War of Resistance.” “The central task of this stage is to mobilize all forces to win the War of Resistance.”¹ The following year, Mao Zedong explained in detail: “What is political mobilization? Firstly, we must inform the army and the people of the political purpose of the war. Every soldier and every person must understand why they must fight and what their role is in the war. [. . .] How do we mobilize them? Through word of mouth, leaflets, newspapers, books, dramas, movies, schools, mass organizations, and officials.”² In reality, as commonly used as the phrase “mobilization” was at the time, the Chinese Communist Party did not pioneer the term. Instead, “mobilization” was a general requirement of the times.³ Wartime mobilization not only shaped the face of China as a whole, but also greatly changed the practice of literature and art. At the time, the theater sphere proposed that in addition to taking on the responsibilities of spreading propaganda and education, theater should also undertake the mission of “organizing the people.”⁴ Xia Yan pointed out that the year 1940 was not a period of “dramas depicting fighting back against the Japanese invasion,” but rather “fighting

1 “Decision on the Current Situation and the Party’s Tasks,” quoted in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Vol. 2), People’s Publishing House, 1991 edition, p. 397.

2 Mao Zedong: “On Protracted War,” *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Vol. 2), p. 481.

3 In the early days of the Anti-Japanese War, a variety of pamphlets named “General Mobilization” were published. The most important ones are: Hu Sheng’s “General Mobilization of the Rear People” (Sanlian Bookstore, 1937), and “Japanese Government Planning National General Mobilization Organs” compiled by the Lushan Training Corps (Lushan Training Group, 1937), written by Lan Weibin, “Theory of National Manpower Mobilization Against Japan in the War of Resistance Against Japan, also known as Opinions on the General Mobilization of Manpower in the War of Resistance Against Japan” by Li Lizhen School (unknown publishing house, 1937), and Luo Dunwei’s “National Mobilization in Wartime” (Central Army Officer School, 1938), Ma Jilian’s “National Mobilization” (Youth Bookstore, 1939), etc.; for an introduction to the mobilization of the CCP’s base areas, see “Wartime General Mobilization in Northwest Special Zone” (Times and Historical Materials Preservation Agency, 1938) and “General Mobilization in the National Revolutionary War—Historical Facts of the Battle of the General Mobilization Committee of the National Revolutionary War” (October 1939 mimeograph, new edition of Shanxi People’s Publishing House in 1986), edited by Han Tao, and so on. It is not difficult to feel the reality and urgency of “mobilization.” However, in its subsequent practice, the CCP’s mobilization is undoubtedly the deepest and most effective. The author will specifically discuss this issue.

4 Editorial Note: “Another Mission of Anti-Japanese War Drama”, November 16, 1937, *Anti-Japanese War Drama* (first issue).

back against the Japanese invasion with dramas,” “because, from the moment the shots rang out at Lugou Bridge, and the Second Sino-Japanese War began, the entire nation’s theater performers regarded themselves as a special unit within the Anti-Japanese Army and began to participate in the War.”⁵ This is an accurate summary of the state of the Chinese theater sphere at the time.

However, the Communist Party’s wartime mobilization in the base areas had quite a unique practice that profoundly shaped the literary and artistic forms of the base area. The Northwest Front-Line Service Corps is a strikingly representative example. From the beginning, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps had a clear position: they were a “semi-militarized group whose main task is to spread propaganda.”⁶ The Corps were neither a companion, nor a temporary organization, but rather a highly organized, collective group. As an organization responsible for wartime propaganda, the Corps’ activities were deeply embedded in the political, military, and cultural structures of the base area, while also collaborating with other rescue groups, cooperating with the temporary duties proposed by the authorities, and carefully considering the timeliness and locality of propaganda.⁷ In order to carry out wartime mobilization, the Corps, from its establishment in September 1937 to November 1938, conducted activities in Yan’an, Northern Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Xi’an.⁸ Traveling performances were

5 Xia Yan: "Three Years of the War of Resistance Against Japan in Drama - Three Drama Festivals in Response to Our Friends in the Soviet Union", originally published in November 1940, *The Spring and Autumn of Drama* Volume 1, Issue 1, quoted from Chen Jian and Liu Housheng: *The Complete Works of Xia Yan* (Drama Review), Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005 edition, p. 65.

6 Ding Ling: “The First Conference,” *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), Hebei People's Publishing House, 2001 edition, p. 49.

7 “The Work Report of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps in October,” a collective creation of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: *Life on the Western Front*, Sanlian Bookstore, 2014 edition, pp. 218-220. This book is the fifth edition of the *Northwest Front-Line Service Corps Series* edited by Ding Ling, Life Bookstore, first edition April 1939.

8 The Northwest Front-Line Service Corps lasted from September 1937 to June 1945. This article mainly examines their activities prior to November 1938 because this period was mainly led by Ding Ling. Although Ding Ling held the post of director until 1941, she no longer acted as director because she went to the Marxist-Leninist Academy in October 1938 to study. At the end of 1938, Zhou Weizhi led the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps to the frontline of Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei. Important changes took place in the organization, its activity space, and its propaganda forms. This should be discussed in a different context. See Wang Zengru and Li Xiangdong: "Long Compilation of Ding Ling's Chronicles" (Part 1), Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2006 edition, pp. 127-150.

the Corps’ most important practice. As long as it was conducive to propaganda, various forms like “drama, music, speeches, slogans, cartoons, and various methods”⁹ could all be applied. This constituted an important distinction between the cultural organizations and activities of the Communist Party’s base areas and those of other groups at the time.

Ge Mao, a member of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps, discovered that: “Generally speaking, when spreading propaganda to the public, street speeches, word of mouth, and one-on-one conversations are quite effective. But based on our experience from the past few months, the most effective method is to use the drama’s immense power to induce and incite the audience.”¹⁰ As a result, the number of dramas in the Corps’ performances gradually increased, even occupying a core position. However, due to the imperfect organization of the troupe, the lack of professional training of its members, and the urgent need for wartime propaganda, the Corps adopted the method of “improvised” acting in rehearsing their dramas. Specifically, it was necessary to create and stage programs that, given the environment, the performance space, stage conditions, and audience seating, were able to both meet the needs of and be well-received by the masses in a short period of time. This was regarded as the normal state of wartime drama at the time and also the most effective method of propaganda. Due to historical material restrictions and other reasons,¹¹ previous studies on the North-

9 Ding Ling: “The First Conference,” *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 49.

10 Ge Mao: “Our Drama and Variety,” a collective creation by the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: *Life on the Western Front*, p. 22.

11 Regarding the situation of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps, please refer to Chen Ming’s “One Year Record of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps” (*New Literature Historical Materials*, 1982, second issue) and other articles. For first-hand information on the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps, see the “Northwest Front-Line Service Corps Series” edited by Ding Ling. The series was published by Sanlian Bookstore from 1938 to 1939. There are ten essays in the series, arranged in order: Jie Fu, Shi Lun, Minfu et al.’s “Battlefield Singing” (Songs of the War of Resistance Against Japan), Ding Ling’s “A Bullet Stuck in the Chamber” (Short Stories, Reportage Collection), Ding Ling’s “Union” (Author’s Note: It should be “*Kawauchi Ichirou*”) (3 Acts), *Life on the Western Front*, a collective creation by the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps (Collected Works of the Life and Work of the Front-Line Service Corps), “Song of the Battlefield” (2), “Acrobatics” co-written by Zhang Ke, Shi Lun, and Xingzhi (Author’s note: It should be “Juggling” (Folk Art and Literature Collection), and Tian Jian, “The Posts Running in the Sands of Wind” (Author’s note: It should be “The Guardians Who Are Running in the Sands of Wind”) (The Anti-Japanese Poetry Collection), “One Year” by Ding Ling (essay collection), Shi Lun and Pei Dongli’s “Baishan and Heishui” (collection of dramas). See Wang Rong, “A Comprehensive Collection of Literature and Art in Yan’an

west Front-Line Service Corps were mainly limited to sketches of a simple historical narrative, with little attention paid to the characteristics and significance of the “improvised” performance. This essay will discuss the form of the “assault” drama and place it within the structure of wartime mobilization.

“Improvised” performance not only contains successful experience, but also touches on certain cruxes of wartime literature and art, namely: first, in the rural space of activity, theatrical performance has to focus on propaganda, but balance it with artistry as much as possible. Second, as the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps were ordered to travel to Xi’an, the space of activity transitioned from the rural village to the city. Performances were mainly based on the stage. The “improvised” performance was created and staged to adapt to this environment. This performance involved issues with scripts, acting skills, public propaganda and commercial techniques. Third, traditional Chinese theater still occupied an important position in the literature and arts sphere of Xi’an. This attracted the attention of Ding Ling and others. As such, they tried to create plays with old forms but new content and were able to win the support of professional theater troupes like the Yisushe. However, this is undoubtedly far removed from Ding Ling’s original intention of “using the traditional theater world as a reference.”

1. Front-Line Drama: A Variation of Propaganda and Artistry

In August 1937, Ding Ling said in an article: “After the Lugou Bridge Incident, Yan’an experienced a huge wave.” Mao Zedong, in a speech delivered at the Counter-Japanese Military and Political University, pointed out: “The university does not need this many cadres. We are sending you out to the battlefield. It does not matter if you are at the front or the rear. When the Japanese have been fully driven out and the nation is well again, then we will welcome you back.” As such, the students graduated early and went to the front line. Later, Ding Ling

in the 1940s,” “Chinese Modern Literature Research Series” Issue 7, 2013. Research was difficult because this series of books was not republished. Fortunately, Ding Ling’s works are included in “The Complete Works of Ding Ling” (Hebei People’s Publishing House, 2001 edition), and Sanlian Bookstore’s new 2014 edition of *Life on the Western Front* has provided a great help to the research of this article. Of course, the drama activities of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps cannot be included in this series. This article will use other related materials.

and others also took action. Their first idea was to “draft a set of rules for a war correspondent group. The group will have few members, spend very little money, travel to many places, and write many newsletters.” To their surprise, with the increase in the number of participants, the nature of the group also changed. The specific circumstances were:

In the evening, more people joined and asked to expand the organization and add theater, singing, comics, and so on. Xi Ru and I both disapproved at first, but later agreed [. . .]. Back then, we were all afraid of those circus-like theater troupes and romance writers and artists. But if they were Anti-Japanese students, they could barely get by. [. . .] Xi Rurong and I are the director and assistant director. But we both have strong misgivings, especially I. While I have done some writing in the past, I think it is inappropriate to have a writer lead the team. In addition, I am not only lacking in experience with these things, but I also am simply not interested in acting, singing, marching, meetings, eating rations, making firewood.¹²

Ding Ling said that she was “afraid of those circus-like theater troupes and romantic artists,” and consciously, or unconsciously, revealed her subconscious prejudice against theater. Her rejection of doing chores for the Corps projects her anxiety about integrating into collective life. However, one year later, in the autumn of 1938, Ding Ling wrote a special essay sharing her experiences with the Corps and made suggestions regarding political education, training talent, and work methods. With her comprehensive and sophisticated insights,¹³ it is evident that Ding Ling’s experience in the Corps transformed her views. During this period, Ding Ling made timely reports on the important activities of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps.¹⁴ Though these texts can be regarded as a record of the writer’s experiences, they also provide a significant record of the Corps’ establishment, organization, and performances, while also touching on many aspects of wartime literature and art.

It is worth noting that the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps encountered

12 Ding Ling: "Before the Establishment of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), pp. 46-47.

13 Ding Ling: "Before the Front-Line Service Corps Departs Again", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), pp. 113-115.

14 These articles are included in "One Year", the ninth of "Northwest Front-Line Service Corps Series", published by Life Bookstore, first edition, March 1939. These texts provided rare, vivid accounts of the Corps’ activities, and were later mostly included in *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5).

various obstacles at the beginning of its establishment. First, there were a lot of chores to handle. Ding Ling wrote: "After completing my morning exercises, I prepare an outline for a meeting while wiping off my sweat; after rehearsal, I have to compose songs; I write drafts of scripts while discussing work matters. If the donkeys are too small, do we need to buy more? Groceries have been too expensive lately, we can't even afford sweet potatoes, only pumpkins – these are the things I have to discuss."¹⁵ Next, most of the team members lacked experience in collective activities, so it was difficult to avoid stumbles along the way.¹⁶ But what was more troublesome was the overall lack of preparation: first, the lack of programs,¹⁷ and second, the Corps members' complete lack of experience and inability to pull off a theater performance. According to Ding Ling: "Twenty-three gradually increased to thirty, and seven out of ten of them are around twenty years old. How many of them have experience? None. And I was to be the director. Xi Ru as well. We composed the songs, and Xi Ru even acted."¹⁸ In light of these problems, in order to adapt to wartime propaganda, the Corps prepared for more than forty days before departure – after all, propaganda also requires a certain degree of skill and professionalism to successfully pull off.

The preparation of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps was mainly concentrated in the following aspects: First, propaganda must face the masses, and it must strive towards popularization. A top priority was adapting traditional theater forms, such as: "Persuade the People to Fight Against Japan," "Ten Guidelines for Fighting the Japanese and Saving the Country," "Refugees," "Get Husbands to Join the Army." *Kuaiban* (快板) include: "Everyone Must Get Up and Save China," "Lugou Bridge," "Kuomintang and Communist Cooperation." Others include "Little Cowherd," *shuanghuangsihuang* (双簧四簧), cross talks, and so

15 Ding Ling: "The Discipline of Our Life", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 57.

16 The "Rules of the Corps," formulated before departure, stipulate: "... (8) Develop a style of collective leadership and individual responsibility. (11) Maintain normal relations between men and women. (12) Be timely in daily life. (13) Pay attention to cleanliness at all times and appreciate public property. (14) Quarrels and fights are not allowed. (15) Alcoholism and all other illegal activities are prohibited." *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), pp. 50-51. From these detailed rules alone, we can imagine the difficulties of leading literary arts groups.

17 Chen Ming wrote: "Due to various reasons, we have very few scripts and songs on hand and not many suit the needs of the War of Resistance." Chen Ming: "One Year Record of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps", *New Literature Historical Materials* Issue 2, 1982.

18 Ding Ling: "Preparation for Work", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 54.

on.¹⁹ Secondly, the dramas were mainly one-act dramas that took into account the wartime environment – short and succinct one-act dramas were easy to pull off, and the performance did not have to be limited by its surroundings, while also considering “the audience, composed of farmers, workers, soldiers, intellectuals, and civilians, but mostly peasants and soldiers.” The famous dramas from the early period of the Second Sino-Japanese War, such as “Let Down Your Whip” and “Whistle in the Forest,” were also selected. Therefore, the Corps rarely rehearsed multi-act dramas. “Two three-act dramas were about student struggles during the fall of Beiping, but because they were too long, we did not rehearse them.”²⁰ With so little time, the Corps evidently could not complete an adaptation and rehearsal of a multi-act play. Finally, Ding Ling discovered the effectiveness of musicals:

The most distinctive and well-received program was the Yangge (folk dance) adaptation of “Down with Japan Shengping Dance.” This dance originally used simple dances, twisting and singing, accompanied by folk songs, gongs, drums, and suona, changing the formation every now and then. The male and female teams, along with the clowns, represent the festivities after the harvest. Now we just changed the characters, roles of workers, peasants, soldiers, and businessmen, Japanese imperialism and traitors. The characters exaggerated their makeup according to their occupations. The content was about living and working in peace and contentment, using actions to express their work; afterwards, traitors fought with one another, and Japan invaded the country. So the students propagated that the whole country was united, expelling Japanese invaders, shooting traitors, soldiers and civilians; all happy, dancing wildly, very vivid.²¹

It can be seen that in addition to the creation and performance of the plays, basing the plays on adaptations of traditional forms was also important. Of course, these were just preliminary preparations. Once they entered the battlefield, creation and performance would naturally be “transformed.”

When the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps left Yan’an, it mainly carried out activities in rural areas, with peasants as their main target. The Ganguyi performance mentioned by Chen Ming in his memories provides a vivid example:

Ganguyi is a small village with only ten or twenty households, seventy miles away

19 Ding Ling: "Preparation for Work", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 55.

20 Ding Ling: "Preparation for Work", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 54.

21 Ding Ling: "Preparation for Work", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 55.

from Yan'an. But the church located there is magnificent, with many beautiful patterns painted on the cream-colored walls. [. . .] What a great church, with great acoustics, and many seats. But the stage is small and not suited for performances. But isn't it better suited for a concert? [. . .] Nobody took any breaks. Some cleaned the venue, some hung curtains, and some went to pick wildflowers. The village head of Ganguyi sent people to notify the neighboring village and we sounded the gongs. [. . .] The audience rushed in, the room packed immediately, and the latecomers stood on the sides. [. . .] They all gazed towards the stage with joy and curiosity. There have been festivities here like blind storytellers, but there have never been so many male and female soldiers dressed in military uniforms who were all singing and dancing. Taking advantage of the audience's wait time, a comrade stood onstage and began to teach the audience how to sing. With only four short lyrics, the song had a Northern Shaanxi melody, sweet and fresh. The lyrics are:

Fellow citizens, listen to me,
Fight against Japan, ya hey,
When all the people came to fight,
We won the war, ya hey.

Their performances included "Foreign Internationale," "La Marseillaise," the local "Anti-Japanese Folk Song," "Drive the Japanese Robbers Back to Tokyo," "Get Husbands to Join the Army," and so on.²² Their usage of "Northern Shaanxi Dialect" was in consideration of the listening habits of the audience. The stage conditions were another important consideration: generally, the existing conditions were utilized as much as possible, and the form of propaganda should be adjusted according to the specific circumstances. This is the norm for theater productions in rural areas.

The Northwest Front-Line Service Corps effectively carried out wartime propaganda. The Corps, to a large extent, did not focus on the artistry of the program, performance, and setting, but rather paid special attention to propaganda strategies. Specifically, the methods used were: First, in addition to actively adapting performances to the time and place they happened to be, the Corps also made sure to satisfy the momentary expectations of the crowds. Ding Ling said: "The march was thirty or forty miles. During rest time, the locals would gather round and ask about the Corps. They hemmed and hawed over what they wanted,

22 Chen Ming: "One Year Record of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps", *New Literature Historical Materials*, Issue 2, 1982.

so we had to drop our bags and pick a location on the spot.”¹ Second, although the Corps did not prepare many programs, it was not a major concern because the Corps were doing traveling performances. In addition, the audience was mostly made up of farmers and soldiers, so the expectations were not very high. The Corps could use many different forms. “Aside from a few particularly moving short dramas and street plays, most of what we performed used the traditional forms of crosstalk, like “Pick Up Gold” and “Fighting the Town God.” These are what the people love to watch the most. We added many new elements into these forms too; we tried to educate the audience on principles about fighting the Japanese, which roused their interest even more.”² Third, the programs adhered to current events, and performers tried their best to integrate into the environment.

During the year we created many little ditties. At every place we visited, we’d create a ditty, and teach it to the people. These little tunes were very popular in Shanxi and Shaanxi. Aside from the popularization of these forms that were used for propaganda, in our script, we strove to align with the interests of the audience and use more colloquial speech [. . .] The subject matter we use is also based on recent stories and things that commonly occurred in the countryside, such as “The People Steal Guns,” “Bitter Old Woman,” “We are Forming a Guerrilla Band,” “Join the Anti-Japanese Army,” and so on. The performers also interacted with the crowd in a lively way. One time, in a small village, someone was playing an erhu. Eight comrades began to hum along. One or two walked over, handing the erhu player a cigarette and began talking about age and family affairs. Then more people came, we sang some more, and they sang some too, as if we were all a family.³

Fourth, in order to spread effective propaganda, the programs often had to be adjusted for the audience. “Work methods and propaganda content was altered with the environment. When we arrived at the 14th Army Group, we performed “The Battle of Xinkou”; when we arrived at the 8th Army Group, we sang “Battle at Pingxingguan.” If the audience contained mostly soldiers, we performed “Eight Hundred Warriors”; if there were more injured soldiers, we performed “Going to the Frontline”; if there were more peasants, we performed “Obedient Subject”; if

1 Ding Ling: “The Corps’ Shaanxi Performances”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 104.

2 “October Work Report of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps,” *Life on the Western Front*, p. 214.

3 “October Work Report of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps,” *Life on the Western Front*, p. 214-215.

there were more businessmen, we performed “Master Wang.”⁴

Of course, there were many problems with propaganda-oriented performances. Ding Ling wrote: “If we stayed in the camp for too long, then we had to change our programs every day for four, five, days, even an entire week. Every day we inserted different speeches into the programs, as if we were teaching a politics class. These situations were as common as eating and marching. So most of our scripts were short one-act plays. Some of them were prepared in advance, others were created on the spot, but most consisted of provocative slogans.”⁵ Inserting speeches into their performances naturally suited the needs of propaganda, and the scripts were mostly one-act plays. Whether they were “prepared in advance” or “created on the spot,” “most consisted of provocative slogans.” These impromptu performances were evidently conducive for achieving effective propaganda. But it is not hard to imagine the roughness of the scripts and performances.

In fact, Ding Ling strove to overcome these problems by creating high-quality plays like the multi-act play *Reunion*.⁶ Such plays could also be used as examples to test the achievements of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps. *Reunion* is a veritable “improvised” work. Ding Ling later said that: “I was part of a play-writing workshop in which I was assigned to write about a young woman living in an enemy-occupied area who, under these special circumstances, strove to car-

4 “October Work Report of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps,” *Life on the Western Front*, p. 215-216.

5 Ding Ling: “The Corps’ Shaanxi Performances”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 104.

6 “Reunion” is a one-act play, included in *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (4), Hebei People's Publishing House, 2001 edition, pp. 355-372. The protagonist Bai Lan is a “local staff member of the Political Department of the Anti-Japanese Army”. The general plot is that Bai Lan is arrested by the Japanese, but her actual identity is not revealed. While in prison, she meets her comrades Zhang Dashan, Wang Guangren and Qi Xin. The three were caught by the Japanese and their identities have been exposed. The comrades learn that Bai Lan did not reveal her identity and urged her to use this opportunity to escape. But Bai Lan was filled by anger and spirit and prepared to fight against the Japanese. Zhang Dashan and the others get into a fight with Japanese secret service captain Yamamoto and are killed. Then Yamamoto asked Ma Daming, the intelligence chief of the secret service, to interrogate Bai Lan. Unexpectedly, the two had previously been lovers. Ma Daming tried to use their prior relationship to trick Bai Lan. Bai Lan, believing that Ma Daming had become a dog for the Japanese invaders, stabbed and killed him. Before he died, Ma Daming revealed to Bai Lan that his true identity was an undercover agent working against the Japanese. Bai Lan, filled with regret, escapes with Ma Daming’s help.

ry out new work. The play was performed in Yan’an and received good reviews, but afterwards was performed less in Shanxi. I have always been dissatisfied with my own work.”⁷ This is likely not Ding Ling’s modesty speaking, but rather her concerns with the quality of her script. Ding Ling later said: “The writing was not based on what I had personally experienced in my life, nor was it a work that was carefully conceived, mulled over, and handled with precision. It was just to meet the needs of propaganda work and the requirements of a task that the theater troupe assigned to me.”⁸ Diving into the script, let’s take a look at an excerpt from a scene with Ma Daming and Bai Lan:

Ma Daming: So, Bai Lan, we should take advantage of this rare opportunity! Let me ask you, how did you get here?

Bai Lan: How does the Section Chief not know? In short, I caught them and brought them here!

Ma Daming: Then those three people...

Bai Lan: These three people... ah... (looks uncomfortable)

Ma Daming: Are they together? Alas... if I had just gotten here a bit earlier, perhaps things would be better. Do you know them?

Bai Lan: How do I not know? Three conscientious, ambitious Chinese men with great moral integrity have died at the hands of your Great Japanese Empire! I saw it with my own eyes! All of the troops, section chiefs, and traitors took part in this massacre! My God! I must avenge them. Today will be the end of you bootlickers!

(Bai Lan touches the knife, but Ma Daming grasps her hand.)

Ma Daming: Stop talking nonsense and lower your voice. What’s the point of spewing such nonsense?

Bai Lan: You’re afraid but I’m not, you coward!

Ma Daming: Alright, I’m a coward! But Bai Lan, please...

Bai Lan: I didn’t expect you to have stooped to this level, only a year after I last saw you! Time is so cruel. If only I hadn’t known you in the past, if only I wasn’t in love you, then... ah!

Ma Daming: Bai Lan, please look deeper and try to understand!

Bai Lan: I understand. I understand that Daming was once an honest, smart, hard-working, patriotic, courageous man, but now...

Ma Daming: Now I still am those things, and always will be...

7 Ding Ling: "Kawauchi Ichirou postscript", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (9), Hebei People's Publishing House, 2001 edition, p. 30.

8 Ding Ling: Preface to "Ding Ling Drama Collection" – “Me and Drama”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (9), p. 160.

Bai Lan: Nonsense! You still want to lie to me... This kind of shameless behavior needs to end. I won't listen to these empty words. I hate you more than I hate all of the traitors to China. I want you to die, I won't allow you to live any longer...⁹

Ma Daming was the leader of the Japanese special unit, but also a secret anti-Japanese spy. He was denounced as a traitor by his former lover Bai Lan, but it is hard to dispute this. The dialogue between the two creates a moving scene. The adaptation could have been very effective, but in order to create the effect of "a young woman living in an enemy-occupied area who, under these special circumstances, strove to carry out new work," the author skewed the play closer towards a political education drama. As a result, the play was overly complicated, and the plot did not make sense. However, such hastily written works became normalized. What is more troublesome is that such multi-act dramas may not be suitable for the audience's habits and tastes. As Ge Mao pointed out: "After just a few months of performing, we realized that the plays that the general public liked the most were short and sweet, simple and energetic, with a clear message. They liked short plays that were provocative and fun, and used the traditional form to deliver new content. If the plot was too complicated, or the meaning unclear, the audience will not understand and not feel moved."¹⁰ In order to adapt to wartime propaganda, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps created many short plays, but unfortunately, due to historical reasons, these plays are now lost, making it impossible to envision their performances and discuss them.¹¹

Although the quality of the script is important, we cannot ignore the next step of adapting the script to the stage. *The Biography of Ding Ling* mentions: "Sai Ke re-arranged *Reunion* for the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps and suggested that Ding Ling make some name changes. His rehearsals were strict and performers had to memorize their lines perfectly [. . .] The performers felt that

9 Ding Ling: "Reunion", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (4), pp. 367-368.

10 Ge Mao: "Our Drama and Variety", *Life on the Western Front*, p. 24.

11 In addition to the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps' scripts included in the "Northwest Front-Line Service Corps Series", see also the "Northwest Front-Line Service Corps Drama Collection," edited by Ding Ling and Xi Ru (Guangzhou Shanghai Magazine Company, 1938). Most of the scripts are one-act plays. Unfortunately, we can only see the catalog because the scripts themselves have been lost. See Jia Zhifang et al. "General Bibliography of Modern Chinese Literature", Fujian Education Press, 1993 edition, p. 602.

Sai Ke improved and elevated their troupe.”¹² The Northwest Front-Line Service Corps evidently faced shortcomings in major elements like having quality directors, playwrights, and performers. These kinds of performances can be passable in rural villages and succeed as propaganda. But as the performance space and audience changed, and the Corps traveled to large cities like Xi’an, the Corps faced considerable challenges.

2. To the Stage: The Paradox of Popular Propaganda and Commercial Performances

Chen Ming recollected: “In early March of 1938, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps received orders from headquarters to carry out propaganda work in Xi’an’s Guoxian District, Shaanxi.”¹³ In order to conduct propaganda, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps had to consider the characteristics of the big city. The Corps decided to rent the Yisushe theater for its first performance. Regarding the selection of a performance venue, Ding Ling stated: “It may seem unimportant, but picking the right performance venue could make or break our first performance in Xi’an. At the time, all of Xi’an’s other venues were too small and had few seats. After comparing, the comrades selected the Yisushe. The Kuomintang Party headquarters could not hinder our script development, but they could meddle with our venue selection or other areas, secretly creating difficulties and ruining our goals.”¹⁴ This mainly refers to the external environment. When it came to the specifics of performing, the spatial shift from the battlefield to the

12 According to records, “On New Year’s Day in 1938, the Western War Regiment and the Eighth Route Army Headquarters celebrated the New Year in Liucun, which was a dozen miles away from Linfen. The Shanghai Anti-Japanese Salvation Drama Troupe, who was in Linfen, also came to give their condolences. Shan Zun, Sai Ke, He Luting, etc.... As soon as the tea party was over, Chen Ming, Wang Yuqing, Wu Jian, etc. came to Ding Ling, hoping to keep Sai Ke, wanting him to choreograph, direct and act for the Corps. The Corps badly needed such a person!” This is a testament to the lack of directors and screenwriters in the Corps. Li Xiangdong, Wang Zengru: “Biography of Ding Ling” (Part 1), China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2015 edition, p. 187.

13 Chen Ming: “Comrade Sai Ke and the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps”, *New Literature Historical Materials*, Issue 1, 1980.

14 Ding Ling: “The Yisu Society and the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (10), Hebei People’s Publishing House, 2001 edition, p. 288.

stage required shifting from village sideshows and one-act plays to on-stage performances.

Ding Ling clearly recognized: "This performance, while common for other theater troupes, was really not easy for us."¹⁵ The first challenge was the script. The Corps' performances were mostly one-act plays, making it difficult to produce "stage plays" from them. In order to prepare for this Xi'an performance, while in Shanxi Ding Ling set out to create the multi-act play *Kawauchi Ichirou*. She said: "Our lack of plays at the time was a real issue. We were planning to go to Xi'an and knew that we needed to have at least one decent play to perform. So I set out to write it."¹⁶ However, due to her lack of solid life experience and play-writing ability, Ding Ling could not make *Kawauchi Ichirou* suitable for performing.¹⁷ The Corps' first performance in Xi'an ended up being Sai Ke's *Assault*.¹⁸

Assault takes place at the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, in a village in Shanxi that was pillaged by the Japanese. Only a few were able to escape. A child named Fusheng lost his parents and Aunt Li's son was killed. Therefore, the young people united and attacked the Japanese soldiers as revenge. Fusheng died from his injuries and Aunt Li was assaulted by the soldiers. *Assault* has the distinctive characteristics of Sai Ke's writing: the plot is not centered around the unfolding narrative, and the characters are not based on stereotypes. Rather, *Assault* relies on the characters' intense emotions, rich expressions, and

15 Ding Ling: "The Corps' Shaanxi Performances", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 104.

16 Ding Ling: "Hanoi Ichiro Postscript", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (9), p. 30. Chen Ming also mentioned in his recollections: "When Wan'an Village was preparing to come to Xi'an, we decided that when we arrived in Xi'an, we should put on a big show instead of a small one." Dictated by Chen Ming, arranged by Zha Zhenke and Li Xiangdong: *50 Years of Ding Ling and I – Memoirs of Chen Ming*, China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2010 edition, p. 56.

17 Ding Ling wrote: "After the first act was written, we showed it to a few comrades working in the enemy army of the Eighth Route Army headquarters. They shared some Japanese customs and habits with me, and encouraged me continue writing, but then we had to set off again. I had no way to finish it. Fortunately, Sai Ke and Duanmu helped me. With their help, I finished writing the script for "Assault", and I didn't finish the last two scenes until recently." Ding Ling: "Hanoi Ichiro Postscript", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (9), pp. 30-31.

18 Chen Ming said that "Assault" was created by "Xiao Hong, Nie Gangnu, and Duanmu Hongliang who temporarily lived in the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps to assist Sai Ke in collective creation. They said that Chen Zhengqing and He Hui of the Corps wrote a series of scenes." Chen Ming: "Comrade Sai Ke and the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps", *New Literature and Historical Materials*, Issue 1, 1982.

symbolic techniques to create an effective play. The play is shrouded in a rebellious, tragic atmosphere. The final scene is: “The brilliant sunrise appears over the horizon, and in the distance the crowds are singing. Uncle Tian lifted himself up using the wall and sang along disjointedly.”¹⁹ *Assault* was highly praised by Mao Dun, who pointed out:

Looking at this storyline alone, we can see that there is no “intellectual” acting as the military counselor, parroting typical discourse of resistance against Japanese like “the War has reached the second stage.” There are also no revolutionary youth or political workers of the Eighth Route Army mobilizing to lead them. This is what makes *Assault* different from other plays and novels. Some works that revolve around peasants rising up to defend themselves follow a formula: the mentally poisoned peasants do not know how to do it, so the revolutionary youth arrive to lead them as their military counselors. Or, similar to *Destruction*, the young poor peasants are the most determined and lead the struggle, while rich peasants and village chiefs choose not to participate. Of these two formulas, the former is an invisible expression of self-aggrandizing intellectuals, and the latter is the uncritical acceptance of the “revolutionary theory” or “loving the left.” After reading *Assault*, I feel that it deserves a bit of reflection.²⁰

Mao Dun believed that *Assault*’s “greatest strength is its authenticity – that is, it isn’t formulaic at all.”²¹ Mao Dun’s interpretation focused on the artistry of the work, while Ding Ling pointed out: “The content of *Assault* is, of course, too simple; and I want to point out the ways that *Assault* hints at how a group of unorganized peasants are able to develop. It is possible for the people to consciously rise up to resist the Japanese, but once they start to mobilize, they need leadership.”²² Undoubtedly, Ding Ling grasped and elaborated on the theme of *Assault* from the perspective of popular enlightenment and war mobilization, which is obviously closely related to her wartime propaganda mission.

However, the biggest obstacle to adapting *Assault* on the stage was the lack

19 Sai Ke: “*Assault*”, originally published in *The Position of Literature and Art*, Volume One, Issue 4, June 1938, quoted from the compilation by Li Zhou and Wang Zhao of the Party History Data Collection Committee of the Ministry of Culture: “Roaring Lion – Sai Ke’s Collected Works”, Culture and Art Publishing House, 1993 edition, p. 315

20 Mao Dun: “*Assault*”, originally published in *The Position of Literature and Art*, Volume One, Issue 4, June 1938, quoted from “The Roaring Lion – Sai Ke’s Collected Works”, p. 624.

21 Mao Dun: “*Assault*”, originally published in *The Position of Literature and Art*, Volume One, Issue 4, June 1938, quoted from “The Roaring Lion – Sai Ke’s Collected Works”, p. 625.

22 Ding Ling: “Written Before the Third Performance”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 106.

of acting skills among the performers. On the one hand, this was due to a lack of preliminary preparations. On the other hand, it was the result of the Corps' prior performances of *Assault*. Ding Ling pointed out: "Our audience was either soldiers or workers and peasants, so our goal was only to educate and encourage them to mobilize and organize. Thus, during the five months that we were in Shanxi, we were welcomed by the locals everywhere. But because of a lack of time, we were unable to develop and improve performance skills quickly."²³ Nie Gannu, who participated in the creation of the script, saw this clearly. He pointed out simply and bluntly:

None of them had any acting experience and I was afraid that they may not even be interested or have any understanding of theater. They come out of universities and high schools in Beijing and Shanghai, having studied politics and national revolution with great fervor and enthusiasm. [. . .] But as for acting, I honestly and bluntly have to say: They're amateurs! Maybe they think it's enough to memorize some lines or have a dialogue onstage, as long as their actions and the plot are not completely disconnected. To them, acting is merely temporary and none of them treated it like a lifelong career – why bother? But now they understand: even amateur acting is not easy. They know that their performances are shoddy, and even if they receive the applause of peasants and soldiers who have never seen a play before, they know that it's not enough for the stage of an urban audience.²⁴

Generally speaking, the performance of *Assault* was a success.²⁵ This was primarily thanks to Sai Ke's skills as a director.²⁶ Chen Ming wrote: "Sai Ke put

23 Ding Ling: "The Corps' Shaanxi Performances", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 104.

24 Nie Gannu: "A Brief Talk with the Director and Actor of *Assault*", a collective creation by the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: *Life on the Western Front*, p. 33.

25 While the reviews at the time were mainly encouraging and positive, in retrospect many reviews were also exaggerated. Chen Ming recollected: "*Assault*" was about the people's resistance in Shanxi. Because it was written quickly, the script was relatively mediocre, but the stage setting and atmosphere embodied the Shanxi rural battlefield. Coupled with the support of mass organizations and media reports, "*Assault*" achieved a certain impact in Xi'an." Dictated by Chen Ming, compiled by Zha Zhenke and Li Xiangdong: *50 Years of Ding Ling and I – Memoirs of Chen Ming*, p. 56.

26 Sai Ke (1906-1988), formerly known as Chen Ningqiu, was born in Ba County, Hebei. He attended Shanghai University of the Arts in 1927 and later enrolled in the Nanguo Academy of Arts. Sai Ke had multiple talents. First, he was an actor. He performed in the dramas "Nara", "In the World", "The Return of the South", the movie "Shared Enmity", "The Romance of Huashan", etc. Second, he was a playwright and composer. Representative plays include "Thirty Millions of Refugees", "*Assault*", etc., and important songs include "Defense of Lugou Bridge", "Complete Anti-Japanese War",

in a lot of effort and his artistic cultivation was extremely valuable.”²⁷ The performers’ efforts was also key, as Nie Gannu wrote: “For many days, they had not (knowingly) been tirelessly trying to figure out their roles’ every little expression and movement, especially not those who took on roles that were very different from their personalities. [. . .] They worked so hard to achieve what they had previously thought was impossible!”²⁸

However, it must be pointed out that the performance of *Assault* actually contains a certain paradox. One problem is the contradiction between the stage performance and the goal of popularization. Prior to the performance, Ding Ling pointed out: “*Assault* is realistic, so although it has proper lighting and beautiful scenery, it is still popular because it is based on the masses and depicts the most common theme in guerilla zones, while correctly pointing out the proper path that the public should take.”²⁹ But Ding Ling quickly realized: “The general public still cannot accept this kind of art. They prefer traditional shows, like erhuang (二簧) big drums, and cross talk. [. . .] So for the second performance, we will try to provide some popular sideshows filled with anti-Japanese spirit.”³⁰ Therefore, they adjusted the second performance. Ge Mao said: “During this performance, we did some local sideshows and tricks that made people laugh, such as *kuaiban* (快板), Chinese bass drum, cooperation performances, cross talk, new melodies, victory dances, and so forth. However, the audience did not laugh at this. Though these theater forms were traditional, we imbued them with new meaning. These forms were not accepted with no choice, they have been criticized and nit-picked at before.”³¹

Another problem is the contradiction between propaganda mobilization and commercial performance. Originally, as a propaganda group, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps implemented a funding system without considering fi-

“Coming in February”, etc. Third, he was a director. His works include: “Thirty Million Refugees”, “Ironed Car”, etc. See “Sai Ke Chronology”, *Howler – Sai Ke Collected Works*, pp. 769-794.

27 Chen Ming: “Comrade Sai Ke and the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps”, *New Literature and Historical Materials*, Issue 1, 1980.

28 Nie Gangnu: “A Brief Talk with the Director and Actor of “*Assault*”, a collective creation by the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: *Life on the Western Front*, pp. 33-34.

29 Ding Ling: “Written Before the Third Performance”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 106.

30 Ding Ling: “The Corps’ Shaanxi Performances”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 105.

31 Ge Mao: “Speaking of Renovation”, a collective creation by the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: *Life on the Western Front*, pp. 36.

nances at all. However, while performing onstage, the problem became more apparent. The most practical issue was the cost of renting the venue. Sai Ke pointed out the pros and cons from the beginning: "Yisushe is the best choice. The conditions of the venue are good, but the rent is also very high!"³² Sai Ke was evidently more familiar with the economic operations of theaters. As the Corps had to consider financial issues, it fell into contradictions: on the one hand, public performances mainly served as propaganda, and since the performances had the nature of public performances, ticket prices had to be low. On the other hand, if ticket prices were too low, then revenue and expenditure became unbalanced and the Corps could not operate at a stable level.³³ And a related issue is that performing programs like "erhuang, big drums, cross talk" was conducive to popularity. So if ticket prices were set according to large-scale performances, then the audience would probably not want to watch these "circus acts," and it is uncertain how long the Corps could last.

It is not insignificant that Ding Ling said, when summing up her experience with the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: "The development of drama during the Second Sino-Japanese War took place on the streets and in the squares of rural villages, not on the city stage. Because of material limitations on time, location, and so on, we had to study how to create street dramas. And it is these experiences, combined with issues of costume, props, makeup, lighting, that others can consider."³⁴ It can be seen that the experience of performing in urban environments did not actually capture Ding Ling's attention or thinking.

32 Li Xiangdong and Wang Zengru: *Biography of Ding Ling* (Part 1), p. 190.

33 Regarding the cost of tickets, Gao Peizhi, the president of the Yisushe, suggested that it be eight jiao or one yuan, but Ding Ling set the price as two or four jiao. Ding Ling's reasoning was: "We are doing propaganda work, not trying to make a profit. In order to allow more people to watch the show, our tickets have to be set at this price." As a result, Ding Ling said: "We lost money. Although the amount we made from the tickets was enough to pay for renting the theater, we could not cover other performance expenses, such as sets, props, costumes, etc." In the end, the rent for the whole venue was supposed to be 750 yuan, but Gao Peizhi only charged 200 yuan, which relieved their financial burden. See Ding Ling, "The Yisushe and Northwest Front-Line Service Corps", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (10), pp. 289-291.

34 Ding Ling: "Attention to the Corps Prior to Departure", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 114.

3. Turning to Traditional Theater: Reform Attempts and Problems

The Northwest Front-Line Service Corps conducted a total of three performances with the help of the Yisushe Theater. The changes between the earlier and later performances were great: the first performance was a drama, the second was based on quyi performances, and the third transitioned into traditional theater. Every change was based deeply on the reality of their circumstances. The turn to traditional theater had a lot to do with Xi'an's literary and artistic environment. Ding Ling pointed out: “After being in Xi'an for several months, I began to acutely recognize the immense power of traditional theater. Traditional theater is entrenched in the general public, Yisushe, Qinfengshe, Jinfengshe, the world stage [. . .] the crowds are always packed and enthusiasts were able to appreciate and inquire about the dramas because they had relatively deep knowledge and new mindsets, despite not having received much education.” Ding Ling was clearly aware of the division between drama and traditional theater; each has their own audiences, whereas what “occupied almost everyone, including the different levels of the audience in the traditional theater, was only *Si Lang's Visit to his Mother, Three Trials* [. . .] and so on.”³⁵ This was no small excitement for Ding Ling. In order to “attract audiences and perform the mission of saving the nation,” the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps “before leaving Xi'an, rehearsed these two plays with great effort, hoping to serve as a reference to the traditional theater world.”³⁶ If “attracting audiences” was mainly based on propaganda effect, then “hoping to serve as a reference to the traditional theater world” implies an intention to reform traditional theater and establish new norms. This approach is ambitious and they had to think over how to implement it.

In order for the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps to perform traditional dramas, the first problem it faced was the script. The traditional theater troupe could not provide a suitable script and Ding Ling and others did not have experience in writing traditional dramas. Ding Ling said: “After deciding to perform traditional theater, I happened to come across two scripts by Lao She. We discussed it and took it upon ourselves to adapt it. I believed that the content was still usable. And there weren't many characters in the play, so we could just

35 Ding Ling: “Written Before the Third Performance”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 106-107.

36 Ding Ling: “Written Before the Third Performance”, *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 107.

barely pull it off.”³⁷ Lao She’s scripts, *A Portrait of Loyalty* and *Patriotic Female Martyrs*, were anti-Japanese propaganda in the form of Peking Opera.³⁸ Strictly speaking, these two scripts were close to traditional opera in terms of plot and setting. In *A Portrait of Loyalty*, Chen Zixiu’s younger brother Chen Zili joined the army to fight the Japanese and died heroically. Chen Zixiu and his brother’s widow buried him in a coffin and held memorial services. Afterwards, they encountered Japanese soldiers. Widow Chen escaped, but was captured by the bandit Zhao Hu and became his wife. Finally, Widow Chen and Zhao Hu agreed on a set of rules, inspiring him to become an anti-Japanese hero. The character at the start of the play said: “Old man Chen Zixiu, a native of Chunxian County, Shandong. A lover of poetry as a child with no intention of riches and honor, who loved spending time at home. Every day he taught his sons and nephews how to read. He was carefree and at ease. Who knew that Japan was invading, attacking Pingjin, destroying my city, killing my people, how aggravating and hateful!” Chen Zixiu sang while paying tribute to his brother:

(*jiaotou* 叫头) Brother! Self-excitement! Brother scared! (Sing *erhuangdaoban* 唱二黄倒板)

The cenotaph, I can’t help it, tears are rolling! (*dingban* 顶板)
For the country, lost his life, utter devotion! (*yuanban* 原板)
Hate that, ambitious, little Japan,
In the first six years, without reason, invaded Manchuria.
The next year, urging people, Rehe invaded,
My China, jinshanhe, four provinces no longer exist!
To this day, bolder and more provocative Northern China,
Be at ease, destroy my country, swallow it whole.
Good man, bloody, who can bear it?
Kill them, protect the country, then you are a good citizen.

37 Ding Ling: "Written Before the Third Performance", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 107.

38 *A Portrait of Loyalty* was written in February 1938, originally published in the first issue of *The Position of Literature and Art* on April 16, 1938, and *Patriotic Female Martyrs* was originally published in the first issue of volume 2 of *Drama of the War of Resistance* on May 25, 1938. These two scripts are included in *The Complete Works of Lao She* (4), China Drama Publishing House, 1985 edition, pp. 15-48. The title of *Patriotic Female Martyrs* was changed to "Sister Xue" in "The Complete Works of Lao She". The quotation in this article is based on this version. No additional notes need to be made.

Although the content of the play tried to focus on the war, without these changes to the characters and background and the “self-introduction” technique used at the start of the play, the tone of the characters is hardly any different from that of traditional theater.

A Portrait of Loyalty's stage adaptation mainly used the “new wine in old bottles” method. The incompatibility between the old and new forms is an unavoidable problem. Lao She wanted to be innovative: “The Japanese in the play are difficult to arrange. Teach them to face paint and somersault. Although this is consistent with the stylized convention, it is difficult to see them at a glance because they are hidden; [. . .] Fortunately, I remembered that there were several gun-toting, tall-nosed “assistants” in *Flying Fork Troupe* [Nao Kunyang], so I borrowed them. *Flying Fork Troupe* is a martial arts play from the Yu School. I've seen Yu Zhenting perform in person. Yu's performance as a martial artist is different from Mei Lanfang's. Yu sent Western devils on stage, so it's not that I deliberately mess around, and destroy the integrity of the play. Onstage, several Japanese soldiers were beaten; this was far more effective than the four “heroes” and their “big defeat and retreat.” But the problem was still evident: “The old structure was indeed convenient; in a pinch, it is necessary to use it. But it is a pity that it is not easy to change, and therein lies the difficulty.” Moreover, the content of *A Portrait of Loyalty* is not a small problem, either. For example, for the bandit leader Zhao Hu to throw himself into the anti-Japanese fight, he must rely on Widow Chen's *Three Chapters of Contract Law* to bind and motivate himself. The addition of similar plot elements into the play was evidently meant to appeal to the masses, but Lao She realized: “The most daring scene of the play is when Widow Chen “obeys” the bandit leader Zhao Hu [. . .] First, this destroys traditional morality; second, this demonstrates that in order to save the country, men and women both have to throw themselves into this work, disregarding their very flesh; third, this point out the reality that the Japanese raped and killed women everywhere, so why shouldn't women commit themselves to their own soldiers? However, although this is true, whether it can pass onstage is another question.”¹ Such a plot setting is both simplistic and vulgar, and Lao She's explanation is forced.

From the perspective of stage performances, Ding Ling and others selected

1 Lao She: “*A Portrait of Loyalty* - introductory note”, *The Complete Works of Lao She* (4), pp. 16-17.

Lao She's plays for another reason: "Because there are not many characters in the play, we can manage to pull it off." The problem is that the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps not only lacked directors, playwrights, and actors, but also had no experience in performing old dramas. "As for the actors, they have probably never seen these plays, let alone performed them. Now we are boldly rehearsing this play to be performed in just ten days. This is because we developed courage as a result of doing this work; lack of skills was to be expected."² Ultimately, *A Portrait of Loyalty* and *Patriotic Female Martyrs* were staged in the form of Peking Opera and *Qinqiang* [Shaanxi Opera]. They received support and cooperation from Yisushe's director. Ding Ling said: "Yet, it is not only our group's comrades who support this performance. We are incredibly thankful and have much respect for Mr. Pei Dongli's direction of *A Portrait of Loyalty*. We are also grateful for the patient guidance of the directors of *Patriotic Female Martyrs*, Wang Zhenhua and Xiao Runhua, and the help of Yisushe directors Gao Peizhi and Yang Shan. In addition, Jiang Zhigong, Sum Baoming, Ru Yuzhong have all put in great effort to help our performance. I would like to thank them all here."³ It is evident that in performing traditional theater, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps adopted the attitude and method of "bring it." They obviously did not think deeply about the deeper issues in reforming traditional theater like Lao She did. Ding Ling even went so far as to claim that their performance should be used "as a reference for the traditional theater world."

Conclusion

In summarizing their experience, especially in the "improvised" performance, the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps described: "We only had two weeks to prepare and write the script for our first performance of *Assault*." During those two weeks, we divided each day into throwing welcome parties to the various troupes and attending evening parties. What was most troublesome was creating the set, printing all kinds of materials, and going through the procedures. The entire group consisted of less than thirty people. The third performance of

2 Ding Ling: "Written Before the Third Performance", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 107.

3 Ding Ling: "Written Before the Third Performance", *The Complete Works of Ding Ling* (5), p. 107-108.

Qinqiang opera was also rushed as we only had two weeks to rehearse, but it received great praise.”⁴ Generally speaking, this is correct. However, if we open up the historical perspective, we can see that “improvised” literature and art have a deeper origin. Zhou Weidong pointed out that “improvised,” as an important form of political, military, and cultural practice, can be traced back to the Soviet era. The Chinese Communist Party, from the perspective of “integrated strategy,” gave “improvised” a brand-new meaning, specifically: “The significance of understanding specific affairs in the anti-Japanese revolutionary base starts with overall strategic needs. First there are strategic needs, then there are specific affairs. This mode of thinking was revealed in its entirety in the propaganda and mobilization of the base area.”⁵ The Northwest Front-Line Service Corps’ performance of “improvised” confirmed this. However, once we enter a specific historical context, as discussed in the article, “Improvised” implicates the complex relationship between propaganda and artistry, popular propaganda and commercial performance, and new and old forms of drama.

What merits further discussion is that in the Communist base areas, “improvised” literature and art is not just a short-term strategy for propaganda and wartime mobilization. It has fundamental significance as a literary concept. In May 1939, the inaugural issue of *Art Assault* pointed out: “The slow progress of the literary and art world is not because of a lack of regard, but rather because our work is often overly concerned with our own art, and therefore cannot be fully used for the resistance. It’s because our artists are often bound by old artistic habits, so they cannot adapt to the newly changed reality. The mobilization of the War of Resistance in the literary and art world has not reached the breadth and depth that it needs. This is the root of why art has been unable to make many achievements. [. . .] We need to go to the front line and see what life is like on the battlefield. However, there was not much mobilization on literary and art, and even fewer who could work in depth. We need to learn from the common people. However, there are still many people in our literary and art sphere who have always been wandering around the cities, making popular works behind closed

4 The Work Report of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps in October,” a collective creation of the Northwest Front-Line Service Corps: *Life on the Western Front*, pp. 217.

5 Zhou Weidong: “Introduction to ‘Assault Culture’ and Yan’an Literature”, *Research Series of Modern Chinese Literature*, Issue 2, 2008.

doors.”⁶ In fact, what is proposed here is that literary and art creation should directly cut into life in a “sudden” way, re-learn and re-establish the relationship between art and reality; on this foundation, we can open new creative paths and create new works.

The concept and practice of “improvised performance” literature and art undoubtedly created the unique form of Chinese literature and art during the war. However, this concept has not been satisfactorily resolved in practice. It still perpetually plagued artists in the revolutionary base area and buried the seeds of disagreement in Yan ’an literature and art circles.

Translator’s Bio:

Chelsea Shieh is currently a J.D. Candidate at Duke University School of Law. She was born and raised in New York City and obtained her B.A. in Anthropology from Columbia University.

6 “The General Mobilization of the Spirit of the Literary and Artistic Circles – Foreword to an Innovative Periodical, May 25, 1939, Art Assault, Volume 1, Issue 1.