

# The 2005 World War II Essay Contest

Third Place

## **Development of New Yangge and Its Role in China During**

**WWII**

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*Yangge*, often translated as “rice-sprout song”, is a type of song-and-dance form that originated in Northern China. The form and style of *yangge* varied from place to place, and was performed in both cities and villages. The original *yangge* “generally involved a troupe of twenty to thirty male performers, with men playing women’s roles”.<sup>1</sup> This original form of *yangge* was pure entertainment. Dancing, singing, clowning, and colorful costumes were all important to *yangge*, and *yangge* storylines often involved flirtation and sexual themes.

The form of *yangge* this paper is concerned with is the “new” *yangge*: the form developed out of the 1942 “Yan’an Forum”. The goal was not to

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<sup>1</sup> Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 230

reproduce any authentic regional *yangge* forms but to exploit *yangge* as a means of communication. By adapting the dances, songs, and variety acts collectively known as *yangge*, the Communists were able to communicate with a large audience. Certain “negative” aspects of traditional *yangge*, such as servility to landlords, clowning acts, erotic gestures, and love dances were replaced by new, modern, and uplifting ideas.<sup>2</sup> New *yangge* subjects and storylines carried mass-mobilizing political messages including literacy, women’s rights, and fighting the Japanese.<sup>3</sup> *Yangge* was very effective for painting a utopian picture of China under Communist rule. The Communists’ ability to exploit *yangge* and reach a wide audience was important to both their success over the Nationalists and the Japanese. In this paper, I will examine the use of *yangge* and *yangge* performance troops and their role during the later years of the Sino-Japanese War.

In the mid-1920s, researchers of the Mass Education Movement made a serious effort to collect the *yangge* of Dingxian, Hebei. The researchers noticed the educational potential of this well-liked, traditional art, and published a collection of *yangge* plays entitled *Dingxian yangge xuan* (*Dingxian Plantation Songs*) in 1933.<sup>4</sup> The work of the Mass Education

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 231

<sup>3</sup> Richard Curt Kraus, *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 62

<sup>4</sup> Hung, 230

Movement in Dingxian later inspired the Communists in Yan'an to realize the potential of *yangge* as a communication medium.

The *Yangge* Movement in Shaan-Gan-Ning was launched as a definite decision by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership.<sup>5</sup> The use of *yangge* as a means of communication was not a sudden development but a planned succession of organized stages.<sup>6</sup> By allowing the *Yangge* Movement time to develop, the performance troupes were able to revise scripts, titles, characters, and other elements to reach their audience in the best way possible. The Luyi Propaganda Troupe, later known as the Luyi Yangge Troupe, was the first model troupe to perform new *Yangge*. Although at first the troupe's performances adhered to the old *yangge* traditions, some suggestions from both Party officials and audience members encouraged the troupe to modernize.

In late February of 1943, the Luyi Propaganda Troupe began performing "*Xiongmei kaihuang*" ("Brother and Sister Clear Wasteland"), the first new *yangge* play. This play also gained from communication with the audience: The original title, "*Wang Xiao'er kaihuang*" ("Little Wang the Second Clears Wasteland"), was changed to "*Xiongmei kaihuang*" after

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<sup>5</sup> David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 216

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 217

audiences insisted on changing the name.<sup>7</sup> *Xiongmei kaihuang* enjoyed great popularity with many performances, and “became the model play for the subsequent *Yangge* Movement”.<sup>8</sup>

Following the success of *Xiongmei kaihuang*, the Party’s Central Cultural Committee met on March 22, 1943, where they discussed the “‘question of the direction of the drama movement’ for all the CCP’s anti-Japanese base areas”.<sup>9</sup> It was during this conference that the intention to build a mass drama movement became clear. To encourage mass creativity and increase the number of *yangge* plays available, the Party advocated a policy of “self-composition” and “self-performance”. This policy encouraged the writers and actors to communicate with the village peasants to make their plays reflect “real people and real events”: the lifestyle of the particular area. “The general slogan, proposed by Kai Feng, became: ‘Content: what is needed by the Resistance War; Form: whatever the masses understand.’”<sup>10</sup>

Concerning what the masses understand, part of the success of *Xiongmei kaihuang* was its simplicity. Composer and musicologist Cheng Anbo (usually known as An Bo) wrote, “The actors have already become

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 225-7. The name “Wang” in the original title came from the surname of Wang Dahua, the original actor playing the role.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 225

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

their most intimate friends. This is because it [*Xiongmei kaihuang*] only has two roles and a very simple plot, very simple props, and three easy-to-sing melodies”.<sup>11</sup> With such great success of *Xiongmei kaihuang* and the Central Cultural Committee’s stance of “whatever the masses understand”, *yangge* performances increased in frequency and continued their function as a propaganda tool.

To place greater emphasis on the moral and educational messages of new *yangge*, plays began to center more on the acting rather than dances. The plays continued to have to anti-Japanese themes, but *yangge* plays in the years 1943 and 1944 also instilled national spirit by addressing social issues and proposing positive solutions. In *War and Popular Culture*, Chang-tai Hung lists some of these new *yangge* topics:

“Communist *yangge* plays manufactured a host of new themes to paint a bright society bursting with energy and joy: sexual equality (*Twelve Sickles* [*Shi'erba liandao*]); female model workers (*A Red Flower* [*Yiduo honghua*]); anti-illiteracy campaigns (*Husband and Wife Learn to Read* [*Fuqi shizi*]); the founding of the new peasant associations (*Qin Luo Zheng*); local elections: an indication of democracy at the grass-roots level (*A Red Flower*); rural hygiene (*An Old Midwife Enters the Training Class* [*Laoniangpo zhu xunlian*]); the harmonious relationship between the Red Army and the people (*Niu Yonggui Is Wounded* [*Niu Yonggui guacai*]); and the correct leadership of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party (*An Honor Lamp* [*Guangrong deng*]).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 236, quoting An Bo, “You Luyi de yangge chuangzao”.

<sup>12</sup> Hung, 231

In addition to promoting nationalism and the aims of the CCP, the *yangge* movement gave the CCP a considerable advantage over the Nationalists in communicating with civilians and their own troops. Many regions used a form of *yangge* similar to that of Yan'an as a form of 'bush television'. Holm writes:

"...Production of plays was co-ordinated on the level of the sub-region, and whenever there was a change of policy that affected peasants or a particularly important development in national or international news, writers and artists were mobilized to write scripts and scores, which were then distributed to the country-level propaganda bureaux in the form of cheap mimeographed booklets, which would then go on tour in the countryside. The message could be carried even to fairly remote areas within twenty days or so of a Party directive".<sup>13</sup>

This mass-produced method of informing civilians of current events was effective because a single *yangge* troop did not have to embark on any extensive performance tours- once the plays and music were in distribution, local *yangge* troupes could arrange their own productions of the news.

The *Yangge* Movement did help the Communists spread their ideology through the border region, and it did help the Communists boost morale and inspire their troops to battle both the Japanese and the Nationalists. Use of *yangge* to inform citizens and troops of news events was also influential to the Party's success. *Yangge* was effective as a means

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<sup>13</sup> Holm, 319

of communication, for *yangge* performances enabled the Party to reach many people at once. Through the adaptation and modification of this traditional art, the use of *yangge* proved helpful to the Party's campaigns against Japan and against the Nationalists.

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