

Ruling the Stage

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF OPERA
IN SICHUAN FROM THE QING
TO THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



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IGOR IWO CHABROWSKI

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the Qing to the People's Republic of China*

By

Igor Iwo Chabrowski



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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

In loving memory of my father, Krzysztof Chabrowski (1939–2017)



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Introduction

This book is about the creation, reform, and manipulation of culture in nineteenth- and twentieth-century China. It analyzes opera—the most popular and widespread genre in cultural production, which transcended divisions between the popular and the elite—in its development from a Qing temple festival to communist revolutionary art. I look at how opera was produced, whom it served, and why it changed in order to reveal its role in the social and political processes that shaped China over the past two centuries.

For almost half a millennium, opera stood at the center of China's social life. Whenever it was performed, multiple forces congregated, interacted, and contended in it, in order to manifest their power, beliefs, and political vision. Every time this medium of unmatched popularity with the tightest grip on people's mentality materialized, it became a space for contestation and struggle. The temptation to control it, regulate it, and speak through it—to rule this prerequisite of power, which reached the depths of Chinese communities—was not lost on anyone with political ambition and authority, whether a village elder, pompous warlord, or communist dictator. Indeed, opera was not a perennial tradition, textual orthodoxy, or religious ritual, nor was it just a form of art and performance, a place (a theater stage, a dining hall, a garden), or a text (a script, a synopsis, a book). Instead, it was a social space and a social institution, which implies a dynamic and continuous interaction and struggle between various social, cultural, political, legal, and economic forces that constitute the communities and societies at each level, starting with a city ward or a village and ending with an empire or a twentieth-century nation-state.¹ The results of this interaction, in form of text, performance, ritual, or place, all bespeak of the complexity, mutability, and historicity of this social space. Every time an opera was produced, it participated in the contact with the broader forces shaping Chinese life during late imperial and Republican times.

My perspective on opera is consciously provincial: instead of analyzing the history of the hegemonic centers of Beijing and Shanghai, I focus on Sichuan: a land settled by migrants of every origin in the eighteen and nineteen centuries. Before the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, it was one of the country's most prosperous and yet traditional provinces; during the Republic, it became an isolated island in the grip of outrageous warlords that, in 1938, within a year

1 I am following Michel de Certeau's use of the concept of appropriation and exploitation of space, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 97–98.

after the outbreak of war with Japan, unexpectedly became China's capital region. After 1945, Sichuan remained provincial yet, at the same time, important: it was among the country's most populous provinces, with copious natural resources, a window on Tibet and Southeast Asia, and the birthplace of many top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (Gongchandang 共產黨; CCP). Equally, Sichuan's culture consisted of both parochial and cosmopolitan elements, some of which mingled, whereas others led a parallel existence with broader developments. By the mid-twentieth century, the defining push for change in this province's sociocultural and political life came from the national centers of political power. When these transformative forces appeared, with an "invasion" of the Nationalist-run government and millions of migrants, then followed by the communist forces, they acted with a full spectrum of force. In a very short time, the intellectual, ideological, and political forces that revolutionized China exploded in Sichuan and made it a center of the country's transformation in the coming years. Thus, the history of Sichuan, especially the story of its opera, not only is local but also sheds light on the historical experience of the entire continent-country of China.

In this book, therefore, I analyze opera as a predominantly social phenomenon, occurring in a western province of China. Not only was the development of opera caught in the broadening web of the political forces shaping the country in the past three hundred years but it also contributed to this country's historical evolution and expressed this period's cultural, political, and social dynamics. My main questions are: what place did opera occupy in society? Why was it important and to whom? How did it work (how was it organized, by whom, and for what), and why did it change from the mid-Qing to the 1950s? How did opera affect the cultural, political, and social changes, and how did it reflect them? If we treat opera as a space for social interaction, even in the smallest social units, can it then inform us about the bottom-up social history of China through the era of reform, war, and revolution? And, as the forces of cross-regional and global integration progressively expanded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, how did these forces affect opera, and what can opera tell us about them?

To answer these questions, I look at three fundamental aspects of opera's development: artistic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical. To explore the artistic change, I look into the transformations in the way in which opera was produced, who made them, and which media were used to propagate it. By analyzing the sociocultural history of this theatrical art, I examine the transformation of a religious performance into commercial art, while researching the transmission and maintenance of the traditional aesthetics and knowledge in the novel environments of the industrializing and modernizing cities in the twentieth

century. I investigate the role of opera in creating and recreating the communities of imagination, knowledge, identity, and values in twentieth-century China. In my research on opera's sociopolitical role, I ask about the changes in how opera worked as a social institution. Moreover, I analyze the way in which opera—a vector of “tradition”—challenged the new Republican political culture and the emergent intelligentsia's (and party cadres') visions of their new “modern” culture.

To examine these areas of interest, I divide my analysis into three parts, which are simultaneously chronological and thematic. Part 1 dips into the origins of opera in Sichuan. It shows that the diversity of genres and tunes related to the subethnic origins of the majority of the province's population consisted of recent migrants from almost every corner of China. At the same time, I discuss the role that opera played in these communities, how it affected their social, spatial, economic, and cultural realms, and how it became one of the constituent elements defining communal identity. Concurrently, I demonstrate the unequal distribution of theater performances within the province and discuss what it could mean for our understanding of social life in Sichuan under the Qing. Finally, I analyze the relationship between popular local operatic traditions and the officialdom that represented the imperial state. Using documents held by the two Qing county-level archives, of Ba 巴 (approx. present-day city Chongqing 重慶) and Nanbu 南部 (approx. present-day Nanchong 南充 Municipality) Counties, I argue that opera-community and the powerholders were not antagonistic but remained entwined by the laws, precedence, and religious practices to which the state extended protection within its limited (and diminishing) means.

Part 2 is devoted to the momentous institutional reconstruction of the theater, which was initiated by the late Qing's New Policies (Xinzheng 新政, after 1901) and lasted until the communist revolution in 1949. Through documentation from Ba County, Chengdu 成都, and the Chongqing Municipal Archives, I show that opera spurred by two unrelated policies—the imperial decree on the Company Law of 1904, which permitted the establishment of joint stock companies, and the founding of the police department—entered a realm of commercial entertainment and colonized Sichuan cities. This “urbanization” of a previously festive art, which had been predominantly bound to religious holidays, caused a desacralization of opera, a migration of talent from the countryside to larger centers, social advancement of the actors, and a proliferation of large, settled, and well-funded theaters. The main result of this process, much of which was complete by the 1920s, was the birth of Sichuan Opera—a multitune style that emerged from the coalescence of local forms into one artistic form. All these could have happened because of a symbiosis of opera

with the police force: a development in which the law and order authorities abandoned their reformist agenda of the early Republican period and linked their budgets to the hefty returns from the theater business. This policy was dubbed “suppression” (*tanya* 彈壓), but, in reality, it was a tax and a protection racket. During the Republic, those who were not protected by the police, who typically resided outside the larger towns, suffered extortion or became pawns of the local powerholders and often had to move to the cities. Consequently, the main provincial centers, Chongqing and Chengdu, evolved into true cultural and entertainment capitals, in which the opera business bloomed hand in hand with the banks and trading houses, forming new city centers and new urban cultures.

The evolution of the institutional framework for staging opera and the urban centers was integral to changes in the actors' careers. Beginning with the New Policies, several exceptionally talented, entrepreneurial, and savvy actors exploited the novel sociopolitical conditions and put the acting profession on a socially upward path. They used their contacts with urban elites and the new legal ramifications of the opera business to build large permanent troupes-cum-theater schools and to make these establishments into the most important cultural centers in Chengdu and Chongqing. In effect, at least among the economic winners, previously minuscule and often drab troupes evolved into sizable and well-endowed institutions comfortably located in the liveliest city quarters.

In the last chapter in Part 2, I research the content of this new urbanized Republican opera culture, analyzing the staging practices and the content of plays. I first provide a case study based on a database of Chongqing's opera advertisements on the cusp of the 1920s and 1930s. With a yearly repertoire exceeding a thousand plays, Chongqing opera houses catered to a whimsical audience greedy for entertainment. At the same time, these advertisements provide indisputable evidence of the success in adopting traditional stories to modernizing and secularizing urban Sichuan. Reading this repertoire, a majority of which consisted of historical plays, I emphasize the cultural values it transmitted and show its influence in structuring Republican urban culture. Furthermore, I discuss opera's impact on the popular understanding of the political and social reality in Sichuan in the 1920s and 1930s.

In Part 3, I focus on the transformative period that started in the mid-1930s, continued through the War of Resistance, and ended in the autumn of 1952, with the nationalization of local opera by the CCP. In this period, opera first came under attack by provincial intellectuals who were inspired by the nationwide iconoclastic movement in the arts and responded to calls for a politicized and “weaponized” performance art meant to serve the anti-Japanese struggle.

Then, with the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and China, opera fell into the hands of increasingly powerful government authorities that were poised to exploit its popularity and its ability to have an emotional impact on the audiences.

In the opening chapter in this part, I focus on the growing indigenous discourse on the role of culture and the performing arts among the local journalistic intelligentsia. I contextualize the discourse of hostility toward popular opera by showing that it was related to four interconnected processes: an anti-Japanese patriotic awakening, national integration of the politicized intellectuals, a sense of defeat in the face of a resurgent and commercialized popular theater, and a turn away from universalistic cultural values toward a particularistic nationalism. The gap that grew between many members of Sichuan's intellectual elites and the opera world, provided a basis (and a language) for their integration with the national elite. During the Sino-Japanese war in 1937–1945, this discursive divide between the intelligentsia and the opera-going public legitimized the iconoclastic attacks on traditional theater.

In the remaining two chapters, I demonstrate that the grand remaking of both opera and the method for running theaters were born out of cooperation between the left-wing Shanghai intelligentsia (with eager Sichuan accomplices) and the wartime government of the Nationalist Party (Guomindang 國民黨; GMD). After 1949, the same needs, ideas, and institutional solutions that underlined GMD's involvement with theater were implemented with more energy and stunning results by the CCP. These reforms, which militarized the performing arts and turned them into propaganda tools, created new organizational forms, established control mechanisms, and institutionalized the system of dissemination.

My argument is built upon an analysis of the rich published and archival documentation from the war period and the first years of the People's Republic, mainly but not solely from the Chongqing Municipal Archives. The intellectuals' and the government's infatuation with spoken drama and its large-scale development in Sichuan led to the creation of a system of cultural production attached to the civilian and military institutions of the state, which effectively harnessed the arts for political ends. Because audiences were not thrilled with European-style drama, traditional opera bloomed, irrespective of punitive taxation and sumptuary laws. Dramatists and art circles also grew disgruntled, seeing that their work was failing to achieve the mission in which they fervently believed. As the years of war sapped morale, the idea of using "traditional" performing arts to transmit political content became aligned with the programs of the political parties. The organizational success of the Nationalists legacy had two legacies. The GMD created a mechanism for cultural work on a statewide

scale, in which art could be ideologically or at least economically subordinate to the government. The Nationalists also thought up an organization for cultural work that attached theater troupes to the army and production units.

After the communist victory in Sichuan in December 1949, although traditional opera came to the fore, religious plays were banished, and certain organizational changes took place, the theater world was left in the hands of the local leadership and lingered in confusion. Only following the outbreak of the Korean War, the CCP used its power to sever the theater from its social roots, streamline the repertoire and stage production, take over the ownership of the theaters and troupes, and create the means for researching the plays and spreading state propaganda. After 1952, Sichuan Opera became truly a national heritage and a national art, which had profound implications not only for the careers of the actors (some of whom were stellar, indeed) but also for opera. As opera lost its often deeply parochial and diverse character, it entered the realm of the written word, institutionalized education, national cultural policy, and political contingency. It steamed ahead into the dangerous and violent waters of Maoist China.

The inspiration for this book comes from an observation that, irrespective of recent significant achievements in understanding the history of socio-institutional structures of Chinese society, the question of the complex relations between local, state-wide, and global dynamics is still understudied.

Research on particular institutions, such as native-place associations (co-provincial halls, *huiguan* 會館) and teahouses, although very inspiring and productively enriching our vision of China's social complexity, often put an exaggerated emphasis on a "place" as a topic of history while sidelining the people's agency in how these loci were utilized and how their use changed over time.² The work of scholars such as William T. Rowe and Wang Di in studying these organizations, valuable as they are, demonstrated them as reflections of the fledging or existing "public sphere," as defined by Jürgen Habermas: forms

2 William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796–1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); idem, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Wang Di, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); idem, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); idem, *The Teahouse under Socialism: The Decline and Renewal of Public Life in Chengdu, 1950–2000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); Wang Rigen 王日根, *Zhongguo huiguan shi 中國會館史 [History of Chinese Huiguan]* (Shanghai: Dongfang chubans zhongxin, 2007); Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

of anti-state organization that granted breathing space to Chinese society under imperial oppression. As Frederic Wakeman, Jr., highlighted, because of the limited suitability of Habermas's conceptual framework to China, insufficient attention to historical continuities across Ming-Qing history, and certain paradoxes in interpreting the entwined nature of the state-led and gentry- or merchant-led institutions, such an approach is problematic at best.³ Free of such theoretical hurdles, Stephen A. Smith's studies on labor unions were inevitably linked to the urban history of Shanghai and to the development of the CCP, having in this respect limited application to the less-industrialized or predominantly rural regions in China. Nevertheless, Smith presented an analysis of the social dynamic in which institutional networks constructed during Qing times were altered, exploited, and redefined by the nationalist and communist movements, without losing sight of the personal and organizational agencies or substituting them with some cumbersome theoretical framework.⁴

Similar, in this respect, are the multiple studies of Ming and Qing societies undertaken from the perspective of historical anthropology or religious history, which revealed, among other things, the role of lineage, temple community, and military organization in providing multilayered, locally specific forms of social life in China and filled the social space between the lofty imperial bureaucracy and the individual.⁵ From the perspective of the culture-society matrix, studies of religion appear to be most insightful because many of them recognize the crucial relevance of regional opera.⁶ The detailed research on

3 Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (April 1993): 108–138.

4 Stephen A. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses: Nationalism and Labor in Shanghai, 1895–1927* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

5 Some important works following this methodological approach include David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). See also "The Historical Anthropology of Chinese Society," <http://www.ha.cuhk.edu.hk> (accessed October 4, 2019).

6 See Sébastien Billoud and Joël Thoraval, *Le sage et le peuple: Le renouveau confucéen en Chine* (Paris: CNRS, 2014); Bu Jian 卜鍵, *Cong jisai dao xiqu 從祭賽到戲曲 [From Sacrificial Rituals to Opera]* (Taipei: Guojia chubanshe, 2008); Chen Peizhong 陳培仲, *Dangdai xiqu luncong 當代戲曲論叢 [Essays on Contemporary Drama]* (Taipei: Guojia chubanshe, 2011); Hu Tiancheng 胡天成 and Duan Ming 段明, *Ba Yu minsu xiju yanjiu 巴渝民俗戲劇研究 巴渝民俗戲劇研究 [Research of the Folk Opera in BaYu (i.e. Chongqing) Region]* (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2006); Vincent Goossaert, *Dans les temples de la Chine*, Sciences des religions (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000); Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011); Hu Tiancheng 胡天成, *Sichuansheng Jielong yangxi jielong duangongxi 四川省接龍陽戲接龍端公戲 [Jielong Opera of Sichuan Province, Jielong Shamanistic Opera]*, vols. 1–3 (Taipei: Ceituan

cultic practices in China provides an exceptionally rich spectrum of practices, beliefs, and institutions, stretching from hamlets in tropical Hainan Island to the immense state rituals in the northern capital of Beijing. Studies of ritual have introduced insights into the changing patterns of spirituality, the use and inheritance of meaning within the ritual practice, the evolution of popular mentality, the cultural links bounding social classes and ethnicities within the Chinese ecumene, the agencies of schools and individuals in shaping culture and beliefs, and the role of state and communities in organizing, managing and self-managing social life.

Yet the shortcomings of these studies provided the main inspiration for this book. Despite its laudable achievement for understanding Chinese history, studying religion focuses on ritual forms, canonical texts, and interaction with the spirits (by mediums, through possessions *et al.*), which, although meant to transmit meaning, are not voiced in a language that is broadly comprehensible to “the public.” Moreover, religious experiences in order to validate their efficacy resist change, thus guaranteeing their special role as a part of the sacrum, which can provide a pillar of legitimacy to the communities but not reflect the change occurring in them. Finally, however important and pervasive, religion does not constitute an entirety of any culture, but an aspect of it, interrelated with other forms of social practices and expressions of meaning.

Precisely in this place, we find the significance of studying opera. Chinese traditional theater grew out of the religious acts directed at the public in the vernacular and in association with festive events that mark the lives of families, lineages, communities, temples, and whole towns. Its ability to communicate

faren Shi Hezheng minus wenhua jijinhui, 1995); David Johnson, *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2009); Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Liu Zhen 劉禎, *Minjian xiuju yu xiqu lixue lun 民間戲劇與戲曲史學論 [Folk Opera and Historical Theory of Traditional Chinese Opera]* (Taipei: Guojia chubanshe, 2005); Tanaka Issei 田仲一成, Yun Guibin 雲桂彬 and Yu Yun 于允, trans., *Zhongguo xiju shi 中國戲劇史 [History of Chinese Opera]* (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 2002); Tanaka Issei 田仲一成; Bu He 布和, trans., *Zhongguo jisi xiju yanjiu 中國祭祀戲劇研究 [Research on Chinese Sacrificial Opera]* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008); Yang Qihong 楊秋紅, *Zhongguo gudai guixi yanjiu 中國古代鬼戲研究 [Research on Chinese Premodern Ghost Opera]* (Beijing: Zhongguo chuanmei daxue chubanshe, 2009); Zhang Junhua 章軍華, *Zhongguo nuoxi shi 中國傩戲史 [History of Chinese Nuo Opera]* (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe, 2014). Opera is not included in the most authoritative current work on Chinese religion thus begging for a more detailed treatment: Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely, and John Lagerwey, ed., *Modern Chinese Religion II* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

both sacred and mundane content paved its way to widespread success and granted it possession of the popular imagination unmatched by any other form of Chinese cultural production before or after. Studying opera allows us to observe the often-confusing development of historical Chinese society unhindered by the limits set by the narrowly defined “public space,” by modern political organizations, by the ritualized practices, by the particularized narratives of lineages, and by the state. Obviously, although far from a complete reflection of the historical experience, a study focused on the history of opera sheds light on society (at the local and translocal scale) in a process of change, from the bottom up, while creating and recreating its social space under the influence and within the limits set by the legal traditions, social needs, and political contingencies.

This book offers a rebalancing of our scholarly views on the history of the performing arts in China by emphasizing the diverse provincial experiences, rather than the much more widely researched capital culture. Indeed, more than a century and a half of various studies of what is now called Beijing Opera (both Chinese and Western) has distorted our understanding of the diachronic processes that shaped this primary element of Chinese popular culture. They also obscured the historical multiplicity of local developments, the dispersion and diffusion processes taking place across the country, and the variety of parallel paths of development that took place in a complex matrix of social, political, cultural, and economic forces shaping this enormous country over the past four centuries.

My contribution joins the already prominent voices of scholars such as David Johnson, Wing Chung Ng, and Tanaka Issei, who have presented the plurality of local Chinese operas across geographic regions and social strata.⁷ My approach differs from theirs by placing an even stronger focus on how the form, content, and social structure that make up the performing arts were formed through interactions of local and central (coming from the imperial/national capital and provincial centers of power) provenance. I emphasize the role of the market, law, travel, power, and cultural contact in how they shaped inland China. I reflect on the similarities and differences in the outcomes of these phenomena between Sichuan and other cultural frontiers (e.g., Guangdong and Hong Kong) and modern cross-cultural frontiers such as Shanghai. My goal is a dynamic study on the diachronic changes that provide us with a chronology and unique insights into the historical processes shaping China, not a snapshot of a passive, unchanging tradition (or piece of heritage)

⁷ Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Johnson, *Spectacle and Sacrifice*; Tanaka, *Zhongguo xiju*.

or a confirmation of other previously accepted narratives of countries past. It is my conviction that studying opera enables this kind of enriching reevaluation.

Treating opera as a social phenomenon both inevitably sidesteps in-depth discussion of the artistic development of the theater arts and subordinates textual and musical analysis to research on communities and institutions. Fortunately, Chinese theater has received detailed attention from scholars and aficionados, widely available in Chinese and to a lesser, but not less significant amount in Western languages. Indeed, little would be possible without *Records on Chinese Opera* (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 中國戲曲志), a twenty-nine-volume study of Chinese opera published in the 1980s and the 1990s and followed by additional volumes on local opera, storytelling, and so on. Invaluable as well are studies and translations by Wilt L. Idema and Steven H. West and both older and more recent scholarship by, among others, Liu Wenfeng 劉文峰, Liao Ben 廖本, Hu Tiancheng 胡天成, Andrea S. Goldman, Dana Kalvodová, Ye Xiaoqing, and Cecilia S. L. Zung. I am deeply indebted to many of these works and refer to them throughout the book as are these and other authors. A musicologist or a reader of literature might be somewhat disappointed with my approach, but it is my firm belief that I have still provided a thorough study for anyone interested in the social, cultural, and political history of China and the Chinese performing arts. Moreover, by offering a careful analysis of local dynamics contextualized at the regional, national, and global scale, I hope that this book will prove valuable to both scholars and students of history.

PART 1

Opera in Qing-Era Sichuan



Development of Opera in Qing-Era Sichuan

1 The Role of Opera in Qing Society

Without opera, life seemed tasteless. Whether during the birthday of the Lord of Sichuan (Chuanzhu 川主), or the mythical Emperor Yu (Da Yu 大禹) whom rich and poor revered the most in this far southwestern province, or when a profitable contract was to be signed by merchants who suffered an arduous journey to procure Sichuan's precious salt and medicines, or a plow manned by a local magistrate, who made the first cut through the red soil of the Chengdu plain—they would all disappear from the public memory if not for the dazzling music, words, masks, and gestures of the opera performers. It is hard to imagine the daily, monthly, and yearly routines of nineteenth-century Sichuan without the constant presence of opera in the background or at center stage. In fact, no one even tried to divide the ritual and festive from the reality of the times—opera was an obvious, potent, and essential part of the social and cultural space and time that made up the province's markets, towns, and cities. Opera, however, was not a central part of the social life in the province, in the sense that its absence could not invalidate ritual or contractual bonds that linked various members of society. In other words, opera made religious cults, friendships, contracts, public meetings, communal gatherings, legal judgments, birthdays, weddings, and funerals, and so forth public, splendid, efficacious, and memorable, but it was not a core or indispensable element of any of them.

The difference between the festivals, market days, or contract signing with or without opera, however, was striking and for important reasons. First, staging theatrical performances implied enriching the otherwise prescriptive, formal, or mundane activities with the joy, color, beauty, emotion, and, above all, meaning transmitted through music, singing, and dramatic verbal expression. Second, watching and listening to the sacred, fictional, and historical narratives of the opera legitimized the quotidian activities and decisions in which people engaged as individuals and members of society—that is, it enabled them to imagine that they and their decisions were related to and validated by the long genealogy of the historical undertakings of opera heroes, who were real and outstanding personalities from the past. Thus, they could see themselves as continuing the past, a part of history, and students of its worthies and its villains—hence a member of the real and imagined society that stretched

deep into the past and was incontrovertibly moral and true: a Chinese, a human. Third, and this question is key for us, even though one's feelings and thoughts about opera could be very private, opera was foremost a social and public event. Because of how it was organized, paid for, performed, enjoyed, and employed, it was also a social institution, and, as such, it overlapped with, enriched, and strengthened other social institutions, including seasonal markets and religious rituals.

1.1 *Community Collection of Funds: The Social Organizational Logic of Opera*

The most important part of its social character was its organizational logic, namely, a majority of opera performances were staged because a community gathered or pooled together adequate funds (*juan* 捐; *jujin* 醴金), each person paying what he could afford, to construct and / or decorate a stage (*xitai* 戲臺 or Wanniantai—Longevity Stage 萬年臺), which could be permanent or a makeshift mat shed (*xipeng* 戲棚), and invite a troupe (*ban* 班) of opera performers to work there.¹ This seemingly simple mechanism hides all the important questions that we discuss later. Assuming that most people contributed funds more or less voluntarily, we ask why they did so and what they hoped to gain from it. If people wanted to have an opera staged in their locale, it must have satisfied their cultural and aesthetic needs, and because they contributed funds, it also means that they exercised a degree of control over what was staged and how. That means that opera was intended to represent the ideas and aesthetic codes held by the audience-cum-funders and not necessarily only those of social superiors (from imperial officials to local landlords and rich merchants). So, whose ideas were expressed in opera and how? What changes did opera introduce to the spatial and temporal character of Sichuan? How did it shape the market towns where it was staged? What does it tell us about its social significance?

Because of opera's social and communal character, staging it was also an area of contestation within society, of demonstration of the relative power and distinction assumed by families, lineages, and whole towns and counties. Opera certainly was not for everyone. Despite the quantity of evidence about the omnipresence of the performances in certain localities and the way in which they enriched every ritual and festival or provided entertainment

1 Adam Yuet Chau provides a very clear analysis and a comparison of this form of public, which he calls "temple festival," and a private religious celebration, namely a funeral. Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 143–46.

in teahouses and docklands, late Qing sources give us no evidence of opera whatsoever for many areas in Sichuan. Moreover, even brief field research in the province demonstrates the disproportionate spread of permanent stages, and, in the towns with numerous venues for staging operas, some were for private use and others for the public. To complicate the picture, we should add that Sichuan was a land settled in the late seventeenth century by people of diverse origins and linguistic traditions, and until the late nineteenth century, they seem to have had limited interaction. The population of Sichuan consisted mostly of migrants, who congregated around *huiguan*: co-provincial guild halls that united people who originated in the same locality or province. *Huiguan* had related functions as temples and clubs, serving as one of the principal locations for permanent theater stages in the province. Theatricals performed there were meant to suit the strongly ethnically demarcated tastes of the audiences. This meant that, from the outset, Sichuan had diverse operatic traditions with limited mutual influence, as each had its own musical form and repertoire of plays. All these divergences, whether social or linguistic, affected the way in which opera functioned as a social institution and the role it occupied in the communities. What can we learn about the inner workings of the market towns where operas were staged? How did these distinctions influence what was performed and which ideas were broadcast to the public? To what extent were powerful families able to dominate the communities and use opera as a tool for increasing their symbolic power? Why was access to opera important, and what were the social consequences of limiting or denying it?

In Qing China, no public activity existed in a political void. Because of its public and communal character and the fact that it was a powerful medium for broadcasting political, religious, social, and economic ideas, opera was under close scrutiny by the imperial government. Indeed, after its suppression of the rebellious Jiangnan 江南 region in the mid-seventeenth century, the Manchu court became intolerant of any seditious or satirical plays that would comment on contemporary reality in any way.² Even though opera flourished later—by the eighteenth century it had become the Beijing's most signatory entertainment, and by the mid-nineteenth century, it took shape of myriad of local styles and forms that were blooming all across the country—it remained suspect to the royal household and to the strictly orthodox Confucian elites from

2 Wu Renshu 巫仁恕, "MingQing zhiji Jiangnan shishijude fazhan ji qisuo fanyingde shehui xintai 明清之際江南時事劇的發展及其所反映的社會心態 [Development of the Current Affairs and Other Reflecting Social Attitudes Operas in Ming and Qing Era Jiangnan]," *Zhongyang yanjiusuo jindaishi yanjiu suo jikan* 中央研究所近代史研究所集刊 31 (June 1999): 1-48 (esp. 20-24).

which most of the official ranks hailed.³ Wary of it as they were, they also saw that opera was instrumental in the construction and regular reconstruction of social order, cohesion, and hierarchy. What constantly worried them and what informed much of the official attitude about opera was the fact that it offered a space for social disruption, contestation, appropriation of the social order, and for overturning of this order. Theatrical performances could, and often did, spark upheavals, protests, and even rebellions. In calmer days, they could take the form of protest, vandalism, cheating, and robbery and offend those high and low. Opera was also a place and a juncture that could pit the governed against and the governing, as official control was wholly insufficient, and the ruling classes could find themselves powerless, especially in the face of ideas and sentiments that were alien to those that they endorsed. In the following pages, we ask how and why opera was (and was seen as) socially disruptive. Why and when was it tolerated, and, if so, how was it managed? When it was not tolerated, what was the range of responses by local imperial governments, and how far did the authorities go in efforts to make it less harmful to the Qing social order?

1.2 *Religious Rituals as Performance: Nuoxi/Duangongxi*

Finally, it is beyond question that various forms of ritual performance existed for a long time in rural Sichuan, many of which are collectively called *nuoxi* 儺戲, *duanwuxi* 端巫戲, or *duangongxi* 端公戲, terms that indicate mostly exorcist performative practices by spirit mediums and witch doctors called *duanwu* 端巫 or *duangong* 端公. During the Republic, most county gazetteer authors and compilers understood *duanwuxi* as a widespread form of folk medical practice.⁴ *Nuo* is typically associated with the most ancient forms of popular ritual exorcism in China; however, it is very hard to establish the actual origins of each local ritual practice or to show their relevance or influence on the other genres of opera that became popular during the later Qing dynasty. That is largely because most of our in-depth knowledge about these forms of

3 For a recent detailed survey and analysis of this phenomenon see Liu Wenfeng 劉文峰, *Zhongguo xiqu shi* 中國戲曲史 [*History of Chinese Opera*] (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shuju, 2013), 167–305. On the development of Beijing Opera, see Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

4 See Wang Jianqing 王鑑清 and Xiang Chu 向楚, *Ba xianzhi* 巴縣志 [*Ba County Gazetteer*] (1939; repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1967), *juan* 5, *lisu* 禮俗, 782–85 (henceforth, BXZ). Xu Cengyin 許曾蔭 and Ma Shen 馬慎, *Yongchuan xianzhi* 永川縣志 [*Yongchuan County Gazetteer*] (1894, repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1971), *juan* 6, *dianli qunsi* 典禮羣祀, 720–23.

performance comes from rather recent sources: the majority was collected in the final decades of the twentieth century by anthropologists searching for evidence of the revival or survival of local ritual practice. The written accounts from previous epochs that survive, however are quite abbreviated and do not provide necessary details about stage movement and music. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the changes in this form of ritual practice and the extent to which it was influenced by opera performance and vice versa.⁵

Nonetheless, we can confidently state that, for much of the Qing era, Sichuanese participation in *duangongxi* was commonplace because they believed it was necessary for their physical and spiritual survival. We should not lump it together with theatrical performance for several reasons. *Duangongxi* was much closer to the exorcist rituals than to the performance for entertainment of plays that were staged for a god's birthday, at weddings, at teahouses, or at wealthy men's mansions. Its form was more formalized and intermingled with other ritual functions, such as recitations of scriptures, offerings, and burning incense. The performance was directed by a ritual specialist with participation by either a family that invited the specialist or the entire village. It is obviously difficult to neatly divide the forms of local ritual performance from the vernacular drama—both involved costumes, singing, and performed a story, which drew heavily on religious and historical imagery. Nevertheless, the reasons for not including *nuo* in further discussion outweigh the possible shortcomings of such an approach. Therefore, opera as discussed here was not *duangongxi*, but the actors who performed it and the communities that organized it could have participated in *duangongxi* rituals and could have been familiar with its forms

5 Zeng Yongyi 曾永義 and Shi Deyu 施德玉, *Difang xiqu gailun* 地方戲曲概論 [Introduction to Local Opera] (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2011), 2: 1089–116; Zhang Junhua, *Zhongguo nuoxi shi*, 231–32; Hu Tiancheng 胡天成, *Sichuansheng Chongqingshi Baxian Jielongqu Hanzude Jielong yangxi: Jielong duangongxi zhiyi* 四川省重慶市巴縣接龍區漢族的接龍陽戲: 接龍端公戲之一 [Han Nationality Jielong Yang Opera of Sichuan Province Chongqing Municipality Ba County Jielong District: Jielong Shamanistic Opera, vol. 1] (Taipei: Shi Hezheng minsu wenhua jijinhui, 1994); idem, *Sichuansheng Jielong yangxi Jielong duangongxi zhier: Jielong qingtian* 四川省接龍陽戲接龍端公戲之二: 接龍慶壇 [Jielong Yang Opera Jielong Shamanistic Opera of Sichuan Province. vol. 2: Jielong Ritual Altar] (Taipei: Shi Hezheng minsu wenhua jijinhui, 1995); idem, *Sichuansheng Jielong yangxi Jielong duangongxi zhisun: Jielong yansheng* 四川省接龍陽戲接龍端公戲之三: 接龍延生 [Jielong Yang Opera Jielong Shamanistic Opera of Sichuan Province, vol. 3: Jielong Continuance] (Taipei: Shi Hezheng minsu wenhua jijinhui, 1995); Tanaka Issei, Yun Guibin 雲桂彬 and Yu Yun 于允, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 78–113; Zhongguo xiquzhi bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo xiquzhi, Sichuanjuan bianji weiyuanhui* 中國戲曲志編輯委員會《中國戲曲志, 四川卷》編輯委員會, *Zhongguo xiquzhi, Sichuanjuan* 中國戲曲志, 四川卷 [Records of Chinese Opera: Sichuan Volume] (Beijing: Zhongguo ISBN zhongxin, 1995), 65–68 (henceforth ZGXQZSJ).

and meaning. This form of ritual opera is therefore mentioned only in passing when it provides relevant context for the discussion or when it is impossible to draw a division between *duangongxi* and other types of performance.

2 Opera and Construction of the Community

2.1 *The First Century under the Qing: The Emergence of Popular Opera in Sichuan*

Opera was not a stable, perennial, immutable part of the sociocultural and political landscape in Sichuan. We know relatively little of the origins of opera in this province and can barely establish its most rudimentary genealogy. Some evidence indicates that *zaju* 雜劇 was popular during the Ming dynasty. Moreover, we have some proof of the existence of local tunes (so called *chuanxi* 川戲) and of ritual opera. The dramatic drop in the population and the thorough destruction of the province during the Ming-Qing transition (1644–1681) effectively wiped out Sichuanese society and culture. Considering the scale of change due to warfare, disease, dispersal, and the Kangxi (1662–1722) policy of repopulating the province, it is impossible to establish any link between these earlier forms of opera and the one that developed under Qing rule.⁶

Much of what we can learn about opera performance in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century are related to two forms of social activity: private performance during feasts (typically called *tanghui* 堂會) and operas offered for celebrations and entertainment of the gods. The former custom was already practiced at the time of the Qing conquest of the province, for example, in May 1659, when one of Zhang Xianzhong's 張獻忠 (1606–1647) generals, Yang Guoming 楊國明, on capitulating decided to celebrate with the performance of female actresses playing *chuanqi* 傳奇 (usually romantic stories played to a popular southern tune).⁷ It was clearly a continuation of the Ming form of elite entertainment and constituted an integral part of the customs for feasts and celebrations.

6 For further references on this topic, see Igor Iwo Chabrowski, *Singing on the River: Sichuan Boatmen and Their Work Songs, 1880s–1930s* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 54–57; Dai Yingcong, *The Sichuan Frontier and Tibet: Imperial Strategy in the Early Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 14–35.

7 Quoted after Shen Xunwei 沈荀蔚 (fl. 1640s–1660s), “Shu’nan xulue 蜀難敘略 [A Sketch of Sichuan’s Tribulations],” in *Sichuan xiqu shiliao* 四川戲曲史料 [Historical Sources of Opera in Sichuan], ed. Dai Deyuan 戴德源 (Chengdu: Zhongguo xiquzhi Sichuanjuan jibu, Chengdushi chuanjuzhi bianjibu, 1986), 37 (henceforth, SXQSL).

The latter type of performance linked to religious celebration appears in the sources at the beginning of the eighteenth century, most likely related to practices that had existed for decades. The bamboo branch poem quoted by Chen Shangxiang 陳商祥 states that opera was performed in front of the Lord of Sichuan temple in Chengdu (Chuanzhuci 川主祠):

川主祠前賣戲聲，
亂敲畫鼓動荒城，
村姬不惜蜜鞋遠，
涼傘遮人夾道行。

Selling opera in front of the Lord of Sichuan hall,
Shambolically beating drums to excite the desolate city,
Village girls unhesitatingly from far on their sweet shoes,
Walk on the narrow roads hiding under the parasols.⁸

Chen obviously viewed opera performances as a bit of a nuisance, and the sight of village girls crowding capital streets was not very appropriate (though perhaps pleasant). Chen also writes a short note on which plays were performed and when, as well as how the stage looked in his day. Apparently, it was similar to stages in Jiang'nan, disguised as a tofu store. The play titled *Du Fu's Spring Travels* (*Du Fu you chun* 杜甫遊春) was staged for New Year's celebrations.⁹ Chen found it an excellent joke that Du Fu and tofu are almost homonymic, apparently wanting either to point out a funny coincidence or to ridicule what he saw as Sichuanese yokels.

Li Diaoyuan 李調元 (1713–1802), a native of Mianzhou 綿州 (present-day Mianyang 綿陽) in Sichuan, a *jinshi* 進士 graduate in 1763, and an avid follower and critic of opera, provides information about Kangxi-era actors. First, he tells a marvelous story about the Chengdu court historian Ri Zhen 日貞, who in his youth had been cheated and was forced to abandon school and become an actor of female roles (*dan* 旦) in Chongqing. Upon being discovered by the prefect (*taishou* 太守), he was questioned, and found to have an exceptional literary talent. Hearing the way in which Ri Zhen improvised poems, the prefect

8 Chen Shangxiang 陳商祥, "Shudu suishi 蜀都碎時 [Fragments from Chengdu]," in Shen Xunwei, "Shu'nan xulue," in SXQSL, 37. Translated with the assistance of Yan Yiqiao.

9 蜀中立春日，臺閣亦似江南，爲豆腐店扮《杜甫遊春》，取“杜甫”與“豆腐”二字相近，可發一笑。Shen Xunwei, "Shu'nan xulue," 37. The play *Du Fu's Spring Travels* was popular during the Ming era and appears under this title in *Luguibo* 錄鬼簿 [Register of Ghosts], in Shen Xunwei, "Shu'nan xulue," in SXQSL, 37–38.

exclaimed: “It’s a heavenly child—how can he waste in the theater!”¹⁰ Ri Zhen later obtained a *jinshi* degree and had a successful official career, abandoning the shameful life of an actor. Apart from being an improbable tale of the fall and sudden rise in social position of someone who had hit bottom and then gained wide respect through his own talent (and a pinch of good luck), the story also shows the dialectical opposition that existed between the entertainers and the officials. Although the two sides somehow needed each other, actors entertained the elites whereas the latter paid for their services, so the distance between them was akin to that separating the civilized from the savage. No respectable person, meaning those who knew and could compose literature (*zuowen* 作文) and improvise poems (*nengshi* 能詩), should ever be an actor.

These sparse notes aside, we do not know how opera was organized, who the people paying for the performance in the Lord of Sichuan temple were, and what the other plays performed there were. We should be wary of not only anachronistically transposing data on the social role, forms of organization, and repertoire of opera from other regions but also of assuming that later forms of organization existed in this era. The initial settler communities that flowed to Sichuan from the end of the seventeenth until the mid-eighteenth century slowly developed the necessary institutions, such as temples and markets. But a small portion of the existing pre-Qing infrastructure in the main urban centers remained in place, whereas the majority of rural settlements were destroyed or abandoned. It was therefore very difficult to revive previously performed rituals and the basic structures of social and religious life. Instead, new forms and structures were created by the migrant population that repopulated the province. The economic flourishing of migrant settlements and related demonstrative performances of religious piety, ritual splendor, and refined entertainment are nearly absent in this period. Only in the later part of the Qianlong reign (1736–1795), when the years of toil in reclaiming land, building terraces, dredging canals, cutting wood, and constructing new towns, farmhouses, *huiguan*, and temples ended, do we find more evidence of a livelier social, cultural, and operatic life.¹¹ This process gradually turned Sichuan into a materially and symbolically humanized space, which reestablished links

10 此神童也，豈九于梨園中哉！In Shen Xunwei, “Shu’nan xulue,” 38. For more on Ri Zhen, see Shen Xunwei, “Shu’nan xulue,” SXQSL, 39.

11 Wang Di 王笛, “Qingdai Chongqing renkou yu shehui zuzhi 清代重慶人口與社會組織 [Qing-Era Population and Urban Organization of Chongqing],” in *Chongqing chengshi yanjiu* 重慶城市研究 [*Research on the Urban History of Chongqing*], ed. Wei Yingtao 隗瀛濤 (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1989), 310–78.

with the rest of China and with its own history.¹² At the same time, the social space of the province was progressively filled with a thickening institutional web that connected the civic spots of social convergence: temples, *huiguan*, monasteries, Buddha statues, landlord and official villas, government buildings, markets, and docks. The process of settlement, however, was far from finished and continued into the nineteenth century.

But before we learn about the operas presented as part of public celebrations of the gods, we see the first detailed information about those staged in a more exclusive elite context. Wang Erjian (*jinshi* 1730), a compiler of the *Ba County Gazetteer* (*Baxianzhi* 巴縣志, published in 1761) and an avid critic of the rotten mores of the Sichuanese, wrote that Chongqing's merchants engaged in the excessively wasteful and luxurious celebrations and entertainments.¹³ Wang's condemnation of excess was premised on the crossing of prescribed class boundaries between merchants and literati as well as the widespread lack of devotion to the pursuit of education. Wang thought that buying elite status and pomp with money was vulgar and despicable. As he was dismissive of opera, we can only speculate (not being far out of mark) that theatrical performances were an important part of this supposedly preposterous behavior, especially in referring to family rituals and feasts that rich merchants enjoyed in their newly purchased landed estates.

Less than fifteen years later, Li Diaoyuan provides a description of changes in the opera world of Sichuan in his lifetime. In the two-chapter book *Opera Talks* (*Juhua* 劇話), written in 1775, Li describes the most popular operas of his time and makes a statement on moral degradation, which in his eyes was the result of the popularization of theater performance.¹⁴ Li attended the plays presented at the so-called *liyuan* 梨園 (meaning theater), which, in the context of Qianlong-era Chengdu, requires a short reflection.

According to a well-informed historian of the city, Fu Chongju 傅崇矩 (1875–1917), under the Qianlong reign, neither Sichuan's capital nor any other

12 Wang Di 王笛, *Kuachu fengbide shijie, Changjiang xiayou quyu shehui yanjiu (1644–1911)* 跨出封閉的世界，長江下游區域社會研究 (1644–1911) [*Out of the Closed World, A Social Research of the Upper Yangzi Districts (1644–1911)*] (Taipei: Wunan tushu chubanshe gongsi, 2002).

13 “Fengtuzhi 風土志 [Local conditions]” and “Xisu 習俗 [Customs],” in Wang Erjian 王爾鑑, *Qianlong Baxianzhi 乾隆巴縣志* [*Qianlong-Era Ba County Gazetteer*], 1761, *juan* 10.

14 Li Diaoyuan 李調元, “*Juhua* 劇話 [*Opera Talks*]” (1775), in *Guoxue mingzhu zhenben huikan: Lidai shishi changbian erji* 國學名著珍本彙刊：歷代詩史長編二輯 [*Publications of the Rare National Classics of the Famous Writers: Past Poems and Histories, Second Extensive Edition*], ed. Yang Jialuo 楊家駱 (Taipei: Zhongguo xuedianguan fuguang choubeichu, Dingwen shuju jingxiao, 1964), 8: 31–72.

city in the province had a teahouse-cum-theater commercial establishment like the famous opera houses in Beijing, which sold tickets for seeing plays.¹⁵ Therefore *liyuan* was either a private stage located in the compound of prominent families residing in the city and acting as an artistic salon for the local elite or meant any other conditions in which an opera was performed: at a teahouse, *huiguan*, banquet, or religious festival. The list of plays provided by Li Diaoyuan does not preclude either of these interpretations. In any case, Li's other jottings about opera in Sichuan demonstrate that, more often than not, he enjoyed the spectacles in the confines of the houses of the local polite society, at the same time that he was critical and dismissive about popular and folk plays mounted during festivals and enjoyed by the commoners.

Among the notable plays that Li recorded we find opera interpretations of the classical historical and moralistic stories, many of which were based on Yuan dynasty *zaju*, Ming dynasty *chuanqi* plays, and historical and fictional writing, such as *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), *History of the Tang* (*Tangshu* 唐書), *History of Shu: Story of Liu Feng* (*Shuzhi Liufeng zhuan* 蜀志劉封傳), *History of the Chen* (*Chenshu* 陳書), *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳), *Annals of the Three Kingdoms: Story of Guan Yu* (*Sanguozhi Guan Yu zhuan* 三國志關羽傳), *History of the Song Dynasty* (*Songshi* 宋史), and the *Manuscript History of the Ming Dynasty, Later Chapters* (*Mingshi gao houzhuan* 明史稿后傳). The division between historical and fictional traditions was by no means firm, and stories based, for example, on the *Annals of the Three Kingdoms* were considered not only artistically but also factually valid narrations of the past.¹⁶ Other popular operas in Chengdu in Li Diaoyuan's lifetime were classics such as: *Elders' Investiture of Gods* (*Taigong fengshenzhuan* 太公封神傳), *Story of the Lute* (*Pipaji* 琵琶記), *Fisherman's Joy* (*Yujiale* 漁家樂), *Butterfly Dream* (*Hudiemeng* 蝴蝶夢), *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiangji* 西廂記), *Story of the White Rabbit* (*Baituji* 白兔記), and *Liu, Guan, and Zhang Peach Garden Vow* (*Liu Guan Zhang Taoyuan jieyi* 劉關張桃園結義) and so on.¹⁷ The plays listed by Li were important parts of the cultural milieu in the provincial capital as well as the opera world in China.

15 Fu Chongju 傅崇矩, *Chengdu tonglan* 成都通覽 [An Overview of Chengdu] (1909; repr., Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1987), 1: 277.

16 Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West, ed. and trans., *Battles, Betrayals, and Brotherhood: Early Chinese Plays on the Three Kingdoms* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012): x–xvii.

17 Other plays mentioned by Li ("Juhua," 49–64).

2.2 *From Kun Opera to the Emergence of Local Tunes*

In fact, Li mostly enjoyed the refined Kun opera (Kunqu 崑曲), which came from the Lower Yangzi region and integrated, transmitted, and enriched the traditional Yuan–Ming dynasty texts and styles (the northern *zaju* and the southern *chuanqi*) into an artistically appealing form. Throughout his life as an opera aficionado, however, what he experienced was the appearance and rapid expansion of different forms of singing and playing, typically described as regional opera.

Li felt a certain discomfort about this change and considered new plays as well as reinterpretations of the classics as having no humanitarian value. He reiterated the statement by the late Ming author Liu Niantai 劉念臺, who in his *Register of People's Characters* (*Ren pu lei ji* 人譜類記), noted that although plays at that time had the same musical movements, they differed radically.¹⁸ Previously, they spoke of values that were most dear to anyone: filial piety, loyalty, chastity, righteousness, and so on, and thus they had the power to arouse people's emotions and impart the wisdom from the classics and sutras. More recent plays, according to Liu, and Li who quoted him, depicted the lusty behaviors of men and women. Even though ordinary people (*shiren* 世人) liked them, these plays in fact were hateful, not suitable for either male or female audiences, detrimental to moral values, turning humans into beasts, and worthy only of blanket prohibition.¹⁹ Li's quotation of thinker and moralist from more than a century earlier shows persistent discomfort with changes in people's cultural preferences and was more judgmental than was justified about cultural novelty.

Nevertheless, Li Diaoyuan remains our main guide to the vast change in his time that refashioned not only how opera was organized, used, and experienced but also how it looked and sounded. The great novelty was the popularization of opera as a form of religious celebration, which implied local organization and use of the music and dialect understood by ordinary people. That led to a boom in so-called local tunes and in the central position of the small town market and *huiguan* as a performance space, instead of the urban or rural villas of literati or officials. In the later decades of the Qianlong reign, opera suddenly turned local, popular, and, as the officials saw it, vulgar. Li was among the first literati in Sichuan to grapple with this new phenomenon. The question was: what is this new sound? Opera aficionados could easily identify the origin and genealogy of the newly dominant tunes in Sichuan. The most important

18 Niantai 念臺 is a *hao* 號 of Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578–1645), native of Shanyin 山陰 in the vicinity of Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang. Liu was an important neo-Confucian scholar.

19 Li Diaoyuan, "Juhua," 45.

among them was *gaoqiang* 高腔 (high tune), a style of singing and accompaniment that originated in the northern Jiangxi 江西 county of Yiyang 弋陽 and was called *yiyangqiang* 弋陽腔. *Gaoqiang* relies on the main singing voice, with other performers acting as a choir and musical background provided by percussion instruments. *Gao* spread along the Yangzi River, step by step becoming the main means of expression for people in Hunan 湖南 and Hubei 湖北, and northward to Beijing (where it was called *jingqiang* 京腔, the capital tune). Not surprisingly, the constant inflow of mid-Yangzi lakeland settlers to Sichuan in the seventeenth and eighteenth century soon caused those in towns and villages in the province to sing in *gao*.²⁰ According to musicologists researching Sichuan opera, more than 70 percent of the collectible melodies and librettos available in the province were in *gaoqiang*, making it the best proof of the strong cultural affinity between Sichuan and the central Yangzi region.²¹

At the same time that Hubei and Hunan farmers settled in Sichuan, other migrants from the northern provinces of Shaanxi 陝西 and Shanxi 山西 were bringing their own tunes. Collectively called *bangzi* 梆子 due to the use of clappers as an important instrument, in Sichuan they are called *luan tan* 亂彈 (chaotic plays). Other tunes that gained a hearing included the extremely popular *xipi* 西皮 and *erhuang* 二簧, both from Anhui 安徽 and collectively called *pihuangqiang* 皮簧腔. These tunes had a striking career in China beginning in the eighteenth century, when step by step they were adapted to the taste, linguistic, and musical habits of the capital elite and lower-class audiences, finally reaching the court of the Dowager Empress Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908) and becoming Beijing Opera.²² In Sichuan, *pihuang* were called *huqin* 胡琴 and, like all the other styles, was one of the local tunes, which had come with the migrant opera troupes that entertained the audiences whose dialects and musical customs were similar to those at home. Over time, *huqin* differed quite significantly from Beijing Opera and the tunes heard in Anhui: it was adjusted to the

20 Du Jianhua 杜建華 and Wang Ding'ou 王定歐, *Chuanju* 川劇 [Sichuan Opera] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2008): 32–38; Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 95–96, 265–69.

21 Du Jianhua and Wang Ding'ou, *Chuanju*, 35; Sichuansheng chuanju yishu yanjiuyuan 四川省川劇藝術研究院, Sichuansheng chuanju xuexiao 四川省川劇學校, and Sichuansheng chuanjuyuan 四川省川劇院, *Chuanju jumu cidian* 川劇劇目辭典 [A Dictionary of Sichuan Opera Repertoire] (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu chubanshe, 1999), contains 3,274 titles played to the *gao* tune out of a total of 3,567 plays collected in the Sichuan; hereafter *Chuanju jumu*. This is the closest, yet probably not complete, approximation of Sichuan opera repertoire.

22 Ye Xiaoqing, *Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Drama and the Qing Imperial Court* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012), 219–67; Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 115–41.

dialects of the migrant Sichuanese population and borrowed from the musical habits developed by the troupes singing and playing other tunes.²³ We can see a fairly clear connection between the migrant communities, their specific preferences, and local cultural habits, but it is much more difficult to account for the development of the local Sichuanese tune called the “lantern play” (*dengxi* 燈戲). It sprouted out of the Lantern Festival (*yuanxiaojie* 元宵節; fifteenth day of the first month) ritual plays, later on, though at an unspecified time, becoming one of the main styles of performance in northern Sichuan in the vicinity of Langzhong 閬中.²⁴

2.3 *Social Distinctions, Opera Tunes, and Religious Theater*

All these tunes were considered lower class and, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, were lumped together as *huabu* 花部, signifying the town and village opera performed on mat-shed stages during religious festivals.²⁵ In Qing-era Sichuan, the more respectable type of opera, as in other regions of the empire, was almost exclusively sung in Kun style (Kunqu or Kunshanqu 崑山曲), mentioned earlier. Kun, which came from the vicinity of Suzhou 蘇州, reached its rank as elite entertainment, and was called *yabu* 雅部, because of its endorsement by the educated and refined class of Lower Yangzi literati and its fairly friendly reception by the eighteenth-century imperial court. This type of opera had much to recommend it: it had a broad repertoire, to which the most important writers in the Jiangnan region in the late Ming and early Qing eras contributed. Moreover, it was sung in the dialects of the Lower Yangzi region, the birthplace of much of the late imperial official and literary elite, and followed the structure of the literary language (*wenyan* 文言), instead of the vernacular.²⁶ These traits gratified the educated audiences that were very sensitive to the metaphors, literary references, and poetic constructions in the

23 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 266. Li Diaoyuan had a strong dislike for this style: Licentious, seductive, monstrous and heretical, it needs to be blamed of and accused of being the most immoral of all the [opera] tunes” [淫冶妖邪, 如怨如訴, 蓋聲之最淫者]. Li Diaoyuan, “*Juhua*,” 47.

24 Almost all the information about the early expansion of various tunes and their genealogies are derived from Li Diaoyuan, “*Juhua*,” 46–47. “On New Year, [people] hang the lanterns, play lantern opera” [上元, 放花燈, 演燈戲], *Qianlong reign period Canxi xianzhi* 乾隆蒼溪縣志 in *SXQSL*, 68. Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 267. It is still popular in rural districts around Langzhong and promoted by the Xi Jinping’s government on the local, provincial, and national level. Author interview with Deng Hejuan 鄧荷娟, an actress and opera manager at Langzhong on November 21, 2015.

25 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 172.

26 Liu Changgen 劉長庚, Hou Zhaoyuan 侯肇元, and Zhang Huaisi, 張懷泗, ed., *Jiaqing Hanzhouzhi* 嘉慶漢州志 [*Jiaqing Era Hanzhou Gazetteer*] in *SXQSL*, 76.

world of the written, not spoken, word. Therefore, Kun had planted seeds in Sichuan through the official and literati networks, as it was a style of the power holders, not of the common people.

The sense of discomfort with the expansion of vernacular opera led imperial authorities to conduct a thorough examination of the kind of tunes that were widespread in the general population. The report by the provincial governor of Jiangxi, Hao Shuo 郝碩, in 1781 demonstrates that Kunqu was not popular in all of southern China (Jiangxi, Guangdong 廣東, Fujian 福建, Zhejiang 浙江, Sichuan, Yunnan 雲南, Guizhou 貴州, etc.), but commoners enjoyed tunes (*qiang*) such as *bei* 碑, *qin*, *yiyang*, and *chu* 楚. Moreover, among general population *gao* (another name for *yiyang*), *bangzi* and *luantan* were extremely popular.²⁷ The spread of all these “vulgar” types of opera demanded special attention by the authorities, control, and possibly censure.²⁸

It is fairly clear that, in the eyes of both educated observers and the imperial bureaucracy (whose ranks were filled from the literati), the expansion of local opera often looked like resurfacing of the offensive and primitive culture of the uncouth masses. It was also the way in which local tunes were employed that spurred controversy. Liu Diaoyuan, for example, stated that the “stupid people, just when they leave the fields, occupy the auspicious space where to make a platform for playing music and singing irrespective of whether it snows or there is a wind.”²⁹ Most of these performances were held for celebration of the gods, and it is hard to determine whether that was problematic for Qianlong-era observers.

The *Luojiang County Gazetteer* (*Luojiang xianzhi* 羅江縣志), edited by Li Diaoyuan, has a fairly detailed account of which temples and gods were the recipients of opera. One of the frequent recipients was Wenchang 文昌, god of culture and literature, whose cult centered on Qiqu Mountain (Qiqushan 七曲山) in northern Sichuan and was particularly appealing in the area described in the gazetteer. Li recorded the foundation stele of Yuefeng Zitonggong 月峰梓潼宮, located 30 li (approx. 15 km) from the county seat, which states that renovation of the temple in fact meant restoration of the theater stage that had deteriorated as well as being misappropriated and desecrated by beggars.³⁰ Wenchang was also celebrated with theatrical performances in other locations

27 Zeng Yongyi and Shi Deyu, *Difang xiqu gailun*, 1: 478–81.

28 “Qianlong sishiliu nian Jiangxi xunfu Hao Shuo fu zou zunzhi chaban xiju weiai ziju 乾隆四十六年江西巡撫郝碩復奏遵旨查辦戲劇違礙字句,” in *SXQSL*, 40.

29 *SXQSL*, 46.

30 Li Diaoyuan, *Luojiang xianzhi* 羅江縣志 [*Luojiang County Gazetteer*], *juan 7*; *juan 8* in *SXQSL*, 48 (hereafter, *LJXZ*).

around the county, such as Tuanduiba 團堆壩, also 30 li away from the county seat, where, in the second lunar month, people gathered to see the play and even invited two graduates (*xiucai* 秀才) to attend.³¹

During the Qianlong reign, other gods also required and received offerings of operas: the Dragon Spirit Temple (Longshentang 南村龍神堂) in Nancun, the Ox King (Niuwang 牛王廟) in Lueping 略平, the Lord of Sichuan (Chuanzhu), the City God (also called God of Walls and Moats, Chenghuang 城隍), the Medicine King (Yaowang 藥王), and Wuxian Temple 五顯廟.³² Discussing the cult of the Ox King, Li details how these performances were organized and their purpose. The temple originally had no designated space for staging an opera, and the celebrations were scheduled for the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month. On the first year of the Jiaqing 嘉慶 imperial reign (1796), the local elites (*shi* 士) and the commoners (*min* 民) pooled a sufficient amount of funds to construct a special music hall (*yuelou* 樂樓), and the time for feasting the god was rescheduled for the first day of the tenth month so as not to interrupt the harvest in the seventh month.³³

Why did they engage in such an enterprise? Li stated that because farmers need oxen to plow the land, the spirit of the ox is revered as a king whom everyone worships. Every year, people need to venerate the ox king, so they must stage an opera; thus, a music hall is indispensable for the joy and happiness of the gods and the people. The best way of entertaining this god, even though no one knew the reason, was to stage *Tales of the Weird* (*Lieyizhuan* 列異傳).³⁴ Therefore, celebrations with opera became a necessity in the life and even survival of the community. This example of cooperation between and financial involvement by various social classes in caring for the temple, maintaining it, preparing the theatrical performances, and staging the opera to worship the gods is one of the earliest and clearest pieces of evidence that opera functioned as a local social institution binding communities. A large number of sources at the beginning of the nineteenth century allows us to ascertain that this form of communal cooperation in venerating gods and celebrating family, lineage, territorial, or temporal celebrations with opera became the main cross-class social institution in late Qing Sichuan.

31 LJXZ, *juan* 7 in SXQSL, 49.

32 LJXZ, *juan* 9 in SXQSL, 49; *Qionglaxian huilongxiang wannian tai beiji* 邱岷縣回龍鄉萬年臺碑記 [*Stellas from Opera Stages of Qionglai County Huilong Village*] in SXQSL, 51; Li Diaoyuan, *Tongshan wenji* 童山文集 [*Collected Essays from Tongshan*], *juan* 8 in SXQSL, 54, 55

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

3 The Nineteenth-Century Flourishing: The Role of Opera in Shaping Local Religious Practice

Most of the definitive evidence we have about the social function of opera and how it was organized relate to the nineteenth century, and this is not an accident. After the Ming-Qing transition, the reconstruction, settlement, and development of Sichuan ended only in the last decades of the Qianlong reign, whereas the interest in and necessity of describing, understanding, and managing the past and present of the life and culture of the communities constituted a work of later generations.³⁵ As for the local customs and opera, the scarcer notes in the county gazetteers in the last century of the Qing are enriched by the copious material in writings during the Republican period. At that time, educated observers and compilers, propelled by the iconoclastic and reformist ideas from the May Fourth period demonstrated a growing interest in “folklore,” and they became (more or less willingly) self-made ethnographers.³⁶ Their unlikely intellectual marriage of the compulsion to reform and of local sentimentality produced a rich picture of local practices, creating a large pool of evidence from which we can divine the social history of the opera. Additionally, in the nineteenth century, we can account for a monumental change in the province’s infrastructure, as more than 1,400 *huiguan* and a much larger number of temples were all regular sites of opera performances.³⁷ Thus we should begin by analyzing the main place where opera flourished in this period: the religious festival.

35 Lan Yong 藍勇 and Huang Quansheng 黃權生, “*Huguang tian Sichuan*” *yu Qingdai Sichuan shehui* “湖廣填四川”與清代四川社會 [“*Huguang Fills Sichuan*” and *Sichuan Society during the Qing Era*] (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009); Chen Shisong 陳世松, *Daqiantu: “Huguang tian Sichuan” lishi jiedu* 大遷徙: “湖廣填四川”歷史解讀 [A Great Migration: A Historical Analysis of the “Huguang Fills in Sichuan”] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2016); Zhao Kui 趙達, “*Huguang tian Sichuan*” *yimin tongdaoshangde huiguan yanjiu* “湖廣填四川”移民通道上的會館研究 [“*Huguang Fills Sichuan*”: Research on *Huiguan* along the Migration Channels] (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2012); Hu Zhaoxi 胡昭曦, *Zhang Xianzhong tu Shu kaobian* 張獻忠屠蜀考辨 [An Examination of Zhang Xianzhong’s Slaughter of Sichuan] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, Sichuansheng xinhua shudian, 1980).

36 See Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Laurence A. Schneider, *Ku Chieh-Kang and China’s New History: Nationalism and the Quest for Alternative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 121–87; Joshua H. Howard, *Composing for the Revolution: Nie Er and China’s Sonic Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2021), 101–36; Gina Anne Tam, *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 111–46.

37 Lan Yong and Huang Quansheng, *Huguang tian Sichuan*, 44.

3.1 *The Excitement of Religious Opera*

Staging opera was always an exciting event. In 1804 Yang Xie 楊燮, a Chengdu literatus (*juren* 舉人, 1801) wrote:

慶雲庵北鼓樓東，會府層臺賀祝同；
看戲小民忘帝力，只觀歌舞颺天風。
戲班最怕陝西館，紙爆三聲要出臺；
算學京都戲園子，迎臺吹罷兩通來。

North of the Qingyun Nunnery and east of the Bell Tower; celebrants congregate by the prefecture's stages to rejoice;
Commoners ignore the existence of the imperial power, while purely enjoying the song and dance fluttering in the wind.
Theatrical troupes are most afraid of the Shaanxi Guild Hall; after firecrackers sound three times, they appear on the stage;
As learned from the capital troupes, the instruments blown invite the troupe playing twice.³⁸

The play was performed in the Shaanxi *huiguan* (Shaanxiguan 陝西館) near the Qingyu Nunnery and the Drum Tower of Chengdu, the provincial capital. The celebration was a time of fervent passion and forgetting, when crowds of common people (*min*), heedless of the hierarchy and order lost themselves in watching and listening to the singing and dancing of the actors. Tension and excitement ran high: exploding firecrackers marked the opening of the play, as crowds jostled in front of the stage, and actors struggled with bouts of the jitters. The celebrations during which opera was staged were equally a form of offerings to the gods and great festive occasions for the local inhabitants and passersby. The music and singing were always "local," which in late Qing Sichuan did not mean in Sichuan dialect but in the respective vernacular of the co-provincial group that occupied a particular territory. And so, a year later, a bamboo branch poem commenting on the Shaanxi people's celebrations describes the following scene:

會館雖多數陝西，秦腔梆子響高低；
觀場人多坐板凳，炮響酬神散一齊。
過罷元宵尙唱燈，胡琴拉得是淫聲；
《回門》《送妹》皆堪賞，一折《廣東人上京》。

38 SXQSL, 75. Translation by Yan Yiqiao and Igor Chabrowski.

Among guild halls, the one in Shaanxi ranks the best, resounding high and low with clappers to the tunes of Qin;
Audience crowds the benches watching, [when] firecrackers burned in reverence to gods, it all dispersed.

The opera continued even after the Lantern Festival, and a fiddle was played to lewd songs;

Returning Home, Sending Off Little Sister [are] all of bearable taste, and so is the piece *A Cantonese Going to Beijing*.³⁹

Almost every celebration needed to be marked with a play, as noted by the *Hanzhou Gazetteer*:

Music [is necessary] for weddings and funerals and in the event of the usual celebrations and to treat guests. To venerate gods on the harvest festival [Baosai 報賽], opera is performed. ... At the beginning of the year, on the festival of the Heavenly Official (Tianguanhui 天官會), operas are performed in the City God Temple (Chenghuang miao). On the eighteenth day of the third month, in the Inner City Palace of the Sacred Mother (Shengmugong 聖母宮) crowds worshipped spirits staging an opera and were joined by all the yamen officials and clerks 演劇賽神者眾, 各衙門官弁鎮會. ... On the twenty-eighth day of the fifth month, there is a festival in the City God temple, in fact the birthday celebration for the City God of the prefecture; high and low from all the prefecture gather to attend the opera performance, to show its splendor to neighboring cities; all the yamen officials and clerks attend.⁴⁰

These few examples demonstrate the social role occupied by opera or, rather, how Sichuanese communities constructed themselves through opera. We can see that, for the general population, it was the majority, if not the most important part, of the religious celebrations. Performances organized for all the territorial communities, such as the ward, the city, or the prefecture, were distinct from those for the groups based on common origins, such as the *huiguan*. We also observe that the organization and financing of these events were not directed by the official administration; rather, it was in local hands. Further

39 “Ding Jinyan qiaosou 定晉岩樵叟 [An Old Man Gathering Wood on the Dingjin Cliff],” in *Chengdu zhuzhici, Chengdu xin taiping zhai cangban, 成都竹枝詞, 成都心太平齋藏板* [*Bamboo-Branch Poems from Chengdu: Chengdu's Peaceful in Heart Announcement Board*], 1805 in SXQSL, 76. Translation by Igor Chabrowski and Yan Yiqiao.

40 Liu Changgen, Hou Zhaoyuan, and Zhang Huaisi, *Jiaqing Hanzhouzhi*, in SXQSL, 77.

examples clarify the distinctions and commonalities that existed in the organization of the opera.

3.2 *Busy Calendar of Religious Opera Shows*

In the principal market towns, the calendar for staging opera was very busy and interrupted the monotony and drabness of life for much of Sichuan's population. Opera accompanied all the major communal acts of worship and became the main form of venerating gods through entertaining them with stories and music.⁴¹ Obviously, it also provided enjoyment to audiences that paid for the worship through community collections of funds. The season for performance was usually happened in the first half of the year, but in the bigger centers, it could even last until the end of the tenth month.

Actors were indispensable in the New Year—Spring Festival celebrations. We have a clear description how such festivities were organized in Hechuan 合川, a large county town about 98 kilometers up the Jialing River (Jialingjiang 嘉陵江) from Chongqing.⁴² The local gazetteer states that, a day before the new year, merchants gathered money and funded the appropriate decoration of the stage in the center of the city. Moreover, they hired child actors to be dressed according to their opera roles (*jiaosi* 角色) to perform plays and engage in various games.⁴³ Another important part of preparations to be completed a day before the festivities was to contract actors and equip them with a banner (*qimao* 旗旄) to lead a bull for Inviting the Spring (Yinchun 迎春) ritual, in which the first plowing of the year was performed by the highest local official. As before, the bill was footed by local merchants, who resorted to the voluntary collection of money among themselves. However, flags were provided by government officials.⁴⁴ On the day of the festival, opera was staged for the civil and military gods of wealth (Wen Wu Caishen 文武財神).

In nearby Chongqing, the ritual for Inviting the Spring was equally important, but with some differences in how it was performed. For example, the bull

41 A contemporary description is in Archibald J. Little, *Through the Yang-tse Gorges or Trade and Travel in Western China* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searl, & Rivington, 1888), 185.

42 Distance by the river route: Zhou Lisan 周立三, Hou Xuetao 侯學燾, and Chen Siqiao 陳泗橋, *Sichuan jingji dituji shuoming* 四川經濟地圖集說明 [*Sichuan Economic Atlas Explanations*] (Beibe: Zhongguo dili yanjiusuo, 1946), 120.

43 “立春前一日市中高賈醴金裝扮春亭慶賀春禧，僱小兒裝扮各頂角色配成劇目。” The gazetteer describes in detail a game with an “iron heart” [*tiexin* 鐵心]; Zhang Senxie 張森偕, *Hechuan xianzhi* 合川縣志 [*Hechuan County Gazetteer*] (1920; repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1968), *juan* 35, *fengsu* 風俗, 2843–44 (henceforth, HCXZ).

44 HCXZ, 2845–46.

was led along the city streets, passing the numerous government *yamen* and *gongsuo* 公所, only to be taken thereafter to the designated ritual ground where the first plowing was performed. This itinerary of the ritual procession was surely a result of the city's size and sociopolitical composition: Chongqing had offices representing three levels of civil government (county: *xian* 縣, prefecture: *fu* 府, and circuit: *dao* 道), and respective institutions of military government. Moreover, it had representations of merchants and inhabitants of the eight imperial provinces (*gongsuo*) who were the most obvious contributors to the spring celebrations.⁴⁵ A bull thus could not have missed the opportunity to pass by their doors. In both the city and the surrounding villages, the New Year's celebrations were an occasion for five-day-long opera performances on the so-called Longevity Stages. Moreover, the same five days were also a birthday feast of the earth gods (*tudi dan* 土地誕), which took the form of theater shows meant to safeguard the communities from disease and pestilence. In all these cases, the main organizers were the *huiguan* and temples—community institutions relying on voluntary contributions of funds.⁴⁶

About a hundred kilometers of sailing north east from Hechuan in the county of Guang'an 廣安 opera was also an essential part of the Spring Festival celebrations. They started on the third day as the main attraction of the Medicine King Festival (Yaowanghui 藥王會) that was a part of the spring time celebrations. The opera was performed along the riverbank uninterrupted for five to nine on the stone stage in front of the temple.⁴⁷

One of the most fascinating depictions of the role of the opera and the actors comes in the form of Huang Ruihu's 黃瑞鵠 (1865–1938) New Year painting titled *Painting Invitation to the Spring* (*Yingchuntu* 迎春圖). Huang was from Mianzhu 綿竹 County, about 80 kilometers north of Chengdu and, among other topics, painted about local festivals. This *Painting Invitation*, which is believed to have been finished in the final years of the Guangxu 光緒 reign (1875–1908), depicts actors and acrobats carried on platforms, officials seated behind ceremonial tables and carried in palanquins, soldiers, musicians, dragon dancers and porters of the paper dragon walking and riding buffaloes, and Daoist priests—all parading in the city streets, coming from *yamen* to exit the city gates. Huang unraveled all aspects of the festive community participation and the important roles played by actors in successful celebrations. His vision of a perfectly congruent and well-organized society, though it idealized

45 BXZ, *juan* 5, *lisu*, 713–14.

46 BXZ, *juan* 5, 765, 771, 776.

47 Zhou Kekun 周克堃, *Guang'an xianzhi* 廣安縣志 [*Guang'an County Gazetteer*] (1907; repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1968), 913–14 (hereafter, GAXZ).

an often-rougher reality (discussed below), fits in the frames of the genre of New Year's prints and pictures (*nianhua* 年畫) as it also turns viewers' attention to the splendor of the festivities even in a very provincial county town.⁴⁸

New Year was not the only occasion for opera. In fact, the entire calendar year, especially the first six months, was packed with specific celebrations, which we can collectively call god's birthdays, that would have been ruined if not for the operas. It has been popularly claimed that Chinese deities loved and craved theatrical performances, music, merrymaking, and excitement (*renao* 熱鬧) as much as did the ordinary people. Only if we trace all the other occasions for opera, both those that were liked and those that were abhorred by the gazetteer compilers, will we gain a relatively full picture of how ingrained opera was in society and how much it represented social life in late Qing Sichuan.

3.3 *City God Celebrations*

Most sources agree that the biggest celebrations were offered to the respective city gods. Each town had its own protector in the form of such a deity, which not only had his birthday celebrated (Chenghuangdan 城隍誕) but also was worshipped on many other important occasions. In Hechuan, the temple of the city god was equipped with a large music hall (yuelou), where citizens gathered for the thanksgiving celebrations that coincided with the Duanwu 端午 festival. An important part of the festival was not only a group of operas performed on that day's *yingshen saihui* 迎神賽會 (Invitation of gods ritual) but also a procession in which a statue of the god was taken out of the temple and paraded around the county.⁴⁹

In Ba County, the city god was worshipped not only on the eleventh day of the fifth month but also on other communal ritual occasions. On the god's birthday, people made a sculpture of the god's wife and put it in his "bedroom." This marked the marriage of the god, known as River Elder Brother's matrimony (*hebo qifu* 河伯娶婦). The city god was involved in two other communal rituals, which were considered of utmost importance. The first one was the midautumn offerings on the altar of the earth (shezhitan 社祇壇)—there, the worship was addressed to the spirit of the wind, clouds, thunder, and rain (*fengyunleiyu zhishen* 風雲雷雨之神) placed on the left side of the altar, the

48 The painting is exhibited at the Mianzhu City Musuem [Mianzhushi bowuguan 綿竹市博物館]. It is said that it was made for a local rich merchant, Du Jinchen 杜晉臣. See the episode "Bashan Shushui—chunyi anran 巴山蜀水—春意盎然 《迎春圖》 [Mountains of Ba, Waters of Shu—overflown with the spring's awakening *Painting of Invitation to the Spring*]," in the series *Guobao dang'an* 國寶檔案 [Archive of the National Treasures], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R54F_tr6p_E (accessed May 17, 2019).

49 HCXZ, *juan 3, jianzhi* 建置, 336–37; *juan 35, fengsu*, 2850.

spirit of the mountains and rivers (*shanchuanzhishen* 山川之神) on the right side, and the city god's statue was in the center.⁵⁰ The second was the worship on the *litan* 厲壇, an altar placed outside Tongyuanmen 通遠門, the only gate of Chongqing that faced land. This ceremony involved a communal exorcism (*jiao* 醮) conducted in the presence of the statue of the city god whose efficacy granted protection to the city. At the same time, performances of *nuo* were staged in the countryside surrounding the county seat.⁵¹

In Daning 大寧 County, far east of Chongqing in the vicinity of the Three Gorges cities of Fengjie 奉節 and Wushan 巫山, celebrating Chenghuang's birthday on the twenty-eighth day of the fifth month consisted of ritual actions for which actors were rented such as sweeping the streets and, if it did not rain, staging variety plays (*zaju*), carrying the god's figure in the city streets, performing as "ghost soldiers" (*guizu* 鬼卒), and lighting incense by the city gates.⁵² While the county seat's streets were enlivened by the musicians, the city god was entertained with operas (*saihui* 賽會), and surrounding villages bustled with the exorcist performances of masked *nuo* plays.⁵³

The celebration in Guang'an had elements of both of those observed in Ba and Daning Counties. It fell on the eleventh day of the fifth month. Part of the celebration involved "ghost soldiers," actors rented for the occasion to walk the streets and dangle gongs, or, as it was customarily called, "sweeping the streets." Opera was performed in the city god's temple and sponsored by each of the city crafts' guilds.⁵⁴ In Jiangjin 江津, as was noted in the 1925 county gazetteer, all the festivals and operas were organized by the merchant guilds, which collected money, employed troupes, and prepared the premises. The oldest and largest of these festivals was the one for the city god, which provided an occasion for staging plays such as *Mulian* 目連 and *Eastern Window* (*Dongchuang* 東窗).⁵⁵

50 BXZ, *juan* 2, *jianzhi*, 692.

51 BXZ, *juan* 2, 695–97.

52 Not meaning the Yuan dynasty *zaju*.

53 Gao Weiyue 高維嶽 and Wei Yuanyou 魏遠猷, *Danling xianzhi* 大寧縣志 [*Danling County Gazetteer*] (1885; repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1971), 200–202.

54 GAXZ, 917.

55 *Jiangjin xianzhi* 江津縣志 [*Jiangjin County Gazetteer*] (1925), *juan* 16, in Ding Shiliang 丁世良, Zhao Fang 趙放 et al., ed., *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian: Xinanjuan* 中國地方志民俗資料匯編: 西南卷 [*Collected Materials on China's Local Records on Popular Customs: Volume on Southwestern China*] (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997), 236.

3.4 *Celebrating Locally Prominent Gods*

In Sichuan's towns and countryside, other gods were also considered very efficacious and therefore popularly celebrated with opera. They included a protector of the indispensable yet lower-class profession of the boatmen—Zhenjiang Wangye 鎮江王爺; the Lord of Sichuan, Chuanzhu, also known as Erlang 二郎, a name more common in other regions of China; Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音; the Lord of the Eastern Peak, Dongyuesheng 東嶽聖, whose temples, called Dongyuemiao 東嶽廟, were present in almost every town and city in Sichuan. No less important was Wenchang, the Dragon King (Longwang 龍王 or Longshen 龍神), the Medicine King (Yaowang), the earth god (tudi 土地), and so on. The scale and splendor of celebrations and staged operas during the “birthdays” of these gods depended on the prevalent local tradition. Local idiosyncrasy, often related to the presence and strength of craftsmen and merchant guilds, the environmental characteristics of the place (e.g., the presence of mountains, plains, or rivers) as well as historical tradition determined which cult was most fervently followed.

Because almost every county town in Sichuan had access to a bigger or smaller river, the boatmen's god festivities were particularly lively. By the sixth day of the sixth month, a makeshift stage was constructed in the dock, on the landing, a beach, or any flat sandbar not flooded at the moment. In the bigger towns, such as Hechuan, the chosen location was a permanent structure called a music hall near the descent to the river stone steps in front of the Zhenjiang Temple.⁵⁶ The operas were paid for from contributions by the shipping guilds and businesses that were located by the riverbanks. The festive performances took up to four days, and people in and out of the city as well as in their private abodes made offerings to this god.⁵⁷

No less lively were the mid-second month celebrations of Guanyin, which also drew crowds to the stages set up on the waterfront. The day for this goddess attracted worship by both men and women who flocked to the stage and the makeshift altar in large numbers.⁵⁸ In some counties, such as Guang'an, the festival of the Lord of Sichuan in the ninth month inspired the most lively worship, but other gods, such as the Local Father and Mother (Shegong Shemu 社公社母) in the city and their rural counterparts, the earth gods, were

56 Zhenjiangsi 鎮江寺, otherwise known as the Wangye 王爺 temple. HCXZ, *juan 3, jianzhi*, 241.

57 HCXZ, *juan 35, fengsu*, 2850. Comparable celebrations took place in Guang'an; GAXZ, *juan 34, fengsu*, 917.

58 HCXZ, *juan 3, jianzhi*, 253; *juan 35, fengsu*, 2847.

also celebrated, with as many as three days of theatrical performances.⁵⁹ In Chongqing, the festivals of Wenchang, the Dragon Spirit, the Lord of Sichuan, and the Lord of the Eastern Peak seem to have been equally important, and they surely motivated the collection of funds, the setting up of stages, and performance of operas.⁶⁰ We also know that the god of the Eastern Peak was said to be particularly keen on hearing a retelling of the *Investiture of Gods* (*Fengshenzhuan* 封神傳), a collection of stories on the marvelous demise of the Shang (17th–11th centuries BCE) and rise of the Zhou (11th–221 BCE) dynasties, which he was rarely spared on his day in the middle of the third month.⁶¹ In Hejiang 合江, the medicine king was worshipped with much more fervor and devotion, but we have insufficient information on whether the other cults also elicited performances.⁶²

In sum, all across Sichuan in the late Qing era, commoners communally celebrated all these and many other festivals, irrespective of distinctions between the gods or which deity was seen by groups or individuals to be more or less efficacious. As one or another “god’s birthday” took place every month in the first half of the year, performing opera to entertain both them and the celebrants was an important part of rural and urban life. The celebration involved financial contributions from all the inhabitants in the community based on how much they could afford. In some cases, particular craftsmen may have stepped forward to make contributions because a god may have been their special protector. In Sichuan, this applied most visibly to Zhengjiang Wangye. This festival, however, was by no means exclusive, nor were other craftsmen or people of different walks of life barred from contributing some cash to underwrite the festivities. If, in the view of the elites, the most important part of festivals was rituals performed in temples, the commoners put all their efforts into the staging of opera, whether for one day or a few days. And it was opera that animated life in these communities for short, but sure to be repeated, days of splendid merriment.

3.5 *Staging Opera for the Migrant Gods*

These celebrations, however, did not exhaust the list of occasions for opera. The grand peculiarity of the migrant-based society in Qing Sichuan was the centrality of *huiguan* in organizing, managing, and defining the cultural character

59 GAXZ, *juan* 34, *fengsu*, 914.

60 BXZ, *juan* 5, *lisu*, 690, 699, 701, 702.

61 BXZ, *juan* 5, *lisu*, 701.

62 Zhang Kaiwen 張開文, *Hejiang xianzhi* 合江縣志 [*Hejiang County Gazetteer*] (1929; repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1967), *juan* 4, *lisu*, 578–79 (hereafter, HJXZ).

of almost every locality. Although the *huiguan* were evenly spread across areas inhabited by Han communities, their concentration and kind depended on the size of the town and its links with the outside world. Because each *huiguan* was primarily a temple of the gods worshipped in the migrants' original hometown, the number of festivals and thus opera performances in a locality was a function of the number of *huiguan* there.⁶³ Unsurprisingly, Chongqing was one of the cities most endowed with these guildhalls; in fact, it was often considered to be ruled by the so-called Guilds of the Eight Provinces (Ba sheng huiguan 八省會館). These were Huguang 湖廣, with the temple of the Great Yu; Jiangxi, with a temple of Xuzhenjun 許真君; Fujian, with a shrine of Tianhou 天后; Guangdong housed a temple of Chanzong liuzu 禪宗六祖 (Huineng 慧能, 638–713); Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Jiangnan shared a temple of Guandi 關帝 (early third-century general Guan Yu 關羽, d. 220); the Zhejiang *huiguan* originally had a temple of Wu Dafu 吳大夫 (Wu Yue 吳越 king Qian Liu 錢鏐, 852–932) during the early Qing and later a temple of Guandi; and Yun-Gui *gongsuo* 雲貴公所, representing the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, which was also a temple to Heishenrong 黑神榮 (Heilu dafu 黑祿大夫).⁶⁴ This collection of *huiguan*, which by the first half of the nineteenth century were all equipped with a permanent stage, meant that noisy festivals and opera tunes were a constant part of life in this inland emporium.

The much smaller but also bustling port of Hechuan had five *huiguan*, representing Huguang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangdong, and Guangxi 廣西 (with a temple called Shoufugong 壽福宮), in which even two-week-long theatrical performances were staged from August to late October, often accompanied by parades and public banquets in the city streets stretching into November.⁶⁵ The Hejiang gazetteer states that the most important celebrations in that county seat revolved around the Huguang, Fujian, Guangdong, and Jiangxi *huiguan*.⁶⁶ In Guang'an, the last days of the seventh month and the first days of the eighth month were a time of merriment and opera in the Jiangxi *huiguan* at the temple called Longevity Palace (Wanshougong 萬壽宮).

In fact, it would be hard to find a locality that did not have at least one festival organized by *huiguan*, the most representative communal organization in Sichuan throughout Qing rule. Considering that these institutions

63 Zhao Shiyu, *The Urban Life of the Qing Dynasty*, trans. Wang Hong, Zhang Linlin, and Lu Yan, rev. Wang Hong (Reading, UK: Paths International, 2014), 269–70; Wang Rigen, *Huiguan*, 303–31, 391–409.

64 BXZ, *juan* 5, *lisu*, 704–705.

65 HCXZ, *juan* 35, *fengsu*, 2855.

66 HJXZ, *juan* 4, *lisu*, 578.

numbered at most 1,400, according to Lan Yong and Huang Quanshen, they were by far the most uniform and the most widespread form of local social organization and religious life outside Buddhist temples and monasteries.⁶⁷ They were also the main engines of fundraising for and organization of opera, giving a clear framework in time and space for such festivities. Despite the reduction in their numbers and often appalling condition, *huiguan* remain the best extant evidence of Qing-era permanent theaters. The sculptures and reliefs covering these venues are among the few ways that we can ascertain the tastes of opera viewers, founders, and supporters of the theaters in late imperial Sichuan.

3.6 *Unequal Distribution of Data or Unequal Distribution of Opera?*

Before we answer this question, it is important to reflect on the very unequal distribution of our data on the religious festivities and opera performances in the nineteenth century. We could be satisfied with a claim that the interests of gazetteer compilers, the lively intellectual world in various counties in Sichuan (or its absence) determined the amount of detail, veracity, knowledge, and clarity of information available today. However, we cannot discount entirely the idea that some places were better endowed with opera because of their wealth and population and the number of artists active in the region, whereas others—poor, crude, and distant from any waterway (the only navigable highway at the time)—rarely hosted an opera troupe. Festivals in these localities were simple rituals conducted in shabby shrines, as their *huiguan* was not only indistinguishable from any large house but also could have been merely a secular building with an altar to commonly worshipped deities.

Therefore, we should not be blinded by the number of *huiguan* in Sichuan, interpreting it as a sign of greater religious and operatic splendor than is warranted. Nor should we think that only the recorded celebrations were graced with opera. Gazetteer compilers, however meticulous if not pedantic, were almost never well disposed toward popular culture, of which opera was the primary representative. We can shed a bit more light on Sichuan's theatrical performances by studying the place and significance of where it was staged. More often than not, it was not on the permanent stage of the rich city god or *huiguan* temple but on the street in the market town. The significance of the space of the town and how it was shaped by opera is our next topic.

67 Lan Yong and Huang Quansheng, *Huguang tian Sichuan*.

4 Opera and Shaping of the Material and Social Landscape

The dominant feature of nineteenth-century Sichuan was not the village but the market town.⁶⁸ Much has been made of this provincial particularity by G. William Skinner and his students. Here, we look at the market towns from a different perspective: as the rural life of Sichuanese farmers revolved around frequent visits to their local market, we should look at how peasants negotiated these occasions, where they went, how the shape of the town channeled their movements, and what it meant for them. The scarcity of peasant-authored sources in the nineteenth century prevents us from obtaining direct answers to these questions.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, we have sufficient knowledge about how the towns looked, what they were made up of, and which temples and festivals embellished them.⁷⁰ This supplemented by the historical records permits us to analyze the triangle of a peasant's need to sell his produce, religious festivals, and the staging of opera, which became the building blocks of the spatial organization of small towns. Conversely, we can also see how opera performed on market days shaped the towns and consequently the social behavior of the petty urbanites and sojourning peasants.

5 A Market Town: A Temple-centered Society, an Opera-centered Society

Irrespective of all the morphological differences that originate in the geographic conditions, market towns in Sichuan were fairly uniform. They were almost always built along the principal road, which was lined with shops of various types and led in and out of the town. Most towns, whenever possible, were located in the vicinity of the waterways, so the road usually connected the center of town with the dock (*matou* 碼頭) or followed the river that led to it. The spatial constraints, especially in the Yangzi valley of Eastern Sichuan were the primary reason for turning the towns into long, snakelike multilayer structures

68 Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen, *Baron Richtofen's Letters, 1870–1872* (Shanghai: Printed at the “North-China Herald” Office, 1903), 165.

69 If not the folksongs, which pose their own set of problems, see Chabrowski, *Singing on the River*, 21–41.

70 We are also helped by the unique field research of Isabel Crook (b. 1915) conducted in Xinglongchang 興隆場, a town in Bishan County 璧山縣 approximately 50 km west from Chongqing during World War II; Isabel Crook, Christina K. Gilmartin, Yu Xiji, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig, *Prosperity's Predicament: Identity, Reform, and Resistance in Rural Wartime China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

suspended on the cliffs overlooking the water. In other parts of Sichuan, we see a certain range of possibilities exploited by the town builders: whether two parallel principal streets or two high streets converged in a complex maze of alleys in the area approaching the dock. The wharf typically did not involve an elaborate feat of engineering but, rather, a long flight of stairs descending to the rocky riverside to provide easy access to the water and to the boats moored in the town for the loaders, water carriers, and peddlers. The center of these market towns was not defined by the square, municipal institution in the form of a town hall or *yamen*. Most Sichuanese towns were fairly autonomous communities dominated by the local gentry and not directly governed by imperial officials. Even during the final years of the Qing, they rarely had a police station or a public school.⁷¹ The center of each town was the temple, which sometimes belonged to a dominant clan, often devoted to Zhenjiang Wangye or a *huiguan* that contained the town's main temple. The latter shrines represented the proverbial "nine palaces and eight temples" (*jiugong bamiao* 九宮八廟), which included the most popular cults of the immigrant societies, the city god temple, the Zhang Fei 張飛 temple, or shrines to the earth god, gods of particular crafts, and lineage halls.⁷²

The dominance of the temple-centered sociopolitical structure meant that religious festivals were of primary importance for residents of the town and its hinterland's local identity and prosperity. Festivities often occurred on market days, during which funds were solicited from the inhabitants (a small surtax collected on the sales of goods, gambling, tea, etc.) to celebrate the god of the town. Later in the day, when trading fever began to subside, the town elders or members of the local gentry either paid for an opera troupe or organized the gambling tables to collect funds. People who remained in town thus could enjoy opera far into the evening. Gambling, going to the opera, and socializing occurred mostly on the grounds of the town's primary shrine.⁷³

5.1 Towns Centered on Opera Stages

The important role played by opera was also indicated by the spatial arrangement of the towns. The clearest example of them are the so-called boat-shaped towns (*chuanxingchang* 船形場), which numbered ten, according

71 Xiaowei Zheng, *The Politics of Rights and the 1911 Revolution in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 124.

72 Ji Fuzheng 季富政, *Sanxia gudian changzhen* 三峽古典場鎮 [*Classical Towns of the Three Gorges*] (Chengdu: Xinan jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2015), 79–85, 93–105.

73 Crook et al., *Prosperity's Predicament*, 33–34. Gazetteer compilers claimed that late-Qing population enjoyed mainly gambling and opium smoking, BXZ, *juan* 5, *lisu*, 754–62.

to Ji Fuzheng, a researcher on urbanization in Sichuan. These settlements, exemplified by Luocheng 羅城 in Qianwei 犍爲 County, were centered on the theater stage, which occupied the only broad, boat-shaped street in the town, in the western corner of the central street, called the Rice Market (Mishichang 米市場). Luocheng, 30 kilometers southwest from Leshan 樂山, was not a small semirural settlement but, rather, a sizable town, decorated with a number of sojourners' temples and other establishments devoted to the Lord of Sichuan, Guanyin, and Wenchang. Moreover, just outside the eastern and western city limits were two mosques (*qingzhensi* 清真寺) attesting to a vibrant Muslim population. By adorning a broad street on both sides with almost five-meter-high arcades, the theater was a focal point of the town and the market. The stage also functioned within the sacred organizational logic of the town, as it faced the altar of the Lingguan 靈官 Temple at the other end of the Rice Market. It thus replicated the bond between the temple and the stage and the worship and the opera.⁷⁴ This relationship is important because it explains when and for which celebrations opera was employed and how many people watched it and contributed to it.

5.2 *Temples and Their Stages as Center of the Communal Space*

Most towns, however well-endowed with cultic spaces devoted to the Buddhist, Daoist, and local deities, rarely had a central space allocated to opera. Most were built along a road that provided little space for the construction of a free-standing theater. We illustrate this point with examples of two market towns in Eastern Sichuan: Soaring Dragon Market (Longxingchang 龍興場) in Jiangbeiting 江北廳 (now in the Chongqing metropolitan area) and Xinglongchang in Bishan 璧山.⁷⁵ In both places, the main street wove between houses whose front opened up to offer access to shops, workshops, and teahouses. Because neither was dominated by any particular lineage, the family temples did not become community centers but, rather, places of private use for the clans. We can still see it very clearly in Longxing, which prides itself for having three single-lineage halls (surnames Ming 明, Bao 包, and Liu 劉) and one devoted to all 172 clans living in the town and its vicinity (Hezhi zongci 賀氏宗祠, now Huaxia citang 華夏祠堂). Even though each lineage hall currently has a small opera stage, it is unquestionable that they were not used in the

74 Ji Fuzheng 季富政, *Ciafeng xiangtu: Bashu chengzhen yu minju (xuji)* 采風鄉土: 巴蜀城鎮與民居(續集) [*Collecting Melodies of the Hometown: Towns of Ba Shu and the Folk Dwellings (Supplement Volume)*] (Chengdu: Xinan jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2015), 14–21.

75 Jiangbeiting was separated from Ba County in 1759. Longxing is currently in Yubei District 渝北區.

communal festivities. The space within them was probably even too small for all the members of the clan.

The community centered, instead, on the grounds of the main temples, in which each shrine represented a different form of the local identity and sentiment of the market town inhabitants. In Longxing, they were the Temple of King Yu (Yuwangmiao 禹王廟), also called the Soaring Dragon Temple (Longxingsi 龍興寺), which, like the majority of the town dwellers, had Huguang origins; and the Hidden Dragon Temple (Longcangsi 龍藏寺, now Hidden Dragon Palace, Longcanggong 龍藏宮) that showed an attachment to the local space and efforts to exploit its beneficial *fengshui* 風水. Both structures were much larger than any of the lineage halls or any other piece of public land available in town.

After entering the temple of King Yu, one passes under the theater stage, which, together with the portal, forms a two-story building supported on twelve columns and with a flamboyant roof with far protruding eaves, covered in glazed tiles and topped with a sculpture of two dragons facing each other. The lower floor has an altar with a human-size statue of a Bodhisattva facing the inner part of the temple, whereas the upper floor is a stage 11.76 meters wide, 9.8 meters deep, and 9 meters high, which also has an altar draped with banners in the center.⁷⁶ Above the stage is a plaque stating “view the matter in this light” (*zuoru shiguan* 作如是觀), which clearly refers to the moral and edifying nature of the plays performed in this shrine. The entire temple takes up more than two thousand square meters, of which five hundred were outdoor spaces mostly comprising the courtyard in front of the theater stage. Having so much space available allowed the Soaring Dragon Temple to be the primary site for hosting opera performances, which pertained to entire the market town community. Although the temple dates to 1759, its current shape is the result of two expansion and renovation projects: one conducted in 1804, when the theater stage was erected, and the other in 1845.⁷⁷

The nearby Daoist Hidden Dragon Palace is an even larger space and a more splendid stage. This shrine is closely linked to the town's history. According to the legend, in 1406, Jianwen 建文, the second Ming emperor, while fleeing the troops of the usurper, the king of Yan, Zhu Di 朱棣 (later the Yongle 永樂 emperor, 1402–1424), hid in a small shrine in a Sichuanese town called

76 It consists of a plaque and banners to the Apparent and Efficacious Spirit of the Holy God [Shangdi lingxian shen 聖帝靈顯神], referring to Yu the Great.

77 Chongqing huguang huiguan guanlichu 重慶湖廣會館管理處, *Chongqing huiguanzhi* 重慶會館志 [*Records of the Chongqing Huiguan*] (Wuhan: Changjiang chubanshe, 2014), 33–34 (henceforth, CQHgz).

Longxing 隆興. When he wanted to cross a nearby stream called River of the Great Flood (Taihonghe 太洪河) he saw the troops entering town and quickly ran to the temple to hide behind it. Fortunately for him, the soldiers did not find him and left. To celebrate their moment in the limelight of the grand history, the locals renamed the town from Prosperity to Soaring Dragon (homonymous), which means “surviving emperor.” The stream was renamed Imperial River (Linyuhe 臨御河), and the bridge Turning Dragon Bridge (Huilongqiao 回龍橋). The shrine that was later rebuilt was named Hidden Dragon Palace, i.e., “hidden emperor,” to commemorate the rare luck of the deposed ruler.⁷⁸ Whatever the truth of this story, it is important to note that, for centuries, the Hidden Dragon Palace not only represented the town in its connection to the broader body politic of imperial China but also was seen symbolically and spiritually as the town itself. It is no wonder that Longcanggong is the market’s biggest shrine, with sufficient space to accommodate the majority of its inhabitants during celebrations. The temple’s main hall was devoted to the Three Pure Ones (Sanqingdian 三清殿), directly faced the theater stage, and linked the practice of Daoism with the fortunes of the town as well as the broader cosmological beliefs that highlighted the beneficial geomantic qualities supporting the profit and prosperity of the inhabitants.⁷⁹

Xinglongchang had a similar location in the most significant public space, which hosted a shrine, opera stage, market, and storage facilities as well as being a locus for demonstrating power and prestige in and of the community. Isabel Crook described the town as having one street that led from the Temple of Culture (Wenmiao 文廟), certainly the most spacious establishment in this “market village,” to the Temple of War (Wumiao 武廟). On market days, the former shrine, dubbed the town square, served as the site where goods were offered, as a gambling den (with purpose of collecting money for operas and celebrations), as the place for opera performances on important holidays, and as the starting and ending point of parades.⁸⁰ The latter was a stage for performances on the locally important birthday of Guan Gong (Guan Yu, the god

78 The story comes from the information plate provided by the town’s heritage bureau and pasted on the temple’s front wall. None of this is confirmed by the 1844 *Jiangbeiting Gazetteer*, for example, the River of the Great Flood, Taihonghe does not appear under the name Linyuhe. This does not undermine authenticity of the story, which is in any case very hard to confirm but points to the variety of histories held by the literati circles and by the local population. Fuzhu Lang’s 福珠朗阿 and Song Xuan 宋煊, *Jiangbeiting zhi* 江北廳志 [*Jiangbei Ting Gazetteer*] (1844; repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1971), *juan 2*, *yudi* 輿地, 267.

79 Most descriptions are based on my own observations in April 2012 and November 2015.

80 Crook et al., *Prosperity’s Predicament*, 140–42.

of war). Crook wrote that this military deity was patronized by the Gowned Brothers (Paoge 袍哥), also called the Elder Brother Society (Gelaohui 哥佬會), a secret society that created a parallel power structure in the town and enabled local landlords and strongmen to manipulate the national government for their own benefit.⁸¹ Although this secret society did not exercise similar power during the final decades of the Qing, as it was illegal and viciously attacked, we cannot assume that the local society in Xinglongchang did not revere the god of war with performances of local opera. In fact, the theatrical performances predated the mid-twentieth-century demonstrations of the Paoge's power and domination over the financing and organization of opera. What Paoge did with this social institution was an usurpation of the previously communal activity and, as we shall see, such development was not unique to Republican Xinglongchang.

In sum, main attraction of town life in Sichuan was the staging of opera, a public act that required fundraising, hiring actors, building or preparing the stage, and attracting a sufficiently large audience. The opera became so important that it took up the main space in the town: whether the market square, the high street, or the most significant shrine. In the view of Skinner, the life of peasants and petty urbanites in most of these small towns revolved around the regular local trading days.⁸² Although his point is fundamentally correct, it does not give the whole picture. The spatial distribution of the towns and their internal morphologies show that trading activities were complementary to the religious worship, accompanied by opera performance. In the allocation of geographic and symbolic space, however, trading appeared to be secondary.

The theatrical stage was the center of local life, and, for many, watching the show presented on it must have been no less an attraction than examining local goods or trying to peddle one's produce. The fact that, in one way or another, local people, whether they lived in town or its environs, supported the performance in form of a small tax or a voluntary contribution made opera a common enterprise and entertainment. Indeed, it was an integral part of the marketing experience that, in itself, was never alienated from the worship of gods responsible for guaranteeing prosperity and good fortune—worship performed through opera. Therefore, it is not an overstatement to say that the small towns' economic, social, cultural, and political space was significantly

81 Crook et al., *Prosperity's Predicament*, 138–39. On the social role of Paoge, see Zheng, *The Politics*.

82 G. William Skinner, "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 275–351; idem, "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China," in *The City*, 211–49.

shaped by the need for theatrical performance, just as it was by trading or by seasonal religious rituals. However, opera often became the dominant feature in the material space of the towns, attesting to its importance and profound impact on Sichuanese society.

6 The Big City Perspective

If the impact of opera on the structure of the marketing towns and the behaviors of local communities was straightforward, we are presented with a much more complex picture in the main provincial centers of Chengdu and Chongqing. Both cities had commercial, industrial, official, and religious functions, which occupied and defined their time and space. At the same time, these temporal and spatial social realities were endowed with their meaning through frequent opera performances. In these diverse metropolitan centers, the seasonal temple and city-ward religious festivals intermingled with opera performances staged in the *huiguan*, in the gentry's manors, and in the residences of the officials.

6.1 *Cosmopolitan Space*

By the nineteenth century, Chengdu and Chongqing had both acquired a cosmopolitan air. They attracted officials from across the empire, who in turn brought with them artists and performers in styles that were fashionable in Beijing and in their mostly Lower Yangzi hometowns. High-ranking officials presided over large patronage networks, which spanned not only students, exam candidates, and expectant officials who shared in the literary culture but also merchants and artisans, who derived their livelihood from providing services to the governing elites and sought advancement in their social standing through contact with officials. Conversely, members of Qing officialdom inculcated their dependents with a taste for particular opera styles and repertoires. Little wonder, then, that in the nineteenth century Chengdu and Chongqing became lively markets for the production and dissemination of the printed opera scripts meant for leisurely consumption by the literate audience and for dissemination among the more sophisticated opera troupes.⁸³

The taste for novelty and cultural diversity is well illustrated by the artistic patronage history of Wu Tang 吳棠. As the general governor of Sichuan

83 Most actors and troupe owners were illiterate. Liu Xiaomin 劉效民, *Sichuan fangke quben kaolue* 四川坊科曲本靠略 [An Examination of the Woodblock Publishing of the Opera Librettos in Sichuan] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2005).

during the Xianfeng 咸豐 reign period (1851–1861), he obtained a ten-member Kun opera troupe from Suzhou. The troupe was called Nourishing Leisure (Shuyiban 舒頤班) and entertained the governor and his distinguished guests in the Garden for Practicing Tranquility (Xijingyuan 習靜園), part of the residence, every afternoon after the morning duties were completed. Over time, the actors collected enough capital to buy 100 mu 畝 of land and to move into the Jiangnan *huiguan*, where it subsequently performed.⁸⁴ The troupe, therefore, was not the exclusive “property” of the governor general. Rather, Wu Tang asserted his priority in employing and enjoying it, while popularizing the Kun style among the local elite and giving it a permanent place in the cultural scene of Chengdu.⁸⁵

6.2 *The Role of Chongqing’s Eight Provinces’ Huiguan*

It was no accident that *huiguan* became the next locus for opera performance as most of Sichuan’s population identified itself with their own or their lineage’s extra-provincial places of origin.⁸⁶ Because the inhabitants of Sichuan and their family members outside the province provided consistent financial support for these institutions, the *huiguan* developed into the most significant building block in the urban material and social space. In the last century of Qing rule, *huiguan* became the primary locations for religious celebrations that involved opera performance. In this respect, however, Chengdu and Chongqing differed. The provincial capital was a much older and culturally established city, which prided itself on having venerable shrines, such as the mausoleum of Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234), called the Temple of the Military Marquise (Wuhouci 武侯祠), or Qingyang Palace (Qingyanggong 青羊宮), an imposing Daoist monastery—each of which was home to seasonal opera performances and had a large stage on its premises.⁸⁷ Chongqing had none of these estab-

84 After Zhou Xun 周詢, *Shuhai congtan* 蜀海叢談 [Essays on Sichuan], juan 3, “Wu Qin huigong 吳勤惠公” in SXQSL, 82–83.

85 On the role of the officials’ and elites’ courts as stages for the opera, see Liao Ben 廖奔, *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi* 中國古代劇場史 [History of Chinese Premodern Theater Stages] (Beijing: Renmin wenhua chubanshe, 2012), 109–16.

86 Chabrowski, *Singing on the River*, 54–60.

87 The number and scale of Chengdu’s religious and official premises can be inferred from the maps and illustrations published in the 1873 *Reedited Chengdu County Gazetteer: The most important shrines in the walled city are on pp. 58–59, the city environs, pp. 60–61, and in the Manchu town [Mancheng shaocheng 滿城少城], pp. 62–63. The plans of major buildings also show possible places for opera performances: Shengmiao 聖廟, Mancheng Wenchanggong 滿城文昌宮, Xianshu 縣署, Jiangjun yamen 將軍衙門, Dutong yamen 都統衙門, Furong Mochi shuyuan 芙蓉墨池書院, Mancheng shaocheng shuyuan 滿城少城書院, Lianguan gongsuo 簾官公所. Luo Tingquan 羅廷權 and Zhong Xingjian*

lishments. Nevertheless, in both cities, the social center stage was occupied by *huiguan* and *gongsuo*, and these two related (often synonymous) institutions attracted financial support from Sichuan's heterogeneous and linguistically divided population. These funds were channeled toward meeting the needs of their respective populations, such as governing, maintaining order, organizing education, religious worship, and entertainment. Although none of Chengdu's thirty-two sojourner halls have survived, the scope and importance of these institutions and the centrality of opera for the venture they presided over can be ascertained on the basis of the extant halls in Chongqing.⁸⁸

Chongqing was dominated by *huiguan* that represent the Eight Provinces.⁸⁹ Established largely during the Kangxi and Qianlong (1736–1796) reign periods, these institutions not only helped merchants settle and conduct business in Eastern Sichuan but also grew into the self-government bodies coordinating, mediating, and enforcing imperial authority in the city and its environs. Because of this role, they occupied the most significant area of Chongqing, the Lower Town (Xiacheng 下城) district facing the Yangzi, which offered easy access to city gates and docks (both maintained by *huiguan*). This bustling mercantile quarter was also shared with the three government *yamen* (of county, prefecture, and circuit administrations) and important temples, such as that of the city god, giving *huiguan* additional prestige. They were also the main venues for cultural production and the patronage and performance of opera. The layout of these compounds leave the impression that theatrical performance was their main purpose.

The *huiguan* complex in Chongqing consists of three separate institutions representing Huguang, Guangdong, and Qi'an 齊安 (called Qi'an *gongsuo*).⁹⁰ Because they were built in a sloping confined space overlooking the river,

衷興鑑. Luo Tingquan 羅廷權 and Zhong Xingjian 衷興鑑, *Chongxiu Chengdu xianzhi 重修成都縣志* [Reedited Chengdu County Gazetteer] (1873, repr., Taipei: Taiwan xue-sheng shuju, 1971), 58–63, 78–97.

88 List of Chengdu's *huiguan*: Guizhou 貴州, Henan 河南, Guangdong, Henan 河南 (the second one), Zhejiang 浙江, Huguang 湖廣, Fujian 福建, Shanxi 山西, Shaanxi 陝西, Jishui 吉水, Jiangxi 江西, Chuanbei 川北, Shiyang 石陽, Yunnan 雲南. List of *gongsuo*: Qiannan 黔南, Xijiang 西江, Yanlu 燕魯, Huangpo 黃陂, Lianghu 兩湖, Jiangyuan 醬園, Sishilu 四十爐, Shaangan 陝甘, Anhui 安徽, Tailai 泰來, Xidong dajie 西東大街, Chuandong 川東, Jiufang 酒坊, Lianguang 兩廣; Outside the walls 城外: Zhejiang 浙江, Tuhang 屠行, Shaofang 燒坊, Anhui 安徽 (second one). Fu Chongju, *Chengdu*, 1: 43–44.

89 See Wang Di, *Kuachu fengbide shijie*; Wang Di, "Renkou," 310–78.

90 Alternatively called Huangzhou 黃州 *gongsuo* It represented cotton yarn merchants from three counties in the Huangzhou prefecture in Hubei province: Huang'an 黃安, Huanggang 黃岡 and Macheng 麻城.

these separate halls were combined into one large compound consisting of four permanent theater stages, four temples, residential buildings, courtyards, and gardens. The largest one for Huguang was built during the Kangxi reign as a temple to the Great Yu and expanded in 1846 to its present size of 2,141 square meters. It has two theater stages, the first over the main gate (called the mountain gate, *shanmen* 山門) facing the main hall of the temple and the second in a separate hall at the back of the temple. Both stages have refined tile roofs decorated with sculptures and are covered with bas reliefs depicting opera scenes. The courtyard between the Great Yu temple and the stage as well as the viewing platform facing the second stage enabled large audiences to enjoy the opera performance.⁹¹ A similar principle of spatial organization was adopted in the construction of the Guangdong hall, which was built in 1786 but assumed its final form in 1833, after reconstruction. This building, even more than its adjacent Huguang counterpart, was devoted to opera, as it largely consists of an open courtyard in which one side had an altar, and the other, perched above the main gate, a theatrical scene 8.2 meters wide and 2.64 meters deep. The outlying courtyard of more than 140 meters provided ample space for accommodating crowds of spectators. Qi'an *gongsuo* also went through two stages of development. Originally, it was just a side shrine to the Yu temple. After it received sufficient funds from sojourners in the three counties it represented, the institution bought a mansion belonging to the Zhou household (Zhoujia yuanzi 周家院子), which was on the side of the Huguang hall and just beneath the Guangdong *huiguan*. By 1818 it already had a splendid structure that centered on the intricately decorated stage 8.45 meters wide, 6.25 meters high, and 2.56 meters deep. In contrast to the theaters in nearby halls, the Qi'an theater was almost entirely covered, with only a meter broad, bottom-level space dividing the elevated stage from the surrounding viewers' platform. The covered "audience hall" was in fact a set of three chambers, two of which could either be opened to the stage or closed and put to other use.⁹²

Based on the splendor of the Chongqing *huiguan*, the three sojourner halls illustrate the institutions that governed the main cities in Sichuan and points of convergence for a broad spectrum of public social activities, which would otherwise require separate establishments. Serving as temples, lineage halls,

91 The measurements of the viewing platform are 15.03 by 12.08 meters. The space between the stage and the platform is 3.6 meters. CQHGX, 17.

92 CQHGX, 19–24. A picture of it as it was used for a theater show at the very end of the nineteenth century was published by Alicia Neva Little in her once-popular book *Intimate China: The Chinese as I Have Seen Them* (London: Hutchinson, 1899), 262–63, available at <https://archive.org/details/intimatechinachioilitt/page/n10/> (accessed May 17, 2019).

and business and cultural centers as well as associations for the gentry and literati elite, they were above all loci for communal expression in the form of opera and worship. The splendor of theatrical stages and their sine qua non relationship with *huiguan* demonstrates the role of opera performance in shaping urban spaces in the late Qing.

6.3 *Social Space of the Opera and Urban Society*

Finally, shows in private and government courts as well as in *huiguan* were not the only spaces occupied and shaped by performance. Nevertheless, whereas the ones discussed earlier indicate regular engagement with opera, sometimes for ritual use but mostly for entertainment of the funders and patrons, seasonal street opera and parade was always linked to the worship of one deity or another.⁹³ The largest cities in Sichuan, therefore, grouped the various types of opera: ritual celebrations, whether organized by the lineages or by entire wards, coincided with those produced by the *huiguan*, large temples, and monasteries with universal appeal and by private courts of officials and powerful local elites. These events were not in conflict but, rather, multilayer activities that occupied and constructed the social and material space of these large and complex settlements. They catered to different groups and social classes and permitted the crossing of cultural and social boundaries. At times, they depicted the city as an entire community (during the city god festival), as a hierarchical society divided by class (e.g., private consumption by the governors), as an ethnically divided social space (opera in *huiguan*), or as a local society much akin to the one in the most townships in Sichuan (for instance, local earth god celebrations).

By the nineteenth century, opera had become a stable social institution, uniform in form, content, and method of organization but diverse in use, implementation, and quality. Opera spread widely to all levels of society; it motivated the construction of permanent stages, and it made the acting profession more attractive to lower-class men. It turned management of the theater troupe into a profitable business and created a career in regional tune singing. Opera was also shaped by forces outside Sichuan: actors were invited from distant lands to perform in the *huiguan* and for sojourning officials, thus, giving audiences experiences like those that were familiar or to which they aspired in the capital and in their homes. The new and foreign styles were adopted and became beloved. The example of cultural consumption from the top of the social hierarchy mixed with the necessity of appropriately reverent worship

93 For a full list of celebrations held in Chengdu, see Fu Chongju, *Chengdu*, 1: 202–6, 1: 548–60, esp. 554–60.

and with the popular taste for excitement. Above all, this adaptation, adjustment, and application of the opera should not be seen as merely the cherry on the cake in the stable world of prescribed rituals and forms of socialization. The communities—seen as acts of social cooperation for a common goal and as material constructs that enabled, facilitated, and represented this social bond—were built on the organization and performance of opera. Together with religious rituals, opera provided the bond that joined these communities by cementing a common history, values, and beliefs.

7 Opera between the Elites and the Commoners

Although festive, an opera was not a carnival. No world was depicted as upside-down, no social order was overturned, and no free rein was given to the popular classes that would assert their cultural independence and vent their frustrations.⁹⁴ More often than not, opera, in form and content, was conducive to the preservation of a hierarchical society built on the value system transmitted through the Three Teachings (*Sanjiao* 三教) of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Opera instructed audiences about the history, morality, and hierarchy that were fundamental to the maintenance of local identity, loyalty to family and dynasty, and the cosmology based on Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian beliefs and traditions, which underpinned sociopolitical order and, it was believed, secured the common good.

Nevertheless, we should not see opera only as a vehicle for teaching orthodoxy. Many things often went awry, whether out of ignorance of appropriate teachings, local cultural variations, the influence of heterodoxy by millenarian or secret societies, or a popular preference for bawdy and licentious stories. Even though opera imparted the “correct” ideas, it was still seen as a disturbing social phenomenon, too often presented for spreading offensive notions and wasting time that people ought to have devoted to work. Moreover, the unclear and intimate link between popular plays and Buddhist teachings, particularly those deemed incorrect and rebellious, made opera highly suspicious to the vigilant officials and perennially insecure Manchu rulers, who had tended to outlaw and regulate theater ever since the start of their rule. Hongli 弘曆 (1711–1799), the Qianlong emperor, took an even more radical approach, attempting to forestall the dissemination of local tunes, which he

94 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1983), 178–204.

saw as a hornet's nest of depravity and possible rebellion.⁹⁵ Successive rulers, though frequently suspicious and faced with innumerable challenges to their rule, such as the White Lotus Rebellion (1794–1804) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), did not design a consistent policy on the management of opera. To the contrary, the prohibition regimes waxed and waned, as troupes made a living, theatrical performances took place, plays continued to be published, and imagery rooted in opera gained an ever-stronger hold on the popular imagination. Perched between conflicting views and policies and used by social actors with often-conflicting agendas, opera and its imagery served the forces of the imperial order and that of its enemies by expressing the prominence of its funders, making distinctions, being appropriated for “sinister” uses, and providing a venue for struggle against political and social hegemony.

7.1 *Elite Uses of Opera: Huiguan*

Graphic depictions of opera available in the form of sculptures and bas reliefs extant throughout Sichuan offer probably the best source on the elite consumption and use of opera imagery. *Huiguan* stages are the earliest spaces decorated with Qing-era bas reliefs illustrating opera scenes. The best examples come from four prominent *huiguan*: first, in the center of the salt-producing city of Zigong 自貢 for merchants and settlers from Shanxi and Shaanxi, called Zigong Xi Qin huiguan 自貢西秦會館; second, the triple compound in Chongqing described earlier; third, in Longchang 隆昌, the neighboring county to east of Zigong, where a Temple of the Great Yu (Huguang hall) was located; and, fourth, the Shaanxi and Shanxi merchant hall in Xuyong 敘永 County south of Luzhou 瀘州. Here we focus on the Zigong *huiguan*.

The *huiguan* in Zigong was constructed in 1736 funded by merchants sojourning in this salt-producing region.⁹⁶ As the salt trade brought immense wealth, the *huiguan* of these northern merchants is among the most beautiful in China. It has seven gilded bas-relief, illustrating stories from a broad range of operas dedicated mostly to appropriate marriages, female chastity, and filial piety toward virtuous mothers. The stories include *Li Kui Shoulders the Chaste Tree* (*Li Kui fu jing* 李逵負荊) recounting a story in the tradition of the *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳); a famous Ming opera, the *Jade Hairpin*

95 Successive events largely proved him right. Ding Shumei expounds the regime of prohibition quoting a large body of documents covering whole of the Qing empire. Ding Shumei 丁淑梅, *Zhongguo gudai jinhuai xiju biannianshi* 中國古代禁毀戲劇編年史 [*Chronological History of the Pre-modern Prohibitions and Destructions of the Opera*] (Chongqing: Chongqing daxue chubanshe, 2014), 363–447.

96 On Zigong merchants, see Madeleine Zelin, *The Merchants of Zigong: Industrial Entrepreneurship in Early Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

(*Yuzanji* 玉簪記), a love story advocating appropriate moral values and marriage; and a selection from the *Three Kingdoms* called *Blocking the River to Force a Fight* (*Jiejiang duodou* 截江奪鬥), which relates the tale of a son's hasty return home to see his sick mother. Another is an opera called *Ningwu Pass* (*Ningwuguan* 寧武關), which takes place during the Ming-Qing transition and tells of General Zhou Yujie 周遇吉 (d. 1644), who interrupted his duties only to pay respects to his mother, Lady Zhao 趙, on her sixtieth birthday. Later, Zhou dies fighting at the border, and the Zhao family commit self-immolation: the heroic and exemplary behavior of the clan attracted great appreciation. Other stories were the *Eight Immortals Celebrate Elder's Birthday* (*Baxian qingshou* 八仙慶壽), a story derived from Wu Yuantai's 吳元泰 (before 1566) *Journey to the East* (*Dongyouji* 東遊記), a hagiographic novel describing the deeds of men and a woman who were worshipped as Daoist immortals. Two other stories considered both historical and Daoist were *Manchuanghu* 滿床笏, which take place in the Tang dynasty, and *Tianguantu* 天官圖, a play about heavenly officials who bring happiness to the world.⁹⁷ The rich visual program presented in the Zigong Hall focuses on three primary topics: filial piety, chastity, and heavenly protection—a source of longevity and felicity.⁹⁸

In the field of representation, *huiguan* trod a narrow path between community beliefs (the god enshrined in the temple), the ideological preferences of the *huiguan* elders—that is, gentry and richer merchants, who bankrolled the common enterprise, and the imperial authorities who sanctioned the *huiguan* and their activities. The sculpture program implemented in the *huiguan* was

97 Sichuansheng wenwu guanliju, Sichuansheng chuanju yishu yanjiu yuan 四川省文物管理局, 四川省川劇藝術研究院, *Sichuan mijian xiqu diaoke xuan: jianzhu diaoke xiqu wenwu minsu liyou yanjiu cangben* 四川民間戲曲雕刻選: 建築雕刻戲曲文物民俗旅遊研究藏本 [Selected Opera-Themed Wooden Sculptures for Sichuan: Collector's Edition for Travelling and Research of Folk Opera Cultural Artifacts (such as) Architectural Sculptures] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2002), 14–25 (hereafter, *Sichuan diaoke*); Wang Qiang 王強, *Huiguan xitai yu xiju* 會館戲臺與戲劇 [Huiguan Theater Stages and Opera] (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2000), 292–98.

98 Chongqing's Huguang huiguan stages featured morality-religious stories such as *Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* [*Quanxiang ershisi xiao* 全相二十四孝], the *Journey to the West* [*Xiyouji* 西遊記], and the *Investiture of Gods* [*Fengshenbang* 封神榜]. Longchang Temple of Great Yu possess depictions of plays on topics concerning female chastity and loyalty, such as *Huangquanhui* 黃泉會 in *Dong Zhou lieguozhi* 東周列國志, *Xiaoman jinshan* 小漫金山 from *Beishezhuo* 白蛇傳, *Xiyi* 戲儀 from *Wugui lianfang* 五桂聯芳, *Sanjiadian* 三家店 from *Jitiangu* 擊天鼓. Xuyong Guandi Temple sculptures offer a mix of patriotic tales, hagiographies of Daoist Immortals, and stories about Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824): *Xianji songzi* 仙姬送子, *Sanyitu* 三異圖, *Yifenglou* 引鳳樓, *Dianjiang zefu* 點將責夫, *Dulanguan* 渡藍關, and *Sanjingong* 三進宮 (*Baogotu* 保國圖). *Sichuan diaoke*, 26–35, 148–59.

not meant to represent the content of the public's favorite entertainment; rather, it emphasized education and rectification of the popular beliefs with use of the well-known, liked, and popular heroes of vernacular plays. In this endeavor, *huiguan* differed little, if at all, from the temples in Fujian and Guangdong, which also often prided themselves on having bas-relief or rooftop sculptures depicting gods dressed as actors, who were acting out their histories and adventures.⁹⁹ In this respect, *huiguan* in some measure resembled Catholic churches, which offer an abbreviated biblical education with a visual storybook that has paintings, sculpture, tapestry, and stain glass, to awe, educate, and inspire the often-illiterate believers. Placed in this context, the *huiguan* stage and the operas played on it were both forthright conduits for broadcasting orthodoxy.

7.2 *Private Residences*

An even more radical use of operatic imagery took place in the private space of the lineage residence, illustrated by the Han 韓 family compound in Shangli 上里, Ya'an 雅安. Ya'an was a backwater county in western Sichuan about 150 kilometers from Chengdu. Even though the county occupied a borderland between Chinese farmers on the plains and Tibetan highlanders, the Han family rose to prominence and held its elevated social position from the Qianlong era onward. Han Tingfan 韓廷藩, a *jinshi* graduate, was a county magistrate in Yunnan, Luquan 祿勸 County and then a military commander. Three other members of the family—Han Shengjiao 韓勝蛟, Han Tingrui 韓廷銳, and Han Tingru 韓廷儒—passed either civil or military examinations during the same period. Building a family compound of five thousand square meters, which took more than thirty years (1790–1824) was a way to assert their social achievement and project both the status of the family and the values it represented. Moreover, by analyzing the artistic program implemented in decorating the manor, we can see how reproductions of opera scenes in bas reliefs served to educate and indoctrinate members of the family, both male and female, with

99 See photographic material from the special exhibition “Gilded Glory: Chaozhou Woodcarving” held by the Hong Kong Museum of History from November 8, 2018, to February 25, 2019, https://hk.history.museum/en_US/web/mh/exhibition/2018_past_05.html (accessed May 17, 2019); a virtual tour of this exhibition available at: https://hk.history.museum/zh_TW/web/mh/190120/index.html (accessed May 17, 2019). See also Wang Dayong 王大勇, “Chaozhou mudiao yishu diyu tesi tanjiu 潮州木雕藝術地域特色探究 [Exploration of the Chaozhou Regionally Specific Wooden Sculpture Art],” *Zhuang-shi* 裝飾, no. 5 (2011): 84–85; Zhang Huizhen 章慧珍, “Chaozhou mudiaode yishu yiyun 潮州木雕的藝術意蘊 [The Artistic Connotation of Chaozhou Woodcarving],” *Meishu guancha* 美術觀察, no. 2 (2012).

the puritan Confucian values of filial devotion, chastity, and loyalty to the dynasty. There are eight such sculptural works, three with stories encouraging filial piety, namely *Bangzi Enters the Palace* (*Bangzi shangdian* 綁子上殿), part of the opera titled *Going up to the Imperial Palace* (*Shangtiantai* 上天台), which takes place in the chaotic period of the Eastern Han ruler Guangwudi 光武帝 and deals with a father and the loyal official who sends his son to the capital to be punished by the emperor for the crime of beating to death the father of an imperial concubine. The story clearly dwells on the problem of dual loyalties, to one's family and to the emperor, balancing the obligation toward the ruler with, at the same time, an emphasis on the lord's benevolence and grace toward faithful subjects. *Chopping the Brilliance* (*Zhanhui* 斬輝) from *Jade Gate Pass* (*Yuwangguan* 玉門關), which takes place during the Song and Liao wars (10th–11th centuries), was based on a famous story about the devotion of Yang Yanhui 楊延會 to his mother against all odds and the support he received from his wife, who deeply respected his filial piety. Another bas-relief depicts a story from *Story of the Shadowy Lotus Tree* (*Huaiyinji* 槐蔭記), an opera based on the story of Dong Yong 董永 from the *Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety*. Dong was the epitome of filial piety, who sold his body to pay for his father's burial. His deed attracts the attention of the Seventh Immortal, who frees him from oppression.

If the previous sculptures were meant to instruct all household members, old and young, male and female, the three pieces of artwork on chastity (*jie* 節) were clearly meant for women. They included scenes from popular operas such as *Kill the Dog, Scare the Wife* (*Shagou jingqi* 殺狗驚妻), which talked about taming a bad wife and making her respect her mother-in-law and the family of her husband; and *A Day of Double Worship* (*Shuangbairi* 雙拜日) from *The Pavilion of Moon Worship* (*Youguiji* 幽閨記) by Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (1225–1320)—a historical play that takes place during the Jin 金-Yuan 元 war (13th century)—was a story of love, devotion, and perseverance in a hopeless time of chaos and warfare, brandishing the strength of the family bonds.¹⁰⁰ Then, there was a depiction of *Wu Family Slope* (*Wujiapo* 武家坡), part of the opera *Returning Dragon Pavilion* (*Huilongge* 回龍閣), which recounted a story about mutual devotion between spouses who did not recognize each other after having been divided for eighteen years, yet remained faithful to each

100 “The Pavilion of Moon Worship,” Chinese Encyclopedia Online 中文百科在線, <http://www.zwbk.org/MyLemmaShow.aspx?zh=zh-tw&lid=192667/> (accessed May 10, 2016); *Chuanju jumu*, 960; Wilt L. Idema, *The Metamorphosis of Tian Xian Pei: Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956)* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2015), 2–7.

other the entire time.¹⁰¹ Finally, two reliefs on diverse subject matter illustrated *Taking Off the Armor by the Feudal King* (*Xiejia fengwang* 卸甲封王), an opera about a heroic Tang dynasty general who suppressed the An Lushan rebellion and submitted to the emperor. It spoke about the loyalty to the dynasty, at the same time advocating the timeless theme of filial piety. Another sculpture depicted *Dancing in Front of Yi* or *Dancing in Front of the Ceremonious One* (*Xiyi* 戲儀), a comic story with a moral message about Dou Yi 竇儀, a man who was free of lust and greed and resisted the advances of the beautiful Huang Jujing 黃菊晶.¹⁰²

The opera-based artwork executed for the patriarchs of the Han family in their manor were part of the didactic and moralizing program directed at the living and future members of the clan. The functions ascribed to opera and the reliance on operatic imagery betray the cultural and intellectual achievements and limitations of the Han family members and the efforts of the patriarchs to communicate with youth and women. Referring to popular narratives and opera stories demonstrates not only the popularity of these traditions but also the efforts of literati at using emotions and easily recognizable images to communicate with members of their families who may not have been literate or felt discomfort with more sophisticated reading materials. These stories, carved in wood, could then strengthen the messages traditionally spread by schools, private tutors, and family rules.

7.3 *Monumental Arches and Graves*

Moralizing scenes taken from popular operas were also popular decorations on the monuments meant for instructing, correcting, and encouraging appropriate values and behaviors, such as arches of chastity and filial piety (*jiexiao shi-paifang* 節孝石牌坊), which once dotted the landscape in Sichuan. Among the few that remain, some offer an astonishingly rich decorative-educational program in bas-relief. For example, an arch in the isolated mountain community of Jiuxiang 九襄 in Hanyuan 漢源 County, located west of Mount Emei 峨嵋, not only attests to a high level of artistic achievement in the sculptures but also represents a conscious and well-planned pictorial realization with 169 figures on 13 sculptures. Built in 1849, it was intended to admonish the common people by reminding them of the fundamental importance of filial piety, wives' devotion to husbands, heroic defenders of the dynasty, and loyal bravados by demonstrating the deeds of various heroes in stories such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Investiture of the Gods*, *Romance of Sui and Tang Dynasties* (*Sui*

¹⁰¹ *Chuanju jumu*, 550–51.

¹⁰² *Sichuan diaoke*, 39–49.

Tang yanyi 隋唐演義), *Taiping guangji* 太平光記, *Mulian Rescues His Mother* (*Mulianzhuàn* 目連傳), and *History of the Song Dynasty* (*Songshi* 宋史).¹⁰³

Many nineteenth-century Sichuanese also found it appropriate to decorate their graves with opera motifs. They did it for various reasons, which remain unclear, but the context and the content of these stoneworks indicate a final wish to demonstrate which values they deemed important, an effort of self-representation (perhaps describing their lifetime achievement), and an effort to impart a lesson for posterity. If anything, these tomb carvings show the firmness of the grip that opera had on the late Qing imagination and its thorough integration with the world of sacred and moral teachings. This funerary art, which always offers a mix of private and public selves confirms the strong link forged between orthodox teachings and opera, with the latter serving as a channel for broadcasting and imagining the righteousness of the Three Teachings and the correct relationship between men (and women) and between subjects and the state.¹⁰⁴

The elite sentiments, whether in the private realm of the household or in a public space such as a garden, had a strong bent for demonstrations of orthodoxy, particularly toward forceful yet not unsophisticated campaigning for female chastity and devotion. Opera was a tool and a metaphor for this teaching. It was also a particularly well-suited tool because, in a manner that was far from crude or repulsive, it transmitted all the complexities and variegations of the meaning of female chastity. These two examples of literati exploitation of the opera illustrate the conscious use of its contents and forms in transmitting moral teachings and, at the same time, the deep immersion of the elite imagination in stories and imagery derived from theatrical performance.

8 Opera, Officials, and the Social (Dis)Order

The religious festivals during which opera was staged often posed a challenge to the social order. In face of the difficulties that surpassed the intercommunal

¹⁰³ *Sichuan diaoke*, 69–101. Similar arches can be found in Ya'an Shanglixiang 雅安上里鄉—advocating righteousness and military prowess, *Sichuan diaoke*, 56–61; similar in the meaning but not in the presented visual material arch in Yanting Mayangxiang 鹽亭麻陽鄉 exhibiting scenes from the Three Kingdoms tradition next to those from the “Pavilion of Moon Worship” and others; *Sichuan diaoke*, 168–77; and Mianyang 綿陽 Mojiexiang 磨家鄉 Xinbuchang 新鋪場 (two arches from 1846 and 1848, respectively) erected for the chaste widows, Tang Chen 唐陳氏 and her granddaughter Tang Zeng 唐曾氏—advocating chastity and loyalty; *Sichuan diaoke*, 62–68.

¹⁰⁴ Examples from across Sichuan: *Sichuan diaoke*, 36–37, 102–15, 117–27, 138–47, 162, 182–93.

ability to resolve conflicts within its own borders, commoners and ranked gentry both called on the authorities to intervene. Despite the often-emphasized claim that the Qing court and administration were inimical to popular opera, officials' actions were largely reactive and did not have a character of a premeditated policy aimed at achieving concrete results. The imperial court and its bureaucratic apparatus acted, instead, according to the changing reality on the ground. Their responses followed ideological premises derived from neo-Confucian (*Daoxue* 道學) teachings, at the same time, perpetuating a political tradition of prohibiting plays and festivals considered harmful to the state and society.¹⁰⁵ This approach meant that the state was not, by definition, negatively predisposed to theater, which progressively formed an indivisible part of the lineage and community religious rituals. On the contrary, the Qing rulers were weary of the “wrong,” “vulgar,” and “heretical” plays and of the abuse, disturbance, and destruction that crowds occasionally unleashed during festivals or market gatherings.

Throughout the nineteenth century, imperial authorities acted locally, sought solutions to particular problems, and worked on rectification of opera as a basic social institution. Officials shared the popular understanding that an opera performance was supposed to alleviate a number of difficulties faced by the general population. These included weather conditions, such as insufficient or excessive rainfall, drought, lack of water in the rivers, and other forms of pestilence that affected agricultural production and food stocks.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, regular performances during gods' birthdays, such as that of the city god, as well as regular communal exorcisms (*jiao*), prevented or solved these problems.

8.1 *Guarding Equitable Contributions and Established Privileges: Maintaining Social Order in Sichuan's Backwaters*

The county magistrates sanctioned the main offerings and the fundraising for the purpose of opera performance. If the celebrations were a part of a locally established practice, officials acted as protectors of customary or historical privileges of households, lineages, and guilds, which stipulated the division of labor, costs, and functions. If a community petitioned for an exceptional

¹⁰⁵ Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 181–212.

¹⁰⁶ See Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke, *Dry Spells: State Rainmaking and Local Governance in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), and a review of this book by Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, “Review of *Dry Spells: State Rainmaking and Local Governance in Late Imperial China*, by Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 70, no. 1 (2010): 209–20. Snyder-Reinke does not mention opera as one of the rainmaking practices.

additional opera performance, the magistrate could sanction or reject it.¹⁰⁷ Among the problems faced by magistrates, organizational chaos and cheating were rather exceptional, whereas disputes about the fulfillment of contractual duties seem to have been quite common.¹⁰⁸ Not all of them ended up in the magistrate's court, as minor issues generally tended to be resolved without official interference. Most complex cases were linked to challenges to the rights of established families by newcomers or those with social mobility. We analyze these cases using several examples.

Nanbu 南部 (northern Sichuan) had an established practice in which all the guilds were obliged to contribute funds for celebrations of the city god so as to reimburse the butchers guild for sacrificing a pig and a sheep. As the tradition went, beginning on the fifteenth of the seventh month, each guild mounted a plaque on the street, probably in front of its headquarters, and collected money for theater performances; thus when celebrations started, they could stage opera for one day. If everything went according to plan, each guild bore the cost of one day of plays donated to the community. In the seventh month (August) 1877, the boatmen's guild wrote a petition to the county magistrate, asking to be spared the burden of paying their dues. According to the docks' headman and a guild elder surnamed Ma 馬, supported by other members of the guild, for a long time, the river had barely any water, and the boatmen were on the verge of starvation. Therefore, no money could be put aside for staging operas. The magistrate recognized that for at least ten years—that is, beginning in the second year of the Tongzhi 同治 (1862) reign period—the number of days on which operas were staged had been reduced because of famine. As it argued to address the issue and protect the public morality (*renen pojian* 仁恩破奸), the magistrate decreed that five other associations—namely, butchers, tobacco leaf driers (*diaoyanbang* 弔煙幫), barbers, and carpenters—were to cover the costs of the boatmen's plays. However, very quickly, more problems ensued. On the eleventh day of the eighth month, a man named

107 Such as an accepted 1886 plea for collection of funds for the rainmaking the opera and for a public lent from all classes, *baojia* 保甲, households and so on, Nanbu Archive [Nanbuxian dang'anguan 南部縣檔案館], 9-54-537, 1 (henceforth, NBX).

108 For example, in the first month of 1879, a troupe of Li Chunrong 李春榮 was supposed to perform three operas for the gods during the yearly cleansing exorcism [*qiqing jiaohui* 齊清醮會] for a set amount of money. By March, however, there was still no agreement to how many operas were actually presented and therefore whether the agreed remuneration was justified; NBX 7-88-808, 1. Similar disputes appeared in September 1881; NBX 8-46-439, 1; and at the beginning of 1895; NBX 12-87-901, 1-2.

Wang Zizhong 王子仲 tricked all the elders of the boatmen's guild and made off with the money put aside for the opera performers.¹⁰⁹

The Nanbu *yamen* office of works (Gongfang 工坊) reported a much more complicated case in 1893. According to a petition filed by the Tian 田 and He 何 families, a local ruffian, Deng Yuankai 鄧元愷, exploited the old age of their households' members and unlawfully appropriated their privilege to collect money from the public for decoration of city's theater stages. The Tian and He families claimed to have held this privilege from the time of the Yongzheng 雍正 emperor (1723–1735). As the petitioners wrote, for more than a century their families performed their duties without anyone complaining about their work. Now, however, Deng had not only illicitly taken over their rights in setting up a stage in the Bei Guan ziyungong 北關紫雲宮 (Guandi temple) but, when reproached, unmoved, he also responded to the well-meaning defenders of the Tian and He families with violence and abuse. After conducting an investigation, the magistrate discovered that similar incidents had occurred before, namely commoners had decorated the Wangye temple in Tiantianbao 天田保 outside the city walls themselves. They had transgressed by using money intended for incense without consulting those who actually had a privilege to perform the decorative work. All these actions damaged the interests of the Tian and He families, who were the exclusive holders of these rights. Based on evidence provided by Zhang Rongen 張榮恩 and Long Yuan 龍元, considered "righteous commoners," the county authorities decided to reinstate the rights of the two families and condemned any attempts to usurp their unique position within the community.¹¹⁰

Various other incidents in which rights of communities or individuals to organize or stage opera were arrogated and local rules were broken continued until the final years of the Qing. One such case, between March and May 1910, mentions that the Dongtai troupe (Dongtaiban 東泰班), led by Pang Yushen 龐玉伸, was performing in the county despite a local prohibition on theatrical performance. The members of Pang's troupe came from outside the county, so if chased away they simply moved to another market town to avoid competition and evade legal consequences. When the officials finally took action against them, it was by chasing them back to their native place so as to restore public order.¹¹¹

109 The magistrate decided to find the man and to press charges against him, but we do not know whether it succeeded; NBX 7-42-393, 1-5.

110 NBX 11-55-608, 1.

111 NBX 21-89-888, 1-4.

8.2 *Prohibitions: Security and Politics in Small Towns*

Prohibitions were an established way to deal with opera, and they could span various aspects of the stage art as well as of the organization of performances. They were typically intended to maintain public security and law and order, but in some cases they were also driven by broader political questions.

For example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, officials attempted to regulate and eradicate the use of real weapons in military plays. Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), a scholar and opera aficionado, wrote that because performers and the public were often hurt by “knives, guns, swords, [and] halberds,” appropriately decorated bamboo and wooden replicas should be used in their place. Equally, to prevent powerholders and social superiors from being ridiculed and offended, civil plays had to eliminate the use of official dress.¹¹² Similar regulations were instated multiple times over the following century and a half of opera’s development in Sichuan. A death in the imperial family was an occasion for suspending all theatrical performances, music, and banquets, so people could express their grief and engage in solemn mourning.¹¹³

A political consideration was behind an imperial ban on all operas staged to celebrate the God of War, Guandi, in Baoning Prefecture (Baoningfu 保寧府, present-day Langzhong), issued in June 1882. Because the emperor highlighted that Guandi is identical to his person (“*Guandi zhi yu wo* 關帝之於我”), and the plays staged to celebrate and entertain the god are equally staged to entertain his majesty (“*Guandi zhi xi funian* 關帝之伏念”), thus no inappropriate celebrations organized by commoners could be held. This applied in particular to soldiers and candidates taking military examinations (*junmin* 軍民). Moreover, the decree stated, staging operas to celebrate the god was a conscious violation of the due respect for the emperor because the plays were offensive and irreverent (“*beimian xiedu* 俾免褻瀆”).¹¹⁴ This prohibition differed from typical ones, which targeted particular stories, opera scripts, and melodies. It was much more related to the construction of imperial ideology, namely, association of the ruler with the god who was the protector of the country and its people (“*fuguo you minshen* 福國佑民神”) than with the offensive nature of the plays staged during religious festivities.

112 Jiao Xun 焦循, *Jushuo* 劇說 [*Discussing Theater*] (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), *juan* 6, 137.

113 One such instance saved in the Nanbu Archive was in April 1881, when the Empress Dowager Ci’an 慈安太后 died. Born in 1837 to a Manchu family named Niuuhuru 鈕祜祿, she became Xianfeng’s emperor consort and later a co-regent for the Tongzhi (1861–1875) and Guangxu (1875–1908) emperors; NBX 8-50-476, 1.

114 NBX 9-69-658, 1–4.

More than twenty years later, in 1901, county authorities faced a different political and social challenge, in which imperial policy, religious beliefs, and the institutional framework for organizing local opera were combined to unleash their destructive power. On the wave of anti-Christian attacks that spread through eastern Sichuan between the late 1880s and the 1900s, one incident in Langzhong involved theatrical performance.¹¹⁵ On the fifteenth day of the second month, during prayers for rain, which involved staging opera and celebrating beneficial deities, a group of soldiers or candidates in military examinations burst (*junmin*) into the city, occupied the civil and military *yamen* (“wenwu geshu” 文武各署), burned incense along the streets and in front of the shops, and ultimately attacked and vandalized a Catholic church. The attackers claimed that Christians did not want to contribute to the celebrations. From the perspective of the magistrate, this event not only posed a threat in terms of diplomatic repercussions but also was a serious breach of public order. As the circuit intendent of Northern Sichuan decreed, it was better not to notify the ministry and respective consulates (“buchu zaojing zongli geguo shiwu *yamen* 不出早經總理各國事務衙門”) and solve the problem themselves. First, military men were forbidden to harass people, illicitly extract funds during celebrations, and attack believers in Western faiths. Moreover, as the freshly built gates and windows of the church had been damaged, the perpetrators had to be found. Posters describing their crimes had to be mounted everywhere in the city and the countryside, so that the masses of commoners were informed about them. In response to this document, a local magistrate in Nanbu prohibited all prayers for rain and assigned the *bao* heads in the town and countryside with responsibility for enforcing this policy.

115 Judith Wyman, “Social Change, Anti-Foreignism and Revolution in China: Chongqing Prefecture, 1870s to 1911,” PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1993; Judith Wyman, “The Ambiguities of Chinese Antiforeignism: Chongqing, 1870–1900,” *Late Imperial China* 18, no. 2 (1997): 86–122. Different understanding of these often-violent upheavals was proposed by Chinese scholars who found anti-Christian pogroms to be a popular form of struggle against imperialism. See Zhang Li 張力 and Liu Jiantang 劉鑑唐, *Zhongguo jiaoaoshi* 中國教案史 [*History of Religious Pogroms in China*] (Chengdu: Sichuansheng shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, Sichuansheng Xinhua shudian faxing, 1987), 413–64, 502–6; Sichuansheng zhexue shehui kexue xuehui lianhehui 四川省哲學社會科學學會聯合會 and Sichuansheng jindai jiaoaoshi yanjiuhui 四川省近代教案史研究會, *Jindai Zhongguo jiao'an yanjiu* 近代中國教案研究 [*Research on Modern-Era Religious Pogroms in China*] (Chengdu: Sichuansheng shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1987); Sichuansheng dang'an guan 四川省檔案館, *Sichuan jiao'an yu Yihequan dang'an* 四川教案與義和拳檔案 [*Religious Pogroms in Sichuan and the Archive of the Boxer Movement*] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, Xinhua shudian, 1985).

The ensuing stream of documents demonstrates the gravity of this case and the effort by the authorities to manage the relationship between the church, *yamen*, and popular religious festivals. The magistrate appreciated the positive influence of Catholic missionaries on the community: they should be protected from abuse because they taught people goodness and religion and because they built and maintained a hospital, which served the community. These were sufficient reasons for the military population to avoid mistreating Catholics and for money not to be extracted from the church for prayers for rain. Moreover, it was announced everywhere that repelling people who went to their communities to extort incense money on the pretext of raising funds for rainmaking prayers was the responsibility of the *bao* headmen.¹¹⁶ In this case, then, local authorities wanted to pacify the community torn by the drought and filled with fear and distrust of foreign believers in a different religion, by rectifying the process of fundraising without stamping out the rituals and theatrical performances during which disturbances occurred. The prohibition imposed by the county authorities was clearly meant to be in force only until an incident was clarified and peace restored in Langzhong and its vicinity. In fact, it appears that most of the official actions were directed at minimizing the destructive impact of these events on the community and efforts to maintain social harmony and local management without interference from the imperial government.

8.3 *Dealing with Chaos in the Provincial Metropolis: Chongqing*

In Nanbu County, opera performances caused quarrels and minor struggles that disturbed the peace in the town and countryside. At the end of the nineteenth century, theatrical performances in Ba County, which comprised the sprawling regional capital of Chongqing, often collapsed into total chaos, which all but undid the community-making spirit of the festivals. The crowds swarming the markets and temples were filled with bandits, bullies, prostitutes, swindlers, and robbers. To combat them, county magistrates could only issue prohibitions and attempt public education campaigns, such as forbidding certain behaviors, posting rules, and encouraging virtuous people to set a good example.

For example, from the perspective of the authorities, one particularly annoying incident occurred late in 1892 in Tangjiatuo 唐家沱, a small market town about eight kilometers down the Yangzi from the city walls of Chongqing. According to the surviving documentation, during the local opera

116 NBX 15-57-555, 1-11.

performance, the town was flooded with all sorts of ruffians, gambling and opium consumption were rife, and men and women were assaulted. The office of circuit intendent admitted that this was not an isolated event. Most towns along the waterways were frequently attacked by groups of outlaws or other transient bullies who traveled by boat and sought any opportunity for disrupting the common people or engaging in illicit trade and entertainment. Officials also admitted their helplessness before the widespread gambling. They posted prohibitions on staging opera and gambling in opium dens, ordered investigations of opium shops, declared a census and regulation of the number of lamps in these establishments, banned operations of irregular pawnshops and the pawning of one's buffalo, crops, and so on. Additionally, those who ran money shops were forbidden to persuade people with references to filial piety, loyalty, and so forth, and businesses had to operate regularly.¹¹⁷

The limited success of these regulations is shown by an event that took place in 1906 in a town called Taojiachang 陶家場 (approx. 10 kilometers up the Yangzi from Chongqing). During opera festivals, this market settlement was invaded by gangs of bullies from surrounding areas that not only made terrifying noise but also disrupted the performances. The official response to this event was to pass responsibility for restoring order to the *bao* headmen and to authorize a ban on thugs (*gun* 棍) entering the town.¹¹⁸ Because this resolution meant that no help was going to arrive from the county, in reality, this document was an act of passive resistance by the overstretched local government, rather than a solution to the problem. In both the incidents mentioned, Chongqing administrators appeared helpless. Tangjiatuo and Taojiachang were located very close to the county, prefecture, and circuit centers of imperial power, and yet life in the riverside communities was rough and lawless.

Moreover, problems of lawlessness and brazen disregard for public morality, officially preached ideology, and the law were rampant in Chongqing, at the yamen's doorstep. In the sixth month of 1888, the magistrate had to intervene in the newly renovated Bao'en 報恩 Temple dedicated to the veneration of Guanyin. Instead of attracting moral women, it was filled with prostitutes, local thugs 俠, and beggars who turned the annual opera festival worshipping the bodhisattva into a place for illicit and lascivious contact between men and women in the local underworld.¹¹⁹

Ba County, like Nanbu, suffered from the crowds of the rough and unruly military candidates, who interrupted the collection of funds for prayers and

117 Ba County Archives [Baxian dang'an 巴縣檔案], 6-31-962 (henceforth, BXA).

118 BXA 6-31-1758.

119 BXA 6-31-1643.

opera festivals and robbed the communal treasury.¹²⁰ Conflict over the appropriate usage of the temple space reached a zenith in 1900 with the case of the Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyuemiao), which the authorities had to regulate in detail. The temple underwent a reconstruction before the plea of the distressed monks. During the renovations, a previously open-air stage susceptible to the elements was rebuilt as a permanent music tower. Yet it transpired that this improvement was a source of serious problems. During the opera shows, not only were the shrine's premises filled with prostitutes but men and women also mingled freely on the different floors of the music tower and threatened morality and decorum with their behavior. Decent ladies in particular felt threatened by the aggressive behavior of unknown men. Other problems ensued. People started to hang unauthorized advertisements on the temple's premises, taking out statues of gods outside the temple halls, and smoking opium, and the "pit" of the theater stage (ground floor area under it) became an opium market. In all these cases, the magistrate issued prohibitions, however, we have no information as to their effect.¹²¹ Another incident, a year later, involved the city's Civil and Military Temple (Wenwumiao 文武廟), where monks were pleading for help against the thieves who stole the silks decorating the theater stage.¹²² The temples, however large, rich, and, in name, well protected by the imperial authority, were not spared the violence and chaos of Chongqing society as it fell into a civil struggle.

8.4 *Weakness in the Face of Social Chaos but No Enmity toward Opera*

The situation was visibly more fragile in Ba County than in the more isolated Nanbu, where most celebrations passed without notice by the authorities, and communities seemed to be better protected than in the central part of the province. We obviously do not have a full sample of all the cases related to the disruption of festivities, and the information that is available can only indicate the kind of problems faced by the local communities. Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that the Qing bureaucracy took no steps to stifle or eliminate opera in public life, regardless of how vulgar, offensive, and absurd literati and officials found it, personally and publicly. The government's main concern was maintaining public order, protecting hereditary privilege, and ensuring the smooth performance of both elite and popular rituals (of which opera formed an increasingly important part). Elites recognized the destructive power of public gatherings, often attended by unknown or unwanted people,

120 Document dating from the eighth month of 1895; BXA 6-31-1883.

121 BXA 6-31-2010.

122 BXA 6-31-1740.

during which the men and women mixed in an unregulated manner, and good mores as well as proper decorum collapsed. Employing legal and coercive power and enforcing imperial ideology, authorities and gentry opposed the evolution of opera and popular religious celebrations into a carnival—defined as a temporary but meaningful upturning of social relations within a community. This struggle for the orthodox order and the correct meaning engendered no rift between officialdom and the elite strata of the population—each action by the magistrate was based on a plea from the righteous (and privileged) local citizens, who in this way protected their own interests and beliefs, which coincided with those of the Qing authorities.

9 Concluding Remarks

During the Qing dynasty, opera in Sichuan became a rudimentary social institution. Its ascendance was slow because it depended on multiple factors that shaped life in the province in this post-cataclysmic period. Repopulation of the cities, colonization of abandoned lands, conquering and reconquering mountain regions, expansion of river transportation, growth of literacy and of publishing as well as increasing urbanization—all these factors had an impact on how people organized their celebrations and consumed art and culture. In the late eighteenth century, market towns and the two capitals of Sichuan were regularly enlivened by opera performance. Within a few decades, it was utterly unthinkable that the gods or people would deem a festivity, worship, or banquet complete without opera tunes. More important, however, was the fact that theater was a communal affair. Everyone chipped in a bit of income or savings, and no one was barred from attending it. Various local associations were called on an ad-hoc basis to manage the collection of funds, the decoration of stages, and provision of food and drink for the celebrants. Many such associations held on to their privileges for generations, but they performed their duties and satisfied community needs only before festivals, while adjusting to the changing conditions in their respective towns. If we limit our view to these aspects of opera, it appears to be an informal institution that produced and satisfied the idyllic, harmonious, self-governing communities. The reality, however, was otherwise. Theatrical performances, because of their formal splendor, high price, and immense power to spread values, political ideas, and religious beliefs, were a constant field of contestation for power and influence. The funders of opera and builders of the theaters used them to spread orthodox Confucian teachings and to ingratiate themselves with the stern and puritan imperial officialdom. Opera therefore helped to reinforce

the political clout of the ascendant local powerholders, whether merchant, gentry, or literati. Through its content, organization, and performance, opera reinforced Sichuan's social hierarchies. At the same time, it was this society's weakest link: large crowds of people of unconfirmed origins and no legitimate professions mingled with performers, whose background was inherently suspicious, as well as with prostitutes and sexually loose women. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Qing authority was weakened, and hierarchies of privilege and distinction were easy to attack, it is unclear whether opera was constructive or destructive to the communities. One thing is certain: until the end of the old order and the introduction of the New Policies, authorities were convinced that opera had an indivisible and indispensable social role, and they spared no effort in trying to rectify it and maintain its positive self-managerial form, so that it could be enjoyed by both the gods and men.

PART 2

*The New Institutionalization: Law, Market, Politics,
and Culture of Commercialized Art, 1902–1937*



A Transformed Relationship: Theater and Power after the Qing New Policies

1 The Three Forces of Change: Destruction of Temples, Commercialization, and the New Legal Order

In the first years of the twentieth century, the rupture in all the previous patterns of staging opera came suddenly and unexpectedly. It also brought fruits entirely different from those intended. In the span of less than fifteen years, opera was ripped of its traditional place in Sichuan's social and cultural geography and recast in a novel form in the entertainment marketplace of the province's twin capitals. While the religious festivals suffered, wounded by the bankruptcy of temples and market communities, urban stages exploded with music, dance, and color previously unseen. As theaters earned money under official and police protection, Sichuan Opera, a new entity on China's artistic map, slowly gained so much respect and appreciation that many started to perceive it as an essentially traditional culture in this westward land. What set these processes in motion?

This all came into being because of the introduction of the Qing's New Policies. Initiated in 1901 but mostly taking effect after 1905, the New Policies were a revivalist-cum-reconstructionist set of policies meant to expand the administration, modernize education, and strengthen the military of the troubled Manchu empire. These intentionally undramatic reforms, however, had an earthshaking effect on the wobbling imperial government. One of their results, relevant to the history of opera and clearly visible in Sichuan, was that they undermined the legitimacy of traditional religious institutions and thus contributed to uprooting opera.¹ Through the New Policies, the Qing government appropriated temples and converted them into schools and police stations, disbanded *huiquan* and replaced them with comparatively penniless associations for people with common origins, called *tongxianghui* 同鄉會. Moreover, all guilds were abolished, including those of actors. Yet none of these changes, however important for opera's development, fully explains the momentous transformation of opera, which occurred in these and the following years.

¹ For the clearest and most complete description of the New Policies, see Zheng, *The Politics of Rights*, 84–87, 111–22.

In the years after the introduction of the reforms, the imperial government was in crisis and ultimately fell, leading to two decades of chaos and destruction, all of which contributed to the impoverishment of society and the destruction of many communities. As bleak as these decades were, they also heralded commercialization in many parts of life, reconstruction of cities, importation of new communications technology, and an institutional reconstruction of every aspect of the state and society.

The three major forces that affected opera—the destruction and excessive taxation of temples, the commercialization of entertainment, and the new institutional framework for business operations—worked together and reshaped the meaning of opera, where it was staged as well as what it said and to whom it spoke. The abruptness of these changes and their character were determined by the fact that all these processes occurred simultaneously. However, their relationship was one of correlation but not causation. Moreover, the claim that any of these processes could, by itself, cause a transformation similar to that in Sichuan has no basis. Indeed, the war destruction and a blanket prohibition on opera under the rule of the Taiping in Jiangnan did not cause its disappearance; on the contrary, they were followed by an energetic revival.² Beijing had a commercial theater since the middle of the reign of Qianlong and Shanghai and Suzhou did as well beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, in all these cases, a teahouse-cum-opera house run purely for profit coexisted with large religious festivals that involved the staging of opera. There is no indication that these commercial ventures made temple celebrations any less attractive than they were before.³ The alternative forms of business organization, which involved local government intervention, were previously attempted in Beijing (where opera was under tight supervision by the capital police), in Hong Kong, and wherever sizable Chinese communities lived in British colonies and the United States.⁴ However, they did not incinerate a destruction-creation process comparable to what happened in Sichuan in the first decades of the twentieth century. The fact that local opera was torn

2 Colin Patrick Mackerras, "Theatre and the Taipings," *Modern China* 2, no. 4 (1976): 473–501; Tobie S. Meyer-Fong, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in Nineteenth Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 30–34; Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 217–31.

3 Barbara E. Ward, "Regional Operas and Their Audiences: Evidence from Hong Kong" in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 161–87; Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 63–67; see the monumental study by Tanaka Issei 田仲一成, Bu He 布和, transl., *Zhongguo jisi xiju yanjiu 中國祭祀演劇研究 [Research on Chinese Sacrificial Opera]* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008).

4 Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera*.

from its religious roots and entered an urban entertainment industry or started even to be considered “art” was a wholly unexpected development for those who attempted to reform it and those who made a living from it.

Finally, we should look at one of the founding dogmas of twentieth-century Chinese theater history. According to these views, in the face of the imperialistic aggression and dynastic collapse, intellectuals and artists both engaged in the campaign for improvement in opera (*xiju gailiang yundong* 戲劇改良運動). This view holds that, in a way that is hard to explain, the scholarly minds of the authors of the failed Hundred Days’ Reform (1898)—such as Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), and Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) as well as a plethora of local actors, musicians, publishers, and so on—united in a struggle to save the nation, defeat the monarchy, destroy vulgarity and superstition, and advance new ways of ordering the stage, performance, and the organization of troupes. Before long, this group of thinkers and artists was joined by a new generation of political activists, students, and scholars, who are typically called May Fourth intellectuals: Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942), Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950), Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), and others. All of them were supposed to share similar ideas, namely, that theater (as a place) and opera (as an art form) needed reform, preferably to change into a spoken drama (*huaju* 話劇) modeled after the works of Henrik J. Ibsen (1828–1906) and, in the case of so-called traditional Chinese opera, a thorough weeding of its mythical and religious elements and harnessing to current political and social issues. Form was no less important than content, in the manner in which the opera troupes were incorporated and in how the plays were staged. Obviously, the “old style” actors’ guilds based on veneration of gods, troupes that functioned as fictive lineages in which all actors shared the same name (*hangbei* 行輩 / *zibei* 字輩), the forms of actor training and division of roles, and differentiation in status based on whether one worked on stage or off stage were to be abolished.⁵ One can only wonder: if everyone had supposedly agreed on this agenda, what had prevented this broad reform movement from succeeding? As the story goes, however, the real fruits of this voluntary cross-class effort came only after the communist victory in 1949.⁶ Even though some

5 See Zhang Fuhai 張福海. *Zhongguo jindai xiju gailiang yundong yanjiu (1902–1919)* 中國近代戲劇改良運動研究 (1902–1919) [*Research on the Movement to Improve Opera in Modern China*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015). The material Zhang prolifically quotes points to very different conclusions than those in his analysis. Liu Wenfeng devotes a chapter to theater reform but also demonstrates parallel developments that shaped the local operas. Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 559–608.

6 This is a prevailing narrative in the government-sponsored projects, such as the multivolume *Zhongguo xiqu zhi*; about Sichuan Opera, see Du Jianhua and Wang Ding’ou, *Chuanju*, 38–42.

parts of this narrative hold grains of truth, it conceals the complex dynamics that shaped opera reform more than it reveals them. The excessive focus on the narrow, mostly émigré groups of political outcasts and, then, on the iconoclastic revolutionary movement of Beijing students obscures the local dynamics as well as the limitations, connections, and inspirations that determined the history of opera in twentieth-century Sichuan.

In this chapter, we analyze how and why the late Qing and Republican transformation of opera happened by following the main developments in the history of opera in Sichuan: the new institutionalization, the delegitimization of festivals, and the destruction of the countryside. Then, we focus on how opera developed within the sociopolitical and economic fabric of Sichuan. The example of Chengdu, Sichuan's capital, demonstrates how actors and theater owners found a mutually profitable accommodation with the city's Police Department and how this affected the development of opera. The protection by the police, although at times expensive for the performers, sheltered opera from the chaos that reigned throughout Sichuan. At the same time, Republican law and order authorities abandoned any reformist zeal, which opened the way for important cultural change to take place on Sichuan's stages, such as increasing feminization of the opera audiences and introducing film in the theaters.

2 New Policies and a Novel Way of Doing Business in Sichuan

2.1 *The Birth of the Commercial Theater in Chengdu and Chongqing*

The birth of the new opera in Sichuan is often ascribed to one man, Zhou Shanpei 周善培 (*hao* 號: Xiaohuai 孝懷, 1875–1958), and to his innovation in the public life of Chengdu, namely, the Police Department.⁷ Kristin Stapleton, who studied Zhou's career and role in shaping late Qing Chengdu argued that Zhou's beliefs, ideas, and actions set in motion a reform of the urban life and culture in Sichuan's capital. Stapleton also holds that because of the toppling of the Qing dynasty, the orderly working of the Police Department and the urban reforms were both stalled for more than a decade, until Yang Sen 楊森 (1884–1977), one of the most idiosyncratic and despotic warlords, instigated a yearlong reformist crusade between March 1924 and August 1925.⁸

7 See Kristin Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895–1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2000), 141–42, 146.

8 Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu*, 217–49; Robert A. Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic: Provincial Militarism and Central Power, 1911–1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 28–29; Ren Yimin 仁一民, ed., *Sichuan jinxindai renwu zhuan* 四川近現代人物傳 [*A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Sichuan*] (Chengdu: Sichuanshenghui kexueyuan chubanshe deng, 1985), 1: 129–30.

A large number of documents held by the Chengdu Municipal Archives (Chengdushi dang'an guan 成都市檔案館) proves otherwise: the police remained the most important partner and controller of the theaters until the early 1920s. Furthermore, the institutional setting created by Zhou Shanpei outlived his political career in Sichuan by almost two decades. Yet, between 1920 and 1933, the police force was a weakened institution. Because of the expansion of the Nationalist Party's institutions in Sichuan (after 1935), the police regained their position as the major players in shaping urban politics. Additionally, their role and *modus operandi* changed radically as they became much more intrusive and vigilant. Nevertheless, throughout the Republic, in both Chengdu and Chongqing, the Police Department remained an important patron and partner of the theaters, and documentation of that role is fundamental for understanding the life of opera in Sichuan.

2.2 *Reform's Early Attempts: Opera Improvement Society*

As mentioned earlier, the appearance of the commercial theater in Sichuan's two most important cities was linked to the career and decisions of Chengdu's police chief, Zhou Shanpei.⁹ Zhou—an upstart young official because of his knowledge of Japanese and Shanghai's methods of urban management, personal determination to implement reformism (or “civilization,” *wenming* 文明 as it was called), and prior possession of some standing within Chengdu's elite—was recruited by Cen Chunxuan 岑春煊 (1861–1933) in 1902 to organize the provincial capital's Police Department.¹⁰ In 1904, after Cen was appointed to head Guangdong and Guangxi, Zhou's rank was raised to that of the circuit intendant the following year. All the governor generals before the 1911 Revolution appreciated his services, and he remained untouched until the dynasty's collapse.¹¹

Zhou made two attempts at opera reform. The first, largely futile, exploited elite politics. In 1905 he created the Opera Improvement Association (or Club; Xiqu gailiang gonghui 戲曲改良公會), which was a platform for writing,

9 Igor Iwo Chabrowski, “Reforming the State and Constructing Commercial Opera in Sichuan, 1902–1920s: An Entangled History of Performing Arts and Administrative Reform,” *Modern China* 45, no. 1 (2019): 64–90.

10 See a biography by Guo Weidong, 郭衛東 “Lun Cen Chunxuan 論岑春煊 [Essay on Cen Chunxuan],” *Jindaishi yanjiu* 近代史研究, no. 2 (1988), available at <http://www.historychina.net/qsyj/ztyj/ztyjzz/2011-12-02/32916.shtml> (accessed September 13, 2016); Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu*, 80–95.

11 Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu*, 67–76. Zhou's superiors after Cen Chunxuan (1902–1903): Xiliang 錫良 (1903–1907), Zhao Erfeng 趙爾豐 (1907), Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1907; did not arrive at the post), Chen Kuilong 陳夔龍 (1907–1908), Zhao Erxun (1908–1911), Zhao Erfeng (1911), Cen Chunxuan (1911; did not arrive at the post) and Duanfang 端方 (1911).

reviewing, and publishing opera scripts that would rise to the elite's and government's cultural demands. Its membership included Chengdu's most prominent literati figures, such as Zhou's teacher and a Hanlin 翰林 scholar, Zhao Xi 趙熙 (1867–1948);¹² a dramatist and opera reformer, Huang Ji'an 黃吉安 (1836–1924); a *jinshi* who later became an organizer of the benevolence halls, Yin Changling 尹昌齡 (1869–1942); and other figures, such as Liu Yubo 劉豫波 (1857–1949), Ran Qiaozi 冉樵子 (1888–1929), and Liu Huaixu 劉懷敘 (1879–1947).¹³ Predominantly a literary project, the Opera Improvement Association was directed at influencing the booming market for publishing opera scripts. At the same time, following the guiding Confucian precept, it was supposed to direct the social mores by setting a positive example.¹⁴ Skewed toward the printed word, the Association's power to affect performances remained insignificant.

2.3 *The Second Try: Chengdu Police and the Chamber of Commerce*

The second effort, much more successful, involved social actors outside the circle of the literati and proved an icebreaker in the history of Sichuan's opera. This time, Zhou attempted theater reform with the double purpose of shoring up the Police Department's strained budget and implementing social reform through government guidance of business, culture, and entertainment.¹⁵ By using the novel legal basis for founding joint-stock companies, Zhou allied with the leader of the freshly established Chengdu Chamber of Commerce,

12 Zhao Xi rewrote a puppet play titled *Huozhuo Wang Kui* 活捉王魁 (*Capturing Live Wang Kui*), which he found vulgar and confused, into *Qingtian huozhuo* 清探活捉, which later gained nationwide fame. Apparently reworking the play took Zhao one night. Du Jianhua and Wang Ding'ou, *Chuanju*, 104.

13 For a biography of Huang Ji'an, see Xi Mingzhen 席明真, "Chuanju zuojia Huang Ji'an 川劇作家黃吉安 [Huang Ji'an: An Author of Sichuan Operas]," in Sichuansheng zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 四川省政協文史資料委員會, ed., *Sichuan wenshi ziliaojicui* 四川文史資料集粹 [*Sichuan's Collected Sources on History and Culture*] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1996), 4: 169–80. He was often known under his *zi* 字 as Yin Zhongxi 尹仲錫. Kristin Stapleton, *Fact and Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 123; Du Jianhua and Wang Ding'ou, *Chuanju*, 102–8. This group was later named the Five Elders and Seven Worthies (or Sages; *wulao qixian* 五老七賢). See "Wulao qixian 五老七賢 [Five Elders and Seven Worthies]," Archive of the Sichuan University, <http://archives.scu.edu.cn/detail.asp?id=1415/> (accessed October 12, 2016). See also Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu*.

14 Liu Xiaomin, *Sichuan fangke*, 9.

15 See Kristin Stapleton, "County Administration in Late-Qing Sichuan: Conflicting Models of Rural Policing," *Late Imperial China* 18, no. 1 (1997): 100–132.

Fan Kongzhou 樊孔周 (d. 1917).¹⁶ Fan, an avowed nationalist and an agent of the Shanghai Commercial Press, a printer, and a political activist, rallied the richest families of Chengdu to join the city-business project of building a model shopping arcade (Quanyechang 勸業場).¹⁷ The arcade opened in 1909, but its opera element appeared even before that: the Joy Tea Garden (Yuelai chayuan 悅來茶園), which opened to its first patrons in 1908.¹⁸ This theater was a novelty in the sense that it resulted from the government-*cum*-private hybrid business model in which most of the investment came from private coffers whereas the protection and supervision came from the police.

However, Yuelai was not the first commercial establishment in town, only an effort to contend on the young market with some increasingly popular but “vulgar” competitors. A particular eyesore in this struggle was Elegant Tea Garden (Ke Yuan 可園),¹⁹ established in 1906 by Wu Bichen 吳弼臣.²⁰ This venture, which sold tickets to female spectators (originally seated separately from men, but in time the division collapsed), gained elites’ opprobrium for spreading immorality, obscenity, violence, and eroticism.²¹ Ke Yuan was also accused of persistently cheating the government by repeatedly performing

16 David Faure, *China and Capitalism: A History of Business Enterprise in Modern China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 45–64.

17 Ren Yimin, *Sichuan jinxiandai renwu zhuan*, 4: 177–78; Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu*, 141–42. On the culture creating value of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century arcades, see Walter Benjamin and Rold Tiedmann, ed., *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

18 SXQSL, 102. Fan also invested in other enterprises, namely, the shopping arcades small electrical plant, Yuelai group’s hotel, Yinyinli Cloth Weaving Factory (Yinyinli zhibuchang 因因利織布廠), Changfu Printing Company (Changfu yinshua gongsi 昌福印刷公司), and the Established Trust Money Shop (Xinli qianye youxian gongsi 信立錢業有限公司). In 1917 Fan also became a head of the Chengdu-Chongqing General Chamber of Commerce (ChengYu zongshanghui 成渝總商會). He earned the enmity of Liu Cunhou 劉存厚 and Luo Peijin 羅佩金, Sichuan and Yunnan warlords subduing the province at the time, which probably led to his assassination on June 9, 1917. Ren Yimin, *Sichuan jinxiandai renwu zhuan*, 4: 179–82.

19 I am following Wang Di’s translation. Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 147.

20 Ding Shumei, quoting Zhongguo xiquzhi Sichuan juan bianjibu 中國戲曲志四川卷編輯部, *Chuanju zhi* 川劇志 [*Records of Sichuan Opera*] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1992), gives 1903 as the date of opening of the Ke Yuan (*Zhongguo gudai jinhui xiju*, 615). If this order of events is taken as correct, then the Opera Improvement Society was a reaction to the outrage of the Ke Yuan. I claim that the Opera Improvement Society was a form of pressure on the publishing market whereas Yuelai was a response to the Ke Yuan. The following events seem to confirm the correctness of this statement.

21 Fu Chongju, *Chengdu tonglan*, 277.

prohibited plays.²² Fighting “vulgarity” was one goal and earning money for the expensive New Policies was another.²³ As Wang Di stated: “[In] 1910, investors in the Joy Tea Garden (Yuelai chayuan) received 1.67 taels for every 10 taels invested, and 0.8 percent interest monthly. Adding the interests the investors received in 1909, they gained nearly two to three taels for every 10 taels of investment, which was a very nice profit indeed.”²⁴ Tapping these profits was among the most important factors in establishing the businesses for both private and government (i.e., police) investors.

Success in running a theater business required finding talented actors who would seduce audiences with their artistry. As Chengdu’s nearly hinterland prided itself on having troupes with a long history and cultural acumen, that would not be much of an issue.²⁵ The Yuelai, for example, hired the Boundless Joy Troupe (Changleban 長樂班), led by two female impersonators (*dan* 旦), Liu Zhimei 劉芷美 (1883–1921) and Huang Jinfeng 黃金鳳 (1850–1909). It was a rejuvenated troupe of some tradition that adjusted to the novel big city conditions as it could perform in two of the province’s popular styles: *gaoqiang* and *dengxi*, thus crossing the sub-ethnic divisions so fundamental in the history of Qing opera.²⁶

2.4 *Chongqing’s First Commercial Theaters*

Although we know a good deal about the political reasoning underlying the establishment of government-protected commercial theaters in Chengdu, a better document trail of this process exists for Chongqing. The story of its first commercial theater began in 1910, when the Ba County *yamen* received a petition from gentlemen named Ding 丁, Xiang 象, Yin 寅, Wang 王, and Ao 敖. They humbly requested recognition of their new limited liability company (*gufen youxian gongsi* 股份有限公司), which was meant to advance public virtue by combatting the evils of violence, pornography, and inappropriate romanticism (what was understood as serving the public good). In fact, the company was a managing body for two new theaters: the Assembled

22 For example, *Shazibao* 殺子報, *Cuipingshan* 翠屏山, or *Xiaoshanfen* 小上墳 were renamed *Tianqimiao* 天齊廟, *Shuangtoushan* 雙投山, and *Ronggui jizu* 榮歸祭祖, respectively, without changing the content. Fu Chongju, *Chengdu tonglan*, 277–78.

23 See Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 374–84.

24 Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 37.

25 In the vicinity of Chengdu, Qinghuaban 慶華班 and Shuyiban claimed to be descendants of the early Qing troupes (Yongzheng). Taihongban 太洪班 was established in the Tongzhi 同治 period. Du Jianhua and Wang Ding’ou, *Chuanju*, 58–60.

26 ZGXQZSJ, 565–66, 580; Du Jianhua and Wang Ding’ou, *Chuanju*, 61.

Virtue Tea Garden (Cuifang chayuan 萃芳茶園) and the Distinguished Assembly Teahouse (Huifang chayuan 會芳茶園), for which they requested the county government to grant legal recognition and provide them with appropriate rules.²⁷ The investors demonstratively claimed steadfast devotion to the mission of educating the public, spreading reformed opera, combating the evils of the old theater, and advancing civilization among Chongqing residents.²⁸ In this way, they inscribed themselves in the political discourse of the New Policies, which propagated widespread reeducation (*jiaohua* 教化), institutional reconstruction, and cannibalization of the resources of the dissolved temples and *huiguan* that were supposed to foot the bill for the ongoing imperial reform.²⁹

We also have a related petition for the establishment of the Assembled Virtue Tea Garden. Submitted the same day by the merchants Wei Fanyu 魏繁餘, Yu Huashe 余華社, Peng Saichun 彭賽春, Wang Qingxiang 王清香, Tan Xiayi 譚暇宜, and Li Pinxiang 李品香, it asked to open an opera teahouse in close proximity to the Eastern Sichuan Association of Promoting Industry (Quangonghui 勸工會). The theater would be in a reconstructed Meige Temple (Meigemiao 梅葛廟) in Cuiwei Ward (Cuiweifang 翠微坊) within the city walls. The investors claimed to have competent people, refined tastes, devotion to cultural improvement, and even close contacts with Chengdu's Joy Tea Garden. Feigning submissiveness, they also asked whether they had needed to apply separately for another theater that they intended to open near Chongqing's main wharf (in Chaotianfang 朝天坊).³⁰

The county government responded, requiring theaters to form an investment fund but barred them from involving any additional investors after registering the company. Additionally, it explicitly established the role of playhouses as promoters of the orthodox neo-Confucian ethics of "loyalty, filial piety,

27 BXA 文衛 6-54-1635.

28 BXA 文衛 6-54-1635.

29 Liang Yong 梁勇, "Qingmo 'miaochan xingxue' yu xiancun quanshide zhuanxi—yi Baxian wei zhongxin 清末 '廟產興學' 與鄉村權勢的轉移—以巴縣為中心 [End of Qing (Policy of) 'Use Temple Properties to Build Schools' and the Transformation of Rural Power (Structure)—A Case Study from Ba County]," *Shehuixue yanjiu* 社會學研究, no. 1 (2008): 102–119; Xu Yue, "Sichuan's Promotion of Education and Activities of Felling Temple Trees in the Late Qing Dynasty," *Frontiers of History in China* 3, no. 3 (2008): 406–431. On education reform, see Ling Xingzhen 凌興珍, *Qingmo xinzheng yu jiaoyu zhuanxing: yi Qingji Sichuan shifan jiaoyu wei zhongxinde yanjiu* 清末新政與教育轉型: 以清季四川師範教育為中心的研究 [New Policies at the End of Qing and Transformation of the Education: A Research of a Case Study of the Teachers Education in the Qing Era Sichuan] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008).

30 BXA 文衛 6-54-1635.

chastity, and righteousness 忠孝節義” and stated that they ought to combat romanticism and pornography. Theaters had to prevent “vulgar men and morally offensive women” from mingling and, at the same time, instructing them in correct mores. The socialization between the actors and the audience after performances (which presumably led to sexual intercourse between them) was sternly prohibited, as was participation by the troupes in “superstitious 迷信” celebrations. The rules also banned the appalling (to officials) “kitten plays” (Maoerxi 髦兒戲): a Beijing-style opera performed solely by female performers who came from Shanghai to Chongqing in that period.³¹

Most important, the government, represented by the Police Department 巡警, established a financial relationship with the theater, binding these two entities with mutual obligations. Originally, the payment requested was called a “police fee” (*jingcha jingfei* 警察經費), but the registration proceedings renamed it “rigorous suppression” (*renzhen tanya* 認真彈壓), in any case, it was a regular tax of 22 silver yuan per day or 660 silver yuan per month.³²

This tax, simply called *tanya*, became a permanent feature of the Sichuan opera business and the main reason that Police Departments invested in and oversaw theaters. Multiple repetitions of the same statements in a string of documents related to opening opera houses demonstrate a deep sense of insecurity with respect to this popular and so-called vulgar art. Officials assumed that, if tightly regulated, it could, however, produce a desired outcome: the broad-reaching propagation of the purified vision of Confucianism thought to have the power to alleviate empire’s ills.³³ If moralizing was an important and not merely formulaic aspect of the new theater, then the demand for funds shaped the commercial stage as a police-protected private institution. It was

31 Chabrowski, “Reforming,” 77–78; Xu Ke, *Qing bai lei chao* 清稗類鈔 [*Qing-Era Barnyard Notes*] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1928), 37:53. Joshua Goldstein called Xu an “encyclopedist,” which is an accurate description of his thorough and detailed, though anecdotal, writings on opera. Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 30, 110. Ultimately, the battle against Mao’erxi was lost, which shows that demand for tax money prevailed over the need for reform. At the same time, a theater in the Mao Family Temple (Maojia citang 毛家祠堂) held the first performances of Beijing Opera in Chongqing. Chongqingshi wenhuaju 重慶市文化局, ed., *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi* 重慶文化藝術志 [*Records of Chongqing Culture and Art*] (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 12.

32 BXA 6-54-1635.

33 See Peter G. Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895–1949* (London: Routledge, 2005), 13; Peter G. Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 24–55, 119–46. In the provincial context, irrespective of the political sympathies, reformers such as Zhou Shanpei and his successors found reinstatement of Confucian morality of fundamental importance for the reform of the state.

the theater's significant profitability, not its ability to serve as a propaganda device, that shaped its future in Republican Sichuan.

2.5 *Squeezing the Communal Resources: Religious Festivals and Itinerant Troupes*

Outside the main urban centers, the same political reforms degenerated into a policy of extractions that burdened mostly itinerant troupes serving various religious festivals. The case that I found in the Nanbu County Archives related to the Fuyi Town (Fuyizhen 富驛鎮), in the sixth month of the third year of the reign of Xuantong (1911) states that: "every market and every *bao* and every *jia* when performing the opera" have to submit the "payment 資釐錢" to the township's police bureau, and all "payment receipts 釐捐票" had to be examined by the county police. However, it was not a tax-per-show deal as in Chongqing or Chengdu but, rather, a yearly contribution that counties collected from subordinate administrative units, which thereupon taxed the opera troupes.³⁴ There is no evidence that this new fiscal burden eliminated or bankrupted the opera troupes, but it could have been one of the many incentives to migrate to larger towns, with more hospitable legal conditions. At the same time, lawsuits from Nanbu County and Jiangbei District show that Sichuan rural hinterlands also attracted troupes from far-off locations, even from Hubei Province. According to them, these troupes invariably disturbed moral order and peace wherever they ventured, but they also bespeak of a rather flourishing business of staging opera.³⁵

A conclusion that we can draw from these examples is that the fiscal demands created by the New Policies led to a reconstruction of the legal framework in which the performing arts existed. Consequently, the location for performing opera changed within the social structure of Sichuan as it entered novel, yet neither immediately synonymous nor congruent paths of development. They were the paths of commercial entertainment, of the Police Departments' source of income, of the means for social and cultural reform, and against an allegedly superstitious and vulgar moral enemy.

3 **The Protecting Power of Official Greed: Republican Commercial Theater**

The Railway Rights Recovery movement initiated in the summer of 1911 quickly turned nasty, resulting in a violent confrontation between the Qing armies and

34 NBX 22-59-579, 1-2.

35 A third case in the folder applied to the Dragon and Phoenix Market (Longfengchang 龍鳳場); BXA 6-54-1636; NBX 21-89-888, 1-4.

the police forces assisted by local militias against the anti-government activists; the latter were soon joined by secret societies, bandits, and all kinds of troublemakers. In the midst of the ceaseless strife, the barely holding social framework of Sichuan collapsed under the burden of such long developing socioeconomic malaises as rural overpopulation, swelling the ranks of the wage laborers filling cities and river valleys (many of them becoming boatmen or bandits) as well as the deepening network of members of the Gelaohui. They all joined the fight against the government's new taxes and extractions earmarked for the construction of schools, police stations, roads, and railways. Empowered by the students' nationalist agitation, these new forces once and for all ruined the fragile sociopolitical status quo that had once made Sichuan a land of opportunity and relative stability.³⁶

Widespread institutional breakdown, economic depression, and unrest across the province loomed over the livelihoods of many itinerant professional acting troupes. It also opened some opportunities. In the following pages, focusing on Chengdu, we analyze four parallel stories that demonstrate the institutional relations between theaters and the law-and-order authorities. Because the police force was the main actor of the urban government, this relationship heavily influenced the development of the commercial opera. First, we explore how the Police Departments fostered the theaters' success, at the same time as satisfying their insatiable hunger for funds. Second, we analyze how the police helped theaters by both adjusting extractions to their financial ability and by protecting their premises and profits. Thus, theaters could weather the spells of violent and economic troubles in the Republican years. Third, we look at how abandoning the authorities' moralistic crusade against women's presence in theaters (on and off stage) was largely linked to their helplessness before the social forces and the cultural change taking place in Sichuan. Women were a part of Sichuan's stage life even during the late Qing, but it took until the late

36 On the Railway Rights Recovery Movement (*Baolu yundong* 保路運動), see detailed studies by Zheng, *The Politics of Rights*; Wei Yingtao 隗瀛濤, *Sichuan baolu yundong shi* 四川保路運動史 [*History of Sichuan Railway Rights Recovery Movement*] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1981); and idem, *Xinhai geming yu Sichuan shehui* 辛亥革命與四川社會 [*Xinhai Revolution and Sichuan Society*] (Chengdu: Chengdu chubanshe, 1991). See also Mary Backus Rankin, "Nationalistic Contestation and Mobilization Politics: Practice and Rhetoric of Railway-Rights Recovery at the End of the Qing," *Modern China* 28, no. 3 (2002): 315–361. On the economic and social turn in pre- and post-1911 Sichuan, see Samuel A. M. Adshead, *Province and Politics in Late Imperial China: Viceregal Government in Szechwan, 1898–1911* (London: Curzon Press, 1984). Sichuan dang'an guan 四川檔案館, *Sichuan Baolu yundong dang'an xuanbian* 四川保路運動檔案選編 [*Selected and Published Archival Sources on the Railway Rights Protection Movement in Sichuan*] (Chengdu: Chengdu renmin chubanshe, 1981).

1920s for official opprobrium to disappear. Fourth, we concentrate on the story of official reformism during the Republic and analyze how it was voided of any meaning and initiative by successive warlord governments.

4 Taxing

4.1 *The Military Police*

The revolutionary upheavals swept away the main administrative organ developed in Chengdu during the New Policies period: the imperial Police Department, though it retained its powers, position, methods, and functions. Instead, in the early months of 1912 they were appropriated by a new institution that suited the new times: the Sichuan Provincial Capital Military Police (Sichuan shenghui junshi xunjing 四川省會軍事巡警). This novel organization did not obtain equal independent standing in urban policing nor could it protect citizens from the atrocities of the civil war. However, it held on to the main strings of the orderly social organization that enabled the early blossoming of the opera business.

First, Military Police retained the obligation to collect regular payment of the per-show tax (*tanya*)- and thus its own income was bound up with the development and prosperity of the urban theaters. Second, it maintained the right to instruct, direct, and punish theaters for breaching moral standards. Although its interest in the reform and rectification of the society waxed and waned throughout the Republican years, the demand for funds never abated and remained a constant feature of opera history. Extracting money should not be equated with strangulation of the theaters. On the contrary, the Military Police approached it with flexibility and care, in order not to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. Moreover, opera's moneymaking capacity served ends other than merely furnishing the police's budget. To a scale unseen during the Qing, Sichuan actors performed for flood, drought, and war relief as well as for the military campaigns supported by Chengdu's overlords.

4.2 *The Political Background*

Irrespective of the large holes in the documentation, which do not cover 1927–1928 and 1930–1931, the extant sources present a picture of an uninterrupted relationship between law enforcement and opera. The intensity of this contact varied, and at times the government tried to reign in the theater, enforce moral rectification, advance its own agenda through plays, and extract more funds, and so on. Between 1912 and 1917, there was great continuity in the forms and practices between the Qing and Republican governments. The death of Yuan

Shikai 袁世凱 (1855–1916), the consequent dissolution of the Chinese army into warlord cliques, and the conquest of Sichuan by the Yunnan-Guizhou Clique 滇黔軍 in 1917 eliminated any vestiges of order in the province. During the fighting in April 1917, Chengdu was set on fire and its centermost imperial palace (Shuwangfu 蜀王府, Gongyuan 貢院) was shelled and ruined. The wars to expel Yunnan troops by the Sichuan militarists occupied much of the following three years, and barely a year after the local warlords' victory, the squabbling for power and the division of the spoils began. Between 1922 and 1933, innumerable smaller and larger wars were fought, and a succession of generals took control of the capital. From the perspective of opera, two periods are notable: between 1924 and 1925, when the city was in the hands of Yang Sen, who attempted its thorough reform; and from 1932 until 1938, when the city-level and provincial structure were revived, and the New Life movement (Xin shenghuo yundong 新生活運動) became an ideological force in the province.³⁷

4.3 *Regular and Irregular Taxation*

Throughout the Republic, the rule that each theater had to pay the tax on a regular daily basis to the coffers of the police remained unchanged. As before the Revolution, the amount was spelled out clearly on acceptance of a petition for opening a new establishment. On June 14, 1912, Yu Shiting 余仕廷 and his associates, the owners of the Quanyiban 全義班, applied for permission to stage puppet shows (*kuileixi* 傀儡戲) in the teahouse that they owned. Every day of performance was meant to bring 1 yuan in tax revenue to the Military Police.³⁸ Other theaters, such as Eternal Spring Tea Garden (Wanchun chayuan 萬春茶元) could be burdened with higher payments, reaching 6 yuan per day of shows. This higher tax rate was exceptional, as it was earmarked for “necessary military expenses 軍需費.” Over the period of forty-five calendar (not business) days before it applied for a relaxation of the extractions, the theater managed to pay 48 yuan and 6 jiao 角.³⁹

The police officials discriminated between various kinds of shows and assessed their extractions according to their status and profitability. A Military Police document on 24 October 1912 shows it in all clarity. Liu Tianyou 劉天佑, the head of Sichuan's Internal Department, and Shen Zongyuan 沈宗元, the

37 Ren Zhaokun 任昭坤 and Gong Zide 龔自德, *Sichuan zhanzheng shi* 四川戰爭史 [History of War of Resistance in Sichuan] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2009), 227–57, 266–320, 327–408; Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 7–23, 87–98.

38 Chengdushi dang'anguan 成都市檔案館 [Chengdu Municipal Archive] 93-6-3753-7, 8; henceforth, CDA.

39 CDA 93-6-3513-42, 84–85.

head of Sichuan's Educational Department, and other officers claimed that "theaters put up three types of opera: those where people played, the shadow theater, and the puppet shows."⁴⁰ Accordingly, they demanded payment of 1 yuan per day paid for the first kind of performance, and the latter two were burdened with half this amount. Moreover, because theaters offered an opportunity for broadcasting educational and reformist contents in the form of lectures and print material, they had to shoulder an additional fee for that purpose.⁴¹

A tax, although obligatory, could be negotiated or even temporarily cancelled if there was a promise of higher profits in future. On December 12, 1912, a puppet opera troupe's appalling financial conditions came to light when it applied for re-registration (after it changed owner). The troupe belonged to Chongqing merchants active in Chengdu. Because its business had withered, the regular payments to the authorities ceased, the troupe's bosses decided to recapitalize it on the eighteenth day of the eighth month (on the lunar calendar). They pleaded for the police to understand their plight and to cancel the previous and current dues because in their financial condition, any extraction would spell doom; even the actors might have no food to eat. If the government agreed, the Chongqing merchants promised to raise five thousand taels of silver and establish an Eastern Ocean Tea House (Dongying chalou 東瀛茶樓) on the Great Central Eastern Street (Zhong dong dajie 中東大街). According to Chengdu's eminent biographer, Li Jieren 李劫人 (1891–1962), Eastern Street was the city's richest and most splendid area, packed with rich and poor scurrying for entertainment.⁴² This location would guarantee the commercial success of the enterprise. Moreover, to ameliorate actors' livelihood, investors offered to construct living quarters for them in the backyard of the theater and to resume payment of the fees as soon as the enterprise became operational.⁴³

Levying fees, their accurate assessment, and collection remained among the main concerns of the police throughout the Republican period. Every teahouse or, later, opera house, after such specialized buildings were constructed, was obliged to pay. In Chengdu, for example, on March 23, 1913, a new establishment that specialized in shadow plays, called Hibiscus Pavilion (Furongting 芙蓉亭) was opened on the First North Drum Tower Street (Gulou bei yijie 鼓樓北一街). As it registered with the authorities, it received a daily quota of

40 CDA 93-6-3710-11, 76.

41 CDA 93-6-3710-11, 73, 76.

42 Li Jieren 李劫人, *Sishui weilan* 死水微瀾 [*Ripples on Dead Water*], 2d ed. (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1961), 132.

43 CDA 93-6-3700-4, 43.

1 yuan, 1 jiao per day in a so-called tea tax (*chajuan* 茶捐).⁴⁴ In April 1914, when a visiting troupe arrived at the invitation of the Hubei and Hunan coprovincials' association and played at the Grand Stage of the Splendid Ocean (Huaying dawutain 華瀛大舞臺), the agreed payment was 3 yuan per day of shows.⁴⁵ An investigation into the amount of payment was also called for by the theater manager when the Sichuan Stage (Shuwutai 蜀舞臺) scheduled a performance of Chengdu's most famous troupe, Sanqinghui 三慶會, on September 3, 1918. The document states that an assessment based on audience size was too complicated and thus required an additional four police officers to come and help with charging the appropriate *tanya*.⁴⁶ In this case, it was clear that the opera house owners desired to avoid, by all means, being overcharged just because their institution could attract a larger audience on one occasion.

The payment was typically based on an assessment of the possible income derived by a particular venue from the kind of performance given there. That is how we also read the report on July 7, 1920, in response to an inquiry by Zheng Shaoqing 鄭少卿, a manager at the Immortals' Gathering Tea Garden (Qunxian chayuan 羣仙茶園).⁴⁷ At that time, Zheng was introducing "electric plays" (dianxi 電戲): opera shows that used electric lights as a stage technology, instead of the traditional reliance on daylight or candle/kerosene lamps. This type of show did not exactly correspond with the prevalent definition of opera.⁴⁸ The chief of the Chengdu police, Zhou Shao'an 周紹安, delegated to the low-level guards twenty-five-year-old Zhao Mingxiang 趙明鄉 and twenty-three-year-old Chen Qingyun 陳青雲 the work of analyzing whether a supplementary fee should be imposed. On this basis, a rule for taxing this opera venue would be established. After an investigation, namely watching the show on July 7, they decided that this opera needed to be charged a fee.⁴⁹ Many similar cases in 1919 and 1920 related to the payment of a fee or for staging the "electric opera," at the Immortals' Gathering and other theaters.⁵⁰

44 CDA 93-6-3716-36.

45 CDA 93-6-3669-35, April 22, 1914, 87.

46 CDA 93-6-1534, September 2, 1918.

47 Wang Di calls Qunxian chayuan "the Deities Gathering Tea Garden"; Wang, *The Teahouse*, 157. I believe that "immortal" is a more accurate translation for *xian* 仙 than "deity" because it does not automatically deify (in the Christian sense) all the celestial and supernatural beings that inhabit Chinese literary and religious tradition. See Wang Mingming, *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2014), 145–49.

48 Xu Ke, *Qing bai lei chao*, 107–8.

49 CDA 93-6-1361-70, 153–55.

50 CDA 93-6-1361-21; CDA 93-6-1361-41; CDA 93-6-1361-47.

At least since 1925, the opera troupes that registered as theaters in Chengdu also had to handle additional burdens. As we learn from the plea to decrease taxes submitted by a rather unsuccessful venture playing in the defunct City God temple, the operating costs included medical treatment and medicines for its members, subtracted from each ticket in the amount of 10 wen 文 per ticket. Moreover, by 1925 the regular fee (*tanya*) charged on the theater rose from 1 yuan charged a decade earlier to 6 yuan (yangyuan 洋元).⁵¹ The increase corresponded to inflation, changes in currency, and increased tax pressure exercised by warlord authorities.

Payments rarely spared businesses that were on the verge of closing. It was up to the Police Department's investigation team to determine whether the previous theater owner declared closure just to avoid onerous financial contributions. We find one such case on April 25, 1929, when Hu Qingfeng 胡慶豐, owner of the teahouse in front of the Qingyang Palace (Qingyanggong), asked the police to cancel his daily tax of 700 wen. By that time, Chengdu's force had been renamed the Public Security Bureau, Gong'an ju 公安局 (in line with the 1927 reform by the Nationalists).⁵² The same archival folder on Hu Qingfeng also contains orders issued by the police chief and the Sichuan's Ninth Police Bureau Chief of the Promoting Industry and Commerce Fair 四川第九次勸業會警察署署長 ordering a thorough check on whether all dues were paid by this teahouse.⁵³ The presence of the latter official demonstrates the close link, established during the Qing's New Policies, between opera houses and the reorganized markets in the provincial capital.⁵⁴ In later years (1935), the Promoting Industry and Commerce Fair had an official assigned to collect fees and protect opera theaters from illegal extraction by the Military Police or acts of violence and abuse committed by soldiers stationed in the city and visiting the event. His functions were defined as "protecting the collection of *tanya* for the city and acting for the good of the business."⁵⁵

51 CDA 93-6-1042-14, 70. The troupe was trying to argue that it deserves a discount because its plays are disseminating educational contents. CDA 93-6-1042-8, 29. Both documents were submitted on October 27, 1925.

52 There is little indication that this reform corresponded to any changes in practice of policing. On the Nationalist police reform, see Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *Policing Shanghai, 1927-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 43-59.

53 CDA 93-5-1053-10, 72-74.

54 See also Wang, *Street Culture*, 115-17; idem, *The Teahouse*, 47.

55 In 1935, the office was named a manager of the Thirteen Sichuan Provincial Promoting Industry and Commerce Fair Theaters [Sichuansheng dishisanci quanyehui juyuan jingli 四川省第十三次勸業會劇園經理], and that year it was held by Ma Weilong 馬爲龍. CDA 93-4-148-1, 174, 177.

4.4 *Assessing the Police Earnings*

The size of the theaters, which determined the amount of taxes, was also important for the fiscal policy of local governments. Therefore, the city law enforcement authorities regulated the number of seats and, thereby, controlled the income of these institutions. Wang Di claimed that:

In 1916, the local government controlled teahouse theaters by issuing audience quotas. The quotas for several well-known teahouses were as follows: the Deities Gathering Tea Garden (Qunxian), 400; the Joy Tea Garden, 200; the New Sichuan Stage (Shuxin wutai), 200; the Sichuan Stage (Shuwutai), 150; the Elegant Tea Garden, 120; the Fragrant Taste (Pinxiang), 120; and the Eternal Spring Tea Garden (Wanchun chayuan), 100. These seven theaters had a total of 1,290 seats. ...

Daily sales at the Eternal Spring Tea Garden in 1920 ranged from 514 to 870 tickets. From June 14 to June 16, the average sale was 607. After night performances were added, 1,076 tickets were sold on June 19 and 1,584 tickets on June 21. Sales data are available for four theaters in 1933: the Grand Stage of Warm Spring (Chunxi dawutai), Newest Grand Stage (Xinyouxin dawutai), Joy Tea Garden, and Yu Garden (Yuyuan). Each theater hosted one show each morning and another in the afternoon, with an average of about four hundred customers per show, or a total of 3,200 for eight shows. Each ticket cost an average of 0.6 yuan, for a total box office of 1,920 yuan per day, 57,600 yuan per month, and 691,200 yuan per year. As an observer said, this was enough money to buy 49,371 dan of rice or cover one month's pay for an army of 385,600 men.⁵⁶

Most of these figures give the impression of accuracy and exactness of information, yet they were derived from three incompatible sources and thus are questionable: police documents from the Chengdu Municipal Archive, and two journals, the government-run *National Gazette* (*Guomin gongbao* 國民公報) and the tabloid *Newest News* (*Xinxin xinwen* 新新新聞). Wang quoted data from 1916 and 1930 from the *National Gazette* and the numbers for 1933 from the *Newest News*; the numbers from 1920 came from police records.⁵⁷ It is clear that the officially produced picture of Chengdu's theater world transmitted through archival documents and newspapers related to the authorities is both incomplete and corresponds to the particular interests of state bodies.

⁵⁶ Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 157.

⁵⁷ Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 157, 308.

It depicts the implementation of the policies of fiscal control exercised on the premises of theaters. In contrast to these bureaucratic narratives, the *Newest News* produces putatively rock-solid data to persuade readers of the extreme waste associated with theater going.⁵⁸ This kind of writing, which calls for reducing spurious social habits and gathering resources for a military buildup, becomes fairly widespread in Sichuan in the aftermath of the Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1932. What is more important here is the doubtful character of the data provided. In fact, it is hard to determine the overall earnings of theaters or the size of the police extractions. Certainly, however, we should treat journalistic tirades against opera critically and trust them only as arguments made in the relevant discussions of the times.

We have a much more accurate, yet not as exciting, overview of the government income derived from the theaters in the case of Wei Licheng 魏李成, an opera tax levy and collection commissioner at the Sichuan Provincial Public Security Bureau 四川省公安局戲捐徵收委員.⁵⁹ The case started with an assessment by Wei at the end of August 1933 and lasted until the end of that year. The main issue before Sichuan's police chief, Yu Yuan 于淵 (1895–1949), was whether the commissioner was correct in his calculations, whether he committed mistakes or was incompetent in carrying out his duties and caused losses for law enforcement.⁶⁰ It was established on December 31, 1933, that Wei had cut corners in his work by omitting two theaters: the Xinyouxin jubu 新又新劇部 and the Yufeng jubu 玉豐劇部. This came out in the report of Peng Qilin 彭啓麟, manager of the West Sichuan Grand Stage (Xishu dawutai 西蜀大舞臺). It seems, however, that in the end Wei was not wrong, as both theaters opened on December 19, almost four months after he submitted the report. Moreover, they regulated all the past payments immediately after being asked by the police to do so.⁶¹

The assessment by Wei Licheng, against all precautions and doubts by his superiors, gives us a unique set of data and should be quoted at length. Wei compiled and annotated a table, translated in Table 1.

58 Wang Di, *The Teahouse*.

59 CDA 93-1352-12.

60 CDA 93-4-1352-15, September 16, 1933, 37. Wei defended himself by restating that his figures were correct on September 21. CDA 93-4-1352-11, 30. Yu Yuan rose to prominence as a commander under Yang Sen in 1925, later he served with Liu Xiang. Beginning in 1927, he was a member of the CCP, then in 1942 he was a member of the Democratic League; then, he was assassinated in the middle of the night on June 2, 1949.

61 CDA 93-4-1352-42.

TABLE 1 A monthly report on Sichuan provincial capital public security bureau opera tax receipts
四川省會公安局劇捐月報表

Theater name	Daily income	Business days [per month]	Received tax amount
Chunxi wutai 春熙舞台 (Warm Spring)	5 yuan, 6 jiao	21 days	117 yuan, 6 jiao
Xishu wutai 西蜀舞台 (Western Sichuan)	3 yuan	11 days	33 yuan
Yuelai chayuan 悅來茶園 (Joy Tea Garden)	4 yuan, 2 jiao 5, xian 仙	13 nights (ye 夜)	31 yuan, 8 jiao, 7 xian, 5 xing 星
Zhiyu yingyuan 智育影院 (Education)	1 yuan, 7 jiao	24 days	40 yuan, 38 jiao
Daguangming yingyuan 大光 明影院 (Great Brightness)	1 yuan	31 days	31 yuan
Xinming yingyuan 新明影院 (New Brightness)	1 yuan, 5 jiao	16 days	24 yuan
Changyi yingyuan 昌宜影院 (Prosperous and Right)	1 yuan, 1 jiao	16 days	17 yuan, 6 jiao
	Overall monthly amount	Received exactly in yangyuan:	295 yuan, 8 jiao, 7 xian, 5 xing

Note: CDA 93-4-1352-12, 34. The numbered notes come from the original table.

1. Chunxi: from the third day to the thirty-first day of the month, in the twenty-nine business days, it was closed for eight days and opened for twenty-one, paying the amount as above.
2. Xishu: from the third day to the fourteenth day, in the twelve business days and from the thirteen, six days of the following two weeks up [incomprehensible]; the amount for eleven days is as above.
3. Yuelai Garden: this month because of hot weather, it only stages plays at night; from the third to the thirty-first day, twenty-nine nights are recorded; apart from the weeks it was not exempted from the tax [omission in the text], it played for thirteen days, paying the amount as above.
4. Zhiyu Theater also [*sic!*] within twenty-nine business days did not work for five days and for twenty-four days paid the amount as above.
5. Daguangming paid for contribution for the entire month of thirty-one days the amount as above.
6. Xingming and Changyi both started on the sixteenth day and until the thirty-first played for sixteen business days, paying the amount as above.

Wei Licheng wrote an explanatory note as to why particular theaters did not produce the expected revenue or did not work throughout the entire month. A few cases are interesting here. The first is the revered Yuelai, which, because of its two-decade-old open-space premises modeled after classical

Beijing teahouses, could not operate on the hot summer days. Moreover, it had secured certain discounts from the government, so its summertime contribution was reduced.

Other theaters mentioned in this document, such as Chunxi, were of more recent design and could offer shows even on the hottest days. Another opera house, called the Western Sichuan, also opened to audiences for barely eleven days, but the document does not furnish any explanation of that. Four other businesses are mentioned in this tax assessment: Education, the Great Brightness, New Brightness, and Prosperous and Right were movie theaters. From the Police Department's perspective, all these establishments were in the entertainment industry and did not need to be distinguished from one another. Nevertheless, there was a clear distinction between the opera houses and the movie theaters with respect to expected taxable income: the former had to pay as much as five times the amount as the latter.

The income of these institutions is hard to determine from these documents or, for that matter, from any of the Chengdu police archive sources. However, it is not inconceivable that opera was more popular, attracted larger audiences, and therefore sold more tickets than films, especially considering the fairly immature stage of Chinese produced cinema in the 1930s, the technological limitations suffered by Sichuan's movie theaters, and a craze for opera in those years.⁶²

Finally, the possible overall tax income from various performances in 1933 is worth mentioning. Although data for Xinyouxin and Yufeng were missing in the accounts mentioned earlier, we arrive at only 3,540 yuan per year as

62 In 1905 Chongqing audiences saw their first films. By 1936 thirty-six movie theaters had opened and closed in the city, but no more than ten operated at the same time. Chongqing'shi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 378. Chinese filmmakers and audiences were strongly influenced by French, German, American, Soviet, and other cinema and foreign films held a dominant position on the market. Even though Shanghai-based movie production boomed after 1925, when overall production grew from 18 to 68 films and reached its peak in 1929 with 137, it still constituted a fraction of what was watched in movie theaters. In 1933, when 91 films were made in China, local production was 16.5% of the market, far exceeded by American movies, which held 68%. Hu Qirong 胡霽榮, *Zhongguo zaoqi dianying shi, 1896–1937* 中國早期電影史, 1896–1937 [*Early History of Chinese Cinema, 1896–1937*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2010), 68, 157–59. See also Tan Ye and Yun Zhu, *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 1–4; Hu Junbin, *Chinese National Cinema before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 29–46. See also Zhang Yingjin, ed., *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 24–42; Paul Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

the lowest possible total tax receipts of the Public Security Bureau. If we take seriously the assessment quoted by Wang Di that in 1933 opera houses alone had annual profit of 691,200 yuan, then the government extraction would have been less than 0.5 percent. Collecting such a ridiculously low amount would not have been worth the administrative effort. Because the documentation does not reveal the Sichuan police as having been particularly meticulous in that period, it is doubtful that mistakes in adding up these petty fees would have troubled its leadership and cause an investigation. It is clear that the Wang Di's amounts either are denominated in a different currency (not in yangyuan) or are wrong.

The documents issued in the summer of 1935 show a bit more about government earnings from opera as well as the revenue of the opera houses. The totals for that year neither add up nor enable us to locate them with the knowledge obtained from the sources for previous or later years. However, they are still worth mentioning for two reasons. First, they show increased regulations by the police and its stronger grip on opera. In fact, they demonstrate the reconstruction of the relationship created during the Qing New Policies. Second, they show the structure of the entertainment industry in Chengdu and the changes it underwent throughout the Republican period.

Accordingly, we learn from the file of the opera troupe called Sublime Perfectness (Chongjing jubu 崇精劇部) run by Guo Run 郭潤 and Wei Guichen 魏桂臣 how much money their rather unsuccessful business venture of staging plays in the apparently defunct Zhangye Temple Opera Garden (Zhangyemiao xiyuan 張爺廟戲園) owed the police. Each ticket there was priced at only 800 wen, but the limited space of the temple allowed only three hundred spectators, thus, severely limiting the chances of this troupe's commercial success. Moreover, the government insisted on charging it 1 jiao (it is not clear for what), which added up to a regular fee of 8 jiao per day, an amount this troupe could not afford.⁶³

A document dated August 28, 1935, summarizes the overall entertainment-related earnings of the Public Security Bureau that month. It specifies that the government obtained 30,580 yangyuan from the theaters alone and an additional 17,950 yangyuan from the movie theaters.⁶⁴ These numbers reveal the dominant position of the theaters in Chengdu's entertainment industry, but they also demonstrate the higher levies that burdened the opera houses and consequently more exploitative approach by the authorities in this branch of business. The latter conclusion is supported by data from two years earlier.

63 CDA 93-4-1206-5, August 21, 1935.

64 CDA 93-4-893-41, 29.

Assuming, however, that many performances were presented to the public by small fry such as the Sublime Perfectness troupe playing in a refashioned temple, we are not far off the mark in claiming that Chengdu's public displayed unmitigated devotion to opera but, at the same time, did not disdain various novelties.

From the perspective of the building and stage, the line between film and the live performing arts could be fluid. The same establishments either tried to profit from both types of shows or, by the mid-1930s, provided fairly high-quality facilities that allowed people to pass time in a variety of ways. The number of such venues grew quite explosively, and in November 1937 more than fourteen opera-cinemas operated in Chengdu. Many of them had some history that were a source of pride: the Joy Tea Garden and the Warm Spring survived throughout the Republican period. The New Brightness, the Great Brightness, the Prosperous and Right, and the Newest were active at the beginning of the 1930s. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was also a long-standing venue showing movies and novelties from elsewhere. Other theaters were of a more recent vintage, such as the Center (Zhongyang 中央), the Chengdu (Chengdu juyuan 成都劇院), the Masses (Minzhong 民眾), the Three Benefits (Sanyi 三益), and the Hooking Happiness (Goule 鉤樂); their names corresponded to the new political environment in the country and to the novel requirements facing the entertainment industry.⁶⁵

With respect to the amount of the *tanya* relative to the theaters' income, we need to state that the available numbers are inconclusive. If we multiply the numbers in August by twelve, assuming that the receipts every month were approximately similar, we arrive at 366,960 yuan. Considering the data provided by Wang Di for 1933, this tax would account for more than half the opera houses' income. Again, however, that seems inconceivable, as none of the documents I consulted for the pre-1937 period mention excessive taxation or of bankruptcy by an entertainment establishment because of government avarice. We can look at this numbers in another way, using the price of rice provided by Wang Di.⁶⁶ Assuming that the price of this basic commodity did not change greatly between 1935 and 1937, rice cost about 26.8 yuan per dan 石. Therefore, if the Chengdu theaters' yearly income hovered around 49,371 dan, and the annual *tanya* was no more than 13,700 dan, then not even 28 percent of the revenue of teahouses staging opera went to the Police Department. A levy of this size certainly would not be overly onerous if there was no economic slump, war, and other unexpected or accidental conditions influencing regular

65 CDA 93-2-148-6, November 4, 1937, 90-91.

66 Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 265.

operations. Again, any calculation provided here is based upon speculative, fragmentary, and highly uncertain data and solely serves to illustrate the possible impact of the opera tax policy.

4.5 *Additional Extractions: Theaters' Contributions for the "Public Good"*

Direct taxation was not the only demand put on urban stages. After the 1911 Revolution, it was not uncommon for funds to be collected for social and political causes seen as important by the authorities. At times, this implicated theaters and their publics in political struggles, but money could also be channeled to welfare projects, which the government failed to do through its regular agencies. Sometimes, an additional fee was added and extracted for a reason not stated in the documentation.

This earliest such case in the Chengdu Municipal Archive was dated March 18, 1913, and submitted to both Huayang 華陽 and Chengdu Counties.⁶⁷ The document states that in February that year, all the theaters were required to add 37 silver yuan and 6 jiao each to their regular fiscal burden.⁶⁸ In March, local magistrates extracted the even larger sum of 119 silver yuan and 2 jiao.⁶⁹ In April and May, as stated in the appendix to the folder, the sum was 200 silver yuan and 8 jiao.⁷⁰ To clarify these payments, we highlight that neither under the Qing nor during the Republic were counties the administrative bodies privileged with access to opera profits. Thus, this imposition was an extra burden that probably did not serve the usual purpose of financing the police.

A radically different situation is presented in a petition dated May 11, 1915, by Liu Changyan 劉昌言, the head of Sichuan Provincial Capital's Orphanage (Sichuansheng chenggueryuan 四川省城孤兒院). Liu asked the police headquarters to grant a tax exemption to the opera troupe when it performed at the Fujian Guild Hall and the Eastern Sichuan Association and contributed funds to the three hundred female orphans in his care.⁷¹ At other times, the Military Police and a theater company worked together in instigating, organizing, and gathering money for a charitable cause. On May 13, 1917, Lei Biao 雷彪, the provincial police chief, and the Gathered Benefit Opera Society (Qunyi jushe

67 The city then was divided into two land administration units, and there was no uniform municipal government before 1921.

68 CDA 93-6-844-2, 24.

69 CDA 93-6-844-2, 37.

70 CDA 93-6-844-2, 42.

71 福建館川東公所. The stage was in the Lord of Sichuan Temple (Chuanzhu miao 川主廟) on Nanfu 南府 Road. He also specifies that the troupe was named Mingyitu 明義園 and included actors of some local fame such as Zhao Yingzhou 趙瀛洲, He Yizhi 何義之, and Xu Yangwen 許映文; CDA 93-6-1644-1, 2-3.

群益劇社) decided that the plays staged at the Eternal Spring Tea Garden would serve the cause of the victims of war. According to the authors of the document, these performances could pay for two meals for a thousand suffering people. Moreover, they indicated that the charitable operas would all be the “new” operas spreading education (*jiaoyu*).⁷²

A few years later, on February 22, 1924, Gen. Yang Sen, a commander of the Second Army, made a similar demand of three prominent establishments: the Gathered Immortals, the (New Chengdu; literally New Brocade, Jinxin 錦新), and the Hooking Happiness. These playhouses had to make a contribution to charities sponsored by the Red Cross. Additionally, an order was issued that required these theaters to inform the government when it was not working. The only one that was spared this burden was the Joy Tea Garden, as during the winter months its actors were kept on the military payroll to receive the usual soldiers’ meals.⁷³

Extra payments by Chengdu theaters had a very different cause. During the Northern Expedition, the opera houses were pressured to make contributions, and, as one document notes, the Everlasting Spring played for that cause for only five days. It also gives the sum collected by the playhouse: 152 yuan, 2 jiao, 223,784 wen.⁷⁴

These examples portray theaters as ready sources of funds, which could be used for different purposes. Performances could have a variety of fiscal burdens that were not necessarily connected with local affairs. Whether audiences wanted to or not, the government involved them (or, rather, their wallets) in the ensuing political causes. It is not clear how much money the people of Chengdu handed over for the power struggle conducted by the Nationalist Party just by going to theaters or how conscious they were that such proceeding took place. If, however, we consider the popularity of opera and the number of commercial establishments in Sichuan’s capital, these sums may have made a substantial contribution to the distant struggle led by the GMD—a struggle that, by and large, did not alter and certainly did not improve living conditions in Sichuan during the early Republic.

5 Helping Hand

We need to recognize the role of police taxation in the evolution of this area of business based on the development of Chengdu’s theaters from their modest

⁷² 難民計至千餘人每日二餐需費。CDA 93-6-3735-29, 82.

⁷³ CDA 93-6-1078-3, 26, 28.

⁷⁴ CDA 93-6-3773-20.

beginnings during the New Reforms until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. The stable but predictable concern about money by the authorities was not inimical to the enterprise of opera. In fact, I would claim that it fostered the business of opera, because the tax demands were not excessive, and the government took care, irrespective of all the difficulties, to remain involved in the running of playhouses so that they could deliver the expected revenue.

This point requires further elaboration and exemplification. The military police and the Public Security Bureau not only demanded tax money but also consciously and flexibly changed their requirements so as not to suffocate the fragile opera business. Both institutions succeeded by either limiting their demands or finding ways in which opera houses could produce more profit, thereby enabling them to pay their taxes. Because of these sorts of policies, some theaters, such as the Joy Tea Garden, weathered all the political, economic, and social storms in the early twentieth century and actors' work, and merchants' investments were not lost due to the protracted warfare at the time.

5.1 *Surviving the Rainy Days*

Opera houses and the police remained in constant communication largely for one reason—that is, if it rained, the public might not have wanted to go to the theater, tickets did not sell, and thus no money was earned. In that case, the playhouse could either pay its daily quota out of its own pocket, perhaps denting actors' salaries or owners' gains, or it could apply to the police for a tax break. At the beginning of the Republic, the Military Police were willing to issue such tax exemptions without much hesitation. They preferred to rely on the regular taxes from ticket sales, rather than on the theaters' founding capital or on the meager resources necessary for maintaining the livelihood of actors. The earliest cases of this fiscal policy were in April and May 1912, when the rainy season started. The new Republican law enforcement institution had to deal with the possibility of decreased income due to bad weather. Indeed, an application for a tax cut was submitted by popular playhouses such as Everlasting Spring in Chengdu's Smaller City (Shaocheng 少城), an old Manchu settlement in the western part of the town.⁷⁵

This lenient tax policy did not abate over time; instead, it became a mainstay of dealing with theaters whose open structures were bound to be affected by inclement weather. Because most Chengdu (and Chongqing) teahouses were small shops with limited capacity, those that staged opera needed large open courtyards or specially constructed buildings.⁷⁶ The latter included the Yuelai

75 CDA 93-6-3513-42, 84; CDA 93-6-3513-36, 69.

76 On the size of an average teahouse, see Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 29–35, 44–52.

and, in the late 1920s, a whole range of other establishments. But during the first decade of the Republic (and, in some cases, later as well), it was more convenient and cheaper for an opera company to rent a temple compound that was not in use or to work on the stage of one of the numerous old *huiguan*. For example, the Lord of Sichuan Temple, Zhejiang Hall (Zhejiang *huiguan*), and the City God Temple served this function until 1925.⁷⁷ At the same time, most of the opera houses resembled a *huiguan* with a stage either perched above the entrance gate or facing it and a courtyard, with seats at the ground level and in balconies surrounding the open space.⁷⁸ In case of bad weather, most customers of lesser means who were either unable or unwilling to pay for a balcony seat would miss the show, significantly decreasing a theater's daily revenue.

Other rain-related reasons for not patronizing the playhouse include the quality of Chengdu's streets, which could pose obstacles for those who searched for entertainment on drizzly days. Interestingly, and perhaps due to the traffic conditions, even after the majority of city theaters were already purpose-built structures, applications for the tax break were just as common as before. The provincial capital's police archive holds numerous pleas for cancellation or delayed payment for weather reasons for the period 1912–1935. Most of these cases were simply accepted by the authorities, and the regular tax payment resumed immediately after the weather conditions improved.⁷⁹

5.2 *Inventing Side Businesses, Dealing with Incompetent Management*

The Police Department also went beyond releasing the stages from their tax obligation. In some cases, it was involved in finding the most profitable side activity for the theater, which would supplement its income, bring back the audience, and produce sufficient funds to maintain the resident opera troupe and the burdens imposed by the authorities. For example, in December 1916, the Sichuan Stage (Shuwutai), which had already endured more than a month of financial duress, attracted more attention from the authorities. Jiang Xingting 將星廷, its manager, must have had quite a good relationship with Ji Zuyou 嵇祖佑 (1880–1961), the provincial police chief, because the latter not

77 CDA 93-6-1644-1, 2; CDA 93-6-1533-8; CDA 93-6-1076-22, 57; CDA 93-6-1042-14.

78 In February 1923, the six most prominent theaters were the Keyuan 可園 on Gongfu beijie 公府北街, Yuelai chayuan 悅來茶園 on Huaxingjie 華興街, Shuwutai 蜀舞臺 on Xiadongdajie 下東大街, Chang[yi] chayuan 昌[宜]茶園 on Shangshengjie 上昇街, Qunxian chayuan 群仙茶園 on Zongfujie 總府街, and Jinjiang chayuan 錦江茶園 on Sanquanjie 三全街, which all qualified as open space tea gardens rather than closed space theater buildings. CDA 93-6-2893-9, 84.

79 For 1914: CDA 93-6-1669; 1918: CDA 93-6-1534; 1919–1920: CDA 93-6-1361; 1933–1935: CDA 93-4-1352 and 93-4-1353.

only permitted a temporary closure of the theater but also encouraged it to install a movie projector. Having its daily program enriched by film screenings while enjoying a tax exemption until patrons came back in sufficient numbers was clearly a privilege.⁸⁰ At the same time, it revealed the Police Department's policy of fostering the theater business in order to maintain its source of easily obtainable and fairly stable income in the long term.

Sichuan Stage, it appears, continued to be a concern for both officials and its employees. Not even four years later, at the end of July 1920, Wu Tiren 巫體仁, its new manager, filed a petition to police authorities to decrease the regular payment by the theater. According to the document, the playhouse suffered from mediocre management, which caused a shortage of money to pay the actors and staff, chased away patrons, killed profitability, and thus made it insolvent. A reduced tax rate could, in Wu's eyes, salvage the moribund business and enable him to revive it.⁸¹

The situation at the Sichuan Stage was by no means unique. The Military Police and the Public Security Bureau were kept busy with these cases of troubled opera houses. The government's instrument of levying or disbursing taxes was used to prolong the life of some badly managed and even unpopular theaters. That said, even the best intentions and multiple attempts could be insufficient, as shown by the case of the exclusively female troupe, called the Women's Club (Funü gonghui 婦女公會). For few months in early 1925, this troupe tried its best on the stage in an old City God Temple. A document dated March 15 of that year indicates that rescue efforts did not succeed, and the troupe had to disband.⁸²

Moreover, even better-established companies, such as the New Chengdu (Jinxin wutai) ran into problems and requested government support. Reports in October 1921 demonstrate that some previously tried solutions, such as enriching the program with other forms of opera (e.g., "electric plays"), may have been sabotaged by frequent rain, over- or underpriced tickets, and disruptive intermingling of men and women in the audience.⁸³ In contrast to the Women's Club, the New Chengdu struggled for another three years or so, until 1925, when it had to be closed because the theater in which it played nearly collapsed. As the *Chinese Opera Gazetteer* states, it was built in a "European manner," with a semicircular stage and three floors, but the construction materials used, taken from a torn-down Buddhist temple, were of inferior quality. The

80 CDA 93-6-1533-48, December 16, 1916 110; CDA 93-6-1533-46, December 18, 1916 104.

81 CDA 93-6-1534-32, 91.

82 CDA 93-6-1076-22, 57.

83 CDA 93-6-1253.

building gained a nickname as “the great grave mound 大墳包” well deserved indeed, as the beams supporting the third floor cracked in 1919.⁸⁴

The case of Wei Licheng from 1933, discussed above, demonstrates that the government understanding of the various interests that overlapped in the social space of the opera houses affected the payment of *tanya* and that the police force prioritized some duties above others. In a file dated September 16, Wei explained why the tax payments from particular theaters were disappointing, or in other words, what limited its expected flow to law enforcement’s treasury. In one case, a playhouse (the Warm Spring) had to pay for medicine for the troupes working in it, and therefore gave the Public Security Bureau only half the usual sum. In other cases, the weather was ill suited to staging opera, and they simply closed. Perhaps the most interesting case was that of the Western Sichuan (Xishu), which shut its door on August 18 for restructuring. This theater was bought by no less a personage than Sichuan’s most powerful warlord, General Liu Xiang 劉湘 (1888–1938; called in the document “Liu tuanzhang 劉團長”) of the Twenty-First Revolutionary Army, who apparently used it for entertaining his guests and hosting parties. A petty official named Wei held out the hope that the theater would soon resume its regular payments.⁸⁵

5.3 *Mediating Conflicts between Soldiers and the Opera Houses*

In addition to protecting the theaters in the event of bad weather, unscrupulous management, or simply bad luck, police authorities tried to mediate conflicts between the soldiers garrisoned in the city and the opera house owners. Most such issues related to unjustified and illegal collection of *tanya* by the military—tax revenue to which regular troops had no right. In many of these cases, the position of the military police and the Public Security Bureau was precarious at best: both institutions were part of the uniformed military structures serving under the same top command and, at the same time, were in a parallel hierarchy and thus were disconnected from, if not antagonistic to, that of the field armies.

A case on March 26, 1934, clearly demonstrates the conflict between the police and military. Yu Yuan, the Sichuan provincial police chief, faced the issue of protecting the business of Liu Zhixian 劉志先 and, at the same time, safeguarding the good name and financial interests of law enforcement. The brazen theft of the *tanya* money collected at Liu’s theater by soldiers in the city garrison threatened the latter. The solution adopted makes Yu’s helplessness

84 ZGXQZSJ, 464.

85 CDA 93-4-1532-4, 9. As seen before, West Sichuan reopened on December 19 and paid all the taxes due.

obvious: he sent an officer to inform and complain to the commander (*duizhang* 隊長) of the troops that demanded payment of the tax in violation of law, but no direct action was taken against the offenders.⁸⁶ The loss of power over the tax and weakness before the garrison haunted the police force until the end of the Republic, and with the advent of the GMD's direct rule over Sichuan, the way in which it managed the opera houses changed radically in the wake of the Sino-Japanese War.

These cases show that, after the collapse of the empire, the Police Department did not lose its grip on the theaters; rather, it continued and even deepened the micro-management of the playhouses. By retaining the right to collect *tanya*, it remained in constant communication with the theater owners and directors, tried to ensure the financial viability of their businesses, and helped make them more attractive to audiences. Supervising a well-run entertainment sector translated into a more secure budget for the police and consequently improved standing in the predatory environment of the warlord-ruled Sichuan. In contrast to its imperial predecessor, the Police Department in the Republican era was not as concerned about what played on stage as it was about how much it could earn from the enterprise. Nevertheless, the concerns about morality, education, and rectification of the social order did not dissipate; instead, their importance fluctuated because of various contingencies. It is to these questions that we now turn.

6 Women on the Show

As seen earlier, creating a reformed commercial theater in the New Policies era implied raising the troublesome question of women's presence in public spaces, most notably in theaters. The moralistic pressure to reconstitute the audiences was neither new nor confined to Sichuan, and many authors already have broached this issue.⁸⁷ An even more pressing issue, though by far not as visible in the Sichuanese sources as in those pertaining to Beijing Opera culture, was that of *dan* actors. Female impersonators famed for their seductive

86 CDA 93-4-1208-27, 52–53. A similar case occurred on October 14, 1936. A group of soldiers forced their way into Commoners' Theater (Pingmin juyuan 平民劇院), did not pay for tickets, and behaved violently toward the owners. The Police Department was ordered to find the perpetrators and called for their punishment (CDA 93-4-1804-13, 32).

87 See, e.g., Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

appearance and comportment caused both passion and outrage among educated spectators.⁸⁸

6.1 *Problematic Female Audiences and Late-Imperial Moralism*

For many reasons, the moralistic fever in the Guangxu and Xuantong reign periods as well as the first Republican decade was aimed not against the actors but the unruly audiences. The differences in stage culture provide part of the explanation: the biggest impersonators of that time more often played male roles (*sheng*) and clowns (*chou*) rather than female roles, making Sichuan Opera quite distinct from its Beijing counterpart. But the importance and influence of female roles in this regional stage should not be underestimated nor should hasty conclusions be reached on the basis of which repertoire was popular at a particular moment. The registration documents of Chongqing's first commercial playhouse quoted earlier make it clear that "lascivious" relationships between actors (of any kind) and patrons were prohibited. Nonetheless, such contacts undoubtedly existed, even if they were not widespread.

A better indication of Sichuan's "women problem" comes from documentation on late-Qing disturbances during the festival opera shows. The official perspective was that the prevalence of violence, abuse, and larceny during such events was intrinsically linked to the allegedly prevalent practice of selling sex. The authorities understood that not all women attending such events were prostitutes, but they also had little doubt that most of them were treated as such. On the one hand, bandits and predatory men and, on the other, women, both those selling bodies and those considered decent and experiencing various offenses, made the theater audience into a stage of the most unwanted, socially disturbing, and morally destructive places: real mirrors of the imperial crisis.

Part of this worldview and the anxiety about society and the state were inherited by the new military elite ruling post-1911 Sichuan. This intellectual and reformist inheritance should not be underestimated. The first years of the Republic betray almost no interruption in late-imperial practices, although they took a back seat to the fiscal interests of the militarized Police Departments and the swelling armies. The reforms were swept away by warfare and the resulting chaos, but they were revived twice, in 1925–1926 and after 1933. In

88 Wu Cuncun, "Official Life: Homoerotic Self-Representation and Theater in Li Ciming's *Yuemantang Riji*," *Frontiers of History in China* 9, no. 2 (2014): 202–24; Mark Stevenson, "One as Form and Shadow: Theater and the Space of Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century Beijing," *Frontiers of History in China* 9, no. 2 (2014): 225–46; Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 36–43; Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17–60; Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 208–10, 231–32.

the face of a largely reluctant public, the leaders half-heartedly tried to implement a mixture of old imperial leftovers marinated in the GMD's New Life movement. Rectifying the role of women, however, was secondary to reforming opera (discussed below), which itself was less important to budgetary needs. Only by taking this perspective can we understand the dynamic guiding Republican opera world in Sichuan's main cities.

6.2 *Violence toward Women and Violations of the Social-Moral Order*

Among the persistent problems faced by the theaters was violence toward women and children appearing in public, for which opera managers and owners (e.g., the Chengdu's General Chamber of Commerce) both refused to take any responsibility.⁸⁹ The first years of the Republic, however, were also a time of experimentation, and, little by little, all-female troupes entered the purely masculine realm of stage performance. We have already seen that the late-Qing authorities and urban elites loathed the "kitten plays," (Maoerxi), the first form of Beijing tunes seen in Chongqing, at the same time expressing resignation before audiences struck by this enchanting novelty. In June 1912, a female-only troupe 女優戲院 was registered in Chengdu, but Jiang Yongchen 江永臣, the provincial chief inspector of the Military Police, insisted that special rules needed to be applied to such an establishment. The most important part of his decree emphasized that the theater hosting this troupe had to provide the actresses with appropriately constructed and secluded living quarters, so as to avoid any evil (both moral and physical) activities against them and (in that way) to limit the suffering of society in general. Actors were a long-recognized but necessary nuisance; the existence of women in the public space and on public display, by contrast, was distressing and could be harmful to the city's social order. Thus, special means of protection of both the public and the actresses were indispensable.⁹⁰

Intermingling of men and women constituted perhaps the most recurrent topic for the police during the first quarter-century of the Republic. Ye Xiaoqing demonstrated that the first Beijing theater with separate boxes for women, tellingly called the Civilization Theater (Wenming xiyuan 文明戲院), opened only in 1907.⁹¹ According to Wang Di, Chengdu soon followed suit, but after an initial period of openness, the authorities reversed their previous "liberalism." Other theaters, however, allowed both men and women to attend the show, but only on different days, privileging male audience with cheaper

89 CDA 93-6-3746-10, September 23, 1912, 69.

90 CDA 93-6-3727-5, June 18, 1912.

91 Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 243.

tickets, access to evening shows, and better performance days (e.g., Sundays). Wang writes: “By the 1920s, the mingling of male and female patrons in the teahouses was still not popular, but some teahouses provided segregated places for men and women.”⁹² In fact, this restriction was hard to apply. According to contemporary critiques, prostitutes roamed freely in opera houses and tea gardens, driving decent women to stay away.⁹³ The police often ascribed a playhouse’s troubled conditions to the presence of female audiences, regardless of whether they sat together or remained separate from male spectators. The police equated women with other seasonal annoyances, such as rain, or bad management practices, such as overly expensive tickets.⁹⁴ Apparently, the Police Department did not want to interrupt the practice of selling tickets to both sexes and was conscious of it for more than six months before using it as an excuse to increase the amount of *tanya* charged on the theater.⁹⁵

6.3 *Loosening the Control over Women and Discursive Struggles for Morality*

By the mid-1920s, the uneasiness about, if not outright rejection of mingling between the sexes in a public space had abated slightly, yet the idea that opera exemplified and inculcated harmful ideas about gender roles was resurrected. In the midst of a his combatant modernizing-cum-moralizing effort, Yang Sen’s city government issued a curious document about opera content, stating that “from old, Chengdu actors without any interruption stage licentious plays [that] incite and tempt ladies from the good families to adultery and to be evil despots, incites women to beat their husbands and such kind of things.”⁹⁶ It was therefore decreed that all the plays be examined, so that such contents were weeded out as quickly as possible, and the offenders were to be punished. We do not know anything about the implementation of this order, but in the wake of the rapid fall of Yang’s government, his policies were largely ignored. At the same time, as the presence of women in theaters increased, the provincial police pressured the public to behave appropriately toward them and threatened punishment for breeches of decorum. The male public was ordered to stop pointing fingers at women, commenting loudly about them, and following female audience members out to the street. The documents indicate

92 Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 194; see also Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 188–96.

93 On the growing number of women in public, see Wang, *Street Culture*, 180–84. Republican authorities in Beijing also implemented more restrictive policy toward gender division in the opera houses; Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 243–44.

94 As in the case mentioned on Jinxin wutai (New Chengdu), in CDA 93-6-1253.

95 CDA 93-6-1253-56, 115.

96 CDA 93-6-1045-33, August 19, 1925, 120.

that harassing, bothering, and grabbing women in public was fairly common: clearly, male opera audiences could not or did not want to understand that women other than prostitutes would have wanted to go to playhouses.⁹⁷

Although the issue of women playing in and attending the theaters largely disappeared from the police archive, yet at times similar questions reappeared, even as late as the War of Resistance against Japan. In late June 1939, a troupe run by Hu Yeru 胡葉如, playing so-called *bengbengxi* 蹦蹦戲 (a type of opera played to the Beijing tune) on the grounds of the Jinjue Temple (Jinjuesi 金絕寺) visited Chengdu. According to the authorities, not only did it offend public morality but Hu was accused of running more of a brothel than a theater.⁹⁸ He allegedly disobeyed the strict regulations imposed by the GMD government in Chengdu prohibiting prostitution in public places.⁹⁹

In retrospect, the treatment of women in Chengdu theaters reveals a discrepancy between the strict rhetoric of restrictive regulations and the recurrent transgressions. The police attention to the question of division of the sexes, public morality, and appropriate education about gender roles declined precipitously when competition for tax revenue and institutional survival became a priority. Women made up a willing and large potential audience that would buy theater tickets and thus increase tax payments.¹⁰⁰ Despite intense campaigning against the female presence in theaters by intellectuals, the authorities were little concerned with this issue and intervened only when profit was to be squeezed or when the public order was threatened. At the same time, the Military Police and the Public Security Bureau were both more than happy to protect and foster female-only troupes as a source of tax money.

7 Rectifying Opera

The quest for moral reform occupied much of the scholarly effort in writing the history of Chinese opera. Some exceptional examples of it, motivated by the banners of social rectification and anti-imperialism, supported the view that the performing arts were part of the decades-long struggle for the sociocultural and political renewal of the country.¹⁰¹ Wang Di, for example, in his *Street Culture in Chengdu* gives credence to the contemporary intellectual

97 CDA 93-6-1059-26, September 17, 1924, 137.

98 CDA 93-2-5436-1, June 27, 1939; CDA 93-2-5436-2, July 3, 1939, 20.

99 Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 195.

100 Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 191.

101 See Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu*, 559–608.

writers, stating the restrictive reform agenda was implemented during the New Policies. Moreover, he equates theaters' disobedience of the rules with resistance practices by civil society, represented by the opera house owners, actors, and public.¹⁰² Neither archival evidence nor histories of the playhouses and actors provide much evidence for that version of history and even less for disobedience as resistance, whether persistent or occasional. Moreover, Wang concedes that theaters sought the city government's approval to stage religious plays in times of necessity.¹⁰³

In fact, the discourse on reform appears to have been used instrumentally by the authorities to satisfy local and national intellectual elites as well as the distant revolutionaries: advocates of the May Fourth cultural renewal and the GMD elites. In other words, just as the taxation policy was a negotiated political and economic space between the theaters and the military governments, the reform policy was a negotiated political realm between the elites, national governments, and local warlord rulers. For these reasons, the reform was often contradictory by nature. For example, the Chongqing warlord Liu Xiang owned theaters, which were criticized for spreading vulgarity and immorality by laws that he decreed and the newspaper that he owned, the *New Sichuan* (*Xinshu-bao* 新蜀報).¹⁰⁴

Sichuan's version of opera rectification served the following aims: extraction of funds, maintenance of the social order, fighting prostitution, struggling against superstition, and combatting the spread of communism. Moreover, the enforcement of provincial laws was not consistent and, like its regulations on women's presence in public, it came in waves. Until 1916, the late Qing policy was maintained and even reinforced; it was restarted once during Yang Sen's year-long domination of Chengdu between 1924 and 1925 and again, after 1933, following the reconstruction of the provincial government by Liu Xiang. Thereafter, local policy responded to the GMD's New Life movement.

7.1 *Reform Initiatives in Post-Imperial Sichuan*

In the provincial capital, talk of reform restarted about a year after the 1911 Revolution. In mid-February 1913, the Provincial Executive of Sichuan (Sichuansheng xingongshu 四川省行公署), together with the Military Police, expressed a direct interest in investigating and regulating activity on various stages in the city. Characteristically, the authorities directed their attention to the shows performed at *huiquan* and not the commercial venues that sprouted

¹⁰² Wang, *Street Culture*, 117–18.

¹⁰³ Wang, *Street Culture*, 171–72.

¹⁰⁴ On Liu's personality, see Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 31.

in Chengdu over the previous decade. Accordingly, the plays presented at the co-provincial guild halls had three problems: “brandishing the olds” (*moni chenji* 摹擬陳迹), “history” (*lishi* 歷史), and “[when] propagating integrity, raising fervent excitement in the audience with the [operas] originally mostly part of popular education on mores.”¹⁰⁵ Orders issued from both departments addressed the aspects of the stage art that they despised—not only attacking the shameless sound and vulgar customs that undermined good customs but also, aiming directly at *huiguan*, scrutinizing any plays staged there. The authorities claimed that “since each provincial guild still played immoral etc. operas, their managers are to act upon the law and from the time prohibition is issued to repress them without pardon, obey.”¹⁰⁶ This regulation was issued in order to directly affect the co-provincial halls and the opera activity at them. The authorities were evidently trying to achieve two outcomes: restoring the grip on public re-education lost during the 1911 Revolution and striking at the culture, which had been built on the tightknit and mutually interdependent religious and historical narratives perpetuated and disseminated through festivals and opera performances. The new provincial and urban authorities seriously engaged in the task of disentangling history and moral values from the religious ritual and from the narrative traditions while purifying them from elements considered harmful and useless, such as romance and eroticism.

Two months later, the police helped establish a new office tasked exclusively with reforming opera and promoting good education in society: the General Association for the Amelioration of Socially Educational Opera (*Shehui jiaoyu xiqu gailiang zonghui* 社會教育戲曲改良總會). This organization’s highest ambition was to “thoroughly remake people’s minds (hearts)” and, in particular, to oppose and eradicate the stupid, sick, obscure, nonsensical, and idiotic popular thinking.¹⁰⁷ However lofty their ambitions were, the obstacles faced were quite fundamental: how could supposedly sanitized cultural contents be disseminated to a public that preferred all the “evil” plays? Members of the General Association understood that it was impossible to coerce theaters to give performances for free, irrespective of how attractive they found such ideas. How quickly would the “fruits of progress ripen” and how easily would immorality be blocked?¹⁰⁸ Nothing more was heard from this organization in the following months and years, so apparently it did not achieve more than just writing a declaration.

105 CDA 93-2718-23, February 16, 1913, 79.

106 CDA 93-2718-23, February 16, 1913, 79.

107 CDA 93-6-3680-5, April 10, 1913, 12.

108 CDA 93-6-3680-5, April 10, 1913, 13.

Even so, the ideas about cultural rectification were not dying out, and as theaters had to register as “ameliorated opera” (*gailiang*) institutions, the early Republican Police Department was rather strict about providing and monitoring their internal regulations. At the same time as that Association was set up, a new theater was trying to obtain the permission to buy land, furbish the premises, and open a business. Sun Weiliang 孫維良, the owner, and a group of shareholders petitioned the provincial government in April 1914 to construct and operate a stage, where a female-only troupe would present “kitten plays” (*Maoerxi*). It appears that this kind of opera, so violently opposed less than a decade before, was already somewhat accepted by the authorities. The petitioners tried to boost their chances of success by insisting that the actresses would reside in rooms at the back of the premises (most probably a back section of the courtyard house) and, in that way, prevent them from venturing outdoors.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, they insisted that the operas intended to be presented would all help advance the public morality and teach “the ancient and current values of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and integrity,” as they pledged to avoid and restrain any fights, obscenity, and evil customs and habits at the theater.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Office of Education of the Military Police took every precautions before registering this theater, and, after a thorough investigation, it decided that it would be best for this theater not to open in Chengdu. One of the main arguments used against the initiative by Sun and his associates was the fact that a theater at that location would attract large audiences, which would create traffic obstructions. Additionally, the plans for furnishing the theater-teahouse stipulated reconstruction of the existing buildings, which the police claimed would pose danger to public safety. The police stated that allowing the sale of land for this particular business venture was not worthwhile, and it should be sold for a better cause. Therefore, for the public’s benefit, permission should not be granted. Other reasons, however, were no less important. Crowding connected with the theater operations posed a threat to hygiene (*weisheng* 衛生), in both a literal and metaphorical sense: watching women on stage could bring unwanted behavior but would also expand the audience.¹¹¹

7.2 *Public Order, Instead of Public Morality*

In the following years, the Police Department lost interest in intervening in the content of plays or in the preservation and promotion of public morality

109 CDA 93-6-2693-4, 27.

110 CDA 93-6-2693-4, 28–29.

111 CDA 93-6-2693-4, 30, 33–34.

at opera houses. The financial issues discussed above and the protection of theaters as businesses and spaces where a large number of people congregated took priority. The idea of public order was limited to the resolution of disputes or to acting when extraordinary intervention was necessary. For example, in mid-November 1916, because of overcrowding at Sichuan's Stage, a stampede occurred in which seven or eight attendees and two police officers were hurt. The Military Police decided that the theater was obliged to pay the cost of medicine and treatment for those who were harmed in the event.¹¹²

The Police Department also adopted a practical approach to change in popular mores. At the time of the incident at Sichuan's Stage, the police realized that many prostitutes attended the opera, which created an opportunity for the extraction of more money under the pretext of spreading social "amelioration and education 改良教育." On November 19, 1916, it was therefore decreed that every time the theater was caught harboring or attracting prostitutes, the usual payment for that day had to be doubled. The rule served to eliminate prostitution, and the additional revenue would be spent on building police substations.¹¹³ Tellingly, this pragmatic turn in the ostensible policy for improving customs was a common invention of Lu Guopu 祿國蒲, the current head of law enforcement, and Yang Baomin 楊寶民, the head of the Finance Bureau. In a time of declining income allocated for urban police and growing expenditures by provincial military forces, this financial penalty for such a common offense (sure to be repeated) was a clear sign that the idealism of a few years before was dead.

Although by 1916 the Chengdu Police Department's reform activity had largely halted, various associations in the province pleaded and expected the capital authorities to act for the good of the reform by sternly investigating, prohibiting, and punishing operas for misconduct. On July 7, 1922, one such application was submitted by Li Zheyuan 李喆元, the Chongqing Treaty-Port Supervisor of the Society for Popular Education 重慶商埠督辦處通俗教育公會, to the office of the Sichuan Police Chief and Province's Police Chief 四川警務長兼省會警察廳長. It provides an excellent example of which elements of the performance culture alarmed authorities and what actions they deemed necessary to rectify popular customs. The Society prided itself on its substantial achievements in elevating culture and civilization in the city, irrespective of the very limited means, especially in the schools where it could act freely. Nevertheless, its success with commercial theaters was negligible, and it needed

¹¹² CDA 93-6-1533, 87.

¹¹³ CDA 93-6-1541-17, 64.

assistance from the institutions in implementing appropriate regulations that would make Chongqing theaters align with the alleged high standards of policing and culture in Beijing. In the capital, old and new operas were alleged to be flourishing in their sanitized form, which had no place for despicable vulgarity.¹¹⁴ What was so appalling to the education officers in this Yangzi port? First, they claimed, in the opera, male and female sexual organs were mentioned, indicated, or stared at. Second, actors spoke on stage and in some fashion performed sexual intercourse between a man and a woman and adulterous acts of sodomy. Third, actors were seducing members of the audience with their eyes and movements.¹¹⁵ Under the direction of police and provincial government, all of them had to be eradicated, and the law enforcement officer responsible for the collection of *tanya* should be the one to execute the orders prohibiting these outrages. Moreover, the Sichuan government was requested to broaden the proscription against such vulgarity to all administrative units including *dao* and county governments outside major cities and to carefully plan how to advance the rectification program; otherwise, various localities would not be able to act together to eliminate all the malpractice.

We cannot be sure whether any of these requests were ever acted on or whether provincial government issued any effective decrees on opera. Even if it did, not only did no documents following this plea point in that direction but the government would have been obstructed by an unmanageable political situation in the province. In July 1922, a year-long war began between Liu Xiang and Xiong Kewu 熊克武 (1885–1970), followed by a war between Xiong and Yang Sen; at that time Xiong was trying to put Sichuan under the control of the Beiyang 北洋 government of Wu Peifu 吳佩孚 (1874–1939).¹¹⁶ For two years, any vestiges of order were absent, and when many cities changed hands, Chengdu was the site of street battles between the contenders. Regulating opera, teaching morality, and fighting vulgarity or pornography were nowhere to be found on the list of pressing tasks for the army-governments that held the province hostage. By early 1924, General Yang Sen had emerged as Sichuan's most important warlord and the ruler of Chengdu. His rule was temporary, lasting only a year, but ushered in a high tide of reform.

114 Called "six rules" (*guize liutiao* 規則六條), but not all are specified further in the document; CDA 93-6-1203-14, 66.

115 CDA 93-6-1203-14, 67.

116 Ren Zhaokun and Gong Zide, *Sichuan zhangzhen shi*, 266–320; Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 21–22.

7.3 *Yang Sen's Dream of Reform and the Role of Patronage in Opera Troupes*

In April 1924, the city government revived a late-Qing demand for all theatrical programs to undergo scrutiny in advance of the performance, stipulating that the plays be read and analyzed by the Social Education Bureau 社會教育局 and either permitted or prohibited.¹¹⁷ This order was issued twice. First, in August 1925, when the Military Police lashed out against the old plays that despoiled women by provoking them to insolence and violence against their husbands. These operas were to be suppressed through a system of preventive censorship enabled by law enforcement's right to punish the violators.¹¹⁸ The second time, on October 19, 1925, was after Yang had lost control over the city. The new powerholders, Yuan Zuming 袁祖銘 (1889–1927) and Liu Xiang, confirmed the city government's mission of educating society and reasserted their power to control and oversee this performing art, the performers, and the stages where they played.¹¹⁹

Different and more intrusive kinds of government interference formed part of Yang's policy toward public entertainment and education. They involved one of the first cases of control over the employment and the working conditions of the performers in their troupes. In November 1924, the provincial Police Department, together with Chengdu's most prestigious troupe, the Sanqinghui, linked the working conditions and remuneration of the young performers entering the craft to the issues of broader official concern, such as payment of taxes and staging reformed plays. The Sanqinghui submitted a petition in which it explained the particular conditions of a troupe that consisted mostly of young performers called the Sichuan Proper Music Troupe (Sichuan Zhengyuehui 四川正樂會). The Proper Music Troupe was cramped in a financially unattractive sector of the opera market. In order to work, they were "limited to searching for an empty temple stage or a *huiguan* around the province." In the 1920s, these troupes occupied an obscure zone of opera life barely visible in sources. Their quality of employment, their income, and beneficial contacts with the authorities were inferior to those of the troupes playing in Chengdu commercial theaters.¹²⁰ The Sanqinghui proposed that this itinerant troupe be investigated, and as it already existed in the market, the difficult living conditions had to be taken into consideration in levying the regular opera tax. Moreover, it was up to the government to determine the program that

117 CDA 93-6-1090-2, April 28, 1924, 5.

118 CDA 93-6-1045-33, 120.

119 CDA 93-6-1045-40, 178; Ren Yimin, *Sichuan jinxiandai renwu zhuan*, 1:130.

120 CDA 93-6-1059-36, 188.

this troupe would perform because the rectification of opera was considered directly beneficial to the people. The revision and correction process were not confined to unassuming establishments such as the Proper Music Troupe but also encompassed troupes playing at well-known institutions such as the Joy Tea Garden and the Everlasting Spring.¹²¹

This document is interesting for two additional reasons. First, it demonstrates that the lesser provincial troupes, which had very limited access to the prosperous urban opera market, were looking for patronage from established and well-connected counterparts, which could ease their way into the city and help them reach the helping (and not the abusive) side of the authorities. The Sanqinghui, which, from the beginning of the Republic, united some of Sichuan's most famous actors, secured support from the majority of city officials. The air of a reformed and modern institution as well as the tax revenue it generated certainly worked to the Sanqinghui's advantage. The special position occupied by this troupe also made it the perfect patron and protector. It could support newcomers in finding employment, training, and securing basic economic stability while shielding them from suspicion of spreading superstition, pornography, or any other "vulgarity" opposed by the authorities.

Second, the case of the Proper Music Troupe also reveals the "organic," in the Gramscian sense, rapport between the military powerholders and the performers in the "establishment" troupe that the Sanqinghui was.¹²² Even though the performers evidently were not intellectuals, in the process of opera reform, many of them either took on the task or accepted responsibility for being the major proponents and propagators of the cultural and social rectification of Chinese society. The "reformed" activities, such as reorganizing the troupes, dividing male from female audiences, rejecting the plays considered vulgar, and staging scripts rewritten by the pro-rectification literati, surely were part of the cooperation between more or less revolutionary warlords, the supporting (or subdued) urban intellectual elite, and the Sanqinghui. At the same time, it was also an act of self-presentation, which enabled social advancement and recognition both within and outside Sichuan. The appearance of being reformed and refined provided a platform for performers (in the Sanqinghui) and the government to discuss and cooperate—not as equals, but not as a master and subjects either.

Whether the Sanqinghui was fully rectified or whether a reformed theater even existed in Chengdu or in the province is doubtful. Moreover, the special

121 CDA 93-6-1059-36, 190, 203.

122 Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukács and Gramsci to Socialist-Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 112–19.

relationship that one troupe, however famous, could forge with the authorities could be easily shattered. Yang Sen and other warlords were not persuaded that the performers subscribed to the militarists' vision of reform and thus had few scruples about criticizing or penalizing those who did not abide by their rules. Hence, Yang altered the government's relationship with the playhouses and imposed the most thorough and restrictive regulations since the Qing dynasty.

In October 1925, in the midst of the struggle for supremacy in the province between Yang (representing Wu Peifu's Beiyang government) and all the other Sichuan warlords, a new element was added to the opera rectification campaign. The Sichuan Provincial Military Police decided to tighten its control over the theaters and to deepen the quality and scope of knowledge it collected about the artists and their art. The "handbook" (*shouce* 手冊) it issued stated that each theater had to register its upcoming repertoire with the government three days in advance, clarifying not only what would be performed but also who was going to play the roles, with a marked division of the characters appearing on stage. After the arrangements were reported to the police, they could not be changed. This regulation applied to all regardless of their tax status. Additionally, it was ordered that seating in the theater be numbered in order to stop people from chaotic dallying during the shows. More attention was paid to the opera scripts (*juben* 劇本). First, the police ordered the inspection of them in case they offended the standards and principles of reformed education. Scripts and performances found to be in violation had to be either corrected or banned, and those that disseminated offensive materials had to be punished. In the event of a severe violation of the not specified rules of good-education, the theater could even be closed by the authorities.¹²³

These rules could be seen as the implementation of previous policies that had been repeated many times beginning with the Qing New Policies. They were not. In fact, a new political quality was added to the struggle for opera. A document explains that strict regulations were implemented because the Sichuan warlords followed the example of the commander of Shanghai (SongHu 松滬) who started a campaign against the spread of Soviet propaganda in the city. The new rules were in line with the previous laws and were a reaction by Chinese authorities to the supposed Soviet policy no. 493 addressed to southern China (especially Guangzhou and Hong Kong).¹²⁴ It is quite clear that Sichuan was not part of this Soviet propaganda campaign, and there is little proof that such a Soviet policy even existed. The strict rules on running theaters were an element of social control and an effort to eradicate or intimidate supporters of

123 CDA 93-6-1045-37, 173.

124 CDA 93-6-1045-37.

the opposing warlord cliques. Because we have no way of knowing whether the document was issued by pro- or anti-Beiyang contenders, it is hard to identify which party it was intended to target. Certainly, joining the anti-communist struggle, hand-in-hand with leaders of national significance, could burnish the reputation of the Sichuan warlord who was behind such an action and perhaps even diminish some of the disrepute of these commanders after constant infighting and destruction in the province. This regulation, like many before, was most probably of no consequence and was lost in the chaos of civil war or invalidated by the much more pressing need for funds. One need in direct conflict with the expanding bureaucratic control as well as with the production of knowledge on operas and actors was that of the audiences necessary to implement the cultural-political rectification.

7.4 *Fighting “Superstition” and Lining Up to the New Life Movement*

Even though, for most warlords and their officials, opera reform was a marginal but recurrent annoyance, it took seven years for the Chengdu government and police to start issuing new regulations. Beginning in 1932, the municipal offices and the Public Security Bureau, in reaction to the patriotic and nationalist agitation against the Japanese seizure of Manchuria, launched a much more thorough and clearly directed campaign to regulate opera. The legislation became even stricter after the Sichuan warlord governments joined the New Life movement in 1934 and augured the radically more oppressive measures implemented during the Sino-Japanese War. However, above all, these renewed actions demonstrate that neither previous efforts nor their current work had much success in controlling the stage.

On January 9, 1932, the Chengdu City Government and the Chengdu Public Security Bureau decided to strike against “superstition” (*mixin*) by promulgating an order titled “City Government Orders All Theaters to Prohibit Staging Operas That Are Licentious, Brutal, Supernatural, and Superstitious.”¹²⁵ In the document, the authorities explain that many opera houses had recently allowed performances that, by “instructing spectators in the immorality and in the brute superstitious belief in gods and sprits,” were harmful to audiences.¹²⁶ Accordingly, they claimed that because the theater had a special mission to spread appropriate and accepted social mores, any such harmful plays had to be eliminated immediately. Furthermore, the document specified the reasons

125 CDA 93-5-889-12. On superstition, see S. A. Smith, “Introduction,” in *The Religion of Fools? Superstition Past and Present*, ed. Stephen A. Smith and Alan Knight (Oxford: Oxford Journals, 2008), 7–55.

126 CDA 93-5-889-12, 61.

for this government action and which actual plays it wanted to be removed from Chengdu's repertoire. It lashed out against romantic plays that wasted people's time and filled their minds with useless stories as much as against the banal stories about ministers, officials, and bandits, or various selections from the tales on the "demonic forces of evil" ("牛鬼蛇神"). All these stories harmed the general population by teaching them "obscene and sexualized vocabulary" ("淫詞褻說") and destroying good mores. Then, it is stated that, in a time of national crisis, there was no place for such theater, with superstitious nonsense and sweetly singing ladies; rather, it was time to "propagate patriotism and to awaken the people's hearts and minds to troubles consuming the country and to prepare for striking the enemy."¹²⁷

The campaign to eradicate superstition must have had a very limited effect because two years later, on April 30, 1934, the government commenced another attempt to eliminate it from Chengdu's theaters. As this campaign began during the annual Fair for the Promotion of Industry and Commerce, the police team for tax collection pounced on a large presentation of the Mulian opera performed by Huang Zongyao 黃宗耀. Because this performance was seen as a form of dissemination of the "evil customs of Mulian plays" ("惡習演唱目連"), officers tried to disperse the crowds of demons and spirit soldiers gathered to stage the play. To their displeasure, this motley crowd from hell overflowed onto the nearby street and carried on squabbling with the forces, instead of listening to the calls for immediate suspension of the "evil" show. During the brawl, the police failed to collect taxes, leading Yu Yuan, Chengdu's chief, ordered an investigation and the thorough eradication of the allegedly superstitious shows; thus, restoration of "social peace" ("社會治安") was undermined by such events.¹²⁸ The frequent reappearance of the religious opera, right under the nose of the authorities during an officially organized and seemingly heavily policed fair demonstrates the limits of government control and the half-hearted official engagement with opera or, more broadly, with cultural reform.

In the mid-1930s, the first signs of industrialization emerged in Sichuan, and some factories had active opera troupes. The regulatory environment of the production units allowed the implementation of a modicum of "modern" means of control: that is, an in-depth survey.¹²⁹ One such effort left an artifact in the form of a document issued by the Public Security Bureau about the

127 CDA 93-5-889-12.

128 CDA 94-4-151-6, 151.

129 On Republican surveys, see Tong Lam, *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

opera and movie theaters run by factories (“Xunling geshu guiding gongchang jifang xiyuan yingyuan 訓令各署規定工廠機房戲園影院”). In it, the police specified that, like other workers in the service sector, such as hairdressers or canteen employees, performers had to be enumerated and described using a standardized form. The available sample of the form has a space for listing performers under the category of “theater actors-workers 戲園伶工.” As with many Republican policies, however ambitious or rudimentary, we cannot be sure whether any such form was ever used to gather information about the performers and, thereby, whether this professional group ever became part of the industrial waged workforce in Republican Chengdu.

When we summarize the attempts to reform Chengdu’s opera in the post-imperial decades, it is hard not to notice the reluctant and inconsequential engagement of the city and law enforcement authorities. Although the rectification of society and culture was ever-present rhetorically, and some serious attempts were made in 1912–1916 and 1924–1925, they did not affect the development of the urban commercial theater much. It is also doubtful that Chengdu’s Republican police and the city government weeded out the religious performances. It appears that the festival celebrations during which opera was staged, though pushed out of the center of public life, constituted a fairly lively underworld of the city’s performance culture. Unfortunately, we cannot compare the situation in Chengdu to that of Chongqing, the other major city in the province, because most of its prewar Republican municipal archive was destroyed in Japanese bombings during World War II.¹³⁰ As discussed below, this Yangzi open port had even more opera houses than the capital and prided itself on the variety of genres from the neighboring provinces and Beijing. Similar developments in the spatial and social distribution of the playhouses in the city and in the availability of career opportunities for the troupes and actors from all over Sichuan as well as, in various periods, remaining under the control of the same warlords demonstrates that cultural rectification was no more successful there. The story in smaller urban centers was very different and was related not to reform activities but to the inconsistent fiscal policy of Sichuan’s rulers and to the impact of the civil wars that wreaked economic damage in the province after 1911.

130 I found only one document about the reform in Chongqing, issued by the Eastern Sichuan *dao* authorities on February 15–16, 1916. This document lashes out against operas that “instruct about brutality and immorality” (*huidao huiyin zhi ju* 誨盜誨淫之劇). The time of production and the purpose are very similar to those in documents produced in Chengdu in the same period. Sichuan Provincial Archive, Republican Archive (Sichuansheng dang’an-guan, Minguo dang’an 四川省檔案館, 民國檔案), 191-1-129; henceforth, SPA.

8 Concluding Remarks

The impact of the official control over opera in Chengdu is comparable to that of a greenhouse in which flowers bloom in the middle of a harsh winter. Historians have been largely accurate in describing Republican Sichuan as a province of institutional collapse, rampant abuse, tax extractions, and recurrent periods of chaos as militarists contended for supremacy. Nevertheless, within the city borders of Chengdu, a degree of institutional permanence coincided with a consistent and reasonable tax policy, which created sufficient conditions for the blooming of the theater business. These conditions, however, were insufficient for the survival of the rather frail creature that was opera, without the direct involvement of police chiefs, tax officers, and single police officer, who more often protected than robbed theaters of their hard-earned money. Allowing playhouses to earn an income guaranteed that, from the police perspective, they fulfilled their most important role: reaping a sufficient amount of tax revenue and thus supporting the threatened existence of the municipal institutions (which themselves could fall prey to voracious warlord armies). This goal for commercial theater enabled its survival and development, at the same time, preventing much success in another venture that was connected to the birth and the very existence of modern Chinese opera: cultural reform. Sichuan Opera grew, largely outside the reach of the coastal critiques or intellectuals bent on linking theater to the national struggle. And when those reformist ideas came, they attracted limited attention from local governments and confronted a well-developed artistic form and a bustling market of the performing arts, which catered to a very broad urban audience. On the contrary, the force that drove Sichuan Opera forward was a cultural market protected by the militarized authorities that both cherished and lived off it.

Commercial Opera: Shaping the City and Shaping the Actors

1 Theaters and Urban Zoning: Researching the Social Background of the Audiences

One important phenomenon associated with commercial theater was the location it occupied in urban space and, conversely, in the social space to which its services were directed. The grand shift from a festival theater to a ticket-selling one meant a change in the type of audience and in the geographical spread of the opera. Whereas the former required communities that organized and financed it, the latter only required patrons who would be sufficiently (although still barely) well off to afford a ticket. Whereas a religious festival needed a temple and thus a ritually defined space, a commercial show had to have a purpose-built structure accessible to customers. Freed from sacred geography, it was shackled to the market of cultural production. In effect, beginning with the New Policies, opera started to take a distinct place in the fabric of towns compared to its place for the previous two hundred years. In this section, we analyze what this geographic shift tells us about the audiences for commercial shows.

However, this spatial shift was very uneven throughout the province. In the majority of Sichuanese towns, religious festival opera became less frequent in the Republic than under the Qing, and engaging itinerant or urban troupes was often unaffordable. Moreover, public establishments, such as the temple stages or *huiguan*, were often seized or destroyed, and rarely replaced with alternative purpose-built structures. In the best-case scenario, the stages built during the Qing were used and reused but not necessarily well maintained. At the same time, in municipalities such as Chengdu and Chongqing, where political will and financial means congregated, commercialization translated to a construction and reconstruction boom in theater building.¹ We should not forget, however, the relative slow pace and inconsequential nature of change. New theaters formed only a relatively prestigious layer of the opera market,

1 From the New Policies to 1914, Luzhou 瀘州 was a notable exception, with six opera-staging teahouses opened in this period. We have no indication of how they fared but, in the following thirty years, no new playhouses were built. ZGXQZSJ, 473.

and we cannot account for every tune sung in teahouse, brothel, street corner, or house in Sichuan. Unavoidably our net misses the small fry.

2 Early Transformation in the Social and Spatial Geography of Opera

In imperial Sichuan, opera performance was confined to two kinds of spaces: temple stages and private compounds. After the implementation of the New Policies, entrepreneurs and troupes settled first in defunct shrines or family temples, and, in one known case, in a new establishment created as a hotel and a theater, the Yuelai. During the last years of the Qing, many other theaters appeared on the map of Chongqing and Chengdu, of which the majority were located where plots were available and followed a “city-building” urban logic.

This state of affairs had some practical reasons: the New Policies either emptied numerous temples or “assigned” to them additional functions that relegated worship to back rooms or eliminated it. After the court ceased to sanction ancestral cults, more spaces opened for occupation by entrepreneurial individuals who tried to secure official permission for opening opera houses. In Chongqing, for example, the first batch of registered commercial theaters, though held by one company, was distributed all around town and even outside its walls.² Thus new theaters popped up in the inner alley of the main city wharf, Chaotianmen 朝天門, or in Caiyuanba 菜園壩, the then-distant, outer-city settlement along the Yangzi.

The presence of this new kind of entertainment was not related in any clear way to either the geographic distribution of possible clients or to the spatial organization of the town. In the 1900s, Chongqing had no center as such, other than that of the government *yamen* and various *huiguan* built all along the Yangzi in the Lower Town. In this city’s crowded mountainous landscape, perhaps no space was ideal for initiating a performance-based business that could guarantee easy access for potential patrons. The distances in Chongqing were short, but movement was difficult. Wealthier residential districts were up in the mountains (Shangcheng 上城), and traders settled close to the docks or along the main, invariably narrow, streets and stair alleys. Indeed, no spatial order or zoning was in place.³ Moreover, these early opera houses—simple

² Chabrowski, “Reforming the State,” 75–81.

³ “Chongqing fuzhi quantu 重慶府治全圖 [The Complete Government Map of the Chongqing Circuit],” 1886–1891, scale 1:4000, in *Chongqing lishi ditu ji 重慶歷史地圖集 [Collected Historical Maps of Chongqing]*, ed. *Chongqing lishi ditu ji bianzuan weiyuanhui 《重慶歷史地圖集》編纂委員會* (Beijing: Zhongguo ditu chubanshe, 2013), 1:78 (henceforth, CLDTJ).

teahouse-like structures—catered to audiences irrespective of their class background. Unintimidating as they were, these theaters provided no stage for brandishing social distinctions or personal splendors.

The development in Chengdu was slightly different. There, the police department and the chamber of commerce both engaged in restructuring a part of the city in an effort to create profitable enterprises, such as a “model market” and a “model theater.” In fact, this was only seemingly an act of careful urban planning: financial limitations clipped the wings of their ambitions and restricted their control over the development of this entertainment district. They acted by adjusting, trimming, and redecorating what was already a living urban space, rather than creating a new city. Consequently, Chunxilu 春熙路 (Warm Spring Street), chosen as the first officially sponsored opera house, had a busy commercial space before and remained so afterward. The other area that gained popularity early on was on the border of a Manchu town, where, in the 1910s, a public park had been established by the city authorities. None of these examples mean that any careful zoning was adopted or that no other theaters appeared in different parts of Chengdu. Because control was confined to registration and taxation, the police and the city governments did not interfere in the workings of the market, and it was a hunt for profit that eventually clustered the scattered opera business into clearly visible urban entertainment zones.⁴ Moreover, Chengdu’s theater market was deeply affected by the political chaos in Republican Sichuan. Although in 1906–1918 twelve theaters opened to the public, in the 1920s only one opened (Warm Spring Grand Theater (Chunxi dawutai 春熙大舞臺) in 1929), followed by another one in 1933, The Newest Grand Theater (Xinyouxin dawutai 新又新大舞臺). Only after political order was reestablished by the GMD did theater business boom again, with eight houses opened between 1936 and 1939.⁵

3 Republican Theaters and Urban Zoning: Crystallization of the Opera’s Public

During the first two Republican decades, Chengdu and Chongqing experienced a similar pattern of development. Both had formed entertainment zones confined to a few central city blocks. These were the same areas where most of the Republican “modern” urban construction and a majority of the new institutions were located: banks, shipping companies, newspaper offices,

⁴ Wang Di, *The Teahouse*, 44–52.

⁵ ZGXQZSJ, 469.

and so forth. Here, we focus on the Yangzi port, rather than Sichuan's capital, which has already been studied by Wang Di.

The postrevolutionary decades, especially the 1920s, although messy and violent for most of Sichuan, were quite prosperous for Chongqing. The city profited from the booming trade in provincial goods and from the superior access to the marketing networks across China. The city was linked to the national and global financial markets thanks to political stability under Liu Xiang (beginning in 1926) and some other important factors: the establishment of many financial and commercial enterprises, the expansion of trade in commercial crops (opium, medicinal herbs, bristle etc.), and the boom in steam and native shipping. A rather precarious version of military capitalism took hold in the city and revamped its social and power structure. Qing-era elites and forms of social prestige were abandoned in exchange for a clique of businessmen, bankers, army officers, and seasoned revolutionaries, who networked through the structures of Liu's Twenty-First Revolutionary Army. The new powerholders, in sharp contrast to the much more cosmopolitan dynastic elite, were explicitly localist and waved a banner of "Sichuan for the Sichuanese." However, by education, social contacts, and ideological leanings, they remained firmly linked with the cultural and political trends of the times. Moreover, the city and province both continued to be enmeshed in the intra-Chinese political squabbles.⁶ One thing that clearly proves continual integration of Chongqing elites with national developments was the model on which the town was reshaped and place (both physical and social) was allocated for culture and entertainment.⁷

By analyzing Chongqing's institutions, we can clearly trace the interrelated development of trading and banking firms with commercial opera. In other words, reading Chongqing's social space inscribed in the practice of using and appropriating urban space—"the act of walking," as defined by Michel de Certeau—allows us to see in full the changes in the social institution of opera in Republican Sichuan.⁸ In the following pages, we therefore outline the

6 Zhang Jin 張瑾, *Quanli, chongtu yu biangue: 1926–1937 nian Chongqing chengshi xiandaihua yanjiu* 權力, 衝突與變革: 1926–1937 年重慶城市現代研究 [*Power, Conflict, and Change: Research on Urban Modernity in Chongqing, 1926–1937*] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2003), 121–24; Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 14–21.

7 Zhang Jin 張瑾, *Quanli, chongtu yu biangue*, 199–211; Xie Fang 謝放, "Jindai Chongqing qiyejiade shangpin yishi yu chengshi jindaihua 近代重慶企業家的商品意識與城市近代化 [Modern Chongqing Merchant Houses' Commodity Awareness and Urban Modernity]," in *Chongqing chengshi yanjiu* 重慶城市研究 [Research on Urban History of Chongqing], ed. Wei Yingtao 隈瀛濤 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1989), 172–217.

8 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97–98.

development of theaters in their urban context and then reflect on what this particular spatial development tells us about the opera audiences.

3.1 *The Emergence of Chongqing's Central Financial District and of the Opera Cluster*

Theaters were an important part of this new landscape. After their initial dispersal inside and outside the city walls, all the new operahouses were located on the most prosperous and busy streets in the city center, which were now in the Upper Town. In fact, most theaters were concentrated a few hundred meters from one another. Among the first of these city-center establishments was Assembled Virtue Tea Garden (Cuifang chayuan). It was among the first opera houses legalized by Ba County authorities in 1910. Located in the central district on Meizi Slope 梅子坡, where the most important roads crisscrossed the city, on the street leading to a major city dock (Qiansimen 千廝門), it took over a space vacated by a Meige Temple.⁹ The Assembled Virtue Tea Garden weathered numerous crises in this river port and survived until 1929. Then it was rebuilt, restructured, and reopened under a new name: Zhanghua Grand Theater (Zhanghua daxiyuan 章華大戲院).¹⁰ This theater held a prominent position among Chongqing's opera houses: its premises involved the costly construction of three floors, and it served as a "model theater" for other similar buildings in town. Moreover, it became a school and a place of performance for the most talented and brilliant actors from Chongqing and beyond. This theater survived until the Japanese bombing in 1940, proving remarkably resilient and successful against all odds.

Its next-door neighbors were two other important opera houses: Spring Sun Tea Garden (Yangchun chayuan 陽春茶園) and the more established Joyful Harmony Tea Garden (Yuehe chayuan, 悅和茶園); the latter was later reconstructed and renamed Innovation Stage (Dingxin wutai 鼎新舞台).¹¹ The

9 BXA 6-54-1635.

10 The name refers to a platform built by the King Ling 靈 of Chu 楚 in the Spring and Autumn period, which served him for astronomical observations. Its remnants are in the northwest of the Linli 臨利 county, Hubei. Although the idiomatic connection between a theater stage and a splendid viewing platform (both called tai 臺 in Chinese) was clear to Republican audiences, it is impossible to translate it to English; "章華" <http://www.zdic.net/hans/章華> (accessed Feb. 18, 2022)

11 The data on the location of these and other theaters, if not otherwise mentioned, is derived from the following sources: Chongqing xiqu zhi bianji weiyuan hui 重慶戲曲志編輯委員會, ed., *Chongqing xiqu zhi 重慶戲曲志 [Records of Opera in Chongqing]* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1991), 9–10, 54, 434–35; Chongqingshi wenhua ju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 12–17, 126–31; ZGXQZSJ, 469–75.

district where these theaters were located was not undistinguished. By the late Qing, an important religious cluster had developed in its narrow lanes, consisting of the following temples: Longshen Temple 龍神祠, Zhiping Temple 治平寺, Erlang Temple 二郎廟, Chongxing Nunnery 崇興庵, and Luohan Cave 羅漢洞. During the Republican period, these temples were taken over by the Luohan Temple 羅漢寺, and others disappeared from the cityscape. However, until the late 1920s, there were confirmed reports of the rain-seeking parades in celebration of the Dragon King enshrined in one of these temples; the cult of Erlang was widespread and important in most of the localities in Sichuan.¹² Additionally, this district was also preferred by Western businessmen and foreign consulates for taking up residence.¹³

Between 1912 and 1937, this old religious center of Chongqing and, at the same time, an emergent theater hub also became the financial center of Southwestern China.¹⁴ Indeed, most financial institutions and companies congregated at the neighboring plots of the temples mentioned—at a crossroads called the Small Intersection and the streets radiating from it: Datong Street 打銅街, Shaanxi Street 陝西街, Xinjiekou 新街口, and Xiaoliangzi 小樑子. All these roads, each but a few hundred meters long, which curved and sloped on Chongqing's bedrock, offered tight but apparently sufficient quarters for the new businesses that opened at the time.¹⁵ In 1922, Sichuan Meifeng Bank 四川美豐銀行, an American-Chinese-owned enterprise, was set up in the area. It was the second modern financial institution in the city, established eight years after Juxingcheng Bank 聚興誠銀行, a venture owned by a local family named Yang 楊. Meifeng's opening augured the temporary revival of the financial market in Sichuan and served the expanding interests of Chongqing merchants and their foreign partners. After another eight years of stagnation, in 1930, two new locally capitalized financial institutions were nested in close

12 George C. Basil and Elizabeth Foreman Lewis, *Test Tubes and Dragon Scales* (Chicago: John C. Winston, 1940), 55–56; Carmelita (Carma) Hinton, "In Search for Erlang," *East Asian History* 21 (June 2001): 1–32.

13 "Zengguang Chongqing diyu quantu 增廣重慶地輿全圖 [The Complete Augmented Map of Chongqing and the Environs]," 1898–1900, scale 1:4000, in CLDTJ, 79.

14 Chengdu and Wanxian were also important financial centers in Sichuan. Wu Jisheng 吳濟生, *Chongqing jianwen lu 重慶見聞錄 [Experiences of Chongqing]* (1939, repr., Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1980), 197–201.

15 A 1935 *Guide to Sichuan* claimed: "[All] the city's splendor is on Shaanxi Street, Post Office Street, Cobbling Copper Street, in the First Model Market, the New Entrance Street etc." Zheng Bicheng 鄭璧成, *Sichuan daoyou 四川導遊 [A Guide to Sichuan]* (Shanghai: Zhongguo lüxingshe, 1935), 25.

vicinity: Bank of Chongqing 重慶銀行 and Sichuan Salt Bank 川鹽銀行. Several years later, the Sichuan-Xikang Herding Industry Bank 川康殖業銀行, the Bank of Sichuan 四川省銀行, the Sichuan Construction Bank 四川建設銀行, the Sichuan Commercial Bank 四川商業銀行, and the nationally prominent Bank of China 中國銀行 were established. All these financial institutions were central to the developing capitalist economy of Sichuan.¹⁶ What was, and to some extent remained, a central area of religious life in the city, by the late 1920s was transformed into an economic and cultural hub in Eastern Sichuan and beyond, housing in a few urban blocks both the best-financed banks and some of the most influential operahouses of the time.

Between 1929 and 1937, this zone doubled in size after the reconstruction of the Circuit Intendant *yamen* 道尹署 as the First Model Market. In the 1930s, this area's development included the establishment of a communication hub for city bus services, through which anyone willing to reach the city's docks had to pass.¹⁷ Novel commercial and banking institutions, a number of hotels with Western-style rooms, and many newspaper offices that smarted their European fronts became characteristic of this zone.¹⁸ Next door was Shaanxi Street, on which was Assembly Tea Garden (Huicui chayuan 薈萃茶園), among Chongqing's first playhouses, which moved there from a location outside the wall (Caoyuanba) to the defunct Bazha Temple 八蠟廟.¹⁹ In the late 1930s, most of the land along Shaanxi Street was occupied by the government and banking institutions as well as by the main compound of the YMCA, with its hotel, restaurant, and theater, called the First People's Movie Palace (Di yi minzhong dianying yuan 第一民眾電影院).²⁰

16 Tang Youfeng 唐幼峯, *Chongqing luxing zhinan* 重慶旅行指南 [A Travel Directory of Chongqing] (Chongqing: Chongqing luxing zhinanshe, 1933), 32; Wu Jisheng, *Chongqing jianwen lu*, 204–13.

17 "Chongqing shitu 重慶市圖 [Map of Chongqing Municipality]," 1935, scale 1:7000, in CLDTJ, 84–85.

18 First neoclassical and colonial, later art deco and modernist. J. E. Spencer, "Changing Chungking: The Rebuilding of an Old Chinese City," *Geographical Review* 29, no. 1 (1939): 53–55; Tang Youfeng, *Zhinan*, 15–16, 85–86. Recent publications cast doubt on Spencer's statement that only facades were rebuilt in the modern style; Ouyang Hua 歐陽樺, *Chongqing jindai chengshi jianzhu* 重慶近代城市建築 [Modern Urban Architecture of Chongqing] (Chongqing: Chongqing daxue chubanshe, 2010).

19 See the contract analyzed in the section above; *Zhongguo xiquzhi*, 469.

20 Tang Youfeng, *Zhinan*, 85, 95. In September 1921, the YMCA took over a large compound of the Wangshougong 萬壽宮 and turned it into its Chongqing headquarters. Chongqingshi wenhua ju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 13.

3.2 *The Entertainment Center of Chongqing: Central Park*

A pivotal role in Chongqing's geography of opera was played by the surroundings of what later became Central Park 中央公園. This rather small public garden clung to a high ridge dividing the Upper and the Lower Town. In the Upper Town, this zone included the city's main artery, lined with quality hotels: the Daliangzi 大樑子, and a commercial-residential block called the Xiaojiaochang 小較場.²¹ Both were close neighbors to the temple cluster mentioned earlier and the financial center. In the Lower Town, Central Park was attached to the Commercial Market, thus, it truly provided a space for respite between the liveliest areas in town.

This area was graced with some of the most important theaters in Sichuan. Among them was Brilliant Ode Grand Theater (Huazhang dawutai 華章大舞臺), established in 1915. In 1925, renamed Qiankun Grand Theater (Qiankun dawutai 乾坤大舞臺), it arguably became one of the most active and interesting stages in the city, which welcomed troupes performing both Sichuan and Beijing Opera. Burned down in 1929, it was quickly reconstructed and opened under a new name: Yiyuan Grand Opera Garden (Yiyuan daxiyuan 一園大戲園). Another long-standing opera house was Opulent People Troupe (Yumin keshe 裕民科社) (established in 1917), which was located in the alley connecting Daliangzi with Central Park.²² Down the hill from the Central Park, at the side of the Commercial Market, was the Eastern Stage (Dongwutai 東舞臺). In November 1918, the Eastern Stage started to show films. In 1925 the theater closed down and was turned into a popular movie theater, the Whole World Movie Theater (Huanqiu dianyingyuan 環球電影院).²³ In the 1930s, the opera came back, and the Whole World started staging plays under a new name, the Grand Theater (*Daxiyuan* 大戲院).²⁴ Finally, on one side of the park, the YMCA opened an additional cultural center equipped with a movie theater, named the Second People's Cinema (Di er minzhong dianyingyuan 第二民眾電影院).²⁵

21 There were seven of them in the zone. Tang Youfeng, *Zhinan*, 85–86.

22 Chongqing, *Chongqing xiqu zhi*, 380.

23 By 1925, this section of the city was rebuilt; the side offices the Ba County government, which included the God of Wealth Temple 財神廟, became bureaus of the City Chamber of Commerce. "Chongqing fuzhi quantu," in CLDTJ, 78; "Xince Chongqingcheng quantu 新測重慶城全圖 [New Complete Survey Map of the City of Chongqing]," 1925 [1912], scale 1:5000, in CLDTJ, 82–83; the First Model Market was already visible in "Chongqing-shi tu 重慶市圖 [Map of the Municipality of Chongqing]," 1935, scale 1:7000, in CLDTJ, 84–85.

24 ZGXQZSJ, 470.

25 ZGXQZSJ, 95.

3.3 *Jiaochangkou (The Parade Ground): Theaters in the Craftsmen and Trader's District*

Farther west from the financial center and Central Park, in the zone dominated by the crafts and specialized trades called Jiaochangkou (the Parade Ground 較場口) was another group of opera stages. Among them was the Gathered Immortals Tea Garden (Qunxian chayuan) on the alley called Mitingzi 米亭子, which probably occupied the opera stage of the Guandi Temple. At the end of the Qing, the square just in front of this theater was occupied by the Grand Teahouse (Dachaguan 大茶館); teahouses were typical venues for staging opera. Gathered Immortals was later reconstructed into a modern venue and renamed the Newest Grand Theater (Youxin dawutai 又新大舞臺). In its new form, it had a splendid career as one of the most significant opera venues in Chongqing. In the early Republican years, just across from this establishment was another commercial stage, called Brocade River Stage (Jinjiang wutai 錦江舞臺), a name indicating contacts or inspirations from Chengdu, which took over a place called Yanwuting 演武廳 (Hall for Surveying the Troops) for a while. Apparently, this platform-like structure provided ample space for opera performance.²⁶

3.4 *Latest Development: The New City District*

Finally, there was the Entertainment Grounds (Youyichang 遊藝場) in the New City District. This part of the city was the realization of an expansion project, first proposed by the Yang Sen government (in a different area) but implemented by General Pan Wenhua 潘文華 (1886–1950), Chongqing's first mayor. It occupied an area that belonged to the Shangqing Temple 上清寺 and to an immense cemetery that took up kilometers outside the city's western gates.²⁷ The New City, although developing slowly, was a source of pride for the warlord government, shaped in visible opposition to the old Chongqing within the city walls. It was spacious, filled with Western-style houses (*yangfang* 洋房); it brandished sport grounds, gardens, and promenades. When the Anti-Japanese War broke out, the GMD central authorities and foreign legations, which were equally fond of the New City, quickly flocked there after being "encouraged" by the Japanese bombing of the old districts.

The Entertainment Grounds were constructed in the late 1920s inside the Taoyuan 陶園 (Happy Garden or Pottery Garden) by the company of Tang Youfeng 唐幼峯, a writer and a leisure-industry entrepreneur, who brought to

26 See "Chongqing fuzhi quantu," in CLDTJ, 78.

27 Lu Sihong 陸思紅, *Xin Chongqing 新重慶* [*New Chongqing*] (Chongqing: Zhonghua shuju yinxing, 1939), 22–23.

this Sichuanese port a scaled-down version of Shanghai's Great World (Dashijie 大世界) and named it the Small World (Xiaoshijie 小世界). According to Tang's (partially promotional) *Traveler's Guide to Chongqing*, for just three jiao, visitors could enjoy "Beijing Opera, spoken drama, magic shows, *zheling* 扯鈴, *xiangsheng* 相聲, biking, movies, etc." Moreover, Entertainment Grounds contained a small zoo, with a tiger and a large snake, and "refined" shows were offered, such as "a snake gobbles down a hen or a tiger bites through a bronze plate, for a uniform price of two jiao. There is also a midget, man with a huge head, and man with a small head, one of each kind."²⁸ The business, irrespective of its exotic attractions, seems not to have survived long; it is not mentioned in either the 1939 or 1944 editions of the Yang Shicai's 楊世才 *Chongqing City Guide*.²⁹

As seen before, opera performances affected the shape of towns during the Qing: temples and their stages almost always defined their centers. However, neither Chengdu nor Chongqing was that simple. Nevertheless, shrines stood proud in pivotal locations, whereas attending festivals, watching opera, and parading were formative elements of urban life, which left their mark in the names of streets and wards. The new geography and the new way of moving within Chongqing's urban space were also related to accessing the opera—the king of entertainment—but opera was not a formative factor. The main city-shaping force was the new socioeconomic function of Chongqing's population: running the financial and commercial affairs in Sichuan and its surrounding mountainous provinces (Guizhou, Xikang). This novel position of Chongqing spurred the creation of business-cum-entertainment clusters in the rapidly forming urban center. The limited space and confinement to only a few wards was the outcome of a different force, namely, the underdevelopment of public transportation networks in the geographically difficult landscape of Chongqing. Therefore, in their work and residence, as well as in their leisure activities, city folk traveled short distances. Although the structure of the municipality was refocused by a shift in the central district, which was moved away from the *yamen* and *huiguan* compounds along the Yangzi to the novel uptown "model markets," banks, and shiny playhouses, the opera leaped from temples and stages to becoming a plaything of these new middle classes, the social winners in Republican Sichuan. What do we learn about the evolution of the opera business and opera audiences?

28 Tang Youfeng, *Zhinan*, 94.

29 Yang Shicai 楊世才, *Chongqing zhinan* 重慶指南 [*Chongqing Directory*] (Chongqing, 1939, 1944).

3.5 *Commercial Theater and the “Middle Classes” of Chongqing*

Beginning in the 1910s and 1920s, when the majority of the commercial troupes parted from the temple stages, urban ticket-selling theaters became the primary place where actors could exercise their skills. This process, however, was gradual and took many years. Most early opera houses opened in old temples (active or defunct) or in the vicinity of sacred sites. In that way, they could participate in the ceremonies prescribed by the religious calendar or profit from the throngs created during the festivities. During the first decade of the Republic, the temple-centric social and urban organization gave way to a less democratic and more commercial social geography in the city. The new theaters became more specialized in the performing arts, at the same time sidelining other activities, such as serving tea or food. New institutional forms also influenced the organization of the theater businesses, the structure of the opera houses, and even their names: “grand theaters,” “opera stages,” and “theaters” suppressed any memory of the unimposing “teahouses” and “tea gardens.” The opera ceased to be spiritual and artistic nourishment for commoners, meant to be enjoyed alongside other activities and important events. It became a consumable object of entertainment and an integral part of the urban experience associated with the habits and practices of the new clerical, military, and business classes in the emerging capitalist center of Sichuan, located in the open port of Chongqing (and, other than Chengdu, hardly anywhere else).

The place of new theaters was related to both the consumers and the investors: how they saw their world, their role in the city, and their expectations of the performing arts. At the same time, the location of the new opera houses was the result of urban morphology: the shape of the city, its residential and industrial zoning, and the available mass transportation. The opera business, therefore blossomed next to the springs of wealth and the social facilities provided by the local warlord government. It grew in between the places of work and residence of the new middle class: employees of the banks and trading houses, shopkeepers, army officers, visitors to Western-style hotels, journalists, professionals, government clerks, and so on. Furthermore, one distinction clearly demonstrates the class nature of theatergoing in the 1920s and 1930s. Opera was an entertainment by artisans who formed a small, privileged, and relatively well remunerated group that had a social standing far above that of other laborers. At the same time, it was removed, physically and socially, from the majority of the working class in Chongqing: boatmen, dock workers, stevedores, and water carriers. Opera was also barely accessible to the crowded market wards of the Lower Town and the Parade Ground, which were occupied by shop apprentices and household servants—which were both the largest groups of Chongqing’s manual laborers, predominantly made up of bonded

laborers.³⁰ Above all, playhouses were also far away from the rural population that flocked to city fairs and festivals, invariably expecting some loud opera performance.

The sense of the distinction of this middle class became so strong that at times its members claimed to be of “Lower Yangzi” origin—as if their fashions, appearance, and preferences walled them off from the putative and, to their eyes, uncivilized “natives” of Sichuan.³¹ This new class, clearly better off than the laboring poor, for whom the price of an opera ticket may have been too high or who may have never experienced leisure time, made opera into what met their needs and accorded with the fashions in vogue among them. At the same time, the successful launching of traditional opera, with its often-centuries-old tales, figures, imagery, and modes of performance, had a profound impact on the cultural formation of the middle class and thus on what the Republican urban culture became in Sichuan. Scholars who focus on Shanghai and other eastern coastal towns point out that early twentieth-century stage arts underwent a process of modernization because of the changing forms of performance, the shape of buildings, the technologies employed, the audience preferences, and the cosmopolitan influences.³² These changes added up to the introduction of “modernity.” This argument is difficult to deny, considering the significant urban reconstruction that took place in Republican China or the changes in the use of urban space and in the practices in everyday life (e.g., attending paid entertainment in public venues) or a sharp class division that beset urban opera, as it was torn away from its popular, “democratic,” temple roots.

Yet the vague meanings of “modernity” and “modernization” give us little analytical insight into the problem analyzed. The changing practices that propelled and enforced class bifurcation, which divided Chongqing society into those who were opera fed and opera starved, who knew entertainment and did not know what it meant, give a better picture of what Sichuan’s urban society and opera became. The commercial districts inhabited by the sufficiently affluent middle class were matched with progressively more specialized, commercialized, and cosmopolitan theaters. These theaters became the cradles in which Sichuan Opera was born, by splitting the performing art from its temple roots, from the dying practice of voluntarism, and from barring entrance by

30 *Sichuan yuebao* 四川月報 2, no. 1 (1933): 5–6.

31 Zhang Jin, *Quanli, chongtu yu biange*, 199–211, 284–89.

32 See Goldstein, *Drama Kings*; Joshua Goldstein, “From Teahouse to Playhouse: Theaters as Social Texts in Early-Twentieth-Century China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2003): 753–779; Catherine Vance Yeh, “A Public Love Affair or a Nasty Game? The Chinese Tabloid Newspaper and the Rise of the Opera Singer as Star,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2003): 13–51.

the “vulgar classes.” The development and economic development of opera, therefore, converged in the cultural, social, and spatial aspects of urban life.

4 Commercial Theater and Actors’ Careers

The late Qing and Republican reconstruction of the theater market contributed to the reformulation of what it meant to be an actor. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the actions of a prominent group of stage artists were equally fundamental in this process. Actors contributed to this transformation to no lesser an extent than local authorities, investors, and publics. The role of actors, nevertheless, should not be exaggerated and needs to be placed in a broader sociopolitical and economic context. As we have seen, the commercialization of the social institution of religious festival opera occurred because of the changes in the governing practice, in the legal structure, and in the taxation regime. These were amplified by business practice, consumer preferences, and urban rezoning.

4.1 *Group Characteristics: No Common Identity and Troupes above the Stars*

Actors were equally the agents and objects of these historical processes. Their cooperation was indispensable to any of the Republican-era developments in the theater arts. At the same time, the marginal social status and the limited resources possessed by Sichuan’s actors in the Qing era effectively limited their ability to act independently as an interest group. In fact, we do not see Sichuanese actors manifesting any class consciousness or professional interest, whether through a guild, union, or political association/party.

Another hurdle of some significance to greater actors’ agency resulted from the fact that the phenomenon of stardom, as experienced by their Beijing counterparts, was not known in Sichuan in the first two decades of the twentieth century.³³ This is not to say that Chengdu, Luzhou, or Guang’an actors were not recognized for their talent and that their talent did not bring them fame.

33 Goldstein’s main argument can be summarized as the growth in Beijing Opera actors’ stardom in the early twentieth century: “[In] the prime-time lunch and dinner hours, the voices of Peking opera’s greatest *stars* of the 1930s can usually be heard singing their signature roles to a hungry nation. These programs, of which there are hundreds, involve today’s *star* actors performing actions and gestures in sync with sound recordings from past decades, in a sort of reverse karaoke. For a historian researching Peking opera, these shows offer not only a wonderful insight into the vocal and staging techniques of actors past but also a daily reminder of the *iconic* stature of Republican-era actors in shaping

Rather, it means that, without either patronage from the imperial court or a developed commercial playhouse market, individual “stars” did not emerge and were not rewarded with higher income. Thus, unlike their Beijing and Shanghai counterparts, throughout the Republican period, Sichuanese actors retained a strong affinity for their troupes, schools, and masters. Within these schools, some famous performers and teachers were perceived as being the epitome of skills, plays, and social mores; the unique characteristics of these masters spread and became the signature property of their students.

Considering these constraints on their professional existence, from the New Policies until 1949 (and even beyond), actors grasped the opportunities afforded by the reformed theater market in Sichuan and tried to take full advantage of their chances for social and material improvement. They did so by cooperating with more powerful social players, by creating novel forms of self-organization, by networking across the province, by adjusting their repertoire, and by improving their acting technique. Above all, they achieved it by abandoning itinerant life in the countryside and migrating to the cities. Actors’ unorganized and yet very much group behavior reflected and often predated momentous shifts that reshaped Sichuan’s social life in the century to come.

4.2 *Actors’ Agency*

It is but impossible to follow all the threads of the life stories of even some of Sichuan’s most notable actors. Most of their names have been lost or are dispersed in records without much information on them. Neither Chengdu nor Chongqing opera aficionados produced books and memoirs on their favorite artists in any great number, such as the famed Beijing “flower registers” (*huapu* 花譜).³⁴ Performers of various Sichuanese opera genres did not enjoy the attention of any scholar with the stature of Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1877–1962), whose words guided generations of scholars and at the same time giving all the richness of anecdotes and details to feed upon. We have some contemporary accounts and jottings, however imperfect, on the actors, their education, and skill. Most noteworthy among them are short biographies of actors by Zhong Yinlou 中隱樓 (pseud., Lu Chaoluan 路朝鑾, 1880–1954) and by the aforementioned Tang Youfeng.³⁵ Other notes on the actors are spread throughout journals, jottings, and poems, which fail to reveal the full richness

Peking opera into a genre of national importance, then and today” (Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 1; emphasis added).

34 For an analysis of the genre, see Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 19–60.

35 Zhong Yinlou 中隱樓, *Shuling xuancui* 蜀伶選粹 [Selected Actors of Sichuan] (Chengdu: Xinmin shuju, 1949); Tang Youfeng 唐幼峰, *Chuanju renwu xiaoshi* 川劇人物小識 [Short Biographies of Sichuan Opera Actors] (Chengdu, 1937).

and confusion in the opera worlds in Sichuan's towns and markets. In fact, if not for the short biographical entries in the encyclopedias on local operas from the 1980s, these dark waters would be impossible to navigate. Unfortunately, these sources provide us with a strictly city-centric perspective, remaining mute about the itinerant troupes that played in the market towns and the countryside. Only if an opera troupe had jumped the dragon gates and landed on the urban commercial stage, it would have appeared on the biographer's radar.³⁶ Moreover, if upcountry villagers and townsfolk had played for their own use and pleasure as amateurs, it is likely that we will never find much information on them.³⁷

Fortunately, although this handicap limits our analysis, it is not our biggest concern: beginning in the last decades of the Qing, actors went to cities to take their place on commercial stages and to fundamentally revise the meaning of opera in Sichuan. In the new institutional setting, performers created a novel path for their art, and as they reinvigorated and remodeled it, they consciously cut the threads that tied them (and their artistic ancestors) to rural and urban religious festivals. Actors participating in this process of artistic urbanization and laicization formed (what we now call) Sichuan Opera and were formed by this new genre. Conversely, rural amateurs and itinerant village players who "stayed behind" were marginalized and written out of the mainstream history of regional opera.

36 Typically, we have only names, members of the troupe, some information on their repertoire, at times accurate dates of operation, and after such troupes were dissolved, the new troupes that their members joined or established. *Zhongguo xiquzhi Sichuanjuan* lists the following provincial troupes: Helingban 鶴齡班 (1781–1898; area of Luzhou); Yanchunban 燕春班 (Daoguang era—1939; it operated in Hechuan); Taihongban (Daoguang era—1908, Chengdu and environs); Yitaiban 義泰班 (Daoguang era—early Republic, North Sichuan, Chuanbei); Jinshengban 金勝班 (Daoguang era—1926, Luzhou); Yuquanban 玉泉班 (Daoguang era—n.d.); Xin quanshengban 新全勝班 (1861–1882, later as Deshengban 得勝班, Luzhou); Hongshunban 洪順班 (Tongzhi or Guangxu era—1924; area of Mianyang); Taihongban 泰鴻班 (1878–1928, Hechuan); Fengyiban 鳳儀班 (1886–n.d., Ziliujing); Cuihuaban 翠華班 (1887—early Republic, area of Luzhou); Fuchunban 富春班 (1891—before 1945, Ziliujing); Laowenhuaban 老文化班 (1891–1923; area of Mianyang); Santaiban 三太班 (1894—n.d., Fuling); Kunyuban 昆玉班 (1902–1934, Jianyang 簡陽 and area of Ziyang 資陽); Yangyiban 洋溢班 (1904–1914, Shehongxian 射洪縣, area of the Fu 涪 River); Yuhuaban 玉華班 (end of the Qing—1949, area of Ziyang); Hengyiban 亨義班 (1910–1923); Jixianzhaiban 集賢齋班 (1912–1936, when it was taken over by the CCP, area of Hejiang); ZGXQZSJ, 401–7.

37 Wang Xuetai 王學泰, following Tanaka Issei, indicates that this social phenomenon may have been widespread in many areas throughout China, in *Youmin wenhua yu Zhongguo shehui* 游民文化與中國社會 [*Migrants' Culture and Chinese Society*] (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2014). David Johnson's findings in southern Shanxi also point in that direction, in *Spectacle and Sacrifice*.

To illustrate and analyze the development of actors' careers in the first half of the twentieth century, we first focus on two prominent case studies of institution builders within their craft: Chengdu's foremost actor and the unofficial "father" of Sichuan Opera, Kang Zhilin 康芷林 (also Zilin 子林/紫麟; 1870–1930), and the prime teacher and pivotal character in the Eastern Sichuan theater, Fu Sanqian 傅三乾 (1866–1950). Below, we look at a broader group of artists and try to elucidate their choices and their reception by the urban public.

4.3 Kang Zhilin

Zhilin was born in Qionglai 邛崃, a mountainside county of no particular importance about 60 kilometers west of Chengdu. He was the second son in the family, and, like all in his generation, had the nickname the "barbarian" (*man* 蠻), so he was often called the Second Barbarian (Erman 二蠻). His father, Kang Dengzhao 康登照, ran an inn in the provincial town but, for economic reasons, moved his business to the neighborhood of the Four Saints Temple (Sishengci 四聖祠) in Chengdu. After Dengzhao's enterprise failed, the sons faced a decision born of necessity, leading Zhilin and his brothers to train as opera performers.³⁸

There is no indication that Zhilin's eldest brother succeeded as an actor, but the youngest one quickly abandoned the profession and took up an apprenticeship as an apothecary. At the age of ten *sui* (ten or eleven years old), Zhilin joined in the Old Splendid Celebration Troupe (Laoqinghuaban 老慶華班) where he trained under Peng Yuanzi 彭元子 for a military young male role (*xiaosheng* 武小生). Other sources state that his training began when he was eight *sui* under a famous male impersonator, He Xintian 何心田, and first appeared on stage when he was twelve *sui*.

During the police and theater reforms implemented by Zhou Shanpei, Zhilin and other performers took an examination before the police chief, and he had the highest score, receiving a financial award.³⁹ At that time, Kang Zhilin performed mostly with two prominent Chengdu troupes, the Bright Pearl Troupe (Mingzhuban 明珠班) and the Guests' Joy Troupe (Binleban 賓樂班); he occasionally appeared on stage with other troupes that were active in and around the provincial capital.⁴⁰ Beginning at the time of the New Policies, he became one of the most active performers in the city and one of the shapers of the

38 Tan Shaohua 譚韶華, *Chuanju qunxing* 川劇群星 [Stars of Sichuan Opera] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1988), 5.

39 *Liangjiao xinwen* 兩角新聞, Tekan 特刊, July 15, 1930, in SXQSL, 110–11.

40 Ibid.

Republican theater. According to Tang Youfeng, by the mid-Guangxu era, Kang Zhilin had gained recognition in aficionado circles. At that time, he gained his other nickname—Jianzi 尖子 (the ace/the best)—because of his acrobatics.⁴¹ This name resulted from humiliation he had suffered from his colleagues: they took advantage of his inability to perform a spectacular feat on stage and showed their own skill while exposing his incapability. Zhilin, who had previously pleaded with them not to spotlight his weakness, stepped up his training and quickly turned his liability into his signature strength.⁴²

After the 1911 Revolution, protracted protests and fighting swept most of Chengdu's businesses and guilds, and theater troupes either dissolved or barely functioned. Zhilin, together with Xiao Kaichen 蕭楷臣 (1878–1950), Tang Guangti 唐廣體 (1877–1936), and Tang Deyi 唐德彝 (and others), established a new company: the Three Celebrations Society (Sanqinghui). Cordial relations with the elite in the provincial capital and widespread appreciation for Kang's art profited the new troupe from the moment it began. It was guaranteed the newest and most prestigious location in Chengdu, the Yuelai Tea Garden. Yuelai was at the forefront of the rectification campaign, the most "modern" cultural institution in town, the most financially secure one as well because it belonged to the Chengdu Chamber of Commerce, and a model for respectable opera houses to follow. The Three Celebrations Society not only united artists able to perform in all the current Sichuanese styles of opera but also functioned as a school and as a laboratory for trying out new scripts and ideas about the performing arts. In this respect, Sanqinghui was a trailblazer in the province and quickly became the favorite of both the elites and the general public.

One of the characteristics of this troupe was its proclivity for experimentation with new scripts produced by the elite, which either addressed current issues or refreshed and refashioned the way in which performers appeared on stage. Sanqinghui, like all opera troupes, presented a traditional repertoire, while enriching it with recent or reformed creations such as *Li Yan ai* 離燕哀 (*Suffering of divided sparrows*), *Longzhouhui* 龍舟會 (*Dragon boat celebration*), *Sanbianhuashen* 三變化身 (*Three changes of the body*), *Bazhentu* 八陣圖 (*Strategies of Zhuge Liang/Octagonal Formation*), or *Qingtan* 情探 (*Explorations of Love*), all composed by Chengdu's intellectual elite.

Li Yan ai was a tragedy rewritten by Yin Zhongxi from a Song dynasty story of loyalty and revenge by a couple, Xu Tiaolang 徐荅郎 and Wang Qiongnu

41 In opera "jianzi" typically refers to an ability to sing in a high pitched voice, yet in the story of Kang Zhilin it indicates his masterful skills in acrobatics.

42 Tang Youfeng, *Chuanju renwu xiaoshi*, 9–10.

王瓊奴, who were divided because of an act of betrayal. All the evildoers in the play were eventually punished, and Qiongnu was buried alive with the remains of her husband, who had been killed. *Qingtān*, rewritten by Zhao Xi, was based on part of a popular Ming *chuanqi*, *Story of the Burning Incense* (*Fenxiangji* 焚香記)—a tragedy about a courtesan, Guiying 桂英, who hanged herself in Haishen Temple 海神廟 because her love had been betrayed by a heartless *xiucai*, Wang Kui 王魁; Guiying later returned to the world as a ghost to find that Wang Kui lived in the capital with his wife; in her anger, Guiying seized her unfaithful lover. *Longzhouhui* was another story rewritten by Yin Zhongxi, a cloak and dagger revenge story about Xie Xiaoe 謝小娥 who sought retribution for the murder of her husband. *Sanbianhuashen* is a romance about a bandit hero (*haoxia* 豪俠) Beirong 貝戎, who went to Suzhou in disguise, together with his accomplices, to gamble and dally with prostitutes. Eventually, Beirong encountered Yueniang 月娘, developed feelings for her, and in the end saved her from being sold to a brothel.⁴³

In each of these operas, and in all other plays he performed, Kang excelled in his skills and had his own unique style. As one commentator remarked, “When Zilin performs this play (*Qingtān*), all the words are clear, sentences understandable, nothing in his performance added or subtracted [glued or broken away]—it is just perfect.”⁴⁴ Many poets, usually in the popular form of bamboo branch verses, eulogized Kang’s art and his role in the opera world of Chengdu. To give one example, let us quote a verse jotted down by a renowned poet, opera fan, and critic, Liu Shiliang 劉師亮 (1876–1939):

鐘曉帆書如世評，劉安全相使人驚，
青衣花旦黃金鳳，三絕而今尚有名。
京劇由來不等閑，高腔從古重川班；
而今伶界飄零甚，不墜元音只二蠻。
包抬唱打一身當，艷說京都“獨角黃”；
若問該班拿手戲，「楊香打虎」頂錫。

Zhong Xiao’s declamations convey an appropriate sense of the times, Liu An’s impersonations are also impressive,

43 *Chuanju jumu*, 44–45, 808, 870; “Huabuzhi fenqi 花部之紛起” in Lu Qian 盧前, *Ming Qing xiqu shi* 明清戲曲史 [*History of Opera in the Ming and Qing Era*] (N.p.: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1935), in SXQSL, 108–9.

44 “Kang Zhou heyān sān jué jù 康周合演三絕劇,” n.d., in *Chongqing xinmin yinshuguan yanchu tekan* 重慶新民印書館特刊, in SXQSL, 108–9.

Blue-robed *dan*, flower *dan*, and the golden phoenix, these three roles and excellences of our days earned fame.

Beijing Opera once it appeared was never put to rest, *gao* tune from the olden days [was played by] Chongqing and Sichuan troupes;

And today's actors rise and fall, but the one whose true voice never drops is the Second Barbarian [Kang Zhilin].

Singing and fighting he mastered all, gorgeously storytelling of the capital's *Yellow Horn* [opera title]

If one ever asks what this troupe's best play is, *Yang Xiang Beats the Tiger* should be the answer.⁴⁵

Kang was famous for his devotion to both personal training and his students, whom he treated with generosity and devotion. He was also commended for filial devotion to his parents and brothers and for the help he extended to their widows. Moreover, Kang was very careful not to make any distinction between himself and other members of the troupe, despite his growing fame and invitations to perform individually. His behavior thus stood in a sharp contrast to career choices made by Beijing Opera figures such as Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) and, later, Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), who derived significant earnings from their personal stardom.⁴⁶ Cohesion of the troupe, equal pay, good treatment of the young performers by their elders, and abandoning the abusive traditional training process were all essential elements of Zhilin's method of management.

Tang Youfeng noted that Kang had also introduced some elements of directorship of opera performance: a role that was absent from the traditional organization of Chinese opera troupes. It did not, however, take the form of a full guidance across the script and tightly controlled and timed performance. Zhilin's direction was limited to joining in a circle with the rest of the troupe after each performance and discussing what had gone right and what had gone wrong, what could be improved, and what should be avoided in the next performance.⁴⁷

In this way, Kang's management style epitomized the limits of the theater reforms so desired by the intellectual elite in Chengdu—reform whose realization was left to the opera practitioners, who invariably failed see that it had any further sociopolitical ramifications. Kang clearly understood that theater

45 "Editor's note: 四省唱戲, 俗呼“鬧黃”; 被擔戲呼“獨角黃”; *Shiliang shicao* 師亮詩草, in SXQSL, 105–6. Translation by author.

46 Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 43–49.

47 Tang Youfeng, *Chuanju renwu xiaoshi*, 13–14.

reform was not about inculcating society with new ideas about republicanism (we know nothing about his understanding of it) or combating superstition and immorality; rather, he grasped that it was about improving the social position and livelihood of the performers. Therefore, Zhilin implemented a novel form of training, supervising, and evaluating young performers and embraced new scripts written or revised by the local elites, because they created effective and interesting kinds of performance.

He also profited from economic security, which was unheard of among itinerant troupes. The business organization of the Sanqinghui and the special position of the Yuelai, where Zhilin's troupe worked, introduced an unprecedented opportunity for improved training and thus mastering unique movements and signature singing styles. They would then attract patrons from the city and beyond and ensure a steady stream of fans. Kang Zhilin seemed to understand all the possible benefits of commercial opera. With a sense of decency and modesty, he exploited the opportunities given to the country boy that he was, in the "big" world of Chengdu's provincial grandees and sophisticated elites, without putting on airs and showing off his newly achieved wealth and status. By doing so, he avoided many of the mistakes made by the first generation of Beijing Opera stars, such as the scandals caused and suffered by Yang Yuelou 楊月樓 (1844–1890).⁴⁸ By contrast, Kang showed a forbearance toward his social superiors and the sociopolitical structure in Chengdu, for which he was lauded, while realizing his own goals within the limits of his ambition, need, and understanding. In this way, he achieved greatness.

Nothing describes Kang Zhilin's character and integrity better than the moment of his death, which made him an instant hero of the Sichuanese opera world. In the summer of 1930, Feng Shizhu 馮什竹, the owner of the renowned and revered Zhenghua Grand Theater, invited him to go to Chongqing in exchange for 2,000 yuan. Because the invitation was for him alone, Kang politely turned it down until the offer was extended to the entire troupe, again demonstrating his disdain for solo opera-celebrity habits ruling Chinese stages. He appeared to be a traditional but morally superior figure. Sanqinghui was meant to mount its signature play, *Bazhentu*, based on the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the trip proved too exhausting for the sixty-year-old performer, and he died on June 29. Almost immediately, Kang

48 Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 44; Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 154–64.

49 It explored the dramatic events after Guan Yu's death, when Liu Bei traveled to Kuimen 夔門 in a futile attempt to avenge his sworn brother, while Zhuge Liang tried to dissuade the hotheaded King of Shu (Liu) from falling into the trap set by the competing Kingdom of Wu; *Chuanju jumu*, 19.

was named the Genius of the Opera (or the god /saint of the opera, Jusheng 劇聖) and given a farewell with great remorse.⁵⁰ Kang Zhilin was a paternal figure in the opera circles of Chengdu and Chongqing, but, above all, he was a successful and talented performer who achieved a stunning personal leap in social standing, opening the way to advancement for the entire professional class of performers, at the same time teaching them how to proceed through the Dragon Gates.

4.4 *Fu Sanqian*

Despite his key position in the opera world of Chongqing, we know much less about Fu Sanqian than about Kang Zhilin. He was born in Chengguan 城關 Township in the vicinity of Longchang County in central Sichuan (present-day Neijiang). His family had a small pastry store. They named their son Jiarong 家榮, also called Xingwen 興文. Fu Sanqian received some early education that included reading the classics and some superficial training in medicine, fortune telling, and astrology. Most of all, he had contact with opera, which, as his biographer claims, he was very keen to learn from the early age.⁵¹ When he was fifteen *sui*, Fu started to train at the Famous Flourishing Opera School (Mingsheng keban 名盛科班) for the role of a young male (*xiaosheng*), however, after twisting his leg, he had to withdraw from the apprenticeship. A year later, in 1882, a famous troupe called Three Characters Opera School (Sanzi keban 三字科班) in Ziyang was recruiting new talent in the area of where Fu lived, and he decided to try his chances. He successfully qualified, as his previous training was apparent to the senior performers, but Sanqian suffered from an open oozing neck wound, so his appearance was considered unsuitable for the role of a young male, and the troupe's elders assigned him to train as a clown (*chou*). From that time on, he was a student of Yue Chun 岳春 (1831–1913), a stern and demanding teacher who shaped Fu's style both as a performer and as a future preceptor of generations of performers in Sichuan.⁵² In accordance with the troupe's tradition, Fu changed his appellation to Sanqian. The character 三 (*san*; three) was in the name of both the troupe and the young performers it trained. Fu remained faithful to this traditional method of establishing fictive kinship between the members of opera troupes and transmitted it to his students when he was a senior and a head of the troupe in Republican Chongqing.

50 Tang Youfeng, *Chuanju renwu xiaoshi*, 14.

51 If not marked otherwise, biographic information after Tan Shaohua, *Chuanju qunxing*, 396–398.

52 ZGXQZSJ, 564.

In 1884, Fu had his first opportunity to play in Chengdu and was well received there. Beginning in 1885, he gained popularity for staging the city god operas (*chenghuangxi* 城隍戲) in Ziyang. After his performance in an opera called *Luhua an* 蘆花岸, he catapulted to fame and started touring the province, winning friends and followers.⁵³ In 1904, Fu moved to Chongqing, where he first played on *huiguan* stages and later joined a local troupe called Prosperous Spring (Fuchunban), which played at the Common Happiness Teahouse (Tongle chayuan 同樂茶園). In a clear parallel to Kang Zhilin's experience in Chengdu, after he faced unpredictable conditions in the wake of the 1911 Revolution, Fu Sanqian gathered his closest friends and most accomplished colleagues to establish a modern-sounding opera troupe: the New People's Society (Xinminshe 新民社). This new venture, mirroring Kang's Sanqinghui, which operated at Joy Tea Garden in Chengdu, a business more or less run by the police, received a sponsorship from a member of the urban elite, Liu Baomin 劉保民, who covered two-thirds of the costs of operation for the troupe.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, five years later, the venture folded, and in 1918 Fu Sanqian, together with some of the most important performers of his generation—Luo Qixiang 羅其湘, Xie Haichao 謝海潮 (1856–1920), Zhao Huanchen 趙煥臣 (stage name: Zhao Xiazhi 趙瞎子, 1876–1947), Zhong Xiangyu 鐘香玉, Tian Qishan 田岐山, Chu Anping 褚安平 (1878–1931), Pan Xinchun 潘鑫臣, Hu Jianting 胡建廷, Zhuo Shaotang 卓少堂, and Xiao Mudan 小牡丹—opened their influential Yumin keshe (Opulent People Opera School).⁵⁵ This school marked both the urban space of Chongqing and artistic life in the city for the following decades, as cohorts of young talent joined other troupes retained the character *yu* 裕 (rich, abundant, opulent) for their names. In 1927, Fu was also engaged by another school, Progressing Virtue (Jinde keshe 進德科社) to teach the opera apprentices. This school was the first to accept both male and female trainees; the former received a name *de* 德 while the latter *zhong* 鐘. Throughout this time, he was actively performing in Chongqing, not only on the stage

53 Probably opera *Luhua ji* 蘆花記 describing a story from the Chunqiu 春秋 period about Min Ziqian 閔子騫 and sung in *huqin* style or an opera *Luhua he* 蘆花河 that picks a story that took place in the Tang era about Xue Yinglong 薛應龍 and Lihua 梨花. For synopsis of both operas, see Sichuansheng wenhuaju xiqu yanjiushi 四川省文化局戲曲研究室, *Chuanju chuantong jumu mulu* 川劇傳統劇目目錄 [A Dictionary of Traditional Sichuan Opera Repertoire] (Chengdu: Sichuansheng wenhuaju xiqu yanjiu shi, 1962), 283; *Chuanju jumu*, 467.

54 Chongqingshi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 149.

55 Opera gazetteer of Chongqing gives the date 1917; Chongqing, *Chongqing xiqu zhi*, 454.

of the Opulent People's school but also at the city's most important theater, the Zhanghua Grand Theater, and in 1931 he performed together with Kang Zhilin's Sanqinghui on the decks of the Yiyuan Grand Theater.

Many of his students flourished on these two Chongqing stages. Fu was famed for his knowledge of a large repertoire, admirable acrobatic skills, and a very rigid style of performance. In contrast to Zhilin, he avoided politics and appeared not to have received any substantial patronage from the consecutive rulers of the city. This impression might well be the result of our having very limited information about him. Suffice it to say, after his death in 1950, he was honored by Sichuan's second-most-powerful man, Marshal Liu Bocheng 劉伯承 (1892–1986), who was the vice-head of the Southwest Military Government, with the title: “Respected teacher who leads the public with the power of his creativity 傅老令公三乾。”⁵⁶

Fu's artistic life was a great success, and he managed to leap across the social boundaries that in his youth were insurmountable for anyone engaging in this lowly profession. Fu Sanqian was neither a careerist nor an opportunist but an intelligent, diligent, and gifted actor who was concerned about the quality of his performance and devoted to his many students. If we compare the careers of Kang and Fu to their Beijing counterparts, they invariably look bleak, with little glamour and only parochial fame. This view, however, is unjust. The Chinese commercial opera market was fractured into very local musical, dialectic, and (to a lesser extent) repertoire styles. Most styles appealed to people of a particular dialectic group or musical tradition, which could be as small as few villages, whereas provincial styles, so common now in discussions in academic circles (Sichuan, Shaoxing, Han, Cantonese, etc.), were either in the process of formation or existed as overarching concepts with, at best, unclear content. Moreover, glamour in Chengdu and Chongqing has to be seen in its Republican Sichuanese context, with a backdrop of ongoing (though dwindling in number) religious festivals, active teahouses, commercial temple stages, and private banquets—venues for opera activity inaudible to us nowadays. Kang Zhilin, Fu Sanqian, and a few others managed not only to make their mark and attract official and elite patronage but also to train entire cohorts of young artists, who replicated the styles and mastered the skills that they taught. They were the real creators of Sichuan Opera.

56 Tan Shaohua *Chuanju qunxing*, 398.

4.5 *Career Patterns during the Republic: The Generations of the 1910s and 1930s*

Urbanization and commercialization of opera were at the root of the new form of engagement with both the art and the performer. Sichuanese performers became recipients of appreciation as well as the objects of description and classification in the handy booklets describing their life, education, and skills. These documents are not nearly as numerous as those produced by Beijing audiences throughout the Qing, nor can they be treated as markers of an aficionado culture of taste or an indispensable form of class habitus of the theatergoers. They are, however, a received literary form, an element of inclusion of Sichuan Opera in the national canon of prestigious opera styles and represent standardization of the perception of the actor and his art communicated to the broad public and set down in writing. The most useful texts in this new genre are about Tang Youfeng and Zhong Yinlou. Tang was an entrepreneur in the entertainment industry who tried various ventures in Chongqing and who developed a passion for writing biographies of prominent opera artists.⁵⁷ Zhongyinlou (Lu Chaolan), a Sichuan University professor, calligrapher, painter, and a deputy editor of the provincial gazetteer (*Sichuan tongzhi* 四川統志) was a Chengdu opera aficionado very well informed about the lives of two Republican generations of stage performers with Sanqinghui. They were performers who entered and shaped the new commercial stage in the first decades of the twentieth century and their students, who matured in the provincial capital became famous in the 1930s and 1940s. These texts enable us to examine changes in the stage artists' lives under the Republic and the influence of commercialization on them and their art. Furthermore, these biographies reveal information about actors' origins, their families, and their artistic lineage. This knowledge helps to answer questions about the impact of the social, financial, and cultural capital available in Sichuan's cities on the choices made by individual performers and the opera troupes.

In the wake of the commercialization of opera, Chengdu acted as a magnet for talented actors in its immediate vicinity and from far-off places. Over the thirty-odd years covered by Zhong Yinlou, there are biographies of artists who succeeded on Sichuan's stages from the city's immediate hinterland (Wenjiang 溫江, Peng County 彭縣, and Xinfan 新繁) as well as locations throughout

57 See "Guanyu benshude hua 關於本書的話" in Tang Youfeng, *Zhinan*. Tang was a member and Chongqing representative of the Magic Research Society (Huanshu yanjiu she 幻術研究社) based in Shanghai and the Suzhou Global Magic Association (Suzhou wanguo moshu hui 蘇州萬國魔術會). "Huanshu yanjiushe qishi 幻術研究社啓事 [Announcement of the Magic Research Society]," in Tang Youfeng, *Zhinan*.

Sichuan (Ba County, Hechuan, Anyue 安岳, Suining, and Luzhou); some artists came even from Hebei 河北 and Jiangsu, the latter group traveling to Sichuan to escape the depredations of the Sino-Japanese war.⁵⁸ However, most were natives of Chengdu and Huayang County (i.e., Chengdu municipality), who had been raised in the city and practiced their art on its stages.

If we composed a group biography of the performers described by Zhong Yinlou, we would divide the group into two generations. The first had largely small-town or rural origins and made Sichuanese opera into an urban art and then taught many students. This was the generation of Kang Zhilin and Fu Sanqian. The second comprised the disciples of this pioneering generation. They predominantly originated in Chengdu and thus profited from the system of schools and theaters already developed to cater to the commercialized entertainment market. The first generation included artists such as Jia Peizhi 賈培之 (1884–1954), who came from Wenjiang and trained first as a weaver, later to turn to acting, in which he mastered the role of a clown. After Zhilin's death, he became the director of Sanqinghui and “a pillar of heaven and a polar star,” as he was called, in Chengdu's theater world.⁵⁹ Many other such personalities are mentioned in passing: the teachers and patrons to those who shined on the stage in the 1930s and 1940s. Among them were Lei Zehong 雷澤洪 (1869–1942), Tang Guangti, Xiao Kaicheng 蕭楷成, Tang Yinfu 唐蔭甫 (1898–1937), and Yang Yunfeng 楊雲鳳 (1910–1984)—all prominent teachers and performers with Sanqinghui.⁶⁰ Fu Sanqian was one outstanding preceptor, whose network of students and associates traversed the narrow borders of one stage. Although he taught and performed in Chongqing for much of his career, his disciples also contributed to the development of Sanqinghui.⁶¹

Another distinctive transformation that took place in the 1930s and 1940s was the emergence and flourishing of female roles (*dan/kunling huashan* 坤伶花衫) played by female performers. The growing presence of women on

58 Chen Shufang 陳書舫 from Huanlu zhou 環路州, Hebei, had trained in Beijing Opera but, at the age of nine, together with her mother, had to flee advancing Japanese troops; she retrained as a Sichuan Opera performer and toured the Sichuan-Xikang borderland, southern Sichuan, and Chengdu; Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 6. Xiao Fangyu 小舫玉 was born in Nantong 南通, Jiangsu, and trained as a Beijing Opera performer. After the Japanese seized Nanjing, he fled to Sichuan and trained under Fu Sanqian a clown as for a Sichuan Opera's role of a clown (*chou*); Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 8.

59 Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 1.

60 Tan Shaohua, *Chuanju qunxing*, 161–63, 404–6; ZGXQZSJ, 570, 574, 601.

61 Students of Fu Sanqian: Dang Toubang 當頭棒 (劉成基 Liu Changji), Xiao Fangyu, Xiaoshengkui 小勝奎 (Chen Shijun 陳士俊); Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 4–5, 8, 20–21.

stage was the result of the thorough upturning of moral standards in the later Republic. At the same time, it was the result of the success of schools that educated women, such as Chongqing's Progressing Virtue, mentioned earlier. Of the fifty biographical notes that Zhongyinlou provided, twenty-seven were about women who adorned Chengdu stages with their artistry. Indeed, it was a revolution in that male-dominated profession in Sichuan. The prominence of female roles also indicated a particular type of opera, which was appreciated by audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, namely: various romantic, comic, and civil dramas that emphasized vocal beauty, proficient singing, and meticulous movement.⁶² Moreover, Zhong Yinlou emphasized each performer's successful with both traditional and new repertoires—proof of opera's resilience in the face of highly politicized pressure from wartime cultural officials.

Some performers in the younger generation not only were present on the urban stage but also gained fame in selected regions in Sichuan or all across the province. For example, Qiong Lianfang 瓊蓮芳 was popular in northwest Sichuan while performing at the Assembled Virtue Tea Garden.⁶³ Chen Shufang 陳書舫 (1924–1996), also called Hibiscus Flower in the Autumn Waters (Furong qiushui 芙蓉秋水; the hibiscus flower symbolizes Chengdu) was loved by audiences in southern Sichuan and in the western borderland, which at that time was part of Xikang Province.⁶⁴ Chen Yumen 陳禹門 and Suo Ping 索萍 made their careers first in Chongqing and then shined on the capital's stage, while Yan Li 艷麗 spent a majority of her career around Neijiang and Luzhou in central-eastern Sichuan.⁶⁵ Their expanded presence of this younger generation of Republican performers outside the confines of the theater was due to two intermingling factors. First, the popularity of Chengdu (and Chongqing) stages spread far outside these cities' borders, and smaller communities as well as wealthy local powerholders paid for metropolitan performers to go to their towns and manors. Second, the need for propaganda work during the War of Resistance gave performers work in disseminating novel operas with educational, political, and anti-Japanese content. By the 1940s, the commercialization of urban theater and the hard work of the first generation of performers, the transition of opera from the temple to the playhouse, dramatically changed the acting profession. It was professionalized and feminized and promoted

62 Dana Kalvodová, "The Animated Theater of Szechwan (Ch'uan-chü)," in *The Bamboo-Leaf Boat: The Magic of the Chinese Theatre*, ed. Dana Kalvodová (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 1996), 107–17.

63 Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 5.

64 Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 6.

65 Zhong Yinlou, *Shuling xuancai*, 10, 15.

talent on a supralocal scale. It was also dominated by the main urban centers, whereas towns and markets that dotted the countryside ceased to be the main pools of acting talent.

4.6 *Novel Troupe Organization: Expansion, Bureaucratization, and Specialization*

A significant outcome of the formation of commercial urban theaters was the expansion and bureaucratization of the troupes. They resembled their itinerant Qing-era predecessors travelling the country with a box or two filled with costumes only in name. We do not have data for the 1920s and 1930s and thus often have to depend on snapshots. As we have seen with the example of Kang Zhilin's Sanqinghui, in the wake of the New Policies, a dozen or so actors per troupe with some unnamed supporting backstage staff organized the commercial theaters. This was enough to form an opera troupe and to open a theater.

By 1949, the performance business had expanded in scale and been formalized, with theaters employing dozens if not hundreds of actors, clerks, servants, and workers. To give an illustration, we analyze two Chengdu opera houses that submitted reports on their troupes and staff: the first is Sanyigong Theater (Sanyigong xiyuan 三益公戲院) from September 1949, and the second is Jinping Theater (Jinping xiyuan 錦屏戲院) from 1949. This documentation, though it shows the theaters' structure at the end of the Republic, does not demonstrate their evolution from small troupes to large institutions. We cannot determine whether and when opera troupes grew or contracted and the impact of warfare and changing economic conditions.

Sanyigong was divided into managerial offices, performers, and various services. The first group consisted of a manager, theater service head, officer responsible for documentation, two accountants, an officer responsible for written announcements, posters, and advertisements, a ticket collector, nineteen service staff, lighting technician, seven miscellaneous workers, and a store manager. The staff and the head manager, Zhang Guangshu 張光術, were all men in their thirties (Zhang was thirty-eight). The workers, however, were between fifteen and fifty-three years old. They originated from various counties across Sichuan, with only one person from neighboring Hubei. The managerial staff, except for seven people, did not reside on the theater premises.⁶⁶

The second and much larger group comprised the performers. They were also organized bureaucratically and presided over by a manager (Chen

66 The places of origin: Xindu 新都, Huayang, Chengdu, Baxian, Pixian 郫縣, Santai 三台, Leshan, Zhongjiang 中江, Jintang 金堂, Ziyang, Yuechi 岳池, Chongqing, and Lezhi 樂至, Anyue, Yangxian 陽縣; CDA 93-2-2272-7, 97-98.

Jingzhong 陳敬忠), an general affairs officer, a publishing planning officer, a planner, and a writer. This group was divided into three sections called “legs 股”: the art section, made up of three people; the announcement section, with seven people; and the stage light section, with five people. Performers were divided into “associations” (*hui*) of various sizes, whose members were young and middle aged, as follows: Virtuous Bearing (Yixianhui 儀賢會: six members), Wenchang (Wenchanghui 文昌會: eleven members), Crown Prince (Taizihui 太子會: nine members), God of Wealth (Caishenhui 財神會: six members), Earth God (Tudihui 土地會: six members), Earth God’s Wife (Niangnianghui 娘娘會: ten members; seven of which were female), Two Hundred-kilo Box (lit., “four *dan* box”; Sidanxiang 四擔箱: four members), Triumph (Deshenghui 得勝會: three members), and Guanyin (Guanyinhui 觀音會: one member). Moreover, the theater had a water carrier and three workers to staff the kitchen. The entire troupe had only seven women, none of whom lived on the theater premises, whereas forty-four men were permanent inhabitants. The performers were invariably born in Sichuan or Xikang (a province that by this time had been absorbed by Sichuan), by a large majority from its central counties; among them, eighteen were from Chengdu, five from Chongqing, and three from Hechuan.⁶⁷ In all, Sanyigong had eighty backstage (*houtai* 後臺) and thirty-three front-of-stage (*qiantai* 前臺) employees.⁶⁸

The report on the Jinping Theater tells us not only about an equally bureaucratized structure of its Chengdu troupe but also about the performers’ level of education and literacy. The latter should not be underemphasized, as it describes the relative social advancement of the performers, whose skills historically were mostly oral.

Like its counterpart, Jinping was divided into a managerial office and the performers’ organization. The first consisted of the office of the manager (Zhao Lingyun 趙凌雲), the deputy manager, association head, two theater service officers, a general head of affairs, head of business affairs, examiner, writer, head of the ticketing, ticket seller, head of advertising, secretary, electrician, thirteen ticket collectors, workers, carpenter, and kitchen staff. This group was comparatively well educated: seventeen people had an elementary school education, twelve finished junior middle school, six had middle

67 Places of origin: Chengdu, Xikang, Qionglai, Fu 福, Chongqing, X, Mianshi 綿什, Xichong 西充, Leshan, Santai, Fushun 富順, GuanX 灌X, Jianyang 簡陽, Chongqing 崇慶, Anyue, Pengxian, Huayang, Renshou 仁壽, Shexi 射溪, Luxian 瀘縣, Yibin 宜賓, Suining 遂寧, Duzhou 渡舟, Tongnan 潼南, Hechuan, Guang’an, Guanghan 廣漢, Yuechi, Ziyang, Xindu, and Tongliang 銅梁; CDA 93-2-2272-7, 99-103.

68 Ibid.

school degrees, and one had a high school diploma. Additionally, four people attended old-style private school; another was qualified enough not to be considered illiterate, and one female employee had a full education at a girls' school.⁶⁹

The rest of the theater personnel were under separate management, with their own head, general affairs officer, miscellaneous workers, artistic director, and a performers' association called the God of Wealth Society (Caishenhui), which provided work for many important backstage workers who took care of precious coffers with the performers' costumes and provided tea and drinking water. They also handled of the "beautiful arts" (makeup and accessories), lights, and various other tasks. The level of education was sharply divided between these employees and the managerial staff. More than half the backstage workers were illiterate (twenty-five people), twelve had finished elementary school, four had completed senior middle school, and eight received some private education.⁷⁰

These two group pictures of Chengdu troupes illustrate the structure and changes in urban opera in the Republican period. First, they became specialized organizations that functioned like companies and thus fully achieved their prescribed purpose as defined by the late Qing company law: profit. Second, these institutions were internally structured with a division of labor, status, and pay, which privileged the managers (as representatives of the investor's capital or investors themselves) over the workers, apprentices in the craft, and the majority of performers, who fulfilled the primary mission of the theater: presenting operas. Exceptions were made for the stars of the stage, who very often were also teachers, managers, and even co-owners of the theaters. Third, the bureaucratic organization of the theater enabled a large expansion in the institution and the elimination of many development hurdles that plagued the classical troupes in the Qing era, especially the pretense of being fictive lineages. The new theaters did not have to portray themselves as a "family" and open a school (*keshe*), recruit talent and workers from across the province, and be a multicentered structure with numerous teachers from various traditions and specializations. Moreover, and perhaps most important, these theaters could overcome many challenges, whether the death of its founder (e.g., Sanqinghui had a smooth succession after Kang Zhilin's passing) or difficult economic and political conditions caused by the Great Depression and after the Sino-Japanese war and the Civil War. Fourth, commercial theaters offered previously unmatched conditions for the training and development of

69 CDA 93-2-2274-7, 218-20.

70 CDA 93-2-2274-7, 221.

individual talent and for Sichuan Opera as an art. Their relatively secure access to income, as well as police protection, gave many artists the time and resources for developing their skills, rethinking long-held traditions, cross-fertilizing various musical styles, and trying out new scripts. In conclusion, the commercial theater, however unequal and institutionalized it had become, was a guarantor of actors' well-being and a mechanism for social advancement far beyond that which their profession had afforded at the end of the Great Qing.

5 Concluding Remarks

From the outset of the New Policies, urban opera set out on a long transformative process, which within thirty years recreated the way in which opera was performed, where it was performed, the position of the performer, and the social reception of opera as an art form. This process was initiated by the imperial authorities, with the goal of harnessing the performing arts, the most prevalent medium in China, to attract a general population to the reform agenda at the same time as they ensured loyalty to the dynasty and the moral-educational transformation of society. Various military and party rulers in Sichuan throughout the Republican period wanted to achieve the same goal, but to no avail. The real reform that occurred due to imperial, warlord, and later municipal policies was the institutional transformation of the manner in which opera existed in society, how it was run, and how it shaped the lives of its performers and the audiences. In short, opera in Sichuan leaped from the unofficial realm of lowly and itinerant troupes catering to festivals into a stable social institution that earned money. The financial resources produced by opera troupes were then directed to both city and theater coffers, to feed the ever-expanding realm of artists and ever-greedier municipal, military, and police authorities. Opera, rather than being presented at temples to add some glitter to religious celebrations, became the center of urban entertainment, even the most distinct characteristic of urban culture. All this was achieved through the adaptation of a resilient organizational form and protection by the police authorities. It was also possible because of theater profitability—an outcome of the public's continuing addiction to the performing arts and the stories conveyed in these shows (we might say, the culture of Sichuan Opera)—and therefore the willingness of the rich and powerful rulers of the province, warlords, bankers, and commercial magnates to invest in them. In the process of institutionalization, Sichuan Opera, an urban phenomenon per se, became an outgrowth of the province's operatic tradition, which in every decade of the Republic distanced itself more from its rural origins. Urban opera, indeed,

started to consume talent from the countryside and, by the 1930s, radiated outside the city centers when troupes were invited by affluent individuals and communities to their remote localities. The new institutionalization therefore meant consumption by the hinterland and then taking over the market from its economically and artistically weaker non-urban competition.

However, this did not mean that either the Chengdu or Chongqing hinterlands or the more distant counties were entirely deprived of opera. On the contrary, as we have seen by analyzing the origins of the performers, many of them originated in towns or small communities spread across the province, where they obtained some rudimentary training. It needs to be stressed, in any case, that the process of “draining” the countryside was more typical in the early years of the Republic, whereas by the 1930s the urban market was to a large extent able to regenerate its talent. This situation changed again during the Sino-Japanese war and after 1949. What is important to mention here is the relative destruction of opportunities for staging opera in the countryside, especially in the vicinity of the larger urban centers. Several elements played a part in this process. First, much of the warfare occurred near the provincial centers, undermining these communities economically, traumatizing them socially, and eliminating any sense of safety and security.⁷¹ Second, counties in which major towns were located, such as Huayang, Chengdu, Baxian, Jiangbei, and Hechuan, experienced the most anti-religious campaigns, which inspired the confiscation of the temple property and enforced the cancellation of communal celebrations, associated with opera performance. The abolition of public religious holidays occurred in the first four years of the Republic, affecting the imperial state’s celebrations and court-supported cults and in 1928, when the political conditions in Sichuan, divided up between various warlords, stabilized.⁷² Additionally, as the police department could easily tap the opera tax in the vicinity of the city, many of those celebrations were squeezed for money as if they were commercial activities. The police also had more means at their disposal to enforce the anti-superstition campaign than the rural county authorities, who could rely only on runners or the local military garrison.⁷³ Third,

71 Ren Zhaokun and Gong Zide, *Sichuan zhanzheng shi*, 266–320.

72 On Ba County and Chongqing, see BXZ, 674–709; on Hechuan, see HCXZ, 2902–3; on Wusheng 武勝, see Sun Guofan 孫國藩, *Wusheng xianzhi* 武勝縣志 [*Wusheng County Gazetteer*] (1931, repr., Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1968), 313–83; on Hejiang, see HJXZ, 580, 598–99; on Chengdu, see David Crockett Graham, *Folk Religion in Southwest China* (1961; second printing, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1967), 189–298; on Suifu, Chongqing, Guanxian, Weizhou, Mianzhou, and Ya’an, see *ibid.*, 208–14.

73 See cases of this in Jiangbei, across the Jianling River from Chongqing in November 1934; Chongqing Municipal Archives, Chongqing 81-8-57 (henceforth, CQA).

the same areas were open to the ravages of the warlord governments, which concentrated their economic and military resources in the cities while sucking up money and grain from the agricultural hinterland. The economic deprivation in these regions was especially acute in the Ba County, which surrounded Chongqing.⁷⁴ Poverty reduced the ability of communities to collect sufficient funds for religious celebrations. In the late 1920s, these places were often seized or destroyed, and inviting opera troupes may have been beyond their financial means because the nearest ones had resettled in the city and now enjoyed the relative bounty of the commercial market. The survival of market town theaters was more than ever a function not of a communal expression of its culture and of its social independence but of the goodwill of the local power holders. Even though we do not have enough reliable source material to either support or refute this point, the story presented by rare wartime field work conducted by Isabel Brown Crook is indicative. In her study of a town in Bishan County, the opera is staged only at the initiative and favor of the local landlord-*cum*-Paoge boss, who made the rules. It was not very related to any of the traditional holidays but, rather, to a tax collected by the town rulers on the market day.⁷⁵ This new power relationship appears to have been in direct opposition to that of the traditional community-based celebrations, which emphasized the relative equality of its members and internal unity during which gods and men were celebrated with opera.

During the Republic, the new institutionalization of urban theater and the flourishing of commercially played and enjoyed opera were paralleled by the contraction and impoverishment of the rural opera market. Rural opera did not disappear, nor was it discontinued; rather, it persisted under strain and lost much of its appeal compared to that of its urban counterpart. As theatrical entertainment adorned cities, and public life they became detached from the religious calendar, rural life became duller, deprived of the festivals, and culturally irrelevant. The new opera became a marker of inequality not only between the prosperous and poor districts in the city but more obviously between the city and the country.

74 Richard Gunde, "Land Tax and Social Change in Sichuan, 1925-1935," *Modern China* 2, no. 1 (January 1976); Zhang Jin, *Quanli, chongtu yu biange*, 335-66.

75 Crook, *Prosperity's Predicament*, 139.

The Culture of the Commercial Opera

The process of reconstructing opera, public arts, and entertainment, as well as urban life and culture in Sichuan cannot be fully understood if we look only at the business of culture without dwelling on what was performed on stage. The push for reform and later for the iconoclastic destruction of the traditional stage arts (accomplished during the Cultural Revolution) is even less clear if we do not center our inquiry on the opera repertoire and on the normal operation of the playhouses. This chapter, based on cases in Chongqing from the cusp of the 1920s and 1930s, focuses on how theaters staged opera and on their repertoire. By analyzing all the businesses for which data is available, instead of focusing solely on the artists and artworks that had exceptional aesthetic value, this study challenges many previous findings about opera in Sichuan. Above all, it proves that commercialization remodeled the manner in which opera was consumed. At the same time, it guaranteed the transmission of a broad corpus of traditional stories and values, responding to popular demand and infusing urban publics with a culture that ran counter to the intentions of modernizing elites and the rulers of China.

1 The Methods of Studying Opera: Troupes, Talent, and Repertoires

1.1 *The Question of Exceptional Talent*

Theater historians have discussed, in some detail, numerous examples of famous plays.¹ They have summarized and listed major actors' most renowned

1 Sichuan theater specialists even tried to reconstruct some of the most famous plays as a part of the Intangible Heritage (*feiwu yichen* 非物遺產) project; Sichuan Opera is officially listed in China (but not recognized by UNESCO, as are Kun, Cantonese, and Beijing Opera); “Intangible cultural heritage, China,” <https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/china-CN?info=elements-on-the-lists/> (accessed May 23, 2019). The Sichuan Provincial Academy of Arts [Sichuansheng yishu yanjiu yuan 四川省藝術研究院] publishes the reconstructed traditional operas, including Sichuansheng chuanju yishu yanjiuyuan 四川省川劇藝術研究院, ed., *Chuanju chuantong jumu jicheng, tuichen chuxin daibiaozuo jumu* [川劇傳統劇目集成, 推陳出新代表作劇目] [*Collected Traditional Sichuan Opera Repertoire, Recovered and Renewed Exemplary Pieces of Opera Repertoire*], 3 vols. (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2009). In the same year, there appeared five volumes of historical plays [*lishi yanyi* 歷史演義], four volumes of contemporary plays [*shizhuangxi* 時裝戲], and three volumes of mythical supernatural stories [*shenhua* 神話志怪].

achievements. They have brought to light the memories and writings of the major stars of the stage. The focus on outstanding personalities and on texts deemed important has affected our understanding of Chinese opera in a way that calls for discussion and critical treatment.²

The significance of talent for attracting viewers and building the popularity of stage arts cannot be overestimated: it is a truism that opera as a performance is propelled by actors' skills and techniques. Nevertheless, most narratives that center on the star performer ignore how theater worked. More important, they use the cultural construction of stardom that had roots in the Hollywood film industry and was skillfully used by the kings of Beijing and Shanghai stages such as Mei Lanfang. Mei's grandiose personality and his unique art left the quotidian of the opera in the shadows, namely, that audiences followed troupes, rather than individual performers. The troupes-cum-schools were repositories of skills and repertoire transmitted from the masters of some renown to their students, who emulated and developed the knowledge and practices they inherited. No wonder, therefore, that in the search for signatory talents among Sichuan actors, we are frustrated by the many names of paternal opera masters, rather than egocentric figures. Likewise, we find corpuses of texts and notes revolving around educational and artistic environments, rather than scripts that are the property of any one artist.

Consequently, the apparent "personality cult" visible in the later biographies of some Sichuan Opera performers, such as Kang Zhilin or Zhang Decheng 張德成 (1888–1967) was primarily a product of the political choices of the historians. Both Kang and Zhang were fundamental in the construction of a modernizing vision of the opera's development from a superstitious and vulgar street art to a politically conscious national and revolutionary art. Kang was the head of Chengdu's Sanqinghui: a troupe that adjusted opera to the commercial setting and that, in the early twentieth century, cooperated with the city's intellectuals in adapting some plays to the new settings. Zhang, who is important in later discussions, was a prominent actor on Chongqing stages and a wartime associate of the CCP cultural and propaganda circles led by Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898–1976) and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978). In the early 1950s, Zhang was among the performers consulted by the heads of the CCP's Southwestern Military Government and by the national leadership during the reconstruction of the operatic arts. These performers, in their actions and as a

2 I refer here to the collected works and monographic studies already cited, such as Goldstein, *Drama Kings*; and Cecilia S. L. Zung, *Secrets of the Chinese Drama: A Complete Explanatory Guide to Actions and Symbols as Seen in the Performance of Chinese Dramas* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1937; repr. 1964), the latter only covering Mei Lanfang.

result of their deeds, were anachronistically considered the main people's (i.e., emerging from the masses) builders of the benevolent tradition of Chinese socialist modernity. They were destroyers of both oppressive "feudalism" and the enslaving practices of exploitation that bound the arts and the artists. The talent and fame of these actors or many similar minor figures is not controversial. Nevertheless, the evidence presented in the following pages clearly demonstrates that these personalities in no way dominated Sichuan Opera or directed how this performing art developed.

1.2 *The Methodology of Studying Opera Repertoire*

Following the personalities, however fascinating from the biographical perspective, gives us a limited understanding of how opera worked as a cultural phenomenon in its particular environment. It does not inform us about the historical process, and it tells us even less about what was on the Republican stage, why it was appealing, and why beginning in the mid-1930s it was so upsetting for the urban intelligentsia in Sichuan and beyond. We can address these questions only by analyzing accessible data on what was played in the opera houses in that period. This approach goes against the established method of in-depth textual analysis of selected significant texts of culture. Focusing on outstanding pieces or on entire opera texts has limited explanatory power in light of how opera was enjoyed at that time. As we shall see, audiences not only rarely listened to a full text but also, in spite of the contemporaneous boom in the opera libretto publishing industry, hardly ever came into contact with a full text. Textual analysis, fully justified from the perspective of literary studies, also sheds little light on how culture worked in society and how it responded to the political contingencies of the time.

In this context, it is more helpful to think of a corpus of stories known by the viewing public, which was shaped and referred to by opera, storytelling, and other forms of oral transmission (and, to a lesser extent, by published matter) but was not canonized in a written form. This corpus enabled creative though limited enrichment by the performers; its interpretation (artistic and textual) was the property of the opera school staging it but had to be believably faithful to the main line of established stories. For this reason, it is important to explore how these stories were "served" to the public and what were they about.

The question of "what" takes precedence over that of "how" (very different from recently prominent schools of performance studies).³ When we ask

3 In Chinese studies developed by scholars the storytelling tradition, especially Vibeke Børdahl, ed., *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999); idem, "The Storyteller's Manner in Chinese Storytelling," *Asian Folklore Studies* 62, no. 1

“what,” we search for all the elements of the operatic menu served to audiences, and we are not concerned just with the main course; even a side dish or a scone with tea counts. Yet our search for content does not lead us to analyze each piece in depth. It is not only impossible based on the remaining Republican sources but also pointless: a broad view informs us much more about the audiences and their preferences than any detailed account of the critiques and educated aficionados—people with taste and knowledge but limited impact in the era of commercial and (by the standards of the 1920s and 1930s) mass entertainment.

So, what did the street like and what did opera transmit to its listeners? Our search is directed at the organization of the artistic meal: why did some pieces take precedence over others? How many and why so many plays? How were operas staged? After we know “what” and we see “how,” we can then ask why Sichuan’s theater became what it did? Why were these stories so popular and not others? And, therefore, what was the cultural universe of the Sichuan audiences during the Republic?

1.3 *A Snapshot of Popular Theaters’ Inner Mechanics: Newspaper Advertisements*

In order to answer these questions, we need to reconstruct the theater schedule as it unfolded daily in an entire city and at all its opera houses. Ideally, we should create a database that would contain every piece staged in all theaters in a province; for many reasons, however, such a task is technically impossible. Primarily, we cannot account for all the active stages and troupes in Sichuan because of limited sources and the informal (by Republican standards illegal, as no tax was paid) character of opera performances. Thus, for most of the rural hinterland, our knowledge of religious plays is limited or nil, particularly after the dissolution of many public rituals and the appropriation of numerous temple properties. Even after we accept that our picture is overly urbanized and skewed toward larger centers, we still have to deal with only a piece of the image because of the characteristics of the source that gives us access to this information: newspaper advertisements.

Not all theater troupes or opera (tea-) houses in the 1920s and 1930s could afford to pay fees for regular advertising in a major local newspaper. Some stages were not featured in broadsheets or tabloids, and that is one main reason for the discrepancy between the number of opera houses that we know existed at one time and the number that we can ascertain on the basis of the

(2003); Vibeke Børdahl and Margaret B. Wan, ed., *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2010).

record left by announcements. In fact, the density of existing data between the main centers in Chengdu and Chongqing is disproportionate. Even though the former was the birthplace of Republican Sichuan Opera, Chongqing had a more developed and stable commercial market and thereby the fullest record. In the ensuing analysis, we therefore look mostly at Chongqing: the commercial and entertainment center of the province, which, at least in terms of popular culture and political trends, served as Sichuan's window to the world. Finally, it is very hard to coordinate the information obtained from advertisements with other sources, such as published plays, memoirs, collections of oral accounts compiled mostly in the 1980s, or even databases gathered by students of opera. Only advertising is reliable for learning about how opera was enjoyed and consumed during the Republic. Published librettos, however, were a supplementary form of engaging with theater compared to watching and listening. Therefore scripts are not a key to the entire phenomenon of theater going any more than reading librettos to Western opera can substitute for watching (listening, feeling, etc.) its performance. Other sources lack authenticity and suffer from exaggeration of the figure and agency of a leading actor figurehead who was mentioned earlier.

In Chongqing at the beginning of the 1920s and 1930s, the main venues for opera advertisements were *Commercial Daily* (*Shangwu ribao* 商務日報) and the *New Sichuan Daily* (*Xinshubao*) as well as a short run tabloid focused on gossip and entertainment, the *Chongqing New People's Daily* (*Chongqing xinminbao* 重慶新民報).⁴

Standard histories of the Chongqing press emphasize its different links to “progressive” politics and emphasize that the high point in their development occurred before the March 31 [1927] Massacre (San sanyi can'an 三·三一慘案): a mass killing of members of the CCP in Chongqing ordered by Liu Xiang, head of the Twenty-First Revolutionary Army.⁵ According to this narrative, in the wake of the castration of leftist politics in Sichuan's biggest city, newspapers

4 Newspapers had a changing interest in welcoming theaters as advertisers. In the early period of their development in the 1910s most Sichuan's titles were relatively short lived and directed to an educated and politically engaged reading public. The earliest such as *Yubao* 渝報 (*Chongqing Newspaper*) published from 1897 were linked with the growing reform movement of the late Qing. Theater advertisement were infrequent before the latter half of the 1920s, fairly consistent for almost a decade and then again sparser before the Sino-Japanese war. Chongqing kangzhan congshu bianzuan weiyuanhui 重慶抗戰叢書編纂委員會, eds., *Kangzhan shiqi Chongqingde xinwenjie* 抗戰時期重慶的新聞界 [Chongqing's Media World during the War of Resistance] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1995), 14.

5 See also Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction*, 198–204, esp. 201; Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 77–81.

became commercialized as well as intellectually and politically bland. Progressive (meaning mildly leftist, aggressively anti-Japanese) reporting began to be revived only in 1935. The question of whether an increasing number of theater advertisements and more space devoted to entertainment was linked to some depoliticization after 1927 or whether it was caused by a different business model, in which the press tried to attract a broader readership, is very difficult to answer without detailed research. Nevertheless, the general withdrawal from reform projects by the warlord governments in Sichuan and a growing reliance on publicity were important factors behind the changes in the format and content of Chongqing broadsheets.⁶

The history of each paper differed because of their ownership patterns, intended readership, and relations with the city and provincial powerholders. The *Commercial Daily* was created by the heads of the Chongqing General Chamber of Commerce 重慶總商會 in 1914 to serve as their voice and as a source on market information. Apparently, in the early years it was apolitical, and its editors showed no particular leanings toward any side in provincial and national conflicts, trying to be informative and as nonpartisan as possible. In fact, it represented the interests of the Chamber of Commerce, for example, by supporting student movements during the May Fourth protests. Like other aspects of political life in Chongqing, the paper was pacified in the wake of the March 31 massacre and gained some political edge only in the face of Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931. In 1938, the *Commercial Daily* was taken over by the CC Clique and, with a new editorial team, it lined up with increasingly right-wing and authoritarian GMD politics.⁷ Nevertheless, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, it remained primarily a business journal. In 1951, under new political and economic conditions, it lost its place in Chongqing's media universe.⁸

The *New Sichuan Daily* had a radically different makeup. Emerging out of the May Fourth youth movement and first published on February 1, 1921, it linked reformist activists with the capital of the then-left-leaning warlord Liu Xiang. This newspaper was meant to change society, fight superstition, and infect society with modern patriotism. Other than *Commercial Daily*, it became the main paper published in Chongqing, quickly issuing more discursive than informative supplements and giving a voice even to the members

6 Chongqing, *Chongqingde xinwenjie*, 14–15.

7 The CC Clique was a right-wing GMD faction led by Chen Guofu 陳果夫 (1892–1951) and Chen Lifu 陳立夫 (1900–2001), called Zhongyang julebu zuzhi 中央俱樂部組織 [Central Club]; Frederic E. Wakeman Jr., *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 89–93, 106–9.

8 Chongqing, *Chongqingde xinwenjie*, 15–18.

of the CCP (e.g., to Xiao Chunü 蕭楚女, 1891–1927). Purged in 1927, the paper lost its political edge for some time, but managed to regain it in 1935, when its editor, Zhou Qinyue 周欽岳 (1898–1984) returned from a study period in Japan. In the meantime, the *New Sichuan Daily* was altered by the events in Manchuria while still functioning as the primary city paper with a broad focus on all aspects of life and politics and closely attached to the political line of Liu's government. In 1938, when Liu died in Wuhan, Zhou Qinyue began to cooperate closely with the communist *New China Daily* (*Xinhua ribao* 新華日報), lending it its printing shop. Pacified in the 1939 by the GMD, *New Sichuan Daily* ended its cooperation with the CCP and remained a faithful voice of the GMD until it was dissolved in 1949 after the "Liberation."⁹

The *Chongqing New People's Daily* is a much more obscure newspaper, and it should not be mistaken for its famous Shanghai counterpart: *New People's Daily* (*Xinminbao* 新民報). It was mainly an entertainment and gossip broadsheet filled with stories of actors and street life sensations. The number of advertisements of every sort implies its reliance on ad revenue for financing, which, one could speculate, led to the newspaper's undoing after to the market collapse in the Great Depression.

1.4 *The Case Study*

In looking at Chongqing newspapers for evidence about opera, we do not cover the entire Republican period but, rather, selected years focused on 1929–1931. To the best of my knowledge, doing so creates among the most complete sets of data obtainable from Chongqing newspapers. In this period, theaters advertised daily, which enables us to observe seasonal changes in business practice and closely follow the structure and development of the repertoire. This period is just before the momentous political changes in the mid-1930s, the CCP Long March, and the GMD takeover of Sichuan's government. The data also provide us with the background necessary for the discussions in subsequent chapters, by clarifying the reasons for the anti-traditional turn of Sichuan's intellectuals in the mid-1930s. In Chapter 5, I argue that this turn was rooted in the discrepancy between popular culture fostered by the opera and China's political conditions after Japan's aggression in Manchuria. Opera was blamed for the political apathy of Chinese society because it taught "erroneous" history. The activist intellectual answer was either to change or to obliterate traditional opera and substitute it with a form of popular performance that would teach "correct" history and thus energize society to fight for the country. Was opera

⁹ Chongqing, *Chongqingde xinwenjie*, 18–23.

really a handbook of Chinese history? Which history? If the judgment of pundits and critics was accurate, then why did the public like this version of history and what do we learn from this about Sichuanese society?

2 Watching the Commercial Show: How Was It Served?

2.1 *Cherry Picking: Commercial Shows and Zhezixi* (折子戲)

On the urban commercial stage, opera was served in a manner that was the opposite of the guiding logic and the purpose of a temple festival. Commercial opera came in selected chunks, the best pieces, the favorite arias, and the most stunning movements or, as it was called, *zhezixi* 折子戲.¹⁰

This style was not a “modern” profanation of some revered art of staging full plays as if they had been liturgical pieces. *Zhezixi* dated back to at least the early seventeenth century, when performances in the “southern opera” (*nanxi* 南戲) tune were rendered in this way. The development of Kun-style opera was also linked to singing it in a “chopped” *zhezi* form, and during the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods, this way of staging opera was often considered the most appropriate. Later in the eighteenth century, this selective approach influenced regional styles, especially those flowing to the capital. Consequently, *zhezixi* was a widespread form of performance in Beijing Opera that flourished at the end of Qing.¹¹ By that time, across the country, playing selected scenes and not full operas was fairly common because it often corresponded to the request of the patrons interested in listening to selected pieces based on a theme of their choice (such as celebrations of birthdays or some important event in family or public life).¹²

Some operas, because of the length of their plots, existed almost solely in the form of *zhezixi*. In this way, they “aspired to utmost artistic excellence in performance, seeking and winning acclaim from both the experts and the populace.”¹³ According to Chang Dongshi, the development of *zhezixi* was the result of the performers’ agency in shaping the operas and their efforts to satisfy audience tastes. At the same time, they indicated that audiences were familiar with

10 The name came from the division of Yuan-era *zaju* into four parts or acts, each called a *zhe*.

11 Wang Ning 王寧, “Zhezixi tedian jianlun 折子戲特點簡論 [Brief Discussion of the Specificity of the Opera Highlights (Style of Performance)],” *Xiqu yanjiu* 戲曲研究 83 (April 2011): 65.

12 Chang Dongshin, “Borrowing the Fan: An Example of Actable Plays (Zhezixi) for the Kunqu Stage,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 259–83. Another translation for *zhezixi* is an “independent act,” Tan Ye, *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Theater* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 148.

13 Chang Dongshin, “Borrowing the Fan,” 260–61.

the plots and wanted to enjoy their favorite parts without sitting through the entire play, which could sometimes take days. Wang Ning 王寧 highlighted several elements of such “fragmented” operas that explained a growing preference for them by performers and audiences alike. He argued that because *zhezixi* were better suited to the stage requirements (*wutaixing* 舞臺性), they ensured a higher quality of performance. These pieces were independent, containing both the highlights of the story and a summary of the entire narrative rendered in a succinct manner (*dulixing* 獨立性). Moreover, they not only accumulated and transmitted tradition but also variegated and renewed it by changing and adjusting the original script to the new stage conditions.¹⁴

The novelty of the early twentieth-century commercial stage was that plays-in-fragments won the day with regional tunes, such as Sichuan Opera. From then on, offering a cocktail of the outstanding pieces created an event for audiences and refurbished the meaning of operatic performance. Each of these points requires some discussion to clarify the depth of the changes.

2.2 *The Main Differences between Celebratory Opera and Commercial Opera*

In the noncommercial setting of a temple festival or during a family celebration, satisfying the audience’s interest in a story took second place to other concerns. The main issue was the appropriateness of the performance for an occasion. Performed in a public temple context, the funeral rituals were embellished by the enacting of the Mulian story whereas celebrations of the gods involved recounting their history. In a private context, birthdays of prominent lineage members were matched with shows about historical and legendary heroes, whose deeds were metaphors for the moral values embodied by the celebrated family members. Such festivities could only be afforded by wealthier members of a community and were often a method for elevating a family’s and lineage’s status in its local social context or were efforts to preserve the status and the family code for the current and future generations.¹⁵ In these cases, the choice of opera was directed rather by tradition (of a temple, community, cult, or lineage) and by the availability of troupes that could perform the shows needed. Audience preferences were a secondary consideration. Moreover,

14 Wang Ning, “Zhezixi tedian jianlun,” 66–73.

15 Hu Tiancheng and Duan Ming, in *Ba Yu minsu xiju yanjiu* 巴渝民俗戲劇研究 [A Research of the Folk Opera in Ba Yu (i.e. Chongqing) Region] (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2006) (pp. 83–84), show that, in addition to regional holidays, there were twenty-six gods’ birthdays treated as standard opera occasions. *The Scholars* [Rulin waishi 儒林外史] (pub. 1750), a classic novel by Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓, offers a plethora of examples of how opera was used by the mid-Qing elites in Jiangnan.

opera was a constituent part of a ritual. In this sense, it was seen as efficacious in what it was applied for, such as healing, granting longevity, or placating ghosts; thus, it did not need to be entertaining. Finally, the length of the performance had little to do with the practices and choices of the spectators—the play went on for hours or days, irrespective of the audience's presence—while other elements of the festival (market, food, acrobats, prostitutes, etc.) and additional side shows satisfied the public's needs.

In commercial opera, the audience's attention was no longer on side activities and focused on the main theater stage. The opera became the main attraction, and, conversely, those who attended it gained control over it. In Sichuan, at its Chengdu and Chongqing origins, this control was mediated among the reformist-minded elite engaged in opera reform, new troupes such as the Sanqinghui, the city police departments, and the spectators. In the later 1910s, little evidence indicates that either literati reformists or the police exercised any influence on the content or performance of the plays. As seen in the previous chapters, the police presence was reduced to extracting income and protecting the theaters as moneymaking ventures, without asserting any consistent agendas of their own. The elite interference was muted by Sichuan's brutal politics and by the lack of agreement and support by powerholders for any clear-cut cultural reform. Thus, in Sichuan in the 1920s and 1930s, it was left to the ticket-buying public and the opera troupes to satisfy each other's demands and shape the development of opera.

2.3 *Quantifying Theaters' Cultural Offerings in Chongqing, 1929–1931*

Considering the fact that the organization of opera had been almost unchanged for the previous two hundred years, the radical change in it after it became paid entertainment was quite stunning. The change came not only from the explosive expansion in the repertoire but also from the fact that viewers could attend the plays in the same form every day at any time of the year. Patchy data in the *New Sichuan Daily* from the latter half of 1929 on three theaters (Qiankun dawutai, Dingxin mofan wutai 鼎新模範舞臺, and Youxin dawutai) show that between June 23 and November 6 that year, they presented a total of 167 operas, either in whole or in part. According to the advertisements published in the *Chongqing New People's Daily*, between October 9 and 26, 1930, 101 different plays were staged at two theaters (Zhanghua daxiyuan and Youxin dawutai). In comparison, three main urban movie theaters (Jiangzhou 江洲, Yude 育德, and Huanqiu) screened only eighteen different films.¹⁶ The difference in the diversity of cultural offerings by theaters and movie houses was

¹⁶ *Chongqing xinminbao*, October 9–26, 1930.

stark, especially if we analyze it from the perspective of the mental type of the audience: a flaneur who enjoyed the leisurely act of browsing and choosing, rather than a dedicated film aficionado.

Newspaper advertisements provide fairly complete coverage of the period from March 5 to October 20, 1931 (except the months April and August). Over the course of these months, 1,214 operas were staged at six theaters: Spring Brightness Grand Stage (Chunming dawutai 春明大舞臺), The First Grand Theater (Yiyuan daxiyuan), Friendship Grand Stage (Yousheng dawutai 友聲大舞臺), Youxin dawutai, Zhanghua daxiyuan; for Grand Harmony Han Opera Society (Taihe hanjushe 太和漢劇社) data only for May. It needs to be stressed that this total does not represent all the plays in all the opera houses mentioned: for some months, we have data from either three (July), four (March, May, September, October), or five (June) theaters. Moreover, it does not represent all the activity of these theaters—only what these entertainment companies considered worth advertising in local newspapers. Because it is difficult to count activities at all the opera-staging teahouses, theater schools, amateur associations, and even specialized theaters in Chongqing in the 1920s and 1930s, we can only assume that the total of 1,200-odd operas represents only a part of a much richer picture.

Truly, any opera fan had plenty of his favorite art at his disposal, and if he was dissatisfied with his experience in one place, he could easily visit the theater next door. The diversity meant not only the disappearance of the coercion and repetition that accompanied ritualized festival culture, but it also inflated the value of a particular play or story. The opera's value was now denominated in terms of the artistry of performers (the ability to deliver it in a clear, beautiful, and impressive way) and in the plays' overall subject matter. Therefore, in the commercial setting, plays ceased to be individuated because their symbolic and efficacious quality—so necessary for the transformative experience of the ritual—disappeared under the pressure of the availability and mass marketization of entertainment. The public could choose what it wanted and discard what it did not want through the simple act of buying a ticket (or not). Henceforth, spectators elevated the kind of plays they enjoyed most, and the performers and their companies quickly responded by mastering and delivering them. We now turn to some general characteristics of this novel commercial system of operatic entertainment.

2.4 *Organization of the Show and the Audiences*

Each theater offered a daily schedule, and they competed in attracting audiences. The schedule was meant to be attractive and to be adjusted to the needs of potential spectators—their age, income, time available, and the rhythm of urban life (i.e., participation in other leisure activities, e.g., dining, drinking,

shopping, sightseeing, visiting friends). For example, in Chongqing from the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the practice of going to the opera was already established, each theater offered two shows daily: at midday and in the evening. At each session, five to seven titles were performed that had no thematic relationship. Most of these short plays, typically performed by a small group of actors, were scenes (*zhezi*) from a complete opera consisting of multiple acts. The noontime and evening shows did not differ in any significant way; nevertheless, one of them often consisted of two to four separate acts staged individually and then followed by a full opera performed by the entire troupe at a particular theater. For example, on October 11, 1931, the Yousheng filled its noontime session with the exceptionally popular story of the *Yang Family Generals* (*Yangjiajiang* 楊家將), or the Youxin offered an afternoon selection of two plays, followed by an entire troupe staging *Greatness of the Dragon and Phoenix* (*Longfengzan* 龍鳳贊), and the evening show was made up of four short plays, ending with a performance by the entire troupe of the *Combating the Old Dragon on the Golden River* (*Zhan jinhe laolong* 斬金河老龍).¹⁷

Overall, the evening slot was reserved for “big events” or cyclical plays—either repeatedly staged titles or a longer opera divided into two or more parts. This kind of show was in the minority, outnumbered by a flurry of short one-act plays. Additionally, even though most theaters had an in-house troupe that filled the entire schedule, both the noon and evening slots could be taken by guest troupes from other cities. For example, in Chengdu, Kang Zhilin’s Sanqinghui, led by Zhou Qihe 周企和, played at the Yiyuan on the evening of July 18, 1931, but on March 10, 1931, a Hanju 漢劇 troupe played a scene called *Wu Tianbao* 吳天寶 in the afternoon at the Yousheng.¹⁸ This opera schedule was unchanged on weekends, holidays, and seasonal festivals, but it could vary if the weather conditions made staying in the theater unbearable. This applied not only to the lack of protection from rain in some older buildings but also to “new” theaters, such as the Youxin, which overheated in July 1931 and closed in the afternoon.¹⁹

The guiding principle in the choice of operas was nothing other than their popularity, which could be based either on an outstanding performance by a troupe or on a narrative that was in favor at a particular moment. The repertoire, however, was bound by one factor: all the plays were romanticized and fictionalized historical stories. This choice and organization was a response to

17 *Chongqing xinminbao*, Oct. 11, 1931, 5. *Chongqing xinminbao*, Oct. 11, 1931, 5.

18 *Chongqing xinminbao*, July 18, 1931, 5; March 10, 1931, 5; Kang Zilin died a year before during his tour in Chongqing.

19 *Chongqing xinminbao*, July 12, 1931; July 5 and 15, 1931, 5.

the power of popular taste, matched by the opera troupes' ability, knowledge, training, and inherited or learned tradition. In other words, a cultural "supply" was available in the bustling theater market of Chongqing. The product was inevitably eclectic in its form and content. The public seems to have reacted with equal enthusiasm to shows of Sichuan Opera and to visiting troupes from other provinces (e.g., visiting Beijing Opera troupes). Overall, local tunes prevailed, and if other genres were popular in Chongqing, they rarely spilled outside this port city, demonstrating its relative cosmopolitanism.

If we assume that the repertoire of each theater was ruled by nothing but the chaos principle, then the number of shows performed is indicative of the aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional transformation of the Republican viewer from his close imperial ancestor. The variegated run of performances substituted for entire multiact plays staged in a ritual context. It delivered immediate satisfaction to an impatient viewer, who, although well familiar with the stories presented, had no desire to sit through boring or unspectacular parts of the show. What he (at times, she) craved were the essential moments, the most dynamic movements, and the most dramatic arias. As with later generations, who gape at the TV or the internet in search of the most touching romantic scenes, the most spectacular ends of the earth, or the most heroic and bloodiest battles ever in a film, Chongqing operagoers were less concerned about a particular story and more interested in a slice of it that conveyed and responded to their feelings and desires. Thus, lengthy narratives from the Qin and Han, the Three Kingdoms, the Yang family generals, and Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (927–976), founder of the Song dynasty, could be melded into one piece on mischief, heroism, loyalty, and betrayal. The stories of love and devotion, whether from the Warring Kingdoms or the Ming, were all jumbled together as a timeless depiction of romantic feelings outside the contexts intended by their authors or the historical background in which they were composed. The same can be said of the mystery tales, dominated by a selection from the *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異) and other tales of fox spirits. All these decontextualized stories produced an exceedingly integrated view of the literary and theatrical tradition consumed by the Republican ticket-paying public.

The audience for Sichuan Opera on the cusp of the 1920s and 1930s had a firm grasp of the most popular texts handed down by the previous two centuries of vernacular opera. At the same time, it was in no way predisposed toward a bookish restudying of all the important texts. On the contrary, the spectators just wanted an extract, a chosen piece, an artistic delicacy to enjoy in shameless disregard of the literati obsession for purity in a text or a genre. For theater, the right mix of stories was consequently a must: viewers were not

to be bored by having a fine point put on unhappy love, violent war, upright judges, or perverted fox spirits. If all the narrative elements could be delivered within the time of a show or a dramatic piece had appropriate diversity, then it was allowed to take the stage. Otherwise, a neighboring theater might be able to mix a happier cocktail and entice the public to its premises.

2.5 *Commercial Desacralization*

This development seemingly replicates Theodor Adorno's important observation on the evolution of classical music struck by the development of popular concert arrangements, radio, and the record industry, which eliminated the whole works of art, decontextualized musical creation, and consequently destroyed the ability to listen and comprehend music.²⁰ This analogy, however, is faulty. As mentioned before, opera had been presented in selections and sets of selections for many centuries before (depending on the genre), and many important pieces were only known in that form. The evolution into a type, rather than focusing on a particular script was also common in Qing times, as illustrated earlier by the application of opera imagery for instruction and embellishment by both the lineages and institutions. These two trends were only strengthened by the commercial market, which, on the one hand, offered broader access to opera and, on the other hand, helped opera troupes professionalize and improve their skills.

What was similar to the development discussed by Adorno was the act of stripping the original meaning of plays as it had been conceived and preserved for the previous two hundred years. Chopped to pieces and staged according to a fad for an afternoon or evening of opera desacralized the art of theatrical performance, transforming it into a lay form of entertainment, no different from watching movies or listening to music.

Indeed, Republican shows reversed the importance of the elements comprising the act of performance. Previously, a god, a revered ancestor, a union, or a friendship of transcendent value were recipients (audiences) of opera, the performers were vectors for the message expressed by the repertoire. Hence, human spectators were both bystanders, allowed to enjoy the show, and funders of the show that was staged at their behest with the purpose of expressing their feelings and thoughts. In commercial establishments, the performers and audiences were bound by the show (occasion for staging) and the repertoire (the text and its performance). Both sides therefore formed an unmediated relationship in which they transacted through opera. Commercial theater left

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Culture Industry: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2015), 29–97.

no space for contact between the transcendent and the human world; by the same token, there was no delegation of the social function of performing, as in celebratory opera. Instead, the text and the performance became central, and thus they had to be “negotiated” between the only two elements—performers and the audience—as the audience wielded the dominant power of decision through economic means (by purchasing a ticket). From the outset of commercial opera in Sichuan in the 1900s, the audience preference was to see multiple and diverse narratives in the largest possible numbers in an absolute oblivion of the sacrificial function these stories may have possessed just a few years earlier or still had during ongoing temple festivals held in many places.

It was not, however, just the story that pulled audiences to one stage or another or that directed the choice of repertoire on a particular day. Actors’ artistry and availability just as important. Actors and entire schools were recognized for the way in which they kept audiences enthralled about the talent and beauty of the performance: the ability to convey emotions, represent historical figures, transmit an accurate sense of the staged character. More mundane but equally significant elements were observed, judged, and ranked: accurate pronunciation and the ability to sing; hand, leg, and hair movement; body posture and eye expression, summarized in the saying “ten movements, five methods 十動五法.” The importance of these performative elements increased in the context of *zhezixi*, which moved a focus away from a precise rendition of an entire dramatic narrative to a short piece meant to stand for a full drama. Some entertainment value had to be given, even for the viewers who were unacquainted with the art of opera and those who were barely able to appreciate an actor’s mastery. Consequently, the “vulgar” need for the spectacular (*renao*) had to coexist with the “refined” expectations of seasoned viewers.²¹ Efforts to satisfy these two distinct publics (though we can imagine a spectator loving both liveliness and refinement) were among the main motors behind the development of the commercial opera.

2.6 Was Commercial Opera a “Traditional” Art Form?

The Republican opera, with its kaleidoscope of thousands of shows, mixed styles, and highly trained actors traveled far from its temple-celebratory origins two decades before. We should therefore question the extent to which we can call opera “traditional.” In other words, to what extent did Republican opera transmit and to what extent did it transform received theatrical tradition? We

21 That kind of public was also described by a proverb: “waihang kan renao, neihang kan mendao 外行看内行看門道 [outsiders look for spectacle, insiders look for artistry]” (personal communication with Hu Tiancheng 胡天成, August 19, 2017).

consider, first, the formal organization of performances and, then, focus on the content. Certainly, the change in the format of performance must be seen as an artistic and entertainment revolution in the context of Chengdu, Chongqing, or any other town in Sichuan, though similar commercial theater had already existed for a century and a half in Beijing and for roughly three decades in Shanghai. The commercialization of the show meant that broad urban audiences accessed the theaters and made actors responsive to their tastes rather than the prerequisites of ritual, local tradition, and elite ideology. These were all new in the history of opera in Sichuan. From that perspective, although opera did not become a vector for the New Policies and Republican cultural reform, the changes wrought by commercialization had a thoroughly transformational impact on the production, presentation, and consumption of the shows.

In this respect, the commercial theater was a departure from the tradition that had connected opera to particular temporal and ritual events and that had long formed a communal social institution more than a form of entertainment. At the same time, it is hard to miss the transmission of the cultural tradition through the commercial theater in the early twentieth century. Opera (both performers and audiences) adjusted to the changed legal, institutional, economic, social, and aesthetic conditions in Sichuan and remodeled the way in which historical scripts and melodies were staged and organized. Opera, however, cannot be treated as an untouched or fossilized product of Chinese tradition. Its innovation was manifested in the professionalization of actors, changes in form, modifications of the content, and rise in attractiveness. Its stories presented would make little sense in the previous settings, and the organization of the daily opera schedule would find no explanation or application on the temple festival stage. Moreover, the number of operas performed had no precedent in provincial artistic history.

We should therefore speak of commercial opera as an art of its time. Indeed, it was more an expression of Republican urban society's cultural needs and expectations than a historical form rooted in past tradition that expressed historical views and values. Republican Sichuan Opera was "current," not "outdated," at that historical moment. Only that perspective gives meaning to the discussions and changes imposed on it beginning in the 1930s.

3 Favorite Plays and the Cultural Universe of Sichuan Audiences

3.1 *Classification of Popular Plays*

A summary of Chongqing's repertoire of the cups of the 1920s and 1930s, though not necessarily free of omissions, calls our attention to the plays that

were staged the most frequently and consequently can be considered the most popular in their time. In the following discussion, we do not arrange the plays according to their relative importance—that is difficult to ascertain—but, instead, group them into three broad genres: historical romance, fictional dramas about love, and magical-fantasy plays.²²

The first genre comprises fictionalized depictions of the historical past that are often called *lishi yanyi*;²³ they predominantly focus on the deeds of past heroes and, to a degree, are consistent with the definition of “romance” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, namely: “a medieval narrative (originally in verse, later also in prose) relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero of chivalry” and “a fictitious narrative, usually in prose, in which the settings or the events depicted are remote from everyday life, or in which sensational or exciting events or adventures form the central theme.”²⁴ These plays typically combine a narrative of the past with multiple conflicts, love stories, and tribulations of the main character. They could be tragedies or comedies. More often than not, their content was derived from one of the grand histories (e.g., the *History of the Tang Dynasty*) or historical fiction in *Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshenzhuan* 封神傳), rewritten, adjusted, shortened, and reorganized for the medium of opera. Because of their roots in the histories, the main subject matter in such dramas related to kings, emperors, generals, gods, rebels, khans, and other grand personalities. Among the historical plays, the uncontested “winners” of the 1930–1931 season were the tales of the *Yang Family Generals*, a related canon of narratives about the founder of the Song dynasty, Zhao Kuangyin, and stories selected from the *Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo* 三國) stock. They were followed by only slightly less popular operas based on the stories of the Qin 秦 dynastic rise to power (*Qinshide quanshi* 秦史的權事); tales of the great contenders for the Qin heritage and of the founding of the Han dynasty centered on the character of Han’s first emperor, Liu Bang

22 Other classifications were proposed but, as Cecilia S. L. Zung (and, indirectly, Mei Lanfang, who guided her in writing the book): “[As] there has never been any strict rule for the classification of Chinese plays, one may freely classify them according to one’s own taste.” She divided them into “tragical, comical, tragi-comical, historical, satirical, sociological, romantic, ethical, anti-war, seasonal or festival, spectacular, superstitious or mythical, legendary, personal [to Mei Lanfang or Cheng Yanqiu], parallel or analogous” providing examples of each kind of the play; Zung, *Secrets of the Chinese Drama*, 151, examples on 152–56.

23 A classification into four groups: “traditional,” “historical,” “contemporary,” and “marvelous” was adopted by the mentioned editions of Sichuan Operas by the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Arts; see Chapter 4, note 1.

24 “Romance,” in *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/167065?rskey=5EDsoH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid/> (accessed October 17, 2017).

劉邦 (256–195 BCE), and his adversary, Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE); histories from the Sui and Tang dynasty (e.g., *Tangshi de quanshi* 唐史的權事); stories of the Wu 吳 kingdom in the Spring and Autumn period, and so forth. From the audience's perspective, the main characteristics of these dramas were the transmission of the historical events and the elevation of the conflicts, characters, and events to the transcendent level of discussion about permanent society-binding values, such as loyalty and filial piety. Because of the popularity of opera, both the transmission of historical knowledge and the discussion of values should be seen as equally important and should be analyzed in their temporal context.

The second genre, fictional dramas of love, although set in a historical reality do not represent events considered factual and usually related the actions and adventures of two or more protagonists embroiled in either tragic or comical situations that determined their lives and choices.²⁵ A broad range of love stories, young scholar and beautiful maiden tales (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人), and family dramas could belong in this category. In Chongqing in 1930 and 1931, it contained popular dramas such as *Hongmeiji* 紅梅記, *Yuzanji*, *Baiyuji* 白玉記, and *Xiuruji* 繡襦記, etc. This kind of play individuated the values and developed characters in much more detail than large historical operas. They allowed for an elaboration of an individuals' feelings and thoughts outside the predefined historical context and the presentation and discussion of personal choices in a conflictual situation. They also served as morality lessons on topics such as the relationship between spouses and disasters caused by lascivious literature (e.g., in the extremely popular play *Yuheqiao* 御河橋); — morality expounded in much more detail than was possible in heroic military romances. Nevertheless, like the plays based on the chronicles and narratives of past dynasties, they should be viewed at the same time as historical and transcendent. Their time frame was typically between the Zhou and Ming dynasties, the canon of dramas was conceived between the Southern Song and the early Qing, and the values discussed represented a set of fundamentals advanced in the Three Teachings.

The third genre, magical-fantasy dramas, are between historical and love narratives and typically function as “tales of the supernatural or strange” (*zhiguai*).²⁶ They also expounded on legends, histories, adventures, romances,

25 In the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Arts edition, these kinds of stories were classified as “traditional” [*chuantongjumu* 傳統劇目], a description that is meaningless at best; see Sichuansheng chuanju yishu yanjiuyuan, *Chuanju chuantongjumu*.

26 The Sichuan Provincial Academy of Arts locates the *Legend of the White Snake* in between the “traditional” plays demonstrating flexibility of the classification. *Zhiguai* is a firmly

religious narratives, stories from the underworld, and so on. Also in this genre are dramas such as the story of Mulian and female-fox adaptations from *Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*), by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715)²⁷ or the *Legend of the White Snake* (*Baishhezhuàn* 白蛇傳), popular in Chongqing in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸ In the context of our knowledge of Chinese popular religiosity, the difference between these stories and the other two genres is highly artificial, as magical elements permeated the standard narratives of imperial history (e.g., in the *Investiture of the Gods* with the all-important story of Nezha 哪吒) or any play based on the *Journey to the West*. They were also important in fictional romances (e.g., *Liangshanbo* 梁山伯)²⁹ and equally integral to the vision of military heroism in the past (through divination or weather control so common in the stories of the *Three Kingdoms* and the *Water Margin*). Differentiating these genres of plays is also useful for indicating the very limited impact on opera of the anti-superstition and cultural modernization campaigns of the Chinese Republic, a topic discussed below.

3.2 *History through Opera: A Universalistic Moralistic Past*

The classification I propose for the following analysis relates more to the use of history in each of these three kinds than to what they narrate or whether they can be classified as tragedies or comedies. Historical romances were explicitly meant as narratives of past events, and through past events, they communicated the paragons of behavior (both laudable and despicable) and transmitted the sense of history as an understandable compilation of communal experience. In contrast, fictional dramas, whether of the romantic or supernatural strain, elaborated human needs, behaviors, choices, and struggles, expounding on the psychological and emotional structure of the characters. All these types of operas, however, shared a temporal location in the historical dynasties, typically, before the ascent of the Qing. Moreover, their use of the past as a repository of relevant and universally valid human knowledge and experience

established genre of classical Chinese literature; see the introduction to Liu Yiqing, comp., Zhang Zhenjun, ed. and trans., *Hidden and Visible Realms: Early Medieval Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xxv–xlvi.

27 *Liaozhai zhiyi* (eighteen titles): *Lingjiaopei* 菱角配, *Shuanghunbao* 雙魂報, *Jieshibao* 借屍報, *Qunhua piaohai* 群花颺海 [not sure], *Chierpei* 癡兒配, *Dahongtai* 打洪台, *Changtinghui* 長亭會, *Rouputuan* 肉蒲團, *Qingmeipei* 青梅配, *Nahu* 拿虎, *Xinshisiniang* 辛十四娘, *Lianhua'nao* 蓮花[鬧?], *Dahongtai* 打紅臺, *Wuguilun* 無鬼論, [X]daobi[X] 刀筆, *Fenghupei* 蜂蝴蝶配, *Shuangxianyuan* 雙仙緣, *Shangzi shanglu* 生子上路.

28 Based on the Mulian story: *Wangpo maji* 王婆罵雞. On *Baishhezhuàn* (four titles): *Chuanzhou jiesan* 船舟借傘, *Jinshansi* 金山寺, *Chifu diaoda* 扯符吊打, *Duanqiaohui* 斷橋會.

29 A play based on the *Liangshanbo* story: *Liuyinji* 柳陰記.

spoke of a universal past and not the past confined to or shackled by national or ethnic denomination. In other words, this was not Chinese history but the universal history of humanity; not Chinese romantic drama but a romantic drama of universal human feelings and relationships.

The primary feature of history through opera was its utter disregard of chronology. This was the case largely because “teaching” about the past was not a task that opera assumed before it came into the hands of the reformists in the 1910s, advocating “civilized opera” (*wenmingxi*). The organization of the transmission followed the rules of composition of the plays for the day, the availability of the performers, the interests of the public, and knowledge of the repertoire by the staging troupe. Among them, the first point seemed to be of the utmost importance: plays were in “bundles” of related themes that elaborated similar issues and conveyed thoughts and feelings to the audience.³⁰ Another important characteristic was the mixing of historical-military plays with love stories and magical dramas, all in one session without maintaining any thematic focus on one epoch, a hero, or theme. The precondition to this “shuffled” approach to themes, genres, and historical periods was spectators’ familiarity with the repertoire and with the mode of presentation of the stories. The audience had to consist of opera insiders, and they had to have learned the stories through opera (and no other medium) so as not to find themselves at a loss or taken aback by the seeming chaos of what was performed on stage.³¹ Their knowledge was therefore confirmed and not challenged by opera, in precisely the same manner as the stories in the Bible are not challenged but, rather, confirmed by the Catholic masses; conversely, it would have been undermined by a sudden reorganization of the form of performance.

4 Gods, Emperors, Heroes...

In 1929–1931, the majority of plays in Chongqing theaters were about the rulers, whether with supernatural or earthly powers, and heroes with outstanding courage, prowess, and integrity. Neither all dynasties nor all the rulers and

30 Li Jing 李静, *Ming Qing tanghui yanju shi* 明清堂會演劇史 [*History of Feast-Time Opera Performances during the Ming and Qing Eras*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 189–200.

31 A similar point was made by researchers of traditional storytelling: Børdahl, “The Storyteller’s Manner”; John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Leo Tak-hung Chan, “Text and Talk: Classical Literary Tales in Traditions China and the Context of Casual Oral Storytelling,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 1 (1997): 33–63.

heroes were a subject of interest in operas. In fact, most were ignored, and the dramatic focus fell on a select group of individuals. This group indicated the shared sense of history and the values of the majority of opera spectators. Who were they, and why did they become the publics' "favorites"?

4.1 Gods

The gods make up a rather small and motley group. They were more background heroes than central characters, but many of them spawned both roles: rulers and deities. Nezha was an example of such a background character: an important if not pivotal hero of the *Investiture of the Gods*, he does not play a central role in the many dramas based on this novel; only some parts of his story were represented in more detail.³² The same can be said about the omnipresent and yet concealed Buddha. Not even one play in the period analyzed recounted the story of his life or was in any sense hagiographic. At the same time, much of the Buddhist mentality, belief, values, and even entire stories proving the righteousness of the doctrine were present in operas.

More present and popular were the King of Hell, Yama (Yanwang 閻王), and Jigong 濟公; however, only a few plays related to them directly.³³ On one occasion, on June 30, 1931, which coincided with the Ghost Festival (Zhongyuanjie 中元節), the Zhenghua theater mounted a series of plays about the stories of the souls of the deceased, bringing the topic of life and death, with their spiritual connotations and supernatural intervention, to the fore. This, however, appeared to have been the exceptional occasion.³⁴

Guan Yu (Guangdi), a god of war and the principal hero of the *Three Kingdoms* story, was by far the most popular deity represented in opera. His personality spanned not only the realm of the supernatural but also, as in the case of many other cultural heroes, that of the distant past: dynastic history, popular lore, and fiction writing.³⁵ As the epitome of devotion, heroism, martial prowess, and unchallenged fighting skills, Guan Yu provided an attractive subject for audiences interested in acrobatic plays as well as for those looking

32 Such as in the play *Nezha naohai* 哪吒鬧海.

33 Story of Yama: *Wuzi gaomu* 五子告母, *Zuixiandan* 醉仙丹. Jigong was celebrated in *Jigong huo fo* 濟公活佛, *Huofen dabelou* 火焚大碑樓.

34 They played: *Huozhuozidu* 活捉子都, *Zhuo Mengzizhang* 捉蒙刺張, *Huozhuo Sanlang* 活捉三郎, *Huozhuo Wangkui* 活捉王槐, *Huozhuo Huanyu* 活捉懷玉, *Huozhuo Yunguang* 活捉雲光.

35 We could list other such characters, who, however, were not dramatized as often as Guan Yu, such as Erlang, Zhenwu, and Mazu. A few plays featured deified legendary figures such as Yao 堯, such as *Fuguihua* 富貴花, God of Wealth (Caishen): *Shouheihu* 收黑虎; the Jade Emperor (Yudi 玉帝): *Pantaohui* 蟠桃會, etc.

for conflict, suspense, development of an individual character, and elaboration on the fundamental values (loyalty, devotion, trust, etc.). Moreover, Guan Yu and the complex story of the *Three Kingdoms* enabled the retention of viewers' interest without boring them with repetition of the same story. Those performing it could brandish their skills and demonstrate diverse characters in a kaleidoscope of costumes, facial masks, singing, and dance. Finally, the plays on Chongqing stages were not consistently derived from one source, such as the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*) adapted for the stage, but consisted also of adaptations of the classical history of this period, *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi* 三國志) and its later oral and spoken versions.³⁶

4.2 Kings and Emperors

Kings and emperors were much more popular in opera than gods and deified heroes. There were some uncontested heroes on Sichuan stages, such as the contenders for power after the demise of the Qin: Liu Bang and Xiang Yu;³⁷ the founder of the Song dynasty Zhao Kuangyin;³⁸ the licentious last ruler of the Shang dynasty, King Zhou 紂王, together with the founder of the Zhou, King Wu 武王;³⁹ and the first master of the assailed state of Shu Han 蜀漢

36 *Three Kingdoms* (thirty-eight titles *Jierentou* 借人頭, *Gaojiamiao* 告家廟, *Fengwang* 封王, *Kuzumiao* 哭祖廟, *Dandaohui* 單刀會, *Fengyiting* 鳳儀亭, *Zhan Ma Chao* 戰馬超, *Baidicheng* 白帝城, *Shuangyuanmen* 雙轅門, *Dagu fa Cao* 打鼓發曹, *Sanshengong* 三聖宮, *Kongchengji* 空城計, *Jiangyouguan* 江油關, *Cuipingshan* 翠屏山, *Caochangci* 草場刺, *Huoshao Yeyang* 火燒業陽, *Luhua[he]* 蘆花[河?], *Hulagouan* 虎牢關, *Houzhanghui* 後帳會, *Shuiyan qijun* 水淹七軍, *Sanchuang Yuanmen* 三闖轅門, *Jiejiang qiuzhu* 截江救主, *Sha Hua Tuo* 殺華陀, *Jieyun po Cao* 借雲破曹, *Huidu wangxiong* 回都望兄, *Linjiangyan* 臨江宴, *Diyiben Sanguozhi: Guan Zhang*, *Taoyuan sanjieyi* 第一本三國志: 關張, 桃園三結義, *Helianghui* 河糧會, *Zhan Hanshui* 戰漢水, *Wenmingyuan* (*Sanguo lishi*) 溫明園(三國歷史), *Zheng Wancheng* 征宛城, *Yuanmen sheji* 轅門射戟, *Huoshao Shangfanggu* 火燒上方谷, *Sanguozhi: Cao Cao chushi* 三國志: 曹操出世, *Zuixie* 醉寫, *Sha Han Hu* 殺韓虎, *Zhan Changsha* 戰長沙, *Sanguozhi: Shanguozhi: Liu Guan Zhang dapo Huangjin* 三國志: 劉關張打破黃巾。

37 Liu Bang, Xiang Yu (seven plays): *Daozongjuan* 盜宗卷, *Yujiale* 漁家樂, *Huaiheyong* 淮河營, *Hongmenyan* 鴻門宴, *Kunrongyang* 困榮陽, *Jiulishan* 九里山, *Wujiang biba* 烏江逼霸。

38 Zhao Kuangyin (eleven plays): *Zhan Sigu* 斬四姑, *Kun Caofu* 困曹府, *Hehou madian* 賀後罵殿, *Gaopingguan* 高平關, *Tian'e[jun]* 天鵝[郡?], *[X]shui qintu[jie]* 水擒土[杰?], *Zhuanqiang taying* 傳槍踏營, *Xiahedong* 下河東, *Zhan Huangpao* 斬黃袍, *Sao Hua[tang]* 掃華[堂?], *Dadong* 打洞。

39 King Zhou of Shang and other plays based on the *Investiture of Gods* (twelve plays): *Fan Yizhou* 反冀州, *Qinzhanke* 琴斬考, *Fan Wuguan* 反五關, *Shuntianshi* 順天時, *Fengshenbang* 封神榜, *Shuangqimen* 雙旗門, *Nezha naohai*, *Juelongling* 絕龍嶺, *Caishentu* (*Caiyanhuo*) 財神圖(彩煙火), *Huanghezhen* 黃河陣, *Wenzhong xianhun* 聞仲顯魂, *Bandong dazhu* 搬洞打珠. A play with a similar theme on the evil Tang emperor Xizong 僖宗 (862–888): *Baojishan* 寶雞山。

Liu Bei 劉備 and his strategist, Zhuge Liang. To this list we add the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398);⁴⁰ the king of ancient Yue, Goujian 勾踐 (r. 496–465 BCE);⁴¹ the valiant second emperor of Tang 唐 and a grand conqueror, Li Shimin 李世民 (598–649);⁴² and, finally, an exile of the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763), emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 of the Tang (685–762).⁴³

What attracted audiences to these heroes? Certainly, they were not images of imperial power at its pinnacle but, rather, the tales of tribulation, struggle, loss, and victory. None of them, at least as subjects of opera, were omnipotent despots holding the reins of a loyal and efficient bureaucracy. Those topics would be boring and probably impossible to depict in dramatic form. On the contrary, these emperors were either ambitious contenders for power seeking their luck at an auspicious moment (Zhao Kuangyin, Liu Bang, Xiang Yu, King Wu of Zhou, and Li Shimin), talented aspiring nobodies jumping to the top of the social ladder through their intelligence, ruthlessness, and fighting skills (Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, Zhu Yuanzhang), or losers in the violent world of power struggles (King Zhou of Shang, Emperor Xuanzong). If only seemingly, these were common people who at times were distinguished by birth but mostly by their skill and by fortune on their side. Their path to power was not a dull succession or a highway lined with victories. Each of them had to survive innumerable (or possibly innumerable, as it was the job of the narrators and performers to shorten or lengthen their story) tribulations. Before they achieved victory, they were roughed up by defeat and almost experienced the ultimate downfall.

These fascinating characters, moreover, were all founders of dynasties. Their life stories enlightened the topic of primary interest to historians and storytellers: which types of character, abilities, and deeds could deliver to them the Mandate of Heaven and, thus, the right to rule humanity. Conversely, what deeds and what depths of personal immorality, unethical rulership, stupidity, ignorance, indolence, and mismanagement could rip the Mandate from a legitimate dynasty. Other than elaborating the logic of history, as believed, and the deeds and minds of the rulers, the tales of the first emperors included a large number of other characters—opponents, contenders, invaders, and so forth, who shaped these times and furnished plays with many textually rich personalities. Each of these elements guaranteed that the plays were dynamic,

40 Zhu Yuanzhang (five plays): *Huaxianjian* 花仙劍, *Taipingcang* 太平倉, *Jiangdongqiao* 江東橋, *Shuangxiangrong* 雙像蓉, *You taimiao* 遊太廟.

41 Goujian (two plays): *Tuoguo ru Wu* 托國入吳, *Qingheqiao* 清河橋.

42 Li Shimin: *Jie Paiguan* 界牌關.

43 Tang Xuanzong: *Maweiyi* 馬嵬驛, *Shatuo banbing* 沙陀搬兵, *Guiji zuijiu* 貴妃醉酒.

military 武, and simultaneously humorous and pathetic and that they had many turns of events and well-developed characters. Watching them, the audience learned about the past, sympathized with the heroes, detested the villains, and reflected on the forces that propelled history. Or they could enjoy the acrobatics, imagine bygone battles, or simply appreciate (if performed well) the martial arts skills of the performers. Kings, moreover, never appeared in drab costumes: they were clad in the splendor of faux-Ming dress characteristic of opera and temple art depictions of the gods and the rulers.

What did these stories say about the popular understanding of the history of China? What was the role of the choice of the characters and what did it mean? Among the theories about these issues, we should mention the impact on opera of the development of the art of narration and representation. The popularity of stories about particular characters was closely bound up with the development of classical prose, booming relatively cheap publishing as well as an expansion in bookselling in the Qing and during the Republic.⁴⁴ Opera had obviously its own text-based, oral-based, and troupe-based forms of transmission, which meant that some stories ended up being popular across the genres, tunes, and geographic areas, irrespective of discrepancies between various versions of each story. The content of the tales of kings, however, cannot be overlooked. Otherwise, we succumb to subjugating all the narrative power of drama to the performance theory-based explanations that privilege the show, reducing the possible power of the story. Moreover, this power of the theater—its ability to transmit a vision and explanation of history—was never missed by opera critics and reformers in the first half of the twentieth century, whether Chinese or Western.

My explanation of the popularity of such plays, granted the importance of the narrative tradition, is that these pieces humanized the rulers and shortened the distance between the lower social classes and the imperial households, therefore making the rulers approachable and understandable, while, at the same time, making them paragons of moral and ethical behavior. Additionally, these stories presented dramatic and lively visions of the empire and rulership, the opposite of the stately, ritualized, and bureaucratic Confucian idea of kingship. In other words, opera's vision was much closer to the conflict-ridden

44 Leo Ou-fan Lee and Andrew J. Nathan, "The Beginnings of Mass Culture in the Late Ch'ing," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 360–395; Zhang Decheng 張德成, *Chuanju goaqlang yuefu* 川劇高腔樂府 [*A Gaoqlang Tune in the Music of Sichuan Opera*] (1964; reprint, Chongqing: Chongqingshi chuanjuyuan, Sichuansheng chuanju xuexiao, 1979), 5–14.

lives of the commoners who constituted the majority of theater goers. Furthermore, the historical distance between the heroes in the stories and the reality of the audiences made the former into legendary figures whose actual deeds could be altered and elaborated so long as the characters represented certain universal traits. Opera heroes' successes or failures resulted from the application of universal moral principles, and they were in reaction to moral, spiritual, cosmological, and social forces with universal meaning. These stories were as much about personal achievement in a defined period in the past as tales that transmitted the passage of time and the development of human society. They demonstrated the operation of the ever-binding principles: a universal history of humanity that was defined by the imperial structure that we now call China.

Finally, if imperial history wrapped up in opera had an air of universality, it was surely one adjusted to the tastes and worldview of the people who watched it. Thus, it was a story of war and violence, strongmen and massacred victims, valiant fighters and vile traitors: a sensational and highly personal account that left little space for institutional agencies or complex explanations. Instead, these stories maintained strong narrative affinity with Daoist tales of demon quelling and the agency of exceptional individuals reaching for immortality.

4.3 *Popular Heroes*

Although emperors and gods were a significant part of opera's vision of history, they still received only a fraction of the fame won by popular heroes. This motley throng of characters, at least judging by Chongqing's repertoire, was dominated by military braves and supplemented by other kinds of characters: officials, bandits, lovers, beautiful ladies, seducers, tricksters, monks, patriarchs, and so on. The most popular among them was the Northern Song general Yang Ye 楊業 (d. 986) and his descendants,⁴⁵ the braves in the *Three Kingdoms* tradition (Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Cao Cao 曹操, Lü Bu 呂布, etc.) and in the tradition of the *Water Margin* (e.g., Wu Song 武松, Li Kui 李逵).⁴⁶ Others, though less popular with the Chongqing public,

45 Yang family generals (nineteen titles): *Yangjiqiang* 楊家將, *Qixingmiao* 七星廟, *Zuogong daoling* 坐宮盜令, *Wutai xiaofa* 五台削髮, *Balang huiying* 八郎回營, *Shouyang ranxing* 收楊冉興, *Jinqianghui* 金槍會, *Heifengpa* 黑風怕, *Yuanmen zhanzi* 轅門斬子, *Shouyang zaixing* 收楊在興, *Dapoguo* 打破鍋, *Yuwangdian* 禹王鼎, *Yanhuogun* 演火棍, *Zhan Hongzhou* 戰洪州, *Zhanhui you an* 斬輝遊菴, *Wutai hui xiong* 五台會兄, *Silang tan mu* 四郎探母, *Jian huayuan* 講花園, *Dazhan Yuhualong* 打戰余化龍。

46 *Shuihu* tradition (eleven titles): *Zuida Xianmen* 醉打仙門, *Wulongyuan* 烏龍院, *Xi Wusong* 戲武松, *Shuibo Liangshan* 水泊梁山, *Yeyao Shatan* 夜遙殺灘, *Shou Jiangwei* 收姜維, *Shou chantai* 受禪台, *Wusong dadian* 武松打店, *Dushou qinfang* 獨手擒方, *Shouguan[xing]* 收關[勝], *Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳, *Yaoyushuai* 要魚稅。

were outstanding characters such as the Southern Song general Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142), heroes of the Sui 隋 and Tang eras: Yuchi Gong 尉遲恭 (Yuchi Jingde 尉遲敬德, 585–658) and Xue Rengui 薛仁貴 (614–683).⁴⁷ With some reservations, we add to these heroic narratives those of Zhao Kuangyin, who was depicted in opera more as a general in service to the Later Zhou 後周 (951–960) than as an emperor of the Song dynasty. Finally, these selected individuals were followed by a plethora of warriors from the fictionalized histories of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–255 BCE) written by the Ming author Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) and called *Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms* (*Dong Zhou lieguo yanyi* 東周列國演義) or the vernacular versions of the *Classic of History* (*Shiji* 史記), by Sima Qian 司馬遷.⁴⁸

These characters were all ostensibly military men. If we consider Chongqing's theatrical season in 1929–1931 as representative of broader urban tastes in Sichuan, these military figures dominated the historical narrative performed in opera. Among the heroes, we can identify more fighters than plotters; more violent, devoted, and courageous men than cunning and intelligent strategists; more heart than brain. At the same time, there was neither fetishization of the brutes nor utter contempt for wise, manipulative, and ingenious characters. One of the most enticing duos caught in the irresolvable struggle of the Chinese narrative tradition—Cao Cao and Zhuge Liang—were both the focus of many plays. Being martial did not mean senseless violence; on the contrary, it designated living a military life and a mastery of the martial arts.⁴⁹ It meant the concentration of intelligence, fighting skill, and prowess conveyed through movement, dress, and makeup of male characterizations (*sheng*).

47 Yuchi gong: *Shou Heishi* 收黑氏, *Yu[chí][sang]feng* 尉[遲?][喪?]瘋. Xue Rengui: *Dayan huiyao* 打雁回窠, *Kun Caofu* 困曹府, *Motianling* 摩天嶺. Yue Fei: *Mantanghong* 滿堂紅, *Jiulongshan* 九龍山, *Xiangfenyuan* 香粉院, *Hukou[yu]* 虎口[嶼?], *Duo Qiukui* 奪秋魁. *Baiyun'an* 白雲菴 also featured the Song military tragedy and Yuan victory. Other plays on this theme: *Sanjinzhong* 三盡忠, *Touzhuang* 投庄, *Yuanting quanxiang* 元庭勸降, *Xiuqi* 休妻, *Niutoushan* 牛頭山, *Wang Yun zhuicheng* 王允墜城. Another larger-than-life hero of the Tang and Zhou (Wu Zetian) dynasties, Di Renjie 狄仁杰, was also honored by only one opera: *Helaolong* 河老龍.

48 Plays on themes related to the Spring and the Autumn and Warring States periods (twenty-six titles), such as *Huozhuo Zidu* 活捉子都, *Jie Cao bao* 結草報, *Wuleizhen* 五雷陣, *Chu Tangyi* 出棠邑, *Shennongrun* 神農潤, *Baimaoqi* 白旄旗, *Fanguan* 樊館, *Du Lu* 渡蘆, *Zhan Yuanlin* 戰袁林, *You Zhulin* 遊株林, *Zhan Liguang* 斬李廣, *Fucijian* 夫辭劍, *Dayu shajia* 打魚殺家, *Tou Suzhou* 投薊州, *Shou Yangshan* 首陽山, *Luhuatang* 蘆花蕩, *Mapo huiku* 罵坡回窟, *Daofan* 盜芝, *Yucangjian* 魚藏劍, *Daobaimao* 盜白旄, *Cun Ningqi* 荇甯戚, *Chi Qingji* 刺慶忌, *Tongfuling* 銅符令 (based on Sima Qian, *Shiji*), *Ye shui tuo Wu* 鄴水投巫, *Xianyang gong* 咸陽宮, *Gu Sutai* 姑蘇台.

49 See Chabrowski, *Singing on the River*, 219–22.

All these elements highlighted the public addiction to military plays and to performers portraying military heroes. The character of a fighter was also emblematic and exemplary. It conveyed a model of masculinity that was both individual and socially determined. Thus, the legendary warrior appeared determined to pursue his goals, skillful in his craft, directed by his understanding of the surrounding conditions, and embodying the “correct” feelings and the “correct” code of conduct (whether congruent with Confucian teachings or bandit lore).

Moreover, the valiant hero, even one who succeeded by intelligence and not by the sword, was led by emotions and only seldom contained by reason. He was bursting with violence, aggression, and vengeance as much as with love, affection, and insuppressible inclinations. These sentiments were directed toward sworn brothers (e.g., Zhang Fei), the leader and the group (*Water Margin* braves), and the ruler (Yang family generals). At times, they could be in the form of a deep-seated anger linked with audacity (Wu Song killing a tiger; Li Kui), which served as a motivation for actions. The martial hero reached out with his arms to take what he wanted or no less brutally resorted to manipulation in order to arrive at this end. The proclivity for violence often led to his undoing, but it did not, in any way, alter his course of action.

What directed these martial characters, however, was not lust and selfishness (or not only) but unbending loyalty that linked him to the like-minded and serving the same cause as friends, associates, or patrons (in this case, mostly monarchic ones). This unwavering sense of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and devotion supported the hero's sense of righteousness and subordinated all other values, whether filial devotion (*xiao* 孝), moral integrity (*jie* 節), a sense of justice (*yi* 義), or benevolence (*ren* 仁). The elevation of loyalty negated the logic of maximizing personal advantage and eliminated the self-perception and self-identification of an atomized individual. None of the grand characters were alone in building their power or in facing their struggles: only the villains estranged everyone around them and rent the social fabric built on loyalty (King Zhou of Shang). At the same time, loyalty offered an alternative to the family- and lineage-centered social structure, providing an explanation for the social relations between men with a different origin, different ancestry, and difficult to distinguish hierarchical differentiation. The braves in the *Water Margin* and the famous Oath of the Peach Garden (*Taoyuan jieyi* 桃園結義) in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* exemplify exactly that understanding of personal loyalty across the major (family-based/Confucian) social contracts.

The feeling and devotion to the ruler or to the cause, such as the previous union that bound parents and ancestors, was inherited by the virtuous offspring of the heroes and lived longer than original creators of that union. The story

of the *Yang Family Generals* shows that kind of devotion across generations between the heroic fighters and the dynasty to which they professed loyalty. In their case, the service to one house and one family of patrons overrode any willingness to compromise the original pact based on devotion and switching sides to the other patrons, the Liao house (Liaodai 遼代), even if the protagonists in the story could have derived some advantage from such a betrayal. In fact, if we continue with our example of the Yang family, its insistence on the principle worked directly against either its advantage or even physical survival; nevertheless, it was its upholding of the value that marked the family as both exemplary and a paragon of appropriate social conduct.⁵⁰

In fact, most of the popular opera heroes prioritized loyalty to their friends and common cause, without regard to their wealth or lives—for example, refusal of Cao Cao's advances by Zhuge Liang and Guan Yu in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the unity of the bandits in the Liangshan marshes before the Song generals. Their choices were neither simple nor black and white, instead, holding bearing strong similarity to many complex conditions that people encounter.

Moreover, they were not undergirded by any ideology or political creed—although Yang family generals fought against a steppe dynasty, as Yue Fei did against the Jin; it was the survival of the house, dynasty, personal relationship between the patron and the client, and the honor of the ruler safeguarded by the loyalty of his subject that were at stake. Their actions did not arise out of nationalism, as was misinterpreted throughout the twentieth century, by foreigners and Chinese alike.⁵¹ All these traits—prowess, truthfulness to one's feelings, spontaneity, loyalty, devotion, and service to a common cause—placed a hero in a social web that determined his character, personal identity, and physical survival and made him a human being. In addition to being human, he was an ideal to be emulated not only by opera goers but also in the social context of early twentieth-century Chongqing, Sichuan, and China. He embodied the common imagination of what people aspired to be. Yet he was also an exemplar of how they should weave together the threads that were asunder in their surrounding chaotic social fabric, which had long ceased to abide by any of the static family- and lineage-based models derived from Confucian teachings. In

50 For further analysis of “Yang Family Generals” operas from their earliest origin, see Wilt L. Idema, *The Generals of the Yang Family*, trans. Stephen H. West (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2013), vii–xxxiv.

51 Marc Andre Matten, “The Worship of General Yue Fei and His Problematic Creation as a National Hero in Twentieth-Century China,” *Frontiers of History in China* 6, no. 1 (2011). See, e.g., antforeign fears by missionaries in J. McGowan, *Lights and Shadows of Chinese Life* (Shanghai: North China Daily News & Herald, 1909), 187–88.

this way, the hero not only was a representation of past events but also a living paragon of the unchangeable yet historical relationships that continued to exist and to inform the present social and political conditions.

To be sure, however, the military heroes were not the only protagonists in the historical plays. All the plays could be considered historical because they were set in the past and depicted bygone social realities. If that statement is held true then we should broaden our vision of history transmitted by opera. It could portray both factual and fictionalized heroes in wars, the founding and collapse of dynasties, and the broad social and cultural reality communicated through fiction. This broadened horizon populated by a range of lovers, beauties, tricksters, seducers, graduates, judges, magistrates, *yamen* runners, and so on filled the plays previously classified as dramas of love. In that case, there is no reason not to consider the stories of magic and supernatural characters—with their foxes, ghosts, immortals, and demons—as historical. Was the reality portrayed in these plays strikingly different from that in the heroic political romances and dynastic histories?

From the perspective of temporality, certainly not: they existed in the same timeless zone, in Ming robes with a uniform moral code, language, set of beliefs, and worldviews. The majority of the stories, written during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing, reflected a social reality built on a neo-Confucian moral education, pervaded by Buddhist and Daoist beliefs, and showing an absence of a division between natural and supernatural realities (whether through direct intervention or the power of destiny). This kind of reality was an integral representation of the past and present, distinguishable only if one insisted on reading it in one way or another. For most viewers, however, it was a set of stories, adventures, conflicts, romances, and tragedies to which they could relate, and which aroused their emotional responses. These stories were communicated through the language and aesthetics of opera (the only one appropriate and beautiful enough for such stories), and, for that reason, they were a part of their present reality, like any event or object filling their everyday existence.

What can we conclude about this choice of heroes? They reflected the aspirations and perceptions of the watching public: violent, emotional, and principled, but not alien to satirical self-denigration, humor, and irony, without crossing the line into fatalism. They satisfied and explained the vision of a “universal” history: the reasons, motivations, values, actions, and consequences of outstanding people in the past. They transmitted the system of values built on the fundamentals of vernacularized neo-Confucian morality and a belief in the unitarian imperial state structure (world-empire) bound by personal loyalties and patronage. But, above all, the cultural world fortified by opera was structured on a very potent counterculture rooted in the military spirit and

fraternity and supported by a belief in the efficacious power of moral integrity within a supernatural universe derived from Daoist and Buddhist beliefs.

5 Time and Place

5.1 *The Role of the Time in the Opera*

The notion of time is crucial in a discussion of opera heroes. Opera presented a past that was from six hundred to more than three thousand years earlier. The characters in theatrical plays, in their dress, movements, style (tune) of singing, language, and makeup, were given the same historical representation, collapsing any difference in time or space. Indeed, the Song dynasty braves from the *Water Margin* plays (representing the twelfth century) would be outwardly indistinguishable from Cao Cao (in the third century) and King Xuan of Zhou 周宣王 (in the ninth–eighth century BCE). From the audience's perspective, these characters were a part of the historical reality communicated by the language and imagery of the opera to the same degree that they offered valid representations of the history understood as well as a lesson and a corpus of positive and negative examples and as a book of marvels about the adventures and mishaps that can happen.

In reality, these representations eliminated time as a historical factor. Instead, they functioned in an extemporal zone, which affected and interacted with the reality that was contemporaneous with that of opera goers. That is why, for the spectators, whether the action of the play took place in the Shang-Zhou transition (mid-eleventh century BCE), Spring and Autumn and Warring Kingdom periods (771–221 BCE), Three Kingdoms period (220–280), or the Song (960–1279) or Ming dynasties (1368–1644, respectively) was indistinguishable.

The depiction in opera of social relations, codes of conduct, and value systems was identical in any and all historical periods. Evidence that the time factor was eliminated from traditional Sichuanese plays so that they could serve contemporary Republican social needs is legion. We could list the adaptation of the heroic vocabulary by secret societies (e.g., the Gelaohui), the lifestyles in the Liangshan marshes, and the bandit-like demeanor; viewing the changing political reality as an opera-style heroic battle; and the omnipresent self-understanding (or disgust due to failure to achieve the ideal) by members of the higher and lower classes based on the representations reproduced in opera.⁵² This timelessness and thus universality of the history

52 Though for higher classes, it may have been more of a game or one of many coats in self-representation. John Fitzgerald, "Continuity within Discontinuity: The Case of

learned through opera led outside observers in the last decades of the nineteenth century, such as Archibald J. Little, to claim that the common people, even the poorest boatmen, knew their national history much better than any of their counterparts anywhere else in the world.⁵³ Little mistook the concept of “national history,” which in those years was being chiseled into the minds of Europeans through the newly created national school systems, for an entirely different concept of the past—the universal human history that informed, instructed, and chastised and thus one that even Yangzi boatmen knew and to which they could refer in their lives.

This does not mean that audiences in Sichuan in the 1930s had neither the capacity for historical thinking (those who read classics and histories or graduated from modern schools certainly did distinguish different epochs and diachronic changes) nor the perception necessary to distinguish the past from the present. Rather, two different orders of relevance exist that relate to two different ways of dealing with the past: the first, built on the timeless, value-communicating rendition of history as transmitted by opera; and the second, constructed by experience and current events that is mundane and valueless, associated with daily drudgery.

The former functioned not unlike the myths and sacred stories shared by religious communities (Egyptian and Greek myths, biblical, Koranic, Buddhist stories, etc.)—that is, always valid because they transcended time through what Jan Assmann called “the floating gap.” This is a process that allows a mythical event to be seen as valid and accessible in any moment later in

Water Margin Mythology,” *Modern China* 12, no. 3 (1986): 361–400; Wang Di, “Mysterious Communication: The Secret Language of the Gowned Brotherhood in Nineteenth Century Sichuan,” *Late Imperial China* 29, no. 1 (2008): 77–103; Whalen Lai, “From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 53 (1994): 29–65; Yeh Wen-hsin, “Dai Li and the Liu Geqing Affair: Heroism in the Chinese Secret Service During the War of Resistance,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 48, no. 3 (1989): 556–58.

53 “In connection to this fact it is interesting to mention that, when travelling in China through the scenes rendered famous in song and history, I have been astonished at the accurate knowledge of the old wars and dynasties displayed by illiterate boatmen on the river and by our porters on land journeys. They are never tired of pointing out historic sites to the foreign traveller, and expatiating upon the great deeds of former generations. It was a long time before I could learn whence these men derived their knowledge, so far surpassing the acquaintance with history displayed by similar classes in our own country. I at last discovered that they had learnt their history in that pleasantest and most impressive of all schools, the Theatre. Elaborate historical dramas form a bulk of the performances given in the public theatre, which almost every village in China possesses, by companies of strolling players who are paid by subscriptions from the more wealthy inhabitants” (Archibald John Little, *Gleanings from Fifty Years in China* [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1910], 217–18).

history, such as the canonical and codified myths of origin, or, as I extend the definition here, a sacred story. These histories of heroes and kings made sacred focus on a shared story and common codes of meanings. They transcended the narrow definition of an artistic creation and a performance while being able to speak for universal “truths” and unchallenged “facts” that were thus instructive, transformative, and efficacious. The place and time in which opera bloomed during the Qing—a religious festival and a temple stage—seem to have strengthened the association between opera and stories with universal meaning, in the same manner in which the content and meaning of operas were determined by occasions bound up with the religious cult. Despite the crisis in traditional religiosity beginning in the 1900s, that sacred and universal feature of the repertoire and its heroes remained in place.⁵⁴ Moreover, another characteristic shared by opera and the sacred stories was its choice of characters: fictionalized, larger than life historical heroes engaged in fabulous adventures—all much more enticing than real life. Finally, no limits were set on the appropriation and use of these stories to one’s advantage: whether they were embellished or simplified, no adverse consequences befell either the artist or the audience.

The latter kind of history consisted of both experience or existence within the living memory of the Qing dynastic past and the Republican political reality. These two kinds of recent historical past had neither the hallowed power nor the flexibility or beauty. On the contrary, contemporary histories were ensnared by multiple problems, one of which was the ethnic difference between the Han audiences and the Manchu rulers. In fact, an obsessive public emphasis on the ethnic distinction during Qing rule, an unwavering official ban on operas critical of the political order, the dynasty, and the steppe people resulted in the disappearance of current affairs from the opera repertoire. Any relevant comment on current conditions was buried in metaphor or abandoned *in toto*.⁵⁵ This became such a permanent trait of opera that even in the material pertaining to the early 1930s, I found only one play that took

54 On “canonization” and “codification,” see Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 140, 248–49; for a definition of the “floating gap,” see Jan Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych* [*Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*], trans. A. Kryczyńska-Pham, ed. R. Traba (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2008), 64–65.

55 Wu Jen-shu 吳仁恕, “Ming Qing zhiji Jiangnan shishiju de fazhan ji qisuo faying de shehui xintai” 明清之際江南時事劇的發展及其所反映的社會心態 [Development of the Current Affairs and Other Reflecting Social Attitudes Operas in Ming and Qing Era

place in the Qing period. It was a satire on the lascivious monks called Iron Dragon Temple (Tielongsi 鐵龍寺), based on the novel *Judge Shi* (*Shi gong'an* 施公案), which took place during the reign of Kangxi. The reintroduction of current problems and contemporary society on stage, however attractive to politicized youth at the end of the Qing and leftist artists and activists in the Republic, offered little challenge and had limited means against the developed form of opera that portrayed “universal” history. Indeed, in the entire 1929–1931 season discussed in these pages, I found only two plays that either dealt with the political situation at the time (anti-Japanese) or were so called “plays on contemporary problems” (*shizhuangxi* 時裝戲).⁵⁶ Contemporary stories also lacked the adventurous character and the narrative flexibility of the old plays. Any embellishment of the surrounding reality could be challenged as unrealistic or contrary to real life, thus damaging the story’s credibility. Additionally, any contemporary hero could be disliked by a potential opponent, who holds different political views. Or worse, such a hero could be perceived as alien or irrelevant.

5.2 *The Role of the Place in Opera*

The choice of a place in the plays confirms the universality of the opera’s transmitted history while undermining any notion of regionality, particularity, or temporal historicity. We could divide their geographic locus of the majority of plays into three groups: the capital, the border, and the broad Lower Yangzi region. Many plays referred to other places, whether Sichuan or Shandong, but they are far outnumbered by these three.

The capital is a generic notion that was universal in any era and any story. It was the seat of the court and imperial power, the place where the emperor resided and from which he ran the state. It was a place of court intrigue, rising and waning careers, ultimate success, and sudden collapse. At the same time, the capital was a center for education, where students and candidates flocked to take the examinations (stock characters in love stories and romantic tragedies), only to be bewitched by beautiful prostitutes, cunning fox-women, and so on. The capital was more functional than specific. Opera goers surely knew that in the Tang era, Chang’an 長安 was not the Northern Song-era Bianliang 汴梁, but they were neither the cities nor their distinguishing characteristic on which the plays centered. It was always the institutions, functions, ways of

Jiangnan], *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiu jikan* 中央研究院近代史研究所集刊 31 (June 1999): 1–48.

56 They are: *Da Riben* 打日本, against the Japanese, presented on October 20, 1931, and *Qingtian nüxia* 情天女俠 on marriage, presented on October 3, 1931.

living, and ensuing adventures mentioned earlier that made the capital and their ethnographic or architectural features. The omission of particulars and the focus on the generic strengthened the view that both space and time in operas were generalized and universalized. It also exaggerated the centrality of the role of personality, of values, and of the plays' action.

The border was an equally unspecified area. In the tradition of the *Yang Family Generals* or in the stories of Yue Fei, it was a northern region in the empire, an area of warfare with expansionist nomadic empires. This characteristic is often indicated as proof of the anti-foreign and xenophobic sentiment toward all things that were not Chinese, however, this judgment is unfounded. The border was an area linked to a particular action and the development and expression of specific characters. It was a space in which personal heroism, loyalty, military prowess, and valiant masculinity were put to the test. If we strip away later interpretations of Yue Fei's story as a nationalist narrative, in what way did his struggle differ from the one waged by Goujian against the kingdom of Wu or from Zhang Fei's and Zhuge Liang's struggles to cross the northern passes of the Kingdom of Shu to oppose Cao Cao and the Kingdom of Wei? All these stories demonstrate how character is forged in the battle: all of them laud loyalty to one's ruler and to one's brothers in arms. All of them are areas in which strategic genius and mastery of the martial arts were used in combat and in shaping the figure and the fame of the warrior. In these stories of struggle, the ethnic origin of the enemy did not matter. Although a certain ethnic bias was always present in the classical texts, we cannot be sure how much it was exaggerated or diminished in the plays. What mattered was the formidable opponent on the other side of the border and the fight against him, a duel in which only one can emerge the victor. As in the case of the capital, however, this space was generic and served a narrative function, not a historical or geographic one.

The Lower Yangzi was a space somewhat dissimilar to the capital and the border, which each designated a specific location on the map and referred to cities, landscapes, and people who inhabited a particular region. The Lower Yangzi was unlike the "capital" and the "border" in two ways. First, because of the transmission of the large repertoire of the Kun operas to the regional styles, such as Sichuan Opera, most of the civilian dramas of love were centered in this region. It became an area inhabited by beautiful young ladies and, more or less, talented youth striving to marry them. It was also the locus of much of the tragedy of war and destitution, abandonment and refusal, unfilial and loveless acts that were subject of so many plays. Second, although transmission of Kun also played a role here, the Lower Yangzi functioned as a cultural center of the country. It was a reputation established not only through the historical

developments (quotas on examination graduates) but also through reflecting the temporal lag between the world of opera and that of contemporary reality: opera stories resided in a reality more representative of the Ming than of late Qing or Republican China. Hence, as in opera, it was a region packed with officials, examination graduates, aspiring scholars, talented youths, and ladies. To some degree, the Lower Yangzi provided what a “country” or a “hinterland” was in the imaginary geography of the plays: a place from which people originated and where they lived, where the dramas of everyday life took place, from which talent was recruited, and which was governed by the imperial administration. It was apart from the capital and from the border. It was civilized, both urban and rural, civic, domestic, filled with petty marvels and mysteries that were not alien or threatening in a way that would require life-and-death choices.

Consequently, for opera audiences, the Lower Yangzi stood for what we now call China at peace, in its essentialized, ahistorical form. The capital stood for the empire as an engine of power, career, and intrigue, whereas the border represented China’s warlike heroic face. We need to stress that none of these “Chinas” was a nationally, ethnically, and historically conceived body but, rather, they were three faces of the universal human condition, invested with moral values and good as descriptions of both the (universal) past and present conditions.

6 Lessons

We have repeatedly mentioned that opera was a moralizing phenomenon. What did it teach its public in the 1920s and 1930s? What did it omit? Certainly, the meaning of heroism was prioritized. It was not merely an idea of bravery in battle and fierceness in combat, but a complicated relational social understanding of what makes a hero. At times, such figures could even show weakness, inability, or stupidity, but they put their lives second to the cause for which they fought: their loyalty to and sacrifice for their sworn brothers and patrons, their unwavering support for the network of social relations that determined their character, directed their actions, and defined them as human beings. The loyalty and sacrifice for the common cause of the particular group—whether bandits or kings of “legitimate” monarchies—was a singular gauge of the person’s value. All the other values, whether internalized or externalized, took second place in determining the overall judgment (and thus popularity) of a hero.

The elevation of loyalty above all else made conflicts of loyalty the primary subject of plays. A choice, a conflict, and a compromise (often damaging, if not catastrophic) between faithfulness to one’s family, and thus filial piety, to the ruler, and thus loyalty, and to one’s sworn brothers and upholders of

the cause could be riven with endless fights and torment. The popular stories in the canon of the *Three Kingdoms*, the *Yang Family Generals*, Yue Fei, the *Water Margin*, and others demonstrated in every detail the complexity of human existence in the face of such contradictory social obligations. In each of them, however, the sworn brother and patron prevailed; the birth family was treated as more important than the legitimate monarch; and the monarch could be the main recipient of devout loyalty if what one could lose was just his own life and the lives of his children. Nevertheless, operas had no simple answers; instead, the contradictions were revealed, discussed, and elaborated, demonstrating the difficulty of choice before each of the heroes and the complexity of lessons to be learned by audiences about their own choices. What needs to be highlighted, however, largely because of the popular nationalist reading of the classics, the state and Chinese ecumene were not subjects of loyalty; rather, this loyalty was personalized and often centered on the ruler and the royal family—factual patrons and protectors to whom one owed service—and not on an abstract state. The story of the *Yang Family Generals* demonstrated this with rare clarity: although Yang Ye and each of his seven sons all fought for the Song, various conditions made one of its members loyal to the Liao and another to abandon the family and worldly affairs by choosing monkhood at Wutaishan. These choices were not irrevocable and did not turn any of the members of the Yang family into traitors to the nation (Hanjian 漢奸). This vocabulary, as discussed by Paul Cohen, emerged during the Republic in reinterpreting well-known stories (e.g., the one about Goujian, the king of Yue) but were alien to the meaning of operas in their manifestation in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁷

In spite of the bias toward martial values and a personalized sense of loyalty, operas emanated from a society shaped by the Three Teachings and its simplified code of conduct called the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues (*sangang wuchang* 三綱五常). Moreover, the strength of these basic relations guiding society was reinforced by a clear belief in reincarnation and the power of mercy (derived from Buddhism), retribution in the afterlife (Buddhism and Daoism), and the power of the supernatural in controlling, directing, and influencing human life. It is no surprise that, even two decades after the imperial demise the traditional code of conduct was not uprooted. The dearth of other teachings, the obvious weakness and moral emptiness of the militarized Republican order, and the unpopularity of the other religions (other than pockets of Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) legitimized the old

57 See Paul A. Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

moral order. It needs to be underlined, however, that opera was a strong voice in the relativizing of moral teachings and subordinating them to the particularized social codes and personalized interpretations. Most stories and histories presented on stage had little to do with preaching and proselytizing; on the contrary, they showed how things had always worked and how they would continue to work in the society in which factional social power is a kind of morality in itself. If these stories advocated a particularistic approach to the realm of morality, then they also made the case for pragmatism, either in accepting the prevailing conditions or in scuttling ideals if they did not serve one's social circle (family, brotherhood, patronage network, imperial family, etc.).

This opera-based history and morality also had its absent heroes: those who prevailed in the educated, elite, court, or national history of China. The operas that demonstrated the universal history of China and advocated a specific morality in the 1920s and 1930s paid no heed to the cultural heroes of the elites and the nation builders and ignored much of the imperial and Republican history of the previous five-odd hundred years. One would be hard pressed to find in them Confucius and his disciples or any of the rulers and heroes canonized in the dynastic historiography. They showed some signs of Buddhist histories, though they were folded into infrequent references to the literary canon related to the *Journey to the West*. None of the rulers, generals, seafarers, or officials who followed the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, ever mounted the stage, nor was there any place for the Manchu emperors and their people. The same can be said of the Republican revolutionaries, warlords, and contemporary activists: none were of interest to audiences or had anything to contribute to the drama of Sichuan theater, which overlooked the present and time-bound history. "The present" had little to offer to universal history.

7 Concluding Remarks

The history of opera in Sichuan is written by the victors: intellectuals turned culture cadres. It is more integrative and much more teleological than the historical reality. It sanctions intellectuals' work as that of improvers of culture who advanced it from the vulgar traditional opera to a politically geared propaganda tool that advanced Sichuan's society in the movement toward liberation (typically the communist one). In this narrative, intellectuals were heard and listened to by the performers and opera audiences; their work made sense and sooner or later bore fruit in the form of the new culture. First, a successful spoken drama boom developed during the war and then "opera's golden age" began in the 1950s. As demonstrated above, this interpretation is anachronistic

in most regards, if not plainly wrong. It lacks appropriate contextualization in the historical social reality and ignores the agency of the people involved in this historical process, as it simply represents an inventive remaking of the past by the victorious CCP.

In the 1920s and 1930s, commercial opera in Sichuan experienced a boom in its scale, size, and choice of repertoire catering to the progressively more theater-addicted public. The popularity of *zhezixi* proves that the new reality of urban life in Republican Sichuan promoted their own patterns of cultural consumption and, as seen with film in Europe and the US, encouraged diversity and multiplicity in the struggle against boredom. This culture of opera was a fundamental part of the reality of Sichuan's cultural life from the beginning of the century until 1949. Irrespective of all the novelties in Sichuan during the war or attacks by intellectuals, it went largely unaltered until the CCP victory.

During the Republic, opera responded to and shaped public attitudes and Sichuan's popular culture. It provided audiences with stories seen as having universal meaning and having explanatory power that helped in navigating the surrounding sociocultural reality. It taught society valid lessons on the basis of the mythologized history—a history that never ceased to exist and held a permanent value in both the past and the present. Opera offered a rich choice of stories, but they did not function as canonic works with an immutable nature and metaphysical power. Rather, they operated as archetypes and valid depictions of true social relations and of human characters. Finally, and importantly, opera entertained audiences and satisfied their need for beauty and joy as well as for action and diversion from their otherwise mostly difficult lives.

Illustration Quire



PLATE 1 Performance of Sichuan Opera at one of the first (and the only surviving until nowadays) commercial venues in Chengdu, Yuelai Jingpin Xiaowutai 悅來精品小舞臺 in 2015. Yuelai chayuan 悅來茶園 was established in 1908 as a model for the other joint-stock theater companies in the Sichuan.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 2 Traditional (as developed in the 1910s and 1920s) spatial arrangement of the audience and the stage in the Yuelai theater-cum-teahouse

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 3 Fengcheng 豐盛 town in vicinity of Chongqing preserved the typical spatial organization of small Sichuanese towns
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 4
Baixiang Street 白象街 in central Chongqing. In the 1920s and 1930s most of the Chongqing's newspapers had offices in the buildings visible in the picture. The street (now partially demolished in an urban gentrification project) was in the center of a prosperous business district where banks and commercial opera houses congregated. Picture taken in 2007.
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 5 The main opera stage of the Huguang huiguan 湖廣會館 in Chongqing. It is a part of the temple of the Hubei and Hunan sojourners devoted to the Great Yu 大禹.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 6 The second theater stage of the Palace of the King Yu 禹王宮 in the Chongqing's Huguang huiguan. Sculptures and bas-reliefs depict scenes from the opera.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 7 Bas-reliefs on the second theater stage of the Palace of the King Yu 禹王宫 in the Chongqing's Huguang huiguan depicting scenes from the opera

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 8 An opera stage of the Qi'an gongsuo 齊安公所 in the compound of the Huguang huiguan in Chongqing

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 9 City of Langzhong 閬中 (also called Baoning fu 保寧府) on the Jialing River 嘉陵江. It is among the largest preserved historical urban centers in Sichuan. Many documents preserved in the Nanbu 南部 County Archive pertain to the area and the city of Langzhong.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 10 An opera stage of the Longcangong 龍藏宮 (Hidden Dragon Palace) in the Longxing 龍興 Town (north-west from Chongqing). The opera stage is perched above the temple gate (the so-called “mountain gate 山門”). It was a typical arrangement for theater stages and can also be observed in other temples in Longxing and in Chongqing’s Huguang huiguan.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 11 Longcanggong (Longxing Town): the open space between the stage and the main hall of the temple allowed for accommodating large crowds during the celebrations-cum-opera festivals.
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 12 An opera stage in the Longxingsi 龍興寺 (Longxing temple) in the Longxing town. The area allotted for the audience/celebrants in temple could easily accommodate all the inhabitants of the town and its environs.
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 13
Opera stage in Dafudi 大夫第, the temple devoted to all the lineages of the area of Longxing Town. The structure was reconstructed in the post-Mao decades. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



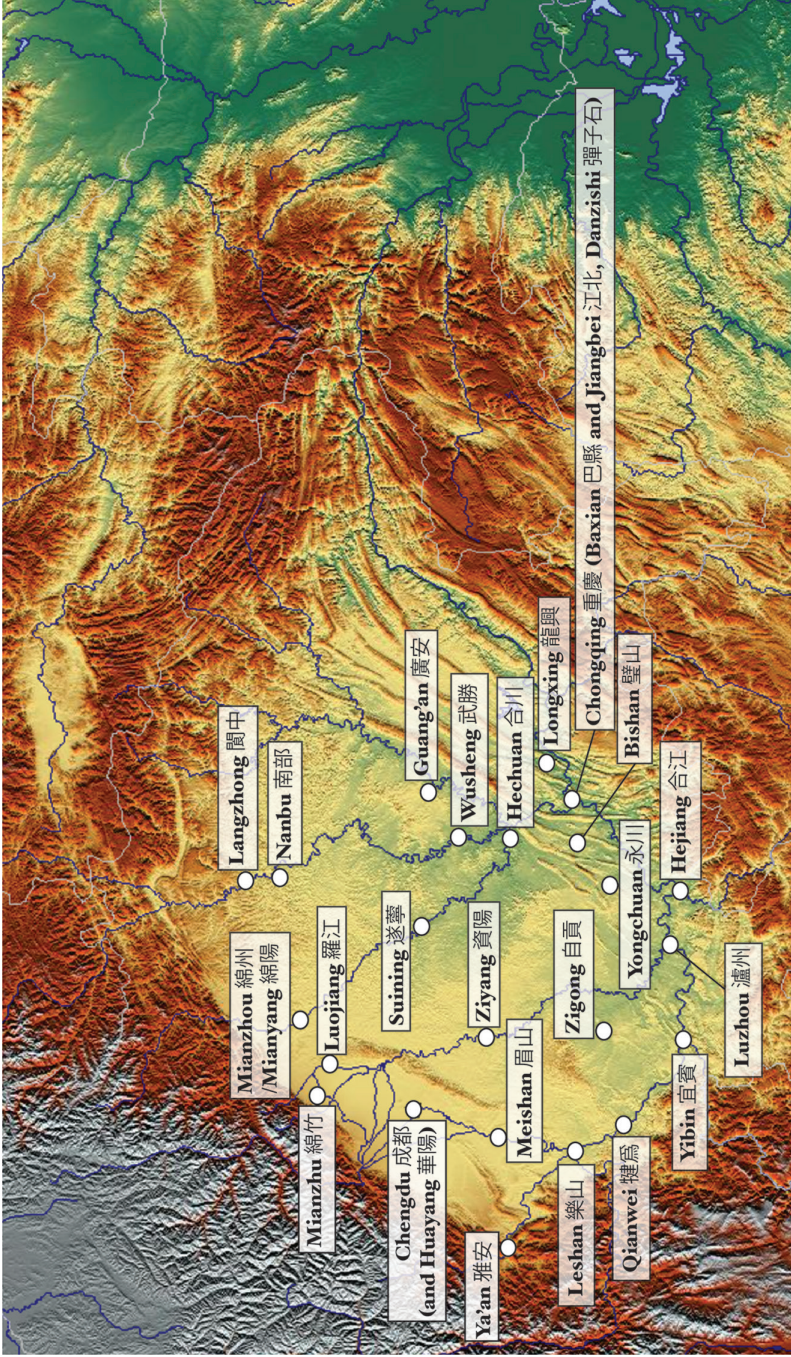
PLATE 14 Theater stage of the Bao lineage temple 包氏祠堂 in Longxing Town. The structure was reconstructed in the post-Mao decades. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



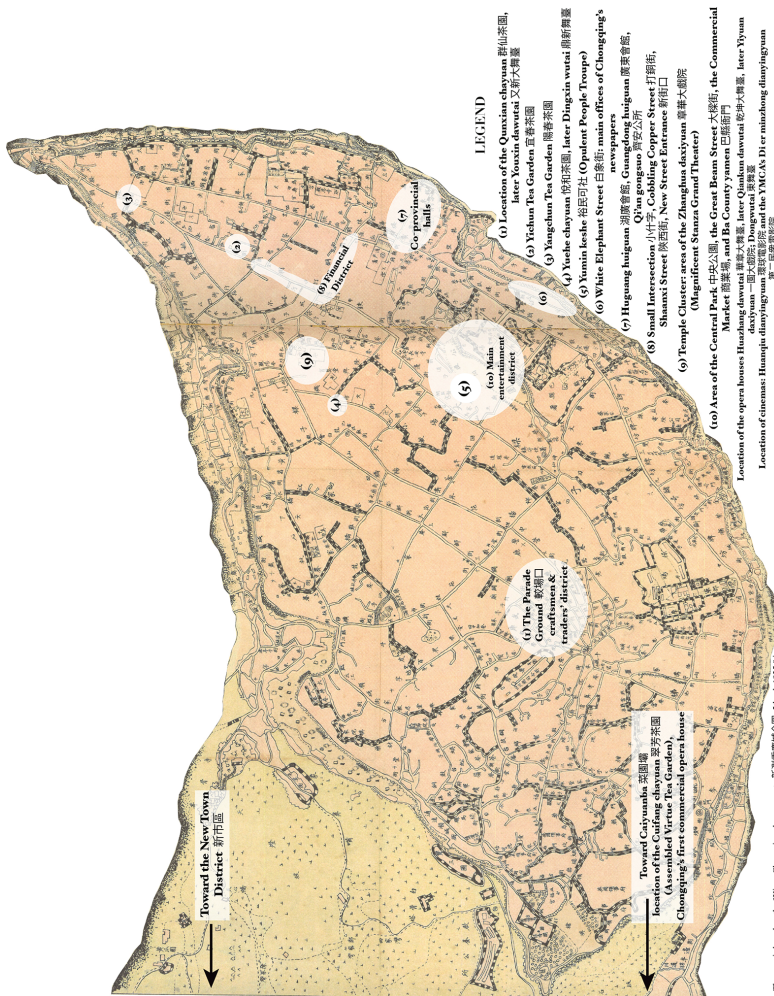
PLATE 15 Theater in Anren 安仁 town in Dayi 大邑 county, founded by Liu Wenhui 劉文輝 (Sichuan warlord, governor of Xikang, member of the prominent Republican Liu clan). This theater, built in the warlord's hometown, was meant to serve as a model modern venue.
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PLATE 16 Sichuan Opera used for entertaining guests at the food court in central Chengdu (Chunxi Street 春熙路) in 2016
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



MAP 1 Map of Sichuan
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



LEGEND

- (1) Location of the Queshan chuyuan 魁山茶園, later Yuexin dawutai 又新大戲臺
- (2) Yichuan Tea Garden 宜眷茶園
- (3) Yongchun Tea Garden 永春茶園
- (4) Yiede chuyuan 悅悅茶園, later Dingxin wotai 鼎新閣臺
- (5) Yuanin keshi 源仁可社 (Opulent People Troop)
- (6) White Elephant Street 白象街; main offices of Chongqing's Huguang huiguan 滙源會館, Guangdong huiguan 廣東會館, Qian gongbao 前報公所
- (7) Small Intersection 小十字, Cobbling Copper Street 打銅街, Shannxi Street 陝西街, New Street Entrance 新街口
- (8) Temple Cluster area of the Zhuanghua chuyuan 華華大戲院 (Magnificent Shinnan Grand Theater)
- (9) Area of the Central Park 中央公園, the Great Beam Street 大梁街, the Commercial Market 商業街, and Ba County yamen 巴縣縣衙
- (10) Main entertainment district

Location of the open houses Huanqiang diangyingyuan 寰球電影院 and the YMCAs 1) or minzhong diangyingyuan 民衆電影院

Toward the New Town District 新市區

Towered Caiyuanlu 塔園樓
Location of the Cuijing chuyuan 翠景園
(Assembled Virtue Tea Garden),
Chongqing's first commercial open house

The map is based on the "New Chongqing" (新重慶) map, published in 1925, in the book "Chongqing City History" (重慶城市歷史), edited by the Chongqing Municipal Government (重慶市政府), Chongqing, China (重慶, 中國), 1925. The map is available at the National Library of China (中國國家圖書館), Beijing, China (北京, 中國).

MAP 2 Map of Theaters in Chongqing
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

PART 3

Creating the New World



The Divide: Local Intellectuals and the Cultural Conflict

Contrary to what much of the teleological narratives of the cultural “development” in Republican China state, the growing divide between popular culture and modern culture was not in the genetic code of the reformist and revolutionary movements born on May 4, 1919. Nor was the division between “old” and “new” culture predetermined by the fact that the former represented a pre-Republican pre-May 4 condition, whereas the latter referred to the rejuvenation movement of a selected enlightened group of intellectuals. These anachronistic assumptions obscure the reasons, diversity, and incongruity of attitudes and ideas, the nonlinearity of development, and the complex nature of the “old” and the “new” cultures. In this chapter, following a Chongqing-based case study, I reconstruct the reasons for changes in attitudes toward the theater arts that occurred from the mid-1920s to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937. Later in the chapter, I analyze the successive two decades, in which the goals formulated before World War II were put into practice, and the discourse turned to power politics. First, however, my focus is more on words than deeds.

The underlying assumption in the following analysis is that urban commercial opera and the twentieth-century Chinese intelligentsia, their culture, their institutional frameworks, and their modes of functioning both resulted from the same sociopolitical changes that took place in the last decade of Qing rule.¹ In other words, Westernized intellectuals writing newspaper articles that hailed the leadership of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936, Zhou Shuren 周樹人) and were inspired by Lenin were not much “older” than commercial theaters staging modified traditional stories for entertainment-starved publics in Shanghai, Chengdu, or Hechuan. They had common roots: the collapsed imperial order and consequent substitution of hierarchy, canon, ritual, and religious celebration with commercialization, capitalist search for profit, revolutionary politics, and the power of the gun. This is the main reason why both shared many commonalities: they occupied the same medial and cultural space that had been

1 C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2016), 3–20. An important recent work on the topic of handbooks and intellectuals’ educational enterprise in Republican China is: Peter Zarrow, *Educating China: Knowledge, Society, and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

vacated by the imperial cultural and ideological institutions. Both offered a response to the changing conditions of life in the first decades of the early twentieth century, though employing a very different form and language. Their main difference was in the claimed lineage: opera referred to the tradition of an undefined but certain antiquity while innovating in the form of delivery; by contrast, revolutionary intellectuals and the fathers of spoken drama leaned on the universalized European enlightenment and various strands of then-contemporary revolutionary tradition. Neither common origins nor different self-perceptions predetermined the conflict, division, or estrangement that emerged in the 1930s. In fact, in the 1910s and 1920s, the content of opera was largely treated as neutral or even seen in a positive light; the theaters were encouraged and publicly funded and, apart from some individuals (Lu Xun!), even village festivals did not cause much outrage or resistance. This is the main reason that we should study the emergence of the violent iconoclastic turn against so-called traditional opera with more attention to the detail, agency, diversity of ideas, and temporality and the reasons for them.

1 *Commercial Daily's Explorations and Experimentations with New Drama*

Even though Chongqing was the press and entertainment center of Sichuan, with firm personal and intellectual connections to national centers, it was not fertile ground for tabloid press and gossip culture as were Shanghai and Beijing. Opera was advertised, staged, and sometimes discussed, but without much evidence of the opera craze so typical of the capital or the coastal metropolis.² As mentioned previously, the boom in opera-related woodblock printing occurred during the Republican era, but no locally produced tabloid appeared in that period. This divergence from the Shanghai or Tianjin 天津 media markets was most probably a result of Sichuan's relative poverty, high

2 In the late 1920s, many articles appeared with news on opening new stages, events, criminal acts, and accidents related to theaters and the actors. These pieces of news were not sensationalistic, e.g., on the opening new opera house in Shanghai style, "Xinxin dawutai 新新大舞台" *Chongqing xinminbao*, November 4, 1929, 7; on the meeting of Sichuan warlords held in the Chengdu's most prestigious theater, "Chengdu Yuelaiyuan zhiyichu Qunyinghui 成都悅來園之一齣羣英會"; opera played *Qunyinghui* [*Gathering of Heroes*] in the Three Kingdoms tradition, *Chongqing xinminbao*, June 1929, 3. Other stories were about children bitten by an enormous rat in the opera house called Youxin wutai, *Xinshubao*, February 1930, 10; suspicion that a theater operated illegally (without paying dues), in *Shangwu ribao*, February 7, 1934, 11.

cost of production and circulation, low readership, and limited circulation of titles outside the main cities—all results of the province's general socioeconomic and political conditions.³

The newspapers published in Chongqing addressed the readership and voiced the ideas of a few thousand relatively well-educated individuals who maintained a liberal outlook with left-wing leanings.⁴ After an initial period of revolutionary contestation in 1911–1912, when the press provided a platform for reform, the anti-Qing movement, and eventually Republican revolution, the press was more preoccupied with commercial and political matters than with cultural reform.

This started to change in 1923, when *Commercial Daily* (*Shangwu ribao*) joined the *huaju* movement by publishing a number of scripts by leading young writers of spoken plays as well as by several nationalist political figures. In July 1923, in daily installments, the paper reprinted Xiong Foxi's 熊佛西 (1900–1965) first play, *Sorrows of Youth* (*Qingchunde beiai* 青春底悲哀) originally written and published in 1922. According to Yang Caibin 楊材彬, it was one of the important early works of the May Fourth youth theater movement. *Commercial Daily's* publication can be understood as an effort to introduce the reading public in Chongqing to some of the most current literary movements in the coastal culture centers.⁵ Otherwise, these works were available only by subscription (often delayed for weeks) or through buying books from a catalogue: both methods were much less accessible than the local newspaper. Needless to say, the play was not staged in the city, but it did open up discussion about the role of the arts and theater in the social and cultural development of the

3 Tim Wright proposed an indicative average per capita income in Sichuan as below 57.3 percent of the “national average,” in “Distant Thunder: The Regional Economies of Southwest China and the Impact of the Great Depression,” *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2000): 703.

4 According to Japanese data in 1932, Chongqing's three main newspapers, *Shangwu ribao*, *Xinshubao*, and *Xinminbao*, together sold 8,700 copies. Their social range must therefore have been quite limited, assuming the city's population of less than half a million inhabitants. *Gaimushō jōhō-bu, gaikoku niokeru shūbun Shōwa 7-nenban jōkan* (*Manshū itaru Shina no bu*) 外務省情報部, 外国に於ける新聞 昭和7年版 上巻 (満洲及支那の部) [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department, Showa 7th Year, Volume 1 (Manchuria and China)*] (Tokyo: Kokuritsu kokkai Toshokan, 1932), 106.

5 *Shangwu ribao*, July 17–21, July 23–27, 1923 (presumably also July 13–14 and 16, 1923, because I collected only from the fourth installment, and the play was published every day except Sundays), all on page 11. “Xiong Foxi 熊佛西,” in Yang Caibin 楊材彬, *Zhongguo dabaikē quanshu, xiju* 中國大白科全書, 戲劇 [Great Encyclopedia of China, Opera], http://lib.wordpedia.com/index.php?md=cp_index&cl=index&at=search_cont&query=23&id=59306&fangshi=%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%87%E8%A9%9E%E6%A2%9D&keyword=%E7%86%8A%E4%BD%9B%E8%A5%BF&title=%E7%86%8A%E4%BD%9B%E8%A5%BF (accessed April 10, 2018).

country. A discussion continued for the next few months. Moreover, it started a small series of drama scripts published in the newspaper. They included short pieces, such as a romance by Ouyang Lan 歐陽蘭 titled *An Arrow of Love* (*Aizhijian* 愛之箭) and Chen Guofu's 陳果夫 (1892–1951)—later one of the principal members of the Guomindang's CC Clique—anti-Confucian, anti-Buddhist, and anti-imperialist piece *The People of the Sage Kang Steal Buddhist Scriptures* (*Kangshengren dao jing* 康聖人盜經).⁶

These publications, very limited in their number and with a not very significant impact, appeared contemporaneously in the first printed discussions on the role of art in the formation and reform of society of the Chinese Republic. One such piece published on July 23, 1923, by Jia Bai 嘉白 (prob. a pseudonym), “Three Main Insights into the Current Artistic Education (Jindai yishu jiaoyu-shangde san da jiandi 近代藝術教育上的三大見地),” stated that because modern art education is much more an issue of social reception than an outcome of artists’ will and because “life without work is a crime, labor 勞動 without art is animal-like,” there are three ways in which society can be improved 改良 through art. First, it is necessary to remodel the way citizens 國民 spend their leisure time; second, every person should ascend to the higher level of pure 純潔 entertainment; third, creating art (labor of making art) has to be considered a real form of labor 藝術的勞動, 才算真的勞動.”⁷ The next day, the discussion was broadened further with arguments linking the economic prosperity of the country and society to artistic development. The main claim of the article was that economic development is indivisible from the widespread access to and participation of society in the arts. The lowering of artistic standards and scarcity of funds for the arts lead to social degradation and economic stagnation. The recipe for future national prosperity is extensive arts education, popularization of works of art, and training of the public in art criticism.⁸

During the same month, *Commercial Daily* gave a forum to Lu Bingqian 陸並謙 and his discussion of the role and aims of arts education. He equated the significance of an artistic upbringing with that of inculcating knowledge and morality and stated that its main objective is to teach children the ability to perceive beauty in the world. Aesthetics has two purposes: increasing happiness and increasing beauty (concurrent with a decrease in ugliness) in the surrounding environment. The art/beauty and joy they bring were public and altruistic 無私的快樂. As the author claimed, they spring from the

6 Chen Guofu, *Shangwu ribao*, February 20–21, 1924; Ouyang Lan, *Shangwu ribao*, February 28, 1924, both p. 11.

7 *Shangwu ribao*, July 23, 1923, 11.

8 *Shangwu ribao*, July 24, 1923, 11.

revolutionary enlightened progressive tradition epitomized by the French Revolution and thus offer hope for “cleansing humanity’s morality 清淨人類的道德”. Art (beauty/aesthetics) is “a principle-governing universe 宇宙間的共同原理” present in each and every emanation 表現, while morality makes each element 體 in the universe obey its rules: that is why morality and beauty are synonymous.⁹ Later, after listing a few issues, such as why such education has a positive social impact, Lu Bingqian concluded that because people have needs beyond material satisfaction, art is necessary for preventing a descent into barbarity and into the falsehood of religion. In the face of the assaulting force of capitalism, Western materialism, and even socialism, in which only a few can move beyond materialism, there is little hope of saving people from this calamity but arts education.¹⁰

After these articles, for more than three years there was no discussion about the questions of art and theater in the Chongqing press. I found only one more text in the 1920s that treated the topic of art and musical critique. On December 28, 1926, *Commercial Daily* published a strongly worded essay by Xiong Zhenggou 熊正鈞 titled “Relationship between Music and Society (Yinyue yu shehui guanxi 音樂與社會關係).” After discussing the antiquity of Chinese music and its civilizational importance at some length, Xiong concluded that this branch of art had degenerated and now lay in ruins. At the same time, from the sixteenth century onward, Europeans managed to reorder their musical production and experienced a flourishing of art at all social levels and in every location; it led cultural progress and buttressed Western power. In China, on the contrary, those who propagated the Three Principles of the People (aka GMD, Nationalist Party) produced songs that were awful and impossible to understand, even if written in *baihua* 白話 (vernacular language). According to Xiong, the only way to vanquish imperialism is to win over the spirit 精神 of the people; and this can only be achieved by conquering their hearts with music in a manner similar to the “La Marseillaise” during the French Revolution: a national anthem that taught patriotism and led soldiers to victory.¹¹

This text was obviously related to the political events at the time, the Northern Expedition and the GMD war with Beiyang warlords for political supremacy in China. It was critical and dismissive of the Nationalist Party propaganda efforts and reflected the distance and disbelief in the success of the GMD project and in the supposed revolutionary impact of its policies. If

9 “Yishu jiaoyu gailun 藝術教育概論,” *Shangwu ribao*, July 25, 1923, 11.

10 *Shangwu ribao*, July 26, 1923, 11.

11 *Shangwu ribao*, December 28, 1926.

read in an exclusively Sichuanese context, the article forecast the failure of the self-proclaimed nationalist revolutionaries, the popular disengagement of the western provinces, and an unheeded cry for change in the arts, music, and performance. According to Xiong, the newspaper and at least a portion of the Chongqing readership had reached a degree of consensus, in a manner similar to that among the other intellectual centers in China influenced by left-wing thought (above all, Lu Xun's work) that a change in the arts was the only way to reform people's minds.¹² This reform was long overdue and desperately pressing for the nation under the imperialist yoke.

2 Dissatisfaction, Estrangement, Elitism, and a Turn to the Left

2.1 *A Silent Province*

In the 1920s, there was minimal interest in discussing, criticizing, and analyzing theater in Sichuan. Most of the local intelligentsia was either satisfied with the status quo of the near-cultural monopoly of commercial theater or remained uninvolved in the movements that rolled across the country and shattered any last vestiges of unity among the May Fourth generation. As is evident through the number of newspaper publications, the few who spoke out had very limited channels through which to communicate. The strategy of choice for the locals engaged in Nationalist, Communist, and broadly conceived left-wing activism was to migrate to Shanghai, Nanjing, Japan, France, or elsewhere.

To be fair, many works of literature, together with the coastal newspapers, circulated in some major centers in Sichuan because they were available by subscription. Moreover, many activists and reformists were persistently engaged in business, education, and urban reorganization. Among them were also some remarkable personalities, such as Lu Zuofu (盧作孚, 1893–1952, the head of the Minsheng Steam Shipping Company (Minsheng lunchuan gongsu 民生輪船公司) and early promoter of the spoken drama in Chengdu) and Pan Wenhua (a general and the first mayor of Chongqing).¹³ The broadly left-wing sympathies (however, without any communist overtones) of *Xinshubao*, as mentioned earlier, a newspaper owned by Liu Xiang, also attest to some degree

¹² According to some scholars, in that year, Lu Xun abandoned literary work for political work, and his further work can be treated as political manifestoes. Eva Shan Chou, "The End of Fiction, the Start of Politics: Lu Xun in 1926–1927," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 266 (January 2017); Hsia, *Modern Fiction*, 42–44.

¹³ Zhou Zhiying 周芷穎 and Gao Sibao 高思伯 "Chengdu zaoqi huaju yundong 成都早期話劇運動 [Chengdu's Early Spoken Drama Movement]," in *Sichuansheng zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui*, ed., *Sichuan wenshi ziliao jicui*, 4: 186–97.

of politicization in the province. And that was possible even despite the blunt cynicism of Liu, who invariably acted directed by conjunctural interests. The strongmen who held the province in their grip appear to have barred activists and intellectuals from taking sides in the GMD–Beiyang conflict and from contesting warlordism through art, literature, and popular propaganda. Thus, we can explain the locals' muted response to the New Culture Movement.

After 1928, in light of the Northern Expedition's success and the GMD's shift to the right, warlords in Sichuan gradually came to an increasing accommodation with Chiang Kai-shek's 蔣介石 (1887–1975) national government. Furthermore, relative peace in Sichuan, intensification of contacts with other cultural centers in China, and a swelling distaste for Japan's aggression all resuscitated discussion of the arts, which soon gained an intensity not seen for decades. These discussions, however, were qualitatively different from previous explorations. They had new, external points of reference and sought to create divisions between the intelligentsia (the only speakers) and the silent majority (a target of the attacks and criticism). The reintegration of the local intellectuals with their peers active in major cities of China and beyond came at the price of the former separating from the social environment in which they lived and acted. At the same time, it gave the Sichuanese educated class an advantage in access to the national stage and the opportunity, although to a limited degree, to ascend to it.¹⁴

Consequently, Sichuanese opera, theater, and local art in general was transformed from a sphere of relative satisfaction, or at least accommodation, into a battlefield on which China would survive or perish. This turn was not sudden, and we should not treat Sichuanese intellectuals and newspaper commentators as mere acolytes of the new reformist and revolutionary faith, if only because no new ideology was well defined in that period, and the positions in the intellectuals' battle for China's future were still fluid. There was a diversity of opinion on the arts and theater, and those views changed in reaction to developing discussions and ensuing political events.

Furthermore, the discourse on opera and the arts conducted in Sichuan in the 1930s, though it addressed universal issues, had local meaning and should be read within the context of the existing environment. As described above, it was a reality in which commercial theater boomed, religious festivals lost a significant part of their former luster, and the art of formal traditional opera greatly developed. The readership of newspaper critiques and the writers themselves

14 Their uniform living up to the communist or broadly socialist course was motivated by the GMD betrayal of the CCP and by a policy of suppression and nonresistance to Japan. Hsia, *Modern Literature*, 100–110; Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution*, 230–47.

in most cases had deep familiarity with both the repertoire and the music of the local genres of opera and, in some cases, of Beijing Opera. It is beyond doubt that many of them were avid fans. Moreover, the newspapers in which they published were properties of the warlords and merchants who invested in and owned most of the successful theaters in Chengdu, Chongqing, and beyond. The inconsistency between intellectuals' opinions on opera appearing in militarist-owned newspapers and the commercial interests of the warlords reveals the political weakness of Sichuanese intellectuals before uniformed men, Sichuanese militarists' businessmen-gangster-like regimes (the "gatekeepers" of local wealth),¹⁵ and the military men's vain love for crossdressing as liberals, playing ball with everyone as long as they could hold on to their power.¹⁶

2.2 *Growing Cultural Distinction: Elite Clubs and the Popularity of Beijing Opera*

In 1930 and 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, the Chongqing press, slashed in size and visual quality, started to publish the slowly evolving educated public's opinion on the topics of culture and society and, by default, the theater.¹⁷ The first topic was the growing prominence of a "foreign" genre in Chongqing: Beijing Opera. There was nothing particularly new about staging the plays to capital tunes in this inland Yangzi port. Beijing Opera appeared early on during the New Policies in various guises, either as an officially disliked all-female Mao'erxi or in the visits of the itinerant troupes. In 1930, Chongqing prided itself on having permanent theaters, most prominently Qiankun wutai 乾坤舞臺, which specialized in playing these tunes. Interestingly, this theater received coverage in the national opera press, and, to the broader national public, its artistic existence stood as proof of Chongqing's cultural achievement. Conversely, in these reports, local Sichuanese opera was

15 The concept expounded by Corey Ross for the rulers of postcolonial African states, particularly Zaire appears very well suited in the context of Chongqing of Liu Xiang, in *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

16 This description seems particularly accurate about the Liu cousins (Liu Xiang, Liu Wenhui, Liu Wencai) but to no lesser degree about the other generals in Sichuan. For ample evidence, see Zhang Jin, *Quanli chongtu yu biange*. For an illustrative and insightful presentation of Chongqing warlords in 1929, see Basil and Lewis, *Test Tubes*.

17 More generally on the impact of the Great Depression on Sichuan, see Wright, "Distant Thunder." For a detailed presentation on the regional economy, see Yang Weibing 楊偉兵, Zhang Yongshuai 張永帥, and Ma Qi 馬琦, *Xī'nán jīndài jīngjì dìlǐ* 西南近代經濟地理 [*Modern Economic Geography of Southwestern China*], *Zhōngguó jīndài jīngjì dìlǐ* 中國近代經濟地理 [*Modern Economic Geography of China*], vol. 4: (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015).

cast into obscurity as backward and rather ugly. In this vein, Shanghai's *Theater Monthly* (*Xiju yuekan* 戲劇月刊) published a report, by Nan Guosheng 南郭生, on the condition of opera in Chongqing.¹⁸ It started with a description of Qiankun, a theater of fairly decent quality that accommodated five hundred people and that was graced with visits by nationally known actors from Tianjin, such as Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生, two of the four Famous Dan performers. According to Nan, Chongqing audiences preferred martial plays (*Han Guangwu* 漢光武) and marvel plays (*Xiyouji*), and its theaters did not distinguish between quality seats and common tickets. Although it had some fan clubs of Beijing Opera, most audiences attended Sichuan Opera theaters; though Nan failed to establish exactly how many there were ("six or seven"), three (Dingxin, Zhenghua, Youxin) were well attended by audiences, and the rest went ignored. Sichuan Opera performances were not appreciated: among the tunes, *gaoqiang* was terribly uneven 非常龐雜 and the others simplistic, the music was unsatisfactory, the performance messy, the division of roles not sharp, the audiences rather careless and inattentive to the quality of acting. Overall, Sichuan Opera inspired the author's contempt. It is obviously hard to read this destructive critique of the local art scene literally. However, it is accurate in depicting the superiority accrued by the actors with a national reputation (Shang and Xun) and the art they represented. Compared to Beijing Opera, local styles received little respect or appreciation. They did, however, receive some interest from the national media, especially from Shanghai's *Theater Monthly*, which described Sichuan Opera in a neutral and informative tone in an issue published in 1930.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, local elites tried to capitalize on Beijing Opera's status and the prestige it bestowed on its listeners and practitioners. On February 26, 1931, *Commercial Daily* reported that Messieurs Mei 梅, Zhu 朱, Jiang 蔣, Xie 謝, and others, all struck by boredom and the dullness of Chongqing's entertainment would form a club devoted to playing and discussing Beijing Opera. The club's name would be China's Spring Opera Research Society (Chunhua xiqu yanjiu she 春華戲曲研究社).²⁰ The organization of a club in this period was not exceptional, nor was the elite predilection for Beijing Opera.²¹ Not only did

18 Nan Guosheng 南郭生, "重慶劇場之概況," *Xiju yuekan* 戲劇月刊 3, no. 6 (1931): 1-3 (page no. internal to the article, not the journal).

19 Zhong Bingheng 鍾秉衡, "Tan jinlaide Shu xi he Shu ling 談近來的蜀戲和蜀伶," *Xiju yuekan*, 2, no. 11 (1930): 1-13.

20 *Shangwu ribao*, February 26, 1931, 10.

21 Early the following month, an artists' club [yishujia julebu 藝術家俱樂部] was opened with the ambition to publish its column *Art* [*Yishu zhuan'gan* 藝術專刊], in *Shangwu ribao*, March 20, 1931.

much of the Chongqing military elite join the *piaoyou* 票友/*piaoshe* 票社 clubs for Beijing Opera modeled after fashionable societies in Beijing and Shanghai but some of the members of this elite gained fame as prominent opera singers.²² One of the oldest of these clubs, New Life Club or Regeneration Club (Xinsheng *piaoshe* 新生票社), was established in 1926, by the Chongqing chief of police, Qiao Yifu 喬毅夫 (1885–1967). Qiao was stationed in Wuhan and Beijing before taking up the post in Sichuan and joined various clubs in these cities. He was an avid follower and allegedly a student of Tan Xinpei—a legend in male roles (*laosheng* 老生)—consequently, he claimed to be part of Tan’s artistic lineage. Although Qiao left the Mountain City in 1930 for Tianjin, the *piaoshe* he established survived until the end of the 1940s, providing a social platform for actors and local elites to mingle and network. Beijing Opera societies were also organized by the Chongqing branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) (in 1934), and some were transplanted from the coastal cities both before and during the Sino-Japanese war. The most famous among the latter kind was the Permanent Society, Chongqing branch (Hengshe Chongqing *fenshe* 恆社重慶分社), a club owned by Shanghai’s foremost gangster, Du Yue-sheng 杜月笙 (1888–1951).²³ After the outbreak of war and migration of the national elite to Sichuan, these clubs offered a platform for socializing between formerly estranged groups with local and national political and cultural leadership and for the formation of an elite class that would cast influence over the province’s politics and culture.

Needless to say, these people profited from patronizing Beijing Opera: its artistic status was merely elevated to that of “national opera” (*guoju*). Additionally, in Chongqing, Beijing Opera radiated with exclusivity because it remained relatively unpopular among the broader public. All these features furnished the new uniformed and moneyed social elites with a needed sociocultural distinction that would legitimize their superiority and justify their domination over the allegedly uncouth locals. This point was progressively advocated by

22 I use the word “club” for *piaoyou* or *piaoshe*, despite many limitations of this word. The meaning needs to include the fact that members of *piaoyou/piaoshe* were amateur performers, sometimes highly trained, who worked on their art together with professionals and even, at times staged opera in public. Members of such “clubs,” however, did not suffer the social opprobrium of the professional actors; on the contrary, they typically came from the middle or upper classes. *Piaoyou/piaoshe* were typical institutions in Beijing Opera and grew in the specific environment of late Qing Beijing before spreading around the country during the Republic. Ye, *Ascendant Peace*, 223–26; Li Jing, *Ming Qing tanghui yanju shi*, 171–89.

23 Chongqingshi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 177–80; Zhong Bingheng, “Tan jinlaide Shu xi he Shu ling,” 2.

the press both in Sichuan and across China. At the same time, Sichuan Opera and its audiences began to fall into a category of an exotic curiosity, nuisance, and, later, even a threat.

2.3 *Growing Dissatisfaction, Leftist Ideas, and Disengagement with National Affairs*

As the GMD and its allied warlords toyed with some elements of the left-wing agenda while fortifying their hold on power, local intellectuals in Sichuan called for popular politicized and leftist art while disparaging the actual popular culture before their eyes. Indeed, the role of the arts preoccupied journalists. Some of them, like Xiang Shutao 向書陶 positively reviewed the newly opened entertainment venue called Taoyuan (an investment by Tang Youfeng that copied Shanghai's New World). Xiang appreciated the natural and cultural offerings available there, which could lull one into forgetfulness and enjoyment of life. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Taoyuan offered opera, dance, a zoo, storytelling, and other kinds of "modern" entertainment. In the article printed beneath this review, titled "A Country of Arts (Yishuguo 藝術國)," a spiteful attack was unleashed on the conditions of the arts in China—the precise arts that were supposed to save the country. The author of the article, Qiling 琪玲 (pseud.) called Chinese film pornographic and beggarly 乞丐化; the arts just a list of vulgarisms, artists a mess, literature awkward and amounting to nothing more than scrawls on paper 書越滿紙塗鴉, in sum, incomprehensible unreadable rubbish 狗屁不通 (literally "not getting through the dog's ass"). The conclusion to the article explained that the target was Chiang Kai-shek's treacherous alliance with the Japanese against Feng Yuxiang 馮玉祥 (1882–1948) during his anti-Japanese fight in Chahar 察哈爾省 (Feng is named in the article, but Chiang is only indicated) and the protracted squabbles between two warlords in Sichuan who were cousins: Liu Xiang and Liu Wenhui 劉文輝 (1895–1976).²⁴

The *Xinshubao* supplement, which published an article by Wang Jianying 王劍瑩 "The Propagandistic Character of the Arts (Guanyu yishushang zhi xuanchuanxing 關於藝術上之宣傳性)," took a softer and more general perspective.²⁵ In response to the growing propaganda by the Nationalist and Communist parties, Wang addressed the question of the government's use of the arts to inculcate its identity and policy with two articles: "Portraits of Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshanxiang 中山像)" and "Union of Workers, Peasants, and

24 *Shangwu ribao*, July 29, 1933, 12. The war between the Liu Xiang and Liu Wenhui lasted from October 1932 to September 1933. Ren Zhaokun and Gong Zide, *Sichuan zhangzhen shi*, 266–320.

25 *Xinshubao*, July 31, 1933, 8.

Soldiers (Gong nong bing dalianhe 工農兵大聯合).” He stated that opponents had three ways of dealing with this problem of propaganda in the arts. They could reject the insertion of any propagandistic material, allow it to have limited influence and presence, or permit a merger of the two. However, Wang claimed that, no matter how much one might try to resist propaganda, each new social formation brings with itself a new form of art, which he demonstrated with examples from European and American history. Each of these new art forms consequently appeared to propagate the ideas of its time. Similarly, art now assumed an unavoidable role in the ongoing class struggle that marks contemporary society. He concludes that the arts always possess a propagandistic character, but that is not synonymous with propaganda because an artistic work has other, unrelated characteristics. The ability to modify an artistic work to the goal of propagating ideas should thus be considered a service and a job. Wang Jianying’s argument is important for understanding the shift in Sichuanese intellectuals’ approach to the arts. They became less and less concerned about the quality of each production, focusing instead on justifying the program-based arts that promote progressive government politics, discarding popular tastes in entertainment, and elevating the position of pen-wielding intellectuals in controlling public opinion and defining a common identity.

In the context of the series of political events, especially the invasion and annexation of Manchuria by Japan in 1931–1932, it is rather striking that intellectual opinion was only mildly politicized, if not disengaged. The proposals mentioned were faint voices that barely reflected the controversies and discussions taking place in other parts of the Republic. It appears that the ultimate prize for writers in Chongqing was to successfully legitimize their social status within the community and to maintain an air of education and involvement with issues that were not strictly parochial. The radicalization of China’s intellectuals by the GMD–CCP conflict and the anti-Japanese movement did not yet affect the local educated class. Similarly, the triangle linking the intelligentsia, the declared cultural programs, and the opera (which remained the ultimate transmitter and projector of popular mentality) did not experience the rupture that occurred in the coming years.

2.4 *Influence of the New Life Movement*

In 1934, the ideological nature of the arts was linked to the redefined notion of “education” in the elite-led project of national transformation. Publications in Sichuan clearly echoed the recently launched New Life Movement.²⁶ In October

26 On contemporaneous GMD initiatives in the revision of culture under the New Life Movement, see Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution*, 255–58; Jennifer Lee Oldstone-Moore,

1934, *Soul of the Great Hero* (*Daxiahun* 大俠魂), a newspaper with an avowedly social-reformist outlook, provided an “analysis of village social education 鄉村民衆社會教育,” in which, it stated, the formal educational institutions had limited reach and control over public mentality. The villagers enriched their worldviews with ideas originating in and transmitted through popular culture, and thus the intellectuals’ primary challenge was to figure out how to control or censure these channels of cultural-educational communication. This popular culture had four parts in which reform was needed: knowledge 知識, health 健康, economics 經濟, and entertainment 娛樂. The need for knowledge could be satisfied, with better or worse results, by itinerant bookshops and public lectures. Poor hygiene and the absence of health-conscious attitudes could be alleviated by popular hospitals 民衆醫院, hygiene inspection stations, and physical examination offices. The economy could be improved through cooperatives for credit, consumers, and production.²⁷ Among all these areas, public entertainment appeared to be the most problematic, because, as the authors claimed, villagers did not have genuine forms of entertainment. Instead, their pastimes promoted “adultery 奸淫, gambling 賭博, indulgence in bad habits and addictions 習染嗜好, alcoholism and violence 吃酒行兇, robber 偷竊, etc.; from the perspective of entertainment, these [culture] had nothing to do with entertainment, but had a huge impact on rural society’s morality and order 治安.”²⁸ Among the popular arts, storytelling 說書 could easily be salvaged by a reform of its content, and film had a large role to play in propagating new ideas if the right movies were produced. Opera, by contrast, though the public’s favorite, as it was beloved and enchanting, caused many problems: its stories were derived from old novels and, like them, provided viewers with mixed lessons. Some taught traditional Confucian values 忠孝節義, but, overall, too many of them taught banditry, depravity, and superstition. Therefore, for reforms to advance, these contents had to be curtailed, and opera needed to have a new repertoire based on current affairs and a scientific spirit 科學精神. Other stories needed to be reviewed.²⁹

“The New Life Movement of Nationalist China: Confucianism, State Authority and Moral Formation” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2000); Federica Ferlanti, “The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province, 1934–1938,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (2010): 961–1000; Wennan Liu, “Redefining the Moral and Legal Roles of the State in Everyday Life: The New Life Movement in China in Mid-1930s,” *Cross Currents East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 7 (June 2013), <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-7>.

27 *Daxiahun*, October 1934, 10–12.

28 *Daxiahun*, October 1934, 12.

29 *Daxiahun*, October 1934, 12.

Within a year, a more nuanced discussion on opera began, based on the New Life Movement's ideas about the performing arts. From then on, theater was seen as a powerful medium that needed to be studied, related to literature, and advanced, according to the principle that art is subservient to the intelligentsia's mission for social reconstruction. Opera's power was seen as one that could touch people's emotions directly, giving audiences a real-life experience of emotions in a much shorter and more concentrated way than a literary text. That is why opera had the potential to become a powerful educational tool for the government and the educated elite.³⁰ From July 3 to 27, 1935, *Commercial Daily* published a series of articles by a critic under the pseudonym Bishan laohe 碧山老何 (indicating local origins—Bishan County neighboring Ba County and Chongqing—and an unassuming intellectual posture), who provided the first thorough local discussion on the role of the theater. This was the high point of humanist reinterpretation of the role of performance in Chongqing, which attempted to merge contemporary thought on stage art and dramatic aesthetics with an appreciation of the local particularity of Chinese opera.

2.5 *Making Opera Meaningful for Sichuan Society*

Bishan laohe's articles were published in nine installments, each treating a different topic: "A Wave on the Stage (Juchang zhi lang 劇場之浪)" described the passion and fever of the rural opera festival;³¹ "The People's Document (Minjian gongwen 民間公文)" was a call for popularizing literacy, in which the author highlighted the power that written documents had on the mostly illiterate farmer and small-town population (and how this power could be used and abused).³² In "The Original Meaning of Opera (Xiju benyi 戲劇本義)," he responded to the notion of whether opera was an "action art 動作藝術" or a "comprehensive art 綜合藝術," saying that "action" did not capture what transpired on stage, and thus opera should be seen as "an art that imitates human actions."³³ Additionally, he gave a more precise definition on the basis of performance's social role, writing that "opera is an art of people's actions in society, an exposition of the affections of the masses 大眾情意的暴露."³⁴

Logically, then, when discussing stage characters, he followed Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) and claimed that they have to accord with reality,

30 *Shangwu ribao*, May 4, 1935, 14.

31 *Shangwu ribao*, July 3, 1935, 13.

32 *Shangwu ribao*, July 4, 1935, 13.

33 *Shangwu ribao*, July 9, 1935, 13.

34 *Shangwu ribao*, July 24, 1935, 13.

meaning that no immutable hero or neat division between good and evil exists in human society; they are always mixed, and those who take the stage personalities have to represent this confusion and change. However, this change must be believable to the audience.³⁵

Discussing the relationship between spoken drama and traditional opera—a question that was to haunt most discussions on performance for coming decades—Bishan laohe wrote “View on the Changes in Theater (Jude yanbian guan 劇的衍變觀).”³⁶ He pointed out that the practitioners of spoken drama disdained Chinese theatrical tradition (*zaju*, *chuanqi*, etc.), and any form of theater that involved singing, finding them inferior to the Western tradition; consequently, they saw a division only between tragedy and comedy, taking an inflexible approach to any other notion. Bishan laohe listed certain bright points in the performance of spoken drama: its progressive character, the presentation of contemporary issues, and the careful if not all-important use of costumes and stage art. He stated, “*Huaju* presents some progress but not absolute progress; it is a stepping stone in the [theater’s] progress, yet not an achievement of the highest order, as stated, not contradicting opera’s history; each era has its own aesthetic standards.”³⁷ Importantly, he defused the notion of spoken drama’s revolutionary character by drawing an analogy to Hu Shi’s new *ci* 詞, poems, which, though novel in their use of language, were still *ci* poems. Consequently, this kind of opera differed from spoken drama in the way it approached the balance between singing and recitation and in the register (classical or plane 白), which was genre specific and based on the principle of artistic efficacy. The conclusion to this was Bishan laohe’s effort to cast changes in the opera as progress that followed the changing tastes of the audiences; not a breakthrough, but an advancement with changing times that would eventually lead to a “future opera” (*weilaiju* 未來劇) after spoken drama had exhausted its effectiveness.

Discussion of what was new in spoken drama led to one regarding the role of supervisors (or managers) in an article titled “Stage Supervisors (Wutai jian du 舞臺監督).” Typically, in Sichuan such a function, called *daza* 打雜, involved ensuring that people flock to theaters to see plays and therefore implied some parity with that of director’s work. He claimed that because the factors of profit and class status are basic for understanding the opera, *daza* tended to cater to an audience’s needs. Stage supervisors chose operas that feature beautiful dresses and create a feeling of being immersed in the magical stories

35 *Shangwu ribao*, July 11, 1935, 13.

36 *Shangwu ribao*, July 14, 1935, 13.

37 *Shangwu ribao*, July 14, 1935, 13.

of old, which were often tragedies about love. Such audiences typically have only a rough sense of aesthetics, and only few supervisors could turn pieces that suit these tastes into valuable works of stage art. The author of this article reckoned that China had a neither revolutionary or truly reformist theater nor a truly reformist stage supervisor. Those within the *huaaju* movement who try still need to battle the public proclivity toward superstition, intoxication, vulgarity, and shallowness 迷醉粗淺 as well as against the requirement to make profit. He hoped that those ills could be attenuated while a new stage and new stage supervisors advanced.³⁸

At the same time, Bishan laohe defended traditional Chinese opera against a critic's insistence on depicting it as a defunct art that employs the dead language of elites. In the "Silent Opera (Chenmode xiju 沉默的戲劇)," he gave evidence that *chuanqi* writers never used literary language but, rather, an embellished vernacular to make their roles express their feelings. Thus, an argument that traditional opera is just "elite 雅," he claimed, automatically located spoken drama within the "vulgar 俗" culture. In the following satire of school performance, in which students acted without any script and called for the "real" language ("beggar like beggar, emperor like emperor"), he highlighted that the best writers, such as Xiong Foxi, could make people cry, regardless of whether they read or watched his plays. It was so, because in a well-written and conducted play, whether an actor speaks or only moves, he has emotive power.³⁹ Concurrently, he claimed that mixing the modern spoken vernacular and the civilized dramas with the pathos of the situation creates a disastrous distortion and gives the public a horrible impression.⁴⁰

Bishan laohe gave the first and last views of Sichuanese intellectuals on the role of traditional opera before the War of Resistance. He discusses the place occupied by the new genres, the reform of language, and the social function of theater in the twentieth century. His view was not radical but, rather, accommodating of significant ideas and changes proposed by the nationally and internationally known intellectuals and reformers, such as Hu Shi and Xiong Foxi. He did not endorse iconoclastic views on either traditional opera or operatic art. Instead, he emphasized evolution in the arts and society over time and, consequently, the reasons for changing tastes, views, and corresponding stage genres. He rejected the revolutionary nature of theater reform and the necessity for the ascent of spoken drama and the demise of Chinese sung opera. His response was based on aesthetic, historical, and moralistic grounds.

38 *Shangwu ribao*, July 16, 1935, 13.

39 *Shangwu ribao*, July 18, 1935, 13.

40 *Shangwu ribao*, July 27, 1935, 13.

Severe formal change was no necessity if the available styles of drama could accommodate both the prevailing tastes of the audiences (which were a product of the times) and, more importantly, aesthetic refinement. At the same time, theater had to transmit a morally uplifting message and combat superstition, vulgarity, and primitivity.

3 Radicalization and Rejection

In the late spring of 1936, when the discussion on the arts and opera recommenced in the Chongqing press, the pool of nonradical thought entirely dried up. At the same time, the intelligentsia's views on the "local" (Sichuanese) were upended, and journalists aligned their views with the radicalizing movements of the cultural revolution and ideological war mobilization. The meaning of this "revolution," however, was quite unclear and voiced more in the form of dissatisfaction with the status quo than as a vision for the future based on a defined program that was realized in order to achieve a future goal. Nevertheless, it was precisely these points of dissatisfaction that paved the way for future declarations and defined the scope of attempted change to be undertaken after the outbreak of hostilities with Japan. The areas of criticism can be summarized as follows: rejection of the local styles of opera, opposition to the vision of history taught by opera and other traditionalists, critique of parochiality of cultural sphere in Chongqing and Sichuan, and an attack on the social and cultural position of traditional theater. This antilocal, antitraditional, and iconoclastic turn had a number of reasons that were unrelated to the actual condition of the theater in Chongqing, Chengdu, or broader Sichuan; it was, rather, connected to changes in the outlook and culture of the local intelligentsia motivated by political reasons.

First, in 1935 Sichuan became ground zero for the GMD campaign to eradicate the CCP: the province was invaded by the forces of the Long March, followed by the Nationalist armies. At the same time, it was experiencing a communist insurgency in the northern parts of the province.⁴¹ As Robert Kapp claims, the civil war between the GMD and the CCP revealed the political and military weakness of Sichuanese warlords, which led to interference by the national center in local affairs and reintegration of the institutions in the province with those of the rest of the country.⁴²

41 Ren Zhaokun and Gong Zide, *Sichuan zhanzheng shi*, 327–408.

42 Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 99–128.

Second, growing outrage among students and intellectuals across the country was behind the calls for more politicized forms of art. These social groups identified the deficiencies in China's nation building, especially the popular disengagement from politics and a lack of understanding of international affairs, as the main reasons for the Republic's disappointingly weak response to Japanese intrusions and aggressions. The "mental intoxication" and "living in the world of fantasies" were key problems to be addressed through education, art, and cultural work, which should produce, as a result, a conscious and militant citizen willing to sacrifice for the motherland. At the time of a "life and death juncture facing China 現在中國到了生死關頭," only such citizens could ensure the state's survival and help prevent the destruction of China as a political, social, and cultural entity. One proposed solution to these grave shortcomings of Chinese society was teaching Chinese in the Latin alphabet to the ignorant masses: a supposed panacea to all the problems.⁴³ Others bewailed the lack of national music that would stir the masses, such as it had done in revolutionary France, the struggles for independence in Poland, or even the ancient Qin and Chu kingdoms. Such music would arouse the masses and save the country from its present crisis.⁴⁴ Whatever the solution, the responsibility for social change fell squarely on the intellectuals.

Third, the disappointment with how the GMD (together with the allied warlords) conducted the national revolution made many intellectuals more receptive to the idea that another form of leadership was needed and that a more radical change was necessary to improve society and save the country. This realization inclined the intelligentsia to oppose any form of tradition, in the belief that brutal attacks were indispensable for a breakthrough from current conditions. At the same time, it prioritized intellectuals' political unity and predicted a new social divide: revolutionary and reformist elites had to walk hand in hand against the broad public, giving the latter no room for accommodation and demanding of it a full revolution of the mind.

To reach the ambitious goal of building a new nation on the debris of the old failed one, a new history had to be written and popularized, and the old history obliterated. Both goals pointed to opera: the principal vehicle for the dissemination of the "wrong" past, which could be harnessed to the mission of building a new Chinese citizen and reviving the country.⁴⁵

43 *Shangwu ribao*, May 20, 1936, 14.

44 *Xinshubao*, July 23, 1936, 4.

45 C. T. Hsia associated this idea on the arts with the 1938 policy essay by Mao Zedong 毛澤東, but clearly these thoughts were much older (*Modern Fiction*, 249–51).

The first attacks on the popular knowledge of history in Sichuan came in a probably fictive biographical essay published in the *Commercial Daily* on May 16, 1936. The author ridicules his putative history teacher as a peculiar person, who spoke only in literary language 文言, was aggressively opposed to the modern vernacular, and knew all the emperors but had never heard of words such as “humor” or “proletariat.”⁴⁶ Not only was the teaching of history wrong but the problem of illiteracy was considered rampant and addressing it was critical for national survival. To fight “cultural backwardness 文化落後” and to heed the call for national rejuvenation brought to Sichuan by Chiang Kai-shek (who visited the province in 1935), journalists proposed radically slashing customs duties on printed matter.⁴⁷ An intellectual bias in the form of a hidden call for abolishing forms of censorship is obvious in this argument. This broad-ranging critique, however, found its focus in discussing the theater: what was the position of the local Sichuanese opera? What were the achievements in the new branches of theater, such as spoken drama? What were the inspirations for the new theater? How did Chongqing drama look in the context of the current national development in the stage arts?

3.1 *Art for the Sake of Politics*

In 1936, compared to Beijing Opera, Sichuanese tunes were seen as rustic and rough, “bearing a primate spirit of the village society” and good for investigating when a new theater by modern engaged dramatists was being developed.⁴⁸ Effectively, perhaps for the first time, Sichuan Opera was erased from contemporary culture and defined as a primitive, exotic, immutable art from China’s historical past that had fossilized in the unsophisticated realm of the lower classes. At the same time, newspaper critics became much more attuned to the other stage efforts undertaken in Chongqing, taking a stern but appreciative look at the development of spoken drama in the schools. Tellingly, in a review of the July graduation shows at the Chongqing School for Female Teachers (Chongqing nüshi xiao 重慶女師校), one author discounted amateur actresses’ very underwhelming performance but praised the political, nationalistic, and reformist choice of the repertoire (calling them euphemistically “content plays 內容的劇本”).⁴⁹ These opinions, published in two different

46 “Lishi jiaoyuan 歷史教員,” *Shangwu ribao*, May 16, 1936, 14.

47 Chiang’s visit to Sichuan, see Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 117–18; “Minghu: Sichuan wenhua 嗚呼：四川文化,” *Xinshubao*, June 19, 1936, 4. The author pointing out the prohibitive taxation was not at all unjustified; see H. G. W. Woodhead, *The Yangtze and Its Problems* (Shanghai: Mercury Press, 1931), 57–72.

48 Yangwo 羊我, “Jingju yu chuanju 京劇與川劇,” *Xinshubao*, June 3, 1936, 4.

49 *Shangwu ribao*, June 12, 1936, 14.

newspapers, demonstrate a new view on the theater that gave the stage arts a much clearer role in the political struggles of the time. Henceforth, intellectuals overlooked the question of artistic quality and imposed a sociocultural classification, which furtively implied a national hierarchy of arts. From that moment on, as well, a local stage could be considered satisfactory only if it participated in the national (or, rather, nationalistic and leftist)⁵⁰ art movements by producing spoken drama as well as following the trend toward patriotic activism and nation-building efforts at the time. Clearly, however, Chongqing was failing in all these respects. The stage artists and writers suffered “loneliness,” as the “River City” was not fertile ground on which culture could bloom.⁵¹ The few who remained, such as Jin Mancheng 金滿成 (1900–1971), could not alter an otherwise bleak picture.

The disappearance of press neutrality meant that it started handing out solutions to sociopolitical problems. Invariably, they came from the quarters of the radicalizing left wing, which heeded “a call to arms” raised by Lu Xun. On July 10, 1936, the *New Sichuan Daily* published a short piece by Zhong Qinghang 鐘青航, a professor of world literature at Beijing University and an associate of Lu Xun.⁵² In “Opera Revolution (Xiju geming 戲劇革命),” Zhong lambasted all traditional opera genres:

Sichuan Opera, Beijing Opera, Han Opera, etc., are hateful because all they show are historical stories, stories taking place in history. All they show is idiotic loyalty, idiotic filial piety, idiotic moral integrity, idiotic righteousness 愚忠愚孝愚節愚義. Also, stupid men and stupid women watch them; they do not recognize in what epoch they live, [and] even take old facts as a model.⁵³

The blame for the prevalence, as he called it, of the evil poison of the “feudal mentality” in all of China fell squarely on the “evil influence of traditional opera,” of which 70 to 80 percent was harmful. This mass of scripts was socially

50 A connection analyzed in detail by S. A. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses*; Arif Dirlik, “The Discourse of ‘Chinese Marxism,’” in *Modern Chinese Religion 11, 1850–2015*, ed. Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely, and John Lagerwey (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1: 324; S. A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 185–86.

51 “重慶文壇寂寞嗎?” *Shangwu ribao*, June 26, 1936, 14.

52 Mentioned in the Lu Xun's diaries on January 9, 1925; 魯迅日記: <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E9%AD%AF%E8%BF%85%E6%97%A5%E8%A8%98/%E6%97%A5%E8%A8%98%E5%8D%81%E5%9B%9B/>.

53 *Xinshubao*, July 10, 1936, 4.

damaging because they were “historical operas 歷史劇” that, in face of the calamities then befalling China, did not address current events. Zhong claimed that these operas should not only be banned from staging or promotion but also entirely prohibited for a century or two. Only after that time, when the country would have solved its problems, could such operas be pleasant and entertaining to watch. The other things that Zhong hated were the gongs and drums typical of any kind of opera: they were a sign of the decay in Chinese culture and its performance culture. They resembled “an anguished howl of the conquered nation 亡國的一種哀號似的.” The solution, he proposed, was to abandon the old opera and to advance *huaju* on a grand scale, at the same time making great progress.

In another article in the *New Sichuan Daily*, *huaju* was presented as a “comprehensive art 綜合藝術” (a description previously reserved for traditional opera) uniquely suited for combating China’s rampant illiteracy. The author concludes that the old opera and the old culture poisoned people’s minds with drunken dreams and false tales of emperors, beauties, and ghosts, which served to prolong imperialism, poverty, and misery. The new drama would fight imperialism, rural hunger, and foreign enemies as well as bring a revolution to China.⁵⁴ Again, the main problem was the lesson taught by the “old” opera, the fact that it dealt with history based on the literary canon and vernacular novels. Spreading these stories was considered harmful in two ways: according to the intellectuals, it taught content that was effectively harmful for their project of nation building and national unity, and it undermined the mission of spreading literacy (an indispensable prerequisite for nation building and modernization).⁵⁵ Opera was the enemy, and spoken drama the solution.

3.2 *The Slow Ascent of Spoken Drama in Chongqing*

As if to answer to this call, the following articles listed various organizational mishaps by Chongqing’s *huaju* troupes and bemoaned their ephemerality. One of the solutions proposed in the article “Discussing the Silence on the Chongqing Theater Circles (Xianhua chenmo Chongqing jutuan 閒話沉默重慶劇壇)” was to institutionalize spoken drama: improve economic management, sustainability, organization, and human resources. All would contribute to the advancement of modern drama.⁵⁶

54 *Xinshubao*, July 17, 1936, 4.

55 *Huaju* was also linked to scientific development—something that was considered deficient in Sichuan—and linked to cinema; *Xinshubao*, November 21, 1936, 4.

56 *Xinshubao*, July 14, 1936, 4.

The sense of mixed hope and disappointment followed in many publications printed in 1936, a year earmarked as “Chongqing’s Year of the Theater 重慶戲劇年” As explained by the magazine *Life of Entertainment* (*Yeyu shenghuo* 業餘生活):

[From] 1935, when a supplement to Chongqing’s *Great River Daily* 大江日報 declared that “1935 is Chongqing’s year of the theater,” in this sort of silent small city, it raised a great wave [that] reached innumerable worthy theater troupes; it added a large dose of restorative medicine, with a great bang, reviving “living theater” for a while.⁵⁷

The reference to medical vocabulary clichés demonstrates the hopes invested in the nontraditional dramatic form. At the same time, it indicated the diseased culture of Sichuan Opera, which spoiled the audience’s taste and made even educated people compromise on this mediocre art. Indeed, as the *Life of Entertainment* claimed, the amateurism common in most performances and an insufficiently developed theater critique of the plays limited the artistic impact of the events associated with the Year of the Theater.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, three new troupes were established in Chongqing—a momentous achievement for a city that had none before—enabling the city’s public to experience many new publications and interesting discussions. But there was no guarantee that these achievements were permanent.⁵⁹

The sense of Sichuanese society’s inadequacy and inability to meet the standards set by the intelligentsia became leitmotifs in all descriptions of society, cultural activity, and involvement in the national awakening in the light of Japanese encroachments. This criticism, however, was directed at local society, its backwardness, and the artwork that failed to achieve the intelligentsia’s aesthetic and political mission. Nevertheless, however radical the outlook against tradition was, in early 1937 Chongqing intellectuals expressed their horror at the drastic cultural policy in Nazi Germany and fear and disgust with Joseph Goebbels.⁶⁰ Although the push for reform, if not outright revolution, in the arts was gaining momentum, a self-limiting trend in the opposite direction

57 “Chongqing’shide “xiju” wang hechu qu? 重慶市的“戲劇”往何處去?” *Yeyu shenghuo* 業餘生活, no. 9 (December 1936): 113.

58 *Yeyu shenghuo*, 113–16.

59 Troupes’ names: Yifeng jushe 藝風劇社, Langhua jushe 浪花劇社, Qingnian youyishe 青年遊藝社. *Xinshubao*, October 2, 1936, 4.

60 “Deguo xiju jiang wang hechu qu 德國戲劇將往何處去,” *Shangwu ribao*, January 17, 1937, 6.

warned against turning the arts (especially theater) into the propaganda fist of dictatorship.

In the first four months of 1937, the list of inadequacies of the local arts environment pointed to deficient infrastructure: theaters and movie houses. In Chongqing, they were on par with the worst ones in Zhabei 閘北 (the Shanghai working-class district) and no better than in the “village.”⁶¹ To be fair, the newspaper showed appreciation for the opening a month later of the large (1,500 seats) new Cathay Grand Theater (Guotai daxiyuan 國泰大戲院), modeled on its Shanghai counterpart. The author emphasized that Sichuan’s audiences would need to fight their annoying “fear of having a cold head,” which led them to wear tall hats while watching plays. Otherwise, the theater was much cleaner and more spacious than any other establishment in town.⁶²

3.3 *Among Primitives: Intellectual’s Spoken Drama and the Outrageous Opera*

At the same time, various proposals were made to engage the audiences in the ensuing international conflict. One article proposed the hiring of itinerant troupes of female singers and actresses to collect funds for the war effort. Female singers were necessary for overcoming pacifism and passivity before the pending national disaster and the very real threat of war. To succeed, these troupes had to improve their performance and repertoire. At the same time, “old opera” had to be discontinued for some simple reasons. First, people did not like it. Second, it provided useless entertainment and spread immorality and pornography. Therefore, in the face of impending war, there was no reason to spread this kind of social and moral rot. The people who played the old operas should restrain themselves and seek moral improvement as well as apply themselves to worthwhile tasks.⁶³

The correct response to the “old opera” was the spoken drama. Yet, by the end of January 1937, the sense that the “Year of the Theater” had brought nothing was becoming more widespread. Li She 籬舍 wrote that *huaju* failed to appeal to popular taste among Chongqing’s inhabitants, undermining the chance for a social revolution in China. Li found some consolation in a recent play by Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968), “*Song of Returning Spring* (*Huichunzhiqu* 回春之曲),” which he reviewed and analyzed. In his view, through its content, spoken drama was a force that could help defend the country, spread the spirit

61 *Xinshubao*, January 18, 1937, 4.

62 *Xinshubao*, February 23, 1937, 4.

63 “Kan funü yuansui youyihui zatan 看婦女援綏游藝會雜談,” *Xinshubao*, January 19, 1937.

of realism, and thus awaken the masses.⁶⁴ In fact, at exactly the same time, Tian Han started to gain some local popularity with his plays broadcast by the new journal *Cinema, Theater*, which printed the first issue with his plays (e.g., “*Female Reporter* (Nüjizhe 女記者)”) alongside the prose and views of Lu Xun.⁶⁵

A few days later, *New Sichuan Daily* struck a much more positive tone by lauding a sudden explosion in spoken drama in the city: a phenomenon that, in one stroke, overcame the depression of previous years and the disgrace of the Year of the Theater. Now, new troupes joined the older ones that had been established in 1935 and started propagating the national defense opera, and ideas, such as the survival of the nation 民族生命 and the survival of the Republic 民國生命 (print not clear). Additionally, they publicized the national shame that China suffered from the hands of its enemies and the need for persistence before adversity (e.g., a play about King Guojian, “Sleeping on Brushwood and Tasting Gall (Woxin changdan 臥薪嘗胆)”).⁶⁶ Apparently, this sudden flourishing in drama gave hope and showed a revival of culture in Chongqing.⁶⁷

Therefore, we should not be surprised that, only a day later, the same supplement of *Xinshubao* launched a scathing attack on the condition of traditional opera in the city. Huang Ke 荒客, a harsh critic of opera, wrote in “Seeing the Front and Backstage (Kandao qianhoutai 看到前後臺),” that he had been “pushed” by his friends to go to the theater and watch some plays. He used the occasion to observe how the troupe worked.⁶⁸ As he summarized it: “hitting, hitting, killing, killing, crying, crying, laughing, laughing. I don’t know how the people in front of the stage [i.e., watching opera] derive any fun from it.”⁶⁹ Then, Huang peeked behind the stage and was shocked by the supposed chaos ruling there: weapons, flags, people coming and going, applying makeup, crowing, running back and forth, and so on. In Huang’s telling, the plays were all about fighting and killing, and the singing was awkward and discordant. The entire experience was suffocating, shocking, incomprehensible, and bewildering. Even though he recognized some plays (he pretended to barely know them

64 “Cong chunyun chuyan ‘Huichunzhiqu’ shuoqi 從春雲出演‘回春之曲’說起,” *Shangwu ribao*, January 30, 1937, 6.

65 “*Dianying, xiju yuekan jieshao* 電影戲劇月刊介紹,” *Shangwu ribao*, January 29, 1937, 6.

66 Names of the troupes: Langhua 浪花, Shidai 時代, Qingnian 青年, Tiane 天鵝, Yixia 藝霞, Shiguang 曙光, Guohua 國花, Xiafei 霞飛, Yilang 藝浪, Dihua 滌花, etc.; “Chongqing jutan zuijin dongxiang 重慶劇壇最近動向,” *Xinshubao*, February 4, 1937.

67 Two months later, the old mantra on the shortage of money, inappropriate social environment, and lack of scripts was recounted again; Mei Fen 美芬, “Chijiude juyun 持久的劇運,” *Shangwu ribao*, March 28, 1937, 14.

68 Huang Ke 荒客, “Kandao qianhou tai 看到前後臺,” *Xinshubao*, February 5, 1937, 4.

69 Huang Ke, “Kandao qianhou tai,” *Xinshubao*, February 5, 1937, 4.

and dismissed them as some tales) and could identify main characters (Cao Cao, Yue Fei), and he strongly emphasized his estrangement from traditional opera culture. If it was not about the country where he originated, a discourse identified as colonial would best describe the attitude that Huang embodied: a civilized man shocked by the “native outrages,” namely an illogical and unintelligible tradition that causes (unhealthy) excitement but eventually leads to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Huang did not share anything with the “primitives” who were performing and watching the opera. In his case, a class division overlapped the cultural and the regional ones: his membership in the intellectual class, which had national ambitions, meant cutting his ties to all those who did not have such aspirations; it also meant denigrating non-intellectuals as lower, barbaric creatures of the past. We need to remark that Huang somehow made a courageous statement because the social elites of Chongqing and Sichuan supported and profited from “traditional opera,” yet they avoided being the recipients of this violent criticism.

At the end of February 1937, a proposal was made to strengthen the spoken drama's position and power, which was considered inferior to the “old opera.” “The Needs of Chongqing's Theater (Chongqing xijude xuyao 重慶戲劇的需要)” stated that since theater functioned as a social mirror “it is people's educational tool, and absolutely not some leisure time entertainment; it possesses the power to change society and to organize the masses.”⁷⁰ Because the theater's power in Chongqing was weak, the author proposed linking various itinerant fundraising troupes into one Spoken Drama Cooperative 話劇協社.

Some days later, *Commercial Daily* publicized a similar idea. Li Ang 李昂 explained that *huaju* differed from the “old opera” because it served as propaganda and was a weapon of the masses. He also expressed the belief that, for the masses, the new theater was much more attractive than that of the old opera. Therefore “a vigorous victory of the new theater over the old one was not only a logical necessity, but also an obligation placed on all the audiences in the effort to save the country!”⁷¹ The circular logic of this argument, which would carry on throughout all the war years and beyond, enabled viewing the activity of a limited number of theater troupes as the kernel of future victory in a one-sided culture war fought by the engaged intellectuals against traditional drama. Moreover, it mistook alleged necessity for actual sociocultural development. Under different conditions, this view would facilitate adjusting

70 *Xinshubao*, February 29, 1937, 4.

71 “話劇新的蓬勃開展不只是新劇於舊劇演進的邏輯的必然，而主要却是全國觀眾救亡的需要！” “Duiyu Chongqing huajude jidian jianyi 對於重慶話劇的幾點建議,” *Shangwu ribao*, March 2, 1937, 6.

audiences to the necessity established by the leaders (intellectual and political). In March 1937, they were mere proposals requiring mobilization on the side of the intelligentsia and work to persuade the political leaders of its ideas.⁷²

The final verdict, as we might call it, fell on Sichuanese opera on April 2, 1937, in an unsigned article, “The Fall of Sichuan Opera and Its Improvement,” which stated that opera was rotten and the plays sickening 肉麻的戲 to the point that going to the theater was difficult to bear. Nevertheless, audiences “loved seeing such theater and wasting their money on watching it, because of their extremely limited knowledge and very deficient morality.” Moreover, the article claimed, from an opera perspective, the lower the moral level is, the better. Because the viewers had very low standards and were only interested in obscene stories 淫褻的戲 and had no sense of stage artistry, all theaters planned their repertoires in response to market demand. The article expressed the hope that the government would step in with an initiative to close down such plays and, in this way, elevate Sichuanese opera, which would then drag the society forward and improve its customs. Whether that was going to “revive the nation 復興民族,” it reflected, was an open question, but any change was better than the current conditions.⁷³ This short piece expressed helplessness in defying the local society and the power of commercial opera, which they failed to challenge with other projects, irrespective of how much optimism they had. The initiative for change changed into the coercive power of the modern authoritarian state (the only one extant in China), which could manipulate, change, prohibit, and direct popular culture and the commercial market in order to realize the vision of reform created by the intelligentsia.

The multiple goals of mobilizing Sichuanese society for the war effort, reforming the culture to the intellectuals’ liking, and asserting the intelligentsia’s position in the society that had disregarded them and had regarded their work as having little importance drove a cultural agenda that was iconoclastic, client to the production of the leftist intellectuals from the coast (and, at the same time, deeply provincial), as well as avowedly patriotic, nationalist, and imperialistic toward the Sichuanese. Because of the restoration of the United Front of the CCP and the GMD, this group, integrated by early 1937 and linked across geographic divides, could express more openly not only its

72 By the end of the month, a call for unity and mobilization and making available all the resources in the propaganda fight against Japanese aggression was published in the *Commercial Daily* under the pseudonym Myriad Novelties [Wanxin 萬新], “Xiang Chongqing wenhuajie jianyi de husheng 向重慶文化界建議的呼聲,” *Shangwu ribao*, March 31, 1937, 14.

73 “Chuanjude diluo yu gajin 川劇的地落與改進,” *Shangwu ribao*, April 2, 1937, 13.

attachment to left-wing ideas but also its approval of the nationalist program.⁷⁴ Moreover, intellectuals had already profited from cross-national integration under the auspices of the GMD, which two years earlier had erased the borders dividing Sichuan from the provinces it controlled. Integration over the heads of the local society and reframing of the knowledge and opinion about their social environment in Sichuan became the building blocks of the attitudes and culture of this intelligentsia, both petty, expressing themselves in newspapers under pseudonyms, and grand, with national renown such as Ba Jin 巴金. In their view, Sichuan was a place of unfathomable backwardness and the most poisonous social mores, which were directly and violently opposed to national integration, progress, and liberation. The “old” opera was the voice of the province’s ignorant masses, representing all that was evil: a false vision of history, teaching about emperors and beauties, improper social mores and manners, obscenity, and fatalism. The problem was the scale of opera’s popularity and autonomy, both organizational and artistic, from the emerging intellectual class. In fact, the attack on the opera struck at the core of the values, imaginations, and forms of organization of the majority of the inhabitants in Sichuan. Their culture failed to adjust to the political changes and urgency, in which both the newspaper writers and the politicians were engaged. Opera “failed” to be malleable to propaganda, and efforts at “modernization” had produced repulsive results. To their annoyance, audiences were happy with the so-called traditional repertoire, which had its own artistic dynamic. The rejection of tradition and the cultural estrangement were not predetermined or immediate results of the growth of the local intelligentsia; they were not preconditioned by the medium—newspapers—or by the social situation in Sichuan. This development came as a result of the political struggles and ensuing radicalization of the intellectual class throughout China as well as the growing gap between the people who accomplished and believed in the “modern” Westernized education and arts and those who engaged with the audience that hankered after a rich (though not necessarily canonical or classical) tradition. The political changes that propelled shifting attitudes toward opera were both local and national. The early start of the discussion was the fruit of the May Fourth movement, whereas criticism of opera emerged in the aftermath of the Great Depression and reached its first peak during the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists (in the Long March). The growing civil

74 Patriotism, the notion of the primacy of the individual and group initiative in changing the course of history and a belief in national liberation 全民族解放 could all be achieved through unity. “Qingzhu! Chongqing wenyijie tuanjie! 慶祝! 重慶文藝界團結!” *Xinshubao*, April 2, 1937, 4.

strife and tension with Japan undermined humanist interpretations of the arts and popularized the idea that opera had to be eliminated to create space for a new art of spoken drama that could achieve the political goals of the intellectual elite. In the last days of peace in spring 1937, however, it became apparent that even this project would be impossible in Sichuan without direct government intervention. Like a bad dream, this fear became a reality in a short time.

4 Concluding Remarks

The growth of newspapers and their vocal engagement with opera, especially denigration of the local culture and strong support for the spoken drama movement was disconnected from actual conditions in the theater “on the ground.” Journalists, the majority of the intelligentsia in Chongqing, who were mostly in cramped offices on the picturesque Baixiangjie 白象街 in downtown Chongqing, searched for a way to accommodate their own need for class distinctions as well as the growing fear of the national collapse in the face of Japan’s imperialist aggression. To pursue the first of these goals, they reconnected with the China-wide urban network of writers, theater reformers, political activists, and university teachers who had broadly left-wing sympathies and who more or less faithfully followed in the path of Lu Xun (including his distaste for traditional opera). Chongqing’s link to this network was limited for many years, as its stance was often critical and independent and, at times, anachronistic. In the mid-1930s, the city’s intelligentsia fully tapped into this network and was more receptive than productive. They tried to copy the solutions developed in other, leading areas of China (e.g., Xiong Foxi’s spoken drama project) and turned hypercritical about the local society’s prophesy of its doom and despair about its backwardness. Some criticisms were justified, but others were less so. This connection to the national elite, however, changed the image of Sichuan, its people, and the people’s popular voice—the opera. In this way, Sichuan became akin to a colonial society within the Chinese state—a land of vulgar, naive, superstitious natives, intoxicated by awkward stories and performing incomprehensible arts and rituals—that had to be taught, directed, and changed by the local elite and national intelligentsia with use of coercive government power. After it emerged in the prewar years, this view, a minority opinion by an educated, politically conscious (and terrified) class frustrated in its cultural projects, would be experimented with and realized in practice in the coming decade.

The Times of the Nationalists (1937–1949) and the War

1 Performing Arts Culture

In early October 1937, the loneliness and shattered hopes of the Chongqing intellectuals were finally swept away. While coastal cities burned, roads packed with refugees, and armies of soldiers and officials swarmed Sichuan in their great trek inland, *Spring Clouds* (*Chunyun* 春雲) magazine rejoiced:

Now, Shanghai's Movie Actors' Theater Troupe (Yingren jutuan 影人劇團) arrived; they are in charge of the great cultural mission, arriving in the rear, [they will need to] use all the resources of the poor village and remote borderlands, mobilize the power of the masses, and spur our nation toward the final victory in the War of Resistance. Apart from expressing gratitude toward the movie actors' theater troupe, [we] hope that the local theater scene and the friends who cherish theater will diligently rise up, not dropping and destroying, contemptuously [treating] this petal that resists the enemy [earlier, spoken drama was called a fragile sprouting flower]; moreover, we are not allowed methods similar to the traitors who shame this group of theater workers that produce anti-enemy propaganda. Nurture this sprout of spoken drama in Chongqing! We need to use this tool of the best anti-enemy culture—the power of the spoken drama, mobilizing the biggest, most numerous masses for the warfront against the enemy.¹

This was not the only voice of strange optimism from Chongqing's and China's artistic circles. The conflict that pitted Japanese Empire against Republican China had been brewing since the early 1930s. Nevertheless, only in the last days of 1936, with the reestablishment of the United Front between the Nationalist and Communist parties, did the intellectual and artistic circles find hope for their mission of united struggle against imperial expansionism, fascism, “old China,” and any other social, political, cultural, and economic ill that

1 “Guanyu Chongqing de huaju 關於重慶的話劇,” *Chunyun* 春雲 2, no. 5 (October 27, 1937), 4.

shackled the country in its march toward the undefined “liberation” (*jiefang* 解放).² This chapter explores the wartime experiments in reconstructing the performing arts and an effort of binding the theater to the political aims set by the government and by the radicalized intellectuals.

2 Military Emergency and China's Migration to the Southwest

The July 1937 outbreak of violence in the environs of Beijing and then, on August 13, (so called *Ba yisan* 八·一三), in Shanghai led to a realignment and rethinking of the role of literature, theater, visual arts, and the role of artists. Indeed, it was felt in a particularly acute manner in Shanghai, where the majority of the “progressive” followers of Lu Xun from the League of Left-wing Writers, the communist sympathizers, their personal friends, and their political adversaries resided. The ideas bred in the dramatic early months of the war, finally published on March 31, 1939, provided a blueprint for the future of all Chinese arts and not just for the period of the war against Japan. These ideas were modified after many failures of implementation on Chinese soil and rethought following the lessons of Stalinist experiences and advice from the Soviet Union, constituted the blueprint for the reconstruction of creative arts in the nascent People's Republic.

This newly united thought based on an agreement between the conflicted artists was first adopted in Free China: the Guomindang ruled areas free of Japanese and Chinese collaborators' administration and outside the control of the CCP base area (so-called Shaan-Gan-Ning 陝甘寧). The main ground for experiments was Sichuan and the center stages in the provisional capital of China, Chongqing, and the provincial capital, Chengdu. Wuhan, the capital of resistance for a few months in 1938, earmarked to be the heart of the national struggle and national rejuvenation, fell to the Japanese army on October 26 and 27, 1938.³ Other cities in Free China, especially Guilin 貴林, Kunming

2 The literature on this issue is already voluminous. See Mark Gamsa, “Communism and the Artistic Intelligentsia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 560; Tsi-an Hsia, *The Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Literary Movement in China*, new ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2015), 99–139. On left-wing theater, see Ge Fei 葛飛, *Xiju, geming yu dushi xuanwo: 1930 nian-dai zuoyi juyun, juren zai Shanghai* 戲劇, 革命與都市漩渦: 1930年代左翼劇運, 劇人在上海 [*Opera, Revolution, and the Urban Vortex: Left-Wing Theater Movement, People of the Theater in 1930s Shanghai*] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008).

3 On the importance of the Wuhan moment for some artists, especially Lao She and Guo Moruo, see Stephen R. MacKinnon and Robert Capa, *Wuhan 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 62–82.

昆明, and Changsha, were prominent on the map of the new anti-enemy or anti-Japanese culture; yet, in the fields of intellectual congregation and the government in investment in cultural institutions they could not compare to Sichuan's cities. The experiments in a new culture and liberation through culture mostly played out in this southwestern province. The lessons drawn from the meeting of intellectuals' idealism, radicalism, naïveté, and a vision of cross-class anti-Japanese unity with the urban and rural public in Sichuan would be a defining experience for Chinese art creators. Other experiences were also formative for this generation of intellectuals. They included working within the government-sponsored institutions, adjusting to the bureaucratization of creative production, operating outside the cozy environment of Shanghai's (or urban in general) buildings, and amenities, and accepting police censorship.

If the intellectuals' activity, conducted by either migrants from East China or Sichuan locals, is one part of the story, then the social, cultural, and institutional context in which they acted is another and, from a longer perspective, perhaps much more definitive. Wartime culture, especially the theater, contrary to what most Chinese-language histories of the war indicate, was not a monopoly of the intellectuals but, rather, a realm dominated by "traditional" opera, in which the local and imported elites tried to find their own space.⁴ During the war, opera fell into the hands of the central government, and it

4 Min'ge Zhongyang Sun Zhongshan yanjiu xuehui Chongqing fenhui 民革中央孫中山研究學會重慶分會, *Chongqing kangzhan wenhuashi 重慶抗戰文化史 [A Cultural History of War of Resistance in Chongqing]* (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2005), does not mention traditional opera at all. Most *wenshi ziliao* publications skip over the topic or devote chapter to the "superstitions" or a historical troupe. See "Chuanju zuojia Huang Ji'an 川劇作家黃吉安," in Sichuansheng zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, ed., *Sichuan wenshi ziliao*, 4: 169–80; "Xide xiyi changliu fengfande Kan Zilin 戲德戲藝長留風範的康子林" in idem, *Sichuan wenshi ziliao*, 4: 181–85; "Shehong chuanju yanchu xisu 射洪川劇演出習俗," in idem, *Sichuan wenshi ziliao*, 5: 275–86; "Jiuju chuanjubande bangui zhidu 舊川劇班的班規制度," in idem, *Sichuan wenshi ziliao*, 5: 287–98 <note that vol 5 is not in the refs, only vol 4>. None of these texts relate opera to the war but either describe timeless reality or the previous period of New Policies and the early Republic. Based on other publications, one might conclude that no "traditional" opera was presented in Chongqing or Sichuan throughout the Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945). See Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi and Chongqing shi weiyuanhui xuexi ji wenshi weiyuanhui 中國人民政治協商會議重慶市委員會學習及文史委員會, *Chongqing wenshi ziliao 重慶文史資料 [Collected Sources on History and Culture of Chongqing]*, (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006), vol. 9, (53); Shen Lierong 申列榮, Shi Man 石曼, Duan Ming 段明, and Xia Zusheng 夏祖生, *Xijude lilian: Chongqing kangzhan xiju pinglun xuanji 戲劇的力量: 重慶抗戰戲劇評論選集 [The Power of Opera: A Collection of Selected Essays on Opera in Chongqing during the War of Resistance]* (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009) (henceforth, Shen Lierong et al., *Xiju*), also does not republish any newspaper article about the "old" opera and retains exclusive focus on *huaju*; in his otherwise thorough history of opera, Liu Wenfeng skips over the period between May Fourth and the establishment of the CCP, sparing not a word for the war period.

could not roam freely (as it never did).⁵ Moreover, it underwent multiple profound transformations in its organization, in the scale of official control over the repertoire, and in the potential for actors to develop their careers. The questions of religious content, patriotism, and vulgarity were answered with administrative means, fulfilling the political agenda dating back to the final days of the Qing dynasty. At the same time, a new vision for using “traditional” opera art was born, not only in form but also in content. These visions spelled out the usefulness of local artists and of folk actors for achievement of the ambitious utopian aims of the “liberation.” Thus, the line between the politically educated urban intellectual and the local proletarian artist was transgressed. Wartime developments augured a new age for local opera in China.

This change was due to the wartime social environment in Sichuan, which in many respects resembled that of European colonies. The GMD came with the people of the eastern provinces and seized most of the leading government and economic positions; it nationalized large sectors of the economy and constantly expanded the grip of its party-state over business and social organizations. The GMD exploited local populations using labor, products, and natural resources, simultaneously blocking the social advancement and empowerment of both the previous warlord elites and of the local organizations such as the Gelaohui.⁶ The intellectuals who came from Shanghai, Beijing, or Tianjin flaunted their strong sense of cultural superiority and belief in being in a half-barbaric land ruled by rotten ancient traditions. Theirs was the land pictured in Ba Jin’s *Family* (*Jia* 家), not the country they saw with their own eyes.⁷

5 Here, I argue against the point made by Chang-tai Hung. Hung states that intellectuals’ initiative was primary, whereas the GMD government not only failed to use what he called “the popular culture” but also resorted to censorship. Hung presented an analysis of some major spoken drama and revised “traditional” plays but did not provide any evidence about the forms and scale of their dissemination and failed to account for the relationship between the wartime authorities, the dramatists, and the actors, in *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 49–92.

6 See Sichuansheng weidangshi yanjiushi 四川省黨史研究室, *Sichuansheng kangri zhanzheng shiqi renkou shangwang he caichan juanshi* 四川省抗日戰爭時期人口傷亡和財產損失 [*Casualties and Loss of Property in Sichuan during the Anti-Japanese War*] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2015); Pan Xun 潘洵 and Lu Keliang 魯克亮, *Kangzhan shiqi Xi’an houfang shehui bianqian yanjiu* 抗戰時期西南後放社會變遷研究 [*Research on the Genealogies of Chinese Actors*] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2011); Joshua H. Howard, *Workers at War: Labor in China’s Arsenal, 1937–1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Rana Mitter, *China’s War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 171–82, 282–91.

7 Most recent analysis of Ba Jin’s vision of Sichuan: Stapleton, *Fact and Fiction*.

With the government on their side, immigrant intellectuals acted in their own interest and were uninterested in communicating with Sichuanese partners. Local needs were ignored, and local forces were not harnessed for the profit of the besieged country. This disconnection between various social actors in Sichuan was bolstered by one important target of their conflict: the performing arts and their content. The struggle between the “old” opera and the reformist theater that brewed throughout the Republican period came to the fore. When “traditional” opera communicated universalistic cultural values through stories representing history, wartime intellectuals who embarked on a mission of education, nation building, and national liberation had no use for either the moral universalism or the fairytale-like imperial-era stories. Their vision of the world’s past was national and revolutionary. It was linked to European intellectual traditions and manifested through European history or through Chinese history, which at that time underwent reconsideration according to European methodologies. Therefore, an important part of the wartime intellectual effort consisted of finding appropriate events in Chinese past and of writing a new history on their basis. Moreover, for an intellectual, rejecting the opera tradition was expedient, logical, and necessary.

The agreement or conflation of two dissimilar orders of communication and representation—that of traditional opera and intellectuals’ new theater—was beyond the pale of acceptability for both sides of this cultural barricade. For this reason, any study of Sichuan theater during the Anti-Japanese war involves reading parallel voices and learning what outcome this choir of the deaf produced.

3 Inventing the Wartime Theater

Ge Yihong 葛一虹 (1913–2005), a dramatist previously active in Shanghai with the Left-Wing Writers League was among the first visionaries of wartime theater. In a short article printed in *Sino-Soviet Culture* (*Zhong Su wenhua* 中蘇文化) on December 1, 1938, he declared that theater could be a “living newspaper” (*huobaoju* 活報劇). This new genre was supposed to describe current events to the masses of illiterate Chinese, to shape their opinions, and to spread wartime propaganda. The inspiration for such a utilitarian innovation in the performing arts came from the Soviet Red Army and its apparent success in creating a war propaganda machine.⁸

8 Ge Yihong, “Lun huobaoju 論活報劇,” *Zhong Su wenhua* 3, nos. 1–2 (1938), republished in Cai Yi 蔡儀, ed., *Zhongguo Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi dahoufang wenxue shuxi* 中國抗日戰

The second idea proposed by Hu Shaoxuan 胡紹軒 (1911–2006) on the pages of *Literature and Art* (*Wenyi* 文藝) magazine on February 2, 1939, was to organize street-corner theaters (*jietouju* 街頭劇). Hu claimed that these theaters were most approachable by the public because they came from the masses (*qunzhongju* 羣衆劇) and had no particular style (*wuxingshi* 無形式, meaning neither “old” nor “new”). As far as he knew, only one successful play had been staged “wherever” among the masses: Chen Liting’s 陳鯉庭 (1910–2013) *Lay Down Your Whip* (*Fangxia nide bianzi* 放下你的鞭子).⁹ It took two more months for more comprehensive and original ideas on art to emerge among the intelligentsia, which took inspiration not only from the ideologically sympathetic Soviet example but also from the longer experience of modern political art led by Lu Xun and other figures in the New Culture Movement.

3.1 *A Plan for Action: Kangzhan wenyi lunji* 抗戰文藝論集 (*Collected Discussions on Wartime Literature and Art*)

In the early days of 1939, when the fighting was over in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Wuhan, members of the Left-Wing Writers League, which had been dissolved, the editorial board of the discontinued *Lone Island* (*Gudao* 孤島) magazine as well as their sympathetic associates attempted to invent a new role for culture under war conditions. Some were still in Shanghai, and others had moved to Sichuan or Yan’an. Among them were many prominent writers, poets, playwrights, and scholars, such as Mao Dun 矛盾 (Shen Dehong 沈德鴻, 1896–1981), Lao She 老舍 (Shu Qingchun 舒慶春, 1899–1966), Guo Moruo, Hu Feng 胡風 (1902–1985), Ding Ling 丁玲 (Jiang Wei 蔣偉, 1904–1986), Mu Mutian 慕木天 (1900–1971), Du’ai 杜埃 (Cao Zhuanmei 曹傳美, 1914–1993), Feng Zikai 豐子愷 (1898–1975), Chang Renxia 常任俠 (1904–1996), Lin Danqiu 林淡秋 (Lin Zerong 林澤榮, 1906–1981), Shufei 舒非 (Yuan Wenshu 袁文殊, 1919–1993), Xia Yan 夏衍 (Shen Naixi, 沈乃熙, 1900–1995), Yiqun 以羣 (Ye Yiqun 葉以羣, 1911–1966), Zhu Xiuxia 祝秀俠 (Zhu Gengming 祝庚明, 1907–1986), Zhou Wen 周文 (1907–1952), Zhou Hang 周行 (1907–1980), and even a later notorious Cerberus of the PRC cultural Hades, Zhou Yang 周揚 (1908–1989).

爭時期大後方文學書系 [*Literature and Publications on the Great Rear during the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan*] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1989), 2, pt. 1: 1250–53. This kind of theater was experimented with for some years beforehand; see Tang Xiaobing, “Street Theater and Subject Formation in Wartime China: Toward a New Form of Public Art,” *Cross-Currents, East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 18 (March 2016) (<http://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-18/>): 22–50.

9 Hu Shaoxuan, “Jietouju lun 街頭劇論,” *Wenyi yuekan* 2, nos. 11–12 (1939), republished in Cai Yi, *Zhongguo Kang Ri*, 1254–57.

The proceedings of their discussion were published in a new Shanghai journal, *Literature and Art* (*Wenyi*) and on March 31, 1939, they appeared in a compilation printed in Shanghai and distributed by the *Translation Journal* Bookstore.¹⁰ By that time, the city, consisting of the International and French Concessions, was surrounded by the Japanese occupation administration and had a precarious life as a “lone island” of relative freedom. Although the results of the discussion were not disseminated as a manifesto, the participants held firm to the ideas printed there and propagated them in Free China under the GMD and in the CCP’s Northwest base.¹¹

Their first priority was finding a purpose for the arts and artists’ work in the context of total war. Lin Qi 林琪, the editor of the volume, responded as follows:

For the future advance of the new arts and literature, to give service in the current resistance struggle, to build a new independent China after the final victory in the War of Resistance, [we] need to improve the level of culture, and this new enlightenment is [our] one task. At the same time, to criticize our received innate literary heritage is another task; irrespective of whether we take the track of utilizing the old-style [works] or creating new-style works, we [should] create [works] “that are understandable to the broad masses, that are liked ... and that are improving” the literature of the masses. This is the central work facing the arts and literature of the Resistance War.¹²

Most authors agreed that the goal of this war, and by default of the arts, was not the vindictive destruction of the Japanese nation but the obliteration of Japanese fascism.¹³ This war was not nationalistic or imperialistic but liberationist, anti-imperialist, and patriotic.

10 Another Shanghai left-wing journal also disseminating translations of mostly European texts, edited by Xia Yan. “‘Gudao’ shiqi ‘孤岛’时期,” *Meiri yibao* 每日译报 <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2013/0905/c85037-22815829.html> (accessed November 17, 2018).

11 On the separateness of theater development in the CCP-held areas during the war, see Brian James DeMare, *Mao’s Cultural Army: Drama Tropes in China’s Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 25–112.

12 Lin Qi 林琪, “Guanyu Kangzhan wenyi 關於抗戰文藝,” in *Kangzhan wenyi lunji* 抗戰文藝論集 [*Compiled Discussions on Literature and Art from the Time of the War of Resistance*], ed. Luo Shiwen 洛蝕文; comp. Cai Dengshan 蔡登山 (1939; repr., Taipei: Duli zuojia, 2017), 19 (henceforth Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*).

13 Zhu Xiuxia, “Xianshi zhuyide Kangzhan wenxue lun 現實主義的抗戰文學論,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 102.

Behind this new culture were five fundamental ideas: “service,” “art as a weapon,” “organization,” “the masses,” and “use of the old culture.” There was broad agreement as to the first four, however, the fifth concept—how to use the cultural tradition, especially the old performative and literary genres for the purpose of war propaganda—was a source of unresolved controversy. All these ideas were woven together into one vision of the role of the arts and artists.

In all clarity, they appear in the article by Zhou Yang. Zhou, who announced an end to the secluded lives of old-style artists and stated that it was not necessary for the young writers to “drop their pens, grab the guns and rush to the battlefields.” He claimed that “a writer according to his place and conditions ought to utilize the weapon with which he is most familiar—use a pen to serve in the War of Resistance, write works about the War of Resistance, whether they are reportage, reports, or even simple propaganda pieces that incite people to action.”¹⁴ Later, he declared that war artists needed to crack the opposition of apathetic writers while fully integrating themselves into the struggle against the enemy. The forms of service advocated by Zhou were: “organization of the meetings, collecting funds, procuring labor, educating refugees, educating soldiers about politics and giving them political leadership, inscribing the plates, making wall newspapers, etc.”¹⁵ This understanding of arts propagated that, in the words of Zhou Hang, “arts and literature are also a kind of science, therefore, at the same time, they are also a kind of fighting weapon.”¹⁶ The idea of “weaponizing” culture was further developed by Zhou Yang, who explained that the power of culture was in educating the masses 抗戰中教育羣衆的武器 and in following the bright tradition of the revolutionary, “realistic 現實主義,” and “utilitarian 功利主義” New Literature professed and practiced by the students of Lu Xun. This use of culture would fulfill the dream of the revolution, which started in 1925 and suffered blows after 1927 but would ultimately produce “a national revolution 民族革命” and “national liberation 民族解放.”¹⁷

The continuation of the revolution was not only Zhou’s opinion. Not only was it the view among left-wing Shanghai-based writers (as replicated by Ouyang Fanhai 歐陽凡海 in the concluding chapter in this volume) but also one

14 Zhou Yang, “Xinde xianshi yu wenxueshangde xinde renwu 新的現實與文學上的新的任務,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 27–28.

15 Zhou Yang, “Xinde xianshi.”

16 Zhou Hang, “Women xuyao zhankai yige Kangzhan wenyi yundong 我們需要展開一個抗戰文藝運動,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 21.

17 Zhou Yang, “Kangzhan shiqide wenxue 抗戰時期的文學,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 88–89.

held by the CCP and Mao, for whom Zhou served as a cultural spokesman.¹⁸ The weaponization of culture, it was assumed, could work solely under the conditions of military discipline and hierarchy. Therefore, they declared it necessary to form a tightly structured organization of writers, artists, and performers focused on the war effort.¹⁹ To some writers, such as Zhou Yang, the army structure was simply equal to the party structure, that is, the CCP and he had no inhibition about calling writers “literary cadres 文學的幹部.”²⁰ Hu Feng went further by pointing out that artists should follow the lessons outlined in Mao Zedong’s 1938 essays “Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War against Japan (Youjizhan de zhanlue wenti 游擊戰的戰略問題)” and “On Protracted War (Lun chijiu zhan 論持久戰),” which analyzed the issue of wartime culture on the basis of Mao’s thought.²¹

Whichever was the precise vision (large, institutionalized army or a partisan force) of militarized cultural work, it was seen as a solution for both production and the dissemination of war propaganda. Propaganda was understood as the arts and as a model for reconstruction of the “masses 大眾.” The meaning of the masses was central to the wartime United Front cultural compromise and to the political survival of the very enterprise of resistance culture. Even if quotations from CCP leaders were permissible, references to the class struggle, so fundamental for the Left-Wing Writers League since the early 1930s, had been dropped altogether.²² In its stead, the discussants offered a *mélange* of ideas bound by one distinct and forceful point: intellectuals determined what constitutes the masses and “created” the masses through their work in making propaganda art.²³ Several points were definitive in this view of the masses. As

18 Ouyang Fanhai, “Kangzhanhoude Zhongguo wenyi yundong ji qi xianzhuang 抗戰後的中國文藝運動及其現狀,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 356–57. Zhou Yang was the principal at the Lu Xun School of Arts [Lu Xun yishu xueyuan 魯迅藝術學院] in Yan’an; see David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press 1991), 62–66.

19 On the necessity of organization, see Zhou Hang, “Women xuyao zhankai,” 23–24; on the unity of organization [*tuanti* 團體], see Zhou Yang, “Kangzhan shiqide wenxue,” 92–93.

20 Zhou Yang, “Xinde xianshi,” 41.

21 Hu Feng, “Lun chijiu zhan zhongde wenhua yundong 論持久戰中的文化運動,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 54–55.

22 Ge Fei, *Xiju, geming yu dushi xuanwo*, 28–31. According to Hsia Tsi-an, in *The Gate*, this was not possible when Lu Xun was still alive. On theater of the masses or, as Tang calls it, public theater [*dazhong xiju*], see Tang, “Street Theater,” 24–30.

23 Art and propaganda art were seen as congruent. See Feng Xuefeng, “Guanyu yishu dazhonghua 關於藝術大眾化,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 155, 158; Lu Digen 鹿地亘, “Guanyu ‘yishu he xuanchuan’ de wenti 關於‘藝術和宣傳’的問題,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 325–338; esp. 331, where he advocates using crude propaganda to struggle and win with traitors.

defined by Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峯 (1903–1976), first, the serviceability of mass culture in the war, which he equated with a revolution, was defined as subordination to the current government and to the mission of cultural development.²⁴ Feng also defined the tasks and the kinds of the acceptable mass culture:

In order to propagate the idea of the War of Resistance, deal with the questions of the War of Resistance, describe and provide a critique of wartime social life, dissect and attack current dark forces like traitors' activities as well as images of those among the despotic gentry 豪紳, turncoat merchants and officials [who] seized the opportunity to harm people, [and who] engage in corruption and the like; depicting the model events of the war, model battles, and heroism; encourage mass involvement in combat; introduce the new ideas and new thinking 輸進新觀念, 新思想, etc. [use] opera (theater; *xiju*), stories, novels, reportage, poems, folk rhymes, songs, murals, woodcuts, comic strips 連環圖畫, craftsmen-made designs, clay sculptures, stone sculptures, wood carvings as well as films, etc.²⁵

This defined mass culture was not a “popular literature and arts” (*tongsu wenhua* 通俗文藝). In fact, it was defined in opposition to the understanding of what constituted popular culture, which was created, perpetuated, and enjoyed by the lower sectors of the society as well as the unenlightened members of China's citizenry. This popular culture was seen as vulgar, harmful, superstitious, reactionary, false, and even disloyal to the nation.²⁶ In the eyes of intellectuals, it taught useless contents and spread quietism. Zhou Wen, after listening to a market storyteller, even claimed that such culture professed defeatism, capitulatory attitudes, and a betrayal of the nation.²⁷

Contributors to this discussion agreed that popular literature and arts were mostly based on a narrow corpus of traditional novels, such as *Journey to the West* or *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, that it functioned in local dialects, and that it was mostly oral and aural, thus not transmitted by the written word.²⁸ The exception was the chapbook—a local, woodblock-printed opera libretto—that, according to Zhou Wen, provided most of the reading content

24 Feng Xuefeng, “Guanyu yishu dazhonghua,” 148–51.

25 Ibid., 154.

26 Lin Danqiu, “Kangzhan wenxue yu dazhonghua wenti 抗戰文學與大眾化問題,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 170.

27 Zhou Wen, “Changben—defang wenxuede gexin 唱本-地方文學的革新,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 222.

28 Mu Mutian, “Guanyu tongsu wenyi 關於通俗文藝,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 193–94.

in Sichuan and elsewhere in rural China.²⁹ Consequently, there was also an agreement as to the nature of this “popular culture” and their participants, whose main characteristic was that “the majority of [the] masses only have ears, [but] do not have eyes.”³⁰ The only way to access this public was through oral arts. In general, the contributors to this discussion all claimed with conviction that the population of rural and small-town China—the social matter meant to be turned into the enlightened mobilized masses—was entirely illiterate and securely backward, even though little proof was given to substantiate that view.³¹ The solution to illiteracy and ignorance was to learn to talk to the common folk in their own language, namely, that of the aurally appealing performances. To do so, however, intellectuals had to overcome the inherent vulgarity of “traditional” arts, especially of the “old” opera, songs, and storytelling (called recitations, *langsong* 郎誦).³²

The other reason for turning to the performing arts was the sense of failure in their previous efforts (in Shanghai between 1930 and 1935) at creating the masses through art and literature. That was a fairly straightforward assessment, which acknowledged that forcing Western-inspired artistic forms of the New Culture Movement on the public did not communicate to the broad sectors of the lower-class society. The reasons for failure were, first, linguistic: Mao Dun stated that popular audiences disparaged the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of *baihua*. Obviously, they were also aesthetic: the spoken drama (*huaju*) and literary forms popular among the urban leftist intellectuals were outmatched by traditional-style novels.³³ Moreover, popular readers perceived the heroes dominating new literary pieces as foreign to their experience.³⁴

From the time that the war collapsed the divisions between the “modern” and “backward” areas of the country and sectors of Chinese society, as Lin Danqiu claimed, there remained little reason to perpetuate the old modes of operation. Instead, writers recognized the necessity of employing the old

29 Zhou Wen, “Changben,” 220–21.

30 Mu Mutian, “Guanyu tongsu wenyi,” 202.

31 Mu Mutian, “Guanyu tongsu wenyi,” 194, 197.

32 The only “modern” popular form considered sufficiently mass in character was reportage. See Guo Moruo, Lao She, Zhang Shenfu 張申府, Pan Zinian 潘梓年, Xia Yan, Zang Yunyuan 臧雲遠, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, Xi Ru 奚如, and Bei Ou 北鷗, “Kangzhan yilai wenyi de zhan wang 抗戰以來文藝的展望,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 45.

33 For example, “abuse” of the particle *de* 的 in *baihua* was considered very annoying. See Mao Dun, “Wenyi dazhonghua wenti 文藝大眾化問題,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 165–66; idem, “Dazhonghua yu liyong jiuixingshi 大眾化與利用舊形式,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 212.

34 Lao She, “Tan tongsu wenyi 談通俗文藝,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 209.

forms to achieve their goals.³⁵ The main problems were as follows: was the old style capable of holding the new content, or was the form inherently communicating the repulsive “backward” cultural message? If the form was not soiled by the content, how then could the old form be used for the purpose of the new? These questions were left largely unresolved. All argued that art has to be realistic, modern in its outlook, and propagandistic in purpose, at the same time reaching the broadest audience possible. Others thought about employing the dialect, syntax, and aesthetic codes of the traditional arts in order to create new heroes and new stories that corresponded to the current national crisis. Few argued that the old arts, particularly performance and storytelling, were impossible to salvage. The very mission of the intellectuals was to break down the stranglehold of tradition in their nation-building resistance war movement.³⁶ Some more refined writers, such as Lao She, called for deeper study of the phenomenon of traditional culture. Results obtained this way should have provided guidance for further propaganda work.³⁷ Zhou Wen was more emphatic in his guidelines for future work. Analyzing the *gaoqiang* Sichuan Opera and recognizing its dominant hold over popular taste and mentality, he declared:

old-style literature, in fact, in the process of examination, in the majority appears to be “local” literature. For example, Sichuan *gaoqiang* opera repertoire chapbooks 唱本, are difficult to understand by people from other provinces, which is not only because of their style but also because of their very local dialect 方言土話. Although fictional stories exist everywhere and can be distributed in any place in the country, when they reach a location, particularly among the lower and middle strata of society, there surely is [only] a limited number of readers [able to access them] because command of the written language is very problematic. We should not, however, give up on distributing texts throughout society. Especially during the current time of the War of Resistance, we ought to have a practical and realistic outlook, and our literature really has to penetrate the masses, where inevitably the dialect literature is firmly

35 Lin Danqiu, “Kangzhan wenxue,” 173–75; Mao Dun, “Wenyi dazhonghua wenti,” 163–64.

36 Luo Shiwen was very critical of “what people like to watch 大眾喜歡看” and found little virtue in that kind of culture, which he thought should be replaced by the works of dramatists such as Tian Han 天漢 and Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩; Luo Shiwen, “Guanyu wenxue dazhonghua wenti 關於文學大眾化問題,” in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 187–88. Fang Xuefeng was also skeptical and advocated new songs for new times, in “Guanyu yishu dazhonghua,” 161.

37 Lao She, “Tan tongsu wenyi,” 211.

established. Literature in dialect can be created according to the new style; furthermore, it must be created according to the new style. But we absolutely cannot just discard the old-style literature; instead, we need to firmly grasp it. In this way, today's question about "using the old culture," is actually a question of "reviving and reforming the local literature."³⁸

According to Zhou Wen, the best way to proceed was first to learn local opera and then to select the pieces to salvage, because some operas in *gaoqiang* existed that "once contained some artistry." The new acceptable pieces should be edited and published. In all this, organizational and financial help should be extended by the national government.³⁹ Lin Danqiu called this approach to the old culture as "using poison against poison 以毒攻毒." Lin meant that the traditional arts were poisoning the minds of the masses, but, because of the popularity of their forms, they could be used to eradicate the evil that they had previously implanted in Chinese minds.

Other than controlling the style and harnessing the old opera, it was proposed that the troupes of spoken drama, in which so many of the left-wing intellectuals invested their work and hopes, should copy the itinerant style of the opera artists. The troupes were meant not only to travel the countryside but also to learn to use temple and makeshift stages and to allow the professionals to mix with the villagers and give them some rudimentary training. Only in this way could the broad masses finally learn what spoken drama is and what great civilizational benefits can be obtained from this form of theater.⁴⁰ According to Ding Ling, some lessons in this area could be learned from a fledgling experiment with *yangge* 秧歌 in Yan'an.⁴¹

Irrespective of whether they discussed *huaju* or the reformed traditional opera, the real benefits were to be extracted from organization building. This organization should have been created along military lines, with strong leadership reaching down the ranks and formalized activities of writing, rehearsal, criticism, and staging of theatrical pieces. For Qian Kun 錢堃 who discussed this topic, theater/opera actors and writers were not artists but as members of a political body that served the purpose of disseminating war propaganda. This

38 Zhou Wen, "Changben," 228–29. Mao Dun supported this point, saying that there was no time during the war to develop a new language for the masses (thus admitting to the failure of the *baihua* movement), in "Wenyi dazhonghua wenti," 165.

39 Zhou Wen, "Changben," 230.

40 Shufei, "Guanyu kangzhan yanju 關於抗戰演劇," in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 270–77.

41 Ding Ling, "Luetan gailiang pingju 略談改良平劇," in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 339–44. For more details on the history of *yangge* during the War of Resistance, see Holm, *Art and Ideology*.

organization would either swallow up or prevail upon other theater troupes, giving them direction. In this vision, directed artistic activity substituted for mass culture and was supposed to become Chinese wartime mass culture. This organization was to be supported, integrate with, and cooperate with the national government.⁴²

3.2 *Shortcomings of the Plan*

In sum, the left-wing intellectuals' answer to the war crisis was fairly straightforward, and it contained many of the ideas that had already been announced over the previous thirty-odd years. The war was a pivotal crisis that would be resolved through a popular victory and a revolution, both leading to national liberation. To achieve this goal, the culture of the Chinese people needed to be thoroughly rebuilt under the guidance of enlightened intellectuals. The new culture was to be created and disseminated through a militarized organization constructed by or with the help of the state and subservient to the state's political goals. Consequently, this organization would eradicate evil and backward elements of the "old" while using both modern and traditional media and styles to broadcast its new patriotic, revolutionary, and civilizing message. While the organization did its work, it would study the conditions, languages, dialects, cultures, and stories prevalent in society, consuming, reusing, and remodeling them according to aims that it had established for itself or the aims of the revolutionary wartime state (which were considered congruent).

Unsurprisingly, this plan had serious issues, some of them discussed by its authors and others ignored and then emerging as soon as these ideas were put into practice. The first issue was the narrow scope of inspiration and examples followed by this group. Lu Xun, Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), and the Soviet experience held unchallenged positions of authority, defining and limiting the scope of reflection. Needless to say, neither Gorky nor Lu Xun ever faced the challenges of the War of Resistance. There were also other reasons why they were the most misleading guides for studying popular culture of China. Lu Xun, though a literary giant, despised the folk culture of his time and, like most of his literary friends and associates, conducted no field studies on it.⁴³ Gorky,

42 Qian Kun, "Juyun jianshe de zhuwenti 劇運建設的諸問題," in Luo Shiwen, *Kangzhan wenyi*, 283–93.

43 Chao Wei-pang, "Modern Chinese Folklore Investigation: Part 1: The Peking National University," *Folklore Studies* 1 (1942); idem, "Modern Chinese Folklore Investigation: Part II: The National Sun Yat-sen University. 中國近代民俗學研究概況," *Folklore Studies* 2 (1943): 79–88; see also Chabrowski, *Singing on the River*, 21–23; C. T. Hsia noted that Lu Xun studied popular literature in libraries and had some experiences, in *Modern Fiction*, 25–46.

though an artistic inspiration, had no interest in China and could hardly give guidance on how to approach traditional Chinese opera or storytelling. As for the Soviet Union, it was seen as the ideal but few of the contributors had seen for themselves how the country worked; most of their knowledge was derived from publications.

Nevertheless, learning from these examples predetermined the conclusions and muddled the possible results of study and observation, which so many authors considered necessary for dealing with popular culture in the future. In other words, the conclusions were proposed before the study was completed. Overall, there was little knowledge of the actual field in which these intellectuals ended up working. Only one article, by Zhou Wen, dealt with Sichuan—the primary center for propaganda work—and it is hard to assess the extent to which his observations about folk storytelling reflect reality or his fear of the omnipresent traitors and Japanese spies disseminating quietist antiwar propaganda. What Zhou Wen's writing certainly revealed was a widespread predilection for the written word. These were published materials that they intended to study; it was editorial and publication work that they wanted to undertake; and it was through the published word that they intended to reconstruct the oral culture of the Chinese countryside. Predictably, this approach was bound to run into enormous problems: Who was going to teach their public to read and write? Which dialect was correct? How would these works compete with those transferred orally? How could oral works be controlled? Their plan was therefore costly and time consuming. Would any government support them over this long period? Would they deliver the propaganda success they promised?

The final problem was their arrogance. Almost none of the left-wing intellectuals had any valid knowledge or experience in southwestern, south central, or northwestern China: the only regions free of Japanese occupation. Those who came from the region, such as Leshan-born Guo Moruo, had not resided in the area for decades and showed no interest in it before the war. Others were largely ignorant of dialects, cultures and subcultures, social organizations, economic structures, local elites, and so on. Nonetheless, they had no inhibition about generalizing about these issues and declaring that their ideas and methods would succeed. Moreover, following their teacher, Lu Xun, and urban opinion prevalent in coastal cities, they assumed that their grasp of the basic characteristics of rural China was correct. Their view could be summarized in a few frequently reported words: “illiteracy 文盲,” “ignorance 愚,” “tradition 傳通,” “vulgarity 通俗/庸俗,” “superstition 迷信,” and “poverty 窮.” Obviously—because of the lack of data or social research from Sichuan in most of the Republican period—these opinions were mostly groundless, based on assumptions and prejudice. In this respect, these intellectuals did not differ

much from those in the past and contemporary European colonial administrators, who though dramatically ill equipped had the full conviction to go on “civilizing missions” to Asia and Africa.⁴⁴ It was also hardly surprising that both groups invariably and quickly met with surprise and disappointment.

4 Putting Words into Action

The reestablishment of the United Front during the early war years ensured that intellectuals had access to the government’s institutional and financial support. Consequently, they could put their ideas into practice. This was in contrast to the prewar years, when left-wing writers staged plays in two of Shanghai’s experimental theaters or led a precarious itinerant existence together with the CCP or dueled with GMD censorship. With the exception of the Ding County experiment, in which Xiong Foxi used the theater to educate farmers and popularized dramas written by amateur farmers-cum-actors, most dramatists had no previous outlet for their literary experiments.⁴⁵ The immensity of the development opportunities provided by the war outweighed all previous experience.

The GMD national government heard the artists’ call for the creation of propaganda instruments along the lines of the military and civilian administration units. At the same time, the Nationalist Party had no intention of achieving the ideological ends proposed by the artists. Instead, it developed its own understanding of the war for the Chinese nation and what could be achieved during the years of combat. Its views, though based on very different premises, surprisingly had many commonalities with the leftist intellectuals’ agenda in cultural work. Chiang Kai-shek made it clear that the war was as much a tragedy as it was an opportunity to revive the nation through a restyled and reinforced New Life movement. He claimed that war was being fought to “save the country, build the country” through a crusade for the national “spirit.”

44 On this topic, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 826–37 and references.

45 William Huizhou Sun, “The Peasants’ Theatre Experiment in Ding Xian County (1932–1937),” PhD diss., New York University, 1990; Yu Zhang, “Visual and Theatrical Constructs of a Modern Life in the Countryside: James Yan, Xiong Foxi and the Rural Reconstruction Movement in Ding County (1920s–1930s),” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 47–95; Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in Twentieth-Century China: The Search of an Ideal Development Model* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104–5; Hung, *War and Popular Culture*, 19–28, 51–55.

The cornerstone of the “spirit” were the Three People’s Principles and loyalty to the state, represented by its leadership. The spiritual fight was described as “the newest weapon.”⁴⁶ This “weapon” was to be applied to society through the party cadres, civilian administration, and military channels in a top-down manner and reinforced through meetings at every level. That would lead to a fully controlled indoctrination of society with the use of propaganda and education. This policy was unchanged throughout the war and was restated many times.⁴⁷ Chiang did not indicate the precise means to be applied, but, as we shall see, drama was one of the most important elements of this program.

4.1 *Early Experiments with Propaganda Theater*

One of the early implemented ideas was driving trucks on the Chongqing–Chengdu highway with an agitprop team on board. A report to the minister of education, Chen Lifu, in November 1938 stated that each truck team screened movies, lent books, taught hygiene, fought illiteracy, and gave various performances (e.g., “local tunes 通俗的小調”), therefore achieving every point of the New Life movement. The trucks were operated by the Sichuan Village Education Promotion Service Cars Association (Sichuan nongcun jiaoyu fuwuche cujinhui 四川農村教育服務車促進會) and each had eight people onboard, who were busy with servicing the car, screening movies, and keeping a library. According to the report, their method of propaganda work allowed them to overcome the serious issue of villagers’ illiteracy (gauged at 90 percent) while enabling the successful propagation of the only correct ideology: the Three People’s Principles. Moreover, the truck managed to reach the audience of 268,815 people in four trips, and, as the authors claimed, even one such unit could influence a million and a half villagers in a year, at a cost of 300 yuan (1938) per month. The dream was to broaden the service to twenty cars and operate on all highways in Sichuan, Hunan, and Guizhou.⁴⁸

46 Jiang weiyuanzhang, “‘Guomin jingshen zongdongyuan gangling ji shishi banfa’ fabiao fangshi zi Chongqing zhi Zhongguo Guomindang zhongyang dangbu mishuzhang Zhu Jiahua dian 蔣委員長《國民精神總動員綱領及實施辦法》發表方式自重慶致中國國民黨中央黨部秘書長朱家驊電 in *Zhonghua Minguo zhongyao shiliao chubian—dui Ri kangzhan shiqi* 中華民國重要史料初編—對日抗戰時期 [*Important Historical Documents of the Chinese Republic, First Edition: Period of the Anti-Japanese War*], ed. Tai Xiaoyi 泰孝儀 (Taipei: Zhongguo guomindang dangshi weiyuanhui, Zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1977), 4: 577–601, esp. 597. This agenda was present in education for a decade before the war; see Zarrow, *Educating China*, 79.

47 See Tai Xiaoyi, *Zhonghua minguo zhongyao shiliao*, 601–40.

48 Zhang Boling 張伯苓, Luo Jialun 羅家倫, and Huang Cixian 黃次咸, “Sichuan nongcun jiaoyu fuwuche cujinhui Qingmeihao fuwuche gaikuang baogaoshu 四川農村教育服務車促進會青美號服務車概況報告書 [A Report of the Situation of the Green

A closer reading of this report makes it apparent that the size of the rural audience mentioned was wishful thinking. Did this audience represent the total population of the villages where the truck stopped? Did the people stop out of curiosity or follow the films, songs, and speeches of the propaganda teams attentively? How did eight people—who were busy from morning until evening with driving, movie screening, repairing the truck, and so on, with a busy schedule, and struggling with the terrible Sichuan roads—find the time to do a detailed headcount of the audiences? All these questions remain unanswered. At the same time, they shone a light on the all-too-eager boasting by the GMD authorities about the size of their audiences and by both left- and right-wing propaganda workers and artists.

4.2 *Constructing an Institutional Approach to Propaganda Theater*

More serious efforts developed on the basis of the government organizations, which effectively set up theaters across the country. An official GMD history of the Sino-Japanese war published in Taiwan in 1971 summarized the development of drama in the following way:

Apart from the drama education in the armed forces which was handled by the Board of Political Training of the National Military Council, civilian drama education was taken up by the Department of Social Education in the Ministry of Education. The National School of Drama was renamed the College of Drama. In addition, the National College of Musical Drama and the Department of Drama of National College of Social Education was established. In 1938, a play editing section was organized to review, edit and collect new and old scripts. On the one hand, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Circuit Drama Education Teams were successively organized. The 4th Circuit Drama Educational Team was organized in 1939, and the Experimental Drama Educational Team in 1941. These teams were actively touring Kiangsu, Chekiang, Fukien, Kiangsi, Hunan, Kwangsi, Kwangtung, Hupei, Yunnan, Kweichow, Szechuan, Sikang, Shensi, Ninghsia, Chinghai and Kansu Provinces. In 1943, efforts were made to consolidate the 1st and 2nd Circuit Drama Educational Teams into the Ministry of Education Circuit Drama Educational Team operating along

Beauty Service Car from the Sichuan Rural Education Service Cars Promotion Association],” in *Kangzhan shiqide Sichuan: dang'an shiliao huibian* 抗戰時期的四川：檔案史料匯編 [*Sichuan during the War of Resistance: Collected and Published Archival Historical Sources*], ed. Sichuansheng dang'anju (guan) 四川省檔案局(館) (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2014), 3: 1613–20 (henceforth, Sichuansheng dang'anju, *Kangzhan shiqi*).

the highways in the southeastern part of the country. The 3rd Circuit Drama Educational Team was integrated into the Social Educational Team operating along the Szechuan-Sikang Highway. The 4th Circuit Drama Educational Team operating along the northwest highways. Apart from the above, there were the Experimental Drama Troupe of the Ministry of Propaganda, the Central Youth Drama Club of the Three People's Principles Youth corps and ten troupes of the Board of Political Training which toured many important cities giving performances for a total of over 10 million people. Their efforts greatly helped the propaganda work of the War of Resistance.⁴⁹

This account represents an official GMD version of the war and makes no pretense of objectivity or, probably, to historical truth (e.g., the figures appear exaggerated and are hard to prove).⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it demonstrates the importance placed on theater during the war years and later. Moreover, this description correctly represents the way in which drama developed during the war: following the aforementioned orders given by Chiang Kai-shek and other top leaders of the Nationalist establishment, the drama troupes became attached to the civilian and military administrative structure of the state, from the center down to the most peripheral parts of the body politic.

4.3 *Expansion of the Institutionalized Propaganda Theater*

An article by Shi Wen 施文 in *Theater Art (Juchang yishu 劇場藝術)*, written on November 1, 1940, but published in July 1941, gives a valuable summary of this development, listing state organizations that developed their own theater troupes.⁵¹ Shi Wen stated that the drama troupes were allocated to three main institutional orders: the military (“military system”), the party (“party political affairs and educational system”), and “the people’s professional associations or to the system of the leisure theater troupes.” Within the military, this meant the Military Committee Political Department Cultural Committees, which

49 Hsu Long-hsuen and Chang Ming-kai, ed., *History of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945)*, rev. Kao Ching-chen, Hu Pu-yu, Liu Han-mou, and Lu Pao-ching (Taipei: Chung Wu, 1971), 237–38.

50 For example, the blame for war fell on the CCP and the USSR; see the preface: “Excerpts from “Soviet Russia in China” written by Pres. Chiang Kai-shek. Ibid., 1; we cannot check whether the figures provided in this document are exaggerated or describe ten million people, or the cities visited had a total population of that magnitude.

51 Shi Wen 施文, “Shancheng pianyu—dahoufangde xiju yundong 山城片羽——大後方的戲劇運動,” *Juchang yishu 劇場藝術* 2, nos. 6–7 (1941), in Shen Lierong et al., *Xiju lilian*, 133–34.

were the most endowed: each of them had “a fighting-enemy theater unit, and education and direction troupe and a children’s troupe.” Field Headquarters Political Departments and war theater Political Departments had so-called Third Departments specializing in propaganda through drama in addition to political work units that employed a person responsible for theater work.

Political work units put in charge of artistic propaganda (including theater) were assigned to every army group, every army, and every specially delegated office for political instruction. Additionally, theater agitprop units were created by every director of the Government Pacification Office (e.g., the Guangxi National Defense Art Society 廣西國防藝術社), every Forward Border Region Column Political Office, every guerrilla warfare army detachment, every military school political department (e.g., the Central Military School’s Bloodstains Theater Society 血花劇社), every replacement/reserve soldiers training office political department (e.g., the Fifth Replacement Soldiers Training Office Vanguard Theater Troupe 第五补充兵訓練處前鋒劇社) and next to the Airforce Political Department (one called the Divine Eagle Theater Troupe 神鷹劇團). Moreover, officers’ district political offices had propaganda performance theater troupes, hospitals had “honorary propaganda units” (e.g., the Promoting Peace Glorious Blood Theater Society 興安血光劇社); and so on.

GMD organizations were also graced with a plethora of new propaganda units that were busy staging theatrical shows, including “provincial activists’ committee theater troupes, such as the Guangdong Activist Theater Troupe 廣東動員劇團. Furthermore, in the provinces of Free China, every National Education Hall and Cultural Educational Committee had an associated theater troupe, for example, the Zhejiang Provincial Central Theater Troupe 浙江省中心劇團 or the Kunming Educational Hall Theater Music and Song Touring Educational Unit 昆明教育廳戲劇樂歌回教育隊.

A long list of specialized drama schools, theaters, and troupes were established with the clear purpose of war propaganda. Among the most notable, Shi Wen listed: the Three People’s Principles Youth Corps Youth Theater Association 三民主義青年團青年劇社, the Chongqing Central Regiment Headquarters Youth Theater Association and its branch associations 重慶中央團部青年劇社暨各分團劇社, the State Specialist Theater School 國立戲劇專科學校, the National Revolutionary Art Academy Theater Department 民族革命藝術學院戲劇系, the Lu Xun Art Academy Theater Department 魯迅藝術學院戲劇系, the Sichuan Provincial Drama and Music School 四川省立戲劇音樂學校, the Shandong Provincial Theater, the Guangdong Provincial Wartime Art Academy Theater Department, the Guangxi Provincial Art Museum Theater Department, the China Film Studio’s China Forever Theater Troupe 中國製片廠中國萬歲劇團, and the China Film Theater Troupe 中電劇團.

The third category of newly established theatrical art organizations consisted of either professional bodies (which were therefore commercial) or amateur drama associations linked to universities, high schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools. In Shi Wen's list they included China's Save the Nation from Extinction Theater Troupe 中國救亡劇團, the China Travel Theater Troupe 中國旅行劇團, the Shanghai Drama Art Association 上海劇藝社, the Chengdu Hebei Theater Troupe 成都河北劇團, the Chongqing Shanghai Theater Work Association 重慶上海戲劇工作社, the Chongqing Roar Theater Association 重慶怒吼劇社, the Fudan Theater Troupe 復旦劇社, the Ji'nan Theater Troupe 暨南劇社, the Southwest United University Theater Troupe 西南聯大劇社, the Central Government School Theater Troupe 中央政治學校的劇團, and the Great China Theater Troupe 大夏劇社.

This immense expansion in state-run theater troupes (mostly of *huaju*) affiliated with almost every part of the state structure was proof of the thorough achievement of the political programs of both the GMD leadership and the leftist intellectuals. At the same time, it was much more a state-controlled, state-financed, and institutional approach to war propaganda than the initial attempts in the earlier part of the war. In fact, the main nodes of theater work followed the primarily urban network of the GMD government, casting a sparse net across the countryside and firmly anchoring itself in the main cities in China's Southwest, especially Sichuan. This urban inflection guaranteed quick results for the writers, actors, and officials used to city culture but ultimately proved constraining, as it progressively estranged them from countryside (a problem addressed below).

4.4 *Developments in the Provisional Capital*

Through an example in Chongqing in that period, we can take a closer look at how this institutionalized system worked. A survey of the professional organizations 社團 conducted in June 1941 shows the speed and size of this development. In 1937, before the arrival of the central government, Chongqing had only four theater-propaganda troupes: Chongqing Leisure Time 重慶業餘劇團, The Roar 怒吼劇社, A Garden of Morality Hankou Leisure Time Singing Group 德園漢口業餘歌詠團, and the *Commercial Daily's* Resistance War Book and Newspaper Propaganda Detachment 商務日報抗戰書報宣傳隊. These four were joined in 1938 by another company (Rise the Halberd 戈興劇社), in 1939 by three more (Chongqing University United Friends 重大友聯劇社, Chongqing May Fourth 重慶五四劇團, the City Ping-Pong Union 市乒乓聯合會), and in 1940 by other three (the Victory Spoken Drama Association 勝利話劇社, the Anhui Youth Service Association 安徽青年服務社, and the Chongqing City Drama Society 重慶市曲社). In 1941, seven additional

troupes commenced activity: the Beneficial National Opera Society 正風國劇社, the Sound of Triumph Theater Society 凱聲劇社, the Melody of Friendship National Opera Research Society 友聲國劇研究社, the Pharmaceutical Society Chongqing Branch Society 藥社重慶分社, the Chongqing and Zhongshan Universities' Song and Drama Research Society 重, 中大歌劇研究社, the Wild Goose Song Directors Sojourning in Chongqing Branch 雁歌導旅渝分部, and the Mountain City Choir 山城合唱團.⁵²

Other notable troupes not mentioned in this document included the Shanghai Movie Actors Drama Troupe 上海影人劇團; the Shanghai Leisure Theater Actors Association 上海業餘劇人協會, and the State Theater School 國立戲劇學校 (renamed the State Specialist Theater School in 1940). The State Theater School was probably the most important drama academy in China during the war; however, it was located not in Chongqing but in a defunct Temple of Literature (Wenmiao) in a small Yangzi town in southern Sichuan called Jiang'an 江安 (in the vicinity of Yibin).⁵³ Irrespective of the distance, its students remained very active on the stages of the provisional capital. Between 1937 and 1945, the following troupes gained visibility: the Ministry of Education Third Touring Drama Educational Unit 教育部第三巡回戲劇教育隊, the July 7 Propaganda Unit 七七宣傳隊, the Children's Troupe 孩子劇團, the Central Government Youth Drama Society 中央青年劇社, and the Japanese People's Antiwar League Southwest Branch Touring Work Team 日本人民反戰同盟西南支部巡回工作團.⁵⁴

We can roughly divide all these troupes into emigrant societies, those attached to educational institutions, troupes of professional or business organizations and firms, national opera groups (i.e., playing Beijing Opera), and

52 "Chongqingshi tezhong shetuan—yilanbiao 重慶市特種社團—覽表 (1941年6月)," in *Zhongguo zhanshi shoudou dang'an wenxian: Zhanshi shehui* 中國戰時首都檔案文獻: 戰時社會 [Archival Records from the China's Capital during the War: Wartime Society], ed. Chongqingshi dang'an guan 重慶市檔案館 and Chongqing shifan daxue 重慶師範大學 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2014), 1613–20 [henceforth, Chongqing, *Zhanshi shehui*], 97.

53 Xie Jin 謝晉, "Jiang'an, yige zhide jiniande xiaocheng 江安, 一個值得紀念的小城," in *Chongqing kangzhan jutan: Chongqing wuji yishujie ziliao zhiyi* 重慶抗戰劇壇: 重慶霧季藝術節資料之一 [The Theater Stage of Chongqing during the War of Resistance: Important Sources to Chongqing's Foggy Season Art Festivals], ed. Chongqing xijujia xiehui "Chongqing juxun" 重慶戲劇家協會《重慶劇訊》 (Chongqing: Chongqing xijujia xiehui, 1985), 27.

54 Shi Man 石曼, "Kangzhan shiqi Chongqing gongyan jumu yilan 抗戰時期重慶公演劇目一覽 (1937年9月–1945年11月)," Chongqing xijujia xiehui, ed. *Chongqing kangzhan jutan*, 121–37.

several spoken drama troupes. All of them were predominantly not-for-profit because they were supported by their respective institutions.

Additionally, by 1941, the GMD government recognized several other drama societies, which were placed in the category of artistic organizations, such as China's Vanguard Theater Society 中國前鋒劇社 and State-Building Opera Educational Touring Group 建國戲劇教育巡回團 and an association called the All-China Drama World Fighting Enemy Society 中華全國戲劇界抗敵協會.⁵⁵ This surely is not an exhaustive list of the associations, groups, amateurs, and school groups performing predominantly spoken drama at that time. However, it gives an indication of the state's organizational support of propaganda and the work undertaken by intellectuals in this period.

In 1942, government-supported theaters reached their peak of development in China's provisional capital. The "music drama groups 音樂戲劇團體" constituted 29 of the 237 organizations registered in the city.⁵⁶ In 1943—a year in which war weariness weighed heavily on Chinese society and economy—a survey of the social organizations run by the Chongqing Municipal Police noted only five theater associations: a sharp drop from just a year before. This was due in part to the government's new tax policy. On April 19, 1943, spoken drama troupes were burdened with an entertainment duty of 30 percent, which was increased on January 6, 1944, to 50 percent. These taxes were considered a way of fighting immorality. In contrast to traditional opera, spoken drama was not staged on a commercial basis, therefore, the entertainment tax most probably had a deleterious effect on it.⁵⁷

We do not have such detailed data enumerating active theatrical companies for the next few years, other than a document dated January 24, 1945, listing

55 "Chongqingshi tezhong shetuan," in Chongqing, *Zhanshi shehui*, 110–11.

56 Most of these groups were student associations [*tongxuehui* 同學會] (81 org.), followed by coprovincial associations [*tongxianghui* 同鄉會], then music drama groups (29), and finally cultural groups [*wenhua tuanti* 文化團體] (23). There were also women's organizations [*funü tuanti* 婦女團體] (8), religious groups [*zongjiao tuanti* 宗教團體] (4), youth and student groups [*qingnian xuesheng tuanti* 青年學生團體] (4), "independent trade unions [*ziyou zhiye tuanti* 自由職業團體] (4), and others (8); "Chongqingshi shehui tuanti tongji 重慶市社會團體統計," Chongqing, *Zhanshi shehui*, 112.

57 Shi Man 石曼, "Chongqing huaju yundong jishi 重慶話劇運動紀事," in *Chongqing wenshi ziliao* 重慶文史資料 [Collected Sources on History and Culture of Chongqing], ed. Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshanghui 中國人民政治協商會議 and Chongqingshi weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 重慶市委員會文史資料委員會 (Chongqing: Xi'nan shifan daxue chubanshe, 1990), 33: 86. At the same time, the number of trade unions and professional associations/guilds, and charity organizations grew rapidly, numbering 113, 46, and 19, respectively; "Chongqingshi jingchaju gezhong shetuan diaocha chabiao 重慶市警察局各種社團調查表 (1943)," *Chongqing wenshi ziliao*, 123.

nine labor unions operating in cultural organizations.⁵⁸ Obviously, the number of labor unions is a very weak indicator of the number of troupes active at that time. Nevertheless, it gives us a picture of the political and labor activation of the members of various social strata and professions. From that perspective, we can infer either a decreased number of (spoken) drama groups or depoliticization of the theater troupes under GMD pressure—troupes that previously were strongholds of the communist-influenced artists. This conclusion is supported by evidence of the “partification” of the opera and spoken drama troupes during the war, discussed below.

The implementation of the ideas of left-wing intellectuals and Nationalist Party leaders led to long-standing cooperation in both the organization and realization of the surprisingly congruent political agenda. Crossing the divide between the left-wing dramatists and the GMD government permitted sweeping development in the notoriously unpopular genre of political spoken drama. This expansion, however, was quite precarious, as it depended almost entirely on theaters shadowing the military, party, and state bureaucracy as well as on enforcing theater education and performance in schools and universities. In this way, *huaaju* became an institution of the state and a part of the state propaganda machine. Effectively taken hostage by the authoritarian wartime party-state, intellectuals developing *huaaju* went against their intention of becoming the state’s critics and fair but stern judges.

The experience with wartime propaganda work was important in other respects, too. It was the first time that any group of artists and intellectuals had harnessed their talent and energy to the modern state administrative system in China, therefore getting a taste of both the grand opportunities and the utter frustrations of that experience. These were the years of work in Chongqing and Sichuan, touring the southwestern countryside, and making painful compromises between ambition, idealism, political reality, and necessity that forged and either warned or encouraged the artists of the era. This unprecedented experience was reflected in the future twists and turns of the Chinese theater world. It influenced the understanding of dramatic art’s power, defined the meaning of success and failure in using theater as well as indicating the opportunities and limitations of performance. Perhaps most important, what intellectuals, writers, directors, and artists experienced in Sichuan and China’s Southwest while serving the wartime state, the inherent conflicts, achievements, and disappointments they underwent all provided the basis for the CCP’s and the GMD’s future decisions on the development of art.

58 “Peidu shetuan,” in *Chongqing wenshi ziliao*, 128.

To understand this point, we now turn to the discussions among the dramatists conducted in Chongqing and see how their interpretations shaped the vision of China's theater of the future.

5 Living through Frustration: Playwrights and the War

The period of wartime work in Chongqing and, to a lesser degree, other cities in the non-occupied zones was marked by substantial publication activity, which raised opinions and created space for sharing experiences and providing solutions to problems. It is not my intention here to dwell in detail on all the discussions in this period. Rather, I summarize the main points and show their relevance to our broader analysis of the development of the dramatic arts and Chinese culture in general. The publication activity between 1937 and 1945 was emblematic of the period and the people it involved. Irrespective of the political ruptures in the United Front (especially after January 1941), the aims and ambitions underlying theater work remained similar, whereas ideological inflections were marginalized. As for the people, political polarization was secondary to the uniform formation and methods of work of the intellectual class, which engaged in and led theater work. Moreover, their origins, social background, and urban predilection determined the potential development of the propaganda drama.

One of the most outspoken and influential voices of the time was that of Xiong Foxi and the magazine he edited, called *Theater's Guard Post* (*Xiju gangwei* 戲劇崗位), published from April 1939 to May 1942. This was a high-quality periodical meant for a professional readership and interested literary circles. Over the years, it published a few dozen spoken dramas, advised theater directors, shared the most important contemporary world trends in the performing arts, publicized research essays on China's theatrical past, and provided critique of plays and the general role of wartime theater. *Theater's Guard Post* appeared quite regularly, sometimes with two issues printed together if the editorial board was interrupted by the bombing of Chongqing. What is interesting from our perspective is the journal's opinion (written by Xiong and his guest writers) on the role of theater and judgment on the achievements after the outbreak of war—in other words, what was accomplished from the time the theater world set its own agenda when it saw the results of Japanese aggression.

What might seem surprising is the consistence of the published statements, which revolved around three main interrelated topics: the creation of new scenarios (*juben*), going to the villages, and education of the masses. Interestingly,

the voices in the *Theater's Guard Post* were paralleled by those among left-leaning and avowed communist outlets, such as *New China Daily* as well as decidedly pro-Nationalist periodicals such as *Youth Literature and Art* (*Qingnian wenyi* 青年文藝). We therefore ask why these politically divided voices sounded similar, and why their fundamental postulates were not fulfilled as the war continued, irrespective of the unprecedented scale of government support.

5.1 *Xiong Foxi and His Mission Statement*

In general, the mission of theater was restated many times. In the editorial essay "Politics, Education, Drama, Three Forming an Organic Whole," Xiong divulged that the "wartime nation building" can be based only on a merger of these three elements. The education of adults and the education outside the school system was considered fundamental for success and achievable through books, events, and theater. Further, Xiong declared that traditional opera was very powerful among the masses and necessarily bound to be "feudal" though it could be turned into a propaganda tool. For its part, propaganda, learning from the experience of the GMD Three People's Principles ideology campaign, could be transformed from the realm of "cheating" to one of "educating." Xiong also recognized that much of the success of the current government in reducing its distance from society was due to the Japanese invasion. This new situation allowed popularization of the theater and its emergence from the professional and scholarly incubator, as the government emulated the Soviet model by politicizing its artistic policy and grounding theaters in the military and administrative bodies. According to Xiong, much work had to be done in order to reach the Soviet level, in which eradication of the "poisonous arts" was very important.⁵⁹

5.2 *Criticizing Failures: No Engagement with Traditional Opera*

The article "Politics, Education, Drama, Three Forming an Organic Whole" can be treated as a mission statement and, at the same time, a reflection on a limited achievement compared to the declarations publicized more than a year earlier. A rather scathing summary of the two years of theater work appeared in the next issue, in which the most detailed was by a theater critic, Liu Nianqu 劉念渠. First, he registered that insufficient work had been done in the countryside, or, as one could conclude, it was high time to move beyond the first contact with rural audiences and start actual work with villagers. Liu claimed

59 Xiong Foxi 熊佛西, "Zhengzhi, jiaoyu, xiju, sanweiyiti 政治, 教育, 戲劇, 三位一體," *Xiju gangwei* 戲劇崗位 1, no. 1 (1939): 3-5.

that China's rural population craved new realistic opera. Second, the scripts were fundamental to any success: they were supposed to serve the public needs above all and not be written just for artistic expression. A statement that "all art is propaganda" was made to resolve the question of sub-par artistry in the staged pieces; nevertheless, Liu wrote that the most "beautiful" plays make the best propaganda. Moreover, he advised testing new scripts on stage before publishing them. This way, more dramas would be presented. Third, he stressed the importance of the Soviet experience—the role of the directors and the high artistic level of theater in Moscow—for development and emulation in China. Fourth, Liu analyzed the issue of social and cultural separateness between urban dramatists and villagers. The former looked down on the latter, exhibited arrogance toward villagers and ascribed cultural backwardness to them. Additionally, drama troupes thought that they could coerce peasants to listen and learn. In fact, Liu stated that artists should learn and immerse themselves in the rural environment, organize traveling troupes, teach villagers how to perform and integrate them into the propaganda work, and at the same time train young people to become future cultural cadres.

Furthermore, Liu wrote that the inhibitions toward traditional opera should be overcome once and for all. "Old opera" should become the main weapon in the propaganda war. It should stand independently of the *huaju*, instead of being subordinated to it and be used in all its diversity. However, it also had to undergo purification from the "feudal" content, a process accomplished with the assistance of government-sponsored investigation and empowered through fiscal and legal means. Finally, drama schools and their graduates were an important source of social capital for cultural reform but also a potential source of trouble as the government took responsibility for their employment.

Liu Nianqu concluded that to date (until summer 1939), theater work had largely failed in its mission because of the absence of engagement with the "true" people's art: the "old opera." In his mind, reforming this genre was a cornerstone of China's future, the only medium through which China's enlightenment could occur.⁶⁰

60 Liu Nianqu 劉念渠, "Liangnianjian Kangzhan xiju zhu wenti de jiantao 兩年間抗戰戲劇諸問題的檢討," *Xiju gangwei* 1, nos. 2–3 (1939): 45–52. The problem of the "old opera" was developed in the same issue by Liu Jingyuan 劉靜沅, who claimed that, on the basis of their content, the plays could be roughly divided into four groups: heroic (20%), defeatist/on national subjugation (10%), historical China-Japan conflict (20%), and on current issues (30%). He proposed that about fifty plays be written and circulated nationally, which would be sufficient for propaganda purposes, in "Kangshi jiuju yingyouzhi tuixing ji zhengli 抗時舊劇應有之推行及整理," *Xiju gangwei* 1, nos. 2–3 (1939): 86–88.

5.3 *Failing Education of Actors: Proposed Solutions*

The topic of educating actors was broached many times, and typically one solution was given: actors should emulate soldiers, and new propaganda theater should be like an army.⁶¹ Additionally, the newly trained actors were obliged to be introduced to the village world, because in reality China was much more like a village than a city. In this way, the local character of opera could be yoked to the propaganda and nation-building mission.⁶² The organization of the troupe should also be streamlined according to the rules and made uniform across the country. The rules defined the hierarchy and structure of the troupe, turning it into a family and not a commercial company. At the same time, the management should be more “scientific” in implementing recordkeeping, control, and constitutions that bound the troupe. The relations between performers should be based on egalitarianism, and all activities should be undertaken in common. The performers were obliged to bear hardship, follow military-style drill and discipline, and believe in the purpose of work. Devotion, selflessness, and openness to constant criticism of their superiors were allegedly intended to guarantee security from the worst outcome: audience derision. Furthermore, performers had to avoid any emotional involvement (“love”) with their company comrades or other people. They also had to be able to resolve conflicts according to the rules, live a clean and hygienic life, maintain a healthful diet, and take time to relax (here all the precepts of the New Life movement were repeated). Above all, actors had to follow their leaders and his detailed plan of action.⁶³

The postulates did not change from the beginning of the war nor did the problems faced by the theater troupes. For example, the itinerant troupes found it difficult to communicate their message because of poor acoustics,

61 For example, Xiong Foxi, “Xiju yu junshi 戲劇與軍事,” *Xiju gangwei* 1, nos. 2–3 (1939): 69–70.

62 Xiong Foxi, “Xiegei yiwei xiju qingnian—diyifeng xin: taolun xiju de luxian 寫給一位戲劇青年 - 第一封信: 討論戲劇的路線,” *Xiju gangwei* 1, no. 4 (January 10, 1940): 135–36. In the next letter, Xiong called for “puritanism” and absolute selflessness; Xiong Foxi, “Xiegei yiwei xiju qingnian—dierfeng xin: taolun xiju gongzuozhede taidu ji jutuande renshi wenti 寫給一位戲劇青年 - 第二封信: 討論戲劇工作者的態度及劇團的人事問題,” *Xiju gangwei* 2, no. 1 (September 1, 1940): 3–4.

63 Yan Zhewu 閻哲吾, “Zhanshi jutuan renshi ganlifa 戰時劇團人事管理法,” *Xiju gangwei* 2, no. 1 (September 1, 1940): 28–34. Yan later developed his ideas by providing detailed models for planning, a template for documents, lists of difficult situations (what to do in the villages?), and how to solve them, in “Zhanshi jutuan yanchu xingzheng 戰時劇團演出行政,” *Xiju gangwei* 2, nos. 5–6 (May 12, 1941): 117–46.

disorganization, and a lack of local engagement.⁶⁴ The problems that inhibited work in the villages could also have been much more basic. Simply put, urban actors and youth were maladjusted physically and mentally to perform propaganda work. A revealing letter to Guo Moruo from the Children's Troupe of the Military Committee Political Department, dated November 4, 1939, demonstrated that Guo was afraid to dispatch the young actors to northern and western Sichuan because he feared that they might suffer from the cold. Guo tried to reschedule their trip to the spring. The brave children answered: "Beloved Mr. Guo: truly, we do not fear cold, we want to depart for work. Because the Sichuan region is not at all that cold, and also, we all have made new overcoats. In these rather cold few months, we shall perform a bit less, attaching more importance to self-education; would that be fine with you, Sir?" The annotation below the letter shows that Guo was satisfied with the Children's Troupe's resolve and permitted its departure.⁶⁵

A report on the work of this troupe between March and August 1939 in two regions of eastern and southern Sichuan reveals that it mostly reached larger towns across the province (e.g., Changshou, Fuling, Fengdu, Zhongxian, Wanxian, Yunyang, Luxian [Luzhou], Hejiang, Jiangjin, and Jiang'an) and worked at performing street-corner drama, visiting hospitals and schools as well as the military bases. Venturing among the lower classes was narrowed to educating workers at the arsenals (e.g., in Luzhou) and the boatmen with whom they spent an excessively long time moving around the province.⁶⁶ Therefore, it definitely failed to reach below the established network of the national government to activate the rural majority of Chinese society.

The problem of not reaching the rural populations seemed endemic. An article published two years later by Zaihua 在划 (pseud.), "Is the [Cultural] Level of the Audiences Too Low?" was a reflection on the problem, however, it was short of novel solutions. The author claimed that people liked movies, and although the medium was of foreign origin in Chinese hands, it was as native as anything else and could be employed for propaganda. The spoken drama

64 Ye Zhongyin 葉仲寅, "Jianli jietoujude yanchu 建立街頭劇的演出," *Xiju gangwei* 1, nos. 5–6 (May 1, 1940): 224–25; Tian Lu 田魯, "Lun Kunming juyun 論昆明劇運," *ibid.*, 226.

65 "Junweihui Zhengzhibu Haizi jutuan wei qingqiu fu Sichuan nongcun gongzuo zhi Guo Moruo han 軍委會政治部孩子劇團爲請求赴四川農村工作致郭沫若函 (1939年11月4日)," in *Sichuansheng dang'anju, Kangzhan shiqi*, 3: 1623.

66 "Guo Moruo qianbao Haizi jutuan Chuandong Chuannan gongzuo baogaocheng 郭沫若簽報孩子劇團川東川南工作報告呈 (1939年11月16日)," in *Sichuansheng dang'anju, Kangzhan shiqi*, 3: 1624–28.

was depicted as often too intellectual. The solution was increased planning.⁶⁷ However, by 1941, painfully few ideas were presented about how to leave the urban “comfort zone” and fulfill the mission that dramatists and intellectuals had set for themselves.

Over time, critics on left and right repeated the same arguments verbatim and despaired about their own powerlessness. The solutions given were equally repetitive: self-education, organization, and activization of the rural masses. According to the contributors of *Youth Art and Literature*, these should all be easy to implement because the masses naturally saw the congruence between opera and the Three People’s Principles—the GMD’s articles of faith. Apparently, both shared the characteristics of nationality, mass character, and being a living art.⁶⁸ There is little proof that any of these views had any relation to the actual reality of theater work. Instead, any such pronouncements were only blunt declarations of political loyalty and partisanship in the brewing conflict between the GMD and the CCP.

One of the most important events for propaganda theater during the war were the yearly drama festivals (*xijujie* 戲劇節). They provided an opportunity for staging new operas, presenting work from the previous year (or years), and reflection on the achievements and failures. The first festival, held in 1938, created optimism because of the successful implementation of all the visions for the performing arts in wartime.⁶⁹ By the fourth year that the drama festival was held, it had become orthodoxly pro-Nationalist and attracted much more skepticism.⁷⁰ Xiong Foxi, for example, appreciated the structural development of the theater art and the ability to work according to the plan, but both he and his colleagues realized that their impact on society was limited. Many things were to blame, such as a shortage of financial resources and insufficient work done in the cities. A belief in the suitability of the top-down structure—one

67 Zaihua 在划, “Shi guanzhongde chengdu taidi ma 是觀眾的程度太低嗎?” *Xiju gangwei* 3, nos. 3–4 (November 1941): 27.

68 He Shouwen 賀守文, “Xiju xiexiang wenti 戲劇下鄉問題,” *Qingnian wenyi* 青年文藝 3, no. 2 (February 1, 1941): 8–10; Zhang Daofan 張道藩, “Sanmin zhuyi yu xiju 三民主義與戲劇,” *ibid.*, 1–2.

69 Lan Tian 藍田, “Diyijie xijujie zai Chongqing: nianwudui jietouju chudong, guanzhong buxia shiyu wanren 第一屆戲劇節在重慶: 廿五隊街頭劇出動, 觀眾不下十餘萬人,” *Guomin gongbao* 國民公報, October 12, 1938, in Shen Lierong et al., *Xijude lilian*, 43–44; Zhang Daofan, “Zhonghua Minguo diyijie xijujiede yiyi 中華民國地一屆戲劇節的意義,” *Guomin gongbao*, October 23, 1938, in Shen Lierong et al., *Xijude lilian*, 45–47.

70 The slogans to be shouted during the event included: “implement the Three People’s Principles ideology 實行三民主義,” “finalize the nationalist revolution 完成國民革命,” and “Long Live the Chinese Nationalist Party 中國國民黨萬歲”; see Shen Deyuan 伸德元, “Zhonghua Minguo disijie xijujie gedi jinian banfa 中華民國第四屆戲劇節各地紀念辦法,” *Xiju gangwei* 3, nos. 3–4 (November 1941): 40.

that reached from the large to the smaller cities and from the smaller towns to townships and villages—was more an ideal than a reflection of reality.⁷¹ Ma Yanxiang 馬彥祥 (1907–1988), one of the most active dramatists in the period, claimed that theatergoers showed more interest in beautiful women on stage than in following the plays. The goal of having the audiences reach an appropriate educational level was as elusive as ever.⁷²

5.4 *Shortage of Decent Plays*

The main problem, however, was a dearth of creativity. A “disease” observed by Tsi-an Hsia in Yan’an during the same period was consuming writers and stage directors in Chongqing.⁷³ Most plays were good only for printing and could in no way be staged. Those that reached the production stage were either old (prewar) pieces or written by the same narrow group of authors. For example, in Guilin in 1942, the dramas performed were those by Tian Han, Ouyang Yuqian, Cao Yu 曹禺 (Wan Jiabao 萬家寶, 1910–1996), Xia Yan, Yang Hansheng 陽翰笙 (1902–1993), Ma Yanxiang, Chen Baichen 陳白塵 (1908–1994), Yu Ling 于伶, and Ao Qiuci 奧秋茨.⁷⁴ Another problem discussed was the “invasion” of translations of foreign plays that dominated Chinese theaters, as local writers failed to produce enough material deemed suitable by the state.⁷⁵

The names that cropped up at the 1943 Festival in Chongqing were invariably the same ones enriched only by the presence of Guo Moruo.⁷⁶ In fact, it was not only the problem of having too few authors, but also of very skimpy offers of new theater productions every year: in 1943 the *Theater Times* (*Xiju shidai* 戲劇時代) listed only twenty-seven titles, a low number compared with the offerings at traditional opera venues.⁷⁷

71 Xiong Foxi, “Wo duiyu jinhou juyunde yijian 我對於今後劇運的意見,” *Xiju gangwei* 3, nos. 3–4 (November 1941): 1; Wang Ruilin 王瑞麟, “Zenyang fahui Kangzhan xiju gongzuode zuigao gongneng 怎樣發揮抗戰戲劇工作的最高功能,” *ibid.*, 2.

72 Ma Yanxiang 馬彥祥, “Kangzhan xiju zai nali 抗戰戲劇在那裏?” *ibid.*, 4.

73 Hsia, *The Gate of Darkness*, 239.

74 “Yijiusiernian Yu, Gui, gezhanqu juyun pingshu 一九四二年渝, 桂, 各戰區劇運評述,” *Wenxue chuanguozuo* 文學創作 1, no. 6 (1943): 121–24.

75 *Ibid.*, 120. Similar conclusions were presented in a critique of the five years of the theater movement: few plays were produced (28 between October 1941 and May 1942) and a flood of foreign plays that were considered stageworthy; see Bianwei fengong zhibi 編委分工執筆, “Chongqing Kangzhan juyun diwunian yanchu zong pipan 重慶抗戰劇運第五年演出總批判,” *Yanju shenghuo* 1 (1942), in Shen Lierong et al., *Xijude lilian*, 148–76.

76 Xu Zirong 徐子蓉, “Chongqingde xijujie 重慶的戲劇節,” *Wanxiang* 萬象 3, no. 4 (1943): 98.

77 Also counting as plays each scene that stood as a separate piece; “Kangzhan diqinian Chongqing yanchu jumu yilan 抗戰第七年重慶演出劇目一覽,” *Xiju shidai* 戲劇時代 1, no. 6 (1943): 35–36.

According to historians of the spoken drama movement, the overall count of writers and plays looked better. Over the entire period of the war (1937–1945), more than 144 authors composed and presented Chongqing audiences with 220 plays.⁷⁸ This was indeed a substantial achievement. Moreover, dramatists employed the institutional framework provided by the GMD government and thus turned a political propaganda theater into reality. But it equally proves that the movement fell short of the intellectuals' immense optimism and their hugely overblown hopes. It was a disappointment for all those who staked their careers on the allegedly powerful "weapon" that theater was supposed to be.

5.5 *War Weariness: A Victory of the Militarized Propagandistic Art*

This frustration was vented in full by 1944 but from a very different political perspective. To describe the working conditions in Sichuan, critics took ideas and vocabulary from Mao Zedong's "Talks on the Yan'an Forum of Arts and Literature" in May 1942. A few words of context are needed before we move on to this development.

As shown by the evidence above, intellectuals who ended up residing in Chongqing and a few other major southwestern cities had in most respects invented the war propaganda mechanism. They also applied it to theater and the performing arts, persuaded the central government to adopt their vision of art-work, implemented it across Free China, and eventually ran into multiple apparently unsolvable problems. They discussed the solutions and collectively arrived at a vision of the arts that would permit them to attain their principal goal: building the "new nation 建國," together with and in service of the warring state-military machine. In their vision, the artists/writers/dramatists occupied a role similar to that of the top revolutionary party leaders, the "foreknowers" of the Sun Yat-sen's ideology or Lenin's revolutionary vanguard.⁷⁹ Subservient to the larger cause, they wielded a potent weapon and followed the leader in his higher historical mission of transforming China, defeating imperialism and fascism (embodied in Japanese militarism), and creating a modern nation. This dominant class of artists, they hoped, would control tightly organized troupes of actors trained from their youth in a manner of the elite military detachments, each bound by trust in the leadership and fraternity toward colleagues. These actors would be desexualized, depersonalized, selfless units within a system of cultural propaganda, acting according to clearly demarcated rules and controlled by uniform bureaucratic procedures. With their mission and example worthy of instant emulation, these actors and actresses, it was assumed, would be able to reach the farthest corners of the country and the lowest sectors of

78 Shi Man, "Kangzhan shiqi," 121–37.

79 On "foreknowers," see Zarrow, *Educating China*, 115–16.

society. They would learn on the ground and directly from the people about how to broadcast the cultural message, then automatically alter their communication to gain trust and understanding without sacrificing the original meaning of their dramas. These actors would also instruct locals, who would continue the propaganda work among themselves after a period of exposure. The message—a dramatic play—was the only remaining object of discussion. It would preferably be a modern drama that speaks in straightforward terms about facts and that gives instruction. It could as well be in a traditional, locally prevalent form—a concession to ignorant folk—which, when filled with the new, politically edifying content, fulfilled the same goal. These plays had to serve the aforementioned higher cause, and their artistic level was secondary to the propaganda power. It was fundamental for the success of the movement to produce as many stage-worthy plays as possible in order to provide attractive and timely material, which could engage the public emotionally and intellectually.

This vision of the arts invented by the leading writers and theater directors of the period was an atrociously authoritarian child of the war contingency and of their radicalizing ideological convictions. It left no space for personal freedom by the actors or the audiences, it limited theater criticism to the narrow environment of politically activist writers, and it created indirect opposition to both the market-driven world of the performing arts and the bottom-up socially dispersed phenomenon of the religious shows and festival plays. In the saturated binary political environment in China in the 1940s, it was neither communist nor nationalist, but had a profoundly militarized and propagandistic nature that could serve any power.

We stress that these ideas were not stated in a consistent manner as a program but, rather, they formed a corpus of opinions, methods, and practices to be implemented or in the process of partial application. None of the artists took responsibility for them, and it was up to the politicians to step in and make them law. Because almost all left-wing artists (the few notable exceptions were Wang Shiwei 王實味, Ding Ling, Hu Feng, and Zhou Yang) as well as those with different political affiliations congregated in Chongqing and other GMD-held territory and worked for the national government and because the CCP's South China Bureau in Chongqing was run by Zhou Enlai, it would be quite improbable that the voices and experiences discussed above found no resonance in Yan'an. Activities by Zhou and others were closely aligned with those of Guo Moruo, a central figure in cultural life in the city and beyond during that period and found their outlet in the foremost communist newspaper *New China Daily*.⁸⁰

80 Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Zhou Enlai: A Political Life* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2006), 72–90.

It is in this context that I read Mao Zedong's "Talks" in relation to the performing arts and cultural workers. The subordination of the artist to the will of the CCP clearly reflected ideas that had been publicized multiple times since 1938. The failure of the intellectuals to immerse themselves in the rural environment and understand the people, their language, and customs was a problem mentioned continually in the Chongqing press for many years. The aloofness and ultimate incomprehensibility of the intellectuals' propaganda were all identified as matters of concern much less in the Red northwest than in the GMD south. Discussing all these problems, Mao eyed Chongqing and Nationalist China, where revolutionary artists allegedly suffered suppression, whereas he gave moderate praise to the work in Yan'an.⁸¹ It is necessary to emphasize that, with both speeches at the forum, Mao joined the preexisting discussion on the semantic and conceptual terms developed over the five years of war and proposed a solution to the problems encountered by artists. His solution, however, had the unique virtue of assuming responsibility in the name of the Party for artistic creation and at the same time of taking control of the direction the artwork was to take. Art (and theater) would not serve abstract "liberation" but, rather, the concrete goals of the CCP in the struggle for China.

What became policy in Yan'an was just another opinion, however politically ponderous, and this took until April 1944, when the *New China Daily* journalist Haiyang 海洋 (pseud.) wrote the article "Why Do the War of Resistance Rear Area Theater Workers Do Not Go to the Front and to the Villages?" It was a recollection of the professional meeting conducted in Guilin where he had interviewed some heads of the theater propaganda troupes. The picture was that of demoralization. The theatrical season was cancelled for lack of money, insurmountable transportation problems (due to lack of resources and funds), and an utter inability to act. In fact, no one believed in the usefulness of propaganda troupes any longer. Haiyang forcefully called on the national government and military to organize and act, as it was their responsibility to reach the "workers, peasants, and soldiers" social milieu and spread there "[cultural/political] health 健康." Moreover, Haiyang advocated eliminating the entertainment tax for spoken drama, because its purpose was serving the higher political and social goals.⁸²

81 Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum of Arts and Literature: Introduction," May 2, 1942; solutions were given in the second concluding speech on May 23, 1942, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm (accessed December 17, 2018).

82 Haiyang 海洋, "Kang Ri dahoufangde xiju gongzuozhe weishenme budao qianfang he nongcun qu? Zai Guilin juxingde Xinan xiju gongzuozhe dahui pang tingji 抗日大後方

He spoke in Maoist terms but that was not binding on anyone but members of the CCP. By the mid-1944, as spoken drama had failed and lost the Nationalist optimism and much of its support, a different legacy remained from the period: the dispirited but still important intellectuals, the ideas of a militarized authoritarian culture yoked to political aims, a state trained in organizing cultural work with a matching population of writers, actors, and stagehands that expected it to take the lead. Still, in a distant region and with no conceivable chance of success, there was a leader and a party all too ready to step in and use these assets.

6 An All too Visible Context: Sichuan Opera and the War

The spoken drama movement that developed during the war and received outstanding support from both the intellectuals and the GMD government made the other story, one of the so-called traditional operas in Sichuan, pale in comparison. This story, however, remained far from insignificant and the precarious flourishing of opera during the war is analyzed below.

Earlier, we discussed the structural changes taking place in the organization of the opera troupes during the last decade and a half of the Republic. The troupes created managerial bodies, expanded their ranks, and often integrated with opera schools, while the big city market largely provided stability and a degree of security. We also mentioned that the troupes became cross regional, integrating people from all over Sichuan without any demonstrable preference for the locals of one place over another. These late-Republican opera companies were in sharp contrast to their predecessors in the Qing era, namely, itinerant troupes that catered to seasonal religious festivals often only in one county. These small troupes, however, probably did not disappear entirely during the Republic, but the lack of evidence makes it difficult to track their presence. Nevertheless, they reemerged from obscurity during the PRC's early aggressive "anti-superstition campaigns," which revealed the still-extant forms of religious theater. We can therefore assume that during the War of Resistance and afterward, this form of opera remained.

6.1 *The GMD's Official Approach*

The relationship between the national government (including its Sichuan administrative bodies) and traditional opera was the opposite of that in spoken

戲劇工作者爲什麼不到前方和農村去?—在桂林舉行的西南戲劇工作者大會旁聽記,"*Xinhua ribao* 新華日報, April 3, 1944.

theater. *Huaju* was perceived as socially, culturally, and ethnically valuable and even superior to other genres of performance. That notion was strengthened by the social, geographic, and dialectic origins of the spoken drama playwrights and actors and by the role it played in projecting the political vision of the powerholders. Traditional opera was seen as a necessary evil or even an enemy: a repository of superstition, feudalism, backwardness, imperialism, and even pro-Japanese defeatism. The local Sichuanese forms of opera had little virtue, even for those who found beauty in it. Intellectuals, critics, and politicians, mostly outsiders to Sichuan, either by birth or education, preferred to voice their appreciation of the national (i.e., Beijing) opera—the only genre valued by the government. Apart from the discursive demarcation between the civilized national culture/national people and the backward local/Sichuanese culture and people was the reality of the government's policy. It could be summarized in three points: discriminatory fiscal policy, the relative support for the development of opera business together with the continuation of the protective measures, and, finally, the successful establishment of censorship. Each of the three highlight the specific approach of the GMD to opera, which saw it as source of revenue and a necessary evil that needed containment, but not elimination or engagement. In other words, the Nationalists did not want to reform opera; theirs project was the spoken drama but, at best, to live off it without paying much attention to it. But like all imperial officials, like the British in Bombay and Cairo or the French in Hanoi and Dakar, they stayed on their side of the wall.

6.2 *Taxes and Legal Measures*

Already on October 8, 1937, the Sichuan Provincial Government had levied new taxes on entertainment to support the war effort. A decree signed by Liu Xiang imposed a tax of 20 percent on each ticket sold by theaters and other venues that staged opera performances. The document specified that this financial contribution was a repayment of the debt due to the soldiers who spilled their own blood in loyal and brave service to the nation and that it was limited to important city and county theaters in the province. Moreover, only the venues presenting Beijing and Sichuan Operas were meant to pay it.⁸³ We can infer that little could have been extracted from audiences attending other kinds of shows, and the burden of paying was placed only on the larger institutions. Moreover, this tax was paid on top of previous burdens.

83 “救國捐抽受之範圍：以本省各重要市縣之京，川劇園，戲院爲限”；“Sichuansheng caizhengting qiancheng zhengshou yulechang suo jiuguo juan 四川省財政廳簽呈徵收娛樂場所救國捐（1937年10月8日）” in Sichuansheng dang'an ju, *Kangzhan shiqi*, 1288–89.

Further regulations were directed less at the extraction of financial resources than at the suppression of certain types of opera, which were primarily seen as forms of excess, undue and wasteful, during the war. The Chongqing City Government announced a regulation on November 5, 1942, after a conference of “the united national organizations, the Propaganda Department, Central Government Regiment Headquarters, Political Department, Three People’s Principles Youth Corps, Military Police Command, Bureau of Social Affairs, Police Department, New Life Movement Headquarters, etc.” It stipulated that all kinds of behaviors and activities of daily life, including clothing, food, transportation, and rituals, would need to forgo any possible excess 奢侈, but included a curious “prohibition on going by car to theaters, hotels, and public entertainment venues.” The same document decreed that during any ritual celebrations, such as weddings, funerals, and birthdays, the celebrations in theaters, restaurants, or other entertainment places should end no later than 11 pm.⁸⁴ This regulation also prohibited gambling during festive occasions, which effectively and perhaps intentionally was supposed to dampen religious celebrations that customarily depended on income from the mahjong tables and card games.

Unsurprisingly, however, this ruling had very limited impact because all the main tenets were repeated less than half a year later, on March 10, 1943. This later document, apart from restating the prohibitions, had an additional aim. It aimed to suppress the “seasonal custom of excessive feasting 贈及季節酬酢” and “acts of excess superstition 迷信之消耗行爲.” The excess consumption was to be dealt with prohibitory taxation, whereas superstition was to be stamped out with a prohibition on religious festivals (*yingshen saihui*) and an investigation of stores selling “superstitious objects,” that is, ritual paraphernalia. After being identified, all such businesses were meant to change their trade.⁸⁵ The writings of Isabel Crook indicate that the success of imposing these measures was certainly limited, as she described a market town fair during wartime in the county neighboring the provisional capital, where mahjong tables paid for opera performances.⁸⁶

Another set of regulatory legislation was directed at the broadly understood area of controlling opera, which included improvement of the business and

84 “限制戲院、飯館及娛樂場所之設置，各地并應規定上述場所之營業時間，最遲不得逾晚間11時”；“Chongqingshi zhengfu canshi chuxi shangtao tuixing zhanshi shenghuo yundong banfa huiyide baogao 重慶市政府參事出席商討推行戰時生活運動辦法會議的報告(1942年11月5日)” in Chongqing, *Zhanshi shehui*, 561–64.

85 “Zhanshi qudi shechi xingwei banfa 戰時取締奢侈行爲辦法(1943年3月10日)” in Chongqing, *Zhanshi shehui*, 571–73.

86 Crook, *Prosperity’s Predicament*, 33, 139, 180.

ensorship of the plays. The latter was understood as implementation of a system of preventive censoring of the repertoire, which had been repeatedly called for since the end of the Qing dynasty. Since 1939, the government had issued decrees on this matter five times:

- “Organizational Rules for the Chongqing Municipal Theater Investigation Committee,” 重慶市戲劇審查委員會組織規程, February 1939
- “A Provisional Improvement Measure to Amend and Relieve the Dispersed Theaters of the Municipality of Chongqing,” 修正重慶市各戲院疏散救濟補充暫行辦法, December 1939
- “Standards for Inspecting Theater, Book Market, Cinema Buildings,” 檢查戲院, 書場, 影戲院房屋標準, February 1940
- “Chongqing Municipality Regulations of the Registration of the Public Entertainment Places,” 重慶市公共娛樂場所登記規則, November 1940
- “Opera Repertoire Publication and Staging Examination and Control Measures,” 劇本出版及演出審查監督辦法, February 16, 1942, together with a draft of the sixteen-point “Measures for Implementation of the Opera Examination.” 戲劇審檢實施辦法.⁸⁷

These policies can be read as congruent with the prewar legal measures imposed by the GMD in Beijing and the coastal cities.⁸⁸ The documents in 1942 also catered to the calls for fighting the “reactionary 反動” content in the operas according to the editors of the *Chongqing Gazetteer of Culture and Art*.⁸⁹ It reveals the increased political struggle taking place in Nationalist zones, where conflicts with both the collaborationist regime of Wang Jingwei and the CCP played out in public. Opera houses—schools and rostrums of the illiterate masses, as it was claimed—changed from profitable residual sources of backwardness to nodes of national struggle.

The “Opera Repertoire Publication and Staging Examination Control Measures” require discussion and quotation at length because this was the most consequential law for Nationalist-controlled Sichuan. It went as follows:

1. Every opera play (*juben*) meant to be published or performed undergoes examination, in [case of] Chongqing Municipality it is managed by the United Central Examination Committee of Books and Periodicals; in other localities by the local Office of Examination of Books and Periodicals. Previously existing party, government, or attached Military Police

87 Chongqingshi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishuzhi*, 47.

88 Ai Lizhong 艾立中, “Guomindang Beipingshi zhengfude xiqu shencha” 國民黨北平市政府的戲曲審查 [Opera Censorship under the Beijing’s Nationalist Party-Run Municipal Government], *Beijing shehui kexue* 北京社會科學 4 (2016): 88–95, 260–61.

89 Chongqingshi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishuzhi*, 47.

- organs [that have] or [that] commonly managed opera examination organizations are without exemption abolished.
2. Every opera published or staged is examined by[:] in Chongqing Municipality by the Central Examination [missing text] of Books and Periodicals; in other localities by the local Office of Examination of Books and Periodicals.
 3. Passing authorization for staging the opera [on the basis of] every play script [reviewed] by the Central or each provincial Book and Periodicals Examination Organ is done in agreement with the delegate of the local government inspection office whether to permit or discard a publication or a performance. (The staff of the inspecting offices will be allocated to their jobs by the local Party committee).
 4. An opera troupe not registered according to the law by the responsible organ, without any exception cannot stage publicly and perform under any changed assumed name.
 5. Each theater publicly staging an opera, irrespective of whether the play script was rejected or not for publication, for example by an inspector who did not register it according to law in the Central Books, Periodicals Examination Committee or in the provincial Books and Periodicals Examination Office, [or] for example [if plying for] rising money or performing for some sort of the movement, not applying to the Social Bureau or to the city or to the county social administration for approval, in each area of the local government authority, the performance will have to be stopped and a monetary payment made to the respective government office without any exception.⁹⁰

The wording of the document is self-explanatory, but a few things need to be noted. The document was issued at the conference of the Central Committee of the Central Government 中央常務委員會 and had an order of immediate implementation. Opera control and censorship were placed in the hands of regular government bodies, which were at the same time interwoven with inspection agencies staffed by GMD members. The performing arts were to be observed, judged, and quelled, if necessary, by the most politically trusted element of the governing structure, the Party.

90 “Juben chuban ji yanchu shencha jiandu banfa, Minguo sanshiyi nian (1942) eryue shili-
uri diwujie Zhongyang Changwu weiyuanhui diyijiuwuci huiyi tongguo Xingzhengyuan
Minguo sanshiyi nian sanyue siri lingfu zunzhao 劇本出版及演出審查監督辦法, 民
國三十一年(1942)二月十六日第五屆中央常務委員會第一九五次會議通過行政
院民國三十一年三月四日令府遵照” in ZGXQZSJ, 644.

6.3 *Implementation of the Law and Forms of Censorship*

Ample evidence shows the existence of the censorship system for all the years before the communist takeover. The Chengdu Municipal Archive stores a trove of declarations submitted by each theater listing the plays they intended to stage in the coming week. These documents took two forms. Their authors could provide a longer description of the repertoire that they intended to present, perhaps introducing a new opera or attempting to discuss the innocuous character of their artistic work with the censorship agency. In my search in the Chengdu Archive, such documents were quite rare—for example, an effort made by Jinping Grand Theater (Jinping daxiyuan 錦屏大戲院) to register a magical story about a famous Daoist immortal, *Liu Hai Plays with the Golden Toad* (*Liu Hai xi jinchan* 劉海戲金蟾). The theater tried to prove that the play depicts Liu Hai's famous reverie (which in the original story had turned him into a follower of the Way), from which, after awakening, he transformed into an avid fighter against superstition and a promoter of education.⁹¹ The play also depicted the dream and probably a story entirely incongruent with the one declared to the authorities. Unfortunately, we do not know whether the opera was ultimately approved. Other similar documents pertained to popular adventure stories, such as *Bravoes of the Sichuan Mountains* (*Shushan jianxia* 蜀山劍俠).⁹² At times, however, opera houses applied for permission to stage a “modern” contemporary affairs drama and those also needed permission from the city authorities before being recommended for staging or rejected and suppressed.⁹³

Some theaters crudely ignored government prohibitions and presented banned stories while cheating on the declaration of their repertoire. An example I found in the Chongqing Municipal Archives related to the One Sichuan Opera Theater (Yichuan xiju yuan 一川戲劇院), which on April 16, 1945, performed a prohibited play titled *Iron Rooster* (*Tiegongji* 鐵公雞) in place of the declared *Tai ping Heavenly Kingdom* (*Tai ping tianquo* 太平天國). The punishment that befell this opera house was by no means heavy: one day of forced closure, after which it could resume business as usual.⁹⁴

More commonly, reports looked like simple lists of plays declaring what a theater would perform in the coming days. For example, a document issued

91 “Liu Hai xi jinchan ju qing ru mo shilue 劉海戲金蟾劇情如末事略,” CDA 93-2-6717-13, 443-44.

92 CDA 93-2-6717-39; CDA 93-2-6717-10; CDA 93-2-6717-7; CDA 93-2-6717-4.

93 See a morality tale about wasteful youth and his change in character in the application from the Chunxi dawutai, May 21, 1938. This play was recommended for broad propagation; CDA 93-2-5677-3.

94 CQA 0060-1-334, 521.

by the Yuelai Laolang Sanqinghui Sichuan Opera Theater (Yuelaiyuan laolang Sanqinghui chuanxiyuan 悅來園老郎三慶會川戲院) but applying to another theater: Everlasting Joy (Yongle xiyuan 永樂戲院) gave an overview of the program for March 10, 11, and 12. It listed thirty titles for both afternoon and evening performances for the authorities' consideration.⁹⁵ The confusion in the theater names, perhaps a result of submitting the declarations by different companies together or just an outcome of sloppy administrative practice (quite probable) should not concern us here, as it does not diminish the picture of pervasive GMD censorship. By my reckoning, this kind of document, usually just neat lists of the names of the operas intended for the stage, was issued by every theater in the city. Even though most applications stem from the period just after the Sino-Japanese war, there is no reason to believe that the system of censorship did not exist during this military conflict.

There are reasons to think that the censorship was stepped up during the civil war between the GMD and the CCP: the documentation is almost full, containing most years, months, and days in the period 1946–1949 and covering all major theaters in the city.⁹⁶ On this basis, we conclude that the policy imposed in wartime was followed by much tighter censorship in the civil war, when the threat from opera was seen as the greatest.

Finally, at times the city government tried to mitigate the damage to opera houses by soldiers or by various bandits in the city. It is noteworthy that one of the last documents issued by the Republic's Chengdu Municipal Police deals with the theaters. On January 10, 1950, Li Fanzhang 李範章 forbade anyone to enter a movie theater or opera house without purchasing a ticket beforehand. The order was to have been implemented immediately after it was issued.⁹⁷ This curious and belated document, coming a few days after the communist armies took over Chengdu shows that, in the midst of the disorder, opera was a temptation that was impossible to forgo. A sense of mission to protect the

95 CDA 93-2-5351-6, 166–68.

96 Some notable examples: Chengdu Yongle xiyuan 成都永樂戲院, January–February 1941, CDA 93-2-4316; Changyi xiyuan 昌宜戲院, October 1947, CDA 93-2-2947; Jingping daxiyuan, April 1949, CDA 93-2-3305, 3306, 3307; November and December 1948, CDA 93-2-3334 and 3335; March 1946, three documents, and November 1947, one document, CDA 93-2-3353; Yuelaiyuan, 1949, CDA 93-2-3125; Chengdushi Yuelai Sanqinghui 成都市悅來三慶會, October 1949 (together with Chunxi Chengdu xiyuan 春熙成都戲院; a case of two theaters reporting together), CDA 93-2-4199; Chengdushi fuji yuelaiyuan laolang sanqinghui chuanxiyuan 成都市福記悅來園老郎三慶會川戲院, March 1946–November 1949, CDA 93-2-3348 [these three might relate to the same troupe and theater but are disorganized].

97 CDA 93-2-5293-12, 14.

theaters from abuse remained with the police authorities even at the moment of the utter collapse of the Nationalist state. This shows that, as cultural institutions, they held a formidable position in the urban life of Sichuan. We should therefore look how the market for opera changed between 1937 and 1949.

6.4 *Blooming Business?*

From the perspective of the number of opera theaters, their variety, their enrichment in the kinds of regional traditions, we should probably speak of the war period as a “golden era” of opera in Sichuan. This seems to have happened irrespective of the central government’s repressive policy toward “the old” opera and of the intellectuals’ bias against it. The enormous development of the spoken drama along with the military and civilian institutions and a migration of the dramatic schools and universities (and establishment of new ones) to Southwest China at which students practiced *huaaju* appear to have had a marginal impact on the choices made by local audiences and on the activity of the performing arts market. No comprehensive statistics on cultural activities exist for this period, but the data available should be sufficient for illustrating the quantitative and qualitative change that took place.

A census of theaters and movie theaters conducted for taxation purposes in Chengdu on November 4, 1937, shows that fourteen establishments were active there: Zhiyu, Xinming, YMCA (Qingnianhui 青年會), Changyi, Daguangming, The Masses (Minzhong 民衆), Zhongyang, Yuelai, Chunxi, Diaole 釣樂, Chengdu, Xinyouxin, Longjiang 龍江, and Sanyigong.⁹⁸ Most of them did not cater exclusively to either movies or opera but, as explained earlier, shaped their program according to the needs of the audiences. At least four places could be added to this list for Chengdu: Common People Grand Theater (Pingmin daxiyuan 平民大戲院), China’s Ocean Grand Theater (Huaying dawutai 華瀛大舞臺) in 1938, and two comprehensive movie houses-cum-theater where Sichuan and spoken drama were played, the Profiting the People (Yimin dianyingyuan 益民電影院) and the National (Guomin dianyingyuan 國民電影院) movie theaters. All were fittingly named for the changed times of GMD rule. Moreover, some of these places offered diverse kinds of opera previously rarely seen in Sichuan’s capital, such as Han and Beijing Opera, each of which seemed to have become well integrated.⁹⁹

The developments in Chongqing were much more exciting. The city received a large influx of artists from all over China who opened prominent stages for Beijing and Han Opera. But Sichuan Opera invariably was dominant.

98 CDA 93-2-148-6, 90-91.

99 ZGXQZSJ, 469.

Fifteen theaters opened in 1930s, both before and after the outbreak of war, followed by two in 1940, one in 1941, one in 1942, three in 1943, two in 1944, one in 1945, one in 1946, two in 1947, two in 1948, and sixteen others as well during the 1940s.

Among these thirty-one new opera houses were small stages whose impermanent nature was reflected in their names: Makeshift Stage of the Actresses Study Society (Lingnü keshe zhupeng juchang 伶女科社竹棚劇場) and the Li Family Mansion Roofed Makeshift Stage (Lixingyuan wapeng jucheng 黎姓院瓦棚劇場). There were also grand theaters that outlasted the war and remained for decades afterward, such as the One Sichuan Grand Theater (Yichuandaxiyuan 一川大戲院) and the Double Three Theater (Sansan xiyuan 三三戲院). Not all of these thirty-odd theaters existed at the same time—some were just previous names of another theater on the list. That is why we cannot claim that, at any given moment, Chongqing had such a large number of cultural establishments. A picture of a very dynamic and changeable market that changed according to economic conditions and the initiatives of private entrepreneurs, actors, and government authorities is closer to reality. Another important factor was Japanese bombing, which in 1943, for example, caused destruction and the closure of the most important venue for the spoken drama artists, the Cathay Grand Theater.¹⁰⁰

The two capitals of Sichuan were not the only cities that profited from the boom in entertainment in these otherwise difficult years. Most of the regional centers and county towns, such as Fuling, Tongjiang 通江, Daxian 達縣,

100 A full list of Chongqing theaters by the date of opening: 1930s: Guangming wutai 光明舞臺, Huanqiu daxiyuan 環球大戲院, Laozhonglou chayuan 老鐘鼓樓茶園, Dahua daxiyuan 大華大戲院, Mishi xichang 米市劇場, Sansan xiyuan 三三戲院, Yuehe xiyuan 悅和戲院, Xinchuan daxiyuan 新川大戲院, Yuegong pingju chang 月宮平劇場, Lixingyuan wapeng juchang 黎姓院瓦棚劇場, Daxingming xiyuan 大星明戲院, Duyoujie wapeng juchang 都郵街瓦棚劇場, Yide chuanju she 一德川劇社, Di yi lianhe chuanju yuan 第一聯合川劇院, Youxin chuanju yuan 又新川劇院; 1940: Desheng wutai 得勝舞臺, Chongqing xiyuan 重慶戲院, 1941: Di er lianhe chuanju yuan 第二聯合川劇院, 1942: Yiyuan daxiyuan 一園大戲院, 1943: Di yi juchang 第一劇場, Di er juchang 第二劇場, Di san juchang 第三劇場, 1944: Di yi biao zhun juchang 第一標準劇場, Xin jingju yuan 新京劇院, 1945: Lijiaban 厲家班, 1946: Zhongyang daxiyuan 中央大戲院, 1947: Sansan xiyuan 三三戲院, Gengsheng daxiyuan 更生大戲院, 1948: Chongqing daxiyuan 重慶大戲院, Minzhong huichang 民衆會場, 1940s: Liujiaban 劉家班, Binliang guoju she 斌良國劇社, Yichuan daxiyuan 一川大戲院, Youxin chuanju yuan 又新川劇院, You-rong chuanju tuan 友容川劇團, Desheng dawutai 德勝大舞臺, Lingnü keshe zhupeng juchang 伶女科社竹棚劇場, Peidu Lizhuang piaoshe 陪都黎庄票社, Jiangsu tongxianghui 江蘇同鄉會, Huangshaxi juchang 黃沙溪劇場, Yinhang gonghui 銀行公會, Peidu chayuan 陪都茶園, Di yi shuchang 第一書場, Di er shuchang 第二書場, Di san shuchang 第三書場, Qingnianguan 青年館; ZGXQZSJ, 470–72.

Hejiang, Luzhou, Yibin, and Santai 三台, either obtained their first permanent stage or added a second or third theater during the war.¹⁰¹

We can gauge the expansion of a particular Republican form of urban culture by looking at these figures—a culture based on the continuity of a huge corpus of stories, images, musical and singing traditions that was transmitted from the late imperial to the Republican period through the commercialized regionally specific opera. This performance-based cultural formation transformed theater shows previously rooted in religion into entertainment and an informal educational institution. It first took hold of the larger centers and, then, with various ups and downs, planted roots in many smaller towns across the province and beyond. Although precise evidence is scarce, opera—a social and cultural institution—profited during the war because of increased urbanization, transfers of wealth and productive capacity from the coastal regions as well as from better communication on the newly built roads and improved shipping. It thrived under stable but repressive government and learned to depend on it. Thus, it still followed a model developed half a century earlier, during the New Policies of the fading Qing dynasty.

7 Concluding Remarks

The war years led to important and permanent changes in the way that culture was conceptualized and used in China. One of these changes involved the emergence of a new role for intellectuals in cultural production, which gave them a novel position vis-à-vis the government. From then on, the institutional structure of art, the content of art, and the dissemination of art entwined the “creative calls” and the ruling powers. Moreover, writers and artists set themselves a mission of creating a cultural “weapon” that in no way would be inferior to guns and bayonets and would allow to win both the war with Japan and a struggle for new China.

Another element in this process was the development and solidification of the government’s role as the controller of arts from both the legal and administrative perspective. This enlarged government acted as a promoter, constructor, and sponsor of artistic creations that were considered in line with the mission of fighting the war and restructuring society. The spreading of government largesse had an addictive impact on the artwork, permitting it to develop outside

¹⁰¹ ZGXQZSJ, 472–75. Japanese bombs also destroyed Desheng wutai, a Sichuan Opera venue in Chongqing, *Chongqing xiqu zhi*, 434. No other theater seems to have suffered directly from the bombs.

the changing demands of the market or the conservative tastes of the audience. Thus the creative production in these years existed largely disconnected and dislocated from the social and cultural fabric of Sichuan and other areas of Free China; at the same time, it received approval from the GMD and praise from its intellectual creators.

This new cultural product—propaganda theater—emerged in the context of a boom in traditional art forms, such as Sichuan, Beijing, and Han Operas, with which most intellectuals had very little engagement (even though many of them greatly appreciated them, especially Beijing Opera). It also functioned in the cultural milieu of Sichuan, with its local elites, its particular dialect forms, and social behavior that bore little resemblance to the practices on the Chinese coast and that often caused revulsion. The blade's edge of both the GMD and the intellectual class was turned against so-called superstitious practices, of which opera was a permanent, indivisible element. Consequently, the new rulers of Sichuan formulated an enemy that consisted of local cultures and practices and opposed the program of political revolution that they advocated. This policy implemented by strangers to the land was read as oppression akin to colonialism and was manipulated, ignored, twisted, and discarded, while causing enmity and alienation.

The consequences of this choice of cultural and aesthetic production weighed heavily on the success of wartime propaganda work. The awareness of failure in reaching the broad public, despite the fulfillment of all the tenets of appropriate “mass art”—allegedly a potent “weapon”—by 1942–1943 had drained away most of the optimism and led to a search for culprits to blame: the illiterate, backward sectors of society or lazy, apathetic, comfort-addicted, urbanite intellectuals, who feared dirtying their hands with work in the villages and learning to speak to “the people.” The failures and resulting intellectual tensions produced from working in Sichuan (and, to a degree, in other provinces) stirred a response across the political field and we see their echoes in both Chongqing and Yan'an. Irrespective of the speaker and his political beliefs and inspirations (whether Xiong Foxi or Mao Zedong), the answers to disappointment in the wartime artwork were similar. They each called for increased militarization of the workstyle, deepening of government control, and going down to the villages to mine local cultural forms and local artists; those would then be transformed into propaganda workers. Finally, they all called for a strict streamlining of art to align with the central government's political program. These ideas did not spring from the mind of Chairman Mao but, rather, resulted from the beliefs, activities, dreams, and frustrations of the most politically active cultural creators in China in the 1930s and 1940s. Their first shoots emerged in the coastal cities, grew taller while on the run from Japanese

barbarity in Wuhan, and matured in Chongqing. These were the thoughts of an urban class with an elite education and position, whose assumed superior intellectual value allowed them to freely mold in the social material of China. Melding these ideas with the necessity of “participation” proposed by Mao was a sign of a quick wit by the CCP leader. The new culture to be born in the fledgling People’s Republic, then, should be seen in context of its deep roots: not as a forced policy by a totalitarian Stalinist leader but as a streamlining of the Soviet model with the ideas and practices of intellectuals and the government developed during the war by the GMD. Differences between the CCP and the GMD, however, led to the success of the former and failure of the latter in using this apparatus of political culture.

Revolution: Communist “People’s Art”

1 Communist Conquest of Sichuan: A New Political Context

In contrast to Manchuria and provinces in Central China, Sichuan escaped violent struggle in the civil war until the second half of 1949. The tragic events, however, did not miss the province: for two days (September 2–3), a conflagration consumed Chongqing, killing three thousand people and causing massive destruction of private property.¹ The economic crisis caused by hyperinflation, the removal of industrial property to Eastern China, the loss of central government offices (and related jobs), government extraction, haphazard postwar reconstruction, and social conflict all had an impact on life in this southwestern province. Then, on November 4, the unfolding offensive of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) added to this cocktail of misery. Less than two weeks later (on November 15), the communists took Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou Province.² Then, on November 21, General Liu Bocheng 劉伯承 (1892–1986) and the political commissar, Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997), became the heads of the military government for the four provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan and Xikang with responsibility for conquering Southwestern China and for suppressing all the counterrevolutionaries there.³ On November 30, the PLA seized Chongqing and took the rest of the province in strategic pincers attacking from the north (Shaanxi) and the southeast (Guizhou, Chongqing).⁴ Because of the rapid advance of invading forces, on December 7, the Nationalist-run national government abandoned Chengdu and relocated to Taipei.⁵ Two days later, in Ya’an, the three most powerful political and military leaders of the region announced their uprising against the GMD and switched

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- 1 One source assessed it as four-fifths of all property. “Zhongguo renmin jiefang zhanzheng junshi wenji 中國人民解放軍戰爭軍事文集 [Collected Documents on the Military Affairs from the Chinese People’s Liberation War],” vol. 5, part 2, July 1949–June 1960 (Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zongbu bianyin, July 1950), in *Zhonggong zhongyao lishi wnxian ziliao huibian 中共重要歷史文獻資料匯編 [Collected Important Sources on the History of Chinese Communist Party]*, Xiandai Zhongguo junshi shiliao zhuanji 現當代中國軍事史料專輯, Fascicle 95, 27: 893.
 - 2 “Zhongguo renmin jiefang zhanzheng junshi wenji,” 924–25.
 - 3 “Zhongguo renmin jiefang zhanzheng junshi wenji,” 926.
 - 4 “Zhongguo renmin jiefang zhanzheng junshi wenji,” 931.
 - 5 “Zhongguo renmin jiefang zhanzheng junshi wenji,” 939.

sides to join the communists.⁶ This group consisted of General Liu Wenhui, the all-powerful chairman of Xikang Province and a member of the hegemonic Liu clan that bossed Sichuan in the 1920s and 1930s; and two deputy heads of the Southwest Military Region 西南軍政長官公署副長: General Deng Xihou 鄧錫侯 (1889–1964), a prominent Sichuan warlord who was among the local leaders of the GMD, and General Pan Wenhua, who once served as mayor of Chongqing. The capitulation of the top military leaders greatly facilitated the conquest of the Southwest, a region with a tiny number of CCP cadres. Moreover, recruiting local leaders was consistent with the strategic line of the CCP, which emphasized a united front strategy and decided on building its power through relying on cooperative local turncoats. As we shall see, the strategy was applied to military matters and the reorganization of local society. The endgame in Sichuan came on December 27, when Chengdu fell into communist hands. Most of the surrounding towns had fallen in the previous two weeks or just before the end of 1949.

Considering the limitations of local transportation and logistics, rapid conquest of the enormous southwestern swath of the country in November and December 1949 did not mean that military operations were over. On the contrary, a direct struggle against an organized enemy transformed into a struggle against various groups of “bandits” (*jiaofei* 剿匪). In the following months, military struggle remained the government’s priority. As reported by *Internal Reference* (*Neibu cankao* 內部參考)—so as to reach the CCP leadership—even at the end of August 1950, Deng Xiaoping, now the chief of the southwestern party, considered the situation unstable but shifting to the communists’ advantage. The article stated that the suppression of bandits had been a great success:

380,000 [bandits] already eliminated, an estimated 120,000 still remaining. Guizhou Province was the most serious [problem] (twenty counties, each of which has a radio and is in contact with Taiwan. At present, organized and large bandit units exist in the Sichuan, Xikang, Yunnan, Guizhou borderlands, Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Guizhou borderlands; South Guizhou; Sichuan Xikang borderlands and some similar

6 “Zhongguo renmin jiefang zhanzheng junshi wenji,” 940. December 9 is often given as the date of this event, because of the declaration by three generals at the Longxingsi 龍興寺 [Surging Dragon Temple] in Peng 彭 County and sent in a letter addressed to Mao Zedong and Zhu De and indirectly to Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping; Peng County Uprising 彭縣起義. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160305014919/http://www.pengzhou.gov.cn/index.php/Detail?cid=215&tid=75282> (accessed January 22, 2019).

connecting areas are their points of concentration). Some areas listed above are no more problematic but are actually laying in ambush; we reckon that when anti-despot, cut-rent, return pawn struggle will start, hidden bandit forces in each district will reemerge.⁷

Further assessments stated that, although an overwhelming number of problematic areas remained, the Party controlled the region but was weak in the countryside, faced widespread tax evasion, managed to provide food for the army and cities but did not initiate any major campaigns. In Deng's words: "progress great, problems abundant 前途很大, 困難很多."⁸

Some fundamental changes in the government and society were implemented precisely in this context of a continuing deadly struggle and terror employed against enemies of the Party.⁹ Initially, the government was weak and entirely militarized. In 1950 to 1952, it functioned under the name of the Southwestern Military Government (Xi'an junzheng 西南軍政, also called Southwest Bureau, Xi'nanju 西南局). This authority divided Sichuan into four districts (north, south, east, west), and the province temporarily ceased to exist as an administrative body. In this period, Chongqing served as a center of authority and the residence of its military and Party leaders: Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping. But within two years, the military authority had achieved many of its goals, such as full control over the interior of the Southwest, expansion to Tibet, relative stabilization of the borders, and, even more important, elimination of the so-called bandits and counterrevolutionaries. Furthermore, it succeeded at constructing a mass party and in implementing the first phase of land reform.¹⁰ In 1952, a civilian authority called the Southwest Government (Xi'an zhengfu 西南政府) was established in place of the military government. It took another two years for the provincial system to be restored and for political authority to be fully returned to Sichuan Province.

7 "Xi'nan qu qingkuang 西南區情況," *Neibu cankao* 內部參考, August 28, 1950, no. 208: 85.

8 "Xi'nan qu qingkuang," 86.

9 On terror in the early PRC, see Yang Kuisong, "Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries," *China Quarterly* no. 193 (March 2008): 102–21. According to Yang's data, Deng Xiaoping's assessment of the enemies eliminated seems very large but could include both those who were killed and those imprisoned and lump the active GMD military resistance together with the suppression of counterrevolutionaries. Without further access to the archives of the Southwestern Military District in the Sichuan Provincial Archives (Chengdu), which as of 2019 were unavailable to researchers, it is hard to confirm or deny the numbers cited.

10 Alexander V. Pantsov and Steven I. Levine, *Deng Xiaoping: A Revolutionary Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 139–51.

With respect to opera, the transformation also had revolutionary and gradualist elements. Several case studies in Chongqing illustrate the complex and confusing process of the CCP takeover and domination of the opera world in Sichuan. At first, the CCP policy operated on the vaguest and most general ideological basis, as policy responsibility devolved to local authorities. Although religious plays and festivals, dubbed “superstitious,” were prohibited by the early 1950s, other performances of opera were suspended between official acceptance and prohibition. The CCP initially tried to tailor inherited theater institutions and troupes to its needs by instigating class struggle sessions and attempting to use performers in propaganda work. At the same time, in view of its limited success in adjusting so-called “old” institutions to its needs, the local Party cadres worked on taking over control of the existing theaters and opera troupes. The results of these often-difficult operations were, however, disappointing, mostly because the communist authorities failed to transform the social, economic, and cultural conditions in which opera functioned in Sichuanese society. Only after the outbreak of the Korean War in summer of 1950, did thorough reform of opera take place under the direct management of the central government of the People’s Republic of China. After a string of regulations, conferences, and festivals and under immense pressure from the state apparatus, this traditional theater form was chopped off from its multiple rural, religious, and commercial roots and put on a leash by the party-state. This process was completed in 1952, after which opera in Sichuan never reverted to its previous form.

The CCP’s overlordship of opera was at once destructive and constructive, producing new channels for performers’ careers and carefully staged plays showcased nationally and internationally. At the same time, Sichuan Opera became a propaganda tool that presented less and less of its traditional repertoire. Because of suppression of the local township temple festivals, the ways in which opera was consumed changed radically, becoming even more formalized, professionalized, and urban.

2 Political and Ideological Basis of the Opera Reform

From the start, the CCP’s use of violence as well as its program for institutional, social, economic, and cultural reconstruction reflected the Party’s specific experiences and practices developed during its rule of North China. However, the power of contingency created by international and local conditions was equally important for developments in Sichuan. Reforming opera, Western-style theater, and the smaller genres of performance as well as the

struggle against religious plays and rituals (festival plays and *nuo*) were all part of the same process of change, which touched other areas of life in the province. As in agriculture, trade, and industry, the performing arts trod an uneven and unsure path of changing policies, political campaigns, and struggle to fulfill the nationally defined revolutionary goals.

The CCP, in contrast to its Nationalist predecessors, imparted more weight to ideology as a guide for political action. It embraced a mixed heritage of Soviet guidance together with the history and Chinese experiences from the previous decade of the anti-Japanese and anti-GMD struggles. By that time, the correct interpretation of political history and the delineation of guiding principles were jealously guarded by the Party leader, Mao Zedong.¹¹ The areas of culture considered worth reforming and necessary for the new People's Republic were dealt with according to one essential principle, namely, the United Front. On October 30, 1944, in face of the continuing yet far from victorious struggle against Japan, Mao envisaged the main problems, roles, and necessary approach toward culture in the New China. His words were repeated endlessly and treated as all-important guidelines for work in a multitude of conditions across the diverse country. He stated:

In our work the war comes first, then production, then cultural work. An army without culture is a dull-witted army, and a dull-witted army cannot defeat the enemy. The culture of the Liberated Areas already has its progressive side, but it still has a backward side. The Liberated Areas already have a new culture, a people's culture, but a good many vestiges of feudalism survive. Among the 1,500,000 people of the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia Border Region there are more than 1,000,000 illiterates, there are 2,000 practitioners of witchcraft, and the broad masses are still under the influence of superstition. These are enemies inside the minds of the people. It is often more difficult to combat the enemies inside people's minds than to fight Japanese imperialism. We must call on the masses to arise in struggle against their own illiteracy, superstitions and unhygienic habits. For this struggle a broad united front is indispensable. ... In the arts, we must have not only modern drama but also the Shensi opera and the *yangko* dance. Not only must we have new Shensi operas and new *yangko* dances, but we must also utilize and gradually transform the old opera companies and the old *yangko* troupes, which comprise 90 per cent of all *yangko* troupes. ... There are two principles for the united front: the

¹¹ On Mao's domination of the Party, see Alexander Pantsov and Steven I. Levine, *Mao: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2012), 341–42, 356–59.

first is to unite, and the second is to criticize, educate and transform. In the united front, capitulationism is wrong, and so is sectarianism with its exclusiveness and contempt for others. Our task is to unite with all intellectuals, artists and doctors of the old type who can be useful, to help them, convert them and transform them. In order to transform them, we must first unite with them. If we do it properly, they will welcome our help. ... Our culture is a people's culture; our cultural workers must serve the people with great enthusiasm and devotion, and they must link themselves with the masses, not divorce themselves from the masses. In order to do so, they must act in accordance with the needs and wishes of the masses. All work done for the masses must start from their needs and not from the desire of any individual, however well-intentioned. The saying "Haste does not bring success" does not mean that we should not make haste, but that we should not be impetuous; impetuosity leads only to failure. This is true in any kind of work, and particularly in the cultural and educational work the aim of which is to transform the thinking of the masses. There are two principles here: one is the actual needs of the masses rather than what we fancy they need, and the other is the wishes of the masses, who must make up their own minds instead of our making up their minds for them.¹²

Mao outlined some of the key points for future work. The temporary success in cultural work and the achievements in building propaganda troupes all existed in parallel with the previous structure of society and culture: the one constituted from "superstitious" practices and "feudal" culture. Eradicating it was not as easy a task as fighting the enemy because this foe lived in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people for whom the revolution was made. Winning the revolution meant recruiting, educating, enlightening, and guiding the people, while always remaining aware of their interests and not the interests of the idealistic party intellectuals. On this point, Mao again voiced his criticism of the wartime practice of cultural work, which he uttered in response to the frustrations of the intellectuals in charge of war propaganda. He failed, however, to address the paradox between the intentions of the Party and those of the "illiterate" and "superstitious" masses. In the end, in the Stalinist spirit, the CCP would decide which traditions and which people were benign and which

12 Mao Zedong, "The United Front in Cultural Work," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_21.htm (accessed January 23, 2019); Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Oxford: Foreign Languages Press distributed by Pergamon Press, 1965), 3: 186.

were deleterious to their project. The key to the masses were traditional arts, now meant to be transformed according to the general principles by cooperative individuals and groups from among “the people.”

This idea of the United Front was a profound change of attitude and practice from that employed during the wartime period under the GMD: Communists looked for allies in society, particularly in the art sector. They gave these people meaningful positions and involved them in the reform process. The earliest and most famous examples of such cooperation was winning the support of the Beijing Opera stars Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋 (1904–1958), but, as we shall see, they were not unique. Additionally, Mao believed that time worked to the CCP’s advantage: reforms were supposed to be implemented but not forced. This idea was revised following national contingencies and emergencies but was reverted to until the 1960s.

Nevertheless, in the critical early period, just after the victory of the Communist Party, Mao’s general outline for political action in the field of culture was adopted and adjusted locally. The same can be said about the central government’s regulations. It was for the local party cadres and local affiliated partners to interpret and implement the orders and ideas from the Party Center. The reform of opera and the performing arts, moreover, was conducted in the midst of economic troubles and widespread terror against the enemies of the CCP. Additionally, it was conducted before and in society as it tried to adjust to new conditions, while the new rulers energetically took on the task of creating a new state as they upended the old society.

3 Breaking the “Superstitious” Opera

The ruthless fight against “bandits” and “counterrevolutionaries” had its counterpart in the campaign to eliminate “superstition”—seen as spiritual pollution that had no place in the New China’s scientific modernization project. This campaign had a direct impact on the way in which opera was meant to exist in Sichuan. Religious festivals, throughout the Republican period, could have been enriched by traditional opera. The traditional form of the festivals took a beating in earlier decades of the twentieth century when temple lands were seized, privatized, or nationalized. Furthermore, legislation during the Sino-Japanese War strongly opposed the staging of any “extravagant” rituals. Nevertheless, if conditions permitted—such as if a rich local patron extended funds or the community maintained its fundamental institutions—and an itinerant troupe or the villagers could mount a play or the proximity of the city enabled one to be rented from there, farmers could enjoy their traditional customs.

Local ritual plays that followed the sacrificial calendar weathered all the Republican campaigns of suppression and extortion. Even in the 1940s, some of them could reach a very large scale. Hu Tiancheng and Duan Ming stated that ritual offerings and cleansing prayers for rain (*daqi yujiao* 打祈雨醮) and celebrations of thanksgiving for the coming of rain (*daxie yujiao* 打謝雨醮), always staged on riverbanks, with hundreds of people involved, could take as much as five days. They cited an example of a ritual prayer from Ba'nán 巴南 district, Jielong town 接龍鎮, which took place in 1945. It involved parading the statue of the Lord of Sichuan, followed by the figures of twenty-eight star generals (Xingchen jiangshuai 星辰將帥), attracting more than a thousand people.¹³ Moreover, we cannot forget the persistence of the various *nuo* opera rituals that served as functions of purification and healing; there were also performances for weddings and funerals, which could be staged either on private premises or by broader communities. The quick revival of these religious-cum-theatrical rituals in the 1980s bespeaks of a living memory of these practices in some parts of Sichuan at the time of the “Liberation” (i.e., 1949).

A rare and insightful account of the community rituals' fortune during the revolution was written by G. William Skinner. At that time, Skinner was a young American student who attempted a fieldwork in the environs of Chengdu. He spent a few months, between September 1949 and January 1950, living with villagers and visiting nearby market towns. He also attended a festival for the God of the Eastern Peak (Dongyuemiao hui) that took place in Gaodianzi 高店子, a town about ten kilometers from Chengdu. This celebration, held on January 16, 1950, was the very last in the local community before the communist authorities issued a blanket prohibition on any such events. Skinner noted interesting adjustments made by the town and country people to accommodate the new rulers, matched by a rather confusing and initially permissive attitude by the authorities. He noted that permission for the festival had been granted because no political decision had been handed down to stop it:

The Communist authorities said that as far as they were concerned, the festival could be held, if precautions were taken to ensure that no thefts, robbery, danger to life, etc. were involved. They also said that while they had no objections to the *pusas* [菩薩] going out and parading, they would prefer that they did not go onto the highway. It was for this reason that the usual route of the parade was altered. ... Mr. Chen remarked that *xiang gongsuo* [鄉公所] had received no formal directives as yet from the

13 Hu Tiancheng and Duan Ming, *Ba Yu*, 85.

new authorities as to what they should do in the *xiang* [鄉], so they were rather at a loss.¹⁴

The festivities therefore took their usual form, with an evening of shows followed the next day by parades representing both gods and demons, staged by each of the eighteen local temple associations (Skinner called them "groups 會").¹⁵ The performances by these groups required a lot of preparation and a considerable amount of time, such as for the "Ji Shen Hui (Troupe of the Chicken God) [of which] the main attraction was a man decked out completely from head to foot as a big chicken. There was a cover-all mask, stiff swelling breast, tail, chicken feet and big wings into which he put his arms."¹⁶

The novelty was a show of *yangge* performed by Chengdu school and university students (the practice of inviting city troupes to the countryside being quite common), which was the finale to the religious festival. We can assume almost certainly that this show took the place of the usual Sichuan Opera that would deal with a subject related to the festival. *Yangge* troupes had first been introduced during the victory parade in Chengdu on December 30 (just two weeks before).¹⁷ Skinner who happened to see the spectacle had found them artistically skillful, faux-folkloristic, and very politicized, with simple stories aimed at the enemies at hand: the GMD, Chiang Kai-shek, and the Americans. The show in Gaodianzi was also political, but the spirit of the festival remained true to traditions:

In a little while we heard that the *yangge* players had arrived in the courtyard [of the temple] to put on the performances. They had already performed once in the street and once in the schoolyard and once before in the courtyard yesterday, and this was to be their final performance. There were two groups really, one from Chuan Da [Sichuan University] and one from a private middle school outside the east gate. The Chuan Da group, about 16 boys and girls, put on a couple of *yangge* and a play, while the middle school group did one *yangge* and sang several numbers. This was alternated in a reasonable fashion by *ziweidui* [自衛隊長, self-defense militia head], who acted as master of ceremonies. The courtyard was so packed and crowded that the crowd could not be contained

14 G. William Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution: Sichuan Fieldnotes, 1949–1950*, ed. Stevan Harrell and William Lavelly (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 211.

15 Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution*, 199–204.

16 Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution*, 196.

17 Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution*, 159–60.

several times and proceedings were stopped temporarily until the *ziwei-duit* [militia] got the crowd under control again. The play had to do with the governor of Sichuan, Wang Lingji [王陵基, 1883–1967], who fled just before the Communists arrived. He is one of the most hated of the Sichuan warlords; especially among students he is hated for his massacre of university students in Chongqing some 20 years ago and for his suppression of students during his period of office in Chengdu. The play enacted his cruelty to all the classes of people, his reliance on force, etc.; then it had him fleeing to Taiwan where he could seemingly evade the revenge of the people, but actually his sins will catch up with him, and he will be killed by his bad conscience even if the people don't get him first. The performance conditions were so poor that few people could hear much less see what was going on. The festival was by now over, there being no more scheduled events.¹⁸

Giving the last evening of the festival to the political plays marked an interesting but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to merge the old religious practice (and local communal custom) with the novel political reality that brought its own contents and forms of representation. It did not make the festival any less “superstitious” or any more “invited” by the CCP because the Party was not interested in local initiative. However, the goal in putting down popular religion could be achieved only by discontinuing such festivals. As noted by the editors of Skinner's diary, the one in Gaodianzi was never repeated, and the temple was destroyed.¹⁹

Similar stories probably unfolded throughout the province. Even in 1950, the discussion on the role of opera was definitely not centered on the villages, and rural opera forms were prohibited or discouraged. We find little evidence of the bottom-up organization and staging of opera in the countryside from then until 1956, when a search for new inspiration provided an opening for more “folk” (*minjian* 民間) forms, and research teams attempted to collect and preserve Sichuan's theatrical traditions. On the contrary, rural areas were invaded by teams from the cities to spread propaganda on land reform and other political campaigns. These topics are treated below. Here, we emphasize

18 Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution*, 207–8. Wang Lingji escaped from Chengdu but was later taken prisoner by the PLA and died a prisoner. Liu Shifei 劉識非, “Wang Lingji 王陵基,” in *Minguo renwu zhuan* 民國人物傳 [Biographical Dictionary of Republican China], vol. 9, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院近代史研究所 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 190–97.

19 Skinner, *Rural China on the Eve of Revolution*, 191.

that the rural and market-town religion-bound theater ceased to be a recognized art form and a source of talent, ideas, and stories to be developed on urban stages. The way in which opera had functioned in Sichuan for more than three hundred years, mixing local talent with infusions from other regions and the nation's capital, ended, thus blocking the countryside from active participation in cultural production in traditional terms. Henceforth, the source of inspiration for the performing arts was reversed: instead of flowing from the rural patrons and urban audiences, it came from the Party and government authorities. This reverse flow permanently shaped the stage arts in the PRC.

4 Adjusting to the New Party-State Policies

New political conditions in Sichuan also ensnared other opera-related institutions, especially if they were too closely attached to the previous government's policies on art. The new rules decreed by the People's government gave only an outline of the actions to be taken and were so vague that they gave no one any comfort. At the same time, Southwestern Military Government authorities put themselves in the position of critics and censors by demanding, judging, and undercutting initiatives that strayed from their interests. The Chinese Theater Professional College (Zhonghua xiju zhuanke xuexiao 中華戲劇專科學校) was one of the well-documented institutions that landed in such a quagmire. Opened in August 1949, it was placed under the authority of the Southwestern Military Government Culture and Education Department (Xi'nan junzheng weiyuan wenjiaobu 西南軍政委員文教部) in November of that year, with an immediate change in the management of the school (the new director was Zhao Mingyi 趙銘彝).²⁰ On March 15, 1950, the college was forced to reform its structure 改組, which implied not only changes in education, "livelihood/life," performance, work, and the economy but also adapting to a new sociopolitical relationship between artists/educators and the authorities.²¹ This meant a discursive transformation: any action undertaken by the college's managers and actors was expressed as a self-criticism of errors, past and present, and efforts at self-improvement. At the same time, they persistently lauded the great achievements due to the intervention of the new guidance and leadership (of the CCP). In its summary of one semester of work (spring 1950), the school admitted that the main impulse for positive change came only because of the new director of the Culture and Education Department, commissar Yang

20 Chongqingshi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 293–94.

21 "中華戲劇專科學校一九五零年上年度工作總結," CQA 295-1-2027, 95.

Dongshi 楊董事, who had set everything on the right path: that is, he overcame the class character of their theater art, clarified their ideology, improved their style of work, and placed their art truly in the service of the workers, peasants, and soldiers. Despite these achievements, problems abounded, and the school openly confessed them.²²

The heads of the college identified that having “a small number of people within the managerial organization meant weak leadership” was its central problem. They claimed, however, that increasing the number of the people responsible had a positive impact on overall activity. The previous style of leadership, which dominated before the March reforms, had vitiated team spirit; it made school employees behave as if they were just employees and not activists faced with an important political task; furthermore, it inhibited teamwork, negatively affected discipline, and prevented the achievement of plans to their full extent. In April, because it had been established that the school’s level of learning (of the Party regulations) was previously insufficient, the “weapons” of criticism and self-criticism were used; consequently, problems and mistakes were revealed, and, ultimately, progress was made.²³

To deal with those grave concerns, a few weeks of political education courses were inserted in the curriculum, during which teachers introduced the topics for discussion, and students formed small groups to analyze them. Here again, certain problem areas were identified: teachers were insufficiently prepared, one could feel a lack of leadership, teachers were absent, and no meetings were held to explain the work. According to the school authorities, this education could hardly alter students’ political and class convictions and satisfy students’ needs for political training. In fact, “political instructors made more progress in studying the ideology of art and literature than [art] professionals [did].”²⁴ Thus, even if political education had “positive” results regarding the ideological awareness of the young actors and the schoolteachers, the shortcomings of leadership and chaotic instruction remained an issue. The proposed solution was to cut the number of spurious teachers and encourage self-education.²⁵

With respect to questions of livelihood (or life), the following instructions by the political commissar Deng Xiaoping were the basis for progress both in art and ideology, which could be achieved by actors’ spending one month in a factory and performing at important propaganda events.²⁶ The errors of the

22 CQA 295-1-2027.

23 CQA 295-1-2027, 95–96.

24 CQA 295-1-2027, 96.

25 CQA 295-1-2027, 97.

26 CQA 295-1-2027.

college leadership in this respect were just as numerous as in the other areas: lack of leadership and of self-discipline, weak and sloppy “small teams,” as well as lack of vigilance and widespread indifference among the actors and managers. Moreover, the school did not successfully oppose and reeducate “backward” and “uncultured” elements nor could it make use of the positive elements among the students.²⁷

Irrespective of all its shortcomings, the college had its first try with the new reality of performing arts that henceforth served the needs of the party-state. The students spent a month staging plays in Chongqing’s factories, allegedly reaching an audience of 7,500 workers. Additionally, they traveled to the Shashi 沙市 (Hubei) Cotton Mill. Other than the regular shows at various school premises, they performed propaganda services for various professional associations, such as those for knitters, tailors, and shopkeepers. They participated in evening meetings of the democratic parties 民主黨派, in occasional celebrations (International Workers Day on May 1, commemoration of the founding of the CCP on July 1), fundraising events, and the World Peace Movement (part of the global Stalinist initiative)—events with an audience of twenty thousand people. Every time, they offered a choice of spoken dramas on recent political themes or on important issues in the communist movement—such as the *White-Haired Girl* (*Baimaonü* 白毛女), *Massacres of the American-Chinese Cooperation Organization* (*Zhong Mei hezuosuo datusha* 中美合作所大屠殺), *May First* (*Wu yi* 五一), *Model Household* (*Mofan jiating* 模範家庭)—as well as a selection of folksongs, among them boatmen’s work songs (*chuanfu haozi* 船伕號子), *yangge*, salt workers’ work songs (*yan’gong haozi* 鹽工號子), and a song for inviting spring (*yinchunqu* 迎春曲). Its packed work schedule consisted of traveling, acting, and political education classes, yet the college allegedly “sinned” by failing to abide by the (unspecified) government regulations. Furthermore, it was still haunted by usual insufficient leadership, lack of activism as well as weak planning. Moreover, the teachers and students did not participate enough, and in general the college still lacked knowledge about workers’ lives.²⁸

In the spirit of positive work, the college decided to change its structure in the following term (autumn 1950), splitting into three departments: Drama and Literature 戲劇文學組, Stage Arts 舞臺美術組, and Performing Arts 表演藝術組. It also resolved to draw new plans and to hire more specialists. Furthermore, it planned to renovate the buildings, invest in new stage lighting, buy new instruments, create new factory-like stage settings, and so on. It planned

27 CQA 295-1-2027, 97–98.

28 CQA 295-1-2027, 98.

to have a thousand students of all kinds (paying and with fees waived), who would be charged tuition equivalent to that of a private high school 私立高中收費標準. Additionally, the college managers intended to create a research unit 研究會 that would prepare shows for celebration of the founding of the PRC (October 1), the anniversary of “Chongqing’s liberation” (November 30), and various competitions 賽節工作. They also wanted to establish a tutorial department 輔導部 meant to deal not only with tasks that arose during performances held outside the school’s premises but also with careful study of political regulations and laws.²⁹ These plans were all very ambitious and expensive, requiring resources probably beyond the means of the college.

As an institution created through a government initiative and intended to propagate party-state policies, it did not suffer from a conflict between freedom of artistic expression and political requirements by the authorities. On the contrary, it was determined to adjust its structure and broadcast the content of its production according to the new conditions in a manner no different from a branch of government bureaucracy. Irrespective of all the work done, time spent on institutional restructuring, self-criticism sessions, and even demonstrated usefulness in spreading CCP propaganda, by the next autumn, the college had been closed down and integrated into another unit (called the Southwestern People’s Art College, Xi’nan renmin yishu xueyuan 西南人民藝術學院),³⁰ Clearly, there was little place for “old” (pre-CCP rule) organizations and representatives of the “old” order in revolutionary New China. These institutions were riven with an overwhelming number of political problems, and reforming them was costly, frustrating, and maladjusted to the chaos and contingencies arising from the internal and external conditions of the newly established communist state. In face of failures to adjust the received order to the CCP’s needs, the Party started to rely on a more decisive policy: seizing control over cultural production by taking over all existing theaters and opera troupes.

5 Seizing Control over the Opera Companies

In January 1950, although the communists’ grasp on power was practically unchallenged, and revolutionary slogans were broadcast far and wide, there was painfully little guidance as to how cultural policy was supposed to develop. In these circumstances, experience took precedence over theory. The CCP

²⁹ CQA 295-1-2027, 99.

³⁰ This school existed between 1950 and 1954. Chongqingshi wenhuaju, *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi*, 294.

had some experience in harnessing theaters to its mission gathered during its rule in Yan'an, Jin-Cha-Ji 晉察冀 (Shanxi, Chahar, Hebei), and Manchuria. Liu Wenfeng stated that these practices had been bundled as a general policy published in *People's Daily* on November 13, 1948, that had summarized it: "Having a plan, having procedures, carry out the work of reforming the old opera" ("Youjihua youbuzhoude jinxing jiuju gaige gongzuo 有計劃有步驟地進行舊劇改革工作"). It divided operas into three kinds: "beneficial 有利," "harmless 無害," and "harmful 有害." After some "research," it was determined that most were in the last of these categories.³¹ In general, during the civil war, military, tax, and police authorities took an optimistic attitude toward the prohibition of traditional operas seen as harmful to the revolution. The CCP cultural leadership started to recognize that in order for any performances were to survive, coordination of the cultural policy was overdue.³²

On May 22, 1949, *People's Daily* published Liu Nianqu's article, "Reforming Old Theater Is a Way to Create a New Opera," which provided some direction for opera reformers. Liu, voicing ideas accepted by the Party leadership, pointed out that "each script of the old opera contained material that reflected the mentality of feudalism, belief in predestination, three types of patriarchy of lords, fathers and men domination as well as slave mentality, becoming a tool of the long-term feudal power of "transformative education 教化" ("poisoning 麻醉, cheating 欺騙, deceiving 蒙蔽") and of broadening oppression."³³ The only way of dealing with old opera was by altering its content, correcting the history described in operas—from the one that slanders the people to one that shows their struggle against oppression, "the people's history, a history created through people's labor"—and through the creation of pieces that are enticing and well performed. In the rest of the article, Liu focused on *pingju* 平劇, a genre of popular Beijing Opera that was a communist darling. He recommended three steps that can be summarized as: researching, finding a way to progress, and destroying all obstacles and undesirable elements. Finally, he decreed, according with Mao's prescription, that popularization go hand in hand with artistic improvement.³⁴ Within the realm described as such, political action had to progress according to the locally defined conditions. Namely, the CCP first needed to have tools for action; only then could it implement its policy with the use of these tools while carefully observing whether the Party's

31 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 610.

32 Liu, Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 617–18.

33 Liu Nianqu 劉念渠, "Gaijie jiuju shi weile chuanguzao xingju 改革舊劇是爲了創造新歌劇," *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 April 22, 1949, 4.

34 Liu Nianqu, "Gaijie jiuju."

actions achieved the expected success. The Party, above all, needed to be in control.

One tried way was through a system of permissions. If a troupe, such as a martial arts performance group called the Returned Overseas Chinese Perfect Warrior Troupe (Guiqiao jingwu tuan 歸僑精武團) wanted to perform in Chongqing, it needed to prove its worth to the Police Department. The troupe submitted an application letter in form of a lengthy narrative, and on July 27, 1950, it received permission to go on stage on August 3 at Chongqing's Youth Center (Qingnianguan 青年館). What arguments did this troupe use? It stated that before the Sino-Japanese War, it had promoted high culture in the Philippines and in Australia. After the war broke out, the troupe returned to China and went to Sichuan, where it resided in Wutongqiao 五通橋 (south of Leshan) and there welcomed the "liberation" by the PLA. Afterward, it presented shows in Tianjin and Shanghai and underwent the (political) schooling for opera artists in Chongqing, with satisfactory results. This résumé was apparently sufficient for the authorities to grant it permission to perform in public.³⁵

The Municipal Culture and Education Bureau also became the main authority for registering new theaters and granting them permission to stage operas. For example, on May 20, 1950, the Actresses' Opera Society (Lingnü jushe 伶女劇社), a troupe presenting Sichuan Opera, received permission to operate in Caiyuanba. The reason for granting the troupe permission was that "the government encourages righteous entertainment, fights bad habits in society, and spreads civilization." The Actresses' Opera Society was allowed to charge 600 yuan per ticket, perform before 10 am and after 4 pm if it followed government regulations, and did not obstruct traffic. It would be hard, indeed, to determine in what way this permission differed from that issued by the late Qing or Republican governments.³⁶

The authorities also applied a mechanism of controlling the arts through organizational activities and planning. The Chongqing Municipal People's Government Cultural and Educational Bureau devised a plan for 1951 in which it intended to alter how music and opera, among others, are produced and consumed (the location of this document within the archival folder leads to an assumption that it was written in mid-1950 or later). The most important part of the plan was the notion of increasing the number of people and the percentage of society that were actively consuming arts. Moreover, the fourth point in the part related to music stated: "music research work shall be accomplished within five years, the most important Southwestern local opera music, popular

35 CQA 1085-1-6, 1.

36 CQA 1085-1-6, 29.

songs, storytelling music will be researched, minority heritage preserved, and new music developed." The opera development plans went as follows:

1. Launch the mass opera: lead leisure-time troupes, consolidate and reform current organizations, progressively develop, strive for that within five years 50 percent of the urban population will participate in leisure-time opera activities.
2. Build a spoken drama theater: within five years, build a perfectly planned building able to accommodate 1,500 people [in the audience] for a newly organized spoken drama troupe composed of 120 people.
3. Establish an opera house: within five years, construct a building that can accommodate 2,000 [in the audience] [and] a troupe composed of 150 people.³⁷

Ambitious as these plans were, considering not only the difficult postwar economic conditions but also a market ravaged by years of hyperinflation, and other important contingencies, such as the necessity of building and repairing basic infrastructure, they strike us as progressive and limited. For better or worse, Republican commercial theater enterprises could construct large buildings and cater to very diverse audiences. The new government run by the CCP understood its meager resources but wanted to compensate with mass participation in theatrical performance by the urban population.

At the same time, however, the city government was implementing a different policy of making theaters submit to its authority—namely, using fiscal pressure, confidential reporting, and administrative as well as police force to take over existing institutions and remold them according to the Party's needs. One well-documented illustration of such an intervention by the authorities concerns the South Chongqing Theater (Yu nan juyuan 渝南劇院). This playhouse was located in Danzishi 彈子石, an industrial district of Chongqing located across the Yangzi from the city center.

In June 1950, Song Pingchen 宋平臣, the manager of the South Chongqing Theater, signed a deal with Zhou Ming 周銘, who headed its identical communist twin called the South Chongqing People's Theater (Yu nan renmin juyuan 渝南人民劇院). The People's Theater, according to a later document, allegedly represented a company established on June 5 by "front stage employee colleagues."³⁸ The contract between Song and Zhou transferred all of the theater's

37 "重慶市人民政府文化教科一九五一年工作計劃." The character 教 *jiao* is rendered as 警 *jing*. Although some police files are kept together in this folder of the Culture and Education Department, in this context it makes little sense to claim that the file was produced by a combined culture and police authority; CQA 1085-1-6, 22-23.

38 CQA 1085-1-6, 78.

property, including stage decoration, costumes, and props, to the People's Theater, Song renounced all future claims on the basis of the number of shares held and so forth. In exchange, Song received no less than 10 million yuan to cover debts, unpaid taxes, and electricity fees. According to the document, this was the real reason for selling the theater. The amount was meant to be high because Zhou and Song were old acquaintances and thus, at least in words, covered this "enemy takeover," in which political ends were reached through economic means.³⁹ As in Leszek Kołakowski's tale *The Hump*, in which the evil identical twin had sprouted from the poor stonemason's back and took over his work, friends, and family, here, too, the People's Theater was allowed to consume the Theater.⁴⁰ Apart from a name change, only the director had to leave, but other members of the management and the signatories to the deal remained employed.

Immediately afterward, Zhou Ming signed a contract with Tao Ze 陶澤, the head manager of the Chongqing Grand Opera Revival Society (Chongqing daxiyuan fuxing jushe 重慶大戲院復興劇社), a troupe performing Sichuan Opera. This Revival Society was now obliged by the conditions of its contract to follow the Government Culture and Education Bureau's propaganda line as well as to be amenable to the authorities; moreover, it had to stage a repertoire free of any counterrevolutionary (*fandong*) or feudal (*fengjian*) content. Old opera and performance styles had to be revised to match current conditions. Other paragraphs obliged the troupe to take care of the property, stage plays punctually, maintain accurate and timely records of the performers (no more than sixty) as well as to engage in planning and strict management and combat waste and laziness. Moreover, smoking opium was strictly banned, any addicts in the troupe had to be sent for reeducation, and performers were obliged to work, study, and stage only art with contemporary relevance that would serve the people. The contract regulated performers' pay and general behavior.

One final point was that every day before a performance, all the repertoire had to be published together with the names of the performers: a requirement that again indicated the need for full reporting and public scrutiny of all of the troupe's activities, thus effectively formalizing its work.⁴¹ On the surface, this contract merely was a continuation of practices established under the Qing New Policies. It included and realized, however, the postulates from the times of the War of Resistance, which called for controlling the performers and

39 CQA 1085-1-6, 69.

40 Leszek Kołakowski, *Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia and the Key to Heaven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10–18.

41 CQA 1085-1-6, 70–71.

scrutinizing the plays presented. No longer were performers judged according to their ability to uphold the ideals of "modernization" and "improvement"; now, they stood before the municipal bureau, which assessed them on their ability to transmit the CCP's nationally uniform propaganda.

A similar logic was behind the novel organization of the theater company, which on June 21 was defined as a shareholding private enterprise valued at 16.8 million yuan divided into thirty equal shares. The contract clearly demarcated the rights and obligations of each shareholder, the structure of management, and the division of expenses. Accordingly, the theater operations should comprise 50 percent of the budget, culture and education 20 percent, shareholders' profit 25 percent, and staff remuneration 5 percent. The only difference between these rules and those used by the company beginning with the twilight of the Qing was in the stated purpose of the business: "to promote the grand spring of the correct culture and entertainment, encourage reformed and improved old opera in the service to workers, peasants, and soldiers [be] in accord with the current ideology of class [-based] new democracy culture and education."⁴²

The rules for the new company were established and enforced by the Police Department in accordance with regulations published in *New China Daily* 新華日報 on July 23, 1950.⁴³ They were intended to overcome the specific class struggle in the theater business, that is, the division of income, livelihood, and social position of the front (responsible for lights, repairs, finances) and back stage workers (workers taking care of clothes, props, make-up, kitchens, toilets, and so forth).

By the first week of July, however, the rules that had appeared clear were already being ignored by Tao Ze, Hu Junliang 胡俊良, and Chen Rongjiu 陳榮久. Chen gathered a group of five actors and demanded pay of 400,000 yuan for a day of work, otherwise they would do nothing, whereas Tao and Hu undermined any plan, as they were lazy, spreading harmful gossip that workers

42 "為提倡大衆正當文娛鼓勵改良舊劇爲工農兵服務界符合現階級新民主主義文化教育爲宗旨。" CQA 1085-1-6, 72.

43 CQA 1085-1-6, 73. The policy issued by an office in the Ministry of Culture called the Xiqu gajin weiyuanhui 戲劇改進委員會 [Opera Improvement and Advancement Committee], which consisted of Zhou Yang (minister) and renowned playwrights and Beijing Opera performers: Tian Han, Ouyang Yuqian, Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun 尙小雲, Lao She, Cao Yu, Ma Yanxiang, Ma Shaobo 馬少波, Zhou Yibai 周貽白, and Yuan Xuefen 袁雪芬, and the names of forty-five others were published in *Renmin ribao*, July 27, 1950. It was supposed to oppose superstition, feudalism, pornography, drug abuse, murders, and expressions of scorn toward the laboring masses. The mention in the source probably relates to the same policy. Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 611.

stole rice from the company, and selfishly cared only about their own profit. The conditions at the company created by them called for a thorough reform in the areas of the company's business, which need to be managed with absolute transparency; human resources had to be revised to remove obstacles to reform, and training that would lead to the performance of valuable reformed plays for mass audiences. Beginning with the fourth point, the remainder of the reforms implemented in this troupe are missing from the available copy of the document.⁴⁴ Its authors concluded that theaters such as the Chongqing Grand Opera Revival Society (as well as other troupes mentioned in previous chapters, e.g. Desheng dajuyuan and Chongqing daxiyuan) should be denounced as perpetrators of exploitation that provide decent performers with no lifetime security, no way to emerge from the realm of vulgarity, and no way to be released from the grips of poverty. They thereupon demanded a thorough investigation of the troupe and removal of its boss, Tao Ze, in order to finally build a renewed theater company.⁴⁵ This plea was well received by the police. It recognized the performers' association, calling it the South Chongqing Laboring Masses Cinema (Yunan laogong minzhong dianyingyuan 渝南勞工民衆電影院, probably a typographical error, as it was a theater, and this name appears on only one document) and on June 28 it launched an investigation.⁴⁶

The report, which echoed all the accusations against the troupe members and their "incorrect" practices, was prepared and submitted by Zhou Ming, the head manager, on July 23, 1950, together with an investigation form 審查表, biographical data on the employees 職員簡歷冊, an outline of the company structure 組織簡章, permanent and replaceable property 永頂生財器俱, and a summary of developments.⁴⁷ The same Zhou Ming, a head manager, but in fact a police spy and a political officer, one more time wrote to the Chongqing Police Department on September 1, 1950, that conditions at the theater were appalling, and thus the authority's help was vital. After a review conducted on August 8, he again detected a yawning class conflict raging between the front stage workers, backstage workers, and the performers. Moreover, he accused Tao Ze (the head of the Chongqing Grand Opera Revival Society) and Hu Junliang of promoting corruption and chaos, demonstrating "an utter lack of devotion to service" and the persistence of evil habits (probably opium smoking).

The company reached a point of no return. The document stated that the government implements a policy that consisted of the following elements:

44 CQA 1085-1-6, 73.

45 CQA 1085-1-6.

46 CQA 1085-1-6, 74.

47 CQA 1085-1-6, 75.

"first, the city set up a scheme for self-education; second, only a theater with a prospering economy was supposed to contribute to government income; third, learn from rich and cultured organizations how to reform."⁴⁸ Thus, it declared that no theater was supposed to offer different service to the masses and to audiences in the city. This theater, however, was hopeless and had failed on all counts (ideology, conditions of the front and backstage workers, evil habits), so it could not be a member of the professional theater association 工商團體. The document stated that it was not enough for a theater to earn money or perform "opportunistic" cultural work; for the government, "running a school was easy while reforming a theater troupe difficult," and "it is better to be destroyed than to give up one's principles 寧爲玉碎." Therefore, Zhou called for speedy action by the police that would deliver change.⁴⁹

A final document (issued after September 1950) on the South Chongqing People's Theater case was a summary report that described the overall situation of this theater within the context of the changes taking place at that time and the political demands that the CCP placed on Chinese society. It first voiced a sense of defeat in reforming the methods of the old world of exploitation and in reshaping such "old" organization into a reformed theater that could provide service in these new "great times."⁵⁰ The potential of the theater was described as the population of 80 percent workers and peasants, 10 percent merchants, and the remainder comprising soldiers living in Danzishi to whom one needed to play. From the time that the theater began to operate, it could earn 1 million yuan a day over two months by attracting audiences locally and from the neighboring districts. In September 1950, the theater turned to a repertoire inherently "superstitious and vulgar" and thus abandoned all previous efforts to improve people's culture and education, again soiling it with contents of the lowest kind. A question was posed in the document: is materially supporting a hundred people (the performers) a sufficient reason for taking "a road to death 死亡的道路?" At the same time, relations between two groups of theater workers (front and backstage) as well as with the performers were marred by corruption, jealousy, mutual scorn, robberies, opium smoking, and so on, making the theater a very difficult place in which to work. Indeed, the problems looked "insurmountable" in this organization, which had "lot of people who eat, few who work," its economic structure was leading to ruin, and the

48 CQA 1085-1-6, 67-68.

49 CQA 1085-1-6.

50 CQA 1085-1-6, 266. The theater's capital stated in this document is less than previously mentioned: 1.5 million yuan, with each share worth 500,000 yuan.

troupe it employed was unsuitable for staging almost anything.⁵¹ An “outsider’s view of the audience,” as the report claimed, agreed that the troupe propagated “plenty of the reactionary propaganda, which should not be tolerated” (this line was inserted after the document was composed, probably to enforce the argument, but undermining that it was a genuinely “outside” comment). Not only did the quality of singing earn negative reviews but also the repertoire of operas, which were full of intrigue, thieves, and opium sellers and thus wasted workers’ hard-earned leisure time and affected the quality of their work.⁵² Three solutions were proposed, all of which called for outside management of the theater company and the troupe. A local government culture bureau would resolve the employment and labor issues and deal with the brewing class struggle among the stage workers; otherwise, if these measures proved unsuccessful, the police would revoke the theater’s license in perpetuity.⁵³

As the case of the South Chongqing People’s Theater shows, even taking over a theater and employing a troupe obliged to follow certain defined interests of the government could run into insurmountable obstacles. It seems to have had two sources of problems: first, sanctioned by tradition and the business practice organization of the troupes and, second, the very nature of Sichuan Opera (or Chinese opera in general)—that is, its repertoire and music. In 1949–1950, the era when the reform was an undefined or imprecisely defined postulate and the usefulness of traditional opera still open to discuss, private as well as private-public enterprises experimented with what they considered reforms and improvement. Yet it became an endless source of frustration for everyone. Violence, adopted by the top management in seizing property more or less pretextually, together with the anti-exploitation propaganda produced another list of accusations from the bottom of the theater organization. These denunciations were well received by the revolutionary power and led to a rather speedy fall of the company bosses. The main issue with the opera, its “superstitious” and “feudal” nature, however, was not resolved. Only more thorough and guided action could make the opera—a social and cultural institution profoundly ingrained in Chinese “old society”—tolerable to the new powerholders. Achieving that was apparently beyond the capacity of the local leadership.

51 CQA 1085-1-6, 268.

52 CQA 1085-1-6, 269.

53 CQA 1085-1-6.

6 Opera Becomes Useful to the Communist State

The signal for change came from an unexpected quarter, thousands of kilometers away from Chongqing on October 19, 1950, as the PLA soldiers supposedly as volunteers crossed the Yalu River to join a terrifying war being waged by Korean communists against the United States and its allies. Suddenly, as the CCP was tossed back to conditions that it only fully understood—a pitched battle against an overwhelming enemy—opera became useful again. As in the mid-1940s, so in the early 1950s, the Party demonstrated its masterful ability to create propaganda by employing local talent and conducting a nationwide campaign against an uncontroversial common enemy.

The initial military successes in Korea did not require the PRC to employ all its national resources, but by December 1950, the situation on the Korean front had turned to the Chinese and North Korean disadvantage. Looming fear of a possible defeat gave the CCP an impulse to conduct a multipronged campaign, with a prominent place for opera. In effect, this traditional branch of the performing arts became appreciated for its popularity, diversity, and, above all, social impact. The CCP leadership recognized its problems with ongoing reform and resolved to make a nationwide push for change.

On December 1, 1950, *People's Daily* published an article, "Start All-Nation Opera Workers' Conference. Now we have 350,000 opera workers and an opera audience of 3 million. The meeting will discuss and decide the problems of opera reform policy and regulations." An initial assessment of the popularity of the opera, according to the research quoted in the article, gave the following national figures: 76,187 performers, 1,348 theaters, 468 opera-staging teahouses 茶社, 1,670 privately run troupes 私营劇團, and an opera audience of approximately 3 million people daily. The last figure was an extrapolation on the basis of the daily count of operagoers in Beijing (25,000) and Shanghai (15,000), plus the results of some field research conducted in Hebei Province and in some other major towns.

Apart from recognizing the widespread phenomenon of traditional opera, the authors of the article identified three problem areas: excessive use of prohibitions of the opera plays, particularly in the areas held the longest by the communists (Manchuria, Shanxi, Xuzhou 徐州); insufficient work done to create a new repertoire; and problems in the education of performers as well as of cadres' awareness. Thus, the conference was supposed to resolve these issues and set operatic art on a track of serving the people. Henceforth, opera should contribute to the enlightenment of the people about the government's political course and motivate people to engage in fervent labor.

The real goal of the CCP leadership's engagement with this traditional performance art was, however, left to the last paragraph of the article: namely, that the entire world of opera should be harnessed for the task of winning the "Resist America, Support Korea" ("Kang Mei, Yuan Chao 抗美援朝") campaign, otherwise called the Korean War. Opera, like *yangge* and spoken drama in the old days, was supposed to be presented on stages, street corners, town squares, and radio in order to spread propaganda. The presiding body of the conference, which was supposed to figure out how to transform opera into a weapon of state propaganda, consisted of Ma Xulun 馬敘倫 (State Administrative Council commissar of culture and education), Zhou Yang (deputy minister of culture), Mei Lanfang, Zhang Decheng (called a "revered performer of Sichuan Opera 川劇老伶人"), Ouyang Yuqian, Beijing Opera performers Zhou Xinfang 周信芳, Cheng Yanqiu, and Gai Jiaotian 蓋叫天 (1888–1971), and a storyteller, Lian Kuoru 連闊如 (1903–1971).⁵⁴

Zhang Decheng was an interesting and relevant addition to this consultative body, especially considering previous similar organizations established since the War of Resistance against Japan. Born in Zigong to a family originally from Baxian, Zhang spent most of his youth and early adult years in South Sichuan (Zigong, Ziliu, Luzhou, and Yibin; he occasionally played in Chengdu and Chongqing), where he trained for and performed the role of an elderly male 須生. As an apprentice, he also practiced for roles of clown and a young male. Zhang earned a reputation for his assiduity, dedication, and unbending spirit because he had not given up an acting career after temporarily losing the ability to sing. When he eventually regained it at the age of twenty-six (or twenty-seven), he became a recognized authority in the art of *gaoqiang*, about which he later wrote a number of books (some published only posthumously).⁵⁵ In the 1940s, Zhang gained fame in Chongqing, received recognition from Guo Moruo, and apparently made friends with influential members of the CCP.

54 *Renmin ribao*, December 1, 1950, 3. According to the reports published in *Neibu cankao*, across regions and social classes, the Chinese was terrified by war with the US, expected that Chinese involvement would invite US aggression, detonation of an atom bomb in China, and lead to World War III; *Neibu cankao*, July 25, 1950, no. 186, 89–90; September 1, 1950, no. 212, 1–2; December 20, 1950, no. 298, 104–9; January 11, 1951, no. 6, 25–36.

55 E.g., Zhang Decheng, *Chuanju goaqqiang yuefu*, which was reprinted in 1979 with an introduction by Ren Baige. During the war, Zhang also wrote *Chuanju neiying* 川劇內影 (I was unable to find a copy of this book), and his art and ideas on Sichuan opera became the basis of separate studies and memoirs, such as Sichuansheng chuanju yishu yanjiusuo 四川省川劇藝術研究所, ed., *Zhang Decheng biaoyan lunwen xuan* 張德成川劇表演論文選 [Selected Essays on Performing Sichuan Opera by Zhang Decheng] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1981).

Among them, apart from Guo, was his later associate, at times superior, and finally editor of his writings, Ren Baige 任白戈 (1906–1986), one of the most powerful politicians in Southwest China. According to all the biographies (or, rather, revolutionary hagiographies), Zhang was appalled by the GMD's corruption and by the depressing conditions facing postwar opera. In protest, Zhang retired from the stage, maintaining lofty seclusion from the decaying body of the Nationalist-era theater. After the communist takeover of Sichuan, responding to an invitation by Shao Zinan 邵子南 (1916–1955; Ren Baige's associate, head of the Southwest Propaganda Bureau and of Chongqing Radio), Zhang reappeared in glory, immediately returning to the stage and taking positions of power in southwestern cultural organizations. By then sixty years old, he became one of the senior members of the national opera reform and the only non-Beijing Opera performer to be invited to the All-Nation Opera Workers' Conference.⁵⁶ Obviously, it is hard to determine the extent to which he was just an enabler for Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhou Yang, and, locally, Deng Xiaoping and Liu Bocheng in pushing propaganda through the channels of the old performing arts. The scale of research conducted and the Party's sensitivity about artistic quality and heritage character of the opera visible in most of the reform efforts of the 1950s show that performers such as Zhang and Mei Lanfang had something to say about how it proceeded. That said, their authority within their respective artistic environments guaranteed much more rapid and much greater success in the reform than anything attempted by the GMD. The lesson had been learned.

While the conference was proceeding, political pressure was building up. *People's Daily* published articles about a campaign of feverish mass optimism about political spectacles that advocated war. They were seconded by reports from provincial cities on this very campaign's immediate success and complemented by descriptions of the CCP's orders to build propaganda networks across the country and the campaign to combat American influence in the arts.⁵⁷

56 Chongqing, *Chongqing xiqu zhi*, 463; Chongqingshi chuanju yishu yanjiusuo 重慶市川劇藝術研究所, ed., *Chuanju yishu yanjiu* 川劇藝術研究 [A Study of the Art of Sichuan Opera] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1985), 5: 175–76.

57 From Chongqing: "Chongqing sanqian yu wenyi gongzuozhe zhankai wenyi chuanguo xuanchuan huodong jizhong yiqie liliang Kang Mei Yuan Chao baojia weiguo 重慶三千余文藝工作者展開文藝創作宣傳活動集中一切力量抗美援朝保家衛國," *Renmin ribao*, December 4, 1950; reports from across the country (in Sichuan from Chengdu): "Gai ge xiqu Kang Mei Yuan Chao 改革戲曲抗美援朝," *Renmin ribao*, December 13, 1950; on American influence, especially in film art: "中央人民政府政務院關於處理接受美國津貼的文化教育救濟關及宗教團體的方針的決定," *Renmin ribao*, December 29,

On January 21, 1951, the conference concluded, and *People's Daily* published Tian Han's report spelling out the resolutions agreed to. It included an unsurprising list of decrees concerning the rewriting of operas, which henceforth had to be conducted in study societies involving fifty thousand performers and members of the audience to be established in the main cities (including Chongqing). Moreover, the old-style performing arts were treated as "China's precious heritage 中國舊劇形式是此種寶貴遺產之一." Thus, following precepts from Lenin ("Lun yishu yu wenhua 論藝術與文化")⁵⁸ and Mao's "On New Democracy" ("Xin minzhu zhuyi lun 新民主主義論"), this art had to be cleansed of all feudal and vulgar elements. Above all, it had to restore the correct meaning of history in traditional stories, which had been corrupted due to the feudalist power exercised on them. As the conference participants stated, the social conditions in the old-style stories created a fiction in which "the classless society, the Chinese Communist Party, [and] Chairmen Mao would never be possible." They also called for more plays to be created on the basis of the current successes. Among such exemplary pieces, they named the Sichuan Opera *Autumn River* (*Qiujiang* 秋江). This piece was extracted from *Yuzanji* 玉簪記 by Zhou Qihe 周企何 (1911–1988), Yan Youhe 陽友鶴 (1913–1984), and Chen Shufang. It told the story of a girl chasing her lover in a small boat rowed by an elderly ferryman. Stripped of all erotic jokes and, instead, larded with witty dialogue and inventive dancing, it became a favorite at national festivals and (later) international tours.⁵⁹ Finally, the report stressed that the basis of future work, as before, was Mao's 1944 speech on the United Front, which sanctioned cooperation between performers and the Party.⁶⁰

Thus, in the initial months of China's involvement in the Korean War, the Party not only found cooperative social actors within the opera milieu but also identified a purpose for the future existence of this art form in the new reality of communist rule. "Serving the people" was no longer a slogan that was hard to understand; now, it attained a more definite meaning: active propagation of the central government's policies, whether in internal or external struggles. As established by the CCP leadership, the mission for the opera world was to raise funds for the war, mobilize labor in the factories, and help with land reform.

1950; on stepping up propaganda by the Party, which should be simple: "中共中央關於全黨建立對人民群眾的宣傳網的決定," *Renmin ribao*, January 1, 1950.

58 Related to collections of Lenin's works.

59 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 635–36.

60 Tian Han, "爲愛國主義的人民新戲曲而奮鬥——一九五零年十二月一日在全國戲曲工作會議上的報告摘要," *Renmin ribao*, January 21, 1951, 5.

When their fulfillment of these tasks had visible successes, remaking the opera organization, opera content, and Chinese popular culture in general started to look like achievable tasks and thus were the subject of a first binding political resolution titled "State Administrative Council Directive on Theater Reform" ("Zhangwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo zhishi 政務院關於戲曲改革工作指示") signed by Zhou Enlai and published on May 5, 1951.⁶¹ Before discussing the results of all these changes, we first analyze this policy.

The directive largely replicated the main points of the more general ministerial report and plan published on April 20, 1951, which called for continuation of the United Front and promotion of mixed public and private enterprises in the realm of culture. The plan recognized that, in the previous period, the practice of prohibiting operas was too radical but that the government should fight "historical reactionism" and promote actual history from the perspective of historical materialism. Moreover, "all operas very harmful to the people that have to be prohibited must be dealt with according to the [orders of the] Central Ministry of Culture."⁶²

The directive listed more points and established the Party's official understanding of the opera and other performing arts. It stated: "people's opera is for the people's democratic and patriotic spirit the broadest means of education and the most powerful weapon of the masses." It highlighted that opera was a precious national heritage but, in order to profit the people, it had to be reformed. After the meetings in November 1950 and considering the achievements and experiences of the previous year, the directive called for a thorough rewriting of traditional scripts, correction of the "false" representation of history in the operas, elimination of eroticism, violence, vulgarity, slave spirit, reactionism, scorn for one's nation, and so forth. Particular attention was given to local opera genres and smaller forms of performance that had a more direct and more popular appeal to audiences. These forms were ordered to be collected, studied, and published, often to be recorded in written form for the first time, and only then reformed and modified for the political needs of the times. All the artists and people responsible for "cultural work" were now burdened with responsibility for educating, "improving," and "advancing" the arts and popular mentality.

The documents from April 20 and May 5 were only the first in the string of annual constitutions, plans, and directives issued by the central government

61 *Renmin ribao*, May 5, 1950.

62 "文化部一九五零年全國文化藝術工作報告與一九五一年計劃要點, (一九五一年四月二十日政務院第八十一次政務會議批准) [April 20, 1951]" in *Wenhua gongzuo wenjian ziliao huibian* 文化工作文件資料匯編, n.p., 1982), 1: 3-4.

concerning the arts in the PRC, regulating its activities, and adjusting it to political contingencies. These central government decisions effectively terminated an era of locally driven reform that had achieved the vague goals of class struggle within the troupes and a revolution in opera content in order to serve the interests of “workers, peasants, and soldiers.” Altogether the centrally conducted opera reform was called “Let Flowers of All Seasons Flourish Together! Improve the Old and Create the New” 百花齊放，推陳出新” after the April 3, 1951, speech of Mao Zedong, which, under the guise of free expression for the arts, bound all local developments to the central directives.⁶³ This flowery policy was behind the establishment of the model opera troupes: the First 一團, the Second 二團, and the Third 三團 for Beijing Opera, the Quyi working troupe 曲藝工作團, the *pingju* troupe, and so on.⁶⁴ Another common term in the process started with the directive was “three changes 三改” which stood for “changing opera 改戲,” “changing people 改人,” and “changing organization 改制.” They can be paraphrased as rewriting the old repertoire, reeducating the performers, and reconstructing opera troupes.⁶⁵

The final outcome of these policies was a tortuous process of creating appropriate artwork or, rather, an initiation of the work to remold existing dramatic pieces with progressively dissimilar (and often awkward) politically acceptable substitutes, which was tightly chained to the schedule of national festivals of operatic art. These festivals were an important innovation that in all respects surpassed previous similar events. The first one met in Beijing on October 6 and lasted until November 14, 1952. It was called the First All-Nation Study and Emulate Opera Performance Festival (Diyijie quanguo xiqu guanmo yanchu dahui 第一屆全國戲曲觀摩演出大會). The audience at the festival consisted of the national leaders in the field of culture, and the plays were seen by Mao and Zhou Enlai as well as by other members of the Politburo. The purpose of this event was to set standards by encouraging with awards and by providing criticism of the works considered deficient. Many of the discussions and conclusions were broadly disseminated through the press, together with some model pieces of opera, such as the aforementioned Sichuan play

63 The date of Mao's speech was given in the memoir of Ma Shaobo, “Baihua qifang' yu 'tuichen chuxin'—20 shiji 50 niandai Zhongguo xiqu zhengce de chongxin pinggu ‘百花齊放’與‘推陳出新’: 20世紀50年代中國戲劇政策的重新評估” <http://www.guoxue.com/xqyj/fjlw/bhqf.htm> (accessed November 6, 2020). Translation of the movement after Shen Yen-ping [Mao Dun], “New Developments in Culture and Art,” *People's China* 22 (November 16, 1952), 29–33, <http://chinaposters.net/resources/shen-yen-ping-new-developments.php> (accessed January 9, 2016).

64 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 612.

65 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 614–15.

Qiujiang. Because the festival and the national developments in the field of cultural policy are both described in detail in recent scholarship by Liu Siyuan, Liu Wenfeng, Mi Zhao, and Wilt L. Idema, it is not necessary to duplicate their work here.⁶⁶ Instead, we focus on the adoption of cultural policy in Sichuan, the development of tools for controlling opera in this period, the problems that arose, and how the new institutional structure of opera served the careers of actors.

7 Policy in Action: Chongqing, 1951–1952

While national scale reforms were under preparation, the Chongqing Municipal Culture and Education Committee wrote several reports describing its achievements and shortcomings. In April 1951, a lengthy document, "How Did Chongqing Municipal Culture and Art Workers Serve the Working Class since Liberation?" ("Jiefang yilai Chongqingshi de wenyi gongzuozhe shi ruhe wei gongren jieji fuwude 解放以來重慶市的文藝工作者是如何爲工人階級服務的") tried to answer this all-important question. At the same time, this document demonstrated local success in faithfully submitting to the precepts expressed in Mao's then-canonical essay "On New Democracy." The two final sections of the Chairman's essay, "Some wrong Ideas about the Nature of Culture" and "A National, scientific, and Mass Culture," were central to the authors of the report, especially the critical significance of workers in the construction of a Chinese cultural revolution and the leading role of the Party in steering artists to instruct the workers.⁶⁷ The use of "On New Democracy" as a basis for cultural work conformed with the decisions of the All-National Congress in November and December 1950 and the aforementioned report by Tian Han on January 21, 1951, which concluded the work of the congress. Accordingly, Chongqing actors were sent to seventy-six factories to learn from the workers and infuse their professional activities and their daily lives (even the time that workers spent in factory dorms) with revolutionary songs and operas. Fifty troupes and more than three thousand people (artists) were involved

66 Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 616–33; Idema, *The Metamorphosis of Tianxian pei*, 33–41; Liu Siyuan, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the Early 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 3 (2009): 387–406; Mi Zhao, "State Capitalism and Entertainment Markets: The Socialist Transformation of *Qiyi* in Tianjin, 1949–1964," *Modern China* 44, no. 5: 525–556.

67 Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy" (January 1940), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm (accessed January 31, 2019); CQA 1085-1-65, 8.

in these activities. Additionally, actors and Party cadres organized workers' song and theater groups, or at least tried to, as the artistic results were rather appalling though the work was seen as politically inspiring. This propaganda work was seriously compromised because of the poor repertoire of songs and plays, apparently to a degree that curtailed the full flourishing of this effort.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, thirty amateur workers' song and drama organizations were set up, particularly at docks 21, 24, and 29. The ambition of the Culture and Education Bureau was to have independent workers' troupes at every factory. As admitted in the record, all these achievements could only have happened due to the help and initiative of the military government.⁶⁹

The problems encountered by the troupes can be summarized in two broad categories: the first was actors' and cultural officials' ignorance of working-class conditions, way of life, and specific needs; the second was uncertainty about how to learn and proceed with work. The report admitted that even a month in the factory could provide fruitful experience, which revealed that the mentality of "petty capitalist intellectuals" inhibits any learning process, whereas immersion, through the study of, emulation of, and devotion to the working class, was the only way to proceed. Artists were obliged to provide "spiritual nourishment 精神食粮" to workers at the same time as providing for their needs (as defined by the Party). This task was seen as daunting but transformative for both artists and workers. By emulating Soviet socialist realism, artwork could follow experience and be realistic. Finally, Party leadership was crucial to the success in factories and mines. Without it, initiating and succeeding in the promotion of political campaigns, such as raising funds for the Korean War or encouraging labor competition, would be impossible. In this type of work, actors were the best if they became like cogs in the machine of production and propaganda work, thus appearing entirely naturalized in their new environments. Even if they failed to learn the inner-most thoughts and needs of the workers, they needed to continue their diligent study of the lives of workers and to try to improve their art. If they failed in these tasks, their pay would be lowered, and thus they would be coerced to do so.⁷⁰

This report fails to mention that this propaganda work turned into a public nuisance and a huge waste of funds, to the point that it became a source of broad dissatisfaction. Propaganda work annoyed the Chongqing Police Department and was even described by *People's Daily* on July 20, 1951, as a cautionary tale. In one case, beginning in December 1950, one factory spent

68 CQA 1085-1-65, 18-20.

69 CQA 1085-1-65, 9-10.

70 CQA 1085-1-65, 13-18.

14,870,000 yuan just to provide costumes and equip one troupe of *yangge* and waist drum groups totaling sixty-four players. The provision of funds for the musicians came from a contribution by private enterprises that was hardly voluntary. Some business owners (e.g. that of the Szechuen Yu Feng Oil Firm) had to provide as much as two million yuan. Moreover:

[Many] of the waist drum bands were disorderly and recklessly beat up the band everywhere disregarding day or night, work time or rest, and where they are. Recently the weather has been sultry, and many people still played the waist drums under the burning sun. This not only wasted time, hindered production and health, but also disturbed the life of the great masses of civilians and obstructed the traffic.

Beating drums before and after work as well as engaging school children as players wasted people's energy and negatively impacted education. The article concludes "[after] the May Day although correction for the phenomenon of reckless drum playing, ostentations and waste has begun, certain cadres, however, are still not taking an active part in guiding corrective measures."⁷¹

Another report, which demonstrates the transformation of the opera after the announcement of a national policy on the theatrical arts comes from the second half of 1951 under the title: "Survey of the Great Masses Entertainment Organization 大衆游藝團." The Great Masses Entertainment Organization was a shareholding company with mixed public-private ownership that provided artistic entertainment for a low ticket price. The city supplied construction materials and a plot of land, but the cost of building the theater and running the company fell on the private investors. We learn that between October 20 and November 30, the lowest sales were 1780 tickets (during power cuts and rain), while the highest 9967 tickets (on Sundays); in forty days of operation overall 202,412 tickets were sold, which gives a daily average of 4937 tickets. Expenses without tax were at 62,342,914 yuan, while the balance was 22,233,168 yuan. The theater was therefore a profitable enterprise for both the city and the shareholders.⁷²

71 Translation of the article "Activities of the Waist Drum Bands in Chungking Carried to Excess and Seriously Waste Man Power and Financial Strength," *People's Daily*, Peking, 20th Jul, 1951. Newspaper extract condemning extravagance of the waist drum bands in Chungking (1951), National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, United Kingdom: Foreign Office, FO 371/92354 1951, 1-2.

72 CQA 1085-1-65, 76-77.

The governing body of the company was organized (1) according to the rules of the Culture and Education Bureau; (2) the chief artistic representative agreed by all the shareholders and therefore the head of the organization was the well-known Zhang Decheng. The committee of the theater consisted of twenty-two people, but they had to select one theater director and a rotating standing committee of nine people; (3) the Culture and Education Bureau was a superior body defining the legal constitution of the theater. Managing the staff was to proceed through a system of minute recording and keeping of the files on the employees. If there were any members of the troupe that had “grave political problems,” they should first be put on record. The counterrevolutionaries, those that acted against the organization, engaged in corruption, did not respect the rules of the troupe and did not respond to the reeducation, if their crime was not just of an economic nature, they were to be reported to the police and fired.⁷³

The main purpose of this business was the propagation of the new, reformed performing arts and promotion of the cultural progress of the masses. It followed the principle of “shorter 短, smaller 小, more 多, changed 變,” while at the same time encouraging research and the writing of new pieces as well as arousing actors’ optimism about this new-style repertoire among the performers.

By the time the document was composed, the company did not have its own troupe; rather, it hosted more than four hundred performers from all the major Chongqing troupes including Lijiaban (Beijing Opera), Youxin daxi yuan, Desheng wutai, Minyou yeyu jutuan 民友業餘劇團 (Sichuan Opera), Huabei jutuan 華北劇團 (folk opera 通俗話劇), and other styles of *quyi*, storytelling, martial arts, and singing.⁷⁴ The company provided a sizable building considering Chongqing’s conditions, with a movie theater, a large theater hall, a storytelling hall, a common reading room, a zoo, a fountain, and other amenities.⁷⁵ In this respect, it was an utterly modern enterprise, with working conditions that were hard to emulate in the impoverished postwar conditions in Chongqing. Presiding over such an enterprise was a hefty reward for Zhang Decheng for all his cooperation with and malleability toward the CCP.

In 1952, the Culture and Education Bureau prepared another document, titled “A Summary Report of the Investigation of Opera and Quyi in Chongqing Municipality” (“Chongqingshi xiqu quyi jiancha zongjie baogao 重慶市戲曲曲

73 CQA 1085-1-65, 79–80. It was recognized that such large enterprises by default would have staff with problematic political characteristics (p. 83).

74 CQA 1085-1-65, 80–81.

75 CQA 1085-1-65.

藝總結報告"). This valuable source shows how opera evolved institutionally in the first two years after the communist takeover and how the changing conditions led to the reconstruction of the performing arts, now led by the Party. It stated that in 1949 Chongqing had nine Sichuan Opera troupes and one troupe apiece for Beijing, Yue 越, and Han Operas and for acrobatics 雜技. These thirteen companies employed 1,081 people. Four Sichuan Opera troupes and all the others operated within the city, whereas the other three were active in the outlying or new town districts. Until August 1952, following local and national policies, twenty-nine new operas (*Baimaoni*, *Honglangzi* 紅浪子, etc.) and sixty-one stories were staged for audiences totaling 330,247 people. At the time the report was drawn (after August 1952), one theater was under private-public ownership, and five were cooperatives. Chongqing's thirteen theaters together had ten thousand seats but could host an audience of twenty thousand daily. In 1951 these premises hosted 2,863,983 spectators, of which less than 50 percent watched new reformed operas. From January to August 1952, they were attended by 2,809,601 spectators, and over this period, new plays were seen by 1,034,146 people, less than 37 percent. This situation was ascribed to inadequate leadership and low level of political education among the performers. The profits were as follows: 52,3X0,000 yuan in 1951, and 600,3X0,000 yuan from January to August 1952, an increase of 15.3 percent over the previous year.⁷⁶ The report also states that the urban performers had a higher standard of living than those performing in the outlying areas; the latter group was "suffering destitution."

Furthermore, the report stated that Sichuan Opera was the most important genre in Chongqing, but improving it required a torturous eight-step selection process (of reform by the reviewing committee of opera pieces), revision, consultation, rewriting, trial, public rehearsal, and more correction until it became suitable for publication and staging. To date, it had not produced enough pieces of sufficient quality, so there was a persistent shortage of new works compared to the demand. The report called for stepping up political efforts, showing leadership, and obtaining as many reformed operas as necessary.⁷⁷

Analyzing the repertoire of Sichuan opera, the Culture and Education Bureau identified 711 stories 折, of which 93 were utterly impossible to correct and 137 needed rewriting before being suitable for the stage: 33.6 percent of the texts were problematic, and 66.4 percent were reformed or relatively

76 CQA 1085-1-65, 5. X means the number in the source is unclear.

77 CQA 1085-1-65, 6.

acceptable texts. The report was critical of the speed of the process of correcting the traditional operas.⁷⁸

Another important issue was reeducation of the artists and their participation in political work. The reeducation campaign reached most: 654 performers in 1950, followed by 1,009 in 1951 underwent appropriate courses in “class, patriotic, and opera policy education.” Afterward followed a hectic schedule in which the performers took part in the Three-anti Campaign (Sanfan 三反) when they fought against corruption, exploitation, and waste in their organizations; in July 1951 they engaged in a movement of self-criticism 整風運動 to raise their ideological purity and to fight against egoistic capitalist spirit while learning how to better serve workers, peasants, and soldiers. Then, they participated in self-education and eradication of illiteracy, dividing into three levels (of 360 illiterates in 1949, only 111 remained in 1952). They also contributed to raising funds and propagating the Resist America Aid Korea campaign, the anti-counterrevolutionary propaganda movement, land reform (12 performers participated), the Five-Anti Campaign (Wufan 五反, 14 performers participated), and the Help Korea traveling campaign (60 performers traveled to Sichuan, Xikang, Guizhou, and Yunnan). By traveling to factories and villages to present thirty-seven shows before 49,900 people, they saved workers 998 million yuan in travel expenses they would have incurred to attend them in the city.⁷⁹

The plans presented in the report included more performances at factories; improvement and strengthening of the process of reforming Sichuan Opera; improved education especially for youth; streamlining the management structure (which had already improved and many conflicts with stage workers had been resolved) while reducing the number of troupes; and developing *quyi* through creating a cooperative.⁸⁰ The quality of many *quyi* artists was considered very low and generally the level of their artistry and political education was uneven. The most important part of this conclusion and plans related to a reduction in the number of active theaters. The reasons given—the “next year’s production and construction needs” and the need “to fight to achieve the plan”—obviously related to the economic crisis caused by the huge cost of the Korean War and the severely impoverished economy after the Three-anti

78 CQA 1085-1-65.

79 CQA 1085-1-65, 6–7. The cost of a working day assessed at 24,950 yuan for a worker, whereas that of performers included cost of travel and labor.

80 CQA 1085-1-65, 6.

campaign, which shut down the marketing network in Sichuan.⁸¹ In effect, the city planned to have three Sichuan Opera theaters, one Beijing Opera, one for acrobatics, one probably (unclear in the document) Yue, and the Entertainment Organization 游藝團 described earlier. The biggest losers in this plan were the troupes operating outside the city, whereas the gains went to the new business managed by Zhang Decheng.⁸²

In 1952, in addition to fully harnessing the theater troupes to the propaganda and political campaign machine of the centrally run party-state and rebuilding the operation of the opera market (as well as who and according to what rules it would be run) and promoting the allies of the CCP while reeducating or reducing its enemies, the local communist power holders gained new tools of control. The highest authority in checking, controlling, and judging the performing arts was held by Ren Baige, once a writer and a member of the Left-Wing Writers League, after 1949 a Chongqing emanation of the deputy minister Zhou Yang; a head censor in the realm of culture. Ren presided over an organization called the Chongqing Municipal Opera Investigation Committee (Chongqingshi xiju shencha weiyuan 重慶市戲劇審查委員), which had seventeen members. It gained the right to oblige every theater, troupe, and other performing organization to submit a repertoire with description prior to any performance. If any portion was rejected by the committee, the text had to be resubmitted until it was judged satisfactory. Basing its power on the need to construct a "culture of the new democracy 新民主主義文化" and advance operatic art, the committee had the authority to eliminate or order the rewriting of any text of an opera that was considered in whether sense to be: feudal, comprador, fascist, anti-people's democracy, destroying world peace, propagating an imperialist worldview, against the laws and principles of the PRC;

81 If we follow articles in *Neibu cankao*, Sichuan's agricultural conditions were as follows: throughout the spring and summer of 1951, agricultural reports show widespread optimism, with increases in farmers' output and consumption power due to the land reform and the abolition of debts and rents. In autumn 1951, the first signs of an oversupply of grain appeared in the market, followed by market panic in October. On March 11, 1952, it was reported that it did not rain enough in northern Sichuan, crops failed, insects proliferated, and many farm animals died. These conditions affected 50 percent of the districts, some of which experienced hunger. The blame, however, was placed not on the weather but on the total collapse in trade and shipping due to the Three and Five Anti Campaigns, which purged as much as 90 percent of the cadres at state grain companies. The agricultural crisis in northern Sichuan did not abate for months. *Neibu cankao*, April 3, 1951, no. 57, 33–34; June 29, 1951, no. 111, 113–14; August 18, 1951, no. 146, 44–45; October 19, 1951, no. 192, 50; October 24, 1951, no. 195, 65–66; March 11, 1952, no. 54, 91–92; April 19, 1952, no. 87, 199–200.

82 CQA 1085-1-65, 7.

propagating pornography, eroticism, or feudal mentality; distorting historical and social problems and scorning laboring people's masses.⁸³ Providing an urban government office with such broad powers undermined the sense of multistage reforms by the troupes and theaters that in name was supposed to correspond to the needs of the masses (namely, audiences). With this power in hand, the only "masses" that had to be consulted were the cultural bureaucrats, and the verdict on the quality of each play rested on their understanding of rather vague notions of feudalism, eroticism, or imperialism, that could be applied to any old piece of opera, if one was so inclined. This regulation also greatly expanded the list of twenty-six nominally prohibited pieces of opera at a national scale—indeed a false face of liberal cultural policy, whereas in fact local prohibitions were in the hundreds—and made the handicap of having an insufficient repertoire a permanent feature of theater in the PRC.⁸⁴

8 Concluding Remarks

The year 1952 marked the end of an era for opera in Sichuan: by the autumn, when the local performers traveled to Beijing to demonstrate their mastery of performance and political uprightness before Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Zhou Yang, and other leaders, the institutional structure and cultural meaning of opera had undergone a revolutionary change. The theater that, for the previous three centuries, took its inspiration, organizational form, training style, and musical and singing forms from multiple sources across the social divide was from now on doomed to a monoculture springing from one source, the Party. What was invented by intellectuals with both left and right political leanings before the Japanese aggression, namely that theater is a propaganda tool or, as some had it, a weapon of the masses reached its realization in the hands of the party that considered itself (and by many was considered) to represent these masses. Now, opera was supposed to become a conveyor belt for propagating campaigns meant to shape Chinese society and garner support for various actions by the central government. This change implied uniformization, transmission of most of the previously orally transferred art into the written word, and institutionalization in cultural bureaus with identical

83 CQA 1071-1-67, 24–26. This document is not dated but, due to its position in the file and the dates on other documents in it, it was probably issued before October 1952.

84 List of titles: Liu Wenfeng, *Zhongguo xiqu shi*, 613. Only two were Sichuan Operas: *Lanying sixiong* 蘭英思兄 and *Zhongkui songmei* 鐘馗送妹.

structures that worked in a similar manner, in order to imprint administrative shapes onto the dynamic and chaotic forms that made opera of the past.⁸⁵

However, communist-era opera, which finally realized the dream of a serviceable nationally useful popular culture in the hands of the government and intellectual elite also created certain opportunities for the performers. Sichuan Opera, which previously was confined to the province or, rather, to each city, market, or stage, in its rewritten form started to shine around the country. Female performers, such as Chen Shufang, one of the reformers of *Qiujiang*, not only was well received at the Beijing festival in 1952 but also appeared before larger audiences in China and elsewhere. Her many performances in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany in 1959 were spectacular successes written about at home and abroad. *People's Daily* alone devoted one article and three press notes to it.⁸⁶ In 1957, various pieces of Sichuan Opera were a popular topic in the influential Shanghai literary journal *Wenhuibao* 文匯報, and the cultured public in Chinese cities recognized this genre as an important regional art form.⁸⁷ Finally, part of the research and rewriting process was the codification of cultural heritage: Sichuan Opera was first recognized as such in policies in April and May 1951. A delayed result, published at a time when little of this heritage could be seen by any audience, was the first-ever dictionary of the traditional repertoire, *Chuanju chuantong jumu mulu*, which came out of the press in Chengdu in April 1962. It was a result of more than a decade of collection across the province. Unfortunately, by that time, a different chapter had already opened for the local opera and its performers—the one in which the government found opera useless and decided to destroy it.

85 Sue Tuohy indicates a similar phenomenon with folksongs, in "The Social Life of Genre: The Dynamics of Folksong in China," *Asian Music* 30, no. 2 (1999): 39–86. Little, however, matches the fearful size of the twenty-nine-volume *Zhongguo xiqu zhi* that nails every genre to a province and even to cities and counties.

86 "Qiujiang zai guowai 秋江在國外," *Renmin ribao*, December 5, 1959, 8; "Woguo chuanjutuan fu Bo Jie De dengguo fangwen 我國川劇赴波捷德等國訪問," *Renmin ribao*, August 4, 1959, 4; "Wo chuanjutuan zai Bo yanchu 我川劇團在波演出," *Renmin ribao*, August 19, 1959, 4.

87 Ding Ling, "Kan chuanju 'Dahongtai'—Chengdu tongxin 看川劇'大紅台'—成都通信," *Wenhuibao*, March 1, 1957; Xu Jichuan 許姬傳, "Kan chuanju 'Tan Jier' 'Lalangpei' 看川劇'譚記兒' '拉郎配'," *Wenhuibao*, April 24, 1957; Huang Chang 黃裳, "Chuanju suibi: shouxian xiangqide 川劇隨筆: 首先想起的," *Wenhuibao*, July 11, 1958; Huang Chang, "Chuanju suibi: 'Funuzhuan' 川劇隨筆: '芙奴傳'," *Wenhuibao*, August 9, 1957; Huang Chang, "Chuanju suibi: 'Chaonao' 川劇隨筆: '吵鬧'," *Wenhuibao*, August 10, 1957; Qu Chu 屈楚, "Congchuan 'chou' tando Li Wenjiede biaoyan 從川'丑'談到李文傑," *Wenhuibao*, August 18, 1957; Cui Jingtai 崔景泰, "Chuanju laoyishuren tan biaoyan yishu 川劇老藝術家談表演藝術," *Wenhuibao*, August 19, 1957.

Conclusion

Opera played a fundamental role in the world of late imperial rural and urban communities. Opera pierced people's dull daily existence with its power for reconstituting, if even for a short time, the quotidian flow of life. As it required coordination, cooperation, mutual agreement, and maintenance of local inherited rights, the act of organizing, financing, staging, and watching opera was the main communal activity undertaken throughout the country.

Opera did not stand independently. It flourished in association with other sociocultural activities, such as religious cults, important family occasions, and celebrations by groups of common origin or profession. Its role, however, was not secondary to such activities. Instead, it possessed its own social space, in which it communicated, broadcast, and solidified meanings and values intended by and directed toward its funders and audience. Opera's power of transmission nestled in this performance art was not missed by anyone, whether literati or farmers, whether its advocates or critics. Not only did opera maintain an enormous repertoire as it tapped the literary and religious traditions, transforming and disseminating them broadly; this repertoire was also adjusted, expanded, mutated, and attuned to suit the geographically, socially, and linguistically diverse spectators. The stories and values communicated through opera, beginning in the mid-Qing, constructed and enforced the main current of Chinese literary and imaginative traditions. The representations of gods, emperors, kings, military, and civil heroes defined and broadcast through opera codified aspects of culture such as the image of feminine beauty, the meaning of male achievement, and the significance of refinement, courage, loyalty, intelligence, and so forth. The language, formal representations, and narrative tools used in opera hijacked the popular imagination of the past, of the social mores, and of accepted values. Thus, during the Qing, across the vast areas inhabited by speakers of various Chinese dialects, opera dominated much of the country's popular and elite culture.

Furthermore, Chinese theater was pleasing and gratifying, not stultifying and imposing like the rituals. It brought outbursts of social chaos, cracked class boundaries, challenged fixed order, and therefore brought an immensely important festive, even carnivalesque, element to people's daily existence. Qing-era opera was a bottom-up event: the funds were collected locally according to a key established without official interference or management but with official recognition. The organizational duties and privileges held by

the families of village and town leaders were congruent with neither political power nor forms of elite domination. In most cases, they helped maintain consistency in the local social units rather than project hegemony of one or another individual, group, or lineage. As it had a bottom-up character, opera performance did not exclude or subvert imperial hegemony. On the contrary, the officials were to be invited to some celebrations of grave importance, such as those related to the New Year, and officials sanctioned order and harmony and tried to quell excessive chaos and conflicts associated with large public events.

Because of the radically changed social, legal, and political conditions created by the Qing New Policies and by the Republican revolution, staging opera took novel forms, adjusted to changed realities, and took a no less important position in the newly formed cultural realm. In Sichuan, as in many other regions in China, opera boomed in urban markets via the commercially run troupes and the permanent joint venture theater enterprises. The city-centric culture of Republican theater was a consequence of the relative institutional stability enjoyed by the towns and the unequal distribution of goods, services, and political power in that period. At a micro scale, however, it was a result of a legal relationship that bound the business of performance with the cities' police departments, to which theaters contributed tax money whereas law enforcement extended protection and provided limited investment. Republican theater, hence, stood as an integral and consequent part of the new order. It was not treated with enmity, and it was spared the opprobrium or annoyance of reformism. On the contrary, the protected environment allowed "traditional" opera with its cultural message to persist and bloom precisely at a time when it had to shed its historical association with various forms of religious life. Seemingly laicized or, at least, devoid of a ritual setting, opera transmitted established values, adjusting them to the needs of the public. Audiences, for their part, redomesticated traditional theater and directed it using an easy tool in any commercial market: money.

Concurrently, to an ever-larger extent, opera became an obsession for the growing number of patriotic, nationalistic, and communist intellectuals, each in a diverse way but for very similar ends. An observation that commercial theater as much as the rural opera festival was a major transmitter of the "feudal" and "rotten" tradition led to the conclusion that it posed the most direct threat to the urgent need for the "spiritual" reconstruction of China. The voices against opera, attuned to Lu Xun's disgust with this popular art, intensified when China was pitted against Japan. Both countries faced the inevitability of the coming violent confrontation. The call for the reform of traditional opera or its destruction grew not only in the coastal cities but also in Chongqing

and Chengdu, sometimes coming from local inspiration but more often as a response to the nationally integrating movement for cultural reconstruction.

These calls, often to intellectuals' surprise, did not go unheard. The Nationalist government, in desperate need of successful war propaganda, turned to the playwrights, actors, and actresses for help. The GMD suddenly cherished the theater arts and provided it with financial and institutional support. Additionally, the Nationalists gave intellectuals an unprecedented free rein for experimentation and creativity. Yet the kind of theater that the GMD supported was distinct from the regional operas known in Sichuan (and other parts of the country). Known as spoken drama (*huaju*), it derived from the left-wing urban circles in Shanghai and was a modernist political project styled on the European model. Irrespective of all the government support, this relatively new genre was off-putting to the public, whereas traditional sung opera led a precarious existence under the suppressive laws and extensive financial extractions. Nevertheless it retained its unabated popularity with audiences. In Chongqing, Chengdu, Langzhong, and Hechuan, even the death and destruction from Japanese bombings did not stop the development of the commercial opera market, making the GMD's power appear even more estranged from the economically and socially overexploited Sichuan society, if not culturally foreign and invasive.

Observing the plight of the great propaganda theater project, dramatists gathered around a prominent writer, Xiong Foxi, and asked for a closer study of traditional opera and for the integration of this style of performing art into China's new culture. Some of them called not only for increased scrutiny of the traditional genres but also for the creation of militarized cultural production units that would serve the mission as defined by the ruling political powers. This method was meant to guarantee a victory, at least on the cultural front, in the war against Japan and the political "liberation" from the evils shackling China. None of these discussions, mostly held in Chongqing, was lost on the leaders of the CCP. The organization of propaganda work during the War of Resistance and the civil war in many respects followed the ideas of the leftist intelligentsia. In particular, the communists abandoned spoken drama for traditional opera styles, at the same time, depriving opera of its classical repertoire. New-old opera advocated the communist revolution.

The centrality of opera in the communist war effort and the fear of opera as a potential voice of enemy social forces were retained after the communist victory over southwestern China in December 1949. Nevertheless, the new regime found it difficult to accommodate the reform agenda, because of widely varying conditions on the field and because of traditional theater's excessively rich historical repertoire. Above all, the CCP had no clear notion of what role opera

would play in New China. Although actors could be useful in spreading land reform propaganda or motivating workers, the new regime was overwhelmed with problems, and the possible solutions were scarce and yielded only short-term results. Only after China's involvement in the Korean War did opera regain its primacy in the arts. Under the close attention of the top leadership, a new order was formed in which opera was chopped off its commercial, local, and religious roots; its rootless branches were then woven by the hands of the Party's leadership into shapes to its liking. At the same time, traditional drama's importance was recognized, and, at least in theory, it was meant to "serve the people," which for a long time meant the people's government.

The history of the opera in Sichuan can be viewed from the perspectives of access and inclusion. As we have seen, traditional theater was not equally dispersed in the province: larger towns and the main cities had regular festival calendars and plentiful occasions for watching opera in many of their temples and *huiguan*. Small, isolated, and destitute settlements were relatively deprived of this form of entertainment. The problem of access was aggravated during the Republic and became widespread in the rural hinterlands of the major towns or, in other words, in any area that was pilfered by the warlord governments and their resource-greedy armies. Campaigns to construct schools, to eliminate "superstition," and, above all, to extract taxes and surtaxes for the military needs brutalized the rural and market town economies. Loss of the communal shrines and the temple commons also undermined the ability to continue religious festivals on a scale similar to that seen during the Qing and, thus, often led to the cessation of opera shows.

Another source of disparity in access to opera throughout Sichuan was a direct result of the opportunities created by the commercial market. Top talent, aspiring troupes, and artists as well as desperados trying their chances as itinerant showmen all flocked to Chongqing and Chengdu (rarely to other centers) in the hope of finding their place on earth. What turned out to be a bounty for the urban audiences, flush with the beauty and talent of the province's best, was a loss for residents in the areas drained of skilled performers. Being cut off from entertainment only deepened the sense of drabness and poverty that already existed in many locations in Sichuan. We should view this process of deprivation in the light of the generally understood welfare. It includes not only the satisfaction of basic economic and social needs (access to food, housing, education, security, and health) but also fulfillment of cultural, social, and political needs: entertainment, self-expression, communal self-management, local autonomy, and the broadly understood possibility of satisfying one's intellectual (or spiritual) needs. It appears that many of these needs were catered to by the relevant religious celebrations and opera festivals.

But during the Republic, they were satisfied by the goods and services provided through the cultural market only in larger urban centers. But other areas, such as rural market towns and village hinterlands in Sichuan, only suffered deprivation without enjoying any of the benefits of the cultural market. This deepened misery struck at the personal and communal dignity of the majority of Sichuanese and further undermined the legitimacy and stability of the Republican social order. It needs to be emphasized that these needs were not catered to by the People's government either, and this century-long cultural deprivation was abated a bit in the 2000s, after widespread access to the new media (e.g., TV and internet) became available.

The evidence presented here shows that a view of twentieth-century opera history that emphasizes the centrality of the reform (which commenced in the last decade of the Qing and lasted until the PRC) requires modification. As demonstrated, the main changes over this half-century were an accidental result of the legal restructuring of the way in which business was conducted in China. Namely, the new corporation law and a contemporaneous abolition of the cult-centered social institutions forced opera to commercialize and to undergo fundamental organizational changes. This newly institutionalized theater became an eyesore to the intelligentsia after its left-wing radicalization and the repeated Japanese aggression. According to many prominent and lesser writers and journalists, opera was guilty of perpetuating superstitious, feudal, and imperialistic elements in people's thinking. The first efforts went into the obliteration and substitution of the regional styles of traditional theater and maintenance of only one style: the national opera (or Beijing Opera), regarded as the only acceptable genre. Efforts at implementing these iconoclastic ideas were undertaken with some effect during the War of Resistance but proved futile, as the darling of intellectuals and the GMD, the spoken drama, held little attraction for the conservative audiences. Henceforth, the word "reform" designated politicization of the regional style of sung theater and institutional inclusion of artists in the propaganda work conducted by the civilian and military governments. In this task of "reform," the Communist Party proved much more persuasive and skilled as well as better organized than the GMD at finding allies among the actors. The cultural product of the united efforts of the CCP and the converted lower-class artists was probably among the communists' greatest successes in drama and literature. These processes of reform, seen through the eyes of various genres popular in Sichuan, reveal the multifaceted character of reform, as well as the flexibility and multiple meanings of this word used by so many different authors, politicians, and, sometimes, actors. The problem of reform also reveals one of the main paradoxes in the history of Sichuan Opera. These were not the popular tunes of folk drama that the CCP

treated as the real people's art—those were bluntly suppressed as superstitious acts—but it fell on the urban commercial drama to be elevated to the prestigious position of Chinese people's national cultural heritage.

Finally, it also needs to be emphasized that the most momentous change in the history of regional opera, which touched on how it was organized and the content it presented on stage, was neither particularly nationalist nor especially communist in character. The intellectual framework and mechanisms of reshaping opera were the creation of a fairly uniform intellectual class that had some communist sympathies, shared authoritarian proclivities, and felt an unwavering sense of the national crisis—a crisis they needed to overcome through their own actions. These ideas were experimented with during the War of Resistance and after the communist “liberation,” amended through experience, and broadened in scope following the failures and successes of each respective regime in power. The personal, ideological, and intellectual continuity across the divide in 1949 shed interesting light on the history of China's most important revolution in the twentieth century. It appears not to be a radical departure from past models of sociopolitical and cultural organization but, rather, the successful implementation of an ideological framework for society and culture. But this framework resulted from struggles with and learning about the local conditions in popular culture. It was conceived from a set of ideas and ideals born out of the crisis of the Qing empire, not derived from Marxism-Leninism. Only when the principles of domination, organization, party rule, and the subservience of operatic art were effectively put into practice did the communist face of reform emerge. Beginning in 1952, the content of plays was supposed to depict the ongoing social revolution. This assumption, however, initiated a new phase in the history of Chinese theater, with distinct problems and challenges.

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