The Dance of Revolution: *Yangge* in Beijing in the Early 1950s*

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**ABSTRACT** *Yangge* is a popular rural dance in north China. In the Yan’an era (1936–47) the Chinese Communist Party used the art form as a political tool to influence people’s thinking and to disseminate socialist images. During the early years of the People’s Republic of China, the Communists introduced a simpler form of *yangge* in the cities. In three major *yangge* musicals performed in Beijing, the Party attempted to construct “a narrative history through rhythmic movements” in an effort to weave the developments of the Party’s history into a coherent success story, affirming various themes: the support of the people, the valour of the Red Army, the wise leadership of the Party and the country’s bright future. However, urban *yangge*’s simplicity as an art form, the professionalization of art troupes, the nation’s increasing exposure to a variety of alternative dance forms and, worse still, stifling government control all contributed to the rapid decline of this art form in urban China.

Unlike the Bolsheviks, who at the time of the October Revolution of 1917 had little experience with political art forms, the Chinese Communists, before their seizure of power in 1949, had skilfully employed the popular art media to conduct an effective propaganda campaign among the mostly illiterate peasant inhabitants of rural China. The story of their use of such rural art forms as storytelling and *yangge* dance as a political tool during the Yan’an era (1936–47) is now relatively well known. Yet their use in the post-Yan’an period, particularly after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, has rarely been examined. This article proposes to fill this void by an examination of the *yangge* movement in urban China in the early years of the PRC.

The *yangge* (literally “rice-sprout song”) is a popular traditional folk dance performed in the open air in rural north China. It is a performance that combines spirited dance, garish costumes and loud music to form a colourful blend of rhythmic movements. The dance was closely associated with New Year’s rituals and celebrations, intended to dispel evil and ensure a bumper harvest in the coming season. The dance troupe is led by a leader known as *santou* (Umbrella Head), who holds an umbrella to direct the movement, and consists of a few dozen to more than 100 dancers, with men playing women’s roles. They are accompanied by drums, gongs, cymbals and *suona* (a shawm-like instrument), and as

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well as dancing incorporate farcical acts played by clowns and erotic moves; the performance often draws loud applause and laughter among the villagers. During the performance, simple plays (yangge xi) are often enacted, mostly on topics relating to the everyday life in rural China.  

After Mao Zedong’s influential 1942 “Yan’an Talks,” which called for the use of literature and art as a political tool to serve the masses, the Communists in Yan’an launched the new yangge movement and infused the dance with socialist elements. A new type of yangge, known as “struggle yangge” (douzheng yangge), emerged. In the reformed dance, the sickle replaced the umbrella as the leader’s guiding tool; new faces such as workers, peasants and soldiers took centre stage, replacing the traditional male and female roles. The part of the comical clown was abandoned, and flirtation in the dance was eliminated as morally repugnant. Moreover, new dance patterns were added, among them a five-pointed star, a potent symbol of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Thus many new yangge plays emerged, including *Brother and Sister Clear Wasteland* (Xiongmei kaihuang), which expounds hard work and production in the communist-ruled border regions, and *The Wounded Soldier Niu Yonggui* (Niu Yonggui guacai), a play that extols the heroic deeds of the Red Army. Taken together, these new yangge plays, collectively known as Shaanbei yangge (northern Shaanxi yangge), were used by the Communists as a political tool to portray a socialist paradise in the making. Their production, as David Holm convincingly argues, was designed to be a mass movement, and it involved “cadres, soldiers of working-class and peasant origins, as well as urban intellectuals.”

During the civil war (1946–49), as the communist forces extended their presence in north China, the CCP promoted a host of other yangge dances in addition to the Shaanbei style, each with its distinct regional variations in style and movement. While the Shaanbei dance is known for its free, bold, majestic and enthusiastic moves, Hebei yangge is more regulated and controlled, Jiaozhou yangge in Shandong is famous for its graceful steps and soft touches, and Dongbei yangge in north-eastern China is noted for its vigorous swings and articulated steps. But it was Shaanbei yangge that received the most publicity and became the most well-known form of the dance because of its robust moves and its proximity to Yan’an, the centre of the Communist Revolution during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45).

The civil war period not only witnessed the shift of the Communists’ strategy from a rural campaign to a battle for control of the cities and industrial sectors, but also the CCP’s relentless effort in mounting an even more aggressive propaganda campaign against the ruling Kuomintang (Nationalists). A good opportunity came in the Lunar New

Year of 1945, when several yangge plays (including *Brother and Sister Clear Wasteland*) were staged in the office of *Xinhua ribao* (*New China Daily*) in Chongqing. To draw wider attention to the performance, Zhou Enlai invited artists and writers to attend. The impact was immediate. Dai Ailian (b. 1916), a gifted dance instructor at Yucai School (founded by educator Tao Xingzhi [1891–1946]) near Chongqing, who also attended the show and had been taught yangge by Zhou, began to teach the dance in her school.  

*Brother and Sister Clear Wasteland* was later staged in Shanghai in May 1946 and created quite a sensation.

In this period yangge pamphlets were also printed, and underground Communists taught the dance surreptitiously on university campuses. A dance group, the “Folk Dance Society” (minjian wudaoshe) at Beijing University, for example, became a hotbed for the introduction of this new technique to students, concentrating primarily on the freer style of Shaanbei yangge. But these activities did not escape the watchful eyes of Nationalist agents, who regarded the dance as an integral part of the larger communist conspiracy to destabilize the government. They wasted no time in banning it. “Before Liberation dancing yangge carried a great risk, since university campuses were under the close surveillance of Kuomintang agents,” a former Beijing University student, and a yangge dancer, informed me.

With the establishment of the PRC in 1949, however, the status of yangge was completely reversed. Now the rural dance, regarded earlier by the Nationalists as a subversive art form, had been transformed into an official celebratory art. It now became a prominent vehicle of propaganda, which the CCP actively advanced in the cities to create a euphoric sense of victory. But why did the Communists use yangge, a rural dance so unfamiliar to urbanites, as a political tool in the early years of the PRC? Did the dance prove to be an effective means of communication after 1949? What role did yangge play in the Communists’ overall cultural policy? This article attempts to answer these questions. In addition, it explores the significance of yangge in our understanding of the Chinese Communists’ political culture – a topic much neglected in the cultural history of modern China.

The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China

By early 1949, after communist troops peacefully “liberated” Kuomintang-controlled Beiping in late January, yangge had become

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ubiquitous in this city long famed for its rich literary culture and architectural grandeur. On 3 February, Derk Bodde, a young American Fulbright scholar studying in Beiping at that time, witnessed the Red Army’s official march into the city in a symbolic triumphant parade. He wrote in his diary:

Today’s big event has been the grand victory parade signalizing the formal take-over of the city …. Prominent in the parade were thousands of students and workers from schools and organizations throughout the city …. Some groups danced to the rhythmic drum-and gong beat of the yang ko [yangge] or “planting song” – a simple traditional peasant dance performed in unison by large groups, which is already becoming enormously popular here as the result of the general Communist emphasis upon folk art.12

Indeed, the dance was closely associated with the Communists’ military campaigns, forming a close link between this rural art and the Chinese Communist Revolution. When the Red Army seized Nanjing in April, Shanghai in May and Guangzhou in October, yangge was seen as both a symbol and a celebration of the political changeover, with people dancing in the streets to mark the communist victory.13 Rong Gaotang (b. 1912), a high Party functionary and a yangge dancer himself, proudly proclaimed, “Wherever there is liberation, there is yangge.”14

However, the type of urban yangge that emerged during the early years of the PRC was a much simpler form of dance than that practised in rural north China. A survey uncovered that there were more than 300 dance figures in north Shaanxi15 but that the urban yangge dancers in the early 1950s performed only a few simple patterns, such as “Double Cabbage Heart,” a spiraling move, and “Dragon Waves Its Tail,” a snakelike procession. “The moves were relatively simple,” one yangge dancer told me during an interview. “The uncomplicated steps were intended to express an exuberant mood and to invite as many people as possible to share in the joy,” she added.16 Indeed, the power of urban yangge as a political symbol in the early years of the PRC rested on its simplicity and visibility. In addition, the exigencies of the time also called for a less complicated format. In the months following the Communists’ seizure of power, this type of yangge spread rapidly in China, employed primarily by officials to draw the populace into public displays of support for the new regime in the most visible manner.

Organizing a superior propaganda network also became a top priority for the officials. Even before the founding of the PRC in October 1949, the CCP had already started to mount a co-ordinated effort to exercise tighter control of cultural propaganda efforts. Early in 1949 the Beijing Literary and Art Committee, an arm of the Beijing Municipal Party,

mounted a drive to propagate socialist information to the grassroots, especially among factory workers. The committee established 15 new yangge troupes, trained more than 2,000 members and gave a total of 82 performances, all reformed yangge plays.\(^\text{17}\) After the founding of the PRC, the Ministry of Propaganda and the Ministry of Culture were assigned the task of co-ordinating propaganda activities to promote the socialist agenda. Cultural Minister Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun [1896–1981]) personally called on artists to take advantage of the Spring Festival in early 1950, the first after the communist takeover, to make use of yangge in order to explain the government’s new policies.\(^\text{18}\) The dance was also actively promoted at schools and staged in theatres.\(^\text{19}\) The powerful printed media, now firmly in the hands of the Party, became another efficient way to promote yangge, as was evident in newspapers in the southern city of Guangzhou.\(^\text{20}\) Media coverage notwithstanding, yangge drew the most attention when it became a staple in official festivals. Like their Soviet counterparts in the 1920s,\(^\text{21}\) the Chinese Communists understood that meticulously choreographed parades and dignified processions were ideal occasions to display the new regime’s authority and achievements. And yangge could be used at such occasions to yield significant results, for it was a distinct native art that reinforced the kind of nationalism the Communists had actively cultivated since the Yan’an days. The yangge troupes were a prominent presence in large-scale parades. The most memorable moment came on Saturday 1 October, when the dance troupes formed part of the grand procession of the PRC’s Founding Day Parade in Tiananmen Square. The impressive parade was staged with pomp and pageantry, and the yangge troupe, composed entirely of experienced dancers from the Department of Literature and Art of North China University (Huabei daxue, commonly known as Huada), a major training ground for communist cultural cadres, made a most imposing appearance following the military march.\(^\text{22}\) Cities throughout the country followed suit. In Wuhan, for example, as many as 1,500 people performed yangge in the streets to celebrate this special occasion.\(^\text{23}\) As time passed, the dance continued to be a vital part of the Communists’ political culture. When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, yangge was again used as a propaganda tool to support the “Resist America, Aid Korea” campaign.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{17}\) “Beijingshi wenyi gongzuweiyuanhui gongzuobaogao” (“The report of the Beijing Literary and Art Committee”) (December 1949); Beijing Municipal Archives, No. 1–12–3.


\(^{19}\) *Yuehua bao*, 14 December 1949.


\(^{22}\) Liu Junxiang (ed.), *Zhongguo wudao yishu (China’s Dance Art)* (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1992), p. 34.

\(^{23}\) *Guangming ribao*, 1 October 1949.

The full significance of the new yangge, however, does not lie in its individual appearances in parades or exhibitions but in the Communists’ overall use of the dance in constructing what I call “a narrative history through rhythmic movements” – that is, using yangge to weave recent CCP developments into a success story about the Communists coming to power, the gallantry of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the staunch support of the Chinese people, the correct Party leadership and a bright socialist future for the country. This story was conveyed in three important musical performances involving song and dance that were staged from mid-1949 to early 1950: The Great Yangge of the Celebration of the Liberation (Qingzhu jiefang dayanggewu); The Great Musical of Long Live the People’s Victory (Renmin shengli wansui da gewu); and The Great Yangge of Building the Motherland (Jianshe zuguo dayangge). Each of the three productions told a different story, but together they could be viewed as an integrated paean to the CCP and its leadership.

The first major yangge production occurred in June 1949, at the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the new Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). At the invitation of the Communists, the CPPCC, nominally representing 23 political groups, gathered in Beiping to discuss the future of China. At the conclusion of the five-day conference, on the night of 19 June, at Huairen Hall (Huairentang) in Zhongnanhai, the Communist leadership compound, a musical performance was staged to celebrate the historic gathering as well as to entertain the participants, which included Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

The programme began with two performances: first, a victory waist drum dance, which paid tribute to the Preparatory Committee of the CPPCC for its role in setting up a new political regime in China; and secondly, the yangge dance, The Great Yangge of the Celebration of the Liberation (hereafter The Celebration of the Liberation) – a combination of Shaanxi, Dongbei (north-eastern), and central Henan yangge dances – which sang the praises of the war of liberation. Students from Huada’s cultural troupe performed the dance which was a joint product of Huada students and teachers (such as Wu Jian, [b. 1920]). It began with the traditional New Year greetings, similar to those of the old Shaanbei yangge but now endowed with a contemporary ring, commemorating the liberation of Beiping and the demise of the Kuomintang. The musical performance included a host of traditional musical instruments (such as the war drum) to generate a buoyant mood, depicting, as one student dancer recalled, “a city immersed in endless rounds of uninhibited jubilation.”

Huada’s yangge troupe was not the only performing group on the programme – others included the drama troupe from the Political Section

of the North China Military Region – but the yangge drew the loudest applause. A newspaper article entitled “The people’s recreation has entered the palace, Huaiyin Hall saw the yangge dance,” clearly spoke to the popularity now enjoyed by this formerly humble art. The show was a resounding success, the paper reported, and of particular value was the performance of The Celebration of the Liberation, which was a revelation for those delegates who “never before had visited the [communist-] liberated areas.”

A second, more elaborate show, The Great Musical of Long Live the People’s Victory (hereafter The People’s Victory) was staged in the same hall in September, when the CPPCC reconvened to prepare for the founding of the PRC. Responsibility for the show was placed in the hands of Guang Weiran (Zhang Guangnian [1913–2002]) and Hu Sha (b. 1922), two teachers associated with Huada’s famed Department of Literature and Art, with the assistance of the dancer Dai Ailian.

All three were experienced artists with distinguished careers. Influenced early on by socialist ideals, Guang Weiran, a noted poet and literary scholar, joined the CCP in 1937 and went to Yan’an in 1938. In 1939 he wrote the lyrics for the Yellow River Cantata, an emotionally charged song calling for guerrilla warfare against the Japanese invaders during the War of Resistance. The cantata, later set to music by Xian Xinghai (1905–45), quickly became one of the most influential songs of the war. Hu Sha had an equally illustrious career in the communist camp. He was a choreographer and an anti-Japanese war drama veteran. Hu joined the Party in 1938 and went to Yan’an two years later, where he continued to be active in drama circles. When the new yangge movement was launched in 1942, Hu became one of its vocal promoters, choreographing a number of dances, his best known being “Production Dance,” a yangge glorifying the merits of labour.

Dai Ailian’s career as a legendary dancer followed an entirely different route. Born in Trinidad to overseas Chinese parents, Dai exhibited remarkable dancing ability when young. In 1931 she went to London to study ballet. In the late 1930s, during the Japanese invasion, Dai was increasingly drawn to Chinese nationalistic appeals. At the same time, she developed a keen interest in Chinese dance. In 1940 Dai returned to China, “with deep feelings about the motherland,” to quote her own words. One of the few Chinese dancers with a firm grasp of Western dance both in practice and theory, she was widely respected by native Chinese artists. Dai was not a Communist but was sympathetic to the socialist cause, so predictably she was one of the prominent figures the Communists tried to entice. That she was invited to watch the yangge show by the New China Daily in 1945 and that Zhou Enlai personally

taught her the dance were indications of her considerable prestige. In 1949 Huada recruited Dai as a dance instructor.

*The People’s Victory* was performed on a grand scale. It had a cast of 250 dancers, mostly students from Huada, and was one of the largest musical spectacles the Communists had produced up to that time. The show, with *yangge* as its principal element, was important not only because it commemorated the opening of the CPPCC meeting and was attended by top CCP leaders such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De; it also had symbolic significance. It was intended, in Hu Sha’s words, “to display a comprehensive view of the people’s victory [in the revolution].”

Although the show was a joint project between producers, directors, dancers, singers and folk artists, its directive came clearly from the top. Its purpose, according to the instruction the Party presented to the organizers, was “to demonstrate the idea of the people’s democratic dictatorship, the leadership of the proletariat, the importance of workers and peasants as the foundation [of the nation], and the great unity of the various national minorities.” This instruction was clearly in line with the official policy of the CCP, as expounded by Mao in his influential article, “On the people’s democratic dictatorship,” delivered in June 1949, in which he called for a united front of “the working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie” and “under the leadership of the working class.”

Compared to the earlier *Celebration of the Liberation*, *The People’s Victory* was a more ambitious, better co-ordinated and lengthier production. Whereas the former underscored the liberation of Beiping and the bravery of the Red Army, emphasizing the military dimension of the communist struggle, the new dance focused on the importance of the masses in the revolution and stressed its political significance, reaffirming the Maoist mass line.

*The People’s Victory* was a song and dance musical arranged in ten parts, each touching on an aspect of the people’s revolution. As if to demonstrate that it was intended as a continuation of the earlier *Celebration of the Liberation*, the show opened with a tribute to the remarkable achievements of the PLA’s war of liberation against the

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31. Ibid.


reactionary Kuomintang and the people’s joy at the ultimate success of the CCP. A war drum dance, in the Hebei folk style, followed as an introduction to the show. Accompanied by a drum and two gongs, a dozen male dancers, each holding cymbals in both hands, moved about the stage, dancing at a feverish pitch while striking the cymbals, creating a thunderous roar. Wang Yi, a virtuoso folk dancer from Hebei, performed a solo. In spectacular, fluid motion, Wang repeatedly swung his two cymbals swiftly around his body, “forming two golden butterflies soaring in circles,” reported one viewer who watched in awe.35

The third part was an overture of song and dance. It applauded the opening meeting of the CPPCC as unprecedented in Chinese history. The flower-drum dance, accompanied by a combination of drums and gongs, formed the fourth part and was intended to express the people’s joy in welcoming the news of liberation. Audiences were reminded of the bygone Kuomintang era when chaos reigned and corruption was rampant. “The Red Flag Is Fluttering,” a marching song, was the fifth part of the programme, and depicted the gallantry and high spirits of the Red Army. Raising red flags and brandishing swords, the performers danced “across” the Huang (Yellow) and Chang (Yangtze) rivers to liberate the country.

This was followed by a yangge play entitled “Four Sisters Brag about Their Husbands.” In the play four female dancers sang boastful tunes about the achievements of their respective husbands, each of whom was either a worker, a peasant or a soldier. The message was clear: were it not for the generous work of workers, peasants and soldiers, the Communist victory would never have materialized – another reaffirmation of the Party line regarding the masses. “Celebration of Victory,” a spirited and uninhibited waist drum dance, constituted the seventh segment of the programme. With native drummers from Ansai county in Shaanxi, the dance communicated the people’s joy of victory and lent power to the show.

Younger dancers performed the eighth part, a “Lotus Dance,” another popular folk dance that originated in northern Shaanxi. The dance was particularly appealing to the audience because of the performers’ skilful moves and handsome costumes designed in the shape of a lotus, a symbol of joy and festivity. In the end, dancers used ribbons to form a five-pointed star to symbolize the victory of the Party.36

Ninth on the programme was a variety of national minority dances, including those of Mongolians, Muslims, Tibetans, Miao and Yi, as well as the mountain peoples of Taiwan. The colourful display of ethnic musical pieces portrayed China as harmoniously united towards a common goal, led by the CCP. Dramatic effects were carefully choreographed. In the Mongolian piece, for instance, the dancers impersonated equestrian locals, “riding” from the steppes to Beiping to pay tribute to the new leaders.

35. Interview with yangge dancer C, October 2002.
“Let Us Triumphantlty March under Mao Zedong’s Banner” was the finale of the show. In this concluding piece, with the chairman’s portrait in the background, dancers, performing as workers, peasants, soldiers and national minorities, marched in unison with determined steps, singing loudly:

Under the banner of Mao Zedong,
We march victoriously forward!
No mountain can block our zeal,
And no ocean can subdue our will.
Our strength is boundless,
And our wisdom is as tall as a mountain.
The long march poses no difficulty,
We will forever follow him,
Forward! Forward! Forward!37

*The People’s Victory* is not an artistic performance per se. Each part was carefully designed to follow a pre-established political script. The narrative is simple, but the political message rings loud and clear. The production, invested with political symbols (red flags and a five-pointed star), was intended to recapitulate and reaffirm the meaning of the Communist Revolution. Emotionally the participants could relive the revolutionary impulse and enjoy the fruits of victory. Though the capture of Beiping was a mere few months old and the civil war against the Nationalists still raged in the south, it was precisely at this critical juncture when revolutionary passion needed to be rekindled and ideals reaffirmed. The show succeeded in delivering several themes: the significance of folk traditions; the splendour of the Red Army; the wisdom of the leadership; and the glory of the national minorities joining hands, united under a new regime.

*The People’s Victory* had strong rural roots; it was a musical “with pronounced nationalistic characteristics,” as director Hu Sha proudly reminded his audiences.38 In addition to *yangge* dances – the popular Shaanbei version being the principal one – it was an assemblage of a host of folk art forms, including the flower drum dance and the waist drum dance.39 “The entire production, including its melodies and dance movements,” one *yangge* dancer pointed out during an interview, “was modelled on Shaanbei *yangge.*”40 Folk artists (such as Wang Yi from Hebei) were brought in to show how the dance was actually performed in local villages, thus adding a sense of authenticity to the performance. This effort towards authenticity, I would argue, demonstrated that the producers continued to hold native dances in high regard. However, convenience and political reasoning were additional motivations. In the dance circles, veterans from Yan’an (such as Guang Weirnan) assumed the lead in setting the agenda. It was not surprising, therefore, to see them relying on

38. Hu Sha, “The creation of *Long Live the People’s Victory.*”
39. Interview with *yangge* dancers A, D and E, October 2002.
40. Interview with *yangge* dancer B, July 2003.
comfortable genres that had earlier proven effective in rural Shaanbei. More important was the political impetus accounting for the decision to incorporate a large portion of folk art forms into the musical, for it continued to demonstrate the correctness of the Maoist line of “learning from the masses.”

Another dominant feature in the dance was the military theme. The spectacle of military force was clearly necessary during the early days of the PRC, a period when the country was not yet unified and when enemies, both the Kuomintang from within and the Americans from the outside, remained a deadly threat to the young socialist regime. This glorification of armed struggle was of paramount importance in stressing the invincibility of the Red Army.

The dance, moreover, was intended as a tribute to the communist leaders, especially Mao Zedong. The charismatic aura of Mao’s manufactured persona was already quite visible during the Yan’an era, and the fostering of Mao’s cult of personality continued in the early days of the PRC. For the CCP, this effort to promote Mao was essential, as it filled the political void left by the demise of the old Kuomintang institutions and provided a rapidly changing society with a stable symbolic centre. Having Mao shake hands with the performers after the show was also helpful in this regard. As one dancer recalled years later with a mixture of wonder and excitement: “When we saw Chairman Mao, met him face to face, we were speechless. After a brief silence, we uttered in unison, ‘Long Live Chairman Mao!’”

The dances also bespoke great national unity, where minority nationalities came together, on equal footing and with mutual respect, as members of one family in a new era. The inclusion of Taiwan’s mountain peoples was no doubt deliberate, signalling the Communists’ determination to “liberate” Taiwan, occupied at the time by the retreating Kuomintang troops, and reunify China.

The third musical, *The Great Yangge of Building the Motherland* (hereafter, *Building the Motherland*), as one of its producers described, was “another major collective effort mounted immediately after *The People’s Victory*.” This musical was staged in the Spring Festival of 1950, the first Lunar New Year after the founding of the PRC. The show therefore symbolized rebirth, signalling the beginning of a new year and drawing its energy from the renewed cycle of the seasons.

Like *The People’s Victory*, *Building the Motherland* was again a government-promoted project, this time sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Central Drama Academy. Supervising the musical were Zhang Geng (1911–2003) and Cao Yu (1910–96), two influential figures in literary circles. Of the two, Zhang was more closely tied to the Party line. Like Guang Weiran and Hu Sha, Zhang was active in staging

41. Long Yinpei, “Participating in revolutionary literature and art.”
42. Zhao Yunge [Peng Song], “Jianshe zuguo dayangge zongjie” (“A summary report of The Great Yangge of Building the Motherland”), *Xiju xuexi* (Drama Study), No. 1 (April 1950), p. 6.
43. Ibid.
anti-Japanese plays during the War of Resistance, and, like them, he went to Yan’an as a devoted Marxist. He became a pivotal figure in Yan’an’s new yangge movement, responsible especially for promoting the dance in remote areas, particularly in the Suide region, north-east of Yan’an. After the founding of the PRC, Zhang assumed the post of vice-president of the Central Drama Academy, again in charge of the drama reform. Cao Yu was a celebrated dramatist, perhaps the single most influential figure in introducing Western-style drama (huaju) techniques into his plays. His ability to weave Western techniques into his work is aptly illustrated in his best-known drama, Thunderstorm (Leiyu [1933]), a play critical of the old oppressive family system and archaic traditional values. As a writer who supported the leftist cause, Cao Yu was appointed director of the People’s Art Theatre in 1950. Dai Ailian was again invited to direct the entire production. Her gifted student, Peng Song (b. 1916), was responsible for co-ordinating the show.

With 135 students recruited from the Central Drama Academy – an offshoot of Huada’s Literature and Art Department – the musical was an open-air group dance with the avowed intention of “elevating the level of art of the old yangge.” It was divided into four segments: soldiers, peasants, workers and a final group dance, each accompanied by music composed specifically for the occasion. The focus of the musical was new: building a socialist nation.

The soldiers’ dance opened the show on the theme of defending the nation. Male dancers, in different formations with various military props, portrayed the valour and will of the soldiers. A peasant dance followed, performed by 40 female students, who projected positive images of raising fat livestock and tilling land at a collective farm. They waved the yields of their harvest (such as wheat), proudly announcing a bumper crop. Next came the workers’ dance, in which male performers represented the workers’ determination to lay a solid foundation of heavy industry in the nation. With the use of props such as wheels in gear, their movements reflected a factory in full motion. Forming a human pyramid, the dancers represented a bustling industrial plant. The finale of the musical was an impressive group dance. It took the form of concentric circles, with soldiers at the outer circle, peasants in the middle and workers at the core. The configuration was both spatial and symbolic: the PLA guarding the nation’s borders, the peasants cultivating the land in the vast countryside, and the workers labouring in the newly developed urban industrial centres. Having the workers occupy centre stage reinforced their leading position in the Marxist framework. This cheerful climax was directed by Peng Song, accompanied by the theme song written by the famous musician Ma Ke (1918–76), a teacher at the Central Drama Academy. The performance as a whole, Peng Song told

44. Jiefang ribao, 15 May 1944.
46. Interview with yangge dancer F, March 2003.
us, celebrated, through song and dance, the noble idea of "building a free and prosperous motherland in the future."  

Building the Motherland was staged nine times in Beijing, primarily at Tiananmen Square, during the Spring Festival. Drawing a total audience of 85,000 spectators, the production seemed to be well received by the general public. For the setting of the musical, the organizers had experimented with various novel approaches such as performing in the open air of a public square, with the hope of drawing more viewers and enabling the audience to become more personally involved. Such creative devices, Renmin ribao (People’s Daily) wrote, “had moved beyond those of the old yangge… and would serve as a model for the new yangge movement.”

The Value of New Yangge

Revolutions tend to have their memorable moments, their own distinct political symbols. For Michelet, the Bastille personified evil in France; for Russians, the Winter Palace symbolized a detested world. Thus the two spectacles “The Storming of the Bastille” and “The Storming of the Winter Palace” represented the people’s rebellion in their respective nations. But the Chinese Communist Revolution did not embody a particular symbol. The three yangge musicals lacked an individual event that could distil the Chinese Communist Revolution into a singular moment. Instead, they presented a variety of significant points: the war of liberation, the heroism of the PLA, the wise leadership of Mao Zedong and the genuine support of the people.

To achieve maximum impact, the communist propagandists placed the three productions in chronological order – the war of liberation (Celebration of the Liberation), the commemoration of the people’s victory (The People’s Victory) and the construction of a new socialist country (Building the Motherland) – each delivered through the familiar technique of storytelling. Like an old-fashioned village storyteller, or “a singer of tales,” to borrow Albert Lord’s noted phrase, the events in the three musicals were woven together to tell a vivid story. It should also be noted, however, that the three productions were not tightly structured nor were their plots clearly defined. But their portrayal of the CCP as the correct leadership linked them closely together, forming what one participant called “an epic story.” It would later reappear in an elaborate production of The East Is Red (Dongfang hong), a 1964 musical of mammoth proportions about the glory of the Chinese Communist Revolution, enacted by communist artists to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the founding of the PRC.

47. Zhao Yunge, “A summary report.”
48. Ibid.
49. Renmin ribao, 23 February 1950.
50. von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals, pp. 1–3, 199–207.
The three musical productions, however, were not without their problems. Artistically, according to the influential writer Tian Han (1898–1968) who had seen the show, *The People’s Victory* remained primitive and paled in comparison with its more sophisticated Soviet counterparts. More important, he said, the dance lacked depth. Although the spectacle may generate excitement at the beginning, such passion would soon fade as the show merely scratched the surface of the revolution. Tian was particularly critical of the national minority dances, especially those of the mountain peoples of Taiwan, which, for him, appeared superficial, devoid of any “realistic touches.” The directors of the musicals candidly acknowledged their inexperience in mounting a major show. For instance, the producer of *Building the Motherland* openly admitted that accurately depicting the life of the working class was a major headache. Clearly the rural yangge did not translate well into a portrayal of workers in an urban setting.

**Decline**

Yangge was both a captivating dance and a compelling political symbol during the early days of the PRC. Indeed, it was ubiquitous, showing up regularly in parades, in exhibitions and on university campuses. But was the Communists’ new yangge movement a success? Did this rural art form thrive in the city? And, more importantly, did the Communists effectively use it as a means of fostering national spirit and conveying socialist messages as originally planned?

After a period of fervent activities from 1949 to 1951, urban yangge seemed to have lost its popularity. After 1951 no major yangge musicals were staged, and writings about it declined drastically. In an interview in the autumn of 2002, one of the original yangge dancers in Beijing admitted that the dance seemed to have lost its appeal. “Few performed yangge in 1951,” she sadly reported. In fact, contrary to the government’s optimistic reports, the yangge campaign encountered many obstacles from the very beginning. Some of the difficulties were technical, but more serious were the political problems, a result of the government’s unyielding control of its art policy, which, I would argue, was primarily responsible for the ultimate decline of yangge in the early 1950s.

The first problem may be traced to the art form itself. The version of yangge that Yan’an cadres had chosen to popularize in the cities was less sophisticated, characterized by simple moves and predictable patterns. To many urbanites, after seeing yangge for the first time, the dance appeared unrefined and not worth learning. Surely Derk Bodde was not the only critic to characterize yangge as “simple.” Some Beijing residents ridiculed it as “vulgar country dancing.” Many believed it was

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55. Interview with yangge dancer A, October 2002.
“monotonous and dull” and did not warrant much attention.\(^{57}\) A similar criticism came from Asian professional dancers. The celebrated Korean dancer Choi Seung-hee, who was visiting China from North Korea during the Korean War, saw \textit{yangge} and commented critically that the dance, though presenting a healthy image, was “technically simple and crude.” In her view, it would earn the respect of those in professional dance circles only if it underwent substantial reform.\(^{58}\) Such criticism from an internationally renowned dancer who had successfully blended traditional Korean dances with Western techniques (as in her famous bodhisattva dance) would certainly have caught the attention of her Chinese hosts.

The changing political strategy of the CCP also contributed to the decline of \textit{yangge} in the early years of the PRC. In early 1949, with a communist victory in sight, Mao announced that the “centre of gravity of the Party’s work has shifted from the village to the city.”\(^{59}\) Subsequently, in September, the CPPCC passed its “Organic Law,” officially announcing that “the People’s Republic of China is a state of the people’s democratic dictatorship, which is led by the working class and is based on an alliance of workers and peasants.”\(^{60}\) This shift in emphasis to the workers clearly affected the workers’ view of \textit{yangge}. In fact, not all workers embraced the dance with enthusiasm. To some, it had a distinctly rural flavour and could not easily be transferred to an urban environment. To gain acceptance among the working class, one worker suggested, \textit{yangge} “must reflect workers’ ideas and sentiments.”\(^{61}\) While this view may well have indicated a rising chauvinism among workers, it did point to the core of the problem: the potential incompatibility between a rural art and an urban industrial workforce.

The Party-sponsored urban form of \textit{yangge} also faced new institutional challenges. “With the establishment of the People’s Republic,” two noted drama critics wrote in a recent book, “the former multi-purpose cultural troupes moved toward specialization and professionalization.” One example was the famed cultural troupe from Huada that was soon incorporated into the dance unit of the newly established Central Drama School, established in 1950. In June 1951 the Ministry of Culture called for a meeting to map out the next phase of propaganda strategies. In December 1952 the Ministry issued a directive, “On the Reorganization and Strengthening of the Work of the National Drama Team,” transforming the formerly flexible, amateurish cultural troupes into a more specialized dance company.\(^{62}\) While this directive ensured stronger institutional support (and hence funding) for artistic activities, it also called on the art

\(^{57}\) Jinbu rihao, 7 June 1949.  
\(^{60}\) Zhonghua renmin gongheguo kaiguo wenxian (\textit{Documents on the Founding of the People’s Republic of China}) (Hong Kong: Xin minzhu chubanshe, 1949), p. 246.  
\(^{61}\) Jinbu rihao, 7 June 1949.  
troupes to become more professional. Inevitably this undermined the original spontaneous nature and spirit of the yangge troupes.

In September 1952 the National Ethnic Song and Dance Ensemble was formed, followed three months later by the Central National Song and Dance Troupe. This institutionalization of art meant that future performances would increasingly demand professionally trained dancers and singers. Moreover, the presentation of large-scale musicals would challenge the limitations of traditional yangge, which was an open-air dance without the capacity for a lengthy, complex production. When choreographing Building the Motherland, Peng Song recognized the shortcomings of yangge. And, indeed, the musical he crafted turned out to be quite unlike the original, simple yangge style; in Peng’s production, for example, the dancers in the roles of worker, peasant and soldier, in co-ordinated movements, formed intricate circular patterns.63

In the early 1950s the increasing presence in China of foreign dancers at the invitation of the Chinese government, especially those from socialist countries, opened the eyes of Chinese artists to new artistic presentations from abroad. Not surprisingly the visits of Soviet dance delegations, ranging from the Red Army Song and Dance Ensemble in 1949 to the celebrated ballerina Galina Ulanova (1910–98) in 1952, received a great deal of attention.64 Dai Ailian’s praise of Ulanova as “the world’s greatest ballerina”65 carried an implicit message to Chinese dancers, since the Russian ballet interpreted dance techniques in ways significantly different from the native performances. In fact, Dai was never preoccupied exclusively with yangge. Her original training as a ballerina and her more cosmopolitan outlook prompted her repeatedly to introduce Western techniques into Chinese dance. This was evidenced in her performance of a ballet in “Peace Dove,” a 1950 song and dance musical in praise of world peace as well as a protest against foreign imperialism. The inevitable result was to cause tension between native forms of dance and foreign models.66 When Dai was named the first president of the newly established Beijing Dance School in November 1954, she turned her energy increasingly towards training a new generation of professional dancers and was determined to introduce non-Chinese dances, including the Russian ballet and the Indian dance, into the school curriculum.67

Still, the most serious challenge to yangge was political, not artistic. The government’s authoritative control of the dance, I would argue, was suffocating for the performers and spelled artistic disaster for urban yangge. Since the Yan’an days, the CCP unquestionably played a decisive role in directing art and literature in the service of the Party. In so doing, it allowed little room for artistic freedom or improvisation. After

66. Conservatives disparaged Dai’s ballet dance: “Workers, peasants, and soldiers cannot bear to see the sight of thighs prancing around the stage” (Dai Ailian, *My Art and Life*, p. 155).
the Party seized power it tightened its control even more. In June 1949 the Beiping Municipal General Labour Association issued four specific rules for yangge: male performers were forbidden to dress as women, and any flirtatious or erotic moves were to be eliminated; the portrayal of ghosts, deities, Buddhist monks and Daoist priests, common elements in the traditional dance, was prohibited; there was to be no vulgarity in the performance, as in the case of ridiculing Chiang Kai-shek as a tortoise, for, according to the association, such derision “does not accurately reflect the true face of the enemy of the people”; and the dancers were not permitted to use excessive make-up. These directives were not the only imposition from above. The government also explicitly stated that any negative portrayal of the working class in yangge was strictly forbidden. In the words of Zhou Yang (1908–89), “anything at all that humiliates the appearance of the working people is unacceptable.”

The Communists also frowned on the inclusion of foreign enemies in yangge. When a county in Hebei portrayed Harry Truman and Douglas MacArthur in the National Day yangge celebration, Renmin ribao responded with harsh criticism: “In yangge, reactionary characters and labouring people should not intermingle. When do we ever see reactionaries such as Harry Truman, Chiang Kai-shek, Syngman Rhee and Yoshida [Shigeru] dancing happily together with the working people?”

But to what degree was the declining popularity of yangge in the PRC a result of political manipulation by the Communists? There is no question that the Communists’ new yangge movement was a political endeavour, without any intention of enhancing aesthetic appreciation or encouraging cultural pluralism. Yangge was viewed as an efficient and appropriate medium for communicating socialist ideals to the people. Its reformed performances had to reflect the government’s positions accurately. Thus the new urban yangge dances no longer resembled the original, spontaneous rural art at the grassroots level. Instead, they represented an art that had been transformed and reinvented from the top. When art is politicized and monopolized by a regime, it is clearly an art under duress. Not only did yangge lose its autonomy, it lost its ability to grow. The reformed urban yangge now spoke with one voice and was performed with one prescribed step. Rapidly the dance became a political cliché, mere rhetoric. Thus the fate of the new yangge was the dissipation of its initial euphoria. Furthermore, urban yangge was not the only form of folk art that suffered under stifling government control in the early years of the People’s Republic. The traditional nianhua (New Year prints) portraying chubby babies and propitious emblems met a similar fate. When the new communist government exercised tighter control

68. “Niu yangge zhuyi sidian” (“Four points needing attention when dancing yangge”), Jinbu ribao, 28 June 1949.
69. Renmin ribao, 19 October 1951.
71. Renmin ribao, 18 February 1951.
over the content and style of rural *nianhua*, the new reformed prints – now featuring “workers, peasants and soldiers” – suffered poor sales and elicited strong negative reactions from peasants.\(^72\)

In October 1958 a teacher in Xi’an lamented that, after having lived in the city for a while, he seldom saw *yangge*: “It is said to be a vulgar art and not worth seeing.” The situation, he recalled nostalgically, was so different from “the early years of Liberation” when *yangge* was so popular in the city.\(^73\) *Yangge* seemed to disappear in urban China in the early 1950s, although it continued to be popular in the countryside, where it enjoyed a greater degree of freedom. In fact, an attempt to revive the art form in the parade commemorating the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1959 met with little success.\(^74\)

Interestingly, *yangge* seems to be making a comeback in recent years in northern China, especially in Beijing and Shenyang.\(^75\) Regular competitions and *yangge* festivals are being held.\(^76\) On closer examination, however, these dances, unlike the earlier political ones, are performed mostly by seniors and retired citizens, and are largely for fitness or medical purposes, as Beijing’s “massage *yangge*” (*anmo yangge*) and Shenyang’s “senior citizen *yangge*” (*laonian yangge*) clearly testify.\(^77\) Why has *yangge* seemed to regain popularity in the city? One explanation is that the practice is now depoliticized, largely free of tired communist jargon and political clichés. The dances now tap into essential aspects of life – retirement and health – which the government finds benign and nonthreatening and can therefore ignore. Perhaps this venerable folk dance has thus been given a new lease on life in China.

74. “Guanyu shoudu guoqing wenyi dadui youxing jihua de baogao” (“A report on the planning of the parade of the art group during the National Day celebration in the capital”), Beijing Municipal Archives, No. 164–1–27.