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RADIO, SOUND CINEMA, AND COMMUNITY SINGING: THE MAKING OF A NEW SONIC CULTURE IN MODERN CHINA

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The rise of choral singing as public performance in Shanghai during the mid-1930s was the result of overlapping historical developments and conditions. This study considers how new sound technologies, the introduction of new singing subjects as well as subject matter, and an acute sense of the nation in crisis converged to turn “community singing” into a fresh musical practice and generate a new sonic culture. Sound cinema in particular made new heroes visible as well as audible. Liu Liangmo, a secretary of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Shanghai, was instrumental in initiating and promoting the community singing movement. His efforts, along with contributions by Lü Ji, a composer and music theorist of the cultural left, propelled the emergence of China as a “singing nation” by the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1937. This process was an integral part of the cultural as well as political history of producing an articulate and audible subject against the soundscape of modernity.

KEYWORDS: Liu Liangmo, Lü Ji, Nie Er, radio, sonic culture, sound cinema, YMCA in China

If we agree to generalize, as Andrew Jones invited us to, that in the early twentieth century the gramophone was promoted in urban China primarily as “an indispensable accoutrement of the modern home and a marker of petit bourgeois respectability,” which had the consequence of turning music into “an object of private, individualized consumption as opposed to the focus of public gatherings,”¹ and, furthermore, if we find it useful to regard, as did Miriam Hansen, classical Hollywood cinema in the form of silent film as instantiating a “vernacular modernism” that globalized a “sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity,” a horizon that became the alluringly intangible substance of a new urban culture for

1 Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 55.

mass consumption in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s,² then the arrival of sound cinema in the first half of the 1930s in the same city, I suggest, brought a new sonic experience and aural imagination, hastening thereby the emergence of a mass culture of a different nature. In this new auditory mass culture, the masses were visualized and addressed as a political agent and national subject; furthermore, a vocal and public form of expression, in particular community singing, often characterized how this new historical subject asserted its presence and collective will. Deeply sonorous and assertive, this politically potent mass culture would soon lead wartime China to be lauded and heard globally as a singing nation, radically transforming the “silent China” (無聲的中國 *wusheng de Zhongguo*) long decried by Lu Xun since the early twentieth century.

We should of course not assume that sound cinema would have the same effect everywhere or that a mass culture associated with it would necessarily be sonic in nature or would inspire, as it did in Shanghai in the mid-1930s, aspirations for a new music movement. Yet an extraordinary convergence of developments made the nascent sound cinema an integral part of a new musical culture in modern China. In 1936, Lü Ji (呂驥 1909–2002), a left-wing composer and music commentator, made this observation: “The songs put forth in progressive films such as *The Big Road* [大路 *Dalu*], *Plunder of Peach and Plum* [桃李劫 *Taoli jie*], *A Poem of the Great Wall* [風雲兒女 *Fengyun ernü*], and *New Women* [新女性 *Xin nüxing*] have not only sped up the development of Chinese music but also introduced a completely new orientation.”³ Screen songs from this group of films, he asserted, marked a resolute departure from sentimental and self-indulgent songs pushed by gramophone and radio. They answered the call to awaken the people, to educate and organize the vast number of laboring masses.

The new music movement in China was accompanied by the rise of a new film culture. It was hardly a deliberate choice initially, but the movement has since grown steadily and has gained independence as it separated itself from cinema. This is evident when we look at the spreading of singing movements across the country and the increase in the number of new songs written.⁴

A pressing task and turning point for this new movement, Lü Ji concluded, was to create “a national-defense music” (國防音樂 *guofang yinyue*) and to disseminate it effectively beyond urban residents.

Entitled “The Prospect of New Music in China” (中國新音樂的展望 “Zhongguo xin yinyue de zhanwang”), Lü Ji’s 1936 article was more a pointed intervention than a disinterested survey. The idea of a music for national defense stemmed from the call for “a literature for national defense” (國防文學 *guofang wenxue*) that theorists on the cultural left, under the Communist leadership, had issued in late 1935 in response to the

2 Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 10–22.

3 Lü Ji, “Zhongguo xin yinyue de zhanwang” [The prospect of new music in China], *Guangming* [Illuminations] 1, no. 5 (August 10, 1936): 297–302; quotation on 297.

4 Lü Ji, “Zhongguo xin yinyue,” 301.

ever-deepening Japanese encroachments in northeast China.⁵ By 1936, practitioners of other forms of artistic expression, from poetry to theater to cinema to visual arts, were similarly urged to contribute to a general mobilization of the nation for an oncoming war of resistance against Japanese imperialism. The connection between a progressive cinema and a new music movement, or more specifically the rise of mass singing, was notable to Lü Ji because he was actively involved in both fields. His writings and activities in the mid-1930s underscored the important role a coordinated cultural left, persisting under the semicolonial conditions of Shanghai, would play in heralding a militant, public-oriented musical culture.

Yet, the practice of community singing in Shanghai, which would serve as a model for the mass singing movement in the rest of the country, was initiated almost single-handedly in early 1935 by Liu Liangmo (劉良模 1909–1988), a charismatic Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) secretary with no apparent political affiliations. Community singing (民众歌咏 *minzhong geyong*), based on choral singing popularized by Christian missionaries and the YMCA, began as an effort to engage young urban residents with no church affiliations or musical experience, whereas the vision of mass singing (大众歌咏 *dazhong geyong*) would embrace not only a broader conception of the singing subjects but also a more activist and politically explicit understanding of the purpose of collective expression.

Of the same age but moving in different circles in the city of Shanghai, Liu Liangmo and Lü Ji would soon find their paths crossing, and their working together offered a concrete example of the unifying power of community singing in a moment of national crisis. Yet, as we will see, their different journeys during the War of Resistance against Japan and beyond may explain why Chinese-language accounts of the development of modern Chinese music have often lionized Lü Ji and his achievements from the mid-1930s onward, whereas Liu Liangmo is much better known in the English-speaking world, especially after his collaboration with Paul Robeson (1898–1976), the great African American singer and civil rights activist, in the making of the historic 1941 album *Chee Lai: Songs of New China* in New York.⁶

In this regard, Joshua Howard's comprehensive research on Nie Er (聶耳 1912–1935) and the growing impact of "martial music" from the mid-1930s into the early 1940s has broken new ground in helping us to appreciate a multilayered picture. His description of a "sonic nationalism" in relation to Nie Er and his legacy is provocative too,⁷ although I

5 Lü Ji, writing under a pseudonym, was in fact the first to expound on the necessity of a national-defense music. See Huo Shiqi [Lü Ji], "Lun guofang yinyue" [On national-defense music], *Shenghuo zhishi* [Life knowledge] 1, no. 12 (April 5, 1936): 612–17.

6 See, for instance, Wu Yongyi, *Renmin yinyuejia Lü Ji zhuan* [Biography of people's musician Lü Ji] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2005); Wang Yuhe, *Zhongguo jinxindai yinyue shi 1840–1949* [History of early modern and modern Chinese music, 1840–1949], rev. ed. (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1994). For accounts of the collaboration between Liu Liangmo and Paul Robeson, see Liang Luo, *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 170–73; Richard Jean So, *Transpacific Community: America, China, and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 83–121.

7 See Joshua Howard, "The Making of a National Icon: Commemorating Nie Er, 1935–1949," *Twentieth-Century China* 37, no. 1 (January 2012): 5–29; "'Music for a National Defense': Making

would argue that the practice of mass singing generated a new sensorial experience and affect more than nationalism as an ideology or concept. This article, drawing on existing scholarship as well as archival research, explores how modern sound technologies—sound cinema in particular—and community singing interacted to create a new sonic culture. Central to this sonic culture were the formation of new vocal communities and also a discovery of the capacity and reach of the human voice, raw or amplified. China's emergence as a singing nation in the 1930s, I suggest, was an integral part of the cultural as well as political history of producing an articulate and audible subject against the soundscape of modernity.

LEFT-WING CINEMA AND SCREEN SONGS

The four films that Lü Ji identified as pivotal to a new direction in modern Chinese music were released within six months from late 1934 to 1935. These films were regarded as progressive by the cultural left because they sought to address contemporary social issues instead of treating film as mere entertainment. They brought different social classes to the silver screen with a clearly sympathetic view of the downtrodden, the laboring masses, and exploited women.

The appearance of this group of films also coincided with the arrival of sound cinema. As Xia Yan (夏衍 1900–1995), a member of the underground Communist Party and a leading figure in what would later be described as a left-wing cinema movement, was to recount later, the bombing of Shanghai by the Japanese military in early 1932 was a key turning point. The January 28th incident, also known as the First Shanghai War, took place when Japanese marines stormed into districts within Chinese jurisdiction under the pretext of pursuing anti-Japanese elements. The ensuing conflict, which included extensive aerial bombing of civilian targets by Japanese warplanes, devastated much of the northwestern section of the city, where many film studios were located. In the course of the brief war, people in Shanghai witnessed heroic resistance by the Chinese 19th Route Army against a far better equipped foreign military. About a dozen documentary films on the war were soon released, which received enthusiastic receptions in China and among overseas Chinese communities.⁸ Deploying raw battlefield footage and rousing patriotic sentiments, these documentaries not only showed urban warfare as a new cinematic spectacle but also provided left-wing critics and commentators with an occasion to endorse films with a political message and, more generally, to embrace cinema as a powerful mass medium.⁹ *The Battle of Shanghai* (上海之战 *Shanghai zhi zhan*, 1932), directed by Cheng Bugao (程步高 1898–1966), a feature film released by the studio Mingxing (明星 Star) and one of many like takes on the January 28th incident, for instance, billed itself as “a

Martial Music During the Anti-Japanese War,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 13 (December 2014): 1–50.

8 For a brief account of these documentaries and their impact, see *Shanghai dianying zhi* [Records of cinema in Shanghai] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue chubanshe, 1999), 33–34.

9 See Xia Yan, *Lanxun jiumeng lu* [Languidly searching for old dreams], exp. ed. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2000), 147–60. For a succinct account of the development of the left-wing cinema movement during this period, see Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–1937* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 37–55.

spectacular war film, with all dialogues in sound” (有聲對白戰事鉅片 *yousheng duibai zhanshi jupian*) shot on location.¹⁰ Indeed, sound effects were rapidly becoming a major attraction of newsreels and documentaries by the early 1930s.

In the wake of the Shanghai War of 1932, the Chinese film industry made a concerted effort to transition to sound cinema. By 1934, Lianhua (聯華 United Photoplay), a leading company in the industry, had purchased recording equipment from America and was going to remodel its Number One Studio for production of sound films.¹¹ As film scholar Zhang Zhen has observed, “the ascendance of the acoustic dominant...coincided with the onslaught of Hollywood sound films in the Chinese market on one hand and Japanese military invasion on the other.” As a result, sound “became an important component in the formation of a certain ‘aesthetics of emergency’ that accompanied the emergence of the left-wing cinema and then the ‘national defense’ cinema” in the mid-1930s.¹²

In December 1934, the newly formed Denton Film Studio (電通影片公司 Diantong yingpian gongsi) released its inaugural production, *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, directed by Ying Yunwei (應云衛 1904–1967). Advertised as a blockbuster with all dialogues and songs in sound, this feature film was the first fully realized talkie that drew on creative talents closely affiliated with the left-wing drama movement in Shanghai. (The first Chinese talkies in a technical sense had appeared in 1931.) Its sound track was made possible with the recording equipment that the three founders of the Denton studio had developed and patented. One of many efforts at the time, the S.U.S. (三友式 Sanyou shi “Three Friends”) recording system was particularly successful, and its three developers were even awarded, in 1934, a cash prize by the Film Industry Supervisory Commission (電影事業指導會員會 Dianying shiye zhidao weiyuanhui) of the central government in Nanjing.¹³

Plunder of Peach and Plum tells of an idealistic young couple’s ruinous encounter with reality after they graduate from school. It delivers a poignant indictment against a corrupt and ruthless society while expressing deep sympathy for the young and the helpless. Melodrama aside, a novel attraction of the film was its screen songs. Indeed, “The Graduation Song” (畢業歌 “Biye ge”) from *Plunder of Peach and Plum* was an instant hit and arguably had an impact even greater than the film itself.

With lyrics written by the famed playwright Tian Han (田漢 1898–1968) and music composed by Nie Er, “The Graduation Song” is heard twice in the course of the film. It first appears early in the film, in a flashback in which, as youthful singing is heard from off-screen, we see, at a downward angle and from behind their backs, rows of standing young men and women, presumably inside a classroom or auditorium. As the camera steadily pulls toward a podium in the front, more and more students—gently swinging their bodies with the music—come into view, and we find ourselves witnessing a graduation

10 See the advertisement for the film in *Shen bao*, July 27, 1932, 22.

11 “Lianhua jiang she shengpian chang” [Lianhua to establish a sound film studio], *Shishi xunbao* [Illustrated chronicle], no. 10 (1934): 28.

12 Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 303.

13 See “Jiangli Sanyou shi yousheng dianying luyinji” [Prize for the S.U.S. sound cinema recording machine], *Zhongyang dangwu yuekan* [Central party affairs monthly] (a publication of the secretariat of the Guomindang central executive committee), no. 71 (June 1934): 497.

ceremony. Within the narrative of the film, this is a moment recalled for its youthful hope and optimism. The scene also refers to the widely practiced ritual of singing together at graduation in modern-style schools at the time. In the early twentieth century, promotion of school songs was an important component of the reformist program in cultivating a stronger sense of communal and national identity among the young. Many songs written for schoolchildren drew on popular melodies from Europe, America, and Japan.¹⁴ The replay of “The Graduation Song,” still as auditory memory, at the end of *Plunder of Peach and Plum* has the effect of a sympathetic chorus, as if in a Greek tragedy, that laments the gaping distance between youthful idealism and a cruel reality. Yet, as the camera zooms in on the photograph of the condemned young man, the choral singing from off-screen evokes a more abstract, if not transcending, voice or commentary. The song seems to reissue calls for a collective identity and enterprise in spite of the personal tragedies and vicissitudes of life.

Upon the release of the film in December 1934, “The Graduation Song” rapidly acquired a life of its own. Its score and lyrics were widely published, appearing for instance in a 1936 Boy Scouts Yearbook,¹⁵ and the song was embraced by many high-school and college students for its uplifting message rather than as bitter irony. The film in effect became a vehicle for teaching the song, making it a much more attractive choice than many other songs used for graduation ceremonies at the time.

The sensational success of “The Graduation Song” further consolidated the reputation of Nie Er as an innovative songwriter in tune with contemporary youth. In the following months he would compose some of his best-known screen songs. The advent of sound cinema, as a commentator observed in July 1935 at the time of Nie Er’s untimely death, had demanded a new musical expression, and the young composer had risen to the occasion. He was a game-changer in the field of music as well as film.¹⁶ “His refreshing and moving songs swept away the stale and dispirited air in film music,” the editorial board of the *Star* (明星 *Mingxing*) magazine concurred, “He provided an uplifting topic for moviegoers and initiated a new era for sound cinema in China.”¹⁷

AUDIBLE COMMUNITIES ON THE SCREEN

On January 1, 1935, *The Big Road*, a transitional silent film produced by the Lianhua studio and directed by Sun Yu (孙瑜 1900–1990), with two screen songs composed by Nie Er, began to play in movie theaters in Shanghai. The film still used intertitles

14 For a succinct overview of this history, see Hong-yu Gong, “Music, Nationalism and the Search for Modernity in China, 1911–1949,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 10, no. 2 (December 2008): 38–69. For a detailed study of efforts to promote martial music in the late Qing dynasty, see Li Jing, *Yuege Zhongguo: jindai yinyue wenhua yu shehui zhuanxing* [Songs for China: early modern musical culture and social transformation] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2012).

15 *Guangyi Zhongguo tongzijun yibai qishiqi tuan niankan diyi qi teji* [Kwang Nee Chinese Boy Scouts 177th Regiment Yearbook, First Issue Special Collection] (Shanghai: Far Eastern Press, 1936), 9. This special collection of songs includes several others songs by Nie Er, as well as three composed by Lü Ji.

16 “Jinian Nie Er jianyi” [A suggestion on commemorating Nie Er], *Diantong banyue huakan* [Denton gazette semimonthly], no. 7 (August 16, 1935): 19.

17 See “Dao Nie Er xiansheng” [Mourning Mr. Nie Er], *Mingxing* [Star] 2, no. 3 (August 16, 1935): 14.

to present dialogues. Yet it also let viewers both see and hear road construction workers, who, as the protagonists in a story about overcoming challenges in building a road to help the nation defend itself, sing on many occasions throughout the film. It is a film with rich visual images and sound effects, presenting many auditory details that explore the possibilities of sound cinema.

Unlike the key scene in *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, wherein we see the graduates only from behind and assume they are singing, *The Big Road* gives viewers a direct and frontal view of the construction workers as they sing. Their first song, “Pathbreakers” (開路先鋒 “Kai lu xianfeng”), comes at the beginning of the film, after its upbeat melody has already been introduced as background music to the scrolling credits. As the film opens, a team of muscular, shirtless, and happy-looking young men, tools in hand, walk toward us, take up position in the foreground, and start singing as they begin to work. They sing in joyful unison, and their singing matches the swinging of their pickaxes. As they sing, the lyrics of the song roll across the screen as subtitles.

A visual as well as auditory presence of the road workers is established at the outset, even though this is a silent film. Later in the film, an even larger number of road workers march to the same melody. Occupying the entire screen in this scene are close-ups of smiling and confident workers walking toward the camera. A central message that director Sun Yu wished to convey, as he explained his motivation for making the film, was one of anti-imperialism and heroic sacrifices. The film was also about a youthful new life.¹⁸ An uplifting message is delivered in the film with the image of a new kind of hero. They are ordinary road workers; they are young, strong, united, and articulate.

By comparison, “Song of the Big Road” (大路歌 “Dalu ge”), another song of the road workers in the film, is much more somber and has a style that is less a confident declaration than a work chant of toiling laborers, as is evident in its opening measures. The song is repeated several times in the film as a transition between scenes of road construction. It is first sung by a group of workers straining to pull a heavy iron roller. Their pained facial expression as well as their bent bodies, as Andrew Jones has observed, constitute “ground-level images of Chinese workers” that are a direct quotation of American filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille’s 1926 silent film *The Volga Boatmen*, which was widely admired in the left-wing cultural circle in Shanghai in the late 1920s.¹⁹ Such images, however, are not a silent spectacle in the Chinese film. On the contrary, we hear the laborers sing and, through their singing, a call for solidarity so that, together, they can build a “big road of freedom” (自由大路 *ziyou dalu*). At the end of the film, when a fierce gun battle with an enemy plane leaves many of the workers dead, “The Big Road Song” reemerges and, as the singing continues, those dead workers and soldiers, through an extraordinarily imaginative effect possible only in cinema, are brought back to life as joyful and lively spectral beings.

In spite of being a silent film, *The Big Road* delivers rich sonic spectacles and gives voice to a collectivity never before seen or heard in Chinese cinema. The first time a group of road workers appeared as self-confident national heroes on the silver screen, they sang and claimed a distinct vocal presence. Singing in the film allowed them an identity that

18 Sun Yu, “Shezhi ‘Dalu’ de dongji” [Motivation for making *The Big Road*], *Shidai dianying* [Modern cinema], no. 6 (November 5, 1934): 13.

19 Jones, *Yellow Music*, 129, 182n64.

is unfractured by local or regional accents. Such accents were a noticeable feature in pioneering sound films such as *Plunder of Peach and Plum* and were indeed a linguistic reality yet to be transformed through mass media like radio and cinema in the years to come. The road workers in *The Big Road* are shown to participate in the construction of a vocal and assertive community as well as that of a road for transportation.

Furthermore, the two songs thematically associated with the road workers are clearly distinguished from two other screen songs in the film, stylistically closer to folk melodies and more plaintive than assertive in mood, that are sung by female characters. We see a clear gender differentiation here between the declarative new songs and traditional folk music. Yet, the new collective voice or musical figure was far from simply masculine or male-dominated. On the contrary, a new voice of women, especially of working-class women, was also heard in sound cinema at the same time. In *The Big Road*, we see Jasmine, who initially provides help in the kitchen, join the road workers and soldiers in the climactic battle against foreign invaders. Her agency and solidarity with them is underscored as the scene unfolds, with “Song of the Big Road” sounding like an anthem in the background.

It is in another transitional silent film, *New Women*, which was released within weeks of *The Big Road* in early 1935 and directed by Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生 1906–1968), that we see the resolute adoption of a new voice for women workers. We also see in this second film a clear rejection of dance hall music as consumerist and subservient to the old patriarchal order. A film about life in Shanghai, *New Women* features a miscellany of background music that exemplifies what Sue Tuohy described as “metropolitan sounds,” wherein a variety of European classical and symphonic traditions, including opera overtures and waltzes, is utilized to signify a modern soundscape.²⁰

The film delivers a powerful condemnation of various forms of exploitation, from sexual to economic, that prey on women in modern Shanghai. Wei Ming (韦明), an aspiring writer and single mother, is first introduced as a high-school music teacher, and the opening sound track presents youthful singing, presumably by her students. In the course of the film, we meet Li Aying (李阿英), one of Wei Ming’s neighbors and a union worker in one of the numerous textile mills in town. Opposite to Wei Ming in profession as well as personality, Aying is vocal, strong, and resolute in action, and she spends her spare time teaching fellow textile workers to sing. At one point, Aying asks Wei Ming the music teacher to compose a song, entitled “Song of New Women” (新女性 “Xin nǚxing”), for which she has written lyrics. Wei Ming tries, but her attempts are continually foiled by the predatory society that eventually crushes her.

Nonetheless, new music, especially the singing voices of working women, rises triumphantly in *New Women*. In an evocative sequence, the film crosscuts between a glamorous dance hall, where Wei Ming is taken by a suitor, and a bare makeshift classroom, where Aying sings with young female workers. As a sing-song girl in the dance hall is about to perform for a crowd of fashionably dressed men and women, the scene cuts to Aying and her group of young women, and we hear instead their spirited singing.²¹ As the young

20 See Sue Tuohy, “Metropolitan Sounds: Music in Chinese Films of the 1930s,” in Yingjin Zhang, ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 200–221, esp. 208.

21 The sing-song girl in the dance hall is to perform “Peach Blossom River,” a song by Li Jinhui (1891–1967), a major figure in the pop musical scene at the time and a former mentor to Nie Er. For a study of the impact of Li Jinhui, see Jones, *Yellow Music*, 73–104.

female workers sing, the screen is split: the upper left corner shows them in a close-up, and the majority lower screen pans over the urban and industrial spectacles that Shanghai was known for. Rising above ringing bells and bustling traffic, their singing presents a stark contrast to the phantasmagoria of city life, suggesting a forceful sonic eruption from underneath urban modernity. Their rising voices, as Weihong Bao describes them in a close reading of this sequence, “permeate the city, creating an assertive soundscape reframing the colonial landscape”²² (Figure 1).

At the end of the film, as Wei Ming cries out “I want to live!” and dies an agonized death, it is the singing textile workers who declare a radically new role for women:

New women are the awakened hardworking masses.
 New women are a productive force.
 New women raise their heads in struggle.
 New women are workers in society.
 We break down barriers and smash thousand-year-old shackles.
 New women are the vanguard in building a new society.
 Fighting for liberation, we want a new life for women.

The film that best illustrates how a community might assert its collective will through singing, however, is *A Poem of the Great Wall* (1935; the film’s English title was given by the filmmaker at the time of release), which was the second feature film produced by the Denton Film Studio and was directed by Xu Xingzhi (許幸之 1904–1991). It tells of a young poet who overcomes his attraction to a wealthy femme fatale and joins the popular resistance against Japanese aggression in Manchuria. With a screenplay by Tian Han and Xia Yan and a musical score by Nie Er, the film was a major undertaking of the cultural left. Even before the film premiered, several Shanghai newspapers published the musical scores of its two screen songs, calling the public’s attention to the synchronized dialogue and passionate singing in the coming attraction.²³

Reception of *A Poem of the Great Wall* was rather mixed upon its release in May 1935. While reviewers generally endorsed its message about rallying the nation, they noted the film’s disjointed narrative and its rigid schematic approach. One sympathetic critic commented that the best part of the film was its theme song, as it expressed a tension and heroism much more powerfully than either the plot or the mise-en-scène of the film.²⁴ (Denton had widely publicized the fact that its S.U.S. recording system was used in producing the film’s sound track.²⁵)

Disappointments with the film aside, its theme song, “March of the Volunteers” (義勇軍進行曲 “Yiyongjun jinxingqu”), quickly caught on and became one of the most popular and beloved songs of the time. Heard toward the end of the film, the song is

22 Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 190.

23 For a discussion of the promotion of the film and its screen songs, see Luo, *Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China*, 160–62.

24 Yi Shui, “Tan ‘Fengyun ernü’” [On *A Poem of the Great Wall*], *Xinsheng* [New life] 2, no. 20 (June 6, 1935): 416–17.

25 See “Gongzuo shi de ‘Fengyun ernü’” [*A Poem of the Great Wall* in the making], *Diantong banyue huakan*, no. 2 (June 1, 1935), pictorial insert.

Figure 1. Still from a split-screen sequence of the film *New Women* (新女性 *Xin nüxing*), directed by Cai Chusheng (Shanghai: United Photoplay, 1935).

introduced through a series of close-ups of villagers who, under siege by the Japanese military, grab their farming tools and open their mouths to call for action. As the keynote is played, a bugle appears at the center of the screen, its shining bell directly facing the audience. We then see villagers, led by the poet Xin Baihua (辛白华) and his friend Afeng (阿凤), a female singer and street performer, march toward us singing, “Arise, people who refuse to be slaves” (起来, 不愿做奴隶的人们 *Qilai, buyuan zuo nuli de renmen*). We see them frontally first, then from the side in a close-up and at an upward angle, gaining an even better view of the hope and determination on the face of the young woman. Through this montage of dramatically lit images—which in terms of visual style and effect is reminiscent of the canonical 1925 silent film *Battleship Potemkin* made by Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948)—the cinematographer Wu Yinxian (吴印咸 1900–1994) accorded the marching villagers a monumental presence. Combined with synchronized sound, these cinematic images illustrate the joy and transformative power of people marching and singing together (Figure 2).

We may view the entire film *A Poem of the Great Wall* as an audiovisual narrative of the birth of its theme song. It opens with the scene of a lonely woman playing “Für Elise” on a piano at dusk in metropolitan Shanghai and ends with the spirited collective singing of “March of the Volunteers” in northern rural China. The film also amounts to a self-conscious effort to make the song both audible and teachable to its intended listeners, namely, a national audience. Not only does the voice of the people, people “who refuse to be slaves,” emerge from the screen as a visible and vibrating object, but the film narrative also becomes an object lesson about assuming a collective identity and finding a new self-expression.

For this on-scene community to come alive and for the song as a sonic object to reach its intended audience, however, a different medium had to be engaged, and a new practice had to be developed. Indeed, a new form of expression and singing practice was

Figure 2. Stills of the singing of “March of the Volunteers” (義勇軍進行曲 “Yiyongjun jinxingqu”) in the film *A Poem of the Great Wall* (風雲兒女 *Fengyun ernü*), directed by Xu Xingzhi (Shanghai: Denton Film Studio, 1935).

rapidly developing at this particular moment and effectively prepared the public to adopt and perform “March of the Volunteers” and other screen songs. The audible community projected on the screen was soon to be heard beyond movie theaters.

CHORAL SINGING AND THE YMCA

By the time “March of the Volunteers” became an instant hit with the release of *A Poem of the Great Wall* in May 1935, its composer Nie Er had left for Japan, only to drown in a swimming accident less than two months later. The news of his death shocked the music as well as film circles in Shanghai. One mourner celebrated Nie Er as “a singer of the times” (一個時代的歌手 *yige shidai de geshou*), who had single-handedly established a new and progressive style of music, energized the field of songwriting, and struck a deep emotional chord with songs about common people’s lives and dreams.²⁶ Film actress Chen Boer (陳波兒 1910–1951) saw Nie Er as a brave pioneer, not unlike the figure exalted in his song “Pathbreakers.” “He did not succumb to composing sensual and whimsical jazz for a few self-indulging hedonists in a dazed and murky society,” she wrote, “On the contrary, he broke a

²⁶ Lü Gang, “Dao Nie Er: yige shidai de geshou” [Mourning Nie Er: a singer of the times], *Diantong banyue huakan*, no. 7 (1935): 19.

new path in music for our country and revealed to us the meaning and mission of songwriting.”²⁷

An even more telling indication of the broad reach of Nie Er’s music was that, following the news of his death, many radio stations in Shanghai began to play his songs in response to listener requests.²⁸ Radio broadcasting first appeared in Shanghai in the early 1920s as a newfangled device for commercial advertisement. After 1928, with support from the Nationalist government in Nanjing, it underwent a period of rapid expansion and became an increasingly vital part of the modern soundscape in Shanghai and other urban areas. In early August 1935, one of the most prominent commercial radio stations went on to broadcast all of Nie Er’s musical works in an on-air memorial service.²⁹ A few weeks later, in September, the radio station of the Ministry of Communications based in Shanghai started a program to teach listeners contemporary songs. The instructor was Liu Liangmo, and the first two songs he taught on air were “March of the Volunteers” and “Song of the Big Road.”³⁰ (A few months later, Lü Ji would resume the program with the same radio station, “March of the Volunteers” being the first song he taught as well.³¹)

On August 16, 1935, about 2,000 people from different walks of life attended a memorial service to pay their respects to Nie Er. One of the speakers was Lü Ji, who had composed an elegy for the occasion, to be performed during the service. After some of Nie Er’s best-known songs were either played through a gramophone or sung by his friends and colleagues on the scene, Lü Ji introduced a group of female textile workers, who sang no other than the theme song of *New Women*, reenacting a memorable scene from the film released only months before.³²

Many years later, Lü Ji would take great pride in having organized this historic performance of a song by a left-wing composer about female workers and their aspirations. In the history of the labor movement as well as that of the new music movement, he believed, this was an unprecedented event. He explained that the group of women workers, known as the New Voice Chorus (新聲合唱隊 *Xinsheng hechangdui*), came from several Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) night schools where he had been teaching singing since mid-1935. He had reached out to YWCA night schools in the fall of 1934 as a member of an informal “music group” (音乐小组 *yinyue xiaozu*) within the League of Left-wing Dramatists (左翼戏剧家联盟 *Zuoyi xijujia lianmeng*). Formed in 1931 and led by Tian Han, the league had actively sought ways to engage the industrial workers concentrated in Shanghai. Before Nie Er left for Japan, he and Lü Ji were both in the music group. The best way to bring current and progressive music to

27 Chen Boer, “Dao ‘Biye ge’ zuoqu zhe” [Mourning the composer of “The Graduation Song”], *Diantong banyue huakan*, no. 7 (1935): 19.

28 See a news report in *Rensheng xunkan* [Life trimonthly] 1, no. 5 (August 25, 1935): 15.

29 See a news report in *Diansheng* [Movie tone] 4, no. 31 (August 2, 1935): 637. The radio station was the Zhongxi Station of the Zhongxi Pharmacy on Fuzhou Road.

30 See *Shen bao*, September 3, 1935, 20.

31 See Zhao Kai, Ye Zhikang, Jin Minzhu, Meng Ping’an, Chen Zuzhi, Li Xuecheng, and Qin Zhen, eds., *Shanghai guangbo dianshi zhi* [Records of radio and television in Shanghai] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1999), 22. On March 2, 1936, Lü Ji started teaching songs on radio.

32 For a contemporary report, see Mingming, “Dao Nie Er ji” [Account of the Nie Er memorial service], *Rensheng xunkan* 1, no. 5 (1935): 3.

the working masses, the group had agreed, was to introduce them to screen songs from contemporary films.³³

That the YWCA night schools in Shanghai should have been a ready venue for Lü Ji to promote screen songs was anything but surprising. By 1930, the YWCA had set up schools in all the major factory districts in the city to provide education for women workers. Pursuing a three-year program of study, students would also participate once a week in club activities such as singing, storytelling, and acting.³⁴ The Shanghai YWCA, formally established in 1908, was only a few years younger than the more influential YMCA. Having arrived in different parts of China as early as the 1870s, various local YMCA branches met and formed a national association in Shanghai in 1896. By that time, the YMCA in the United States had undergone what was known as its social gospel movement and, as a result, “the Chinese YMCA and their native and American secretaries were much more resolute and responsive to the Christian liberalism as embodied in the social gospel.”³⁵ David Willard Lyon (1870–1949), appointed in 1894 by the International Committee of the YMCA in America as its China representative, famously declared that “I came not to preach, but to serve.”³⁶ Eugene E. Barnett (1888–1970), who served from 1921 to 1936 as student secretary of the YMCA in China, proudly claimed that “the YMCA, and especially the Student YMCAs, had pioneered the idea and the practice of ‘social service’ in China—the very term for social service being of YMCA coinage.”³⁷

Since the 1920s, the YMCA commitment to social service had led to many an innovative program intended to improve working women’s health and education, conditions for the industrial labor force, and life in rural villagers in China. In 1926, for instance, the Shanghai YMCA built a housing project for working families in Pudong and billed it as “China’s first model village” for healthy living. By 1928, the “Workers’ New Village of Pudong” had constructed 24 low-rent residences. At the center of the village was a community house that provided a variety of social, educational, and recreational programs for the benefit of the residents and their children.³⁸ Three years later, in order better to serve the worker population in the booming industrial district, the Shanghai YMCA founded a Huxi Commune on the other side of town. The many activities organized regularly by the YMCA at these two working communities included Bible studies, public lectures, speech contests, theatrical performances, night schools, youth sports and competitions, and sanitation campaigns.³⁹

33 Lü Ji, “Zai yu renmin qunzhong xiang jiehe zhong qiude fazhan he qianjin” [Seeking to develop and march forward from joining the people], *Wenyi lilun yu piping* [Theory and criticism of literature and arts], no. 4 (1990): 4–10, esp. 7. See Wu, *Renmin yinyuejia Lü Ji zhuan*, 13.

34 See Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 219–21.

35 Jun Xing, *Baptized in the Fire of Revolution: The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China, 1919–1937* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1996), 42.

36 Quoted in Xing, *Baptized*, 49.

37 Eugene Barnett, “As I Look Back, Recollections of Growing Up in America’s Southerland and of Twenty-Two Years in Precommunist China, 1888–1936” (unpublished memoir, 1973), 174. Quoted in Xing, *Baptized*, 48.

38 See Xing, *Baptized*, 116.

39 See Fu Qinghuai, “Laogong shiye” [Labor affairs], *Shanghai qingnian* [Shanghai young men] 38, no. 8 (March 6, 1935): 27–32.

Indeed, the YMCA had long regarded choral singing, and music in general, as an effective means for spreading its message and building local communities. Choral singing, an unfamiliar form of musical expression to the Chinese, had been introduced in the nineteenth century by earlier generations of Christian missionaries, who have also been credited with the introduction of various forms of Western music and instruments, as well as with the modernization of musical education in China.⁴⁰ In 1919, about a dozen male and female singers from different Christian churches came together to form the Shanghai Songsters, the first choral group in the city.⁴¹

The YMCA was particularly successful in promoting choral singing as part of a new musical culture among college students. On many college campuses in Shanghai, whether they were church affiliated or not, members of the YMCA helped organize glee clubs and musical performances. A notable example was the University of Shanghai (滬江大學 Hujiang daxue), which was founded in late 1905 as the Shanghai Baptist College and Seminary and renamed in 1931. The university required music training of all students and worked with the YMCA on campus in maintaining a robust musical program.⁴² The annual concert staged by the campus music club in April 1931 was a memorable event for its faculty and students. With over 70 members, more than two-thirds of them women students, the club, as a campus weekly proudly reported, was even larger than the Shanghai Songsters at that time.⁴³

By the time Lǚ Jī began teaching songs at YWCA night schools in late 1934, choral singing was already a widely practiced musical activity among YMCA branches and YWCA night schools. Within this established tradition, Liu Liangmo organized the Community Singing Society in early 1935, under the auspices of the YMCA in Shanghai. Under his energetic leadership, community singing quickly spread and moved beyond the YMCA circle. Over the next two years, while Lǚ Jī remained active as a songwriter and commentator committed to a left-wing music movement, it was Liu Liangmo and his vision of a community singing movement that took center stage and galvanized public support and participation.

COMMUNITY SINGING AS NATION BUILDING

Among the many eulogies mourning Nie Er's death was one contributed by Liu Liangmo to the September 1935 issue of *Tidings* (消息 *Xiaoxi*), a monthly journal

40 See Hong-yu Gong, "Music, Nationalism and the Search for Modernity." Gong's Chinese publications on this topic are more specific. Gong Hongyu, "Jidujiao chuanjiaoshi yu Zhongguo xuexiao yinyue jiaoyu zhi kaichuang (shang/xia)" [Christian missionaries and the establishment of musical education in Chinese schools, pts. 1 and 2], *Yinyue yanjiu jikan* [Music studies quarterly], no. 1 (March 2007): 5–17; no. 2 (June 2007): 40–46. For a case study of Christian hymns and their adaptations into patriotic songs in the late Qing period, see Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857–1927* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 127–33.

41 See V. P. Ting, "The Shanghai Songsters," *Huanqiu Zhongguo xueshenghui zhouban* [World's Chinese Students Federation weekly], April 17, 1920, 3.

42 For a recent study, see Guan Xin, "20 shiji 20 niandai jidujiao qingnianhui yinyue tuiguang huodong" [Promotion of music by the YMCA in the 1920s], *Minguo dang'an* [Archives of the Republican era], no. 3 (2013): 102–7.

43 See "Shengda de yinyuehui" [A spectacular concert], *Huda zhouban* [University of Shanghai weekly] 6, no. 5 (April 20, 1931): 13–14.

of the Shanghai YMCA. “The dead is no longer with us,” Liu wrote, “but the great enterprise of using music to raise the awareness of national liberation will need to be carried forward by young people in China who love music.”⁴⁴ The homage paid by Liu Liangmo on this occasion signaled a conscious embrace, by a nascent singing movement, of the patriotic, progressive, and contemporary music that Nie Er had heralded and exemplified.

In the fall of 1934, Liu Liangmo had a particularly memorable experience of singing with several hundred attendees of a YMCA night school, all of them young employees in various professions. Seeing how these young people became energized after a long day’s work, he decided to organize a Community Singing Society (民眾歌詠會 *Minzhong geyonghui*) with the support of the Shanghai YMCA. The goal was to enable common people to acquire a new voice so as to lift their spirit. “The singing by 300 young people may shake the roof of a building; if people all over China could sing the same songs together, their voice would shake the entire world,” Liu believed, “The day when all the people of China know how to sing these strong and powerful songs will be the first day in the life of a ‘New China.’”⁴⁵

Liu Liangmo’s Christian upbringing, his active role in the Student Division of the YMCA since 1932, and his passion for music and choral singing, all primed him for starting a singing club. But an even more powerful factor that compelled him to take choral singing to the community at large in early 1935 was his growing activism in the wake of first the Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and then the Japanese attack on Shanghai in January 1932. To many of his fellow Christians, the threat posed by Japanese aggressions in the early 1930s meant both agonized soul-searching and a historic turning point. Unlike some of the more prominent figures in the YMCA, Liu did not experience the painful tension they felt in finding themselves torn between a Christian vision of pacifism and international brotherhood, on the one side, and their sense of justice and national belonging, on the other. On the contrary, he voiced strong support for resistance against Japan’s imperialist ambitions. He saw no conflict between his Christian faith and his national identity or his desire for national unity. As Japan’s threat to subjugate China grew and his own reflections expanded, Liu would gradually adopt a different vocabulary and articulate his activism through a more secular language. The “community” or “public” that he sought to awaken and organize would therefore be based far less on religious faith than on national identity.

Less than a decade later, while reflecting on the broad impact and appeal of what he had initiated, Liu Liangmo remarked that he had always been “thrilled and impressed by the way church congregations sang,” but he was dismayed that choral singing was “confined to Christians and [has] never passed beyond the church door.” Appreciative of the “inspirational value of community singing,” he wanted to take to the common people

44 Liu Liangmo, “Dao Nie Er” [Mourning Nie Er], *Xiaoxi* [Tidings] 8, no. 7 (September 25, 1935), 11. In an interview with Frank Lenz in the 1940s, Liu Liangmo indicated that he knew Nie Er personally and they were “intimate friends.” See Frank B. Lenz, “He Taught China to Sing,” *Christian Herald* (Chappaqua, NY), October 1942, 30–31, 51–53.

45 Liu Liangmo, “Women yao dasheng de gechang” [We need to sing aloud], *Changcheng* [Great wall] 2, no. 10 (1935): 195. According to a brief report in the *Chinese Christian Advocate* (*Xinghua*), a weekly published by the Methodist Episcopal Church in Shanghai, the Community Singing Society at the YMCA started on February 28, 1935, with Liu Liangmo as one of its two musical directors.

“the possession of church congregations and mission students only.” By 1942, when he made these remarks, Liu took a rightful pride in stating that people all over the country “express themselves through this medium even more passionately than before” 1937, when the War of Resistance began, and that mass singing had grown into “an indigenous Chinese institution.”⁴⁶

To make community singing an indigenous experience, Liu Liangmo began by introducing songs that were easy to learn and would resonate with contemporary Chinese, especially songs that appealed to the young. He collected folk songs, adapted new lyrics to familiar tunes, and promoted screen songs written by Nie Er and other songwriters. He went on the radio, as we have seen, to reach a large audience. He compiled and published a collection called *Youth Songs* (青年歌集 *Qingnian geji*) in 1935 for various singing groups to use. “National salvation songs,” he wrote in the preface to the song book, “are the bugle call of the national salvation movement. Wherever such songs are heard, troops for national salvation are marching on.”⁴⁷ To demonstrate the potential of community singing as well as its effect, he also organized public concerts. The experience gained from overseeing the Community Singing Society he would later present as guidelines for coordinating the mass singing movement in cities large and small across the nation.

In June 1935, hardly four months after its formation, the Community Singing Society gave its first concert in the YMCA auditorium, and the event was a resounding success. Over 150 members performed on two consecutive evenings, singing 14 songs and drawing a combined audience of over 1,200. On the first evening, the head of the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Education was present and heartily endorsed the program, saying community singing ought to be promoted broadly. A news report in *Shen bao* noted that the audience at the concert responded most enthusiastically to “Song of the Big Road,” “Pathbreakers,” and “The Graduation Song.” Thus Liu Liangmo and his singing society were announced to the general public.⁴⁸

Around this time, Lü Ji, who had been writing songs and music scores for films at the Denton Film Studio, organized the Amateur Choir (业余合唱团 *Yeyu hechang-tuan*), initially drawing in over a dozen left-leaning young music lovers. The choir soon attracted members from Liu Liangmo’s group, such as aspiring songwriters Meng Bo (孟波 1916–2015) and Mai Xin (麦新 1914–1947). Following Lü Ji’s example, Meng Bo too began teaching songs at YWCA night schools, schools that, according to historian Emily Honig, were increasingly a training ground for labor activists and would soon include nationalism and anti-imperialism in their educational agenda.⁴⁹ It was also during

46 See Lenz, “He Taught China to Sing,” 51.

47 Quoted in Liu Liangmo, “Liangnian lai zhi Zhongguo geyong yundong” [The mass singing movement in China over the past two years], *Kangzhan yuekan* [War of Resistance monthly], no. 8 (1939): 33–36.

48 See “Qingnian hui yinyue dahui shengkuang” [Spectacular concert by the YMCA], *Shen bao*, June 25, 1935. The *Shen bao* report was later reprinted in a newly started publication *Yule zhoubao* [Variety weekly] 1, no. 1 (July 7, 1935): 17.

49 See “Meng Bo koushu” [Oral account by Meng Bo], in Li Danyang and Liu Nanhong, eds., *Kangzhan shiqi de Zhongguo wenyi koushu shilu* [Literature and arts activities in China during the War of Resistance, oral records] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015), 348–354, esp. 348. See Honig, *Sisters and Strangers*, 221–23.

this time that Liu Liangmo invited Lü Ji to visit his Community Singing Society and to teach its members some basic musical knowledge.⁵⁰

A year later, Liu Liangmo organized the third and last concert of his singing club. On the early morning of June 7, 1936, at the Public Recreation Ground south of downtown Shanghai, some 700 young men and women, along with about 150 schoolchildren, stood in formation and waited as thousands of city residents, with tickets they had picked up the day before, lined up to enter the athletic field. Those young men and women were members of two branches of the YMCA Community Singing Society, and the children were the brass band of the Moore Memorial Church.

Promptly at 10 o'clock, Liu Liangmo, standing on top of a tall stool, started the concert by addressing through a bullhorn the more than 3,000 people gathered on the field.⁵¹ In both size and location, this was a choral concert unprecedented in the history of Shanghai. About five songs into the program, Liu the conductor-in-chief turned around and invited all those present to follow him and learn to sing "Save China" (救中國 "Jiu Zhongguo"), a song of three simple lines set to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." A few quick rounds of practice later, everyone in the field began to sing along.

This well-publicized event attracted much media attention, with news reports and photographs appearing in a range of publications in the following weeks. Analogous to cinematic projections, those news photographs provided visual illustrations of what mass singing was about and looked like. The *China Pictorial* (中國畫報 *Zhongguo huabao*), a mainstream monthly with extensive domestic and international distributions, covered the concert in its "National News" section, along with photographs of students in Beijing protesting Japanese encroachments.⁵² A poet who was at the scene published a poem in a well-known literary journal to express his excitement and marvel at the power of a collective singing voice, equating it with both natural forces and modern industrial energy:

This rhythm of iron and cadence of steel
pulses like electric current
and erupts like a volcano.
In an instant—maybe right now—
the old world may crumble into a pile of rubble.⁵³

The June 1936 concert demonstrated the potential of a singing practice that had begun with far less contentious claims. As the female members of the singing society began the theme song of *New Women*, according to one contemporary account, a policeman on the scene ordered Liu Liangmo to stop, apparently worried that the large gathering would lead to a political demonstration. The conductor ignored the request and stopped only when

50 See Liu Liangmo, "Minzhong geyong" [Community singing], *Shanghai qingnian* 35, no. 34 (1935): 5–7. See also Wu, *Renmin yinyuejia Lü Ji zhuan*, 156.

51 See Mo Zhihen, "Shanghai minzhong geyong dahui: sanqianren de da hechang" [Community singing concert in Shanghai: a chorus of 3,000], *Xin shaonian* [New youth] 1, no. 12 (June 1936): 17–19.

52 See *Zhonghua huabao* [China Pictorial], no. 43, (June 1936): 5.

53 Bai Lang, "Zai minzhong geyong hui shang" [At the community singing concert], *Wenxue jie* [Literary field] 1, no. 3 (1936): 157.

the song was over. He then turned to the audience and asked, “We are singing a Chinese song in China. We have the right to do so, don’t we?” A thunderous “Right!” roared over, and Liu declared that the concert would continue as planned.⁵⁴

Less than two weeks later and without any explanation, the YMCA of Shanghai announced that it would no longer sponsor activities of the Community Singing Society or assume any responsibility.⁵⁵ In July, some 15 singing societies in Shanghai, including the Community Singing Society and the Amateur Choir, jointly proposed a song rally on the first anniversary of Nie Er’s death. Yet the police of the French Concession intervened and denied the organizers’ request for a venue, citing the Chinese police’s disapproval of the public concert held by the Community Singing Society earlier in June.⁵⁶ As a result, the rally could not take place as planned. Instead, some 400 singers turned their last practice into an impromptu commemorative meeting, with Lü Ji presiding and delivering a keynote speech.⁵⁷

Yet such a turn of events could not stop the singing movement from gaining momentum. On the contrary, the movement became unstoppable as singing societies among students and the general public mushroomed across the country. In June 1936, Tao Xingzhi (陶行知 1891–1946), a renowned public intellectual, wrote to hail Liu Liangmo’s endeavors, regarding community singing as the most desirable form for a new mass music.⁵⁸ Within days, Zou Taofen (邹韬奋 1895–1944), an influential journalist and a close associate of Tao’s, wrote about the intense emotion and hopefulness expressed at a community singing concert that the Hong Kong YMCA and YWCA had organized in a public venue, with over 3,000 attendees.⁵⁹ Toward the end of 1936, Liu Liangmo described, in a YMCA communiqué, the activities of singing societies in many cities across the country. He also reported that the city associations of the YMCA had formed a commission to promote mass singing, with Lü Ji as one of its members.⁶⁰ Notably, the term in frequent use by this point was “mass singing” (大眾歌詠 *dazhong geyong*) rather than “community singing,”

54 See Mo, “Shanghai minzhong geyong dahui.” See also Fang, “Shanghai minzhong geyonghui disanjie yinyue dahui ji” [An account of the third concert of the Shanghai community singing society], *Shanghai qingnian* 36, no. 23 (June 1936): 4–5.

55 See “Minzhong geyong hui jieshu” [Community singing concert concluded], *Shanghai qingnian* 36, no. 23 (June 1936): 8. Lü Ji indicated that the Community Singing Society, with over 1,000 members, was forced to disband in August 1936. See Lü Ji, “Weida er pinruo de gesheng: yijiu sanliu nian de yinyue yundong de jiesuan” [Magnificent and yet weak songs: an overview of the music movement in 1936], *Guangming* [Illuminations] 2, no. 2 (1937): 884–88, esp. 885.

56 See “Fazujie bufang ganshe Nie Er jinian dahui linshi shouzu” [French Concession police intervene, Nie Er commemorative meeting temporarily stopped], *Diansheng* 5, no. 29 (July 1936): 709.

57 See “Linshi juxing Nie Er zhuidao dahui” [Impromptu memorial service for Nie Er held], *Diansheng* 5, no. 29 (July 1936): 708. See also Wu, *Renmin yinyuejia Lü Ji zhuan*, 160.

58 Tao Xingzhi, “Cong dazhong gequ jiangdao minzhong geyong tuan” [From mass songs to community singing societies], *Shenghuo ribao xingqi zengkan* [Sunday supplement to *Life Daily*] 1, no. 4 (June 28, 1936): 37–38.

59 Zou Taofen, “Minzhong geyonghui qiantu wuliang” [Community singing society has a bright future], originally published June 1936, collected in *Taofen wenji* [Collected writings by Zou Taofen] (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1959), vol. 1, 159–60.

60 See Liu Liangmo, “Dazhong geyong tongxun” (Mass singing communiqué), *Tonggong* [Tung Kung] (“An open forum for city associations published monthly by the City Division of the National Committee of the YMCAs of China”), no. 157 (December 1936): 17–19.

an inflection of the vision of the cultural left that bespoke a more inclusive and more activist understanding of the nation.

In November 1936, a volume entitled *Songs of the Masses* (大眾歌聲 *Dazhong gesheng*) was published to recommend about 90 songs to the rising singing movement. Edited by Mai Xin and Meng Bo, members of singing societies organized by Liu Liangmo and Lü Ji, the volume included an essay by Lü Ji on the new music movement and another by Liu Liangmo on how to perform and teach national salvation songs. The two essays aptly illustrated the former's role as a prominent theorist advocating for a new, public-oriented music and the latter's position as an experienced organizer and conductor.

A SINGING NATION MUST BE HEARD

The aftermath of the June 1936 concert brought even greater recognition to Liu Liangmo and his singing society, and it helped clarify his objectives and made him ever more dedicated to mass singing on a national stage. In January 1937, the widely circulated pictorial *Young Companion* published a photograph of Liu Liangmo conducting a YMCA concert in Fuzhou, Fujian, with 3,000 participants.⁶¹ After finishing his tour of southeastern China, he took a wartime YMCA service team to northern China and taught, on one occasion, "March of the Volunteers" to some 5,000 soldiers in barracks close to the front.

In the meantime, Lü Ji also left Shanghai in early 1937 and eventually found his way to Yan'an, the Communist headquarters in northwestern China. Warmly received there as a distinguished composer, Lü Ji continued to write music and play a leading role in the creation of new and revolutionary music he had always advocated for. When the Lu Xun Academy of Art (鲁迅艺术学院 *Lu Xun yishu xueyuan*) was founded in April 1938, he was appointed head of its music department and, from that position, would exert a lasting influence on the development of a new musical tradition in twentieth-century China.

When the War of Resistance broke out in July 1937, Liu Liangmo actively assumed the role of guiding a national mass singing movement forward. An urgent task for "all the singers in China," he stated, was to teach the 450 million Chinese, in the shortest time possible, two songs: "Down with Japan" (打日本歌 "Da Riben ge") and "March of the Volunteers." Singing, theater, and visual arts, he believed, would be the three most effective means for national mobilization. Singing, in particular, would serve as "the most powerful bugle call" (最有力的军号 *zuiyouli de junhao*) summoning the nation to rise and fight.⁶² "We want to make sure all the soldiers in China will sing 'Arise, people who refuse to be slaves' as they grasp their guns and charge toward the enemy, for the goal of winning a magnificent war of national liberation."⁶³

61 See *Young Companion*, no. 124 (January 1937): 13.

62 Liu Liangmo, "Zhanshi jiaoyu zhong zhi geyongjie de dongyuan" [Mobilization through singing in wartime education], *Zhanshi jiaoyu xunkan* [Wartime education trimonthly], no. 2 (October 5, 1937): 7; Liu Liangmo, "Kangzhan qizhong de geyong gongzuo" [The work of mass singing during the War of Resistance], *Dikang sanrikan* [Resistance semiweekly], no. 7 (September 9, 1937): 10.

63 Liu, "Kangzhan qizhong de geyong gongzuo," 10.

Liu Liangmo continued to emphasize the importance of organizing public singing events and making songs accessible in different dialects. He called for a national center to coordinate local efforts and the training of effective leaders. His guidelines for carrying out the singing movement during the war suggested many practices and tactics that mobile theatrical groups had consciously adopted at this time. Yet, on hearing people from different walks of life sing, he came to appreciate more than ever the auditory impact of a collective singing voice. Just like gunfire and artillery explosions, passionate singing, he came to believe, would also cause panic in the enemy.

The belief that music and singing would provide a powerful weapon in the War of Resistance was pivotal to Liu Liangmo's passion and commitment. To the extent that singing as a weapon is a metaphor, this belief expresses a deep appreciation of the affective as well as motivating power of music, or simply collective voicing, in asserting human subjectivity and will. At the same time, the fact that music or singing was embraced as a weapon, in a literal sense as well, reveals a specific condition of war or emergency. For the Chinese, the War of Resistance was a situation in which, invaded and violated by a militarily far superior foreign power, the entire nation had to be rallied for self-defense. Spiritual resilience and a collective will to resist would enable the imperiled nation to overcome technological disadvantages in modern warfare and outlast its enemy. Such resilience was at the heart of the song "March of the Volunteers." A call for action and bravery, it urges a "final outcry" (最後的吼聲 *zuihou de housheng*) from each and every member of the nation so that a magnificent chorus may be heard and the nation may be recognized as an indomitable and resolute community.

"We of course do not think that by getting together and singing a few songs, we will eliminate the calamity facing our nation," commented Zou Taofen after witnessing the YMCA concert in Hong Kong in June 1936, "but we believe the liberation of the entire nation depends on everyone in the nation understanding the seriousness of the national crisis and being willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation."⁶⁴ Community singing to Zou Taofen was a concrete and innovative form of a new mass culture that was necessary for informing and mobilizing the nation. His comments remind us that we need to see the mass singing movement, as well as the new sonic culture of which it was a key component, as a continuation of the general project, undertaken in earnest by reform-minded intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, of awakening the Chinese nation to the threats posed by modern imperialism and colonialism. While this enduring project of awakening the nation valorized the formative power of culture, its advocates had insisted on a systematic cultural transformation as well. They had been keenly responsive to changing historical conditions and evolving media, from print culture to sound technologies to cinema.

The mass singing movement, as we have seen, grew rapidly in response to new sound technologies and a complex of contemporary events and practices. It helped create a new sonic culture not only by bringing forth new vocal communities but also by making sound itself a powerful new medium in social organization and mobilization. During the War of Resistance, it became ever clearer to Liu Liangmo that mass singing ought to soar above the violent and deafening wartime soundscape so as to interject clarity and purpose for those fighting for their nation's survival. The sound of people singing contributed to

64 Zou, "Minzhong geyonghui," 159.

the war effort when it was heard and experienced as a sonic intervention. It had to be received and felt as a pulsating physical force.

With this understanding, Liu Liangmo stressed the importance of radio broadcasting during the war, as it would take singing voices to the front in spite of ruined roads and railways. Radio proved to be a more reliable and practical technology for the projection of sound than cinema, especially in combat zones. Although essential elements of the film industry in Shanghai, along with human resources, were regrouped and relocated to the wartime capital, Chongqing, as we have learned from Weihong Bao's recent study, the production as well as mobile exhibition of cinema, heroic efforts notwithstanding, was still severely constrained by the conditions of war. This may in part explain why no memorable screen or theme songs emerged from Chinese cinema during the war period. Instead, there was much appreciation of radio broadcasting. In "combining the affective force of voice and the speed of communication technology," it had the potential to become "the most powerful weapon of war."⁶⁵

Yet how to fully grasp the implications of a sonorous China that emerged in the 1930s remains a conceptual challenge. In February 1941, three and one-half years into the War of Resistance, Lin Yutang, the eminent essayist and translator then living in the United States, wrote for the journal *Asia* to introduce the "singing patriots of China." He opened his article by stating that "the present war in China is an amazing war in many respects," because, among its many impacts, it "has compelled a complete social and economic break-up and consequent rebuilding of the entire nation. Incidentally, it has brought many surprising results in the social life of the people. Mass singing is one of them." "One of the most inspiring sights today in free China," he continued, "whether at the front or in the rear, is to see thousands of people join in mass singing of war and patriotic songs. This is a spectacle never seen before in China—unheard of until six years ago."⁶⁶

Lin Yutang was absolutely right to see the Second Sino-Japanese War as bringing about a violent and profound transformation of Chinese society, an uprooting process that necessitated a "rebuilding of the entire nation." He was also keenly perceptive of the broad reach as well as the historical significance of the mass singing movement. But the full impact of the movement that spread like wildfire was sonic rather than visual in nature, and mass singing was not so much a sight or spectacle to behold as it was an enveloping sonic wave that often threw into question the assumption of an observer's distance or objectivity. Lin Yutang's account reveals a predominant reliance on visual metaphors in gauging the impact of a sonic culture, a conceptual limitation that persists in different forms even today. Unless we truly grasp the sensory implications as well as the affective power of mass singing, our understanding of a formative stage of modern Chinese culture may well remain incomplete and inadequate. We may also find it hard to make sense of many phenomena in a China that turned profoundly sonorous and assertive in response to war and revolution, a condition very much the norm rather than the exception in the history of the modern world.

⁶⁵ Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 307.

⁶⁶ Lin Yutang, "Singing Patriots of China," *Asia* 16, no. 2 (February 1941): 70–72.

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