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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Wengongtuan and the Rural Literary Popularization Movement in Yan'an

Abstract This paper takes the folk song collection movement in Yan'an as an example to examine the role of the *wengongtuan* (The League of Literary and Artistic Workers) in organizing the rural literary popularization movement in the 1940s. Dispatched by the Communist Party of China (CPC), *wengongtuan* members took on the task of mobilizing peasants into cultural production, and realized a self-reconstruction in the process of integrating themselves into the lives of revolutionary peasants. The idea of the *wengongtuan* derived from the CPC's theory of the mass line—"from the masses and to the masses"—which laid the foundation of New Democratic culture in the 1940s.

Keywords literary popularization, new peasant poet/singers, intellectuals' self-reconstruction, mass line

The rural literary popularization movement in the 1940s was initiated by left-wing intellectuals, and became integrated into the nationwide War of Resistance against the Japanese. What distinguished it from previous literary popularization movements was its institutional innovation, through which millions of peasants were mobilized into cultural production. This paper takes the folksong collection movement in Yan'an as an example to examine the role of the *wengongtuan* (The League of Literary and Artistic Workers) in organizing the rural literary popularization movement.

A recent cinematic representation of *wengongtuan* was Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* in the 1980s. It depicts a young *wengongtuan* member, Gu Qing, goes the countryside to collect folksong. The film is adapted from a memoir written by Ke Lan, a *wengongtuan* member, *Echo from the Valley* (*Shengu huisheng*), which is based on his personal experience in collecting folksong. In this film, Gu Qing is called a *gongjia ren* (public servant) by villagers—a person working in an organization for public good. The new world he comes from and represents displays a huge contrast with the traditional world in which Cui Qiao, the female

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protagonist, grows up. Villagers could not understand the meaning of Communist Party of China (CPC)'s project of collecting folksong. Folksong, or *suanqu* (sour tunes) has nothing to do with their current conditions, in the villagers' perception. Moreover, it is sometimes a burden for them to host *gongjia ren* in their own homes. The miscommunication between Gu Qing and the villagers raises questions about what literary and artistic workers are doing in the countryside, and what is the purpose of mobilizing the peasants in this way. Cui Qiao's tragic death at the end of the film suggests a negative view of this movement. However, Chen Kaige overlooked the historical context of 1940s, a historical moment in the uprising of the revolutionary masses, which included the poor village girl Cui Qiao.

Dispatched by the CPC, *wengongtuan* members took on the task of mobilizing peasants into cultural production, and realized a self-reconstruction in the process of integrating themselves into the lives of revolutionary peasants. The organic principle of the *wengongtuan* derived from the CPC's theory of the mass line, "from the masses and to the masses." Unlike the popularization movement of the 1930s, at Yan'an the masses were no longer merely defined as a class category, but became viewed instead as a revolutionary collective of all who were devoted to the revolutionary enterprise—all the Chinese people. The *wengongtuan* developed from and further substantiated the Yan'an model of participatory mass politics. An idea of literary democracy developed from the *wengongtuan*'s practice, a point not yet fully addressed in previous scholarship, and often misread as simple propaganda or literary utopianism.

The *Wengongtuan*: A Conscious Political Mobilization

After Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature in 1942, a large-scale movement for the collection of folk art and culture had been organized in the Base Areas. Unlike the earlier folk song collection movement in May Fourth period, the Yan'an folk song collection movement was based on successful rural mobilization. As He Qifang wrote in the introduction to *Shanbei minge xuan* (Selection of folksong in North Shanxi), folk songs were mostly collected directly from the peasants, and, more importantly, this was done "with respect."[1] He Qifang highlighted this idea of respect and equality in the process of collecting folksongs, stating that "the key point was the attitude of respecting them."[2] These ideals were put into action by the *wengongtuan* system, a unique semi-literary and semi-military institution affiliated with Eighth Route Army and, later, the People's Liberation Army. Instead of producing a comprehensive

[1] He Qifang, 1979, 148.
[2] Ibid.

account of the history of *wengongtuan*, I will focus on how the relationship between intellectuals and peasants was transformed by the idea of equality in the process of folk song collection. With the aid of the *wengongtuan* system, peasants were encouraged to fully participate in creating literature in familiar forms and in their own language. Nonetheless, this does not mean that peasants were trained to be modern professional writers, or an organ of the Party's policy. A new structure was developed to guarantee the peasants' subjective and active role in literary creation and stimulate their literary productivity. This new structure was the literary popularization movement, and it sprang from the conceptualization of the masses in the theory of New Democratic period.

The *wengongtuan* system can be traced back to various propaganda groups affiliated with the army in the early years of the War of Resistance. These groups employed all kinds of traditional entertainment activities to spread the message of resistance and boost the war effort. The Yan'an *wengongtuan*, however, started a wholesale transformation of entertainment. It was aimed at creating a "new national literature and culture," as Ke Zhongping declared at the inauguration of Mass Entertainment Reform Association in 1938.

Ke Zhongping (1902–1964), formerly a poet of Creation Society of the 1920s, joined the CPC in 1930 in Shanghai. Ke arrived in Yan'an in 1937, and actively promoted the street poetry movement, the recitation movement, and the Mass Opera Troupes. He was elected vice-president of the All-China Literary and Artistic Workers Association in 1949. After 1949, he went to Xi'an to take charge of literary and cultural activities in the north-western region. At the inauguration of the Mass Entertainment Reform Association in 1938, Ke Zhongping insisted that entertainment was "our right," and was something of which the Chinese people had been deprived by the Japanese invasion. He also noted that the term entertainment might sound "not serious," but declared that "since the masses called folk arts and literature entertainment, we will follow them in adopting this term."[3] Using the term familiar to the masses was a significant change in the collecting of folk culture, and resulted from Ke's positive attitude toward the masses as a potential revolutionary force. Entertainment was an integral part of their lives and their familiar mode of expression, Ke argued. Therefore, the various forms of folk culture or "entertainment" could be used to help the masses realize their role in the War of Resistance, and new singers and artists would emerge from the masses. Entertainment was thus transformed to being a means of self-empowerment grasped by the masses themselves. The focal point of Ke Zhongping's agenda was no longer the folk culture per se, but the growth of the masses.

Ke Zhongping's new approach to promoting folk culture was elaborated upon

[3] Ke Zhongping, 2002, Vol. 3, 75–77.

in Mao Zedong's interpretation of political mobilization in his "On Protracted War" in the same year. "On Protracted War" was originally a lecture given by Mao to the Yan'an Research Association of the War of Resistance in 1938. Consciously distancing himself from other predictions on the future of war, Mao called attention to the power of the ordinary Chinese people, in addition to political parties and the armies. He argued that the first and foremost task of the revolution was to ensure that the ordinary people understood the importance of the war. "On Protracted War" began by emphasizing that a firm and clear political goal for the war was a prerequisite for effective mobilization. "What is political mobilization? First and foremost, we need to clarify the goal of the war to the army and the people. We must make every soldier fully understand what we are fighting for, and what the relation is between them and the war. The goal of the War of Resistance against the Japanese is to 'expel Japanese Imperialism and establish a new China with freedom and equality.'"[4] This was a typical nationalist discourse—the outcome of the War of Resistance depended on the thorough mobilization of the masses.

Mao's analysis of the war did not stop at the level of nationalistic defense. He especially explicated the role of Soviet Union, not only as a friend of China in the geopolitical sense, but also as the first and only socialist country in the world at that time. He argued that the War of Resistance against Japan was not merely a war between two nations but "the result of the development of the general crisis of world capitalism which began with World War I; this general crisis is driving the capitalist countries into a new war and, above all, driving the fascist countries into new war adventures… but, owing to the existence of the Soviet Union and the growing political consciousness of the people of the world, great revolutionary wars will undoubtedly emerge from this war to oppose all counter-revolutionary wars, thus giving this war the character of a struggle for perpetual peace."[5] This "political consciousness" he expected to arise in the Chinese masses had the dual character of being both nationalistic and proletarian, and would be the decisive factor in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

The CPC's rural mobilization was driven by the convergence of nationalist and anti-capitalist visions. "On Protracted War" marks a significant change from the former so-called "passive mobilization,"—the forced national mobility by the Japanese invasion—to the "active mobilization"—the fight for emancipation in the national sense and class sense, and a subjective act of self-empowerment. This idea of political mobilization was reflected in the changing relationship between the ordinary masses and intellectual groups. There had been a sustained

[4] Mao Zedong, 1965, Vol. 2, 155.
[5] Ibid., 149.

effort to bridge the gap between intellectuals and the masses in the 1930s, including the Left-League's literary popularization movement in urban areas, the Rural Reconstruction movement, and Tao Xingzhi's mass education programs, etc. All these means of literary popularization, mass education and rural reconstruction had been experimented before Yan'an. After the beginning of the war, intellectuals were thrown into the same situation as the peasants, and a collective identity of the two, based on political consciousness, was now conceived in Yan'an rural cultural activities. The example of Ke Zhongping's "Song of Mass Theatre" reveals a political vision of the relationship between intellectuals and peasants.[6] A fundamental change had occurred in the attitude to the masses, which enabled the appropriation of folk entertainment forms. This new relationship between intellectuals—represented by the *wengongtuan* members—and the masses redefined the concept of literary creation in the 1940s.

According to statistics on the Mass Theatre's cultural performances during the eight years of the War of Resistance, *wengongtuan* members of the Mass Theatre spent three days out of every eight in the countryside. They walked through 23 counties out of 31 in the border areas. They gave some 1,475 performances, and their audiences were estimated to total around 2,600,000. During these eight years, they created 49 new dramas, revised 15 historical dramas, and learned 15 dramas from local opera troupes. Ke Zhongping's idea to "let the flowers of victory bloom in the wasteland" had been actualized by the end of the War of Resistance. A strong passion for enlightening the peasants is evident in the song he composed about the Mass Theatre. However, the song's use of the new term "democracy" merits more attention. In 1943, in a private meeting with Mass Theatre leaders, Mao warmly praised them for their rural tours and related their activities to his own thinking on New Culture. According to Yang Zuixiang's 杨醉乡 memoir, Mao asked: What is new culture? The ideological construct that represents and serves for the new political and economic forces, is New Culture. His characterization of the Yan'an literary popularization movement as New Culture was closely related to and determined by the emergence of those

[6] Ke Zhongping, 2002, Vol. 2, 75. It reads:
Where have you come from? From the masses. 你们从哪达来？从老百姓中来
Where are you going? Back to the masses. 你们又要到哪达去，到老百姓中去
We are here to learn precious experiences from the masses. 我们是来学习老百姓的宝贵经验
They've lived here for countless generations. 你看老百姓已经活了几千、几万年
The power of the masses is deep and huge. 你看老百姓的力量深无底，大无边
We suck at the breast of the masses. 我们是来吃老百姓的奶
We are here to farm the wasteland for the masses. 我们是来为老百姓开垦荒山
We come and go freely in the democratic border areas. 在民主的边区，我们自由的走来走去
We will let the flowers of victory bloom in the wasteland. 我们要叫胜利花开遍，花开遍，在荒山.

"political and economic forces," the mobilization of the revolutionary masses in cooperative production activities and democratic experiments in the Base Areas.

In the "Talks at Yan'an Forum of Art and Literature," Mao quoted a famous line from Lu Xun: "Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers, Head-bowed, like a willing ox I serve the children" (*hengmei lengdui qianfuzhi, fushou ganwei ruziniu*).[7] He then further elaborated the idea of the revolutionary masses, saying, *qianfu* (a thousand people) here should refer to our enemy… and *ruziniu* (the willing ox) is our proletariat class and our people. Every comrade member, every revolutionary, and all the revolutionary literary and artistic workers should learn from Lu Xun and work as the *ruziniu* of the proletariat class and Chinese people."[8] Through reinterpreting Lu Xun's poem, Mao removed the sentimental tone of self-sacrifice and replaced it with a "them and us" confrontation, based not just on resistance to the foreign invader but on the antagonism between capitalism and proletarian revolution. Yan'an cultural policies, the work of Ke Zhongping and local *wengongtuan* members, and Mao's pronouncements display the constant efforts to integrate theory and practice in this field. These efforts were concentrated on two interrelated elements, the self-reconstruction of intellectuals and the cultivation of new peasant artists. I will investigate how the idea of New Culture was established in the peasants' self-empowerment and reflected in the intellectuals' self-reconstruction.

Xiaxiang (Going to the Countryside): The Self-Reconstruction of Intellectuals

The majority of *wengongtuan* members were young students with only a rudimentary education and little literary background, but they received further training in Yan'an. According to Ai Ke'en's memoir, there were around 20 literary and artistic associations and groups at that time in Yan'an. Among them, Luyi was the oldest and largest. Compared with the other groups, Luyi could be considered a professional arts school, but it initiated a quite different non-professional style of schooling. Students were encouraged to go the countryside and learn from the peasants. This process was called the Big Luyi, as opposed to the professional education they received on campus, which was called the Small Luyi.

The slogan "from the masses and to the masses" gradually became a school motto in Luyi, especially after Mao's Yan'an speech to the school on May 30, 1942, during the Rectification Movement. Small Luyi provided on-campus arts education, but Big Luyi referred to the vast lively world of the masses. By

[7] Mao Zedong, 1965, Vol. 3, 96.
[8] Ibid.

building a bridge between the two spheres, Luyi transcended the scope of conventional modern education and introduced an idea of mobility and self-reconstruction. This mobility of the *wengongtuan* was quite different from the social chaos and migration forced by the war. A memoir of the time by Ke Lan illustrates how an urban intellectual youth underwent self-reconstruction in Big Luyi.

Ke Lan arrived Yan'an in March 1938 and left for Beijing around March 1949. His memoir, entitled *Ten Years in Yan'an* (*Yan'an shinian*), documents his own experience of these cultural activities and the mass literary movement. This memoir, as he said, "mostly focuses on the life of workers/soldiers/peasants and the self-reconstruction of intellectuals, and especially on cultural activities."[9] After graduating from Luyi in 1941, he was assigned to work in the Literary Association of border area ShanGanNing as a journalist. Besides of *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao*), the *Mass Newspaper in Border Areas* (*Bianqu qunzhongbao*), for which Ke Lan worked, was the major newspaper in Yan'an, concentrating on cultural activities, peasant life, and publishing peasants' works. The *Mass Newspaper in Border Area* is much lower and more accessible to ordinary peasants than other literary journals circulating among intellectual writers in Yan'an. As Ke Lan recalled, work groups like his were "different from Luyi and Wenkang (the Literary Association of National Defense). We are local branches in the border area. We, fifty to sixty persons, are mostly spending our time wondering from one village to another."[10] He used a special term *xiaxiang* (going to the countryside) for this way of life.

In his memoir, Ke Lan highlighted "eating at peasants' houses" (*chi paifan*) as an important element in *xiaxiang*. Ke Lan provides a vivid account of *chi paifan* in which he begins to think for the first time about the relationship between himself and his work. Ke Lan asked for some cash to purchase food when preparing to leave for his assigned village. His director told him with a simile, "No, you don't need to carry money when you *xiaxiang*. And there are no restaurants in the countryside. There is no place to buy food even if you have time. It's better to eat at peasant's home."[11] He gave an introduction letter to Ke Lan, stating the background and the purpose for going to the countryside, then said, "The county government leader will refer you to the village head, and then the village head will assign you to a peasant's home each day.[12]

Under siege from both the Nationalist Party of China and the Japanese, more and more revolutionaries were coming to Yan'an, and the burden of supporting them became heavier for the local peasants. A campaign for the mass cooperative

[9] Ke Lan, 1996, Vol. 5, 512–13.
[10] Ibid., 785.
[11] Ibid., 531.
[12] Ibid.

production had been launched in the early 1940s "in order to support the war, to cope with the enemy's policy of 'Burn all, kill all, and loot all,' and to provide disaster relief." Mao further elaborated his theory of the mass line in this mass cooperative production initiative. In his speech at a reception in honor of the labor heroes of the ShanGanNing border region—later titled "Get Organized"—Mao argued that "economic work [should be viewed] as a broad movement or as an extensive front, [not] only as an expedient for meeting financial deficits."[13] Mao wanted to use all means, including cultural resources, "to organize the strength of the masses," not just to consolidate the power of the CPC's power but because it was, he said, "the only road to liberation for the people, the only road from poverty to prosperity, and the only road to victory in the War of Resistance."[14] Mao turned the integration of intellectuals with the masses into a key method of facilitating the self-cultivation of the Chinese communists. In this way, communists distanced themselves from the bureaucratic style of the Nationalist Party. Mao acknowledged that the communists, like the Nationalist party, had to collect grain from the peasants in the cause of national salvation, but he addressed the question of what the communists could give the peasants in return. This was the question that every *wengongtuan* member confronted in the process of *xiaxiang*, and through which a new connection between revolutionary intellectuals and the ordinary peasants was established. William Hinton once said that the connection with the peasants made through *chi paifan* was a thousand times stronger than that made through political meetings. The efficacy of the *wengongtuan* member's "introduction letter" was secured by the military and political authority of the CPC in the border areas, but each individual *wengongtuan* member still had much to overcome when they arrived in a peasant's home. Ke Lan described the dramatic effect *chi paifan* had on him. He was deeply touched by the unexpected generosity of the peasants. He often brooded guiltily about it: "What on earth can I eat at his house? What should I pay for this dinner? I wouldn't question it, if I had money and was asked to pay. I would think that was not unreasonable. Isn't it a fair deal that I pay and eat? But now, I don't pay anything. Am I a person eating a free lunch?"[15] His answer was: "Of course not! I'm here to work for the peasants. Therefore they treat me good dinner. Though this is absolutely true, I still ask myself—is what I have done for them worthy of a meal, of their generous hospitality? "[16]

Ke Lan's experience was shared by a great many young revolutionaries who left the cities for Yan'an. The experience of *chi paifan* raises a pointed question about what it meant to "work for the people." Ke Lan said, "We know the idea of

[13] Mao Zedong, 1965, Vol. 3, 155.
[14] Ibid., 157.
[15] Ke Lan, 1996, Vol. 5, 531.
[16] Ibid.

working for the people, and we are enthusiastic about it. But when we relate it to practice, some things are still unclear."[17] The unclear part, which was also the central problem for left-wing intellectuals involved in the literary popularization movement in the 1930s, became clear through eating at a peasant's house. Since they could not pay for their food, a *wengongtuan* member had to work with the peasant family as an exchange. This was a turning point for revolutionary intellectuals in their relationship with the peasants.

A new mode of communication emerged when a pecuniary relationship was annulled. It was through the process of working together that intellectuals and peasants gained an opportunity of communicating with each other equally and effectively. The idea of undertaking physical/farming work as a means of intellectual self-reconstruction has been severely criticized, especially in the post-Cultural Revolution era, and so the call for "intellectuals to serve the worker/soldiers/peasants" in Yan'an has also been interpreted as precursor of later anti-intellectual campaigns. This viewpoint overlooks the vibrant social dynamic contained in the principle of working alongside the peasants.

Ke Lan did not mention the hardship of work during his stay in the countryside. He ate with a peasant family, worked with them on their land, and endured the hardship of laboring and the happiness of harvest. A couple of months later, peasants sung folk songs for him, since one of his tasks was collecting folksong.

At first, though, the peasants had not felt obliged to help *wengongtuan* members with their folk song collecting. They just treated Ke Lan as a respected guest from the upper level government; but such guests usually came demanding taxes rather than folk songs, so they were wary. Ke Lan tried to convince them: "We are here to serve you. We collect folk song in order to make sure that your lives are expressed and recorded. We are doing revolutionary work. Why don't you want to tell us?"[18] *Wengongtuan* members had their own vision of the revolutionary agenda, but the peasants had their own world and their own concerns.

Farm work was a second key element in the path of spiritual development experienced by *wengongtuan* members like Ke Lan. The point of sending intellectuals to the countryside and working together with peasants was not to increase agrarian production or supplement the rural workforce. Intellectuals struggled to learn farming skills. Sometimes their participation was nothing but interference in the peasants' work. The importance of working with the peasants was that it conveyed a message of active outreach, of seeking to understand another's way of life, and of identifying with each other. In Ke Lan's view, intellectuals and peasants quickly became friends from working together: "And it

[17] Ibid., 532
[18] Ibid., 548.

is only after we take them as our real friends, not rationally, but emotionally, that we can manage to reconstruct ourselves."[19]

Superficially, it might seem that these young intellectuals were being targeted for reconstruction in the countryside, that they were passively involved in a Yan'an rectification movement. Ke Lan's account of *xiaxiang* tells a different story. In this process of bringing no money, eating with peasant family, and working with peasants, the idea of work acquired a new political meaning. It signified an active engagement with the status quo and making an effort to change it. The noun-adjective *laodong* prefixed to "reconstruction" should be understood in this way: it was based on manual laboring work—farming—but transcended it, engendering an emotional tie between peasants and intellectuals. The act of working together was driven by an idea of equality and it signified the emergence of a new morality in the CPC's revolution.

Yan'an *wengongtuan* members went to the countryside not with ideas investment or technology as the Rural Constructionists did, but with the idea of equality. The non-pecuniary relationship between *wengongtuan* members and peasants was not coincidental; it embodied a conscious rejection of the commercialized cultural production of the urban areas. In the 1950s, the idea of *xiaxiang* was summarized as "eat together, live together, work together." For those who went to the ethnic minority areas, there is one more element of egalitarian "togetherness"—"sing and dance together." The focal point of the "four equals" was not the activities themselves but their involvement in the process of building a new society. *Wengongtuan* member's self-reconstruction did not take place within a self-contained circle, flowing simply from the Party's order to the intellectual's own mind. Nor were *wengongtuan* member's able to make a direct contribution to improving peasants' living conditions. Instead, they addressed the peasants' minds, seeking to empower them to reconstruct their way of life. As Rebecca Karl has argued, this effort constituted an "integration of theoretical precepts—based upon education and wider knowledge—with the everyday experiences and existence of the masses, generally confined to local concerns."[20] This integration was initiated and manifested by a voluntary change in status by the elite of society. Yan'an's call for the integration of intellectuals with the masses was a response to the duality of elite culture and popular culture, which had been inherent from the dawn of modern Chinese literature.

New Peasant Poets/Singers

Two years after Mao's Talks at Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature, the Border

[19] Ibid., 553.
[20] Rebecca Karl, 2010, 58.

Areas Literature and Education Convention was held in Yan'an in 1944. Ke Zhongping's view, this described this as "a review of the new literary and artistic movement by both peasants and us… an unprecedented grand convention of cultural heroes and literary professionals."[21] Many well-known new peasant poets such as Sun Wanfu 孙万福, Li Pu 李卜, Han Qixiang 韩起祥 and Wang Tingyou 汪庭有 gained fame in the liberated area. The image of these new peasant poets presented a powerful contrast with the image of silent, miserable and powerless peasants that had been standard in the 1920s and was still common in the areas controlled by the Nationalist Party.

Yan'an folksong collection movement was organized not solely for the sake of preserving folk cultural materials, but also to mobilize the potential of the peasants for cultural production. As the emergence of so many new peasant poets in a short time shows, there was considerable literary creativity and productivity among the peasants, and this fact was recognized in the folk song collection movement.

However, peasants who were accustomed to listening to folk songs or had a talent for singing them often did not care about the collection and preservation of their folk songs. In *Yellow Earth*, a conversation between Gu Qing and the old peasant family who hosts him vividly presents the disparity in outlook of the two sides. The old peasant seems very dumb and a little confused by the *wengongtuan* member's mission. Gu Qing tries to elucidate the revolutionary significance of folk song collecting to his host, but fails. However, Cui Qiao, the young daughter who suffers in an arranged marriage, finally realizes her capacity for both singing and fighting. Ordinary peasants like Cui Qiao and her father do not need to learn to sing, it is their innate ability.

Ke Lan recorded another example of a peasant poet/singer,[22] the creator of "White Horse Rhythm" which was the original version of "The East is Red":

> When his "The East is Red" became widely known and well-loved in Yan'an, we had an interview with him. We told him that his work was a great success. He was not excited at all to hear this. He was not expecting such great fame when he created this song. And he does not care to have his name, Li Zengzheng, credited as the author of this famous song…. He is almost illiterate, and he has no idea of what literary creation is.[23]

Li Zengzheng's modest response went against Ke Lan's expectations. Li's case demonstrates that peasant literary creativity was neither a myth nor a projection

[21] Ke Zhongping, 2002, Vol. 3, 157–58.
[22] Most peasant poets were illiterate and unable to write. The "peasant poet" is actually a peasant singer.
[23] Ke Lan, 1996, Vol. 5, 553, 604–5.

of CPC ideology.

Becoming recognized as a peasant poet was by no means to become a professional poet. The emphasis of the folk song collecting movement was less on the songs themselves but on the transformation of the people. It was intended to help revive the passion and spirit of resistance among the ordinary Chinese people.

Ke Zhongping recorded a song made by a blind peasant poet, Han Qixiang, in the preface to *New Storytelling in Northern Shaanxi* (*Shanbei gaizao shuoshu*) in December 1949:

> The Literary Association of the ShanGanNing Border Area once assembled several blind peasant poets. Han Qixiang was well-known to the Literary Association and very popular with them. In order to encourage other blind peasant poets to produce new works, Han Qixiang gave an impromptu performance in front of them…. He was playing and singing… the lyrics were: "You are blind and I'm blind too. Blind people are miserable.… You have pity on me and I also care about you. Only a blind person can see (understand) the blind." [24]

Han Qixiang here used the idea of shared suffering to incite an atmosphere of compassion. What these people shared was not a physical handicap but a similar existential situation—poverty, oppression, and being exploited; sorrow, but also happiness. This meeting was organized by *wengongtuan* that enabled the peasants to recognize the common features of their experience.

Lin Shan was the *wengongtuan* member who worked most closely with Han Qixiang. He accompanied Han Qixiang as he traveled around the countryside to perform. They worked together on revising old local dramas in order to reach a wider audience among the literate rural population. Lin Shan also helped to deal with Han's family affairs so that he could concentrate on his literary creation. They also collaborated to provide a training program on new storytelling in other literary branches in the border areas.[25] Far from just being treated as a living dictionary of local stories and dramas, Han Qixiang was encouraged to actively participate in almost every aspect of the literary popularization movement.

Ke Lan observed that: "If you are talking with peasants just for the sake of folk song collection, that would be doomed to fail. It would be an incomplete and unreal process, even though you might succeed in collecting some material anyway."[26] The folksong collection process, in order to be comprehensive and

[24] Ke Zhongping, 2002, Vol. 3, 172–73.
[25] Ibid., 174.
[26] Ke Lan, 1996, Vol. 5, 553.

real and to have a meaningful impact, required hard work and ongoing communication with the peasants: working together, singing together, etc. Peasants who had a consciousness about themselves and their own potential in the new society were the core of the process. They became more than just local artists performing for entertainment. They were the new peasant poets, transforming their way of life by embracing the revolution and thereby extending the range of their creativity. As the composition of "The East is Red" showed, these new peasant poets challenged the concept of a writer, which had been shaped by the modern publishing industry. When was asked about the background to his most famous literary creation, Li Zengzheng said:

> We created this song to help with migration. Some migrants are despondent because they are unhappy to have had to leave their homes and go to the south. I think it is so bad for them to go with tears. We're going to the south and planting the desert land there. Then we can come back with a harvest. So, why should we worry?! Then I made this song set to the old Shanxi local tune "White Horse Rhythm": "The east is red, and the sun is rising. There comes Mao Zedong in China."[27]

According to Ke Lan's interview, a lot of peasants contributed to the revising of this song. It was created by a collaborative effort of peasant migrants,[28] not Li's individual genius. For example, Li Zengzheng's uncle, Li Youyuan, created the first four lines before a migrant group from Jia County set off for the south. Li Youyuan suggested making some songs in order to boost morale and prevent timid peasants from slipping away from the group. During the six to seven-hundred-mile trip to Yan'an, this song had been added to and polished by more and more migrants. The content of the song was gradually revised from their simple and unadorned wish for a good life to praise for the leadership of the CPC and Chairman Mao. Their optimism on their journey provided the energy for their composition.

Their various cries for harvest, their non-malicious mocking of their own poverty and starvation, their passion for a great future, etc. all came together in the making of "White Horse Rhythm." Ma Ke reported their experiment in collective writing in the *Liberation Daily* on May 24, 1944. He quoted Li Youyuan in this article: "We are composing in this way. One person's idea cannot fully meet everyone's need. It is essential to let everybody talk about their own ideas, and follow the democratic way."[29] This was a conscious process of

[27] Ibid.
[28] Peasants who were encouraged to relocate from their hometowns to the border areas, were called immigrant peasants at that time.
[29] Ma Ke, 1944.

accumulating all the participants' voices, with no distinction between author and audience, and an emphasis on the idea of democracy. In fact, this had always been how folk song was usually produced. Songs were constantly circulated and refreshed by many singers; they were a product of the wisdom of the masses, not of individual peasant poets.

Versions of "The East is Red" had been collected by many *wengongtuans* at that time, and some had been published in the *Selections of Folksong in North Shaanxi*, edited by He Qifang and Zhang Songru. More and more *wengongtuan* members continued adding new lines to the song. The editor Zhang Songru also known as Gong Mu, the lyric writer of the later official version, "The East is Red," was among them. Gong Mu revised the lyric and made another version during a journey to Northeast battlefield in 1945. On arriving in Shenyang, the last section was replaced with content about the Democratic Allied Army. During the Civil War period, this song was renamed "The East is Red" or *"*China Has Brought Forth a Mao Zedong" in northeast China. Later it had been spread nationally wide with along with the victory of People's Liberation Army. Little of Li Youyuan's song was retained in the final version of "The East is Red," but it was not completely replaced by intellectuals' revisions. Gong Mu recalled: "We did not keep sentences like 'leading the people to fight,' but returned terms like 'great savior.' When I look back on this, I consider this an acceptance of the peasant's language."[30] In many versions published during the 1940s and 1950s, there is a special footnote to "The East is Red"—"Shanxi folk song; lyric revised by Gong Mu." The transformation from "White Horse Rhythm" to "The East is Red" is representative of the typical process of folk song creation. Xian Xinghai's (the composer of "Yellow River") followed a similar path in making New Chinese Music. Reflecting on workers' powerful voices, Xian once wrote: "They are destined to become the masters of the new world, and to turn the world into a great commune. Their spirit is magnificent and their power is profound."[31] Xian, however, departed further from the spirit of the original folk music that he was adapting. Both "The East is Red" and Xian Xinghai's "Yellow River Cantata" were included in the 1960s' "The East is Red." They shared a focus on the voice of the oppressed and their enthusiasm for resistance, but one took a local form while Xian's work was entirely westernized.

The Yan'an literary popularization movement was not purely concerned with cultural pluralism. Folk forms were emphasized at Yan'an from the necessity of accessing peasant preferences in order to communicate with them and mobilize them in the revolution and the War of Resistance. Folk forms were valued

[30] Zhang Ling'er's grandfather was Zhang Songru (Gong Mu), the lyric writer of "The East is Red."
[31] Xian Xinghai, in Ai Ke'en ed., 1992, 323.

because of the revolutionary spirit and voice of resistance they encapsulated, and this was an inspiration to intellectual writers such as Guang Weiran, the lyric writer of the "Yellow River Cantata." I would suggest that the appropriation of folk forms should not be tied up with a fixed identity—i.e., peasant, local, or traditional—but considered primarily as an expression of the voice of resistance collectively. Starting from this point, I shall further elaborate the modern characteristics reflected in the appropriation of folk forms in the Yan'an literary popularization movement.

The modern characteristics of the Yan'an movement, described as a "Chinese style and spirit," were first noted by Ke Zhongping and later endorsed by Mao Zedong. *Wengongtuan*, as its dynamic relationship between the intellectuals and peasants, provided an institutional support for the making of "Chinese style and spirit." Franz Schurmann comments on the new form of mass organization that emerged out of the social revolution in Yan'an, and argues that they were "built from the bottom up,"[32] and that the link between "organization, work, and war," is a "penetration of the natural village," which is the great achievement of the Yan'an period. Schurmann interprets the Yan'an model from the perspective of social revolution, and concludes that it is with this new form of organization that the Chinese peasant "even in remote inland areas, has been drawn into political life."[33] Being "drawn into political life," which means an active participation in their own way, differs greatly from subjugating peasants into an existing system. The *wengongtuan* method of working was an institutional exploration of a new "political life" that intellectuals and peasants could fully participate in together.

After the founding of PRC in 1949 and the establishment of various literary institutions, *wengongtuan* were gradually dismissed or reorganized into local cultural and literary institutions. It is considered to be a wartime strategy and thus no longer compatible in New China. In a meeting organized by the *Wenyi bao* (Literary gazette) in June 1949, in preparation for the opening of Representative Convention of All-China Literary and Artistic Workers, Ke Zhongping stressed the urgency of organization,[34] but his proposals on this diverged from mainstream opinion which was focused on restoring professional literary associations and journals[35] that had been suspended during wartime. Ke Zhongping suggested keeping the *wengongtuan* system, and training greater numbers of cadres to organize literary and cultural activities in the countryside. In his view, neither professional literary associations nor literary magazines

[32] Franz Schurmann, 1969, 426.
[33] Ibid., Introduction, xlix.
[34] Ke Zhongping, 2002, Vol. 3, 168.
[35] For example, *Shuoshuo Changchang* had been an important literary journal, organized by the Beijing Literary Association and edited by Zhao Shuli and Lao She, with a focus on folk literature and arts.

could guarantee an effective interaction between peasants and literary cadres. It is not just a matter of various mediations, and Ke did not deny the proper function of both of them. There is a realm of communication which could not be reached and even shadowed by the professional system of literary production. In this sense, Ke Zhongping's insistence on *wengongtuan* system was an effort to maintain the diversity in literary production that had been initiated at Yan'an.

At the Conference of Literary Representatives in North-Western China in 1950, which he chaired, Ke Zhongping spoke about enlarging the *wengongtuan* system in the north-western areas:

> In the current situation, it is absolutely necessary to maintain and upgrade all the *wengongtuan* units, instead of disbanding them. For these remote areas, there is an urgent need to establish new *wengongtuan* units. These should function as training centers for cadres undertaking literary and artistic work. We have to carry on the glorious tradition of the *wengongtuan*—integrating with the masses and overcoming the hardship.[36]

This is not an obsession with the "movement" style and simply rejects institutionalization and professionalization. The "situation" in north-western regions, with its high illiteracy and backwardness, according to Ke Zhongping's analysis remained the same. Ke Zhongping's undertaking on *wengongtuan* raised a question central to the rural cultural production: how to prevent it from being subsumed under the "rural theme" and make it a way of improving the social and cultural transformation in the countryside. It is through mobilizing more and more local literary and artistic forces, according to Ke Zhongping, that can protect the literary creativity among revolutionary peasants and their political status as the true masters of New China.

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[36] Ke Zhongping, 2002, Vol. 3, 185–86.

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