

## The Political Influence on the Chinese Song Composition of 1930s-1940s

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### Abstract

Anti-Japanese patriotic songs that referred to saving the Chinese nation had been widely composed and sung during the period of 1930s-1940s. Many patriotic Chinese composers were forced to replace the romantic poetic texts of their songs with patriotic texts in order to cater to the taste of the masses. A minimum of one thousand patriotic songs were composed during the period. At the same time, some commercial popular songs in jazz style were also composed. But it seemed that they were not useful for the needs of the Chinese society to enhance the cohesion of the nation at the time. Some popular song writers were even criticized by other Chinese composers because their compositional styles were not patriotic and revolutionary. The genre soon lost its place in twentieth century Chinese society and was replaced by patriotic songs. This article is mainly describes the manner in which politics influenced the Chinese song composition style and Chinese people's musical lives during the period of 1930s-1940s.

**Keywords:** Chinese song, political propaganda, Anti-Japanese song, 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese music, Chinese Communist Song

With the purpose of changing the Chinese people's worldviews from feudalism and capitalism to communism, the Chinese Communist Party<sup>2</sup> established an organization called the League of Left-Wing Writers in 1930. This organization recruited young Chinese writers, musicians, and artists to study Marxism-Leninism and revolutionary Russian literature, arts, and music. It intended to establish a new national policy and guidelines for the arts by announcing that all art works must become a revolutionary tool to serve the masses (Zheng, 2002). Soon, this policy became standard practice. The 9.18 Incident<sup>3</sup> in 1931 was only a prelude to the Japanese full-scale invasion of China. A series of Japanese military victories in the early 1930s made the Japanese believe that the Chinese people were lacking in cohesion and it was the right time to gain control of China. The Japanese army hoped to conquer China in less than one year. On July 7, 1937, the Japanese army fabricated the Marco Polo Bridge Incident<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>It is the founding and ruling political party of the People's Republic of China.

<sup>3</sup>An action that violated China's territorial integrity and produced a growing anti-Japanese movement in China. On the evening of September 18, 1931, the Japanese army blew up the Liutiaohu Railway which was part of the Japanese-owned South Manchuria Railway in Shenyang, northeastern China. However, they fabricated a story that the Chinese army had done it. Under this excuse, they attacked Shenyang. Soon after the incident, Japan occupied northeastern China and established the puppet state of Manchukuo.

<sup>4</sup>An action that launched the beginning of Anti-Japanese War. A Japanese rifle company took part in a field exercise outside Beijing near the Marco Polo Bridge on the night of July 7, 1937. One soldier went missing. The company commander believed the soldier was kidnapped by the Chinese army of Wanping City. He wanted to search the city, but the Chinese army refused him. A shot rang out and the Japanese accused the Chinese of firing that shot. As a result, the Japanese army bombarded the city. Once hostilities began, Japanese reinforcements from the Japanese puppet state of Manchuria and the home island poured into north China, resulting in Japan's massive invasion of China.

Which led to the full-scale invasion of China by the Japanese. Eight years of Anti-Japanese War<sup>5</sup> (1937-1945) followed (Liu, 2010). The Japanese invasion in the 1930s made significant changes to the style of Chinese song compositions. Many Chinese composers of the time felt it was urgent to find a proper song form that could unite masses in a common struggle against the enemy. After the Japanese bombed Shanghai in 1932, a National Salvation Song Movement began under the influences of some Communist Party-affiliated associations such as the League of Left-Wing Writers, the Soviet Union Friendship Society, and the Chinese New Music Research Society (Melvin & Cai, 2004). *On the Banks of Songhua River* was a typical Anti-Japanese song that was composed under the influences of these Communist Party-affiliated associations. It was composed in 1936 by amateur composer Zhang Hanhui, one of the earliest members of the Chinese Communist Party. He graduated from the Theatre Department of Beijing University in 1929 and joined the Chinese Communist Party and the League of Left-Wing Writers in 1930 (Liu, 2010). The text of this song was written by the composer himself and describes the lives of the people who used to live in Northeastern China before and after the 9.18 Incident in 1931. In a through-composed form, the melody uses Chinese pentatonic scales that create a strong Chinese music flavor and make the song easily learned. It was one of the most stirring Anti-Japanese songs of the time and was particularly popular among the students who were providing resistance to the Japanese invasion. An excerpt from *On the Banks of Songhua River* is seen in figure 1:

我的家在东北松花江上，那里有  
森林煤矿，还有那满山遍野的大豆高粱。我的家在东北松花  
江上，那里有我的同胞，  
还有那衰老的爹娘。  
“九一八”，“九一八”，从那个悲惨的时候，  
“九一八”，“九一八”，从那个悲惨的时候，

**Figure 1: Zhang Hanhui's on the Banks of Songhua River, mm. 1-30 (Yuan, 2001)**

My home is on the banks of Songhua River in the Northeast.  
There are forests and coal mines.  
There are soybeans and sorghum all over the mountain.  
My home is on the banks of Songhua River in the Northeast.  
There is my brother and my old parents.  
September 18, September 18, since that miserable day,  
September 18, September 18, since that miserable day,  
I've left my homeland, discarded the endless treasure.  
Roam, Roam, the whole day I roam at the other side of the Great Wall.  
When can I go back to my homeland?  
When can I get back my endless treasure?  
My mother, my father, when can we gather together?

<sup>5</sup>A military conflict fought primarily between China and Japan from July 7, 1937 to September 9, 1945 after the Japanese invaded China, sending the country into a state of turmoil and destruction.

Author of text-Zhang Hanhui

Translator unknown

Li Jinhui was one of the most active Chinese popular song composers of the pre-communist period. He is often considered the father of Chinese popular music (Liu, 2009). He is best known for creating a new Chinese song genre that was strongly influenced by American Jazz. As early as the 1920s, he had begun to develop a kind of Chinese popular music that combined the musical elements of Chinese folk music with the musical elements of American Jazz music. His songs were usually accompanied by a jazz band. His goal was not just to duplicate jazz but create Chinese jazz (Liu, 2009). Many of Li's songs were love songs, the lyrics of which contrasted with those school songs or patriotic songs of the time. His 毛毛雨 (*The Drizzle*) in 1927 was one of the most widespread popular songs of the 1930s. In this song, a girl is impatiently waiting for her lover to come back:

Drizzle keeps falling  
 The breeze keeps blowing  
 In the breeze and the light rain, the willows turn green  
 Little darling, I don't want your gold and silver  
 All this little girl wants is your heart  
 Drizzle and rain, don't be such a pain  
 Light breeze, don't be such a tease  
 It's so much harder to walk through the wind and rain  
 Young man, the sun has just risen over the hills  
 Young girl, the lotus flowers are starting to show their petals  
 Don't wait 'til the flowers are dead and the sun has set behind the hills  
 Author of text unknown  
 Translator unknown (Jones, 2012)

There is nothing wrong with the text in a common sense. The main theme of the song is "have pleasure now when you can; don't wait until it's too late" (Zheng, 1997). Obviously, the theme of the song was not revolutionary; however, love is one of the most popular themes of commercial songs. During the Anti-Japanese period, it could be seen as a typical hedonist subject in the eyes of some people. Moreover, the performing locations for jazz-style songs were bars, ballrooms, and night clubs that were replete with alcohol, drugs, and prostitution. The audiences of this genre were mainly Westerners and upper-class Chinese. Nonetheless, the early twentieth century Chinese commercial popular songs were considered an important part of popular Chinese culture of the time and coexisted with other musical forms. However, the fate of this genre was tragic. Jazz-influenced Chinese popular music, although well-liked in some urban Chinese cities in the 1930s and 1940s, was short-lived. It soon lost its place in Chinese culture due to the development of the National Salvation Song Movement (Feng, 2007).

One of the most active patriotic song composers of the time was NieEr, a self-taught composer. Before he joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1933, he had written some articles criticizing the jazz-style Chinese popular songs of Li Jinhui (among others). NieEr sharply criticized some of Li's songs, "describing them as 'soft bean-curd,' 'erotic and sensual,' and 'a mess' (Liu, 2009)." Er believed that good popular songs should embody both artistic power and patriotic spirit (Yeh, 2002), but Li's genre would abandon the masses to pleasures only; it would cause them to lose their fighting will and it was seen as a corruptor of public morality (Liu, 2009). With the spread of the Chinese Communist Party's political influences throughout China, the genre of jazz-style Chinese popular songs was eventually prohibited by the Chinese Communist Party (Zheng, 1997). The reason given was that this kind of music was not revolutionary and was the typical product of Western capitalistic living styles. Obviously, NieEr's worldviews were very close to this communist ideology about the genre and he became one of the favorite composers of the party. In addition, during the Anti-Japanese period, he even doubted the social value of being a musician. NieEr wrote the following words on the day after the Japanese bombed Shanghai in 1932 reflecting his concerns: That's the question I've been thinking about all day, but I haven't come up with any concrete plans yet. Isn't so-called classic music just a plaything of the leisure class? I spend a few hours every day slaving over my basic exercises. After a few years, even a decade, I became a violinist. So what? Can you excite the laboring masses by playing a Beethoven Sonata? Will that really be an inspiration to them? No! This is a dead end. Wake up before it's too late (Melvin & Cai, 2004). His concerns demonstrated a typical social phenomenon of the time. Many Chinese composers were feeling the urgency to look for a path to save the nation by using their music as weapons.

Moreover, many of them became members of communist associations, and they had already been influenced by the communist ideology that music, drama, art, and literature were the most effective weapons for inciting and organizing the people (Huang, 1996). These facts foretold the development of a new phase in twentieth century Chinese song as a weapon for the patriotic and revolutionary masses against foreign invasion, both ideological and military. In 1932, NieEr became an active member of the musical group of the Soviet Union Friendship Society. Later, he organized the Chinese Contemporary Music Research Group which participated in the League of Left-Wing Writers (Feng, 2007). It is interesting to note that his musical output came only after he had joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1933 and only lasted for two years until his death in 1935. During his compositional period, NieEr wrote about thirty-five patriotic songs. They were characterized by the influences of socialist realism and contemporary Soviet music aimed at the masses (Wang, 2009). Thus, most of his songs reflected the lives and struggles of laboring masses – dockworkers, newspaper sellers, miners, and child laborers. He often spent time with the people about whom he intended to write in order to better mirror their world in his songs. He often returned to teach his songs to the people about whom he had written; these people in turn were able to teach the songs to their friends. Therefore, NieEr's songs could be heard all over the Shanghai and many other surrounding areas in a short period of time (Wang, 2009). His *义勇军进行曲* (*The March of the Volunteers*), composed in early 1935, is his most well-known song. It is a typical Anti-Japanese patriotic song of the time and has been used as the national anthem of the People's Republic of China since 1949. This song was originally composed as the theme song of a 1935 communist film titled *风云儿女* (*Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm*). The story of this film is about a young Chinese intellectual who gave up his good living conditions and upper class families to go to the frontline to fight Japanese invaders. At that time, self-sacrifice was one of the common themes of communist films. *The March of the Volunteers* is through-composed. The melody of this song is simple but rhythmic and perfectly matches the Anti-Japanese patriotic text. The music example of *The March of the Volunteers* is seen in figure 2:

### 义勇军进行曲（国歌）

田 汉 词  
聂 耳 曲

起  
来， 不 愿 做 奴 隶 的 人 们， 把 我 们 的 血 肉， 筑 成 我 们  
新 的 长 城。 中 华 民 族 到 了 最 危 险 的 时  
候， 每 个 人 被 迫 着 发 出 最 后 的 吼 声。 起 来 起  
来 起 来！ 我 们 万 众 一 心， 冒 着 敌 人 的 炮 火，  
前 进！ 冒 着 敌 人 的 炮 火， 前 进！ 前 进！ 前 进 进！

Figure 2: NieEr's *The March of the Volunteers* (Yuan, 2001)

Arise, all you who refuse to be slaves!  
With our flesh and blood, let us build our new Great Wall!  
The Chinese nation faces its greatest peril,

The thundering roar of our peoples will be heard!  
 Arise! Arise! Arise!  
 We are many, but our hearts beat as one!  
 Selflessly braving the enemy's gunfire, march on!  
 Selflessly braving the enemy's gunfire, march on!  
 March on! March on! March on! On!  
 Author of text-Tian Han  
 Translator unknown (Yuan, 2001)

Only one month after the film was released the song became popular, and it was sung by crowds of people in small villages and urban areas. The popularity of the song reflected the frustration of a nation that had been long subjected to imperialist aggression and the Japanese invasions. Thus, Chinese people could vent their anger and cry out for a solution by singing this song. It was influential in capturing the hearts and minds of millions of Chinese during the eight years of the Anti-Japanese War (Huang, 1996). To many Chinese people, the importance of *The March of Volunteers* would be for China the same as what the *Marseillaise* is for France. This song even became known outside of China. The world famous African-American singer Paul Robeson recorded it in 1941 to help the Chinese people against Japanese invaders (Melvin & Cai, 2004). In the spring of 1935, Nie Er was warned by his friend that he was on the blacklist of the Chinese Nationalist Party<sup>6</sup> government. Thus, for his safety, Nie decided to go to the Soviet Union via Japan for further study. Unfortunately, he drowned in a swimming accident in Japan in July 1935 when he was only twenty-three years old.

In addition to Nie Er, another Chinese Communist composer, He Lüting, wrote a large amount of Anti-Japanese songs for the purpose of political propaganda that were very popular during the Anti-Japanese period (Liu, 2009). He studied music at Shanghai Conservatory of Music from 1933 to 1937. After the 9.18 Incident, he joined an Anti-Japanese music troupe and moved from Shanghai to Chongqing, a city in Southwestern China, where he composed two of the most well-known Anti-Japanese songs of the time, *Song of the Guerillas* (1937) and *On the Banks of Jialing River* (1938) (Yang, 2009). The *Song of the Guerillas* was simple and short, but the cheerful melody and passionate moods of the song describe the Chinese Communist guerrilla fighters' optimistic fighting wills and inspired the Chinese people to resist the Japanese invasion. An excerpt from *Song of the Guerillas* is seen in figure 3:

**游击队歌**

贺绿汀 词曲

我们 都是神枪手，每一个子弹消灭一个仇敌，我们  
 都是飞行军，哪怕那山高水又深。在密密的树林里，到处都  
 安排同志们的宿营地，在高高的山岗上，有我们无数的好兄弟。

**Figure 3: He Lüting's Song of the Guerillas mm. 1-9 (Yuan, 2001)**

We are all sharpshooters,  
 Each bullet takes out an enemy.  
 We are all soldiers with wings,  
 Unafraid of tall mountains and deep waters.  
 In the dense forests,  
 Our comrades set their camps.  
 On the tall mountains,

<sup>6</sup>It is the political party that governed China from the founding of The Republic of China in 1912 until it moved to the island of Taiwan in 1949 after being defeated by the Chinese Communist Party during the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949). The Chinese Nationalist Party subsequently ruled Taiwan under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and his successors.

Roam out countless brothers.  
 Nothing to eat, nothing to wear,  
 There's the enemy who will supply us.  
 No guns, no cannons,  
 The enemy will forge them for us.  
 We are born in this place,  
 Every inch of the land belongs to us.  
 Should anyone invade it,  
 We will fight him to death.  
 Author of text-He Lüting  
 Translator unknown

Compared to the short and simple *Song of the Guerrillas*, He Lüting's *On the Banks of Jialing River* was one of few highly artistic Anti-Japanese songs of the time. This song is through-composed and is written in an operatic recitative style with piano accompaniment. Use of dissonant harmonies and frequent dynamic contrasts make the song very expressive. The *fortissimo* at the end of the last phrase perfectly suits the mood of the text that expressed the Chinese people's determination to drive out the Japanese army from China. An excerpt from *On the Banks of Jialing River* is seen in figure 4:

Figure 4: He Lüting's *On the Banks of Jialing River*, mm. 51-60 (Yang, 2009)

That day, the enemy invaded my village,  
 I lost my lands, family and cattle.  
 Now, I am wandering on the banks of Jialing River, and I seem to smell the fragrance of my homeland.  
 The same water and the same Moonlight,  
 but I have lost all my mirth and dreams.  
 The river moans day and night, it seems to flow through my heart.  
 I must go back!  
 Even only for the young cauliflowers and hungry lambs.  
 I must go back!  
 Even back under the bullets of the enemy.  
 I must go back.  
 Even back through bayonet bushes of the enemy.  
 I will place my victory bayonet in the place where I grew up.  
 Author of text-Duanmu Hongliang  
 Translator-Zhao Xiaoyang

The two Chinese political parties of the first half of the twentieth century – the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party – were temporarily united in the so-called Anti-Japanese United Front to resist the Japanese during the eight years of the Anti-Japanese War.

Thus, the National Salvation Song Movement soon included all of China. Anti-Japanese patriotic songs could be heard everywhere at the Anti-Japanese United Front, the Chinese Nationalist Party-controlled areas, and the Chinese Communist Party-controlled areas. The masses singing activities became the important feature of the patriotic song performance medium. Many choral groups were established after the 9.18 Incident in 1931, and soon they appeared in almost all major Chinese cities during the 1930s and 1940s. Among these choral groups, one of the most well-known was the *People's Singing Society*. It was established in February 1935 in Shanghai by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). This society had hundreds of members, and they organized choral performances, singing at factories, schools, and even on the streets. The motto of the society was that "we are not singing for the sake of singing, we are singing for the sake of national liberation (Huang, 1996)". Under this specific historical and social environment, most of the Chinese people during the time could easily sympathize with the genre of Anti-Japanese patriotic songs. As a result, the masses singing activities became the most important musical activity of the time. The enthusiasm of the Chinese people to join such activities was extremely high. In the summer of 1938, around 100,000 Chinese stationed on 200 boats in the Yangzi River sang Anti-Japanese patriotic songs (Melvin & Cai, 2004). A minimum of one thousand patriotic songs were composed during the period from the 9.18 Incident in 1931 to the victory of the Anti-Japanese War in 1945 (Liu, 2009). Because many composers had to resort to extraordinary methods to produce enough songs for people to hand to others in order to stir up their fighting capacities, the artistic quality of many Anti-Japanese patriotic songs was not high. Many of them were written without accompaniments; many of them sound alike and are disorganized in structure, while others are adapted folk song melodies; some were even created by just adding notes to patriotic poetry or slogans (Wang, 2009). The genre only served one political purpose – to unite all Chinese to resist the Japanese invasions.

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