

# Compilation of Wu Xiaobang's Dance Drama Activities in Northern Guangdong During the Anti-Japanese War

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## ABSTRACT

Wu Xiaobang is the pioneer and founder of Chinese new dance art as well as an outstanding dance artist, theorist and educator. Wu Xiaobang's achievement was inseparable from his early artistic practice especially during the Anti-Japanese War and the positive influence of the Communist Party of China on him. During the Comprehensive Anti-Japanese War, Wu Xiaobang actively participated in the performances of anti-Japanese and national salvation and also came to Qujiang, Shaoguan, twice to give dance lessons and training. The creative practice in Qujiang for more than a year became an important time node for Wu Xiaobang's creation and performance on his artistic path. During this period, Wu Xiaobang's creative concept of dance and dance drama achieved a great change, reaching new heights in the combination of art and life, modern dance and traditional elements.

**Keywords:** Southern China education, Anti-Japanese War, Dance drama, Wu Xiaobang, Northern Guangdong.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the Anti-Japanese War, the anti-Japanese cultural propaganda was a war without gunpowder, and the dance drama became an important means of inspiring the people to resist the Japanese. In the history of China's Anti-Japanese War propaganda, the Anti-Japanese War dance played an important role. [1] Wu Xiaobang is the founder of China's new dance art, a great master who has had a significant impact and made outstanding contributions in the history of Chinese dance development, providing rich practical experience and solid theoretical support for the development of Chinese dance in the new era. Art comes from practice. Wu Xiaobang's dance creation

philosophy and achievements were inseparable from his dance drama art practice during the Anti-Japanese War (especially his second trip to Qujiang to teach dance and choreography).

## 2. WU XIAOBANG'S EARLY ANTI-JAPANESE AND NATIONAL SALVATION DRAMA ACTIVITIES

In July 1937, the Japanese army provoked the Lugou Bridge Incident and launched a long-planned full-scale war of aggression against China. After the "8.13 Incident", revolutionary youths who were unwilling to give in organized one after another to participate in various salvation activities. Literary and art workers also formed many salvation drama teams successively to leave Shanghai to carry out propaganda upcountry. In September 1937, Wu Xiaobang participated in the fourth team of Shanghai national salvation drama. At first, he rehearsed and performed "Let Down Your Whip" (《放下你的鞭子》) and "San Jiang Hao" (

\*Funds: 1. Shaoguan Social Science Fund Project "Research on the Musical Drama Activities in Northern Guangdong Under the Leadership of the Communist Party of China During the Anti-Japanese War" (J2021004); 2. 2021 National University Student Innovation Project (202110576014) "The Excavation and Arrangement of Historical Materials on Music and Dance Activities in Northern Guangdong During the Anti-Japanese War".

《三江好》) in the urban and rural areas of Wuxi to publicize national salvation, organize the masses, and expand the anti-Japanese forces. He rehearsed the dance dramas "March of the Volunteers" (《义勇军进行曲》) and "Slaying Traitors" (《打杀汉奸》). During the performance, the comrades of the chorus sang the songs "March of the Volunteers" and "Slaying Traitors" in due time, the audience enthusiastically applauded and sang in unison. Feelings were running excitedly, and the audience was immersed in the warm atmosphere of all the people of one mind and sharing a bitter hatred of the enemy, which could arouse the emotions of the audience a lot. When he performed the dance "Broadsword Dance" (《大刀舞》), the audience became astir and the performance was warmly welcomed by the masses. In Zhenjiang, Nanjing and Anqing, he performed dance dramas "Trilogy of Exile" (《流亡三部曲》) and "Song of Bushwhacker" (《游击队员之歌》) for the people and the wounded soldiers. In 1938, Wu Xiaobang participated in the New Fourth Army's field service group in Nanchang, Wuhan and other places to perform for the people and New Fourth Army soldiers. From December 1938 to March 1939, Wu Xiaobang gave short-term lectures at the Shanghai Sino-French Drama School, rehearsing dance dramas "Poppy Flower" (《罂粟花》) and "The Internationale" (《国际歌》).

The material of "Poppy Flower" was selected based on the life on an isolated island, and was represented by symbolism, which was a dance drama that opposed German, Italian, and Japanese fascism. In the Shanghai Concession at that time, publicly opposed speeches and activities against Germany, Italy, and Japan were not allowed. Newspapers were not allowed to publish articles against Germany, Italy, and Japan. All programs related to the anti-Japanese content should use various symbolic techniques to make the audience understand tacitly. In the dance drama, the poppy flower represented Japanese imperialism, and her two families were compared to the fascists of Germany and Italy, when the three axis powers attempted to dominate the world. The two men and the peasant woman who symbolized the masters of the land referred to patriotic forces against fascist aggression. Wu Xiaobang's works tried to use various performance techniques to make modern dance play a role in the publicity of anti-Japanese and national salvation activities, publicizing anti-Japanese, praising heroes, educating the masses, and fighting against the enemy from life.

In the early days of the Comprehensive Anti-Japanese War, Wu Xiaobang created and rehearsed dance dramas "Chou Biao Gong" (《丑表功》), "The Herald" (《传递情报者》), "Wandering" (《徘徊》) and "Strange Dream" (《奇梦》). "Wandering" was a satirical dance work that revealed the lives of citizens of the isolated island Shanghai after the fall of Shanghai. The motive for the creation of the dance drama "Chou Biao Gong" was that Wang Jingwei published an obsequious telegram in Hanoi that flattered Japanese imperialism and he became a stooge fed by Japanese imperialists. The dance drama incisively and vividly exposed and castigated the traitor Wang Jingwei. "The Herald" was created to praise the correspondents in the anti-Japanese guerrilla zone.

Before coming to Qujiang in northern Guangdong, in September 1939, Wu Xiaobang was invited by Ouyang Yuqian to go to the Guilin Museum of Art. In June 1940, invited by Xin'an Tour Group, Wu Xiaobang rehearsed for them the children song and dance "News of Spring" (《春的消息》) and the dance drama "God Tiger" (《虎爷》). The creation of the dance drama "God Tiger" was at the stage of stalemate in the Anti-Japanese War. The Kuomintang began to cause divisions and was engaged in the business of seeking after glory by selling out its own country. The dance drama chose the theme of resistance and unity against the Japanese. After rehearsing for more than three months, this dance drama was officially staged in Guilin in October 1940, and the reverberations were very good. After that, Wu Xiaobang was invited by the Changsha Anti-enemy Troupe to Changsha for short-term lectures and performances.

When he participated in the Shanghai National Salvation Drama Group and the New Fourth Army's field service group, while performing and creating for the masses and soldiers, he sprouted the seeds of a positive change in his creative concept. At that time, he was only thirty-one years old and full of energy. More importantly, the enthusiasm of the soldiers was injected into his blood, and his passion and loyalty were intertwined to produce such a magical power. This new environment seemed to have brought him into the door of life. In the past, he had thought that only the "ivory tower" was his place to stay, and climbing high and drilling deep were his ideals. But when he was among the people and exposed to the real fighting life, he saw how vast the world outside the tower was. He suddenly felt like a clumsy schoolboy standing in front of these workers, peasants and

soldiers. What should he perform to them? How could he dedicate his art to this great era? His creative activities at this time were a new path he found in real life: it broke away from the shackles of the old dance form and expressed the characteristics of the times, so that dance was no longer just to cater to the needs of the leisure class as in the past, but became the spiritual power to fight the enemy and inspire the fighting will of the people. This was indeed a development of his artistic life towards realism. [2]

In 1940, Wu Xiaobang was hired to come to Qujiang, where he gave short-term lectures at the Guangdong Wartime Art Museum and sowed the seeds of new dance art, thus opening a new stage of Wu Xiaobang's dance drama creation.

### **3. WU XIAOBANG'S TEACHING AND CREATION OF ANTI-JAPANESE DANCE DRAMAS IN NORTHERN GUANGDONG**

In October 1938, Guangzhou fell, and the provincial capital of Guangdong evacuated to Qujiang in northern Guangdong. In order to meet the needs of the Anti-Japanese War, the Education Department of Guangdong Province arranged the "Guangdong Wartime Art Museum" to carry out anti-Japanese propaganda work. At the beginning of 1941, it was renamed the Guangdong Provincial Academy of Arts, and in 1942, it was renamed the Guangdong Provincial College of Art.

After the performance in Changsha, in July 1940, Zhao Rulin, the dramatist, curator of the Guangdong Wartime Art Museum, invited Wu Xiaobang to come to Tangwan, Qujiang, to hold a drama (play) dance training class. In 1942, when Zhao Rulin once again invited Wu Xiaobang to Qujiang to start a one-year dance training class, he swept away all the years of depression.

The whole year from 1942 to 1943 was an unusual year in Wu Xiaobang's artistic life. After Wu Xiaobang met Zhou Enlai in Chongqing in 1941, he received the care and support of the Communist Party of China, and he worked harder on his artistic activities. In May 1942, when Wu Xiaobang was teaching for the second time in Jiang'an National Opera Academy, he received a letter from President Zhao Rulin from Qujiang, Guangdong. He was extremely excited. Zhao Rulin invited him to the Guangdong Provincial College of Art to organize a one-year dance class, and he would personally teach. Zhao Rulin's invitation this

time was extremely important to Wu Xiaobang. From then on, he would get a piece of land for sowing the seeds of dance art, which Wu Xiaobang had dreamed of for many years. [3]

What made Wu Xiaobang even happier was that the school had built a spacious rehearsal room especially for the Department of Dance. Wu Xiaobang wrote: "There was an incident at that time. For many years, I often recalled it with gratitude. During the difficult years of the Anti-Japanese War, President Zhao Rulin actually built a classroom with a floor-mounted room for me. I was happy to have such a classroom. Since 1937, I winded up the "Xiaobang Dance Institute" in Shanghai. After five years of wandering from place to place, I never had a fixed classroom, and my teaching and performances were often carried out on levelled squares. This made me accustomed to carrying out activities in the muddy ground, and I felt that the "classroom" with nature as the background without walls and mirrors was freer. As long as I was not exposed to the scorching sun, I could maintain my vigorous energy for teaching. But when I got this classroom, I cherished it very much, which was really not easy at the time." [3]

This floor-mounted dance classroom was not big, and it could only accommodate 30 people in class and rehearsal. In order to keep the classroom clean, people were not allowed to enter with shoes at ordinary times. The school office also posted a notice stating that the classroom was dedicated to the Department of Dance. In Qujiang, for the first time in his life, he had a dance rehearsal room with a floor-mounted room. Because of his fixed residence and stable environment, Wu Xiaobang's desire for creation increased and his inspiration was abundant. That year became the most prosperous and rewarding year in his creative activities. It was also a year when he gradually matured in art and formed his own unique style. During his one year in Qujiang, he established an unshakable confidence in modern dance art, had a clear view of the relationship between art and life, and explored some rules of artistic creation. His representative dance dramas "Pagodas and Memorial Archways" (《宝塔与牌坊》), the pas de trois "The Three Hungry Men" (《三个饥饿者》), and the solo dance "Si Fan" (《思凡》) were all completed in this classroom.

"The Three Hungry Men" reflected the problem of hunger among the people throughout the country during the Anti-Japanese War. The Kuomintang army still relied on methods of "三丁抽一" (for each

family with three middle-age laborers, one labor shall be requisitioned) and "五丁抽二" (for each family with five middle-age laborers, two laborers shall be requisitioned), and forcibly arrested people as soldiers. After a large number of poor peasants were arrested, they were either dragged to death or starved to death. The commissioned officers, however, colluded with the despotic gentry and landlords, extorted excessive taxes and levies, and ransacked people everywhere. In most of China under the rule of the Kuomintang, the people lived in misery. Even high-level intellectual artists like Wu Xiaobang often lived hungry days. The cheap rice they bought was moldy and difficult to swallow. At that time, the food for students of Guangdong Provincial College of Art was even worse, and hunger was already in front of people. In the vast rural areas, myriads of people were on the verge of starvation. Wu Xiaobang created this play based on this reality. This play was accompanied by percussion of watchman's clappers and small gongs, which was like an exciting pantomime with only plot action.

The background of the creation of "Pagodas and Memorial Archways" was that pagodas and memorial archways could be seen in almost every big and small county that Wu Xiaobang passed in the rear area. Most of these pagodas were built to commemorate the local Number One Scholar and prime ministers, representing a kind of male majesty and the power to suppress evil heretics. These archways were built for women who were "chaste" and "virtuous", and were a sign of women's burial for feudal ethics and morality. The pagodas and archways had been tightly handcuffed to the necks of the Chinese people for thousands of years, and countless young men and women had sacrificed their beautiful youth and love for this. The dance drama "Pagodas and Memorial Archways" was a poetic tragedy created by Wu Xiaobang, based on the folklore of his hometown. The hero and heroine of this dance drama, the Yangge group, and the people at the temple fair were all played by students in the dance class of Guangdong Provincial College of Art, while those who played pagodas, archways, and evil spirits were played by students from the Department of Theatricals. It took four months from design to rehearsal. This dance drama was a repertoire of the graduation performance of the dance class.

During his stay in Qujiang from 1942 to 1943, Wu Xiaobang also composed dance dramas "Elegy of Life" (《生之哀歌》), "Si Fan", "People in the Net" (

《网中人》), and "Welcoming Spring" (《迎春》) and dance works such as "Moonlight Sonata" (《月光曲》), "Song of Flowers" (《花之歌》) and "To Alice" (《给爱丽丝》) adapted from famous European classical music.

The dance drama "Elegy of Life" described a true story. A young man was imprisoned on suspicion by Kuomintang secret agents. He was not rescued by his friends and died of torture in prison.

At the end of Qujiang's one-year dance class, a performance was held by him. On the night of the performance, it rained heavily, and many viewers could not go to the theater to watch it. But the audience in the venue was still very crowded. On the evening of the second night, the audience bought tickets more enthusiastically. After the performance, Wu Xiaobang left Qujiang and went to Xi'an, Chengdu, Chongqing and other places to open up new dance venues and sow new dance seeds.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As a special form of artistic expression, dance encourages the fighting spirit and uses dance as a "tool" to play an important role during the Anti-Japanese War. [4] From 1942-1943, Wu Xiaobang's actual teaching and performance time in Qujiang, Shaoguan, was only more than one year. Although the time was short, it had a huge impact on his dance art growth. During the teaching period of Qujiang, Wu Xiaobang had a better understanding of the relationship between life and art (what was true and what was false) in the practice of art. Inwardly, he distinguished good from evil more clearly. Therefore, he also gave a new aesthetic point of view in the contrast method of expressing beauty and ugliness, and gradually formed his own unique style. In addition to creative activities, he also gained a broader world in teaching. He made the modern dance tutorial more systematic; in terms of movements and gestures, he combined learning and application better. He also studied and partially absorbed a set of performance techniques for welcoming the gods and exorcising ghosts in the folk "witchcraft", which became the basis for his teaching on breathing and performance. He began to research and learn Chinese martial arts, enriched his teaching methods, and made a set of modern dance systems scientific and sinicized. During this year, Wu Xiaobang created a lot of works. Several of his important masterpieces — dance dramas "Pagodas and Memorial Archways", "The Three

Hungry Men" (later adapted as solo dance "Hunger Fire"), solo dance "Si Fan", "Elegy of Life", etc. were all completed here. It was these dance works that pushed his creation to the peak. In addition, most of the famous chapters in his monograph "Introduction to New Dance Art" were also completed during this year. He would not have been able to open up this wasteland without the experience of the war years and if he had not had all the conditions needed. [5] 1942 was an unusual year for Wu Xiaobang in Qujiang, northern Guangdong. In this year, he not only made outstanding achievements in creation, but also trained a group of successors who devoted their lives to dance, such as Liang Lun, You Huihai, Chen Yunyi, and Luo Zhang and so on, all of whom achieved extraordinary achievements. Through creation of works, stage performances, and classroom teaching, Wu Xiaobang "put Chinese dance on the stage of theatre art, used the dance art as a weapon in a pioneering manner for the struggle of the country and the nation, and laid the foundation for China's dance career with far-reaching impact". [6]

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Qunying Wang was responsible for paper design and wrote the manuscript. Liping Liao collected researching materials and analysed data. Guangtao Cao is responsible for paper revising and editing.

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