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The Sinification of Soviet Agitational Theatre: 'Living Newspapers' in Mao's China[1]

Jeremy E. Taylor
University of Nottingham

Abstract

The adoption and development of zhivaya gazeta *(lit. 'living newspapers') in China follows a trajectory common to many forms of artistic expression that were introduced into that country by the Soviets in the early decades of the twentieth century. While the Soviet heritage of this theatre was at first celebrated, the Chinese Communist Party sought to tailor it to particular needs and to present it as a specifically Chinese innovation, rechristening it '*huobaoju'*. Despite dying out in the Soviet Union by the late 1920s, 'living newspapers' continued to be produced in China from the 1930s through until the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), with the form being employed in tandem with specific campaigns or attempts at mass mobilisation. Indeed, the very nature of Chinese communism under Mao provided the perfect environment in which this form of theatre could thrive.*

Keywords: China, theatre, Soviet, culture, revolutionary, *huobaoju*

Introduction

Much of the academic literature on performance art in Mao Zedong's China has focused on the eight 'model operas' (*yangbanxi*), which represented the only form of officially sanctioned theatre to be produced in China during much of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (e.g., Roberts, 2010). Indeed, so many analyses of specific model operas have been written that the *yangbanxi* have become synonymous with Mao-era theatre: the stage and film versions of *The*

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Red Detachment of Women (*Hongse niangzi jun*) have inspired so much scholarship, for example, that they now represent something of an academic subfield (e.g., Chi, 2003). In much of this literature, there has been a tendency not only to focus on the *yangbanxi* as the apotheosis of Cultural Revolution art, but also to stress the uniqueness of the form and its links with the 'ten years of chaos'. In lecture halls and on film screens, the grand yet now vaguely comic sounds and imagery of such socialist realism have become the primary means through which historians have introduced students and lay audiences to the Cultural Revolution.

In recent years, however, scholars have started to locate within the model operas influences from other forms (e.g., Mittler, 2013), as well as connections that place such works firmly on a much broader 'evolutionary tree' of Chinese revolutionary theatre, dating back to the early twentieth century (and in some cases earlier). Such work has not only helped to trace artistic connections across the 1966 divide, but has also forced us to revisit less-documented art forms which survived the early years of the Cultural Revolution. In other instances, the ubiquity of the *yangbanxi* has been challenged with references to other forms of Cultural Revolution theatre, most notably the dramatic pursuits of the Red Guards, who drew inspiration for impromptu street performances not merely from officially ordained operas, but from all manner of artistic expression (Clark, 2008: 192-5).

This paper aims to expand on this emerging academic literature by examining one such form: *huobaoju*—a street theatre which took its Chinese name directly from a Russian phrase (and a Soviet form of theatre) known as the *zhivaya gazeta* (lit. 'living newspaper'). *Huobaoju* are certainly known about in China today: the form merits brief mention in wider reference works on theatre, and the term is still used to refer to theatrical performances undertaken as part of protest movements, not only in China, but elsewhere around the world. More importantly, the influence of *huobaoju* on later styles, including the *yangbanxi*, has been noted in at least one recent study of the latter (Yang and Conceison, 2012: n. 4). *Huobaoju* has hitherto not, however, been studied in any systematic fashion, and despite its brief appearance in a number of historical accounts, the form's own history has yet to be properly documented. While the intellectual fashion for studying the *yangbanxi* may partly explain this absence, I would also argue that *huobaoju* has—in historiographical terms—been its own 'worst enemy'. By its very nature,

huobaoju was ephemeral and transient, while never seeking to achieve anything beyond propagandistic effect. The form certainly never aspired to artistic greatness or longevity, and its practitioners often moved on to other forms of cultural expression in due course.

At the same time, however, the development of this form is important, for it tells us much about what replaced it in the 1960s. At the same time, it raises questions about a whole range of issues, from the Chinese adaptation of Soviet theatre to the interaction of various media in the early years of the People's Republic. As I show in this paper, this form also fed directly into the dramatised political culture of the early years of the Cultural Revolution, not primarily by influencing the development of the *yangbanxi*, but by shaping the very way in which the Red Guards developed their own versions of street theatre, and their decidedly theatrical approach to iconoclasm, violence and mobilisation.

Living Newspapers

The roots of the 'living newspaper' in Europe can be traced to Italian futurism in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was in the young Soviet Union (and principally the Moscow Institute of Journalism), however, that it was developed into a recognisable form of agitprop theatre. Performed by small bands of propagandists, the scripts for *zhivaya gazeta* were often pasted together from materials found in newspapers—though a high degree of improvisation was also encouraged—and were designed to provide illiterate audiences (such as workers or Red Army recruits) with details of campaigns, battles or other newsworthy events (Casson, 2000). Plays were performed on street corners or in other public spaces, with the aid of a handful of props and simple yet highly symbolic costumes.[2]

By the late 1920s, however, *zhivaya gazeta* were already being seen as *passé* by many dramatists in the Soviet Union, with all forms of 'revolutionary agitational art' becoming 'increasingly unwelcome', and official attention turning towards the development of more sophisticated forms of theatre in the lead up to the adoption of socialist realism as official state doctrine in 1932 (Frolova-Walker, 2006: 185). Indeed, Stalin disbanded the Blue Blouse Group, the main exponent of *zhivaya gazeta*, in 1928 (Casson, 2000: 109).

[2] Top hats, for instance, were used with much frequency to mark out a particular character as being bourgeois (Tolstoy, 1998: 24).

Despite the decline of the form in Russia itself, there was nothing particularly unusual about the export of the *zhivaya gazeta* to China. In the 1930s, various forms of Soviet agitprop theatre were being emulated by groups abroad. Indeed, Left-leaning theatre practitioners in the United States had attempted to introduce *zhivaya gazeta* into that country under the New Deal's Federal Arts Project—though with little success (Nadler, 1995).

What *is* significant about the development of this form in China, however, is that, unlike in the Soviet Union, the *zhivaya gazeta* never actually 'declined'. Indeed, it not only outlived the immediate wartime culture of resistance that had provided such a suitable setting for its genesis, but remained an important part of mass propaganda campaigns in the People's Republic into the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, *huobaoju* thrived during the early years of communism under Mao, with the form being continually called upon to encourage participation in demonstrations of support for the regime. This is significant, for it suggests not only that Chinese theatre practitioners were successful in continuing to make what had been, elsewhere, a transitory form of theatre relevant and topical, but also that street theatre of this sort arguably had a far more important role in China under Mao than it had in other revolutionary contexts. How and why, then, did *zhivaya gazeta* become *huobaoju*?

From the time of the Republican Revolution in 1911, the Bolshevik attempt to create a 'propaganda state' (Kenez, 1985) remained the main template for numerous Chinese governments of diverse political proclivity, as well as for movements which sought to undermine the state at various times. During periods such as the May 4th Movement of 1919, the Northern Expedition of 1926-8 and the Jiangxi Soviet of 1931-4, Chinese artists, writers and dramatists learnt their crafts from the Soviet model, often doing so in combination with regional Chinese art forms (e.g., opera) and vernacular traditions. The sheer number of Soviet terms that have since been 'normalised' in China, and in modern Chinese historiography—'warlord', 'comrade' and many others—reflect not merely the scale of Soviet influence, but also the frequency with which Soviet ideas and styles could be successfully incorporated into Chinese political culture.[3]

The development of Soviet agitprop theatre in China followed this pattern, with *zhivaya gazeta* appearing to have been introduced into the country in

[3] On the appropriation of Soviet jargon (such as 'warlord') into the early Chinese revolutionary lexicon, see van de Ven (2003: 72).

1931, when the first Chinese 'Soviet' government was established in Jiangxi, and dramatic troupes were specifically created for the purpose of using it to spread propaganda in rural areas (Judd, 1983: 138; Snow, 1998: 29). The form was certainly a regular part of socialist culture by the mid-1930s. Indeed, a young Deng Xiaoping is said to have written an anti-Nationalist play in this mode in early 1937 (Meng, 1994: 44), and Jiang Qing was said to have performed a (presumably translated) Soviet *zhivaya gazeta* during her time in the Communist base of Yan'an in the same period (Yang, 2009).

Given this background, it is perhaps surprising that it took until mid-1937 for the form to be dispersed more widely throughout China. As Chang-tai Hung (1994) notes, it was the Japanese invasion that year that forced the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its allies amongst the intellectual elite to fully appreciate the value of this particular type of theatre and to bring it to the fore of wartime propaganda work. Indeed, Hung notes that, during the war against Japan, the 'living newspaper' emerged as one of the two most popular forms of spoken drama in those areas of China not occupied by the Japanese, often being performed by travelling drama troupes attached loosely to either the communists or the Nationalists. Many such plays were written:

> …on the spot, to depict very recent incidents, and members of the traveling troupes would often collect stories on the road, which they quickly turned into new plays. This kind of improvised product, though rarely polished, gave the poorly equipped troupes added flexibility (Hung, 1994: 55-7).

Accounts of such *huobaoju* provided by contemporary observers suggest a theatre which had not changed much since 1920s Moscow. The American journalist Edgar Snow wrote of such plays being 'full of overt propaganda' and 'primitive props'; 'bursts of laughter alternated with oaths of disgust and hatred for the Japanese', with the audience becoming 'quite agitated' as it watched performances in makeshift theatres (Snow, 1998: 27-8).

Huobaoju was particularly well suited to the popular mood in areas outside Japanese control during the war, where there existed a public sentiment—as the historian Stephen MacKinnon (2008: 85) has phrased it—of 'moral outrage choreographed as street theater'. The highly simplified nature of *huobaoju* meant that the message of resistance to the Japanese could be disseminated

to large audiences via a small number of actors. Unsurprisingly, many of the early *huobaoju* portrayed individual enemies such as Wang Jingwei, and the Japanese themselves, in highly caricatured fashion (e.g., Wang, 1943). Indeed, it is telling that the development of *huobaoju* in China paralleled the emergence of the satirical wartime cartoon—a topic to which I shall return below.[4]

As the form began to be used with much more frequency in China in the months following the Japanese invasion, however, its promoters recognised that it required elucidation. Writing in the appropriately named *Sino-Soviet Culture Magazine* (*Zhong Su wenhua zazhi*) in early 1938, one theatre practitioner introduced *huobaoju* to fellow Chinese propagandists by describing it as a 'new type of performance' which represented the 'dramatisation of the news'. The potential benefits from such a form in China included the fact that the news usually reported in print could be brought to the attention of those unable to read—i.e., the vast majority of China's peasants. Indeed, the success of 'living newspapers' in 1920s Soviet society was presented as reason enough for its emulation in wartime China (Ge, 1938).

While the Japanese invasion certainly acted as a catalyst for the rapid development of *huobaoju*, the form also benefited from the very deliberate attempts on the part of the Chinese Communist Party in May 1942 to redefine the role of the arts in Chinese society. These ideas were laid out during the 'Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art', under which Mao Zedong decreed that all art must be political, as well as subservient to the needs of China's 'masses'. As Mark Amitin (1980:12) notes, this new direction heralded, for performance art, 'the death warrant for operas about good emperors, kind landlords, evil serfs and plotting servants, and heralded the beginning of a hard-core agitprop theatre'; yet it also provided room for greater levels of experimentation, particularly in terms of the incorporation of appropriately peasant forms of cultural expression into what were essentially foreign forms of propaganda. In the communist base areas, such theatre became 'a functional part of the war machine', with the Communists' Eighth Route Army (*Ba lu jun*) devoting a number of troupes specifically to it (Meserve and Meserve, 1972: 317).

[4] For more on this topic, see Lent and Xu (2008).

The link between mobilisation (as experienced during the war) and 'living newspapers' remained an important one after 1945, too. *Huobaoju* were scripted during the Korean War for performance amongst Chinese troops (e.g., Xue, 1951), and there were cases during that conflict of Chinese and North Korean propagandists jointly producing such plays. Library catalogue listings of published scripts suggest a noticeable rise in *huobaoju* production in the years of the Great Leap Forward, as well as during Chinese moral and logistical involvement in the Vietnam War.[5] And the form was revived at other moments of armed conflict, such as the Second Offshore Islands Crisis of 1958 (during which Chinese forces clashed with Nationalist forces from Taiwan over islands off the south China coast), when *huobaoju* such as *Get Out of Taiwan, American Wolves!* (*Meiguo lang, gunchu Taiwan qu*) and *The Dead End for American Imperialism* (*Mei di de qiongtu molu*) were written.[6]

However, it was during the Chinese Civil War of 1945-9 that the 'living newspaper' reached its apogee. Dozens of *huobaoju* lampooning or denigrating the Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek were produced in this period, often for performance amongst communist troops, or for peasants in 'Liberated' areas. Local cells of the Communist Party all over the country formed specific propaganda groups for the purpose of performing *huobaoju* and other forms of drama (Sha, 1999: 67). Celebrated leftwing playwrights were also tasked with scripting *huobaoju* in this period and after, amongst them Du Xuan (e.g., 1952). And a handful of intellectuals emerged from the Civil War period as specialists in the genre. By far the most prolific compiler of *huobaoju* in this period, for instance, was Zhou Fang, who was based in the Jin Ji Lu Yu Border Region.[7] Zhou was responsible for editing one of the most popular *huobaoju* of the Civil War era—*Jiang's Army Must be Defeated* (*Jiang jun bi bai*), which had been collectively authored by cultural workers in the communist base at which he was stationed (*Renmin ribao*, 16 January 1947). Zhou went on to be involved in the scripting and editing of a significant number of *huobaoju* through until the 1950s. (Figure 1)

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[5] Although one must be cautious in taking published scripts as evidence of actual *huobaoju* performances. As Ellen Judd (1983: 147) suggests in her study of Jiangxi Soviet-era drama, *huobaoju* scripts were often not produced at all (for fear that the plays would lose their topicality by the time they were printed and distributed to potential practitioners).

[6] These are taken from a list of new *huobaoju* advertised in the journal *Juben* in July 1960.

[7] I.e., the region between the four provinces of Shanxi, Hebei, Shandong and Henan.

While members of a relatively small band of intellectuals took charge of compiling *huobaoju*, productions were staged by all manner of groups, ranging from university- and school-based drama societies to communes, trade unions and the armed forces. Indeed, the very nature of this genre made it adaptable to troupes of various size and diverse levels of dramatic talent.

It was also in this period that the educational function of *huobaoju* was at its clearest, with compilers inspired by Mao's 1942 calls to make art subject to politics openly extolling the form as a means through which Party policies could be taken directly to 'the masses'. 'This volume', wrote Liu Chuan, the editor a collection of early post-Civil War *huobaoju*

> is written for the special use of dramatic troupes within factories, villages, military units and schools. My aims in editing this volume are to introduce works that combine politics and art, and form and content, to my comrades amongst the workers, peasants and soldiers. At the same time, I hope that it can serve some level of educational purpose for the broad masses (Liu, 1951: no page numbers).

Figure 1: Agitprop theatre in the Communist base areas of northern China, January 1948. Note the almost complete absence of props, the minimal use of costume and the proximity of the audience to the actors. (Courtesy of Getty Images)

One of the most important ways in which plays 'educated' audiences was to form a highly caricatured yet uniform picture of the Communist Party's main enemies: Chiang Kai-shek, the United States and those within China deemed 'counterrevolutionaries', 'landlords' or 'Rightists'. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the images of such figures borne out of the simple props and wardrobe items of 'living newspapers' bore a striking resemblance to the cartoon images of the same figures circulating in printed newspapers on a daily basis. It is thus perhaps more than coincidence that some of China's most celebrated state cartoonists of the 1950s, such as Hua Junwu—famed for his dozens of derogatory caricatures of Chiang Kai-shek and various American leaders during the early post-1949 years—also took a role in directing *huobaoju* (Zheng, 2010). Cartooning as a revolutionary art form in China had, like *huobaoju*, been perfected during the war years in Yan'an, and represented the graphic and satirical denigration of enemies in much the same way as actors and playwrights did with street theatre (Hung 2011: 155-81).

Figure 2: Hong Huang, *Baowei shijie heping* (Protect World Peace), ca. 1947. This is one of many artistic representations of children acting out *huobaoju* that were created during the Civil War. Note the celebration of theatrical violence, as well as the use of items such as the top hat to denote the United States and the 'White Star' badge (official emblem of the Chinese Nationalist Party) and mask to denote Chiang Kai-shek. (Courtesy of the Special Collections Department, University of Sheffield Library)

While cartoons could inspire *huobaoju*, 'living newspapers' could also influence visual art. One of the most enduring images of the Civil War period by the CCP-affiliated artist Feng Zhen, for example, was a *nianhua*- (New Year print) inspired depiction of a group of children involved in a *huobaoju*, with two individual children dressed as Chiang Kai-shek and a stereotypical American being attacked by others dressed as Chinese peasants and workers. The original image, entitled 'Wawa xi' (Child's play), is still held by the National Art Museum of China, and was given pride of place in the 'Cong Yan'an zoulai' (Coming from Yan'an) Exhibition held in 2012 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Mao's talks at the Yan'an Forum.[8] Feng's work was not exceptional, however. Depictions of *huobaoju* performances were regularly produced during the Civil War years (Figure 2), with such renditions often incorporating elements of peasant artistic traditions—like *huobaoju* productions themselves—or being presented in the form of *nianhua*.

Equally, *huobaoju* scripts and textbooks were regularly adorned with images either inspired by or taken directly from the growing canon of Chinese poster art (Figure 3). And *huobaoju* (including many of those cited in this paper) were given titles which echoed, or were precisely the same as, *biaoyu* (slogans) found in the Communist-affiliated press, scrawled on the walls of 'liberated' areas or used as the titles to posters.

[8] Details can be found in the May 2012 (89) issue of *Zhongguo meishuguan yuekan* (Journal of the Art Museum of China), which was published to coincide with the exhibition.

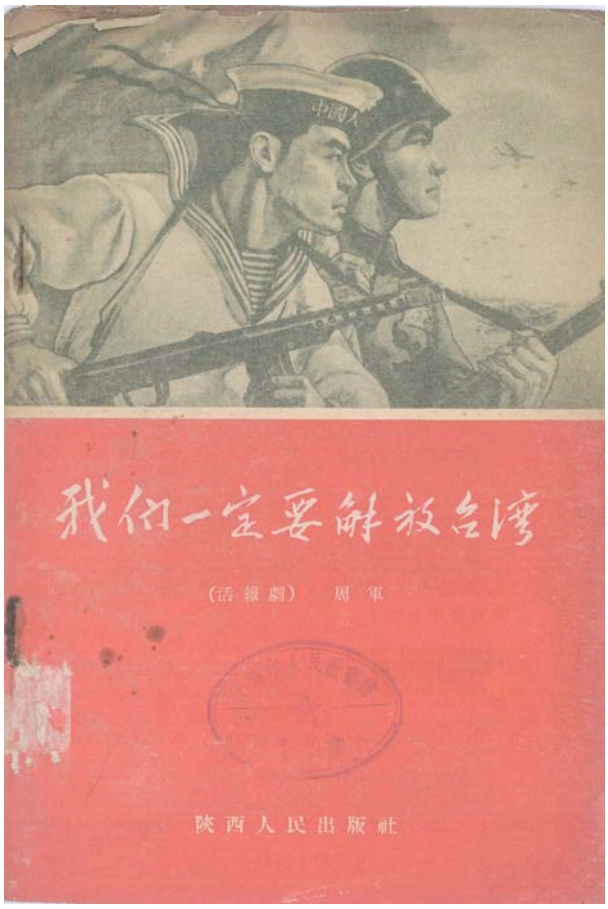

Figure 3: Cover of Zhou Jun (1955), *Women yiding yao jiefang Taiwan* (We must liberate Taiwan). The image used here, depicting mainland military personnel gazing across the Taiwan Strait, was typical of those circulating in official reference publications produced for the benefit of propaganda artists in the 1950s. (Courtesy of the Shanghai Library)

In this way, *huobaoju* were made part of intertextual mobilisational efforts which incorporated and encouraged exchange between all sorts of artistic expression. Just as admiration of a *nianhua* depicting a *huobaoju* might inspire disparate communities to try their hand at staging such a play, access to a centrally published script to be used in such productions might, in turn, assist in the distribution of specific vocabulary, imagery or iconography which went well beyond the bounds of street theatre, and which could help spread the uniform message of any given campaign or policy to a broad audience.

Sinifying *Zhivaya Gazeta*

Such intertextuality, and the place of *huobaoju* within networks of propagandistic cultural expression, suggests not simply that *huobaoju* were

influenced by developments in the visual arts during the Civil War, but also that their use had developed along lines already quite different from those in the Soviet Union. In being brought into a broader body of revolutionary art developed in Yan'an, *huobaoju* was being given a far more influential role than it had ever been granted in the land of its origins.

During and shortly after the Chinese Civil War, the Soviet connection to *huobaoju* was not denied. On the contrary, the involvement of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Alliance in the scripting of such dramas suggests that this heritage was celebrated (e.g., Dongbei wenhua jiaoyu gongzuodui, n.d.). As with much else drawn from the Soviet canon of propaganda art, however, the Chinese eventually came to claim the form as their own invention, particularly following the Sino-Soviet split of 1960. Writing of *huobaoju* in that very year, for example, an article in one of the leading theatre journals in China noted merely that 'it [i.e., *huobaoju*] already has quite a long history in China, having proven its agitational strength in opposing imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism…' (Li, 1960: 95).

Such claims to innovation and ownership, however, were not without merit. After all, Chinese 'living newspapers' had incorporated aspects of vernacular and regional forms of performance art from at least the Yan'an period. One example was the incorporation of *kuaiban* (rhythmic storytelling)—a form of performance in which a story is recounted in a rhythmic and free-rhyming fashion to the accompaniment of bamboo 'clappers' held by the speaker (Anon, 1949), while *xiangsheng* (cross talk) was also used for some *huobaoju* (Anon, 1958). Like other forms of artistic expression developed in Yan'an, some *huobaoju* (e.g., An, 1950) also showed a tendency to incorporate elements of Shaanxi folk dance and song.

In all of this, the well-documented effort on the part of Leftwing intellectuals in China to incorporate elements of folk culture in an attempt to make propaganda more palatable to peasant audiences during both the war against the Japanese and the Civil War was evident.[9] (Figure 4) This represented a peculiarly Yan'an-inspired vision of the role of theatre forms such as *huobaoju*, which it was believed could be made more attractive to the 'masses' if they articulated revolutionary ideas in vernacular Chinese form, despite their Soviet roots. Just as communist painters worked peasant artistic

[9] On this topic, see Judd (1990).

traditions (such as *nianhua*) into visual propaganda, *huobaoju* could be made more convincingly 'of the people' by incorporating local performance traditions into them. In this regard, *huobaoju* shared much in common with other forms of performance art during the Mao years. Be it small-scale street theatre, stage-managed events such as early post-Liberation national day celebrations (Hung 2011: 75-91) or strictly managed events such as *The East is Red* (*Dongfang hong*) of 1964 (Clark 2008: 158-9), the conscious incorporation of regional peasant musical, dance and performance traditions was a standard method by which theatre could be made to speak 'to the masses' in terms they understood.

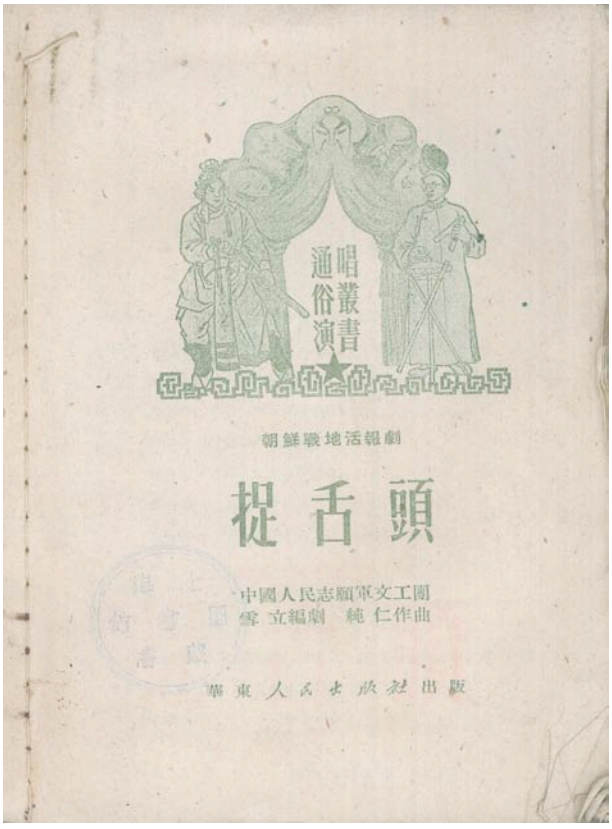

Figure 4: Cover of the script for Xue Li's 'Hold Your Tongue' (*Zhuo shetou*) from 1951. The figure on the right is depicted as holding bamboo 'clappers' as used in the *kuaiban*-style of story-telling. (Courtesy of the Shanghai Library)

Unlike the Soviets, the Chinese also wrote *huobaoju* specifically for children, such as 'The Little Heroes Outwit the KMT Spies' (*Xiao yingxiong zhiqin feite*) (Zuo, 1951). Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, a number of other variations of the *huobaoju* form were also developed in China ranging

from '*gewu huobaoju*' (lit. *huobaoju* with singing and dancing) to '*guangchang huobaoju*' (plaza *huobaoju*). All of this suggests a highly flexible view of the form and its uses, as well as a talent at adapting *huobaoju* to very specific audiences.

This is not to suggest, however, that *huobaoju* shed everything from its *zhivaya gazeta* origins. In the Chinese context, *huobaoju* lost none of the common criteria it had inherited from early Stalinist Russia: a simple plot set around a specific event or campaign; a limited number of acts, with most being limited to a single act (*dumu*); an equally limited time frame, with most *huobaoju* lasting only a matter of minutes; a small number of characters, with actors dressed in a cartoon-like fashion; lively participation from the audience; and a frequent use of comic violence. As had been the case following the Japanese invasion of 1937, the purpose of *huobaoju* in Mao's China was to continue to agitate against individuals or groups deemed to be enemies of the people.

Moreover, like Soviet practitioners of the 1920s, those in Mao's China who scripted or produced such *huobaoju* never claimed that their art represented the height of dramatic endeavour. Such plays were deemed best if they 'contained dialogue and song, music and dancing, exaggerated actions, loud [vocal] delivery…and bright colours…', and if they '…denigrated counterrevolutionaries while glorifying the people's heroes' (Li, 1960: 96). Indeed, one of the most recurrent words in the instructions that accompanied *huobaoju* scripts was 'ease' (*yi*), for 'living newspapers' were deemed effective only if they were easy to perform and understand. 'These three plays', instructed the anonymous editors of a 1965 anti-American *huobaoju*, for instance, 'are easy to organise and easy to act out: they are suitable for production in villages as well by all kinds of artistic troupes' (Anon, 1965: no page numbers).

Indeed, and in a reflection of the Mao-era rejection of 'intellectualism', *huobaoju*'s simplicity and lack of subtlety were held up as the form's source of virtue by its many proponents. 'As a form of immediate propaganda (*jishi xuanchuan*)', argued the Chinese playwright, novelist and defender of *huobaoju* Lao She in 1966, 'it [i.e., *huobaoju*] is perhaps a little crude… but only by being immediate does it have an effect'. The point of *huobaoju* was not to aspire to dramatic greatness but to get a point across, argued Lao She: these plays had to be presented in such a way that people 'understood

something as soon as they saw it and as soon as they heard it' (*Renmin ribao*, 8 April 1992).

This being the case, the messages of almost all *huobaoju* were exceedingly simple, and the emotions they encouraged visceral. Characters representing class and state enemies were habitually shown to suffer physical abuse at the hands of the 'masses' (or via their own ineptitude), or were theatrically killed, while members of the audience were encouraged to hurl abuse or objects at actors playing the part of such villains. Scripts contained constant repetition of political slogans. And to make absolutely sure that the message was understood, some *huobaoju* involved actors in roles known as the '*jieshuoyuan*' (lit. 'explainer'), whose job it was to narrate events as they occurred, ask rhetorical questions of the audience in an attempt to increase agitation, and to speak directly to characters within the play (e.g., by speaking 'for' onlookers when berating a villain). Another common practice was to have a villain's name attached to his or her person throughout the course of the play so that even the most ill-informed of observers would understand which character was worthy of vitriol.[10]

In keeping with the original aims of the form, plays were also written at astounding speed. During the Great Leap Forward, for example, the China-wide rush to harvest grain in excess of wildly ambitious targets was mirrored in attempts by cultural workers to produce *huobaoju* overnight: in 1958, actors, directors and scriptwriters from the Shanghai People's Arts Theatre (Shanghai renmin yishu xiyuan, 1958: 132) wrote eight *huobaoju* in the space of five days based on their experiences of visiting factories around the city. In other instances, *huobaoju* were said to fit the very aims of the Great Leap Forward in that they were 'quick and economical' (*duo kuai hao sheng*) (*Renmin ribao*, 12 April 1958).

At the same time, however, and despite the great lengths that were taken to present *huobaoju* as a Chinese innovation, many of these practices suggested little real narrative development beyond the sorts of 'living newspapers' that had been produced in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. The

[10] This practice is even suggested in one script so that 'it will make it easier for the audience to understand' (Liu, 1951: 2). This practice bore a striking resemblance to everyday life in China in the early 1950s. During the Land Reform campaigns, and during various purges of the same period, 'class enemies' were habitually paraded through the streets with name tags hung around their necks (see Schoenhals, 2007).

photographic record of performances suggests, for instance, that *huobaoju* had changed little between the 1940s and the 1960s. Actors portraying Americans and other 'capitalists' in 1965 dressed in much the same way as their predecessors had done in 1949 (or *zhivaya gazeta* actors had done in Moscow in the 1920s)—donning a top hat or MacArthuresque sunglasses (Hong, 2002: 159)—while the ubiquitous figure of Chiang Kai-shek continued to be depicted in Civil War mode (and in much the same way that illustrators such as Hua Junwu continued to draw him for the country's newspapers), wearing an 'ill-fitting army uniform and only a single boot', with 'hands bandaged and a plaster on his head' (An, 1950: 1).[11] (Figure 5) While 'living newspapers' in China had thus been embellished with numerous vernacular cultural elements, they remained at heart a revolutionary form of agitational theatre, and one which continued to betray an early Soviet provenance.

Figure 5: A *huobaoju* being performed on the streets of Shanghai, 1950. The actor in the centre of the image with sunglasses, pipe and bandages is playing the part of Douglas MacArthur; the actor holding a samurai sword and wearing a kimono is playing a Japanese militarist. (Courtesy of the Shanghai Municipal Archives)

[11] The depiction of Chiang with a plaster on his head originated in early wartime visual propaganda created by the Japanese and their allies in 1937-8; it was adopted by the Chinese communists in almost all post-1945 depictions of the Nationalist leader.

Controlling the Form

From its inception, the 'living newspaper' was an improvisational and ephemeral art form. In the early years of the war against the Japanese, for instance, plays were indeed scripted, and particular troupes were tasked with the performance of specific *huobaoju*. In just as many cases, however, these plays were performed without recourse to printed scripts or official sanction.

In the Soviet Union, the improvisational quality of 'living newspapers' had served a specific purpose during the 1920s, but had come to be viewed with suspicion as Stalin attempted to consolidate power. In post-1949 China, a similar pattern developed. The Communists recognised the success that this agitational theatre had achieved. In the years following 1949, however, when mobilisation of the entire population in support of the Korean War, Land Reform, and the collectivisation of agriculture was imperative, the need for a scripted, unified and tightly controlled programme of propaganda became paramount.

In China, however, this was achieved *not* by doing away with *huobaoju*, but by tasking state-run bodies at both the national and local level with scripting and producing *huobaoju*, and by maintaining strict control over the rights to publish the scripts for such plays. At the same time, and in an effort not to stifle the improvisational nature of the form that had made it so effective in the war years, they also decreed within these published scripts a significant measure of flexibility in terms of production. 'When acting out this script', instructed the collective authors of a 1965 *huobaoju* concerning the Vietnam War, for instance, 'the actors, clothing, props and so on can be organised according to one's own discretion, based on the actual circumstances' (Li, et al., 1965: n.p.). In other instances, distinctions were made according to *where* a *huobaoju* was to be performed. In a Great Leap Forward-era *huobaoju* written in the southern city of Guangzhou, actors were instructed in great intricacy about the stage setting for a particular *huobaoju*, right down to the inclusion of a papaya tree that was to be made visible at the back of the stage;[12] 'if performed on the street', however, 'a single chair and table will suffice' (Guo, et al., 1958: n.p.).

[12] Suggesting a very local reference to sub-tropical Guangzhou.

In other cases, however, a far more elaborate list of items that could or could not be altered in the performance of *huobaoju* was included for performers and producers towards the end of a script. In one early play, performers were given the choice to set words to whatever melodies they thought appropriate—suggesting that regional variation in terms of musical accompaniment remained a major factor in Chinese *huobaoju*—yet they were also reminded that certain elements were not to be changed: 'When you sing the line "It was precisely at this moment of danger that the Soviet Union arrived", the [person playing the] Soviet Red Army [officer] must come on stage immediately—an early or late entry will ruin the effect entirely' (Dongbei wenhua jiaoyu gongzuodui, n.d.: 17).

This is not to say that the writing of new *huobaoju* became the exclusive domain of the Party or organs of the central government. Instead, and in a reflection of the concept of the 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*), there was a very deliberate attempt to encourage non-Party and non-government groups to become involved. Indeed, *huobaoju* was justified precisely because it was so well suited to the fulfilment of the 'mass line' insofar as it encouraged audience participation and collective authorship. The *People's Daily* noted with some pride in August 1958, for instance, that a *huobaoju* written by professional dramatists was being performed and further developed by an amateur dramatics club run by railway workers in Shanghai, with workers themselves refining elements of the original production (Zhang, 1958).

Furthermore, rather than simply monitoring the scripting or production of plays, the authorities also controlled the context in which they could be performed. *Huobaoju* were still performed on street corners and in factories or villages. However, by assimilating such performances into events such as national day celebrations, mass rallies or other staged events, the improvisational quality of the *huobaoju* could be retained, while the content or message of each play strictly monitored. Dramatic troupes could independently produce quite different versions of a particular *huobaoju*, but the fundamental message of each play could be maintained by those organisations which published scripts and associated guides—most prominently municipal or provincial-level publishing houses and theatres.

The result was an 'institutionalisation' of *huobaoju*, with the form *appearing* immediate and spontaneous but being just as firmly controlled as other forms of propaganda. Like posters, for example, records were kept of

the number of each *huobaoju* script that were published (with these being marked on the publications themselves), and the independent production of such plays was not condoned.

Conclusion

The onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 had widespread ramifications for all types of performance art in China. Yet as I suggested at the very start of this paper, the hitherto generally accepted narrative of the model operas replacing all other forms of drama in this period is now beginning to be undermined by new scholarship. While it is clear that *huobaoju* did have an influence on the *yangbanxi*, the form initially lived on after 1966 through the Red Guards, many of whom appear to have incorporated not simply elements of the form into their street performances, but entire sections of extant *huobaoju* where appropriate. Paul Clark (2012: 35-6), for example, provides evidence that *huobaoju* were incorporated into impromptu performances provided by 'sent down youth' to rural audiences in the late 1960s, suggesting that those whose job it was to spread revolution to the countryside saw no contradiction in the continued use of the form in the Cultural Revolution context. In other cases, the 'hybrid form of spoken play' often performed in an improvisational fashion by Red Guards in the cities, and reaching a peak in popularity during the summer of 1967, betrayed clear echoes of *huobaoju* (Clark, 2008: 192-5). It is telling that, in both cases, *huobaoju* appears to have been called upon precisely because of its agitational quality (one that suited the mood of the Cultural Revolution), but also because the improvisational nature of the form represented a potential threat to authority. Just as the state had sought to control *huobaoju* prior to 1966, so could those who sought to criticise state 'bureaucracy' reformulate *huobaoju* for their own purposes.

I would argue, however, that the legacy of *huobaoju* after 1966 was found not in the officially codified forms of theatre which were celebrated in this period, but in the dramatic hysteria of the Cultural Revolution itself. After all, none of the agitational functions of the 'living newspaper' disappeared in 1966. Most were instead channelled into others forms of political expression. There is but a thin line between public denunciation of 'Nationalist spies', the forced donning of dunce hats and other theatrical accoutrements on 'class enemies', the public beating of villains or the shouting of slogans at mass rallies and the basic elements of the *huobaoju*. The public spectacle that so

typified the Cultural Revolution represented the triumph of everything that the *huobaoju* form stood for.

In this regard, *huobaoju* can also be seen not merely as part of a tradition of revolutionary theatre in China that stretches back well beyond the 1960s, but also as part of what Chang-tai Hung (2011: 262) has referred to as a wider 'Nationalistic propaganda state' fostered under Mao, one in which the very purpose of all artistic expression was to '*fadong qunzhong*' (stir up the masses). In such a context, *huobaoju* sat alongside, but also interacted with, a whole range of artistic expression that had been developed and Sinicised in Yan'an, from cartoons to poster art. Such a culture may have been forged primarily in the war against Japan, yet it developed most rapidly in the CCP's war against the Nationalists, and became subsumed into a wider practice of encouraging mass participation with the ultimate aim of 'understand[ing] and exploit[ing] the mentality of the masses' (Hung, 2011: 261). In this regard, *huobaoju* was inseparable from the broader practice of mass campaigns in the People's Republic, in which all sorts of artistic expression—drama, visual art, music—were designed for the purpose of 'inviting popular participation by stirring up collective hatred' (Strauss, 2002: 82). Most *huobaoju* were, after all, created to accompany specific campaigns, ranging from the Korean War to the Great Leap Forward, and most involved the direct vilification or even execution of enemies, *in absentia*, against which campaigns were directed.

The importance of *huobaoju* for our understanding of Chinese cultural development under Mao thus lies not purely in the Soviet origins of the form, nor even in its Sinification, but in the extent to which the history of this form in China forces us to question the viability of 1966 as a natural watershed in the development of revolutionary culture. As Barbara Mittler has recently argued, many of the cultural expressions that emerged in the post-1966 period were 'not without historical precedents' (2013: 30), just as many of the forms that we have come to associate so closely with the Cultural Revolution—such as the *yangbanxi*, with which I started this paper—developed out of an existing body of Yan'an-derived political culture. *Huobaoju* predated but also presaged the advent of Red Guard theatricality and the more formalised world of the model works. This fact alone has all kinds of ramifications for our understanding of agitational theatre in China, and should perhaps prompt us to revisit the argument that the *yangbanxi*, and the wider Cultural Revolution culture they have come to represent, were in any way unique.

There is, admittedly, much more work that needs to be done to provide a more holistic picture of the *huobaoju* form and its development over the *longue durée*. Future archival research might provide greater insights into the control and development of the form at various levels of the state and party—and in the cities as opposed to the countryside—while wider use might also be made of the photographic and audiovisual record in understanding how Chinese *huobaoju* differed (or otherwise) from their Soviet predecessors in terms of key functions such as audience participation.

In any case, *huobaoju* was both reliant on and reflective of the very nature of political culture in China in the 1950s and 1960s. Stylistically, *huobaoju* looked very similar to their Soviet antecedents—right down to the top hats worn by 'capitalists' in both. Contextually, however, they represented something quite different. The comedic violence and constant exhortations to loathe common enemies in *huobaoju* may have seemed unremarkable in times of war. What is telling in China's case was that such depictions, rather than fading with the Communist victory in 1949, became, like other forms of revolutionary art—from *manhua* to posters, slogans and woodblock prints—a constant feature of socialist political culture under Mao for another two decades.

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Jeremy E. Taylor is an associate professor at the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-Dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia* (Routledge, 2011) and over 20 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. He is also the founder of "Enemy of the People: Visual Depictions of Chiang Kai-shek", an AHRC-funded on-line database.