



The Builders of Chinese Drama

The History of Chinese
Drama, Volume 2

Ronghua Wang

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PART I

Actors



CHAPTER 1

Important Actors

There are many important actors on the Chinese drama stage. Zhao Dan (赵丹) and Yu Shizhi (于是之) are the greatest among them. They are just like Marlon Brando and Henry Fonda in the United States.

ZHAO DAN

Zhao Dan was born on June 27, 1915 in Yangzhou of Jiangsu Province. His original name was Zhao Fengao (赵凤翱), his family origin was Feicheng of Shandong Province. His father once served in the army as a battalion commander during the Northern Warlords period. After the army service, the family was settled down in Nantong of Jiangsu, and the father opened a cinema and was its manager. The father was very much addicted to relics, ancient art works, and he sometimes composed poems while drinking liquor. To keep his son from mischief, he often asked the boy to rub an ink stick to produce ink for his calligraphy or painting. While the son was rubbing the stick, the father often dropped a few drops of water on the boy's wrist, and the boy had to be very careful not to let the drops slide away. In doing so, the boy's wrist strength was enhanced. So, gradually the boy picked up the skills of calligraphy. When Zhao Dan was twelve or thirteen, he was able to write with a brush pen central scrolls or large piece of inscription for his father's customers. When Zhao Dan grew older, he used to say his calligraphy was better

than his painting and his painting was better than his acting. Of course, this was self-deprecating, it shows, however, that Zhao Dan was talented in calligraphy and fine arts when he was a child.

The father, who was also an owner of a theatre, often brought the boy to watch operas or to the rear part of the stage, he gradually became addicted to operas. China's very last top scorer of the imperial examination, Zhang Jian (张謇) was from Nantong, the scholar was a person who held that the country could only be saved by the development of industries. He often invited famous Peking Opera singers such as Mei Lanfang, Ouyang Yuqian, Cheng Yanqiu, Yang Xiaolou, and etc. to Nantong to perform. Drama player Wang Youyou (汪优游) also came quite often. All these activities influenced Zhao Dan imperceptibly.

Soon came his first chance to appear on stage. He was asked to play a role of a worker in a drama at the graduation ceremony of the primary school, but he was late to step on stage, because he took a wrong entrance. Thus, his desire for acting was not really satisfied. Then, after he entered the middle school, he organized a "petty troupe" with his schoolmates. The little troupe was quite successful, they staged quite a number of one-act plays in his father's theatre. In 1931, when he graduated from the middle school, he was enrolled by Shanghai Fine Art School, the teachers there were all well-known artists. Much of his spare time at the fine art school was spent on drama activities with the school's troupe and two troupes outside the school. He played in some progressive plays such as "SOS", "Bell at the Troubled Times", "Brothers" and "Determination". Zhao's given name "Dan" was given by Shi Chunshou, one of his elder schoolmates. "Dan" was the name of a prince of the State of Yan (燕) in the Warring Period, who was known for his courage in opposing the tyranny of the State of Qin, and more importantly, it also means the red color, which was a taboo in the Nationalist area. During that period, the lining of his coat was also red; and he combed his hair to the left. Zhao Dan himself explained later why he did so was that he was afraid others might not know he was a leftist. In the late autumn of 1932, he and his friends Xu Tao, Wang Weiyi joined the Left Dramatists Federation, introduced by Zhao Mingyi (赵铭彝). Since then, he had been busy with playing dramas, taking part in parades and spreading leaflets. At the graduation ceremony at the fine art school, he played the leading male role in "The Portrait of Madame C". His acting impressed a film director, Li Pingqian, who was watching the play, and the director invited him to play a dandy in the soundless movie "Spring Complaints with a Pipa". This is

Zhao Dan's first experience with film, and thus he became an amphibious actor in both drama and film.

Zhao Dan tried hard to improve himself in acting while staging more plays such as "*The Father Returns*", "*The Song of Spring*", "*Storm along the Yangtze River*", "*Alarm Bell*", "*Under the Mercury Lamp*", "*Sisters*", and etc.

When the Japanese imperialists had frantically invaded China's territory, the Kuomintang reactionaries pursued a policy of non-resistance of "settling the interior before attacking the outsider". The struggle of the revolutionaries was arduous. In 1934, the Kuomintang reactionaries carried out cultural encirclement and suppression, they arrested the revolutionary writers Tian Han and Yang Hansheng, smashed the Film Company under the Bureau of Arts, controlled and destroyed progressive drama and film with various censorship regulations, and threatened to drive the Left-wing Drama Federation out of the literary and artistic stage. Zhang Daofan, a reactionary literato and a spy of the National Investigation and Statistics Bureau wrote a play titled "*Mrs. Modern*", which intended to call women to go back to the kitchen and to be a plaything of their husbands. They did not hesitate to spend a lot of money on rehearsals and performances and advertisement of the play. In order to fight back against the enemy's cultural encirclement, the Shanghai Dramatists Association decided to perform a tit-for-tat play, Ibsen's famous novel "*Nora*" (Zhao Dan as Torvald Helmer, Lan Ling as Nora, Jin Shan as Nils Krogstad, Wei Heling as Dr. Rank).

In the spring of 1934, Jin Shan accompanied Zhang Min (章泯) to meet with Zhao Dan, and they said: "We can't always stay at the stage of shouting a few slogans and shedding a few tears, we must improve the acting skills of left-wing theater, and we should establish our own theater art!".

These words aroused Zhao Dan's great enthusiasm, and also touched his heartstrings, he knew that this was a political confrontation and an artistic contest. When talking later about the rehearsal of "*Nora*", Zhao Dan once said: "Before this, I was acting completely like a blind cat that run into a dead mouse, and I was relying on the little intuition I had. It is a precious opportunity to have such a purposeful learning opportunity".

Many actors' talents are displayed brilliantly after they were instructed by a director. Throughout his life, Zhao Dan praised his teacher, Comrade Zhang Min, a famous drama theorist and drama director in China. Here,

we quote a few paragraphs from Zhao Dan's book "The Gate of Hell" about his vivid memories of the rehearsal of "Nora":

"Zhang Min told us from the beginning: "The important thing for an actor is not how to play the role, but how to interpret the role correctly and profoundly. Therefore, the actor's position and his thoughts and feelings are the key to determining a character. In this sense, an actors must have attitude, ideology, and artistic value in creating a character. For this paragraph, I gave a one-sided, mechanical understanding at the beginning, I thought: Helmer is a figure being criticized, in order to reveal his selfish class nature and ugly soul, I tried to produce a disgusting negative effect in every word and deed--thinking that this was the firm stance and thoughts and feelings of the revolutionary materialism of the actor, but as a result, I made him a two-faced person who speaks insincerely and falsely, and a freak with chaotic behavior. Not only does it seem inexplicable to others, but even I myself was at a loss (in fact, it is the so-called class nature of the role that is purely objectively illustrated), and the more I rehearsed and analyzed it, the more wizened it becomes".

"Zhang Min also enabled us to learn such words of Stanislavsky 'an actor should absolutely believe that everything his character does is extremely reasonable: I can only be like this, not otherwise...'. At that time, I did not understand the dialectic of having to start from the 'self', even though I understood that we had to start from the character; nevertheless, I finally corrected the creative method of conceptualization and vulgar sociology, restored the character as it was, and thus returned to the correct direction of realism. I realized that I should not criticize him and scandalize him in the performance, on the contrary, it is necessary to believe in the character that his words and deeds are correct and natural".

Finally, Zhao Dan's interpretation of Helmer, according to the theory of Stanislavsky, is thus: "Helmer regarded himself as an upright and serious citizen, a man of great benefit to society, and that he had a genuine love for his wife, who knew how to protect her husband in order to achieve a happy family. Thus, Helmer was extremely proud and complacent". So, he decided to change his plan, he will "not demonize him, instead he will portray him as a well-bred and kind gentleman. With the development of the play, when he found out that his 'docile' wife had violated the law and rules, and borrowed usury behind his back, his feelings were stirred up, and only then did he disclosed his philosophy of life and explain it, and became a different person—only in this way did he reveal the inner world of the character, so as to convince people that what I portrayed was

indeed a logical selfish husband in real life, a hypocritical gentleman, and that the character–Helmer was a typical artistic image.”

To make the play a success, Zhao Dan and his colleagues consulted a large number of foreign films, oil paintings, prints, and illustrations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, studied the psychology and demeanor of the characters, and jointly demanded that the movements should be clean and neat.

When “Nora” was performed for the first time at the Carlton Theater (now the Yangtze River Theater), there was a long applause from the audience, and Zhao Dan was excited. Director Zhang Min shook hands with him tightly, congratulating the victory of this unusual performance and his success. The praise of peers is endless. The press commented on his performance: “The Chinese actor profoundly recreated Ibsen’s Helmer!” The suave gesture looks like a sculpture, because he was a student of art.

The success and significance of Zhao Dan’s starring role in “Nora” is not only that it caused a sensation in the society and fired a shot of the victory of the left-wing drama, but also a greater success in his heart. Starting from “Nora”, he felt that performing arts is a science, and there is a mystery in it, and he wants to study and explore this mystery. He heard for the first time from Zhang Min about Stanislavsky, Danchenko, Wagtankov, Meyerhold, Teylov, Reinhardt, When heard the names of these masters, at this time, he developed a sense of responsibility to dedicate himself to Chinese art, he said, “I riveted a tenacious iron nail in my soul and made a grand wish: to fight for the establishment of China’s performance system all my life!”.

Soon after *Nora*, Zhao Dan played a part in *Thunderbolt*, a famous play written by A. H. Ostrovsky. He then played in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and a historical play “*The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom*”.

From 1936 to 1937, Zhao Dan starred in *Cross Street* (十字街头) and *Angel on the Road* (马路天使), which are classic films in the history of Chinese cinema. In “*Cross Street*”, he played the role of Lao Zhao, an unemployed college student, portraying the image of an innocent, simple, enthusiastic, and somewhat silly young intellectual; in *Angel on the Road*, Zhao Dan made a new breakthrough in performance by using realistic creative techniques in his acting, in a true and natural manner, the image of Xiao Chen, a kind-hearted, helpful, honest and simple, and self-intelligent drummer. His acting was widely praised, thus laying a solid foundation for him as an artistic master.

After the “August 13” incident, Zhao Dan resolutely participated in the Third Drama Team for Anti-Japanese Aggression and National Salvation led by the Communist Party of China (CPC). The team went to Wuhan first, then it went to Chongqing. Along the way the team performed such street plays as “*Put Down Your Whip, Sanjiang Is Good, Storm beyond the Great Wall, Poison, Two Brothers, Hometown* and so on. In Wuhan, all the roadshow drama teams came together. He participated in the joint performance of “National Mobilization” created by Tian Han. When the team arrived in Chongqing, Zhao Dan not only directed *The True Story of Ah Q*, but also performed in *Under the Eaves of Shanghai* and *One Year*.

In June 1939, a group of ten, including Zhao Dan, Wang Weiyi and Xu Tao wanted to conduct drama performances in the rear of the enemy, and Zhao Dan also wanted to go to the Soviet Union to study. They heard the local warlord Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang had been helping people to go to the Soviet Union to study, and then asked related persons to introduce them. When Zhao Dan discussed this matter with Yang Hansheng, Yang thought that there were Mao Dun, Chen Tanqiu, Mao Zemin and others in Xijiang, who could take care of the matter, and he also agreed with them on this matter. Later, when Zhou Enlai found out that they were going to Xinjiang, he felt that it was deeply inappropriate for them to go and immediately sent Feng Naichao to get them back, but unfortunately, they were already on the road.

As expected, Zhao Dan and Xu Tao were arrested soon after they arrived in Xinjiang by Sheng Shicai, they were labeled as a “Trotskyist bandits”, and dragged into a case. Soon, Wang Weiyi was also arrested. They were interrogated several times and received heavy tortures several times. It was only five years later that the three of them were able to escape from the “medieval-style living hell”. They flew back to Chongqing from Dihua (now Urumqi) in June 1945.

Yang Hansheng reported the return of the three to Zhou Enlai, the secretary of the Southern Bureau of the CPC, who immediately instructed his secretary Xu Bing to represent him in hosting a dinner at Zeng Jiayan No. 50 for them, accompanied by Yang Hansheng and Yu Ling. At the dinner Yang told them a piece of encouraging news: Mao Dun’s newly written play *Before and After Qingming* is waiting for them to act.

The friends, who have gone through woes together, received some subsidies from the “Drama Federation” for their lives, although they have not fully recovered and still suffered from pains from the torture, they

threw themselves wholeheartedly into the rehearsal of *Before and After Qingming*. The play was staged while Mao Zedong was in Chongqing taking part in the negotiations with Chiang Kai Shek. The play caused a sensation, and Zhou Enlai spoke highly about the performance. This drama, which directly intervened in the political circles and lashed out at the crimes of the bureaucrats and capitalists, was naturally interfered with by the Kuomintang reactionaries. Soon after Mao Zedong's departure from Chongqing for Yanan, they resorted to all kinds of despicable means to obstruct and sabotage the performance. Mao Dun, Zhao Dan and others were under the surveillance of spies.

Zhao Dan and the Film *The Life of Wu Xun* (武训).

In the summer of 1944, when Sun Yu was working at China Education Film Studio, which was situated in the North Hot Spring of Chongqing, one day, the famous educator Mr. Tao Xingzhi (陶行知) gave Sun Yu a movie script (*The Illustrated Biography of Wu Xun*), and he hoped that Sun Yu would be able to make a movie about Wu Xun's deeds when he had the opportunity. Wu Xun was a native of Tangyi County, Shandong Province (now Guanxian County, Shandong) in the late Qing Dynasty, born in 1838 and died in 1896. He came from a poor background, and when he was a young man, he was often deceived because he was illiterate, and he was determined to beg for education so that the children of the poor could read and write, and live a good life without being oppressed by the rich. After 30 years of begging, Wu Xun accumulated some money, and after he was 50 years old, he successively set up three schools free of charge for students, and he himself continued to beg for a living until he died. Wu's begging and learning activities were praised by the ruling class at that time, and Zhang Yao, the governor of Shandong in the late Qing Dynasty, once submitted a memorial to Emperor Guangxu suggesting to build an arch way in praise of Wu Xun. After Wu Xun's death, his deeds entered into "Historical Books", and he was respected as "righteous beggar" and "beggar saint". Sun Yu read "The Illustrated Biography of Wu Xun" with great interest, and was deeply moved by Wu Xun's unique deeds of "begging and promoting learning", and thought that this was a good movie theme. So, the shooting started with Zhao Dan playing the role of Wu Xun. When the People's Republic was founded, only one third of the film was finished. The shooting was completed at the end of 1950. It was released in Shanghai in February 1951. At the beginning of 1951, *The Life of Wu Xun* was shown all over the country, it was rated as one of

the 10 best films of 1950. Unexpectedly, two or three months later, there was a thunderbolt on a sunny day, and a nationwide criticism of “*The Life of Wu Xun*” was launched, and on May 20, 1951, the People’s Daily published an editorial written by Mao Zedong himself, “We Should Pay Attention to the Discussion of Film (*The Life of Wu Xun*)”. On July 23, 1951, the People’s Daily published an article entitled “Historical Investigation of Wu Xun”, saying that Wu Xun was one “big hooligan, big creditor and big landlord”. In this way, the discussion of Wu Xun became a national political mass criticism, *The Life of Wu Xun* was then banned from showing. The critique lasted for more than a year, and this critique seriously confused the boundaries between art and political issues, also caused bad influence to film making in new China. More than 40 crew members such as Sun Yu and Zhao Dan were hit hard or implicated. Since then, Zhao Dan had no roles to play in any films for over two years. He never fully understood why he was implicated. On September 6, 1985, the People’s Daily published an important piece of news on its first page, titled “Hu Qiaomu Said: The Criticism of the Film (*The Life of Wu Xun*) is Very One-sided, Extreme and Crude”. The movie *The Life of Wu Xun* was finally rehabilitated after 34 years of being wronged. At the end of 2005, at the film retrospective exhibition held in Shanghai Film City to commemorate the 90th anniversary of Zhao Dan’s birth, *The Life of Wu Xun* was completely screened in front of the audience, which was the return to the light of day after *The Life of Wu Xun* was locked up for more than 50 years.

Zhao Dan joined the Communist Part of China in 1957.

Zhao Dan was quite unfortunate, almost at the same time as *The Life of Wu Xun* was criticized, the film *In Between our Couple* was also being criticized. The film was adapted from a novelette of the same title, written by Xiao Yemu. The criticism was directed mostly to the author. The film director Zheng Junli and the actor of the leading role Zhao Dan were implicated. The novelette depicts the contradictions between the intellectual husband and his wife, who was from a peasant family; their conflict after entering the city and their eventual mutual understanding and reconciliation. The novelette describes daily and ordinary family trivialities such as what to drink and what to eat, which is full of strong human feelings. Xiao Yemu’s novels are known for his delicate depiction of personal emotions, which was a unique wonder in the literary and artistic circles at that time, which also attracted fierce criticism, and the author was regarded as a criminal and died at a cadre labor school for it.

Zhao took part in the filming of *For Peace*, produced by Shanghai Film Studio in 1956. The main plot is: at the end of 1941, after the outbreak of the Pacific War, and after the Japanese army entered into the Shanghai Concession, how Professor Jiang Hao was tortured by the Japanese invaders and finally killed by the Kuomintang spies and how his family engaged in the revolutionary cause.

In 1956, Zhao played the role of Li Shizhen (李时珍1518-1593), who was reputed as the Saint of Medicine, who, after 27 years of collection of herbal medicine samples in fields and mountains and completed *Compendium of Materia Medica*, which contained 1.92 million characters. Zhao's acting in the film was transparent and refined, he was silent in some cases when his posture looked as a sculpture, he made Li Shizhen very lively, exciting, and sometimes humorous. With his acting, Li was not only a firm and resolute person, but also a man with rich thoughts and passion, the audience could clearly feel his joy, rage, sorrow, and happiness. The director of this film was Shen Fu (沈浮). It is difficult to tell whose merits were greater between Zhao Dan and Shen Fu in making a great film. The following were obvious: The whole film still successfully uses real life details to highlight Li Shizhen's strong will to complete the revision of the "Materia Medica" despite all kinds of ups and downs. It was very touching to hear how Li shizhen exhorted his wife under the lamp before he was leaving home for three or five years in order to find mandala flowers and other medicinal herbs, and to see the difficulties for Li to put a thread through the needle's eye in a winter night on his hard trip. The repeated usage of the lens of boatmen pulling the boat by a rope along the bank to illustrate that Li Shizhen's study of medicine and compilation of "Materia Medica" is like sailing against the current, and he had to face a hard life. It is precisely these details captured from life, and not just the confrontation with people like Squire Bao and the alchemist, that create the image of a persistent and touching Li Shizhen. It is no wonder that after the fall of the "Gang of Four", "*Li Shizhen*" was the first film selected by the British Film Society for its first Chinese Film Festival.

In 1957, the movie *Soul of the Sea* starring Zhao Dan caused a sensation. It is an all-star blockbuster, based on a true story, which tells the story of the uprising of the officers and men of a certain ship of the Kuomintang Navy. Among them, the poignant love story of Taiwanese maid Wen Mengyuan played by Wang Danfeng and sailor Chen Chunguan played by Zhao Dan adds a unique tenderness to the film. The film

was banned during the 10-year catastrophe. It wasn't until the 80s of the last century that it was once again put on China's screens, and it was still a national sensation. After more than half a century, looking back at *Soul of the Sea*, from today's point of view, it is still a superb masterpiece.

Zhao Dan's next role was Nie Er (1901–1935), a most respected musician who composed PRC's national Anthem—"March of the Volunteers". The film was produced by Shanghai Film Studio, directed by Zheng Junli. "*Nie Er*" was released in 1959, telling the story of the patriotic young Nie Er who came to Shanghai from Yunnan, accepted progressive ideas, devoted himself to the mass movement, and gradually grew into a people's musician. The film is the first music biopic in New China. In 1960, the film won the Biopic Award at the 12th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

The Opium War is a film produced by Shanghai Film Studio, directed by Zheng Junli and Cen Fan, starring Zhao Dan, and released in 1959. The film tells the story of Lin Zexu in the middle of the nineteenth century, when he was ordered to ban opium in Guangzhou, fought wits and courage with British opium dealers and Chinese lawless officials, and burned all the opium in Humen in 1839. The film is one of the ten tribute films for the 10th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1959. It was also the first Chinese color feature film to be released in the United States. When the film was being filmed, the "Great Leap Forward" had not yet passed, and the film industry was trying to make films in "more, faster, better, and more economical" manner, and it was desired to shoot 100 shots a day. But the director of the film, Zheng Junli, did not follow the trend, and always controlled the shooting speed to ensure the artistic quality, at most a dozen shots a day. Later, in the "rectification" movement, he was charged with "less, slow, poor, and expensive" filmmaking. In the summer of 1958, Premier Zhou Enlai sent a poem he just obtained from Guangzhou about the fighting against British Invaders by the Sanyuanli inhabitants, he asked Zheng Junli to study the poem carefully so that the struggle of the people of Guangzhou resisting the British invaders could be well reflected in the film. Chen Bo, film critic and former director of "August 1st" Film Studio, believes that at the beginning of its release, this film was all the rage with its extraordinary and touching artistic charm and soul-shaking ideological power, and it is still loved by the audience after many years, and the long-term artistic effect proves that the film is indeed a classic of modern Chinese film art.

Living Forever in Burning Flames is a movie released in 1965, directed by Shui Hua and starring Zhao Dan and Yu Lan. It is based on the novel "Red Rock". In 1948, on the eve of the liberation of Chongqing, the Kuomintang, which knew that its days were numbered, began to carry out a frenzied massacre of Communists and progressives. After her husband was killed, Sister Jiang (played by Yu Lan) gathered up her mood and went to Huaying Mountain to participate in the rural armed revolutionary work, but due to the betrayal by Pu Zhigao, she and Xu Yunfeng (played by Zhao Dan), the leader of the underground party organization in Chongqing, were arrested and imprisoned in the Cinder Cave concentration camp. The Kuomintang successively coerced, lured, and tortured Xu Yunfeng and Sister Jiang in a vain attempt to get clues about the underground party from them, but failed. When they were physically tortured, Xu Yunfeng and Sister Jiang became more and more courageous mentally, and they led their cellmate the Little Radish Head (played by Fang Shu) and others to fight against the Kuomintang. In April 1949, when the People's Liberation Army crossed the Yangtze River and the liberation of Chongqing was imminent, Xu Yunfeng, Sister Jiang and others got in touch with the outside party organizations by Hua Ziliang, who pretended to be crazy and stupid in the concentration camp for more than 10 years, and began to plan a prison escape. Hua Ziliang took the chance when the enemy asked him to buy vegetables, he wittily got in touch with the party organization outside the prison, and brought the news of the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1 back to the prison and handed it to Sister Jiang. Although Xu Yunfeng was confined in a dark and damp dungeon, he used all his strength, day and night, with his shackled hands, and dug up the masonry of the prison wall and prepare a hole for his comrades to escape from prison. The enemy frantically massacred political prisoners on the eve of death, as a result Sister Jiang and Xu Yunfeng were killed; Hua Ziliang led the fellow prisoners to break out of the prison through the hole left by Xu Yunfeng, and joined the advance troops of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Huayingshan guerrillas who came to meet them. When Zhao Dan played Xu Yunfeng, he tried to pursue an improvised, real and natural life performance, so that this character has both an inner heroism and an approachable sense of intimacy.

How Zhao Dan was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution?

The persecution of Zhao Dan, as recalled by Zhao's Wife Huang Zongying, started from a visit of Jiang Qing (江青) in 1959. Jiang Qing

is the actress by the name of Lan Ling in Shanghai in the 1930s, she played major leading female roles in a series of drama staged by Zhao Dan and a few others. Jiang Qing went to Yanan and became the wife of Mao Zedong there. When the Great Cultural Revolution started, she was an important member of the Central Leading Group. According to Huang Zongying's memory: "one day in 1959 Jiang Qing sent a car to take Zheng Junli and his wife Mrs. Huang Chen, and Zhao Dan and me to a deep compound on Yongfu Road. I remember that Zhao Dan was still from the filming location of 'Nie Er' and was sent over still with his make-ups. After arrival, we saw Jiang Qing and a municipal leader, but they didn't say what this place was, and according to our observations, it might be the residence of the city leader.

During the banquet, Jiang Qing suddenly pointed at Zhao Dan and Zheng Junli and said to the city leader, 'I only have these two best friends in Shanghai. Today I will entrust the two of them to you.' Then Jiang Qing said seriously to Zhao and Zheng, 'If you need help in Shanghai in the future, you can go directly to him; I hope that you will listen to us more and not listen to them.' We were all confused as we didn't know who were included in her 'us' and 'them'.

On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic in 1964, the city leader asked to talk to Zhao Dan and me again. He asked, 'Have you created any new works lately?' I replied immediately with excitement: 'I am taking on an important task, and filming *The Weather at the End of Summer*, the protagonist is Mao Liying.....' His face fell and slapped the table and asked sharply, 'Who is Mao Liying?' I replied, 'We don't know her.....' he immediately interrupted me: 'Why do you have to write about her if you don't know her?' We have long said that we should not write anything about the ancient people or the dead people. You should spend more efforts in writing about the 13 years since the founding of the People's Republic, but you are still writing about people who are died. You just don't listen to us, and you are still following them?''

In early 1965, during the session of the Third National People's Congress, during the meeting of the delegates of Shandong Jiang Qing suddenly lost her normal manner, slapping the table and angrily denouncing Zhao Dan in face of all the delegates: "What kind of game are you playing! In the past few years, you have been playing their tricks again and listened to them again, and you have never listened to us.

“Zhao Dan was once again confused by Jiang Qing’s accusation, and never understood who are ‘them’.

In the early morning of 9 October 1966, a mysterious case of house searching and property confiscating occurred in Shanghai. The houses of Zhao Dan, Zheng Junli, Gu Erji, Chen Liting, Tong Zhi were searched. The gang acted secretly and quickly, they took away only diaries, letters, manuscripts, photo albums, negatives, and movies and pictorials of 1920s, they warned those who had been raided before they left: ‘Don’t tell anybody about it, or you’ll lose your heads!’ The work units of the five, the neighborhood committee, the police stations and even the municipal party committee were not aware of this house searching. The searchers claimed they were a bunch of Red Guards, but they didn’t say where they were from. It was not until the public trial of the “Gang of Four” that it became known that Jiang Qing, through Lin Biao’s wife, Ye Qun, directly instructed Air Force Commander Wu Faxian and their sworn ally in Shanghai Jiang Tengjiao to secretly select and send soldiers from the Air Force Guard Platoon and some children of the Air Force officers to disguise themselves as Red Guards. When the confiscated items were sent to Beijing, Jiang Qing, Ye Qun and Xie Fuzhi destroyed them in the kitchen of Lin Biao’s residence at Maojiawan. Jiang Qing should have felt relieved when things developed to such a state. No! She was not satisfied, because Zheng Junli, Zhao Dan and Gu Eryi were still alive, who could open their mouths to speak. Thus, at her behest, on November 26, 1967, Zhang Chunqiao (one of the ‘Gang of Four’) personally instructed to arrest and interrogate Zheng Junli, Zhao Dan, Gu Erji, He Luting, and other 15 people who had worked with Jiang Qing in Shanghai in the thirties. They were all falsely accused as “spies, traitors, historical counter-revolutionaries, and black line representatives” and subjected to appalling physical and mental persecution. Among them Zheng Juli and Gu Eryi died unjustly, and the rest survived a narrow escape from death.

The joy and excitement Zhao Dan felt after overthrowing the “Gang of Four” were soon replaced by depression, bitterness, and resentment caused by quite a number of things he run into, which were not really satisfactory. In his view, the by-election as a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and other honors, the improvement of housing, the payment of back salaries, and the arrangement of overseas visits are not as important, they could only serve as a “comfort cup” in a ball game. As an artist who devoted his first half of his life to the people and was shackled by

the “Cultural Revolution” for more than ten years, his greatest wish is to return to the screen. In the early 60s of the twentieth century, after he acted in “Nie Er” and “The Opium War”, he enthusiastically participated in the film crew of “Lu Xun” to play the cultural giant he admired the most, but due to various reasons, the film was never shot, which was a great disappointment to many. After the “Cultural Revolution”, he was invited to play Premier Zhou Enlai in a new film about the vicissitudes of the Yellow River as the theme, for which he made a lot of preparations. Yet, the filming plan was denied because of a remark made by a high-ranking official, and his good wish was thus shattered. In the end, another opportunity came: Chinese and Japanese filmmakers decided to cooperate in the filming of “*A Chess Game That Never Finished*” and he would be asked to play the leading role on the Chinese side. However, he was already sick in bed, so the film makers turned to Sun Daolin instead.

Although he was staying away from film making, he had never forgotten the affairs of the literary and artistic world. He had a lot to say, a lot of advice to make, and he had many wishes to confide! His wife Huang Zongying took a full note of his ideas and opinions, she then forwarded it to Yuan Ying, an editor and poet working at the People’s Daily, who managed to have it published on the eighth of October of 1980. The published writing was titled: There Is No Hope for Literature and Art if the Controls Are Too Specific. The full text reads:

The People’s Daily is carrying out a discussion on “improving the party’s leadership over literature and art and invigorating the cause of literature and art”. I was quite happy to see the headlines of “improving” and “invigorating”, and I was worried when I saw that in the “Editor’s Note”, “the party’s leadership over literary and artistic work must be improved and strengthened through improvement, and we are unwavering in this respect”. I don’t know how broad the scope of “we” in “Editor’s Note” is. I only know that some of our artists, who are loyal and indomitable to the party’s cause will reflexively be frightened when they hear that “the party’s leadership is to be strengthened”. This is because, our accumulated experience of previous political movements tells us: each time when it was strengthened, there was a big toss, wanton interference, and even “total dictatorship”. Our memory is still fresh, and there are still special feelings. I wish there would be no such “strengthening” in the future. In my opinion, strengthening or improving the party’s leadership over literature and art refers to the party’s grasp and implementation of the party’s policy on literature and art, and specifically, how the party unwaveringly

implements the “double hundred” policy. As for specific literary and artistic creations, does the party want to lead or not? How can the party lead! The party leads the formulation of national economic plans and the implementation of agricultural and industrial policies; however, the party does not have to lead how to farm, how to make benches, how to cut trousers, how to stir-fry vegetables, how to write articles for writers, and how to act for actors. Literature and art are the affairs of the writers and artists themselves, and if the party manages literature and art too specifically, there will be no hope for literature and art, and it will be done for. The “Gang of Four” was the most specific in managing literature and art, even managing a belt and a patch on the actors’ bodies, and their way of management ended up with only eight plays for 800 million people, can’t it still be a warning to us from the opposite side! Has there ever been a writer who became a writer because the party has told him to do so? Did Lu Xun and Mao Dun really write only after listening to the party’s words? Did they write only what the party told them? So, who was the one who told Marx what to write? Life and struggle—the process of history has produced a certain culture and created artists and theorists of an era, “each of them would rule their own domain for hundreds of years”. As far as a robust and powerful style in literature and art is concerned, from the philosophical viewpoint, it is not up to any one party, faction, organization, or branch to manage it. If you have to manage it so specifically, you are asking for trouble and thankless attitudes, and it is a disaster to literature and art. The leaders in charge of literature and art at every level said that they “adhered to the party’s literary and artistic policy and adhered to the revolutionary literary and artistic thoughts”, as if only literary and artistic experts were creatures who are dazzled, deaf, and thoughtless. Otherwise, 30 years have passed since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, 60 years have passed since the “May Fourth” New Cultural Movement, and the proletarian literary and artistic army across the country has claimed to be in the millions. Why is it that the top leaders could only rest assured when a layman who does not understand literature and art is appointed to take charge in the central government, in the provinces, autonomous regions, counties, communes, factories, and mines? What a puzzling logic! The more senior the laymen are, the more concentrated the power is. When the laymen are being asked to change themselves into experts, millions of literary and art workers have to mark time at where they are. What’s more, some leaders refused to change themselves. Because once you become an expert, you may not be able to be a leader again? What’s more, the rapid pace of life, the professionals can’t catch up, it is laborious to do a good job, and on top of that there are many inferences; so, in the end most of the more popular works in the current literature and art only remained a

home truth of street talk. Should all literary and artistic associations and literary and artistic organizations set a rigid rule on what ideology should be the only guiding principle? Should they take a certain work as their aim? I wish to propose that we need to think about it seriously and discuss it. I personally don't think it's good. In the history of literature and art throughout the ages, when one school is respected and a hundred schools are overthrown, there must be no prosperity in literature and art. At the Third Session of the Fifth National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the deputies enthusiastically discussed institutional issues. The word "system" was originally unfamiliar to us artists. Later, I gradually found out that when we are too lazy to care about the "system", the "system" would exert itself to control us, thus we are forced to deal with it seriously. Let me ask, which are the other countries in the world that are acting like China non-professional cadres in the field of literature and art account for such a large proportion? In our society, we are not encouraged to say who feeds whom, because except for the peasants and the youth (as well as some elderly people and women), there is finally an "iron rice bowl" for each. But why do we have to hold on to so many non-art cadres to control the artists? Some non-art cadres may be able to make a difference in other jobs. But now so many top-level swimmers are being crowded into one pool, you have to "insert" by force if more are needed to get in. In order to be loyal to their duties, every cadre in the "art of leadership" must always speak on artistic creation, and each has his own set of opinions, and it is difficult to find unity. Take the film "Lu Xun", since I auditioned in 1960, my beard has been shaved, retained, shaved, and retained, and it has lasted for 20 years. In such a length of time, in a country as big as ours, three or five "Lu Xun" with different styles, different eras and different angles should have been made. We used to say when we are expecting something: we hear steps on the stairway, yet no one comes down. Now, we don't even hear the steps on the stairway anymore. This is not a problem that the artistic life of an actor cannot withstand, the delay in the release of the "Lu Xun" film is actually related to the birth of a new generation of Lu Xun-style literary artists. Individuality is the mark of literary and art creation. Literary and artistic creation cannot be passed by raising your hand! But it does not reject comment and criticism, you can also encourage and applaud. From a historical point of view, literature and art refuse restrictions and they cannot be restricted. Habit is not truth. Bad habits should not become an ironclad system. Layers of checks and examinations cannot produce good works, and no good works with vitality were born from censorship throughout the ages. When it comes to films, every time there is an argument, I am addicted to speaking. Sometimes I want

to keep myself from talking. For me, there's nothing to be afraid of. I just feel that enough chatter, what is the purpose...
September 1980 in a hospital bed.

Poet Yuan Ying wrote: "On the afternoon of the day the article appeared in the newspaper, I took the newspaper to the hospital. Zhao Dan is in a critical and a dying state and is being rescued. Huang Zongying held back tears and told me that she told Adan that the article had been published in the morning, and Adan's eyes moved, and I don't know if he heard it clearly. None of us expected that on the third day, October 10, he would leave with regret.

"People read Zhao Dan's article and the news about his death almost at the same time on the one hand, people were saddened by the loss of such an excellent artist, and on the other hand, people are more moved by the fact that he cared so much about the future of literary and artistic cause before his death. His opinions are frank, straightforward, and to the point, because many people have had some similar experience, and they have tasted all the ups and downs, so they all feel the same way as Zhao Dan. Although some of them may be extreme, not without one-sidedness, but every sentence is sincere from his heart.

Soon, a criticism from a certain high-level leading comrade was widely circulated in the literary and art circles: 'Zhao Dan farted before he died'. Another version is even more powerful, saying that Zhao Dan 'put an anti-party fart'. Whatever version it is, it's extremely harsh anyway. 'Zhao Dan's last words' caused discussions for a while, and finally gradually fell silent, leaving people with a complex mood: grief and sentimental, contemplating and helpless. I once wrote an article 'Seeing off Zhao Dan on a Long Trip', in which when mentioning the 'last words', I wrote down such sentences: 'He used his last effort to state his opinions to the party and the people, and the words he shouted are indeed sincere!' His opinion may be inaccurate, inconsiderate, or even biased, and one can make strict demands of one way or another. But you know, these are the words from the bottom of his heart when he is dying! Just like Huang Zongying said: 'Adan used the last spark of his life to ignite the torch of literary and artistic emancipation, and used his last breath to urge the sails to move forward.' 'A dying man's last words are benign.' 'Dear party and people would certainly listen to the last cry of a faithful son'. Twenty-five years later, when I revisit these words, I still feel that there is nothing wrong with them. Re-reading Zhao Dan's last words and re-seeing the

last spark of his life, you will still feel the shining light that has never been extinguished”.

Remarks on Zhao Dan by Celebrities

Zhao Dan and I have met, worked and interacted with each other for nearly half a century. Zhao Dan began to love and engage in drama activities because he was influenced by the “May Fourth” New Cultural Movement since he was a child. In particular, after studying in Shanghai, he organized and participated in the “Art School Theater Troupe”, “Xindi Drama Society”, “Tuosheng Drama Society”, etc., and wrote and directed many dramas, for purpose of criticizing darkness and seeking light. In the autumn of 1932, he formally joined the Left-wing Drama League, and from then on became the backbone of the Drama League... After “August 13th”, Zhao Dan left his daughter Zhao Qing, who was less than a year old, and resolutely joined the anti-Japanese salvation drama team until he was unjustly imprisoned by the reactionary warlord Sheng Shicai. Zhao Dan was imprisoned twice in his life, the first time in Xinjiang and the second time during the “Cultural Revolution” and was imprisoned by the “Gang of Four” for five and a half years. In those years many people who were familiar with the ugly history of Jiang Qing, such as Zhao Dan, Zheng Junli, Shu Xiuwen, Gu Erji, Xu Tao, and others were persecuted to death one by one. Zhao Dan was also the target of the “Gang of Four” and suffered all kinds of inhuman torture. Zhao Dan survived through thousands of trials and tribulations in the purgatory of mankind. Among the performing artists in the country, Zhao Dan is the most accomplished one, and can be called an outstanding revolutionary artist and an artist of the people.

—Yang Hansheng, “Fifty Years through Storms and Hardships”,

In the past few days, I have often heard people talk about Zhao Dan and, of course, about his articles published in the People’s Daily. Everyone has their own opinion of what he wrote at the end of the text. Comrade Zhao Dan said, “There is nothing I am afraid of!” His words stirred my heart like a small match. I thought about it again and again for a few days and I felt that now I understood him better. During the “Cultural Revolution”, I heard people in the “cowshed” (where intellectuals were living during the Cultural Revolution—the author) talk about Zhao Dan,

who said he made a request at a meeting that he wanted to ask Chairman Mao to give him a “card to free him from cruel criticism”. This was what people revealed as one of his sins”. I didn’t express what my views on his words, but I thought in my heart, “Well said!” The endless criticism, like the noise in our big cities, has brought great mental torture to people and how much damage it has brought to the literary and artistic undertakings. At that time, the “criticism” against me “while parading” had just begun, and I wished for peace, but I was afraid of the possible spiritual collapse. The Red Guards with the “Red Book” in one hand and the copper-headed belt in the other, and the “heroic image” of the rebels who recited the “highest instructions” while beating people are still present in my nightmares, so when death was approaching, I was able to say “there is nothing I am afraid of!” Zhao Dan said what some of us had in our hearts, what we wanted to say but couldn’t say. He may have spoken a little late, but he was still the first to speak out. I advocated telling the truth, but he already set an example on his sickbed.

—Ba Jin: [Excerpted from Ba Jin, *Exploration and Recollection*, pp. 104–105]

I read Zhao Dan’s last words in the “People’s Daily”...It was his crying, shouting, arguing, persuading, complaining, even pleading! The ardent hope for the future of development has ignited the flame in everyone’s heart! He pointed out some problems on the road of literature and art that urgently need to be solved... Zhao Dan has never wasted his time. His many years of dedication to the drama and film industry need no more mentioning. After the ten-year long catastrophe, I heard that he really wanted to show his talents in the film arts. What makes people feel sad is that Zhao Dan “died before his ambition was rewarded, and the heroes were full of tears”. Disease finally took his life! After reading Zhao Dan’s last words, I don’t know why I thought of Zhuge Liang’s “Later Memorial on Sending Troops”. Before his death, Zhao Dan never forgot the rise and fall of literature and art, and he was deeply afraid that the future would not be easy. I feel that he is loyal, loving, and outspoken, showing his open-mindedness. He really “did his utmost till his last moment”. This is the spirit we should be learning. Although Comrade Zhao Dan’s posthumous writings are about literature and art, his heart and intentions are far-reaching and broad. Comrade Zhao Dan is really a people’s artist!

—Cao Yu: A True Artist of the People, [excerpt from “Zhao Dan’s Memorial Essay Collection—He Lives”]

The light of the art of Adan must still be in motion! In the Chinese film review exhibitions that have been held many times in the world in recent years, there are quite a few works created by Adan: “*Cross Street*”, “*The Angel on the Road*”, “*Journey of Ladies*”, “*The Crow and the Sparrow*”, “*Li Shizhen*”, “*Soul of the Sea*”, “*Nie Er*”, “*Living Forever in Burning Flames*”, The rich and colorful characters show that the brilliance of his art is still in motion, allowing more people in the world to recognize and understand the history of Chinese films and the history of people’s suffering and struggle. This year, the film “*The Opium War*” was finally screened in Hong Kong. This page in the history of the Opium War a century ago is refreshingly reproduced in a vivid way, and the distinctive image of this national hero created by Adan and his undying glory is still in operation...Adan’s poem put it thus: “It is the blessing that carried me through all the ups and downs,

My hair is still dark after ten years of imprisonment; despite dramatic changes from sweet to sour, I have been searching for art pearls no matter where I have been, the hell or the heaven”. This shows that even after the brutal persecution he endured during the 10 years of unrest, he was still optimistic, believing that he could give us a few more artistic treasures in his old age. But very unexpectedly that he left us forever before he could start filming “*An Unfinished Chess Game*”.

—Chen Huangmei, *The Light Is Still Shining when the Super Star Is Gone*. From *Symphony of Destiny*, pp. 11–12

YU SHIZHI

His Life

Yu Shizhi (于是之) was born in July, 1927 in Tangshan. His original name is Yu Xiao and his family origin is Tianjin. He came to Beijing with his mother after the death of his father. He studied at Beijing Kong De Primary School; in 1938 he graduated from the Affiliated primary school of Beijing Normal University; he then entered and graduated from the Affiliated Middle School of Beijing Normal University. After graduation, he dropped out of school due to his family’s poverty. At the age of

15, he worked as a warehouse helper and later as a scribe. In 1942, he participated in an amateur drama event organized by students at Fu Jen University.

In 1945, he was admitted to the Department of Western Languages of Peking University, and soon dropped out of school, and joined the Motherland Theater Troupe in the same year, and participated in the performances of the drama “*Metamorphosis*” and “*Leading by Example*”. In 1946, he went to Tianjin to participate in the performance of a professional theatre troupe, and changed his name to Yu Shizhi. While there he performed in “*The Gall of Peacock*”, “*Promotion Chart*” and other plays. In 1947, he entered the Beijing Art Center and participated in the performances of “*Under the Eaves of Shanghai*” and “*Great Reunion*”.

In February 1949, he participated in the North China People’s Art Troupe (one of the predecessors of the Beijing People’s Art Theater), and in 1951, he played the role of Cheng Maniac in the drama “*Dragon Beard Ditch*”, which deeply impressed his audience. In the same year, he played the leader Mao Zedong in the opera “*Long March*”, and was the first actor to play Mao Zedong after the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

Yu Shizhi has played more than 30 major roles on the stage of dramas and film and television productions over the decades. Aside from Cheng Maniac, he played Lord Xin Ling in “*Tiger Tally*”, Zuo Baokui in “*The Death of a Famous Actor*”, Lao Ma in “*The Rickshaw Boy*”, Grandpa Song in “*The Girl Clerk*”, Li Shiqing in “*Sunrise*”, Wang Heqing in “*Guan Hanqing*”, Wang Lifa in “*Tea House*”, Ding Wenzhong in “*The Paradigm of Red Hearts*”, Weller in “*The Gin Game*”, Yu Yongze in the movie “*Song of Youth*”, Dzerzhinsky in “*In the Name of Revolution*”, Guifu in “*Qiu Jin*” and other roles, which have left an extremely deep impression on the audience.

In 1958, the artistic image of Wang Lifa, the shopkeeper of the teahouse he created in the drama “*Teahouse*” established his status as a drama performance artist.

His performance not only reflects a highly condensed perceptual understanding of life, but also is full of intriguing aesthetic value. He is good at summarizing, integrating life and art. There was no trace of performance skills in his image creation; he formed a unique realistic performance method. His book “*Yu Shizhi on Performance*”, which is based on his many years of artistic creation and performance experience, which has had a wide impact on the national theater circles, has made