

# The Beacon of *New Music Monthly*: Li Ling and Zhao Feng

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**Abstract:** Launched in January 1940 in Chongqing, *New Music Monthly* stands as one of the most enduring and influential music periodicals of the first half of the 20th century in China. Under the stewardship of Li Ling and Zhao Feng, it gradually became a powerful tool for promoting the war of resistance and developing new national music. Overall, Li Ling and Zhao Feng exhibited a clear and consistent editorial approach for more than a decade. They emphasized the scholarly and ideological nature of the journal, focused on the war of resistance and the advancement of Chinese national music. This endowed *New Music Monthly* with a vibrant life force, and its unique style of passion, unity, innovation, and combativeness made significant contributions to modern Chinese music and the revolutionary struggle of the war of resistance.

**Keywords:** *New Music Society*; *New Music Monthly*; Li Ling; Zhao Feng

## 1. Introduction

In the wake of the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, the early 20th century saw a significant transformation in Chinese intellectual thought. Patriotism, focused on national salvation, became the central theme of the era. To promote the war of resistance and rouse the national spirit, the cultural sector spearheaded a surge in the creation of newspapers and magazines. As documented by the Full-Text Database of Periodicals during the Republic of China (1911-1949) from the Shanghai Institute of Scientific and Technical Information, over 25,000 periodicals were published in China during the first half of the 20th century. They covered a wide array of subjects, including politics, military affairs, foreign relations, economics, education, and ideological culture, gradually becoming the main channels for ideological and cultural exchange.

In the domain of music, statistics reveal that Chinese intellectuals launched 145 music periodicals between 1913 and 1945.[1] They spanned a broad spectrum of content, including myriad vocal and instrumental compositions, as well as contemporary music theoretical expositions (including music performance aesthetics, the preservation of Chinese national music, and introductions to Western music theory). The advent and evolution of music periodicals served not only as a chronicle and manifestation of the development of modern Chinese music but also as a crucial impetus for the advancement of new Chinese music.

It is noteworthy that, among these 145 periodicals, the majority faced difficulties in sustaining their publication for an extended duration, with some even failing to endure beyond a single year (such as the *Music Magazine* by the National Conservatory of Music in 1934, and the *Chorus Post* by the Yunnan Chorus Association in 1940). In this arduous context, the *New Music Monthly*, which managed to maintain its publication for 11 years and produce over 120 issues, distinguishes itself as an exceptional case.[2] This raises several questions: How was the *New Music Monthly* founded? What enabled it to persist for such an extended period? What contributions did the principal editors make in its editorial endeavors? To address these questions, one must delve into the origins of its founding organization, the *New Music Society*, and the editorial leadership of *New Music Monthly*, embodied by Li Ling and Zhao Feng.

## 2. *New Music Monthly* under the *New Music Society*

The fall of Wuhan in October 1938 marked the Sino-Japanese War's transition into a protracted stalemate, intensifying the dire situation of the Chinese military. To bolster troop morale and expand the scope of the national resistance, a nationwide Anti-Japanese and Rescue the Nation Singing Movement was initiated. As the provisional capital of the Kuomintang and a critical stronghold in the interior, Chongqing played a particularly significant role in these efforts.

To further propel the anti-Japanese music initiatives in Chongqing, the Chinese Communist Party dispatched Li Ling to the Third Department of the Political Ministry of the Military Commission in Chongqing to engage in anti-Japanese and national salvation singing activities in September 1939, who was teaching at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts in Yan'an. The following month, under the leadership of the Chongqing Cultural Committee's Party organization, the *New Music Society*—a pivotal patriotic and progressive music group in modern Chinese music history—was established, with Li Ling and Zhao

Feng appointed as its principal leaders.

Upon its formation, the *New Music* Society consistently aimed to unite music workers and promote the patriotic and anti-Japanese *new music* movement. It subsequently set up branches in Kunming, Guiyang, Guilin, and even in Burma and Singapore, with its membership peaking at over 2,000, making it a significant patriotic music organization of the time.

To strengthen connections with music workers across various regions, Li Ling et al. planned to publish a music journal—*New Music* Monthly, in the second year following the establishment of the *New Music* Society to amplify the influence of anti-Japanese music. The journal was first issued in January 1940, edited by Li Ling and Lin Lu. However, since Lin Lu was in Guilin, about 800 kilometers away from Chongqing, communication was challenging. Consequently, after editing the first three issues, Zhao Feng took over from Lin Lu to co-edit with Li Ling from the fourth issue until the final one.[3]

As a music periodical born amidst the turmoil of war, *New Music* Monthly faced the same arduous journey as other publications. Despite several suspensions, the editors never despaired. Between 1940 and 1950, they moved through multiple publishers in Chongqing, Kunming, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other locations, ultimately sustaining it as the longest-running and most influential comprehensive music periodical of the Republic of China era.

In the “Editor’s Note” of the first issue, the editorial board explicitly stated the purpose of *New Music* Monthly: “To inherit the achievements of the *new music* since the May Fourth Movement and the world’s progressive music, to create new, nationalized, and popularized music art, so that it can truly penetrate the masses and become the most powerful weapon for the war of resistance and national construction.”[4] Judging from its content, the journal featured many patriotic, progressive, and excellent musical works and theoretical articles. The results were of a notably high standard compared to other music periodicals of the time.

Consequently, *New Music* Monthly was immediately embraced by a wide audience of students and progressive youth upon its release. Its circulation peaking at over 30,000, making it the best-selling and most influential music periodical in the Kuomintang-controlled areas.[5] Moreover, the extensive efforts led by Li Ling and Zhao Feng, and their harmonious editorial vision, infused *New Music* Monthly with robust vitality and a distinctive style characterized by passion, unity, pioneering spirit, and combativeness.

### 3. The Editorial Vision of Li Ling and Zhao Feng

A comprehensive review of the hundreds of musical compositions and theoretical articles published over the decade in *New Music* Monthly reveals that, under the stewardship of Li Ling and Zhao Feng, the periodical became a powerful tool for advocating the war of resistance and developing of new national music. Their editorial vision was characterized by a pronounced unity and coherence, directly shaping the trajectory of *New Music* Monthly. The main elements are as follows.

Firstly, the editors underscored the scholarly and ideological integrity of the journal. *New Music* Monthly was primarily composed of musical compositions, theoretical articles, and music critiques. The theoretical articles reflected Li Ling and Zhao Feng’s focus on analytical rigor in music theory and practical exploration of musical praxis. For instance, the inaugural issue of 1940 included articles such as “One Need Not Attend a Music School to Learn Composition,” while subsequent issues delved into topics like “How to Harness Traditional Festivals” and “An Examination of the *New Music* Movement in China.”

The content of these articles was penned by eminent musicians of the era (including Xian Xinghai, Li Lvyong, Zhao Feng, and Miao Tianduan et al.). Their writings were characterized by clear logic and rigorous reasoning. Moreover, given that most of these contributors were actively engaged in music endeavors on the frontlines during the war, their writings were grounded in the realities of the burgeoning Chinese music scene. They also took into account the objective difficulties of the battlefield and the traditional aesthetic preferences of the Chinese people. For example, the article “Learning to compose music does not necessarily have to be done at a school”[6] discussed the prerequisites for composing music in the context of the war of resistance and the methodologies for those unversed in music to embark on composition, commencing from the objective scarcity of outstanding songs in the theater of war. The article “How to utilize traditional festivals”[7] guided cultural propagandists on using traditional Chinese festivals to propel the *new music* movement. It advocated for the integration of contemporary music themes (such as war of resistance and patriotism) with traditional musical forms (like folk songs and small theatrical pieces) to craft music that resonates with the Chinese audience.

Additionally, *New Music* Monthly also showcased translated articles introducing renowned Western European and Northern European musicians and their canonical works. For instance, the article “Wagner: A Warrior of the Noble Ideal of Humanism”[8] detailed some of Wagner’s operas, his compositional techniques (including leitmotifs), and the impact of his creative philosophy on the evolution of Western opera. The article “How Did Beethoven Compose?”[9] explored Beethoven’s approaches to tonality and rhythm through two compositions, *Die Trommel gerühret* and *Freudvoll und leidvoll*.

The dissemination of these articles enabled contemporary Chinese readers to understand the ethos and development of the *new music* movement, providing significant referential value for the populace to undertake cultural propaganda efforts and comprehend the new music.

Secondly, the editors consistently prioritized the war of resistance and national salvation as the nucleus of their editorial focus. “Employing music to serve the war of resistance” was a pivotal rationale for the inception of *New Music* Monthly. In 1941, Li Ling (under the pseudonym Lvyong) articulated the editorial philosophy and developmental orientation of *New Music* Monthly thus: “We music workers... can only aspire if we accurately discern the laws of the evolution of Chinese music... rendering music a genuinely revolutionary and potent tool for the masses, to forge a milieu more conducive to the advancement of *new music* art.[10] That is, as a music periodical engendered born from China’s pressing needs, *New Music* Monthly has persistently adhered to the vision of utilizing music to serve the war of resistance and as an instrument for national liberation, with its articles and compositions closely linked to the zeitgeist.

Taking the vocal works, which constituted the largest portion of *New Music* Monthly, as an example. Although the published works were diverse in genre (spanning solos, duets, ensembles, and choruses), they almost exclusively reflected themes of the Chinese people’s war of resistance and national salvation, articulating the resolve to combat and the yearning for victory. This can be illustrated by the vocal works published in *New Music* Monthly from 1940 to 1941:

**Table 1. The vocal works published in *New Music* Monthly from 1940 to 1941**

Year	Issue Number	Number of Songs Published	Number of Songs with Anti-Japanese Content	Other Songs and Their Types	Proportion of Anti-Japanese Songs	Publication Region
1940	Vol. 1, No. 1	7 songs	6 songs	1 song (Soviet song)	85.7%	Chongqing
	Vol. 1, No. 2	9 songs	9 songs	0 songs	100%	
	Vol. 1, No. 3	12 songs	12 songs	0 songs	100%	
	Vol. 1, No. 4	4 songs	3 songs	1 song (Northeast folk song)	75%	
	Vol. 1, No. 5	8 songs	7 songs	1 song (Mongolian folk song)	87.5%	
	Vol. 1, No. 6	12 songs	11 songs	1 song (Soviet song)	91.7%	
1941	Vol. 2, No. 1-2	4 songs	3 songs	1 song (“New Talent Practice”)	75%	
	Vol. 2, No. 4	16 songs	14 songs	2 songs (“Excerpt from the Opera ‘Peach Blossom Spring’”)	87.5%	
	Vol. 3, No. 1	15 songs	12 songs	3 songs (“One excerpt from the opera ‘Peach Blossom Spring’; two songs with lyrics added to selected tunes”)	80%	
	Vol. 3, No. 2	14 songs	10 songs	4 songs (“All are Nie Er’s posthumous works”)	71.4%	
	Vol. 3, No. 3	13 songs	11 songs	2 songs (“One is a tribute to Lu Xun; the other is a ‘New Talent Practice’”)	84.6%	
	Vol. 3, No. 4	15 songs	14 songs	1 song (lumberjack song)	93.3%	

In an effort to expand the influence of music advocating for the war of resistance and national salvation and to encourage frontline music workers to create new works, *New Music* Monthly initiated two dedicated columns, “New Talent Practice” and “Monthly Lyric Selection,” beginning with the fourth issue of its first volume in 1940. The former aimed to nurture emerging talents by inviting submissions and selecting superior works for publication. The latter curated a collection of meticulously chosen lyrics, provided to musicians for composition practice..

The editorial efforts quickly yielded results. Starting from Volume 3, Issue 3 in 1941, the compositions featured in “New Talent Practice” began to incorporate elementary structural alterations that aligned with the lyrical content, beyond the foundational “four-phrase structure.” These works also consciously integrated embellishments and modulations into the melodic lines to augment musical expressivity. For instance, Jun Qing’s *We will not return home until the invaders are driven out* in Volume 3, Issue 3 employed a two-part round; In Volume 3, Issue 4, Ye Yun’s *Our Troops Are Marching* was composed as a two-part chorus; and in Volume 4, Issue 4, Xiao Kai’s *Condolences* fused the stylistic elements of Chinese folk songs with varying rhythmic patterns.

The lyrics proffered in “Monthly Lyric Selection” were more expansive and nuanced than the previous concise four-

phrase verses, presenting new poetic forms for aspiring talents to explore. Notable works included Ren Luo's Old Homeland in Volume 3, Issue 3, An E's Spring on the Battlefield in Volume 3, Issue 6, Ren Sun's "Travel Song" in Volume 3, Issue 1, Wang Jiangxia's *The Wilderness of Wei North* in Volume 4, Issue 4, and Yan Tao's *In This Long, Long Night* in Volume 5, Issue 1—all of which were exemplary contributions.

The enhancement in the caliber of works within "New Talent Practice" and "Monthly Lyric Selection" reflected a marked improvement in the compositional skills of the contemporary music community. This advancement was instrumental in facilitating their anti-Japanese music initiatives on the frontlines and held substantial significance for advancing the trajectory of *new music* in both the "New Music" battle field and the hinterland, as well as for the dissemination of anti-Japanese and rescue music.

Thirdly, the editors emphasized the development of Chinese national music. As Western music strongly influenced China, presenting music styles that were markedly distinct from traditional Chinese music. The key questions became: How can we properly incorporate the strengths of Western music to develop Chinese national music? How can we blend Western musical aesthetics with traditional Chinese music? These questions were the focal points of exploration for Chinese composers in the first half of the 20th century and were central to the discussions within *New Music Monthly*, which was at the vanguard of its era.

In 1940, Li Ling and Zhao Feng each contributed insightful articles on the subject of "national forms in new music." In "On the National Form of New Music"[11], Li Ling highlighted the critical role of folk songs in artistic creation and emphasized that Chinese composers, while embracing Western composition techniques, must not neglect their own folk music heritage. "*New music* should inherit the national heritage," he stated. Furthermore, he provided a detailed analysis of how to draw upon national musical materials in creating new music, using examples of folk song scales with four distinct tonal characteristics. Zhao Feng's "The National Form of Music"[12] traced the lineage of Chinese music from antiquity to the Qing Dynasty. After analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of ancient music and the development of new music, and posited that to create music with a national form, composers must "embrace the precious heritage of national music" while also "equipping themselves with the advanced techniques and theoretical knowledge of Western music."

In addition to these articles, *New Music Monthly* also featured similar pieces (such as Guang Weiran's "Advancing on the Path to a New National Music" and Xian Xinghai's "Folk Songs and New Chinese Music") and paid meticulous attention to theoretical articles on Chinese national music (like Tian Feng's "The Form of Folk Songs in Northern Shaanxi" and Xia Bai's "On the Ballads and Folk Songs of Sichuan") and symposia on the national character of *new music* (such as "Discussion on the Production Cantata" and "Symposium on the Performance of the *Yellow River Cantata*"). The dissemination of these articles played a pivotal role in dispelling one-sided perceptions of progressive music among some individuals and in aiding the general public and music workers to comprehend "what *new music* is."

In terms of publishing musical works, *New Music Monthly* continued its theoretical approach, featuring a plethora of new compositions that integrated Western musical techniques across various months. These works included genres such as cantatas, yangko operas, national operas, and national instrumental music. Among them were both experimental pieces and many works of high technical proficiency.

Lü Ji's theme song *Young Able-Bodied Men*[13] for the national opera Village Song represented an innovative work of his time. Composed in C major, 4/4 time, as a four-part chorus, this short piece of only 19 bars showcased a functional treatment of chords, with its syntax and melody adhering to traditional aesthetic characteristics while exuding a sense of order and grandeur.

Xian Xinghai's *Ballad of the Yellow River*[14] is a mature example of *new music* works of the time. The piece, the fourth movement of *The Yellow River Cantata*, was divided into three parts, featuring not only choral sections but also accompaniment with flute, high and low erhu, bell, and drum, presenting a melancholic melody and rich emotional depth. Additionally, his two-act topical opera "Production Cantata"[15] was also widely sung and of high quality. The work, combining singing, dancing, and dramatic performance, depicted scenes of people's production and combat life through "Spring Ploughing," "Sowing and Joining the War," "Autumn Harvest Rush," and "Harvest." The composer skillfully integrated national musical materials with Western opera techniques. The structures included solo sections reminiscent of folk stanza songs, as well as traditional Western two-part and four-part choruses, and a mix of instruments such as harmonica, violin, organ, bamboo flute, and gong.

From the works published in *New Music Monthly*, it is evident that both experimental and mature pieces were extensively featured. Together with the theoretical articles, these works provided practical tools and spiritual sustenance for music workers to promote new national music and propagate the war of resistance across various regions.



## 4. The Persevering *New Music Monthly* Amidst the Chaos of War

As previously discussed, under the guidance of Li Ling and Zhao Feng, the editorial team of *New Music Monthly*, despite the harsh and challenging conditions of the Anti-Japanese War, advanced resolutely. Post-1943, as the demand from music workers and readers increased, the original format of *New Music Monthly* no longer met the evolving circumstances. Consequently, Li Ling and Zhao Feng made certain modifications to the periodical.

Initially, *New Music Monthly*, exhibiting fervor and unity, persistently augmented its investments in financial and human resources. Li Ling reminisced, “Authors were enthusiastic about submitting their works... manuscripts of various genres were dispatched to the editorial office... song manuscripts were the most numerous, reaching four to five hundred each month.”[16] To enhance the efficacy of the communication team, the editorial department established submission cards for frequent contributors. Within two years, it compiled approximately 400 author cards. Given the constrained space in *New Music Monthly* and the profusion of high-caliber song submissions, the editors proactively solicited support from diverse publishers to assist composers in compiling and issuing their works. In subsequent years, *New Music Monthly* successively released song collections such as *Cantata Songs of the War of Resistance* (edited by Lin Lu) and *Children’s Songs* (edited by Sun Shen).

Furthermore, the editors facilitated an interactive platform for authors and readers through the journal. The communication team in the inaugural issue of *New Music Monthly*’s first volume, in the article “To Music Workers Everywhere,” announced the formation of the “Music Workers Communication Team” and openly recruited information from authors and readers (encompassing: updates on the work of music professionals in various battlefields, summaries of *new music* work experiences across different regions, and Q&A on *new music* creation, etc.).

Inspired by the “Music Workers Communication Team,” the volume of correspondence surged. Zhao Feng recollected: “Every Saturday, I would bring back a substantial stack of letters from Li Ling, responding to them within a week. Li Ling replied to even more letters. This approach became a crucial channel of contact for ‘*New Music Communication*’... to the extent that we later had to appoint a dedicated individual to manage the liaison work.”[17]

This communication conduit not only connected music professionals across disparate regions but also propelled the further evolution of *New Music Monthly*. During this epoch, music books were scarce in many areas, and numerous music professionals mentioned in their submissions that they hoped *New Music Monthly* could publish some music books for them to self-study and enhance their competencies. To this end, the editorial department specifically organized the publication of some theoretical and popular music books, such as *New Music Handbook* (compiled by Li Baochen, Li Ling, Zhao Feng, etc.), *Pocket Music Dictionary* (Lin Lu), *Lectures on Music Knowledge* (compiled by Zhao Dingbao). For music workers on the frontlines, these books were like a welcome rain after a long drought.

Secondly, as a pivotal periodical established under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party and the voice of the war of resistance music front, *New Music Monthly* consistently adhered to the pioneering and combative ethos of publication. It persistently voiced the cause of the war of resistance and the *new music* movement in China. In addition to the extensive publication of war songs mentioned above, the *New Music Society*, relying on *New Music Monthly*, orchestrated war song fellowship meetings in multiple locales and instituted some small music education organizations to conduct short-term music training classes.

On July 17, 1942, the *New Music Society* organized a “*New Music Workers Conference*” based on *New Music Monthly*. It was attended by over sixty influential musicians of the time, including Tian Han, Ma Sicong, Lin Lu, Shu Mo, etc. The conference deliberated on how to develop the *new music* movement and how to unite for patriotic music in the war of resistance. In June 1946, *New Music Monthly* established a branch in Kunming. Under Zhao Feng’s direction, it organized music education activities such as the “Summer Music Seminar” and the “Chinese Music Training Class,” cultivating a cohort of music talents for music groups and schools in the Kunming area.

Overall, in an era with exceedingly inconvenient communication conditions, *New Music Monthly* utilized various war music works and social music activities as platforms to connect the vast number of music professionals and battlefield music groups across disparate regions. These endeavors played a certain role in promoting the development of war music activities and invigorating the revolutionary spirit of soldiers and civilians in various regions.

## 5. Conclusion

From 1931 to 1945, the Chinese nation endured fourteen years of the Anti-Japanese War. Social upheaval and the ravages of war filled people’s lives with hardship. During this period, musical art—particularly song compositions—became a primary means of promoting anti-war and patriotic sentiments among the populace due to their short creation cycles, timely content, wide audience, and ease of learning and singing. *New Music Monthly*, which published over 600 songs, was a sig-

nificant platform in this effort. Founded in Chongqing in 1940 and lasting until its cessation in August 1950, it ran for 11 years and published over 120 issues. It was the longest-running and most influential progressive music publication in China during the first half of the 20th century.

The evolutionary narrative of *New Music Monthly* attests to the substantial investment of effort by Li Ling and Zhao Feng into the journal. They provided crucial guidance that made *New Music Monthly* a benchmark for the development of *new music* in China at the time. Additionally, they actively responded to the needs of the Anti-Japanese War by publishing numerous theoretical articles and musical works that reflected the social conflicts and struggles of the era. These initiatives served to underscore the paramountcy of a national war of resistance and to invigorate the morale of the armed forces.

In that special era, the editorial team led by Li Ling and Zhao Feng consistently adhered to the correct direction for music development. They made significant contributions in fostering the creation and evolution of new music, facilitating cross-cultural music exchange, safeguarding and perpetuating Chinese traditional culture, and nurturing exceptional musical talents. They used music as an instrument to rouse the national spirit and as a weapon to promote the war of resistance and national salvation, making *New Music Monthly* a music periodical that bore historical imperatives and possessed a unique cultural identity and significance.

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