

Instructions from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the Northeast Bureau on Banning Old Plays

March 13, 1950

Northeast Bureau, forwarded to the Propaganda Department:

The reform work on northeastern operas has achieved success by adopting a mass line in collaborating with artists in the writing and modification of scripts, which is commendable. However, your call to completely eliminate old operas containing feudal, superstitious, obscene, and other toxic elements in the entire Northeast by the end of 1951 is like a severe illness. Mechanically implementing it will result in very unfavourable consequences.

It is unclear on what basis and through what implementation plan you intend to realize this call. If you rely on administrative orders to achieve this goal, it would be a mistake. According to information from artists who have come to Beijing from the Northeast and reports in the Shenyang newspapers, the excessive prohibition of old plays in your region has led to a scarcity of new plays being performed. In some places, such as Shenyang, old opera troupes are struggling to survive, and the livelihood of artists is becoming a significant issue. Some theatres are resorting to the practice of "posting new plays but performing old plays" to cope with government regulations. If you continue to implement this call and enforce it through administrative orders, it will result in the further banning of old plays. In the seventh issue of the opera newspaper, Li Lun's "List of Old Plays That Should Be Banned and Those That Can Be Performed" already includes explanations for 142 plays.

In the 36th issue of the newspaper, it is reported that the Jinzhou City Literary Federation plans to immediately ban a portion of old plays from the current repertoire of 225, and further intends to implement a phased ban on 92 plays before the end of October this year. At the same time, it stipulates the proportion of new programs to be performed in various theatres and tea houses, aiming to achieve a 30 percent ratio within this year.

This method of eliminating old plays within a set timeframe is inappropriate. The struggle between new and old plays is a matter of popular thought and, at the same time, a social issue related to the livelihood of old artists. Excessive prohibition of old plays not only leaves old artists without performances, leading to mass unemployment, but also, because the quantity and quality of new plays cannot yet meet market demands, it leaves the audience with few options, causing dissatisfaction among the people. Simultaneously, if new plays are not improved and are produced crudely, it may negatively impact their credibility and prospects for promotion among the masses.

Now that the people have gained political power, old artists have also aligned themselves with us. For general old plays, the principle should be not to adopt a policy of outright prohibition but rather to engage in consultations with old artists who perform these plays to make modifications. For new plays, enforcement through legislation should be avoided, and a principle of voluntary participation, encouragement, and assistance should be adopted. Only by doing so can we unite old artists and reform old plays.

Concerning certain "leftist" and immature views and practices among cultural workers in the Northeast and government cultural institutions, the Central Committee urges the Northeast Bureau to correct them. Additionally, please inform the Northeast Bureau of the actual situation and experiences in the reform of Northeastern dramas.

Central Committee