CHAPTER SIX

PUBLIC HEALTH AMID THE TURMOIL OF WAR, 1938–1949

Whether the Public Health Movement in this country will be recorded as just a historical event of the past, or as an epoch-making contribution to the modern history of Chinese civilization, is now dependent on whether we can uphold standards before the war is over.\(^1\)

Anonymous, 1943

By the end of 1937 the modern public health movement in China was in crisis. Due to the Japanese military onslaught on Nanjing the whole NHA had to let go of many of its staff and restart in marginal circumstances in southwest China. Once again it became an appendage of the Ministry of the Interior.

Despite these setbacks the NHA kept public health initiatives going during the eight-year War of Resistance against Japan. Led for most of this period by Dr. Jin Baoshan (金宝山), the NHA responded actively to epidemics and against the odds promoted public, preventive healthcare in rural China. Due to sharp inflation and social upheaval these initiatives became increasingly difficult to carry out during the mid 1940s. Yet the public health leaders did not give up.

Did the case for preventive healthcare advance because of their work? Were standards upheld? Or did the bombing, the displacement, the epidemic diseases, the hyperinflation, the loss of staff, or an inherent conservatism, undermine these efforts? The reason for considering such questions is that there has been a tendency over the last sixty years to write off the work of the Nationalist government's NHA as marginal and reactionary, so that the public health movement had to begin again in 1949 under more auspicious leadership. Such an interpretation seemed plausible until it became clear that during 1958–62 the PRC leaders presided over one of the most life-destructive famines in human history, far worse than the famines and health crises suffered during the War of

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The lowly but active Nationalist NHA did not preside over any such disaster; instead its agents moved ahead in unoccupied China with their preventive rural health strategies. How well did they succeed?

See i) Frank Dikotter (2010); ii) Yang Jisheng (2012). These works call for a fundamental reassessment of the relationship between famine and human causation, especially as regards the famine of 1958–1962.

Photograph 6.1: Dr. Jin Baoshan
Director General, National Health Administration, 1940–1947. A protégé of the influential writer Lu Xun and also of Dr. Liu Ruiheng, Dr. Jin studied medicine in Japan and public health at Johns Hopkins. He was a tireless worker who strove to promote universal health care under far from positive circumstances. (Source: ABMAC Archive)

Resistance. The lowly but active Nationalist NHA did not preside over any such disaster; instead its agents moved ahead in unoccupied China with their preventive rural health strategies. How well did they succeed?