

# A Study on the History of the Drama Movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

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**Abstract:** The authors introduce the historical background of the drama movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region from three aspects: the establishment of the border region, its cultural ecology, and revolutionary literary and art work. This paper focuses on the development process of the border region's drama movement in three stages: its rise with the founding of the border region, its rapid development during the stalemate stage of the War of Resistance against Japan, and its vigorous growth under the spirit of "Yan'an". It particularly conducts in-depth research on the development status of different types of dramas during the stalemate stage of the War of Resistance. It is thus believed that the drama movement is of great historical significance, serving as a powerful cultural resistance against Japan, an effective mobilization of the masses, and a beneficial reform movement of traditional operas.

**Keywords:** Jin-Cha-Ji; drama movement; background; development process; significance

## Introduction

The authors aim to sort out the historical context of the drama movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region by compiling relevant historical materials. Using dual methods of history and drama studies, and from the perspectives of revolutionary history, cultural history, and drama history, this paper endeavors to write the history of the drama movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region. At present, the study of the history of the War of Resistance needs to shift its focus to refinement, and the study of drama history should be closely linked to the times for deepening. This academic exploration is exactly what the authors are engaged in.

## I. Historical Background of the Drama Movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

### 1. The Establishment of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

On July 7, 1937, the Lugou Bridge Incident marked the full-scale outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan. By the end of July, the Japanese invaders had fully occupied Pingjin. In mid-August, they launched a new offensive against the eastern section of the Ping-Sui Railway. During the crucial period of rapidly changing battle situations from August 22 to 25, the Central Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China held an expanded meeting in Luochuan, Shaanxi Province, emphasizing that the Party's work focus should be on war zones and enemy-occupied areas, and deciding to carry out independent guerrilla warfare behind enemy lines and establish anti-Japanese democratic base areas. On August 25, the Central Military Commission issued an order to reorganize the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army into the Eighth Route Army of the National Revolutionary Army.

At the end of August, the main forces of the Eighth Route Army marched from Shaanxi to the front lines of the War of Resistance in North China. Between September and October, the Eighth Route Army achieved a series of victories in

Pingxingguan, Yanmenguan, Yangmingbao, etc., setting the stage for the establishment of the Jin-Cha-Ji Anti-Japanese Base Area. On October 25, in accordance with the instructions of the Central Military Commission, the Jin-Cha-Ji Military Region was established, with Nie Rongzhen as commander and political commissar. As the guerrilla warfare behind enemy lines by the Jin-Cha-Ji Military Region developed in depth, the anti-Japanese base areas were continuously consolidated and expanded, making the establishment of government organs an urgent need. On January 10, 1938, the first military, political, and civilian representative conference of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region was held in Fuping. The conference elected the Administrative Committee of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, with nine members including Nie Rongzhen and Song Shaowen, and Song Shaowen as director. Thus, the government of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region was formally established.

The Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region gradually developed into an anti-Japanese democratic regime behind enemy lines, centered on the border areas of Shanxi, Chahar, and Hebei provinces, covering vast regions including Shanxi, Chahar, Hebei, Rehe, Liaoning, and Suiyuan, with a population of over 25 million, becoming a strong fortress for the protracted War of Resistance.

### 2. The Cultural Ecology of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

During the War of Resistance against Japan, wherever the Japanese invaders went, their secret service agencies carried out cultural aggression. They conducted obscurantist propaganda through publishing books, periodicals, newspapers, distributing pamphlets, leaflets, posters, painting large wall paintings and slogans, and playing "Oriental music", and the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region was no exception. As Deng Xiaoping put it: "This kind of propaganda is good at catering to the psychology of backward masses and peasants, good at covering up its basic weaknesses in quality (i.e., politically) with quantity, attempting to achieve the

effect that a lie repeated a hundred times becomes the truth.” Due to being behind enemy lines and caught between the Japanese invaders and the puppet regime, the situation of cultural resistance in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region was always severe.

Most areas in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region were economically depressed, resulting in underdeveloped education and cultural undertakings. The poor could not afford to read or write, and the majority of the people were illiterate or semi-literate. In some remote areas of the border region, due to isolation and poor transportation, there was no access to external information. In individual places, “people still did not know the existence of the Republic of China and lived as if in the Qing Dynasty”. The local people there had no understanding of Japan’s invasion of China, let alone awareness of the War of Resistance. Meanwhile, the people in the border region were also poisoned by reactionary secret societies.

3. Revolutionary Literary and Art Work in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

To carry out cultural propaganda among the still illiterate or semi-literate masses, the most convenient and effective way was to recite or perform the content to be propagated in person. And the only ones who could carry out propaganda in this way were art performance teams. Therefore, at the beginning of the establishment of each base area in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, the work of forming propaganda teams (drama troupes) was given top priority. By the end of 1938, 15 propaganda teams (drama troupes) had been established by the military region, various military sub-districts, and local administrative agencies, in the order of their establishment as follows:

Name of the Troupe	Establishment Time
Front Troupe of the 1st Sub-district	October 1937
Struggle Troupe of the 2nd Sub-district	November 1937
Charge Troupe of the 3rd Sub-district	November 1937
Anti-Enemy Troupe of the Jin-Cha-Ji Military Region	December 1937
Fireline Troupe of the 4th Sub-district	December 1937
Fireline Troupe of the Jizhong Military Region	February 1938
New Era Troupe of Jizhong	February 1938
Tiexue Troupe of Pingshan	April 1938
National Defense Troupe of the 4th Jizhong Sub-district	April 1938
Anti-Japanese Troupe of the Hui People's Detachment	April 1938
Guangfu Troupe of the 1st Independent Brigade	Spring 1938
Vanguard Troupe of the 1st Jizhong Sub-district	May 1938
Propaganda Team of the 2nd Jizhong Sub-district	May 1938
Propaganda Team of the 3rd Jizhong Sub-district	July 1938
Mass Troupe of Northeast Shanxi	October 1938

Table 1: Establishment of Drama Troupes in the Early Stage of the Jin-Cha-Ji Military Region. Source: Historical Materials of Revolutionary Culture in Jin-Cha-Ji (Compiled by Hebei Provincial Department of Culture)

The purpose of forming these troupes and propaganda teams in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region was very clear: to use all available forms that the people could accept and were

willing to accept to carry out cultural propaganda and mobilization among the whole people, so as to awaken, unite, and organize the people to fight to the death against the Japanese invaders.<sup>[1]</sup>

II. The Development Process of the Drama Movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

1. Rise with the Founding of the Border Region (1937-1938)

With the establishment of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, the regional drama movement began to rise. By the end of 1938, over a year, it was the initial stage of the regional anti-Japanese drama. During this period, the members of the drama troupes responsible for pioneering drama, except for a very few Red Army propagandists, were mostly exiled students from the Northeast, Pingjin, and local primary school teachers or students. Basically, most of them not only did not know what drama performance was but also most troupes lacked talents for scriptwriting, so they could only learn and perform existing plays.

In the early days of their establishment, the troupes learned and performed plays from the rear areas or Yan'an, such as The Obedient People, Guerrillas, Scars from Ironing, etc. Among them, Put Down Your Whip was performed most frequently. This short play not only had strong ideological and artistic qualities and obvious on-site inspiring effects but also its performance method was extremely simple: no curtain, no set or large props were needed, and it could be performed in any open space in the village, with the audience surrounding to watch. This form of drama was called street drama at that time.

In the early stage of the War of Resistance, the troupes carried out activities along with the opening of base areas. In newly opened areas where democratic regimes had not yet been established or improved, if there were no old theaters or stages left, it was difficult to raise materials for building a stage temporarily. Therefore, they had to adapt to local conditions and perform in open spaces in villages. Thus, the street play Put Down Your Whip became the first choice for various troupes in their initial cultural propaganda. In the late 20th century, some dramatists inspired by the "May 4th" New Culture Movement, advocating the popularization of drama, put forward the slogan of “taking drama to the streets”. Accordingly, the dramatist Tian Han timely launched the script Put Down Your Whip, adapted from the story of Mignon in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister.

In the process of performing existing plays, people gradually found that the content of these popular plays, especially those from the rear areas, was largely disconnected from the reality of the border region, which had become an anti-Japanese base area behind enemy lines, making it difficult to achieve good propaganda effects. Therefore, some troupes with creative capabilities began to write their own scripts using new materials from the base areas from 1938 onwards. In the initial stage of the regional anti-Japanese drama, the troupes that performed more self-written plays included the Fireline Troupe of the Jizhong Military Region, the National Defense Troupe of the 4th Jizhong Sub-district, the New Era Troupe of Jizhong, the Tiexue Troupe of Pingshan, the Fireline Troupe of the 4th Sub-district, and the Charge Troupe of the 3rd Sub-district.

Most of the self-written plays by the Fireline Troupe of the Jizhong Military Region were created by the playwright Wang Lin, including Self-inflicted, Chapaev, Joining the Army, etc. The self-written plays of the National Defense Troupe of the 4th Jizhong Sub-district were mainly created

by its director Tian Yuan, such as *Defend Wanping*, *Heroine*, *The Devil*, etc. Liang Bin, director of the New Era Troupe of Jizhong, created *Dad Was Wrong*, *Return with Victory*, *Bloodshed at Lugou Bridge*, etc.

For song and dance dramas in the early stage of the War of Resistance, since most troupes and propaganda teams generally lacked talents for composing music and choreographing dances at that time, they could only perform programs from the rear areas, Yan'an, or the Red Army. These included *On the Songhua River*, *Fisherman's Song*, *Sickle Dance*, etc. Many of the dances in these song and dance dramas were inherited from the Red Army, and a considerable number of them were Soviet dances learned by the Red Army propaganda teams.

Although these song and dance dramas were disconnected from the struggle reality of the border region, their beautiful melodies, high-spirited emotions, and combat-themed content still refreshed the people in the border region, who had only been exposed to traditional folk songs and dances, inspiring their urgent desire to participate. The spread of these revolutionary song and dance dramas quickly created a new cultural atmosphere of popularization, nationalization, and combativeness in the entire border region, laying a solid foundation for the vigorous development of mass literature and art in the region later.

## **2. Rapid Development During the Stalemate Stage of the War of Resistance (1939-1942)**

The initial revolutionary drama movement had an enlightenment effect in the border region, but by 1939, troupes lacking self-written plays could no longer win the favor of the masses. At that time, most new works were only created to meet the shortage of scripts, resulting in rough artistic expressions and lack of plots and content.<sup>[27]</sup> However, despite their slight emptiness, these plays popularized the new form of drama, i.e., modern drama, in the border region, further deepening the masses' understanding and recognition of this "imported product".

With the convening of the regional forum on creative issues, the regional dramatists deepened their understanding that dramatic art, rooted in life and closely connected with real life, possesses strong vitality. Since then, an upsurge emerged in creating dramatic works that closely combined with the actual anti-Japanese struggle in the border region, carefully drew materials from the military and civilians' fight against the enemy, democratic construction, and production support for the front, and met the needs of the times and the aspirations of the people. Meanwhile, in their creative practice, the regional drama workers continuously explored new forms of dramatic expression. In addition to modern drama, which had always been the mainstay, they successively launched various new types of dramas such as living newspaper dramas, village dramas, operas, folk tune dramas, clapper dramas, and cross-talk dramas, making the regional drama stage flourish with diverse styles and enhancing the effects of dramatic art demonstrated in the early stage of the War of Resistance.

### **(1) Rapidly Developing Living Newspaper Dramas**

Living newspaper dramas originated in the Soviet Union and were performed during the Red Army period. They were called "living newspapers" or "living reports". The first to introduce living newspaper dramas into the border region was the West War Troupe. In early 1939, shortly after arriving in the border region, the West War Troupe performed four living newspaper dramas, namely *The Doomsday of*

*the Invaders* (written by Ling Zifeng and Shi Qun), *Hell on Earth* (written by Ling Zifeng), *Glorious Death*, and *Unity* (both collectively created), for the regional Party congress held by the Northern Branch of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to convey the resolutions of the Sixth Plenary Session of the Central Committee on January 7. Since then, living newspaper dramas quickly spread in the border region.

The most widely circulated and far-reaching living newspaper drama was the large-scale song and living newspaper drama *Join the Eighth Route Army*, written by Cui Wei, director of the Drama Department of the United University of Arts, composed by Lü Ji and Lu Su, directed by Cui Wei and Ding Li, and jointly performed by the Drama Department of the United University of Arts and the United University Art Troupe in December 1939. This play mainly depicted the brutal massacres of Chinese people by Japanese invaders, arousing great anger and determination to resist Japan among the people. Notably, this living newspaper drama broke through the previous form, with simple characters, plots, and dramatic conflicts, and had a significant impact on the birth of regional operas later.

In 1939, during the activities of the 120th Division's Combat Drama Troupe in Jin-Cha-Ji, the living newspaper drama *Villages in Jin-Cha-Ji*, written and directed by Cheng Yin, was widely welcomed. This three-act living newspaper drama had no lines, but expressed the heroic mood of the military and civilians in the border region to rebuild their homes and persist in the War of Resistance through music, sound effects, and actions.

The Wang Laowu Visits the Temple Fair, written by the Anti-Enemy Troupe in 1940 to publicize the "Double Tenth Program", had a more novel form. This living newspaper drama not only had characters and plots but also was composed of folk Quyi (ballad-singing art), resonating deeply with the regional masses.

On July 7, 1941, at the closing ceremony of the 2nd Regional Art Festival, the regional literary and art workers presented a large-scale living newspaper drama *Unite Under the Banner of Jin-Cha-Ji*, written and directed by Ding Li, Cui Wei, Wang Yang, Su Youlin, Ling Zifeng, Cai Qijiao, etc., with music composed by Zhao Shangwu, Luo Lang, Zhang Fei, etc. More than 2,500 people participated in the performance, including the Drama Department of the United University of Arts, the United University Art Troupe, the Military Region's Anti-Enemy Troupe, the West War Troupe, the Battle Achievement Troupe, the July Troupe, the Charge Troupe, the Fireline Troupe of the 4th Sub-district, the Tiexue Troupe, and the troops under the Military Region Command. The performance was held in the river beaches and valleys near the military region headquarters, with heaven and earth as the stage, presenting a magnificent and spectacular scene. However, such large-scale living newspaper dramas could only be performed in specific periods and under specific conditions.

### **(2) Village Dramas with On-site Settings**

Village dramas are a form of dramatic performance using existing scenes. Due to the environment where they might be attacked by the enemy at any time, troupes could not build stages, set up backdrops or props, and even had to be ready to evacuate at any time. The West War Troupe performed the first village drama, *Stone*, written by Fang Bing and directed by Ling Zifeng, which mainly displayed the plot through actions and sound effects. This form of performance was very suitable for the wartime environment and was more authentic and appealing compared to other stage dramas. The



one-act village drama Sister-in-law Zhang's Clever Plan to Save the Cadre (written by Li Shukai and Li Guixin) by the Charge Troupe was also one of the most popular plays and was performed by other troupes repeatedly.

### (3) Operas Developing in Practice

There were no operas in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region except for local operas. After the "May 4th Movement", this new art form was only performed sporadically in schools in cities where the national defense drama movement had been carried out. After the opening of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, this new art form was brought into the region by literary and art workers from northern Shaanxi. At that time, only two operas were performed: one was the three-act opera *The Sorrow of a Fallen Nation* (written by Peng Jialun), performed by the propaganda team of the Song Shilun Detachment in the Yanbei area in April 1938; the other was *Rural Song* (written by Wen Tao, Li Lilian, and Gao Minfu, lyrics by Li Bozhao, composed by Xiang Yu), performed by the Fireline Troupe of the Jizhong Military Region in June 1939.

The first to create operas based on the war life materials of the border region was the Military Region's Anti-Enemy Troupe. Its opera *On This Land* (written by Liu Jia, composed by Xu Shu), performed in November 1939, adopted national and folk methods of writing lyrics and composing music, and was very popular among the masses when performed in Tang County and Wan County (now Shunping) in Jizhong.<sup>[3]</sup>

The United University Art Troupe was also one of the pioneers of opera art in the border region. The large-scale song and living newspaper drama *Join the Eighth Route Army*, jointly performed by it and the Drama Department of the United University of Arts in November 1939, already had the embryonic form of an opera. The opera *Unchainable* (written by Han Sai and Mu Hong, composed by Chen Di and Wang Xin), performed in June 1940, had a comedic style and a relatively complete form. Its music creation not only absorbed the characteristics of folk songs but also focused on expressing characters' personalities and life interests, with clear and pleasant melodies and rich expressiveness.

*Going to Be a Soldier* (written by Liu Jia, composed by Xu Shu), performed by the Anti-Enemy Troupe in May 1940, described the beautiful yearning of a family in the base area in a romantic way. Starting from real life, it aroused people's longing for the future. The performance, which combined singing and dancing, expressed the border people's pursuit of a better life in a cheerful atmosphere.

To welcome the first session of the Border Region's Senate to be held in January of the following year, the West War Troupe rehearsed the opera *The Immortal Old Man* (written by Shao Zinan, composed by Zhou Weizhi, Chen Di, and Li Jiefu, directed by Ling Zifeng) in December 1942. This opera drew on the expressive techniques of Western operas and Greek tragedies, with all lyrics and dialogues in poetic form, including long arias, choruses, accompaniments, and accompanied recitations. It was a complete opera with a revolutionary romantic style. However, due to its music featuring Western opera characteristics, which had a sense of estrangement from the common people's cognitive aesthetics, it received few followers but aroused a strong response among cultural figures.

In February 1940, Ding Li's *Spring Plowing Clapper Opera*, written to cooperate with the border region's spring plowing production movement, was performed in the form of yangko dance. Since then, this form has been widely used in the creation of song and dance dramas in the border

region, resulting in a number of works such as *Capturing the Prisoner* (written by Tian Ye and Jie Xiao of the Forward Troupe), *Destruction Battle* (collectively created by the Anti-Enemy Troupe, composed by Hong Yu), and *Military and Civilians as One Family* (written by Yuan Yinghe and Xin Yi of the Anti-Enemy Troupe, collectively composed). The song and dance dramas appearing from 1940 to 1942 played a positive role in promoting the development of national new operas and laid a solid foundation for the birth of new yangko operas.<sup>[4]</sup>

### (4) Peking Opera Taking on a New Look

During the War of Resistance against Japan, Peking Opera, a traditional opera with a history of over 140 years, was also put on the stage of the national revolutionary struggle by literary and art workers in the border region to inspire the national spirit and combat the enemy. Most of the traditional Peking Opera plays performed at that time were adapted and sorted out to highlight the democratic essence and eliminate the feudal dross. At the same time, some troupes compiled new modern plays according to the needs of real struggles. Compiling and performing modern Peking Opera based on real life gave the ancient Peking Opera art a new look.

In the initial stage of Peking Opera performances on the Jin-Cha-Ji anti-Japanese drama stage, the content of traditional Peking Opera was mainly replaced with stories of resisting Japan and saving the nation, and eliminating traitors and tyrant while still being performed in the original mode. *New Empty City Plan* (written by Wang Mingshan), performed by the Forward Troupe of the 7th Sub-district in the autumn of 1938, was a play that put the story of the Japanese invaders' failed attack on Wuji from Gaocheng into the framework of the Peking Opera *Empty City Plan*. The first modern Peking Opera created and rehearsed was *National Salvation Grain* (written by Wang Jiuchen), performed by the United University Art Troupe in November 1939 to cooperate with the collection of national salvation grain.

Due to the severe shortage of Peking Opera talents in various troupes in the early stage of the War of Resistance, occasional Peking Opera performances by individual troupes could only be supported by amateur enthusiasts. Moreover, the inherent Peking Opera conventions, without reform, were difficult to use to express real life, and at that time, the border region's troupes had neither the conditions nor the ability to reform Peking Opera performance conventions. Therefore, the creation of modern Peking Opera failed to develop until the end of 1942.

In terms of performance frequency, traditional plays or adapted and newly compiled historical plays with themes of promoting national integrity, advocating patriotism, and punishing evil and promoting good were still the main ones at that time. Traditional plays mainly included *Fishing and Killing the Family*, *Empty City Plan*, *The Gathering of Heroes*, etc. Adapted and newly compiled plays included *Lu Wenlong* (written by Wang Jiuchen) by the United University Art Troupe, *Yue Yun* (collectively created) by the Fireline Troupe of the 4th Sub-district, and *Shi Kefa* (collectively created, with Zheng Hongyu as the main writer) by the Anti-Enemy Troupe. These adapted and newly compiled plays had more performances not only because their themes were closely combined with the political needs of the War of Resistance period but also because they had such structural characteristics as complete structure, tortuous plots, and intense dramatic conflicts.

### (5) Modern Drama Moving towards Maturity

Modern drama is a type of drama that does not require standardized stylized movements, complicated singing, or gong and drum scores. Since most members of the border region's troupes had no contact with performing arts at the beginning, starting with performing modern drama became a set rule. After the establishment of the Border Region Drama Association, promoting and developing modern drama was regarded as the focus of the border region's drama movement, so the development of modern drama in the border region had been on the rise. In the situation of script shortage from the end of 1938 to the beginning of 1939, the modern drama scripts written by various troupes set off another upsurge in modern drama.

On June 20, 1939, at the drama forum held by the Border Region Literary Salvation Association, Yuan Muzhi advocated that plays reflecting the life of the border region's military and civilians united in the War of Resistance should be written, which was unanimously agreed by the participants. Then, a creation team was formed by Zuo Moye from the 120th Division's Combat Drama Troupe, Liu Xiaowu from the Art Troupe of the Second Branch of the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University, and Zhang Ke from the West War Troupe, and under the guidance of Yuan Muzhi, they compiled the three-act modern drama *Harvest*. The performance of this play pushed the modern drama movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region forward in the early stage of the War of Resistance. Although it had such defects in artistic form as pale characters and insufficiently detailed portrayal of psychological processes, it was a new starting point for the development of modern drama in the enemy-occupied base areas.

The one-act modern drama *Chapaev*, performed by the New Era Troupe in 1939, was written by Wang Lin at the request of Sun Zhiyuan, director of the Political Department of the Jizhong Military Region, when the political commissar system was generally established in the Jizhong Military Region in 1939. It played a role in publicizing and educating in rectifying the military style. It was a reserved play of the New Era Troupe and was performed repeatedly by other troupes.

Plays such as the one-act play *Our Own Book* created by Hu Su, a teacher of the Drama Department of the United University of Arts in 1940; the three-act modern drama *Qingming Festival* (written by Hu Ke) performed by the Anti-Enemy Troupe in 1942; the one-act modern drama *Hanako* created by Ling Zifeng of the West War Troupe in 1942; the one-act modern drama *Mother* (written by Hu Su) performed by the Jizhong Fireline Troupe in 1942; the three-act modern drama *The Moth* created by Cui Wei in 1942; the one-act modern drama *Sixteen Guns* created by Zhang Zhen and adapted by Cui Wei in 1942; and *Look Farther* (written by Hu Danfei) premiered by the Jizhong Fireline Troupe in 1942, all left a deep impression on the military and civilians in Jin-Cha-Ji and occupied an important position in the history of anti-Japanese drama.<sup>[5]</sup>

## **(6) "Performing Grand Plays" and the Controversy It Aroused**

An important phenomenon marking the overall improvement of the artistic level of modern drama was the performance of large-scale Chinese and foreign famous plays and large-scale plays adapted from foreign novels by border region writers that reflected foreign life, which was called "performing grand plays".

The performing groups that took the lead in performing large-scale Chinese and foreign modern dramas in the border region were the West War Troupe and the United University

Art Troupe. In August 1940, to celebrate the third anniversary of its establishment and improve the members' cultivation, the West War Troupe rehearsed Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*. In the same month, the United University Art Troupe rehearsed Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. The reason why the United University Art Troupe chose to perform *The Government Inspector* was, on the one hand, to test its own performance level; on the other hand, to further improve the existing level of directing, performing, and stage art by rehearsing this difficult foreign play. When watching this play, the audience combined the ugly and ridiculous faces of the petty officials and gentry in Tsarist Russia exposed in the play with the images of similar figures in Chinese feudal society, and understood the play's profound criticism and merciless castigation of certain essences of the old society.

In October 1940, to welcome the third anniversary of the establishment of the Jin-Cha-Ji Military Region and the first Border Region Art Festival to be held on November 7, the United University of Arts, the United University Art Troupe, the Anti-Enemy Troupe, and the West War Troupe jointly rehearsed the modern drama *Mother* adapted from Gorky's novel. This play was the first large-scale modern drama adapted by the border region that reflected foreign life and was also the largest, highest-level, and most effective performance in the border region.<sup>[6]</sup>

The continuous performance of Chinese and foreign famous plays aroused a controversy about "performing grand plays" in the literary and art circles of the border region. After the joint performance of *Mother* in 1941, the performance of *Sunrise* by the Anti-Enemy Troupe, and the performance of *Marital Change* by the United University Art Troupe, the Border Region Drama Association realized at a forum that performing famous plays was not the ultimate goal of the drama movement. "Grand plays" were not easy to understand, so they could not be widely popularized among the people. If every troupe only aimed at "performing grand plays", it would definitely affect the work of popularizing drama, restricting drama activities to a small circle and separating them from the broad masses. However, this did not mean that they should not be performed. Instead, drama workers should learn from their advantages to create more new plays that reflected reality and were more acceptable to the masses, so as to continuously improve the art of drama on the basis of popularization.<sup>[7]</sup> However, a few people in the literary and art circles of the border region did not view "performing grand plays" from a dialectical perspective, but instead exaggerated it with "left-leaning" ideas and attitudes. 3. Flourishing under the Guidance of the Spirit of "Speech" (1943-1945)

After the 1943 literary and art rectification movement, especially after learning the spirit of Mao Zedong's *Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, the literary and art workers in the border region became more clear about the direction of serving workers, peasants, and soldiers, improved their consciousness of integrating with workers, peasants, and soldiers and reforming their thoughts, and set off a movement of going to the countryside and joining the army. During this period, many excellent works reflecting the real struggle life of the military and civilians in the border region were created, pushing the drama creation in Jin-Cha-Ji to a climax.

## **(1) Flourishing Creation of Modern Drama**

In 1943, Ding Li created the large-scale modern drama *Soldiers and Civilians*, which eulogized the flesh-and-blood friendship between the military and civilians in the border region and showed the revolutionary heroism and

revolutionary optimism of the anti-Japanese military and civilians through characters with different personalities.

In April 1944, Hu Ke created the large-scale modern drama *Rong Guanxiu* based on the real story of “the mother of the soldiers”. To create this play, Hu Ke went deep into life many times and got to know and explore the protagonist’s daily behaviors and hidden characteristics through interacting with *Rong Guanxiu*, thus vividly shaping the characters in the play with a strong flavor of life.<sup>[8]</sup>

Reflecting army life and armed struggle was an important theme in Jin-Cha-Ji’s drama creation. The large-scale modern drama *Li Guorui* created by Du Feng in 1944 was based on a real figure in life during the upsurge of the movement to learn from *Li Guorui* in the army, after Du Feng had been living in the company for a long time. It portrayed a new image of an Eighth Route Army soldier, reflecting the intense and vigorous combat life of the soldiers in the border region and having great artistic appeal.<sup>[9]</sup>

After the literary and art rectification, the majority of drama workers went deep into the masses’ lives and participated in actual struggles, so the themes of drama creation became broader and more profound. In addition to plays reflecting army and rural life and eulogizing the advanced deeds of soldiers and heroic models, they also involved aspects beyond the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers.<sup>[10]</sup> For example, the three-act modern drama *Wang Ruitang* created by Wang Xuebo revealed the complicated class contradictions in the base areas during the War of Resistance, vividly showed the peasants’ strong desire and fighting spirit to gain political and economic emancipation, and eulogized the Party’s class line and national united front policy.<sup>[11]</sup>

After Japan’s unconditional surrender in August 1945, Cui Wei created the large-scale living newspaper drama *Collusion of Enemies, Puppets, and Reactionaries*, which exposed the plot of the Kuomintang reactionaries attempting to collude with enemies and puppets to monopolize the fruits of the victory of the War of Resistance. The performance timely cooperated with the political situation at that time and received an excellent response.

## (2) Development of National New Operas

In the early stage, Chinese opera art simply copied and borrowed the creative methods of Western traditional opera art to interpret Chinese stories, which was difficult to be accepted by the broad masses. Later, drama workers began to pay attention to absorbing the advantages of folk songs and local operas that could resonate with the people, and integrated the strengths of various arts such as poetry, music, dance, and drama, creating Chinese new operas with the spirit of the times and national characteristics, which were different from Western operas.

The opera *Spinning Cotton* (written by Wang Xuebo, arranged by Wang Xin) performed by the Border Region Mass Troupe in September 1943 adopted the melody of Hebei folk songs, with smooth and pleasant tunes; the large-scale opera *Living a Life* (written by Wang Xuebo and Tian Ye, composed by Wang Xin, Liu Pei, and Huo Xing) performed by the Border Region Mass Troupe at the end of the same year absorbed the Dingxian yangko and Beihe folk tunes in its music, with strong local characteristics.

The large-scale opera *Wang Xiuluan* was a symbol of the maturity of operas in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region. This play was closely connected with the real life of the border region at that time. Through the growth process of an ordinary housewife becoming a labor hero in the border region, it eulogized the leadership of the Party, profoundly revealed the

significance of the mass production movement, thus inspiring women’s enthusiasm for participating in labor production and making the protagonist *Wang Xiuluan* a banner for the liberation of rural women.

## (3) Reform and Innovation of Traditional Operas

In the entire Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, the Fireline Troupe was the first and most outstanding troupe in performing Peking Opera. In early 1939, when Chen Qiao was the director, he focused on using the popular form of Peking Opera to serve real struggles, adapting *Fishing and Killing the Family into On the Songhua River*. After 1943, the new director Cui Wei rehearsed more than ten Peking operas such as *The Death of Yue Fei*, *Suzhou City*, and *Famen Temple*, enlivening the cultural life of the military and civilians. These plays were revised by Cui Wei and others, enhancing their ideological and artistic qualities in terms of characters, plots, lines, and melodies. Cui Wei required actors to replace the old conventions and movements in Peking Opera with the expression of real inner emotions, infusing modern drama performance into traditional opera, making attempts at Peking Opera reform. Later, Cui Wei also created the realistic Peking Opera *The Old Hero*, which had content close to reality and new designs for movements and melodies.

Driven by the Fireline Troupe, the Forward Troupe, the July Troupe, the Vanguard Troupe, etc., all performed newly compiled historical Peking operas such as *Lu Wenlong*, *The Injustice to Dou E*, and *Killing at the Gate*, pushing the Peking Opera performances in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region to a new climax.

In July 1944, the Anti-Enemy Troupe and the Border Region Party School jointly performed the historical Peking Opera *Li Zicheng* adapted from Guo Moruo’s *On the 300th Anniversary of Li Zicheng’s Uprising*, which carried out reforms and innovations in coordinating content and form, accumulating certain experience for the transformation of traditional operas.

## II. Historical Significance of the Drama Movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region

### 1. A Powerful Cultural Resistance against Japan

Mao Zedong pointed out in *Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*: “In our struggle for the liberation of the Chinese people, there are various achievements, among which we can say there are two fronts, the cultural and the military. To defeat the enemy, we must first rely on the army holding guns. But such an army alone is not enough; we also need a cultural army, which is an indispensable force for uniting ourselves and defeating the enemy.” As Mao Zedong stated, the drama movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region was closely integrated with the anti-Japanese armed struggle in the region, confronting the cultural aggression of the Japanese invaders with plays based on anti-Japanese practices and performances behind enemy lines. Through vivid plays, it publicized anti-Japanese heroes, explained anti-Japanese policies, and exposed Japanese atrocities, promoting public awakening, inspiring national spirit, and conducting a powerful cultural resistance against Japan.

### 2. An Effective Mobilization of the Masses

Regarding the mass mobilization function of the drama movement in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, the *Anti-Enemy News*, the organ newspaper of the Communist Party of China Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region Committee, once commented in an editorial: “It has played a great role in publicizing,



organizing, and educating the masses in cooperation with the current anti-Japanese tasks. It has brought the songs and words of the new era to millions of people in this barren and backward area who are almost isolated from culture, liberated the broad masses in the border region from their deceived lives, made them turn their eyes from their small piece of land to the broad and complex world, and pushed them from their poor, tired, and broken family lives to the new political stage, thus further correcting their narrow view of being indifferent to politics, which was always limited to daily trivial disputes, and increasingly enhancing their national consciousness.” It delivered the most needed information to the broad masses in their most favorite forms, enabling them to receive ideological education, distinguish right from wrong, improve their spiritual realm, and arouse anti-Japanese enthusiasm while enjoying the cultural pleasure of watching drama performances. The drama movement in Jin-Cha-Ji was an effective mass mobilization.<sup>[12]</sup>

### 3. A Beneficial Reform of Traditional Operas

Traditional drama is a treasure of Chinese culture, but it also has some inherent drawbacks: in content, it carries obvious feudal ideology; in creation, it focuses on “expression of ideas” and is often divorced from objective reality; in performance, it has a single and rigid form. The revolutionary drama movement in Jin-Cha-Ji was a movement to reform traditional operas. It endowed traditional plays with new connotations, injected new content into traditional forms, integrated new and old artistic forms, and explored a path for the progressive development and innovation of traditional drama. The positive changes in traditional drama from content to form in the revolutionary drama movement in Jin-Cha-Ji were essentially the revolutionization of traditional drama. The revolutionized traditional drama, adhering to the principle of serving the people, rooted its creation in the combat, production, and life practices of the broad military and civilian masses, was more close to reality and practice, and had more flexible performance methods, thus being more loved by the military and civilians in the border region. Traditional drama regained new vitality in the harsh war environment.

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