

Research on Red Drama Stage Art

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Abstract:

In the history of Chinese drama in the 20th century, the “red drama” that emerged under the leadership of the Party is an important drama. Having gone through three stages including the red drama of the Soviet area, the red drama of the Anti-Japanese War and the red drama of New China, the “red drama” has had an extremely far-reaching impact on the revolutionary struggle and even the political struggle within the Party.

Keywords:

Red Drama, Stage Art, Mobilization Strategy, Cultural Imagination

1. Introduction

“Red drama” arises from specific historical circumstances. Song Baozhen, Director of the Drama Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts, defined “red drama” in *Blood Creates Classics: Review and Reflections on Red Drama*. She said: “in a narrow sense, red drama refers to the modern drama performed during the Red Soviet regime in the late 1920s after its establishment in Ruijin, Jiangxi to consolidate the regime, publicize the revolution, mobilize the people, expand the Red Army, carry out the agrarian revolution, and create revolutionary bases. In a broad sense, it refers to dramas based on the history of the Chinese revolution led by the Communist Party of China. The “red drama” that emerged under the leadership of the Communist Party of China has roughly gone through three periods, namely, the “red drama” in the embryonic period, the “red drama” in the period of the Anti-Japanese War and the War of Liberation in the period of development, and the “red drama” in the prosperous period of New China.

2. Historical Review of “Red Drama”

Since May Fourth, intellectuals have called for drama reform. Chen Duxiu, one of the founders and first general secretary of the Communist Party of China, published *On Opera* in both classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese under the pseudonym “San'ai” from 1904 to 1905 while systematically putting forward five guidelines for improving opera: 1. it is advisable to compile more dramas that are beneficial to morals and manners; 2. new law shall be adopted; 3. dramas of gods and ghosts are not allowed; 4. lewd dramas are not allowed; 5. clichés of wealth and fame in drama shall be abandoned. Chen Duxiu’s proposal also represents the general understanding

of traditional drama in the late Qing and early Min. In the period of historical transformation, the revolution is mainly to promote the “turning-over” liberation of the masses of workers and peasants and to promote the “concept-changing” practice of the masses of workers and peasants. “Translating radical ideas and images into purposeful and influential practical actions requires both beneficial external structural conditions and a great deal of emotional work on a part of the leaders and their followers.” The call for dramatic improvement has ignited the spark of “red drama”. Since the founding of the CPC, it has not only attached importance to the social function of drama, but also has been trying to deal with the relationship between traditional drama and contemporary society, which are the two main lines of “red drama”. After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, the red drama performances focused on the propaganda needs in the Anti-Japanese War era.

2.1. Soviet “Red Drama” in the embryonic period (1927-1937)

After the Nanchang Uprising in 1927, the CPC began to embark on the road of “armed independent regime of workers and peasants”. While creating revolutionary base areas, the CPC has launched vigorous agrarian revolutions, established a red political power and expanded the ranks of the Red Army of workers and peasants on the basis of mobilizing the masses. While propagandizing to the masses, the CPC has sprouted a new type of revolutionary drama activity, namely, the “Red Drama” in Soviet Area, a mass revolutionary drama activity centered on drama in the Central Soviet Area during the Second Revolutionary Civil War.

At the first stage, taking “propagandizing to the masses, organizing the masses and arming the masses” as an important political task during the period from the founding of Jinggangshan Revolutionary Base in 1927 to the convening of “Gutian Conference” in 1929, the Party has not only set up the club, but also set up a publicity team to reflect the real life in the way of acting and meet the publicity needs of revolutionary tasks. It was the germination stage of red dramas from the winter of 1927 to the winter of 1929, during which such live newspapers and small dramas as Expropriate the Local Tyrants, Chairman Mao’s Empty Mountain Plan and Harvest were created. The creation and performance of large-scale dramas represented by Two Rams Defeat Qixiling and Compatriots also appeared one after another.

At the second stage, “Sanwan Reorganization” was the turning point of the rise of “Red Drama”. From September 29 to October 3, 1927, Mao Zedong led the world-famous “Sanwan Reorganization” in Yongxin County, Jiangxi. He pointed out that “apart from fighting, the revolutionary army must do a good job of propagandizing to the masses.” As an important political task, the Fourth Army of the Red Army established a propaganda team immediately after its establishment. The rich forms of publicity include singing, ballad singing, dancing and poetry. With its popularization, intuition, popularity and the ability to simultaneously undertake the functions of education, entertainment and publicity, drama soon became the main form suitable for the Red Army to spread. During this period, with the attention of the Red Regime and military leaders, the Red Drama Movement flourished. The mass red drama movement sprung up like mushroom in the base areas, represented by the establishment of drama clubs. In particular, Snow on Lushan Mountain, written by Li Zhuoran, deputy director of the Political Department of the Red Army Faction, directed by Luo Ruiqing, and performed by Luo Ruiqing, Nie Rongzhen, et al, is the first large-scale and well documented drama in the history of modern Chinese drama.

At the third stage, the mass “red drama” realized the transformation from amateur to professional, marked by the creation of professional art schools and professional troupes. In 1932, Ruijin in the Soviet area established the first specialized art school “Blueshirt Theater School” (later renamed the Gorky Theater School), and the first specialized theater troupe “Workers’ and Peasants’ Theater Society” (formerly known as Bayi Theater Troupe). This “one troupe and one school” has strongly promoted the maturity of red drama. In the past year and a half since its founding, the School has trained more than 1,000 cadets and formed more than 60 drama teams, warmly welcomed by the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, to go to the front line and go deep among the masses of workers and peasants. At that time, the local blueshirt troupes and clubs in the Soviet area sprang up one after another. According to statistics, there were more than 1500 clubs in Jiangxi, Fujian and Guangdong, with nearly 50000 staff. After its establishment, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Theater Society created and performed many high-level dramas, including *The Summer of Battle* and *Li Baolian*, which had a great impact.

In October 1933, the Kuomintang launched the fifth counter-revolutionary “encirclement and suppression” campaign against the revolutionary base area, and the main force of the Red Army was forced to withdraw from the Central Soviet Area for a hasty Long March. In 1934, Qu Qiubai came to Ruijin to preside over the work. Under his leadership, the red drama team left in Fujian-Jiangxi borders attached great importance to script creation and stressed the need to give play to collective wisdom. During this period, he edited and published the script collection *The Gun Collection* and created five scripts, including drama *Sacrifice* and *Guerrilla*. At the same time, three troupes including “Mars,” “Red Flag” and “Warfare” were established. On the Lantern Festival in 1935, the three troupes held a theatrical performance in the trees, performing the one-act drama such as *Sacrifice*, *Non-human Life* and *Female Heroes*. At this stage, the Red Drama was publicized and performed on two fronts, and its personnel were also divided into two parts, one part of whom carried out the Long March with the Central Red Army, and the other part of whom stayed in Fujian-Jiangxi borders to participate in guerrilla warfare. The other red drama team that participated in the Long March temporarily set up a soldiers’ drama club to perform with the army, and staged street dramas, live newspapers and multi-act dramas with realistic themes, such as *Broken Straw Shoes*, *Going to the North to Resist Japan*, and *I’m going to be the Red Army*.

2.2. “Red Drama” in the Development Period of Anti-Japanese and War of Liberation (1937-1949)

With the intensification of the national crisis and the arrival of the Red Army in northern Shaanxi, resistance to Japan became more and more the most urgent task facing the Chinese Communist Party. While the red drama continued to spread the original dream, it also found a new dream that must be disseminated: “Defeat the brutal Japanese invaders and return me splendid rivers and mountains.” The creation and performance of the “Red Drama” of the Anti-Japanese War and the War of Liberation is an extension of the “Red Drama” of the Soviet area. In July 1937, the Lugou Bridge Incident broke out, and China entered the historical period of the national liberation war. Regarding their work as part of the national liberation war, the dramatists vigorously propagated the idea of resisting Japan, mobilized the masses, and organized the masses, and many red theater workers often performed behind enemy lines and sometimes sacrificed themselves to the enemy’s bayonet before they

can retreat. During this period, the red drama was carried out simultaneously on two fronts, namely the Kuomintang government-ruled areas and the Communist-led liberated areas. The different nature of political power and social system has put the red theme drama movement in the two regions in different cultural backgrounds, thus forming different development characteristics. The “red drama” activities of the Anti-Japanese War and the War of Liberation can be roughly divided into three stages:

2.2.1. Drama Becomes the Main Type of Drama that Goes Deep into the Masses (1937-1940)

In July 1937, the Shanghai Drama Writers Association held a plenary meeting. Xia Yan proposed to establish the Chinese Drama Writers Association at the meeting in accordance with the spirit of the Central Committee of the CPC on the establishment of the Anti-Japanese United Front. At the meeting, he decided to collectively create a three-act-drama *Defending Lugou Bridge*, and elected seven people, including Xin Hanwen, Chen Baichen, A Ying, and Yu Ling, to prepare for the performance committee, which became the battle declaration of the Chinese drama front in the Anti-Japanese War. At the same time, the drama cultural activities in Yan'an during this period were extremely active. In March 1937, the People's Anti-Japanese Drama Club was established, with “central”, “combat”, “youth”, “hoe”, “ordinary” and other troupes. At the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938, under the organization of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in Yan'an, the plays such as *Guangzhou Storm* and *Blood Sacrifice to Shanghai*, jointly directed by Sha Kefu, Zhu Guang, et al, were also staged. In particular, *Blood Sacrifice to Shanghai*, performed for 20 consecutive days, watched by more than 10,000 audiences, which was rare in drama in Yan'an. In April of the same year, LuXun Academy of Fine Arts was established in Yan'an. The Drama Department of LuXun Academy of Fine Arts created and performed a large number of plays with novel themes, providing many good plays for the drama movement in the base area. The drama team has created a large number of new plays, such as the multi-act dramas including *Eight Hundred Heroes* and *Shanghai War*, the one-act dramas including *Blood Sacrifice for 918*, *The Fury of the Ancient City*, and *Go to the Front*.

In 1938, as the Sino-Japanese War entered a difficult stalemate stage, the focus of the anti-Japanese drama movement shifted westward, and many theater troupes came to Chongqing, making the drama activities in the mountain city Chongqing gradually prosperous. On October 10, 1938, Chongqing held the first drama festival, staging the drama *General Mobilization* created by Cao Yu, Song Zhi, et al. At the same time, there is also a drama team active in various anti-Japanese bases. For example, in the Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei base area in North China, many drama groups have been set up one after another, such as the Huoxian Jushe, the Qiyue Jushe and the Kangdi Jushe, creating and performing drama plays such as *Jidong Riot* and *Unyielding to Death*. Around 1940, the drama movement in various base areas in North China set off a climax, and drama has become the main genre of drama that penetrates deep among the masses.

2.2.2. The Chinese Drama Society, a troupe directly led by the Party, was established (1941-1945)

In October 1941, considering the difficult and dangerous situation at that time, Yang Hansheng believed that it was necessary to form a theater troupe directly led by the party, namely, the Chinese Drama Society, and this idea was approved and

supported by Zhou Enlai, head of the Southern Bureau of the Communist Party of China. In May 1942, beginning with Mao Zedong's *Speech at the Yan'an Literary and Art Forum*, the development policy guided by "getting rid of the stale and bringing forth the fresh" became the wind of reform. The Yan'an literary and artistic rectification movement brought about a turning point in the drama movement in the border areas, and dramas with red reality themes, reflecting the fiery life of struggle and life in the border areas, quickly emerged, such as, *Our Headquarters* created by Chen Huangmei in 1942, the four-act drama *Comrade, You Have Gone the Wrong Way* created by Chen Boer in 1944, and the four-act drama grain created by collectives. According to incomplete statistics, there were about 46 major theater groups about the troops established in Yan'an and various anti-Japanese base areas from 1937 to 1946, including the Northwest Field Service Regiment, the Literature and Art Working Group of the General School of the Chinese People's Anti-Japanese Military and Political University, the Frontline Troupe, the Beacon Troupe and the Central China Luyi Experimental Troupe.

2.2.3. The focus of the drama movement in the Kuomintang-controlled area moved eastward (1946-1949)

In January 1946, Zhou Enlai met with the captains of the three acting teams in the southwest and the heads of the New China Troupe in Chongqing, and made clear and specific requirements for the work of the acting teams: they should strive to work in the larger cities along the Yangtze River or to the south, so as to cooperate with the democratic movement in the cities and strive to the liberated areas when possible. In accordance with this spirit, the mobile drama teams in East and South China have returned to Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou and other coastal areas to continue to accept the leadership of the Communist Party of China's underground party. At this stage, the drama movement mobilized the masses to strive for the establishment of New China. After the victory of the Anti-Japanese War, the focus of the drama movement in the Kuomintang-controlled areas moved eastward. From 1946 to 1948, the Second Drama Team in North China staged *Propaganda, Peking People, Great Three Rivers* and other plays on the Beijing-Tianjin drama stage. At the end of 1948, with the full outbreak of the civil war, the performance teams withdrew to the liberated areas to welcome the birth of New China. During this period, there was also a special drama team, namely, the military drama group, which was full of vitality. In line with the service tenet of writing, acting and acting for the military, the military dramatists adhere to the principle of "mass" acting, follow the troops to different places, and create and perform a large number of dramas reflecting the military life in the process of mobility and change, such as *Jolly Meeting, Red Flag Song* and *Cannonball*.

3. New Change of Stage Art of "Red Drama"

The arduous and cruel revolutionary struggle needs the help of literature and art to form national cultural identity among the broad masses of the people. "Red Drama" was born in the revolutionary gunfire. In terms of stage art, from the original Soviet Red Drama when there was no light during the performance, the actors put pine branches into the barbed wire and lit them, creating a "pine light" for stage lighting. When there was no oil paint for makeup, actors used red paper to soak in water and then mix it with lard as cosmetics, and used charcoal as eyebrow pencil. When the instruments were not enough, they went up the mountain to catch snakes and made

erhu with snake skin. When performing at the front, the actors brought their own weapons to be ready to take part in the battle at any time.

In the arrangement of the performance venue, the dense forest and the empty land, seeming to be excellent rehearsal venues given by nature, was full of spirited singing and dancing troupe actors and all surrounded by the Soviet masses who watched the rehearsal with interest. The actors used local materials and makeup in rudimentary equipment. Although it was still coldest days of the year, with a lot of wind and rain, and the actors' faces and hands were frozen red, the excited actors rehearsed like a fire burning in their hearts. During the performance, the party, government, and military leaders of the Central Committee of the Soviet Area attended and watched the performance. The songs and fighting songs on and off the stage, the Jiangxi mountain songs and Fujian mountain songs, were colorful and extraordinary. In the dangerous days when the Kuomintang army was pressing the border and encircling ring upon ring, the actors of the troupe and the people of the Soviet area were so ecstatic about revolutionary literature and art that the performance lasted until midnight. Until the 60s of the 20th century, Zhao Pinshan also wrote poems: "who remembers the past thirty years, the scene in Yudu is just like before" to express his infinite nostalgia. After that, the Central Soviet Region was successively occupied by the Kuomintang troops. Forced by the dangerous environment of struggle, the troupes were disbanded and went to the theatrical propaganda of the Anti-Japanese War and the War of Liberation. It was common that the League members were incorporated into the various units to participate in the arduous guerrilla war.

3.1. Orientation of drama reform of "getting rid of the stale and bringing forth the fresh & all flowers blooming together"

After liberation, the Central Ministry of Culture held the first national drama work conference in Beijing on November 27, 1950, and issued the *Instructions of the Government Council on Drama Reform Work*, also known as the "Fifth Five-Year Instruction" in 1951 according to the proposal of the meeting. Since then, due to the deviation of policy grasp, a large-scale "ban on play" movement has also followed. In June 1956 and April 1957, two national theatrical repertoire work conferences were held, and through the discussion of the meeting, the *Notice on Waving the "Ban on Play"* was issued. Representative works at this stage include *Forcing Up Liangshan*, *Three Sieges of Zhu Village*, *Emperor Li Zicheng Breaking into Beijing* and *The White Haired Girl*. The above notice is a practice of art for politics' sake. Under the control of political discourse, the literary and artistic creation of this period has a strong political attribute. Qi Yanming of the Ministry of Culture put forward: "modern drama, traditional drama, and new historical drama should be carried out simultaneously. It is necessary to vigorously develop modern repertoire, actively organize, adapt and stage excellent traditional plays and advocate the creation of new historical repertoire from the perspective of historical materialism." Since then, the "three simultaneous development" policy has designated a development idea for drama compilation for the first time, which has had a profound impact on the drama transformation in this period. At the same time, it has also promoted the transformation from the old "role-centered" to the "director-centered", and the multiple perspectives of drama, music arrangement and dance beauty presentation have changed.

3.2. "Great and all-round" stage character modeling of the Revolutionary Model Drama

From May to June 1967, the dramatic art works supported by Jiang Qing were collected in Beijing, and eight revolutionary model dramas including *The Red Lantern*, *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, *Sha Jia Bang*, *Haven*, *Riad the White-Tiger Regiment*, ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White Haired Girl* were repeatedly staged in the six major theaters. The title of “revolutionary model drama” was well known, and model opera became extremely popular and highly respected. The literary and artistic creation and stage performances at this time became a tool for revolutionary culture and socialist construction. In the revolutionary model drama, the costumes of the characters in the drama are mainly realistic uniforms, such as the Red Army costume in *The Red Detachment of Women*, the Eighth Route Army costume in *The White Haired Girl* and the New Fourth Army uniform in *Sha Jia Bang*. For another example, the song *Sha Jia Bang* “You must learn the green pine on the top of Mount Tai” compares the eighteen wounded and sick to the eighteen green pines on the top of Mount Tai. Green pine became a symbol of warriors. The background of the sacrifice of Li Yuhe and Grandma Li in *The Red Lantern* is the pine and cypress jungle, symbolizing the eternal life of revolutionary heroes.

The model drama characters are characterized by that they have three prominences and have focused on shaping the images of a number of great and all-round proletarian revolutionary heroes. They are a group of idealistic people’s heroes. From the performance level, the model dramas have been reformed in terms of performance programs, stage music, and stage art. As the successor of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the revolutionary model drama also highlights the need for class struggle and the consolidation of political power.

3.3. Symbolized set image

In terms of stage setting, the stage space design during the model drama period mainly focuses on realistic story scenes, emphasizing the image of “great and all-round” characters, such as the deep mountains and forests in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, the reed marshes in *Sha Jia Bang*, and the docks in *Haven*. In the scene design, tall green pines and cypresses, five-star red flags flying in the wind, etc. become a symbol, highlighting the image of the main characters. In light design, the sun and the rays of the sun have also become a metaphor for creating noble figures. For example, there are rays of morning in the setting for the “sun rises” in the revolutionary modern ballet *The White Haired Girl* and in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* when Yang Zirong sang the aria of *Have Moring Sun in the Chest*. For another example, in order to create a cold and depressing performance atmosphere, the China National Peking Opera Company set up a grass house interior with a real scene door in the middle of the stage. The stage equipment includes a stove and a water tank, and artificial snowflakes fall from the sky. The revolutionary model dramas of this period are designed with the idea of setting the stage of drama, tending to “seek truth”.

There are also some sets in the model dramas that are dominant imagery. For example, the cuckoo in *Azalea Mountain* symbolizes revolution. The scene of the first scene describes: “The azalea is in full bloom, red and white, and full of life. Lei Gang sang: “do not say it is in vain. Azalea turns red all over hometown.” “In the fourth scene of *Qingzhu Tucui*, the curtain is opened: it is fine and warm with blue sky and white clouds; the distant mountains overlap, the terraces are layered, the bamboo is green and luxuriant, the azaleas are in full bloom, brilliant and colorful, the white wall of the peasant association with tile roof can be seen in the distance, and a huge rock is

across the side of the platform.” In the fifth scene of *Midstream Pillar*: “curtain opening: The forest is deep, the road is narrow, the cliffs pierce the sky, the azaleas are like fire, and the pine is facing the wind; the mountains are pale, and the sunset is like blood. In the ninth (Rolling Red Flag) curtain opening: the scene is the same as the first, but the azaleas and the red flag shine together, Ke Xiang, Lei Gang and all the soldiers “appear” together majestically and heroically--curtain closing. Here, the “first bloom of the azalea”, the blooming of the azalea, the azalea like fire, and the azalea “blooming all over the mountain” symbolize the beginning and development of the revolution to the climax and also mean that the drama from the beginning, development to the climax. On the other hand, the scenes for the appearance of class enemies are dim and lifeless, such as, the gendarmerie prison in *The Red Lantern*, the Grand Tiger of the vulture in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, and the hall of the Diao De family in *Sha Jia Bang*. The masonry props of traditional Chinese drama are symbolic. In the model drama, such as the cipher code in *The Red Lantern* is also a symbolic symbol. In *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, Yang Zirong won the trust of the vulture by virtue of the vulture’s desire for a contact map as a gift. Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* picked up the leather bag left by Changqing from the position with grief. In the bag were a pocket watch and a volunteer book to join the party, which was a symbol of the revolutionary fighter’s thoughts. Another example is the rice seed in *Haven*. Shipping the rice to Africa embodies the spirit of internationalism. These stage props all have symbolic red symbolism.

4. Conclusions

In the history of Chinese theater in the 20th century, the “red drama” that emerged under the leadership of the Party was an important dramatic phenomenon. Showing great aesthetic differences from traditional opera in terms of drama form, stage space, actor dressing, props design, etc., red drama has soon become the main form of exploitation with its characteristics such as being popular, intuitive, popular and able to undertake the functions of education, entertainment and publicity at the same time. The organized production of red drama does not only satisfy the actual needs of revolutionary mobilization, but also conforms to the cultural imagination of revolutionaries about proletarian cultural production, which is not only a realistic revolutionary mobilization strategy, but also a collectivized form of life for the masses of workers and peasants.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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