



From the Lu Xun Academy of Arts to the Southwest Theatre Exhibition: A Study of the Cultural Value of the “March of the Army and the People”

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Abstract

The opera “March of the Army and the People,” which premiered in Yan’an in 1939, stands as a significant milestone in the development of a new Chinese national opera. At the Southwest Theatre Exhibition, this production was the only opera presented, and it was also the sole theatrical work originating from the Yan’an liberated area. The performance received widespread acclaim from audiences and sparked enthusiastic discussions. As a representative work of the “Chinese style” new opera, “March of the Army and the People” has made substantial contributions to artistic exploration and innovation, providing a crucial reference and discussion foundation for the new opera movement. Its successful staging at the Southwest Theatre Exhibition marks a significant achievement in the theatrical movement of Guilin Cultural City, reflecting the vital values of “resistance, unity, and progress,” while also underscoring the unique role of the Southwest Theatre Exhibition in consolidating the cultural forces of resistance.

Subject Areas

Culture, Literature, Philosophy

Keywords

National New Opera, March of the Army and the People, Guilin Cultural City, Southwest Theatre Exhibition, Cultural Value

1. Introduction

The Lu Xun Academy of Arts, established during the Anti-Japanese War, is often

referred to as the “cradle of new opera.” From March 1938 to 1939, the academy produced a large number of performances, most of which were created by its faculty and students. “March of the Army and the People,” exemplifying Xian Xinghai’s “Chinese style” musical composition, premiered on February 11, 1939, in Yan’an, marking not only a critical milestone in the history of new Chinese national opera but also exerting a profound influence on the broader landscape of Chinese drama.

At the Southwest Theatre Exhibition, “March of the Army and the People” stood out as the only opera and the sole theatrical work derived from the Yan’an liberated area among more than eighty performances, garnering particular attention and widespread acclaim from attendees. The production sparked enthusiastic responses and discussions across various sectors of society. Its unique artistic creativity and exploration of national identity not only distinguished it as an iconic opera within the context of Guilin’s wartime theater but also transcended the realm of art itself. The opera played a pivotal role in advancing the development of Chinese opera, enhancing the artistic standards of Chinese drama, and stimulating public enthusiasm for the resistance effort. Consequently, it holds significant historical importance and contemporary relevance in the context of cultural and artistic movements during a critical period in Chinese history.

2. The Artistic Characteristics and Cultural Value of “March of the Army and the People”

2.1. The Historical Context and Political Significance

“March of the Army and the People” emerged at the end of 1938, a critical moment in the Anti-Japanese War. Wang Meng emphasizes that the pervasive political, moral, and social engagement in Chinese literature has deep roots. Following the May Fourth Movement, leftist ideologies began to dominate various artistic forms, leading writers to fully commit to revolutionary causes. The Chinese Communist Party’s call for perseverance in the struggle, unity, and progress was timely and essential, providing a clear direction for the future of the resistance. This policy not only aligned with the demands of the war but also reinforced the importance of a united front, significantly influencing the work of cultural figures and artistic groups throughout the conflict.

Wang Meng argues that the politicization, moralization, and socialization of literature have long been entrenched traditions in Chinese literary discourse. Following the May Fourth Movement, leftist ideologies gradually dominated various artistic domains such as drama, film, and music, leading to a literary landscape where “literature chose revolution, and writers devoted themselves to revolutionary causes” [1]. In this context, the environment of the Anti-Japanese War demanded that “writers within the revolutionary ranks genuinely immerse themselves in the revolution, resolutely commit to it, remain unwavering, fear no sacrifice, and dare to struggle, avoiding the sentimentalism of the petty bourgeoisie and the moral codes of old Chinese society” [1].

The late 1938 period, during which “March of the Army and the People” was conceived, marked a critical juncture as the Anti-Japanese War entered a phase of stalemate. Faced with an increasingly severe wartime situation, the Chinese Communist Party proposed timely policies to uphold resistance, promote unity, and pursue progress. This policy not only aligned with the developmental needs of the Anti-Japanese War but also effectively addressed the question of “the future direction of China’s resistance,” guiding the nation toward a correct path. Such measures were crucial for ensuring the smooth conduct of the war and maintaining the stability of the anti-Japanese national united front. The principles of resistance, unity, and progress also significantly influenced the working direction of progressive cultural figures and artistic groups throughout the wartime period.

Regarding the types of plays that should be performed at the Southwest Theatre Exhibition, Ouyang Yuqian articulated a clear perspective: “Scripts that directly promote the cause of resistance should be widely performed by various groups. However, the war of resistance is not only fought on the front lines but also in the rear; it is not a transient struggle but a long-term endeavor; it is not merely localized but comprehensive. If we reconsider the conditions for nation-building, playwrights will broaden their vision, and the scope of our script selection will also expand. In essence, resistance and nation-building are inseparable. Please examine the performance lists of the various theatrical teams in the Southwest; ninety percent of them are aligned with the significance of the new era, and they are not disconnected from politics and society” [2].

Furthermore, the influence of political and cultural backdrop on thematic choices and narrative structures is deeply significant to the development of the opera. The political and cultural backdrop of the Anti-Japanese War directly shaped the thematic choices and narrative structure of *March of the Army and the People*. The opera’s central theme of “resistance, unity, and progress” reflects the Chinese Communist Party’s wartime policies, which emphasized the importance of a united front against Japanese aggression. The narrative structure, which transitions from initial disunity among the characters to collective resistance, mirrors the Party’s call for solidarity among different social classes and groups to overcome adversity. For example, the strained military-civilian relationship depicted in the early scenes highlights the social tensions caused by the Nationalist government’s policies, while the eventual unity between the army and the people serves as a metaphor for the broader national effort required to resist foreign invasion. This alignment of artistic themes with political ideology underscores the opera’s role as both a cultural artifact and a tool for wartime propaganda.

2.2. Artistic Features Reflecting Social Realities

Under the overarching theme of “resistance,” “*March of the Army and the People*” seeks to find answers pertinent to the “significance of the new era.” The opera showcases a simple yet powerful narrative that effectively conveys rich dramatic tension. With a limited cast and straightforward plot, it tells the story of a family’s

struggle against Japanese invaders and local traitors. The initial portrayal of disunity among the characters evolves into a collective effort to combat oppression, highlighting the complexities of the military-civilian relationship during the war. The characters' dialogues and songs express their grievances against the Nationalist government, revealing the social tensions exacerbated by the war. As the story progresses, the characters undergo a transformation, ultimately uniting to resist their oppressors, which underscores the theme of solidarity in the face of adversity.

After the August 13 Incident, Xian Xinghai joined the second theatrical troupe, moving from Shanghai to Wuhan to engage in anti-war propaganda. His enthusiasm for work was immense; he often toiled for over ten hours each day, producing a series of anti-war and national salvation songs. However, the stringent censorship imposed by the Nationalist government and the numerous restrictions on the activities of the theatrical troupe caused him considerable distress. This sense of frustration became a significant motivation for Xian Xinghai to accept the invitation from the Lu Xun Academy of Arts to travel to Yan'an. This emotional turmoil also found its way into his creative process for "March of the Army and the People."

Audience Reception and Critical Reviews. Direct evidence of audience reception and critical reviews further support the opera's impact and success. Contemporary reports from *Salvation Daily* and *Li News* praised the opera for its innovative integration of Chinese and Western musical elements and its compelling narrative. Critics highlighted the opera's ability to resonate deeply with audiences, particularly in its portrayal of the struggles and resilience of ordinary people during wartime. The enthusiastic discussions sparked by its performances at the Southwest Theatre Exhibition indicate widespread public appreciation. For instance, Chen Zhi's review in *Li News* (May 23, 1944) described the opera as "a groundbreaking work that successfully merges artistic excellence with political urgency, inspiring both audiences and creators to contribute to the resistance effort." Such evidence demonstrates the opera's cultural significance and its ability to mobilize public sentiment.

2.2.1. The First Characteristic Is the Ability to Express Rich Dramatic Tension through a Simple Plot

"March of the Army and the People" is divided into two acts and three scenes, featuring a limited number of characters—only ten, including Li Qiang, Old Man Li, Li's wife, Li Xiaolan, Chen Biao, Ding Ersao, Captain Kong, the traitor, Japanese soldiers, and the wounded soldier Zhang. The plot is not complicated; it tells the story of how Old Man Li's family collaborates with Chen Biao and Captain Kong to kill the Japanese invaders, capture the traitor, and rescue the wounded soldiers fighting against Japan. However, as the plot progresses, the theme of "disunity" among the army and the people transitions to one of united resistance, with layers of conflict and contradictions that fully showcase the character arcs of the main roles.

In the beginning, the Nationalist Army is in retreat, and Li Qiang is conscripted, being ordered to help carry a wounded soldier. At this moment, Li Qiang's reaction is to hide and flee, and upon returning home, he immediately thinks about urging his family to "escape early to avoid danger." Captain Chen Biao, who is in charge of capturing deserters, searches for Li Qiang and tracks him down to his doorstep. Upon discovering Li Qiang's dropped hat and belt, he attempts to force his way into the house, even trying to justify his actions to assert his authority, berating Old Man Li and others who obstruct the search as "fools."

This seemingly simple event of carrying a wounded soldier reflects the tense military-civilian relations between the Nationalist government and the common people at the time. In the name of resistance against Japan, the government enforced a "scorched earth" policy in rural areas, seizing food from the populace at low prices and conscripting able-bodied men into the military. When the common people resisted or argued, they were labeled with the accusation that "military orders are like mountains! Anyone who resists is a traitor!" Old Man Li responds to Chen Biao with the following lines:

"We are the common people,
And you are Chinese soldiers.
Why do you bully your own kind,
Forcing us to live in despair!"

Ding Ersao's lyrics are even more direct in their accusation:

"What you are doing is utterly disgraceful,
Ignoring that we are few and our family is poor.
You take our three to five stones of grain at a cheap price,
And my husband is taken away without a word.
This cannot stand, boss—
Return my grain and release my man!"

Here, through the voice of the "people," the lyrics expose the reality that the Nationalist government's one-sided policies during the war caused social division and strained military-civilian relations. However, the focus of this military-civilian conflict changes with the arrival of the wounded soldier Zhang, whom Old Man Li's family takes in after he passes by seeking help. Soon after, the traitor and Japanese soldiers appear in turn, committing acts of violence. In this context, Old Man Li's family finally awakens to their situation, undergoes a transformation, and discards their outdated views. They unite to "attack the bandits from both inside and outside," ultimately cooperating to kill the Japanese soldiers and capture the traitor. Li Qiang also conveys the news to the troops in a timely manner, heralding the dawn of victory.

2.2.2. The Second Characteristic Is the Close Integration of Various Musical Forms

In terms of instrumentation, traditional Chinese instruments such as the dizi (bamboo flute), huqin (bowed string instrument), sanxian (three-stringed lute),

liuqin (six-stringed lute), dingding (a type of percussion), zhupan (bamboo clappers), muyu (wooden fish), along with large gongs and drums, closely cooperate with Western instruments like the violin, harmonica, organ, and war drums to advance the plot. From the chaotic and hurried tune played at the beginning, which creates a sense of anxiety and confusion, the music evolves throughout the story, accompanying moments that are either sorrowful, passionate, or grand. At the climax of victory, a march is played, showcasing the abundant artistic beauty and uplifting power of the music.

In terms of vocal performance, the appropriate use of solo singing, accompaniment, and chorus not only increases audience engagement but also makes it easier to resonate with the audience when it is necessary to evoke emotions or express key themes. At the end of each scene, the characters sing about the theme of unity between the army and the people, emphasizing the need for cooperation. In the final act, the theme is elevated through a grand chorus:

“To resist to the end, the army and the people must work together,
 To achieve victory in the resistance, the army and the people must unite.
 The army and the people are one family,
 All are good sons and daughters of the great Chinese nation.
 In the resistance, we are even closer,
 Life and death are all to defend ourselves.
 To repel Japanese imperialism,
 To repel Japanese imperialism,
 We cooperate together,
 To launch a counterattack,
 And reclaim all our land.”

2.2.3. The Third Characteristic Is the Abstract Form of Stage Design

“March of the Army and the People” is structurally a typical example of the “three unities” in drama. An important factor driving the dramatic conflict is the location where the plot unfolds, namely Old Man Li’s home. The stage design takes into full account the practical conditions of the performance and the abstract mode of expression. The color palette of the stage, aside from the purple-toned background of the snow-capped mountains, predominantly features dark ochre and gray. The lines of the scenery are somewhat rigid, yet they harmonize with the rhythm of the opera and the overall atmosphere.

In the explanations regarding the stage design of “March of the Army and the People” in the “Opera Collection,” it is noted that changes in light and shadow are utilized to depict the flow of time and the differences in atmosphere within the same set. This ranges from the tranquility of the dark night to the dawn of victory. All are presented through variations in light and shadow. However, it is mentioned that during the initial performances in Yan’an, the conditions were rudimentary: “Unfortunately, we did not have electric lights here; the performance used gas lamps as stage lighting, which naturally reduced the overall effect” [3].

2.3. Musical Innovation and Integration

“March of the Army and the People” is characterized by its innovative use of diverse musical forms that enhance the narrative. The integration of traditional Chinese instruments with Western ones creates a dynamic soundscape that reflects the emotional journey of the characters. The opera employs various vocal styles, including solo, duet, and chorus, to engage the audience and reinforce its themes. The climactic moments are underscored by powerful music that elevates the narrative, culminating in a grand chorus that emphasizes the necessity of military-civilian cooperation for victory. This musical synergy not only enriches the audience’s experience but also serves to unify the message of resistance and collaboration.

Of course, as Xian Xinghai’s inaugural work in national opera, “March of the Army and the People” has areas of artistic expression that are worth discussing and improving. Xian Xinghai himself hoped to gather feedback from various perspectives to further refine the work. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the significant cultural value of the play within the realm of wartime drama.

“March of the Army and the People” pioneered a new era in national opera. Du Xuan, in his article “On ‘March of the Army and the People,’” mentions, “This is the first bud in the Chinese new opera movement because it is the first opera created by Chinese musicians and dramatists themselves, which gives us great excitement”. Therefore, “we should not mechanically discuss its success or failure, but focus on its developmental value” [4].

In Xian Xinghai’s artistic perspective, the “new” in new opera refers to being “based on folk songs, possessing new forms and techniques, and having the richest content” [5]. When discussing his creation of “March of the Army and the People,” Xian emphasized the distinction between new opera and traditional Chinese Peking opera. He believed that “Chinese opera exists, but it is somewhat feudal and lacks creativity. While it has ‘social value,’ it is deficient in artistic and political value” [6]. The “new” in “March of the Army and the People” represents a breakthrough in artistic and cultural value. In terms of artistic technique, “March of the Army and the People” does not adopt the forms and characteristics of European and American operas; “the script does not meet the requirements of classical opera, and the performance’s sound and instrumentation do not achieve the beauty of Italian opera” [7]. The dialogues in “March of the Army and the People” extensively use colloquial expressions, while the music draws from traditional folk songs, reflecting a strong sense of nationalism. “In terms of arranging music and poetry, it strives to use Chinese flavors. It has a distinctly Chinese style, written according to the current situation of the war” [6].

2.4. Cultural Value and Artistic Legacy

As a pioneering work in the realm of national opera, “March of the Army and the People” holds significant cultural value. While Xian Xinghai acknowledged areas for improvement in artistic expression, the opera’s contribution to the develop-

ment of a new genre of Chinese opera is undeniable. It represents a departure from traditional forms, embracing a distinctly Chinese identity while incorporating modern techniques. This “Chinese style,” as articulated by Mao Zedong, emphasizes the importance of merging internationalist content with national forms. Xian Xinghai’s vision for new opera reflects a commitment to creating works that resonate with the common people, ultimately aiming to foster a sense of unity and resilience among the Chinese populace in their struggle against imperialism.

Whether referring to “Chinese flavor” or “distinct style,” both clearly point to Xian Xinghai’s explicit view of opera with a “Chinese flair” reflected in “March of the Army and the People.” The concept of “Chinese flair” was first proposed by Mao Zedong in 1938 in his article “The Position of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War.” He emphasized that the so-called Chinese style and flair must “discard foreign formalism, reduce the singing of empty and abstract tunes, and put an end to dogmatism, replacing them with fresh, lively, and popular styles that resonate with the Chinese people” [8]. He also stressed the importance of closely integrating internationalist content with national forms.

In this regard, Xian Xinghai elaborated on the concepts of “Chinese flair” and national forms from a musical perspective in his articles “On the National Form of Chinese Music” and “Folk Songs and Emerging Chinese Music.” He believed that to reflect and promote national forms in artistic works, especially in music, it is essential to strengthen “Chinese style” and “Chinese flair,” making “Chinese style” something that ordinary people can feel and relate to. He also pointed out that the “overall goal of ‘March of the Army and the People’ is to make the Chinese people feel the cooperation between the military and the civilians and to persevere in the war” [9].

Comparison with Contemporary Operas. Compared to other operas produced during the same period in different regions of China, March of the Army and the People stands out for its artistic and thematic focus on the integration of military and civilian perspectives. While many patriotic operas of the time, such as *The White Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women*, emphasized class struggles or revolutionary heroism, March of the Army and the People uniquely explored the nuanced relationship between the army and the people, portraying their initial mistrust and eventual collaboration. This thematic focus, combined with the opera’s innovative use of mixed musical forms, set it apart from other works and contributed to its lasting influence on the new opera movement.

3. The Performance of “March of the Army and the People” in Guilin Cultural City

3.1. The Creation and Initial Performance of “March of the Army and the People”

Xian Xinghai’s involvement in the creation of “March of the Army and the People” was a key factor in its emergence as an opera. In 1938, at the age of 33, Xian Xinghai faced obstacles in his work at the Political Department’s Third Hall and

subsequently went to Yan'an, where he became the head of the Music Department at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts. On December 19 of that year, during a special meeting on opera held in Yan'an, Xian was assigned the task of adapting the already existing script and lyrics of "March of the Army and the People" into an opera. After an intense period of creative work, Xian completed the piece in less than half a month. On January 13, 1939, Xian conducted the opera himself, with a performance team composed of faculty and students from the Lu Xun Academy of Arts, marking the opera's premiere.

Although there were controversies regarding the methods and forms of expression, this performance in Yan'an reflected the determination and strength of the unity between the military and the people under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and it greatly uplifted the spirits of the populace through the art form of opera.

In March 1939, "March of the Army and the People" and another work, "Rural Song," were included in the "Collection of Operas" edited by the Lu Xun Academy of Arts and published by the Shanghai Chengguang Bookstore. This initiative facilitated the dissemination of these two works beyond the liberated areas, allowing various theatrical groups to perform them widely. The "Collection of Operas" not only contained the scripts but also included "stage instructions" and sketches of stage designs, enabling other performance groups to reproduce the original creators' concepts as closely as possible, even in the absence of direct guidance from the original authors, thus ensuring the quality and stylistic consistency of the works.

Adaptations and Changes in Performances. The opera underwent adaptations during its various performances to better suit different audiences and political contexts. For example, when performed at the Southwest Theatre Exhibition, certain dialogues and lyrics were modified to emphasize themes of national unity and resistance, aligning with the exhibition's broader goals of rallying cultural forces for the war effort. Additionally, the stage design and musical arrangement were simplified to accommodate the logistical constraints of touring performances in wartime conditions. These adjustments demonstrate the opera's flexibility and its creators' responsiveness to the needs of diverse audiences.

3.2. The Reception and Impact of the Performance in Guilin

In the summer of 1940, Xu Fanglue, the party branch secretary of the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team, went to the Eighth Route Army's Guilin office to report to Li Kenong. Li Kenong handed him the "Collection of Operas" and requested that the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team stage a performance. Considering that these operas "have a lively form and are easy to understand, making them an art form that is easily accepted and enjoyed by the broad masses of the people" [10], the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team immediately began preparations for the performance.

The Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team first staged "Rural Song." After perfor-

mances in places like Lengshuijiang and Xing'an, "Rural Song" received a very positive response, which gave the team the confidence to continue rehearsing "March of the Army and the People." The decision to rehearse "March of the Army and the People" received strong support from various sectors in Guilin at the time: Ouyang Yuqian provided the stage, venue, orchestra, and other facilities at the Guangxi Provincial Art Museum for the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team, stating, "Whatever the art museum has that is needed for the rehearsal and performance of the opera 'March of the Army and the People,' we will provide" [10]. Jiao Juyin served as the chief director, and groups such as the Guilin Art Museum Orchestra and the Yequn Choir assisted in the performance. By the last show, "there were nearly a hundred crowd members and soldiers on stage, and these extras were temporarily organized from other theatrical teams, school music training classes, art teacher training classes, and nearby stationed troops" [11]. This objectively achieved a broad mobilization of social forces for the rehearsal of "March of the Army and the People." According to Fan Lai, the executive director of the play at the time, "the entire Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team had only about twenty to thirty members, relying entirely on the help of friends for manpower" [12].

On December 14, 1940, "March of the Army and the People" was publicly performed at the Yequn Society in Guilin. This performance not only achieved great success but also ignited tremendous enthusiasm among the audience. The literary and artistic community in Guilin highly praised and responded to the event, creating a sensation in the city, with full houses for several consecutive days, and it had a significant positive impact. The play "caused a strong reaction in Guilin, and this performance was regarded as a major event in the political life of the people of Guilin. This was the result of the joint efforts of the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team and the cultural and artistic community in Guilin. The performance educated the masses and also helped the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team make friends with various sectors of Guilin, expanding the progressive forces against Japanese aggression" [13]. After the Southern Anhui Incident, the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team was forced to withdraw from Guilin, but the influence of "March of the Army and the People" did not diminish as a result. On the contrary, the play continued to be performed as the team moved to places like Liuzhou in Guangxi and Qujiang in Guangdong, winning similar acclaim and appreciation from audiences. Particularly during the time in Qujiang, the play underwent further improvements in aspects such as drama, dance, and music, enriching the content of the performance.

3.3. The Evolution and Legacy of "March of the Army and the People"

By the end of 1943, when the Southwest Drama Exhibition began preparations, "March of the Army and the People" had already reached a very mature stage of performance. After the establishment of the organizing committee for the Southwest Drama Exhibition, "March of the Army and the People" was selected as one

of the featured plays, to be performed by the Seventh Propaganda Team (the restructured Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team). During the Southwest Drama Exhibition, “March of the Army and the People” was performed continuously for three days from May 5 to May 8, receiving enthusiastic support from the audience. Due to the extremely positive public response, the organizing committee also decided to add three free performances in the square, with audience numbers exceeding thirty thousand each night, setting a new record for square performances. After the performances, the organizing committee of the Southwest Drama Exhibition specifically organized a seminar on opera, hosted by Ouyang Yuqian, Tian Han, and Xiong Foxi, to discuss topics such as “Understanding and Improving Opera” and “How to Create National Opera.” These discussions not only reflected the artistic achievements of “March of the Army and the People” but also demonstrated the profound impact the play had on promoting the development of Chinese national opera.

According to statistics, during the Guilin Cultural City period, there were 14 opera productions staged, and “the performance of the opera ‘March of the Army and the People’ in Guilin marked the beginning of the new opera movement in Guilin during the Anti-Japanese War, as well as the starting point for the Seventh Propaganda Team’s transition from text and song propaganda to using opera, dance drama, and song-and-dance drama as their main means of artistic promotion” [11].

By adopting the widely loved art form of opera, “March of the Army and the People” extensively promoted the concept of military and civilian unity in the resistance struggle, inspiring the populace to engage in the fight against aggression. In this process, the artistic expressiveness of drama, music, and dance was fully mobilized, becoming an important component of the theatrical resistance effort. This artistic practice not only highlights the significant value of “March of the Army and the People” during the Guilin Cultural City period but also establishes its crucial position in the history of the development of Chinese opera.

Through the transition from Yan’an to Guilin, the creation and performance practices of “March of the Army and the People” were marked by continuous exploration and innovation.

As the birthplace of revolutionary culture, Yan’an placed greater emphasis on the political propaganda function of artistic works, highlighting the role of collectivism and mobilization for the resistance. In contrast, during the Cultural City period in Guilin, although performances were also set against the backdrop of the Anti-Japanese War and there was leadership from the party organization regarding the united front of literature and art, the performance teams and the audiences they faced, as well as the cultural environment and social needs, differed significantly. This required artists to make corresponding adjustments and innovations to their works to adapt to local performance conditions and audience receptivity.

Consequently, the changes in “March of the Army and the People” from Yan’an to Guilin were not only reflected in artistic exploration but also illustrated how

artistic works could be reshaped and reinterpreted under different political influences to suit the socio-political environment and cultural atmosphere of various regions, thereby achieving their propaganda and educational objectives. According to Fan Lai, who served as the executive director of the play, Xiao San's evaluation after watching "March of the Army and the People" in both Yan'an and Guilin was that "each of these two performances had its strengths. The Lu Xun Academy of Arts excelled in vocal techniques, while the performance by the first team left a more complete overall impression. The fact that this play could be performed in the Nationalist-controlled area has deeper realistic significance" [12].

In performances in Liuzhou, Qujiang, and other locations, "March of the Army and the People" also adapted to the characteristics of the audience and regional culture, improving the play while performing, which broadened its acceptance. In July 1943, after Shi Jin took over as the director of the play, he further enriched its dramatic, dance, and musical elements. When commenting on the performance of "March of the Army and the People" at the Southwest Drama Exhibition, Yi Ren noted, "In order to ensure the completeness of the program for this drama exhibition, 'March of the Army and the People' was restaged. It is said that this restaging was not a mere repetition; it incorporated feedback and practical experiences from various sources over the past three years, completely reprocessed for further exploration, aiming to get closer to the ideals of national new opera" [7].

As a new opera art form that fully integrates elements of song, dance, dialogue, and traditional folk music, "March of the Army and the People" demonstrates significant advantages in breaking through the limitations of traditional theatrical expression. This advantage effectively transcends geographical boundaries, linguistic differences, and social identities, achieving broad outreach to diverse audience groups. During theatrical activities in Cantonese-speaking regions such as Qujiang, the performance team found that the audience's acceptance of opera was higher than that of other plays performed in Mandarin, as the barriers posed by dialects were smaller.

With the continuous performances of the work, especially following its prominent showcase during the Southwest Drama Exhibition, the attention and discussion within the literary and artistic criticism community regarding "March of the Army and the People" have intensified, creating an academic fervor. This discussion not only focused on the artistic details of the work itself—such as topic selection, musical composition, vocal expression, dance choreography, and dialogue design—but also expanded to the broader cultural phenomenon of the new opera movement.

In "From the Performances of the Seventh Propaganda Team to the New Opera Movement," the author argues that the play has noteworthy aspects in terms of topic, music, singing, dance, dialogue, and stage design, but also has areas that are not perfect. For instance, the music should be more "Chinese"; the essence of folk songs should be elevated and integrated into the new opera without disconnecting from the dance; the lyrics should be simple and understandable for the audience;

the dance should unfold with the plot and align with the music; the dialogue should include recitations, possibly accompanied by music; and the stage design does not need to be realistic, among other suggestions.

Compared to other similar works, “March of the Army and the People” remains substantial, magnificent, and progressive. Its “realistic themes, skilled performances, beautiful settings, exquisite music, and moving vocals evoke emotions of compassion, sadness, excitement, hatred, and joy, making it truly an ‘epic of the Anti-Japanese War,’ a superior opera” [14].

A review published in the “Jiu Wang Daily” also emphasized the unique value of “March of the Army and the People” within the broader context of the Anti-Japanese War, stating that “without the Anti-Japanese China and without a new artistic movement, it may have no reason to exist; for this reason, it is worth performing today” [15].

4. The Performance of “March of the Army and the People” at the Southwest Drama Exhibition and the Transformation of Anti-Japanese Theatrical Forces

4.1. The Impact of “March of the Army and the People” at the Southwest Drama Exhibition

The performance of “March of the Army and the People” at the Southwest Drama Exhibition achieved undeniable success, as it “left the deepest impression on the common people, especially during the performance of the new opera ‘March of the Army and the People’ in the stadium, which charged no admission fee. The audience watched the performance with tears in their eyes, and the scene was truly moving” [11].

The successful performance at the Southwest Drama Exhibition was not only attributable to the work itself but also to the gradual maturation of the anti-Japanese theatrical forces in Guilin’s Cultural City. In traditional Chinese society, theatrical practitioners were not highly regarded. As Zhu Anping mentioned in an editorial for “Li Bao,” this phenomenon was prevalent: “For example, in the case of old dramas, people often have the impression that the lives of ‘performers’ are filled with sin and degradation. When it comes to movies, the mention of ‘stars’ conjures images of all sorts of absurd and debauched behaviors. The situation in the theater world is somewhat better because the quality and character of playwrights, critics, directors, and actors are generally superior and more noble than those in the old drama and film industries. However, overall, the profession of drama, particularly among actors, has yet to completely rid itself of the traditional perceptions prevalent in society” [16].

4.2. The Transformation of Theater Practitioners and Their Role in the Anti-Japanese Struggle

The shift in social perceptions regarding theatrical practitioners began to occur gradually after the establishment of the National Anti-Japanese Drama Associa-

tion in 1937. Subsequently, with the formation of anti-Japanese performance troupes and propaganda teams, “drama soldiers” gradually became an important force in the anti-Japanese literary and artistic movement, using drama as a weapon in the struggle against the enemy and becoming part of a systematic and organized cultural initiative among various performance teams. “The actions of Guilin Cultural City’s dramatists, using drama as a weapon to participate in the anti-Japanese struggle, represent a form of cultural politics. It is both a political act of dramatists as national liberation fighters and a cultural act of dramatists as intellectuals” [17].

Focusing specifically on the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team that performed “March of the Army and the People,” “in its early establishment, the team primarily used methods such as visual arts, written materials, speeches, and singing, occasionally performing folk tunes like ‘Flower Drum Melody’ and staging some one-act plays for anti-Japanese propaganda; however, the response among the masses was not favorable” [18]. After 1940, the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team gradually staged several operas, including “Rural Melody,” “Production Chorus,” and “March of the Army and the People.” During the rehearsal process, team members not only overcame difficult creative conditions but also continuously reflected, summarized, and improved their performances. “At that time, we learned from performances in Guilin, Liuzhou, and Qujiang that the audience was not accustomed to watching plays due to language barriers, but operas and song-and-dance performances were different; audiences from the interior also enjoyed them. Therefore, we resolved to explore a new path in music and dance, rehearsing and creating more of such programs” [12].

At the same time, the performance work strengthened the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team’s ability to unite and mobilize progressive forces. These performances received recognition from the general public, progressive individuals, and party organizations. Wu Dizhou recalled the successful performance of “March of the Army and the People,” stating, “This was the result of the joint efforts of the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team and the cultural community of Guilin. The performance educated the masses and helped the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Team forge friendships with various sectors of the Guilin community, thus expanding the progressive forces in the anti-Japanese struggle” [10].

4.3. The Significance of New Opera in the Evolution of Chinese Theater

In 1943, the magazine “Yi Cong” (Art Collection) launched a special column in its second issue, inviting contributors such as Tian Han, Xiong Foxi, Xu Chi, An E, Meng Chao, and Wu Dizhou to write articles discussing the issues surrounding new opera. In the preface of this column, the editors made a “assertion” about new opera in China, pointing out that while it was a newly emerging sector in the Chinese theater scene, it would occupy an extremely important position in the future of new art.

This “assertion” was not only based on the achievements of the new opera movement at that time but also offered a forward-looking judgment on its prospects. If we revisit the journey of “March of the Army and the People” from its initial period in Yan’an, through its spread to Guilin, and finally to its debut on the stage of the Southwest Drama Exhibition, we can observe the vitality and broad influence it demonstrated as an emerging art form within the context of the anti-Japanese struggle. This process not only reflects the continuous maturation and development of new opera in artistic practice but also substantively confirms the “assertion” made by “Yi Cong” regarding the future importance of new opera, significantly advancing the exploration and development of modern theatrical forms in China.

5. Conclusions

Through an in-depth analysis of “March of the Army and the People” and its surrounding context, we can clearly observe the significant role that new opera played during the Chinese Anti-Japanese War. The artistic creations of this period not only reflected the harsh realities of society but also served to inspire and uplift the spirit of the people engaged in the struggle. As an emerging art form, new opera successfully established its foothold within the social environment of the time, thanks to its unique expressive techniques and profound cultural connotations.

Firstly, the new opera demonstrated remarkable vitality and broad influence in artistic practice. Although the initial performances by the Anti-Japanese Propaganda Troupe received lukewarm responses, the group gradually overcame various creative and performance challenges over time, producing a series of works that were characterized by the spirit of their era. These works not only enriched the cultural lives of audiences but also subtly enhanced the people’s awareness of the war effort, fostering a sense of national cohesion. Notably, the successful performance of “March of the Army and the People” marked a milestone in the maturation and development of new opera as an art form, establishing it as an important vehicle for anti-Japanese propaganda.

Secondly, the editors’ “assertion” regarding the new opera in the magazine “Yi Cong” was not only a recognition of the achievements of the new opera movement at that time but also a forward-looking perspective on its future development. This viewpoint has been validated in practice, as new opera occupied a significant position in the evolution of modern Chinese theater in the post-war era. The creative and performance activities associated with the new opera provided a platform for numerous artists to showcase their talents while promoting dialogue and collaboration across different cultural domains, thereby fostering a vibrant artistic atmosphere.

Finally, the success of the new opera is not solely reflected in its artistic accomplishments; it also lies in its positive impact on society. By integrating music, dance, and dramatic narrative, the new opera effectively conveyed the spirit of resistance, motivating people to unite and confront their adversaries. Wu Di-

zhou's recollections indicate that these performances not only educated the masses but also strengthened friendships with compatriots from various backgrounds, thereby expanding the progressive forces in the anti-Japanese movement. This phenomenon underscores the indispensable role of art in social transformation, positioning it as a crucial force for societal advancement.

Furthermore, the artistic innovations in *March of the Army and the People* distinguish it from other patriotic operas of the time. Its seamless integration of traditional Chinese instruments with Western musical forms represented a pioneering approach to opera composition, creating a unique auditory experience that appealed to both rural and urban audiences. The abstract stage design, which utilized minimalistic elements to evoke a sense of universality, also marked a departure from conventional theatrical practices. These innovations not only enhanced the opera's artistic appeal but also influenced subsequent works in the new opera genre. For instance, later operas such as *The White Haired Girl* adopted similar techniques in blending musical styles and emphasizing social themes. The success of *March of the Army and the People* provided a crucial reference point for the development of Chinese national opera, inspiring artists to explore new ways of combining traditional and modern elements to address contemporary issues.

In conclusion, "March of the Army and the People" and related new opera works during the Anti-Japanese War represent not only artistic achievements but also symbols of national spirit. They conveyed the voices of their time through artistic expression and showcased the determination of the people in their fight against oppression, thereby laying a solid foundation for the development of modern Chinese theater. Therefore, a thorough examination of new opera from this period not only aids in understanding its historical significance but also provides invaluable insights and lessons for contemporary artistic creation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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