

Yan'an Through Papered Propaganda: Establishing a Cultural Hub in the Early 1940s

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Abstract: In the early 1940s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strategically employed Yan'an-centric propaganda to forge a narrative deeply rooted in the loess plateau, laying the foundation for subsequent cultural movements. After the arrival of the cohort of CCP forces in Yan'an, the reduction in their numbers prioritized their mission to recruit talent and bolster their forces to compensate for the losses. With the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937, Yan'an gained recognition and external support as the capital of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region. However, it encountered challenges associated with growing reliance, particularly after the New Fourth Army Incident in 1941. As a result, the CCP shifted towards self-reliance, instituting policies aimed at reducing land and interest rates. Simultaneously, cultural clubs were organized to foster a "free" environment for intellectuals, promoting the coexistence of farmers, troops, and intellectuals to boost local morale. Rather than categorizing the CCP's decision to host the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art as mere coincidence or deliberate planning, this article redirects focus toward understanding the cultural ambiance that prevailed in the city leading up to the conference. Through an exploration of the factors contributing to Yan'an's emergence as a crucible of cultural activities, this paper seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics shaping its cultural landscape.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party, Yan'an, cultural activities in Yan'an

1. Introduction

Mao Zedong's iconic speech at the 1942 Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began molding the narrative for literature and art in their envisioned "New China," is widely recognized. Situated on the eastern border of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, the city of Yan'an served not only as a strategic bastion during the anti-Japanese war but also as a focal point for cultural activities. This raises a fundamental question: What motivated the CCP to choose Yan'an as the epicenter for such cultural richness? Additionally, why did Yan'an hold such magnetic appeal for ambitious young individuals, drawing them to converge and nurture their talents in this locale? This essay delves into these inquiries, unraveling the profound significance of Yan'an in shaping the cultural trajectory of communist China before the pivotal Yan'an Conference of 1942.

2. Settling in the Border Region

The CCP's journey of establishment and growth in Yan'an presents a compelling narrative of resilience and adaptation. Tracing the chronology, the initial cohort of Communist Party forces reached the northern region of Shaanxi towards the end of the Long March in October 1935, represented by the First Red Army. Originally numbering approximately 80,000 soldiers, the arduous journey and confrontations with Nationalist forces reduced this number to a mere 7,000-8,000 upon their arrival. Consequently, the primary mission following this arrival was the recruitment of talent and force augmentation to compensate for the incurred losses.

With the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War and the subsequent formation of a united front between the Nationalist Government and the CCP, Yan'an received official recognition as the capital of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region in 1937. As a result, the city attained the status of an autonomous administrative entity under its jurisdiction. Between 1937 and 1940, the Eighth Route Army of the CCP stationed in Yan'an received substantial external assistance. This support included a monthly allocation of 600,000 yuan from the Nationalist government, complemented by donations from overseas Chinese and progressive individuals nationwide. At one point, these sources accounted for more than 50% of the region's annual income. [1] However, this strategy of relying on external support led to the paralysis of regional forces after the New Fourth Army Incident¹ in 1941, placing them temporarily in dire need of supplies. The economic blockade implemented by the Nationalist government fueled the CCP's reassessment of its strategy, prompting a quest for self-reliance in economic production.

Against the backdrop of this historical context, the CCP, through high-ranking officials and Liberation Daily, promulgated and implemented a suite of policies tailored to address the exigencies arising from the Wan-Nan Incident. These policies included "the Grand Production,"² reductions in land rent and interest, the expansion of arable land, and the initiation of livestock farming endeavors within the region. Notably, General Zhu De personally provided guidance on numerous occasions. For instance, during his visit to the South Niwan Grand Production team, Zhu delivered a speech underscoring the significance of the land cultivation policy while also motivating the troops: "Chiang Kai-shek deployed Hu Zongnan's forces around the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, with their weapons pointed at us. Not only did he withhold funding from us, but he also enforced an economic blockade, attempting to besiege and starve us within the border region. Our Red Army and Eighth Route Army have never yielded to adversity. Last year, we simultaneously defended and engaged in production. This year, we are determined to expand cultivation and conduct large-scale agricultural production." [2]

Simultaneously, by propagating the thriving coexistence of farmers and troops in rural towns, the CCP significantly boosted the labor morale of the local population. For example, excerpts from Liberation Daily vividly portrayed the harmonious life between some farmers and the military:

"Gao Fengcheng: Impoverished before the Revolution, now they enjoy an affluent life"

Gao Fengcheng, from Xiying Village in the fourth district of Anzhai County, arrived in Anzhai in the early years of the Republic of China. He brought along his wife and two young children but had nothing else. Initially, he resided in Yao Gou in the fifth district and worked for Gao Fengzhu, toiling without rest for seven consecutive years...By 1939, his prosperity had significantly expanded. He

¹ Mao insisted the military forces led by the CCP ought not to be constrained by the limitations imposed by the Nationalist Party. He advocated for independent expansion of the forces without relying on external provisions, with a firm commitment to autonomously establishing and consolidating bases.

² "The Great Production Movement" refers to a mass mobilization initiated by the CCP during the Anti-Japanese War within its controlled territories. This movement encompassed both military land cultivation and the promotion of civilian production, allowing the CCP to effectively achieve economic self-sufficiency within its controlled regions.

acquired a strong ox, cultivated 40 “mu”³ of land, hired a farmhand, purchased four large oxen, and personally embarked on salt trading expeditions to the east. That year alone, he earned 9,000 yuan from transporting salt. His team of salt-transporting oxen grew to five, and presently, he owns over fifty sheep, two large oxen, one horse, and raises three pigs and numerous chickens. His household is well-equipped with all necessities... Today, they have everything they need. The entire Gao family now enjoys a life of plenty, but they never forget who provided them with this life. Gao himself says, “I’ll never forget the people who gave me rice. I will be grateful to the Communist Party for the rest of my life.” [3]

“The Joyful Life of the Eighth Company”

Some people praised the barracks where they now lived in this way: it resembled the courtyards where wealthy landowners in the south resided... Melodious songs and music wafted from the barracks, making it livelier than a gathering of thousands. They lived with such lively and joyful enthusiasm. However, when it was time to work, it was as solemn as a place devoid of human habitation... In the past ten months, they slaughtered 29 pigs, 6 large cattle, 15 sheep, 152 chickens, and over 1,500 eggs. On average, each person consumed more than 40 pounds of meat, ate cold noodles 8 times, rice cakes 9 times, and steamed buns 4 times per month... In the warehouse, they stored 333 stones of millet, 63 stones of corn, 47 stones of millet, over 2 stones of hemp seeds and beans, more than 40,000 catties of Chinese yam, 8,500 catties of radishes, 2,500 catties of Chinese cabbage, 850 catties of dried chilies, over a thousand catties of pickled vegetables and dried eggplants, along with 75 chickens, 11 ducks, 69 pigs weighing more than 40 pounds each, and numerous goats and sheep. All of these were the fruits of their own labor, and they joyfully and proudly enjoyed the fruits of their work. [4]

According to the excerpts above, it’s evident that following the economic blockade imposed by the Nationalist Government, the CCP were left with no alternatives but to stimulate an economic recovery of the border region. Furthermore, through the disseminated propaganda and distribution of Liberation Daily, Yan’an increasingly attracted intellectuals and progressives. Drawn not only by patriotic fervor against Japanese aggression but also by the aspirational vision of this burgeoning city, this massive influx brought the labor force to the border region, as well as propelling the cultural atmosphere in Yan’an to new heights.

3. A Cultural High Ground

The CCP’s Upon establishing itself in Yan’an in 1937, the Central Committee of the CCP swiftly transformed this vital fortress from the anti-Japanese war era into a cultural propaganda center within a decade. Prior to the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art, Yan’an had already magnetically drawn a substantial number of progressive youths and intellectuals from across the country. The CCP achieved this through various propaganda avenues, including the establishment of art academies, the organization of cultural club activities, and the publication of literary journals. In Yan’an, these young individuals found an opportunity to showcase their talents and freely channel their intellectual energies in a relatively liberated environment at the time.

As early as around 1940, Mao Zedong proposed the transformation of Yan’an, previously considered a “culturally backward area,” into a cultural center. [5] Subsequently, in 1941, Hu Qiaomu authored an editorial in Liberation Daily, pronouncing Yan’an as “the vanguard in both political and cultural domains,” thus anointing it as “the vibrant epicenter of the nation’s cultural renaissance.” [6] Prior to the “Yan’an Forum,” this northwestern border city had attracted numerous progressive youths and intellectuals from across the country, providing them a platform to express themselves and channel their intellectual energies freely in this relatively “free” environment. Consequently, this loess plateau flourished in the 1940s with a diverse cultural atmosphere: the Lu Xun Academy of Arts

³ “Mu” is a traditional unit of land area measurement in East Asia. 1 Mu = 0.1647 Acre.

staged plays such as Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm" and Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake;" community-led cultural clubs thrived with frequent activities, and the academy showcased woodblock print exhibitions and offered in-depth courses on Konstantin Stanislavski's renowned performance system.

Around the early 1940s, the CCP began advocating for the establishment of a democratic republic in the border areas, allowing various political parties, religious groups, and cultural organizations to operate freely. This concept of "democracy" here can be linked to Mao's notion of "democratic centralism" — two seemingly conflicting ideas suggesting that the government must have the support and endorsement of the people, and that the populace can influence government decisions. However, the ultimate authority still resides with the government, as long as its actions do not contradict guidelines previously approved by public consensus. [7] Considering the conditions in the border areas, manifestations of this "democracy" included restoring the voting rights of landlords and other bourgeois classes, as well as promoting the development of spontaneously organized community groups. Consequently, the relatively relaxed political and cultural environment promoted by the CCP at the time attracted a large influx of intellectuals and progressive youths to Yan'an. [8] For example, in the recollections of woodcut artist Li Qun, his arrival in Yan'an in early 1940 was significantly motivated by the Communist Party's authorization and support for the art of printmaking. Notably, he had faced persecution at the hands of the Nationalists in Shanghai due to his involvement in woodcut art, leading to his imprisonment. [9] Another artist, and later the Vice Chairman of the Southwest Cultural and Art Workers Association, Zeng Ke, recalled that after her arrival in Yan'an in December 1940, she actively participated in literary activities in Yan'an. "Yan'an was very free and vibrant," she said. "When I went there, it was all about pursuing enlightenment. Although I might not have had a deep understanding of the Communist Party, I knew that it was anti-Japanese, and Yan'an was a base against the Japanese." She mentioned that there was a cultural club in Yan'an known as "Wen Kang (Literature Liberation)," which organized activities every Saturday and sometimes even held dances. The club also had a small store that sold snacks like melon seeds and peanuts. [10]

In the backdrop of Yan'an's evolving cultural landscape, a combination of substantial economic backing and a democratic ethos was crucial in catalyzing the flourishing of literature and the arts. As a result, the central government of the CCP took steps to promote literature and the arts by issuing directives, expanding bookstores, and establishing art institutions. A case in point is the establishment of the Xinhua Bookstore in Yan'an in April 1937, which wasn't merely a bookstore but a platform for disseminating Marxist-Leninist ideologies and the tenets of Maoist thought across China. As young intellectuals from across the nation poured into Yan'an, the burgeoning demand for literary resources prompted Xinhua Bookstore to envisage an expansion. Notably, in its announcements on August 18, 22, and 25, 1939 in the New China Newspaper in August 1939, the bookstore indicated a forthcoming relocation to a new venue due to space constraints at its original site. Complementing these ground-level efforts, the central government, in a directive from September 1940, amplified the importance of distributing cultural materials, compelling regional party committees to prioritize the distribution of newspapers, publications, and books. Navigating this mandate, the distribution and transportation mechanisms of bookstores in the Yan'an region underwent adaptive modifications to ensure publications reached their intended readers seamlessly. For instance, publications pre-ordered by Yan'an's various agencies, organizations, and schools were delivered directly by the bookstore; those for counties in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border area were dispatched via the border area's communication stations. Meanwhile, for wartime bases, sample publications were supplied by the main store, and individual bases took on their printing and distribution. As for regions under the Nationalist government's jurisdiction, delivery was either executed by CCP-controlled stations or conveyed via covert channels. [11]

In the realm of arts, in February 1938, the article “Origins of Establishment,” spearheaded by key CCP leaders including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, underscored that art was the most powerful weapon for promoting, mobilizing, and organizing the masses, especially emphasizing the importance of nurturing artists and cultural workers during the wartime resistance. Consequently, two months later, the Lu Xun Academy of Arts, aimed at training revolutionary cultural workers, was inaugurated in Yan’an. The central CCP government set out in the educational guidelines for this academy that it should become the “fortress and core” in implementing the CCP’s cultural policies.

Looking at the quantity of works produced and the response from the masses from the establishment of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts until the conclusion of the resistance against Japan, it becomes evident that this institution significantly enriched the cultural milieu of Yan’an. From April 1938 to May 1944, the combined efforts of both faculty and students at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts yielded approximately 121 literary and artistic compositions, including highly acclaimed songs such as “Yellow River Cantata” and the opera “The White-Haired Girl.” The literature department, by way of illustration, contributed 119 dispatches, 51 novels, 50 essays, 105 poems, 7 scripts, and 1 fairy tale to Yan’an publications from May 1941 to June 1944. [12] Such an extensive body of literary and artistic work undoubtedly reached a pinnacle in stirring the sentiments of the intellectual community residing in Yan’an. For example, according to Chen Huangmei’s recollections, he referred to his time studying creative writing at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts as “a significant turning point.” Chen arrived in Yan’an in 1938 and dedicated seven years of service to the literature department of the Lu Xun Academy. In 1939, he, along with the Lu Xun Academy’s experimental theater group, embarked on a mission to the southeastern frontlines in Jindongnan, where they performed for the soldiers of the 129th Division and the 385th Regiment of the Eighth Route Army. [13] During the Anti-Japanese War, similar cultural troupes, including the one Chen was part of, marched alongside, resided with, and delivered morale-boosting performances for the troops. Following the conclusion of the war, the Lu Xun Academy established a sustained artistic work group, persistently fostering the amalgamation of art with the daily lives of the masses through initiatives such as rural visits and extensive community engagement. This approach set the tone for the literary and artistic expressions in Yan’an during the 1940s.

4. Conclusions

This essay has thoroughly explored the developmental initiatives undertaken by the Communist Party following their establishment in the border region, with a focus on agricultural programs, policy advancements, and cultural outreach. These multifaceted efforts collectively attracted diverse talents to Yan’an. After 1941, faced with a cessation of economic support from the Nationalist Party, the CCP’s central government responded by embracing a strategy of localized adaptation and self-reliance. This strategic shift played a pivotal role in Yan’an’s evolution into the central hub for the CCP’s political endeavors. The establishment of the *Liberation Daily* and the inauguration of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts further elevated Yan’an’s prominence in both political and cultural spheres, solidifying its position as a crucial revolutionary base for the CCP in subsequent stages. This narrative outlines Yan’an’s gradual consolidation as a stronghold of political and cultural significance, portraying it as an unwavering symbol of strategic ingenuity and resilience during a crucial chapter in China’s history. Yan’an emerges as a beacon that symbolizes the party’s ability to adapt and thrive amidst challenges, making it an indomitable force in shaping the nation’s trajectory.

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