

War of Resistance and Public Health: Health Propaganda in the Jinsui Anti-Japanese Base Area

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During the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, epidemics broke out frequently in the Jinsui Base Area, causing massive civilian casualties, severely disrupting residents' livelihoods and hindering the construction of various undertakings. Apart from restrictive factors such as underdeveloped economy and inadequate medical and health resources, poor personal hygiene among the local population stood out as a major trigger of diseases. Guided by the Communist Party of China's medical and health policies, the Jinsui Base Area launched large-scale health campaigns. Scientific health knowledge was popularized among the masses to break feudal superstitions and foster sound health awareness, with particular focus on public hygiene, personal hygiene. Health publicity transformed the public's health perceptions and daily living habits, boosted the development of medical and health services in the base area, and provided robust support for the ultimate victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.

Keywords: health propaganda, Jinsui Anti-Japanese Base Area

Introduction

In modern China, the long-standing backward social economy, recurrent famines and wars, and widespread social unrest brought untold suffering to the people. Frequent epidemics ravaged numerous regions, resulting in heavy population losses. These overlapping destabilizing factors exacerbated public health crises, inflicting severe damage on economic development and society at large. The Jinsui region during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression serves as a typical example. Frequent Japanese military raids and sabotage devastated the local economy and triggered rampant epidemics. Coupled with primitive medical and sanitary conditions and entrenched unhealthy living customs among residents, the population plummeted, gravely disrupting local production and daily life and hampering the consolidation and development of the anti-Japanese political power in the base area.

Severe Sanitation Crisis Faced by Masses in the Base Area

Nestled in mountainous northwest terrain, the Jinsui region suffered harsh natural conditions and lagging economic growth, leaving its inhabitants trapped in poverty with extremely weak health awareness. A prominent problem lay in the general disregard for sanitation.

Villages were overrun with latrines, manure piles, sewage pits, garbage, as well as cattle, sheep and pigsties—some built right beside residential houses, wells, ponds and main roads. Streets were never cleaned, and people relieved themselves

at will. Wells and ponds were left unprotected against wind-blown dust; livestock drank from these water sources, and residents even washed their faces, hands and clothes in them. In summer, putrid odors filled the air, with dust carrying microorganisms floating everywhere, making breathing difficult. Such environments became prime breeding grounds for bacteria and mosquito larvae. Mosquitoes and flies acted as disease vectors, spreading germs far and wide and endangering healthy residents. These conditions constituted one major source of typhoid, gastrointestinal illnesses and a host of other diseases. (“Prioritize Environmental Sanitation”, 1942, p. 4)

Surveys revealed that the majority of deaths in the border region stemmed from preventable infectious diseases. Gastrointestinal ailments including typhoid, dysentery and vomiting were commonly caused by drinking raw water or consuming rotten food contaminated by flies. Neonatal tetanus often occurred due to unsanitary umbilical cord cutting. Seldom bathing, washing clothes or sunning bedding bred lice, which transmitted diseases such as typhus and relapsing fever on a widespread basis. (New Education Society, 1948, p. 68)

In the summer of 1941, a plague swept Xing County and claimed countless civilian lives. Statistics from military sub-district medical staff showed that among four villages in the Seventh District of Xing County, Shuanghui Village recorded the highest mortality rate at 64.8%, while the lowest rate in Zaishang Village still reached 11.9% (“Plague Devastates Seventh District”, 1941, p. 3). Simultaneously, epidemics ravaged Baode County, killing more than 200 residents in Zhangjiagou, Xialiuqi and Balougou villages (“Prioritize Sanitation”, 1941, p. 3). In 1942, a violent plague broke out around Xun Town in Hequ County, spreading at an alarming speed. Patients suffered hematemesis and hematochezia and died shortly after infection, with a local mortality rate hitting 50% (“Administrative Office Order: Commissioners and County Magistrates to Launch Epidemic Prevention Campaigns”, 1942, p. 3). Two-thirds of residents in villages including Sunjiaping of Xing County fell ill, with seventy to eighty cases of typhoid alone (“Prioritize Environmental Sanitation”, 1942, p. 4). In Rongjiagou Village of Baode County, 57 out of 107 young and middle-aged villagers contracted illnesses, alongside numerous children suffering from typhus and dysentery (“Military Region Health Department Treated 342 Civilians in Half a Year”, 1944, p. 2). Meanwhile, Japanese troops stationed in Wuzhai County conducted plague experiments on massive numbers of rats within the city. Before launching biological warfare against the base area, their plague experiments had already killed 1,500 local civilians (“Japanese Plague Experiments Killed 1,500 Civilians in Wuzhai”, 1942, p. 2).

The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression was a nationwide people’s war. China’s large population constituted its core advantage in sustaining prolonged resistance and defeating Japanese invaders. “In this prolonged, brutal struggle, we must not only adopt sound strategies and tactics to disintegrate and eliminate the enemy, but also maintain robust physical fitness to endure future hardships” (Launch Sanitation Campaigns Nationwide, 1939, p. 1). Yet “sanitation constituted an extremely grave issue for the masses in the border region” (*Selected Works of Mao Zedong Volume III*, 1991, p. 119).

Diverse Health Propaganda Initiatives to Raise Public Hygiene Awareness

Following the establishment of the Jinsui anti-Japanese political power, all Party, government, military and civilian forces were mobilized to launch health campaigns alongside anti-Japanese combat. Efforts were made to improve public and personal hygiene, build public hospitals and pharmacies, and cultivate medical teams. The goal was to encourage universal attention to sanitation so that robust residents could fully engage in all undertakings of the base area (“Foreword to the Health Column”, 1942, p. 4). A medical and health system centered on the Military Region Health Department was established and refined to unify leadership over regional health campaigns. Epidemic prevention and control were elevated to the level of anti-enemy combat, requiring

government organs and troops nationwide to take the lead. Health institutions bore core responsibility for epidemic suppression, pooling medical workers to serve civilians. Extensive health education was rolled out to inform the public of the hazards of epidemics and corresponding prevention measures.

Newspaper Publicity

The War of Resistance Daily, the primary cultural and ideological propaganda platform of the border region, undertook the mission of educating and serving the masses. On January 20, 1942, the newspaper launched a dedicated health column offering comprehensive guidance on regional medical and health work. Its rich content covered epidemic updates, medical services, sanitation campaigns, general health tips, role model stories and public health achievements, with special emphasis on epidemic reporting, medical care and progress in mass health initiatives. Popular science articles addressing daily sanitation issues were also featured. A readers' mailbag section was created to provide detailed responses to readers' questions on daily life and medical care.

Exhibition Publicity

In 1944, the Border Region Production and Combat Exhibition was held, divided into sections on combat, production, anti-traitor work and public health. A prominent slogan "Unify Military and Civilian Sanitation Efforts" hung in the health exhibition hall, which displayed over 60 self-manufactured medicines, human visceral anatomical models, and comic strips with themes such as "Seeking Medical Treatment Instead of Praying to Gods" and "Infant Care". These exhibits helped visitors grasp basic health knowledge ("Glorious Achievements in Combat and Production", 1944, p. 1).

In early July 1945, a cultural pavilion event was hosted in the Jinsui Border Region, featuring six thematic sections including a medical and health exhibition. Displays encompassed 76 Western medicines, 44 Chinese herbal medicines, and 33 biological specimens and anatomical charts. Local villagers commented: "Our Eighth Route Army can produce so many medicines—we need not fear Chiang Kai-shek's blockade!" Attendance remained high throughout the event. On the afternoon of the eighth day alone, 1,269 women visited the maternal and infant health section. Many women emotionally confided to female staff: "I bore five children, yet only one survived... I will take better care of my baby from now on." Some women returned three or four times, bringing sisters-in-law and neighbors to view the exhibits. Doctors including Zhao Shixiu from the Traditional Chinese Medicine Research Association set up a temporary medical station, treating 18 patients on-site. The Xinhua Bookstore stall sold bestsellers such as *On Coalition Government*, *Natural Science Basics*, *Rural Practical Writing* and *General Health Knowledge*, many of which were purchased by visitors. Numerous women stayed to read the comic strip *How to Raise Infants* before leaving ("Visiting the Cultural Pavilion", 1945, p. 4).

Blackboard Newspapers and Folk Ballads

These grassroots formats were widely popular among residents. Blackboard newspapers were used for publicity in Yuangou Village, Baode County. A villager named Niu Guiren drank a large bowl of raw water after farm work, suffering stomach pain the next day that prevented him from working and cost him a full workday. The village blackboard subsequently posted a reminder: "Drinking raw water costs you workdays." After reading it, Niu Guiren vowed never to repeat the mistake ("Issues Concerning Blackboard Newspapers", 1945, p. 4). In Hejiatai Village of Xing County, Zhao Youmin ran a blackboard newspaper for local publicity. During village sanitation inspections, Liu Houdan's wife was found living in squalor. Zhao published a public

criticism on the blackboard: “Wife of Houdan, look how filthy you are! Everyone else keeps clean and hygienic—why do you neglect sanitation?” This incident prompted villagers to prioritize personal hygiene (“Zhao Youmin’s Blackboard Newspaper”, 1945, p. 4). Zhang Yuhou, a primary school teacher in Tamin Village of Hequ County, integrated education with real life by composing rhyming textbooks posted on blackboards: “All adults and children, heed sanitation rules; avoid raw rice and unboiled water; sweep homes and yards thoroughly; maintain cleanliness all year round” (Compilation Office of Luliang Prefectural Party Committee’s Party History Materials, 1984, p. 301).

Winter School Campaigns for Literacy and Health Education

Given widespread illiteracy among the population, large-scale winter school campaigns were launched starting in 1941. That year, 3,116 winter schools opened across 19 counties including Shenchì, enrolling 17,812 students. The Jinsui Administrative Office further expanded winter education through a public-run, government-subsidized model. By 1944, statistics from six sub-districts recorded 1,810 winter schools with 132,820 registered learners. Special literacy textbooks were compiled, enabling students to master nearly a thousand Chinese characters for newspaper and book reading. While political education formed the core curriculum, cultural learning and health education were also integrated. *The 1945 Winter School Literacy Textbook Volume II*, published by the Jinsui Border Region Administrative Office, contained eight lessons dedicated to medicine and sanitation: Lesson 12 Hygiene (I), Lesson 13 Hygiene (II), Lesson 14 Preventing Infectious Diseases, Lesson 36 Women’s Health, Lesson 37 How to Raise Infants (I), Lesson 38 How to Raise Infants (II), Lesson 39 How to Raise Infants (III), Lesson 40 Infant Hygiene (Xin & Yue, 2017, p. 91). Winter schools allowed villagers to acquire literacy while absorbing essential health knowledge.

Conclusion

The health publicity and practices in the Jinsui Base Area yielded remarkable results with profound historical value.

First, hygienic ideas took root among the people. Popular science education helped villagers recognize the importance of public and personal hygiene, fostering healthy habits like drinking boiled water and frequent cleaning. Large-scale sanitation drives thoroughly improved rural living environments and drastically cut infectious disease infections.

Second, feudal superstition was effectively weakened. Widespread health education dispelled blind faith in witchcraft. Villagers learned to seek medical treatment rather than rely on fraudulent witches, who were persuaded to abandon deceptive practices and take up productive labor. Though superstition could not be fully eliminated under wartime hardships, this progress marked a vital ideological transformation.

Third, local medical and health undertakings achieved tremendous growth. Guided by the CPC’s health policies, a complete medical service system covering military hospitals, civilian clinics and health cooperatives was built from scratch, cultivating a group of dedicated medical workers. Ultimately, the health campaigns boosted the CPC’s prestige among residents and provided solid health support for the final victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.

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