

A Review of Domestic and Foreign Studies on Russian Writer Boris Pilnyak's Works

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ABSTRACT

Boris Andreyevich Pilnyak is known as the "founder of Soviet prose". He is one of the founders of the Russian avant-garde and one of the most outstanding Russian writers in the first half of the 20th century. Pilnyak has fully demonstrated his philosophical thoughts on major propositions such as artistic creation, social responsibility, historical truth, and national destiny in his works, and has formed a unique "Pilnyak style" in his years of creative practice. His exploration of formal representation and aesthetic value has made outstanding contributions to the overall development of Russian literature. He is a writer who deserves continuous attention and in-depth study, yet the research on him in China is still in its infancy. This article will sort out the history of research on Pilnyak in Russia, Europe, America, and China, summarize the research results in China and foreign countries, and point out the problems and deficiencies of Pilnyak research in China at this stage.

Keywords: *Pilnyak, Russian literature, Review.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Boris Andreyevich Pilnyak (Борис Андреевич Пильняк, 1894-1938) was born in Mozhaysk along the Volga River, a middle intellectual family with Germanic, Jewish, Russian, and Tartar blood. His literary activities began in the Old Russian Era before the revolution. Through years of creative practice, he formed a unique artistic expression method and "Pilnyak style": on the one hand, he inherited the classic Russian realism of the 19th century; on the other hand, he absorbed the useful nourishment of modernism and actively carried out language experiments and formal explorations. Pilnyak's writing began before the October Revolution, and in the 1920s ushered in a blowout of creative power, successively publishing *The Famine Years* (《荒年》), *Snowstorm* (《暴风雪》), *Ivan and Maria* (《伊万和玛利雅》), *The Temptation of Death* (《死亡的诱惑》), *The Story of Petersburg* (《彼得堡的故事》), *The Machine and the Wolf* (《机器和狼》), *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon* (《不灭的月亮的故事》), *Redwood* (《红木》) and many other novels, which lasted until the 1930s, and then, he published *Good!* (《好!》), *Stone and Roots* (《石与根》), *The Maturation of Fruits* (《果实的成熟》), *Salt Storehouse* (《盐仓》) and other

works in succession. Pilnyak remained one of the most productive writers in the Soviet Union until his death in 1937, publishing 43 books in total with rich, diverse, profound and real themes, fully expressing his outlook on life, nature, and philosophy of history, as well as his attitude towards revolution and the new world. "Pilnyakology" has been fully formed in Russia and has achieved fruitful research results. Many writings on Pilnyak have also emerged in Europe, America and other countries. China's translation and commentary on Pilnyak began in the 1920s, and academic articles have been published since then. This article will sort out the research on Pilnyak in Russia, Europe, America and China so far, summarize the research results, and point out the problems and deficiencies in order to provide reference for the follow-up research.

2. RESEARCH ON PILNYAK IN RUSSIA

Pilnyak's works have been subject to mixed reviews for a long time, often triggering widespread controversy in Russia, as Vyacheslav Polonsky (В.И. Полонский) said: "There may not be other Soviet writer who has evoked such contradictory

reviews at the same time as Pilnyak" [1]. Some people in the Russian literary world affirm his creative ability and call him a genius; however, on the other hand, due to factors of the times and the influence of ideology, there is no shortage of people who view his work from a political level and examine the characters and themes of the novel from a distorted perspective. Especially after the publication of "The Famine Years", "The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon" and "Redwood", he was stigmatized as a "counterrevolutionary" in the literary world and a person who "seriously deviated from the social idealism". The Soviet literary world together attacked him, launching a frenzy of criticism against him. Volin (Б.М. Волин) published an article entitled "The Assault of the Class Enemy in Literature" ("Вылазки классового врага в литературе", 1929), condemning Pilnyak as a class enemy and criticizing his creative path for being full of anti-Soviet and anti-social ills and failures. Gorbachev (Г.Г. Горбачев) pointed out in his article "The Creative Path of Pilnyak" ("Творческий путь Б. Пильняка", 1928) that Pilnyak paid too much attention to "ugly, mean and special circumstances" and other ugly phenomena, believing that he used the fashionable way of "bricolage" in his works to conceal the blindness of ideology. In the complex literary environment, Lunacharsky (А.В. Луначарский) always advocated the diversification and pluralism of literature and opposed the prevailing dogmatism, believing that Pilnyak was an excellent artist as well as a "writer produced by revolution" [2], with a firm stand and novel viewpoints. In addition, Volonsky (А.К. Воронский)'s "Literature Silhouette" ("Литературные силуэты", 1922), Polonsky (В.П. Полонский)'s "Chess Without a King" ("Шахматы без короля", 1927), and Tynianov (Ю.Н. Тынянов)'s "Literature Today" ("Литературное сегодня", 1924) all discussed in depth the fragmented narrative style, montage-style splicing, cutting and pasting techniques and the non-plot principle in Pilnyak's works. When talking about the similarities of art methods, critics turned their attention to Pilnyak's "teachers", trying to reveal the connection between him and the literary process of the 20th century and the tradition of Russian classical literature. The dependence of Pilnyak's prose creation on Bely has almost become the consensus of all critics. Gorky, Trotsky, Shklovsky, Zamiatin and others believed that Pilnyak's imitation was pretentious and unsuccessful. However, Lutokhin, Volonsky, and Hoffman resolutely refuted such views. They believed that other writers didn't play a decisive

role in the formation of Pilnyak's style. Lutokhin (Д.А. Лутохин) stated that Pilnyak "loves Russian life and folklore, and is familiar with every corner of Moscow and other distant provinces. In this aspect, he reminds people of Pechersky, Remizov and Zamiatin, but this is just 'similar', not an imitation. Pilnyak has his own language, his own rhythm, his own theme... His works have clear images and show the deliberation of a true modernist writer" [3]. Pilnyak fully demonstrated his creative personality through imitation and comprehensive application.

After Pilnyak's death, he and his works disappeared in the history of Russian literature for decades. Any mention of this writer's name was accompanied by criticism of his narrow outlook on life and distorted ideology. Until 1963, the 70th volume of "Literary Heritage" ("Литературного наследства", 1963) came out, which published unpublished letters between Gorky and many Soviet writers. Some materials related to Pilnyak re-entered the public's view. Many researchers turned their attention to Pilnyak and expanded the academic scope of the research on Pilnyak. In 1975, Novikov published an article named "Pilnyak's Creative Path" ("Творческий путь Б. Пильняка", 1975) in the "Literature Issues" ("Вопросы литературы"); for the first time, he considered Pilnyak's works from 1915 to 1930s as a complete art system for research, particularly emphasizing the modernist characteristics of Pilnyak's early novels, and pointing out the duality, contradictoriness and contrariety of the styles of his works. Skorospelova (Е.Б. Скороспелова) also focused on the antagonistic tendency of Pilnyak's world of art. She believed that Pilnyak's world was antagonistic: rationality, seeking truth from facts, and the state system on one side, and sensibility, cottage system, and anti-nationalism on the other. Vassiljeva (Н.Е. Васильева) and Andreev (Ю.А. Андреев), however, found a new path, focusing on the modernist style in Pilnyak's creation. Researchers in this period paid great attention to the originality and particularity of the writer's writing skills and art form, actively exploring the contradictory elements, the duality of form, and the contrariety of artistic ideas in the novel.

Since the 1980s, with the upsurge of "Return Literature" (возвращённая литература), Russia has ushered in the spring of research on Pilnyak. Pilnyak's works have once again become the subject of close attention by Russian and foreign literary criticism circles, and the study of Pilnyak's creative heritage has entered a fruitful stage.

Scholars have conducted research on Pilnyak's creations in different categories, and the representative results are as follows: Orr (А.П.Ауэр)'s "On the Poetics of Boris Pilnyak" ("О поэтике Бориса Пильняка", 1991), Babkina (Е.С. Бабкина)'s monograph "The Formation of Genre System in Pilnyak's Creation" ("Формирования жанровой системы в творчестве Бориса Пильняка", 2011), Kagirova (О.М. Кагирова)'s "The Organization Principle of the Wholeness of Novels in the Creation of Pilnyak in the 1920s" ("Принципы организации романного целого в творчестве Бориса Пильняка 1920-х годов", 2006), Ampilova (Л.Н. Анпилова)'s "Pilnyak's Prose in the 1920s: Poetics of the Wholeness of Art" ("Проза Б. Пильняка 20-х годов : Поэтика художественной целостности", 2002), Klyuchkov (В.П. Крючков)'s "The Functional and Intertextual Theme of Pilnyak's Prose in the 1920s" ("Проза Б.А. Пильняка 1920-х годов мотивы в функциональном и интертекстуальном аспектах", 2006), and Brevnova (С.В. Бревнова)'s "Description of System Function in the Field of Literary Text Decoration: Based on the Works of Zamiatin and Pilnyak" ("Системно-функциональное описание орнаментального поля художественного текста: На материале произведений Е. Замятина и Б. Пильняка", 2002). Researchers have spoken highly of Pilnyak's creative personality in terms of genre, theme, character and work structure. In addition, there are two important figures in the research circle studying Pilnyak, namely, Pilnyak's son Boris Androni Gashvili (Б.Б. Андроникашвили-Пильняк) and his granddaughter Kira Androni Gashvili (К.Б. Андроникашвили-Пильняк). With the continuous efforts of Pilnyak's descendants, Pilnyak's six-volume collection of works was published again in 2003, with the preface and commentary written by Kira Androni Gashvili. At the same time, academic exchange activities are also worthy of attention. In 1994, the Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences held the First Symposium on the 100th Anniversary of Pilnyak's Birth, introducing the fruitful scientific research achievements that had been made, analyzing the current research trends, and discussing future research directions in this field. This symposium also compiled the book "Boris Pilnyak: The Experience of Reading Today" ("Борис Пильняк: опыт сегодняшнего прочтения", 1995) and officially published it. The year of 2019 marked the 125th anniversary of Pilnyak's birth. The Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian

Academy of Sciences held the International Symposium on "Pilnyak: Life Story and Literary Heritage" in Moscow. Many scholars interpreted and elaborated on a particular work by Pilnyak, and some scholars also started their research by comparing Pilnyak with domestic and foreign writers. Compared with previous studies, researchers in the new era have taken a different approach with novel perspectives, increasing research dimensions. "Pilnyakology" has been fully formed in Russia, and its research fields have been continuously expanded and deepened.

3. RESEARCH ON PILNYAK IN EUROPE, AMERICA AND OTHER COUNTRIES

In addition to Russia, the research results on Pilnyak in other countries in the world are also very impressive. In 1971, Struve comprehensively examined Pilnyak's creation in his classic "Russian Literature in the Period of Lenin and Stalin: 1917-1953", and emphasized the unique charm of the decorative style of Pilnyak's novels: "Lack of the unity of the plot, narration at several levels at the same time, and the arrangement of the structure according to the rules of the musical theme with reiterative sentences and variations" [4]. This "decorative" artistic means adds poetic feature to the prose, poetizes the prose, and gives the work a special artistic effect and aesthetic value. Similar to Struve's point of view, the famous German Slav scholar and literary critic Wolfgang Kasack also greatly praised the decorativeness of Pilnyak's works. In Wolfgang Kasack's most important work in his life, *The Dictionary of Russian Literature in the 20th Century*, he said: "The chaos brought about by the revolution is formally reflected in Pilnyak's fragmented plots and experimental narrative techniques (affected by Bely, Remizov and Zamiatin). His narration deviates from the complete narrative of traditional realism. The plot elements exist in isolation from each other, are cut off and displaced in time, and are brought together through symbol marks and repetitive techniques... Pilnyak's decorative style is embodied in the microstructure of the prose as well as in the syntax, and has a profound influence on other Russian writers". [5] Yale University once assembled and published a collection of essays on Soviet Russian novels, including a chapter entitled "Fiction in Crisis: Pilnyak and Fedin". The article started with the popular aesthetic thoughts and ideas in the West, especially the aesthetic viewpoints of Hegel and Nietzsche, focusing on the innovation of Pilnyak in

terms of novel form. The research method of comparative literature is used here to compare the literary works of Pilnyak and Fedin, thus revealing the narrative characteristics and formal aesthetics of Pilnyak's novels. The Israeli Slav scholar Tolstaya Siegel also used the parallel research method in the comparative literature research method to compare the works of Platonov and Pilnyak, examining the concrete manifestation of the spontaneous force of revolution in the works of the two, and analyzing the similarities and differences in the creation of the two in combination with the style of decorative prose, with special emphasis on the binary opposition phenomenon in Pilnyak's creation. Different from the focus of the above-mentioned researchers, Gary L. Browning, a well-known American Slav scholar and Pilnyak research expert, focused on analyzing Pilnyak's creation themes and attitude towards "human instinct". In 1985, Browning pointed out in the monograph "Boris Pilnyak: The Scythian on the Typewriter" that Pilnyak paid great attention to the biological instincts of reproduction and death in his early works, and repeatedly emphasized "other 'instincts' or deep-rooted behaviors in the later stage of his creation: society (equality and justice), morality and ethics (honesty and brotherhood), and finally aesthetics (exquisite artistic taste)" [6]. These research results investigate and study Pilnyak's creation from the perspectives of structure, narrative, theme, and comparative literature, with relatively broad academic vision and deep and breadthwise research, providing an important reference for Pilnyak research in other countries.

4. RESEARCH ON PILNYAK IN CHINA

The translation and commentary of Pilnyak in China began in the 1920s. At first, the introduction of the writer and his works was only scattered in some periodicals and magazines. Pilnyak's acceptance in China was mainly through the translation of works of English versions by scholars studying English and American literature. At the same time, Mr. Lu Xun also translated Pilnyak's novels from Japanese and spread its influence. In December 1923, Mr. Mao Tun published the article "Three Novelists in Soviet Russia" in the "Novel Monthly". The article believes that Pilnyak "belongs to a disgusting aestheticism, but he is indeed a great genius" [7], and summarizes Pilnyak's creative style concisely in terms of the breadth of the writing range, the depth of the psychological description, and the complexity of

the creative theme. This may be the first evaluation of the characteristics of Pilnyak's works written by a Chinese scholar. Since the 1980s, China has translated the following novels of Pilnyak: *Redwood*, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*, *Small Town* (《小城》), *The Maturation of Fruits*, *Damp Mother Earth* (《地母》), *The Wolf* (《狼》), *Three Brothers* (《三兄弟》), *The Plain Story* (《平淡的故事》), *The Wind of Human Nature* (《人性的风》), and *The Liars* (《骗子手们》). At the same time, Chinese research and commentary on Pilnyak's works have also begun to warm up. According to the author's statistics, from the 1980s to July 2021, a total of 27 research articles on Pilnyak and his works were published in CNKI, including 23 journal articles and 4 master's theses. Entering the 21st century, the number of Chinese research works and the angle of analysis of Pilnyak have increased significantly. The perspectives of journal articles can be roughly divided into the following two aspects: 1. Thematic research. In "A Story in a Small Town: Start From Pilnyak's 'Small Town'" (Business Culture (Academic Edition), 2007), Sun Zhongwen used the short story "Small Town" as a textual example, and through the prism of "revolution", captured the differentiation of intellectuals within the camp, and discussed the problem of the intellectual team at the turn of the century; in "Looking at the Russians' Worship of the Earth-goddess from Pilnyak's 'Damp Mother Earth'" ("Russian Learning", 2014), Zhou Changyu analyzed the Russians' feelings of worship of the earth-goddess in "Damp Mother Earth" and believed that the earth-goddess was not only the overall feature of Russian culture, but also the origin and destination of Russians; in "Polytheistic Culture in Pilnyak's Novella 'Damp Mother Earth'" ("Journal of Harbin University", 2014), Zhang Mei investigated the polytheistic cultural landscape in "Damp Mother Earth" from the perspective of "national culture" and analyzed the lack of Russian national spirit under the erosion of instrumental reason. 2. Interpretation of artistry In "Talking About the Creative Techniques of Boris Pilnyak's 'The Wind of Human Nature'" ("Journal of Language and Literature Studies, Foreign Language Education and Teaching", 2016), Liu Lulu analyzed the deep meaning of the work from the two aspects of the narrative structure and rhetorical means of "The Wind of Human Nature"; Professor Fang Ping discussed from the perspectives of symbolic rhetoric and contrastive rhetoric in parallel in "Boris Pilniak's Writing in the Anti-modernization Context: An Examination of the Symbolic Meaning of The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon" (Journal

of Shanghai Normal University, Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition", 2009), and explained the author's profound reflection on the autocracy and the modernization process in "The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon". In addition, there are also researchers who study the character images, creative characteristics and creative thoughts in Pilnyak's works. For example, in "Similarities of Creating Thought Between Pilniak and Yesenin" ("Journal of Yangtze Normal University", 2012), through a comparative study of Pilnyak and Yesenin, Li Liang found similarities in their political attitudes, creative process, and themes of their works, believing that they were highly consistent in their creative thoughts in their works, and they all showed their ambivalence towards old Russia and their appreciation for the objective law of artistic creation. In terms of academic papers, it is worth mentioning that in Sun Haiying's paper "'You See Through Everything Alone...' — On Pilnyak's Creative Personality" published in 2007, the author focused her research on the writer's writing about life in small towns in other provinces, mainly analyzed the artistic expression of the three novels "Redwood", "The Famine Years" and "Damp Mother Earth", and through the investigation of the characters, themes, narrative structure and intertextuality of the works, discussed Pilnyak's historical view, artistic view and creative characteristics, trying to interpret the rich connotation of Pilnyak's creation with a broader perspective.

5. CONCLUSION

Scholars in China and foreign countries have recognized Pilnyak's important role in Russian literature and have launched research on him. Foreign research started earlier than Chinese research with more diverse research perspectives. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Pilnyak's studies have gradually entered the academic field of Russian literature studies in China and have achieved some academic achievements, but there are still some problems and deficiencies. To begin with, the translation of Pilnyak's works has stagnated. The collection of Pilnyak's works has not been fully introduced into China, and many foreign research materials and research monographs about Pilnyak have not been translated into Chinese, making it difficult for researchers to accurately grasp the overall context of Pilnyak's creation. In addition, from the perspective of the breadth and depth of research, in Chinese academic circles, researchers have concentrated too much on the

selected topics of Pilnyak's works, and most of the studies have focused on some of the more popular and well-known works of Pilnyak such as "The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon", "Redwood" and "Damp Mother Earth"; moreover, there are too many introductory texts, most of the analysis of works still stays at the stage of "post-reading commentary", the literary theory is rarely used to study and analyze the texts, and the theoretical depth is not enough, resulting in insufficient deep excavation. Therefore, in terms of promoting Pilnyak's works and increasing his influence, Chinese academic circles still have huge room for expansion.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Zhao Wei.

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