



# An Analysis of the Literary Image of Yan'an Literature and Art in the United States

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**Abstract.** As an overseas research center for Chinese modern and contemporary literature research, the United States began to study Chinese Yan'an Literature and Art very early. This article examines the literary image of Yan'an Literature and Art in the United States as an example, in order to explore the strategy of Chinese literature going global by analyzing the cultural bias in literary communication, the American school's "pure literature" concept and the reader responses in the United States.

**Keywords:** Yan'an Literature and Art · The United States · Literary image

## 1 Introduction

The United States is an overseas center for Chinese modern and contemporary literature research, and many American academic journals are involved in the field of Chinese modern and contemporary literature research, such as *Asia, East and West Review*, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Chinese Literature Today*, *China Literature: Essays, Articles and Reviews*, *Contemporary World Literature*, *Eastern and Western Literature*, *Harvard Asia Journal* and *20th Century China*, etc. On the whole, due to the influence of geographical relations, historical and cultural relations and other factors, Chinese academic circles have a relatively detailed understanding of the translation, introduction and research of Yan'an Literature and Art in Japan and Soviet Russia. Although the United States has gradually formed its literary hegemony, but the acceptance and dissemination of literature and art in Yan'an in the United States has been neglected for a long time in Chinese academic circles. Yan'an Literature and Art is a literary model with unique local experience in world literature. On the basis of respecting the unique background and social environment of the emergence and development of Yan'an Literature and Art, this article critically examines and comprehensively considers the local experience in the translation works of Yan'an Literature and Art, and sorts out Yan'an Literature and Art. The reception and dissemination in the United States, and the exploration of

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its historical and cultural roots, can provide a rich theoretical and practical basis for the dialogue between Chinese modern and contemporary literature and the world.

## 2 Cultural Bias in Literary Communication

The cultural bias in literature dissemination [4] greatly affects the dissemination of Yan'an Literature and Art in the United States. As an important part of literary communication, culture is a broader concept than literature. [2] The cultural factors and cultural prejudice in literary communication are in the process of constant change and development. "Culture" as a concept is a relatively new understanding in academics. Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), the British anthropologist and founder of cultural anthropology, defined culture as a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and human any other abilities and habits acquired as a member of society. Due to the multifaceted nature of culture, there are more than hundreds of definitions of culture in academic discussions, and the use of the word culture is ubiquitous in public discussions. Culture has become a widely discussed concept, triggering the use of the term from multiple perspectives across disciplines. [5] As the concept of culture becomes more important and prevalent, the essentialist definition of culture is increasingly questioned. Most scholars believe that defining culture from an essentialist and positivist perspective is limited, that there is a distinction between culture and culture, and that culture should be seen as practice rather than just a fixed system of symbols and meanings. Culture as an academic concept is used to examine different forms of culture, such as regional culture, period culture, etc. Scholars of intercultural studies take a constructivist view, viewing culture as a discursive construction, emphasizing that culture is something people do, rather than a still life that people have. Intercultural scholars advocate a social constructivist approach to the massive cultural embeddedness in society. This approach emphasizes that culture is constructed, not only within a society, but also across societies. From this perspective, culture is considered not to be fixed and objective, but embedded in the social and cultural background, in a state of constant change and development.

The issue of cultural bias in today's academic discourse has received increasing attention. Intercultural Communication studies how different cultures and social groups communicate, or how cultures influence communication across borders, and explores to describe the processes and issues of communication that arise in broad social settings composed of people from different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, intercultural communication attempts to examine how people of different countries and cultures act and communicate. To varying degrees, cross-cultural scholars agree with the constructivist view that discourse constitutes the way societies express themselves. However, in cross-cultural communication, ethnocentric thinking creates communication problems, and people try to judge others by their own cultural standards, and tend to think their own culture is superior to others. The typical way of dissemination at present mostly adopts Western-oriented or European-centered research methods. Critics of Western-centrism argue that Western media theories are very limited because they are based on European and North American political, economic, and media models. The academic paradigm should shift towards communicating cultures "as equal but differentiated interlocutors" and calling for the correction of cultural imbalances.

As a solution, some scholars suggest using a different research method. For example, some scholars have proposed Afrocentricity as an ideological and methodological approach to research from an African perspective, while others have proposed to examine the Asian context from an Asian perspective. Afrocentric and Asiatic methodologies illustrate the current academic trend that is taking place in that diversifying analytical tools helps to study human activity and capture its diversity, opening up new research perspectives. From the perspective of new historicism, history is full of faults, made up of discourses. French philosopher, social theorist, linguist and literary critic Michel Foucault (1926–1984) argued that history is not a single or exclusive record, nor a mere record of past events. The multifaceted history should be understood through exposure to various discourses. French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) also believed that “there is no world outside the text”, language itself is a structure through which we all understand the whole world. New historicism is a form of literary theory that understands intellectual history through literature and literary context through cultural context. At present, the translation of Chinese literary works in the academic circles and book markets of Western countries is still mainly classical literary works, or some controversial modern and contemporary Chinese literary works, and their content does not represent the whole period of Chinese cultural history and the reality of modern and contemporary China. In the absence of a detailed understanding of Yan’an Literature and Art, western scholars and audiences have limited and prejudiced understanding of the development of Chinese literature. Although with the rapid development of the Internet and the continuous emergence of various transnational media, different cultures can appear relatively equally in the public eye on various platforms, but for Chinese literature, especially Yan’an Literature and Art, there are still a large number of literary translations, publishing, and distribution needs to be further advanced to bridge cultural biases.

### 3 The American School’s “Pure Literature” Concept

The United States is an overseas center for Chinese modern and contemporary literature research. In the early 1960s, American scholar Chih-tsing Hsia published *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, using “pure literature” as the only criterion for judging works, ignoring the social and historical mission of literature, showing strong political prejudice, aesthetic prejudice, and an over-reliance on Western values. The dissemination and acceptance of Yan’an Literature and Art in the United States was influenced by the American school’s concept of “pure literature”. The American school regarded Yan’an Literature and Art as “politically dominated literature” and criticized the “local experience” of Yan’an Literature and Art. The presupposition of world value is “pure literature”.

However, the process of integrating American native literature into world literature and guiding the discourse power is also full of “local experience” of American literature. In 2011, Davis Antiano, president of the *American Contemporary World Literature* magazine, pointed out when talking about the “local experience” of literature, “The United States also put our works into the world in the 1930s and 1950s, so we are also discussing local issues.” The Nobel Prize winners in the twentieth century in the United

States all reflected political connotations in their literary creations. These winners were all based on the “local experience” of the United States, and under the background of internationalization, they carried out the universality and social order of human beings. Along with the thinking of the international order, the United States gradually formed its literary hegemony. Zhang Xudong, professor of the Department of Comparative Literature and East Asian Studies at New York University, director of the East Asia Department, and director of the China Center, pointed out that “cultural politics” is to have a political understanding of one’s own culture. Culture itself is the greatest politics, and politics is also the greatest culture. Western culture has never left its own politics; it is indeed serving Western politics.” Zhang Xudong believes that “the historical impetus of globalization is to tear down the country’s barriers, and the United States not only does not tear down the barriers, but push the borders of others outwards. This is globalization. However, globalization is not homogenization and standardization. It is meaningful to realize that one’s own active participation in globalization. In the construction process, firstly, one should not completely give up the legitimacy of one’s own culture and political entity; secondly, one must realize that one’s own special universal meaning.

“Politics” is the fundamental attribute of Chinese literature. Mao Zedong pointed out in his speech at the Yan’an forum of Literature and Art, “In today’s world, all culture or literature and art belong to a certain class and belong to a certain political group. In fact, there is no literature beyond class, no literature parallel to politics or independent of politics.” The universal value of literature in the West denies the particularity of countries and nations, and believes that world literature is advancing along the same pattern and track. Chinese literary theory should be based on the national form of literature and art of its own nation, and should place the national form of literature and art in the world and the nation, as well as the relationship network between the world, the nation and the reality to conduct a macro examination and analysis. Gorky pointed out in the article “The Literature”, “Literature is the literary image expression of the ideology, emotion, opinion, attempt and hope of a class and group. Literature, novels, novellas, etc. are the most common and effective methods of ideological propaganda. Meaning... Wherever the class organization is the most solid and tidy, where the class tradition is deeply permeated with consciousness, that is where literature is most full and saturated with class content. Therefore, novels are class-oriented, powerful propaganda sees everyone as a product of time, race, class, and we should look at writers from the same perspective. Authentic literature is by no means a picture that has nothing to do with reality-imitated pictures”. “Politics” is the local literary experience of Yan’an Literature and Art and even Chinese modern and contemporary literature. The standard of “pure literature” established by American academic circles is to cover the heterogeneous culture of the East.

#### **4 Reader Responses in the United States — Dialogue between Literature and Politics**

The reading of Yan’an Literature and Art in the United States is mainly concentrated in the American academic circles. In addition to literary research, the American academic

circle's reading demand for Yan'an Literature and Art also reflects the drive of political intentions. The social background differences, aesthetic differences, and cognitive differences between Chinese and American readers have affected Yan'an Literature and Art to enter the American general readership.

First, differences in social background lead to differences in readers' aesthetics. The aesthetics of Yan'an Literature and Art is an aesthetic under ideology, which had a huge reaction to the aesthetics of Chinese society at that time. For example, it is not easy for the peasants at that time to feel the "great hatred" and establish a "class" consciousness. It is not easy for this kind of hatred to break through the barriers of small peasant consciousness and the fetters of clan relations, therefore, the literary "class concept" runs through literature. The class hatred of the works has social and political appeals, and the literary works to a large extent shaped the class education and political views of the ordinary people in the society at that time. Many works of Yan'an Literature and Art show the orientation of "the poor are being kind and brave, and the rich are usually not benevolent", which still has a large market in China today; wealth has become an indicator for judging the level of morality in a sense, and in the western world, this judgment standard is difficult to gain the acceptance and recognition of the western readers. In the United States, possession of wealth is an act to be proud of. The evaluation system of American society is incompatible with the message of Yan'an Literature and Art. In the American social system, American readers cannot understand the "socialist realism" of Yan'an Literature and Art, mainly because the aesthetic ideology conveyed by the unified way of "poor/rich" in literary works under the form of literary expression.

Secondly, the reader's acceptance of a literary work is a complex psychological process, which is affected by the reader's own education level, social and cultural background, and the reader's psychological cognition of the ideas that the literary work is trying to express. From birth to development, Yan'an Literature and Art have been continuously evolved with the push of powerful political forces. It is a kind of translated literature with a political color. It cannot be examined from the perspective of "pure literature" in the United States. [3] American readers' perception of Yan'an Literature and Art is different from that of Chinese readers, and this difference makes Yan'an Literature and Art less acceptable among American ordinary readers. Take the "hatred" in the typical "class hatred" narrative in Yan'an Literature and Art as an example, this hatred usually stems from its departure from traditional Chinese morality. "Bullying men and bullying women" and "killing father's revenge" are behaviors that are most likely to arouse public anger in traditional Chinese society. "Murder" and "public trial" are social realities that are widely staged in Chinese society. In Yan'an's literary and artistic works, there is a tendency that "the poor are kind, and the landlord should be killed." However, in Western countries, it is difficult for readers to understand the legality of killing in the works. In "The White-Haired Girl", Yang Bailao, as a tenant farmer, defaults on the land rent, and it is only natural for him to repay the debt. However, after the "forced marriage" plot appeared, the rationality of Yang Bailao's debt repayment was ignored and replaced by the dramatic elements of passionate crusade by the masses. As a bitter love drama, whether Huang Shiren deserves death is a questionable issue. This huge difference in social background knowledge and social cognition makes American readers feel helpless regarding the proper understanding of the meaning of Yan'an literary and

artistic works, and therefore will affect the acceptance of Yan'an's literary and artistic works in the American general readership.

Finally, the ambivalent reaction of the US readership market to China's official ideology is also a factor to keep an eye on. Eric Abrahamson, an American translator and editorial director of *Pathlight*, the English edition of *People's Literature*, admitted that there are several factors that make Chinese literature difficult to sell to the Western readers. Take sensationalism as an example, Chinese readers usually like works that are emotionally moving, but Western readers will be suspicious of works that are too sensational, and these aesthetic differences are difficult to reconcile in translation. Eric points out that if a novel is clearly influenced by China's official ideology, they usually don't promote it. Readers want to read stories, not propaganda. As far as its translated works are concerned, all editing work is based on literary considerations rather than political factors, and the considerations are concerned with factors like brevity, rhythm, narration, clear and tight story plot. On the other hand, when many works are published in the West, in order to make a gimmick, the publishers politicize the books that are openly popular in China, and promote book sales in the process of satisfying the curiosity of Western readers. It also greatly strengthened the Cold War mentality of Western readers. [6] For example, the popularity of Mo Yan's novels in the United States is the pursuit of "exoticism", and behind it is the reader's expectation of "backward China"; the author of the English version of "Wolf Totem" introduced the intensification of "Cultural Revolution", "1967" and other sensitive words, to win the attention of readers under the tendency to show ideology.

Although it is difficult to spread Yan'an Literature and Art in the United States, it should be noted that the positive energy of the times conveyed in Yan'an's works has also been understood and respected by quite a few American readers. For example, readers spoke highly of the idea of equality between men and women shown in *The Marriage of Young Blacky*: [9] "In Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Young Blacky*, it is mentioned that 'any boy or girl who wants to get married can go to the civil affairs department to register. No People can stop them'. Through these words, readers can understand the equality between men and women advocated by Mao Zedong. Even if the storyline carrying feudal ideas still exists, it is ultimately defeated because of marriage equality. Qin's character was born in a very feudal her family, but her mind has not been eroded. She doesn't like the ignorant and superstitious Sanxian Gu, but bravely breaks the world and gives herself the right to happiness. In general, this story is told through Xiaohei, a young farmer in the countryside. The story of marriage with Xiaoqin describes the struggle between the new progressive forces in the countryside and the backward and ignorant fanatical reactionary forces. In the end, with the support of the Communist Party, the young Xiaohei and Xiaoqin broke through the barrier of a happy marriage, which shows that the power of new ideas to triumph. This story shows that the Mao era was (or was) committed to achieving equality between men and women."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Google Book Review [EB/OL]. [2022-01-20]. <https://www.coursehero.com/file/ps5obe/In-Zhao-Shulis-article-The-Marriage-of-Young-Blacky-he-mentions-that-any-boy/>

## 5 Conclusion

During the Anti-Japanese War, Yan'an was relatively isolated geographically. Yan'an literature and art were very different in terms of cultural policy, writer composition, and audience groups. Literature was absorbed into the system of revolutionary propaganda. The propaganda function of literature is particularly prominent in the special years of the revolution.

The international propaganda of Yan'an literature and art began as early as the Yan'an period. In February 1938, it was initiated by Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Lin Boqu, Zhou Yang and others. The article "*The Origin of the Founding of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts*" drafted by Shakov pointed out that "art — drama, music, and literature are the most powerful weapons for propaganda, agitation and organization of the masses, and art workers are an indispensable force in the current Anti-Japanese War." During the Yan'an period, literature and art were considered to be the forces of the Anti-Japanese War. "The truly valuable artistic creations are all the creations of fighters, and they are all a special form of social warfare... have the power to promote and transform reality." In International Propaganda, writers and artists have not done enough in international propaganda. To defeat Japanese fascism and win the aid of peace-loving and justice-loving people from all over the world, they must correctly report on the Chinese people's war of resistance. Literature and art are powerful means, and in the midst of the whole nation's heroic war of resistance, there are countless epic stories worth expressing in the form of art. Only by arousing the sympathy of the progressive human beings in the world for the war of resistance, can international assistance be greatly increased, and literature and art should make full contributions to the war of resistance. Of course, when Cheng Fangwu talked about the international propaganda of literature and art, he mainly considered the positive effect of literature and art on the Anti-Japanese War at that time, and the desire to invoke foreign aid was the original intention of Cheng Fangwu to write this article at that time. However, this article also reflects the fact that the literary and art workers at that time had realized the importance of international propaganda of literature and art and had a positive attitude towards it.

Ai Siqi believes that the theoretical academic series should be edited. *Chinese Culture* was published as the central magazine to promote the cultural movement, and organized an international publicity committee to carry out international publicity work in various ways. "The Research Department of the Cultural Association has four regular symposiums. During the meetings, we discuss literary and art topics separately and combine them into four pamphlets, such as "Anti-Japanese War Novels", "Anti-Japanese War Poems", "Anti-Japanese War Drama" and "Anti-Japanese War Reportage". These four pamphlets should be handed over to the International Propaganda Office and translated into the languages of several countries as an introduction to the literature and art of the Anti-Japanese War. Lao She and Zhou Yang pointed out in the article "Suggestions on the Work of the Literary Association" that although the Hong Kong Branch of the Literary Association has established an English version of "Anti-Japanese War Literature and Art", which is sold to Europe, America and Southeast Asia, it will be printed in French later. However, the international propaganda of the literature and art of the Anti-Japanese War is still too far off — or in other words, completely ignored. "This requires firstly, high-quality manuscripts and secondly, a large number of printings. No matter where

the most effective propaganda text is written, let us print it everywhere, and disseminate it widely”, in replying to Lao She’s letter, Zhou Yang said.

However, in general, Yan’an Literature and Art still lacks works that have widespread influence among American ordinary readers, which directly leads to the fact that, without a large number of popular works, the narrative style of Yan’an Literature and Art is difficult to be well-known and accepted by western readers [7].

Even today, Liu Sola, a Chinese writer whose works have a certain audience in the United States, still believes: “It is widely believed that only Chinese people can fully understand Chinese literature — no matter how skilled the translator is, foreigners will never fully understand Chinese works... The world has become Westernized to the point that everything has to be viewed from the perspective of the West and the United States... Some Chinese writers are resentful because their works are difficult to be recognized by the international literary community.”

Since Yan’an Literature and Art was somehow first introduced for political purposes, the reading of literature and art in Yan’an in the United States is largely limited to the level of social elites, such as college students or professors who study Chinese literature, and many American historians and professors also study Yan’an literature and art, not for literary reasons of course. Research from the perspective of history and politics does not pay much attention to literature itself. Because most ordinary American readers do not pay attention to literary works at the political level, especially translation works, which makes the reading of Yan’an Literature and Art in the United States appear to have a dislocation of authors and readers.

All in all, Yan’an literature and art is the successful practice of the Sinicization of Marxism. [8] The reason why Yan’an literature and art is widely welcomed by the masses in the liberated areas is that it fully demonstrates the essential characteristics of proletarian revolutionary literature and art. Yan’an literature and art not only conformed to the development trend of China’s modern revolution and standardized the trend of Chinese literature and art modernization, but also brought Chinese literature and art into the trend of the world proletarian revolutionary literature and art movement. However, it will take time for Yan’an Literature and Art to enter the reading list of ordinary American readers. Therefore, the study of the translation and introduction of Yan’an literature and art should put Yan’an literature and art into the historical context, and under the interpretation of the historical situation, the process of translation and introduction of Yan’an literature and art, a literary form with the label of “ideology”, [1] and its survival in the United States. In the process of worldwide exploration of the powerful dynamic resources and spiritual system provided by Yan’an literature and art, we can explore how Chinese modern and contemporary literature can go to the world. The research of the dissemination path of Yan’an Literature and Art in the United States would bring inspiration and reflection to the overseas dissemination of Chinese modern and contemporary literature.

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