



Zhou Yang's Exploration of the Sinicization of Marxist Literary and Art Theory during the Yan'an Period

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Abstract. The Yan'an Period stands as a crucial stage in the history of the sinicization of Marxism, as well as in the development of the sinicization of Marxist literary and art theory. After putting forward the scientific proposition of the sinicization of Marxism, the Communist Party of China, on the basis of inheriting Marxist literary and art theory and closely combining with the practical needs of the revolution, formulated a Marxist literary and art theory with Chinese characteristics and the features of the times. As a literary and art theorist, Zhou Yang made unremitting explorations and outstanding contributions to the sinicization of Marxist literary and art theory, which are embodied in promoting the dissemination of Marxist literary and art theory, establishing the authoritative status of Mao Zedong's literary and art thoughts, and practicing the popularization of Marxist literary and art theory.

Keywords: Marxist literary and art theory; Zhou Yang; Sinicization

1 Introduction

During the Yan'an Period, the Communist Party of China integrated Marxist literary and art theory with the practice of the Chinese revolutionary literature, and continuously advanced the sinicization of Marxist literary and art theory. In this process, literary and art workers played an important role. As a revolutionary theorist and formulator of literary and art policies, Zhou Yang was always at the forefront of the literary and art cause. He adhered to the integration of Marxist literary and art theory with the reality of the Chinese revolution and explored the development path of Marxist literary and art theory in China. An in-depth study of Zhou Yang's exploration of the sinicization of Marxist literary and art theory is of great significance for further adhering to the principle of "Literature and Art Serving the People and Socialism", and for prospering and developing socialist literature and art oriented to the people in creation.

2 Publicity and Education: Promoting the Dissemination of Marxist Literary and Art Theory

Zhou Yang began to contact works related to Marxist literary and art theory during his study in Japan. After arriving in Yan'an in 1937, he made great efforts in translating classics, exploring the laws of literary and art education, and cultivating professional talents, thus becoming an important promoter of the dissemination of Marxist literary and art theory.

2.1 Translating Literary and Art Works by Marxist Classic Writers

Scholars have pointed out that “the first threshold for the sinicization of Marxism is the translation of classic texts.”^[1] Translation was the first step for Zhou Yang to disseminate Marxist literary. In 1940, *On Art* by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, compiled under his auspices, was published. It included five literary and art letters by Marx and Engels, four articles by Lenin on Tolstoy, and two papers by Soviet scholars. In the postscript, Zhou Yang spoke highly of the literary and art insights of Marx, their method of analyzing literary and art phenomena from a materialist perspective is of great significance for the establishment of Marxist literary and art theory.

Affected by the times, the Soviet Union became an important channel for the early Chinese literary and art circles to contact and learn Marxist literary and art theory. In 1942, he published *On Chernyshevsky and His Aesthetics*, which systematically and comprehensively evaluated the academic career and aesthetic contributions of this “Prometheus” in the Russian literary world and revolution, affirmed the core proposition of “beauty is life”, and opened a window for Chinese literary and art workers to learn progressive Western literary theories. In 1944, *Marxism and Literature and Art*, a Marxist literary and art work with distinct Chinese characteristics compiled under Zhou Yang's auspices, was published. The book selected and compiled literary and art works by Marx, Engels and other Marxist classic writers, showing the historical context of the development of Marxist literary and art theory, and highlighting the consistency of its stand and method, as well as its scientific historical outlook and revolutionary class nature.

2.2 Initially Exploring the Laws of Marxist Literary and Art Education

The Lu Xun Academy of Arts was founded in 1938, and Zhou Yang served as its vice president in 1939. Under his auspices, the academy summarized its early teaching experience, formulated an education plan in 1940, and revised it twice in 1941 and 1942. The academic system was changed to three years: the first year focused on the study of general basic knowledge, and the following two years on more professional development, with each department setting up specialized courses according to its training objectives. Since then, the Lu Xun Academy of Arts has gradually moved towards “specialization” and “standardization”.

To better implement the policy of specialization and standardization, the academy launched a comprehensive inspection and summary by all faculty and staff in March 1941 to clarify the future development direction. Subsequent institutional adjustments were made, with four professional departments of Literature, Drama, Music and Fine Arts established to exercise centralized management over all faculties and working groups, further improving the professional teaching system. Zhou Yang advocated free lectures by experts of various schools of thought, attracting elite literary and art workers such as Mao Dun, Ai Qing and Ding Ling to teach at the academy. A high-level teaching team with both theoretical and creative strength was built, laying a solid faculty foundation for Marxist literary and art education.

2.3 Cultivating Marxist Literary and Art Talents

Under the specialized and standardized educational policy implemented by Zhou Yang at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts, the academy was regarded as a cradle for writers and artists. Most students admitted to the academy had a clear goal of becoming a writer or artist in their struggles.^{[2]109} From March 1938 to 1945, the academy cultivated a total of 685 anti-Japanese war art cadres, it sent a large number of new forces to the literary and art front. On March 11, 1942, the "Literature and Art" column of Jiefang Daily published its 100th issue. Ding Ling, the chief editor of the column, summarized in her Editor's Note that more than 30 young writers had been discovered through the column in the past six months, more than half of whom were students of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts.^{[3]57}

Talent cultivation at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts was always closely aligned with revolutionary needs. By 1942, 80% of its graduates were assigned to the army and base areas, engaging in anti-Japanese publicity and cultural construction in the border areas with literature and art as their weapons. After the liberation of China, teachers and students of the academy moved to major cities across the country and took up various literary and art positions. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, many important leading cadres in the publicity and cultural departments were alumni of the academy. Zhou Yang, the president of the academy, even served as Vice Minister of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and Vice Minister of Culture. These talents became an important force in the literary and art cause of the People's Republic of China, making immortal contributions to the construction and prosperity of literary and art in the new country.

3 Acceptance and Implementation: Establishing the Authoritative Status of Mao Zedong's Literary and Art Thoughts

After Mao Zedong delivered Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (hereinafter referred to as the Talks) in 1942, Zhou Yang took it as the core of his literary and art theoretical activities. As he put it himself, he "strived to be a propagandist, interpreter and practitioner of Mao Zedong's literary and art thoughts and policies".^[4] By

establishing the classic status of the Talks, systematically interpreting its core ideas and fully implementing its spiritual connotation, Zhou Yang promoted Mao Zedong's literary and art thoughts to become the core achievement of the sinicization of Marxist literary and art theory.

3.1 Establishing the Status of the Talks

After the public release of the Talks, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China initially regarded it only as a textbook for the sinicization of Marxism-Leninism and a concrete embodiment of the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism, without in-depth discussion. Many literary and art workers understood it merely as the literary and art policy of the Liberated Areas, and even considered Mao Zedong's views as a product of the historical conditions of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Zhou Yang was the first to break the temporal and spatial limitations of the Talks as a product of "the War of Resistance period" and "the Liberated Areas", elevating it to the status of a classic work of Marxist literature and art.

In 1944, Zhou Yang compiled *Marxism and Literature and Art*, pushing the Talks to a new stage. He also wrote a lengthy preface, speaking highly of Mao Zedong's Talks and clarified the relationship between Mao Zedong's literary and art thoughts and Marxism, stating that "it not only expounds the literary and art thoughts of Marx, Engels, Lenin and others in an excellent way, but also their literary and art thoughts just confirm the correctness of Comrade Mao Zedong's literary and art theory".^{[5]454} After reading the preface, Mao Zedong wrote to Zhou Yang: "I have read this piece; it is well written. You have given a concise historical account of several major issues in literary and art theory, thus proving the correctness of our current policy. This is very beneficial and also a lesson for me."^{[6]123} More importantly, this book compiled Mao Zedong's literary and art works with those of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin for the first time, enshrining Mao Zedong among the world's Marxist classic writers and laying a crucial position for the Talks in the history of Marxist literature and art.

3.2 Interpreting the Core Ideas of the Talks

In interpreting the Talks, Zhou Yang focused on the relationship between literature and art and politics. Based on the Marxist class outlook, he pointed out that the proletarian politics is the politics of the class and the masses, serving the cause of the proletarian revolution. He put forward the proposition that "proletarian politics and genuine literature are identical", and clarified that "political correctness is the correctness of literature", thus establishing the guiding position of politics in the dialectical relationship between literature and art and politics, and providing a theoretical basis for the proposition that "art is subordinate to politics". He not only endorsed Mao Zedong's idea that literature and art serve politics, but also equated politics with policies. He interpreted the combination of writers with reality as combination with policies, and the service of literature and art to politics as service to policies, further strengthening the Party spirit principle of literature and art. He emphasized that literary and art workers must study and master policies, and that the workers themselves should preferably be implementers

of policies, so as to enable literature and art to better serve politics. Without an understanding of policies, it is impossible to grasp the laws of people's life in the new era.

In terms of literary and artistic creation, he stressed that grasping the essence of life through literature and art must be based on politics, while opposing formalism and conceptualization. He advocated that writers should go deep into the proletarian struggle and express political life through artistic forms. In literary and art criticism, he affirmed Mao Zedong's view that political criteria take precedence over artistic criteria, and further emphasized that the stronger the political nature, the stronger the artistic nature.

3.3 Implementing the Spiritual Connotation of the Talks

The Talks was delivered in response to the problems emerging in this circle. To safeguard the authority of the Party's literary and art policies, Zhou Yang launched a series of criticisms against writers and works that were inconsistent with the spirit of the Talks, the most typical of which was the criticism of Wang Shiwei. In the name of "the Yan'an literary and art circle", Zhou Yang published Wang Shiwei's Outlook on Literature and Art and Ours in Jiefang Daily. He focused on analyzing and criticizing Wang Shiwei's erroneous views from the perspective of literary and art theory, explicitly negating the theory of human nature transcending classes. He pointed out that the stand of literary and artistic creation is far more important than the choice of themes, that literature and art approaching the people means eulogizing the light, and that the core is to establish the connection between literature and art and the workers, peasants and soldiers. While criticizing wrong views, he held high the banner of literature and art serving the people.

To help the teachers and students of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts understand the spirit of the Talks in depth, Zhou Yang invited Mao Zedong to give a speech at the academy a week after the forum. Mao Zedong called on literary and art workers to step out of the "small Lu Xun Academy of Arts" and move towards the "big Lu Xun Academy of Arts", to learn from the broad working people, transform their ideological feelings, and gradually shift their stand to the side of the workers, peasants and soldiers. Subsequently, under Zhou Yang's leadership, the literary and art workers of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts responded positively to this call and created a large number of excellent works that were warmly welcomed by the people and close to their lives.

4 Inheritance and Innovation: Practicing the Popularization of Marxist Literary and Art Theory

After the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Zhou Yang focused his main efforts on the practical exploration of the popularization of literature and art. He carried out practices from the three dimensions of form, content and language, proposing that literary and art workers should integrate with the masses and create works with new styles and manners that are popular among the people.

4.1 Advocating the New Yangko Movement

On New Year's Day in 1943, Zhou Yang personally organized a propaganda team. Under his direct leadership, the team took folk art forms such as the big yangko as carriers to create works reflecting the masses' lives. After a preview at the academy, the team performed in the rural areas of Qiaogou and was warmly received by peasant masses. Their subsequent performances in government agencies, military troops and markets in Yan'an won recognition from both the masses and the central leading comrades, and meanwhile, they received comments that "the yangko portrayed peasants in a derogatory way". In response, Zhou Yang eliminated the feudal and superstitious elements in the traditional yangko and added new characters representing workers, peasants, merchants, students and soldiers. After that, the propaganda team of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts stepped out of the campus and performed in Yangjialing, the Central Party School, Wenhuaqou, the United Defense Command and other places. Their performances were widely popular among the people, who even affectionately called the team "the folks from Lu Xun Academy of Arts". Among their works, *Brother and Sister Reclaim Wasteland*, which publicized the people in northern Shaanxi responding to the call and actively participating in productive labor, was the most beloved by the people and received recognition from Mao Zedong and other central leading comrades. Since then, the new yangko movement flourished rapidly in Yan'an and the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, and was soon popularized in all anti-Japanese base areas and even the Kuomintang-ruled areas. This massive New Yangko Movement was a great achievement in practicing the integration of Marxist literature and art with traditional folk art forms. It realized the popularization of new literature and art in rural China, providing guidance for mass artistic activities.

4.2 Organizing the Creation of the Opera *the White-Haired Girl*

In 1944, Zhou Yang received a literary story about "the White-Haired Fairy" sent from the front line. He discovered extraordinary significance in this legendary story and decided to take it as the theme to create a large-scale stage play, so as to show the miserable sufferings of peasants in old China and the bright prospect of their liberation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. During the creation and rehearsal, Zhou Yang emphasized highlighting the class struggle between peasants and landlords and demonstrating the revolutionary spirit of resistance of the working people. At the same time, he organized the creation team to absorb opinions from local villagers, making the work more close to the masses' lives.

In June 1945, *The White-Haired Girl* was performed for the delegates to the 7th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and achieved a great success. The core aria "The old society turned people into ghosts; the new society turns ghosts back into people" aroused a strong resonance among the audience. Mao Zedong and other central leading comrades spoke highly of the play, and the General Office of the Central Committee even conveyed specific revision opinions, changing the ending of Huang Shiren to being executed on the spot to further sharpen the play's class stand. After its public performance, the play received a large number of letters and critical opinions

from the audience. Zhou Yang organized the creation and performance team to study them earnestly. The team adhered to the creative direction of basing on the masses and depicting the masses. When the crew moved to Zhangjiakou in October 1945, the script was revised extensively, with the revolutionary spirit of resistance of the peasants further highlighted. *The White-Haired Girl* was performed more than 30 times in Zhangjiakou and then staged throughout the Liberated Areas.

4.3 Promoting Zhao Shuli's Novels

After the surrender of Japan in 1945, Zhou Yang went to work in the Northeast and North China Liberated Areas. During his work in North China, he attached great importance to the distinctive popular style of Zhao Shuli's novels. For this reason, he published *On Zhao Shuli's Creations* in *Jiefang Daily* on August 26, 1946, in which he highly praised Zhao Shuli's creative path, introduced and promoted his works. Zhou Yang's promotion established Zhao Shuli's benchmark status in the Yan'an literary and art circle, prompting numerous literary and art workers to learn from his popular creative style.

Creating works for peasants had always been Zhao Shuli's pursuit. He once said, "I would rather not be recognized in the literary and art circle than change my views. As long as the masses can understand and love my works, my goal is achieved."^[7]¹⁵⁷ The popularization of Zhao Shuli's creations lies in the fact that "he chose the living language spoken by the masses and created a lively new national form welcomed by the broad masses".^[8] Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Young Blacky* created in 1943 became a milestone work in the popularization of literature and art. Since then, a large number of popular literary and art works such as *Heroes of Luliang*, *New Heroes and Heroines* and *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang* have been published one after another, forming a new upsurge of prosperity in popular literature and art during the Yan'an Period.

5 Conclusion

After arriving in Yan'an in 1937, Zhou Yang carried out effective explorations on the sinicization of Marxist literary and art theory, which provided theoretical guidance for the development of literary and art undertakings after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Among them, the creation orientation of "people-centered" has been followed to this day. In the new era, literary and art workers must keep in mind the original aspiration and mission of literature and art, fulfill the responsibility of literature and art serving the people, create works loved by the general public, and contribute to the literary and art undertakings of the new era.

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