

Indigenization Reform: Formation of the Theory of “National Form” in Chinese Film During the Anti-Japanese War

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Abstract—With the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in an all-round way, Chinese literature and art began to re-examine its manifestations in the course of historical changes, showing a more tortuous turn of literary and artistic path under the historical tide of the revolutionary war. Film art was inevitably involved in this cultural self-determination. How did Chinese films during the Anti-Japanese War inherit and reflect on the previous historical stage? What criteria should be used to measure the unique “national form” of Chinese films during the war? How did the “national form” make the films revolutionary and militant and meet the needs of propaganda of the Anti-Japanese War? Chinese filmmakers must solve these problems in art creation in that period.

Keywords—“national form”; creative concept; propaganda of the Anti-Japanese War

I. INTRODUCTION

The so-called “national form” refers to whether cultural and artistic works in the process of creation conform to the national artistic aesthetic characteristics and cultural appreciation habits in a specific historical period in terms of ideas and methods, and whether the literary and artistic works created by Chinese artists in this historical period can accurately reflect the national cultural and psychological conditions and undertake the corresponding historical mission. In short, the creative mode of literary and artistic works needs to be combined with the national characteristics of the times in different periods, so as to produce real literary and artistic works reflecting the characteristics of the times. Since 1938, literary and artistic creators, represented by film art, have launched a series of theoretical discussions and practical explorations around the “national form” of Chinese films during the Anti-Japanese War. As the main force of literary and artistic creation during the War of Resistance against Japan, Chinese film circles have been trying to find “national form” in film creation that accorded with the theme of the times since the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in the 1930s. Since the National War of Resistance against Japan in the 1940s, the issue of “national form” in films has been constantly revised. Ultimately Chinese films could accurately reflect the historical environment of the Anti-Japanese War and conformed to the aesthetic propaganda of

the overwhelming majority of the people. The culture and art represented by Chinese films became the merit propaganda machine of the revolutionary war during the Anti-Japanese War.

II. FROM THE PRACTICE OF “FILM GOING TO THE COUNTRYSIDE” TO THE PROPOSITION OF “NATIONAL FORM”

After the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan, Director Cai Chusheng recalled the reality of Chinese film circle at that time: “filmmakers had to put down this effective propaganda tool temporarily and join other national salvation groups separately, and worked hard to encourage people to participate in the War of Resistance against Japan”¹. With the all-round anti-Japanese war entering a stalemate stage, a large number of literary and artistic workers entered the border areas, rural areas, pastoral areas and other areas far from cities in order to avoid the war². The geographical transfer naturally led to the emergence of intellectuals and cultural elites propagating nationalist appeal and political values to the vast rural areas far from enemy-occupied urban areas. As the rural population accounted for the vast majority of the total population of the whole country, it was necessary for Chinese filmmakers in this period to mobilize peasants to actively participate in the anti-Japanese and national salvation campaign through systematic and large-scale propaganda. How could they use film to mobilize peasants in rural areas to participate in the Anti-Japanese War? It had become an important issue for Chinese filmmakers to solve in this period. The key to solve this issue is how to show the national character represented by the peasant groups and rural life in the film production, and get watching resonance of the majority of peasants in the national form. The realization of the creation concept of Chinese films, which mainly propagandized the anti-Japanese and salvation of the nation, entering into rural areas determined that Anti-Japanese War films were different from the left-wing films and the new citizen films in the last historical stage. So, filmmakers must

¹ Sun Lifeng. History of Films, Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Publishing House, 2012, P 109.

² Sun Lifeng. History of Films, Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Publishing House, 2012, P 110.

pay attention to the use of national forms dominated by rural cultural resources. When using film art to enlighten the masses' awareness of resistance of war, they need to go deep into the cultural habits of peasants, so as to build the political appeal and revolutionary progress under the Anti-Japanese war on the cultural acceptance subject of the broad masses of peasants based on the countryside. In this regard, Mao Zedong's Speech at the Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium, published at the Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium in May 1942, clearly expounded the development direction of revolutionary literature and art during the Anti-Japanese War, including films, which enlightened the peasants by revolutionary means, and established a new Chinese modern culture on the basis of peasant culture. The literature and art could "better be an important part of the whole revolutionary machine". He required artists and writers to have "consistency of class attitude and national position"³ in the expression of national form. It was the concrete direction that guided the anti-Japanese war filmmakers in this period.

Under the organization of the National Anti-Enemy Association of the Film Industry, the patriotic progressive filmmakers timely put forward the slogan of "film going to the countryside", which can be seen as the transformation of the concept of "de-urbanization" and "ruralization" of Chinese film industry in this period. Shi Yan, a film critic, wrote in *Sweeping Daily* run by the General Political Department of the Military Commission of the Kuomintang in Wuhan about the reasons and necessity of "film going to the countryside": "In the past, films were only shown in cities, and only ordinary citizens could watch. Rural people could not even hear them. Even propaganda films were only broadcast in cities. It was impossible to reach to the countryside. But we shall not forget that our countryside is the key to the final victory in the future"⁴. It is self-evident that the countryside was of great importance to the lasting resistance of war, which provided a realistic impetus for filmmakers to call for "film going to the countryside" and change the concept of film work to the direction of reflecting rural life.

In the time path of "film going to the countryside", the importance of this slogan lies not only in clarifying the form of film going deep into the countryside, but also in raising the question of what kind of content the film should present after "going to the countryside"⁵. As the undoubted protagonists of Chinese revolution, peasants rightly occupied the central position of the "national form" embodied in the artistic expression of film works during this period. A large number of elite intellectuals went to the countryside and experienced the real life of the countryside, so that they could make their creative concepts approach peasants as far as possible in the mode of thinking and emotional expression. Creators put themselves in the vanguard position of the historic change of

Chinese films in this period, trying to express to the peasants, the revolutionary pursuit and political appeal originating from the anti-Japanese salvation and the redistribution of the means of production from the perspective of the peasants. Filmmakers were deeply aware that the filming had the purpose of propaganda and enlightenment. Only when the film works were organically combined with the "national form" of the inherent values of rural life in China and embodied the "national character" of the majority of peasants, could the series of revolutionary public opinion propaganda on the war of resistance be sincerely accepted by the revolutionary participants with peasants as the main body.

The Anti-Japanese War was an important stage of China's New Democratic Revolution. Chinese films in this period have always been developing in the direction of trying to show the vast masses of the people and enlighten the broad masses for the resistance of war. Xia Yan wrote a letter to Director Shi Dongshan after the end of the Anti-Japanese War, and artistically summarized the work of Chinese films during the war. He wrote: "sowing diligently in war and sowing a fruitful seed in the struggle for peace and democracy"⁶. The slogan of "film going to the countryside" indicates that Chinese films in this period were eager to find an art form that could fully adapt to the historical changes and a propaganda way that conformed to the characteristics of the times. This desire was bound to take the peasants as the main acceptance group - since the purpose of the revolution was to liberate the lowest oppressed people, the majority of them represented by peasants naturally became the most qualified subject of film expression and acceptance. What Chinese films needed to consider when they entered rural life was to use the artistic rules of films to express this subject, so that the subject existing in the historical changes can become real screen images, which could arouse profound resonance, and reflect the history truly. The consideration was a realistic subject with national form characteristics hidden behind the slogan of "film going to the countryside" during the Anti-Japanese War. In order to unify the artistic features of films with the national form of China, filmmakers should recognize the contradiction of artistic creation under the historicity and reality of the Chinese revolution. It was true that the War of Resistance against Japan was a historical selection process of a series of contradictions between tradition and modernity. This process also brought tremendous mental anxiety to the whole society. The film art in the revolutionary tide needed to provide people with screen images that could arouse profound resonance and perception, so that the audience could calmly enter the historical situation. In the film works, the audience could not only see the history and revolution, but also feel the artistic aesthetics and spiritual comfort of the film itself. Chinese films during the Anti-Japanese War should not only propagate revolutionary violence and historical anxiety in the national form, but also bear humanistic care to soothe anxiety. Under the double tasks, filmmakers strived to seek the national form of Chinese films in the specific historical period of the Anti-Japanese War, so as to reflect the revolutionary and indigenous nature of Chinese

³ Yuan Shengyong, *Convening of Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium and Publication of Speech*, Chief Editor Qian Liqun, *Chronicle of Modern Chinese Literature: Focusing on Literary Advertising (1937-1949)*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013, P 232.

⁴ Shi Yan: *Three Suggestions — To the Chinese Film Industry*, *Sweeping Daily*, December 4, 1938.

⁵ Zhang Yuren. *Culturalism of Anti-Japanese War Films*. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2013, P 49.

⁶ Xia Yan: "Have You had Eight Years of Bitterness for Nothing?" To Dongshan and Other Friends, *Supplement to Weekly Club of Singapore's Nanqiao Daily*, April 27, 1947.

films in this period. In other words, this was a reform of creation concept to fully mobilize the existing national cultural resources and strive to promote the historical progress of artistic means, and exert strong artistic appeal in the process. Obviously, the mainstream Chinese films during the Anti-Japanese War have the attributes of revolutionary public opinion propaganda machine. If they ignored the resonance of reality and the processing of artistic effects in the reflection of "national form", they couldn't really undertake the task of revolutionary propaganda. Therefore, filmmakers after "going to the countryside" realized that, facing the issue of "film going to the countryside", the primary issue was to localize and reform Chinese films. Influenced by the historical background of the Anti-Japanese War and the reality of rural China, the filmmakers began to think about to present the national form of peasant characteristics in film creation and show images of peasants on the screen widely, establish a new theory of film art that could be accepted by the rural society to guide filming practice. Only by solving this problem could they said that Chinese films has perfectly express the national form during the Anti-Japanese War.

In the 1940s, the change of filmmaking concept initiated by Chinese filmmakers under the slogan of "film going to the countryside" should not be understood only from the perspective of film art or its expression form, but also from the direction that what kind of national forms should be used in Chinese films to express their nationality during the Anti-Japanese War. Hu Feng raised a series of questions about national forms in Chinese literature during the War of Resistance against Japan, including film art, in his *Collection of Discussions on National Forms*, published in May 1941. These questions all pointed to the key issue of "national form" in Chinese literature and art during the war. Hu Feng thought the proposition of national form was a major event in the literary and artistic movement since the War of Resistance against Japan. It concerned all aspects of the literary and artistic field, such as literary and artistic movement, theory, creation, literary and artistic history, popularization and so on. What was the form of Chinese literature in the War of Resistance against Japan? What were its significances? What would be influenced? What were unresolved problems?⁷

III. THE THEORETICAL PRESENTATION OF THE STANDARDS OF "NATIONAL FORM" IN ANTI-JAPANESE WAR FILMS

National form was not only an urgent problem to be solved by Chinese literary circles in wartime, but also a major problem faced by Chinese films at that time. Liu Nianqu, a dramatic theorist of the Republic of China, once mentioned in his article *Creating Typical Models on the Screen*, published in the magazine *Chinese Film* that "the national crisis cannot help but affect Chinese films, and it requires Chinese films to take another road. That is to say, China's social change requires Chinese film to face the reality, have a close relationship with the reality, and do its best to change the society"⁸. In other

words, the concept transformation of Chinese film should follow the basic reality of social change during the Anti-Japanese War, and this basic reality was the reality of the aesthetic concept of film art of the general public with the peasant class as the main body. Xu Gongmei, a film critic, mentioned in his book *Film Art: the sociality and popularity of films* were inseparable. Chinese film, with national forms and "as a visual, intuitive, direct and powerful means of expression, should undertake social tasks and it is more complex than other forms of art. Film art faithfully conveys the consciousness of the class making it and is used as a weapon of ideological struggle"⁹.

As a summary of the national forms of wartime film works, Mao Zedong's Speech at the Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium in 1942 put forward that the revolutionary and ethnocentrism of Chinese film during the Anti-Japanese War lied in following the basic path of revolutionary literature and art serving workers, peasants and soldiers. The speech at the Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium specifically referred to the work problem of literary and art workers - films with national forms should be focused on and combined with the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers in expression¹⁰. In other words, wartime films should reflect national forms. However, it was not enough for wartime films to embody national forms in a simple way. It is more important for revolutionary filmmakers to sublimate national forms to the level of self-remolding. That is to say filmmakers should transcend the limitations of urban elite intellectuals, become the members of the masses, and actively integrate into the national subject, so as to show the revolutionary character of the history of the War of Resistance and changes of personal feelings in the film from the perspective of real national character. Films in line with national characters in the national forms could arouse the resonance of the masses and thus enlightened the masses to fight for the country. Guided by the dual goals of self-transformation of filmmakers in wartime and enlightening the broad masses, the national form also should conform to the principles of literary and artistic work of "improving on the basis of popularization" and "popularizing under the guidance of improvement".

Director Zheng Yongzhi compared the absence of the national form of the film to "Chinese monkeys wearing suits" in his article *Films with National Character*. He believed that the uniqueness of Chinese film during the Anti-Japanese War lied in that "the content should correctly reflect the history of people's thoughts and life of the country"¹¹. As an important spiritual food for the literature and art of the Anti-Japanese War, it should not give peasants a feeling of alienation and separation in the process of watching. During the War of Resistance against Japan, filmmakers left the cities and went to the vast rural areas. In the profound historical sense of the whole nation's War of Resistance against Japan, they deeply excavated the contents of rural and peasant character in film creation. This was the most characteristic expression of

⁷ Hu Feng: *Collection of Discussions on National Forms*. Huazhong Book Publishing Company, May 1941.

⁸ Liu Nianqu: *Creating Typical Models on the Screen*, *Chinese Films*, Volume 1, No. 1, 1941.

⁹ Xu Gongmei: *Film Art*. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1938, P 5.

¹⁰ Mao Zedong: *Speech at Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium*, *Liberation Daily*, October 19, 1943.

¹¹ Zheng Yongzhi: *Nationality-based Films*, *Chinese Films*, Volume 1, No. 3, 1941.

national form, and only in different social groups, finding out the commonality of every class, could it construct the basis and premise of a complete national form. As one of the main means of public opinion propaganda in the War of Resistance against Japan, films could construct the unique national character of Chinese film art from the dialectical relationship among the countryside, peasants and national forms, and play a role in opening up the people's wisdom, enlightening the peasants and mobilizing them to fight for the country in wartime.

From the perspective of "national character" to see anti-Japanese war films going from city to countryside, it lied in combing the unified relationship between the national forms and popularization presented in the films during the period of anti-Japanese war. The proposition of the national form in the war films showed that the artistic form of films was subordinate to the needs of war propaganda and that the national form emphasized the main body of peasants for they were the main component of the nation. It is admitted that the core of the national form of film was to gain the broad understanding and support of Chinese peasants. It was the main creative thinking change of Chinese film form from city to countryside during the Anti-Japanese War. In May 1940, Guo Moruo published an article *Discussion on National Forms* which elaborated on the way of expression of this "national form" in literary and artistic creation. Guo Moruo believed that the creators should "fit in the public, experience the public life, learn their language, know the demands of the public, and praise the mission of the public"¹² in order to present "national form" concretely.

Does eulogizing the War of Resistance and heroes in films embody the national form? Director Fei Mu expressed his anxiety about the mismatch between content and form in his article *Way Out for Domestic Films*. Fei Mu mentioned in the article: in order to convey a kind of content to the audience, filmmakers dealt with it with ordinary skills because they couldn't find the most suitable way to convey it. But it affected the unity of form. In terms of content presentation and national form, there were conflicts between realism and romanticism in making films. Few revolutionary Chinese filmmakers were blind to the reality. In terms of the style of anti-Japanese war films, the creative techniques of Chinese films were subjective, quite close to those of European continent¹³.

In the conflict between the form and the purpose of the film, the filmmakers soon found that their elaborate "War of Resistance" films could hardly resonate with the audience. In the film, the audience could see at best the story of the film stars wearing the clothes of the War of Resistance and the formulaic and empty structure of anti-war stories. In fact, all presentations of nationality and Anti-Japanese War were only stunts around film action. The experiences and common sense of filmmakers were divorced from the reality in most cases, far from the practical experience originating from real life. The purpose of film creation was to express the "national form" for

¹² Guo Moruo: *Discussion on "National Forms"*, Chongqing Ta Kung Pao, June 1940.

¹³ Fei Mu: *Way Out for Domestic Films*. Chongqing Ta Kung Pao, February 15, 1948.

the national form. It was difficult for films to gain the masses' understanding. It even decreased the propaganda effect of anti-Japanese war films. In 1941, Director Ying Yunwei directed the film *Eight Hundred Strong Men*, which depicted the Chinese army's heroic defense of the Sihang Warehouse, to perform in Mongolia's agricultural and pastoral areas. Films that received high praise in the cities were widely questioned and misunderstood in the rural and pastoral areas. Playwright Pan Jienong recalled that when the film was shown in the rural and pastoral areas, "the reception process of people were disappointing, and most of them kept their mouth open and felt strange"¹⁴. Creators saw that the revolutionary propaganda they had carefully conceived became counter-revolutionary propaganda, because this propaganda in fact hindered the audience's acceptance of the war of resistance. Pan Jienong later believed that all filming perspectives of the film should be based on "the understanding and interest of the broad masses of revolutionary soldiers and civilians. Only in this way could the film play its function in propaganda of Anti-Japanese War, and be truly national". Director Cai Chusheng also realized that empty artistic expression was not only conducive to positive social propaganda, but also harmful to propaganda. He appealed to filmmakers not to superficially express the national form in film creation during a visit of friends of the literary and artistic circles. It could also be regarded as a true portrayal of the filmmakers' reflection on the national form that cannot be truly reflected in the film. He said: "blind production was rebuffed by the reality, and then I woke up. I think screenwriter and director shall not only casually put a story on the film. At least, they shall be a writer with unique writing style and correct understanding, and serving the public. I liked a lost child and began to grope my way forward. I decided that my future works should at least reflect the suffering of the lower classes and make it contact with the masses as much as possible"¹⁵.

However, during the Anti-Japanese War, the filmmakers advocated that the film art should represent the real folk life of the public, the countryside and the peasants. Is it equivalent to the expression of "national form"? The scholar Xiang Linbing pointed out in the article *Source of "National Forms"*, published in *Ta Kung Pao* in 1940, that because folk life contained many negative elements, on the one hand, these elements were the opposite of all national forms; on the other hand, because these elements originated from the folk, they belong to the national forms. Literary and artistic workers should not evade the existence of negative elements when creating literary and artistic works showing national forms¹⁶. A group of playwrights and literary theorists represented by Guo Moruo, Mao Dun and Hu Feng objected to this. They believed that the manifestation of national forms in films must of course originate from folk life, but they should not deliberately use the form of folk life to create literary and artistic works; they can seek the help of folk life and understand the life style from

¹⁴ Pan Jienong: *An Interpretation of American Style*, National Gazette, 30 September 1941.

¹⁵ Cai Chusheng: *In the Reception Room*, Film · Drama, Volume 1, No. 2, 1936.

¹⁶ Xiang Linbing: *Source of "National Form"*. Chongqing Ta Kung Pao, March 24, 1940.

the practical experience living in the folk and learn to express thinking and feeling like the public and thus achieving the national form in the works of art. Pan Jienong put forward in his article *Thoughts on the Edge of the Screen* that the filmmakers should "look farther and dig deeper" in selecting the material of folk life experience. Although the material of the film should take "authenticity" as the starting point, it should make deep-seated artistic processing. It was the meaning of "looking farther and digging deeper". In the anti-war propaganda, "fantasy" and "illusion" should be eliminated in the films. Creators should sublimate ideals based on reality with the help of folk experience and reach the artistic creation realm of "poet describing possibility" as Aristotle put without violating revolutionary realism¹⁷. Therefore, whether it was the positive or the negative experience of folk life, the expression of these experiences in the film works was not the ultimate goal of the film. The ultimate goal of the film was to make these folk experiences conform to the "national form" under the revolutionary realism. In this sense, we could find a conclusion from Mao Zedong's "the realism of Anti-Japanese War and the romanticism of revolution" inscribed in Yan'an Luxun Art College on the issue whether the folk experience of wartime films can be equated with the national form and how do refined national form balance the reality and artistry in film production.

IV. CONCLUSION

The research on the national form of Chinese films during the Anti-Japanese War mainly focuses on whether the national form is focused on the form or content of film art expression. Looking at this issue from a realistic perspective, it seems that national form can be regarded as a branch of realistic artistic creation. If creators pay attention to the creation of realistic subject matter, there is no need to attach too much importance to national form. From this point of view, the content of national form is higher than its formality. If we see it from the perspective of whether artistic expression methods accord with China's actual conditions, Chinese manner and reflect watching interest of the vast majority of Chinese peasants, it seems that the national form is only a simple expression form. In order to thoroughly clarify the relationship between the content and the formality of the national form of Chinese films and achieve the unity of dialectics, we should judge it from the historical background and the mission of the times of Chinese films during the Anti-Japanese War. It can be an effective way to judge whether Chinese films in that period can reflect unique national forms by being based on the reality of the times, nationalizing the historical experience and make folk experience artistic.

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¹⁷ Pan Jienong. *Thoughts on the Edge of the Screen*, Chongqing Ta Kung Pao, 19 July 1947.