

# Theoretical Innovation and Contemporary Value of “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art”

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**Abstract:** Looking at the law of the forward development of human society, it can be found that culture is an important force for the survival and development of China, while literature and art are the most important manifestations of culture. Historical practice has proved that the cause of literature and art is an important cause for the party and the people, and the front of literature and art is an important front for the party and the people. During the revolutionary period, the cause of literature and art gave a tremendous impetus to revolutionary work and greatly promoted the revolutionary cause. The Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of China is not only the improvement of economic strength and comprehensive national strength, but also the enhancement of Chinese national quality and the enrichment of spirit. Lu Xun said that when high-rise buildings are built everywhere on our country’s land, the building of the Chinese national spirit also should stand upright<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, to realize the great rejuvenation of China, we must pay more attention to the work of literature and art. The “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in May 1942 creatively combined the basic principles of Marxism with the practice of Chinese revolutionary literature and art, and developed Marxist literary and art theory.

**Keywords:** marxist view of literature and art, sinicization, contemporary significance

## 1. Historical background and great significance

### 1.1. The Rectification Movement Contains The Thought of Sinicization of Marxist View of Literary and Art

Due to the long-standing influence of leftist errors in the party, the understanding to Marxist theory emerged the tendency of idealism and dogmatism. This has brought serious losses to the Chinese revolution and the Chinese Communist Party. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Committee in 1931, Wang Ming’s “leftist” dogmatism advocated adventurism in the military and closed-doorism in politics. This claim directly led to the fifth anti-encirclement defeat in the Central Soviet Area and forced the start of the Long March, resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of the Red Army and a tremendous loss of revolutionary strength. In 1937, after returning from the Communist International, Wang Ming used the instructions of the Communist International and proposed the rightist slogan of “all obeying the united front and all going through the united front” and repeatedly opposed the independent line of the Chinese Communist Party’s united front, thus undermining the early days of the war of resistance. Eventually, the occurrence of the Southern Anhui Incident made Mao Zedong profoundly realize the differences between the Communist

International and the Chinese Communist Party and the harmfulness of dogmatism. He decided to carry out the rectification movement to eliminate all kinds of erroneous ideas within the party.

In May 1941, Mao Zedong made a report on “Reconstructing Our Study”.<sup>2</sup> This contains some basic ideas of the Marxist view of literature and art. This report mainly discusses some

problems in the process of studying Marxism. It mainly includes a partial understanding of Marxism, ambiguity, only attention to superficial phenomena, ignorance of its nature, the disconnection between theoretical study and revolutionary practice, and subjectivism prevailing. These thoughts are the seeds of the process of literary and art creation. For example, in the “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art”<sup>3</sup> (hereinafter referred to as “speech”), Mao Zedong pointed out the thoughts that literary and art workers do not understand the object of creation, do not delve into the lives of the people, they just display in their own mind, and the relationship between art work and revolutionary work is not clear. Therefore, it can be said that in the rectification movement, the bud of the sinicization of literary and art thoughts has been included.

### 1.2. The Convening of The Yan’an Forum on Literature And Art Marked The Deepening of Sinicization of the Marxist View of Literature and Art

In 1942, Chairman Mao Zedong personally presided over the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, which included literary and art workers and leaders from various departments of the central government. This meeting had a profound influence on the formulation of the Party's literature and art policy and the healthy development of literature and art work. Earlier in the forum, Mao Zedong had interviewed some literary and art workers and exchanged questions with them about the work of literature and art at that time. From May 2nd to 23rd, 1942, the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art held a total of three meetings. The purpose of the forum was mainly to clarify the relationship between the literary and art work and the revolutionary work, the position, attitude, object, work and study of the proletarian literature and art work. The meeting clearly put forward the shortcomings and various mistakes of the Yan'an literature and art work during that period, and made it clear that the proletarian literary and art workers and literary and art work must serve the proletarian revolutionary cause, must adhere to the position of serving the people, and stop the sectarianism and dogmatism in the literary and art work, which is the deepening and concretization of the Marxist view of literature and art, and is a concrete manifestation of the Marxist view of literature and art in China. The "Speech" given the party's literary and art cause a clearer goal and mission in the new-democratic era, eliminating ideological confusion, enabling the literary and art work to better adapt to the requirements of China's social revolutionary work, and promoting the smooth development of revolutionary work.

"Speech" adheres to Marx's materialist conception of history, and considers that as a manifestation of social ideology, literary and art work is determined by social existence, and affects social existence to a certain extent. Literary and art work is determined by social life. The people's lives are the source of artistic creation. At the same time, literary and art works have a certain impact on the people. In conjunction with the concrete reality of the Chinese revolution, at that time, Yan'an was the center of the Chinese revolution. It attracted a large number of literary and art workers with different backgrounds and different identities, who come from different places. It also brought some problems while it brought vitality to Yanan. At the same time, China was in the period of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, and the national revolution was still the primary task China. Based on social reality and with a correct understanding of literary and art work, the "Speech" fully embodies the combination of Marxist basic principles and China's actual conditions. It is the sinicization of Marxist basic principles in the field of literature and art, as well as the materialization of the Chinese revolutionary practice, and have an important impact on the literature and art cause and revolutionary cause in China.

### **1.3. The Publicity and Implementation of "Speech" Brought Unprecedented Prosperity to Yan'an Culture**

October 19, 1943 was the seventh anniversary of the death of Lu Xun. The "Speech" was publicly published on the "Liberation Daily" in Yan'an at that day. Under the guidance of the spirit of "Speech," writers went to the forefront of life. The opera "The White Haired Girl" aroused great repercussions and became a milestone in the history of Chinese opera development, marking a major gain for the writers' in-depth life. On the Yan'an theater stage, the use of old forms of play to express new content also made outstanding achievements. At the same time, a large number of outstanding literary works are created in succession. In short, the "Speech" brought a brand-new spirit to Yan'an literary and art circles. Since then, there has been a new upsurge in Chinese revolutionary literature and art under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The spirit of the "Speech" guided the direction of China's revolutionary literature and art, not only in the war years, but also since the founding of the People's Republic, it has become a beacon for the advancement of revolutionary writers and artists. We believe that as an important document of Marxism, even in the future, "Speech" must have far-reaching influence.

## **2. Theoretical Innovation and Important Contributions**

### **2.1. The Ideology of "Literature for the People, First For The Workers, Peasants and Soldiers" Enriched and Developed Marxist Aesthetic Ideology**

The vast majority in China are the people, who account for more than 90% of the population. They are workers, peasants, soldiers, and urban petty bourgeoisie. This is the main force of the revolutionary work and a progressive force that represents the direction of the Chinese revolution. Therefore, the literary and art work of the proletariat must serve these people and must be popularized and improved among these people. In his "Speech," Mao Zedong encouraged literary and art workers to go deep into the life of workers, peasants and soldiers, learn from the workers, peasants and soldiers, and created some literary and art works favored by workers, peasants and soldiers and welcomed by workers, peasants and soldiers.

Mao Zedong developed the literary and art ideology of the classic Marxist writers "serve the working people" and "serve the proletariat" into the ideology of "serving the masses of the people, above all for the workers, peasants and soldiers", embodying the sinicization of Marxist literary thoughts. Under the background of the time, the formulation of "workers, peasants and soldiers" was obviously more practical than the "masses" and "working

people". At that time, China was in the period of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The formulation of "workers, peasants and soldiers" met the background of the revolution. Putting forward literature and art "first for the workers, peasants and soldiers" was good for morale-boosting, and it also clarified the goal of the literature and art work during the revolution. In short, this idea is an important manifestation of the sinicization of Marxist literary and art thought.

## 2.2. Stylization of Literary and Art Creation

In Engels' letter "To Ma Hankins,"<sup>4</sup> in April 1888, he pointed out that "realism means that in addition to the truth of the details, the typical characters in a typical environment must be truly reproduced." Not only the character is required to be typical, but also the character's environment is required to be typical and it is required to represent the direction of the entire society at that time. In the "Speech," Mao Zedong pointed out that although human social life is the only source of literature and art, the life reflected in the literary and artistic works can and should be higher, stronger, and more concentrated than the ordinary real life. The revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters based on real life and help the masses to promote the advancement of history. Literature and art is to bring together everyday phenomena, to stylize the contradictions and struggles among them, and to create literary works or art works that can awaken the people to change their environment.

Mao Zedong's literary and artistic creation is the idea of contradictions and struggles stylization, which is the development of the typical character idea in the typical environment of Engels. Art comes from life but above life. The characters and images in literary and artistic works not only are the reproduction of facts, but also can reflect the characteristics of the environment and the characteristics of the era in which the characters are located, which makes literary and artistic works have epochal character and universality. They can show some universal and common things, and reflect the characteristics of the times and even advance the society.

## 2.3. The Petty-Bourgeois Writers and Artists Are An Important Force in the Proletarian Literary and Artistic Work in China

Among the various forces in the united front of the proletarian literary and artistic circles, the petty-bourgeois writers and artists are an important force in China. Their ideas and works have many shortcomings, but they relatively tend to revolution and are relatively close to the working people. Based on the needs of revolutionary practice, the petty bourgeoisie is an important force in the anti-Japanese united front of the entire nation. The role of the petty bourgeoisie in the status and practice of the Chinese revolution determined that the proletarian lite-

rary united front must also include petty-bourgeois writers and artists. However, in the work of literature and art, it is necessary to help them overcome shortcomings and help them to play an active role in favor of the revolution so that their literary and artistic works can meet political and artistic standards.

The united front of the proletarian literary and artistic circles included petty bourgeois writers and artists, which is an important embodiment of the integration of Marxist literary idea with Chinese realism. This is determined by the reality of the Chinese revolution. Facts have proved that this view is consistent with China's national conditions and is conducive to mobilizing the revolution enthusiasm of the petty bourgeoisie, will help stabilize the anti-Japanese national united front and promote the practice of the Chinese revolution.

## 3. Important Revelations and Contemporary Values

Since the publication of the "Speech", China's literary and art work has gone through more than 70 years. There are outstanding works, classic artists, vulgar works, and failure lessons. Since the reform and opening up, China's society has undergone earth-shaking changes, especially the introduction of market economy, which has provided rich material for the work of literature and art, but it has also brought new challenges to the work of literature and art. Since the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics has also ushered in new developments, and all-round deepening reforms have been carried out in full swing. These all set new requirements for the current literary and art work. Under the current complicated domestic and international situation, revisiting the spirit of the "speech" has very important significance for the current literary and art work.

### 3.1. Adhere to the Unity That Life is the only Source of Literature and The Guiding Significance of Literature and Art For Life

In the "Speech," Mao Zedong pointed out that "literary and artistic works are all products of certain social life reflected in the human mind" and that "people's lives are the only source of literary and artistic works." Art comes from life and is higher than life. Valuable literary and artistic works are all concentrated expressions of people's lives. With the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the improvement of China's overall strength, people's lives have become increasingly abundant. New things have been emerging from the source of literary and artistic works, providing many new materials for literary and artistic works. Therefore, only by constantly learning and constantly absorbing nutrition from the people's lives can we create literary and artistic works that meet the requirements of the development of

the times and meet the needs of the people. In the “Speech at the Forum on the Work of Literary and Art”, General Secretary Xi Jinping also pointed out that there are thousands of pieces of literary and artistic creation methods, but the most fundamental, most critical, and most reliable method is to take root in the people and take root in life.

At the same time, we must see the impact and guiding role of literary and artistic works on life. Literature and art work is the main content of the cultural front. Under the influence of globalization and the ever-changing science and technology revolution, literature and art work has become a non-negligible part of the competitiveness of various countries. Literature and art, with its unique qualities, profoundly influence people’s lives and the world. The first thing after imperialist colonial aggression was to infiltrate culture and values, because culture is the soul of a nation, only culturally leading the way can completely conquer the oppressed. Although today’s China is “a lion who has awakened”, the domestic and international situation is not “cloudless.” Domestically, comprehensive deepening of reforms and the completion of a well-to-do society have reached a critical stage. Internationally, we are facing the challenge of sovereignty and the capitalist countries’ non-recognition to China’s market economy status. These have given us new issues. Literary and artistic work must not only condense the strength of the people throughout the whole country to advance socialist modernization, but also issue a Chinese voice in international, to strengthen international communication and exchange, and win a favorable external environment for China’s development. Therefore, the majority of literary and art workers must adhere to the unity that life is the only source of literature and the guiding significance of literature and art for life. Only in this way can literary and art work adapt to the needs of the development of the times. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that the literary and art workers should well speak Chinese stories, well spread Chinese voices, interpret Chinese spirit, display Chinese style, and allow foreign people to deepen their understanding of China and enhance their understanding of China by appreciating the works of Chinese writers and artists.

### **3.2. Adhere To The Unity of The Subjectivity and Diversity of Service Objects of Literary and Art People**

In the “speech,” Mao Zedong pointed out that “our problem is basically a problem for the people, a problem how to for the people,” and pointed out that our literature and art are for the people, especially the workers, peasants and soldiers. The publication of the “Speech” was in the period of the War of Resistance Against Japan. Workers, peasants and soldiers accounted for more than 90% of the population of the people and greatly mobilized the enthu-

siasm of the revolution and pushed forward the revolutionary cause. Today, the national situation has undergone great changes. However, the problem that who is served by the literary and artistic work is still the primary problem of literary and art work.

With the progress of society and the advancement of the informationization process, people present a diversified situation in accepting the channels of literary and artistic works and people’s interest in literary and artistic works. It should be said that this provides a broader stage for the majority of literary and art workers and provides an opportunity for cultural prosperity and development. However, the diversity of service objects does not mean giving up the most basic needs of the people. The more in this case, the more it is necessary to “root deep in the working masses” to “unify them from the masses’ feelings, thoughts, and aspirations to increase them”. Persistence on the subjectivity of the people is the basis of the literary and artistic work. Only on the correct basis can literary and art work be properly improved. Therefore, in the current literature and art work, we must adhere to the unity of the people’s subjectivity and diversity of service objects.

### **3.3. Adhere to The Unity of Content and Form, Politics and Art of Literary and Artistic Works**

In his “Speech”, Mao Zedong pointed out that “Our requirements are the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unify of political content of revolution and the best possible art forms.” “The artistic works that lack artistic quality, no matter how advanced in politics, they have no power. Therefore, we are both opposed to the artistic works with wrong political views, and opposed to the so-called ‘slogan’ tendency of having only correct political views and no artistic power”. At the same time, he pointed out that politicality is the top priority, and artistic standards are placed the second. Only by upholding the correct politicality can we meet the requirements for the development of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics and promote the prosperity and development of socialist culture. Excellent literary and artistic works are the integration of content and form, politics and art. Any bias and tilt will cause the value of literary and art works to be destroyed.

General Secretary Xi Jinping’s “Speech at the Forum on the Work of Literary and Art” pointed out that there are still many unsatisfactory aspects in China’s society, and there are also some ugly phenomena at present and it is not only necessary to reflect these phenomena, but also to solve the problems that are reflected. Only by upholding the unity of content and form, political standards, and literary standards can the work of literary and art correctly and properly reflect the various forms of life, and correctly guide the people in pursuit of truth, goodness,

beauty, and criticism of ugliness, help people form correct values, and promote social development.

### **3.4. Adhere to the Unity of Social and Economic Benefits of Literary and Artistic Works**

General Secretary Xi Jinping's "Speech at the Forum on the Work of Literary and Art" pointed out that "a good work should be a work that can stand people's evaluations, expert evaluations, and market inspections. It should put social benefits in the first place and it should be a unified work of social and economic benefits." Under the condition of market economy, literature and art works only through the market to realize its value, which requires the broad masses of literary and art workers to adhere to the unity of economic and social benefits of literary and artistic works.

To realize the unity of social and economic benefits of literary and art, we must prevent excessive pursuit of economic interests and sacrifice social benefits. At the 70th anniversary academic seminar commemorating Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art", it was pointed out that although China entered a great era, it lacked great works; although the number of literary and artistic works was blow out, it lacked the classic products. The reason is that under the impact of the commodity economy, the phenomenon of "the hero of the economy" is produced, which leads to the impetuosity of literary and art workers. The spread of ideas such as "fast food culture" and "entertainment supremacy" has greatly destroyed the creative atmosphere of literary and art workers. From the above, it can be concluded that the literary and artistic work must correctly handle the social and economic benefits of literary and artistic works, put the social benefits in the first place, and put the economic benefits in the second place, and can not blindly cater for the market to reduce the level of creation. To realize the unity of social and economic benefits of literary and art, we should prevent overemphasizing social benefits and neglecting economic benefits. he statistics of the National Bureau of statistics<sup>5</sup> show that the added value of the cultural industry in 2014 was 2401.7 billion yuan which accounts for 3.77% of GDP. From 2004 to 2014, the contribution of the cultural industry to China's GDP steadily increased. This shows that the development of the cultural industry is in line with the current requirements of China's economic development - low energy consumption and high output. And the development of China's cultural industry is in the initial stage and has great potential and resource advantages. Therefore, through the reform of the economic and cultural systems, it is necessary to release more vitality of the cultural industry, increase the proportion of cultural industries, and promote economic transformation and development.

In the new form of economy, adhering to the organic unity of the social and economic benefits of literary and art will help promote the development of cultural industries and bring new vitality into the economic development, which will not only promote the transformation of the economic development mode, but also improve the soft strength of the national culture.

### **3.5. Adhere to The Party'S Leading Position in Literary and Artistic Work**

In his speech, Mao Zedong pointed out that "the new Chinese culture at this stage is the anti imperialist and anti feudal culture of the masses under the leadership of the proletariat. What truly meets the requirements of the masses of the people must now be led by the proletariat. All cultures or literature and art belong to certain classes and belong to certain political lines. Art for art, art for class, and art that is parallel or independent with politics actually do not exist." The cause of literature and art serves the revolutionary cause of the party which shows that the cause of literature and art is serving the interests of the people and the country, and "art for art" does not exist. Today, despite the tremendous changes in the national conditions and social conditions, this principle is still an important basis for handling the work of literary and artistic works and the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In "Speech at the Forum on the Work of Literary and Art" on October 14, 2014, Xi Jinping pointed out that "The leadership of the party is the fundamental guarantee for the development of socialist literature and art. To strengthen and improve the party's leadership in the work of literature and art, we must grasp two articles: the one is to rely on the broad masses of literary and art workers, and the two is to respect and follow the law of literature and art. "Only by relying on the broad masses of writers and artists, can we understand the present situation of literary and art work in time and detect the existing problems, thus make practical and effective measures to ensure that the policy of literary and art work conform to the practical requirements of literary and art work, so that the leadership of the party can effectively promote and protect the work of literature and art. Secondly, only by respecting and following the rules of literature and art and guiding its development according to requirements, can we develop the cause of literature and art effectively. This is a concrete manifestation of the basic principles of Marxism in following objective laws and giving play to subjective initiative. The party always represents the forward direction of China's advanced culture, so only by adhering to the leadership of the party can we develop a literary and art cause that is suitable for China's national conditions and is in the right direction and in line with China's interests. On February 19, 2016, Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the party's Forum on news

and public opinion in Beijing, that “The party’s work on press or news media must adhere to the principle of party spirit, and must uphold the party’s leadership, and the party’s press or news media must follow the party’s ideas.” The party’s press or news media is an important position of public opinions of the party. It embodies the will of the party, and publicizes the party’s theory and guidelines. Only by adhering to the basic principle of “the party’s press or news media must follow the party’s ideas” can the masses understand the policies of the state and act consciously. Otherwise, the masses of the people will be plunged into ideologically chaotic situations. Therefore, it is necessary to uphold the party’s leadership over the press or news media.

Only by adhering to the leadership of the party in the work of literature and art can we make the work of litera-

ture and art serve the construction of the socialist cause, help build a well-off society in an all-round way, and realize the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation!

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