

CHINESE REALISM: FROM IMPORTATION AND INTEGRATION TO INDEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: In China, the creation method of Realism in the modern sense has gone through a long process, from the introduction to independent development, from xieshizhuyi, xinxieshizhuyi, Realism, Socialist Realism, and finally to the combination of revolutionary Realism, and romanticism. In the early stage of development, the basic theories and main concepts of Chinese realist creation methods were introduced from abroad and adopted by the Chinese literary society after being refined and improved. Regarding the "Two Combinations" creative method, it is the first national realist creative method proposed by the Chinese, based on their social reality. Later, the Chinese realist creation method entered the path of independent development.

Chinese literature has always had a tradition of Realism, which has been unbroken through the Yuefu poetry of the Han Dynasty, the poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties, and the novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, as a modern approach to creation, Chinese Realism emerged, developed, and finally took the path of independent development under the impact and influence of Western culture, literature, and literary thought. From the introduction of the concept to its independent development, it is a long and repeated process of adjustment and integration, in which Western culture and literature, Chinese culture and literature, Chinese social reality, and Marxist literary and artistic thought all play an essential role. We need to explore this process to grasp the connotation and characteristics of Chinese Realism and understand its development and form today.

I. Late Qing and Early Republican Periods: The Introduction of Western Realist Theory and its Emergence in China

Around 1990, Western realist theory entered China and had its repercussions. At that time, combined the reality of western learning transition and the desire to revitalize China after the Opium War, a group of late Qing literati, such as Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, and Lin Shu, etc., turned to the West to find intellectual resources. As a result, realism captured their attention.

Japanese Scholar Michio Uchida states, "The Chinese novel is a spontaneous move toward realism. It is only that, for a long time, the Chinese novel has been willing to reside at a low level of evaluation, as art for the sake of life, from which it is consciously distant. Thereby, in realism, the production of excellent works and the emergence of sophisticated theories cannot but await the influence of Western European literature." (Mitio, 1983, 272-273) The Chinese literary tradition tends to be realistic, but from this tendency to become a creative method

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in the modern sense, it has yet to be impacted by Western culture. Qiu Weixuan considered that “novelists’ works must record the actual event and study the laws and reasons of things so that those works are enough to be assessed as orthodox. While the remaining works, which talk about evil spirits, romance and vulgarian, are just like games to kill time, they cannot be compared with the former. Since they are branches of the novel, I will add more narratives later.”

Given that this traditional memoir and the inclination to emulate history corresponded with a realistic ideological trend in western literature, realistic Western literature and literary theory attracted the attention of critics as soon as they were introduced to China. Since 1897, Lin Shu has cooperatively translated 181 western literary works¹ that are realistic novels. It increased Lin Shu’s own realistic tendency and improved his realistic theoretical standard. In his *Hototogisu-Preface*, he pointed out that “Chinese historians tended to exaggerate their words. Once defeated the enemy, they undoubtedly described the enemy’s shortcomings to the extreme. Reciprocally, our own soldiers, powerful and sharp, dared to kill the enemy. But civilized countries are the opposite. Because many spectators are there, they must record actual events to avoid being criticized.” “Recording actual event” means faithfully revealing reality. Lin Shu confessed that an important reason for his translation of *Hototogisu* was that “it was mingled with a detailed account of the Sino-Japanese war” (Lin, 2006, 73-74) so the Chinese would know the truth about the Sino-Japanese naval war. He once compared *Water Margin* with *David Copperfield* written by Dickens, saying that *Water Margin* is a shocking story of the thief and the knight, treacherous and malicious. If *David Copperfield* only narrates trivial and prosaic things, not only is the author not good at telling, but it will make people feel bored and sleepy.

Nevertheless, Dickens’ unique style of writing blended with the spirit turned corruption into wonder, summarized the scattered into the whole, and encompassed all things. It was because Sima Qian’s and Ban Gu’s narratives about trifles were worth appreciating carefully that no full-length novels can be found. *The Story of the Stone*, as the only full-length novel found, could be full of showing off wealth, telling stories of an aristocratic family, and integrating, attracting, and romantic love between men and women. *David Copperfield*, written by Charles Dickens, carefully depicted a lower society. Although there were many despicable things in this book, once skillfully written, it was certain to make people laugh. The social rottenness and inequality in a semi-civilized period of England had also been completely exposed. (Lin, 2006, 66-67) In Lin Shu’s opinion, *Water Margin* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* attracted readers to their themes. However, in some sense, *David Copperfield* deserved higher evaluation in that it made readers obsessed, though it merely depicted the daily life of the underclass. In his own related discourses, Lin Shu emphasizes the truthfulness and authenticity of literature, demanding that literature manifests the everyday life of the lower classes and emphasizes the truthfulness of details and the vividness of images. All of these requirements are realistic.

Like Lin Shu, Liang Qichao also put forward his realistic propositions under the influence of Western realistic thoughts and the tradition of Chinese literary

¹ The data are adapted from Han Hongju’s statement. See Han Hongju, *A Study of Lin’s Translated Novels—Concurrent Discussion of Lin Shu’s Self-Written Novels and Legends*, Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2005, p. 53.

realism. In 1902, he proposed *On the Relationship between Novels and the control of the Masses* that the novels were divided into “idealistic school” and “realistic school.” “Although there are many items for novels, none of them can be outside the scope of these two schools.” “The idealistic novels guide the readers into a higher state of consciousness, changing the common scenery of their life”, while realistic ones, by describing experiences that people have in their hearts but cannot write down, make people deeply moved. (Liang, 1992, 4) “There is nothing more touching than this.” However, Liang Qichao distinguished idealism and realism mainly in terms of the fictional and documentary aspects of the novel, with a tendency to equate the “realistic writing” with “actual record of events,” which is accidentally in line with the naturalism of Western literature. Wang Guowei explored this issue from a different aspect. In his book *Poetic Remarks on the Human World*, published in 1908, Wang Guowei advanced that “There is a creative state (*Tsao-ching*) and there is a descriptive state (*Hsieh-ching*). This is the basis of the distinction between idealists and realists. However, it is difficult to make a differentiation between the two because the state which the great poets create must accord with what is natural, and the state which they simply describe must approach the ideal.” “Objects in nature are mutually related and at the time mutually restrictive. But in describing them in literature and art, one must disregard those points of relationship and restriction. Thus, even though one may be a realist, one is also an idealist. And again, no matter how imaginary the state (*hsu-kou chih ching*) one may construct, the materials must be sought in nature, and the construction must follow the laws of nature (*tsu-jan chih fa-lu*). Thus, even though one may be an idealist, one must also be a realist.” (Wang, 1987, 348-349) Like Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei also believed there were two schools of literature, realism, and idealism. However, the difference between their viewpoints was that Wang believed the two were not wholly opposed but mutually contained for their reliance on nature. On the one hand, realists cannot imitate nature. They are bound to change the interrelation and inter-limitation of the natural things according to the author’s intention, which includes idealistic elements. On the other hand, for the impossibility of separating from nature, idealists must seek materials and rules of law from nature, which also contain realistic factors.

However, the angle that Wang Guowei explored realism and idealism is not how the writer deals with the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity but the connection between the writer’s creation and the objective world—nature. In other words, What he effectively discussed was not about the problem of the creation method but about the content of the work. Thus although Wang’s views were ostensibly more dialectical than those of Liang Qichao, his views did not become mainstream in early 20th-century China. At that time, China was facing the challenge of blood and fire. Based on this fact, China needed literature that could be close to Chinese reality and awaken the Chinese people and literature that could only be realistic and be created in a realistic way rather than an idealistic approach. The key here was the method of creation instead of the content of the work. It was superficially dialectical to discuss the relationship between realism and idealism in terms of the content of the work, which cannot provide the solutions that Chinese literature desperately needed.

Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, and Lin Shu were scholars with a solid background in sinology and a deep knowledge of western learning. Their thoughts of realistic literature embraced not only the foundation of Chinese culture and literature but also the factors of Western culture and literature and were affected by both. However, they lived when Western learning was spreading to the East. However, it had not yet formed a bandwagon as widespread as in the May Fourth Movement. Chinese society and literature circles were still at the initial stage of accepting Western culture. Therefore, under the collision of Chinese and Western culture and literature, although they have formed initial concepts of realism, these concepts have not yet been systematized; further refinement and adjustment are needed. Establishing and developing realistic creation methods still awaited a more open period and a stronger cultural movement. The May Fourth Movement provided this opportunity.

II. From the “May Fourth” to the 1930s: A period of the Establishment and Development of the Realistic Creation Method in China

Realism, as a creation method, had considerable achievement during the May Fourth period, but it was named literalism then. Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi contributed significantly to the rise and development of realism. In 1916, Chen Duxiu strongly advocated realism in correspondence with Zhang Yongyan. (Chen, 1987, 16-20) In 1917, Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi interacted and successively published their most crucial articles to advocate realism. “The Attempting Discussion of Literary Reform,” written by Hu Shi, published in *New Youth*, Vol. 2, No. 5. This article proposed that “only realistic writing about the conditions of today’s society could be the real literature.” “Everyone should describe what he has seen, heard and experienced with his own words to achieve the aims of keeping reality, describing things and expressing emotions.” (Hu, 1998, 9-10) Chen Duxiu’s “On Literary Revolution”, published in *New Youth*, Vol. 2, No. 6. proposed three major doctrines in his article. “Overthrow the carved and flattering aristocratic literature, and build the ordinary and lyrical national literature; Overturn the trite and exaggerated classical literature, and build the fresh and honest realistic literature; Invert the obscure and obscure rhetorical literature, and build the clear and popular social literature.”(Chen, 2013, 203) This exposition explicitly put forward the banner of “realistic literature in the second article of the “three major doctrines.” Moreover, the other two doctrines, including “national literature” and “social literature,” also mutually complement and support “realistic literature.”

The reason why Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and others advocated realism was closely related to the realities of China and the introduction of western culture and literature. In the 1910s and 1920s, the climax of Western realism had passed, followed by the thoughts and creative methods of naturalistic literature that became the mainstream of western literature. During the period of western learning in the East, along with the realistic creation method, the naturalistic creation method also entered China. Moreover, from the perspective of reality in China, the scientific spirit of Chinese culture has been inadequate. Science and democracy are highly exalted during the May 4th period. Science, the sound of the times, was regarded as an effective way to solve the problems of the times.

Chen Duxiu once pointed out that the Chinese “ have never recognized the need for Chinese learning to be baptized by science. If we want to change our previous mistakes, we should advocate natural science and study and explain all knowledge (including national heritage). We should strictly observe the scientific methods, so as to avoid exaggerated delusion and nonsense.” (Chen, 2013, 2) Naturalism, under the signboard of science, declared a purely objective depiction of life, which naturally was quite attractive to the May Fourth scholars who stressed science and suffered from the distance of literature from reality. It was therefore welcomed. It was an essential reason for the appearance of early Chinese realism in the form of literalism.

The reason literalism ultimately failed to gain a firm foothold in China was also related to the conditions and characteristics of Chinese society. Literalism emphasized purely objective descriptions and had a strong naturalistic tendency. According to Mao Dun, “The naturalist writers treat life entirely with an objective, calm mind and without any interference of subjective psychology.” (Mao, 1989, 237) He advocated that Chinese literature should also be portrayed in a pure object manner, contrary to the proposition of awaking the people and reforming society through literature in the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Instead, to reform society and remold people, the literature must talk about something concrete, minded, and sentient, which means that the subjective ideas of the writer must permeate into the literary works. Literalism, with its emphasis on purely objective descriptions, encountered difficulties here. In this context, participants in the May Fourth New Culture Movement began to rethink realism, such as Jiang Guangci, who published an article in the *Republic of China Daily*. He wrote, “since the literary revolution, the so-called literalism has overflowed from those who randomly talk about literature. We think that literature reflects social life, so we certainly do not oppose realism and consider that realism can solve the problem of empty content in Chinese literature. But we shouldn’t assume that any literature which portrays the truth is good and needed one.” (Jiang, 1925) Realistic literature is not always good because of the over-emphasis on objective descriptions and the lack of ideology, making it difficult to achieve the goal of transforming society and remolding people. Capitalism entered a period of steady growth in the middle and later periods of the 19th century in Europe. Optimism in science became popular, Comte’s positivist philosophy prevailed, and naturalism flourished. While in the early 20th century, China was in a period of social unrest and national crisis, various groups and parties needed to win over the masses for their own purposes, requiring literature to play a role in propagandizing and mobilizing the people. Realism, with its emphasis on purely objective portrayal, naturally failed to adapt to the demands of society and was unsustainable.

The changes in Chinese society and cultural trends in the mid-1920s, especially after the May Thirteenth Movement, made realistic continuing development unavailable. After the May thirtieth Movement, the Chinese working class became a striking force. In 1926, Guo Moruo clarified that “literature is the pioneer of the revolution, and there is always a golden age of literature in the revolutionary period.” “The literature required by the times is socialistic, realistic and sympathetic to the proletariat.” (Guo, 1989, 43) In this year, Mao Dun also suggested that “the root cause for the failure of the time-

honored Chinese literature to develop soundly” was that “firstly, there was indecisive literature view and inadequate literature; Secondly, it was obsessed with the past rather than the present; Thirdly, it was not clear that literature should give priority to express life and must be of individuality.” (Mao, 1991, 109-110) Guo Moruo and Mao Dun were influential critics in their time, the former demanded literature leaning towards the proletariat, and the latter required a clear conception of literature. Their demands were different. However, to some extent, they both demanded a revision of the realism established during the May fourth period. 1928 saw the rise of the proletarian revolutionary literary Movement. The participants in this Movement emphasized the proletariat’s literary expression and the proletariat’s positive and bright side. Realism, with its emphasis on truthful depiction, had clearly fallen behind the demands of the times.

So people began to look for a more desirable creation approach than literalism. The realistic portrayal was not denied. The objective portrayal of society was still the priority of literary creation. Nonetheless, people would like to express subjective perceptions and objective depictions, enhance the ideology, influence the readers, and transform society. Thus, neo-literalism, advanced by Kurahara Korehito, a Japanese theorist, gained the attention of writers and critics.

Kurahara Korehito used to study in the Soviet Union, and his neo-literalism has a deep theoretical origin with “Lapu.”² Kurahara Korehito advocated “proletarian realism” (later known as “creation method of dialectical materialism”), requiring this to replace the natural science, which was the basis of the old realism and conceptual materialism, calling for the artists to become the true Bolshevik communist artists, combining artistic creation with the temporary tasks of the proletariat and its party, and creating revolutionary proletarian art. Kurahara Korehito rejected purely objective, superficial descriptions and called for a combination of truthfulness and correctness in portrayal.³ Kurahara Korehito’s views exactly met the demand of the soaring political enthusiasm and theoretical poverty of left-wing writers after the defeat of the Revolution. His opinions were, therefore, simultaneously translated into China by members of the Creation Society as soon as they were published.⁴ And his views were all the rage for a time under the advocacy and promotion of the Creation Society and the Sun Society, with the approval and support of Zhou Yang, a key leader of the left

² Lapu is the Russian acronym for the “Russian Proletarian Writers’ Association.” It advocated a dialectical materialist creation method, with sectarianism in the organization, and disbanded in 1932.

³ According to Jiang Fei, According to Jiang Fei, “the new literalistic literary trend that persisted for about half a century after the 1920s included not only left-wing proletarian revolutionary realism and socialist realism, but also right-wing literalism of The Three People’s Principles, which had been neglected. Both left-wing and right-wing neo-literalistic theories, although they serving the ideological competition of their respective political groups, originated from the Soviet Union and Japan in the 1920s, from the same revolutionary political and instrumental literary thinking.” (See Jiang Fei, *the Left Wing, and the Right Wing from the Same Origin: Neo-Literalism in the History of New Literature*, *Journal of Sichuan University*, No. 1, 2012.) This article does not think about the right-wing view of neo-literalism because of the purpose of the study.

⁴ As soon as Kurahara Korehito’s essay *To the Path of Neo-literalism—Proletarian Realism* was published, it was translated by Lin Boxiu (Du Guoxiang), a member of the Chinese Communist Party and published in the *Stop of Sun Monthly*, No. 7, 1928.

league. In the early 20th century, the development of Chinese realism stepped from the literalism stage to the neo-literalism stage.

Neo-literalism that prevailed in the Chinese left-wing literary circle was naturally linked to its strong “tendency” and its advocacy of “proletarian art of revolutionary,” which coincided with the revolutionary proletarian literary movement advocated by Guo Moruo and others at that time. However, compared with literalism, neo-literalism was more incompatible with Chinese reality. It was mainly manifested in the following three aspects. Firstly, it is the creation method of dialectical materialism. The creation method mainly included how writers deal with the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity and how to reveal real life and the related expressive techniques which belong to the field of literature and art. Conversely, dialectical materialism belongs to the philosophical level, dealing with the relationship between material and spirit, thought and existence. The creation method and dialectical materialism are on different levels. This so-called “creation method” will only lead to formulation and conceptualization in Chinese literature. Secondly, it is the contradiction between truth and correctness. Neo-literalism requires writers to portray life both “truthfully” and “correctly,” while this “correctness” is based on the interests and demands of the proletariat. It is not easy to reconcile both.

Moreover, the position and attitude of the proletariat must always be expressed through specific characters and viewpoints. In contrast, the specific characters and points of view may not always express the proletariat’s position and attitude comprehensively and accurately. On the other hand, writing is always a concrete, personal matter. The emphasis on correctness inevitably affects truthfulness, while the insistence on honesty does not necessarily meet the requirements of correctness, which means that contradiction between the both is practically impossible. Thirdly, it is the proletarian literature of creating the revolution. Engels argued that any advanced class deserved acknowledgment only if it represented the broad masses of people. Over-emphasis on the proletarianism of literature and art will inevitably narrow and undermine its artistic expressiveness. Accordingly, promoting literature and art seemingly meets the proletariat’s needs but undermines the proletarian interests. In the late 1920s, the Nationalist party betrayed the revolution. The motivation and driving force of the Chinese revolution were the workers and peasants whom the Communist Party led. Both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces need to win over the people. One purpose of the movement’s rise in the popularization of arts in the early 1930s was to unite and strive for the broadest masses. According to Feng Xuefeng, “the popularization of literature and art is the most pertinent and stern issue for the Pulo revolutionary literature in China today, and is almost general issue for the Pulo revolutionary literature movement.” (Luo, 1987, 341) Qu Qiubai considered that the ideas and practices of rejecting to popularize but waiting for the masses to improve themselves, “actually makes them under the influence of reactionary ideas.” (Qu, 1985, 490) By advocating proletarian literature and the art of creating a revolution, neo-literalism only narrowed its own camp in practice and pushed a large part of the masses to the opposite of revolutionary literature art and even the revolution.

Due to the incompatibility with China’s national conditions and the rules of literary development, neo-literalism was replaced by realism in 1933 after a short-

lived boom in China. In April of this year, “Max, Engels, and Realism in Literature” written by Qu Qiubai published in *Modern* magazine. In May, Zhou Yang also published an article, “the Authenticity of Literature,” in the same magazine. Both of them unequivocally promote realism in articles. Because of the importance of Qu and Zhou in the Chinese left-wing literary circle and the significant influence of *Modern* magazines at the time, “realism” was accepted as a common term in the literary world. (Kuang, 2017) The reasons why “realism” replaced “literalism” and “neo-literalism” as the final name for China’s realistic creation method are complex. There are several non-negligible factors, such as the realistic tradition in ancient Chinese literature, the factual recording and the tendency to emulate history, the weaknesses and deficiency of literalism and neo-literalism, and the strong advocacy of important figures at crucial points. Besides these, the following four points also need to be noted.

Firstly, regarding etymology, the western derivation of literalism and realism were both “Realism.” It was translated as “literalism” to emphasize its faithful portrayal of reality. However, an overemphasis on realistic depiction would quickly become a purely objective record, leading to naturalism. When translated as “realism,” it stressed the overall meaning of “Realism.” In other words, it was not only about the truthful representation of reality and the authenticity of details but also about the portrayal of typical characters in a typical environment, expressing the writer’s thoughts, feelings, and understanding of reality. Accordingly, the distinction between literalism and realism represented the different understandings and focus of “Realism” rather than the mere problem of the translated term. The literalistic problem may not be the problem of “Realism.” After literalism was in decline, “Realism” still held strong vitality. Therefore, after literalism and neo-literalism had become untenable, it was inevitable that realism, as the latest expression, was selected by the Chinese literary and artistic community.

Secondly, it was the need for China’s reality. In the early 20th century, China was full of crises and ups and downs. When the Qing dynasty was overturned, the warlords were busy with partition. Enlightenment had just begun, and the national salvation movement came one after another. What the times and society demanded was literature that confronted reality. Literalism met this demand, becoming popular hence. On the other hand, the more sufferings and contradictions there were, the more urgent requirements society had, demanding literature exerted its social function to arouse the masses and to effect reality. It required literature to have content, ideas, emotions, and tendencies. Literalism cannot meet this requirement, and neo-literalism can meet neither of these requirements. What can satisfy these needs mentioned was only realism, which was the social reason for the establishment of realism in China in the early 1930s.

Thirdly, it was the reality of European and American realist literature. The emergence of the realist creation method in early 20th century China had its roots in traditional Chinese literature. However, more than that was the influence of western literature, especially Western realist literature. Western realistic literature, including the classic realism of the nineteenth century and the realism of the pre-nineteenth century, were rarely purely nonfictional. With its emphasis on objective description, Literalism had to skip realism and turned to naturalism for support. However, the strictly accurate depiction of naturalism did not meet the

requirements of Chinese conditions, so Literalism eventually had to move towards realism. It was the literary reason realism was established in China in the early 1930s.

The last reason is the spread of Marxist literary ideas. Marxism entered China in the early 20th century, especially after the Russian October Revolution in 1917, and was quickly rooted here owing to China's reality and history. In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party was founded with Marxism as its guiding ideology. Naturally, Marxist literary thought became the guiding ideology of the left-wing literary circles, especially the writers who were members of the Communist Party. However, in the early 1920s, Chinese Communists mainly focused on the political, economic, and military revolutionary struggle.⁵ In addition, some essential literary treatises of Marx and Engels had not been translated or published then, resulting in a limited influence of Marxist literary thought. Around 1930, Marx and Engels' related literary treatises were published one after another⁶ and translated into Chinese⁷ in time. The discourses of classic Marxist writers about realism include showing life as it is, attaching importance to the truth of details, shaping typical characters in typical environments, and the tendency to express naturally through scenes and plots. Those discourses have profoundly influenced the accurate understanding of realism in Chinese literature and art. It was why realism was established in China in the early 1930s regarding guiding ideology and theory.

III. In the 1940s and 1950s: A Period of Time from the Introduction of Realism to Its own Development

The realistic creation method was established in China in 1933, but across the 1930s, it did not grow into a more systematic theoretical system acceptable to everyone. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, after "September 18", while country entered a period of the war of resistance, and the construction of theory gave way to the demands of the war; Secondly, the refinement and systematization of the theory required a process. Realism gained a firm foothold in the Chinese literary world in the early 1930s and could not immediately

⁵ For example, Qu Qubai, the most famous Marxist literary theorist and an important translator of Marxist literary treatises in the early period of the Communist Party, was mainly engaged in practical revolutionary work until 1928 and served as the top leader of the Communist Party once. In April 1928, after retiring from the top leadership position, he devoted his primary energy to cultural and literary theoretical work.

⁶ For example, the letters of Max and Engels to Lassalle, respectively, were published in 1922, while the letters of Engels to Min·Kautsky and to Mar · Harkness were only collected and published in 1932.

⁷ For example, in 1932, Qu Qiubai compiled a book entitled *Realistic-Marxist Literary Essays*, based on material from the first and second issues of *Literary Heritage* published by the Soviet Communist Academy, which collected some of the literary treatises of Engels, Plekhanov, Lafargue and others, including two letters from Engels to Mar Harkness and Paul Ernst. In 1934 Hu Feng translated the full text of Engels's letter to Min Kautsky in terms of the Japanese translation. From the beginning of 1934, Marx's *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844* was also quoted in fragments by Liang Shiqiu, Liu Ruoshui, Zhu Guangqian, and others in their own articles.

develop into a mature system;⁸ Thirdly, it lacked a standard-bearer. In the exploration of this theory, socialist realism gradually became prominent. In China, the earliest theorist to elaborate socialist realism more systematically was Zhou Yang. He published an article in *Modern* on 1 November 1933 entitled “Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism”—the negation of “creation method of materialistic dialectic” where he elaborated the meaning of socialist realism in more detail. Nevertheless, Zhou Yang also had some concerns about this new theory. He considered that “the new slogan is susceptible to misunderstanding and distortion in China” and “It would be extremely dangerous to mechanically apply this slogan to China.” (Zhou, 1933) Zhou Yang’s hesitant attitude influenced to some extent, his propaganda of socialist realism.

In May 1942, Mao Zedong published *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature* (hereinafter referred to *Speech*), establishing socialist realism as the mainstream creation method in China’s left-wing literary world. In the *Speech*, Mao Zedong presented his opinions of realism. He elaborated his view of realism more systematically from the aspects of the literature and art and the life, the literature and art and the people, typification, and representation of reality. However, Mao did not consciously compose a complete system of his related ideas from the realism perspective. On the one hand, this is because the core of the *Speech* is why literature and art services for the masses and how to serve them, which made realism unable to become a focus of the *Speech*; On the other hand, it was due to the influence of the Soviet socialist realistic creation method. Mao stressed that “we uphold socialist realism.”⁹ Although he only mentioned socialist realism once in the *Speech*, it is clear that he accepts socialist realism as the correct creation method. Practically, socialist realism is the theoretical background and purpose of the *Speech* and Mao’s discourses on realism in this period.¹⁰ Mao’s advocacy significantly impacted the national literary scene of his status as a leader. Socialist realism became a nationwide influential creation method and was established as the basic method of Chinese literary creation at the Second National Literary Congress held in September 1953.

Chinese realism did not develop toward the classical realism advocated by Marx and Engels.¹¹ Instead, it has embraced the principles and assertion of socialist realism.¹² The reasons for this are manifold.

⁸ What illustrates this point more graphically is the controversy between two slogans of Zhou Yang’s “national defense literature” and Lu Xun’s “popular literature for the national revolutionary war.”

⁹ Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature*. Selected Works of Mao Zedong, vol. 3, Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1991. P 867. (Notification: In his 1942 *Speech*, Mao Zedong referred to “proletarian realism,” which was later changed to “socialist realism” in the 1953 *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 3. In essence, proletarian realism in 1942 also meant socialist realism.)

¹⁰ Mao Zedong also mentioned “realism” in his *Speech*, but he treated it as a general term rather than a special one worthy of promotion like socialist realism. (Mao Zedong’s original statement was that “Marxism can only be included but not replaced realism in literary and artistic creation.” *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume III, p.874.)

¹¹ “Classical realism” refers to European and American realism in the mid-nineteenth century, and Marx and Engels’ realism theory is the essence and enhancement of classical realistic theory. See Zhao Yanqiu, *Classical Realism and its Reflection*, *Academic Studies*, No. 6, 2021.

From a historical perspective, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various European and American literary trends and creative methods simultaneously flooded into China. However, only realism and romanticism stood firmly in the end, especially realism. Luo Gang once analyzed and believed that the reasons for this choice should be explored from four perspectives: reality, tradition, Marxist literary theory, and evolutionism. (Luo, 1993) According to the main body of the New Literature Movement, "If the ideological bond that linked Chinese writers to romanticism was individualism, then what linked May Fourth writers to realism was humanitarianism. An important reason why realism was able to develop to its fullest extent during the May Fourth period was that it was the most adaptable to the historical demands of the intellectual enlightenment of the time. And this was precisely the original intention that many writers chose realism at that time." (Ibid.) Western literature has gone through more than 300 years, from classicism, romanticism, realism, and naturalism to modernism, while it poured into China at the same time around 1900. The results of diachronic developments were synchronically presented to the Chinese. Naturally, the Chinese could not accept them all but could only adopt the bringing principle according to their own needs. This need is, first and foremost, a real need. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China urgently required literature to express society, arouse the people, and save the Chinese Nation from fire and water. Realism was the most capable of meeting this need. Therefore it was better than other creation methods, becoming the preferred method of Chinese literature.

Furthermore, precisely because the formation of the realistic creation method was not a product of Chinese literature's own development but rather the result of realistic choices, Chinese realism has had difficulty forming its own characterization. It has been susceptible to the influence of other literary trends and creation methods. Historical circumstances in which romanticism, naturalism, and modernism, together with realism, jointly flooded China made Chinese realism vulnerable to the influence of other creation methods during the developing process. At first, it was naturalism, but as its purely objective approach to depiction was incompatible with Chinese conditions, it was gradually replaced by romanticism. On May 4th, Lu Xun mentioned abandoning the mindless pursuit of material civilization, expanding people's desire for moral conscience, respecting the individual character and unique spirit, and rejecting the undifferentiated and unconscious majority. His individualistic thoughts influenced not only the romantic writers but also the realist writers of that time. It was taken for granted that realistic writers would adopt some elements of romanticism in their own writing where the individual was paramount.

On the other hand, the proposition of romanticism advocating ideals and promoting feelings is also more suitable for the requirements of infecting and educating the public, which is not only basically in the same tone as realism but

¹² According to Zhang Qingmin, in the early 20th century, realism in the process of sinicization produced directional variations: one is the realism of Marx and Engels, and the other is the politicized realism of the Soviet Union. This view deserves attention. In fact, for a long time, Chinese realism followed the path of Soviet politicized realism, that is, socialist realism. See Zhang Qingmin, *The Discursive Divergence of Realism: A Problematic History of the Chineseization of Marxist Literature*, *Journal of Shanghai University*, No. 2, 2016.

leads to the infiltration of romanticism factors into realism. This innate origin, coupled with later developments, led to Chinese realism inevitably influenced by elements of romanticism. Socialist realism “requires the artists to portray reality truthfully and historically concretely from the revolutionary development of reality. At the same time, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of artistic portrayal must be combined with the task of ideologically transforming and educating the laboring people in the spirit of socialism.” (Cao, 1953, 12) Romantic elements were merged with realistic depictions, which were more in line with the Chinese realistic literary tradition and the current situation, and the understanding of Chinese writers and critics for realism. So it was naturally easily accepted by the Chinese literary world.

In addition, there are also reasons for cultural tradition, reality, and politics. From the perspective of cultural traditions, Chinese literature did not go through a stage of pure naturalism. Realistic literature always contained some subjective elements, thus making it easy to accept socialist realism, emphasizing romance and ideals. The liberated areas in the 1940s and China in the early 1950s were full of vigor, enthusiasm, and a bright desire for a better future. Purely objective portrayals were not popular. What people wanted were realistic portrayals added with romantic ideals and passion. It is the social basis for the prevalence of socialist realism in China. The political reason was that the Soviet Union, as the world’s first socialist country, had been a role model and a learning object for China throughout the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s. Socialist realism, as a creative method advocated by the Soviet Association of Writers (actually the Soviet party and government), naturally influenced Chinese literature. However, socialist realism did not last very long in China. After the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, the relations between the communist party of China and the Soviet communist party became hostile and finally broke down. The influence of socialist realism in China also gradually declined. In 1958, Mao Zedong proposed combining revolutionary realism and romanticism, which Zhou Yang later perfected, Guo Moruo and Zhang Guangnian. This idea was formally established as the basic method to guide China’s literary and artistic creation at the Third National Congress in July 1960. (Cui, 2004)

Although the two-combination’s creation method emphasizes the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, in essence, it is still a theory of realism for the following two reasons. Firstly, although the two-combination’s approach listed realism and romanticism as its two components, realism still came first; Secondly, the outstanding works were considered to be created following the two-combination’s creation method, such as *Red Sun*, *Red Rock*, *Red Flag Profile*, *the History of Entrepreneurship*, *the Song of Youth*, *Great Changes in a Mountain Village*, *Defending Yan’an*, *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*, *Sow Thistle*, *Three Families Alley* and *Sunny Day*. Though these works had many romantic elements, they generally represented life by the requirements of realism and followed the basic realistic principle of showing the natural image of life. However, the two-combination creation method is not essentially different from socialist realism. In his political report for the Second Literary Congress, Zhou Enlai said, “Our idealism should be the idealism of realism; Our realism should be the realism of idealism. The combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary idealism is socialist realism.” (Zhou, 1979, 53) This shows that at

least in 1953, in the mainstream understanding of Chinese literary and artistic theory, there were no essential differences between socialist realism and the two-combination creation method proposed in 1958. The proposal of “two-combination” can only manifest that Chinese literature and art were no longer influenced by Soviet literary thought and took the path of independent development against the background of the breakup of Sino-Soviet relations. It also aligned with the social reality of the soaring romantic notions in China’s material and spiritual fields during the Great Leap Forward in 1958.

On reflection, as a creation method, the “two-combination” have certain limitations. The most crucial distinction between realism and romanticism is that realism represents life itself, while romanticism represents what life ought to be. That realism emphasizes objectivity, the truthfulness of life, faithful depiction, detailed reality, and verisimilitude, distinguishes it from romanticism, subjectivity, ideal expression, strong emotion, strange imagination, and extreme exaggeration, which gives rise to the irreconcilable differences between realism and romanticism. It was the radical reason all the works once considered representatives of the two-combination creation method were realist works. The “two-combination” attempts to integrate realism and romanticism, which is difficult to achieve.

Therefore, the significance of the two-combination creation method does not lie in the creation method itself but in the first nationwide realistic creation method proposed by the Chinese on their own, based on their own social reality.¹³ Before this, the basic theories from realism to socialist realism were introduced from abroad, through refinement and improvement, becoming a common creative method in the Chinese literary world. Conversely, with its theories derived from Chinese reality, the “two-combination” was home-grown and was the product of independent thinking by Chinese leaders and scholars. The proposal of the “two-combination” signaled that Chinese realistic theory had entered a stage of independent development from the introduction through friction. From then on, the Chinese realistic creation method began to develop independently. Although various realistic concepts and ideas were influenced by Western thought, the basis and primary source of their ideas were local. Realistic broad path theory, Realistic deepening theory, Modern realism, Neo-literalistic novel, Realism shocking wave, Realism of network literature, and God realism have undergone this process. Based on this independent development and choice based on national conditions, classical realism, affirmed and constructed by classic Marxist writers, has returned and been increasingly becoming the mainstream creation method of Chinese realism.

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¹³ In fact, it was also the first nationwide creation method.

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