

The Historical Dialectic Between “Zhao Shuli Direction” and Mao Zedong’s Yan’an “Talks”

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Abstract

The term “Zhao Shuli Direction” was penned by Zhou Yang and other critics who regarded Zhao Shuli’s works as putting into practice the principles of Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” but both Zhao Shuli and Zhou Yang’s understanding of the “Talks” was too simple. Due to the lack of in-depth understanding of the historical dialectic between “economy” and “power” in the “Talks,” Zhao encountered insurmountable difficulties in dealing with the relationships between “politics” and “policies,” “popularization” and “improvement,” and “serving workers, peasants, and soldiers” and “serving peasants.” “Zhao Shuli Direction” was a short-lived slogan, and Zhao himself became a tragic figure in the Chinese left-wing literary world. The mutual observation between Zhao and the “Talks” can not only help us solve the mystery of Zhao Shuli in Chinese literary history, but also enable us to rethink and understand the cultural and political significance of the modern project of the “Talks.”

Keywords

Talks, Zhao Shuli Direction, Cultural Politics

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In American journalist Jack Belden's 1949 nonfiction book *China Shakes the World*, Belden dedicated an entire section to a 1947 interview he conducted with the famous writer Zhao Shuli while traveling through the "liberated area" of Shanxi. Of special significance is his description of his first encounter with the "border region celebrity Zhao Shuli":

"It had been snowing since dawn that day. I sat on the stone floor of my home, feeling a bit melancholic and lonely when he stepped inside – a spectral figure in a long cotton gown and a skullcap on his head. Bowing like an old-fashioned teacher, he took a seat on a stool in front of my pot of burning charcoal, greedily warming his hands. He let out a shiver as he raised his head to glance at me, then lowered his eyelids and picked up a sunflower seed, skillfully spitting out the shell. He tentatively watched me for a bit, then gave an unnatural chuckle. What a bashful man!"¹

"A Spectral Figure," Belden's depiction of Zhao Shuli, is not only impressive, but also offers a vivid portrayal of Zhao Shuli's life. Zhao Shuli can indeed be regarded as a spectral figure in the history of twentieth century Chinese contemporary literature: from being elected as the representative figure of the development of Chinese arts and literature in 1947, to suddenly drifting away from mainstream arts and literature, until his death at the hands of "Leftist" political persecution in 1970, Zhao Shuli's erratic appearance and strange life of ups and downs provides us with a deeply rich example for how to understand the texture and structure of contemporary Chinese art and literature. Its symptomatic meaning is far beyond that of cross-era writers like Ding Ling and He Qifang who had been canonized. In particular, the interplay between Zhao Shuli's literary principles and Mao's Yan'an "Talks" – their conformity, conflict, and division – provides a vivid portrayal of the evolution of modern Chinese culture and politics and the formation of historical subjects.

1 [U.S.] Jack Belden: *China Shakes the World*, translated by Qiu Yingjue, pp. 108, 109, 189, 117, Beijing Publishing House, 1980.

1. “Misplaced” or “Misread”: The Formation of “Zhao Shuli Direction”

In 1943, Zhao Shuli, while working for the Northern Bureau’s Investigation and Research Office, learned of a case in which a rural cadre persecuted to death a young farmer named Yue Dong who was fighting for freedom of marriage. Zhao, using this as direct source material, wrote a “popular story” in May of the same year called *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage*. Peng Dehuai, who greatly enjoyed the novel, penned a dedication for the novel: “It is rare to see a popular story like this come out of investigation and research.” The novel was well-received by Taihang Mountain readers. That same year, Zhao Shuli published the novella *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk*, followed by the novel *Changes in Lijiazhuang*. Zhao Shuli earned a reputation for his back-to-back publication of these three works. However, Zhao Shuli did not form a “direction” until the Northern Bureau’s Ministry of Propaganda, Zhou Yang, created it. In the famous *Liberation Daily* essay “On the Creation of Zhao Shuli,” published on August 26, 1946, Zhou Yang not only referred to Zhao’s works as “three solemn and beautiful portraits of great changes in the countryside,” and summarized two major characteristics of Zhao Shuli’s novels: “character creation” and “language creation.” At the end of the essay, he connects Zhao Shuli with the 1942 Yan’an Literature and Art Forum: “After the arts symposium, great achievements were made, and new playing fields created, across all areas of the arts. Comrade Zhao’s works are an important achievement in cultural creation and a victory for Mao Zedong’s directives on revolutionary literature and art.”² Zhou Yang elevated Zhao Shuli’s works to unprecedented political heights. Left-wing literary big shots Guo Moruo and Mao Dun from the Kuomintang-controlled district enthusiastically agreed with his essay.³ From July 26 to August 19, 1947, under the directive of the Propaganda Department of the Central Bureau of the Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan Border Region, the Federation of Literature and Art held a literary symposium to discuss

2 Zhou Yang: *On Zhao Shuli’s Works*, earliest publication in Zhangjiakou’s *Great Wall* magazine in July 1946; August 26 publication in Yan’an’s *Liberation Daily*; September edition of *Beijing Magazine*; October edition of *Northeast Culture*, published in succession.

3 See Guo Moruo: *Reading Changes in Lijiazhuang*, *Beijing Magazine* 1st and 2nd issues; September 1946; Mao Dun: *On Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk* (*Masses* Volume 12, Issue 10, September 1946), *On Zhao Shuli’s Novels* (*Wencui* Volume 2, Issue 10, December 1946).

Zhao Shuli's works. Zhao Shuli participated in the symposium and introduced his works. During the symposium, the participants discussed Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, and Zhou Yang's commentary on Zhao's works, as well as Zhao's creative process and methods. After much exciting and heated discussion, the participants reached a conclusion: Zhao's creative process and spirit is a specific direction for artists and writers from the border area to strive towards when practicing Mao Zedong's directives on literature and art. On August 10, the *People's Daily* published "Towards Zhao Shuli," the closing speech of the literary symposium, delivered by Chen Huangmei, Vice Chairman of the Federation of Literature and Art. Throughout the history of the Communist Party of China, only two writers were considered to have "directions": the first was Lu Xun, the second Zhao Shuli. Mao Zedong remarked in *On New Democracy*: "Lu Xun is the key figure in the cultural revolution," "Lu Xun represents the majority of the nation on the cultural battleground."⁴ After Lu Xun's death, Zhao Shuli was launched as the new model in his place. Zhao quickly became an influential figure in Yan'an, so when Belden arrived in the liberated area for an interview in 1947, he discovered that Zhao had become the liberated area's "most famous figure, aside from Mao Zedong himself."⁵

Over the years, scholars have come to a consensus on the causal relationship between Zhao Shuli and Mao's Yan'an "Talks": "Comrade Zhao set the world on fire with the publication of *Xiao Er's Black Marriage*. *Xiao Er's Black Marriage* was published in May 1943, under the inspiration and direction of Mao's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," and was based on Zhao's many years of creative work and three decades of immersion in rural life."⁶ This relationship has been cited by meticulous foreign scholars. The Japanese scholar Wataru Kaji wrote the foreword "Zhao Shuli and His Works" for the Japanese translation of *Li Youcai's Clapper Talk*. In answering the question "Why are [Zhao Shuli's] works so loved by readers?" he pledged that, "the simple answer to this question, at its core, is that Zhao faithfully implemented the policies

4 Mao Zedong: *On New Democracy, Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Volume 2), p. 698, People's Publishing House, 1991 edition.

5 [U.S.] Jack Belden: *China Shakes the World*, translated by Qiu Yingjue, pp. 108, 109, 189, 117, Beijing Publishing House, 1980.

6 Shi Jiyan: *Fen River's Tears Flowing – Recalling Comrade Zhao Shuli*, edited by Gao Jie, *Recalling Zhao Shuli*, p. 59, Shanxi People's Publishing House, 1985 edition.

of Mao’s revolutionary literature and art movement (prior to May 1942).”⁷ The Czech historian of modern Chinese literature Jaroslav Průšek made a very similar statement in the postscript he wrote for the Czech translation of *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk*: “Zhao Shuli and other New China writers have no doubts as to who they are writing for. Chairman Mao made this point clear at the Yan’an Forum. Firstly, Chinese literature must serve the broadest masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers. Based on this principle, Zhao Shuli accurately explained what form literature should take in order to properly complete this mission.”⁸

In reality, Zhao Shuli was not actually present in Yan’an when Mao Zedong delivered his speech at the Yan’an Forum in May 1942. As such, it was not until 1943, when the Yan’an Talks were officially published, that Zhao first came into contact with it. Zhao could not have engaged with the “Talks” until the end of 1943. This means that it is impossible for Zhao’s 1943 works *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* and *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk* to be the product of his engagement with the “Talks.” During the Cultural Revolution, while reminiscing on his experience studying the “Talks”, Zhao recalled: “After Chairman Mao’s speech reached the Taihang Mountains, I was as elated as a newly emancipated peasant. Though I had yet not met Chairman Mao, I believed that Chairman Mao understood me and spoke the words that my heart yearned to say. For over ten years, I have debated with my literature and art-loving friends, but they never concurred with my ideas; in the “Talks”, my ideas were affirmed and became righteous. My heart was filled with an indescribable joy.”⁹ But this “reverse film” is not actually a work of fiction by historians. Zhao Shuli’s brilliance was undoubtedly cast by the “Talks” light. It is only when Zhao’s works are used to analyze the veracity of the “Talks”, can “Zhao Shuli Direction” be established. Without the “Talks”, there would still be Zhao Shuli, but there would be no “Zhao Shuli Direction.” In this sense, it is not so much that Zhou Yang “discovered” Zhao Shuli, but rather that Zhou Yang “invented” the inner connection between Zhao Shuli and the “Talks”. After the “Talks” were published as an important document of the Yan’an Rectifica-

7 Edited by Huang Xiuji: *Zhao Shuli’s Research Materials*, pp. 454, 522, 431, 463, *Beiyue Literature and Arts Publishing House*, 1985 edition.

8 Edited by Huang Xiuji: *Zhao Shuli’s Research Materials*, pp. 454, 522, 431, 463, *Beiyue Literature and Arts Publishing House*, 1985 edition.

9 Zhao Shuli: *Recalling History and Knowing Oneself, The Complete Works of Zhao Shuli* (Vol. 5), pp. 379, 376, *Beiyue Literature and Art Publishing House*, 2000 edition.

tion Movement, Zhou Yang selected the popular novelist Zhao Shuli to promote the “Talks”, allowing the “Talks” to become “incarnated.” Zhou Yang fully reproduced the process of “power produces knowledge.” According to Foucault, power produces knowledge; on the other hand, knowledge can hardly become knowledge without first preconceiving and constructing power relations. Foucauldian discourse theory reversed the production process of knowledge: it’s not that without the patient, there can be no doctor; rather, without the doctor, there can be no patient; it’s not that only with prisoners can there be prisons, but rather that without prisons there cannot be prisoners – here, it appears that without the “Talks”, there could be no Zhao Shuli.

Zhao was among the members of the Presidium for the first National Literary Congress, held on July 2, 1949. As a representative of the liberated area’s literature and arts workers, Zhou Yang gave the utmost praise to Zhao Shuli’s works in his keynote speech “The New People’s Literature and Art.” Zhou ascribed *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk* as the “representative work of literature from the liberated areas.” Zhao Shuli is the only classic writer to be included in both pre-liberation and post-liberation publications of the *Anthology of New Literature* and *People’s Literature and Art Series*. These two anthologies predefined the distinction between “modern Chinese literature” and “contemporary Chinese literature,” reflecting differing literary paradigms. The fact that Zhao Shuli was included in both anthologies at the same time turned him into a Chinese writer with “cross-era” significance, reflecting his special position in the literature of Chinese history.

But Zhao Shuli’s moment of glory was cut unexpectedly short. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Zhao Shuli’s journey on his path as a representative towards “People’s Literature” became filled with missteps and difficulties. Not only could his works not keep up with the pace of the times, but the popular literature conference he was responsible for and the works he published in *Talking and Singing* were heavily criticized. The literary principles that Zhao had always adhered to gradually drifted away from mainstream literature. A symbolic moment of Zhao’s decline was his failure to be chosen for the 1951 Stalin Prize for Literature, the highest literary award set up by the socialist camp during the Cold War to compete with the Nobel Prize in Literature. Ding Ling’s novel *The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River*, Zhou Libo’s novel *The Storm*, and He Jingzhi and Ding Yi’s opera

The White Haired Girl, all belonging to the same “liberated area literature” as Zhao Shuli’s works, all tied for the Stalin Prize. The irony of the failure of Zhao Shuli, a representative of the “literary direction,” to be nominated within China for the Stalin Prize for Literature, is self-evident. By the start of the Second National Congress on September 23, 1953, Zhao Shuli, unlike the First Congress four years prior, had faded in celebrity, and his name was not mentioned in any important reports. Zhao Shuli’s “golden age” had ended practically just after it began.

In the beginning of 1951, Zhao was transferred to the Central Propaganda Department as the Secretary of Literature and Arts. This is because “Comrade Hu Qiaomu criticized my writing for being not serious (not touching on important topics), not deep, and unable to excite readers. He asked me to draw from other writers’ works.”¹⁰ As an important ideological leader of the Chinese Communist Party at the time, Hu Qiaomu personally selected the works of great Russian writers like Chekhov and Turgenev, as well as *New Democracy*, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” excerpts from Lenin’s essays on art, and works by other theorists for Zhao. He wanted Zhao to live in Zhongnanhai’s Qingyun Hall, be relieved from all work, and study behind closed doors. But Zhao wasted this excellent learning opportunity. At the time, Zhao lived next door to Yan Wenjing, and the two spent practically every day debating the pros and cons of both Chinese and foreign literature. Yan, on the one hand, was astonished by Zhao’s knowledge of classical literature. But on the other hand, he felt that Zhao not only did not want to change his opinions, but also wanted to convince others that he did not need to intensively study foreign works.¹¹

Zhao Shuli was a dazzling meteor that swiftly cut across the sky of Chinese left-wing literature. Despite the downfall of Zhao, the embodiment of the spirit of the “Talks”, the “Talks” status as the highest guiding principle of Chinese literature and art has never been shaken. The relationship between Zhao and the “Talks” is truly intriguing. Mao’s “Talks” was surprisingly among the list of books that Hu Qiaomu made for Zhao, so in Hu’s eyes, Zhao did not understand the “Talks”. Does this mean that the “Zhao Shuli Direction” proposed just a few years ago

10 Dai Guangzhong: *Biography of Zhao Shuli* pp. 174, 275, 175, 157, Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 1987 edition.

11 Dai Guangzhong: *Biography of Zhao Shuli* pp. 174, 275, 175, 157, Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 1987 edition.

was a mistake? Does this mean that Zhao Shuli – which also refers to the mythical Zhao Shuli created by Zhou Yang – never understood the “Talks”?

2. “Politics” and “Policies”

The famous article “Towards Zhao Shuli,” published in the *People’s Daily* on August 10, 1947, presented three reasons that Zhao Shuli’s works became “directions”: First, Zhao’s works are very political. He reflects the essential conflict between landlords and peasants as a complex and acute struggle. He writes from the perspective of the people and it is clear where his sympathies lie – his thoughts and emotions are with the people. Second, Zhao’s works chose a language that lives on the words of the masses, creating a new, vivid national form that they welcome. Third, Zhao put his heart and soul into serving the people through his writing. He has a high degree of revolutionary utilitarianism, long-term hard work, and a truth-seeking spirit. The motivation for and purpose of his writing is all for the masses, for the battles, for raising and solving certain problems. In Zhao’s own words, “if people like to watch it, then it is politically useful.”¹²

Comparing the “politics” of Zhao’s novels with the “politics” of the “Talks” clearly reveals the conflict and estrangement between the two. Throughout his life, Zhao was a writer who took initiative to serve politics with his writing. “In the process of working for the masses, I encountered problems that needed to be solved, yet had no easy solution. This often turned into subject matter for my writing.”¹³ Zhao always believed that literary work needed to directly serve the current revolutionary mission. He said: “I was involved in rural propaganda and mobilization work in the early days of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Afterwards, those who became professional writers could only say that they “switched jobs.” Writers borne out of this type of work often had to cooperate with the current political propaganda mission, and the results had to be quick.”¹⁴ On the surface, Zhao clearly embodied the principle from the “Talks” that “literature and art should serve politics.” But the problem is that the “politics” referred to in

12 Chen Huangmei: “Towards Zhao Shuli,” *People’s Daily*, August 10, 1947.

13 Zhao Shuli: “It Counts as an Experience,” *People’s Daily*, June 10, 1949.

14 Zhao Shuli: “Before and after the writing of *Sanliwan*,” *Literature and Art News*, 1955, No. 19.

the “Talks” is not an essentialist concept and is definitely not in line with Zhao’s understanding of the “policies” of the time. According to Hu Qiaomu’s recollection, after the “Talks” were published, they not only had a huge impact on the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, but also received feedback from Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, and others in Kuomintang-controlled Chongqing. Mao Zedong appreciated Guo Moruo’s feedback the most. Guo believed that the strength of the “Talks” lay in its “*youjingyouquan*,” (有经有权) that is to say, its persistent basic principles while allowing flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Mao admired this statement and felt that he had found a friend.¹⁵

In a sense, the relationship between “economy and power” in the “Talks” is a concentrated reflection of Mao Zedong’s dialectical views, which is considered to be the essence of “Mao Zedong Thought.” Mao evidently regarded Guo Moruo as a confidant because not many could understand the dialectical significance of the “Talks”. The vast majority of people only understand Mao’s calls for “literary arts must serve politics,” “literary arts must serve the people,” and “literary works must be popularized first.” This includes both Zhao Shuli and Zhou Yang. As far as the mainstream “New Democracy” politics of the Yan’an period are concerned, “New Democracy” is filled with the dialectical concept of “economy and power.” Mao held that, on the one hand, New Democracy has the characteristics of bourgeois revolution, and provided the method for expressing a united front during the Second Sino-Japanese War. On the other hand, New Democracy is different from old democratic principles in that new democratic revolution must be led by the proletariat, who must ultimately set the socialist revolution as their goal. The former is “power,” the latter is “economy”; the former is national liberation, the latter is class liberation. This dialectic demonstrates that all of the New Democratic policies of the Yan’an period, including land policies, rural politics and so forth, were all transitional in nature. If Zhao Shuli’s works stop short of describing this phenomenon, then they cannot demonstrate the mutual harmony and negation between these two types of politics. Thus, Zhao never touched the true heart of the “Talks”.

The reason that Zhao Shuli failed to write “great” works like Zhou Libo and Ding Ling is not because of a lack of artistic skills, but because his works represented his different understanding of politics. Zhao Shuli’s early works spanned

15 “Hu Qiaomu’s Memory of Mao Zedong,” pp. 60 and 7, People’s Publishing House, 1994 edition.

the Communist Party's varying "land politics." During the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Communist Party abandoned the Soviet policy to "fight local tyrants and divide their land," instead implementing a policy of rent and interest reductions. On the one hand, this required landlords to reduce rent in order to improve peasants' living conditions; on the other hand, peasants were required to pay rent and interest in order to take care of the interests of the landlords and rich peasants. This land policy helped unite and mobilize the entire population and establish the Communists' national anti-Japanese united front. But after the Second Sino-Japanese War, the class conflict between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party became a major issue. The Communist Party's land policy changed drastically. In 1946, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued the "May Fourth Directive," which re-sounded the trumpet for the "land to the tiller" Land Reform Movement. On October 10, 1947 – the year that the "Zhao Shuli Direction" was born – the Central Committee of the CCP announced the "Outline of China's Land Law," declaring the death of the formerly accepted and unaltered feudal land system. An unprecedented scale of *fanshen* movement took place in rural China. Several foreign journalists and writers who personally experienced this huge historical shift all witnessed the shockwave created by the Agrarian Revolution. American journalist William Hinton, who participated in Shanxi's Zhangzhuang land reform in 1947, pointed out: "The role that the newly released "Outline of Land Law" played in the Chinese Civil War from 1946 to 1950 is exactly like the role that Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" played in the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865." ¹⁶ The Canadian couple Isabel and David Crook, who had been investigating the land reform in Hebei's Shilidian Village that same year, wrote in their book *Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn*: "The day that the Communist Party decided to change the country's traditional land system was the day that the entire Chinese society began to transform. For hundreds of millions of landless peasants, this broke the shackles that the ubiquitous landlord ruling class had placed on them. For the first time, they could procure their own homes and livestock. This is a fight to inspire the peasants to do away with their deep-rooted cowardice and their vassal status, to rise up against those who have oppressed them for so long." ¹⁷ In the eyes of American scholar

16 [U.S.] Han Ding: *Turning Over: A Revolutionary Documentary in a Village in China*, translated by Han Liao, p. 7, Beijing Publishing House, 1980 edition.

17 [Canada] Crook (Crook, I.), (Crook, D.): *Shilidian - Mass Movement in a Village in China*, translat-

Mark Selden, who had had in-depth contact with Zhao Shuli: “The Communist Party’s land policy played a decisive role in its attempt to seize power because it mobilized the long-oppressed masses to rise up and overthrow the old society. The Agrarian Revolution ruptured the ever-dormant state of Chinese peasants in two ways: on the one hand, the change was spiritual; on the other hand, it was material; on the one hand, the change worked from the inside; on the other hand, it worked from the outside. Spiritually, the Land Reform roused peasants’ hopes, as it was the first time they had felt any passion in their entire lives. Materially, the Land Reform provided peasants with a method to fight against landlords.”¹⁸

Regrettably, Zhao Shuli’s creations during this period did not reflect the tremendous changes of that era. Zhao continued Li Youcai’s career, telling countryside stories from his perspective. After more than a year of hard work, and with all eyes on him, Zhao Shuli published the novella *Evil Does Not Suppress the Righteous* in 1948 in the *People’s Daily*. This “problem novel” attempted to reflect certain rural grassroots cadres’ usage of power for personal gain during the Land Reform – but it was the same story about rural “bad cadres” that we saw in *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* and *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk*, using Wang Juc’ai’s family and the four mishaps in his daughter Ruanying’s marriage as the main narrative. Regardless of the theme, subject matter, structure, and literary skills, Zhao was unable to rid this novel of the framework and components of his previous novels. In the same year, Zhou Libo completed *The Storm* and Ding Ling finished writing *The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River*. Comparing Zhao’s novel with these latter two, it is not difficult to understand the widespread controversy that spread after the publication of the blasé *Evil Does Not Suppress the Righteous*. Zhao, faced with growing confusion, never talked about the novel again and chose not to include it in his own volume of collected works. In actuality, Zhao Shuli had not changed much between writing the earlier *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* and *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk* and the later *Evil Does Not Suppress Righteousness*. The problem was that the times had changed – as had the politics. Most of the literary and artistic works coming out of the anti-Japanese base recounted anti-Japanese war stories and promoted anti-Japanese war heroes, particularly during the early stages of the cooperation between the Kuomintang

ed by An Qiang and Gao Jian, p. 1, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2007 edition.

18 [U.S.] Jack Belden: *China Shakes the World*, translated by Qiu Yingjue, pp. 108, 109, 189, 117, Beijing Publishing House, 1980.

and Communist Party. The border area's depiction of class struggle and theme of hatred had quickly decreased from the Central Soviet Area period. But in the mid-1940s, after conflict arose between the Kuomintang and Communist Party, works depicting class conflict such as *White Haired Girl* began to emerge in large numbers. Zhou Libo and Ding Ling's works not only allowed Hinton and other foreign scholars to experience the earth-shattering changes of the Land Reform, but also unfolded a "grand and magnificent historical portrait" of rural China, and even looked to the prospect of continuing the socialist revolution after the Land Reform.¹⁹ Envisioning the prospects of the socialist revolution in the revelry of the Land Reform – this is the true "historical dialectic"! Though Belden, who interviewed Zhao Shuli in 1947, knew of Zhao's reputation and paid respects to his character, he still accurately identified the problems in Zhao's writing: "[I translated three of Zhao's novels.] To be honest, I am disappointed with Zhao's writing. Some say that if his works were to be translated into a foreign language, it will transform him into a world-renowned writer. I disagree with this. Zhao's novel is not a mere piece of propaganda; there is no mention of the Communist Party in it. His description of rural life is vivid, and his satire is biting. The poems he writes are unique, and some of the characters he pens are interesting. However, he only sketches the plot of the story, and the characters are often mannequins with no distinctive qualities and devoid of fully developed personalities. The biggest weakness of Zhao's writing is that he merely outlines the events, instead of detailing the characters' actual experiences. I personally witnessed the entire Chinese countryside gripped by passion during the Land Reform, but none of this could be found in Zhao's writing."²⁰

3. "New Society" and "New Subject"

Even in Zhao's three representative works of his early period – *Xiao Er's Black Marriage*, *Li Youcai's Clapper Talk*, and *Changes in Lijiazhuang*, these

19 See Chapter 26 of the second part of *The Storm*'s description of the emotions of task force leader Xiao after leading the peasants in completing the land reform. In Zhou Libo: *Storm and Rain*, pp. 355-356, People's Literature Publishing House, 1952 edition.

20 [U.S.] Jack Belden: *China Shakes the World*, translated by Qiu Yingjue, pp. 108, 109, 189, 117, Beijing Publishing House, 1980.

classic works that established “Zhao Shuli Direction” – we can still see the appearance of unity but underlying disharmony between Zhao and the “Talks”. Though critics, starting with Zhou Yang, would constantly interpret Zhao’s works through the ambiguous lens of “class struggle,” the humble Zhao did not elevate the class element in his works. Many years later, as Zhao reflected on his works, he stated: “*Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk* accommodated the struggle for rent reduction. The class struggle is still clear, and the protagonists are still positive. However, in my writing I described the villains in greater detail than the protagonists. *Changes in Lijiazhuang* exposed the exploitation and oppression of the poor, lower, and middle-class peasants by landlords in the old society. It was meant to mobilize the people to participate in the Shangdang Campaign (though this did not succeed). Although I wrote about leaders in the Party, I was not competent at it because I was not familiar with the Party leadership.”²¹

Changes in Lijiazhuang can be regarded as an anomaly of Zhao’s works during this period. As far as Zhao’s own subjective will is concerned, the starting point of that novel is no different from that of his previous two novels. The novel is still a manifestation of “revolutionary utilitarianism,” still “in unity with the current political propaganda mission,” but the unintentional structure of the story renders it the closest Zhao ever came to writing a “modern novel.” *Changes in Lijiazhuang*, completed around 1945, portrays the history of a small Shanxi village from the start of the Republic of China in the 17th century to the Second Sino-Japanese War. Zhao uses descriptions of changes in the small village to paint a larger picture of major events of Chinese history, such as the Central Plains War in 1930, the Long March in 1934, and the creation of the Ximenghui through the cooperation between Yan Xishan and the Eight Route Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. He also illustrates the later conflict between the old and new armies and the establishment of the people’s power. An entire population of peasants living in far-flung, remote villages finally developed their own political awareness and emancipated themselves during this era. “Although the story is set against the backdrop of a changing village, Zhao manages to paint a microcosm of the Chinese countryside. From this portrait, we can gain perspective into China’s national and societal struggles.”²² This writing style, especially

21 Zhao Shuli: *Recalling History and Knowing Oneself, The Complete Works of Zhao Shuli* (Vol. 5), pp. 379, 376, Beiyue Literature and Art Publishing House, 2000 edition.

22 Quan Lin and Ge Qin: *Changes in Lijiazhuang*, in *Selected Readings of Literary Works*, Sanlian

the introduction of the “historical sense,” is the proper way to write about history. The difference between *Changes in Lijiazhuang* and Zhao’s prior two novels is that this novel was quickly noticed by Japanese scholar Yoshimi Takeuchi, who pointed out that “[In *Changes in Lijiazhuang*], every scene contains a meaningful development and change in the characters’ relationships. That is, with the unfolding of the plot, the scene itself also unfolds. Thus, here, the plot is not the main element of the story.”²³

Though *Changes in Lijiazhuang* has the skeleton of a “modern novel,” it is evidently not a mature “modern novel.” But had he continued down this path, Zhao could have written epic works akin to Ding Ling’s *The Sun Shines on Sanggan River* and Zhou Libo’s *The Storm*. He could have found his place among authors writing about rural themes during the 1950s and 60s. Regrettably, Zhao Shuli did not form a clear awareness of his own breakthroughs; even more regrettable is that critics like Zhou Yang did not recognize the significance of the “ordinary speech akin to the tone of the novel”²⁴ in Zhao’s works. On the contrary, critics lamented the loss of Zhao’s earlier “folk” style that was present in his earlier classics *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* and *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk*. In Zhou Yang’s *On Zhao Shuli’s Creation*, he compared Zhao’s three works and concluded that *Changes in Lijiazhuang* admittedly “touched upon many important events that occurred in Shanxi during the Second Sino-Japanese War and included realistic historical and political content. The author made a noble effort here. But this novel has not reached the heights that it should have. It pales in comparison to the accomplishments of *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* and *Li Youcai’s Clapper Talk*. Those works are more complete, more refined.”²⁵

As the creator of “Zhao Shuli Direction,” Zhou Yang, on the one hand, bestowed Zhao’s work with meaning. On the other hand, his critiques also limited Zhao’s creative potential. The winner and loser here is Zhou Yang. In Zhou’s view, the reason that *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* is a masterpiece that transcends

Bookstore, June 1949 edition.

23 Edited by Huang Xiuji: *Zhao Shuli’s Research Materials*, pp. 454, 522, 431, 463, *Beiyue Literature and Arts Publishing House*, 1985 edition.

24 Quan Lin and Ge Qin: *Changes in Lijiazhuang*, in *Selected Readings of Literary Works*, Sanlian Bookstore, June 1949 edition.

25 Zhou Yang: *On Zhao Shuli’s Works*, earliest publication in Zhangjiakou’s *Great Wall* magazine in July 1946; August 26 publication in Yan’an’s *Liberation Daily*; September edition of *Beijing Magazine*; October edition of *Northeast Culture*, published in succession.

the times is because the novel is an ode to the new society: “Is the author here singing the praises of free love? No! He is singing the praises of a new society (in which peasants can finally enjoy the right to love freely), of the victory of the peasants (who have started to take control of their destiny by recognizing the struggle for a better life), of their enlightenment, of progressive values over ignorance, backwardness, superstition, and last and most importantly, of peasants over feudal powers.”²⁶ Zhou Yang repeats the once-popular theme that he once bestowed on Lu Yi’s *White Haired Girl*: “The old society turns people into ghosts, and the new society turns ghosts back into people.” Interpreting *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage* as an ode to the new society transcends the “outdated” May Fourth era theme of “free love,” but when Zhou Yang interpreted the liberation of Chinese villages and peasants as a victory of external military and political forces, he completely ignored the peasant class’ internal consciousness of “liberation” and “emancipation.” As the Japanese scholar Tōru Sunouchi pointed out in *Characteristics of Zhao Shuli’s Works*, Zhao’s writing does not take place after the awakening of modern self-consciousness. His peasants who “live and work in peace and contentment, leisurely and carefree,” “are nothing but shadows of social significance and historical value,” “new government and decrees arrive like saviors. The path automatically opens up.”²⁷ But the birth of the historical subject’s consciousness is the “people’s consciousness” – and the core and foundation of the “Talks”.

In his July 1945 report “On the Party” for the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party, Liu Shaoqi clearly pointed out: “The people’s liberation can only be achieved, strengthened, and maintained if the people struggle and fight for themselves; it is not something that those outside of the masses can bestow upon them, nor is it something that outsiders can strive for on behalf of the masses. Therefore, the idea that outsiders can bestow something or struggle on behalf of the masses is wrong.”²⁸ As an author who writes about peasants yet also

26 Zhou Yang: *On Zhao Shuli’s Works*, earliest publication in Zhangjiakou’s *Great Wall* magazine in July 1946; August 26 publication in Yan’an’s *Liberation Daily*; September edition of *Beijing Magazine*; October edition of *Northeast Culture*, published in succession.

27 Edited by Huang Xiuji: *Zhao Shuli’s Research Materials*, pp. 454, 522, 431, 463, *Beiyue Literature and Arts Publishing House*, 1985 edition.

28 From April 23 to June 1, 1945, the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China was held in Yan’an. At the meeting, Liu Shaoqi presented a report on the revision of the party constitution. This report was renamed “On the Party” by the author in January 1950 and was published by

insists on “realism,” it is not surprising that Zhao Shuli could not comprehend the significance of such an abstract historical subject. What is really surprising is that Zhou Yang, the leader of the literary and art front who is known for his knowledge of Marxist literary theory, could so narrowly miss this “dialectical materialism”!

In 1970, the Shanxi Provincial Higher People’s Court was ordered to set up the “Zhao Shuli Task Force.” Zhao was isolated for interrogation and tortured to death. Before his death, Zhao, with two ribs broken by the rebels, enduring severe pain, wrote out Chairman Mao’s “Ode to the Plum Blossom”《卜算子·咏梅》and solemnly handed it to his daughter Zhao Guangjian, stating: “Little one, if one day in the future you meet the Party leader, give this to him for me, for he will understand what I mean.”²⁹ This “Party leader” – the image that appeared in Zhao Shuli’s mind as he was dying – is actually Zhou Yang, Zhao’s godfather and mentor. What Zhao did not know was that Zhou, who had been one of the prominent leaders of the CCP’s literary and artistic front since Yan’an, had since become the “chieftain” and “ancestor” of “the black line” of literature and arts from the 1930s through 60s, and had lost his freedom. Zhou Yang’s support of Zhao Shuli had become one of his greatest crimes, and the theme he penned for the Lu Xun Art Institute’s opera “White Haired Girl” – “the old society turned people into ghosts, the new society turned ghosts back into people” – had been thoroughly criticized. In 1965 the Shanghai Dance School’s ballet adaptation of *White Haired Girl* went through many changes and eventually became the representative “model opera” of the Cultural Revolution. A critic wrote in the *People’s Daily* of the new political and aesthetic pursuit in the *White Haired Girl*: “A red line representing class struggle runs through the *White Haired Girl*, and through its vivid characterization, reveals to the audience that the heavily oppressed peasants have never yielded; they fought stubbornly and bravely! Under the leadership of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party of China, the broad masses of revolutionary peasants took up the gun, waged armed struggles to seize power, and constantly expanded the ranks of the fighting, moving from one victory to another and continuously pushing the revolution forwards!”³⁰

People's Publishing House. *Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi* (Part 1), p. 351, People's Publishing House, 1981 edition.

29 Zhao Guangjian: “Recalling My Father Zhao Shuli,” *Shanxi Daily*, October 22, 1978.

30 Chen Huangmei: “Towards Zhao Shuli,” *People's Daily*, August 10, 1947.

4. “Farmers” and “People”

Although Chen Huangmei always put the “politics” of Zhao Shuli’s works first when considering and defining the “Zhao Shuli Direction,” the real iconic feature of Zhao’s works is the that “Zhao’s works live in the mouths of the masses. His writing created a lively new national form that was welcomed by the masses.”³¹ Compared to the “Talks”’ in-depth expositions on the “popularization” of literature and art and the need for writers and artists to direct their thoughts, feelings, and stances at the masses, I believe we can bid farewell to the May Fourth writer’s dream of having their works sold at newsstands. Zhao, who wrote for the masses and served the peasants, who was repeatedly promoted by literary authorities such as Zhou Yang, Guo Moruo, and Mao Dun, was pushed to the opposite end of May Fourth literature, becoming the model of the spirit of the “Talks”.

When expressing his creative principles, Zhao placed “what the people like to see” in front of “political purpose,” and always regarded the former as a prerequisite for the latter.³² According to his recollections, it was in 1934 that Zhao consciously began to use “popularization” as a revolutionary service. He was deeply invested in the discussion about popularization of literature and art by the Shanghai “Left League,” and penned many articles advocating for it. Before the Second Sino-Japanese War, Zhao published various types of works totaling two to three hundred thousand words in length, mostly of popular literature and art. In the winter of 1941, at a symposium on literature and art held by the Taihang Anti-Japanese District, Zhao loudly championed for popularization. After the publication of *Xiao Er’s Black Marriage*, an article critiqued Zhao for writing a meaningless love story while the country was currently at war with the Japanese. Prior to reading the “Talks”, Zhao had evidently been under serious pressure in his creations. After the “Talks” was published, Zhao, like a desert blessed with rain, proudly stated that at last, Chairman Mao had “approved” and “recognized” him. He became deeply attached to the “Talks” and studied them repeatedly. Ultimately, with his incredible memory, Zhao was able to memorize the entire twen-

31 Chen Huangmei: “Towards Zhao Shuli,” *People’s Daily*, August 10, 1947.

32 Gong Dun: “Discussing the Adaptation of the Ballet “White Haired Girl”, *People’s Daily*, June 11, 1967.

ty-thousand character work, word by word.”³³

Wang Chun, lifelong friend of Zhao, stated in the article “How Zhao Shuli Became a Writer” that Zhao’s family and childhood environment bestowed him with three lifelong treasures: an understanding of the pain of the peasants, a familiarity with all aspects of peasants’ knowledge, habits, and sentiments, and finally, a proficiency with peasant art.”³⁴ “Writing for the peasants” was always Zhao’s conscious pursuit. His intended readers are rural audiences with little to no culture and literacy. “I myself would rather not file suit against the literary world, nor will I change my views. As long as the masses can understand and enjoy it, then I have achieved my goal.”³⁵

The problem with Zhao Shuli is that he interpreted the “Talks”’ “serving the people” – specifically, “serving the workers, peasants and soldiers” – as merely “serving the peasants.” Zhao Shuli devoted his entire life to writing rural stories for peasants. However, the “people,” the “workers, peasants and soldiers” referenced in the “Talks” were not the “peasants” that Zhao traditionally understood them to be, nor were they real-life “peasants.” The “people” are a new historical subject, led by the “imaginary community” of the proletariat. “Since our literature and art are essentially for the workers, peasants, and soldiers, then “popularization” must refer to popularizing literature and art among the workers, peasants, and soldiers. And “improvement” must improve the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers.”³⁶

In other words, according to the logic of the “Talks”, if “literature” is a tool with which to “organize” peasants and create a new historical subject, then it cannot be used to serve old peasants or satisfy their lowly tastes. Evidently, the “peasant” referred to here is a modern invention, and can only acquire meaning through the “people” or “workers, peasants, and soldiers” of the “imaginary community.” Hu Qiaomu once recalled this period of history as such: “In Yan’an, Chairman Mao put forth the slogan of organizing. Organizing was not meant to

33 Dai Guangzhong: *Biography of Zhao Shuli* pp. 174, 275, 175, 157, Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 1987 edition.

34 Wang Chun: “How did Zhao Shuli become a writer?”, *People's Daily*, January 16, 1949.

35 Dai Guangzhong: *Biography of Zhao Shuli* pp. 174, 275, 175, 157, Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 1987 edition.

36 Mao Zedong: “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Volume 3), pp. 859, 859, 862, People's Publishing House, 1991 edition.

defend the peasants, but rather a means to transform them. Mao consistently held this belief, and we saw all the important transformations of the 1940s that happened as a result.”³⁷

Because of this lack of understanding of the “the people” and “the workers, peasants, and soldiers” of the “general historical consciousness,” Zhao failed to comprehend the “people’s dialectics” and historical logic of the “Talks”. “Chairman Mao wants us to ‘go to the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers, and stay with them for a long time, unconditionally, and wholeheartedly.’ I have faithfully done this, for a long time, unconditionally, and wholeheartedly.” “I don’t dare to claim that my experience conforms with the spirit of Chairman Mao’s literary theory. I can only say that I subjectively followed the spirit of Mao’s literary theory. I bring this up to solicit comments from my comrades.”³⁸ Of course, Zhao Shuli’s persistence does not reflect “Chairman Mao’s theory of literature and art,” because in a socialist country with a “proletarian dictatorship,” the true historical subject is the “working class”, not the “peasant class.” Mao pointed out in his 1949 essay “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship”: “A serious problem we face is educating the peasants. Their economy is scattered, and according to the Russians’ experience, it will take a long time and careful work to socialize the peasants. Without peasant socialization, there will be no consolidated national socialism. The process of peasant socialization must be compatible with the development of a powerful industry dominated by state-owned enterprises. A country under the people’s democratic dictatorship must resolve the problem of national industrialization step by step.”³⁹

Zhao Shuli, as a result, was backed into a corner. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Party leadership asked Zhao to change the subject matter of his novels from the countryside to the factory. He obeyed the order, of course. Soon after arriving in Beijing, he showed up at a small atomizer manufacturing factory to experience what life was like and collect material for his writing. He believed that the factory was the same as the countryside; everyone ate, lived, and worked the same. Zhao carefully and silently observed the day-to-

37 “Hu Qiaomu’s Memory of Mao Zedong,” pp. 60 and 7, People’s Publishing House, 1994 edition.

38 Zhao Shuli: “On “Long” – An Experience of Going Down to the Countryside,” *People’s Literature*, August 1960.

39 Mao Zedong: “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” (June 30, 1949) *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Volume IV), p. 1477, People’s Publishing House, 1991 edition.

day life there and slowly began to understand it. But this outdated method did not work. The workers were busy with work during the day and had no time to chat; after work, they all went their own separate ways. There was hardly any chance to talk, and it was not easy to get involved, let alone discuss anything in depth with them. Zhao Shuli/Li Youcai had no chance to “speak” at all! Feeling dejected, Zhao had to turn around. “This road is too unfamiliar; I want to turn back and go down the familiar path back to the countryside.”⁴⁰

Zhao Shuli did not realize that the issue he faced was not of subject matter, but rather of “worldview.” Zhao Shuli’s artistic choices confirmed a phenomenon criticized by the *Speech*: “Because they have not figured out who to write for, there is no accurate standard for popularization and improvement, so of course there is no correct relationship between the two.”⁴¹ Zhao Shuli always believed that “popularization” was more important than “improvement.” He believed that the Chinese people of the day had two emotional realms and two creative states. On the stage was a tablecloth, a chair cover, and drums, and a musician began to play his instrument; the stilt walker and bamboo horses opened the stage, and the crowds immediately entered the realm of the arts and those who accepted the new arts tradition could not admit that there was any real art in there. The piano top was lifted, the chorus stood in line, and the readers came out with the script. New art lovers immediately entered the realm of the arts, while those who had yet to experience this type of tradition mostly listened and stared, unable to find any magic in there.” He advocated that the latter should learn from the former.⁴² Though Zhao admitted that the three traditions embodied in modern Chinese literature (ancient, folk, May Fourth New Culture Movement and foreign literature) should be integrated and combined, he always believed that out of the three, folk literature should be regarded as the most legitimate tradition. But he completely failed to understand that socialist literature and “modern world literature” were of the same kind.

Zhao Shuli saw that the “Talks” emphasized the importance of “popularization” and took the practice into his own hands, but did not realize that the “Talks”’ emphasis on “popularization” was in the context of its dialectical relationship

40 Zhao Shuli: "Determined to Go to the Masses", *People's Daily*, May 22, 1952.

41 Mao Zedong: "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Volume 3), pp. 859, 859, 862, People's Publishing House, 1991 edition.

42 Zhao Shuli: "Revisiting the "Popularization" Work," *Beijing Daily*, June 16, 1957.

-- both in opposition to and unified with – the concept of “improvement.” The “Talks” made this clear:

“Popularization work and improvement work cannot be completely separated. Not only is it possible for some excellent works to be popularized now, but also the cultural level of the masses is improving. If popularization work stops at one level forever, then one month, two months, three months, a year or two or three from now, it will always be the same “Cattle Grazing,” the same “people, hands, mouths, knives, cows, sheep.” In that case, then, don’t the educator and the educated become six of one and half a dozen of the other? What, then, becomes of the significance of the popularization work? When the people demand popularization, they will also demand improvement, and the demand will increase year by year and month by month. Here, popularization is the popularization of the people, and improvement is also the improvement of the people. And this kind of improvement does not come out of thin air, nor does it happen from behind closed doors; it happens with the help of popularization. This improvement is determined by popularization, and at the same time improvement provides guidance for popularization. [. . .] Therefore, our improvement is an improvement with the help of popularization; our popularization is popularization under the guidance of improvement. Because of this, what we call popularization work is not only a hindrance to improvement, but also a foundation for the currently limited scope of improvement, and a necessary condition for preparing for a larger and broader scope of improvement work in the future.”⁴³

The “cattle grazing” mentioned in the “Talks” originates from an incident from the second day of the Yan’an Art Forum. Once a member of the “Creation Press” and “Hurricane Press,” Ke Zhongping was the longtime leader of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningbo People’s Theater Troupe, which toured and performed in many villages. He led the Troupe down the path of popularization, and their performances were widely well-received in the border areas. From within the big drama-loving Yan’an literary and arts world, and the environment of public opinion that criticized “closing the door to improvement,” Ke proudly stated: “Through performing big dramas for the past two years, many people have forgotten the small dramas that the common people used to love. Our People’s

43 Mao Zedong: “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Volume 3), pp. 859, 859, 862, People's Publishing House, 1991 edition.

Theater Troupe will thus perform “Cattle Grazing.” Do you look down on “Cattle Grazing”? The common people love it. When the Troupe departed from the villages, the masses reluctantly bid us farewell and sent us many condolences. Where can you find our Theater Troupe? How do you find us? Just follow the trail of eggshells, peanut shells, fruit peels, and date pits. We can’t eat it all; our pockets, luggage, and saddlebags are stuffed.” The immense pleasure on his face caused great laughter among the audience. Mao Zedong himself also chuckled and interjected: “After eating the people’s eggs of appreciation, you must serve the people well in return. You must come up with better programs to perform for them, and don’t be too arrogant or self-satisfied. If you only perform “Cattle Grazing,” then you won’t have any more eggs to eat.”⁴⁴

Mao not only inadvertently predicted the fate of the People’s Theater Troupe, he also predicted the future of Zhao Shuli. Mao believed that it was necessary to correct any trends in literature and art that did not exhibit “popularization,” but if literature and art were to stop at “popularization,” without “gradually improving over time,” “only performing “Cattle Grazing,” then naturally it will be abandoned by the times. In the dialectical relationship between “popularization” and “improvement” in the “Talks”, “improvement” is the purpose of “popularization,” and “popularization” is only the basis and intermediary for “improvement.” “Popularization” is “power,” and “improvement” is “economics.” Zhao’s lack of recognition of this dialectical relationship resulted in his essentialist understanding of “popularization” of literature and art, as well as his “paranoia” against folk literature and art. After the Cultural Revolution, Sun Li spoke of his feelings about Zhao:

During this period [post-Chinese Communist Liberation: writer’s note], Zhao’s love for folk literature and art veered close to paranoia. He compared and contrasted the various new literary forms developed after the May Fourth movement with each other. That was unnecessary. The folk form is only one of many forms of literature. It is because of long-term backwards feudalism that the vast numbers of peasants in China are unable to improve their culture, compared to the urban intellectuals. No form has inherent superiority, nor is it set in stone. Literary forms must be gradually developed and mutually absorb and be pushed

44 See Ai Kesi: “Comrade Mao Zedong’s “Speech at the Yan’an Literary Symposium”: Before and After,” *Liberation Army Daily*, May 5, 1992.

forward by each other.

Popular folk literature and art comes in many different shapes and sizes as well. Literature and art should be popular, but the popular does not necessarily have to become literature and art. Zhao’s later works are clearly inspired by Song Dynasty Story-tellers’ Prompt books and later imitations of Prompt books. Zhao appears to have become more and more obsessed with this form over time. This form typically takes the shape of a slow-moving story with little momentum that displays one’s wisdom through its many details of life. Therefore, the whole story feels spread out and inconsequential, without much depth. The simple and straightforward style of ancient Chinese novels is completely unlike this.⁴⁵

Zhao Shuli’s fate is undoubtedly a tragedy. In 1968, during the climax of the criticism against Zhao, a student from the Chinese Department of Shanxi University paid a secret visit to him. Zhao looked at him suspiciously and asked: “Peasant boy, do you believe that my works harmed the villagers or educated them?” “I am most afraid that the peasants will call me a gangster; I spent my whole life writing for them!”⁴⁶ Zhao’s confusion and grievances moved others. With false statements piling up against him, Zhao urged the departments to “as an academic issue, use the Chairman’s Talks and related documents as the yardstick with which to conduct a thorough investigation,” and that “I believe this process is like playing cards. When playing Mahjong, it is common to stack the wrong cards together, but after a few rounds you can make it up. I’m willing to wait until the last shuffling of the deck before being scrutinized.”⁴⁷ But Zhao evidently did not make it until that day. This “peasant writer” who regarded himself as a practitioner of the “Talks” for his entire life, and always firmly believed that he stood on the same side as the “Talks,” eventually became just another tragic figure lost in the flood of history. Once the logic of the modern device of “historical dialectics” unfolds, it cannot be contained. It can not only crush the “other” and the “enemy,” but also backfire on itself, even its own children.

The spectral figure of Zhao Shuli is reflected in the mirror of the “Talks” as a translucent body with subtle details. Conversely, the ups and downs of “Zhao

45 Sun Li: “Talking about Zhao Shuli,” *Tianjin Daily*, January 4, 1979.

46 Zhao Guangjian: “In front of the old house - Recalling my father Zhao Shuli,” edited by Gao Jie, *Recalling Zhao Shuli*, p. 53, Shanxi People's Publishing House, 1985 edition.

47 Li Mengyu, Wen Fengqiao: “A Fish Out of Water: On Zhao Shuli after the Founding of the People's Republic of China,” http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cb0c8830100086e.html.

Shuli Direction” have given us an unprecedented perspective with which to re-think and understand the true meaning of the “Talks”.

Perhaps the biggest problem with Zhou Yang and company’s creation of the “Zhao Shuli Direction” is the simplification of the meaning of the “Talks”. This “simplification” not only reflects that the advocates of “Zhao Shuli Direction” failed to truly understand the “historical dialectics” of the “Talks” and that they only understood the “Talks” from its perspective on “literary arts.” When they interpreted Zhao’s works as a successful practice of the “Talks”, they regarded the “Talks” as a method for literary creation. Their questions were limited to discussing how writers and artists should establish their own political positions, artistic styles, and reader orientation. In reality, in the seventy-odd years since the publication of the “Talks”, the representative discourse on the meaning of the “Talks” – whether it insists that the “Talks” be deemed as period-defining and a universal literary and arts principle that will never become outdated, or that the “Talks” were a literary policy born out of the specific context of wartime – should all be abandoned during this peacetime era because they overly emphasize the politics and neglect the artistry . . . These seemingly diametrically opposed views share and tacitly agree on a common premise, that the proponents of “Zhao Shuli Direction” regard the “Talks” as a literary policy or literary program – even a mode of creation. But if we restore the historical context of the publication of the “Talks”, and then examine the dissemination and practice of this work over the past half century, then we can easily find that the “Talks” is not a work that is purely concerned with literature and arts or “aesthetics.” In fact, its main concern is not so much the “politicization” of literature and art, but rather a cultural and political practice in the name of “literature and art.”

By understanding the “Yan’an Road” as a unique road to modernity⁴⁸, “Yan’an Literature and Arts,” no matter its theoretical conceptualization or its profound influence on history and production, is no longer just a choice of literature and art, so there is no set of so-called “aesthetic” standards that it judges by. This is the real reason why the “Talks” and Yan’an’s literature and arts/cultural politics practice has been continuously ghosted by seventy years of Chinese literature or literary and arts research.

48 See Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Harvard University Press (1993).

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