

History's View of "Yan'an Literature and Art": Reinterpretation of the Contemporary Value of "Yan'an Literature and Art"

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Abstract

As one of the most important spiritual legacies of left-wing literature and art, Yan'an literature and art holds an extremely important position in the history of both modern Chinese and modern world literature and art. The cultural, ideological, and artistic vitality of Yan'an literature and art has only grown. Yan'an literature and art has not only survived repeated "farewell" attempts, but also, the more it is cleansed by time, the more radiantly brilliant it appears. Thus, analyzing Yan'an literature and art can be done from a variety of theoretical perspectives. However, from this author's limited reading, research on this issue often centers around several classic works, such as Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" and "On New Democracy." Objectively speaking, these classic works are what laid the foundation for the ideas and theories surrounding Yan'an literature and art. Their attraction to scholars, therefore, is not only natural, but also inevitable. But as far as research is concerned, overly fixing one's sights on one particular point not only produces thorough and detailed analysis, but can also easily result in

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the homogenization of research and even the ossification of critical thinking. Thus, the author believes that in order to analyze the rich cultural legacy of Yan'an literature and art, in addition to focusing on collecting and researching the classic works, there also needs to be a broadening of historical perspective and academic scope in order to activate the cultural, ideological, and artistic vitality contained within Yan'an literature and art.

Keywords

speech, contemporary value, New Democracy, spiritual legacy

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As one of the most important spiritual legacies of left-wing art, Yan'an literature and art holds an extremely important position in the history of both modern Chinese and modern world literature and art. The cultural, ideological, and artistic vitality of Yan'an literature and art has only grown. Yan'an literature and art has not only survived repeated farewell attempts, but also, the more it is cleansed by time, the more resplendently it shines. Thus, analyzing Yan'an literature and art can be done from a variety of theoretical perspectives. However, for authors who have limited reading, research on this issue often centers around several classic works, such as Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" and "On New Democracy." Objectively speaking, these classic works are what laid the foundation for the ideas and theories surrounding Yan'an literature and art. Their attraction to scholars, therefore, is not only natural, but also inevitable. But as far as research is concerned, overly fixing one's sights on one particular point not only produces thorough and detailed analysis, but can also easily result in the homogenization of research and even the ossification of critical thinking. Thus, the author believes that in order to analyze the rich cultural legacy of Yan'an literature and art, in addition to focusing on collecting and researching the classic works, there also needs to be a broadening of historical perspective and academic scope in order to activate the cultural, ideological, and artistic vitality contained within Yan'an literature and art.

In this essay, the author plans to place Yan'an literature and art in the rela-

tively broad historical perspective of “the debate on the nature of Chinese society,”¹ because only in this historical vein can we further liberate the ideological underpinnings of classic works like Mao Zedong’s “On New Democracy” and “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.” Therefore, placing Yan’an literature and art in a more scientific position for observation is more conducive to deepening our understanding of it. For this reason, it is imperative to revisit this debate that significantly impacted Chinese society at the time.

Inquiry into the nature of Chinese society began with Lenin and created a debate in the Soviet Union that served as a distant backdrop for related debates in China.² However, due to the close relationship between this question and the Chinese revolution, these theories blossomed slowly with the turns of the Chinese revolution. The first turning point was the failure of the First Revolutionary Civil War. At the Sixth National Party Congress in Moscow in July 1928, when summing up the gains and losses of the First Revolutionary Civil War, the members analyzed China’s social and political conditions and concluded that “China’s current status is a semi-colonial society,” and “the current Chinese economic and political system should be defined as a semi-feudal system,”³ and accordingly defined the nature of the Chinese revolution as a bourgeois-democratic revolution whose objective was to oppose imperialism and feudalism. As soon as this thesis was put forward, it received opposition by Chen Duxiu, who represented the Chinese Trotskyists. On July 28, August 5, and August 11, 1929, Chen Duxiu wrote three consecutive letters to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, in which he reached completely different judgments than the Sixth National Congress on the nature of Chinese society, class relations, and

1 “The problem of the nature of Chinese society” is the general term for a far-reaching debate launched by Chinese ideological circles around the 1930s, particularly in leftist ideological circles, to clarify China’s reality and find a revolutionary path. The most brilliant outcome of this debate is “On New Democracy.”

2 In articles like “China’s Democracy and Populism” and “Imperialism is the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” Lenin identified modern China as a “backward, semi-feudal agricultural country,” “semi-colonial country,” and “semi-independent country.” He further pointed out that such a country is a “typical ‘intermediate’ form” and a “transitional country.” Trotsky and others did not agree with Lenin’s judgment, causing controversy within the Soviet Union.

3 “Resolution of the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on Land Issues” (July 1928), published in *Chinese Rural Areas Before Liberation*, Volume 1, pp. 22-24, China Prospect Press, 1985 edition.

the nature, situation, and undertakings of the Chinese revolution. Chen Duxiu wrote: "The revolution of 1925—27, despite its failure and inability to complete its goals, will never lose its historical significance, for it started a major period of transformation in Chinese history. The characteristic of this transition period is the transformation of class relations. The bourgeoisie were victorious, rose to an advantageous political position, received concessions and help from imperialism, and increased its class strength."⁴ He also wrote: "China's feudal remnants have undergone long-term erosion by commercial capital. Since global capitalism invaded China, the conflicting forms of capitalism have spread into the countryside. The entire peasant society's economic structure is dominated by the commodity economy, but it is evident that the rural economy cannot dominate the city. The fundamental conflict between the feudal class and the bourgeoisie's economic interests, such as the lord-serfdom system, has already ceased to exist."⁵ In other words, Chen Duxiu believed not only that Chinese politics had become capitalist, but also that capitalism occupied a dominant position in the economy. From this premise, Chen Duxiu naturally concluded that "the previous revolutionary climax has passed, and the latter one has yet to arrive, nor are there signs that it will arrive," thus only a "lawful movement" can be carried out.⁶

Chen Duxiu's remarks naturally triggered group criticism, leading Chen and others to engage in countercriticism. In this cycle of criticism and countercriticism, the controversy gradually escalated and overflowed in the party, surpassing the organizational form, taking the *New Trend of Thoughts* and *Momentum* magazines as the main positions, forming two schools of thought.⁷ Both sides

4 Chen Duxiu, "Letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Issue of the Chinese Revolution," (excerpt), in *The Controversy on Issues Regarding the Nature of Chinese Society – Selected Materials*, edited by Gao Jun, p. 79, People's Publishing House, 1984 edition.

5 Ibid, p. 78

6 Ibid, p. 86, 87.

7 "New Thoughts" was originally a magazine published by the Creation Press. After the establishment of the Chinese Social Scientists Union ("Social Union"), it became an organization publication of the Social Union and presented one of the theoretical positions of leftist social science workers. In the debate on the nature of Chinese society, "New Thoughts" published a series influential articles such as Pan Dongzhou's "The Nature of China's Economy," Wu Liping's "Chinese Land Issues," and Wang Xuewen's "The Status and Development of Chinese Capitalism in the Chinese Economy and its Future." As a result, this group became known as the Criticism School. "Movement" was a magazine founded by Yan Lingfeng in July 1930. Because Yan Lingfeng was the representative of this school of thought—Trotskyism—this group is called the Movement School.

launched fierce arguments on whether the nature of Chinese society was capitalist or semi-feudal and semi-colonial. The arguments developed into a major debate within the realm of ideology.

Both sides agreed on the major changes that the entry of foreign capitalism/imperialism into China had brought on modern Chinese society, but their understandings of the role that foreign capitalism/imperialism played in Chinese society and economy were different. The Movement School emphasized the opposition between imperialism and feudalism and the unity between imperialism and Chinese capitalism. They believed the role that imperialism played in the development of Chinese capitalism was to promote it, rather than obstruct it. Yan Lingfeng believed, “ever since world history developed to this new stage—the imperialist period, on the contrary, not only did not preserve feudal power, but also accelerated the development of colonial capitalist production methods.”⁸ The Criticism School emphasized the duality of imperialism’s role in China’s economy: on the one hand, imperialism destroyed the self-sufficient natural economy and created specific capitalist production structures in China, but more importantly, imperialism’s entry into China did not help the independent development of Chinese capitalism, but rather made China dependent. Moreover, an important method it employed was using China’s feudal power. Therefore, it “not only eliminated feudalism in the countryside, but also intensified its exploitation.”⁹

Regarding feudalism’s status in Chinese society, the two schools are also tit-for-tat. The Movement School denied that feudal power was still influential in Chinese society, believing that due to the encroachment made by the commodity economy, China’s “old-style landlords” had long disappeared with their companions, “old-style peasants.” According to them, the current landlords were national capitalists, businessmen, and loan sharks. They were “new-style landlords”, capitalist landlords. There was essentially no difference between their exploitation of peasants and the exploitation of workers by urban capitalists. Ren Shu clearly declared: “The main problem of China’s land is not feudal, but capitalist.”¹⁰ The

8 Yan Lingfeng, “Is China a Capitalist Economy or a Feudal Economy?” in *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society – Selected Works*, p. 366, edited by Gao Jun.

9 Liu Mengyun, “Research on the Nature of China’s Economy,” in *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society – Selected Works*, p. 529. Liu Mengyun is Zhang Wentian’s pen name.

10 Ren Shu, “Introduction to Chinese Economic Studies,” (excerpt) in *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society*, p. 481.

Criticism School, on the other hand, pointed out that the actual situation in the countryside was as such: "Land concentrated in the hands of the landlord class is not being cultivated by hired laborers with new machinery, but rather is being chopped up into small pieces and leased to landless peasants. . . the essential sign of capitalist landlords is using new production technology and hiring wage laborers to till their own land. However, Chinese landlords do not share this sign. . ." ¹¹ The Criticism School's view that commercial capital's ownership of land demonstrated the disintegration of feudal relations and the development of capitalist relations. The Criticism School instead held that "under the rule of feudalism, if commercial capital were to invest in the land, it can only utilize old feudal methods of exploiting peasants," ¹² therefore, "this is not the 'capitalization of capitalists,' but rather the feudalization of capitalists." ¹³

On the issue of the development of Chinese capitalism, the Criticism School proceeded from the premise that imperialism absolutely destroyed feudalism, and naturally concluded that Chinese capitalism had "developed to the extent of replacing the feudal economy Ancient y and dominating the economic life of China." Ren Shu used sailboats and private banks to represent feudalism, and steamships and banks to represent capitalism. The numbers advantage of the latter over the former confirmed the superiority of Chinese capitalism over feudalism. Despite the "numbers" basis, the Movement School could not deny that the development of Chinese capitalism was extremely limited. As such, it put forth the argument that "Eastern and Western capitalism" should "be treated equally," claiming: "Although China has been reduced to a colony, we must not deny the advantageous development of capitalism in the national economy. We cannot push imperialist factories, enterprises, mines, railroads, etc. onto the national economy." ¹⁴ They also put forth the concept of "Chinese economic leadership", believing that China's urban capitalist economy had dominated the rural agricultural economy. The Criticism School questioned the Movement School's core idea that "Eastern and Western capitalism" should "be treated equally". It pointed out that when studying the development of China's capitalist economy, "it

11 Liu Mengyun, "Research on the Nature of China's Economy," p. 552.

12 Wu Liping, "China's Land Issues," in *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society – Selected Works*, p. 242.

13 Liu Mengyun, "Research on the Nature of China's Economy," p. 553.

14 Yan Lingfeng, "Is China a Capitalist Economy or a Feudal Economy?," p. 366.

is okay to treat the economic development of imperialism in China as the development of China's capitalist economy to a certain extent." However, "we cannot deny that there are contradictions within these ideas, that there are no differences in their nature or status. From a scientific perspective, Chinese and foreign capitalism should be divided into the conqueror (the imperialist Chinese economy) and the conquered (the Chinese national capitalist economy) as two separate forms to consider. More importantly, we must understand the reality that the imperialist economy oppressed the development of the Chinese national capitalist economy. It cannot be said that Chinese and foreign capitalism is the same as large and small businesses. Rather, 'in terms of the relationship between the two capitalist systems, there is only a quantitative difference, not a qualitative difference' (Yan Lingfeng: *Pursuit and Counterattack* p. 138).¹⁵ The Criticism School also brought up, regarding the question of "China's economic leadership", that: Under imperialist oppression, China's "transitional economy" had "no economic component that could assume the dominant position. The declining feudal economy could not be dominant, and the abnormal development of national capitalism (during the third period of the economic crisis, there was threat of total collapse!) was also not enough to dominate the entire national economy. Similarly, the declining feudal economy could not lead the reproduction process of the national economy, and the national capitalist economy, which itself was oppressed and dominated by the imperialist economy, could not lead the reproduction process of the national economy either. In reality, the imperialist economy was the dominant economy, and also the leader. The Chinese economy was clearly in a subservient position and had become subordinate to several imperialist nations".¹⁶

Due to the acuteness and urgency of the problem, the start of the debate on the nature of Chinese society – "analyzing the relationship between imperialism, feudalism, and national capitalism" – brought along the debate on Chinese history – "analyzing the ins and outs of modern Chinese society through tracing history."¹⁷ The debate mainly revolved around three interrelated issues—the question

15 Liu Suhua, "The Development of China's Capitalist Economy," in *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society – Selected Works*, p. 751.

16 Liu Suhua, "Material Dialectics and Yang Lingfeng," in *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society – Selected Works*, p. 734.

17 Edited by Committee for Collection of Party History Materials of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China, *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*,

of the "Asian mode of production," the question of whether slavery ever existed in China, and the question of the nature of Chinese society post-Qin/Han and pre-Opium War.

Guo Moruo was the first to speak out in China regarding the question of the "Asian mode of production." In *Social Change and Ideological Reflection During the Spring and Autumn Period*, published on August 5, 1928, Guo wrote that "Asian" referred to "ancient, primitive societies of the commons." Later, in the 1936 second issue of *Cultural Relics*, Guo revised his views in his essay *New Understandings of the Stages of Social Development*. He proposed that the "Asian mode of production," or "Eastern society," is a new form of "patriarchy" or clan property. As soon as Guo's views were published, they received fierce criticism. Du Weizhi said, "China did not go through a stage as a slave society, nor did it go through a stage as an Eastern society. The transition from feudalism to capitalism occurred during the demise of the clan society, and incorporated feudal relations, slave labor, and capitalist relations." This not only denies the existence of the Asian mode of production and slavery in Chinese history, but also denies the general pattern of development in world history. Li Ji cited Plekhanov's "geographic-environmental determinism" in arguing that the Asian mode of production was based on different geographical environments and appeared after the demise of the primitive clan society, as coexisting with ancient Greek and Roman slavery, an independently existing social and economic form that preceded feudal society. Hu Qiu held that "if there is an Asian mode of production, then it is autocratic serfdom," believing that China was an Asian society from the Qin Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty, and that "the foundation of Chinese society prior to the British invasion was pre-capitalist Asian production."¹⁸ He believed that the Asian mode of production was just a special form of feudalism in the East (China, India, etc.)—a form of pre-capitalism.

Even today, the Asian mode of production is still a matter worthy of research. However, as far as the debate was concerned at the time, the Marxist social scientists represented by Guo Moruo worked hard to incorporate China into the Marxist general development of human history. They argued that though Chinese society had its own unique aspects, the uniqueness was typical under

Knowledge Press, 1987 edition, p. 62.

18 Hu Qiuyuan, "Asian Mode of Production and Despotism," quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 53.

this pattern of development. Thus, the future of the Chinese revolution also conformed to general Marxist patterns. Those on the other side of the debate denied the way China's development conformed to patterns in world history, thus denying that the Chinese revolution was headed from democracy towards socialism. It is this major disagreement that led to their divergence on the question of the Asian mode of production, and also led to their inability to see eye-to-eye on another major issue—whether a slave society existed in Chinese history.

Regarding the question of whether there has been a slave society, most are denialists, whether they are Soviet or Japanese or Chinese researchers. Guo Moruo was the one who “broke the official school's thousands of years' of ‘neglect’, ‘change’, and ‘misinterpretation’ of ancient Chinese history Writing”.¹⁹ In *Research on Ancient Chinese Society*, Guo conducted in-depth research on the social economy, political system, and ideology of the Zhou Dynasty through examining cultural relics. He put forth the “Theory of Slavery in the Western Zhou.” When this viewpoint was first put forth, it received great disapproval from many historians, but in 1937, Han Gezhi stated that “new foreign historians of China have almost all started with Guo's research.”²⁰ For instance, Lu Zhenyu praised Guo's pioneering work and proposed the “Yin Shang slave society theory” and “Western Zhou Feudalism Theory.”

The debate on the question of the history of Chinese society is closely related to practical concerns—the nature of Chinese society and the nature of the Chinese revolution. Therefore, the research and debate on the history of Chinese society is in reality connected to the question of what kind of system and path of development to construct in Chinese society. This issue is undoubtedly related to understanding the characteristics of feudal Chinese society. Therefore, the two schools were diametrically opposed on the issue of the nature of Chinese society prior to the Opium Wars. Non-leftists often used theories like the Western European “kings entrusted the dukes to guard the land” and the development of commercial capital post-Qin/Han as foundations for “theories” such as “pre-capitalist society,” “before-capitalist society,” “commercial capitalist society,” and “autocratic society,” which they use to demonstrate the disappearance of feudal society. Thus, the argument that modern Chinese society was semi-feudal and

19 He Ganzhi, “The Debate on Chinese Social History,” *He Ganzhi's Collected Works*, Volume 1, Beijing Publishing House, 1993 edition, p. 313.

20 Ibid.

semi-colonial was completely unfounded.

Leftist researchers, on the other hand, believed that feudalism was not only a political system, but also an economic system. Therefore, starting from the decisive role of the landlord land tenure system, they emphasized that although Chinese feudal society lacked the typical political phenomena of Western European feudalism, this difference did not alter Chinese feudalism's nature. Lu Zhenyu argued in *Prehistoric Chinese Social Studies* that the development of Chinese social forms should be divided into the primitive commune system, slavery, feudalism, semi-colonial and semi-feudal system, thereby constructing an understandable framework for the history of Chinese society. This became a "new achievement" in the field of historiography.²¹

After these debates on the history and nature of Chinese society, the thesis on modern Chinese society being "semi-feudal and semi-colonial" was finally constructed and swiftly disseminated. By 1935, it could openly be said: "Since having that debate, these conclusions were inconspicuously made public in the intellectual sphere. Now, if you grab someone who's even just slightly concerned about China's economy and ask them about the nature of China's economy, he will undoubtedly respond without hesitation: China's economy is a semi-colonial and semi-feudal economy."²² However, this preliminary "truth" of the "semi-feudal" and "semi-colonial" status of modern Chinese society needs further examination. This requires an inquiry into the nature of Chinese rural society.

This examination is the most stringent one. This is due to both theoretical considerations and practical considerations. Theoretically speaking, because "China's naïve bourgeoisie have not had time and will never be able to prepare complete or even adequate materials on social conditions, like the bourgeoisie in Europe, America, and Japan."²³ Thus, the first two debates lacked first-hand information, particularly information about rural China. This debate unfolded from this deduction. At the same time, China is still a "native China"—rural areas not only constitute the foundation of Chinese society, but also the source of Chinese

21 This is a review written by Li Da for Lu Zhenyu. See *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 61.

22 Shen Zhiyuan, "The Basic Nature of China's Current Economy," *New China*, Volume 3, Issue 13, quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 62.

23 Mao Zedong, "Preface and Postscript to 'Rural Survey'," *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume 3, People's Publishing House, Second Edition, 1991, p. 791.

culture. To understand Chinese society is to understand rural China. Since modern rural China fell into a persistent state of decline and reached its climax amidst the debate, that makes the issue of the nature of rural Chinese society is all the more crucial. The debate between the Chinese Economic School represented by Wang Yichang and Zhang Zhicheng and the Chinese Rural School represented by Chen Hansheng, Qian Junrui, and Xue Muqiao,²⁴ revolved around two issues: first, how to research rural China—that is, whether productivity or production relations should be the main object of research—and second, whether rural Chinese society is semi-feudal and semi-colonial or capitalist in nature.

Regarding the question of the rural Chinese economy, the Chinese Economic School worked from the premise that productivity determines production relations and believed that productivity was the proper research object. This appears to be an authentic Marxist view, but because they “subtracted” the “productivity,” they first understood it as the “relationship between man and nature,” and then reduced it to the “production technique.” This way, they not only subverted the dialectics of productivity and production relations, but also subverted the concept of productivity. Thus, in their eyes, the research object of the rural Chinese economy—“productivity” —“regards the fertility of land, quality of farm animals, types and application levels of various agricultural techniques, and the relationships among farmers and how they distributed their labor and techniques”.²⁵ The Chinese Rural School believed, first, that it was necessary to clearly differentiate the objects of rural economics and agricultural research. Qian Junrui clearly pointed out that “researching the rural economy is by no means an extension of agricultural sciences (such as soil science, fertilizer science, pests and diseases, etc.), but rather a branch of theoretical economics. The object of agricultural scientific research is related to the coordination and composition of natural factors related to agricultural production, but agricultural economics studies is the

24 In the debate, the party represented by Wang Yichang and Zhang Zhicheng was called the Chinese Economic School because they used the theoretical publication “Chinese Economy” founded by the Nanjing Chinese Economic Research Association as their base. The leftist social science researchers represented by Chen Hansheng, Xue Muqiao, and Qian Furui used the China Rural Economic Research Association publication “Chinese Countryside” as their base, hence why they are named the “Chinese Countryside School.”

25 Wang Yichang, “A Change in the Direction of Rural Economic Statistics,” quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 79.

production relationship at a specific stage of social development.”²⁶ Thus, the research object of the rural Chinese economy must be the “production relationship in rural China, or the social relationship between people during the process of agricultural production, exchange, and distribution.”²⁷ Second, productivity should be examined as a dialectical union between productivity and production relations. For example, Xue Muqiao said in response to Wang Yichang: “If we leave production relations to study productivity, or treat productivity as a technical matter and study it separately from production relations,” it is impossible to understand rural China’s economic problems from a scientific standpoint.

In fact, the Chinese Economic School is just old wine in new bottles, resurrecting the views of Ren Shu and Yan Lingfeng by believing that China is already in the stage of capitalist economic development. The Chinese Economic School went to painstaking lengths to demonstrate the capitalist nature of rural China. They first rejected land as a central issue in rural China. Wang Yichang believed that due to the 1925-27 revolution, the land issue had become a thing of the past: “Land is no longer the center of rural economic and capital issues.”²⁸ From this starting point, Wang extended the problem to rural China’s tenancy system. He believed that the main difference between the feudal tenancy system and the capitalist tenancy system lay in the type of contract utilized—the former only used “oral contracts,” the latter “document contracts.” The appearance of the “document contract” signified the liberation of peasants from dependence on landlords. In response to the Chinese Economic School denying that the land issue was at the core of rural China’s issues, the Chinese Rural School refuted it tit-for-tat based on first-hand data obtained from field investigations. According to a 1933 survey of 2,614 farmers in 48 villages in 22 counties in Guangxi, Xue Muqiao pointed out that 1/3 of village households were made up of poor peasants with less than five Mu (about 1/6 acres) of arable land, while landlords and rich peasants with more than 50 mu of arable land accounted for only 1.5% of village

26 Qian Junrui, “The Tasks of Researching China’s Current Rural Economy—Also on the “Turning” of Current Rural Economic Research by Wang Yichang and Han Dezhang,” in Xue Muqiao and Feng Hefa’s *Selected Papers on Rural China*, People’s Publishing House, 1983 edition, p. 89.

27 Ibid p. 87.

28 Wang Yichang, “A Change in the Direction of Rural Economic Statistics”, quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 85.

households, but accounted for $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total number of farms.²⁹ According to more extensive survey data, Chen Hansheng confirmed that at the time, 70% of rural land in China was concentrated in the hands of landlords and rich peasants, who accounted for only 10% of the rural population, while the vast group of poor farmers who accounted for 90% of the population only occupied 30% of the land. This critical fact illustrates that land truly is still the central issue in rural China, and the tenancy, land rent, and employment systems are all determined by this issue. In response to the Chinese Economic School's conclusion that China's rural economy had turned capitalistic based on the prevalence of the "document contract," the Chinese Rural School correspondingly pointed out the necessity of studying the land issue in rural China by starting from the relationship between people under the land ownership system, rather than from surface-level phenomena like contract forms. Xue Muqiao, using a large number of research materials on rural labor and employment issues, argued: "The above-mentioned employment methods also carry a strong feudal or even slave connotation; these farm hires take on loans (including borrowing money, grain, and even farm animals), and are tied to the land, unable to sell their labor freely. This type of employment is undoubtedly somewhat coercive in nature. As for married and elderly long-term workers, they have lost their independence and are akin to domestic slaves."³⁰ After refuting the "document contract theory" of the Chinese Economic School, the Chinese Rural School further argued that the massive concentration of land in the hands of a few was indeed a pre-requisite for the development of capitalism. However, in rural China, "concentrated land was not used for large-scale capitalist production, but rather divided and leased to small farmers for farming."³¹ Thus, land ownership was still the most important foundation for landlords to claim ownership over farmers' surplus production, making the land rent system in rural China pre-capitalist, or feudal. Thus, based on this type of land relations,

29 Xue Muqiao and Liu Ruisheng, "Guangxi Rural Economic Survey", published in the 1934 inaugural issue of "Chinese Countryside", quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 88.

30 Xue Muqiao, "A Review of "Investigation and Research on the Employment Habits of Farmers and Workers in Various Provinces"" by Mr. Chen Zhengmo in "Chinese Countryside", Volume 1, No. 7, quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 89-90.

31 Xue Muqiao, "How to Study China's Rural Economy", published in the 1934 inaugural issue of "Chinese Countryside", quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 89.

there can only be class opposition between the landlords and the peasants.

Therefore, the debate on the nature of rural Chinese society inevitably extends to the most sensitive issue—class relations in rural China. The Chinese Economic School understood class relations in rural China from the perspective of pure productivity or production technology and divided the relations into two forms: the first was “parasitic landlords divided against peasants” and the second was “business owners divided against wage laborers.” The former was “rural feudal economic relations based on land” and the latter was “rural capitalist economic relations based on non-land ownership.” This division appears to be objective, but it contained a misunderstanding. In the specific discussion, on the one hand, they drew lines between producers and non-producers and designated rich peasants as opposed to landlords. On the other hand, they drew lines between the business owners and hired laborers, and included land-holding farmers and sharecroppers as business owners, which confuses rural class relations not only in terms of “quality” but also in terms of “quantity.” The Chinese Rural School, starting from field investigations on rural production relations, divided rural China into five classes of landlord, rich peasants, middle-class peasants, poor peasants, and farm laborers, emphasizing that only this method of classification “can fully showcase the overall structure of society,” “only then can we grasp the core of production relations in rural areas today (tenancy relations and employment relations),” “only then can the status of each rural class be accurately assessed.”³²

It is worth noting that, due to the harsh environment of war, Mao Zedong, who was in the rural revolutionary base area, could not participate in theoretical debates like leftist social science researchers working in the “white areas.” But he participated in the debate in a practical way, leaving behind important theoretical works: as early as December 1, 1925’s “Analysis of Class in Chinese Society” and March 1927’s “An Investigatory Report into the Hunan Peasant Movement,” starting from the “primary revolutionary question” of “Who is our enemy? Who is our friend?”, Mao conducted a class analysis of Chinese society, especially the rural countryside, and defined peasants, particularly the lower class, as the driving force of the revolution. In January 5, 1930’s “A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire,” he clearly stated that “China is a semi-colonial land that many im-

32 Qian Junrui, "The Tasks of Researching China's Current Rural Economy", in "The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Rural Society", quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 91-92.

perialist countries compete over.”³³ In his “Rural Survey Essays” written during this period, especially May, 1930’s “Xunwu Survey,” October, 1930’s “Xingguo Survey,” and November, 1933’s “Changgang Township Survey,” he recorded and analyzed the status of population and land ownership in the countryside, exploitative conditions, political views of each class, changes before and after the revolution, and the transportation, commerce, economic, and political conditions of small cities near the countryside, providing a vivid description of social conditions in rural China. In terms of method and content, these essays were similar to the early social surveys of the Chinese Rural School. From this perspective, Mao Zedong’s exploration of the nature of Chinese society and the leftist social science researchers’ exploration were actually two currents in the same ideological wave. It is precisely because of this shared awareness that the group of leftist theorists (including Wang Xuewen, Wu Liping, He Ganzhi), who participated in the debate on the nature of Chinese society, came to Yan’an and quickly resonated with Mao Zedong’s ideas. “Theory” and “practice” were able to organically combine, the most significant and widely recognized result of which was Mao’s 1940 “On New Democracy.”

This literary essay “Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society,” includes and sorts out the three major debates on the nature of Chinese society, issues of Chinese social history, and the nature of rural Chinese society, which contain explanations to the mysteries of modern China, the mysteries of “New Democracy Theory,” and the mysteries of Mao’s “Talks” that laid the foundations of Yan’an literature and art. If we do not understand the entire process or content of these debates, then we cannot clearly present the problems of modern Chinese society, nor can we find solutions to these problems or understand the “story” that comes out of this process.

The first result of the debate was the discovery of the modern “China problem.”

Since the collapse of the “super-stable structure” of Chinese society at the end of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese people have reached a consensus on China’s unprecedented crisis. But contrary to this consensus, Chinese people have had different understandings of what exactly modern China’s crisis is; in other words,

33 Mao Zedong, “A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire”, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume 1, p. 98.

different people have had different "China problems." For example, in the eyes of the reformists, the root of the "China problem" lay in cultural dysfunction. Therefore, the way to rescue China was to rescue Chinese culture. Sun Yat-sen, for instance, believed that the root of the "China problem" was that Chinese citizens could not be independent, civil rights could not be protected, and people's livelihoods were not happy; as such, China could only be saved by the "Three Principles of the People." Another example is that in the eyes of some theorists, the root of the "China problem" lay in deep-rooted feudalism, while in the eyes of others, the root of the "China problem" lay in the invasion of imperialism. Only the "debate on the nature of Chinese society," and the basis of the modern "China problem" —feudalism and imperialism—can provide a more complex and scientific answer; that is, the semi-feudal and semi-colonial nature of modern China. In other words, the modern "China problem" is neither a purely internal nor a purely external problem, but a problem caused by the co-existence of the two. This is the world's perspective on the "China problem"—on the one hand, due to profound changes in modern China's society and economy, feudalism has become a heavy shackle on China's road to modernity. On the other hand, although the invasion of imperialism led to the collapse of feudalism to a certain extent, it also supported feudalism to a certain extent and created its own lackeys. Therefore, imperialism and feudalism are a pair of coexisting monsters. It has become a general problem that hinders China from moving towards the future.

At this point, I cannot help but think of recently passed Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, who gave this speech after winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982: "The Solitude of Latin America." At the end of this speech, the literary master who ignited the global explosion of Latin American literature with his works solemnly declared: "On a day like today, my master William Faulkner said, "I decline to accept the end of man". I would be unworthy of standing in this place that was his, if I were not fully aware that the colossal tragedy he refused to recognize thirty-two years ago that is now, for the first time since the beginning of humanity, nothing more than a simple scientific possibility. Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness will be possible."

In other words, in Marquez' view, "looking at the entirety of human development," this world being filled with oppression, injustice, and bloodshed is absurd, illusory, and lacks the basis of human history. Therefore, the motivation of his creation lies in: revealing the illusion and absurdity of the world we live in, to provide a foundation for the rival "real world!"

This passage from Marquez provides us with a device for observing the world. Such a device allows us to see what kind of world is "real" and what is "fake." The theory of modern Chinese society as "semi-feudal and semi-colonial" provides us with a similar device. Such a device allows us to see how cruel and "false", or rather, "magical," modern Chinese society has been. All of this has provided our literature and art with extremely rich and dynamic historical content. But unfortunately, our writers and artists do not seem to have discovered this content and are still stuck in the old dream of enlightenment. Only from this perspective can we understand why Mao Zedong clearly proposed in his "Talks" that literature serves politics, workers, peasants, and soldiers. Of course, in Mao's writings, "politics" contains the war for national and democratic liberation, but could "politics" also contain richer potential, that is, writing to break the "false" world? Writing to create a "real" future world?

Parallel to the discovery of the "China problem" is the construction of the "China theory." Since modern times, progressive Chinese people have been searching for theories to solve the "China problem" through methods like learning from Western countries. But as Mao Zedong pointed out, the results of these learnings are frustrating—the "teacher" always refused ("hit") the "students." It was not until the October Revolution in Russia that the Chinese Communist Party found Marxism. But Marxism is not a "magic panacea" that can be utilized at any moment. It must go through the painful process of Sinicization before it can be effective. The debate on the nature of Chinese society is an important stage in the construction of "Chinese theory."

Generally speaking, in traditional Marxist theory the socialist revolution is a "natural" product of highly developed capitalism, but this theoretical prediction did not become a reality in developed capitalist countries. Rather, it was after the victory of the October Revolution in Russia that the world's first socialist country was established on the weak chain of European capitalism. Lenin's writings on this topic enriched Marxist theory on socialist revolution, demonstrating the possibility of the first victorious socialist revolution against the weak links of

imperialist rule. Hence, "a bridge was built between the socialist West and the enslaved East."³⁴ However, because China's societal structure was more "backwards" than Russia's, and in the eyes of Westerners, China was a "stagnant empire," the question became how to bring China into the world's perspective, a "scientific" proposition that had to be overcome. Only then can we reclaim the meaning that China lost ever since its collision with the rest of the world in modern times. Objectively speaking, in the debate, the leftist social science researchers have done quite well. Regarding the debate on the nature of Chinese society, they initially used Marxist methods to explain China's problems. Regarding the debate on Chinese social history, they used the "Asian" societal form interpretation, employing research on the stage of slavery in Chinese society and through a unique understanding of feudalism, they incorporated Chinese history into the general process of human historical development concluded by Marxist theory, thereby providing a strong theoretical basis for the socialist future of the Chinese revolution. Regarding the debate on the nature of China's rural issues, leftist social science researchers "not only extended the theory to research methodology, but also to the study of determining a social nature of productivity and production relations. They conducted in-depth research on specific economic categories like small farmers, commodities, hired labor, and primitive markets, giving a deep investigation," "introducing" the investigation on the nature of Chinese society "to a deeper level."³⁵ More importantly, after confirming their position in the general process of human history and development of world revolutions and reinterpreting their own past, present, and future from a global perspective, the "righteous path in the world"—for the first time, the "alternative" modernity program that went through a transitional stage of democracy before entering a socialist society had clearly surfaced before Chinese people.

Only by seeing this can we understand why Mao Zedong used the new democratic economy, politics, and culture as the "portrait" of the future of China in *On New Democracy*. During such a difficult time, he conveyed this hopeful message:

34 Joseph Stalin, "October Revolution and National Issues", *Collected Works of Stalin (Volume 1)*, p. 126, People's Publishing House, 1979 edition.

35 Wang Yanan, "A Study on the Economic Formation of China's Semi-feudal and Semi-colonial Countries.", quoted from *The Debate on the Nature of Chinese Society in the 1930s*, p. 94.

New China stands in front of everyone, and we should welcome it. The masthead of the new Chinese ship has risen to the horizon, and we should clap our hands to welcome it. Raise your hands, New China is ours.³⁶

Only by seeing this can we understand why there were so many uncharacteristically bright scenes, joyous voices, and new things in “New Democracy Theory”-guided Yan’an literature and art. Corresponding to New Democracy, which transcends feudalism, capitalism and semi-feudal, semi-capitalism, Yan’an literature and art was a new “enlightenment literature and art” that was different from feudal, capitalist, and modern literature and art. Its mission was to discover the “second reality,” to point out new truths in the description of old truths, and to point out “new things found in the hearts of those amidst of the chaos of collapse, which have been born and will survive forever, unable to be destroyed, and will only become better.”³⁷

As the New Democracy Theory emerged, a new Chinese subject also emerged. In traditional Chinese society, the main subject of history was often the bureaucrats and gentry, headed by the emperor, while the peasants—the largest group and the group with the greatest social potential—was often hidden behind the curtain of history. With the outbreak of the modern Chinese revolution, the “major revolutionary questions” of “Who is our enemy? Who is our friend?” were formally raised.³⁸ However, objectively speaking, during the early stages of the Chinese revolution, the imagination of the subject of the revolution—the people—was too abstract. In this abstraction, the image of the people was mainly fixed on the working class, which in terms of numbers, was a relatively weak group in modern China. In the debate on the nature of Chinese society, the “friends” of the Chinese revolution gradually became clearer. Through the confirmation of China’s semi-feudal, semi-colonial status, the peasant class—who accounted for the vast majority of the Chinese population, particularly the lower-middle class ones—emerged to become the main subject of the Chinese revolution. With this subject, the Chinese revolution found its glimmer of hope.

36 Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume 2, p. 709.

37 Maxim Gorky, "Young Literature and Its Tasks", quoted from Zhou Yang's "Marxism and Literature", *Yan'an Literature and Art Series · Literature and Art Theory Volume (1)*, p. 226, Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 1987 edition.

38 Mao Zedong, "Analysis of Various Classes in Chinese Society", *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume 1, p. 3.

It is precisely because of this "discovery" and "creation" that Mao put forth his cleanest thesis on workers and peasants in his "Talks," contending that intellectuals should learn from peasants to reform themselves. And it is because of this that Mao wrote the following in his letter to Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming after watching the Central Party School of the CPC perform the Peking Opera "Forced To Go Up Liangshan": "History is created by the people, but on the stage of this old drama (as in all old literature and art that has left the people), the people have become scum, and the stage is ruled by old men and women and young ladies. This kind of historical reversal is now up to you to achieve. You can restore the face of history and allow old theater to be reborn; this is worth celebrating."³⁹ Only from this perspective can we understand the images of lively and vigorous "new people" that appeared in Yan'an literature and art and the subsequent revolutionary literature and art. Even today, these "newcomers" are still vivid, meaningful, and thought-provoking.

Finally, I want to point out that in his letter to Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming, Mao pointed out the truth about the "upside-down" of the world, and Marquez told us the same truth in his speech. Today, this "truth" still exists in an extremely absurd and "magical" way. Thus, the work of "reversing it again" has not stopped, and may never stop. And this may be the reason why Yan'an literature and art continues to shine today and into the future.

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39 Mao Zedong "To Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming", *Yan'an Literature and Art Series-Literary Theory Volume (1)*, p. 70.