

# On Mao Zedong's Thought on Literature and Art and its Contemporary Value

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## Abstract

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art guided the forward direction of cultural development in New China, embodying a scientific summation by the Communist Party of China of its endeavors in the literary and artistic fields. It has established a robust foundation in the realm of literature and art in New China and injected the great strength of the times into the development of socialist literature and art. In the new era, reviewing and organizing the historical context and distinct characteristics of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art, and deeply analyzing its contemporary value, can clarify the origins, strengthen the foundation, and provide new methodologies for creating a new situation in the work of literature and art with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

## Keywords

Mao Zedong; Thought on Literature and Art; Historical Context; Distinct Characteristics; Contemporary Value.

## 1. Introduction

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art not only continues the essence of Marxist literary theory but also represents the first major leap in adapting Marxism to the Chinese context, rooted in China's national conditions. The Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China affirmed the significant achievements and historical experience in cultural construction by the first generation of central collective leadership with Comrade Mao Zedong at its core, and made it clear that the guidelines formulated by the Chinese Communists in the cultural field during the period of socialist construction still have extremely important guiding significance in the new era (Xi Jinping, 2021). Elucidating the historical trajectory, distinct characteristics, and contemporary value of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art offers scientific guidance for the flourishing and development of the people's literary and artistic endeavors in the new era.

## 2. The Historical Context of Mao Zedong's Thought on Literature and Art

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art was deeply shaped by the influence of the New Culture Movement. In 1915, with the rise of the New Culture Movement, a variety of thoughts spread widely throughout Chinese society, providing rich cultural and ideological resources for the initial formation of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art. During this movement, Mao Zedong was influenced by advanced intellectuals such as Li Dazhao and became one of the early adherents of communist ideals. Friedrich Engels pointed out when discussing issues related to literature and art: "The development of politics, law, philosophy, religion, literature, art, and other fields is based on economic development." (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1995) On this basis, Mao Zedong further pointed out that literary and artistic works reflect the real world

in which the creators live, and life is the sole source of artistic creation. The New Culture Movement prompted Mao Zedong to closely integrate literature and art with real life for in-depth consideration.

The May Fourth Movement played a crucial role in the formation of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art. Mao Zedong achieved a profound understanding and innovation of the new culture. In the journal *Xiangjiang Review*, which Mao independently founded, a special column for literature and art was added, aimed at using the new form of art to play a role in enlightening thought. Mao Zedong's understanding of literature and art reached a new level, linking literary works with social transformation, thus breaking through traditional forms, and making literature and art an important tool for driving social change. During this period, Mao Zedong profoundly realized that only when literature and art are embraced by the masses can they become a significant force in triggering social transformation. Mao Zedong believed that after the May Fourth Movement, he had already become a communist (Beijing: Oriental Publishing House, 2005). Since 1921, the Chinese Communists, guided by Marxism, have carried out extensive practical activities in the field of literature and art, closely integrating literary art with the revolutionary cause. Mao Zedong pointed out incisively that throughout the thousands of years of Chinese history, culture has always been the monopoly of the landlord class, and the peasant class did not truly possess culture. However, the culture enjoyed by the landlord class was created by the peasant class. Therefore, only by overthrowing the rule of the landlord class could culture truly return to the hands of the peasants and become their own spiritual wealth (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1991). In 1927, with the establishment of the Chinese Soviet Republic, Mao Zedong further emphasized the importance of revolutionary literary and artistic work. In documents such as the Resolution of the Ninth Congress of the Red Army of the Communist Party of China, he eloquently discussed the basic guidelines for literary and artistic work, solving practical issues for the advancement of literary and artistic work in the Central Soviet Area, ensuring the correct direction and effective implementation of literary and artistic work in the revolution. In 1936, he raised higher demands for literary and artistic work, emphasizing, "We must continuously promote and develop the literature and art of the workers and peasants, making it the mainstream form of art in the Central Soviet Area, and constantly elevate it to a higher level of literature and art for the national resistance against Japanese aggression." (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993) During this period, Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art had basically taken shape, and the literary and artistic work in the Central Soviet Area achieved its first integration with the masses of the people.

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art was formed during the war against Japanese aggression. In 1940, Mao Zedong provided a comprehensive explanation of the new culture, stating that the culture of New Democracy is the culture of the people, its purpose is to oppose imperialism and feudalism, and it can only be led by the proletariat and guided by Marxism (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2002). In 1942, the Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art broadened the scope for the development of literary and artistic work and is an important symbol of the formation of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art. The full text is guided by the Marxist view of literature and art, clarifying that literature and art stem from social life, serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and that literature and art should also possess the standard of political criticism, and that a united front should be established within the literary and artistic community, among a series of comprehensive thoughts on literature and art. At that time, the speech played a crucial role. Firstly, it clarified the direction for literary and artistic work, promoting the advancement of the literary and artistic cause, giving rise to a multitude of literary and artistic works belonging to the people, such as the large-scale new opera *At the Bottom of the Yinshan Mountain* and the song *The Yellow River Cantata*, among others. Secondly, it expanded the influence of the Party's work in literature and art across the nation. Thirdly, it facilitated the spread of the Chinese Communist Party's thought

on literature and art worldwide. The text was translated into multiple languages and published abroad. The convening of the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China further marked Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art as the guiding principle for the Party's work in literature and art.

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art was fully developed and refined after the Liberation War and the establishment of New China. Firstly, Mao Zedong proposed the shift in focus of literary and artistic work. On the eve of the establishment of the state, with the convening of the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Mao Zedong stated that as the focus of the Party's work shifted, so too should the work in culture and the arts, emphasizing the need to concentrate on the laws governing the development of literature and art. Secondly, in terms of the guiding principles for literary and artistic work, Mao Zedong, in line with the objective laws of traditional Chinese culture and art, creatively proposed the policy of "Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend." During the period from 1951 to 1956, Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art was further refined. In the inscription for the Chinese Drama Research Institute, he first innovatively put forward the principle of "Let a hundred flowers bloom," and then supplemented this with the idea of "a hundred schools of thought contend" on this foundation. Finally, Mao Zedong established this policy as the fundamental strategy for China's literary and artistic work. Once again, in his 1964 instructions to the Central Conservatory of Music, Mao Zedong further required that literary and artistic workers should integrate Chinese literature and art with traditional Chinese literature and art, as well as the advanced literature and art of the world. This is to say, "make the ancient serve the present, and make the foreign serve China." Lastly, Zhou Enlai and others also made outstanding contributions to the development of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art. At the first National Conference of Literary and Art Workers organized by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Zhou Enlai resolved the key issues of who literature and art should serve and how they should serve, emphasizing that literary and artistic work should always serve the people, the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and promote proletarian culture and art. Liu Shaoqi believed that the development of literature and art should start with understanding, and on this basis, strengthen the Party's guidance and management of literary and artistic work to ensure a better embodiment of proletarian thought in artists (Beijing: Communist Party History Press, 2007).

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art, having undergone the baptism of the New Culture Movement in modern China, the accumulation of the New Democratic Revolution, and being tested in the practice of China's revolution and construction, its historical context reflects the first historic leap in adapting the Marxist view of literature and art to the Chinese context.

### **3. The Distinctive Features of Mao Zedong's Thought on Literature and Art**

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is characterized by its distinct revolutionary nature, populism, practicality, and timeliness. These traits not only embody the essence and mission of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art but also highlight its theoretical image. Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is a revolutionary theory, having originated from and evolved within the context of revolutionary warfare. It is a theory for the masses of the people, always focusing on serving the people. It is a theory that integrates with practice, guiding the innovation and development of China's literary and artistic work. It is a theory that is constantly developing, not only guiding the literary and artistic work of that era but also guiding the literary and artistic work of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is a correct reflection of the Chinese revolution. Originating from the practice of the Chinese revolution, it has led the revolutionary front in the development of Chinese literary and artistic work. Mao Zedong elucidated that revolutionary

literature and art are a portrayal of people's lives and the Chinese revolution. Revolutionary literary and artistic workers must use this as a prototype to create works that reflect the actual conditions of the Chinese revolution and meet the needs of the revolution (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2002). To obtain the most authentic materials from the revolutionary war is necessary to make literary and artistic works vividly depict reality. The political nature of literature and art is unified with its revolutionary nature. Mao Zedong believed that literature and art have class attributes, and Chinese literature and art should be of a proletarian nature, serving the proletariat (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2017). Proletarian literature and art should "submit to the revolutionary tasks that the Party has determined for a certain revolutionary period." (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2002) Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is class revolutionary in nature, having formed and developed during the proletarian revolutionary struggle.

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art always adheres to the principle of serving the people. This thought carries on the Marxist spirit, combines with the core view of historical materialism, and integrates with the specific practice of the Chinese revolution, creatively proposing that the work of Chinese literature and art must always face the masses of the people. Mao Zedong always emphasizes that "the question of for whom is a fundamental and principled issue." (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2002) The definition of New Democratic Culture underscores the profound populist nature of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art. Engaging in literary and artistic work in the New Democratic society must rely on the people and be accepted by them (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2020). In Mao's view, regardless of the type of cultural or artistic expression, whether modern or ancient, only when it is integrated with the people can it truly possess the correct value of literature and art (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1984).

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is a concept that is born in practice, developed through practice, tested in practice, and continues to evolve with practice. The mission and role of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art have always been not to explain Chinese literary and artistic work, but to directly serve the proletariat and the people, guiding them in the practice of transforming the world with truth. Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art represents a leap in adapting Marxism to the Chinese context, with practice being the core concept of Marxism. Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art was not only formed in practice but also developed during the practice of the New Democratic Revolution, refined in the practice of the socialist revolution and construction in New China, guiding the specific practice of socialist literary and artistic work in China. In the historical process, it continuously promotes the unity of literary and artistic theory and practice, and its truth is tested in practice. Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is a theory that is continuously evolving, possessing the character of keeping pace with the times. It not only provided guidance for the literary and artistic work before the period of reform and opening-up but also continues to offer insights for the literary and artistic work after that period. Developed and refined throughout China's revolutionary and constructional processes, Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art clearly reflects its innovative and developmental nature. In his Speech at the Symposium Commemorating the 120th Anniversary of Comrade Mao Zedong's Birth, Xi Jinping emphasized the need to always adhere to Mao Zedong Thought and advance the cause of the Party. At the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping clearly stated: "In the fields of science and culture, we must uphold the principle of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend'. These innovative theoretical achievements continue to play an important guiding role today." (Xi Jinping, 2021) This indicates that the most distinctive feature of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is the perfect integration of its contemporaneity and developmental nature.

#### 4. The Contemporary Value of Mao Zedong's Thought on Literature and Art

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art has played a significant role in the development of China, transforming the historical trajectory of the country's literary and artistic domain. Entering the new era, as a phenomenon of ideology, literature and art are subject to higher demands in the process of building a socialist modernized country. Nonetheless, Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art continues to offer illuminating guidance.

First, to advance the work of literature and art, it is necessary to recognize its nature--the nature of ideology. According to the Marxist view of literature and art, literature and art are part of the superstructure of ideology, and they can react upon the economic base (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2012). Based on such views, Mao Zedong further developed the idea that culture reflects social politics and the economy (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2002). Such a definition highlights the dialectical relationship between politics, the economy, and literature and art, and it is an important aspect of literary and artistic work in the context of the new era. In the face of complex domestic and international situations and the ever-changing forms of invasion by Western capitalist countries, it is particularly important to recognize the ideological nature of literature and art. Xi Jinping demanded that the front line of literary and artistic work should develop under the guidance of Marxism, strengthen the Party's leadership over literary and artistic work, and ensure that it progresses in the direction of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Xi Jinping, 2015). To always serve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is necessary to recognize the ideological nature of literature and art.

Second, to advance the work of literature and art, it is necessary to adhere to the direction must be Chinese in orientation. Only under the guidance of Marxism can the work of literature and art create a new situation. Adhering to adapt Marxism to the Chinese context within the field of literature and art has become an indispensable direction for literary and artistic work. How to handle the interaction and development between China's literature and art and that of the world is a new issue for literary and artistic work in the new era. As early as the period of revolutionary war, scholars had profound insights into this matter. Cong Xian, in his 1937 essay *The Cultural Movement at the Current Stage*, pointed out that in previous cultural movements, there was an excessive presence of foreign influence. It was imperative to fully adapt the cultural movement to the Chinese context during the war of resistance, to absorb the outstanding culture from both within and outside China, and to resist vulgar culture. In 1938, Mao Zedong emphasized in *On the New Stage* that Marxism must be integrated with China's realities to give it Chinese characteristics, and that the construction of new culture should innovate and develop based on inheriting traditional culture (Beijing: Central Party School Press, 1991). Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping has consistently integrated the governance of the country with the excellent traditional Chinese culture. In the field of literature and art, he emphasizes that outstanding works of art should reflect the cultural creativity of the Chinese nation (Xi Jinping, 2015). Therefore, the development of literature and art must embody Chinese characteristics, integrate China's excellent traditional culture with the advanced culture of the world, tell Chinese stories well, and achieve new accomplishments on the front line of literature and art.

Third, to advance the work of literature and art, it is essential to put the people at the center. The timeliness of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is reflected in its people-centric nature. Whether in the past, present, or future, only by putting the people at the center can we promote new developments in literary and artistic work and achieve more splendid accomplishments under the new circumstances of the new era. Mao Zedong elucidated that only by replacing the old-style literature and art with that of the people can we truly embody

the people's status as the creators of history (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2002). Since the new era, Xi Jinping has emphasized that "we must adhere to a people-centered creative orientation, improve the quality of cultural products, and provide the people with a richer and better spiritual diet." (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2014) Xi Jinping further states that the artistic creations of literary and artistic workers should be deeply rooted in the people, and all works of art should serve the people (Xi Jinping, 2016). In the field of literary and artistic work, only by Third, to advance the work of literature and art, it is essential to put the people at the center. The timeliness of Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is reflected in its people-centric nature. Whether in the past, present, or future, only by putting the people at the center can we promote new developments in literary and artistic work and achieve more splendid accomplishments under the new circumstances of the new era. Mao Zedong elucidated that only by replacing the old-style literature and art with that of the people can we truly embody the people's status as the creators of history. Since the new era, Xi Jinping has emphasized that "we must adhere to a people-centered creative orientation, improve the quality of cultural products, and provide the people with a richer and better spiritual diet." Xi Jinping further states that the artistic creations of literary and artistic workers should be deeply rooted in the people, and all works of art should serve the people. In the field of literary and artistic work, only by serving the people wholeheartedly can we open up a broad path for the work of literature and art in the new era.

## 5. Conclusion

Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art serves as a guiding action plan for China's literary and artistic front during the process of Chinese revolution and construction. It is the product of the integration of Marxist literary views with China's specific national conditions, providing clear direction for the construction of new democratic literature and art and the development of socialist literature and art. It has broadened the path for the development of socialist literature and art with Chinese characteristics, and laid a solid foundation for the innovative development of the literary and artistic front in the new era. Mao Zedong's thought on literature and art is a guiding principle that must be adhered to in the development of literature and art under the leadership of the Party.

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