

## The Reception of Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in English-language Scholarship

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Qilin Fu,

**"The Reception of Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in English-language Scholarship"**

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**Abstract:** In his article "The Reception of Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in English-language Scholarship" Qilin Fu examines the three waves of the reception of Mao Zedong's 1942 text. Fu elaborates on the understandings of Mao's ideas about literature and art and discusses the changes depending on historical and political contexts. Fu argues that the changes are explicit or implicit representations of cultural politics ranging from an anti-communist criticism based on Cold War ideology to the concerns of literary theory and the cultural critique of discourse in the context of globalization.

## Qilin FU

### **The Reception of Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in English-language Scholarship"**

Mao Zedong's 1942 "在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话" ("Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art") not only constitutes the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) literary policy and the primary discourse of Chinese Marxist literary theory, but also takes an active part in the formation of Western Marxist literary theory even while confronted with questions and resistance. Starting in the late 1940s, Sinologists started to pay attention to Mao's text. For example, when discussing wartime ideological development John King Fairbank wrote that "in particular Mao's dicta on art and letters required that artists and writers subordinate their personal creativity to the political aims of the CCP ... art for art's sake was out" (298). After that, the Yan'an Talks as part of "Mao's thought" became one of the hottest issues for English-speaking Sinologists. In the study at hand I examine changes in the reception of the Yan'an Talks and argue that these changes are explicit or implicit representations of cultural politics.

The first wave of discussion about the Yan'an Talks that emerged in the 1960s can be characterized as an external study of literature and of "anti-or noncommunist attitudes" (McDougall 6). Most Sinologists read Mao's Yan'an Talks as concerned with ideological control of literature and art and also as an important literary policy in the history of the CCP. Ironically, their readings are usually tainted with ideological elements. Hsia was the first Sinologist who wrote about ideology in the Yan'an Talks in detail and his *History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 1917-1957* covers the history of Chinese left-wing literature and literary criticism from the May Fourth movement to 1957 and criticizes the basic premises of the Yan'an Talks. He also describes how Mao furthered the Marxist Qiubai Qu's literary thought. Hsia makes the point that there are many conflicts within the Chinese Marxist circle and by locating the Talks in the historical and social context of the 1940s and 1950s, Hsia maintains that Mao overlooks the importance of traditional literature and Western culture and ignores the freedom of creation in order to make literature serve the CCP's revolutionary aims: "In spite of the allegation by fawning critics that Mao manifests unprecedented critical originality and genius in his formulation of literary politics, the Talks can be seen, in the perspective of Chinese literary history, to be only a restatement of the extremist communist literary opinion of the two preceding decades (*History* 311-12). According to Hsia, backed by the CCP the talks became the basis of a harsh literary policy and caused harmful effects on literary creation and on writers' lives. His criticism of the Yan'an Talks is built on his notion of literariness and aesthetic quality, which he draws from the New Criticism and F.R. Leavis's idea of a "Great Tradition." Hsia regarded "the discovery and appraisal of excellence" as a literary historian's first task (vi). His analysis, however, demonstrated many bias and prejudices and generated vehement disputes in the early 1960s especially with Jaroslav Průšek who argued that Hsia distorted Mao's intention in the Talks with "unscientific" reading and that although Hsia attempted to move towards the opposition of Mao's ideological control of literature in accordance with artistic criterion, in fact his interpretation remains a mode of political critique, namely an anti-communist attitude supported by his own ideological prejudices. Průšek pointed out that Hsia "does not see the absolutely urgent need to create a new literature and art for the broad masses" (370). In his 1963 reply, Hsia offered his objection to Průšek's study of modern Chinese literature and theories and insisted on his own stand of greatness and individuality for literature: "In 1942 Mao had called a halt to the petty-bourgeois trends of the earlier leftist literature and proclaimed a new era of propagandist literature" (57).

Hsia's reading laid a major foundation for the following decades' attitudes and methods. His stimulating remarks from the perspective of New Criticism and his anti-communist position stimulated Sinologists' interest in the Talks, as well as that of communist Chinese literature. For Merle Goldman, the Chinese Communist Party's attitude toward literature is closely correlated with the parallel development of its power. In the 1930s, Feng Hu had relatively more freedom to express his unorthodox Marxist literary thought, which emphasized the emotional and individual elements of literary creation. However, when the publication of the Yan'an Talks was made to be the first literary policy from the CCP, Hu felt pressured by the party and thus Goldman maintained that Mao's Talks were an expression of ideological control: "Implicit in Mao's declaration was the doctrine that literature and all phases of life were to be completely subordinated to the dictates of the party" ("Feng Hu's" 110). In *Literary*

*Dissent in Communist China*, Goldman extended her view to a discussion about the criticism and counter-criticism between dissidents and stressed the higher significance of the former's insistence on the autonomy of literature than the latter's literary control: "One day it may be shown that China's writers, under overwhelming pressures, kept alive a sense of freedom and an appreciation for human and artistic values. In the West, where writers have been free to say they please, composing a poem or writing a literary criticism is not a rebellious act, but in Communist China it can be an act of courage and fortitude" (278). For Goldman, however, the Talks attach more importance to the educational transformation of literary intellectuals rather than Russian Marxist literary theory: "Unlike Stalin, the Chinese Communists did not do away with groups of intellectuals who refused to reform. There was a fundamental difference in approach. The Chinese used moral persuasion and indoctrination rather than violence against those did not comply" (*Literary Dissent* 49).

T.A. Hsia analyzed the effects of the Yan'an Talks on the Chinese literary development from 1942 to 1962 and presented a historical context and details of the Talks. Following a Yang Zhu's evaluation of the Yan'an Talks as the second literary revolution in China, Hsia emphasized the Talks' significance to the CCP in a relatively objective way: "To defenders and detractors, the Yan'an Forum of 1942 was a major event in the determination of the nature of future Chinese Communist literature. For the first time in history, the Chinese Communist Party could boast of a 'policy for literature and art'. All writers under the control of that policy were henceforth obliged to conform" (232). He viewed the Talks as an integral part of the Rectification Campaign and reflected on how Mao's personal voice dominated the forum. Hsia maintained that in spite of obvious deficiencies, the Talks gave writers some opportunities to assert their independence. In Howard L. Boorman's view, "Mao Tse-tung's brand of totalitarianism has certain roots in the massive tradition of bureaucratic government, variously labeled authoritarian or despotic, found in dynastic China" (34). In my opinion, in spite of his appraisal of Mao's literary talents, Boorman's remarks are a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Yan'an Talks and the Confucian tradition. In addition, Cyril Birch considers the political function of the Yan'an Talks and posits that great works of literature emerged in the past from writers who worked under the control of despotic monarchs and authoritarian religions, but "the ideological nature of Chinese Communist literature is determined rather by the nature of that truth at whose service the writer places himself" (3).

During the first wave of the Talk's reception, Sinologists—generally from US-American universities—interpreted the ideological control of the Yan'an Talks as the literary policy of the CCP and their attitudes of political disapproval and disaffection contrast with the celebration and appraisal of the remarks in China itself. Even if some of them attempted to devalue the Talks in terms of a literary criterion, most took a negative view of the Talks from an ideological perspective, which is characteristic of "social critique" expressed by David Der-Wei Wang (28). Obviously, their reading and criticism are ideological in light of the cold relationship between China and the West, especially the United States, during the 1950s and 1960s. Thus these initial critiques do not provide an in-depth analysis of the Yan'an Talks. The second wave of criticism of the Talks occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Following Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to the People's Republic of China and the gradual normalization of the relationship between China and the West and the shift of critical theory from Europe to the U.S., Sinologists such as Paul G. Pickowicz, Douwe Fokkema, and Bonnie S. McDougall began to take Mao's texts of Yan'an Talks seriously from the perspective of neo-Marxist literary theory. Their interpretations delved into the central issues of modern and contemporary literary theories and thus reveal the explicit or implicit significance of the Talks. The second wave is also associated with Chinese Marxist literary theory as seen in the work of Pickowicz who discussed Chinese Marxist literary theory based on Qu's and Mao's thought: "While the role played by Mao's Talks at Yan'an during and after 1942 has attracted considerable attention in Western scholarship, no effort has made to study the relationship between Mao's ideas about literature and the works of earlier Chinese Marxist literary critics" (*Ch'uch'iui-pai* 365). There are obvious similarities and differences between Mao's and Qu's ideas about literature and art in that both emphasized the revolutionary role of writers and critics. In Mao's Talks there is an expression of unconventional Marxist ideas and a regard for culture as a powerful revolutionary weapon. Like Qu's thought, Mao's notions on the classist nature of literature and art and on the continuity between the past and the present are in harmony with views expressed by Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, and Lunacharsky. Mao's idea, however, leads to the following conclusion: literature

and art should be integrated completely into the revolutionary movement against the autonomy of revolutionary literature, that is to say, literature is subordinate to party policy. This is different from Qui's understanding of the complicated relationship between literature and revolution.

Although Mao's analysis of the nature of the revolutionary cultural movement bears a striking resemblance to Qu's conception, they differ from each other because of their setting and time. In contrast to Qu's works on the Jiangxi Soviet base area in the early 1930s, Mao's Talks—without dealing with the role of mass participation in literary and artistic movements—was not only a document of "rectification," but also a document of a united front against the aggression of the Japanese army (see Pickowicz, *Ch'uch'iu-pai*372). For Pickowicz, Mao's critique of May Fourth literary intellectuals including Lu Xun, along with his critique of the Europeanization of Chinese Marxist literary theory and his idea about "national form" and popular literature and the arts is similar to Qu's. What's more, Mao's formula for resolving contradictions by transforming the intellectual's thought through criticism and self-criticism is also related to Qu's ideas. Compared to other Sinologists, Pickowicz considers that Mao and Qu both emphasized the integration of content and form and the aesthetic element of works of art: even proletarian culture is concerned with aesthetic matter. Thus, for Pickowicz Mao's Talks represents a key achievement of the Sinification of the Western tradition of Marxist literary criticism while taking issues with the judgment that Mao's writings on literature and art were most important and brilliant statements on literature and art ever made by a Marxist.

Fokkema associated the Talks with the history of Marxist literary theories and argued for Mao's special significance in the context of comparison. In his opinion, Mao's primary concern was subject matter, which may be separated from content in terms of Marxist literary theory: "a characteristic feature of Maoist literary theory is that subject-matter can very well be considered in isolation, separate from its formal expression" (110). Therefore, class struggle and anti-Japanese propaganda may serve as literary subject matter. Mao's introduction to the Talks gives the fullest attention to the themes of socialist revolution and construction and to more specific military campaigns. In his conclusion, Mao's commented on the "theory of human nature," "the love of humanity," and so on suggesting further restrictions about proper subject matter. The Talks are the combination of Mao's literary theory and his political ideology and, as a result, their lack of aesthetic qualities harms the literary field: "The exclusiveness of Maoist ideology and the infallibility of its wording prevent the Chinese writers from probing into the relation between sign and concept, or between word and reality. In fact all propaganda work in China, of which literature is often considered a part, is directed towards spreading the belief that words and concepts are one and that things do exist in reality if words only say so often enough" (Fokkema111). In spite of his misunderstanding of Marxist literary theory's separation of content from form, I suggest that Fokkema's interpretation of the Talks is more valuable and more significant than Hsia's and his simple criticism of ideological control.

McDougall was sympathetic towards Mao's politics and investigated the Talks from the early 1970s. Her most important contribution is her 1980 *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*. To some extent, she disagreed with some Sinologists' hostile attitudes and simple ideological approaches. Nor did she agree with Chinese scholars who "all choose to focus on contemporary politics rather than pursuing the theoretical implications of their text" (5). On the contrary, she insisted on discussing the importance of the Talks to literature in order to "seek[s] primarily to examine the elements of literary theory that arise in the text of the 'Talks'" while also touching on the political overtones (10). McDougall investigated the different versions of the Talks and translations of the original to English for the first time. Through her close reading of over eighty editions of the Talks in the West and in China from 1943 to 1980, she discovered that the pre-1953 editions are original, while the post-1953 editions are revised following changes in the CCP. Further, she reevaluated the role of the Talks from the perspective of literary theory in the twentieth century: "Mao's 'Talks' read in the context of modern Western literary criticism provides an alternative to the 'essence' or 'particle of art' approach by relating both form and content to specific audiences and their requirements" (7). She established some close associations between Mao's literary ideas and classic Marxist and Western Marxist and neo-Marxist literary theory. For example, she argued that Mao's interest in the traditional literature is similar to Marx's appreciation of ancient Greek literature. McDougall reevaluated dialectically Mao's texts and corrected some Sinolo-

gists' misunderstandings of the Talks such as the assumption that Mao ignored the aesthetic quality of literature. She argued that Mao's naming writers and artists as "workers" implied that they produced their works as factory workers free from the mysterious quality of literary creation and closely bound up with the process of creation and that thus in the process, Mao made room for the writer's individual imagination. For example, in the post-1953 version of the Talks the words "on a higher plane" replaced the word "organized" in the original one and the word "organized," like "processed," implies Mao's reliance on structure and technique in literary creation. Mao's concern with the literary process is based on his talent in writing traditional Chinese poetry and thus McDougall offered a revelatory notion: Mao's speculations on the nature and origin of literature and art mainly depend on an underlying conception of Chinese classic poetry as the paradigm of literature and art generally. In her view, another one of Mao's achievement was his concern about the question of the audience: "It was Mao who brought the audience to the forefront of the discussion in China, and his analysis of audience needs and the influence of audience on writers remains one of the most important and innovative sections of the 'Talks'" (15). Further, in McDougall's view Mao's notion of audience came remarkably close to Hans Robert Jauss's and Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetics. In his introduction, Mao perceives audience as a reflective and passive element and in contrast to the writer an active element; however, in his conclusion he almost reverses this relationship: the writer loses his primary importance and "serves" the audience or the masses. Mao's emphasis on the political criterion is understood in accordance with his theory of audience because political response to different audiences is a basic factor for the reception and comprehension of a work of art (27). In my opinion McDougall's work is significant because of her penetrating and creative analyses of the texts from the perspective of New Criticism along with her translation of the original Talks and the comparison of the difference and identity of different versions of the Talks.

However, during the second wave of the Talk's reception in English the idea of literary control still persisted. Leo Ou-fan Lee deconstructed the literary tradition of the May Fourth Movement and the mystification of Lu Xun starting from Mao's Talks. Lee was concerned with the Yan'an Forum. As mentioned above, Pickowicz and McDougall pointed out that Mao emphasized the role of consciousness and subjectivity. For Lee, however, it was unjust that Mao criticized the individualism and subjectivism of the May Fourth tradition and argued that "Mao spelled out only the political side in these dialectical polarities, but left the aesthetic side unspecified"(479). Mao's Talks—as a new theory of Marxist aesthetics—also left more lacunae than the works of Marx and Engels and showed many limits in the field of literature through the role of arbiters assumed by CCP bureaucrats. Thus, although Lee recognized the positive value of Mao's Talks for arousing the new creation of popular literature and arts and considered this phenomenon as "the second literary revolution" which realized the transformation from the written convention of the May Fourth era to the "direct 'audio-visual' contact with the mass audience," as a whole Lee approached the Talks from a critical stand similar to Hsia's position (483). On the contrary, David Holm paid more attention to "the effects of this policy on less exclusive, more popular genre"(3) through the analysis of the Yangge movement in Yan'an. Goldman continued to discuss the Talks starting from the first wave and put them in the context of Chinese contemporary conflicts between liberal intellectuals and radical ones and revealed Mao's process of literary control: "After Mao had laid down his policy of political control over intellectuals and writers in his Yanan 'Talks on Literature and Art' in 1942, Zhou's main function was to ensure ideological orthodox not only in the creative arts but in every sphere of cultural activity" (Goldman, *Literary Dissent* 39). To some extent, however, Goldman agrees with Pickowicz's and McDougall's interpretations of the Talks from the perspective of literary theory.

The third wave of reception of the Talks is contemporary in the context of globalization as it occurs in China. From 1992 on with the advancement of Chinese market socialism alongside with the increasing exchanges between China and the West and along with different discourses of knowledge about modernity and post-modernity, the reception of Mao's Talks in English-language scholarship once again changes with different attitudes and methods. The interpretation of the Talks is bound up with a study of political discourse. Here, it is proper to cite Pickowicz's insight about China in 2011 as a general pattern of Sinology: "When new sources are available, and new methodologies are developed, they can in fact cause us to think differently" (*Independent* 161). In the last couple of decades, it has

become possible for Sinologists to see what is not usually visible and in the third wave there is reflection on the complicated relationship between Chinese communist politics and the discourse of the Talks. For example, Kirk A. Denton discusses the Talks in the context of literature and politics in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asia Literature*. Although he continues to touch on the Talks' effects and main content, his interpretation is based on the "schizophrenic tension" of Mao's Talks on literature: "Although the subservient role for literature is clearly expressed, one is struck by Mao's balanced approach to, for example, the use of both Chinese and Western literary models, and to the question of literature's role as satirical exposure or ideological extolling; he never unequivocally denounces Western literary models, nor does he completely erase a critical role for literature. This tension in Mao's ideas on literature is reflected in the schizophrenic cultural policy implemented by the CCP after 1949, which wavered from relative freedom to strict control, shifts that were invariably by calling on the authority of Mao's 'Talks'" (465).

Minmin Wang's analysis of the Talks in 1998 is more detailed than Denton's and interprets the Talks as a kind of speech and then applies Western classical rhetorical analysis to it in order to create "new ideas" or rather Chinese political rhetoric from "old perspectives": "Mao's Talks at the Yan'an forum can be seen as an effort to apply those tenets to literary and art works, aiming especially to establish his ideological doctrine among intellectuals in the CCP" (185). For Wang, Mao's development of argumentation is based on induction and deduction with the conclusion that literature and art must serve politics. Further, for Wang the structure of the Talks conforms to classic Chinese rhetorical order. Wang's discourse analysis of the Talks shows that Mao's political rhetoric is successful; however, the significance of literary theory is not discussed.

Liu Kang pushed the third wave to its final point to date. He is familiar with most of contemporary Chinese scholarship and following also the thought of Jameson, Kang analyzes the Talks in the context of Chinese Marxist aesthetics and "Western Marxist" aesthetics from the inter-disciplinary perspectives of genealogy of discourse, semiotics, comparative literature, aesthetics, theory of modernity and postmodernity, cultural politics, and postcolonialism and shows Mao's importance in the times of globalization. For Kang, Mao's Talks show an alternative modernity: confronted with the neglect and misunderstandings of Chinese Marxist aesthetics, Kang's intention is to question the Eurocentrism of Western Marxist aesthetics and postcolonialism in order to suggest an alternative modernity of Chinese Marxist aesthetics and a relationship between localism and globalization. That is to say, Kang investigates the values of the Talks as one of Mao's significant contributions to Marxism and thus establishes similarities and differences between Mao's Talks and Western Marxist thought: "I find the vision of Chinese aesthetic Marxism original, not only because of the conceptual framework that it offers, but also because its own discerning positions and agenda constitutes a crucially different voice that may demystify the current preoccupation of difference and otherness in cultural studies" (xvi). Kang's study shows the transformation of the pattern of interpretation in the context of globalization. He picks up the central idea of Mao's Talks through an interesting reading of the key term "national form" which has never been discussed fully by sinologists before. According to him, national form plays several major roles in the Talks in mediating Mao's interpretation of Marxism. By means of this mediation, Mao associates international Marxism with Chinese particular practice, and also resolves the tension between modern urban intellectuals and the rural peasants. What's more, Mao uses the notion of national form to articulate his aesthetics of production-reproduction and reception which is aesthetics of communication similar to Robert Jauss's Reception Aesthetics.

For Kang, the mutual interaction and determination of aesthetic production, reproduction, and reception are tied to national form. Literature and art must serve the masses first only by learning from the language, as well as the "incipient forms" of the common folk. The process of learning is a twofold transformation: intellectuals shift from petty-bourgeois to proletarian positions and the unpopular, foreign forms inherited from the May Fourth legacy evolve into the national, popular forms of the peasants. Therefore it is Mao's notion that transforms intellectuals' political stand through the transformation of aesthetic form: "popularization through a national form was not merely a process of aesthetic creation; it was first and foremost a process of political, ideological, and moral transformation—a process which urban intellectuals could redeem their impure souls through immersion into peasant life" (Kang 90). Further, for Mao the audience's horizon of expectations determined the aesthetic ex-

perience of production and reception and communicative efficacy and as a result the pragmatic purpose that serves politics is different from Jauss's catharsis of aesthetic experience. This also implies the political significance of national form because the audience's experience of national form is aesthetics and politics at the same time. Finally, there still exists a matter of national form regarding production and reproduction. In the original version of the Talks, it was expressed through the process of aesthetic creation with the mediation of form. From the perspective of Jameson's political semiotics Kang discusses the process from the peasants' everyday life and natural folks form to art formation (91).

When discussing the conflicts between the Talks and Hu's "subjective fighting spirit," Kang is concerned with the issue of national form. He maintains that Mao tended to romanticize traditional, national, and popular forms while Hu pointed out their negative aspects regarding them as part of feudalism hegemony thus reversing Mao's notions on the signification of Marxism and national forms by affirming the contribution of the urban intellectuals to the new national forms. Despite of their differences, Kang asserts that both Mao and Hu constructed a mediatory mechanism between ideology and aesthetic representation. Kang reconstructs Mao's theory of cultural hegemony by means of the conception of national form and suggests that Mao's thought included an alternative modernity. Thus Mao's theory is similar to Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, a notion that is accepted generally within Western Marxist aesthetics and US-American theories of postcolonialism. Kang considers it a pity that these values and contributions have not been discussed by Sinologists before. In my view, however, some of his analyses are over-interpretation, since it is more appropriate to compare Mao's Talks with Russian Marxist aesthetics than to compare them with Western Marxist aesthetics.

Other approaches to the literary context of the Talks include, for example, Fairbank's *China: A New History* in which he takes the Talks as part of Mao's signification of Marxism and that can be viewed as a two-part enterprise: when he Sinified his Marxism, Mao masked it with an orthodox terminology. Fairbank keeps considering Mao's ideological strategies in the sense that the Talks "laid down the law that literature should serve the state, in this case the cause of CCP-led revolution" (324). Further, Perry Link approaches the Talks from the angle of systems theory. By means of the five factors of systems—readers, writers, editors and publishers, critics and cultural officials, and leadership—Link analyzes the actual workings of the system and points out that the 1942 Talks laid down some basic rules about literature in communist China: "From then until the 1980s, when their influence gradually waned, Mao's 'Yan'an Talks' were the foundation of China's literary control system" (63). Maurice Meisner discusses the Talks from the historical and political perspective of Mao's cult. The cult of Mao was born in China's rural hinterland in the mid-1930s, but the Rectification Campaign strengthened his cult through the power of culture. According to Meisner, the Talks gave primacy to political over artistic criterion established by Mao as the final arbiter on the form and content of artistic and literary expression(94).

In conclusion, there is a substantial corpus of scholarship on Mao's Talks with a variety of approaches. Generally, scholars of the first wave criticized Mao's literary ideology and policies from the point of view of New Criticism and Cold War thinking had an effect on the readings and misreadings of the Talks. Then, with the establishment of a relationship between China and the West in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars in the second wave concentrated on the interpretation of the Talks in terms of literary theory. The third wave emerged in the context of globalization after 1990. It is with the rise of critical theory in the English-speaking world that Mao's notions of cultural hegemony and the mediation between aesthetics and politics are reevaluated against the discourse of Western Marxist aesthetics and postcolonial theory.

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