

# A brief discussion on Zhou Zuo ren's literary criticism

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**Abstract:** Zhou Zuo ren is best known to the public as an essayist. However, as a literary critic, his achievements are equally remarkable. Especially during the May Fourth Literary Revolution, Zhou Zuo ren, while grounded in Chinese tradition, absorbed Western modern literature and new ideas of the time. He gradually developed his unique impressionistic critical approach from his initial vague critical views of "literature of humanity" and "literature of the common people." This approach holds significant research value.

**Keywords:** Zhou Zuo ren, Literature of Humanity, Literary Criticism

## 1. Introduction

Zhou Zuo ren actively engaged in the literary revolution as both an essayist and a literary critic since 1917, and became one of the main members of the movement with his ideas and creative concepts of modern literature. Especially after the May Fourth Movement, he emerged as one of the leading figures of the literary revolution. Although Zhou focused exclusively on essays and never ventured into modern fiction, his critiques of feudal literature and his incorporation of advanced literary creation experiences from Western countries played a significant role in promoting the development of modern Chinese literature, achieving remarkable success especially in the field of novel theory.

## 2. Literature of humanity and literature of the common people

### 2.1. "Literature of Humanity": The integration of humanism and individuality

The concept of "Literature of Humanity" was proposed by Zhou Zuo ren in 1918. At that time, the May Fourth New Literature Movement was in full swing, and many new literary ideas were being disseminated through magazines such as New Youth. At the end of that year, New Youth published Zhou Zuo ren's essay "Literature of Humanity," in which he first articulated the philosophy of the new literary movement. He argued that the New Literature Movement should be guided primarily by humanism and simultaneously address issues in people's lives and work. This viewpoint caused a significant stir in the literary world, especially his call for "humanism as the foundation," which was supported by many advocates of the new literary movement. It was during this period that Zhou Zuo ren established his reputation as a literary critic. In his view, new literature is essentially literature of humanity, and it should reject anything that is inhumane.

This perspective is closely related to Zhou Zuo ren's identity as an individualist and a humanist. Individualism and humanism are deeply rooted in his literary criticism. He advocated that literary criticism should have a distinctive personality and express the self. At the same time, he promoted humanist ideals, arguing that "literature of humanity" and literary criticism should be based on "humanism." He believed that "literature is personal, but because it can voice what everyone wants to say but cannot express, it can also be considered universal." "Humanist literature is when an individual, as a member of humanity, uses artistic methods to express personal emotions, represents the will of humanity, and influences human happiness." In other words, humanist literature is when an individual, as a member of humanity, primarily expresses their emotions through art, represents the will of the masses, and promotes a happier life for people. In his essay "Sinking," he wrote, "Strictly speaking, articles based on inhumane hierarchical ideas also fall into the category of immoral literature." In "The Requirements of New Literature," he stated that for writers and critics, "the ideal of humanism is their belief, and the will of humanity is their god." As a

critic, Zhou Zuo ren's subjective, incisive, and persistent critical writings are built upon individuality and universal humanity. They possess a kind of subjective universality, a form of purposeful subjectivity. His writing and criticism are based on the values of his time and general human values, a kind of unshackled common sense, and a comprehensive aesthetic judgment based on ordinary human nature and humanism. This critical attitude enables him to always write with an open perspective, rich knowledge, and deep emotions, expressing his choices, impressions, and insights.

## **2.2. Popular literature: A literary transition from the aristocracy to the commoners**

Shortly after proposing the theory of "Literature of Humanity," in 1919, Zhou Zuo ren published "Literature of the Common People." In this essay, he pointed out that traditional feudal literature was a form of classical, aristocratic literature. In contrast, literature of the common people should be based on real-life facts, expressing the authors' true feelings and thoughts. He also advocated replacing the traditional feudal moral concepts of blind loyalty and filial piety with a moral view of equality among all people. By studying the joys and sorrows, successes and failures of ordinary men and women, literature of the common people could achieve its original intention of examining the lives of the commoners. Ultimately, it would implement the ideals of the New Literature Movement from another perspective by improving the lives of the common people. This means that humanist spirit should be truly reflected in creation, writing methods, and content.

In Zhou Zuo ren's view, new literature should first focus on three of the most important elements in the process of life: having inspiration, being able to evoke emotion, and possessing aesthetic value. These elements could free literature from the decay caused by numerous external social constraints in tradition while also reflecting the most essential inner beauty of life. At the same time, without completely discarding the functional role of literary tradition, literature should be organically combined with humanity from a human perspective and vision. This approach would elucidate the unique value of literature.

Like literary creation, literary criticism is closely related to the social environment of its time. Living in an era of revolution and being one of the advocates of the literary revolution, Zhou Zuo ren's literary criticism inevitably carried a certain degree of political utilitarianism. However, more often, Zhou Zuo ren actively practiced these three most important elements. By examining literature from a "human" perspective and focusing on the transformation of modern people, he studied the nature and value of literature from the standpoint of humanity and human nature. This also theoretically completed the transformation of new literature.

## **3. One's own garden and impressionist literary criticism**

### **3.1. The convergence of Zhou Zuo ren's literary criticism and impressionist literary criticism**

After proposing the concepts of "Literature of Humanity" and "Literature of the Common People," Zhou Zuo ren published his essay collection *One's Own Garden* in 1923. In a sense, the title of the book clearly reflects his critical stance. In the book, Zhou Zuo ren specifically uses the metaphor of "one's own garden" to signify his literary criticism, which originates from individual personality and genuinely expresses personal emotions. He regards the essence of literature as a means of expressing individuality. On this point, Zhou Zuo ren explained in *One's Own Garden*: "The so-called one's own garden is, in fact, very broad and not limited to any particular kind: whether it is growing vegetables, medicinal herbs, or flowers like roses and daisies, as long as one consciously cultivates the ground, no matter how large or small, with dedication, one has fulfilled their duty." This passage indicates that Zhou Zuo ren had developed his personal understanding of new literature. Literature, in his view, originates from life and should not be obsessed with exploring causes. Instead, it should be a matter of personal choice, much like deciding whether to grow vegetables or medicinal herbs in one's own garden. This idea shares a similar spirit with the impressionist literary criticism proposed by the famous French critic, Anatole France.

Zhou Zuo ren regarded literary criticism as his own garden and first introduced the concept of "literature of individuality." He not only emphasized the role of the writer's unique personality in literary creation but also explicitly pointed out the role of the critic's personality in literary criticism. He said: "Objective criticism, like objective art, does not exist. Those who deceive themselves by believing that they can

separate their personality from their writings are victims of the most erroneous illusion. The reality is that we cannot escape ourselves...We are confined within our own personalities, as if in a permanent prison. In my view, it is best to calmly acknowledge this dreadful situation and admit that we are merely speaking for ourselves."

Impressionist literary criticism originated in Europe, and one of its most representative figures was Anatole France. France believed that there was no need to overemphasize the purpose of criticism or focus too much on the external framework of coherence and unity, as traditionally believed. Instead, rational analysis could be entirely discarded in favor of capturing the critic's immediate, genuine feelings through intuition. This method aligns perfectly with Zhou Zuo ren's view in *One's Own Garden* that "literature and art should be centered on self-expression and aimed at touching others. It is both personal and universal, and the condition of literature and art is self-expression."

### **3.2. Zhou Zuo ren's reflection on and advocacy for literary critical standards**

In fact, in the essay "Miscellaneous Talks on Literary Criticism" in *One's Own Garden*, Zhou Zuo ren quoted Anatole France's exposition on impressionist literary criticism, which almost took up one-third of the entire text. After the quotation, he offered his own critique, saying: "This passage is extremely well-put, and every literary critic should pay attention to it." This brief statement clearly shows that Zhou Zuo ren fully accepted the viewpoint of impressionist literary criticism and, like France, opposed any objective external critical standards. He advocated that new literature should embrace a policy of tolerance. He pointed out that in this world, there is only one kind of critic who creates social literature in the name of humanity and society and achieves uniformity. However, this uniformity is one-sided and limited. Although it has some historical reference value, it is still prone to flaws. The mistake lies in the fact that there is no permanent and unchanging criterion for judging the quality of literature and art. So-called criteria are merely the tastes of a particular time and place.

## **4. Impressionistic appreciation in literary criticism**

### **4.1. The proposal and connotation of impressionistic appreciation theory**

Although literary criticism is an essential component of literature, it has always occupied an awkward position since the inception of literature and literary criticism. On the one hand, literary criticism is meant to serve literature and must be based on literary works. On the other hand, literary criticism itself is a form of literary creation, and due to its creative nature, it should avoid becoming a mere appendage to literature to prevent being reduced to a subsidiary product. Addressing this dilemma, Zhou Zuo ren proposed the theory of impressionistic appreciation in literary criticism. He stated: "I believe that genuine literary criticism should itself be a piece of literature, expressing the critic's impressions and appreciation of a work, rather than being merely a rational judgment. Ultimately, criticism is also a form of creation."

In his essay "Miscellaneous Talks on Literary Criticism," Zhou Zuo ren offered his unique perspective: "As long as the criticism expresses the self and is well-written, it can become a beautiful piece of prose. Ultimately, criticism is also a form of creation." Zhou repeatedly emphasized that criticism is "the act of a poet, not a scholar." This not only clarifies that criticism is itself "a piece of beautiful prose" but also highlights that its language style and creative methods should fully reflect the characteristics of literature. Critics should not only focus on the aesthetic aspects of literary works but also pay attention to the study of language style, structure, and other elements. In particular, critics should approach their work with the mindset of a poet. In his literary criticism, Zhou Zuo ren consistently adhered to the principles of simplicity, ordinariness, and authenticity, which imbued his critical writings with a plain yet poetic beauty, offering readers a unique and profound experience.

Most of Zhou Zuo ren's literary criticism is written in the form of prose, discussing his understanding, feelings, and suggestions with a calm and objective attitude. This style conveys a rich and poetic literary charm. The renowned writer Guo Moruo, three months after the formal publication of *One's Own Garden*, expressed his joy and excitement through an article, highly praising the beauty of the prose in the book, as well as its advanced and clear ideological concepts. In the concluding section of his book *Fifty Years of Chinese Literature*, Hu Shi made an appraisal of Zhou Zuoren's literary criticism. He believed that Zhou's

plain words can embody profound meanings..."Through his unique insights and mode of expression, Zhou Zuoren elaborated on books, life, the world, and human cultural attitudes, fully demonstrating his high emotional intelligence, intelligence, extensive knowledge, and complex psychology. This has led his literary criticism to present an unusual and novel cultural context.

#### **4.2. The practice and significance of impressionistic appreciation in literary criticism**

With the gradual maturation of the theory of impressionistic appreciation in literary criticism, Zhou Zuo ren's critical approach evolved from an initial unconscious phase to a more sophisticated and deliberate form. He opposed the judicial, law-like criticism of literary works, rejecting the notion that the majority should suppress the minority or that the minority should conform to the majority. This stance was particularly evident when authoritative forces attempted to suppress or dominate emerging critical views through violence or power. Zhou believed that a wise critic could be part of a dominant force but should always approach new ideas with understanding, support, and recognition. Any form of uniformity imposed by a single individual or authority was inevitably doomed to be resisted.

Zhou Zuo ren's theory of "understanding and acknowledgment" in literary criticism not only emphasized the promotion of the spirit of new literature but also highlighted that the life of literature and art is free, fragmented, and unequal. Therefore, he advocated for tolerance, recognizing the right of individuals to make judgments while also understanding the personal judgments of others. This approach extended to the field of children's literature. During the May Fourth New Literature Movement, while most critics focused on new literary forms and emerging expressions, only a few, including Zhou Zuo ren, turned their attention to children's literature. His dedication to this area was another manifestation of his humanistic spirit, rooted in the new literary concept of prioritizing humanity.

Before engaging in literary criticism and creation, Zhou Zuo ren was already a well-known translator. It was through his translation work that he absorbed many new literary trends from abroad. He maintained a clear critical stance towards foreign literature, advocating that while it was acceptable to learn from the strengths of foreign models, direct imitation should be avoided. Instead, one must use their own language and ideas. This viewpoint remains relevant even a century later.

From "literature of humanity" to impressionistic appreciation in literary criticism, we can trace the evolution of Zhou Zuo ren's critical thought from an initial unconscious phase to a more mature stage. However, throughout this journey, the principle of "humanity-centered" thinking remained a constant thread. In his critical views, "humanity" was the central focus and the subject of all literature. Any literary work could not be separated from the role of "humanity." His concept of "literature of humanity" opened a new chapter in modern literature and was widely recognized by many writers during the May Fourth period. His progressive ideas have made an indelible contribution to the field of literary criticism.

### **5. Conclusion**

Zhou Zuo ren's literary criticism, from his initial explorations of "Literature of Humanity" and "Literature of the Common People," to his emphasis on individuality and freedom in *One's Own Garden*, and finally to the maturation of his impressionistic appreciation in literary criticism, reflects a literary master's profound contemplation and relentless pursuit of the essence of literature in a turbulent era. By integrating humanism and individualism into his critical practice, he broke through traditional constraints to advocate for freedom, tolerance, and authenticity, infusing new vitality into the May Fourth New Literature Movement. Zhou's critical thought was not only pioneering at the time but continues to shine with wisdom today, reminding us in a diversified literary world to always center on the "human," respect individuality, cherish freedom, and embrace diverse voices with an open mind. His critical practice and theoretical exploration have laid a solid foundation for the development of modern Chinese literary criticism and provided valuable experience and inspiration for later literary creators and critics.

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