

On the influence of Yan' an university on Lu Yao's literary creation

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Abstract: Yan' an University, as Lu Yao's alma mater, is an extremely important factor in Lu Yao's personal growth and creative accumulation, exerting a profound influence on his life and literary creation. With its open and inclusive geographical sentiment, Yan' an University fostered the humanistic spirit in Lu Yao's novels. The systematic literary training provided by the university cultivated the ideological depth of his works. The rich literary resources available enhanced the artistic vision of his novels. Moreover, the unique campus culture of Yan' an University influenced the artistic style of his works. It was through the cultivation of Yan' an University that Lu Yao ultimately transformed from an amateur writer into a professional author with profound literary accomplishment.

Keywords: Yan' an University, Higher Education, Lu Yao, Literary Creation

1. Introduction

With the popular broadcast of the TV series *The Ordinary World*, Lu Yao has once again become the focus of public attention and discussion, sparking a renewed "Lu Yao fever" among readers. In fact, even without the TV adaptation, Lu Yao has long maintained a lasting popularity among readers. For over 20 years, his works have inspired millions of young people to strive forward and have brought deep emotional resonance and warmth to countless readers. His books have remained bestsellers for more than two decades and continue to be widely read today. Among the works that have won the Mao Dun Literature Prize, *The Ordinary World* is arguably the most widely read and profoundly influential. In the 2012 "Civilized China" national reading survey, *The Ordinary World* even surpassed *Dream of the Red Chamber*, ranking second as the book readers most wanted to read. In the "Public Awarded Book Recommendation Activity" organized by the Publicity Department of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Press and Publication, and 15 other member units, *The Ordinary World* topped the list. These survey results demonstrate the enduring appeal of *The Ordinary World* as a classic literary work to readers.

Recently, with the popular broadcast of the TV series, Lu Yao's works have once again attracted widespread attention and enthusiastic discussion among readers. The original novel has surged in sales, leading to shortages and even sellouts in bookstores across the country. The Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House has had to issue four emergency reprints. Moreover, Lu Yao's *Life* and *The Ordinary World* have become essential items on the tables of pirated book vendors. The enduring influence of Lu Yao's literature is closely related to his unique life experiences, personal charisma, and the multifaceted cultural influences he encountered. Among these influences, Yan' an University, where Lu Yao lived and studied for three years, played an extremely important role in his later literary achievements.

2. The open and inclusive geographical sentiment promoted the humanistic spirit in Lu Yao's novels

2.1. Lu Yao's connection with Yan' an university

The establishment of a relationship between Lu Yao and Yan' an University, and his enrollment as a student there, was characterized by a certain degree of contingency and drama. In 1973, with universities across the country resuming enrollment, Lu Yao began to consider pursuing higher education to improve his writing skills through specialization in literature. With high expectations, he listed his preferences for university programs: first, the Philosophy Department of Peking University; second, the Chinese Department of Northwest University; and third, the Chinese Department of Shaanxi Normal University. Yan' an University's Chinese Department was not on his radar. Moreover, the leaders of Yan' an County and the county's Education and Culture Bureau strongly promoted Lu Yao's literary talents to university admissions officers, seemingly confident of his admission. Coincidentally, both the Chinese Department of Beijing Normal University and Shaanxi Normal University had enrollment points in Yan' an County that year, and the county's Education and Culture Bureau leaders recommended Lu Yao to both institutions. However, both universities politely declined the recommendation because Lu Yao had been a leader of the Red Guards.

In the social context of that time, the Red Guards were regarded with apprehension, and the more the county pushed for Lu Yao's admission, the more the universities suspected that the local authorities were trying to "dump a burden" and thus were even more reluctant to accept him. After several rejections, someone from the county suggested recommending Lu Yao to Yan' an University as a last resort. Firstly, the leaders of Yan' an University's Chinese Department had organized a survey on mass worker-peasant-soldier literary creation activities in Yan' an County in 1972 and had met Lu Yao, gaining a good understanding of his background. Secondly, as a regional university, Yan' an University had more manageable relationships to coordinate. Moreover, the then County Party Secretary, Shen Yi, was very committed to this matter. He personally visited Yan' an University to lobby on Lu Yao's behalf, coordinating with his own relative, Shen Pei Chang, who was in charge of admissions for the Chinese Department, as well as with the university leaders Guo Yu bao and Zhang Xun bin. Finally, with the approval of the university leadership, Lu Yao was admitted to Yan' an University. Whether it was out of appreciation for Lu Yao's literary talent or a compromise due to local social obligations, Yan' an University took a risk in admitting Lu Yao, who had been a Red Guard leader.

After his admission, the university's Chinese Department held a special political review meeting to discuss Lu Yao's case. They concluded that "no issues could be identified from the materials regarding Wang Lu Yao. Yan' an University's procedures were complete, with recommendations from the production team to the Revolutionary Committee. The accusation of causing a death had been investigated by the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which had cleared him of suspicion"[1]. However, the university still had to prepare a contingency plan: according to the investigation by the Yan' an County Public Security, Procuratorate, and Court Special Case Group, the accusations were not entirely baseless, but there was insufficient evidence to substantiate them, and thus they were not recognized. The Yan' an County Committee had a clear political review conclusion that the mutual accusations between different mass organizations did not affect Lu Yao's eligibility for university admission. We had already known during our 1972 visit to Yan' an County that Lu Yao was passionate about literature and had considerable talent. Admitting such a student to university might help cultivate a useful talent. Recklessly rejecting him would not only jeopardize his political future but also be a dereliction of duty on the part of the educational authorities. In the later stages of the Cultural Revolution, factionalism was rampant, with mutual accusations and attacks being common occurrences. These should not be taken at face value, and certainly not used as evidence to convict someone based solely on an accusation letter[2].

2.2. Yan' an university's tolerance and cultivation of Lu Yao

Thus, Lu Yao was embraced and nurtured by Yan' an University, and this spirit of tolerance continued throughout his university life and later career. When Lu Yao entered university, he already had a clear plan

for his future: to acquire more knowledge, read more classics, and lay a solid foundation for his future literary creation. However, this focus led to some imbalance in his studies. During his time at Yan' an University, Lu Yao concentrated primarily on modern and contemporary literature as well as masterpieces of foreign literature, while showing less interest in classical Chinese literature and ancient Chinese, which were more distant from his main interests. Perhaps due to limited time and energy, he did not pay sufficient attention to his courses and often took leave or missed classes. As a result, some of his teachers had reservations about him. Nevertheless, the leaders and headteacher of the Chinese Department at Yan' an University, citing reasons such as "teaching students according to their aptitude," smoothed things over and explained Lu Yao's situation. After understanding his specific circumstances, the teachers also adopted a tolerant and open-minded attitude and did not make things difficult for him. It was this inclusive and even somewhat indulgent approach that allowed Lu Yao to fully absorb literary nourishment on the platform of Yan' an University and comfortably accumulate potential for his literary dreams.

2.3. The influence of Yan' an university on Lu Yao's creation and his gratitude towards his alma mater

The open-mindedness and magnanimity of Yan' an University, rooted in the regional culture of Northern Shaanxi, had a significant impact on Lu Yao's novel writing. This influence is mainly reflected in the humanistic spirit presented in his novels. Of course, the formation of this humanistic spirit was influenced by multiple factors, including foreign literature, regional culture, and the influence of Yan' an University itself. Lu Yao had a deep affection for the ordinary people living in the ordinary world depicted in his novels, especially the farmers of Northern Shaanxi, whom he passionately praised and deeply admired. Even for some negative characters, he managed to highlight their redeeming human qualities. Similarly, Lu Yao's novels are imbued with a strong sense of gratitude. His works consistently convey a warm and grateful sentiment towards life, the land, and the people. This sense of gratitude is inseparable from the influence of Yan' an University. Despite rumors that Lu Yao denied his connection with Yan' an University after becoming famous, he firmly refuted such claims and personally inscribed: "Yan' an University, this warm cradle..." to express his gratitude towards his alma mater. After graduation, Yan' an University continued to pay attention to, care for, and support Lu Yao. Shen Pei Chang recalled that before falling ill, Lu Yao sought help from his alma mater, saying, "The five-volume collection of Lu Yao's works, edited by Chen Ze shun, had been typeset by the publishing house but lacked the 50,000 yuan needed for printing. He came to Yan' an, despite his illness, hoping for assistance to resolve this urgent problem." In the end, Yan' an University resolved the issue by providing 50,000 yuan to the publishing house, which later gave the university an equivalent value of Lu Yao's works in return [2].

3. Systematic literary training enhanced the ideological depth of Lu Yao's novels

3.1. The significance of university education and professional growth

If secondary school is considered a stage of general education, then university is a stage for systematic learning of professional knowledge. Under the guidance of a rigorous and scientific professional training program, university students progress from one knowledge point to another, from one course to another, and from one teaching module to another, gradually consolidating and internalizing their professional knowledge over the years of university study. The systematic training in professional knowledge during the university years is of great significance for the future development of professional talents. Overall, professionally trained individuals who have attended university tend to have greater potential and better prospects in their future careers compared to those who have not. Although literature is a unique discipline that demands a high level of artistic talent, systematic training still plays a positive role in future literary creation under equal conditions.

3.2. Yan'an university's enhancement of Lu Yao's literary literacy

During his time at Yan' an University, Lu Yao received a comprehensive literary education that significantly elevated his literary literacy.

Lu Yao Received Systematic Literary Training at Yan' an University

Although we are now unable to know the exact curriculum system, structure, and progress of the courses at that time, from the course schedule for the second half of 1973 mentioned in the meeting minutes of the Chinese Department on September 29, 1973, we can see that Lu Yao's courses for that semester included Literary Theory, Modern Literature, Modern Chinese, Literary Lectures, as well as Physical Education and Politics[3]. These courses are not very different from the current curriculum system of Chinese Language and Literature majors. Through the study of this series of literary courses, Lu Yao's literary literacy was significantly enhanced. This systematic training transformed Lu Yao from an amateur writing enthusiast into a professional writer with profound literary accomplishment. The difference can be clearly seen in Lu Yao's works before and after university.

Before attending university, Lu Yao mainly focused on poetry, mostly creating short poems in the form of Northern Shaanxi folk songs known as "Xin tian you." Although these poems were easy to understand and melodious, they appeared rather naive due to his limited literary background and the influence of the social environment at that time, and their impact was quite limited. After several years of literary accumulation at Yan'an University, Lu Yao grew into a promising young writer. He was highly regarded by the well-known editor Dong Mo of Shanxi Literature and Art, and was invited to intern at the editorial department of this publication. During his internship, Lu Yao leveraged the excellent platform of Shanxi Literature and Art to fully unleash his literary potential. He published several works in the magazine, including the poem "Songs Flying with Wheels" co-created with Gu Xi, "Red Guards 'Song'" co-created with Jin Gu, and his own essays "Shining Silver," "Shining Lights," "Unfrozen Land," as well as the short story "Father and Son." These publications earned him unanimous recognition from the editorial staff, and he was eventually recruited into the editorial department after considerable effort. Of course, his literary potential burst forth even more intensely after he moved to Xi'an. In 1980, he published the novella *A Stirring Scene*, and in 1982, he published the novella *Life*. These two works were successively published in China's top literary journals, *Contemporary* and *Harvest*, and both won the National Excellent Novella Award. More importantly, *Life* caused a sensation in the literary circles of Shaanxi and even the entire country. Just imagine, in less than ten years, Lu Yao leaped from an obscure amateur writer in Yan'an County to a nationally renowned writer, and this transformation was greatly related to the systematic literary training he received at Yan'an University.

3.3. The shaping of Lu Yao's ideological horizon by Yan'an university

The three years of university life at Yan'an University also endowed Lu Yao's novels with profound ideological depth. For a writer to create classic works that stand the test of time, several conditions are minimally required: literary talent, ideological horizon, and life experience. Before attending university, Lu Yao already possessed good literary talent and rich life experience, but he lacked a sufficiently broad ideological and artistic horizon. The university's scientific knowledge system opened the door to a higher level of thought and art for Lu Yao, enabling him to contemplate life and depict the world from a more elevated ideological and artistic perspective. After several years of university study, Lu Yao acquired a good ideological horizon and a high theoretical level. His works are imbued with profound ideological depth and sharp ideological insight. His novels were among the first to address issues such as the future of rural youth, the urban-rural fringe, and the living conditions of the underprivileged, demonstrating a strong sense of foresight. Lu Yao's level of literary theory can be seen in a series of creative essays such as *Starting from Noon*, especially his unique insights into the development trend of realism, which many literary theorists find hard to match.

4. Abundant literary resources expanded the artistic vision of Lu Yao's novels

After entering Yan'an University, Lu Yao fully utilized the university's library resources, immersing himself in the ocean of newspapers, magazines, and books. His dedication to reading was well-known among his classmates in the Chinese Department's Class of 1973. Many classmates, reminiscing about his university life after his passing, most vividly remembered his diligent reading. Xu Lai Hian recalled, "At that time, there were pitifully few good books. Under the constraints of the extreme-leftist line, many Chinese and foreign classics were still imprisoned in a 'literary inquisition' and had not been liberated. The vast library of Yan'an University had only one copy of *Les Misérables*, which was incomplete, tattered, and

truly miserable. In this barren environment, Lu Yao visited the library every few days, trying to find books and reading them with great enthusiasm, one after another"[4]. Bai Zheng ming recalled," In my interactions with him, I found that he read some novels not just once, but two, three, or even more times. On Lu Yao's bedside table, there were always two books: one was *The Story of the Founding* by Liu Qing, and the other was *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* by Ai Siqu, both of which were sacred readings that Lu Yao never tired of"[5]. During his time at Yan' an University, Lu Yao read numerous foreign classics such as *War and Peace*, *The Young Guard*, *Don Quixote*, *The Red and the Black*, *Père Goriot*, *Resurrection*, *Anna Karenina*, as well as domestic masterpieces like *The Story of the Founding and Defending Yan' an*, and several other literary classics whose titles were unfamiliar even to his classmates. Lu Yao highly praised the reading environment at Yan' an University, saying, "Yan' an University is a great place for reading, with its mountains and rivers, and especially in the summer, the Yan River beach is fresh and cool, and the pine and cypress on Yangjialing are lush and green, creating a very elegant environment"[6]. At Yan' an University, Lu Yao engaged in in-depth artistic exchanges with literary masters from China and abroad through his readings. Through repeated reading and continuous contemplation, he laid a solid foundation for his future literary creation.

In addition, the high-caliber faculty of the Chinese Department at Yan' an University provided substantial guidance and assistance for Lu Yao's literary creation. At that time, Yan' an University had a group of highly qualified teachers, many of whom, filled with revolutionary passion, had graduated from prestigious institutions across the country to support the reconstruction of Yan' an University in the old revolutionary base area. Among them were Xiong Dao tong, Yang Yong Chang, Shi De Yu, Zhang Chong wen, Feng Liping, Bao Yong Xin, Lei Zhao Lin, and Chen Min xu. Most of these teachers were young graduates from top universities such as Beijing Normal University, Fudan University, East China Normal University, Northwest University, and Shaanxi Normal University, and they later became the backbone of Yan' an University's teaching and research. Among these backbone teachers were Bao Yong Xin, Feng Liping, and Chen Min Xu from the Chinese Department, who provided direct or indirect guidance on Lu Yao's studies and writing, thereby influencing his later novel writing.

5. The unique campus culture influenced the artistic style of Lu Yao's novels

5.1. The inheritance and development of Yan' an university's red culture

As a product of revolutionary politics, Yan' an University has always been intrinsically linked to red revolutionary culture since its inception. After its establishment, red culture has been a unique resource for campus cultural construction at Yan' an University. This distinctive campus cultural spirit merged with Lu Yao's inherent political potential, jointly fostering the formation of the political character in Lu Yao's novels.

From 1966 to 1972, Yan' an University suspended its enrollment activities. The university officially resumed enrollment in 1973, making Lu Yao a member of the first student cohort after the resumption. During this period, the teaching, research, and management of Yan' an University were in a state of revival, and so was its campus culture. In 1970, Yan' an University formulated the "Concepts on How to Build a Socialist Yan 'an University" and successively dispatched 18 educational revolution exploration teams to conduct surveys in 39 counties across Shaanxi Province." These exploration teams conducted research on the educational conditions of primary and secondary schools in the old revolutionary base areas and carried out a comprehensive, systematic, and complete investigation of the educational traditions of the 'Anti-Japanese Military and Political University'(Anta),the shining example of the proletarian educational cause"[7].This can be regarded as an initial exploration by Yan' an University into the educational traditions of Anta, which is also the inheritance of Yan' an Spirit. Subsequently, starting in 1974, Yan' an University responded to the Party's call to implement "open-door schooling," with the humanities and social sciences adopting the slogan" society as the classroom." For instance, the Marxist-Leninist Teaching and Research Office proposed the work plan" Promoting the Yan' an Spirit and Cultivating Theoretical Cadres in the Three Revolutionary Movements," organized political education classes to visit six revolutionary sites in Northern Shaanxi for education, and the Chinese Department compiled works themed on Yan' an Spirit and Shan Bei folk art, such as *Ode to Yan' an*, *Ode to the Red Sun*, and *Selected Shan bei Folk Songs*. The

Political Department produced the Mei Hu opera *Sending Millet*, and the Marxist-Leninist Teaching and Research Office compiled *Stories of Mao Zedong's Thirteen Years in Yan' an*, among others. It is evident that since then, the campus cultural characteristics of Yan' an University, relying on red cultural resources, have begun to emerge and have continued to the present day.

5.2. The shaping of students' spiritual character by Yan'an university's red culture

This unique campus culture, through various teaching components during the university years, gradually permeates the hearts of every Yan' an University student and is internalized as their distinctive spiritual character and temperament. Under the influence of this campus culture, which is imbued with boundless positive energy, students from Yan' an University develop a strong sense of responsibility. They are able to endure hardships, work diligently, and explore bravely in their professional positions. Lu Yao's literary career and his creative practice, as well as the "Lu Yao Spirit" distilled from his work, are a prime example of the externalization of this campus culture. Moreover, the campus culture of Yan' an University contains rich political elements that coincide with Lu Yao's own political consciousness. These elements have reinforced his political awareness and significantly propelled the formation of the political character in his later novels.

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5.3. The fit between Lu Yao's creations and the mainstream ideology

Influenced by the red campus culture of Yan' an University, Lu Yao always maintained a high degree of fit with the mainstream ideology in his novel creations and was also recognized by the mainstream ideology. It can be said that Lu Yao's acceptance by the mainstream ideology began when his early works *A Thrilling Scene* and *Life* won the National Excellent Novelette Award, and this recognition was further strengthened when *Ordinary World* won the Mao Dun Literature Award. In fact, *Ordinary World* had already begun to blend with the mainstream discourse system before winning the award, that is, through the radio drama *Ordinary World* launched by China National Radio. This form of dissemination, which was very popular during the Seventeen Years period, was basically a product of the Mao Zedong era and in itself represented a kind of authoritative voice from the higher echelons and the invisible mainstream discourse system. Therefore, by means of this mainstream media, *Ordinary World* achieved a certain fit with the mainstream ideology and was promoted and disseminated within the mainstream discourse system. Afterwards, *Ordinary World* was included in the required reading list of the new curriculum standards, and was continuously promoted in the mainstream discourse system, gradually becoming a classic inspirational work that motivates millions of people.

5.4. The inheritance of Lu Yao's Spirit and the promotion of the mainstream ideology

After Lu Yao's death, the creative trend and spirit of his novels received attention and emphasis from the mainstream ideology. At the 6th Congress of Shaanxi Writers Association in 2013, Zhao Zheng Yong, Secretary of Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee, said in the face of more than 400 Shaanxi writer representatives, "Struggling to overcome hardships and constantly challenging difficulties in adverse circumstances is the core value of Lu Yao's spirit. I firmly believe that the fertile land of Shaanxi is bound to nurture more 'Lu Yao s'". [8] Lu Yao was endowed with a special meaning in the official way and was regarded by Shaanxi as a benchmark and a spiritual leader, becoming an example for writers to learn from. In 2014, at the National Symposium on Literature and Art, Xi Jinping hoped that literary and art workers

would adhere to the people-centered creative orientation, keep the people's well-being in mind and record their joys and sorrows. Only by delving deep into life and having a thorough understanding of its essence can literary and art workers create vivid plots and characters. To some extent, this orientation of literary and artistic creation is exactly in line with the direction of literature and art advocated and practiced by Lu Yao.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Yan' an University cultivated Lu Yao and enabled his brilliant literary achievements with its broad-mindedness, high-quality resources, systematic management, and unique culture. We cannot say that Lu Yao would not have become an excellent writer without Yan' an University, but without it, his path in literary creation would not have been so smooth, and his literary legacy would have taken a different shape.

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