

The genesis, evolution, and expansion of the theory of literary aesthetic ideology

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Abstract: The core concept of the theory of literary aesthetic ideology is that literature is a reflection of real social life and is an ideology; at the same time, it is a reflection that has played subjectivity and initiative, and is an aesthetic ideology. From the perspective of philosophical foundations, the theory of aesthetic ideology is epistemological; from the process of concept formation, it has not been able to get rid of the "essence—feature" thinking mode; therefore, the essence of literature is still ideology, and aesthetics is just a feature. In view of this, we propose to construct a literary view of "aesthetic practice" based on the theory of practice. Different from the epistemological view of literature, the literary view of aesthetic practice not only sees literature as a means to reflect social life but also sees literature as a basic way of human activity and existence. Because of its aesthetic characteristics, this way of activity determines that literature can play a great role in negating, criticizing, and guiding reality. Therefore, literature not only plays a role that is subordinate to ideology but also plays a role in resisting ideology. The theory of literary practice and the view of aesthetic practice are both an inheritance and a transcendence of the theory of literary reflection and the view of aesthetic ideology literature.

Keywords: Literary Aesthetics, Ideology, Aesthetic Practice

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the Chinese literary and artistic academic community has defined literature as an aesthetic ideology, marking an important achievement in the theoretical research of Marxist literature and art. The proposal and construction of the "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology" is a process of sublimation and transcendence of the Soviet literary and artistic model, as well as a process of learning from and drawing on Western literary and aesthetic thoughts and the aesthetic thoughts of Western Marxism. At the same time, it is a process of continuous debate with various viewpoints opposing the "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology," and it has been gradually perfected through this ongoing debate.

2. Literature's liberation and redefinition in the new era

At the beginning of the new era, attempts to liberate literature and redefine it were carried out at various levels. From within Marxist philosophy, the publication of Zhu Guang Qian's article "Questioning the Relationship Between Superstructure and Ideology" in early 1979 sparked discussions and debates on the relationship between literature and art, superstructure, and ideology. Subsequently, Mei Lin, Cao Ting Hua, Min Ze, and others joined the discussion and generally formed the following opinions: Although literature and politics are both ideologies and belong to the superstructure, they are not in a determining and determined relationship, and there is no issue of politics determining literature. Ultimately, it is "social existence" that determines literature, not politics. The debate, as a result, not only upheld the identification of literature's role in the social structure as presented in the classics of Marxism but also echoed the party's stance of no longer advocating "literature and art serve politics." It also met the demands of the literary and art community for ideological emancipation and liberation of literature and art, taking into account the interests and appeals of all parties.

Regarding the relationship between Marxism and humanism, and class nature versus universal human nature, Zhu Guang Qian pointed out: "The relationship between human nature and class nature is one of

universality and particularity. Affirming class nature does not deny human nature." "Humanism in the West is a historical product, with different specific contents in different eras, but it has a core idea, which is to respect human dignity and place people above everything else." Subsequently, Cheng Dai xi, Ru Xin, and others published articles in support of Zhu Guang Qian's views, arguing that humanism "generally refers to the advocacy of maintaining human dignity, rights, and freedom," and that "Marxist theory itself has always taken the resolution of humanistic issues as its starting point and central task," while "human nature has both class and social characteristics, as well as a common humanity; they complement each other and form an organic whole." [1] Qian Zhong wen agreed, arguing that human nature mainly refers to common humanity, which, like class nature, is a fundamental characteristic of real people. [2] This expresses the urgent desire of the literary and art theory community under the new situation to replace the narrow class nature and class emotions with "common humanity, common aesthetics," breaking through the taboo of humanism.

Regarding the inherent characteristics of literature and art, many scholars at that time expressed their respective views. In 1979, the fourth issue of "Shanghai Literature" published a commentator's article titled "Restoring the True Name of Literature and Art—Refuting the Notion that 'Literature and Art are Tools of Class Struggle'". The article argued that if "literature and art are tools of class struggle" is taken as the basic nature of literature and art, it would negate the fundamental principle that life is the source of literature and art, and would overlook the diversity and richness of literature and art, which would not be conducive to the diversification of themes and genres and the flourishing of a hundred flowers. [3] In the same year, Xu Zhong Yu published an article titled "The Essential Characteristic of Literature and Art is the Imagistic Expression of Life" in the 11th issue of "Shanghai Literature", in which he said: "The essence of literature and art is the imagistic expression of life. Life is incredibly rich and complex, and there are various ways and methods to express it vividly. The essence and characteristics of literature and art require the author to be able to depict all people, classes, and masses, all vivid forms of life and forms of struggle in the work." [4] It can be seen that when Xu Zhong Yu combined life, imagery, expression, truth, and free writing in his text to form his own narrative space, such elements and modes of expression are not only a negation of the instrumental view but also a departure from the reflection theory. This means that when discussing the nature of literature and art, the emphasis has shifted from external factors (such as revolution, politics, class, society, etc.) to internal ones (expression, imagery, etc.), from respecting the objective attributes of literature and art to respecting the subjective creation of literature and art, and from emphasizing the passivity of literature and art to emphasizing their proactivity. A few years later, the literary theory community saw the emergence of character studies, subject studies, aesthetic reflection studies, etc., which should be considered as a continuation and deepening of the discussion. [5]

3. The rise of aesthetic ideology in literary theory

In 1980, Wang Ruo wang proposed the proposition of "aesthetic reflection" in the article "Literature and Art Are Not Subordinate to Politics" [6]. Subsequently, Qian Zhong wen raised the issue of "the aesthetic reflection of the completeness and richness of life" in literature and put forward that "literature and art is an ideology with aesthetic characteristics." In 1984, Tong Qing Bing clearly proposed and defined "aesthetic reflection" as "reflecting the unique object and content of people's holistic social life with aesthetic attributes, and using artistic images, especially typical images, as the unique form of reflection. Both the unique object and content of literature, and the form of reflection determined by this unique object and content, have aesthetic characteristics. Therefore, the aesthetic reflection of life is the basic characteristic of literature. [7] In 1986, Qian Zhong wen published an article that fully demonstrated the connotation of "aesthetic reflection," such as having strong emotional color, being related to language, symbols, and form, and maintaining the subjectivity of the subject through imagination and fantasy. [8] In 1987, Qian Zhong wen officially proposed the definition of "literature as aesthetic ideology" in the article "Literature Is Aesthetic Ideology" and conducted a more comprehensive discussion. In 1989, the "Principles of Literature" edited by Wang Yuan Xiang incorporated "aesthetic ideology" into the teaching material, becoming the core concept of the textbook. In 1992, the "Literary Theory Course" edited by Tong Qing Bing also included "aesthetic ideology" in the teaching material, becoming the theoretical basis for the textbook's definition of literature. To this day, the literary view of aesthetic ideology has become the mainstream in academia.

It is generally believed that Qian Zhong wen, Tong Qing Bing, and Wang Yuan Xiang hold core positions in the construction of the "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology," but their understanding and interpretation of this concept are actually quite different. The construction of Qian Zhong wen's "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology" starts with the proposal of "aesthetic reflection" and takes the discovery of "aesthetic consciousness" as the logical starting point. The original intention of proposing "aesthetic reflection" was to oppose the "mechanical reflection" view of literature; identifying "aesthetic consciousness" as the logical starting point of the "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology" aims to change the thinking mode that starts from collective will and is based on reflection on individual living conditions and care for authentic ways of living. Qian Zhong wen's view of "aesthetic ideology" in literature insists on the ideological nature of literature but emphasizes its aesthetic characteristics; if literature loses its aesthetic characteristics, it is not enough to talk about literature; if a person loses their aesthetic nature, they cannot be called a complete person. The theoretical construction process of Qian Zhong wen's "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology" is always permeated by the humanistic spirit. [9] Tong Qing Bing believes that "ideology" can only show the general characteristics of literature reflecting social life when defining literature, and "aesthetics," as a subjective, emotional, and imaginative creative activity of human beings, is the basic characteristic of literary practice. Only by further defining literature with "aesthetics" can literature free itself from the generality of ideology and highlight its own unique and specific existence. The literature of ideology often becomes a mechanical reflection of social existence and a testing ground for vulgar sociology; purely aesthetic literature may become an uncontrolled vent for personal emotions, and literature that lacks concern for reality and humanistic spirit always has limited value. Only literature that finds a balance between "ideology" and "aesthetics," between the overall process of social development and the self-generation of the subject, can better achieve its "historical-humanistic" value pursuit. [10]

Unlike Messrs. Qian and Tong, Mr. Wang Yuan Xiang approaches aesthetics from the perspective of Kantian philosophy, meaning that in Wang's view, as in Kant's, aesthetic activity serves as an intermediary and process leading to morality. Through the training and cultivation of aesthetic education, one can achieve a moral elevation. In this sense, beauty is subordinate to morality, rather than being an independently developing and existing force as seen in the views of Messrs. Qian and Tong. There is also a divergence in the understanding of ideology. For Messrs. Qian Zhong wen and Tong Qing Bing, ideology exists not only as a background and limit but also demonstrates its own existence and value as an object that aesthetics needs to overcome, negate, and transcend. Although Mr. Wang Yuan Xiang's understanding of ideology includes aspects of being a background and limit for aesthetics, what is more important is its role in influencing, changing, and shaping people. Qian Zhong wen and Tong Qing Bing do not deny this function of ideology, but they are wary and reject it. Overall, Wang Yuan Xiang's understanding of the theory of aesthetic ideology ultimately leans towards the side of ideology because the aesthetics he advocates actually play a role similar to the ideological transformation of thought [11]. In contrast, the theoretical focus of Qian Zhong wen and Tong Qing Bing lies in "aesthetic consciousness" or "aesthetic practice." At this point, there is a profound difference between Wang Yuan Xiang's thoughts and those of Qian Zhong wen and Tong Qing Bing.

Despite the differences, they do not change the important position occupied by the "Theory of Literary Aesthetic Ideology" in the process of constructing literary theory in the new era. As Feng Xian Guang said: Marx's view that art is a "form of ideology" and his view that art grasps the world are the two most basic viewpoints of Marx on the essence of art. These two basic viewpoints have not been integrated and penetrated for a long time. The popular literary theory in the West places the essence of literature on the basis of aesthetic activity, but rejects and denies the Marxist view that literature is a social ideology. Soviet Leninist literary theory emphasized the essence of literature as a social ideology, but regarded social ideology as the only highest essence of literature, excluding and denying the aesthetic essence of literature. Or although it has been proposed that literature has artistic aesthetic characteristics, it still does not regard aesthetics as the basic characteristic of defining the essence of literature. It can be said that the Sinicized and Westernized Marxist literary theories have not fully and holistically grasped the theoretical resources of Marx on the essence of art. Only the literary theory of the new period in China has defined the essence of literature as "aesthetic ideology," fully integrating the main ideas of Marx on the essence of art. [12]

At the same time, it should be recognized that the academic community has never lacked voices of skepticism. For example, Zhang Yong qing believes that defining the first principle of literature as "aesthetic ideology" is an innovation in the basic theory of literature and a result of the literature theory keeping pace with the times. However, as an academic continuation of the theory of literary ideology, this proposition has five logical flaws: inappropriate starting point of cognition, ambiguous grammatical relationships, self-contradictory connotations, extension with no reference, and ineffectiveness of experience and logic, making it difficult to stand from the perspectives of essentialism or original theory. [13] Li Shi Lai, on the other hand, believes that as two heterogeneous and mutually contradictory fields, the organization and superposition of aesthetics and ideology cannot forge and derive an objective real existence or spiritual phenomenon unified in the nature of art. As a knowledge construction of a disciplinary theory, the theory of aesthetic ideology, in pursuit of the neutrality of value, has extracted and abandoned the critical edge of Marxist ideological theory; as an essentialist discourse construction, the theory of aesthetic ideology has not been able to jump out of the ideological centralism, get rid of the essentialist thinking malady, and unilaterally dominate, thus departing from the spirit of dialectical materialism that rejects dictatorship and respects differences. [14] Among the scholars opposing the theory of literary aesthetic ideology, the views of Zhang Yong qing and Li Shi Lai have a certain representativeness.

By examining the emergence, evolution, and various forms of the theory of literary aesthetic ideology, we believe that "aesthetic reflection theory" is an inheritance of the "active reflection theory" of literature since the 1950s, and also a counteraction. The "aesthetic theory" that began to rise in the 1980s mainly catered to people's psychological needs for the free liberation of human nature. Compared with "active reflection theory," "aesthetic reflection theory" more expresses the subjectivity, emotionality, and creativity of literature in reflecting life. From this perspective, art "is both reflection and creation. Reflection and creation are interconnected, constituting a complete process of gradual aesthetics" [15]. The "theory of literary aesthetic ideology," which was proposed on the basis of aesthetic reflection theory and gradually developed and matured, expresses such a theoretical demand of the literary and artistic community, that is, to seek the integration and unification of Marxist historical materialism and aesthetics, and the integration and unification of philosophical epistemology and practice theory. Therefore, different from the Soviet Union and Western Marxist literary theory, the "theory of literary aesthetic ideology" proposed in the new period of China has accurately grasped the two basic points of Marx on the essence of art - that is, literature, as a social ideology, is a reflection of social existence; at the same time, literature expresses its ideological characteristics in the form of aesthetic practice. Aesthetics and ideology, although there is a side of conflict and confrontation between them, there is also a side of harmonious integration. As a compound concept, the aesthetic ideology does not "find it difficult to stand" because of the internal conflict of the concept, but on the contrary, because the concept is full of tension, the connotation becomes richer, so it can interpret literary phenomena more dialectically. In terms of the form of this theory itself, it can also be understood as a result of compromise and balance between the official will and academic discourse. Therefore, it can be said that the theory of aesthetic ideology is the result of the literary theory keeping pace with the times, and is the academic continuation of the theory of literary ideology.

4. Marxist Literary Theory: debates on foundations

The impact of the theory of literary aesthetic ideology is immense and far-reaching, but from the perspective of its philosophical foundation, the theory of aesthetic ideology is still epistemological. Under this epistemological premise, literature naturally becomes a means for people to understand the world, albeit in an aesthetic and artistic way. Looking at the process of concept formation, it still follows the pattern of essence and characteristics; thus, the essence of literature is naturally ideology, while aesthetics is just a characteristic. If examined from this perspective, the progress made by the "theory of literary aesthetic ideology" may not be as great as we imagined. [16]

The issue here ultimately involves whether Marxist literary theory should be based on epistemology as the fundamental principle, or should it be based on practice theory as the fundamental principle? This question is worth pondering. The philosophical foundation of epistemology is recorded in the Marxist classic "The German Ideology," stating, "It is not social consciousness that determines social existence, but social existence that determines social consciousness." The former Soviet Union took the Marxist

epistemology—reflection theory as the philosophical foundation of Marxist literary theory. Before the reform and opening up, China used Marxist epistemology as the basic theoretical basis for our understanding and recognition of literary activities. As a result, literature is a reflection of social life, although it may be an active reflection. When the Marxist literary theory thought of the former Soviet Union developed to Zhdanov, it regarded the reflection theory as the only philosophical foundation of Marxist literary theory, and then denied that Marxist philosophy had its own ontology.

The philosophical foundation of the theory of practice is also rooted in the original works of Marxism, with specific discussions on practice found in works such as the "Manuscripts," "Theses on Feuerbach," and "The German Ideology." Later, Gramsci elevated practice to the height of the ontology of Marxist philosophy, and thus he named Marxist philosophy "the philosophy of practice." The introduction of Western learning to the East, which identified Marxist philosophy as the philosophy of practice, broadened the theoretical horizons of Chinese scholars and also sparked a long-lasting and extensive debate between Chinese and Soviet Marxists and Western Marxists. Scholars who adhere to the Soviet Marxist literary theory insist on viewing literature from an epistemological perspective, believing that practice does not hold an ontological position in Marxist philosophy. The theory of practice can be a way to view literature, but it is not a fundamental principle. Scholars who draw on Western Marxism, on the other hand, regard practice as a fundamental and metaphysical mode of human activity. Therefore, characterizing literature with practice, as opposed to characterizing it from an epistemological perspective, has a more ontological significance.

According to our research, the early Chinese Marxists were not interested in creating a new theory, but in guiding literary activities to actively change society and life through Marxism and literary theory. [17] Therefore, the reason why Marxism incorporates literature and art into the social structure system, to examine and explain their status and characteristics within the social structure system, is that "the focus is on the role that literature and art can play in social change." [18] In this light, conducting research from the perspective of the theory of practice is not only a way to fully and accurately understand the spirit of Marxism, but also an important means to achieve the Sinicization of Marxist literary theory. Because, "Marxism and literary theory have always been the products of social practice and struggle." [19] Looking back at the original texts and sorting out the development process of Marx's philosophical thoughts, we can also find that in his original vision, "human practical activities are both objective activities that transform objects and non-objective activities that promote, create, and pursue the generation of humanity. Objectivity and non-objectivity constitute the basic contradiction of practical activities. The unfolding of this contradiction is also a process in which the relationships between man and nature, man and society, man and man, and man and himself continuously achieve a negative unity and continuously create a new world civilization." [20] Looking back at ancient Chinese philosophical thought, it emphasizes a spirit of practice. Although this philosophical thought is not exactly the same as Marx's practical philosophy, it is completely consistent in emphasizing the intervention in reality. [21] Based on this, Wang Yuan Xiang proposed the theoretical concept of "practical nature theory of literature and art", attempting to use "practice" as a medium to combine epistemology, epistemology with anthropology, and value theory, scientism with humanism, to further elucidate the "anthropological" nature of literature and promote the new development of Marxist literary theory. [22] In his view, once the practical nature of literature is established, we can "not only fundamentally overcome the past philosophy that divides and opposes spirit and matter, subjectivity and objectivity, individual and society, value and knowledge, freedom and necessity, ideal and reality, but also more clearly help us recognize the limitations of Western modern humanistic philosophy and literary theory that practice is personalized, subjectified, psychologized, and irrationalized, and provide a scientific and solid theoretical basis for the development of Marxist literary theory in the contemporary era, while absorbing the rational factors of Western modern humanistic literary theory." [23]

There is no consensus in the field of literary studies on whether practice is the ontology of Marxist philosophy. For instance, Dong Xue wen believes that Marxist practice fundamentally refers to material production practice, and that material ontology is the theoretical core of Marxist philosophy. Practice has ontological significance, but it is not the ontology of the world [24]. This view is open to question. In his writings such as the "Manuscripts" and "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx discussed practice on multiple occasions, and he never defined practice merely as material production practice. Instead, he used the concept in a broader sense, such as human sensory activity. Therefore, any narrow understanding of practice

may not conform to Marx's original intention and may not meet the requirements of theoretical development. It should be recognized that "practice," as a dimension of ontology, has a dimension of self-negation. The self-negation and self-development of practice are actually transformations in the way the world is constituted and the way humans exist [20]. If examined from this perspective, it can be found that some scholars who have elevated practice to the height of the ontology of Marxist philosophy have a potential purpose to highlight and utilize practice as a unique human activity, as well as its implicit power to transcend reality, criticize reality, change reality, and lead reality. Therefore, taking practice as the ontology of Marxist philosophy is a break from the Soviet Marxist philosophical concept; replacing the Soviet model of epistemological literary view with a practical literary view has a subversive implication, with the ultimate goal of viewing literature from a "human" perspective rather than a "material" perspective.

The literary and artistic view based on the theory of practice is different from the traditional epistemological literary and artistic view in the following ways: the latter is object-oriented, while the former starts from humans; the latter tends towards rationality, while the former returns to life; the latter regards literature and art as a lower form of cognition, while the former sees literature and art as the spiritual homeland and behavioral reference system for people; the latter tends to conduct static research on literature and art, while the former tends to conduct dynamic studies. However, it should be noted that while the practical literary and artistic view distinctly reflects the requirements of the current era, it also has limitations due to the separation or even opposition of practice and cognition, which can lead to the Subjectivization, personalization, and Irrationalization of literary and artistic creation and research [23]. Wang Yuan Xiang therefore proposes that to fully and completely elaborate on Marxist literary theory and promote its development in contemporary times, it is necessary to unify the epistemological perspective with the practical perspective for research [21]. Zhu Liyuan said, "The philosophical foundation of literary studies should shift from a purely epistemological approach to an existential theory centered on practice in Marxism." [25]

5. Conclusion

It needs to be clarified that so-called practice, as a way for humans to transform the external world and themselves, is motivated and ultimately powered by the essential human force—free will, and thus is inherently aesthetic. Looking at aesthetics, whether it adopts revolutionary struggle as a means or follows the strategy of artistic creation, as a unique human activity, it is practice in itself. Whether it is practice or aesthetics, they are the same in terms of negativity, criticality, and transcendence towards the real world. In light of this, we propose the establishment of a literary view of "aesthetic practice," which aims to combine the multiple meanings of philosophy and aesthetics to better reflect the complexity and richness of literary activities. In "the theory of literary aesthetic practice," aesthetics and practice are two sides of the same coin, depending on each other, and together define literary phenomena. Among them, aesthetics emphasizes more the spiritual aspect of human free will, while practice emphasizes more the aspect of humans transforming the objective world and themselves in reality.

By comparing the theory of literary aesthetic ideology, it can be found that the literary view of "aesthetic practice" undoubtedly breaks away from the essence-attribute thinking pattern in the process of concept formation and directly points to the essence of literature. Taking "aesthetic practice" as the primary essence of literature emphasizes that the creation and appreciation of literary art are inherently basic ways of human activity, making this activity ontological and existential in nature. As one of the ways of human aesthetic practice, literature possesses spiritual, forward-looking, transcendent, in short, aesthetic qualities, which determine that literature can play a significant role in negating reality, criticizing reality, and guiding reality. Therefore, literature is no longer content to play a subordinate role in ideology but also undertakes the mission of resisting ideology. The theory of literary practice and the literary view of aesthetic practice are an inheritance of the theory of literary reflection and the view of aesthetic ideology, but they are even more a transcendence.

It cannot be denied that using aesthetic practice as a means to perfect individual morality and achieve a beautiful society is largely wishful thinking. And the idea that social system leapfrog development can be achieved through violent means and overnight change is also not easily realized. Our view is that compared to the utopia of the system, the creation of an aesthetic utopia is the fate that literature carries. It is precisely

because of the creation of an aesthetic utopia that the imperfections and shortcomings of the existing world are compared, thus pointing out the direction for the future of human civilization. The significance and value of aesthetic practice activities lie in this. Within the existing institutional framework, how to better utilize literature as a symbolic free will of aesthetic practice activities, to engage in dialogue and negotiation with the metaphor of totality ideology, to reach a compromise or even a limited consensus, should be the main direction of our thinking.

6. References

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