

A Review of the Debate over National Form in 1940s: How to Create a National Form for Chinese New Literature?

Gong Gang & Ma Yueling

Abstract: The debate over national form dominated the ideological trend of the nationalization of literature and art after the Second Sino-Japanese War, which not only extended the disputes over new form and old form, and Chinese form and Western form, but also enriched the discussion of the popularization of literature and art in 1930s. This debate concerned not only about how to develop Chinese literature, but also about how to properly evaluate new literature and art ever since the May Fourth Movement. After the break out of the War, one of the function of literature was to mobilize and encourage the masses, and thus, the creation of a national form became a crucial question which attracted much attention. To emphasize the national form was to strengthen national consciousness, which was also required by the need of mobilizing the people during wartime. Based on the fact that both sides agreed with the necessity of creating a national form, the debate centered on Xiang Linbing's argument that "the folk form is the central source for creating a national form." This article reflects on Hu Feng's view that the debate *per se* was a "theoretical tragedy" and explores the two questions essential to the development of Chinese new literature and art, that is, "the transplant of the foreign form" and "the utilization of the old form." Besides, it also analyzes the theoretical values and the significance of practical guidance and expounds on the contemporary development of the nationalized fiction with Mo Yan as an example.

Key words: the debate over national form; the law of "Wai Li"; the law of the struggle between the new form and the old form; new literature and art since the May Fourth Movement; Hu Feng; Mo Yan

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标题：如何创造中国新文学的民族形式？——回顾 1940 年代的民族形式论争

内容摘要：民族形式论争作为“抗战”以来文艺民族化思潮的主体，既是五四时期新旧中西之争的拓展，也是三十年代文艺大众化问题讨论的深化，不仅关乎中国文学的发展方向，也关乎对五四新文艺传统的正确评价。“抗战”爆发后，文学需要承担起动员大众、鼓舞大众的职责，因此，民族形式问题就成了深受关注的重大文艺问题。对于民族形式的强调，既是为了强化民族意识，也是基于战争期间广泛动员大众的需要。关于民族形式的论争，是在论辩双方都对创造民族形式的必要性予以肯定的前提下，围绕着向林冰的“民族形式的中心源泉是民间形式”这一观点展开。本文反思了胡风所谓民族形式论争是“理论的悲剧”的观点，探讨了外来形式的移植与旧形式的利用这两个关乎中国新文艺发展的重大问题，分析了民族形式论争的理论价值与实践指导意义，并以莫言为例，论及民族化小说的当代发展。

关键词：民族形式论争；外砾法则；新旧斗争法则；五四新文艺传统；胡风；莫言

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The debate over national form (hereafter referred to as “the debate”) after the break out of the Second Sino-Japanese War (hereafter referred to as “the War”) has played a crucial role in the development of Chinese literature and art under new circumstances, which not only continues the constant debate over “westernization” and “nationalization” since the late Qing Dynasty, but also contributes to the still growing ideological trend of the popularization of literature and art since the May Fourth Movement (hereafter referred to as “the Movement”). Since the spring of

1940, the debate has last for “over half a year”¹, attracting attention from many leading men of letters, like Zhou Yang, He Qifang, Ai Siqu, Xian Xinghai, and Guang Weiran from the liberated area, and Mao Dun, Guo Moruo, Hu Feng, and Hu Sheng from the KMT-controlled areas. It is no exaggeration to call it a “a big event in the world of letters”².

The debate mainly centers on the point made by Xiang Linbing (1905-1982, originally named Hua Nan), that is, “the folk form is the central source for creating a national form.” In his view, “new substance is originated from the old one,” and thus, “the creation of a national form” belongs not to “the law of Wai Li,” or the law of transplanting foreign forms, but to the “critical application” of the “folk form,”³ He even argues that “if the new form originated not in the self-denial of the old one, it would be nothing but an unpractical and impossible aim”⁴. His view, however, is challenged by other scholars like Guo Moruo, He Qifang, and Hu Feng, all of who contend that the creation of a national literary form is not in antithesis to the learning of the foreign forms, which, as they argue, are helpful for such kind of creation. They also stress the importance of introducing outstanding foreign literary and artistic works. Viewing the debate in the literary-historical perspective, the debate is of significant theoretical values, because it concerns not only about the orientation of Chinese literature, but also about how to properly evaluate new literature and art since the Movement.

It has been sixty years since Mo Yan put forward that “striking backward from western literature to folk literature,”⁵ in the postscript of his contemporary masterpiece *Sandalwood Punishment* (2001), which has been highly appreciated as “a real national novel.” Such aesthetic standpoint of returning to folk culture not only echos with Xiang’s argument, but also corresponds to contemporary trend represented by the popularity of *Liu Sanjie* (or *The Third Sister of Liu’s Family*) and the nation-based view that “the more it is ethical, the more it is international.” It

1 Hu Feng, “Postscript of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)* (Wuhan: Hubei People’s Press, 1999) 790.

2 Hu Feng, “Preface of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)* (Wuhan: Hubei People’s Press, 1999) 711.

3 Xiang Linbing, “On the Central Source of ‘National Form’,” Xu Naixiang, ed., *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature* (Beijing: Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2010), 156, 158.

4 Xiang Linbing, “The Application of Folk Form and the Creation of National Form,” *Sino-Soviet Culture (Vol. 6)*, 1940(1).

5 Mo Yan, “Postscript of *Sandalwood Punishment*,” *Sandalwood Punishment* (Beijing: Writer Press, 2012): 515-516.

also manifests that the creation of a national form is still of theoretical and practical significance, and is thus worth contemplation and exploration in a new social-cultural context.

The Debate over National Form is not a “Theoretical Tragedy”

After the break out of the War, one of the functions of literature was to mobilize the people, therefore, a proper national form became a crucial and deeply-concerned issue. To stress the national form was to intensify national consciousness, which was also based on the need of mobilizing the masses during wartime. The debate was based on the fact that both sides agreed with the necessity of creating a new form, and thus, it focused not on whether a form should be created or not, but on how to create it and how to popularize the literature and art.

Looking back into the intellectual history of modern Chinese literature, one knows that Mao Zedong proposed the concept of “national form” at a comparatively earlier period. In 1938, influenced by the Soviet ideology, that “the content should be socialist and the form nationalist,”¹ Mao Zedong, in the report entitled “the Position of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War,” stated that “‘the international content’ should be closely combined with ‘the national form,’ so as to create a Chinese style that is welcomed by the Chinese people.”² In the February of 1940, he further pointed out in a report entitled “on New Democracy,” that “the form should be nationalistic and the content new democratic, both of which constitute today’s new culture.”³ In the March of 1940, Xiang Linbing, in his article “on the Central Source of ‘National Form’,” which was published on *The Dagong Daily* in Chongqing, maintained that “a national form for the popular literature and art,” or “the national form for Chinese style and Chinese manner” should be created to support “the political practice of resisting against Japan and of building a new country.”⁴ Furthermore, as he pointed out, “there existed two forms of literature and art previously: one was the new form since the Movement while the other the folk

1 Guo Moruo, “Discussion on ‘National Form’,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p. 254.

2 Mao Zedong, “The Position of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p. 2.

3 Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p. 126.

4 Xiang Linbing, “On the Central Source of ‘National Form’,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, pp. 158-159.

form widely known among the people,”¹ and between the two, the latter should be the “central source” for the national form, while the former should only occupy a “minor position.”²

According to Hu Feng, Xiang’s argument forms a sharp opposition to traditional orientation of new literature and art, and thus becomes the main target of the debate³. Hu speaks little of the level and effects of the debate, and he summarizes the intellectual limit of both sides as two “theoretical tragedies.” The first refers to Xiang’s understanding of literature, which, in his mind, is too formalistic because it is based on mere concepts. He further points out that Xiang attempts to solve the problem with self-contained dialectics, which, however, unfortunately breaks away from both the society and the “pattern on the paper” in the actual literary development, and thus forms the “wrong direction” which is harmful to the development⁴. The second refers to the fact that the objectors did not surpass Xiang’s theoretical logic and were emmeshed in his argument concerning the “central source,” rather than solving the problem from the real struggle. The results of this fact were twofold: on the one hand, the real feature of the national form was not highlighted, while on the other, combat, the more urgent task, was nevertheless cast aside, since most energy had been diverted to the metaphysical discussion.⁵ Therefore, Hu Feng suggests that the creation of national form not be separated from the literary and artistic development and the actual struggle in real life. For him, this should be the attitude of both sides, so long as they have to deal with both the “poor” “legacy of the theories” and the “urgent” “task of real struggle for literature and art.”⁶

Hu Feng’s claim of linking theory with practice is admittedly blameless, but his theory of “theoretical tragedies,” however, is one-sided. First of all, the directive function of literary theories could not be fulfilled at one stroke, because, different from mechanical operation, creative writing requires not the mechanical execution of certain instructions, but the enthusiasm, talents and inspirations, apart

1 Xiang Linbing, “On the Central Source of ‘National Form’,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p. 156.

2 Xiang Linbing, “On the Central Source of ‘National Form’,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p. 158.

3 Hu Feng, “Postscript of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 790-791.

4 Hu Feng, “Postscript of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 790-791.

5 Hu Feng, “Postscript of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 791.

6 Hu Feng, “Postscript of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 791.

from the accumulated life experience and rich emotions. The author's temperament, experience, interests, and self-cultivation decide both his/her creative orientation and style. An author has to select, accept and gradually digest the theories as guidance, and nobody could force him/her to create immediately a masterpiece by abiding by such literary direction as nationalization and popularization, nor could he/she deny the theoretical values of the debate *per se* simply because it fails to realize immediately its guiding function. Besides, there are admittedly a large amount of "metaphysical discussion," which, however, is not a reverie divorced from reality, because it on the one hand exerts an actual influence on the writing practice and thus leads to many popular literary classics, like *The Song of Ma Fantuo*, and Zhao Shuli's *Peasant Takes a Wife*. On the other hand, much metaphysical discussion is indeed based on actual experiences, with the urgent "task of real struggle for literature and art" as the aim, just as Guang Weiran points out in his exploration of the national form,

Our fiction should make its way into the masses, which requires that the novelist be emancipated from his/her desk, and to "give as many lectures" to the masses on the square, that is to say, literary creation should adopt the oral speaking form, becoming "lecture literature" or "confession literature," in an aim to amplify its effect. As for the reportage and the quick sketch growing from the wartime, the author should improve their flexibility and artistry, extending their application to every farm, factory, school and military camp. As for applying and overcoming the old customs, I would suggest that the opening introduction and the art of composition in *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Xun has set a good example. As for the novelette, "The Story of a Wild Girl" by Li Qun (published on *Literary and Artistic Front*), in my opinion, represents the embryonic form of the national form as regards its vivid application of the old form revealed in the opening introduction, its adventure of adopting the technique of confession, and its smart way of finishing the fiction with filmic artistry, although it still has many drawbacks.¹

Guang Weiran makes the mission of literature after the War as its starting point by taking into account the actual development of literature, and he also specifies the methods of creating a national form for fictions, like adopting the form of "reading out loud" from "speech literature" and "confession literature," learning

1 Guang Weiran, "On the National Form of Literature and Art," *Materials of the Discussion of the "National Form" of Literature*, p. 246.

from the opening introduction in old novels, introducing the confession style, and even applying the newly developed artistic techniques from film industry. If “the Story of a Wild Girl,” as raised by Guang, has outlined an embryonic form of the nationalized fiction, and Zhao Shuli’s novels like *Peasant Takes a Wife* has marked its preliminary maturity, then *Sandalwood Death* and *Fatigue of Life and Death* by Mo Yan should be regarded as a breakthrough. Talking about the artistic features of *Sandalwood Death*, Mo Yan humbly remarks,

Just like Maoqiang (a local drama in Gaomi) can only be appreciated by the toiling masses on the square, only the readers who are comparatively fond of folk culture would appreciate my novel. It may be better if it is to be read out loud by someone with a hoarse voice when surrounded by the masses. Such kind of reading activity requires the “participation” of not only one’s ears, but also one’s body and soul. In order to make it more adaptable to such way of reading, much of the novel is purposely written in rhythm, and dramatic narrative method is also adopted intentionally, tinted with certain exaggeration and magnificence, aiming to make it easy to read and understand.¹

Obviously, Mo’s aesthetic appealing to popularize the novels and make them adaptable to the square, has developed Guang’s idea of “emancipation from the desk” in a new historical-cultural context.

To summarize, the debate which lasts for half a year, has not only deepened the theoretical studies of literature and art regarding forms, sources and functions, but also enriches modern aesthetic thoughts and advances people’s understanding of folk culture, literature and art arising from the Movement, and their understanding of both the relationship between the new and the old literature, and between Chinese literature and foreign literature. Therefore, it is far from being a “theoretical tragedy,” rather, it was and still is of significant theoretical values. As regards the discussion centering on the crucial point of the “central source,” this debate has explored two key issues: one is the transplant of the foreign form while the other the utilization of the old form, both of which will be further discussed as follows.

Proposing the Law of “Wai Li” and of “Struggle between the New Form and the Old Form”

Talking about the relationship between Chinese new literature and the old/foreign form, Guo Moruo proposes an answer quite dialectics,

1 Mo Yan, “Postscript of *Sandalwood Punishment*,” *Sandalwood Punishment*, p. 515.

In fact, Chinese new literature and art can be regarded as a synthetic unity of two traditional forms, one of which is created by the folk and the other by the scholar-bureaucrat in feudal China, and then, popularity as acquired from the former and artistry as from the latter, accompanied by some foreign elements, form another synthetic unity of the old form and the foreign form.¹

For Guo, Chinese new literature and art have led to “two kinds of unity”: one is the unity of the two old forms created by “the folk” and “the scholar-bureaucrat,” while the other the unity of “the old form” and “the foreign form.” Compared with Xiang’s view, Guo’s view is more flexible and closer to reality.

A little different from Guo’s approach, which is mediate rather than radical, Hu Feng, citing the view of Fritsch (former Soviet literary theorist, 1870-1929), points out that the new form is based on two contradictory laws: one is “the law of Wai Li” and the other “the law of struggle between the new form and the old form”² (hereafter referred to as “law of struggle”). The so-called “law of Wai Li” means that a country accepts and transplants the artistic forms produced by another country with similar social condition, because such foreign form is “suitable for reflecting the reality at home”³. Hu Feng suggests that this law is not a mere reverie because related examples abounded in history. For instance, “ode” thrived in the mid-18th century France, and yet prospered in Russia one hundred years later, because both France ruled by Louis XIV and Russia by Ekaterina Pavlovna were immersed in an atmosphere of empire glory and heroism. Such lyric forms as “ode” are full of hyperboles, metaphors and rhetoric, all of which correspond with the needs of that epoch, and thus manage to prosper in France and Russia one after another. Furthermore, the influence of Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863, a French romantic poet) and George Gordon Byron (1788-1824, a British poet) on Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov (1814-1841, a Russian romantic writer), and that of George Sand (1804-1876, a French novelist) on Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818-1883, a Russian novelist), have also proved the law of “Wai Li.”⁴

Hu Feng suggests that Xiang has researched the theory of “the transplant of novel form” by Georgi V. Plekhanov and Xiang’s view is similar to that of Fritsch.

1 Guo Moruo, “Discussion on ‘National Form’,” *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p. 256.

2 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 731, 735.

3 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 735.

4 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 731-733.

However, in his mind, it is a pity that although Plekhanov has brought to light how and to what extent literature and art could be transplanted to a foreign country, Xiang still one-sidedly insists that “the law of Wai Li” could not be applied to the creation of a national form, because “the British imitators can never be on equal term with the French creators” and so on.¹ This view does not conform to the exchange history of world literature, and what is worse, it would prevent the national literature from learning from foreign literature, which is indeed harmful and wrong. Viewing from the origin and development of Chinese new literature, the new form actually has profited from the foreign form. An eloquent example of how “the law of Wai Li” works from the perspective of modern Sino-foreign literary relationship comes from Lu Xun, who mentions that one feature of his novels is the “uniqueness of the form,” which is benefited from techniques adopted in foreign literature, like the modernist techniques.

The so-called “law of struggle” refers to the fact that the new-rising social stratum forms its own form and style by denying the old ones created by previous dominant social class which has lost its power. Hu Feng expounds that every ideological trend and every new form created and prospered in the history, had fought fiercely against the old ones.² This view could be regarded as a new one after the theory of “every dynasty has its own style” in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and the theory of literary revolution/evolution during the New-Culture Movement. In 1912, Wang Guowei, in his preface of a book titled “a Study on the Opera in the Song and Yuan Dynasties,” stated that “every dynasty has its own style, Chu Sao, Han Fu, Parallel of the Six Dynasties, Tang Poetry, Song Poetry, and Yuan Songs, each of which represents the literary style of a dynasty and cannot be surpassed by later generations”³. This is a conclusion of the theory of “every dynasty has its own style” since the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and has basically not transcended Liu Xie’s theoretical framework that “the literature changes with varying social customs while politics leads to the vicissitude of society.”⁴ In 1917, Hu Shi proposed in the article “on the Improvement of Literature,” that literature in each dynasty “changes with the times and each has its own strong points. We should

1 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 733-734.

2 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 735.

3 Wang Guowei, “Author’s Preface of ‘A Study on the Opera in the Song and Yuan Dynasties,’” *The History of the Opera in the Song and Yuan Dynasties (Introduction by Ye Changhai)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1998) 1.

4 Zhou Zhenfu, “Modern Translation of *Wenxin Diaolong*,” (Beijing: Chung Hwa Book Company, 1986) 404.

view them from the perspective of evolutionary history, rather than regarding all literature created by ancient people as better than ours.” He raised an example, “the works by Zuo Qiuming and Sima Qian are just marvelous, and yet is *The Water Margin* by Shi Naian worse than theirs? The poems anthologized in *San Du* and *Liang Jing* are great enough, and yet they pale before the Tang and Song poetry.”¹ Hu’s view adds new element of “evolution” to traditional views, which apparently transcends the cognitive horizon of previous generations. Hu Shi further suggested, that “Chinese literary history is but a history about the super-session and renewal of literary forms, that is, a history about the ‘living literature’ which is to replace the ‘dead one’ at any time,”² and thus, “today’s literature should take vernacular literature as orthodox.”³ Objectively speaking, the struggle between the vernacular style and the classical style was fierce between the new form/ideological trend and the old ones. What Chen Duxiu said, that “now if one wants to revolutionize the politics, one has to revolutionize the literature that shapes the spiritual world of the politicians who are going to revolutionize it,”⁴ best exemplified the deep connection of literary revolution with ideological and political revolution.

After all, however, the New-Culture Movement is an ideological and cultural movement about the fundamental changes of Chinese society. During this process, there is a fierce struggle between the new and the old, which is a corollary of the trend of times, rather than a reflection of the universal law. Seeing from the development of Sino-foreign literary history, it is natural to see the new form and the old one takes turn, but the relationship between the two is not that incompatible as fire and water. When the radical ideology wanes, the new form could not only

1 Hu Shi, “On the Improvement of Literature,” *Academic Anthology of Hu Shi: New Literature Movement*, Jiang Yihua, ed., (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1993) 21. Hu Shi had mentioned a similar point in the article “The Concept of Literary Evolution and the Improvement of Drama,” that “literature offers a kind of record of the living status of human life. Life changes with the development of society, so is literature, and that’s why each generation has its own literature, be it Zhou-Qin Dynasties, Han-Wei Dynasties, Tang Dynasty, Song Dynasty, or Yuan Dynasty.

The author of *The Book of 300 Songs* was not able to compose *Anthology of Yuan Opera*, and vice versa. Likewise, Zuo Qiuming was not able to compose *The Water Margin* while *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* was an impossible task for Shi Nai’an. (See Jiang Yihua, ed., *Academic Anthology of Hu Shi: New Literature Movement*, pp. 74-75.)

2 Hu Shi, “Driven to Join the Liangshan Rebels,” *Academic Anthology of Hu Shi: New Literature Movement*, p.200.

3 Hu Shi, “On the Improvement of Literature,” *Academic Anthology of Hu Shi: New Literature Movement*, p.28.

4 Chen Duxiu, “The Theory of Literary Revolution,” *Duxiu Text* (Hefei: Anhui People’s Publishing House, 1987) 98.

coexist peacefully with the old one, but also strives for creative development by learning greatly from the latter, which reveals the limit of “the law of the struggle” by Hu Feng.

Other scholars like Ai Siqu and Xia Zhaobin also comment on the old form and on how to utilize it, and theirs seem much milder when compared with that of Hu’s, which is more competitive, as Ai Siqu said:

The Chinese old literary form does not divorce from the reality, rather, it provides a special technique for reflecting it, which is characterized by representing the essential respects in a hyperbole way, and the most obvious manifestation could be found in old novels and dramas. In this sense, the old form could be regarded as not realistic, but “freehand,” a term borrowed from traditional Chinese painting...Its exaggeration allows it to reflect the reality mightily, and to magnify its crucial points, and thus, it won the favor of the masses. It goes without saying that the art requires not to reflect the reality in a nuanced way, but to catch it and hold it. In this sense, the old form has something to boast of...To grasp the old form, one must get its “reasonable kernel,” that is, stressing the important points and adopting a moderate degree of hyperbole technique...¹

And also, according to Xia Zhaobin,

One cannot deny that most Chinese readers are still greatly influenced by *Yue Fei*, *Xue Rengui* *Levy East*, *The Cases of Judge Bao*, and *Chinese Sherlock Shi*, the form of which, however, is not mature enough, and the content virulent, and yet they have all grown up from Chinese soil in the past thousands of years. Therefore, they belong to China and are especially capable of discovering unique Chinese national hue. To establish a national form for a novel, we have to pay attention to the powers of such traditional novel and its form, and thus, we should first of all use some techniques adopted by them, such as the technique of describing some characters, and the words or sentences that move the Chinese so much.²

1 Ai Siqu, “On the Basic Principles of Applying the Old forms,” *Materials of the Discussion of the ‘National Form’ of Literature*, pp. 13-14.

2 Xia Zhaobin, “On the Construction of a National Form for Literature and Art,” quoted in Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 754.

As we can see, both Ai Siqi and Xia Zhaobin maintain that literary legacy should be carried on in a reasonable basis, such as “stressing the important points and adopting a moderate degree of hyperbole technique” “the technique of describing some characters” and “the words or sentences that move the Chinese so much” in old novels and dramas. According to Xia Zhaobin, although such classics as *Yue Fei* and *The Cases of Judge Bao* are far from being flawless in terms of both form and content, they grow up in Chinese soil, and thus they are especially tinted with national colors, whose power over the Chinese masses could not be ignored. Therefore, to establish a national form for the novels, the old form should be referred to and taken advantage of.

Reviewing the history of modern Chinese literature, one would find that the most popular writers with the widest influence are not the most famous figures in the field of new literature, like Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She and Cao Yu, but Zhang Henshui, the “great master of the chapter fictions.” It was Zhang’s *Bring Your Smile Along* that caused an uproar, rather than *Diary of a Madman* by Lu Xun, or *Goddess* or *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo, or *Midnight* by Mao Dun, or *Torrent Trilogy* by Ba Jin, or *Four Generations Living Together* by Lao She, nor *Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu. Zhang’s novel unprecedentedly breaks the record with over 20 editions and six film versions. Zhang’s other novels that have integrated the form of traditional Chinese novels with that of the western ones, such as *An Unofficial History of Chuming* and *The Story of a Noble Family*, have also swayed the whole country. Among those novels, *The Story of a Noble Family* is about a history of rise and fall of a noble family in the Republic of China, with the pains and sorrows between Jin Yanxi, the son of the Prime Minister, and Leng Qingqiu, a female student from a humble family, as the thread. This novel is tinted with a dense sense of aristocratic literature and a rich color of classical romance, which is sufficient to prove that the old form is still of vitality and that the classics and old form remain still the aesthetic taste of the newly rising stratum.

The Creation of a National Form and New Literature and Art since the May Fourth Movement

Seeing from the fundamental question of creating a national form, Guo’s view of “synthetic unity” and Hu Feng’s “law of Wai Li” could be regarded as two simple and clear theoretical guidelines, which are of practical values, and are also in line with the literary theories. According to Guo, the new form since the Movement is based on the integration of the two old forms (one by the folk and the other by the scholar-bureaucrat) and the foreign form. Guo’s view demonstrates that the

nationalized and popularized folklore and the so-called “aristocratic literature” and “mountain-forest literature” by Chen Duxiu are of complementary advantages and could coexist with each other. It also reveals that the creation of a national form relies on the foreign form, and obviously, Guo is against the two radical positions of resisting the foreign form and the old form by the scholar-bureaucrat. Therefore, his theory of “forming a synthetic unity” not only denies Xiang Linbing’s partial view that “the creation of a national form belonged not to ‘Wai Li,’”¹ but also revises the theory of “literary revolution” by Chen Duxiu and “the law of the struggle” by Hu Feng. However, although Guo Moruo and Hu Feng see the relationship between the new literature and old one differently, they show similar concerns about the relationship between the new and the foreign literature, and also about the question concerning whether new form should conform to “the law of Wai Li.”

According to Hu Feng, the exploration of a “national form” reveals that the “realistic tradition since the Movement” takes its initiative to strive for development under new circumstance. The “May Fourth tradition” is a force combining with the actual national development which strives for emancipation and progress, and it “takes the initiative to be guided by the revolutionary experience of world literature and art to improve itself, and to be cultivated by the fast-developing national reality to enrich itself.”² Then he proposes that Xiang’s view about “central source” or the theory of “old bottles for new wine”³ by Zhao Xiangli and the others are problematic because both, in his mind, violate the rule of “the content decides the form.” According to this viewpoint, specific form should not divorce from its corresponding content and be utilized only as imported product, and thus, the acceptable form should not be like a “bottle,” but the one that, in the author’s mind, conforms to the internal rules of the reality and to his/her comprehensive understanding of the reality. Since the creation of a “national form” aims to “more artistically represent the ‘content of new democracy,’”⁴ and to create “Chinese style” and “the optimistic ideological or artistic force of new China,”⁵ one should learn from the folk and traditional literature and art, with intensifying understanding of life, opinions, the words of the Chinese people and their way of conveying their emotions. On the other hand, one should also overcome the defects of the new literature and art by actively accepting “the experience of international

1 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng* (Vol. II), p. 729.

2 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng* (Vol. II), pp. 769-770.

3 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng* (Vol. II), p. 763.

4 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng* (Vol. II), p. 788.

5 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng* (Vol. II), p. 773.

revolutionary literature” and probing into the “living reality”¹. However, such learning aims not to revitalize the old tradition, but to “overcome them,” and to “create new content and new form.”² To overcome the defects of new literature and art, is not to “throw it away, or to replace it with another thing, but to make it healthier and develop better.”³

To conclude, for Hu Feng, the central resource of national form is not “the folk form,” but the “experience of international revolutionary literature and art” and the “fast-developing national reality.” The essential aim of creating it, is to promote what he understands as the New-Culture Movement and new literature and art since the Movement, rather than to revitalize the folk or traditional ones. Compared with other views, Hu Feng’s criticism of Xiang’s view, which stresses too much the folk form while degrades the new ones⁴, is fiercer, but is more comprehensive and systematic. His treatise “on the National Form” could indeed be regarded as a conclusion of the debate. However, the fairest and the most objective discussion about the relationship between the national form and the other forms, was made by Pan Zinian,

On the one hand, the national form should learn a lot from folk literature and art and classical ones, such as the fine language, grammar, tones, writing

1 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 773-774.

2 Hu Feng, “On National Form,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 774. Besides, Hu Feng even held that for the new realistic literature and art, all old forms (including that created by the folk and that by the scholar-bureaucrat) had paved the road for the new form, but they essentially functioned as a resisting force. Therefore, in his mind, people should persistently strive for intensifying the leading function of the new realistic literature and art, to “reasonably eliminate” these old forms revitalized from the national war. (See Hu Feng, “the Seventh Part of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, pp. 771-772.

3 Hu Feng, “the Seventh Part of ‘On National Form’,” *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 774.

4 Xiang quoted “An Investigation of the Current Literary and Artistic Movement” by Huang Sheng and commented, “new literature and art since the Movement, catered for ‘university professors, bank brokers, dancers, politicians, and other petty bourgeoisies’.” (See Xiang Linbing, “On the Central Source of ‘National Form’,” *Academic Anthology of Hu Feng (Vol. II)*, p. 158; Xu Naixiang, ed., *Materials of the Discussion of the “National Form” of Literature*, p.45.) As early as 1932, Qu Qiubai argued, “The masses seemed to learn nothing from the New-Culture Movement. New literature and art since that time was just westernized ones for the genteel stratum, which the working people had not that good fortune to enjoy.” (See Qu Qiubai, “May Fourth and the New Cultural Revolution,” *The Selection of Historical Materials of Literary Movement (Vol. II)* (Shanghai Education Publishing House, 1979) 368.

techniques and styles, while on the other, it needs to learn from the excellent new literature and art since the Movement. All these are the sources for a national form and it is hard to differentiate which is the center and which not.¹

From the perspective of literary history, the debate concerns about the questions of literary sources, the social functions of literature, and the nationality and cosmopolitanism of literature, and thus, it is of universal theoretical significance which has transcended a specific historical background and political objectives. From these questions, there comes another one that is also crucial to the development of Chinese literature: how to create a new literature that is capable of representing the new reality? The exploration *per se* will undoubtedly lead to other debates — say, the antithesis between westernization and localization, between nationality and cosmopolitanism, between popularization and elitism, and between the folk position and the intellectual position--and would trigger a new discussion over the relationship between the creativity of Chinese literature and folk culture, and between classical literature and foreign ones.² In other words, the debate has become a historical event, and yet the exploration has far from being finished, which will continue to the new century.

If Chinese literature in the new era is oriented towards the network, the fantasy, the petty bourgeoisie and the folk, then we could say that Mo Yan's declamation of "striding backwards from western literature" and his learning from the narrative structure of folklore, the chapter-style fictions, and the popular artistic forms, represent properly the orientation of Chinese literature towards folk literature, which is a question worth further exploration.

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1 Pan Zinian, "Inheriting the Revolutionary Tradition of May Fourth and Developing New Democratic Culture," quoted in Hu Feng, "On National Form," *The Complete Works of Hu Feng (VOL. II)*, pp. 774-775.

2 For instance, in 1940s, there appeared a trend for novel creation in the liberated area, represented by the "potato" Group, authors from the liberated area remained dominant in Chinese literature during the 17 years after liberation. Around 1960, there also appeared a trend of the popular folk literature and art, and works like *Liu Sanjie* became the orthodox.