



Problems and possibilities of the image of the “new man” in Chinese contemporary literature: starting with an argument between Yan Jiayan and Liu Qing over Liang Sheng-pao

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Abstract Taking the debate between Yan Jiayan and Liu Qing in the early 1960s about Liang Sheng-pao’s image in *Builders of a New Life* as an example, the image of “new man” has been generally considered to be a reflection of the shortcomings of “Seventeen-Year Literature” and “Cultural Revolution Literature” since the 1980s, which is why later researchers and writers rejected it. This essay argues holds the idea that the concept of “new man” has existed since ancient times. Archetypal figures in literary history are not fixed, but always change alongside the era and in relation to society; this is what underlies the legitimacy of the image of “new man”. The “historical trauma” caused by “Seventeen-Year Literature” and “Cultural Revolution Literature” is what causes scholars to an overly narrow bias against the “new man” image. Revisiting the significance and the changes undergone by this image will help us to explain literary history and related literary phenomena, helping the future literary creation find a way of grasping reality.

Keywords Builders of a New Life · The image of the “new man” · Seventeen-Year Literature

In 1959, Liu Qing published the first part of the novel *Builders of a New Life* in the *Yanhe River* and *Harvest*. In 1960, the novel was published by China Youth Publishing House. After its publication, there were many affirmative views; Liang Sheng-pao’s “new socialist image” was widely praised by critics and regarded as an important breakthrough in the characterization of Socialist Realist Literature.

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Of the voices in that time, Yan Jiayan's deserves special attention. His evaluation of the history of *Builders of a New Life* seems to be in line with the mainstream attitude since the new period. In 1961, Yan Jiayan published two essays in *Literary Review and Journal of Peking University*: "On the Image of Liang the Third" and "the Outstanding Achievements in the First Part of *Builders of a New Life*". On the basis of affirming this novel, he especially affirmed Liu Qing's characterization of Liang the Third, and put forward some criticisms on Liang Sheng-pao. After this view was refuted, Yan Jiayan published the article "About Liang Sheng-pao's Image" in 1963, and made a special analysis of the shortcomings of this character's image. Yan Jiayan's argument was quite unique at that time, even though, to some extent, it was contrary to mainstream views about Seventeen-Year Literature and the Literature of the Cultural Revolution. Soon after, Liu Qing, who had always been low-key, published "Several Questions to be Discussed" in *Yanhe River* magazine, in response to the criticism of Liang Sheng-pao's image by Yan Jiayan. Later, a large number of articles going along with Liu Qing and criticizing Yan Jiayan's views emerged. Until Yan Jiayan published "The Image of Liang Sheng-pao and the Creation of New Heroes" in 1964, this series of controversies was over. In this article, Yan Jiayan admitted that "without Liang Sheng-pao's image, of course, it is impossible to estimate the achievements of *Builders of a New Life*".¹ However, he still insisted on his own views. At that time, this series of debates became a frequently mentioned case in the history of contemporary literature.

The image of the "new man" destined to fail

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and changes within contemporary literature in the 1980s, Yan Jiayan's views have now become consensus. Referring to *Builders of a New Life*, most people recognize that Liang the Third is a highlight in the character pedigree of Seventeen-Year Literature and the literature of the Cultural Revolution, while the image of the "new man" represented by Liang Sheng-pao is not only artistically unsatisfactory, but a metaphor for a bygone era. However, as time goes on, the Seventeen-Year Literature and the literature of the Cultural Revolution and even the literature in the new period need to be "historicized"; people can no longer only discuss problems from the binary opposition of "literature" and "politics", regarding the mainstream literature of a period as only a "illustration" of politics.

From a historicist perspective, we can find some interesting things. Yan Jiayan's criticism of Liang Sheng-pao's image concentrated vividly in his article "About Liang Sheng-pao's Image". It is considered in the article that Liu Qing's portrayal of this image is characterized by "excessive ideological activities and insufficient characterization of personality (the degree of political maturity departs from the actual conditions experienced by the characters); excessive attention to the setting

¹ Jiayan (1964a).

and insufficient conflict; excessive lyricism and insufficient objective description”.² In general, it is “three excesses and three insufficiencies”. Nowadays, when it comes to Yan Jiayan’s article, some people still believe that his assessment is absolutely correct. However, from a historicist perspective, we should notice ambiguities in the evaluation criteria embodied in “three excesses and three insufficiencies” and the reasonable factors in Liu Qing’s response.

The generalization of “three excesses and three insufficiencies” which cannot be quantified is the problem that almost all the characters in the literary works in the same period will face. Two examples help readers understand the conflict between Yan Jiayan and Liu Qing’s views. When Yan Jiayan described Liang Sheng-pao’s rather rude “Marxist discourse” as a Marxist theoretical quality that “cadres who have participated in the revolution for several years can rarely have”.³ He also described Liang Sheng-pao as a man who can rise above the trifles around him into “philosophical and theoretical heights” at any time. Liu Qing argued that Liang Sheng-pao’s actions merely reproduced what every rural Party member participating in ideological mobilization knew.⁴ According to Yan Jiayan, high theoretical attainment and political consciousness were only general requirements for rural Party members. He also held the idea that that the difficulties Liang Sheng-pao faces are too ordinary and the conflicts with the negative characters too simple. Liu Qing thought that in the background of this novel, there was nothing more serious in a village, and Liang Sheng-pao is not powerful enough to solve all the problems.

The specific details of the controversy then formed an interesting contrast with the mainstream evaluation after the Cultural Revolution. According to the understanding of later generations, the “new man” violates the principle of literary realism, precisely because he is too “tall, big and complete”. The opposition between Liang Sheng-pao and Liang the Third is the opposition between positive and neutral characters. When describing the so-called positive characters, their shortcomings and limitations should also be highlighted. But at that time, Yan Jiayan’s criticism was that Liang Sheng-pao’s image was not “tall, big and complete”. In the article “The Image of Liang Sheng-pao and the Creation of New Heroes”, Yan Jiayan also said that Liang Sheng-pao “has some delicate and strange ideas about the hands of women”, which is not in harmony with “simple young peasants”,⁵ putting forward higher requirements for Liang Sheng-pao’s personality.

When we focus on the image of “new man”, strange phenomena appeared. On one hand, the image of Liang the Third is almost the only way for peasants to be depicted in a literary manner in the 1950s and 1970s; on the other hand, it is impossible for the image of Liang Sheng-pao to compromise with Liang the Third. Yan Jiayan is not the only one who engaged in empty word games. In the literary world, since the 1980s, the “new man” is almost necessarily a defective character image and reflects a wrong view of literature. In contemporary literature since the 1980s,

² Jiayan (1963).

³ Jiayan (1964b).

⁴ Qing (1963).

⁵ Jiayan (1964c).

writers no longer create images of the “new man” image like Liang Sheng-pao, and there are few other types of this image. Times and society are changing, but the characterization of contemporary literature has stagnated to some extent. Is the “new man” image doomed to illegitimacy within the field of literature and culture?

The legitimacy of the “new man”

Before discussing the legitimacy of the “new man”, I think it must be clear that the “Seventeen-Year Literature” and “Cultural Revolution Literature” cannot contain all the possibilities of the “new man” image.

The concept of “new man” has already appeared in the Bible Ephesians, which refers to a new concept formed by the integration of Jews and foreigners. This shows that when the nationality, laws, concepts and wider ideologies be changed, the connotation of the concept of “people” can be divided into “new” and “old” to some extent. Fredric Jameson, discussing the conflict between the peasants and Protestants after the 16th century religious reform in *Postmodernism and Cultural Theory*, pointed out that “the psychological structure of the past has disappeared in the new historical era, to be replaced by a kind of brand-new psychological experience... The structure of human subjectivity, the structure of spiritual essence, or the structure of psychological subjectivity, has been thoroughly adjusted. This change in spiritual structure has produced new men, just like the so-called ‘New Soviet’ in the Soviet Union”.⁶ The change of ideology has brought about a comprehensive change in the content of life. In order to reflect the new changes of people’s spiritual structure and psychological experience, art needs new characters. “Cultural revolution is a process of resettling people and adapting them to new situations, conditions and requirements. It is also a necessary process.”⁷

The creation and development of the image of the “new man” can naturally be an important part of the “Cultural Revolution”. Since 1949, a series of changes in rural land ownership have fundamentally affected the lives of most people in China. Although there are many appreciations on the image of Liang the Third by scholars, this image in the final analysis does not go beyond the scope of the old farmers. Liang the Third showed the limitations of the old peasants and their ridiculous or tragic fate in the new era. But this is only a description of the current shock and dismay of the peasants at the turning point, which cannot be regarded as the “resettlement” of the people after all.

In the Western canon, the change of the times always corresponds to a “new man”. The courage and self-confidence of Achilles and Prometheus who are demigods; Don Quixote’s obsession, madness and Hamlet’s hesitation; the contrast between beauty and ugliness between Esmeralda and Quasimodo; the ambition and shrewdness of Eugène de Rastignac and Vautrin that belonged to the bourgeoisie; Gregor’s transformation from human to beetle in *Metamorphosis* and Leopold

⁶ Jameson (2005a).

⁷ Jameson (2005b).

Bloom in *Ulysses*, who has the longest day in the history of literature; these are just some examples. It is not difficult to find out in this sequence that there are great differences in character and concept between important figures in different historical stages. These differences prove that the evolution of history must have new characters in literature. Of course, there is no comparison between Liang Sheng-pao, Gao Daquan and these classic characters. However, as “the other” against the old characters, this kind of image represents an attempt containing some possibility. It is inadequate to face the new era by relying solely on the image of Liang the Third, the “three great talents” and other literary figures such as Shangguan Jintong, Fu Gui and Tan Duanwu, who are highly consistent with Western modern literature or traditional Chinese literature.

It must be admitted that the enormous pressure exerted by politics on literature has limited the imagination of writers and critics about the image of “new man”. In most writers’ writings, the “new man” either belongs to a certain class and identity, or becomes a simple illustration of politics. This underdeveloped image of new man has always been banned by scholars and critics. In 1994, Hao Ran’s *the Golden Road* was republished. Shu Sui-ren wrote the article “the Dialogue on the Re-edition of “Famous Works” *the Golden Road* “. He held the idea that: “ During national crises, the more popular people become, the more lonely they will feel in the future. It’s just a matter of self-sufficiency... What is the golden road? It is the last radiance of the setting sun.” Then, a series of critical articles, including the ones written by Chen Sihe and Li Hui, expressed similar views though they were more serious and euphemistic. Considering the controversy caused by the interview with Hao Ran in *the Global Times* in 1998, a large number of researchers in mainstream literary circles since the 1980s hope that the literature closely related to politics will never be repeated again.

However, it should be noticed that, when “Seventeen-Year Literature” and “Cultural Revolution Literature” used violent means to suppress literary possibilities, the literary outlook dominated by aesthetics and Enlightenment also suppressed the possibility of new characters. The “tall, big and complete” image of the “new man” has been criticized as expressing the mainstream ideology by hypocritical means, then we have to decide whether or not all the positive factors in the image of the “new man” are undesirable. Besides the writing of “political moralization”, are there some positive factors related to the new economic form and social structure in the image of the “new man”?

Since the 1990s, a series of long works, such as *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, *White Deer Plain*, *To Live* and *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*, have been published, reflecting the artistic achievements of contemporary high literature. But at the same time, high literature is gradually separating from the public readers and social reality. These contemporary literary classics almost all ended with tragedies, and the main characters also highlighted the seamy side of human nature and destiny. Is the development of the times and the evolution of history necessarily tragic? In the criticism and exclusion of “Seventeen-Year Literature” and “literature of the Cultural Revolution”, perhaps the restraint of the image of “new man” by literary history also undermined the ability of contemporary literature to grasp the new reality. From these works, we can see the cycle of fate and the repetition

of tragedy. Can the change of social formation and the influence of technological means on ideology also bring a positive personality to the characters? Can readers reasonably find some positive imagination about life and future from the spiritual world of China created by writers? There are no any clear answers in contemporary literature.

My intention is certainly not to insist all writers to re-write the story of “contemporary Liang Sheng-pao”. However, I just want to emphasize that the image of the “new man” is necessary for the changing times, both in theory and in literary history. And the positive factors that correspond to the experience of the new generation are equally important.

A few years ago, Germany faced the challenge of republishing Hitler’s *My Struggle*. In the eyes of many people, the publication of this book is like opening Pandora’s box, which will call a dark and terrible history. In China, the study of “Seventeen-Year Literature”, “Cultural Revolution Literature” and the promotion of the image of “new man” is facing the same challenge. It’s surly right to be vigilant and sensitive, remembering the bloody historical mistakes. However, the theory of mechanical causality had been over in the age of Hegel. The relationship between literature and politics should be reviewed more carefully, which is not only the need of literary history, but also the need of further development of literature.

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