
The Development of the Chinese Interpretation of Socialist Realism as a Principle for Creation (Part One)¹

⊙ DING Fan

Nanjing University

Abstract: This essay traces the complex trajectory of socialist realism as both a creation principle and a critical framework in modern Chinese literary history. Beginning with the transmission of Soviet literary theory, particularly through the 1950s reception of Ivanov S. Pidakov's *An Introduction to Literary Theory*, the paper examines how Chinese intellectuals struggled with the interpretive enigma of socialist realism, oscillating between its official programmatic definition and its contradictory literary practice. By revisiting the roles of Maxim Gorky, Andrei Zhdanov, and other Soviet writers and literary critics, the essay highlights the entanglement of realism, naturalism, and romanticism in shaping the aesthetic and ideological imperatives of Chinese literature. It argues that the genealogy of realism in China, stretching from naturalism and critical realism to socialist realism and beyond, cannot be understood without accounting for this transnational circulation of theory and its selective adaptation. Moreover, the study foregrounds the tensions between ideological prescription and artistic autonomy, demonstrating how socialist realism operated less as a stable method than as an "invisible code" structuring both creation and criticism. In doing so, it reconsiders the fate of naturalism in Chinese literary discourse and calls for a renewed dialectical approach to realism, romanticism, and their afterlives in the post-socialist era.

Keywords: socialist realism, Chinese literary history, Soviet literary theory, naturalism and realism, revolutionary romanticism

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Right now the intelligentsia needs self-criticism, not self-adulation. We can come to a new consciousness only by way of repentance and self-indictment.

— H. A. Berdiaev, *Landmarks*

I

This title has lingered in my mind for more than forty years. Each time I picked up my pen,

and each time I put it down, I felt a deep sense of entanglement, for I could not unravel the interpretive enigma it posed. Too many symptomatic issues, intertwined like a tangled skein, prevented me from finding a precise incision point for analytical dissection. This is not only a proposition of literary theory but also an unavoidable issue in the creation and criticism of works by Chinese modern and contemporary writers. Looking back on the decades-long experience of the so-called *rewriting of literary history*, I have come to feel profoundly that, unless this problem is resolved, our writing of literary history cannot truly get to the core of literary history itself, particularly to see the essentials of the literary history of the People's Republic of China.

In the 1970s, a docent, who had once taught us a brief section in a literary theory course, was held in particularly high regard because she had attended the literary theory seminar given by the Soviet literary scholar Ivanov S. Pidakov in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University from the spring of 1954 to the summer of 1955. She relayed Pidakov's literary theory to us and, likewise, illustrated and substantiated the sophistication of his ideas with examples drawn from Russian literary works. To be frank, we were all complete novices at the time, eager to grasp the profundities of this advanced course, yet never able to find the key to its understanding. Although we borrowed a large number of Russian literary works from the library in an attempt to verify the theories recorded in our lecture notes, we still could not attain a clear and thorough comprehension. After reading Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* in particular, I found myself even more bewildered. Intuitively, was not such a Russian novel essentially of the same kind as Lu Xun's (鲁迅) *The True Story of Ah Q* (阿Q正传)? This seemed far removed from the creating method of socialist realism. Consequently, I went to an old bookstore and bought a hardback edition of the translated version of Pidakov's lecture scripts, titled *An Introduction to Literary Theory* (文艺学引论). Although at the time Pidakov was merely an associate professor in the Department of Philology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in the USSR, his Chinese audience were all experts in literary theory at Chinese universities, among them more than a few renowned professors. Later, when I came into contact with eminent university professors engaged in literary theory, I discovered that many of them had, in fact, been trained in that very seminar.

It was not until the late 20th and early 21st centuries, after reading extensively in Russian literary history and Soviet literary history, especially works on the Silver Age, that I came to realize: we had greatly overestimated Pidakov's teaching at the time. This was due to our own shallowness, which, of course, stemmed from our inability to access genuine historical materials, and even more so from the limited scope of our learning.

This work, translated and transcribed from Pidakov's lecture by the Literary Theory Teaching and Research Group of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University, was first published by the Higher Education Press in September 1958, with its fifth printing in 1959. The edition comprised 432,000 characters, with 16,000 hardback copies priced at two *yuan* each, and sold 32,500 paperback copies. It was never reprinted afterward—I guess, because after 1959, Sino-Soviet relations turned remote—and revisionist works ceased to be published. Thus, in my efforts to understand and master Soviet literary theory, this book accompanied me for more than forty years. Just as I was on the verge of fully comprehending it, the theory itself met the fate of being completely abandoned in the early 1980s. Yet I have always believed that the specter of Pidakov's literary theory has persistently shadowed the trajectory of our literary history—especially the creation principles and methods labeled as socialist realism, which seem to have continually shaped our literary production. Even though we have undergone successive trials through new realism (which was, in fact, a form

of naturalism), modernist, and postmodernist creating methods, and although countless avant-garde, trendy, and experimental literary works have challenged the so-called labyrinth of the socialist realist method, that labyrinth has been razed. It still towers over the realm of our literary creation. Though we may appear unable to see or touch it, we are as if forever battling windmills; in the domain of creation and criticism, it is a struggle with an invisible genetic code of influence.

In the past, many sources maintained that the term “socialist realist literature” was coined by Maxim Gorky. This is partly true, yet also somewhat misleading. In 1932, when Joseph Stalin personally brought Gorky back from Italy and led members of the Politburo to the train station to welcome this literary titan, the Soviet government came to a profound realization: words spoken by Gorky carried far greater authority and persuasive power in the literary and cultural spheres. However, in my humble view, the creation of socialist realism as a theoretical method should be understood as a programmatic document collectively formulated by Soviet literary theorists under the guidance of Stalin and the Communist Party of Soviet Union with the intention of directing writers’ creation. Accordingly, Pidakov also remarked:

In his 1932 conversation with Soviet writers, Stalin provided a definition of socialist realism, and this definition serves as our starting point for understanding the issue. Later, the concept of socialist realism was mentioned by [Andrei] Zhdanov, who spoke on behalf of the Communist Party at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, and Gorky also discussed the concept during the same congress. (Pidakov 502)

What, then, was Stalin’s definition? Based on my reading of Andrei Zhdanov’s speech, it appears to have evolved from the famous maxim that has prevailed in China’s literary circles for ninety years: *the writer is the engineer of human souls*. To be an *engineer of human souls* one must create according to this principle and method. In his opening remarks, Zhdanov elaborated on this by stating:

This means, first, one must know life in order to depict it authentically in artistic works—not in a tedious, rigid, or merely simplistic representation of *objective reality*, but rather by portraying reality through its revolutionary development.

Furthermore, the authenticity and historical specificity of artistic depiction must be combined with the task of transforming and educating the people ideologically through the spirit of socialism. This approach to literature and literary criticism is what we refer to as the method of socialist realism. (Pidakov 502–503)

Thus, as a strict rule tailored by the Soviet Writers’ Union for men and women of letters, it served as a guide for proletarian writers’ creation and, at the same time, as the artistic goal followed by leftist writers throughout the socialist camp.

Accordingly, the theorists of “Association of Chinese Left-Wing Writers”² swiftly translated this programmatic document issued by the Soviet Writers’ Union. At the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Zhdanov stated that

Our literature, grounded firmly in materialist principles, cannot be entirely divorced from romanticism; yet this is a new form of romanticism—a revolutionary romanticism. We assert that socialist realism is the fundamental method of Soviet literature and literary criticism,

based on the following premise: revolutionary romanticism should be incorporated as an essential component of literary creation, for the entire life of our Party, the life of the working class, and their struggles lie in the combination of serious, measured practical work with the greatest heroism and the grandest vision. (Pidakov 504)

I do not intend here to trace the origins of revolutionary romanticism, as that is a matter I will examine in detail in another article on the roots of romanticism in China. What I wish to emphasize here is that, at the time, in order to counter the viral spread of romanticist literature in the Soviet Union—which had harassed the development of socialist realist writing, to incorporate it under the banner of socialist realism and to baptize it revolutionary was clearly a strategy of the development of literary theory. The focus of Zhdanov’s statement lies in the emphasis on party loyalty and class consciousness: socialist realism must become a “grand vision” for proletarian literary creation and represent the developmental trajectory of communist literature. In light of such a goal, Gorky spoke with measured caution:

Socialist realism sees existence as action, as creation. Its purpose is man’s conquest of nature’s forces, the health and longevity of humankind, and the attainment of great happiness for those dwelling on Earth, while continuously developing the most valuable individual talents of humanity. People, in accordance with their ever-growing needs, aspire to transform the Earth into a magnificent dwelling place for all of humanity united as one family. (Pidakov 504–505)

This passage seems somewhat disjointed yet declarative in tone. It is evident that although Gorky was esteemed by Stalin, Gorky’s earlier works—particularly his early writings—had been termed as socialist romanticism. It would have been unreasonable to exclude his works from the category of socialist realism. Consequently, Gorky had to resort to ambiguous expressions such as “existence as action, as creation” and “the most valuable individual talents,” as well as the somewhat utopian phrase “a magnificent dwelling place for all of humanity,” to align with the creation principles of socialist realism. In reality, Gorky would never deny that his own work was romanticist. Thus, when Zhdanov defined Gorky’s writing as revolutionary romanticism, Gorky himself may not have accepted such a publicized evaluation. However, Gorky, seated on the podium, could reconcile with his own writing history—this was merely a historical moment of formality. Pidakov further explains:

Gorky’s combative social romanticism was, on the one hand, opposed to the reactionary idealism of decadent bourgeois literature and, on the other hand, countered the base and hypocritical realist literature, exemplified by Populist writers who imitated Lev Tolstoy and advocated his doctrine of non-resistance, thereby upholding a theory of trivialities. In Gorky’s early works, naturalism, romanticism, and critical realism were already integrated. His romanticism did not contradict the depicted reality of critical realism. Rather, it developed upon the foundation of realism. (505)

Although Pidakov’s remarks gilded the romantic elements of Gorky’s works with a revolutionary sheen, they simultaneously underscored, from another angle, an implicit rejection and critical negation of all the earlier traditions of naturalism, realism, and romanticism from Russia’s Golden and Silver Ages. After all, Gorky had long since passed away and could no longer defend his own literary legacy. His works were left entirely to the overinterpretation of Soviet critics and literary

historians of the 1940s and 1950s, who read them through the lens of class struggle theory. From this textbook formulated by Pidakov's seminar transcript, we can clearly see the strongly negative critiques leveled against figures such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky—critiques far more saturated with the rhetoric of class struggle than those of even the slightly more neutral theorists. Later, I will focus in greater detail on another major Soviet-era theorist, Lev Timofeev, and his interpretation of the theory of socialist realism. Before that, however, my primary concern lies with the question of socialist realism's influence on the century-long trajectory of Chinese literary history.

In 1984, I accompanied Mr. Ye Ziming (叶子铭) to participate in the compilation of *The Complete Works of Mao Dun* at the People's Literature Publishing House. While working through the ten-plus volumes of "Chinese Literary Theory" and "Foreign Literary Theory," I became particularly intrigued by Mao Dun's (茅盾) early admiration for naturalism. From this, I delineated the following developmental trajectory of realism in Chinese literature:

naturalism → realism (*xieshi zhuyi*)³ → critical realism → realism (*xianshi zhuyi*) → socialist realism → revolutionary realism → the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism → tragic realism → "ground-covered-with-chicken-feathers" realism.

In 1984 and 1985, I published two papers on Mao Dun's advocacy of naturalism. Although limited in depth, these studies nonetheless elucidated the reasons underlying Mao Dun's early fascination with naturalism—formed prior to his exposure to Soviet socialist realism. Naturally, Mao Dun's complete transformation in his value orientation toward naturalism did not become fully apparent until the 1950s, when he composed *Notes from Night Reading* (夜读偶记). Although Mao Zedong had already articulated in his 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" that "we are for socialist realism" (87), the decisive shift in Mao Dun's literary stance only manifested in this later period. However, this was regarded merely as a writing method, whereas the core spirit and guiding principle of the talks in Yan'an were centered on the commitment to "serv[e] the workers, peasants, and soldiers" (85). In the history of literature in the People's Republic of China, before 1959 in particular, our writing mission adhered strictly to the guidelines of socialist realism. Consequently, the literary production of the 1950s, in all its diverse manifestations, perfectly embodied this principle. By the early 1960s, as the ideological debate between China and the Soviet Union entered a white-hot stage, our literary policy was implemented strictly in accordance with the spirit of the "Talks at Yan'an." However, this did not mean that socialist realism vanished from Chinese literary and artistic creation. As Professor Yang Hui (杨晦), then Dean of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University, remarked in the postscript to Pidakov's *An Introduction to Literary Theory*:

In the past two years, revisionist currents of thought have been rampant internationally, provoking intense debates. However, the socialist realist writing method was regarded as the best and most progressive approach to literary creation, one that in China, the Soviet Union, and other socialist countries had successfully repelled the fallacies of revisionism. In these lecture notes, the treatment of socialist realism stands on a correct political footing, with no issues in its basic standpoint. At the Second Congress of Soviet Writers, the Charter of the Soviet Writers' Union was amended; the formulation of socialist realism was rendered somewhat simpler in wording than in the old charter, but without any substantive change in principle. (Pidakov 528)

Indeed, the influence of socialist realism in China extended well into the 1980s. Although Professor Yang did not anticipate that the ideological struggle between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s would escalate to an irreconcilable confrontation, socialist realism, as an invisible companion, continued to lie beside our creative and critical endeavors—much like Nikita Khrushchev, quietly crouching next to them.

Then, how should we evaluate Gorky, a great writer who lived through two eras—from the Tsarist period to the Soviet period? This is a question through and through. In the words of Russian literary historians, Gorky was a man full of contradictions. The fundamental reason, as Pavel Basinsky observed, is that

Gorky's humanism differed both from the humanism of the populists and from that of the Marxists who issued their manifestos in the 1890s. His humanism lacked the characteristics of scientific positivism. It was an angry revolt against all forms of reason that distort humanity—distortions that confine human thought within narrow secular, national, social, and natural frameworks. The writer sought the roots of evil not only in external social barriers but also, and above all, within the depths of the human being. (Keldysh et al. 2: 44)

Gorky, with no doubt, emerged with his eagle and stormy petrel, earning the title of an “idealistic romantic writer.” He forged a close friendship with Vladimir Lenin during the revolutionary movement and supported the Soviet Revolution. Yet, when the Soviet government ruthlessly suppressed intellectuals, he interceded with Lenin, saving countless intellectuals from arrest and massacre—a role made evident in his renowned works *Untimely Thoughts* and *Notes on Revolution and Culture*. However, deep in his soul, he remained at odds with the *intelligentsia* writers. Perhaps this son of a carpenter yearned more for entry into the creative kingdom of freedom. His early works, beginning with *My Childhood*, are essentially autobiographical, and I would argue that his novels constitute what we now define as non-fictional literature. At the time, Russian critics categorized these texts as exemplifying idealistic lyricism, replacing artistic typification. This, I believe, explains why Zhdanov did not reject the romantic method of creation but instead incorporated it within the overarching framework of socialist realism. This logical distinction of conceptual categories allowed Gorky—without denying romanticism—to be naturalized into socialist realism, thereby enabling the contradictory Gorky to recognize the legitimacy of the latter in literary creation. Of course, to some extent, it also unravels another aspect of Gorky's temperament: his instinctive aversion to the *intelligentsia*, which had emerged during Russia's Silver Age (the last decade of the 19th century).

According to Gorky's own recollection, one can glimpse his complex inner world in a remark made to him by the aristocratic writer Tolstoy, which revealed the profound class consciousness that seemed almost like an ingrained instinct. Tolstoy once said to him: “Your rough fellows are all very clever.” The implications here are profoundly layered, for Tolstoy's words were at once a mocking kind of laudation and a gently ironic jab. How are we supposed to decipher this message? Was it Tolstoy's prejudice, or was it a piece of advice that Gorky, from different social rank, took to heart as guidance from another literary giant? Undoubtedly, Gorky's attitude, a concoction of respect and resentment, toward the *intelligentsia* was not misplaced. On the one hand, he accused intellectuals of ignorance toward the power of the people. On the other, he reproached the masses for their refusal to accept the intellectuals. Was this dialectical materialist analysis, or rather

Gorky's conscientious judgment on Russian culture and literature after his overcoming of class prejudice? And yet, as one scholar has observed:

Gorky himself seemed to be a kind of intermediary between the *state camp* (the Bolshevik camp) and the true *intelligentsia camp*. He could neither restrain the former, nor fully integrate into the latter. He came from the lower classes, but was by no means a proletarian. Later, his ties with the technical intelligentsia were far closer than with the working class. Gorky could never penetrate the inner core of any intellectual circle, and this condemned him to a deep sense of loneliness. (Keldysh et al. 2: 68)

It was precisely this in-between identity that produced so many contradictions in Gorky's political stance, cultural role, and even in his literary writings. This reminds me of the Chinese writer Mao Dun, who also found himself wandering without firm footing in an age of great revolution, and who openly admired naturalism. Mao Dun's very pen name, whose Chinese meaning is "contradiction," was a faithful reflection of his inner condition. His *Eclipse* (蚀) trilogy, as he himself admitted in his memoir *From Guling to Tokyo* (从牯岭到东京), was nothing less than an artistic manifestation of a state of ideological confusion. Mao Dun was, in truth, a composite of contradictions. The so-called "petty-bourgeois feebleness" left him wavering in the "filth and blood" of revolution, eventually seeking to evade reality rather than confront it. This is why, in the 1950s and 1960s, Mao Dun carefully avoided referring to the *Eclipse* trilogy or his short story collection *Wild Roses* (野蔷薇). After the failure of the 1927 Revolution, these works had carried distinct traces of sentimental and romantic elements whose features were fundamentally at odds with the principles of socialist realism.

Thus, we can see why Zhdanov repeatedly emphasized the importance of the working class as the creating subject of socialist realist literature, and likewise why Pidakov, in his lectures, echoed this same emphasis. Yet, if we look at the first thirty years of modern Chinese literature, the representation of the working class in left-wing writing was in fact rather vulnerable. Even in Mao Dun's magnum opus *Midnight* (子夜), the portrayal of workers in a typicalized fashion is widely acknowledged as one of the novel's major flaws. Throughout the 73 years of the literary history of the People's Republic of China, an upsurge of industry-themed novels sprung up in the early 1950s. However, in retrospect, none of these works can be truly regarded as a success. By contrast, in recent years, works returning to the realist method while incorporating modernist—indeed, essentially naturalist—elements of depiction have blossomed into some of the most brilliant representations of workers' lives. The novels of Lu Nei (路内), for instance, stand out as genuine masterpieces in capturing all the makings of Chinese workers. Some critics, perhaps, long ago predicted this outcome. For China has never had a genuine industrial working class, there has never been fertile ground for industry-themed novels. Yet, I do not see eye to eye with such analyses. The reality is that, much like in the Soviet Union, the truly proletarian industrial working class oppressed by capitalism did not come into being within the cultural context of public ownership. This very condition endowed Chinese workers with their own distinctiveness. Unfortunately, our writers failed to grasp this issue from the perspectives of philosophy or political economy, and thus did not seize upon this distinctiveness in order to render our workers artistically distinctive. As a result, a vital opportunity for literary expression was missing. When China entered the era of market-oriented industrial production at the end of the 20th century, our literature likewise missed the chance to

capture the life-worlds of workers. To be precise, the worlds were fundamentally different from those Friedrich Engels had once described in his account of London's East End. Just when family-based industry once again reappeared in the Chinese cultural landscape, our writers lacked the perceptual acuity to recognize in it the very distinctiveness most capable of generating profound artistic energy. This forms a deeply regrettable fault line in the history of Chinese literature. Fortunately, the belated explorations and emulative local efforts undertaken by writers such as Lu Nei are not yet too late. Still, what I look forward to even more is the emergence of panoramic works with grand narratives and detailed depiction that can profoundly represent the typical environments and typical characters with typical qualities in industrial literature across different historical periods. Accordingly, what our literature most lacks is precisely the lucid, philosophically-grounded perspective of the *intelligentsia* writers who are capable of observing and distilling life in its full dimensions, and who can apply a writing method from the metaphysical to the physical and back again in a second dialectical cycle.

Gorky sought to position himself simultaneously as the moral conscience of the Russian nation who exposed the dehumanizing violence of the state system and who stood as the spokesman for a fantasy of a mighty domineering leader who might lever history for progress and lead Russia to greatness. In his eyes, "Peter the Great was one such lever, and Gorky held him in high esteem" (Keldysh et al. 2: 69). Consequently, Gorky could agree with Stalin's claim that writers are *engineers of the human soul*, and therefore he raised no explicit objections to socialist realism, even if his recognition of its artistic principles was less than wholehearted. From D. S. Mirsky's *A History of Russian Literature*, we may have a clearer view of Gorky's creating tendencies, which in turn reveals how he navigated this inner contradiction:

In all Gorky's early work his realism is strongly modified by romanticism, and it was this romanticism which made for his success in Russia, although it was his realism that carried it over the frontier. To the Russian reader, the novelty of his early stories consisted in their bracing and daredevil youthfulness. To the foreign public, it was the ruthless crudeness with which he described his nether world. Hence the enormous difference between Russian and foreign appreciations of the early Gorky—it comes from a difference of background. Russians saw him against the gloom and depression of [Anton] Chekhov and the other novelists of the eighties saw him as a foreigner against a screen of conventional and reticent realism of Victorian times. His very first stories are purely romantic. (380)

Gorky's works, be they romanticist or realist, did not embody the principles of socialist realism. Thus, Gorky, although seated on the rostrum of the Soviet Writers' Congress, must have experienced a measure of embarrassment. He, being a bright banner of Soviet writers and a signpost for Soviet literature toward its proclaimed glory, could do nothing but tacitly endorse these principles and programs of creation. Even though his later works hardly show any trace of socialist realist method, his acquiescence played a pivotal role.

II

It can be said that with the proclamation of socialist realism as the mainstream creating principle and method of the literary history of the People's Republic of China, China's critique of naturalism spread throughout the three decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. Although the vast

majority of people had little knowledge of its origins or true essence, the focus of this critique was concentrated on naturalism's so-called mechanical copying of life and its alleged representation of sexual scenes. Naturally, this echoed the merciless denunciations of Zola-styled naturalism made by Soviet literary theorists. In the early 1980s, while editing the literary theory section of the *Collected Works of Mao Dun*, I was struck by Mao Dun's early admiration for naturalism. Finding this confounding, I wrote two papers in defense of naturalism. Clearly, since the available resources on naturalism were extremely limited at that time, coupled with the constraints and shallowness of my own theoretical training and horizon, the essays now seem far from desirable. They failed to uncover the real purpose behind the critique of naturalism. This failure results from a lack of understanding of the historical development of the relationship between naturalism and realism in Soviet literature, and from inability to see the reason why socialist realism strove so hard to reject naturalist methods. Without the abovementioned awareness, any judgment was bound to be a blind fumbling, leaving us incapable of truly comprehending the historical fact of Soviet literary theory's massive impact on Chinese literary creation and criticism.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries,

the "great" Russian realism developed within the broad movement of another kind of realist practice of creation, which came to be defined as "naturalism."

The exploration for new themes, new protagonists, new plots and genres, as well as new ways of engaging in dialogue with readers—these were most clearly embodied in the works of Tolstoy and Chekhov, followed by [Vsevolod Mikhaylovich] Garshin, [Vladimir Galaktionovich] Korolenko, and somewhat later (from the 1890s onward) Gorky. At the time, these literary enthusiasts were included in a relatively lenient category—plain realism, these young fellows—labels that arose in discussions of Russian naturalism. Certain elements in their otherwise destined-to-be-forgotten works have already surfaced before literary historians as the earliest signs of the future as agreed upon by them.

Most interestingly, the French writer Émile Zola, hailed as the father of naturalism, remarked with humorous pride: "I invented nothing, not even the word 'naturalism' [...] but it has been in use in Russia for thirty years." (Keldysh et al. 1: 139–151)

In the fourth chapter of the first volume of *Russian Literature at the Turn of the Century (1890s–Early 1920s)*, "Realism and Naturalism," Valentin Kataev devotes extensive pages to a detailed introduction of naturalism's origins and the clash of various viewpoints. His scrutiny is well worth our in-depth study and analysis. Nonetheless, the most valuable passage for defining its essence is this:

Naturalism does not seek to stand on the polarity of realism, but rather shares with it most of the broadest characteristics. The principle of mimesis, the criterion of authenticity, truth of life, representing life as it really is, representing what is most common—under these slogans Tolstoy, Chekhov, [Nikolai Alexandrovich] Leykin, [Ignaty Nikolayevich] Potapenko affixed their names. (Keldysh et al. 1: 139–151)

In my view, the relationship between naturalism and realism is not simply a matter of mimicry in the struggle for survival, but rather a stylistically consistent method of recreating the raw

immediacy of life to express the writer's unified perception of life in its original form. Their only real difference lies in the manner of the author's involvement in life. Namely, one takes a stance, while the other refrains.

It was precisely the purely objective writing method of naturalism that allowed writers like Chekhov to experiment boldly in restoring life to literature. This technique deliberately distanced itself from the old Balzacian realism. I have always thought of this method as one that intervenes with the sangfroid of the murderer. It conceals the writer's own values deep inside the language, leaving all judgment to the reader. The key difference from detective or suspense fiction is that it does not reveal life's enigma, nor does it announce moral judgement on its characters.

As Zola once made clear in his "Letters from Paris"⁴: "I do not intend, like [Honoré de] Balzac, to be a politician, a philosopher, or a moralist ... the picture I depict is a simple dissection of the fragmental reality as it really is." To present reality *as it is* is far from an analytical dissection of life's fragments. Rather, it is a self-sufficient and faithful transcription. This is exactly what linked together many Russian novels at the turn of the century. Such a variant of naturalism can be defined as documentary naturalism or photographic naturalism. A large number of writers represented this strain. In their works, the traits of a transitional era sometimes emerged earlier than in the writings of some literary giants, and sometimes more vividly, more roughly, and thus more conspicuously. (Keldysh et al. 1: 139–151)

Undoubtedly, this exerted a tremendous impact on a value system that had long been accustomed to knowing itself and discerning the meaning of reality through the image of the protagonists of literature. It reminds me of the "Great Exhibition of New Realist Fiction"⁵ that we launched in the mid-1980s in China, with the original intent of depicting the raw texture of primitive life. It becomes an attempt to cast off the shackles of imposed value systems around the writer, and to free them from the fetters of a single method of creation. From this perspective, the Russian naturalism of a century ago was like the swan song echoed in China. At the time, of course, we were unaware of the full history of naturalism, and even less aware that before Soviet literary theory came to dominate, there had been an indelible period in both the Russian Golden and Silver Ages whose literary current, phenomena, and works consisted in naturalism.

As for Kataev's discussion of Peter Dmitrievich Boborygin's naturalist novels, in which he classified Boris Leonidovich Pasternak within the framework of the Russian *intelligentsia* novel, this should be a topic to be addressed in another article. I briefly touched upon it in a paper published ten years ago, but without developing an in-depth analysis of the specific content and form of the works, it is something that can only be discussed in the future.

Undoubtedly, in the era when the principle of socialist realism as the sole creating guideline prevailed, the term *naturalism* was absolutely forbidden from sullyng the purity of socialist realist principles and methods. It is no wonder that Pidakov's critique of naturalism was exceptionally fierce, and his definition clearly followed the official line:

The artistic method, that depicts the external features of reality realistically, yet whose portrayal of reality itself is distorted, is called naturalism. Unlike realism, which strives to reveal and understand typical, profound connections and relations in life, naturalism focuses on isolated, individual, single and partial aspects detached from the broader processes of

reality and social phenomena.

Naturalism advocates an indifferent, nonchalant attitude toward reality and an empirical approach to depicting life. It embodies the conservative tendencies of the bourgeois worldview, aligning with the interests of the reactionary bourgeoisie, who, in order to consolidate their rule, set themselves against the people and their revolutionary aspirations.

Naturalists believed that the task of art was to depict the external form of phenomena, and their works were crammed with all sorts of quotidian, often clumsy and physiological, trivial details. Naturalist writers did not make profound generalizations about real phenomena and things. Instead, they merely produced photographic-style depictions. (Pidakov 495)

These characteristics precisely summarize Zola's naturalist works as noted by literary critics and historians. It is at this point that Pidakov rather unexpectedly defended Zola's naturalism:

Contrary to the bourgeois experimental theories of objectivism favored by Zola, his entire body of work extensively reflects various aspects of social relations in bourgeois France. His works demonstrate the writer's close concern with the times. The enormous effort devoted to collecting materials for *Les Rougon-Macquart*, and his increasing attention to social life phenomena, helped him overcome his feigned detachment from political issues. (496)

This statement is reminiscent of Engels's famous commentary on Balzac, a tribute to how critical realism as a writing method overcame its class limitations. Unfortunately, Pidakov's skill in repurposing quotations is rather clumsy, especially in the final sentence, which completely reverses Zola's own claim of "feigned detachment from political issues"—truly somewhat incongruous. Nevertheless, when he evaluates all writers' works by the standards of socialist realism, his assessment of Zola-styled realism is the most lenient. This is because his purpose is to negate the interference of this literary trend from Russia's Silver Age in the history of literature with the methods of socialist realist writing, using the affirmation of the naturalist founder's political engagement to refute any principles and methods of creation that do not center on politics as a theme.

However, another leading theorist of proletarian literature in the Soviet period, Timofeev, clearly distances himself from Pidakov's conclusions, offering a more academically rigorous and convincing evaluation:

Realists do not merely reproduce existing facts as they are, but depict the possible forms that facts may take. In other words, they portray those aspects of reality whose patterns can be grasped. Naturalists, by contrast, depict only what has actually occurred, even if it consists of accidental, untypical facts. Thus, accidental characters in accidental circumstances became a hallmark of naturalism, which seems like a preparatory stage for realism. (42)

This evaluation of naturalism is not only objective and fair, but it also shows an essential link in the historical development of Soviet literature. It remains a key reference when revisiting socialist realism. Timofeev's arguments presented in his monograph, while centering on socialist realism, also engage with realism, critical realism, and romanticism in insightful ways, many of which offer unique perspectives. I will provide a detailed analysis of these points below.

However, when examining the issue from the perspective of the dominant ideological stance

of Soviet literature at the time, we are limited to seeing socialist realism as a literary movement falling in an abyss like Icarus with a pair of wings made of creation and criticism. Looking back on the first thirty years of the literature created in the People's Republic of China, all works were evaluated primarily according to ideological standards, and the limitations in writing practice and the impotence of criticism persisted. It was not until the Fourth National Congress of CFLAC (China Federation of Literary and Art Circles), when Deng Xiaoping reinstated the "Two Serves Principle" (二为方针) and the "Double Hundred Movement" (双百方针)⁶ policies, that pluralistic methods of creation began to play a crucial role of correction in following literary creation and criticism, and Pidakov's literary principles and their influence on China were, to a certain extent, brought to an end.

The divergence between old realism and naturalism lies in their differing conceptions of creative methodology, which ultimately boils down to whether the writer's subjective values are concealed or openly displayed. The extreme of the former is seen in the rise of grandiose critical realism during the peak of capitalist-era literature, characterized by the flourishing of works with a strong critical spirit toward the real world, which still remains a trend that has persisted to the present. In contrast, the latter's creating method aligns with the literary credo for writing inherited from Engels's advocacy for the more concealed the perspective of the work, the better, a principle supporting the typification central to critical realism. From this aspect, writers sharing similar values may employ different methods to depict the reality of life. This is not a conflict of ideas, but a difference in creation methodology. Old realism seeks to guide readers through the author's ideas. As long as the ideological imposition is not coercive or rigid, it is feasible and can function as a literary guide, acknowledging that not all readers possess knowledge or insight *a priori*. However, once the insertion of ideology becomes coercive, the artistic integrity of the work suffers greatly. Socialist realism's highest principle is precisely such ideological imposition, and it is indeed more than a simple question of creating method. In contrast, naturalist methodology attempts to conceal ideas behind the depiction of real life, making no explicit statements, thereby enhancing the work's distinctive external artistry. This meets Engels's highest artistic standard for literary works concerning typical environment and typical character. From this angle, for readers with strong literary appreciation skills, ample space for secondary interpretation allows the work's inherent ambiguity to release tremendous energy. This creates a philosophical pleasure in reading experience and gives birth to an utterly new second author from its self-interpretation. Even a misreading in contradiction with the intended meaning of the original author gives rise to the ideal reader. This is the true sense of a living work. Conversely, realism and critical realism, with their omniscient commentary and explanatory force, also make an immeasurable historical contribution to literature through their Enlightenment-inspired ideological guidance for the general readership.

Therefore, in the following essay, I will further elaborate on critical realism, as well as the contrapuntal relationship between romanticism and socialist realism.

Translated by XIA Kaiwei

Notes

1. This paper was originally published in Chinese in *Wenyi Zhengming*, no. 7, 2022, pp. 6–12.
2. The "Association of Chinese Left-Wing Writers" (中国左翼作家联盟), founded in Shanghai on March 2, 1930, was a Chinese literary organization with over 400 members, many affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party. Established to promote socialist realism and support the Communist Revolution, it

operated in cells to avoid Kuomintang persecution. The League criticized bourgeois literary groups like the Crescent Moon Society (新月社), launched magazines, and engaged in cultural activities under the Chinese Culture World Total Alliance (中国左翼文化总同盟). Banned in 1930, it faced executions during the “White Terror” and was voluntarily disbanded in 1936 to unite against Japanese aggression. Notable members of this league include Lu Xun, Ding Ling (丁玲), Hu Feng (胡风), Zhou Yang (周扬), Roushi (柔石), Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Yu Dafu (郁达夫), Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白), Mao Dun, etc. Unless otherwise specified, all notes are added by the translator.

3. Interestingly, in the context of Chinese literary history, two distinct terms exist for “realism.” The first, *xianshi zhuyi* (现实主义), corresponds closely to the Western tradition of realism as a critical and historical category. The second, *xieshi zhuyi* (写实主义), while related to Western realism, is more literally translated as “the depiction of reality” (*xieshi*), and often emphasizes the technical or stylistic act of faithful representation rather than a specific literary movement.
4. This title, drawn from Zola’s work, appears in this paper through the author’s citation of a Chinese translation of a Russian monograph. Due to the multiple layers of translation, identifying the French original is difficult.
5. The author employs the term *xieshi zhuyi* (写实主义) rather than *xianshi zhuyi* (现实主义). Although both expressions are generally rendered as “realism” in English, they carry distinct connotations within the Chinese literary context. *Xieshi zhuyi* literally means “descriptive realism” or “the tendency to depict reality in a faithful, representational manner,” often with an emphasis on style or technique. By contrast, *xianshi zhuyi* usually refers to “realism” as a critical or historical category in modern Chinese literary discourse, aligned with European realist traditions and frequently associated with progressive or socially conscious writing. The distinction, therefore, is not merely terminological but conceptual, reflecting different layers of meaning in the reception and adaptation of “realism” in Chinese literary culture.
6. The term “Two Serves” (二 为) refers to the principle that literature and art must follow the right path of serving the people and serving the socialist cause. The “Double-Hundred Policy” (双 百 方 针) is an abbreviated form of the policy of “letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend,” which was made as a guidance of developing a prosperous socialist science and culture.

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