

*“Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers,
Head-bowed, like a willing ox, I serve the children”*

Lu Xun

The Significance of Mao Zedong’s Talks at the Yennan Forum on Literature and Art for People’s Literature and Art

Professor S. Sivasegaram

In matters of art and literature, the first problem that a Marxist should resolve concerns purpose. To be more specific, it concerns the question, ‘for whom is our literature and art?’ Lenin, in pre-revolutionary Russia, stated unambiguously that art should serve the millions and tens of millions of working people. In principle, all Marxist Leninists endorse this position. However, there have been differences of opinion about putting this principle into practice. Dogmatic interpretation of the Leninist position has been as harmful as bourgeois liberalism in resolving important issues.

Those who blindly extrapolate Soviet experience to revolutionary politics in their countries have their counterparts in literature and art. What is required of a Marxist, however, is to start from objective facts and not abstract notions. It was this quality that enabled Mao Zedong to make outstanding creative contributions to Marxist Leninist theory and practice. The concepts of people’s war and mass line as advanced by him are central to making revolution as well as safeguarding it. Following inevitably from them is the concept of people’s art, which needs to be developed further in terms of theory and practice.

His introductory and concluding addresses at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942 clarified the Marxist position on literature and art in greater detail than by any Marxist thinker before. Mao also ranks among important modern poets of China and is known for his appreciation of classical and contemporary Chinese literature. The purpose of this essay is to examine the significance of Mao’s views expressed at the Yenan Forum to the continued development of the concept of “people’s art”.

Mao’s position on literature and art, while unambiguous, is neither rigid nor dogmatic. He has been consistent in his recognition of the importance of work on the cultural front and the need for political work to go hand in hand with it. There was no doubt in his mind on questions relating to the purpose of art. On the question of ‘For whom?’ he re-emphasised the position taken by Lenin, and went further to address specific issues that arose from what he saw as the purpose of art from a revolutionary Marxist perspective. The ideas that he gave expression to in Yenan were clear and, in keeping with his political views, placed great emphasis on class and class struggle and the identity of an artist and a work of art as products of class society.

His position on the nature of the relationship between the artist and those for whom the work of art is intended is an echo of the mass line that he advocated on the question of revolutionary struggle. Having clearly identified from a revolutionary Marxist position the class nature of literature and art, and their respective roles in the struggle for social change, he adopted the strategies for carrying forward the class struggle to struggles at the cultural front and in the arena of literature and art.

He deals with the problem in terms of class stand, attitude, audience and study, and the comments below by him would help us to understand his position on the various aspects of the problem.

“The problem of class stand. Our stand is that of the proletariat and the masses. For members of the Communist Party this means keeping to the stand of the Party, keeping to the Party spirit and Party policy”.

“The problem of attitude.... The question is whom are you dealing with? There are three kinds of persons: the enemy; our allies in the united front and our own people; the last are the masses and their vanguard. We need to adapt a different attitude towards each of the three”.

Mao, while being unambiguous about the class stand of the art and literature of communists, has no illusions about the existence of good comrades who are not clear on this question: *“It is conceivable that there are still some who maintain that revolutionary literature and art are not for the masses of the people but for the exploiters and oppressors”.*

The above lack of clarity arises from the erroneous view that literature and art transcend class. Mao also points out that those who uphold such views in reality uphold bourgeois literature and art and oppose proletarian literature and art. His position that the literature and art of communists should be for the masses was based on his recognition of the importance of literature and art to liberation, and led to defining the new culture for China which, at the stage of the anti-Japanese war of liberation, as *“an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal culture of the masses of people under the leadership of the proletariat”.*

What is significant is that Mao rejects the leadership of the bourgeoisie and insists instead on the leadership of the proletariat: *“We should take over the rich legacy and good traditions that have been handed down from the past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people”.* Mao has been consistent in his encouragement of the use of literary and artistic forms from the past and from outside China, remoulded and infused with new content so that they become something revolutionary to serve the masses.

He has warned about the influence of petit bourgeois thinking manifesting themselves as tendencies to deviate from the proletarian approach to literature and art, and failure to correctly resolve the question of ‘For whom?’ Petit bourgeois thinking affects progressive and revolutionary writers and artists in several ways. Firstly, many writers and artists have a petit bourgeois social background and require remoulding of their thinking. This does not happen automatically when one joins the left movement or a Marxist political party, but requires exposure and experience in mass political work.

Secondly, in bourgeois society, especially in the absence of a revolutionary mass struggle, most of the creative work relies on media dominated by the bourgeoisie. The values promoted by the sponsors of literature and art and by the media through which writers and artists express themselves are bourgeois in orientation. Proletarian outlook in literature and art requires not merely the acceptance of proletarian ideology but also a transformation in one’s outlook.

Writers and artists in feudal and bourgeois society generally tend to look up to approval if not patronage from the elite classes. This elitism also finds its way into literature and art, and finds a breeding ground in individualism, which is invariably a victim of thirst for fame, longing to prove one’s self, and desire to be acknowledged by ‘peers’. Awards and recognition from bourgeois institutions and the state contribute to rivalry and envy and many a progressive writer and artist has fallen victim to individualism and pathetic self-glorification.

This could be averted only by being clear about one’s purpose and constantly reminding one’s self about it. Collective effort and working as a member of a team help to some degree, but what is essential is the resolution of the question of purpose. The full resolution of the question of ‘For whom?’ would lead to the position that the real peers are the masses and the success of a work of literature or art depends on how well it has served the cause of the oppressed masses.

Thus, not surprisingly, petit bourgeois elitists make a major issue of the question of form and content and accuse Marxists, especially revolutionaries, of sacrificing artistic quality for political content.

We need to be clear that content is fundamental to a Marxist and takes precedence over form. But no work of art can justify itself purely on the basis of content. Mao has been absolutely clear on this matter and went to the extent criticising stereotype writing even in political literature. His emphasis on artistic quality and on the need to draw on various resources is unmistakable:

“We must take over all the fine things in our literary heritage, critically assimilate whatever is beneficial, and use them as examples when we create works out of the literary and artistic raw materials in the life of the people of our own time and place. It makes a difference whether or not we have such examples, the difference between crudeness and refinement, between roughness and polish, between a low and a high level, and between slower and faster work. Therefore we should on no account reject the legacies of the ancients and the foreigners and refuse to learn from them, even though they are the works of the feudal or bourgeois class. But taking over legacies and using them as examples must never replace our own creative work; nothing can do that. Uncritical transplantation from the ancients and the foreigners is the most sterile and harmful dogmatism in literature and art”.

Nevertheless he does not compromise on the nature of revolutionary literature and art: *“Revolutionary literature and art are the products of the reflection of the life of the people in the brains of revolutionary artists and writers”*, and goes on to emphasise that the life of the people is the ultimate, inexhaustible and richest source of material for all literature and art. The value added by the artist and writer essentially comprises the identification of the rich raw material, and the refinement and concentration of the content.

Again one is confronted by the question of ‘For whom?’, and the way this question is resolved determines the form, style, and issues of aesthetics. Popularisation is a matter that is anathema to bourgeois and petit-bourgeois literary elite. This does not mean that the members of this elite group despise fame or popularity and all the good things that go with it. As much as they crave for mass approval, they like to appear aloof and ‘out of the ordinary’. Such elitism manifests itself in many ways. Dark and unintelligible writing, the use of alien and even archaic expressions in a show of scholarship, imitation of obscure and unfamiliar styles to distinguish one’s self from the ‘mob’, and seeking novelty for its own sake or to be reckoned among the avant garde are among the characteristics of petit bourgeois artists and writers.

Naturally, any new fad in the west is readily taken over by this group, often in a most superficial fashion, and dished out as the most advanced thought on earth. They also like their personal appearances to be out of the ordinary, and go out of the way to look unusual. Mao’s observations about such trends in his time are just as appropriate today: *“Uncritical transplantation from the ancients and the foreigners is the most sterile and harmful dogmatism in literature and art”.*

What is unfortunate is that many progressive and leftist writers are tempted by such tendencies. There are several writers who seem to think that writing in a lucid and simple style could make them appear less intellectual. Hence, they tend to express even the simplest idea in a complex way rather than express seemingly complex things in ways that are readily accessible to the people.

While emphasising that man’s social life is the only source of literature and art, Mao explains the role of literature and art on drawing on these sources to elevate, intensify, generalise, idealise and thereby create something more universal than actual everyday life. The universals that emerge from a work of art or literature depend on the social outlook of the individual. The way in which they are expressed can differ from person to person, and one cannot be blind to the questions of quality and standard. Aesthetic criteria and norms exist, although they vary with class and social outlook. Out of those arises the contradiction between raising standards and popularisation. But they are neither mutually exclusive nor do they have a clear dividing line between them as some advocates of ‘pure aesthetics’ would have it.

Mao’s advice to the revolutionary writer and artist on raising the standard of the people is particularly relevant: *“Popularisation means popularisation for the people and raising of standards means raising the level of the people. And such raising is not from mid-air, or behind closed doors, but is actually based on popularisation.... With us therefore, the raising of standards is based on popularisation, while popularisation is guided by the raising of standards. Precisely for this reason, so far from being an obstacle to the raising of standards, the work of popularisation we are speaking of supplies the basis for the work of raising standards”.*

Mao thus recommends that specialists in fine arts get close to the masses, and give expression to their thoughts and feelings: *“Only by speaking for the masses can the revolutionary writer or artist*

educate them and only by being their pupil can he be their teacher". The idea of learning from the masses has not been emphasised more strongly by any Marxist thinker before Mao Zedong.

Mao has also addressed the from petit bourgeois quarters that the Marxist attitude to literature and art is utilitarian by pointing out that it only as utilitarian as that of the opponents of the Marxist view, which is utilitarian with a different class character: *"There is no "ism" in the world that transcends utilitarian considerations; in class society there can only be the utilitarianism of this or that class"*.

On the issue of literature and art criticism, there is a tendency among progressive writers and artists to yield to the demand of petit bourgeois intellectuals that only the artistic criteria should be used. There are several dangers here. In an explicit sense, the importance of content could be altogether ignored. But more serious is the risk of implicit acceptance of the values and norms of the bourgeoisie and the feudal classes in the assessment of any work of art or literature. Mao rejects outright the hypocrisy of 'pure artistic criteria': *"There is the political criterion and there is the artistic criterion; what is the relationship between the two? Politics cannot be equated with art, nor can a general world outlook be equated with a method of artistic creation and criticism. We deny not only that there is an abstract and absolutely unchangeable artistic criterion; each class in every class society has its own political and artistic criteria. But all classes in all class societies put the political criterion first and the artistic criterion second. The bourgeoisie always shuts out proletarian literature and art, however great their artistic merit. The proletariat should similarly distinguish among the literary and art works of past ages and determine its attitude towards them only after determining their attitude to the people and whether or not they had any progressive significance historically. Some works which are politically downright reactionary may have a certain artistic quality. The more reactionary their content and the higher their artistic quality, the more poisonous they are to the people, and the more necessary it is to reject them"*.

The last sentence in the above comment by Mao deserves the attention of Marxist literary critics.

Mao goes on to demand the unity of politics and art, of content and form and of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form: *"Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically. Therefore we oppose both the tendency to produce works of art with a wrong political point of view and the tendency towards the 'poster and slogan style', which is correct in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power. On the question of literature and art we must carry on a struggle on two fronts"*.

Thus, he is strongly critical of the attitude of making Marxism a substitute for literature and art: *"Marxism embraces but cannot replace realism in literature and artistic creation, just as it embraces but cannot replace the atomic and electronic theories in physics. Empty, dry dogmatic formulas do indeed destroy the creative mood; not only that, they first destroy Marxism. Dogmatic 'Marxism' is not Marxism, it is anti- Marxism"*.

In this context, there is the danger of incorrect judgment, and Mao's approach for determining the subjective intentions upholds the democratic principle of the right to free expression: *"In examining the subjective intentions of a writer or an artist, that is, whether his motive is correct and good, we do not judge by his declarations but by the effect of his actions (mainly his works) on the masses in society. The criterion for judging subjective intention or motive is social practice and its effect. We want no sectarianism in our literary and art criticism and, ... we should tolerate literature and art works with a variety of political attitudes. But at the same time, in our criticism we should adhere firmly to principle and severely criticise and repudiate all works of literature and art expressing views in opposition to the nation, to science, to the masses and to the Communist Party"*.

His reliance on an open and democratic approach, consistent with the mass line advocated by him to settle issues pertaining to the advancement of human thought, was further clarified in his well known essay, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People", published in 1957:

"Letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land."

Different forms and styles in art should develop freely and different schools in science should contend freely. We think that it is harmful to the growth of art and science if administrative measures are used to impose one particular style of art or school of thought and to ban another. Questions of right and wrong in the arts and sciences should be settled through free discussion in artistic and scientific circles and through practical work in these fields. They should not be settled in summary fashion ”.

On the question of criticism, we should be clear that Marxists place self-criticism very high on their agenda, and Mao has been most emphatic about it: “A person with good intentions must criticise the shortcomings and mistakes in his own work with the utmost candour and resolve to correct them. This precisely why Communists employ the method of self-criticism. This alone is the correct stand”.

To summarise Mao’s position on literature and art:

1. Literature and art in class society have a class identity and are ideologically conditioned.
2. The source of all literature and art is life, and the class outlook of a writer or an artist determines what is gathered.
3. The class outlook of the writer or artist also determines the question of audience, approach and attitude.
4. Form and content are important to any creative work, but content is fundamental. This does not, however, mean that content could be a substitute for artistic quality.
5. Revolutionary writers and artists should create for the masses and, more importantly, learn from the masses.
6. The revolutionary writer or artist needs to create works of meaning and value to the masses. Thus, in raising the aesthetic standards of the masses, the writer or artist should ensure accessibility, since elevation of aesthetic standards will not be possible without first popularising literature and art among the masses.
7. Revolutionary writers and artists should be open-minded and be willing to draw on foreign and traditional resources, not blindly, but in a critical manner, discriminating between the positive and negative aspects of things.
8. When criticising works of art and literature, both the artistic and the political criteria are important.
9. Free expression of views and open discussion is important in coming to correct decisions on any issue. An oppressive approach is not permissible.
10. Self-criticism is essential to revolutionary writers and artist.

Mao did not exempt any aspect of human existence in class society from having a class character. Thus every aspect of human life in class society necessarily reflects class struggle. The approach that one takes in resolving class struggle in the context of seizure of state power has its echoes in all aspects of social life. Thus the concepts of upholding a revolutionary class stand, the united front, and mass line are not merely applicable to literature art but are of great importance in advancing the cause of proletarian literature and art. The question facing us is how do we develop and advance the concept of mass line in literature and art. We need to grasp the significance of the ‘mass line’ in context.

The mass line is central to the political thought of Mao and he encouraged people to play an active role in every aspect of life including literature and art. To carry forward the mass line in literature and art, initially the masses should be inspired. Thus creating for the masses is the first step. Combating individualism is important and collective work is valuable to revolutionary literature and art. Writers and artist should get used to seeing their creative work as a contribution to society rather

than as their individual achievement. The ability to cherish whatever is progressive and beneficial to the masses, irrespective of the source, is a quality that grows out of collective work.

Of all forms of art, theatre offers most opportunity for collective work and mass participation, and much has been achieved in this respect internationally following the new directions chartered by Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and Badal Sarkar, to name a few.

People's literature and art in its pre-revolutionary stage comprises drawing from the masses and creating for the masses. This stage also involves collective work and shifting of emphasis from the individual to a larger group. It could extend to mass participation in various ways, including discussion of creations with writers and artists at different stages and consultation between the masses and creative writers and artists. The masses need to be encouraged to criticise, rather than leave all critical opinion to 'experts'.

Creating for the masses, creating collectively and subjecting creations to critical assessment by the masses are positive steps towards people's literature and art. But they only make them literature and art 'for the people' and, to a limited extent, 'of the people'. There will still remain a separation between the artist and the masses, the former a producer and the latter a consumer.

The reason why only a small fraction of the population is artistically creative is not that they are the blessed few, but that the creative potential of the vast majority has not been freed. The liberation of this tremendous creative potential of the masses will involve a long period of social transformation, and will find its fulfilment in the communist society, towards which all Marxist Leninists are working. Socialist transformation under proletarian leadership would, in the meantime, enable and emphasise the collective over the individual; it should be noted here that socialist writers and artists have successfully explored collective painting and writing. Collective work is not aimed to suppress the individual but aimed to overcome bourgeois individualist tendencies by redefining positively the relationship between the individual and society.

Admittedly, human society is being conditioned to accept selfishness as the norm and the driving force of development, and this is particularly true of the last three decades of imperialist globalisation. Socialists have a duty to combat it. The battle against imperialism and globalisation has to be carried out on every front, and mass struggle is the only way forward. While political and ideological leadership comes from the advanced sections of the proletariat, enhancing the role of the masses is essential. People learn more in the course of participation in struggle than by any other means. A similar approach is possible and necessary in literature and art.

Bringing out the creative potential of the masses need not wait for the later stages of socialist transformation. Every aspect of this creative potential that could be freed should be freed so that revolutionary literature and art could acquire a stronger mass character. It is a challenge facing the revolutionary writers and artists to apply the mass line to transform the masses into fighters in the battlefield of literature and art, which is now dominated by bourgeois vulgarity. The mass line, which was strongly advocated by Mao for political struggle, could be creatively applied to literature and art, by combining it with the criteria proposed by Mao in his talks in Yennan.
