

From "Cultivating Oneself" to "Building the Nation"—An Analysis of the Thought of Cultivating People in Zhao Shuli's Early Novels

Yunong Zuo

*School of Liberal Arts, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China
386723152@qq.com*

Abstract. Since the May Fourth New Culture Movement, responding to the call of enlightening the public, Zhao Shuli became an intellectual who truly cared about farmers. His works focus on issues of personal freedom, individual liberation and self-realization among the peasant group, permeated with a profound thought of "cultivating people" throughout. From discovering and understanding farmers to relying on them, Zhao Shuli transformed his ideological concepts into the spiritual awakening of farmers, their struggles for survival, and the practical construction of New China. As an intermediary between intellectuals and the grassroots, he successfully converted grand and abstract theoretical language into specific and accessible popular language, enabling the thought of cultivating people to take root in the grassroots soil.

Keywords: thought of cultivating people, spiritual cultivation, survival, nation-building

1. Introduction

Research on Zhao Shuli has roughly gone through four stages. Its ups and downs in the history of literature show the continuity and new changes of Zhao Shuli studies in different periods. Firstly, from the perspective of "revolutionary discourse", since the 1940s, affirmed by Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art and with the proposal of the "Zhao Shuli Direction" by Chen Huangmei [1], up to the 1970s, research on Zhao Shuli mainly focused on the historical periods of the New Democratic Revolution and socialist transformation. It analyzed and interpreted the value of his works from the perspective of ideology, based on the theory of class and class struggle, supplemented by the ideas of popularization and nationalization. Secondly, from the perspective of "rewriting literary history", since the new era, with the revival of the May Fourth enlightenment spirit, Zhao Shuli studies entered a new historical stage. Influenced by the pursuit of literary modernity, these studies, featuring the tendency of aesthetic politicization, completed the basic writing of his evaluation history. Meanwhile, integrating Robert Redfield's anthropological concepts of "great tradition" and "little tradition" proposed based on the "urban" and "rural" duality in society, the ideas of popularization and nationalization gave birth to another important achievement in Zhao Shuli studies—the critical "folk stance" [2], reaffirming his literary value. Thirdly, from the perspective of "re-reading", in the trend of rewriting literary history initiated by

Tang Xiaobing and others in the 1990s [3], Zhao Shuli studies were labeled with "anti-modern modernity" and "anti-modern avant-garde", and his literary value was reflected in the imagination of a socialist modern nation-state. Moreover, inspired by Takeuchi Yoshimi's view of "overcoming modernity" in Zhao Shuli's novels, Zhao Shuli studies obtained new interpretations in the context of diverse understandings of the modernity of contemporary Chinese literature, particularly in the context of Chinese-style modernization. Fourthly, from the perspective of "social history", since the new century, Zhao Shuli studies have paid more attention to historical data analysis and comparative research, including studies on his identity and regional background. These studies emphasize "the openness of literary research itself and its social intervention" [4], and further establish a "concrete and perceptible framework for historical understanding" [5].

However, most existing research focuses on Zhao Shuli's works created after the 1942 Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, and insufficiently explores the significance and value of his early novels from the 1930s to the early 1940s. In fact, this period was a crucial stage for the formation and development of his thought of cultivating people. Deeply influenced by the May Fourth enlightenment and Lu Xun, his early novels, with their distinct theme of focusing directly on the awakening of individual farmers, laid the foundation for the later "peasant subjectivity" in his works. Therefore, building on previous studies, this paper explores the origin and manifestations of his thought of cultivating people, as well as his historical significance as a decoder of enlightenment ideas. He Guimei once noted: "Zhao Shuli's literature contains rich connotations beyond these theoretical evaluation frameworks... demonstrating its own richness and complexity that cannot be covered by a single modernity imagination" [6]. His ideas, on the one hand, aligned with the Communist Party of China's demands on farmers and the two-way relationship pointed out by Mao Zedong—that farmers need to improve themselves and intellectuals need to go to the grassroots. On the other hand, he cared about issues of personal freedom, individuality and self-fulfillment among the peasant group, with the profound thought of cultivating people running through all his works. From discovering and understanding farmers to relying on them, his works fully reflect his sincere recognition of farmers' dignity and value. Thus, the proposal of the "Zhao Shuli Direction" may not only be based on the interpretation and response to political themes, but also because he was a writer who depicted farmers undertaking the dual responsibilities of China's realistic tasks and future ideals, and more importantly, because the practical requirements for farmers embodied in his thought of cultivating people were effective. This is the reason for the complexity of Zhao Shuli's literature and the value of this paper.

2. Ideological origins: from Lu Xun to rural practice

Since the late Qing Dynasty, China faced a critical situation of internal troubles and external invasions. The collapse of the traditional system and the aggression of Western powers pushed the country to the brink of political and economic ruin, while traditional culture also teetered on the verge of collapse under the fierce impact of Western culture. Against this backdrop of social upheaval and cultural collision, "national liberation" and "national awakening" became the themes of the times. Liang Qichao proposed that "new citizens" are the foundation of building a nation, and Sun Yat-sen emphasized the theory of "Knowledge is difficult, Practice is easy". Intellectual revolutionaries criticized the traditional concept of subjecthood and strived to transform the national character, inspiring people's sense of responsibility for society and the country, as well as their recognition of individual values.

The exploration of the thought of cultivating people must begin with Lu Xun. Its core lies in promoting the awakening and liberation of people by enlightening their independent spirit and

critical awareness to break the shackles of feudal ethics and traditions. Specifically, it manifests in three aspects. Firstly, independent thinking and individual liberation. Before the 1911 Revolution, Lu Xun had already reflected on how to cultivate people from the perspective that "the rulers of ancient times were merely autocrats; following the current path, they will soon transform into countless scoundrels, making the people unable to bear their suffering" [7]. In his view, most people in society at that time were ignorant and blind, while a few were greedy traitors who seized more power with the authority in their hands. Under the rule of such mobs, there was no real democracy, and the truth was drowned in the so-called "public opinions". It was these people who led the new culture astray. Recognizing this, Lu Xun put forward the idea of "valuing spirituality over materialism and emphasizing the individual over the majority" [7]. It is evident that the democracy Lu Xun pursued advocated independent thinking, opposed blind obedience and group unconsciousness, and rejected being the vassal of others' ideas. The "cultivated person" he advocated must possess a people-centered awareness rather than an official-centered one; otherwise, any uprising, with its inherent revolutionary and feudalistic contradictions, would ultimately lead to the miserable fate of "being unable to become a slave" or "temporarily being a comfortable slave". The genuine happiness he pursued meant that people should not sacrifice for the past generations, nor should they force future generations to sacrifice for them: "We must eliminate the sufferings that are meaningless to life. We must eliminate the ignorance and cruelty that create and take pleasure in others' sufferings" [7]. Secondly, the pursuit of survival and dignity. Lu Xun stated: "The most urgent tasks we face today are: first, to survive; second, to have adequate food and clothing; third, to develop. If anything hinders this progress... we must crush it completely" [8]. This straightforward and progressive declaration not only summarizes the course of individual life, but also contains a profound humanistic philosophy. In his view, survival ensures the continuation of life, adequate food and clothing lay the foundation for dignity, and development enriches the breadth of life. Therefore, breaking free from the oppressed living conditions and striving for basic dignity were the most urgent needs of the people. This not only broke through the traditional linear thinking that "only when granaries are full can people know etiquette", but also echoed Marx's thought of "the free and all-round development of human beings". Thirdly, the criticism of national character and social transformation. He once claimed: "To wipe out these man-eaters, to topple this feast, to destroy this kitchen—this is the mission of the youth today!" [7]. The metaphor of the "man-eating feast" is a profound exposure and criticism of the dark side of old Chinese society. This vivid expression not only revealed the cruel reality of society at that time, but also triggered people's reflections on human nature, society, history and other aspects. He laid out the distortion and alienation of human nature, the boundary between good and evil, the criticism and reflection on society, the exploration of historical civilization, and the value of survival and dignity at this feast, making people clearly aware of the direction of individual development: they must take the path of cultivating themselves!

Unfortunately, society at that time was plagued by warlord melee like that of Sun Chuanfang, sectarian revolutionary activities like those of Xu Maoyong, and the neglect of class nature by figures like Liang Shiqiu. Although the thought of cultivating people received an enthusiastic response among the intellectual class, it was severely suppressed by those in power in the military, officialdom and business circles. Furthermore, Lu Xun witnessed the utter apathy of the grassroots people. He thus frankly admitted: "Society does not realize that I am attacking them; if they did, I would have died long ago without a burial place... I have been able to survive only because most of them are illiterate and unaware, and my words are as ineffective as an arrow shot into the sea" [8]. It is no exaggeration to say that Lu Xun was a sharp observer of old China, a calm analyst of his contemporary China, and a passionate guide for the China of the future. He abhorred the

psychological shackles of "nameless and unconsciousness" among the Chinese people, and deeply understood that only by awakening their ability to think independently could this shackle be broken. Regarding how to achieve true knowledge through independent thinking, Lu Xun argued in 1907: "The so-called profound truth refers to the essential principles of life. This truth is subtle and profound, and cannot be fully conveyed by scholars. Just as people in tropical regions, who have never seen ice, cannot truly understand ice even if it is explained through physics and physiology—they still cannot comprehend that water can freeze and that ice is cold. However, if you show them ice directly and let them touch it, they will clearly understand what ice is without the need to explain its physical properties" [7]. It was precisely for these illiterate and unaware people that Zhao Shuli took on the responsibility of "showing ice rather than talking about it". Influenced by Lu Xun, he also deeply realized that most intellectuals at that time ignored the actual needs of grassroots farmers and the huge gap in vision, knowledge and critical thinking ability between the educated and the uneducated. He innovatively integrated ideas such as individual independent thinking, people-centered awareness, and the view of "survival, adequate food and clothing, and development" into his practice of popularization. Instead of talking about grand theories and new terms with the undereducated—barring them from accessing profound truths and then dismissing them as "unteachable"—he chose to simplify complex ideas, allowing grassroots people to gain personal experience. Through practical actions, he encouraged them to think, to reflect, and ultimately to develop the courage to rebel.

Additionally, Zhao Shuli drew inspiration from Sun Yat-sen's theory of "Knowledge is difficult, Practice is easy". Sun Yat-sen once stated: "The long-standing backwardness of China does not stem from the inability to act, but from the inability to know. When people do know but still fail to act, it is because they mistakenly believe that knowledge is easy and practice is difficult. If we can prove that knowledge is not easy and practice is not difficult, making the Chinese people fearless and willing to take action, then China will have a bright future" [9]. In his view, the Chinese people suffered from excessive fear of difficulties and a lack of diligence, trapped by the age-old mindset that "knowledge is easy and practice is difficult". Even during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, when "human awakening" and "human liberation" became the new keywords of the era, replacing "national awakening" and "national liberation" under the general goal of opposing imperialism and feudalism, intellectual revolutionaries still failed to innovate the ways of enlightening grassroots farmers with democracy and science, nor did they recognize the practical capabilities of the grassroots. Thus, for the grassroots, the works of Lu Xun and others were like encrypted files that could not be understood without decryption. However, this does not mean that the thought of cultivating people could not reach the grassroots. Just as traditional Confucian culture permeated the entire Chinese nation through ethical concepts, the ideas of human awakening and cultivating people first proposed by intellectual revolutionaries would eventually be learned by certain groups and spread to the entire peasantry through their personal experiences.

In 1925, at the age of 19, Zhao Shuli entered Shanxi Provincial No. 4 Normal School in Changzhi. This was the first time he left his rural hometown for the city, marking a crucial turning point in his transformation from a farmer to an intellectual. During his three years at the normal school, he was profoundly influenced by the May Fourth Movement, albeit somewhat belatedly. He diligently read various works, including *The Short Story Monthly*, works by Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Kang Youwei, Sun Yat-sen, Liang Qichao, as well as novels by Kikuchi Kan, Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, and Ibsen. He not only learned about the Three Principles of the People but also had initial contact with Marxism. The superstitious rhymes and traditional dogmas in his mind were soon replaced by concepts such as science, democracy, resistance and freedom. These new ideas

drastically reshaped his worldview. Amid the distractions of urban life, he could not help but think of Gelun, a hardworking farmer in his hometown, who was forced to become a bandit and eventually killed simply because he had no fertile land to cultivate. This tragedy made him realize for the first time that the poor villagers in his hometown lived without any dignity. It also inspired him to use his pen to depict the lives of grassroots farmers and strive for their dignity, freedom and happiness.

During this period, under the guidance of his peers, Zhao Shuli participated in student movements to oust authoritarian principals, engaged in revolutionary propaganda in villages southwest of Jincheng, established farmer training courses and peasant associations, and took part in various political demonstrations on the streets of Changzhi [10]. These experiences tempered his will and honed his practical skills. Through the integration of theoretical study and practical revolutionary struggles, Zhao Shuli's thought of cultivating people gradually took shape, and he firmly established his own "path": to link his destiny with that of farmers. No matter what role he played in the revolutionary movement, he would never leave rural areas, vowing to find a true path of self-cultivation for grassroots farmers. He deeply understood that if farmers remained unawakened, their "ability to endure hardship" would condemn them and their descendants to endless suffering. Their labor would never be free or bring them joy, but only endless humiliation and oppression. As Zhao Shuli put it: "Enduring hardship can increase the harvest of grains and miscellaneous crops; but it cannot prevent droughts or floods, nor can it make landlords forgo rent, prevent grain prices from falling, ensure an adequate supply of daily necessities, or exempt villagers from taxes imposed by the county government. Thus, the result of enduring hardship often leads to even more hardship... In addition to enduring all these hardships, they are even forced to become the property of others, and may one day be drafted into the army to fight against their own relatives and friends" [11]. If things did not change, this tragic fate would soon befall them. Determined to create works in accessible language that farmers could understand, Zhao Shuli published a sincere article titled *Criticisms and Suggestions on Taihang* in the popular *Kaizhan* (Development) supplement of the *Taiyuan Daily* during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. In this article, he wrote: "Popularization is the key to unlocking that lock. When you create ballads, short novels, and simple songs... every word and sentence must be accessible to the general public" [12]. He also emphasized the great significance of literary popularization: "It should serve as a bridge between 'culture' and 'the general public', and the main path to 'popularizing culture'; thus, it can also be regarded as an integral part of the 'new enlightenment movement'. On the one hand, the new enlightenment movement should first remove the barriers that prevent literature from reaching the general public; on the other hand, it should transform the outdated consciousness of the masses, enabling them to accept the new worldview" [12]. This can be seen as the answer Zhao Shuli summed up through his revolutionary enlightenment practice, and the optimal creative approach he recognized for connecting with workers, peasants and soldiers.

As someone born and raised in the countryside, familiar with farmers' lives and psychology, Zhao Shuli, through accessible language and concrete practices, transformed Lu Xun's thought of cultivating people into actionable guidelines for farmers, becoming a crucial intermediary linking intellectuals and farmers. He made it possible for the thought of cultivating people to spread among grassroots farmers. In this sense, the times needed a grounded decoder like Zhao Shuli—someone who recognized the great power and value of grassroots farmers, and understood their psychology and potential. He not only helped Lu Xun's ideas take root in rural areas, but also ignited the spark of awakening in the hearts of farmers.

3. The practice of cultivating people: from individual awakening to collective resistance

According to Shi Jiyuan, a close friend of Zhao Shuli, before he rose to fame in 1942, he had been quietly creating for more than a decade, publishing approximately 200,000 to 300,000 words of works. He strived to leave behind accessible texts for farmers that were both engaging and understandable, conveying the spirit of resistance, the courage to fight, and practical revolutionary guidelines tailored to their capabilities. He integrated Sun Yat-sen's national salvation concept of "Knowledge is difficult, Practice is easy" and Lu Xun's individual enlightenment concept of "emphasizing the individual over the majority" into his literary creation to promote the awakening of farmers. In his view: "It is not enough to merely give advice to young people, because the principles that intellectuals and revolutionaries can make them understand are extremely limited—they cannot afford to send every young person to university, so they cannot broaden their horizons to match their own. When they see what needs to be done, they must take the lead and shout to the young people: 'Follow me!' Only in this way can young people avoid being lost after taking action, only in this way can they become more capable day by day, and only in this way can their strength be united as one" [11]. He fully understood that the cognitive level of farmers at that time was far from being able to grasp grand concepts. Even the vernacular Chinese popular among intellectuals was not well-mastered by farmers. Therefore, in his works, Zhao Shuli never delivered inspiring speeches or lengthy essays to arouse farmers' revolutionary enthusiasm. Instead, he attached great importance to the ideological impact of specific events on grassroots farmers, meticulously teaching them how to achieve enlightenment, how to engage in revolution, and how to resist Japan and save the nation through daily rural production and life. This is presumably the fundamental reason why Zhao Shuli referred to his novels as "problem novels". He positioned himself as an intellectual who engaged in dialogue with farmers, hoping that through his works, farmers could easily understand the principles of the world and find the courage to resist.

Although Zhao Shuli's early literary works were not part of the mainstream literary circle at that time, they achieved remarkable results. Through his efforts, both the individual awakening and revolutionary awareness of farmers were significantly enhanced. It is believed that the cultural work done by Zhao Shuli and others greatly contributed to Shanxi Province becoming a revolutionary base area at that time. Meanwhile, his works—including various novels, fables, ballad narratives, essays and doggerel that combined combativeness with popularity—received widespread acclaim. Summarizing his creations during this period in the 1960s, Zhao Shuli recalled: "The supplement of that tabloid was called Shandi (Mountain Land), and I served as its editor. I used the folk art forms I was familiar with to attack them (the warlords). To be honest, I had a good grasp of Lu Xun's writing style, and when combined with elements of folk art familiar to the masses, my works had considerable influence. This tabloid was posted wherever the warlords went, attracting crowds of readers wherever it was posted... In 1940, I was transferred to the New China Daily office. Soon after, the newspaper decided to launch an additional tabloid targeting the border areas of enemy-occupied regions, named Zhongguoren (The Chinese People), with a supplement called Dajia Kan (Everyone Reads), which I also edited. I continued the style of Shandi, exposing the cruelty and ugliness of the enemy without reservation, and exerting the effect of a sharp dagger" [11]. This fully demonstrates the dominant position of popular folk texts among farmers. Zhao Shuli's choice of traditional folk genres, and the integration of content and form in his works, were truly innovative and deeply loved by the masses.

Zhao Shuli attached great importance to the ideological impact of specific events on grassroots farmers. Therefore, the primary goal of his early works was spiritual cultivation: to awaken farmers' awareness of resistance and build a psychological barrier of resistance in their hearts. Published in

Shanxi Party News in 1933, his novel *A Certain Person* depicts Bingying's awakening, exposing the truth behind the deprivation of farmers' economic rights and inspiring their courage to resist exploitation. Bingying was originally a relatively well-off intellectual farmer, but after the division of his family property, the death of his parents, and taking up the post of village tax collector, his life gradually declined, and he was eventually forced to flee his hometown to avoid overwhelming debts. Notably, Bingying is not portrayed as the traditional image of an ignorant and oppressed peasant. Through the conversation between Bingying and his wife, Zhao Shuli encouraged farmers to reflect: "Think about why we got into debt? I don't smoke opium, I don't gamble, and we haven't suffered any natural disasters. Haven't all our losses been from farming?" [13]. Instead of explaining farmers' oppression through abstract criticism of the unjust public finance system, Zhao Shuli guided farmers to uncover the truth themselves. The realization of "economic injustice and systemic exploitation" gained through personal reflection was far more compelling than abstract theory. When Bingying realized that the village head and his creditors had conspired to seize his land—preventing him from selling his land to outsiders while forcing him to repay the money they had already advanced—he made a bold and somewhat rogue decision: he would still give the land deed to the outsider and flee to avoid the debt. No matter what happened, the creditors would have to bear the consequences! When driven to despair, he did not take his anger out on the weaker by shifting his economic troubles onto them; instead, he directly confronted the conspiracy of the powerful and fought back. After reaching an agreement with his wife, Bingying earnestly instructed her: "Don't worry about me, take care of yourself first... If they insist on seizing our property, you can hand it over to them, but under no circumstances should you sign any more deeds or agreements" [13]. Through this simple yet powerful narrative, Zhao Shuli taught farmers a crucial lesson about "economic rights": they must do everything in their power to retain ownership of their land. Only by doing so could they avoid losing their means of survival and their dignity, will and freedom to resist. This can be regarded as Zhao Shuli's most vivid and thorough interpretation for farmers of Lu Xun's statement: "Freedom cannot be bought with money, but it can be sold for money" [7].

Another novel written in 1933, *The Golden Characters*, depicts the awakening of farmers' collective consciousness, from merely watching the excitement to jointly demanding an accounting from the town mayor. In the novel, farmers initially gather just to watch the excitement—to help the narrator write a farewell banner for the district mayor. However, under the narrator's guidance, they gradually develop a sense of resistance. Through their discussions, they piece together the truth behind the so-called "official fees" that had forced them to mortgage their land to the town mayor: the money was actually used by the town mayor to hold banquets and curry favor with the departing district mayor. The farmers finally realized that the age-old custom of farewell banquets was essentially a tool for the ruling class to exploit them. Filled with anger, they united to demand an accounting from the town mayor. The simplicity and naivety of the farmers had led them to accept the collection of public funds and debt-mortgaged land as normal and even reasonable practices, never questioning these so-called "universal truths" for thousands of years. But why should hardworking farmers, who had done nothing wrong, be denied even the most basic means of survival? This was the question Zhao Shuli raised on behalf of the grassroots farmers, challenging the exploiters and the unjust society.

Secondly, Zhao Shuli sought to awaken grassroots farmers to a second crucial realization: they had to choose between surrendering their right to life and death to the enemy or resisting to survive. Published in *The Chinese People* in 1941, the story *The Red Silk Pants* depicts Ma Jinzhu's ideological transformation, completing the enlightenment of justice through the narrative of "Japanese atrocities and Eighth Route Army's rescue". Ma Jinzhu was drafted by the puppet village

government to serve as a laborer for the Japanese army during their mopping-up operations. Before his departure, his wife told him: "I have been your wife for six or seven years, and I have never worn a pair of red silk pants. If you come across any red silk pants this time, be sure to grab a pair for me" [13]. The red silk pants serve as a symbolic object, embodying the couple's aspirations for a better life and accompanying Ma Jinzhu's spiritual growth and transformation. At this point, they still lacked a rational understanding of the war and the military. However, this experience made Ma Jinzhu clearly see that the laborers following the Japanese army were engaged in burning down houses and looting property, while the Eighth Route Army were the righteous forces that had treated his wounds and given him a second chance at life. After recovering from his injuries, Ma Jinzhu repeatedly expressed his remorse, evoking the image of Xianglin's Wife weeping over her child who had been taken by wolves. However, there was a crucial difference: while Xianglin's Wife was indeed tragic, she was also ignorant. In contrast, Ma Jinzhu's remorse reflected his progress and awakening. Emotionally, he deeply felt the meticulous care and assistance from the soldiers and civilians, filling him with a sense of guilt towards the Eighth Route Army. Rationally, he recognized the injustice of his actions towards these kind-hearted people, further strengthening his identification with the revolution and his sense of solidarity with the army and civilians.

The cross-talk script *Overthrow the Traitors*, published in the literary supplement *Kaizhan* (Development) of the *Taiyuan Daily* in 1937, aimed to dispel the illusions of farmers about certain fellow villagers who profited through unscrupulous means. In the story, Heidan, a farmer who struggled to make a living, wandered around the guild hall all day. He stood in stark contrast to Baoguan, a fellow villager who dressed in silk and satin, flaunted his wealth, and claimed to help villagers find jobs in cotton mills. Heidan's family resented him for being incompetent and lazy. However, a tragic account from Laishuan, another fellow villager, who had been "helped" by Baoguan to work on an airport for the Japanese army, opened the villagers' eyes to Baoguan's true colors as a traitor who colluded with the Japanese and exploited his own fellow villagers. Laishuan's account revealed the harsh reality of the so-called "jobs" Baoguan had arranged: "You were forced to fill 300-jin baskets with soil, sweating profusely and gasping for breath! If you dared to stand up straight and rest for a moment, you would be whipped... If you tried to run away, they would kill you without hesitation, chopping off your head and throwing your body into the river, leaving no trace behind!" [13]. Isolated and ill-informed, grassroots farmers only knew that some of the more resourceful villagers had gone to work in the cities and returned wealthy. They were easily deceived by these villagers' smooth words, unaware that they were helping the enemy exploit their own relatives and friends. Such unscrupulous individuals were not uncommon at that time. Farmers might initially fail to understand the root causes of things, but through personal experience, they would "gradually understand the significance through comparison" and "make progress in this way" [14].

The popular story *Xizi*, published in *Kangzhan Shenghuo* (War of Resistance Life) in 1940, uses the warning of death to confirm the survival principle that "one cannot survive without resisting Japan". *Xizi* was a timid farmer living in an area occupied by the Japanese army. He believed that avoiding trouble would help him stay out of harm's way. One day, when he went to visit his uncle in another village, he was delayed returning home by rising river waters and missed the Japanese army's roll call. As an example to others, he was severely whipped by the Japanese. Instead of focusing on the brutality of the Japanese army, Zhao Shuli objectively depicted *Xizi*'s agonizing death from the flogging: "Red welts began to appear on *Xizi*'s back—one, two, three... horizontal, vertical, diagonal—forming squares, triangles, and finally covering his entire back. At first, *Xizi* cried out in pain with each blow; then his cries turned into a continuous wail; soon, he could only

gasp for breath; and finally, he stopped breathing altogether" [13]. Through this dispassionate narration, Zhao Shuli described the horrific scene of Xizi's bloodied body using cold, geometric terms like lines, squares and triangles, without expressing any humanitarian sympathy or anger towards the enemy. In essence, this narrative implies that when Xizi willingly surrendered to the enemy and gave up his resistance by returning to the village under Japanese surveillance and oppression, he had already lost his right to survive. Before his death, Xizi told everyone: "I am dying. A comrade named Wang once told me: one cannot survive without resisting Japan; it is impossible to live a decent life under the Japanese devils. He told me that if I joined the army and held a gun, I could kill the enemy if they did not kill me first. But if I obediently submitted to them as a commoner, they could kill me at any time, and I would be powerless to resist. I have learned this lesson too late, but it is not too late for all of you!" [13]. Through Xizi's humiliating death, Zhao Shuli urged farmers to reflect on their own survival. Instead of preaching grand principles about the War of Resistance, he understood from years of rural life that farmers' understanding of national identity could only be forged through personal experience. He believed that farmers had to recognize that their living space was being increasingly squeezed. Only by making them personally feel the humiliation and suffering of living under enemy rule could they empathize with the atrocities that might one day befall them. This sense of empathy and fear of shared fate would arouse their primal desire for survival, prompting them to embrace the revolution. Chen Duxiu once wrote: "What are the strengths of primitive human nature? It is unwavering will and perseverance in struggle; it is a strong physique capable of resisting nature; it is trust in one's instincts and self-reliance; it is living authentically without pretense or hypocrisy" [15]. The short story *I've Got My Money's Worth*, published in *The Chinese People* in 1941, vividly depicts the primal courage of grassroots farmers fighting for survival. Convinced that he was going to die at the hands of the Japanese army, Wang Shunxing secretly picked up a knife and stabbed a Japanese soldier when the enemy put down his weapon and let his guard down. His catchphrase after escaping death—"I've Got My Money's Worth"—symbolizes his medal for fighting for survival, a symbol of his fearlessness in moving forward, and his simple resolve to sacrifice his life for the revolution.

Through these stories accessible to farmers, Zhao Shuli illustrated Lu Xun's assertion: "When your enemy is a beast, you must act like a beast; when your enemy is a sheep, you can act like a sheep!" [8]. In his novels, after awakening, the villagers resist the exploitative "beasts" using "beastly means"—fleeing, demanding accountability and fighting back—to drive them back to hell. Through these narratives, Zhao Shuli provided a powerful spiritual boost to grassroots farmers in reality.

In 1927, Lu Xun commented: "Some writers use common people—workers and farmers—as material for their novels and poems, and we call this 'common people's literature'. But this is not true common people's literature, because the common people themselves have not yet found their voice. It is written by others who observe the lives of common people from the outside and pretend to speak in their voices... Nowadays, some people also record folk songs and ballads sung by common people, believing them to be the voice of the common people simply because they are sung by ordinary folks. However, these songs are deeply influenced by ancient books. The common people admire local gentry who own 3,000 mu of land and often adopt the gentry's ideas as their own... Thus, these cannot be called true common people's literature" [8]. This critique was a severe blow to the intellectual revolutionaries who were enthusiastically promoting the popularization of literature and art at that time, highlighting the long and arduous road ahead for literary popularization. In fact, as early as the beginning of the New Culture Movement in 1917, common people's literature had emerged amid widespread calls for its development. Chen Duxiu advocated in public newspapers for

the establishment of a new literature closely connected to real life and the general public. In his *On Literary Revolution*, he declared: "Overthrow the refined and sycophantic aristocratic literature... Establish a clear and accessible social literature" [16]. Hu Shi also argued in *Constructive Theory of Literary Revolution*: "For more than a thousand years, all literary works with genuine literary value have contained elements of vernacular Chinese, and none of them could have achieved their success without the support of this 'vernacular nature'" [17]. Zhou Zuoren also proposed two requirements for common people's literature: "universality" and "sincerity" [18]. While these views undoubtedly opened up new horizons and trends in cultural development among the intellectual elite, the literature they advocated focused more on inspiring people to break free from feudal autocracy and the constraints of Confucian ethics, primarily aiming to enlighten the intellectual class through vernacular reform. Thus, during this period, common people's literature remained confined by the elite consciousness of urban intellectuals, centered on self-enlightenment and the criticism of national character, largely ignoring the working class and peasantry. As a result, the real and complete lives of rural masses were still absent from literary creation. With the deepening integration of the objective reality of national revolution and Chinese literature, the "human literature" advocated during the May Fourth Movement gradually split into two branches in its subsequent development. One branch evolved into increasingly individualistic literature, represented by Zhou Zuoren and later Shen Congwen. They distanced themselves from political upheaval, pursued an idyllic world, adhered to an art-for-art's-sake approach, and mostly depicted simple, beautiful and otherworldly artistic images, embodying a writing style of "retreating to a small building to be master of one's own realm, ignoring the changing seasons outside". Influenced by the input of Marxist theory and Lenin's view on literature and art that "art must take deep root among the broad masses of working people, be understood and loved by them" [19], the other branch developed into proletarian labor literature and later revolutionary literature. In 1919, Li Dazhao proposed in *On Labor Education*: "We must use accessible literature to help the working class understand many truths" [20]. Qu Qiubai also advocated: "Go to observe, understand and experience the life struggles of workers and the poor, and sincerely feel a different world alongside them" [21]. These views clarified the objects, methods and purposes of literary creation: from this point on, depicting the lives of grassroots people truly entered the vision of intellectuals. Workers and farmers were not only to become the main subjects of literary works, but their ideological growth and spiritual liberation were also to be prioritized.

However, the path to popular literature was not smooth, and it gradually became a form of representation that lacked genuine connection to real life and was merely conceptual. In the 1930s, literary circles were abuzz with new terms such as "revolutionary literature", "non-revolutionary literature", "Leftist", "Beijing School" and "Shanghai School". Writers of various literary schools worked diligently to prove that their own school could inject vitality into the literary scene and point the way forward for China's development. As the individualistic enlightenment of literary revolution advanced into the class enlightenment of revolutionary literature, common people's literature still failed to bridge the insurmountable gap separating it from grassroots people—a gap rooted in "the lack of connection to rural life". Zhao Shuli later recalled: "My conscious efforts to use popularization to serve the revolution began in 1934, and I have persisted in this pursuit ever since" [11]. In the same year, Lu Xun depicted the image of a new type of intellectual: "Whenever there is a reform, it is initially the responsibility of awakened intellectuals. These intellectuals must engage in thorough research, be capable of critical thinking, have the courage to make decisions, and possess unwavering perseverance. They exercise power, but not to deceive others; they guide others, but not to pander to them. They do not belittle themselves as mere performers for the masses, nor do

they look down on others as their subordinates. They see themselves simply as members of the masses. I believe only such individuals can accomplish great things for the masses" [20]. Zhao Shuli was precisely this new type of intellectual described by Lu Xun, and he successfully bridged the gap between intellectuals and peasant readers. As demonstrated in his early works discussed above, Zhao Shuli put Lu Xun's proposition of "showing ice directly rather than talking about it" into practice, enabling farmers to understand abstract truths through specific events, thereby achieving personal awakening, resisting oppression and taking action. In other words, he transformed the "individual liberation" advocated since the May Fourth Movement into farmers' awakening to their economic and political rights, reflecting their transformation from passive acceptance to active struggle. The idea of the right to survival was expressed in his works through farmers' direct resistance to exploitation, embodying the fighting spirit of "acting like a beast when facing a beastly enemy". The fragmented state of society was transformed into organized collective action by farmers, marking their progress from individual complaints to collective resistance.

4. The path to nation-building: the modern transformation of peasant subjectivity

In 1927, Zhao Shuli joined the Communist Party of China through the introduction of his friends Chang Wenyu and Wang Chun. However, due to his wandering and fugitive life, he lost contact with the Party organization for nearly a decade, and his literary creation during this period was scattered and unorganized. It was not until 1937, when he joined the Propaganda Team of the Changzhi Sacrifice League, that he officially participated in revolutionary activities as a Party member. Recalling his revolutionary experiences during this period, Zhao Shuli later stated: "At that time, my understanding of the revolution was very vague. I thought that as long as I took every possible opportunity to oppose the old rulers, the revolution would succeed once the Red Army arrived. As for what we would do after the Red Army's arrival, I never even thought about it... During these seven years (from the second half of 1930 to the first half of 1937), although I subjectively considered myself revolutionary, my life was actually a state of wandering—I did not continue my studies, did not seek a job, did not return home, and did not participate in any Party organizations" [11]. It is evident that apart from his literary mission of promoting literary popularization, established in 1934, Zhao Shuli had not yet thoroughly considered the development direction of the new society after the revolution or the role of farmers in this new society during this period. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Zhao Shuli maintained a strong sense of authorial subjectivity throughout his career. Even after accepting the leadership of the Party organization in later years, he expressed his intention: "I am willing to join the Party, but I cannot absolutely obey all Party orders. I will only accept those that I believe are reasonable" [22]. This sentiment is also reflected in many of his works created after the founding of New China. For example, *Registration* criticizes the bureaucratic and formalistic work styles of grassroots cadres; *Exercise, Exercise* exposes the petty peasant mentality of some farmers, such as their lack of public responsibility and tendency to shirk work; and *Mutual Evaluation* criticizes outdated ideas deeply rooted in Chinese society, such as "those who work with their minds rule, while those who work with their hands are ruled". All these works revolve around the core idea that "only when individuals are cultivated can the nation be built", demonstrating his unwavering sense of subjectivity.

Zhao Shuli believed that "new people can accomplish new things, and new things can also temper new people". These new people were to be cultivated as a new type of farmer through three key paths: mutual assistance and cooperation, cultural learning and technological innovation. "Through the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the Liberation War, the Land Reform, the Suppression of Counter-revolutionaries, and the ongoing support for the Chinese People's Volunteers

in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, we have not only trained various Party, government, military and mass organization cadres at the village level, but also sent dozens of cadres to work at the county and district levels, as well as officers and soldiers to the People's Liberation Army. Similarly, in terms of production, they have trained competent cadres through mutual assistance and cooperation, who have taken on the numerous production tasks I mentioned earlier... Every morning, they also participate in cultural studies. They send all their school-age children to school. They have sent outstanding cadres to attend training courses on agricultural technology, accounting and water conservancy organized by the prefecture government in the prefecture seat. They have also sent outstanding young people to study at county middle schools. All these efforts demonstrate their determination to march forward towards socialism" [11]. In Zhao Shuli's view, he depicted real-life scenarios—such as "young teachers" propagating revolutionary ideas to their elders, young people actively participating in various revolutionary activities, and elderly villagers concerning themselves with revolutionary developments—through works such as *Xiao Erhei Gets Married*, *Li Youcai's Board Talk*, *Meng Xiangying's Liberation* and *The Changes of Li Family Village*, highlighting the pivotal role of farmers as the main participants in revolutionary movements and the construction of New China. Therefore, the rural world after the success of the revolution was not so much a complete breakdown of the existing rural social order as a process of "restoration and reconstruction"—eliminating the landlord class and replacing it with a "fair and reasonable world" managed by farmers themselves.

Zhao Shuli was passionate about writing, about identifying problems in daily life, and about observing the implementation of political policies in rural areas. Ultimately, all these efforts were driven by a single goal: to reshape the independent spirit of grassroots farmers, enabling them to develop a sense of ownership and identity, and freeing them from the constraints and self-deprecation imposed by their social status. At the same time, he sought to eliminate the age-old arrogance and estrangement that intellectuals had towards the uneducated. In works such as *The Poor Must Take Charge of Their Own Affairs and Be the Master of Your Own Life*, instead of using esoteric philosophical jargon, Zhao Shuli taught grassroots farmers about subjectivity through the simple concept of "being the master of your own life". He encouraged them to face up to the labels of "poverty", "honesty" and "manual labor"—not to take pride in these labels blindly, but also to avoid underestimating themselves. He urged them not to back down at the first sign of difficulty, believing that "lack of experience in handling matters makes things seem challenging", and not to wait passively for others to assign tasks as they did in old society. Instead, he guided them to "rely on laws and regulations, rely on collective organizations, listen to the opinions of the masses, and make their own decisions" [11]. What does it mean to cultivate people? How can farmers achieve self-cultivation? Zhao Shuli provided his own answers: cultivating people means being free from the control of others in terms of survival and ideology; achieving self-cultivation requires opening up channels for public opinion, engaging in diligent learning, and taking control of one's own destiny. In a nutshell, Zhao Shuli witnessed the growth of farmers and firmly believed that they would continue to serve as the cornerstone of national construction after the founding of New China.

Furthermore, Zhao Shuli pursued the integration of tradition and modernity, advocating that reforms should respect the reasonable core of rural society rather than negate it entirely. Through the depiction of the cooperative movement in *Three-Mile Bay*, he illustrated how farmers integrated traditional rural ethics into socialist construction. This grand and forward-looking practice, which the whole nation was engaged in during the transition period after the founding of New China, perfectly embodies the integration of the "differential mode of association" [23] with modernity. Although this work can be seen as a historical imagination of "the transition period towards

socialism", it undoubtedly reflects a strong sense of realism, depicting the true landscape of rural agricultural cooperatives in the 1950s.

In the world of Three-Mile Bay, the painter Lao Liang created three paintings depicting the village. The first painting shows the existing Three-Mile Bay, where the village has not yet expanded the cooperative or built new irrigation canals. The second painting depicts the Three-Mile Bay of tomorrow, where newly built irrigation canals meet the water needs of all farmland in the village. The third painting portrays Three-Mile Bay in the socialist era, featuring highways, tractors, new houses and neatly arranged crops. While these three paintings are works of historical imagination about the village, the new scenes depicted in the second and third paintings are all grounded in reality and not purely fictional. The artistic representation (the paintings) establishes a direct dialogue with the villagers living there: if Ma Duoshou agreed to build a canal through his wedge-shaped field, water diverted from the river could irrigate all farmland in Three-Mile Bay, fulfilling the village's aspirations for a better tomorrow; if the villagers of Three-Mile Bay agreed to join the cooperative, with land managed uniformly by the agricultural cooperative, grassroots cadres could more efficiently allocate labor and land use, thereby expanding production, increasing yields, improving the living standards of farmers and enhancing the village's infrastructure; if Wang Yusheng's innovative method of "planting living willow fences" continued to be used in Huangsha Gully to prevent sediment from clogging the water intake, water could be channeled into the gully for irrigation, helping to conserve soil and water and creating a green barrier for Three-Mile Bay. All these scenarios represent Zhao Shuli's vision of the greatest contributions that agriculture and farmers could make to national socialist construction. In other words, Zhao Shuli used the small village of Three-Mile Bay as a microcosm of New China, treating it as a pilot project for national construction. Based on his understanding, participation and practice in rural affairs, he then sought to extend the experiences gained from Three-Mile Bay to the entire nation. This represents an important part of Zhao Shuli's vision and approach to nation-building. As He Guimei noted, the depiction of the village "community" in Three-Mile Bay is essentially an attempt to shape an "ideal" of community [24].

However, this "ideal community" embodies a strong sense of continuity. Even though China had been influenced by Western cultural trends after the May Fourth Movement, traditional Chinese civilization and culture remained deeply rooted. According to Fei Xiaotong, China's grassroots rural society operates according to a "differential mode of association" centered on human relations, which can be described as "concentric circles of social relations radiating outward from oneself" [23]. In other words, everything that an individual comes into contact with—people, events and things—is related to themselves or known to them through others. Whether directly or indirectly, all perceived experiences create a sense of familiarity among people. It is this sense of familiarity that connects the emotions of even those who have never met, and this emotional connection inevitably fosters an inclusive attitude. Thus, even when New China faced the contradiction of choosing between the capitalist path and the socialist path, Zhao Shuli still regarded this contradiction as an internal contradiction among the people. Instead of resorting to criticism and confrontation, he advocated education and persuasion to guide farmers to voluntarily choose the path of socialist construction. This concept is reflected in the harmonious and reconciliatory narrative of Three-Mile Bay with a "happy ending": even when Fan Denggao developed ideas of taking the capitalist path, the cadres and villagers did not harshly criticize him but patiently persuaded him; after experiencing family conflicts over the division of property, the feudalistic Ma family finally recognized the situation and decided to join the cooperative; the model worker Yusheng, who had been divorced, and the intellectual Lingzhi, who cherished a mutual understanding and respect, got married; the

hardworking and intelligent Yumei married Youyi, who had the courage to break free from family constraints; and Xiaojun, a once misguided young woman, married Manxi, an impulsive but upright young man. These storylines not only reflect Zhao Shuli's pursuit of traditional cultural aesthetics but also his sincere hope that traditional values could be integrated into modern life. In other words, Zhao Shuli aspired to build an inclusive New China where tradition and modernity coexisted harmoniously.

Hong Zicheng argued: "Zhao Shuli did not believe that social changes in rural areas should be completely disconnected from traditional rural society, nor did he see it as the beginning of an entirely new era. Undoubtedly, outdated and inhumane systems, ideas and customs needed to be reformed and eliminated (as depicted in his works such as *Xiao Erhei Gets Married*, *The Changes of Li Family Village*, *Family Heirloom* and *Registration*). However, the dynamic and viable elements of systems, ideas and customs in rural society could and should be integrated into this transformation. It can be said that Zhao Shuli maintained that the reforms led and promoted by the new government and political forces should be built on the reasonable and sustainable aspects of the 'traditional rural order' (including systems, ethical relations and customs)" [25]. Therefore, through their participation in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the Land Reform and the cooperative movement, Zhao Shuli depicted how farmers transformed from "cultivating themselves" to "building the nation", emerging as the builders of New China. He examined rural society and the development of New China from the perspective of farmers themselves, ensuring that all policy directives assisted rural transformation in a timely, reasonable and beneficial manner. All these efforts not only serve as powerful evidence of his respect for farmers' independent development and his trust in the internal driving forces of rural society but also represent the practical realization of his ideal of nation-building.

5. Conclusion

Zhao Shuli's thought of cultivating people represents a combination of enlightenment and practice. With farmers at the center, he transformed Lu Xun's critical spirit into the awakening and resistance of farmers through accessible language and concrete actions. Although their approaches differed, they shared the same spiritual core. His early novels not only filled the gap in the enlightenment of grassroots farmers since the May Fourth Movement but also provided unique cultural resources for the construction of New China. He internalized enlightenment and revolutionary theories into his own practical struggles and gave back to the peasant group. His thought can be regarded as a practical philosophy that truly influenced the enlightenment and awakening of farmers, as well as a life philosophy that promoted the intellectual development and improvement of farmers. In his view, farmers lacked formal education but were not without culture. The concept of human awakening may have initially entered the historical vision of Chinese society as a grand and theoretical form of knowledge, but after years of development and accumulation, it would inevitably evolve into an integral part of culture. His lifelong pursuit and achievement were to integrate knowledge reasonably and appropriately into the culture familiar to farmers. Zhao Shuli's creative practice demonstrated that true modernization must be rooted in the soil of rural society, respecting the subjectivity of farmers and cultural traditions. This idea still holds profound enlightenment significance for Chinese-style modernization today.

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