



# The Criticism and Reception of Zhao Shuli's Concept of Literary Popularization in Japan

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**Abstract.** In Japan, the popularization of Zhao Shuli's literature has been fully understood and accepted. His ideas on literary popularization have prompted Japanese intellectuals to reflect on and discuss their own literature. The main points of focus include: the necessity of literary popularization, how to integrate national forms into popular literature, and how writers can align themselves with the general public. The discussions revealed that while the Japanese academic community expressed a desire to use Zhao Shuli's literature as a model for reforming Japanese literature and addressing contemporary issues, the experience of popularization in Zhao Shuli's works was difficult to replicate in Japan. This is due to significant differences in the social realities and literary traditions of the two countries, leading to divergent views on popularization. These differences are evident in the inconsistent interpretations of the "public," discrepancies in understanding the balance between "popularization" and "elevation," and varying opinions on the necessity of intellectual reform for writers. Ultimately, Zhao Shuli's concept of literary popularization became a key term in Japanese scholars' understanding of China and Chinese literature, but it did not have a substantial impact on Japanese literature itself.

**Keywords:** Japan; Zhao Shuli; Concept of Literary Popularization; Criticism and Reception

## 1 Introduction

After World War II, Japan was under U.S. occupation, and many Japanese intellectuals saw parallels between Japan's situation and China's efforts to save the nation during its period of crisis. These intellectuals recognized the powerful role literature had played in China during such times, particularly in Zhao Shuli's works, and believed that Japan should promote a similar type of literature to change its current situation. They argued that only by reading such literature could the Japanese people unify in resisting U.S. dominance. In response, Japanese scholars called for the creation of a "national literature" inspired by China's "people's literature," with the key feature of the latter being popularization—also the defining characteristic of Zhao Shuli's work<sup>[1]</sup>.

The question of how Japan could "borrow" this literary model sparked significant debate in Japanese literary circles. Traditionally, both popular and pure literature in

Japan had been seen as separate from politics. Many believed that literature should remain apolitical, which led to skepticism about the idea that literature could be used to change societal conditions. Furthermore, they regarded popularized literature as inferior to pure literature in terms of aesthetic value. A vivid example of this is the fact that Zhao Shuli's audience in Japan was not the general public, but rather intellectuals. Consequently, figures such as Takeuchi Yoshimi faced challenges in introducing the novelty of this literature to the public, raising questions about the necessity of literary popularization in Japan.

From a more positive perspective, for intellectuals associated with the Japanese Communist Party who advocated for the "popular line," Zhao Shuli's popularization of language and style was exemplary. They read *The Changes in Li Village* as a straightforward social and national allegory. In his essay "What We Learned from Zhao Shuli's Literature," Sasaki Motoichi interpreted Zhao's works as literature of resistance, comparing *The Changes in Li Village* with *Robinson Crusoe*. Sasaki highlighted Zhao's clear themes, uplifting characters, and use of adventurous storytelling, which resonated with Japanese intellectuals under U.S. occupation. This approach, however, reflected a proletarian literary perspective, as seen when Japanese author Kaguchi Genta translated Li Yucui's *Words* after returning to Japan post-defeat, calling on Japanese writers to follow the "Zhao Shuli direction," which was essentially the direction of literary popularization.

There were dissenting voices as well. Junzo Uchi, for example, argued that the attention Zhao Shuli received in Japan was largely due to his association with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), at a time when interest in the CCP's activities was particularly strong in Japan. Uchi contended that Zhao Shuli's work primarily served as a means for Japanese readers to understand China, rather than having direct relevance to Japanese literature. The New Japan Literature Society echoed this sentiment in the preface to the Japanese translation of *The Direction of Chinese Literature in the Current Phase*, stating that the most significant aspect of Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum was its role in steering Chinese literature away from petty bourgeoisie aestheticism toward a revolutionary path of serving the people<sup>[2]</sup>. Zhao Shuli's works, as a product of this movement, represented this democratized, people-serving literature, reinforcing its political significance.

In fact, debates over "literary popularization" and popular literature in Japan had a long history. Since the 1926 publication of *Popular Literature*, popular literature had developed alongside pure literature. Theorists such as Shirai Kyōji advocated for literature that served the masses, and publishers expanded the audience for popular works by producing affordable editions. Even some pure literature authors began writing popular literature. For instance, Kikuchi Kan's *Lady Pearl*, which emphasized "life first, art second," blurred the lines between the two by aiming to enlighten readers on the values of life. The most influential example of popular literature was Yoshikawa Eiji's *Musashi*, which played a major role in shaping the national spirit of Japan. This trend was accompanied by the rise of the proletarian literature movement, which emphasized the need for popularization in literature. Tsurahara Hideo, a key figure in this movement, advocated for literature that encompassed both political struggle and representation of various social classes, while others, like Aono Kiyoshi, had divergent views on

what constituted the "people," leading to debates over how to balance political engagement and artistic quality in popularized literature. Ultimately, the movement failed to transform Japanese literature, and some pure literature writers even rejected the artistic value of proletarian literature, such as Nakamura Takemasa.

When Zhao Shuli's literature reached Japan, its "popularization" once again became a focal point for academic debate, with both supporters and critics. Supporters argued that it demonstrated the unquantifiable value of popularized literature in shaping class consciousness and fostering national resistance. Critics, however, noted that Japanese scholars and readers, accustomed to traditional literary perspectives, struggled to understand Zhao Shuli's works. Figures like Takeuchi Yoshimi, responding to postwar Japan's political and cultural demands for independence, traced the necessity of literary popularization from Lu Xun to Zhao Shuli, arguing that Zhao's work facilitated the development of national consciousness. He contended that Japan must adopt this Chinese literary model to reshape its own national literature<sup>[3]</sup>.

The idea of "national literature" represented a significant departure from the artistic modes of the May Fourth Movement, leftist literature, and Yan'an literature, reflecting a desire among figures like Takeuchi for Japan to follow Zhao Shuli's path toward literary popularization. They believed that to overcome Japan's postwar challenges, literature had to embrace this popularized approach.

## 2 Literary Popularization and National Forms

Another reason why Japanese scholars adopt a cautious attitude towards Zhao Shuli's literature is that they consider literary popularization to be a tradition in modern Chinese literature: "In the genealogy of modern Chinese literary tradition, popularization is one of the important traditions<sup>[4]</sup>". In the Complete Works of Modern Chinese Literature, Volume 10: Zhao Shuli, Ono Shinobu pointed out that both the League of Left-Wing Writers and Lu Xun advocated for popularization, and the reason Zhao Shuli's practice of literary popularization was successful was that he retained a sense of national consciousness, which aligned with Japanese scholars' expectations of a "national literature." In their view, after the publication of Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, the overall transformation of Chinese society led to the unification of the individual with the collective society, resulting in the "imagined community" seen in *The Changes in Li Village*, where the individual and the collective are isomorphic<sup>[5]</sup>. This "imagined community" became an important means of rallying the people, which is why Okazaki Toshio called Zhao Shuli a "writer who connects the nation." The foundation of this "imagined community" is the awakening of national consciousness, and one important literary technique for awakening the people's national consciousness is the preservation of national forms<sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, Japanese scholars have discussed the national forms in Zhao Shuli's literature. The emphasis Japanese scholars place on the national forms in works such as *The Marriage of Xiao Erhei* and *Li Youcai's Ramblings* is, in fact, an expression of their intention to preserve national consciousness within "national literature."

In the preservation of national consciousness, the spirit of resistance is a particular focus for Japanese scholars. The volume on Chinese, Korean, and Indian literature in the series *The Life Lessons We Learn from Great Works* places these three literatures together because the editors believed that these countries all share histories of being colonized, and their modern and contemporary literatures are national literatures, fully dedicated to the happiness of their respective nations and peoples. “National literature” must necessarily carry national imprints, which is where national forms come into play. Satō Tōru believed that Zhao Shuli created a new national form by using the popular language of farmers <sup>[7]</sup>. Ozaka Noritsugi observed that, although *The Changes in Li Village* uses a traditional form similar to chaptered novels, it replaces poetry with clapper talk, allowing readers to understand the novel even through listening without having to read slowly. While affirming the national characteristics of Zhao Shuli’s works, Japanese scholars also seek corresponding techniques in Japanese literature to prove that this mode of creation is practicable. For instance, they believe that Zhao Shuli’s method of introducing time, place, and characters at the beginning of a story can be realized in the Noh and Kyogen theater traditions; the typified characters in folk stories remind Japanese readers of Kunio Kishida’s dramas; Ozaka Noritsugi equates Chinese folk story forms with Japan’s kusazōshi literature, a popular literary genre in Japan; and the drum-song format of *The Indestructible Stone Wagon Driver* is likened to Japan’s *Naniwabushi* by the editors.

Can this method of creation find materials for adaptation? Affirmative answers exist, such as from Satō Tōru, who believed that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship depicted in *The Heirloom* also existed in Japan at the time. He admired the progressive efforts of the daughter-in-law in Zhao Shuli’s works while sympathizing with the mother-in-law, viewing her troubles as a reflection of old societal traditions lingering in a transitional society. In other words, Japan had the same realistic issues reflected in Zhao Shuli’s works, and there were national forms of popularization that could be used to depict them. However, there were also dissenters, such as Ono Shinobu, who believed that this method could not be used to address urban themes or represent urban laborers. “Everyone is talking about ‘today’s literature absorbing the essence of Chinese folk literature and drawing on the legacy of foreign literature,’ but my question is, which should take precedence? Should we take Chinese national forms as the vessel to absorb foreign literary heritage, or take foreign heritage as the vessel to absorb the essence of Chinese folk literature? I think we should ride the Chinese vessel. Why? Because it is something the people enjoy hearing and are accustomed to. However, this idea is easy to talk about but difficult to implement. Writers develop certain habits in their work. For those accustomed to reversing the order of events in a story or starting from the middle, suddenly forcing them to write in order is no easy task. Similarly, for someone used to writing ‘there was a widow with two sons and a daughter,’ having them write ‘there was a widow, and she had two sons and a daughter’ is not something easily achieved”<sup>[8]</sup>. The phrase “not easily achieved” reflects Ono Shinobu’s skepticism about the applicability of the national forms in Zhao Shuli’s literature to Japan.

In fact, as some scholars have pointed out: "The reason Zhao Shuli shifted from the May Fourth intellectual elite mode of literary creation to writing for and serving the farmers was not only because he discovered the 'barrier' between new literature and farmers, but more importantly because he realized that literary enlightenment must focus on the farmers and must choose a language and narrative mode that farmers could understand—i.e., a traditional, Chinese aesthetic mode integrated with the modern peasant language, thus creating a type of modern Chinese narrative style of peasant literature that fused the narrative methods of Chinese folk literature, the ideological content of new literature, and the popular language style of the farmers"<sup>[9]</sup>. However, while Japanese scholars recognize Zhao Shuli's contribution to the innovation of national forms, they also categorize his literature as being of a "popular" nature. Komata Shinji believed that "before China's liberation, due to the low level of cultural dissemination, the traditional works enjoyed by the people were mostly dramas or oral literature, and the new works produced since the May Fourth Movement were only popular among intellectuals. The masses still enjoyed the earlier literary forms, which created a divide between intellectuals' literature and popular literature. According to Zhao Shuli's own theory, the use of traditional forms was to make works accessible to the public and did not represent a conscious inheritance of traditional forms"<sup>[10]</sup>. In other words, whether traditional literary forms are inherited or transcended stems from Zhao Shuli's view of literary popularization. "Popular literature for the people" is, in essence, popular literature. In other words, the national forms are a tool Zhao Shuli used to gain readers, and the artistic level of his literature is limited by the readers' level of acceptance.

In reality, Zhao Shuli's understanding of popularization and elevation aligns closely with Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum. He believed that both popularization and elevation must include ideological and artistic elements, and that literature for farmers should prioritize popularization; however, popularization does not equate to vulgarity<sup>[11]</sup>. Popularized works must meet the people's demands for both ideological and artistic content. "Our elevation is based on popularization; our popularization is guided by elevation"<sup>[12]</sup>. "The elevated products should have the unique height of proletarian literature and art, and not use bourgeois standards as a model, for such standards would exclude the majority of the masses, who either lack culture or whose cultural level is low"<sup>[13]</sup>. Popularization is not low-level, as Zhao Shuli explained by analogy: "The people now enjoy eating noodles, rice, and steamed buns, so we should not force them to eat bread and butter. If we want them to expand their tastes, we can offer these things in the cafeteria for them to choose from. But we cannot say that noodles, rice, and steamed buns are inferior foods while bread and butter are superior, insisting that people must eat the latter because it contains the most 'vitamins.' Wouldn't that be imposing on them?"<sup>[13]</sup>. Hence, Zhao Shuli firmly opposed elite literature and advocated for the value orientation of serving the majority. His view of popularization and elevation did not involve classifying literature into orthodox and non-orthodox categories, nor did it create distinctions between high and low levels of art.

### 3 Conclusion

Japanese scholars' studies on Zhao Shuli's literary contributions have largely focused on his concept of literary popularization and its impact on Chinese society. However, this concept did not lead to significant changes in Japan's own literary tradition. Zhao Shuli, through self-reform, immersed himself in rural life, adopting the perspective and language of farmers, successfully bridging the gap between intellectual elites and the common people. His approach aligned closely with Mao Zedong's call for cultural workers to "eat, live, work, and think together" with the masses, as outlined in the "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art."<sup>[14]</sup> Zhao Shuli fully embodied this philosophy, establishing himself as a pioneer of peasant literature in China. His works, such as *Xiao Erhei Gets Married* and *The Rhymes of Li Youcai*, became classic examples of popularized literature, reflecting the core spirit of cultural engagement with the masses<sup>[15]</sup>.

Japanese scholars highly regarded Zhao Shuli's creative stance and practice, especially his use of popular language and traditional national forms in his works, which provided a model for achieving literary popularization. For instance, scholar Rokuji Sakae urged Japanese writers to follow Zhao's lead by engaging with rural life and seeking inspiration from the people, arguing that only through close interaction with the people's struggles could new forms of literature emerge. Similarly, Hiyama Hisao emphasized that Zhao Shuli's experiences working in the countryside strengthened his determination to write works accessible to peasants, making his stories widely appreciated by rural readers.

Despite their admiration for Zhao Shuli's literary principles and practices, Japanese scholars noted that such popularization had limited influence in Japan. For example, Tokunaga Nobuo pointed out that Japanese writers found it challenging to emulate Zhao's model of embedding themselves in rural or factory environments for their creative work. Most Japanese authors continued to work from the confines of their studios, detached from the day-to-day lives of the masses. While Zhao Shuli's literary practices offered valuable insight into a more accessible form of literary creation, the practical impact on Japan's own literary scene remained minimal. Zhao Shuli's approach to literary popularization became a key concept in Japanese scholars' understanding of Chinese literature, but it did not lead to profound changes in Japanese literary traditions.

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