The Chinese Localization of Foreign Marxist Literary Theory
—A Key Project on Eastern-European Marxist Literary Theory

Qilin FU
Sichuan University

The Chinese Marxist literary theory is part of the modern Chinese literary theory. It is also one component of world Marxist literary theories while being neglected usually by foreign scholars. However, it seems to be a little paradoxical that it is not simply a kind of native Marxist literary theory but a combination of local experience and Marxism, especially foreign Marxist literary theory. Although in China, some scholars have taken up the insights into the signification of Marxist literary theory, many research fields concerning the localization of Foreign Marxist literary theory have not been researched. Our study will go into the key issues of localization mainly by focusing on the Soviet and Eastern-European Marxist literary theory which is an extension of our concerns about Western-European Marxist literary theory and aesthetics in the past more than ten years.
I. History of the Localization

As usual, Chinese Marxist literary theory is formed by the influences of Marxism. We can argue that almost every important foreign Marxism or Marxist literary theory is able to have its acceptance or some of its mirror image in China where emerges a socialist revolution and construction along with waves of cultural revolutions and creation. Historically, we intended to divide the localization of foreign Marxist literary theory into three phases. In the first phase from the 1920s to the 1940s, Russian and Soviet Marxist literary theories were gradually introduced into China by modern Chinese intellectuals, mainly through the translation of Japanese and Russian writings. The texts of Georg Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky and Lunacharsky on literature and art were translated into Chinese and interpreted by some literary theorists such as Luxun, Qu Qiubai, Suwen, Mao Zedong, Zhouyang, etc. Owing to the urgency of the revolutionary social reality of China, the localization of foreign Marxist literary theory is one-party, which is full of much misunderstanding, but has the originality of localization which attaches importance to the solving of real problems, a case in point as Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” in 1942. It is well-known that the localization in this phase belongs to political discourse, which means that the subjects of localization are mainly political leaders and most of the authors of foreign Marxist literary theory are also party leaders. In the second phase—the basic phase of Chinese socialist construction which may be limited between the 1950s and the 1970s, the localization of foreign Marxist literary theory kept the former tendency while new kinds of characteristics were emerging in China. Except Socialist Realist, the new tendency in Soviet Marxist literary theory after Stalin, which began to concerns with aesthetic issues, had an effect on the Chinese Marxist literary theory in the 1950s. What’s more, Marx’s writings including ones about literature and arts were translated into Chinese and interpreted by Chinese scholars. After Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 was translated into Chinese in 1956, it was gradually localized by the analyses of Li Zehou, Lu Meilin, Zhu Guangqian and so on. Also, the “Western Marxism” and Eastern European Neo-Marxism and their literary theories came to China in the 1960s. The third stage is located in the over thirty years after 1978 when the localization was mainly based on the diverse and academic fields. The Chinese tradition of Russian and Soviet Marxist literary theory remained but began to be challenged; Marx and Engel’s
literary notions were reinterpreted from different points of view; Western Marxist literary theories were deeply integrated into the Chinese literary field; the discourses of Eastern European Neo-Marxist were increasingly paid attention to by some Chinese literary theorists. In the context of globalization, the localization of foreign Marxists literary theory seems to be a complicated academic spectacle, which records the voices of Chinese scholars or Marxist literary theorists.

II. Basic Issues of Theories

In spite of the complicated situation, the Chinese localization of foreign Marxist literary theory is related to some basic issues. Each of these issues has its key categories, theoretical discourses and practices in China. We will investigate the following six important theories during the process of the localization of foreign Marxist literary theory.

First comes the localization of the theory of reflection. The theory is an important topic of foreign classical Marxist literary theory or Marxism-Leninism, especially Lenin’s philosophy of reflection which is lacking in the traditional Chinese literary notion. It was introduced into modern Chinese literary field and constructed by Chinese Marxist literary theorists. Mao Zedong’s definition of literature accepted Lenin’s ideas of materialism reflection: “Works of literature and art, as conceptualized forms on whatever level of operation, are the result of the human mind reflecting and processing popular life; revolutionary literature and art are thus the result of the revolutionary’s mind reflecting and processing popular life.” Based on Mao’s construction, Marxist theory of reflection became part of Chinese literary theory with particular discourse and renewed Chinese understanding of literature. Now, it has been an important modern tradition of China. The second theory, which is intimately associated with the first one, is Marxist notion of realism. The texts of Marx and Engels on realism, Soviet socialist realism, and Lukács’ notion of realism and so on, were translated and discussed again and again in China. They were combined with Chinese literary reality. The third important theory is the theory of literary ideology. Chinese scholars studied the conception of Marx’s ideology, Soviet definition of literary ideology, and Western Marxist “aesthetic ideology”, and advanced new understanding of literature named after “theory of aesthetic ideology of literature”. The fourth is about humanism of literature which was discussed by the young Marx and most of Western Marxists including Lukács, Frankfurt School, Sartre, Eastern European Neo-Marxists, etc., who were familiar
to most of Chinese humanitarian scholars, even many Chinese students. Thus the
notion of literature as a study of human being has been well known in Chinese
literary circle for almost sixty years. The fifth one is related to the theory of Marxist
cultural modernity in the 20th century, mainly from Western Marxism and Eastern
European Neo-Marxism. The theory of cultural modernity enlisted to understand
the capitalist reality and cultural phenomena, and to offer new views for Chinese
scholar to construct the recognition of Chinese cultural modernity or “alternative
modernity”. The last one, which is increasingly emphasized in China, is Soviet and
Eastern European Marxist theory of formalism and semiotics. We may see a turn of
formalism and semiotics in the contemporary Chinese literary field. One of
the factors is the result of localization of foreign Marxist theory of formalism and
semiotics, such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of discourse, Mukarovsky’s
structuralism and dialectics, and Lotman’s structural semiotics, etc.

In a word, these important issues of theory go into the Chinese intellectuals’
views and satisfy their need of theory and social reality. Certainly, they combine
Chinese native elements and foreign Marxist literary theory. The Chinese
consciousness of localization is obvious while confronting with problems at
different levels.

III. Analyses of Several Cases

In order to deal with the complicated situation of the localization of foreign
Marxist literary theory, we should analyze in detail some typical cases and reveal
their characteristics, machinism of operation, and significances. We emphasize the
localization of Soviet and Eastern European Marxist literary theories by focusing on
the following six typical cases.

The first case that we discuss is the localization of Soviet Marxist Mikhail
Lifshitz’s literary theory through the Chinese translation, introduction and
interpretation of his writings such as Marx and Engel on Literature and art, Karl
Marx’s philosophy of Art, etc. Lifshitz’s literary theory has an effect on
contemporary Chinese Marxist literary theory in the understanding of Marx and
Engel’s literary thoughts. The second case is about the trans-cultural journey of Lukács’s literary theory to China. Lukács’s literary theory from his writings such as
_History and Class Consciousness_ (1923), _The Specificity of the Aesthetic_ (1963),
etc., has been kept as a hot topic for Chinese literary theorist in the contemporary
times. The third case is the Chinese translation and introduction of Eastern
European Neo-Marxist theory of literature and art. Since the 1960s, Chinese scholars have paid attention to Yugoslav Praxis’ group, Adam Schaff and Leszek Kolakowski in Poland, and Budapest School. Especially after 1978, they critically absorbed the positive elements of generally Neo-Marxist humanism. The fourth case is about the Chinese understanding of Mukarovsky’s literary theory. We attempt the trace of Chinese localization of Soviet and Eastern European Marxist formalism. In the fifth case, we research China’s acceptance and interpretation of contemporary Eastern European Marxist Slavoj Žižek’s cultural theory. At last, we analyze a typical university textbook entitled *The Basic Principle of Literature* edited by Yi Qun in the 1960s in accordance with the localization of foreign Marxist literary theory. One may see that our analyses of localization are double ways. It means that one direction is from foreign Marxist literary theory to China while the other is China’s native voices from the complicated conditions of cultural language, consciousness of theory, needs of social reality and development, and personal but rich experience.

Through the investigation of the localization of foreign Marxist literary theory, we can conclude that the localization is native and creative practices of general Marxist literary theory; that the localization is complicated, even full of many paradoxes and it is not stable but dynamic, that is to say we could describe the detailed traces of the localization with a function graph; that the differences of the localization are valued according to three standards—the effects of China’s revolution and construction, the active establishment of Chinese literary theory, and the achievements of Chinese literary practices of creation and criticism. In a word, the pluralist localization of foreign Marxist literary theory is still on the way and we should make full use of the active values of localization and learn from the failures or dilemmas to develop Chinese literary theory and literary practice in the context of globalization.

**Notes:**

[1] Fu Qilin, Ph. D. professor and Ph. D. Tutor, Vice-dean of College of Literature and Journalism in Sichuan University. His research is mainly about Marxist literary theory. This paper is supported by National Philosophy and Social Science Program “The Localization of Foreign Marxist Literary Theory” (12AZD091).

[2] C.F. Fu Qilin, *Agenisi Hele Shenmei Xiandaixing Sixiang Yanjiu (A Study of Agnes Heller’s Thoughts on the Aesthetic Modernity)* (Chengdu: Bashu publishing House, 2006); Fu Qilin, *Hongda Xushi Pipan Yu Duoyuan Meixue Jiangou: Budapeisi Xuepai Chonggou Meixue Sixiang*
[3] Bonnie S. McDougall, Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: a Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1980: 69.