

# The Aesthetic Inheritance of the Mao Dun Literature Prize in the Flux—Take *Xu Mao and His Daughters* and *A Tale of the Wind* as Examples

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The Mao Dun Literature Prize is one of the well-known literary awards in China, and in the process of selection over the years, the Mao Dun Literature Prize has developed its own aesthetic orientation. A comparison is made between the early generation of *Xu Mao and His Daughters* and the recent award-winning work, *A Tale of the Wind*, to discover the aesthetic heritage in its flux, which is enlightening for the literary criticism and an orientation for the literary creators.

*Keywords:* Mao Dun Literature Prize, esthetic inheritance, *Xu Mao and his daughters*, *A Tale of the Wind*

The Mao Dun Literature Prize, as one of the more influential local literary awards in China, has always received the attention of the nation. Throughout the years, the Mao Dun Literature Prize has developed a more mature selection mechanism and a unique style. *Xu Mao and His Daughters* is the first Mao Dun Literature Prize winner, and *A Tale of the Wind* is the latest Mao Dun Literature Prize winner, from these two works, we may be able to discover the aesthetic heritage in the evolution of the Mao Dun Literature Prize.

## Realism-based Creative Approach

Mr. Mao Dun's original intention in establishing the Mao Dun Literature Prize was to allow socialist literature and art to flourish, so the award's selection criteria inevitably included the phrase "in line with the requirements of socialist literature and art" (Zhang, 2009, p. 23). The requirements of this award competition subconsciously favor realistic literary works, not because of a deliberate choice of creative methods, but because of China's long-standing literary and artistic traditions. Since May Fourth Movement, the proletarian literary movement has been in full swing, and the realist approach to creation has been widely advocated. Especially since the founding of the country, the leaders have repeatedly emphasized that "literature and art should serve the people". This idea of popularizing literature and art coincides with the philosophy of literary creation advocated by the proletariat in modern China, so the realist approach has become the mainstream of socialist literature and art works (Shao, 2004, p. 7). The Mao Dun Literature Prize serves socialist literature and art works, and is naturally biased toward works created with realistic techniques.

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It is needless to say that *Xu Mao and His Daughters* was written by Zhou Keqin in response to the profound impact of the ten-year turmoil on the ordinary peasants. It is close to the people of the land and expresses in a frightening way the disasters experienced by the peasants in that era, but also focuses on the struggle of the fourth girl and others against this fate, highlighting the people's desire for a better life. When we read this book, we can clearly feel the charm of the typical characters in the book: the fourth girl of the Xu family, a virtuous, generous, subtle and deep woman, through this soft and tenacious rural woman, I saw a warm and capable peasant woman like my grandmother, but the fourth girl is a little different from the ordinary peasants we see in our lives—her tenacity, strength and dedication are particularly prominent. Gourd Dam is not just a dam, it is a microcosm of the vast Chinese countryside of that era; the fourth girl is not just a woman of the Gourd Dam, but has become representative of millions of farmers who yearn for happiness. The hardships and realities that the fourth girl suffered were a shadow of the situation of the majority of rural women at that time. Her desire for a better life and her practical spirit to create a better life gave her hope for her small family and the future of Gourd Dam, but also motivated her to fight against the black and evil forces. When she finally said "I can wait", she was determined to link her fate with the fate of the land, to put the happiness of her hometown in her personal happiness, and to grow up to be a "fighter". As a representative of a rural woman, she is also a metaphor for the awakening of millions of women who, when their individual strengths come together, can change the country and the nation. The writer's intention is to see the "big" in the "small". At the same time, combined with the special background of the times, it also resonates with more ordinary people like the fourth girl, thus strengthening their fighting spirit. Isn't this the power of literature?

The characters in *A Tale of the Wind* are simpler, with three people and a horse forming the bulk of the narrative. The naive and pure female instructor Wang Keyu, the sophisticated "No. 1" Qi Jing, the slick and smooth Cao Shuier, and a wise military horse, against the cruel and tragic backdrop of the war, reveal some beauty. The story of these individuals during the 1,000-mile leap into the Dabie Mountain is brought to life by Xu Huaizhong. The grand war scenes are interwoven with personal experiences and emotions, which makes me want to describe it as "poignant". The first appearance of Wang Keyu gave a sense of softness that was not commensurate with the brutality of war, a song "High Mountain Flowing Water" like the wind and the moon to soothe the heart, behind was the rumble of artillery fire, but the music of the guqin made people forget their worries. The flowers that bloom in the midst of war are even more admirable and cherished, and "Wang Paper Dough" is a beautiful but tough flower in the midst of war. The first appearance of the empty string sound seems to have laid the groundwork for the fate of Wang Keyu, the sound of natural suspension, unrestrained by external forces, is the most primitive and natural sound, quite a bit of philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Wang Keyu's relationship with nature is equal and harmonious, as shown by her time with the military horse "Tan Zao". The military horse is spiritual and intelligent, to some extent it can be said that it is a dynamic image of nature, Wang Keyu's harmonious relationship with the living creature is not only her beautiful nature, but also the honor of nature to her. In the last moments of her life, it was nature that took her in and made her body a perfect sculpture with the ancient trees. The sound of empty strings, indiscriminately gobbled up in emptiness, is transformed into emptiness, just like a pond of water, pure and clear, returning to silence.

Like the traditional Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning works, both works use realism as the main approach to literary creation, both of which portray typical characters in typical settings and add color to

characters and scenes through details. In these two works, it is obvious that the authors are concerned with reality and the people and objects in reality. At the same time, in the process of depicting the characters, valuable spiritual qualities are incorporated to enlighten the readers. Both of them show certain differences under the same basic approach. The setting of *Xu Mao and His Daughters* is a piece of land, and there are many characters in a scene that does not seem to be vast, and even the secondary characters appear frequently. The story of *A Tale of the Wind* places the three men and one horse in the context of a grand war, and narrates the stories of a few characters on the battlefield, while the secondary characters do not have much space and have distinctive features but are often fleeting, such as the young soldier who dies bravely and the wise enemy counsellor. There is a tension between the two, one is a small scene with many characters, and the other is a large scene with few characters, which shows the author's different points of emphasis when selecting material and characters. The former depicts a large number of characters in a small area and adopts the method of character grouping, like a long shot in film and television, to present the story of Gourd Dam, while the latter focuses on the main character in a grand scene, the camera moves with the main character, without moving, so that people's attention is drawn away. Although they are both realistic, there are still some differences in the narrative perspective.

### **The Pursuit of Beauty is the Same**

The Mao Dun Literature Prize is an award to help the cause of socialist literature and art, and is established to select works that are pleasing to the people. The award-winning works have been required to reflect the spirit and style of the times, from *Xu Mao and His Daughters* to *A Tale of the Wind*, all of which reveal the pursuit of beauty and reflect the aesthetic orientation of the authors.

In both works, we can see the pursuit of beauty, especially in the depiction of "beauty", often using "ugly" as a contrast. There are many characters of beauty in *Xu Mao and His Daughters*: the Xu family girl, Yan Shaochun, Jin Shunyu ..... and the opposite, Zheng Bairu, is an ugly image. In the clash of beauty and ugliness, beauty appears more beautiful and ugliness appears more ugly. Under this strong contrast, readers' emotions are like a drawn bow, and the more profoundly they perceive the literary work. Take the growth of the ninth girl as an example, the ninth girl was lucky to have so many beautiful people in her world: Yan Shaochun was kind, strict and insightful, giving the ninth girl timely help and encouragement with a compassionate heart, aiding the growth of the ninth girl; Jin Shunyu was warm-hearted and upright, treating Xu Qin as her own daughter. Fortunately, there were such people guiding the ninth girl Xu Qin during her critical period, so that she did not take the wrong path at the critical moment. Compared with the ninth girl, the seventh girl suffered a sigh of relief, ignorant and confused moment by Zheng Bai Ru deception, although doing what seems to be a bright job, the pain behind was no one can say. What is even sadder is that her spirit was empty and her whole being was immersed in shallow desires and pleasures. It cannot be said that the seventh girl is ugly, but she has become so under the influence of the ugly Zheng Bai Ru. The two Xu girls' lives were guided by different people, and the results and beliefs were different. From this we can also see the author's painstaking efforts to the recipients of the text: to approach beauty and draw it out in order to become beautiful.

The beauty in *A Tale of the Wind* is also enchanting, the female instructor Wang Keyu can be called the embodiment of beauty, not only the appearance of beauty, but more importantly, the beauty of her heart makes

people like a spring breeze. Wang Keyu was polite but not unfriendly, always with a warm smile on her face, to say “hello” to every readers. She loved war horses and ginkgoes, and everything in her eyes was peaceful, natural and worthy of respect. Because she loved everything, everything loved her, the war horse listened to her, the ginkgo took her in, and everything had a spirit like the tide, silent but raging. The “Wang Paper Dough” was like a spring, shining brightly out of the hearts of people, shining Qi Jing at a loss, shining Cao Shuier ashamed of himself. There is no absolute ugly image of the main characters in *A Tale of the Wind*, but under the background of Wang Keyu, a little bit of ugliness is nowhere to be seen. When Wang Keyu escaped from the enemy camp, Qi Jing drank foreign ink inside the head of the residual feudal chastity concept to Wang Keyu heartache, but also let the reader greatly disappointed. Even “No. 1” such a highly educated young people can hardly break away from the backward and pedantic thinking, this ugly in Wang Keyu’s beauty, let us wake up (Xu, 2019, p. 5). Cao Shuier’s beauty is reflected in his transformation, as he submits to Wang Keyu, treating her as a solemn role that cannot be touched, and devoting all his efforts to protect her. This is very different from his previous attitude towards young women, and the reverence and guardianship of beauty reveal the beauty of Cao Shuier’s character. In the background of the fire and smoke, it is a beauty to have someone like Wang Keyu, and it is also a beauty to have such beauty affect others.

Both works highlight beauty, the beauty of humanity and nature, which is in line with the consistent literary standards of the Mao Dun Literature Prize. The theme of the works of the Mao Dun Literature Prize varies greatly, but the pursuit of beauty is consistent. In the manifestation of beauty, ugliness is both the object of criticism and the counterpoint of beauty.

### **Artistic White Space and Timeless Mood**

The realistic approach and the focus on reality of the Mao Dun Literature Prize often bring to mind the word “heavy”, but when we dig into the details, we can find that what we share is not only a sense of heaviness, but also the beauty of artistic white space and context. Taking *Xu Mao and His Daughters* and *A Tale of the Wind* as the objects of analysis, we find that both the first generation of Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning works and the more recent ones adopt the artistic technique of leaving white space, and this treatment will bring a different feeling of context.

The typical character in *Xu Mao and His Daughters*, the fourth girl, is soft on the outside but strong on the inside, very much in her own mind, always determined to pursue happiness and not yielding to fate. When she encountered gossip, when she faced the misunderstanding of her family, even when she was dying, she took her own ideas and chose her own way forward. After a series of misunderstandings and calamities, she finally kept the clouds and saw the moon, and with the unremitting personal efforts and the help of the working group, she finally got a good life for herself. But until the end of the work, we do not see any concrete depiction of the beautiful life of the fourth girl, all the beauty is attributed to “I can wait”. This is the author’s white space, not to explain the good ending of the characters, but to turn all the answers into expectations. This expectation is beautiful and clever. Three short words highlight the character of the fourth girl: in front of the great righteousness, in front of the happiness of the people of Gourd Dam, she puts her personal happiness second, which is not a destructive self-sacrifice, but a budding happy life full of expectation. It is only when the people

of Gourd Dam are happy that personal happiness becomes more stable and something to fall back on. Second, this treatment also saves the work from vulgarity.

The ending of *A Tale of the Wind* is also a kind of white space, which also leaves a long-range beauty of mood. In the last moments of her life, an unarmed and severely wounded female warrior, clinging to a war horse, returned to emptiness in the arms of an ancient ginkgo and was transformed into a statue of eternal life. No one knows for what purpose “Tan Zao” moved Wang Keyu out of the stone cave and into the cave of the ginkgo tree, and no one knows how the female staff officer left this world and how she survived in the form of a sculpture. Was it a mysterious force of nature? Or did she herself, in the midst of the chaos, instruct the military horse to do so? We do not know. The uncertain and slightly magical treatment is bewildering and enchanting, all of which adds a legendary dimension to the image of Wang Keyu and a touch of mystery to the battlefield.

Because the white space is left, it is implicit, and because of the white space, the mood is long. Wang Guowei once proposed that “the upper one is muddy with the realm of meaning, and the second one may win with the realm, or win with the meaning” (Wang, 2017, p. 69). Excellent literary works render the realm of meaning very cleverly. *Xu Mao and His Daughters* and *A Tale of the Wind* focus on reality while leaving white space for the reader’s imagination, transcending concrete things and allowing the receiver of literature to have a deeper understanding. In fact, not only these two works have such characteristics, but most of the winning works of the Mao Dun Literature Prize are able to highlight this kind of mood and spirit, adding meaningfulness to the weight. For example, the legend of the white deer in “The White Deer Plain” and the fate of the fool in “The Dust Settles” are all products of white space.

### Conclusion

The Mao Dun Literature Prize is one of the well-known literary awards in China and has a high status in the literary world. Although there have been several controversies in recent years, its value cannot be denied. During the selection process for many years, the Mao Dun Literature Prize has developed its own aesthetic orientation (Hong, 1999, p. 121). We have chosen to compare the first generation with the latest award-winning works to discover the aesthetic inheritance in its flux, and the discovery of this selection tradition is instructive for literary critics as well as orienting for literary creators.

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