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THE PROBLEM OF THEMES: A DISCUSSION

- COMMUNIST CHINA -

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## THE PROBLEM OF THEMES: A DISCUSSION

- Communist China -

Following is a translation of an unsigned article in Wen-i Pa0, Peiping, No 3, 26 March 1961, Page 2-6.

The Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom policy in the sphere of the workers, peasants and soldiers demands many forms for creative themes, style, and character. In order to satisfy this demand, the problem of themes must be correctly treated. Varied forms of themes will greatly help the many forms of style and character. But the limitations and the restrictions of the theme problem not only will restrict the development of many forms of style and character, but also will have an unfavorable effect on the all-over prosperity of literary creativity. That is contradictory to the demands of the Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom policy.

In the process of practicing the Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom policy, not a few comrades in the literary world realize that the themes for literary creation must expand further. They know that the limitations and restrictions on the problem of themes must be thoroughly eradicated. This opinion must be given full attention.

Life is an inseparable entity, a contradictory unity realizing the various types of social relations, class relations and relations between the individuals. The authors are confronted by the entity of life and they describe the general through the presentation of the individual. From the vast sea of life, an author selects one thing which he is familiar and thoroughly understands, and which he believes to be of value and meaningful. He then uses it as the object of his processing. This is a theme. It can be seen that a theme is formulated in the process in which the author observes and experiments in life. It is the product of his creative process. However, the idea of a theme is generally given a broader explanation, relating to the materials that can be written, such as a certain phase of social life and social phenomena, for instance, the theme of revolutionary struggle, the industrial theme, the agricultural theme, etc. In order to facilitate discussion, this article has adopted this broader meaning.

The various classes in the various periods of history required that literary technique must serve their class interests, revealing their own spiritual phase. The difference in living standards and the difference in viewpoints had a very penetrating effect on the selection and treatment of the creative theme. The social content revealed by the literary tech-

nique of the feudalistic period could not escape the great limitations of the social living standards of the time. With the appearance of the capitalist society, people's views were broadened. The capitalist authors praised the rising of the people in the cities, describing the various features of the capitalist class and the intellectuals, and with a sympathetic pen, portraying the forgotten man who had been trodden upon by society. Speaking from the standpoint of themes alone, this was already a very great step forward. The proletarian and socialist literary technique in the field of creative themes, opened up a new world which had never been visited by any human endeavor in the past. Socialist literary art describes the heroic revolutionary struggle of the masses of workers and peasants, depicting the courageous actions of the laboring people in constructing a new world, revealing an angry tide of revolution by people throughout the world against Imperialism, praising the great heroic action of the new human race in conquering the universe.... Proletarian literary art naturally emphasizes the spiritual phase of the proletariat and the laboring people. Not to do so, would be unthinkable. However, when the proletariat reveals itself, it must: use the revolutionary viewpoint to observe the world, use the critical attitude to relate history, use the leader's position to take of the various classes in society, look after the physical and mental actions of the various types of people, use the emotions of the hero to appreciate all that is beautiful. This does not apply only to those new things of this new world that the people in the past had not yet seen. The objects of literary processing today can also be the many themes that have been described by the people of the old society. So far as they can meet today's needs, they also can be used in the sphere of socialist literary arts. In the age of Mao Tse-tung, many historical stories and legendary events have been glorified anew in dramas and on the stage. Even the landscape, the flowers, the birds and the animals that the painters had portrayed hundreds and thousands of years ago, in the various stages of history, have again brought to new life on canvas today.

In comparison with the literary arts of the past, our sphere of themes has been expanded we do not know by how many times. But, based on the needs of the Let one Hundred Flowers Bloom policy in socialist literary arts, there is the necessity that the creative themes must be expanded continuously.

We suggest that we should depict great themes, and, at the same time, we also suggest that the themes must be in many forms.

by depicting great themes, we mean that we should use the literary arts to relate the outstanding accomplishments attained by the masses of the workers, peasants and soldiers in their revolutionary struggle and in their socialist construction as they reform the old world and create a new life. Time and the masses have raised this demand on the literary arts. Socialist literary art must answer this demand. Engels anxiously hoped that authors would describe the outstanding revolutionary heroes and suggested that authors should reveal the active phase of the workers' life. Lenin believed that the really great artist should at

least reflect certain basic aspects of the the revolution. Comrade Mao Tse-tung appeals to China's literary authors to penetrate into the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers to reflect the masses' militant struggle and to portray the new people and the new world. This is also a suggestion describing themes that possess great social meaning. To suggest the description of great themes is to suggest that authors and artists must face the mass struggle and that they must be more energetic in reflecting this great age. Authors and artists of today can attain all the conveniences by participating in all the great movements promoted by the laboring people to reform the world. Through their familiarity with and understanding of these great meaningful themes, they facilitate the description of the main current in life and the pulse of the time. They also show us the marvelous view of the revolution and the construction. This type of superior creation has a great understanding and encouraging effect. These products are valuable contributions for the readers of the present and future generations. The thing that we should be grateful for is the fact that not a few authors and artists in China have already done this and they are just doing this, producing a great number of good products. Starting from their own personal experiences, they know how to respond to the party's appeal and penetrate deep into the militant struggle.

To suggest the portrayal of great themes is but to start the great expansion and strengthening of the theme contents of literary creation. The great theme itself has many forms. The revolutionary struggle and the socialist construction contain boundless and rich contents, providing many types and forms of themes for the literary arts. The treatment of these great themes must be based on the different individuality of the authors, to be realized through various ways, various methods, and various forms and characters. Simple things are tasteless. They are the first to contradict these boundlessly rich theme contents. Though it may be so, we cannot stress these great themes to the absolute degree. We must take notice that the author's is at liberty to adopt this type of theme or that type of theme. Based on the different conditions of the authors, we cannot compel them to be unanimous. We must also notice that that old-time authors, a great number of whom had not lived in the whirlpool of class struggle, were greatly restricted in their writing themes. But through their understanding of the themes, some of the outstanding authors were able to reveal certain basic materials of their period. Today, time is different, but this does not eliminate the possibility of certain authors being able to reflect correctly the spirit of the times through sideline descriptions of social life. We must also notice that the independent character of certain authors and artists is closely related to characteristics of theme selection and theme treatment. Certain literary styles, forms or models possess obvious characteristics. For instance, children's stories and fables in literature, mimicry in songs, cartoons, landscapes, pictures of flowers and birds in paintings, light music and lyric songs, certain satiric plays and pleasant comedies, certain schools of artistic performances, all these have their own characteristics in theme selection and treatment. If these characteristics of theme selection and theme

treatment are taken away, it means that the characteristic of their character, style, form and school are taken away and it also means that their existence is taken away. Therefore, it is essential that there be many forms for the themes. The author and the artist, based on the differences of their own conditions, should be free to select and treat the themes that they are well versed in and the themes they love most. Only they are beneficial to the masses of the people and will be welcome by the masses. The various types and various forms of needs in the spiritual life of the masses and all the beneficial attempts that are carried out to satisfy the many forms of the masses' needs not only should not be neglected, but, on the contrary, should be fully respected.

In the last few years, the people in the literary world have carried on a struggle on two fronts, surrounding the problem of themes. The counter-revolutionary Hu Feng (胡风) clique and rightist elements, in order to accomplish their mysterious purposes, had opposed the great themes depicting the revolutionary struggle of the workers, peasants and soldiers. This was one of the important contents in their outline against Socialism. Of course, this cannot be tolerated. At the same time, we literate more than once, opposed some wishful comrades in our own ranks, contributing certain partial opinions concerning the problem of themes. These comrades described workers, peasants and soldiers in opposition to the broadness of the themes and established the revelation of the great main theme as contradictory to the family life and love life (the so-called "domestic affair, romance"). They depicted modern themes as contradictory to historical themes. They saw these things as mutually exclusive. Certain individual comrades even erroneously believed that in a certain period they should write only certain themes. For instance, when we smelt steel, we should only write about steel smelting and when we promote agriculture, we should only write about agriculture. This is of course, extremely unfavorable to the development of creative writing.

In the future, we must firmly repudiate the reactionary theories with which the capitalist class entices literary workers to desert the mass struggle and to oppose the description of the mass struggle. In the recent period, there appeared a new growth of a partial and narrow viewpoint on the theme problem. As to this matter, we cannot presume that we cannot see it.

Since the Great Leap Forward, the masses' morale has been very high. The revolutionary spirit of the literary people is very high. "Praise the Great Leap Forward, remember the history of revolution," has become a new fad in the literary arts. The present great themes concerning industrial and agricultural construction have received greater attention from the literary people. Many literary workers have made timely reflections on the new people and new things in the great leap forward. The timely atmosphere has been obviously increased in books and periodicals, in paintings, on the stage and on the screen. This is a very encouraging aspect. But some comrades, while correctly and enthusiastically supporting this revolutionary atmosphere, regard literary creative themes as being partial and narrow. It seems to them that the proletarian literary arts can demonstrate only the great present themes and that the great themes can only be the new people and new matters in today's mass movement.

They believe that the mass movement can be the only main activities here and now. They feel that people and new matters can only be the existing model people and model events. Some individual comrades even regard the great events in news reports as great themes, hoping that plots be made in accordance with the contents of the news reports and the real people and real events can be completely moved onto the stage without any alteration. In order to get the news and gain time, they frequently make use of last minute news materials and adopt the short-term shock writing method. Under these circumstances, in the creative plays of a certain period they made a very outstanding showing. Of course, some authors, because they are more familiar with the contents of the themes that they are treating and have a deeper understanding of them, can finally overcome their difficulties and attain better or even very good achievements. But some authors are continuously busy in personifying news reports and dramatizing great events. Thus because of competition they have sacrificed their great opportunity of penetrating into the militant struggle. Under the influence of these facts, the modern themes that have been presented in the plays of a certain period have struck the people as being immature and uninteresting plays.

The partial and narrow understanding of the problem of themes will inevitably cause the formulation of prohibitions and disciplines. If the description of great themes had been stressed to the absolute degree, certain things would not be regarded as very important. But some relatively more meaningful themes, if they are done from the side as an attempt to develop the small into the great, will be treated coldly. If in order to describe righteous people, new people and new matters are stressed to an improper degree, treated comically or satirically, and if evil figures and backward people are portrayed such products will be suppressed. But to describe life in the old society, the events in the Sino-Japanese War, the Liberation War, land reform, the resistance against the United States and the assistance to Korea movement as if they dealt with old people and old matters is to court neglect. If we place the great themes on the same level with the great events in the news reports and real people and real events in the mass movement, promoting them to be used in literary creations, we will not only place great restrictions on creative content, but will also encourage people to overemphasize news, themes and timesaving. Thus, this will become a fad valuing superficiality and not reality. Such a trend will completely violate the original purpose of suggesting great themes. Of course, these prohibitions and disciplines are seldom seen in writing. It is not possible that they exist universally among literary people. However, we cannot neglect the fact that they have created a certain type of restriction. Of course, those authors who have real ability and sound understanding will not be restricted by prohibitions and disciplines, whereas some immature authors very frequently have exhibited these weaknesses with their pens.

It must be pointed out that some literary criticism essays have encouraged the simplification trend of the problem of themes. In last few years, literary critics have enthusiastically supported authors and artists in following the mass struggle, praising new people and new matters, portraying heroic people on the industrial and agricultural fronts, and

revealing the communist character among the masses. This is entirely correct and essential. But some critics have used the criterion of whether the product has treated the great theme as the first or principal standard in evaluating a literary product. Sometimes, a certain literary product, just because it merely deals with a great theme, will receive excessive praise even though the author has not fulfilled his own task. Some literary products have shown rather profound and realistic development, but just because they are not written about important themes they receive inappropriate evaluations. Some essays have used too much space to discuss and analyze how the literary product's theme was selected, but they make only slight mention of the ideological depth and the literary characteristics of the author's description of the people concerned. Our criticisms have not given enough support to the development of the literary theme, style, form, technique and the many variations. Our periodicals very frequently have adopted a liberal attitude towards partial publicity on the problem of themes. This shows that our editorial and critical works have not been firm enough in carrying out the party's policy of Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom, Let One Hundred Schools Contend.

In order to promote the Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom policy in the socialist literary arts, prohibitions and disciplines on the problem of themes must be abolished.

The theme is important. From the past to the present, many great authors not only describe the things that are interesting to themselves as individuals, but also the things that are interesting to thousands upon thousands of readers. In the socialist literature of today, the ideological contents of the literary products and the contents of life have a very close relationship. Even so, the theme itself is not the principal and decisive factor that determines the value of a literary product, nor is it the sole factor. Under the premise that the political standard has priority, unity between a high degree of ideology and literary art and unity between a revolutionary political content and the greatest possible perfect literary form are the goals that we must strive for. For the theme is not equivalent to the main theme. Similar themes may be developed into many types of different main themes. Similar themes under the pens of different authors can attain completely different or even completely contradictory ideological effects. A revolutionary author, sometimes through an unimportant theme, can bring out a very profound ideology. "What comes out from a fountain is but water, what comes out from a vein is but blood." Lu Hsun (魯迅) believed that a "revolutionary man" is the basic factor that produces revolutionary literature. This has much truth in it. From this we can see that the so-called "peak theme" and "non-peak theme" theory is not satisfactory, and the saying that "when you have possessed the theme, your literary product is already half successful" has no basis. In the selection of themes, the author and the artist are at liberty and they are not bound by any restriction. In a speech delivered at a literary discussion meeting at Yen-an, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, while he appealed to the authors and artists to follow the workers, peasants and soldiers penetrating deep into the mass struggle, pointed out that the literary workers "must study the various classes in society, study their mutual relations and the various individual conditions and study

their appearance and their psychology" so that our literature would have "a rich content and a correct direction." He also pointed out that the literary workers must "observe, realize, study and analyze all people, all classes, all the masses, all the lives of the quick and their struggles, all primitive literary and artistic materials" so that they will become the objects of literary works in the process of creation. These few sentences have pointed out that the objects of creation are boundless in content. In order to abolish the prohibitions and disciplines over the problem of themes, it is essential to review a passage in an essay on the Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom, Let One Hundred Schools Contend movement written by Comrade Lu Ting-i (陸定一) in May, 1956:

...One. the problem of themes, the party has never set any restrictions. To only allow themes concerning workers, peasants and soldiers, to only allow themes dealing with the new society, new people and new matters is to be restrictive and not correct. Since literature is to serve the workers, peasants and soldiers, it must praise the new society and the righteous people and, at the same time, criticize the old society and the evil people. It must praise progress, but at the same time it must criticize backwardness. Therefore, literary themes must be extremely broad. In literary products, there should appear not only those things that existed in the world and in history, but also those things that have never existed in this world, such as fairies and the animals that can speak. Literary products can depict the righteous people and the new society, but also they can depict the evil people and the old society. Furthermore, if there were no old society, the new society could not be contrasted. If there were no evil people, it would be very hard to contrast the righteous people. Consequently, prohibitions and disciplines over the problem of themes will only suffocate the growth of literary works, enabling formalism and low taste to develop. This is harmful, not beneficial.

To suggest great themes is still a very important and essential thing. In order to produce a high degree of historical generalization and a literary product which will profoundly reflect the times, this problem so much the more should not be neglected. However, since the great theme is stressed and the main theme is emphasized, we must learn Marxism-Leninism and social life and we should also stress the long period of penetrating into the masses. We must also reform ideological emotions. All these are very important, especially to young writers. In the midst of political and social life, important events cannot be used without careful selection. Everything cannot immediately be put into the realm of the literary arts. What is written by an author and how he writes it

must follow the interests of the revolution and the interests of revolutionary literature. All this is determined by the author's own political training and his training in life. The greater the theme, the more familiarity and understanding are required. Only by really understanding and becoming familiar with the subject can the author write to the best of his ability. When the author's ideological emotions have changed, the angle for the selection of the theme is naturally different. If he has participated in the mass struggle, he naturally is willing to describe the mass struggle. When he writes he is not familiar with the subject and has to collect materials urgently. This is naturally more profound. We can see that encouraging authors to learn Marxism-Leninism and participate in the militant struggle constitutes the best method to induce the authors to portray great themes. Contrary to this, there is improper emphasis on the so-called "peak themes" and peak main themes." At the same time, there exists improper encouragement of the short-term shock attack and the urgent-digging writing method. The themes come first and the living later. There are the main-themes-first and the personification-later methods. These methods do not simply reverse the normal creative process. Just in the case of great themes, it is the reverse of the cause and effect relationship. It is unfavorable to the growth of the creation of the new strength.

It is necessary that all methods be used to open new literary roads, promoting the development of the many forms of creative themes. The many forms of creative themes are favorable in reflecting the many forms of the world and reflecting the great and boundless rich reality. In order to satisfy the many needs of the people's spiritual life, the boundless and rich realistic pictures are used to help the readers to understand the truth in life. At the same time, this is more favorable to the development of the socialist literary arts themselves. For our literature has realized the unity between the unanimity of political direction and the many varieties of literary form. Under the common direction of serving the workers, peasants and soldiers, it is just as Lenin said! "In this enterprise, there must be an absolute guarantees for individual creativity and the broad world of the individual's fancy and there should be a broad world for ideology and imagination, form and content." The road for socialist literature is the broadest road. We cannot permit it to be narrowed. The many varieties of creative theme, style and character enable all those who have talents and are willing to serve the people to exert their best ability and not to let the ambitious ones and talented people to be neglected or suppressed. This will be more favorable to the mobilization of all the positive factors and to the solidarity of the literary world, arousing the morale of the literary workers and constructing the new socialist literature in a, faster, better and cheaper manner.

The narrow understanding of the problem of themes is due to the reason that some comrades have a very narrow understanding of the relationship between literature and politics. Literature obeys politics and serves politics. This is an unshakeable principle. Literature obeys politics,

speaking from the standpoint of today. It is obedient to the revolutionary struggle and the basic interests of socialist construction. Literary products, through a living description of man's personality, mentality and his relations with his fellow men, help people to understand the many varieties in the world and the complexity of life. They help people to develop good character and arouse the people's revolutionary will and progressive spirit and, at the same time, enable the people to enjoy beauty and a healthy cultural rest. The communist educational function of literary products is realized in the high degree of unity of truth, excellence and beauty, which is the high degree of coordination of the proletarian intellectual, moral and beauty education. This will help to train the new communist personality, one with advanced ideology, a broad mind and noble characteristics. This is how literature is to serve politics. It is the basic road in serving socialist construction. Consequently, not only do many superior literary products directly describe existing mass struggle and production construction themes, but there also are superior products which are coordinated in a timely manner with the existing political task. They have a very great educational function among the masses. The novels Red Flag Standar, The Song of Youth and Red Day, the movies "Lin Tse-hsu," "T'ung Ts'un-shui" and "Nieh Erh", the plays "Growth in a Struggle" and "Kuan Han-ch'ing" and many other literary products that have profound contents of historical themes have greatly encouraged the masses to struggle for the three red flags. Of course, through the use of literary reports and light literary forms, the new people and new matters on the production front can be reflected rapidly. For timely coordination with central activities, some literary products may be rapidly produced for publicity purposes. These are also important and should be promoted. Good literary products may be found among them. But if we make this the principal trend of literary creation or if in order to further promote production experience, describe technical processes, analyze policies and catch up with news reports, we make this the principal function of literature, it will weaken the educational effect of literature, and will block the broad road by which literature serves politics. The sphere of politics is very broad. Literature in serving politics also should follow a very broad road. If the road becomes narrow, it will be unfavorable first to politics. All literary weapons must be controlled, all positive factors must be mobilized and all possibilities must be utilized so that they will be combined to serve the people and to serve the common goal of socialist construction. This is the greatest political interest.

The relationship between literature and politics cannot be simplified. Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom, Let One Hundred Schools Contend constitutes the best policy for handling the contradictions among the people correctly, under the direction of the workers, peasants and soldiers. It is also the best policy and the best method for handling the relation between literature and politics correctly. The party's policy is the party's life. The party's literary policy is the life of the party's literary enterprise. The people who really pay attention to politics are the people who pay attention to the party's interests. They must firmly implement and struggle for this strong class policy.