Towards a Partisan Aesthetics

Zhou Yang, Chernyshevsky,
and 'Life'

Kind Guidance (Chairman
Mao teaching theory in
Yan'an), 1975.
PC: Chinese posters.net

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This essay seeks to excavate a Maoist politics of 'life' as the grounds for a new, proletarian aesthetics and as a counterpoint to the biologisation of life under authoritarian state formations. It does so through a reading of Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an Talks and their demands that intellectuals immerse themselves in the life of the masses via the theoretical role of Zhou Yang. In doing so, it seeks to suggest answers to the question: how might we conceive of a non-fascist life under late capitalism?

The time of crisis in which this article is written has seen the political aesthetics of 'life' return to the forefront of social critique. The enablement of new capacities of state surveillance and intervention, in and beyond China, draws its legitimacy from the real and pressing demand to protect citizens against a serious medical threat. But political language is never innocent. The Chinese press therefore abounds with references to the problem of life as *shengming* (生命), denoting a biologised, existential concept of life, and one that enables slippage between the life

of the individual citizen and the life of the racialised nation-state qua corporate entity. The proliferation of these references points beyond our immediate political context to recall a larger set of political invocations of life in modern Chinese history, including but not limited to the fashioning of the nation as a biological organism amid the Chinese intellectual investments in Social Darwinism at the fin-de-siècle, and the fascist political aesthetics of the corporatist nation caught in a fight for survival during the 1930s.

The return of a political language that is at once both remote and familiar is no coincidence. It marks the historical structure of repetition that links the Chinese neoliberal authoritarian present with a previous historical moment dominated by discourses of national self-strengthening and the consolidation of the nation-state form. Between the present and the cusp of the twentieth century lies a trajectory of revolutionary experiences that are increasingly put under erasure as the discursive condition of the ideological coherence of the contemporary Chinese state. China's hyper-authoritarian quarantine measures provide a further alibi for the defeat of the revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century.

The choice of words does not exhaust the entirety of politics, but words do matter. The experience of Chinese socialism sought to offer an alternative vocabulary of life whose point of departure was not the mythologised nation state or life as biology, but rather life as a problem of social relations, and one that offered the possibility of a transformation in the relations between intellectuals and the masses. This too was an aesthetic conception of life and, more specifically, of life as *shenghuo* (生活) within a larger process of political revolution where writers were called upon to immerse themselves in the conditions of mass life to prepare for the task of producing literature for the masses. The retrieval of this genealogy, then, is important not only as an exercise in revolutionary history, but also as a warning against the statist monopolisation and biologisation of life in the present political

conjuncture. Recovering this genealogy can go some way to answering the contemporary question: what does it mean to live a non-fascist life in times of crisis?

Non-fascist, or Maoist Life

'The life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich, and fundamental' asserted Mao in his famous Yan'an Talks in 1942. These Talks were to provide the basis for cultural policy for the remainder of the socialist period, and yet their development also encompassed a legacy of theoretical exploration that centres around the problem of 'life', denoted as *shenghuo*, as the origins of literary creation and as the site for the transformation of the intellectual. In actual fact, this term enjoyed wide purchase in the 1940s amidst the intellectual debates of Chinese communism. The problem of life is, for example, also central to Ai Siqu's interventions concerning problems of philosophy. Ai provided much of the inspiration for Mao's own philosophical texts 'On Contradiction' (矛盾论) and 'On Practice' (实践论), and so too did his vernacular writings enjoy wide popularity from the 1930s onwards. In his famous primer *Philosophy for the Masses* (1936), he posits philosophy as immanent within the sphere of everyday life, arguing that 'in our everyday life, it is possible to find traces of philosophy at every place and every time' (Ai 2012, 3). The understanding of life as the stuff of everyday quotidian experience rather than existential biology already underscores the specific valences of the Maoist theorisation of life.

In its aesthetic permutation, however, the introduction of life as a central category of Maoist cultural theory was not the innovation of Ai Siqu or of Mao alone, but owed a great deal to his cultural lieutenant Zhou Yang, who has otherwise received recognition only for his complex role as a cultural official under

the People's Republic. More specifically, Zhou Yang served as the mediator for a process of profound theoretical borrowings between Mao and the Russian nineteenth-century aesthetician Nikolai Chernyshevsky. If, outside of the Chinese context, Chernyshevsky is perhaps best known for his rambling revolutionary novel *What Is to be Done?* (1863), and for his influence on a generation of Russian revolutionaries, Zhou Yang's writings over 1936–42 reveal a persistent concern for Chernyshevsky's aesthetics, especially his theoretical treatise *The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality*, which Zhou Yang ultimately translated into Chinese in 1942 after its appearance in the Soviet English-language journal *International Literature* in 1935. The importance of Chernyshevsky for Zhou Yang, as for others, lies in the fact that Chernyshevsky provided a coherent theoretical justification for a resolutely realist aesthetics, one that emerged in opposition to the prevalence of neo-Hegelian idealist modes of aesthetics in the Russia of the nineteenth century. If, for idealist aestheticians, beauty existed as a permutation of absolute spirit, Chernyshevsky invoked the category of 'life' in order to point towards a realist, materialist aesthetics, asserting 'that is beautiful in which we see life such as it should be according to our conceptions; that is beautiful which expresses by itself life or reminds of life'. Yet for Chernyshevsky, his category of life was not an existential concept withdrawn from the complexities of social relations but rather a resolutely political one, in that the conception of 'life' that informs beauty is itself sundered by the different aesthetic horizons of beauty attached to different classes. Chernyshevsky therefore counterpoises the aesthetic horizons of peasants and the ruling class, arguing, for the former, 'the description of beauty in folk songs will not contain a single attribute of beauty which would not be a sign of flourishing health and balanced strength of body, the consequence always of a life of plenty with constant hard, though not excessive, work,' whereas, for the

Zhou Yang. PC: Wikimedia Commons.

bourgeoisie, their conception of beauty is an ethereal one, arising from and validating 'a life without physical labour'.

Chernyshevsky's text therefore offers a conception of partisan aesthetics—an aesthetics given in the material relations of social life—that was to inform the entire Chinese socialist project, especially in terms of how the problematic of life came to generate a solution for how writers of intellectual backgrounds were to write in the service of the masses. Zhou Yang's encounter with Chernyshevsky via *International Literature* informed his theoretical engagements over the 1930s and 1940s, and so too did Chernyshevsky's category of 'life' supply a major theoretical edifice of the Maoist project. But between Chernyshevsky's text in the abstract and Mao's Talks lay a series of mediations involving problems of

translation, and it is here that Zhou Yang becomes centrally relevant as a theorist who mediated between Chernyshevsky and Mao, and in the process of doing so also transformed the theoretical significance of life itself.

Rendering ‘Life’

The problem of language and conceptual precision that confronted Zhou Yang was that of how to render ‘life’ in such a way that it would come to articulate the problem of social relations and the transformation of the writing subject, being, therefore, adequate to the rich theoretical position of such a concept in Chernyshevsky’s account. The salience of a social and historical conception of life, one that would incorporate an emergent understanding of labour as the basis of the social and of social relations, may be judged from the multiple renderings of the English term ‘life’ that pervaded Zhou Yang’s successive translations of, and responses to, Chernyshevsky.

In his first two essays in which he referred explicitly to Chernyshevsky and cited at considerable length from Chernyshevsky’s treatise, entitled ‘Art and Life’ (艺术与人生) and ‘We Need a New Aesthetics’ (我们需要新的美学), both published in 1937, Zhou Yang rendered ‘life’ as *rensheng* (人生). Only later did he change the translation to the more precise *shenghuo* (生活) in his 1941 and 1942 treatments, including in the preface to his 1942 translation of Chernyshevsky. These two renderings or modes of translanguaging practice carry their own connotations and nuances. *Rensheng* echoed a much earlier set of debates that had emerged as part of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, in which liberal intellectuals committed themselves to a project of ‘literature for life’ (文学为人生). In this register, then, *rensheng* maintained a fundamentally metaphysical valence. Yet even at this earlier moment, the details of Zhou’s text reveal an understanding of the class content of aesthetics that radically

anticipates the theoretical problems of the 1940s and Mao’s Talks. In a gesture that draws unmistakably from Chernyshevsky, in his ‘We Need a New Aesthetics’ Zhou argues that, due to the close relationship between aesthetics and social conditions, the possibility of aesthetic horizons that are particular to specific class formations, such that ‘in any given epoch the conceptions of beauty on the part of different social strata are radically different from one another, and are indeed directly opposite’ (Zhou 1937a, 218). Only at the end of this essay does Zhou invoke Chernyshevsky explicitly as one of the theorists who may be recruited to the task of constructing a new science of aesthetics. Zhou acknowledges the Russian writer as having derived his theoretical impetus from Feuerbach, and cites his formulation of ‘beauty is life’ (人生即美) as the centre of his theoretical project.

While these early engagements with Chernyshevsky emerged out of the Shanghai literary scene, Zhou’s move to Yan’an during wartime as part of a larger contingent of intellectuals lent a new urgency to the problem of the cultural subject in rural conditions and amid the exigencies of wartime mobilisation. This urgency made itself felt in Zhou Yang’s ongoing excavations of Chernyshevsky above all through a shift in translation, to *shenghuo*, which situated ‘life’ as a problem of social relations that not only comprised the aesthetic horizon of the masses but also, crucially, held out the possibility of transforming the intellectual. This was true especially of Zhou Yang’s 1941 essay ‘A Casual Discussion on Literature and Life’ (文艺与生活漫谈), which may be read as the singularly most important document in raising the central categories of Mao’s Talks, before the Talks themselves. The problem that Zhou addresses is the relationship between art and life, and he makes the origins of this problematic explicit, proclaiming that ‘with respect to aesthetics, I am a loyal follower of Chernyshevsky. His famous formula of “beauty is life” carries a fundamental truth’ (Zhou 1941, 325).

Zhou Yang's discussion is by no means a mechanical folding of literature into life but rather an examination of the complex dialectical relations between the two. The importance of life lies in the fact that it provides the author with the materials and experiences that are the ultimate source of cultural production, and yet no simple equivalence can be drawn between what Zhou Yang describes as 'the practice of life' (生活实践) and 'the practice of creation' (创作实践). Rather, the problem of the author is that of mediation, how the author mediates between the material substance of social relations and life, and the transformation of life into the work of art. The formation of a relationship between the author and the life of the masses of a kind that can yield artistic creation is, for Zhou, a long and painful process. His imagery anticipates Mao's Talks, and so deserves to be quoted at length:

'To be suited [to life] is not the kind of thing that can be done in a moment. It requires a relative period of time amidst this life. To go everywhere and observe flowers from horseback is rather easy, but it cannot yield any real results. It is necessary to participate in some actual work, and in order to do this, you shouldn't fear any difficulties ... Merge into one with the people around you, study from them, and ask for guidance from them. Don't blame them for not understanding you, instead you should seek to understand them' (Zhou 1941, 330).

In this instance, the significance of life for literary creation becomes something other than merely being that which is reflected in the art work, even in a highly mediated or technical form, and instead becomes the basis for the transformation of the subject position of the writer. This transformation is one that rests on and enables a new set of social relationships, in which the intellectual ceases to be a purveyor of intellectual enlightenment to the masses. Thus, further on, Zhou asserts that 'a creator must broadly, in many respects and deeply merge with people in everyday life, you must become friends with them, talk about family matters, intimate affairs of the heart, so

that between you there is no longer any kind of psychological forbearance or distance' (Zhou 1941, 333). Having done so, 'at this time the true masses will become visible to you, what you understand will no longer be an abstract concept of the masses, but concrete individuals of flesh and blood' (Zhou 1941, 333).

Zhou Yang's translation of Chernyshevsky's aesthetic treatise in its entirety and his accompanying essay in the *Liberation Daily* marks both the culmination of a process of theoretical development and a text of theoretical importance that was directly proximate to the Yan'an Talks. In this article, which initially appeared under the title 'Materialist Aesthetics: An Introduction to Chernyshevsky's Aesthetics', Zhou reprised some of the basic points of emphasis that had emerged as early as 1937, including the orientation between social class and horizons of aesthetic beauty. More important is that Zhou also brings a critical light to bear on the limits of Chernyshevsky's conception of realism, arguing, therefore, that the Russian writer maintains a passive conception of the process through which art may be said to reflect reality, and that he therefore ignores the active function of art in the transformation of society (Zhou 1942, 371-72). Taking Zhou Yang's responses to Chernyshevsky across the whole period of the 1930s and 1940s seriously, then, the problematic of life assumes a great theoretical complexity. 'Life' comes to mark the material set of social relations among the masses that also define class-specific aesthetic preferences. Crucially, for the Maoist project, including Mao's Yan'an Talks, life also provides the conditions for the transformation of the intellectual, a transformation that is felt above all at the level of aesthetic experience, whereby the intellectual comes to assume the aesthetic experience of the masses as their own. Yet they must do so, also, in order that art and literature may come to transform the conditions of life of the masses. This complex dialectic is central to Mao's Talks, and it relies substantially on a conceptual vocabulary of life produced by Zhou Yang through his engagements with

Chernyshevsky, a powerful intellectual genealogy that has been overlooked. To live in Maoist fashion, then, meant to commit to the refashioning of the intellectual amidst the quotidian life of the masses, whose conditions of daily labour would also provide the conditions for a new, partisan aesthetics.

Life after Socialism

The theoretical demand that writers enter life was soon institutionalised under the People's Republic via the ongoing dispatch of writers to live amongst the masses, signified by the terms 'experiencing life' (体验生活) and 'entering into life' (深入生活). The contours of 'life', and the conditions under which life would remain the basis of literary creation, remained the basis of varied debates around problems of aesthetics and cultural production through the socialist period, with the Russian lineage of this vocabulary being more or less visible according to shifting political conjunctures. The theoretical richness of Maoist life could not, however, be sustained through the Cultural Revolution, which, in addition to the toppling of Zhou Yang and others from power, also witnessed the hollowing-out of life as a set of quotidian social relations and its replacement with the hyper-aestheticised heroes and villains of the model works, as an ultimately failed attempt to stage a new set of communist social relations through a literal life or death struggle between revolution and counterrevolution. The reduction and immiseration of 'life' in the Cultural Revolution portended the re-biologisation of life that rears its head in the present.

Here too, words matter. In the early reform period, an existential conception of life as *rensheng* reappeared as part of a renewed humanist discourse, which, at its most reflective moments, offered a melancholic response to the eclipse of the socialist project. Such a reflection may be found in the 1982 novel *Life* (人生) by celebrated author Lu Yao, recently rendered in

a superb translation by Chloe Estep. The novel marks an emergent existentialist scepticism as to the possibilities of transformation in a post-revolutionary period, narrated through the wholly accidental encounter between a teacher and the conditions of manual labour. This degree of introspection is absent from our contemporary moment. The appearance of life as *shenghuo* in contemporary political language is overwhelmingly recoded in the depoliticised, developmentalist discourse as 'standard of living' (生活水平) or else as the class-bound 'civilised habits of life' (文明生活习惯), which provide a fitting accomplice to the renewed biological notion of *shengming*. Life as *shenghuo* has been deprived of its transformative dimensions.

A political and medical crisis like that of the present opens different paths. A new fascist politics defined by the biologisation of the nation-state under the rubric of life as *shengming* beckons. The alternative, if there is one, is to renew our bonds of solidarity and social life to each other. The political and aesthetic lineage of Maoist life provides some advice as to how, in these times, live a non-fascist life. ■

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