

The Unique Literary Style of Zhao Shuli: Language, Folk Traditions, and the Popularization of Modern Chinese Literature

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Introduction:

Zhao Shuli (赵树理, September 24, 1906- September 23, 1970), occupies a unique position in the history of modern Chinese literature because he developed a literary style that successfully connected modern literature with the everyday lives of ordinary rural people. At a time when much of the new literature was mainly read by educated intellectuals, Zhao Shuli wrote for peasants. He believed that literature should be simple, meaningful, and closely related to the experiences of common people. By combining modern literary ideas with Chinese folk traditions, he created a new style of writing that was both artistic and easily understood by rural readers.

This article examines the major literary techniques and artistic features that make Zhao Shuli's writings distinctive. It explores how he created realistic and memorable characters, organized his plots, and used simple yet lively language to make his stories engaging and believable. Particular attention is given to his use of everyday spoken language, natural dialogue, folk storytelling techniques, humour, nicknames, realistic narration, and hopeful endings. These stylistic features not only made his works enjoyable to read but also enabled him to communicate social ideas effectively to ordinary villagers.

The article also discusses how Zhao Shuli drew inspiration from Chinese folk literature, local customs, oral traditions, proverbs, and village humour while adapting them to the needs of modern fiction. His stories reflect the realities of rural life without losing their artistic appeal. Instead of using complicated language or abstract symbolism, he relied on simple expression, vivid characters, and familiar situations that readers could easily recognize from their own lives.

By analyzing these artistic features, this article demonstrates that Zhao Shuli's uniqueness lies not in any single literary technique but in his successful combination of language, folk culture, realism, and narrative skill. His writings played an important role in narrowing the gap between modern literature and the rural masses and made a significant contribution to the popularization of modern Chinese literature.

Technique and Style of Zhao Shuli's Writings:

Although the May Fourth Movement(1) successfully replaced Classical Chinese(文言) with vernacular Chinese(白话), the new literary language remained largely intellectual in character and was not easily understood by ordinary people. Zhao Shuli sought to overcome this limitation by adopting the spoken language, dialects, and narrative traditions of rural communities, making literature more accessible to peasants and closely connected to Chinese folk culture. From the beginning of his literary career, Zhao Shuli was influenced by left-wing writers such as Lu Xun(鲁迅) and aimed to address the real social problems of China. Unlike many other left-wing writers, he grew up in the countryside and was closely

connected with the language and folk-art forms of rural people. Deeply concerned about rural society, Zhao Shuli believed that progressive ideas could reach the peasants only through a new form of literature that rejected feudal ethics, superstition, and outdated traditions.

As per Zhao Shuli, this new literature had to be understood and embraced by the peasants. Unlike most of the literature at the time, which dealt with the sentiments of the educated youth in a refined language, his stories would contain the smell of the yellow earth, written in a language that the peasants would understand. While studying at the Fourth Normal School in Changzhi County, Zhao Shuli became deeply interested in the New Literature movement and wanted to introduce it to rural readers. However, when he read Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" (阿 Q 正传) to his father, his father soon lost interest. This experience made Zhao Shuli realize that much of the New Literature was difficult for ordinary peasants to understand. It inspired him to write in a simple, accessible style that could communicate with rural readers and better serve their needs.

Zhao Shuli argued that there should be no difference between written and spoken language but, at the same time, he is careful to note that every system of speech has its artistic and non-artistic aspects: the writer must learn first to distinguish these, and then artistically apply whatever required. As Zhao Shuli showed in stories such as "Marriage of Xiao Erhei" (小二黑结婚) and "Changes in Li Village" (李家庄的变迁), he believed that the language of ordinary people was rich, lively, and fully able to express all aspects of life. He rejected the idea that everyday speech was too simple or limited for literature. Zhao Shuli wrote mainly for rural readers and carefully shaped his language and storytelling to match their interests and understanding. He had a deep knowledge of peasant life, their thoughts, and their cultural preferences. Instead of following foreign literary models, he drew on Chinese classical fiction and folk storytelling traditions, adapting them into a simple, lively, and realistic style. His use of colloquial language of the peasant community and his focus on the real problems of rural society made his works popular among ordinary people. Zhao Shuli himself explained that he wrote in the language of the peasants so they could both enjoy his stories and gain new ideas. To ensure his writing was easy to understand, he even read his work to his parents and revised any part they found difficult.

The popularization of literature among the masses was an important concern of the May Fourth Movement and remained a subject of continuous discussion thereafter. Although many writers, including Lu Xun, known as "father of modern Chinese literature", proposed different ideas on how literature could reach ordinary people, Zhao Shuli achieved this goal more successfully than any of his contemporaries. Through his simple language and use of folk literary traditions, he made modern literature accessible to the common people, particularly the rural peasantry, and is still remembered in China for this remarkable achievement. In his works, in terms of creating different character, structure, plot and language, he has created something, unique. His personal artistic style has become a national and popular style. His works which is full of Chinese national flavour, is liked by the masses, has enriched the modern Chinese literature.

The famous communist critic Zhou Yang (周扬) said to his writing "Zhao Shuli is a new comer in the literary world, but he is an author who has made a careful study of life and thoughts in all their aspects. He is an author who matured before he became famous, an original artist who has created a style of his own, and a writer who belongs to the people" (2)

Zhao Shuli combined his deep knowledge of Chinese folk traditions with the progressive ideas of the May Fourth New Literature. Although he appreciated the social message of the New Literature, he believed

that its language and style were too intellectual and lacked a connection with folk literary traditions, limiting its appeal among ordinary people. Rather than simply preserving old literary forms, Zhao Shuli gradually transformed traditional storytelling into a new literary style that was both progressive and accessible. By blending folk narrative techniques with modern ideas, he created literature that ordinary rural readers could understand and appreciate. In his works, he, in one hand maintained national form and on the other hand, systematically rejected whatever not required from both old and new for peasant masses. For example, he never used typical Chinese traditional style(章回). His story “Marriage of Xiao Erhei” (小二黑结婚), though we find some traces of old form specially in structure, otherwise it’s a merely a new typed story. In “Rhymes of Li Youcai” (李有才板话), some rhymes in the story reminds us old form of the past but after reading, one can easily find new things in it, a model work of new national form or new style of Chinese literature. Thus, Zhao Shuli tried to create something new and interesting thing in literature (喜闻乐见, means Popular or like to read and hear) in an intelligent way.

From his child hood days in his village, like other forms of traditional art, Zhao Shuli was also well versed with the old popular entertainment style of ‘talking and singing’ (说唱 3) which is one of the popular sources of his literary creativity. He was also able to perform of ‘talking and singing’. Zhao Shuli successfully applied this oral trend of folk literature like rhyme, poetry, doggerel etc. His story “Rhymes of Li Youcai” (李有才板话) is the example of rhyme and in this story, he imitates that old style and created a new style in ‘talking and singing’ literature. In “Registration” (登记), published in 1950, he used the style of storytelling and starts his story, “Friends, let me present before you a story” (诸位朋友们：今天让我来说个故事) (4) Here Zhao Shuli represent himself as story teller. Later on, he used that style again in” Lingquan” (灵泉). Zhao Shuli liked story telling style and believed that many novels in Chinese literary history became famous because of storytelling method of writing. He tried professional story telling in local colloquial dialect. His story “Exercise Exercise” (锻炼锻炼) starts with a poster. In the story there was a big-character poster published during the rectification movement of the "Zhengxian Agricultural Cooperative" in late autumn of 1957) where the content inside looks like a poem.

The uniqueness of Zhao Shuli's writings lies mainly in his innovative characterization and his distinctive use of language. He broke new ground by creating realistic rural characters and by using the everyday spoken language of ordinary villagers in his fiction. These innovations enabled him to develop a unique literary style that combined realism with Chinese folk literary traditions. As a result, he not only established his own creative identity but also made a significant contribution to the development and popularization of modern Chinese literature. The following sections examine these distinctive features of his writings in detail.

(i)Characters:

One of the most remarkable features of Zhao Shuli's fiction is his realistic and natural portrayal of rural characters. Unlike many modern writers who depended on long descriptions or detailed psychological analysis, Zhao Shuli allowed his characters to reveal themselves through their everyday language, actions, and responses to social conflicts. Influenced by Chinese classical fiction and folk storytelling, he

introduced his characters in a simple yet vivid manner, making them easy for ordinary readers to understand and remember.

Another distinctive feature of Zhao Shuli's characterization is the diversity of his rural characters. His stories include progressive young men and women (Xiao Erhei, Xiao Qin, Xiao Shun -小二黑, 小芹, 小顺) conservative elders (Er Zhuge 二诸葛, Yu Fu 于福) corrupt landlords and officials (Yen Hengyuan 阎恒元, Li Ruzhen 李如珍), hardworking peasants, and ordinary villagers. Each character reflects a particular aspect of rural society and plays an important role in the development of the story. However, Zhao Shuli does not present people as entirely good or entirely bad. Instead, he shows that individuals are shaped by their social background, beliefs, and experiences. As society changes, many of his characters also grow and transform, making them realistic and convincing.

Zhao Shuli also gave special importance to ordinary peasants, who had rarely been treated as central literary figures before. Through characters such as Xiao Erhei, Xiao Qin, Meng Xiangying, and Li Youcai, he portrays the hopes, struggles, courage, and weaknesses of rural people. These characters are not idealized heroes but ordinary individuals facing real social problems. By combining realism with folk narrative techniques, Zhao Shuli created characters that are both socially representative and artistically memorable. Their simplicity, individuality, and close connection with rural life remain one of the defining features of his literary achievement.

(ii) The Unique Language of Zhao Shuli (colloquialism)

One of Zhao Shuli's greatest contributions to modern Chinese literature is his unique use of language. Unlike many May Fourth writers, whose works often contained Europeanized sentence structures and were mainly understood by educated readers, Zhao Shuli wrote in the everyday spoken language of the peasants. He believed that literature should be easily understood by ordinary people, especially rural readers, and therefore transformed the colloquial speech of northern China into an effective literary language.

The most distinctive feature of Zhao Shuli's language is its simplicity, clarity, and naturalness. Both the narration and the dialogues sound like real conversations among villagers. His language is lively, humorous, and full of local flavour without becoming difficult for readers from other parts of China. He also avoided artificial expressions and the Europeanized style that influenced much of the literature of his time. Instead, he created a language that was close to everyday life while remaining artistically refined.

Another important feature of his language is the creative use of folk expressions, proverbs, idioms, and local sayings. These elements not only make the stories vivid and entertaining but also help reveal the personalities of the characters and the realities of rural society. Zhao Shuli believed that written language should remain close to spoken language, and he carefully revised his works to ensure that ordinary peasants could understand them. For example: Zhao Shuli's use of everyday spoken language makes his characters realistic and believable. For example, in "Registration" (登记), Wan asks Ai Ai, "I have heard that your father and mother have gone off with that old Aunt Wu (the matchmaker) to get you a husband. Is it true?" ("听说你爹你妈跟东院里五奶奶去给你找主儿去了。是不是?") Ai Ai replies, "How would I know why that damn old man loves to meddle in other people's business so much?" ("咱哪里知道那老木死的为什么那么爱管闲事?"). The expression "老木死的" ("that damn old man" or "that old fool") is a rural colloquial expression that conveys Ai Ai's anger and frustration. By using such local dialect and informal speech, Zhao Shuli captures the natural voice of rural people and makes his characters appear authentic and lifelike.

Zhao Shuli's language is therefore more than a means of communication; it is an artistic expression of rural life and folk culture. By combining colloquial speech with the techniques of Chinese classical fiction and folk storytelling, he created a fresh literary style that was realistic, lively, humorous, and accessible. This unique language became one of the defining features of his fiction and established him as one of the pioneers of popular literature in modern China.

Other Distinctive Features of Zhao Shuli's Literary Style:

Besides his use of simple spoken language, folk narrative techniques, and realistic characterization, Zhao Shuli employed several other literary devices that made his fiction unique and widely accepted among rural readers. His creative use of nicknames, gentle humour, optimistic endings, realism, and straightforward narration not only enriched his artistic style but also helped him communicate progressive ideas in a form that ordinary people could easily understand and enjoy.

(i) Use of Nicknames:

One of the most distinctive features of Zhao Shuli's fiction is his creative use of nicknames. Nicknames have long been a part of Chinese folk culture and oral storytelling. In traditional Chinese society, people often received nicknames based on their appearance, habits, personality, occupation, or behaviour. Zhao Shuli adopted this folk tradition and made it an important part of his literary style.

Unlike the heroic nicknames found in classical novels such as "Water Margin", Zhao Shuli's nicknames have a strong rural flavour and are closely connected with the daily lives of ordinary villagers. They are humorous, meaningful, and immediately reveal the personality of the characters. Readers can easily understand a character's nature even before reading the full story.

For example, Er Zhuge (The second ZhuGeliang, 二诸葛) is ironically named after the famous strategist Zhuge Liang. Instead of being wise, he is superstitious and constantly consults fortune-telling before making decisions. San Xiang (三仙姑, taken from Chinese myth) is a village woman who pretends to possess supernatural powers and misleads people through superstition. In "Exercise Exercise", the nicknames Xiao Tuiteng (小腿疼, "Calf Pain") and Chi Bubao (吃不饱, "Never Full") humorously describe two women whose laziness and greed become central to their characterization.

Many of Zhao Shuli's nicknames also come from local opera, folk customs, and everyday rural speech. They not only make the characters more memorable but also preserve important elements of rural folk culture. Through these names, Zhao Shuli expresses both sympathy and gentle criticism, allowing readers to laugh at the characters while also understanding their weaknesses.

(ii) Humour and Satire:

Humour is another important feature of Zhao Shuli's literary style. His stories are full of amusing situations, witty conversations, and gentle satire. Instead of attacking feudal customs or corrupt village officials with anger, he exposes their foolishness through laughter. His humour is never cruel or offensive; rather, it encourages readers to think about social problems in a relaxed and enjoyable way.

For instance, in "*Marriage of Xiao Erhei*", the ageing San Xiang continues to dress and behave like a young woman. Zhao Shuli humorously compares her heavily powdered face to "a frosted donkey dropping," creating a vivid comic image that rural readers could immediately appreciate. The description is funny, but it also gently criticizes vanity and hypocrisy.

Similarly, Er Zhuge's blind belief in fortune-telling becomes the source of repeated humour. Because he waits for an "auspicious day" before sowing his crops, he misses the right season and suffers poor harvests.

Later, young villagers jokingly ask him whether the day is suitable for planting, making him an object of village laughter. Through such humorous scenes, Zhao Shuli criticizes superstition without directly preaching to his readers.

Humour also appears in dialogues. In “Registration”, Yanyan is shocked when she first time saw that the boy chosen as her future husband is much younger than she expected. Her innocent thought that he "should still be drinking his mother's milk" creates a humorous situation while exposing the absurdity of arranged marriages. Such humour made Zhao Shuli's stories lively and entertaining while carrying a serious social message.

(iii) Happy endings:

Another distinctive feature of Zhao Shuli's fiction is his preference for happy endings. Unlike many May Fourth writers, especially Lu Xun, whose stories often end in tragedy or despair, Zhao Shuli usually concludes his stories with success, reunion, or social progress.

In “Marriage of Xiao Erhei”, Xiao Erhei and Xiao Qin finally overcome feudal opposition and marry happily. In “Registration”, Ai Ai and Yanyan succeed in defending their right to choose their own marriages. In “The Rhymes of Li Youcai”, corrupt landlords lose their power and justice begins to prevail. These endings reflect the gradual transformation of rural society during the revolutionary period.

Zhao Shuli believed that literature should encourage people rather than leave them hopeless. His optimistic endings gave rural readers confidence that social change was possible. They also reflected the expectations of peasant readers, who traditionally preferred stories ending in reunion, justice, and happiness. By combining entertainment with hope, Zhao Shuli inspired readers to believe in a better future.

(iv) Realism:

Realism forms the foundation of Zhao Shuli's literary style. His stories are based on the everyday lives of ordinary peasants rather than on romantic imagination or symbolic expression. He wrote about familiar subjects such as farming, village administration, family disputes, marriage, superstition, and land reform because these were the realities experienced by rural people.

His realism is practical and people-centred. Even when writing about love, Zhao Shuli presents it within the social and economic conditions of village life. His characters speak naturally, behave like ordinary villagers, and solve problems through practical action rather than heroic sacrifice. Because of this close connection with real life, his fiction appears authentic and convincing.

(v) Straightforward Narrative Style:

Zhao Shuli's narration is simple, direct, and highly effective. Instead of lengthy descriptions or complicated psychological analysis, he allows readers to understand characters through their speech, actions, and interactions with others. A character's personality is gradually revealed through everyday events rather than through the author's direct explanation.

For example, Zhao Shuli introduces Xiao Qin's beauty not by describing her appearance in detail but by showing how the young men of the village always follow her wherever she goes. “When Xiaoqin goes to wash the clothes, all of the youngsters also go to wash their clothes; whenever Xiaoping climbs on to the tree to pick some wild herbs and vegetables, then again all of the youngsters of the village also go to pick them. (5)

(小芹今年十八了，村里的轻薄人说，比她娘年轻时候好得多。青年小伙子们，有事没事，总想跟小芹说句话。小芹去洗衣服，马上青年们也都去洗；小芹上树采野菜，马上青年们也都去采。)

This indirect method is simple, lively, and more impressive than elaborate physical descriptions. Such straightforward narration reflects the influence of Chinese folk storytelling, where stories move quickly and characters are revealed through action and dialogue.

Conclusion:

Zhao Shuli's literary style is unique in the history of modern Chinese literature because he successfully combined modern literary ideas with the rich traditions of Chinese folk culture. At a time when much of modern literature was mainly read by educated intellectuals, he created stories that ordinary villagers could easily understand and enjoy. His use of simple spoken language, realistic characters, folk storytelling techniques, memorable nicknames, gentle humour, hopeful endings, and straightforward narration gave his works a distinctive identity that set him apart from most of his contemporaries.

Unlike many May Fourth writers who relied on complex language, symbolism, or psychological analysis, Zhao Shuli preferred clarity, simplicity, and realism. He portrayed the everyday lives of peasants in a natural and lively manner, allowing readers to recognize themselves and their society in his stories. His characters speak like real villagers, his dialogues sound natural, and his plots are closely connected with the social realities of rural China. As a result, his fiction was not only artistically successful but also widely accepted by common readers.

Another remarkable feature of Zhao Shuli's writing is his successful integration of folk literary traditions into modern fiction. He borrowed techniques from oral storytelling, local opera, proverbs, idioms, and village humour, but used them to express modern social ideas. In this way, he created a new literary style that preserved China's cultural traditions while supporting social progress and reform.

Therefore, Zhao Shuli's uniqueness lies not in any single technique but in the successful combination of all these artistic elements. His writings demonstrate that literature can be both aesthetically rich and socially meaningful, both modern and deeply rooted in national culture. Through this distinctive literary style, Zhao Shuli bridged the gap between intellectual literature and the rural masses, making him one of the most original and influential writers of twentieth-century Chinese literature. His works remain an outstanding example of how literature can educate, entertain, and inspire ordinary people without sacrificing artistic quality.

Notes:

1. The May Fourth Movement (1917–1921) brought a major change to Chinese literature and communication through the Literary Revolution. It replaced the old classical Chinese language (wenyan-wenyan), used mainly by educated elites, with baihua (白话-vernacular written Chinese), the language of everyday people. This change made reading and writing easier for ordinary people and helped make modern Chinese literature, education, and political participation more accessible.
2. "Rhymes of Li youcai and other stories", Zhao Shuli, Foreign Language Press, Beijing.1980
3. This narrative art form emerged as a way to recount history, legends, and religion. Performers use drums, gongs, and stringed instruments, blending speaking (cross-talk, pingshu) and singing (big drum, ballad singing) to entertain audiences.
4. "Rhymes of Li youcai and other stories", Zhao Shuli, Foreign Language Press, Beijing.1980
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