

# The Literary Practice to “Suit All Taste” in Zhao Shuli’s Works

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## Abstract:

Nowadays, the literary practice of some writers has presented a “Fusion of elegance and vulgarity” writing style. “Elegance” and “Vulgarity” have been important angles of view for scholars to understand Chinese literature and art since ancient times. Therefore, based on collecting relevant authoritative literature, this paper analyzes some academic research results and explores the literary creation style of “Suit all taste” in Zhao Shuli’s works. This paper shows that the relationship between “Elegance” and “Vulgarity” is dynamic and the boundary between them is fuzzy. There are also several limitations when defining both of them. As a typical feature of Zhao Shuli’s novels, “Suit all taste” is embodied in artistic form, characterization, and ideology. This kind of creation idea not only affects the local literature but also has a profound influence on modern and contemporary literature, providing the theory support for the literature creation. From this, “Elegance” and “Vulgarity” mutual integration, is an important element of modern literary creation.

**Keywords:** Zhao Shuli; peasant novel; Elegance in Vulgarity; Suit all Taste; literary practice.

## 1. Introduction

In the thirty years of development of modern Chinese literature, mainstream literature, and popular literature have opposed each other, exchanged, and integrated. Most of the mainstream literature admired by the May Fourth New Literature is “Elegant Literature”, which attached importance to the political, utilitarian nature, and social value of literature, and occupies the center of the literary stage. At the same time, Popular Literature is excluded to a certain extent because of its entertainment and interest, resulting in popular literature being on the edge of the

literary world. Therefore, in the relevant research on the May Fourth New Literature, compared with Elegant Literature, Popular Literature has lower attention and research level. Generally speaking, issues such as the concept, scope, research methods, development direction of popular literature, and its distinction and definition from Elegant Literature are more worthy of in-depth study and discussion.

With the evolution of social thoughts and the continuous development of literary creation techniques, Zhao Shuli, a representative of modern Chinese literary writers who write peasant novels, has shown the creative characteristics of “Elegance in vulgarity” in

his literary practice. Zhao Shuli's novels *Xiao Erhei Gets Married*, *Sanliwan Village*, *Li Youcai's Banhua*, and many other peasant novels embody the artistic realm of "Suit all taste", which have had a profound impact on the novel creation of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, peasant literature, popular literature, and revolutionary literature. According to Tang Zhesheng's *The Distinction of Elegance and Vulgar in Chinese Literature in the 20th Century*, it can be seen that although there are obvious differences between elegance and vulgar literature in modern literature in the 20th century, the general trend is to infiltrate each other and merge [1]. In addition, according to Wang Xianpei's *The Characteristics of Zhao Shuli's Popular Literature Thought and Its Historical Destiny*, Zhao Shuli was once established as a banner for the popularization of literature and art. At the same time, he urged artists to understand and respect farmers' aesthetic tastes, care about farmers' interests, and reflect farmers' demands. This artistic style has far-reaching influence [2]. His novels had a distinct anti-feudal tendency and his artistic style had a far-reaching influence. The paper's understanding and mutual integration of refined and popular literature and the study of Zhao Shuli's literature will also bring new enlightenment.

## 2. The Definition of Elegant Literature and Popular Literature

Whether in the traditional aesthetic concept or the contemporary aesthetic value, the binary division of "Elegance" and "Vulgarity" has always existed. Their opposites had many meanings in pre-qin Confucianism. Firstly, it is the opposition of cultures inside and outside the system, that is, ideological opposition. Secondly, it is the opposition of the past and the present. Thirdly, it is the opposite of sex. Fourth, it is the opposite of teaching and entertainment[3]. Throughout the history of literature, the opposite relation between "Elegance" and "Vulgarity" is more inclined to the fourth way of saying. Elegant literature focuses on the transmission of culture and education of the people. While popular literature is more focused on entertainment and recreation, reflecting social reality and popular feelings. However, compared with the traditional concept of literary creation, in modern and contemporary literature, the relationship between "Elegance" and "Vulgarity" is not limited to the rigid definition principle in the traditional sense. Instead, it presents a close relationship of mutual accommodation and interdependence.

Liu Xie explained the meaning of "Elegance" in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. "Elegance" was defined by three criteria: whether it is conducive to

political indoctrination or not, whether it is ethical or not, whether it embodies the beauty of rhetoric or not. It can be seen that elegant literature is often closely related to intellectuals and upper-class society. Its theme tends to be orthodox. Its content is mostly related to moral education and other aspects. And its language and form are more standardized. Therefore, it is an elegant and pure literary form with very high aesthetic value. Later, the large system of elegant literature was divided into "Pure literature", "Elite literature", "Serious literature" and other important branches. By contrast, the popular literature pays more attention to the civilian life and social situation. In the history of Chinese popular literature, Mr. Zheng Zhenduo gave a reasonable explanation of popular literature, "*Popular literature is popular literature, folk literature, and popular literature. In other words, the so-called popular literature is not elegant, not for the attention of scholars and doctors, but popular among the people, and become the People's favorite, the joy of things*"[4]. "Popular literature" is often associated with lower-class scholars and ordinary people, which is easy and close to life. Taking colloquialism as the main language carrier, it covers fiction, opera, folklore, and more.

According to Liu Xie, "*The scriptures are told according to the standard and the sayings according to the standard*". Mr. Zheng Zhenduo, on the other hand, believes that the quality of popular literature is fresh and daring to introduce new things. It is the opposite of the tendency of refined literature to imitate the ancient [5]. In modern times, under the influence of the May 4th new literature, Avant-garde writers like Zhang Henshui and Zhao Shuli began to mix elegance with popularity. Their works are in the pursuit of artistic, innovative, and ideological, but also to pay more attention to the works of popularity, interest, and life. Zhao Shuli's peasant novels, in particular, are no longer limited to the elite intellectuals but are based on the real life of the peasants, the creation of peasant-related literature, and the creation of literature that farmers can understand. Therefore, the boundary between "Elegant literature" and "Popular literature" is ambiguous. "Elegant" and "Vulgarity" are dynamic and a group of categories containing rich cultural accumulation from the historical perspective. They are always in the literary development of the base position [6].

## 3. "Elegance in Vulgar": The Artistic Features of Zhao Shuli's Peasant Novels

"Elegance in vulgar", that is, in folk culture or popular

culture, contains elegant cultural elements or spiritual connotations. The formation of this cultural phenomenon, on the one hand, stems from the rich diversity and innovation of folk culture. On the other hand, it was also closely related to the cultural blending and ideological emancipation of the society at that time. With the rise of New Culture and the transformation of traditional culture, popular culture began to absorb the essence of elegant culture. The elegant culture also borrowed from the popular culture of the expression and dissemination of ways. In the 1940s, Mao Zedong put forward the idea of “The division of the literary field” in the Yan’an Forum. It shows that artistic creation should not only draw nourishment from folk literature but also draw lessons from elegant and excellent artistic heritage. The birth of this idea, to a large extent, has influenced Zhao Shuli’s literary creation. Since the publication of his works such as *Xiao Erhei Gets Married* and *Li Youcai’s Banhua*, Zhao Shuli was highly regarded in the literary world for his Nothing in Common peasant novels and critical language. He created the “Yam Egg Sect”, which had a far-reaching impact on the entire literary community. Most of his novels are set in rural areas of North China, exposing the vicissitudes and conflicts at the bottom of society. They reflected the peasant’s life, the peasant’s emotions, and the peasant’s pursuit in plain and simple language. They also reflected the pursuit of advanced ideological values. It is the true portrayal of “Elegance in vulgarity”.

In Zhao Shuli’s peasant novels, the artistic concept of “Elegance in vulgarity” is mainly embodied in his flexible borrowing of rich folk art forms, Allegro, ballad, rhyme, etc. And these popular literary elements are skillfully interspersed in the novel between the lines. The novella, *Li Youcai’s Banhua*, is the best example of folk art narration [7]. The shadow of popular literature can be seen everywhere in *Li Youcai’s Banhua*. Each chapter has a specific embodiment. This paper takes the two Allegro passages in the third chapter *Beating the Tiger* as an example. Paragraph one is “*The first month twenty-five, down with a tiger, to twenty-six, the tiger even more bitter, we give advice, the tail can not hide, gudong press down on the ground, hit a rabbit back. Home Xiang Dry Eye, Heng Yuan a pair of pants. Everyone laughed and felt comfortable.*” Paragraph two is “*Old Heng Yuan, what a bastard, clinging to the village head. Say the election, is false, nephew come down stem son go up. Xifu is Heng Yuan’s nephew, and Guangju is his godson*” [8].

As a traditional form of Quyi, Allegro literature has the most remarkable characteristic of “Enjoying both elegance and vulgarity”. The two excerpts of this article are told in a “Grounded” way and humorous spoken language. So

the audience and readers can deeply feel the feelings and values conveyed in the story while enjoying the beauty of art. From the content, the excerpt reveals the fact that Yan Hengyuan cheated in the process of re-election of the village head. He was elected village chief year after year, and later gave the position to his “Nephew” and “Godson”, secretly controlling the overall situation and burying the opportunities of ordinary people. Zhao Shuli’s humorous utterances, which rhyme and rhyme with each other, and his popular way of lashing out at the injustice of reality, make people laugh at the absurdity of reality. “Laugh” is the absurdity of reality. “Cry” is the injustice of the world, which is a true reflection of the psychological changes of all classes in rural areas.

In the rural areas of the early 20th century, landlords and bullies ran rampant, colluding with each other and oppressing peasants. The so-called “Tiger slaying” targets such unscrupulous exploiters. In *Li Youcai’s Banhua*, this kind of person is embodied, which refers to the manipulators and exploiters like Yan Hengyuan and Yan Qingjing. In the form of a folk allegro, Zhao Shuli resonates with readers, exposing the evil acts of the village chief, Yan Hengyuan, who oversaw the whole world and acted recklessly, accusing the social reality of falsifying and “Unfair elections”. Between the lines, there is sympathy for the reality of rural life and the plight of the oppressed peasants, it reflects Zhao Shuli’s absorption and transformation of the nutrition of folk literature and art in the process of literary creation and his deep feelings towards the countryside and peasants. It has distinctive local characteristics and profound social significance. This is the high cultural connotation in popular literature.

#### 4. The Artistic Realm of “Suit All Taste”

The artistic concept of “Suit all taste” refers to the creator’s artistic creation. Combining high art with popular art to achieve an artistic realm that is both elegant and popular so that the works not only meet the aesthetic standards of high art but also can be loved by the general public.

Zhao Shuli’s portrayal of the main character, San Xian’gu, in *Xiao Erhei Gets Married* is a classic: San Xian’gu is different from everyone else. Although she is already 45 years old, she prefers to act coquettishly. She still has embroidery on her shoes and lace on her trouser legs. She also shaved all the hair on her head and covered it with a black handkerchief. It’s a pity that the powder cannot smooth out the wrinkles on her face, and she looks like a donkey dung covered with frost [9]. San Xian’gu, in the

article, is already a middle-aged rural woman, but she tries to look younger through exquisite decorations and make-up. For instance, “*Small shoes should still be embroidered, and trouser legs should still be trimmed*” are more elegant details. It reflects San Xian’gu’s pursuit of traditional aesthetics as a rural woman. Description of “*The hair on the top door was stripped off and covered with a black handkerchief*”, and the metaphor of “*Frost on donkey dung*”, which looks rustic and has a certain vulgarity. The elegant details and simple metaphors skillfully blend the elements of elegance and vulgarity. It not only maintains the depth of literature but also is close to the real life of the majority of readers. This integration makes the words full of life and a particular artistic expression, which is impressive to read.

Zhao Shuli’s detailed description of rural life has achieved a deep understanding of folk culture and is also famous for it being deeply loved by readers. His representative work *Xiao Erhei Gets Married* once received Peng Dehuai’s personal inscription, “*Such popular stories written from mass surveys and research are rare*”. Adhering to the artistic principles of realism and drawing on true stories from rural areas in Taiyuan, the novel *Xiao Erhei Gets Married* describes the bright ending of a young couple. During the Anti-Japanese War, the young man and woman Xiao Erhei and Xiao Qin were in pursuit of freedom of marriage in the Liberated Area. They broke through feudal traditions and conservative parents’ obstruction and finally married. The novel has given the farmers hope and the possibility to pursue happiness freely. Secondly, Zhao Shuli is also committed to promoting the awakening of feudal farmers, as represented by Er Zhuge and San Xian’gu. At that time, rural areas had an equally important task as Land Reform: to oppose feudal thoughts. Not only feudal landlords but also ordinary farmers became guardians of feudal society. In response to this phenomenon, Zhao Shuli asked farmers to empathize with the works, which will definitely cause farmers to reflect on themselves. Finally, the novel also reveals the transformation of Er Zhuge and San Xian’gu, which also gave farmers subtle guidance in their ideological concepts [10].

Zhao Shuli’s works have a funny and optimistic style, undulating plots, fleshy characters, vivid, simple, and humorous language, and a popular style with the masses. At the same time, it accurately and truly reflects the psychological changes of all classes and the vivid reality of China’s rural areas in various periods before and after liberation. The blending and evolution of creative techniques and old and new ideas is also the blending of “Elegance” and “Vulgarity”.

## 5. The Influence of Zhao Shuli’s Literary Practice of “Suit All Taste” on Chinese Modern and Contemporary Literature

Zhao Shuli’s works have had a wide impact on Chinese modern and contemporary literature in the literary practice of “Suit all taste”. By combining folk cultural elements with an elegant artistic style, Zhao created a novel literary form that enriched literary expression and expanded the audience of literature. This stems not only from Zhao Shuli’s literary expression and influence in literary creation but also from creating a creative method of “Suit all taste” and forming a new form of literary expression. This form is not limited to local literature but also has an impact on modern literature.

The Literary Revolution that broke out in 1917 and the subsequent Five-Fourth New Culture Movement announced the end of the era in which popular literature dominated the world. The new literature marked by enlightenment aesthetics became the mainstream of China’s literary modernization [11]. Therefore, in the literary world of the 1920s, there was a lack of literary and artistic works that truly stood on the people’s standpoint and were liked and accepted by the people. However, the tradition of Chinese popular novel creation has not been interrupted. The writers all wrote brilliantly about rural China, and most of them discovered farmers with humanitarian or class concepts, including Lu Hsun and local writers in the 1920s, Ye Zi, Sha Ting, Mao Dun, Xiao Hong, and others in the 1930s. The farmers in their novels were mainly regarded as objects of sympathy and pity. Zhao actually inherited and promoted this literary tradition, but he did not discover farmers in a general sense. He directly talked to farmers to demonstrate the historical initiative and new moral outlook that workers radiate in the process of gradually breaking the shackles [12]. By the Anti-Japanese War period in the 1940s, the possibility of the shift from intellectual discourse to peasant discourse was increasingly strengthened, which laid the foundation for the rise of Zhao Shuli. Zhao’s novels are not only popular among ordinary peasant readers but also refresh the entire literary world.

Zhao Shuli regards the popularization of literature and art, which he has clearly promoted as the main “Cultural Popularization” method since 1941. It also became integral to the New Enlightenment Movement, thereby realizing the “New Enlightenment of cultural popularization” [13]. The novella *Xiao Erhei Gets Married*, written by Zhao Shuli in 1943, describes a young man and woman, Xiao Erhei and

Xiao Qin, in the Liberated Area during the Anti-Japanese War in pursuit of freedom of marriage, breaking through feudal traditions and the obstruction of old-fashioned parents, and finally getting married. The representative of “Allegro Literature”, published in the same year, *Li Youcai's Banhua*, focuses on describing the struggle for the re-election of village power and rent and interest reduction during the Anti-Japanese War. It is a story in which Li Youcai, the farmer, uses “Banhua” as a weapon to carry out complex and sharp struggles with the landlord, Yan Hengyuan, and finally wins with wisdom. The novel *Sanliwan Village*, published in 1955, focused on the four tasks of the Sanliwan Agricultural Cooperative: autumn harvest, cooperative expansion, party consolidation, and canal opening. It describes the complex contradictions and entanglements of the four families of Ma Duoshou, Fan Deng’gao, Yuan Tiancheng, and Wang Jinsheng. It reflected the conflict between advanced and backward forces in rural areas and showed the rural lifestyle during significant social change [14]. It can be seen that paying attention to reality and serving the struggle of reality is Zhao Shuli’s creative pursuit. Through an in-depth analysis of these old-style farmers who bear the heavy historical burden of feudalism, Zhao Shuli has his own unique understanding and discovery of the liberated Chinese rural society. This understanding is that although the declining and decadent feudal economic system has been eliminated in the new society, the influence of feudal traditional thoughts and the original intention of small production still existed for a long time. It will take a long historical process for farmers to truly achieve spiritual liberation [13].

Mr Chen Huangmei said: (Zhao Shuli was) *a writer who was praised as “The most concrete implementation of Chairman Mao’s literary and artistic policy” in the 19C* [15]. The use of popular spoken language in Zhao Shuli’s novels is integrated with the people’s customs and customs in Shanxi, forming the unique natural, cordial, humorous, and simple language style of Zhao Shuli’s novels. This artistic style influenced many Shanxi writers, such as Ma Feng, Xi Rong, Sun Qian, Shu Wei, Hu Zheng, etc. They not only pay attention to linking creation with “Actual work” in rural areas but also maintain Shanxi’s strong regional characteristics and pay attention to the popularization of their works. Even the nicknames given to characters and the humorous light comedy style of the novel are quite like Zhao Shuli. Therefore, they were called the “Yam Egg Sect” [16]. Based on Zhao Shuli’s literary achievements, his works were widely praised in the Jiefang District in the 1940s. In 1947, the “Zhao Shuli Direction” was established for him at a literature and art symposium held in the Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan

Border Region.

Professor Fan Boqun wrote in the general preface to *The Series of Commentary Biography of Popular Writers in Modern China*, published in 1994: *Pure literature and popular literature are the wings of literature, and the literary history written in the future should be a literary history with wings flying together* [17]. Therefore, the literary market and mainstream values will change in the contemporary literary period, including several factors such as the influence of the new literary environment, changes in the writer team, and improvement of reader needs. Based on understanding Zhao Shuli’s literary creation, contemporary writers will learn from Zhao Shuli’s experience during the creative process, combine local culture with elegant art, and find a new balance between tradition and modernity, folk customs and elegance. This will explore the correct path of “Adapting to customs” in contemporary Chinese literature and form more diverse literary styles.

## 6. Conclusion

In Chinese modern and contemporary literature, the relationship between “Elegance” and “Vulgarity” is not limited to the rigid definition principles in the traditional sense but presents an interconnected and integrated dynamic relationship. Therefore, the boundary between the two is ambiguous. On the one hand, “Elegance in vulgarity” means that elegant cultural elements or spiritual connotations are contained in folk culture or popular culture. On the other hand, “Suit all tastes” is reflected in Zhao Shuli’s works, which integrate traditional folk elements with new aesthetic forms of modern literature. This includes integrating and evolving artistic techniques and old ideas in novel creation, ultimately achieving “Elegance in vulgarity” and achieving the realm of “Suit all taste”.

With a work style and creative attitude of seeking truth from facts, Zhao Shuli presented his profound experience of the revolutionary process in China’s rural areas in his works. It made him one of the most outstanding writers who represented China’s rural areas after Lu Hsun in the 1920s. This enriched the expression forms of modern Chinese literature and promoted the attention of the literary world and the masses to social reality and cultural issues. Zhao Shuli’s works reflected the vivid reality of China’s rural areas in various periods before and after liberation and gave farmers subtle guidance in ideological concepts. The unique style and profound connotation in the work have had a profound impact on modern Chinese literature. This provided valuable experience and inspiration for the creation of subsequent writers while promoting the further

development of literary creation. Therefore, Zhao Shuli's contribution to the "Suit all taste" is far-reaching.

This paper is relatively simple regarding textual analysis of Zhao Shuli's works, so it fails to provide detail. Therefore, more relevant theories should be introduced in subsequent research, including a more in-depth analysis of the specific narrative techniques, language styles, and characterization in Zhao Shuli's works. Furthermore, we should expand the scope of the analysis and cover more of Zhao Shuli's works, making the study more in-depth and comprehensive.

#### Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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