

Youth in literature and art offers inspiration today

LITERATURE

By JIANG SHUZHUO

For the past few centuries, China has been faced with internal and external troubles. Amid turbulence and decline, generations of people with lofty ideals have persistently called for the awakening and prosperity of China. As Liang Qichao, the renowned Chinese scholar and reformist, once observed at the turn of the 20th century, "the thriving youth lead to a thriving nation." China's future lies in its youth.

Since its founding, the CPC has relied on the youth and their revolutionary spirit and enthusiasm. Over the past 100 years, many works of literature portrayed inspiring images of young people, who are vibrant, moving, and serve as role models for new generations of youth today.

Seeking a life purpose

Under the influence of the May Fourth Movement and New Culture Movement, Chinese intellectuals called for national independence, equality and freedom, emancipation of the individual, and rebuilding society and culture.

Jiang Guangci, praised as "the pioneer of revolutionary literature," wrote the novella *Young Wanderers* in 1926. It tells the story of young Wang Zhong, who lost both of his parents and found himself forced to search for his own way in life, wandering through central China as an apprentice, a beggar, and a worker. Finally, he signed up for the Huangpu Military Academy to become a soldier and eventually died in combat. During these wanderings, Wang underwent the awakening of his conscience amid traumatic experiences. He resisted exploitation and inequality, pursued progress and happiness, and longed to change his destiny and realize his ideal in the revolution, which reflected the awakening of Chinese society after centuries of lethargy.

The transformation of Wang, from a young wanderer to an icon of revolutionary spirit, inspired countless peers who also sought a life purpose by devoting themselves to the revolution.

During the crucial period of the 1920s in the Chinese Revolution, a group of left-wing writers focused on young people's ideological distress and actively searched for answers. For example, Chinese novelist Ding Ling focused on young women who pursued equality, freedom, liberation of character, and spiritual emancipation. Though they were somewhat trapped by



FILE PHOTO: The TV drama *Minneding Town* chronicles the immeasurable trials and hard won triumphs of young Ma Defu who tries his best to keep villagers from leaving and, with the help of dedicated experts, build a once uninhabited land into a prosperous community.

troubles in real life, even doubted the meaning of life and value, these heroines never gave up the fight for light and hope.

Similarly, Mao Dun's first major work *Eclipse (Shih)*, which consists of three slim volumes, also profiled a group of women who fought and resisted fearlessly and relentlessly in the face of depression, confusion, and despair. In the unremitting exploration, they, with their own strength, walked out of the predicament and achieved a form of rebirth.

In his novel *Rainbow (Hong)*, Mao Dun chronicled the political and social disruptions in China during the early years of the 20th century. The heroine Mei Xingsu was an educated youth. During the May Fourth Movement, she supported the nationwide boycott of Japanese goods, and she was enlightened by *New Youth* magazine. Afterwards, she embarked on a journey that took her from the limitations of the traditional family to join the May 30 Movement and work for the women's federation.

Such progressive thinking is not reserved in literary works for youth during the revolutionary and war periods, but also in those times of socialist construction and reform and opening up. Wang Meng's *Long Live Youth* tells the story of a group of high school girls who face contradictions and proactively seek a life purpose. In *A Red Shirt without Buttons* by Tie Ning, the author portrays an independent youth who, after some mental anguish, gives up being a model student to wear a red shirt among the uniformity of blues and greys. The story captures the spirit of the new era, when nonconformist behavior was beginning to emerge. The TV drama, *Like a Flowing River*, is set during the period of the Chinese economic reform from 1978 until 1992 and

tells the story of three men who push the boundaries amidst trying times. The protagonist Song Yunhui is an explorer and practitioner who insists on ideals and principles and dares to innovate in his work.

Riding with the times

In the 1920s, many works that talked about youth also touched upon the relationship between individuals and collectivity, individuals and organizations, and individuals and the revolutionary cause.

In *Ni Huanzhi* by Ye Shaojun, the protagonist Ni Huanzhi was an idealistic, reform-minded schoolteacher in a turbulent era. He was convinced that education is the hope of all hopes, and carried out experiments in rural primary schools with new methodologies despite strong resistance from his fellow coworkers and the parents. Jin Peizhang, who held the same belief in the reform of education, fell in love with Ni and married him. However, Jin Peizhang became a housewife after they had a baby, and indulged in household chores all day long. Upon failure of the reform and disillusionment of romance, Ni moved to Shanghai to engage in urban political activities, but the abortive 1927 revolution brought on his final descent into hopelessness and death. On his deathbed, he still longed for the bright day when "there must be people different from us."

Mao Dun spoke highly of this novel, saying that Ni Huanzhi's adaptation to the times "from education to mass movement, from liberalism to collectivism" was to be lauded.

In the 1930s, left-wing films such as *Fate of Graduates*, *Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm*, and *Let's Live Together* also portrayed figures who properly handled the relationship between personal life and the public course, and indi-

vidualism and collectivism. In *Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm*, the wandering poet Xin Baihua gave up a relationship with the glamorous and westernized widow Ms Shi and joined in the resistance against the Japanese invasion upon the occurrence of the Mukden Incident, or September 18 Incident, of 1931. It shows an intellectual's progression from hesitation to awakened struggle and revolution, reflecting the popular will to resist the Japanese military occupation of Northeast China.

Yang Mo's *Song of Youth* depicts a young woman's ideological transformation into a revolutionary youth. Lin Daojing gradually realized that only under the leadership of the CPC could the fate of individuals and the nation be united and salvaged.

Such a spirit of immersing oneself in the masses and pursuing the greater good can also be seen in Liang Shengbao from Liu Qing's novel *History of Entrepreneurship*, Sun Shao'an from Lu Yao's *Ordinary World*, Ma Defu from TV drama *Minneding Town*, and Lei Dongbao from *Like a Flowing River*. They devote everything they have to the cause of socialist construction and reform, striving for collective development and the common prosperity of the people, and eventually becoming the trendsetters of the times and vanguards of entrepreneurship.

Spirit of sacrifice

In the struggle for national independence and liberation, the people's army under the leadership of the CPC made great contributions. Without their arduous struggle and sacrifice, there would have been no new China, no peace, and no security. In TV drama *Defend Yan'an*, Zhou Dayong was a brave and resourceful soldier with a strong will. At the age of 24, he commanded a

battalion and grew into a revolutionary hero.

TV drama *Dong Cunrui* depicts the glorious image of a young soldier. Dong was determined to join the army at a young age, and he grew from a common civilian into a brave soldier and finally he heroically sacrificed his life in the destruction of the enemy's blockhouse. Similarly, in TV drama *Heroic Sons and Daughters*, Wang Cheng, a heroic soldier, showed acts of valor and died in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (1950-53). The images of young soldiers in literary and artistic works have become hardcore models in contemporary literature and art, inspiring generations of young people to struggle for the better future of the nation.

During the socialist construction period, Lei Feng became a cultural icon for his selfless acts of helping others. Nearly half a century after his death, books, essays, and news articles about him are still being produced in print and internet media and his name is ingrained in popular culture.

Again, Sun Shaoping in *Ordinary World* is sincere and kind, with a heart of gold. After suffering disfigurement from a mining accident and the death of his life, he refused to stay in the city, and returned to the coal mine, to take care of his coworkers' families. He is an ordinary young man, but has extraordinary behavior and quality, an embodiment of the hardworking and high moral youth in the new era.

Song Yunhui in *Like a Flowing River* grew from a college student to a technician and then to the executive deputy director of a state-owned chemical enterprise. He keeps up with the times and makes bold reforms. He devoted himself to technological transformation and promoting the joint venture. He even sacrificed his future in exchange for the progress of the enterprise, which makes him a truly respectable role model in today's era.

Over the past 100 years, Chinese literature and art have delineated the struggle and journey of young people, and praised their selfless dedication and high spirit, inspiring and encouraging the masses, which earns them an irreplaceable role in China's socialist revolution and construction. In the new era, how literature and art should depict the youth of today and how they can learn from past experience is worthy of further reflection and discussion.

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