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### Gorky Motives in Prose about Tramps Ai Wu

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**Abstract.** Compared the originality of the depiction of people at the bottom in the works of Maxim Gorky and the Chinese writer Ai Wu (1904–1992). From the comparison it follows that the famous Chinese prose writer of the twentieth century had reason to consider himself a student of the Russian prose writer. Both authors, Gorky in Russia, Ai Wu in China, acted as artists of marginalized people, homeless, and, what is especially important, not only rejected, but also rejecting. An analysis of a large number of stories by the Russian and Chinese writers reveals many creative similarities in themes, problems, poetics, and reveals the identity of their socio-philosophical views. Gorky and Ai Wu in a similar manner decorate stories about ordinary everyday life with appeals to bright pictures of nature, to musical and song principles. According to the teachings of A. Veselovsky on the comparative study of literature, here we can speak with certainty about the genetic and typological connections of the two writers.

**Keywords:** reception, problems, Russian literature, Chinese literature, stories, poetics, tramping

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## Горьковские мотивы в прозе о босяках Ай У

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**Аннотация.** Цель исследования – сопоставительное изучение творчества русского и китайского писателей Максима Горького и Ай У (1904–1992), в равной мере уделявших внимание изображению людей, которые по разным обстоятельствам оказались «на дне» жизни. Задача – выяснить, что конкретно стоит за высказываниями Ай У о своем «ученичестве» у Максима Горького. Оба автора, Горький в России, Ай У в Китае, выступали художниками людей маргинальных, лишенных крова, и, что особенно важно, не только отвергнутых, но и отвергающих. Анализ большого ряда рассказов русского и китайского прозаиков выявляет множество творческих схождений в тематике, проблематике, поэтике, тождество их социально-философских взглядов. Горький и Ай У в схожей манере украшают повествования о невзрачной текущей жизни обращениями к ярким картинам природы, музыкально-песенным началам. Проведенное исследование, сделанное на основании учения А. Веселовского о сопоставительном изучении литератур, доказывает основательные генетические и типологические связи двух художников слова.

**Ключевые слова:** рецепция, проблематика, русская литература, китайская литература, рассказы, поэтика, босячество

**Вклад авторов.** Разработка идеи, сбор и анализ исследовательских данных – В.А. Мескин; написание и редактирование рукописи – Цай Ицин. Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

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### Introduction

Maxim Gorky has been and continues to be very popular among Chinese readers. Many of his works have been regularly translated into Chinese since the beginning of the 20th century. The literary works written by the Russian master have influenced the thinking of the Chinese people in socio-political terms, but more importantly, they have served as textbooks for Chinese writers, teaching them creative skills.

The famous Chinese writer of the 20th century Ai Wu is a representative of Chinese literature whose writing was especially strongly influenced by Gorky. His life experience, and then his writing, so closely resembled the life, fate and

works of the Russian writer that he is called the “Chinese Gorky” (Lian, 1992, p. 2). A modern literary scholar rightly noted that the literary path of both Gorky and Ai Wu “began with the description of tramps, and wanderings through the south of Russia of one, and the southern journeys to Yunnan and Burma of the other have served as important sources of literary inspiration for both writers” (Zhang, 2011, p. 82).

## Results and Discussion

The similarity in their creative interests stemmed from the similarity of their social positions. The Russian prose writer, who began his literary career three decades earlier, became Ai Wu’s teacher in the field of literary, shaping both his aesthetic and stylistic preferences. Ai Wu wrote in the article “I and Soviet literature” (1956): “Among the literatures of the whole world, Soviet literature is the closest to me. Russian literature, which is traditionally humanistic, sympathetic to the workers, the insulted and oppressed people, has always attracted me... In my literary career I have studied all the time, and I can name a long list of Russian writers, from L. Tolstoy, A. Chekhov, M. Gorky to A. Fadeev, who have been my teachers” (Mao, Huang, 1986, pp. 221–222).

It is evident that it was Gorky who had a particularly strong influence on Ai Wu, in particular turning his attention to describing the life of the lower social classes, paupers and tramps. Two years after the publication of the aforementioned article, Ai Wu wrote in the *People’s Daily*: “When I read Gorky’s early stories, they poured down on me like a life-giving rain that fell on dry land. I felt a true sense of joy. I read all of Gorky’s works translated into Chinese, and often reread them. I also read the works of those authors whom Gorky loved... Thus, I became an admirer and follower of the Russian writer” (Mao, Huang, 1986, p. 335).

It is also noteworthy that both writers share certain biographical similarities. In childhood, both of them were strongly influenced by their grandmothers, who were storytellers and sparked their interest in words and distant lands. Ai Wu’s favorite childhood story was his grandmother’s tale *The far journey of Little Wei*. Later, Ai Wu wrote: “At that time I thought, if Little Wei could travel alone to distant lands, then I could do the same...” (Ai, 1984, p. 40).

The theme of tramps in the works of both writers, the Russian and the Chinese, was prompted by similar socio-historical circumstances at that time, when both in Russia and China the shortage of arable land forced peasants to leave their villages and head to cities in the hope of finding work and means of survival. However, the influx of labor from former peasants far exceeded the cities’ need for their services, as a result of which many of the newcomers, unable to find work, began homeless wanderers, fell to the bottom of society, lost themselves and their human dignity. In these circumstances, the tramps in Russia, represented by Gorky, and in China, represented by Ai Wu, found their biographers.

Both writers worked primarily in the genre of short prose, focusing on marginalized individuals, who had been thrown out of the normal life by circumstances and people, “like garbage” (Ai, 1981, p. 26). The outcasts that Ai Wu writes about are robbers, thieves, smugglers, and drug dealers. Society rejects these “former people”, but among them, Ai Wu, like Gorky, discovers characters that deserve both sympathy and compassion. Just like his Russian predecessor, Ai Wu usually paints the rich and wealthy in a negative light. Tramps, however, are a different matter. “When Ai Wu describes people from the bottom,” writes a Chinese literary historian, “he seems to be panning for gold in souls, searching for and finding kindness and nobility in them” (Yan, 2010, p. 168). As is well known, this characterization largely applies to Gorky as well.

It is noteworthy that the narrators of both writers, the Russian and the Chinese, seem to gain life experience from those they meet in their wanderings. It can be assumed that Ai Wu’s story *My Companions* (1944) was written under some influence of Gorky’s story *My Companion*, despite all their obvious plot differences. It can be said that Prince Shakro taught his fellow traveler a lesson: “He taught me much that cannot be found in thick tomes written by sages, because the wisdom of life is always deeper and broader than the wisdom of men.” In Ai Wu’s story, the companions teach life lessons to the one they meet on the road, enriching him with the “gold of their souls”. In terms of technique, it does not matter that in one case the experience is negative, while in the other – positive.

A more obvious favorite technique of both Gorky and Ai Wu is to base their narratives on the encounter between a traveling character, close to the author, and another notable character, and either to tell something remarkable about him or to convey his story, presenting a story within a story. Such are, for example, Gorky’s *Emelyan Pilyai*, *Konovalov*, *My Companion*, *Makar Chudra*, *The Old Woman Izergil*, *In the Steppe*, Ai Wu’s *The Happy Man* (1935), *Vagabonds* (1948), *In the Forests* (1948), *Wild Cherry* (1963), *In the Mountains* (1964), *By the Lancang River* (1962).

The extraordinary personality of Gorky’s tramps often manifests itself in the contrast of characters, for example, yesterday’s peasant Gavrila and his antagonist – the thief Chelkash, after whom the famous story is named. Ai Wu also often use this technique. For example, in his story *In the Forests* the tramp Matouge encountered a man who had gone broke and for this reason wanted to commit suicide, Matouge dissuaded the unfortunate man from this idea and took him into his company of tramps. Hungry tramps steal food, get caught doing this, and the wealthy man betrays them. People ‘garbage’, like Matouge, in this collision are shown as more humane and compassionate than a man from a higher social class.

Other similarities in the works of Ai Wu and Gorky are also symptomatic, particularly in the description of majestic natural phenomena. Nature appears

in their works as a symbol of absolute beauty, strength, and elemental freedom. For the author of *The Petrel* it is, of course, the sea, with its marine elements, with related phenomena Gorky compares his ambivalent, sublime characters. Such are, for example, Chelkash and Malva, who brought him fame. This was rightly noted by the first researchers of his early stories. One of them wrote: “Reading Mr. Gorky’s stories, you feel that ‘he breathed life with nature alone’, that he loves this nature, knows it and therefore gives descriptions that are remarkable in their artistry and truthfulness... Mr. Gorky has a rich brush and fresh colors, he writes with strokes, without unnecessary words, without any rhetoric... He especially loves the sea...” (Botsyanovsky, 1901, p. 169). In Ai Wu’s works, majestic celestial mountains, swift mountain streams appear in this meaning, and he also describes them “without any rhetoric”.

Both writers organically incorporate natural phenomena into the plots of their stories. The sea elements fit very naturally into the narrative of the aforementioned story *Chelkash*. Nature here is not indifferent to what the main characters are doing. In some cases, the sea was “silent” and “deserted”, and the clouds were “ready to crush people with their weight”. All this creates a tense atmosphere and reflects the inner state of the characters. In other cases, when “the deed is done”, nature changes, becomes softer, the sea “calms down”. In the story *The Old Woman Izergil*, before the woman tells the legend of Larra, the specific landscape seems to be preparing for the specific story of the woman, one flowing into the other: “All this – the sounds and the smells, the clouds and the people – was strangely beautiful and sad, it seemed like the beginning of a wonderful fairy tale”. And when Izergil told the legend, the sea “quietly echoed” her. When it came to Larra killing the girl and being caught, the night began to fill with “strange, quiet sounds”, and the gophers began to “whistle sadly”, and “the full disk of the moon, which was blood-red earlier, turned pale”.

The same natural correspondences are observed in Ai Wu’s works, for example, in the story *In the Mountain Gorge* (1933). Here the river “boils in the darkness, roars and angrily beats against the rocks”, as if in anticipation of an impending crime: the tramps decided to get rid of the burden, their wounded comrade. And conversely, the river calms down when the same tramps leave money for their unfortunate accidental companion. In the story *In the Pine Forests* (1936), in unison with the cruel story of one character about another, an old man, a suspected murderer, nature behaves accordingly: “The mountain wind beats against the rocks, shaking the tall old pines, beats against the walls and doors of the hut, and howls like some unknown wild monster roaming the mountain valleys”.

And another correlation. Both writers organically introduce the theme of music into their works. “To write is to sing,” said Aleksey M. Gorky. Love for music was born in the soul of the future writer in childhood, when he lived with his grandmother. And this love was reflected in the literary works he created. The aforementioned critic rightly notes that Gorky is “a remarkable artist, who



understands not only colors, but also sounds...” (Botsyanovsky, 1901, p. 170). To emphasize the beauty of Radda, old man Chudra, the narrator of the dramatic story *Makar Chudra*, says: “About her, this Radda, nothing can be said in words. Perhaps her beauty could be played on the violin, but only by someone who knows the violin like his own soul”. Radda’s lover Loiko is also presented in the story “musically”, the handsome man sings: “Hey-hey! A fire burns in my chest, And the steppe is so wide! My greyhound is as fast as the wind, My hand is firm!...” According to the old woman Izergil, only “beautiful people who loves life” loves to sing and can sing well... Music and singing also feature in other works by the Russian master, such as *Chelkash*, *The Khan and His Son*, *Konovalov*, *Malva*, etc.

The same can be observed in the Chinese writer’s works. In his story *In the Mountain Gorge* a female tramp, a woman of hard fate, sings a sad song about a river carrying its waters to a calm space, corresponding to her life and mood: “River water, flows slowly, flows, flows, flows east to the sea, there is no sorrow! There is no worry!” In the story *My Companions*, singing helped the hero, a tobacco smuggler, to deceive the police. He distracted their attention by performing beautiful folk songs, the guards carried out the check carelessly, failed to discover the contraband. In the story *My Love* (1933), through songs a prisoner woman told her fellow prisoners in the next cell about her whole bitter life, evoking endless sympathy and human pity in them.

Thus, it can be said that the musical beginnings of both Gorky and Ai Wu not only give the texts a romantic flavor, but also contribute to the development of the plot.

In the literary works of both authors, a critical attitude towards current life predominates. According to their characters, the misfortunes and sorrows of most people are caused by incorrectly structured social relations. This philosophy of life is thoroughly expounded by the apprentice Maxim in the story *Konovalov*. At the same time, the Russian writer has individual tramp characters who do not agree with this worldview, such as the baker Konovalov: “Every man is his own master, and no one is to blame if I am a scoundrel!”. In her own way, the old woman Izergil is close to Konovalov, who reasons: “In order to live, everyone needs to be able to do something. I could do nothing and paid for it with myself”. The reason for this, according to V. Botsyanovsky, lies in the “strong faith in themselves, in their own strength” (Botsyanovsky, 1901, p. 172). Ai Wu also has such characters. In the story *The Happy Man* the main character says: “If a strong, healthy man cannot find a way out of a mundane life situation, then he is to blame and should blame himself”. Although there are few such self-critical characters in the Chinese prose writer’s works, the majority of his characters, focus on criticizing social circumstances.

Ai Wu’s characters are so angry at the unjust, in their opinion, social structural system that they do not consider their actions – theft, robbery, smuggling, etc. – to be crimes. In the story *The First Lesson in the Philosophy*

of *Life* (1931), his character justifies his crimes with the reasoning: “A person can become a thief if he is threatened by hunger. Otherwise, a different, perfect world is needed”. Of course, the hopelessness that forces people to commit crimes is often expressed in Gorky’s stories about people of the bottom, very vividly in the story *Grandfather Arkhip and Len’ka*. The old man’s theft is the only way for him and his grandson to survive.

Not all, but many of Gorky’s tramps are portrayed with sympathy. His statement about them is well-known: “I saw that although they live worse than ‘ordinary people’, they feel and consider themselves better than them, and this is because they are not greedy, do not strangle each other, do not hoard money...” (Gorky, 1940, p. 43). Obviously, Ai Wu could have made the same statement about his lumpen. His tramps also have a sense of human dignity that prevents them from succumbing to a slave mentality. Often this feeling is exaggerated in the characters of both authors. Loiko killed his beloved just to avoid submitting to her desire to be the dominant one in their would-be family. Chelkash, who miraculously escaped death-robbery, threw money to the ‘felt’ Gavrila with a proud feeling as a sign “that he – a thief, a reveler, torn away from everything dear – will never be so greedy, low, and forgetful of himself...”. In Ai Wu’s *The Horse Thief* (1942), the main character suffers because of his unsightly appearance, but his heroism earned him respect in his thieves’ circle. In the story *In the Barren Mountains* (1943), Ai Wu contrasts greedy peasants with generous tramps. In this way, the writers show the superiority of tramps over people who are higher than them on the social ladder.

The hatred of the rich is what brings the Russian and Chinese writers together especially closely. The tramp Yemelyan Pilyai, the main character of the aforementioned story named after him, says something that is in the minds of many tramps: “And to peck a moneyed man on the head – whatever you say – is pleasant; especially if you do it well... And if I know that people can live well, then – why shouldn’t I live? Eh? Damn you, devils!” In Ai Wu’s story *Moonlit Night* (1948), the main character, a tramp, holds the same opinion as Yemelyan Pilyai: “For me, there are only two types of people in the world – the poor and the rich. Every time I meet the rich, I steal from them mercilessly...” The thought of the drama of social inequality is present in the Chinese writer’s story *The Sea* (1947). Here the main character, with a bit of irony, talks about different types of birds: “Birds in a cage still have space, and they can jump, fly and bump around there, but we, sailors, in the cage-ship have no freedom or space! Why? Because inside the cage we are ruled by more noble birds”. In the story *On the Island* (1936), a tramp-thief says, nodding toward the rich: “Look how arrogant they are! But, in fact, they have no more noses and eyes than we do... They just... have a few extra bills in their wallets. I hate such people!”

Literary scholars often say things about the Russian writer that fully apply to the Chinese writer as well. “The heroic pathos of Gorky’s images”, the authors of the article about Gorky, but equally about Ai Wu, rightly write, “was expressed

in the disobedience of his heroes to the general rules of being, striving for freedom and independence...” (Shirvanova, 2018, p. 540). Both writers wrote with disdain about the humble obedient masses, who are unwilling or afraid to shake the established order. They equally romanticized rebellion. Here is a remark from the main character in the aforementioned story *The Horse Thief* in response to a suggestion from an outsider to stop stealing: “You, law-abiding people, live as long as others allow you to live. You are like kites flying in the clouds, your fate is in the hands of others. What is the meaning of such a life?” The meaning of such a life is unclear, unacceptable for many of Gorky’s characters as well, the main thing for them is to keep their lives in their own hands. For example, in the Russian master’s story *In the Steppe*, the main character reveals his soul to a fellow traveler: “I love, my friend, this wandering life. It is cold and hungry, but very free... There is no authority over you... and now I lie down, looking at the sky... The stars twinkle at me: nothing, Lakutin, walk on the earth and do not give in to anyone...”.

In many early stories by Gorky and Ai Wu, the central figure is a rebellious man striving for unlimited freedom, this is the ideal man in their understanding. Indeed, independence, liberty, freedom – all these are included in the law of beauty of both prose writers, the Russian and the Chinese. Many of their characters, being in hunger and cold, do not want to change their wandering life for another. At the same time, they despise people who lead a settled life, content with freedom within the confines of their yard. “They are funny, those people of yours. They huddled together and crushed each other, but there is so much space on earth... He is a slave – as soon as he is born, a slave for life, and that’s all! ... That’s how one should live: go, go – and that’s all...” – said the gypsy in the story *Makar Chudra*. The essence of these reflections continues in the story *The Rogue*: “In the vagabond life there is something sucking, absorbing. It is pleasant to feel free from obligations, from various little strings that bind your existence among people...” This is in tune with the philosophizing of Chinese proponents of the vagabond life of Ai Wu. In the story *Brother Cun* (1947), one of them says: “We lead a difficult but joyful life. Today – here, tomorrow – there. And all places are our home...” And in the story *In the Pine Forests* the main character praises the vagabond life and, being an old man, does not want to give it up.

## Conclusion

As a follower of Maxim Gorky, Ai Wu wrote a number of literary works dedicated to the theme of tramps. Similar socio-historical circumstances in Russia and China at that time pushed both writers to the theme of tramps. There is much in common between the works about tramps by Ai Wu and Gorky. In terms of the genre, both worked primarily in short prose. In terms of character portrayal, most of the tramps they wrote possess excellent qualities. They



are kind, not greedy, brave, love freedom, hate the rich, despise the humble obedient masses and oppose a controlled life. In terms of writing technique, both writers focus on describing majestic natural phenomena, which often correspond to the psychological state of their tramps. In addition, music plays an important role in their literary works. Music not only gives their works a romantic color, but also contributes to the development of the plot.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Ai Wu's love and respect for Maxim Gorky was reflected in his work, both in terms of themes, problems, and poetics. As a writer, he followed the paths laid by his Russian predecessor. Both of them expressed their time, a premonition of great social changes.

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