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A Brief Study on He Lin's Idea of "Popularization of Philosophy"

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Abstract: Starting from the 1930s, the philosopher He Lin constructed his systematic thinking on the popularization of philosophy based on the theoretical standpoint of Neo-Hsin Hsueh (New Idealism of Mind), centering on the historical mission of national salvation and state-building. He authored a series of essays including *National Salvation through the War of Resistance and Nation-Building via Scholarship, Propaganda and Education*, and *Methods of Reading and Modes of Thinking*. He opposed confining philosophy to abstruse speculative studies within academic ivory towers, and advocated that philosophy should step out of scholarly seclusion, integrate academic research, civic education and the transformation of popular customs, and convert profound philosophical theories into spiritual strength for all citizens. For He Lin, the popularization of philosophy never equates to crude simplification of philosophical theories. Instead, it preserves the intellectual integrity of philosophy, cultivates the mental capacity of citizens through sound thinking methodologies, reshapes public mindsets and social customs via education and propaganda, bridges elite academia and ordinary social life, and serves the epochal goal of nation-building through scholarship. Though his idea of popularizing philosophy bears certain limitations-for instance, he overestimated the transformative power of spiritual ideas upon social reality and underestimated the constraints of material social conditions-it still offers valuable references for advancing the popular communication of philosophy and social sciences today.

Keywords: He Lin, Popularization of Philosophy, Nation-Building via Scholarship, Neo-Hsin Hsueh (New Idealism of Mind), Culture of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.

1. Introduction

In the construction and evolution of modern Chinese philosophy, a prominent trend emerged: the popularization of philosophy. The most influential representative of this trend was Ai Siqi (1910–1966), whose *Philosophy for the Masses* ran through ten editions within merely two years after its first release in 1936.[1] Prior to Ai Siqi, however, He Lin (1902–1992) put forward the proposition of "the popularization of philosophy" at an earlier stage, even though he never published monographs or essays titled *Philosophy for the Masses*. In the spring of 1933, in *the Foreword to the Philosophy Supplement of North China Daily*, He Lin clearly stated: "The greatness of a truly eminent philosopher lies in his capacity to articulate the common aspirations of all humanity, awaken people's spiritual nature, and stir up latent consciousness within them. Therefore, philosophy must engage the masses, if it is to sustain vitality; meanwhile, ordinary people ought to draw close to philosophy, if they wish to lead meaningful lives."[2] P120

He Lin was unwilling to be a purely ivory-tower scholar. He harbored a profound concern for real-world affairs and upheld the traditional ethos of Chinese literati: applying learning to practical governance and social needs. As early as 1925, in the aftermath of the May Thirtieth Massacre, he was selected as one of two public speakers for the relief committee. In that summer, funded by public expenses, he traveled to Shijiazhuang, Taiyuan, Kaifeng, Luoyang, Xinyang and other cities to deliver speeches, mobilize the public, and disseminate progressive ideas.[3]P193In 1946, following the victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, he wrote in the preface to his collected essays *Culture and Life*: "Most of these essays record my intimate thoughts, feelings and newly realized insights, written to converse and exchange academic ideas with young friends. I have no intention of addressing specialized, systematic philosophical issues. Nevertheless, my personal philosophical viewpoints permeate every chapter in an accessible manner. It is my hope that sympathetic readers will, to some degree, develop an interest in philosophy and be inspired to cultivate their own philosophical thinking."[4]P8-9 This saying demonstrates that He Lin consistently upheld his ideal pursuit of "the popularization of philosophy".

2. The Historical Context of the Formation of He Lin's Idea of Popularizing Philosophy

In the 1930s, the full outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression plunged China into a national existential crisis, forcing intellectuals to rethink the social functions of philosophy. Traditional philosophical research had long been confined to scholarly studies, treating philosophy as an exclusive discipline for intellectual elites and severing its connection with the daily lives of ordinary people. Faced with the peril of national subjugation, He Lin realized that philosophy could never fulfill its mission of national salvation if it remained trapped in conceptual deduction within academia and failed to nourish the spiritual life of citizens. His idea of popularizing philosophy took shape against the historical backdrop of transitioning from "national salvation through wartime resistance" to "nation-building via scholarship", with *National Salvation through the War of Resistance and Nation-Building via Scholarship* serving as the overarching manifesto of his thought.

He Lin argued that the War of Resistance entailed more than military and economic confrontations; it represented a contest of morality, culture, academia and spirit. "The

ultimate victory of our resistance war must be a triumph of culture and scholarship. The genuine completion of national reconstruction must be grounded in the research, mastery, creation, development and application of new culture and new scholarship across all sectors and disciplines."[4]P26-27 Military resistance alone could only fend off foreign invaders, while genuine national rejuvenation demanded the overall spiritual awakening of the citizenry. This necessitated breaking philosophy free from academic isolation, connecting it with social realities through popularization, nurturing individual character via philosophical ideas, and uniting the national spirit. He Lin criticized two ideological biases: first, some scholars barricaded themselves in ivory towers, ignored the national crisis, and reduced philosophy to empty textual games detached from the survival reality of the nation; second, many patriotic propaganda campaigns consisted of hollow slogans lacking philosophical foundations. Though emotionally stirring, such superficial agitation could hardly foster stable and enduring national convictions.These two biases respectively correspond to elite philosophy's detachment from reality and the intellectual barrenness of mass propaganda, and He Lin's vision of popularizing philosophy serves as a twofold correction to both extremes.

In the article of *Optimism and Pessimism*, He Lin further clarified the personality-oriented goal of popularizing philosophy. Wartime society was permeated with despondency, yet most people's optimism or pessimism amounted to impulsive emotional reactions devoid of rational foundations. He Lin distinguished superficial emotional optimism from sound optimism rooted in philosophical cultivation: "Genuine optimism must be grounded in scholarly attainment and life experience, accompanied by vision and perseverance to surmount harsh and perilous circumstances and overcome pessimism-only then can one attain wholesome optimism free of negative repercussions."[4]P118 The popularization of philosophy is never a matter of reciting inspirational slogans. It aims to internalize philosophical rationality into the spiritual world of ordinary individuals, equipping them with the capacity to independently judge reality and forge solid spiritual convictions amid suffering. The ultimate foothold of popularizing philosophy lies in elevating the intellectual caliber of all citizens, rather than merely disseminating superficial knowledge.

He Lin's thinking on popularizing philosophy also contains an inherent stance: dismantling the rigid barrier separating scholars and the general public. In *Learning from Youth*, he proposed that senior scholars must avoid indoctrinating young people from a condescending height, and instead pursue mutual learning to break the old model of elites unilaterally enlightening the masses.[4]P327 The popularization of philosophy is not a one-way charitable bestowal of ideas from intellectuals to ordinary people, but a bilateral spiritual exchange. Scholars must understand the lived realities of the masses, while the public elevates themselves through philosophical training-this constitutes the axiological premise of He Lin's vision. In short, the national crisis of survival compelled He Lin to advocate philosophy's departure from academic seclusion; his critical reflection on hollow propaganda and sterile scholasticism defined his vision of popularizing philosophy, which rejects both elitism and shallow vulgarization, and seeks the genuine embedding of philosophical rationality into the lives of all people.

3. The Theoretical Core of He Lin's Idea of Popularizing Philosophy

He Lin's popularization of philosophy is far from the simplified vulgarization of philosophical theories as understood by later generations. Rooted firmly in Modern Neo-Confucianism, it maintains rigorous theoretical boundaries. He Lin upheld the speculative integrity of philosophy and refused to dilute its depth merely to cater to mass comprehension. Its core connotations unfold along three dimensions: philosophy functions as the fundamental force reshaping human minds; popularization must never degenerate into vulgarization; and the popularization of philosophy ultimately serves the ideal of "scholarly governance".

First, the remolding of human minds forms the ontological foundation of popularizing philosophy. In *Human Hearts and Social Customs*, He Lin posited that social customs originated fundamentally from human minds, and the quality of customs stemmed from citizens' inner concepts and spiritual states. "To reform politics or education, one must start by cultivating sound social customs. With wholesome customs, subtle edification and silent moral teaching can exert a formative influence on the public and young students."[4]P232 Customs are not external coercive regulations, but externalized manifestations of human mentality. The essential function of philosophy lies in refining human thought and rectifying inner convictions. Therefore, the popularization of philosophy essentially means permeating human minds with philosophical spiritual power and reshaping social customs through inner spiritual transformation. Centered on the "mind" as the ontological foundation of culture, Neo-Hsin Hsueh holds that the root of culture lies not in external artifacts and institutions, but in people's spiritual self-awareness. This distinguishes He Lin's vision from general enlightenment thought: popularizing philosophy is not superficial knowledge dissemination, but a fundamental reconstruction of the national spiritual ontology.

Second, He Lin drew a clear demarcation between the popularization and vulgarization of philosophy. He refused to sacrifice rigorous philosophical speculation to accommodate the limited comprehension of the masses. In *Methods of Reading and Modes of Thinking*, He Lin outlined three modes of thought: logical method, experiential method, and metaphysical method.[4]P176-180 The logical method cultivates ordered reasoning; the experiential method demands personal, embodied comprehension of moral principles; the metaphysical method fosters far-sighted, comprehensive insight. These three methodologies apply equally to academic research and the intellectual cultivation of ordinary citizens. To popularize philosophy is to transmit such modes of thinking to the public, rather than truncating philosophical doctrines and retaining only superficial conclusions. When ordinary people study philosophy, their task is not to memorize dogmas, but to learn independent reasoning. Abandoning logical speculation and personal lived experience for the sake of simplicity reduces philosophy to fragmented slogans, which directly contradicts the original purpose of popularization. He Lin criticized wartime propaganda practices that prioritized immediate emotional arousal without training people's capacity for critical thought: the public could only passively accept viewpoints and lacked the ability to distinguish truth from fallacy, rendering propaganda effects fleeting and ephemeral. Authentic

popularization of philosophy delivers tools for independent thinking rather than prefabricated conclusions.

Third, the ultimate axiological orientation of popularizing philosophy lies in the ideal of "nation-building via scholarship" and "scholarly governance". In *National Salvation through the War of Resistance and Nation-Building via Scholarship*, He Lin proposed replacing pure force-based governance with "scholarly governance", arguing that virtuous rule must be grounded in scholarly rationality.[4]P27-28 Scholarly governance refers to social administration built upon rational academic spirit, where the general populace possesses the capacity for rational reflection. The popularization of philosophy lays the ideological groundwork for scholarly governance: only when ordinary citizens can examine social reality and distinguish right from wrong through philosophical reasoning can scholarly governance take root in society. The popularization of philosophy is never a mere cultural undertaking; it is inherently linked to the modern transformation of the state and society. Rejecting the reduction of philosophy to a tool for individual self-cultivation alone, He Lin integrated personal spiritual advancement with the reconstruction of the nation and society.

He Lin acknowledged an inherent tension within the popularization of philosophy: philosophy inherently pursues profound speculative inquiry, while the daily lives of the masses call for simple, actionable truths. His solution was not to lower the standards of philosophical inquiry, but to transform its modes of communication. Profound theoretical speculation remains confined to specialized academic research, while modes of thinking, spiritual convictions and core values are disseminated to citizens through education and subtle social edification. Elite academic research and mass spiritual cultivation advance side by side, neither to be neglected. This theoretical stance differentiates He Lin's popularization of philosophy from two extremes: ivory-tower scholasticism detached from reality, and superficial popularization that caters blindly to mass tastes.

4. Practical Pathways of He Lin's Idea of Popularizing Philosophy

Beyond theoretical elaboration, He Lin proposed a set of actionable pathways for popularizing philosophy in essays including *Propaganda and Education*, *Cultivating Trees and Cultivating People*, *Human Hearts and Social Customs*, and *Learning from Youth*. These pathways fall into three core dimensions: distinguishing propaganda from education and designating education as the primary channel for popularizing philosophy; innovating the conception of human cultivation and targeting youth as the core recipients of philosophical enlightenment; transforming social customs to deliver silent philosophical edification through subtle social influence.

First, to clarify the dividing line between propaganda and education, and to entrust education with the core mission of popularizing philosophy. *Propaganda and Education* constitutes He Lin's key text on ideological communication. He differentiated propaganda and education: propaganda prioritizes short-term emotional mobilization to arouse mass sentiment, while education focuses on long-term cultivation of rational mindsets and integrated personalities.[4]P222 Though indispensable in the wartime context, propaganda can never replace education. Pure propaganda risks indoctrinating biased ideas and manipulating mass emotions, whereas education aims to inspire independent critical thinking, making it the most suitable vehicle for popularizing philosophy. The popularization of philosophy cannot rely on pervasive sloganeering propaganda; it must be sustained through long-term educational practice. Propaganda may serve as an auxiliary measure, yet nurturing philosophical rationality fundamentally depends on education. He Lin advocated breaking the confinement of knowledge to textbooks, integrating learning from printed texts with practical labor and social service, and uniting intellectual and manual labor to connect philosophical ideas with lived social reality. Philosophy ought not to remain confined to classroom lecture notes, but embed itself within personal life experience.

Second, to renovate the conception of human cultivation and target youth as the primary audience for popularizing philosophy. The ancient maxim holds that "it takes ten years to grow trees, a hundred years to cultivate people", yet He Lin revised this view in *Cultivating Trees and Cultivating People*, asserting: "It takes a hundred years to mature trees, yet only ten years to cultivate a complete human personality."[4]P237 Trees require prolonged time to grow, while the spiritual character of human beings can take distinct shape within a decade of sound education. Youth possess the most malleable minds, making them the key group for popularizing philosophy. He Lin opposed cramming-style indoctrination, and in *Learning from Youth* advocated reciprocal learning between teachers and young generations. Elders ought to avoid stagnating in outdated mindsets and seek to understand the lived predicaments of youth, while young people must humbly absorb the wisdom of prior generations. Popularizing philosophy does not mean elders imposing ready-made truths on youth; instead, it guides young people to master modes of thinking and interpret philosophical doctrines independently by engaging with the realities of their times. He Lin advocated dismantling the traditional hierarchy that designated literati as a privileged intellectual class, and promoted the scholarly integration of all vocations-scholarship for workers, merchants and soldiers alike. Philosophical rationality ought not to belong exclusively to literati; laborers, soldiers and merchants can all acquire rational thinking, breaking down class barriers that isolate philosophy from broader society.

Third, to realize silent philosophical edification through subtle transformation of human hearts and social customs. In *Human Hearts and Social Customs*, He Lin elaborated extensively on the formative power of social customs. Beyond formal schooling, social customs constitute a vital sphere for popularizing philosophy. "Every great statesman or educator must devote energy to transforming social customs." Philosophy exists not merely as printed theories, but must evolve into prevailing social norms embedded within citizens' daily words and deeds. Sound customs deliver silent moral edification, allowing the masses to absorb philosophical spirit imperceptibly in ordinary daily life. The popularization of philosophy cannot rely solely on classrooms or publications; it demands reshaping social ethos and establishing moral role models to refine human character through customary influence. Formal schooling constitutes conscious, intentional education, while social customs deliver unconscious, subtle edification. The two sides work in tandem to carry philosophy from scholarly texts into all corners of society.

5. Conclusion

Amid the turbulent wartime era of national crisis, He Lin constructed a rich and systematic framework for popularizing

philosophy centered on the ideal of nation-building through scholarship. Unlike Liang Shuming (1893–1988), who shifted his focus from scholarly study to rural reconstruction, He Lin remained steadfast in his identity as an academic. In other words, his vision for the popularization of philosophy prioritized philosophical inquiry itself, with popularization serving only as a supplementary means. His thinking carries distinct historical limitations. Pinning the transformation of national mentality solely on educational reform and custom renovation, he overestimated the transformative capacity of spiritual ideas over social reality and failed to fully recognize the structural constraints imposed by material social conditions. Against the backdrop of national resistance, his vision of popularizing philosophy largely relied on top-down enlightenment from intellectuals, lacking in-depth observation of the lived practice of grassroots masses. However, during the War of Resistance Against Japan, He Lin attempted to safeguard the rational character of philosophy, avoid philosophy from becoming empty slogans, and seek communication between elite academia and popular spirit, which still had important historical value in thought. Starting from the ontological primacy of the human mind, he took formal education as the primary channel supplemented by customary edification, and advocated infusing modes of philosophical thinking and spiritual convictions into all citizens to reconcile individual self-perfection with national cultural reconstruction. He Lin's philosophy popularization is an important ideological response made by modern Neo Confucianism in the face of the crisis of the times. The thinking of "adhering to the depth of philosophy and promoting popularization" still has reference significance for promoting the popularization of philosophy and social sciences today.

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