

Contemporary Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry

ed. by Michael S. Duke
(Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

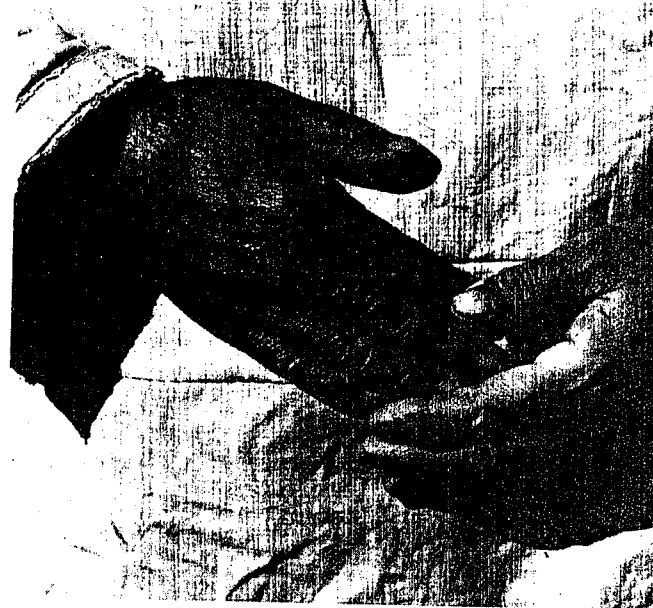


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Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era: The Return of "Critical Realism"

by Michael S. Duke

To my mind, however, though all literature is propaganda, not all propaganda is literature. . . . In addition to slogans, posters, proclamations, telegrams, textbooks and so forth, the revolution needs literature—just because it is literature.

—Lu Xun, 1928¹

The mainstream of modern Chinese literature during the pre-communist era was a form of realism that fits very well Rene Wellek's definition of realism as a regulative idea in European literature;² namely, it aims at

... "the objective representation of contemporary social reality." It claims to be all-inclusive in subject matter and aims to be objective in method, even though this objectivity is hardly ever achieved in practice. Realism is didactic, moralistic, reformist. Without realizing the difference between description and prescription it tries to reconcile the two in the concept of "type." In some

writers, but not all, realism becomes historicist: it grasps social reality as dynamic evolution.

Such a tradition of realist fiction—didactic, moralistic, reformist—grew up in China through a combination of serious concern for society and principled demand for social justice that was characteristic of the finest products of traditional Chinese literature and the more individualistic humanitarianism of predominantly nineteenth-century European literature. It flourished during the period from the May Fourth Movement (1919) to the end of the Civil War between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang and the establishment of the People's Republic (1949). Under the influence of a narrow-minded Maoist interpretation of the function of literature in society, it lost its critical edge and humanistic thrust and became the handmaiden of the Party.

The works presented in this anthology are ample proof that the tradition of critical realism did not die. Chinese writers consider themselves to be intellectuals and are so regarded by society in general. As intellectuals they feel a serious responsibility to comment on and influence society. Accordingly, the majority of Chinese writers in the immediate post-Mao era, like their May Fourth predecessors, endeavored to use "critical realism" once more to ameliorate social ills by

1. Lu Xun, "Literature and Revolution," written 4 April 1928, in *Selected Works*, 3rd. edition (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1980), Vol. III, p. 27.

2. Rene Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 252-253.

probing and criticizing injustices in the immediate past as well as the present.³ After a decade of nearly complete suppression of literature in any meaningful sense of the term, a decade during which scores of writers and other intellectuals were hounded to death, the serious moral purpose of the bulk of Chinese literature in the immediate post-Mao era was to analyze and expose the systematic injustices created or exacerbated by the increasingly dictatorial and disastrous policies of the Maoist regime, from the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957) and the Great Leap Forward (1958) through the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). These writers were determined to “tell the truth” about society as they saw it and never again to lie to themselves and to others. Tang Dacheng put their credo most forcefully at a literary conference sponsored by the Anhui branch of the Chinese Writers Association in July 1980.⁴

For a long time now it has been forbidden to write the truth, forbidden to truthfully reflect the people's lives, the people's loves and hates, forbidden for writers to base their works on their own observations and feelings about life and to express their own opinions. We could only write campaign literature or footnote literature. As a result we've been unable to produce true works. . . . This has been a tragic and shameful page in our nation's literary history. We must not under any circumstances ever again write lying or vainglorious literature.

In order to understand contemporary Chinese literature and its relationship to contemporary Chinese society, then, we should keep the following two points in mind:

- Chinese literature of the immediate post-Mao era is an outgrowth of May Fourth literature and is related to contemporary Chinese society in ways that parallel the relationship of May Fourth literature to the society of that era.

- Post-Mao literature reflects the changes that have occurred in Chinese society since 1949, the changing attitudes toward those events since the death of Chairman Mao, and the new regime's increasing emphasis on economic modernization as the overriding goal of the Chinese revolution.

During the decade of the Cultural Revolution, an ever more narrow application of the literary principles laid down in

3. “Critical realism” is a term given great currency in literary criticism by Georg Lukács in his 1956 essay “Critical Realism and Socialist Realism.” For a variety of personal, artistic, and perhaps political reasons, many contemporary PRC writers do not characterize their works as “critical realism” and some scholars of contemporary Chinese literature do not use the term. Nonetheless, I am hard put to find a better term for this literature. Except for the so-called obscure poetry (*menglongshi*) and possibly “One Winter's Evening,” which is critical of a certain universal species of human insensitivity or cruelty, the fiction and a good part of the poetry in this book seem to me to be both realistic in Wellek's sense and critical in Lukács's sense. As Lukács wrote:

The critical realist, following tradition, analyses the contradictions in the disintegrating old order and the emerging new order. But he does not only see them as contradictions in the outside world, he feels them to be contradictions within himself; though he tends—again following tradition—to emphasize the contradictions rather than the forces working for reconciliation. (Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, London: Merlin Press, 1963, p. 114)

I understand that contemporary Chinese writers, especially the younger ones, would like to go beyond realism, but I don't believe very many of them have succeeded in doing so to date. I certainly hope more knowledgeable readers will correct me if I am in error on this point.

4. “Bujian baodao de yici wenyi zuotanhui—ji Huangshan bihui” (An Unreported Literature and Art Discussion Meeting—Report on the Huangshan Writers' Conference), *Qishi niandai* (*The Seventies*, January 1981), p. 102.

Mao's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*⁵ had created a situation in which “critical realism” had been completely replaced by “Revolutionary Romanticism,” an abject servant of each and every minor twist and turn of Party Central's day-to-day political policies. Nearly everything that had characterized May Fourth literature and even the previously acceptable “revolutionary” literature of the first seventeen years of the People's Republic was then forbidden. Gone were objective truth or common sense factuality, having been denounced as “naturalism” or “critical realism.” Psychological exploration of character, one of the key elements that made modern Chinese literature modern, was denounced as a “bourgeois” indulgence. Universally applicable humanistic concern was forbidden because it detracted attention from the “essential class relations” (however prescriptive these had become since the elimination of the landlord gentry and bourgeois classes) said to determine all human behavior. Romantic love unrelated to interests of state or class solidarity was an unacceptable theme, as was the depiction of so-called middle characters as yet uncertain of their ideological commitment to the communist revolution. Finally, no spontaneous resistance to social injustice not led by the Communist Party, even in a historical context, could be presented in fiction.

This situation changed dramatically from late 1977 until the middle of 1981, as a result of liberalized literary policies pursued by the Deng Xiaoping reform faction during its power struggle with a faction predominantly composed of Maoist diehards, or “leftists,” the former advocates of Jiang Qing's literary line. The relaxation culminated in Deng and Zhou Yang⁷ extending personal promises, at the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists in late 1979, that the Party would continue to let literature be free from “the issuing of executive orders.” Although Deng and Zhou both outlined an agenda for writers to follow, their basic premise, proclaimed by Deng, was that “the sole criterion for deciding the correctness of all work should be whether that work is helpful or harmful to the accomplishment of the Four Modernizations.” As a result of this open invitation from the highest Party leadership, the years 1979 and 1980 witnessed an unprecedented outpouring of critical realism that went far beyond anything written during the brief Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956–57 or the previous two post-Mao years.

These works, harsh, satirical, or ironic, exposed such dark sides of contemporary Chinese life as rural poverty and the often cruel treatment of the peasantry by rural cadres; the venality and special privileges of older “revolutionary cadres” who had been attacked during the Cultural Revolution but were now getting even at the expense of society; corruption and degeneracy in the officer corps of the once sacrosanct People's Liberation Army; endemic bureaucratic corruption among

5. Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980).

6. This term was created for Mao by Zhou Yang in 1958 to replace “Socialist Realism” after the Sino-Soviet split, and was greatly elaborated by Jiang Qing and Yao Wenyuan during the Cultural Revolution.

7. Former Minister of Culture who was purged by Mao and rehabilitated by Deng as Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Writers Association.

failings of
DENG

economic cadres so bad that nothing can be produced without going through an incredible extra-legal network of bribery and gift-giving; embezzlement by high level officials; moral corruption and nihilism among a segment of the younger generation, often the children of high cadres; and the physical exhaustion of middle-aged intellectuals and professional cadres. These works also contained a number of technical "innovations," reintroductions, or rediscoveries from the pre-communist era of modern Chinese literature as well as from western fiction. Among the more notable of these were structural irony combined with allegory, ironic undercutting of accepted Party interpretations of reality through the playful manipulation of socialist rhetoric, the presentation of morally flawed characters as protagonists, settings involving high-ranking cadres in compromising positions, and the use of "stream-of-consciousness" and "internal monologue" aimed at revealing or even confessing a character's inner thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

As Deng's reform faction became increasingly secure politically throughout 1980 and 1981, they began to narrow the scope of what was artistically permissible. At a Drama Forum held in Peking in January and February of 1980, Hu Yaobang delivered a six-hour speech outlining precisely how the Party leadership wanted writers to treat nearly every conceivable literary topic. The immediate result of this speech was that the satiric drama *What If I Really Were?* (*Jiaru wo shi zhende*, 1979) was refused permission for open performance unless objectionable passages were revised. The leadership was particularly unhappy with the play's implication that the Party is a bastion of privilege that lords it over the general population. This was said to be an inaccurate presentation of the true relationship between the Party and the masses. Also unacceptable was the great sympathy shown to a young man who impersonates the son of a high cadre in order to wangle a transfer from the countryside back to the city where he can marry his already pregnant girlfriend. The authors refused to revise the play, but they did go on subsequently to tone down their criticisms and write safer, less objectionable, and less interesting plays.

The speech had a chilling effect on both writers and editors who had always been confused about the limits of the new freedoms and were afraid of overstepping those limits. There were some exceptions. Zhao Dan, a sixty-five-year old film star, denounced Hu's speech from his deathbed as another instance of the kind of "wanton interference" with literature that had always led to its stagnation in the PRC. Although his speech was printed in the *People's Daily*, Party policies towards literature grew continually more repressive.

From April to November 1981, the playwright Bai Hua was criticized for his supposedly anti-Party, anti-socialist film script *Bitter Love* (*Kulian*). It had been written in 1979, was then well received by critics, and hence made into a film in 1980-81, one destined never to be released. It was Hu Yaobang who took over the anti-Bai Hua campaign. It had been initiated by Deng's "leftist" opponents, but he made it the prototype for a late 1981 media blitz against "bourgeois liberalization," which Deng Xiaoping said was in essence "opposition to Party leadership." In late November Bai Hua finally submitted a letter of self-criticism. He confessed to having been ideologically confused when he wrote *Bitter Love* and reaffirmed his faith in the Party and the literary principles of Mao's *Yan'an Talks*. He went on the following year to write another historical

play that appeared to be critical of Mao Zedong's last ten years. It was very popular with theatre audiences, and was also criticized in the press; but not to anything like the same degree that *Bitter Love* had been. This was probably because the later play adhered very closely to the dominant party faction's view of Mao and "ultra-leftism" as the main problem in recent Chinese history while *Bitter Love* implied an overall criticism of Communist Party policies since at least 1957.

Throughout 1982 the CCP conducted a campaign in favor of the building of a "socialist spiritual civilization" the most important aspect of which was said to be the education of the populace in communist ideology. By 1982 the great wave of critical realism with its open attacks on contemporary social problems had subsided. Many fiction writers continued to examine personal problems and employ modernist narrative techniques. Their works touched on the overall social situation, but were less obviously critical of the current regime. Meanwhile many young poets, despite being attacked as "obscure" and "nihilistic" by their elders, continued to experiment with the use of private symbolism. They advocated writing as a means of self-expression as much as social commentary. Indeed, many writers both young and old went on trying to produce works that emphasized technical artistry at least as much as, if never more than, theme.

Further insecurities were to affect Chinese literature late in 1983, after Zhou Yang himself tentatively suggested, following the young Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* then in favor among some Chinese Communist Party theoreticians, that there could be Marxist-style "alienation" from labor, from political power, and from self and society in contemporary China. This opening quickly closed, though, when a shakeup took place in inner Party propaganda offices. A short-lived media campaign was carried on against these and other ideas grouped together as "spiritual pollution," meaning the pollution of China's revolutionary communist ideology by the importation of Western ideas and practices. The latter now included "bourgeois individualism," views of writing as self-expression, modernist literary techniques, "bourgeois humanism," alienation, the profit motive, sexual promiscuity, and others. A number of writers were publicly criticized and continued to be under a cloud into 1984, but many of those who were criticized by name refused to write self-criticisms. The Deng-Hu-Zhao Ziyang leadership, anxious not to alienate the intellectuals and professionals whose labors they took to be the key to modernization, did not vigorously pursue the campaign.

The literary situation in 1984 was one of general stability under a paternalistic system of literary control. Over thirty official journals churned out a vast amount of generally unremarkable material, but a few gifted writers consistently continued to turn out readable works. Now and again a particularly bright gem would be spotted by alert readers, receive national attention (perhaps official government condemnation, possibly the surest way to increased public notice and popularity), and be eagerly sought out by readers and scholars of Chinese literature abroad.

The present anthology was collected and translated with the readers of English language literature in mind. It is intended to introduce them to some artistically excellent examples of the genre of "critical realism" from the immediate post-Mao era in China. Most of the writers and all of the selections appear here for the first time in English. I do not maintain that these

particular works are either the most popular inside the PRC or the most representative of the literally thousands of works published there from 1979 through 1982. What I do affirm is that each of the stories and all of the poetry in this volume was chosen for its intrinsic literary merit; not merely for its readability, but for its re-readability. There is no doubt much to be learned about the problematic areas of contemporary Chinese society from these works, but they are presented here as technically successful works of literary art worth reading

and studying, in Lu Xun's words, as "literature—just because it is literature."⁸ ★

8. I would like to thank Jeffrey Kinkley of St. John's University for his "labor of love" as both an outside reader and a strong supporter of this entire manuscript before it went to press. The poetic epigrams that precede each thematic section below were translated by Bonnie S. McDougall (Bei Dao) and Shiao-ling Yu (Gu Cheng and Shu Ting). I would like to give my thanks to Sandra Sturdevant who took the fine photos of China that grace this volume and chose them carefully to complement the themes of the selections.