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Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Politics and Romance

Jing Kaixuan

I. Introduction

When we review Chinese literature since the new era began in 1978, we may reach the conclusion that the writing of novels has flourished both in quality and quantity, compared with other periods since 1949. Chinese writers have more freedom in writing and publishing (in some respects) than ever before, creating the impression of relative freedom from political influence. However, as we know from the textbooks of literary history, the “Literature of the New Era” is still divided from the other eras according to political history. Contemporary literature cannot evade politics because China remains a highly politicized state. Although the influence of politics has taken different forms in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the present decade, it has always been present, whether overtly or implicitly.

Nevertheless, contemporary literature should—but fails to—put forward old questions like, “What is the essence of life?” “What is the essence of literature?” “What do we think of life and literature?” In this very regard, we have reasons to be disappointed with the novels in this new era, not because they follow the political life too closely but because they exhibit very little truth of our being. After we experienced the darkest epoch in Chinese history, we are still under a totalitarian regime, and yet what contemporary literature exhibits is an epoch of romance.¹

II. "Scar" Literature

In 1978, two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, a new era of Chinese literature began. It was marked with the short story "The Scar," written by Lu Xinhua, who was an undergraduate. The story, which describes the sufferings of a Communist family in the previous decade of madness, was the first to condemn the Cultural Revolution. A young woman, Wang Xiaohua, cut her ties with her mother in 1969, because her mother, who was a party official, was falsely accused of being a traitor to the cause of communism during the civil war between the Communist Party and Kuomintang regime. No matter how hard she tried, Wang Xiaohua couldn't get rid of her counterrevolutionary identity. During that period of time when the whole society was filled with "class struggles" and divided into the "red" families (the revolutionary families) and the "black" ones (the counterrevolutionary families), if one person was accused of being an enemy of the Communist Party, his or her children were also the enemies and had no rights to education and employment. In the story "The Scar," Wang Xiaohua's mother, lonely and helpless, finally died of a heart attack.

Although "The Scar" is only a shallow sentimental story, lacking the details of real life, it impressed the readers, aroused the strong sympathy of the whole society for the people who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, and thus brought about a large number of similar short stories, such as "Class Counsellor" by Liu Xinwu, "The Music of the Forests" by Zhang Jie, "Yue Lan" by Han Shaogong, "What Should I Do" by Chen Guokai, "Maple" by Zheng Yi, "The Ivy-Covered Cabin" by Gu Hua, "The General and the Small Town" by Chen Shixu, and "A Chinese Winter's Tale" by Yu Luojin (whose brother was sentenced to death in 1970 because of his article criticizing class discrimination). With a political moral, these extraordinary and intriguing stories reveal the cruelty and ignorance of the Cultural Revolution, condemn class discrimination and social inequality, and end with bright, hopeful prospects. The critics often call these stories "Scar Literature." For example, in "The Music of the Forests," a boy from the countryside who had lived in the forest and had no education incredibly became the best examinee in the entrance examination of a music college after the Culture Revolution because he had been taught and trained by an exiled musician. "What Should I Do" tells a melodramatic story in which a woman was remarried after her husband was purportedly persecuted to death, but after the Gang of Four (the

cabal including Mao's wife and her three accomplices) was thrown out of power, her former husband suddenly returned home alive. What the writer wanted to express was not whom the woman should choose but who created this tragedy. "Maple" depicts a violent fight between two Red Guard groups. One day, a Red Guard, Li Honggang, encountered his girlfriend, who belonged to the opposite Red Guard organization. He ordered her to surrender to Mao Zedong's revolutionary line, and she asked him to do the same. Finally, she chose to jump off the building rather than submit to him. At the end of the story, Li Honggang was sentenced to death as a murderer.

The political authorities completely attributed the calamity of the Cultural Revolution to the political intrigues of the Gang of Four (paradoxically, this kind of viewpoint is usually called historical idealism in China), so the Cultural Revolution looked as if it were just a random historical event in the whole course of communism. Most of the conflicts in the novels and short stories of Scar Literature are full of theatricality, owing to some chance events. To the writers, the Cultural Revolution is oppressive but generous, offering writers many romantic stories: evil prevails for a time and the good suffer but triumph in the end. These stories of Scar Literature appeal to humanitarianism; therefore, during that period of time, they evoked a lot of traumatic memories and intense arguments among the people.

The most heated argument was about what the truth was. In modern China, the discourse about the truth relates not only to fact but also to political correctness. On the one hand, the official critics attacked those works for not being typical and for disobeying the truth (which often means writers must write according to the Party's interpretation of social reality in the past and present). For example, they strongly criticized "What Should I Do" only because it does not end with a bright view of reality. On the other hand, lots of readers believed this work had authenticity, and they sent letters to the magazine newsroom to testify to its truth. For the readers, to speak the truth is one of their powerful weapons against the lies of the Party.

The Party authorities realized that they could no longer use the discourse of "the anti-party motive" to condemn people who had different opinions. Instead, they tried to manipulate the discourse about the truth, whereas some common people argued about what was the truth with similar expressions that were even more romantic than the official ideology. To the common people, any kind of tragic romance could occur during the Cultural Revolution. The more melodramatic

the stories were, the more sympathetic the readers became over what had happened during the Cultural Revolution, even though most of the stories were oversimplified, overstated, or even lacked a descriptions of the personalities. This explains the enormous popularity of Scar Literature in China at that time. To the oppressed, literature plays an important part of their daily life, especially when novels have to do the job of newspapers (the so-called official newspapers contain no genuine news). Only through literature can people express their true feelings and thoughts under a totalitarian regime.

However, Scar Literature is lacking in profundity and artistry. Most writers were in their twenties and inexperienced in writing. Because those writers had been influenced by the literary doctrines of the Party and isolated from world literature for years, their works were filled with enthusiasm and emotions but short of artistry, weak in detailed description, and devoid of a psychological analysis of their characters, so that these works seem artificial and poorly conceptualized. Many of the writers were still politically homiletic, following the authorities' interpretation of the Cultural Revolution, eulogizing the Party and the people's victory over the Gang of Four, even though the word "people" had lost its real implications long before.

Scar Literature can be regarded as a collective traumatic memory, as it must conform to the discourse of the authorities. Thus, the traumatic memory became a kind of chosen memory that was allowed to be published by the authorities. In this type of literature, the tyranny of the powerful over the powerless is described as the Gang of Four's political persecution of the revolutionary cadres and the people—in other words, as a political struggle between the Party and the anti-Party. Once the struggle is over, Chinese people naturally enter a bright new world. Thus, the literature for memory became a tool for forgetfulness.

A few years later, when one writer talked about his works, he regretted not telling the whole truth in them: "I hated that period of time, but I eulogized it with my pen."² This proves Michel Foucault's argument: Under the control of the powerful, the subject of writing is not the base of a discourse but the object fashioned by a discourse.

At the same time, some young writers, such as Wang Anyi, Xu Naijian, Shi Tiesheng, Chen Cun, and Kong Jiesheng, wrote about the hard life of the "Intellectual Youths"³ in the countryside from 1968 to 1979. Soon after they graduated from high school, most of them were sent to the countryside and forced to be re-educated by the uneducated poor peasants. They spent the bloom of their youth in the fields. They saw

the poverty of the countryside and experienced the real and ugly society that they had never learned about in school. They felt deceived by the falsehood of the authorities and angry about the bitter reality and the ugliness of human nature. In "Polluted Yangbo" by Xu Naijian, a group of Intellectual Youths lived and worked together harmoniously in a village, but owing to the boring daily life and the tough fight for a chance to return to the city, they began to intrigue against each other. Chen Cun's "I Once Lived Here" describes in a melancholy tone a man who returned to the village where he had lived before as an Intellectual Youth and mourned for his girlfriend who had married another man and died there.

All those stories about the Intellectual Youths were written after the writers had returned to the city, found it difficult to find decent jobs, and were no longer used to city life. In their works, they showed nostalgia for the rural life and cursed it as well. Shi Tiesheng's "My Faraway Qingping Wan" tells a story about an Intellectual Youth and an old peasant, portraying their poor life and true feelings between them. The writer felt there was much more human kindness and a more valuable life in the countryside, compared to the apathy of the townsfolk. Nevertheless, nostalgia of this kind is just an illusion, and it expresses a theme of confusion relating to youth, love, and revolution. Through their rural experiences, those writers gained esthetic growth.

Some of the writers suffered from the "Red Guard complex," wherein radical actions meant a great rebellion against the corrupt old world. In their works, they tried to show the idealism and heroism of the Intellectual Youths. These writers said they didn't regret having spent their bloom of youth in the countryside, because this experience gave them an opportunity to know what "people" were like. For example, Zhang Chengzhi's "River of the North" was highly praised by the critics for expressing the spiritual process of the lost generation. In the story, there is no plot but lots of passions. The hero, who is the author himself, walked on the yellow plateau, and like the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution, he was fascinated with revolutionary high-sounding words and romanticism. He constantly faced the plateau and the river, shouting emotionally "mother" and "youth" (which often mean "people" and "revolution"). Under this call, "with his arms wide open, he ran towards the great river." However, this passion seems to be untruthful and posturing in many readers' eyes. The more passionate the writer was, the less he understood himself and the world

around him, and thus his novel turned out to be just an inane echo of the history of the Red Guards.

Before long, some writers in their fifties, mostly the former Rightists in 1957,⁴ such as Wang Meng, Zhang Xianliang, Gao Xiaosheng, Lu Wenfu, Deng Youmei, and Cong Weixi, began publishing novels and short stories describing not only the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution but also the political persecution in the 1950s. Technically, these novels are more mature because all of these writers were former professional writers in the 1950s and they all had gone through great suffering. They looked into the historical causes of the national tragedies, so their novels are termed "Introspection Literature" by the critics.

III. Introspection Texts

Those works, such as Wang Meng's "A Bolshevik Salute" and "Butterfly," Zhang Xianliang's "Soul and Body," Lu Wenfu's "The Well," Zhang Xian's "Memory," Fang Zhi's "A Traitor in the Ranks," Gao Xiaosheng's "Chen Huansheng's Adventure in Town," and Lu Yanzhou's "Legend of Tianyun Mountain," all belong to Introspection Literature, the subjects of which touch the extent and depth of life. Some novellas and short stories even relate to concentration camps, where many intellectuals had been exiled since 1957, and exhibit the cruellest life in this society. However, Introspection Literature is actually lacking in "disenchantment." There is a new kind of "enchantment" in these writers' works. Scar Literature unmask the dark ages to a certain degree, whereas Introspection Literature has a stronger political concern and is deeply in love with life in the early 1950s, which for the writers was full of "bright prospects." For these writers, the relationship between the Party and the people was very pure and nice at that time; only since 1957 did the Party make the mistake of overemphasizing class struggle, which harmed the regime itself. Introspection Literature writers even regarded patriotism as a needed moral salvation in order to correct the bias of Scar Literature, which, in their view, was too critical of the social system. So, to many readers, the authenticity of characters in Introspection Literature is questionable.

Among them, Cong Weixi is considered as a representative writer of so-called "Prison Literature," a branch of Introspection Literature. His novella "Quiet Snow Falling on the Yellow River" tells about a Rightist on a penal farm, who fell in love with a woman, also a political prisoner. The woman was sent to this penal farm because she had once

tried to escape through the frontier to go abroad. When the man found out the woman's "political crime," he regarded her as a young woman who had lost her virginity. He immediately ended his love relationship with her, although she had already repented of her "crime" to the government. The writer made up such an inauthentic plot to make his suffering hero politically righteous. Through a male-centered discourse about virginity, the writer bowed to political power.

Another novella, "The Green Trees," written by Zhang Xianliang, is about a man who nearly starved to death as a Rightist in a concentration camp. It is somewhat realistic in the description of details but romantic and unbelievable in the plot. The man dug turnips in a cold winter field, searched for steamed breadcrumbs in the kitchen, and was delighted to find a few greens in the bowl. The description of hunger is touching and real. The inconceivable thing, however, is that the man finally became a Marxist through studying Marxist-Leninist classics and especially through the pure love of a peasant woman, whose love and flesh repaired his undersexed functional disorder and also reformed his whole soul and body. Having suffered greatly in the past, the writer could have produced a powerful theme, but it turns out like a traditional Chinese romance in which a gifted scholar is in distress, finally is rescued by a pretty woman, and ends with the accomplishment of his ambitions in both politics and marriage. The writer wanted to describe true human nature but instead described a false human nature. In other words, when the writers of Introspection Literature tried to rationalize and sublimate the tribulations of the past, they created an anachronism. They clung to the ideals of the early fifties, not facing the history of the intervening decades.

Of those Rightist writers, Wang Meng, one of the earliest to write using the stream-of-consciousness method, is the most thoughtful and influential. He mainly writes about the Rightists and high-ranking officials. For him, "A Bolshevik Salute" is always sublime, and the later experiences of suffering and persecutions under the regime are nothing but for the sake of the motherland and people. As a hero in one of his novels says, "Mother will sometimes beat her children, but children will never hate their mother." In Wang Meng's novella "Butterfly," a high official, as a victim of the Cultural Revolution, finally realized that he himself used to be a persecutor and therefore regretted what he had done before. To the writer, the main character's sufferings in the Cultural Revolution were not due to divine retribution or karma but due to the fact that the rulers had forgotten the people. It seems that

what happened in that decade of madness was merely a temporary distortion of socialist ideals.

According to an article by Ms. Wang Youqin, the official's wife in the novel is based on a real woman who was a middle-school teacher in Beijing. Forced to divorce her husband after she was accused of being a Rightist in 1957 and severely persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, she committed suicide by hanging herself.⁵ If the writer had spent his ink mainly telling about her true story, it would have been a much more powerful theme. However, he did not use her as a main character. He even avoided describing the real details about how she was forced to hang bricks around her neck and crawl on broken pieces of glass, and how she died miserably. Because the writer did not focus on this real woman and other long-suffering individuals who "bear history," in Albert Camus' words, but instead chose to focus on those people, like the official, who "make history," the novel could only have a superficial theme of anti-bureaucracy. In fact, "Butterfly" is not as good as another novella of Wang Meng, "A Young Man Arrives at the Organization Department," written in the 1950s. The latter at least follows the complex logic of life rather than creating a happy, bright ending according to the writer's imagination.

Most of those middle-aged writers of Introspection Literature had lived through the Anti-Rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution, but surprisingly, their cognition of reality didn't change much. The only difference is that they had written reality as a myth before, and wrote a myth as reality in this new era. Nevertheless, there are also some extraordinary works, such as Zhang Yi-gong's "The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong," the first novella to reveal the widespread starvation at the end of the 1950s and to intensely criticize the crimes of the Party. Generally speaking, all of these writers claimed their works were written according to the rules of realism, so they exercised a great social impact and pushed the Movement of Thought Liberation and Reform to start in the early 1980s.

As early as 1978, some unofficial literature magazines appeared on university campuses and in some small literary circles. One poetry magazine, *Today*, was published by several young poets, including Bei Dao, Shi Zhi, Gu Cheng, Mang Ke, Yang Lian, Jiang He, and Shu Ting. Some of their poems, for example, Bei Dao's "Answer" and "Declaration" and Gu Cheng's verse "Darkness gives me black eyes, and with them I will search for brightness," are representative of the anger and agony of the lost generation, who no longer believed in anything in

the past but pursued something in the future. *Today* also published short stories that began to depict the past from the angle of individuals instead of society, and especially through some unusual stories about death and the disabled, to search for individual values. For example, Shu Ting's "The Piano Sound in Church" is about an old musician who had an ardent love for music but had to play the piano secretly during the Cultural Revolution. Playing the piano gave him strength to live on, but in the end he died in agony because his piano was forcibly taken away by the Red Guards. In Shi Tiesheng's "The Corner Without Sunshine," three disabled youths, who worked in a small plant with other crippled people, simultaneously fell in love with a newcomer, a pretty young woman. This is a kind of hopeless love, containing conflict between beauty and ugliness, full of tender feelings and kindness. This story was obviously influenced by the early works of the former Soviet writer Maxim Gorki.

These writers are aesthetes, and their stories have a sentimental and exaggerated style. They are not interested in the motif of the Party and the people sharing happiness and suffering together. Yet their belief that they could find brightness through universal love is merely a romantic idea in the literature of the twentieth century. What they lack is the ability to represent the essence of life.

"Realism" has always been an indistinct term in China. In the eyes of the regime, it is both acceptable and dangerous, for the Party sees the effect of literature's education and propaganda as more important than the effect of its knowledge of society. In 1942, Mao Zedong held a famous literary symposium in Yan'an and established the literary principles of the Party, regarding literature as a tool of class struggle, a tool of politics. On the one hand, he opposed realism derived from the West and the May Fourth Movement,⁶ and on the other hand, he called for writers to serve workers, peasants, and soldiers. Mao advocated writing in a popular and traditional style, that is, romanticism. In the 1950s, Mao put forward his literary principle, "combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism." This may be partly due to his resistance against Stalin's principle of "Socialist Realism" and partly due to Mao's personal literary tastes and his awareness that most Chinese people preferred romance to reality. In fact, the symbol of the Chinese revolution was never the cannon on the Russian cruiser Aurora but the spears and broadswords on Jing Gang Mountain, which was the first base area where Mao started his peasant war. From then on, Mao and his colleagues tried to mold their revolution as an "Oriental

Romance." It has so deeply influenced Chinese writers that most know little about realism, although all of them declare they write in terms of the realistic method.

In 1983, Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the opening of China to the outside world were followed by the "Thought Liberation Movement," which was started mainly by intellectuals. Deng Xiaoping became alert to the libertarian trend in the literary circle, and thus launched the two movements of "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" and "Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization." In this political atmosphere, most Chinese writers were forced to keep away from reality. However, some writers continued to explore issues of Chinese society, which has been considered the social duty of a writer, at least since Liang Qichao argued for the reform of fiction in the early twentieth century.

Then a fever of cultural study occurred in academia, and those writers, mostly young people born after 1949, began to study traditional culture, attempting to find the connection between ancient and modern China. One of these writers, Han Shaogong, said, "Literature has its own root. It should root deeply in a nation's soil of the traditional culture. If its root is not deep, it won't produce enough leaves."⁷ Another writer, A Cheng, said, "Undoubtedly, the May Fourth Movement pushed the Chinese society forward, but its nihilistic attitude toward the national culture, along with long-standing social turbulence, made the national culture desolate."⁸ They thought contemporary Chinese literature was not qualified to hold a dialog with world literature, for it had lost the root of its own traditional culture. In their minds, they tried to answer these questions: What is the real national culture? Did this culture bring about the Cultural Revolution? How did people survive the calamity?

IV. Root-Seeking Writing

Their novels are called "Root-Seeking Literature," although these writers had different values and concerns. For example, in Han Shaogong's novella "Pa Pa Pa," the title of which means "father" or "meaninglessness" in the Chinese language, an idiot, who had never grown up, lived in a southern mountain village, completely cut off from the outside world. He did not know his exact name and age, and always uttered "pa pa pa." The villagers worshiped nature, performing various rituals all the year round, eating the corpses of their enemies, and taking living people as sacrificial lambs. The villagers regarded the

idiot as a god because he did not fear any poison and answered any question with just “pa pa pa” or “f*** your mother.” This isolated place was filled with hatred and ignorance, and there was no independent thinking but instead highly uniform action. One critic remarked that the story reveals that Chinese culture lacks “self-awareness of rationality.”⁹ However, can one truly explain the reality of modern China through exploring non-rationalism in the traditional culture, while disregarding the hundred-year process of the Chinese assimilation of Western rationalism? Is there mainly non-rationalism in Chinese history? And does the root of Chinese culture exist only in the southern mountains?

In A Cheng’s novella “The Chess Master,” an Intellectual Youth went to the countryside. From a miraculous old man who was an excellent chess player, lived on collecting garbage, and never cared what was happening in the world around him, the youth got to know that the real traditional culture had always existed in the folk society. This real traditional culture—accepting things as they come and being satisfied with one’s fate—has been a secret of Chinese people who can exist and multiply on this mysterious and miserable land, and there is no political power of the past, present, or future that can destroy it. In the writer’s account, he tried to make an impression that “looks very common in the beginning but fascinating in the end.”¹⁰ The scene of some young people eating snakes on the hill is riveting, and the narrator finally achieves enlightenment, a state of Taoism, by returning to the folk society: “Even if your family is broken up, but you go to work with a hoe in the field every day, you can discover real life in your work.” Obviously, the writer did not have this view of life and history in the past, but it occurs to him today. But when the writer claims that he found quietness and harmoniousness under the surface of hard life, or eternity of the moment, we may doubt what the Cultural Revolution means to us. Compared with the former writer Lu Xun, who once strongly criticized the traditional culture by using the Western value of freedom, both Han Shaogong and A Cheng are infatuated with the traditional culture. Their literary imagination, however, can interpret neither Chinese reality nor its history.

Mo Yan’s and Zhang Wei’s works narrate the political slaughters between the Kuomintang regime and the Communists. This history is allegorized as one full of brutal and horrifying events, along with romantic folk customs. To look into the root of the nation’s traditional culture and discover the folk society again, the writers of Root-Seeking

Literature set most of their stories in rural China. As these writers were disillusioned with the revolutionary "utopia," they felt in depression "an ethnic degeneration."

Before the Cultural Revolution, revolutionary historical novels followed classic Chinese historical ones, like *Water Margin*. In revolutionary historical novels, the rebel peasant heroes were armed with the discourse about class struggle, and they took part in the revolution under the leadership of the Party. To the writers of Root-Seeking Literature, the images of traditional "bandits" portrayed in revolutionary historic novels had been brought under the control of rigid disciplines and lost their manliness. In their novels, the "bandits" threw themselves into the rebellious world once more. Through the description of sex and violence, kindness and enmity in the household, love-making in the broomcorn field, the strolling wild dogs in search of corpses all around, and the mysterious predictions of mad individuals, and so on, the writers of the Root-Seeking Literature subverted the official myth of class struggle with a new myth of native lands. Their purpose was to express that history was incredible and inexpressible. In their works, life is no longer a series of historical events decided by historical materialistic laws but an exhibition of desire, instinct, totem, savagery, absurdity, and foreordination.

However, this kind of subversion of the official myth of class struggle is, after all, a homogeneous subversion. Once the writers get rid of the influence of politics, they immediately become infatuated with more romantic nostalgia, replacing the "myth of class" with the "myth of the nation." A critic once remarked on the Revolutionary Beijing Operas' discourse as "Succeeding to traditional culture's imagination of and satisfaction with the aberrantly rebellious world."¹¹ We can also use this comment on those novels of Root-Seeking Literature. Such a folk society has never existed in China, so the new salvation exists only in the writers' imaginations. What interests the readers is love affairs, folk customs in the rural areas, and a longing for the return to nature. If the readers intend to find the truth of history and reality as well as real and profound descriptions of human nature in these stories, they will be greatly disappointed.

This cultural root seeking, looking back at the 1930s through the 1950s or even back at more remote ancient times, led the writers to discover folk society again. A Cheng's stories exhibit the folk spirit and its common values, whereas Jia Pingwa and Feng Jikai are especially fond of the materialized folk culture. For example, Feng Jikai's *The Three Inch*

Golden Lotus portrays the small feet of traditional Chinese women, an object of erotic interest for Chinese men, and depicts in detail the process of women's foot-binding, competition with other women's bound feet, and taking pleasure in their bound feet. After he finished writing the story, the writer said, "The more I think of it, the more I feel its profundity." When the root seeking arrived at this stage, it was almost like the "erotomania" exhibited in ancient erotic novels. In fact, a novel is not profound if the conflict described is not based on the inner and human nature but on the outer and culture, because a novel's only morality is knowledge of human nature. The mere display of a certain national culture in literature has always been a discourse of the Third World and indicates that a nation's literature is not yet qualified to hold a dialog with world literature about the general values of humankind.

Chinese writers try to get across the border of the real, not to better capture the real world but to escape from it. In the early 1990s, *To Live*, written by Yu Hua, tells about a man who spent all of his life decadently and passively, without a clear life goal. In the writer's mind, our desire is more significant than our individuality. Obviously, its theme is against the interpretation of life by historical materialism. The writer enjoyed his theme and character and pointed out the essence of Chinese culture in the preface, "We live only for the sake of living, not for anything beyond living." This testifies to a function of Chinese culture that can effectively digest tribulations, that is, a life attitude of living at this moment and never asking why we live, where we are from, or where we are going. This is a happy, self-fulfilled philosophy deeply rooted in Chinese culture, but it also never raises the level of human beings. In a sense, this attitude of "living" is precisely the cultural and psychological base that brings romances into contemporary Chinese fiction. As the cultural root seeking went on, the writers returned to a legitimizing of reality.

As for the cause of the Cultural Revolution, some writers ascribed it to the traditional culture and some to the traditional culture's devastation. However, the Cultural Revolution was due to neither. It actually resulted from a new mixed culture—the socialist culture, on which no writer shed light in this literary movement. The Root-Seeking Literature confuses the modern culture with the traditional culture, neglects individual consciousness and human rights, and is therefore an early sign of a rising Chinese nationalism's push against the universal human values that have been expounded by the West.

V. Modernistic and Experimental Modes

As the works of modern Western writers (like Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Garcia Marquez) and literary trends (like stream of consciousness, phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, anti-roman, the theater of the absurd, black humor) are introduced into China, many Chinese writers begin to learn Western narrative methods from the translations. For instance, Ma Yuan, Han Shaogong, Zhang Wei, and Mo Yan are influenced by Marquez and William Faulkner; Can Xue by Kafka; Liu Suola and Xu Xing by J. D. Salinger; Wang Anyi by Freud; and Zhang Xinxin by existentialists.

What interests readers is that after the May Fourth Movement, the mainstream of literature turned from the West to Russia, and now it has turned from Russia to the West once again. Some young writers, whose works are called "Modernistic Novels" by the critics, criticize the cultural root seeking for "paying too much attention to materialized culture and forgetting spiritual stuff," and claim that the writer should play with literature rather than create literature. For them, novels should no longer have any social effect. Their works, for instance, Liu Suola's "You Have No Choice" and Xu Xing's "Variations without a Theme," are patterned on the rebellious characters of Western literature and depict the mental disturbance and cynicism of young people, who enjoy the luxurious life and intellectual self-indulgence of a privileged group. In Liu Suola's novella, the male and female students are all future artists, going back and forth to luxurious salons, and spouting modern art. Life seems so carefree, piquant, full of self-indulgence that they become easily agonized and bored. As members of a small art circle, they are proud of their social status, look down upon material goods, and are satisfied with their own genius and their modernistic awareness. However, this modernistic consciousness is not rooted in Chinese reality but transplanted from modern Western novels, so the readers cannot understand where these rebellious characters in their works come from. In an unconstrained place, they resist against a certain unknown restriction; therefore, their rebellion seems purposeless and luxurious. The writers now have gained more freedom in writing, but judging from their works, freedom seems as if it were a privilege of the minority.

Other writers, like Ma Yuan, Can Xue, Ge Fei, Bei Cun, and Sun Ganlu, write "Experimental Novels." For them, the important thing is

no longer what they write about but how they write. In their works, there are very few characters and plots but many symbols, rhetoric, and metaphors, with which they try to rebel against the orthodox way of writing. For instance, Ma Yuan tells us that life cannot be repeated through a novel, which is just fictional and readers should not believe it. His novels can be called meta-fiction, a kind of experiment of language and text. Ma Yuan often presents himself in his own novels and tells readers how he writes the stories. In *More Ways than One to Make a Kite*, he describes the street scene of Lhasa from various visual angles—the wandering young artist, the old woman making a statue of Buddha—all of which produce a pure formalistic impact on readers and make them forget all the pain in life. In *Can Xue's Old Floating Cloud*, we see a crazy world: the mosquitoes flying all over the sky, humans' hair hanging from the tree, a spider's feet stretching from the ceiling, the father cheering up over the daughter's divorce, the mother driving the daughter mad, and the brother crawling like a monkey. Thanks to the writers' imagination, these novels express the emotions of modern people in an alienated world.

But an Experimental Novel (also called Avant-garde Literature) is only an imitation of the forms and contents of the Western writers, whose themes do not completely conform to the Chinese context. When the Avant-garde Literature goes farther and farther away from reality, its works become texts offered for only a few critics to read.

There are some writers, such as Wang Zengqi, A Cheng, and Jia Pingwa, who draw words and expressions from ancient Chinese literature, so their stories look more mature and have more individual characteristics than do others in that style of writing. In Wang Zengqi's stories, there are lots of exquisite descriptions of simple-hearted characters and simple scenes. In "The Love Story of a Young Monk," we see a Buddhist monk and a young village woman and their unconstrained and harmonious love, with a southern folk custom setting, so that its atmosphere, as a whole, seems just like a quiet Chinese watercolor painting. These writers' writings are thought to have discovered the significance of Shen Congwen, an important rural writer in the 1940s. But Shen Congwen's best short story is not any of his idyllic ones but his "The Husband," in which a man visited his wife, who was a prostitute working on a boat. At the end, when the wife gave her husband money, he recalled his wife's prostitution with other men just beside him the night before, threw down the money, and wept sadly. In an old Chinese writer's words, "there is a certain great Russian lament in it."¹²

In learning from Shen Congwen, these writers have still failed to learn from his greatest bitter masterpiece.

Since many contemporary Chinese writers cast aside political concerns and merely seek novelty of form, their works keep aloof from reality and lack true feelings, whether happiness or sadness. About the literary playfulness of this kind, critic Liu Xiaobo said at an academic conference in 1986, that contemporary Chinese writers lack “the sense of tribulation.” It is truly a paradox that the writings of modernism and postmodernism come into being in today’s China, where most people still live without freedom of expression. No wonder that there have been fewer and fewer literary readers since the early 1990s. This indicates a silent act of rejection. To most Chinese people, such literature is no longer an important part of their daily life.

Most of the writers become embarrassed because their works are neither true to serious readers nor romantic to general readers. The turning point of contemporary literature was most likely marked in the early 1990s. As a market economy has replaced a planned one, the regime no longer opposes mass entertainment and even allows exhibitions of sex and violence in cultural products, and thus the popular culture has rapidly become the mainstream. Most people no longer care about the concerns of the writers. They can watch various entertainment programs on TV, listen to pop music in the concert halls, or dance disco in the ballrooms. Now publishing struggles contend with both official censorship and the impact of the market. The output of the writers is no longer state supported but has to compete in the market economy. As a result of their doubt about or fear of politics and also because of the influence of the market economy, the writers keep a distance from politics and reality. They give up on the principles established by the May Fourth Movement that literature should be realistic and should be critical of society. Under this situation, literature is no longer a “barometer” to measure the emotions of the society, but a form of entertainment. As long as one writes amusing novels without referring to bitter reality, one truly has freedom in writing.

VI. Genre and Popular Fiction

The best sellers are the love stories written by Qiong Yao, a female writer in Taiwan, and the martial arts and chivalry novels written by Jin Yong, a light literature writer in Hong Kong. In their books, readers can enjoy the romantic stories that take place in different eras and con-

tent themselves with illusionary feelings for life. In mainland China, popular literature is represented by the young writer Wang Shuo, who has written a series of sentimental love stories, in which some youngsters idle and tease all day, but they are all kind, sincere, and helpful to society. The writer makes fun of the sacred official ideology with the characters' vulgar dialogues, and thus has contented the masses who are intent on living in their happy illusions and who want to be both resistant and safe. Some critics decry Wang Shuo for his works promoting a hooligan mentality around China, but they misunderstand him. In fact, the writer seems to avoid anything sublime because he is so disappointed with the lost idealism that he resists religiosity and hypocrisy in a cynical way. For example, his novels are entitled *Please Don't Call Me Human, I Am Your Father*, and *I Am a Hooligan, and I Fear Nobody*, but his characters are truly lyrical and noble in their love and friendship. They have not yet stepped out of the world bounded by socialism. As there are not any real social conflicts or individual afflictions in his novels, we can consider them as a combination of vulgar revolutionary realism and vulgar revolutionary romanticism.

During the period of Scar Literature, some works, such as "Awake, My Brother!" by Liu Xinwu and "There Is a Youth" by Zhang Jie, expressed the writers' unease about the young people losing their ideals, but now the writers no longer seem to care about it. On the one hand, a novel written by writers of popular literature (like Wang Shuo) has a subversive effect, for its vulgar lyricism is able to deconstruct the orthodox official ideology—communist ideology—that has been molded as a kind of sublimity in aesthetics. On the other hand, it can also be helpful to social stability by giving vent to the angry emotions of people. In Vaclav Havel's words, there was also a "strange, almost mysterious horror of everything that is overstated, enthusiastic, lyrical, pathetic, or overly serious" in China after 1989. The regime has realized that the best way to placate its people is to place literature at a distance from life's tangible reality. That is to say, both the Party and the people need lyricism and romanticism.

In the early 1990s, a TV series, *Yearnings*, which was compiled by Wang Shuo and other playwrights, was televised on CCTV, narrating a sentimental story that happened in a highly educated official's family during the Cultural Revolution. The story tells little about the class struggle and political persecutions during the Cultural Revolution but mainly tells us about how this family despised the daughter-in-law, who came from a poor family and was a typical type of good wife and mother. This resembles an ancient story of criticizing those who

adore the rich and despise the poor. It is not a real story of the Cultural Revolution, and to a certain degree, it had the effect of erasing people's memory of the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, this show caused a great sensation all over China and successfully eased the social tension after 1989. We might say this TV soap is a successful shift of the strategy of political power in a new era.

Wang Shuo's works have been well received and adapted to films. Partly because of Wang Shuo's success and partly because of fear and prudence, many writers have begun to write in a popular style for the masses, which is well adapted to the new cultural market. For instance, Wang Anyi's novel *A Song of Unending Sorrow* depicts a family's life in Shanghai, against a background of the long history of the city. The story is about a woman who let several lovers slip away during her lifetime and lived a lonely life. The writer's detailed description of the Shanghai alleys produces an overly refined and exquisite atmosphere in which there is both pomposity and exhaustion. In Ye Zhaoyan's novel *Nanjing 1937: A Love Story*, we read of a love story that took place in the living room of an upper-class family. One married man fell in love with a bride on her wedding day and courted her unremittingly. They flirted and then quarreled with each other. They reconciled and flirted with each other again. Their flirting and quarreling repeated again and again until her husband died in a battle against the Japanese army. Finally, their flirtation became real love when the Japanese occupied Nanjing. Su Tong's novel *Wives and Concubines*, adapted in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, directed by Zhang Yimou, describes a big family filled with conflicts among a man's four wives. The third wife was lynched for adultery, and the fourth became mad in the end. The writer was not as interested in the meaning of their deaths as the exhibition of multifarious family rules.

Those stories all took place long before the writers were born, and these writers used the same dated themes and flimsy plots, which remind us of the works of Zhang Ailing (Eileen Zhang), the romantic writer in the 1940s, and even of Zhang Henshui and Lin Yutang in the 1930s, who wrote romantic novels with big family settings and without descriptions of human nature. To the human spirit and experience, they have not provided any new insights. It is as if we were reading the old stories once more and nothing had happened in China during the past several decades. Generally speaking, these writers have no self-consciousness in their writing. As a critic remarked about Zhang Ailing's stories, "There is neither real happiness nor profound sorrow in them."¹³ To any real thinkers, the call of literature conforming to

the existing social order in China is definitely questionable. So, these novels seem like worn-out furniture put in a supermarket in modern China.

Zhang Ailing went abroad after 1949, and her novels turned to realism. The novel *The Rice Sprout Song* tells about a Party member who questioned himself about the orders to shoot peasants who were raiding a granary during a famine. *The Rice Sprout Song* expresses a deep lament about life and transcends all her previous works that just portray the tension between men and women in love. Zhang Ailing once commented on Scar Literature (in the preface of her translation of *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*) that Chinese writers write their novels and short stories "as if we had no past, at least no novels in the past."¹⁴ In her view, contemporary Chinese fiction has halted the realism of traditional novels even though there were few realistic novels, like *Flower of Shanghai*, in China's past. In fact, not only Scar Literature but also almost all novels since 1949 have betrayed the realistic tradition. Owing to the Chinese revolutionary features of peasants and Mao's favor for the romantic and popular style, romantic writings have controlled modern Chinese literature for a long time, and the idea of romanticism has long been accepted into the political-cultural system and penetrated into the subconscious of almost all the writers. Once the system collapses, what we see are only the skeletons of those romances.

Owing to the impact of popular culture on serious literature, a dispute about the humanistic spirit occurred in the middle 1990s. Wang Meng, a former minister in the Culture Ministry, supported popular literature because of his experiences during the 1950s. For him, the ideological uniformity is a great threat to a diverse society and popular culture, because one of the characteristics of popular culture is anti-heroics and anti-idealism, which can effectively deny the state's ability to create or recreate an officially monochromatic political culture. In contrast is Zhang Chengzhi, the author of *History of the Soul*, which narrates the violent history of Chinese Muslims oppressed by the government of the Qing dynasty 300-years ago, along with Han Shaogong, Zhang Wei, and other well-known scholars in universities. All were against popular culture. They saw it as simply entertainment and material things, filled with moral decadence and with no sublime values of life.

This dispute reflects the difference between the liberalists and the idealists in China after 1989. Since then, Chinese intellectuals have split into different blocs, although they were once united to support reform and the opening of China in the 1980s. One bloc appeals to "fleeing

from the sublime" (as Wang Meng said), and the other claims to oppose mass culture and pulp fiction. Nevertheless, neither of the blocs has offered a satisfactory answer to what real literature is, because what they insist on is still limited to either propaganda or luxury.

It is interesting to note that the writers who are not against popular literature create some relatively realistic works. Wang Xiaobo, a well-educated liberalist and a believer in Bertrand Russell, resigned from a university professorship to be a freelance writer. He criticizes the idea of pursuing ultimate aims and emphasizes freedom of thought in his essays. His novel *The Golden Age*, published in 1994, narrates a love story in the 1970s, in which we see a young man who made love with his girlfriend in the field as a challenge to that abstinent era and then unconcernedly accepted the severe punishment by the Party and the masses. This novel has a mode of Socratic irony, and because of its marvelous calm and objective description, the readers can keep an esthetic distance to look at the history more clearly. In a sense, it is a humorous novel set against the lyrical attitude of most Chinese writers, but its broadly and overly sexual descriptions indicate only an opposition between the romance of the flesh and the romance of sentiment. By contrast with Czech writer Milan Kundera, who also describes sex versus the reality but thinks sex is not reliable, Wang Xiaobo believes that sexual freedom can conquer the darkness around us, so his sense of absurdity doesn't approach the core of human issues that deeply question and explore what is real or delve into our reactions to severe and limited choices.

The younger generation is not at all concerned about this dispute. Born in the late 1960s and beginning to write in the 1990s, they are called "New Generation Writers." They know very little about the Cultural Revolution and do not care about the endless disputes about various "isms" in the literary circle. In a sense, they are an egocentric generation, well educated, and familiar with modern Western literature. They have their own different views of life and literature and often describe, in their works, individual existence. To these New Generation Writers, the older writers always write in behalf of the people or the nation, covering up their individual existence, which is actually the real life. These writers of the new generation deny the social duty of literature and see the call to it as emotional and lyrical. Instead, they emphasize literature's role as entertainment and artistry.

The younger writers, including Han Dong and Zhu Wen, often write about their private memories or their own state of being, which we can see from the titles of their novels such as *One Person's War* by Lin Bai,

My Own Story by Zhang Min, and *My Private Life* by Chen Ran. All of these writers have grown up in the cities and tried to find ways to write about city life, which has rarely been depicted during the past decades, for the older writers are familiar with rustic areas and see such settings as more colorful and lyrical than city life. Some writers, such as Zhu Wen and He Dun, depict a city as a world filled with sex and money, in which merchants, bankers, managers, reporters, singers, movie stars, bagmen, and brokers bustle around all day, making money by hook or crook in this highly material society. They describe the human lust for money in a way similar to that of 19th-century Western writers.

Some women writers offer their own female vision of modern China. For example, *One Person's War* and *My Private Life* are typical feminist writings that depict in great detail the secret female psychology, sexual experience, and desire for and infatuation with the body. All of this may mean a shift in writing from grand-narrative to mini-narrative, from the national discourse to the individual discourse.

However, when these writers separate the "private self" from the "public self," seeing the private self as the *true* self in order to resist official ideology which often mixes up the two, their writings may also be a shift from national romance to individual romance, since complete individual freedom does not exist in a state where there is a market economy under a totalitarian regime. These novelists intentionally keep a distance from politics, which greatly affects Chinese daily life all the time. Their "monologic" novels, in which the characters are always the writers themselves and the world exists only for their sake, will not question or offend the reality of life under Communist rule.

Some of them claim, as a challenge to the existing literary order or an excuse for escaping from reality, that Lu Xun, the greatest writer in modern China, was too involved in politics and too highly praised as an idol so that he has become a "stone" blocking freedom of writing. Of course, it is not true. It is these writers, not Lu Xun, who have lost the sense of the real, as a result of their own escape from political reality. Ironically, some official writers also criticize Lu Xun, using fashionable Western post-colonial theory, declaring that Lu Xun's criticism of Chinese characteristics was derived from Western missionary books. Finally, under the flag of nationalism that has overwhelmed China since 1990, all of the romantic writers unite, whether they are official or unofficial, in taking revenge on the modern enlightenment movement that took place in the early twentieth century.

VII. Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese literature has two remarkable characteristics: politics and romance. Both of them are deeply rooted in the long history of the Chinese literary tradition. The official literary principle of “combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism” has greatly strengthened and distorted literary tradition and become the standard for Chinese writers, consciously or unconsciously. Nevertheless, in an era when politics rules over everything else, describing the existence of individuals under a totalitarian regime can also make a literary work great, as exhibited by Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, Kundera, and other Eastern European writers. That is to say, great writing is about living in truth, not living in the moment. No matter what the writer is concerned about, society or individuals, the most important thing is to concentrate on the essential aspects of life and the human condition. For Chinese writers, the problem may be that although Chinese people are very practical in everyday life, they have a yearning for romanticism in literature. As Zhang Ailing said, most Chinese people always think of literary works as “a romantic story with some true details,”¹⁵ in which we can experience what we can’t in real life.

The traditional culture and the modern political culture have nourished this Chinese characteristic, the core of which is to live for the sake of living. They have made Chinese people tend to imagine a romantic world. Because of this characteristic, Chinese writers seem to lack the ability to perceive and describe tragedies in daily life. Tragedy, in knowledge of the essence of life, is much deeper than other literary genres. This lack of the sense of tragedy restricts Chinese writers’ success in creating profound descriptions of human nature. Even if Chinese writers are describing suffering, they deal with the subject as a tale of romanticism, as if literature should be different from life. It becomes an illusion of desire, not a realistic description of life. Thus in its long history of literature and in stark contrast with its history, China lacks not romance, but real tragedy. ●

Notes

1. I use “romance” here to render the term *chuanqi* (literally, transmitting the marvelous, tales of the marvelous). Although this is a term for two traditional forms of literature, a form of classical Chinese short story and a kind of drama, I use the term here to describe works that deliberately obscure the true face of reality, deceiving the reader by offering false comfort.

2. Leung, Laifong, *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* (Armonk, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994).
3. "Intellectual Youths" (also called "Educated Youths") is a term referring to millions of Chinese junior and senior high school graduates in the 1960s and 1970s, who were sent to the countryside by the authorities to till the fields and be re-educated by uneducated peasants.
4. Rightists were the Chinese intellectuals who criticized the Communist Party in 1957 and then were exiled to penal farms as counterrevolutionaries.
5. Wang Youqin, "Xiao Shuo Hu Die Zhong De Ren Wu," in *Wen Ge Shou Nan Zhe*, Kai Fang Chu Ban She, Hong Kong, 2004.
6. It was an enlightenment movement that began in China on May 4, 1919. Chinese intellectuals in this movement called for democracy and science, and pushed China into modernity.
7. Han Shaogong, "Wen Xue De Gen," in *Zuo Jia*, Vol. 5 (Peking, 1985).
8. Zhong A-cheng, "Wen Hua Zhi Yue Zhe Ren Lei," in *Wen Yi Bao* (16 July 1985).
9. Chen Sihe, *Zhong Guo Dang Dai Wen Xue Shi*, Chapter 16, Fu Dan Da Xue Chu Ban She (1999).
10. Zhong A-Cheng, "Jing Tian Duan Pian Xiao Shuo Qian Tan," in *Today*, Vol. 4 (1998).
11. Huang Ziping, *Ge Ming, Li Shi, Xiao Shuo*, Chapter 4 (Oxford University, 1996).
12. Huang Yongyu, "Tai yang xia de feng jing," in *Tai yang xia de feng jing*, San Lian Shu Dian (1998).
13. Fu Lei, "Lun Zhang Ai Ling De Xiao Shuo," in *Zhang Ai Ling Wen Ji*, Vol. 4, An Hui Wen Yi Chu Ban She (1992), p. 423.
14. Zhang Ai Ling, "Guo Yu Ben Hai Shang Hua Yi Hou Ji," in *Zhang Ai Ling Wen Ji*, Vol. 4, p. 367. *Flowers of Shanghai* is a realistic depiction of life in the brothels of Shanghai in the late Qing.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

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