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The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century

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1

INTRODUCTION

Classical Chinese poetry and the great traditional novels are widely admired by readers throughout the world. Chinese literature in this century has not yet received similar acclaim. Some works have been unjustly neglected, through lack of knowledge or good translation, but many may never gain a wide readership abroad purely on the basis of literary appeal. Nevertheless, modern Chinese literature provides insights into the lives of the largest population in the world. Our aim in this book is to provide a broad picture of the general history of Chinese literature from the beginning of this century up to its last decade, showing the ways in which Chinese people have expressed themselves through one of the most difficult, exciting and confusing periods in the long history of their culture and civilisation.

Literature in modern China

The relation between a literary work and the society in which it is produced and consumed is a matter on which Chinese critics, theorists and writers have held strong views, usually closely related to their political stance. It was less common for them to acknowledge that literary works are also related to each other: to the tradition from which they emerge, and to the other works which appear at roughly the same time. In practice, a literary work is usually viewed by its writer, reader and critic in the context of other literary works. Above all, writers and readers generally share unspoken assumptions of what 'literature' is.

The concept of 'literature' in modern China is heavily indebted to Western ideas dating from the early nineteenth century. Through the intensive debates of the 1910s and 1920s, it became understood as a body of written work comprising a certain set of genres –

chiefly fiction, poetry and drama – in which individual expression through consciously employed artistic techniques became the characteristic mode. Earlier Chinese and Western ideas of literature, or more avant-garde or radical concepts, were for the better part of this century generally ignored among the writers and critics who determined the boundaries of the literary world.

The idea of a canon of accepted literature, created and controlled by scholars, has existed from the earliest times in Chinese history: while the canon has changed in modern times, the authority of the educated elite to define it in their own interests and to preserve their own position as its creators and consumers has been jealously guarded. The democratisation of the literary canon, of its creators and of its audience, has been one of the major achievements of the reformist literary intellectuals in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, non-written literature – oral and performing literature of the villages and towns, including folksong and local opera – has continued to be excluded, along with popular entertainments of the cities such as commercial bestseller fiction and Peking opera, and the private or drawer literature of the elite (for instance, in the form of classical poetry). Despite the slogans of the reformers and revolutionaries, the majority of the Chinese population has been effectively barred from consumption of canonical works.

Despite this limitation, the modern canon is still the most discussed, studied and influential body of literature among educated readers in twentieth-century China, and works outside the canon make only brief appearances in this book. Film, which has functioned both as mass entertainment or instruction and as art cinema, and has often been closely related to written literature, belongs to the broader category of the arts generally and is not included as a central topic.

Literary genres

Modern Chinese literature, narrowly defined, consists mainly of published fiction, drama and poetry, with occasional special cases in manuscript or oral form. A few modern writers have crossed genres, writing both fiction and poetry or both poetry and drama, but on the whole the genres have remained distinct and followed differing lines of development. For this reason, the nine core chapters of this book are arranged by genre, reflecting in their

different order in each of the three parts their relative importance in each period.

Traditional Chinese literature can be divided into two broad, overlapping groups according to the language in which it was written. At one end of the spectrum was the classical literature (chiefly poetry and essays), written in a highly developed literary language characterised by compressed syntax and an elaborate, allusive vocabulary; in the middle, short stories and novels written in a vernacular closely connected with the spoken language of their time; and at the other end, the oral literature of folksong and opera in stylised regional forms. Although the writers and readers of these two groups overlapped to a remarkable degree, literary scholars in imperial China recognised only the first as true, serious literature, while fiction and drama were classed as popular entertainment. In reality, the literary and vernacular languages were often employed even within one particular work, and the popular and elite traditions constantly interacted in the development of both serious and entertainment literature.

Fiction, especially in the form of short stories, has been by far the most popular mode of expression in the twentieth century and receives special emphasis in this book. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, noting the importance of fiction in current Western literature and the language reforms of an even earlier age, reform-minded scholars advocated a reworking of the canon to include fiction and to extend the use of the vernacular into poetry and literary prose. Initial opposition by conservatives was undermined by changes in society introduced by political reforms, and the new mainstream literature was firmly established by 1920. As part of the new respectability of fiction, the traditional vernacular language was transformed into a new written vernacular in which contemporary and colloquial forms were combined with elements of Western vocabulary and grammar; at the same time, it also claimed respectability as serious literature by virtue of its concern with reforming Chinese society. This kind of writing proved enormously popular, especially among young readers. At the same time as it was elevated into respectability, however, new fiction had little appeal to the less-educated sectors of the urban population, which continued to rely on entertainment fiction of a more traditional kind.

In most traditional societies, including China, poetry is the

dominant form of literary expression, but while it has declined in popularity in Western countries, it has continued to be relatively important in China, especially at times of crisis. The use of the new vernacular in poetry, on the other hand, seems to have resulted in a slight drop in status: the formerly pre-eminent role of poetry was occupied by fiction, and the success of the new poetry continued to be questioned (though not successfully challenged). Classical poetry continued to be written and read, and at times enjoyed special recognition conferred by the elevated status of its authors – most notably, Mao Zedong. Folk poetry as oral composition and performance in the cities and countryside was largely ignored by professional writers in the early part of the century, but received new attention following the Japanese invasion and the dispersal of intellectuals to the countryside. Collections of folk poetry were popularised and imitated by established poets in the 1940s and 1950s, but propaganda aims led to such distortion that these published works cannot be considered genuine examples of folk poetry. From the point of view of most modern poets, both the classical and the folk tradition were linguistic and formal hindrances to the creation of a distinctive modern voice.

Drama in the form of plays with a written text for spoken performance on stage was a Western import which got off to a slow start early this century and only became an important genre for limited periods. Traditional Chinese drama comprised a wide diversity of theatrical forms in cities, towns and villages, in which the chief characteristics were the predominance of singing rather than recitative, musical accompaniment, elaborate costuming (including make-up and masks), stylised gestures, dance and acrobatics. In other words, it was more like Western opera, pantomime or vaudeville than post-Renaissance spoken drama. Traditional Chinese theatre was centred on performers rather than authors: little use was made of written scripts or scores, the plots were familiar to the audience in advance, and the didactic content reinforced rather than explored conventional moral and social attitudes. Twentieth-century reforms to drama brought it closer to the written play of the contemporary Western stage, notably in the use of a scripted, colloquial prose dialogue and socially reformist or morally subversive themes. Following Ibsen, Shaw and Brecht, Chinese reformers believed that stage performance could be a powerful means to present challenging views of social

problems. The reformers, however, were largely unable to convince audiences that the new drama of ideas could be as theatrically exciting as the thematically and morally conventional but technically accomplished and sensuously appealing traditional forms. The most successful modern dramas were the five-act plays of the 1930s which combined the glamour of traditional staging with the sensationalism of Western plots, and where contemporary dialogue was interspersed with music and song in Western or Chinese styles. From the early 1940s, the stage was primarily for the presentation of accepted ideas, and writers and audiences shared a general sense of apathy about the theatre. At the end of the 1970s, however, a new impetus for social reform enabled language, staging and perspectives on social problems to be dusted off and given new life on the contemporary stage.

Other genres, including essays, journalism, reportage, diaries, letters, biography and autobiography achieved eminence only in the hands of a small number of writers, and are not included in this volume.

Writers

Since the majority of literary works in modern China are polemical, our chief concern in this book is not so much for trends or styles in writing but for literature as an expression of writers' engagement with their readers on a topic of overwhelming interest to them both: the nature, development and future of Chinese society. The core chapters of this book list the main writers of each period in chronological order with brief biographical sketches and accounts of their major works.

The contributors to the traditional literary canon were the scholars or literati, members of the highly educated gentry elite which occupied roughly one per cent of the population, along with a small number of women from the same social stratum or serving it as entertainers. Their successors in the twentieth century are the intellectuals, defined broadly as men and women educated to upper-secondary levels and associated with non-manual occupations (excluding business, the armed forces and government), who also occupy roughly the same one per cent of the population.

The creation of a new language for literature was part of an attempt by the new intellectuals to establish for themselves a

perquisites and status. When the Communist ruling elite fell from power in the Cultural Revolution, the intellectual and literary elite which had supported it fell with it; and both were revived together after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. During the Cultural Revolution, however, younger intellectuals deprived of social expectations formed a new group of cultural and political dissenters, whose achievements laid the basis for the new literature and arts of the 1980s. This decade, with its loosening of social constrictions, led to redefinitions of the role of writers in society and eventually to a much wider social composition of both writers and their readers.

Periods in literary development

Twentieth-century Chinese literature can be divided into three major periods on the basis of changes within the structure of the literary canon. These periods form the three main parts of this book, each beginning with a chapter on general literary developments set against the historical background.

The first period, from 1900 to 1937, represents the beginning of a distinctively new literature in China, in which Western influence is a decisive factor in the growth of writing as a profession, in the creation of new concepts of literature, its styles and its languages, and in the development of a more broadly based readership.

The second period, from 1938 to 1965, can be seen as an interruption to the almost unchecked Westernisation of the earlier period. Under the impact of Japanese invasion, writers became more responsive to native Chinese traditions as they strove to reach a wider audience in the interests of national salvation. The consolidation of Communist Party power, spreading from its base in north-west China in the mid-1930s to become the ruling party on the mainland in 1949, also exerted increasing political restraints over the production and consumption of literary works. The tension between the native tradition, Western-style modernisation and the Soviet model of political control is the main characteristic of the literary world in this period.

The Cultural Revolution, dating from 1966 to 1976, by undermining the control of the Communist Party and the influence of the Soviet model, brought the second period to an end. The

apparent victory of a heavily politicised voice in collectively written stage dramas based on traditional Chinese opera was offset by the growth of an underground literature in the 1970s which drew on the modern traditions of the 1930s and further Westernisation. As the Cultural Revolution came to an end, this underground literature set the tone for a new era in contemporary writing in the 1980s, and attempts by the authorities to reimpose the restrictions of the 1950s and 1960s were increasingly ignored. The experimentation of the 1980s and its openness towards books and readers from outside made this literature attractive to Western readers, and when the June Fourth massacre of 1989 forced many Chinese writers into involuntary exile, writing by Chinese abroad formed a new link between Chinese literature and the rest of the world.

China, Taiwan and Hong Kong

Throughout the years of warfare and economic turmoil in China from late imperial times up to 1950, migration was common in south and eastern China among the rural and urban poor. It was much less common among intellectuals, especially from the central, northern and western parts of the country. Even after 1949 when modern China became divided into two realms – the People's Republic of China on the mainland, the Republic of China on the offshore island of Taiwan, with a renewed influx of migrants into the British colony of Hong Kong – the vast majority of writers stayed on the mainland, while the development of literature in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Overseas Chinese communities took separate routes. The largely independent literatures of these communities have their own histories and will not be discussed in this book.

2

TOWARDS A NEW CULTURE

On the morning of 5 August 1900, the Manchu Emperor, the Empress Dowager and a small entourage fled in disguise from the Imperial Palace, making their way westward to re-establish the court in Xi'an two months later. The group travelled either on foot or in donkey carts, and dressed as commoners to avoid detection. Their pitiable state was a telling symbol of the degree to which the once-majestic Qing Empire had declined. With only a few thousand men, European and Japanese forces marched into Beijing, meeting almost no effective opposition from either the imperial troops or their secret-society supporters, the Society of Harmonious Fists. The latter, known also as the Boxers, was an anti-foreign organisation which had laid siege to the foreign legations in the capital for nearly two months, enjoying the tacit support of the Manchu court. The subsequent plundering of Beijing by the occupying Allied troops and humiliating settlement agreed to by the Qing government demonstrated unmistakably to reform-minded Chinese that the Manchu rulers themselves were the chief obstacle to reform, and that a complete change in the system of government was the only hope for the country.

The Empress Dowager, obliged to acknowledge responsibility for the Boxer catastrophe, made a belated attempt to remedy the social, political and economic weaknesses that had led to their defeat. Her comprehensive reform programme, spanning the years 1901–5, covered the bureaucracy, education, military, and general social reforms. Specific changes included the abolition of the government examinations, the establishment of new ministries and the active recruitment of Chinese students abroad for government office. These reforms had a direct bearing on the changes in literature which followed.

The civil service examinations had a restricted subject-matter,

the Confucian classics, and an even more restrictive prose style, known as the 'eight-legged essay'. Even during the nineteenth century, in the face of the Western incursion into China, the central and regional administrative bureaucracies continued to be staffed by traditional scholars trained within this classical mode. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was obvious even to conservatives like the Empress Dowager that this kind of education was failing to equip China for the modern world. Curricular reforms in schools introduced foreign languages and studies of foreign governments alongside the Confucian classics. For speedier recruitment of modernised officials, the government also sponsored selected students for study abroad. By 1906, the number of Chinese students in Japan alone had reached 13,000. These young people imbibed not only Japanese culture but also a host of European ideas through Japanese translations of Western works. In turn, the students translated hundreds of Western and Japanese works into Chinese, resulting in the wide dissemination of foreign ideas and literary forms among educated Chinese.

The Empress Dowager's policies were not themselves innovative. In 1898, her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor, had instituted a reform programme, modelled after the Meiji reforms in Japan, on the advice of a group of scholars led by Kang Youwei and his student Liang Qichao. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were both educated in the classics but, coming from the southern province of Guangdong far from the conservative centre, also had ready access to the outside world. Advocates of change, they remained royalists, and their ultimate ideal was the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. The Empress Dowager, however, more sensitive to the threat of internal change than external aggression, suppressed the reform movement after one hundred days and placed the Emperor under house arrest. Most of the reformers fled to Japan, and some who remained, such as Tan Sitong, were executed.

The failure of both the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 and the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 brought drastic changes to the Chinese political agenda. While the most influential figure before 1900 was unquestionably Kang Youwei, whose revision of the Confucian classics as a vehicle for political change was matched by his loyalty to the Manchu Emperor, the early years of this century were dominated by a more radical advocate of change, Liang Qichao.

Now living in exile in Japan, Liang, through his contacts with Japanese modernisers and studies of European philosophical and political texts, developed the idea of a new 'nation-state' which would be home to 'citizens' rather than 'subjects'.

Like his mentor, Liang believed that this change, which he rightly called 'revolutionary', could be contained without altering either the dynastic structure or overthrowing the current ruling house. Other reformers demanded the overthrow of Manchu rule altogether and even the establishment of a republic. Led by Sun Yatsen, another radical political thinker from Guangdong, the latter group had perhaps a better claim to the term 'revolution' (*geming*). While its first known use, in *The Book of Changes*, implies a change in reign title only, its political import in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came from the Japanese, who had borrowed the ancient term for the new Western concept. Tracts such as Zou Rong's 1903 *The Revolutionary Army* which called for the expulsion of the Manchus became a rallying point for political action.

While Liang Qichao did not endorse the demands of the revolutionaries, his acceptance of the term 'revolution' had momentous implications for the history of Chinese literature. On 25 December 1899, Liang advocated a 'revolution in poetry'; three days later he put forward the view that a 'revolution in literature' was required, and three years later, in 1902, he also coined the slogan 'revolution in fiction'. Liang's role as an innovator was enhanced by his own literary output (discussed below in Chapter 3). His combination of literary creation and literary theory not only heralded the rise of modern Chinese literature but established a pattern for twentieth-century literary intellectuals.

Liang Qichao's influence became widespread with the publication of his journals *Public Opinion* (1898–1902) and the *New People's Miscellany* (1902–7). As their titles suggest, these journals were targeted at a broad audience and Liang's writings were devoured by an eager public. Prior to 1900, the classical or literary language was the medium for serious writing of any kind. Scholars such as Yan Fu and Lin Shu, who translated Western thought and literature into Chinese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, prided themselves on the refined classical style of their translations. Lin Shu, although inevitably influenced by the European works he translated, derided Liang Qichao's journalistic

semi-vernacular. The success of Lin's versions of novels by Dickens and H. Rider Haggard seemed to justify his attachment to the older tradition. Within a few years, however, it was the 'Liang Qichao style' which laid the foundations of a new language for literature.

The Liang Qichao style was based on the grammar and vocabulary of the old vernacular (the traditional language of most entertainment fiction) but drew also on both traditional literary Chinese and contemporary spoken Chinese. The magnitude of his achievement can be estimated by comparing his style with the dominant nineteenth-century writing styles, the Tongcheng School in prose writing and the Jiangxi School in poetry, both of which advocated antiquated models divorced from any conceivable spoken language.

Liang Qichao's ideas on the function of literature in society also laid the foundation for modern literary practice. Like many who went to Japan after the failure of the Hundred Days Reform, he was convinced that the success of the Meiji Restoration in Japan resulted from the willingness of the Japanese to imitate European ways. Japanese writers even claimed that Europe's modern governmental systems were due to the high regard in these countries for fiction, especially political fiction (for example, the novels of Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton). Liang was quick to seize on this notion, and his article 'On the Relationship between Fiction and Ruling the Masses', featured in the first issue of his new journal, *New Fiction*, in 1902, advocated the elevation of fiction to the status of a serious genre of vital importance to good government.

Liang Qichao also promoted Western literary criticism and theory, although he was not the first to practise Western methodologies. Wang Guowei (1877–1927), a conservative intellectual who had studied in Japan and was critical of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, drew on Schopenhauer's philosophy in his analysis of the traditional novel *Dream of the Red Chamber.* In poetry, Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), another scholar from Guangdong and a close friend of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, advocated the adoption of colloquial vocabulary and reference to objects in the modern world such as telegraphs and steamers. Ill-health prevented Huang's participation in the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, and he went on to enjoy a successful career as

a diplomat in San Francisco, London and Singapore. An accomplished poet in the classical style, his familiarity with Western cultures encouraged him to explore Liang's 'poetry revolution' in practice.

A flood of translations and adaptations of foreign literary works and theories poured into China in the first decade of the twentieth century, leaving the late-Qing reformers stranded in a rapidly transforming society. The Qing court failed to understand the scope and nature of the new influences coming in from abroad, and even the more progressive among them, such as Li Hongzhang, refused to question the traditional reverence for Chinese culture as inherently superior and contempt for all others as barbaric. With the Guangxu Emperor's death in 1908, the last link between the imperial court and monarchist reformers such as Kang Youwei was broken. In its place, the revolutionary policies of Sun Yatsen and his followers gained further support.

The Qing rulers had become so inept that the revolutionaries succeeded in establishing the Republic of China with minimal bloodshed and within the space of a few years. The new era was proclaimed on 1 January 1912, with Sun Yatsen as provisional president. Lacking a substantial power base despite his Overseas Chinese and Triad links, however, Sun Yatsen was forced to relinquish his post to Yuan Shikai, the former Qing military commander who had been responsible for arresting the Hundred Days reformers in 1898. Owing no particular allegiance to republican ideals, Yuan tried to re-establish the monarchy with himself as emperor in 1915; but was promptly deserted by his generals who sought to proclaim their own independence in their provincial strongholds. When Yuan died in 1916, however, none was strong enough to capture and hold a centralising authority, and for the next ten years, China was divided and ruled by a succession of warlords in what was virtually a state of civil war.

While the warlord decade created political chaos in China, it also witnessed one of the most spectacular intellectual transformations in Chinese history. The warlords themselves were repressive and hostile to new ideas, but weakness at the centre meant that writers could operate in relative freedom in the provinces as well as in the foreign concessions in Shanghai and even in the capital itself. The unstable relationship between the warlords and foreign governments was also behind the ambiguous attitudes of

Chinese intellectuals towards Japan and the West. The young and impatient revolutionaries drafting their nationalist and anti-imperialist writings were aware that they were able to do so precisely because of their education in foreign countries and the protection they enjoyed thanks to foreign extraterritorial privilege.

One of the most prominent writers of this period was Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), the founder in 1915 of *New Youth*, a Shanghai-based journal dedicated to the creation of a vigorous new culture in China. Chen, who had studied for several years in both Japan and France, singled out Confucianism as the biggest stumbling block to the development of a new China. To replace it, Chen proposed allegiance to two Western concepts: science and democracy. To Chen and his followers, 'science' was not so much a body of scientific knowledge acquired by rigorous study but more a culture of experimentation and scepticism towards received ideas, while 'democracy' implied no more than limited suffrage for educated people.

Like Liang Qichao, Chen also tended to overestimate the role that literature could play in what became known as the New Culture movement, and encouraged Hu Shi, then a student of the American philosopher John Dewey at Columbia University, to publish his ideas for literary reform in *New Youth*. The modestly titled 'Some Tentative Suggestions for the Reform of Chinese Literature' appeared in January 1917. By today's standards, the eight principles put forward by Hu Shi seem commonplace, a series of admonitions against the use of clichés, stale literary phrases and writing without meaning or substance. In exhorting aspiring writers not to avoid using vernacular words and speech, however, Hu Shi initiated a movement which changed Chinese language and literature forever.

Although Hu Shi avoided the term 'revolution', his article nevertheless established the date for the beginning of China's 'new literature' and was followed by Chen Duxiu's call for 'literary revolution' in the February 1917 issue of *New Youth*. Without Liang Qichao's efforts, the literary revolution could not have been so universally and rapidly accepted, but where Liang Qichao stopped short of writing in the vernacular free of classical elements and of advocating the replacement of Chinese literary traditions with modern Western models, Chen had no such reservations.

Hu Shi's suggestions for the adoption of the vernacular in

literature may seem somewhat confusing, since traditional fiction had been written in the vernacular for several centuries; Hu Shi even drew readers' attention to the splendid achievements in premodern Chinese fiction and suggested that the older vernacular could be adapted for use in modern fiction. To contemporary readers, however, the new term used by Hu Shi, 'literature' (*wenxue*), understood to include fiction and drama, still meant primarily poetry and other high-minded prose writing, and the old respect for poetry still lingered. Hu Shi himself illustrated the use of the vernacular in literary writing by publishing several of his free verse poems in the same January issue of *New Youth*, to be followed over the next two months by short poems in the new style by Chen Duxiu and Liu Fu.

The work which is celebrated as the turning-point for modern literature, however, appeared in *New Youth* in May 1918: Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman'. This story, with its penetrating analysis of fundamental flaws in Chinese society, proved beyond doubt that vernacular fiction was a suitable vehicle for the expression of serious views in prose. Its distinctively new mode of expression and subject-matter not only launched a new literary tradition but also foreshadowed a period of sustained analysis of Chinese culture in general, which later became known as the May Fourth Movement.

The May Fourth Movement received its name from a demonstration of several thousand students assembled in Tiananmen Square on 4 May 1919. Carrying banners with slogans such as 'Boycott Japanese Goods' and 'No to the Signing of the Peace Treaty', the students marched to the Legation Quarter to protest against the world powers' agreements at the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference. The consequences of the First World War (1914–18), including the Russian Revolution of 1917, had a profound impact on the development of literature in China. The war effort in Europe temporarily distracted Western intervention in China, causing a rapid growth in local industry and commerce. In 1913, for example, there were only about half a million industrial workers in China, but by 1919, their number had grown to about 2 million. The new industries contributed to the development of urban centres into modern cities, whose populations benefited from the new educational policies of the 1900s and 1910s. By 1917, over 10 million people had received a modern education,

forming a new class of readers distinct in their backgrounds and needs from the old scholar-official elite.

World War I also brought the realisation that European science and technology did not bring peace and happiness to their inventors. Furthermore, it became evident that Western values such as equality and democracy were for the exclusive enjoyment of countries which were strong and wealthy. China was neither. China had been on the side of the Allies against Germany, but despite this support, the Treaty of Versailles handed German-held concessions in China (most importantly, the Shandong peninsula) to another Allied supporter, Japan, on the basis of a secret treaty agreed between China and Japan dating back to 1915. The Allies' contempt for China's territorial integrity and the Chinese government's submission to Japan set off great indignation. The student demonstration in Beijing on 4 May 1919 quickly grew into a widespread patriotic movement throughout China incorporating a demand for a total re-evaluation of Chinese culture and civilisation.

The May Fourth Incident also marked the beginnings of an irreconcilable split between those who saw Chinese spirituality and Confucian values as the antidote to the moral disease of Western civilisation and those who sought national salvation through the Communist ideology of the Soviet Union. In the immediate aftermath of the May Fourth Incident, both camps still laid claim to the word 'revolution', but the aggressive activities of the Communist International instigated by the Soviet Union soon led to its appropriation by left-wing activists. Sun Yatsen's party, formerly known as the Chinese Revolutionary Party, was reorganised in October 1919 as the Chinese Nationalist Party, while the Chinese Communist Party was established by Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao in 1921. The initial membership of the latter was fifty-seven; within six years it had grown to 57,963. The two founders of the Communist Party were both men of letters who had a very strong interest in literature, and Party members were an articulate and influential minority in the new literature movement of the 1920s.

The most significant achievement of the literary left in 1920 was to take control of the journal *Short Story Monthly*. Founded in 1910 and published by the Commercial Press in Shanghai, *Short Story Monthly* was a major outlet for popular fiction, including stories written in the literary language by such writers as Su Manshu.

The literary reformers regarded it as a commercial enterprise of little artistic or moral value, and a young left-wing employee, later to become famous as the novelist Mao Dun, persuaded the owners to appoint him as editor. Under Mao Dun's editorship the journal changed policy, attacking its former preference for apolitical entertainment and switching completely to the vernacular in 1921. *Short Story Monthly* became the best-known literary journal of the modern era: didactic and polemical in its early years, and yet receptive to a wide range of foreign literary theories and broad enough to include the majority of the most famous writers of the 1920s and early 1930s.

In 1921, the *Short Story Monthly* became an unofficial organ of the Literary Research Association, the first modern literary society to promote the new movement. Established in Beijing in January 1921, the Association boasted among its founders Mao Dun, Zheng Zhenduo and Zhou Zuoren, all to become prominent figures in the new literature. Literary journals sponsored by the Association included *Poetry* and *Drama*, the first of their kind in China. Out of touch with these developments, a group of students in Japan, including Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu and Tian Han, formed the Creation Society in July 1921. After moving its headquarters to Shanghai later the same year, the Creation Society prevailed on the Taidong Bookstore to publish its books and journals, such as *Creation Quarterly* and *The Deluge*. While there were more similarities than differences between the two groups, not to mention a great diversity of theories and styles within each group, the slogans by which they are best known indicate an allegiance to two broad alternatives: 'literature for life's sake' (or realism) for the Literary Research Association, and 'literature for art's sake' (or romanticism and expressionism) for the Creation Society.

New literary societies flourished in the 1920s: some of the more notable were the Popular Drama Society, the Unnamed Society, the Thread of Talk Society and the *Contemporary Review* group. Their main activity was to publish books and journals for their members, and by 1925, there were well over a hundred new literary magazines in all parts of the country, providing writers with ready outlets for their creative and theoretical or polemical work, and also space for translations of foreign works by Japanese, Russian, American and European authors ranging from the classics to the avant-garde.

The influx of new ideas encouraged an atmosphere of debate and controversy, to which personal and political rivalries sometimes added considerable bitterness. In the pages of the *Contemporary Review*, writers such as Hu Shi, Chen Yuan and Liang Shiqiu argued that good literature was free of class allegiances and should be independent of politics. They were denounced by left-wing critics including Lu Xun, who claimed that by denying the influence of class upon literature, these writers were acting as running dogs of capitalism. Even the most basic ideas of the new literature came under question from the *Critical Review*, established by the Harvard-trained scholars Wu Mi and Mei Guangdi in Nanjing in 1922, and *The Tiger Weekly*, published in Beijing by the Minister of Education, Zhang Shizhao. These journals tried to re-activate opposition to the vernacular movement, but since they wrote in the literary language, their journals had limited circulation and the new writers did not bother to mount a sustained counter-attack. Instead, in response to a series of national crises in the mid and late 1920s which polarised the political parties, the literary societies in turn became more intolerant of each other in their attempts to control the direction of the new literature.

Nationalists and Communists agreed that under warlord rule the national interest had become secondary to appeasement of foreign powers and industrialists. Foreigners filled important posts in the Maritime Customs and Postal Service, and the foreign concessions were a continual reminder of their privileges. Patriotic demonstrations by students and nascent trade unions became a common occurrence. On 15 May 1925 a Chinese worker was killed by Japanese police in Shanghai during one such demonstration. In protest, over 10,000 workers and students marched in the city's concessions on 30 May. The British officer in charge of a detachment of Chinese and Sikh police commanded his men to open fire, killing eleven demonstrators and wounding dozens more. Further protests took place across the country, and the literary journals joined in denunciations of the May Thirtieth Incident.

The brutality of the warlords in suppressing demonstrations made them equally a target of attack. On 18 March 1926, thousands of students and workers assembled in Tiananmen Square to protest against foreign (particularly Japanese) domination in national policy. The head of the Beijing ruling faction, Duan Qirui, ordered

troops to open fire on the demonstrators: about fifty were killed and hundreds wounded. Among the many writers who expressed their rage and grief were Lu Xun and Wen Yiduo. These two incidents brought to a head several years of agitation by left-wing literary critics such as Mao Dun and Jiang Guangci for a more politicised literature. Guo Moruo's 'Revolution and Literature', published in *Creation Monthly* in May 1926, showed that the new 'revolutionary literature' was to be completely different to Liang Qichao's original concept. The function of literature, in the darkest days of warlord rule in the 1920s, could not be defined as a tool for the promotion of good government; writers were now encouraged to speak on behalf of the oppressed classes and help create a social revolution conceived in Marxist terms. The revolution in literature now having been achieved, left-wing writers were poised to use literature for revolutionary ends. Many were by this stage Communist Party members.

The split between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party intensified the polarisation and politicisation of the literary camps. In alliance with the Communists, Sun had planned to establish a new national government with an assault on warlords from his base in Guangzhou. His death in 1925 brought Chiang Kaishek, a military officer, to the fore. After skirmishes with local Communist groups, Chiang set out in July 1926 as commander-in-chief of a National Revolutionary Army which included prominent Communists such as Mao Dun and Guo Moruo. With the help also of local Communist agents in mobilising support from peasants and workers, the Northern Expedition was a spectacular success. By March 1927, both Nanjing and Shanghai were taken, and a provisional government was set up in Wuhan.

Alarmed at the support for the left-wing even within his own party, Chiang Kaishek decided to abandon his Communist allies in order to win the support of the foreign powers and native capital. With the support of the notorious 'Green Gang', Communists and union leaders in Shanghai were rounded up and shot in April 1927. The Shanghai massacre drove the Communist movement out of the cities into the villages; at the same time, formerly non-aligned intellectuals were persuaded by Chiang's treachery to join the ranks of the left-wing. Chiang Kaishek's 'White Terror' was matched by warlords in other parts of China, equally ruthless in their attempts to exterminate left-wing influence:

in Beijing, for instance, Zhang Zuolin (a Manchurian general who protected Japanese interests in the north and north-east) arrested and hanged twenty Communists, including Li Dazhao.

The Communist response was first to find a scapegoat. Chen Duxiu, who had engineered the alliance with the Nationalists on orders from Stalin, was accused (in the current rhetoric) of being a Trotskyist and dismissed as secretary-general in August 1926. He was replaced by another intellectual and activist in the new literature movement, Qu Qiubai, who in turn remained in power for less than two years: at the Sixth Party Congress in June 1928, held in Moscow for reasons of safety, Qu was accused of opportunism and stripped of his post.

The foreign concessions in Shanghai still offered comparative security even at the height of the White Terror. The Communist writers Jiang Guangci and Meng Chao formed the Sun Society in 1928 to promote proletarian revolutionary literature. Much of their effort went into denouncing the failure of writers like Lu Xun and Mao Dun to produce literature that described the lives of, and was read by, the urban proletariat. Cheng Fangwu's essay 'From Literary Revolution to Revolutionary Literature' summed up the change in outlook in the Creation Society. Lu Xun also came under attack by Guo Moruo for counselling caution, and was ridiculed as an old man belonging to the leisured class. Lu Xun's riposte, that while all literature is propaganda, not all propaganda is literature, was evidence of his distance from the Communist-backed factions of this time. A debate between the Creation and Sun writers and Mao Dun (who by this time had let his membership of the Communist Party lapse), on the concept of proletarian literature, lasted until early 1929. The controversies among the left-wing writers and intellectuals during these years continued to reverberate half a century later.

Having successfully isolated the Communists in Shanghai's foreign concessions or in remote rural bases, Chiang Kaishek, in cooperation with the remaining local warlords, continued with the liquidation of the Communist Party and its sympathisers (about one million had been murdered by 1932). A further Nationalist push towards Beijing resulted in the assassination of Zhang Zuolin by the Japanese, who saw him as no longer able to defend their interests, and Beijing fell to the Nationalist forces in June 1928. Beijing (meaning 'northern capital') was renamed Beiping ('north-

ern peace') and Chiang established a Nationalist government in Nanjing ('southern capital') on 10 October 1928 (10 October is still celebrated as China's National Day in Taiwan).

Stability of a kind was established with the taming of the warlords but economic and social conditions for workers and peasants deteriorated. A League of Nations study revealed that peasants paid about half of their harvest as land rental as well as other taxes. Mao Zedong's investigations in his home province of Hunan in 1927 (to where he was forced to retreat by the White Terror) showed much the same, and Mao concluded that the countryside – not the urban centres as decreed by conventional Marxism – could launch the Communist Chinese revolution.

Bickering among left-wing writers finally stopped in late 1929 when the Nationalist government began to terminate their organisations. The Creation Society was forced to disband in February 1929, soon followed by the Sun Society and other groups. Under pressure also from the Communist International to settle their differences, the two societies joined forces with Lu Xun in early 1930 to form the League of Left-wing Writers. The League was inaugurated on 2 March 1930 in Shanghai to an audience of over forty people, and Lu Xun gave the keynote speech. Branches were set up in Beijing and Tokyo, with sub-branches in Guangzhou and Nanjing. Mao Dun and Zhou Yang, who were not in Shanghai at the time, joined soon after, and Qu Qiubai became a leading member on his return from the Soviet Union in 1931. Altogether, nearly three hundred writers joined the League, amounting to a sizeable proportion of writers and critics in China at that time.

With so many experienced and popular writers and editors at its disposal, the League's publications became very influential. As well as being vehicles for their own members' work, journals such as *Pioneers* and *Sprouts Monthly* offered space to an even greater number of translations of Marxist and Soviet texts. The Nationalist government was so alarmed by these publications that a new code on censorship was announced in December 1930. As one League journal was closed, however, another was launched to take its place.

The popularisation of literature was central to the League, which took over the last few issues of *Mass Literature and the Arts*, a journal founded in 1928 by Yu Dafu and Xia Laidi. In 1931 and 1932 Lu Xun, Mao Dun and Zhou Yang conducted

a detailed debate on the content, audience and language of proletarian literature, and Qu Qiubai's 1932 essays on mass literature summed up the League's position. Qu Qiubai believed that the May Fourth vernacular revolution had failed because the literature it produced was not welcomed by the masses. The style and even more the language of the new literature were Europeanised and therefore elitist, beyond the comprehension of the masses.

The gap between written and spoken Chinese is due partly to the largely non-phonetic nature of the Chinese script (that is, a script based on pictographs or ideographs as distinct from an alphabetic script). Another reason is the diversity of spoken Chinese in different parts of the country, where regional or even local dialects were unintelligible to outsiders. Qu Qiubai advocated the creation of a 'common language' (*putonghua*) which could be understood throughout China. As the country modernised and travel became more widespread, according to Qu, a common language had already begun to emerge at train stations and in the docks. This common language, which was very different to the vernacular language (*baihua*), only existed at that time as a rudimentary spoken form and needed to be popularised as a means of expression for all people in all parts of the country. Like the vernacular, it could also be written down using the old ideographic script, but Qu Qiubai and Lu Xun made the even more radical proposal that this script be replaced by a romanised (alphabetic) script in the interests of educating as many people as possible.

On 18 September 1931, Japanese troops stationed in north-east China attacked Shenyang (Mukden). Meeting virtually no resistance, they proceeded to occupy the whole north-east. This invasion of Chinese territory was followed by the punitive bombardment of Shanghai on 28 February 1932, and in May 1933 Japanese troops approached within ten miles of Beijing. Their own experience of Japanese aggression, combined with the testimony of refugees from the north-east, made national salvation a key issue among writers in the early 1930s and led to a new set of slogans such as 'revolutionary war literature', 'nationalist revolutionary literature' and 'national defence literature'.

Nationalist sentiments were also voiced by government supporters. A group under Huang Zhenxia, an army instructor, and Fan Zhengbo, the chief of police, declared war on the League

under the slogan 'nationalist literature'. *The Vanguard Weekly* was launched in June 1930, followed by other publications such as *The Vanguard Monthly*, which carried in its first issue 'A Declaration by the Nationalist Literature Movement'. In direct opposition to the League, the declaration states that the relationship between individuals and class is superficial, and that the highest significance of literature is national. The term 'national' has racial overtones, and the notion of Chinese racial superiority is inherent in works written by members of the movement. Huang Zhenxia's 'Blood of the Yellow People' (1931), for example, describes the invasion of Russia by Genghis Khan's grandson.

At a time when Japan posed the main external threat, appeals by government supporters to racist emotions were calculated to sway public opinion. Left-wing writers, however, were alert to the implied subversion of the internationalism favoured by the League. Qu Qiubai, for instance, dismissed the Nationalist literary journals as nothing more than anti-Soviet propaganda, read by only the wives of their authors, while Lu Xun condemned the authors themselves as traitorous and despicable. The Nationalist Literature movement was clear evidence to League members that the government's chief aim was to wipe out Communism in China rather than to repel the invaders.

For its part, the dominance of the League crushed even moderate voices at this time. From 1931 to 1933, the literary critics Hu Qiuyuan and Su Wen, calling themselves 'free people' and 'the third kind of people', called for the non-interference of politics in literature and criticised the League for abandoning literary freedom for short-term political gains. Although their disquiet concerning the politicisation of literary debate was shared by many non-aligned writers, they were no match for the organised response from League members. Qu Qiubai and Zhou Yang in particular took the opportunity to promote the Leninist doctrine of literature as a tool of Party organisation. The combination of the Nationalists' repressive cultural policies and the threat of Japanese invasion effectively made arguments for a liberal and humanitarian approach to literature seem hollow.

While Shanghai continued to be the centre of left-wing literary activity, away from Shanghai the atmosphere was less militant. In Beijing, for example, Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang promoted non-aligned literature in their journals *Camel Grass* and *The Analects*,

and although they received constant criticism, the attacks on them were less vindictive. Zhou advocated literature free from any kind of didactic purpose while Lin defended the role of humour and private feelings.

While the League may have dominated literary debates and publication outlets, it by no means had a monopoly on writing. Entertainment literature was still commercially successful in the hands of key writers such as Zhang Henshui. Mainstream May Fourth novelists and poets such as Ba Jin, Shen Congwen, Lao She, Wen Yiduo and Bian Zhilin kept their distance from the League, freely experimenting with both traditional Chinese and modern Western techniques. The cosmopolitanism of this time was even more noticeable in the theatre, where playwrights such as Cao Yu and Ding Xilin transplanted the European stage to China.

In the Jinggangshan area on the Jiangxi-Hunan border, meanwhile, literature was taking a very different path. After the failure of Mao Zedong's attempt to stage a peasant uprising in Hunan in 1927, he was joined later the same year in Jinggangshan by Zhu De, retreating from the unsuccessful Nanchang Uprising. Together they established a Communist base in Ruijin, which operated more or less independently of the Party's headquarters still located in Shanghai. While the urban-based Party continued to be dominated by the Communist International and to suffer from internal ideological division, Mao Zedong was both willing and able to ignore the Soviet Union and conventional Marxism. His base was the peasantry, most of whom were illiterate. To gain their support, Mao turned to traditional folksong and local opera as a vehicle for revolutionary ideas.

The new drama produced in Jiangxi shared with the Shanghai stage the message that revolution was needed to achieve improvements in living conditions, but because it was designed for performance rather than publication and for a local rather than a national audience, it remained almost unknown even to the left-wing in Shanghai. Nevertheless, over a hundred scripts are still extant, over forty of them in a complete form. Most of these plays or operas are quite simple, little more than straightforward propaganda on peasant struggles against landlords and battles waged by the Communist forces against the Nationalists or Japanese.

Their significance is mainly historical, as the forerunners of the new opera movement in Yan'an in the 1940s.

Even though conditions in Ruijin were far from perfect, the situation for Communists elsewhere in China was much worse. By 1931 Mao Zedong felt confident enough of his own relative success that he invited members of the Central Committee to attend the First National Congress of the Soviets in Ruijin. He also succeeded in being elected chairman of the Central Committee, and his policy of designating the peasantry as the primary element in China's revolutionary struggle was finally approved. This policy was further confirmed by Mao's ability to hold off repeated attacks by Chiang Kaishek's forces on the Red Army base between 1930 and 1934. Using German military advisers and superior firepower, Chiang's strategy was positional warfare, but Mao adopted guerrilla tactics which relied on massive local support.

Mao's unconventional tactics were frowned upon by Stalin, and Mao lost control of the Central Committee to Soviet-trained cadres known as the 'Twenty-eight Bolsheviks'. When Chiang Kaishek's Fifth Encirclement and Annihilation Campaign was put into operation in 1934, the new leaders switched from guerrilla warfare to conventional positional warfare. They were defeated so thoroughly that the Red Army was forced to evacuate the base which they had held for seven years. Qu Qiubai was among those ordered to stay behind to defend the base: he was captured and executed.

Some one hundred thousand soldiers and Party cadres broke through the siege in October 1934: the first stage of what was later to become known as the Long March had begun. In January 1935, Mao Zedong regained his position as chairman of the Party's Central Committee, a position he held for the rest of his life, and under his direction the Red Army moved further west and then north. The price for Mao's ascendancy was high: by the time they reached Baoan in the north-west province of Shaanxi a year later, there were only 8,000 survivors. The Long March, made under extremely difficult conditions and over scenic but inhospitable terrain, became a Communist legend, providing both inspiration and myth in countless literary works over the next fifty years. In December 1936, the Party moved its headquarters from Baoan to Yan'an, which became the base of the Red Army (and its successor, the Eighth Route Army) throughout the War

against Japan. It was here that Mao implemented the literary theories developed by Qu Qiubai in Shanghai and later refined in Ruijin. His own formulation of Communist literary doctrine in 1942 was the culmination of trends that had been evolving in China since the beginning of the century.

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