



Recent Changes in Contemporary Chinese Literary Trends

ZHANG YIWU

1

THE LAST TEN YEARS have witnessed profound changes in Chinese literature and culture. On the one hand, the changes in quotidian domestic life brought about by China's high-speed development have exceeded the capacity of plotting and anticipation of the "New Culture" and "New Era." On the other, China's status in the chain of global capitalist production and consumption has reached unprecedented levels. We now must face seriously the impact of a "New 'New China'" on a "New Culture."

Many changes have taken place in the domain of literature, and they will continue to become more profound. Several tendencies can be seen clearly: First, a process of "generational change" among writers has transpired, and the influence of the important writers of years past has been fading away. The rise of a new generation is becoming more and more discernible. Moving from the works of the very active writers of the 1970s to such writers today as Guo Jingming, Han Han, and Chun Shu shows this tendency of generational change. Second, mechanisms for the best-seller have evolved; the

booming trend of best-sellers by popular writers and the shrinking of "pure" literature is becoming more obvious every day. Third, the role of the full-length novel is becoming more and more distinct in the world of literature. With the demise of literary journals, the decline of the medium-length novel is almost certain. The market functions of the full-length novel have gradually become the center of literary production. Fourth, the development of online literature has provided an unprecedented impetus. All these changes have shown the profound historical transfer brought about by globalization and market-oriented exchanges. On the whole, contemporary literature has undoubtedly gone beyond the norm of the new literature since China's May Fourth Movement and is entering a new historical stage. Creative works manifest the trends of being *middle-class oriented* and dominated by a sense of *rejuvenation*, while from the vantage point of a critical theory of literature, the changes illustrate the emergence of a type of new literary interpretation and exploration that transcends other exciting new developments.



2

BEING MIDDLE-CLASS ORIENTED in literature indicates that the impact of the middle class on the creation and reading of literary works is becoming more and more evident. The exploration of this problem is closely related to the processes of Chinese social change. The literary imagination symbolizes the transformation of a society, and societal transformations, in turn, will provide the new literary imagination with fresh material. The major impact of the taste and value of the middle class on the literary imagination can be summarized as follows:

First, the most conspicuous phenomenon is the rise of a new urban element in Chinese literature. This urban element shifts the center of literary imagination to the cities. The contrasts between the country and the city have always been the center of attention in modern Chinese literature. Not only did a large number of writers originate in rural areas (and their memory of country life has therefore become an unending source of their literary creation), but the city itself exists in contrast to the rural and in many cases is determined by it. Except for the works by the “New Sensation Writers” and Zhang Ailing, there are no works that truly demonstrate the urban experience. Moreover, the urban experience showed by today’s middle class is completely different from that of the past. A type of urban element entirely divorced from

the country has already become the center of recent literary works.

Second, along with the ascendancy of consumerism, the significance of daily life has been magnified to become the center of culture and viewed as something sacred, whereas the sacred value of modernization in the good old days has been relegated to the status of the ordinary. In the age of globalization, the rise of the middle class means that their ideas usually emphasize the importance of daily life. The desires of daily life have been normalized and subsequently become one of the objectives of life. Among the vast modern narratives, daily life that once was neglected and constrained has become the center of the literary imagination, providing it with unusual value and significance. The pursuit of rediscovering this type of daily life is entirely guiding the new literary imagination. The trivial details and consumption values of daily life have become prominent. Meanwhile, the link between the temperateness and conservativeness of the middle class as their chief social characteristics and transnational capital and globalization has contributed to the increasing secularism of literature. All the radical ideological propositions, either of the left or the right, have become peripheral trends.

3

THE LITERATURE OF REJUVENATION implies that both writers and readers are being invigorated by youth culture. Today’s “rejuvenated” writing is an outcome of mass culture and the market during the new age of globalization. It has nothing to do with mainstream literature, but the marketing structures of literature have been altered by it. Unexpectedly, the most notorious literary stars are some presumptuous, raving juveniles with personal characteristics of sensitivity and conceitedness. These young writers’ sudden fame has shaken the usual orderliness of literature, and the standards of judgment for both the meaning and value of literature are now reeling under the impact of that celebrity status. The development of rejuvenated writing is the unique product of youth culture. This type of writing carries the clear cultural characteristics of teenagers living in the age of electronic games and the Internet. This type of writing, in general, has the following features:

First, the plot and story are often fragmented; a person’s private world unfolds through the clustering and flowing of fragments of their emotion. The plot lines are extremely obscure, and very often there is only the extemporaneous penning of some blurry fragments of daily life or the mere rise and fall of emotion.

Second, the scope of experience of these works is restricted to private life and trivial matters, such as resentment against older generations, the capricious feelings of adolescent youth, and restlessness.

Third, there exists in this rejuvenated literature a mixture of rebellion and conformity. The content of this literature shows some rebellious sentiments against the logic of current global capitalist culture. Under the influence of Western teenage subculture, rock-n-roll, “the collapsed generation,” an emphasis on self, the concept of “free choice,” and the expression of strong emotions are all prioritized.

Fourth, the literature of rejuvenation marks the appearance of a type of subliterate that mixes mass culture and pure literature. It is also a mixture of rebellion against and recognition of the value of the mainstream. Posing as rebels and trying to speak out against

the adult world, these writers attract teenage readers obsessed with consumption. Meanwhile, it is supported and approved as something positive by the parents since engaging in reading and writing is a symbol of progress.

4

FACING THIS REALITY in literature, the development of China's literary criticism and theory is confronted by the question of whether we need to leap over the "new literature" since the May Fourth Movement and onto a new stage.

Chinese literature originally set the historical goal and realistic path of following the Hegelian model of "world history," manifested in the great historical consciousness bestowed on us by the May Fourth Movement. We admitted our backwardness on the world historical stage, and so several generations of rigorous striving and rebellion against the world order marked our attempt to achieve historical significance. The historical goal was to establish the wealth and power of China and the liberation of individuals. China is, on the one hand, full of the sadness and humiliation suffered in its early and modern history; on the other, its consciousness of being "weak" as a class had been knitted to its consciousness of being "weak" as a nation. The class struggle of Chinese people at the lowest levels of society fighting against their oppressors is, to a certain degree, equal to the national struggle against world imperialism. These two aspects have strengthened our consciousness of being "weak." The concern of being "unaccomplished" in the goals of modernization has always been the central theme of our culture. The goal assumed by us in the cultural imagination—set against the backdrop of world history—has never been accomplished. This is the biggest concern in Chinese history of the twentieth century.

From the early stage of China's globalization and being market-oriented in the 1990s to the new century, the development of the new China has overcome such historical concerns. The contemporary development of China has been achieved in two ways: by engaging in the world order and by the great efforts of ordinary people in earning wealth and changing their lives, China has managed to achieve unprecedented levels of development and demonstrated a "peaceful rise" in the history of the past hundred years. These unexpected developments have helped China to move beyond its former feelings of historical weakness and rebellion. With the arrival of the new century, this sort of new development has become very clear.

China's literary thinking will rest on several new bases. First, it will be manifested as the rethinking and questioning of the history of the "New Literature." From the rewriting of literary history in the late 1980s to the prominence of postmodern literary criticism and theory in the 1990s through today, the rethinking of twentieth-century literary history has never stopped. This type of rethinking is marked by the continued questioning and exploration of literary modernism.

Second, it will need to give a new description and explanation of the current situation in literature brought about by its market-oriented and globalized condition. Literary theory and criticism have engaged in a broader study of culture, including the relationship between mass culture (especially consumerism) and literature as well as the influence of globalization on literary writing. Going beyond the scope of literary criticism has become an important tendency in the study of broader cultural phenomena. It is the response of literary criticism to the complex linguistic situation in the culture of today's China. Such a new literary criticism is also required because of the problems in today's China. Therefore, literary criticism geared toward cultural criticism is not a fashion but a must.

Beijing Normal University

*Translation from the Chinese
By Ming Chao Gui*

ZHANG YIWU, a literary critic and professor at Beijing University, is the author of *Zai Bianyuan Chu Zhuisuo* (The pursuit on the edge), *Cong Xiandaixing Dao Houxiandai Xing* (From modernism to postmodernism), and *Sixiang De Zongji* (The trail of thoughts).

MING CHAO GUI is Associate Professor of Chinese and Linguistics at the University of Oklahoma. He is the adviser of the Chinese major program, current chair of the East Asian Exchange Committee, and is currently serving on the Study Abroad and International Student Services Advisory Committee at OU. The recipient of the 2006 UOSA Outstanding Faculty Award and the 1998 Cecil Woods Memorial Teaching Excellence Award, his major research interests are phonetics, phonology, dialectology, Chinese teaching methodology, and translation theory. He is the author of five books, and in the past ten years over forty of his articles have been published and presented at academic conferences in China, the U.S., Germany, France, and Sweden.