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**TEXT, POLITICS AND SOCIETY:  
LITERATURE AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY  
IN POST-MAO CHINA**

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**ABSTRACT**

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The purpose of this study is to arrive at a critical overview of politics and literature in the Chinese context. The relationship has increasingly become a “field” of studies and theoretical inquiry that most scholars in either disciplines are wary to tread. This thesis tries to venture into this problematic field by a theoretical examination as well as an empirical critique of Chinese literature and politics, where the relationship seems even more paradoxical, but adds more insight into the argument.

The Introduction and Chapter One set up a framework by asking some general but fundamental questions: what literature is, and how it is to be related to politics. Chapter Two examines the historical function of literature and Chinese writers in society to establish the basis of argument in the Chinese context. Chapter Three focuses the discussion on the relationship between politics and literature during the Mao era and after. Chapter Four analyses the literary works published during the post-Mao period to establish the argument that literature, as part of our perception of the world, is most concerned with human society and social amelioration and participates in the socio-political development by contributing to it through a discourse that is otherwise inaccessible. Chapter Five explores the argument further by extending it into the field of cinema, which basically comes from the same narrative tradition of prose literature, but offers a wider and different dimension to the argument pursued. Chapter Six and the Conclusion try to draw together the argument by examining literature as both form *and* content to argue how and why literature is related to politics and how it has functioned in a political manner in Chinese society. To summarise, Chinese literature in this period will be shown to be involved in a process of political reform and development by way of bringing the reader to participate in a critical and philosophical dialogue with power, history and future. In the long run, it offers

emancipating visions and possibilities revealed to the reader in ways that are historical, developmental, philosophical and comparative.

This study focuses on the prose fiction published in this period, for it is the leading force in China's cultural development and constitutes the major trunk of the modern Chinese canon. In addition, the research also extends to drama and films, and the way they, together with prose fiction, make up the most popular perception and intellectual discovery of contemporary Chinese society and politics and best inform the argument of the study of politics *and* literature.

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This thesis is also dedicated to my parents for their invaluable and unconditional support in every way.

Nevertheless, the names mentioned above are by no means associated with the errors that may still remain in the thesis. They are, needless to say, entirely my own.

Dongning Feng

## NOTES

Transliteration of Chinese names into English strictly follows the *pinyin* system, the official romanised Chinese pronunciation alphabet, which is widely used in all modern authoritative Chinese encyclopaedias or dictionaries. Thus in accordance, the names which appeared in other systems in cited materials are standardised into *pinyin* in order to avoid confusion.

Titles of publications either retain the original English translation, or are translated into English, and thus used in the thesis proper for the sake of consistency and ease of reading. The original Chinese titles are give in square brackets in the Bibliography. In most cases the titles of Chinese sources are translated into English by myself. In places where there is an English version of the title already available, the original title is either maintained, or retranslated without further acknowledgement.

The order of the Chinese naming system is also retained in the thesis proper, that is, the surname comes first and the given name afterwards.

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## INTRODUCTION: Why Politics and Literature

A literature review finds that books on contemporary Chinese politics are surprisingly few given an ever-thriving interest in China by academics as well as students of politics. Moreover, most of the books on Chinese politics are dated and disappointingly lacking in depth of analysis. They tend to be overly descriptive and structural in the way in which they present contemporary China to their readers. Many of them rely on the published party and government documents and newspapers that are few in number and sketchy in terms of background knowledge, not to mention the complicated social, cultural and historical environments in which politics has rooted and developed. These books also tend to adopt a methodology of structural-functionalism in their analysis. These approaches dismiss either a comparative, developmental perspective or one of distinctly Chinese political behaviour and mentality with necessary references to its society, culture and tradition, and, to some extent, its language.<sup>1</sup> Thus, what such approaches present is very much like, as the technical term suggests, the skeleton of Chinese politics, not a living organic entity with its distinctive characteristics. They somehow fail to explain many events and developments in Chinese politics.

Hsia, even in the early 1970s, was able to observe a missing dimension in studies of Chinese politics by pointing out that “social scientists, in their investigations of modern Chinese history and culture, have by and large failed to

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Language, Thought, and Reality*, Whorf (1976) maintains that language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity. Marx (1967) also notes that the problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world turns into the problem of descending from language to life. According to Tambling (1991), literature, as a form of narrative, does not only affect or influence our thinking, but is a mode of thinking, which is ideological itself. Thus a change in literary narrative will eventually have an impact on society as a whole as this study is to explore.

make use of the literary record, even though they cannot be unaware of its profound influence on modern Chinese thought and politics.” (Hsia:1971:ix) More recently, a few social scientists have tried to make use of Chinese literature to assist their academic studies, however, they tend to look at Chinese literature predominantly in terms of its content.<sup>2</sup> This approach ignores the aesthetic dimension of literature and thus impedes a holistic vision of Chinese literature, which, like any other literature, is both form *and* content and thus deserves to be treated as such. Failure to do so will prevent a full and all-round understanding of Chinese literature and society, and will certainly fall short in mapping out the relationship of politics and literature and the position of literature in political studies. More specifically, Chinese literature examined in this study has performed a unique function in recent developments in Chinese politics, culture and society. Its impact on Chinese society and its interaction with politics cannot be fully evaluated without such a holistic approach in the analysis.

Primarily Chinese literature *can* be a significant source for understanding contemporary Chinese politics and society. It provides such a realm where all social, cultural and historical parameters appear to various degrees in a highly personified *de facto* manner. It thus carries very useful knowledge and information which is a rich source of studies of Chinese politics. To use Hoggart’s words, “without the

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<sup>2</sup> Recent trends show that the overtly political and socially controversial literature of contemporary China has been very much debated, but many other literary works with less tangible social and political messages or experimental literature have been inadequately studied due to reasons analysed in the following chapters. The situation in the West has been quite the same. Academic priority has been given to so-called socially and politically controversial literature, typical examples being such collections as *Trees on the Mountains*, (Soong & Minford (eds.) 1987), *Stubborn Weeds* (Link (ed.) 1984), *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, (Engle, 1981), *Mao’s Harvest Voices from China’s New Generation* (Siu & Sterne (eds.) 1983) and many other translated individual works. However, a recent collection by Barmé & Minford (*Seeds of Fire*, Barmé & Minford (eds.) 1989) gives a more balanced picture of contemporary Chinese literature and society.

literary witness the student of society will be blind to the fullness of a society's life.” (Hoggart:1970b:20) Moreover, in the case of China (as in many other nations) the interaction of literature with politics has been so self-evident that to separate the two fields of studies would certainly result in a great loss to both subjects, and hence inhibit a full understanding of either politics or literature.

Besides being a source and a reservoir of many social and political ideas, literature also functions as political commentary as well as judgement of politics. Thus to relate politics with literature not only benefits studies of politics, but also does justice to literary studies. The methodology of relating literature with political studies has long been dismissed by political scientists because it is very often labelled as “non-factual” and “unscientific.” Nevertheless, recent research shows that literature, as a form of persuasion and transmitting ideas, values and cultural assets, plays an essential and very important part in real politics and society.<sup>3</sup> It thus makes more sense to place literature within the academic boundary of political studies.<sup>4</sup> This approach renders much more meaning and insight especially in the study of Chinese politics and literature.

This study is, therefore, an endeavour to offer an alternative to existing methods and perspectives in order to broaden one's understanding of contemporary Chinese politics, especially of modern Chinese political thought and the function of Chinese literature in the transformation of Chinese society. It is intended to be an empirical inquiry of contemporary Chinese literature in relation to politics. With

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Ingle's *Socialist Thought in Imaginative Literature* (1979), and his other published articles offer useful insights in this respect.

<sup>4</sup> Though, admittedly the approaches in the political studies and literary studies are bound to be different.

contextualised characteristic and distinctive social, cultural and political aspects of realities, literature undoubtedly offers a rich source of materials as well as a background against which politics can be studied in a more holistic manner. Political trends and issues are portrayed in a realistic or dramatic language and discourse that is to be understood only by the reader's reference to the real world. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, literature itself is a domain where original political ideas and thought are formed and developed. In this way, literature contributes substantially to politics and the political process. Especially in the post-Mao era, literature presents itself as a dimension of contemporary Chinese politics and interacts and influences society and politics in a way that not only gives history a push, but is part of social and political development. Contemporary Chinese literature in the period concerned can be said to have created an irrevocable trend in Chinese history since the May Fourth Movement.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the West, the study of the relationship between politics and literature has by no means been as sufficiently explored as the subject deserves,<sup>6</sup> probably

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<sup>5</sup> The May Fourth Movement in 1919 was one of the most radical social and political movements in modern Chinese history. After Germany's defeat in the WWI, at the Versailles Peace Conference instead of returning its privileged rights over Shandong Province back to China, they were granted to Japan. This aroused great rage up and down the country. Nationalist feeling ran high. The demonstration grew into a powerful and fiery mass movement. It was the time when China really began to understand the West, to grapple with the changes in the world and to try to see and explain its situation. This movement has had many implications in modern China, symbolic as well as realistic.

<sup>6</sup> The major works on the subject include *Writers and Revolution: The Fatal Lure of Action* (R. Winegarten, 1974), *What Is Literature?*, *Politics and Literature* (J. Sartre, 1950, 1973), *The Writer and Commitment* (J. Mander, 1961), *Politics and the Novel* (I. Howe, 1970), *The Politics of Twentieth-Century Novelists* (G Panichas, 1971), *Illusion: An Essay on Politics, Theatre and the Novel* (D. Caute, 1972), *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (J. Lucas, 1971), *Socialist Thought in Imaginative Literature* (S. Ingle, 1979). Some of the more recent publications are *Writers and Politics: A Partisan Review Reader* (E. Kuizweil & W. Phillips (ed.), 1983), *Hopes and Impediment* (C. Achebe, 1988), *Essays on Politics and Literature* (B. Crick, 1989), *The Writer and Politics* (G. Woodcock, 1990), *Politics, Theory, and Contemporary Culture* (M. Poster, 1993), *Literature and the Political Imagination* (J. Horton & A. Baumeister (eds.), 1996) and so on. There is yet a full-length critique to be written on Chinese literature and politics, though some collections of original texts published so far were intended to relate the two subjects and a

because, as Lucas in his pioneering book, *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century* notes,

The subject is a daunting one, the relation between the two so problematic, elusive, uncertain. Yet it is these difficulties which make the subject fascinating and deserving attention. (Lucas:1971:1)

As far as China is concerned, the relationship is even more problematic, complex, and sometimes muddled. Literature in China has never been clearly separated from politics, if it can be at all. In the past, Chinese literature was commonly regarded as a moral crusade. In more recent years it has been invariably criticised and assessed against social and political criteria as well as so-called “social consequences.” Notwithstanding, the subject has barely been approached in real academic terms. There has yet to be a single book on the study of the relationship of Chinese politics and literature – an omission of a most intriguing and rewarding area of academic studies which offers insight into both fields.

The area of the interaction between politics and literature is a vast and complex one which causes all sorts of problems, for instance, theoretical and conceptual problems. The first difficulty to confront is the distinction of “social literature” and “political literature.” Some critics try to distinguish “social literature” from “political literature” on the presumption that “social literature” only deals with sociological relations between persons, and a group or groups of people, or between groups in matters such as family life, daily social life and so forth. But in a world like ours, all these relations seem to be dominated by politics and political implications. Behind every social issue there is a deeper political concern and vision.

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collection of essays edited by Liu Kang and Tang Xiaobing was published in 1993 to attempt to relate the two areas in modern China in general.

Some seemingly “social literature” can only be properly understood with political references and is ultimately preoccupied with political concerns, not to mention the fact that “social literature”, when appropriated by the reader, is more often than not able to lead him in a political way and to influence politics. This is especially true in the Chinese context, where writers have been conditioned to be socially and politically committed.

In view of the above point, this study does not intend to draw a clear line to separate the two categories. Rather, it intentionally blurs the division, focusing on the *meaning* of literature as a whole and its meaning in relation to politics, together with its aesthetic dimensions and its social and political implications in society. By doing so, it is hoped to gain a better understanding of Chinese politics as well as a better understanding of Chinese contemporary literature and the function it has performed in society in terms of shaping and contributing to the on-going social and political developments in China.

The influence of literature on political personalities, events and developments or on the shaping of human values and ideology has been too obvious for political scientists and politicians to disregard, but its data are difficult to acquire and problematical to apply and interpret “scientifically.” Finally there still remains the question of the reliability of the data if they are collectable at all. In view of the complexity and difficulty of conducting research of this nature, it is essential to establish some theoretical and conceptual framework based on the studies and research in the field to date. However, this study aims to present a text-based argument which is intended to be primarily an empirical study and does not rely on *an* established model or data analysis, though some statistics may be applied to

throw light on the argument pursued where appropriate. In this respect, this study acknowledges that China's present situation resists many of the paradigms developed in cultural studies and political theoretical discourses. This study is therefore intended to concentrate partly on relevant and useful theoretical findings and scholarly premises collected from a wide interdisciplinary reading and to refer these theoretical bases to the Chinese context, thus to further illuminate the subject concerned. Therefore, literature is not only examined in terms of its content, but as both content and form, one inseparable from the other. Literature as a whole inter-relates with politics, reacts upon it, and shapes its development.

Unlike politics, which can be described in the most general terms but has a distinctive academic boundary of its own, literature seems altogether to defy definition. In his recent work, Terry Eagleton makes another endeavour to tackle the seemingly simple but intangible question, "What is literature?" only to give up the original attempt to define the intrinsic qualities that comprise "literariness." He concludes that literature is not an "object", certainly not an unchanging canon, but a reflection of how we read and value texts. (Eagleton:1994:1-17) This explains why most, if not all, multiplications of approaches to the study of literature leave the impression that students of literature have no body of methodical knowledge formally constituting a discipline of their own. It is also this quality of literature that interacts upon society and politics and contributes to political progress, but in a way that can only be achieved through literature, and at the same time makes it an intriguing subject of political studies.

Nevertheless, there are certain objectives which literary critics can be said to share, certain assumptions which they hold in common about the texts they read.

One of the most important of these and one of the few principles on which all critics do tend to agree, is the inseparability of form and content, a belief staunchly defended against the heresy of paraphrase. "A literary work is its meaning"; its meaning cannot be "abstracted" from it and conveyed in another discipline, cannot be paraphrased or put into another language without loss. (Frye:1961:43) Frye also argues that literature is at first "a commentary on an external 'life' or 'reality'." (Frye:1957:351) Hence the whole point of reading literature, its significance as a human and social institution, besides that of giving pleasure, is that it informs about the real world in a unique way that is otherwise inaccessible. Literature, in other words, has the capacity to generate new meaning by setting up imaginative social and political environments, utilising language beyond its ordinary uses. It thus creates a philosophy of its own, and has to be read and understood in a way that is appropriate to its own logic and laws. Only in so doing, will it yield new meaning and shed light on the understanding of human society.

Evidently enough, there exists a common foundation of politics and literature as forms of persuasive discourse. For both politics and literature are, by using language as a fundamental means, perceptual activities and are directed towards a better understanding of human existence and social welfare and a desirable transformation and development. And one always interacts upon, shapes, and feeds the other.

### **Politics *in* Literature**

This research is mainly concerned with contemporary Chinese fictional writing, such as novels, novellas, short stories and plays, and to some extent, films.



Due to its intrinsic nature, literature – the novel in particular – with its enriched human experience and unique form of expression, offers a very extensive political vision. A large part of literature itself portrays the political world and confronts political issues, and instances can be found in all modern literatures, just as Hoggart claims, “in one sense most if not all literature can be said to be engaged with its society. The statement seems virtually self-evident. But its implications are varied and complex; they differ from period to period and from country to country.” (Hoggart:1970c:155) Hoggart not only states a fact about what literature is, but also implies the complexity and uniqueness of the relationship at different times for different nations.

Literature’s intrinsic relationship with social and political issues can be ascribed to the following reasons. First of all, it is widely acknowledged that social, political and philosophical themes certainly enhance the artistic value of literary work in terms of their proper content. “It corroborates several important artistic values: those of complexity and coherence. A theoretical insight may increase the artist’s depth of penetration and scope of reach.” (Wellek:1985:123) However, Wellek’s statement is rather misleading. The social, political and philosophical themes in literature cannot be inserted into the works at the author’s will. They are reflections of the author’s genuine concerns about society and his vision of the human world in general, because writers generally are “highly intelligent men concerned with human affairs and relationships.” (Ingle:1979:2) Writers possess a vision of the world which is otherwise inaccessible and they have a faith that the present world can be changed. Thus, literary works are able to influence events in history in a way otherwise impossible. Since literature is concerned with society and

its values, which not only provide literature with the content but also with a form conducive to such a purpose, it is difficult to imagine that literature can hold together without this content. The ideas hold the text together and provide an organic unity for the works.

Secondly, in today's world, especially in times of change, as George Orwell once notes that there is no such thing as a non-political literature, least of all in an age like our own, when fears, hatreds and loyalties of a directly political kind are near to the surface of everyone's consciousness. (Orwell:1968) Although several decades have gone by, Orwell's political insight has not faded. The underlying factor which shapes today's reality is still politics which, in turn, is still the main concern of writers, consciously, or unconsciously. There is no way for fictional writers to avoid "the political" altogether. Their only alternative is to choose between to write and not to write. Even their deliberate avoidance of politics in their writing is itself a political manifestation, which undoubtedly carries political implications and has political impact.

Thirdly, literature is very often thought of as a form of philosophy, since "ideas" are wrapped in it, and it is analysed to yield "leading ideas." This may be too generalised a statement, but under some circumstances, literature does help form new dimensions of thinking in the social and political domains. In the post-Mao era, as will be argued in later chapters, literature appeared to have a liberating influence on Chinese politics and Chinese social and cultural life. The ideas borne by the literary works led people to reconsider their existence and values in a new perspective and perhaps to share the authors' search for values and truths of life. However, exactly for this reason, few would take the political visions in a nation's

literature lightly because this function of literature poses some threat to the social and political establishments. This “dynamic capacity of literature to generate fresh meaning of reality” (Wright:1988:4) is always considered to cause disorder and subversion to the established order as will be amply demonstrated in the following chapters.

Hirsch proposes another relationship between literature and reality. He holds that literary scholars could usefully analyse the interaction of “literature” and “fact”, since to consider the status of fact in literature means to consider basic questions about value and the critical evaluation of literary efforts. He finds it hard for literature to be disconnected from fact. (Hirsch:1978:24-34)

Wellek points out, “The artist will be hampered by too much ideology if it remains unassimilated.” (Wellek:1985:123) It is true, during the first three decades of the People’s Republic of China, because of the political and ideological edict from the authorities to create a “revolutionary culture” to match the “advanced system”, works produced in this period failed to wed heavy political ideology to a popular existing culture and reality. Theoretical insight can only arise from within as part of an organic unity with the form and is not something that can be imposed from without for convenience: it is something intrinsic and spontaneous. For literature, after all, is a form of art possessing its own rules and principles. Any violation of the underlying literary and aesthetic laws will not only lead to artistic failure, but also to a failure to convey the intended political messages. History proves works with undigested social and political tendentiousness either failed to wed into the existing culture and were soon forgotten or became purely propaganda materials. They were evidently divorced from the culture which the works were supposed to address and

be based on. Culture here, as Hoggart suggests, “means the whole way of life of a society, its beliefs, attitudes, and temper as expressed in all kinds of structures, rituals and gestures, as well as in the traditionally defined form of art.” (Hoggart:1970c:156)

Therefore, since literature strenuously takes as its main concerns, if not its sole impetus, social and political expressions and explorations, it would be a loss if we subsequently dismissed or ignored them in our reception. It is also hard to imagine that without referring to the real world and the fundamental truth that literary works are intended to convey one can achieve a full artistic and aesthetic understanding and appreciation of literary texts, not to mention their functions and significance in the real world.

At the end of a decade characterised by the social distortion and political falsification which earmarked the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China, people hungered for an explanation of what had happened to them and to the nation. At this stage, truth was much stranger than falsehood after over ten years’ falsified indoctrination. It was literature that initiated and led a retrospection into the trauma and a search for truth. Much of the literature in this period mounted a daring confrontation of a wide range of social and political issues as later chapters will illustrate.

### **Literature *without* Politics?**

Olsen in his book, *The End of Literary Theory*, identifies that:

The success of the analysis of fiction as a mode of expression that is neither true nor false and the fact that it provides a logically satisfactory formulation of the view that literature is epistemologically ‘light’ has lent an apparent philosophical

legitimacy to the tendency in modern criticism and modern literary theory to write as if 'fiction' was synonymous with 'prose literature', and as if the definition of 'fiction' and the definition of literature were one and the same thing. (Olsen:1987:158)

Whilst it is important to recognise the contributions that such theories as formalism, structuralism, deconstructionism have made to literary and critical studies, Olsen's observation provides important perception and sensitivity for this study. Although it is important to recognise the difference between the concept of "text", that of "fiction" and that of "literature" this study does not try to distinguish these concepts. It is mainly concerned with the concept of literature, and at the same time, fiction means a part of literature in a similar form,<sup>7</sup> and a text is a particular piece of literature in a particular form.

Recent literary criticism has tended to clarify its own methodology and to define itself as an autonomous academic discipline and to try to ignore the meaning of literary works and their relation with the real world. Some American critics, such as W. K. Wimsatt (1957, 1958), Cleanth Brooks (1957, 1964) and Yvor Winters (1957), tried to establish literature as an entirely autonomous object in parallel with the Russian formalists and structuralists. Althusser, though not deliberately separating the real world from literature, also distinguished between "great art" and ideology allowing only the very few to transcend ideological practice. They either tried to treat literature as an enclosed entity with no reference to the outside world or regarded it primarily as an ideological construct. (Jameson:1972) Others would

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<sup>7</sup> Olsen is right to distinguish literature from fiction which means, according to Olsen, false and untrue story and so on, but has somehow subsumed our perception of "literature". He is right to warn us that this is an erroneous and misleading premise on which to base our study of literature. The concept is particularly misguiding in terms of studies of politics *and* literature. Admittedly "literature" is created by historical force and "fiction" can by no means assume such claim.

disagree: though a form of art possessing intrinsic literary and aesthetic values, literature is predominantly a social and cultural institution and

can never be aesthetically 'pure' or abstractly contemplative. There can be no such thing as 'abstract literature'. ... By its nature – because its medium, language, is used by almost everybody in all sorts of everyday situations; and because it tries both to say and to be – literature is an art which invites imperative. (Hoggart:1970b:13)

As a discourse, literature contains the meaning of an experience being transferred from one sphere of life to another and it should be analysed semantically for a meaning that transcends literature *per se* and directs the reader towards a vision of the world. As an inscription, it can be analysed structurally and semiotically, but even at this point, the interpretation is a dialectic between the semiotic sphere, which explains what is said, and the semantic sphere, which appropriates the world projected by the text. One has to select constitutive units, segments, and antinomies that have existential bearing to ensure that the text has meaning as a narrative of significance. However, these elements can transcend social, cultural, racial, economic, and political boundaries, which makes reading literature a fascinating and liberating experience.

Literature possesses a double world, and is not as some formalists or structuralists suggest, a purely self-contained field of study. Admittedly form and style are part of literature's meaning. However, any attempt at separating the reading of literature from its meaning in society undermines the significance of literature as a means of understanding human existence and generating new meanings about the real world. Literature can only exist in ways that it produces new meanings for the "real" world. It "cannot stand outside of itself to declare its significance." (Walter:1994:196) To do so would be to transform this significant form of art "into

its other – a form of redundant interaction that entropic art inherently resists.” (Walter:1994:196) To ignore the productively generative dimension of literature is undeniably to diminish the whole subject even though the initial motive for such literary formalism was to set it up as an autonomous discipline of studies.

Fredric Jameson regards the priority of the literary interpretation of literary texts to be akin to the approach that “conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretative methods current today ... but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.” (Jameson:1981:17) Few would disagree that “if criticism does not pursue the truth about texts, including their relation to the real world, it does not deserve to be taken seriously.” (Wright:1988:38) As a matter of fact, contemporary Chinese literature would not yield very much if it were approached as a pure and independent domain. Since literature concerns human society and its values, which not only constitute its major content, but also give the text a meaning in return, it is difficult to imagine that literature makes any real sense when it is divorced from the real world. As is widely acknowledged, it is much less meaningful, if not impossible, to read Swift, Tolstoy, Proust, Orwell, Marquez, Kundera, Lu Xun, and many contemporary Chinese writers, or even Beckett, Joyce, Woolf and many Chinese experimental writers, if the reading is divorced from a reference or an understanding of the real world. It is equally very difficult to explain the impact the works of these great writers have on politics and society. This is not to say that content is everything. The meaning of literature comes from form as well as content. Although this study does not concern itself with the concept of truth or truth value in imaginative literature *per se*, an understanding of how literature functions in human

society will be instrumental and contributory to the later discussions. It is important to recognise that this uncovering of truth in the text is not necessarily a thematical one. As Barthes again points out that:

... the very form of literary message has a specific relationship with history and with society; but this relationship is special, and does not necessarily include history and sociology so far as its contents are concerned. The qualitative elements form a code, a code whose validity can be sustained over a short or long period. (Barthes:1973:191)

Barthes's argument assumes important meaning and insight in the following discussion of politics and literature.

### **Literature *and* Politics**

Political ideas are meant to be shared, to influence and to change. According to Marx, literature reflects social relations and also tries to understand what these relations should be like, though such critique is mainly based on non-literary political and ethical criteria. (Wellek:1985:107) Bonald also notes that "literature is an expression of society." (Bonald in Wellek:1985:95) According to his point of view, the classic artist is ultimately concerned with the real world, and with the truth about the world and he is also necessarily concerned with historical and social truths. Admittedly, there exists some kind of relationship between politics and literature as the "and" in the subtitle undefinedly but undoubtedly suggests. It would be an academic loss if we overlooked this function of imaginative literature as political persuasion and discovery, and it could even be a misfortune for politicians to slight it. Hoggart points out:

In England, it shows most often as a kind of concrete pragmatic, human insistence. There is a long-standing belief, not much examined but powerful and shared by many writers, critics and



serious general readers, that 'good literature' offers a key to understanding societies better, a way of apprehending better their 'moral life'. (Hoggart:1970c:156)

He continues:

By this tradition it is claimed that good literature can reveal a society to itself in unique ways if – and the proviso is very important – we learn how to read it properly and do not try to use it for external ends. (Hoggart:1970c:156)

In his book, *Socialist Thought in Imaginative Literature*, Ingle notes the significance of the relationship in a more specific manner:

To the students of politics, however, the relationship is more important because of one simple fact: major writers have always been widely read. If any group of men deserve to enjoy the status of opinion-formers, then imaginative writers surely do. ... many of them, as Lucas' book shows, write with the conviction that they can influence men and events. (Ingle:1979:2)

There is little doubt that imaginative writers do have an impact on society in various ways as history has testified. Their function in society is self-evidently manifold: as "cultural architects", "social engineers" and "political catalyst", to name but a few. In this respect literature has been regarded as a powerful instrument of political communication precisely because it carries a real sense of the world as understood by most readers, a world composed of feelings and experience rather than abstract formulae. In their wisdom, the writers are the "men who dream visions in our age; they enrich the gamut of human expression by the ideas which they pinion and by the idioms they invent." (Lasswell in Torgerson:1990:344)

Recent Chinese history has also echoed and thus verified the preceding argument. The literary works, especially the novels, in the period concerned in this

study, have formed “the leading force in China’s the cultural<sup>8</sup> development.” (Huang:1988:3) The writers’ political visions derive from their concerns with human relations and their understanding of reality. In their writings, they always give themselves away and want their political visions to be shared and even realised. Some tend to mobilise the discontent of certain groups of people. “Literature is or can be an instrument of social amelioration, at the same time it is shaped by social events.” (Brantlinger:1979:1) It is true that “in the ‘real’ world, literature and politics are continually overlapping as history so amply illustrates.” (Ingle:1979:4)

Ingle concludes his book by presenting to the reader his findings of literary influences upon British politics. He notes that one-third of the British Parliamentary Labour MPs concurred to having read and been politically influenced by imaginative writers. (Ingle:1979:184) He highlights three quotations from the questionnaire returns, which offer fascinating and illuminating perspectives:

- (a) ‘Imaginative writers can help to create... a general climate of opinion.’
- (b) ‘These writers were able to appeal to the politically sophisticated, the activists, much more so than the heavy, turgid writings of “serious” writers.’
- (c) ‘They added to the background against which highly influential men made political and social decisions.’ (Ingle:1979:184)

It is very difficult – perhaps impossible – to assess the influence of imaginative literature upon individuals and society in terms of statistics and data analysis. Moreover, the reliability of such findings still remains questionable, but Ingle’s findings are indeed unique and valuable in the study of politics *and* literature and

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<sup>8</sup> “Cultural” is a literal translation of the Chinese word *wenhua*. Although “culture” is the nearest equivalent that can be found in English, the definition of *wenhua* in Chinese carries a much wider meaning, including a broad range of cultural activities such as literature, education, ideology, social and political beliefs and behaviour and so forth.

possess universal significance. In terms of the Chinese context, the literary influence upon the Chinese people and political figures at various levels and the formation of their political ideology is even more elusive and controvertible.

Hence this inquiry seeks to focus on the subject, i.e. literary texts, in relation to wider social, historical, cultural and political perspectives and the reader's and critic's responses. This study will undoubtedly show that contemporary Chinese writers unquestionably helped to build up a general trend of opinion, which in turn influenced decision-making personalities in their development of particular policies.

### **Text, Politics and Society**

To examine the relationship between literature and politics, the concept of "text" is both helpful and clarificatory. In his "The Death of the Author" published in *Contemporary Critical Theory* (1989), Barthes speaks of the necessity for a new object, i.e. the text. He suggests that the literary work was related to the meaning, behind or within the work. In order to prove that the task of the literary criticism is not to find out and reveal what the work means, he expounds the necessity to claim that the author is dead. The connotation of the concept that "the author is dead" is that there is no transcendent figure at the origin of a text's meaning. (Barthes:1989:54-9)

Admittedly this does not mean that original circumstantial meaning of a literary work is non-essential as far as our reading of classic or modern literature is concerned. Quite the contrary, to introduce the concept of "text" is to open up a very meaningful and important dimension in the study of politics and literature. Jameson also articulates that the work of art does not confer meaning on such elements as

“words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities”, “but rather transforms their initial meanings into some new and heightened construction of meaning; for that very reason neither the creation nor the interpretation of the work can ever be an arbitrary process.” (Jameson:1971:402)

Inasmuch as “the author is dead”, the reader, instead of only understanding and laying out the originally intended meaning in interpretation, is now obligated to produce the meanings of texts. Thus the reader is offered “the desired possibility of seeing themselves as co-author, allowed them to feel like creator.” (Sutrop:1994:38) In addition, for most of the literary critics, “the substitution of the literary works by the text also had axiological foundations.” (Sutrop:1994:38). Therefore, instead of attempting to make a clear distinction of the meaning of literary works and that of the text, it is more conducive to the understanding of literature and the study of its relationship with politics to introduce the concept of text into the study of politics and literature.

As Hoggart correctly and accurately observes “the ebb and flow of imaginative power within the work may reveal attitudes hidden from the writer himself. But there will be a meaning, a kind of order – expressed or implied.” (Hoggart:1970b:11-12) This concept makes it possible for critics as well as readers to make the transition between the past and the present and the future, between that which is familiar to them and that which is foreign. In such a way, the reader is able to make sense of the imaginative world presented to him and to search for the orders of human life and experience as far as he is concerned. He becomes “at once

interpreter and interpretation.”<sup>9</sup> (Freund:1987:109) Sartre, too, recognises the reader’s position in the interpretation of the text. He iterates that “reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself.” (Sartre:1985:379) It is the reader’s understanding that thrusts the text into his “life of meaning and exposes it thereby to the critiques which Ricœur labels ‘explanation’.” (Andrew:1984:181) Andrew continues to argue that:

Nearly the whole of academic life in the humanities concerns itself with explaining the assertions of texts. Primarily a regressive mode of interpretation, explanation aims to dissolve the text in its origins, to find the reasons for its claim on us. The text is situated in its various contexts (biographical, generic, historical) and is subjected to linguistic study, psychoanalysis, and ideological critique, until the particularity of its appeal is explained as an effect of these generating forces. This important step in our relation with a given text removes us somewhat from its aura and forces us to recognise that language does not permit truths to be uttered directly or at all, that the forces of the unconscious derail and reroute our purported drive toward truth and that, in any case, truth is conditioned by the historical situation, since texts never arise in limbo, but always derive from the struggle of discourses, a struggle we must never separate from the social struggle that is the life of history. (Andrew:1984:181)

Andrew’s argument has further strengthened the previous point that the true meaning of literature consists of two parts – the understanding and the interpretation – both of which bear witness to politics and work as an “indictment of the system of practical activities and practical human beings, who are in turn mere façades for the barbaric appetite of the human species.” (Adorno:1984:343)

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<sup>9</sup> Freund also argues that “the reader’s self is itself a sign - another text. Like ‘formal units’ it is what our critical conventions allow us to *perceive*”. (Freund:1987:108) She continues to articulate that the reader is “always situated inside a system of language, inside a context of discursive practices in which are inscribed values, interests, attitudes, beliefs”. (Freund:1987:109)

In view of the above argument, literature, though a fictional form and an imaginative institution, is seen by the writers as well as the readers (knowingly or unknowingly) to possess an intrinsic capacity of persuading and ushering the readers to see something that they have never seen before, to understand something that they have never thought of before, and to experience something otherwise impossible for them to apperceive. Thus in this aspect, literature is invariably supposed to hold truth of some kind or to possess the ability of uncovering truth in the real world.

Marcuse argues forcefully that “the critical function of art<sup>10</sup>, its contribution to the struggle for liberation, resides in the aesthetic form. A work of art is authentic or true not only by virtue of its content (i.e., the ‘correct’ representation of social conditions), nor by its ‘pure’ form, but by the content having become form.” (Marcuse:1968:8) In addition, he continues to argue that “the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality”, (Marcuse:1968:9) which is mainly concerned with the struggle of the individual with stronger social and political forces, no matter these forces are “from an external force or internalised in the individual’s conscience.” (Barthès:1973:191)

The subject of function and status of imaginative literature, especially the novel, has been substantially discussed and explored, usually with reference to the capitalist society where the form grew mature during the development of capitalism. Marx finds that novels were produced by capitalism, thus they served its needs,

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<sup>10</sup> In his own preface to *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse clarifies that, when speaking of art, he mainly refers to literature.

though he does not make it clear whether they did so from the point of view of ideology or not. (Lovell:1987:14-5) However, Lovell also argues that, according to Lucas, the novels are not necessarily a production of ideology, but of knowledge, a knowledge of the hidden underlying structures of capitalist social relations. More importantly, she locates the ability of realist fiction to uncover hidden structures in its formal organisation as narrative rather than in themes and descriptions. It is in its overall structure of climax and resolution rather than surface resemblances, and through 'typicality' (Lovell:1987:14-5), that the great realist novel is enabled to 'tell the truth' about capitalism.

This argument reinforces Marcuse's position that the critical function of literature lies in its aesthetic form, that is, the content having become form, though it is arguable that the novel should only be associated with a certain socio-economic system. The above observation adds insight to the earlier argument and lays the foundation for further inquiry. Lucas' emphasis on the narrative and structure of literature does not mean that content and themes are secondary to narrative, but the new meaning about the world can only be discovered and brought about through the content conveyed by a narrative structure. A separation of the two would only produce bad literature, or no literature at all, as recent Chinese history illustrates. Therefore, literature, intuitively, is that art "which makes a man understand his own self in relation to those with whom he has interactions. Literature is regarded as a powerful medium of man's natural expression, his aspirations and frustrations in life, his personality in differing shades and his own image which undergoes frequent changes." (Sinha:1979:vi) Thus, the novel, due to its intrinsic mechanism, helps the reader to come to terms with the new changes and developments to his

circumstances by provision of new images and languages of the time. In fact, literature in China began to regain its vitality during the period of change in post-Mao China. It regained aesthetic verve, which not only contributed to informing the changes, but also brought about changes in a subtle but axiomatic way. This phenomenon poses a very interesting dimension to the study of the relationship of politics and literature in the Chinese context.

If it was industrialisation that brought the British novel into being, it was political turbulence and modernisation that changed the face of modern Chinese literature, which, in turn, advanced and shaped social and political development. The anti-Confucianist movement delivered the arrival of the modern Chinese vernacular novels and short stories. This form was particularly favoured by contemporary writers mainly due to its almost unlimited social capacity. Fredrick Engels professed in his letter to Margaret Harkness that he had learned more from Balzac about French society than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period put together. (Engels:1956:480) Many other prominent political figures also admitted that literature had exerted a similarly important but almost unfathomable impact and inspiration upon their career and role in the world.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, literature not only possesses an unlimited capacity of recording and presenting socio-economic, historic, cultural and political events and conditions, but also offers an extraordinary insight and perspective into the world that one has never seen or thought of otherwise. It is true that:

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<sup>11</sup> In his *Politics Needs Literature*, Maskell (1985) discusses in lengthy detail how important literature was to Winston Churchill's political career and his role in British politics and history. Similarly, Lenin's love for literature, especially novels, was well documented. And Mao himself was an admirable poet and his interest in Chinese classics greatly influenced his thinking and added to his charisma.



No one who reads Tolstoy can ever see Russia the same way after finishing Tolstoy as he or she might have seen it before coming to Tolstoy. No one who reads Kafka and Joyce can ever see the inner world of humankind the same way after finishing Kafka and Joyce as he or she might have seen it before coming to Kafka and Joyce. The great writers create maps that affect our view of the world and help us to chart our outer and inner destinies on this planet. (Potok:1992:45)

Hayden White in his article, *The Fictions of Factual Representation*, defines the functions of historians and imaginative writers by articulating:

Historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, whereas imaginative writers – poets, novelists, playwrights – are concerned with both these kinds of events and imagined, hypothetical or invented ones. (White:1976:155)

It is these kinds of imagined, hypothetical and invented events dressed in reality-like costumes that endow the novel itself with the ability to inform the reader about the *other*, the alternative and the possibility, thus to change, shape and influence events and conditions and to chart his destinies. Undoubtedly, the fictionality has consequences as history does, if not more so. It is more concerned with a general truth than history is.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, literature can be said to exist both in time and outside time. (Hoggart:1970b:13) It is “in time” because it works best when it creates a sense of a certain time and space. It is “outside time” because it concerns, through its allegorical and personifying meaning, a *difference*, an alternative and a truth otherwise inaccessible, a kind of future otherwise unperceivable.

Hence literature possesses advantages over history, philosophy and other social and political writing in the dissemination of new social and political ideas; in

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<sup>12</sup> History, according to many critics and scholars, is a form of discourse anyway, similar to that of literature, though it is concerned with events within time and space.

the “debunking” of the established institutions, and their legitimating thought patterns in social and political reality; and also in the discovery of new values about human beings and their ultimate freedom from oppression. This explains why some literature, centuries after its publication, continues to offer insights into human existence, not simply because many human conditions remain unimproved and many fundamental questions posited then largely remain unanswered, but also because literary texts, as an aesthetic form, make continuous claims on the reader to make fresh sense of the text in view of his own circumstances. It is this aesthetic transformation that “becomes a vehicle of recognition and indictment.” (Marcuse:1979:9)

Whilst history is concerned mainly with time and space, namely, the phenomena of the world, literature is ultimately political, and preoccupies itself with the real world and attempts to discover the real meaning of that world, both within time and space, and outside time and space. Only as autonomous work, to quote Marcuse once more, “the work of art can attain political relevance. ... The aesthetic form is essential to its social function. The qualities of the form negate those of the repressive society – the qualities of its life, labor, and love.” (Marcuse:1979:53) It is this artistic imagination that “shapes the ‘unconscious memory’ of the liberation that failed, or the promise that was betrayed.” (Marcuse:1970:130) Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics<sup>13</sup> brings this point of argument to an even more constructive

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<sup>13</sup> This thesis makes no attempt to make an in-depth systematic study of the philosophy of hermeneutics. However, a clear and concise definition is imperative for further discussion. The definition basically takes on Heidegger’s (1889-1976) and Gadamer’s (1900-) arguments, though its origin can be traced back to Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Max Scheler (1874-1928). Gregory Johnson examined the development from Husserl’s phenomenology to Gadamer’s hermeneutics in his article “Hermeneutics: A Protreptic”. To borrow his interpretation, hermeneutics may be defined as “the phenomenological study of the temporally articulated processes by which we can identify things through and against the horizon of past experiences”.

philosophical ground. He articulates that “aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics. ... Conversely, hermeneutics must be so determined as a whole that it does justice to the experience of art.” (Gadamer:1975:146) Undoubtedly the work of art “possesses a mysterious intimacy that grips our entire being, as if there were no distance at all and every encounter with it were an encounter with ourselves.” (Gadamer:1977:95)

The powerful arguments put forward by Marcuse, Gadamer and other critics are of great importance in this study of the relationship between politics and literature in the Chinese context. Their full recognition of the significance and complexity of literature in society and of its function and nature, which, according to Wellek, generates an emancipation of sensibility, imagination and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity, (Wellek:1985) is the cornerstone of this research edifice.

### **The China Case**

There is little doubt that literature has played more conscientious a role in contemporary Chinese society and politics after the death of Mao, which is the major concern of this study. The contribution of the Chinese writers has been crucial for the survival of a healthy modern intellectual tradition and for contemporary Chinese

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(Johnson:1990:187) According to him, hermeneutics has two principles: the “Principle of Contextualism” and the “Principle of Temporality”. The Principle of Contextualism informs that all understanding is in terms of a horizon of background knowledge and skills. The Principle of Temporality expresses that all processes of interpretation involve anticipatory and retentive moments. “Present actualities and future possibilities are interpreted in terms of the knowledge, categories, habits, and interests formed and deposited over our pasts – both our individual pasts and our linguistic and cultural pasts. Conversely, our understanding of our past and present states is in terms of our anticipations of future possibilities. Furthermore, we find that these horizons, and therefore the interpretations founded upon them, change constantly with the passage of time.” (Johnson:1990:187-8) This argument bears serious significance and critical importance in this study of politics and literature.

social, cultural and political life. However, a literature of such importance has been largely neglected, possibly due to the old theory “that contemporary Chinese literature is predominantly communist in character” and “one tends to look askance on this literature as an instrument of political agitation and propaganda and therefore dismiss it as an unrewarding subject for study.” (Hsia:1971:ix) Even during the Mao era “not all of it is superficial: much bears sensitive and pained witness to the turmoil and tragedy of the contemporary Chinese scene.” (Hsia:1971:ix) After the death of Mao, contemporary Chinese literature is not only rejuvenated, but it forms part of the modern national identity and constitutes a major theme of contemporary Chinese cultural, social and political life. It directly interacts with politics itself as the following chapters will illustrate. Literature produced in the period of this study provides us with both typical and unique data and evidence to prove the argument of the relationship of politics and literature, as Richards has it “arts, if rightly approached, supply the best data available for deciding what experiences are more valuable than others.” (Richards:1985:111) Moreover literature also confronts many topics and issues in politics and provides realistic and thought-provoking visions for Chinese society.

As literature represents the highest values of each age, (Leavis:1943:35) the imaginative writing examined in this study presents no less a panoramic picture of the transformation of China in a changing world. Literature *per se*, with both its messages and aesthetic values, interacted with politics in a way that had far-reaching consequences in rebuilding China after the Cultural Revolution. More importantly, it continues to shape modern Chinese thinking providing visions which represent “the ultimate goal of all revolutions: the freedom and happiness of the individual.”

(Marcuse:1979:69). These visions are not only important to the development of the individual mind, but also intrinsic to the development of China as a nation.

China witnessed a new situation after the death of Mao (1893-1976) and the downfall of the Gang of Four,<sup>14</sup> one quite unprecedented in its history. In view of the cataclysm that China had gone through, there was great confusion among people at all levels. In order to comprehend China's past and interpret its new situation, the imaginative writers resumed their historical task to offer new "visions" of society. This was a continuation of the new novel movement which had started in the early decades of this century. The major concerns and central themes in the work of these artists echoed those in that period, such as: a concern for human values and their well-being, a concern for demythologisation, pluralism, humanism and democracy, trying to come to terms with the atrocities either self-inflicted or *extra*-imposed. It had a distinctive record of direct and specific engagement with questions facing the society of the time.

The thriving of literature in China during the period concerned can be connected, in economic and philosophical as well as political terms, with an increased interest in individual and human values as made possible after the Cultural Revolution. The contemporary Chinese writers discussed in the following chapters, though not completely free from traditional and political limitations, represented a positive vision of the role of literature in politics by creating a narrative of progress,

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<sup>14</sup> The so-called Gang of Four were Mao's ideological *protégés* in the Party leadership and the government, including Mao's widow Jiang Qing (member of the Party Politburo), Wang Hongwen (Deputy Party Chairman), Zhang Chunqiao (Vice Premier), and Yao Wenyuan (the Party's Propaganda Minister). They were arrested after the death of Mao through a leadership *coup d'état* masterminded by a group of more liberal-minded figures in the Party and government. This incident has had a tremendous impact on China's social and political life and, to some extent, altered the course of contemporary Chinese history.

emancipation and civilisation. As history proves during times of change or social and political disturbance, literature always presents itself as an enlightening source of power, ideas, alternatives and inspirations either through writing, reading, or rewriting and rereading. During this period, the Chinese writers pushed the social and political importance of literature to an unprecedented position. On the one hand, their works reached a general audience, using both realist and experimental modes of expression with their unique historical commitment to address issues of contemporary social and political importance. On the other hand, the complex interplay of unresolved problems at this stage also prompted many major Chinese writers to observe with a new perspective and through a new language and discourse. They sought not only to explain the Chinese past in a historical sense, but also by introducing *modern* and *critical* forms of narrative, they challenged “the very notion of origins”, (Kearney:1988:12) and opened up new possibilities that added a different understanding and insight to politics. Their language was deeply rooted in the socio-economic, political and cultural history of China and was thus able to inform contemporary Chinese society and politics in a unique way.

Contemporary Chinese writers tried to restore the interrupted cultural tradition that had already been in existence for centuries by engaging in the process of social and political change through the creative process. Their writings attempted to explore the major social and political issues in society, such as the use and abuse of power by those who wield it, as well as more traditional and fundamental questions about human values and human existence.

The history of the People’s Republic shows that its narrow political doctrine resulted in a simplistic approach to studies of both literature and politics. A

dominating political idealism finally gave rise to the eruption of the ten years' turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, in which politics and political studies became nothing more than drilling a number of slogans into the heads of the people. Political science, like sociology, was held to be a bourgeois "pseudo science" and both its study and teaching were suspended at university. Even Marxism was simplified and treated as a dogma, rather than a progressive methodology and theory of seeing and interpreting the world. Literature was treated in a similar way. Literary study and criticism was exclusively content and theme-based. Consequently this approach did damage not only to literature, but also to politics.

In the process of rational retrospection of the political trauma of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people were greatly encouraged by the political development after the death of Mao. A concern about China's reality and future was wide-spread among the nation in view of the damage and injury perpetuated by the Cultural Revolution. People were anxious to make sense of what had happened and why it had happened. Rigid and unrelenting indoctrination over many years had resulted in a limited and circumscribed political vocabulary and by extension discourse at this time. Consequently, political scientists were short of critical means to confront the issues. It was by no means accidental that literature became both an avenue of truth-seeking as well as a voice of a general quest. Literature is the most sensitive aspect of ideology, and because of its fundamental concern about the world and the human condition it provides the potential to ameliorate and liberate us from the distorted image of present society and thus to offer an alternative insight and new ways of thinking.

Chinese writers exhibited a genuine concern about China and its future, and humankind and human society. After all, imaginative writers are widely regarded as persuasive purveyors of the truth (Wellek:1985:35), whether conscious or not, and thus represent the creative potential to influence readers to share their attitude towards life, especially by using a particular form of literature, the novel.

Driven by the tradition of commitment and enthralled by their own intellectual integrity, writers could no longer ignore the real social and political concerns and issues of the day unless they abandoned their craft altogether and thus abandoned their intrinsic pursuit of artistic and aesthetic truth. Due to this tradition, the aestheticism of “art-for-art’s-sake” or “pure art” literature never acquired real significance, nor did it gain any momentum in Chinese society, though certain works and critiques of this trend did surface in the twenties and thirties and have to a lesser degree re-emerged more recently. Nevertheless, the appearance of such criticism and discourse itself carried and continues to carry a very clear and distinctive political overtone.

As far as topics were concerned, no aspects of public life were left untouched by those writers engaged in the post Cultural Revolution creative explosion: government policy on intellectuals; bureaucratism; hierarchical privileges; discrimination founded on family background, sex, political attitudes, even on locality where one was born; political uprightness and public conduct; problems in the legal system; position of humanitarianism in socialism; the freedom and status of the individual; the relationship between officials and the people; the power and misuse of power; and most of all a deep concern of human conditions and progress



of humanity in general. Literature during this time spoke the unspeakable, presented the unrepresentable, and most importantly helped readers to see the unseeable.

The founding of socialism delivered China from political turmoil in the first place and yet along with it arose many fresh problems in the new situation. Ogden is correct in pointing out that China's economic and political change and development "must be judged by criteria appropriate to a developing country with socialist and traditional Chinese cultural values." (Ogden:1989:4-5) However, a relevant comparative and developmental dimension should not be overlooked in the studies of Chinese politics and literature because the influence of Western literary and political thought has been undeniable. In this respect, a healthy balance should be struck between external influences and a recognition and firm grounding in traditional Chinese values when attempting an analysis of China's economic and political developments. To understand the development in China, the undigested borrowed concepts and pure data without reference to the socialist and traditional Chinese cultural values did little to inform about a vast country like China.<sup>15</sup> In this aspect, Chinese literature with its intrinsic nature tends to resist any fixed models and paradigms of explanation and a healthy and balanced understanding can be derived from such creative writing.

Thanks to the distinctive moral commitment of Chinese writers to the social and political issues and ideas, contemporary Chinese literature engaged itself in the

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<sup>15</sup> Recent trends show that most of the studies carried out in this area are either heavily dependent on data analysis, or ready-made Western concepts to explain the recent social and political development in China. Concepts known in the West, such as conservatism, modernisation, consumerism, authoritarianism, liberalism, social democracy, even terms like Marxism, neo-Marxism, rightist and leftist, egalitarianism, and so on bear different connotations when used in the Chinese context and can by no means be conveniently adopted without questioning in discussion of Chinese politics. Literary terms can also carry different meanings in the Chinese context.

complex *realpolitik* of the vast transformation taking place in China. It offered the student of politics extensive materials which were most realistic, comprehensive and multi-dimensional. Many political issues and events were portrayed with their broad and complex social and political background. Literary works played a very active and direct part in politics, constituting another interesting aspect for political studies. More importantly, the aesthetic dimension of these works added new meaning to the narrative and shed more insight into politics and political transformation in society. Thus, without an understanding of the aesthetic dimension in the texts, and aesthetic values in society, it would be impossible to decipher the social and political codes concealed in the writings, and ultimately one would fail to gain an understanding of both Chinese literature and politics and their relationship.

This argument can be further proven and developed by including another form of narrative into the inquiry – the contemporary Chinese cinema. Thanks to an all-round development in technology, economy and politics and the efforts of a group of young film directors, Chinese cinema developed into a sophisticated and powerful form of art and expression. The films produced in this period, as will be argued in Chapter Five offered new visions to contemporary Chinese society, and injected new meanings into Chinese social and political life. They evidently became a very important aspect of China's social, cultural and political development.

The Chinese contemporary writers' engagement in social and political issues reflects the modern tradition of contemporary Chinese literature and often runs into conflict with the myopic official political domination of literature, which has added another intriguing and important dimension to the inquiry into the relationship

between politics and literature. It is not an exaggeration to say that these authors have contributed a great deal to creating a new cultural and intellectual rebirth, which has eventually led to a fundamental change in China's social and political realities. In view of the obligatory infusion of political subject-matter and socialist realism during Mao's era, China produced a literature in which content was seen to be paramount. However, the resurgence of the new literature has precipitated an improvement in aesthetic values and qualities, and the content has also increasingly become the form. It is this fusion of form and content that is able to offer the reader new ideas and meaning to society and to become a major part of an on-going political discourse and struggle for emancipation.

Therefore, contemporary Chinese literature offers a useful and characteristic area for academic and theoretical inquiry if one wants a true record and a new understanding of Chinese history and politics. The literary works produced in the post-Mao period have the advantage over data and materials gathered from recent history and politics, which were largely misrepresented at the time when they were published. Although "literature was not necessarily history", (Gordon:1971:3) like history, it became a collective memory of the Chinese people. It functioned to renew acquaintance with its recent history in order to "relish fully the present." (Glissant:1961:7) As literature *links* the past with the present and the future, it *re-creates* the past concurrent in a new image, and *invests* this image with a new meaning. Accordingly Chinese history and society at the time needed such a means to make sense and discover the meaning of the post-Mao era.

Writers themselves are politically important in any society, not only because their representation of social and political issues in their writing is of relevant

importance in society, but they also have great potential influence and enjoy a unique position within a social and political frame. This was the case particularly in contemporary China. Political issues and events in China were seldom seriously examined because of the official domination of all aspects of social life. Historically, imaginative literature became the main possible forum, if not the only one, where political issues were imbued and confronted. Ideas and visions contained in literature were hence heeded by sensitive readers, and its views and opinions were either discovered, shared or rejected by a wider range of readers to create a locus where different opinions meet.

A paradox remains. Some critics tend to classify literary works into two categories: politically charged, or aesthetically oriented. "Politically charged" is seen to be those works with overt political concerns or themes. Works produced during the Cultural Revolution and many produced before that belong to this category. Exactly for this reason, Chinese writers try to guard against being classified into this category as far as possible. In view of what has been discussed above, all literature has political potential and meaning. Even so-called "art for art's sake" itself is at least in part, a political manifesto.<sup>16</sup> The distinction should be made whether the political engagement is imposed from above, or spontaneous and intrinsic, though

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<sup>16</sup> Though as pointed out earlier that "art-for-art's sake" literature rarely gained any social and political momentum in Chinese history, the slogan has popped up in China's cultural scene from time to time. In the twenties and thirties when China was in deep social and political turmoil, there occurred the so-called "Butterfly and Mandarin Duck School" of literature which mainly portrayed the urban petty bourgeois life and deliberately ignored the more acute historical and political events and aspects of life. They claimed that they were creating pure art. Their voluntary omission of historical and political dimensions was much more than simply escapism, especially when China was virtually in an all-round civil war and people were suffering great loss. Also more recently after the death of Mao, there arose some voices demanding that art should only be for art's sake, though the intention of propagating such a slogan this time was to keep politicians out of literature and art production as well as criticism.

sometimes it is very difficult to tell one from the other.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the formula is simple: literature is both form and content, it is “the content having become form.” (Marcuse:1978:8) Hardly surprisingly, Gadamer’s concept of literature does echo the traditional Chinese theory of literature, which records –

... the basic way of literature consists of three principles: the first is called “formal pattern” [xing wen], which refers to the five colours; the second is called “auditory pattern” [sheng wen], which refers to the five notes (of the pentatonic scale); the third is called “emotional pattern” [qing wen], which refers to five temperaments. The five colours, when interwoven, form embroidered patterns; the five notes, when arranged, form music such as the shao and xia; the five temperaments, when expressed, form literary compositions: this is the inevitable working of divine principles. (Fan Wenlan in Liu, James:1975:102)

“Pure” form does not make literature, and content itself is not literature. Also being removed from the actuality of the world, literature vindicates a freedom, a freedom from “the given.” Thus “the aesthetic transformation becomes a vehicle of recognition and indictment.” (Marcuse:1978:9) This explains why frequently literature without overt political representation exerts an impact in a political way. The reading of any piece of literature is a process of communication, communicating “truths not communicable in any other language.” (Marcuse:1978:10)

In contemporary China, all phenomena of social and political life found expression in fiction, which functioned as a political instrument not only revealing conflicts between political ideas but also shaping new political vistas. Thanks to the new forms of language and narrative introduced after the Cultural Revolution, literature was able to say much more about China and create new meanings about

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<sup>17</sup> However, MacKeon’s concept of creation could be very useful in defining. As long as the writer is creating, then his work can be accepted as literature. Too much unassimilated politics and ideology, as was discussed earlier, only leads to bad literature, which cannot be called creation.

Chinese society as this study tries to prove. Thus contemporary Chinese imaginative literature can be said to reflect reality more fully and convey more truth than in any other period of the People's Republic. In this respect, literature has anticipated and reflected substantial changes in Chinese society at large with the effect of shattering "the reified objectivity of established social relations" and opening "a new dimension of experience" (Marcuse:1978:7) which in turn has helped to nourished the rebirth of freedom and liberation for the Chinese people.

## CHAPTER ONE: A Review of Politics and Literature

If you prefer, substitute 'appreciation' for 'truth'.

– (Louch:1992:363)

In view of the introductory discussion, it is important to recognise that literature, like politics and many other social sciences, constitutes part of the perception and understanding of human society. More importantly, this part of perception relates, affects and contributes in a subtle and yet constructive way to the other parts of human knowledge of the world. It is this quality that makes literature an important endeavour of modern humankind to understand the world and can thus be said to contribute to the progress of humanity.

Literature, in other words, has the capacity not only to reflect the writer's understanding of human existence but also to generate a new meaning by setting up imaginative social and political environments, creating a philosophy of its own, which cannot be matched by any other forms of discourse. It constitutes an integral part of a nation's humanity on an extensive scale, and hence it offers itself as a window to the understanding of that nation's politics and thinking. It can, if successfully written, change and broaden the reader's perspective and his understanding of human society and the world in a political way. In today's world, there "is nothing which is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political." (Jameson:1981:20) In this aspect, to relate literature with politics is not only conducive to the understanding of the world perceived through literature, but also contributes to the understanding of literature, which interacts with

the real world, and with other disciplines of knowledge, such as sociology, psychology, economics, and most important of all, politics.

The above observation presents a complex and problematic relationship between politics and literature, wherein there exists a common foundation of politics and literature as forms of persuasive discourse. Both politics and literature are, by using language as a fundamental means, perceptual activities. Both are directed towards a better understanding of human society and social development, and are fundamentally concerned with the shaping and transformation of human values. And one always interacts upon, *shapes and nourishes the other*.

### **Literature as Political Knowledge**

A large part of literature confronts or contains political issues and events. The portrayal of political issues and events in literature is self-evident and does not require elaboration. Many social and political events are even better represented and documented in literature than other historical writings. Understandably, literature, carrying a real sense of the world as understood by most readers – a *world* composed of feelings and experience rather than dry data and descriptions of issues and events appeals to a wider audience. As far as the general public is concerned, it works better towards an understanding of human history and society than other historical and persuasive discourse, for instance, historical archives, political manifestos and philosophical writings.

Due to its unique form of expression and potential to enrich human experience, literature has become the most popular form of portraying political issues and events whereby the writer tests, knowingly or unknowingly, the validity



of certain ways of seeing these issues and events, and offers, “no matter how provisionally, a way of ordering the flux of experience.” (Hoggart:1970b:12) The reader is brought to “face experience or succumb to it or seek to alter it or try to ignore it.” (Hoggart:1970b:12) Lovell also points out:

It would be foolish not to recognise that the goal of using art to expose the real has been a strongly recurrent one, nor that a great deal of knowledge is transmitted through art. To say that art is not a form of knowledge parallel to, but different from, scientific knowledge is not to deny the cognitive content of art. (Lovell:1983:88)

Until recently the discussions and arguments on the relationship between politics and literature have been largely focused on this distinctive category of literature, namely, commitment literature and literature with immediate political themes. It usually poses itself as the first and one of the major domains for academic inquiry as far as the relationship is concerned.

Many think that the Cultural Revolution should be documented<sup>1</sup> in some panoramic Tolstoyan unity. It is an epic theme. (Pan:1989:198) Recent history proves that the best record and representation of the Cultural Revolution can only be found in Chinese literature. Dealing with such a theme was a tedious and highly demanding task and many writers, with traditional social and moral commitment behind them, had little time to lose in resuming their role as social and political critics after the downfall of the Gang of Four. They had too much to say and wanted to say it quickly. Under the circumstances, *zhongpian xiaoshuo*<sup>2</sup> (novellas) was most

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously literature not just only “documents” historical events, it “sees” and “tells” historical events in its own way. Arguably Pan’s use of the word is quite loose and lacks proper defining. However, Chinese literature happened to form the best documentation of the Cultural Revolution and other Chinese social and political events.

<sup>2</sup> *Zhongpian xiaoshuo* is a form somewhere between a long short story and a short novel, though in terms of length, many can be classified as novels.

favoured by the Chinese writers and thus became the dominant literary form in early post-Mao China, which contained an extensive record of the time, and more importantly this record was well imbued with a sensitivity and seat of passion of the time.

The imaginative literature in post-Mao China proves Davis' argument that fictional narratives "are part of an information-disseminating system that is by definition social." (Davis:1980:143) The information in a nation's literature comprises an important part of that nation's knowledge about itself. A national education system also permeates such knowledge to a wide audience. In this way, literature certainly operates as a database for that nation.

### **Literature as a Source of Political Thought**

This information not only supplies a knowledge about the past, but this information of the past informs the present and the future. Davis tries to prove this point by looking at the origins of the novel, which Richardson placed clearly at the side of newspapers. He argues by quoting Richardson's words that novelists, instead of writing news about public events of a nation, were writing news of the ideology as it were of that nation. (Davis:1980:144) In today's world, literature still maintains the same functions as "a medium for writing news of the ideology." (Davis:1980:144) This argument has been defended by important modern critics and scholars working in this area, such as Lu Xun (1967), Sartre (1950, 1973), Brecht (1974, 1993), Gadamer (1975, 1977), Marcuse (1970, 1972, 1978), Jameson (1971, 1981, 1988), Adorno (1984, 1992), and Kundera (1990)

The history of literature proves many political ideas and visions were pioneered in literary works, far in advance of their formulation within the sphere of political theory. Hence literature can also be analysed as a form of philosophy; there are “ideas” wrapped in it, even “leading ideas.” Admittedly the great writers are men and women of exceptional wisdom, insight, and understanding of social and political trends and reality. The authors’ perceptions are inexhaustible reservoirs and representations of social and political values, ideas and images of the time, which lend the reader an insight into himself and the world he is in. Indeed, Lovell argues that both Marxists and non-Marxists have made compelling cases that art is centrally concerned with the production of ideas, and that emotive theories of art cannot even specify the emotive content of a work without reference to its ideas. (Lovell:1983:88)

Imaginative literature, especially in times of change, provides ideas and possibilities for transformation. For instance just as the decade of social distortion and political falsification during the Cultural Revolution ended in China, truth was much stranger than falsehood for the Chinese people. Although official attempts were made to condemn the doings of the Gang of Four and some of Mao’s mistakes, the efforts made through political channels seemed short of an operative force due in part to the dogmatic and restrictive discourse previously created during Mao’s rule. People were thirsty for knowledge about themselves and society. It was literature that filled this political vacuum and led to a retrospection into the trauma and a subsequent search for truth in the present. Much of the literature in the early post-Mao period launched a daring discovery of a wide range of social and political ideas, some of which were to influence Chinese politics in a profound way. The new

imaginative literature contributed to obliterate the so-called leftist radical thinking and actions.<sup>3</sup> It led the reader to see Chinese politics and society in a new perspective and thus paved the way for later social and economic reforms. It formed a political force *per se* and was deeply involved in political process and development. As literature represents the highest values of each age, (Leavis:1943:35) similarly, Chinese literature, too, created ideas and values that were to influence China's social, cultural and political development.

Maskell once noted that:

... *without* literature, politics is impotent or nugatory – as ... modern politics is impotent even to accomplish its own purpose, let alone those of literature, impotent to make the sense of our lives, it is its special business to make. What we find in present-day politics is that the sense it makes of our lives is none of the many vivifying senses we find in literature but the one monotonous stultifying sense we get from advertising. (Maskell:1985:23)

Politics without literature is unthinkable, and literature without politics is meaningless. Clearly Chinese literature engaged itself directly in a process of political orientation and creation of a new ideology. It was responsible for setting societal priorities, changing social and political values, and breaking the domination of power. It was even involved, in an indirect but subtle way, in policy-making and preparing the ground for new developments. Literature, thus, as part of the consciousness of reality which was highly social and political, penetrated deeper into realities of the mind, and finally passed into the common currency of politics.

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<sup>3</sup> The literary works published during the early period after the downfall of the Gang of Four largely focused on very recent history and other social and political issues. They questioned the socialist doctrines, investigated the political trauma which had haunted China for the past decades and inquired into other social issues with an unprecedented scope and vigour. And they shed light on people's understanding of the transformation which was undergoing at the time and created a general atmosphere for change.

## Literature and Cultural Development: Language, Images and Ideology

As history illustrates there is no doubt that human progress, technologically and politically, starts from imagination and ideals, for:

... our imagination, unfettered by the constraints of fact, may dream up possible worlds that are stranger than our actual world. The actual world is mundane almost by definition, whereas in fiction we may suit our fancy; and our fancy may wander into keys remote from the C major of ordinary life. (Gallop:1991:1)

Gallop continues to say that:

... there are, to be sure, fictional worlds for which an affirmative answer will seem obviously true. The worlds of Homer, the brothers Grimer, Lewis Carrol, Kurt Vonnegut, or Stanislaw Lem, ... are stranger than our own world in various ways, and may illuminate it by their very strangeness. (Gallop:1991:1)

Many critics recognise that literature, as a form of art, has an implicit and comprehensive bearing on politics and society. Employing language as representation, it transforms fictional narrative into a powerful discourse thus to create new ideas and images in society. Davis points out that this discourse transcribes “reality into language” and it does so with the aim of creating political ideologies and embodying social consciousness in the printed. (Davis:1980:143)

Rorty also repeatedly reminds us that we are what our previous experiment with language has made us. (Rorty:1982, 1989) “Without these distinctions, initially expressed in fresh metaphors, we would be in thrall. The active living character of language made our beliefs historically contingent and always open to modification.” (Kolenda:1991:112)

Kolenda, whilst assessing Rorty, suggests that:

Rorty does not think that changes of vocabulary for a reason, from an awareness that a situation *calls for or would be improved by a*

vocabulary change. But what new terms or redescrptions will be adequate to the situation is a question which cannot be answered before hand, in the light of familiar distinctions and customary ways of talking. This is why new suggestions of how the situation and its problems could be handled in part depend on fresh, original redescription. (Kolenda:1991:112)

Literature constantly supplies us with many new and fresh images and metaphor, which do change the vocabulary and perception of the world. Sarup also sees new images and fresh metaphors in this light, saying “the creative or imaginative aspect of sociological theories often lies in their use of metaphor.” (Sarup:1988:54) He sums up that Parsons likens society to a biological organism; Marx uses the metaphor of a building, the base and the superstructure; Goffman uses the metaphor of a stage “performance.” Metaphors serve to draw attention not only to similarities but to differences, and as the theory develops and becomes more precise, concepts emerge that sometimes have little to do with the original metaphor. (Sarup:1988:54)

Hence the fictional world constantly provides the reader with various images and metaphors about the world he is in, and is able to lead him to review his understanding of the reality in a fresh perspective. It is this aspect of fiction that broadens the cultural dimension in society which works eventually towards an environment in which political objectives and destinies are to be realised. For literature is, after all, a perception of human relationships and concerns human society and its future.

It is this literary language that gives “impetus to history, because it drives us toward the realisation of aims and plans that initially lived only in our hearts and minds.” (Peer:1995:276) Furthermore, Chinese literature in the post-Mao period rejected the simple-minded approach to the puzzling “modernisation theory.” During

the recent years of Chinese politics, one of the most persistent themes among social and political scientists and critics (even among some officials and politicians) was the belief that modernisation was the only way to rebuild China. However, the real problem with the “modernisation” paradigm, and “modernisation theories” more generally, was that they somehow ignored the fact that there were many modernisations and many modernities. Thus although the politicians tried very hard to put forward a modernisation solution to China’s problems, it was Chinese literature, that introduced new images and metaphors and thereby suggested things were not as easy as it seemed. *More importantly, these images and metaphors* created a cultural environment in which the modernisation drive was able to develop in a more realistic and healthy manner. The metaphorical potential of literature thus exposed the possibilities *and* difficulties of modernisation in a way that political manifestos could not. A diversified cultural environment was bound to produce healthy politics.

Milan Kundera, while evaluating the form of the European novel, discovers that its:

... imaginative realm of tolerance was born with modern Europe, a dream many times betrayed but nonetheless strong enough to unite us all in the fraternity that stretches far beyond the little European continent. But we know that the world where the individual is respected (the imaginative world of the novel, and the real one of Europe) is fragile and perishable.... if European culture seems under threat today, if the threat from within and without hangs over what is most precious about it – its respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his right to an inviolable private life – then, I believe, that precious essence of the European spirit is being held safe as in a treasure chest inside the history of the novel, the wisdom of the novel. (Kundera:1990a:164-5)

It is perhaps true in most civilisations that the novel constitutes the most important part of cultural and linguistic identities as well as the wisdom of a nation. The fictional characters and worlds are remembered and “respected.” They form part of the everyday discourse. And their language becomes the language of the day. The fictional events become parables in society and they influence people’s concept of social and political values and their way of thinking. All these values serve to influence people’s political demeanour and actions.

### **Literature as Didacticism and Propaganda**

In view of the discussion in the previous sections, it is quite understandable that literature has been repeatedly used for didactic purposes or as a means of propaganda. Lerner observes:

... in the field of politics, didactic views of literature will not lie down. This is inevitable, as long as people care about political questions: if improving the world (or preserving it from disaster) is important, then it is natural (and not necessarily discreditable) to ask what contribution poems and novels can make to this task. (Lerner:1988:161)

As the underlying current of today’s reality is fundamentally political in nature, literature thus continues to function to inform, influence and transform politics in its unique yet subtle ways.

The idea that literature can contribute to the “improvement” of the human world has been shared by many in the history of human society. The realisation of the didactic nature of literature can be traced back to Plato (427-347BC), who simply regarded literature as a means to an end, otherwise undesirable. Plato found that poetry had the potential to sway people from the path of good citizenship and was



dangerous (Plato:1974:375-6) and that therefore, “the only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and peans in praise of good men.” (Plato:1974:375-6) Too often, Plato viewed the poet of portraying “heroes sulking in their tents, magistrates taking bribes” and and it was such dangerous representation which led to Plato banishing all poets from his Republic. (Plato:1974:376) This view has been shared by many religious leaders and political authoritarians as well as by some critics. For instance, Montgomery Belgion, too, sees this function of literature, in the same negative terms, saying, that the literary artist is an:

... ‘irresponsible propagandist’. That is to say, every writer adopts a view or theory of life.... The effect of the work is always to *persuade* the reader to accept that view or theory. This persuasion is always illicit. That is to say, the reader is always led to believe something, and that assent is hypnotic – the art of the presentation seduces the reader. (Belgion in Wellek:1985:35)

Inevitably anyone who accepts such a theory of literature and “believes he has found the *truth* will fall into Plato’s position toward art.” (Hall:1963:1) Such ideas have often fuelled political and religious forces to try to regulate literature to fit in with their own ideology and agenda as illustrated by Hitler’s curse of modern art, the arbitrary ban of Lawrence’s novel, Khomeini’s *fatwa* against Rushdie, and the Gang of Four’s tyrannical reign over literature and art.

Besides safeguarding and administering literature from the “invasion” of different ideas, the project of such authoritarian figures also echoed Plato’s stipulation that songs and poetry should be written under the supervision of the rulers. According to Plato, only the politically reliable were permitted to write poetry, even though they might not be very “musical.” He laid down very strict rules for writers and artists, upholding that “our first business is to supervise the

production of stories, and choose only those we think suitable, reject the rest.”

(Plato:1974:72) He reiterated this position time and again and extended it to other forms of arts, pronouncing:

It is not only to the poets therefore that we must issue orders requiring them to portray good character in their poems or not to write at all. We must issue similar orders to all artists and craftsmen, and prevent them portraying bad characters, ill-discipline, meanness, or ugliness in pictures of living things, in sculpture, architecture, or any work of art, and if they are unable to comply they must be forbidden to practise their art among us. (Plato:1974:103)

His stance was reinforced by another one of his beliefs that “the artist knows little or nothing about the subject he represents” and “the art of representation is something that has no serious values.” (Plato:1974:369) Thus, for Plato it only deserved to be treated as a means to an end.

Such Platonic theory has been heavily borrowed by the twentieth-century political authoritarians. Evidence shows that propaganda literature and art arose alongside the rise of political authoritarians. Propaganda literature consists of two major categories: one is to employ the existing literary works and arts through an officialised interpretation to achieve the purpose of a regime and the other is to commission authors and artists to “create” what the state and the official ideology dictate. This kind of literature has to be written with a preconceived form. It cannot be called “creation”, for it informs very little about society at the time and is tantamount to a lie about the world. In many authoritarian regimes, propaganda literature has brought about nothing but cultural deprivation, social injustice and political falsification and the consequences have been not only disastrous to literature but also to politics and humankind as a whole. Too often, such cultural administration fails to heed the pluralistic nature of the world and by seeing things in

totality, our vision is obstructed, even though some of the initial motives were well-intentioned.<sup>4</sup> Such totalitarian approaches to culture inevitably hinder human progress to say the least, and destroy humanity at their worst.

Thus, although literature concerns itself with the real world, which is basically political, it is a form of art possessing its own rules and principles. Any violation of the underlying literary and aesthetic laws would only lead to artistic failure, a failure to convey the intended political insights, for as René Wellek points out, “the artist will be hampered by too much ideology if it remains unassimilated.” (Wellek:1985:123). Thus works with undigested social and political themes become “one-dimensional optimism of propaganda,” (Marcuse:1978:14) and they are either soon forgotten or become instrumental to the destruction of humanity. Thus even to subordinate the existing literature to the state authority is to destroy the spirit of that literature, because the existence of literature depends on its autonomy.

Marx reiterated the didactic properties of literature and held that literature reflected social relations and hence should point out what these relations should be like, though this critique was mainly based on non-literary political and ethical criteria (Wellek:1985:94), just as Plato displays his generosity towards those less “musical” but politically “reliable” poets. However, writers, by nature, belong to “society”, not the “state”, which, as these examples illustrate, often threatens the existence of literature. According to Marcuse, literature, in nature, “opposes the

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<sup>4</sup> Here a distinction between Nazi Germany’s propaganda literature, that of the Soviet Union and that of the Cultural Revolution in China needs to be drawn in view of a recent trend to speak of Nazi German propaganda literature and that of the Soviet Union in the same breath. Nazi Germany’s propaganda literature started with the belief of racial superiority, but that of the Gang of Four and that of the Soviet Union were first based on an idealistic egalitarianism. In China’s case, it was a by-product of a revolution that went wrong, though the final verdict of that revolution is far from being complete. In the case of the Soviet Union, it was the result of a revolution that has completely gone sour.

given society.” (Marcuse:1978:13) In addition, “the more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change.” (Marcuse:1978:xii-xiii) However, as history testifies, less “musical” poetry and less “literary” literature has been less successful in terms of political communication, not to mention affording new social and political insights.

During the Cultural Revolution, due to authors’ negotiations made with external forces and internal censorship, the literary works at the time were divorced from the culture which they were supposed to be rooted in and addressed to. Culture here, as Hoggart suggests, “means the whole way of life of a society, its beliefs, attitudes, and temper as expressed in all kinds of structures, rituals and gestures, as well as in the traditionally defined form of art.” (Hoggart:1970c:156) However,

... good rhetoric is what a free community lives by, in law or science or politics. The authoritarians since Plato have sneered at it, arguing that without authoritative and quasi-theistic foundations we are left with Anything Goes, which is their description of democracy. It is no minor detail in the long history of anti-rhetorical rhetoric that Plato banished poets from his totalitarian community. (McCloskey:1991 :222)

Hoggart points out:

By this tradition it is claimed that good literature can reveal a society to itself in unique ways if – and the *proviso* is very important – we learn how to read it properly and do not try to use it for external ends. (Hoggart:1970c:156)

Accordingly only “good literature” or “real literature”<sup>5</sup> could offer the key to a better understanding of the world we live in. History illustrates that “bad literature” very

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<sup>5</sup> The argument of “good literature” and “bad literature” can be substantiated by both Irish Murdoch’s concept of bad art and good art and Albert Camus’ notion of literature of consent and literature of rebellion. According to C. Belsey’s discussion on “truth and insight model” of literature, it “is considered that particularly acute and perspicacious novelists offer truth and insight into the human condition; in fact, this is the basis of their talent and reputation. Bad art, according

often contained either no truth value or failed to convey the message that was intended and was eventually excluded from the realm of literature. In the post-Mao era, literature helped to form new dimensions of thinking in the socio-political domains. The reader was brought to share the authors' search for truth of life. Exactly for this reason, this function of literature poses some threat to the establishment. This "dynamic capacity of literature to generate fresh meaning of reality" (Wright:1988:4) is always considered to impose disorder and subversion to the established order.

During the first three decades of new China, works produced then failed to wed heavy political ideology to a popular existing culture and reality. Theoretical insight and literary truth can only arise *ab intra*, from a freedom of imagination. Literature is an organic unity of the form and content. It is something intrinsic and spontaneous. It is not something that can be made to order and imposed *ab extra*, out of negotiation and allowance with external forces. If any literature is negotiated out of such a position, the form is very unlikely to hold the content but to repeat what has already been said.

Thus literature and politics (realistically and academically) are bound to overlap one another. Both are perceptions of the same world from different angles

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to Irish Murdoch, 'is a lie about the world', while good art is 'in some important evident sense seen as *ipso facto* true and as expressive of reality'." (Belsey:1980:13) And Camus also distinguishes the concepts of literature of consent and literature of rebellion. He argues that literature of consent "coincides, by and large, with ancient history and the classical period" and literature of rebellion "begins in modern times." But he continues to argue that "the first category is scarce, and when it exists, with very few exception, it is not concerned with history but with fantasy. ... These are fairy-tales not novels. In the latter period, on the contrary, the novel is really developed - a form which has not ceased to thrive and extend its field of activity up to the present day, in conjunction with the critical and revolutionary movement. The novel is born simultaneously with the spirit of rebellion and expresses, on the aesthetic plane, the same ambition." (Camus:1971:224) Thus most literature of the previous age in the Cultural Revolution and before belonged to a literature of consent and it was at the time political fairy-tales.

but constantly get nourished from one another. As the two realms of literature and politics are so closely related, there is little wonder that in some totalitarian regimes, literature is state-controlled and highly politicised. The on-and-off official domination of literary activities in China, for example, is a reflection of the authorities' realisation of literature's "illicit persuasion." Arguably, serious writers are mostly concerned with real human values and social progress in a positive way rather than tend to lead people in an "irresponsible" manner. Literature is, after all, a form of art concerning truth of humanity and not about "happy consciousness." The effect of propaganda literature, though mostly short-lived, can be highly dramatic, as history testifies. However, when propaganda literature reigns, alongside it there rises a false consciousness which destroys the fine qualities of humankind and leads to human tragedy.

### **Imagination and Truth**

There are books and books as far as literature is concerned. It is true that "the socialist will want them to promote socialism, the feminist to transform gender relations, the Conservative to defend the free market economy." (Lerner:1988:162) Nevertheless, readers are sophisticated enough not just to be persuaded by these overt political manifestations. Quite the contrary, they tend to appreciate more or less the same few books all over the world no matter what political inclination and ethnic background they possess. Apparently it is more than the so-called literary value and beauty that they come to appreciate, particularly in the case of fiction. "The argument is more likely to claim that any true literary experience works towards an appreciation of human equality, of the value of the feminine, of the virtue

of freedom, an appreciation that, when we think about it politically, leads to the position we hold.” (Lerner:1988:162) Literature is important to politics not only because it can pass on information about the real world, but more importantly it tries to lead the reader to see something about the world that cannot be seen otherwise.

Undoubtedly, the fictionality offers some kind of truth that other forms of knowledge cannot. And the factuality and imaginativeness combined provide this form of writing with more advantages over history, philosophy, psychology and political writings. In this sense, any genuine literature can be said to contain not only imagination and hypotheses or quasi-historical facts, but also to reveal truth, a truth outside time and space, which is to be sought after through reading and re-reading its allegorical and personifying meaning by the reader in various circumstances.

Great literature asserts repeated challenges upon the reader’s understanding and knowledge of society and the world he is in. For his understanding of truth is always relative and subject to time and space. Real literature transcends the time and the space when and where it was produced. So while literature bears a real sense of the world, portraying events mainly within time and space, namely, the phenomenon of the world, it is more concerned with humanity in general and is able to bring to light the real meaning of human existence, outside time and space, namely, in new circumstances. This explains why the classics, even after hundreds of years, still render new understanding and insight into the *whole* of humanity. In this sense, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, George Orwell, Solzhenitsyn, Kundera, Gabriel Marquez, Lu Xun, and many others have not only provided a “scientific” account of society but also of its workings and laws.

However, social scientists, philosophers and critics hold different claims about truth in fiction. Derrida breaks down the boundary between philosophy and literature (Norris:1986:4-5)<sup>6</sup> and maintains that all language is ineradicably metaphorical, working by tropes and figures. Sarup agrees that it is a mistake to believe that any language is literally literal. “Literary works are in a sense less deluded than other forms of discourse, because they implicitly acknowledge their own rhetorical status. Other forms of writing are just as figurative and ambiguous but pass themselves off as unquestionable truth.” (Sarup:1988:51) Riffaterre also notes that being a genre fiction “rests on conventions, of which the first and perhaps only one is that fiction specifically, but not always explicitly, excludes the intention to deceive. A novel always contains signs whose function is to remind readers that the tale they are being told is imaginary.” (Riffaterre:1990:1) However, “fiction still manages to interest, to convince, and eventually to appear relevant to the reader’s own experience, despite containing so many reminders of its artificiality.” (Riffaterre:1990:1)

Accordingly wrapped in fictionality and artificiality, truth about the real world resides in great literature. Thanks to this particular quality of literature and the reference it makes to the real world, literature has naturally become a *popular* and powerful form of persuasive and philosophical discourse.

Literature is such a subject which does not offer ready-made truth, but truth that is relative to the reader and the world. This kind of “truth does not impose itself

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<sup>6</sup> According to Norris, Derrida is very often charged to have “erased the distinction between philosophy and literature, treating the former as a purely textual phenomenon and thus effectively subjugating reason to rhetoric.” (Norris:1986:4-5)



on a pure, receptive human mind: it is sought after” (Sheridan:1982:123) by the reader who has to employ his intellectual faculties and his knowledge outside the text to seek the truth out of the text. This explains why some seemingly *apolitical* literature can also influence the reader in a political way.

Contemporary discussions on “truth about fictional objects” have given rise to a review of the status of literary writing. (Derrida, 1981, 1992; Rorty, 1982, 1989; Cavell, 1969, 1979) As Sarup points out that

one of the implications of this view is that literature can no longer be seen as a kind of poor relation to philosophy. There is no clear division between literature and philosophy, nor between ‘criticism’ and ‘creation’. Since metaphors are essentially ‘groundless’, mere substitutions of one set of signs for another, language tends to betray its own fictive and arbitrary nature at just those points where it is offering to be most intensively persuasive. In short, philosophy, law, and political theory work by metaphor just as poems do, and so are just as fictional. (Sarup:1988:51)

Undeniably in this respect, literature is a knowledge that works by images and metaphors. Images and metaphors can be liberating and can work towards a better understanding of the world and human society. For instance, as the historian Christopher Hill explains, the fact that in the seventeenth century nature came to be thought of as a machine to be understood, controlled and improved upon by knowledge freed human beings from the stultifying dominance of “providence” or “divine will.” (Hill:1967) In this way men could not only understand the world better but could begin to think of changing it.

In his article, “On Literary Truth”, Mellor notes that expressing faithfully an author’s emotion, conviction, attitudes and experience is not what makes a novel “true.” Nor can the reader’s response, though important, be the measure of a novel’s literary truth either. (Mellor:1968:150-168)

Lovell brings this view a step further by analysing Della Volpe's position on art. Her analysis lends instrument to this argument. She argues, according to Della Volpe that

all cultural forms are forms of thought, all involve conceptual thinking, and all use language. The difference between art, science and common sense, the three main categories which he distinguishes, lie in their different language use. He identifies three main types of concept, the *univocal*, the *equivocal* and the *polysemic*, used by science, common sense and art respectively. The univocal concepts of scientific discourse create a one-to-one relationship between terms and concept, equivocal concepts link the same term to different concepts and the same concept to different terms, while polysemic concepts link the same terms to a multiplicity of concepts. The common relationship of polysemy and univocality to the equivocal language of ordinary speech allows comparison, translation and interpretation. (Lovell:1983:88-9)

Based on the above argument, a conclusion can be drawn that literature undoubtedly produces ideas and knowledge. However, this is a kind of knowledge that relates to reality, and at the same time transcends reality. This knowledge is only accessible and meaningful, to use Lovell's words again, "not by virtue of their 'signifying practice', nor by such tricks as passing themselves off as mirrors of the real, but *by reference to independently acquired knowledge of that to which they refer.*" (Lovell:1983:91) Although "art may express true ideas, and may produce knowledge in the sense that some people may learn these truths through art rather than through historical or sociological analysis ... the status of its truths as valid knowledge is determined elsewhere than in art, in the univocal language of science and history rather than the polysemic language of art." (Lovell:1983:91) Thus literature has to be looked at in relation to other forms of knowledge and to the world in general.

Epistemologically, imagination is central to the acquisition of truth and knowledge. As historical evidence proves that it is imagination that provides human beings with what reason cannot. Imagination supplies a connectedness among various ideas which yield a coherent, objective and causally ordered world. Conversely, to understand such an imaginative world requires the reader's anticipation of other "worlds." Only approached in this way, can the true value of imaginative literature be unveiled and appreciated.

### **Imaginative Writers as Holistic Socio-Political Scientists**

Admittedly writers themselves are politically important in any society, not only because of their daring inquiry into social and political issues in their writing and its potential influence, but also because of their unusual position within a social and political structure particularly in contemporary China. Generally speaking, the author occupies a locus where various forms of knowledge meet and present a connectedness in his or her works among various kinds of ideas and knowledge. D. H. Lawrence notes that the novelist is "superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog." (Lawrence:1972:133) This reminds one of what Engels said about Balzac, who informed him about French society more than all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period put together. (Engels:1956:480) Imaginative writers, novelists in particular, indeed have some advantages over historians, economists, statisticians and such like. In this sense, they are at the same time historians, sociologists, politicians, psychologists, and perhaps all combined.

Regarding the above view, introducing literature into the discipline of politics and other social sciences can also contribute to those fields, as O'Dair finds that:

images of human being constructed by the social sciences are abstract and artificial, partial accounts intended to facilitate analysis of certain kinds of behaviour – social, psychological, economic. Thus, one might wish to note for a literary audience that *homo sociologicus* or *homo psychologicus* will never be the particular character who peoples the plays and novels – unless the author or critic reifies abstractions, or takes a part for a whole. (O'Dair:1991:264)

She notes that the social sciences do not have much to say about the subject's uniqueness or freedom, about action as an activity that engages the person as a moral agent, thereby differentiating him from non-reflective organisms. (O'Dair:1991:264)

It is literature that offers a picture of *homo in toto*, whereby a better understanding of humankind and his existence in the world can be studied.

The story is one of the ways we give configuration to the dense waves of disorderly perception that incessantly impinge upon our consciousness; it is a form of model-making activity which we use to think and shape the world, to explore with words and images realms of experience heretofore sealed to us, to map those experiences by means of language charged and heightened by the imagination, and to transmit those models to one another, thereby adding them to the pools of accumulating knowledge about ourselves and our world. (Potok:1992:26)

In this sense, imaginative writers can exert influence upon the understanding of the world in a more rounded manner, appealing to our rationality as well as emotions.

Potok indicates that:

... we experience the world in a kind of choreography of confrontation. Some of our best novelists have been tracking – in most cases, unknowingly, instinctively – the steps of this choreography as they explore and present to us their personal vision of their encounters with the world. (Potok:1992:19)

He continues to say that “the modern writer of serious stories, obligated only to his or her art and introspective vision of the world, is more often than not viewed as a threat by religious authority and is discouraged, opposed, fought, censored, persecuted.” (Potok:1992:25) The same is true in most authoritarian regimes. For, in general, the imaginative writers are, by and large, the “eyes of the angry iconoclast, the breaker of inherited models of the world, the rebel who grows up inside a small and particular world.” (Potok:1992:25) Their works have been read time and again by readers of various backgrounds.

Literature, especially the novel, has an almost unlimited capacity in recording socio-economic, historic, cultural and political events, having acquired an extraordinary insight and perspective into the world it is concerned about. The writer functions as an omnipresent commentator on the events of the world through various narratives which can lead the reader in a way that many other forms of discourses cannot.

Literature can do more than provide the reader with information or understanding of different ways of life. Literary works can affect the way people see their own lives as well. Literary authors practise an insidious form of rhetoric. They persuade us to see the world the way they do by establishing the context and deciding what is important without our being aware of it. (Zuckert:1995:189)

As far as China is concerned, the imaginative writers have played an even more prominent part in politics and society. Due to complicated historical and political limitations, China has produced a relatively thin layer of intelligentsia. This fact has made many writers take upon themselves a social responsibility and a political commitment. Contemporary writers very often function as critics of society

and work with their talent and ability for the improvement of the people's well-being. Due to the same fact and the nature of literature in Chinese society, these writers enjoy a special and important position as opinion-formers. They form a main source of both ideas and ideals of reform and development within Chinese society, though their relationship to society is very much determined by the political environment as a whole. In the post-Mao era, the readership and the circulation of literary works and periodicals have been increasing dramatically hand in hand. More importantly, with the publication of a new book, its criticism is normally carried in national papers. Many publications have launched various heated debate over political issues, as will be argued in the following chapters.

There certainly is a great difficulty, if not an impossibility, in assessing the literary influence upon Chinese politics and society. However, a study of various texts in relation to Chinese society and the theories that have been put forward would inform that Chinese writers have not only contributed greatly to influence public opinion, change people's perception of the reality and allow them to review their world in new perspectives, but would also add some light to an understanding of the relationship between literature and politics.

### **The Role of Literature in Post-Mao China**

In the Chinese context, the relationship between politics and literature presents itself in a two-fold manner. First, literature in China plays a crucial role in contemporary Chinese society and politics in times of change in all area of life. Second, the contribution of the Chinese writers to the survival of a healthy modern intellectual tradition and to the contemporary Chinese social, cultural and political

development in China has been pivotal. Literature not only reflects the contemporary Chinese society, but it itself has become a real indicator of Chinese politics and society and a realm where new ideas and concepts have been created and struggles for liberation and freedom are taking place.

Because of the relative relaxation of the political command where people could, without much encumbrance, manifest their social and political views independent from state power, the role of literature was characteristically supposed to become less crucial in voicing the suppressed voices. However, literature was to say something differently, though what it said might be still fundamentally political. Nonetheless internal and external constraints existed.

China witnessed a new development after the death of Mao, quite unprecedented in its history. Whilst open to outside influence in ideas and technology, the state mechanism and its philosophy remained largely unchanged. Imaginative literature more than any other form of discourse found a voice to engage in interpreting China's new situations *vis-à-vis* its social and political future, which had previously been distorted during the Cultural Revolution. This phenomenon was a continuation of the new culture movement which started in the early decades of this century. The central themes echoed those in that period, such as democratisation, iconoclasm, pluralism, demythologisation, striving to come to terms with the recent atrocities, and to identify their roots, seeking for new ideas of survival and development. Chinese literature had a distinctive record of direct and specific engagement with questions and issues to which the society of the time was urgently in need of an answer.

The thriving of literature in China in the post-Mao period can be connected in economic and philosophical as well as political terms with an increased interest in individual and human values, made possible after the Cultural Revolution. During this period, though still having to be written within certain various constraints, Chinese novels were to explore vigorously social and political issues as well as more fundamental questions in society, such as the use and abuse of power, the modern political identity and reality of China and human values *vis-à-vis* socialism.

As conditions improved to encourage literary creation, the writings of Chinese fiction in the eighties presented an unprecedented phenomenon. No doubt, contemporary Chinese fiction directly contributed to the widening of political vision and reshaping of Chinese political thought. Due to an unhealthy practice of literary criticism after the founding of the People's Republic, most authors were disinclined to see their works reviewed in social and political terms. Though it is beyond one's means to do anything about the practice of literary officials in China, we do not have to throw the baby out with the bath water. There is nothing wrong with the approach of literary criticism, as long as it is not used for purposes other than literary criticism. Characteristically, without social and political references, the aesthetic value of contemporary Chinese literature is not to be fully appreciated and its meaning is hence not to be fully understood.

Critics and authors in China represented by Wang Yao, a scholar and literary critic, agree that literature is fundamentally a linguistic art and at the same time a kind of ideology, influenced by social existence. The Chinese writers, enchanted by the commitment tradition and enthralled by their own intellectual integrity, could not ignore the political commitment of their day unless they abandoned writing



altogether. Owing to this tradition, the “art-for-art’s-sake” or “pure art” literature never gained any momentum in the Chinese literary scene. In terms of Chinese tradition and culture, even this trend of “art’s for art’s sake” in both literary production and criticism carried a very clear and distinctive social and political message.<sup>7</sup> It was just another form of iconoclasm, *per se*.

As *engagés*, the authors in this period displayed an extraordinary sense of social and political responsibility. “Truthfulness” and “artistic conscience” were the terms prevalent at the time. By “truthfulness” they meant more than just a realistic approach to address the issues, what they intended was to seek truth of life and reality through aesthetic means. This was a real concern not only about social and political realities of Chinese society, but also making new meaning out of new situations and building new visions about the future.

Thanks to a distinctive moral commitment of the Chinese writers to the social and political issues in China, the best way to approach contemporary Chinese literature is to read it against its broad and complex socio-political background together with a consideration of the aesthetic dimension. Otherwise, it would be impossible to decipher the social and political codes concealed in their writings, and ultimately to misread them. The writers’ engagement in socio-political issues and progress reflected the modern tradition of contemporary Chinese literature which often ran into conflict with the myopic official domination of political and literary expressions. These processes have added an intriguing and important dimension to this inquiry into the relationship between politics and literature. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Chinese contemporary writers were seriously concerned

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<sup>7</sup> See Note 15, Introduction.

with China's social and political realities. In addition to this obligatory infusion of political subject-matter and socialist realism over the past forty years, since Mao China has produced a literature where content, though seemingly possessing a priority, is tightly fused with the form and form itself can be maverick.

Though during the period concerned in this study China was beginning to open up, its politics was still politics *nemine contradicente*. Discussions of political issues and thoughts were still confined in a monolithic discourse because of official domination, thus imaginative literature becomes the main possible forum where political issues and thoughts are imbued and confronted. The authors' messages were heeded by many students, young intellectuals, and those who had influence over the power structure in China.

More importantly, literature does not merely imitate reality, and thus repeat what has been said about reality – it creates new meanings of reality through its form, it is the remembering of the past explained in a new light. Thus it is a general force to change. In this study we shall be concerned not only with the so-called socially and politically committed literature, but literature in general that works towards to offering “the individual a modicum of freedom and fulfilment in the realm of unfreedom.” (Marcuse:1978:10)

All phenomena of social and political life find expression in imaginative literature, where not only relevant data can be found, but also concepts are infused with events which in turn are characterised in a *de facto* social and cultural, and yet autonomous manner. Literature operates intentionally or unintentionally as a political instrument not only revealing political conflicts but also creating new social and political meanings by its autonomy, which “contains the categorical imperative:

‘things must change’.” (Marcuse:1978:13) Thus contemporary Chinese fiction in the post-Mao period more fully reflects reality and conveys more truth than at any other period in the history of the People’s Republic. And in addition, as recent fiction gives an in-depth description of fundamental social and political contradictions, it more clearly indicates trends in Chinese history and politics by offering *otherness*.

The relationship of literature and politics can be discussed in the following respects: firstly, political ideas wrapped in the text, which the author, as a talented observer of the human world, perceives and means to convey to the rest of the world. This category consists mainly of so-called political literature or commitment literature, which illustrates and supplements the existing political issues or theories in a most concrete manner. Secondly, “leading political ideas”, which are born in this imaginative world, offer a fresh perception and new meaning of human existence. Thirdly, literature can create a general cultural atmosphere, which can in turn influence the political front of a nation. Literature, to a great extent, determines and creates the social discourse. Literature also sets a socio- and politico-linguistic pattern in society. Language is power, especially for those who yield power, or want to influence the power structure. Fourthly, literature can be read in epistemological terms. One gains *knowledge* from literature, however this knowledge is phenomenologically related to the reader’s experience. Thus aesthetics works towards discovering truth in life in hermeneutic terms. Works of literature, as form and content, extend human phenomenological *understanding*<sup>8</sup> and insight into themselves and the world based on other forms of knowledge, create new meanings and indicate possibilities in social and political life. Finally in the Chinese context,

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<sup>8</sup> According to Gadamer, knowledge is not equal to understanding. (Gadamer:1975, 1977)

politics constantly intervenes in the realm of literature, and *vice versa*, precipitating conflicts and compromises between the two fields. Subsequently, the world of literature, as a social, cultural, philosophical and political entity has the potential to vanquish external authoritarian manipulation, but it must maintain its intrinsic and unique artistic autonomy in order to contribute to a better understanding of human existence and progress. Chinese literature in the period concerned in this study does indeed perform such a function as Liu describes:

To destroy the various obstacles in the path of real life and in people's traditional attitudes, to enable the Chinese people to have their due dignity and rights in the various spheres of life, to stand up like masters ... this is the task of contemporary literature, and it will be the most vital topic in the literature of our era. (Liu:1982:130)

In the process of the rapid transformation taking place in China, literature is not only an indicator of the changes, but also informs and contributes to the changes. Moreover, by its particular qualities and its unique impact on society and the world, Chinese literature itself has become more mature and sophisticated and thus will be able to offer more insight into political studies.

## CHAPTER TWO: Chinese Writers and Society – a Historical Review

### Literature and Mind-Labouring Elite

Chinese literature is probably the oldest and richest tradition in the world's civilisation<sup>1</sup> and yet its producers and their contribution to Chinese culture and politics have not been sufficiently recognised, let alone analysed in a constructive manner. The fact that writing was not a profession until the early decades of this century was partly the cause of such absence. Nevertheless, without a historical dimension and consideration of their social and political status, or lack of it, any conclusion drawn would be insufficient to explain the function of literature in Chinese society and the relationship of politics and literature as an important field of academic study.

In view of the above, this chapter tries to examine the Chinese men of letters as a social group, who not only created a large amount of cultural wealth and legacy, but also played critical roles in various historical periods from actually forming part of the governing elite in feudal China, to championing social and political reforms and revolutions; giving birth to new thoughts and ideas that constitute the modern identity of China; and virtually paving the ground for the founding of New China. However, their relationship with the regimes was never a harmonious one. In fact, they laboured and struggled through all kinds of social, cultural and political adversities and vicissitudes, more than their counterparts elsewhere. In the long history of China, though their role transformed from that of cultural and social

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<sup>1</sup> Although the earliest Chinese literary texts can date back to the period between 1324-1123 BC, China's written historical chronicles extend back to around 1122 BC, and are still regarded as the longest uninterrupted tradition of historical documentation of any civilisation, which formed the basis of the ancient Chinese literature. Poetry started flourishing around 900-700BC and the first full length collection of some 300 poems (*The Book of Songs* [*shi jing*]) appeared some time between 850-600BC.

beneficiaries and apologists to that of cultural and political iconoclasts, there always existed in them and their writings an unmistakable sense of political commitment which can be traced back to the centuries-long feudal history of China.<sup>2</sup> However, the emergence of writers as an independent social force was only a recent historic event, brought about by China's contact with the Western world in the latter part of the last century. (Hook:1982:355-381; Ebrey:1993)

Until the middle of the last century, Chinese literary men had mainly functioned in the upper stratum of the social structure due to an imperial civil service examination system based on Confucian learning and other literary classics.<sup>3</sup> Many literary intellectuals, having succeeded in the imperial civil service examinations, were either assigned to head the local governments at various levels in accordance with their examination grades and results, or served in the imperial court or the Hanlin Academy [hanlin yuan]:<sup>4</sup> the highest circle of literati sponsored by the court

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<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest example of these figures is Qu Yuan (343-302BC), one of the best honoured poets in Chinese literature and politics.

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese *Keju Zhidu* is normally translated into the imperial civil service examination, or imperial court examination. This method of recruitment to the administrative service of the Chinese imperial state by means of officially conducted written examination dates back to the Early Han Dynasty (206BC-24AD). Philosophers in the Zhou Dynasty (1100BC-256BC) laid intellectual and philosophical foundation that appointment to government should not be based on inherited privilege but on the grounds of an individual's proven abilities. Though Confucianism stresses a social hierarchy and encourages people to behave in accordance with their appropriate social status, it also believes that most men were by nature endowed with similar faculties that they should be selected for office according to the skills and qualities that education and moral training had given them. This method of recruiting governors at various levels promoted a certain degree of social mobility.

<sup>4</sup> The functions of Hanlin or Hanlin Yuan varied from dynasty to dynasty. Its roots can be traced back to an earlier period, but it developed into a fully functioning institution in the early Tang Dynasty (618-907AD) when it was in charge of the Emperor's confidential papers and documents and maintained a very close contact with the Emperor, acting as His Majesty's inner court secretary. After the Tang Dynasty, the Prime Minister (*Zaixiang*) was selected from the *Hanlin* Academy. Later the *Hanlin* Academy was expanded to contain all the officials of similar functions. But the Song Dynasty (960BC-1279) saw a decline of its function, which mainly included preparing and drafting edicts for the inner court and was in charge of astronomy, arts and literature, medicine and historical writings. In the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) it served as an advisory bureau to the inner court. In the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), its function remained largely

to serve state functions, provide advice to emperors, record and revise national historic texts, manage and supervise science and arts institutions or to entertain emperors and their ministers. Hence, many students of literature began their learning with the ambition to “serve” the country some day and indeed quite a few did end up with imperial appointments. This unique process of selecting government officials produced a peculiar group of governing elite – literati officials. They were the group who were termed as “labouring with their minds.”<sup>5</sup> Levenson tries to mark the true nature of this peculiar elite group by comparing them with the French aristocracy before the revolution. He points out:

... as long as the governors did indeed ‘labour with their minds’, as long as they maintained their occupational badge, their Confucian intelligence, as the intelligence of the society, they were never, as a ruling class, parasites in the full sense of the term.  
(Levenson:1968:82)

Admittedly, all aristocracies are “parasitic” to some degree in society, but the Chinese literati governors cannot be conveniently defined in the traditional sense of the word, for many of them did not acquire their titles and positions through inheritance. Because many of them came from quite humble family background and climbed the social ladder through the imperial civil service examination system, they very often showed much concern for socio-political realities. In general, traditional Chinese intellectuals, though occupying the upper stratum of the social structure (for

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unchanged performing several ceremonial functions including revising and compiling history, recording emperors’ daily activities, writing books, drafting ceremonial documents, teaching emperors classics and history and so on. It was also an institution that housed the reserve of potential governing personnel who were selected on the results of imperial civil service examinations.

<sup>5</sup> This is Mencius’ (372-289 BC) famous dictum: “Some labour with their minds, and some labour with their strength. Those who labour with their minds govern others, those who labour with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support those who govern: those who govern others are supported by those who are governed.” (Mencius:1989:112)

instance, above landlords, artisans and merchants),<sup>6</sup> were nevertheless never too alienated from the lower classes in terms of political sympathy. After all, many had indeed gained their positions through “mind-labouring.” In a rigid hierarchical system like that of feudal China, reading literature was one of the very few ways that allowed a certain degree of social mobility.<sup>7</sup> Because they managed to reach the upper division of the social ladder through accumulating ideas, wisdom and knowledge, rather than capital, they did tend to show a great deal of concern for social justice and political integrity. The following are some excerpts that demonstrate their socio-political concerns and sympathy towards the masses. Du Fu (712-770AD), the great realist Tang poet, exhibited a genuine concern for the welfare of the people in one of his most remembered verse “Ode to the Thatched Hut Blown Apart by the Autumn Wind”:

I long to raise hundreds of thousands of palaces,  
To shelter all the cold and poor with their happy faces.  
(Du Fu:1961:269)

He also condemned the polarisation of society at the time in another one of his most remembered poems – “Behind the crimson gates meat and wine rot and stink,/By the roadside the frozen bodies sink.” (Du Fu:1988:432)

Gao Panlang’s (1562-1626) words expressed a common moral code for those who wanted to read literature. According to him, to read literature, one was to

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<sup>6</sup> Some would disagree with this point and argue that the traditional intellectuals in China were branded “Grade Nine” in society, even below prostitutes and burglars. However, this is a rather mystified view of traditional Chinese intellectuals, and later substantiated during the Cultural Revolution when the intellectuals were systematically persecuted and further branded “stinking Grade Nine.” This view or rhetoric was employed in turn by both sides of the argument ignoring the real roles they were playing in society and the *de facto* authority they had acquired through their position. The fact that the regimes had always tried to undermine their legitimate social status proves their untold influence in society.

<sup>7</sup> Also see Footnote 3.



take the responsibility of the affairs of the country and the affairs of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Many of them cherished as their moral guideline and professional axiom Fan

Zhongyan's (989-1052) words:

To be concerned about the people before they become concerned,  
To seek happiness only if all the people lead a life content.  
(Fan Zhongyan:1989:15)

Some even manifested heroism bravery against injustice and authority. Wen

Tianxiang's (1236-1283) verse goes – Who does not perish in his life?/I long to

bequeath a heart of gold into history t'shine. (Wen Tianxiang:1987:348)

Unlike other groups of social elite, such as landlords and merchants, or aristocrats by birth, the literati elite were more concerned with the social well-being of the people and an egalitarian vision of society. They read literature in order to “govern.” Whilst this practice gave literature an authoritative and institutionalised status in society, it also largely developed a humanitarian mentality among these “future governors.” Literature and literary knowledge were first of all regarded as a stepping stone and pre-condition to governing. If one was already an eminent figure in literature, one would be automatically “invited” into the governing “four hundred”.

This process had a repercussion on traditional Chinese politics. Being characterised as narcissistic, sentimental and self-pitying, these literati officials governed with a “literary” style, which appeared to be humanitarian and sympathetic on the one hand, but “romantic”, irrational and inefficient on the other. As literature was never an established vocation in traditional China, its practitioners never

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<sup>8</sup> Gao Panlong's words became a motto for pupils and students in Chinese society – The sound of wind, the sound of rain, the sound of books being read,/Each sound enters our ears;/The affairs of the family, the affairs of the country, all the affairs under the heaven,/Each affair concerns our hearts.

became a self-conscious status group in society and had to rely on the patronage of the autocratic ruling class. They might lack radical political vision and yet most of them cherished an unequivocal hope for a more just and prosperous society and a strong and powerful China.<sup>9</sup> Because of this characteristic they frequently ran into conflict with the autocratic regime and consequently from time to time they were harassed, persecuted and even scapegoated in history. As early as in the Qin Dynasty (221BC-206BC), when the Emperor Qin Shihuang (246BC-210BC) for the first time unified China, he systematically persecuted the Confucian intellectuals in order to eliminate deviant thinking and philosophy and strengthen the young Qin Dynasty. Hence, Confucian intellectuals were witch-hunted and some were buried alive and their books were burned. This process cut short a healthy tradition of flourishing literary and philosophical writing. Ever since, “hundred flowers” were seldom to bloom and “hundred schools of thought” were rarely allowed to contend in the Chinese literary, cultural and political history again until recently.<sup>10</sup> The intellectuals, especially the imaginative writers, were time and again witch-hunted

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<sup>9</sup> This point can be amply illustrated by the vast output of Chinese authors in various centuries, some of whom will be mentioned in this study in passing, though this hope and vision of a strong and powerful China did not go very far beyond a nationalist and chauvinist standpoint at this historical stage.

<sup>10</sup> The Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD) witnessed a bloom in literature and philosophy and schools of thought flourished. This period was later called “era of hundred schools of thought”. This constituted the enlightenment of traditional Chinese literature, philosophy and political thinking. In 1956, in view of Khrushchev’s secret speech of February 1956 denouncing Stalin’s doings and also eager to see a prosperity in the cultural and ideological front, Mao drew the lesson from the Soviet Union and realised that the communist parties had to beware of alienating the people, hence he launched the campaign of “letting a hundred flowers to bloom and a hundred schools of thought to contend” (Flower is a constant metaphor for literature in China, and schools of thoughts usually refer to philosophical and political thinking.) Mao urged the writers to write freely and called on the non-party intellectuals to offer views on social, political and philosophical issues and criticisms of the party and government officials so that the system might be revitalized. Later the campaign took Mao by surprise and went beyond Mao’s original expectation and criticisms came sharp and overflowing. It ended up tragically for the Chinese writers and intellectuals. (Also see Footnote 26) Thus many of the flowers were branded as “poisonous weeds”, and “hundred flowers and schools of thoughts” has become an irony in the Chinese literary and political scene.

and persecuted by the regimes in Chinese history because of their characteristic status in society. Their talent was used only to be misused and abused in turn.

However, culturally, because of the special traditional role and position of these literati officials in society, the printed messages (in particular literary and historic writings) were regarded as inherently true<sup>11</sup> by the general readership. The power of the printed word was considerably greater in Chinese society than in most other societies. Thus literary writings had acquired a certain degree of credibility and authority amongst the masses, posing an challenge to the autocratic regimes.

### **Confucianism and Traditional Chinese Literature and Society**

For nearly two thousand years, both as a philosophy and as a way of life, Confucianism provided the moral, social and political basis of Chinese culture. (Rodzinski:1979:34; Gray:1990:15-7) Its essence was the “principle of social hierarchy”, which governed Chinese social and political life and formed the basis of traditional ethics. It overtly and unequivocally advocated a social hierarchy and emphasised the importance of the social *status quo* of different categories of people.<sup>12</sup> (Gray:1990:19-26) Until the 1840s, orthodox Confucianism had held a dominant position in traditional Chinese political, social and cultural life. The literary intellectual class had been, to a certain extent, the beneficiaries of Confucian

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<sup>11</sup> The meaning of “true” is two-fold. Firstly the readership believed what they read was true in factual terms (in regard to literature, still true but in disguised form). Secondly, it was believed true because they looked up to the writers as some form of authority, thus the readership believed authors’ judgement, and to some extent, their-discourse and in another word truth value in the texts, even though what they had written might not be true events.

<sup>12</sup> But the emphasis on these different categories was largely on the behaviour of the people. Confucius’ famous maxim “Monarch ‘monarches’; minister ‘ministers’; father ‘fathers’; son ‘sons’.” (all the verbs are coined to mean “to do or behave as such”).

learning. They gained entry into the gentry class and the governing elite through the civil service examinations system based on Confucian learning and other classic wealth. Thus, for centuries, they came to see themselves as the scholarly guardians of such a political tradition that emphasised a view of hierarchy in society based on patriarchy and an unconditional respect for the old, the past and the bygone days.<sup>13</sup>

Confucianism, having been developed fundamentally from an autarchic family-based agrarian economy, honoured and safeguarded patriarchal power. In the early stage of its existence, it was compatible with the economic development of China and helped to create *positive social values in society maintaining both the stability and reasonable living standards of the autarchic family.* (Su:1988:70) Nevertheless, in time, it became a reactionary force and was ritualised and bureaucratised by the rulers to serve as a means of maintaining the *status quo*. As a result, gradually the people became less energetic, less enterprising, and less innovative, being governed by patriarchal rule in and outside the family.

The well-known sinologist and diplomat, John Fairbank once noted that “to Western observers, China has presented a puzzling contrast: a great richness of human personality but little tradition of civil liberty.” (Fairbank:1980:72-3) The all-pervasive Confucianism of social and political patriarchy, plus another important traditional Chinese philosophy of the so-called “non-action” or “do-nothing” Taoism could never possibly give birth to any concept of Western-type civil liberty. In fact, in feudal China, all political communications with officialdom “were, by definition, petitions.” (Gray:1990:16) However, the literati officials did bring some form of

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<sup>13</sup> Confucius (551BC-479 BC) himself always looked back to the old days (the Western Zhou Dynasty, 1100BC-771BC) for moral and political inspiration. Thus Confucianism was in fact conservatism in nature.

human personality into China's political system and culture as it was seen earlier in this chapter. As the world was developing rapidly in terms of industry and economy, China soon was not only out of step with this new global development, but also out of touch with the outside world largely due to the lack of civil liberty which was instrumental and imperative to modern industrial and economic development. Consequently, the strength and vigour of the country were greatly diminished by the dogmatised Confucian learning and lack of political communication between different factions of people.

However, Chinese social, cultural and political entity at the time was still sustained by its richness of human personality and cultural deposits represented by a highly moralistic literature. The most distinctive feature and quality of literature consisted of a series of novels that flourished during the late Yuan, and the Ming and Qing Dynasty.<sup>14</sup> The most notable and best-read novels included *Pilgrimage to the West* [*xiyou ji*], *The Water Margins* [*shuihu zhuan*], *An Unofficial History of the Confucian Scholars* [*ruli waishi*], *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [*sanguo yanyi*], *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [*honglou meng*], *The Golden Lotus* [*jinping mei*], *The Three Swordsmen* [*sanxia wuyi*] and so on. A common feature of these works was their rebellious spirit against oppression, injustice, hypocrisy and corruption. They embodied the Chinese people's protest against tyranny and dark forces and outlined their vision of a just society. They were read by a wide-ranging readership and the insights they afforded in different periods of history were never

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<sup>14</sup> Actually novels were not regarded as literature at the time. They were considered to be pastime entertainment. "Xiao shuo", the Chinese term for novel, literally means "small talk", which indicated its cultural status in society. However its influence and socio-political function could not be nonetheless overestimated.

exhausted. These novels came from a unique combination of two sources, the historical record and the market place. Coupled with the authors' aesthetic vision and astuteness, they became another gem in the canon of Chinese classics.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, these novels were constantly rewritten into different forms of operas and stage shows, which not only popularised the novels, but was also able to invest new meanings into the originals.

Although *Pilgrimage to the West* was a fantastic story about a monk's journey to the West (India) to fetch the "real bible" with his three disciples (the Monkey King, the Swine and Monk Sha) it was, like *Gulliver's Travels*, a deeply political novel. It pointed to the superficiality and corruption in the late Ming politics and challenged the supreme power of both the autocratic and the supernatural.

*The Dream of the Red Chamber* recorded the decline of two aristocratic families and unmasked the hypocrisy and cringing conformism in society. It rendered profound criticisms of contemporary institutions, especially the patriarchal power.

The most popular characters in ancient Chinese literature were, perhaps, those officials with great honesty, intelligence and professional integrity, such as Bao Cheng<sup>16</sup> (999-1062), who defied tyranny and oppression and championed social

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<sup>15</sup> The Tang poetry and Ming and Qing novels are the two most outstanding accomplishments in Chinese classical literature. Though this study does not directly concerns classical novels, it is important to note the tradition of the Chinese novel, its popularity and influence in society and politics which are all on a par with what this study tries to illustrate.

<sup>16</sup> Bao Cheng (also Bao Gong) Governor of Kaifeng Provincial Government during the Song Dynasty (960AD-1279), well-known for his integrity, untouchability of corrupt politics and stance against the practice of nepotism. He was later called Bao the Blue Sky (Bao Qingtian, the metaphor "Blue Sky" in Chinese is used to refer to those officials with honesty and integrity) and commemorated by many people even today for his uprightness and courage to fight against the powerful corrupt imperial officials and their relatives. He was portrayed in many novels, plays and other forms of Chinese arts.

justice for the underprivileged and socially wronged. Literature with the characters of this kind was widely read and appreciated. Other well received characters included historic and legendary outlaws in their authentic struggle against the corrupt autocratic monarch (in *The Water Margin*, also translated as *All Men Are Brothers*) These outlaws fought the cause of the commoners and the underprivileged. The novel propagated the vision that “different names come together as one family from all corners of the world.” This was due to the fact that basically in real life there were not many “Blue Skies” around. People consequently turned to the fictional rebellious characters to lodge their hope in a better and fairer society. This kind of literature had two effects. On the one hand, it was to make up for the lack of civil and institutional restraints on power in ancient China by impregnating a sense of justice among various readers and creating a cultural constraint. On the other hand, it could lead people to look to such figures in reality to uphold their desire for justice and fair play, and their freedom from the arbitrary power of the regime. It might thus cultivate a false expectation that some day some idealised figures from the governing elite would come to do justice, instead of trying simply to build a civil liberty to protect themselves. However, the reading of these novels carried different implications and rendered various meanings in society in various periods of Chinese history. The novel, after all, was “the most anarchical of all forms of literature”, (Orwell:1968:518) which was a “product of the free mind” (Orwell:1968:518) and thus was able to emancipate the reader from any pre-ordained thinking and dogmatism. .

It is also imperative and constructive to note that all these works were cited and reinterpreted in different social and political campaigns and movements both before and after the Revolution.

### **Early Western Influence versus Confucian Values**

The above conditions lasted till the mid 1800s when Confucian values were confronted by Western political ideas. During the period between the 1840s to the early 1910s, China was rocked by restlessness, reforms, reactions, foreign encroachments and revolutions in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. The Chinese intelligentsia was then forced to reckon with the West whose social and political system had been regarded as the result of its military superiority and its economic strength.

The beginning of the 1800s found the last feudal dynasty, the Qing regime (1644-1911), in irrevocable decline. Held back by outdated Confucian ethics, it developed all kinds of sick social and political symptoms: such as administrative inefficiency, widespread corruption, speculation, a drained treasury, an incipient economic crisis, and an unchecked population growth. These symptoms presaged the fall of the Dynasty in a not too distant future. The invasion by Western countries accelerated the decline. By the middle of the nineteenth century, all the symptoms coalesced into a serious political cancer. In addition to the above symptoms, foreign encroachment and local revolutions began to beset the aged monarchy. A period of turbulence started with the most radical and violent rebellion in the Qing history, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) accompanied by China's defeat in the two Sino-British opium wars (1840 and 1860 respectively).



The conflict with the British opium traders and the subsequent invasion of British expeditionary forces in 1840 was a turning point in modern Chinese history. The Chinese mandarins as well as the general public were petrified and confused by the defeat in the first Opium War. The narcissistic and self-conceited Confucian literati, who had never doubted the superiority of their culture, power and civilisation before, had to swallow this hard fact – they had been defeated by a strange people they had always called “barbarians” – and their Confucian learning could not cope with the newly emerged social and political situation. This event had a very strong impact upon Chinese political, social, and economic life.

Eventually, Chinese Confucian conservatism – the “gut” of the one of the world’s oldest civilisations – had to take notice of the new reality. The influx of an alien culture in the wake of military, economic and political invasions began to confront the Chinese way of life and political thinking, at the root of which lay Confucianism. Its values, appropriateness and accountability in a changing world were being brought into focus and questioned. By way of contact with the outside world, many open-minded traditional scholars found that Chinese traditional learning was long dated. Moreover, the rigid and morally corrupt civil service examination embittered and disqualified many knowledgeable and sagacious scholars from either the *Hanlin* Academy or government service. The famous poet, essayist and thinker, Gong Zizhen<sup>17</sup> (1792-1841), cried out that this was a period of total confusion: there were no qualified (gifted) ministers in court, no competent (gifted) commanders in the army, no talented and intelligent (gifted) students in

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<sup>17</sup> Gong wrote many books attacking the Qing regime and championing reforms. His main works include *Respecting Hermitage* (*Zun Yin*), *The Theory of Conscience* (*Mingliang Lun*), *On Egalitarianism* (*Pingjun Pian*).

schools, no able (gifted) farmers in the fields, no adept (gifted) workers in the factories, no skilled and masterful (gifted) artisans and no capable (gifted) businessmen in the trades, even no gifted and skilful thieves and burglars. (Gong in Su Xiaokang:1988) The whole nation was still in the dream of the “Middle Kingdom” when it was virtually on the edge of collapse. Gong was among the very few who really came to appreciate China’s situation and crisis. He recognised that Confucianism was outworn and outmoded in society and assailed it in a well-versed poem:

Ban Gu listed nine schools of thought,  
The Confucians just one of nine.  
All these teachers had their own share of the truth  
And would not follow the Confucian line.  
As, later, Confucianism became exalted,  
Confucians grew more thick-skinned;  
But whether at court or in the wide countryside –  
More schools than nine can be found;  
And who knows which of the ancient schools still exist,  
Which, today, has most adherents?  
Some say Confucianism is defunct –  
Does this contention make sense? (Gong Zizhen:1986:317)

In another of his best memorised verses, he cried out:

I plead to God to rejuvenate His spirit,  
To send to us in more ways than one men of wit. (Gong Zizhen:1989:341)

These few intellectuals began to charge the Qing regime with decadence, and advocated the abolition of the out-of-date and stultifying civil service examinations. Thus, the traditional and historical role of the Confucian literary intellectuals was being strongly challenged, if not drawing to an end.

Foreign invasion, though of a completely despoiling, colonising and destructive nature, brought opportunities for the progressive forces in the country to take action against the ruling class and the dated Confucian ethics. The first incident

of this kind was the Taiping Tianguo ( the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace) Uprising, which took place between the years 1850 and 1864. The rebels began their campaign by introducing a form of Christianity to attack the traditional patriarchal hierarchy. They advocated total equality between men and women, which hit hard on another foundation of Confucianism – discrimination against women.<sup>18</sup> (Lindley:1970:300-24; Gray:1990:52-76) This movement was of great significance, since the patriarchal order, by instilling in people a slavish morality, had provided the ideological foundation for the autocratic monarchical rule and the dominant position of patriarchy.

Some progressive Qing bureaucrats (most of them were men of great literary attainments) began to appreciate the extent of the crisis the nation was in. They united and planned to reform Chinese culture, economy and politics. To this end they launched a movement known as “Westernisation” (1861-1894). The movement had two objectives: the purchase of Western weaponry to strengthen national defence and the introduction of Western machinery and technology to industrialise the country; and the revival of traditional Chinese Confucian culture. These measures were aimed at saving the declining Qing Empire. They wanted to see China revive and become strong and powerful again and attributed China’s situation to a decline of the traditional Chinese culture and want of modern machinery and technology.

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<sup>18</sup> Confucianism makes unequivocal discriminatory proclamations against women, such as “women and low-born men are hard to cultivate”, “women without talent and knowledge are the most talented”, etc. More importantly, the rebels abolished the horrible custom of cramping and deforming the feet of women.

Inevitably, however, with Western modern equipment and technology came Western influences, which were at odds with Confucian ethics. Therefore, the Westernisation Movement was a breakthrough for the feudal government to take in not only new technology but new ideas, though unwittingly at this stage. This brought in its wake a budding rise of modern journalism and literature.

China's Westernisation Movement came to a halt when it was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-5). The dream of restoring China's power and strength through the Westernisation Movement was shattered. If the defeat by the Western powers came as a shock, the defeat by its small neighbour, Japan, brought nothing but utter humiliation to the Chinese government. For Japan had, until recently, been regarded by the Chinese as a cultural colony, whose modernisation had been recently completed through its Meiji Restoration launched only in 1868.(Schirokauer:1978:414-43) The defeat had immediate and extensive repercussions at home and made Chinese progressives review the problems of its own Westernisation Movement.

They found that their attempt to modernise China was nothing more than building a skyscraper on sand. Foreign ideas and practices could not simply be raised on China's traditional cultural soil. They realised that if China wanted to restore and strengthen its power to catch up with the developments in the Western world, a change of the political system, reformation of its culture including reforms of moral, cultural and intellectual institutions and introduction of a new educational system were all essential. These ideas were simply too much for a minor reform to accommodate. It would have to take the form of a major revolution. An overthrow of Confucianism was necessary. As Lu Xun (1881-1936), the greatest modern writer

and thinker in twentieth-century China, later noted, reconciliation of the new thinking with the traditional culture was impossible. He expressed his uncompromising attitude towards Confucian tradition by quoting Ibsen's words: all or nothing.

Many mandarin scholars, therefore, now demanded radical reforms. By this time, more and more scholars among the gentry class came to realise the serious political and cultural decline that the country was in and attributed the full extent of it to the Confucian learning. Thus, in 1898, led by a group of well known literati officials, Kang Youwei<sup>19</sup> (1858-1927), Liang Qichao<sup>20</sup> (1873-1929), Yan Fu (1833-1921) and others, another movement, known as the 1898 Constitutional Reform was launched with the aim to introduce into China the Western bourgeois political system and ideology. (Rodzinski:1979:368-73) They banded together and were able to gain influence with Emperor Guangxu and persuade him to issue edicts calling for the creation of a political advisory council, and the abolition of sinecures in the bureaucracy, the promotion of industry and commerce, and the creation of a national school system which would include western learning in the curriculum. These leaders of the reform also realised that cultural reform could in turn bring a change in political institutions. However, all these measures were aimed at saving the

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<sup>19</sup> A controversial figure in Chinese political history. Kang Youwei propagated reform at this stage, but turned back to Confucianism and became a Qing loyalist in his later years when the Qing regime had been overthrown. His major works includes *The Great Commonwealth*, in which he envisaged a utopian world attainable through successive stages of human development, a world where the barriers of race, religion, state, class, sex and family would be removed and where there would be an egalitarian, communal society under a universal government.

<sup>20</sup> Kang Youwei's disciple and a bourgeois reformer. Liang Qichao founded the Translation Council of the Capital University (*Jingshi Daxue Tang*), later expanded and renamed Beijing University in 1898. He championed the so-called poetry revolution and novel revolution. After the miscarriage of the Constitutional Reform he fled to Japan. His writings had a great influence on Chinese writing and literary styles. During the nation-wide debate on socialism in 1920, he strongly opposed Marxism.

Monarchy, and not to change or end it. Hence when the movement came to pose some threat to the very core of Confucian values, a hostile conservative reaction, headed by the Empress-Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), led to the arrest of the leading reformers and the repression of the movement, and she virtually placed Emperor Guangxu under house arrest. The so-called Constitutional Reform miscarried only one hundred days after it started, and so became known as the Hundred-Day Reform.

Although the Empress-Dowager Cixi showed some sympathy for elements of Western culture, she would never permit any radical transformation of Chinese traditional culture, and would never tolerate any change in the indigenous social and political systems. Hence, when she perceived that Western cultural influences had become a threat to Chinese feudalism, she resorted to military action to suppress the Constitutional Reform Movement. Next, she supported the Boxer Rebellion, an anti-Western revolt, which started in 1897, as a movement to drive out the foreigners and protect the great Qing dynasty. (Shanghai Mercury Office:1967:i-xvi; Fairbank:1987:137-8) Cixi freely employed xenophobic sentiments to deter and, if at all possible, to get rid of, Western influence in the country, which had grown so powerful and become a threat to her reign. In 1899, the anti-foreign movement was beginning to get out of hand. Several foreign missionaries were killed and Chinese Christians were attacked by the Boxers. Railways and telegraph lines, which were associated with the hated foreigners, were destroyed. And finally, when the Boxers besieged the foreign legations in the capital, Cixi took the chance to ride this anti-foreign wave by declaring war upon the foreign powers. This untimely decision did not gain any support from the provincial governors in the South, who, on the contrary, guaranteed to protect foreign lives and properties in their own power domains due to their own

and local interests. This prevented the spread of the conflict. Neither was the decision fully supported in the court. Hence, when the allied force of eight Western powers was gathered and marched into the capital to relieve their legations, the Qing government could not put up an effective resistance. A quick and harsh settlement was imposed upon the Qing government, including the payment of an indemnity and the permanent stationing of foreign troops between Beijing and Tianjin.

This defeat by the eight-power force smashed the Qing literati officials' dream of restoring the empire by military force. From then on, the Qing government, on the one hand, continued to make concessions to the foreign powers, and on the other, began to adopt some reforms in the hope of reviving the dying empire. Even the Empress-dowager Cixi herself, a couple of years later, having vaguely realised the weaknesses of the Chinese educational system and the associated cultural values, in a desperate attempt to secure the survival of the Dynasty, also launched a series of political, educational and military reforms. These included the abolition of the traditional imperial civil service examination system in 1905 and its replacement by a national system of modern schools, and the encouragement of study abroad, particularly in Japan, which was by now regarded as an inspiring, successful and relevant example of Asiatic modernisation.

This was the time when China began to come to terms with the changes and development and recognised the fact that it had ceased to be "the world." The Chinese state was changing its identity from that of a world to that of a nation. Its traditional values were perceived to have ceased to have virtue, vitality or centrality and to have ceased to offer vigour and intellectuality in the new situation. Meanwhile, in the social and political spheres, Chinese people, especially the

intelligentsia, totally disenchanted with the Qing regime, were forced to take notice of the changing world, and began to cast doubt upon the appropriateness of Confucian ethics and values under these new circumstances. Whilst some Qing loyalists were still struggling to save the Empire by various make-do measures, the collapse of the Qing Dynasty was accelerating very rapidly. Before these loyalists could put up any effective measures, the Emperor Guangxu and the Empress-Dowager Cixi died within a week of each other. The six-year-old Emperor Xuantong (Aisin Gioro Puyi, 1903-1968) succeeded to the throne and the Qing Dynasty became even weaker than ever before. Finally Dr Sun Yet-sun<sup>21</sup> (1866-1925) seized the opportunity and launched a bourgeois democratic revolution in 1911, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty and ended the history of feudal reign of some two thousand years' standing.

### **Finding a Role – the Emergence of Modernity in both Politics and Literature**

The abolition of the imperial civil service examination of some one thousand three hundred years' practice and the establishment of a new educational system of modern schools brought to an end the traditional source of government officials. However the influx of Western modern ideas and thinking created a new vision for the Chinese literary men. The rapid decomposition of the old feudal regime in 1911, and a series of institutional changes all led to the collapse of the established prospects of life for traditional intellectuals in society, who were being faced by an uncertain future. Their traditional role had been lost. Whilst some of them still lamented the loss of their traditional privileged roles in society, others very quickly

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<sup>21</sup> Father of the 1911 Revolution and the founder of the Republic of China.



realised the inevitable tendency in the face of Western influence and came to terms with the newly emerged social, cultural and political environment and appeared as a new progressive social force. They mounted onto the social and political stage by waging a fierce attack on traditional Chinese values and most of all Confucian learning.

Though the feudal system had been overthrown, its values associated with and sustained by Confucian learning, were still deeply rooted in society and people's mentality. Immediately after the 1911 Revolution,<sup>22</sup> the Nationalist Party, (Guomin Dang) did engage itself in the plan of modernising Chinese politics by embarking on a well-planned and co-ordinated electoral campaign calling for local government reform as well as limited presidential power and cabinet responsibility to parliament. However, the process was nipped in the bud when Song Jiaoren (1882-1913), Sun Yet-sun's close friend and colleague, was assassinated in March 1913, just one month before the parliament was due to meet. This incident brought to an end China's apprenticeship in political modernity. Thereafter, politics in China, controlled and manipulated by the Northern and other warlords, continued to be corrupt and despotic. Popular resentment and resistance grew ever stronger. In order to consolidate the misrule of the landlord and comprador class, the warlords used their hired feudal literati and surviving Qing loyalists and let loose an adverse current in the intellectual world under the banner of "Promoting Confucian learning and back to the ancients" which aimed at a restoration to feudal autocracy and a retaliation against bourgeois republicanism and democracy.

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<sup>22</sup> The 1911 Revolution was led by the Nationalist Party (Guomin Dang, other transliteration, Kuomin Tang, thus KMT) overthrew the feudal Qing Dynasty and founded the Republic of China.

## Literary Revolution and Social and Political Reforms

Many intellectuals again fought in the front-line against this reactionary tendency with their pens as their most sharp weaponry. Literature became the battleground where a cultural crisis could be appreciated and the struggle for a clear meaning about China's situation and future was to be waged. Literature at the time was not only instrumental in bringing changes to Chinese society, but also in creating new meanings and concepts to the old civilisation. The writers played an active and crucial role in the radical transformation from a feudal society to a semi-bourgeois republic. Without literature one could hardly imagine that the transformation could have been possible, at least not to the scale and extent that had now been under way.

Literature, regarded as a means to express new ideas and make new meanings in a changing China, came naturally into the focus of social and political attention. Liang Qichao wrote as early as in 1902:

To renovate the people of a nation, the fictional literature of that nation must first be renovated ... to renovate morality, we must renovate fiction, to renovate manners we must first renovate fiction ... to renew the people's hearts and minds and remould their character, we must first renovate fiction. (Liang:1984:349)

He, like Gong Zizhen, also realised the irrevocable decay of Chinese thinking. He described the period as a time when "old learning is gone, new learning is not yet formed; and all sorts of debauched ideas and thoughts converge." (Liang Qichao:1984:259) It was a time when "chaos and corruption reach their extreme and all kinds of evils converge." (Liang Qichao:1984:259) Meanwhile he recognised the importance of a new literature in Chinese society. He claimed that this new literature concerned China's future and to reform Chinese politics should start from the reform

of literature. (Liang Qichao:1984:353) Chen Duxiu (1880-1942) – who later became the Secretary-General of the Communist Party in the 1920s – also called for the establishment of “a plain and lyrical national literature”, “a fresh and sincere realistic literature” and “intelligible and popular social literature”, to replace the time-worn “ornate, bombastic literature of classicism”, and “obscure, difficult literature of the hermit and the recluse.” (Chen Duxiu in Hsia:1971:4) It was during this period that the practice of literature was becoming an independent vocation due to the increasing prosperity of journalism and publishing attendant with the political change in the country. Liang understood very well the position and nature of literature in Chinese society. The classic Chinese literature based on Confucianism left very distinctive marks on Chinese culture and mentality. It encased the personality of the individual within the parameters of his prescribed roles in society, to the extent that his individuality was hardly differentiated from those roles. In traditional Chinese society, all interpersonal relationships were held together by a hierarchy of such social roles. Each role was performed in the way it had been prescribed and celebrated in the Confucian texts, which were highly formalised in such a way that was instrumental to such social and political controls. Thus, literary revolution and cultural enlightenment was deemed cardinal and absolutely essential by these reformers in order to carry out radical social and political reforms. The radical literati officials believed that by way of literary revolution and cultural enlightenment they could re-cultivate the “subjectivity of man” and thus re-address man’s position *vis-à-vis* society in order to pave the ground for deeper and wider social and political reforms. (Li Huanxing:1991:65) It was at this historical moment that the Chinese *littérateurs* began to function as social and political catalysts.

Although political modernity had stagnated, literary modernity was looming large. Some progressive intellectuals and writers led by Chen Duxiu inaugurated in 1915 the periodical *Youth (Qingnian)*, (later renamed *New Youth, (Xin Qingnian)*), which advocated Western style democracy to oppose the Chinese autocracy; liberation of individuality to oppose the traditional Chinese ethics and Confucian hierarchical values; science to oppose superstition; and a modern literature to oppose the traditional literature. The other contributors to *New Youth* included literary and intellectual celebrities such as Hu Shi (1891-1962), and Li Dazhao (1888-1927), the later Communist chief and many others. Most eminent among them was the greatest Chinese writer of the century, Lu Xun, who had gone to Japan in the early years of the century to study medicine with the hope of strengthening the Chinese nation by medical science but later gave it up in the realisation that science could not of itself change China until a fundamental change in mentality occurred amongst the Chinese people. Through the medium of literature, Lu Xun hoped to draw attention to the evils of traditional ethics and Chinese society and thereby encourage his compatriots to question the attitudes that underlay them. He savagely attacked Confucianism as “cannibalism” in his *Diary of a Madman*, the first novel to be written in vernacular Chinese. Not only did it set an example of the form of modern Chinese writing, but it also established, to a certain extent, the progressive and critical tradition of modern Chinese imaginative literature. The story conveys, most succinctly, the author’s attitude towards the Confucian tradition. Suffering from a persecution complex, the madman thinks that all those around him, including his immediate family, (very significant in the light of Confucian tradition) are going to kill and eat him. To confirm his suspicions, one evening, he delves into a book of Chinese history:

In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I try to look this up, but this history records no dates, and over every page are scrawled the words 'benevolence, righteousness, virtue and morality': since I couldn't go to sleep anyway, I made a close scrutiny of this book, until by midnight. I discovered all over it a succession of two words between the lines: 'Eating people'...

I have only just realised that I have been living all these years in a place where for four thousand years they have been eating human flesh. My brother had just taken over the charge of the house when our sister died. And he may well have used her flesh in our rice and dishes, making us eat it unwittingly.... Perhaps there are still children who have not eaten human flesh?

Save the children! (Lu Xun:1968:19)

Together these progressive Chinese writers launched a fierce attack on Chinese tradition and argued that the persistence of Confucian ethics stifled the emergence of a modern democratic political culture. They particularly criticised the traditional family order, with its emphasis on absolute respect and obedience for the old and the relegation of women to an inferior status. In spite of the Confucian protestation of benevolence and righteousness, for Lu Xun and many progressive Chinese, traditional life consisted of nothing but moral cannibalism.

It was not only the message concealed and conveyed in the text that drew the attention of society and brought new meaning to society. Another very important contribution that these literary men made was to reform the Chinese written language altogether. The classical Chinese language,<sup>23</sup> not only modelled after and associated with Confucian learning, but also absorbed into the feudal patriarchal values, presented an obstacle to mass communication and dissemination of information and knowledge, and became a hindrance to China's economic, cultural

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<sup>23</sup> The classical Chinese, or traditional Chinese language, was highly conventional and full of strict and complicated rules and most of all unreasonably disconnected from the spoken form.

and political development. Therefore, the impact of adoption of the vernacular language in literary writings was two-fold. Firstly, on the pragmatic level, this change allowed many more people with a minimum reasonable literacy to gain access to the press media and literature which had previously been denied them. This linguistic change popularised modern Chinese literature and journalism attracted a much wider audience. Secondly, the campaign bore far-reaching significance in modern Chinese literary and political history. At Cornell University as a student in 1908, Hu Shi started publishing articles condemning the rigidity and formalism of the Chinese classical language, which for him and many of the progressive intellectuals, confined and degenerated Chinese thinking and produced dogmatism. Later when he was completing his PhD in January 1917, he published in *New Youth*, "Suggestions of a Reform of Literature", which ignited a revolutionary literary movement and radically changed the course of Chinese literature and brought a modern literature into being. On his return from the United States in 1917, he continued to write articles for *New Youth*, promoting a modern literature based on vernacular language. Such literature, he argued, would not only be more lively and practical, but would also enable China to escape the stultifying effects of Confucian culture associated with the classical language.(Levenson:1968:97-8)

This literary and cultural movement brought Chinese literature in close contact with contemporary Chinese reality and politics. This new form of literature gave directions to social and political change and progress and started a modern progressive tradition of Chinese literature accelerated by the May Fourth Movement. On 4 May 1919, some 5,000 Beijing students demonstrated and called for a rejection of the Versailles Peace Conference decision which granted Japan rights over China's

Shandong Province. The demonstration grew into a powerful and vociferous mass movement. Nationalist feeling which had hitherto been limited to a few intellectuals now spread through all levels of society. The movement spilled over into a literary and intellectual revolution – the New Culture Movement. This was the time when China really began to grapple with new ideas to try and explain its situation. The movement was characterised initially by an interest in the West, especially in its modernisation and democracy associated with its successful economic and industrial development. However, due to the disillusionment with the West as a result of the Versailles Treaty and the encouragement of the declaration by the new Soviet government in 1918 that it would renounce the unequal treaties concluded by Tsarist Russia and the Qing China during the nineteenth century, there arose an interest in the new Soviet Union and Marxism among students and intellectuals.

### **From Mind-Labouring Elite to Critical Social Catalyst**

The period (1910s-1930s) witnessed the beginning of China's "apprenticeship" in modernity in literature and politics and a new "civilisation of the coast." Although political modernity was largely checked by the rise of statist nationalism in 1927, the momentum of this literary modernity still carried on for some time until it was diverted into different paths by the fundamental change of the political system in the late 1940s. Even after that, whenever circumstances permitted, the trait of modernity of Chinese literature kept coming back to the Chinese cultural and political scene. \*

Here a relationship between Chinese politics and literature is clearly visible. As the modernity of literature emerged with the social and political developments in

society and the world it would react upon politics. For modernity is an intrinsic characteristic of modern literature. It “is not a movement. It does not get confused with any of those that are enumerated. Modernity is criticism, and it reverses into a criticism of modernity. It is provocation. But provocation, of itself, is not modern.” (Meschonnic:1992:408) The efforts of these literary writers stimulated a keen interest in something that came from the *other* which was to provide a critique of Chinese society and an inspiration to China’s future.

Thus Western literature and political thought among other things caught the attention of the radical Chinese students and young intellectuals. Writers such as Shaw, Ibsen, Turgenev, were translated. In 1919 and 1920, Shaw, Russell, and the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey arrived in China on a visiting tour to give lectures to enchanted Chinese student audiences. The fact that many of the Chinese writers publishing at the time were university lecturers and professors contributed to the promotion and expansion of modern political thought. For the first time in its long history, China was really brought into the whirlpool of modern world politics and made to re-evaluate its cultural legacy by the introduction of a new type of literature. The literary reform brought significant changes to Chinese society, especially the emergence of a healthy popular vernacular-language literature directed at social progress and democracy. This modern literature was deeply and intrinsically intertwined with the Chinese revolution and emergence of modern China, though it is very difficult and perhaps pointless to argue about the question whether it was literary revolution which led to social revolution or *vice versa*. Evidently in view of China’s history, social revolution could not have been



completed without literature and literary revolution would not make any sense without social and political perspectives.

It was during the same period that a modern and revolutionary tradition of Chinese writers was formed. After the abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905, there arose a new group of intelligentsia, many of whom took up writing as their profession. Though they had received Confucian learning earlier, their political outlook was broadened by the developments in the West. They soon adapted themselves to the new situation in China and by the 1930s they succeeded in establishing a very healthy modern tradition among themselves. They began to produce a large amount of literary works directed towards social and political issues and realities. These works showed great concern about the progress and development of the nation and adopted a self-conscious political stance to search for creative freedom and political ideals. This tradition of moral commitment to social and political issues and the country's future was to influence Chinese writers for generations to come. Thanks to a comparatively unrestrained atmosphere for artistic creativity, literary works produced in this period have seldom been surpassed in artistic terms even up to the present day. The Chinese writers and intellectuals of the May the Fourth tradition, with their questioning of tradition and promotion of science and democracy, paved the way for the communist victory in 1949. Some critics even compare these writers and intellectuals to the French author Voltaire (1692-1776), who helped to prepare the ground for the French Revolution. (Schwarcz:1986; Bailey:1988) Just as Voltaire fought against tyranny, bigotry and cruelty, these Chinese writers propagated an ideal of progress.

Later disappointed with the Guomin Dang rule, many progressives saw China's hope in the Communist Party and went to Yan'an, the military base of the communist force during the anti-Japanese war and started another tradition of modern Chinese literature.

Even Mao himself, though very often suspicious of Chinese literary men and intellectuals, spoke highly of these early progressive writers and their contribution to the Chinese revolution:

To defeat the enemy, we must rely primarily upon the army with guns. But this army alone is not enough. We must also have a cultural army... Since the May Fourth Movement, such a cultural army has taken shape in China. It has helped the Chinese revolution. It has weakened the influence and reduced the domain both of China's feudal culture and of the comprador culture which served imperialist aggression. (Mao:1967b:69)

The Yan'an years (1937-1947) witnessed the maturity of Mao's ideological leadership and the Chinese Communist Party as a major political force, which marked the beginning of a personal cult. It was also during this period that Mao began to show great concern about a "genuine revolutionary literature", beginning his criticism of the elitism of certain writers and intellectuals in Yan'an. He launched his *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, which has served as the guiding beacon for literary creativity and management even to the present day. Since then *The Talks* has served as the only systematic formulation of the Party's guideline on art and literature, though the article contributed only marginally to Marxist literary theory. It did little more than just to reaffirm the Leninist principle – to create a worker-peasant literature in order to serve proletarian politics. The fundamental questions it addressed included: that literature should serve the general masses and that the political criterion should come before the artistic criterion.

## The 1949 Revolution and Literature

The year 1949 found a new social and political order in China, which is still exerting influences as well as providing possibilities to China today and the world in general.<sup>24</sup> However, the success of the socialist revolution gave the Party and state the unequivocal authority to run literary and cultural affairs. Thus literature, as part of the superstructure, which was believed to have a subsequent impact on the economic base, was again incorporated into the state mechanism, though to a lesser extent. Structurally, the Chinese established writers were assigned under central administrative control and usually attached to various branches of the Chinese Writers' Association. The state housed them, national-health-serviced them and salaried them, no matter how much they produced – a condition, which, at one time, became the envy of their foreign counterparts. The salaries they drew from the Association were on the same scale of their equivalents in other fields or professions. This meant that their livelihood was guaranteed to be reasonable by Chinese standards even if they did not produce at all. In addition, they were also entitled to other privileges and material perquisites, such as travel allowances for “experiencing life”, royalty fees and print-run payments as well. This system, more or less, put them in a similar situation as their predecessors, i.e. literati governors<sup>25</sup> and explained the reason that they always preferred to operate within the system and never tried to become overt literary dissidents. It was not only the writers who were

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<sup>24</sup> Chris Connery puts forward a similar view in his recent article “The China Difference” in *Post-modern Culture* by pointing out that “events in China over the last fifteen years should not cause us to forget China’s revolution, for the 1949 revolution was not just a marking of the China difference. It was also the hope of a global possibility.” (Connery:1992)

<sup>25</sup> Apparently much less powerful, but no less influential.

made vulnerable by the system. In fact, the implicit “covenant” made every intellectual vulnerable. Each aspect of his or her “being in the world” – birth, residence, growing up, schooling, work, travel, marriage, childbirth, child-rearing, ageing, death – was confined and defined in a tightly structured network. Constantly coached to act according to a prescribed pattern, they even developed internal referential surveillance to guard themselves against feudalist backsliding and the allure of bourgeois commercialism.

What had happened in the Soviet Union since 1917 not only provided economic inspiration for the Chinese people, but ideological inspiration as well. Stalin’s concept of writers as “engineers of the human soul” was always held as definitive under the notion that the superstructure could exert a *re-impact* on the economic base. In the socialist era, it was generally assumed that writers in China had a more central and influential role to play. Most Party ideologues believed that correct ideology did not grow spontaneously. It could only be fed into the heads of the general public. Literature was considered an important means to serve such purpose. Thus Mao’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* was indisputably accepted as the commanding text for creative writing and literary criticism. Nevertheless, the writers of New China were by no means a vested-interest group in society, economically or politically. Due to the humanistic tradition of Chinese civilisation and the recently-acquired more radical modern critical spirit, there still remained in them some humanistic aspiration, professional integrity and desire for freedom. They formed an amorphous, yet reasonably independent political and social island in the vast sea of the Chinese new bureaucracy.

In the initial stage, the victory of the socialist revolution first attracted the intellectuals and writers in Chinese society. Having contributed a great deal to the revolution and socialist construction, they displayed a fervour in explaining the new situation in China and with their literary creativity and artistic conscience they helped the general public to come to grips with the unprecedented economic and political changes. Evidently, there existed a common ground between the Party and the Chinese writers at this stage. Generally speaking, the literature of this period reflected events of great importance in Chinese social, political and economic life. It nourished society's craving for knowledge about the new system and the deep concern about politics and the changing reality. To a certain extent, it also offered a new dimension on events happening in China. Hence, the writers managed to produce quite a number of works mainly either concerning the political changes in China or re-viewing historical events in a new perspective. Works of great influence of this period include: *The Sun Rises Over Shanggan River*, *Tempest*, *Registration*, *Marriage*, *Don't Take That Road*, *Pioneering Years*, *Sanliwan*, *Storm and Thunder*, *Great Changes in a Mountain Village*, *Bright Sunny Skies*, *Selling Tobacco*, *The Story of Li Shuangshuang* etc. The writers displayed a zealous involvement and commitment to the social and political issues. Themes ranged from the change of social structure and attitudes to the transformation of ownership of means of production. In their writing, they accepted, some at least passively, and many undoubtedly actively, three inseparable dimensions of socialist China: all-pervading authoritarianism; centralised economic planning; and highly co-ordinated group orientation. Either by choice or by default, they portrayed in a rather realistic manner the social change and political revolution and thus helped to bring about an

understanding of the new socialist order. Their works were generally and genuinely received with applause. The first six years of New China went by comparatively peacefully and fruitfully for the Chinese writers.

As time went by, their previous enthusiasm was quenched by uncongenial realities. They tried to see things more in perspective and began to air some subtle but different voices. It was not until 1956 when Mao invited “a hundred flowers to blossom and a hundred schools of thoughts to contend” that the Chinese writers began to make louder noises. Due to a sense of history and the recent experience in Yan’an Rectification Movement, writers and other intellectuals were reluctant to “bloom and contend.” However, Mao’s persistence moved most, if not all, of the writers and intellectuals, who really began to take the invitation seriously. The blossom did not last very long before they found themselves, instead of blooming flowers they had been expected to produce, having yielded “poisonous weeds and thorns.” Thus, a national campaign was mounted to eliminate all those weeds and thorns.<sup>26</sup>

There is no sufficient evidence to arrive at the conclusion that Mao had set a trap to test or even to catch the Chinese writers and intellectuals. Though he distrusted intellectuals in general, he displayed a great interest in Chinese literature and expressed a high appraisal of modern Chinese writers, especially Lu Xun. His motive was perhaps to really lift restrictions on the expression of views and to

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<sup>26</sup> On June 8, 1957, *The People’s Daily* published an editorial proclaiming that certain rightists had exposed themselves as pro-Western, harbouring the intention of discrediting the Communist Party and sabotaging socialism. Thus an Anti-Rightist Campaign was called for, almost exclusively targeting at the intellectuals, many of whom were imaginative writers. In the campaign, some four hundred and fifty thousand were involved; they were either put into prison, or exiled to the remote areas, or banished to the labour farms. Some writers discussed in this study were also victims of the campaign.

encourage more variety in *socialist* literature and art. His initial intention was seen to be based on a confidence of his economic and political achievement over the previous six years, assuming that the economic and political success should have completely converted Chinese writers and intellectuals to his own views. He was prepared to see more prosperity in literary and cultural spheres. Instead of the hymns and eulogies he expected to hear, he was showered with an eruption of criticisms in various forms – literary and journalistic – directed at the policies of the regime itself, the political monopoly of power by the Communist Party, the overriding authority of Party members in all institutions and activities and the lack of freedom of expression. Many called for radical political changes in the structure of the government and regime. Some even went so far as to demand the sharing of the power with the Communist Party. All this took Mao by surprise. He started to retaliate and within no time, he not only silenced the different voices, but made sure that those who had voiced different views would have a hard time. From then on, a harsher enforcement of the unified criteria based on Mao's *Talks at Yan'an Conference* was exercised in the field of literature and art. If the writers wished to continue their careers, they had to make even greater concessions to their artistic instinct and principles. Hence works produced since increasingly became politically didactic.

According to the party authorities, the foreground of literary works was to be occupied by characters of model working-class heroes and heroines with “perfect” political conscience. Accordingly, writers had to regulate, control and self-censor their own works to an acceptable level, consciously and subconsciously. However, their moral commitment urged them to resist such pressure and to write as a writer

should. Hence, they went through extremely intense pressure from both the inner and the outer world and suffered much more political harassment than any other group of people in China. For the authorities clearly knew not to undervalue literature both as a potentially explosive phenomenon that needed to be controlled and constantly censored and as a vehicle for positively inculcating regime values and attitudes.

Many scholars and critics noted that the anti-Rightist Campaign was a lesson for the Chinese writers and intellectuals. However, retrospectively, it was a lesson first of all for Mao. After the campaign, Mao and his close colleagues lost no time in setting themselves two tasks in the realm of literature and art: to unify literary and artistic thought and philosophy under the banner “Serve the People”; and to further integrate the system of literature and art into the state mechanism.

Even by now, many of Mao’s most vigorous opponents were the established literary figures, such as Zhou Yang, Kang Zhuo, Shao Zhuanlin, and Wu Han.<sup>27</sup> Zhou organised a fortnight’s conference for writers and literary officials, at which many speakers lashed out at Mao and the destitution caused by his policies of the Great Leap Forward. Kang Zhuo pointed out the “contradiction between socialist ideological leadership and the actual needs of the peasants”, appealing to imaginative writers to raise their voices against the pressures imposed by Mao’s policies. Shao Zhuanlin also criticised Mao’s literary theory as “oversimplification, doctrinairism, and mechanical theories.” (Goldman:1969:70-3)

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<sup>27</sup> See Footnote 27.



Although, since the Yan'an years, Mao had carefully guarded the realm of literature and art – having had the established writer Wang Shiwei executed in Yan'an and having impeached writers and intellectuals generally by asserting in 1953 that “the pen murders” (Mao:1977:107,108) – he had not really directly intervened in specific decisions and management. Ever since the anti-Rightist Campaign, Mao became even more sceptical about Chinese writers. May of 1963 witnessed Mao's first personal attempt to promote a campaign to reform literature and art in the belief that literature and art had been used for anti-Party purposes. He claimed, “problems abound in all forms of art ..., in many departments very little has been achieved so far in socialist transformation.” (Mao:1967)<sup>28</sup> Mao attended in person the National Conference of Writers and Artists convened in 1963, seeking to mobilise writers and artists to play their full revolutionary role in the struggle against modern revisionism and urged them to identify with the broad masses of the labouring people, with workers, peasants and soldiers. This reflected Mao's particular concern about literature and arts in the socialist regime. His previous belief that a sound superstructure could react upon the economic base and society was further strengthened.

Mao's personal involvement in literature and art further muzzled many writers, including those privileged Chinese writers of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Cao Yu and many others. Shen Congwen, once a nominee for the Nobel Prize for Literature, gave up creative writing and redirected his writing to Chinese costume history. Those who continued to write had either to drastically censor themselves or to incur further tragedies in the Cultural Revolution. Due to

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<sup>28</sup> This quotation comes from the same Source as Footnote 5 and 6, Chapter 3.

constant negotiations between the political constraints and their true inspiration and stance as a writer, they inevitably produced works of a lesser standard.

A mutual distrust developed between the Party and the writers and intellectuals. The Party would assume that if it loosened control and let the writers and intellectuals speak, they would always speak like an Opposition. For the writers and intellectuals, if they were allowed to speak out their minds, their message could always be turned into something that would create deviant thinking. Even after over a decade of Mao's icy treatment of them, they could still mutter some meaningful noises in society.

However, the worst was still to come, and by 1965, the second year after the Chinese economy had substantially picked up after the three-year period of "natural disaster" caused by his Great Leap Forward, Mao was ready to launch an even more ambitious campaign to impose his unique vision and ideology on China and the Chinese people. According to statistics (He:1989:502), from 1951 to 1988 the Party launched fifteen large-scale political campaigns, fourteen of which involved writers and intellectuals and nine of these were almost exclusively targeted at writers and intellectuals.

### **The Cultural Revolution and Culture-Makers**

On April 19, 1966 *The People's Daily* published an editorial officially launching the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution<sup>29</sup> (1966-1976)

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<sup>29</sup> Though the real date is still disputable, its origin dates back to September 1965 when Mao returned to Beijing to convene the Politburo Standing Committee after spending the summer in his official Hangzhou retreat. At the meeting he put forward the proposal to "criticise bourgeois reactionary thinking", particularly in literature and art. The first target he chose was Wu Han's historical play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*, which he had suspected to be an allegorical criticism of his dismissal of the Defence Minister, Marshal Peng Dehuai, who had openly criticised Mao's

masterminded by Mao Zedong aimed at revolutionising Chinese society in terms of art and literature, culture in general, ideology and politics. What aims Mao exactly had in mind when he started the revolution remain unclear. However, as the revolution went deeper, it was revealed that its fundamental aim was to transform people and remould the soul. (Karnow:1990:182) During the revolution, Mao insisted even more that literature should whole-heartedly serve the interests of the masses in the new socialist context. Anything else was branded as “revisionist” and thus did not have any place in society.

As a revolution directed at the established cultural orders, the Cultural Revolution first of all challenged the legitimate status of the culture-makers, i.e. writers and other intellectuals and their works. Then it silenced all writers who did not want to produce “made-to-order” writings, as Mao insisted on the political correctness of art and literature. The literary scene became even more bleak. The whole decade produced no more than a few novels and eight so-called revolutionary model operas. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing was the patron of these operas. These model operas, however, were not created by Jiang and her cronies in the first place. They simply adapted the existing plays to serve their purpose. Originally they were art and literature of a form among many others and thus contributed to a cultural

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policies in the Great Leap Forward Campaign. Prior to the play, Wu Han published an essay entitled “Hai Rui Scolds the Emperor” in 1959. Even at that time it was not difficult to decipher the analogy. Hai Rui, a high-ranking official in the sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty, was well-known for his overt criticism of the then Emperor Jiaqing. He articulates in the opera “in earlier times you did quite a few good things, but how about now? ... Your mind is deluded, and you are too dogmatic and prejudiced. You think you are always right and refuse criticism. Your faults are too numerous. ... The whole country has been dissatisfied with you for a long time, and the inner and outer ministers and officers all know it.” (Quoted from Goldman:1969:70-3) And later in 1961, Wu Han went a step further, published and staged a full-length play in the form of a Beijing opera. It took Mao a few years to wage a full retaliation.

development.<sup>30</sup> Once the Gang of Four made them into the only form, the meaning of these plays changed. They brought in nothing but cultural hegemony and political deprivation all in the name of the Cultural Revolution. Even these playwrights were frustrated by not being able to follow the Party's policies and especially Jiang's edicts. They were constantly told to mend and patch their works. Consequently, they were torn between their instinct and professional desire to be an artist, and the awareness of being a revolutionary whose foremost mission was political – and the consequent fear of being charged politically incorrect. Eventually the cultural revolution turned into cultural vandalism. Most culture-creators were banished from society. Many of their talents and resources were squandered by the regime's leaders in the pursuit of a falsified political ideal. Most literature published in this period did not even merit inclusion in Chinese university literature courses. Mao's policy in literature and arts led to a state-managed culture which assumed hitherto unimagined proportions in the Cultural Revolution. After the death of Mao and China's exposure to the "other" world, this was to contribute to an even more forceful eventual backlash, especially in terms of creative writing. In view of the above discussion, it is apparent that Mao made literature an overriding and sudden political issue and this reinforces the argument further that the political import of literature in the post-Mao era is by necessity a relationship.

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<sup>30</sup> In fact, these modern operas were created by some enthusiastic traditional opera writers. The conventions of the traditional Chinese opera (*Jingju*, or Beijing Opera) with their moral didacticism and emphasis on performing technique coincided with the new ideology that the Party wanted to procreate. They represented a concurrent of the traditional Chinese cultural values and that of the new socialist regime.

## Post-Mao Reforms and the Writers – Continuing a Disrupted Mission

The death of Mao Zedong (1976) gave the more liberal-minded leaders in the Party a chance to seize power and carry out some reforms to rescue the collapsing economy and pursue a less rigid political guideline. The Third Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party's Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978 marked an important turning point for Chinese writers in the history of the People's Republic. It delivered the first reasonably thorough criticism of the "ultra-leftist" policies which had plagued China for a decade. China embarked on a programme of reform aimed at liberalising the planned economy by a limited use of the market mechanism in the hope of boosting China's economy. Some classic Marxist doctrines were questioned. Mao's leftist Cultural Revolution was implicitly and sometimes officially re-evaluated and criticised. This was absolutely unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic. Politically, the Party also attempted again to incorporate writers into the new system by a completely new rhetoric proclaiming them as part of the working class.<sup>31</sup> Though simply a change of rhetoric, it did have a positive repercussion on the writers and intellectuals, as many of them did come to believe that they would not be singled out as odd men in society. This had indeed given them a sense of ease and allowed them a degree of freedom to write without much interference from the authorities, at least about the Cultural Revolution.

There followed a whole spate of short stories and novellas exposing the happenings of the Cultural Revolution under the rule of the "Gang of Four." This

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<sup>31</sup> Until recently, writers and other intellectuals had been classified as "petty bourgeois class" belonging to the category who could be used and united into the working class, but not trusted.

was known as “the Literature of the Wounded” and usually took the form of tales of sufferings ending with a note of optimism and determination not to allow a second Cultural Revolution to happen. The mushrooming of such short stories and novellas and other writings started a second period of “a hundred flowers to blossom and a hundred schools of thought to contend.” It was widely regarded as a continuation of the long-postponed modernity of literature and art in society.

Literature played a pioneering role in China’s political life. Some writers began to explore various aspects of Chinese life and more serious and subtle ideological and political issues. Literary works triggered off many national discussions and debates about Chinese society and politics, and other more specific issues such as alienation in Chinese society, humanism in socialism, all of which questioned the party’s eligibility and non-fallible position.

Later writers began to involve themselves in assessing the history of New China and in inquiring into what had given rise to the appearance of feudal fascists in the Party by way of imaginative writing. The authorities did not feel very comfortable about it and tried to give guidelines to writers urging them to look to the bright side and write inspiring themes. Thus the relationship between the Party and the writers waxed and waned time and again.

According to the late Party Secretary-General, Hu Yaobang, a widely respected reformist and liberal, in his speech given on February 1985, there should by no means be freedom of the press, which must be “the mouthpiece of the Party.” The same person, nevertheless, granted a somewhat lenient criterion for literature and art. This meant that Chinese writers were still under the influence of the political authorities and their creative freedom was still partly harnessed. Such a view would

continue to affect their writing to a certain extent. The dilemma they were facing was still very restrictive to their writing. However, time was working for justice and truth. The time when they would be able to enjoy more liberty in their career might not be far away.

There existed a common ground between the Chinese literary men and the Party. That is, they all believed that literature could “change people’s spirit.” (Lu Xun:1964:5) Literature has been a ground that has been constantly invaded by politicians and reclaimed by writers and critics as modern Chinese history so clearly illustrates. Generally speaking, literature in China has had a wider implication and function. It has been constantly involved with Chinese politics, wittingly and unwittingly, and it has been itself a forum and wrestling ground for political ideas and activities. In view of the present reforms and developments in China, literature will continue to function in this way, and its producers will still bear the mission interpreting China’s existence and reality and offering new visions for its future.

In his recent article “The Ideology of Intellectuals and the Chinese Student Protest Movement of 1989”, Calhoun classifies Chinese intellectuals into three categories as follows: natural scientists, social scientists and literary intellectuals. Natural scientists, represented by the famous dissident and astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, “linked democracy very closely to science.”<sup>32</sup> (Calhoun:1991:123) His view echoes

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<sup>32</sup> Fang believes that “science and democracy are running parallel.” (quoted in Calhoun, 1991) Due to his limitation of an astrophysics scientist who commented on Chinese politics actively and frequently, he had a rather simplistic view of society and encouraged scientists to “express their feelings about anything in society, especially if unreasonable, wrong and evil things emerge.” He also cherished an emotive belief that “since physicists pursue the unity, harmony and perfection of nature, how can they logically tolerate unreason, discordance and evil? Physicists’ methods of pursuing truth make them extremely sensitive while their courage in seeking it enables them to accomplish something.” His approach to politics was based on his perception that “almost invariably it was the natural scientists who were the first to become conscious of the emergence of each social crisis.” (Fang:1986:16-7) He also claims that “what I pursue is a more reasonable

some slogans in the May Fourth Movement<sup>33</sup> and even the earlier Constitutional Reform. Due to a specious omission of peasants and workers in their political discourse and rhetoric, the natural scientists' concept of freedom and democracy was couched almost entirely in a scientific elitism. What Fang advocated was a rational, scientific leadership based on a simplified scientific view of politics and society, which did not adhere to scientific laws. It hence made little impact on the general public who were the real driving force behind all historical movements. Thus, his ideal society was not "anything like 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'", (Calhoun:1991:124) but was, perhaps, to lead to a meritocratic state. Calhoun's view might be too harsh on Fang, for he did believe in a more democratic political process and stood as an independent candidate in a local election.

Fang's views were, by and large, shared by many social scientists in China. They were the newest group<sup>34</sup> of the three, but they commanded a very strong social and political discourse. This group can be further divided into "insiders" and "outsiders."<sup>35</sup> The "insiders" formed various "think tanks" that developed policy

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society that is pluralistic, non-exclusive, a society that incorporates the best in the human race." (Fang:1988:73)

<sup>33</sup> One slogan that prevailed in the May Fourth Movement was "Science Save the Nation", which was proven inadequate politically to rebuild the country. This view was typical among many intellectuals at the time. History proves that it is but wishful thinking. Technological advancement can never be sufficient in rebuilding a country like China.

<sup>34</sup> In pre-reform years (1949-76), social scientists were practically non-existence in the true meaning of the word, even though the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had been in operation during this period, but the evidence shows that what they largely did was to function as a Party apparatus and another surrogate voice for the Party and its policies.

<sup>35</sup> Terms borrowed from modern Western politics in regard to pressure groups. (See Kingdom: 1994; Dearlove:1989).



analysis and proposals for the Party and government reformers.<sup>36</sup> They went a step further than the natural scientists and put forward many arguments, such as decentralisation of economic decision-making, the need for private ownership and democratisation of political decision-making. At the same time, however, unlike Gorbachev and his close associates<sup>37</sup>, they argued that the strong authority of the centre was necessary to carry out a radical transformation of the economy. (Calhoun:1991:127) According to Calhoun, Su Shaozhi and other colleagues tried to develop a more serious Marxist theory, which would serve as an impelling force to China's reform and modernisation. This group generally looked to the West for intellectual and academic inspiration, whilst the "outsider" group, represented by Li Zehou attempted to reconstruct traditional Chinese culture and focused on the important role allocated to intellectuals in general.

Calhoun calls the third group the literary intellectuals. Chinese radicals and reformers in recent history had long seen literary efforts as central to the fundamental changes they meant to bring about, (Calhoun:1991:127) and even to the present time, imaginative writers generally considered very influential in society. However, their role in society and politics in relation to their works still remained a controversy, realistically and academically. The influential journalist and literary critic, Liu Binyan, was critical of Chinese literary intellectuals for their experiments with new literary discourse, styles and images, criticising that they had turned away

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<sup>36</sup> One representative of this faction was Yan Jiaqi, who was one of the ex-Prime Minister and Party Secretary-General Zhao Ziyang's closest advisors and helped co-ordinate the activities of various intellectual "think tanks". (Calhoun:1991:125)

<sup>37</sup> Gorbachev and his close colleagues emphasised the need for political openness (*glasnost*) and restructuring (*perestroika*) to coincide with, or pave the way for economic reforms. (Calhoun:1991:126)

from “reality.” For Liu, the first and foremost purpose of literary writing should help to “reorganise society” (Liu:1990:171) and contribute to social improvement. The poet and literary critic Bei Dao dismissed Liu’s argument abruptly by disagreeing that “true art does not ask about its own ‘social effects’.” (Link:1989:40) Whilst it is important not to deny both views without proper analysis, it is also important to recognise that a meaningful conclusion of their role in contemporary Chinese society can only be drawn from a study of the texts in relation to their appropriate cultural, economic and socio-political dimensions. For:

*... literary discourse, particularly in its modernist guise, is hyperpoliticising. By producing alternative forms of thought in<sup>38</sup> language, it makes a political point. By virtue of its departure from linguistic normality, it points to the way that institutions hold individuals within a linguistic web. But it goes beyond this demonstration. It deforms images to show how accepted models of the real are productions of grammatical and rhetorical constructions, and it forms antagonistic imagery that provides sites for resistance of domination. A failure to exercise a literary self-consciousness, then, amounts to the adoption of a de-politicising posture, the acceptance of institutional imperatives. (Shapiro:1984:394)*

Cultural and political progress and transformation required a new way of thinking and discoursing and literature offered such access to a sphere where new concepts and contradictions of the world were created. Thus to detach politics from literature for whatever reasons “would only delay a fuller understanding of the multi-faceted political processes in human society.” (MacDonald:1990:512) However, to treat writers as politicians or political scientists would also lead to a misunderstanding of their role in society and eventually undermine the messages they wanted to convey and the value of their work and contribution to society.

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<sup>38</sup> Emphasis original.

Whilst many of these intellectuals, especially the social scientists, did work inside the system, sometimes even very close to the sources of power and in “the business of the State somewhat like Confucian scholars in earlier days”, (Pan:1988:172) literary intellectuals mainly functioned in the margin of power. This did not indicate that they had played a lesser role in Chinese society. On the contrary, they functioned both as theorists of society, and the unofficial opposition to government, and therefore they were figures of public importance and significance. Until recently, as evidence shows, literary writers were either regarded as irrelevant in politics and political studies, or their works were treated only in terms of their political content divorced from their aesthetic dimension, or *vice versa*, – just in terms of their so-called literary values without a consideration of their wider social, cultural and political context.

In conclusion, it is important to recall the historical role and function of Chinese writers in society. They have played no less a role in contemporary China. As many would agree they are normally considered as people “who create, distribute, and apply *culture*.”<sup>39</sup> (Lipset:1976:311)

The current reform and transformation required a new cultural discourse, images of the time, and new ways of thinking, which, as evidence shows, were largely supplied by these cultural creators. Moreover, at a level of *realpolitik*, they also acted as “watchdogs for government accountability, proposers of policies, interpreters of the demands and desires” (Calhoun:1991:137) of the masses who generally had less access to means of expression. Hence literature served as a

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<sup>39</sup> Though emphasis is original, incidentally the Chinese equivalent *wenhua* has a much wider connotation. See Note 7, Introduction.

modern “*Hanlin Academy*” of political thinking and human values, and functioned as a political philosophy.

Thus this thesis is intended to fill in the gap that exists in the studies of politics and literature, especially in the Chinese context with a consideration of both aesthetic and socio-political dimensions.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Ideology and Literary Criticism in China: The Changing Discourse

The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world turns into the problem of descending from language to life.

– Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

#### Literature and Ideology: From Marx to Mao

Marx and Engels were very interested in literature and literary issues but they never went far enough to arrive at what could be called a systematic aesthetics, (Baxandall:1973:115) which left plenty of room for future Marxists in all corners of the world to develop their own understanding, theories and practices as far as literature was concerned in terms of both literary production and criticism. Nevertheless, their theories have exerted a great impact on literature and literary studies. China is one of these corners where literary practices have been considerably influenced and dominated by a certain interpretation of this fuzzy kind of Marxist aesthetics. A well-known passage in “The German Ideology” has been regarded as the seed of all revolutionary understanding, giving rise to many concepts of the understanding and practice of literary writing and criticism. The passage reads:

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, or conceive, nor from men narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology, as well as the forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the resemblance of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Praver:1976:103. The original text can be found in Marx & Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 3, p.432.

independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. For the first manner of approach the starting point is consciousness, taken as the living individual; for the second manner of approach, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness. (Marx & Engels:1976:36-7)

In a later passage, the authors also stress that a complete view of the relationship between material life and consciousness must include the principle of interaction:

This conception of history thus relies on expounding the real process of production, starting from the material production of life itself, and comprehending the form of intercourse, connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its actions as state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc., etc., arise from it, and tracing the process of their formation from that basis, thus the whole thing can, of course, be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another). (Marx & Engels:1976:53)

Marx and Engels' methodology was historical, materialistic and dialectical, a fact which has serious implications when applied to literary studies. Accordingly, as Praver notes, literature might be thought of and looked at, not as an inertly faithful reflection of something outside, of a "material" reality, but as a union of the objective with the subjective, of a world apprehended through the senses with a particular cast of mind, temperament and character. This applies to the reception of literature as much as to its production. In this sense, those who produce literature and those who read it are not passive creatures of circumstance: they are engaged in activities that can change the circumstances in which they find themselves. (Praver:1976:104)

Mao's theory of literature was derived from his understanding of the Marxist and Leninist conception of subjectivity and objectivity as well as their conception of "base and superstructure". Dialectical materialism told the Chinese communist ideologues that in the contradiction between base and superstructure, the base was always dominant.<sup>2</sup> However, Mao had his own understanding of the relationship and noted in his famous essay, "On Contradictions":

Some people think that ... in the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the productive forces are the principal aspect; in the contradiction between theory and practice, practice is the principal aspect; in the contradiction between the economic base and the superstructure, the economic base is the principal aspect, that there is no change in their respective positions. ... True, the productive forces, practice, and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role ... But it must be admitted that in certain conditions<sup>3</sup> such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal or decisive role. When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role. ... When the superstructure (politics, culture, etc.) obstructs the development of the economic base, political and cultural changes become principal and decisive. (Mao:1967a:335-6)

Mao's understanding of Marx's theory of base and superstructure, to a great extent, was enhanced by Lenin's concept of that relationship. Mao further explains that "the creation and advocacy of revolutionary theory plays the principal and

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<sup>2</sup> A popular reader at the time was a course book by Shirokov *et al* (1933) entitled *Course of Instruction in Dialectical Materialism*. The Chinese edition was translated by Li Da, one of the leading Marxist ideologues and theorists in China at that time.

<sup>3</sup> "Times" was used in the original text, and was replaced in by "in certain conditions" in this edition. This change, explained in Mao's *Selected Works*, implies that such circumstances, or 'the totality of the necessary conditions', will be present only for limited periods, in times of revolution or crisis. For "times" might signify that this reversal of roles between base and superstructure might last for a considerable period of time. This change indicates Mao's own uncertainty over the relationship, especially in the circumstances where he wanted to underscore the importance of superstructure while his overt belief in Marxist materialism deterred him from doing so. (Also see Schram:1989)

decisive role in those times of which Lenin said, 'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary moment'." (Mao:1967a:336) This brought about and determined Mao's understanding of the relationship between literature and politics, and his judgement and standpoint in terms of the relationship. He assumed that literature was something belonging to the consciousness and superstructure which reacted upon people's actions, thus it ought to advocate revolutionary theories, which, in turn, he hoped, would reinforce the socialist economic base. He noted unequivocally that literature and art should be subordinate to politics so that it could exert a "positive" influence on politics. He continued to assert that they are indispensable cogs and wheels in the whole machine, an indispensable part of the entire revolutionary cause. If there was no literature and art even in the broadest and most ordinary sense, the Chinese people could not carry on the revolutionary movement and win victory. (Mao:1967b:86)

This explains why, like the leaders of other political and religious authoritarian regimes, he was trying to control the realm of literary production to the greatest possible extent. He confused the descriptive and prescriptive concepts of literature, which were left unanswered by Marx and Engels. Admittedly, literature is, in Marxian terminology, an ideological form, which possesses a socially and political formative function as a way towards a new system of interpretations. Mao's perception of literature was based on his intent to utilise this informative function as a means of political education, though political theorists, from Marx to Mao have not established a system showing how literature functions as a form of ideology.

Ideology, defined as belonging to the superstructure, is seen "objectively" as a set of beliefs imposed by a particular group or class to influence the way people



think. As a system of belief, admittedly, it exerts an immediate impact on political action by structuring the thought of its adherents and is closely related to politics and literature. Yet this relationship has never been clearly mapped out by political theorists as far as literature is concerned. The following passage shows Mao's confusion over the issue:

Although man's social life is the only source of literature and art and is incomparably livelier and richer in content, the people are not satisfied with life alone and demand literature and art as well. Why? Because, while it is beautiful, life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life. Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forwards. (Mao:1967b:82)

Mao believed that through the creative labour of revolutionary writers and artists, the raw materials found in people's lives could be shaped into the ideological form of literature and art to serve the masses. (Mao:1967b:81) Accordingly, he set definitive criteria for literary production and criticism:

There is the political criterion and there is the artistic criterion; what is the relationship between the two? Politics cannot be equated with art, nor can a general world outlook be equated with a method of artistic creation and criticism. We deny not only that there is an abstract and absolutely unchangeable artistic criterion; each class in every class society has its own political and artistic criteria. But all classes in all class societies invariably put the political criterion first and the artistic criterion second. ... Some works which politically are downright reactionary may have a certain artistic quality. The more reactionary their content and the higher their artistic quality the more poisonous they are to the people, and the more necessary it is to reject them. A common characteristic of the literature and art of all exploiting classes in their period of decline is the contradiction between their reactionary political content and their artistic form. What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form. Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically. Therefore, we oppose both the tendency to produce works of art with a wrong political viewpoint and the tendency towards the "poster and

slogan style” which is correct in political viewpoint but lacks in artistic power. (Mao:1967b:89)

Mao’s statement was to lead naturally to the fact that only the Party authorities who themselves had commanded the political “truth” could have the final say about a work’s ideological correctness and thus its “literary value” – consequently undermining the work of writers and critics who, without political authority, had to say what the Party wanted them to say. But literature is a form of human perception of the world possessing its own rules and principles which do not allow negotiations due to external forces. “No masterpiece can be produced by someone who lacks internal freedom.” (Pan:1988:197)<sup>4</sup> Literature, though overlapped with philosophy, politics, sociology, and psychology and so forth, reveals something new and different about the “real” world that cannot be told in any other way.

Calvino also recognises this quality of literature from a different angle. He argues:

Literature is one of society’s instruments of self-awareness – certainly not the only one, but nonetheless an essential instrument, because its origins are connected with the origins of various types of knowledge, various codes, various forms of critical thought. (Calvino:1992:100)

Recent discussion of ideology as a form of political discourse has thrown some more light on this analysis. Some academics argue that ideology is a form of

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, though what Lynn Pan says here is right and undeniable, she naturally adopts the language of a typical Western critic, being critical of Chinese literature and politics from a Euro-centric stance. Admittedly cultural management is not only administered in authoritarian regimes. In the West, market forces can also be so administered that the “choice” in the guise of freedom is predominantly the imposition of another kind of ideology, which results in another kind of unfreedom or “managed” mediocrity. Literature can be argued to possess the function to debunk such mediocrity. Though this function of literature assumes special importance in politics *and* literature, this is not a direct concern of this study.

political discourse which exists in a social space between its users and may influence actions whether or not it is an object of belief. This is particularly true in the Chinese context. Althusser redefines ideology as the way we live and express ourselves in our social and cultural practices, rather than the way we think. Schull argues in his recent article that linguistic propositions expressed as speech acts and united by a common vocabulary, such as figures of speech, images, symbols, standards of argument and verification etc., frame political debate, and set limits of legitimate political action.<sup>5</sup> (Schull:1992:728-41) Literature can be argued to constantly supply the reader with “new and fresh” images, metaphors and narratives which shape political discourse and perception of the world. In this way, literature plays an important part in structuring and restructuring social, cultural, and political language and discourse. For as Davis recognises “novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology.” (Davis:1987:24) Its production is a complex process of the author’s subjective reflection of the objective reality and does not allow any external intervention, which, more often than not, gags the real voices of the author (even if they are sympathetic to the progressive cause), and destroys his artistic intuition and castrates his wisdom. There is no lack of such examples as far as literature is concerned.

Balibar and Macherey are right to point out that:

... to see literature as ideologically determined is not – cannot be – to ‘reduce’ it to moral ideologies or to political, religious, even aesthetic ideologies which are definable outside literature. Nor is it to make ideology the content to which literature brings form – even

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<sup>5</sup> Recent Chinese history shows that the discourse on ideology once became so “state managed”, the general public were forced to use the officialised language and its register. Similarly in many other cultures, the discourse of ideology was managed by some “cultural gurus”. Literature is one of the only few things left that possesses the potential to generate new meanings and provide the people with *forte* to negotiate with such superimposed language and discourse even though many critics still try to impose their views on art.

when there are themes and ideological statements which are more or less perfectly separable. Such paring is thoroughly mechanical, and, moreover, serves to corroborate the way in which the ideology of literature by displacement misconstrues its historic determinance. It merely prolongs the endless false dialectic of 'form' and 'content' whereby the artificially imposed terms alternate so that literature is sometimes perceived as content (ideology), sometimes as form ('real' literature). (Balibar & Macherey:1992:226)

Mao painstakingly argued in his *Talks at Yan'an Forum for Literature and Art* about the relationship and contradiction about these two concepts (some Chinese Marxist critics still do), which brought nothing but detriment to both literature and politics. Calvino observes that "wherever writers are persecuted it means not only that literature is persecuted, but also that there is a ban on many other kinds of discussions and thought (and political thought in the forefront). Fiction, poetry, and literary criticism in such countries acquire unusual political specific gravity, insofar as they give a voice to all those who are deprived of one." (Calvino:1992:100)

Hence, literature is fundamentally ideologically charged and ideology naturally and intrinsically resides in literature, but this ideology is fluid and has to be contingently determined, and cannot be judged against another set of ideological views. Nor can it be simply inserted as a content to serve a purpose. More importantly, ideology that resides in literature is not determined by its content alone. It can only be realised by the unity of content *and* form, by *content becoming form*. In short literature *is* ideology, but also *creates* ideology. Accordingly literature should be approached with reference to various forms of other ideologies, which nevertheless cannot and should not be used as the only criteria to judge the meaning and value of literary texts.

## **Mao Zedong Thought and Literature**

The formation of modern Chinese ideology took place in two stages: initial accumulation and consolidation. The accumulation period started during the Yan'an years (1937-1945) and was completed a few years after the founding of the People's Republic. Due to the struggle against the old system and regime in China during that time, a new revolutionary rhetoric and discourse was emerging. The younger writers, as the progressive force, were inspired by the change. Most of the writers began to "report" the new society with euphoric enthusiasm, or to write with a new approach of Socialist Realism. Their works were imbued with a lively freshness and youthful aspiration and an innocent noble faith, expressing a sense of pride and a black-and-white political commitment: examples are Hao Ran, Zhao Shuli, Liu Shaotang, Cong Weixi, Fang Shuming and Han Yingshan. As a contemporary Chinese critic observed that due to the sharp contrast between the life before and after the Liberation (1949) and the great economic achievement over a short period of time, their writing was thus imbued with an element of mystery and wonder, which was the result of their whole-hearted belief that the Party's objective was noble and well-intentioned for the entire people. They tended to accept the Party's rhetoric and idealised the contemporary society. (Zhang Zhizhong:1987:142-5)

However, their "voluntary commitment" soon began to succumb to pressures which they had hardly known before – the rigid and exacting concern of ideological correctness regardless of the authors' individual preferences and intrinsic quality of literary creation. Every aspect of cultural activity became integrated into a tightly organised system of direction and control. Authorities in both the Party's Propaganda Department and the Cultural Ministry of the State Council gradually

gained an effective control over literary production. Although no formal censorship mechanism ever existed in China, Mao's *Talks* was held as an indisputable and overriding guideline in literary production and cultural activities, according to which, political and ideological correctness should always be regarded as the primary concern of the writers and the authorities. The sole criterion of literary merit became ideological correctness, while literary criticism was reduced to a matter of repeating political correctness set up by the political authority. Orwell is certainly right to claim that "any writer who accepts the discipline of a political party is sooner or later faced with the alternative: toe the line or shut up." (Orwell:1968:518)

Sun Li, a well-known Chinese critic, when evaluating the literature of the 1950s, points out that:

The authors, subjectively, intended to express the economic and political liberation of the peasants, but what impressed the reader was, more often than not, a modified pastoral tone with the clouds and rain completely vanished... country life, as a matter of fact, is far more complicated and deep and, therefore, more significant than they might have thought to be. (Sun Li:1983:83)

A paraphrase of Sun's undertone is needed here: the reader was not directly impressed by the subject matter of the writing, but by the literary intuitive quality of the writer. In these works, though the ideology and the political theme might be imposed internally or externally to a degree, it is quite obvious here that the form somehow was still held in unity with the content by the writers' creative and artistic efforts. These texts did inform on Chinese society.

The 1950s saw the consolidation of this unified ideology, which created a coherent discourse about literature and art and further led to the statisation of

literature. The principle Mao set before the Party had seized power was further strengthened and dominated literary criticism in China. Mao dictated that:

... materialists do not oppose utilitarianism in general but the utilitarianism of the feudal, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes... We are proletarian revolutionary utilitarians and take as our point of departure the unity of the present and future interests of the broadest masses, who constitute over ninety per cent of the population; hence we are revolutionary utilitarians aiming for the broadest and the most long range objectives, not narrow utilitarians concerned only with the partial and the immediate. (Mao:1967b:85)

In the 1960s, the final result was that one of the main characteristics of contemporary literature was its politicisation: politicisation of language, images, rhetoric and way of writing, which, to some extent, framed the popular political language and structured people's thinking. Consequently when Mao started the Cultural Revolution, his legitimacy and intention was hardly questioned even by the intellectual elite. The different voices raised mainly by the imaginative writers during the Yan'an period and the early years of the People's Republic to challenge Mao's overarching power and some of his doings were hardly heard this time. His ideology in the form of political discourse had conditioned the thinking of the nation and was beyond argument. The intellectual function of writers was thus undermined. They were either silenced or assigned to write, to use Salisbury's observation of Russian writers, "on topics designated by the state; their works were to be directed towards the achievement of state purposes." (Salisbury:1969:84) This practice almost destroyed the soul of Chinese literature during the Cultural Revolution.

The Party's determination to gain a peremptory control over imaginative literature was mainly the consequence of its belief in its command of a truth in human society and its indisputable status and authority. It is equally true, as Kundera

argues, that in the realm of totalitarian *kitsch*, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. Therefore it follows that the true opponent of totalitarian *kitsch* is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it. (Kundera:1990a) As all other aspects of political life were completely dominated by the Party, literature constituted the only part of the intellectual life of the nation where questions were raised from time to time, in the hope of reshaping the political discourse. As Chernyshevsky pointed out over a century ago, in Germany there were special publics, for instance for the novel, and in England philosophers, jurists, economists were read by the layman, but in Russia literature was the whole of the intellectual life. As a consequence, literature in Russia had a much wider function than in the West, (Chernyshevsky in Wellek:1992:115) and the situation in contemporary China resembled that of Russia to a substantial extent.

Gradually, as time went by, the dazzling, intoxicating and elusive splendour in these authors of the early People's Republic backslided. They began to re-examine their writing soberly, which was further encouraged by the new policy of "letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" in 1957. Different voices began to multiply and literature was gaining vitality. However, this took Mao by surprise and further confirmed his preoccupation about the literary sphere, which he often regarded with a suspicious mind. He thus launched his Anti-Rightist campaign some months later, which silenced the writers whose artistic intuitive and political conscience would not let them speak otherwise for two full decades.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by the even more tragic campaign, the

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<sup>6</sup> See Note 3, Chapter 2.



Cultural Revolution with the intention to reform literature, art and cultural practices.

Mao's suspicion about the literary sphere is clearly demonstrated in the following quotation:

The use of the novel for anti-Party activities is quite an invention. To overthrow a political power, it is always necessary, first of all to create public opinion, to do work in the ideological sphere. This is true for the revolutionary class, and it is also true for the counter-revolutionary class. (Mao:1967:17)<sup>7</sup>

This article was reportedly published to expound his theory of continuing class struggle in the new socialist period. Mao singled out contemporary literature as a typical example where, he believed, the class struggle was still going on. Later in another article, Mao expressed his idea of the relationship between literature and politics and more explicitly his disappointment of the present situation:

The social and economic base has already changed, but the arts as part of the superstructure, which serve this base, still remain a great problem today. Hence we should proceed with investigation and study and attend to this matter in earnest.

Isn't it absurd, that many communists are enthusiastic about promoting feudal and capitalist art, but not socialist art? (Mao:1967:8)<sup>8</sup>

Mao always believed that works of literature and art, as ideological forms, are products of the reflection in the human brain of the life of a given society. Revolutionary literature and art are the products of the reflection of the life of the people in the brains of revolutionary writers and artists. (Mao:1967b:87)

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<sup>7</sup> This is quoted from an article entitled "*Great Truth, Sharp Weapon*", published in *Red Flag* and *Beijing Review*, No. 9, and No. 23 1967 respectively. It was originally presented at the Tenth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Conference of the Chinese Communist Party in September 1962.

<sup>8</sup> The original text is dated December 12, 1963 and published in *Red Flag* and *Beijing Review* on 2 June 1967 in English entitled "Two Instructions Concerning Literature".

In spite of the Party's efforts to regulate literature at this stage, literature somehow remained the only forum where different voices did appear from time to time. For imaginative writing always gave the author some elasticity and allowed some room for interpretation. Some of the literary works published before the Cultural Revolution were not at all superficial. They not only constituted the main data to analyse and understand contemporary Chinese politics, but they also bore sensitive and astute witness to Chinese society.

Later, the Cultural Revolution brought Chinese literature down even further. The monopoly of the state and the Party not only controlled literary publications at various levels to impose complete uniformity, but it also saw to it that those who had deviated even slightly from the Party's guidelines were condemned to long terms of isolation, which almost extinguished literature completely. If the major characteristic of literature before the Cultural Revolution is its politicisation, the major characteristic of literature during the years of the Cultural Revolution is its anti-intellectualism. The Party and its ideologues had literature and art completely under their control. Many Chinese writers were further pressured towards a collective art, an art which was pushed to transcend the traditional heritage of individualism in literature – the real meaning of literature – because they had to articulate the needs and aspirations of the Party. Some of the literary techniques used and their consequences proved to be disconcertingly similar: the theatrical chorus; the exemplary model hero whose private life is totally subordinate to the collective and the state; the degeneration of character into caricature; a “realism” which only finds the prescriptive; the cult of monumentality and heroicisation; and a bankruptcy of imagination in the face of a barbaric reality. Although the authors tried to stress the

typical by reference to historical, social and economic data, they were unable to avoid the constraints of the Party's aesthetic and to employ freely their intellectual judgement. Therefore literature and art in this period declined into a collective political institution and approximated to cultic ritual, and was regarded as nothing but a display of ideological correctness, which functioned simply as a substitute for religion. The aims of such a literature were to preserve the people and the state from dangerous influences from other sources, to be an instrument of political education and to bear witness to socialist revolution and construction.

During the Cultural Revolution, the Party's ideological rhetoric completely dominated and substituted the authors' instinct, intuition and intellectual thinking. It condemned all other literary genres and intellectual thinking as decadent and destructive, and instead glorified the orthodox communist doctrine and thinking and its associations of proclaimed superiority and correctness. It also repudiated the complexities and ambiguities of aesthetic modernism of any sort and anything western in favour of a much-vaunted clarity, simplicity and directness in literary writing and critical analysis. Some of the writers helped set out to invent a new mythology based primarily on a strict interpretation of the so-called revolutionary spirit. The few writers active in this period include Jin Jingmai, Hao Ran and probably just a couple of others.

In a interview with *New Left Review*, Raymond Williams speaks favourably of the Cultural Revolution in China, saying:

There are a number of ways in which it is necessary to look at the Cultural Revolution. At one level it is necessary to see the real complications behind the official rhetoric. None the less it seems to me that the principle which was behind the rhetoric and some of the practice, and which no doubt got tangled up with much else, was a vital one: namely that even in the early stages of a post-revolutionary

society it is an indispensable condition of socialist democracy that the division of labour should be challenged by regular participation of everyone in ordinary labour. The fact that the Chinese did not fully put it into practice or that certain people were exempted from it doesn't change the fundamental principle at all. That principle has never been so clearly and powerfully enunciated as in the Cultural Revolution. I do not think that anybody should manage or administer any form of labour without the knowledge that they themselves will perform it, as well as, preferably, having come from it. When I heard pathetic stories about professors being taken from their libraries and laboratories and sent to help bring in the harvest I felt totally on the side of the revolutionaries.... A socialist movement will have nothing to offer to the working class unless it stands by that. For it is this principle alone which can make it clear to working people that socialism is something other than a new way of managing them, given their deep suspicion of solutions like nationalisation. (Williams:1979:403)

If the socialist revolution in China indeed began with such a noble vision, it certainly turned sour during the Cultural Revolution, perhaps even before that. The Cultural Revolution proved to be cultural destruction. To achieve a society based on a utopian vision with no division of labour and a unified culture not only proved to be too costly; but in the end it would go to its opposite extreme. History has testified that when literature is suppressed, humanity will suffer.

In assessing the role of Mao and his thought in Chinese politics and history, Schram sums up with perceptive insight:

Eternal rebel, refusing to be bound by the laws of God or man, nature or Marxism, he led his people for three decades in pursuit of a vision initially noble, which turned increasingly into a mirage, and then into a nightmare. Was he a Faust or Prometheus, attempting the impossible for the sake of humanity, or a despot of unbridled ambition, drunk with his own power and his own cleverness? More of the latter than used to be imagined, no doubt, and yet something of the former as well. Even today, the final verdict, both on the man and on his thought, must still remain open. (Schram:1989:206)

Contemporary Chinese literature, to a certain extent, illustrates this metamorphosis from noble vision to mirage and finally to nightmare. Nevertheless, though the final

verdict of contemporary Chinese history still remains open, the literature produced since the death of Mao would provide us with a better understanding of the Chinese nation and her future.

In analysing the right and wrong ways of handling literature, Calvino observes that there are two wrong ways of thinking of a possible political use for literature. The first one has already been quoted in the beginning of this chapter: that is to claim that literature should voice a truth already possessed by politics. (Calvino:1992:99-101) Judged by this observation, Mao is certainly guilty of this kind of practice, which reduced literature to an overt propaganda, and in turn its dogmatic politicised rhetoric and propositions reinforced bad politics. As for the author, too much unassimilated ideology only makes bad literature. The other mistaken way of treating literature, as Calvino finds, is to see literature as “an assortment of eternal human sentiments, as the truth of a human language that politics tends to overlook, and that therefore has to be called to mind from time to time,” which Calvino believes does more harm than good. (Calvino:1992:100) He continues to argue:

This concept apparently leaves more room for literature, but in practice it assigns it the task of confirming what is already known – or maybe of provoking in a naive and rudimentary way, by means of the youthful pleasure of freshness and spontaneity. Behind this way of thinking is the notion of a set of established values that literature is responsible for preserving, the classical and immobile idea of literature as the depository of a given truth. If it agrees to take on this role, literature confines itself to a function of consolation, preservation, and regression. (Calvino:1992:100)

## **From Mao to Deng: The End of Theory?**

Since the death of Mao, there has arisen discussion and debate about how and why Mao went wrong with the Cultural Revolution. Parenthetically this study may provide a new explanation to the existing theories, that is, his mistakes initially started from his own confusion of the relationship between base and superstructure, and a misconception of literature and art which he misplaced subordinate and auxiliary to politics. Though Marxist theory allowed reading an author by a study of the social and economic conditions, Mao and his ideologues relapsed into simple didacticism much too far. This was arguably the original reason for Mao to start the Anti-Rightist Campaign and nine years later the Cultural Revolution – with the intention both in the narrow sense to reform art and literature and in the broad sense to reshape the culture of the entire nation – only to have effected a human tragedy.

Unlike Mao, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1977) expounds no holistic political theory, this is perhaps because Mao outshone all his contemporaries in terms of political writings. However, being a pragmatist and consequentialist, Deng does state his creed from time to time in his numerous political speeches before and after the Cultural Revolution. His fundamental philosophy is best illustrated by his so-called “cat theory”, which states – no matter the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat.

Generally speaking, Deng’s political wisdom has largely been received from Mao’s theories and practices, but he does have more balanced view in terms of political practice and shows a deep concern for China’s well-being, and a great deal of liberal tendency in terms of economic and cultural construction. After the death of Mao he came back to power. He instigated a well co-ordinated experimental

economic reform in order to recover the Chinese economy, but at the same time he also laid down the so-called four cardinal principles<sup>9</sup> to reaffirm his legitimate position as Mao's successor. As a consequence, Deng, on the one hand, lamented that "in a vast country of nine hundred million people, there are too few literary writers." (Deng:1989:9) He recognised that "literature and art is a very complicated spiritual labour, and writers should freely employ their individual creativity. It must be up to the writers what to write and how to write – and it can only be gradually resolved in their artistic practice and exploration. In this respect, no external interference should be allowed." (Deng:1989:9-10) He also reiterated that in the realm of artistic creation, different forms and styles and free development should be promoted. In terms of literary theories, different views and schools and free discussion should be promoted. (Deng:1989:9-10) Like Mao he also quoted Lenin: that individual creativity should be absolutely guaranteed. On the other hand, with the same breath, Deng stated that "in the respect of the Party's leadership in literature and art, it should not be command, or any request on literature to follow any temporary, concrete and direct political tasks ...." (Deng:1989:9) After all, he, as many powerful politicians did, still regarded literature as a platform, and writers as intermediaries to their thoughts and beliefs.

In the decade of the 1980s in China, there was a significant loosening of controls, even voices like de-ideologisation and de-Mao-ification began to emerge. "Pluralism", which was still taboo in politics and ideology, was gradually creeping into the cultural sphere and literary works. Various literary salons were

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<sup>9</sup> The four basic principles are: adherence to the socialist road; adherence to the dictatorship of the proletariat; adherence to the leadership of the communist party; adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.

mushrooming. Therefore in these years (even to the present), there was hardly an aspect of the social changes which were taking place that was not touched upon and underscored in literary exploration. Though some of the issues were only metaphorically portrayed, they were understood by students and young intellectuals who made up the growing body of major social and political force to demand reform and change.

If the myth of communism in the real world exploded with the collapse of the Eastern block, communist vocabulary and rhetoric started to change in socialist countries well before that moment. In the time of change during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as will be noted later, literature functioned as a liberating discourse in Chinese society. Although economic reform brought China into a post-communist economic stage, its political entity was still untouched by the change. Nevertheless, a close examination of the contemporary literature will inform that its philosophical, ideological and political make-ups were undergoing dramatic changes.

The new generation of Chinese writers, unlike many of their predecessors, realised that their art could not ignore the real truth about life or continue to betray their artistic intuition and consciousness any longer. They came to realise that the Party regarded literature at best as serving its ideology and a thing that could be tampered with at their will. The writers for their part were aware that in following the Party's rule of literary production they were already abstracting from immediate, concrete reality and subordinating it to alien laws, thus depriving themselves of the chance to influence the political situation altogether. They realised that their forced commitment not only lacked aesthetic pleasure, it also failed politically. Once



circumstances permitted, they soon turned this forced commitment into another kind of commitment, voluntary commitment.

Their revived commitment could be found in a literature, expressing truth, both literary and political, with little violation of their independent artistic judgement. If literature in a totalitarian regime is the last field of humanities where freedom of expression can be completely checked, then it is equally true that it is the first to free itself from the dogmatic doctrines and bring in new and fresh images and expressions. In contrast to the monotony of theme, uniformity of expression and politicised language, which dominated for almost three decades since 1949, recently published literary works showed a shift of theme and depth of expressions, and change of vocabulary. The ideological front was first broadened in the field of literature, which yielded insight into Chinese politics, when viewed in an appropriate manner.

However, old doctrines died hard. Some critics and literary officials still defended the concept that didacticism should be the authors' primary concern. These critics and Party workers held that literature should instruct rather than delight or instruct by delighting. (Ai:1992:121) Ai uses the Horatian formula that prevailed in eighteenth century Russia: *Utiledulic* (Utilitarianism), which means that literature must serve "specific interests". This is nothing but a modified Mao's politics-priority formula which also reminds the reader of Dobrolynbov's proclamation, "literature is an auxiliary force, the importance of which lies in propaganda, the merit of which is determined by what it propagates and how it propagates." (Ai:1992:123) This view was then incorporated by the Party's ideologues to seize as much cultural ground as possible.

After the downfall of the Gang of Four, China speedily restored itself to normality. During this process, the writers pioneered a cultural movement to amend the damage inflicted by the Cultural Revolution and to create different cultural values and knowledge through their writings. The serious challenge to the false values of the Cultural Revolution and other political indoctrination started from a “big question mark” about the authoritarian rule during the previous thirty years in Bai Hua’s work, *The Bitter Love*. All the critiques of the work later spilled over into a serious national debate and discussion on the topic of alienation, which became a dominant theme first in literature, then in political spheres. Although “alienation” was one of the most outstanding features of the contemporary society, the word until now had remained only in philosophical texts. Only through this debate did the concept of alienation enter the everyday vocabulary. It was a powerful concept designated to improve Chinese society, especially in the context of socialism. Thus it was regarded as a very sensitive and elusive theoretical issue by the authorities. Writers in both literature and politics tried to draw extensively from classical thinkers, like Marx, Engels and Fromm, for Mao himself never touched this topic. In order to understand the complex ramification of the term “alienation”, the numerous connections in which the term was used were restricted to include only a few meanings and applications among which, the most important refers to a disparity between one’s society and one’s spiritual interests or welfare the society is supposed to serve.

Dai Houying’s work *Man Ah Man!* suggests combining a humanistic vision with disciplinary struggle to avoid the loss of humanity. She tries to argue that Marxism and humanism are compatible and should not be set to exclude one

another. She skilfully explores the sense of alienation which is caused by the conflicts between political belief and reality, and calls for an immediate new treatment for the cure of this most prominent symptom of society. She argues through her work that it is necessary for a healthy society, a socialist society in particular, to regard all its members equally as whole human beings. Alienation is a dangerous disease. She urges her reader to achieve a political recognition of and courage to face this undesirable phenomenon, which is caused by various reasons, from unbridled power of the Party and its members in office, the concept of continuing class struggle, to the personality cult, etc.

The challenge of political dogma and orthodox thinking was initiated by the introduction of the theme of alienation and the advocacy of humanism in literary works. Admittedly, humanism *per se* is fundamentally a political issue. The discussion of alienation directly questions the Party's legitimacy and challenged the existing order of the society. This accounts for a very important development in contemporary Chinese literature: to commit itself to social and political development. Later Wang Ruosui, a well known liberal journalist and ideologue, points out that in socialist society there is not only alienation in ideology, but also alienation in politics and in economy. (Wang Ruosui:1980) Some other Chinese scholars articulate in a more daring and forthright language:

Politically, bureaucraticism and privilege completely reverse the relationship between masters and servants – the servants who have been elected by the people to serve them have become overlords sitting on the backs of the people. They do not treat people as masters, but as tools and means subject to their will, and thereby assigning to people a status of personal dependence. Some even treat the people as a non-humanity and regard the lives of workers as nothing; economically, there is an alienation between labourers and their products ...(Zhang Kuiliang *et al* in Li & Bao:1989:213)

Although the pall of official dogma still lay heavily on Chinese literary scholarship and criticism, courageous individuals, like Liu Binyan, Wang Meng, Zhang Xian Liang, Jia Pingwa, as well as a few critics,<sup>10</sup> once punished for their rebellion, came back again, only more mature professionally and politically, to challenge the official dogma. Meanwhile some were taking refuge in developing methods which did not openly clash with the official doctrine, like Zhang Jie, Zhang Kangkang. And some other younger and hitherto unknown writers emerged, questioning, modifying and loosening the shackles of the official controls of expression. One could only hope that literature in China would again affirm its vitality, which it had shown for some thousand years. A real and truthful literature and literary criticism was gaining momentum, which not only did justice to literature and good politics, but also informed more about China, its past, present, and more importantly its future.

### **Literature as Ideology: A New Critique**

Many critics underscore the importance of ideology in literature in a more perceptive way. Terry Eagleton stresses the meaning and place of ideology in works of literature, showing the applicability of Marxist theory of ideology to literary studies involving much more than just a sociology of literature. (Eagleton:1994) Pierre Macherey takes the Marxist approach a stage further by recognising that there is considerable variation and autonomy between and within ideological forms

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<sup>10</sup> The critics were slow and reluctant in coming to terms with the new developments in both literature and politics, mainly due to two reasons: first, criticism was traditionally dominated by the official media; second, some perceptive critics would not like to spell out the allegorically and metaphorically suggested messages intended in the works, for it did more harm than good to the authors, for ideological and political offence was still considered a crime by the regime. Examples include Wang Meng's *Hard Porridge*, Liu Heng's *Judou*, and Zhang Xianliang's *Black Cannon*.

themselves only in the last instance determined by the underlying realities of the economic structure of society. (Macherey:1992)

Davis locates the relationship among the text, the author and the reader, which is very conducive to the analysis in the following chapters:

Life is a pretty vast and uncoordinated series of events and perceptions. But novels are pre-organised systems of experience in which characters, actions, and objects have to mean something in relation to the system of each novel itself, in relation to the culture in which the novel is written, and in relation to the readers who are in that culture. (Davis:1987:24)

Then he continues to argue all description

will depend on ideology – that is the vast signifying system that, in its interpenetration with the individual psyche, makes things ‘mean’ something to a culture and individuals in that culture. Ideology constitutes the sum of that which a culture needs to believe about itself and its aspirations as opposed to what really is. Ideology is in effect the culture’s form of writing a novel about itself for itself. (Davis:1987:24)

However, that does not mean the reader’s perception of the ideological message will be what the writer wishes. Ideology in literary works does not have to be determined by ideology in everyday political terms. It is determined by the “qualitative elements” (Barthès:1973:191) which form a code, a code the understanding and interpretation of which is contingent to a wider social and political backdrop. Thus “the very form of literary message has a specific relationship with history and with society; but this relationship is special, and does not include history and sociology so far as its contents are concerned.” (Barthès:1973:191) Davis also notes that novels attempt to contain through representation the totality of a society at a given moment. Even if a novel is set only in a drawing room, that room will contain in its small and limited scope the social

relations and thought-system of the larger world. (Davis:1987:26) Davis' observation here has subtle implications. He suggests that "the writer follows his own road and chance or social and psychological factors lead him to discover something that may become important for political and social action as well." (Davis:1987:26) In such a way, the ideology in imaginative literature is very often able to transcend the ideology it has as its content. Calvino also argues along these lines that "the solitary individualism of an author's work may happen to explore areas that no one has explored before, within himself or outside, and to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness." (Calvino:1992:101) This explains why one very often finds that some literature of seemingly apolitical nature which is remote to our immediate outlook and ideology can influence us in a political way. Quite often, the influence that the work has on the reader does not directly resemble the ideological content of that work.

In China, literary criticism has been predominantly conducted against another set of ideology, i.e. Marxist ideology. In a recent article Xiao, a Chinese Marxist literary critic, still defends such practice. He argues inextricably, as literature belongs to ideology, it is to be judged by ideology. (Xiao:1991:124-127) He neatly falls into the category that Calvino criticises. These people simply want literature to express:

... truth already possessed by politics; that is, to believe that the sum of political values is the primary thing, to which literature must simply adapt itself. This opinion implies a notion of literature as ornamental and superfluous, but it also implies a notion of politics as fixed and self-confident: an idea that would be catastrophic. ... Such a pedagogical function for politics could only be imagined at the level of bad literature and bad politics. (Calvino:1992:100)

Furthermore, in Britain, as Ingle points out, “the imaginative writer, it seems, was able to present vividly the problems and aspirations of ordinary people to senior politicians whose job by its very nature would lead them to lose contact with the people.” (Ingle:1977:552) In China, too, the imaginative writers certainly played a critical role in bringing the Party in touch not only with the feelings and experiences of the people and also with the theoretical issues such as alienation and democracy. Particular topics – such as rural economy, ownership system, juvenile delinquency, marriage and family, division of labour – caught the attention of some of the senior Party officials and helped them to come to terms with the problems, re-evaluate and revise the existing policies.

Marxism-Leninism failed as a popular *Weltanschauung* in Eastern Europe. In China, despite the efforts the regime made to popularise it and the fact that the number of Party members increased to a considerable percentage (roughly, five per cent of the whole population) and many others declared themselves as believers, Marxist ideology, as a system of belief, never took root in society, though, to a great extent, it framed the political grammar and structured society in practical terms. The impact of Marxist ideology has always been very limited. As soon as the new thinking and rhetoric appeared, hardly surprisingly, it replaced the dogmatic discourse very quickly. Humanism and equality substituted class struggle, pluralism monolith politics; pragmatism ideological correctness; democracy centralism; and individualism collectivism; and so on.<sup>11</sup> The main tenets of Marxism-Leninism were gradually transforming into:

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<sup>11</sup> All these terms have to be understood in the context. Thus the argument in Footnote 4 applies here. In some Western states, a more disguised ideological agenda is administered in the same discourse, so-called “freedoms”.

... ritual messages and signals, meant to be only formally respected. The citizen (and even the members of the Communist Party) are not expected to believe in the correctness of the contents of ideological postulates but simply to respect them outwardly: to refrain from criticising them publicly, and to behave in practice according to ideological signals roughly in the way a driver respects road signs. Those who fulfil those requirements are not asked by the regime to display any measure of internal identification with official ideology in private life. (Mlynar:1984:22)

This process was associated with, on the one hand, an increasing organised public pressure for liberalisation and, on the other hand, an increased tolerance on the part of the authorities for unorthodox policies and various creative developments in the public sphere. Literature played a crucial part in this liberalisation and de-ideologisation in the post-Mao society.

The reduction of Marxism-Leninism throughout the 1980s to a ritualised, formal and largely 'internal' (that is used within the elite and the top political-administrative staff) political formula seemed to suit the interests of all major political actors. All revolutionary and anti-statist references had been removed or played down. The central thesis on the 'inevitable transformation to communism' and 'the historical mission of the proletariat' had been translated to mean a dictatorship by the party-state leadership. Transition to communism which had been interpreted as a prolonged process consisting of many stages, including the present 'elementary stage' and the later 'advanced socialism', and 'classlessness' was pronounced as compatible with the persistence and even desirability of considerable socio-economic inequalities.

During this period, literature, ahead of journalism and social sciences, acquired a different voice – a voice it had lost for three decades. It further gave a voice to those who do not have a voice yet.



Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. ... situations, and languages both of the outer and the inner world, the tendencies repressed both in individuals and in society. Literature is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics; it is like an eye that can see beyond the colour spectrum perceived by politics. It is the responsibility of the socio-political observer not to leave anything to chance, and to apply his own method to the business of literature in such a way as not to allow anything to escape him. (Calvino:1992:101)

Hence according to Calvino, literature can impose “patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts, and in short the creation (and by creation I mean selection and organisation) of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action, especially in political life.” (Calvino:1992:101) “What books communicate often remains unknown to the author himself, that books often say something different from what they set out to say that in any book there is a part that is the author’s part and a part that is a collective and anonymous work.” (Calvino:1992:102) If a book is prescribed with a fixed formula based on a certain ideology, which is already a so-called recognised truth, it is not only the author’s part that is missing. In the end it loses both parts.

Calvino stresses this kind of awareness saying it does not influence literature alone: it can also be useful to politics, enabling “science to discover how much of it is no more than verbal construction, myth, literary *topos*. Politics, like literature, must above all know itself and distrust itself.” (Calvino:1992:102)

To quote Davis’ argument to conclude this chapter:

... the ‘eternal truths’ embodied in novels will become, in effect through the process of reproduction, eternal truths in fact. Novels make sense because of ideology; they embody ideologies, and they

promulgate ideology. They exist by virtue of ideology and... they owe their origin to the beginning of the modern concept of ideology. (Davis:1987:25)

It is the ideology in the novels that first of all gives meaning to literature, and also influences human perception of the world, provides the reader with new insight into his existence and reshapes our actions, more in a form of political discourse than in a form of political belief system. The flow of ideology is artistically spontaneous and should not be affixed on by external pressure, or even by internal desire to the extent that it violates the author's artistic judgement and consciousness. It is this artistic intuition of solitary individualism of an author's work that may happen to explore areas that no one has explored before, within himself or outside, and to map out human society. This vision of society will sooner or later turn out to be the vital areas of future development of society. On being politically committed to the extent of becoming the mouthpiece of a particular ideology, a writer was not only repeating a so-called "truth already possessed by politics", but he was also abandoning his independent judgement, hence his literary integrity, (Ingle:1977:555) and in the end literature altogether, for literature exists because it tells something that other disciplines do not.

Admittedly, the "borderline between propaganda and literature is not calculated upon the *degree*<sup>12</sup> of political commitment, rather upon the extent to which that commitment accurately reflects the beliefs and values of the writer", (Ingle:1979:9) and perhaps also upon the extent that his artistic intuition and consciousness as an imaginative writer allow him to display. The trauma and

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<sup>12</sup> Original emphasis.

experience that contemporary Chinese writers have gone through provides a very convincing illustration of the point. Moreover, the development of contemporary Chinese literature during the last decade also best illustrates Derrida's belief that:

... literature is a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which, to hold on to just this trait, secures in principle its right to say *everything*<sup>13</sup>. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain non-censure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.) No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. One can always want neither one nor the other, and there is no shortage of doing without them under all regimes; it is quite possible to consider neither of them to be unconditional goods and indispensable rights. But in no case can one dissociate one from the other. No analysis would be equal to it. And each time that a literary work is censured, democracy is in danger, as everyone agrees. The possibility of literature, the legitimation that a society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together – politically – with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyse every presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility.<sup>14</sup> (Derrida:1992:23)

Derrida's argument can be used as the final judgement of how literature should be treated in any society. It makes more sense as far as Chinese society is concerned where literature is still largely viewed as secondary to human understanding of the world.

This thesis, whilst trying to map out the relationship between politics and literature in academic studies as well as in the real world, especially in the more problematic Chinese context, will hopefully work towards a better understanding of the meaning and function of literature in Chinese society, which was once so enriched by imaginative literature. Once a more meaningful and profound

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<sup>13</sup> Original emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Again this point ties up with the question what literature is at the beginning of this study. Surely what Derrida describes here are not evaluative criteria of literature, or rather its functions.

understanding of literature is achieved, it is not only politics (realistic and academic)  
that will benefit, but the whole of humanity.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Literature as a Human Essay

Imaginative writers: conscience of humankind in the twentieth century.  
– Sartre

Imaginative literature:  
a preserver and creator of the highest values of mankind.  
– Wellek

Building on the discussion in the previous chapters, this chapter aims to explore the relationship between politics and literature by examining Chinese literature in relation to politics and the critical role it played in post-Mao Chinese society. It attempts to analyse how literature and the literary *language* functioned as political philosophy in a socio-political development.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) left the Chinese people with little but a collapsed economy, cultural deprivation, corrupted morality and political disillusionment. As a consequence, it had extensively undermined the Communist Party's legitimacy as the leading authority. Great efforts were needed for the Party to come up with a reasonably plausible account for what had happened so that it could regain its legitimacy and authority. After the deposition of the Gang of Four, the new leadership encouraged denunciation of their doings, because they had masterminded most of the policies which resulted in the sufferings of many Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution.

Many critics think that the removal of the Gang of Four was largely the Party's internal reconfiguration of the leadership. This change, however, was at the time extremely auspicious and encouraging for the Chinese people. Many Chinese writers were also convinced that the way had been cleared for a great popular

outpouring against the extreme leftism that had plagued China prior to and during the Culture Revolution and beyond.<sup>1</sup> There were changes which involved limited political and administrative proceedings and manoeuvres, such as reinstating the officials who had been ostracised during the Cultural Revolution and compensating the victims of many so-called anti-revolutionary cases. However, the main avenues for serious contemplation of the true extent of the tragedy came through imaginative literature. The most noticeable and refreshing effect was the mushrooming of literary magazines and periodicals.<sup>2</sup> The literary works published in these periodicals reflected the actual society and popular thought and showed more involvement in political life than ever before. This was an era that many authors would regard as opportune and conducive to airing their long suppressed desire for freer literary expression. It was regarded as a time to restore their traditional moral, social and political commitment as writers, and ultimately to create a more just and prosperous society.

Encouraged by the political developments which saw a relaxation of officious directives, writers began to produce a new literature, different from that of the previous age. Many new forms along with new themes began to emerge and finally gathered together to form a significant social, political and philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> This event was indeed to have a far-reaching impact on Chinese politics and to give contemporary Chinese history a push towards a more open society.

<sup>2</sup> Literary magazines [*wenxue zazhi*] or literary periodicals [*wenxue qikan*] are a typical modern Chinese cultural phenomenon and tradition. In modern and contemporary China, many novels, plays, short stories, poems, and even film scripts are published in literary magazines (normally published monthly or bimonthly). In this way they reach the readership very quickly and also help cultivate a unique reading culture in Chinese society. As a result, this has strengthened the status of literature in society. According to statistics, there are over 2,000 different titles of literary magazines published nation-wide. Most of the texts examined in this study were first published in such periodicals. Also by 1994, China had 561 publishing houses, about 8,000 periodicals, and more than 2,100 newspapers and over 300 audio-visual publishing companies. (Goldman:1996:50)

force in society. In the initial stage (1977-1978), literature became one of the main channels to speak out against the wrongs of the previous decade and to search for an explanation of the catastrophic effects of the Cultural Revolution. At this time, the publication of a new literary work was a piece of political news, (Song:1988:11) capturing great attention from the public and giving rise to serious political debates and discussions. In early 1979 it appeared that a fundamental change had happened in terms of the state control of literature.

### **The Literature of the Wounded – Redressing the Grievances**

Literature was held by many as a powerful and unique means for making sense of the Cultural Revolution and getting to the roots of all the elements of “ultra-leftism”, “socialist fascism” and “remnants of feudalism”.<sup>3</sup> Chinese literature now became a mirror in the quest for social and political justice and reflected an understanding of China’s modern and contemporary identity.

The first important event in terms of politics and literature was the publication of Liu Xinwu’s short story *The Class Teacher* in 1977, which was regarded as a landmark of literary writing in this new era. (Ji:1986:86) The story concerns the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in a Beijing secondary school. The author engages in a daring critique of the repercussions of the Cultural Revolution and the doings of the Gang of Four. The story line focuses on one of the many social and political issues – juvenile delinquency which up till now “everyone had been supposed to ignore”. (Link:1984:19) A young man nicknamed “little

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<sup>3</sup> Terms used in the Party’s “Resolutions on the Major Issues after the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party’s Congress of 1978 to attribute the fundamental causes of the catastrophic effects of the Cultural Revolution.

rascal” freshly arrives in class exhibiting all the traits of a juvenile delinquent having no moral sense *despite* being from a working class background. He is supposedly a victim of the Cultural Revolution, in which the normal education system was badly undermined by the Gang of Four’s dogmatic ultra-leftist policies. The merits of the story lie in the way the author portrays another character, the class secretary of the students’ Communist Youth League, a young woman “whose intelligence had been wasted by her extremely rigid indoctrination in political dogma”. (Link:1984:19) She believes nothing unless it appears in a Party’s official newspaper, though this does not necessarily make her an exemplary character. On the contrary, she is quite narrow-minded and politically naive, and almost as inadequate as the “little rascal”. The conflict develops around a discussion about the book *The Gadfly*<sup>4</sup> by the Italian writer Vojchni. Surprisingly, here the views of both the “little rascal” and the Youth League secretary converge and both regard the novel as pornography because of its love theme. In the rigid regime under the Gang of Four, it seems everyone is a victim, and no one can escape. So-called political correctness did not encourage useful knowledge and constructive social morals and values: quite the contrary, it distorted the lives and minds of the young people. The writer cried out, as Lu Xun had done half a century ago, “Save Our Children!”

The story still left much to be desired in terms of literary and artistic quality. It is rather superficial and has “little lasting literary value”. (Jenner:1981:277) It also demonstrates the author’s propensity of moralising politics. Nevertheless, its importance in its day should not be underestimated. According to Jenner, literary

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<sup>4</sup> The novel was a popular read in China before the Cultural Revolution, and was then considered a revolutionary piece of work.



works like this one “infringed some earlier literary taboos with impunity, created a sense of interest and expectation, and prepared for the much bolder effects that were to follow”. (Jenner:1981:277) It certainly had a broad political implication by challenging not only the Gang of Four and their leftist policies, but also questioning the fundamental political faith that had deranged China’s social, cultural and economic life. The importance lies in its revelation of the consequences of an ossified political discourse and behaviour, which, as Ji points out, resulted from the perpetuation of erroneous thinking in politics. (Ji:1986:88) The story was hailed by the public, and the editor’s office of *The People’s Literature* was flooded with hundreds of letters each day. (China Social Sciences Academy:1982:144) When the story was published, most critiques focused on its immediate message cheering its daring critique of the leftist Cultural Revolution. (Huang:1988:31; Link:1984:19) Their criticism did not go far beyond its thematic concern about one of the consequences of the Cultural Revolution, juvenile delinquency.

It was, however, the first serious literary attempt to address and re-evaluate the Cultural Revolution and its consequences upon the Chinese people and Chinese politics.<sup>5</sup> After over a decade of cultural and political indoctrination, literature of this kind came timely to set free a sensibility and imagination which China needed in order to recover from one of the worst periods in its history. It also, as Kinkley argues, “cultivated sensitivity to the political environment”. (Kinkley:1990:7) Imaginative literature in this period constituted a significant political voice and

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<sup>5</sup> In view of the fact that the Party did not make any official evaluation of the Cultural Revolution until late 1978, it indeed laid the political ground for the Chinese people to come to terms with what the Cultural Revolution really meant for China. Due to the intrinsic nature of literature, it not only made a political complaint, but also it expressed something that had not been said in politics. In literature like this reality was transformed to represent a vision as seen by art and thus became “a motive power in the struggle for changing the world”. (Marcuse:1978:73)

force, but the message did not stop there. Though critics normally play a significant part in revealing the meanings and possibilities of texts, that does not necessarily mean that the reader can only derive an understanding when the meaning is spelt out for him by the critic. Quite the contrary, the meaning of the texts is highly dependent on the reader's experience and his world view. Without the contingent social and political context into which the story was to bring meaning, the implication the story had in China's political life could easily be overlooked. *The Class Teacher* not only started a literature of the new age, but it also opened up social, cultural and political possibilities and critiques that China was critically in need of.

The name of this new literary movement – the Literature of the Wounded<sup>6</sup> – was coined from Lu Xinhua's short story, *The Scar* (1978) (also translated as *The Wounded*) published a few months later after *The Class Teacher*. Again it was a story that redressed the grievances of the Cultural Revolution, but in a more general manner. It unveiled the tragic consequences and mental sufferings of a young woman during and after the Cultural Revolution due to her blind faith in the regime's political indoctrination and ruthless policies. During the Cultural Revolution, the heroine was entirely enraptured by the fever of radical vision and threw herself into the revolution believing it would bring about a completely new society. She trusted the Party with all her heart. When she was told that her mother was an enemy of the revolution, she chose to denounce her rather than to "betray the

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<sup>6</sup> In this study all Chinese terms of literary movements in the period concerned are loosely applied because it is rather arbitrary to classify all the works into such movements or schools. Many works also run into other categories. In Huang's book, he classifies literature of this period into "literature of the wounded", "literature of retrospection", "literature of reform", and "literature of consciousness", as a rather loosely defined gradual developmental process. (Huang:1988:5) Others classified them purely in thematic terms.

revolution". In order to prove herself, the heroine knocked down her mother and left a scar on her mother's face. The story is straightforward but the author focuses on the psychological damage the Cultural Revolution had brought to the ordinary people. The story, though simple, works at several levels. The scar, as a symbol, is an indication of the damage that the nation had incurred through the harsh political campaign. It also serves as a testimonial to the atrocities and a memorial of remembrance. The author implies that the healing of a psychological scar was a longer and much more complicated process than that of a physical scar. It is interesting to note that the critiques at the time seldom went beyond the immediate message. Most of them engaged in a simplified criticism of the text trying voluntarily or involuntarily to establish a fixed value and interpretation of the text. The representative argument among them came from Huang, an active critic at the time. He maintained that these works exposed the scars and the tragedies of the past – the mistakes that had been made in the march of socialism – whilst the works themselves reflected a firm belief in socialism. (Huang:1988:6) Whilst Huang and others are entitled to their interpretations as far as the text is concerned, to exhaust the meaning of literary texts and to try to place a fixed value on literature is a *misunderstanding of its function*. The scar was not only a symbol of the past, but also a constant reminder of the years of atrocity, forming part of the collective memory, which was a driving force in contemporary Chinese politics and history. In general, literature not only redressed the wrongs of the past, it was also the reservoir of collective memory which was to provide a source of political inspiration for the present. It also formed part of the experience of the nation whose future was to be built on such memories and experience – for nothing existed outside history.

Another important event in China's literary and political life was the publication of Zheng Yi's short story *The Maple* (1979). Although similarly crudely written, it revealed for the first time the scale of violence and armed conflict that had plagued China during the Cultural Revolution. Until the publication of this story, this type of violence had remained a "forbidden zone" for writers. Political critics had mixed reactions, but the general readers overwhelmingly welcomed it as a breakthrough.

The story portrays the armed conflicts between the opposing political groups during the Cultural Revolution in a naturalistic fashion. It reveals how a couple of lovers are split by different political views and involved in a violent conflict. In the end the man shoots his lover in the battle. However, behind all the death and cruelty one can only see purposelessness and madness. The battles are fought with each faction firmly believing that they are fighting for the revolution, and for a better tomorrow. Though this story cannot be considered to be representative of the genre of the absurd, still Camus' words prefigure the effect of *The Maple* – "Death and Absurdity are the principles which generate the only rational Liberty – that which human being can experience with body and soul". (Camus:1976:9) The story created shock waves in Chinese society. The strong images of blood and death for the first time forced the Chinese people to re-evaluate not only the most recent history – the Cultural Revolution – but also the whole of their modern political history and beliefs.

There followed the publication of many stories and novels of similar themes, including Wang Yaping's *The Sacred Mission* [*Shensheng de Shiming*], Ru Zhijuan's *The Wrongly-Edited Story* [*Jianji Cuole de Gushi*], Lu Yanzhou's *The*

*Story of Heavenly Cloud Mountain* [*Tianyunshan Chuanqi*], another novel by Liu Xinwu – *Wake Up, Brother* [*Xinglaiba, Didi*], Li Zhun's *The Mangoes* [*Mangguo*], Zhang Xianliang's *The Gypsies* [*Jipusairen*], Zhang Tianmin's *The Prisoner's Supper* [*Qiyu de Wancan*], another novella by Lu Wenfu – *Sacrifice* [*Xianshen*] and finally Bai Hua's *Bitter Love* [*Ku Lian*]. These works almost exclusively tried to make sense of the dark years of the Cultural Revolution through their artistic perception. This mushrooming of literary works formed the so-called second Blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese literature as termed by many Western observers and critics. (Link:1984; Duke:1985; Link:1988; Goldman:1987, 1994; and others) Naturally enough, these works' concerns to reverse historical injustice struck a responsive chord in the readership. They gave vent to the readers' political grievances against the previous regime, helping to release the political tensions that were running high amongst various factions of society. Also by remembering the political past, the Chinese people began to acquire a new critical and political literacy which until now had been generally denied. Furthermore, the Literature of the Wounded performed a literary psychoanalysis of the suffering in the preceding period and is thus more concerned to synthesise the understanding of the past for a future "imaginative" vision, which a pure political understanding could never reach.

### **Remembering as Political Dynamic**

As the Literature of the Wounded (1977-9) was gathering momentum and growing into a more mature literary genre, its bearing on political life loomed larger. Many issues and even fundamental political arguments were brought into focus through literary expressions, such as the nature of the Cultural Revolution and other

political campaigns, economy, education, agriculture and industry and state socialism, confluence of social and political life, conflict of public life and that of private, humanism and politics. The Literature of the Wounded not only filled a political vacuum, but also led an intellectual and cultural renaissance. For it constituted a major political voice and force in a way that was only able to be fulfilled by imaginative literature. Literature after Mao directed Chinese society towards a more tolerant, humanitarian and pluralistic society.

Historically speaking, the Literature of the Wounded was hailed by the Party's new leaders for the role it had played in discrediting the Gang of Four's regime to the greatest possible extent. The Fourth National Writers' Conference in October 1979 was formally attended by Deng himself and some other senior leaders, such as Ye Jianying, Chairman of the People's Congress and Li Xiannian, the acting President, and Mao's successor – Chairman Hua who was on the verge of going out. Deng's speech at the Conference was welcomed by the writers, and few suspected that this was the beginning of the end of a period. Deng spoke highly of the writers and their efforts to expose the darkest forces that had been mostly attributed to those four people and made some promises that he later found hard to cash.

In a speech that was to influence China's literary and political future Deng first quoted Lenin's speech that "In literature, 'it is absolutely necessary to guarantee that writers have ample room for individual creation and inclination, and ample room for different ideas, imagination, form, and contents'". He continued to reassure:

The magisterial approach must be done away with. The issuing of executive orders in the areas of literary and artistic creation and criticism must be stopped. If we view such things as upholding Party leadership, the result will be the opposite of that intended.

We must shake off all the yokes of outmoded ideas and dogmas. ... In mental endeavours as complicated as literature and art, it is absolutely essential for writers and artists to totally utilise their individual creative spirit. Writers and artists must have the freedom to choose their subject matter and method of presentation based upon artistic practice and exploration. No interference in this regard can be permitted. (Deng:1982:13)

However, there was an apparent parallel between this period and the time when Mao tried to encourage the writers and other intellectuals to speak up in 1957. Deng's view did not solely derive from an understanding of the nature of literature. It was largely due to his confidence in his economic and political achievements after the deposition of the Gang of Four,<sup>7</sup> and subsequent events were to prove this argument.

By 1980, however, the authorities had begun to show some signs of unease with the writers and their works.<sup>8</sup> Naturally more voices meant more challenges, more criticisms of the authority and the established order. Although these criticisms, if properly accredited and channelled, could abridge tensions in society, bring new vitality and possibilities to Chinese politics and society, the authorities had different views about the benefits of literature. The reasons are two-fold; first, they had to guard the ideology that had made them legitimate, and secondly, many of the

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<sup>7</sup> Deng's confidence was that the writers could write eulogist literature if they had been "convinced" by the Party. For instance the socialist victory in the early years in China did win the allegiance of many intellectuals and attracted quite a few writers. They did produce some good revolutionary writing, though here a distinction between revolutionary literature and propaganda literature should be made. However, as the totalitarian regime became more radical and dogmatic, it alienated most of them.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, by late 1979, the authority already closed down the Wall of Democracy, where the public could put up posters expressing their political views and criticising the authorities or publishing literature of a political nature, despite the fact that Deng had approved and openly praised it earlier. Putting up posters on the walls of the imperial residence or palace or on the so called Imperial Posts in front of the Forbidden City to publicise the grievances against officials or other authorities was a traditional practice in feudal China approved by the imperial court, though to what extent their grievances could be redressed was another question.

political leaders were still in the habit of running the country in their way, especially having just gone through a very difficult time. Whilst society was, by way of literary creativity, trying to build a collective remembrance of the past which was to provide meaning for the present, the authorities were to move in another direction, namely, “looking forward”. According to the authorities and even some critics, (Huang:1988) the Literature of the Wounded was solely concerned with the past, and this represented a mistake because it should be “forgotten”. This view ignored a simple fact: “looking forward” should be based on a form of remembering. History informs the future. It was literature that told part of history and constantly offered insight to society in various contexts. Obviously the official stance remained much as it had always been: that literature served a social and political purpose, a stance which was not only a misunderstanding of the function of literature, it was also detrimental to political and cultural – as well as literary – development.

On the surface, the 1980 retrenchment happened for two related reasons. First, the leadership felt that its goal of discrediting its predecessors had been adequately achieved and further outpouring of grievances of this kind was not only unnecessary, but jeopardised its authority and legitimacy. To continue excoriating the tainted past encouraged a spill-over into discontent with the present and could undermine the current leadership, despite the leadership’s efforts to assign all the blame almost exclusively to the Gang of Four and “remnants” and “residues” of feudalism and capitalism. Second, with the increased elbow-room enjoyed in the late 1970s, writers had begun departing further from their *prescribed* role of transmitting “received wisdom”. Among the more outspoken writers, there was a general drift towards works that examined basic problems not easily attributable to only four



people. Furthermore, the authorities, by instinct, could not be unaware of the fact that to lose authority in controlling the “language” and “discourse” of the past would certainly impair their leverage over the future. This was to prove once again Orwell’s celebrated statement that “who controls the past controls the future”.

Although the Literature of the Wounded had been regarded by the authorities as serving a purpose, and by the readership as “healing the wounds”, its significance would carry on for the decades to come, simply because the literary past could not simply be confined to “the past”. Understanding and remembering the past was a driving and liberating force in the present. As Marcuse points out “if the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions”. (Marcuse:1978:73) As a young Chinese author writes in one of his recently published novels:

To forget those days is to betray our integrity. Only this integrity, this integrity alone, is able to revive our dispirited world, to *re-form* our disintegrated nation of loose sand into a reinforced constitution of cement, so that we will, in a world full of storms and tempests, staunchly rise again. (Tan:1996:5)

The Literature of the Wounded therefore, as a whole, formed a major form of political remembering. Crude as it was, it represented a consciousness of the time. It lodged a memory, which informed a future. It embodied the struggle of man against power, which, according to Kundera, was “the struggle of memory against forgetting”. (Kundera:1990a:130) Only based on this remembering could China recover from the trauma and could a future that was free from all deprivation and enslavement be born.

## Lobby Literature

After the death of Mao (1976), writers gradually formed an intellectual and political opposition to the prevailing form of authority through their writing. The aims of this opposition ranged from the very basic and abstract humanistic endeavour of man's liberation from domination and repression to the more immediate practical issues such as economic reform, social and political justice and elimination of corruption. During the Cultural Revolution (and the years before to some extent), literature had been assimilated into the all-embracing system of a monopolistic regime. Literature was left without a real denominator. Lacking a tangible designation, the *clou*, the image and the tone which ought to be antagonistic and transcendent to the prevailing order, did not possess any alienating power as imaginative literature should.

Literature which conforms to any thought system betrays itself and is therefore bad literature or no literature at all. It is its nature to remain strange, antagonistic, transcendent to normalcy.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, being the expression of mankind's suppressed needs, faculties and desires, imaginative literature is an entirely appropriate medium to bring these elements into political arenas.

The play *What If I Really Were?* by Sha Yexin *et al* (1979), is an important example of how Chinese literature operated in political spheres. The play explicitly identified its time of action as after the Gang of Four. Its satire of official corruption was received with great enthusiasm by the general public, especially urban youth. The play, staged in 1979, pointedly confronted the issue. The story begins with the

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<sup>9</sup> Even the "literature of nihilism", among some current Western presumptions at "art", can be seen as a refusal of all thought systems, though its real meaning and function are questionable and debatable, and rather circumstantial.

hero's (or anti-hero) difficulties in obtaining a ticket to see Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing*. Suddenly he hits upon an idea of passing himself off as the son of a certain VIP. It works straightaway. The theatre responds obligingly and so does everyone else with whom he comes into contact. He gets access to all privileged facilities. Gradually he gets carried away by his deception and finds himself in the highest circles of Shanghai society. Finally the ploy blows up and he is arrested. Upon his arrest, he protests, "My only crime is that I am not the son of So-and-so. What if I really were his son?". The play did much more than just criticise the privileged class and the corruption prevalent in China, although on the surface, it directly attacked such phenomena and practices. The play was taken really seriously by the authorities at various levels, though their response was quite different. Whilst some officials did make an effort to review their behaviour and policies concerned, some ignored it, and others tried to suppress the play by claiming that it had distorted reality and exaggerated an isolated incident. The play, among others, was chosen for debate and discussion at a twenty-day National Drama Symposium held in Beijing in January 1980. The Symposium was attended by many important Party officials and well-known writers and critics, such as Zhou Yang, Xia Yan, Zhang Geng and Chen Huangmei. Hu Yaobang, the Party Secretary-General, also gave a lengthy speech (China Social Sciences Academy:1985:479) which was quite balanced in view and genuine and sensitive in spirit.

However, due to an internal dispute in the leadership, the play was singled out as an example of a tendency that had to be curbed. Although the authorities eventually had the play banned, it raised an important issue in Chinese politics that had to be faced in the years to come. However, some other works containing similar

themes were to find access to the canon of contemporary Chinese literature. Here is an excerpt from Gao Xiaosheng's *Li Shunda Builds a House*. The hero laments that:

Nowadays, 'rounded heads'<sup>10</sup> are not as good as 'nodded heads'.<sup>11</sup>

Big officials have it delivered to their doors, small officials must open back doors; and common people can only implore other people.  
(Gao Xiaosheng:1982:360)

Gao's sarcastic tone did not obscure his biting criticism of the official corruption prevalent in China. His work was not only directed at the leaders in the central power structure, but also pointed to the officials at the grass-roots level. It highlighted the fact that contemporary Chinese society had metamorphosed into a new hierarchy centred around the Party and Government officials in proportion to the power they held. This made the authorities as well as the ordinary reader realise that this phenomenon was not only undesirable, but destructive. In a country like China where literature was traditionally a moral crusade, such works were bound to have an impact on politics. Gao's works together with others, (i.e. authors such as Liu Binyan, Bai Hua, Liu Xinwu, Lu Wenfu) were deeply involved in a gradual process of democratisation of Chinese politics. They not only created a general atmosphere that was conducive to democratisation and coercion against corruption and nepotism, but also drew the attention of various state leaders to address the issue.

Deng himself was genuinely involved in the debate to clean up the corruption and bureaucratism, which had been initiated by the above-mentioned works. He issued his edict to clamp down on corrupt conduct among the Party

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<sup>10</sup> Official seals, as they were usually round.

<sup>11</sup> Personal connections or friends, as in China, people normally just nodded to friends.

officials. He said that “bureaucratism is a big and widespread problem in our Party’s and state’s political life. Its main phenomena and problems include: sitting aloft, abusing power, divorced from reality, and divorced from the masses, dogmatic thinking, lacking initiative, ... irresponsible, untrustworthy, ... suppressing democracy, ... looking after self-interests, and cheating and taking bribes ...”. (Deng:1980:287) Deng admitted that all these phenomena continued to exist in the Party’s and the state’s political life, and some were even beyond bearing. It is not difficult to detect a resemblance between the situation in China and a typical Western parliamentary debate. These works functioned in society as an information-disseminating mechanism which not only pointed to the problems, but also led the reader to see the problems in a unique way – as imaginative literature always implied that things were not that simple. The works also created a general atmosphere in which more direct measures against corruption were able to materialise with little resistance. Soon after their publication, quite a few laws regarding the officials’ public conduct were passed, other relevant laws were strengthened and many wrongdoers were disciplined and punished.<sup>12</sup> Some punishments were admittedly showcases to appease the public and warn potential offenders, while others were genuine penalisation.

### **Socialism Revisited**

Bai Hua, a celebrated veteran writer, spoke on behalf of many other Chinese writers at the Fourth Conference of Writers and Artists (1979):

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<sup>12</sup> This campaign led to a number of arrests of officials at various levels and the execution of a county Party chief in Guangdong Province in 1980 and 1981.

We are trying to renew the tradition of realism in our country's literature! We are trying to bring back literature's minimal function – the reflection<sup>13</sup> of life in society.

...  
Our mission as writers and artists is given by history. All those who go against the laws of historical progress by putting pressure on literature to make it serve their political interests will ultimately fail.  
(Bai:1982:58)

During the years after the Cultural Revolution, many writers and artists functioned as an opposition to authoritarian power and many of their works had a profound consequence in Chinese politics. Political events, issues and ideas were shaped into works of art, which thus had a perpetual impact in Chinese society and politics. They not only confronted the issues of the day, but were to continue to render the actual political process and add new interpretations to Chinese society and politics.

One of the persistent and on-going themes in contemporary literature had been the effort by the writers to make sense of Chinese socialism. Soon after the Cultural Revolution, literary themes moved once again into a concern about socialism in contemporary China in view of the tragedy inflicted upon the Chinese people by a distorted version. The presentation of these themes and issues in literature represented a genuine breakthrough in public discourse and exploration into the areas where most writers had feared to tread since 1957.

The 1949 Revolution brought China a completely new social system, theoretically based on Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, practically modelled after the Soviet Union. From an economic point of view, any revolution or change of social system was supposed to achieve either a greater economic efficiency or a fairer distribution of social wealth. In the initial years after the

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<sup>13</sup> Although “reflection” is the correct translation of the Chinese equivalent “*fanying*”, perhaps “mirror” in this context would be a better translation literally and metaphorically.

Revolution, China seemed to have achieved both. Literary works like *Morning of Shanghai* by Zhou Erfu certainly had a role to play in such a process.

The book was one of the earliest examples thematically concerned with the issue of socialism. Zhou Erfu's novel *Morning of Shanghai* was published in 1958. The author convincingly portrayed a picture of the early days of the People's Republic, when the state had not yet gained possession of all the properties that the national capitalists had possessed. The state policy to take over ownership of the capitalists' properties was divided into two stages. First, the state furnished the capitalists with the orders for the production of the merchandise and purchased the goods. Second, the state was to buy over part of the ownership and started a state-private co-operation and management of the factories and firms and divided the profits. The working masses enthusiastically supported the Party's policy of reforming the capitalists. Nevertheless, limited by their lack of schooling and education, it was impossible for them to understand the whole concept and principle of socialism. They were conditioned by their social and economic status and the traditional simplistic Chinese conception of egalitarianism. Their understanding of socialist revolution at the time was limited to a demand for a fairer distribution of wealth, namely, an immediate alienation of capitalists' assets. The book approached the issue in a striking and uncompromising manner covering both the theoretical and practical aspects. The novel turned out to be a profound contemplation of political reality and its concerns and expressions soon made an impact on China's social and political life.

Because it was held that the revolutionary leadership had mastered "the truth" in socialism, different views were held to be either of less important nature or

detrimental to the socialist cause. Hence alternative expressions through normal political channels were discouraged, if not completely obstructed, and questions of the theories and practice of socialism were never addressed except in official media. Thus literature was found to be the only possible channel for expressing proper concerns. Due to what Kundera described as the “spirit of the novel”, its narrative tended to defy any fixed idea about the system and exclude any totalitarian truth propounded by the prevailing thought system. *The Morning of Shanghai* turned out to play an extraordinary role in the formation of a constructive political atmosphere and in the later socialist reconstruction. It was instrumental to many later political developments in Chinese society. Exactly for this reason, this particular book was singled out and attacked for its revisionist tendencies.

After the death of Mao, imaginative literature in China became closely and subtly intertwined and implicated with Chinese politics. “The overturning of previous verdicts caused many people to question the merit of socialism, the role of the Party or at least the sagacity of its leaders, particularly the part that Mao Zedong had played”. (Ching:1979:693) It must also be pointed out that literature substantially raised the critical and political literacy and awareness after thirty years of rigid one-dimensional indoctrination. Literature in the post-Mao period led the reader to see his situation in a new perspective and to realise new possibilities that had not been there before. It further led to changes in his beliefs and values as well as in his actions.

Gao Xiaosheng, by adopting a satirical but humorous tone, showed a deep concern of socialism in his works. His first major work, *Li Shunda Builds a House* (1979) depicts the situation in the countryside, and is his first serious attempt to



question both the theoretical basis and the effective reality of the socialist concept in China. Li Shunda's great ambition in life was to build a brick house of his own. But this ambition was time and again thwarted. His building materials, which he had carefully and painstakingly accumulated over the years, were first commandeered during the Great Leap Forward Campaign. The local Party leader told him to sacrifice a small individual property for a better future. Having an unconditional faith in the Party, he gladly obliged. After that it was the so-called three-year famine, and then the Cultural Revolution. He was never to see the better life that he had sacrificed so much for. Although the tone of the novel is satirical, a close reading will reveal that a serious attempt lies beneath Gao Xiaosheng's satire:

In his (the hero of the story, Li Shunda) eyes, doing socialism is nothing but 'both upstairs and downstairs, both electric lights and telephones'. It is basically a matter of building houses. But, he thinks that a two-storied house is not as convenient as a one-story bungalow. He would rather prefer downstairs to upstairs, so he wants only to build a bungalow. But then he isn't sure whether building a bungalow can be considered socialism. Electric lights he is in favour of having, but telephones are not necessary. He doesn't have that many relatives or friends, so what's the use of a telephone? When the children break it, it costs money to repair. Isn't it an unlucky thing for the household?

Since he once said that a two-storied house is not as convenient as a bungalow and it costs too much to repair a damaged telephone, this is proof that he viciously attacked socialism. (Gao Xiaosheng:1982: 348)

The message is conveyed in a rather humorous way. On surface, the passage shows some questioning of the understanding and practice of socialism. However, the real message goes deeper. Subject to the historical and political experiences of the reader it brought the reader to re-view the concept and practice of Chinese socialism in a new and different light. It heightened his awareness, increased his sensibility of the

issue and created a sense of collective remembering of the years in which “the revolution was so earth-shaking that it pretty much scorched the earth”. (Gao Xiaosheng:1982:360) It also infringed the authority’s monopoly over political discussions and understanding and brought the debate of socialist issues into the public arena. The novel was enthusiastically reviewed in most major journals and newspapers. One critique suggests that Gao Xiaosheng:

... continually attempts to teach a true understanding of reality and grasp the truth about things. He conscientiously and tirelessly seeks to discover the complicated underlying currents of life. Therefore, his works give an impression of considerable weight. (Dong Jian:1980)

The author contemplatively revisited the realm of socialism. However, his revisit was not based on concepts and arguments directly borrowed from political discourse, but was deeply rooted in the lives of ordinary people like Li Shunda and in the vast territory of China and the depth of Chinese culture. The author not only showed great sympathy for ordinary people, whose well-being socialism was supposed to serve, but also expressed his hatred for those who showed callousness or bigotry in their dealings with the people. He was also engaged, wittingly or unwittingly, in a process that generated a new social and political discourse through the philosophy of literary irony. His works simultaneously distanced and defamiliarised politics, and also drew the issue to the centre of Chinese culture, and thus contributed significantly to Chinese people’s political awareness of concepts such as dignity, justice and freedom.

*The Sieve* (1980), one of Gao’s Chen Huansheng Series<sup>14</sup> novels, displays his witty literary style and his political commitment. In a way, the story prefigures

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<sup>14</sup> Gao wrote a series of novels based on the same character named Chen Huansheng, a peasant. Through him Gao portrayed the changes that were under way in China’s vast countryside.

the work of the Czech writer Milan Kundera. In this novel, the hero, Chen Huansheng is so desperate about his plight that he decides to go and ask the school teacher to write a letter to a newspaper to complain about his difficulties as a farmer:

Chen Zhengqing (the school teacher, representing the educated in rural China)<sup>15</sup> assumed a serious demeanour and shook his head. 'I can't do it', he uttered.

'Why not?'

'In socialist society the facts which you told me about do not exist.'

'But this is my own personal experience. Would I lie to you?'

'I know you wouldn't lie', Chen Zhengqing suddenly blazed. 'But what you don't understand is that facts must serve needs. Facts must all go to show that socialism is paradise – therefore what you have been telling me is not facts. If I were to write such a letter for you, it would certainly be called a poisonous weed. I wouldn't only lose my job, I would be smashed to the ground never to rise again'. (Gao Xiaosheng:1980:45)

The ironic tone and child-like innocence of the dialogue made the novel unique. The author rendered a common conversation into an almost perpetual irony about the political life. The work not only functioned as a question of socialist practice and a comment on the politics of the day, but through irony the work also operated in the aesthetic sphere which certainly opposed a wholesale *kudos* of other thought systems. By rewriting the recent history of socialist China, writers like Gao gave an insight and a different perspective into what had been taken for granted in Chinese society for decades. More importantly, by introducing such themes into the Chinese cultural arena, institutionalised thinking and doctrine were questioned. Although Gao used concrete everyday words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places and activities in contemporary Chinese society, his work did not "confer meaning on these elements, but rather (transformed) their initial meanings into some new and heightened construction of meaning, for that very reason, neither the creation nor the

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<sup>15</sup> Brackets added.

interpretation of the work (could) ever be an arbitrary process". (Jameson:1971:402-3)

Subsequently these themes brought fresh elements, especially irony, into Chinese political culture, which would make Chinese politics and culture wiser and more healthy. Kundera notes that the novel is, by definition, the ironic art: its "truth" is concealed, undeclared and undeclarable. (Kundera:1990a:134) Kundera continues to argue that "irony irritates. Not because it mocks or attacks but because it denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity".<sup>16</sup> (Kundera:1990a:134) This is exactly what Gao's works achieved. His works did not dwell on emotional exposure and attacks, but offered perspectives and possibilities by recognising China's successes and as well as failures. They offered intimate knowledge of Chinese politics in a way that *economic and scientific data could never do*.

### **Socialism Revised**

The 1980s was a decade of national economic development and enlightenment in China. Many authors were stimulated by the development and directed their attention towards economic issues, which were actually fundamentally political. Their works might not provide well-considered economic models or scientific data, however, to dismiss them as purely fictitious and literary would be a loss to society's understanding of itself and its economic and political life.

The major concern of Chinese literature soon began to expand to see Chinese socialism in a different light. Many authors in their writings realised that civil society should not be subordinated to the state and politics should not rule over the

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<sup>16</sup> However, it has to be pointed out irony can operate as a ruse to truth as well.

market any more. Issues of social, economic and political reforms found their way into the contemporary imaginative literature after the Party's Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Congress.<sup>17</sup>

In view of the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square (1989), the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1990), the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and the more recent drift towards the right in many European states, socialism has come under intense critical scrutiny. Against such a background it would seem difficult to strike a balance on any discussion on socialism. However, imaginative literature seemed to offer a constructive discourse, for literature by exploiting every aspect of life always suggested that things were not as clear-cut as they seemed and hence was able to procreate a wholesome and reflective view of the world appealing to both reason and emotion. It is *àpropos* to pursue the following argument by examining what political scientists have to say. Saunders, for example, argues rather cynically that:

... every time practical socialism is found to have been a disaster, the theories are responded so as to protect the basic belief that socialism will one day realise the dream rather than repeating the nightmare. Everywhere, socialism is found to have been repressive – the Soviet show trials in the thirties, the forced collectivisation of the peasantry, the invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, the butchery of the Cultural Revolution, the killing fields of Kampuchea, the shootings at the Berlin Wall, the tanks in Tiananmen Square, yet the fundamental belief in socialism as a human and compassionate way of organising human affairs still persists as strongly as ever.

How can all the accumulated experience of the human suffering inflicted by socialism be so easily ignored by people whose full-time job it is to analyse and reflect upon the organisation of modern societies? The answer is today as it has always been. Actually existing socialism, we are told, is not the real thing. It is a distortion.

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<sup>17</sup> It is still considered a very important event in China's contemporary history. At the congress in 1978, the Party put forward a new policy to "liberate the mind, mobilise the resources, seek the truth, unite and look forward". The Party announced its shift of its central programme from that of a political one to that of an economic one. (China Social Sciences Academy:1985:466)

It went wrong. Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Honescker, Ceausescu – they were all mistakes. Next we will get it right. (Saunders:1993:90)

On the other hand, Martell in his article in *Economy and Society* argues that:

... the failings of socialism have been in its methods (state ownership and central planning, for instance) rather than its ends (equality, co-operation and internationalism, for example) and once the statist means of socialism are rid of, there is a lot left that is indispensable. In fact the ends of socialism remain more or less unscathed, if not more pressing than ever. (Martell:1992:153)

The conventional Chinese socialist concept had been held to consist of three inseparable dimensions: an all-pervading authoritarianism, centralised economic planning, and highly co-ordinated collective orientation. Until this moment few had challenged these dimensions as part of the socialist state. Either by choice or by default, many writers also expressed some degree of support for official views in their writings, which contributed to disseminating and promoting such views. In respect of the Cultural Revolution, writers came to learn a very important artistic and political lesson: that they should not follow external laws. “Literary subjectivity” itself was the source and the meaning of literature. (Liu in Dong:1992:483) Marcuse also defends this view and argues that “the *nomos* which art obeys is not that of the established reality principle but of its negation”. (Marcuse:1979:73) Thus literature forms a permanent flux. It draws into itself new meanings from social and political development and then passess them back into society and gives it a push.<sup>18</sup>

Many writers began to understand the nature of state socialism and to address its problems. One of the works attempting to make sense of the reality was Jiang Zilong’s novella, *The Director, Qiao Assumes Office*, which started the so-

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<sup>18</sup> A distinction has to be drawn between the concept of permanent flux and change of “fashion”. “Fashion” is a form of external imposition which passes so fleetingly from one to the next that people assume that they are “free” thinking subjects.

called “reform literature” in post-Mao China. The author’s fictionalisation of China’s situation in terms of socialism foreshadowed Martell’s basic argument. The story was set in urban industry in the immediate post-Mao period. A machinery manufacturing factory was on the verge of bankruptcy because of its inefficiency and mismanagement incurred by the so-called big iron bowl (secured life-long job, state ownership, and lack of incentive and initiative on the part of both employers and employees). After assuming office as director, Qiao put a series of measures and policies into practice, such as forcibly making workers redundant; putting them on some sort of training schemes, and of course on a lower pay; introducing performance-related pay; and creating a so-called individual responsibility system. This was a rather radical view at the time, though the author had no knowledge that at the same moment, ten thousand miles away, a newly-elected Prime Minister was introducing some very similar “supplieside policies” to “revive” the country’s economy.<sup>19</sup>

This work was widely welcomed. Many critiques were focused on Qiao, the hero in the story, regarding him as an ideal reformer to champion the cause of economic reform. He had qualities that were highly regarded as mandatory for modernisation of the country, such as balanced thinking, broad-mindedness, conscientiousness, and a good knowledge and expertise in economic management and technology. (China Social Sciences Academy:1985:169) Though many of the critiques realised the work’s importance in Chinese literature and social and political

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<sup>19</sup> This study makes no attempt to evaluate Mrs Thatcher’s intention of introducing such a policy, or its consequences. This passing comment just tries to show that literary authors are equally (if not more) concerned about economic and political issues and questions. This coincidence can also, to some extent, explain Mrs Thatcher’s popularity, though how much this entrepreneurial culture contributed to China’s economic growth in the short and long term remains to be a question.

life, they still tried to see and explain the work at the surface level attributing the economic problems to the rule of the Gang of Four. They tried to find solutions to China's economic problems in a literary character like Qiao. This view, however, was not completely groundless. Jiang's novels and short stories were usually written in a very plain traditional realistic style, which directed the reader's attention to a superficial meaning. This is a story without much irony. However, with the experience of the contemporary inefficiency of the system and the practice of dogmatic state socialism in China, criticism could somehow reposition itself *vis-à-vis* more profound questions such as state ownership *versus* competition and efficiency, human nature *versus* politics, means *versus* ends and so on, which were more subtly conveyed in the text. Qiao pictured a system that had failed.

*The Director Qiao Assumes Office* provoked many questions to the existing economic and political system, to which any answer was bound to be a complex one. The story posed a challenge to an out-dated system and an orthodox mode of thinking, but it also recognised the social and political limitations in China at the time. It is this complex interplay of unresolved problems of an economic and socio-political nature, and an aesthetic desire that prompted many Chinese writers to explain China's situation from a new angle. Jiang's discourse was not so much subversive as constructive. It tried to restore good sense and dignity to politics and to revise the philosophy of a system "within the possible" in Chinese society.<sup>20</sup>

Literature like this denied dogmas from either left or right. It recognised Chinese reality, successes and problems – as novels usually tell us "things are not as

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<sup>20</sup> This argument derives from Edward Said's dictum – working within the possible. (Said:1980, 1985,1993)



simple as you think”. (Kundera:1990a:18) As Kundera points out that “the novel’s spirit is the spirit of complexity. ... That is the novel’s eternal truth, but it grows steadily harder to hear amid the din of easy, quick answers that come faster than the question and block it off”. (Kundera:1990a:18)

Wang Runzi’s *The Descendants of Lu Ban*<sup>21</sup> was another work to provoke wide-ranging reviews and serious debates. Lao Liang, an old, diligent and virtuous carpenter was caught up in the years of economic reform in the countryside. His workshop went bankrupt and closed down because he did not have the courage to contract it out. He was the sort of man who lacked initiative in economic life, but there resided in him at the same time the good tradition of honesty, diligence and altruism. All these qualities were well instituted in the socialist ideals, but unfortunately did not contribute much to the economic well-being of the people. His faith in socialism was largely in line with his traditional work ethics. His understanding of socialism was as much due to social and political conditioning as to a sense of traditional value,<sup>22</sup> which was bound to be confronted in the new situation. His son had been on the run to escape criticism for having set up a privately owned carpentry workshop. Later he came back to the village and contracted out the workshop. He discarded most of the qualities of traditional craftsmanship and was determined to run his workshop in a very business-like and mercenary fashion. The consequences were not hard to predict. Money became the

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<sup>21</sup> Lu Ban was a historical figure, who invented carpentry tools and worked really hard to perfect his skills and his working ethics. He is remembered for his craftsmanship and uprightness even to the present day.

<sup>22</sup> For a very long period of time, the small-scale household agricultural production and way of life led to form a concept among the average Chinese people that unequal distribution of wealth was much more unacceptable than scarcity. Thus they tended to favour and accept those social systems in which fair distribution was stressed.

first priority and the quality of the goods went down. All the traits of early capitalist society began to reveal themselves. Finally the young carpenter had to leave the village because his goods were so badly made that they had to be refunded. In the end the old carpenter had to take over the workshop and ran it in a compromising way. The story ended with a contemplative and uncertain tone.

It was almost impossible for the critics and readers to remain neutral and objective. Some expressed their concern that this novel, by placing the young carpenter in a noxious light, might derail the on-going reform. (Yin:1992:260) Yin Yu pointed out that although the novel was concerned with the most sensitive areas in politics and society and engaged in a political understanding of the reality and policies, the author's sympathy seemed to rest with the old tradition, which was quite unhealthy. (Yin:1992:259) Yin also noted that Wang Runzi's portrayal of some incidental aspects of the economic reform could easily overflow into a doubt about on-going social and political development. The book somehow advocated a philosophy which suggested that if human hearts did not worship the old,<sup>23</sup> morals were bound to deteriorate. (Yin:1992:259) Although Yin's view could be justified in some senses, his reading of the text was rather simplistic and echoed Plato's banishment of the poet from his Republic!

However, others recognised the complexity of the text and realised that its impact on *realpolitik* was not solely due to its content, for literary values register in the content *and* form. When form is separated from content, literature loses its power and is reduced to a sort of appendage to other forms of knowledge, and has no

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<sup>23</sup> The "old" here embodies the old generation, the old values and tradition that Lao Liang represents in line with the traditional Chinese custom of respecting old age.

value of its own. Mei Duo disagreed with Yin's view of the text, arguing that it was obvious that some of the old habits were so deeply rooted that some people were still trying to illustrate a literary text by judging if it accorded with some external criteria regardless of the fact that it was a literary text. (Mei:1992:271) Its message did not stop where the story ends. Other critics and readers held a more balanced view likening it to a modern symphony. Lei Da was more philosophical about the text arguing that the text gave the reader hope as well as thought in this historical moment. It symbolised that the old order was passing away, and the new order was born, though the birth was not without discomfort. (Lei:1992:261)

The efforts that these authors had put into their works, to some extent, restored the Chinese realist tradition pioneered by Lu Xun early this century, using literature "as a means of fighting for social justice and reforming society". (Chinnery:1982:415) As long as Chinese writers did not stop writing they would continue to "ask questions". Enjoying the limited freedom they were given they courageously set out to probe wider areas in China's social, cultural and political life even after the more direct political expression was subdued.

### **Literature – A Herald for Humanistic Values**

A few years after the Cultural Revolution was called off, imaginative writers gradually re-established their professional ingenuity. The subject matters of the fiction deepened and widened. A much more contemplative and thought-provoking writing emerged trying to reveal the roots of social and political injustice and to make sense of Chinese society as it developed. These writers began to produce works which were concerned with the well-being of the nation and human

values in general. They began to understand China through a more daring inquiry of the nature of the Chinese nation. Compared with the manner in which the issues of the Cultural Revolution were handled by the writers, the way they approached other issues of a more fundamental nature was much more sophisticated.

One of the questions that informed their writings at the time was a serious concern about the Chinese political system which had been distorted into what was surely the opposite of its aim. Many Chinese writers tried to ask why a system which was *based* on public ownership of the means of production (generally recognised as fairer and more egalitarian) had turned into a “quasi-fascist” regime. Their writings also raised many issues, such as: why the system was subject to such extreme abuse of power; whether it was an inevitable progression (or just a mutation) from Party dictatorship to Mao’s despotism; how such enormities could have been committed with practically complete immunity in a country which claimed to be egalitarian and socialist? – especially since many of the actual crimes were not carried out by the conspirators themselves but, to a considerable extent, perpetrated by the state mechanism.

These questions penetrated the writings of the Chinese writers who bore a commitment to social and political justice and progress. However, to expect imaginative writers to answer social and political questions is not only an unrealistic demand for the authors, but is also a misunderstanding of the relationship between politics and literature. Though literature does provide the reader with information or understanding of different ways of life, its importance lies in its ability to “affect the way people see their own lives”. (Zuckert:1995:189) Writers “practise an insidious form of rhetoric. They persuade us to see the world the way they do by establishing

the context and deciding what is important without our being aware of it". (Zuckert:1995:189) It is this kind of rhetoric which is interlaced with psychology, sociology, history, politics, critical theory and other forms of knowledge that makes literature a unique form of wisdom and insight and adds understanding to politics.

After the initial stage of redressing the wrongs of the Cultural Revolution, and questioning the system and its mechanism, many writers manifested their readiness to go beyond their earlier lines of vision by breaking into the so-called "forbidden zones" in Chinese literature and eventually in Chinese politics. These writers wished to eliminate all the falsification and gratuitousness evident in literature and art in the previous age. They were ready to break free from intellectual and political restraints in all forms until they were wiped out for good from literature and art production. Their writings in recent years (i.e. since 1981) reflect so very clearly the authors' deep concerns about the future of China and human values which can be seen in impassioned writing and fine irony. They were working towards a literature that would not only bear witness to the first thirty stormy years of the People's Republic, but would also enrich China's intellectual and political thinking, which was to exert an impact on the transformation and development of contemporary Chinese social, economic and political life.

Only after the Cultural Revolution, did China realise the enormity and extent of the damage it had inflicted on itself. China was not only on the brink of an overall economic collapse, but more tragically the whole country was brought into a political and intellectual crisis. Literature, thanks to its revelatory power and perceptive narrative became the major forum to tackle the crisis in order to articulate an intellectual explanation.

After the Cultural Revolution, enlightened as well as disturbed by their experience, Chinese writers began to question the retrenched but uncertain status of humanism in the whole concept of Marxist socialism. Accordingly, the concept of alienation became a current catchword in both literary and political discourse in order to debunk the roots of the atrocities that had prevailed for over a decade. In the light of the trauma, they came to understand that alienation was still a predominant aspect in society even after the Revolution which had overthrown the exploiting class. They became more concerned about social amelioration, political justice and human values in all aspects of life through the free development of individuality. It had been categorised as a forbidden area because it ran contrary to the official ideology of collectivism. Thanks to the policy of “opening to the outside world” after the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Congress, the Chinese writers found expression and articulation in modern literature and philosophy, which projected a liberating thinking onto the social, political and *cultural* arenas.

Yu Dafu, a well-known Chinese writer, in assessing the role of modern Chinese literature in the years after the May Fourth Movement, argued:

... the literary revolution was an integral part of the ideological revolution, and the newly awakened self-consciousness of the Chinese intelligentsia exemplified humanitarianism and individualism sweeping China’s literary scene. ...

This new literary thinking negated feudal dogmas, attacked decadent conventions and guided by the call for scientific and democratic ideas led to the unfolding of an all around revolution in literature. (Yu:1982:171)

He maintained that literature contributed to the discovery of new meaning and the individual in society. (Yu:1982:102) Literature was like cement for a nation. It

worked towards building the most just and most progressive society (Yu:1978: 233) Many decades on, the basic role and function of the imaginative literature remained the same. Inspired by patriotism and enlightenment, Chinese men of letters in the early twentieth century were anxious to stimulate the masses, to rebuild China's image and to help it regain its prosperity and strength through the medium of literature. Later this torch was handed down to Lu Xun, the greatest Chinese writer of the century. Lu Xun had abandoned a career of medicine to take up literary writing in the belief that China's illness was not so much "physical" as in the "soul" and "spirit". He was distressed about the decline of the country and the ignorance of the masses and believed that literature was the best means of all to serve the purpose to revive the nation and liberate the people. Even Mao, who usually had a mixed opinion of modern literary writers, spoke highly of Lu Xun:

Lu Xun breached and stormed the enemy citadel; on the *cultural*<sup>24</sup> front he was the bravest and most correct, the firmest, the most loyal and the most ardent national hero, a hero without parallel in our history. The road he took was the very road of China's new national culture. (Mao:1964:691)

Although this revolutionary tradition was once restrained by Mao himself and his own theory of literature, it was unswervingly honoured by most writers. The very spirit of Lu Xun was his rebellion against social and political injustice, and his ardent search for truth and emancipation on both the political and aesthetic plane. Lu Xun's works represented a true humanistic search for an emancipation of sensibility and imagination, a struggle for liberation from oppression and the corruption of the day. His works have been read and reappropriated in various

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<sup>24</sup> See Note 7, Introduction.

historical circumstances where struggles against the monopoly of power and the domination of the established order arise.

An ideological and intellectual vacuum caused by the crisis of political faith provided an opportunity for young intellectuals “to pursue their own interests by seeking the ‘self’ and ‘individuality’” in their work. (Li:1986:267) These intellectuals (in the fields of literature, art, philosophy, film and mass media and higher education) drew their intellectual inspiration partly from contemporary foreign literature and philosophy – such as existentialism, neo-Marxism, modernism, psychoanalysis and fantastic realism – to review China’s realities in a way that politics and other social science discourses were not able to articulate. Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Joyce and Faulkner were widely read in China in the hope of restoring human values and dignity, as their predecessors had gained inspiration from Ibsen, Shaw, Voltaire and Goethe to help create a modern Chinese identity, characterised by the introduction of a new form of language, the creation of a realist modern literature and a call for “self” emancipation in the early decades of this century.

After the initial stage of the post-Mao period, imaginative literature, especially the novel, though being regarded today as not immediately immanent on the world of things, still reported “on ideologies of our cultural moment” (Davis:1980:145), and possessed an incomparable capacity to participate in a semi-journalistic discourse. Hence, Chinese imaginative writers, almost unaided, once again took on this historical mission which could have been shared by other media in a more open society. This led to a rapid thriving of literary works focusing on humanism and human values in a socialist state. Furthermore a



nation-wide debate on the philosophy of humanism and socialism was triggered off bringing about a change of social and political discourse and behaviour.<sup>25</sup>

The writers showed great concern and interest in the concept of humanism. Their works were characterised by the use of this political controversy and polemics. The works were notable for their liberal and humanitarian interests, their predilection of social and political concerns.

Many of their writings echoed a concern with the questions cited at the beginning of this section. The attempts to answer such questions soon became fused with the concern about humanism and human values, something which they felt had been eroded by the ideological insistence on viewing man perpetually in terms of his class nature. They appreciated that the nation needed new intellectual and political vigour and dynamics in order to reconstruct itself. A new kind of political thinking was regarded to be imperative in order to prevent similar destructions. However, many people working in the fields of theory and ideology were trying hard to look for the right rhetoric and discourse to deliver their message. With the official media and propaganda apparatus still in the control of the central authorities, direct political praxis, though having raised an awareness in society to a degree about the crisis that the Cultural Revolution had inflicted, was limited in its ability to bring new dimensions to Chinese society and politics.

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<sup>25</sup> A national symposium on human nature and humanism was held in October 1980 in Tianjin. The topics discussed included: human nature in class society, class nature and universal human nature, literature and human nature, the concept of alienation and Marxism and humanism and so on. A large volume of articles were published in newspapers and journals and some of them were collected in Chen Huangmei (ed.) (1988) *An Anthology of Chinese Literature and Art*. Other works, such as *Director Qiao Assumes Office* and *The Descendants of Lu Ban*, also sparked off nation-wide debate and discussions on questions of economic reforms.

Encouraged by the political relaxation, many writers and some philosophers awoke to their intellectual conscience and began to produce some “real literature”,<sup>26</sup> which the country had been denied for decades. This led to a cultural renaissance and political revival which focused on human values in a mass state. And also “it was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, ... Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation”. (Bhabha:1993:49)

Li Zehou, one of the leading Chinese writers and philosophers, notes that in China humanistic theory developed from the social needs of the “wakening eighties”. (Li:1986:267) Following the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese nation called for a philosophical theory that would restore human dignity and values. Words such as “freedom, equality, fraternity, human rights ... (which) accord with the people’s wishes, desires and intentions” (Li:1986:267) thus penetrated many literary writings. Humanistic theory expressed what had long been suppressed in Chinese society, calling on people to struggle for their individual rights, so long denied them. In the realisation of what the Party’s political dogma had cost the country and what damage it had inflicted on Chinese “humanity” and economy, many intellectuals began to turn elsewhere for political and philosophical inspirations and alternatives.

Dai’s novel *Man, Ah Man!* [*Ren, A Ren!*] published in 1980 was one of the most notable efforts and attempts yet to fathom the existential meaning of the Mao

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<sup>26</sup> For definition, see Note 5, Chapter 1.

era from 1957 to the late 1970s. It not only attempted to review China's social and political conditions till then, but also broke away from the instituted literary and political boundaries. It brought in a different political rhetoric and thinking into Chinese society and helped to raise a genuine political consciousness among Chinese people. Gladys Yang wrote one of the early critiques saying:

The title, alone, was enough to shock the ultra-leftist<sup>27</sup> old guard because they had been accustomed to assessing people according to their class origin; landlords, rich peasants, intellectuals and others were "badies", and the workers, peasants and soldiers basically were "goodies".<sup>28</sup> How could one lump them all together as "people"?<sup>29</sup> This novel gave a realistic picture of how the Cultural Revolution had distorted and broken down the comradely attitudes between people that had existed previously.<sup>30</sup> It made a strong plea for showing concern for each individual and for introducing a socialist humanitarianism which would be better than bourgeois humanitarianism as a hypocritical way of covering up class distinction. The hero of this novel argues that social problems should be solved not by class struggle but by humanitarianism, which he sets in opposition to politics, and this is considered un-Marxist.

Dai was the first writer to preach humanitarianism, and her novel created quite a sensation, partly because it is well-written and in a form which is rather unusual for China; she tells the story through the mouths of different characters in turn. The literary establishment did not like the content of the novel and the debate on humanitarianism is still continuing. (Yang:1985:513)

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<sup>27</sup> "Ultra-leftist", at that time, usually referred to radicals during the Cultural Revolution, i.e. the Gang of Four and their followers and the members in the Lin Biao Clique. The Party officials reinstated after the downfall of the Gang of Four were normally deemed as moderate. Later the term was loosely referred to those who opposed the economic reform and political relaxation in other areas in the late eighties.

<sup>28</sup> It is quite clear that Yang was being sarcastic. However, what she described was an even more simplified classification of an already very simplified vision of the class system in China.

<sup>29</sup> "People" here refers to the title of Dai's novel *Man, Ah Man!*. The Chinese language does not have the plural form of the noun without a numeral modifier. Thus "man" could be translated into "people", or "human being", or "humankind", which rejected the official rhetoric of the class nature of mankind.

<sup>30</sup> This contradicts what she says before. Moreover, how previously can it be dated back?

Though there are flaws and confusion in her critique of the novel, Yang has identified the importance of its publication. In the novel the author's own voice is distinct and obvious. The protagonist's long monologue (Chapter 20) embodies the most insistent theme of the novel – the possibility of reconciling Marxism and humanism. The novel expresses a unity between the two in their respect for the dignity and worth of individual human values, and their defence of independent views and opinions. Theory aside, much of the hero's humanism is actually derived from the example of his father's simple goodness and dignity in the face of oppression, starvation and death. A reconciliation between Marxism and humanism was reflected in the hero's life-long endeavour of writing a book on Marxism and humanism. Hence Marxism and humanitarianism, often conceived as opposing viewpoints in China's political discourse were united in Dai's vision of politics. It was an introspective and retrospective examination of China's political reality which offered an understanding of contemporary Chinese society, stimulated a sense of humanism and provided a new view of the self in a mass state.

The novel directly took as its main motif the theme of alienation, the treatment of which was regarded as a very daring attempt at that time. The subject of alienation later turned into a national political debate, which was joined by many critics and readers and finally the Party's new propaganda chief. During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people had been mesmerised by an ideology which they were made to believe was doing them good. Few people tended to challenge intellectually such a belief. Under such a system, "if you can't speak anything new and don't have your own thoughts, then you are the most

revolutionary". (Dai:1980:40) After the Cultural Revolution, people began to realise what such ideology had done to them. In such a system, humanism was considered anti-Marxist and anti-revolutionary. Humanism and Marxism were viewed as opposing and mutually exclusive. (Su Hongchang:1991:8) Dai subtly raised the question of alienation in her writings. These writings challenged the concept that after private ownership (which was seen as both the source and the outcome of alienation) was done away with and production materials were nationalised, the working people became the masters of the state and thus alienation was an irrelevant issue in a socialist state. *They questioned why the people's state had become a "feudal Fascist dictatorship" exercised by the Gang of Four and transmuted into a means to suppress people; why people's servants had metamorphosed into people's masters; and why the leader of the Party was deified as an almighty god. Consequently the people's state became a mechanism to suppress people's needs. The author attributed all these to a missing dimension in the practice of Marxism, i.e. human values and humanism.*

The author's theme of reconciliation of Marxism and humanism has two implications. First, it recognises that Marxism is still viewed as the guiding ideology in China. Second, it intends to bring a more humanistic dimension into society. Liu Binyan notes that over the years the taboo on words such as "human" and "human nature" had arisen out of a fear of contamination from the bourgeoisie. He justified the argument by *re-claiming* that Marx had never placed any taboo on man and his nature, (Liu:1982:128) He continues to defend individual rights by asserting that:

The idea of the individual and individuality is also a product of recent history and is of central interest to modern literature. An

important factor in promoting man's independence, achieving a reasonably full development of his hidden potential, and maintaining a reasonable pace of historical development is for him to enter the stage of history with independence, dignity and freedom. ... We now have the rights to discuss human dignity, human rights and the equality of all men in a socialist country. This is not out of some theoretical interest, but because the manifestations of feudal attitudes towards these problems have become an obstacle to the socialist modernisation of our present society.

To destroy the various obstacles in the path of real life and the people's traditional attitudes, to enable the Chinese people to have their due dignity and rights in the various spheres of life, to stand up like masters ... this is the task of contemporary literature, and it will be the most vital topic in the literature of our era. (Liu:1982:130)

According to most existentialists, from Kierkegaard to Sartre, man stands alone, alienated from any social or intellectual order, and is therefore, totally self-dependent. And he is very often found in a strange hostile social or political world, and possesses none of the social or political rights he is supposed to have in society. He is more like a product being processed on an assembly line or conveyor belt, having totally lost the identity of the self. In analysing this tendency, Dai's philosophy was similar to Sartre's in emphasising human values and self-determination on the one hand and the absurdness of the existing reality on the other. But at the same time, the novel did attempt to suggest a way out for the people who were struggling in such an alienated world. This philosophy was presented as a liberating and enlightening force for the Chinese people to cast off their bitterness and despair. Having endured the nightmare of the atrocities, the Chinese people needed to re-examine the nation's political ideology and re-address its political faith and identity. Solzhenitsyn once defined ideology, arguing that:

... the imagination and the spiritual strength of Shakespeare's evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no *ideology*. Ideology – this is what gives evil-doing its long-sought justification and gives the evil-doers the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which makes his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honours. That was how the agents of the inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their motherlands; the colonisers, by civilisation; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations. Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evil-doing on a scale calculated in the millions.<sup>31</sup> (Solzhenitsyn:1986 :173)

Ideology bears an overriding importance in Chinese political life. This obsession with ideology can be traced back to the Confucian tradition. For rectification of ideas is always a prerequisite for rectification of policy and practice – a belief shared by successive Chinese leaders. Unlike the Protestant ethic of the Western leaders – with their natural tendency to address the economic-political problems and issues directly and pragmatically to take direct action to solve the social problems and to attain what they wanted – Chinese leaders maintained a kind of highly unpragmatic political style which prevented them from effectively addressing socio-economic and political issues in a straight-forward manner. They cherished the belief that if you got the theory right, everything would be resolved accordingly. So a lot of emphasis was laid on theoretical verification. And in the sessions of the People's Congress or the Party's Congress, much time and attention was devoted to the "debate" or rather the dictate of the fundamental principles

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<sup>31</sup> Solzhenitsyn's analogy of the ideological force in Shakespeare's plays and ideology behind many large-scale human tragedies is most improper and simplistic, though still his statement can offer some insight into the argument. Undeniably there is ideology in Shakespeare's either evildoers or do-gooders, for instances, the monarchy and power. Moreover, the meaning of a dozen corpses on stage certainly does not stop at a dozen corpses and it has to be linked to the statement that "Denmark is a prison".

instead of major social and political issues. As it was a well-established fact that the core of modern Chinese ideology encompassed mainly Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, it was not only theoretically important, but also practically and strategically important to put some humanistic touch to it. Later this view came to be shared by other writers and critics and others and proved to have had good sense in terms of *realpolitik*.

Dai was trying to neutralise the official ideology of viewing people strictly according to their class backgrounds, by introducing her own political vision in her fiction. Her work was particularly concerned with *the human values and the meaning of human existence in post-Mao China*. Under the previous regime, political decisions were believed to be made in the general interests of the people and sacrifices were made for the future. According to her, this was only an illusion. With the concentration of power in the hands of the state, the class power of the old bourgeoisie and land-owning class was only replaced by the power of those who *de facto* controlled the means of production. They were thus in control of society in an even more absolute fashion. She expressed in her work that this was certainly a move backwards in history. As Lowenthal points out that abolition of feudalism obliged man to learn how to cope with countless problems that had formerly been taken care of by worldly and spiritual authorities. He argues: “together with the anxieties generated by this new autonomy (man) sensed as a great promise, for in the period of the formation of the national state and the development of a mercantile economy, his own future seemed to have infinite possibilities”. (Lowenthal:1957:v) Hence the freedom of man is seen to constitute the basis for human progress in modern history and any infringement on



individuality and human values could turn into coercion and prevent further social and political progress. Introduced by authors like Dai and enlightened by Sartre and the like, many critics and social scientists in China came to regard individual freedom to be “of primary importance to philosophical theory and the highest goal in life”. (Liu Xiaogan:1988) These humanist views placed “man” at the centre of the universe and saw the individual as the source and end of ideas, action and meaning; the world was explained primarily in individualised terms. Philosophy and literature in this tradition tended to stress the uniqueness and autonomy of each individual, emphasising freedom of choice, the imagination and the power of individual action. (Webster:1990)

Dai's *Man, Ah Man!* is basically a plotless work (in the conventional sense of plot as the story line) and consists of a series of testimonies by a number of characters who witnessed the tragic events. The author employs the modernist techniques of multiple first-person narration combined with internal monologues and non-linear time sequences (streams of consciousness) to explore the problematic areas of alienation in socialism, to articulate the relationship of the individual to history in Chinese society. All the means she adopted were instrumental to her exploration into an interplay between politics, history and personal life. The work posed a challenge to the existing social and political institutions in the form of a new philosophy. It contributed to a sense of revival of humanism and a revision of human values in a mass state after the trauma the country had gone through. This work categorically offered, to borrow Marcuse's words, “another *Reality Principle*, of estrangement – and only as estrangement

does art fulfil a *cognitive* function: it communicates truths not communicable in any other language; it *contradicts*". (Marcuse:1979:10)

The novel immediately gained great popularity and became the subject of ideological controversy, a controversy that was renewed in the 1983-4 campaign against "bourgeois liberalism" and "cultural pollution". The book was a focus of debate at many symposiums and conferences and in many national newspapers. A year after its publication, Yao Zhengming and Wu Mingying published their article "Exploring What Kind of 'Philosophy of Life'?"<sup>32</sup> criticising the book's compromising position between Marxism and humanism. The article was joined by a number of other articles carried in *Liberation Daily*, another important national daily newspaper based in Shanghai. However, a symposium held in Guangzhou two months later presented a more positive judgement about the work. Evidently, these discussions and conference were not just about an imaginative piece of work. They were an uncompromising political debate, a debate about real human values, a debate that had bearings on China's political future.

Another important work was Bai Hua's film script, *Bitter Love* (1979), which demonstrated what a system decked out with all the ideological attributes of order and justice could do to the individual by degrading human values. Here, two intellectuals were driven into exile by political turmoil, completely alienated from society and the human world. The story ends quite tragically; in the end one had to leave the country he loved, and the other was still on the run dragging himself on in a snow-clad wilderness, without knowing that the fall of the Gang of Four, who

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<sup>32</sup> The article was published in one of the leading newspapers in China, *Literary Gazette Daily* on October 17, 1981. (China Social Sciences Academy:1985:518-9)

were supposed to be responsible for their sufferings, had been overpowered by the so-called Party's correct line. The track left behind him was gradually taking the shape of a big question mark. Based on this ending, some official critics either confined the interpretation of the text within the time "now past", or just read the literal meaning of the text saying that the work was a complete negation of the Party and the socialist system. Although the story ended with a pessimistic tone, the reader always received a literary text in an enlightened way, which constituted the force of literature in history and society. Many critics and readers found the story quite uplifting, for after tragedy came the "sublime".

Although the work's exact meaning and degree of its pessimism were the subject of critical discussion, a pessimistic ending need not necessarily incur despair among readers and was not an end itself. "The pessimism of art is not counterrevolutionary. It serves to war against the 'happy consciousness' of radical praxis: as if all that which art invokes and indicts could be settled through the class struggle". (Marcuse:1979:14) Quite the contrary, the realisation of alienation and the harsh reality would incur a sense of new beginning in the reader and help him rationalise his own situation and raise his political consciousness. The author's technique of presenting strong images and symbols worked exceptionally well on the screen towards portraying a really powerful view of alienation in a highly politicised society, in which man's private space and independent thinking were largely eliminated. It was the cinematic version of the text that contracted an all-round attack and eventually a ban on the book.

The play *If I Were Real?*, (the main theme of which has been previously discussed) is on the surface a satire about official corruption and abuse of power.

However, its underlying theme is also about alienation and loss of identity. In a highly centralised and restrained society, man tends to lose his own identity and values as an individual human being. Impersonation can be seen as loss of self and displacement in society.

This advocacy of human values and the discussion of alienation were regarded by the authorities as a heresy which could undermine the validity of official ideology and the collective basis of the socialist system. It was assumed by the official theorists before 1978 that emphasising the concept of alienation was tantamount to advocating bourgeois individualism.

Liu Binyan argued, at the Fourth National Writers' Conference, that "socialist man should have greater dignity, pride, and perfection than man under the capitalist system. Capitalism freed man from the fetters of feudalism, giving him a measure of freedom, rights and dignity". (Liu:1982:126) Initiated and inspired by the publication of a few so-called controversial novels, "people all over the country are taking part in the debate on the question of literature, a question that is intimately tied up with people's lives. Once the masses find their voice, we can be sure that the truth will become increasingly clear through debate". (Bai:1982:59)

### **Literature as a Human Essay – Towards a Political Philosophy**

Kavolis in his "Political Dynamics and Artistic Creativity" points out:

... artistic creativity tends to be stimulated by disturbances of political latency; inhibited during the periods of most intensive goal – directed action; maximised in the phase of social – emotional integration normally following such periods; and again reduced in the subsequent phase of latency. (Kavolis:1978:3)

Contemporary Chinese literature in the post-Mao period restored, to a certain degree, literary values and perceptions and realist tradition to Chinese literature. In his *Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry*, Duke tries to argue that “the mainstream of modern Chinese literature during the pre-communist era was a form of realism that fits very well René Wellek’s definition of realism as a regulative idea in European literature”.<sup>33</sup> He continues to argue that

Such a tradition of realist fiction – didactic, moralistic, reformist – grew up in China through a combination of serious concern for society and principled demand for social justice that was characteristic of the finest products of traditional Chinese literature and more individualistic humanitarianism of predominantly nineteenth-century European literature. It flourished during the period from the May Fourth Movement (1919) to the end of the Civil War between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang and the establishment of the People’s Republic. (Duke:1985:5)

This realist tradition was highly regarded by generations of writers and was of critical significance in Chinese society. Chinese literature formed a major part of Chinese political philosophy which could not be isolated from literature. Due to recent one-dimensional politics, the development of literature was inhibited and its critical socio-political function became defunct. The trend in the late 1970s which saw writers begin “expressing their own views on social morality and the fate of the nation”, ... was a trend less toward “bourgeois” interests than toward an ancient concept of the writers’ role in China. To understand this role one must go back to the Chinese traditional idea of literature, morality, and politics. The Chinese classics

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<sup>33</sup> René Wellek argues that realism aims at “the objective representation of contemporary social reality’. It claims to be all-inclusive in subject matter and aims to be objective in method, even though this objectivity is hardly ever achieved in practice. Realism is didactic, moralistic, and reformist. Without realising the difference between description and prescription it tries to reconcile the two in the concept of ‘type’. In some writers, but not all, realism becomes historic; it grasps social reality as dynamic evolution”. (Wellek:1963:252-3)

were not only literature but also, for centuries, the crucible of the morality that uniquely qualified one for political office. Historical writing was also literature, one of its main purposes being to establish the legitimacy of the current dynasty by “correctly” describing the wrongs of the previous one. Dissenters, too, shared assumptions about the moral and political duty of writers.

Literature itself was an integral part of Chinese political life and was closely connected to political changes and transformation in Chinese history, especially in post-Mao China. Literature was the major legitimate channel which could challenge and criticise the authorities in a way that other social and political institutions could not. Chinnery argues that on the whole the Chinese tradition did not encourage outspokenness among writers. (Chinnery:1982:413) However, imaginative literary works were not political manifestos and they spoke up in ways which were only appropriate to literary expressions. Their messages and meanings were received only in a manner that was appropriate to literary understanding. Hence the philosophical force of literature not only ran parallel to political philosophy, but also intertwined with political philosophy. Imaginative literature played a crucial part in leading the reader to see his situation, rather than the reader being told about his situation. He derived an understanding of his life and the world, which was bound to be more personal, more complex, and more authentic. Apart from being socially and politically critical, literature of the time also presented radical philosophical critiques of Chinese society and of the nature of Chinese politics.

The literary works examined in this study presented a challenge towards social and political domination and offered an alternative vision to the established reality. They truly represented – what Sartre regarded the imaginative writers to be –

the conscience of humankind of the twentieth century. Eventually some voices arose demanding the Party to leave literature alone. On his deathbed, the famous film actor, Zhao Dan, delivered a renewed plea for the freedom of literature and art in early October 1980. "If the Party controls literature and art too closely", he said, "literature and art are hopeless – they are finished". (Zhao:1980:5) Writers and artists like Zhao realised that the crude style of Party direction of literature should be abandoned. (Chinnery:1982:414) The various genres and narratives the authors developed in their writing did keep the politicians and officials at bay in terms of literary creativity and criticism, but their messages succeeded in getting across to the reader, especially to those who were able to influence society in a way that was only possible through literature.

Admittedly it would not be well justified to say that the years of 1979 to 1980 produced artistic masterpieces. When the controls were released, however the literary quality of published works did improve along with the breadth of subject matter but in general the increase in quality was not as striking as the increase in the so-called "outspokenness". Pan's view may, to some extent, explain the situation. She points out that we need to remind ourselves that the distinction between art and outspokenness has for a long time been less clear in China than in the modern West. In China, candour on behalf of one's people and country has long been considered a primary duty of intellectuals and therefore a literary value in itself. (Pan:1989:200) Though here Pan seems somehow to separate the form from the content as far as the value of literature is concerned, she does recognise that content is part of literary value.

The reason that literature delivered a new understanding to Chinese society and functioned as a social and political dynamo lay in the combination of improvement of literary and artistic quality and widening of content. Pan finds that Chinese readers were more preoccupied with the “scope question”<sup>34</sup> and this fact explains why “pathbreaking” works that are highly praised by Chinese readers can seem quite dull to an outsider. Pan continues to argue: unless one understands how a “forbidden zone” is being opened, and unless one can feel the exhilaration that comes when a long period of enforced silence ends, it is hard to appreciate a story that simply tells about an unfair bureaucrat, or an intellectual separated from his books, or a boy and girl who put love before class background. (Pan:1988) The Chinese writers did not break the so-called “forbidden zones” for the sake of it. The traditional concept of literature and role of a writer instilled in them a sense of responsibility for society. This determined their way of writing. Chinnery notes that “the mainstream of modern Chinese literature will continue to be realism, if only because this is more likely to appeal to and be understood by the reading public. It will also accord more closely with the didactic and political aims which will continue to be an important factor”. (Chinnery:1982:415) However, as soon as the Chinese writers found that other forms and genres were able to provide a better means to either inform or understand society, they did so accordingly.

It is important to bear in mind that contemporary Chinese literature was created by the writers “who live most significantly for their own age; they are writers who help redeem their time by forcing it to accept the truth about itself and thereby

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<sup>34</sup> Due to the control and oversight of cultural production by the authorities in the past decades, Chinese writers acquired a knowledge of what they were supposed to write about and where to draw the line. It came to be known as the “question of scope”.



saving it, perhaps, from the truth about itself'. (Howe:1961:251) On the other hand, as Cate finds that

in conditions of strict censorship, such as prevailed in nineteenth-century Russia, the committed writer must of necessity adopt codes of conveyance which are both cunning and oblique. Art becomes a favoured weapon, offering opportunities for masking the message, for wrapping it in the diverting garments of character portrayal, or for presenting it in symbolical or allegorical form. The writer's scope is limited; the censor, the Holy Office, some idiot careerist bureaucrat in the Kremlin, casts a shadow over his desk. But there are compensations. In a 'closed' society, the audience is quicker on the uptake than in an 'open' society – they make a habit of reading between the lines; the slightest wink or nod and they are with you to a man. (Cate:1972:63-4)

Therefore "the political impact of art increases in proportion to the inexorability of the censorship". (Cate:1972:64) Although the Chinese authorities were no Holy Office, in a state like China, the Party's unremitting command over literary matters made the reader pick up the message very quickly and selectively and be alert and sensitive about what was presented and coded in the writings.

The literature of the period of this study was indeed politically bold and artistically conscious for its time. However, it would be erroneous to read these works solely as social and political manifestations and prophecies. They contributed to social and political change and development, and they did so by discovering new meanings of society in a way that only literary works could do.

During the recent years of Chinese politics, one of the most persistent themes among social scientists and social science scholars was the belief that modernisation was the only way to save China. However, the real problem with the "modernisation" paradigm, and "modernisation theories" more generally, was that they somehow ignored the fact that there were many modernisations and many

modernities. By refusing to conform to the officially accepted paradigms of perception, Chinese literature represented many alternative ways of viewing society and the world. As literature breached the norms of conventional communication and response, it thus illuminated reality and offered radical socio-political implications.

It was not necessarily that the reader believed *what* he was told by the story. It was the self-contained philosophy and the reader's reflective reference to his own life and experience that played the crucial role in persuading him to think seriously about the reality. Literature, by remembering the things past and creating a vision, constantly presented an antithesis to the given and the entrenched.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Screening China, Envisioning China

Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important.

– Lenin

### From Fiction to Cinema

In his informative introductory book *Film and Literature*, Morris argues that written stories (novels) and filmed stories (films/television drama) are two forms of a single art: the art of narrative literature, which he defines as any work which recounts a sequence of events, a story. However, any attempt to transfer this sequence of events from one medium to another is not a simple process. (Morris:1979:1) This statement indicates both the *literariness* of the cinema and its uniqueness as a form of art. It functions socially and politically in both similar and dissimilar ways as literary works. Giddings *et al* also note the narrative quality of films:

Film may have been a non-verbal experience, but it based its narrative on the Western European cultural experience of literature. Its basic syntax clearly belonged to the same civilisation which produced Shakespeare, Racine, Pope, Fielding, Dickens and Balzac. (Giddings *et al*:1990:ix)

These two statements afford clear justification to include cinema in this study. Furthermore, the approach adopted here in this study is also able to explain the importance of Chinese films produced after the death of Mao and their impact on society and politics because these films:

... call so many of our ordinary assumptions about art into question: neither realistic nor fantastic, they draw us into a new imaginative world which is at the same time a real one and fantasy; neither language nor silence, they compel us to reinvent a relationship between the word and space surrounding the word; neither private creations nor public acts, they raise again the problem of the political values of art. (McDonnell:1975:118)

Roland Barthes' analysis of the rhetoric of cinematic images provides a useful framework for a critical appraisal of Chinese contemporary films, especially films of the "fifth generation".<sup>1</sup> Barthes is fully aware of the paradox that the cinema, while being one of the most advanced forms of fictional representation, is no less 'realist' in its dominant forms of narrative than the older art forms of the novel or drama. Whilst acknowledging that films and fictional literature belong to a similar narrative tradition, Barthes also brings to light the possibility of cinematic images producing another kind of meaning. This meaning is properly called "filmic" and Barthes illustrates its power in his analysis of Eisenstein's use of synchronic montage techniques. Barthes calls this a "third meaning" that disrupts and transcends the conventional meanings of cinematic realism. (Barthes:1977b:52-69)

Although the academic position and history of cinema and film studies has yet to be decided, an inclusion of contemporary films in this study of the relationship between politics and literature will yield a better understanding of the subject and its relation to society and politics. It will also demonstrate the applicability of this approach and the advancement it will bring to the study of Chinese politics and literature in the period concerned. As evidence clearly shows among all literary and artistic forms in China in the past decade, the cinema has

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<sup>1</sup> The "fifth generation" refers to a group of young film-makers and directors, most of whom graduated from the Beijing Film Institute in 1982 and began to produce films which markedly broke away from Chinese film traditions. Its major members include Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Junshao and Wei Ziniu. And their early representative works are *Yellow Earth*, *One and Eight*, *On the Hunting Ground*, *Old Well*, *Red Sorghum*, *Black Cannon Incident*, *The King of Children* and so on.

again<sup>2</sup> developed into a mature and powerful form of art and expression resolute and sophisticated enough to bring vigour and new meanings into Chinese social and political life. The cinema thus became the forerunner in China's social, cultural and political development. As discussed in earlier chapters, the political dimension should not be conceived as "an optional, auxiliary to other interpretative methods current today – the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural – but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation." (Jameson:1981:17)

### **Chinese Cinema and Chinese People**

Cinema-going is a central cultural activity in modern China, which boasted an annual production of over 130 films in 1985 and the largest cinema audience in the world.<sup>3</sup> However, cinematic studies and criticisms have been disappointing and insufficient, failing to justify the tremendous achievements of the Chinese films and their profound impact and significance. Due to a lack of critical methodology and theories among most Chinese scholars and inadequate knowledge of Chinese culture, literature and politics among Western critics, most criticisms and analyses lack depth, and therefore do not explain the texts, not to mention the insights and consciousness these texts are supposed to raise. Film, though the youngest form of art in China, has always retained a special appeal to Chinese people and, as a consequence, to the authorities, partly due to its easier

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<sup>2</sup> During the 1930s and early 1940s, Chinese films once was a very well-developed and sophisticated form of art, dealing with social and political issues such as class exploitation, foreign invasion, urbanisation, wars, and even women's issues and so on.

<sup>3</sup> 1985 statistics, about 26 billion a year, an average of 26 films per person. (Q. Ma:1988:168)

access than the hard grind of reading. Even in the heat of the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s, the Chinese authorities, though involved in an ideological war with the West, tried to solicit a major world film-maker to make a film about China.<sup>4</sup> (Chatmen:1985) Such anecdotal evidence illustrates the importance of the cinema as both a form of media and a genre of imaginative literature, which is not only informed by the world, but also creates, informs and transforms the world.

Until recently the cinema was under strict state regulations. It was impossible to keep powerful politicians out of film production and distribution. The script had to be censored before filming and the *finished product had to* undergo the same procedure before public screening. This practice proves that the filmed story, even though elicited from exactly the same script, can contain different, if not more powerful, implications. Immediately after the Cultural Revolution, many intellectuals as well as the general public focused their attention on “correcting the wrongs” through film-making. The film-makers also began to think for themselves with less external constraints for the first time in the history of the People’s Republic. However during the initial phase, many of them mainly translated the fictional stories into cinematic drama<sup>5</sup> with the conventional realistic and “true to life” techniques to give a cinematic presentation of the fictional works. Even though they tried to present a vision and an understanding of Chinese society and politics through the means of cinematography, their presentations were

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<sup>4</sup> The unfamiliar way of presentation of M.,Antonioni in his documentary *China* baffled the then Chinese authorities, who reacted in anger accusing him of misusing and abusing China’s trust and hospitality and misrepresenting China with strong prejudice and evil intention, though some ten years later, other authorities admitted they could see little evil intention in the film.

<sup>5</sup> Films of this kind are abundant, the representatives of which are *The Petite Street, Under the Big Bridge, The Days of Autumn*, etc.

largely reproductions of the fictional stories originally envisaged by the source texts' authors.<sup>6</sup> However, due to the uniqueness of cinematographic techniques, the directors' reinterpretation of the original texts and their artistic contribution, these films consequently had a wider and more powerful influence than the original written works on the Chinese audience, who responded with enthusiasm. These films somehow retained a philosophy of their own, and were able to make the audience see reality in a different light. Some of them did arouse considerable discussion, though largely in terms of their social and political content, though admittedly the form had contributed a great deal to present, and re-present the meanings of the stories. Hence, although they told the same story as the original fiction, combined with cinematic techniques and a different literary language, films made the audience think again and think harder about the same story. Thus filmic re-presentation of the text can be seen to encourage further reflection about the original through a combination of aural and visual images which contribute to either a more controlled or more liberating reading of the source text. In either way, the film is bound to possess a deeper political implication.

### **The Cinema of the Wounded**

Although the films produced in the immediate post-Mao period more or less paralleled the Literature of the Wounded, they reached a wider audience and helped create a favourable environment for further emancipation of thinking. Some of them were even engaged in exploring new meanings and new

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<sup>6</sup> This point resembles Platonic third/fourth order of mimesis.

possibilities in post-Mao China. The best example of this kind of film is Bai Hua's screenplay<sup>7</sup> *Bitter Love* and the film with the same title. In this film, the author depicts the fictional life of Ling Chenguang, a young artist and revolutionary activist during the Guomin Dang<sup>8</sup> rule. Courageous and radical during World War II (the Anti-Japanese War), he leaves China for the United States to flee the Guomin Dang repression. Having become a fashionable painter in San Francisco, Ling nevertheless chooses to return to the New China in 1950, bringing his wife and their new-born daughter with him to serve the country. Happy and prosperous in the early years of the People's Republic, Ling and his family are brutalised during the Cultural Revolution because of his earlier Western connections. Unable to bear his treatment any longer, Ling runs away one winter from his labour camp and dies from exhaustion fleeing those he thinks are his pursuers. In fact, they have come to rescue him after the fall of the dogmatic "Gang of Four", and to inform him that after all his sufferings he has finally been exonerated by the new authorities in power. At the end of the film, as the camera spans upward from Ling's dead body lying in the snow, the audience are presented with an image of a

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<sup>7</sup> In China, films are regarded as a form of literature, which is normally included in literature departments at universities. Even at the Institute of Cinematic Studies, a department of cinematic literature is always taken for granted as a key dimension in film-making and studies. Moreover, Chinese readers do include published film scripts in their reading list of literature, which is rarely the case in the West.

<sup>8</sup> The pinyin version of the Chinese Nationalist Party (in many old texts it is spelt Kuomin Tang according to the Webster pronunciation system, thus initials are KMT), that ruled China roughly between 1911 to 1949 and since then has maintained a government in the name of the Republic of China better known as Taiwan on the Island of Taiwan. The Guomindang rule was generally regarded as inefficient, corrupt and repressive by scholars as well as the public in and outside China.



black question mark formed by his crumpled body against the whiteness of the snow. The filmic image certainly adds visual and aural power to the original text.<sup>9</sup>

A great debate broke out about the messages the film intended to convey. It made some authorities very uncomfortable, even though the film just told a story about an imaginary event, in an era “now past”. Nevertheless, criticisms abounded. Hu Qiaomu<sup>10</sup> condemned the film for distorting socialist reality and historical development, defaming socialism and the Party’s leadership and advocating capitalist freedom. He construed that the film equated the Gang of Four with the Party; ten years’ turmoil of the Cultural Revolution with socialism; so that it gave people a sense of despair. (Hu:1982:286) His views found supporters among some orthodox officials. Though his response was spontaneous and opinionated, it was intellectually legitimate and justifiable, for his reading of the film was phenomenologically based. Hu’s criticism of the film antithetically proved Barthes’ theory of the “third meaning”. The content of the film was mainly the same as previously the published film script, if not less daring. The content was specifically assigned to a “period of the past” that the Party encouraged to condemn. Whilst the story articulated one thing, the filmic language always suggested the other, which contributed to a varied understanding of the text and made a controlled interpretation even more difficult.

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<sup>9</sup> Filmic language contributes to the imaginative potential and provoke more direct response from the audience. In this aspect, film is more powerful politically. It may also be argued that film has the power to delude and mislead because it “controls” the imaginative power narratively and visually.

<sup>10</sup> He held several key positions in the Party and government, such as Party Propaganda Minister, Principal of the Party Institute, Member of the Politburo.

This suggests that although fiction and films belong to the same narrative tradition, films carry a different dimension in bringing together the audience's social and political consciousness and can provoke in a more diversified way, directly or indirectly. The meaning of a literary text did not end where the powerful politicians wanted it to be. Some critics regarded the film as uplifting and constructive (Zhang:1988:67-78) by revealing the dark side of our society and thus giving rise to a new desire to improve the system. Zhang found that the film was "a bit absurd, difficult to understand ... and its language was rather foreign", however, it represented "real art, real work of the silver screen". (Zhang:1988:67) "Only one understood its artistic approach and value could the real meaning of the film be unveiled." (Zhang:1988:67) Zhang recognised the power of the film in society through a detailed analysis. He argued that the film concerned "the direction of development of our nation." (Zhang:1988:83) Though the film was banned for public screening, the debate about it created a healthy cultural and intellectual environment, which produced many films of similar themes.<sup>11</sup> These films hit the public screen without much resistance from above, and also won various official awards. This wholesome environment finally gave birth to an important generation of film-makers – the "fifth generation", who made a great contribution to Chinese cultural and intellectual life and produced some of the world's finest films, and more importantly raised the contemporary Chinese

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<sup>11</sup> Films of similar themes that deal with the suffering of the Chinese people during the political campaigns, the Cultural Revolution in particular, released after *Bitter Love* include: *A Tale from Tianyun Mountain*, *The Town of Hibiscus*, *In the Archives of Society*, *A Female Thief*, *The Petite Lane*, *Xu Mao and His Daughters*, *The Corner That Was Forsaken by Love*, to name a few.

political consciousness and formed an important part of contemporary Chinese identity and cultural memory.

### **Emergence of the “Fifth Generation” Film-makers and Their Films**

Many intellectuals saw the 1980s in terms of an intellectual and political renaissance, re-addressing the immediate or more distant past in the hope of bringing about a deeper reflection on the realities. Among the groups that rose to meet this need of intellectual and political rebirth in the post-Mao years were a number of young film directors who broke away from the predominantly so-called “socialist realist” and “true-to-life” tradition of the fifties in the form of Hollywood melodrama and injected into the Chinese cinema new vigour and vivacity. They were later invariably called the “fifth generation” film-makers who came of age after the Cultural Revolution.

This group of film-makers are not in any sense a Western-orientated intellectual elite. In their works, they displayed an extraordinary identity with the Chinese people by opposing patriarchy and feudal hierarchy – the cornerstones of China’s social and political tradition. They championed the concepts of individuality, freedom, and equality derived from a vision made possible by their understanding of the Chinese reality, their personal experience and technological development. Today’s China owes a great deal intellectually and culturally to their efforts and commitment to a better future. In the late reform period (1984 to the present), as literature (fiction) had engaged itself in searching for a new meaning and identity in post-Mao China to inspire Chinese culture, politics and society, films also came of age and stepped into the exploration at this historical moment

by supplying cultural and intellectual leadership. The cinema provided a new and fresh aesthetic reflection on an era when rapid changes were taking place. The films of the “fifth generation” went beyond a simple historical and theoretical connection with the reality. Their works cut even deeper into making a fundamental and profound meaning out of the rather disorderly Chinese reality. The emergence of these so-called “fifth generation” film-makers raised significant issues for sociological and political inquiry. Chinese cinema, by choice or by chance, became a means of striving for presenting and understanding China’s reality, its recent history informed by the authors’ experience and understanding of this particular form of art. The concurrent emergence of these *modern* films together with fiction provided new images and discourses to inform China’s social and political currents and realities. The infusion of films and politics necessitated an examination of its relation with and difference from other cultural practices.

Caught in the times of change, these young film-makers were striving to understand the changes in an advanced technological society. They “have thought deeply and seriously about society and life, and even if their feelings are vague and obtuse at time, they have gone far beyond the social analyses and statistics of our philosophers and sociologists.” (Huang Zongying: 1988:251) Actually, they were producing some of the world’s finest films, responsive to the genuine needs and aspirations of the Chinese people.

Technically, many of the films displayed aesthetic and cultural range, sophistication, and emotional affinity with concerns of the time and Chinese people. Their films defied the previous critical theory and ideology based on a definition of realist form in the cinema by adopting a new cinematic language and

technology and creating multiple meanings which strongly challenged the traditional understanding of the cinema and thus brought a new dimension to the nation's cultural and political life. These films left the traditional methods short of critical force and insight. They suggested that there was no single truth in arts and literature (as the authorities would like to have it believed). These films also informed the Chinese people for the first time that the truth value of a literary text did not reside in the text alone and it had to be contextualised and appropriated with other knowledge, such as social, psychological, economic, political, and most important of all, historical. This generation of film-makers recognised the full potentiality of film as a form of art and what film could do to change people's understanding of life, unlike their predecessors who had mainly regarded films as secondary to literature. In general, these films were received with applause and provocative thought as well as confusion and even, to some extent, resistance.

### ***Yellow Earth*: a Negotiation with Power, a Challenge to Tradition**

The release of Chen Kaige's film *Yellow Earth* in 1984 heralded the emergence of China's acclaimed "fifth generation" of film-makers and created great sensitivity in Chinese cultural and political life. This subsequently gave rise to a serious debate and heated discussion on modern Chinese identity. The film's freshness in cinematic narrative language, emphasis on image over traditional heavy-handed dialogues, minimal story line, and unconventional way of presenting strong images worked in a powerful and opportune manner towards offering new ways of seeing Chinese life. It challenged Chinese aesthetic traditions by building a fresh literary aesthetic, which soon turned into a new

discourse functioning extensively in social and political spheres. To a great extent, it established the Chinese film as a sufficient and mature form of art in its own right for the first time in the cinematic history of New China. *Yellow Earth* became an instant classic, collecting awards from London, Hawaii, Berlin and even from Beijing for its excellency in cinematography. It raised the curtain of China's new cinema for the years to come.

However the initial screening in China did not catch too much public attention. Only after a series of awards and publications of critiques, did many come to realise the importance and significance of the release of this film, though Chen Huangmei, the former Vice-Minister and advisor of the Ministry of Culture, recognised its value and potential importance by claiming earlier that "China needs films like that." (Chen:1989) However, though Clark and some other critics also recognised its social and political significance, his emphasis on the film's "carefully crafted timelessness" seemed misleading and obscured the real social and political meaning and cultural significance. As a matter of fact, its merits lie in its capacity to subvert the outdated political thinking, to address the fundamental questions and issues of China and to draw attention to its deep and hidden meaning and philosophy.

Ma Ning, a famous Chinese film scholar, one of the earlier critics to discover the credits of the film, correctly points out that "the film is deceptively simple." On the surface, *Yellow Earth* tells a very simple story with minimal dialogues. In 1939, an Eighth Route Armyman (the former Red Army) is commissioned to collect folk songs in a remote area along the great Yellow River in North Shanxi Province. He finds lodging with a local peasant widower and his

two children. Later the teenage daughter establishes a friendship with this outsider (who represents new hope for this barren land of heavy social and cultural deposits). During his stay he witnesses child marriage, poverty, ignorance alongside assiduity, endurance and tradition. Upon his return to base, he promises to come back to take her to join the army. However, tragically, his father insists on her marriage to a man she never meets. Cherishing a hope for a new life, she rebels and steals down the turbulent Yellow River in a small boat singing a folk song. The singing is cut short, and apparently she drowns herself. The man returns later only to find the land parched, and the local peasants praying for rain in a traditional ritual. On seeing him coming from a distance, the younger brother of the girl rushes towards him against the huge current of men.

Various cinematic techniques substantially enriched the film's meaning and expression. The minimal plot and characterisation, and expressive composition of framing, meaning *mise-en-scène*, and unusual and unconventional narrative strategies (Ma Ning:1987:77), all combined to create a profound meaning and understanding about China and Chinese history derived from this new visual and aural image and language, which are so strikingly different from what had preceded it that no spectator could fail to perceive the "other" meanings (Ma Ning:1987:77) intended or unintended by the author. In fact the film uses many uncinematic still shots which, together with the aural images create a flux of leitmotifs and strengthen the minimal story-line and help to provoke meanings beyond the screen. To understand the meanings of the film, an extra-textual apprehension of reality (aesthetic as well as political) is essential. We must realise whilst *Bitter Love* works mainly within the content of the film, *Yellow Earth*

functions largely outside it, transcending the content and moving into a larger context, that is, an entity that we call China, historically and politically, or even beyond it. Yau uses a phrase from the ancient Chinese Taoist text [Dao De Jing] to describe the cinematic techniques of the film, especially the use of still shots, silence and non-traditional narrative – “Silent is the Roaring Sound; Formless is the Image Grand.” (Yau:1991:77)

Formalised language played an important part in Chinese politics and had also dominated film production. The main characters had been quite often perfunctorily sketched: the antagonists had been so evil and reprehensible that the audience were left no choice but to choose the protagonists because they were usually the viewers’ sole hope to vanquish the villain. Such Manichean presentation of polarising between good and evil also contributed to a simplistic political thinking. Schoenhals’ research indicates all the data are filtered through language, and language is not neutral. (Schoenhals:1992) Therefore the authorities, through administrative supervision and official media control, created an ordained social and political discourse that shaped people’s fundamental ways of seeing and understanding their realities. Though literature produced immediately prior to the release of this film had, to some degree, freed the Chinese people from this conditioning, cultural and aesthetic discourse still remained largely unchanged and basically *unmodern*.

The film, through a sense of reflection, identification and consciousness creation, brings into focus many of the contemporary issues of China’s social and political life, especially in terms of political thinking. As was pointed out earlier, the characterisation clearly delimits the protagonists and antagonists. They are



one, or one in the other. The characters in the film possess elements of semiotic and symbolic significance which is closely related to history and reality. Whilst one sees hopes, encouragement, honesty, kindness and progressiveness, the visual images constantly remind him of despair, embarrassment, ignorance, indifference and backwardness. All these elements raise the audience's consciousness, produce a sense of crisis, and encourage questions about contemporary society and politics: this is a film that "provides food for thought". (Semsel *et al*: 1990:132)

Yau's article also identifies the film as being "deeply political" through a detailed analysis of the text by employing cine-structuralist, Barthesian post-structuralist, neo-Marxist culturalist and feminist discursive approaches.<sup>12</sup> She observes that "major historical events in China ... have made four topics crucial to national consciousness – feudalism, subsistence, socialism and modernism." (Yau:1991:76) She recognises the political implication of the text by placing the viewing and understanding in a wide context of these topics. She concludes that the film provides a "modernist power of critique of Chinese culture and history." (Yau:1991:76) However, Yau also construes and jumps to the conclusion that this power "comes from its sub-textual, non-critical proposition of capitalist democracy as an alternative." (Yau:1991:76) Admittedly an extra-textual interpretation is often contingent, but no evidence can be found in the text to support this claim. It should be recognised that the image of the Armyman strongly suggests a "China difference". In the years of the economic and political development in China, this film raised many questions as well as hopes. By

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<sup>12</sup> Yau's article analyses the film by identifying four structurally balanced strands (micro-narratives) on three levels (diegetic, critical and discursive).

provoking the audience's imaginative faculties and their historical and cultural awareness, the film suggested alternatives, but these alternatives had to be built upon Chinese culture, history and politics as Yau herself analysed earlier in a notably informative and constructive fashion. Historically, China already gave capitalism a chance, which failed China badly. This argument is not to dismiss Yau's sub-textual interpretation of the film, but simply to highlight the political nature of a cinematic text and its implication for Chinese society and politics.

Kant's notion of "transcendence" has always allowed us to relate the "transcendent" dimension of the aesthetic to the embodied necessities of physical nature. *Yellow Earth* also worked very effectively in this aspect. What made a simple story into a politically liberating experience was its captivating visual imagination. Berenice sees the strength of the film in its vision of the natural and social landscape in the poorest areas of Shanxi Province. (Berenice:1991:27) On the one hand, the images, visual and aural, seemed to be so Chinese and familiar to the audience; however on the other hand, it was these images that questioned people's beliefs about the *status quo*, and drew many of instituted views and concepts about Chinese society and history into focus. Hence on the whole, *Yellow Earth* offered no ready-made explanation, and it inhibited the audience from taking a direct moral, social or political message from the works. It was such an intensely visual and aural experience that any reading of its screenplay was bound to be a frustrating and perfunctory exercise. The colour, the visual image, the aural image and the language all played their parts. This was the kind of work that disturbed as it demanded of ordinary viewers and critics alike both labour and risk in making sense of the whole of its images and interpreting its meaning. It was

exactly this quality of the film that was to help to change Chinese political attitudes towards society, shape and reshape Chinese views on life, and stimulate the desire for aesthetic and political freedom. Thus the film not only depicted concurrent events in China, but was simultaneously transforming the understanding of what was happening and what was going to happen. This further proves that “art does not simply reflect ideology but reproduces it through forms of representation.” (Wolff:1983)

### ***Life on a String: Downfall of a Saint***

The “fifth generation” films-makers are inclined to see themselves as destined to carry the burden of Chinese culture and society, “a perception which obliged them to reconstruct over-arching visions of the state of the nation’s politics and social dynamics.” (Rayns:1995:37) Some films produced in this period take the form of modern legends set in remote and distant times so that it gives them room to contemplate and travel back and forth between geographic, historical and ideological depth over absolute surfaces. Consequently they sustain a mass of interpretations. *Life on a String* [*Bian Zou Bian Chang*] and *Judou*<sup>13</sup> are two outstanding examples. *Life on a String* seems like a familiar story retold, but this time it goes beyond the ordinary master-disciple tradition and plumbs the depths of existential problems and meanings of Chinese social and political life.

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<sup>13</sup> These two films were based on Shi Tiesheng’s novella, *Bian Zou Bian Chang* (translated as *Life on a String*) and Liu Heng’s novel with the same title *Judou*. The films were banned for a time in China, though the earlier publication of the books *per se* did not provoke any official disapproval. This fact signifies that films convey a different message and thus have a different impact on the viewer, if not a deeper one.

The story is told in a detached manner. An old blind musician, revered as a saint by the local folks, travels with his boisterous young disciple Shitou (literally meaning “stone”), who is also blind. The old man is sustained by a belief that his blindness can be cured one day by a prescription that he carries hidden inside his *Sanxian* (three-stringed banjo). But the prescription can only be administered when he has broken one thousand strings in the course of playing as instructed by his own master on his deathbed. So far he has broken nine hundred and ninety-five strings, but he feels the end of his life is drawing near. One day the old man and his disciple walk across the desert to a valley called Rams, site of a long-standing feud between the Sun clan and the Li clan. En route, Shitou undergoes his first sexual awakening when he meets a group of playful village girls and falls in love with one of them, Lanxiu. He later loses his concentration in his singing and playing the instrument. Despite the old man’s disapproval, Shitou seeks out the village girl and spends more and more time with her. The old man, privately agonising over his own life-long sublimation of sexual longings, falls ill. When a pitched battle between the two clans breaks out, Lanxiu begs the old man to intervene with his music, which has a magic power to quell violence. Shitou protests, but the old man rises and ends the fight. On discovering that Shitou has slept with Lanxiu, the old man flies into a rage and slaps him, and Shitou runs off. Next day, the old man goes out to play alone, and breaks the thousandth string. At the pharmacy, the old man learns the prescription is nothing but a blank sheet of paper. In a violent anger, he takes a sledgehammer to the grave of his own master. The same night, after he plays and sings for the last time, he dies peacefully. Lanxiu’s father disapproves of Shitou’s love for his daughter, who commits

suicide in despair. After the funeral the village folks ask Shitou to be their new saint but he declines and goes away with Lanxiu's suicide note hidden in his *Sanxian*.

On the surface the film presents a conflict between self-denial and sexual fulfilment, and embodies the juxtaposition of a Utopian vision and harsh reality, and the breakdown of the age-old master/disciple tradition of Confucianism. The difference between the saintly old man and his disciple Shitou is as much a generation gap as a radical disparity of views and philosophies. However, Chen Kaige gives equal weight to both musicians and makes no judgement about either of them. He exploits various narrative as well as cinematographic devices to resist literalism so that the work possesses the quality of “*otherness*”, which denies “any dominant position from which to tally the representation with some supposed ‘original’.” (Kearney:1988:195) The viewer is thrust into a position which demands a re-examination of the values and beliefs that appear to hold true in a different reality. In the end, “both men are justified and neither has all the answers.” (Rayns:1992:37) Obviously Chen does not just create a fictional story about the “past”; instead he creates worlds where political and philosophical questions can be animated and allowed to play among themselves and between his viewers and the text. Hence, the viewer, being both inside and outside the story, has to make social, cultural and political logic out of this open story. Though the meaning of any literary work is intrinsic – it is intrinsic to an experience. “It exists partly as the emotions inheriting in it, and these come into being only when it is

read with sympathy.”<sup>14</sup> (Miller:1991:63) And the viewer is not a passive machine for bringing verbal or visual meanings into existence, rather “he has a personality and a history of his own.” (Miller:1991:63) In a state where there existed a deep-seated patriarchal tradition, where a single correct “truth” was still prevailing, nothing could be more political than to create ideologies on one’s own, to challenge the authority (even though this authority is not totally illegitimate in the text), even to set societal priorities according to one’s own terms.

As indicated earlier, any reading of literary works was contingent upon one’s experience and history, and this film appeared to embrace a broader vision and a deeper meaning as far as Chinese politics was concerned in view of the Events of June of 1989 in China. China envisioned by Shitou was different from China envisaged by his old master. There might be no answer to either positions; a third stance therefore had to be sought. The filmic “third meaning”<sup>15</sup> recognised the old master as well as his disciple and at the same time rejected both of them. *Life on a String* created an avenue to such a third stance which was to make sensible politics. Though the film, due to its distancing quality, met little official objection, it nevertheless proved to be an endless source of meaning. By resisting the uniform mode of perception it became instrumental to intellectual and political liberation, for it conveyed contemporary sensibilities and concerns and shaped the consciousness of the audience.

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<sup>14</sup> Miller’s concept of “sympathy” can be understood as to be based on historical and individual experience.

<sup>15</sup> See later discussion on Barthes’ third meaning.

### ***Farewell My Concubine: Art and Politics; This and the Other***

Lopate in his article “Odd man out: Tian Zhuangzhuang” published in *Film Comment* gives his preference to Tian’s *The Blue Kite* in terms of its political significance when comparing it with *Farewell My Concubine*, saying, “What is certain is that *The Blue Kite* is quieter, more understated realistic, and quotidian, yet more politically subversive of the two.” (Lopate:1994:60) However, a close examination will find otherwise. Lopate arrives at such conclusion from a Western point of view and largely bases his statement on the content of the two films, failing to take into consideration the aesthetic dimension or the factor of the audience. The overtly political subject matter of *The Blue Kite* does not necessarily work effectively towards challenging the existing social and political order as described by Lopate so much as *Farewell My Concubine* does. Firstly, the subject matter of any literary art (as defined earlier that films are works of art), though important, does not indicate importance and significance of a piece of art. That explains why classics are a constant source of understanding of one’s life and human society. Hence, though the subject matter of *The Blue Kite* is more contemporary and politically charged as it appears to the outsiders, it lacks a kind of “otherness” as a piece of art. It is much too familiar to the Chinese audience and for them it is just another story which has been told time and again. Secondly, aesthetically speaking, it is a familiar story told with a familiar voice. It says little more than what has been said before about the Cultural Revolution and Chinese politics. It mainly reinforces an already-existing scenario of the explanation of the Cultural Revolution among Chinese viewers. In contrast, *Farewell My Concubine*

is both historical and contemporary in terms of its subject matter. Although the life of a couple of opera-singers is slightly “out of focus” of typical Chinese reality, the film encounters ambiguous experiences: a deviant sexuality, conflicts between real and unreal, art and reality, public and private, brutality and civilisation, tradition and change, history and contemporary. At the same time, it is an ideal setting for a multi-levelled metaphor and a “real, true” story full of historic accounts and tragic undertones.

Chen Kaige himself, when being interviewed, acknowledged that the best thing in the original novel “is the emphasis on how difficult it is to stay true to what you want to make of yourself. And how difficult it is to keep relationships intact when you come under pressure from social and political forces.” (Chen in Rayns:1992:13) In spite of this, Chen has made a masterpiece out of this seemingly ordinary story. The historical moments are infused with issues such as gender and sexuality, arts and reality, individuality and authority, power and private life and so forth. Again like Chen’s debut *Yellow Earth*, this film consists of multilevel meanings rendered possible by various subtle cinematographic images and structures.

The film epically spans over seven decades recounting the story of a couple of opera singers caught up in various historical moments in modern China: the collapse of the feudal system, the warlords’ rule, the Guomindang rule and the Japanese invasion, and finally the radical Leftist regime during the Cultural Revolution in the Mao era. Unlike *Yellow Earth*, *Farewell My Concubine* has a strong story line, and a more realistic portraiture. This feature, instead of flattening



its aesthetic quality and alienating force, tremendously strengthens and enriches its meaning.

The initial response from the authorities was rather intuitive, touchy and disagreeable. The film was temporarily banned on three assumptions: firstly, it defamed the Party's rule and its image; secondly, it discredited socialism; thirdly, it advocated homosexuality. Their reading of the film might be superficial and totalitarian, but was not totally unjustifiable. However, to use power to ban a literary work based on *a* reading that was, to say the least, far from the correct reading (if there was such thing as the only correct reading) was an utter arbitrary play of power politics. How much this film contributed towards the state's relaxation on laws regarding homosexual relationships remains unclear. But literature and films did in various ways and to various degrees raise the consciousness of the public, provide a domain of discourse for further discussion, and bring the issue to the public's attention and make it into a social and political one that has to be confronted in reality. This film did speak with a voice that had not been heard of before.<sup>16</sup> However, the film brought into focus much more than just a social issue. The homosexual aspect of the film facilitated critical participation on part of the audience and engaged them in thinking politically. It drew people's attention to the contradiction between public life and private life in a mass state, uncovered the politically unrepresentable of the society in ways and discourses otherwise impossible. It exposed the social and the historical in a more political light. It analysed the possibility to remain true to oneself in a mass state.

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<sup>16</sup> The portrayal of homosexuality can be found in Chinese classics, but it somehow disappeared from modern Chinese literature, and altogether in Mao's era.

It raised political consciousness towards the contradiction of individual identity and that of the nation in Chinese society.

Cinematic tradition in China tends to require that films end with an optimistic tone rather than tragic, which complements the Chinese narrative tradition and the theory of the so-called “socialist realism.” In this sense, the ending of *Farewell My Concubine* is simultaneously anti-cinematic and anti-Chinese tradition. That is why many Chinese audiences<sup>17</sup> were taken aback by the tragic ending of this film which defied both the Hollywood melodramatic cinematic tradition and the traditional Chinese philosophy of life. After surviving the harsh years of various regimes, there seemed little reason for the hero to commit suicide especially when there appeared a hope for the future. Both opera singers were back on the stage, after having witnessed the vicissitudes of society both as actors and spectators. However, with an uncertain political future, the status of arts unclear, his sexuality unfulfilled, the hero still cannot see any future for a man like him. The film not only reflects social, cultural and political dilemmas in Chinese society, but also strongly challenges the conventional way of understanding human society and its politics.

### **Screening the Unspeakable**

Unlike modern Chinese literature, Chinese cinema started as a pure form of entertainment early this century. It was not “until the late 1920s, more than a decade later than literature, that film started to turn away from providing popular

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<sup>17</sup> The film did reach the public screen in many parts of China, especially in places outside Beijing, not as some Western critics reported it as a total ban.

entertainment towards dealing with issues such as class exploitation, foreign invasion, and urbanisation.” (Pickowics:1994:59) Even after the founding of the People’s Republic, the film-makers basically followed this film tradition based on the form of Hollywood melodrama, which was in line with the “socialist realism” advocated by the Party. Immediately after the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most Chinese films still aspired to the same tradition. Their content reflected a direct concern of the immediate past and lessons that could be learned from that past. They thus invariably anticipated a kind of rosy future, not dissimilar to the “Literature of the Wounded” and so-called “literature of reform” as discussed earlier. Many of these individual films, as time went by, were either forgotten or proven to lack any sustaining literary and artistic merit. However, as the Literature of the Wounded, these films formed a memorable and monumental trend that had paved the way for a more daring and rejuvenating age in China’s cultural and political life.

With the screening of *Yellow Earth*, the “fifth generation” of Chinese cinema came into being. The films produced from the mid-eighties onwards, including *Judou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Life on the String*, *Farewell My Concubine* etc. simultaneously display the two features of post-modernist texts that Jameson (1983:3,111,125) has identified in the West: an effacement of the boundaries between the past and the present (typically given in the forms of pastiche and parody), and a treatment of time which locates the viewing subject in a perpetual present. These films speak the unspeakable in society (violence, repression, political brutality, unconventional sexuality, falsehood, gender issues etc.) and the viewer has to make sense of the film by relating history to the

present, society to himself, images to language. They break down the boundaries that ordinarily separate private and public life, the speakable and unspeakable, the falsehood and the truth, in a seemingly orderly society. Also more importantly a review of history in a new form and discourse helps re-examine our reality, for

... our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present, and in particular on the structural peculiarities of what is sometimes called *société de consommation* (or the “disaccumulative” moment of late monopoly or consumer or multi-national capitalist), what Guy Debord calls the society of the image or of the spectacle. The point is that in such a society, saturated with messages and with “aesthetic” experience of all kinds, the issues of an older philosophical aesthetics themselves need to be radically historicised, and can be expected to be transformed beyond recognition in the process. (Jameson:1981:11)

Lyotard’s concept of post-modernism offers another dimension to understand the contemporary Chinese cinema and its significance. He conceives that “the post-modern world would be that ... which searches for new presentations ... in order to impart a strong sense of the unrepresentable.” (Lyotard:1984:81) Most of the films discussed here in this study can be seen as modern and post-modern texts which treat the historic as contemporary and personal as political. They work subtly and penetratingly to connect personal matters to public issues within radically-changing post-Mao China. These films seek to give a voice to the voiceless, depict an image that has never been seen before, as they deconstruct the texts of popular culture and belief, and reproduce stereotypes and historic images about the powerless and look at history in terms of the aesthetic, political, ideological and moral meanings of the present. They bring into focus the many marginal and marginalised issues such as women, unconventional sexuality, social and political deprivation, which have been excluded before from political discourse. Albert *et*

*al* point out that to be liberatory, concepts need to counter tendencies to ignore, devalue, or over-simplify the important social dynamic such as race, sex, class, or authority. (Albert *et al*:1986:5) All the elements that are profoundly presented in these films play with one another in this highly imaginative and yet subtly realistic form of art. Rather than being audio-visual illustrations of this or that social and political issue in the past, today's cinema helps form a deeper cognition of political reality and has a crucial place as part of the ongoing discourse of both reality and history. Technologies and modern techniques make this possible and subtly desirable. Barthes perceptively observes "the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under appearance of a given meaning." (Barthes:1977:46) hence film becomes more conducive to the "third meaning".

The adoption of particular cinematic language and cinematographic techniques and structure strengthened the thematic content of the text and gave cinema more power to present and see the world in a more meaningful way. The visual and aural images presented to the viewer carried social, cultural and political implications. Similarly in terms of historiography, the selection of what constituted a significant "fact of history" was politically charged. Hence, the departure of "fifth generation" film-makers from the Chinese cinematic tradition introduced both a new way of thinking and a challenge to all established orders, no matter whether they were social, racial, economic, gender or political. These films, with their unique and synthetic way of looking at and making the world, seemed to show their capacity as a holistic philosophical commentary of China's political realities in a subtle, constructive and liberating way.

These “fifth generation” films had a certain rapport with experience and reality and generated a deep reflection upon Chinese society among the Chinese audience. They created historical, social and political connections, as well as aesthetic ones. All these qualities not only reflected an era of transformation, but also went beyond immediate political events and had far-reaching consequences. For “literature is not a privileged activity separated and alienated from the real world. Even the most abstract writers still somehow bear witness to reality”, (Semprun:1984:272-3) not to mention much of contemporary Chinese cinema, which is constantly in the present, the present dressed as the past, and is perpetually contemporary in its spirit of stunned post-Mao melancholia.

### **Films, Aesthetics, and Political Communication – Towards a *Third Meaning***

These films of the “fifth generation” altered the traditional Chinese aesthetic form in order to inform the changes that were taking place in China. And yet they did not abandon it; they based their vision primarily on a typically Chinese image and its history. In so doing, they reinterpreted the audience’s everyday way of seeing, transforming meaning as it had “already been expressed into meanings yet to be expressed.” (Kearney:1988:198) To use Kearney’s words “they remained essentially liberating in so far as they disassemble out-worn forms of representation, not in order to sanction formlessness, but in order to reconstruct different forms. In this sense, it is an uncompromising indictment of the perceptual, and by implication social, status quo.” (Kearney:1988:198) The cinematic language and structure adopted by the “fifth generation”, gave the audience a critical insight into the world they were living in and helped discover

the truth about themselves, the truth they could not see, or perhaps would rather not see. Thus these new forms combated stasis in Chinese society, and the hardening of people's postures and perceptions of themselves by providing new images and symbols, narratives and discourses to further transform their views of the world and their existence.

However, to say these films of the "fifth generation" would have any immediate repercussions and produce an immediate action in reforming society would be unrealistic and a misunderstanding of the function of arts and literature. Nevertheless, the important point is, these kind of films, to use Semprun's words, are "to foster the birth of reflection." (Semprun:1984:276) "With regard to impact on the audience, the immediate repercussions – the transmission of information, ideas and views on the world, be they political, aesthetic, or personal, cinema is obviously a much more effective means of action." (Semprun:1984:266-7) Thanks to the maturing intellectual thinkers and artists, among them the "fifth-generation" film-makers, Chinese society was experiencing a fundamental intellectual and philosophical rebirth.

Films such as *Yellow Earth*, *Judou*, *Life on the String*, *The King of the Children*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and so on were constructed both to draw in and distance the audience by stressing the contradictions, and setting the story in the "remote" past and applying various modern cinematic discourses. They began to understand that seeing a film about the past today is a process of shifting back and forth in history, which is made possible and accessible by modern technologies and concepts. These films entered the lives of the viewers and disturbed their social and political consciousness, not as a statement of politically correct views

and ideas but as a reflection and rethinking of the existing structured social and political order and contradiction within such an order. To see current Chinese films in this way – as an intervention and provocation of political consciousness and a necessarily incomplete political discourse – will help the audience understand the changes that are taking place in China. “For once our inner vision changes we realise that the outer world can also change.” (Kearney:1988:198)

Kearney’s argument on arts best explains how these films work towards changing people’s views and eventually their society. He maintains

Aesthetic transformation may thus serve as a prelude to social transformation; but it can only do so by insisting on the difference between the worlds of art and reality, that is, by refusing to become a weapon of propaganda or a commodity of consumerism. In short, it is precisely the otherness of art which reminds us that the world as it is can be made other than it is. (Kearney:1988:198)

Due to its narrative tradition and advanced technologies modern cinema does indeed capture a fuller vision of society. Barthes presents a very intriguing discussion on the meaning of cinematic image. He acknowledges the possibility of cinematic images producing another kind of meaning which is properly “filmic” in his analysis of Eisenstein’s use of synchronic montage techniques. Barthes calls this a third meaning<sup>18</sup> which disrupts and transcends the conventional meanings of cinematic realism. (Barthes:1977:52-69) The third meaning, however, breaks with the linear sequence of narrative information and reference and opens up what Barthes calls the “metonymic logic of the unconscious.” (Barthes:1977:141) He

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<sup>18</sup> Barthes observes that the first meaning of the cinematic image functions at an *informational* level (i.e. it communicates descriptive information about the surface-structure of setting, plot, characterisation etc.). The second meaning works at a *symbolic* level (i.e. it points to the social, political, economic or ideological message signified by the images of a film).



argues that this metonymic logic operates by virtue of vertical displacement and repetition rather than by the normal means of sequential representation. It estranges the audience from the “predictable expectations of ‘realist’ narrative allowing for ‘surprises of meaning’.” (Barthès:1977:141) To go back to Barthès,

I receive a third meaning – erratic, obstinate. I do not know what its signified (reference) is, at least I am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which this – consequently incomplete – sign is composed.

...  
Here the image cannot be conflated with the simple existence of the scene, it exceeds the copy of the referential motif, it compels an interrogative reading ... a ‘poetical grasp’ (...) The third meaning is one ‘too many’, the persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive ... it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is, infinitely (...) It is discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning (as signification of the story). This dissociation has a de-naturing or at least distancing effect with regard to the referent (to ‘reality’ as nature, the realist instance). Eisenstein would probably have acknowledged this incongruity, this impertinence of the signifier (image).

...  
It is clear that this obtuse meaning is the epitome of a counter-narrative, disseminated, reversible, set to its own temporality; it inevitably determines a quite different analytic segmentation to that in (narrative) shots and sequences – an extraordinary segmentation: counter-logical and yet true. ... this meaning can only come and go, appearing – disappearing. (Barthès:1977:54-5; 62-3)

Though there is no evidence that this third meaning is solely a filmic quality,<sup>19</sup> it is certain that films render this third meaning better than other forms of narrative literature. Roland Barthès’ analysis of the rhetoric of cinematic images provided a useful framework for a critical appreciation of Chinese contemporary films, which were richly endowed with aural and visual images, aesthetic and cinematographic

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<sup>19</sup> A similar meaning of images can also be found in some fictions, especially novels. Typical examples would be E. M. Forster and Proust, in their works “petite phrases” (leitmotifs) serve more or less the same functions; and some of the so-called “stream of consciousness” novels, both in English and Chinese.

languages that enabled them to produce the third meaning. Well imbued with the informational first meaning and symbolic second meaning, they offered the audience a unique vision about their society and the world, that would transform their social and political attitudes in the long run.

### **Cinema and Politics: Screening China, Envisioning China**

In view of the above argument, it is sufficient to sum up that films, too, not only inform about China and its society and politics, but also contribute to the transformation from a primarily *unmodern* society to a *modern* society through provision of new images, tropes and metaphors, which form a large part of the ongoing social and political discourse. Thus these films of the “fifth generation” and some other earlier ones have created a force in society which functions politically. This study demonstrates the necessity and inevitability of breaking down the boundary of politics and literature. It also illustrates that to relate politics with literature should not only focus on the so-called political literature. Literature informs politics not merely in terms of content, but in terms of both form and content. Only in this way, literature has a bearing upon politics. The analysis of the films in this chapter can be said to support this argument.

The above analysis suggests that contemporary Chinese literature and cinema have matured from an intuitive moralist institution to an intellectual and philosophical one. In a relatively short period of time both have acquired a unique way of expression and transformation. The films have created a different and independent social and political discourse. The rational, dialectical, popular, ideological and committed cinema has contributed, and continues to do so, to the

creation of a new, rational society, a new culture, and a new image of the modern Chinese. The film *Farewell My Concubine* was made with many constraints and difficulties, which eventually formed part of its merit and success. They gave the audience a sense of perpetual presence and helped shift their viewing back and forth across historic and geographical distances.

All these works leave the audience to ponder in a different perspective about society and themselves, and elicit a vision rather than a binding policy (some imaginative literature did indeed result in bringing about public policies based on such visions) unlike a more descriptive and edge-cutting sociological, or political language. Although cinema is widely regarded as presenting the world as it is (instead of creating a new “world of art” and projecting an abstract or imaginative world as other forms of arts and literature), *reiteratively, it is by no means just a replica form of life and reality*. By employing various techniques and cinematographic languages, it possesses an intrinsic logic and philosophy and presents itself as a unique way of seeing the world, which is unapproachable through other means. This is exactly what Chinese cinema of the “fifth generation” has done. It does not attempt to duplicate life or other subject matter as it is. Consequently it has more to say about Chinese society and politics.

Chinese cinema, as well as literature functioned as both a reflection and vision on politics, and perhaps most fundamental of all, as the judgement of politics. Maskell draws the reader’s attention to this function of literature on politics by pointing out that the politics of the day, however ordinarily corrupt or unwise, if subjecting itself to various possibilities of judgement found in the literature, there was still hope for politics. (Maskell:1985:31) He continues to

argue that “politics conducted as if subject to no judgement but its own, and its own reflected in journalism and advertising, making the worst politics of all, inviting the worst dangers, a much worse kind of political badness than mere corruption of earlier days.” (Maskell:1985:31)

Admittedly politics in China was in many ways not exactly conducted in a judicious and wholesome manner. However, as long as there were literature and films like the ones examined in this study to offer visions and possibilities, a better system would eventually emerge. As long as Chinese literature and films continued to pass judgement on politics, and the political process, with their unique language and discourse, a better understanding and a better vision could finally be realised. These films advocated a more tolerant and diversified political culture and led to a progressive, and yet realistic and non-extreme pluralism “that represses no one and liberates all.” (Denzin in Scheler:1961:154) These films also provided a terrain that allowed the viewer to see Chinese politics in perspective and to “explain relationships; to envision possibilities and delineate trends that impede or promote those possibilities; and to make ‘probabilistic predictions’ about the likely outcome of current activities – all in ways that broaden our perspectives and counter our biases.” (Albert *et al*:1968:5)

To conclude, aesthetically these films of the “fifth generation” strongly challenged the traditional Chinese concepts and ways of literary appreciation, and the domination of a monist theory elicited by the authorities towards the explanation just about every aspect of society. Thus they made the audience see their life in a different and broader light and created new dimensions of thinking about realities. In their own unique way they contributed new images and

discourse towards the general movement for change in social and political spheres.

Generally speaking, as long as China produces films like the ones of the fifth generation and is able to subject politics to literary judgement, a healthy and wholesome political culture will eventually come into being. “With China taking its place as a major power in the world”, (Lessing:1994:188), it is not only vital to the Chinese people, but also important to the whole world.

## CHAPTER SIX: Form and Meaning: Genre as Political Philosophy

Words, after speech, reach  
Into Silence. Only by the form, the pattern  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness.

– T. S. Eliot (1968:12)

Novels do not imitate reality; they create it.

– Todorov (1980:67)

Nash's discussion on narrative in his *Narrative in Culture* is to serve as a suitable beginning of this chapter on form and meaning, which, ultimately, determines how literature functions politically:

There is an important sense in which writing never informs us of any fixed (about some past, prior-to-the-text) truth; that it only informs our way of thinking about things, that it shapes, *re-models*, our sense of truth – *in the present, as we read it, and for the future* – as we go along. In this respect, there is very little difference indeed between anything we may call 'pure' writing. Virtually, their effects are identical. They – both, and always – reform the terms of our thinking. (Nash:1990:212)

The above quote casts an important light and gives direction to pursue the study of the relationship between politics and literature, especially in post-Mao China. During this time, many writers and critics gradually came to realise that the traditional forms of writing were bankrupt, and for the past three decades the forms of expressions, literary and political, became stagnant and ritualised and did not inform correctly on Chinese society. It is therefore necessary to go beyond earlier and traditional concepts and to break away from the conventional discourse in order to gain insight into contemporary China. Thus to revolutionise the literary language and style, according to Liu, is to break up the domination and to attain the maximum freedom of the mind. (Liu:1989) Due to the pressure imposed by the

historical development on writers and artists, there grew a desire among them to innovate the literary, cultural and political discourse, which was binding on the serious writer, because “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized”. (Foucault:1984:110) Goldman, seeing art as a revolt against conformity and oppression, argues that:

... this revolt can be comprised and described under two different, complementary aspects. There is the formal revolt of an art, which, not accepting a society, refuses it by finding new forms of expression unlike those the society has created and in which it has traditionally seen itself. I believe it necessary to comprehend the first manifestations of the New Novel, and a whole series of today’s literary works, on the basis of this extremely important phenomenon. (Goldman:1977:58)

In post-Mao China, many writers working in the fields of art, film, literature and philosophy posed an uncompromising challenge to traditional forms and ways of thinking. They drew their intellectual inspiration substantially from Western literary and philosophical theories, such as Western Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, existentialism, modernism, post-modernism and magical realism. Their efforts to bring in “otherness” to Chinese literature contributed towards bringing in new insights and inspirations to Chinese social and political life and creating a cultural and political diversity that was fundamentally important for a healthy development of culture, society and politics.

Literature at this time, ahead of other discourse, delineated a liberating picture and championed a political development. Chinese writers came to appreciate the crisis pervading China<sup>\*</sup> which presented possibilities to Chinese society by pursuing new forms of expression through literary creativity and

imagination. Their venture was part of their commitment to advance social and political justice and to find new meanings of post-Mao Chinese society. For literary art, to reiterate, through its characteristic intrinsic quality and special forms of expression, and its aesthetic dimension according to Marcuse, renders as a form to inspire new thinking, to criticise reality and liberate human spirit. (Marcuse:1978) The new literary discourse presented itself as part of the efforts of depoliticisation of literature and arts from the official leverage. More importantly, this literary endeavour in new forms of expression and fictional narrative actually constituted part of the powerful discourse associated with social, cultural, political and philosophical thinking and activities. Indeed, many Chinese intellectuals came to realise that “historically, the rebuilding of China’s soul was composed of two complementary traditions: the rebuilding of the rational spirit of humanity, which stresses the social, moral, and universal aspect of human life; and the rebuilding of the sensual vital force of humanity, which stresses the individual, aesthetic, and unique aspect of human life”. (Lin:1993:176) The literary works discussed in this study represented such an effort and expression of both traditions.

As Lin points out “unlike most Western countries, where the political and moral order is relatively stable, China is undergoing momentous social and spiritual transformation”. (Lin:1993:179) Despite the enormity of the changes (i.e. the social, economic and political transformation of society in contemporary China) the concepts most often used to explain and understand the realities still retained significant elements of the early Soviet and the fifties’ political thought. Admittedly, the complicated nature of Chinese society and politics cannot be fully understood through a fixed angle and an officially endorsed mode of expression,



but it requires more varied and sophisticated modes of expression. Hence many writers experimented with various means of literary expressions to make sense of contemporary China. The literary narratives they created and adopted (combined with their themes), not only enhanced their perception and expression, but also provided a critical and emancipatory social and political discourse, which designated the changes that were taking place and became a social and political catalyst and analeptic. This trend became “one of the most energetic and promising” social movements in modern Chinese history. (Li & Wang:1990)

### **“Stream of Consciousness” and Its Political Implications**

Sun Longji, a cultural critic from outside mainland China, once pointed out “A Chinese is programmed by his culture to be ‘Chinese’. In other words, in-bred cultural predispositions make the Chinese what they are and prevent them from being full-blown individuals”. (Sun:1989:136) Added to this cultural tenet, the astringent systems, social and political, during the first three decades of New China reinforced this “mass mentality” of the population, especially during the Cultural Revolution which “dehumanised man” and “made slaves out of men who should have enjoyed freedom. It turned independent minds into servile tools. It transformed men into animals, and in the process, men, that is the Chinese people, abandoned their conscience”. (Liu:1989:354)

Traditional culture plus constant political campaigns created an increasingly monolithic social and political discourse which left the nation without a real denominator and designator to analyse the meaning of the events and affairs. Moreover, the one-dimensional political discourse – regarded as instrumental to

the Cultural Revolution conducted in the name of cultural and political revolutions – resulted in society of subservient mass mentality and little individuality. Prior to and during the Cultural Revolution, everything was examined and interpreted through this fixed discourse, which as Liu Zaifu correctly points out, served as a means of domination of thinking, rather than as a way of seeing and understanding. (Liu:1988) Tambling also holds the same view and argues in a clearer and more concrete manner that “narrative seems not only to affect our thinking, but to be a mode of thinking, the only way it is possible to think. If narrative is so closely tied to ideology, it suggests that how we narrativise – in other words, the very structure of our thinking – is ideological itself”. (Tambling:1991:109) Indeed until very recently, China was predominantly narrativised by a single discourse, and Chinese society was seen from only one angle, and the events and moments of history were interpreted in a language that finally brought stagnation to the whole society in both cultural and economic life. AE is right to point out that “we do not want uniformity in our culture, but balancing of our diversities in a wide tolerance. The moment we had complete uniformity our national life would be stagnant”. (AE:1988)<sup>1</sup>

Sun Longji perceives that it is not objective to lay the entire blame for everything that happened in China at the doorstep of the Communists. There is something in the “deep structure” that is also answerable for the human tragedies other than political and social causes. (Sun:1989:31) He finds that the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Richard Kearney (1988) *Transitions: Narrative in Modern Irish Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press. Title page. AE – the pen name of George Russell.

“individual” is organised and motivated by the “other”<sup>2</sup> (if not the “nation” then the “family”). The Chinese “individual” *per se* does not possess the capability to “unfold” his own potentialities fully to give himself a willed shape. (Sun:1989:31) These values were well embedded in the traditional form of writing, and later reinforced by an authoritative state.

The literary works in the form of “stream of consciousness” in the post-Mao Chinese reform period functioned as a critical reportage and an intense subjective exploration of the alienated consciousness and fitted into a popular demand for self-awareness in a political environment. It not only opened up another angle from which to see themselves as individuals, but also allowed the readers to approach reality and history with a new perspective, presented a means to *re-view* man in Chinese society, as they became part of this narration, both inside and outside it, accepting and rejecting it at the same time.

The Cultural Revolution and other self-imposed political campaigns (such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the Great Leap Forward Campaign in 1958,<sup>3</sup> the Four Clean-Up Campaign in 1964) rendered nothing but a twisted personality, a false consciousness, a mistaken identity and a distorted mass mentality. After the Cultural Revolution, in order to liberate society from such falsehoods and mendacity and to revive Chinese society, some critics realised, a revolution in language and discourse was imperative and indispensable for the survival of Chinese literature and political thinking. (Liu:1989) Many writers felt

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<sup>2</sup> Here the “other” is not the unknown, the foreign, or the unfamiliar; it is societal and conformist.

<sup>3</sup> The Great Leap Forward Campaign was on the surface considered to be concerned with economic development in China, however, the fundamental motives and characteristics, as well as the consequences, were all of a political nature.

an inadequacy in their capacity to explore the meaning of such a complex period of time. They began either to experiment with new forms of writing or to turn elsewhere for more liberating ways of expression. Thus many new forms of writing began to emerge, among which the writing of “stream of consciousness” was the most notable and striking and the first to come onto the literary scene after thirty years of domination of the so-called “socialist realist” writing.

Barmé’s observation, somehow, catches the mood of this period, and identifies the importance of such literary innovations. He makes an interesting analogy:

... in many ways the situation in the post-Cultural Revolution China mirrors Europe after World War I. A sense of spiritual dissolution and crisis has become a salient element of the society, while the decay of political orthodoxy and the increased pressure to industrialise ... have caught millions of Chinese, especially the so-called ‘lost generation’, in a dilemma between Self and Society. The attraction certain ‘classics’ of Modernism hold for such people – Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* – is hardly surprising. Yet among the Sino-cenacles of the New literature there are many trendy supporters of the faith who are willing to apply modernist literary devices to the tenets of socialism, and are basically more in sympathy with the positivistic views of Germany’s later-nineteenth century *avant-garde*. (Barmé:1984:54)

Wang Meng,<sup>4</sup> who had been exiled to the countryside for some twenty years for his moderate critical portrayal of the bureaucracy and apathy among the party officials in the mid 1950s, led this literary experiment and movement. The

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<sup>4</sup> An important writer in the post-Mao period. He started his writing career before the Cultural Revolution and published his first controversial work, *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* in 1957, which cautiously criticised bureaucraticism among the Party officials effected by concentration of power. He was branded as a Rightist and exiled to work in a remote area. After the death of Mao he was reinstated and finally made the Minister of Culture. He is generally well regarded as a writer with a history of courageous resistance to the dominant ideology. Most of his works are entangled with recent social and political development and refer to the injustice and bad faith of an authoritarian regime. However, during the anti-bourgeois liberalism campaign in 1988, he was made responsible for the liberal tendency in the field of literature and culture. He resigned from the post in 1989.

writing of “stream of consciousness” first appeared with the publication of his first experiment of the form, *Sound of Spring* (1980), when the demand for social and political justice for all was at its highest voice, and a political consciousness of human values after such great human tragedies that had frequented China was keenly sought. Though it was a work with a light political undertone, it caught the attention of a wide range of readers and critics. The story depicted a journey of the hero back to his hometown after he had visited Europe. It did not have a straightforward story-line. The important feature of the story rested upon the hero’s retrospective journey which paralleled his journey home. His thoughts were roaming back and forth between the present and the history and the East and the West across the time and space. The story broke up the limit and order of the time and space in a way that gave the author a powerful means to maximise his imagination. It offered a new angle and perspective into contemporary Chinese society. In this way, unlike the traditional narrative which presented to the reader in a more or less lineal chronological and spatial order, the story written in “stream of consciousness” invoked the reader’s intellect and imagination so that he could make meaning out of the story. It engaged the reader in a process that was to encourage his own understanding and interpretation of the text, thus to inspire his individuality and creativity. The presentation of the *self* as something precious and inviolable certainly exerted a far-reaching impact on Chinese politics and society. As a consequence, the text caused a wide and intense debate, (Cao:1988:116) even though the story could not be classified as a political work in the least sense of the word.

Without being outspokenly political, *The Tale of the Kite* (1979), by Wang Meng, combined realism and modern techniques such as imagism, symbolism, and “stream of consciousness” in its moving presentation of ordinary post-Mao urban life. A kind, honest and hardworking young couple found themselves estranged in a hostile and alienated world. In such a world, people became suspicious of one another. “If I don’t eat you, you will eat me”. (Wang:1992:1) Although the author did not blame anyone for such phenomenon, he undoubtedly brought the reader into a political re-thinking by abandoning the traditional way of narration and adopting a new form of narrative.

Few of Wang Meng’s works published in his period can be termed as overtly political in terms of the subject matters. However, to quote Kani, “it is for the audience to call a play political, not for the artist to intend it so ... plays are called political because they show our lives, not because we are politicians”. (Kani in Vandenbroucke:1982) This genre of writing defied the traditional language of criticism and, to some extent, pre-empted the literary officials’ predominance in literary criticism. It was naturally not welcomed by the establishment. However, these works could not be called political in a strict sense of the word, but their political implications upon Chinese society could not be underestimated.

In Wang Meng’s works, the heroes were no longer heroes in received terms. His characters were no longer a fixed and stable entity, but became somewhat problematic in the new situation. For example, in Wang Meng’s *tour de force The Mobile Transformable Man*, after the hero, Ni Wucheng died, his son tried to analyse and categorise what kind of man his father was:

An intellectual? a fibber? a lunatic? an idiot? a good man? a collaborator? an old revolutionary? a Don Quixote? an extreme

leftist? or an extreme rightist? a democrat? a parasite? an undiscovered genius? a good-for-nothing? an old child? a Kong Yiji?<sup>5</sup> a pathetic wretch? a snake? a die-hard? or an *avant-garde*? a hedonist? a rascal? a philistine? a book-worm? an idealist?  
(Wang:1987:336)

To define his character is no simple matter. The undertone is apparent – he is everything; he is nothing. This novel represents Wang Meng’s highest artistic achievement. The novel is complicated and laden with meaning, though it evolves around the life of just one main character, Ni Wucheng. The story spans from 1930s to the present. Ni’s grandfather was a progressive scholar and took part in the Constitutional Reform. He hanged himself after the reform was defeated. However his father is a slow-witted sycophant and drug-addict, being introduced and encouraged by his wife to take opium. She believes that drugs will get rid of the rebellious temperament in the family. Once he is hooked on drugs he will be insensate about the outside world and keep away from social and political trouble so that they will live happily as a family. When she comes to know that her son Ni Wucheng wants to have his education in the city, she tries to duplicate what she has done to her own husband. Eventually Ni compromises with his mother and promises to get married and start a family after he gets a chance to study abroad. Years later he comes back home with the knowledge of the Western maestri such as Descartes, Rousseau and Hume. Though his knowledge opens up his sensitivity and dissatisfaction with the Chinese reality, it does not give him strength to change it. Thus he lives in a state of frustration and confusion. Life becomes a purgatory with no purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> The main character in Lu Xun’s novel, *Kong Yiji*, in which the writer portrayed a decadent traditional Chinese scholar. Impoverished and hard-stricken, he fell into stealing, but he tried to maintain an air of pretended dignity by resorting to florid antiquated words and phrases.

The novel caught the attention of the readership immediately after its publication. Wang Meng brings into focus modern Chinese history and its political turmoil by presenting a picture of a metamorphosed national identity. One critic discovers the meaning of the work by pointing out that to face history is to face reality. (Tang:1996:202) In his own foreword of the novel, Wang Meng admits that he endured a great pain in writing the novel. Wang Meng here not only articulates a tragedy of an individual or individual family, but it is also a tragedy of the nation. The reader is doubtless to experience the same pain, which is going to turn into a positive vision and a collective consciousness.

It is not only the content which defies the dominant and traditional interpretation of this particular work of literature, but more importantly the form of narrative makes any superficial and thematic interpretation of the content obscure and problematic, and often futile. This work refuses a separation of the content from the form. If one denies the content, he automatically denies the form altogether.

As part of the consciousness of reality, self-consciousness was regarded as an inexorable trend of a general consciousness, which was a reaction against the total conformity of the fifties and sixties and the over-generalisation of society and politics. This was the first serious literary attempt to understand man as individual in a political state, his position in society to others, socially and politically. Thus Wang Meng's works presented political retrospection, paving the way for a new mode of thinking and the making of a new political discourse. This allowed one to open the darkest and deepest corners of the mind and accept some aspects of humanity other than the social traits. It also broke up the domination of a certain



discourse and the blind faith in authority. Thus *The Mobile Transformable Man* offered the reader a true social and political testimony. It spoke for the time and its consciousness. And because it derived from a perception of the relationship between the time and its consciousness, the book was certain to create an emancipatory and iconoclastic social and political critique.

In Wang Meng's works, through the portrayal of a subjective point of view, the conventional heroes suddenly became problematic and reality was no longer black and white. Complicity replaced simplification of politics. These works presented themselves with a strong antagonistic force, representing estrangement and raising a general consciousness for freedom and human values in the immediate post-Mao era. The intention of these works can be seen as continuing the process of China's modernity initiated by the May Fourth Movement (1919) in the early century. At that time, the changing international situation kindled fresh hope and inspiration for national emancipation among Chinese intellectuals. The extensive influence of foreign literature had brought about an enthusiasm for democracy and sciences, and innovations in narrative styles and literary genres. The foreign influence also endowed the new forms with features of modern literature, which helped pave the way for China's progress in modern history. As Tenenbaum points out the "aesthetic sphere can operate to subvert autonomous actions and internalise relations of subordination". (Tenenbaum:1980:473)

As evidenced then, this form of writing made it difficult for the authorities who still upheld their authoritarian stance to assert power in literary criticism. Wang Meng's works rendered the authoritative critiques irrelevant, and fostered

new ways of reviewing realities. They also helped to establish a new political discourse which placed man in the centre. Such writings also restored literature to its original status, that is, in terms of literary and artistic production, to create according to certain foreordained rules and concepts is not to create at all. Similarly, in terms of literary criticism, to read literature with prescribed approaches will ultimately either fall into Plato's position, or fail to see its meaning altogether.

### **Creating New Ways of Thinking**

In her "Against Interpretation", Sontag argues: "in most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art". (Sontag:1967:8) This thesis follows Sontag's argument, not attempting to interpret each text by itself, but looking at them in relation to broader issues and perspectives. In Goldmann's observation, *Cultural Creation*, he argues:

The novel is not homologous to empiricism, to rationalism, or to Enlightenment philosophy. It is a critical literary form implying a positive element: the affirmation of the individual and of the individual value implicit in the novels. ... Precisely in this primary affirmation of the individual's values, the novel is an extremely vigorous social critique. (Goldmann:1977:53)

Although during the 1980s, few Chinese writers and critics realised this intrinsic nature of the novel, or literary art, yet their desire of seeing and understanding Chinese society in post-Mao China led them to explore other means of literary expression to fulfil their social and political commitment. They found that the

traditional forms of writing were incapable of imagining the *other* and had failed them in their efforts to make sense of the ongoing change in Chinese society. (Wang Meng) One of the consequences of this formal experimentalism was to encourage the reader to view the familiar quality of life in an unfamiliar way, revealing a disturbing alien quality which forbade the security of an immediate appropriation of the texts. By so doing, Chinese writers and critics, to a certain degree, excluded the politicians and literary officials from intervening in literary creativity and criticism in a meaningful way. As a further consequence, by abandoning the traditional uniform modes of perception and expression, the imaginative writers managed to introduce the *other* into the *same* and restored literary art to its original and intrinsic function of “an endless production of meaning”. (Kearney:1988:195)

Tongqi Lin sees this drive for new ways of expression as Chinese intellectuals’ search for the soul of the nation. He finds that:

China is undergoing momentous social and spiritual transformation. Broad and fundamental social and cultural issues loom in the minds of Chinese intellectuals. These issues are their souls’ concerns and the ‘driving force’ behind their ‘exploration of the secret of knowledge’. The theoretical exploration of these issues is not a highly professionalised and impersonal enterprise. Nor is the new intellectual discourse a new ideology completely dictated by political needs or a product of disinterested, academic scholarship. It is essentially the voice of Chinese intellectuals searching for the soul of their nation. (Lin:1993:188)

In view of the above discussion, the “stream of consciousness” in contemporary China was not just another form to tell the same story. There was a crucial distinction between what some doctrinaire critics called formalism and the creation of true or meaningful form. The first presupposed the search for new

stylistic devices, new ways of manipulating materials of art like concrete entities. The second represented the realisation of the artist's thought about life through the structuring of a work. So that units which themselves evoked states of life, or re-presented "human images". These units were brought into relationships that created new insights, especially at this historical moment when China needed ideas and inspirations urgently.

In his *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse notes that traditional images of artistic alienation are in aesthetic incompatibility with developing society. He continues:

This incompatibility is the token of their truth. What they recall and preserve in memory pertains to the future; images of a gratification that would dissolve the society which suppresses it. (Marcuse:1970:60)

Certainly the techniques evolved by these experimental novelists, through which they penetrated deeper into realities of the mind, have passed into the common currency of fiction and finally reached philosophy and politics. These works also gave the reader a sense of the formative, though still largely submerged, currents of the age. The heroes' contemplation brought back together and contained within itself a world of individual and social meanings, becoming a comprehensive expression about China and its society. The images Wang meng had presented also brought together a whole range of insights into the Mao and post-Mao eras, which brought the readership to a new plane of thinking, and a new way of ordering the reality.

Here Wang Meng and others illustrated a different kind of first-person subjective perspective, which showed less emphasis on the traditional explicit

modality and personal judgement but concentrated instead on the construction of a radically transformed syntax and semantic imitating peculiar patterns of thought and perception. This perspective involved the viewer/reader's perception of him/herself in relation to the wider world. With the realisation of the protagonists' self-identity through his difficulty of integration into society and its values, this mode of writing, in narrative terms, became a powerful vehicle to explore the wider issues of how to improve human conditions and regain a sense of human values after the Cultural Revolution. Different from other social and political discourse, these works concern themselves with an ultimate value of human life in a given time, not simply denouncing certain people, and uncovering certain aspects of social mechanism so that they effectively work towards a new way of thinking and re-evaluation of the social and political system in China. Thus it helped to create independent critical thinking, for the reader of those works was "denied any dominant position from which to tally the representation with some supposed 'original'". (Kearney:1988:195)

Wang Meng's protagonists describe a world filtered through his narrating consciousness and leave consoling interpretation up to the individual reader, thus permitting a different voice to the established social and political authorities and institutions to emerge. Precisely in this primary affirmation of the individual's value, these works possessed political implications: as Roszak argues "we live in a time when the very private experience of having a personal identity to discover, a personal destiny to fulfil, has become a subversive political force of major proportions". (Roszak:1979:xxviii) Once the individual is:

... liberated from the pressure of painful purpose and performance necessitated by want, man will be restored into the 'freedom to be

what he ought to be.' But what 'ought' to be will be freedom itself: the freedom to play. The mental faculty exercising this freedom is that of *imagination*. It traces and projects the potentialities of all being; liberated from their enslavement by constraining matter, they appear as 'pure forms'. As such, they constitute an order of their own: they exist according to the laws of beauty. (Marcuse:1970:153)

According to Jin Guantao, a thriving young historian, the Chinese, as a nation, are known:

... more for contemplating past glories than for solving present problems or seeking ways into the future. The primary concern in the political, ideological and economic sphere is equilibrium. Self-determination and self-realisation are taboo, venturing out into the unknown is fatal. Balance and harmony are maintained at the expense of growth. The ruthless coercion imposed from the centre inhibits the emergence of new life.<sup>6</sup> It safeguards the absolute power of the monarch, the sages, elders, and ancestors, as well as the perennial traditions and customs. ... There is no accepted mechanism within the culture for the Chinese to confront the present without falling back on the inspiration and strength of tradition. (Jin:1989:133)

In contrast to traditional realist approaches, some of these new forms of narrative devoted vital attention to a philosophical quality of fictionality. Cao notes in his *A Study of Literary Phenomena in China of the 1980s* that contemporary Chinese literature, even up to the early 1980s, had lacked philosophical vigour. Thus these works offered little insight into Chinese society. (Cao:1988:348) However, the Cultural Revolution and other self-inflicted tragedies forced writers to realise that the Chinese people needed to examine Chinese reality in a different light. The new discourse and narrative provided them with such a means to re-think society. To fulfil such a need, one of the sources which provided insight was once more from outside China. Works such as *The Castle*, *The Cave*, *Metamorphosis*, *Waiting for*

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<sup>6</sup> Although the original Chinese is possibly *xinshengming* (literally, new life) however I think the best English equivalent should be vigour, or dynamics.

*Godot, The Outsider, The Fly, Nausea*, and the writings of Joyce and Woolf, were widely read and appreciated. In addition, the Chinese writers represented by Wang Meng provided new dimensions to understanding modern China through their literary expressions, because grasping truth in literature depended upon responding as an autonomous person to experience. Thus knowledge was also inextricably bound up with integrated activity, namely, with being fully human. The traditional way of understanding literature so far in China, had merely involved an understanding of the outside world which was separated from the inner.

### **Absurd – Today’s Negativity, Tomorrow’s Positivity**

As Laurenson and Swingewood suggest:

The Absurd, then, is a relationship between man and things, and does not inhere in things, in the world alone. Camus developed this conception in the first chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he defines four major types of absurd. There is the absurd routine way of life, catching the same train each day, performing the same duties week in week out, refusing to pose the question of meaning and purpose of life; there is the sense of time passing, bringing man nearer to death; there is the sense of the arbitrary character of life, the sheer contingency of existence, the sudden awareness of the alien nature of the object world, its essential humanity; and finally there is absurd as the experience of utter isolation from other human essence, mechanical routine existence drives them to mechanical, ritualistic responses to other persons. But he demands to know, to understand, to be conscious of his experiences, and it is this desire to grasp what Camus regards as fundamentally unknowable which leads to what Robbe-Grillet calls the fatal complicity, the affirmation of freedom in the face of an indifferent, hostile and alien world. (Laurenson & Swingewood:1971:228)

Gao Xingjian’s *Bus Stop* best informs this general sense of loss and bewilderment in contemporary China. A group of passengers wait at the bus stop for the bus to come. Buses come and go without stopping for them. They start panicking and do

not know what to do. Nobody can decide whether to walk away or continue waiting. Years seem to have gone by, but nobody has moved or decided to leave. The audience are perplexed by a sense of endless waiting and purposelessness of life. The debt the author owes to Samuel Beckett here is too obvious to miss. This is the first glimpse of the Theatre of the Absurd that a Chinese audience had ever had. However, it was unquestionably meant to “say something about the Chinese conditions” (Pan:1988:133) and rightly caught the mood of post-Mao China. Having lived in a society of an extreme mass mentality, all of a sudden, Chinese people were brought by these works to face a new inner world *which was both familiar and alien at the same time.*

The formerly accepted values and meanings of life were brought into question. They suddenly became strangers in society. The life they had lived all of a sudden became socially absurd and politically void and meaningless. The play cannot be understood, nor can it be properly valued, simply by resorting to the usual literary categories, for it posits a situation in which these categories are no longer significant. The play is tinted with an after meaning, a serious implication. Thus this play should be approached through politics, yet not as a political study or treatise. It is a vision of what a “mass” state and false consciousness can do to human life, and how such life can be understood and improved. And yet this kind of vision and interpretation do not mainly reside in the works *per se* and have to be appropriated and contextualised by the reader with an experience and a knowledge of reality. The Cultural Revolution, though having started as a new way of managing a mass society, ended as a horrifying human tragedy. The Revolution rendered a sense of hopelessness and purposelessness, all seemed



inamenable to reason. Thus the *absurd*, to recall Camus, is a reaction and confrontation of this non-rational world by the desperate desire for clarity which is one of man's deepest needs. It is also a revelation of his moral condition, which makes him reflect consciously upon his predicament and see it in a new light. (Camus:1955)<sup>7</sup>

Another influential work of the same kind would be Liu Xinwu's *Black Wall*, in which a man named Zhou lives in a courtyard compound and one morning he starts to paint the walls and the ceilings of his apartment black without giving any reasons and explanations. This act thus confounds and exasperates his neighbours, for it challenges their intelligence, except for a little boy of ten.

The work challenged the officials' intellect as well. Thanks to its non-political theme, the official critics could not pinpoint the meaning of the work, and only criticised the author's tendency of trivialising literature. But any reader could come up with an interpretation of the story, which would be inevitably politically charged.

However, many critics, even those who were sympathetic with the fundamental concept of experimentalism, failed to understand the real and positive message of works as such, not to mention those who always cherished a sceptical and hostile attitude towards anything beyond the language and the discourse they were comfortable with. One criticism is typical of this kind. This critic labels this work as "egotistical indulgence". He mumbles on:

An egotistical 'indulgence' of this nature can hardly be seen as normal or acceptable; and since there is no elucidation of the significance or use of such a black room (certainly none is offered in the story), we must assume that this behaviour is 'abnormal'.

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<sup>7</sup> Camus calls this process "awakening" in his *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.

Confronted by this situation the characters in the story react in various ways ... the problem, however, is that the author ... regards the 'abnormal' as 'normal', and is critical of the attempted suppression of Zhou's desire to express his quirky individuality. ...

... The author depicts the contradiction (between Zhou and his neighbours) as one that is so intense as to be virtually unreconcilable. In so doing he has revealed that he lacks a firm basis in life, and that he is out of step with the world around him. He has created a fraudulent set of characters and an exaggerated *mise-en-scène* in order to express ideas that are neither new nor of any profundity. ... the work is shallow and flat.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously using a critical language like this, the critic entirely missed the point. He was only looking for *a priori* knowledge in the text and failed to read it with a wider experience and exterior knowledge that would invoke the meaning and philosophy of the text. Liu Xiaobo's words may, to some extent, explain the meaning of such works. Liu realised what group consciousness did to Chinese society, saying:

... what has brought about the present state of affairs is group consciousness. People feel that they can't rely on themselves, they can't prove their own unique worth, that self-esteem only comes when you've thrown your lot in with the group. But if you act independently, even if people think you are absurd and that what you do is of no social relevance, if it's something no one else has ever thought of or done before, and you do it, then I believe your life hasn't been wasted. (Liu Xiaobo:1989:397)<sup>9</sup>

To read a story like this, one must bear in mind,

Literary messages can be defined as deviant association between signs. ... The very form of the literary message has a specific relationship with history and with society; but this relationship is special, and does not necessarily include history and sociology so far as its contents are concerned. The qualitative elements form a code, a code whose validity can be sustained over a short or long period. (Barthès:1973:191)

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<sup>8</sup> This literary review was published anonymously in the official journal, *Literary Gazette*, April issue, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Barmé's interview with him in Barmé and Minford (eds.) (1989).

*Black Wall* best illustrates Liu's claims, but the important aspect is: it does have a social relevance and a political message to convey. Was there anything more socially and politically important than such an effort to bring the Chinese people to terms with the damage that a false consciousness had done to Chinese society and to break down the mentality that had caused China to stagnate for decades? Even if it was intended as a total negation of the society and a portrayal of the purposelessness of life at the time, did it not bring the people to realise that tomorrow's positivity is entirely "hidden in today's negativity". (Barthès:1973: 157) and today's absurdity will lead to tomorrow's rationality?

### **Retelling the Past – a Prophet to the Future**

Many intellectuals felt that a proper and sufficient assessment of the past was a prerequisite for any social and political advancement. When the West thought of China and Chinese society and politics, it tended to think of its history as having began in 1949, hardly taking its historical and cultural dimensions into account. Resetting the scene in a distance for some authors at this time was not to avoid today's political reality as some critics suggested. On the contrary, it strengthened literary narrative and social and political discourse. Leaving out the historical dimension, we cannot get an answer to today's issues.

Chinese writers played a unique role in mediating between China yesterday and China today, between China today and China tomorrow. Their literary practices which turned on pastiche, parody, and the effacement of the boundaries

between the past, the present and the future, must be connected to the contradictions in the post-Mao period.

Modernist experiments with historical fiction were intent on inventing alternative modes of character portrayal that could present history as a mode of consciousness rather than an objective process or state of affairs. Besides the subjectivisation of history, modernists developed yet another strategy for presenting history as a function of complex consciousness, which represents the very process whereby history is transformed into a mode of consciousness in the first place. (Wesseling:1991:82)

Wesseling's view breaks away from the traditional method of reading historical literature, in which the historian tries to gather information regardless of the fact that any information worth having from imaginative literature is internally related to the reader's judgement of their value as art.

### **Literary Criticism as a Political Discourse**

To sum up the above literary trends, it can be said that these Chinese experimental writers' ideas, though not systematically presented, were thought-provoking and liberating at the time. They were the products of enquiring minds, using every intellectual means at their disposal to confront the social and political dilemma of being Chinese in post-Mao China. Their writings possess the very spirit of Lu Xun, which was conveyed in forms intrinsic to the time. The works by Wang Meng and others discussed above, when fully appreciated and appropriated, tend to give the readers insight into themselves rather than just into the characters and the works themselves. Their achievement did not only engage the cultural establishment, but also substantially encouraged similar developments in sociology, philosophy and politics, and to a large extent, developments in the

social and political well-being of the Chinese people. Hardly surprising, this experiment in literary forms evoked disapproval from those who did not wish to see the changes. A campaign was launched in 1984 to eliminate the so-called “spiritual pollution” aimed at the works containing “corrupt and decadent ideas of the bourgeoisie”, for they were believed to spread “distrust of socialism, communism and leadership of the Communist Party”. (Deng:1983:13) But the campaign soon came to a halt as Deng was informed that the term anti-spiritual pollution had a disreputable history<sup>10</sup>. However, the Chinese official critics and other authorities were not able to recognise the analogy of their treatment of modern literature to Hitler’s loathing and hostility of forms of modern arts and literature. At this time, they still could not appreciate the true nature of literature and its real function in society. Two years later, the campaign resumed under a different terminology, namely, anti-bourgeois liberalisation.

Despite official disapproval, the trend of embracing these new literary forms of narrative and expressions soon gave rise to a new critical language which in turn gave birth to a new political discourse. Xu Chi, a well-known veteran writer argued forcibly, if not entirely convincingly, in his article “Modernisation and Modernism”, that it is impossible to develop “socialist modernisation” without Modernism. Probably there is a confusion of modernism with modernity in his argument. Nevertheless, the importance of the issue for Chinese cultural, social and political life was too obvious to miss. To build “socialist modernisation” based on an old discourse that had little relevance to today’s world

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<sup>10</sup> In his notorious speech on “Aryan art” in 1937, Hitler had used the term to condemn “decadent” bourgeois and Bolshevik culture.

would not be of any constructive significance. Barmé's sharp observation on this issue illustrates the importance and the significance of the debate and the introduction of modernism into Chinese literature:

In considering the complex, confused and at time simply muddle-headed arguments surrounding modernism in China today the Western observer may well feel a sense of *déjà vu*. Living in a world based on economic prosperity and avaricious consumerism, in a contemporary culture that is fragmented and elitist, it seems to the onlooker that modernism is hardly something that can easily be limited to a specialist debate on historical detail or literary techniques. In fact, the discussion concerning modernism and China has broken free from such academic confines to become a crucial issue in the cultural and political arena. (Barmé:1984:45)

Conventional discourse and forms tolerate outmoded rituals and practices, reinforce the traditional and dogmatic form of thinking and habitually reject new ways of perceiving and understanding the world. To understand the reality today:

... with the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and other sources to render reality to men in a form they can master. ... Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions. (Brecht:1993:424)

Therefore this innovation of narrative was indeed political and radical. It not only changed the language of literary criticism in China, it had also widened the dimension of social, cultural and political visions in society, due to particular circumstances characteristic of contemporary China. In view of this reality, the function of arts and literature had to be redressed and re-evaluated. For all:

... art requires its author to make a statement. The creator must study, analyse, and reinterpret to produce a final synthesis. Applying this activity to shattered imagery of the schizophrenic is an attempt to establish a system where previously non-existed. It is, perhaps, a first step in reassembling the fragments of a disintegrated

personality. ... Art externalises the inner world of its exponent.  
(Creedy:1970:153)

Thus it possesses a special vision of the reality. A writer and artist's role can be best understood in Coser's observation of the intellectual. He finds that:

A certain measure of alienation seems to be the perennial lot of the intellectual; he can never be 'like other men'. Criticism and detachment will always mark him, so that he will always be *in* the society without being fully *of* it. A certain degree of estrangement is the very precondition for playing the intellectual's role. Yet this detachment may at the same time be based on a deeply felt commitment to be ideals and central values on which the society rests. We are likely to be especially critical of the things we love. ... Similarly, intellectuals may be highly critical of their society because they are intensely devoted to its main aspirations. And they will criticise its current performance in the light of these aspirations. They may attack what 'is' in the name of an 'ought' derived from the very value premises to which the society professes to adhere. In this sense, intellectuals may indeed be detached while they are at the same time deeply concerned. Such an attitude permits them to transcend both affective neutrality and blind involvement through *detached concern* with the fate of one's society and one's fellow men. (Coser:1970:360)

Different from the mass media, which can be totally under the control of the state, the *message* of literature is difficult to control. The text is highly fluid and inferential and can be (in many cases should be) differently contextualised. Thus in the struggle against injustice and hegemony, the writers have an advantage – a capacity to offer their vision of the reality without being overtly anti-establishment.

The mainstream tradition of modern Chinese political thought mainly arose from the fountain of Mao Zedong thought. His thought was based firstly on an understanding of Marxism, which had mainly been formed during his Yan'an years, and secondly on traditional Chinese culture and values. Mao skilfully combined these two sources into one, which naturally acquired a public and

authoritative status. His thought soon reproduced a public discourse which was widely used for moving about and mapping out the values in other fields of life and subsequently dominated academic studies. Literary criticism only engaged in a kind of content evaluation completely based on externally imposed values and discourse. This kind of discourse did not possess a dynamic force to make the reading of literary works a meaningful activity. When applied to other fields and disciplines, it left a large part of the reality unexplained, and rendered real politics inaccessible to most people.

The emergence of the new literary forms and styles made the official reading of literature void and insignificant and in a sense broke down the hegemony of so-called truth based on an omnipresent political power. The writers actually launched a search for a new set of values through their creativity, a search that was to draw them far beyond the confines of traditional and dogmatic rhetoric by using a language that was both modernistic and liberating.

Literature became a major force to revitalise political discourse, for it depicted “losers” and “outsiders”, as well as “heroes” and the “godly”. It reported on society in a different cultural dimension, describing a wider politics other than the one presented to the masses in the official vocabulary. With the growth of new literature in the 1980s, a new discourse began to enrich Chinese social and political expression and vision. New forms of expression brought about new ways of reading the texts, and furthermore new ways of looking at society and reality. For example, the “stream of consciousness” school and psychoanalysis led to an awareness of the complexity of human nature and social values. The “stream of consciousness”, Wicht suggests:



... is technically, the revolutionary change from the 'epic naivity' of the narrator, who tells things 'as such', to a complex narrative structure, which constitutes a multiple disposition of voices and textual determinations. (Wicht:1985:135)

The writers in these schools were trying to convey the visions and thoughts of today's world. Their form gave the writers a greater capacity and freedom to move about in their imagination and creativity. As a consequence, it liberated literary criticism from political hegemony to some extent and brought it back to a wider social context. Adorno is right to point out that:

Since art's substance is dynamic and changing, and since objectified works have a history, they time and again become practical patterns of behaviour facing reality. In this regard the practice and theory of art are in agreement. Theory repeats praxis in a modified, neutralised form. In doing so it takes up a position. (Adorno:1984:342)

Words such as individual, representative, humanism, justice, freedom, began to replace the old so-called "political correctness". For art, "by retaining a semblance of qualitative difference from other objectified acts of communication", is able to call into question the appropriateness of such acts and suggest the possibility of other ways of looking at the world arising from its critique. (Walter:1994:195)

These changes could not occur without resistance, some of which even came from quite a few other fellow writers, not to mention many officials and politicians. They wished to stick to the so-called "realist" approach. However, they failed to understand a very important concept Brecht had upheld some years earlier. In his essay on Lukács, Brecht defines "realism" exclusively in terms of its goal, rather than its conventions. He argues that conventions must be made absolutely subservient to this goal, and that as social reality changes, so different conventions will be appropriate to its depiction. Any approach in art which sticks

rigidly to given conventions, whether “realist” or “non-realist” regardless of its adaptability to the task of “showing things as they are”, he calls formalist, again regardless of the types of conventions it uses. “Realism” in art is simply art which reveals the real whatever conventions it uses, while formalism is art which systematically distorts the real. He continues to argue that the means whereby realism is achieved cannot be determined *a priori* and for all time. There are, he claims, a great many works which are “realist” in form only, and which are therefore formalist and *vice-versa*:

If someone makes a statement which is untrue – or irrelevant merely because it rhymes, then he is a formalist. But we have innumerable works of an unrealistic kind which did not become so because they were based on an excessive sense of form... we are then in a position ... to characterise and unmask as formalistic even works which do not elevate literary form over social content and yet do not correspond to reality. We can even discover such works which are realist in form. (Brecht:1974:42)

In this sense it is up to the reader to decide whether a text is “realist” or not. It is “realist” because it relates him in a meaningful way to society and helps him make sense of the world he is in, not because it describes a series of events in a conventional manner.

As a matter of fact these experimental texts of the “stream of consciousness”, and the “absurd” and so on, exerted a much more “realistic” impact in Chinese society than the so-called socialist “realist” literature in the fifties and sixties. For meaningful forms of literary narratives gave scope to explore, contemplate and celebrate, search and order human experience. (Hoggart:1970:11) These new forms were deeply located in their various contexts, such as biographical, generic, historical and were subjected to linguistic, stylistic

studies, psychoanalysis, and social, political and ideological critique, which gave rise to a new discourse that would in turn give meaning and vision to society.

The real meaning of these forms partly lies in the fact that they stand in contradiction to the conventional modes of thinking, to the status quo, and the authoritarian power. As “art thrives best on the variousness of life and on a search for new forms and new techniques”, (Edel:1955:142) it is equally true that new forms will bring forth variety and vitality to society, which, too, prospers on diversity and pluralism.

### **An Emancipatory Vision of China’s Future**

Though many realised the importance of the changes brought about by literary works of this kind, due to lack of critical methods, many questions as to how and why literature had such an impact would have to remain unanswered. Guillèn’s observation on the genre can be seen as a starting point to confront the question. According to him, “a genre is a descriptive statement, but, rather often, a declaration of faith as well. Looking toward the future, then, the conception of a particular genre may not only invite or make possible the writing of a new work; it may provoke, later on, the critic to search for the total form of the same work”. (Guillèn:1971:109) Kearney once noted that “it is not enough to free a society *from* the false consciousness of tradition, one must also liberate it *for* something”. (Kearney:1988:270) The Chinese writers, by showing profound psychological insight into characters they portrayed, gave the readers insight into individual characters and advance their knowledge of “man” in society. As Flaubert once expressed:

Modern man is progressing, Europe will be regenerated by Asia.  
The historical law that civilisation moves from Orient to Occident  
the two forms of humanity will at last be soldered together.  
(Flaubert:1984:985)

Some Chinese writers in the 1980s admitted their debt to Western philosophy and literature. Literary forms were an expression of history. As far as the nature of the literary forms is concerned, there are similarities as well as differences, (Cao:1988:116) however the significance and meaning of art and literature lies in their changing nature, for “art is never static. It neither accepts conformity nor does it like repetition. When it is reduced to propaganda it ceases to be art and becomes advertising”. (Edel:1955:142) Under Mao, due to the fact that a literary criterion (both in terms of creative writing and literary criticism), was set by those who did not write, the literature lacked its own self-consciousness and philosophical power. Consequently literary works at that time were only mimics and imitations of a prescribed political nature. They did not possess the ability to inform the past and the present of China, let alone the future. Encouragingly, the emergence of the new literature after Mao began to reveal the real relationship of man and history, of nature and history, and of reality and history in contemporary China. These new forms gave the reader the capability to:

... change, criticise, pervert and destroy those typified (and typifying) truths, facts and thematics which have solidified (what we may not be) and what we can do (by way of the various inside/outside inscriptions that exclude and thus determine what counts as discourse). (Miguel-Alfonso *et al*:1994:214)

These forms not only made it possible to go some way to understanding the concept of “man” in many perspectives, such as psychological, social, historical and political, but also pointed to a new way of acting.

Socially and politically, this study raises the question of literary art (“real literature” or “good literature” as discussed in the previous chapters) as a potentially positive and emancipatory force, because literary art “is an endeavour of a society to tell ‘itself about itself in order to describe itself to itself and to others’”. (Kearney:1988:270) Unlike some of the social and political critics who sought fully to embrace Western culture and political values and who totally rejected Chinese cultural and political values and history, contemporary literature offered a vision and understanding within the context of China yesterday and China today. Myrdal is right to argue that:

... the practice of expressing political attitudes only through the medium of purportedly objective arguments and scientific theories is probably in the long run highly injurious to the actual policy that one wishes to support. Quasi-scientific rationalisation of a political endeavour may be an effective propaganda weapon; yet its effect at the crucial time, when the ideal has not acquired enough political backing to be transformed into practical action, is ... almost inhibitory and disintegrating. (Myrdal:1954:xii)

However, literature, being granted a truth of a ‘higher’ order, “should not and indeed did not disturb the order of business”,<sup>11</sup> (Marcuse:1989:61) and it therefore possesses a certain advantage over the quasi-scientific rationalisation of politics. In the 1980s, Chinese people experienced some fundamental changes in their political and economic status, which were not only reflected in literature, but also informed and reformed by literature. Literature, as all other forms of art, contains a utopian moment and “even in the most sublimated works of art, there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise’ ... as eminently constructed and produced subjects, works

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<sup>11</sup> “The order of business”, as I understand, means the day-to-day proceedings, social, economic or political, and it also implies a limited period of time, In the long run, arts and literature, as I believe, do “disturb the order of business”.

of art, including literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life". (Adorno:1977:194) Exactly in this sense, Chinese writers were providing a vision for Chinese society. They might not possess the immediate power to change, but this vision not just served as a mirror: it also pointed towards possibilities for the future. Chinese literature in this period was actually creating a process of democratisation. It offered visions and possibilities revealed in ways that were only possible through literature. It also broke down an omnipresent hegemony not just over politics but also over language and discourse. If the authority was to lose its hegemony over language, discourse and cultural images, it would eventually, as a consequence, almost certainly lose its hegemony over politics.

Though the thematic messages were largely dismissed and ignored by the powerful politicians, their influence as a social and political discourse was too strong to overlook. Maskell notes that "the particular lessons politicians might learn from literature are not so important as something into which they shade: a whole language of true judgement in which alone politics can have its right place". (Maskell:1985:23) Chinese literature in the post-Mao period did bring into being a new discourse which stimulated China's social and political thinking in a way that it could not be done by any other means.<sup>12</sup> It was literature that gave the people a sense of purpose, a vision to look forward to, and above all a new language to

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<sup>12</sup> Though admittedly at this time other discourses, such as cultural, philosophical, political etc. did provide in-depth knowledge about China and Chinese society. Books as such included *China on the Mountain Ridge: Problems, Dilemmas, and Painful Alternatives* by He Bochuan (1989), *The River Elegy* by Su Xiaokang et al (1988), Li Zehou's *The History of Thoughts and Marxism in China*, Liu Zaifu's *Reflections on Literature*, and *Literary Criticism and Genre Revolution in the Eighties*.

perceive themselves and a means to discover and transform themselves. And this process was fundamentally a political one.

Literature, according to Wellek, “is really not a reflection of the social process, but the essence, the abridgement and summary of all history.” (Wellek:1985:95) And the artist can have no truck with falsehood or servitude which, wherever they reign, breed isolation. (Camus:1967) This explains why much of the literature produced during and before the Cultural lacked a true vision. They also lacked an ability to function as a signifier of national identity, because “a creative period in art is determined by the order of a particular style applied to the disorder of a particular time” and thus “it gives form and formulae to contemporary passions”. (Camus:1971:239) This comprises the true and intrinsic function of literary forms which provide a vision and give meaning to a particular time and space and to an experience, which has a personality and a history behind it. T. S. Eliot’s words may best describe the spirit: “last year’s words belong to last year’s language/And next year’s words await for another voice”. (Eliot:1968:39) Much of China’s most inventive and liberating thinking and writing over the century was produced in the field of literature. Literature, by combining imaginative creativity in forms with a keen sense of social commitment, served as a driving force in Chinese society, and broke down from time to time the domination of the old discourse and provided new visions and modes of thinking which paved the way to further economic and political changes in the years to come.

## CONCLUSION: Literature as Political Philosophy

### Aesthetics after Propaganda

In the recent years of reform, some of the so-called “Cultural Revolution literature” re-entered the Chinese literary and cultural arena, but not out of political manipulation and indoctrination. The audiences and readers came to re-appreciate the former model operas and some of the Cultural Revolution literature (novels by Hao Ran) in new perspectives. This phenomenon puzzled many critics as well as other social and political commentators. Some critics saw it as political nostalgia on the part of the hard-line leftists. A close examination of the audiences and readership, consisting of people from various background, many of whom had even suffered a great deal under the regime of the Gang of Four, disproves this argument. Some saw this development as a sign of dissatisfaction with the present, which was equally arguable. The real truth goes beyond a simple and straightforward answer. A recent exhibition of the arts of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in London<sup>1</sup> is another example of the same phenomenon, though its attraction to Western viewers is not the same as that of the Chinese operas to Chinese audiences.<sup>2</sup> These model operas had largely been rejected and derided by the general public during the immediate post-Mao period due to their association with the ultra-leftist Gang of Four. However, after a period of time, people came

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition “Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930-45” took place in the Hayward Gallery, London, from 26 October 1995 to 21 January 1996. It was subsequently shown in Barcelona and Berlin later in the year. A book with the same title was published on the occasion edited by Dawn Ades *et al*, foreworded by Eric Hobsbawm and afterworded by Neal Ascherson (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Although admittedly the meaning of visual arts or the interpretation of visual arts (which are not a direct concern of this study) are very different from that of fiction, a temporal distancing and new historical circumstances have caused the meaning of the works to change or grow in both cases.



to look at these “propaganda arts” in a different light, this time without any external pressure or internal obligation to embrace them as the truth. In addition historical and political happenings in China injected new meanings into these once ritualised and awesome forms of arts. Thus the reader was able to acquire a better understanding and insight of the present stimulated by a historicised reading.

This second coming of the past propaganda literature can be explain by Gadamer’s concept of temporal distance. He perceptively notes in his edifying book, *Truth and Method*,

Temporal distance has obviously another meaning than that of the quenching of our interest in the object. It lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. But the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that the true meaning has filtered out of it all kinds of things that obscure it, but there emerge continually new sources of understanding, which reveal unsuspected elements of meaning. (Gadamer:1995:265-6)

Fundamentally, literature is a form of representation. Hence there exists an irreducible difference between representation and what it represents. The truth it tries to say is bound to be distorted. To bridge such a difference constitutes the challenge and the nature of literature. Social and political developments add new elements to the representation, which makes the reading of literature a perpetual liberating process. Once the reader is freed from all the subjections and captivities, as Gadamer also argues, “not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive, but always a productive attitude as well”. (Gadamer:1975:264)

Szanto interestingly notes that there are two circumstances under which a bad novel or film can become a good one. He argues:

(1) *Aesthetically*: a novel or film that may, for whatever reason, be bad aesthetically, could be good politically. That is, in its political effect it can serve, in whatever way, to render its readership more fully human.

*Corollary*: a novel or film one considers good aesthetically may prove to be bad politically; it can *de*-humanise its readership.

(2) *Contextually*: a novel or film that may itself be bad politically – in its explicit political content – can prove, in a context larger than itself, to be good politically; that is, it may unintentionally reveal the human injustices of its political stance. (Szanto:1987:5)

This further suggests that there not only exists an intrinsic relationship of literature and politics, but also by relating literature with politics – political events, issues, phenomena and thinking and so on – a better understanding of contemporary social and cultural events and phenomena will be arrived at. In addition, by relating literature to political studies and *vice versa*, bad literature can be given a life, which not only serves as textual materials for political studies, but it will also, as Szanto points out earlier, reveal truth and insight into society and humanity. A re-reading of such literature in the reform years in China has created a new critical language and improve critical literacy among the general public. Because the texts of the past are “objects in our present-day world, and it is by way of our present-day notions of similarity and difference, continuity and discontinuity, that we construct their historical meaning in the present day, and for the present day, by construing relationships among these objects and ourselves”. (Lemke:1995:28)

Moreover, because some propaganda literature and art had been created to compensate for the shortcomings of the system, it bore witnesses to these shortcomings. Inferentially they represented irony to the contemporary reader. The new historical environment translated these works into a new autonomy and broadened their literariness so that they were to release new meanings into society

and politics. After the Cultural Revolution these texts were read and viewed against a broader context and real experiences of the reader and audience. Hence the understanding was not derived from a “quasi-uncanny” pleasure,<sup>3</sup> but from a real pain and agony, a real experience and a dark page of China’s history. These works of art (admittedly some were of high artistic quality) strongly opposed the given reality in a converse order. They made *us* uncomfortable, disgusted and quasi-pessimistic. However, a pleasure could still arise from the viewing and reading, a pleasure of a better understanding of *ourselves* and of the world. Thus relate politics with literature plays an even more pivotal role in this process.

It is important to realise that “art as Form means not the beautification of the given but the construction of an entirely different and opposed reality. The aesthetic view is part of the revolution”. (Marcuse:1972c:51) Conversely historical circumstances also impose new meanings on literature, even those once-inanimate literary works. This phenomenon can only be explained by establishing a sound approach of studies in the relationship of politics *and* literature, which is not only an alternative, but also a necessity in terms of political knowledge. Levinson, whilst assessing Budd’s recent publication *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music* in his article “Art, Value, and Philosophy” argues:

Since actual influence on the history of art depends ... not only on the nature of the work and the relations it bears to its antecedents, but on a contingent degree of receptivity to and uptake of what it offers, this means we may need to recognize a measure of artistic luck in how much artistic value attaches to a work – for that is what actual as opposed to merely potential, groundbreakingness, seminality, and so on, require. We should in addition be prepared to

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<sup>3</sup> According to Aristotelian theory, reading tragedies gives the pleasure, but this pleasure derived from accident and catastrophe is an uncanny one, a recognition of pleasure in “unpleasure”, in pain. This pleasure is not keyed to the reader’s experience of pain or terror or the unthinkable, but rather to his protected spectatorial contemplation of such experiences.

accept the consequence that the full artistic value of a work in effect accumulates over time, and is thus not definitively assessable at a work's point of origin. (Levinson:1996:672)

After all "literature is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics; it is like an eye that can see beyond the color spectrum perceived by politics", (Calvino:1986:97) because literature can "make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness". (Calvino:1986:97) Recent Chinese history proves this argument. In today's politics, it is still literature that travels the farthest and echoes mostly loudly.

Against the new socio-political circumstances, the propaganda literature and art was to release a profound social and political consciousness into the mind of the readership and audience. It made the reader and the viewer to question their own thought systems. By doing so, the reader entered a new dialogue with the political world, which eventually was to translate into actions to chart the future of their destiny.

### **From Text to Philosophy**

The study has so far focused its attention on literary meanings of the texts and the political function of literature in society and the role of the writers as a whole. The political inclination of individual authors *vis-à-vis* their works has generally been omitted. Though it is interesting and sometimes pertinent to study the author's political propensity, to place undue emphasis on this aspect often leads to a diversion from the real meaning of a literary text, especially in terms of politics *and* literature. Hassan in his recently published article "Negative Capability Reclaimed: Literature and Philosophy *contra* Politics" intriguingly notes:

... we all know the stretching list of authors – Yeats, Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Drieu de la Rochelle, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Christa Wolff, Louis Althusser, Paul de Man – whose politics ranged from the silly to the archaic, from the naive to the awful, as they flopped from side to side. Yet in the case of great artist – Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence – all this hardly matters. Politics, embedded deeply in their works, submits to a refining alchemy, which is to say, submits to mediation by other codes and constraints, by truths of another kind. (Hassan:1996:311)

The same applies to Chinese writers. In fact the authorial position of Chinese writers intrudes on their readers and audiences to an even less influential degree. Although most of them manifested a historical consciousness as writers, their political awareness similarly ranged from superficial to irrational, from illusive to wishful as was illustrated in the previous chapters.<sup>4</sup> This, however, did not overshadow the political insight their works were to offer to the reader. To locate this characteristic of literature, especially the novel, it is constructive to begin with D. H. Lawrence's expression. He claimed that the novel was utterly incapable of the "absolute". It never "*let* you tell didactic lies". (Lawrence in Tindall:1952:189-90) He also declared – "give me the novel! Let me hear what the novel says/As for the novelist, he is usually a dribbling liar". (Lawrence in Tindall:1952:202) This argument can be further confirmed by Gadamer's statement that:

... the real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. (Gadamer:1975:263)

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<sup>4</sup> Some quotes from the Chinese authors demonstrate this point, such as Xu Chi's confused discussion on Modernism and Modernisation and Bai Hua's statement about the writers' role in society.

This point can be reinforced by examining Engels' fond interest in literature, especially the novel. Like Marx, he did not go far enough to develop a literary and aesthetic theory either. However, his comments on Balzac in various occasions were to shed light on a better understanding of the relationship between politics and literature. On the one hand, he construed that "Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the irretrievable decay of good society; his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction".

(Engels:1956:480) However, Engels at the same time found that:

... his satire is never keener, his irony is never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathises most deeply – the nobles. And the only men of whom he always speaks with undisguised admiration, are his bitterest political antagonists, the republican heroes of the Cloître Saint Merry, the men, who at that time (1830-36) were indeed the representatives of the popular masses. That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he *saw* the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he *saw* the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found – that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac. (Engels:1956:480)

This can be seen as a typical Marxist approach of reading literature and literary criticism, which is fundamentally sociological and ideological. The Chinese *littérateurs* and critics' vision was limited by such an approach prior to the present day. However, this approach seemed unsound and inadequate even to explain Engels' own interpretation of literature. Although he did recognise that the quality and signification of Balzac's fiction resided in "his poetical justice",<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On another occasion Engels notes that "*there* (in Balzac's novels) is the history of France from 1815 to 1848, far more than in all the *Vaulabelles*, *Capefigues*, *Louis Blancs* and *tutti quanti*. And what boldness! What a revolutionary dialectic in his poetical justice!" (Engels:1993:71)

(Engels:1993:71) he somehow failed to explain how and why a Legitimist came to sympathise with the republican heroes and did not verify clearly how and why literature came to possess such a quality as “revolutionary dialectic”. (Engels:1993:71) However, since then, later critics have developed various theories which were not only to answer such questions as this, but also to provide new dimensions and a driving force in literary theory and in social and political critiques and developments.

Kundera points out that it would be wrong to read novels as social and political prophecies. On the contrary, novelists discover “what only the novel can discover”. (Kundera:1990:12) Marcuse further argues that aesthetic quality and political tendency are inherently interrelated, but their unity is not immediate. (Marcuse:1979:53) He moves forward from Walter Benjamin’s formula<sup>6</sup> in the inner relation between tendency and quality in his thesis by pointing out that Benjamin’s “formulation rejects clearly enough vulgar Marxist aesthetics”, but it does not solve the difficulty implied in his concept of literary “correctness” – namely, his identification of literary and political quality in the domain of art. (Marcuse:1979:53) Marcuse finds that “the perfect literary form transcends correct political tendency; the unity of tendency and quality is antagonistic”. (Marcuse: 1979:53) Thus authorial position, though important in literary studies, does not assume priority in terms of politics *and* literature. A text’s philosophical strength lies not in its authorial stance, but in “the unity of tendency of quality”, which can be further reinforced through a historicised reading.

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<sup>6</sup> Marcuse in the same place quotes Benjamin’s formulation, which is “the tendency of a literary work can be politically correct only if it is also correct by literary standards”. (Marcuse:1979:53)

In view of the discussion as a whole, to relate literature with politics is not to judge literature with political knowledge, nor simply to use literature to as a source for political studies or to justify political theories, but rather to expand the knowledge of politics by approaching literature as both a subject and an object. It is to arrive at a political knowledge that not only involves a horizon of past knowledge (individual, linguistic, cultural and socio-political), but also embraces present actualities and anticipations of future possibilities. As the interpretations founded upon these dimensions “change constantly with the passage of time”, (Johnson:1990:188) political knowledge and perception attained in such a way continued to appropriate new meanings in society and to guide future actions. The dynamism of contemporary Chinese literature represented such a philosophical *tour de force* in society that any reading was bound to bear social and political consequences.

Lukàcs points out in his essay “An Outline of German Literary History” that in accordance with Marx’s exposition the German literature represented by Lessing, Goethe, Schiller and Heine, was the twin brother of German classical philosophy, because it manifested the same boldness of vision and concretely reflected the core problem of bourgeois humanitarianism. (Lukàcs:1986) Lukàcs’ analogy of “twin brother” pinpoints the true nature of literature in society. As shown in this study, Chinese imaginative literature, by delineating small worlds, pioneered formidable visions in Chinese society and politics. As Sartre argues, literature:

... is to have recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make one’s self be recognised as essential to the totality of being; it is to wish to live this essentiality by means of interposed persons; but on the other hand, as the real world is revealed only by action, as one feels himself in it only by exceeding it in order to change it,



the novelist's universe would lack thickness if it were not discovered in a movement to transcend it. (Sartre:1985:382)

Undoubtedly, literature also:

... depends on historical realities for many or all of its constituent elements: from the subject-matter (mankind) to language (medium of expression) to the artistic traditions that provide the author with form and other modes of expression, to the critic and reading public that literature needs to survive. (Bamikunle:1991:73)

In terms of literature's position *vis-à-vis realpolitik*, Heaney's triple "redress of poetry" also applies to literature in general. In defence of poetry Heaney articulates "how poetry restores something to the world, how it can re-establish itself as object and occasion of celebration, and how, finding its own rightness, poetry sweeps ahead into the fullest human self-realisation". (Hassan:1996:321)

"To be 'ill' brings hope; for every sickness there is a painkiller, a therapy or a medicine". (Schuster:1992:595) Thanks to literature's philosophical power to oppose the given reality, it was not only able to diagnose the noxious symptoms in society, but also to start a healing process. To go back to Aristotle, literature contributes to the elevation of mankind, to *paideia*. By showing us that which is possible, and by involving us in the inescapable passage of tragic events, readers and spectators are drawn into emotions of fear and compassion, emotions that lead to *katharsis*, a process that purifies us of megalomania (*hubris*), safeguarding democratic government and protecting us from unrestrained tyranny. (Salkever:1986) In such a process, the reader's interpretation was essential and critical. Because only through interpretation, the hidden meaning in the texts was able to be revealed and it was the reader – only the reader – was able to bridge the chasm that separated the past and the present, the *other* and the *same*, and

imagination and actuality. In such a way, he was able to enter the “interpreted” text, and thus set his foot in history and reinterpret it against his own experience. Reading literature not only offered a way to gain philosophical insight of the texts, but also led the reader into a philosophical relationship in society and *realpolitik*.

In addition to personal experience which contributes to the understanding of the world, many ardent literature readers tend to belong to the groups that are most influential in various walks of life (for instance, social, cultural, educational, economic, professional and political). Their readings of literature are bound to bear their occupational as well as individual imprints so that it will afford a different light and enrich the understanding of society seen through their eyes.

As it is intended from the outset, this thesis has explicitly mapped out the relationship between politics and literature in post-Mao China. It has sought to open up a new theoretical construct<sup>7</sup> and another perspective to approach China and Chinese politics.

### **Postscript: Making More Sense of Politics *and* Literature**

In view of the whole argument, imaginative literature *created* and *recreated* social, cultural and political discourses in contemporary China. It initially *de facto* campaigned for the liberation of thought and crusaded against the corruption and abuse of power. Moreover, in the post-Mao era, it is literature that problematised many received social and political concepts like humanism,

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<sup>7</sup> Connery finds that China “is curiously under-represented – in theoretical formations and as a site for application of theoretical constructs” (Connery:1992) especially in view of the recent “returning of theory situated in important work on and from Latin America, South Asia, Africa, and in minority cultures in Britain, Europe, and the United States”. (Connery:1992)

Marxism and socialism. In this way, contemporary Chinese literature also invested in the readership and the audiences a critical ability that could only be gained through a new literature discourse and consequently dislodged the authorities' hegemony over critical language.

Imaginative literature functioned as a central force in contemporary Chinese society propelling the whole society towards a somewhat more open, tolerant, humanitarian and democratic one. At the same time, contemporary literature also helped Chinese people recognise their history and the 1949 revolution, which, according to Connery, "was not just a marking of the China difference", but "also the hope of a global possibility". (Connery:1992) The China informed by contemporary literature was certainly to accommodate diversified political values and to recognise its historical and cultural tenets. In theoretical terms, imaginative literature advanced a development of political concepts and prospects in society. It precipitated the economic and political reforms and developments by way of interpolating new ideas and visions and concocting all parameters such as politics, economics, philosophy, psychology and language in society into an extensive cultural and intellectual development.

All this was done on a "third conception of nature", according to Lukács:

... one in which we can clearly discern the ideal and the tendency to overcome the problems of a reified existence. 'Nature' here refers to authentic humanity, the true essence of man liberated from the false, mechanising forms of society: man as a perfected whole who has inwardly overcome, or is in the process of overcoming, the dichotomies of theory and practice, reason and the senses, form and content; man whose tendency to create his own forms does not imply an abstract rationalism which ignores concrete content; man for whom freedom and necessity are identical. (Lukács:1990:136-7)

Imaginative literature became a major signifier of the nation's cultural and political identity producing regimes of meaning, truth and representation from which there emerged particular relations of signification. The reader was led to enter as a "relation" and to become "positioned" in philosophical as well as actual social and political structures. Aesthetics not only created social and political meanings in hermeneutic terms, but it also was to open up an important area of political knowledge, and hence to form a constructive area of academic studies in politics and literature.

Arguably, China's future was not doomed by Tiananmen Square<sup>8</sup> though many critics and especially human-rights activists tended to believe so. Its future, as informed by imaginative literature, was a complex one, one which was to resist many socio-political paradigms in theoretical discourse as the last twenty years of Chinese history showed. However, as imaginative literature denied any fixed-value judgement, it was to provide a new consciousness and understanding in Chinese politics. Undeniably "without literature politics no longer is politics, however much that helps it become a 'subject', an object even, for academic study: without literature politics is impotent". (Maskell:1985:22) "For of all the things that confront us in nature and history, it is the work of art that speaks to us most directly". (Gadamer:1992:95) There is no doubt that reading literature "makes the reader more socially tolerant, more perceptive about other humans, and more politically conscious". (Peer:1995:277)

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<sup>8</sup> I argued in my master's thesis *Chinese-British Relations during the Thatcher Governments* (1990) that it was highly unlikely that China's future was destined in the long run by the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square, even though this argument had become less well-grounded in view of Eastern Europe (1990), and 1991 Moscow. This study of contemporary Chinese literature and politics can, to a large extent, inform that this argument is still valid.

Admittedly politics *and* literature is a complicated field of studies, however, when properly explored in a hermeneutic approach, it helps to “recover humanity – the humanity of the human sciences and the humanity of the human scientist”. (Johnson:1990:201) Such an approach allows the reader, as both the subject and the object, to “seek out original sources, and ... create and participate in a critical dialogue – all processes which themselves will offer ample instantiations of hermeneutical truths”. (Johnson:1990:201) Chinese literature (indeed literature in general) offers such an amplitude in which understanding is a perpetual historical process. In such a process, new factors emerge and lead to the formation of new meanings in society. As has been discussed, Chinese literature has *facilitated critical and political participation on part of the readership and audience* and led the reader enter the political process as both a subject and an object so that he is able to gain a better understanding of history and reality. Chinese literature has indeed opened up many new possibilities for China’s social, cultural and political life. Accordingly, any political knowledge or actions derived from such a process are more likely to question our social and political stance and received knowledge, thus to resist any political dogmatism which did great damage to China and Chinese politics.

When a nation effects wholesale destruction against another nation or enslaves other nations, or when a nation experiences self-destructive cataclysm, or a person encounters social and political ostracism and deprivation, they must come to question, and to expose their roots, media, aims, and their representations in order to justify or to condemn them. “Such an intellectual search will guide the questioning person into philosophic domains, where he may find or create a

‘wisdom of life’’. (Schuster:1992:595) Chinese literature in the post-Mao era has provided a venue and avenue to lead to such search political and philosophical search. It is very difficult to imagine China’s economic and political development without Chinese literature.

The reader’s search was to lead him to form a philosophical stance which would influence his social and political actions. To use Schuster’s words on philosophical practice, contemporary Chinese literature offered, sometimes potentially, “what philosophy itself was to offer: freedom from the preconceived, the ill-conceived, the prejudiced, and the unconscious”. (Schuster:1992:598) The development of contemporary Chinese literature was not a pure narrative change, Chinese literature was a powerful agent of social, cultural and political change and represented a search for expression and articulation of China today. It indicated and accelerated the transition from a closed to open society.

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