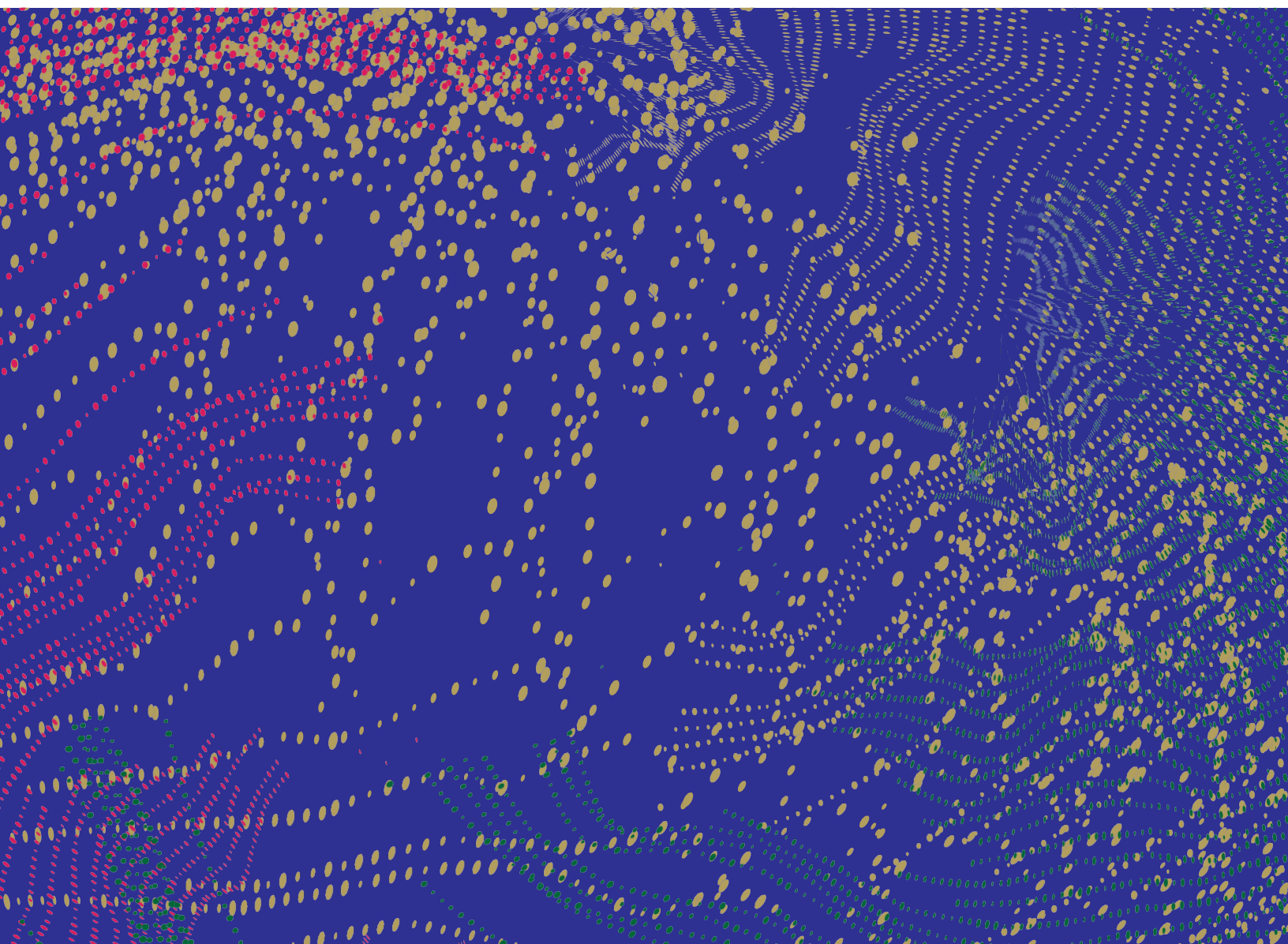


The World Humanities Report

Contemporary Chinese Literature

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Contemporary Chinese Literature

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In mainland China “contemporary literature” has different meanings within different contexts. In a descriptive mode, it designates the literature practice under way “at this moment.” In a context of criticism, it is a restrictive determination of a certain literary character that focuses on a work’s “contemporary” nature. In the context of comparison with “classical” literature and “modern” literature, it refers to a specific historical period that has its own fairly well-defined origin, content, and characteristics. For the sake of compatibility with other fields, I will use this last, relatively narrow concept of contemporary literature. But we will also take the critical context of contemporary literature into account because no matter the practice of the disciplines, the meaning of “contemporaneity” is an important component of contemporary literature.

“Contemporary literature” has a number of origins. One of course is October 1949, the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Another is when the principles of Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art of 1942 were put into practice. *Shinianlai de xinzhongguo wenxue* [The last ten years of literature in New China] is generally recognized as the earliest most successful work of a historical account of contemporary literature.¹ From this point, contemporary literature enters into the critical and historical narratives. Here contemporary literature had its own defining characteristics, that were the “socialist characteristics”² of “modern literature,” which are distinct from the “new democratic characteristics” described in Mao Zedong’s famous 1940 article “On New Democratic

¹ Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Literature, comp., *Shinianlai de xinzhongguo wenxue* [The last ten years of literature in New China] (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, 1963).

² The first to firmly propose the socialist characteristics of contemporary literature was Zhou Yang in his 1960 speech, “Woguo shehuizhuyi wenxue yishu de daolu” [Our nation’s path to socialist literature and art], that opened the Third Congress of Writers and Artists. See *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* [A selection of important documents since the founding of the nation], vol. 13 (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 1996).

Politics and Culture.” The development from “new” to “modern” to “contemporary” literature is not simply the result of the historical march of time, but also a sequence of increasing value. In this sense, “modern literature” only attained its current meaning after the emergence of “contemporary” literature as its replacement in the late 1950s. In fact, the practical unfolding of contemporary literature was the site of fervent ideological struggle in mainland China from the 1950s to the 1970s,³ when literature that attracted the most intense ideological struggle had the strongest “contemporary” character.

Contemporary literature was formally established in universities in 1978 after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1967–77).⁴ In this new phase of literature, under the direction of “intellectual liberation” and “bringing order out of chaos,” ideological and intellectual discourses were entirely different from what had come before. In the 1980s the space of literature, which includes the creation of literature, literary criticism, the literary zeitgeist, and literary research, was extraordinarily lively. Literature was intertwined with intellectual, cultural, and societal movements and enjoyed a leading role in a vast range of issues. The “intellectual liberation” movement began with the denial of “Minutes of the Forum for Literary and Art Workers in the Military” (1966, by Lin Biao and Mao Zedong’s wife Jiang Qing) and the reorganization of important issues from the left-wing literature movements of the 1930s, which set up the continuity again with the new literature from the May Fourth movement in 1919 and tradition of left-wing literature from 1930s. Debates over “alienation and humanitarianism” involved a series of intellectual discussions and literary practices reminiscent of the denunciations and settling of accounts over the Cultural

³ A series of political, ideological, and cultural movements were launched with contemporary literature as a breakthrough point. For example, the criticism of petty bourgeois consciousness (with Xiao Yemu’s criticism at the core), the criticism of *Hongloumeng yanjiu* by Yu Pingbo [Dream of the red chamber studies], the criticism of Hu Shi’s thought and research, the purges of Hu Feng’s group and Ding Ling and Chen Qixia’s counterrevolutionary bloc, and even taking *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* as a guide, the Cultural Revolution taking the “model operas” as the pinnacle, etc.

⁴ In 1978, when the Ministry of Education drafted the outline of modern literature for Chinese majors in institutions of higher education, it listed contemporary literature as a new course. Many institutions of higher education had followed this, establishing independent contemporary literature teaching and research sections, compiling teaching materials for the history of contemporary literature, and carrying out related discipline-building activities.

Revolution, the “ultra-left,”⁵ and the Literature of Seventeen Years.⁶ The era featured explorations of individual thought and expression and experimentation with new literary forms. Artistic and intellectual tides took shape one after another, including what became known as scar literature, introspection literature, and reform literature, with roots-seeking literature being the most representative.⁷ The last one interacted with the “cultural fever” of the intellectual cultural sphere of the time, which had the goals of spreading the resources from their masters in Europe and the United States and following the modernist schools during the 1930s–40s period in China.

Two trends represent the two main cultural orientations of the 1980s. The roots-seeking line of thought sought to present the cultural factors of ethnicity and locality in order to criticize a backward “national character” in favor of modern enlightened values. The other orientation was a “walking toward the world,” in which modern Western values and cultural experiences became the object of desire for Chinese authors and intellectuals. In creative spheres, authors and literary works of the Latin American boom became models for Chinese authors to emulate, particularly after Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982. And all manner of Western theory, especially modernist theories and those Western contemporary theories represented by poststructuralism, became the subjects of diligent study for Chinese authors and critics. Literary critics and scholars pioneered introduction of Western contemporary theories and animated passionate debates about them.

In contrast with the lively nature of the creative and critical spheres, contemporary literature in terms of the narrative of literary history was relatively silent during this period. Following the establishment of the discipline in universities in 1978, most institutes of higher learning compiled works and

⁵ The core texts of this debate include Zhou Yang’s 1983 report, “Guanyu makesizhuyi de jige lilun wenti de tanta” [An inquiry into several theoretical questions of Marxism], and Hu Qiaomu’s rebuttal, “Guanyu rendaozhuyi he yihua wenti” [On the question of humanitarianism and alienation].

⁶ Literature created from the establishment of the socialist government in 1949 until 1966, right before the Cultural Revolution.

⁷ Roots-seeking literature is a literature movement that is very broad in scope. Authors writing very divergent works like Han Shaogong, Zhang Chengzhi, Li Hangyu, who are generally categorized as group of *zhiqing* [educated youth sent to the countryside] and even the Nobel Prize laureate Mo Yan can all be classified within this trend.

textbooks on the history of contemporary literature,⁸ and yet, because of a lack of fundamental literary premises and an understanding of the complex relationship between literature and politics, a clear gap emerged between the stiff and repetitive contemporary literature histories and textbooks, on the one hand, and the rich and multifaceted practice of “literature of the new age,” on the other. This gap led to universal dissatisfaction. At this time, the narrative of modern literary history had already established its “modern” character. During the search for an atmosphere of complete modernization in the 1980s, the value ranking of modern literature and contemporary literature became inverted. Modern literature became the discipline of norms, the standard of evaluation.

Under this narrative framework that seems all-encompassing but is in fact virtually exclusive, the original “contemporary literature” is put in an awkward position to the extent that the legitimacy of the only just established contemporary literature is continually called into question. In fact, the literary historian Wang Yao declares that the period of modern literature ends in 1976, which means that modern literature subsumes most part of contemporary literature, with the exception of the present criticism.⁹ Another literary history scholar, Tang Tao, however, raises doubt based on the logic that contemporary literature lacks a kind of epistemological framework for historical narrative. He asks: “Can contemporary literature write history?”¹⁰

A variety of authors addressed this situation in the late 1980s. The authors of the 1985 article “On Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature” explained what they considered to be the goal of integrating twentieth-century Chinese literature as a whole: “It is not simply to make those kinds of connections between the late Qing, modern, and contemporary literature, nor is it only to expand the area of research. It is to grasp twentieth-century Chinese literature as an

⁸ Representative works include *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi chugao* [A first draft history of Chinese contemporary literature], 2 vols. (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 1980), compiled by Guo Zhigang; *Dangdai wenxue gaiguan* [A survey of contemporary literature] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1980), edited by Zhang Zhong et al.

⁹ See Wang Yao, “Zhongguo xiandai wenxueshi de qiqi shijian wenti” [On the question of periodization of Chinese modern literature], *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, no. 5 (1986): 184. According to Wang Yao, the period of modern literature is from 1919 to 1976. After that, “literature of the New Era” should fall within the scope of literary criticism and is “unsuitable to enter into the histories.”

¹⁰ See Tang Tao, “Dangdai wenxue buyi xieshi” [Contemporary literature is unsuitable to write as history], *Wenhui Bao*, October 29, 1985. Those joining the debate at the time included Xiao Zhu and Shi Zhecun.

indivisible, organic, whole.”¹¹ From the overall characteristics of twentieth-century Chinese literature, such as its relationship with global literature, the ethnic consciousness it contains, its aesthetic awareness, and its evolution in form as a linguistic art, they composed “twentieth-century Chinese literature” as a whole and intended to subsume “contemporary literature” into the “modern” of “modern literature.” When one of its authors, Chen Pingyuan, spoke of the article’s intentions twenty years later, he said, “To simply connect the late Qing, modern, and contemporary is not enough. What is critical is the cultural ideal behind them. To speak frankly, that [cultural ideal] is to replace the lens of class struggle that has always been used previously within the ‘narrative of modernization.’”¹² One of the prominent features of the above-mentioned 1985 essay is its discussion of the clear reduction in the quantity of the twentieth-century left-wing literature and socialist literature. Luo Gang has pointed out that “the central position of ‘Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature’ raised by Huang Ziping and his coauthors has a direct relationship with the crisis that came about in the 1980s around ‘contemporary’ literature from the 1950s and 1960s.”¹³

In a similar vein, the 1988 essay “Rewriting Literary History” and other corresponding articles focused on “rewriting” the previous historical narrative framework that took the left-wing literature as its core, with the values of the Enlightenment and modernization as its methods.¹⁴ This rewriting differs from that of the early 1980s, which was disinterring the gaps of unsettled points of authors, works, and trends that had been buried and hidden. This new rewriting intended to “re-research, evaluate Chinese New Literature’s important authors, texts, and cultural trends and phenomena . . . to assault those conclusions on

¹¹ Huang Ziping, Chen Pingyuan, and Qian Liqun, “Lun 20shiji zhongguo wenxue” [On twentieth-century Chinese literature], *Wenxue pinglun*, no. 5 (1985): 3.

¹² Chen Pingyuan, “Chen Pingyuan fangtan: Guanyu bashi niandai” [An interview with Chen Pingyuan: On the 80s], *Shehui kexue luntan*, no. 6 (2005): 92.

¹³ Luo Gang, “Chongxin zhaohuan ‘shiluode shiye’—Zai *wenxue pinglun* chuangkan liushi zhounian ji’nianhuishang de fayan” [Re-summoning the “lost horizon”: A Speech at the sixtieth anniversary commemoration of the publishing of the *Literature Review*], *Wenxue pinglun*, Weixin, November 15, 2017.

¹⁴ See Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming, “Chongxie wenxueshi” [Rewriting literary history], *Shanghai wenlun*, no. 4 (1988): 4, which gained a wide response. In fact, “the entire course of 1980s Chinese New Literature research was constituted of a kind of rewriting literary history trend.” See *Zhongguo xiandangdai wenxue xueke gaiyao* [An outline of Chinese modern and contemporary literature studies], comp. Wen Rumin et al. (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), 153.

literary history that have become accepted verdicts.”¹⁵ In order to achieve this goal, it is not enough that the “subjectivity” and “individuality” of historians of literature must be given a place of prominence in order to facilitate the “diversification of possibilities” in the study of literary history. As for the choice between what standard is most important in the narrative of literary history—the “historical” or the “aesthetic”—the inclination is toward the latter, because history is only the manifestation of the consciousness of the time and aesthetics can transcend the era.¹⁶ Of course, this position is consistent with the ontological view of literature as seeking innovation in literary form and a “return to literature itself,” which writers and critics favored in the 1980s.

Finally, Chen Sihe uses a similar logic in *A Holistic View of China's New Literature*, which attempts to reintegrate twentieth-century Chinese literary history.¹⁷ In addition to stressing the authority that modern consciousness has had over Chinese literature since May Fourth, the book also compares New Era literature of the early 1980s with May Fourth literature more than half a century earlier in an attempt to bridge that fractured history.

The 1980s ended in a tragic social movement, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc followed closely upon that. As the Cold War arrangement ceased to exist, China's humanities sphere at the turn from the 1980s into the 1990s found itself in a completely different context. Intellectual circles of the 1980s that were founded on the “consensus” values of the Enlightenment and modernization tended to break up. In the early 1990s the nation launched a new round of reforms pushed by urban reform and comprehensive commercialization. For contemporary literature the first issue was how to confirm its position and value after literature has lost the “sensationalism” it had in the 1980s, how to resonate quickly and strongly with morale of the whole society. Massive societal changes and the fragmentation of ideas brought anxiety to humanities intellectual circles in the early 1990s. The discussion of the “[lost] spirit of the humanities” among literary critics and scholars found resonance in the humanities. This discussion was an attempt to reaffirm writers' and scholars' position and function within the social structure under changed historical

¹⁵ Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming, “Chongxie wenxueshi: Zhuchirende hua” [Rewriting literary history: Host speech], *Shanghai wenlun*, no. 4 (1988): 4.

¹⁶ See Wang Xiaoming, “Jiutushangde jiaoyin” [Footprints on an old road], in *Cicongli de qiusuo* [Exploring the thorny brush] (Shanghai: Shanghai Far East Publishing House, 1995), 265–66.

¹⁷ Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo xinwenxue zhengtiguan* [A holistic view of China's New Literature] (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1987).

circumstances and stressed a concern for values. In contemporary literature research circles, this issue first arose in efforts to understand the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s, to evaluate the thinking and culture of the 1980s as a whole, and to develop a new cultural course within a new framework in a context of “academic transformation.” After the declaration that “the 1980s are over,” some authors and critics adopted a positive and optimistic attitude, embracing the arrival of a new, more diverse era where “idealism is over” and where attention should be paid to people’s daily needs and desires. One example is the “Post studies” group who took “post–New Era” as their core concept.¹⁸ Zhang Yiwu, one representative of that group, explains “post–New Era” this way: “It takes consumption as dominant, as controlled by mass media. The value trend is a practical spirit. It is a new cultural era built from a multiplicity of discourse structures. It ends the authority of Enlightenment discourse and is in dialogue with the international trend of postmodernism.”¹⁹

An important trend that runs through contemporary literature in the 1990s is reinterpretation.²⁰ To a certain extent, reinterpretation is a continuation and deepening of the 1980s trends of rewriting literary history and rereading twentieth-century classical literature works. The theoretical sources of reinterpretation are connected to many post-1960s cultural and critical theories from the West. Because of the provocative nature of these theories, researchers began to rethink assumptions in literary analysis. These included questions such as: Why is it called “literature”? What is the relationship between literature, politics, and history? How does the literary form serve as a kind of “symbolic behavior”

¹⁸ “Post studies” is a term given by contemporary literature and humanities scholars to a group of critics and scholars who have introduced and applied postmodernist theory to describe and analyze contemporary literature. Wang Hui states that this kind of “Chinese postmodernism is a still a supplementary form of the ideology of modernization.” See Wang Hui, “Dangdai zhongguode sixiang zhuangkuang yu xiandaixing wenti” [The ideological situation of contemporary China and the problem of Modernization], *Sihuo chongwen* [Restoking a dead fire] (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 2000), 68.

¹⁹ Zhang Yiwu, “‘Fenlie’ yu ‘zhuanyi’—Zhongguo ‘houxin shiqi’ wenhua zhuanxingde xianshi tujing” [“Splitting up” and “transformation”: The real view of China’s “post–New Era” cultural transformation], *Dongfang*, no. 4 (1994): 8.

²⁰ Representative achievements of the trend of “reinterpretation” are mainly collected in *Zaijiedu: Dazhongwenyi yu yishixingtai* [Reinterpretation: Mass literature and art and ideology], ed. Tang Xiaobing (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), and *Piping kongjian de kaichuang: Ershi shiji zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* [Opening a critical space: Twentieth-century Chinese literature studies], ed. Wang Xiaoming (Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center, 1998).

socially? What is the position and function of literary and social mechanisms in a nation-state? Thus, the work mainly focused on exploring symbolic characteristics and the power relationship between ideology and language in texts that serve as historical artifacts. With a keener awareness of language, one can open a text in a more meticulous and penetrating way. The main targets of re-interpretation study are the works of left-wing literature from the 1940s to the 1970s, which came to make up the so-called red canon, that is, the foundational discourse formed by studying the fictional narrative of revolutionary history. Because of this, it opened up new methods of research and points of view for re-understanding Chinese left-wing literature and culture in the twentieth century. On the one hand, re-interpretation shatters the organized narrative of the 1940s to the 1970s, exposing its contradictions and fractures. On the other hand, it transferred the literature research trend of overemphasis on “literariness” and the oversimplified understanding of politics and history in 1980s. But such efforts, which usually took theory as the starting point and textual interpretation as the method, did not form a more complex and complete historical narrative, although they did provide insight into possibilities of new research.²¹

Chinese contemporary literature, as a discipline, was greatly influenced by the extreme ideological conflicts that took place within the Cold War order. In the post-Cold War era, the historical narrative of contemporary literature matured when writers confronted the contradiction between the historical legitimacy of contemporary literature and the trend of rewriting literary history, beginning in the 1990s. This critical issue had not been publicly addressed. The resolution of this problem is represented in two works on the history of contemporary literature published in 1999: *A Course in the History of Chinese Contemporary Literature*, edited by Chen Sihe; and Hong Zicheng’s *History of Chinese Contemporary Literature*.²² These two works were widely used as texts in the history of contemporary literature in colleges and universities.

A Course in the History of Chinese Contemporary Literature is a “perceptual literary history that takes literary texts as the core.”²³ It is distinctive for its inclusion of literary texts and their interpretations, particularly in the exploration

²¹ Wen Rumin et al., *Zhongguo xiandangdai wenxue xueke gaiyao* [An outline course of study for Chinese modern and contemporary literature] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), 178.

²² Chen Sihe, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng* [A course in the history of Chinese contemporary literature] (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1999); Hong Zicheng, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi* [History of Chinese contemporary literature] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999).

²³ Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng*, vi.

of the multifaceted composition of contemporary literature, which is to say that it goes to great lengths to show what it calls “invisible structures of the *minjian* [nongovernment people]” and “hidden writing.” This approach makes the vista of literary history much richer, but, taken as a whole, its narrative–historical framework and its standards of literary criticism are still within the logic of the rewriting literary history of the 1980s.

Hong Zicheng’s *History of Chinese Contemporary Literature* is considered to be a foundational work in the “academicization” of the discipline of contemporary literary history. The book is delightfully refreshing in its account of the development of contemporary literature: its narrative style; systems of literary production; changes in genre and, particularly, in authors’ narrative position and method. It provides a groundbreaking model and has been widely commended for its sober “historian–like quality” and its breakthroughs regarding several critical tangles in the study of contemporary literary history. The book describes the era of contemporary literature as the “literary period from the complete realization [during the Mao period in 1949–76] of the trend toward ‘integration’ of new literature after May Fourth to the dissolution of this ‘integration’ [after the 1980s].”²⁴ This periodization emphasizes the break between contemporary literature and modern literature” which allows contemporary literature to escape from the category of “New Literature” and gives it its own independent thread of historical development. The book’s groundbreaking contribution to the disciplinary meaning of contemporary literature, particularly on the multilayered nature of the integrated pattern of literature production systems, opened many opportunities for future research.

The most prominent debate in the humanities in the late 1990s was between the so-called New Left and the Neoliberals.²⁵ This debate involved judgments on China’s reality, intellectual planning, and the direction of development in the future. Despite the fact that it involved the opening of broad public issues in divergent disciplines such as politics, economics, and society, many scholars with a background in modern and contemporary literature studies became important participants in the debate. The debate also influenced the knowledge

²⁴ Hong Zicheng, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi*, iv.

²⁵ This debate began with the official publication of Wang Hui’s famous article “Dangdai zhongguo de sixiang zhuangkuang yu xiangdaixing wenti” [Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity] (written in 1994, published in 1997)] and continued until the middle of the 2000s. To a certain extent, this debate redrew the map of Chinese humanistic thought. For the English version of the article, see Wang Hui, “Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity,” *Social Text*, no. 55 (1998): 9–44.

production of Chinese contemporary literature by asking such questions as: How can one come to know the reality of China? What is meant by China? What is meant by Chinese modernity? and, How does one come to know the history of twentieth-century China, especially the Chinese Revolution, its central event? These were urgent questions set before Chinese contemporary literature.

Sensitive authors began to shift from the modernist formal experiments of the 1980s to the new realism of the 1990s. In the period from mid-1980s to early 1990s, a group of modernist authors appeared, including Yu Hua, Ge Fei, even Mo Yan and Ma Yuan, who all took a turn toward a broadly defined realism. Some authors, such as Zhang Chengzhi and Han Shaogong among others, turned toward the repressed history within folk elements in order to find richer, more abundant spiritual resources. Due to an ever-changing and unpredictable reality, more authors turned to historical themes, producing works with differing scope and scale in such genres as epic poetry, inner histories, clan histories, and others.²⁶ By giving new accounts of important events and turning points in the twentieth-century China from different perspectives, they restructure the country's history in that century.

In response to these questions, literary critics began to rethink the concept and literary practice of "pure literature."²⁷ By reflecting on the historical use that rethinking of "pure literature" had been put to, they called for the possibility of rebuilding the connections between literature, social reality, and the broader spectrum of thought and knowledge. And against this background, there was also a boom in cultural studies within contemporary literature in the latter half of the 1990s. However, it is very difficult to carry out the imported "holy trinity" of cultural studies—class, ethnicity, and gender—in contemporary Chinese literature, and, after a burst of tracking research on the hot issues of contemporary culture, cultural studies quickly turned toward the painstaking probing of China's own theoretical resources and problematic consciousness. At the

²⁶ For example, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* series, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, *Sandalwood Death*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, *Frog*, and other works that constitute a fictional narrative dealing with most of the important historical events in the twentieth-century China. Another example is Chen Zhongshi's *Bailu yuan* [White Deer Plain], as well as works from the authors like Jia Pingwa, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei, among others.

²⁷ The earliest clear proposal to rethink "pure literature" came from Li Tuo in his interview "Manshuo 'chunwenxue'" [An appreciative talk of "pure literature"], *Shanghai wenxue*, no. 3 (2001): 4–15. Han Shaogong, Nan Fan, and Cai Xiang, among others, have also had important discussions.

opening of the twenty-first century, against the backdrop of rapid economic development, social mobility, and the exacerbation and solidification of stratification, critics returned to the literature of *diceng* [the underclasses], a critical concept that lacks sufficient support from creative achievement. As a theoretical effort, it does not propose an analytical framework such as class analysis but divides social reality into different strata. Like many critical concepts and intellectual trends since the 1990s, discussions of *diceng* literature remained confined to literary circles, with no way of expanding out to the broader sphere of the humanities and was later replaced with the critical concept of “telling well the story of China.” This concept had a much broader scope and was also more ambiguous. With echoes of the “Chinese way,” which was initiated by scholars in the social sciences, but its content is unwieldy, its knowledge association muddled, and it has not provided sufficient theoretical force.

The Nobel Prize in Literature has served as a boundary marker for Chinese literature’s effort to “go global” since the 1980s and has presented an inferiority complex because of the long absence of Chinese writers among the awardees.²⁸ In 2000 the Sinophone author Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Amid the delight of domestic literary circles was an even stronger disappointment, because the literary accomplishment and influence of Gao Xingjian were rather limited within China and he had not been considered among important authors even before he moved to France in the late 1990s. As a result, skepticism about the Nobel Prize’s “international standards” arose in literary circles. This anxiety and skepticism were in a large part alleviated after the Chinese author Mo Yan won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. An energetic response ensued from officials, mainstream commentators, and the book market. The media even coined a new word—“Mobel”—to describe the public craze that had arisen. But some critics decried Mo Yan’s wild language and déclassé aesthetic habits. Others saw in Mo Yan’s narratives of Chinese modern history too much violence, blood, and suffering, which they found in accord with the one-sided and simplified ideology of the post-1980s, which they saw as having origins in the requirements of the West.²⁹

²⁸ For the most classic example, see Liu Zaifu, “Bainian nuobei’er wenxuejiang he zhongguo zuojia de quexi” [One hundred years of the Nobel Prize for Literature and the absence of Chinese authors], *Beijing wenxue*, no. 8 (1999): 6–8.

²⁹ Liu Fusheng, “Nuobei’er wenxuejiang beihoude wenhua zhengzhi” [The cultural politics behind the Nobel Prize for Literature], in *Tianxia*, no. 1 (2013): 12–19.

The most theoretically rigorous scholarly developments in contemporary literature studies in the new century are related to historical narrative, especially the literary history of the revolutionary literature from the 1950s to the 1970s. Cai Xiang's *Revolution/Narrative: Chinese Socialist Literature-Cultural Imagination (1949-1966)* is representative of this self-conscious theoretical pursuit. Cai Xiang sees the historical narrative of contemporary literature as a battlefield and opens with a brilliant defense of the legitimacy of revolutionary China.³⁰ He argues that the legitimacy of the Chinese Revolution was established on the foundation of the "rebellion of the weak" and that "revolutionary China" is a radical successor of "modern China": "Revolutionary China is a dynamic process. Its main forms of practice are contained within the 'postrevolutionary' socialist revolution and construction. This produced a concept of revolutionary egalitarianism as well as a re-stratification of society. It produced a political-social imagination, and real-world desires. It produced a collective spirit, as well as the individual. It strengthened mass participation, and also a hierarchical management system. . . . All of these contradictions came to compose the complex landscape of Chinese socialism in this era. These contradictory elements were juxtaposed in the socialist period of 'post-revolution,' which created a period of intense contradictory conflict."³¹

Within the discipline of contemporary literature Cai Xiang's works cast off Hong Zicheng's "integrated" discourse and the institutional model of literature research. Cai Xiang's textual analysis and his theoretical and critical concepts (such as "mobilizing structures," "local landscapes," "the rights of nature," and "labor utopia") create more possibilities for the historicization of contemporary literature studies. If Hong Zicheng's work delimits the boundaries and marks out the fundamental issues of contemporary literature, Cai Xiang's introduces values into its historical narrative. Because of the controversial nature of revolutionary China and the clearly argumentative nature of Cai Xiang's works, their influence is still developing. From the complexity and theoretical challenge coming mainly from contemporary literature from the 1950s to the 1970s, a trend toward historicization has come about. However, most scholars

³⁰ Cai Xiang, *Geming/xushu—Zhongguo shuihui zhuyi wenxue-wenhua xiangxiang (1949-1966)* [Revolution/narrative—Chinese socialist literature-cultural imagination (1949-1966)] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010), 1.

³¹ See Luo Gang, "Dangdai wenxue": Wufa huibi de fansi—Yiduan xueshu de huigu" ["Contemporary literature": Unavoidable reflection—A look back at academic history], *Dangdai wentan*, no. 1 (2019): 35.

are either still grounded in an awareness of the construction of the discipline, or they continue to push to reverse the historical narrative following the trend of “rewriting” and “reinterpretation.” Yet there are some scholars who begin from historicization in an attempt to integrate the methods and results from history (particularly social history), anthropology, economic history, and other disciplines. By restoring and reconstructing the historical texture from the emergence of revolutionary literature, the emotional structure, and the methods of production, they reopen the interrelationships of the texts, reconstructing the narrative of contemporary literature in a manner that is closer to the historical process, more “historically sympathetic.”³²

Although contemporary literature is more than seventy years old, it remains a young discipline. It is a discipline that is continually developing. The vast amount of literary criticism produced each year fills the newspapers and forms an important part of literary studies journals in China. The discipline of contemporary literature began to take shape while commenting on, and attempting to catch up with, the production of contemporary literature. Initially, the discipline was composed primarily of literature reviews from authors and professional literary workers, especially officials from the Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Writer’s Association (themselves authors and literary professionals). With the establishment of contemporary literature as an academic discipline, the core of criticism and research has now shifted to the academy, where the composition of the history of contemporary literature has become one of the most important tasks.³³ However, when attempting to firmly establish its legitimacy, the discipline of contemporary literature continually faces the issue of how to express its historicity and contemporaneity. This problem is also the site of its vitality.

Translated from the Chinese by David Hull

³² See Cheng Kai et al., “Shehuishi shiyexia de zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu’ bitan” [Chinese contemporary literature studies from a social history point of view: A written conversation], *Wenxue Pinglun*, no. 5 (2015): 54–66.

³³ According to statistics, up to December of 2015, there have been as many as 270 works in the history of contemporary Chinese literature. From Luo Changqing, “Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi’ de chuban zhuangkuang yu bianji celue” [The publication and editorial strategy of “A history of Chinese contemporary literature”], *Hubei shehui kexue*, no. 10 (2016): 114.

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