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Perry Link

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Ideology and Theory in the Study of Modern Chinese Literature

An Introduction

PERRY LINK

Princeton University

Until about thirty years ago, the field of modern Chinese literature scarcely existed in the American academy. A few scholars of Ming-Qing fiction did occasionally consider modern writers, but only secondarily. Language teachers used stories by Lu Xun, Zhu Ziqing, and others as teaching materials. But beyond that, only some historians and social scientists did anything with twentieth-century Chinese literature.

In the 1960s, modern China studies were dominated by the interdisciplinary “area studies” approach that was exemplified in about five major university centers supported by the Ford Foundation and National Defense Foreign Languages funding from the United States government. These funding efforts, which were indirect results of the shock of *Sputnik* and the vision of an expanding Communist bloc, were primarily rooted in the precept “know thine enemy.” Many of the scholars who became the foot soldiers in this early march had broader aims—including more complexly humanistic approaches to China, as well as, in many cases, outright sympathy with the putative enemy. But still, in intellectual terms, the area studies approach remained dominant. When it came to literature, it seemed natural to use literary texts, especially realist fiction, as a means to understand Chinese social life. The suitability of this approach seemed to be confirmed by modern Chinese writers themselves, who, almost unanimously, seemed to be focused on China’s social crises and eager to portray them in literary form.

But beginning in the 1970s, and accelerating in the 1980s, the inadequacy of viewing literary texts only as historical source materials became ever more widely recognized. This major shift was a result, in one practical sense, simply of the field's growth in size. In the 1960s, only one American college or university (Columbia) had a position (C. T. Hsia's) primarily devoted to modern Chinese literature. By 1980 there were about a dozen such positions, and by 1990, several dozens.¹ People who took the new positions found themselves not in area studies centers but in language and literature departments, where disciplinary approaches were dominant. At the same time, in American academe as a whole, area studies were generally declining as all the disciplines, including those of the social sciences, were ascendant. Hence, in order to communicate with their colleagues in the literary discipline, scholars of modern Chinese literature began increasingly to read Western criticism and theory, as well as to approach the field of comparative literature.

At first, this effort felt like "catching up," and some even resented their graduate training in Chinese departments for having failed to prepare them in the techniques of literary analysis. But the most common response was fresh excitement: we can now look at the whole field anew, analyzing texts as works of art rather than reports on history; we can use Western literary theory to reexamine the assumptions that undergird both Chinese writing and our own approaches to it; through comparative literature, we can broaden our own horizons as well as those of our Europeanist colleagues. (Before the China and Japan fields came along, "comparative literature" meant essentially English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian.) Moreover, beginning in the 1970s in Taiwan, and in the 1980s in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Chinese writers began to express their impatience at being viewed as mere societal reporters rather than artists. Although it remains true, especially among PRC writers, that worry over China's historical crisis strongly conditions literary expression, the ways in which these worries are expressed are varied, sometimes sophisticated, and clearly appropriate for literary analysis.

The move toward literary analysis has itself gone through several stages. C. T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 1917-1957*

(1961), which is still a monument in the field, led the way in treating texts as works of art. Hsia, trained in English literature at Yale, set his goal as "the discovery and appraisal of excellence." This approach, which for many years lay side by side with the historical document approach, by the later 1970s had fueled a controversy over "text" versus "context": which is the proper object of study? (In fairness to both C. T. Hsia and the more able practitioners of the "document approach," we should note that neither side ever held—or could reasonably have held—extremist views on this question. The mutual relevances of text and context are too obvious.)

In the 1980s, another major impact on the field resulted, interestingly, from a confluence of ideas from across the Atlantic Ocean and personnel from across the Pacific. From Europe, primarily France, came "critical theory," which has affected not only modern Chinese literary studies but whole disciplines in America, including literature, anthropology, and some branches of history.² From China came a cohort of bright young students of literature eager to learn what the West had to offer.

For students from the PRC, critical theory in some ways held a special attraction that went beyond the general excitement prevailing among Western students and Chinese students from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Critical theory was, first, undeniably and purely a Western thing, and this was important because the PRC students' approach to Western ideas was simultaneously a flight from Maoism and its legacy; they wanted, at least at first, to purge themselves of Maoism as thoroughly as possible. Second, critical theory was the newest thing, even in the West. When China opened its doors in the late 1970s, many young Chinese peered out and were startled to see where the world had gone while they had been bottled up. The most conspicuous foreign advances were in technology, an area where it was clear that whatever was latest was automatically best. (The new four-speaker portable stereos—to cite a perhaps excessively concrete example, but one that was very widespread in the 1970s—were clearly an advance over transistor radios.) Without adequately appreciating that humanistic theory does not show linear progress nearly as reliably as do science and technology—and that, in the contemporary West, humanistic theory sometimes proceeds only in very interesting circles—

Chinese students tended to assume that critical theory rested at the apex of Western learning.

The rush to critical theory has brought some problems. First, the intense effort to examine the underlying assumptions of the critical enterprise—that is, to dissect one's own self and colleagues—easily results in an excessive self-absorption that diverts attention from literary works. It has become possible to publish articles in the literature field that make few or even no references to stories, plays, or poems. Second, the excessively facile labeling of viewpoints (historicist, representationalist, humanist, positivist, imperialist, hegemonist, and many others) has nurtured the sense that one's critical position, if properly selected, leaves no loose ends. Complexities and mysteries—the uncapturable fullness of life that traditionally had been literature's concern and that does not obey the contours of any “-ist” position, however conceived—seem, but only seem, to disappear. Third, and most obvious, is the problem of modish but sloppy language. Although by no means limited to students from China (who after all did not invent it), the jargon that comes and goes with the fashions in critical theory has become an object of emulation among them. It is regarded as a scholarly achievement to be able to handle the jargon in grammatically correct form, even if the underlying thought is not new, or not even coherent. One can, for example, express a truism in the field, such as, “Lu Xun introduced irony into the relationship between implied author and narrator” and put it in the form, “Lu Xun problematized narratological spatiality by (re)mapping contingencies of epistemological closure between foregrounded voice and its noumenal other.”¹³ This example is extreme, but it represents a phenomenon that is unfortunately widespread.

Yet, these problems notwithstanding, no one should doubt that the generation of the 1980s is a most welcome addition to the modern Chinese literature field. For one thing, as memory serves, my own scholarly generation also had certain problems at a similar stage during the politicized late 1960s and early 1970s. (Interestingly, those problems might also be classified under the headings self-absorption, facile labels, and puffy language.) But what strikes me most forcefully about the generation of the 1980s is, to put it bluntly, how smart they are.

Some of them graduated from Chinese universities as late as the mid-1980s and today are assistant professors at American universities. Just in terms of language learning—including the learning of the specialized language of Western academic disciplines—their accomplishment is astonishing. We too easily take such things for granted. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the great imbalance in numbers between Chinese who truly master English and Westerners who truly master Chinese has become so much part of our world that we scarcely notice it. But ask: how many young Western academics can compare in bilingualism to the dozens of young Chinese who have joined the field of modern Chinese literature (not to speak of many other fields)? Geremie Barmé, an Australian, may be the only one.

Furthermore, the substantive issues that the 1980s' generation is raising are themselves interesting and important. Even people like me, who find in critical theory at least as much posturing as insight, and who are quite certain it is not the best that Western philosophy has to offer, can acknowledge that its flow of terminology contains the potential to turn questions in interesting new ways. With the addition of a bit of rigor and cogency, these newly turned facets can lead to interesting and vital arguments.

For example, in the China field, feminist criticism is clearly one area that bears exciting promise. It presents challenges to both sides of the Pacific. Western feminists must come to terms with the puzzle presented by Chinese women writers (Zhang Jie, Wang Anyi, and others), whose works in some ways appear to be feminist but who stoutly insist that they are uninterested in feminism because China has bigger problems. To probe the several questions involved in this puzzle is necessarily to probe self as well as "other." To test Western theory against non-Western life is to expose it to possible counter-example but, by the same process, possibly to strengthen it by adapting it to become more general. Yet the challenge in the other direction across the Pacific appears even more potentially fruitful. The prism of Western feminist theory has already shown that it can reveal components of Chinese life that those who are immersed in it do not normally observe but, when they do notice, find fascinating. These people may also, variously, find the discoveries threatening, angering, inspiring, or amusing—but never boring. Chinese feminism, barely in its infancy, has a considerable future.

Another interesting area, although it is hard to see much of a future for it in China, is Neo-Marxism. It is interesting because of the ironies it generates upon the playing grounds of Sino-American academic exchange. Most Chinese students come to the West eager to escape Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, and those who study literature are especially concerned to escape Maoist language. (By Maoist language they mean not only political vocabulary but, as they see it, ingrained and constricting habits of thought that have resulted from years of immersion in a language environment.) As noted above, one reason why they are enthusiastic about mastering the jargon of critical theory is that they see it as an escape hatch into a wider world. After escaping into critical theory, however, they find that some of its terms come from European Marxists who were indirectly influenced by Mao. Thus a circle appears. Mao is in Foucault who is now in us who fled Mao. But, on further reflection, the circle begins to seem not exactly a circle after all. The "Mao" at the Parisian end does not bear a very good resemblance to the Mao remembered from the China end. For the more conscientious of the Chinese students, a serious problem arises of how to situate two Maoisms within a single worldview.

The Western neo-Marxist teachers of these students are of little help, and indeed are often part of the problem. As people who admire state socialism without every having lived under it, they embody their own bundle of ironies. Starting from well-founded criticisms of the modern capitalist West, they draw upon Marxist-Maoist theory to construct a "China" that underscores their criticisms of the West but diverges almost unrecognizably from the actualities of China. When ordinary facts of Chinese life are brought to their attention, they are reluctant to face them squarely because they do not wish to relinquish their criticisms of the capitalist West. These teachers present a dilemma to their Chinese students: do we tell them their China is not exactly China? How do we tell them? How much? They are the teachers, after all. There is still much that we can learn from them, and they do write the recommendation letters. Moreover, there is another, deeper advantage to allowing the idealized China to stay basically in place in the minds not only of one's teachers but of the Western intellectual community at large. This reason is respectability. Here we are, in a foreign environment, struggling to adjust and succeed, and an image of China comes along that causes large numbers of well-

intentioned foreigners to look upon us with favor. Do we want to purge that image so quickly? At a distance, Mao can feel less repulsive than he did up close.

The symposium that follows was not planned. It came about after Liu Kang submitted his article "Politics, Critical Paradigms" in the normal way. Reader reports produced a knot of controversy, the appropriate disposition of which was far from clear. At this point, the editors of *Modern China* turned to me for an opinion (I had not been involved until then), and my view was that there was no way to resolve the controversies but every reason to air the debate. What follows, therefore, does not, and does not claim to, converge on a set of conclusions. (Actually, there is no harm in this. Honest symposia in the humanities seldom do really converge on conclusions, even though their organizers are often obliged—by publishers, funders, promotion committees, and so on—to make it seem so.) The editors accepted this suggestion and asked me to write an introduction.

The issues raised in the symposium are especially complex, and sometimes laden with irony, because they are not only cross-cultural but intergenerational. Liu Kang, a young Chinese scholar, uses European theory to charge C. T. Hsia, a senior Chinese scholar, with "Eurocentrism." Liu could as well have charged Hsia with simply being out of date because—if one imagines for a moment placing C. T. Hsia of the late 1950s next to Liu Kang of the late 1980s—they cut similar figures: young Chinese trained in state-of-the-art Western approaches and inspired to use these approaches to set the field of modern Chinese literary studies in the West on a new course.⁴ Hsia was consciously concerned with denouncing overt political intrusion into Chinese literature. Now Liu, while acknowledging that intrusion, argues that Hsia, too, has politics deep within his "paradigm." Liu's tool for making this discovery comes, ostensibly, from the West; but Liu also grew up in the same politics-is-everything environment that Hsia denounces. The two versions of "politics-is-everything" that have impinged upon Liu are, as he himself analyzes them, in some ways the same and in some ways not. In the end, Liu's complicated position allows him, in addressing Hsia's "anti-modern modernist paradigm," to disapprove of both "the modern spirit" that Hsia "so adores" and, two paragraphs later, Hsia's "abhorrence of modernity."

I have held above that humanities symposia are by nature diffuse, and further that this does not really matter; nevertheless, I would like to end by pointing out what I see as an important underlying connection among C. T. Hsia, Liu Kang, and two major Chinese literary figures, Liu Zaifu and Li Tuo, who are also mentioned in this symposium. As an appendix to the second edition of *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, C. T. Hsia published an essay called "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature." Hsia argues that virtually all Chinese writers during 1917-1949 are, in the final analysis, "obsessed" with patriotism and driven by questions such as "What's wrong with China?" and "What can be done about it?" He holds that writers before 1917 and after 1949 are not as markedly obsessed in this way. Hsia's essay was published in 1971, well before the remarkable changes in PRC literature that arrived with the reform decade of the 1980s. One can easily argue, in my view, that "obsession with China" resurfaced in the 1980s, and, as Hsia claims for the 1917-1949 period, was virtually universal among literary intellectuals—including even those who consciously sought to escape it. Liu Kang, although wanting to disapprove of Hsia's "obsession" essay, goes on to analyze both Liu Zaifu's humanism and Li Tuo's promotion of modernist language as political challenges to Maoist hegemony—or, to put the point in C. T. Hsia's terms—as efforts aimed ultimately to answer the question "How can we bring about a better China?"⁵

Liu Kang himself indirectly confirms the broad applicability of C. T. Hsia's insight in the way he sometimes rises to defend "China" from foreign criticism, even if this requires making points that run counter to other parts of his argument. He often, for example, uses phrases such as "Maoist political dominance," "repressive cultural policies," and "arbitrary, dogmatic, and authoritarian Chinese Marxist line," but then also complains when Western critics are unimpressed by the literary quality of works produced in the Maoist period. The concern for China's dignity in the view of the rest of the world is just one other facet of that big preoccupying problem (What is wrong with China, and what can be done?) that C. T. Hsia has pointed out. However the world of Chinese literature develops, and whatever happens in the Western field that studies it, this question is likely to stay around for quite some time.

NOTES

1. It is difficult to count these positions with precision, because many of them cover two or more areas—traditional and modern vernacular fiction, modern language and literature, and so forth. A determination of whether the main field is modern literature or something else would require case-by-case adjudication.

2. Much of what is called "critical theory" is not, properly speaking, theory; but this issue is complex and beyond my present scope. Here I use the term "critical theory" uncritically, and without prejudice to how or whether theory is involved.

3. I ask the reader's forgiveness in not attributing this example. My aim is to illustrate a generality, not to embarrass an individual.

4. By inviting this historical thought experiment I do not mean to imply that Liu is bound for the brilliant career of a C. T. Hsia. That Liu and several like him have brilliance is beyond doubt; but matching Hsia is another matter. What will happen remains to be seen.

5. Liu Kang argues that Liu Zaifu does not acknowledge his position to be fundamentally political, but that Li Tuo does. Liu may be right, but I, for one, would argue the opposite. After the explicitly political debates of the early 1980s over "humanism," the mere espousal of the term by Liu Zaifu constitutes, in my view, acknowledgment of a political position (although this is not to say that politics is Liu's reason for espousing humanism, which would be a distortion of Liu's views). Li Tuo, on the other hand, has often made heartfelt pleas that Chinese literature, and indeed all Chinese intellectual activity, pull free not only from politics but from all notions, including Confucian notions, that "knowledge" is for "use." Liu Kang is, in my view, correct that Li Tuo is ultimately unable to pull free, but incorrect to suggest that he accepts the political nature of his position more fully than does Liu Zaifu.

Perry Link teaches modern Chinese language and literature at Princeton University, and has also published in the fields of popular culture and intellectual history. He is author, most recently, of Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China's Predicament (New York: Norton, 1992).