

Introduction

1

This volume is the product of a conference held at Duke University, on October 26 to 28, 1990. The conference, with the general title of "Politics and Ideology in Modern Chinese Literature," was the first annual meeting of the American Association for Chinese Comparative Literature (AACCL) and attracted some forty scholars and critics from across the world. The meeting at Duke brought together scholars and critics from three distinct backgrounds: scholars of Chinese literature in the United States, writers and critics from mainland China and Hong Kong, and a number of Chinese graduate students who, having come to the United States in the early 1980s, have begun to form a noticeable intellectual and professional presence in their field. This historic convergence of separate intellectual traditions turned out to be highly productive. Papers read and discussed at both plenary sessions and individual panels covered a wide range of topics and represented various political agenda and theoretical approaches, such as feminism, psychoanalytical criticism, poststructuralism, narrative analysis, Marxist critical theory, and new historicism. To a certain extent, these new theoretical interests reflect the transformation that the study of modern Chinese literature is currently undergoing.

The significance of the Duke conference lies beyond its immediate academic context. Because of the strong presence of Chinese writers and critics who arrived in this country after the Tiananmen Incident

in 1989, discussions at formal sessions as well as outside regular meetings gained a sense of urgency and relevance. The heated exchange at a special roundtable discussion in Chinese testified to a general mood of what Edward Said has called, in a different context, the commitment to “worldliness and change.”¹ In the spirit of worldly commitment and intervention, participants in the Duke conference reached a consensus that it was time to engage in a comprehensive reexamination of modern Chinese literature not only in terms of its local political and ideological traditions and determinations, but also against the larger background of world historical experience of modernity and postmodernity. To accomplish such a goal, it was felt, a new critical discourse and cultural strategy is needed to reinscribe a specifically determined indigenous cultural experience. The enormity of this task is obvious. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the Duke conference was an acute awareness of both the power and limits of languages and paradigms with which we conceptualize and articulate our experience. The three central themes that generated the most interest attest to this search for a new language: the problematic nature of a theory of subjectivity, representations of modernity in the Chinese context, and the question of cultural critique. All these recurring topics point to the difficulty of either achieving or inventing an authentic, at least inalienable, discourse for modern Chinese consciousness. As a particular form of this consciousness, modern Chinese literature and literary criticism, especially in the contemporary period, can be said to have moved constantly in two opposite directions. On the one hand, they turn toward the future and embrace modernity as an ideology for change. On the other hand, they look back to the past with ambivalence and even nostalgia, claiming radical iconoclasm against tradition and in the same breath hoping to resurrect certain forms from the past so as to escape from the imposingly strange modern age.

In contemporary Chinese literature, the search for a new language is expressed by literary experiments that include modernist techniques and a return to traditional narrative forms; such a search is better reflected in debates over terminology of literary criticism. In the second half of the 1980s there was an outburst of interest in “culture,” specifically traditional cultural forms. Yet, curiously enough, what has now been termed the “culture fever” of the 1980s was indirectly fueled by an impassioned interest in new theories and methodologies. Western theories of postmodernism and poststruc-

turalism were embraced by Chinese literary critics with great enthusiasm at the same time that “three new theories” (system theory, cybernetics, and information theory) from the natural sciences were eagerly being applied to the study of literature. Understandably, the strategy of importing Western theories en masse has been motivated primarily by a pragmatic consideration (the same strategy underlay most May Fourth intellectuals’ zeal for a “bright, advanced, and humane Europe”): namely, to confront the Chinese reality, and, in many cases, to claim radical or what Lin Yü-sheng has described as “totalistic” iconoclasm in the face of all old models and traditions, Chinese as well as Western.² One fruitful way to examine twentieth-century Chinese history, it appears to us, is to retrace and examine the persistent problem of language.

The seemingly perennial Chinese anxiety over “Westernization” and “modernization” is compounded by the current debates about postmodernity that have been going on in other intellectual and institutional milieus. The discourse of postmodernity puts into question all the fundamental assumptions about culture, history, and the accepted notion of self and the other. Chinese critics, including most authors contributing to this volume, find themselves not only caught between the two readily accessible models of cultural relativism and evaluative universalism, but also torn by the tension between “old models” and new theories. As is obvious from this volume, political intervention tends to bring to crisis these two related but different lines of intellectual orientation: while some authors find it highly relevant to further a mandatory critique of the official literary and cultural practice and politics in China, others tend to tackle the equally compelling task of dismantling ideological constructs such as “modernity” and “subjectivity” from a global perspective. A constant worry shared by participants in the conference can be stated as follows: Are we using new theory as a superior vantage point of intervention only to speak the language of yet another master?

The chapters in this book inevitably reflect the problems of re-inventing a critical discourse that would come to grips with the issues concerning theory in general and historical narratives in particular. A major objective of our intervention is to challenge our accepted notions and to see in what way we can construct a different narrative of the Chinese experience of modernity through the medium of literature. But we must constantly be aware of possible pitfalls, since the established paradigm has largely been predicated

on a convenient division between an undifferentiated “West” and a homogenized “China.” In other words, we must caution ourselves against the danger of turning our own inquiries into either an ideological foreclosure or a form of nativist politics. On a close examination, binary thinking still appears to be the dominant mode when we realize that some of our inquiries are inextricably based on an opposition between, for instance, the historical and the imaginary, truth and fiction, realism and lyricism, or, finally, longing for the future and nostalgia for the past. Binary thinking by itself does not necessarily constitute a problem, but it does indicate the extent to which we need to be aware and critical of our own intellectual heritage. In such a spirit of painful and necessary self-doubt, authors in this volume have raised more questions than offered ready solutions.

2

The present volume does not intend to offer a comprehensive chronological study of modern Chinese literature. Nor do the authors focus solely on rejecting or even invalidating “old models.” On the contrary, authors are primarily concerned with exploring implications of major theoretical constructs such as “subjectivity,” “representation,” and “modernity.” All three of these concepts, as indices to prevailing ideologies of culture, history, and society, have irretrievably implicated themselves, either with their presence or through their negation, in modern Chinese literary discourse and thereby have determined the latter’s social relevance. In this sense, literary discourse is an ideal site for an investigation into both a real and an imaginary encounter with history. History is not to be displaced, but history is accessible to us only through specific and very often distorted “textual forms.”³

In their attempt to recapture the Chinese experience in its historical specificity, some authors strategically take contemporary Western theories as a point of departure. This revisionist gesture often helps release new energies in those appropriated theoretical formulations. The continual return to the topic of subjectivity reveals the degree to which many of the authors included in this volume are involved in contemporary debates about identity, selfhood, and otherness. For instance, the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks with which authors such as Stephen Chan and Lydia H. Liu discuss subjectivity

and modernity are decidedly steeped in contemporary Western theoretical discourse. Others, like Liu Kang and Wendy Larson, engage in historical and archival analyses. As Liu Kang indicates in his essay “Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China,” while subjectivity as a “liberal humanist” concept has been under assault in the Western context, particularly in the antihumanist, poststructuralist tradition, it nonetheless acquired an emancipatory significance in China in the mid-1980s. If the decentering of the subject has indeed become a central trope for the postmodernist scenario in the West, it is because, as some thinkers argue, reification and commodification of the most private and emotive spheres of human experience have reached their present proportion. In China, the formation of subjectivity has a different political thrust. Liu Kang sets out to recontextualize the debate about *zhuti xing* (subjectivity) in the 1980s by first tracing the issue back to the staunch but unorthodox Marxist theorist Hu Feng’s formulation of “subjective fighting spirit” in the 1940s. Hu Feng’s intent then was to contend for a site of revolution and resistance at the level of subjective experience, which as a cultural arena had been either ignored or suppressed by the official ideology of collective class struggle and national salvation.

In the 1980s theorists Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu inaugurated a heated discussion of subjectivity within a Marxian framework. Their initial reflections crystallized a cultural ethos of “recovering” the once-denounced humanist values and “returning” to the May Fourth project of cultural enlightenment. However, the politics underlying the debate that ensued are quite obvious. The discourse of subjectivity, as Liu Kang argues, can be seen as a self-conscious effort to redefine the intellectual as an autonomous and self-regulating subject. By advocating a humanist, autonomous literature of subjectivity, Liu Zaifu effectively challenges the literary orthodoxy that has always valorized a revolutionary collective identity at the expense of individuality. Thus his theorization of a “literary subjectivity” makes a pivotal political insurgence. As Liu Zaifu’s essay “The Subjectivity of Literature Revisited” illustrates, his purpose is to move beyond the “dualistic” mode of thinking while retaining the fundamental “ontological” and “axiological” thrust of his thoroughly dialectical conception of subjectivity. Liu’s exposition becomes more trying as he moves on to grapple with the existential meaning invested in “subjectivity” in modern times. He posits a forward-looking “subjective force” that is the hallmark of modernity. This “subjective force”

expresses the subject's desire for self-fulfillment and self-realization, which he terms *duxiang xing* (objectifiability), as opposed to *zhuti xing* (subjectivity). At this point, Liu Zaifu actually goes beyond a critique of institutionalized denial of subjectivity and addresses, in his own terms, the issue of modernity.

If Liu Zaifu's reflections on *duxiang xing* as the project of modernity and his critique of traditional "dualism" are symptomatic of the twofold movement toward both past and future, then Stephen Chan's "Split China, or, the Historical/Imaginary: Toward a Theory of the Displacement of Subjectivity at the Margins of Modernity" resituates the problem of subject formation within contemporary, if not specifically poststructuralist, terrains. Chan's strategy is to examine the poststructuralist terms and concepts that he will subsequently employ to prepare for a Chinese textuality in which "subjectivity" is to be constituted. After fully gauging the difficulty at the theoretical level, he turns to read Mo Yan's novel *Thirteen Steps* in order to retrieve the repressed or displaced subjectivity at the level of the unconscious. The volatile, traumatic movement of becoming "Chinese" is captured by Chan in the very form of his own suggestive prose and the logic of his argument. In his own words: "My essay represents not so much coherent arguments on my part for arriving at a conceivable analytical paradigm as some personal notes toward an alternative critical imagination through which the fragmented body of text—any text—would manifest itself in dreams."

In her critical reading of two first-person narratives by Lu Xun and Yu Dafu, Lydia H. Liu focuses on the experience of disillusionment resulting from modern Chinese intellectuals' frustrated quest for *ziwo* (self). She draws us deep into the labyrinth of ethics and even ontology in Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past" and explores the repressed narcissistic desire of the I-narrator in Yu Dafu's "Reminiscences on Returning Home." Her reading is sustained by a feminist critique of masculinism as well as by a historical analysis of the intellectual context of the 1920s and 1930s. Liu highlights in her chapter the complex and often conflictual relationship between a determinedly modern conception of an individual self and the reality of modern life. Her intervention raises questions about the understanding of modernity as well as about the discourse of individuality, abundant in writings from the May Fourth period.

This ideological quest for a modern self during the May Fourth period is most of the time voiced from an assumed male perspective,

while efforts to articulate a feminine identity have often gone unheard. Wendy Larson ventures into this field by offering historical and formal analyses of stories written by two women writers, Lu Yin and Bing Xin. Her reading shows that Lu Yin and Bing Xin, and to some extent Ding Ling, constructed their fictional worlds from a unique female perspective, very often through the preferred form of letters and diaries. These formal devices give shape to an oppositional female subjectivity that acknowledges as legitimate the emotive, “female-voiced” lyrical tradition and offers a glimpse of an alternative selfhood at variance with what is postulated by the dominant ideology of the modern nation-state.

It is by now obvious that our reexamination of the modern discourse of subjectivity has a double vision: it is a critique that specifically situates itself in the context of modern China while drawing on the antihumanist tradition in contemporary Western theoretical formulations. Closely related to this development then is a questioning of realism and representation, for if the subject is recognized as constituted and problematic, its claim to realistic representation and eventually to truth has to be taken with a grain of salt. In fact, Marston Anderson has already begun this work in his 1990 book *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. In his critical analysis of the fate of realism in modern China, Anderson tells the story of how various impediments (social and moral) that the discourse of realism encountered eventually led to its relinquishment: “In working with the mode, Chinese writers and critics had come increasingly to understand that realism did not naturally lend itself to the activism and populism that Chinese radicals felt the times demanded.”⁴ Thus critical realism, when its imperatives are faithfully followed, reveals its own limitation and vacillates between a withdrawn “individualism” and a “revolutionary collectivism.”

Theodore Hutters' essay in our volume picks up the issue of representation where Anderson left off. Further pressing Anderson's argument about the limits of critical realism, Hutters calls attention to a series of contradictions inherent in what he calls the “anxiety of the Real” in modern Chinese literature. First, there is the confusing entanglement of realism and modernism as conflicting literary movements (for instance, state-realism versus unofficial modernism), which Hutters attributes to a “peculiar convertibility of the [political] contexts.” Second, a “historical contingency” creates a paradoxical situation where Chinese writers encounter a Western “universal”

discourse of representation only to be reminded of a silenced and nullified Chinese “universal” discourse in the past. The need for universality as a rhetorical device for legitimation then makes it necessary for Chinese writers to mask the alien origin of the new, imported universal discourse. Hutters further probes the complicitous relationship between politics and literature in modern China by examining the conflation of two attributes of realism: a “critical spirit of the modern” and a “supreme faith in the powers of representation.” He concludes that the politics of (national) salvation and a deeply embedded utopianism in modern Chinese realist works have only intensified the social and cultural crises. A “perfect metaphor” for this intensification is found in Mao Dun’s two short pieces of realistic fiction that he analyzes here.

Between the anxiety of the Real that Hutters describes and the impediments to critical realism, David Wang intervenes to examine another dimension of the realist discourse, namely, the representational chain that links the body to language. Overloaded with guilt and moral anxiety, Lu Xun’s realistic fiction, for instance, actually undermines the signifying chain of realism by grounding the representation of Chinese reality on the thematic of decapitation, which then serves as a metaphor for “the mutilated condition of the meaning system that makes Reality what it is.” Motivated by Lu Xun’s literature of rupture and anxiety, Shen Congwen, argues Wang, renders the decapitation motif in a unique and displaced “lyricism” that grasps yet more forcefully the complexity of human emotions and motivations. Wang’s reading of these two writers’ different representations of the “break” or decapitation further develops, albeit in a revisionist vein, C. T. Hsia’s argument that modern Chinese writers are all burdened with a “moral obsession.” Yet while Hsia reproaches those writers for their lack of transcendent power to overcome their parochialism (a blame that Hutters in his essay identifies as coming from Hsia’s own “determination to pursue successful representation”), Wang’s reading in effect recuperates a representational power in Shen Congwen’s lyrical realism that requires the reader to take a mobile perspective and to weave together “all sensory impressions.”

It is in Mo Yan, the contemporary novelist known for his *Red Sorghum* series, that the linkage between literary representation and the body is given a new spin. Stephen Chan, as we have seen, deploys Mo Yan’s almost volatile text to advance his thesis of a split and fragmented body of text, but Tonglin Lu sees in Mo Yan’s often

extravagant, sometimes grotesque representations of the female body an intentional manipulation and transgression of the official “socialist realism.” On the one hand, Mo Yan resorts to a carnivalistic celebration of the body that has a decidedly revolutionary significance as a subversion of what the critic Li Tuo and others have termed “the Mao Style.” On the other hand, as Lu demonstrates, Mo Yan’s work also epitomizes a deeply rooted nostalgia for a “natural” and prerevolutionary community. Such writings by Mo Yan seem to move in precisely the two directions that we identified at the outset. The central concern and obsession—an obsession that is historical rather than moral—has to be the memory of the recent revolution. Indeed, contemporary Chinese writings can only articulate their historicity when the massive revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century find themselves represented and reflected upon in all types of emplotments and formulations. This is also true for literary criticism. Besides Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, we find a whole group of young critics (Chen Pingyuan, Qian Liqun, Huang Ziping, Wang Xiaoming, Ji Hongzhen, Chen Sihe, and others) whose work echoes, although in a different form and at a separate level, the same critical reconfrontation with a historical revolution. It is noteworthy that the Chinese critics began to probe the issues of collective memory and the writing of history with little recourse to poststructuralist thinking and theorization. Their initial critical impulse was more like a reaction, an effort to resist the official representation or outright distortion of either the past revolution or the everyday lived experience.

3

It is undeniable that the “cultural reflection” in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) became possible only with a postrevolutionary mentality. But very often this intellectual reflection goes beyond a simpleminded rejection of terroristic, authoritarian social control and violence, and actually reaches the difficult philosophical moment of rethinking modernity. Through various forms of “cultural reflection,” such as the “Searching for Roots” and “Educated Youth” literature as well as the debate about subjectivity and discussions on the “tradition/modernity” dichotomy,⁵ the modernist desire for domination over nature and human destiny is being critically revalued, with the project of socialism

being shown as a sublime expression of that utopian longing for modernity. Also the effort of rethinking history, tradition, or simply the retrieved and reinvented memory of a collective or personal past begins to address the present in a different voice and to produce a creative tension. Most noticeably, in the highly experimental fiction of the late 1980s, such as Su Tong's fictional genealogy and Ge Fei's continual reimagining of the imagined past, we find a strong expression of the nostalgic, and no less revolutionary, yearning for history. This history is evoked not only through a painful questioning of "master narratives" such as those of national identity and collective movements, but also by means of reconstructing the micronarratives of personal memoirs, fantasies, and testimonies.

One narrative form that falls between the collective master narratives, on the one hand, and personal testimonies, on the other, is reportage. Yingjin Zhang's chapter on Chinese reportage, which constitutes what he calls a "subversive discourse," examines a literary genre that vacillates between conformist propaganda and subversive writing; cases in point are writings by Liu Binyan, Qian Gang, and Hu Ping. On close examination, the "textuality" of reportage is quite complex and presents a transgression of accepted categories of fiction and history. It is also informed by the implacable tension between official ideology and the experience of everyday life. The ultimate challenge for the reportage writers, however, is to voice their own "subjectivity" in a mode of writing that is supposed to be impersonal and objective.

Just as Yingjin Zhang's critical vocabulary is largely taken from Althusser, the following essay is another case in which Western theory is expanded, if not brought to crisis, by being tested in a different cultural context. In "Anxiety of Portraiture: Quest for/Questioning Ancestral Icons in Post-Mao China," Yuejin Wang situates Luo Zhongli's "photorealist" or "superrealist" images of impoverished Chinese peasants against the general intellectual background of cultural reflection. Luo Zhongli's iconographic portrait of a father figure bespeaks the need to confront the father-leader-despot icon as a Chinese cultural residue. In cinematic spectacles of *Grandma* and *Grandpa*, as Wang also observes, the moving camera presents the past/present, self/other relationship in a shifting and dynamic way, which nevertheless ends up magnifying a rather immobile icon—a single portrait. Wang's chapter on contemporary art and cinema, like Yingjin Zhang's on reportage, is an example of ideological analysis

that carefully poses important questions and highlights some of the fundamental contradictions of contemporary Chinese culture. Both projects are strong evidence that more extensive cultural critique has to be conducted from an interdisciplinary approach. The divergent writing styles witnessed in Zhang and Wang, on the one hand, and in Li Tuo and Liu Zaifu, on the other, highlight the problem of language once again. Li Tuo's brief piece, beautifully translated by Mary Scoggin, presents an interesting alternative case of how Western theories and theorists can be incorporated into a writing that sets as its task to revolt against the Mao style.

Finally, in his review of recent interactions between Chinese and Western critical theories and, moreover, of the general cultural dynamic in contemporary China, Xiaobing Tang establishes a historical connection between locally engaged discourse such as "subjectivity" or simply "theory" and its global context. Tang argues that the attraction of "postmodernism" for a new generation of Chinese writers and critics has its own historical and cultural implications. The "function of new theory," in other words, is to constitute a forceful cultural critique in its own right. This is yet another way of defining the task of critical intervention, or "the act of insurgency." The point, in the final analysis, is to critically uncover the complexity of political and ideological commitment and contradictions that underlies and simultaneously propels every instance of cultural imagination and production. As Edward Said puts it, "criticism belongs in that potential space inside civil society, acting on behalf of those alternative acts and alternative intentions whose advancement is a fundamental human and intellectual obligation."⁶

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We owe the most, perhaps, to Marston Anderson for his understanding and encouragement. Without his firm initial backing, this book may never have come into being. It has been our deepest regret to realize that Marston, whose sudden death in 1992 deprived our field of a brilliant scholar and a sensitive critic, will never see this volume in its book form; for this reason, we would like to dedicate this book to the memory of Marston Anderson.

Notes

1. Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 233–234.
2. See Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Anti-traditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).
3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 82.
4. Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 200.

5. See, for instance, Gan Yang, ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo wenhua yishi* (Contemporary Chinese cultural consciousness), introduction by Gan Yang (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1989).

6. Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, pp. 29–30.