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Studies of Modern Chinese Literature

JAROSLAV PRŮŠEK

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Foreword

In the field of Chinese literature, the pioneering scholarship of Professor Jaroslav Průšek has received wide recognition. His painstaking research into the origins, genres, and social and historical milieu of Chinese vernacular literature has long been taken by students of traditional Chinese literature as a point of departure in their own work. Some years ago, a fairly comprehensive volume, which includes most of Průšek's important scholarly papers on literature of the traditional periods, appeared under the title of *Chinese History and Literature* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1970). However, his contributions in the field of modern Chinese literature, published mostly in European journals and in book-length monographs, were never collected. This volume of selected papers by Professor Průšek, spanning more than a decade (1957–1969), is designed to fill in such an obvious gap and to provide students (especially in the United States and other non-European countries) who may not otherwise have easy access to European scholarly journals with a representative sampling of his seminal works. Professor Průšek has been kind enough to leave the choice of these papers entirely in my hands, and I alone bear the responsibility for any deficiencies in the final selection and format. The innumerable merits in the content of these papers belong, of course, to Professor Průšek.

The selection of these papers has been determined by three kinds of concerns: their scholarly quality and originality, their representativeness of Průšek's general approach to modern Chinese literature, and their suitability as basic reading and teaching material in the classroom. While my assessment of the individual merits of Průšek's papers may not be entirely sound due to my own limitations, I have chosen those papers which have exerted significant impact on myself and on my students. I would have liked to include more had I not been pressed by a practical concern to make this volume widely available to scholars and students at a cost they can afford. I have also left out, with great reluctance, some important papers written in other European languages. Whatever its faults of omission, I am nevertheless convinced that the present collection provides sufficient evidence for the kind of broad sweep combined with detailed analysis which is so characteristic of Průšek's work. In

these papers we can also find a number of recurring themes which, in my judgment, are central to an understanding of Průšek's thinking on modern Chinese literature.

One of the paramount themes in Průšek's treatment of modern Chinese literature is the close connection between the New Literature and China's classical tradition. As one of the very few European sinologists who feel equally at home in traditional and modern Chinese culture, Professor Průšek perceives with great insight the complex reverberations from a long history of China's literary past on the formation of modern literature. He is most impressed by the variety, spontaneity, artistic inventiveness, and increasing dynamism of traditional Chinese popular and folk literature (hence his extensive research in the subject). But at the same time he has not neglected to take note of the so-called literati culture—its moral weight, its precision of language, its finesse and sophistication of expression. This bifurcation of traditions seems to recall Hu Shih's verdict concerning the gradual ossification of the latter and the increasing vitality of the former, thus affirming the vernacular strains since Sung times as the main living tradition of Chinese literature. Unlike most May Fourth leaders, including Hu Shih, Průšek emphatically points out that the lyrical side of literati culture, as manifested in particular in classical poetry, has also left an enduring legacy in shaping the literary sensibilities of May Fourth writers.

This "lyrical" tradition, which tends to focus on the subjective feelings of the writer and on an artistic evocation—of mood, color, or imagery—has persisted in the works of many modern Chinese writers—Lu Hsün and Yü Ta-fu are but two prime examples. This lyrical sensibility is by no means the exclusive prerogative of the literati. Though Průšek has not gone deeply into the Ming phenomenon of the literati novel—that is, the vernacular novel as used by highly educated scholar-intellectuals who for one reason or another had chosen this "popular" form as medium to convey their artistic vision—it can be inferred that this elitist "appropriation" of a popular genre may have been one of the factors contributing to what Průšek considers to be the gradual blending of genres, which in turn signifies the merger of literati and popular strains in the past three or four millennia. The growing popularity of the diary, the personal note (*pi-chi*) or essay (*hsiao-p'in wen*), as well as the novel (*hsiao-shuo*) from the late Ming to the late Ch'ing, in Průšek's view, indicates that the earlier barriers between poetry and prose, and between the moralistic, elitist "great tradition" on the one

hand and the more carefree, fanciful popular tradition on the other, were breaking down. By late Ch'ing times, there was, according to Průšek, a noticeable tendency toward subjectivism and individualism, as evidenced in such works as Shen Fu's *Fu-sheng liu chi* (Six chapters from a floating world), Liu O's *Lao Ts'an yu-chi* (The travels of Lao Ts'an), Wu Wo-yao's *Erh-shih nien mu-tu chih kuai hsien-chuang* (Strange things witnessed during the past twenty years) and others. Thus the late Ch'ing period can be singled out, as Průšek did some twenty years ago, as the crucial transitional era between traditional and modern literature in China.

While Průšek devotes considerable attention to analyzing late Ch'ing fiction (treated in several papers of this collection), he has not given this literature undue praise in terms of artistic significance. With the possible exception of *Lao Ts'an yu-chi*, he finds most of the late Ch'ing novels lacking in the sophisticated technique needed to represent reality. In this regard, he considers modern Chinese fiction from 1917 to 1937 to be far superior. The example he cites again and again is the fictional *oeuvre* of Mao Tun, who aspires to and in some degree achieves what Průšek calls the "epic" quality in his works.

The term "epic," used by Průšek more often as adjective than noun to cover a broader spectrum of literary genres than poetry, is posed in contrast to the term "lyrical" as the other central artistic approach to reality. If the stories of Yü Ta-fu and Lu Hsün are in some ways reminiscent of poetry in their lyricism, Mao Tun's novels are "epic" in the sense that they are conceived as massive, objective panoramas of life and society. Průšek traces this "epic" orientation to the tradition of nineteenth-century European realistic fiction, but he also goes into great detail in qualifying Mao Tun's indebtedness to European theories of realism and naturalism. While Mao Tun professes to be a naturalistic writer, he does not, in Průšek's analysis, concern himself, as Zola did, with "a slice of life" by concentrating on the *individual* fate of his characters. Thus in a curious way Mao Tun may be said to have inherited—or revitalized—the Chinese "epic" tradition of fictional writing which invariably presents a broad social canvas in which no individual protagonist stands out. Mao Tun's fictional world is one in which social, economic, political as well as personal forces are inextricably intertwined. As a Marxist, however, he is assuredly more preoccupied with the socioeconomic forces and their attendant class configurations as the overarching themes in most of his fiction. But even in this most "epic" of all modern Chinese writers, we can also find, as Průšek has

pointed out, certain subjective concerns: the characters' personal emotions are not deemphasized; rather, they become vivid, often tortured, expressions of the interplay with larger historical forces. It is this dialectical combination of the objective and the subjective, the "epic" and the "lyrical," that gives the mainstream of modern Chinese literature its major hallmark. While Průšek might have been temperamentally attracted to the lyrical strain, he is intellectually committed to both.

In delineating these two "subtraditions" in modern Chinese literature, Průšek also seeks to establish their possible "correspondences" with European literature. As mentioned earlier, he finds in the epic works of Mao Tun certain implications of nineteenth-century European realism. In the realm of the lyrical, however, Průšek presents the daring thesis that May Fourth literature exhibited some tendencies which are very akin to modern lyrical strains in European literature produced between the two World Wars. He further argues that, given the lyrical heritage of classical Chinese poetry, it is by no means accidental that the prose poetry of Lu Hsün, for instance, shows amazing similarities to the symbolist poetry of Baudelaire (though Lu Hsün may not have read Baudelaire extensively). In his analysis of the stories of Lu Hsün and Yü Ta-fu, he asserts in a similar vein that the two writers' preoccupation with constructing evocative, lyrical tableaux at the expense of plot and the narrative line are likewise characteristic of European fiction of roughly the same period.

This intriguing thesis, though argued with analytical brilliance (see the article "A Confrontation of Traditional Oriental Literature with Modern European Literature"), seems nevertheless unconvincing. The avant-gardist ethos which infused European art and literature since Baudelaire stems, in my judgment, from an entirely different set of artistic presuppositions and is therefore qualitatively at variance with the May Fourth ethos, despite many formal similarities in their literary products. From the perspective of literary history, a more significant phenomenon which awaits detailed exploration is the "modernistic" experimentation in modern Chinese poetry of the 1930s and 1940s—the works of Li Chin-fa, Tai Wang-shu, and Pien Chih-lin and the statements printed in the influential journal *Hsien-tai (Les contemporaines)*, for example—and the subsequent blossoming of modernistic writing in Taiwan poetry and fiction of the 1960s. Here the European influence is more direct and relevant, and the correspondences (as well as differences) may yield more fruitful "leads" for comparative studies. Despite these

minor reservations, it is revealing that Průšek should have deemed it necessary to make a strong case for modern Chinese literature in the light of Western literary developments. May we take this to be a testimony to Průšek's own modern sensibilities, nourished as he was by the likes of Joyce, Mann, Eliot, Hesse, and Picasso? Or could we surmise that, perhaps unconsciously, he feels the need to defend the artistic merits of this new and fledgling literature out of a deep sense of love for Chinese culture and the Chinese people? (Průšek is in a position to count Mao Tun, Cheng Chen-to, and Ch'ien Hsing-ts'un as his former personal friends.)

In a sense all scholars of modern Chinese literature outside of China are faced with the same problem: how to make this very "Chinese" body of literature comprehensible to non-Chinese readers? Against typical Western standards of literary criticism, this literature can be found deficient in many aspects. It is, therefore, fascinating to follow the scholarly exchange of views between Professor Průšek and Professor C. T. Hsia, the leading authority of modern Chinese literature in the United States. Průšek's critical review of Hsia's book, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, and Hsia's lengthy reply have demonstrated not only differences of methodology and approach but also varying standards of literary judgment. It is also intriguing to note that Hsia, a Chinese scholar with an impressive grasp of Western critical canons, is more harsh in his judgment of the general quality of modern Chinese literature, whereas Průšek, a European scholar, is more sympathetic to Chinese writers and more positive about their achievements. Their differences in the "scientific" approach are derived, to some extent, also from their divergent conceptions of the proper functions of the literary historian. Following the great tradition of F. R. Leavis, Professor Hsia considers it an inherent duty of any literary historian to discover and *evaluate* the major literary works of any period. Professor Průšek, on the other hand, tends to seek a broader understanding by placing the literary texts in the social and historical contexts of the period in which they were written. Their respective analyses of Lu Hsün's stories provide a most instructive case in point. And it is from the scintillating insights emerging from these two opposing approaches that a student of modern Chinese literature gets his first rewarding lesson on how to analyze a literary text.

The debate between these two eminent scholars took place in the pages of *T'oung Pao* between 1961 and 1963. Since that time, the study of

modern Chinese literature in the West has made considerable strides as a result of several academic conferences and publications. The volume which emerged from the Dedham Conference of 1974, *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), bears in its front matter a brief but fitting dedication: "To Jaroslav Průšek, whose work made this book possible." I am tempted to add that Průšek's work has, together with Hsia's, performed a task of more monumental consequence: he has not only pioneered in the establishment of the scholarly discipline of modern Chinese literature studies but also, in several decades of dedicated service to the cause of modern Chinese literature through teaching and writing, has inspired an increasing number of young scholars to follow in his footsteps and discover new exciting terrains in this not yet fully developed field. It is hoped that Průšek's followers and friendly opponents will find in these papers a wealth of insight and information which may provide a source of renewed faith in their own chosen profession.

Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana
July 26, 1979

Leo Ou-fan Lee

Just as this book was going to press, I was deeply grieved to learn of the death of Professor Průšek, in Prague, in April 1980. It is my hope that this volume will serve as a commemoration of his decades of teaching and scholarship.

June 1980

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I would like to thank Professor Průšek for his encouragement and also the publishers of the following journals and books for permission to reprint the articles contained in this volume:

Archiv Orientální
Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies
T'oung Pao (E. J. Brill, Leiden)
Studies in Modern Chinese Literature (Akademie-Verlag, Berlin)
Three Sketches of Chinese Literature (The Oriental Institute in Academia, Prague)

I am very grateful to Professor C. T. Hsia for kindly permitting us to reprint his 1963 "reply" to Professor Průšek, "On the 'Scientific' Study of Modern Chinese Literature," as Appendix One of this book.

My special gratitude is to Mr. John D. Coleman, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Indiana University, for compiling the selected bibliography and for editorial assistance. Sincere thanks are also due Professor Milena Doleželová of the University of Toronto who was kind enough to go over the bibliography and suggest several important titles for inclusion. Mr. Jason Wang of the University of Wisconsin has provided the elegant Chinese calligraphy.

Leo Ou-fan Lee

Contents

I

Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature

In this paper dealing with modern Chinese literature, that is, more especially, with literature of the period following the first World War and of the Manchu period, I wish to follow a single complex of features which may be summed up under "subjectivism and individualism." I understand these terms to cover an emphasis on the creator's personality in art and a concentration of attention on the artist's own life. The artist sees in artistic production above all the opportunity to express his views, feelings, sympathy or maybe hate; in extreme cases a work of art may provide the means for expressing, developing and finding scope for those aspects of his personality which in real life are somehow suppressed or not given full play. The work of art then, as a rule, does not document objective reality but rather reflects the author's inner life and comprises descriptions or analysis of his own feelings, moods, visions and even dreams; the artist's work approaches more and more closely to a confession in which the author reveals the different sides of his character and of his life—and especially the gloomier and more hidden sides. In my view, the growth of these features in the literature of a given period may serve as an important indication of certain changes in the social structure in which it arises and is not seldom the sign of the individual's emancipation from traditional views in the spheres of philosophy, religion or ethics, or even of actual revolt against the inherited social order. In the case of Chinese literature of the period referred to above, I should say that the measure of these features is one of the symptoms of the

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Paper read at the IX Conference of Junior Sinologues in Paris. Published in *Archiv Orientální* 25 (1957), 261–283.

emancipation of the individual from feudal traditions, the breaking of all those fetters restricting the freedom of the individual in the old society, whether in family or in public life. There is no doubt that only when the individual realizes his own entity and singularity can he begin to claim his right to order his life in his own way and determine his own fate. In tradition-bound societies, this feeling for individual self-determination is weak or even completely stifled by the demands and claims of religion and traditional morality. Thus, for instance, Buddhism, in the teaching of Karma, of the chain of cause and effect, conceived this life as only an episode in an endless series of similar episodes which man must pass through in ever new incarnations. If his fate happens to be hard, the causes must be sought in a previous life, and if man bears his burden without complaint, he will be rewarded in a future life. Thus the importance of this life and of the lot of the individual was very much diminished. Man was not responsible for his own life, did not direct it or determine it, for everything was pre-determined by fate. The belief in the pre-determination of the personal lot was also shared by Confucianism, which in addition placed duty to the family and to society altogether above the interests of the individual. The belief, too, that human nature was naturally good and only deformed by the world's temptations, merely obscured the real problems both of individual psychology as well as of the motivation of the actions of others. No more did Taoism with its yearning for complete merging with the universe, for a state in which the individual ceased to exist, do anything to strengthen the consciousness of the significance of the individual life and lot. It is natural that the birth of a modern, free and self-determining individual was possible only at the price of shattering and discarding these traditional views and customs and the whole social structure on which they were based. The modern revolution in China is thus, first and foremost, in the sphere of ideas, a revolution of the individual and of individualism in opposition to traditional dogmas. In this context, we can then realize the immense importance of subjectivistic and individualistic tendencies in modern Chinese thought and art. It is equally natural, however, that this consciousness of self, this investigation of one's own personality, must go hand in hand with realism, with the ability to look at oneself and at the facts of existence without the spectacles of tradition. This is an aspect of literature, however, which would require special study. An accompanying feature of this consciousness of self, of one's own entity and significance is a feeling for the tragedy of life. If we are confined to this life alone, and if it is full of hardship and suffering, then nothing can

recompense us for this tragedy, it is a misfortune that cannot be repaired. We shall see later on how this feeling for the tragedy of existence—very weakly developed or not at all in older literature—is in fact a characteristic feature of modern art. In the same way, along with this new feeling of the singularity of existence, goes hand in hand the revolutionary character of the new man and his art. In this life alone is all the content and purpose of existence, and so it is necessary to remove everything that would stand in the way of its full development and full enjoyment—and by force if necessary. The other side of this mentality, however, is a tendency to self-destruction. If only this life exists—and it is not worth living—then it is better to make an end of it. These are, in rough outline, the different aspects of this new, modern mental complex which we call subjectivism and individualism, and to which we wish to devote our attention in this paper.

It is evident that we cannot here give by any means an exhaustive or complete picture of these tendencies in recent Chinese literature of the Manchu and revolutionary periods. Besides, the present state of our knowledge is far from sufficient for such a task, for we should need to have a good knowledge of the character of this period not only in literature, but also in all other sectors of Chinese life. In literature, too, we are faced with a complete insufficiency of monographs providing systematic studies of the various personalities, trends, problems and so on, on the basis of which we could then attempt to build up a synthetic picture of the successive stages of development, in which all the facets of social life could be evaluated and taken into account for the epoch in question. As it is, all we can do is to call attention to certain symptoms and indications rather than present a systematic account of the whole development in all its aspects. So, too, it will be possible only in a later study to classify the individual writers according to the different social groups to which they belong and to establish the relations between their ideology and their class origin.

There can be no question that subjectivism and individualism, joined with pessimism and a feeling for the tragedy of life, along with an inclination to revolt and even the tendency to self-destruction, are the most characteristic qualities of Chinese literature from the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to the outbreak of war with Japan.[1] Typical, too, for the mood of the time was undoubtedly the fact that the Bible of the new

[1]For the literature of this period see my study: "Die neue chinesische Literatur," *Das Neue China* VI (1940) 39, pp. 456–465; 40, pp. 523–536; 41, pp. 588–600.

youth was *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. In proof of this, it is sufficient, perhaps, to quote at least one passage from the novel *Tzu yeh* 子夜, by Mao Tun 茅盾.[2] Captain Lei 雷, one of those who took part in the May Fourth Movement, a former student and later a cadet of the Huang-p'u Academy, is speaking to Mrs. Wu 吳, his one-time student love, now the wife of a Shanghai industrialist:

"Captain Lei lifted his head and drew out a book from his pocket. Opening it quickly, he extended it toward Mrs. Wu with both hands. It was an old, well-worn copy of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. The place at which it was open was marked with a pressed white rose. Like a flash this book and this white rose recalled to Mrs. Wu the stormy times of student meetings during the Movement of the 30th of May, and so vividly that she found herself trembling . . .

"Captain Lei smiled a little bitterly and sighed as it seemed, but then he went on: '. . . This book and this white rose are dearer to me than all else . . . I took part in the campaign against Hu-nan, I rose from a lieutenant to the rank of captain, I was present at the taking of Ch'ang-sha, Wu-han, Chêng-chou and of Peiping. I made my way over thousands, indeed tens of thousands of corpses. Innumerable times I escaped death by a hair's-breadth, I lost everything, only from this rose and book I never parted . . .'"

The passage is extremely interesting for the way it shows how the greatest product of European Romanticism found a kindred spirit and mood among Chinese revolutionary youth. It testifies to how the moods in China were reminiscent in many aspects of the moods of European Romanticism and its exaggerated individualism, tragic coloring and feeling of "Weltschmerz." It is well known that *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* was translated into Chinese by Kuo Mo-jo 郭沫若,[3] who in this period was the principal representative of Chinese romanticism, individualism and even titanism, and also the chief propagator of revolt and revolution. In the early works of Kuo Mo-jo, we also find strong echoes of the great German model as, for example, in the highly romantic and lyrical tale of love and suicide entitled "The Grave of Yeh Lo-t'i 葉羅提之墓."

Characteristic, too, of the subjectivistic-individualistic tendency of that time is the fact that Kuo Mo-jo wrote an account of his life,

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[2] See Mao Tun, *Šerosvit*, translated by J. Průšek, Praha, 1950, p. 109 et seq.

[3] Under the Chinese title of *Shao-nien Wei-t'e ti fan-nao*.

especially his early youth and literary beginnings, up to the Great Revolution, in seven autobiographical novels of which the best is perhaps "Childhood" [*Shao-nien shih-tai* 少年時代], published in 1929. His other work is also strongly autobiographical in character, in fact not seldom his works are the raw material rather than the finished product of literary art, records and notes of personal experiences rather than stories and novels in the accepted sense, examples of which are to be found, for instance, in the collection "Olive" [*Kan-lan* 橄欖].

There can be no doubt that their own lives, their own experiences and feelings are the main source of writers' inspiration in the inter-war period, and these sources are always gloomy and tragic in coloring. This melancholy subjectivism also pervades to a large extent the work of the greatest of modern writers—Lu Hsün 魯迅. Here we shall quote no more than the beginning of his introduction to the collection "Call to Arms" [*Na-han* 吶喊], where Lu Hsün alludes to his own sad experiences in childhood and early youth as the source of his inspiration: "I, too, in my young days dreamt many a dream, but later I forgot the greater part of them. But this I by no means regret. People say that such so-called reminiscences can give one pleasure, but equally often they cause us grief, for the silken threads of our thoughts may renew long past stabs of pain. What delight is in that? Besides, all our proneness to grief is in the impossibility of complete forgetfulness. And so that part of my recollections which I am unable to forget gave birth to 'Call to Arms'." Here we have a subjectivistic explanation of the author's creative work. If we go through the collection *Na-han*[4] or *P'ang-huang* 彷徨,[5] we shall have little difficulty in persuading ourselves of the subjectivistic character of Lu Hsün's work—even though we must bear in mind that this man of genius also created some of the most convincing and most penetrating pictures of Chinese society. This subjectivity is particularly clear in his collection of poetry and prose, "Wild Grass" [*Yeh-ts'ao* 野草], while its autobiographical character is indicated in the title of the collection, "Dawn Flowers Plucked at Dusk" [*Ch'ao-hua hsi-she* 朝華夕拾].[6] It is, of course, necessary to note that even the vision and dreams recorded in

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[4]See Lu Sün, *Vřava—Polní tráva*, translated by J. Průšek and B. Krebsová, Praha, 1951.

[5]See Lu Sün: *Tápání*, translated by B. Krebsová, Praha 1954.

[6]See Lu Sün: *Ranní květy sebrané v podvečer—Staré příběby v novém rouše*, translated by B. Krebsová, Praha 1956.