

# Fictional Authors, Imaginary Audiences

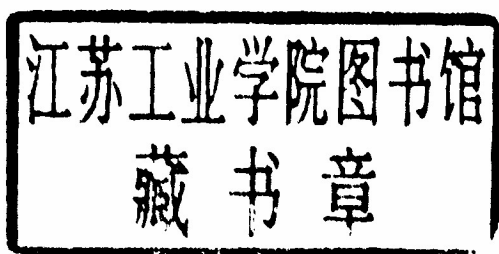
Modern Chinese Literature in the Twentieth Century

BONNIE S. McDUGALL

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*Modern Chinese Literature  
in the Twentieth Century*

Bonnie S. McDougall



The Chinese University Press

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Modern Chinese Literature in the Twentieth Century*  
By Bonnie S. McDougall

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“Writing Self: Author/Audience Complicity in Modern Chinese Fiction” was originally given as a paper at the University of Cambridge in May 1991 under the title “Self-projection and the authorial voice in modern Chinese fiction,” in revised form as “Self-narrative as group discourse in modern Chinese literature” at the University of Oxford in January 1992, and in further revised form under the present title at the Harvard University East Asia Colloquium in August 1993. I am grateful to these audiences for their comments. It was first published as “Writing Self: Author/Audience Complicity in Modern Chinese Fiction,” *Archiv Orientalni*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1996), pp. 245–68.

“The Importance of Being Earnest in China: Early Chinese Attitudes towards Oscar Wilde” was first presented at the XXIX International Congress of Orientalists, Paris, 1973, and first published in the *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1 & 2 (1972–73), pp. 84–98. It has not been revised for this publication except for minor changes in formatting and additions to footnotes shown in square brackets.

“Self-Narrative as Group Discourse: Female Subjectivity in Wang Anyi’s Fiction” was first presented at the University of Cambridge in May 1991

under the title “Self-projection and the authorial voice in modern Chinese fiction”; a revised version was presented at an international conference on “Self and social order: China, India and Japan” at the East-West Center, Honolulu, in August 1991 under the title “Self narrative as group discourse: authorial voices in modern Chinese fiction.” A further revised version appeared in *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (November 1995), pp. 1–24. I am grateful to the audiences at Cambridge and the East-West Center and to T. E. Hutters, Carole Murray and Hilary Chung for their comments.

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“Censorship and Self-Censorship in Chinese Poetry and Fiction, 1977–1984” is based on a talk given at a one-day seminar on censorship in modern China in 1992 and subsequently published under the title “Censorship & Self-Censorship in Contemporary Chinese Literature” in *After the Event: Human Rights and Their Future in China*, edited by Susan Whitfield (London: Wellsweep Press, 1993), pp. 73–90.

“The Anxiety of Out-fluence: Creativity, History and Postmodernity” was originally presented as a paper at a symposium on modern Chinese literature in Aarhus in 1992, attended by Chinese writers as well as Western academics, and was included in the proceedings, *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture*, edited by Wendy Larson and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), pp. 99–112. I am grateful to the participants for their comments.

“Literary Decorum or Carnivalistic Grotesque: Literature in the People’s Republic of China After Fifty Years” was commissioned as an article in a special issue of *The China Quarterly* to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China; it appeared in abbreviated form in *China Quarterly*, No. 159 (September 1999), pp. 723–32, and in *The People’s Republic of China After 50 Years*, edited by Richard Louis Edmonds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 161–70. I am grateful to the pre-publication conference audience and to Chen Maiping, Anders Hansson, Michel Hockx, Kam Louie and Tommy McClellan for their comments.

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## **Introduction: Fictions, Authors and Audiences in 20th Century China**

The most striking feature of mid twentieth-century Western research into modern Chinese literature was that no direct contact was possible between Chinese writers still living in China and Western scholars. The absence of standard research aids, including reliable biographical dictionaries and bibliographical guides to writers both dead and alive, was also a daunting problem for beginners. Everyone now engaged in this kind of research must feel greatly encouraged by how much has changed since then, and share some satisfaction that modern Chinese literature has established itself as a distinct academic subfield with its own journals, research guides, methodologies and critical apparatus. The enormous progress in this regard that has been made owes a great deal to the individual and collective efforts of Chinese and non-Chinese scholars. Nevertheless, the chief differences between research on modern Chinese literature then and now are due to political upheavals: the death of Mao Zedong, the re-opening of China, and the end of the Cold War. It is thanks to these events that scholars in the rest of the world can now communicate directly with writers and scholars in China and have access to Chinese libraries, some archives, research aids and so on.

For all these advantages, it is still worth considering how very little still is known about Chinese writers and readers, and how unreliable or untested much of the information that we have about them is. For example, research on a modern British or Dutch writer might include a visit to the Public Records Office to establish dates and places of birth, marriage and death should there be any doubt about them, but this kind of archival research is by and large not undertaken by foreign scholars in China. The literary canon shaped by the cultural bureaucracy in China was accepted without question for too many years in the UK and the US,

and, after contact with writers became possible again in the late 1970s, claims by writers about themselves and their work were similarly accepted without being subjected to normal standards of critical examination. Even in the 1990s, although gossip about individuals could be freely exchanged, what could be found in print in academic works on writers' lives was still subject to political prudence and moral prudery. Such fundamental matters as relationships between literary groups and mechanisms by which literary reputations are constructed have only very recently come under critical attention.<sup>1</sup> The personae thus created for modern Chinese writers, in the present and in retrospect, are largely fictional.<sup>2</sup> This book attempts to go beyond the self-image of high-minded patriotic intellectuals to probe the domination of written literature by an élite stratum of university-educated men and the extent to which writers' interests are (legitimately) pursued under warlord, totalitarian and market-friendly governments.

In traditional China, scholars followed the path from literacy through literature to the expectation of lifetime employment in the service of the state. Although ruptured in 1905 with the abolition of the official examination system, the ancient connection between literacy, literature and socio-political power in China was not easily forgotten by educated men. Deprived of an automatic path to political power but retaining a lingering monopoly over literacy, modern intellectuals developed a new strategy to establish their right to social and moral leadership within the social order. Control over literature was an important part of this strategy, but it set up an awkward conflict: at the same time as writers claimed to speak for the whole country, they addressed their work to only a small fraction of the national audience. Hence a pervasive characteristic of modern Chinese writing: what Marston Anderson has identified as the imprint of a "moral taint" in would-be realistic fiction,<sup>3</sup> or what could be called, from a different perspective, "the anxiety of literacy."<sup>4</sup>

In the first half of twentieth-century China, aspiring writers were deprived of guaranteed employment and had to seek jobs or royalties in the market-place. The typical May Fourth writer was from an educated family, had himself been educated to tertiary level (although occasionally without benefit of the usual institutions), and was a member of at least one literary society or faction.<sup>5</sup> His sources of income included land rents, inheritances, parental handouts, salaries from teaching or editing jobs,

and royalties or fees from translation and writing. His choice of literary allegiances and styles included realism and romanticism along with a wide range of avant-garde options. The stereotype broadened by mid-century: women became prominent, and writers emerged from uneducated families through journalism and training classes. Between 1949 and the 1980s, writers returned to state employment through the educational and cultural bureaucracy. The Cultural Revolution disrupted the post-1949 establishment, and the new writers who began their careers under or above ground in the 1970s had more in common with their May Fourth predecessors, but their career paths were still supported by indirect state subsidies in the 1970s and 1980s.

In twentieth-century China, the term “intellectual” [*zhishi fenzi*] (which could be glossed as meaning “the element(s) [in society] that possess (es) knowledge”) could refer to anyone who had received a senior secondary education and above, and who was employed in an occupation that required literacy. In its broadest use, it meant little more than “white-collar worker,” and included everyone from office clerks to professors. Confusingly, persons otherwise eligible and employed in the state and Party bureaucracy were sometimes classed (or classed themselves) as intellectuals, and sometimes not (for instance, in periods when “intellectuals” were seen by dominant politicians as hostile to social and political development). As commonly used by modern Chinese intellectuals themselves, the word “intellectual” meant educated persons *excluding* politicians and bureaucrats. (The status of Mao Zedong was tellingly ambiguous in this regard.) Again, and even more confusingly, the term “intellectual” was also commonly used in a more limited sense to refer to “higher intellectuals,” chiefly well-known writers, journalists and academics. This last usage suggests that a high degree of literacy, as typically demonstrated by literary skills, is one of the main defining characteristics of the intellectual. Modern Chinese writers almost invariably identified themselves and were usually identified by others as “intellectuals”, signifying a cluster of characteristics not necessarily associated with the figure of “the writer” in the UK, the US and Australia.<sup>6</sup>

Speaking in the mid 1980s, Fang Lizhi, one of China’s most famous scientists and also a leading university administrator, claimed that intellectuals were “the leading class in China,” with special responsibilities towards the masses.

When asked what characteristics the advanced class should have, Fang responded that "Generally speaking, people, who have internalized the elements of civilization and possess knowledge, have hearts which are relatively noble, their mode of thought is invariably scientific and they therefore have a high sense of social responsibility or even self-sacrifice. They also have grievances and may be discontent. Their point of departure is not their personal interest, but social progress.... Intellectuals have inherited the cultural legacy of mankind, and keep on searching for new ideas for scientific and cultural development. They have volunteered to quietly dedicate their lives to China's modernization. Undoubtedly, intellectuals are the most revolutionary component, the backbone and mainstay of China's working class."<sup>7</sup>

As intellectuals, Chinese writers shared a belief in their destiny as the rightful social and moral leaders of the state, and as this role was generally challenged, usurped, undermined or ignored during the twentieth century, their work was shaped by a need to reassert or defend what they regarded as their destined role. Who better, after all, than writers of poetry, fiction and drama to idealise, fictionalise and dramatise themselves?

If reliable information about writers is still relatively sparse, knowledge about their audiences is almost non-existent. Early May Fourth writers had enthusiastic readers from all parts of China, but widespread illiteracy was a fundamental block to truly national or proletarian literature, and audiences for modern literature were thinly spread. From the 1950s until the 1990s and to a large extent even afterwards, cultural bureaucrats decided who should be published and in what quantities, and neither they nor the writers themselves were obliged to consider any audience outside their own immediate circles.

It is probably too late ever to obtain reliable information on actual readerships throughout most of the twentieth century. Small-scale surveys of Chinese literary preferences and readership habits from the 1980s onwards offer valuable insights but provide little that is useful for systematic research.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there is almost no information at all on audiences outside China, although they play a significant role in writers' reputations and even in their lives.<sup>9</sup> It is not reasonable to expect literary scholars to be trained in sociological research, and the lack of systematic and statistically robust surveys of reader response is only one aspect of a general shortage of reliable information about cultural production

and consumption in China. In their continuing absence, it is left to speculation based on observation and anecdote to fill in the gaps. From the perspective of the writers and their producers, the reading audiences are also imaginary entities.

In order to dispel the myth of a unitary audience from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s, this book proposes a notional categorisation of four different kinds of audience. The primary audience were educated youth (EYs), with a sprinkling of their elders in the case of works by older, more powerful, more talented or more controversial authors like Lu Xun, Mao Zedong or Bei Dao. The few reader polls that exist tend to be of this audience.<sup>10</sup> There was in addition a secondary and more powerful audience, consisting of “literary intellectuals”: sometimes called in Chinese “literary circles” or “the literary world”, they are readers with a professional interest such as editors, critics and academics, and, especially after 1942, political and bureaucratic personnel with responsibility for cultural affairs. Most writers kept at least one eye on this audience as they wrote, since it was this audience that decided whether their works would be published, in how many copies, and the extent to which they would be regarded as successful. These two audiences might be lumped together as “the Chinese reading public” or “the Chinese literary public”. The gross number of the literary public could be immense, but it would still be far below the total population of China, since there is no reason to believe that the bulk of the population in the countryside were readers of modern Chinese literature (with the exception of special cases where reading was assigned for specific purposes, such as Mao’s poems). This mass audience in China is a non-audience for the kind of fiction examined in this book.<sup>11</sup>

From the end of the 1970s into the 1990s, there were at least two additional audiences outside China. An increasingly influential readership which included Western sinologists and other academics as well as Overseas Chinese readers can be grouped together for the purpose of this discussion as a third audience. In some cases, this tertiary audience claimed superiority to the primary audience in its understanding of the authors’ meaning. Although their expectations towards their own societies may have been very different, these readers had much in common with Chinese writers as intellectuals and tended to identify closely with them. This tendency became strengthened amongst Western students and scholars of modern Chinese literature as contact between

the two groups became common. The third audience rarely challenged the choices made by the second audience, and in some cases seemed to collaborate with the second audience in keeping alive works which the first audience had long since lost interest in.

All of these readers can be distinguished from a fourth audience in countries outside China: people who read for pleasure, choosing fiction from any age or any country, impelled perhaps by fashion and/or publicity, but with no ulterior motive to shape their responses. The two wings of this audience are the literary critics and scholars who guide public opinion and the buying public, and their responses can be estimated by references in scholarly works and literary reviews and by best-seller lists respectively. In North America, Western Europe and Australasia, following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the opening of China to the rest of the world, the fourth audience was favourably disposed towards modern Chinese literature, but even their apparently bottomless funds of goodwill, as shown for example by reviews of individual works in translation, failed to generate either best-sellers or accepted points of reference in Western literary criticism.<sup>12</sup> Translations from modern Chinese literature still ended up as remainders.

(A striking example was the contrast between the rapturous reception given to Ah Cheng's fiction by the first three audiences (the "Ah Cheng fever" of 1985), and the silence that greeted the publication by a UK commercial press specialising in translated literature of his stories in translation in 1990.<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, Ah Cheng (like Lu Xun) is a hard author to translate, and the "China fever" had cooled off by the time the English translations got into print, but some further explanation seems necessary. Another example is the first collection by the poet Duo Duo in English translation,<sup>14</sup> also published by a UK commercial press; widely publicised at the time, a few weeks after the June Fourth massacre in 1989, it was remaindered within twelve months.)

The expression "modern Chinese literature" as used throughout this book also needs some clarification. This expression refers to written literary texts produced in the twentieth century by writers mainly resident or brought up on the Chinese mainland, writing in Chinese for Chinese audiences, in a recognisably and self-consciously modernising mode. By restricting the term to written literary products I am following the message implicit in the modern Chinese term for literature, *wenxue*, as well as its customary domestic usage. The word *wenxue* can be glossed as "literacy-

learning,” referring to written texts which require learning: a commodity produced and consumed by those who have acquired a written culture by the application of sustained study.<sup>15</sup> Professional writers are known as *wenxuejia*, or “professionals in literacy-learning.”

Literature from Taiwan, Hong Kong or Overseas Chinese communities is not under discussion. Their exclusion is not a comment on the relative value or interest of works produced in these places but is due to the difficulty of making useful generalisations about such very different products. I am not convinced by recent claims that discussions of modern Chinese literature must take into account all literature written in Chinese.<sup>16</sup> In practice, very few scholars have been able to integrate research on mainland and Taiwan literature, and when the two are linked in a single article one of them tends to be the focus and the other the comparator. The lack of literary logic in the argument can be shown by comparison with English-language literatures. The relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland may be likened to that between Scotland and England, but it is perfectly proper to write separately about Scottish and English literature, and “British literature” is a relatively uncommon expression. Again, the geographical and political distance between the mainland and Taiwan is much greater than that between Canada and the United States, but these literatures are also treated differently although they share a common language and political ideology. No-one would want to argue either that there should not be studies which cover “British” or “American” literature or even British *and* American literature: whichever geographical or geopolitical entity is chosen depends on the aims or focus of the researcher.

The term “modern” includes the literary products of the 1980s and early 1990s affected by massive changes to the economic system since the end of the 1970s but normally excludes “contemporary” literature (from the second half of the 1990s into the early twenty-first century), which to a large extent also tells a different story. Generally speaking, periodisation in this book is based on historical chronology, not political or literary markers.

Remarkably often in studies of modern Chinese literature, fiction is confused with the whole body of literature: books or journal articles on “modern Chinese literature” regularly turn out to be on fiction only. The confusion between literature and fiction is understandable: in twentieth-century China, while poetry was initially favoured by writers

and drama was briefly the model for all other genres, the preference of readers at home and abroad has generally been fiction. In one sense, very little of this fiction can be described as imaginative. The dominance of varieties of realism cannot wholly be attributed to the distorting influence of leftist critics and establishment scholars. The qualities in Oscar Wilde's work that Chinese writers in the 1920s and 1930 were unable to relate to (or at least to confess in print to liking) were his dedication to pleasure and sense of fun: the majority of authors are conspicuously lacking in both. Even the neo-sensationalists of the 1930s (rediscovered in the 1990s) and the imitators of "magical realism" in the 1980s and 1990s were still anchored to the actualities of modern Chinese life in their fantasies of sex and violence. In another sense, however, their fictions are imaginary in that they do not constitute sociologically reliable portraits of Chinese life; they do tell us about the writers themselves, their audiences and their producers.

The term "Western" for the critics and scholars discussed below refers to residents of any ethnic origin in the UK and other European countries, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; they do not include critics and scholars based in East Asia. The reason for the exclusion of Japanese and Chinese critics in this context (that is, as a topic under discussion) again does not imply a value judgement on their work but is due to the very different traditions in which they work, so that generalisations about twentieth-century Western critics do not apply to them. In some cases, distinctions are also made between European countries or between the US and the UK: although there are shared European and American traditions in Western sinology, different countries have developed their own perspectives. The term "foreign" unless otherwise specified refers to people and countries outside the Chinese mainland.

Part I of this volume begins with an overview of the role that critics and scholars in Western countries have played in the formation of the modern Chinese literary canon. Written at the beginning of the 1990s, "Modern Chinese Literature and Its Critics" addresses fundamental questions on the nature of teaching and research on modern Chinese literature in the UK and the US over the past half-century. It is shown, for example, that "the West" is not a monolithic structure that can be compared with a monolithic counterpart, China. Other questions still relevant to the twenty-first century include the effects of the Cold War



on the politics of literary studies, censorship and self-censorship, the social and cultural background of modern writers and their audiences, the redefinition of the modern literary canon, applications of Western literary theories to Chinese works, mutual illusions in the relationships between Chinese writers and Western critics, the intervention of Western critics in the careers of Chinese writers, and the effects of a potential Western audience on Chinese literary creativity.

The “obsession with China” which C.T. Hsia famously claimed had impeded the maturity of modern Chinese fiction, is re-defined in “Modern Chinese Literature and Its Critics” as obsession with the fate of Chinese intellectuals, and further identified in “Writing Self: Author/Audience Complicity in Modern Chinese Fiction” as an obsession held by male intellectuals, whose fictional female characters commonly disappear before the end of their narratives, leaving the male characters to close the story. Alongside an analysis of what it means to be a professional writer in twentieth-century China, the concept of a four-tier audience is examined in detail in “Writing Self” in an attempt to fill an evidential space for which documentary proof may never be available. “Writing Self” also takes issue with the application to Chinese fiction of a central tenet in Western criticism, that authors may not be identified with their characters (including narrators and protagonists). Since Chinese authors invite audiences to make the leap from fiction to autobiography, audiences who do so cannot be dismissed as naïve; the naïve readers, on this account, are Western critics who read Chinese works from a Western perspective. The ways in which Chinese authors and critics read an unconventional Western writer are in turn examined in “The Importance of Being Earnest in China: Early Chinese Attitudes towards Oscar Wilde”.

Fictional authors and imaginary audiences are examined in Part II from a gender perspective. In “Self-Narrative as Group Discourse: Female Subjectivity in Wang Anyi’s Fiction,” the central topic has switched to female rather than male subjectivity, although the issues may not correspond to what Western critics would regard as feminist. The self-image of Wang Anyi’s protagonist in the last of her “Romance” trilogy stories, for example, is predominantly as an intellectual: her primary allegiance is to her career, and solidarity with other women is not among her concerns. Western and Chinese reader attitudes towards intellectuals in fiction are compared in this chapter in order to isolate cultural