

The New Realism

Writings from China after
the Cultural Revolution

Edited by Lee Yee



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For information, address: Hippocrene Books, Inc.,
171 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The New realism.

Translations from Chinese works chiefly selected from literary magazines published in China.

Contents: A reflection of reality / Lee Yee — Sons and successors / Ru Zhijuan — Li Shunda builds a house / Gao Xiaosheng — (etc.)

1. Chinese literature—20th century—Translations into English. 2. English literature—Translations from Chinese. 3. Realism in literature. 4. Chinese literature—20th century—History and criticism. I. Yee, Lee.

PL2658.E1N48 1983 895.1'5'08 83-4337

ISBN 0-88254-794-1

ISBN 0-88254-810-7 (pbk.)

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The New Realism

Introduction

A REFLECTION OF REALITY

LEE YEE

An Entirely New View of Chinese Society

In early spring 1979 a body of literature emerged in China which differed radically from that of the past. Creative works, literary criticism and theory reflected unique perceptions, characterizations and purposes. In this very short period in China's history, the genre of New Realism established itself as a viable and profound force in society. New Realism produced literary works which revealed aspects of the reality of the Chinese experience previously suppressed in literature: an economic system at a virtual halt, decreasing productivity in poorly managed factories, extreme poverty for those in the villages, administrative organizations riddled with corruption and materialism and a bureaucracy unresponsive to the needs of its people.

The disclosure of some of the less pleasant aspects of reality is achieved through vivid images and character portraits. The emphasis in this new literature focuses on the frustrations and restraints imposed upon the people by the cadres whose abuse of status and power and prestige releases unrelenting oppression, and by a social system which perpetuates social and economic disparities. The Chinese people depicted in the literature of this period are low spirited, perplexed, and oppressed. Yet, in the midst of difficult and complex situations, the Chinese people are applauded by the writers of this period as being simple, diligent and hard working.

For those living in the People's Republic of China the suffering is not merely literary. It is not simply spiritual. The devastation is

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physical as well. It is easier for us abroad to endure the pain of their experience and to face the injustices and the failures, but to the people of China the reality of failure is manifested in the intolerable conditions that define their lives.

With the fall of The Gang of Four, Communist Party newspapers and magazines began to reveal some of the failures and contradictions within Chinese society. Reactions from leftists abroad were at first skeptical, a refusal to accept the notion that the new society was, in fact, drastically flawed. The writings of New Realism continued, however, and slowly began to have an effect on the deeply-rooted feelings socialists had for the Chinese Communist Party.

To a conscientious writer in China, the need to accurately describe the realities of the Chinese experience is compelled by a sense of mission for the people, and complicated by the knowledge that past literary efforts to reflect the actual state of society were repressed. As a result of the surge of New Realism, many impressive literary works were produced on both the mainland and Taiwan. Since the People's Republic of China has a far greater population, the quantity of literature produced on the mainland during this period exceeds that of Taiwan. Longer novels such as *Red Flag Score* and *Li Zicheng* have been written in the People's Republic. The quality of the literary accomplishments of Taiwan, however, surpasses that of the mainland. The literature of Taiwan clearly and vividly exposes the social contradictions in China and more accurately reflects the extent of their influence upon society.

The Literary Background of New Realism

Prior to 1978 the literature of China revealed and preserved images of a flawless, idealistic society created and nourished by the Cultural Revolution. Conceptions of the party's ideological consistency, vitality and viability were exported abroad through various Chinese news media and literary works. Many aspects of the reality of life in China were not exposed or expressed. Repression and government control dominated literary efforts. Leftist doctrine had cast a shadow over Chinese literature, distorting the images of reality which it delineated. In an article published in the *Shanghai Literary Review*, Liu Binyan stated, "There is this awkward phenomenon: Literature and life are riding on two mutually irrelevant rails. What is written is one thing, actual life is another. They are two totally different worlds. For a long period of time the literary works of China were not accurately reflecting reality,

but were functioning to reinforce the images which top level officials wanted to perpetuate.”

The literary trends in China, like those of other countries, follow a distinct developmental pattern. A literary nadir accompanies periods of great prosperity, while there is a surge when periods of repressive, despotic rule are about to end and the prospects of increased freedom seem more plausible. During the Tang dynasty, poetry flourished under the corrupt government of Emperor Tang Xuan Zhong and waned in the prosperous period of the Zhen-Guang Reform. Tang poetry reached its apex while the country was experiencing social and political deterioration. Similarly, the decline of a powerful family in *Dream of the Red Chamber* symbolized the decline of the Qing Dynasty. After the May Fourth Movement, the dawn of liberalism brought twenty to thirty years of literary prosperity to China.

In 1942 Mao Zedong published his “Talks on Art and Literature.” This statement, long regarded as the classic guideline for literature in China, clearly defines standards and literary imperatives for writers. Literature must emphasize the positive revolutionary character and commitment of workers, peasants and soldiers. Literature must serve the political ends defined by the party.

The Russian proletarian literary model became the standard for Chinese writing, employing the ethic and ideology of socialism to educate the people. Following the so-called “war of liberation” and the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the combined influences of Mao’s literary imperatives, Stalin’s “socialist realism” and the Russian proletarian literary model produced a body of literature in China which was strictly doctrinal. This type of literature evaded contradictory social issues and denied political inconsistencies. Early post-1949 literature presented images of a society of peace, harmony and prosperity.

From 1956-1957, during the period of the Hundred Flowers, a group of writers began to reexamine and subsequently challenge accepted literary doctrine. Writers such as Qin Zhaoyang, Zhou Bo, Zhong Dianfei, Chen Yong and Liu Shaotang viewed literature as a means to reflect the discord and contradictions which existed in the reality which they perceived. Using the pen name “He Zhi,” Qin Zhaoyang wrote an article entitled, “Realism — A Broad Path,” in which he distinctly expressed dissatisfaction with the established Russian literary model.

The literary movement of 1956-1957 marks the birth of the genre of New Realism. In its aversion to affirming the validity of conventional literary doctrine and practice, it produced works

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which differed dramatically from those of the past. Following the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957, these new concepts were repressed. Once again Chinese literature was reduced to a state of social silence.

After the fall of The Gang of Four in 1976, many senior cadres were reinstated to old positions; others were promoted as a result of the deaths of superiors. Almost immediately, a philosophical contradiction became operative within the party because cadres did not simply resume old positions, but old perceptions and behavior as well. Almost as compensation for their own suffering during the period of the Cultural Revolution, many senior cadres now took advantage of the power which their new positions offered.

A creative literature, which sought to accurately reflect reality, again began to emerge. The clichés perpetuated by dogmatism appeared less frequently in literary works.

In November 1977 the publication of Liu Xinwu's short story "The Class Teacher" marked the beginning of the period of the "literature of the wounded." The writing during this period focuses on and graphically depicts the tragedies occasioned by the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath.

During the Third Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in late 1978, the objectives of liberation of thought and promotion of democracy were put forth. As a result, a significant number of literary works seeking to reflect social and political realities emerged from May 1979 through the spring of 1980. This is the period of the New Realism.

The literature of New Realism focused on disclosing a comprehensive image of reality rather than exploring the historical tragedy that had been exposed by the literature of the wounded. Works such as "Manager Qiao Assumes Office," "General, You Must Not Do This!" and "Between Man and Demon" probe the social and political complexities of bribery, selfishness, exercise of personal prerogatives and lavish abuse of power among officials. The indictment in "Manager Qiao Assumes Office," as well as in other literary works of this period, is against the bureaucratic priority of political survival in a system which appears to have forsaken certain moral possibilities and permitted abuse. The literary works of New Realism reveal the existence of a widespread philosophy in which power and profit have become goals, corrupting and distorting the aspirations of the socialist ideal.

This new literary surge created a tremendous controversy in Chinese society. When "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" was published, the *Tianjin Daily News* printed critical reviews denounc-

ing the story for four consecutive days. After the publication of "General, You Must Not Do This!" the poet was continually harassed by officials. "Between Man and Demon" was publically condemned as being a "disgrace to the Communist Party" and an "attack on the Four Items of Persistence!"

After a short period of time, however, editors of Communist Party newspapers and literary magazines became less harsh in their criticism of this new literature. Subsequently, the New Realism enjoyed greater acceptance and wider publication and readership. This in itself served as an incentive for other Chinese writers. "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" received first prize for The Outstanding Short Story of 1979.

In March 1979 Liu Binyan's treatise, "Concerning the Disclosure of Darkness and Reflection of Life," was published in the *Shanghai Literary Review*. Liu Binyan urged literary workers to intervene in China's social and political crises by exposing bureaucratism and self-proclaimed communists — really imposers — who had joined the party, and by defining mistakes made by the proletarians themselves. Two months later, in May 1979, People's Literature Publishing House of Shanghai compiled and published a collection of works written during the Hundred Flowers period (1956-1957). The selections included in this anthology, entitled *Fresh Flowers Blooming Once Again* had previously been condemned as "poisonous weeds." Its publication was a signal that the direction of Chinese literature was indeed changing.

In the September 1979 issue of *Shanghai Literary Review*, an article entitled, "The Important Mission of Socialist Literature: Oppose Bureaucratism," openly challenged the accepted literary model. The article clearly defines bureaucratism as a system of prerogatives, special favors and bribery, and as "a hindrance to the Four Modernizations." The authors, Peng Yunqing and Yang Zhijie, challenge Chinese writers to a new consciousness and sense of purpose: "We, as revolutionary literary workers must never whitewash reality, but bravely fight against bureaucracy with our pens! This is the major mission of Socialist Literature."

Until the latter part of 1979 New Realism as a genre was only hazily defined. The surge of new literary works produced around this time solidified the definition and purpose of literature, reaffirming a philosophical commitment which had begun almost twenty years earlier. The emergence and mission of the new, revolutionary literature had become an undeniable reality and a profound force in China.

At the Fourth Literary Symposium in 1979, Bai Hua, Liu Bin-

yan, Lin Shaotang and other writers implored all of China's literary workers to accept their social responsibilities and political obligations. Writers must expose social contradictions, bureaucratism and political inequity and injustice. These writers stressed the importance of reflecting the voices and conditions of the people through literary works.

New Realism defies the restriction of doctrinal confinement. It is not created to blindly praise the society, but to expose the totality of reality. It does not exist to whitewash and subdue, but to define clearly mistakes and contradictions. New Realism is a profound and insightful literary movement, committed to the resolution of problems through the disclosure of their existence. From this perspective, the contributions of New Realism benefit both party officials as well as the people. Through an accurate reflection of social, political and economic realities, the nation can be led to implement workable solutions to its problems and can ultimately achieve a viable political future. Literary works such as "Manager Qiao Assumes Office," "General, You Must Not Do This!" and "Between Man and Demon" have been instrumental in moving in this direction.

In the Villages and Factories

Prior to the emergence of New Realism, the serious economic and agricultural problems which confronted the people were virtually unexplored. Earlier literary works depict a viable agricultural policy and a government striving to improve the democratic rights of the peasants working within a flawless ideological system. In "A Place Forgotten by Love," Zhang Xian describes the twenty-odd-year process of deterioration in the quality of rural life in China. The disregard for the livelihood and welfare of the people is a theme supported by another major work of this period. In "Li Shunda Builds a House," the struggle for achieving an adequate standard of living is explored. The story follows the progress of a man's effort to save money to move his family in turn from a mat on a boat to a thatched shack, a hog house, and a simple three-room home. Li Shunda eventually saves enough money and buys the materials needed to build his home. Due to The Big Steel and Iron Smelting Movement of 1958, however, these materials are confiscated by the commune to be used for the construction of furnaces and bulldozers.

The story further explores the nature of the suppression of the individual's needs to the arbitrary will of authorities through the description of the situation that the parents of Li Shunda's daugh-

ter-in-law must face. When one official wishes to "rearrange the mountain and the river" to construct a canal, their home and all the others in the way of the future riverbed are destroyed.

In another case presented in this story, a brigade destroys a large number of well built homes, relocating residents to a "New Village" where poorly constructed homes are provided.

The reality of Chinese rural life for the past 20-odd years, as depicted in the New Realism, portrays a leadership which is insensitive to the needs of the people, unconcerned with their personal struggles and aspirations and obsessed with prestige and power. A character in "Li Shunda Builds a House" prophetically proclaims, "Nobody has any regard for the livelihood of the common people!"

Factory life is vividly reflected in "Manager Qiao Assumes Office." The author describes a large electrical machinery plant after the Cultural Revolution. Manager Qiao works diligently to increase productivity in a factory which has become over-staffed and inefficient. His efforts result in the reorganization of personnel, meeting of production deadlines and a savings to the plant of nearly six hundred thousand *yuan*.

The sequel to this theme in "Manager Qiao Assumes Office, Part Two" clearly defines Qiao's struggle with the absolute authority of the bureaucracy, its dictates and its interference with his effective administration. This short story goes beyond the realm of philosophical statement to explore the problems created by lack of competition in industry and China's difficulty in promptly delivering goods for export.

Corruption and the Bureaucracy

A central concern expressed in the works of New Realism is the corruption, degeneration and abuses by what Mao Zedong called "the bureaucratic class." The special privileges and prerogatives exercised by cadres are depicted in the works of this period as oppressive to all aspects of Chinese society. The poem "General, You Must Not Do This!" openly criticises a high level government official who orders the demolition of a kindergarten in order to build an elaborate, modern home valued at several hundred thousand *yuan*. The absolute and unchallenged exercise of personal prerogatives at the financial, spiritual and physical expense of the people is a recurring theme in New Realism. The play "If I Were For Real" provides another example of the exploration of this sense of moral degradation in society.

Abuse of military prestige is revealed in the screenplay "In

The Archives of Society.” In this work a senior military cadre, a member of the Lin Biao clique, rapes and humiliates a young girl, Li Lifang. The drama spans the period from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution to 1971, revealing the ever present and continuing moral degradation which has characterized military control.

The image of personal corruption in the bureaucracy is not all pervasive in recent Chinese literature. Works such as “Middle Age” and “Sons and Successors” portray the cadre protagonists as individuals truly devoted to the proletarian struggle yet hampered by a way of life which has a devastating effect on their ability to make moral choices. Thus, the emphasis in these works shifts from one of individual degradation to an exploration of Chinese society and history which have inhibited the realization of the socialist ideal.

An insightful portrait of philosophical contradictions is skillfully drawn in the character of Qin Bo in “Middle Age.” “An old lady of Marxism-Leninism,” Qin Bo is politically astute and fluent in socialist terminology. As a character, Qin Bo represents the duplicity inherent in the political reality of China. On one hand her allegiance to the party surpasses even her emotional commitments. When her husband is in need of an eye operation, Qin Bo reminds hospital personnel “to be responsible to the Revolution and the party.” Yet Qin Bo is also depicted as frequently using revolutionary rhetoric to exercise her own prerogatives for her personal interest. This profound ideological contradiction is a tragic commentary on social reality in China.

In “Sons and Successors” the contradiction of personal and party interests is vividly portrayed in the relationship between a mid-level cadre and her son: “Children! When did they first appear in our lives? And when was it that they managed to capture the commanding heights of the Revolution?... It’s as if from the very moment they were born they began to occupy a dominant position. I don’t know about other people, but Tian Jing had once said that her only worry was about setting up things for her children...”

Works such as “Sons and Successors” are not quite as shocking in their portrayal of immorality and abuse as is “In The Archives of Society.” This work approaches the character and consequences of a complex bureaucracy on a more sophisticated and philosophical level. Yet in both of these literary approaches the underlying problems, the real conflicts and their political and social consequences, remain vividly unresolved.

Emphasis on the People

Prior to the New Realism, literature existed primarily as a glorification of the character of party member-cadres and soldiers. After the formation of The People's Republic of China, despite Mao Zedong's philosophical emphasis on the heroism of the people, literary works continued to express praise, regard and respect only for party officials. The image of the people and their struggle with moral and philosophical issues was clouded by the image of their absolute dependence upon cadres for leadership and resolution of problems. In literary works in which a civilian was positively portrayed, the aspect of his or her character which was emphasized was the close connection with and dependence upon party officials.

Thus, a positive image of the real commoner in China was repeatedly absent in the literary works of the past. At the expense of the people, party members were virtually deified in literary works which preceded New Realism.

By contrast, the New Realism exposes this false image by focusing attention on the abuses and moral degradation of the "bureaucratic class." When a cadre is depicted as possessing a genuine moral commitment, it is generally juxtaposed to the contradictory realities of his or her position. Qiao Guangpu and Shi Gan in "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" and Shang Qi in "In the Archives of Society" provide explicit examples.

Qiao Guangpu, despite his tough efficient exterior, needed the comfort of his wife during difficult periods. Shang Qi was arrested for investigating and exposing a senior official's crime of rape.

The portrayal of party members as less than infallible human beings immersed in states of moral and philosophical contradiction and confusion is characteristic of the genre of New Realism. China's people have achieved new stature and respect through this form.

Li Shunda in "Li Shunda Builds a House" is ordinary. He is not a party member. He possesses an integrity and moral commitment which clearly overcomes the unjustified oppression which he suffers as a result of the personal prerogatives of party members.

The real heroes of New Realism are the oppressed. True empathy is evoked in the conflicts and moral introspection of such characters. The unique strength, courage and high moral aspirations of China's people are reflected in the New Realism.

A New Social Structure

The obliteration of class differences and the liberation of the people to become “real” and “free” is the professed ideal state of both socialism and communism. The socialist ideal, which was conceived as a means to eliminate differences among people, is presented in the literature of New Realism as a system which has simply created new divisions. The differences between those who once owned productive property and those who did not have been eliminated. The cadre system, however, has created new divisions within society. These divisions are not based upon material attributes, as in the past, but rather upon the distribution of power. Power from the central government to the local districts flows through a complex, bureaucratic organization of cadres. The chasm which this system has created in Chinese society and its impact upon the people is critically explored in the works of New Realism. In “Sons and Successors,” a mother with a revolutionary past expects her son, “to become a dragon” some day. Her son complains, “I can’t go on like this...I can’t become a dragon and I know that I am not made for it either. I am no dragon, nor do I want to be one. I just want to live my own life.” His love for a girl also preoccupied with the more mundane rather than the political aspects of life sharpens his conflicts with his mother, who rebukes the girl as a “vixen.” “What is the point of living in the world,” replies the girl, “if it isn’t for some good food and nice clothing? I have not done anything bad.”

The generation gap in Chinese culture is reflected in the writers themselves as well as in the literature which they have produced. Among middle-aged writers of this period, criticism toward party members and cadres is less harsh than that expressed by younger authors. There is an empathy which apparently emerges from having experienced the political and cultural upheaval which has been responsible for the current malady. Among younger writers, the criticism of the corruption is both severe and unrelenting. To these younger writers, the glorious past of the Communist Party is merely history. Their collective reality is defined by the conditions that characterized the period following the Cultural Revolution, a time in which members of the party’s privileged stratum exercised individual prerogatives to achieve personal power. The working conditions and environment in which these young writers have developed and grown have brought them into close contact with the struggles of the lower strata of society.