

CHINA PERSPECTIVES

# Literature and Literary Theory in Contemporary China

Zhang Jiong



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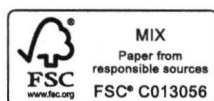
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# Literature and Literary Theory in Contemporary China

Marxism initiated a new era not only for people to fight for socialist future, but also for each discipline of sciences to witness profound changes. In such a context, literature, which has always been closely related to politics, will inevitably move toward a new direction.

This book is composed of two parts. Part 1 studies the development of literary theories in contemporary China from a Marxist perspective. It introduces the basic ideas of Marxist literary theories as well as their spread and development in China, such as the combination of the theories and Chinese revolutionary literature. Moreover, it discusses the challenges facing Marxist literary theories in the 21st century under the background of diversification of literature and art, in terms of theory and practice and high technologies, which brought about electronic writing and digital communication of literary works. Part 2 elucidates the author's insights into major issues concerning literary theories (e.g., the relationship between literature and people, literature and reality, perception and rationality in literary creation, etc.). This book will appeal to scholars and students of literary aesthetics and Chinese literary and cultural studies. People who are interested in history of contemporary Chinese literature will also benefit from this book.

**Zhang Jiong** is the director of the Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and a famous Chinese literary theorist and historian. He has studied Chinese literary theories and history for more than 60 years.

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# Preface

In China, literature theory can trace its history back to the ancient times, to some sections of the ancient book *Shang Shu* (*The Book of History*) and to some of Confucius' teachings. The period from the Wei-Jin Dynasties (220–420) to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589) is recognized as the era of "literary self-consciousness." Classical works of literary theories in this period include the *Dianlun Lunwen* (*Historical Allusions and Essays*) by Cao Pi, *Wen Fu* (*A Poetic Exposition on Literature*) by Lu Chi, *Wen Xin Diao Long* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) by Liu Xie and *Shi Pin* (*Critique of Poetry*) by Zhong Rong. In particular, *Wen Xin Diao Long* presented a systematic exposition of the stylistic features and literary creation thinking, as well as the laws of artistic expression in literary works, and was therefore viewed by subsequent literary theorists as comparable with the *Poetics* by Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, though they discussed different topics. After the Tang and Song dynasties (618–907 and 960–1279), there were fragmented brilliant opinions in notes on poets and poetry and relevant works, as well as in novel comments by Jin Shengtan, but most of them were based on sentimental perceptions rather than on systematic theories. In the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and early Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the system of dramatic theories was established by Li Yu in his *Health Preserving and Cultivating in Feelings Jotted Down Occasionally*. In the late Qing dynasty and early Republic of China (1912–1949) period, new ideas were put forward by Liang Qichao and Wang Guowei in their works of literary theories, most of which were single works instead of systematic monographs.

After the rise of the New Culture Movement (around the time of the May 4th Movement in 1919), the Western thoughts of scientism and humanism came into China in a new formidable manner. Ever since then the May 4th New Culture Movement had pressed forward in China under the banner of "science" and "democracy." In the meantime, Marxism was also introduced into China after the October Revolution of 1917 broke out in Russia. The aforesaid thoughts therefore constituted the ideological and theoretical background for birth and development of Chinese new literature theories. At that time, however, there were more translated and introductory than systematic works in the circles of literary theory and criticism. It was in 1928 that Pan Zinian's *Introduction to Literature* came out. In the transition from literary revolution to revolutionary literature



and during the left-wing literature's debates against its oppositions, many writers had contributed much to the development of new literary theories, including Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Qu Qiubai, Wen Yiduo, Liang Shiqiu, Hu Feng and Zhou Yang, some of whom were oriented to Marxism but some others to scientism and humanism. The *Psychology of Literature and Art* by Zhu Quangqian and *On New Art* by Cai Yi represented new achievements made in systematic theories of literature and art in the 1930s and 1940s, while the *On New Democracy* and *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* by Mao Zedong were far-reaching milestone works summarizing the practice of Marxist literary and art theories in China since the New Culture Movement.

After the founding of new China in 1949, China's literary theories were under the profound influence of the former Soviet Union's theories of literature and art. In the mid-1950s, different textbooks of literary and art theories came off the press one after other, written by scholars such as Huo Songlin, Wu Diaogong and Ran Yuda. Before and after this period, political critiques initiated by the literary circles against studies of *The Story of Stone* and Hu Feng's and so-called rightists' thoughts of literature and art, including those against the abstract *Treatise of Human Nature* and other specific works, had encouraged viewpoints of the leftists and vulgar sociology and also hindered normal development of the literary theories. In response to calls for objective laws of literary theories in early 1960s, the compilation of university textbooks for literary arts was initiated by Zhou Yang, which subsequently led to such new publications as *An Introduction to Literature* under the general editorship of Cai Yi and *The Basic Principles of Literature* under the general editorship of Ye Yiqun. Later, the breakout of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the prevalence of ultra-left thoughts minimized the likeliness to produce theoretical works of academic value.

At the advent of a new period of reform and opening up to the outside world in 1978 and at the call of “emancipating the mind and seeking truth from the facts,” a large number of new works of literary theories were produced by theorists such as Qian Zhongwen, Tong Qingbing, Du Shuying, Dong Xuewen, Lu Guishan, Chen Chuancai, Wang Xiangfeng, Zhu Liyuan, Wang Yuanxiang, Wang Yichuan and Nan Fan. In the new period, there were other publications of new theoretical explorations, including symbolic, subjective and ecological theories of literature and art, theoretical treatises on novel, drama, essay and poetry, as well as new works of literary psychology, literary sociology and literary linguistics. In the new period, many literary theorists were influenced by the Western scientific, neo-humanistic and Marxist theories of literature and art of the 20th century, by the formalist, structuralist, post-structuralist and Freudian theories, by the existentialist theories and by literary theories of René Wellek and Austin Warren, but most of their works alleged regarding Marxist as guideline; those listed into the CPC Central Committee Project for Studies of Marxism and Discipline Construction and the collective monograph – *Theory of Literature* led by Tong Qingbing represented new achievements made during sinicization and modernization of Marxist literature and art theories in this period.

\* \* \*

This book is composed of a series of monographic papers by the author. Rather than a systematically and precisely theoretical work, the book is intended to briefly introduce the development of China's literary theories under the background of the world's literary theory development in the 20th century and to elucidate the author's insight into some major issues concerning literary theories. The author's other book – *Perspective of Literature*, which was published by China Social Sciences Press in 2015 and tended to be more systematic – aims to present the author's general understanding of regular phenomena such as the essence and function, the creation and expression, the dissemination and reception and the history and ecology of literary works.

Nevertheless, this book may help readers better understand the status quo and development of contemporary Chinese literary theories. I would appreciate comments from experts and readers on any inaccuracy or inadequacy in this book.

Zhang Jiong  
August 2016, Beijing

# Acknowledgments

This book is a collection of literary studies funded by the Innovation Program of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). It contains my experience regarding Marxism and literature in contemporary China.

Here I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Yang Limeng and Wu Yisheng, the translators of this book, for their painstaking efforts devoted to the book; I also thank all of the colleagues at China Social Sciences Press for their professional and energetic support.

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Zhang Jiong  
October, 2016

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**Part 1**



# 1 Marxism and trends of literary theories

Marxism initiated a new era for people to fight for socialist future and also ushered in a new era for each discipline of science to witness profound changes as it benefited from dialectical materialism and historical materialism. In such an era and academic context, the literary theory will inevitably move toward a new direction on the global scale.

## (1) Importance of literary theory and its correlation with practice

Any theory is the distillation of practical experience and in turn foreruns and guides of practice. According to Lenin and Mao Zedong, without revolutionary theory there could be no revolutionary movement. In no way can theoretical development be isolated from practice; instead, the motive source of theoretical thinking is often derived from realistic practice. The literary theory is to literary creation what theory is to practice. Writers often say they dislike literary theory and even threaten to defy it; in practice, however, they have to draw upon literary theory more or less through various channels while they are writing and growing up.

Indeed, it is highly likely that neither one of writers has created literary works in accordance with some literary theory. As a sort of creative mental labor, literary creation needs to break conventional rules and seek originality. This is why literary theory usually falls behind literary creation. Nevertheless, at no time can we accordingly conclude the unusefulness of the literary theory, because theory generally reveals the essence and universal law of things while originality invariably represents the particularity in universality. This particularity is inadequate to deny universality; on the contrary, it always contains, embodies and develops universality.

It has been found that the nature and law of literary creation are formed in a long historical course. In the West, the *Poetics* written by Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, is identified as a classical work on literary theory in the ancient times; whereas in China, perhaps only the *Wen Xin Diao Long* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) by Liu Xie (A.D. 465–520), a famous Chinese literary theorist in the Southern and Northern Dynasties period (A.D. 420–589), can be on a par with Aristotle's *Poetics*. In fact, these two great books vary in strong points

and focal points: the *Poetics* addresses different relations and attitudes between literature and reality as well as the aesthetic values by revealing the genre and aesthetic features of Greek epics, tragedies, comedies and other artistic forms, while *Wen Xin Diao Long* highlights the stylistic classification features of Chinese ancient literature and the staged features in the process of literary creation. But there is something in common: both attempt to conduct theoretical discussion and summary from the viewpoint of then literary reality in each respective country. To this day, literary theorists in all ages have made more or less but ongoing contributions to revealing the nature and law of literature in the long history of human recognition. Over the past hundred years, the formalist, structuralist, humanist and Marxist theorists have produced a huge number of theoretical writings to promote the development of literary theory and made noticeable contributions to the modern system of literary theory. These theories of the one hand sublimated scientific development and literary practice of relevant countries in the 20th century, and on the other urged literary development in each country to a certain degree and within a certain scope. As far as Marxist theories of literature are concerned, they played a significant role in promoting and guiding the proletariat socialist literary movements over the past hundred years, and in extensive practice, they proved to be the most dynamic and truthful literary theories containing spirits of scientism and humanism in the contemporary time.

To promote prosperity and development of the socialist literature in China, therefore, we have to attach importance to the literary theory, the general nature and law of literature and especially the special nature and law of socialist literature. Mr. Deng Xiaoping once told us to “respect rules of literary art.” The truth behind these words urges us to lay much stress on learning literary theory and guiding literary movement by means of literary theory knowledge.

## **(2) Main trends of literary theory in the 21st century all over the world**

The world literary theory in the 21st century may roughly have two trends: i.e., scientism and humanism.

In modern times, Western scientism advocated seeking the truth and empirical evidence, thus classifying the research method of natural sciences into social science and humane science. With respect to literary theory, Russian formalism first emerged in this century, headed by Shklovsky and Jakobson, and then emerged Czech and French structuralism headed by Mukarovsky and Levi-Strauss, further followed by “New Criticism” in Europe and America as well as “Literary Semiotics” in the former Soviet Union. All of these literary schools were successively subject to influences from Saussure’s linguistics and Husserl’s phenomenology, as well as Modern System Theory, Modern Information Theory and Modern Control Theory, part of them subject to influence of Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory. The humanistic school inherited the humanistic thoughts during the Renaissance and evolved thereof under new historical conditions. Apart from Freud’s theory that carried humanistic connotation, Sartre’s Existentialism along with Fromm and