



CHINA STUDIES

# A SHORT HISTORY OF MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE

Ting Yi



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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The manuscript of this book was originally used by the author as teaching material in his lectures at many universities in China. In 1954 he was invited to teach at Moscow University. He died there before he had time to revise the manuscript to bring it to final form. As it stands, however, it provides a clear factual analysis of the history of modern Chinese literature. In the present edition for foreign readers, the editor has condensed the original text and added some material on later developments.

This book has been translated from Chinese by Chang Hsing-lien (Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 5), Chang Su-chu (Chapter 4), Chou Chia-tsan (Chapter 6), Wang Cheng-chung (Chapters 7, 8 and 9), Liang Liang-hsing (Chapter 10) and Fang Chen-ya (Chapters 11 and 12).

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# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE

THE MAY 4 MOVEMENT AND THE RISE AND GROWTH OF THE MODERN LITERARY REVOLUTION IN CHINA. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF LU HSUN	1
Section 1. The May 4 Movement and the Spread of Communist Ideas as the Causes for the Modern Literary Revolution in China	1
Section 2. The Rise of the Literary Revolution and Its Theoretical Foundation	6
Section 3. The Development of the Theories of the Literary Revolution	11
Section 4. The Struggle of the Literary Revolutionary Camp Headed by Lu Hsun Against Feudal and Right- Wing Bourgeois Literature	19

## CHAPTER TWO

THE LEFT-WING LITERARY MOVEMENT—ACTIVITIES OF THE CHINA LEAGUE OF LEFT-WING WRITERS LED BY LU HSUN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AND STRUGGLES AROUND THE THEORIES ON REVOLU- TIONARY LITERATURE	22
Section 1. The First Revolutionary Civil War and the Formation of a New Front in the Literary Movement	22
Section 2. The Establishment of the China League of Left-Wing Writers and Its Struggle Against Reaction- ary Politics	24
Section 3. The Contributions of Lu Hsun and Chu Chiu- pai	33

Section 4. The Art and Literary Movement in the Soviet Areas	44
Section 5. The Struggles of the Camp of Revolutionary Literature Led by Lu Hsun Against the Reactionary Literary Trends	49
 <b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
THE LEFT-WING LITERARY MOVEMENT ( <i>Continued</i> )— THE ANTI-JAPANESE NATIONAL UNITED FRONT OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AND STRUGGLES AROUND THE THEORIES ON RESIST- ANCE LITERATURE	59
Section 1. The Formation of the Anti-Japanese United Front of Writers and Artists	59
Section 2. The Outbreak of the War of Resistance and Literature in the Service of the Resistance Movement	63
Section 3. Discussions on the Question of Resistance Literature in the Kuomintang-Controlled Areas	70
 <b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
CHINESE LITERATURE IN THE SERVICE OF THE WORK- ERS, PEASANTS AND SOLDIERS—THE PUBLICATION OF MAO TSE-TUNG'S TALKS AT THE YENAN FORUM ON ART AND LITERATURE	77
Section 1. The Publication of the <i>Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Art and Literature</i>	77
Section 2. <i>Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Art and Litera- ture</i> —Its Contents and Historic Significance	80
 <b>CHAPTER FIVE</b>	
LU HSUN, STANDARD-BEARER OF THE CHINESE PEO- PLE'S NEW CULTURE AND COMMUNIST THINKER	104
Section 1. His Life and Ideological Development	104
Section 2. Lu Hsun's Works of Fiction—from Thorough, Critical Realism to Socialist Realism	113

## CHAPTER SIX

### LU HSUN, STANDARD-BEARER OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S NEW CULTURE AND COMMUNIST THINKER

(Continued) 120

- Section 1. Lu Hsun's Essays — Socialist in Content and National in Form 120
- Section 2. Lu Hsun's Earlier Essays 125
- Section 3. Essays of the Later Period 131

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### KUO MO-JO AND OTHER WRITERS BEFORE AND AFTER THE MAY 4 MOVEMENT

144

- Section 1. Kuo Mo-jo's Literary Works 144
- Section 2. Novelists of the Late May 4 Period 151
- Section 3. Realism in Poetry and Drama Before and After the May 4 Movement 158

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### REVOLUTIONARY WRITERS, PROGRESSIVE WRITERS, AND LITERARY SCHOOLS OF THE DECLINING BOURGEOISIE

163

- Section 1. Revolutionary Writers 163
- Section 2. Progressive Writers 171
- Section 3. Literary Schools of the Declining Bourgeoisie 184

## CHAPTER NINE

### MAO TUN AND THE REVOLUTIONARY WRITERS OF THE PERIOD OF THE LEAGUE OF LEFT-WING WRITERS

189

- Section 1. Mao Tun and His Literary Works 189
- Section 2. Various Sides of Social Life Reflected in the Novel 197
- Section 3. Revolutionary Poetry and Drama Movements During the Period of the League of Left-Wing Writers 205
- Section 4. The Rise of Reportage and Attempts at Producing Popular Literature 210



<i>CHAPTER TEN</i>	
LITERARY WORKS ON THE WAR OF RESISTANCE	217
Section 1. Reportage, "Street Poetry," "Street Plays" and Popular Literary Works	217
Section 2. Literary Works on the Early Period of the War of Resistance	223
Section 3. Literary Works Exposing the Kuomintang in the Later Period of the War and After V-J Day	232
Section 4. Literary Activities in the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia Border Region and the Anti-Japanese Bases in the Enemy's Rear	242
 <i>CHAPTER ELEVEN</i>	
LITERATURE IN THE LIBERATED AREAS ON THE PATH OF SOCIALIST REALISM	251
Section 1. Works Mirroring Mass Struggles and Productive Activities	251
Section 2. The Literary Activities Among the Workers, Peasants and Soldiers; the Reform of the Folk Arts	272
 <i>CHAPTER TWELVE</i>	
THE VICTORY OF MAO TSE-TUNG'S PRINCIPLES ON ART AND LITERATURE	283
Section 1. The Victory of the Chinese People's Revolution and the Convocation of the All-China Congress of Writers and Artists	283
Section 2. The Realization of Mao Tse-tung's Principles on Art and Literature	285
 INDEX	 289

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE MAY 4 MOVEMENT AND THE RISE AND GROWTH OF THE MODERN LITERARY REVOLUTION IN CHINA. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF LU HSUN

### Section 1. The May 4 Movement and the Spread of Communist Ideas as the Causes for the Modern Literary Revolution in China

During World War I, when the European imperialist powers were occupied with war and temporarily relaxed their aggressive activities in China, Chinese national capitalism, weak though it was, enjoyed a period of expansion. While its development was limited in scope, being still dependent upon imperialism, the Chinese working class grew rapidly. Industrial workers were then estimated to be around three million. In 1917 the October Socialist Revolution in Russia won its momentous victory. The Soviet Government set up by the proletariat and supported by all the working people proclaimed the abrogation of all unequal treaties concluded by tsarist Russia with China and renounced all privileges without compensation. These friendly measures deeply moved the Chinese working people and progressive intellectuals and stimulated the confidence and militancy of the

Chinese proletariat. Subsequently, Marxism-Leninism was introduced into China and well received by a great number of progressive intellectuals. The confluence of all these streams gradually formed a mighty current.

In April 1919, when the news reached China that at the Paris Peace Conference the capitalist powers had recognized Japan's right to succeed to the former German privileges in Shantung, a great patriotic movement against imperialism broke out. This was the May 4 Movement. It gathered way, and by the time of the June 3 Movement,<sup>1</sup> when the proletariat joined in, it had become a nation-wide anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolutionary movement. Thereafter, the Chinese revolutionary movement became a new-democratic revolution and part of the world proletarian socialist revolution.

In his *On New Democracy*, Mao Tse-tung drew a scientific summary of the conditions in the Chinese cultural circles prior to May 4, 1919. He wrote:

The studies in the modern school or new learning or Western learning of that time consisted basically (we say basically, because they still retained some poisonous vestiges of Chinese feudalism) in the natural sciences and the bourgeois social and political theories,

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<sup>1</sup> This marked a new stage in the patriotic movement launched on May 4, 1919. On June 3, students in Peking held public meetings and made speeches in defiance of persecution and repression by the army and police. Following the lead of the students, the workers and business men in Shanghai, Nanking, Tientsin, Hangchow, Wuhan, Kiukiang and in the provinces of Shantung and Anhwei went on strike. In this manner the May 4 Movement developed into a broad mass movement with the participation of the proletariat, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie.

all of which are needed by the representatives of the bourgeoisie. At that time the ideology of the new learning played the revolutionary role of fighting the Chinese feudal ideology, and was in the service of the bourgeois-democratic revolution of the old period. However, as a result of the flabbiness of the Chinese bourgeoisie and the advent of the era of imperialism in the world, such bourgeois ideology was defeated in only a few rounds by the reactionary alliance of the slave ideology of foreign imperialism and the Chinese feudal ideology of going back to the ancients; as soon as this reactionary ideological alliance started a small counter-offensive the new learning folded up its banners, muffled its drums and beat a retreat, losing its soul and retaining only its carcass. The old bourgeois-democratic culture had decayed and become enervated in the era of imperialism: its failure was inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

The period of the May 4 Movement brought entirely different conditions. A brand-new cultural force then appeared in China. The communist ideas guided by the Chinese Communists — based on the communist world outlook and communist theory of social revolution — began to spread.

Back in 1917 there appeared in the *New Youth* magazine (Vol. II, No. 5, Readers' Column), an influential progressive magazine, published a letter advocating socialism, evidencing the effectiveness of the preliminary dissemination of socialist ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1954, Vol. III, p. 143.

The strong and widespread influence of these ideas can be attributed to the efforts of Li Ta-chao,<sup>1</sup> a communist intellectual and outstanding thinker of that time.

In an article entitled "Youth," published in *New Youth* in 1916, Li Ta-chao called upon the young people to "break the meshes of past history, destroy the prison of old ideas."<sup>2</sup>

With the victory of the October Socialist Revolution in Russia in 1917, Marxism was introduced into China. In November 1918 Li Ta-chao wrote two articles, "The Victory of the Common People" and "The Victory of Bolshevism" (*New Youth*, Vol. V, No. 5). In the first, he pointed to two results of World War I. Politically, he said, it had resulted in a victory of democracy over autocracy and, socially, in a victory of labour over capital. He concluded by saying: "The Russian revolution of 1917 is the harbinger of the world revolution of the twentieth century," and "the world of the future will be the world of the working people." In the second, he made even more profound remarks: "This is a victory for socialism, for Bolshevism, for the Red Flag, for the world's working class, for the new current of the twentieth century!"

After the May 4 Movement, the Chinese proletariat gathered strength and its political consciousness grew. The movement itself helped to spread Marxism-Leninism, a source of great enlightenment. Publications

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<sup>1</sup> Li Ta-chao (1888-1927) from Loting, Hopei Province, was the earliest popularizer of Marxism-Leninism in China and one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. He was killed by warlords on April 28, 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Li Ta-chao, "Spring," *Chinese Literature*, No. 5, 1959, p. 17.

mushroomed: *New Youth* edited by Li Ta-chao and Chen Tu-hsiu,<sup>1</sup> *Hsiangchiang Review* edited by Mao Tse-tung, and other periodicals such as *Weekly Review* and *Chekiang Tide* — all propagating the science of socialism. In 1919, *New Youth* published a special number on the study of Marxism. Subsequently the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Marx and Engels was translated into Chinese; its publication exerted a great influence on Chinese thought.

In his *On New Democracy*, Mao Tse-tung said:

The May 4 Movement was in the beginning a revolutionary movement of the united front of three sections of people — the communist intelligentsia, the revolutionary petty-bourgeois intelligentsia and the bourgeois intelligentsia (the last forming the right wing of the movement at that time).<sup>2</sup>

Communist ideas in fact formed the main stream of thought among the cultural circles and serious thinkers of the day. Allying with and influenced by this main stream were some ideas representing the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie.

*Editor's note:*

After the May 4 Movement, particularly after 1921, some of the bourgeois deserted the movement and went over to the reactionary

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Tu-hsiu (1879-1942) from Huaining, Anhwei Province, was a professor in Peking University and the editor of *New Youth* at the time of the May 4 Movement. He was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. But later he lost his faith in the future of the revolution and took a liquidationist stand. He was expelled from the Party in 1929.

<sup>2</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

side; among them Hu Shih was the most conspicuous example. This marked the beginning of the struggle between two diametrically opposed roads in art and literature. It is out of the constant struggle between the proletarian and bourgeois outlooks in art and literature that socialist literature emerged. In China, however, the struggle was marked by a special feature. The Chinese bourgeoisie was weak in its social base and the bourgeois literati were in no position to wage battle against proletarian literature as their European and American counterparts had done. They did make some attempts. First there were Hu Shih and his followers, then the Modern Review clique with Chen Hsi-ying as leader, later the Crescent clique, the "third category,"<sup>1</sup> the "nationalist"<sup>2</sup> literary school, and so on. They openly raised their banner against communism and against the people. But they were never able to muster enough forces and were beaten after a few rounds. On this subject more will be said later.

## Section 2. The Rise of the Literary Revolution and Its Theoretical Foundation

### (1) What Did the Literary Revolution Sponsor?

The May 4 Movement and the spread of communist ideas were the two basic causes for the rise of the revolutionary movement in modern Chinese literature. On account of these causes, the role this literary movement was destined to play, as soon as it rose, was anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. As to its class foundation,

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<sup>1</sup> This was the name by which a handful of reactionary writers like Su Wen styled themselves. They claimed that they belonged neither to the proletariat nor the bourgeoisie, and were above classes and politics.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 52.

it was a united front led by the proletariat. It came in answer to the demands of the people.

As a new form had to be used to suit the new content, the literary revolution began by sponsoring the vernacular style of writing. It would be a serious mistake, however, to regard the literary revolution simply as a movement for the vernacular style of writing. This was merely the form decided by the basic content of the literature. Nevertheless, there were other reasons for advocating the use of the vernacular at that time.

There was the question of historical tradition. In China's feudal society culture had long been the exclusive privilege of the ruling class. The ordinary people, under oppression, developed a rich culture of their own—a literature that passed from mouth to mouth, folk arts and a large number of stories, novels and plays in the vernacular from the Tang and Sung dynasties down. The ruling class despised these works and even attempted to suppress them. But as the people liked them, they became popular and were widely circulated. The adoption of the vernacular style of writing in the literary revolution was, therefore, based on historical tradition and it had a mass foundation.

In the circumstances of the new-democratic revolution, Lu Hsun, Chen Tu-hsiu, Chien Hsuan-tung,<sup>1</sup> Hu Shih and others wrote articles in *New Youth* on the literary revolution. The new literary works produced by Lu Hsun, the most outstanding among them, bore the clear imprint of the impact of this literary renaissance. As these men expressed the pressing demands of the bulk

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<sup>1</sup> Chien Hsuan-tung (1887-1938) from Wuhsing, Chekiang Province, was a phonologist.



of the intellectuals, the reactions from all quarters were tremendous. When the editorial board of *New Youth* was reorganized in January 1918, the magazine became the first to use the vernacular throughout its issues. Soon afterwards appeared *Weekly Review*, edited by Li Ta-chao, and *New Tide*, edited by students of Peking University. The literary revolution was in full swing.

## (2) Lu Hsun's Contributions to the Theories of the Literary Revolution

From the outset of the literary revolution, Lu Hsun began to lay a sound foundation in literary theories and the practice of writing. Under the influence of communist ideas he had clearly seen that literature must be subordinate to revolutionary politics and must play an active role in the struggle against feudalism. A profound understanding of the role of literature was not Lu Hsun's only attribute. More important was his ability to apply his theories to his writing. His short story "A Madman's Diary"<sup>1</sup> published in *New Youth* in May 1918 was a militant declaration against the feudal system. It was also the first work of fiction in modern Chinese literature.

With the unfolding of the literary revolution a number of China's old realistic novels came under discussion. *Water Margin*,<sup>2</sup> *The Dream of the Red Chamber*,<sup>3</sup> *Chin*

<sup>1</sup> This is included in *Selected Works of Lu Hsun*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1956, Vol. I.

<sup>2</sup> A well-known novel about a peasant war in the Sung dynasty, said to have been written by Shih Nai-an in the 14th century.

<sup>3</sup> A long realistic novel of the Ching dynasty, written by Tsao Hsueh-chin (1715?-1763).