

LITERARY TEXT AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Dongning Feng

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PREFACE

Dongning Feng's study of politics and literature in post-Maoist China is groundbreaking. The study of politics through imaginative literature has not been a key aspect of many Politics programmes in academic institutions anywhere. Politics and Literature and Politics and the Arts groups have been formed and have organised panels at the (UK) Political Studies Association, the American Political Science Association, the World Congress of the International Political Science Association and the European Consortium for Political Research. The case for studying politics through the medium of imaginative literature has been well made in such fora.

Students of politics may study literature as process of the economic forces that shape its production and the cultural forces that shape its style; as illustration of certain political conditions or dilemmas; as moral education of how to lead the good life; as an account of historical processes, institutions or events and lastly as political theory. Dongning Feng's study is concerned with each of these, though the emphasis is on culture and philosophy.

But this "literature project" is a risky business. After all, W.H. Auden once wrote: "in grasping the character of a society, as in judging the character of an individual, no documents, statistics, 'objective' measurements can ever compete with the single intuitive glance". That single intuitive glance is thought by some to strike at the fundament of political science, and political scientists react, according to Richard Hoggart, like the early natural scientists: they fear a relapse into alchemy. Yet it is undeniable that the

development of natural science generally owed as much to intuition as measurement. Indeed there is much to be said for the intuitive glance.

If we can take it as established that imaginative literature has much to offer the students of politics, it is very helpful to get a handle on the nature of literary explication. We should note that imaginative writing does not seem to be primarily concerned with the transmission of information so much as with the sharing of an experience and to do this successfully that experience has to be sustained within a shared *aesthetic* experience. It is primarily for this reason that imaginative literature is able to convey through graphic illustrations some aspect of a general truth that is not capable otherwise of being stated explicitly. And of course this capacity is doubly important in society like post-Maoist China where "truth" may not be stated explicitly at all!

In questioning the nature of truth philosophers like Rorty and Foucault have cast doubt on the supremacy of reasoning, and by extension philosophy itself. This has done much to establish the credentials of imaginative literature as a mode of explanation. For Rorty when the great figures of the Romantic movement had argued that imagination and not reason was the central human faculty they were telling us that the catalyst for social change was not so much being able to argue well as to see things differently. Foucault's vision of all discourse as a network of power relations also undermines the notion of truth as something to be discovered and explained by the application of reason. For him there was no neutral and superior form of truth. This opened the way for imaginative literature to claim a "truth" as valid (or invalid) as any other. (Indeed, in Nietzsche colourful phrase, truth is nothing more than a "mobile army of metaphors".)

So philosophy is dethroned and the poet-exile returns. Let us be

clear: Rorty's point is not so much that literature is suddenly discovered as a source of truth but that philosophy and other forms of discourse are exposed as just as imprecise and capricious as literature was traditionally thought to be. However Rorty does make it clear that imaginative literature might nevertheless provide a superior form of explanation if only through its wit and imagination. This is the force of that army of metaphors.

If all this can be said about literature, surely it can also be said about film. Eisenstein's *Potemkin* showed conclusively that film could be used as a powerful form of narrative. There is a focused directness and immediacy about visual media and they have a potentially huge audience. Arguably no book written in or since the 1960s in the United Kingdom, for example, has had an equal impact upon the British public as the television documentary film on homelessness *Cathy Come Home*, which was shown on television in 1966. It stunned the public and undermined the government, who immediately began to look for Communist infiltrators in the BBC. Whoever wishes to study politics through literature in these modern times cannot afford to miss film. And Dongning Feng's study does not miss film!

The study itself is drawn from a doctoral thesis written at the University of Stirling in 1997 and the author embeds it in a general theoretical introduction, which provides the base for the detailed analysis of works of literature and film. Dongning Feng examines the historical function of literature in China and the place in society of Chinese writers. He then goes on to discuss literary works – prose and drama and finally films in the post-Mao period and to show how they provided a discourse that would otherwise simply have been unavailable. Dongning Feng's purpose is to show how literature in China involved itself in the process of political

reform. It did this by engaging the reader and audience in an analytical investigation into the nature of power and the ways in which that power might develop. Dongning Feng considers literature as a social process, as illustration, as a form of moral and political education, as a factor in historical development and finally as political theory. As such this book constitutes one of the most complete and detailed studies of the relationship between politics and literature. It helps to show how literature can affect politics by its power, wit and imagination – by its intuitive glances.

Stephen Ingle, University of Stirling 2001

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Notes

Transliteration of Chinese names into English strictly follows the *pinyin* system, the official romanised Chinese pronunciation alphabet, which is widely used in all modern authoritative Chinese encyclopaedias or dictionaries. Thus in accordance, the names which appeared in other systems in cited materials are standardised into *pinyin* in order to avoid confusion.

Titles of publications either retain the original English translation, or are translated into English, and thus used in the book proper for the sake of consistency and ease of reading. The original Chinese titles are given in square brackets in the Bibliography. In most cases the titles of Chinese sources are translated into English by myself. In places where there is an English version of the title already available, the original title is either maintained, or retranslated without further acknowledgement.

The order of the Chinese naming system is also retained in the book proper, that is, the surname comes first and the given name afterwards.

INTRODUCTION

Why Politics and Literature

A literature review finds that books on contemporary Chinese politics are surprisingly few given an ever-increasing interest in China by academia, students of Chinese studies and general public world-wide. Moreover, most of the books on China and Chinese politics are dated and disappointingly lacking in depth of analysis. They tend to be overly descriptive and structural in the way in which they present contemporary China to their readers. Many of them rely on the published documents and newspaper reports that are few in number and sketchy in terms of background knowledge, not to mention the complicated social, cultural and historical environments in which Chinese politics has rooted and developed. These books either tend to adopt a methodology of structural-functionalism in their analysis, or are deeply entrenched in a western political rhetoric disregarding thousands of years Chinese history and its unique social and cultural make-up. These approaches dismiss either a comparative, developmental perspective or one of distinctly Chinese political behaviour and mentality with necessary references to its society, culture and tradition, and to some extent, its language.¹ Thus, what such approaches present is very much like, as the technical term suggests, the skeleton of Chinese politics, not a living organic entity with its distinctive characteristics. They somehow fail to explain many events and developments in Chinese politics.

C. T. Hsia, in the early 1970s, was able to observe a missing dimen-

sion in studies of Chinese politics. He pointed out that "social scientists, in their investigations of modern Chinese history and culture, have by and large failed to make use of the literary record, even though they cannot be unaware of its profound influence on modern Chinese thought and politics". (Hsia, 1971: ix) More recently, a few social scientists have made some attempts to make use of Chinese literature to assist their academic studies. However, they tend to look at Chinese literature predominantly in terms of its content.² This approach ignores the aesthetic dimension of literature and thus impedes a holistic vision of Chinese literature, which, like any other literature, is both form and content and thus deserves to be treated as such. Failure to do so will prevent a full and all-round understanding of Chinese literature and society, and will certainly fall short in mapping out the relationship of politics and literature and the position of literature in political studies and the meaning of literature in society at large. Admittedly, Chinese literature has performed a unique function in recent developments in Chinese politics, culture and society. Its impact on Chinese society and its interaction with politics cannot be fully evaluated without a holistic approach in the analysis.

Primarily, Chinese literature *can* be a significant source for understanding contemporary Chinese politics and society. It provides such a realm where all social, cultural and historical parameters appear to various degrees in a highly personified *de facto* manner. It thus carries very useful knowledge and information which is a rich source of studies of Chinese politics. To use Hoggart's words, "without the literary witness the student of society will be blind to the fullness of a society's life." (Hoggart, 1970b: 20) Moreover, in the case of China (as in many other nations) the interaction of literature with politics has been so self-evident that to separate the two fields of studies would certainly result in a great loss to

both subjects, and hence inhibit a full understanding of either politics or literature.

Besides being a source and a reservoir of many social and political ideas, literature also functions as political commentary as well as judgement of politics. Thus to relate politics with literature not only results in a better understanding of politics, but also does justice to literary studies. The methodology of relating literature with political studies has long been dismissed by political scientists because it is very often labelled as "non-factual" and "unscientific." Nevertheless, recent research shows that literature, as a form of persuasion and transmitting ideas, values and cultural assets, plays an essential and very important part in real politics and society.³ It is thus instrumental to place literature within the academic boundary of political studies.⁴ This approach renders much more meaning and insight especially in the study of Chinese politics and literature.

This book is, therefore, an endeavour to offer an alternative to existing methods and perspectives in order to broaden one's understanding of contemporary Chinese politics, especially of modern Chinese political thought and the function of Chinese literature in the transformation of Chinese society. It is intended to be an empirical inquiry of contemporary Chinese literature in relation to politics. With contextualised characteristic and distinctive social, cultural and political aspects of realities, literature undoubtedly offers a rich source of materials as well as a background against which politics can be studied in a more holistic manner. Political trends and issues are portrayed in a realistic or dramatic language and discourse that is to be understood only by the reader's reference to the real world. Moreover, as will be discussed in later chapters, literature itself is a domain where original political ideas and thought are formed and developed. In this way, literature contributes substantially to politics and the

political process. Especially in the post-Mao era, literature presents itself as a dimension of contemporary Chinese politics and interacts and influences society and politics in a way that not only gives history a push, but is part of social and political development. Contemporary Chinese literature in the period concerned can be said to have created an irrevocable trend in Chinese history since the May Fourth Movement.⁵

Even in the West, the study of the relationship between politics and literature has by no means been as sufficiently explored as the subject deserves,⁶ probably because, as Lucas in his pioneering book, *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century* notes,

The subject is a daunting one, the relation between the two so problematic, elusive, uncertain. Yet it is these difficulties which make the subject fascinating and deserving attention. (Lucas, 1971: 1)

As far as China is concerned, the relationship is even more problematic, complex, and sometimes muddled. Literature in China has never been clearly separated from politics, if it can be at all. In the past, Chinese literature was commonly regarded as a moral crusade. In more recent years it has been invariably criticised and assessed against social and political criteria as well as so-called "social consequences". Notwithstanding, the subject has barely been approached in real academic terms. There has yet to be a single book on the study of the relationship of Chinese politics and literature – an omission of a most intriguing and rewarding area of academic studies which offers insight into both fields.

The area of the interaction between politics and literature is a vast and complex one which causes all sorts of problems, for instance, theoretical and conceptual problems. The first difficulty to confront is the distinction of "social literature" and "political literature". Some critics try

to distinguish "social literature" from "political literature" on the presumption that "social literature" only deals with sociological relations between persons, and a group or groups of people, or between groups in matters such as family life, daily social life and so forth. But in a world like ours, all these relations seem to be dominated by politics and political implications. Behind every social issue there is a deeper political concern and vision. Some seemingly "social literature" can only be properly understood with political references and is ultimately preoccupied with political concerns, not to mention the fact that "social literature", when appropriated by the reader, is more often than not able to lead him in a political way and to influence politics. This is especially true in the Chinese context, where writers have been conditioned to be socially and politically committed.

In view of the above point, this study does not intend to draw a clear line to separate the two categories. Rather, it intentionally blurs the division, focusing on the *meaning* of literature as a whole and its meaning in relation to politics, together with its aesthetic dimensions and its social and political implications in society. By doing so, it is hoped to gain as a better understanding of Chinese politics as well as a better understanding of Chinese contemporary literature and the function it has performed in society in terms of shaping and contributing to the on-going social and political developments in China.

The influence of literature on political personalities, events and developments or on the shaping of human values and ideology has been too obvious for political scientists and politicians to disregard, but its data are difficult to acquire and problematical to apply and interpret "scientifically". Finally there still remains the question of the reliability of the data if they are collectable at all. In view of the complexity and difficulty of

conducting research of this nature, it is essential to establish some theoretical and conceptual framework based on the studies and research in the field to date. However, this study aims to present a text-based argument which is intended to be primarily an empirical study and does not rely on one established model or data analysis, though some statistics may be applied to throw light on the argument pursued where appropriate. In this respect, this study acknowledges that China's present situation resists many of the paradigms developed in cultural studies and political theoretical discourses. This study is therefore intended to concentrate partly on relevant and useful theoretical findings and scholarly premises collected from a wide interdisciplinary reading and to refer these theoretical bases to the Chinese context, thus to further illuminate the subject concerned. Therefore, literature is not only examined in terms of its content, but as both content and form, one inseparable from the other. Literature as a whole inter-relates with politics, reacts upon it, and shapes its development.

Unlike politics, which can be described in the most general terms but has a distinctive academic boundary of its own, literature seems altogether to defy definition. In his recent work, Terry Eagleton makes another endeavour to tackle the seemingly simple but intangible question, "What is literature?" only to give up the original attempt to define the intrinsic qualities that comprise "literariness". He concludes that literature is not an "object", certainly not an unchanging canon, but a reflection of how we read and value texts. (Eagleton, 1994: 1-17) This explains why most, if not all, multiplications of approaches to the study of literature leave the impression that students of literature have no body of methodical knowledge formally constituting a discipline of their own. It is also this quality of literature that interacts upon society and politics and contributes to political progress, but in a way that can only be achieved