21ST CENTURY CHINESE LITERATURE

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21st Century Chinese Literature — Chinese Literature to the West

By Li Jingze

Many foreign media outlets have expressed the hope to see works from the younger generation of Chinese writers.

I think this is because foreign readers wish to understand China through literature. They believe that through these young writers' works they can get to know firsthand what is happening in China. By the way, this is also a wish of Chinese readers, who are also confused and curious about everything around us and hope that our literature can express our complex experience, and multifarious and changing cultural sector and moral situation. In this regard, young Chinese writers are particularly sensitive and imaginative, and have a strong desire for and are bolder in expressing their feelings.

Who are the writers among this young generation in China? How old are they? Are their works different from those of the older generation in theme, style of writing and language?

We usually classify writers into different generations by their date of birth. A dozen years ago, when you heard people mention a '70s writer, it meant he was born in the 1970s, a writer of the youngest generation at that time; but this would sometimes lead to disappointment in a writer who was born in 1969 and was so close to the '70s generation. Time flies, and there emerged a younger and more prominent generation – that of the '80s. People joked that there

would be '90s writers, and actually there are now.

Of course, this way of classification is ridiculous and goosey, because it assumes that a group of people shares similarities just because they were born in the same decade and write. But this goosey approach is popular because it gives expression to people's serious and widespread anxiety: In China, people are experiencing drastic changes in society and daily life, and our experience is rapidly depreciated. We are keenly aware of a crisis in self-knowledge and identity; thus we are eager to establish our own characters and to prove our control of life in this changeable world as an initiative force, even as part of an initiative group. Young people believe they lead the trend of the times. With the aid of the media, the Internet and pop culture, their symbolic production and propagation are faster and more effective than previous generations experienced, proving their absorption of up-to-date experience and mastery of a collective cultural power superior to that of their seniors. Of course, this might just be an illusion; China, just the same as other countries, is still a society dominated by seniors. Moreover, the force for reviving traditions is gaining new momentum from amidst this anxiety for identity.

Therefore, every generation of Chinese writers is delighted to claim they are completely different from the previous generation. Of course, in addition to rapidly fading experience and other apparent differences, it is necessary for them to prove that they can offer some more lasting things. Over the past century, modern Chinese literature has formed a pedigree of traditions from which writers start creation and respond to traditions — and one way of such a response is to assert their differences.

For both foreigners and Chinese, contemporary Chinese literature is usually classified into the '80s avant-garde literature and '90s nonfiction literature. What about the 21st century? Is it necessary to classify literature by each decade? Did literature change with drastic changes in every decade since the reform and opening-up policies were adopted some 30 years ago?

I think this is similar to the '70s and '80s. We must be very careful when attempting to judge and summarize the literature of an era with a name, because it will possibly conceal the richness of the writing and fail to advance our knowledge other than by making us believe that the truth is in our hands. Over the past three decades, drastic changes have taken place in China, and Chinese literature has been responding to such changes. But literature develops by its own logic and at its own pace, rather than passively responding to outside changes.

In general, in the 1980s Chinese literature was about enlightenment, avant-garde attitudes and "root-seeking"; in the 1990s, it turned to discover and express the human body, desire, daily life and social circumstances in the midst of the general adoption of market principles, showing an impulse to discover and to expand. In 1977, when Chinese writing was renewed, the writers did not have their own language or topics. In the following 30-plus years, they simply repeated what had been done by their predecessors in the first half of the 20th century and by their Western counterparts over the past two centuries: They freed people from ideological imprisonment, carried out large-scale exploration, expanded their understanding and imagination concerning people, and tried to find some form

and language to express our experience and circumstances. So, during those years we were hurrying on our journey, accompanied by frequent changes; and being in a hurry we could not do our best. In this sense, Chinese literature may need more composure. Now, some theoreticians have proposed a new concept of "new century literature," believing that Chinese literature has gone through great changes since the advent of the 21st century. But I think the real changes took place in the period 1989-1999, when we could strongly feel the emergence of the Internet, consumption, globalization, mass media and pop culture. In a short period of time writers found themselves in a new environment of language, communication and culture, and their traditional, intellectual "belles-lettres" faced severe challenges. Now, to a certain extent, Chinese literature has become part of the country's consumer culture.

Chinese literary works have various themes, mostly in a rural context. Someone has even said that 80 percent of contemporary Chinese literature is rural literature. Is this true?

I have no idea how this figure was arrived at. But if you take Chinese literature in the past three decades as a whole, most works have rural themes or are in the context of agricultural civilization. China was a traditional agricultural society, and the rural issue is a core one in China's transition and modernization, and it has attracted attention from intellectuals and writers for rather a long time. Even now, most Chinese writers over 40 years old have experienced rural life. Our very cultural tradition is one of agricultural civilization, long and profound. When a writer writes on rural themes he can resort to many other writers for esthetic resources.

Foreign media often carry reports about Beijing and Shanghai, two megalopolises. Young foreign readers also want to know about China's city life through its literature. Are there mature and outstanding urban literary works among contemporary Chinese literature?

In China, a megalopolis is almost a brand-new thing. The wave of urbanization, floating and migration of population from rural to urban areas and from small and medium-sized cities to big ones, and big city landscapes appeared on a large scale in the early 1990s. People of my age still remember that when we were at college in the 1980s Beijing had a tranquil atmosphere of country life, as most places in it were not much more than villages.

So it was in the early 1990s that Chinese writers began to write about cities. With few materials or resources, many of them had to turn to historic memories of Shanghai in the 1930s. But in contemporary Chinese literature, the emergence of young writers in large numbers has brought works with a city context into the mainstream, at least in quantity. Wang Anyi, Bi Feiyu, Zhu Wen and Qiu Huadong made important contributions to the description of Chinese cities. As for '70s and '80s writers, most of their works are in the urban context.

In this process, writers pay close attention to cities' huge influence on our life. They try to understand what has happened in us and around us; their efforts have taken Chinese literature into a new realm as they have created new themes, styles of writing and language. But we may not yet get out of the shock and excitement that cities first brought to us, and our complicated imagination that is rooted in

urban experience has not been fully tapped.

When I talk with foreign media people, many of them stress that they want such Chinese works: On the one hand, they can show the great changes in present-day China and its society, people-to-people relationships, and emotions and thoughts; on the other hand, they must be readable for Western readers. Many works of Western literature have been published in China. Is contemporary Chinese literature hard to read for the West? Are there too many baffling Chinese elements in it?

Of course, China and the West have huge cultural differences. China's complicated historical experience over the last century may not be so easy to understand for ordinary Western readers, which makes it difficult for Chinese literature to be accepted in the West. But one thing is certain: For several generations of Chinese readers foreign literature is not at all strange. This shows that as long as we start to read and have the wish to understand, cultural and experiential differences need be no insuperable obstructions.

Irina's Hat

Tie Ning

Born in Beijing in 1957, now Chair of the China Writers' Association, Tie Ning began publishing in 1975. Her most important novels are The Rose Door, Bathing Women, *and* Benhua Village. *Her novellas and short stories number over a hundred, including "Oh, Xiangxue!", "The Red Shirt With No Buttons", and "How Long is Forever?", and more than fifty collections of her stories and essays have been published. The 5-volume "Collected Writings of Tie Ning" came out in 1996, and in 2007 People's Literature Press published the 9-volume "Works of Tie Ning." She has won six national awards in China, including the Lu Xun Prize for Literature. Her work has been translated into English, Russian, German, French, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Danish, Norwegian, and Vietnamese, among other languages. In 2004 the French house Bleu de Chine published two of her novels as* Pile de coton *and* La nuit des rois.

Irina's Hat

I stood in Moscow's Domodedovo Airport waiting for a plane to Khabarovsk. A Russian speaker told me "Domodedovo" means "cabin." So this airport could also be called "cabin airport."

It was the summer of 2001.

I had been traveling together with my cousin to Russia, a ten-day trip. We both believed we were each other's ideal travel partners. Did you ever have a middle school teacher who asked, right before holidays, what's the shortest way to get from Beijing to London? The answer: not by plane, or the internet or what have you, but rather, with a friend. It sounds nice, but in reality, friends at the outset of a journey often become enemies by the end. When my cousin and I left from Beijing for Moscow we were still friends, but by the time we went from Moscow to St. Petersburg we were essentially enemies. The reason, well, I thought that my cousin and I would have a lot in common, both being recently divorced. We no longer had the support, or

better yet the burden, of a husband, and we could curse our exes without holding back. But, shockingly, my cousin – practically on the plane to Moscow – began a new romance. Immediately after taking his seat, the man next to us, who was also a member of our tour group, began to chat her up enthusiastically. At first I thought their conversation was just aimless banter, but I soon found out that he was also unmarried. Truly a coincidence. I realized then that my cousin was a blind optimist, and that she excels at ingratiating herself to others. I'm not as optimistic. Dealing with other people, I am always quick to see their faults. If I want to be unhappy I am unhappy, regardless of the time or occasion. When I let my face droop, my skin looks like a brushed-out layer of flour paste, stiff and cracked. And when my self-esteem is low, I conversely am even more easily agitated by other people.

On the plane, I observed the man in the seat next to us with a cold eye. Immediately I discovered that the nails on both his pinkie fingers were excessively long. From time to time he would habitually lift his outstretched right pinky and brush hair back from his forehead onto the top of his head. That long, translucent, pale green fingernail brought to mind none other than the set of gold nails in foreign paintings of the Empress Dowager Cixi: strange, unclean, frivolous. Then there was that staccato laugh of his, how blaringly it breached my ear. After we checked into the Cosmos Hotel in Moscow, my patience was strained to the limit, and I told my cousin of my impression. She laughed sneeringly, "Objectively speaking, you're not generous enough with people. Objectively speaking, he has some interesting opinions." It was then that I dis-

covered something new about my cousin. I realized that she had a pet phrase: "objectively speaking". What in the world is "objectively speaking"? Who can prove that when she says, "objectively speaking", what she says is actually objective? On the contrary, as soon as she sets that "objectively speaking" in front of a phrase, odds are she's stressing that her opinion is overly biased. So I came to hate this pet phrase of hers.

When I was waiting in Cabin Airport for the plane to Khabarovsk, I sorted out all the reasons my cousin and I split up midway through the trip. It may have been just the guy's overlong fingernail and my cousin's pet phrase. Sure, these reasons seem trivial, but their very triviality was why I couldn't just put up with them. After we arrived at St. Petersburg from Moscow, I forced myself, face drooping, to follow the tour group sightseeing to Dostoyevsky's old residence on Kuznechny Lane. We listened to a bone-thin old docent with an imposing face tell some stories about Dostoevsky. I didn't absorb anything from the stories, I only remember how many broken wrinkles there were on the old woman's mouth, like a dumpling that's been reheated over and over until the dough around the edges have shriveled. I also remember she said that one of Dostoevsky's great-grandchildren now drives a trolley in the same district as the old residence. At this fact I felt a spark of *schadenfreude*: Dostoevsky is one of Russia's greatest historical figures, and even among his descendants there's a trolley driver. I thought of my mother, also an author, and how I wasn't able to distinguish myself as she had hoped. Perhaps my career and marriage grieve her, but at any rate I'm still a civil servant in the