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海外中国现代文学研究文选

孔海立 王尧 选编

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The Literary Revolution

By C. T. Hsia (夏志清)

In January 1917 a rather modestly titled article, "Suggestions for a Reform of Literature," appeared in *New Youth*, the leading journal of Chinese intellectuals. Its author, Hu Shih (1891-1962), who was then completing his doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University, had for nearly two years pondered over the necessity of adopting *pai-hua* or vernacular Chinese as the national medium of communication and had discussed the problem with a number of unsympathetic Chinese friends studying in America. Earlier, in a letter to the editor of *New Youth*, he had introduced the phrase "literary revolution"; in the new essay, however, he refrained from using that explosive term and spoke out for the vitality of *pai-hua* only under the negative emphasis of "Don't hesitate to use colloquial words and expressions," the last of his eight proposals for reform. Hu Shih did not then suspect that his article would ignite a literary movement of unprecedented scope and importance, radically changing the course and shape of Chinese literature.

Ch'en Tu-hsiu, the editor of *New Youth*, was extremely pleased with his correspondent in America. A veteran revolutionary and dean of the School of Letters at National Peking University, he was then fired

by his enthusiasm for science and democracy and by his ambition to demolish the social and ideological structure of Confucianist China. To him, therefore, a reform of language and literature was but another phase of the battle against the decadent tradition. Warmly endorsing Hu Shih's article, he followed up, in the next number of his monthly, with an editorial entitled "For a Literary Revolution." It departs in spirit almost wholly from Hu Shih's earlier essay, which in the main counsels avoidance of stale sentiments and themes and of outworn diction. Grandiloquently, Ch'en Tu-hsiu calls for the establishment of "a plain and lyrical national literature," "a fresh and sincere realistic literature," and "an intelligible and popular social literature" to replace the time-worn "ornate, adulatory literature of the aristocracy," "stale, bombastic literature of classicism," and "obscure, difficult literature of the hermit and the recluse."^① The editor gives next a brief, grossly unfair sketch of the Chinese literary tradition as the monopoly of the servile and obscurantist aristocrat, classicist, and hermit, and goes on to invoke the names of six Western authors as example and challenge: "Literary worthies of the nation, dare you promise to become China's Hugo and Zola, Goethe and Hauptmann, Dickens and Wilde?"^② The enlistment of Oscar Wilde in the cause of a national, realistic, and social literature may be thought appropriately anticlimactic.

① Two sections of Ch'en Tu-hsiu's editorial, from one of which these phrases are taken, have been translated in Huang Sung-k'ang, *Lu Hsiu and the New Culture Movement of Modern China*, pp. 13-14.

② *Chien-shê li-lun chi* (Toward a Constructive Literary Theory), Vol. 1 of *Chung-kuo hsien-wen-hsüeh ta-hsi* (A Comprehensive Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature), pp. 46-47. "Wen-hsüeh kai-liang ch'u-i" (Suggestions for a Reform of Literature), "Wen-hsüeh ko-ming lun" (For a Literary Revolution), and all the subsequent important discussions about *pai-hua* and the creation of a *pai-hua* literature are to be found in that volume and Vol. 2 of the same anthology, *Wen-hsüeh lun-cheng chi* (Literary Debates). I am naturally indebted to these for the historical information in this chapter.

Upon his return to China in July 1917 Hu Shih was appointed professor of philosophy and chairman of the English department at Peking University. By that time other faculty members of the University besides Ch'en Tu-hsiu — notably Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung and Liu Fu — had been convinced of the importance of a literary reform. During the whole year of 1917 and afterward, *New Youth* served as their forum for exchanging views on many theoretical and practical problems relating to the use of pai-hua. If these reformers had anticipated some lively opposition, they were quite disappointed: for the March 1918 number Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung had to write, under an assumed name, a vigorous letter of protest to the editors, in the hope of stirring up controversy. Among the conservative literati, only Lin Shu, foremost classical stylist and indefatigable translator of Western fiction of his time, had shown from the beginning some alarm, but it was not until March 1919 that he took the trouble of addressing an open letter to Ts'ai Yüan-p'ei, Chancellor of Peking University, deploring his connivance with members of his faculty in the onslaught on Confucian morality and the classical literary tradition. By that time, however, Hu Shih had already written, in his cogently reasoned essay "For a Constructive Literary Revolution" (*New Youth*, April 1918), a solid defense of the pai-hua movement in the perspective of Chinese literary history; Lin Shu's charges of literary subversion therefore sounded rather hollow. In 1920, by the decree of the Ministry of Education, pai-hua was introduced as a medium of instruction into the first and second grades of elementary schools: the work of the reformers had won official recognition.

When Hu Shih began to occupy himself with the idea of a literary reform in the summer of 1915 (he was then a student at Cornell University), he was attacking a problem whose crucial relevance to the task of national reconstruction had been felt by a number of enlightened

scholars, journalists, and educators for over thirty years. The accelerated military and economic aggression by foreign powers since the Opium War had entailed an urgent need for more effective communication on all levels: not only had the officials and scholars to arm themselves with a competent knowledge of Western institutions, arts, and sciences, but the populace had also to be alerted to the national danger. The literary language, or wen-yen, with its proverbial difficulty and its pronounced archaic and poetic flavor, was clearly unprepared to fulfill that need. For one thing, it had proved to be an awkward instrument for accurate translation. Yen Fu's elegant rendition of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, is at best a tour de force, unlikely to be duplicated by translators of less literary skill. Lin Shu's popular adaptations from the works of Scott, Dickens, Tolstoy, Conan Doyle, and a host of other serious and popular writers, maintain the integrity of classical prose only by an almost complete disregard for accuracy.^③ For another, wen-yen was found to be equally unsuitable for the task of disseminating modern ideas among a more or less literate public. A group of frustrated reformers, banished from the Manchu court, had turned journalists in order to make their appeals directly to the people, and they were compelled to abandon classical prose and forge a wen-yen style readily intelligible and more hospitable to Western terminology. Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, a prominent member of this group, was especially

③ In "Notes on Translation," *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 1958), Arthur Waley gives high praise to Lin Shu as a translator, especially of Dickens. "Dickens, inevitably, becomes a rather different and to my mind a better writer. All the overelaboration, the overstatement and uncurbed garrulity disappear" (p. 111). Granted that Lin Shu's "precise, economical style" makes better reading than Dickens' "uncontrolled exuberance," shouldn't a translator's primary duty be fidelity to the spirit and style of the original?

successful in molding a prose which, while literary, was adequate to the exposition and discussion of ideas and highly effective as an instrument of patriotic propaganda. This style was widely imitated by political writers and revolutionaries of his time, among them Dr. Sun Yat-sen, and persisted as the standard newspaper and bureaucratic Chinese well after World War II.

Vernacular Chinese itself, of course, had been the medium for a number of highly popular novels long before Hu Shih urged its adoption as the national language. Such novels of the late Ch'ing period as *The Travels of Lao Ts'an* and *Bureaucracy Exposed* testify not only to an expanding popular interest in pai-hua literature but to the increasing reliance of writers on pai-hua for satiric exposure of current social and political ills. The development of a modern press at that time also promoted the use of pai-hua in other types of popular edification and entertainment than the novel.

Still other reformers, seeing the impossibility of educating the illiterate masses, advocated the romanization of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects as well as the adoption of a simplified ideographic script. These reformers, prominently Wang Chao and Lao Nai-hsüan, were inspired by the success of Christian missionaries in reaching the peasant population by phonetic rendering of dialects through the use of an alphabet.

Before the time of Hu Shih, the use of pai-hua, a more intelligible wen-yen style, and some alphabetic system of writing, then, was mainly conceived as a political and educational necessity. The early reformers had no thought of encroaching upon the domain of polite letters, and the pai-hua novelists had always regarded themselves as peripheral to the main literary tradition. Hu Shih's distinctive contribution to the pai-hua movement is that while yielding to none in

his appreciation of the educational value of the vernacular, he was the first to assert its dignity and importance as a literary medium. To him, the trend of Chinese literature has been its periodic appropriation of subliterate forms of popular entertainment. In his early essays for *New Youth* as well as in his *History of Pai-hua Literature*, Vol. 1, he has demonstrated again and again this principle of growth in the development of Chinese poetry, drama, and fiction.^④ A new pai-hua literature, therefore, far from being a radical departure from the literary tradition, is the only guarantee for its continuing growth and renewal.

In seeking historical sanction for a literary reform, Hu Shih has achieved also a complete reappraisal of the Chinese literary heritage. The task was long overdue. Through the centuries the civil service examination system, which was not abolished until 1905, had willy-nilly perpetuated a narrow canon of prescribed readings: the classics, history, and the poetry and prose of standard authors. With drama and fiction excluded from this canon, the literati aspiring to or holding government positions could afford only a covert interest in these types of literature. As a matter of fact, since the Yüan dynasty the development of drama and fiction has been principally the work of the men who, failing to achieve an official career or early disgusted with it, have written to amuse themselves without any thought of advancing their social position or literary reputation. Even though, by the Ch'ing dynasty, literati and populace alike were showing a growing interest in the novel, and the novelists themselves had gradually assumed a vocational dignity, there were few scholars, with the exception of such heretic spirits as Chin Sheng-t'an, who would openly commit

^④ In *The Chinese Renaissance* Hu Shih gives a concise exposition of his theory of Chinese literature.

themselves to admiration for the novel as a genre worthy to stand beside poetry or history.

The flourishing of a genre in the teeth of critical indifference or hostility is, of course, nothing unusual in literary history. Few Elizabethan dramatists rated their plays as serious literature, and few English readers in the eighteenth century held Fielding and Richardson in as high esteem as Pope and Milton. Without the reassuring example of Western literary tradition, Hu Shih himself, with all his scholarship and critical daring, could not have brought about a revaluation of Chinese literature. Just as he re-interpreted ancient Chinese thought with the aid of the more precise Western philosophical terminology, he was able to see Chinese literature in a new light by his awareness of the importance of the vernacular element in Western literature since Dante and Chaucer, and of the high critical regard for fiction and drama.

As architect of the literary revolution, Hu Shih saw as his task the bringing about of a heightened appreciation of the historical importance of *pai-hua* and its unlimited future. He reasoned that if the earlier vernacular literature had produced several masterpieces in the absence of critical guidance or encouragement, the new literature, impregnated with an evolutionary faith in the destiny of *pai-hua* and responsive to the literary currents of the West, should have immense possibilities. But although eminently sound as a strategist, Hu Shih was not able to provide an example of the new literature through his own writings. His rejection of the *wen-yen* tradition was for his time and place comparable in revolutionary importance to Wordsworth's rejection of Dryden and Pope, and to the early Eliot's rejection of Romantic and Victorian poets, and was fraught with much greater social and cultural consequences. But unlike Wordsworth and Eliot, Hu Shih did not come upon his critical theory as a justification for urgent personal needs as an

imaginative writer. He did produce, dutifully, a pioneer volume of insipid pai-hua verse, called *Experiments* (1920), but only to encourage others to follow his suit in an apparently new field. (One may remark here that Hu Shih's theory of a central pai-hua tradition is least satisfactory in regard to poetry; in his *History of Pai-hua Literature*, he is compelled, quite unfairly I think, by the logic of his thesis to dismiss much important though admittedly erudite and allusive poetry as either academic or spurious.) He also translated a small volume of standard Western short stories, so as to acclimate this genre to the tradition of Chinese fiction.

Primarily and pre-eminently a historian and critic, then, Hu Shih directed attention to a type of humanitarian realism with which he was in personal sympathy. In "For a Constructive Literary Revolution," he rightly deplores the then popular novelists' obsession with the world of bureaucracy, vice, and crime; but characteristically he recommends the following subjects for the new writer: "factory workers of both sexes, ricksha pullers, inland farmers ... domestic tragedies, marital sorrows, the position of women, the unsuitability of [current] educational practices."⁵ An obvious invitation to examine the sad lot of the underprivileged and maltreated, the list betrays Hu Shih's narrow view of literature as an instrument of social criticism.

If Hu Shih was limited in his view of literature, his fellow revolutionaries were downright irresponsible. Ostensibly his supporters, they at heart entertained grave doubts as to the validity or adequacy of his reform program. At times it seems nothing would satisfy them but complete abolition of the Chinese language and culture. Thus Ch'ien

⁵ Hu Shih, "Chien-shê ti wen-hstieh ko-ming lun" (For a Constructive Literary Revolution), *Chien-shê li-lun chi*, p. 136.

Hsüan-t'ung argues:

To abolish Confucianism and annihilate Taoism, the only way is to store up all the Chinese books in a library and leave them there. Why? Because nine hundred ninety-nine out of every thousand books are either Confucian or Taoist in outlook. The Chinese language has been the language of Confucian morality and Taoist superstition... Such a language is absolutely unfit for the new era of the twentieth century. Let me boldly repeat my manifesto: to the end that China may not perish and may become a civilized nation of the twentieth century, the basic task is to abolish Confucianism and annihilate Taoism. But the destruction of the Chinese written language, which has served as the repository of Confucian morality and Taoist superstition, is a prerequisite for the accomplishment of this task. ⑥

Hu Shih must have been made very uncomfortable in the presence of such thoroughgoing radicalism; in reply to Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung, he could only point to the infeasibility of the proposal and direct Ch'ien's attention to more urgent practical problems. But Hu's prestige was not sufficient to deter all discussion of the subject. Even his favorite student, Fu Ssu-nien — later a distinguished scholar and educator but at that time the editor of the undergraduate magazine, *The Renaissance* — wrote in support of Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung: "Moreover, the Chinese language has this special defect: its deeply rooted barbaric character. The invention of ideograms being a matter of barbaric antiquity, it cannot be helped that the language has remained barbaric. Can one not

⑥ Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung, "Chung-kuo chin-hou ti wen-tzu went'i" (The Language Problem in China: Its Prospects), *ibid.*, pp. 142-44. A thorough materialist who shared with Ch'ien a contempt for Chinese culture and a desire to abolish the Chinese language at that time was Wu Chih-hui, who unaccountably was held in high esteem by such liberal critics as Hu Shih and Ch'en Yüan. For a survey of the cultural debates of the period see Wingsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China* (New York, 1958), chap. 6, "The Religion of the Intellectual."

be ashamed of its being in continuous use in modern times?"^⑦ As if the Chinese language were unique in being traceable to barbaric antiquity!

In spite of their apparently successful collaboration, Hu Shih and his colleagues represent two diametrically opposed intellectual persuasions. Reared upon the rigorous traditions of Ch'ing scholarship, Hu Shih was a Confucian rationalist whose passion for critical inquiry, under John Dewey's personal guidance at Columbia, was early fortified with American pragmatism. He was the realistic optimist who did not flinch from truth, however painful or embarrassing. In his reappraisal of Chinese literature and culture as well as in his commentaries on current Chinese affairs, therefore, he was able to maintain a sense of fact and equanimity of mind, refusing to be overwhelmed by the all too apparent faults and vices he discerned. His colleagues, on the contrary, became involved in a sense of national humiliation; they were eager for radical reform because they were deeply ashamed of China's past. Ch'en Tu-hsiu, Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung, Li Ta-chao, Lu Hsün — regular contributors to *New Youth* — would have no traffic with tradition. Perhaps in their younger days they had been proud of China, but this pride had turned into a frankly masochistic admission of what they saw as inferiority in every department of endeavor. Disgusted with pigtailed, bound feet, and opium — palpable symbols of China's backwardness — they were no less ashamed of her art, literature, philosophy, and folkways. However absurd it may sound today, Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung's demand for a total repudiation of the Chinese language and culture was made with a seriousness almost morbid in intensity. Positive in their rejections, these intellectuals have been no less dogmatic in their

^⑦ Fu Ssu-nien, "Han-yü kai-yung p'ing-yin wen-tzu ti ch'u-put'an" (Preliminary Remarks on the Latinization of Chinese), *Chien-shê li-lun ch'i*, p. 149.

recommendations for curing the nation's ills. It is little wonder that most of them eventually turned to Communism as the answer to their prayers.

In view of the radicalism of Ch'en Tu-hsiu and Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung, one might think that the pai-hua movement could not have swayed public opinion in its favor, since what was held in question was the very nature of Chinese language and culture. But to the patriotic and restive students of that time who eagerly sought enlightenment from the pages of *New Youth* and *The Renaissance*, the adoption of pai-hua was the first step toward progress and the guarantee for eventual national reformation. Even if some of them shared with the radicals a dissatisfaction with the contemplated language reform, they did not deny themselves the immense advantages of freer self-expression afforded by the use of pai-hua.

To begin with, these students were disgusted with the Peking Government and impatient to exert their influence on the management of national affairs. Their disappointment with the Republican Revolution of 1911-1912, which had neither brought about national unity nor averted foreign aggression, finally came to a head over the ignominy of Chinese representatives at the Paris Conference of 1919. On May 4 and the ensuing days, student demonstrations broke out in Peking and the other major cities in protest against government submission to exorbitant Japanese demands for economic and territorial rights in Shantung. Particular grievances against a corrupt and impotent government and its treasonous ministers now swelled into a seething tide of patriotic indignation. It is not without reason, therefore, that this so-called May Fourth Movement has been synonymous in Chinese writings with the new culture movement; it marks the first strong showing of the powerfully articulate class of students and intellectuals determined to effect vast changes in the national life. The May Fourth Movement also

assured the initial success of the Literary Revolution: upon its wake, a number of pai-hua magazines, more or less literary, began publication to satisfy the needs of an eager and ever-growing audience.

The conservative literati, indifferent to the theoretical stage of the Literary Revolution, were now alarmed at its nation-wide success. But from Lin Shu to Chang Shih-chao (the Minister of Education in the Peking Government who maintained a belated and foredoomed struggle against the reformers in 1925), even their doughtiest champions produced only a feeble defense of the cultural and literary tradition. With insatiable zest, the best scholars of the day — Wang Kuo-wei, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, and Hu Shih himself — had taken pains to study Western literature and philosophy so as to breathe fresh life into their Chinese studies. On the other hand, the self-appointed guardians of traditional culture, in their refusal to face up to the Western challenge, were hopelessly lagging behind their time. In their exclusive attack on the supposed vulgarity and cumbersomeness of pai-hua as against the elegance and brevity of wen-yen, moreover, they missed completely the serious danger lurking behind the new culture movement: the confident immaturity and unreasoned dogmatism attendant upon any major cultural reorientation.

It therefore took a group of scholars with an educational background similar to Hu Shih's to lodge some serious protest against the new cultural and literary movement. Mei Kuang-ti, Hu Hsien-su, and Wu Mi, American-educated professors in Nanking, launched in 1922 a *Critical Review* (Hsüeh Heng) to counteract what they regarded as the pernicious tendencies of the movement.^⑧ While a student of

⑧ Recent literary historians (Wang Yao, Ts'ao Chü-jen, Liu Shou-sung, et al. — see Bibliography, I) have all perpetuated the error that the *Critical Review* was launched in 1921. The first issue of the journal appeared in January 1922.

Irving Babbitt at Harvard, Mei Kuang-ti had been one of Hu Shih's friends opposed to his espousal of vernacular; in 1922 he was not so much opposed to pai-hua as to Hu Shih's evolutionary concept that it would necessarily supersede wen-yen. Over and above the issue of pai-hua, the *Critical Review* was mainly concerned with the dangers of ignorance apparent in the naive eagerness with which the new cultural leaders imported foreign ideological and literary fashions. When Karl Marx, John Dewey, and Bertrand Russell — Dewey and Russell were invited to lecture in China respectively in 1919 and 1920^⑨ — were worshiped as oracles of truth, when transient literary schools of the present-day West and Japan were blindly imitated to the exclusion of the classical authors, the new cultural leaders could be justly accused of a signal unawareness of the more abiding literary and philosophical traditions of the West, a shallow delight in innovation and change in apparent disregard for the cultural needs of the country, and a tragic failure to live up to their educational responsibility. Mei Kuang-ti therefore indicts the cultural leaders as “not thinkers, but sophists,” “not creators, but imitators,” “not scholars, but opportunists,” “not

⑨ Dewey and his wife arrived in China on May 1, 1919, on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, and didn't leave until July 1921. For an account of Dewey's lecture tour and his influence in China, see Hsia Tao-p'ing's translation of Hu Shih's address given at the University of Hawaii in the summer of 1959, “Dewey tsai chung-kuo” (John Dewey in China), *Tzu-yu Chung-kuo* (Free China), 21, 4 (August 1959). For a brief account of the visits of the other celebrities in the early twenties, see the chapter on Dewey and Tagore in Ts'ao Chü-jen, *Wen-t'an wu-shih-nien* (Fifty Years of Chinese Literature), 1, pp. 180-181. It is a sad thing to notice that Dewey and Russell have persisted as oracles of truth, the last word in Western scientific enlightenment, to a large segment of intellectuals on Taiwan, most of whom have probably never followed the anti-Dewey reaction in recent American educational thought, nor apparently read the more recent writings of Russell. The chief organ of these intellectuals is the aforementioned Taipei fortnightly, *Tzu-yu Chung-kuo*.