



Literary Activism In Twentieth Century China

Author's details:

Manju Rani Hara

Assistant Professor

311, Centre for Chinese, South & East Asian Studies

School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies II

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi

Literature is a mirror of human emotions and human society in all its complexities of social, cultural, political and economic dimensions. It is a product of human imagination that is conditioned and shaped by subjective consciousness of the writer as well as the objective context in which the writer is located. Literature is multifaceted in the way it can be studied and interpreted, as it is plural in genres, trends, techniques, schools of thought, roles and objectives, linguistic innovations etc. Readers, critics and academics approach literature with different perspectives and expectations. Of these, those who study the process of literary creativity and its purposefulness, can and do use multiple frameworks and disciplinary training to unravel issues that are both universal and specific as well as overarching and focused. They use multiple and interdisciplinary methods to answer the questions that have arisen from observed and problematized socio-cultural milieu and practices reflected in literature. In that sense, literature can be perceived and analysed at the interface of Humanities and Social Sciences.

It is this multi-disciplinary nature of literature that has made it serve as an excellent example of a social discourse. The literary writings can reveal an inner world of complex social relationships, ideas and beliefs; and are therefore, beyond entertainment or serving as directives sometimes, very often literature has enlightened us and helped us understand how people in a given society relate to or respond to the dominant beliefs or their position in society.

The most common belief that sociological studies of literature highlight is that among many genres of literature, novels and short stories provide us with an insight into the functioning of the society, as many of them can be inspired from the real events and happenings around us. Using the same line of thought, Raymond Williams talks of relationship between society and its literature:

'If we compare art with its society, we find a series of real relationships showing its deep and central connections with the rest of the general life'.¹

Literature has consistently made an attempt to understand, analyze or explain the ongoing social relations or other issues of the society, and has gradually become a vital area for study of society. Thus, the role, contribution and significance of the writers and their works that serve this cause can hardly be overemphasized, definitely cannot be undermined.

Various societies have produced literature that has reflected on their economic, social or political changes and has enlightened readers with influx of new set of thoughts or the declining of an old one. Though some societies have been more open, thus more critical of the then current regime's policies or its functioning, some societies such as authoritarian societies,² have had a limited or almost non-existent scope for criticism or even mere unbiased reflection. In such societies, literature has often served as an ideal tool for expressing concerns or criticising the policies and practices of the dominant political-cultural force.

Socio-political changes that have had impact on social life, large or small, have often been raised and discussed in literary works. Even though authoritarian societies restrict generation of such awareness or dispersion of certain kinds of information fearing unrest and hostility, literature has somehow managed to carve out space for itself to present such issues before the society in the form of short stories and novels. Therefore, literature, on one hand, has become an effective agency and tool of criticism, and on the other, because of this very reason it lends itself well to socio-cultural and political analyses and interpretation.

Activism and Literary Activism:

Before the term Literary Activism is discussed, it is necessary to understand what Activism is and how it is played out in various societies. Activism (*xingdong zhuyi*) can be understood as a practice of vigorous campaigning, action or even involvement as a means of achieving political goal or to bring about a political or a social change. It is sometimes more active and direct, i.e. achieved by actions such as demonstrations, protests etc., in opposition to certain actions, inactions, policies etc., or in support of a particular cause, and sometimes through less obvious methods such as by writing or speaking about it. Broadly speaking, of most frequently seen activisms are Judicial Activism (*sifa xingdong zhuyi*),

¹ Williams, Raymond, *The Long Revolution*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.86.

² Authoritarianism or Authoritarian regimes are a system of government that are not democratic in its functioning. It has a strong central power and allows limited political freedom; in a narrow sense, Authoritarianism is a kind of autocracy which has been distinguished from the Totalitarianism. For a detailed analysis of difference between a Democracy, Authoritarian regime and Totalitarian regime, please refer to Juan Linz, "Totalitarian and Authoritarianism Regimes", in Greenstein, F. I. et. al. (Ed.): *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 3: Macro-Political Theory, (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1975), pp. 175-411, and Lauth, Hans-Joachim, "Authoritarian Regimes", *InterAmerican Wiki: Terms-Concepts-Critical Perspectives*, accessed from https://www.unibielefeld.de/cias/wiki/a_Authoritarian%20Regimes.html?_xsl=/uni_portale_2017_print.xsl There are other traits of an authoritarian regime such as limited political pluralism, minimal social mobilization, informally defined executive powers etc. For details, please see Gretchen Casper, *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule*, (London: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995), pp. 40-50.

Social Activism (*shehui xingdong zhuyi*), Political Activism (*zhengzhi xingdong zhuyi*) and Literary Activism (*wenxue xingdong zhuyi*) etc. Activism has existed in different kinds of societies in various forms, and nature of Activism has depended upon or influenced by the kind of society it has emerged from. Some societies, therefore, have given rise to one particular kind of Activism over the others, and torchbearers of Activism have ranged from common people to social or political activists to writers and artists.

Speaking of Activism, one must delve into the role civil society plays in achieving it. Civil society has been assumed to play the role of a mediator between the civilians and the governments, as when the local political terrain changes, the civil society pattern changes too. However, civil society is more a concept of the democratic nations as it best operates there.³ Also, in each democracy, one can see different models of civil society that address issues of local livelihood and interests.

To illustrate further, in some authoritarian states, there may be little or no scope for civil society organizations to operate autonomously or in opposition to the State, as they need to be approved by the State first. There might be civilians in every society, but they might not have any organized political structures that fight oppression or lend their voices to the interests of the common people. In authoritarian societies such as former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, as well as in China, Literary Activism has been one of the major methods of expressing concerns about one's surroundings. In case of China, in the modern times Literary Activism has existed within the mainstream literary production. It becomes necessary to study the Marxist view of Literature and Art that will unravel how the role attributed to Literature and Art has in fact encouraged and stimulated Literary Activism, even though most often conceived and implemented in a top-down manner. For this study, the twentieth century China is divided into three phases: (a) from May Fourth period to establishment of Communist Party of China (1919- 1949), (b) From establishment of CPC to Third Plenum of Eleventh Party congress (1949-1978) and (c) The period of Economic Reforms onwards to the end of the 20th century (1978 onwards) in which all major events, debates or movements will be covered.

Chinese Literature in May Fourth Period: 1919 – 1949

With a corrupt Qing government and Opium War in 1840 & onwards, China went through massive socio-political upheaval towards the end of the 19th Century. As a result, at the turn of the twentieth Century, Chinese intellectuals were consciously thinking about the path of development for the nation. In pursuit of reform and development, the Republic was established in 1911. However, it was the May Fourth Movement (*wu si yundong*) in 1919, a political movement that brought common people of China led by

³ Civil societies, in a nutshell, are organised through key organising principles such as idea of rights, autonomous associations, self-mobilization etc. They promote stability and effectiveness of democratic polity through ability and efforts of civil associations to mobilise citizens on behalf of public causes. For more details on civil society and their organisation, please refer to Pointer, R, Bosch, T, Chuma, W, et. al. "Civil Society, Political Activism and Communications in Democratisation Conflicts: A Literature Review", *Media, Conflict and Democratisation* (MeCoDEM), (UK: University of Leeds, 2016), p. 4. The source is also available online on <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk> and [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net).

intellectuals in the mainstream Chinese national struggle to free China of imperialist forces, that paved way for a “literary revolution” for the first time in the history of literary creativity. The need to create something for the common people was not felt so strongly before this; and now for first time literature had assumed a class character, literature had begun to experience an activism that did not exist before this time.

The newly assigned role of Literature as a tool of class struggle also was drawn from the Marxist Literary thought, as many Chinese intellectuals and writers were drawn to the teachings and philosophy of Marx and Engels. In the years after the formation of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921, there were many debates involving issues like the role of literature in Chinese society or how the literature could be developed. Prominent modern writers and theoreticians such as Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Jiang Guangci and Qu Qiubai etc. that participated in these debates debated and insisted extensively on literature to be used as a weapon to enlighten the masses to the reality of their existence, and thus bestowing the literature with a social responsibility. Chinese literary thought seemed to be taking shape while growing closer to the Marxist Literary Thought.

Since literature had hardly addressed concerns and lives of common people before, this was the first occasion of social and political activism in Chinese literature at the beginning of the 20th Century. “Subsequently, the slogan “From ‘Literary revolution’ (*wenxue geming*) to ‘Revolutionary literature’ (*geming wenxue*)” signified that literature was to become a mirror of society. This can truly be regarded as the first instance when literature was used as a tool of class struggle”.⁴

On Revolutionary literature, the legendary modern writer Lu Xun (鲁迅) was of the view that there can only be a revolutionary literature when revolutionaries start writing. His concerns for new literature were worth noticing as he was urging writers to take off their masks. A pre-revolution writer, Lu Xun was an advocate of writing stories ‘about real flesh and blood’. Even though Socialist Realism was the accepted form of creativity, writers like Lu Xun continued to maintain a non-doctrinaire attitude towards Marxism, literature and Party organization. In his literary contribution, Lu Xun’s *Madman’s Diary* (狂人日记 *kuangren riji*) of 1918 was the first Chinese story written in Vernacular. The story revolves around the story of a protagonist that comes to realize that the traditional value system is formed of a unified network of ‘people eating people’ tenet and he, thus, is held up by his idiosyncratic beliefs that are contradictory to reality:

I read that history very carefully for the most of the night, and finally I began to make out what was written between the lines; the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE!⁵

The protagonist is going paranoid by his own thoughts, which is viewed as self-imposed cannibalistic

⁴ Mitra, Sabaree, *Literature and Politics in 20th Century China: Issues and themes*, (Books plus, New Delhi: 2005), p.15.

⁵ Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, Translated by William A. Lyell, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p.30.

torment, where he feels that he must have had inadvertently participated in the eating of others, including his own kin. Cannibalism has been a recurring theme in Lu Xun's writings, be it *Madman's Diary* or his nightmarish prose poem, *The Epitaph*, (墓碣文 *mujiewen*, 1925)⁶ where the narrator reads his own Epitaph:

I tore out my own heart to eat it, wanting to know its true taste. But the pain was so agonizing, how could I tell its taste?

When the pain subsided I savoured the heart slowly. But since by then it was stale, how could I know its true taste?⁷

A master of irony and satire, Lu Xun wrote harsh criticism of nearly all social problems and retained a trait of humanity in his works. Another longest story *The True story of Ah Q* (*AhQ zhengzhuan*) published in 1923 made everyone question if the story was based on their lives. Ah Q was believed to be a metaphor for Chinese national character, setting a negative example (commonly used as a label for those who were complacent, ignorant, indolent, parochial, backward or slavish) and urging the masses to be better. However, since this metaphor was used to denote "negative human characteristics as 'natural' components of the Chinese national character, they were accepting and reinforcing certain stereotypical images of the Chinese."⁸

In the analysis of Lu Xun's *Madman's Diary*, it was being said that the motif of Cannibalism and the plot of self-torment in his works is linked to the attainment of truly revolutionary consciousness, a necessary negativity in the formation of revolutionary subjectivity. In *The True Story of AhQ*, he symbolized everything that was backward and tragic in Chinese society, but often served Chinese intellectuals of 1920s as a negative criterion against which they could measure China's and their own advance into modernity. Since Lu Xun was a follower of 文以载道 (*wen yi zai dao*) which meant literature as the vehicle for a moral message, he believed that the purpose of literature was to enlighten and transform the minds of the fellow Chinese.

On clear distinction between old and new, Lu Xun's critique of Confucian orthodoxy and morality in Chinese traditional families in *What is Required of us as Fathers Today* (1919) was also a strong rejection of patriarchy and other unhealthy traditions that patriarchy upholds. In another essay *What happens after Nora leaves home* (1923), Lu Xun argues on the importance of equal economic rights for women. The work was suggestive of Lu Xun's attitude to feminism and Chinese politics; and that even

⁶ The prose poem, also known as "Tombstone Inscriptions" or "Written on a Tombstone", was written on 17 June, 1925 and first published in *Yusi*, 32 (a journal run by Lu Xun's own literary society) on 22 June, 1925. See, Yang, Xianyi, Yang, Gladys, (trans.) *Wild Grass* (野草 *yecao*), (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1974).

⁷ Lu Xun, *Wild Grass/Ye Cao: A Chinese-English Bilingual Edition* (1927). Translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2003), pp. 80-82.

⁸ Chang on Foster, "Ah Q archeology: Lu Xun, Ah Q, Ah Q progeny and the national Character discourse in 20th Century China", *I H-Nationalism, I H-Net*, networks.h-net.org retrieved on 18.5.2018.

though Nora's predicament is compared to that of raw fate of Republic of China, this work labelled Lu Xun as a feminist writer.

With such new radicalism and changes in the education system brought about by May Fourth Movement, there were women writers like Ding Ling that wrote about relations between the sexes, family and other domestic matters. These writers which initially seemed to be preoccupied with themes of emotions and personal life had eventually paved way for a revolutionary and far more direct access into the female world and an expression of female subjectivity.

Ding Ling's *Miss Sophie's Diary* (莎菲女士的日记 *shafei nüshi de riji*) expresses the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist with all their complexities. Particularly expressive of sexuality, identity and with a unique take on relationships, *Miss Sophie's Diary* was an exploration of a variety of emotions that a person goes through. The chaos of personality, anguish, desire and emotional complexity of the character makes Sophie a strong independent woman, fearing no judgement. This story has often been compared to *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert and is also considered Ding Ling's outburst of 'non-accommodation of such independent women in Chinese society'.⁹

There were other women writers of same era such as Ling Shuhua who delved into the private lives and emotions of women and brought their world to focus. Ling's story *Embroidered Pillow* (绣枕 *xiuzhen*) established the hard lives of women and that, women have to trade sacrifice for respect in society. In other words, amongst other virtues, women sacrificing for their families etc are worthy of respect in society.

Most women writers and their writings were evaluated on the grounds of 'personal accounts', which, in other words, did not have much merit or literary value and were termed 'trivial'. Nonetheless, writers like Ding Ling, Ling Shuhua, Bing Xin etc consolidated the body of women's writings in the early 20th Century with variety of themes and literary styles. Such remarks/evaluation serves as an indicator of whether there existed a space to explore concerns of gender, and how open and encouraging this space was. Interestingly, there were other writers that hinted at the stereotypical attitude of the Party leadership in evaluating different works.

Ding Ling's another famous work *Thoughts of March 8* (三八节有感 *san ba jie you gan*) published in Party newspaper questioned the double standards of male Party workers, such as male cadres making fun of women cadres working in public sphere, remaining unmarried and male cadres misusing divorce provisions to get rid of their old wives. She also questioned commitment of the Party in changing popular attitudes towards women.

Chinese writers joined hands in The United front in 1935, namely, "United Association of Chinese Writers" (中国作家联合会 *zhongguo zuojia lianhehui*) which emerged as a new face of association of writers; this Association united writers of all political persuasions on the issue of opposition to Japanese

⁹ For a detailed analysis of this line of thought, see Kuhlman, Erika A. *A to Z of Women in World History*, (New York: Facts on File, 2002), p.362 and Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei and "Wild Lillies": Rectification and Purges in the CCP, 1942-1944, Part I*, (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1994), p.18.

aggression of China. The literature coming out of this United Association was termed as “Literature for National Defence” (国防文学 *guofang wenxue*). There were writers who, while sympathising with the cause, rebelled against the literary directives and unwillingly supported this political policy owing to the long-standing debate with the Party. These debates and discussions had led to multiple views on the idea of revolutionary literature, what is the role of literature in the cause of revolution, discussions on form & technique or what should be the approach to literature etc were the key issues. Then in 1938, Mao Zedong delivered a speech calling on the writers to create their own style of writing on the basis of indigenous Chinese literary forms. This issue which later turned into the question of National forms in literature continued to be discussed and debated throughout the 1939.

The question of National forms in literature was opposed by a section of Chinese writers that had not been willing to turn to the past, especially writers like Hu Feng and Feng Xuefeng. They both were of the view that Chinese literature should continue to grow in the direction and seek continuous inspiration from realistic traditions of western literature. Feng Xuefeng was more in favour of a broader and universal approach to literature, over a narrow nationalistic one. These two writers and their oppositions was met with a mild response from the Party as they were preoccupied with military affairs.

The CPC felt the need to politically train and educate these writers into a more disciplined and committed organised workforce. The Party then held a ‘Thought Rectification Campaign’ (延安整风运动 *yan'an zhengfeng yundong*) also known as Yan'an Rectification Movement, the first one in early 1940s, to wash away dogmatism and liberalism on one hand and dictatorial attitude of the bureaucracy on the other. The movement was formed to crush all forms of heterodoxy and therefore with such beginnings, many revolutionary writers came out with some critical essays in a month's time, i.e. between March 1942 to April 1942 in Jiefang Ribao. Some of the most prominent ones were “Thoughts on March 8th” (三八节有感 *sanbajie yougan*) by Ding Ling (March 9, 1942), “Understand Writers, Respect Writers” (了解作家、尊重作家 *liaojie zuojia, zunzhong zuojia*) by Ai Qing (March 11, 1942), “This is Still the time of Satiric Essays” (还是杂文的时代 *hai shi zawan de shidai*) by Luo Feng (March 12, 1942), “The Wild Lilly” (野百合花 *ye baihehua*) by Wang Shiwei (March 13 and 23, 1942), “Statesmen and Artists” (政治家、艺术家 *zhengzhijia, yishujia*) Guyu (Grainrain) April 1 No. 4 and “On ‘Love’ and ‘Forbearance’ among Comrades” (论同志之‘爱’与‘耐’ *lun tongzhi zhi ‘ai’ yu ‘nai’*) by Xiao Jun (April 8, 1942).

These articles written at different times on different subjects were common in their exploration of life in Yan'an. All these articles, fundamentally, expressed their disappointments which emanated from non-realisation of the ideal communist life and also criticised CPC's regime. Out of these, Wang Shiwei's *The Wild Lily* (野百合花 *ye baihehua*) met the harshest treatment by the Party for its portrayal of lavish life of leaders and the increasing divide between the rich and the poor.

In 1940s, Zhang Ailing (张爱玲) was another woman writer who came to prominence after Ding Ling's writing career was well on its way. Her most acclaimed works like *Love in a Fallen City* (倾城之恋 *qingcheng zhi lian*) and *The Golden Cangue* (金锁记 *jinsuo ji*) became best sellers in Shanghai. Zhang displayed a rare literary maturity beyond her years with her characters from works like *The Golden Cangue* that had impressions of dysfunctional families, broken marriages and hysterical women. Apart

from such impressions, her works have also taken on social ills like foot binding, exploitation under familial hierarchy and deep psychological impact that modernity brought on Chinese women. Another achievement of Zhang Ailing's works was construction of a Wartime narratives where sentiments and physical space of a city are often weaved together with concerns of revolution and national salvation.

Another writer, Ai Qing (艾青), in his critical essays *Understand Writers, Respect Writers* said, that a writer, being a sensitive member of the community and being "best able to perceive its problems", cannot and should not be "a Mongolian Lark, nor is he a singer who sings solely to please others". Ai Qing continued to exert that the problems of the Chinese society were too hypothetical for the CPC alone and only by understanding and respecting writers would these problems be solved; he favoured a culture free from the Party politics so that 'true feelings' can be presented in literature.

Wang Shiwei in another of his article *Statesmen and Artists* (政治家、艺术家- *zhengzhijia, yishujia*) published in *Guyu* (Grainrain) delved into the question of the role of writers and artists, where he emphasized on the need of separating life from politics. According to him, literature should assume a critical attitude and reflect reality, sometimes by exposing the deficiencies of the system also. Wang asserted:

Let us take up the superb task of remaking the soul and let us first proceed with ourselves and with our own camp.¹⁰

These writers viewed Marxism and its implication in the light of their creative discipline, thereby pushing the boundaries of creative space for intellectual independence. It was now that the leadership felt the need to disregard such views and to also bring about some ground for literary conformity. It was in this backdrop that Mao Zedong convened literary meetings in May 1942 where his famous "Talks on Literature and Art" outlined the Party's official policy on literature and art for the years to come.

Chinese Literature after the Establishment of People's Republic of China - 1949-1978

After the successful conducting of Yan'an Talks and utilizing the writer's unity throughout the civil war period to eventually triumph, the Party leadership had discontinued many literary norms that allowed the writers to expose the ills and brought the writers under institutional control with a strict censorship.

Soon after the establishment of PRC during the Korean War in 1950, the Communist Party used oral, written and demonstrative propaganda material as a part of comprehensive propaganda campaign. Some of the prominent posters read "Beat American Arrogance", "Great Movement to Resist America and Assist Korea", "It is glorious to take part, to oppose America, support Korea, protect the home and the nation" etc.

¹⁰ Wang Shiwei, "Statesmen and Artists" (《政治家、艺术家》 *zhengzhijia, yishujia*); quote has been taken from its excerpt in Jin Zhanran, "After Reading Comrade Shiwei's Statesmen and Artists" (读王实味同志的 '政治家、艺术家' 后 - *du shiwei tongzhi de 'zhengzhijia, yishujia' hou*), *jiefang ribao* (26 May 1942), p. 4; translation as in Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p.27.

The Party intensified its supervision on writers, as there were some newspapers and journals that criticized party cadres of old charges, such as bureaucratism, ignorance etc. and later Hu Feng, a member of editorial board of *Renmin Wenxue*, wrote in *Wenyi bao* wrote a criticism reducing literary criticism to 'Vulgar Sociology' (庸俗社会学 *yongsu shehuixue*) asserting that reality was being replaced by principles. Most of these criticisms were met with immediate attack on the writers. Some examples were of Huang Qiuyun article *We Must Not Close Our Eyes to the Hardships Among the People* which criticized the vision of Socialism, 'cheap optimism' and on a writer's dilemma of exposing darkness of society. Qin Zhaoyang expressed views on oversimplification of characters and dogmatism of cadres; Liu Binyan's *Our Papers Inside News* spoke of losing virtues and values of honesty in the face of corruption, and Wang Meng's *A Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* portrays dilemma and confrontation of an ideal communist youth when he comes face to face with the Party officials and their bureaucratic methods.

Having specified how the Party viewed the role of literature in Chinese society, and regarding it 'subservient' to politics, Mao carried out a number of campaigns to 'rectify the thoughts' of the writers and intellectuals of China during the Anti-Rightists Campaign (1957-58) and later during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The question of literature and politics remained one of the core issues of disagreement between the writers, intellectuals and the regime, only to resurface time and again through the 1950s, 1960s and later. During the Great Leap Forward, the Party glorified and insisted on the use of Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism and during the Cultural Revolution, the literature was also used by the Party to ensure ideological uniformity, and to activate and influence the masses with revolutionary zeal. For example, 'Eight Model Operas' engineered by Jiang Qing were staged in different locations in China, along with select films and novels on themes of Heroism, to do away with everything that was feudal or Bourgeois. These operas were constructed on ideas such as glorification of Peoples Liberation Army, Mao Zedong and his thought's role in the victory of Socialism, China's recent struggle and bravery of common masses etc.

The literature produced during the Mao period was very closely 'chained' to political necessities of the Party-State, leaving very little space for subjectivity and Activism in creative production. The tussle between the political establishment and writers periodically manifested itself in occasional literary dissent, tightening of political control that followed such dissent and with a pattern of criticism and self-criticism that was established in Yan'an in 1942. These measures of political control over literary activity more or less remained the same until 1976.

Chinese Literature in the Reform period (1978 onwards)

Ten years of turmoil of the Cultural Revolution shook China with potentially far-reaching implications but with Mao passing away in 1976, and Deng Xiaoping and his associates coming to power, there were some efficient measures to revive economy, such as Reform and Opening up. With the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978, several changes were introduced in

China that had far-reaching effects on the Chinese society. The CPC leadership introduced key thoughts such as ‘Emancipation of Mind’ (解放思想 *jiefang sixiang*).¹¹

Soon enough, Chinese literature was flooded with different themes and genres. Many of them were unexplored trends such as *Scar Literature* (伤痕文学 *shanghen wenxue*) where the leadership loosened ideological control on the writers and permitted them to write emotional and psychological devastations of life during the Cultural Revolution; *Reflective Literature* (反思文学 *fansi wenxue*), also known as Introspective literature sometimes, that explored human disasters caused by extreme politics of the Communist Party; *Roots-Seeking Literature* (寻根文学 *xungen wenxue*) that explored both positive and negative aspects of Chinese culture and its tenets; *Avant-garde Literature* (先锋文学 *xianfeng wenxue*) that experimented with modernist techniques and literary concepts; *New Realism Literature* (新现实主义 *xin xianshizhuyi*) that explored and emphasized everyday life of the ordinary people; *Women’s Writings or Women’s Literature* (女性写作/妇女文学 *nüxing xiezu/funü wenxue*) which explored plight of the Chinese women in contemporary society etc.

In a relaxed and liberal atmosphere after the fall of Gang of Four, the first trend that emerged was that of Scar Literature. Scar literature criticized and exposed the darker aspects of the Socialist society, mistakes of the past such as the Cultural Revolution, and psychological and emotional wounds inflicted on the people by them. Despite of the critical nature of these works, they were published in state-sponsored literary journals and newspapers. Scar literature found its name and direction after publication of a short story by the same name *Scar*. *Scar* (伤痕 *shanghen*) by Liu Xinhua (刘新华) is a story of a young woman whose parents were branded ‘counter-revolutionary’ during the Cultural Revolution and she was forced to abandon them. She is later abandoned by a man, whom she loves, because of the same reason, i.e. her ‘polluted’ family background. A real person caught up in a real-life situation made *Scar* appealing to the masses, and it then unleashed a string of real-life stories of family tragedy under this genre. Other prominent works of this genre are: *The Homeroom Teacher* (班主任 Chinese, year) by Liu Xinwu, *Body and Soul* (灵与肉 *ling yu rou*, 1981) by Zhang Xianliang, *A Chinese Winter’s Tale* (一个冬天的童话 *yige dongtian de tonghua*, 1980) by Yu Luojin, *At the Middle Age* (人到中年 *ren dao zhongnian*) by Shen Rong, *The Transcript* (Chinese, year) by Liu Jinlan etc.

On Humanism, Dai Houying’s *Man, oh Man!* (人啊, 人 *ren a, ren*) also translated as *People, oh People!* asserts the value and agency of human beings over blind acceptance of dogma or fallacy.

The literature published during 1979 to mid 1981 is called New Realism literature (新现实主义文学) which included plays like *If I were Real* (假如我是真的 *jiaru wo shi zhen de*) and film scripts like *In the Archives of the Society* (在社会的档案里 *zai shehui de dangan li*), *Girl Thief* (女贼 *nü zei*) and *Unrequited Love* (苦恋 *ku lian*) and also some works of reportage. The film script *Unrequited Love* brought forth the issue of blind dogmatism that people dread, for it crushes ethos like humanism and patriotism under its feet. These examples were honest portrayals by writers of extended Scar literature,

¹¹ Refer to Deng Xiaoping’s speech from 13 December 1978, when he spoke at the Central Working Conference about ‘emancipating the mind’. It had set theme for the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central committee. His speech entitled “Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from the Facts, and Unite as One in Looking to the Future”. For details, see Deng, Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1984), pp.151-165.

and all these plays and films scripts highlight the problems of the contemporary Chinese society.

Reportage (报告文学 *baogao wenxue*), also a part of New Realism literature, was a literary style that involved reporting of true events and concrete facts. This genre was in the format of journalistic reports which usually redressed social and political injustices. One of the most prominent examples of a reportage was *Between Monsters and Men* (人妖之间 *ren yao zhijian*) by Liu Binyan which exposed the corruption within the party with glaring intensity. The work earned Liu immense popularity and since then this work has been regarded as a landmark of the revival of 'Critical Realism'.

Roots-Seeking literature in early 1980s (1983-86), also known as 'searching-for-roots' fever, was suggestive of seeking roots of Chinese culture. With an underlying thought that the roots of China's political problems lie in the historical traditions of China, this literary genre criticised not only the traditional Chinese culture, but also the national character of China. As this was a view supported by liberal intellectuals, they also consciously looked for new cultural concepts that China could look up to and revitalise itself. Writers like Han Shaogong, Mo Yan and Jia Pingwa that also sought to reconnect literature and culture to Chinese traditions, which a century of modernization had eroded away. Han Shaogong's *Pa pa pa* (爸爸 *ba ba ba*), *The Roots of Literature* (文学的根 *wenxue de gen*) and *Women Women* (女女女 *nü nü nü*) were prominent examples of the trend.

In the genre of Women's Writings, eminent scholar Dai Jinhua identifies common features of female writings in China by reading works of Wang Anyi, Xu Lan, Meng Hui, Xu Kun, Chi Li, Hai Nan, Tie Ning, Lin Bai and Chen Ran etc. and explains that all these writers have themes of gender identity and gender awareness. Further explained by Dai Jinhua in her understanding of Women's writings and Feminism in China: "Feminism in China today is marked by two distinct characteristics. Firstly, it attaches importance to literature as a historical development and much work has been done in charting the history of feminist writings. Secondly, critics are becoming more aware of the differences between China and the west. They believe it is necessary to take into consideration the peculiarities of Chinese culture and society when they practice feminist criticism."¹² To cite a few examples of this genre, Wang Anyi's *Love Trilogy* (三恋 *sanlian*) and *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌 *chang hen ge*), Zhang Jie's *Love must not be Forgotten* (爱是不能忘记的 *ai shi bu neng wangji de*), *The Ark* (方舟 *fang zhou*) and *Laden Wings* (沉重的翅膀 *chenzhong de chibang*), Zhang Xinxin's *On the Same Horizon* (在同一个地平线上 *zai tongyi ge dipingxian shang*) and *Dreams of our Generation* (我们这个年纪的梦 *women zhege nianji de meng*) and Chen Ran's works, published later in the 1990s, such as *Private Life* (私人生活 *siren shenghuo*) etc. These works are an amalgamation of Neo-Realism, Modernism and an exploration of female subjectivity in a radically changing Chinese society.

In Avant Garde literature, serving as the people's Avant-Garde (literally meaning advance guards), the writers believe that the power of the art is indeed the most immediate and fastest way to bring about social, political and economic reforms. Pioneers of this trend were writers like Yu Hua (余华

¹² Refer to Dai Jinhua's 1996 essay, "Adventures and Breakthroughs: Female Writings in the 1990s" (奇遇与突围: 九十年代女性写作); here cited from Tam, Kwok-kan, Yip, Terry Siu-han., *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in the Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010), p.43.

), Ge Fei (格非), Su Tong (苏童) etc. that probed into the darkness of history in the search of ultimate truths about human conditions. Yu Hua's *Cries in the Drizzle* (在细雨中呼喊 *zai xiyu zhong huhan*) and *To Live* (活着 *huozhe*), Su Tong's *Wives and Concubines* (妻妾成群 *qiqie chengqun*) and *Rice* (米 *mi*), and Ge Fei's *The Lost Boat* (迷舟 *mizhou*) and *A Flock of Brown Birds* (褐色鸟群 *hese niaoqun*) are prominent examples of this genre.

These works tried to make sense of old traumas, psychological bearings of it and massive social change that often accompanied it. The works set out a new historical discourse, by rejecting, subverting and finally transcending the Mao's vision of China, in overall, by undermining the history of China put forward by the State.

There were some other obscure literary trends that rose to prominence such as Hooligan literature, introduced by Wang Shuo. This prominent literary trend that originated from the late 1980s and continued into the 1990s was linked with the emerging 'middle class', a class that did not have great political power to yield but had the purchasing capabilities and aspirations and had found the space to look at the establishment with a critical eye. Hooligan Literature's hallmark was a fast-paced storyline, quick humor and slangs of the street, and thus, this kind of literature challenged the existing social and literary norms.

Conclusion:

It can be seen that the modern Chinese literary thought was influenced by the orthodox Marxist view of literature to a great extent and took its final shape based on the interactions between several factors such as the differing interpretations of the Marxist literary thought. The debates on what kind of conflict arise as a result of differing perceptions and how will it be applied in the Chinese context etc. carried on much later into 1930s. Chinese literature of the May Fourth period was diverse in variety and content of literature produced, also the theoretical understanding of what role literature could play continued to be debated much into the 1930s. It is only the period of civil war and Mao period where we see tightening of political control and almost no scope of activism in literature. The only activism one can acknowledge is the Party sponsored literary activism with strict censorship.

The changing equation between the relationship of literature with politics was evident in the post-Mao period as the rigid control over literary activity was somewhat loosened in the 1980s. Therefore, Deng era saw unprecedented diversity in literary trends and themes that the writers explored. On the old concern of artistic creation, Deng adopted a comparatively relaxed policy towards writers and artists. In his speech at the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists, Deng asserted:

In the production of literature and art, which involves complex mental labour, it is essential that writers and artists follow their own creative spirit. What subjects they should choose for their creative work and how they should deal with those subjects are questions that writers and artists themselves must examine and gradually resolve through practice. There should be no arbitrary

meddling in this process.¹³

All these trends have shown concerns for various issues plaguing the Chinese society or its advancement, but many of them also have brought focus away from the Party or society as a 'collective', back on the 'individual'. Universal human nature was an important concern that had surfaced in the Chinese literature during the early 1980s; along the exploration into the human nature, humanism and alienation emerged as two important concepts in literary exploration. In preoccupation with innovation and technique, the writers explored a different perception of human existence, i.e. perceiving human life through individualistic and psychological frame of reference, and not just limiting the human life to be perceived in the framework of socio-political environment.

The 1980's literature addressed many issues of human existence, including the issue of alienation. Especially in the early 1980s where addressing concerns like human nature, alienation etc. had just started to emerge, theoretician Wang Ruoshui supported the sentiment that alienation can exist in Socialist society too. Citing Marx's earlier writing, he professed that alienation can exist in any system that produces forces which oppress people. In his 1986 speech, Wang sympathized with masses and clearly argued that Chinese Socialist system has produced negatives like personality cult, irrational economic policies, bureaucratic indifference, corruption, privileges and selfish individualism, all of which had bred alienation and diminished human worth. Suggesting an ideological change, he lamented: "...it is highly necessary to prevent these servants of the people transforming themselves into masters of the people".¹⁴

The literature of 1980s concerned itself with negative manifestations of a Socialist system, alienation being one of them, and revival of humanism. In general, the post-Reform period marks various precedence in terms of the genres of literature that emerged and the concerns that they reflected. All trends like the renewal of Critical Realism during the Scar Literature days, emergence of a fresh body of Women's writings and many other trends such as the New Realism Literature, Roots-Seeking Literature, Hooligan Literature and online literature later on were indicative of fundamental changes of the social consciousness and presented a new social reality by trying to influence and expose the undesirable trends, political or social, and calling for change.

It is important to say that this period did see unprecedented diversity with complex interactions in literary works, new artistic skills and exploration of new themes, because before this the writers and intellectuals could not hold the government responsible for their wrong practices and misdeeds. While there were a few exceptions around the May Fourth period, it is the post-Mao period, that created and experienced a spectrum of literary expressions of discontent for the longer time. The similar kind of sentiments or a wave of such expressions, was either an experiment or a conscious effort to voice discontentment in the earlier times.

¹³ Deng Xiaoping, "Speech Greeting the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists", October 30, 1979, accessed from <http://en.people.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1350.html>

¹⁴ Wang Ruoshui's speech of 15 August 1979 was published in his collected essays, "为人道主义辩护" (wei redaozhuyi bianhu- *In defense of humanism*), Beijing, 1986, p.16. Cited from Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim (ed.), *China's Quest for National Identity*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p.139.

Post-Reform period literature has continuously strived hard to broaden the creative spaces by not succumbing to the pressures of the official dictum as far as their creative undertaking is concerned. Many of them had continued to cross boundary of forbidden areas by staying true to reality and writing about them.

