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## From Mind-Labouring Elite to Cultural Iconoclasts:

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### The Changing Role of Chinese Men of Letters

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*Chinese literature has probably the oldest and richest tradition in the world's civilisation. Yet the role of Chinese imaginative writers in Chinese culture, politics and society through different periods of history has not been sufficiently mapped out. The fact that writing was not a profession until the early decades of the twentieth century was partly the cause of such an absence. Moreover, modern Chinese history of literature is a complex one, one that has been intertwined with almost every aspect of Chinese life. This study tries to examine the Chinese men of letters as a social group, who have not only created a large body of cultural wealth and legacy, but who have also played critical roles in various historical periods from actually forming part of the governing elite in feudal China, to championing social and political reforms and revolutions; giving birth to new thoughts and ideas that constitute the modern identity of China; and virtually paving the way for the founding of New China. More recently, during the current reform and development, Chinese men of letters came first to appreciate the crisis pervading China, which presented possibilities to Chinese society, by pursuing new forms of expression through literary creativity and imagination.*

#### Literati Officials: "Mind-Labouring Elite"

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese literary men had mainly functioned in the upper stratum of the social structure owing to an imperial civil service examination system based on Confucian learning and other literary classics.<sup>1</sup> Many literary intellectuals, having succeeded in the imperial civil service examinations, were either assigned to head the local governments at various levels in accordance with their examination grades and results, or served in the imperial court or the *Hanlin Academy* [*Hanlin Yuan*]<sup>2</sup>: the highest circle of literati sponsored by the court to serve state functions, provide advice to emperors, record and revise national historic texts, manage and supervise science and arts institutions or to entertain emperors and their ministers. For nearly two thousand years, both as a philosophy and as a way of life, Confucianism provided the moral, social and political foundation of Chinese culture. Its essence was the "principle of social hierarchy", which governed Chinese social and political life and formed the basis of traditional ethics. It overtly and unequivocally advocated a social hierarchy and emphasised the importance of the social *status quo* of different categories of people.<sup>3</sup> Because the literati officials gained entry into the gentry class and the governing elite through the civil service examination system based on Confucian learning, for centuries they came to see themselves as the scholarly guardians of such a political tradition based on patriarchy and an unconditional respect for seniority, the past and

bygone days.<sup>4</sup>

This unique process of selecting government officials produced a peculiar group of governing elite—literati officials. They were the group who were termed as “labouring with their minds”.<sup>5</sup> In a rigid hierarchical system like that of feudal China, reading literature was one of the very few ways that allowed a certain degree of social mobility. Because they managed to reach the upper division of the social ladder through accumulating ideas, wisdom and knowledge, rather than capital, they were more concerned with the social well-being of the people and harboured a more egalitarian vision of society than other groups of social elite, such as landlords, merchants and aristocrats. They read literature in order to “govern”. Whilst this practice gave literature an authoritative and institutionalised status in society, it helped create a humanitarian mentality amongst these “future governors”. Literature and literary knowledge were first of all regarded as a stepping stone and pre-condition to governing. If one was already an eminent figure in literature, one would be subsequently “invited” into the governing “four hundred”. Levenson tries to mark the true nature of this peculiar elite group by comparing them with the French aristocracy before the revolution. He points out:

... as long as the governors did indeed “labour with their minds”, as long as they maintained their occupational badge, their Confucian intelligence, as the intelligence of the society, they were never, as a ruling class, parasites in the full sense of the term. (Levenson, 1968: 82)

This process had a repercussion on traditional Chinese politics. Being characterised as narcissistic, sentimental and self-pitying, these literati officials governed with a “literary” style, which appeared to be “romantic”, humanitarian and sympathetic on the one hand, but irrational, inefficient and backward-looking on the other. As literature was never an established vocation in feudal China, its practitioners never became a self-conscious status group in society and had to rely on the patronage of the autocratic ruling class. There thus formed a contradictory personality in these literati officials. They might lack radical political vision and yet most of them cherished an unequivocal hope for a more just and prosperous society and a strong and powerful nation. Culturally, because of the special traditional role and position of these literati officials in society, the printed messages (in particular literary and historic writings) were regarded as inherently true<sup>6</sup> by the general readership. The power of the printed word was considerably greater in Chinese society than in most other societies. Thus literary writings had acquired a certain degree of credibility and authority amongst the masses, posing a challenge to the autocratic regimes.

### **Confucian Values *vis-à-vis* Early Western Influence**

Confucianism, having developed fundamentally from an autarchic family-based agrarian economy, honoured and safeguarded patriarchal power. In the early stage of its existence, it was compatible with the economic development of China and contributed to creating positive social values in society maintaining both the stability and reasonable living standards of the autarchic family (Su Xiaokang, 1988: 70). Nevertheless, in time it was ritualised and bureaucratised by the rulers to serve as a means of maintaining the *status quo*.

The well-known Sinologist and diplomat, John Fairbank once noted that “to Western observers, China has presented a puzzling contrast: a great richness of human personality but

little tradition of civil liberty” (Fairbank, 1980: 72–73). The all-pervasive Confucianism of social and political patriarchy, plus another important traditional Chinese philosophy of the so-called “non-action” or “do-nothing” Taoism could never possibly give birth to any concept of Western-type civil liberty. In fact, in feudal China, all political communications with officialdom “were, by definition, petitions” (Gray, 1990: 16). Historically speaking, Confucianism created a social and political culture of duty-oriented society. A man’s role was defined by his duty to his superior, his subordinates, his parents, his family, and his children. In such a culture, civil liberty was not, to a large extent, the foremost concern in society. However, the literati officials did bring some form of human personality into China’s political system and culture.

The beginning of the 1800s found the last feudal dynasty, the Qing regime (1644–1911), in irrevocable decline. Held back by outdated Confucian ethics, it developed all kinds of sick social and political symptoms: such as administrative inefficiency, widespread corruption, speculation, a drained treasury, an incipient economic crisis, and an unchecked population growth. These symptoms presaged the fall of the Dynasty in a not too distant future.

However, Chinese social, cultural and political entity at the time was still predominantly sustained by its richness of human personality and cultural deposits represented by a highly moralistic literature. The most distinctive and popular consisted of a series of novels that flourished during the late Yuan, and the Ming and Qing Dynasty.<sup>7</sup> The most notable and best-read novels included *Pilgrimage to the West* [*Xiyou Ji*], *The Water Margins* [*Shuihu Zhuan*], *An Unofficial History of the Confucian Scholars* [*Ruli Waishi*], *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [*Sanguo Yanyi*], *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [*Honglou Meng*], *The Golden Lotus* [*Jinping Mei*], and *The Three Swordsmen* [*Sanxia Wuyi*]. A common feature of these works was their rebellious spirit against oppression, injustice, hypocrisy and corruption. They embodied the Chinese people’s protest against tyranny and dark forces and outlined their vision of a just society. They were read by a wide-ranging readership and the insights they afforded in different periods of history were never exhausted. These novels came from a unique combination of two sources, the historical record and the market place. Coupled with the authors’ aesthetic vision and astuteness, they became another gem in the canon of Chinese classics.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, these novels were constantly rewritten into different forms of operas and stage shows, which not only popularised them, but was also able to invest new meanings into the originals.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, all the symptoms coalesced into a serious political cancer. The invasion by Western countries accelerated the decline. Foreign encroachment and local revolutions began to beset the aged monarchy. A period of turbulence started with the most radical and violent rebellion in the Qing history, the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) accompanied by China’s defeat in the two Sino-British opium wars (1840 and 1860 respectively).

The influx of an alien culture in the wake of military, economic and political invasions began to confront the Chinese way of life and political thinking, at the root of which lay Confucianism. Its values, appropriateness and accountability in a changing world were being brought into focus and questioned.

Many mandarin scholars, being concerned about China’s future, now demanded radical reforms. By this time, more and more scholars among the gentry class came to realise the

serious political and cultural decline that the country was in and attributed the full extent of it to Confucian learning. Thus, in 1898, a group of well-known literati officials, Kang Youwei<sup>9</sup> (1858–1927), Liang Qichao<sup>10</sup> (1873–1929), Yan Fu (1833–1921) and others, launched another movement, known as the 1898 Constitutional Reform in order to introduce into China the Western bourgeois political system and ideology (Rodzinski, 1979: 368–73). They banded together and were able to gain influence with Emperor Guangxu and persuade him to issue edicts calling for the creation of a political advisory council, the abolition of sinecures in the bureaucracy, the promotion of industry and commerce, and the creation of a national school system, which would include western learning in the curriculum. These leaders of the reform also realised that cultural reform could in turn bring a change in political institutions. However, all these measures were aimed at saving the Monarchy, and not to change or abolish it. Hence, when the movement came to pose some threat to the very core of Confucian values, a hostile conservative reaction, headed by the Empress-Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), led to the arrest of the leading reformers and the repression of the movement, and she virtually placed Emperor Guangxu under house arrest. The so-called Constitutional Reform miscarried only one hundred days after it started, and so became known as the Hundred-Day Reform. By this time many had realised that piecemeal reforms were not able to rescue China from decline. It would have to take the form of a major revolution. An overthrow of Confucianism was deemed necessary, as Lu Xun (1881–1936), the greatest modern writer and thinker in twentieth-century China, later noted that reconciliation of the new thinking with the traditional culture was impossible. He expressed his uncompromising attitude towards Confucian tradition by quoting Ibsen's words: all or nothing.

From then on, the Qing government, on the one hand, continued to make concessions to the foreign powers, and on the other, began to adopt some reforms in the hope of reviving the dying empire. Even the Empress-Dowager Cixi herself, a couple of years later, having somehow realised the weaknesses of the Chinese educational system and the associated cultural values, in a desperate attempt to secure the survival of the Dynasty, also launched a series of political, educational and military reforms. These included the abolition of the traditional imperial civil service examination system in 1905 and its replacement by a national system of modern schools, and the encouragement of study abroad, particularly in Japan, which was by now regarded as an inspiring, successful and relevant example of Asiatic modernisation.

Whilst some Qing loyalists were still struggling to save the Empire by various make-do measures, the collapse of the Qing Dynasty was accelerating very rapidly. Before these loyalists could put up any effective measures, the Emperor Guangxu and the Empress-Dowager Cixi died within a week of each other. The six-year-old Emperor Xuantong (Aisin Gioro Puyi, 1903–68) succeeded to the throne and the Qing Dynasty became even weaker than ever before. Finally Dr Sun Yet-sun<sup>11</sup> (1866–1925) seized the opportunity and launched a bourgeois democratic revolution in 1911, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty and ended the history of feudal reign of some three thousand years' standing.

### **Finding a Role—the Emergence of Modernity in the Early Republican Years**

The rapid decomposition of the old feudal regime in 1911, and a series of institutional changes all led to the collapse of the established prospects of life for traditional literati intellectuals in society, who were being faced by an uncertain future. Their traditional role had been lost. Whilst some of them still lamented the loss of their traditional privileged roles in society, others very quickly realised the inevitable tendency in the face of Western influence and came to terms with the newly emerged social, cultural and political environment and appeared as a new progressive social force. They mounted on to the social and political stage by waging a fierce attack on Confucian values and learning.

Though the feudal system had been overthrown, its values associated with and sustained by Confucian learning, were still deeply rooted in society and people's mentality. Immediately after the 1911 Revolution, the Nationalist Party (Guomin Dang), did engage itself in the plan of modernising Chinese politics by embarking on a well-planned and co-ordinated electoral campaign calling for local government reform as well as limited presidential power and cabinet responsibility to parliament. However, the process was nipped in the bud when Song Jiaoren (1882–1913), Sun Yet-sun's close friend and colleague, was assassinated in March 1913, just one month before the parliament was due to open. This incident brought to an end China's apprenticeship in political modernity. Thereafter, politics in China, controlled and manipulated by the Northern and other warlords, continued to be corrupt and despotic. Popular resentment and resistance grew ever stronger.

Liang Qichao described the period as a time when "old learning is gone, new learning is not yet formed; and all sorts of debauched ideas and thoughts converge" (Liang Qichao, 1984: 259). It was a time when "chaos and corruption reach their extreme and all kinds of evils converge" (Liang Qichao, 1984: 259). Meanwhile, he recognised the importance of a new literature in Chinese society. He claimed that this new literature concerned China's future and to reform Chinese politics should start from the reform of literature (Liang Qichao, 1984: 353). Chen Duxiu (1880–1942)—who later became the Secretary-General of the Communist Party in the 1920s—also called for the establishment of "a plain and lyrical national literature", "a fresh and sincere realistic literature" and "intelligible and popular social literature", to replace the time-worn "ornate, bombastic literature of classicism", and "obscure, difficult literature of the hermit and the recluse" (Chen Duxiu in Hsia, 1971: 4). It was during this period that the practice of literature was becoming an independent vocation owing to the increasing prosperity of journalism and publishing attendant with the political change in the country. Liang understood very well the position and nature of literature in Chinese society. The classic Chinese literature based on Confucianism left very distinctive marks on Chinese culture and mentality. It encased the personality of the individual within the parameters of his prescribed roles in society, to the extent that his individuality was hardly differentiated from those roles. In traditional Chinese society, all interpersonal relationships were held together by a hierarchy of such social roles. Each role was performed in the way it had been prescribed and celebrated in the Confucian texts, which were highly formalised in such a way that was instrumental to such social and political controls. Thus, literary revolution and cultural enlightenment was deemed cardinal and absolutely essential by these reformers in order to carry out radical social and political reforms. The radical literati officials

believed that by way of literary revolution and cultural enlightenment they could re-cultivate the “subjectivity of man” and thus re-address man’s position *vis-à-vis* society in order to pave the way for deeper and wider social and political reforms (Li Huanxing, 1991: 65). It was at this historical moment that the Chinese *litterateurs* began to function as social and political catalysts.

Many men of letters again fought in the front-line with their pens as their most sharp weaponry. Literature became the battleground where a cultural crisis could be appreciated and the struggle for a clear meaning about China’s situation and future was to be waged. Literature at the time was not only instrumental in bringing changes to Chinese society, but also in creating new meanings and concepts for the old civilisation. The writers played an active and crucial role in the radical transformation from a feudal society to a semi-bourgeois republic. Without literature one could hardly imagine that the transformation could have been possible, at least not to the scale and extent that had now been under way.

Although political modernity had stagnated, literary modernity was looming large and strong. Some progressive intellectuals and writers led by Chen Duxiu inaugurated in 1915 the periodical *Youth* (*Qingnian*), (later renamed *New Youth* [*Xin Qingnian*]), which advocated Western style democracy to oppose the Chinese autocracy; liberation of individuality to oppose the traditional Chinese ethics and Confucian hierarchical values; science to oppose superstition; and a modern literature to oppose the traditional one. The other contributors to *New Youth* included literary and intellectual celebrities such as Hu Shi (1891–1962), and Li Dazhao (1888–1927), the later Communist chief. Most eminent among them was the greatest Chinese writer of the century, Lu Xun, who had gone to Japan in the early years of the century to study medicine with the hope of strengthening the Chinese nation by medical science but later gave it up in the realisation that science could not of itself change China until a fundamental change in mentality occurred amongst the Chinese people. Through the medium of literature, Lu Xun hoped to draw attention to the evils of traditional ethics and Chinese society and thereby encourage his compatriots to question the attitudes that underlay them. He savagely attacked Confucianism as “cannibalism” in his *Diary of a Madman*, the first novel to be written in vernacular Chinese. Not only did it set an example of the form of modern Chinese writing, but it also established, to a certain extent, the progressive and critical tradition of modern Chinese imaginative literature. The story conveys, most succinctly, the author’s attitude towards the Confucian tradition. Suffering from a persecution complex, the madman thinks that all those around him, including his immediate family, (very significant in the light of Confucian tradition) are going to kill and eat him. To confirm his suspicions, one evening, he delves into a book of Chinese history:

In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I try to look this up, but this history records no dates, and over every page are scrawled the words “benevolence, righteousness, virtue and morality”: since I couldn’t go to sleep anyway, I made a close scrutiny of this book. Until by midnight, I discovered all over it a succession of two words between the lines: “Eating people”....

I have only just realised that I have been living all these years in a place where for four thousand years they have been eating human flesh. My brother had just taken over the charge of the house when our sister died. And he may well have used her flesh in our rice and dishes, making us eat it unwittingly.... Perhaps there are still children who have not eaten human flesh?

Save the children! (Lu Xun, 1968: 19)

Together, these progressive Chinese writers launched a fierce attack on Chinese tradition and argued that the persistence of Confucian ethics stifled the emergence of a modern democratic political culture. They particularly criticised the traditional patriarchal order, with its emphasis on absolute respect and obedience for the old and the relegation of women to an inferior status. In spite of the Confucian protestation of benevolence and righteousness, for Lu Xun and many progressive Chinese, traditional values consisted of nothing but moral cannibalism.

This literary and cultural movement brought Chinese literature in close contact with contemporary Chinese reality and politics. This new form of literature gave direction to social and political change and progress and started a modern progressive tradition of Chinese literature accelerated by the May Fourth Movement. On 4 May 1919, some 5,000 Beijing students demonstrated and called for a rejection of the Versailles Peace Conference decision, which granted Japan rights over China's Shandong Province. The demonstration grew into a powerful and vociferous mass movement. Nationalist feeling, which had hitherto been limited to a few intellectuals, now spread through all levels of society. The movement spilled over into a literary and intellectual revolution—the New Culture Movement. This was the time when China really began to grapple with new ideas to try and explain its situation and its relation to the world. The movement was characterised initially by an interest in the West, especially in its modernisation and democracy associated with its successful economic and industrial development. However, owing to the disillusionment with the West and the Western powers' wilful violation of Chinese sovereignty and interests as a result of the Versailles Treaty, and the encouragement of the declaration by the new Soviet government in 1918 that it would renounce the unequal treaties concluded by Tsarist Russia and the Qing China during the nineteenth century, there arose an interest in the new Soviet Union and Marxism among students and intellectuals.

The period (1910s–1930s) witnessed the beginning of China's "apprenticeship" in modernity in literature and politics and a new "civilisation of the coast". Although political modernity was largely checked by the rise of statist nationalism in 1927, the momentum of this literary modernity still carried on for some time until it was diverted into different paths by the rise of the communist force in the late 1940s.

During this time the modernity of literature clearly and positively catalysed the social and political developments. For modernity is an intrinsic characteristic of modern literature. Thus, Western literature and political thought amongst other things caught the attention of the radical Chinese students and young intellectuals. Writers such as Shaw, Ibsen and Turgenev were translated. In 1919 and 1920, Shaw, Russell and the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey arrived in China on a visiting tour to give lectures to enchanted Chinese student audiences. The fact that many of the Chinese writers publishing at the time were university lecturers and professors contributed to the promotion and expansion of a modern literature, and the modern political thought came with it. For the first time in its long history, China was really brought into the whirlpool of modern world politics and made to re-evaluate its cultural legacy by the introduction of a new type of literature. The literary reform brought significant changes to Chinese society, especially the emergence of a healthy popular vernacular-language literature directed at social and political progress. This modern literature was deeply and intrinsically intertwined with the Chinese revolution and emergence of

modern China, though it is very difficult and perhaps pointless to argue about the question whether it was literary revolution which led to social revolution or *vice versa*. Evidently, in view of China's history, social revolution could not have been completed without literature and literary revolution would not make any sense without social and political perspectives.

It was during the same period that a modern and revolutionary tradition of Chinese writers was formed. During this period, there arose a new group of intelligentsia, many of whom took up writing as their profession. Though they had received Confucian learning earlier, their political outlook was broadened by the recent developments in the world. They soon adapted themselves to the new situation in China and by the 1930s they succeeded in establishing a very healthy modern tradition in Chinese literature and culture. The prominent figures included Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Cao Yu and Lao She. They began to produce a large body of literary works directed towards socio-political issues and realities. These works showed great concern about the progress and development of the nation and represented a self-conscious political stance to search for creative freedom and political ideals. Thanks to a comparatively unrestrained atmosphere for artistic creativity, literary works produced in this period have seldom been surpassed in artistic terms even up to the present day. The Chinese writers and intellectuals of the May Fourth tradition, by questioning the traditional values and promoting science and democracy, paved the way for the socialist victory in 1949. Some critics even compare these writers and intellectuals to the French author Voltaire (1692–1776), who helped to prepare the ground for the French Revolution (Schwarcz, 1986; Bailey, 1988). Just as Voltaire fought against tyranny, bigotry and cruelty, these Chinese writers propagated an ideal of progress in modern Chinese history.

Later disappointed with the Guomin Dang rule, which had fallen into an utter corrupt and tyrannical regime, some progressive writers saw China's hope in the Communist Party and went to Yan'an, the military base of the communist force during the anti-Japanese war and started another tradition of modern Chinese literature, which became the main stream imaginative writings in New China.

Mao himself, though very often critical of Chinese literary men and intellectuals, spoke highly of these early progressive writers and their contribution to the Chinese revolution:

To defeat the enemy, we must rely primarily upon the army with guns. But this army alone is not enough. We must also have a cultural army.... Since the May Fourth Movement, such a cultural army has taken shape in China. It has helped the Chinese revolution. It has weakened the influence and reduced the domain both of China's feudal culture and of the comprador culture which served imperialist aggression. (Mao, 1967b: 69)

The Yan'an years (1937–47) witnessed the maturity of Mao's ideological leadership and the Chinese Communist Party as a major political force, which marked the beginning of a personality cult. It was also during this period that Mao began to show great concern about a "genuine revolutionary literature", beginning his criticism of the elitism of certain writers and intellectuals in Yan'an.

### **The 1949 Revolution and Literature**

The year 1949 found a new social and political order in China, which is still providing possibilities to China today and the world in general.<sup>12</sup> However, the success of the socialist



revolution gave the state the unequivocal authority to run literary and cultural affairs. Thus literature, as part of the superstructure, which was believed to have a subsequent impact on the economic base, was again incorporated into the state mechanism, though to a lesser extent. Structurally, the established Chinese writers were assigned under central administrative control and usually attached to various branches of the Chinese Writers' Association. The state housed them, national-health serviced them and salaried them, no matter how much they produced—a condition, which, at one time, became the envy of their foreign counterparts. This system, more or less, put them in a similar situation as their predecessors, i.e., literati governors and explained the reason that they always preferred to operate within the system and never tried to become overt literary dissidents.

Nevertheless, the writers of New China were by no means a vested-interest group in society, economically or politically. Owing to the humanistic tradition of Chinese civilisation and the recently acquired more radical modern critical spirit, there remained in them a strong humanistic aspiration, professional integrity and desire for freedom of creativity. They formed an amorphous, yet reasonably independent political and social island in the vast sea of the new Chinese bureaucracy.

In the initial stage, the victory of the socialist revolution first became a magnet for the intellectuals and imaginative writers in Chinese society. Having contributed a great deal to the success of the revolution and socialist construction, they displayed a fervour in promoting an understanding of the new situation in China. With their literary creativity and artistic conscience they helped the general public to come to grips with the unprecedented economic and political changes. Evidently, there existed common ground between the Party and the Chinese writers at this stage. Generally speaking, the literature of this period reflected events of great importance in Chinese social, political and economic life. It nourished society's craving for knowledge about the new system and the deep concern about politics and the changing reality. To a certain extent, it also became a new dimension for events happening in China. Hence, the writers managed to produce a large number of works mainly either concerning the political changes in China or *re-viewing* historical events in a new perspective. The writers displayed in their works a zealous involvement and commitment to the social and political issues. Themes ranged from the change of social structure and attitudes to the transformation of ownership of the means of production. In their writing, they portrayed with a positive overtone three inseparable dimensions of socialist China: all-pervading authoritarianism; centralised economic planning; and highly co-ordinated group orientation. Either by choice or by default, they reflected in a rather realistic manner the social change and political revolution and thus helped to bring about an understanding of the new socialist order. Their works were generally and genuinely received with applause. The first six years of New China went by comparatively peacefully and fruitfully for the Chinese writers.

As time passed, their previous enthusiasm was quenched by uncongenial realities. They tried to see things more in perspective and began to air some subtle, different voices. It was not until 1956 when Mao invited "a hundred flowers to blossom and a hundred schools of thought to contend" that the Chinese writers began to produce louder voices. Mao's persistence persuaded most, if not all, of the writers and intellectuals, who really began to take the "invitation" seriously. The blossom did not last very long before they found themselves, instead of producing the flowers they had been expected to cultivate, having yielded

“poisonous weeds and thorns”. Thus, a national campaign was called for to eliminate all those weeds and thorns.<sup>13</sup>

There is not sufficient evidence to arrive at the conclusion that Mao had set a trap to test or even to catch the Chinese writers and intellectuals. Though he had a critical view of intellectuals in general, he displayed a great interest in Chinese literature and expressed a high appraisal of modern Chinese writers, especially Lu Xun. His motive was genuinely to lift restrictions on the expression of views and to encourage more variety in *socialist* literature and art. His initial intention was seen to be based on a confidence in his economic and political achievement over the previous six years, assuming that the economic and political success should have completely converted Chinese writers and intellectuals to his own views. He was prepared to see more prosperity in literary and cultural spheres. Instead of the hymns and eulogies he expected to hear, he was showered with an eruption of criticisms in various forms—literary and journalistic—directed at some of the policies and the system itself, the political monopoly of power by the Party, the overriding authority of Party members in all institutions and activities, and the lack of freedom of expression. Many called for radical political changes in the structure of the government and system. Some even went so far as to demand power sharing with the Communist Party. All this took Mao by surprise.

Ever since the anti-Rightist Campaign, Mao became even more sceptical about Chinese writers. May of 1963 witnessed Mao’s first personal attempt to promote a campaign to reform literature and art in the belief that literature and art had been used for anti-Party purposes. He claimed, “problems abound in all forms of art ..., in many departments very little has been achieved so far in socialist transformation” (Mao, 1967). Mao attended in person the National Conference of Writers and Artists convened in 1963, seeking to mobilise writers and artists to play their full revolutionary role in the struggle against modern revisionism and urged them to identify with the broad masses of the labouring people, with workers, peasants and soldiers. This reflected Mao’s particular concern about literature and arts in the socialist regime. His previous belief that a sound superstructure could react upon the economic base and society was further strengthened.

Mao’s personal involvement in literature and art silenced many writers, including those well-established writers of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Cao Yu and many others. Shen Congwen, once a nominee for the Nobel Prize for Literature, gave up creative writing and redirected his writing to Chinese costume history. Those who continued to write had either to drastically censor themselves or to incur further tragedies in the Cultural Revolution. Owing to constant negotiations between the political constraints and their true inspiration and stance as writers, they inevitably produced works of a lesser standard.

However, the worst was still to come, and by 1965, the second year after the Chinese economy had substantially picked up after the three-year period of “natural disaster” caused by his Great Leap Forward, Mao was ready to launch an even more ambitious campaign to impose his unique vision and ideology on China and the Chinese people.

### **The Cultural Revolution and Culture-Makers**

Mao’s policy in literature and arts led to a state-managed culture, which assumed hitherto unimagined proportions in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which he had masterminded.

What aims Mao exactly had in mind when he started the revolution remained unclear. However, as the revolution went deeper, it was revealed that its fundamental aim was to revolutionise Chinese society in terms of art and literature, culture in general, ideology and politics. During the revolution, Mao insisted fervently that literature should whole-heartedly serve the interests of the masses in the new socialist context. Anything else was branded as “revisionist” and thus should not have any place in society.

On the one hand, as a revolution directed at the established cultural orders, the Cultural Revolution first of all challenged the legitimate status of the culture-makers, i.e., writers and other intellectuals and their works. On the other, the whole campaign was hijacked by a faction in the party, namely the Gang of Four, to serve their own interests and political ambition. The campaign silenced all writers who did not want to produce “made-to-order” writings, as Mao insisted on the political correctness of art and literature. The whole decade produced no more than a few novels and eight so-called revolutionary model operas. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing was the “godmother” of these operas. These model operas, however, were not created by Jiang and her cronies in the first place. They simply adapted the existing plays to serve their purpose. Originally they were art and literature of a form amongst many others and thus contributed to a cultural development.<sup>14</sup> Once the Gang of Four made them into the only form, the meaning of these plays changed. They brought in nothing but cultural hegemony and political deprivation all in the name of the Cultural Revolution. Even these playwrights were frustrated by not being able to follow Jiang’s edicts. They were constantly instructed to mend and patch their works. Consequently, they were torn between their instinct and professional desire to be artists, and the awareness of being revolutionaries whose foremost mission was political—and the consequent fear of being accused of political incorrectness. Eventually the Cultural Revolution turned into cultural vandalism. Most culture-creators were banished from society. Many of their talents and resources were squandered by the state in the pursuit of an unattainable political ideal. Most literature published in this period did not even merit inclusion in Chinese university literature courses. Edel is right to point out “when it is reduced to propaganda it ceases to be art and becomes advertising” (Edel, 1955: 142). During this period, owing to the fact that a literary criterion (both in terms of creative writing and literary criticism) was set by those who did not write, the literature lacked its own self-consciousness and philosophical power. Consequently, literary works at that time were only mimics and imitations of a prescribed political nature.

### **Post-Mao Reform Years and the Imaginative Writers as Social Iconoclasts**

The death of Mao (1976) marked a turning point in contemporary Chinese history. China began to move to a more open and diversified society through a well-coordinated economic reform aimed at liberalising the planned economy by a limited use of the market mechanism in the hope of boosting China’s economy. The Third Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party’s Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978 delivered the first reasonably thorough criticism of the “ultra-leftist” policies, which had plagued China for a decade. Mao’s leftist Cultural Revolution was implicitly and sometimes officially re-evaluated and criticised. This was unprecedented in the history of the People’s Republic. Politically, the Party also attempted again to incorporate writers into the new system by a

completely new rhetoric proclaiming them as part of the working class.<sup>15</sup> Though simply a change of rhetoric, it did have a positive impact on the writers and intellectuals, as many of them were convinced that they would not be singled out as odd men in society. This had indeed given them a sense of ease and allowed them a degree of freedom to write without much interference from the authorities, at least about the Cultural Revolution.

There followed a whole spate of short stories and novellas exposing the happenings of the Cultural Revolution under the rule of the “Gang of Four”. This was known as “the Literature of the Wounded” and usually took the form of tales of sufferings ending with a note of optimism and determination not to allow a second Cultural Revolution to happen. The mushrooming of such short stories and novellas and other writings started a second period of “a hundred flowers to blossom and a hundred schools of thought to contend”. It was widely regarded as a continuation of the long-postponed modernity of literature and art in society.

Some writers began to explore various aspects of Chinese life and more serious and subtle ideological and political issues. Literary works triggered off many national discussions and debates about Chinese society and politics, including issues such as alienation in Chinese society, and humanism in socialism, all of which questioned the party’s non-fallible position.

There existed a common ground between the Chinese literary men and authority at this stage. That is, they all believed that literature could “change people’s outlooks” (Lu Xun, 1963: 5). Generally speaking, literature in China has had a wider implication and function. It has been constantly involved with Chinese politics, wittingly and unwittingly, and it has been itself a forum that gives birth to many political ideas and developments. In view of the present reforms and developments in China, literature will continue to function in this way, and its producers will still bear the mission of promoting an understanding of China’s existence and reality and offering new visions for its future.

In his recent article “The Ideology of Intellectuals and the Chinese Student Protest Movement of 1989”, Calhoun classifies Chinese intellectuals into three categories as follows: natural scientists, social scientists and literary intellectuals. Natural scientists, represented by the dissident and astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, “linked democracy very closely to science”<sup>16</sup> (Calhoun, 1991: 123). His view echoes some slogans in the May Fourth Movement<sup>17</sup> and even the earlier Constitutional Reform. Owing to a specious omission of peasants and workers in their political discourse and rhetoric, the natural scientists’ concept of freedom and democracy was couched almost entirely in a scientific elitism. What Fang advocated was a rational, scientific leadership based on a simplified scientific view of politics and society, which did not adhere to scientific laws. It hence made little impact on the general public, who were the real driving force behind all historical movements. Thus, his ideal society was not “anything like ‘government of the people, by the people and for the people’ ” (Calhoun, 1991: 124), but was, perhaps, to lead to a meritocratic state. Calhoun’s view might be too harsh on Fang, for he did believe in a more democratic political process and stood as an independent candidate in a local election.

Fang’s views were, by and large, shared by many social scientists in China. They were the newest group<sup>18</sup> of the three, but they commanded a very strong social and political discourse. This group can be further divided into “insiders” and “outsiders”.<sup>19</sup> The “insiders” formed various “think tanks” that developed policy analysis and proposals for the Party and government reformers.<sup>20</sup> They went a step further than the natural scientists and put forward

many arguments, such as decentralisation of economic decision-making, and the need for private ownership and democratisation of political decision-making. At the same time, however, unlike Gorbachev and his close associates,<sup>21</sup> they argued that the strong authority of the centre was necessary to carry out a radical transformation of the economy (Calhoun, 1991: 127). According to Calhoun, Su Shaozhi and other colleagues tried to develop a more serious Marxist theory, which would serve as an impelling force to China's reform and modernisation. This group generally looked to the West for intellectual and academic inspiration, whilst the "outsider" group, represented by Li Zehou attempted to reconstruct traditional Chinese culture and focused on the important role played by intellectuals in general.

Calhoun calls the third group the literary intellectuals. Chinese progressives and reformers in recent history had long seen literary efforts as central to the fundamental (Calhoun, 1991: 127), and even to the present time, imaginative writers were generally considered very influential in society. However, their role in society and politics in relation to their works still remained a controversy, realistically and academically. The influential journalist and literary critic, Liu Binyan, was critical of Chinese literary intellectuals for their experiments with new literary discourse, styles and images, criticising them on the grounds that they had turned away from "reality". For Liu, the first and foremost purpose of literary writing should help to "reorganise society" (Liu, 1990: 171) and contribute to social progress. The poet and literary critic Bei Dao dismissed Liu's argument abruptly by disagreeing that "true art does not ask about its own 'social effects'" (Link, 1989: 40). Whilst it is important not to deny both views without proper analysis, it is also important to recognise that a meaningful conclusion of their role in contemporary Chinese society can only be drawn from studies of the literary texts in relation to their appropriate cultural, economic and socio-political dimensions. For:

... literary discourse, particularly in its modernist guise, is hyperpoliticising. By producing alternative forms of thought *in*<sup>22</sup> language, it makes a political point. By virtue of its departure from linguistic normality, it points to the way that institutions hold individuals within a linguistic web. But it goes beyond this demonstration. It deforms images to show how accepted models of the real are productions of grammatical and rhetorical constructions, and it forms antagonistic imagery that provides sites for resistance of domination. A failure to exercise a literary self-consciousness, then, amounts to the adoption of a de-politicising posture, the acceptance of institutional imperatives. (Shapiro, 1984: 394)

Cultural and political progress and transformation required a new way of thinking and discoursing and literature offered such access to a sphere where new concepts and contradictions of the world were created. Thus, to detach politics from literature for whatever reasons "would only delay a fuller understanding of the multi-faceted political processes in human society" (MacDonald, 1990: 512). However, to treat writers as politicians or political scientists would also lead to a misunderstanding of their role in society and eventually undermine the true messages their works were meant to convey and the value of their work and contribution to society.

Whilst many of these intellectuals, especially the social scientists, did work inside the system, sometimes even very close to the sources of power and in "the business of the State somewhat like Confucian scholars in earlier days" (Lynn Pan, 1988: 172), literary intellectuals mainly functioned in the margin of power. This did not indicate that they had

played a lesser role in Chinese society. On the contrary, they functioned both as theorists of society, and the unofficial opposition to government, and therefore they were figures of public importance and significance. Until recently, as evidence shows, literary writers were either regarded as irrelevant in politics and political studies, or their works were treated only in terms of their political content divorced from their aesthetic dimension, or *vice versa*—just in terms of their so-called literary values without a consideration of their wider social, cultural and political context.

It is important to recall the historical role and function of Chinese writers in society. They have played no less a role in contemporary China. As many would agree they are widely considered as people “who create, distribute, and apply *culture*”<sup>23</sup> (Lipset, 1976: 311).

The current reform and transformation required a new cultural discourse, imagery of the time, and new ways of thinking, which, as evidence shows, were largely supplied by these literary and cultural creators. Moreover, at a level of *realpolitik*, they also acted as “watchdogs for government accountability, proposers of policies, interpreters of the demands and desires” (Calhoun, 1991: 137) of the masses, who generally had less access to means of articulation and expression. Hence literature served as a modern “*Hanlin Academy*” of political thinking and human values, and functioned as a political philosophy.

In today’s China, many writers working in the fields of art, film, literature and philosophy posed an uncompromising challenge to traditional forms and ways of thinking. They drew their intellectual inspiration substantially from various sources including the world, history and aesthetics. Their efforts to bring in “otherness” to Chinese society contributed towards bringing in new insights and inspirations to Chinese social and political life and creating a cultural and political diversity that was fundamentally important for a healthy development of economy, culture, politics and society.

Their venture was part of their commitment to advance social and political justice and to find new meanings of post-Mao Chinese society. For literary art, to reiterate, through its characteristic intrinsic quality and special forms of expression, and its aesthetic dimension according to Marcuse, renders as a form to inspire new thinking, to criticise reality and liberate human spirit (Marcuse, 1978). The new literary discourse presented itself as part of the efforts of depoliticisation of literature and arts from the official leverage. More importantly, this literary endeavour in new forms of expression and fictional narrative actually constituted part of the powerful discourse associated with social, cultural, political and philosophical thinking and activities. Indeed, many Chinese writers and intellectuals came to realise that “historically, the rebuilding of China’s soul was composed of two complementary traditions: the rebuilding of the rational spirit of humanity, which stresses the social, moral, and universal aspect of human life; and the rebuilding of the sensual vital force of humanity, which stresses the individual, aesthetic, and unique aspect of human life” (Lin, 1993: 176).

Literary art “is an endeavour of a society to tell ‘itself about itself in order to describe itself to itself and to others’” (Kearney, 1988: 270). Unlike some of the social and political critics who sought fully to embrace Western culture and political values to apply to Chinese reality, and who totally rejected Chinese cultural and political values and history, contemporary literature and its creators offered a vision and understanding of China’s future based on an understanding of China yesterday and China today. Myrdal is right to argue that:

... the practice of expressing political attitudes only through the medium of purportedly objective arguments and scientific theories is probably in the long run highly injurious to the actual policy that one wishes to support. Quasi-scientific rationalisation of a political endeavour may be an effective propaganda weapon; yet its effect at the crucial time, when the ideal has not acquired enough political backing to be transformed into practical action, is ... almost inhibitory and disintegrating. (Myrdal, 1954: xii)

Similarly, literature, being granted a truth of a “higher” order, “should not and indeed did not disturb the order of business”<sup>24</sup> (Marcuse, 1989: 61), and it therefore possesses a certain advantage over the quasi-scientific rationalisation of politics. In the 1980s, Chinese people experienced some fundamental changes in their political and economic status, which were not only reflected in literature, but also informed and reformed by literature. Literature, as all other forms of art, contains a utopian moment and “even in the most sublimated works of art, there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise’ ... as eminently constructed and produced subjects, works of art, including literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life” (Adorno, 1992: 194). Exactly in this sense, Chinese writers were providing a vision for Chinese society. They might not possess the immediate power to change, but this vision did not just serve as a mirror: it also pointed towards possibilities for the future. It offered visions and possibilities revealed in ways that were only possible through literature. It also broke down an omnipresent hegemony not just over politics but also over language and discourse, especially in view of today’s sweeping globalisation and destruction of a diversity of different cultures.

Chinese literature in the post-Mao period did bring into being a new discourse that enlightened China’s social and political thinking in a way that could not be done by any other means.<sup>25</sup> It was literature that gave the people a sense of purpose, a vision to look forward to, and above all a new language to perceive themselves and a means to discover and transform themselves. And this process was fundamentally a political one. It is very difficult to imagine China’s development without the efforts of Chinese imaginative writers.

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### **Notes on Translation**

Transliteration of Chinese names into English strictly follows the *pinyin* system, the official Romanised Chinese pronunciation alphabet. Thus in accordance, the names that appeared in other systems in cited materials are standardised into *pinyin* in order to avoid confusion.

In most cases, the titles of Chinese sources are translated into English by myself. The original Chinese titles are given in square brackets in the bibliography. 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. That is, the surname comes first and the given name afterwards.

### Notes

1. The Chinese *Keju Zhidu* is normally translated as the imperial civil service examination, or imperial court examination. This method of recruitment to the administrative service of the Chinese imperial state by means of officially conducted written examination dates back to the Early Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–24 A.D.). Philosophers in the Zhou Dynasty (1100 B.C.–256 B.C.) established the intellectual and philosophical foundation that appointment to government should not be based on inherited privilege but on the grounds of an individual's proven abilities. Though Confucianism stresses a social hierarchy and encourages people to behave in accordance with their appropriate social status, it also believes that most men were by nature endowed with similar faculties that they should be selected for office according to the skills and qualities that education and moral training had given them.
2. The functions of *Hanlin* or *Hanlin Yuan* varied from dynasty to dynasty. Its roots can be traced back to an earlier period, but it developed into a fully functioning institution in the early Tang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.) when it was in charge of the Emperor's confidential papers and documents and maintained a very close contact with the Emperor, acting as His Majesty's inner court secretary. After the Tang Dynasty, the Prime Minister (*Zaixiang*) was selected from the *Hanlin* Academy. Later the *Hanlin* Academy was expanded to contain all the officials of similar functions. But the Song Dynasty (960 B.C.–1279) saw a decline of its function, which mainly included preparing and drafting edicts for the inner court and was in charge of astronomy, arts and literature, medicine and historical writings. In the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) it served as an advisory bureau to the inner court. In the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), its function remained largely unchanged performing several ceremonial functions including revising and compiling history, recording emperors' daily activities, writing books, drafting ceremonial documents, teaching emperors classics and history and so on. It was also an institution that housed the reserve of potential governing personnel who were selected on the results of imperial civil service examinations.
3. But the emphasis on these different categories was largely on the behaviour of the people. Confucius' famous maxim "Monarch 'monarchs'; minister 'ministers'; father 'fathers'; son 'sons'." (All the verbs are coined to mean "to do or behave as such.")
4. Confucius (551 B.C.–479 B.C.) himself always looked back to the old days (the Western Zhou Dynasty, 1100 B.C.–771 B.C.) for moral and political inspiration. Thus Confucianism was in fact conservatism in nature.
5. This is Mencius' (372–289 B.C.) famous dictum: "Some labour with their minds, and some labour with their strength. Those who labour with their minds govern others, those who labour with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support those who govern: those who govern others are supported by those who are governed" (Mencius, 1989: 112).
6. The meaning of "true" is two-fold. Firstly the readership believed what they read was true in factual terms (in regard to literature, still true but in disguised form). Secondly, it was believed true because they looked up to the writers as some form of authority, thus the readership believed the authors' judgement, and to some extent, their discourse or truth value in the texts, even though what they had written might not be true events.
7. Actually novels were not regarded as literature at the time. They were considered to be pastime entertainment. *Xiao Shuo*, the Chinese term for novel, literally means "small talk", which indicated its cultural status in society. However, its influence and socio-political function should nonetheless not be underestimated.
8. The Tang poetry and Ming and Qing novels are the two most outstanding accomplishments in Chinese classical literature.
9. A controversial figure in Chinese political history. Kang Youwei propagated reform at this stage, but turned back to Confucianism and became a Qing loyalist in his later years when the Qing regime had been overthrown. His major works include *The Great Commonwealth*, in which he envisaged a utopian world attainable through successive stages of human development, a world where the barriers of race, religion, state, class, sex and family would be removed and where there would be an egalitarian, communal society under a universal government.
10. Kang Youwei's disciple and a bourgeois reformer. Liang Qichao founded the Translation Council of the



- Capital University (*Jingshi Daxue Tang*), later expanded and renamed Beijing University in 1898. He championed the so-called poetry revolution and novel revolution. After the miscarriage of the Constitutional Reform he fled to Japan. His writings had a great influence on Chinese writing and literary styles. During the nation-wide debate on socialism in 1920, he strongly opposed Marxism.
11. Leader of the 1911 Revolution and the founder of the Republic of China.
  12. Chris Connery puts forward a similar view in his recent article "The China Difference" in *Post-modern Culture* by pointing out that "events in China over the last fifteen years should not cause us to forget China's revolution, for the 1949 revolution was not just a marking of the China difference. It was also the hope of a global possibility" (Connery, 1992).
  13. On June 8, 1957, *The People's Daily* published an editorial proclaiming that certain rightists had exposed themselves as pro-Western, harbouring the intention of discrediting the Communist Party and sabotaging the socialist system. Thus an Anti-Rightist Campaign was called for, almost exclusively targeting the intellectuals in various fields, many of whom were imaginative writers. In the campaign, some four hundred and fifty thousand were involved; they were either put into prison, or exiled to remote areas, or banished to the labour farms.
  14. In fact, these modern operas were created by some well-established traditional opera writers. The conventions of the traditional Chinese opera (*Jingju*, or Beijing Opera) with their moral didacticism and emphasis on performing technique coincided with the new ideology that the Party wanted to procreate. They represented a concurrent of the traditional Chinese cultural values and that of the new socialist system.
  15. During and before the Cultural Revolution, writers and other intellectuals had been classified as "petty bourgeois class" belonging to the category who could be used and united into the working class, but not trusted.
  16. Fang Lizhi believes that "science and democracy are running parallel" (quoted in Calhoun, 1991). Owing to his limitation as an astrophysics scientist who commented on Chinese politics actively and frequently, he had a rather simplistic view of society and encouraged scientists to "express their feelings about anything in society, especially if unreasonable, wrong and evil things emerge". He also cherished an emotive belief that "since physicists pursue the unity, harmony and perfection of nature, how can they logically tolerate unreason, discordance and evil? Physicists' methods of pursuing truth make them extremely sensitive while their courage in seeking it enables them to accomplish something". His approach to politics was based on his perception that "almost invariably it was the natural scientists who were the first to become conscious of the emergence of each social crisis" (Fang, 1986: 16–17). He also claims that "what I pursue is a more reasonable society that is pluralistic, non-exclusive, a society that incorporates the best in the human race" (Fang, 1988: 73).
  17. One slogan that prevailed in the May Fourth Movement was "Sciences Save the Nation", which was proven inadequate politically to rebuild the country. This view was typical among many intellectuals at the time. History proves that it is but wishful thinking. Technological advancement can never be sufficient in rebuilding a country like China.
  18. In pre-reform years (1949–76), social scientists were practically non-existent in the true meaning of the word, even though the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had been in operation during this period, but the evidence shows that what they largely did was to function as a Party apparatus and another surrogate voice for the Party and its policies.
  19. Terms borrowed from modern Western politics in regard to pressure groups. (See Kingdom: 1994; Dearlove: 1989).
  20. One representative of this faction was Yan Jiaqi, who was one of the ex-Prime Minister and Party Secretary-General Zhao Ziyang's closest advisors and helped co-ordinate the activities of various intellectual "think tanks" (Calhoun, 1991: 125).
  21. Gorbachev and his close colleagues emphasised the need for political openness (*glasnost*) and restructuring (*perestroika*) to coincide with, or pave the way for economic reforms (Calhoun, 1991: 126).
  22. Emphasis original.
  23. Though the emphasis is original, coincidentally the Chinese equivalent *wenhua* has a much wider connotation. "Cultural" is a literal translation of the Chinese word *wenhua*. Although "culture" is the nearest equivalent that can be found in English, the definition of *wenhua* in Chinese carries a much wider

- meaning, including a broad range of cultural activities such as literature, education, ideology, social and political beliefs and behaviour and so forth.
24. "The order of business", as I understand, means the day-to-day proceedings, social, economic or political, and it also implies a limited period of time. In the long run, arts and literature, as I believe, do "disturb the order of business".
  25. Though admittedly at this time other discourses, such as cultural, philosophical, political etc. did provide in-depth knowledge about China and Chinese society. Books as such included *China on the Mountain Ridge: Problems, Dilemmas, and Painful Alternatives* by He Bochuan (1989), *The River Elegy* by Su Xiaokang et al (1988), Li Zehou's *The History of Thoughts and Marxism in China*, Liu Zaifu's *Reflections on Literature*, and *Literary Criticism and Genre Revolution in the Eighties*.

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