

# Modernism and China:

## A Summary from the *People's Daily*

By He Li

Translated by Geremie Barmé

### TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

#### *Do You Have to be a Modernist to be Modern?*

GAO XINGJIAN has commented that the discussion concerning Modernism is a 'non-debate', such is the ignorance about modern Western literature among both specialists and laymen in China. A legitimate dialogue on Modernism and its relevance to Chinese culture would be a sisyphian undertaking. A survey of the discussion as it has developed in China since 1979 certainly does reveal a woolliness about the history and literature of Western Modernism that is only paralleled by the enthusiasm with which writers and critics alike have joined the fray, disputing issues involving everything from Italian Futurism to the black humour of Kurt Vonnegut and William Burroughs.<sup>1</sup> There is no denying it, the 'cult of the Modern' has taken root in Chinese soil once more, and it is a cult that craves to have a 'modeng' 摩登

<sup>1</sup>Futurism, with its obsession with machinery, has understandably attracted the attention of some Chinese critics. The Italian school of Futurism led by Filippo Marinetti into the welcoming arms of Mussolini is cited as an example of the *avant-garde* doing the goose step, while Russian Futurism is seen as being more progressive in that it was 'absorbed' into Bolshevism after the October Revolution. See "Three Topics in Western Modernist Literature" 西方現代派文學三題, Yuan Kejia 袁可嘉, *Wenyibao*, January 1983. Yuan is one of the most informed writers involved in the debate, though he falls down in his analysis of class struggle and Modernism. Vonnegut has fared surprisingly well in China, and is widely translated. Even the voluble Zhang Jie 張潔 has nothing but praise for his eccentric behaviour, professing herself to be his Chinese 'soul mate' in an article in which she also

roundly condemns American culture as bankrupt and wizened (see *Dushu* 讀書, 1983.5; "Kurt Vonnegut Says: No!"). Joseph Heller of *Catch-22* fame is lauded as the 'creator of black humour', and his novel is available in Chinese; while his long-deceased British cousin in the grotesque, Saki (H.H. Munro) is only known to students of English. Burroughs, the contemporary master of literary cut-up technique, has been mentioned in passing in a number of articles on black humour, but one can hardly imagine his works will ever appear in Chinese. Yet, for all the material now available in Chinese on Modernism, Yuan Kejia's lengthy introduction to the massive compendium of *Selected Works of Foreign Modernism* (*Waiguo xian-daipai zuopinxuan* 外國現代派作品選), Shanghai 1981, Volume 1, is one of the only well-researched studies on the subject.

culture all of its own.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways the situation in post-Cultural Revolution China mirrors Europe after World War I. A sense of spiritual dissolution and crisis has become a salient element of the society, while the decay of political orthodoxy and the increased pressure to industrialize and make projections about the future have caught millions of Chinese, especially the so-called 'lost generation', in a dilemma between Self and Society. The attraction certain 'classics' of Modernism hold for such people—Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* being among the most popular<sup>3</sup>—is hardly surprising. Yet among the *sino-cénacles* of the new literature there are many trendy supporters of the faith who are willing to apply modernist literary devices to the tenets of socialism, and are basically more in sympathy with the positivistic views of Germany's late-nineteenth century *avant-garde*.<sup>4</sup>

In considering the complex, confused and at times simply muddle-headed arguments surrounding Modernism in China today the Western observer may well feel a sense of *déjà vu*. Living in a world based on economic prosperity and avaricious consumerism, in a contemporary culture that is fragmented and elitist, it seems to the onlooker that Modernism is hardly something that can easily be limited to a specialist debate on historical detail or literary techniques. In fact, the discussion concerning Modernism and China has broken free from such academic confines to become a crucial issue in the cultural and political arena.

<sup>2</sup>In recent months the veteran writers Ba Jin and Xia Yan have both commented on the positive influence of Western literature in China up to 1949, and much "foreign-inspired" literature of the 20s and 30s has been reprinted. Some of the more thoughtful proponents of an absolutely contemporary literature along the lines of one or another Westernism are coming to the belated realization that what appears to them to be so new, is in actual fact a continuation of a major trend in post-May 4th literature. In this context, mention should be made of Leo Lee's 李歐梵 fascinating article "Modernism and Modern Chinese Literature: Studies and Comparisons in Literary History" (in Chinese, printed in a collection of essays entitled *Langman zhi yu* 浪漫之餘, Taipei, 1981). Although basically a study of the continuation of the modernist tradition of 30s Chinese literature by Taiwanese writers in the 60s, many of the points that Lee makes, especially those concerning Taiwanese modernists' excessive concern with technique even to the extent of excluding humanity (here he quotes Chen Yingzhen), are of relevance to the study of modernist writers in the mainland.

<sup>3</sup>'Kafkaesquerie' (to indulge in a neologism) in China promises to be an intriguing field for research. Even Gao Xingjian has managed to read a tale of proletarian woe into *The Metamorphosis* (see his *Techniques* page 38, and Zi Wei's *A Portentous Parable Concealed in Absurdity*, in *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu* 1980.1—an interesting cross-cultural and political

comparison can be made between Zi Wei's rather holier-than-thou comments on this story and Vladimir Nabokov's analysis of it in his *Lectures on Literature*, Picador, 1983). Kafka, along with Camus, is one of the most widely read 'modernist' writers in China. The attraction of his scarifying records of desperate isolation and mordant gloom perhaps hold a special fascination for many Chinese. Not all readers are similarly impressed, however; and one critic declares that "for a mentally healthy person to read him . . . requires a great effort of will so as to overcome one's psychological and even physical revulsion . . . (his) world is too distant from our own." ("An Unfamiliar and Confused World", a review of *Selected Works of Foreign Modernism*, by Mu Mu, *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu*, 1983.1).

<sup>4</sup>Their approach may best be summed up in the following quotation: "Suffusing the entire 1880s' sense of the modern was a confident faith in social advance, a readiness to believe that to expose abuses was to invite their annihilation, that to repudiate the conventional past was to clear the way for a healthy moral growth, for welcome ideals. Hard work, clear vision, courage, purposefulness—these were the keys to the future, to the evolution of new types of men, of society, of art" (*Modernism 1890-1930*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, Penguin Books 1976, p. 41). All you have to do is change '1880s' to '1980s'!

Material not available due to  
copyright restrictions.

*'Que sommes nous, d'où venons nous, où allons nous?'*

*'What are we, where do we come from, where are we going?'*

—Paul Gauguin

WOODCUT by the English artist Leon Underwood for *The Dragon Beards versus The Blueprints* by Hsiao Ch'ien (Xiao Qian 蕭乾), London, The Pilot Press, 1944.

The following article appeared in China's leading daily newspaper, the *People's Daily*, on the 13 September, 1983. He Li, the author of this resumé (in all probability a pen-name, as it just happens to be a homophone of the word 'reasonable'), takes the articles that have appeared on Modernism in the Writer's Association *Literary Gazette (Wenyibao)* as his major frame of reference and covers the debate by summarizing a few key articles which have expressed conflicting views on the analysis of Modernism, its place in China, and Modernist writing techniques. The format used in the article is typical of other 'hundred flowers' debates that have been so obligingly summarized for the average reader in the pages of the *People's Daily*. The present digestible compendium of abstracts makes a pretence of objectivity (a striking departure from traditional Chinese mud-slinging journalese), outlining the controversy and the conflicting opinions with seeming impartiality. Upon slightly closer scrutiny, however, the bias of the *People's Daily* reveals itself. Even the writer's introductory remarks betray his heart-felt concern that "certain disturbing tendencies have become evident" in the discussion, and indicate that he is anxious to counteract the influence of writers who have "expressed an unprincipled and open admiration for" Modernism. He Li is perturbed by "the clamour for a 'Chinese literature of Modernism'", and unabashedly regrets that the majority of

the hundreds of articles on Modernism are in favour of it. Perhaps then it is in a spirit of fair-play that he attempts to redress this overwhelming one-sidedness by using this article as a forum in favour of the critics of Modernism. The casual reader may verify this statement by measuring the amount of type-space given to either side; I think you will find that the 'majority opinion' in favour of Modernism gets not quite half the space of their right-thinking opponents. Yet we should console ourselves with the knowledge that although the dice are loaded, it is pretty grand of the *People's Daily* to let the other side play at all.

The first protracted debate on Modernism in China was carried in the pages of *Researches in Foreign Literature* (*Waiguo wenxue yanjiu* 外國文學研究) from December, 1980 up to March, 1982 when Xu Chi 徐遲, who apart from being the originator of a bizarre form of prose he calls 'scientific reportage' is also the Editor-in-Chief of this journal, concluded the discussion with his article "Modernization and Modernism" 現代化與現代派. This is without doubt one of the most amazing and confounding arguments in favour of Chinese Modernism that has appeared to date, and it is little wonder that *Wenyibao* chose it as a fulcrum in its own discussion of the topic. Xu states that he was reluctant to write anything on the subject, but distressed that most critiques of Modernism had failed to note the primacy of economics in the evolution of 20th-century Western literature, he felt obliged to make a few comments. He makes the interesting point that at the moment when China took its first decisive steps in the direction of modernization, abstract paintings, vague (or misty, *menglong* 朦朧) poetry and stream-of-consciousness novels made a fleeting appearance. He regrets that the sprouts of a Chinese Modernism were trammelled by adverse criticism and a change in economic policies, yet although Chinese culture is now based on revolutionary realism once more, he is convinced that in the not too distant future, when a modernized socialist China begins to take shape, "we will finally produce a modernist culture based on a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism".<sup>5</sup> (My italics.) Xu sees such a 'neo-modernism' as a natural by-product of government economic policy. And until the day when it is possible he enjoins everyone to use Marxism to study Modernism, concluding his article with quotes from *Das Kapital* to demonstrate that Karl Marx had actually foreseen the development of Marxist Modernism!<sup>6</sup>

It is only by reading articles such as the above or even the opposing opinions of writers such as Li Zhun 李准 in "Is there necessarily a link between Modernization and Modernism?" 現代化與現代派有着必然聯繫嗎?<sup>7</sup> that one realizes that the whole question of Modernism is even more confused and confusing in China than it is in the West (impossible though that may seem). Therefore, I caution the reader not to expect too much from Chinese theoretical discussions of Western Modernism, for the burden of literary orthodoxy and intellectual isolation still weighs heavily on even the most well-informed Chinese critics and writers. Works by Kafka and Pinter,

<sup>5</sup>This topsy-turvy piece of reasoning was first printed in *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu*, 1982.1 (see page 116 of that issue for this quotation), and later reprinted in *Wenyibao*, 1982.11.

<sup>6</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup>See *Wenyibao*, 1983.2.

after all, were only tentatively introduced to Chinese readers in 1979, and it was not until 1981 that the first selection of modernist literature became available in translation.<sup>8</sup> The important thing in all of this is that the Pandora's Box of twentieth century 'isms' (including many that are already 'wasms') has been opened in China, giving all who wish it the knowledge that socialist realism and a fickle Party line are not the be-all and end-all of literary and artistic creation. Some writers, like the dexterous Wang Meng 王蒙, have already managed to find a common ground between a dogged faith in Party politics and technical innovation; others like Dai Houying 戴厚英 and more recently Liu Xinwu 劉心武 prefer to use their new skills to build a bridge to their own humanity.<sup>9</sup> If the debate about Modernism can validate and encourage individual diversity and a touch more creative license, then the conflicting and ill-argued opinions summarized in the following pages will not have been in vain.

WE ARE fortunate indeed to be able to avail ourselves of a concise survey of the debate on Modernism, and thus avoid the arduous and unrewarding task of sifting through those four hundred-odd articles on the subject ourselves, searching for the essential elements of disagreement in a skein of contention. The polemical style of this type of writing retains none of the terse cut-and-thrust of argument characteristic of the classical language; while the rhetorical devices and obfuscation of the most unlettered style of Chinese prose have found a haven here. In translating this article I have taken some time to read a number of the original works quoted herein. The majority of them are, to take a line from Clive James, of such length and tediousness that the mere reading aloud of them would put a whirling dervish to sleep in mid-spin. Unfortunately, even in this summary we are not spared all of the turgid turns of phrase and overstated platitudes of the originals. Not of a mind to make Chinese jargon more acceptable to an English-reading audience through translation than it is to Chinese readers, I have been at pains to keep as close to both the letter and the spirit of the original as possible. After all, this is the record of a complex politico-literary debate, not a tea-party.

<sup>8</sup> See Note 1.

<sup>9</sup> For further comments on Dai Houying, see Note 12. Liu Xinwu's literary pedagogy tended to alienate many of his readers, but with the publication of his novella *As You Wish* (*Ruyi* 如意) a few years ago, his writing has taken a new, more independent direction. His recent short story "The Black Wall" ("Heiqiang" 黑墙, *Beijing wenxue*, 1982.10) is a quantum leap

towards an honest and individual style. *Wenyibao*, again in the role of judge and jury, printed a scathing criticism of this story (see "Green Leaves—Black Wall—Gold", by Li Bingyin, *Wenyibao*, 1983.4) in which Liu's present writing is described as being "self-indulgent" and "twisted". Liu, with characteristic humour, has commented that he feels honoured that this criticism is actually longer than his original story.

何理：“文藝報”等報刊關於西方現代派文學與我國文學發展方向問題的討論

**He Li: The Discussion Concerning the Question of Western Modernism and the Direction of the Development of Chinese Literature, Being Held in *Literary Gazette (Wenyibao)* and Other Journals and Papers**

OVER THE LAST few years, newspapers and periodicals throughout the country have acted as a forum for a discussion concerning Western Modernism and the future of Chinese literature. In the twelve months since *Wenyibao* reprinted Xu Chi's essay "Modernization and Modernism", along with a rejoinder by Li Di 理迪,<sup>10</sup> that magazine has published over twenty articles on the question of Modernism, while other journals and newspapers have printed numerous studies and introductory articles on the subject. From its very inception, this discussion has revealed clear-cut differences of opinion among writers and literary critics.

Many comrades have pointed out in their articles that in developing our own socialist literature in the past, we learned from and assimilated all of the outstanding elements of foreign writing, and that to do so has been both correct and necessary. With literature coming to reflect modern life with greater force and depth in recent years, some writers have begun to experiment with the use of certain artistic techniques that originated with Western Modernism, thereby hoping to enrich the means of artistic expression at their disposal. An exploratory use of such artistic forms and techniques should be encouraged as long as it roots itself firmly in our own national life, and does not lose sight of our aim to develop a socialist literature with a Chinese na-

<sup>10</sup>These articles were printed in the November issue of *Wenyibao*. Li Di, who is most probably a staff writer for the magazine, does little more in his reply "Questioning 'Modernization and Modernism'" than list his queries. It is reasonable to assume that while Li Di's article is not aimed at orchestrating the discussion, it definitely did try to set the tone for the controversy as presented by *Wenyibao*. For a reply to Li Di, see Jie Fei and Mei Ni's "Some Questions for the 'Inquisitor'" (*Waiguo wenxue*, 1983.2).

tional character. It must be noted, however, that in the discussion concerning such experimentation and the evaluations of Modernism, certain disturbing tendencies have become evident, such as:

1. Despite the fact that a few of the numerous articles and books—over 400 articles and more than ten books—that have appeared give an appropriate evaluation of Western modernist literature, the majority have expressed an unprincipled and open admiration for it; and,

2. Some of the literature produced recently, in both describing and commenting on Chinese society, reflects a social outlook and philosophical approach typical of Western Modernism.

Of even greater concern than the above is the fact that a number of highly questionable proposals concerning the future direction of Chinese literature and the evaluation we should make of Modernism have come to the surface. Some comrades have even declared that Chinese literature should aim at developing along the lines of Western Modernism. According to this view our revolutionary socialist literature is "the product of the steam age", and as such is now hopelessly antiquated; while Western modernist literature is the creation of "the electronic and atomic age", and "represents a definite advance in human thought". They even go so far as to clamour for a "Chinese literature of Modernism", and claim that "Marxism needs Modernism".<sup>11</sup>

Below follows a summary of the three major points of controversy that have emerged from this discussion as it has developed in *Wenyibao* and the press.

**1) Are we going to make a critical evaluation of Western Modernism and take from it what we need, or are we to accept it as the future direction of Chinese literature?**

<sup>11</sup>These last two quotations are from Xu Chi's article.

Those comrades who are enamoured of Western modernist literature are of the opinion that Chinese Modernism is a necessary corollary to modernization. To them, the advent of modernist art is "an inevitability which is both a negation of realism by modernist writers and a negation of realism by itself".<sup>12</sup> Some comrades have said that "the present reform is in effect a revolution in literature", and that "it is an 'historical necessity'". "If the society is to modernize, why shouldn't we have 'Modernism' in literature?" In his article "Modernization and Modernism", Xu Chi writes, "With the realization of the Four Modernizations of socialism, a 'culture corresponding to modern thought and feeling' will appear", which will "mean Modernism in art and literature", and thus he concludes that "there should be a Marxist Modernism". Other comrades have stated that "the appearance of a modern Chinese poetry has undermined the principle of realism in poetic creation" and that, "in the final analysis, Modernism will become the mainstream of Chinese poetry".

In pointed contradiction to the above opinions, some comrades have stated that the appearance of Modernism is by no means the inevitable result of material development, but rather it is the product of definite historical circumstances peculiar to Western societies this century. The nature of our socialist system is fundamentally different from that of societies under monopoly capitalism, and because of this basic difference we are not influenced by the historical conditions that gave birth to Modernism in the West. The dramatic changes that Chinese society has undergone in recent years have merely highlighted the need for us to develop and enrich the scope of artistic expression available to our socialist literature. To

do so we must make an exhaustive critical appraisal of all artistic forms, including those of Western modernist literature, and assimilate whatever will be useful in the description of the changes occurring in our society, and which will both satisfy the demands of the masses and further the development of our socialist literature.

In an article entitled "Is there necessarily a link between Modernization and Modernism?", Li Zhun states that, "Every literary and artistic genre as well as every intellectual trend has specific social origins, including economic, political and sociological and ideological factors, while the material forces of production can only be said to play an indirect role. Take for example the advent of Romanticism at the beginning of the nineteenth century: it was the direct result of the French Revolution, the climax of the movement for democracy and the struggle for national independence at that time. Critical Realism which made spectacular developments in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, had its origins in the continued dissolution of the feudal social structure and the increased manifestation of the inherent contradictions within capitalism... yet it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of either of these developments in the changes taking place within the material means of production at the time."

In "Three Topics in Western Modernist Literature", Yuan Kejia states that the origins of Western modernist literature are complex, yet can be seen as the reaction of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois Western intellectuals to the changes and pressures that had developed within the material and spiritual civilization of the West since the advent of monopoly capitalism. The objective causes of Modernism may be considered to be the concrete historical and social changes in the period of monopoly capitalism, including changes in the relations of production, social relations, the standard of living, science and culture, and so on. On the subjective side there are changes in the class status of modernist writers, their world view and artistic perception. The clash of these various subjective and objective elements has resulted in the bizarre and seductive phenomenon known as modernist literature. Thus, although these conditions resulted in Modernism, they do not equal modernization.

<sup>12</sup>See the Postscript of Dai Houying's novel *Oh, Humanity!* (*Ren a, ren!* 人啊!人 Guangzhou, 1981). Dai was the first writer not only to attempt to use a dramatic new technique of narration in a novel-length work of fiction, but also to deal with the dangerous theme of the humanity of man. Her Postscript contains an illuminating autobiographical sketch along with an argument in favour of 'literary renewal'. Dai's more recently published works, a novel called *Death of a Poet* (*Shiren zhi si* 詩人之死, Fuzhou, 1982) and *The Chains Are Soft* (*Suolian, shi rouuande* 鎖鏈, 是柔軟的, Guangzhou, 1982), do little to fulfil the promise shown in her first book.

Li Di says, "Modernist art and literature, or simply Modernism, is a concept with a definite historical connotation covering the various 'isms' of Western bourgeois art and literature in the 20th century. The content and nature of Modernism is quite clear, and it constitutes an ideological system and world view which is in direct opposition to Marxism. Just as it is impossible to talk of 'Marxist idealism' or 'Marxist Dadaism', it is equally erroneous to advocate 'Marxist Modernism', and to do so is tantamount to adopting modernist Western art and literature."

2) Are we to carry on and develop the outstanding traditions of progressive and revolutionary literature that date from the May 4 period, or negate and abandon these traditions?

Those comrades who propose to negate and abandon our revolutionary literary tradition are of the opinion that authority and tradition are obstacles to the liberation of thought and the reform of literature. They claim that our literary tradition is the result of past historical conditions, and its conservative and narrow aspects are thrown into relief now that those conditions no longer exist.

Sun Shaozhen 孫紹振 writes that, "All traditions, including artistic ones, have a conservative side, and if artistic reform is to be successful, then we must be extreme when we first challenge those traditions" ("Give artistic reformers an atmosphere of greater freedom" 給藝術的革新者更自由的空氣). While Xie Mian 謝冕 declares that, "Because of the antiquity of the Chinese race and the fullness of our traditions, the burden we bear from the past is heavier than that of other peoples" ("After Losing Equanimity" 失去了平靜以後). Xu Jingya 徐敬亞 in his "Volant Tribe of Bards—a critique of the modernist tendencies of

Chinese poetry"<sup>13</sup> says that one of the objects of "the inevitable literary negation that follows on a [major] social negation" is to condemn "the increasingly narrow path along which Chinese poetry has been moving for the last thirty years. A path that was initially characterized by a basic rehash of the Romanticism of the nineteenth century; then progressing from the joyous pastoral ballads of the 50s and the orgiastic lyricism of [the poetry of] the 60s... to the quasi-religious Hosannahs of the ten year Cultural Revolution. ... [The new poetry moves to negate this trend that] all but submerged Chinese poetry in a vast sea of small production poetasters locked into their formula of 'Classics + folk songs = poetry'." He goes even further to state that the contemporary trend of poetry is "to break free of the traditional realist principles [of writing] and express anti-realism and anti-rationalism... so that poetry can finally rid itself of the shackles of millenia of tradition and work in favour of expressing the 'feeling of the here and now' of a modern society."<sup>14</sup>

The comrades who oppose the above opinions regard culture as an historical accretion and consider that when dealing with the relationship between tradition and the development of culture in a period of transition [such as the present one], it is necessary to make a detailed and historical analysis of the traditions in question and not simply to condemn them out of hand. In "On Reading *A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques*", "現代小說技巧初

<sup>13</sup>Cf. pp. 59-68 below. See *Contemporary Literary Trends (Dangdai wenyi sichao 當代文藝思潮*, Lanzhou, 1983.1) for the full text of this sensational and highly controversial view of Chinese poetry. Xu, a young poet in Jilin, argues convincingly, albeit with uncommon acerbity, in favour of the modernist tradition of post-May 4th literature and the more recent vague (or misty) poetry. See Bonnie McDougall's introduction to her selection of Bei Dao's poetry in *Notes from the City of the Sun* (Cornell, 1983) for an excellent summary of the debate surrounding the new poetry.

<sup>14</sup>Again this is a sentiment that recalls the *Zeitgeist* in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. A poem by Arno Holz, a leading theorist at the time, insists: 'Modern sei der Poet/modern vom Scheitel bis zur Sohle (Let the poet be modern/Modern from head to toe)' (*Modernism, op. cit.*, p. 38). For the reader whose palate has been jaded by all of this heady fare, I recommend a dose of Tom Wolfe. Wolfe in *The Painted Word* (Bantam Books, 1975) and *From Bauhaus to Our House* (Abacus, 1983) offers a refreshing antidote to the tedious dead-pan of discussions on Modernism and the *avant-garde*, be they from the East or the West. Fewer Chinese writers and critics would view Modernism with such an almost religious sense of awe if they could read what one of the most voluble critics of the modern world has to say on the subject.



探'讀後,<sup>15</sup> Wang Xianpei 王先霈 states that China has its own solid tradition of fiction writing, and a number of narrative styles beyond those of the 'chapter novel' (*zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說) and the 'sketch novel' (*biji xiaoshuo* 筆記小說). This tradition, he continues, has produced a wealth of outstanding works as well as bequeathing to us a unique national form and artistic technique. There is a great amount of material on narrative technique contained in traditional theoretical works on the novel which reflect the aesthetic concerns of Chinese writers of the past. And Wang points out that it is clear from the developments of recent years that writers have been hindered in realizing their full artistic potential for the very reason that they have failed to make a serious study of our own outstanding national traditions, and have neglected to develop a [contemporary] fiction with definite national characteristics.

Miao Junjie 繆俊傑 in his "Thoughts on the Question of Literary Innovation" 關於文學創新問題的思考 says that Marxism has always put an onus on developing outstanding national cultural traditions and on "indigenization" 民族化 in art and literature. "The question of whether China's socialist art and literature is to 'indigenize' and develop her own national style is not merely a question of literary form, but also of crucial importance if we are to start a new phase in the development of our art and literature, effectively respond to the needs of the masses in this new period and advance along the correct path. It is for this reason that we must lay particular emphasis on the issues of inheriting our national tradition and making 'indigenization' a matter of artistic innovation. . . . The art and literature of every national group has its own unique national character."

In "A Critique of One View of Contemporary

<sup>15</sup> See *Wenyibao*, 1983.6. Wang's criticisms of Gao Xingjian are not unreasonable. Unlike Gao, he is aware that modernist writing techniques are not universally popular in the West today (France being an exception to a certain extent), and that Gao has been too hasty in attempting a post-mortem on realism, since it is still alive and well in Western literature. Unfortunately, Wang's tenuous claims that "we had it first", citing examples of classical Chinese literature, tend to detract from an otherwise clear-headed argument.

Poetry" 評一種現代詩論,<sup>16</sup> Yang Kuanghan 楊匡漢 says, "An artistic tradition is full of vitality, it is like a mighty river, continually surging anew with the confluence of other streams; it should not be, indeed it cannot be dammed up. [As] Lenin says, we are not trying to create a new proletarian culture from nothing, but rather to build on the excellent models, traditions and achievements of the existing culture in accordance with a Marxist world view, and an attitude based on the realities of life and struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Be that as it may, the author of the tract 'Volant Tribe of Bards' is calling for nothing less than the wholesale rejection of our poetic tradition. He ridicules all classical poetry as an abomination spawned in 'a union of feudal politics and morals with an economic base of small production'; he indiscriminately reviles all folk songs as 'feudal pastoral ditties'; and, furthermore, he regards the new age of poetry that was ushered in by Comrade Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Art and Literature* in 1942 as nothing more than a 'vast sea of small production poetasters'. He even goes so far as to declare that the venerable tradition of realism in Chinese poetry is no more than a 'creative label with the adaptability of a chameleon' which he claims should be 'given well-considered rejection'. In the final analysis, however, it is the spiritual doubt evinced by a certain group of people, doubt in the basic need to fight for socialism, that is the root-cause of their deviation from the tenets of socialist literature in their creative work. Thus, it is inevitable that the 'three negations' [social negation, political negation and artistic negation] will cut artists off from the source of their artistic life and end in their abandoning realism and divorcing themselves from the people and the present age."

3) Are we to adhere to and continually pursue the rules that govern art, or are we going to negate them?

Some comrades say that any artistic innovation necessitates a clash with and in some cases the

<sup>16</sup> See *Wenyibao*, 1983.3. Clearly affronted by Xu Jingya's extremism, Yang attempts to refute the "biased, confused and incorrect" views expressed in "Volant Tribe of Bards". In fact, he succeeds in being little more than condescending and dogmatic.

destruction of pre-existing aesthetic tastes and artistic habits. They say that traditional and popular artistic tastes are the very object of [the present literary] renovation. Gao Xingjian in his book *A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques* 現代小說技巧初探 claims that the Balzacian novel should be regarded as classical form and that modern writers do not aim at creating individuals, or indeed at depicting an environment as Zola does of *Notre Dame*. In modern novels, he says, plot has given way to a variety of new structural styles. The examples that Gao gives of traditional methods of writing prose fiction are, the refining of plot, the description of scene, creation of characters, types, . . . etc; while those of modern fiction are the use of stream-of-consciousness, the bizarre and non-logic, artistic abstraction, and so on.

Xu Jingya asks: "Is human art to be forever limited to realism and romanticism? Do we want to, or more importantly, *can* we free ourselves from 'concrete art' and move towards 'abstract art'? . . . The answer to this question will not only determine the way in which we evaluate world art, but is also of pressing relevance to the future of art and literature in China, and to the way in which we approach certain phenomena already evident in some contemporary Chinese works."

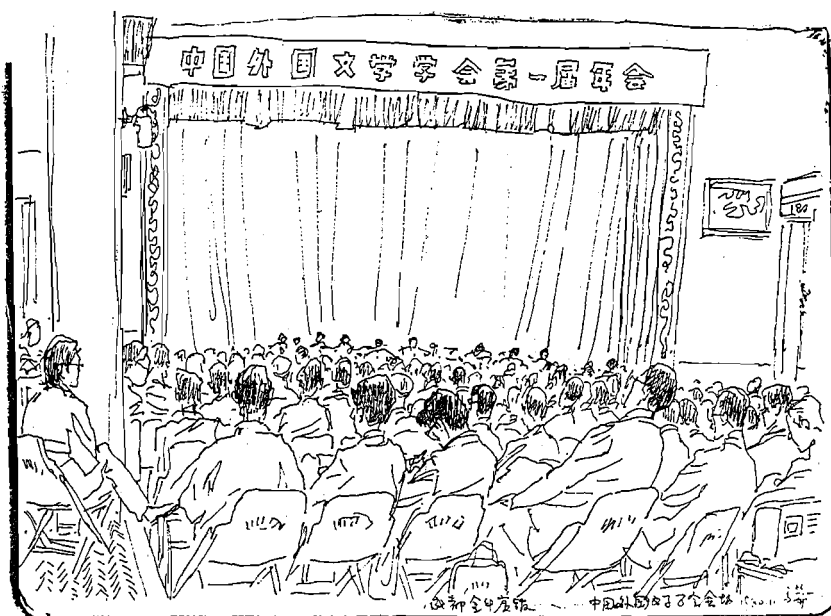
Sun Shaozhen declares that "the present clash with artistic traditions is in reality a clash of artistic habits", and, "for artistic innovation to be made possible, we must first carry out a struggle against traditional artistic habits."

Other critics are of the opinion that Western modernist literature has only been concerned with "imagism and poetic techniques", and lacks substance, as a result of which characters in modernist works are quite colourless; while even if a certain personality is created, it is inevitably abstracted to become a universal character type. A lack of characterization, especially the lack of character-types with a high degree of individuality and generality, is a major indisputable failing in modernist literature. Not to see this defect for what it is—an example of failure—but rather to advocate it as a success is, to say the least, quite inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> The creation of artistic types is a universal rule in the arts, and at the core of this rule is the need to create definite character types. This is so because literature is the reflection of the

true nature of life. To exhort writers to describe psychological states, feelings, ideas, thoughts and settings, and not to aim at typicalization—to emphasize the description of feelings, psychological states, fantasies and the expression of the individual in opposition to the need for the creation of artistic types, thereby negating the basic rules of art—can only be of the greatest detriment to our literature.

In "The Upgrading of Literature and the Clamour for Modernism" 文學的提高和現代主義的呼聲, Guan Lin 關林 declares that the anti-traditionalism professed by the modernists is not only a denial of traditional literary views but also of traditional philosophical views. Ideologically, modernist arts and modernist philosophy are inseparable. They have both abandoned the Rationalism that has come into being since the Age of Enlightenment, and lean heavily in the direction of anti-rationalism and irrationalism, emphasizing intuition and the role of the subconscious to the exclusion of all else. Artistically, the basic premise of Modernism is the negation of realism. It opposes writers dealing with objective existence and encourages them rather to concentrate on the Self and the internal world of the individual. Certainly, it cannot be denied that Modernism has given rise to a number of unique artistic techniques; nevertheless, its deep-rooted anti-traditionalism inevitably leads to a wide-sweeping rejection of accepted artistic maxims. For

<sup>17</sup>This is a very valid point, and one that Chinese modernist enthusiasts would be wise to take heed of. In praising the use of interior-monologue (or stream of consciousness), Chinese writers have been known to quote Virginia Woolf's famous dictum that the task of the novelist was to record life itself—"not as a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. . . ." As J.B. Priestley in *Literature and Western Man* so wisely remarks, "If his [the novelist's] fiction is concerned with men in a particular society, and with the character of that society, then this highly subjective, interior-monologue, halo-and-envelope method will not serve his purpose. . . . It is one thing to feel free of that series of gig lamps; it is quite another thing to atomize narrative, construction, scene, character, so that nine-tenths of what is valuable in fiction vanishes. . . ." (p. 435). Chinese writers such as Zong Pu 宗璞 and Wang Meng have made attempts to construct a "luminous halo" around that very "series of gig lamps" with some interesting results.



SKETCH OF THE FIRST ANNUAL CONVENTION of the Chinese Society for Foreign Literature, held in Chengdu, November/December 1980 (from *Foreign Literature Studies*, 1981.1).

example, it denies the importance of plot, characters and scene-setting—all crucial elements of narrative art. Its further rejection of typical types leaves the reader with nothing more than an 'anti-novel'. It is clear that the Modernist world view is one that is diametrically opposed to that of Marxism.

In "The Road of Life and the Road of Realism" 生活之路和现实主义之路, Wu Yuanmai 吴元邁 states that following the raising of the standard of living individuals are finding increased opportunities for self-fulfilment, and the descriptions of characters in realist literature should reflect these changes as a matter of course. Styles, forms and techniques can ossify and need to be supplemented or even replaced by new ones. This on-going dialectical process in realist literature in which the new replaces the old will continue as long as life does itself. For this reason, realism remains eternally young and will never be superseded. Yet it is crucial that we do not rest in our efforts to explore and innovate in literature along the guide-lines indicated by life itself. We must, above all, avoid stagnation. Realism rejects none of the things of value and meaning in the progressive art of the past or the present, nor does

it reject those things of value and meaning in Modernism. However, the elements of Modernism that disrupt and confound the rules of art cannot be assimilated into realism.

Wang Xianpei says that for the short story/novel to flourish and develop it is essential that it retains the unique elements that go to make it up; it must continue and develop the artistic tradition that has accrued over its long history, and it will be disastrous if this is abandoned. To disperse with artistic rules, and replace an artistic style and a form of literature that has its own special techniques with some pie-in-the-sky "modern techniques", far from being the "salvation" of the novel, will only result in disaffecting large segments of the reading public.

The discussion outlined above continues unabated in the pages of *Wenyibao*, and other journals and newspapers throughout the country. No doubt our literature will be able to make large strides along the road of socialism if we cling fast to the principle of "letting one hundred schools of thought contend and one hundred flowers blossom" and continue the present discussion in an energetic, thorough and healthy way.