



The Pen and the Sword: Literature and Revolution in Modern China. By Innes Herdan. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992. xx, 156 pp. HK\$115.00.

This book is its author's attempt to present what modern Chinese literature harvested under the dictates of politics. The time-span covered is from 1919 to the early 1980s. It is rather unusual for the beginning of "Modern China" to be defined as 1919 (what is objectionable about the 1911 revolution?) but given the literary connection of the title, one surmises that this particular definition is designed to serve the author's specific purpose.

The question one should ask is: what is the author's purpose? This book is obviously not an objective description of the interaction between politics and literature in twentieth century China, but a heavily loaded and biased view of how well or badly the writers chosen for discussion served the communist revolution and the political struggles that followed. Thus equal space is given to the barren years of the Cultural Revolution as to the highly active periods of the 1920s to 1940s. What weakens this book most seriously is the author's shaky grasp of facts, the often groundless generalizations she makes about Chinese people and Chinese literature, and a deliberate avoidance of material which contradicts her firm views about the virtue of politically "progressive" literature.

Innes Herdan states in her introduction that China's "archetypical man of letters was someone who withdrew from society" and who found politics dirty (p. xvii). In such a brief statement she manages to relegate the legions of famous Chinese writers, including the Eight Masters of classical prose and the majority of the Han, Tang and Song poets, who held government posts (quite a few making it to prime minister), to the curious position of a marginalized minority.

Taking people's words at their face value and without regard for the objective circumstances is, if not exactly dangerous, at least extremely unwise and unfair. One need look no further than this slim volume for solid proof. Chinese writers' self-criticism becomes the final judgement on their work. Thus, Ba Jin's "outlook is limited; his writing involves only a small minority, and his vision is short" (p. 44), while Shen Congwen stopped writing and cut himself off from all literary activities "not because of lack of sympathy for the new China" but because of incompetence (p. 90).

In the one short paragraph describing Lao She's death, Herdan attributes the cause of death to "shock, a sense of humiliation, and loss of 'face'" after Lao She had gone through one struggle session (p. 122). Besides being factually incorrect, this description reveals a failure of moral sensitivity and imagination and demeans the life and death of, in Herdan's own words, "a great many artists and intellectuals" who were hounded to death during the Cultural Revolution — apparently it all came down to a matter of face; after all, they were Chinese.

If Herdan could have relied more on first hand material, many factual errors, such as those related to Lao She's death, could have been avoided, though that would not have precluded errors of judgement. There are also errors of commission: certain information is given authoritatively but without means of substantiation. According to Herdan, Zang Kejia was Lao She's "close friend" and Tian Jian was Ding Ling's "close friend". Readers familiar with the life of these writers would wonder what Herdan's definition of "close friend" is,

besides being puzzled why such “friendship” should be dragged in when it contributes little to the matter under discussion.

Herdan obviously subscribes to the Maoist view that literature should serve the needs of politics, an opinion revealed in both her choice of writers for discussion and the conclusions she draws about them. It is thus not totally surprising that she should try to justify or at least represent as harmless Mao’s motives for continuous political struggles. One can only marvel at the strength of her faith. According to Herdan, *xiafang* (sending down) “was never intended as a punishment; rather as a practical form of education” (p. 105); in 1957 “poisonous weeds” sprang up, “actively encouraged by enemies of China outside its borders” (p. 105), and therefore had to be eliminated through the Anti-rightist campaign. In the section entitled “Postscript on Tiananmen 1989”, she makes a number of absurd (and again unsubstantiated) claims, one of which is that people in Hong Kong “hope to see violence as an opportunity to press the British Government for permission to emigrate” (p. 145). Aside from the question of factual correctness, one would also like to ask what relevance such “revelations” have to the subject of this book.

What is equally significant is what Herdan chooses to leave out. A discussion of the interaction between literature and politics under Mao (i.e., beginning with the Yan’an era) can hardly afford to ignore the first Rectification Campaign of 1942 and its aftermath, and yet strangely the name of Wang Shiwei, whose fate turned out to be a preview to that of many other writers and intellectuals, is nowhere to be found in this book. Wang wielded his pen against social injustice in Yan’an and paid for it with his life — he was beheaded in 1947 after prolonged imprisonment, the first victim of Maoist rectification campaigns.

In his preface, Brian Power describes this book as having “the effects of a vivid tapestry”. Given the huge scope of the subject matter one would indeed expect a tapestry, and its colours should certainly be vivid. Unfortunately the 147-page text is more a monochrome preliminary sketch (the accuracy of its proportion and details often doubtful) than a finished product. A tapestry as that described by Power is very much needed and will I hope be made available one day, but it should be woven by the expert and discriminating hands of a true researcher. The author of this book, on the contrary, seems to be a member of the rare species who cling firmly to the falling debris of collapsing communist building blocks. One wonders if Hong Kong’s Oxford University Press, the publisher of this title, has put this book onto their list for its curiosity value.

Eva Hung

The Chinese University of Hong Kong