

Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

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The Pragmatic Tradition of Chinese Literature and the Current ‘Spirit of the Times’

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Abstract The role of Chinese writers, during the Maoist period, was mainly that of educating the masses to the official ideological values promoted by the Communist Party (CCP), in order to mould their attitudes and behaviours in accordance to the social goals pursued by the Communist state. Since the inception of the Reform Era (1978), however, and especially since the rise of the market and the consequent commercialization of the cultural production in the Nineties, the majority of the Chinese writers increasingly declined their previous role of social educators preferring to devote instead to the pursuit of a politically detached, and socially disengaged, ‘pure’ literature. The CCP, nevertheless, continued all along to encourage the Chinese writers and artists to educate the people fostering their social values and shaping their worldview according to the correct ‘spirit of the times’. How could literature continue to perform, in this period, this educational task despite the depolitization of many Chinese writers and the commercial logic that came to dominate the literary field? What kind of social values and goals constituted the current ‘spirit of the times’? What literary genres and narratives did in fact contribute to the propagation of this spirit? These are the central questions that will be addressed in this article, whose main purpose is to observe how certain expressions of popular literature, in today’s China, are renewing some older didactic conceptions of literature in order to provide new types of teachings suitable to the demands of the current Chinese society.

Keywords ‘Spirit of the times’. Popular literature. Didactic conception of literature.

A continuous tradition, one that spans the ancient and the modern and is central to Chinese literary history, is that of literary pragmatism. Within this tradition, literature is seen as being instrumental in nature: it is considered valuable primarily for the effects it is able to produce, and precisely for its capacity to transmit the core values and norms of society and to shape human behaviour.

This tradition was originally carried forward and handed down by the Confucians. Pronouncements about the ‘uses’ of literature are recurrent in Confucian literary theory, starting with the master’s seminal statement that the *Book of Poetry* can «be used to inspire, to observe, to make you fit for company, and to express grievances» (Liu 1975, p. 109). The most well-known Confucian slogan about the function of literature, first put forward by Neo-Confucian Zhou Dunyi in the 11th century, affirms that «literature serves to convey the Way». Literature is thereby seen as a

carriage, a vehicle whose aesthetic properties, albeit important, are yet subordinated to the central task of disseminating the (Confucian) moral order of society: «Literature is that by which one carries the Way (*wen yi zai dao* 文以載道). If the wheels and shafts are decorated but no one uses it, then the decorations are in vain. How much more so in the case of an empty carriage! Literature and rhetoric are skills; the Way and virtues are realities» (Liu 1975, p. 114).

This tradition undergoes a fundamental reconfiguration at the dawn of Chinese modernity, when the onslaught of Western imperialism convinces many reform-minded intellectuals that the Confucian doctrine and its visions of social order are no longer suitable to withstand the challenges of the modern world. Liang Qichao, certainly the most prominent figure epitomizing the transition from a traditional to a modern worldview, believes that China, in order to survive, must evolve from a backward, declining ‘empire’ into a rich and strong ‘nation’. He also believes that, to achieve this goal, China’s passive, self-regarding ‘subjects’ must be transformed into active and responsible ‘citizens’. However, as much as he discards many of the old Confucian social values on behalf of the new political principles essential to the building of the modern nation, his ideas about how to transmit these principles remain firmly embedded in the pre-existing Confucian framework, inasmuch as the task of (re)fashioning human behaviour is again entrusted to literature, viewed by Liang as an immensely productive medium with a profound power to «influence the way of man» (1902, p. 76) and «capable of shaping the world as well as establishing and nurturing the various norms of society» (p. 78).¹

To reform (*gaizao* 改造) the people’s mentality thus becomes the core task of modern Chinese literary pragmatism, whose instrumentalism, following a period of experimentation and pluralism in the aftermath of the May Fourth movement, becomes an article of faith in the hands of the Chinese Marxists, who from the late twenties onwards come to define the notion of literature in narrow terms as a ‘tool’ (*gongju* 工具) and a ‘weapon’ (*wuqi* 武器) of the revolutionary struggle (Yin 2002, pp. 140-142). These views become orthodoxy after 1942, when Mao, in his Yan’an Talks, lays down the guidelines that will govern the role of literature after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. Here, Mao calls on writers to acquire a ‘utilitarian’ attitude, and, quoting from Lenin, declares that «proletarian literature and art» are «*cogs and wheels* in the whole revolutionary machine» and are thus «subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period» (see Mao 1975). More specifically, the task that Mao assigns to writers is that of «uniting and educating»

1 Obviously, the very notion of ‘literature’ at this point undergoes a substantial overhaul, inasmuch as it no longer refers to the traditional genres sanctioned by Confucianism, but rather to the modern literary forms imported from the West, primarily fictional writing.

the masses, so as to help them form the correct class consciousness and develop the proper proletarian attitudes needed to win the revolutionary war and to build the socialist and the communist systems.

Guaranteeing the continuity of these expressions of literary pragmatism, despite the obvious discontinuities exhibited by their different ideological and imaginative horizons, is the fact that the instrumental function of literature is attached to a number of common, enduring conceptions of the nature of the social order, the production of social behaviour and the status of the individual within society. First, although the proponents of the aforementioned notions of literature promote widely discrepant ideals of society, they all believe in the existence of a single socio-political order, or, in other words, one unifying social 'Way': that is, one overriding paradigm of society presupposing a precise axiology of values. The Confucian 'way', for example, hinges on the 'three bonds' and the 'five constants', namely the system of social relations, norms and virtues designed to guarantee the preservation of social harmony and obedience to patriarchal authority. The early modernizers, abandoning the traditional Confucian belief that the 'way' – inscribed in the immutable patterns of nature and enshrined in the scriptures of the ancient sages – is 'unchangeable', take Western evolutionary visions of history, transplant them in Chinese soil and begin to profess the conviction that the 'way' of nature (*tiandao* 天道) is, in itself, 'change' (Xu 2010, p. 51). This claim is already made by Liang Qichao's master, Kang Youwei, who from this tenet also derives the notion that every age must have its distinct social 'way' (*dao ge bu tong* 道各不同). Henceforth, the notion that history is a linear process of development, divided into clear-cut social stages and oriented towards a future *telos*, becomes a staple axiom of 20th century Chinese social thought. However, the idea that each historical period must express one singularized socio-political order remains strong (see Cai et al. 1994), as is somewhat proved by the constant preoccupation of modern Chinese intellectuals – especially evident in the cultural battles of the politically fraught Post-May Fourth period – with grasping the correct 'spirit of the times' (*shidai de jingshen* 时代的精神) and devising neatly defined axiological schemes that are valid for each new historical stage (see Davis 1992, p. 153). This view is turned into dogma by the Communists, who, claiming to have mastered the 'scientific' laws of the historical dialectic, maintain that they are the only force capable of leading Chinese society along the 'correct path' of history, towards its final *telos*, and are therefore entitled to mould the correct patterns of thought and action appropriate to each historical phase (assigning to the people the 'revolutionary tasks' required by the 'concrete' historical circumstances). Second, the assumption that there exists one unifying socio-political order and an ensuing system of virtues and norms entails the educational effort, on the part of the ruling elite, to inculcate in the people some standard behavioural patterns, in line with the dominant

social 'way', and, since the advent of modernity, its underlying historical *telos*. Individuals are therefore judged by how they enact this behaviour and how they perform their allotted social roles, to the extent that both in Confucian and Maoist societies people are sorted into social classes that are ranked according to an ideal hierarchical scale, whose positions are determined by the contribution they make to the creation of the social order or the attainment of the key social goals. This hierarchy, however, is essentially based on a moral dichotomy, inasmuch as it mainly emphasizes two opposing types of behaviour: on the one hand, 'good' behaviour that faithfully reproduces the ideal social paradigm (personified by the model figures of the Confucian 'saints' or proletarian 'heroes'), and on the other, 'bad' behaviour that deviates from or is harmful to such a paradigm (exemplified by Confucius's 'small men' or Mao's 'class enemies').

As a corollary of these assumptions, the pragmatic tradition in Chinese literature thus appears primarily concerned with the aim of teaching people the values and norms sanctioned by the ruling elite, so as to foster in them the most desirable social behaviour. In particular, given the deeply held Chinese belief that the most efficient way to transform human behaviour is by setting exemplary models (which people are considered instinctively disposed to emulate; see Munro 2000, pp. 135-157, and 2001, pp. 84-116), one typical didactic task of literature is to portray persons and events endowed with exemplary meaning, so as to display by means of concrete examples the attributes and attitudes that the people should learn to emulate. In Confucian China this role is quintessentially performed by history, wherein writings have the purpose of «encouraging good and deterring evil» (*quanshan cheng'e* 劝善惩恶) by «praising and blaming» (*bao bian* 褒贬) the figures of the past for the courses of action, positive or negative, that they are said to have taken in recorded historical events. At the dawn of the modern era, when the original educational role performed by history is to a large extent replaced by fiction,² the main function of literature still seems to remain that of providing exemplary models: «If the protagonist of the novel is Washington», affirms Liang Qichao searching for models among the heroes of the various Western national movements, «the reader will be transformed into an avatar of Washington, if it is Napoleon, he will feel himself an avatar of Napoleon; and if it is a Buddha or Confucius, he will become an avatar of Buddha or Confucius» (Liang 1902, p. 78). As for the Marxist understanding of fiction, this has among its basic aims – in accord with Friedrich Engels' famous formula – the «truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances» (Zhou 1936, p. 342). However, inasmuch as the genuine purpose of such 'typicality' is

2 It should also be noted that the Chinese traditional vernacular fiction is strongly indebted to the traditional historical writing, from which it derives several characters and plots and of which it partially retains the admonishing nature.

not to grasp how historical reality truly is, but rather to show how it should (or shouldn't) be, according to the Communist vision of history and society, typical characters tend, in fact, very easily to become exemplary models personifying the ideal behaviour the people are called upon to emulate in the name of the revolutionary struggle. Mao, calling upon writers, in his Yan'an Talks, to «extol» the revolutionary masses who «have remoulded themselves in struggle» and to «expose» the counter-revolutionary enemies who are «harming the masses of the people», inaugurates a new 'praise and blame' tradition that divides people into two simplified moral categories: the first obviously positive and the second negative. This division is bound to grow increasingly sharp as Maoist politics become ever more radicalized from the end of the fifties onwards, until reaching the verge of fanaticism during the Cultural Revolution, when the principle that literature is 'the tool of class struggle' (*jieji douzheng de gongju* 阶级斗争的工具) is shouted as a militant battle cry by leftist radicals. By this time, while the enemies of the revolution are demonized as 'ox-ghosts and snake-demons' (*niu gui she shen* 牛鬼蛇神), the models of proletarian virtue have instead become spotless heroes, deprived of any individuality, selflessly loyal to the Party, their attributes unquestionably «lofty, great and perfect» (see Lan 1998, p. 27).

It is the reaction to the aberrations of the Cultural Revolution, and the opposition to the strictures imposed on literature by the Yan'an Talks, that constitute the hallmark of the new literary course that emerged with the inception of the post-Maoist Reform Era, initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. One of the first battles on the literary field, in fact, is against what comes to be addressed in this period as the 'instrumentalism' (*gongjulun* 工具论) of Maoist literary theory: namely, the complete subordination of literature to the dictates of political power and its reduction to a 'tool' of the revolutionary struggle. Over the course of the eighties, in particular, the members of the Chinese literary field increasingly embrace the principles of 'pure literature' (*chun wenxue* 纯文学) in order to free literary practice from the burden, as Shao Yanjun says, of «carrying the Way» and «effecting political propaganda» (Shao 2012, p. 18). In this way, by re-conceptualizing literature as an intrinsically aesthetic activity, no longer tied by a 'reflectionist' bond to reality, freed from any obvious practical purpose, and valued exclusively for its formal properties (the qualities of so-called 'literariness'), Chinese literary theorists and practitioners are able to carve out an autonomous space meant to shield them from the interference of political power and the pressure to perform through literature any pragmatic social task. Such a notion of literature will remain central through the nineties and even beyond, when the insignia of 'pure literature' are now held up less against the intrusion of the political sphere than against the «contaminations» of the market and the alleged «turbidity» of commercial mass culture (Li, Tao 2002). It is a discourse so powerful among

Chinese theorists and critics that it has been regarded by some scholars as no less than the dominant 'ideology' of the Chinese literary field, an ideology that tends to discredit, or even to rule out as non-literature, all those literary expressions that manifest some pragmatic, either political or commercial, inclinations (Liu 2005, He 2007).

However, in spite of the 'purity' constantly yearned for by most Chinese writers, the Communist Party, throughout the Reform period, has never ceased to supervise and discipline cultural production, and has never lost the chance to exhort writers – although of course no longer coercing them – to create literary works 'beneficial to society' and able to «educate and inspire the people» (Shao 2003, p. 194-195). As late as 2011, for example, Hu Jintao was still reminding the audience of the Writers' Association and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, that he «wished» the «largest number of workers in the field of literature and art» would «persevere in coupling art with morality», because «literature and the arts are a crucial force in lifting the spiritual condition and fostering the noble soul of the people». In particular, since the institutionalization of the 'socialist market economy', in 1992, and the consequent large-scale commercialization of cultural production, the Party has been very successful in hegemonizing the ideological contents of cultural production through the strategy of the so-called 'main melodies' (*zhuxuanlǜ* 主旋律); that is, by encouraging the production of, and giving ample recognition to, those narrative works, mainly created in the realm of literature, cinema and TV, that succeed in meeting all of the following requirements: to achieve high profits in the market, to be rich and original in artistic content, to be well-liked by the people and, at the same time, to convey 'healthy and uplifting' messages that are in tune with the didactic aims of the government (it is to the ideological 'themes' propagated by the *zhuxuanlǜ* products that the expression 'main melody', in a stricter sense, refers).

Thus it can be observed that Chinese literary production over the last twenty years has been influenced by two opposing forces: on the one hand the ideal of 'pure literature', promoted by a large section of the literary establishment, that in order to safeguard the autonomy of the literary field has spurred the creation of depoliticized narratives that avoid delivering positive social messages and direct social criticism; and on the other hand the principle of literary didacticism, promoted especially by the Party, that has boosted, particularly in the areas of commercial popular culture, the production of narratives aiming not only to provide entertainment but also to guide social behaviour in accord with the main ideological lines of the time. This state of affairs has also meant that although the pragmatic literary tradition seems still to be very much alive and well, it is nevertheless not easy to observe, as it is generally not acknowledged by the institution of Chinese literary criticism, which operates mainly from the perspective of pure literature.

Now, in the remaining part of this article, I want to turn my attention to a fiction genre that recently appeared in the domain of commercial popular literature: the so-called 'corporate novel' (*zhichang xiaoshuo* 职场小说). My aim here is to explore whether, and how, the pragmatic tradition manifests itself in the period that goes from the establishment of the 'socialist market economy' to the present day. Before doing that, however, as I have already noted that the main purpose of Chinese literary pragmatism is to transmit the core social values and norms of a given social order and to shape human behaviour according to those values and norms, I now need to identify, in very broad terms, the most important social principles outlined by the ideology of 'market socialism', which are also the principles that help to structure the dominant 'spirit of the times' in 'socialist market' China. It is therefore useful to remember, to quote Liu Fusheng, that «the basis of the CCP's legitimacy», after the demise of the international Communist system, shifted to achieving the double target of «promoting economic growth and maintaining national stability», so that the «beautiful promises brought by the economic development, together with the ideals of peace and unity, became the focus of the new ideology» that emerged in the nineties (Liu 2008, p. 29). Thus, in order to establish this new ideological order, the government has, since the nineties, focused on disseminating values such as personal initiative (*zhudongxing* 主动性), creativity (*chuangzaoxing* 创造性) and innovation (*chuangxin* 创新), inasmuch as they are functional to the creation of a thriving capitalist system, while simultaneously emphasising the values of discipline, harmony and social responsibility (together with the older repertoire of socialist virtues), as they are favourable to the preservation of a stable authoritarian order. In brief, the ideal citizen envisaged by the government in this period should be competitive, enterprising and professionally competent, and at the same time socially conscious and politically conservative (qualities that are quintessentially possessed, in the eyes of the Chinese government, by the emerging social group of the 'middle class').

Presumably, the popular literary phenomenon that best captures, and in fact also helps to propagandize the aforementioned human qualities, by spreading a 'middle class' mentality throughout contemporary Chinese society, is precisely that of the 'corporate novel': a commercial fiction genre dismissed by the Chinese literary establishment for its poor literary value, but which has nevertheless generated a considerable number of bestsellers and attracted a large audience of readers, while also inspiring the creation of several successful TV series based on the literary originals. This genre has emerged over the last decade, in the context of China's growing integration in the world of global capitalism, and its most typical formula contains the following pattern: a fresh graduate, normally a woman, with an ordinary family background and average physical features, is employed by a big corporation where she starts her working adventure

as a modest white collar worker. Work in the office is hard, competition is rough, deceit and intrigue are always round the corner; but a mix of ambition, resourcefulness, diligence and sense of duty – together with the help of some well-disposed senior employees willing to teach her the tricks of the trade – enable her to ignite a brilliant professional career by means of which she improves her economic and social status. The corporate novel can be therefore considered a sort of ‘economic’ bildungsroman, whose basic intent is to narrate a parable of personal growth – essentially intended as the professional development of a common but capable woman who ascends in society by means of her goodwill, honest effort and professional merits (see Xu, Zhang 2011, p. 47).³

Corporate novels, however, do not simply aim at satisfying the career fantasies of their readers, or at soothing their working life tribulations; their declared purpose, in fact, is primarily educational, as they are generally created with the goal of providing «knowledge and experience» to the white collar workers who ‘need’ to improve their professional skills in the workplace (see Yan 2010, p. 212). Indeed, many have affirmed, including some authors themselves, that these novels should actually be considered «textbooks» (*jiaokeshu* 教科书) written in fictional form so as to be easier to read, more enjoyable and, therefore, able to make their teachings more «digestible» (Zhang 2012, p. 6). The reading public, conversely, is mostly composed of university students or young white collar workers who admittedly approach these novels as «supplementary» material to increase their knowledge of the practical problems of daily ‘office’ life (Xu and Zhang 2011, p. 48). Publishers often brand corporate novels as ‘motivational’ (*lizhi* 励志), revealing that, albeit different in form, they are not supposed to have different content from that particular kind of self-help book (very popular in today’s China), that goes by the name of ‘successology’ (*chenggongxue* 成功学). It can thus be observed that the nature of this type of literature is explicitly pragmatic, as shown by the fact that while the few Chinese critics who have paid any attention to the genre agree in assigning to it no literary value, they nevertheless recognize that it has a different kind of value, found specifically in its «practical function» (*shiyong gongneng* 实用功能; see Yan 2010, p. 213). It is also interesting that this kind of novel has often been described as a ‘tool’ (*gongju* 工具): showing that even though the instrumental purpose of literature has changed considerably since the Maoist Era – in that literature is no longer a tool of class struggle, but rather one of professional career – the tendency to see literature in instrumental terms has remained unaltered.

3 Among the most popular examples of the genre, all having similar narrative structures, there are *Chronicles of Du Lala's Promotions* (Du Lala shengzhiji 杜拉拉升职记 2007), by Li Ke 李可, *Ups and Downs* (Fuchen 浮沉 2009), by Cui Manli 崔曼莉 and *Hate to Lose* (Bu renshu 不认输 2009), by Song Lixuan 宋丽珏.

This blatant instrumentalism is already sufficient to highlight the connection between the corporate novel and the former tradition of Chinese literary pragmatism. But there is more. As an educational tool aimed at popularizing among readers the principles and rules of the multinational corporate system, as well as the most acceptable behavioural norms typical of the Chinese working environment, this literary genre also helps to spread the principles and values of the capitalist system and the economic-instrumental rationality which is dominant in current Chinese society. This in turn helps to construct and disseminate many of the core social values underpinning the present ideological order, following a pattern of exemplarity which is not dissimilar in substance from that of the Maoist period. As I have already suggested, one of the most crucial tasks of Maoist literature was to exemplify the processes of self-transformation the people had to undertake in carrying out the transformation of China. To this end, Maoist writers very often portrayed the process of growth of a 'typical character' who through the study of Party doctrine and the help of mentors developed a steadfast revolutionary consciousness necessary to accomplishing important goals connected with the revolutionary struggle or the rise of collective production. Similarly, the parable of growth of the 'corporate' heroines is not merely professional, but also moral, to the extent that they do not just acquire technical skills or practical wisdom, but also, and even more importantly, they learn to mould themselves according to the values of the corporate system, and to pursue certain goals that, far from being narrowly selfish, are actually targeted at the growth of the system. This process of growth is generally described as one of 'personal struggle' (*geren fendou* 个人奋斗), a formula widely used in today's China, recurrent in both governmental discourses and the state media, where it is used to highlight all individual effort to make one's way in society and to achieve success by means of unrelenting self-improvement. This concept is a conflation of ideas that comprise the ancient Confucian notion of self-cultivation, the Maoist imperative to overcome the obstacles impeding the achievement of revolutionary goals, and the resurgent social Darwinist dictate to fortify oneself in order to become fit to survive and thrive in an increasingly competitive society. 'Personal struggle', however, is not presumed to be advantageous only for the sake of the individual, but should also be, as many official statements love to repeat, to the benefit of society at large (see Xia 1989). In line with this tenet, corporate heroines promote values such as ambition, self-interest, initiative and creativity, which are as favourable to the achievement of personal success as to the growth of the capitalist system, as well as values like altruism, discipline and responsibility, which are beneficial not only to one's own capitalist employer but also to the socialist system as a whole.

A strong overlap can thus be detected between the qualities embodied by the protagonists of corporate novels and the main social values

advocated by the ideology of 'market socialism'; indeed, these heroines represent the most ideal citizens the government wishes to create today. This is, in a nutshell, how the 'corporate novel' has come to represent the quintessential embodiment of the pragmatic Chinese literary tradition in today's China: a successful product of the market that has attained a high degree of popularity among readers (and, via its TV transpositions, among viewers), it has helped to shape the mainstream imagination of a globalizing China; and, with its instrumental ends spreading the instrumental knowledge valuable to the current economic system, and its exemplarity aimed at creating idealized projections of the kind of personalities most valued in the Chinese social order of the age, it fulfils the objective of the ruling political elite to 'educate and inspire the people' to the core values and norms best suited to the current 'spirit of the time'.

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