THE STORY OF MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE

By T. F. CHU

Chinese being one of the most difficult languages to read, few non-Chinese ever become proficient in it. Thus it happens that most of us live in China, passing Chinese bookstands every day, without being able to read a single sentence. As a result, modern Chinese literature—that mirror of modern China—is practically unknown to non-Chinese and, furthermore, it is very rarely translated into other languages. The following article attempts to give the non-Chinese readers of our magazine a survey of China's literature since the Revolution of 1911.

T. F. Chu (瞿重福), a son of Shanghai, has traveled widely in America and Europe. He has taught in several colleges and has written many articles on Chinese questions.—K.M.

THE development of Chinese literature in the last thirty years has been nothing short of extraordinary. The method of writing the language has been revolutionized, the literary style of over three thousand years thrown overboard, a new method of translation initiated, and the beautiful flower of new verse and prose has blossomed out in all the fresh splendor of a new age. The change has been so rapid and so complete that all this has happened within the living memory of many a man.

It is notable that, during the same period, Chinese literary thought has rushed ahead and, by skipping many a step, has caught up with the most advanced of current ideas. The story is so interesting and so unique that a full record deserves to be made, notwithstanding all the difficulties.

LITERARY REVOLUTION

To begin with, we must point out that by far the most important event was the literary revolution. Starting in 1917, this revolution followed closely upon the heels of the political one of 1911. The banner of revolt was raised by Hu Shih, with the able support of Chen Tu Hsiu (陳獨秀) and Chien Hsüan Tung (錢玄同), through the medium of the *New Youth Magazine* (新青年). A manifesto was proclaimed, and a bold attack directed against the old literary style as a medium of expression. The propounders criticized the continued use of the *Wen Li* style—which is unintelligible when read out loud—now that all countries, including the newly converted Turkey, were using the living speech as the means of communication. They declared that the *Wen Li* style was dead for all practical purposes, like Latin and Greek, whereas the colloquial style was living, with new terms being invented every day for every new situation. There was no reason why we should forego one which was alive and growing for another which was dead, a thing of the past. After all was said and done, they maintained that as the colloquial style was understood by everyone and the literary one by only a few, it went without saying that the colloquial style should be set up as the standard.

The method employed by Hu Shih and his colleagues for popularizing the colloquial style was eminently efficient. Believing that nothing is more convincing than a concrete example, they started off the movement by diligent application, namely, by writing countless articles in the new style. In the end, it was proved in black and white that the new style was capable of producing any kind of writing, whether in verse or prose.

By dint of indefatigable work, the whole student body was converted. After 1919, thousands of students followed in their footsteps with vigor and enthusiasm.

The large total of some 400 magazines appeared within a few years, all written in the new style. By 1921, the movement was so overpowering that the last stronghold of the old conservative camp, the *Short Story Monthly* (小說月報), and the other magazines published by the Commercial Press, were converted, thus compelling the public to read in the new style, whether it liked it or not. Soon after, even the Government was converted, and by 1928 none but new-style textbooks were used in all schools. The victory of the movement was complete.

TRANSLATIONS

In retrospect we find that the initial success of the movement was scored in the field of translation. Here the colloquial style is clearly superior, and consequently, during the first five years of the movement, the whole energy of output was concentrated in this field. The central motive power of this work was the Literary Guild (文學研究會), founded in 1920 by a group of Anglo-American-returned students and others with a knowledge of English. The books they translated were mostly of the present generation, with just a sprinkling of classical authors. This was done to widen the horizon of the Chinese-reading public and to put them in close contact with the literary products of the modern world.

In technique, the method of translation was improved by a new style of Chinese, invented by Lu Hsün (魯迅) and Chow Tso Jen (周作人). This style, known as "Europeanized Chinese" (歐化語體), was better adapted to reproducing the original idea. The books translated include those of relatively unimportant countries, such as Iceland, Bulgaria, Armenia, and South Africa; and among the authors translated we find J. Aho, Meric-chakatika, A. A. Haronian, Ephtaliotis, and M. Pogacic. But, strange to say, the great bulk of the books translated by these Anglo-American-returned students are of Russian origin, and the most-translated author is Ivan Turgenyev, a man who did not write a word of English.

All in all, there have been some three hundred translators, including about one hundred and eighty one-book translators. Among the most outstanding ones are Wu Kwang Chien (伍光建), a translator of many books from English, and Kuo Mao Jo (郭沫若), who took great pains to reproduce the exact meaning of the original. Kuo's versions of *Faust*, *The Jungle*, and *War and Peace* will go down in history. Keng Chi Chih (耿濟之) made direct translations from Russian, and Tsong Hsien Ming (鍾憲民) from Esperanto. Li Tsing Yah (李青崖) translated the complete works of Maupassant, and Chao Chang Sen (趙景深) those of Chekhov. Cheng Tsen Doh (鄭振鐸) translated many books by Rabindranath Tagore. Chow Tso Jen (周作人) and Wang Liao I (王了一) introduced a number of Japanese authors; and Wang Lu Yen (王魯彥) translated nothing but authors from little-known countries such as Esthonia, Greece, the Ukraine, and Afghanistan.

Up to 1935, the proportion of books translated, according to a list selected for libraries by the Life Press (生活書店), was as follows:

Country	Novels	Verse	Drama	Prose	Total	Percentage
Russia	135	4	23	7	169	22.5%
France	93	7	32	6	138	18.5%
England	60	15	32	8	115	15.0%
Japan	52	0	18	4	74	10.0%
America	56	3	6	4	69	9.0%
Germany	25	3	23	2	53	7.0%
Others	90	7	28	8	133	18.0%
Total:	511	39	162	39	751	100.0%

Many books were translated more than once. One man invariably translated the same book twice and marketed the translations through two different book companies. All in all, there are thirteen books translated three times, sixty-one translated twice, and one book, *The Road Back* by E. M. Remarque, translated as many as four times.

The following are the most-translated authors, arranged according to the number of books translated: Turgenyev (22), Gorky (22), Maupassant (17), Tolstoy (15), Upton Sinclair (14), Chekhov (13), Tagore (12), Mushakoji (11), Dostoyevsky (11), Shaw (9), Anatole France (9), Kan Kikuchi (9), Andreyev (9), Galsworthy (8),

Thomas Hardy (8), Victor Hugo (8), Goethe (8), and Pearl Buck (7).

ORIGINAL WORKS

Not satisfied with mere translations, the promotors soon plunged into the work of original composition, so as to provide new mental food for the consumption of the Chinese public. The books produced were for the most part "with a purpose," together with those of mere popular appeal. Nevertheless, because of the want of authors, the works produced were few and far between during the first five years (1917-1922), hardly half a dozen books a month. But by 1922, as the movement gathered momentum, more and more original works were produced. The motive power for such an undertaking was now supplied by the Creative Society (創造社), founded by a group of Japanese-returned students. In contrast to the "gilded gentlemen" of the Literary Guild, the members of the Creative Society were uncouth, rustic students, hardened products of this hard age. New books were produced with a rush and a dash hitherto unknown. According to the figures of the *China Year Book*, the total number of new books produced in the years 1934, 1935, and 1936 were 525, 326, and 677 respectively. After 1937, most of the writers moved into the interior of China, and figures for book production became unavailable. But we know that the production has been considerably reduced.

The books published during the first few years took up the topic of love and marriage, of free love versus conventional marriage. Next, the attention was keyed to the problems of the poor, and "proletariat literature" became the vogue of the day. This continued for a good many years until the closing of the Creative Society in 1929. After 1931, Lin Yu Tang (林語堂) introduced a literature of humor and sarcasm by means of his magazine *Lung Yu* (論語), modeled after *Punch*. Soon after that, there emerged above the horizon a literature of racial self-determination and war. All the intelligentsia were rudely stirred up, and ceaseless agitation continued until the war itself put an end to all such activities.

VERSE

The writers of verse now had the first opportunity to free themselves of the tight shackles of the old form. The speaking language was brought into full use and all the latest foreign verse forms employed for a full display of the emotions.

Here again, Hu Shih was the first man to break the ice, although his little volume *Trial Efforts* (嘗試集), written during the years 1916 to 1920, still savors strongly of the old style. But Hu's attempt was soon bettered by Kang Pai Tsing (康白情), then a student of the University of Peking, and his *Leaves of Grass* (草兒集) showed some of the possibilities of the new style. After Kang came Hsu Tse Mo (徐志摩), a graduate of Oxford, whose style was flowery and polished. His collection, with the queer title of *The Tiger* (猛虎集), is read and reread by all students of poetry.

Hsu was followed by Kuo Mau Jo (郭沫若), a Japanese-returned medical student who, in his volumes *The Goddess* (女神) and *Stars in Space* (星空), succeeded in producing poems filled with warmth and emotion. Another poet, by the name of Pai Tsai (白采), was clever enough to choose an untrodden path when he wrote a long epic in verse, *The Passions of an Invalid* (瘋疾者的愛), an unusual study of an abnormal mind. A Miss Hsia, writing under the pseudonym of "Icy Heart" (冰心), composed many little poems on mother love, Nature's ways, and the innocence of children. Miss Hsia has the rare gift of transforming mere simplicity into beauty, and her poems are as refreshing as ice water.

The one characteristic of Chinese poetry is its brevity and conciseness. Verses are generally written in just a few lines in such a way that, even though the lines are finished, the idea still carries on. In this respect, Chinese poetry conforms very much to Edgar Allen Poe's stipulation that "a poem should be written in a

limited number of lines, so that it may be read in an uninterrupted mood of increasing exaltation."

NOVELS AND PRESS

The chief product of the period was novels, short stories, and sketches. In 1918, Lu Hsün (魯迅) started the ball rolling by writing the first example of the kind, entitled *A Lunatic's Diary* (狂人日記). After that, Lu wrote very prolifically, running up a total of twenty volumes, representative of which are *The Outcry* (吶喊) and *The Dilemma* (彷徨). The former is a collection of short stories including *The Story of Ah Q*, which was translated into English. Lu's style was most entertaining, sometimes bitingly sarcastic yet often relieved by humor. His *Autobiography* was also translated into English. Lu was followed by Chang Tse Ping (張資平), who wrote many novels on the problems of marriage, triangular, and rectangular love. The novels were just what the public wanted but not the kind to be handed down to posterity. But Yü Ta Fu (郁達夫), a contemporary of Chang's, is of quite a different caliber. He set down unadorned his life's experience, and his novels, e.g., *The Sinking* (沉淪), *Chicken Breast* (鷄肋集), and *Cold Ashes* (寒灰集), treat of poverty, misery, and other vicissitudes of life that compel sympathy. He was not afraid to laugh at himself, and his humor was invariably inserted to emphasize the cruelty of this hard world.

At about the same time, a new development took place in the writing of dialogue in that Hung Ling Fee (洪靈菲) employed the Cantonese dialect instead of Mandarin. He was followed in this by other writers who also made use of various local dialects. Shen Tsung Wen (沈從文) described the contradictions of human behavior, and Mu Shih Ying (穆時英) added local color by making use of naïve conversations between country people. Miss Lu Ying (盧隱) wrote bravely on the lives of married women, and Miss Ting Ling (丁玲) equally bravely on that of unmarried women. Lin Yu Tang amused the public with his humorous magazine, while Chou Tao Feng (鄒韜奮) caught the heart of thousands and thousands of students by the powerful sway of his *Life Magazine* (生活雜誌). Kuo Mau Jo wrote a vivid description of the first ten years of the Creative Society.

Miss Hsieh Ping Yung (謝冰瑩) became famous overnight with her *Journal of an Amazon* (從軍日記), which was soon translated into English. The novels of Mao Dung (茅盾), one of which has been translated into German, and Pa Ching (巴金) are invariably long; whereas those by Shao Hsün Mei (邵洵美) and other writers of the New Moon Society (新月社) are always short. While the former group may or may not be novels of purpose, the latter are without exception tales of flesh and flirtation. *A Trip to the Border* (塞上行) by Fan Chang Chiang (范長江) written in 1940 is an excellent example of reportage, deserving all its popularity; while Pa Ching's *The Family* (家), the most popular book at present, is but a poor imitation of an old pattern.

DRAMAS

Compared with the other forms of writing, the dramas produced during the last thirty years are of no great consequence. Perhaps the main reason for this was the lack of response. However, the playwrights themselves were also to blame; they had no magic wand with which to transform the inert public. As a result, we find more enthusiasm than good plays. With regard to quantity, the plays published up to 1935 numbered 252, with 74 original works and 178 translations.

Among the foreign authors translated, none was as popular as Ibsen. For several years the study of problem plays was the prevailing fashion. After Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Maurice Maeterlinck also enjoyed periods of popularity.

It is enough to mention two of the enthusiastic Chinese dramatists: Tien Han (田漢) and Hung Sen (洪深), each of whom founded a school and devoted himself wholeheartedly to his work for over twenty years. Lately, however, one of their students by the name of Tsao

Yu (曹禺) has written a masterpiece entitled *Thundering Rain* (雷雨), the only modern Chinese play to have been translated into English. The play deals with the problems and struggles of the poor. With its pathos and fine climax, the play fully deserved its full houses. The most popular drama at present, however, *Autumn Quince* (秋海棠), is mediocre, being an odd mixture of classical and modern drama.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Children's books, formerly neglected, have been produced on an unprecedented scale since the advent of the Republic. They are now written by such first-class authors as Lu Hsün and Chow Tso Yen. The stories are generally written with a moral to them but not fettered with religious beliefs. A few of them are saddled with instruction, whereas the majority of them are just sugar-coated fiction. For the most part the booklets are short stories and fairy tales, plus songs, plays, historical tales, and digests of popular literature. Within the short space of ten years there have been 823 in all. Among the authors who are not afraid of "writing down," we might mention Miss Ling Lan (林蘭), who has the infinite patience to put into fluent writing the countless folk tales which are told, with slight variations, in places all over China. Li Ching Hwei (黎錦輝) is the author of many children's songs and not a few children's plays.

VICTORY OF THE NEW STYLE

According to the Life Press catalogue, the total number of original works, aside from children's books, written in the new style up to 1935 was as follows:

Verse	153
Drama	74
Essays and sketches ..	289
Novels and fiction ..	637
Total: ..	1,153

We have traced the development of Chinese literature since the literary revolution. We have noted how the forerunners, by means of indefatigable zeal and boundless energy, overthrew the reigning tyrant of the old literary style. We have noted how, by skipping many a step, they managed to bring the literary thought of old Cathay up to the high level of the rest of the world. We have also noted how they set out to open the eyes of the Chinese public, first by translation of modern foreign authors, and then by original writings of their own.

Since most of the old-style literary men have gone to their long rest, all books produced at present are in the new style. There is one noteworthy characteristic, namely, that all Chinese authors nowadays are young men of foreign education, whether Japanese, German, or Anglo-American. Chinese literature has thus been richly fertilized, and there is now hardly a single Chinese author speaking only his native language.

The new style is very pleasant to read when well written. In the form of "Europeanized Chinese," however, it is sometimes too distorted, especially in translation by the so-called direct method, and its meaning not always clear at a glance. Personally, I often find it easier to read the original than the translation. But it will not be long before such defects are adjusted.

As a result of the war, everything is at present in a turmoil and literary production at a standstill. But, as masterpieces are often produced during the aftermath of war, we have great hopes for the future. Just as Tu Fu (杜甫) and Pai Chü I (白居易) emerged in all their grandeur after the devastations of the Tang Dynasty, so we hope soon to have the pleasure of seeing the works of modern Tu's and Po's when this war is over. Lu Hsün is dead, but in the spirit of the youth of today he still lives. One thing is sure: if the new style is to stay alive, it needs the constant replenishment of literary fuel. Without it, the fire will never have a chance of bursting into brilliant flames.