CHAPTER NINE

THE PLIGHT OF OTHER FORMS OF FICTION

1. Inhibited Fiction

Although from a literary point of view it is difficult to distinguish between concepts such as “popular literature” and “vulgar literature,” in China’s twentieth century fiction circles still another type of literature coexisted with that termed “pure literature” or “serious literature.” Romantic, knight-errant, detective, and other varieties of popular fiction are a product of urban culture in recent times. They are primarily aimed at urban readers of tentative reading abilities, and are for reading of a “consumerist nature” as leisure or entertainment products. During the 1930s and 1940s, this type of literature was seen by the writers of new literature as an embodiment of feudalistic and comprador culture and duly discriminated against. However, as a literary fact, the writing and reading of this type of literature continued. Moreover, popular literature contained “refined” and “vulgar” forms of fiction, and while they developed along relatively independent lines, they shared a complicated situation of mutual osmosis, assimilation, and conversion.

In the late 1940s, during the struggle to establish the direction of literature, “popular fiction” (sometimes referred to as “old fiction”) was critically attacked by those writers who endorsed the “revolutionary mass literature tradition.” These all-embracing critical attacks are evidence of

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1 Such as Mao Dun in his report to the first congress of literary representatives. He stated that in Nationalist-controlled areas during the 1940s, “old fiction that carried a heavy whiff of feudal obscurantist policies [meant to dumb-down the people] and works on the supernatural and knights-errant written by bored literati under the influence of reactionary domination, disseminated their poison among the urban petty bourgeois and a portion of the laboring people.” He criticized “still a ‘third type’ of literary work.” “Under the guise of new literature and arts, on the surface it does not necessarily touch on politics, but the subject matter it selects is of a standard of backward urban petty bourgeois tastes, or it arranges love scenes in tragedies and comedies, or it advances one or two trivial contradictions in the daily life of urbanites, and constructs stories from these…” See: Mao Dun, «Struggling and Developing Revolutionary Literature and Arts Under the Oppression of the Reactionaries» in A Collection of Essays Commemorating the China National Literature and Arts Workers Representatives Congress, New China Bookstore 1950, Beijing.
the rejection of this type of fiction by literary circles on Mainland China after the 1950s. Yet, in the early 1950s, this issue was handled somewhat indecisively by literary circles. Not long after the first congress of literary representatives, the Literature & Arts Press called a conference for Beijing and Tianjin writers who wrote “serialized and traditional-style novels,” to “study the literary practice and the situation of readers of this type of fiction, and to discuss how to develop and modify this form.” Although the conference stressed the need for this “old form of fiction” to modify its contents and form, it did not adopt an entirely negative attitude. Furthermore, authors expressed enthusiasm for writing this type of fiction with “new contents.” However, if the “diversionary” nature of this type of fiction was negated, and if “new content” meant the discarding of previous romantic, chivalrous models, the desire to “develop and modify this form” was bound to come to naught. Inevitably, a few writers of “old fiction” (such as Zhang Youluan) wrote works with this “new content” (Records of a Shrine), were quickly criticized for it, and the authors had to make self-criticisms. Some famous writers of “popular fiction” essentially stopped writing the form and turned to adapting stories from traditional opera and folk legends: Zhang Henshui’s rewriting of the《Tale of Meng Jiang》，《Tale of Rubbing the Mirror》，and others such stories is a case in point. During the 1950s, the Popular Literature and Arts Publishing House and the Precious Literature Hall Bookstore in Beijing were among those institutions that specialized in publishing popular literature. Aside from reprinting the Tale of Shrimp Balls by Huang Guliu (1948) and a few other pieces of fiction, very little of what could be truly called new “popular fiction” was published (Zhao Shuli’s Sanliwan was published by the Popular Literature and Arts Publishing House, but it is very difficult to consider this novel “popular fiction”). The majority of the items published by these two Beijing publishing houses consisted of story-telling and ballad-singing scripts, comic dialogues, traditional opera scripts and related materials, and their so-called “mid-length fiction department” mostly produced stories rewritten from their original traditional opera, folk story, or other folk art forms. The vein of romantic and chivalrous “popular fiction” dating from late-Qing dynasty times.

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