CHAPTER TEN
BEYOND THE MAINSTREAM

1. ‘Non-Mainstream Literature’

From 1949 until the 1970s, the overall appearance of the contemporary period’s literature was one of the integrated natures of literary opinion and writing. However, at certain times and with certain writers, “heterodox” phenomena did appear. In this book, the term “non-mainstream” is used to describe those opinions and texts that depart from or run contrary to mainstream literary norms. This term has the following connotations: First, it is relative to the opinions and writings that were accepted, approved of, and being championed during different periods; in other words, it is a “historical” concept. Its scope and nature is related to the literary “norms” of the time. Therefore, the works being approved of and championed during any one period could come to be seen as heterodox and subject to critical attacks during another. Secondly, “non-mainstream literature” in a highly integrated discourse field is in a position of being suppressed: Some works were critically attacked after publication, some never had an opportunity to be published and were circulated in various forms among a restricted number of readers. Thirdly, between 1949 and the 1970s, “non-mainstream,” “heterogeneous” literature appeared in a “periodic” manner. This literature was either produced when the demands of literary “norms” were relatively relaxed and there was the possibility of multiple understandings of what they might be (such as 1956–1957 during the phase known as the “Hundred Flowers Period,” and the early 1960s when adjustments were made to political, economic, and literary policies), or it was produced when literary controls were very strict, but where space still existed for a form of individual writing and “publication” (such as towards the end of the “Cultural Revolution”).

After 1949, those who were termed “liberal” writers lost their positions in literary circles. Moreover, “avant-garde” exploration, which was linked to twentieth century modern literature of the west, was seen as illegitimate. In a situation where left-wing literature was the sole literary fact, the “non-mainstream” was manifest in a relatively concentrated
fashion. Conflicts often occurred over the unwillingness of some writers to discard certain mental attitudes and literary opinions. In the vast majority of situations, the ideological characteristics of “non-mainstream literature” were based on suspicions of a literature that was “approved” and expounded fixed political concepts, on the desire to protect and re-establish the “enlightened consciousness” of questioning and critical realism, and on the wish to explicate and imagine a humanistic world. These attitudes were related to these writers’ understanding of China’s social reality, and of the living conditions and spiritual state of people in China. Towards the end of the “Cultural Revolution,” the nature of some “heterodox” literature began to go beyond these limits and showed signs of transcending the conceptual frames of left-wing literature.

2. The First ‘Heterodoxy’

A series of literary works were subject to critical attacks in the early 1950s. Prime among them were Xiao Yemu’s short story ‘Between this Husband and Wife’, Bi Ye’s novel Our Power is Invincible, Bai Ren’s Fight Till Tomorrow, Hu Feng’s long poem ‘Time Has Begun’, Bian Zhilin’s poem ‘Gate of Heavenly Peace Quartet’, and the plays and fiction of Lu Ling.

The critical attack on Xiao Yemu’s\(^1\) short story was one of the most important events in literary circles during the early-1950s. The gist of ‘Between this Husband and Wife’\(^2\) was as follows: Although there are big differences in family background, educational level, and life styles, the intellectual cadre Li Ke and Zhang Tongzhi, from a worker-farmer background, are happy together after their marriage, and are seen as a “model of the merger of intellectuals and workers and farmers.” But after the war and a move into the city, cracks develop and deepen between them on ideological and emotional levels. Later, after these contradictions are ultimately resolved, there relationship is restored to its initial

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1 Xiao Yemu (1913–1970) was from Wuxing in Zhejiang Province. He went to the Jin-Cha-Ji base area to join the revolution in the late-1930s. In the early 1950s, Xiao was subject to critical attacks over his short stories and novellas such as ‘Between this Husband and Wife’, ‘On the Banks of the River Hai’, and ‘Temper Steel’. In 1957, he was deemed a rightist and lost the right to write. While working at the China Youth Publishing House, he was a responsible editor for Song of Youth and Composition of the Red Flag. He was persecuted to death during the “Cultural Revolution.” See: Selected Works of Xiao Yemu, Tianjin Hundred Flowers Literature & Arts Publishing House, 1979.

2 Published in People’s Literature, vol. 1, no. 3.