PART TWO

LITERATURE SINCE 1976
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE LITERARY ENVIRONMENT DURING THE 1980s

1. The Thought Liberation Tide

With the declaration that the “Cultural Revolution” was concluded in late-1976,¹ important changes in China’s political, economic, social, and cultural conditions began to occur. The radical leftist revolutionary craze to establish a modern utopia was replaced by a line in “realism” that had economic construction at its core. Very quickly, the national leadership clearly refuted this “revolution” and declared it “was a bout of internal disorder that was mistakenly launched by the leadership and used by a counter-revolutionary clique to inflict severe calamities on the Party, the state, and all people’s.”² The “Cultural Revolution” was widely referred to as the “ten years of upheaval”, “ten years of catastrophe”, and the “time of nightmares”, and the term “the second liberation” was used to stress the historical significance to the people and the individual of the end of the “Cultural Revolution”. In many essays and books at that time and later, vocabulary such as “great transition”, “new epoch”, and “new period” were indicative of the optimistic hopes of people in characterizing the period of history in the process of unfolding before them. Of these concepts, it was “new period”, which had originally been used in reference to socio-political affairs, that was most widely used in the area of literature. For a comparatively long time, “new period literature” was a term acknowledged and used as the general term for post-“Cultural Revolution” literature.

¹ In August 1977, at the Eleventh National Congress in Beijing it was declared that “the smashing of the ‘Gang of Four’ was symbolic of the conclusion” of the “Cultural Revolution”. Documents from this congress termed the period following the conclusion of the “Cultural Revolution” the “new period” of China’s socialist revolution and construction. Literary and arts circles were very quick to label post-“Cultural Revolution” literature as “new period literature” (such as Zhou Yang in his report to the Fourth Literary Representatives Congress, «Carry on the Past and Open a Way to the Future, Make Literature of the New Period of Socialism Prosper»).

² See the resolution of the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Congress (June 1981): «Resolution concerning Certain Historical Issues since the Establishment of the State», in A Compilation of Important Documents since the Third Congress (vol. 2), People’s Publishing House, 1982: 811.