CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A SURVEY OF 1980s LITERATURE

1. Process: The First Half of the 1980s

For a period after the conclusion of the “Cultural Revolution” in late 1976, there was no great shift away from “Cultural Revolution literature”. The literary concepts, subject matter, and artistic methodology of writers still followed the practice of “Cultural Revolution literature”. A break with “Cultural Revolution” modes of practice did not begin to become apparent until 1979. As a result, many critics, when they speak of the beginning of “new period” literature, do not use the end of the “Cultural Revolution” as a dividing line.\(^1\) Of course, before this happened there were literary works that presaged this “change”, such as the short story 〈Class Teacher〉 (by Liu Xinwu) published in November 1977, and 〈The Scar〉 (by Lu Xinhua) in August 1978.\(^2\) These artistically crude literary works highlighted important characteristics of the “thaw” in literature: A concern for the fate of the individual and their emotional scars, and the authors search for “subject consciousness”.

The literature of the 1980s can be broken into two parts, with 1985 as the dividing line. During the earlier period, there was a relative concentration on various issues in literary, ideological, and cultural circles. At the time, the recently concluded “Cultural Revolution” was widely seen as the “savagery” of “feudal despotism”. Therefore, fighting free of

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\(^1\) Zhu Zhai, the editor-in-chief of *The History of Ideological Trends in Chinese Contemporary Literature*, points out that the reason they made the division for the “history of ideological trends in contemporary literature” at 1979 and not the “smashing of the ‘Gang of Four’ in 1976”, was because before 1979 “thought in literature and the arts had not yet fundamentally broken free of inhibitions”; “Bringing order out of the chaos in literary and artistic thought and new breakthroughs in literary and artistic work” began in late 1978 “about the time of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Congress”. Moreover, “the Fourth National Congress of Literary Representatives, which implemented the spirit of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Congress, became the milestone of this shift in the history of literature and the arts”. See: Zhu Zhai, ed., *The History of Ideological Trends in Chinese Contemporary Literature*, People’s Publishing House, 1987: 8–9.

\(^2\) Published, respectively, in the 1977 no. 11 edition of *People’s Literature* and the 11 August 1978 edition of *Literary Confluence Daily* (Shanghai).
the yoke of “cultural autocracy” and a renewal of the notion of “cultural enlightenment” (a “new enlightenment”) for the entire nation was the “main current” in ideology and culture. Related to this was the call for a resumption of the “tradition” of “realism” in literature. During these years, all literary themes were related to the “historical memory” of the “Cultural Revolution”, literature was the “testimony” provided by those who had experienced the “historical disaster”, as well as a consideration of and exploration into “historical responsibility” (“whose crime”). In fiction, there were the “scar fiction” and “introspective fiction” trends; poetry primarily consisted of the “songs of return” by “re-emergent poets” and the “Misty poetry” of young poets; and theater, especially western-style drama, was primarily made up of “social issue dramas” related to the “Cultural Revolution”. Deeper-going changes in artistic concepts and methodologies were fermenting, but had yet to become apparent and receive universal notice. Overall, the subject matter and themes of literature were directed toward the socio-political strata, and most bore qualities of “intervention” in socio-political matters. The issues touched on and the feelings expressed were in step with the thinking and mood of all social strata. This intimate relationship between literary works and society and politics, of literature with public life and feeling, was not to be seen again, and has led some to reminisce fondly about the “glory of former times”.

As the “Cultural Revolution” was seen as the “darkest page” in the history of modern literature and the arts in China, and the “field” of literature and the arts had suffered grievous devastation and the “withering of a hundred flowers”, “new period literature” was seen as a “literary revival”, and this “rejuvenation” was often linked to “May Fourth” literature, and even seen as a “revisiting” of “May Fourth”. During the early 1980s, people were most inclined towards viewing the “May Fourth” era as a situation of freedom and a “symbiosis of pluralism”. However, in view of the central issues of the first half of the 1980s, the “revival” people wanted was primarily that of the enlightening spirit of “science and democracy” advocated by “May Fourth” and the literary thought that held up “May Fourth” as its banner, but had been criticized as “heterodox” from 1949 until the 1970s. Many critics and writers strove to carry on the work of Hu Feng, Feng Xuefeng, and Qin Zhaoyang during the 1940s and 1950s (as well as that of Zhou Yang and others during the 1960s) that had ended in tragedy. One aspect of this was to impel literature to free itself from obligations to diagram political concepts and