CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FICTION DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1980s

1. A Few Concepts of the Fiction Tide

The literature of the late 1970s and early 1980s was referred to as “scar literature”, “introspective literature”, and “reform literature”, among other terms, in literary circles of the time. These concepts were widely accepted and used. Their appearance was both a manifestation of contemporary critics’ fondness for the “tradition” of summarizing patterns in literary trends, and reflected the actual situation in literature at the time. These terms fairly effectively described the literature of this period. Of course, this sort of description of literary trends also simultaneously played a part in constraining the directions and agendas of literature. The literary work terms such as “scar literature” referred to was chiefly fiction, especially novellas and short stories, and therefore, in many circumstances, these terms were equivalent with terms such as scar fiction, introspective fiction, and reform fiction.

For many people in China, the “Cultural Revolution” was an unavoidable historical topic during the 1970s and 1980s, and it was a focal point of the thought and expression of writers as well. As the writers of this period had personally experienced the “Cultural Revolution”, writings on this subject were seen as “testimony” to the historical wounds of those who had experienced it. The formulation of the term “scar literature” was directly related to the appearance of a great quantity of literature exposing the disaster that was the “Cultural Revolution”, and described the tragic fate of educated youths, intellectuals, and persecuted officials during that time. A comparatively early work that gave rise to “massive repercussions” among readers was Liu Xinwu’s ‘Class Teacher’.¹ At the time, critical circles believed this short story’s chief value lay in exposing the “internal spiritual scars” caused by the “distortion” of the “souls of a fair number of educated youths”.² Following this, Literary Confluence

¹ People’s Literature, no. 11, 1977.

Initially, the term “scar literature” was applied in a deprecatory sense. The tragic sentimental tone and the tendency towards revelatory subject matter was seen by some critics as a 1980s re-enactment of the “literature of exposure” and the “writing the dark side” trends of the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, there was fierce controversy over “The Scar” and other such works that began in the summer of 1978 and continued into the autumn of the following year. The divergence in critical opinion was centered on how to regard the ideological implications of these works, and how to assess their social effect—the raising of such issues was a continuation of a specific mode of left-wing literary criticism. Critics holding negative opinions believed there was too much exposure of “scars” in this literature, it had a “downcast tone”, and that it “influenced the will to fight for the realization of the four modernizations”; this literature was “backward looking”, and was “wicked” literary art that “treated the great

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4 This novel was completed in the early 1980s and describes the tragic lives of “educated youths” sent to work in the farms and pasturlands of Inner Mongolia. Due to the frankness of description, a number of publishing houses rejected the manuscript. It was finally published in 1986 by the Workers Publishing House (Beijing) and became a bestseller.