CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FICTION OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE 1980s (B)

1. Literary Exploration and ‘Avant-Garde Fiction’

During the mid- and late 1980s, the relationship between politics and literature was not in as “sticky” a state as it had been during the early 1980s, writers and readers no longer held approving, receptive attitudes toward literature as a carrier of political intentions and concepts. At the same time, the development of the commodity economy unavoidably altered the living conditions and lifestyles of people, and the “marginalization” of “pure literature” became more evident by the day. Under these circumstances, there was an acceleration in self-questioning and readjustments within literature, and it was possible for writers to gravitate towards “popular fiction” and other aspects of the mass literary arts, but it was also possible for them to strengthen the impetus towards further aspects of exploration into “literature itself”. In respect to the latter, the poetry of the “third generation” had an obvious “experimental” flavor, while “root-seeking fiction”, “modernist fiction”, “avant-garde fiction”, and “new realist fiction” appeared in the field of fiction. These exploratory tendencies chiefly drew support from the practices provided by twentieth century Western literature, as they sought out all manner of new possibilities in subject matter and artistic technique. Topics transcended concrete socio-political issues, and the art of fiction broke free of its confinement to “realist” methodologies, and pursued “noumenal meaning” in form and “eternal meaning” in topics: These became enticing goals at the time. This idea of a “noumenalized” state was consistent with the previously envisioned idea of “globalized literature”. At the time, critical circles variously referred to these forms of fiction that were “closely related and directly influenced by modern Western philosophical and aesthetic trends, and modernist literature” and “those works that evidently possessed a transcendental character from their philosophical trends to their artistic forms,”1 as “new tide fiction”, “modernist fiction”,

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“experimental fiction”, and “avant-garde fiction”. By the 1990s, the terms by which people referred to new trends in fiction were relatively uniform. The meanings of “modernist fiction”, “avant-garde fiction”, and “new realist fiction”, and the scope of each of them, had been differentiated.

The boom period in literary innovation occurred around 1985. In that year, “root-seeking” in literature and “modernist fiction” were the first literary phenomena of this tide in innovation to make their appearance. Among the fiction listed by critics as “root-seeking” fiction, some did not possess what at the time were considered “avant-garde” characteristics, but some, such as Han Shaogong’s ‘Pa Pa Pa’ and Mo Yan’s ‘Red Sorghum’, certainly were related to this type of avant-garde exploration. However, as the literary works included within the scope of “root-seeking” in literature were diverse and complex in artistic thought and modes of expression, as a literary trend, it generally was not seen as a unitary form of “avant-garde” literature. The term “modernist fiction”, which appeared at this time, can be seen as a judgment on its nature.

In 1985, the publication of Liu Suola’s novella ‘You Have No Other Choice’
2 gained an enthusiastic reception and was termed “true” modernist fiction by some critics. This assessment reflected the broad hopes of literary innovators during the 1980s: That China could give birth to “modernist” literary works like those of the West. This expectation was impelled and strengthened by a series of facts during the first half of the 1980s: The application of modern techniques such as “stream-of-consciousness” by Wang Meng and aspects of the absurd and distortion by Zong Pu;
3 the publication of Initial Explorations into Techniques of Modern Fiction (1982),
4 and the correspondence between Li Tuo, Liu Xinwu, and Feng Jicai; a controversy about Western modernist literature (1982–1984); and “experimentation” carried out by Li Tuo in ‘Grandma Qi’ and ‘Freely Falling Bodies’. Following ‘You Have No Other Choice’, Xu Xing published ‘A Variation Without a Theme’. Moreover, during this period Can Xue published a succession of short stories, including ‘Soap Suds on Sewage’, ‘The Bull’, and ‘Hut on the Mountain’.

2 Liu Suola, ‘You Have No Other Choice’, People’s Literature, no. 3, 1985. Other fiction by Liu Suola includes ‘Blue Sky, Green Sea’ and ‘In Search of the King of Singers’. No other works have since been published.
4 Gao Xingjian, Initial Explorations into Techniques of Modern Fiction, Flower City Publishing House, 1981. The appearance of this book led to the enthusiastic recommendation of it to others by some writers, and the participation of Li Tuo, Feng Jicai, Liu Xinwu, and others in a discussion concerning literary innovation.