1. A Survey of the Art of Prose

During the 1980s, the development of prose faced an obstacle formed by the model for prose form established during the 1950s and 1960s. This model was commonly described as “seeing the big through the small” and “expressing beliefs through things” in an effort to get close to the “spirit of the times”, the themes of the ideological trend in society, and structural orientations, as well as pursuing the “poetization” and artistic conception of prose. This form of writing, which was taken to be symbolic of the “rejuvenation” of prose in the early 1960s by writers such as Yang Shuo, Liu Baiyu, and Qin Mu, produced a powerful influence on both writers and readers, and for a time after the “Cultural Revolution” was followed by some prose writers as a path worthy of commendation in rebuking “Cultural Revolution” prose. However, viewed in the context of the overall trend, the work of some writers already exhibited the initial stages of a “return to” individual experience and the description of everyday developments and moods. During the early 1980s, elder writers such as Ba Jin, Sun Li, and Yang Jiang, and young and middle-aged writers such as Zhang Jie, Jia Pingwa, Wang Yingqi, and Tang Min, tended to emphasize the “free” writing of their “own” experience, shifting from responding to social topics toward the expression of individual moods and states of mind, as well as the pursuit of the writer’s “individual character” in language and linguistic technique. From the mid-1980s, prose writers such as Liu Yeyuan, Zhao Mei, Zhou Peihong, and Heihai, propelled the writing of prose into greater depths, into facing up to areas of human emotion, the public mood, and stream-of-consciousness, as they strove to describe the complex internal world of modern people. These works were termed “new prose” and “Misty prose.”

Another aspect of the development of prose during the 1980s was the tendency towards the “narrowing” of prose form, namely the peeling off from prose of narrative forms such as reportage literature and argumentative forms such as miscellaneous essays, and a renewed interest in concepts such as “lyric prose”, “artistic prose”, and “beautiful writing”. For many critics and prose writers, forms such as reportage literature, memoirs, and historical biography literature were no longer considered to be in the category of “prose”. During the early 1980s, reportage literature such as 〈Suppositions about Goethe and Bach〉 (Xu Chi), 〈Wild Goose Feelings〉 (Huang Zongying), and 〈The Ship’s Captain〉 (Ke Yan) in particular, as well as the lengthy “reports” on social issues that created a great commotion during the mid- and late 1980s, were already no longer seen as prose. At the same time, the naming of a mixed literary genre formed from the permeation and mingling of elements of other forms in certain works of prose was taken as a reference point in a movement toward the “standard characteristics” of the genre of prose. The fusing of certain prose elements into the fiction of writers such as Wang Zengqi, He Liwei, and Zhang Chengzhi constituted the “prose-stylization of fiction” and “prose-style fiction”; and the work of writers such as Guo Feng, Ke Lan, and Liu Zhanqiu was “a genre of lyrical literature that both embodied the intensions of poetry and accommodated poetic prose details, combining the techniques of poetic expression with certain characteristics of the descriptive techniques of prose”, and was thus listed independently as “prose poetry”.

During the early 1980s, in the discourse field of the re-evaluative ideological trend that enveloped all of society and literature, the major representatives of prose writing were elder writers such as Ba Jin, Sun Li, Yang Jiang, Chen Baichen, and Huang Shang. The majority of their work dealt with personal perceptions and experience, memories of old friends and family, and castigation of the injuries caused by tyranny during the “Cultural Revolution”. Some young and middle-aged writers, such as Zhang Jie, Zong Pu, Jia Pingwa, Han Shaohua, Tang Min, and Wang Yingqi, frequently expressed warm, sentimental, yet refreshing emotions while displaying a simple, emotive aspect of “humanity” from the perspective of children. In the main, their efforts may be seen as a response to the style of the lyric prose of “May Fourth” (primarily

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2 Wang Guangming, The World of Prose Poetry, Changjiang Literature & Arts Publishing House, 1987. This book is a broad study of the aesthetic characteristics, the historical formation, and the writers and their works of “prose poetry”.