Chinese literature from 1949 and after is commonly known as “contemporary Chinese literature”; within this, the literature from the period between 1949 and 1965 is called “literature of the seventeen years period” (十七年文学 Shiqi nian wenxue). This chapter discusses fiction from the seventeen years period to investigate the basic characteristics of and ideological factors behind “revolutionary narrative.”

Fictional narrative from the seventeen years period addresses the process of establishing a modern nation-state and involves the two major themes of revolutionary history and “socialist transformation.” It addresses the problem of why and how “we” should engage in revolution and demonstrates the results of “our” final victory. The fictional texts from this period present the basic features of the revolution in narrative. Within the overall context, this narrative follows the principles of artistic creation established in 1942 by Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.” For this reason, these texts all show varying degrees of formulaic tendencies both in their intellectual content and in their management of plot. Be that as it may, authors’ individual mental labor and their varying ways of imagining the modern nation-state both enriched well-established narratives and created their own vision, thus forming a different type of revolutionary narrative that marks the seventeen years period. With different ways of handling plot and character, mainstream fictional narrative in the seventeen years period may be divided into two types of narrative: classic revolutionary narrative and legendary revolutionary narrative. Classic revolutionary narrative completely followed well-established narratives in terms of plot and characters; revolutionary legendary narrative, however, blended in imaginative elements found in popular literature. The differences between these narrative forms reveal the richness of literature from the seventeen years period and demonstrate aspects of its modernity.
In classic revolutionary narrative, the author’s management of plot and characters follows completely the principles of artistic creation established by cultural policy. The plot design follows similar logic and has become the established mode of narration. Using Claude Bremond’s model of plot types, we can clearly delineate the patterns of plot formation. Bremond divided the plot development process in narrative works into two categories, “amelioration” and “degradation.” Within any category, a plot’s development and its conclusion both have the possibility for amelioration and degradation. Based on this model, Bremond laid out three ways of linking amelioration and degradation in narrative works.¹

¹ In his article, “The Logic of Narrative Possibilities,” Bremond argues, “All narrative consists of a discourse which integrates a sequence of events of human interest into the unity of a single plot. Without succession there is no narrative, but rather description (if the objects of the discourse are associated through spatial contiguity), deduction (if these objects imply one another), lyrical effusion (if they evoke one another through metaphor or metonymy). Neither does narrative exist without integration into the unity of a plot, but only chronology, an enunciation of a succession of uncoordinated facts. Finally, where there is no implied human interest (narrated events neither being produced by agents nor experienced by anthropomorphic beings), there can be no narrative, for it is only in relation to a plan conceived by man that events gain meaning and can be organized into a structured temporal sequence.” He divides events into two categories based on whether they complete or hinder this sequence.

Specifically, the three processes of combining degradation and amelioration are: the “end-to-end series,” in which, according to a series of linked cycles, a story substitutes and exchanges stages of amelioration and degradation; “the enclave,” in which the failure of a process of degradation or amelioration is caused by the interference of a reverse process that prevents its development and conclusion; and “coupling,” in which, in the same sequence of events, “the degradation of the fate of the one coincides with the amelioration of the fate of the other.” See Claude Bremond, “The Logic of Narrative Possibilities,” trans. Elaine D. Cancalon, *New Literary History* 11, no. 3 (1980): 387–411.