Since 2004, “subaltern literature” (底层文学 diceng wenxue) has gradually become a focal point of the Chinese literature and art world. Its prevalence is closely related to the changes in China’s social reality, intellectual world, and cultural domains. It reflects a development of China’s literature and art under changed social circumstances, as well as the creation of “people’s art” in the new age.

Subaltern literature primarily takes excluded and disempowered social groups as its subject. It is different from the three other main categories of Chinese literature: pure (纯 chun), main-melody (主旋律 zhuxuanliu), and popular (通俗 tongsu) or commercial (商业 shangye). Specifically, pure literature tends not to be interested in real social life, or it mainly depicts the lives of the elite classes. Popular literature is formulaic, caters to the tastes and fantasies of the masses, and has an escapist tendency. Main-melody literature tends to either gloss over social injustices or rationalize them. In contrast, subaltern literature demonstrates a reflective and critical attitude toward reality by focusing on the lives of lower class people, raising questions, and generating critical awareness in the hopes of helping the masses understand their social and economic circumstances.

As with other cultural domains, today’s literary realm is controlled by mainstream ideology, the market, and the elite. In comparison, subaltern literature occupies a marginal position in the literary realm. However, subaltern literature is more than simply literature about the so-called “vulnerable group” (弱势群体 ruoshi qunti). Despite the fact that as individuals they may be powerless, as a group the subalterns may fundamentally determine China’s future. “People, only the people, are the forces that create history.” ¹ This belies the understanding of some elite: that subalterns

¹ Mao Zedong “Lun lianhe zhengfu” (On coalition government), Mao Zedong Xuanji (Selected Works of Mao Zedong) vol. 3, 1031.
are a hindrance to social development, an element that can be sacrificed, abandoned, and ignored. The role of subaltern literary narration is to tell their stories and give them voices.

One point that should be made clear at the outset is the relationship between subaltern literature and migrant literature (打工文学 dagong wenxue). One major difference between the two concerns the authors. Subaltern literature is created by intellectuals and professional writers, such as Cao Zhenglu, Wang Xiangfu, Liu Jiming, Cheng Yingsong, Hu Xuewen, and Luo Weizhang. They are generally either university professors or authors working within the Writers’ Association. In contrast, the representative authors of the migrant literature are migrant workers themselves. They include Zheng Xiaoqiong, Lang Taosha, Wang Shiyue, Yu Huaian, Xu Dong, and Ye Er. This form of literature received widespread attention in 2004, around the same time that subaltern literature gained popularity. We can consider these two literary phenomena to be new trends of the twenty-first century, or perhaps we can say that they are two aspects of a single literary trend that concerns the disempowered. I feel that subaltern literature, in a broad sense, should encompass all works in which an author directs their attention to and depicts the lives of the subalterns. In this sense, it should include migrant literature. Only in a narrow sense does it refer to the subset of works created mainly by intellectuals and professional writers. Subaltern literature and migrant literature are mutually complementary and, together, they constitute a new form of literature in reform-era China.

Subaltern literature is not an isolated cultural phenomenon. Concerns for subalterns have also manifested in other artistic realms, for example, in cinema. The start of the New Green Movement and the transition to the sixth generation of filmmakers, some of whose movies focus on the hardships of the real lives of laborers, marked a change in Chinese film. Examples include documentaries such as Teixi District (铁西区 Xi tiequ) by Wang Bing and Along the Railroad (铁路沿线 Tielu yanyxian) by Du Haibin; and such feature films as Still Life (三峡好人 Sanxia haoren) by Jia Zhangke and Blind Shaft (盲井 Mang jin) by Li Yang. On stage, plays like Huang Jisu’s Che Guevara《切・格瓦拉》and We Walk the Big Road (我们走在大路上 Women zouzai dalu shang) broke through the boundaries of small theater, generating strong responses and active debates in artistic and intellectual circles. On television, the drama Migrants (民工 Mingong) was popular, and Sparks (星火 Xinghuo) had the highest viewership rating for CCTV over the last decade, reaching 12.9 percent. In popular music, musical