CHAPTER 7

What Is Reality? How Should We Think? One Understanding of the “State of Thought” in Contemporary Literature

Wang Yao

The relationship between literature and thought as well as the “state of thought”\(^1\) in literature has been a rather controversial issue in academia since the beginning of the new century. The debate began with a 2006 report in *Southern Weekend* titled “Intellectuals Bombard Literature: Modern Chinese Literature is Divorced from Reality and Lacks Any Thought.” The article highlighted the basic issues and the disagreements over this issue. “Intellectuals” argued that modern Chinese literature is divorced from reality and lacks any thought: “Chinese writers have increasingly lost the ability to think and express courage. They have lost a sensitivity to real life and the concerns of humanity. Literature has gradually degenerated into an “Ivory Tower”\(^2\) completely irrelevant to the lives of most people.” For these critics, modern literary writers are completely out of touch with real life and have lost the ability and courage to feel the flesh and blood realities of life. In present literary works, we do not see the everyday scenes faced in real life. Literature lacks a concern for public matters today. It is very rare that a writer can directly face the contradictions of Chinese society. A common trend in literature is to serve the market, provide entertainment, and pander to the market. Like literature that was dependent on politics,\(^3\) literature that depends on the market has no self-respect to speak of. In contemporary literary works, we do not see any thoughts on the difficulties faced by Chinese in their lives; we see no thought on the meaning of life; and we certainly do not see any thoughts on any overarching values.\(^4\) Since

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1. The state of thought, *sixiang zhuangtai*, is a short-hand phrase used throughout this article to refer to the question of the status of an overarching ideology or message in contemporary literature.—Trans.
2. The original term, *xiao quanzi youxi*, literally means “a game for a small group,” but carries the same connotations as the “ivory tower” in English.—Trans.
3. I believe that the author is indirectly referring to literature in the Mao era where all literature and art had to serve political ideology.—Trans.
then, “literary circles” have responded to the accusations of “intellectuals”: Most literary scholars believe that intellectuals are biased when it comes to their evaluation of Chinese literature; they have made a reckless supposition based on a very limited reading of literature. Relatively speaking, the critical response of “literary circles” was not a clearly focused argument like that of these “intellectuals,” and this reflects the unique and complicated circumstance in which literature currently finds itself. As in many of the debates since the 1990s, there is no consensus concerning the problem of the state of thought in literature; however, the discourse of critics and supporters undoubtedly highlights the importance of ideology in literature. The problem mostly centers on the relationship between literature and reality, literature and the market, literature and ideology, and the core issue focuses on the ideological ability of writers and the ideological quality of literature. Hence, in reconstructing the relationship between literature and the world, there should be more discussion on how to understand the “state of thought” in literature that has arisen in the new century.

When we discuss what is missing in modern Chinese literature, we often turn back to writers like Lu Xun. Between the late Qing dynasty (i.e., late nineteenth and early twentieth century) and the May Fourth (1919) movement, China experienced an unprecedented period of radical change. Lu Xun and some contemporary writers used their outstanding ideological foundations to participate in the establishing of a modern nation-state and thus achieved the status of “intellectuals.” This is a part of history with which we are all familiar. The “literary revolution” and “ideological revolution” were closely linked, so when we talk about “New Literature,” we cannot escape discussions of the “New Culture movement.” In discussing the rise of modern short-story prose, Yu Dafu said: “One of the greatest successes of the May Fourth movement was, first of all, the discovery of the individual…. This idea centered on the ideological awakening and made its essence and utility the destruction of the writing

6 Essence and utility is a reference to the ti-yong formula espoused by many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals. This was an idea that Chinese traditions should be preserved as China’s spiritual and ideological essence while Western learning, like science, should be employed for its utility. In this case, the author is referring to the transition in the 1910s and 1920s to writing in the vernacular, as opposed to classical Chinese, as