

Chinese Cultural Studies:  
CHINESE LITERATURE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

China is the only country in the world with a literature written in one language for more than 3,000 consecutive years. This continuity results largely from the nature of the written language itself. It is the use of characters, not letters as in Western languages, that is most important in the Chinese language.

The characters stand for things or ideas and so, unlike groups of letters, they cannot and need never be sounded. Thus Chinese could be read by people in all parts of the country in spite of gradual changes in pronunciation, the emergence of regional and local dialects, and modification of the characters .

The dominance of the written language has had significant effects on the development of the literature. In handwriting or in print, a piece of literature has visual appeal. This has given rise to the great respect that calligraphy enjoys in China, where it has been regarded for at least 16 centuries as a fine art comparable to painting (See Calligraphy). The main disadvantage of written Chinese is the great number of characters it contains: Even basic reading and writing require a knowledge of more than 1,000 characters. This has often made it difficult to spread the skills of reading and writing into certain areas of the country. But even with this disadvantage, Chinese has been a potent factor in shaping and maintaining a cultural continuity for millions of people. Because the written characters tend to keep the language stable, Chinese never developed into distinctly separate languages as did Latin in southern Europe with the formation of the several Romance languages.

China has a very old and rich tradition in literature and the dramatic and visual arts. Early writings generally derived from philosophical or religious essays such as the works of Confucius (551-479 BC) and Lao-tzu (probably 4th century BC). These writings were often about how people should act and how the society and political system should be organized and operated. A strong tradition of historical writing also evolved. After the fall of a dynasty, for example, a grand history of the late dynasty was commissioned and written by scholars in the next dynasty.

In addition to philosophical, religious, and historical writings, China also produced poetry, novels, and dramatic writings from an early date. Poetry became well established as a literary form during the T'ang Dynasty, from AD 618 to 907. One of China's greatest poets, Li Po, wrote during this period. This tradition of poetry, often dealing with the relationship of humans to their natural surroundings, has continued.

Drama is another old and important literary form. Chinese drama usually combines vernacular language with music and song and thus has been popular with the common people. A variety of popular and standard themes are presented in Peking Opera, which is probably the best known of several operatic traditions that developed in China. Chinese opera is a favorite artistic and cultural medium.

Early Chinese novels often stressed character development and usually centered on an adventure or supernatural happening; an example is the classic Ming version of 'Shui-hu chuan' (The Water Margin). Historical themes were also popular, as in the 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms', written in the late Yuan period. There were also love stories such as the extremely popular

'Dream of the Red Chamber', probably China's most famous novel. Many of the early novels were written anonymously. Often these works were written in the vernacular, and many authors felt it was beneath their station to be associated with this type of writing.

China's literary tradition continues to the present, though much 20th-century writing has concentrated on efforts to reform or modernize China.

Probably the most famous 20th-century writer is Lu Xun, a poet, essayist, and novelist whose work focused on the need to modernize through revolution. Under Communism, writers have been expected to uphold the values of the socialist state, though the degree of control over their output has varied. (See Chinese Literature; Confucius; Lao-tzu; Li Po; Lu Xun)

## 2. DYNASTIC LITERATURE FROM 221 BC TO AD 960

With the unification of China by the short-lived Ch'in Dynasty (221 to 206 BC), the singular feature in literary matters was what is called the "Burning of the Books." The emperor, Shih Huang Ti, was determined to be an absolutist ruler and opposed to writings on good government such as those in the Classics. In 213, it is believed, he ordered the burning of all texts that appeared threatening to him. Whether the books were actually burned or simply kept from the people is uncertain. The result was the same: It was necessary during the next dynasty to reconstruct the texts of the Classics.

The Han Dynasty (206 BC to AD 220) actively promoted the restoration and teaching of the Classics. In 124 BC a national university was opened

for the purpose of teaching Confucianism. Probably at about this time civil-service examinations, which determined the appointment and promotion of government officials, began to be based on the Classics. It was also during the Han period that the Classics became established as the basis of Chinese education.

Literature flowered again during the Han Dynasty. Traditional poetry and prose forms, especially the fu prose poems, flourished. But the most notable achievement came with the reactivation of the Yueh Fu, or Music Bureau, in 125 BC. This agency was founded in the previous century to collect traditional songs. One of its achievements was the compiling of folk songs and ballads. The most outstanding folk ballad of the period, about AD 200, was 'Southeast the Peacock Flies'. It tells of the tragedy of a young married couple who committed suicide as the result of the cruelty of the husband's mother.

The major prose authors of the Han Dynasty were Liu An, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, and Pan Ku. Liu An was a prince of Huai-nan in the 2nd century BC. The work attributed to him, but probably done under his patronage, is 'The Master of Huai-nan'. It is a compilation of 21 chapters on cosmology, philosophy, politics, and ethics. Although the book contains little that is not traditional, its cosmology was highly regarded by the Taoists and became part of their accepted teaching. The masterpiece of the period was the 'Shih-chi', meaning "Historical Records," of Ssu-ma Ch'ien. It was completed in about 85 BC and took 18 years to produce. It contains a record of events and personalities for the previous 2,000 years. The text is divided into 130 chapters with more than 520,000 words. It was the first attempt at a national history in China, and it set the pattern for the histories of dynasties in the following centuries.

In the next century Ssu-ma Ch'ien was followed as historian by Pan Ku, who was born about AD 32 and died about AD 92. He was also a poet, soldier, and the author of 'Han shu', meaning "History of the Former Han Dynasty." Completed after 16 years of study, the history contains more than 800,000 words. Because he was court historian, Pan Ku could get all the official records as well as the family histories of the emperors. In addition to information about the rulers, the author added sections on geography, natural phenomena, memorable biographies, and a descriptive account of books in the imperial library.

The Han Dynasty was followed by the period of the Six Dynasties and the Sui Dynasty (AD 221 to 618). The major poet of this era was T'ao Ch'ien (365-427). In his 20s he became a government official, but after about ten years he resigned and with his family went to live in a farming village to contemplate nature and to write poetry. His verse was in a plain style that was imitated by poets long after. He was a master of the five-word line

and has been called the first of China's great nature poets because most of his writings deal with rural activities. Although he was essentially a Taoist, his work also showed elements of Confucianism and Buddhism.

The 3rd and 4th centuries were, for prose writers, a time of individuality and partial rejection of slavish imitation of past models. Lu Chi (261-303) was a renowned poet and literary critic who emphasized originality in creative writing. He wrote a great deal of lyric poetry but is best

remembered for his 'Wen fu', an essay on literature.

The revolt against imitative writing was also expressed in a 5th-century style called "pure conversation," an intellectual discussion on lofty matters. Some of these were recorded in a collection of anecdotes entitled 'Sayings of the World'. In the 6th century the first book of literary criticism, 'Carving of the Literary Dragon', was published by Liu Hsieh (465-522). It was written in the p'ien wen, or parallel prose, style. Two other 6th-century prose masters were Yang Hsien-chih, author of 'Record of Buddhist Temples in Lo-yang', and Li Tao-yuan, author of 'Commentary on the Water Classic'. Both of these are outstanding records of not only what was happening but also of the folklore of the time.

The period from 618 to 960, the time of the T'ang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties, is considered China's golden age of poetry. The works of more than 2,000 poets, totaling more than 48,900 pieces, have been preserved. The writing adapted traditional verse forms and created new ones. Among the new and popular forms were lu shih, meaning "regulated verse"; chueh chu, "truncated verse"; and a song form called tz'u. Regulated verse consisted of eight lines of five or seven syllables set in accordance with strict tonal patterns. Truncated verse was an outgrowth of regulated verse: It omitted four of the lines but maintained the tonal qualities of regulated verse. The tz'u consisted of lines of irregular length written as lyrics for music. Because the lines varied from 1 to 11 syllables, they were comparable to the natural rhythms of speech and were easily understood when sung. The tz'u served as a major style for poetry during the succeeding Sung Dynasty.

Two of the greatest poets in all Chinese literature lived during the T'ang Dynasty: Li Po (701-762) and Tu Fu (712-770). Li Po was a romantic who celebrated such things as drinking, friendship, and nature as well as solitude and the passage of time. His work showed a great deal of imagination and a fresh approach to old themes. Tu Fu also celebrated the beauties of nature and bemoaned the passage of time, but he was also a satirist and critic. In 'The Army Carts' he condemned the senselessness of war, and in 'The Beautiful Woman' he made fun of the luxuriousness of the imperial court. Tu Fu's great reputation in literature comes in part from his expert use of all types of poetic style. His mastery of the regulated verse form was unmatched.

Chinese prose also underwent a stylistic reform during the T'ang period. The major change was brought about by Han Yu (768-824). He promoted classic Confucian doctrines at a time when they had begun to fall into neglect because of the rising popularity of Buddhism and Taoism. In his writing he advocated a return to the free, simple prose of the ancient philosophers. His own essays are among the most beautiful ever written in Chinese and became models for the style of writing he prized. At his death he was honored with the title "Prince of Letters."

### 3. SUNG DYNASTY (960-1279)

During the Sung Dynasty, especially in the 11th century, the tz'u form of poetry and song was brought to its greatest heights, particularly through the efforts of China's best woman poet, Li Ch'ing-chao (1081-1141). She produced six volumes of poetry and seven volumes of essays, all of which have been lost except for some poetry fragments. Her early poems dealt with the joys of love and were intensely personal. Later in life her writing began to reflect a dark despair, caused by long separations from her husband and, eventually, by his untimely death.

The prose reform continued under followers of Han Yu, and poetry of the conventional type continued to be written by members of rival literary schools. The only real innovation came with the use of everyday speech in local dialects in storytelling. This literature had its origin in unrecorded oral tales recounted by individuals to audiences gathered in marketplaces or temple yards. By the 12th century these tales became fairly lengthy narratives, many dealing with fictionalized history. This style opened new vistas in prose fiction in later periods, though its use was at first despised by professional writers.

### 4. YUAN, OR MONGOL, DYNASTY (1279-1368)

The best-known ruler of the Yuan, or Mongol, Dynasty was Kublai Khan. In literature Chinese drama came to the fore for the first time, and vernacular fiction was firmly established. (See Kublai Khan; Mongol Empire)

Puppet shows, skits, vaudeville acts, and shadow plays of previous ages had laid the foundation for a full-fledged drama. Plays in four or five acts, including songs and dialect in language quite close to that of the common people, became popular. More than 1,700 musical plays were written, and more than 105 dramatists were recorded. The first, and probably the greatest, playwright of classical theater was Kuan Han-ch'ing (1241?-1320?), author of about 60 plays. He wrote in a simple and straightforward manner, often about common everyday occurrences. Among his best works were 'Injustice Suffered by Tou-o', 'Meeting Enemies Alone', and 'Saving a Prostitute'.

Wang Shih-fu (1250-1337?) wrote one of the best dramas of the period, 'Romance of the Western Chamber', a work that is still popular. It is about the romantic exploits of the poet Yuan Chen, renamed Chang Chun-ju in the play. It is notable for its length, two or three times that of the standard Yuan drama.

In vernacular fiction one of the greatest novelists was Lo Kuan-chung (1330-1400), known for his masterpiece, 'The Romance of the Three Kingdoms'. He is also presumed to be the author of one of China's best-known novels, 'The Story of the Water Margin' (translated by novelist Pearl S. Buck as 'All Men Are Brothers'). The work is a semihistorical collection of stories about a band of enlightened outlaws--social and political dissenters whose exploits were recorded in official dynastic history. This is one of the few traditional novels approved today by Chinese Communist authorities and critics.

#### 5. MING DYNASTY (1368-1644)

Most Ming literature in both prose and poetry was traditional, imitative, and old-fashioned. Two schools of writing challenged this trend, claiming that literature should change with the age instead of slavishly imitating the past. The influence of these schools did not last long, however.

It was in the vernacular literature of the period that writers made significant contributions. The dramatic form ch'uan-chi (tales of marvels) became popular. Some examples were full-length dramas with many changes of scene and many subplots, while others were one-act playlets. This drama form won gradual support from literary figures, and in the 16th century the influential K'un school, which was to dominate the theater until the end of the 18th century, was formed.

In fiction there were some novels that are still considered outstanding. Wu Ch'eng-en (1500?-82?) wrote 'Monkey', the adventures of a cunningly resourceful animal that accompanied the Buddhist monk Hsuan-tsang on a pilgrimage to India. 'Adventure to the Western Ocean' was an expanded tale of the 15th-century explorer Cheng Ho. The author of 'Gold Vase Plum', subtitled "The Adventurous History of Hsi-men and His Six Wives," is unknown. It was the first realistic social novel to appear in China--the first fiction work not derived from popular legends or historical events. In a very naturalistic, somewhat coarse way it describes the life of a well-to-do businessman who has acquired his wealth largely through dishonest means; his goals in life are animal pleasures and heavy drinking. Although the novel was banned in China more than once, and Western translators have occasionally resorted to Latin for offensive passages, it is one of the most popular Chinese novels.

## 6. CH'ING, OR MANCHU, DYNASTY (1644-1911)

Ch'ing was the last imperial ruling house of China. During its reign most Chinese literature tended to be old-fashioned and imitative; genuine creativity was rare. Toward the end of the period, however, China had its first extensive contacts with European powers, and ideas from the West began to filter into the literature through translations of novels and other books.

In native prose fiction two works stand out. P'u Sung-ling (1640-1715) wrote a collection of supernatural tales entitled 'Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio'. The other is one of the great novels in world literature--'Dream of the Red Chamber', by Ts'ao Chan (1715?-63). Partly autobiographical and written in the vernacular, it describes in sometimes lengthy detail the decline of a powerful family and the ill-fated love between two young people.

A much later novel, 'The Travels of Lao Ts'an', by Liu E (1857-1909), was significant because it pointed up the problems inherent in the weakening dynasty, which was soon to be overthrown by revolution. The book was published in 1904-07.

## 7. POLITICAL AND LITERARY REVOLUTIONS

The Ch'ing Dynasty was overthrown in the Chinese Revolution of 1911-12, and from that time China was in almost continual turmoil until the success of the Communist revolution in 1949. Even then the turmoil did not altogether cease, for the nation was subject to the whims of the Communist leadership.

The Great Leap Forward, the government program of the 1950s, brought economic disaster to China, and the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s poisoned the whole cultural and social environment.

Political revolution was followed by literary revolution. In 1915 Youth Magazine (later, New Youth) was founded by Ch'en Tu-hsiu (1879-1942), who soon became a founder of the Chinese Communist party. A leader in developing the intellectual basis of the revolution, Ch'en published an article about the rebellion against traditional and classical literary forms and ideas. Hu Shih (1891-1962) was a proponent of a new national literature in the vernacular (See Hu Shih).

Another significant writer of this period was Lu Hsun, the pen name of Chou Shu-jen (1881-1936). In 1918 he published a short story, "A Madman's Diary," the first Western-style short story written in Chinese. He followed it in 1921 with "The True Story of Ah Q." Both stories criticized and rejected the old order. He is considered a revolutionary hero.

Political writings and speeches came much into prominence at this time, especially in the works of Sun Yat-sen, known as the father of modern China;

Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China; and Mao Zedong, the leader of Communist China. Under Mao's leadership countless literary works were produced, all of which reflected Communist policies and what in the Soviet Union was called "socialist realism."

One of the prominent writers of the early Communist era was Ting Ling, the pen name of Chiang Wei-chih (1904-86). He wrote 'The Sun Shines over the Sangkan River', a novel about land reform. Chou Li-po (born 1910), author of the novel 'The Hurricane', about rebellious peasants seizing power from armed landlords, was also a major writer. So too was Chou Erh-fu (born 1912), the author of 'Morning in Shanghai', a novel about changes in a textile factory after the revolution.

The one 20th-century giant of Chinese literature whose fame spread far beyond his native land was Lin Yu-tang (1895-1976). The peak of his career in China came with the establishment in 1932 of the satirical magazine *Analects Fortnightly*. His work reached English-speaking readers with 'My Country and My People', published in 1935. From 1936 he lived mostly in the United States, writing books on Chinese history and philosophy, but he returned to Asia ten years before his death in Hong Kong. He has been acclaimed as one of the most versatile Chinese writers of all time, producing novels, plays, short stories, and essays in addition to historical and philosophical works.

Lu Xun (1881-1936).

Although he died 13 years before the Communist party came to power in China, the writer Lu Xun is considered a revolutionary hero by present-day Chinese Communists. By the 1930s, when his reputation as a writer was established, he hailed Communism as the only means of unifying China and solving its social and economic problems.

Lu Xun was born Chou Shu-jen in Shaoxing in 1881. He attended the School of Railways and Mines of the Kiangnan Military Academy in Nanjing and later studied medicine, literature, and philosophy in Japan. He returned home a committed foe of the Manchu dynasty, and, after the revolution that overthrew the dynasty in 1911, he joined the new republican government in its ministry of education.

Lu Xun's literary activity began in 1918 when, at the urging of friends, he published a short story, "A Madman's Diary." The first Western-style short story written in Chinese, it was a satiric attack on the traditional Confucian culture of China. Its success laid the foundation for acceptance of the short

story as a literary vehicle. "The True Story of Ah Q," published in 1921, was also a repudiation of China's old order. In addition to his stories, Lu Xun wrote essays, of which "Outline History of Chinese Fiction" is by far his best known; made compilations of classical fiction; and translated literature from Russian to Chinese.

His pessimism about the republican government led him to leave Peking in 1926 and settle in Shanghai. There he recruited many fellow writers and countrymen for the Communist party, although he never joined it himself. He died there on Oct. 19, 1936.

Lin Yu-tang (1895-1976)

Chinese philosopher and writer, born in Fukien (now called Fujian) Province; son of pastor of American Reformed church mission; professor at Peking National University 1923-26; in U.S. 1935-66; returned to Asia 1966; interpreted China with urbane humor (nonfiction: 'My Country and My People', 'The Importance of Living', 'On the Wisdom of America', 'The Importance of Understanding'; novels: 'Moment in Peking', 'A Leaf in the Storm', 'Chinatown Family', 'Vermilion Gate', 'The Secret Name')