



*chapter one*

THE IMAGINATIVE UNIVERSE OF  
CHINESE LITERATURE

Pauline Yu and Theodore Hutters

*Editor's note:* Yu and Hutters stress the integrated place of writing in Chinese civilization, explaining that the word for writing, *wen*, also means “culture, civilization, learning, pattern, refinement, and embellishment.” Examining the creation story of Pangu, the authors contrast traditional Chinese aesthetic values to Western aesthetics: Chinese aesthetics reflect a holistic and correlative worldview in which art describes concrete phenomenon, the writer exists in a network of relationships, and literature interprets and resides within the historic tradition.

ANY UNDERSTANDING of the fundamental principles and assumptions underlying the writing and reading of Chinese literature should begin with a consideration of the larger cultural context in which those conceptions were embedded and which they to a large extent articulate. Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that the very word for writing in classical Chinese, *wen*, embraces a multitude of meanings beyond that of literature alone—among them culture, civilization, learning, pattern, refinement, and embellishment. The notion of literature as the primarily aesthetic phenomenon of belles lettres arose only very late in China—as indeed was the case in the West as well—and never took deep or exclusive root in the tradition. Much more compelling were the presumptions that literature was an integral element of the cosmos and of the sociopolitical world, and that in writing of the self one spoke ineluctably to and of society as well: the forms and patterns of one's writing corresponded naturally with those of the universe itself.

Needless to say, the tradition was not a monolithic one: significant voices were heard over time to question some of these presuppositions, and it could also be argued that the very need to reiterate them constantly suggests some fundamental uncertainty as to their validity. Moreover, these presumptions became increasingly tenuous and problematic over time. But it is undeniable

that they represent the vision that the dominant literati culture continued to perpetrate of itself.

By examining what was at one time considered to be an important creation myth of the culture, we may find an example of the worldview that is implicit in notions of the nature and function of literature in China. According to this legend, the universe was once an enormous egg that one day split open, with its upper half becoming the heavens, its lower half the earth, and the first human, Pangu, emerging from within it. Each day the heavens grew ten feet higher, the earth ten feet thicker, and Pangu ten feet taller until, after eighteen thousand years, he died. His head then opened up to form the sun and the moon, his blood filled the rivers and seas, his hair became the fields and forests, his breath the wind, his perspiration the rain, his voice the thunder, and his fleas became our ancestors.

Even the most cursory reading of this myth allows us to infer certain basic presumptions about the world that produced or received it. We might conclude, for example, that the universe is an uncreated one, generating itself spontaneously from a cosmic egg whose own origins are unspecified; that the elements of the universe are, from their very beginnings, organically and inextricably linked with one another; and that within those relationships the human being does not occupy a particularly glorified position. These conclusions are further confirmed by evidence that the myth is not indigenous to China at all, since it appears so late in the tradition and has so many well-known parallels in Indo-European cultures. The Chinese evidently were not concerned earlier in their history with questions of creation at all, or at least not creation by the hand of some divinity or force outside the cosmos itself—the ultimate sanctions for human activity could therefore be sought solely within the mundane realms of nature, human society, and human history. To be sure, recent archaeological discoveries have suggested that creation myths of other sorts did arise and circulate, but they never occupied the prominent place within the culture that, for example, the Book of Genesis held in the West, indicating a relative lack of interest in the question itself.

Although the Pangu legend has been shown to possess roots in foreign soil, its implications are nonetheless borne out by other evidence of more assuredly Chinese origin. These implications of the legend can be suggestively extended to the realm of literature, where they yield a number of immediately apparent observations. In what follows the foreign myth simply serves as a useful focus for the isolation of what were pre-existing and prevailing ideas within the Chinese tradition—this may also, of course, explain why it eventually appealed to Chinese sensibilities.

A first observation might be that the tradition lacks the figure of some anthropomorphic deity whose creative actions and products serve as the model for human literary activity, as in this well-known formulation from Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*:

Only the poet, . . . lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature. . . . Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the modern Western tradition, Chinese theories of the arts did not emphasize the notion of creation *ex nihilo*—Sidney's "invention," and its attendant values of originality and uniqueness—choosing instead to stress the importance of continuity and convention. It is important to keep in mind that these were emphases rather than exclusions: the culture was by no means a static or unimaginative one, but the privileging of tradition and pattern shaped critical discourse in powerful ways.

Second, the Chinese evidently did not view the work of art itself as the image or mirror of some suprasensory reality, whether successful, as in Romans 1:20 ("For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal Power and Godhead"), or inevitably incomplete or flawed, as in the Platonic theory of mimesis. Literature did not claim to represent a realm of being fundamentally other from that of concrete phenomena; it embodied principles transcendent to any one individual object in the sensory world (*dao* [*tao*]), but the very essence of those principles lay in the fact that they were at the same time immanent in and inseparable from those objects, rather than residing on some altogether different level of being. In contrast to the dualistic view of the universe that lies at the basis of Western notions of poesis, mimesis, and fictionality, there was in early Chinese literary theory no true dichotomy between the real and the ideal. Rather, literature spoke of the things of this world—and it was but a short step to the assumption that it spoke of the actual personal, social, and political circumstances of the historical author. From this arises the persistent impulse to contextualize the elements of a literary work—to assume that they referred directly, even if veiled, to the author's empirical world, rather than representing the products of a fictive imagination. Thus a poetic oeuvre could serve to construct a biography, and known biographical facts, conversely, could explicate the poetry; extended works of fictional narrative would similarly be construed as chronicles—no matter how disguised—of the author and his or her personal circumstances.

Another way of understanding this attitude, or a third implication of the Pangu myth, is to see it as a manifestation of the holistic, unitary notion of the universe, within which all things are organically connected. Just as our

human ancestors are only one small yet integral element of a larger whole, so the writer in traditional Chinese formulations exists in a network of relations with the worlds of nature and society that provide the impetus, forms, and subject of his or her works. We can see this totalizing view clearly in the following passage from the “Great Preface” to the sixth-century B.C.E. canonical anthology of poetry, the *Book of Songs*:

Poetry is where the intent of the heart goes. What in the heart is intent is poetry when issued forth in words. An emotion moves within and takes form in words. If words do not suffice, then one sighs; if sighing does not suffice, then one prolongs it [the emotion] in song; if prolonging through song does not suffice, then one unconsciously dances it with hands and feet.

Emotions issue forth in sounds, and when sounds form a pattern, they are called tones. The tones of a well-governed world are peaceful and lead to joy, its government harmonious; the tones of a chaotic world are resentful and arouse anger, its government perverse; the tones of a defeated state are mournful to induce longing, its people in difficulty. Thus in regulating success and failure, moving heaven and earth, and causing spirits and gods to respond, nothing comes closer than poetry.<sup>2</sup>

This is a classical statement of the expressive-affective conception of poetry that the Chinese tradition shares with other Asian literatures as well. Certain basic ideas resemble those in the West—the importance in poetry of song, emotion, and patterning—but others seem quite distinctive. Later texts would make explicit the tacit assumption here that the “intent” or emotion that moves within represents a natural response to the stimulus of the external world, be it that of nature or the body politic. Certainly the “Preface” emphasizes the latter and thus takes for granted that what is internal (emotion) will naturally find some externally correlative form or action, and that song can spontaneously reflect, affect, and effect political and cosmic order. We should not underestimate the pervasive power of this assumption throughout much of the tradition—that a seamless connection between the individual and the world somehow enables the poem simultaneously to reveal feelings, provide an index of governmental stability, and serve as a didactic tool. Whether or not these could be demonstrated to everyone’s agreement, the literary work certainly was never regarded as a heterocosm—an autonomous being that could serve as an end in itself and be read independently of its context and tradition. The very notion of “literature” itself embraced pragmatic forms such as epitaphs, mnemonics, dispatches, and memorials to the throne that the West generally does not include. And the act of writing even such a “high” form as poetry was an eminently social and political, as well as personal and interpersonal, form of communication. It was a skill any educated person was presumed to possess and be able to use on a regular basis—at social gatherings large or small, court festivities (and there often on command), leave-takings and reunions, births and deaths, and at any of the countless events

that merited commemoration. The earliest historical works also recount incidents when allusions to poems provided a means of conveying information and opinions obliquely in delicate diplomatic situations. For several hundred years, furthermore, the ability to write poetry to set topics was tested on the civil service examinations that represented the officially sanctioned route to government office—the only acceptable career for the well-born and educated individual. This emphasis on the didactic function of all writing and the obsession with the political dimension of expression distinguishes the Chinese tradition notably from that of Japan, with which it otherwise shares several basic ideas.

A fourth possible set of implications for literature centers on the attitudes to history that the Pangu myth reveals, both overtly and implicitly. Even the myth itself demonstrates the typically felt need to place its account within some precise if meager temporal framework—note the specific mention of the “eighteen thousand years” that elapsed until Pangu’s death. More important is the tacit assumption that the passage of time inevitably involves a movement from fullness to diminution, here literally from the wholeness of the original egg to its fragmentation into the elements of the cosmos. At the same time, however, no element of causality or true linear sequencing enters into the account; the egg simply opens up, and the myth focuses on what comes into existence through natural transformation rather than exploring or exploiting the possibilities of a more “vertical” set of relationships. This leads to the fifth implication: the absence of some divinity or demiurge who, like the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, not only brings the world into being but also provides it with its laws. The lack of such a god places the burden for providing those norms and values on history itself.

These notions are related to each other and were enormously influential and persistent within the culture as a whole. The belief that history is the story of decline from some earlier golden age is basic to Confucianism. This tradition locates the perfection of sages in some dim era of mythical culture heroes, and more recently in the founding years of the Zhou dynasty, whose ideals Confucius (six hundred years later) claims merely to “transmit.” This belief is shared as well by early Daoist texts like the *Dao de jing* (*The Classic of the Way and Its Power*), which advocates a return to values and modes of behavior that were possible—unself-consciously, at least—only at some prior stage of civilization. These attitudes are certainly not unfamiliar to Western culture, which locates itself somewhere and sometime after the Fall. However, the Chinese—and more particularly the Confucian—responses to this given differed significantly. Perfection did lie in the past, and earlier works were generally by definition superior to those that followed. The impulses in favor of archaism and imitation were powerful ones; innovations were therefore often best disguised as “returns” to some prior mode. At the same time, however, as the notion of “return” suggests, perfection was recuperable to the extent that one was able truly to study and emulate the past, because the exemplars were

not only human—of the same order of being and therefore in theory totally imitable—but also carefully demonstrated to be genealogically related to the founders of the political order. History thus served much the same function that revelation did in the West, providing didactic models and principles to be studied and, perhaps even more importantly, embodying those ideals in concrete human figures to whom one could trace one's lineage directly and thereby be assured of the possibility of return. In literary terms these attitudes are particularly evident in the fondness for allusions to and reiterations of past texts and in the obsession with tracing the progenitors of one's own works; the descent lines are rarely fleshed out in any coherent chronological fashion, but the sources are identified. And finally, this lack of interest in a fully developed logical or temporal sequencing is significant especially for later narrative, as discussed below.

Despite this concern with history and historicity, that is, the impulse to place literature both within its own tradition and within a larger cultural context, we should note that linearity—at least in the Aristotelian sense of a shaped movement from beginning to middle to end—is conspicuously absent as a structuring principle in traditional Chinese literature, historical or otherwise. The reasons for this are extremely complex, and one can only speculate at best. It may have something to do with the primary place of the short lyric, with its values of brevity, immediacy, and momentariness, as the first and foremost paradigm for written expression (as opposed, say, to longer narrative forms like epic or drama), although here one runs into classic chicken-and-egg type questions. It may have something to do with the Chinese view of history itself. Although history suggests a linear mentality in positing a diminishment of the perfection of some distant past, it does not in Chinese formulations possess a determinate point of origin or a clear line of devolution, and does not move teleologically toward some future apocalypse or redemption. This lack of linearity certainly also has something to do with the absence mentioned earlier of a distinct creator figure who might suggest that literature itself, analogously, creates an autotelic world as well. Rather than representing a metaphoric substitution for some realm of an ontologically different order, the work—and its author as well—are construed as being metonymically related to the only world there is. Indeed, the characteristic mode of reading a poem in traditional China consisted of a synecdochic filling-in of what had only been suggested.

Most of these notions are associated most directly with the Confucian tradition in China, although many are also shared with Daoism and, later, Buddhism as well. Daoism certainly takes for granted the integral relationship of all beings in the universe while denigrating, of course, the primary position Confucianism assigns to the human. And while the other-worldly orientation of Indian Buddhism is undeniable, the uniquely Chinese development thereof that proved to be the most enduring, Chan (better known by its Japanese pro-

nunciation, Zen) shared with the indigenous systems of belief the notion that insight into true, transcendental reality was best gained by an appreciation of the concrete things of daily life.

While the actual extent of the impact of these philosophical and religious traditions cannot be measured here (they have been and are still being examined in a number of scholarly works), a few general points can be made, with particular reference to poetry. The interest in Daoist texts as a mystical, intuitive apprehension of reality proved attractive to early literary theorists, who then wrote of a transcendence of sensory perception and spatiotemporal limits that precedes the act of composition. Discussion of the ineffability of writing itself, its curious blend of conscious craft and spontaneous outpouring, found prototypes in anecdotes centering on the marvelous accomplishments of various artisans in texts like the *Zhuang Zi* [*Chuang Tzu*]. Classical Chinese poetry was an extremely demanding and highly crafted form, but the ultimate goal came to consist in producing a poem that, exquisite, left no visible traces of the artistry that had labored to produce it.

Daoism and Buddhism also shared a distrust in the power of language to express meaning with any degree of adequacy, an issue that obsessed poetic theorists as well. The preference for short lyric forms throughout the tradition may reflect not only certain conditions imposed by the language itself—its heavily monosyllabic character, the proliferation of homophones, and the resulting limited number of rhymes—but also an acknowledgment of the incommensurability of words and meaning and a consequent preference for the evocative and unstated, for suggesting a “meaning beyond words.” A slightly different version of this ideal was embraced by Confucius himself as well, who expressed an impatience with students for whom everything had to be spelled out in its entirety. Indeed, the overlaps among systems of thought that to Western eyes might appear to be mutually exclusive and antagonistic are numerous. Perhaps the most important point to be made in connection with the relationship of these systems to the culture and literature of China is that they are best viewed as mutually necessary complements. There is a strong disinclination historically to extremism and an equally strong preference for harmony, evident on as minute a level as the love for balanced pairs and parallelism in both poetic and narrative forms. Thematically, especially in poetry, the most persistent issue focuses on the obligation of the scholar-bureaucrat to serve the state versus the powerful attraction of life in retreat. Confucianism dictated the former, except in extraordinary circumstances; Daoism and Buddhism sang the lure of the latter. In some instances the two possibilities were able to coexist: the integration of public and private was presented as the image of culture from its very origins. Yet in other cases, the contradictions between the public and the private, the needs of society and those of self, began to call into question this integration of the two.

Indeed, such questions were posed from the inception of the written tradition, in poems like “Encountering Sorrow” (fourth to third centuries B.C.E.), whose author, Qu Yuan, was forced to confront an inexplicable unwillingness of those around him to recognize the true nature of his self and to trust the motives behind his public actions. He was left with no recourse but escape, whether into death or shamanism, depending on what tradition of reading one follows. The poem expresses the disjunction between the individual and the body politic; later commentary tried to put them back together. Similar questions are suggested in the first comprehensive work of history, the *Records of the Historian* of Sima Qian (145–90? B.C.E.). Like Qu Yuan, Sima Qian had been unjustly accused of disloyalty to the state and suffered the severe penalty of castration in order to be able to continue pursuing his craft. Understandably, his work often focuses on the nature of justice in the world, or—more to the point—on why there seems, on the whole, to be so little of it. He delves into this issue by repeatedly asking why, if people behave honorably, they are not thereby guaranteed at least recognition of their virtue, if not conspicuous success in life. Sima Qian allows himself to ponder this matter at some length in his biography of Bo Yi and Shu Qi, two earlier and paradigmatic victims of this noncoincidence of virtue and happiness (loyal to the Shang dynasty ruling house, they refused on principle to eat the grain of the usurping Zhou rulers, retired to “eat ferns” on Mt. Shouyang, and died there of starvation). Toward the end of the essay he quotes Confucius and comes to the sensible conclusion that since the rewards of riches and glory appear to be in no way correlated to virtue, one might as well choose the path of virtue: one prefers it, after all, and it will as likely lead to worldly success as any other approach. He seems at this point to be heading toward the larger conclusion—one very comfortable for the contemporary Western reader—that living out his own shame for the sake of his writing and pleasing himself by doing good is thus a good in and of itself. Sima Qian sums up this attitude by saying, “When the whole world is in foul and muddy confusion, then is the man of true purity seen. Then must one judge what he will consider important and unimportant.”

The biography does not end there, however; instead it goes on immediately to lament that “the superior man hates the thought of his name not being mentioned after his death,” and that merely doing good is a waste if others do not learn of it. The ultimate value of virtue is measured in a public sphere—the only place where it really gains any meaning. In considering the question of why anyone does anything—and this must be seen, finally, as a meditation on the nature of his literary art—Sima Qian ultimately concludes that public recognition is prerequisite to any real private value. Sima Qian and his attitude here, already adumbrated in the situation of Qu Yuan, loom large in the Chinese literary history and thought of later centuries. This is so, owing both to his position as one of the first writers in China to manifest self-



consciousness concerning one's very creative motivation and to his paradigmatic role as someone concerned in equal measure with his own integrity and with the political health of the realm.

The historian's ultimate valorization of a public life has an important theoretical dimension behind its practical side. In granting precedence to the context in which one lives rather than to any individual existence that can subsist outside that context, Sima Qian points to the pervasive feature of Chinese literature mentioned above: the sense that the individual exists more as part of a network of other beings than as an entity unto himself. This overwhelming sense of context also helps explain why Chinese narratives are characterized more by metonymic progression from a given point to a closely related point within an extremely broad range than by stories that develop a limited number of elements to reach a definitive climax and denouement.

The very form of Chinese history writing best illustrates this point. Chronological sequences centered on a story with a beginning and an end are rare; more common instead are collections of a large series of individual essays and biographies. These are accompanied perhaps by a bare listing of significant dates and events, all of which taken together provide a picture of a period as a whole. Later, when novels developed, they tended to take the same shape; often they did not focus on a single set of characters for more than a few chapters before introducing a completely new group. And even when the same protagonists are retained throughout (as in *The Story of the Stone/Dream of the Red Chamber*), whole sequences of events and characters that bear very little apparent causal relationship to or acknowledgment of the needs of straightforward plot development occupy large portions of the narrative. This is also the case with *Journey to the West*, where the series of episodes in which the book's heroes are tested continue with little regard for how the events in each episode move the plot toward its conclusion. As with history, the metonymic universe of narrative discourse encompasses the whole sweep of earthly existence and is thus theoretically infinite; narrative closure becomes an arbitrary and almost insignificant act. That many novels also present themselves as either real or imagined elucidations of historical writings illustrates, in turn, how the whole genre of *xiaoshuo*—in fictional narrative—in itself exists in a contiguous relationship with other forms of narrative. Rather than being a distinct and clear-cut entity circumscribed with definite and definitive conventions, fiction shades imperceptibly into the more “factual” genre that it so much resembles. It is perhaps needless to say that the converse holds for early history writing in China as well.

With history at the forefront of narrative concern, and with the persistent assumption that interests of the individual inevitably implicate a larger context, it is perhaps only natural that politics often comes to dominate novelistic discourse. One reason for this, of course, is the position of Confucianism within Chinese thought, already adumbrated above. As an ideology

concerned above all else with the happy survival of the state, Confucianism inevitably placed concerns of state in the foreground within all varieties of written expression, while subordinating all other discourses. Given the extremely broad definition of concerns of state, however, the politics of the novel are at once broader and more subtle than we are accustomed to thinking of them. Since everything has a political dimension, for an author to introduce political concerns into his work does not require the overt signification that political literature has taken in the West; on the other hand, everything, whatever else it has, has a political reading as well. The point at which these horizons merge, however, was concern for maintenance of the overall context that guaranteed meaning to each fragment of life that was represented.

Since Confucianism harbored at its core the faith that state and society could perfectly mirror one another, depiction of any sort of discord, no matter how personal it might seem to us, automatically had profound social overtones. The relations of contiguity implicit within the structure of Chinese thought wrought its effect on the arrangement of values within the system. While the paramount values were assuredly positioned within a decidedly hierarchical order, they existed at the top of this order side by side in such a way that it was almost impossible to adjudicate among them. For instance, loyalty to family and loyalty to state were seen as complementary, but certainly of a higher order than loyalty to self. If, however, family and state loyalties happened in practice to come into conflict, choosing between them was an almost impossible task—particularly in light of the virtually universal narrative awareness that the major Confucian values were usually debased in their actual historical existence. The necessity of choosing between two imperfect values provides the major source of tension in traditional Chinese narrative, in both its ironic and pathetic modes. Chinese irony and Chinese pathos both force people to make untenable choices between ideals that have become seriously flawed somewhere in the course of their implementation, but irony makes light of the result while pathos stresses how unfortunate the consequences can be.

This type of structure is in a sense writ small within *Journey to the West*, in which each major character represents a particular concatenation of imperfect values that clashes with that of each other character. The final submergence of these differences through realization of the transcendent doctrines of Buddhism finally confirms the comic nature of the earlier episodes, but only perfunctorily resolves the problems raised by the juxtaposition of the differing virtues. What renders *The Story of the Stone* so painful is the degree to which the faulty implementation of the dominant values of Confucian society destroys any possible honorable accommodation to them. In Cao Xueqin's novel, the belief that society and its ideology faithfully represent one another has turned into a disabling fear of the consequences that would ensue if the claim were true. The characters' corrosive inability to find alternative means

to lodge their subjective impulses accompanies this disillusion with the prevailing order. This inability is a powerful foreshadowing of the crisis of modern literature, in which the fabric of traditional values has become so tattered that there can be no meaningful response to the situation.

#### CHINESE LITERATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

With the widespread realization among the educated that traditional culture was increasingly unable to meet the political challenge presented by the coming of Western power, a sense of cultural crisis marked intellectual discourse in China after 1895. For a variety of reasons, but perhaps primarily because it was the only field of endeavor regarded as having the broad scope required, literature became a focal point of efforts to meet the new demands made upon the Chinese conceptual order. The years after 1895 witnessed the publication of a spate of novels that wove their net of social relations with an irony calculated to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the network as a whole. This gloomy picture of the whole is punctuated by tentative efforts to establish the possibility of individual perception independent of what was seen as the tyranny of a received wisdom that insisted upon a uniform view of social events. More often, however, the cause of individual perception is mocked by a relentless epistemology that puts true understanding of events at a level of complexity far beyond the capacity of the individual knowing mind.

In this sense, the wide metonymic scope of the traditional conceptual order presents a devastating paradox at its moment of crisis: the very comprehensiveness that had at one time insured a place for everything now defeated any attempts to separate out discrete perceptions that would shape events into some new order. If the old order could continue to move along on its own terms by not changing its conception of the relationship of parts to whole, the new context represented by the wider world had rendered the old context radically contingent and finite by making Chinese civilization merely one narrative among others. It was at the point where the relentless exploration implicit within the old system suddenly discovered its new boundaries that the ultimate cultural crisis exploded in modern China.

Of the writers of the iconoclastic period that began around 1917, Lu Xun comes closest to the crux of the problem in his brief accounts of individual failures to communicate at any level with the rest of society. His characters are continually obsessed with their inability to transmit their own notions about a society that is constitutionally unable to live up to its own promises to itself. This in turn casts a negative light upon the tradition of a literature that had always vowed to itself that depicting a representative sample of experience would satisfactorily encompass the whole—and it is decidedly negation that Lu Xun seeks. For if to be understood one must become part of an extended network of meaning, Lu Xun and his various personae would

emphatically reject the invitation. Thus another paradox of literature in modern China centers on the desire of authors to escape being integrated within the framework of traditional understanding by destroying the relationships of meaning they find around them. But the destruction of these networks in an important sense also destroys the possibility of representing any entity beyond the writer's own tormented self-consciousness. In response to the pervasive objectivity of events that no longer seem to add up to anything, writers retreat into denial and intransitive subjectivity. This inability to move the focus beyond themselves painfully blocked out any possibility of fulfilling the desire to express the full dimensions of the cultural crisis that had caused them to turn to literature in the first place.

The extraordinary frustration implicit in this reduced posture perhaps best explains why Chinese writers were so drawn to Marxism. As an ideology that offered powers of rational explanation of the same order as Confucianism, while at the same time—at least initially—utterly rejecting the particulars that the tradition had based itself upon, Marxism offered a restoration of context that took into account the extraordinary changes that had so disordered the Confucian worldview in its final years as the orthodoxy. Marxism also had the considerable virtue of building a context that included the whole world and all its history. With the metaphoric sweep of its dynamic view of historical change, Marxism turned Confucianism on its head even as it maintained the contextual range of old patterns of thought. That the ideology of revolution had a ready explanation as to why intellectuals were restricted to wallowing in their subjectivity only made it that much more appealing. The literature that Mao called for in his famous utterances of 1942 (*Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*) specifically denied the legitimacy of any further explorations of the personal worlds of the authors; the remarkable acquiescence this prohibition encountered testifies as powerfully to the desperate situation writers had worked themselves into as it does to the brute power of state enforcement.

With literature now enlisted in the campaign to create a new context for China, it was at the same time reinvested with tremendous powers of signification. It was the job of literature to demonstrate the existence of the new order, and writers, well aware of the alternative, threw themselves into the task. But as the new context either failed to materialize or, far worse, began to manifest alarming similarities with the tradition, writers were also assigned the duty to find out why—with the important caveat that the Communist Party could never be at fault. Ruling out the Party and its class allies left writers with a set of familiar targets: the bourgeoisie, the intellectuals, and, above all, themselves—or perhaps more accurately, other writers. The sad reality left to literature by the time of the Cultural Revolution combined the worst features of the traditional and the modern: a vulgar and utterly mechanical didacticism combined with the renewal of doubt about the legitimacy of

the authorial voice. It is no wonder that literature after 1979 began with a veritable orgy of subjectivity: denied both subjectivity and objectivity for so long, writers quite naturally began the painful task of reconstruction by attempting to gain a new sense of themselves. This new subjectivity, however, had it remained fixated upon itself, threatened to take Chinese literature back to the indulgences of the May Fourth period.

In the past several years a number of new voices have come on the scene, working out new techniques to explore a broader horizon. Perhaps the happiest result of this reaching outward is represented by the work recently translated as *Chinese Lives*.<sup>3</sup> Superficially a collection of reportage, this work, in presenting the profound differences among a variety of people, perhaps marks the beginnings of the sense of a new context that modern Chinese literature has promised itself for so long.

#### NOTES

1. Walter Jackson Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 85, 86.

2. Author's translation.

3. Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye, *Chinese Lives*, ed. W. J. F. Jenner and Della Davin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).