

CHINESE LITERATURE – 19TH CENTURY

Prof. Feng Yuan-chun

LITERATURE FROM THE OPIUM WAR TO THE MAY THE FOURTH MOVEMENT

The years between the Opium War of 1840 and the May the Fourth Movement of 1919 form the sixth and final stage in the history of classical Chinese literature.

In the latter half of the Ching dynasty, the capitalist countries of the West carried out ceaseless economic and military aggression against China. Thus the feudal society which had lasted for so many centuries collapsed, and China became a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country. At the same time changes took place in class relationships.

All this time the Chinese people continued to fight against aggression and tyranny. The Opium War was followed by the Taiping Revolution (1851-1864), the 1898 Reformation, the anti-imperialist Boxer rising (1899-1901), and the 1911 Revolution, to name only the largest revolts. So for the eighty years preceding the May the Fourth Movement, the Chinese people persisted in their struggle for democracy. But owing to the weakness of the Chinese bourgeoisie and the lack of working-class leadership, the revolutionaries failed to gain their objective.

Almost without exception, the best writers of this period were sympathetic to the popular cause. The chief poets of these eighty years were Chang Wei-ping, Wei Yuan, Chu Chi and Huang Tsun-hsien. The first three depicted the truth about the First Opium War, revealing the stupidity and cowardice of the government and the courage of the people. Poems like "San Yuan Li" by Chang Wei-ping, "Recalling History" by Wei Yuan and "Contemporary Affairs" by Chu Chi were thoroughly realistic works. Huang Tsun-hsien was an important writer who aspired to start a "revolution in poetry" and founded the "modern" school. Most of the "modern" poems written at that time were somewhat superficial, yet Huang's work is outstanding for its patriotic feeling and close concern with the political and social realities of the time. His language is rich and natural. His poem "Lamenting Pyongyang" records the Chinese defeat at Pyongyang in Korea in 1894, and bitterly reproaches the generals who disgraced China.

*Of thirty-six strategies, the best is to run;
Horses stampeded, men trampled on each other....
One general was taken captive, one was killed,
And fifteen thousand men laid down their arms.*

"Tungkou" and "Taiwan" were good poems too, fresh and robust compared with the pseudo-classical verse of that time.

In prose the chief writers were Lin Tse-hsu, Chang Ping-lin and Liang Chi-chao. Lin Tse-hsu, the heroic commissioner in Canton who opposed the import of opium, wrote powerful and moving prose on political subjects, including his *Draft Memorandum to the Queen of England* and *Severe Penalties Proposed for Foreign Smugglers*. Chang Ping-lin's style is more erudite, but he was a fervent revolutionary who eloquently urged **revolt**. In his Declaration on the 240th Anniversary of China's Subjugation by the Manchus, he wrote:

Though Greece was conquered, she recovered; and though Poland was dismembered, her people retained their societies. Why should China — our great country with

its vast population and fine cultural tradition — prove inferior to these smaller states? Let fathers and sons take counsel together and unite as one; let us wipe our tears and attend this gathering to commemorate the loss of our independence.

Liang Chi-chao advocated a new style of prose which had the virtues of simplicity and fluency. Lucid and unhampered by rules, it occasionally used colloquialisms or sentence constructions borrowed from foreign languages. Being clear and expressive it was an effective tool for convincing readers. This is why the writings of Liang Chi-chao were so popular at the end of the Ching dynasty and the beginning of the republic.

The best-known novelists of this period were Shih Yukun, Liu O, Han Pang-ching, Li Pao-chia, Wu Wo-yao and Tseng Pu. Li Pao-chia's two most important works are *Modem Times* and *The Bureaucrats*. He tears the mask from the faces of arrogant foreign missionaries and mandarins who are cowardly bullies. Of Wu Wo-yao's many novels, the most famous is *Strange Events of the Last Twenty Years*. This attacks not only the bureaucrats but the merchants and scholars too, describing with relish the stupidity of certain "cultured" savants. Tseng Pu is best known for *A Flower in an Ocean of Sin*, a novel about the famous courtesan Golden Flower, which deals with various aspects, of society at the end of the Ching dynasty and exposes the corrupt politics and in-competent bureaucracy of that time. In Chapter 5, for instance, we read of a poor official in Peking who cannot pay his debts until he wins the emperor's favour and becomes rich. But in Chapter 6, when he is sent to lead China's army and navy against France, he bungles everything.

He neither knew his officers nor cared for his men, but growing arrogant, arrogated all authority to himself, though all he was capable of was tricks and wiles. The French commander did not spare him, however, but catching him off his guard started to bombard his headquarters during a storm. Although Chuang racked his brains, clever as he was with his pen, he was helpless against cannon; eloquent as he was, he could not withstand the onslaught of the enemy fleet. So he escaped barefoot through the rain, running seven or eight miles without a thought for all the ships and men he was losing, to hide himself inland in a monastery.

This novel, though it was never finished, ranks as one of the best of its time.

During this period, foreign novels translated into Chinese by Lin Shu, Wu Tao and others contributed to the development of Chinese fiction and the Chinese people's understanding of foreign countries.

In drama, while such classical forms as *tsa chu* and *chuan chi* were declining, local operas were growing increasingly popular. Carrying on the best traditions of earlier operas like *The Fisherman's Revenge* and *Borrowing Boots*, different localities produced a number of lively plays, often filled with the spirit of revolt or criticism of current abuses. By the time of the 1898 Reformation, Wang Hsiao-nuag had written operas on historical themes to foster patriotism. Thus in *Lamenting at the Ancestral Temple* he describes how when the king of Shu decided to surrender to Wei in A.D. 263, his son Liu Shen killed himself after uttering the following protest:

*Drums thunder in my ears
As my father approaches General Teng.
I cannot bear to see
A king kneeling before his horse.
Would I could kill all traitors!*

*Today ends our imperial house;
Fiercely I draw my sword,
Preferring death to dishonour!*

New operas on contemporary themes now became an important part of the Chinese theatre, and played an active role in the political struggle. At this time, too, responding to the political needs of the times, modern plays of the Western type gradually appeared. By the 1911 Revolution there were many repertory companies, among them the Friends' Society, the Spring Sun Society, the Spring Willow Society and the Evolution Club, all of which made their contribution to the Chinese theatre. The plays they produced reflected to a certain extent the popular demand for revolution.

The literature of the period of the democratic revolution also reflected the conflict between the new bourgeois culture and the old feudal one. But since the world had already entered the era of imperialism, the young Chinese capitalist class could not put up a strong fight; thus the bourgeois thinkers of this period showed a striking tendency towards reformism, and the writers did not attain very high standards. Not till the new democratic revolution was inaugurated after the May the Fourth Movement was there any marked advance in Chinese literature.