

MODERNISM IN CHINESE “SEARCH FOR ROOTS” LITERATURE OF THE 1980s

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*The article is focused on the problem of **modernism development** in Chinese literature of the 1980s. The relevance of the modernism study in Chinese literature of the 1980s is determined by the importance of modern forms of art, which enabled a fundamental change the situation in contemporary Chinese literature, not only through the first decade after the “cultural revolution” but also in subsequent periods. Particular attention is paid to the study of the “search for roots” literature — one of the most significant results of searching for modernism in the 1980 in China. The direction of the “search for roots” literature took politics out of literature and separated it. This is one of the most significant results of searching for the modernism of the 1980s, which aimed at forming a new subjectivity in Chinese literature in the context of awareness and overcoming the identity crisis, caused by the catastrophe of the adamant ideological discourse. In this sense, the value of modernism in contemporary Chinese literature goes far beyond the literary process itself.*

Key words: modernism, “searching for roots” literature, Chinese literature, cultural revolution, China.

Семеніст І.В.

Модерністські тенденції в китайській «літературі пошуку» 1980-х років

Стаття присвячена проблемі формування модерних тенденцій в китайській літературі 1980-х років. Особливу увагу приділено дослідженню «літератури пошуку» — одного з найбільш значущих результатів модерністського пошуку 1980-х років в Китаї. У роботі досліджується формування нової суб'єктності в китайській літературі в контексті усвідомлення і подолання кризи ідентичності, викликаній «культурною революцією».

Ключові слова: модернізм, модерністські тенденції, література пошуку, китайська література, культурна революція, Китай.

Семенист И.В.

Модернистские тенденции в китайской «литературе поиска» 1980-х годов

Статья посвящена проблеме формирования модернистских тенденций в китайской литературе 1980-х годов. Особое внимание уделено исследованию «литературы поиска» — одного из наиболее значимых результатов модернистского поиска 1980-х годов в Китае. В работе исследуется формирование новой субъектности в китайской литературе в контексте осознания и преодоления кризиса идентичности, вызванного «культурной революцией».

Ключевые слова: модернизм, модернистские тенденции, литература поиска, китайская литература, культурная революция, Китай.

Introduction

The relevance of the modernism study in Chinese literature of the 1980s is determined by the importance of modern forms of art, which enabled a fundamental change in contemporary Chinese literature situation, not only during the first decade after the “cultural revolution” but also in subsequent periods. The “searching for roots” literature direction could separate literature from politics. This is one

of the most significant results of the modernist search of the 1980s which aimed to create a new subjectivity of Chinese literature in the context of understanding and overcoming the identity crisis caused by the catastrophe of an unbending ideological discourse. In this sense, the significance of modernism in modern Chinese literature goes far beyond the literary process. Modernism significantly influenced the understanding of culture, the formation of a new

mentality and the formation of a new personality. It should be perceived as a literary, socio-political and cultural-historical phenomenon.

Theoretical Background

The study of modernism in Chinese literature is closely connected to the concept of “modernism” in literature and art of the West of the 20th century. The correlation of ideas about “classical” modernism and its Chinese modification pushes the spatio-temporal research framework and locates Chinese literature in the context of global cultural processes. The globalization context is an integral part of many contemporary interpretations of cultural and literary processes in China in the last three decades after the end of the “cultural revolution”, also in Chinese literature of the 20th century. Numerous works of Western scholars are more varied than in national literary criticism, focused on the study of Chinese modernism as key points in understanding the phenomena and processes of Chinese literature of the “new period”. Recently Ukrainian literary scholars have paid more attention to the works of Chinese modernists. The works of the following researchers deserve due attention: N. Isayeva and M. Voina [5; 1; 2; 3]. Despite the apparent achievements of national and foreign humanities, many significant phenomena and processes in the literature of the “new” and subsequent periods, including modernism, remain poorly understood.

Methods

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study of Chinese “search for roots” literature as part of world modernistic literature is comprised of the structuralism theorists works: J. Lacan (structural psychoanalysis), C. Levy-Strauss (structural typology of myth), P. Ricoeur (interpretation of the text); work on the theory of literature M. Bakhtin (dialogue of cultures, Spatio-temporal symmetries), A. Veselovskiy (concept “counter-currents”), Y. Lotman (structuralist poetics); work of C. Jung, dedicated to archetype, also mythology and folklore work written by E. Meletinskiy, S. Nekliudov, and M. Eliade. The relevance of historical and literary aspects requires an appeal to the works of national and foreign experts in the field of Chinese literature and culture of the 20th century — V. Sorokin, S. Toroptseva, Liu Zaifu, Ji Hongzhen, Zhang Xudong and others.

Results and Discussions

Important changes took place in the middle of the 1980s in Chinese literature through the Communist Party weakened control over the sphere of ideology, art, and literature after the campaign “for the eradication of spiritual pollution” (1983). As a result of the open-door policy, foreign literature influence increased. Large-scale translations and

studies of Western culture, primarily written in the 20th century, filled the intellectual space and radically changed the very fabric of modern Chinese cultural discourse.. The width, depth, and severity of the collision and interaction of two cultures that existed in the same period, but had a different history, were truly unprecedented. The pop culture of Hong Kong and Taiwan also had a big impact on China, especially the special economic zones in the South.

In 1985, China’s leading literary journals almost simultaneously published vivid and distinctive works by young Chinese writers: “You Have No Other Choice”, “Blue Sky, Green Sea” by Liu Suola, “Variations Without a Theme” by Xu Xing, “One Day” by Chen Cun, “Buffalo” by Can Xue, “Tibet, the secret years” by Tashi Dawa, “Little Bao Village” by Wang Anyi, “Transparent Red Radish” by Mo Yan, “*Papapa*” by Hang Shaoguang. In the preface to the collection “*New prose (1985)*”, where works were written by Hang Shaoguang, Xu Xing, He Liwei, Liu Suola, Mo Yan, Tashi Dawa, Ma Yuan, Zhang Chenzhi, Zheng Wanlong, Can Xue and other writers, Chinese critic Wu Liang wrote: that the Prose of 1985 interrupted his theoretical dreams, it quietly and imperceptibly, but quite confidently showed itself [11, 2].

The term “search for roots” in literature refers to the combination and interweaving of various trends, especially modernistic ones, in Chinese literature of the 1980s and is an invention of critics who found themselves in extremely difficult situations. In the 1980s, Xu Zhidong highlighted three areas of Chinese literature: “social literature”, which considers its mission to improve society; “modern popular literature” (“entertainment” literature) and “pure” or “searching for roots”, the purpose of which lies within the literature [10].

A. Wedel-Wedelsburg also highlighted the literature of the “search” among the literary directions of the 1980s. This category includes works that are original in form and content, distinguished by a delicate and careful attitude to the language, which is of more value than “just a source of sociological information”. For the authors of such works, art is a means of self-expression, an opportunity to approach the essence of being [7; 12].

For writers, who represented the direction of the “search for roots” literature, the main aim was to “create a new consciousness”, and most Chinese writers in human cognition were still limited to the concept of “humanism” in that interpretation, which was developed in the late 19th — early 20th centuries. At that time, the “Inevitable Evil” of Chinese literature was the disharmony of form and content, right up to their complete inconsistency.

Although this expression is not without a certain declarative character characteristic of the criticism of the 1980s, it nevertheless contains a description of the internal contradictions and emotional expe-

riences of modernist writers of the new generation — the generation of the “transition period”, who proclaimed themselves “lost youth”. In the late 1970s, “bewildered youth” were still the subject of criticism and education in the works of writers such as Liu Xinu. Now the “bewildered youth” not only turned into the main character of literature but also took a definite, officially recognized position in society. Its characteristic features began to be considered as distinctive features of the modern generation of youth. Such metamorphoses indicate cardinal changes in the understanding of subjectivity.

A new understanding of subjectivity leads to a more active search for new representative forms of the human subject, allows young writers to achieve harmonization of form and content. So, Liu Suola in the novel “You Have No Other Choice” used cacophony as the basis of the narrative, which allowed her to organically convey the hectic creative life of conservative students. So, young people who tried to break with old and backward ideas about music and creativity, immediately found themselves under the yoke of the same “double doubts” — doubts about the rationality of the existing order of things and doubts about their ability to change something. The fact that they went abroad, passed away, left the walls of the conservatory author described as a “process” faced by people who were not clearly defined in life undergo. What if everything presented by the author as “blindness”, thoughtlessness, immaturity of these actions was the “truth” of the whole generation — the absence of another choice.

According to the content and presentation style, “Variations without a Theme” written by Xu Xing is the Chinese version of J. D. Salinger’s “The Catcher in the Rye”. The inner world of the character has been exposed in his monologue on the first page of the work. An experienced reader will not find anything special in this passage. But in the middle of the 1980s, when China society turned to openness, they perceived these lines quite differently. They understood the concept of “modernity” when the “self” was in their life and art in a heightened sense. The “self” deeply reflected the feeling of “tiredness from activity” (expressed by Men Fanhua and Chen Guangwei, the authors of the “History of the Development of Contemporary Chinese Literature”), accumulated over a fairly long period of Chinese history. During the years of the “cultural revolution”, the concept of “human” was completely collapsed, then its significance, new blows and shocks as a result of a market economy development took place. Faith and doubt, bitterness and a smile, a thirst for activity and confusion — people simply fell from their feet from such a change of moods and vital feelings, but we had to continue to live and look. And although these searches were futile in some ways, erroneous, they formed for literature of the 1980s a truly modern

outlook on life, as well as the necessary creative experience [9, 188-191].

Modernist prose started to move away from direct copying. Writers increasingly paid attention to the combination of a foreign form with their vision and individual emotional perception. The works of Chinese authors of that time possessed features of anti-prose in the sense of prose, an alternative to traditional (official, realistic). There was a notable connection with the literature of existentialism in the following works: J. D. Salinger’s “The Catcher in the Rye”, Jack Kerouac’s “The Dharma Bums”, “The Naked and the Dead” by Norman Mailer, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s “Les Gommes”, and others. The works of Chinese authors gravitated toward “black humor” mixed with painful conditions and fears on a comedic basis. They created a picture of the absurdity reigning in the world.

The bitterness of the human existence is meaninglessness. It is the main theme both in the absurdist works of writers from the West and in the works of Can Xue. But the position of the Chinese writer is far from deliberately indifferent disappointing. For example, in the story “Buffalo”, Can Xue fixed certain irrational observations of the world, certain false sentiments — peculiar metamorphoses of the spirit. However, in these outwardly transformed, hypertrophied, false, ephemeral images it is reflected hidden from the eyes reality of established public beliefs. In fact, “black humor” and “new romance” intended to reveal the “root cause of the internal state” and “the deep layers that are happening”. The Chinese modernists described the absurdity of life. “Truthfulness” or “reality” was still one of the secret goals of their research. From the narrative and narrative constructions, the story of Can Xue is completely different from how it was in traditional realistic prose. In traditional works, there were events developed in time and space specially reserved for them, and therefore the characters bore the imprint of “history”. The “stories” of the characters by authors such as Can Xue are hidden and unclear. The main characters are absent and replaced by the narrator’s self. This leads to the fact that the work acquires the character of a dream, something mysterious, where the plot is fantastic and meaningless, and the composition is chaotic, there is nothing solved, definite and clear in it. Some works are quite consistent with “*subito*” in traditional theory — “spontaneous recordings”, plotless prose. When the writer explored the “root cause of the inner state” of the modern character, he tried to break through the subjective “visual image” to a kind of objective “truth”, so he combined the unconnected: fantasy and truth, farcical and sarcastic, fictional and real, book language and street language. He processed all this piling up of techniques into a single uniform style of a work of art. Thus, the language of the works of Xu Xing is a seamless combination of Beijing

vernacular expressions and literary norms, hidden irony, and direct utterances. Liu Suola connected a professional music warehouse with the banter. Tashi Dawa instilled the experience of the Tibetan life of the Han language tree. All his language experiments with “alienation” and “polyphony” could be seen as part of this kind of effort.

Perhaps, Tashi Dawa felt the greatest influence on him the principle of the prevalence of “form” over the “content”. He went much further than Can Xue, Liu Suola, Xu Xing, and other writers.

The most striking about the «A Soul in Bondage: Stories from Tibet» story and his other works is that all the characters and their fates ranked by the “story” — “the narrative style resembles holography when different facets of the story unfold in one moving plane” [4, 524]. According to researchers, the description of Tashi Dawa is just “Tibet”, which exists in the Chinese language as a kind of linguistic concept, and not real Tibet, therefore, critics express concern about this kind of “congestion” in the narrative technique. Thanks to the work, Can Xue opens up a new view of the modernist prose of the 1980s. It deepened and developed the idea of modernism. If the Chinese modernist prose gravitated towards «black humor» and a new novel, then the prose of Can Xue is different. Creativity of Can Xue is associated with surrealism, and psychoanalysis of the famous writer F. Kafka.

The individual, personal “wounds” of the writer, determined her creative position and allowed her not to limit herself by existing “fashionable” trends, but to give preference to the search for new ways, the development of deep layers of consciousness in the inner world of a person.

Men Fanhua and Chen Guangwei drew attention to the fact that the work of all the modernists of that time was divided into two directions of development. The first can be named “extroversion”. The writers who followed it preferred to refer to those motives that had an undoubtedly “modernist” sound, were already identified in the course of the reforms — loneliness, disappointment, the absurdity of what was happening. It was easy enough for readers to perceive because these topics and motives were able to attract general attention and the “problems of public voice” were recognized. The most typical representatives of the “extroversion” direction are Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Zhang Xinxin. The second direction is the “introversion”. Writers who were in-depth in themselves did not attach importance to ideas that already existed, and sought to show the inner world of a person because of the characteristics of one’s perception and the individual expression of this perception. They wanted to strengthen their work with deep meaning and symbolic sound. That is precisely such an author as Can Xue [9, 196].

Can Xue was ahead of many fellow writers, and also predicted the heated debate in 1987–1991, which

developed on the pages of “Wenyi Bao” around the term “introvert” in literature. The initiative of using the term belongs to the Chinese critic Lu Shuyuan, who later summarized the discussion materials. Such questions are the following: “Does turning inward harm the healthy development of socialist literature? Does this perspective contradict the realistic image method? Does it stop writers from taking root? Does he suffer from one-sidedness or not? Are the meaning and content of the term expressive?” During the discussion he highlighted that there were many Chinese critics who understood modernism or went beyond the discussions of the 1980–1983s. About the existence of modernist literature in China writer Can Xue, clearly indicate that the modernism started in the middle of the 1980s, and not only declared self, but also firmly “stood on its feet”, entered into force, independence, and creative maturity [6, 171–183].

The works written by Can Xue make it clear that the real value of modernist prose is not to resist the forms of traditional literature, and not to get ahead and impress everyone with the new narrative technology, but to re-learn and understand “reality” in a specific work. In the earliest works of Can Xue, the horror and darkness of the “cultural revolution” are deeply remembered, and a peculiar, dreamy interpretation allowed us to convey these sensations as metamorphoses of the spirit. The prose of Can Xue thoroughly permeated by an atmosphere of the danger of human life, which comes from a man, people harm themselves and harm others. This character of relations reaches its apogee in the works of the writer, without going beyond the spirit. Can Xue, using symbols, a hazy, obscure image, represented the existence of man as a kind of surreal state, which in turn leads to a denial of reality. The prose of Can Xue filled with impressive imagery, substantiating the thoughts and feelings of the author: detached houses, sticky mists, wet walls, swollen boards, strange sounds, adversity, sleepwalkers, treacherous spies, mice, tyrannical acts, senseless behavior, crazy men and women... All these images remind the reader that one is not to be confused with everyday life, and they force one to mercilessly reveal all that is vile and low and in oneself.

Men Fanhua and Chen Guangwei believe that the subjective representations of Can Xue, based on fantasy and imagination, is a special phenomenon. Her short story, “House on the Hill,” is an example of subjective “reality” in its purest form. The “hallucinations” of the writer have a special “piercing force” and are capable of delivering tangible blows to the psyche. Thus, readers are constantly amazed by the anomalies extracted from the author’s subconscious and transmitted to the reader, “anomalies”, “chaos”, “fear” and other similar sensations, create a special aesthetics of the extraordinary or, more precisely, the awakened one, which undoubtedly expanded the space of the 1980s

prose. Being in agreement with other Chinese literary scholars Wu Liang, Men Fanhua and Chen Guangwei claim: everyone can recognize the subjective world of Can Xue because this story with all the fantastic, absurd details and the shaken psyche is a distorted projection of our real world [9, 197].

Literature of the initial stage of reforms (end of the 1970 — middle 1980), which are characterized by bias, played a historical role. It made possible to express the revived collective experience and expectations of society. The enthusiasm that caused the work of the mainstream in society reflected the social programs that were carried out in the first years of Deng Xiaoping's rule, and also contributed into the formation of a certain social ideology that determined the framework of the cultural products of the 1980s. Ultimately, the form of expression, the internal logic of perception and imagination in official literature remained separate from the new experience that the new era formed. Official literature lost its importance not because it was loyal to realism, but because one of the conditions for its existence was ideological conformism.

It is difficult to disagree with Zhang Xudong's assessment of the official literature of that period [13, 123–124]. Under these conditions, modernism took a prominent place as negativism additions to the mainstream. The roots of modernism are in the cultural-historical layer that immediately preceded the period of reform in China. Modernism — politically and stylistically — took a subordinate position, but its driving force in the first half of the 1980 coincided with the utopian and the euphoric desire for a new life, based on a rationalized version of post-Maoist socialism. The craving for rationalism with the inherent dream of cosmopolitanism was the basis for literary experiments in the first years of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. It can be argued that the differences between the modernist movement and orthodox approaches lie in the aesthetic and/or methodological field. A distinctive feature of modernism was a bold desire to turn to the “irrational” or “subconscious” to define the origin of the “normality” of society.

The discovery of “irrational” or “subconscious” in modern Chinese prose was due to familiarity with the classical texts of European and American modernism. The innovation of the young modernist writers of the 1980s, who shocked the Chinese public with their non-conformist gestures lies mainly not in their stylistic experiments, but, in the words of Zhang Xudong, “a prophetic vision of the future free world”. While the most of their fellow citizens still imagine the future in the face of technological advances, these writers see a society where a personality dominated. The fact that they saw the personality's position as so heroic and even privileged shows that they still did not understand the political and economic nature of this idealized social sphere of the market.

This heroic vision reflects the ephemeral nature of utopia, in which creative energy is associated with the liberating potential and the acuteness of forms of modernism. The symbolic image of the unconscious not only proclaimed the appearance of the individual as a subject who defies social norms but also gave access to a full range of various stylistic techniques that confirmed the technical and moral advantage of modernist art as a form of over throw authority. The acceptance of Western avant-garde — a “slap in the face” to the bourgeois public — helped Chinese modernists to show a lack of respect for the pseudo-reality that the party and state-created using their ideological apparatus.

“Unconscious”, “irrational”, and “formal” complemented the social discourse of the new era, which was in search of global norms of everyday life. Chinese modernism had the role of a “permanent heretic” and was able to fit quite organically into the symbolic order of the culture of late capitalism, to identify the crisis in the social and cultural community and claim its rights to social experience, suppressed by the official style. In the search process, the Chinese modernists, the following representatives of “misty poetry”, inevitably brought their collective backstory. There was a similarity between the “heretical” and the orthodox position, which no one denied, but did not confirm the painstaking by modernism in searching for art institutions and the content of individuality, aimed at the art and humanism of two basic concepts in the culture of the “new period”.

Conclusions and perspective for further research

The works of Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Can Xue, Hang Shaoguang and other young writers, published in 1985, opened the modernist page of modern Chinese prose and formed the direction of the “search for roots” literature. Their works are distinguished by the search for a new hero, a new language, style, form of artwork, and, ultimately, the search for their own unique “self” as an inherent creative principle of Chinese literature. A distinctive feature of modernist prose is a bold desire to turn to the “irrational” or “unconscious”, to define the emergent “normalcy” of society. The symbolic image of the “unconscious” not only proclaimed the emergence of a new subject in Chinese literature, which challenged social norms but also gave modernists access to a full range of metaphorical techniques that confirmed the technical and moral superiority of modernist art as a form of resistance and the overthrow of authority. In Chinese literature of the 1980s, modernism managed to occupy a prominent place as a negativist addition to the mainstream. In the 1980s modernism in China historically and culturally occupied a position between the humanist-realistic paradigm and postmodern cynicism.

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