



Literature the People Love: Reading Texts from the Early Maoist Period

Speaker - Dr. Krista Van Fleit Hang, Associate Professor, University Of South Carolina

Chair - Prof. Sabaree Mitra, Honorary Fellow, ICS.

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Dr. Krista Van Fleit Hang's presentation was based on her book '*Literature the People Love: Reading Chinese Texts from the Early Maoist Period (1949-1966)*.' The presentation aimed at describing the ideas and beliefs of the authors and the communist literary establishment in the Maoist period, who believed that art could reshape reality, and was thus just as crucial in the creation of a new nation as building infrastructure or developing advanced weaponry. The speaker said that her book investigates the production of a literary system designed to meet the needs of a new revolutionary society in China, decentering the Cold War understanding of communist culture. The presentation highlighted the main arguments in the book, showing how gender, tradition, and communist ideology intersected in key texts.

At the outset, the speaker made it clear that her study was focused on presenting a sympathetic understanding of culture from a period in China's history in which the people's lives were greatly affected by the political events, rather than arguing for or against the literary merits of the works of those times.

The academia focusing on China Studies in general was looking at the literature emanating out of China, brandishing it as mere 'Communist Propaganda' referring to this as *kongbai lun*, or the theory of the blank. The speaker contended that to have a better understanding of the system of cultural production in China, even during the post- Maoist era, one cannot simply avoid looking at the literature during the Maoist period. Therefore, in her works she had

focused on the various texts, films, novels, short stories, even comic books, produced during the Maoist era.

Referring to her book, the speaker emphasised that it is about the creation of the Maoist literary system in the first seventeen years after the formation of the People's Republic of China. Because the Maoist state wanted to reach the masses through literature and culture, she refers to the literary production in the Maoist period as 'state-sponsored popular culture.' She was of the view that, the texts that seem so simple on first reading are actually a complex negotiation of tradition, politics, and the search for a modern identity for Chinese citizens. In the analysis of texts produced in the early Maoist period, readings must combine a focus on the literary, filmic, or visual aspects of specific works with a study of the institutional and historical forces that informed their creation. Only when we understand both the ideals that the authors were trying to convey and the political constraints under which they worked can we fully comprehend this literature, making it a challenging body of work to interpret. Further the literary production in this period might be approached as the struggle to create a new popular culture, written with the express purpose of promulgating an official ideology.

The speaker then went on to highlight the defining characteristics of literature and culture of the early Maoist period. Firstly, there was a dual focus on education and entertainment in the culture of the seventeen years. Secondly, it was a dynamic period that was rich in experimentation. Lastly, the literature and culture was marked by a sense of optimism felt by writers that they were involved in works that could bring about fundamental social change.

Regarding the role of state, the speaker informed that there was direct involvement of the government in the works of the producers of culture. Literary and art workers, as they were called, created ideal societies in their books, films, plays, and artworks. Further, because of the state's direct involvement in cultural production, artists and writers had a limited scope in which they could imagine a new society. The works produced in this period often had narratives that were framed in such a way that desires and passions that did not fit the party line had to be contained. Characters that had overflowing passions quickly learned to channel them in the direction of work for the nation. In this way, desires that lay outside the ideological limits set by the party were contained and redirected in politically correct directions.

Continuing with the tenor of literary production in China during the Maoist period, the speaker further said that the popular was signified with the concept of the people, or

renmin and the idea of the people would become a central concept in the development of literature both during and after the early Maoist period. For authors, Communist Party victory meant that China's citizenry, the people, would be able to enjoy culture that was created for them, rather than as a commercial profit making production or a leisure for the upper classes. The people were imagined as yearning for cultural experiences, in the cinema, in the library, or at street performances, that represented their lives and the sense of optimism over the birth of new China. Writers produced stories that would both satisfy the entertainment needs of the people, and also teach them how to act as members of a communist society. As an integral part of the development of a socialist nation, literature in the early Maoist period did not just aim to move the citizenry, it aimed to create the people anew.

The speaker further contended that many of the earlier English language studies of communist literature in China emphasize its break with Chinese tradition. But the speaker has looked at the ways in which the communist literary system made use of earlier tradition. In order to give convincing stories of life in new China that would be intelligible and 'Chinese', artists and authors tapped into earlier popular traditions such as the vernacular novel or urban cinema from the 1930s in Shanghai. Referring back to her book, the speaker said that her book looks into three areas, the *minjian*, *dazhong*, and *tongsu*, as sources for Maoist popular culture. The *minjian* had folk connotations, the *tongsu* was a middlebrow sensibility, and the *dazhong* had leftist connotations. As they adopted older forms, the revolutionary narratives they were telling were necessarily changed by them, while simultaneously modifying the previous tradition. Imposing the framework of a popular novel on a revolutionary narrative necessarily changed how that story was told, just as the revolutionary narrative changed the traditional popular framework. It is this intersection of tradition and revolutionary narratives, and the interplay of meanings formed by their mutual influence, that formed one of the main objects of analysis in the speaker's work. The merging of literary traditions and ideological elements such as women's liberation or collectivization often results in dynamic works of literature, and a goal of speaker's study was to explore ways to appreciate these complex texts that can seem so simple when given only cursory perusal. The mixing of various ideological, literary, and moral traditions produces unexpected stories that cannot be explained away as communist rhetoric erasing artistic value in tradition.

In her talk the speaker further analyzed some of the literary works, looking at gender and literature. She was of the opinion that the desire for a public identity for women also structures 'The Story of Li Shuangshuang' an immensely popular narrative that was turned into a film, a play, and an illustrated storybook after its initial publication in *People's*

Literature in 1960. The speaker examined the various versions of this work to give a vivid picture of the tone and tenor of cultural production in the Maoist period. Further, with the help of videos and film clips, the speaker analysed some of the popular movies which were produced during the Maoist era, to show how the Communist leaders captivated the masses to break old traditions and work towards an egalitarian society. She then went on to examine the ways in which the rural, or *minjian* and folk elements influence the narrative of some of the popular movies and literature of those times.

The speaker apprised the audience that the folk elements in the stories are not only enveloped in a communist framework; but they also combine with the choice of a female main character to productively change the narrative of the revolutionary woman. Stories combining love and revolution have been an integral part of the literary landscape in China since the 'love plus revolution' stories in the popular novel tradition of the 1910s and 1920s. When the main character in these stories is female, the narrative often includes an initial choice between her political ideals and her object of romantic love.

Delving deep into the structure of the stories, the speaker opined that a common strategy was to create a female intellectual and give her two choices of love object, one a humanist, May Fourth-type student/lover, and the other a progressive, handsome young man who is unavailable romantically but who introduces her to the world of political activism. This is usually not a painful choice for the female protagonist, because the sharp conflict between love and revolution found in Soviet literature is softened in the Chinese tradition, in which women's liberation was a vital part of the narrative of Chinese anti-imperialism. Through the course of the narrative, the woman grows and naturally falls out of love with the improper love object. According to the speaker, one can often see this dynamic at work in stories like Mao Dun's *Rainbow*, Yang Mo's *Song of Youth*, and Zong Pu's short story 'Red Beans.' The speaker maintained that it was not that love and revolution are contradictory, but they are now inseparable. Female protagonists cannot love men who do not share their political beliefs. Indeed, the erotic force of the stories is lifted, through a process of sublimation, from a mundane love affair to a passion for revolution and activism that overshadows romantic considerations.

The speaker ended the lecture by giving the larger context in which her work is to be seen. According to her, it is a part of the project of understanding China's experience in the Maoist period outside of a Cold War lens that requires either an affirmation or negation of the communist project. Appreciating the utopian vision of authors of the early Maoist period, even in an age in which the easy access to material comfort for many of China's citizens

makes these issues seem out-dated, is one way to approach this project. The speaker was of the opinion that engaging with these stories reveals many ways in which the ideals they present fit neither the CCP's rigid narrative of state-bestowed liberation, nor the Western narrative of insurmountable repression in the communist system; thereby allowing for the discovery of a relevance that surpasses either of these narratives.

Report prepared by Peter Joy Hudson, Research Associate, Institute of Chinese Studies

About the Speaker:

Dr. Krista Van Fleit Hang is an Associate Professor of Chinese Literature and Language at the University of South Carolina. She holds a PhD. in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. She is a recipient of the Jacob Javits Fellowship. Apart from the book, *Literature the People Love: Reading Chinese Texts from the Early Maoist Period (1949-1966)*, Dr. Van Fleit Hang has also contributed chapters and articles on Chinese Literature and Cinema. She is in the process of writing another book titled, *From the Middle Kingdom to the Western Heavens: Cultural Production in Modern Asia*. In recent years, Dr. Van Fleit Hang has been studying the social impact of Indian cinema on the Chinese mindset. Presently, she is doing her research as a Fulbright Nehru Visiting Scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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