

Genealogies of Literary Form in Contemporary China

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Multiple literary experiences, since the end of the Maoist “unification” of the literary system, have emerged in China bringing about a multiplicity of literary expressions articulated in different forms and through different media. In some cases, following the urge of bringing Chinese culture “to the world”, this gave rise to trends and genres conversant with the more consecrated developments of modern Western literature – however claiming proudly their distinctive “Chinese characteristics”. In some others, stemming more directly from indigenous cultural sensibilities and social experiences, it gave rise to popular genres with a distinctively local circulation and readership.

Whether called to join the noble ranks of “world literature”, or more humbly catering to local tastes and concerns, all of these literary expressions, rooted as they are in the terrain of the Chinese social life, typically respond in their emergence to the specific historical circumstances that enable or prompt their very existence. In other words, the processes of their formation are motivated and shaped, in multiple and variable ways, by the intricate webs of social factors that co-operate in constituting them as *forms* even before inspiring their contents.

Given the awareness that literary signification is inseparable from form, and that form is not just a matter of individual choice but is always steeped in some wider historical and social grounding, the purpose of this conference is to invite for a series of interventions aiming to capture significant social processes in the creation of literary forms in contemporary China, observing on the one hand how specific social dynamics – political, economic, technological, cultural at large and more narrowly literary – participate in shaping the formation of certain specific literary configurations, and on the other how particular formal arrangements within these configurations tend to *inform* the very body of the specific texts structuring their particular articulations of meaning.

In short, why do certain forms emerge at specific times? How, once they have emerged, do they function, both internally as textual constructions and externally as socially symbolic acts? What do they aim to do, what are their social “affordances”? And, in view of their functions and aims, what are they able to express through language, what are they not able to express? How are they interpreted by their readers, professional and amateur alike, what kind of effects – aesthetic, political, cognitive, affective – do they elicit in them?

While much has been done in European and American scholarship to connect the genesis of literary forms with their specific historical environments and discourses in the late Qing, Republican and Maoist periods, less attention has been paid to historicize the constitution of forms in contemporary China. On the one hand, literary studies on contemporary China in the West tend to be focused primarily on the analysis of broad cultural-historical themes and contents; on the other, interpretation of contemporary literary trends in China seems often driven by the double impulse of either inscribing Chinese literature into universal historical trends of development or producing some quintessential images of Chinese culture. A more systematic inquiry into the processes of the constitution of forms could help us better understand the concrete workings of contemporary Chinese literary representations by observing how they are at the same time influenced by, and able to exercise agency on, their social and historical environments.

In light of the already long historical trajectory since the beginning of the Reform era, and the recent historical reinterpretations called forth in the Xi Jinping era evoking perceptions of a more fluid and organic relationship among the Maoist, Reformist, and present (“new”) era, the time is suitable for engaging in a retrospective review of the processes of the last decades placing them in a larger

historical perspective, one that sees the contemporary relation with the Communist period not only in terms of “breaking out” but also of continuity within discontinuity.

As to the analysis of “social processes”, this should begin with and be focused on the ways in which communities of literary producers (critics, theorists, authors, readers) react to, and refract in literary terms the particular solicitations arising from the shifting social conditions, reflecting on how these reactions morph *first of all* into literary discourse; that is, those public ways of talking about literature with the power to solidify certain preferences, hierarchies, epistemologies, canonisations, thematizations etc., with the result of opening up to certain literary expressions and closing down to others, valorising certain languages and depreciating some others, favouring the emergence of specific texts and authors with their specific contents formed through literary language.

Thus, “forms”, here, are generally understood as these particular languages, both at the broader level of literary trends and that of specific literary outputs by specific authors. This includes the development and transformation of genres (with their recurrent themes and conventions); modes of representation (with their distinctive ways of establishing textual relationships with the world); or the specific narrative, rhetorical and figurative devices characterising the compositions of particular texts. Given the necessarily fragmentary and historically volatile nature of the “contemporary” as a field of inquiry, and the multifarious interests and approaches of the scholars participating in the conference, the conference favours the investigation of specific case studies that obviously do not claim to draw broad maps characterised by sweeping historical generalisations. The goal is instead to provide a variety of examples capable to offer some insights into the “genealogies of form” in contemporary China, and perhaps envision the possibilities of a methodology apt to combine “historicist” analyses of social contexts with textual “readings for form” as recommended by the recent “new formalist” approaches, breaking more ground for the study of a “poetics of social forms” – to put it in Fredric Jameson’s words – in contemporary China.