

*Dilemma of the Modern
Chinese Writer*

***A History of Modern Chinese Fiction
1917-1957***, by C. T. Hsia. With an
appendix on Taiwan by Tsi-an Hsia.
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OBSERVING THE DEVELOPMENT and con-
temporary condition of almost any branch
of art in China, one is reminded of a two
stage rocket. The first stage gets it out of

the gravity of tradition and the second gets it into Communist orbit. This impression is borne out by C. T. Hsia's book on modern Chinese fiction. The book also bears out the fact that both stages are open to manipulation. It devotes ample space to this manipulative aspect and thereby greatly enhances our understanding of why the development followed the curve which is traced here.

In the course of China's modernization, the creative writer shared the fate of the intellectual in general. Whereas in Imperial times the intellectual was directly involved in the political process as a tool of statecraft, modernization emancipated him from this involvement and made him an autonomous agent with accruing responsibilities for which tradition had prepared him only poorly. His commitment, to a large extent rationally motivated in Imperial China, became predominantly emotional. Social and political contingencies under which the intellectual's life was conducted were stable or at least recurrent, that is to say foreseeable, in Imperial China. The value system to meet these contingencies could therefore be fixed in advance. During the process of modernization these contingencies were much more accidental and could not be met from a fixed position. This led to a heightening of individual responsibility and of the incidence of personal choice. Furthermore, social and political contingencies were predominantly determined by internal factors in Imperial China; an equilibrium between these and intellectual concerns could therefore be much more easily achieved. During the process of modernization, external factors tended to predominate and as a result the primacy of political contingencies over intellectual concerns had to be acknowledged also by the intellectuals as an inescapable fate. In this process the values of the traditional system lost much of their validity and—still more im-

portantly—their integratedness. The consequent search for substitutes led to a necessity of individual choice from a variety of unrelated other—mostly foreign—systems, resulting in a lack of general or even widespread acceptance of the chosen positions, that is to say, the loss of unanimity, and in a lack of inter-relatedness of specific choices. At this stage the emotional urge toward an integrated whole made the intellectual frequently succumb to the lure of systems which had the appearance of rationality and universality but of which only parts had been tested or consciously chosen.

In this situation the intellectual's personality is exposed to extraordinary strains. Problems common also to other cultures present themselves to him in a much more emotional way. They are overlaid by antitheses: traditional versus modern and indigenous versus foreign. These emotional incubi make it impossible for him to arrive at decisions by a strictly rational value choice. This emotional strain and the resulting loss of security, the resulting self-abasement and the resulting fears and doubts have then led either to a partial or complete alienation, or to a hypertrophied self-assertion, or to a heavier reliance on an emotional foundation where faith substitutes for reason. Working in this context, a disciplined Communist leadership keenly aware of the political potential the situation offers and shrewdly familiar with manipulative techniques, could, of course, and did, accomplish a great deal. The degree of initial success of the Communist movement is largely explainable by the position the intellectual found himself in at the onset of the drive. It was inevitable, however, that this development led to a suffocation of all creative urges and to the death of all creative activities.

C. T. Hsia is especially well endowed to deal with these problems as manifested in

the world of Chinese fiction. He has a sympathetic understanding for the prevailing social and psychological situation and an unusual perceptiveness of the problems of literary creativity. With great skill general trends in literature and the fate of individual writers have been interwoven into an integrated whole and thus he has written a book which reads like a great and moving tragedy of Greek dimensions.

Reviewed by HELLMUT WILHELM