

CHINESE CULTURAL HISTORY – 20th Century

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PART I : EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Culture

The May 4th Movement of 1919. The Chinese had participated in WWI by sending more than 100,000 laborers to work behind the lines in Europe for the British and French. Although only a few thousand died, many came back to their village with a fresh perspective. They were world travelers, had seen the carnage of the trenches, or their aftermath, and were unwilling to allow westerners or Japanese to maintain the fiction of their moral superiority. Among those who traveled to Europe in this program were Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), future Premier of the People's Republic of China (second in command to Mao Zedong) and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), leader of the PRC from 1978-1992). The titular Chinese government had also cut diplomatic ties with Germany and eventually declared war in 1917. Although they didn't provide soldiers or much in the way material aid, they did expect that they the German territories in Shandong province would be returned to Chinese control after the war. The problem was that Japan had seized these territories by force during the war and did not wish to relinquish what they had conquered. At the Versailles Treaty talks, the Japanese delegation was able to make its case directly as one of the victorious powers. Nonetheless, when the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were made known in May of 1919, the Chinese erupted in protest because portions of Shandong were to be leased to the Japanese according to the terms of a previous secret agreement between the two nations. The Chinese people felt betrayed by both their government and by President Woodrow Wilson, because of his insistence on the implementation of "National Self-Determination" in all other elements of the treaty. The protest movement was sustained for many months and was felt in virtually all of China's major cities. In the aftermath, it was clear that this was an expression of a strong sense of nationalism in a country in which it had never been seen before. It is unfortunate, for the Japanese in particular, to have missed this dramatic shift in Chinese sentiment.

The Literary Arts. The early 20th century saw a flowering of new forms of expression in China. New authors using new forms of the language, commenting on things they had never been allowed to write about provided a fresh environment for the literary arts. The most well-known of all Chinese authors in the early 20th century was Lu Xun (1881-1936). Lu wrote novels, essays and poems. Many of his books are works of political satire. One of his most famous is the satirical novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, which first appeared in serial form in 1921. Lu wrote in the modern form of the Chinese vernacular, a development which would eventually characterize all modern Chinese forms of literature. He is thus remembered for his biting political wit and for being a pioneer in the creation of modern Chinese literature. Lu wrote prolifically until his death from tuberculosis in 1936. He is known as one of the leaders in the "New Culture Movement" which sprang up in China after the May 4th period.

New Youth. Among the many elements of the "New Culture Movement" was the appearance of a journal known as the *New Youth*, founded by Chen Duxiu (who was also a founding member of the CCP). The first volumes were published in 1915 and pre-date the May 4th Movement, but the leadership of the journal happily tapped into the new nationalism of the May 4th era. The *New Youth* was also written in the vernacular (as opposed to classical Chinese) and was designed to appeal to the largest audience possible. The articles pointed out weaknesses in Chinese national character and called for the introduction of new ideas and new philosophies into China: communism, capitalism, pragmatism, democracy, nationalism, and the like which, if embraced by large segments of Chinese society could make China stronger. The *New Youth* even published Lu Xun's short story "A Madman's Diary" in 1918

(reportedly inspired by Nikolai Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*). Also included were reprinted articles from abroad. This provides evidence of just how sophisticated and international the "New Culture Movement" was in China.

PART II : LATE 20TH CENTURY

Socialist Realism. The fine arts, performing arts and visual arts were all under the control of the CCP in the years following 1949, as were all human endeavors. For the CCP, the arts provided yet another venue to educate the population on the true socialist path. In the visual arts, Chinese painters, printers and lithographers produced images depicting the ideal communist worker. Most often these images included a very healthy, happy man or woman (or a crowd) engaged in some form of heroic socialist activity: farming, heavy industrial work, large-scale marches, etc. There are few examples of landscapes, portraits or idle workers in evidence. Many, if not most, had an image of Mao Zedong as the benevolent father pointing the way to a brighter future. In virtually all images, the dominant color is red and a communist slogan provides the context. After the death of Mao, artists working in the visual arts were allowed to produce images that were not just to be used to promote communism. Today, there is a thriving visual arts community that produces just about anything they wish, as long as they don't explicitly or implicitly criticize the state.

The Written Word. The written word was understood by the communists to be one of the most dangerous but effective tools one can use to shape and mold society. It is not a surprise that in the literary arts in the years following 1949, all writing was strictly controlled by the state. The function of literature was to promote and glorify the communist system, to "serve the people and promote socialism," according to Mao. Most, if not all, of the literature produced during the revolutionary period is of little intrinsic value and there are very few authors who are remembered as being visionaries. One of the few is Hao Ran (1932-2008), who produced such works as the *Golden Road* (1972) and *Sunny Days* (1977). Hao first and foremost served the state and was even the literary editor of the CCP journal entitled *Red Flag*. It is worth noting, however, that though the literary arts have in the post Mao-era been liberalized to a considerable degree, there is still no freedom of the press and no freedom to write and publish whatever one wishes. The Chinese authorities carefully scrutinize and monitor all written works. Books are still often banned and their authors fined, jailed or worse if there is any criticism of the state detected. This extends to any treatment of China's founding fathers such as Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai. Therefore, one can write poetry, works of fiction, and even non-fiction as long one does not engage in social or political criticism. One of the most influential novelists in contemporary China is Mo Yan (1955-present), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2012. Mo's selection is not without controversy because he has been willing to work within state systems. Indeed, he was vice president of the Chinese Writers Association, an organization recognized and sponsored by the Chinese government. Mo is known for his works *Red Sorghum Clan* (1986) and *The Republic of Wine* (1992).

The Internet. In addition to the traditional literary arts in which one uses paper and pen, the written word is also carefully controlled in the virtual world. China today seeks to carefully monitor and control all interaction on the internet. Bloggers in particular are targeted for what they write and face punishment in varying degrees. According to a CNN report from October 17, 2013, the Chinese government employs more than two million people whose sole responsibility is to police the internet for writing that has not been approved by the state. Web sites are regularly blocked on the mainland and there is no free flow of information within the country or from outside the country. This is a monumental task, but one to which the Chinese government is very committed. It is expected that the Chinese government will continue to increase their budget for monitoring the internet in the coming years. The written word remains an extremely dangerous thing for the CCP and the Chinese government is keen to control what topics are permissible in the public realm.