



# An Analysis of the Phenomenon of “Alienating Literature” in Contemporary Chinese Literary Studies

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of “alienating literature”, which has gained considerable attention in contemporary Chinese literary studies, is a multifaceted issue that requires a nuanced understanding. This paper delves into the intricate dynamics that have led to the current status quo of literature which has been perceived as slipped to the periphery and alienated from mainstream societal discourse. By examining the socio-cultural, economic, and technological factors at play in the contemporary context, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the underlying causes contributing to this awkward situation. It is argued in this paper that the rapid pace of modernization, the commodification of societies, and the advent of digital media have collectively reshaped the landscape of literary creation and reception. The study further explores how these forces have impacted the role of the author, the nature of literature, and the relationship between readers and literature. Through a critical lens, the study offers a rational reflection and interpretation of the alienation phenomenon, suggesting that it is not merely a symptom of broader societal changes but also a catalyst for reevaluating the purpose and potential of literature in the contemporary world. This study hopes to draw on theoretical and empirical evidence to provide a robust critique and to stimulate further scholarly discussion on the subject.

**Key words:** Contemporary literary studies; Alienating literature; Status quo; Enquiry; Reflection

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of the 1990s, when China embarked on a “new era” characterized by rapid socio-economic changes, the status of literature in the academic world seems to have slipped to the periphery, leading to a phenomenon of detaching from literature or alienating literature in the field of contemporary Chinese literary studies.

Looking back on the history of Chinese literature, it is widely acknowledged that many “great masters” have come to the fore in the field of modern Chinese literature. They have left behind plenty of classic works that have then become valuable assets of the literary history. And when reviewing the history of modern Chinese literature before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, one will find that the societal standing of literature at that time was sacred and sublime, thriving with unlimited glory. It was due to the influence of the special political and historical background of that time. The exalted status of literature during this period was not only a reflection of its cultural significance but also a testament to its profound influence on the intellectual and moral fabric of society. Literature appeared as an exalted part of the superstructure, and thus was widely sought after and admired by the public. It was deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the era, as if it were a beacon, guiding the ideological trend of the people at that time and influencing their spiritual outlook. In

this context, modern Chinese literature has indeed made remarkable achievements, with great masters such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She, Cao Yu (collectively called “Lu Guo Mao Ba Lao Cao”) appearing and shining on the literature scene. Their achievements in various literary forms could represent the voice of Chinese literature of their time and even of that at present. And their works have remained since then and gradually become classics in the history of literature. Thus the contributions of these literary masters were not confined to their immediate impact but have had a lasting legacy.

In contemporary times, however, literature has left its original position described above. The status of literature has diminished. It has no longer been widely admired by the public as if it were the moon among the stars, and it has even become not that valued. The term “literature” then seemed to have become an odd topic. Literature used to play a vital role in the society, but in contemporary times, the once central role of literature in public and intellectual life has been supplanted by other forms of cultural expression and discourse. Literature seemed to be gradually losing its original crucial importance, no matter in terms of literary creators or readers. As a result, a prominent and widespread phenomenon known as alienating literature has emerged in the field of Chinese literary studies. This phenomenon reflected the changing attitudes and expectations towards literature in an era marked by rapid technological advancement and the proliferation of diverse media. Literature, which used to possess great splendor and thus was widely pursued by the public, has now become an outcast to be avoided by most of the people. In today’s world, engaging in literary studies is almost tantamount to showing ignorance of the times. Therefore, a variety of “turns” have continued to arise, as a lot of literary researchers have left their former field of literature and turned to other fields such as sociology, political science, religious study and cultural research. The phenomenon of “alienating literature” has become more and more intense, and literary studies seemingly have lost its original value in the circumstances.

This phenomenon has become an indisputable fact at the present time. Although there have indeed been certain achievements of Chinese literature in contemporary times and literature does still keep on developing and renewing, we cannot but be concerned about the actuality of literature in the contemporary world that it is gradually losing its previous splendor and true color, becoming more and more marginalized, and is increasingly detaching from its true nature.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF THE UNDERLYING ECONOMIC, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS OF THE PHENOMENON

In this era of rapid economic expansion, the advance of science and technology and the reform and innovation of the economic system have led the whole society increasingly step into the age of “consumerization”. And the prosperous development of market economy has become an irreversible trend which would reshape the cultural landscape and deeply influence the production and reception of literature. As it is said by the eternal truth that the economic base determines the superstructure, literature, as a cultural expression, is subject to the influences and demands of the economic context. The changes of the economy would surely lead to a shift in the status and role of literature within the academic and cultural spheres. And thus in the contemporary world, literature, as a part of the superstructure, will no longer be treated as a particular favourite remaining in the ivory tower.

Modern science and technology has fundamentally updated the media, means, effects and the modes of production, circulation and reception of artistic activities, leading to changes of the internal structure of artistic categories. New media and technologies keep coming out, altering the internal dynamics of art, challenging the traditional forms and functions of literature, and constantly influencing the role of literature in the dissemination of information and culture. With the revolution of modern technologies such as film and television, audio-visual materials, and the internet, literature is no longer a superior medium comparing to other categories of art, and thus the advantage of it as a medium has gradually disappeared. As it is just a single language art, its superiority is undoubtedly overshadowed by the increasingly advanced film and television media, the constantly developing and renewing audio-visual technologies, and the gradually popularized and faster internet technology, as these technologies can offer alternative and often more engaging forms of cultural expression. In addition, the “market” has become more and more important as a result of the development of economy, the acceleration of circulation, and the reform of the system. It seems that everything in the world is rushing towards the “market” overnight, and anything that runs counter to the disciplines of the “market” will be eliminated as well. These changes have led to a society of consumerization. And in such a society today, where there is consumption, there is a market, and where there is a market, there is interest for people to chase. This characteristic has shaped the cultural production and

reception as well. Resulting from this kind of societal situation, literature has inevitably lost its holiness and naturally been taken down from the altar. And to exist in a world like this, literature also has to change its posture to gain a place in the fiercely competitive contemporary market.

Creators and recipients are major participants in literary activities. From the perspective of literary creators, their works must win a place in the market before anyone will support them. As the marketability of literary works has become a prerequisite for their support and recognition, the process of creation and exploration will be influenced and restricted. In this context, more and more literary works which cater to the consumption demand of the mass market have come into being, reflecting the adaptation of literary production to the demands of consumer culture. There are certainly good works among them, but the broader trend towards market-oriented literature has led to concerns about the potential for the dilution of literary quality. And to a greater extent, literature has inevitably been tainted with the atmosphere of vulgarization influenced by these kinds of circumstances. Thus, in the field of contemporary literature, there are a lot of hype, a variety of shows, and a deluge of phenomena like “beauty writers”, “private part” writing, and web writing coming into sight. From these phenomena we can notice the trend of entertainment, straightforwardness, and consumerization that has emerged in the developmental trajectory of contemporary Chinese literature, as if the creative process of literature has become a kind of transaction that is driven by the interest equal to the current mass market demand.

From the perspective of recipients of literature, they now have more choices of reading and thus no longer rely on literature which is just a single language transmission mode to convey and receive information. This kind of changes in communication are an inevitable result of the rapid advancement of contemporary science and technology and the emergence of various modern media which are continuously getting faster and more convenient. The pace of today’s society is continually getting faster and the competition in the modern world is getting more and more intense as well. The traditional sense of pure literature seems to have lagged behind the rapid pace of current development. In this case, people are more willing to accept those media which are simpler and more convenient than the traditional ones. As we think about it, if not for the fame of Zhang Yimou’s film known as *Raise The Red Lantern* (*Da Hong Denglong Gaogao Gua*), how many people would know about the contemporary writer Su Tong and his novel *Wives And Concubines* (*Qiqie Chengqun*)? Also, if not for the extensive popularity of the film *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang*), how many people would know that

it is adapted from Mo Yan’s masterpiece with the same name? And if not for the big awards winning by the film *To Live* (*Huo Zhe*), how many people would have read Yu Hua’s original work? Similarly, if not for the great reputation of the film *In The Heat Of The Sun* (*Yangguang Canlan De Rizhi*), how many people would know that it is based on the novella called *Ferocious Animals* (*Dongwu Xiongmeng*) written by the contemporary writer Wang Shuo? ... Thus we can see that in contemporary times, more and more new media are gradually replacing traditional literary ones. And in this contemporary society with the high speed of development and the fast pace of daily life, pure literature seems to be slowly forgotten and disdained by the public, becoming a distant and odd topic in current life.

It is therefore not difficult to understand the phenomenon of detaching from literature in the field of contemporary Chinese literary studies. The phenomenon of detachment is a reflection of the shifts of the role of literature in society corresponding to the changes of the societal environment and the people. Both literary creators and recipients have changed, thus literary studies also have to respond to the changing cultural context and adapt to the latest needs of the times and societies. And as literature itself has lost its true color in the wave of market economy, the literary researches derived from it will naturally deviate from its original track and turn towards the market as well. This is the embarrassment and predicament that literature has run into at present, which is also an inevitable result of the development of the economy and the evolving times and societies, as there is no other choice for literature but to keep abreast of the times. We really don’t want to see such a result of literature losing its natural appearance. Although it may be hard to face and deal with, we still have to pay our great attention and careful consideration to it. While the current state of literature and literary studies may be disconcerting, it is important to engage with these issues critically and thoughtfully, recognizing the need for reflection and the chance for potential reform.

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### 3. DISCUSSION ON THE HUMANISTIC SPIRIT

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In the early 1990s, there was a major discussion in the academic and cultural sector that focused on the humanistic spirit. One important cause of this discussion was the remarks of the writer Wang Meng who represents the writers of the older generation and those of Wang Shuo who stands for the writers of the new generation. In the 1980s, the “Wang Shuo Fever” has had a great vogue, exerting a strong and profound influence

on contemporary Chinese literature. His works and the cultural phenomenon associated with it had a significant impact on the literary and cultural scene, challenging established norms and sparking discussions on the nature of literature and its role in society. The cynical troubleshooters (*wanzhu*) described by Wang Shuo in his works had replaced solemn sermons with hooligan spirit, and dispelled the loftiness with mediocrity. Such works and the impressive characters in them have revealed the message of folk grassroots culture in a ridiculing way. But the other writer mentioned before, Wang Meng, is a rather orthodox litterateur deeply imbued with the Soviet idealism literature. He is the one that can represent the voice of contemporary literature in his time, and his literary works and ideological stance were representative of a different generational perspective. Although the literary style of Wang Meng differed considerably from that of Wang Shuo, he later treated the phenomenon of “Wang Shuo Fever” with understanding and even with affirmation. He mentioned in his comments that the “Wang Shuo Phenomenon” “is specific to China and to the contemporary world”, and “he (Wang Shuo) has torn off some masks of hypocritical loftiness”. It is an undeniable fact that Wang Shuo had a quite far-reaching influence on the cultural mentality of the society at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His theory of “dodging and dispelling loftiness while affirming and catering to mediocrity” has been recognized by many people, just as it has been questioned by many, too. This has then triggered the discussion on the contemporary humanistic spirit and reflected the ongoing debate about the implications of humanistic spirit in the context of contemporary cultural and literary production.

The absence of humanistic spirit in the contemporary society is indeed an indisputable fact. Humanistic spirit is an ultimate concern for human culture. It is a cultural reflection on life and fate, and also a moral kind of constraints and norms that transcend the secular life. It should be an indispensable spiritual power and ideological indicator of a civilized society. In contemporary times, however, with the rapid development of economy and the fierce competition in the society, it has seemed that everything has considered profit as the only orientation and everything has become equivalent exchanges. The dominance of economic factors and the emphasis on profit have led to a shift away from humanistic values in many aspects of contemporary life. The society has become more and more secular and impetuous, and people in such a society have also become obstreperous and restless by degrees. A huge wave of commodification and secularization has been rolling in, making the mass culture which has catered to the requirements of the market become increasingly prosperous. Then in this overall

environment, the elite consciousness has gradually faded and the humanistic spirit has also disappeared over time. All these seemingly have made great sense and appeared to be a natural outcome of the prevailing cultural and economic conditions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Chinese intellectuals have always had the awareness of potential risks and the sense of social responsibility. In the Chinese classics of ancient times, it is described as “to cultivate oneself, to put family in order, to govern the state, and to pacify the world”. And literature is an important way they use to help the world and the people. As it is said in another classic of ancient China, *Discourse On Literature (Dianlun Lunwen)* written by Cao Pi, “writing is a great cause of administering a country and a great event of eternity.” Literature has been seen as a powerful tool for social and moral engagement that has the potential to influence the course of a country and the perpetuation of cultural values. Literature seems to have always assumed the important guiding responsibility of leading the times towards progress, and it should take on the most crucial task of spreading the humanistic spirit. However, in contemporary societies, the absence of humanistic spirit in literature has indeed become a regrettable and concerning problem. The field of literary studies has been bound to be affected and impacted in this case as well. The studies of literature had to face the considerations of the market and respond to the cruelty of competitions. Therefore, it needed to make some adjustments to its research direction and operation mode, so that it could gain the affirmation of the market and obtain the recognition of the mass culture. As a result, it has been an inevitable trend that the humanistic spirit in it would decline. And the deviation from the original track of literature has also been in logic. All these shows that the thing of “literature” in literary studies is sliding from a dominant position to a marginal one, and its pure color is being replaced by some other colors. This is an awkward predicament of literature and literary studies at present. The changing status of literature within literary studies reflects the broader challenges and dilemmas faced by the field in the contemporary context.

Therefore, the prominent and widespread phenomenon of “the eclipse of literature” in current Chinese literary studies indeed need to attract extensive attention. This kind of phenomenon, characterized by a decline in the prominence of literature in the academic and cultural scene, is a multifaceted issue that warrants a thorough and nuanced understanding. The swift advancements of science and technology, the development of the market economy, and the transformations of the culture have reshaped the landscape of literary production and

consumption. It is an adverse consequence of the rapid development of the times and society, but there is also the potential for positive changes and reforms and it can be used as a catalyst for improving the role of literature in the contemporary world. Despite the difficulties that may be encountered, the recognition of the challenges ahead is coupled with a sense of optimism and anticipation for the future. The journey towards revitalizing the role of literature and literary studies is indeed a long and arduous way to go, but we look forward to it.

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