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Supplementing Socialist Realism:
The Ups and Downs of Revolutionary Romanticism in Twentieth-Century China

Abstract This article follows the ups and downs of revolutionary romanticism in twentieth-century China, as well as the entanglements of romanticism with Soviet literary guidelines. Despite being consistently overshadowed by realism, revolutionary romanticism presented an answer to the newly established Chinese communist regime's search for an independent discourse in the Eastern bloc. The movement also reflected Chinese writers' ambition to maintain literary creativity amidst the mandated ascendancy of verisimilitude demanded by realism. Although revolutionary romanticism was ultimately hijacked by the economic and social campaigns of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), its ideological utility continues to offer an important theoretical foundation for the cultural products that promote Chinese patriotism in the twenty-first century.

Keywords revolutionary romanticism, the combination, socialist realism, the Great Leap Forward

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, movements devoted to Chinese literary reform have prompted Chinese writers to absorb diverse elements from Western literary schools into their literary creations. This absorption has often been ahistorical, and has sometimes involved infusing undigested and even paradoxical elements into original Chinese works. One amalgamation that became characteristic of Chinese literature after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the "combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" (henceforth: the "combination".) While realism unsurprisingly dominated the mainstream, romanticism became an indispensable supplementary feature, stressed by the Chinese as differentiating their creation from the pure Soviet discourse of socialist realism.

Geopolitical needs motivated the Chinese to search for a literary discourse that would not break socialist bonds with the Soviet Union but would nonetheless

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declare cultural independence. At the same time, however, the accentuation of romanticism also responded to the aesthetic demands of Chinese writers who were not satisfied with the principle of faithful representation. As Ban Wang argues, "[in] this early reception of realism in China, a moral thrust and aspiration for a romantically imagined world were interwoven with realistic portrayals" (238). For writers, the promotion of romanticism allowed greater freedom in their literary creation; for politicians, the romantic conceptualization of realism generated realistic depictions that could still accommodate utopian visions for the purposes of propaganda.

To a certain extent, the versatile nature of romanticism made possible such a combination, with its diverse artistic and political functions. After all, even at the height of revolutionary romanticism in China, its definition was vague and elusive. Although most scholars have identified Romanticism with the Romantic movement in European arts and literature from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, its impact has continued beyond that period. Its tenacious vitality has invited a range of interpretations. I agree with Paul Dave that "romanticism only exists in the disconnected plural—romanticisms—not the grand singular" (3). After all, even canonical Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), George Gordon Byron (1788– 1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and John Keats (1795– 1821) might not be particularly flattered to be grouped together under the title of Romanticism (Perry 4–5). Their successors gave further play to the idea's versatility by layering their own interpretations on top of the prior romantic traditions.

Another approach to defining romanticism is to describe it in terms of what it is not. Rather than designate significant features purportedly shared by the works of Romantic writers—an approach that can lead to arbitrary conclusions—it can be compelling instead to construe romanticism by setting it opposite its supposed antitheses, including Classicism, Realism, Enlightenment, or Capitalism. However, the boundaries between these movements are not always clear-cut. Consequently, after examining the various and sometimes contradictory definitions of Romanticism in recent scholarship, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have drawn the conclusion that "Romanticism is fundamentally antimetaphysical" (4). The only reasonable approach to a definition is to accept its arbitrary nature and tumultuous multiplicity. Thus, these scholars propose to treat Romanticism as a Weltanschauung or worldview, a collective mental structure (14).

Discussion of Romanticism is typically confined to the realm of European culture. When considering the leftist literature guided by Marxism, the example of Soviet literature leads to the natural conclusion that realism enjoyed absolute dominance. One might therefore also expect that the Eastern bloc—

which advocated Socialist Realism or critical realism as the prime manifestation of historical materialism—would reject Romanticism. Yet Romanticism was not always the "cultural avatar of counterrevolution" that Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre assert (12). To the contrary, the concept of revolution—used as an adjective to modify romanticism—gave Chinese writers a way to mingle realism with romanticism, thus creating a distinctive literary discourse in the twentieth century.

The historical entanglement of romanticism and realism

Realism is often regarded as the product of artistic rebellion against the romantic tradition. Yet arguably the fundamental difference between Western romanticism and the later revolutionary romanticism that travelled from the Soviet Union to China lies in the latter's distinctive and complex relationship with realism. Revolutionary realism enjoyed officially sanctioned dominance in Chinese literature for more than half of the twentieth century, and Chinese revolutionary romanticism has necessarily been conceptualized in terms of its intimate entanglement with that realist tradition.

Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests treating certain social and political movements, including the Cultural Revolution, as a "resurgence of a kind of collective romantic spirit against the routinization of an established order" (296). If we accept this idea, we can in turn assume that the romantic impulse consistently managed to find its way into mainstream Chinese literature throughout the twentieth century, even amid the predominance of realism. As Lee vividly demonstrates, the seemingly paradoxical combination of realism and romanticism established itself in China as early as the 1910s and 1920s, in the groundbreaking practice of the writers of the May Fourth Movement.

When Chinese literature took a leftist turn in the 1930s, the romantic and utopic visions crafted in literature were further explored by Communist theorists such as Qu Qiubai (1899–1935) and Zhou Yang (1907–1989), who promoted the idea of merging romanticism with realism (Anderson 56).1 In particular, in 1933 Zhou Yang published an article restating an argument from Soviet critic Valerii Kirpotin's (1898–1997) speech at the first meeting of the organizing committee of the Union of Soviet Writers (Soiuz pisatelei SSSR) in 1932. In his speech, Kirpotin presented revolutionary romanticism as an essential component of socialist realism, and indeed heretically divergent from classic capitalist or bourgeois romanticism (Zhou 30–31).

1. Qu Qiubai suggested extracting positive qualities from both realism and romanticism, to produce a superior literary mode. Zhou Yang, meanwhile, proposed the more ambitious idea of integrating romanticism with realism.

Mao Zedong (1893–1976) implied a similar amalgam of realism and romanticism in his 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua*, or "Talks") when he suggested that realism might be "elevated to a higher, more intense emotional pitch and endowed with a forward-moving momentum: revolutionary realism driven by popular energy and romantic visions of a new world" (Wang 238). According to Mao, the life reflected in literary and artistic works should be more intense, more concentrated, and more idealistic than reality; only in this way can literature and art be universal and revolutionary, capable of helping the masses to promote historical progress (Mao 861). Mao's Talks recall Zhou Yang's insights into Chinese socialist realism inspired by the Soviet tradition, published almost a decade earlier:

> Only by focusing on non-superficial details, holding to an essential and representative pursuit, and depicting objective reality—on the one hand delineating diverse negative and positive elements, and on the other hand revealing the victorious nature of socialist revolution, indoctrinating readers with the spirit of the struggle for a better future—can we find paths towards socialist realism (Zhou 29).

Yet where Zhou Yang's 1933 article—directly inspired by Kirpotin's speech to the Union of Soviet Writers—is more theoretically oriented, Mao's talks instead take the socialist realist doctrine and repackages it in a colloquial style more accessible to the everyday Chinese reader. Mao's talks never highlight romanticism as a historical artistic tradition. Nonetheless, both Zhou and Mao articulate similarly romanticized reconceptualizations of realism, intended to develop a literature better suited to arouse certain emotions and serve as a guide for class struggle and daily life.

The Chinese promotion of revolutionary romanticism had its basis in Marxism, especially its Soviet manifestation entailing romantic inclinations merged with realism. The entanglement of romanticism with Marxist aesthetics can be traced to the Marxist–Leninist ideology that drew on the romantic spirit of nineteenth-century European revolutionary thought, incorporating romantic philosophy invested in ideal social conditions (Löwy 17).[2] In the Soviet context, though, romanticism was more closely connected with practical political goals. One of the earliest conceptualizations of socialist realism is as an amalgam of proletarian realism and revolutionary romanticism put forward by Aleksei Tolstoi (1883–1945), Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875–1933), and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) (Clark 33–34). It gained political traction through Stalin's mouthpiece Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), who gave a keynote address at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, which declared socialist

2. Michael Löwy, for example, perceives a romantic dimension in Marxism.

realism the fundamental method of Soviet literature. Zhdanov declared that such literature should not only represent reality, but also prioritize the task of ideological transformation and mass education (Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd 716). As Hilary Chung observes, in Zhdanov's speech, "the 'historically concrete representation of reality' is enhanced by the dynamic of its 'revolutionary development' by means of a revolutionary romanticism infused by the writer's commitment to Socialism"; nevertheless, Zhdanov's proposal still emphasized realist conventions such as "an authoritative narrative voice and coherent plot structure" (Chung 15). Although socialist realism became the literary norm of Soviet society, the principle of verisimilitude on many occasions in fact gave way to revolutionary romanticism, which urged Soviet writers to heroize, monumentalize, and exaggerate. In the end, by turning realism (or romanticism) into merely a rhetorical device, socialist realism incorporated what had hitherto seemed uncombinable: "verisimilitude and mythicization" (Clark 35).

Such a fusion must still be governed by the earnest belief in the communist future as depicted in socialist realism. Readers must feel assured that the ideal communist future depicted in such texts is reliable and attainable. Two cultural shifts occurred to eliminate potentially problematic connotations of unrealistic utopianism implied by the term romanticism. First, realism underwent a process of remodelling to incorporate myth, as described above; second, romanticism itself was gradually redefined as reactionary and bourgeois, and thereby antithetical to socialist principles.[3] By obscuring the boundary between realism and romanticism, and incorporating the romantic spirit into an extended vision of realism, romanticism became ubiquitous. Even as romanticism ostensibly declined in favor, it persisted in hidden ways, never fully withdrawing from realism in Soviet literature.

At the same time, the decreasing discussion of romanticism in Soviet Russia left the Chinese extra space to create their own discourse of revolutionary romanticism—unsurprisingly, a concept that came to have an intimate relationship with Chinese revolutionary realism. It is worth noting that in the late 1950s and the 1960s, during the post-Stalin years, romanticism returned to Soviet literary scholarship as a concept worth studying (Leighton). In addition, Marxist philosophers in the Western world also advocated their own vision of revolutionary romanticism in the same period.[4] However, by then the Chinese had become fixated on the search for their unique revolutionary voice, and

3. The popular assumption in Russia that romanticism should assume a position subordinate to realism also facilitated the recasting of romanticism and realism. For scholarship on Russian romanticism and its development, see Lauren G. Leighton, *Russian Romanticism: Two Essays* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); Robert Reid, *Problems of Russian romanticism* (Aldershot: Gower, 1986).

4. For example, Henri Lefebvre published "Romantisme Révolutionnaire" in *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1957, where he argues for a new revolutionary romanticism as an aesthetic that might be embraced by Western anti-capitalist movements outside Soviet realism. Cf: Henri Lefebvre and Gavin Grindon, "Revolutionary Romanticism," *Art in Translation* 4, no. 3 (2012): 287-299.

therefore barely resorted to the latest Soviet or Western sources in seeking inspiration for their own discussions of revolutionary romanticism.

The "Combination"

The discourse of Chinese revolutionary romanticism was solidified as an officially recognized mode in 1958, when Mao established the slogan of the "combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism." Mao highlighted this "combination" in a March meeting at Chengdu, where he commented on the development of Chinese poetry. In May, at the second session of the Eighth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao reemphasized the "combination," alongside his promulgation of the Great Leap Forward (Cui 269–270).

Initially the principle was designed to encourage Chinese poets to learn from Chinese folk songs. However, the idea was soon expanded. The famous Chinese poet Guo Moruo (1892–1978), who rejoined the Communist Party in 1958, used the "combination" in an April essay to explain Mao's lyric poem "Butterfly Lingering Over Flowers: Reply to Li Shuyi" (*Die lian hua: Da Li Shuyi*) (Wang 342–343). Then, in June, Guo elaborated the idea of the "combination" further, acclaiming Mao as both the greatest realist and the greatest romanticist. He also proclaimed Mao's poetry to be the prototype of the "combination" and the greatest extant paragon (Guo 7–9). Guo called on all writers and artists to learn from Mao, not only in terms of writing poetry, but also in other forms of literary composition. Zhou Yang in his discussion of the "combination" also moved beyond Chinese poetry and claimed the "combination" to be "the scientific summing-up of the experience of all literary history". He therefore declared it the goal to which all Chinese writers and artists should aspire (Zhou 5).

Still later in 1958, Zhou Yang published an article based on his speech at Peking University of earlier that year, in which he elaborated in detail the idea of the "combination," providing an extended theoretical framework based on his interpretation of Mao's thought and his reading of Russian literature. In particular, Zhou cited Russian literary criticism by Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848) and Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) in his discussion of realism. He also traced the merging of revolutionary romanticism and socialist realism back to Gorky's remarks at the Soviet Writers' Union's First All-Union Congress in 1934, when Gorky had promoted the idea of combining positive romanticism (as distinguished from negative romanticism) with socialist realism.[5] In the same 1958 article, Zhou also pointed out that Soviet writers had gradually

5. According to Gorky, positive romanticism presents a reflection of reality, whereas negative romanticism distorts and falsifies reality.

shifted their attention away from romanticism, and that it was Mao who had brought it back to the people's attention. Zhou explained romanticism as a kind of idealism—a motivation embedded in great foreign writers, especially Russians such as Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881). According to Zhou, the conflict between the ideal and the real—the conflict underlying the traditional opposition between romanticism and realism—can be solved by proletarian literature, because the people's ideal life is realizable through mass labour and struggle. Therefore, for Zhou the "combination" best reflects "our time and the spirit of the people" (63).

Zhou Yang and Guo Moruo were the leading figures in discussions around the "combination," which ultimately aroused the enthusiasm of writers, editors, artists, and film producers all over China. Already in 1958, workshops were being organized by local literary and artistic offices in major Chinese cities including Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenyang. News agencies, periodicals, and party journals all solicited essays on the "combination." Famous writers including Lao She (1899–1966), Mao Dun (1896–1981), and Tian Han (1898–1968) participated actively in the discussion. In 1960, at the Third Congress of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the "combination" was confirmed as the guiding principle of Chinese literary and artistic creation. As the cultural manifestation of the spirit of the Great Leap Forward—filled with fervor and fantasy—the "combination" became a political form of romanticism that drew both writers and readers to identify with the party's vision and strive for its realization. The literature produced in this period concentrated on the narration of three types of history: the history of factories, the history of the people's communes, and the history of the army, alongside revolutionary memoirs of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The main theme was "to recollect the revolutionary history, and to glorify the Great Leap Forward" (Wang 356).

Significantly, promotion of the "combination" initially aligned with the Anti-Rightist Campaign which commenced in 1957 and resulted in the purge of many Chinese intellectuals. An unspoken terror was embedded in the romantic discourse, even as that discourse illuminated a grandiose communist future in the spirit of the sublime. Consequently, the launch of the "combination" demanded a precise elucidation of Mao's thought. In a speech at the Third Congress of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles in 1960, the Minister of Culture Mao Dun addressed the "combination" in a section that opens with a paragraph repeating Mao and his mouthpiece Zhou Yang's assertions. The following paragraph likewise restates the importance of Mao's poetry as the sublime model of the "combination," as it reflects the worldview of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, along with the rich experience of struggle, the

persistent revolutionary spirit, the lofty ideals, and the noble qualities of a strong proletarian soldier (Mao Dun 46–47).

Mao Dun's romantic description of the impact of Mao Zedong's "combination" continues:

> The flame of the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism in literary works may have arisen before [Mao's] proposal of the ["combination"] slogan as a result of writers' unconscious or subconscious. Now, after the proposal, writers have lived and worked through two years of the legendary Great Leap Forward that made the earth tremble, the mountains sway, the wind and cloud change colour, and miracles take place in succession. They do not only understand the writing principle of the "combination" rationally, but gain sensorial understanding of it from the majestic and splendid reality. The unprecedented harvest in the field of literature and art in the two years of the Great Leap Forward has proven the potential of the profound enlightenment and formidable inspiration embedded in this slogan (48).

A similar rhetorical style with its emphasis on sublimity appears in Chinese publications throughout the Great Leap Forward, describing miraculous advances achieved by the people. Mao Dun not only adopts such rhetoric in his description of the social transformation of the previous two years (60), he also utilizes it in his description of the new look of the field of literature and art. After all, the principle of revolutionary romanticism is to "mobilize people's subjective attitudes, to depict the grand prospect of communism with tremendous courage and foresight, to extol the heroes of our generation from amidst the masses that create history and transform nature" (64). Romanticism takes center stage as a way of motivating citizens to vigorously promote—rather than simply reflect on—communist life. To a certain extent, Mao Dun's speech is in itself a performance in keeping with the goal of reconstructing social life—including public speeches—into a collective, communal art form, itself part of Mao's aestheticized politics intended to appeal to an ideologically conditioned audience.

Interestingly, however, it is not clear that Mao Dun himself in 1960 is certain where the future lies. It is difficult for him even to name model literary and artistic works that anticipate the future in the spirit of the "combination." In contrast to the grandiloquence of his general overview, Mao Dun is stingy with concrete examples that might illustrate the spirit of the "combination." The few works that he names include Liang Bin's (1914–1996) novel *Red Flag Flying* (*Hongqi pu*), Liu Baiyu's (1916–2005) short stories, the poems of Ruan Zhangjing (1914–2000) and He Jingzhi (b. 1924), the new opera *The Red Guards of Lake Honghu* (*Honghushui chiweidui*), and the dramas *To Subdue the*

Dragon and Tame the Tiger (*Xiang long fu hu*) and *A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire* (*Xing huo liao yuan*). Mao Dun does not seem to have the appetite to analyze any of these works in depth, despite the fact that he includes lengthy analysis of classical Chinese literature and foreign works in his 92-page speech. The section on the "combination" ends abruptly with Mao Dun's hasty projection of a bright future for Chinese literature.

Mao Dun does not mention that the Great Leap Forward embedded a cultural plan, launched in the second half of 1958. This cultural plan required all Chinese writers and artists to "write about, sing about, perform about, and draw about the center [Maoism]". The masses meanwhile were encouraged to produce their own work. The hope was to create an upsurge of literary and artistic creation (Li Yuntuan 98). These practices—rather than the few works Mao Dun mentions in his speech—were the true embodiment of the "combination" that made the seeming "cultural leap" possible.

The "combination" may reasonably be treated as an offshoot of Soviet literary theory. After all, the Chinese drew persistently on Soviet and Russian theories as the starting point for their discussions of the "combination." In their essays, many Chinese writers and literary critics of the time also remarked on the close connection between the "combination" and Soviet socialist realism, or argued that the "combination" enriched socialist realism through a greater emphasis on romanticism (Fokkema 273–274). However, it is equally important to highlight Mao's determination to find a uniquely Chinese path in cultural development. The period's emphasis on Chinese folk culture and the call for Chinese poets to learn from folk songs, alongside the endorsement of elements in Chinese classical literature as proper examples of the "combination," all reveal the fact that this "new formula stressed the continuity in the development of Chinese literary history" (197).

It is also important to note that the political relationship between the PRC and the Soviet Union had deteriorated in the second half of the 1950s. The resulting Sino-Soviet split led to the removal of Soviet specialists from China during the Great Leap Forward. The Chinese recognized the need for independence both in scientific and cultural development. Zhou Yang's speech in August 1958, for example, criticized any dogmatism that would copy the Soviet experience mechanically without considering Chinese reality. Instead, Zhou emphasized the necessity to revaluate the Chinese cultural legacy and draw lessons from the Chinese revolutionary experience since the May Fourth Movement, in order to prepare the Chinese working classes to become the true masters of science, culture, and art (Zhou 38). Where learning from foreign culture, even Soviet culture, might invite the charge of being reactionary, the Chinese literary tradition and folk culture offered relatively safe ground. In

addition, the promotion of revolutionary romanticism fell in line with Mao's own poetic temperament, which sparked a sense of recognition from poets such as Guo Moruo, who entered into the ideas from the start.

Despite the enthusiasm with which Chinese writers and literary critics embraced Mao's proposal of the "combination" as the basis for a new school of literature to answer the call of the Great Leap Forward, the literary response was not straightforward. A perusal of the discussion around the "combination" in the late 1950s reveals an imbalance between literary criticism and literary creation. While a heated theoretical discussion followed Mao's proposal, the accompanying literary creations were not comparable in either quantity or quality. Moreover, the influence of the "combination" was interrupted in the 1960s, beginning with the political shift that occurred from the middle of 1960 to 1962.[6] Although this shift did not last long—and was soon replaced by the radical zeal that led directly to the tumultuous Cultural Revolution—the "combination" lost its influence as a pivotal slogan. A new formula—Three Prominences (*san tuchu*)—emerged during the Cultural Revolution, emphasizing a tiered approach: at the base, writers should give attention to characters viewed as positive; amongst these, the most prominent should be heroic main characters; and foremost amongst these should be the central hero. This slogan triumphed over all prior ones, becoming the clarion call of a new era.

Notwithstanding the great variety of dominant slogans, however, the spirit of revolutionary romanticism held on through the Cultural Revolution. The situation resembled the Soviet Union's, where romanticism had been outwardly rejected, even as its useful elements were absorbed into socialist realism. The most prominent shared emotional commitment during the Cultural Revolution was to none other than the appropriated figure of the sublime. Specifically, the culturally accepted sublime took the form of representation that helped construct an image of grandeur and transcendence in accordance with Mao's political vision.

Overall, revolutionary romanticism served specific political functions during Mao's era. As Laikwan Pang argues, "[if] modern European arts resort to the poetic and the artistic to reach beyond the world of order, Maoist arts were given the opposite mission of constructing an order. They were tasked to provide affective aesthetic anchorages in a highly disorienting political reality, and to construct a more coherent sphere of existence in contrast to the political chaos" (Pang 37). To a certain extent, the art produced in the spirit of revolutionary romanticism constructed a utopia meant to transcend material

6. These years saw an attempt to moderate far-leftist elements within the party through various means, including by reinstituting the 1956 Hundred Flowers Campaign that had allowed for greater freedom of thought and speech, and by downplaying the role of the "combination," perceived as encouraging exaggeration and empty talk.

reality. Through the constant repetition of a limited selection of artworks circulated across China, revolutionary romanticism stimulated a collective emotional consensus among the Chinese in a decade of political and social turmoil. It also offered a channel for readers to move beyond their mundane life and engage with the extraordinary.

The Return of Revolutionary Romanticism

In a work report submitted to the First Session of the Fifth National People's Congress (NPC) on February 26, 1978, the Premier of the State Council Hua Guofeng (1921–2008) discusses the sabotage by the "Gang of Four" (*Siren bang*). Hua holds the "Gang of Four" were responsible for the relative dearth of literary and artistic creation during the Cultural Revolution and urges the revival of principles from the 1950s, especially the formula of the "combination." In his report, he writes:

> The topics of literary and artistic creation must be diversified. The focus should be on modern revolution, especially the three revolutionary movements during socialist times, but we should also pay attention to historical subjects and other topics. We must uphold the artistic method of the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism (Hua).

Hua's report generated a new round of discussion about the "combination" among literary critics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1978 in his inscription for *People's Literature* (*Renmin wenxue*), the official journal of the China Writers Association, Hua reemphasizes the importance of the spirit of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, which had encouraged free speech and criticism of Chinese society. Hua's inscription helped prompt the resurgence of revolutionary romanticism. In the same journal's next issue, the editorial staff asserted that an in-depth discussion of the "combination" was essential to the success of socialist literary and artistic creations, and upheld the "combination" as a crucial starting point for restoring order after the Cultural Revolution (He and Tian 108–112).

Familiar voices from the 1950s also chimed in. Zhou Yang, the theorist who had enthusiastically advocated for the "combination" in the 1950s, took the opportunity to restate its importance in a December 1978 speech, which was published in the party's official newspaper *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) the following year:

> To follow the principle of revolutionary realism means that we need to base work on actual life, to observe and study reality. We need to be loyal to that reality, but we should not be limited to fragmented and trivial phenomena; instead, we should stand up high and see far beyond: we need to combine our revolutionary ideals with realist description. Chairman Mao's

> revolutionary romanticism means revolutionary idealism. The combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism is the combination of the principle of seeking truth from facts, with the revolutionary spirit (Zhou Yang 84).

Zhou's statement did not greatly diverge from what he had proposed twenty years earlier. However, in terms of his concrete approach, Zhou now not only supported the positive depiction of revolutionary heroes, but also considered it necessary to reveal social problems. He maintained that self-criticism is just as important as the denunciation of enemies: "socialist literature should not only criticize capitalism, feudalism and all kinds of hostile ideologies of the exploiting classes, but also reprimand the negative phenomena, malpractices and dark elements of socialist society" (86). This deviation from the earlier interpretation of the "combination," which had only allowed for optimistic renderings of socialist society—gave rise to new potential for literary creation starting in the late 1970s. In particular, it meant that the pursuit for sublimity was no longer a necessity.

In many ways critics in the late 1970s and early 1980s relied on similar theoretical and literary sources to those used in the 1950s. These included the Russian and Chinese literary canons, Marxism and Leninism, Mao's statements—including his Yan'an talks and his poetry—and Soviet critical discussions of writers such as Gorky. Occasionally the Western tradition of realism and romanticism was raised for comparison. However, where critics in the 1950s had been expected to unanimously glorify the "combination," the loosened political environment after the Cultural Revolution gave critics more freedom to interpret it according to their own understanding. Some critics argued that the "combination" does not stipulate a single formula by which writers and artists must abide, but allows for a wider variety of approaches to reality (Ma 125). This approach opened up possibilities for using the "combination" to represent frustrations and even setbacks. Writers also debated the specific relationship between realism and romanticism, and argued for an organic synthesis that would allow flexibility and variety of composition (Li Peihua 124–125). Conceived in terms of material dialectics, realism and romanticism need not be mutually exclusive, but instead, the two can be synthesized while each retains its distinctive essence.

Throughout this renewed discussion, there was even room for dissent: while most critics welcomed the revival of the "combination," others cautioned against the dangers of the sort of superficial and grandiloquent romanticism that had reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (117–122). Despite this lively revival within the field of literary criticism, though, few actual literary works represented the spirit of the "combination." Critics were able to

agree in condemning what was seen as the false detour taken by revolutionary romanticism during the Cultural Revolution—and particularly the sort of literary and artistic works represented by the eight revolutionary operas produced during that time. Yet it remained challenging for critics to name successful examples that truly reflected the "combination." Critics ended up repeatedly mentioning a few works produced before the Cultural Revolution, especially *Red Flag Flying*, *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (*Lin hai xue yuan*), and *Red Rock* (*Hong yan*).

Coda

Revolutionary Romanticism has been summarized by Chinese scholar Ding Fan as a school that exerted a great impact on Chinese literature in the first thirty years of PRC before it was "ruthlessly abandoned." This description reflects the fate of revolutionary romanticism in more recent decades. By the 1990s, the Great Leap Forward had been recognized as a failure by the Chinese communist party; its strong connection with the "combination" caused that proposal to lose favor as well. Today, Chinese writers and scholars are still primarily interested in realism—though without the constraints of the modifier "revolutionary." Yet revolutionary romanticism has been replaced by modernist schools such as symbolism and decadence—schools once suppressed by the overpowering discourse of realism—as inspirations for literary creation.

The decline in the fortunes of revolutionary romanticism has corresponded with Chinese intellectuals' fading excitement about revolution, as seen in works such as Li Zehou (1930–2021) and Liu Zaifu's (1941–) 1995 book *Farewell to Revolution: Looking Back at China of the Twentieth Century*. Despite accusations that this book expressed a kind of cultural conservatism or historical nihilism, it reflected Chinese intellectuals' disillusionment with the transformations promised by revolutionary violence. Consequently, romanticism qualified by revolution also lost its appeal.

The 1990s and beyond reveal a clear reduction in the number of scholarly articles on the "combination," especially when compared with the end of the 1950s or the early 1980s. Recent articles addressing the "combination" tend to treat it as a historical event, not a proposal quintessential to Chinese contemporary literature.[7] This does not mean the end of revolutionary romanticism, though. In primary schools, where Chinese language textbooks still incorporate heroic stories of the Red Army, the sacrifices made by Red Army heroes are still interpreted as fulfilling the spirit of revolutionary romanticism. Moreover, the popularity of Chinese "main-melody" (*zhuxuanlü*) blockbusters, some of which are direct adaptations of works such as "Tracks in the Snowy

7. See Zhiyuan Cui, "*Guanyu "liangjiehe" chuangzuo fangfa de lishi kaocha yu fansi*."

Forest," has revived the term revolutionary romanticism, which has been used to describe these films—twenty-first century works of propaganda that pay tribute to the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, in the "post-revolutionary" era, the evocation of revolutionary romanticism has remained a powerful way to accommodate the sublimity of revolutionary heroism.

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Reviews