

## A HISTORY OF MODERN CHINESE POPULAR LITERATURE

With no comparable study in the English language, the first English translation of Fan Boqun's *A History of Modern Chinese Popular Literature* presents one of the most authoritative and significant studies on modern Chinese literature to a new readership. Starting in the late Qing Dynasty, a period often overlooked by literary scholars, Fan maps the blueprint of modern Chinese popular literature through a broad range of popular literary genres. Thoughtfully illustrated throughout and utilizing courtesan novels, martial arts fiction, pictorial journalism and detective novels, Fan's innovative approach to this rich material develops pioneering new arguments which will be of interest to all interested in modern Chinese literature and popular and visual culture in late Qing and Republican China.

FAN BOQUN (1931–2017) was a scholar of modern Chinese literature. He taught at Suzhou University and at the Chinese Classical Literature Research Center of Fudan.

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# A HISTORY OF MODERN CHINESE POPULAR LITERATURE

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

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Fan Boqun (1931–2017) can be considered the leading figure in the study of modern Chinese popular literature, a category he did more than anyone else to redefine after decades during which it was dominated by ideologically driven views. To understand the importance of this book, which came out in its present form in 2007, it is necessary to see where it fits in the study of modern Chinese literature particularly as it has evolved since the 1980s. We will see that Fan’s book ends with a prescient recognition of how the emergence of Internet and other media forms of literature suggest answers to some of the theoretical questions raised by his work.

Since the 1920s the history of modern Chinese literature has been largely dominated by a narrative according to which modern vernacular fiction, poetry, prose and drama all sprang from the New Literature and Culture Movement of 1917–1923 centred on Peking University, which came to be symbolized by the antigovernment student demonstrations of May 4, 1919. The May Fourth demonstrations were triggered by the government’s acceptance of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, under which the German-controlled territories in China were handed to Japan, rather than being returned to China. China’s weakness on the international stage was intimately linked to failures in domestic politics and added vigour to the quest of these intellectuals to find radical ways to save the country, including thoroughgoing language reform to displace the elite literary form of the written language (*wenyan*) and its replacement by the vernacular (*baihua*). This was intended to foster the birth of a new national literature, able to spread new ideas.

Ideas that literary and language reform were essential elements in China’s quest for national strength in the face of the problems brought by imperialism and internal political and social turmoil did not begin with the May Fourth intellectuals, however. A “discourse of modernity” had started to develop in the last quarter of the 19th century, including Liang Qichao’s call in 1902 for fiction to “renovate” the people. But the May Fourth intellectuals who, following a failed attempt to restore the emperor in 1917, had become increasingly convinced that there was a need for drastic change embraced an iconoclastic approach to tradition.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A useful account is to be found in Kirk Denton, “Historical Overview,” in Kirk A. Denton (ed.) *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

Writing in 1922, one of the movement's intellectual leaders, Hu Shi, noted that, in fact, vernacular fiction had been the highest achievement of Chinese literature in the past fifty years, with noteworthy works Liu E's *The Travels of Lao Can*, Li Boyuan's *Panorama of Officialdom* and Wu Woyao's *Strange Things Seen over Twenty Years*. However, it was only in the five years since the May Fourth movement began that there had been a clear sense of direction and the recognition that the classical literary language was "dead" and the vernacular "living."<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Hu Shi begins by noting that the first important event of 1872 had been the founding of the *Shenbao* (*Shanghai News*). The *Shenbao* was founded and managed by Ernest Major, an English businessman, but staffed by Chinese who wrote in Chinese with the aim of bringing information from all over the world and other parts of China to its Chinese readership.<sup>3</sup> Shanghai went on to become the centre of a vibrant print media industry. As noted in a recent study, the emergence of popular fiction in many parts of the world resulted from "the application of new technologies of industrial production to publishing, an expanding market driven by increased literacy and urbanisation and the emergence of new commercial media" between the 1880s and 1920s.<sup>4</sup> However, alongside the vernacular examples praised by Hu Shi, much of the fiction published in China in the 1900s and 1910s was written in an enormous variety of traditional styles and linguistic forms. An outstanding example is Xu Zhenya's *Soul of the Jade Pear* (1912), a tragic love story written in the parallel-prose style of the Six Dynasties (222–589) period while incorporating the epistolary form imported from the West and depiction of the characters' inner states of mind. The book was reprinted many times and sold over a million copies.<sup>5</sup> The linguistic complexity of such works plus the cost of purchasing them meant that the primary audiences in the 1910s were middle- and upper-class, but by the 1920s serialization in newspapers made them much more accessible to students, shop clerks and office workers.<sup>6</sup>

Driven both by their iconoclastic approach and by their desire to trounce existing competitors in the fiction market, May Fourth intellectuals attacked the writers of popular fiction, referring to them as the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school," although there had never been any such school. This was

<sup>2</sup> Hu Shi, "Wushi nian lai Zhongguo zhi wenxue" (Chinese Literature over the Past Fifty Years) in *Hu Shi zuopin ji* (Hu Shi's Collected Works), Vol. 8 (Hong Kong: Yuanliu chuban, 1986), 65–68.

<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Mittler, "Domesticating an Alien Medium: Incorporating the Western-Style Newspaper into the Chinese Public Sphere," in Rudolf G. Wagner (ed.), *Joining the Global Public: Word Image and City in Early Chinese Newspapers 1970–1910* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), 16.

<sup>4</sup> David Glover and Scott McCracken, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Xu Xueqing, "The Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School," in Kirk A. Denton and Michel Hockx (ed.), *Literary Societies of Republican China* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 189–192.

a mocking, reductive term which came from a trope in *Soul of the Jade Pear*, comparing lovers to a pair of mandarin ducks, and included innovative new publications like *Saturday* magazine, founded in 1914 to provide leisurely reading for the weekend. The label covered all genres and came to be represented as an old-fashioned, decadent, socially unproductive school of writing that was read mainly by a class that was similarly decadent and unproductive, namely the “petty urbanites” (*xiao shimin*) who could, in Marxist readings, be assimilated to the petty bourgeoisie. It was consistently attacked throughout the 1920s and 1930s as socially conservative and produced merely for entertainment by writers who had “escaped from politics and maintain[ed] a decadent lifestyle.”<sup>7</sup>

Hu Shi’s work, with its evolutionary paradigm, in which old literary forms die away and are replaced by the new, proved very influential. Over the next decade literary histories by Zhou Zuoren, Wang Zhefu and Zhu Ziqing brought new theoretical and methodological insights to the study of modern Chinese literature, although Zhu’s work, while used in his teaching between 1929 and 1932, was not published in book form until 1982. In the late 1930s, A Ying and Li Helin brought social-reflection theory and class analysis to the study of literature. No major modern literary histories were produced in the following decade, and so Yingjin Zhang, on whose work I have drawn in this paragraph, sees Li Helin’s work as bringing to an end the “founding” period of the construction of modern Chinese literary history, characterized by an “experimental” approach undertaken by scholars working individually.<sup>8</sup>

The question of the meaning and success of the May Fourth movement went far beyond literature, however. Both the Nationalist Guomindang and the Communist Party had to decide whether and how to commemorate it, given that it represented student activism and iconoclasm. The Guomindang, striving for control, made May Fourth into a nationwide school holiday from 1927 to 1935, and in 1934 integrated commemorations into the recently launched New Life movement, which was aimed at bringing rejuvenated Confucian social values into national life. By 1943, however, the May Fourth movement had become completely marginalized in Guomindang historiography.<sup>9</sup> The Communist Party approach was to see the May Fourth movement as part of a worldwide social reform movement. Mao Zedong’s 1939 essay “On New Democracy” expanded on this by noting that Marxist intellectuals in

<sup>7</sup> See Xu, “The Mandarin Duck and Butterflies School”, 60. This criticism was made by Zheng Zhenduo in the preface to the volume on literary debates in the *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature* (*Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi*) edited by Zhao Jiabi and published in 1935. Lydia Liu analyses the production of the compendium in terms of canon formation, theory and legitimation in her *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity: China 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 214–238.

<sup>8</sup> See Yingjin Zhang, “The Institutionalization of Modern Literary History in China, 1922–1980,” *Modern China*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1994), 351–358.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Wagner, “The Canonization of May Fourth,” in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldřich Král (ed.), *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Project*

the movement had founded the CCP, and then come to learn that in order to make real progress they needed to integrate with the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party and through re-education.<sup>10</sup>

After the establishment of the PRC, modern Chinese literature became a required undergraduate subject for students of Chinese, and Wang Yao's *A Draft History of New Chinese Literature*, the first volume of which was published in 1951, became the principal university textbook. It was, until the late 1970s, the most comprehensive history of modern Chinese literature. Wang, who taught at Tsinghua University, divided his history into four periods determined by sociopolitical historiography, and narrated literary history as moving in the direction set out by Mao in his "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art."<sup>11</sup> Zhang discusses other PRC literary histories and notes how they were continually revised to create a politically correct version of New Literature, epitomized by Lu Xun, who had been praised by Mao.

We must note that the first English history of modern Chinese literature was C.T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* published by Yale University Press in 1961. Hsia's purpose was to write a history of fiction since the May Fourth period and to counter the Communist readings of literary texts. In his first chapter he acknowledges that there were writers of old-style fiction such as Zhang Henshui who were "in narrative skill much superior" to their more ideologically driven "fellow craftsmen." They provided escapist entertainment for large groups of readers and at some point it might be useful to examine their work.<sup>12</sup> Hsia made clear his rejection of the Communist reading of the modern literary tradition and put forward the Shanghai-based Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) as possibly the greatest Chinese writer since the May Fourth movement — a judgment for which he has since won great praise. Hsia's book was challenged by Prague University's Jaroslav Průšek, a founder of the Prague school of sinology whose research covered modern and premodern literary genres. Průšek lambasted Hsia for his failure to use a "scientific" approach to literature and accused him of "dogmatic intolerance." Despite these differences, subsequent scholars have emphasized the contributions of both men to the study of Chinese literature and the institutionalization of its literary history in the West.<sup>13</sup>

(Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 108–110; on the New Life movement see Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (August 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 112–114.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang, "The Institutionalization of Modern Literary History in China, 1922–1980," 358–359. Zhang notes that Yao was criticized in 1952 for various ideological and methodological errors and for failing to take class analysis as his primary task.

<sup>12</sup> C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press), 25.

<sup>13</sup> See David Der-wei Wang, "Introduction", in C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Legacies of Jaroslav Průšek and C.T. Hsia," in David Der-wei Wang (ed.) *A New Literary History of Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

The death of Mao in 1976 and the shift in Chinese politics that followed meant that the 1980s were a period of reassessment. Wang Yao had moved to Peking University and in 1982, having been asked by a Shaanxi journal to produce articles that could be used as teaching materials, he asked his student Qian Liqun to take on the project. Qian asked his fellow students Wen Rumin and Wu Fuhui to join, laying the groundwork for the best-selling *30 Years of China's New Literature* (*Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian*) (1987), which covered the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. They wanted to move away from the politically correct readings of literary history that Wang Yao had been obliged to take, preferring the concept of “modernization.” In 1985, Chen Pingyuan and Qian Liqun joined Huang Ziping in putting forward the concept of 20th-century Chinese literature. In Shanghai, Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming had put forward the idea of “rewriting literary history.”<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, in Suzhou – coincidentally a major publishing centre before the rise of Shanghai and the home of many “Mandarin Duck” writers – Fan Boqun was carving out a new field of study. Fan Boqun graduated from Shanghai’s Fudan University in 1955, having majored in Chinese. Over the next few years he collaborated with fellow graduate Zeng Huapeng, writing many articles and five books on May Fourth literary figures, including Yu Dafu and Bing Xin. In 1978, after the Cultural Revolution, he was assigned a teaching post in the Chinese Department at Jiangsu Normal University, soon to become Suzhou (Soochow) University. The Academy of Social Sciences gave the department a research project editing historical materials on Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, some of which had been published in 1962 in a handbook of research materials edited by Wei Shaochang. However, whereas Wei had been unable to provide any commentary on the materials, Fan realized that there was a need for theoretical and literary analysis of works which had been written off as “adverse currents,” and for a complete “systematization” of research into Ducks and Butterflies. During the rest of the 1980s he published extensively on the topic, including in 1989 a volume of theoretical essays titled *Saturday's Butterfly Dreams* (*Libailiu de hudie meng*).<sup>15</sup> We might pause to look briefly at Western scholarship on the topic in the same period. The pioneering work in English is Perry Link’s *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, 1981), which saw this type of fiction as the

<sup>14</sup> Li Yuxiang, “Zhongguo xiandai wenxueyanjiu de daolu, fangfa yu jingshen” (The Path, Method and Spirit of Research into Modern Chinese Literature: An Interview with Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin and Wu Fuhui), online at [www.chinawriter.com.cn](http://www.chinawriter.com.cn).

<sup>15</sup> Zhang Lei, “Zhongguo xiandai tonggu wenxue yanjiu de kaishan: Fan Boqun xiansheng de xueshu gongxian” (The Founding of Research into Modern Chinese Popular Literature: Fan Boqun’s Contribution to Scholarship), in *Dongwu xueshu*, No. 6 (2018), 48–50. I am grateful to Ji Jin for sending me a number of relevant articles, including this one, and the one by Yuan Jiangyue cited below.

product of the commercialization and industrialization of Shanghai. However, although Link saw this fiction as having sociological interest, in that it represented “modern” life, it was still not seen as a literature worthy to be compared with May Fourth writings. Liu Ts’un-yan’s edited volume *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction: From the Qing and Early Republican Period Eras* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984) followed suit in seeing popular literature as not quite worthy of attention. This volume contained a noteworthy chapter by C. T. Hsia, “Hsu Chen-ya’s *Yu-li hun*: An Essay in Literary History and Criticism,” which, although admiring the literary skill of Xu Zhenya, considered that the novel *Soul of the Jade Pear* represented a decadent and moribund tradition. Rey Chow’s *Woman and Chinese Modernity* saw Ducks and Butterflies fiction not only as a product of the clash between traditional Confucian morality and an emerging modern society, but also as highlighting the relations of power both within the society and within the literary world. It represented the weak, feminized face of Chinese culture.<sup>16</sup>

Fan started to use the term “popular literature” in the 1990s, publishing a series titled *Critical Biographies of Writers of Popular Literature from the mid-19th Century and Modern Periods* (*Zhongguo jin xiandai tongshu wenxue zuojia pingzhuan congshu*) in 1994 and asserting in the General Introduction that the writers denigrated as “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” under “left” thinking were an important school in popular literature.<sup>17</sup> In 1999 Fan published his two-volume *History of Chinese Popular Literature from the mid-19th Century and the Modern Period* (*Zhongguo jin xiandai tongshu wenxue shi*), by which time “popular literature” was being put forward as a scholarly concept, finally becoming accepted as a neutral term in the new century.<sup>18</sup>

Wu Fuhui, the Beijing-based scholar, recalled how an important new change in the revised version of *Thirty Years of China’s New Literature* published in 1997 was the addition of a chapter on “popular fiction.” The academic world had paid little attention to the idea, but through his research on Shanghai school writers he had come in contact with popular-fiction researchers. “Since the 1990s Professor Fan Boqun and his students at Suzhou University have made huge achievements in this area. They always invited me to their conferences and so I gradually came to research popular fiction myself.”<sup>19</sup>

Fan and his researchers saw popular literature as essential to the study of modern literature as a whole, something which needed to be brought into the

<sup>16</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> The Chinese title refers in abbreviated form to *jindai* and *xiandai* historical periods. *Jindai* is explained in the authoritative *Xiandai hanyu cidian* dictionary as “mainly referring to the period from the second half of the 19th century until the May Fourth movement.” *Xiandai* (modern) refers to the period since the May Fourth movement.

<sup>18</sup> Zhang Lei, “Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxue yanjiu de kaishan,” 50–51.

<sup>19</sup> Li Yuxiang, “Zhongguo xiandai wenxueyanjiu de daolu.”

subject's field of vision, because "pure literature and popular literature are the two wings of our literature, and the literary histories we write from now on must be a history where the two wings fly together."<sup>20</sup> This, however, was not something that everyone agreed with; Wu Fuhui, cited above, went on to say that as the May Fourth literary tradition was the "main trend" the wings could not be equal.

Fan retired from his university teaching post in 2001, and continued to throw himself into research following his own direction. The result was this groundbreaking *History of Modern Chinese Popular Fiction*. The work differs significantly in structure from the 1999 study in that it places popular literature in a historical timeline and so brings out its development, whereas the earlier study was divided into separate sections according to genre. As noted recently by Yuan Jiangyue, Fan had unearthed and worked through a huge amount of published and unpublished material to write the book, which challenged many assumptions. The book pushed the academic community to reflect on the scope of modern literature, as popular fiction had entered the process of modernization some twenty years earlier than the New Literature and Culture movement. Moreover, the book had not only "rectified" the name of popular fiction; it had also challenged some of the values, narrative strategies and criteria of the mainstream literary history. His attention to late Qing fiction meant that he had much in common with scholars outside China like David Der-wei Wang and demonstrated the possibility of mutual scholarly communication between them.<sup>21</sup>

Yuan notes that Fan's book confirms that enlightened thinking and modernity existed in popular literature and that the discourses of New Culture intellectuals and popular writers need not be seen as antithetical and were in fact often complementary. However, Fan wanted to transcend the structural dominance built into the "two-wings theory" by elite discourse. He called repeatedly for the need to build a new system of literary history based on "pluralistic symbiosis" (*duoyuan gongsheng*) which would pay attention to the literary tastes and experiences of the entire population:

This kind of literary history would both transcend categories of refined and popular and lead them; it would include both shifts in cultural attitude and factors such as social structure, the cultural market, the composition

<sup>20</sup> Fan, Boqun, *Zhongguo jinxian di tong su wen xue shi* (Vol. 1) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), cited in Zhang Lei, "Zhongguo xiandai tong su wen xue yan jiu de kaishan," 51.

<sup>21</sup> Yuan Jiangyue, "Cong jiazhi chonggu dao wen xue shi chongxie-tan Fan Boqun *Zhongguo xiandai tong su wen xue shi*" (From Re-evaluation of Values to the Rewriting of Literary History: On Fan Boqun's *History of Modern Chinese Popular Fiction*), *Xibu xuekan*, No. 11 (2018), 74. Wang's *Fin-de-Siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction 1848–1911* was published by Stanford in 1997.



of readerships and so on. Such an approach would also take in the impact of cultural influences from abroad while being aware of the evolution of China's cultural tradition.<sup>22</sup>

Asking where scholarship will go from here, Yuan points out that in his epilogue Fan speaks of the prevalence of images in early popular publications and their increase thereafter in cinema and other mass media, including today's television and Internet industries.

There are indeed many similarities between early popular literature and Internet literature, not least the fact that some Internet genre fiction is a reworking of earlier popular fiction. One example is the resurgence of "The Legend of Zu Mountain," first published in 1932 by Huanzhulouzhuzhu and discussed in Chapter 16 of this volume. Moreover, Yuan continues, both are aimed at popular readerships, both to varying extents provide leisure, and the authors come from all sorts of work and social backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> Other scholars have also pointed to these parallels: Michel Hockx described literary websites as employing the latest publishing technologies to foster and enhance the traditional function of literature as a social, as well as cultural, institution, just as new literary journals had done a century before.<sup>24</sup> Jin Feng notes that Perry Link's observations on literary consumption in the early 20th century could easily apply to Web-based popular Chinese fiction and its audience at the turn of the 21st century.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Fan himself in an important article coauthored in 2013 with Liu Xiaoyuan makes urban popular literature the bridge linking late Ming vernacular fiction writer Feng Menglong (1574–1646), the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writers and contemporary Internet fiction.<sup>26</sup>

This book establishes the importance of 20th-century popular fiction in Chinese literary history in a way never done before, as well as opening up the story of one of the world's largest reading publics to English-speaking scholars worldwide.

<sup>22</sup> Yuan Jiangyue, "Cong jiazhi chonggu dao wenxue shi chongxie-tan Fan Boqun *Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxue shi*," 75.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. On *The Legend of Zu Mountain* Yuan cites Huang Fayou, *Wangluo wenxue yu bentu wenxue chuantong de guanxi* (*The Relationship between Internet Literature and Indigenous Literary Traditions*) (Beijing: Zuoqia chubanshe, 2014), 252.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Hockx, "Links with the Past: Mainland China's Online Literary Communities and Their Antecedents," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 13, No. 38 (2004), 106.

<sup>25</sup> Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 30.

<sup>26</sup> Fan Boqun and Liu Xiaoyuan, "Feng Menglongmen – yuanyan hudiepai – wangluo leixing xiaoshuo – Zhongguo gujin 'shimin dazhong wenxue lian'," *Zhongshan daxue xuebao*, No. 6 (2013), cited in Zhang Lei, "Zhongguo xiandai tongshu wenxue yanjiu de kaishan," 56.