
Miriam E. Wells

Published posthumously, this collection of Tsi-an Hsia’s writing examines the political conflicts and personal feelings of the leftist writers of the May Fourth movement who became associated with the Chinese Communist Party. In his own unfinished introduction, Hsia takes issue with the place of Chinese leftist authors in a neat Marxian historical progression. In other words, the Communist narrative suggests that the writers effectively bridged the gap between the bourgeois and the proletarian revolution. Hsia writes that the reality for most of these authors was that their private lives, principles, and art were increasingly at odds with party goals. His selection of authors for this volume captures a wide range of authors who served different political uses and endured different fates. With the exception of Lu Hsün, most of Hsia’s authors are not especially well known in the West. They include Chiang Kuang-tz’u, a writer who was politically discredited as bourgeois after his resignation of membership in the party (55), Ch’ü Ch’iu-po, the “tenderhearted communist” who cultivated two personalities in order to reconcile himself with communism, and five young writers made martyrs by the Kuomintang.

Hsia’s brother writes in the book’s introduction that Hsia himself was a product of the same intellectual environment as the writers he discusses, and just as acutely interested in China’s future. C. T. Hsia suggests that Tsi-an had a more intimate connection with the subject matter despite Tsi-an Hsia’s insistence that he has “no personal story to relate . . . no smoldering cinders [of Marxism] burning in my heart” (xx). Even so, Hsia’s voice and opinions appear stronger and more easily distinguished than in other historical treatments of the subject. Knowing that the difference is noticeable, C. T. Hsia characterizes the book as “cultural criticism,” or the fusion of biography, history and criticism (xvi-xvii).

One of Hsia’s arguments is similar to Jonathan Spence’s in *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*: that the authors included in *The Gate of Darkness* were all devoted to May Fourth ideals, and many to changing China through revolution, but were ultimately betrayed by the party.¹ Hsia adds some interesting layers to that conclusion. One of those layers is the relative worth of the writing that became so important to the Communist Party. This question of stylistic worth comes across strongly in Hsia’s chapter about Chiang Kuang-tz’u. Hsia maintains that there isn’t much intrinsic artistic worth in Chiang’s writing. He characterizes the writing as romantic and unrefined, and Chiang as pompous and shallow. Hsia connects Chiang’s rise in popularity to the particular moment

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¹ It would be interesting to go back to Spence and reread his treatment of Ch’ü Ch’iu-po/Qu Qiubo.
of May Fourth and its insistence on frankness, and then his ultimate failure to the refinement of pai-hua as the style attracted a greater number of (more talented) authors (63). Hsia also takes on the stylistic qualities of pai-hua and wen-yen, highlighting some of the merits of wen-yen ignored by the communists, as well as the formulaic use of the favored pai-hua.

Some of the authors expressed ambivalence toward China’s history and traditions, adding another layer to Hsia’s argument. For example, in one of Hsia’s essays about Lu Hsün, he captures Lu Hsün’s frequent allusions to traditional Chinese literature (wen-yen). He suggests that Lu Hsün included these allusions in his stories not only to give his writing a broad appeal but also out of feelings of closeness and connection to traditional forms of writing, and historical context. Hsia writes that Lu Hsün felt some pleasure in successful “emulation of the masters” through poetry (150), or his decidedly non-modern use of ghosts in his stories. Some of these feelings of ambivalence toward tradition are also captured in the chapter about Ch’ü Ch’iu-po, in Hsia’s narrative of Ch’ü’s childhood and education. Hsia’s discussion of Ch’ü Ch’iu-po is particularly interesting because he notes Ch’ü’s ability to create for himself two distinct personas—one political, one artistic—a feat none of the other writers in The Gate of Darkness seem to have been able to achieve.

The posthumous nature of this volume gives it an unfinished quality that is captured in a letter to his brother, included in the introduction. The letter contains questions about controversy in the formation of the Left League, opposition to Mao and Lu Hsün in the late 1920s, and Hsü Mou-yung’s satirical writing during the Hundred Flowers period. Though the questions he posed in his letter were not intended as revisions to this volume, the letter gives the reader a sense of what direction Hsia would like to have taken in his research, and some of the problems he saw with his existing work for this book.

The Gate of Darkness appears more critical of the Chinese Communist Party than most, due perhaps to the author’s own background and the book’s publication squarely within the period of the Cultural Revolution. As Hsia wrote, he was able to observe (from the outside) changes in the reputations of these authors, driven by changes in policy and leadership in the Chinese Communist Party. In Lu Hsün’s case, the CCP altered historical reality in order to maintain the author’s good reputation, while the reputations of other authors were completely undone. The book also maintains a personal flavor of writing throughout, which I mentioned earlier, but is powerful enough to mention in more depth. Biographically speaking, The Gate of Darkness offers much insight into its subjects’ emotional lives. While much of this is based in research and the writings of Hsia’s subjects, there is also some other quality in it, as well. For instance, Hsia spends the first few
pages of his chapter about Ch’ü Ch’iu-po discussing the necessary internal qualities of a communist, before he addresses the ways in which Ch’ü might have failed in that role. Hsia also employs some unusual language regarding Lu Hsün’s feelings about death, ghosts, and loneliness that implies more than a little personal connection to the subjects. If this is merely artistic language on Hsia’s part, then the execution of it is strikingly beautiful at times.


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In this collection of Lu Xun’s most well known stories, tradition and modernity in China collide. Lu Xun captures this transition through sometimes through satire (The True Story of Ah Q), sometimes through poignant dramas (My Old Home), and often in deeply disturbing ways (Medicine). The themes Lu Xun most often explores in these short stories are illness, death, poverty, and ignorance—and in most cases, these problems are linked to adherence to tradition. The stories are not transparent instruction about the benefits of modernity and the evils of tradition. Lu Xun’s attitude toward Chinese tradition in these stories is ambivalent. As a result, Lu Xun’s fiction remains open to interpretation. He has consistently been seen as a crucial writer for the communists in the pre-revolutionary period, and his reputation has remained intact in the CCP over the course of many changes in government. Western and non-party writers see other elements in Lu Xun’s writing. For example, novelist Ha Jin sees in the work the presence of individual loneliness and despair. Tsi-an Hsia notes Lu Xun’s own close relationship with Chinese history and the language of classical literature, which complicates his interest in modernity. The longevity of Lu Xun’s work surely lies in his ability to write stories that continue to inspire discourse.