Literature and Ideology: The Case of China.

*I.R. Mbise**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ideological underpinnings of literary practice in China. The underlying task is to reveal how literature can prompt to action: how, for instance, it can make a nation "move" or how it can "make crops grow on a stony hill" and how it can even make "our people" become "our mountains".

Literature in post-revolutinary China is essentially different from that of pre-revolutionary China. Peasant oppression, feudal exploitation, the rise of a commercial aristocracy with expropriated wealth to support artistic specialists—all contributed enormously to the creation of literature (art, theatre and music included). China—with its long cultural past and vast geographical reality—has a tremendous cultural variety. For instance, at least 200 styles of drama have been counted in China since the liberation. There is the Central Ensemble of Song and Dance of Peking formed in 1952 consisting of 400 instrumentalists, singers, and dancers. And going through the pages of **China Reconstructs,** performances given to audiences of thousands at one sitting are a common practice.[2]

In ancient China, music (subsumed under the category of literature) was regarded as an image of the universe; it expressed "the accord of Heaven and Earth" and produced "harmony between men and spirits".[3] Its main object was not aesthetic pleasure, but the conveyance of eternal truths. It also had another object: to prepare men to receive these truths. Confucius saw music as "putting man's inner spirit in order" and music was believed to have a moral effect on the individual.[4]

Music has had both political and spiritual implications. Ancient China perceived everything to be a unity; and music and the state reflected the laws of heaven. As in ancient Greece and also in ancient Egypt, order and harmony in the spiritual world meant order and harmony in the material world, and vice versa. This philosophy runs contrary to Western thought which compartmentalizes the differrent aspects of human life and even places them in opposition to one another. Thus we have the classical Western dichotomy of mind and body, spiritual and material. In Western philosophy, literature and music are confined to the spiritual side, whereas politics and the state are confined to the material world.

It is true that in pre-revolutionary China, literature was dominated by aristocratic landlords and princes; indeed by the ideas of the ruling feudal class, which was at the same time the class with political and economic power. Thus literature reflected and reinforced the **status quo**, which included, **inter alia**, Confucian idelogy, unequal economic and social relations between antagonistic classes, the landlords versus the peasants, the subordination of women, superstitious beliefs, and so forth. Literature from the Chinese courts appealed to the wealthy class, "the haves", who had all the leisure to lie around and contemplate. Human life and history were a cyclical process in which the laws of nature were prime determinants.

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Literature, University of Dar es Salaam.

Basically, this was a static world view in which the old feudal order was able to sustain itself for thousands of years.

But **change** was inevitable, for history moves forward; and society with internal contradictions carries seeds of its own destruction. The Marxist world view, however, is not static but dialectical. It regards human history as a progressive continuum in which human forces—the forces of class struggle (and not natural or divine powers)—are the prime movers.

In a violent revolution, the old China had to give way to the New, and literature entered a new era. Can the traditional philosophical ideas in ancient China be related to Marxist ideology in present-day China? And how has the latter integrated literature ideologically into the economic and social life of post—revolutionary China?

To understand the role of literature and the incorporation of some traditional culture into modern socialist culture, it is important to understand the dialectical relationship that exists between literature, politics and the economic superstructure. In his famous Yenan talks, Mao observed:

> Literature and art are subordinate to politics, but in their turn exert a great influence on politics. Revolutionary literature and art are part of the entire revolutionary cause...an indispensable part of the entire revolutionary cause. It we had not t literature and art even in the broadest and most ordinary senses, we could not carry on the revolutionary movement and win victory.[5]

Economic and social structures are the primary articulations of class struggle which is the propelling force of human history. Literature, an integral part of culture, grows out of the underlying social and economic structures and reflects them, turns back on them and exerts a tremendous influence on them. In revolutionary China, literature reflects and reinforces (no longer the ideas of the feudal class but) the dictatorship of the proletariat, the masses.

> All our literature and art are for the masses of the people, and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers, they are created for the workers, peasants and soldiers and are for their use.[6]

Literature becomes a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people. It becomes part of that dialectical process in which antagonistic forces clash and resolve in new social and economic forms.

In post-revolutionary China, literature also becomes a powerful revolutionary weapon for educating the masses. The stage for instance is a classroom: "The basic task of socialist literature and art is to work hard and create heroic models of workers and soldiers".[7] Otherwise, the stage populated by "emperors, princes, generals, ministers, scholars, and beauties"[8] would undermine the revolution. Hence the need for the creation of proletarian heroes who would provide good models for the people and protect the socialist base of Chinese society. For what kind of education would the people receive from plays filled with reactionary character—models? Thus the theatre had to be revolutionised. Plays were written to reflect the revolution, and some old plays were adapted to reflect contemporary, politically progressive situations, depicting proletarian heroes in the process of revolutionary struggle. The past was to serve the present:

> Nor do we refuse to utilise the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people.[9]

Looking back over centuries of Chinese historical development, over the oppressive feudal era, and over the revolutionary struggles that gave birth to present—day socialist China, literature and art had to be socialised and "converted" into a revolutionary weapon at the service of society. And it was an effective ideological weapon at the disposal of the Chinese Revolution:

> ...a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people. It prepares the ground ideologically before the revolution comes and is an important, indeed essential, fighting front in the general revolution[10] (sic.).

Indeed literature and art were instrumental in attaining cultural works of the proper political orientation in winning people's confidence in socialism, in strengthening their unity and in renewing their enthusiasm for the living struggle to win the revolutionary battle and later to establish and maintain a true socialist society.

This therefore leaves us in no doubt that literature has played a very significant role in present-day socialist China. Turning literature into a revolutionary weapon can be a very necessary stage in a nation's historical epoch. Literature may even run the risk of developing into a cultural dogmatism and a narrowing of cultural subject matter that is considered politically acceptable. The language, too, may be propagandistic; this is a season in history. But, as we have already pointed out, history moves forward, and to be confined to a season in the long life of history is to deny history of its dialectical nature, its dynamism. Surely a higher stage must follow when we must gò beyond dogmatism and beyond propaganda. While Mao regarded literature as a **weapon,** Lenin regarded it as a **product** in the process of history. But, at times, even Mao saw the need to strike a balance:

> What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form. **Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically" (emphasis mine).**

Indeed, literature can be political without necessarily the political underminii.g the literary. In the revolution, the two are not antagonistic.

Notes

1. See the September 1976 issue, pp. 40-41.
2. For instance at the Songfest of May 1976, in Peking, there were 18,000 workers, peasants, and soldiers in attendance.
3. "Chinese Music" in **Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians** Vol. II, London; Macmillan, 1954.
4. Here one is reminded of the Tibetan Buddist view that sonic arts are sacremental arts and that, by singing in extraordinary ways, one can attain an extraodinary state of being.
5. Mao Tse-tung, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art", in **The Chinese Cultural Revolution: Selected Documents** ed. K.H. Fan, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1968, p. 16.
6. Chiang-Ching, **On the Revolution of Peking Opera,** Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1968, p. 17.
7. **To Find Men Truly Great and Noble-Hearted We Must Look Here in the Present,** "In Praise of the Modern Revolutionary Peking Opera Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy", Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1971, p. 54.
8. Chiang-Ching, **op. cit.,** p. 2
9. **To Find Men Truly Great and Noble-Hearted We Must Look Here in the Present,** p. 61.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 52

N.B. Some of these quotations by Mao Tse-tung can also be found in **Collected Works of Mao Tse-tung** and in **Selected Readings From the Works of Mao Tse-tung,** Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1971.