

7-1-2001

Perry Link. The uses of literature : life in the socialist Chinese literary system

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Recommended Citation

Kaikkonen, M. (2001). Perry Link. The uses of literature: Life in the socialist Chinese literary system. *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 5(1), 173-175.

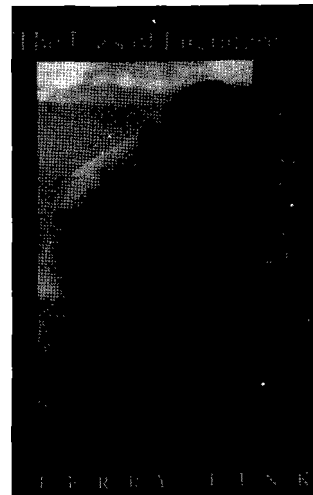
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Book Reviews

The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System. By Perry Link. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000. vi + 387 pp. ISBN 0691001987 (paperback).

Perry Link's latest book presents a new, comprehensive approach to literature in the People's Republic of China. With the concept "socialist Chinese literary system," Link creates a framework within which much more than the earlier "reflection of society," "dissent," and "art" approaches to PRC literature can be accommodated. The socialist Chinese literary system is seen as covering the years 1949 to the mid-1980s, after which it gradually, under the influence of market economic reforms, lost its pure form. Thus this book sets out to describe a system which has ceased to exist and is not likely to reappear. The motivating force is Link's conviction that socialist China's literary activity has not been understood in its entire richness. With a detailed study of the literature and its functions in Chinese society of the late 1970s and early 1980s as a point of departure and as a basis for analogies, Link subtly uncovers and describes the intricate web of rationales at work in the system. The book starts out with a historical sketch of literary phenomena in 1976-1983, and then moves on to illustrate the functioning of literary control, media, market, writers and readers. A final chapter is dedicated to analyzing the various uses of literature among readers and writers which occurred in the system.

This is thus a book of literary history, but a very different book. It does not contain chronologies of Communist Party directives, lists of award-winning works, or catalogues of criticized writers. Instead, it contains examples of all these and countless other literary phenomena, presented and analyzed as organic parts of the system. These presentations abound with facts so subtle that their importance and mutual relations have not always been properly understood. Earlier studies,



although presenting big hunks of similar material, have either not tried or not managed to systematize, which has kept the structures and regularities invisible. This book brings it all together. Maybe it is because Perry Link views the system as history, with a beginning and an end plus a definable in-between, that he is able to describe it and dissect it. This is for the benefit of students of China, no matter whether we view the system as a thing of the past or not. As a reinforcement, Link also illustrates some Chinese cases with parallels from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, a welcome addition to the regular diet of Chinese literary studies.

The chapters are sectioned by subtitles that usefully define important dimensions of the system. The chapter on writers, for example, takes up "Tradition of Responsibility," "The Modern Crisis and the Idea of a 'Path,'" "Establishing National Guidelines," "Effects of the Anti-Rightist Campaign," "Maoist Utopianism in Command," as well as non-chronological sections on writer' groups, their associations, "Livelihood," "Dissent," etc. Interesting features and statistics are presented in the chapter on "Media and Market," which covers distribution of books and periodicals, both official and non-official, as well as film and TV, and includes a section on libraries. The literacy question is discussed, as is the mythic admiration of the novel *Honglouloumeng* [The story of the stone]. The chapter "Readers: The Socially Engaged Level" elaborates how readers take in works on corruption, bureaucratism, and other sensitive topics. "The Uses of Literature" contains some fascinating sections about how the Communist Party tried to manipulate literature to change the people; and the difficulties it met, while readers are shown to have used literature for "learning about other parts of China," "identifying with groups," "expressing the self," and so on.

The most impressive chapter is "The Mechanics of Literary Control." Now that I know it has been written, I can sleep better at night. Considering the difficulty for young people today to grasp the whys and wherefores of the Maoist period, one is relieved to have at least one important aspect of it, the complicated mechanisms of cultural repression, meticulously interpreted and analyzed on the basis of personal experiences and first-hand sources, before it all disappears into the oblivion

of history. From now on, we will have a kind of standard against which the changes in repressive measures in post-socialist China can better be judged.

The socialist Chinese literary system in all its complexity is described in this book with a great wealth of rare information. Concrete facts, public claims, and literary expression are consistently supported or contrasted with evidence from attitudes, painstakingly gleaned from a large number of surveys, from audience reactions, readers' letters, and interviews. This gives special weight to the arguments. Convincingly, Chinese literature is given new dimensions, and so is its study.

All through this very readable book, which is also relievingly free of theoretical jargon, we are served crucially analytic explanations and interpretations of the conditions discussed. Even though it is apparent that the wealth of detail allows analysis to reach a deeper level than usual, it is also clear that this amount of aha-reactions can only be caused by someone with a profound knowledge of Chinese conditions and a very keen eye for observing the tiniest blind spots in the West as well as in the East. These interpretations deepen our understanding of life, not just cultural life, in the Maoist period, and I believe they will be an inspiration for many a student of China.

This book is written about the literary system, not about individual works of literature; it is organized accordingly, and most works are dealt with in a number of places. Still, from the point of view of individual Chinese literary works, this study manages to explain more about them than others do. Works are here placed in a multidimensional perspective and surrounded with various nuances of empirical information, each complementing the other. This actualizes the question: how adequate are the traditional tools of Western scholarly literary inquiry for the study of socialist Chinese literature? On the other hand, this book supplies us with plenty of tools for the study of Chinese literature; if we indeed lack these tools in the West, what is there in our own literary system that we do not know?

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