

Realism as Cultural and Historical Transformation in Post-May Fourth China: Some Preliminary Analyses

Chingkiu Stephen Chan

Realism certainly never did exist in a vacuum; but to say that its basic literary elements can be extracted from the conditions of its social practice is clearly not enough for us. My interest in this study lies not in the application of a set of "realesmes" to a specific cultural and historical scene, but in an attempt to outline the ethical, cultural, and political conditions that have made possible the emergence and development of a realist discourse in China since the May Fourth Movement of 1919. For this particular purpose, two determinant factors may be suggested in relation to these historical conditions of possibility.

Collapse of the Confucian Regime

The Chinese Revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen had meant more than the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty. Replacing the old empire by a new republic, it paved the way for a much more totalistic anti-traditional revolution which the subsequent May Fourth Movement is now famous for. But if the political revolution of 1911 is a sign of the collapse of an entire *ancien régime*, then more symptomatic of the disintegration of a corresponding cultural hegemony would be the whole range of literary, intellectual, and social movements set off, on May 4, 1919, by the young and furious Chinese students who raised their voice against the Paris Peace agreement to cede to Japan the entire Shantung peninsula of China.¹ Ever since those critical moments of crisis and unrest, the Chinese people felt an urgent need to strengthen their "will to power" in face of the dual oppositional

forces represented externally by the strong and aggressive foreign powers, and internally by an impotent and corrupt government still in the hands of a few competing warlords. For the first time in modern Chinese history, history itself was rendered a mass experience. (Years later, the violent bloodshed resulting from the demonstration by students and workers against the foreign settlements in Shanghai on May 30, 1925, in particular, had significantly transformed the mounting anti-government and anti-imperialist sentiment into a nation-wide protest against "international justice" itself). Everywhere the call for a strong China was heard. For many, this patriotic "call for arms" (*na-han* 吶喊) was overtly emotional; but for some, the realists included, its political overtone echoed as well the ethical voice of a new generation of self-conscious intellectuals. In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács points out that through this realization of mass experience history becomes a totalizing process: "the national element is linked on the one hand with problems of social transformation; and on the other, more and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history" (25). Now what Lukács wants to suggest here about the French Revolution could have also been applied to the Chinese Revolution, at least with regard to the reading public of the May Fourth generation. Not uncommonly, for those readers of the "new literature," the everyday crises which they lived as part of history were mediated by the intervening practice of a literary discourse — the alternative practice of realism that helped unleash the call for change in the dominant cultural hegemony of the time.

In the sense that Antonio Gramsci first gave it, hegemony must always be taken to refer to a real process, a lived reality. On this basis, Raymond Williams would then go on to argue that within the reach of hegemony no cultural practice could ever exist singularly as an absolute form of dominance. Instead, any such practice should be understood as being at all times part-dominant, part-alternative, because "it has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified; [and] it is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own."² Now in the case of the May Fourth culture, what had driven the realist writers into their pursuit of a new form of literary practice was no doubt a phenomenon of history very specific to the functioning of the Confucian hegemony and its structure of dominance in the years after 1919. For as the Republic grew weaker during a period of internal disintegration and external exploitation, the widespread chaos left over from the collapse of

the old regime began to multiply and disseminate the initial discontent among the frustrated intelligentsia. A pervasive discourse of despair and desire began to precipitate in the newly popularized vernacular language and the newly imported literary form, thus presenting itself as a symptom of the greatest cultural and historical crisis ever to plague the new nation. (It is somewhat ironical, moreover, to note that a Reign of Terror could not be found at that particular time in China because the central government was not even powerful enough to rule with an efficient iron hand. Two decades after the political overthrow of the feudal regime, the republican system was still a long way from uniting the new nation under its dominant ideology, since it failed to maintain control over what Althusser might have recognized as the Ideological State Apparatuses. In France, more than a century ago, neither Robespierre nor Danton had resorted exclusively to the Repressive State Apparatuses; the French knew well that to rule was in part to accumulate power through a combined deployment of both the ideological and repressive apparatus, of what Gramsci refers to respectively as the civil and political society, a task so extravagantly demonstrated by Napoleon himself).³

The Chinese state, entering a new age of modernization, could not effectively maintain a viable balance between its civil and political societies in the post-revolutionary days of the twenties; for a time, the ideology of the dominant class did not become the dominant ideology. One may even argue that, insofar as the intellectual circles were concerned, the emergent hegemonic discourses in the May Fourth era — a discourse that celebrated the despair of love and revolution, espoused the desire of women and labor — would have been marginalized as part of a counter-culture only a decade ago. Now it became actually difficult for anyone to categorize the culture of May Fourth simply as the “dominant hegemony,” or to continue calling it the “counter-hegemony” despite its tremendous success in displacing the traditional cultural and ethical order, especially among young intellectuals nationwide. For ever since the beginning of the revolution, the ideological state apparatuses of the Confucian systematics had been drastically uprooted, granted that actual conditions within the political body remained rather chaotic. As a progressive force of history, the May Fourth Movement had produced in the cultural reality of China a genuinely radical discourse — written in boldface by the two giant hands of “Mr. Te” (Democracy) and “Mr. Sai” (Science) — a discourse not endorsed by the repressive organs of the state, but perpetuated by the ideological “weapons” of committed

writers fighting for the dominance of their "new" cultural practice. It is within the total process of this cultural and historical transformation in China that the significance of the realist movement must be studied.

Thus, understood as a revolutionary agency activating the hegemonic formation of a counter-culture, an alternative discourse, the realist practice initiated by the May Fourth iconoclasts became the first historical instant for the Chinese readers when crises were allowed to multiply, disorder to disseminate, and changes to precipitate in the literary text. For as the political society since the revolution appeared powerless to stabilize the structure of the new republican state and generate a feeling of unity and security among its people, intellectuals all over the country began to believe strongly that it was now their moral duty to culture a sense of strength and identity in their own ways. Their attempts might not all be successful, and their all-too-voluntary acceptance of divergent trends of western ideas might not always be critical and responsible, but it is nonetheless true that, with the advent of such a pervasive "cultural revolution,"⁴ the dangerous abyss blown open by the collapse of the old regime could now allow the eruption of new ethical and aesthetic possibilities. To study the effects of this eruption through the despair and desire implicated in a quasi-dominant, quasi-alternative discourse is, in part, to study the strategy and ideology of realism during the post-May Fourth era.

It has recently been suggested by Sun Lung-chi that the Chinese culture is a "hyper-static" system with a collective structure of consciousness that fosters stability and represses variance in its basic formations.⁵ In his fascinating study entitled *The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture*, Sun draws our attention to the fact that historical changes (*tung* 動) in China are almost always interpreted as unwanted instances of disorder (*luan* 亂); hence, in Chinese, the expression *tung-luan* 動亂 (turmoil, upheaval) is often used when referring to incidents of sociopolitical unrest. Sun's subsequent thesis is to argue, convincingly, that with every instance of chaos (*tung-luan*) that punctuated the course of Chinese history, fewer and fewer differences and variations would be accommodated in the process of cultural formation, thus resulting in the reification of structure which Sun characterizes as "hyper-static." For us, however, there would seem to be one significant exception (which Sun has recognized but not discussed) to this historical indulgence in a harmonious and integrative (*he-he* 和合) order of culture: May Fourth. By building up the momentum for a radical sociocultural revolution, the Movement had indeed provided for the first time in modern

Chinese history an open field of discourse upon which the intellectuals would attempt rigorously to subvert almost all facets of the existing hegemony. For many, *despair* became the quintessential reason for being, an irrational rationality, so to speak. Love and revolution, their marriage and their divorce, formed a net of frustration and discontent through which the self in crisis was captured as the subject of solitude and despair. Marginal topics like sexuality, women and labor were brought into the field of representation. For the realists, this sudden eruption of alternative realities not only accounted for their irresistible obsession with the repressed as objects of representation, but it also contributed to the precipitation of the crisis of history in a crisis of discourse. Despair became the ultimate condition of representation, as it were; the indulgence in the possibilities of hopelessness as an agency of revolution became itself a critical act of subversion, a concrete practice of discourse that gave voice to a whole culture of anxiety called the May Fourth.

Among the writers, there was then an instantaneous outburst of a desire to be Real — a desire to be able to represent a reality through which, they imagined, the future of culture and history could be envisioned. As the intense moment of crisis perpetuated by the May Fourth Movement was widely recognized among the intellectuals as an unusual opportunity for them to attain “a glimpse of the absolute,” writers of divergent temperaments began to look to the western tradition in search of new methods with which they expected to facilitate the representation of that “total vision.” Regardless of what the realists’ strategies turned out to be, both the totality of that “vision” and the representation of the “method” itself could best be captured, not in the order and unity of their literary program, but through the contradictions in their very practice of discourse. Such an approach to the phenomenon of realism would also allow us to understand the Chinese writers’ general lack of concern in the theoretical inconsistency and practical unevenness of their project. For them, realism could have little appeal as a period concept, or as an embodiment of the aesthetic problems of representation for that matter. Even to Mao Tun, their chief spokesman during the May Fourth era, realism as an ideological movement among the nineteenth century European intellectuals was relatively insignificant in comparison with its strategic usefulness for the Chinese writers in developing an alternative discourse from within the cultural politics of their own time.

Order, in short, was not something of Mao Tun’s immediate “realistic” concern. Although he and many other realists had to undertake their task in

face of fierce opposition from the "romantics," both "schools" of writers showed a deep contempt of the "hyper-static" system built upon traditional values of the Confucian hegemony.⁶ Just as the realists held a strong faith in the writer's mission to save China, the romantics considered it equally rightful to demand freedom from any form of collectivization through their devout worship in the instinctive self and artistic beauty. Hence, amid the heated debate between a realism and a romanticism, plurality began to slip in — silently — not as part of any overbearing doctrine, but as the unexpectedly reinforcing after-effects to the discursive acts of subversion initiated by the May Fourth iconoclasts. It is these somewhat unexpected effects of an alternative discourse of culture that must eventually be subjected to the therapy of a symptomatic reading, for, as Raymond Williams puts it:

A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized (*Culture & Society* 334).

Dilemma of the New Intellectuals

然而我不願彷徨于明暗之間，我不如在黑暗裏沉沒。

But since I do not want to wander between light and shade,
I would rather sink into darkness.

— Lu Hsun
"The Shadow's Leave-Taking"
Wild Grass
1924

The notion of iconoclastic totalism is borrowed from Lin Yü-sheng. In *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, Lin argues that the radical nature of the May Fourth Movement was rooted in a "cultural-intellectualistic" mode of thinking among the iconoclasts that "stressed the necessary priority of intellectual and cultural change over political, social, and economic changes" (26). Such a view, according to Lin, was ultimately accountable for the totalistic rejection of the Confucian culture as "an organismic whole whose nature was infected by the disease of traditional Chinese mind" (29). It is believed that a "discursive law" underlying the sociocultural formations in May Fourth China has virtually been discovered by Lin.⁷ Yet granted that the modern intelligentsia had undergone

fundamental changes effected by western influences, a traditional mode of thinking is still discernable at the source of the wholesale disintegration of the Confucian hegemony itself. It is now necessary to identify the intellectual predispositions typical of the iconoclast's belief that ideological changes provided the backbone to all other social transformations.⁸

"How does the intelligentsia become radicalized?" asks Lukács.⁹ In the Chinese context, it has already been suggested by Chow Tse-tung that the May Fourth Movement was in essence an intellectual revolution caused by a sudden rise in political interest among the new intelligentsia. Much earlier, on the eve of the May Fourth incident, Chén Tu-hsiu had likewise argued that "the purely political revolution is incapable of changing our society."¹⁰ As a revolutionary leader, a co-founder of the pioneering intellectual magazine *New Youth*, and possibly the first advocate of realism in China, Ch'en was desperate in attributing the failure of the various revolutions since 1911 to the general negligence of the ethico-political function of cultural practices. He contended that the most urgent and basic revolution for China must involve a change of "fundamental ideas," which he defined in terms of a new conception of ethics without whose incitement people would remain "in a state of confusion." Yet, paradoxically, as Lin has observed, Ch'en's anxiety about the weakness of China and his hope of effecting changes through and among the young intellectuals were evidently rooted in the traditional Confucian ethic which stressed the close link between the values of "self-cultivation" (*hsiu-shen* 修身) and "state-administration" (*chih-kuo* 治國).¹¹

The crux of the paradox, I am saying, may be located in the very category of the intellectuals (*shih* 士).¹² There is little doubt that, in traditional China, the "Yellow Emperor" was considered not only the sovereign head of the state (*kuo* 國) but also the symbolic authority on moral values. As Son of Heaven he was even considered Father of the nation, or the nation-(as)-family (*kuo-chia* 國家). But in everyday practice, it was rather the ideal *shih* (or *chün-tzu* 君子 the Confucian "gentleman") who championed the hegemony of the ethical discourse. And according to the Confucian teaching, even after the successful cultivation of a moral self and the subsequent establishment of a harmonious family-home (*chia* 家), the career of any conscientious Chinese intellectual was only half-way completed. For the ultimate goal of the *shih* was, ideally, to apply all his human virtues (*jen* 仁) first to the righteous management of the state, and eventually to the peaceful regulation of the entire universe.¹³ Such an

intellectual, as Löwy remarks in a different context, tends to live in a universe governed entirely by "qualitative values" (22). In his own way, Sun Lung-chi characterizes the system that nourishes such values as a culture of *hsin* 心 (the heart-mind) in which the highest ideal of "ordering the universe" (*p'ing t'ien-hsia* 平天下) could only be attained in a state of Great Harmony (*ta-t'ung* 大同) or Great Peace (*t'ai-p'ing* 太平) (126-7). Hence, whereas the political system (*cheng-t'ung* 政統) in China was headed indisputably by the Son of Heaven, the ethical order (*tao-t'ung* 道統) had always remained within the control of the category of *shih* intellectuals as a whole. But it is when the modern *shih* had to fight for their cause amid the collapse of established systems of values (within which they had been educated) that the dividing line between private conscience and public responsibilities became most difficult to draw. Given the instability of both the ethical and the political orders, intellectuals of the republican era experienced great frustration in trying to seek any compromise between the cultivation of self and the administration of state. This dilemma, materialized during the historic moment of May Fourth, became the cause for much anguish, anxiety, and disillusionment.

So far we have been discussing how some cultural historians argue for the powerful influence of a hyperstatic tradition on the formation of the modern Chinese intellectuals. We have also attended to the presence of a strong cultural and historical tie between the May Fourth iconoclasts' insistence on the broader political necessity of their specific cultural practices on the one hand, and the traditional *shih*'s embrace of an entire ethical order within their individual pursuits of political ideals on the other. Now, we must stop to look for the critical differences amid these basic similarities. Given the fact that its cultural roots still stretched deep into the soil of the Confucian *shih* tradition, we must ask ourselves how the May Fourth culturo-intellectual revolution was to become a substantial break from that hyper-static continuum. How, we must ask, could the May Fourth iconoclasts effectively turn their back on the Confucian hegemony while still somehow aspiring (albeit unconsciously) to be a modern *shih* fighter for their new nation? How, in other words, were the modern Chinese intellectuals *radicalized*?

To answer that question, we cannot for a moment forget that, for a typical Confucian *shih* to govern was to govern properly — that is, in line with the established order of ethics. Politics (*cheng* 政) called for rectification (*cheng* 正) and rectification was none other than maintaining the order

of the system itself. To politicize, in this traditional sense, was to govern within the dominant hegemony, and to revert chaos, whenever it occurred, to order. In terms of our earlier discussion on *tung-luan*, we may now say that, to contain a culture within the power network of its hegemony was to curtail *changes* and reduce *disorder* in society to their minimum.

On the other hand, however, it is important to remember that one of the more urgent tasks for the committed intellectuals in post-May Fourth China was to disrupt the hyper-static order of the existing system. Leo Lee, therefore, has reason to celebrate the Wertherian, Promethean, and Byronic "romantic tempers" of the May Fourth writers,¹⁴ despite the fact that (as was well acknowledged even among the "romantic generation" of modern Chinese writers) a rebellious romanticism had already been superseded in the West by an equally offensive realism since the mid-nineteenth century. Having made this point, we would still agree with Lee's argument that the Literary Revolution in twentieth-century China had followed the Romantic Movement in nineteenth-century Europe in foregrounding "the primacy of subjective human sentiments and energies." Indeed, it has been customary to distinguish the "romantics" from the "realists" in modern China on the basis of the expressed opposition between the "art for art's sake" doctrine held by the Creation Society (Ch'uang-tso she 創造社, 1921-1929) and the "art for life's sake" tenet maintained by the Association for Literary Studies (Wen-hsüeh yen-chiu hui 文學研究會, 1921-1930). (It is remarkable to see how much the names of these contending "schools," respectively considered "romantic" and "realist," aptly bespeak the two different tendencies toward the representation of reality; though, to a significant degree, the discrepancies between the one's faith in "creating" the real through art and the other's insistence on "studying" the real through art seem little more than illusory). Now as revealing as it is for one to suggest that the romantic writers in China might have best expressed the "Byronic spirit of revolution," it seems only partially true to say, as Lee does, that despite their "theoretical espousal" of a stern doctrine, the realists were actually "motivated by an emotional ethos more akin to romanticism" (277). For, as we have discussed earlier, not only did "theory" in general tend somehow to overwhelm the Chinese realists to the degree of sheer confusion, but their private ethos were often emphatically represented by the tension between various forms of subjective and objective crises of the time. It is through the analyses of such romantic motifs as love and revolution that the dynamics of this tension can be properly

understood.

To call the Chinese realism "romantic" is therefore not wrong; indeed, it is suprisingly accurate if by "romantic" we mean not only emotional energy but aesthetic and ethical profundity as well. By the latter I mean to suggest (it would now be clear) the specific cultural predispositions among the May Fourth intellectuals to effect social revolution through discursive practice. And as the iconoclastic cultural productions were carried out in line with the traditional "ideologeme" which identified any self-strengthening movement of a nation-family with the self-cultivating activity of the Confucian ethos (*jen*), the alternative discourse of realism became an open field for the testing of a new ethical order.¹⁵ By subverting, at a deep structural level, the hyper-static sociocultural hegemony of the *ancien régime*, the modern intellectual radicalized themselves via the formation of a new ethic spelled out, in the realist discourse, through the mediation of such basic conditions of humanity as despair and desire.

But despite their attempt to articulate all these problems in their text, the "method" of realism/naturalism which the realists conscientiously employed and persistently defended was — in the last analysis — no more a simple artistic style than the prevailing interest in science and the scientific spirit was a mere craze among the May Fourth intellectuals for rudimentary technological skills. The interesting thing is that, sensible as it seemed, when tested against their own textual practice the theory often turned out to be extremely vulnerable to being engulfed by the overwhelming currents of the existing hegemony, from which even the most committed writers would find themselves difficult to escape. It is through this ideological containment of consciousness within the power network of dominant social relations that the desire for the Real — the desire for Capital, Labor, Love, Revolution, and other Ideals in life — would ultimately take its form. And to reach for the unconscious of this form, this Reality, one's strategy must necessarily involve making detours to areas of concern that lie beyond *all* the formal delimitations of a culture. But what exactly did such a strategy involve: a subtle paradox of representation, or as Mao Tun would rather have it, a plain rhetoric of politics?

Let me frankly confess: my commitment to literature was not as loyal and unshakable as it seemed

— "From Kuling to Tokyo"
1928

The Politics of Culture

History is *not* a text, not a narrative . . . but . . . as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and . . . our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.

— Fredric Jameson
The Political Unconscious

History is a cultural process, a complex of events that drive home to us (as subjective experiences) through the intricate movement of cultural text, of its various forms of symbolic message. Accordingly, the movement of realism in early modern China is understood to be the historical agency that has given rise to the production of a new discourse. It is my contention that, among the May Fourth intellectuals, the kernel of a new ethic of discourse is to be found in their insistence upon *both* the political dynamic of cultural practices and the cultural specificity of political endeavors.

Taken as a cultural action, the May Fourth Movement has been characterized by Leo Lee as “a Western craze” that “represent[s] a zestful effort to squeeze the entire nineteenth century into one decade and to embrace the entire romantic legacy in one volcanic outburst of youthful emotion and energy” (279). But even if we welcome the notion of a “romantic realism,”¹⁶ as a social category the May Fourth intelligentsia still appeared more closely related to a predominantly realistic tendency which fostered, among others, a dual principle of extrospection/introspection in the course of its cultural praxis. As Jerome Chen has once observed, the emerging Chinese nationalism in the early May Fourth period was introspective from a social Darwinian point of view, “looking inward for an explanation of its weakness and unfitness and for a way towards strength” (227-8). But when the revolution became less exclusively cultural-intellectualistic, the nationalism that tended to turn inward for strength gave way to a more extrospective strategy of anti-imperialism. In the course of revolution, such a transition was marked by the more active participation by urban workers and the non-intellectual petite bourgeoisie. Likewise, in the context of cultural praxis, it may be possible for us to see a tentative distinction between the romantic and the realistic tendencies based upon the difference between an introspective mode which energizes the ethos

of instinctive conscience and artistic freedom, and an extrospective one that activates a corresponding mission to represent an objective reality re-visioned not only as the image of a real world, but also as the illumination of an absolute ideal. The realistic principle is extrospective not by virtue of its subject matter (taking the "ordinary" or the "proletarian" life as object of representation), but by virtue of a discursive mode of formation (representing external life in such a way as to reflect and refract the mimetic image in the glimpse of an inner vision). It does not, therefore, belong to a "pure" aesthetics; its real function must be radically compromised within the dynamic of a politics of culture.

It is already apparent that such an extrospective principle may also, paradoxically, be introspective — in two senses. Firstly, in agreement with Jerome Chen's initial point, Chinese realism is introspective in its "naturalistic" insistence on discovering the cause of a weak China through an anatomy of the social body. The temperament here is basically tied to the more general "scientific" tendency of the age. "Science to save China" (*k'e-hsiieh chiu-kuo* 科學救國) was not just a banner-slogan for the May Fourth iconoclasts; it affected the underlying discursive principles in their cultural and intellectual activities. We have seen how closely this burden of "mission" might be related to the traditional *shih* theme on "ordering the universe." But the contribution of western influences should by no means be underestimated. Zola's naturalism, itself partially a product of Darwinian evolutionism, was raised in China in the joint custody of Mr. Te and Mr. Sai. Though Democracy and Science have been found unable to solve all the problems the new nation had to face, they are deemed functional in "modernizing" — displacing and re-orienting — the structure of consciousness shared among the intelligentsia. The will, that is to say, to generate a historical power — introspectively, through cultural transformation — this will has set sail to the Chinese realist's search for a way toward spiritual integrity and material strength.

In this way we may therefore identify the realist aesthetic strategy as political; it has predicated, however, not a politics of class struggle, as is often suggested, but a politics of cultural ethic. This radicalization of a new ethico-aesthetic principle brings us directly to the second aspect in which Chinese realism is considered introspective. Speaking of the young Lukács, Löwy has called our attention to "a tragic conflict between the desire for self-realization and the conditions of the reified objective reality" (116). Though not convinced that an insurmountable gap existed between the

subjective will and the objective possibility, the Chinese did experience and even exploit, albeit unconsciously, the effects of that "tragic" conflict. The realists, in particular, had tried hard through their revision of the diseased social body to return to a bracketed subjective consciousness the *immateriality* of an objective "life." In their view, the objectified state of life in China was "immaterial" both because of its lack of substance or authenticity, and quite to the contrary, because of its embodiment in cultural formations of the "spiritual essence" of their historical will-to-power. This paradox, in turn, is the one to be expressed by the dialectical poles of extrospection and introspection within the realistic principle. The transition now in question is no longer an active and collective political participation, but, using Löwy's word in his characterization of young Lukács' final passage to the road of revolution, a "growing-over" (*transcroissance*) of aesthetics into politics (169).

To sum up, part of the problematic which involves the Chinese realists, as a sub-category of the May Fourth intelligentsia, can be implied by the following dilemma. In their persistent demand for change in an hyper-static society with a badly uprooted foundation, and struggling amid a web of culturally transformative acts over a discursive "field of possibilities," the Chinese realists were: (1) conscious both of the need to generate a new Life for continual revolution through concrete practice of an alternative discourse, and of the urgency to redefine and reorganize a new chain of social relations (such as family sexual and labor relations) through textual production of those differences in relations. At the same time, however, the realists were also (2) constantly frustrated and disillusioned by the fact that their new aesthetic and ethical principles could only help them to go so far in their totalistic rejection of tradition and their discursive reproduction of a Life that never existed before except in the glimpse of their imagination. Taken together, these two factors would explain the radical nature of the entire realist project in the May Fourth era, for they have added to the cultural practice of realism a vigorous sense of *risk* — the risk, perhaps, of another totalistic collapse of ethic, of another cultural abyss as detrimental as the previous one.

Materialized in the realist form of language, the crisis of consciousness implied in the realist text brings home to the subject this risk — this solitude and inauthenticity of life experienced by most of the characters portrayed. Often, May Fourth intellectuals would find themselves stretched in the tension between a deep sense of social, cultural and political alienation,

and a corresponding passion to overcome that very alienation in their own practice of discourse. The result was, simultaneously, the objectification of internal ideological crisis and the internalization of objective social crisis. Out of this process which I call the "homecoming of despair," the individual emerges as subject, the subject of discourse, struggling endlessly to live with the reality of historical crisis amid the vanity of time, language, and consciousness itself.

For time informs language and consciousness; and together they remain the crucial mediations to any form of human understanding of reality. Emerging from the philosophical tradition of Kant and Hegel, Lukács has been able to construct his aesthetic model of realism on the basis of a theory of consciousness that necessitates the truthful representation of time if any specific order of reality is to be maintained (*The Theory of the Novel* 125). Time, therefore, becomes not only the basic formal principle for producing hope and despair; but its organization in narrative also conditions the order of meaning and the dynamic interrelationship between language and subjectivity. And consciousness, in effect, finds itself "facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*," as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it in *The Dialogic Imagination* (295). That which appears to be lacking in most readings of the realist discourse of the May Fourth era is therefore a diacritical conception of subjectivity — one which posits *through language* an ethical and aesthetic subject, and "entails the existence of a gap between self and other, self and world, and the self and its deeds" (Bernstein 52). For it is only in language that subjectivity becomes at all visible as part of the realistic representation of history; it is only in form that the objective reality can ultimately be represented in the private cell, the privatized freedom, of subjectivity.

My overall purpose, in short, is to mark the traces of this persistent search among the realists for both an objectifiable representation of consciousness and an internal realization of historical crisis. The trajectory of their despair and desire, I suggest, is identifiable in their discourse as the ethical and aesthetic formations and transformations of otherness in the self, of the instinctual in the intellectual, of love and passion in revolution and rationality. If indeed history began as a continuing process of alienation, contradiction, and the separation of self from other, then, to summon up the moments of this history *for* a subjectivity *as* the crisis of subjectivity is not only the primary concern for any form of historical representation, it should well be the central task in all variants of cultural criticism.

Notes

1. By "hegemonic order" or "cultural hegemony" I am referring to Antonio Gramsci's notion of social hegemony expressed in his *Prison Notebooks*. According to Gramsci, the functions of hegemony consist in (i) the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; and (ii) the apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline of those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively (12).
2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 113. From Gramsci's concept of hegemony (see note 1 above), Williams develops a new view of culture: "Culture work and activity are not now, in any ordinary sense, a superstructure: not only because of the depth and thoroughness at which any cultural hegemony is lived, but because cultural tradition and practice are seen as much more than superstructural expressions — reflections, mediations, or typifications — of a formed social and economic structure. On the contrary, they are among the basic processes of the formation itself and, further, related to a much wider area of reality than the abstractions of 'social' and 'economic' experience. . . . Yet they can still be seen as elements of a hegemony: an inclusive social and cultural formation which indeed to be effective has to extend to and include, indeed to form and be formed from, this whole area of lived experience" (111). For a recent integration of Williams' concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony into the semiotic study of socio-cultural discourse, see Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*.
3. What Althusser calls "ideological state apparatuses" include institutions such as religion, education, family, the legal and political systems, the cultural and communication organs of society; they are to be distinguished from the "repressive State apparatuses" like the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Court, the Prisons, etc. ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 142-3). Althusser admits the connection of these concepts to Gramsci's notion of "civil" and "political" societies. The former, according to Gramsci, is "the ensemble of organism commonly called 'private,'" and is governed by the hegemonic function of spontaneous public consent; the latter, on the other hand, is commonly referred to as "the State," and exercises direct domination on society through the "legal" enforcement of state coercive powers (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 12).
4. The notion of "cultural revolution" is Fredric Jameson's (*The Political Unconscious* 95-6). As a specific object of historico-ideological study, it is here recognized as "that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life." Thus conceived, "Western Enlightenment may be grasped as part of a properly bourgeois cultural revolution, in which the values and the discourses, the habits and the daily space, of the *ancien régime* were systematically dismantled so that in their place could be set the new conceptualities, habits and life forms, and value systems of a capitalist market society" (96).
5. Sun Lung-chi, *Chung-kuo wen-hua te "shen-tseng chieh-kou"* [The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture] 9, 359. It seems clear to me that by "structure" Sun is referring not to "world view," but to the cultural predispositions of a people as well as the collective form of social and moral behavioral "rules" upon which the stability of that order is based.
6. In China of the 1920's, the "romantic school" was a fashionable label generally

attached to those writers affiliated with the Creation Society (1921-29), a literary group first organized by Chinese students in Japan, including Kuo Mo-jo, Yü Ta-fu and Cheng Fang-wu. After they had returned to China, these young advocates of western romanticism and aestheticism found their views of literature directly at odds with the "realist school" of writers led by Mao Tun and other members of the Association for Literary Studies (1921-30). The debate between these two camps marked the beginning of the long history of modern Chinese literary criticism since the May Fourth Movement broke out in 1919.

7. David Der-wei Wang, "Verisimilitude in Realist Narrative: Mao Tun and Lao She's Early Novels," *diss.*, U of Wisconsin-Madison, 1982, 34.
8. It might be said that the Chinese intellectuals, like Gramsci, "held fast to a goal of social transformation which involved nothing less than recomposition of society as a culturally integrated totality" (Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution* 226). But historical changes are much more than a matter of will; hence Gramsci: "Every 'essential' social group which emerges into history . . . has found categories of intellectuals already in existence and which seemed indeed to represent an historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social forms. One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectual, but this assimilation and conquest [by the new intellectuals] is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals" (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 10).
9. Lukács (1969) as cited by Michael Löwy, *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires: L'évolution politique de Lukács, 1908-1929* 20. In this study on the political evolution of young Lukács, Löwy attempts to answer this question in terms of a sociological analysis by which "the ethico-cultural nature specific to the intellectuals" is contextualized in the sociopolitical atmosphere of Hungary during the 1910's. Defining the intellectuals by their specific relation to the non-economic instances of the social structure, Löwy prefers to recognize them as a "social category" rather than a "class": "That is to say, the intellectuals are a social category defined by its ideological role: they are the *direct producers* of the sphere of ideology, the *creators of cultural-ideological products*" (17). It is the ideological predisposition of the May Fourth intellectual as a social category which we must address here in this study.
10. Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement* 227. Chow also believes that May Fourth was "an intellectual revolution in the broad sense," because "it was based on the assumption that intellectual changes were a prerequisite for such a task of modernization, because it precipitated a mainly intellectual awakening and transformation, and because it was led by intellectuals" (359). Ch'en Tu-hsiu's line is also cited in Chow 275. For a full study of Ch'en's view on culture and politics, see Lee Feigon, *Chen Duxiu*, esp. ch. 4: "The Politics of Culture."
11. Lin 64-5. Chow has likewise noted that young intellectuals of the May Fourth generation "took for granted their own exceptionally significant position in public affairs and mission to save China" (94).
12. Intellectuals in ancient China were variously referred to as *wen-jen* 文人 (the literator), *tu-shu jen* 讀書人 (the scholar) and *shih* (the "gentleman," the scholar-official). The categorical status of the various types could hardly be more ambivalent, especially when the Confucian system of imperial examination was

- still in place before its abolishment in 1905. Within the category of *shih*, for example, to draw the further distinction between *shih-jen* 士人 (the plain "gentleman," usually without official titles) and *shih ta-fu* 士大夫 (the ennobled scholar-official) was not only difficult but embarrassing.
13. Among the Chinese public, in higher as in lower classes, the category of *shih* was consistently idealized as the perfect embodiment of *jen* (often translated as "benevolence" or "humanity"), the highest virtue to which the Confucian *shih* should aspire. To become the perfect "gentleman" (*jen-che* 仁者, the man of *jen*), the *shih* should strive not only to improve the ethical integrity of the self, but also to promote the political well-being of the state.
 14. Leo Ou-fan Lee: "It can be concluded, therefore, that in the romantic framework the shift from Literary Revolution to Revolutionary Literature is epitomized by the dynamizing view of Byron — a progression from sentiment to force, from love to revolution, from Werther to Prometheus" (292).
 15. Jameson describes Bakhtin's semiotic "ideologemes" as the minimal "units" around which the larger "class discourse" clusters: "The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea — a conceptual or belief system, an absolute value, an opinion or prejudice — or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the 'collective characters' which are the classes in opposition" (*The Political Unconscious* 87). In our context, it is useful to repeat Löwy's earlier point and speak of the modern Chinese intellectual as a "social category" rather than a "class."
 16. See Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, in which the author believes that "romantic writers" like Dostoevsky are truly realists "in the higher sense." The purpose and effect of their version of realism is to "*devenir romanesque*." "The mythologies constructed by the romantic realists (who are the mythopets of the novel) thus unite what is most personal in their art with what is most objective" (74).

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