

# CHINA'S MEN OF LETTERS

Priestley, K. E., and Shou-jung Ch'ên. China's Men of Letters, Yesterday and Today. Hong Kong: Dragonfly Books, 1962. Print.

More works by K.E. Priestley;

<https://www.google.co.uk/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=inauthor:%22K.+E.+Priestley%22>

[https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C5&q=inauthor%3A%22K.+E.+Priestley%22&btnG=](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=inauthor%3A%22K.+E.+Priestley%22&btnG=)

Difficult to find information on him.

Hu Shih's work can be found in the book.

## At a Glance

- Covers China's literary history from 1917 to (at the time) the present day of 1962.
- Chinese names are written in Wades-Giles, rather than Hanyu Pinyin. Hanyu Pinyin was standardised in 1958. I use Pinyin where possible.
- This book, being as old as it is, could have a touch of anti-communist bias in it. I am treading the political points mentioned in the book carefully by fact checking where necessary. Obviously, like all sources, use your noggin.
- It also has a big fat "US Information Service" label dated 1967 on it so like, lol?
- Lots of information on Classical Chinese and its history in literary usage, including some aspects of its grammar.
- Denotes periods in historical Chinese literature.
- Gives numerous details on Hu Shi's critiques of Classical Chinese literature prior to his Literary Revolution. A brilliant example of descriptivism in action that should be cited whenever possible.
  - Both New Youth entries are noted and cited.
- Commentary is given on the Hundred Flowers Campaign as it had just happened.
- Gives a definition on Mao's Chinese Socialist Realism.
- Discusses Life of Wu Xun, a banned movie.
- Goes over literary themes.

## The Past is Prelude

By K. E. Priestley

- **Chinese is ~2,500 years old, one of the oldest languages still extant.**
  - Modern etymology proves this is false.
- Its literature has borne four distinct categories;
  - Confucius's thirteen publications (551-479 B.C.)
  - Historical writings (Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145 B.C.)
  - Philosophical works

- Collectivised works of various writers.
- Priestley, generally, comments on various trends that Communist China brought upon Chinese literature, among other things.

## The Literary Revolution and its Aftermath

### By Lin Yutang

This is a legitimately interesting read that could be utilised in some work.

- Classical Chinese (Old Chinese Gǔwén 古文, lit. “Ancient Language”; 文言文 Liturgical Classical Chinese; See “Zhongwen 中文,” aka Chinese language, lit. “Middle Language” for modern) had a different word order.
  - This was used in formal literature at all times until the Literary Revolution of 1917. Thus, most old studies are written in Classical Chinese.
  - Whereas Modern Chinese is SVO like English, “I know it,” Classical Chinese is SOV like French, “I it know.”
  - You can most definitely draw equivalents to Latin, which remained a strong international language of business, communication, etc, until the 18th century. Classical Chinese died 200 years later.
- The Literary Revolution occurred in 1917, aiming to replace Classical Chinese in literary works with colloquial Chinese; this was due to Standard Chinese becoming, in effect, a foreign language by comparison. Additionally, writers struggled to find their voice, due to the bevy of works and limited ways to express themselves. It was headed by Dr. Hu Shih from Columbia University, who proposed modern spoken Mandarin be the new standard.
  - Details on Hu Shih himself:
    - <https://www4.hku.hk/hongrads/graduates/ba-phd-shih-hu-hu-shih>
  - The Literary Revolution coincided with a number of other revolutionary actions in China at the time, very much severing its ties with the past.
    - Perhaps you could say this abandonment of the old way of writing was a symbol of all these revolutions.
  - Hu Shih’s criticisms;
    - Classical Chinese had devolved into “a system of pedantic allusions and outworn cliches.” Therefore, mastery of Classical Chinese was often just mastery of these allusions and cliches.
    - Writers of Classical Chinese were often restricted and unable to express themselves due to these time-worn trends.
    - Learning Classical Chinese often dominated the lives of scholars, time that was very frequently wasted.
    - Examples of modern Mandarin Chinese novels of the 17th Century proved that the literature could be superior; cited critics Chin Sheng-t’an, Li Cho-Yu, and Yuan Chung-lang.
  - Prior to Hu Shih’s criticisms, Classical Chinese was “sacrosanct.”

- Lin Yutang criticises the literary revolution from the following standpoints (Note that this was 1962, and the revolution was in 1917; compare with Hundred Flowers reasonings):
  - At the time, only around a dozen Chinese writers post-revolution produced something of worth, but never anything great.
  - Economic issues, centralising around China's communist system.
    - The writers are economically insecure and thus cannot devote their time to creative endeavours. Ergo, they cannot dedicate their time to writing.
    - People found it easier to write an essay, travel sketch, or journalistic article.
  - No historical mastery to evaluate one's self, and nobody had mastered written Modern Mandarin; remember, Classical is still fundamentally a different language.
    - Instead of writing like they speak, most "new" writers were instead using Academic Mandarin, just using what Lin Yutang describes as "Europeanisms"
  - Plagiarism/imitation of Western stories.
  - Due to Europeanisation, what Lin Yutang describes as "the elegance of the classical tongue" had disappeared, and in return, we got "long, involute, affected and torturous" lines of Modern Mandarin.
- Lin Yutang proposed solutions along these lines:
  - Adopt more of the beautiful sides of Classical Chinese into Modern Mandarin, to "restore" what made Chinese written works great.
    - He seems to focus on the written form, the Hanzi.
  - Hsu Chih-mo, a poet, is cited as one of the best writers of modern Mandarin Chinese under Lin Yutang. He died in 1931, from a plane crash.
  - Lao Sheh, author of Rickshaw Boy, is cited as one of the best Pekingese writers. Novelist.
  - The Chou Brothers, Chou Tso-jen and Chu Tzu-ch'ing, are noted for their impeccable prose in the modern vernacular. Writer.

### **Additional Research on Classical Chinese**

Research jumping-off point: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical\\_Chinese](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_Chinese)

Hu Shih's proposal can be found here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu\\_Shih#Writings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu_Shih#Writings) (English)

<https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E6%96%87%E5%AD%B8%E6%94%B9%E8%89%AF%E8%8A%BB%E8%AD%B0> (Chinese)

But a superior extract is provided within China's Men of Letters itself, uncut.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical\\_Chinese\\_grammar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_Chinese_grammar)

- Classical Chinese saw multiple objections over time.
  - Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den by Yuen Ren Chao was written in Classical Chinese in the 1930s, a story using only the “Shi” sound. It's perfectly grammatical but sounds incomprehensible in speech due to all the homophones. The homophones developed over the past 2,500 from Classical to Mandarin Chinese. Therefore, Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den can demonstrate how impractical Classical Chinese has become, due to the disconnect between written Classical Chinese and spoken Mandarin Chinese.
  - In general, many poems in Classical Chinese can no longer rhyme when read with Mandarin pronunciation.
- No inflectional morphology.
- Classical Chinese is much more compact, using around half the amount of characters as Mandarin Chinese to relate to the same idea. It rarely uses more than two characters to make a word.
- Classical Chinese was pro-drop in some ways: It had pronouns, but if you could understand a point without a pronoun, it would drop it. With respect to the pronouns, it had more than Mandarin Chinese, using an honorific system among other things.
- Classical Chinese had no word class system: Nouns could be used as verbs, adjectives could be used as nouns, and so on.
- Classical Chinese lacked a copula (a word that connects a subject to its subject component). In Mandarin Chinese, 是 (shì) serves as this component. In Classical, 是 (shì) it basically meant “this.” Mandarin's equivalent for this today is 这 (zhè).
- In Taiwan, old laws from prior to 1970 were still written in Classical Chinese, many years after mainland China's Literary Revolution. President Yen Chia-kan changed course here, ordering the switch to vernacular Chinese instead; however, while this did occur, a subset of Classical Chinese is still used. Therefore, as a lawyer in Taiwan, you still need to learn Classical Chinese.
  - Its status is very similar to Law French, a version of the French language used in legal proceedings until the 17th Century. We still use some words from this language, such as culprit (cul. prit, an abbreviation of culpable: prest), defendant (défendant), and attorney (atorné).

A century later, when Kung-Fu Panda released, the movie was so good, it caused the Chinese to start “soul searching” to figure out why they can't make something like

it that is as “rich and fresh a take on Chinese culture”. This ended with government criticisms, noting its meddling with how the Olympic animated content’s direction. [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-film-panda-idUSPEK34047220080705/?fbclid=IwAR3XFZNXJxgqMNgSOnax6iXgLa\\_A4EYqw36JI-Wh-azLy4oLAh3LEv1dyrs](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-film-panda-idUSPEK34047220080705/?fbclid=IwAR3XFZNXJxgqMNgSOnax6iXgLa_A4EYqw36JI-Wh-azLy4oLAh3LEv1dyrs)

We have two views here. Hu Shih’s literary reform and Li Yutang’s criticism. Who was right, then, factoring in how China works now?

## Yenan and the Palace Gates

By Gopal Mittal

- Yan’nan (延安市) is a prefecture-level city in Shaanxi and was the centre of Chinese Communist activities from 1935 to 1947.
- **Chapter 1:**
  - Mao Zedong, at the 1942 Forum on Art and Literature, gave a speech where he wanted to eradicate creative spirit not in line with the masses and the proletariat.
    - Mao himself was a poet, producing works such as Changsha and Loushan Pass. He primarily wrote using Classical Chinese verse styles, being very traditional and conservative.
  - Some members of the League of Left-Wing Writers of Shanghai, formed 2nd March 1930, worked with the communists in Yen’nan in 1937 following the breakout of war in Japan. However, with limited creative capabilities, they were disappointed with the revolution’s direction.
  - One writer, Wang Shiwei, author of *The Wild Lily*, criticised the CCP and was expelled in 1947 under orders from Mao Zedong. This was after translating hundreds of Marxist-Leninist works to assist with the revolution. He had been working in the party since 1926. He was accused of being a Trotskyite.
  - **Mao’s Chinese Socialist Realism:** *A fundamentalist view of Marxist-Leninism is that existence determines consciousness, i.e. the objective reality of the class struggle and national struggle determines our thoughts and feelings* (Mao, 1942)
  - Mao wanted writers and artists to give up their own thoughts and feelings, instead contributing to the revolution by viewing things strictly through the lens of class warfare, essentially.
  - Mao decreed that because art and literature were for the workers, peasants, and soldiers, they should be about them too. These materials must serve them, but not be over-emphasised.
- **Chapter II - Literary Remoulding, 1949-1955:**
  - *The Life of Wu Xun* was the first film banned in China, first produced in 1950. Initially praised, Mao Zedong retaliated against it, due to an

exchange between Wu Xun and “Chou Ta” (Wades-Giles) that allegedly implied the revolution was unnecessary;

*Chou Ta: “How can one live in a world like this? Only one way is now left to us - to kill.”*

*Wu Xun: “To kill..? What good can that do?”*

- After Mao Zedong hit out, the people began criticising the film and themselves for having liked it. The criticism was so vast that Wu Xun’s body - the historical figure who had died in 1896 - was exhumed and burned.
- During this time, Mao Zedong was demanding “thought reform.” The aim was to minimise media that neglected ideology, did not support CPC politics, and expressed bourgeois or capitalist sympathies.
- This manifested in December 1951’s issue of People’s Daily with four demands;
  - Weapons of mutual criticism and self-criticism were to be used in art and literature to differentiate between right and wrong. Make political standpoints clear.
  - Marxism in art and literature must be for propaganda purposes.
  - Develop official guidance and criticism for creative work.
  - Writers and artists were to be organised to produce worthwhile works and should observe labour discipline.
- The belief was that writers and artists prior to the “thought reform” were too geared towards a capitalist class mentality.
- A study committee of literary and art circles was formed in 1952 with 20 members, including Ting Ling (author) and Mao Zedong. Yes, all this over a movie.
- Yu Pingbo’s work on Dream of the Red Chamber, including some columns in various magazines, led to criticism from Mao Zedong; he believed Dream of the Red Chamber exposed the failings of Feudalism and showed class struggle. Due to the severe criticisms that arose in 1954, which were filled with quotes; ergo, despite decrying Pingbo as a “bourgeois idealist,” his ideas were spread massively in a Streisand effect. Yu was deemed a bourgeois intellectual and made to attend “rectification meetings.”
- Hu Feng called for some of the literary restrictions to be eased up. He believed “five daggers” were being plunged into the brain of the writer;
  - Forced to accept (and really, adopt) Communist ideology.
  - “Enter into” the lives of the workers, peasants, and soldiers.
  - Undergo ideological reform and re-education.
  - Give works a form prescribed by the CPC.
  - Work on subjects designated by the CPC.
- To alleviate this, Hu Feng proposed;
  - Loosening the control over the literary world that the CPC was holding.

- Substitute compulsory indoctrination with voluntary self-study.
- End interference with the writer's work.
- End the production of state cultural magazines.
- Establishment of 7-8 new national literary and art magazines, each to be edited by a "competent man," with about two dozen writers.
- Freedom for editors to handle manuscripts without CPC interference.
- 1/3 of the writers attached to each magazine to be communists, but with no interference by the CPC.
- Freedom for writers to choose their literary projects according to circumstances; optional attendance at indoctrination courses.
- Hu Feng was branded a "conceited man," with his ideology "bourgeois and individualistic." This could be a euphemism for liberalism, which Mao despised - see "Combat Liberalism." In February 1955, the Presidium of the Chinese Writer's Union condemned him. He produced a recantation in People's Daily later on, and a White Book denouncing him was published.

## The "Hundred Flowers" Campaign

### By Hsu Yu

- Since the formation of the People's Republic of China, up to this book's writing, most Chinese Communists kept to Mao Zedong's school of thought. This included his literary theories, demonstrated at the Yanan Forum of 1942.
- From May 1956-1957, this would momentarily change, with Mao's "Hundred Flowers" campaign (zh: 百花齐放 Bǎihuā Qífàng).
- During this, Hu Feng (see previous chapter) criticised the Literary Gazette, the CPC's propaganda organ for literary matters, for engaging in covert operations to manipulate readers, with those who produce "counter-revolutionary" work being criticised and expelled from the party.
- Since Wang Shih-Wei's removal, the literary movements around 1962 were marred with repeated Maoist purges.
- During the Hundred Flowers campaign, in June 1957, Shanghai's Literary Monthly released an editorial called "Facing a New Situation." They attributed the struggles in the literary sphere to the lack of the CPC's understanding of creative writing, difficult formalistic rules, bureaucracy, sectarianism, and narrow-mindedness amongst literary cadres of the CPC. However, the chief issue they noted was an inability to comprehend the new post-revolutionary environment they were in. There were "contradictions" within the people themselves that they were still figuring out; disagreements were fiery, even amongst "comrades."
- After June 1957, a purge occurred, with the following offences cited;
  - Rejection of party leadership in literature.

- Subordination of politics to art in literature.
- Exposure of the dark side to life in literature.
- Rejection of the communist literary style.

## **Controls, Themes, and Trends in Chinese Literature**

### **By Shau Wing Chan**

- Mao implemented his literary policies in the following ways:
  - Supervised organisation; eg. All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, All-China Association of Writers, and their district branches.
  - Ideological reforms, such as enforcing criticism and self-criticism. Party members and public figures in Maoist China would often submit the latter to People's Daily.
  - Purging of writers, such as Wang Shih-wei, Hu Feng, etc,
- Major recurring themes;
  - Condemnation of landlords; cites The White Haired Girl (1951; 白毛女 Bái Máo Nǚ) as an example. By extension, land reform is a very consistent theme.
  - Condemnation of Nationalist authorities; characterising them as greedy, dishonest, bureaucratic, etc. Communists are often shown in the opposite light, caring strongly about the welfare of their citizens where Nationalists would not. "Cites Hsieh-lei ch'ou" (Bloody Tear Vengeance) as an example; play. Cannot find much information.
  - Denouncing social traditions, particularly planned marriage. Cites "Hsiao Erh-hei chieh-hun" (The Marriage of Hsiao Erh-hei).
  - Supreme, extreme loyalty to the CPC and Mao Zedong. Cites the musical "Liu Hu-lan." Some praise is given to the USSR as well.
- Long story short, literary works were strictly propagandistic in nature, with little exception.

## **A Preliminary Discussion of Literary Reform**

### **By Hu Shih**

New Youth, Vol.II, No.5 (January 1917)

- Hu Shih's 8 Fundamentals;
  - Write with substance (feeling and thought)
  - Do not imitate the ancients
  - Emphasise grammar
  - Reject melancholy
  - Eliminate old cliches
    - Specifically, cite personal experiences; describe your own things.
  - Do not use allusions; specifically;
    - Analogies employed by ancient writers
    - Idioms



- References to historic events
  - Quoting or referring to past individuals for comparison
  - Quotations
- Do not use couplets and parallelisms
- Do not avoid popular expressions or popular forms of characters
- Chiefly, Hu Shih was a descriptivist, believing **real** language should be used, as it is spoken.

## Constructive Literary Revolution: A Literature of National Speech - A National Speech of Literary Quality.

By Hu Shih

New Youth, Vol.IV, No.4 (April 1918)

- Hu Shih's Revised Four Fundamentals;
  - Write when you have something to say.
  - Express yourself as you would in speech.
  - Use only your own words, not others.
  - **Employ the spoken language of the day.**
- Hu Shih, factoring in his descriptivist views on language, calls Classical Chinese a "dead language." It is not spoken, so the written works end up lacking in life. This is accurate: China had not produced good literary work for over 2,000 years.
- Further to his descriptivist views, he states that a national language is not formed by a small group of linguists and government officials, but the people. People produce that language by speaking.
- Hu Shih proposed three points in which the revolution should be carried out:
  - Tools:
    - Extensive reading of works written in vernacular Chinese.
    - Write in the style of plain speech.
  - Methods:
    - Collect material in large areas; areas like officialdom, houses of prostitution, and "dirty society" are not enough.
      - Poor man's society is stated to have no place in literature(?)
      - Suggests family catastrophes, marriage tragedy, the position of women, and poor education can serve as good material.
      - Stress real observation and personal experience. Use broad imagination to supplement it!
    - Tailor and lay out the plot; understand what you want to write.
    - "The method of description..." (not elaborated)
  - Creation:

- States that mastery of the tools will realise this tool; he did not believe it was necessary to discuss the theory of creation until China is creating literature once more.