

“ A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF LITERARY REFORM ”
By Hu Shi

Introduction

Beginning around 1917, Chinese intellectuals began to engage each other in serious discussion and debate on culture, history, philosophy, and related subjects — all with an eye to the bigger problem of China’s weakness and the possible solutions to that problem. This period of intellectual debate, labeled the May Fourth Movement, lasted to around 1921.

Hu Shi (1891-1962) was one of the leading May Fourth intellectuals. A student of agriculture at Cornell University, and then of philosophy under John Dewey at Columbia University, Hu led the way in the movement to write Chinese in the vernacular, as opposed to the elegant, but (to the average Chinese) incomprehensible classical style. Hu also played a leading role in the cultural debates of the time.

The following document represents Hu’s ideas on literary reform.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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I believe that literary reform at the present time must begin with these eight items: (1) Write with substance. (2) Do not imitate the ancients. (3) Emphasize grammar. (4) Reject melancholy. (5) Eliminate old clichés. (6) Do not use allusions. (7) Do not use couplets and parallelisms. And (8) Do not avoid popular expressions or popular forms of characters.

...

... By *substance* I mean: (a) Feeling. ... Feeling is the soul of literature. Literature without feeling is like a man without a soul. ... (b) Thought. By *thought* I mean insight, knowledge, and ideals. Thought does not necessarily depend on literature for transmission, but literature becomes more valuable if it contains thought, and thought is more valuable if it possesses literary value. ...

... Literature changes with time. Each period from Zhou and Qin to Song, Yuan, and Ming has its own literature. This is not my private opinion but the universal law of the advancement of civilization. ... Each period has changed in accordance with its situation and

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on

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circumstance, each with its own characteristic merits. From the point of view of historical evolution, we cannot say that the writings of the ancients are all superior to those of modern writers. ...

...

... *Reject melancholy.* This is not an easy task. Nowadays young writers often show passion. They choose such names as "Cold Ash," "No Birth," and "Dead Ash" as pen names, and in their prose and poetry they think of declining years when they face the setting sun, and of destitution when they meet the autumn wind. ... I am not unaware that our country is facing many troubles. But can salvation be achieved through tears? ...

Questions:

1. What philosophical ideas or assumptions about humankind, life, and history underlie Hu Shi's ideas on literature? Is he a Confucian?
2. What assumptions does Hu make about the purpose of literature? What is literature for? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What advice might Hu give to writers today?

Longer Selection

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Many people have been discussing literary reform. Who am I, unlearned and unlettered, to offer an opinion? Nevertheless, for some years I have studied the matter and thought it over many times, helped by my deliberations with friends; and the conclusions I have come to are perhaps not unworthy of discussion. There I shall summarize my views under eight points and elaborate on them separately to invite the study and comments of those interested in literary reform.

I believe that literary reform at the present time must begin with these eight items: (1) Write with substance. (2) Do not imitate the ancients. (3) Emphasize grammar. (4) Reject melancholy. (5) Eliminate old clichés. (6) Do not use allusions. (7) Do not use couplets and parallelisms. And (8) Do not avoid popular expressions or popular forms of characters.

1. *Write with substance.* By *substance* I mean: (a) Feeling. ... Feeling is the soul of literature. Literature without feeling is like a man without a soul. ... (b) Thought. By *thought* I mean insight, knowledge, and ideals. Thought does not necessarily depend on literature for

transmission, but literature becomes more valuable if it contains thought, and thought is more valuable if it possesses literary value. This is the reason why the essays of Zhuangzi, the poems of Tao Qian [365-427], Li Bo [689-762], and Du Fu [717-770], the *ci* of Xin Jiaxuan [1140-1207], and the novel of Shi Naian [that is, the *Shuihu zhuan* or *Water Margin*] are matchless for all times. ... In recent years literary men have satisfied themselves with tones, rhythm, words, and phrases and have had neither lofty thoughts nor genuine feeling. This is the chief cause of the deterioration of literature. This is the bad effect of superficiality over substantiality, that is to say, writing without substance. To remedy this bad situation, we must resort to substance. And what is substance? Nothing but feeling and thought.

2. *Do not imitate the ancients.* Literature changes with time. Each period from Zhou and Qin to Song, Yuan, and Ming has its own literature. This is not my private opinion but the universal law of the advancement of civilization. Take prose, for example. There is the prose of the *Classic of History*, the prose of the ancient philosophers, the prose of [the historians] Sima Qian and Ban Gu, the prose of the [Tang and Song masters] Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan, Ouyang Xiu, and Su Xun, the prose of the *Recorded Conversations* of the Neo-Confucians, and the prose of Shi Naian and Cao Xueqin [d. ca. 1765, author of *The Dream of Red Mansions*, also called *The Dream of the Red Chamber*]. This is the development of prose. ... Each period has changed in accordance with its situation and circumstance, each with its own characteristic merits. From the point of view of historical evolution, we cannot say that the writings of the ancients are all superior to those of modern writers. The prose of Zuo Qiuming [sixth century BCE, author of the *Zuozhuan*] and Sima Qian is wonderful, but compared to the *Zuozhuan* and *Records of the Historian*, wherein is Shi Naian's *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) inferior? ...

I have always held that colloquial stories alone in modern Chinese literature can proudly be compared with the first-class literature of the world. Because they do not imitate the past but only describe the society of the day, they have become genuine literature. ...

3. *Emphasize grammar.* Many writers of prose and poetry today neglect grammatical construction. Examples are too numerous to mention, especially in parallel prose and the four-line and eight-line verses.

4. *Reject melancholy.* This is not an easy task. Nowadays young writers often show passion. They choose such names as “Cold Ash,” “No Birth,” and “Dead Ash” as pen names, and in their prose and poetry they think of declining years when they face the setting sun, and of destitution when they meet the autumn wind. ... I am not unaware of the fact that our country is facing many troubles. But can salvation be achieved through tears? I hope all writers become Fichtes and Mazzinis and not like Jia Yi [201-169 BCE], Wang Can [177-217], Qu Yuan [343-277 BCE], Xie Gaoyu [1249-1295], and so on [who moaned and complained]. ...

5. *Eliminate old clichés.* By this I merely mean that writers should describe in their own words what they personally experience. So long as they achieve the goal of describing things and expressing the mood without sacrificing realism, that is literary achievement. Those who employ old clichés are lazy people who refuse to coin their own terms of description.

6. *Do not use allusions.* I do not mean allusion in the broad sense. These are of five kinds: (a) analogies employed by ancient writers, which have a universal meaning ... ; (b) idioms; (c) references to historical events ... ; (d) quoting from or referring to people in the past for comparison ... ; and (e) quotations. ... Allusions such as these may or may not be used.

But I do not approve of the use of allusions in the narrow sense. By using allusions I mean that writers are incapable of creating their own expressions to portray the scene before them or the concepts in their minds, and instead muddle along by borrowing old stories or expressions that are partly or wholly inapplicable. ...

7. *Do not use couplets and parallelisms.* Parallelism is a special characteristic of human language. This is why in ancient writings such as those of Laozi and Confucius, there are occasionally couplets. The first chapter of the *Daodejing* consists of three couplets. *Analects* 1:14, 1:15, and 3:17 are all couplets. But these are fairly natural expressions and have no indication of being forced or artificial, especially because there is no rigid requirement about the number of words, tones, or parts of speech. Writers in the age of literary decadence, however, who had nothing to say, emphasized superficiality, the extreme of which led to the development of the parallel prose, regulated *ci*, and the long regulated verse. It is not that there are no good products in these forms, but they are, in the final analysis, few. Why? Is it not because they restrict to the highest degree the free expression of man? (Not a single good piece can be mentioned among the long regulated verse.) To talk about literary reform today, we must “first establish the fundamental”¹ and not waste our useful energy in the nonessentials of subtlety and delicacy. This is why I advocate giving up couplets and rhymes. Even if they cannot be abolished, they should be regarded as merely literary stunts and nothing to be pursued seriously.

There are still people today who deprecate colloquial novels as trifling literature, without realizing that Shi Naian, Cao Xueqin, and Wu Jianren [1867-1910] all represent the main line of literature while parallel and regulated verse are really trifling matters. I know some will keep clear of me when they hear this.

8. *Do not avoid popular expressions or popular forms of characters.* When Buddhist scriptures were introduced into China, because classical expressions could not express their meanings, translators used clear and simple expressions.

Their style already approached the colloquial. Later, many Buddhist lectures and dialogues were in the colloquial style, thus giving rise to the “conversation” style. When the Neo-Confucians of the Song dynasty used the colloquial in their *Recorded Conversations*, this style became the orthodox style of scholarly discussion. (This was followed by scholars of the Ming.) By that time, colloquial expressions had already penetrated rhymed prose, as can be seen in the colloquial poems of Tang and Song poets. From the third century to the end of the Yuan, North China had been under foreign races and popular literature developed. In prose there were such novels as *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) and *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*). In

¹ *Mencius* 6A:15.

drama the products were innumerable. From the modern point of view, the Yuan period should be considered as a high point of literary development; unquestionably it produced the greatest number of immortal works. At that time writing and colloquial speech were the closest to each other, and the latter almost became the language of literature. Had the tendency not been checked, living literature would have emerged in China, and the great work of Dante and Luther [who inaugurated the substitution of a living language for dead Latin] would have taken place in China. Unfortunately, the tendency was checked in the Ming when the government selected officials on the basis of the rigid “eight-legged” prose style and at the same time literary men like the “seven scholars” including Li [Mengyang, 1472-1529] considered “returning to the past” as highbrow. Thus the once-in-a-millennium chance of uniting writing and speech was killed prematurely, midway in the process. But from the modern viewpoint of historical evolution, we can definitely say that the colloquial literature is the main line of Chinese literature and that it should be the medium employed in the literature of the future. (This is my own opinion; not many will agree with me today.) For this reason, I hold that we should use popular expressions and words in prose and poetry. Rather than using dead expressions of three thousand years ago, it is better to employ living expressions of the twentieth century, and rather than using the language of the Qin, Han, and the Six Dynasties, which cannot reach many people and cannot be universally understood, it is better to use the language of the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) and *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*), which is understood in every household.