

HUALING NIEH, ed.

*Literature of the Hundred Flowers*

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I: \$27.50; II: \$42.50.

The “hundred flowers” period, 1956 and 1957, was a brief experiment in relative freedom of expression for China’s writers and the harsh purge of Rightists it prompted. The term itself comes from a slogan proposed by Mao Tse-tung in the early 1950’s to describe the creative diversity he hoped for in Chinese drama: “Let a hundred flowers bloom.” He and other leaders restated this theme in 1956 to encourage new approaches to writing in place of the disappointing didacticism of the People’s Republic’s first years. This slogan was coupled with another drawn from China’s past: “Let a hundred schools of thought contend.” The latter was encouragement for non-Communists within China to propose new ways to speed its economic and social development and to criticize the Communist Party’s mistakes in those realms. Slow in coming, the criticism thus encouraged was far too strident to be tolerated by China’s leaders opposed to this liberal Maoist policy; the ensuing anti-Rightist campaign suppressed all critics, writers and others, sending many to labor in the countryside for indefinite periods.

Traditionally China’s Confucians saw an important set of relationships between the creative writings of the individual and the concerns of society as a whole. As early as the Han period 2,000 years ago it was felt that while literature reflects the mood of the people and the moral tenor of the times, it could also serve to teach proper standards for society and help to create a moral climate in the state. From then onward China’s literate elite evoked one or the other of these concepts to praise or to blame literary works, regularly imputing ethical standards to authors on the basis of the assumed effect of their writings on society. Fears that certain plays, novels, and short stories might encourage licentiousness among China’s populace led to literary inquisitions during the last 500 years of imperial rule.

However, while dominant Confucianism officially saw literature and society as intimately related, individual writers, particularly poets, saw creative writing as one of the arts—the others including painting and calligraphy for most, music and gardening for others—through which essential *self*-expression might be achieved. Poets especially went in for creating private worlds of language and aesthetic sensibility, often with no obvious concern for any but the most sensitive and cultivated reader. Likewise, technical virtuosity was seen as the necessary prerequisite to practicing any of the refined arts; one might explore new orders of expression only after mastering the forms presented by tradition.

China’s unhappy contact with the West, particularly the disastrous wars with Western powers and Japan during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drove its intellectuals to examine the scientific, philosophical, and even literary, underpinnings of these technologically and commercially powerful cultures; most concluded that China could be strengthened to the point of joining the community of nations as an equal only by rejecting its past and embracing things Western. To that end, China’s young writers of the 1920’s read and translated fiction from other cultures, particularly Europe and Japan, adapted Western literary forms and modes of expression, and strove to “catch up” with literary

trends in the Western world. Not surprisingly, most of these writers constantly kept society's needs foremost in mind and wrote accordingly. The Communist Party's assumption of political power in 1949 meant numerous changes in the lives of writers, but their general commitment to the service of society remained constant.

When Mao and others encouraged them to do so in 1956, writers were only too happy to turn their attention to foreign models for literature and to traditional forms as well, in an effort better "to serve the people" culturally. Specifically, they turned from the narrow prescriptions enunciated by Mao himself in 1942 that demanded that political needs of the masses be seen as first, and virtually only, concern of writers; veteran poets and story writers sounded the call for self-expression, self-determination of the best means to serve society's needs, and high artistic standards for literature. These concerns had their roots in tradition and had been nurtured by contact with the ideologies and literature of the West. Other, particularly younger and less well educated, writers took the second of the two official slogans of the period most thoroughly to heart. They wrote stories exposing the hypocrisy and bungling of Communist Party bureaucrats—from a perspective that was idealistic but decidedly Marxist. With the end of the movement, the first group of writers was censured for their backward, bourgeois views; many of the latter, because they criticized the Party, were declared Rightists, and were arrested.

These two volumes edited by Hualing Nieh are a goldmine of primary documents, carefully translated, concerning the effect of the Hundred Flowers campaign on writers and writing in China. She presents, in Volume 1, "Criticism and Polemics," those official statements by political and literary figures that so clearly reveal the parameters of the contradiction between China's ruling Party and its creative artists. Included are the earnest admonitions of Mao Tse-tung and Lu Ting-i, Propaganda Department Director of the Party's Central Committee, that China needs criticism to help its intellectuals advance politically and to achieve ever higher stages of social harmony and moral consensus. The best approaches will win out by showing their superiority, they declare. Professor Nieh also presents the carefully reasoned essays of writers like Lao She who express confidence that writers are fully capable of recognizing and responding to their social responsibilities without overt governmental pressure.

Other writers discuss the importance of realism in creative writing. Of course this is a loaded term: is it realistic to show only society's best, its worst, or both? What good does it do China's laboring masses to expose the shortcomings of its struggling government? Or of its leaders? Is "socialist realism" flexible enough for China's writers? Are there alternatives? Must literature in a politicized state turn its back on the tender emotions, personal relationships, and private feelings? Such basic questions become absolutely essential in the struggle of writers against dogmatic ideologies, regardless of the principles involved. This collection is excellent for its careful assortment of perspectives on these relationships between society and literature. Likewise important is the inclusion of rebuttals and rejoinders in the heated debates on these issues.

Professor Nieh's second, even more substantial volume, focuses more directly on literary works. Here major poets discuss their work in relation to the "hundred flowers" call, and selected poems are presented in juxtaposition with essays criticizing them. The perspectives thus revealed are fascinating, if unnerving. Mu Tan's long poem about ridding himself of old ideas, "Funeral Ode," becomes to a dogmatic critic "a bad poem propagating bourgeois sentiments" because it so narrowly focuses on one individual mind. By presenting editor's confessions after

the crackdown began, the reader sees all the more clearly the subtle differences of view represented—as well as the awesome power of political authority to enforce conformity in the field of literature.

The second half of Volume II is devoted to fiction and fables, including works published before 1956 but which caused political trouble for their authors in 1957. A case in point is Hsiao Chün's *Village in August*, 1935, the first modern Chinese novel to appear in English, in 1942; the attack that brought him down had reached a high point in 1949. Ting Ling, the woman novelist, also fell in 1957 for a novel she had written just after the war. A point to be observed here is not only the political complexity of the writer's task in China, but also of his peril: in the minds of dogmatic ideologues, reform is apparently impossible when one's creative efforts of previous decades are to be held culpable by criteria of a new day. Thus the poet Ho Ch'i-fang says of a gadfly critic: "For thirty years, Feng Hsüeh-feng has been operating within the Party in the interests of his individualist anti-Party ambitions" (II, 310). This sort of "hindsight" became even more popular during the Cultural Revolution when "crimes" were to be found for nearly all writers.

The literary works translated here vary in content from satiric exaggeration to realism of disarming frankness. Wang Jo-wang's "A Visit to His Excellency" traces an old peasant's misadventures when he visits a new bureaucrat—his son: after jousting with officious subordinates and ubiquitous red tape he leaves in disgust, an ominous reflection of the distance between Party officials and the masses they are meant to serve. Wang Meng's notorious story "A Young Man Arrives at the Organization Department" pits a naive and politically idealistic youth against official boredom and self-protection. A nascent love affair between the young man and a married woman served to raise even more objections. These and the virulently pointed fables provide a fascinating glimpse into what loyal opposition can produce in the highly political atmosphere of China.

Despite the apparent narrowness of range in this hefty anthology, Hualing Nieh's *Hundred Flowers* contains all the critical apparatus necessary to make it extremely useful to China specialists and general readers alike. Each volume begins with a lucid, although brief, introduction by R. David Arkush to the political setting for this ill-fated literary movement, its events, and its outcome. Professor Nieh's essay, reproduced in both volumes, entitled "The Second Hundred Flowers—After Twenty Years," draws parallels with writing in China today. A writer herself, Hualing Nieh is well qualified to appreciate the irony and the hope involved in a second Hundred Flowers campaign led by the new, post-Mao leadership. Now that all "Rightists" of 1957 have been cleared, many have returned to their intellectual positions of 1956, with literature again exploring the self, personal relationships, and, above all, official malfeasance. And again, the more cautious leaders chafe under writers' criticism and long for revenge. Thus, as Professor Nieh amply demonstrates, this anthology presents a uniquely useful means to understand most recent Chinese literature. Even a newcomer to this area of writing will be amply prepared to read further.

For the specialist, Professor Nieh and her assistants have provided brief biographies of all writers referred to and bibliographical information, in Chinese with English translations, for all cited and translated works. Given the paucity of studies of the literature—in contrast to the political events—of this tumultuous period, Nieh's anthology is a ground-breaking contribution to Chinese literary studies in the West. Her standards for scholarship and translation (by team) are high; it is unlikely that this work will be supplanted in importance for years to come. And for the penetrating view it presents of the ongoing role of the Chinese

writer in society, of the perilous interaction of literature and politics, and of the immense complexities of the responsibility of the writer to serve society, *Literature of the Hundred Flowers* is a remarkable document in the annals of creative expression.

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## How Does One Handle Sarraute's Fiction?

### A Note on Valerie Minogue, *Nathalie Sarraute and the War of the Words*

As a consequence of the leading position that was hers in the fifties with respect to other, mostly younger, "new novelists," Nathalie Sarraute was later drawn into a wrong-headed controversy; critics as well as some fellow novelists wondered if her ideas on the novel, not to speak of her writing practice, were congruent with those of Robbe-Grillet, Ricardou, and others. As if fiction or poetry should ever conform to a preestablished theory. For a while, in France, it seemed as though people were reliving the neoclassical arguments involving Corneille's plays and pedants' definitions of tragedy. Theories should of course emerge from studies based on the practices of writers, not the other way around, and they often need to be modified after having been confronted with evolving practices. Postwar literary theories did first arise in precisely that fashion, and they are of crucial importance to our understanding of the writing process. They are ancillary to sound scholarship; they do not, however, make up a set of laws. Criteria for the evaluation of poetry and fiction lie elsewhere.

The difference between Sarraute's writing and that of writers originally associated with her by critics may be what has affected the number and quality of book-length studies devoted to her work, especially in English-speaking countries. Those unsympathetic to contemporary trends have been attracted to her work, but they found themselves illprepared to analyze it; those interested in current theory have been inclined to pass her by. Valerie Minogue's book (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1981) is thus only the second one to appear. Hence, to say that it is the better of the two (and I think it is), is both somewhat meaningless insofar as Minogue's essay is concerned and unfair to Gretchen Besser's *Nathalie Sarraute* (Boston: Twayne, 1979). The latter is more academic, attempts to be all-encompassing, and is subject to constraints laid down by the editors of Twayne's "World Authors" series. The former concentrates on five novels, which are analyzed in some detail, and displays greater originality in style and presentation. Minogue accurately describes Besser's book as "useful" (p. v); I should term hers both useful and engaging.

Her title, *Nathalie Sarraute and the War of the Words*, in its obvious takeoff on H. G. Wells's classic, places the discussion on proper grounds, "the war between the petrifying power of words and the fluidity of experience" (p. 1). The implicit allusion to Mallarmé's "mots de la tribu," hence to a poetic presence in the