Chapter 3

On the Relationship Between Fiction and the Government of the People

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If one intends to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction. Therefore, to renovate morality, one must renovate fiction; to renovate religion, one must renovate fiction; to renovate politics, one must renovate fiction; to renovate social customs, one must renovate fiction; to renovate learning and arts, one must renovate fiction; and to renovate even the human mind and remodel its character, one must renovate fiction. Why is this so? This is because fiction has a profound power over the way of man.

Now let me pose a question. Why is it that men are generally more fond of fiction than of other types of literature? You will no doubt reply: “Because fiction is simple and easy to understand; because fiction is enjoyable and interesting.” This certainly is true. However, this is not exactly the case since not all writing that is simple and easy to understand is fiction. There is indeed nothing profound and difficult in the letters of ordinary women or young children, or in official circulars and correspondence. But who

likes to read them? Moreover, talented and erudite scholars capable of reading the most esoteric of ancient works and writing commentaries on the classics should have no bias against any form of writing, be it profound and archaic, or easy and straightforward. Yet why do they take particular delight in fiction? This shows that the first answer is inadequate. There are, of course, many novels that aim solely at providing pleasure and entertainment, but this kind of novel is not very highly regarded. The most popular are invariably those that are able to surprise, to startle, to make us feel sad, and to move us. Reading these works causes us to have countless nightmares and to wipe away countless tears. But if we wish to seek pleasure from something of which we are fond, why should we torture ourselves with writings that disturb our heart and soul? This shows that the second answer is inadequate.

I have been meditating hard on this question so as to understand it comprehensively. There are probably two explanations. First, human nature is such that it is often discontented with the world. The world with which we are in physical contact is spatially limited. Thus, apart from direct physical or perceptual contact with reality, we also often desire to touch and perceive things indirectly; this is the life beyond one’s life, the world beyond one’s world. This sort of vision is inherent in both the sharp and the dull-witted. And nothing can transcend the power of fiction in molding the human into more intelligent or duller beings. Thus, fiction often leads us to a different world and transforms the atmosphere with which we are in constant contact.

Second, man is generally unaware of the imaginings he harbors in his mind and the world he has experienced. Normally we are aware of sadness, happiness, remorse, anger, love, fear, worry, and shame, but not of their cause. We want to describe the motivations behind them, but our minds cannot understand them, our mouths cannot express them, and our pen cannot describe them. If there is someone who can give a thorough account of them, we will pound the table and cry out, “Excellent! Excellent! How true! How true!” This is exactly what happened to King Xuan of Qi.

2. The original reads fen dian suo qiu 填典求丘, abbreviated from sanfen 三進, wudian 五典, baihao 八樁 and jiutian 九天. In one interpretation, sanfen and wudian refer respectively to the books ascribed to the legendary three sage-kings and the five virtuous emperors of China; baihao refers to the Eight Diagrams devised by Fu Xi; and jiutian to the annals of the nine divisions under Yu the Great. They are used here to refer to the writings of the sages and the wise men of old.

3. The original reads zhu cong qu cao mu 注蟲魚草木, “definitions of insects, fish, grasses, and trees,” an allusion to the Etymological Lexicon, an early Han lexicon containing commentaries on the classics, names, etc. Here it refers to those scholars devoted to philological study.
when he said to Mencius, "What you have said has deeply moved me." There is nothing more profound to move men's minds than fiction.

These two are in fact the essence of all writings and the source of the power of the pen and the tongue. If we can get to the crux of writing, we will find that any literary genre has appeal for the reader. But fiction alone among the literary forms gives the highest expression to both subtlety and technique. Therefore, I say, fiction is the crowning glory of literature. The first reason explains the ascendency of the idealistic school of fiction, and the second reason that of the realistic school. Although there are many types of fiction, none falls outside the parameters of these two schools.

In addition, fiction has four powers to influence the way of man. The first power is called thurification. It is like entering a cloud of smoke and being thurified by it, or like touching ink or vermillion and being tinted by it. As mentioned in the Lankāvatāra Sūtra, the transformation of deluded knowledge to relative consciousness and of relative consciousness to absolute knowledge relies on this kind of power. When reading a novel, one's perception, thinking, and sensitivity are unconsciously affected and conditioned by it. Gradually, changing day by day, it makes its effect felt. And although the effect is momentary, alternating interruptions and continuations, over the course of a long period of time the world of the novel enters the mind of the reader and takes root there like a seedling with a special quality. Later, this seedling, being daily thurified by further contact with fiction, will become more vigorous, and its influence will in turn spread to others and to the entire world. This is the cause of the cyclical transformation of all living and non-living things in the world. Thus, fiction reigns supreme because of its power to influence the masses.

The second power is known as immersion. Whereas thurification is spatial and hence its effect is proportional to the space in which it acts, immersion is temporal, and its effect varies according to the length of time it operates. Immersion refers to the process by which a reader is so engrossed in a novel that it causes him to assimilate himself with its content. When one reads a novel, very often one is unable to free oneself from its effect even after having finished reading it. For instance, feelings of love and grief remain in the minds of those who have finished reading The Dream of the Red Chamber, and feelings of joy and anger in those who have finished read-

4. Liang uses the terms lixiang 理想 and xieyi 写意 for idealism and realism, respectively.

5. In this article Liang makes extensive use of Buddhist ideas and terms, such as shi 智 (relative consciousness) and shi wu 无 (absolute knowledge), to explain the power of fiction.

ing The Water Margin. Why is it so? It is because of the power of immersion. It follows that if two works are equally appealing, the one that is longer and deals with more facts will have the greater power to influence the reader. This is just like drinking wine. If one drinks for ten days, one will remain drunk for a hundred days. It was precisely because of this power of immersion that the Buddha expounded on the voluminous Avatamsaka Sūtra after he had risen from under the Bodhi Tree.

The third power is that of stimulation. Whereas the effects of thurification and immersion are gradual, that of stimulation is immediate. And although the effects of thurification and immersion take place without the reader's being aware of them, that of stimulation is able to suddenly evoke in the reader strange feelings over which he has no control. For instance, before reading The Water Margin I am calm and peaceful. But when I read about Lin Chong's fulfilling within three days his pledge to kill a man as application for entry into Liang Mountain Marsh, or about Wu Song's creating a mighty disturbance at the Pool of the Flying Cloud, why is it that I suddenly become furious? Before reading The Dream of the Red Chamber I am happy, but when I read about Qingwen's leaving the Grand View Garden or Lin Daiyu's dying in the Bamboo Retreat, why do I suddenly shed tears? My emotions are over control before reading, but when I come to the scenes entitled "The Heart of the Lute" and "An Exchange of Poems" in The Romance of the Western Chamber, or "The Fragrant Couch" and "A Visit to the Beauty" in Peach Blossom Fan, why are my emotions instantly stirred up? These are instances of the effects of stimulation.

Generally speaking, the more sensitive a man is, the faster and greater will the effect of this power of stimulation be. But the effect varies in direct proportion to the stimulating power of the book. Zen Buddhism also resort to this power of stimulation to lead men from their folly to sudden enlightenment. This power is more effective in speech than in writing. However, the effect of the spoken word is spatially and temporally limited, because of the inherent limitations of speech, we must turn to writing. And for writing, the vernacular is a more effective medium than the classical language and the parable is a more effective form than the serious statement. Hence, nothing possesses more power of stimulation than fiction.

The fourth power is that of lifting. The first three powers work from the outside and penetrate into the mind, but the power of lifting originates from within and works outward. This in fact is the highest attainment in Buddhism. All readers of novels often feel that they have entered a state of self-transformation and that they themselves have become the principal characters once they are engrossed in them. For instance, the reader of A Rustic's Idle Talk invariably identifies himself with Wen Suchen, of The
environment will certainly languish, fall sick, meet with tragic death, or fall into moral degeneration. If the air is not purified and food not properly selected, even if the community is daily given precious herbs like ginseng and daily provided with medical care, eventually people will not be saved from the pains and sufferings of illness and death. Once we understand the significance of this we can point to the roots of all decadence in Chinese society.

How did the Chinese develop the idea of holding scholars successful in the official examinations and prime ministers in such high esteem? It stems from fiction. What is the origin of the Chinese obsession with beautiful ladies and talented scholars? It lies in fiction. Where does the Chinese sympathy for robbers and brigands hidden away in the river and lake areas spring from? It springs from fiction. Where does the Chinese interest in witches and fox spirits come from? It comes from fiction. Such ideas are never transmitted in a formal and serious way, as when the Buddhist master who hands over the alms bowl to his disciple. And yet, everyone, from the uneducated butchers, cooks, peddlers, messengers, old ladies, young girls and boys all the way to those in the upper-class, including officials and men of high talents or wide learning, harbors at least one of these ideas. Although some of them may not have been directly influenced, they behave as if they have been affected by fiction. This is because there are over a hundred works of fiction whose poisonous effects have directly or indirectly affected the people. Indeed the situation has become deplorable! (There may be some who do not like to read novels; however, since this kind of fiction has already infiltrated the entire society and made its effect felt in the morals and manners of society, one has already inherited this legacy even before birth. After birth, one is again subjected to this influence, from which even the virtuous and the wise are unable to free themselves. This is what is called indirect influence.)

Nowadays our people are deluded by such superstitious practices as geomancy, physiognomy, divination, and praying to spirits to bring good fortune and to exorcise calamities. The superstitious belief in geomancy has driven people to oppose the construction of railroads and the opening of mines. Disputes over the site for a grave can embroil an entire clan in armed fighting and merciless killing. Processions and festivals intended to welcome the spirits or offer thanksgiving to the gods annually cause people to squander millions of dollars, waste their time, stir up trouble, and drain the national economy. This is all because of fiction.

Nowadays our people yearn deliriously for success in the civil service examinations and strive avariciously for rank and honor. They grovel about obsequiously with almost no feeling of modesty or shame. What they really
have in mind is to turn their "ten years of study by the light of the fireflies and the snow" or their secret bribes amassed in the dark of night into bragging rights before their wives and concubines and those in positions of power in their hometowns. For this kind of ephemeral satisfaction they tarnish their reputations and integrity completely. This is all because of fiction.

Nowadays our people readily forsake the virtues of honesty and righteousness and engage themselves in risky intrigues and schemes. Everyone has become harsh, cold, and crafty, and the whole nation is in great trouble. This is all because of fiction.

Nowadays our people are frivolous and immoral. They indulge in, and are obsessed with, sensual pleasures. Caught up in their emotions, they sing and weep over the spring flowers and the autumn moon, frittering away their youthful and lively spirits. Young men between fifteen and thirty years of age concern themselves only with overwhelming emotions of love, sorrow, or sickness. They are amply endowed with romantic sentiment but lack heroic spirit. In some extreme cases, they even engage in immoral acts and so poison the entire society. This is all because of fiction.

Now everywhere among our people there are heroes of the green forests. The ceremony of "swearing an oath of brotherhood in the Peach Garden" in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and of "oath-taking in the Liang Mountain" as in The Water Margin is rampant. Dreams of having "big bowls of wine, big slices of meat, sharing gold and silver and weighing them on a scale, and putting on complete suits of clothes," as those heroes did, fill the minds of the lower classes. This has gradually led to the formation of secret societies such as the Old Brothers and the Big Swords, culminating in the Boxer Movement which was responsible for the loss of the capital and for bringing foreign troops into China. This is all because of fiction.

Alas! Fiction has entrapped and drowned the masses to such a deplorable extent! The thousands of words of the great sages and philosophers fail to instruct the masses. But one or two books by frivolous scholars and marketplace merchants are more than enough to destroy our entire society. The more fiction is discounted by elegant gentlemen as not worth mentioning, the more fully it will be controlled by frivolous scholars and marketplace merchants. As the nature and position of fiction in society are com-

parable to the air and food indispensable to life, frivolous scholars and marketplace merchants in fact possess the power to control the entire nation. Alas! If this situation is allowed to continue, there is no question that the future of our nation is doomed! Therefore, the reformation of the government of the people must begin with a revolution in fiction, and the renovation of the people must begin with the renovation of fiction.

—Translated by Gek Nai Chong

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8. "Ten years of study by the light of fireflies and snow" (shí nián yíng xuě 十年萤雪) alludes to the stories of Ju Yin 贾俨 and Sun Kang 孙康, both of the fourth century A.D. Ju Yin was so poor in his early years that he studied by the light of a gauze bag full of fireflies. He later became the president of the Board of Civil Services. Sun Kang was so poor he could not afford to buy a lamp; instead he studied in winter by the light reflected from the snow. He later rose to high officialdom.