SEARCHING FOR ROOTS
RECENT CHANGES IN THE ATTITUDE TOWARD TRADITION AS REFLECTED IN THE BEGINNING OF THE LITERARY DEBATE ABOUT "ROOTS"

OLGA LOMOVÁ
(Charles University, Prague)

Modern Chinese writers and literary critics until recently did not show much sympathy for their own traditional culture. The May Fourth generation's men of letters perceived tradition first of all as a burden hindering the rise of truly modern literature; they were convinced that the new vital forces had to be imported from the West. Thus Western and Chinese came to be understood as two antipodes: Western — modern and positive, and traditional Chinese — backward and negative. Even the few writers, like Zhou Zuoren, who were aware also of positive aspects of traditional Chinese culture, remained Western-oriented.¹

The Anti-Japanese War brought about a rise in patriotism and greater interest in Chinese history and traditional culture as well. It had to some degree weakened the previous cultural nihilism; the Chinese tradition, however, was still viewed through the prism of the May Fourth ideology, i.e. as basically degenerate and unable to live without the help of Western culture.

During the war, some of the writers experimented with the so-called national forms — i.e. literary techniques of the traditional domestic folk and popular literature, mainly in its oral forms. The shift in search for inspiration toward folk tradition became the core of the new concept of literature that was proclaimed by Mao Zedong in Yan'an. However, the Yan'an Talks did not attempt to reevaluate Chinese traditional culture; the interest in "national forms" was aroused

¹. Compare for example his essays on Western and Chinese literature collected in Zhitang shuhua (知堂書話), Zhong Shuhe (ed.). Yuelu Shushe, 1986.
by needs of propaganda among the rural population. In Mao Zedong’s view, literature is just one of the weapons in social revolution, which by definition is anti-traditional.

After 1949 “national forms” became an important part of the new socialist literature in China, partly at the expense of its previous Western-style flavour. Moreover, much of the earlier modern literature started to be criticised for its “bourgeois spirit”. However, this turn toward domestic tradition could not bring about the creative exploitation of the Chinese cultural heritage. While on the surface tradition persisted in “national forms”, the ideological message of this literature was “revolutionary” and anti-traditional. It was really just “pouring new wine into old bottles”.

The contradictory attitude toward domestic tradition — using traditional forms to fight tradition — was brought to extremes during the Cultural Revolution. In this campaign much of the tradition still living in China was destroyed. At the same time the modern westernised culture that had been built during earlier decades of the 20th century disappeared as well, and yangbanxi and fiction notable for the employment of traditional techniques, represent Chinese literature of this period.

After the Cultural Revolution a new generation of writers arose that was highly critical of the previous socialist literature, including the “national forms”. They turned to reviving the ties of Chinese literature with the West and to a certain degree brought back the spirit of the May Fourth westernisation.

In mid-1980s some of these western oriented younger writers suddenly started to show deep interest in Chinese tradition and Xungen wenxue, “Searching for roots” came into existence. The a priori negative attitude toward traditional Chinese culture disappeared and, at the same time, the May Fourth idol lost much of its aura. Instead of the previous uncritical admiration, the May Fourth Movement came to be criticised for “creating a rift in culture” (wenhua duanlie 文化斷裂) thus hindering the development of Chinese literature.

The first stories of xungen type appeared in the relatively liberal atmosphere of late 1984, and first reflections on the idea of domestic “roots” followed soon afterwards. A debate about tradition versus modernity ensued, during which various concepts of tradition and its role in modern literature were formulated, and the idea of “roots” began developing into different directions.

In the follow “roots”, publishes de gen” (文學的根), “Li-ya-lie women de gen”, Zuo; these essays can st “roots”.

Some basic facts

The notion of two other essays a some new dimens; Li Hangly expressing the generation.

It seems that ref for modern literat joyed some kind Shaogong was public script to several infl the publication of th encouraged wider discu rary magazines, nan publish articles about rature.

Han Shaogong’s id sprouted most proba in Hangzhou, which and where the issue of


3. This author’s name is by some authors as Ah Cheng
5. Liu Xinwu (劉心武), 文學到合金文學), Zuojia, 19
6. The conference unde 文學:回顧與預測) was organ zhou, in December 1984. It young writers participated
In the following article I would like to sum up three essays on "roots", published during 1985 when the idea was born. It is "Wenxue de gen" (文學的根) by Han Shaogong (韓少功), "Li-yi-li women de gen" (理理我們的根) by Li Hangyu (李杭育) and "Wenhua zhiyue zhe renlei" (文化制約著人類) by A Cheng. I believe that these essays can shed some light on the original meaning of the idea of "roots".

Some basic facts

The notion of "roots" was first formulated by Han Shaogong. The two other essays approved of Han Shaogong's idea but also added some new dimensions to it. A Cheng made finer observations on tradition; Li Hangyu on the other hand rather simplified it, apparently expressing the vision of Chinese tradition prevailing among his generation.

It seems that reflections on the importance of domestic tradition for modern literature were quite common at the time, and even enjoyed some kind of official support. Before the essay by Han Shaogong was published, the editorial board of Zuojia sent the manuscript to several influential writers and critics for comments. After the publication of the essay by Han Shaogong, the editorial board encouraged wider discussion on the topic. At the same time, other literary magazines, namely the influential Wenyi Bao, also started to publish articles about the meaning of tradition for contemporary literature.

Han Shaogong's idea, that marks the beginning of this discussion, sprouted most probably during a conference held in December 1984 in Hangzhou, which dealt with the perspectives of Chinese literature and where the issue of tradition was already discussed.

3. This author's name is Zhong Acheng; A Cheng is his nom de plume transcribed by some authors as Ah Cheng.
6. The conference under the name Xin shiqi wenxue: huigu yu yuwe (新时期文学: 回顧與預測) was organized by Shanghai Wenxue and took place in Hangzhou, in December 1984. It was not widely covered in press, however many famous young writers participated in it. For further details on this conference see Li
All the three contributors to the idea of “roots” I am going to discuss here, are writers. Li Hangyu was already mentioned in the essays by Han Shaogong and A Cheng as one of the established xungen authors; Han Shaogong became one of the most famous representatives of Xungen wenxue during 1985. A Cheng became famous at the same time; his writings, however, do not on first glance represent the typical Xungen wenxue 尋根文學 centered on stories from backward rural districts.

Writers are not necessarily good literary critics; also these essays do not represent consistent literary criticism. They are rather one-sided and too personal, including the style — exalted and florid in the case of Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu, and highly colloquial and paradoxical in the case of A Cheng. The main shortcoming of these essays is their more or less prescriptive authoritarian attitude, combined with simplifications and sometimes misunderstandings in the way Chinese tradition is interpreted.

But if we read the essays just as a kind of random thoughts on literature, they prove to be valuable material. We can see how these Chinese writers perceived their own traditional culture in the moment it started to arouse their interest; moreover, certain substantial changes in understanding what creative writing means are reflected here, changes which are apparently going to have a great impact on modern Chinese literature.

Why “roots”?

For better understanding of the idea of “roots”, it is helpful to see the primary impulse that gave rise to it. The first considerations on “roots” were inseparable from a largely shared belief that modern literature in China is in crisis, and that a substantial change is necessary to make it flourish again. Han Shaogong, Li Hangyu, as well as A Cheng start from the point that Chinese literature after the Cultural Revolution somehow disappointed the expectations many writers and critics held. It did not become the literature of “eternal values”, comparable with the masterpieces of world literature, whose quality would materialise in the award of the Nobel prize for a Chinese writer.

The first writers discussing the issue of "roots" found explanation of this failure in the dependence of modern Chinese literature on models imported from the West, i.e. from alien culture.

Hoping to find new perspectives for Chinese literature, they all come to the conclusion that it must become independent of western models and be rooted in what they call traditional national culture (minzu chuantaong wenhua 民族傳統文化). Thus the roots under discussion are roots of literature (wenxue de gen 文學的根), but at the same time also roots of (Chinese) culture (wenhua de gen 文化的根).

Interest in "traditional national culture" is further reinforced by a certain cultural determinism. In all three essays we can explicitly or implicitly find opinion that literature is a process commanded by objective, irreversible laws, one of them being dependence of literature on the cultural milieu created within each nation. 7

In spite of their self-proclaimed determinism, implying that literature is shaped by its cultural background, these writers do not accept Chinese traditional culture as a whole, but try to sort out only some parts, seemingly vital for further development of Chinese literature. In the way this selection is made, the views of Han Shaogong with Li Hangyu differ substantially from the views of A Cheng and I am going to treat their essays separately.

Exotic vision of native culture

The idea of "national traditional culture" as formulated by Han Shaogong and later by Li Hangyu has a decidedly exotic, non Chinese flavour. Surprisingly it ignores most of the culture of the Han nation. Namely Li Hangyu criticises Chinese tradition for its allegedly "anti-artistic character" using arguments strikingly similar to the arguments of the May Fourth generation and their iconoclastic attacks on the past. 8

Traditional culture, in which both Han Shaogong as well as Li Hangyu are discovering the “roots” of contemporary literature, is far

7. Han Shaogong does not try to clarify his criteria for definition of the idea of nation; it is evident that he does not keep to one clear definition. Promoting "traditional national culture" he identifies it sometimes with regional cultures, while in other cases he mentions Eastern or European cultures as one entity, etc. Li Hangyu uses the expression Zhonghua minzu wenhua (中華民族文化) and often identifies it with the "culture of the national minorities".

8. Li Hangyu, op. cit., p. 76.
away and only partly preserved; it is hidden in ancient times or remote areas and it has to be “excavated”. In their view, it is first of all the culture of South China before the Han unification, which was not dominant in further development of the Chinese culture. It is represented by the poetry of Chuci in the individualistic, non-Confucian interpretation. After Chuci, there has been, according to the view of Li and Han, hardly anything in Chinese literature, that could be inspirational or just of any interest for contemporary writers.

Moreover, they view Chuci not so much as a literary masterpiece, but as ritual songs reflecting religious beliefs of the people of ancient state of Chu. (This neglect of literary values is especially striking in the essay of Li Hangyu, who expresses the deepest admiration for Tianwen, part of Chuci that is artistically rather dull.) That is why they can easily identify the poetry of Qu Yuan with religious customs and festivals of the non-Han mountain tribes in South-West China.

This neglect for literary values in Chuci is not incidental. Neither Han Shaogong, nor Li Hangyu, mention in their essays in greater detail other works of traditional Chinese literature. Their attraction to Chuci, besides its irrationality and religious preoccupation, is caused mainly by certain aesthetic qualities I am going to discuss later, which are not of purely literary character.

Regionalism and ruralism; “non-standard culture”

Instead of further investigations into Han culture, both Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu discover roots of contemporary Chinese literature in different regional cultures. In fact the idea of “roots” was for the first time expressed in the concept of the Chu regional culture understood as direct continuation of the ancient tradition and traditions of local national minorities.9

Han Shaogong further mentions with approval also other regional cultural traditions, and Li Hangyu directly states that traditions preserved with all the minorities in China have, unlike the Han nation, great value for modern literature.

Another place where Chinese writers are advised to seek for new vital forces is in “rural culture” (or cultures perhaps) (xiangsu wenhua 鄉土文化) because of its alleged authenticity and surviving “primeval”

(yuanshi 原始) of the city and the

Different regional cultures of China have in the view of Li and Han, are “non-standard culture”.

The quality of Chuci is not into stagnating literary tradition because of Han Shaogong with culture spirit of the Central Plains, idea of the importance illustrated by the authors. Han Shaogong for example including the “Chu culture” (Huis and Uighur).

New Aesthetics

Han Shaogong phenomena not only of language, the beliefs, festivals, with their songs and melodies. An important thing is nature untouched by modernity.

The beauty appears in the aesthetic ideal of other “roots” of Chinese. (xuanli 詢薀), or not interested in they admire. Li Hangyu mentions which are “charm of primitiveness” at the same time and “intoxicating”.

This kind of beauty in freedom of expression they share. In past tracings

10. Han Shaogong.
11. Han Shaogong.
Searching for Roots

New Aesthetics

Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu are fascinated by certain aesthetic phenomena not necessarily unique for literature. More than by the art of language, they are both attracted by exotic religious rituals and festivals, with the colourful attire of dancers and unusual musical melodies. An integral part of this exotic vision of beauty is a wild nature untouched by human presence.

The beauty appealing to Han and Li is far removed from the aesthetic ideal of traditional Chinese literati. In the essays on the “roots” of Chinese culture, Han and Li employ words like “gorgeous” (xuanli 紛麗), or “exotic beauty” (qili 奇麗) to describe the culture they admire. Li Hangyu, in addition, expresses admiration for cultures which are “simple and vigorous” (bunhou 濃厚), or contain the “charm of primitive simplicity” (gupu de fengyun 古樸的風韻), and at the same time are “blazing with colour” (wucai binfen 五彩繽紛) and “intoxicating” (miren 迷人).

This kind of beauty is inherent in the ideal of spontaneity and total freedom of expression, which both Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu share. In past traditions and in the cultures of non-Han nationalities

11. Han Shaogong, op. cit., p. 32.
they search for free expression of the individual, finding these cultures “unrestrained” (kuangfang 狂放) and filled with “solitary indignation” (gufen 孤愤) and admiring their alleged free sexual morals.

New way of understanding the world

The concept of exotic, primordial beauty together with the ideal of spontaneity and freedom in the essays by Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu is accompanied by a concept of cognition based on intuitive knowledge. The beauty Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu discover in remote cultures does not result from rational considerations; it is a straightforward expression of spontaneous feelings and impressions, usually too vague to be grasped in an explicit formulation. Both Han and Li admire myths, are enchanted by mystery and emphasise the importance of free fantasy for artistic creation.

Here they both express their admiration for Zhuangzi, namely his fantastic visions and love of freedom. Zhuangzi is, according to Han and Li, the only ancient Chinese author who still has something to say to contemporary Chinese writers.

Passion for the truth

Besides exotic beauty and irrationality, literary works like Chuci and Zhuangzi and some regional cultures appeal to Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu also because they seem to provide a truthful view of human existence, later distorted by Confucian ideology and again by modern civilisation.

Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu strive in their essays for the essence of things, they want to strip reality of its conventional interpretations and on their own discover its substance. They focus on what they believe are the earliest and hence, in their view, the most authentic expressions of Chinese civilisation, assuming that it is precisely there that they can discover truth about man and about the meaning of life. This passion for unadorned truth is reflected in the language Li Hangyu is employing when talking about the ideal culture he is looking for. He calls it “the truthful culture” (zhenshi de wenhua 真实的文化) or “simple and honest culture” (shipu de wenhua 简朴的文化).

No more ideology

Behind the search for the emphasis on every and suspicion of rational distrust of any preconceived official ideology in C

Neither Han Shaogong nor the concept of literature in

Talks. Instead they (shiyong zhuyi 諸用主義) well as with the "cult

for ideology and protected by any theory might suggest. It is an

individual approach to living aims. It should, i

puzzles of the develop

Far from an open

the issue of ideology, and true vision of the

on first sight conflict

ponded to its demand

truth and might be a

A Cheng and his me

A Cheng welcome

nese literature has to

some of the earlier s

that has found its "re

cussion on roots, at

achieving social goals

official ideology dis

the modern literature

12. Han Shaogong, op
No more ideology

Behind the search for ultimate truth about man, as well as behind the emphasis on everything nonstandard, the ideal of primeval beauty and suspicion of rational explanations of the world, scepticism and distrust of any preconceived ideology can be seen. Their scepticism implies that Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu hesitate to accept the “one and only scientific explanation” of man and society, as offered by the official ideology in China.

Neither Han Shaogong, nor Li Hangyu even mention the official concept of literature in service of ideology, derived from the Yan'an Talks. Instead they are criticizing an unspecified utilitarianism (shiyong zhuyi 實用主義), linking it with the Confucian ideology, as well as with the “culture of the Centre” or “standard culture”. Distrust for ideology and protest against utilitarianism, however, are not motivated by any theory of l'art pour l'art, as the Chinese Marxist critics might suggest. It is rather a call for unconventional, creative and individual approach to literature, which still is supposed to have far reaching aims. It should, in the view of Han Shaogong, “unravel certain puzzles of the development of nations and survival of mankind.”

Far from an open revolt, these essays are rather an attempt to avoid the issue of ideology, stressing the importance of personal experience and true vision of the national past. Thus the idea of “roots” did not on first sight conflict with Chinese Marxism of the 1980s; it corresponded to its demand for practice as the ultimate criterion of the truth and might be also interpreted as an echo of the officially supported nationalism.

A Cheng and his more complex vision of national tradition

A Cheng welcomes Han Shaogong’s idea that contemporary Chinese literature has to be rooted in national culture; he also praises some of the earlier stories by Li Hangyu as an example of literature that has found its “roots”. A Cheng, like his predecessors in the discussion on roots, also claims that literature is not just a tool for achieving social goals, and with the same undertone of revolt against official ideology disapproves of the utilitarian character of most of the modern literature in China.

In spite of these similarities we find in his essay a concept of tradition in many respects different from the concept presented by Han Shaogong and later shared by Li Hangyu.

The most striking difference is in the fact that A Cheng does not seek "roots" only in distant past or in regional cultures; he is not attracted by exotic, sensuous beauty, neither does he show any fascination with religion and mystery. Instead, A Cheng tries to view traditional Chinese culture as a whole. Though he also voices certain preferences partially similar to those of Han and Li (e.g., Zhuangzi), he does not bother with more detailed discussion of this topic. For A Cheng "traditional national culture" is one whole, to a large degree determined by language.

The importance of language

Language is in A Cheng's view the most important part of every national culture; thanks to the character of language, each national literature is endowed with distinct qualities, says A Cheng in his essay and concludes that no writer can avoid the issue of his own language and no writer can be successful unless he grasps its essence.

A Cheng does not have in mind language merely as a medium of expression; he is convinced that language shapes the way people experience reality and to a large degree also preconditions what he calls "national mentality" (minzu xintai 民族心態). A Cheng claims that most modern Chinese literature lacks unique national mentality — as an exception he mentions Lu Xun and Lao She — because most of the Chinese writers in the 20th century turned away from domestic tradition and only blindly imitated the West. Here, A Cheng is the most pronounced critic of the May Fourth Movement.

Traditional philosophy and aesthetics

Language and national mentality find their expression, according to A Cheng, also in unique philosophical concepts. Thus he defines Chinese (or Eastern) culture in opposition to the Western culture, comparing their different philosophical backgrounds. In the case of the East he emphasises intuitive knowledge and unity of man and nature as opposite to Western logical reasoning and basic antagonism between man and nature.

A Cheng argues that different philosophical backgrounds gave rise to different approaches to creative art and calls for revival of the Chinese concepts of creative use examples from literature.

A Cheng, contrary to traditional China was aware that art and literature first of all as a spontaneous feeling.

A Cheng defines this "freedom of creativity" as man’s creativity.

Freedom and discipline

A Cheng argues that a writer’s freedom of expression is only possible if he combines total freedom and discipline. On the one hand he is convinced that Chinese literature has its discipline, but does not define freedom as an absolute concept.

The idea of freedom and discipline, according to A Cheng, is combined with the "freedom of creation", but after all it is not freedom but freedom to publish.

In the creative process, discipline, or "national mentality", is only this discipline can bring true art. A Cheng believes that Chinese culture, with its unique philosophy, language and the above-mentioned "national mentality" is necessary for a true expression of art.

China and the West

The problem of incompatibility of Eastern and Western philosophy and aesthetics is explored by A Cheng. He believes that both philosophy and aesthetics are unique and to a large extent they are not comparable. They are rather different and only a genuine writer can understand these differences.

In fact none of the Chinese writers, according to A Cheng, uses work that is comparable to a Western reader.

The problem of artistic expression is explored by A Cheng, who refuses Western concepts of art and culture, arguing that Chinese concepts are fundamentally different. He believes that Chinese art and literature have their own unique qualities that cannot be compared to Western art. He emphasizes the importance of language in shaping national culture and the need for a strong Chinese identity in literature.

A Cheng argues that Chinese literature lacks a unique national mentality compared to Western literature, which is characterized by logical reasoning and antagonist views. He believes that Chinese culture, with its unique philosophy, language, and national mentality, is necessary for true art expression.

A Cheng's work explores the differences between Chinese and Western philosophy and aesthetics, arguing that they are not comparable and that only genuine Chinese writers can understand these differences.
nese concepts of creative art. For his arguments, however, he does not use examples from literature, but from painting and calligraphy.

A Cheng, contrary to Li Hangyu, does not think that creative art in traditional China was in service of social goals; he reminds his readers that art and literature in traditional China were understood first of all as a spontaneous expression of personal experiences and feelings.

A Cheng defines this concept of art as uniquely Chinese, apparently unaware of similar concepts in the Occidental world.

**Freedom and discipline**

A Cheng argues that the traditional Chinese concept of art combined total freedom and spontaneity on one side, with high discipline on the other. He is convinced that the lack of freedom, together with certain discipline in the creative process, are the very reasons why modern Chinese literature is not very successful.

The idea of freedom is crucial to A Cheng. It is not an outward political freedom, but inner freedom of each individual. A Cheng ridicules one of the sacred ideas of Chinese writers in the 1980s — "freedom of creation" —, and tries to attract attention to the fact that after all it is not freedom to create which everybody is talking about, but freedom to publish, which in itself cannot secure artistic quality.

In the creative process, besides inner freedom, A Cheng demands certain discipline, or in his own words "restrictions" (xianzhi 限制); only this discipline can transform common experience into a piece of art. A Cheng believes that these restrictions are determined by the cultural tradition, which in the case of literature is embodied in language and the above-mentioned national mentality.

**China and the West**

The problem of intercultural relations is touched upon by all three writers. They all express a similar opinion that Chinese culture is unique and to a large degree incompatible with Western culture. This belief is very strong, even though the definition of "Chineseness" is always rather vague. Moreover many of the characteristics these writers use in description of Chinese traditional culture do not seem to a Western reader to be uniquely Chinese.

In fact none of them, neither Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu, nor A Cheng, refuses Western inspiration totally. (In the stories of Han
Shaogong from 1985-86 we can see the abundance of Western literary techniques.) The example of literature in Xinjiang, Han Shaogong mentions, suggests quite the contrary — belief in the positive role of cultural contacts.\(^\text{13}\)

The importance of "Chinese roots" is stressed, so that "Western branches could be grafted on them".\(^\text{14}\)

At the same time, Han Shaogong and the other writers on "roots" doubt the possibility of promoting contemporary Chinese literature through imitations of translated Western literature. Each of them has his own reasons for this doubt: Han Shaogong points to the fact that Chinese translators usually choose works of literature that have already become part of what he calls "standard culture"; moreover, says he, they usually have difficulties in grasping all the layers of meaning in foreign literary works and usually reduce everything to the already petrified standard.

A Cheng doubts any advantages of intercultural literary influence mainly because of the decisive role of language and national mentality over literature. It does not mean, however, refusal of all contacts with different cultures; in fact he calls for dialogue between cultures, and just warns against taking foreign literature for a "guiding force" (zhidao 指導).

It is interesting to note that in spite of the opinion that contemporary Chinese literature has to be rooted in domestic tradition and must have unique national character, none of these writers even mentions "national forms" as an example to be followed. From their criticism of most of the modern Chinese literature it is evident that they do not view the way traditional techniques were employed in Chinese literature after 1949 in modern literature as a genuine continuation of traditional culture.\(^\text{15}\)

**What does the idea of roots bring to Chinese literature?**

In spite of some substantial differences in the opinions of Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu on one side, and A Cheng on the other, we still can see several common points in their essays, marking a radical change in modern positive attitude to hand in hand with the contribution to modern literature in China.

From the point of view of literary form, as it was formulated by many of the writers, the "Chinese ness", which started to be understood in literature in China,

These essays define and develop many aspects of the concept of "Western", as it was formulated by Li Hangyu, and so much attracted the attention of many of the ideologists. It seems certain that anti-cultural and ink-painting Chinese literature in modern times.

It seems that the traditional culture is a step beyond the traditional culture.

13. Han Shaogong, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
15. Though the literature during the Cultural Revolution is usually described as one in which the traditional forms persisted, A Cheng calls the Cultural Revolution a time of total destruction of tradition.
abundance of Western literary influence in Xinjiang. Han Shaogong’s belief in the positive role of Western literature is stressed, so that “Western influence on “roots” or traditional literary in literature. Each of them has Shaogong points to the fact that works of literature that have a “standard culture”; moreover, in grasping all the layers of culture reduces everything to the intercultural literary influence and national mentality, refusal of all contacts or dialogue between cultures, literature as a “guiding force” of the opinion that contemporaried in domestic tradition and one of these writers even mentions to be followed. From their literature it is evident that techniques were employed in literature as a genuine contin-

change in modern Chinese literary thought. It is first of all a new positive attitude toward Chinese traditional culture, which goes hand in hand with the first attempt at reevaluation of the May Fourth contribution to modern Chinese literature.

From the opinions on the incompatibility of Chinese and Western literatures, we can see that the total opposition between Chinese and Western, as it was felt by the generation of the May Fourth Movement, is still at work. What changed is the attitude toward “Chineseness”, which is no more seen as a burden, but on the contrary it starts to be understood as essential for further development of modern literature in China.

These essays show the limits of young Chinese writers to absorb and develop manifold Chinese tradition. First of all the sophisticated literati tradition seems to be inaccessible to them, or perhaps too distant from contemporary life to be worth even mentioning.

It is also clear, that in spite of critical remarks about the May Fourth, at least Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu do not substantially depart from the vision of Chinese traditional culture and modern values formulated by the May Fourth generation. This explains why they are so much attracted by phenomena in Chinese culture which remind us more of the “noble savage” of European romanticism, or certain anti-cultural trends in Western art in the 20th century, than of ancient Chinese literature.

In this point it was only A Cheng who was able to see Chinese tradition from a new perspective, probably thanks to his experience with traditional Chinese aesthetics through his interest in calligraphy and ink-painting. But even he does not use examples from traditional Chinese literature when talking about the importance of tradition in modern times.

It seems that the time for deeper re-evaluation of Chinese traditional culture was not yet ripe in 1985. The idea of “roots” was just the first step — it raised the problem and changed the previous a priori negative attitude to traditional culture, without being able to

16. The same change of attitude toward domestic tradition is already apparent in China before 1985 not only in literature but also in film, music and especially painting. It seems to be growing stronger, as evident in works of some young artists, such as Li Xiaofeng and Zhang Dan. (They both graduated from Peking Academy of Applied Arts in 1991.) In their paintings they express aesthetic inclinations similar to Han Shaogong or Li Hangyu; however when I talked to Li Xiaofeng in Prague in 1992, he did not even know about the idea of “roots” in contemporary Chinese literature.
see the tradition in greater complexity, and to discover modern values in traditional Chinese literature.

I believe that the vision of traditional culture, expressed in these essays, is not so important as the basic approach to literature present here implicitly. On this point Han Shaogong, Li Hangyu and A Cheng totally agree; they all emphasise that literature is a result of independent creative act, and cannot be subordinated to the dictate of the prevailing ideology of the time. They all want literature to be spontaneous and truthful, to be original and individualistic. They reject literature that is just a product of rational planning, or a passive reflection of the outer world.

It is in fact a tacit revolt against official ideology; revolt that goes hand in hand with a painful search for identity (including national identity in confrontation with the world) and is expressed in a new aesthetic sensibility.

In this respect I can see the idea of “roots”, as formulated in its very beginning, as a direct continuation of the ideas of the unofficial literature of late 1970s and early 1980s, and of the modern sensibilities it introduced into Chinese literature. Thus Han Shaogong and the others did not so much “excavate tradition” but rather through the idea of tradition approved of a modern concept of literature and new aesthetic perception that had been so far banned from the official literary scene.