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The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century



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INTRODUCTION

Classical Chinese poetry and the great traditional novels are widely admired by readers throughout the world. Chinese literature in this century has not yet received similar acclaim. Some works have been unjustly neglected, through lack of knowledge or good translation, but many may never gain a wide readership abroad purely on the basis of literary appeal. Nevertheless, modern Chinese literature provides insights into the lives of the largest population in the world. Our aim in this book is to provide a broad picture of the general history of Chinese literature from the beginning of this century up to its last decade, showing the ways in which Chinese people have expressed themselves through one of the most difficult, exciting and confusing periods in the long history of their culture and civilisation.

Literature in modern China

The relation between a literary work and the society in which it is produced and consumed is a matter on which Chinese critics, theorists and writers have held strong views, usually closely related to their political stance. It was less common for them to acknowledge that literary works are also related to each other: to the tradition from which they emerge, and to the other works which appear at roughly the same time. In practice, a literary work is usually viewed by its writer, reader and critic in the context of other literary works. Above all, writers and readers generally share unspoken assumptions of what 'literature' is.

The concept of 'literature' in modern China is heavily indebted to Western ideas dating from the early nineteenth century. Through the intensive debates of the 1910s and 1920s, it became understood as a body of written work comprising a certain set of genres -