

# The Development of The Essay Genre in Chinese Literature

Ashurova Maktuba Abduazizovna

Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Lecturer at the Higher School of Sinology, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This article explores the development of the essay genre in Chinese literature, tracing its evolution from historical roots to contemporary trends. The earliest forms of the essay in China date back to the Tang Dynasty. Sanwen (散文), or the essay, is one of the most prominent genres in Chinese literature, having undergone significant transformations and evolutions over the centuries. Unlike traditional genres such as poetry and prose, sanwen offers readers a distinctive perspective on the world, enabling the author to freely express personal thoughts, emotions, and observations. This study examines the transformation of the sanwen genre in Chinese literature, its historical progression, key authors, and its influence on modern literary discourse.

**Keywords:** Sanwen, essay, cultural revolution, Lu Xin, political changes, historical biography.

**Introduction:** The essay is a distinctive and complex form of literary journalism that is increasingly attracting readers' attention. The founder of the essay genre is the French writer and humanist philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who wrote his work "Essais" ("Essays") in 1580, in which he expressed his thoughts on the fate of humanity and society as a whole.

An essay is essentially a short prose composition with a free structure, expressing individual impressions and reflections on any given subject.

It does not claim to provide a definitive explanation or comprehensive interpretation of a specific question or topic. As a rule, an essay offers a new, subjectively colored perspective on a matter and may take the form of philosophical, historical-biographical, journalistic, literary-critical, popular-scientific, or purely fictional writing. The essayistic style is characterized by its imagery, use of aphorisms, and a conversational tone and vocabulary. Since ancient times, the genre has developed in works where the author's personality is placed at the forefront.

As a genre, the essay is distinguished by the following features: "a short prose work with a free composition that seeks to convey individual impressions and reflections related to a particular topic in one way or

another."

A synthesis of various definitions of the essay allows us to highlight the following characteristics: a small volume and a clearly defined topic; a wide thematic range—from science to fiction; the subject of discourse in an essay is the author's subjective impressions and thoughts, resulting from introspection; the interpretation of the topic emphasizes the author's individual perspective and subjectivity; a free composition; the use of paradox and aphorism; a style oriented toward conversational and relaxed speech.

The structure and composition of an essay are typically mosaic in nature. For example, if the essay discusses a particular character, the text may interweave episodes from that person's life, descriptions of the era in which they lived, observations and conclusions, sketches, and more. The essayist often includes scenes from their own life within the text, which allows for an implicit comparison between two different time periods. The essay can also incorporate elements of other genres such as confession, diary entries, notes, memoirs, autobiography, letters, and others.

The essay style cannot be described with a single word. Within one text, depending on the author's intent, one may encounter elements of literary, journalistic, scientific, and even conversational styles. According to

Chinese scholar Cai Jiangzhen, the works and worldview of Chinese writers have been most strongly influenced by the leading figures of English essayism—William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb. The essay genre was fully formed in the early 17th century in the philosophical writings of Francis Bacon, considered the successor of Michel de Montaigne, the founder of Western essayism. Throughout its long historical evolution, the genre eventually developed into two main types: the formal essay and the informal (or familiar) essay.

At the same time, the second category—informal essays in the spirit of a “sincere heart-to-heart conversation”—became especially widespread in 19th-century England and later attracted great interest among prominent Chinese writers and literary scholars of the 20th century, such as Lin Yutang, Xu Menghua, and Fan. Chinese readers were first introduced to the classical heritage of Western essayism during the New Culture Movement of the 1910s–1920s (notably the May Fourth Movement). Many scholars—including Zhao Xiuyuan, Li Gang, Cai Jiangzhen, and others—have come to share the view that this social movement represented the most significant turning point in the history of modern Chinese essayism. According to Zhao Xiuyuan, the developmental paths of Chinese and Western essayism intersected for the first time during this period, marking what he describes as “the first revolution in the field of the sanwen genre in China.”

**Sanwen (散文)**, or the essay, is one of the most important genres in Chinese literature, having undergone significant changes and evolutions over the centuries. Unlike traditional genres such as poetry and prose, sanwen offers readers a unique perspective on the world, allowing the author to freely express personal thoughts, emotions, and observations.

**Historical development of the sanwen genre:** The sanwen genre began to emerge during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), when poets started to use colloquial language and personal themes more frequently in their works. However, the genre truly flourished during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, when essays became popular among scholars and writers. During this period, sanwen evolved into a modern form that incorporated elements of personal reflection, philosophical meditation, and social commentary.

**The Impact of the 1911 Revolution:** Significant changes in the sanwen genre occurred in the early 20th century amid the political and social transformations that swept across China. The 1911 Revolution ended centuries of monarchy and opened the way for new ideas and forms of expression. Inspired by the concepts

of democracy, science, and individualism, writers and intellectuals began to use sanwen as a means to express their views on social justice, politics, and cultural identity.

One of the leading figures of this period was Lu Xun, who utilized the sanwen genre to criticize traditional values and social injustices. His works, such as “A Madman’s Diary,” became emblematic of a new literary movement striving to liberate Chinese literature from past conventions.

**Sanwen as a form of self-expression:** Sanwen allows authors to freely express their thoughts and emotions, making it an ideal genre for personal reflection. Unlike poetry, which often requires strict forms and rhyme schemes, the essay offers greater freedom in style and content choice. This flexibility enables writers to explore complex topics such as identity, culture, and society with depth and nuance.

Contemporary authors like Yan Ge (阎格) and Wang An (王安) continue to develop the sanwen genre, using it to address pressing issues such as ecology, globalization, and cultural change. Their works reflect the diversity and complexity of modern Chinese society, as well as a desire to explore new forms of self-expression.

**The Influence of the Sanwen Genre on World Literature** The revolution in the sanwen genre is not confined to the Chinese context alone. As a form of essay writing, it has had a significant impact on world literature and inspired writers from many countries. Chinese authors who utilize sanwen offer unique perspectives and insights on contemporary issues, becoming an important voice in the global literary discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The sanwen genre in Chinese literature has traveled a long path since its inception, undergoing profound changes and revolutions. It has become an essential means of self-expression and social critique that allows authors to explore complex topics and propose new ideas in a rapidly changing world. The revolution in the sanwen genre continues to open new horizons for writers and readers worldwide, influencing contemporary literature globally.

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