Chapter 5

Modern literature: trauma, movements, and bus stops

In Gao Xingjian's 1940- play *Bus Stop* (1983), eight characters, stuck in an outer suburb, wait for a bus. Though sound effects announce passing buses, none stops, and the characters gradually despair of ever reaching the city. Gramps cannot get to his chess match; Girl misses her date; and Hothead fears losing his chance to taste yogurt. Mom tries to teach Hothead some manners, consoles the lovelorn girl, and worries about her husband and child, whose laundry awaits her weekend visits. Early on, without explanation, the Silent Person leaves to walk, and when the others realize that ten years have passed, they regret not having followed his example.

At regular intervals, the audience sees the silhouetted Silent Person walking, accompanied by a signature tune. His movement serves as a foil for the waiting characters, whose predicament recalls that of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Drawing on both traditional Chinese theater (with its interplay of sound and drama) and French theater of the absurd, Gao's characters sometimes talk for the sake of talking. But their dialogues also express deep longings and trenchant social criticisms. For Glasses, who misses his final chance to take the College Entrance Exam, the waiting becomes unbearable: “Life has left us behind. The world has forgotten us. A lifespan passes by in vain right before your eyes.” “Waiting’s not so bad,” the master
carpenter counters later, when the actors break character to deliver overlapping lines. “People wait because they have hope.”

A political allegory of China’s passage from the countryside to the city, Gao’s play suggests five themes central to the modernization and globalization of Chinese literature. Though many critics interpret the play as signaling the government’s failure to deliver the means of progress, others hear in it ongoing commitments to national pride, humanism, progress, memory, and pleasure. Although such positive aspirations have often been downplayed by critics of Gao’s 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, their resonance for the Nobel Committee and for his other admirers suggests these themes’ centrality in contemporary world literature.

Pursuing the nation

After Gao’s characters have waited a year, they try to block the road as a bus approaches. It blares its horn, and the characters scatter as the bus, full of foreigners, speeds past. It was a tour bus for foreigners, Mom explains, which would have required foreign currency certificates. This affront further discourages them, and a little later Glasses despairs that no bus will come: “Let’s walk, as that guy did. In the time we’ve spent foolishly waiting at this bus stop, someone could have not only arrived in the city, but accomplished something there. What are we waiting for?”

Because the characters decide to set off on foot only at the end of the play, their passivity has also been interpreted as an allegory for China’s belated modernization. Though many features of modern societies were developing in China by at least the sixteenth century, China was militarily unprepared when European powers forcibly entered China in the nineteenth century. After disputes over Britain’s importation of opium led to the Opium Wars, a series of unequal treaties imposed mercantilism (what would now be called free trade), opened China’s ports, created foreign concessions in key cities, and made Hong Kong a British colony.

Concerned that China would be carved up like a melon, reformers pursued a limited Westernization movement—based on the notion of “Chinese essence, Western means”—until Japan too defeated China in the 1894–95 war over Korea. After Japan imposed its own unequal treaty that, among other humiliations, made the island of Taiwan a Japanese colony, many Chinese saw Japan’s power as the result of the Meiji regime’s embrace of Westernization. As Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853–1921) and others translated works by thinkers such as Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Montesquieu, “survival of the fittest” and other vocabulary from the social sciences increasingly shaped Chinese intellectuals’ understanding of their nation’s dilemmas, and they advocated a more radical modernization program for China.

This nationalistic project supported Chinese literature’s evolution into a distinct and respected field. Convinced that China’s survival depended on an educated citizenry, reformers published vernacular novels, newspapers, and magazines. From Beijing University’s founding in 1898, newly established universities nurtured academic study of the humanities, including Chinese and foreign literatures, and literary groups formed around key universities. With the abolition of the civil service exams in 1905, intellectuals gained further independence from the government.

To buttress the newly conceived nation, reformers drew heavily on ideas and forms in Western literature, available thanks to, among others, Lin Shu’s 林紳 (1852–1924) translations of more than a hundred novels by writers including Conan Doyle, Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, Balzac, and Tolstoy. Crediting Western novels for the steady progress of Europe, America, and Japan, the reformer Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) published numerous Western works in his journal, New Fiction 新小說 (1902–6), and in 1902 Liang explicitly called for a transformation of China’s own fiction: “If one intends to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction.”
These concerns intensified after a series of uprisings overthrew the Qing dynasty in 1911. The new Republic of China (1912–) seemed ill equipped to address the nation's troubles, and the revolution of 1911 came to be seen as a "revolution betrayed" after the Republic's first president tried to declare himself emperor. Warlords controlled much of China until the National Revolutionary Army, led by General Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), reunited the country through the Northern Expedition (1926–28).

During this period, journals such as New Youth 新青年 (1915–26) criticized the patriarchal family system and other Confucian "feudal" traditions they deemed responsible for the nation's weaknesses. Eager to orient China toward the future, intellectuals launched a New Culture Movement championing individual freedom, feminism, democracy, science, and a more accessible vernacular literature. This movement, sometimes called the Chinese "Enlightenment," became politicized once students at Beijing University launched their own journal, New Tide 新潮 (1919–22), and demonstrated to protest the Allies' plan to give Germany's territories in China to Japan at the Paris Peace Conference. These demonstrations, which began on May 4, 1919, brought democratic and nationalist ideals to a larger popular base and led many in this "May Fourth Movement" to turn to the Left and found the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921.

As foreign powers' designs on China made urgent the task of modernizing its citizens, many reformers believed that depictions of individual consciousness were key to this modernization. Self-expression gained prominence in novels, stories, plays, and poems, but such individualism was deeply rooted in social responsibility and what critic C. T. Hsia later called modern Chinese literature's "obsession with China."

Even writers committed to European romanticism and "art for art's sake" felt deep concern for China's standing. In the semi-autobiographical story "Sinking" 沉淪 (1921), Yu Dafu's 郁達夫 (1896–1945) protagonist, feeling "maltreated by the world," ties his personal despair to China's national destiny: "China, ah China! How can you not rise up wealthy and strong? I can no longer go on secretly suffering!" And in "Dead Water" 死水 (1926), the poet Wen Yiduo 謝一多 (1899–1946), an ardent champion of poetry's musical, pictorial, and architectural beauty, closes with an ominous metaphor for his country—especially eerie in light of Wen's later assassination by Nationalist agents.

Here is a ditch of hopelessly dead water—a region where beauty can never reside.
Might as well let the devil cultivate it—and see what sort of world it can provide.

Expressions of nationalism proliferated in works of leftist writers such as Wu Zuxiang 吳祖湘 (1908–94). In Wu's satirical "Young Master Gets His Tonic" 官官的補品 (1932), the spoiled young narrator bolsters his health with milk expressed by a wet nurse, from whose husband he had earlier purchased blood, and marvels with self-satisfaction: "What a wonderful world it is; if you have the money, there's nothing you can't buy." Oblivious as the narrator is to the economic and political structures that support his indolence, he reports his cousin's pointed analysis:

Everything around here going downhill from one day to the next has nothing to do with fate. If you ask me, it's because we've been cheated out of all our money by the foreigners.... All these things are foreign invented, foreign manufactured, ways they've thought up to cheat us Chinese out of our money; .... how are you going to stop the country from getting poorer? And then you talk about fate!

Issues of national identity also mark literature on Taiwan, especially in works reflecting on the period of Japanese Colonialism (1895–1945). In "The Doctor's Mother" 先生媽 (1945), Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流 (1900–76) documents the suppression of
Taiwanese identity through his mocking portrayal of a doctor's obsessive pursuit of status. The doctor takes a Japanese name, entertains Japanese officials, and otherwise creates a "Japanese-only household." His Taiwanese mother rejects his endeavor, slices up her kimono with a cleaver, and gives alms to beggars. Her stubbornness further alienates her family, but her philanthropy is rewarded on her deathbed, when an old beggar brings her favorite fried doughsticks; he is the only true mourner at her Japanese-style funeral.

Though Taiwan was returned to the Republic of China in 1945, the province separated politically from the mainland after the CCP won a bloody civil war (1946–49) and founded the People's Republic of China (PRC). After the Nationalist Party (GMD) fled to Taiwan during what they called the Communist “takeover” of the mainland, intellectuals on Taiwan deemed themselves the guardians of traditional Chinese culture. Reinforcing the GMD's campaign to restore the lost homeland, nostalgic anti-Communist fiction condemned the CCP not only for China's political crisis but for threatening the survival of China's ethical tradition.

The most probing of Taiwan's anti-Communist historical novels may be Jiang Gui's 姜贵 (1908–80) Rival Suns 重陽 (1961), set in Shanghai and Wuhan from 1923 to 1927, the year of the CCP-GMD split. Ambitious but without means, Hong Tongye serves a French family that represents two faces of Western imperialism: Mr. Lefebvre is an arms dealer trafficking in drugs, his wife a proselytizing Christian. But as the disillusioned Tongye becomes involved with the Communist Liu Shaqiao, the novel focuses on the reformers’ hypocrisy in touting liberation while committing atrocities. When Tongye invokes the prospect of building a new society to justify deserting his indigent, bedridden mother, his sister questions, "If we can't even take care of our own mother, can we be qualified to worry about so many people's troubles?" Moreover, as Tongye abets Shaqiao in acts of sexual torture, their relationship (possibly also sexual) could symbolize the

CCP-GMD alliance, and the novel suggests that the Nationalists' corruption and acquiescence to foreign imperialism facilitated the Communist victory.

Pursuing humanity

Although Gao's Bus Stop shares features with avant-garde theater, its realistic details follow modern Chinese literature's dominant mode of critical realism. Mom can't live with her husband and child because she lacks the connections needed to have her work unit transferred to the city, and Gramps scolds Director Ma, director of a general store, for exchanging brand-name cigarettes for favors. At first Director Ma flaunts his privilege, and he cares little about missing a chance to be wined and dined, but he becomes more determined to reach the city as his indignation grows.

DIRECTOR MA: I'm going. I have to get to the city to denounce the bus company. I'll track down the manager and ask him whom they're driving the buses for anyway. Is it for their own convenience or for us passengers? They have to take some responsibility! I'll take them to court and sue for compensation for the loss of our years as well as our health!

Gao's use of characters representing typical social roles recalls the stock characters of traditional Chinese drama. But his realism has more in common with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, whose dramas, especially A Doll's House (1879), greatly influenced the new genre of modern Chinese "spoken drama." Ibsen’s heroine Nora became a cause célèbre among intellectuals sympathetic to the New Culture Movement's advocacy of women's freedom. "What Happens When Nora Leaves Home?" 紅樓夢走後怎樣? asked Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) in a famous 1923 speech and essay by that title.

Often considered the vanguard of modern Chinese fiction, Lu Xun's stories helped launch the New Literature Movement.
Already by the late Qing period, “denunciation novels” documented corruption and inhumanity, but now writers made it their mission to criticize superstition, class inequality, and the exploitation of women. Condemning traditional classical-language literature as a reflection of feudalism, reformers drew on both imperial-era vernacular literature and Western languages to develop a modern written language. Much closer to speech (and thus called baihua 白話, “plain speech”), this language formed the basis of Standard Written Chinese and facilitated literature’s service to social transformation.

Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” 狂人日記 (1918) cries out against exploitation in a hallucinatory modernist mode. After an opening preface written in classical Chinese, the story switches to baihua to present excerpts from a diary whose author, the preface explains, eventually recovered and presumably disowned the diary’s insights. Yet even as details of his hysteria and delusions suggest the diarist’s derangement, with his realization that classical texts conceal veiled exhortations to “eat people,” he positions himself as the sole “real person” among wolves: “You should change, change from the bottom of your hearts. You must realize that there will be no place for man-eaters in the world of the future.” The diary ends with a portentous call to “Save the children” followed by an ellipsis that may undermine the preface’s claim about the madman’s “recovery.”

Stories such as “Madman’s Diary” include modernist elements, but most “New Literature Movement” works employ straightforward realism to depict the suffering caused by the patriarchal family system, poverty, and other injustices. Many works appeal for compassion, as does Lu Xun’s portrayal of an out-of-work scholar in “Kong Yiji” 康乙己 (1919). Disenfranchised by his impractical classical education and taunted for the pilfering on which he survives, Kong is finally seen crawling, his legs broken for stealing. Just as the crippled Kong represents a class disabled by outmoded traditions, the story’s uncaring child narrator represents the indifference Lu Xun most feared. In Ye Shaojun’s 葉紹鈞 (1894–1988) “A Posthumous Son” 遺腹子 (1926), a loving couple, obsessed with having a son, hears seven daughters before a tiny son fails to survive. Foreshadowing the husband’s suicide, the story indicts tradition as the source of his despair: “Along life’s highway a poisoned arrow of tradition had cruelly pierced his heart.” Yet the cycle continues. Three years later, as the devastated widow still imagines that she is pregnant, matchmakers arrive to arrange marriages for her eldest daughters.

From the story of a woman’s sale by her husband in Xu Dishan’s 許地山 (1893–1941) “The Merchant’s Wife” 商人婦 (1921), to the dehumanizing rural poverty in Xiao Hong’s 小紅 (1911–42) The Field of Life and Death 生死場 (1934), many works of the twenties and thirties present individuals whose determination and hard work cannot surmount the economic and social obstacles they face. In Lao She’s 老舍 (1899–1966) depiction of Beijing’s urban poor in Rickshaw Boy 駐駕祥子 (1937), a young rickshaw puller’s aspirations and integrity cannot withstand the competition and other trials he suffers: from thefts and his wife’s death in childbirth to a beloved’s suicide and the climactic public execution of a union organizer he himself betrayed.

Leftist fiction and drama often depicted the dangers as well as the promises of abstract humanist ideals. In Ba Jin’s 巴金 (1904–2005) passionate Family 家 (1931), the idealistic young writer Juehui confronts the feudal family system. Yet he colludes with the hierarchy he abhors when his political activism leads him to ignore the bondmaid who loves him, and who drowns herself rather than be made an elderly man’s concubine. Ba’s masterful Ward Four 第四病室 (1946) describes the desperate conditions of a wartime hospital, an allegory for the treatment of the poor more generally. In Cold Nights 寒夜 (1947), the most powerful of Ba’s twenty novels, a common-law wife abandons her tubercular husband to pursue personal happiness and career fulfillment.
Writers on Taiwan, too, pursued liberal humanist themes, particularly during Taiwan’s long decades of martial law (1949–87). As U.S. military and economic support promoted Western literature and philosophy, Western-influenced modernists treated themes of exile, alienation, and generational conflict. Other writers, resisting Taiwan’s embrace of American capitalism and culture, responded with a vibrant “nativist literature,” from Huang Chunming’s 黃春明’s 黃春明 (1939–) riveting account of a poor father’s demeaning work as a clown advertisement in “His Son’s Big Doll” 兒子的大玩偶 (1967) to Chen Yingzheng’s 陳映真 (1937–) fifteen volumes of deeply moralistic works.

In Chen’s “Roses in June” 六月裡的玫瑰花 (1967), Barney, a black American GI on R&R in Taiwan, falls in love with Emmy, a bargirl. Yet Emmy starts to remind Barney of a little girl he murdered in Vietnam, and also of his mother, who too worked as a prostitute for white men. As the trauma re-stimulates memories of his father beating his mother after she’d turned tricks to feed the family, Barney lands in a mental hospital, where Emmy sends him a rose every day. The story ends when the pregnant Emmy receives an official letter from the U.S. Army, a sign to the reader that Barney has honored his promise to marry her. Yet the story’s final paragraph shatters Emmy’s illusion that it announces a promotion; Barney has died for his country. While most of Taiwan supported what the Vietnamese call “the American War,” Chen’s story ventures dissident opposition, possibly a reason for which Chen was imprisoned for “subversive activities” from 1968 to 1975.

Much of the best contemporary writing from the mainland also follows in China’s humanist tradition, including Yu Hua’s 余華 (1960–) 杨华 To Live 活着 (1992) and Chronicle of a Blood Merchant 许三观卖血记 (1995). And whereas Yu’s portrait of a desperate father who nearly dies selling his blood offers a subtle critique of market capitalism, Yan Lianke’s 郭连科 (1958–) Dream of Ding Village 丁庄梦 (2006) directly indict the government’s blood-selling profiteers who unleashed an AIDS epidemic in Henan province. As Yan’s characters die “like falling leaves,” his haunting novel may be a twenty-first century version of Camus’s The Plague (1947).

Pursuing progress

In Bus Stop, Glasses, refusing to waste his time merely waiting for the bus, studies English-language flashcards for his College Entrance Exam. He’s tempted to walk but fears that a bus might come the moment they leave: “Maybe our waiting for a lifetime here, until old age and death, has been determined by fate. Why don’t people create their own future? Why do we have to bitterly suffer as victims of fate?”

Gao’s characters’ plight recalls that of the sleepers Lu Xun hesitates to rouse in the preface to his first collection of stories, Call to Arms 呼吁 (1923). Likening China to “an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation,” he fears that crying out would only torture those trapped. Yet when a friend insists that those awakened might destroy the iron house, Lu has a change of heart: “True, in spite of my own conviction, I could not blot out hope, for hope lies in the future.”

Such hope for human-led progress departs from traditional conceptions of nature’s cycles and heaven’s will. Revolutionaries seek to reform political, economic, and social institutions because they believe that, unlike fate, these institutions can be changed. Committed to showing that injustice and suffering were caused by people with power rather than by destiny, Lu Xun, Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896–1981), and others founded the League of Left-Wing Writers in 1930.

Mao Dun’s name (a nom-de-plume, and homophone for “contradiction”) signaled his embrace of Marxism, and his fiction chronicles the structural contradictions crippling China’s economy.
In “Spring Silkworms” 春蚕 (1932), a guileless peasant family’s tender care of their silkworms yields abundant cocoons, but their superstitions blind them to the collapse of their market. And in Mao’s naturalistic Midnight 子夜 (1933), a textile industrialist learns through successive losses the insufficiency of national capital to withstand foreign economic imperialism. Because portrayals of crushing socio-economic conditions argued for national revolution, leftists championed such realistic fiction and drama. Realism’s importance was confirmed by the Compendium of Chinese New Literature 中國新文學大系 (1935), a collection increasingly influential after the Japanese invasion (1937–45), the civil war, and CCP cultural policies restricted other sources.

Literature’s subordination to progressive politics was decreed by the CCP leader Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) in his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature” (1942). Determined to make China the vanguard of international Communism, Mao adapted Marxism to make land reform, class struggle, and mass rural mobilization the mainstays of his three decades of rule. Believing that the collective will of the people could transform China’s material base, Mao viewed thought reform as key to the “revolutionary spirit” needed for a Communist utopia. To this end, the party nationalized publishing and regulated writers through the Chinese Writers’ Association founded in 1953.

During the “seventeen years” between the birth of the PRC (1949) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), novels modeling Mao’s collectivization programs became “how to” manuals for cadres facing recalcitrant former landlords or apathetic peasants. Winner of the 1951 Stalin Prize, Ding Ling’s 丁玲 (1904–86) The Sun Shines over the Sunggan River 太阳照在桑干河上 (1948) drew on her personal experiences of land reform for its vivid characterizations and ominous depictions of violent vengeance.

A progressive vision persistently marked Mao-era historical novels, some of which still enjoy popular success, especially Yang

Mo’s 杨沫 (1915–95) Song of Youth 青春之歌 (1958), which has sold more than five million copies in twenty languages. Set in the 1930s, her bildungsroman recounts the heroine’s transformation from melancholic intellectual to devoted revolutionary. Upon reading Marxist theory, she embraces socialism: “From these books, she saw the future of the development of human society. From these books she saw the brilliant rays of truth and the road that she as an individual should take.”

Works promoting socialist progress became dutifully optimistic after Mao launched his “Great Leap Forward” (1958–62), and his vice-minister of culture called for “revolutionary realism” and “revolutionary romanticism.” In portraying a young mother’s transformation from passivity to initiative, Ru Zhijuan’s 如志鹃 (1925–98) “Warmth of Spring” 春暖时节 (1959) exemplifies such ardent works. As an estranged couple bond over their efforts to engineer a crucial tool for the wife’s work unit, the story highlights the overlapping benefits for the characters’ personal and collective futures. The formulaic operas and ballets of “revolutionary model theater” further glorified self-sacrificing workers, soldiers, and peasants, as did collectivization novels such as Hao Ran’s 毛然 (1932–2008) multivolume Bright Sunny Days 金光大道 (1964–65) and The Golden Road 金光大道 (1972–74). Ignoring famines and environmental devastation, legacies of Mao’s programs, these works presented visions of revolutionary history consistent with party policy and Mao’s rising cult status.

During the “new period” of the post-Mao era, many writers supported the “four modernizations” of agriculture, industry, technology, and defense. Whereas the late Mao sought to strengthen the countryside, the CCP reform leader Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–97) emphasized industrialization and urbanization.

“Reform literature” addressed the personal costs of modernization, as in Zhang Jie’s 张洁 (1937–) Leaden Wings 沉重的翅膀 (1981), a psychological novel of parents devoted to duty and youths seeking personal fulfillment. Zhang was also one of the first writers to
return to themes of romantic love, long forbidden during the Mao era. In her controversial “Love Cannot Be Forgotten”, the daughter-narrator’s considerations of marriage frame her reading of her dead mother’s diary. As she reads, its story of her mother’s unrealized love for a married man inspires five views of marriage: a “commodity exchange,” a social duty, and a means of procreation, but also potentially a loving relation, and a free choice. The story provoked impassioned discussions about the ethics of extramarital affairs in the face of culturally compelled marriage, and about socialism’s progress in allowing young people to postpone marriage to find love.

After a revised constitution (1982) shifted emphasis from class struggle to economic development, the relaxation of thought control unleashed additional intense cultural debate and literary experimentation. Although still committed to “a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship,” since the 1980s China has instituted market reforms promoting private enterprise; opened to foreign culture, technology, and capital; and generated the biggest building boom in history. Literature has traced this vertiginous, aggressive development. Neorealist and avant-garde works, and a growing body of reportage all reflect concerns about rising consumerism, massive rural-urban migration, environmental degradation, and China’s threatened “humanitarian spirit.”

China’s development has also facilitated an explosion in entertainment culture, some of which reflects China’s pursuit of both technological strength and cultural “soft power.” Ever since Ye Yonglie’s Little Smart’s Wandering in the Future 小灵通漫游未来 (1978) sold more than 3 million copies (including the comic book version), China has become a leader in science fiction, now publishing the world’s largest circulation sci-fi magazine, Science Fiction World 科幻世界. Much realist literature has also championed progressive social visions. At least since Lu Tianming’s Heaven Above 苍天在上 (1995), popular anti-corruption novels have shaped perceptions of party reform, and literature on the Internet may also be raising expectations for socio-economic and political development.

Pursuing memory

When Bus Stop opened in Beijing in 1983, critics denounced Gao for abandoning socialist literature’s progressive mandate. Despite the drama’s authenticity in presenting the lives of ordinary people, it was attacked in the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. For when Glasses looks at his watch and announces “We’ve been here talking for a full ten years,” his lament evokes the inescapable memory of China’s devastating Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Designed to re-engineer people’s beliefs by suppressing the “four olds” (traditional customs, culture, habits, and ideas), this crusade left millions dead as packs of young Red Guard zealots denounced their teachers and other professionals (breaking the fingers of artists and musicians), destroyed temples, and burned books and paintings. (Scholars estimate 3 million to 20 million deaths including deaths in labor camps and suicides.) As they paraded “class enemies” wearing humiliating placards and dunce’s caps, insufficient fanaticism was deemed revisionism, so almost everyone colluded with persecutions, as Jung Chang 张爱玲 (1952–) later documented in her memoir Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China (1991).

During the political thaw following Mao’s death and the fall of the Gang of Four (1976), brave writers began redressing the wounds of the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957) and the Cultural Revolution. Even before the official relaxation of thought control, Lu Xinhua’s Scar 伤痕 (1978) and other works of “scar literature” testified to long-suppressed sorrow and compassion. In Zhang Jie’s Remorse 怨悔 (1979), a man cowed by his expulsion from the party forbids his son to join a mass memorial service (an implicit protest of Mao’s regime). After the son, his spirit broken, dies of an ordinary infection, the father’s reinstatement in the
party offers him little solace: “He had not even done the most basic thing: communicate to his dearest beloved son belief in truth.” Guilt also plagues the protagonist of Dai Houying’s 戴厚英 (1938–96) Humanity, Oh Humanity 人啊，人！ (1980, translated as Stones of the Wall). In her novel, multiple points of view and vivid flashbacks illustrate the piecemeal nature of memory and historical understanding. But as the classmate betrayed in 1957 consoles the protagonist in the narrative present, reconciling their histories opens the door to forgiveness and renewal.

On the heels of scar literature, other genres of testimony included “new realism,” (pointedly distinct from “revolutionary realism”), “literature of reflection,” and “prison literature,” literally “big wall literature” 大墙文学, named after Cong Weixi’s 从维熙 (1933–) “Red Magnolias Beneath the Wall” 大墙下的红玉兰 (1979).

Despite decades of loyal military service, because of a few lines in his notebook criticizing Mao’s deification, Cong’s protagonist Ge Ling is summarily condemned to a life sentence of forced prison labor. Yet as in many works of prison literature, the protagonist experiences his incarceration as purifying, his ordeals strengthening his faith in the party and in Communism. Though he is shot dead while climbing a ladder to pick magnolias to make a wreath for the beloved premier Zhou Enlai, the novella ends with a “bright tail” when an old comrade escapes to Beijing to deliver the wreath stained red with Ling’s blood. More shocking testimony about the labor camps came with Zhang Xianliang’s 张贤亮 (1936–) semi-autobiographical Half of Man Is Woman 男人的一半是女人 (1985), in which sexual impotence becomes a telling effect of political repression.

Silenced for nearly four decades by Mao-era literary strictures, modernist works re-emerged and implicitly confronted the nation’s collective historical traumas. Inspired by 1920s poets such as Wen Yiduo, young writers rekindled symbolism with “misty poetry,” while “search-for-roots” fiction probed the sometimes pernicious legacies of culture and tradition. By looking backward and inward as well as forward and outward, these
and other avant-garde works challenged the party's ideology of modernization. Historical determinism weighs heavily in many of these works, but they often portray decadence rather than progress.

By depicting historical periods before 1949, writers could exhume traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution with less risk of censorship or reprisals. Influenced by the modernism of Kafka and Faulkner, along with the “magic realism” of Gabriel García Márquez, Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum 红高梁家族 (1987) presents five overlapping (yet occasionally incongruous) accounts as the narrator, writing in 1985, imagines his grandparents’ experiences during the brutal Japanese invasion of their village in 1939. Similar in its intense imagery and graphic violence, Su Tong’s My Life as Emperor 我的帝王生涯 (1992) is set in an unspecified distant past, but the slicing out of concubines’ tongues might remind readers of Cultural Revolution “struggle sessions” when Mao’s Red Guards severed tongues to silence victims’ loyal cries of “Long Live Chairman Mao!”

Recalling concerns about the destruction of nature and of ethnic minorities voiced in 1980s search-for-roots fiction, Jiang Rong’s W Wolf Totem 狼图腾 (2004) provoked new concern over the devastation of Mongolia’s fragile grasslands. Drawing on the author’s experience as one of 12 million educated urban youth sent to learn from rural peasants during the Cultural Revolution, the novel recounts a “sent-down” youth’s growing reverence for nomadic Mongolians and for the ecological balance symbolized by the wolf.

A comment on both collective amnesia and the creative yearnings of the soul, Ma Jian’s Beijing Coma 北京植物人 (originally titled Land of Flesh 肉上, 2008) follows the thoughts of its narrator-protagonist Dai Wei as he lies unconscious and paralyzed after a bullet to his head during the 1989 June Fourth Tiananmen Square protests. Formerly a PhD student in biology, Dai Wei lies in his mother’s shabby Beijing apartment, relives the past, and ponders the present. When he awaken at the novel’s end, his mother suffers a nervous breakdown as bulldozers begin to demolish their apartment. (Written after Ma’s 1987 exile, the novel was published abroad before Chinese editions appeared in Hong Kong and Taiwan.)

The pursuit of memory (along with the powers and dangers of nostalgia) has also been central to fiction on Taiwan, especially in modernist works such as Bai Xianyong’s 白先勇 (1937–) elegant story collection Taipei People 台北人 (1971). In the privileged world of Taipei’s Shanghainese exiles depicted in Bai’s “Eternal Snow Beauty” 永遠的尹雪鵬 (1965), a seemingly enviable façade of genteel comfort soon reveals a forlorn vision of moral decadence. Sensual details of light, color, and fragrance shroud the beautiful hostess in mystery, but fantasies of recapturing the past ultimately doom her lovers and deny her own humanity. Since the lifting of martial law (1987), authors in Taiwan have also faced the ongoing ravages of the island’s political traumas, as in Chen Yingzhen’s Zhao Nandong 趙南棟 (1987). In this chilling account of Taiwan’s “white terror,” memories of a condemned political prisoner entrusting her infant son (Nandong) to a fellow prisoner are interwoven with the latter’s search, thirty years later, to understand the now grown son’s estrangement.

Pursuing pleasure

In Bus Stop, when Girl laments that she can’t wear a certain trendy dress outside the city, Mom reassuringly strokes her hair. “Wear what you like. Don’t wait until my age. You still count as youthful; some young guy will be attracted to you. You’ll feel close, fall in love, and after you have his child, he’ll become even more devoted.” Surprisingly uncritical given her own dreary marriage, Mom’s romantic idyll voices aspirations for personal happiness that were verboten during the Mao era’s fanaticism for collective sacrifice. Yet both before and since the Mao period, longings for fulfillment through love, career, and material comforts rose dramatically.
While scholars often emphasize its ethics, Chinese literature has also long provided entertainment and pleasure. In contrast to the elite genres of history, philosophy, and poetry, much fiction and drama offered diversion and escapism to larger audiences, markets that soared after the 1875 introduction of less expensive Western printing techniques. As modern written Chinese further promoted literacy, a widening readership led to a proliferation of literary magazines, and Saturday 礼拜六 (1914–16, 1921–23), the best-selling periodical of popular fiction, reached a circulation of 50,000. Christened “Saturday fiction,” sentimental romances, martial arts tales, detective stories, social satires, and “black curtain” accounts of scandals all flourished from the 1910s through the 1930s.

Such fiction was disparaged for distracting readers from national salvation, but avidly read. Though usually set in contemporary times, popular works generally spared readers the political issues posed by the critical realism of the period. Whereas leftist realist writers underscored economic determinism, many popular works present characters who exercise a self-determination that helps explain their appeal. In Zhang Henshui’s 张恨水 (1895–1967) Fate in Tears and Laughter 喜到因缘 (1930), the superhuman knight-errant Xiugu wins little moral reward (she remains unmarried), but she exercises fantastical power in slaying a corrupt general, freeing his brutalized wife, and distributing his extravagant wealth to the poor.

Nor did all serious fiction follow the leftists’ agenda for critical realism. Writers of the “Creation Society” championed the emotional expression of romanticism, while Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902–88) wrote lyrical fiction celebrating nature, rustic customs, and other earthly enjoyments. Shen’s pastoral novel Border Town 过客 (1934) uses bucolic imagery to recount the mutual love between an elderly ferryman and his granddaughter, whom he tries to protect as she comes of age. Pursuits of pleasure and sensuality also overshadow concerns about social problems in the modernist works of the Shanghai-based “New Sensationists.”

These works, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, foreground sexuality and self-consciousness, as in Shi Zicun’s 施蛰存 (1905–2003) story of an office worker’s fantasies about a young woman in “One Evening in the Rainy Season” 梅雨之夕 (1929).

Obsession with sensual gratification, often linked to struggles for power or wealth, also haunts the desolate characters of Zhang Ailing’s 张爱玲 (1920–95) incisive masterpieces, many set during the wartime Japanese occupation of Shanghai and Hong Kong. In her Love in a Fallen City 倚城之恋 (1943), a young divorcée’s desperation for the financial security of marriage leaves her suitor skeptical of her love, but the couple discovers unexpected contentment as they survive the bombing of Hong Kong. In “Lust, Caution” 色, 戒 (1979) a former student actress sent to seduce a collaborator falls in love and warns him of the plot to assassinate him, for which he executes her and her comrades.

Often likened to Zhang Ailing, Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954–) confronts the potentially destructive forces of sexual desire in a trilogy of lyrical novellas. In her Love on a Barren Mountain 荒山之恋 (1986), a sensitive cellist and his strong-willed mistress pursue an extramarital affair, and its exposure leads to their double suicide. Love in a Small Town 小城之恋 (1986) offers a visceral account of the erotic awakening, shame, and sexual aggression of two young dancers, and Love in a Brocade Valley 锦绣谷之恋 (1987) contrasts an editor’s lackluster marriage with her wistful desire for an inaccessible writer. The fleeting rewards of material pleasures are shown in Song of Everlasting Sorrow 长恨歌 (1995), Wang’s prizewinning novel about a beauty whose early fame in magazines and near-win in the 1946 Miss Shanghai contest ill prepare her to endure four decades of political tumult.

After the government slashed subsidies for publishers in the mid-1980s, many presses turned to popular literature, including gangster fiction by the self-proclaimed “hooligan” Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958–) and “body writing” by “glamour girl writers” such as
Mian Mian 棉棉 (1970-) and Wei Hui 伟慧 (1973-). In the decade between Wang Shuo's Playing for Thrills 玩儿的就是心跳 (1989) and Wei Hui's Shanghai Baby 上海宝贝 (1999), novels banned in China (but published in Taiwan and circulated underground) also explored political and sexual deviance. Hong Ying's 虹影 (1962-) Summer of Betrayal 背叛之夏 (originally titled The Generation of Naked Dancers 撞舞代, 1992), set in the shadow of the 1989 June Fourth incident, confronts the moral implications of membership in the "Degraded Survivors' Club" as the protagonist uses her sexuality (e.g., taking multiple partners at a final party) to further her quest for selfhood.

Preoccupation with private pleasures also marks much of the fiction written in Hong Kong, both among émigré writers such as Liu Yichang 刘以鬯 (1916-) and among Hong Kong natives. Ruled by the British for 156 years (1841-1997), Hong Kong enjoyed considerable press freedoms, but self-censorship fostered apolitical writing focusing on private lives. Liu's story "Intersection" 对倒 (1972) alternates between the ruminations of a young woman and a middle-aged émigré whose paths cross in a movie theater. While the émigré reflects on his vanished life in Shanghai and the changes he has witnessed during his twenty years in Hong Kong, the young woman, aroused by an explicit photograph, projects her face onto mannequins, singers, and movie stars. The story ends with the characters' parallel erotic dreams, her fantasy of a handsome lover conjoining with his memory of his virile youth.

Pursuing "cultural China"

Despite its critical dialogues, Gao's Bus Stop 送别 ends hopefully. A romance seems to be budding between Glasses and Girl, and all the characters set off together on foot. Hothead carries Mom's heavy bag as she supports Gramps, and even Director Ma, earlier the least willing, calls out for the others to wait. This ending affirms values of social responsibility, as well as visions of China joining an increasingly modernized world.

Because Gao himself did not wait, but left China in 1987 and took French citizenship before his 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, his award has been harshly criticized. Contention over Gao's prize, seen by some as an affront to resident Chinese writers, intensified debates about the boundaries and political uses of Chinese literature. These debates had already led some to champion the notion of a greater "cultural China" not limited by the political borders of the PRC.

Those eager not to let geopolitics restrict discussions of Chinese literature sometimes invoke the term "Sinophone" to include literature written in Chinese by writers in the Asian and wider diaspora. Sinophone may be an apt label for a global audience of Chinese-language readers. It may also appeal to those seeking Chinese cultural values, such as the discipline and traditionalism idealized in the martial arts novels of Hong Kong's Jin Yong 金庸 (1924-), probably the most widely read living Chinese author. Yet the term "Sinophone" may strain to encompass literature written in Taiwanese, other topolects, or other languages.

Thanks to dedicated translators (whose labors of love are seldom lucrative), publishers are slowly bringing out translations of the many deserving Chinese works. Yet as Chinese authors writing in English and French have garnered major awards, for much of the world these writers have come to represent transnational Chinese literature. Many readers have learned about the Cultural Revolution from Dai Sijie 戴思杰 (1954-), who has lived in France since 1984 but drew on his experience as a "sent-down" youth for his international bestseller Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise (2000, Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, 2001). In recounting its young protagonists' discovery of a forbidden cache of nineteenth-century French novels, Dai's heartrending tale demonstrates literature's power for personal transformation, even in the face of manipulation or repression.
Americans in particular now buy more books written in English by Chinese-born authors than translations from Chinese. Ha Jin 哈金 (1956–), who published his first book of poetry in English just five years after his 1985 emigration, rose to fame with his spare novel Waiting (1999), which recounts a man’s devastating discovery after his eighteen-year wait for a divorce. More recently, Yiyun Li 李翊云 (1972–), who came to Iowa to study immunology before turning to writing, has penned startling stories, many on the blessings and limitations of love. Collected in A Thousand Years of Good Prayers (2005) and Gold Boy, Emerald Girl (2010), Li’s stories increasingly depict Chinese living in America, and her relative youth means that her identity as “Chinese” may change to “Chinese-American.” Yet literature transcends taxonomies that would put people into boxes, and this integral power of literary culture promises a compelling future for the living tradition of Chinese literature.