Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Approaches to Chinese Literature

IDEOLOGY AND FORM IN YAN LIANKE'S FICTION

MYTHOREALISM AS METHOD

Haiyan Xie

ROUTLEDGE

Ideology and Form in Yan Lianke's Fiction

Xie analyzes three novels by the international award-winning Chinese writer Yan Lianke and investigates how his signature "mythorealist" form produces textual meanings that subvert the totalizing reality prescribed by literary realism.

The term mythorealism, which Yan coined to describe his own writing style, refers to a set of literary devices that incorporate both Chinese and Western literary elements while remaining primarily grounded in Chinese folk culture and literary tradition. In his use of mythorealism, carrying a burden of social critique that cannot allow itself to become "political," Yan transcends the temporality and provinciality of immediate social events and transforms his potential socio-political commentaries into more diversified concerns for humanity, existential issues, and spiritual crisis. Xie identifies three modes of mythorealist narrative exemplified in Yan's three novels: the *minjian* (folk) mode in *Dream of Ding Village*, the allusive mode in *Ballad, Hymn, Ode*, and the enigmatic mode in *The Four Books*. By positioning itself against an ambiguous articulation of social determinants of historical events that would perhaps be more straightforward in a purely realist text, each mode of mythorealism moves its narrative from the overt politicality of the subject matter to the existential riddle of negotiating an alternative reality.

A groundbreaking study of one of contemporary China's most important authors that will be of great value to scholars and students of Chinese literature.

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Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Approaches to Chinese Literature

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Introduction

Contemporariness and Contemporary Chinese Literature

In his essay "What Is the Contemporary?" Giorgio Agamben asks: "[o]f whom and of what are we contemporaries?" (39) After reflecting on Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and then echoing Roland Barthes's response to Nietzsche that "[t]he contemporary is the *untimely*" (40), Agamben goes on to craft a more comprehensive definition of the "contemporary"—or "contemporariness"—in which he expands upon the concept of "untimely" as follows: contemporaries are not "those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect," because these people are ultimately unable to "see" their epoch, to "firmly hold their gaze on it" (41). Rather, according to him, "contemporariness" encompasses two layers of meaning. First, it implies "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism" (43). Second, "the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness … [t]he contemporary is … who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present" (44).

In Agamben's context, then, "contemporariness" must be understood beyond the delineations of the temporal and spatial domains. In other words, it is a philosophical term that is not identical to the word "contemporary" in the ordinary sense. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the latter is defined as either "belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time," or "modern; of or characteristic of the present period." Conversely, "contemporariness" in Agamben's sense indicates a state of being both distant from and close to the present. In this light, one may ask who, then, belongs to the contemporary, both living in and at odds with his own time? One such exemplary figure may be Walter Benjamin's notion of the "flâneur," a term first used by Baudelaire to understand the modern urban experience of nineteenth-century Paris. Briefly, a flâneur is a city stroller and observer of street life, disengaging himself from the crowd and taking up a new stance toward the present world. He demonstrates an attitude of both detachment from and involvement in modern life, holding his gaze fixedly on his own time and perceiving the darkness of the world in which he lives. However, the nuances

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between Baudelaire's and Benjamin's flâneur should be noted: while the former enjoys the gaze and devotes himself to watching the crowd in the street, the latter is positioned as "other" who appears as an anachronic intruder into the present space and is unable to integrate himself into his seemingly harmonious surroundings. It is Benjamin's flâneur, then, who could provide a prototype for the contemporary as defined by Agamben. Yet, as Agamben himself argues, "contemporaries are rare" because "to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage" (46).

In his acceptance speech for the 2014 Franz Kafka Prize, Chinese writer Yan Lianke defines himself as a person who feels darkness in a manner resonating with Agamben's philosophical idea of "contemporariness":

> I developed a keen appreciation for the somber side of our existence. I came to understand that darkness is not the mere absence of light, but rather it is life itself … I know that darkness is not only the time, the place and the event, but also the water, the air, the people, and the most daily existence and the breath …. The greatest darkness is people's adaptation to the darkness; the most terrible darkness is people's indifference to and ignorance of light while living in the darkness …. I see the unbelievable ugliness of human souls, the humiliation the intellectuals suffer and the great efforts they make to live with dignity and think independently, and I see more Chinese people who live for money and hedonism and whose inner lives are emptied and disintegrated by power.
>
> (Yan Lianke)

This passage provides a general outline of Yan's perception of his own time, a perception somewhat at odds with the zeitgeist of contemporary China. Darkness in Yan's context, first of all, indicates ignorance or the inability to see or understand, like a kind of existential blindness. Meanwhile, it also represents two social phenomena: the widespread reality of corruption and the abuse of power on the one hand, and the degradation of human nature on the other. Instead of being a detached bystander who merely describes the darkness, Yan perceives the darkness of his time as a matter of moral urgency requiring ongoing engagement.

Yan Lianke and Chinese Fiction in the 1980s and 1990s

Yan Lianke is among the most prolific, successful, and outspoken of contemporary Chinese writers. He has won many awards, such as the prestigious Lu Xun Literary Prize in 1998 and 2003, the Lao She Literary Award in 2005, the Franz Kafka Prize in 2014, the Dream of the Red Chamber Award in 2016, the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature in 2021. He was also shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013 and longlisted in 2016 and 2017. Most of Yan's stories take place during or make explicit reference to politically charged moments in recent Chinese history. Ever since his novel *Wei renmin*

fuwu 为人民服务 (*Serve the People!*), whose title satirizes Mao's famous slogan, was recalled soon after its publication in mainland China in 2005, Yan has gradually risen to fame abroad and is now widely regarded in the West as a political writer with a reputation for criticizing official corruption and state policies both during and after the Mao era, constantly testing the boundaries of state censorship. Yan has been nicknamed "book-banned writer" because he is the most frequently banned or censored author in mainland China. Besides *Serve the People!*, Yan's early novellas *Xia Riluo* 夏日落 (*Xia Riluo*, 1992) and novel *Dingzhuang meng* 丁庄梦 (*Dream of Ding Village*, 2006) have also been banned, whereas *Sishu* 四书 (*The Four Books*, 2011) was rejected by a dozen publishing houses before being published in Taiwan. His 2015 novel *Rixi* 日熄 (*The Day the Sun Died*) and 2019 novel *Xinjing* 心经 (*Heart Sutra*) have only been released outside mainland China. His novel *Feng ya song* 风雅颂 (*Ballad, Hymn, Ode*, 2008), criticizing academic corruption, was contested even before its publication and aroused furious debate among many established scholars.

Considering the above facts, can it be said that Yan is one of those rare contemporaries who are "able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present," as Agamben argues? If so, then of what, exactly, does his "contemporariness" consist? And most importantly, why should Yan be of particular interest, given that there are other writers in contemporary China expressing similar concerns about their own time? To answer these questions, Yan cannot be treated as an individual writer isolated from his peers, nor can he be understood without reference to the dynamic socio-political environment in which he lives or the complex literary tradition that he has inherited—even as he in many ways rejects this tradition.

Yan was born in Song County in Henan province in the late 1950s, a turbulent period in Chinese history. The three-year Great Famine (1959–1961), political movements such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–1959), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) all took place during or shortly after this time. Yan would have been too young to be directly influenced by these movements in his teenage years; however, living in the impoverished countryside, he experienced poverty, hunger, and the rampant corruption of rural village politics, and he dreamed of escaping from the countryside and living a better life in the city. In his youth, Yan became fascinated by the subjects of power, urbanity, and sickness and health, all of which were to become central elements in his fiction. Reflecting upon the impact of his early life, he has stated: "survival means everything to me. The desire for survival leads to my worship of power, cities, health, and life. It can be said that survival occupies an important position in my memory" (Wode 12).

In his writing, Yan positions his personal experiences as part of Chinese collective memory as it exists in the present. Agamben would label such historically embedded experiences as "archaic" or "origin" experiences which, according to him, are "not only situated in a chronological past" but also "contemporary with historical becoming and … not ceas[e] to operate within it, just as … the child in the psychic life of the adult" (50). Certainly, this particular characteristic of

"contemporariness" is not exclusive to Yan. In a sense, it is universal among Chinese writers who were born in the same period and share similar traumatic memories of their youth. However, there may be significant differences in how this "archaic origin" is perceived, interpreted, and represented by different writers, as well as how it is integrated into their own sense of the present. This is an important point to which I will return shortly.

The late 1980s and early 1990s mark a transitional period from the officially called New Era to the Post-new Era in Chinese literature and are essential to the discussion of contemporary Chinese literature. During this period, Chinese writers were influenced by two primary forces that have fundamentally changed the landscape of Chinese literature as it had existed since May Fourth: the market economy, and the importation of Western literature and modernist theory. Although there is no obvious connection between these two forces, in combination they have moved Chinese literature from the extreme of being heavily politically charged to the other of removing the political dimension and voluntarily avoiding socio-political commentary.

Since the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, which brought the "revolutionary" manipulation of discourse to an end, Chinese writers gradually released themselves from "the greatest pressure in their handling of the relationship between literature and politics" (Hong 271). Following the brief trends of "shanghen wenxue" 伤痕文学 (scar literature) and "fansi wenxue" 反思文学 (introspective literature) in the late 1970s and early 1980s—both of which sought to expose and criticize the excesses of the Cultural Revolution specifically—the mid- and late 1980s saw the consecutive emergence of "xungen wenxue" 寻根文学 (root-seeking literature), "xianfeng xiaoshuo" 先锋小说 (avant-garde fiction), and "xin xieshi zhuyi xiaoshuo" 新写实主义小说 (new realist fiction). To varying degrees, all these literary movements incorporated forms and techniques of Western modernism as a means to resist the traditional dominant discourse of revolutionary realism, explore new literary themes, and refresh the old themes that had been rejected or overlooked since May Fourth. For example, Han Shaogong 韩少功, the initiator of root-seeking movement, responds positively to Chinese tradition, holding that "the root of literature should be situated deep in the soil of national traditions and culture, and if the roots are not deep, it's difficult for the leaves to flourish" (251). As it developed, root-seeking literature provided deeper explorations of "the relationship between historical mistakes and the 'sediment' of the national culture and psychology" (Hong 368). Root-seeking writers, however, were generally ideologically ambiguous and gradually shifted their attention from socio-political subject matter to local customs and cultural traditions. One of the best known root-seeking writers is Jia Pingwa 贾平凹, whose works are characterized by "truthfully representing Chinese people's lives and moods in modern times, employing the Chinese tradition of beautiful representation" (Jia 70). Unfortunately, Jia's novels often leave social problems unsolved and moral judgments suspended. Jia is deliberately apolitical, touching upon politics from time to time only because, in his words, there is no clear boundary between the political and the apolitical,

no clear distinction between politics and other social phenomena, including culture, ethics, belief, and tradition.

Like many other Chinese readers, Yan was obsessed with revolutionary literary works in his teenage years because, according to him, these were the only books he could access before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Yan has claimed he was indebted to Chinese writer Zhang Kangkang 张抗抗 for guiding him to the world of literature. In the preface to her novel *Fenjiexian* 分界线 (*The Boundary Line*, 1975), Zhang relates how her writing enabled her to change her fate from being exiled to the remote countryside during the Rustication Movement to being recruited as a full-time writer in Harbin, a city in Northern China. Yan followed suit and started his literary career with military novellas while he was serving in the army in the late 1970s. As his experience in the army provided abundant source material for military literature, Yan's early writing focuses primarily on soldiers. However, instead of covering such grand themes as nationalism, heroism, and war and peace, he is more concerned with the everyday lives of ordinary soldiers, most of whom come from the impoverished countryside, joining the army not for the sacred ideal of protecting the country but, like him, for the more personal motivation of changing one's fate. In this way, Yan's subversion of traditional military literature aligns itself with the prevailing trends in Chinese literature in the 1980s, which tended to subvert the triumphalist revolutionary narrative.

But although he was closely following the realist style of the time, Yan's writing has a flavor of existentialism, probably because, like many of his contemporaries, he had been influenced by the Western modernist literature imported to China in the 1980s. This influence is particularly apparent in his collection of essays on Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Sartre's *The Wall*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, among others. Many of his military novellas written in the 1990s, such as *Xia Riluo*, *Heping yuyan* 和平寓言 (*Peace Fables*, 1993), *Heping zhan* 和平战 (*The War of Peace*, 1994), are tinged with nihilism, depicting human feelings of impotence when confronted with helplessness and hopelessness in their lives. Nevertheless, Yan did not take it as far as other writers during that period who came to prominence by experimenting with new forms of literature and imitating the Western modernist style. In 1985, for instance, Liu Suola's 刘索拉 novella *Ni biewu xuanze* 你别无选择 (*You Have No Other Choice*), which integrates Western modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and absurdism into a Chinese local story, marked the beginning of Chinese modernist fiction. This modernist trend was pushed to the peak by a group of writers who became known as avant-garde, including Ma Yuan 马原, Hong Feng 洪峰, Ge Fei 格非, Su Tong 苏童, Yu Hua 余华, and Can Xue 残雪. Unlike traditional forms of fiction, which aim to present a realistic picture of life and provide a realist commentary on social realities, avant-garde writers tend to be more concerned with using innovative literary forms than with the content of their works. This experimentation with Western modernist techniques has made their fiction obscure and at times unintelligible. Although avant-garde fiction inevitably "touch(es) upon the discourse

field of contemporary China and memories of the violence and spiritual scars of the 'Cultural Revolution'" (Hong 387), most of its stories are ahistorical, irrational, and ideologically ambiguous, focusing primarily on the psychology and subjectivity of individuals. In general, these Chinese avant-garde writers differ from their Western counterparts and their Chinese peers in that they "do not have clear anti-social emotions, neither do they take a resolute stance of anti-tradition …. What they pursue is the helpless escapism resulting either from the unrepresentable reality or from their unwillingness to represent reality" (Chen Xiaoming "Xianfeng" 40). Ultimately, avant-garde fiction was unable to sustain itself because of its exhaustion of forms and the obscurity of its content, and many avant-garde writers gradually moved toward realistic styles. One such example is Yu Hua, about whom more will be said later. Another literary trend, known as new realism, emerged at approximately the same time as the avant-garde and became especially prominent in the 1990s.

Overall, the New Era marks a period of value reestablishment after Chinese literature broke away from the restraints of its political function. As Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 notes, "the 'new era' is a period in which all the literary speculation and discussions are 'man-centered'…. It is a process during which value has been reestablished and then deconstructed from the linguistic perspective; a process of searching for 'modernity' and 'individuality'" (9). In a nutshell, the "man" who is centered in New Era literature has been transformed from the "revolutionary" man to the "individualized" man, a transformation that ultimately made possible the unique imagined space that characterizes Post-new Era literature.

Although the periodization of New Era/Post-new Era is problematic due to the hazy boundary separating these two periods, it can safely be asserted that the Post-new Era is marked by the emergence of a unique social environment. During the 1990s, the success of the market economy resulted in a rising commercial culture among the Chinese public, something which, on the one hand, celebrates human individuality but, on the other hand, causes an expansion of human desire and an increased prevalence of materialism. It was an era during which society was focused on a single activity: doing business. This tide of consumerism also swept across the intelligentsia. Excited by the idea that getting rich is glorious, *xiahai* 下海 (literally, jumping into the sea of commerce) became a fad among intellectuals. Of course, along with the trading fever came greed, pleasure-seeking, and financial misconduct. As Cai Xiang 蔡翔 laments, "whereas prosaic if not vulgar taste and value orientation are quietly being established, the spiritual (*jingshen*) is subject to repudiation and ridicule. An age of vulgarization has descended" (qtd. in Zhang Xudong 115). Correspondingly, there was a sense that literature, now subject to the pressures of the market, began catering to "vulgar" tastes and, in doing so, gradually lost its critical edge as the guardian of humanistic values. Thus, "pure literature" became marginalized and was replaced by mass-market fiction and other forms of popular culture.

The "Wang Shuo 王朔 phenomenon" is a typical case. Wang was arguably one of the best known writers during the late 1980s and 1990s. His works are

intended mainly as sources of entertainment and escapism, with many of them adapted for film and television. Wang himself has unapologetically declared that he is "most interested in the social stratum that [enjoys] a popular lifestyle … that contains violence and sex, mockery and shamelessness" (Barme 108), and his unique brand of "pizi wenxue" 痞子文学 (hooligan literature) became the darling of the literary market in the 1980s and 1990s. Replete with hedonism, cynicism, vulgar language, and unrealistic plot structures, Wang's style of writing attracted many Chinese readers. Though some writers applauded it, it was also widely criticized by numerous scholars and writers who sought to defend the "pure" literary culture. In the late 1990s, a group of intellectuals launched a discussion about the loss of the humanistic spirit in Chinese humanities, which in less than two years attracted a large number of established scholars. Wang Shuo became the primary target of this attack and was condemned as a "spiritual pollutant." Nevertheless, this so-called Wang Shuo phenomenon stands as a testament to the irreversible influence of the market economy in which the force of "vulgar" culture remains "beyond the powers of any intellectual antipathy to rebuff" (Wang Jing 262).

The market economy and China's opening-up endeavor have undeniably changed the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature. Even so, to attribute the transformation of contemporary literature to the market economy exclusively would be reductive. To some extent, economic reform provides a convenient scapegoat. At least as important is that Chinese writers, many of whom were not yet able to come to terms with the political trauma of the past decades, became like the burnt child who dreads the fire, collectively becoming more silent in the 1990s. With this in mind, the public's "vulgar" reading preferences, having rocketed to the top of the market by superheated economic reform, conveniently provide shell-shocked writers with compelling motivation to sidestep any responsibility for providing social commentary. The simultaneous emergence of the "Wang Shuo phenomenon" and avant-garde literature during the same era is an interesting phenomenon. In many ways, they are diametrically opposed to each other, respectively representing "low" and "high" culture and sharing little commonality with regard to their literary forms and narrative styles. However, the co-emergence and coexistence of these two widely divergent literary movements arguably arise from the same impulse to respond to the dramatic social transformations taking place during "the brand-new era that survived the dystopian mood of 1989" (Wang Jing 262).

Largely in response to these wide fluctuations, contemporary Chinese writers tend to embrace a "middlebrow" literature: they center on ordinary people's everyday lives, focusing on typicality and scrupulously hiding their ideology. This is particularly true of the new realism, which is itself the outcome of the incessant experimentation with and modification of traditional realism. It is also, in some sense, a counterattack against avant-garde literature's violent rejection of reality. New realist literature marks an era in which, after a carnivalesque explosion of various literary thoughts and trends, Chinese literature "not only

goes back to respecting rules and ethics again … but also goes back to complying with the principle of narration as well as the rule of the reality"; thus, "it is increasingly aligned with the realistic discourse and the cultural apparatus" (Zhang Yiwu 10). Some of the most prominent new realist works include Chi Li's 池莉 *Fannao rensheng* 烦恼人生 (*Troublesome Life*, 1987), Liu Zhenyun's 刘震云 *Yidi jimao* 一地鸡毛 (*Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, 1993), Liu Hen's 刘恒 *Pinzui Zhang Daming de xingfu shenghuo* 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活 (*Whatever Zhang Damin's Happy Life*, 1998), and Fang Fang's 方方 *Heidong* 黑洞 (*Black Hole*, 1995), to name a few. In the name of restoring the real-world dimension of ordinary life, these new literatures "have abruptly transformed from the traditional realism that radically criticizes everyday life and resists mass culture to a moderate and restrained identification [with] and submission [to the mass culture], a townspeople's literature providing entertainment from tedious and mediocre daily life" (Zhang Yiwu 9–10). This tendency of new realism pervades contemporary Chinese literature, with some of its permutations having become acutely contentious among literary critics, particularly *shenti xiezuo* 身体写作 (body writing) and *meinv xiezuo* 美女写作 (beauty writing).

Yan, however, seems to have taken a direction divergent to the mainstream of new realism. During the 1990s, he published more than sixty novellas and one novel, all centered on soldiers and peasants, exploring themes of human nature, existential despair, and resistance in the face of disease, hunger, death, and the abuse of power. Additionally, Yan's style during this period progresses from one of strict realism to one that integrates the techniques of modernism and sometimes postmodernism into a realist framework. Three works from this period include aspects of surrealism, which was widely noted at the time and caused him to rise to prominence in the Chinese literary arena. These three works, the novellas *Nian yue ri* 年月日 (*Year Month Day*, 1997) and *Palou tiange* 耙耧天歌 (*Sky Songs of Palou*, 1999) and the novel *Riguang liunian* 日光流年 (*Streams of Time*, 1998), portray either individuals or groups suffering and struggling against obstacles arising either from the cruelty of the natural environment or capriciousness of fate. As well as Yan's frequent use of the "suffering" motif distinguishing him from other new realist writers of the time, his literary style also differs from traditional realism and the new realism in important ways. In particular, Yan's integration of Chinese folk elements—such as ghosts and the supernatural and his use of dialect—into a variety of Western modernist forms which are themselves incorporated into an ostensibly realist narrative, has made it difficult for literary critics to determine which literary school he should belong to. Fortunately, Yan solved this dilemma himself by inventing the term "*shenshi zhuyi*" 神实主义 (mythorealism) and claiming that most of his recent works are mythorealist. Although his early stories are not as ambitious and thoughtful as his more recent works, in an age of increasing "vulgarization," Yan's writing has become to many a single spark serving as a beacon in the darkness. He is persistently concerned with the predicament of the lower classes, their never-ending struggle for survival, exploring the parameters of human nature and the tenacity of the drive for life. Finally, at the turn

of the twenty-first century, having reached the conclusion that realism cannot adequately represent the unrepresentable of Chinese reality, Yan breaks away from realism in favor of mythorealism.

Minjian Writing and Contemporary Chinese Writers

The literature of the early twenty-first century is largely continuous with that of the 1990s, with no major gaps or changes of direction occurring during this period. One notable thing, however, is how a growing number of writers whose works center on people at the bottom of society have risen to prominence in the Chinese literary world. These writers have, to varying degrees, all tried to break away from the trend to popular literature during the late twentieth century, demonstrating a willingness and capacity to rethink writing's social responsibility. Because it would be impractical here to provide a complete list of names, I will focus only on three additional writers—Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, Mo Yan 莫言, and Yu Hua 余华—for the reason that they share the most common ground with Yan—though they all rose to fame in the 1980s, prior to Yan's arrival on the literary scene. Like Yan, both Mo Yan and Liu Zhenyun were born in the impoverished countryside in the 1950s and served in the army; Yu Hua, in contrast, was born in 1960 in Hangzhou city and came of age in somewhat better circumstances. All three, however, indirectly experienced the historical traumas of the Cultural Revolution, something which they all have attempted to communicate through their literary works.

Although exhibiting different literary techniques, these four writers share what has become a distinctive characteristic of post-1990s Chinese literature: they all take a *minjian* 民间 (literally, folk) position in their writing,[1] from which they adopt a counter-enlightenment narrative, dispelling the so-called original sin of Chinese national character, famously condemned by Lu Xun. *Minjian* was first identified as a critical concept in the early 1990s by Chen Sihe 陈思和, a professor of modern Chinese literature based in Shanghai. According to him, *minjian* is "a concept in opposition to the central government; *minjian*'s cultural patterns refer to the cultural space that exists on the margins, removed from the power center of the governmental control mechanism" (1997: 75). This description contains two main messages: first, it provides a vision of literary creation in which life is observed, represented, and described according to a model of rural village culture in traditional times or the emergent secular culture of China's modern economy; second, although these writers speak from the standpoint of the traditional Chinese intellectual, what they represent is not so much the cultivated opinion of high culture but the unregimented lifestyles and simple aesthetic tastes found among *minjian* (126). Unlike Jürgen Habermas's concept of civil society or the public sphere, *minjian* refers to a cultural phenomenon that is unique to the Chinese context, one that provides a uniquely Chinese critical space which allows for the preservation and recreation of the "authentic but residual, primitive but unrestricted" (Zheng 248) cultural traditions of pre-modern agrarian China.