

Preface

This book is derived from the Mandel Lectures in the Humanities that I presented at Brandeis University in the spring of 2018. I am grateful to the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis, and in particular Ramie Targoff, its director, for inviting me to join the lecture series. I also wish to express my deep appreciation for everyone who attended my lectures and shared their thoughts and questions, which informed and improved this book.

As the first of its kind, the book represents an effort to address the power of fiction in relation to China and the rest of the Sinophone world from the millennial turn to the present. I have defined “fiction” not only as a narrative genre in print or other media but also as an amorphous process of fabrication at every layer of our society, something that energizes our capacity to imagine and act, for good and for ill. In China, fiction has been invoked as a key factor of nation building at the beginning of the twentieth century and an apparatus of postsocialist governance in the new millennium. Fiction provides one of the most polemical ways to engage with Chinese realities.

Accordingly, the book takes as its point of departure the call of President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2013 to “tell the good China story” and not only explicates the fictional turn of contemporary Chinese cultural politics but also traces its genealogy from early modern times. By using the phrase “fictional turn,” I do not mean to observe Chinese reality as a mere simulacrum. Rather, I am more concerned with the tangled relationships between ideological imperatives and emancipatory yearnings, and between empirical contingencies and narrative interventions, in contemporary China.

In five chapters, the book highlights the variety and vitality of fictional works from both China and the rest of the Sinophone world—in genres ranging from science fiction to political allegory, from erotic escapade to utopias and dystopias, and from social exposés to psychological thrillers—and examines the way they have intrigued, fascinated, puzzled, and

scandalized readers. The book also introduces a series of discourses by critics within China (such as Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, and Shen Congwen) and from the West (such as Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Gilles Deleuze). These critics have tried to explain modern narrativity from ethical, political, and affective perspectives and have offered their observations of its agency, or lack thereof, and consequences.

The book follows three thematic threads. Transgression identifies the deviant subjects and soundings that contest the legal, ethical, and cognitive terms in reading and writing fiction. Transmigration calls attention to the necrological and natal cycles beneath and beyond the anthropomorphic horizons, questioning the feasibility of humanism when encountered by multiple forms of being in time and space. Transillumination takes issue with the extant paradigm of realism in relation to luminosity and enlightenment, eliciting instead the typology of “the beam of darkness” that sheds light on the invisible and unthinkable. The three thematic threads are each represented by the emblematic figures of aliens, the phantasm, and post-human beings.

To conclude, the book offers its own theoretical take on fiction in terms of modernity and monstrosity. And it argues for a literary ecology in which ideological doctrines and individual eccentricities, as well as conventional forces and speculative impulses, interact in such a way as to constitute a kaleidoscopic structure of feeling in contemporary China. It contends that where history fails to address the consequences of atrocities, fiction arises to bear witness to the immemorial and unforeseeable.

Selected passages are drawn from my previous work: *Fictional Realism of 20th-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (Columbia University Press, 1992), *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911* (Stanford University Press, 1997), and *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in 20th-Century China* (University of California Press, 2004). All referenced passages have been adapted in the context of the new arguments in this book.

As this book went to press, the coronavirus outbreak was dominating the headlines. At the peak of the health crisis, the Chinese people were asked to stand in solidarity against the virus and to “tell the good China story of fighting the pandemic.” Meanwhile, numerous good and not-so-

good stories were flooding the virtual and actual media and were quickly hailed or censored. This book inadvertently bears witness to how fiction is invoked to narrate a state of emergency in China today as it was at the beginning of the modern era.

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