

Genealogies of Literary Forms and the “Limits” of Realism in Contemporary China

Marco FUMIAN
Oriental University of Naples

The mainstream Chinese narrative about the literary reconstruction of the post-Maoist period (1978-1989) emphasizes the efforts of the Chinese writers to gain their “intrinsic” creative autonomy freeing themselves from the “external” control of the political system. This autonomy, however, had to be negotiated with the authorities, who continued throughout that period to exercise their ideological supervision over the literary representations of reality, primarily by means of their control over the theory and practice of realism. In order to break away from the ideological boundaries set by the Party-State, the Chinese writers had first of all to break away from the normative territories of realism, setting out to claim new spaces of imagination “distant” from the realist norms where they could exercise a certain amount of formal *and* ideological autonomy. This article, then, reinterprets the genealogy of the most representative fictional trends of the post-Maoist period by reading them as successive movements of “deterritorialization” from the previous realist boundaries. In doing this, I argue, the Chinese writers developed some “strategies of distance” to work “around” realism and overcome its “limits” over the representation of the social reality. The inclination to produce some “distanced” representations of the socio-historical dimensions of contemporary Chinese life, in the end, became a “habitus” of many Chinese writers which characterized many representative fictional works created in the two subsequent decades of the mdm era.

1

In the volume *My Reality, My Ism*, Yan Lianke, one of the sharpest contemporary Chinese writers, made a series of observations that offered several important insights into the creative mechanisms of the Chinese literary field in the Reform era.¹ Since the Nineties, he noted in a number of passages, most of the best Chinese writers – and the

I would like to thank Rossella Ferrari, Wendy Larson, Michel Hockx and David Der-wei Wang for their valuable suggestions that helped me to elaborate the final version of this article.

¹ Yan Lianke 阎连科, *My Reality, my Ism* 我的现实，我的主义 (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2010).

most highly praised by the Chinese critics – manifested an inclination to detach themselves from the reality of the present, “keeping a distance” (*lakai juli* 拉开距离) from this reality, and producing works that were often only “indirectly” related to the actual experiences of contemporary China.² If he recognized that this detachment was “advantageous” in helping the Chinese writers to “write more freely” and “adjust their imagination”, he also noticed that a lamentable result was the creation of works that were somehow ill-equipped to unveil the complexities of the current social life, as a “true” work of realism, according to him, should do. These, he remarked more than once, were the “limits” (*juxian* 局限) of the contemporary Chinese writers, that were also the “limits” of the contemporary Chinese realism, which in Yan Lianke’s view was mostly apt on “tracing over” the contours of the present reality (*miaomo xianshi* 描摹现实), but was hardly disposed to genuinely investigate and question the “soul” of its experiences. As to the most important causes of this inclination, apart from the intrinsic aesthetic aspirations of the Chinese novelists, they were perhaps best clarified in his other book of literary theory, *Discovering Fiction* (2012). Here, in mentioning “the distinctive impediments (*tese zulan* 特色阻拦) that made the Chinese writers unable, as well as unwilling, to approach the deepest truths of realism”, Yan Lianke explained that these were mainly the “constraints of the new ideology” (*xin yishixingtai de yueshu* 新意识形态的约束), which, with their mix of political restriction and economic temptation, ultimately led most Chinese writers to “voluntarily abandon the probing of certain truths, avoiding to reach for the inner core of social reality and the most authentic heart of human beings”. As a result, Chinese realism “stops at (representing) that part of the world that is perceivable, but on the contrary is unable to explore and comprehend those absurd and weird aspects of existence that cannot be perceived”; while the “struggle to break through this constraining barrier (*shufu pingzhang* 束缚屏障) has already become the biggest cause of exhaustion and anxiety” of the

² Read in particular pp. 47-60 and pp. 189-192. The works mentioned by Yan Lianke are Chen Zhongshi’s *Bai lu yuan* 白鹿原 (White-deer plain, 1993), Wang Anyi’s *Jishi he xugou* 纪实和虚构 (Reality and fabrication, 1993) and *Chang hen ge* 长恨歌 (The Song of Everlasting sorrow, 1996), Mo Yan’s *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (Big breasts, wide hips, 1996) and *Tan xiang xing* 檀香刑 (Sandalwood death, 2001), Yu Hua’s *Huo zhe* 活着 (To live, 1992) and *Xu Sanguan mai xue ji* 许三观卖血记 (Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, 1995), Zhang Wei’s *Gu chuan* 古船 (The ancient ship, 1986) and *Jiuyue yuyan* 九月寓言 (September’s fable, 1992), Li Rui’s *Jiu zhi* 旧址 (Old site, 1992), *Wu feng zhi shu* 无风之树 (Trees without wind, 1995) and *Wan li wu yun* 万里无云 (No clouds for ten thousand miles, 2004), Zhang Chengzhi’s *Xinling shi* 心灵史 (History of the soul, 1991), Su Tong’s *Mi* 米 (Rice, 1991), Ge Fei’s *Renmian taohua* 人面桃花 (Peach Blossom Paradise, 2004), Han Shaogong’s *Maqiao cidian* 马桥词典 (A dictionary of Maqiao, 1996), A Lai’s *Chen’ai luoding* 尘埃落定 (Red poppies, 1998), Chi zijian’s *Gu’erguna he zuo’an* 额尔古纳河右岸 (The last quarter of the moon, 2005), Bi Feiyu’s *Yumi* 玉米 (Yumi, 2003), Lin Bai’s *Wanwu huakai* 万物花开 (All things in bloom, 1998), Shi Tiesheng’s *Wuxu biji* 务虚笔记 (Notes on principles, 1996), and Li Er’s *Huaqiang* 花腔 (Coloratura, 2001). But, as Yan Lianke also suggested, other works could be added to the list. He also admitted that he was not immune to this habit of “distancing” citing as an example his novel *Riguang Liu nian* 日光流年 (Years in the sun, 1998).

contemporary Chinese writers.³ It is exactly to break this barrier that Yan Lianke developed his peculiar way of writing, which he first described as an “alternative realism” (*linglei xianshizhuyi* 另类现实主义), and eventually called with the neologism *shenshizhuyi* (神实主义, mythorealism or pararealism): a mode of representation that aims to be realistic and at the same time to “transcend” realism, which typically resorts to a variety of non-realist devices (such as the weird, the allegorical, or the absurd) with the intent to dig out those “invisible” truths that are hidden behind the conventional truths mostly portrayed by the mainstream Chinese realism.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to discuss about Yan Lianke’s idiosyncratic mode of writing.⁴ Rather, what I find very intriguing about Yan Lianke’s observations is that they seem to illuminate a broad socio-historical tendency which seems at once subjective – as a personal attitude of many representative Chinese writers – and objective – as the average outcome of some external conditions, somehow related to what Yan Lianke calls “ideology”. As a piece of evidence, Yan Lianke also conceded that he himself was not immune from displaying an “excessive” tendency to “stretch a distance from the present reality” in some of his writings.⁵ Moreover, the particular style that he came to call *shenshizhuyi*, in his own description, is not a unique personal invention belonging exclusively to himself, but rather a common formal approach embraced since the Eighties by several Chinese writers in their efforts to solve a common problem: precisely, that of circumventing the difficulties inherent in the investigation of the contemporary Chinese reality by the mainstream Chinese realism.⁶ This would suggest that the inclination to keep a distance from a more “direct” approach to the representation of the contemporary Chinese social reality – what “realism” is really about, according to Yan Lianke – *either* by retreating into history, *or* by lingering on the phenomenological surface of the contemporary social life, *or* by resorting to some non-realist forms and devices when attempting to break through that surface – is a phenomenon that has a structure and a historical “thickness”, and therefore also some degree of observability. If this is so, this inclination could be properly understood, drawing from Pierre Bourdieu, as a *habitus* characteristic of the Chinese writers: that is, an internalized disposition, rooted in the objective conditions of the literary field, that having been structured by these conditions, structures in return the distinctive literary behaviors of the members of the field, orienting their individual choices and strategies in collective ways in accordance with the “space of possibles” – “the finite universe of freedom under constraint”, as Bourdieu defines it – available in

³ Yan Lianke 阎连科, *Discovering Fiction* 发现小说 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2014), 158-159. See also the English translation of the book by Carlos Rojas, *Discovering fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁴ On this, see Marco Fumian, “Mythorealism or Pararealism?: Yan Lianke’s Short Fiction as a Key to Enter the Author’s Representational World”, in Riccardo Moratto and Howard Yuen Fung Choy, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Yan Lianke* (London: Routledge, 2022), 49-69.

⁵ Yan Lianke, *My Reality, my Ism*, 52.

⁶ 210-215.

the field; or, more specifically, “subfield” in this case as I will focus mostly on the realm of fictional production.⁷

If Yan Lianke’s insights are correct, how did this inclination to “stretch a distance” come into being? In what ways did it structure the Chinese writers’ representations of reality? Is it possible to describe some recurring patterns in the formal and thematic construction of these representations? And what are, in general, the alleged “limits” of contemporary Chinese realism, how do they operate in the Chinese writers’ creative processes?

These are the questions that I will try to address in this article, in which I will explore the roots of this inclination focusing not so much on the general *formal* limits of realism – for example, the problematic relationship of the realist mimetic language with the “real” it seeks to represent – but rather, following Yan Lianke’s suggestions, on the specific *ideological* impediments that appear to constrain the realist imagination of the Chinese writers, mainly as the result of the complicated relationship of the Chinese literary field with the particular “system of ideological administration” (*yishixingtai guanli tizhi* 意识形态管理体制), directed by the Chinese Party-State, that, as of 2003, still constituted the “distinctive” heteronomous force, as Shao Yanjun observed in her study on the structures of the Chinese literary field in the Reform Era, regulating the literary “space of possibles” in conjunction with the forces of the market.⁸ What I will do, more specifically, is to observe how the most representative actors of the Chinese literary field came to elaborate some distinctive ways to represent the Chinese social reality precisely in the effort to negotiate with the representational limitations structured by this system of ideological supervision, developing some specific “strategies of distance” as internalized dispositions to find “freedom under constraint” in their representation of the Chinese social life.

I will do this, notably, by going back to the literary history of the post-Maoist “new era” (1978-1989), as it was in this long, transitional decade also known as the “Eighties” that the avant-garde cohorts of the Chinese literary field, in search of aesthetic and ideological autonomy, began to rebuild the Chinese literary imagination in a close confrontation with the limits set by the cultural authorities, mostly expressed by their

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 235.

⁸ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, *The Inclined Literary Field: The Marketization of the Contemporary Literary Production* 倾斜的文学场：当代文学生产机制的市场化转型 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe 2003), 9. For a reflection on the application of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on the modern Chinese literary field, see Michel Hockx, “The Literary Field and the Field of Power: The Case of Modern China”, *Paragraph* 35.1 (2012): 49-65. See also Marco Fumian, “The Temple and the Market: Controversial Positions in the Literary Field with Chinese Characteristics”, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21.2 (2009): 126-166.

ideological delimitations of reality by means of the official realist norms.⁹ It is therefore in this decade that we can locate, by means of a genealogical reconstruction, the origins of certain representational attitudes that will inform to varying degrees, in the more flexible ideological environment of the "post-new era" unfurled with the establishment of the "socialist market economy" in 1992, many of the critically acclaimed fictional narratives produced in the two subsequent decades of the Reform era until the publication of Yan Lianke's critical reflections.

Given the lack of space available, I will be able to trace this genealogy only in very broad strokes, sketching out the emergence of the most representative fictional trends of the Eighties up to the beginning of the Nineties reinterpreting them mainly as strategic orientations aimed at finding formal and thematic solutions to break or circumvent the restrictions over the representation of reality administered by the Communist Party. In doing this, I will focus my discussion on the internal articulations of the Chinese domestic literary discourse, drawing mostly from the literary theory and debates produced by the very actors of the literary field who participated in the configuration of these trends. This means that, while informed by the relevant Western scholarship, this study will not be primarily based on the latter. Likewise, it will not be possible to offer in this essay close readings of the significant textual examples illustrating these strategies. This will be the subject of a few specific case studies that I intend to accomplish after the completion of this general survey.

⁹ In this essay I will mainly define as "avant-garde" those actors in the Chinese literary field of the Eighties who made an effort to break the state-dominated "rules" of literary creation, and "conservatives" those who reverberated the official views of the political authorities.