

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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In 2010, Cai Xiang's *Revolution and Its Narratives* [*Geming/Xushu*] was published in China.¹ It immediately garnered positive reviews (as well as a few politically motivated attacks) and became one of the most talked about scholarly books of the year. Roundtables were organized to discuss its challenges to conventional scholarship and workshops convened to explore its many strands of inquiry. The translators decided soon after that this was precisely the kind of book that is still quite rare in English-language scholarship on modern socialist Chinese literature. Its major topic—the relationship among Chinese narratives of revolution, modernity, and socialism in the Maoist period—generally has been dismissed in English-language studies of modern Chinese literature. In the few exceptions, the discussions often reduce the cultural to the political, neglecting the complex literary and aesthetic aspects of the work in favor of assumed transparently political-ideological readings, which amounts to the same thing as a dismissal. Cai Xiang's book argues otherwise and thus presents a potential map for future research. It is, in short, an entirely new

1. The literal translation of the title is *Revolution/Narratives*; we have been persuaded by outside readers and Duke University Press to slightly modify this title for the English edition.

theoretical meditation on the historical and aesthetic possibilities opened up by, as well as the ultimate impossibility of writing a literature adequate to, the socialist transformation of China in the 1950s and 1960s.

Since we undertook the translation of the book in the summer of 2011—it has taken several years to complete the work because each of us has been engaged in a number of other projects—a couple of studies on this general subject have been published and a slew of dissertations launched, with several doubtless already completed.² Indeed, after years of lying fallow, Chinese culture and cultural production of the 1950s and 1960s have become a rather trendy field of research, and as the period recedes into the past and becomes ever more historical, a newer research environment is without a doubt taking shape. Rather than completely initiating a trend in English, then, this book's English-language edition joins an ongoing scholarly conversation that increasingly takes seriously what Cai calls contemporary literature (*dangdai wenxue*) and what otherwise is usually known as socialist literature, or the literature of the seventeen years [1949–66]. Many of the individual literary works and some of the issues taken up in Cai's book have been raised in Chinese scholarship and U.S.-based studies of Chinese literature. Yet Cai's systematicity and his literary-historical dialectical mode of inquiry remain rare and lead in some startlingly innovative directions. Indeed, as Cai described the project in an interview we held with him in the summer of 2013 at a Shanghai coffee shop, his core problem in this book is how to take seriously the legitimacy of socialism and the experimental contemporary literature that was pioneered in its name—and the core difference between his work and that of others is that he does take that legitimacy seriously. As he indicated, even maintaining the legitimacy of the 1950s and 1960s (as compared to the left-wing literature of the 1930s) has become a matter of debate in discussions of modern China's history and contemporary literature. The highly politicized debate is not about theory but in the evaluation of socialist history and its literature and cultural

2. A partial listing of recent books would include Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Alexander Cook, *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Krista Van Fleit Hang, *Literature the People Love: Reading Chinese Texts from the Early Maoist Period (1949–1966)* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Richard King, *Milestones on a Golden Road: Writing for Chinese Socialism* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013); Wendy Larson, *From Ah-Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Publications, 2012).

imaginary, which are thus often dismissed. In these conflictual conditions, people often cannot forgive a certain seriousness in coping with the history of “the seventeen years” or its literary and cultural production.

We will have more to say about these issues in what follows. For now, suffice it to note that this introduction to the English translation of Cai’s book is intended to situate the book in a context—English-language studies of literature produced under Chinese socialism—for which it was not originally intended. We thus hope to indicate what we believe is this book’s importance not only for Chinese studies at the current juncture, but also for research on socialist and modern experimental literatures of the contemporary period more generally.

Our introduction proceeds in three parts. First, we situate Cai’s discussion in the context of the Chinese historical turn in socialist new culture toward massification (*dazhonghua*) during the Yan’an period (1935–49) and after. If a previous emphasis in China on new culture focused on the May Fourth period and beyond (1915–1937) and located the source and catalyst of China’s and the world’s cultural renewal in the petit bourgeois urban literary sphere, then in the Yan’an period under Mao Zedong’s directives and in the dual contexts of mobilizing for the national socialist revolution and the War of Resistance against Japan, the turn was toward the mass rural sphere (peasants) as source of and catalyst for social transformation and national unity. By the 1950s and 1960s, after the Chinese Communist Party came to power, having vanquished internal and external foes alike, the rural emphasis was joined, enhanced, and complicated by the revolutionary addition of the urban proletarian realm, symbolized by the problem of rural cadres’ entering the cities from the villages in which the revolution had been developed and nurtured, and from which it had been launched. These successive and simultaneous turns posed sociological challenges, to be sure, but they also presented new possibilities for old-style (urbanized, petit bourgeois) intellectuals (*wenren*) and new-style (revolutionized and rusticated) cultural workers of the time. These challenges and opportunities were in large part articulated in and through Mao Zedong’s important 1942 lectures, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature” (hereafter, “Talks”). Following Cai’s lead, we position his book’s theoretical-historical contribution in this context.

Second, we locate Cai’s discussion in the post-1980s global repudiation of all things socialist, and thus in the ascendant scholarly atmosphere in socio-cultural analysis and wider society that Daniel Vukovich has called “liberal

revenge.”³ This atmosphere is even more prevalent in China than it is elsewhere. “Liberal revenge,” in this case, resides most pointedly in the move from analyzing and taking seriously the political-cultural concepts of the masses (*dazhong*) and the revolutionary people (*renmin*) as the subject of history to primarily engaging the depoliticized ahistorical concept of the human (*ren*) or the individual (*geren*) not only as the subject of history but also as the measure of all worthwhile cultural, economic, and political endeavors. Cai addresses this question in the text at hand in his frequent evocations of the 1980s Chinese critiques of literature from the 1950s and 1960s. In this, we can see his insistence on retrieving the contemporaneous meanings and strivings of socialist literature from the detritus of recent historical-ideological erasure as one of the major goals of his study.

Third, we situate Cai’s work in his attempt to answer the deceptively simple question: what happens culturally the day after the revolution?⁴ As Cai argues, a significant feature of the revolution was that it was an ongoing cultural narrative event, whose logic, tensions, localizations, and so on all needed to be worked out in concert with the economic building of socialism and the socialist transformation of everyday life. That is, the revolution was embedded in narratives just as it was narrativized in multiple different ways. These are not separable, according to Cai’s analysis; indeed, he insists that the Chinese revolution was a cultural revolution from the very beginning in its intention to transform social consciousness. Rather than turn narrative into a function of revolution, then, Cai dialectically intertwines them. We conclude with a brief discussion of the ways in which Cai leads us from the literature of socialism toward the paradox of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which simultaneously strictly enforced various cultural dogmatisms while representing liberation from authority for many individual cultural workers.

The Yan’an Talks: How to Narrate the Revolution in Socialist Literature

One of Cai’s major theoretical proposals derives from Benedict Anderson’s discussion of imaginary communities as a nationalist narrative project and process. While for Anderson the implicit and explicit narrator of this project is the state, for Cai—reading Anderson through Mao, one could say—the

3. Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C.* (London: Routledge, 2012), 17–20.

4. “After the revolution” derives from Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic, 1976). See chapter 7 of this book.

narratives are written by novelists and fiction writers, who were tasked from the mid-1930s onward with inventing a socialist revolutionary literature. In this process, while the national imaginary and the socialist imaginary were often simultaneously narrated from the Yan'an period onward, and while they often drew upon common themes, Cai argues that neither of them can be dissolved into the other without some elision of the important ways in which the socialist imaginary departed from, enhanced, and embedded itself in society differently from the national one. This insight on the nonconflationary simultaneity of socialism and nationalism requires us to take the revolutionary nature of Chinese nationalism and socialism quite seriously. In other words, as Cai explains, socialist narratives had a revolutionary and thus socially transformative task: their explicit and ambitious goal was to embed themselves among the very audiences whose members were in the midst of transforming their own lives and the future of the nation. Thus, to embed itself in the countryside and among peasants, the socialist cultural narrative, or the narrative of socialist culture, often needed to strengthen local identities in typified ways by incorporating national transformations into traditional communal forms. This is what Cai calls the localization of the national imaginary through transformative social practice and imagination, a process that created socialist cultural content that itself mixed with and became a lived part of socialist everyday life.

The task of those who produced the literature and culture of the time was to create narratives adequate to this process—including the localization, socialist transformation, and multiple levels of cultural integration—with as much complexity and sympathy as possible. Thus, one of Cai's most important points in this regard is to elucidate how the relation of narrative to revolution in socialist literature was an integral part of socialist literary practice. Indeed, this was its very logic, rather than merely a political or ideological requirement imposed by the Party-State. Because of the internal relation demanded of narrative and socialism, Cai takes very seriously the attempts after 1949 (following World War II and what is commonly called China's "liberation") by a generation of major and minor literary producers to put into practice Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks." He takes seriously the idea that this generation of writers were determined to produce socialist literature because of their own political commitments and social sympathies, and were striving very hard to achieve this goal both as writers—cultural producers—and as people who lived in and through the historical politics of the time. Retrospective denunciations or repudiations of this literature or these literary practi-

tioners because of the supposed falsity of the ideological consciousness they espoused thus entirely miss the historical point. Indeed, what Cai demonstrates is how writers' political and social commitments led them to identify contradictions in socialist life, even while they were unable narratively to resolve those contradictions adequately.

Following Mao's indications in the "Talks" and elsewhere, then, narrative and narrativity became and remained effective, important, and necessary points of entry into socialism as a culturally, politically, economically, and socially generative lived system of ideology and social transformation aimed at revolutionizing the social relations of production and life in general. Cai reconfirmed this point in our summer 2013 interview, during which he emphasized that putting the ideas in Mao's "Talks" into practice demanded a high level of competency and self-reflection; that this endeavor was embraced by great writers of the time, and was essentially inaccessible to hacks; and that the effort was not merely to apply some theoretical or ideological yardsticks to existing writing, but rather, as in the spirit of Mao's "Talks," it was to create an entirely new literary form and content for the socialist transformation of life, culture, and China.

The difficulty of practicing what the "Talks" required thus stemmed in part from the fact that writers had to enter into a constantly changing social situation—everyday life, after all, is both routine and rife with transformative potential; narrating the resultant complexity required nimbleness so as to enhance the potential and ensure the proper direction of socialist transformation. As Mao observes in the "Talks," every transformation in the social relations of production requires the development of a new consciousness of and in society. For Mao, then, the task of socialist literature was not merely to reflect but to produce culturally this consciousness and this new society, for which the changing social situation became not merely the raw material for a crude representational practice, but also the ground upon which the cultural production of a socialist literature adequate to the ever-changing situation had to be engaged as a practice. The engagement, then, was to include the shifting political—as well as, and perhaps even more important, shifting cultural and social—consciousness of and in the masses for whom, by whom, and in whose name modern socialist literature was being created. The task that was taken on by the mostly elite intellectuals, who were literate and urban-educated, unlike the masses for whom they wrote and in whose idiom they strove to invent a new practice of cultural production, was not an easy one. It required that these intellectuals enter a rural or industrial lifeworld that was alien to them in many

respects. And it required, as Cai pointed out in our interview, that intellectuals reform and reeducate themselves in conversation with peasants and proletarian workers. In this sense, the *renmin* (revolutionary people)—peasants and the proletariat—are the necessary interlocutors not only as a market (there is still a market consideration throughout the Maoist period), but primarily as an ethical principle of socialist literary practice. This was an ethics founded upon preexisting forms of sociality that needed to be embraced while also being transformed.

For this complex endeavor, Mao broke the tasks of cultural production in his “Talks” into five realms of creative consideration that he analyzed as the most important for the formation of a revolutionary national culture, a revolutionary cadre of culture workers, and a new culture of socialist revolution. The realms—each of which was autonomous and yet also dialectically related to the others—were class stand, attitude, audience, work style, and popularization (massification).⁵ Cai’s exploration into the creative potential in, as well as the impasses encountered by, contemporary literature refers to each of these realms specifically through an examination of the major literary figures of the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, including Zhao Shuli, Zhou Libo, Liu Qing, Yang Mo, Hao Ran, among others. For Mao—and for the writers who seriously attempted to put his social-literary analysis into practice so as to thereby invent a new socialist literature—the problem of class stand included not only a consciousness of where the cultural worker located himself or herself, but also and more important, it included a recognition that all works of art or culture embody a class stand. Just as socialist society in China was to be informed by and was intended to serve, while also strengthening, the peasant-proletariat alliance, socialist works of art needed to embody, create, and represent the class stand of these leading revolutionary classes. Those works of art had to narrativize the transformation of the former slaves of social production into masters of the state and nation.

If one took seriously the problem of revolutionary classes and the problem of class stand, then one’s cultural attitude became an issue of paramount importance. Where, socially, did one locate oneself? Revolutionary works needed to help unite the socialist classes as well as encourage and promote revolutionary progress—whether in war, in urban and industrial construction, or in rural cooperation and collectivization; such cultural works needed

5. The “Talks” were delivered in May 1942 and published in revised form in 1943. Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong], “Talks at the Yanan [Yan’an] Forum on Literature and Art,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 3: 69–98.

to criticize revolutionary enemies and laggards while praising and depicting positively revolutionary progressives. Yet these negative and positive depictions could not be cast in stone: they needed to provide hope and a method for change and social transformation. This needed to be done in a way that took the audience for such works seriously; that is, with due consideration for local and traditional forms and languages already loved and known by the masses, which were now to be integrated into a larger context of national-level socialist transformation and cultural production. The combination of attitude and audience, as Cai demonstrates, helped produce some very clear innovations in the uses of legend and myth, heroic narratives, romance, and other traditional oral narrative forms that were reconstituted into the modernist socialist novel, short-story, and narrative cinematic genres.

Creating works that were complex enough to grapple with the ongoing transformations in social life and yet direct enough to be understood and appreciated by a new proletarian and peasant audience required cultural workers to shift their work styles. Intellectuals were now encouraged to go forth from their petit bourgeois urban lives into the countryside and to industrial sites to learn the rhythms, languages, difficulties, and joys of the common people, and thus become better able to narrativize imaginatively and aesthetically the struggles and triumphs of regular folk. Intellectual high-handedness and pretension were to be traded for humble learning from the masses. The failures and foibles—the real life—of common people needed to be dealt with directly and yet also aestheticized and fictionalized. Tying the whole endeavor together, then, was the injunction to popularize or massify: to produce writing for the revolutionary masses and for a truly popular readership. This required not the dumbing down of literature, but the introduction of new narrative forms through the use of older oral story-telling forms; the conscious attempt to cater to a subaltern population, so that they could recognize themselves in the works as well as recognize how to transform themselves for the new society; and the participation of the masses themselves in the very creation of the works.

In tracing China's socialist literature movement to Mao's "Talks," Cai may be taking an unorthodox position on Chinese literary history. Many scholars, in fact, have understood China's socialist literature within a genealogy already produced in the Soviet Union through a Stalinist-inflected socialist realism and its major creations, such as Mikhail Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*, Galina Nikolaeva's *Harvest*, and many others. These books and films were widely translated and read and watched in Maoist China. We cannot say with cer-

tainty why Cai decided to mostly ignore the Soviet influence (although we can note the fact that he disavows the problem of influence altogether), which may very well be a topic worth exploring in a different analytical idiom. However, we can speculate that Cai's point is to emphasize how socialism was nativized in and through China's modern experience with revolution and cultural production, for which Mao's "Talks" are far more important.⁶

As Cai demonstrates, in practice, the abstract idealism of Mao's philosophical "Talks" contained contradictions, which at first posed interesting narrative challenges but increasingly became amenable to simplified and eventually entirely rigid ideological solutions. It was in the Cultural Revolution that the requirements for literature finally were dogmatized; that the radicalism of the possibility of socialist literature was undermined; and that literary creation fell into the hands of lesser producers. This outcome was not inevitable, however. Indeed, Cai's book shows how revolutionary themes were opened into different types of narratives, creating the tensions and the possibilities that later were foreclosed by fiat.

"Liberal Revenge": How to Erase China's Socialist Literature after the Cultural Revolution

While challenges to the socialist cultural imaginary already existed within socialist practices during the Mao era, the wholesale repudiation of these practices emerging from the postsocialist period—dating domestically in China since the start of the reform and opening up of the late 1970s and, globally, from within the victorious capitalist West after the Cold War—has been overwhelming. This "liberal revenge," as Vukovich calls it, has mustered ideological forces from all corners to denounce the mistakes, disasters, and violence committed in the name of revolution and has, by extension, almost succeeded in relegating the socialist cultural imaginary to the dustbin of history. Vukovich argues that the "eclipse of Maoist discourse—its defeat in the discursive battle for hegemony within Chinese society—is one of the conditions for the rise/return of liberalism in China and abroad."⁷ Starting in the late 1970s and throughout much of the 1980s, a good portion of what intellectuals pro-

6. We thank one of our anonymous readers for the Soviet works mentioned. We have disagreed with the reader's point, but it has helped us clarify another of Cai's contributions.

7. Daniel Vukovich, "From Charting the Revolution to Charter 2008," in *Culture and Social Transformations: Theoretical Framework and Chinese Context*, ed. Cao, Zhong, Liao (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 101.

claimed to be thought liberation in China's reform period was accompanied by such cultural movements as the new enlightenment and a culture fever, all of which were essentially responsible for casting doubt upon, if not completely delegitimizing, many of the socialist premises, practices, and accomplishments of the 1930s through the 1970s. The various short-lived but powerfully influential literary schools of writing, as well as critics who applied humanist theories in support of what they called new-era literature, paved the way for an abrupt ruptural cultural departure from the socialist cultural forms, content, and ideals that had been promoted during the Mao era. (Nonetheless, as Cai argues, what has been referred to as a rupture has not been as complete as some would claim.)

One of the best known voices advocating for the shift was that of Liu Zaifu, whose most influential 1980s writings include "On the Subjectivity of Literature," "Literary Studies Should Take Humanity as Its Central Focus," and *On the Composition of Literary Personality*.⁸ Liu's major argument was that literature should not be understood as a political and ideological tool but as studies and representations of the subjective feelings and emotions of the individual. While Liu's central argument was highly political—and it was articulated in the midst of a denunciation of the political violence of the Cultural Revolution and its cultural expressions—his new theory was premised on a depoliticized and derevolutionized notion of the self or the human being, which is of course highly ideological.⁹

In a recent article titled "People's Literature: An Unfinished Historical Project," the Tsinghua University-based scholar Kuang Xinnian offers—by way of a brief discussion of Liu's 1989 article titled "The Loss and Return of the Enlightenment Spirit of 'May Fourth' Literature"—a clear reading of the ideological implications of Liu's argument for "human literature." Kuang points out that "Liu thinks that after the May Fourth . . . , Chinese society advanced directly into the modern world and quickly transitioned to a socialist society. And yet, according to Liu, in the process [of moving] toward a community of free individuals, a middle period—a commercial economic period in which material exchanges are emphasized—went missing. As a result, China lacked

8. Liu Zaifu, "Lun wenxue de zhutixing" (1985), "Wenxue yanjiu yingyi ren wei siwei zhongxin" (1985), and "Xingezu he lun" (1986).

9. For a postmodern critique of Liu's theory, see Jing Wang's *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

a social form that would make human independence possible.”¹⁰ While actual May Fourth literature (1915–1927) was in fact more than humanistic and exhibited a potent mixture of urban petit bourgeois and revolutionary political and aesthetic experimentation, the post–Cultural Revolution realignment with the May Fourth New Culture Movement, as demonstrated by the writings of Liu and many others, downplayed the political message of May Fourth literature and reduced its content into a humanistic enlightenment movement.¹¹ This had the effect of presenting the 1980s return to humanism as a return to the unfinished project of the enlightenment. Such a realignment had the clear (and, in Kuang’s view, pernicious) goal of negating the socialist literature that had questioned some of the May Fourth literature’s narrower range of subjective voices and concerns; that is, the 1980s reform literature wished to erase and negate the socialist literature that had followed the Yan’an spirit in making efforts to create culture for, of, and by the people (or the mas-sification of literature). The post–Cultural Revolution new enlightenment movement, by evoking its supposedly depoliticized version of the May Fourth spirit, thus managed to overthrow the revolutionary spirit that was already contained in the May Fourth literary scene and that had developed during the period of socialist literature’s ascendancy, thereby derevolutionizing cultural forms—including literature—and negating the historical legitimacy of people’s literature. What Liu assumed would objectively result from non-socialist modernization was “a corresponding strong material foundation (a social form in which commodity exchanges are free and competitive).”¹² Upon this material foundation, a humanistic literature could grow, according to Liu. Yet, as Kuang argues, “what is essential in all of this development is the quiet and sure arrival of the capitalist market economy beckoned by and along with this discourse.”¹³ In other words, humanistic literature, far from being non-ideological, is itself premised upon the arrival and development of capitalism.

10. Kuang Xinnian, “People’s Literature: An Unfinished Historical Project in *Debating the Socialist Legacy and Capitalist Globalization in China*,” ed. Xueping Zhong and Ban Wang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 269.

11. This type of ideological reduction was taken up by such American scholars as Vera Schwarcz and popularized in US-based China studies. See, for example, Vera Schwarcz’s *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

12. Quoted in Kuang, “People’s Literature,” 269.

13. *Ibid.*

In today's China, capitalist development has taught lessons about capitalism, but not in the way that Liu assumed would be the case. One of the lessons is none other than the fact that the modernization and humanistic literature imagined by Liu and others in the 1980s has proven irrelevant in face of the capitalist commercial tidal waves, which in fact have marginalized literature as a cultural form except as hot commodities on the market. Within this context, humanistic literature has also proved itself unable to contend with the development of capitalist social relations and the subalternization of the working people. The rendering of the masses as no longer a revolutionary people and the replacement of them with the depoliticized figure of the human—a cornerstone of the liberal discourse of the 1980s and beyond—has made unsustainable the utopian notion of the human despite its discursive hegemony in the cultural sphere. The marginalization of literature in today's China demonstrates that it is no longer a cultural form that people love, especially when it is not clear who constitutes the people today, who speaks on their behalf, and if and how they can speak for themselves.

This is where we believe Cai's study is particularly significant. In his challenge to liberal discursive hegemony, Cai presents us with a layered reexamination of socialist cultural practices—including the tensions and crises within those practices—that aimed at transforming a society and its people. That is, when Cai revisits the notion of *renmin* (the revolutionary people), he insists both on the humanist nature of the notion and the fact that in the socialist period, the revolutionary struggle for equality was constantly in danger of being hijacked by the newly formed state bureaucracy and the hierarchical impulses within it. *People* (*renmin*), therefore, is and was a concept fraught with impermanence; yet within the socialist cultural imaginary, as Cai's study indicates, this concept—especially as it was linked to “the people as masters of society”—was about the possibility for the weak to resist and transform themselves so as to construct a new society. It was also about the emergence of the “socialist new person,” who represented the possibility and the potential of building a society in which economic equality and social dignity were central to the imagination of the present and a better future.

In this sense, Cai's discussion of the notion of *people* and the tensions within the concept echoes Maurice Meisner's musing on the “Yan'an spirit”:

The “Yan'an spirit” was in fact largely concerned with spiritual and moral matters and, more specifically, with the kinds of social and ethical values and life orientations once seen as essential to a continuing process of rev-

olutionary transformation. The values which Maoists derived from the Yan'an era, and which are attributed to that heroic revolutionary past, are essentially ascetic and egalitarian. They are the values of selfless struggle and self-sacrifice on behalf of the people, the values of hard work, diligence, self-denial, frugality, altruism, and self-discipline. . . . In the Maoist view, such values were not only responsible for the revolutionary successes of the past but remained essential to bring about the socialist society of the future.¹⁴

Where Cai differs from Meisner is in Cai's recognition of and emphasis on the dialectics in the "Yan'an spirit" when it comes to a mobilized and liberated people. That is, the literary texts Cai studies prove Meisner's argument that the "Yan'an spirit" would be carried over as the basis for China's socialist construction and cultural imaginary, but Cai's discussion helps break the rigidity in Meisner's evaluation, which is premised on a top-down perspective. Cai's argument lends credence to the importance of the liberation of a people as a force for the revolution and then a major social force for the socialist transformation of the old society and construction of a new social order, a revolutionary legacy that may be longer-lasting than most liberal scholars of today have been willing or able to recognize. Central to the Yan'an spirit and what Cai in this book calls the "mobilization structure" it motivated, in other words, is the attempt at the simultaneous social-cultural—and narrative—transformation and formation of a people. Such a practice was premised on what Cai refers to as "politics of dignity," through which people acquired not only political consciousness but sociopolitical agency as well. That is, they became masters of society. Despite—in fact, probably because of—the idealistic and utopian tendencies in such affiliated cultural imaginaries and practices, the "mobilization structure" functioned as a liberating force for a people, especially those at the lower rungs of society, to join society as fully political and social beings.

At the same time, in his typical dialectical fashion, Cai also critically reflects on the crises that emerged in the socialist cultural imaginary and its practices, crises in part occasioned by the very imaginary and practices themselves. As his discussion throughout the book demonstrates, the construction of the "new socialist person" also produced its negation. This leads to our third area of contextualization.

14. Maurice J. Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1999), 49.

What Happens Culturally the Day after the Revolution?

Within the Chinese historical context, the day after the revolution was also the beginning of the construction of a socialist nation. What happened culturally, therefore, happened in tandem with what the scholar Lin Chun has called the “socialist transformation” of China. Cai’s study of 1950s and 1960s Chinese literature against the backdrop and as a contemporaneous narrative construction of the multilevel political, socioeconomic, and sociocultural lifeworlds of China’s transformation restores a good deal of complexity to the cultural spheres. As Cai shows, each level of transformation was closely related to the others, giving rise not only to possibilities but often also to tensions and crises. Recognizing the uniqueness and also the dialectical domestic and international historical filiations of the literature of China’s socialism forces Cai to grapple not only with the legacy of the revolution itself, as a newly narrativized historical form, but also with the social and cultural aporia contained within this narrative process.

Politically, in his discussion of the “mobilization structure,” the notion of the people is divided into three categories: the masses, the cadres, and the intellectuals. What Cai reveals in his discussion of these three categories are the representations of the new type of village-level leaders who are not cadres in a bureaucratic or a hierarchical sense, peasants in a traditional sense, or intellectuals in terms of an educated urban elite. These leaders thus embody the ideal of the “new socialist person” that the mobilization-remolding movement wished to create. By grafting certain traditional or extant cultural forms onto the new socialist literary practices, these new local-level leaders could become narrators of a new socialist history in the making. Yet these new leaders (and the cultural forms from which they emerged) always were tinged with nonsocialist aspects. The challenge was to transform them adequately so that they were still recognizable and yet also new. This challenge also constituted a crisis for the literary production of new leaders.

In Cai’s reading, the portrayals of new cadres—those progressive individuals who are peasants, instead of intellectuals—who emerged with such mass mobilization movements as land reform and the cooperativization in the 1950s are suffused with a moral and ethical ideal deriving from earlier literary, cultural, and social types that now also embodied the literary ideal of the “socialist new person.” This moral and ethical ideal person—most typically depicted as a local villager—was someone with a politically progressive and socially forward-looking attitude and a free spirit who was willing to chal-

lenge old thoughts and tradition, even while his (and, rarely, her) ethics and morality gave voice to village traditions. Thus, as Cai points out, many of the moral and ethical ideals were local in their origins, and it was the political context of the socialist mobilization and transformation that breathed new life and meaning into those local values. In other words, the local was generalized. Writers such as Zhao Shuli, Zhou Libo, and Liu Qing were some of the literary practitioners and theorists who demonstrated a deep understanding of both the political need to mobilize and the cultural complexities involved in the mobilization practices.

At the level of socioeconomics, recognizing the question of what happens the day after the revolution is in effect recognizing a concern with specific visions, policies, and organizations of economic, social, and cultural life. In this regard, Cai focuses his discussion on well-known literary works that deal with land reform and the cooperativization movement or with industrial development in urban centers from the early 1950s through the mid-1960s. These works are socialist in that they represent peasants and workers as major protagonists. But Cai pushes the discussion further by uncovering the extent to which socialism on the economic level was filled with tension and the mobilization of people at times suffered from setbacks and pushbacks due to a range of factors internal to the transformations themselves. Still, Cai's analysis indicates that the socialist transformation and its associated literary forms could not have been possible without efforts to establish socialist economic relations. Without the latter, the former would have been entirely groundless, as was shown in the post-Cultural Revolution retreat from the Maoist socialist economic structure and practices and the defeat of such literary practices. Cai's discussions of the narration of labor and the working class as the new national subject and the long-neglected subject of history reveal at the same time a sophisticated modern socialist imaginary (based on structural changes in economic organizations, policies, and practices) and its powerful social-cultural literary instantiation. The constant difficulties posed by forces that resisted socialist transformation are likewise given their due.

These latter tensions are where Cai's study finds both the lifeworld possibilities and the everyday difficulties encountered in the course of socialist transformation. That is, as Cai demonstrates, the very point of transformation was quotidian: it was not merely abstract or beyond the arena of everyday life. As soon as large-scale policies and revolutionary mobilizations were brought to the narrative level of everyday life, problems and potentials emerged. As Cai foregrounds, the specific genre of strange tales of revolutionary heroes

demonstrates the extent to which socialist literature relied on a mythification of revolutionary heroes, a mythification that was derived from certain earlier oral storytelling forms. In this genre, such lifeworld issues as love, sexuality, and desire were treated in a “transcendental” fashion to promote the revolutionary spirit in the context of the day after the revolution. But Cai also examines the contradictions emerging from within the impulse to continuous revolution, contradictions that produced their own desires and forces opposed to socialist transformation. In close readings of classical texts of contemporary literature—which is what Cai calls modern socialist literature—such as novels, short stories, plays, and films, Cai reveals what he refers to as the deterritorializing desires manifested in the representations of negative characters. He argues for the need to better understand such countercultural tendencies within the socialist context, and he does so based on his desire to search for ways that socialist literature attempted to overcome crises in socialism at the quotidian, cultural, social, and economic levels. This attempt, as he shows, was not successful, yet it is notable for its aesthetic, historical, and cultural innovativeness and vitality.

Concluding Remarks

We would like to end with an elaboration on this last point. As Cai makes clear, anyone who studies Chinese socialism and its culture must directly address antisocialist ideological challenges on the one hand, and examine the shortcomings, mistakes, and disasters in socialist China on the other hand. Citing in his introduction the early literary scholar Chen Yinque’s notion of “understanding-based sympathy,” Cai argues that “‘understanding-based sympathy’ is premised on the establishment of a particular kind of attitude toward history. . . . This attitude is both scholarly and political, for—at least with regard to contemporary Chinese history—there is no transcendent or pure scholarship. A historical attitude here must direct its attention to the problematics (*mingti*) of the ‘resistance of the weak,’ an issue that is both historically specific and theoretically challenging.”

Cai does not evoke the “resistance of the weak” merely in a nationalist sense. “The weak” here refers primarily to the laboring people—the proletariat (including the peasantry)—who suffered the consequences of China’s weakness at the hands of foreign imperialist aggressions and encroachment. Here, Cai echoes Lin Chun’s point about the distinctiveness of the Chinese revolutionary formation, in which intellectuals as a social class were consi-

tutively organic to the working class. As Lin observes, “after all, the rise of the social was not brought about by a burgeoning bourgeoisie, as in Europe, but rather by a peasant revolution led by communist intellectuals.”¹⁵ And, as Cai argues:

Modernizing was the major goal of the revolution, to be carried out in political, economic, and cultural terms. Indeed, in contemporary [that is, socialist] Chinese literature, traces of modernity existed in the social form shaped by heavy industry in the modern organizational model of the nation-state, as well as in cultural expressions of radical pursuits for personal and individual freedom. Even at moments of radical debate on the form of literature, there continued to exist in-depth depictions of individual characters’ inner thoughts or feelings. That was the case regardless of whether, in contemporary Chinese literature, such depictions took the form of a “socialist new person” or a “typical character in a typical environment.”

In other words, the socialist cultural imaginary—informed by revolution and modernity—should be understood as both profoundly modern and uniquely Chinese due to its historical conditions. This basic understanding is the foundation for Cai’s critical and dialectical exploration of literary works produced during the Mao era.

Central to Cai’s study, then, is a consideration of how Chinese socialism was constructed culturally—that is, through narrative—in the context of what he calls the “after-the-revolution” (*geming hou*),¹⁶ and how this cultural production struggled to sustain itself in the face of a range of international and domestic challenges. Cai notes that he “interpret[s] Chinese socialism as a historical process filled both with tensions of self-negation and impulses for continuous revolution.” And the corresponding literary narratives address a wide range of questions central to China’s revolutionary modernity. Those questions include why mobilization was key to after-the-revolution cultural reconstruction; how to understand the forms and structure of the mobilization; why certain traditional forms were retained and enlisted in modern so-

15. Lin Chun, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2006), 219. For Lin’s further discussion on the issue of class in China, see her “The Language of Class in China,” in *Transforming Classes: Socialist Register 2015*, ed. Leo Panitch and Gregory Albo (London: Merlin, 2014), 24–53.

16. We should point out that *after-the-revolution* is counterposed to and used along with *post-revolution*. *Postrevolution* treats the revolution as an event that ended in 1949; *after-the-revolution* makes clear that the work of the revolution begins after the seizure of state power in 1949. See Cai’s introduction for more discussion on his usage.

cialist literature; how all of this helps explain the social-cultural characteristics of the Chinese revolution; what crises the practices of socialist culture generated; and how to understand the efforts, and their failure, to overcome the crises.

Thus Cai identifies the relationship between the multiplicity of narratives and revolution and the concept of revolution as multiple possible narratives, while exploring the tensions this relationship manifests and represents. The dual aspects of the people as both the agent and object of change inevitably informed and shaped various narrative forms—short stories, novels, plays, films—and the ways in which they were narrated. If the struggles for the success of the revolution were transformative, so were the establishment and construction of socialism, which was the goal of the revolution. But the transformations would prove even more challenging and difficult than the revolution itself. Cai's clear-eyed examinations of the various tensions manifested in modern socialist literature present us with a study based on a principled stance in favor of taking socialist revolution seriously and a willingness to critically explore the key question of what happens the day after the revolution.

Cai ends with the ways in which the Cultural Revolution both created a liberatory potential but also resubordinated everyone to other kinds of demands. In his summer 2013 interview with us, he said:

The socialist period was about desires: how, in a relatively closed environment, to create desires that were both “healthy” and political? This closed environment made for a hothouse situation: once everything was opened up, there was no resistance to anything. Socialism before 1949 was about the creation of desires; after 1949, desire was gradually erased from the equation: this became a real problem. How to beckon to the young, [how to present] the everyday life aspects of desire and happiness as an embodied issue? This is where the Cultural Revolution felt like a liberation from the obedience and the lack of desire inherent in socialism.

However, the violence of the Cultural Revolution ultimately betrayed its utopian premises, and the scars that resulted led intellectuals in the 1980s to a full-scale reevaluation of socialism and, by the 1990s, to a wholesale repudiation of it. Today, by taking seriously and studying the modern socialist literature of the first seventeen years, a vital component part of what he calls contemporary literature, we can hope—as Cai mentioned to us—to be seen as advocating not a restoration of the past, but rather an understanding of its promises and legacies for our times. That is, as Cai said to us, “socialism requires narra-

tive because it is creative; it is trying to re-create people's desires and aspirations; it is trying to transform existing relations and re-create a new narrative." Capitalism, too, has its narratives. In order to critique capitalism, one needs the creativity of socialism. The point of discussing socialism is, as Cai maintained, "not because one wants to return to that era, but to deal seriously with the possibilities and impossibilities of it" so as to deal with the possibilities and impossibilities of our current moment.