The power to enchant a reader through his or her willing suspension of disbelief is a characteristic of fiction and reveals a genealogical entanglement of the genre with power itself. For example, Clifford Geertz has argued that political order relies on “master fictions” that narrate or perform the sacred center of power found in premodern contexts. However, at many points in the past, and perhaps more frequently in modern times, fiction has also sought to use the specific nature of the belief it generates to question ideology or moral norms. From an anthropological perspective, fiction may be characterized by a kind of double bind: its ability to foster belief and immersion makes it a uniquely efficient tool to propagate political narratives; its specific status as a game of make-believe always introduces skepticism and contestation. Modernist and postmodernist works have made the fullest use of fiction’s generic power of contestation.

In the Chinese context, studies have traditionally pointed to the expectation that aesthetic experiences should have a harmonizing effect on society (an argument Haun Saussy’s reading of Xunzi qualifies in his contribution to the present issue). A related and common approach to the study of modern Chinese literature highlights how writers of the May Fourth period (1915–1927) used fiction to champion an ideology based on democracy and greater
equality within Chinese society (first advocated by Liang Qichao in 1902), very much in the manner of such nineteenth-century European standard-bearers of revolution as Victor Hugo, whose novels, in Walter Benjamin’s famous words, unfurled the banner of revolution over the man of the crowds.³ The scholar and critic Wang Xiaoming has pointed out that, in the 1910s and 1920s, Chen Duxiu and the editors of New Youth, most of whom were not writers themselves, “stressed the instrumental function of writing” and “did not fully realize the particular nature of literature itself.”⁴ This must be accounted a lost opportunity, for “nothing other than a comprehension of the special nature of literature on the part of the intellectuals could have provided an escape from an unthinking devotion to evolutionism and determinism.”⁵ On a slightly different note, as Ban Wang suggests in his essay, Lu Xun’s praise of Mara poetry can be read both as a critique of contemporary politics and a reestablishment of the connection between sublime aesthetics and noble moral sentiments.⁶ This connection was both reaffirmed and reified, Gloria Davies argues, when formulaic language became a way of shrinking the world to a set of reductive oppositions during the Mao era.⁷

Other critics, however, have dwelled on specific modernist and self-reflexive techniques in May Fourth literature that aim to break this hegemonic enchantment and make the reader question the credibility of the narrative.⁸ Indeed it could be maintained that May Fourth literature was defined by an iconoclasm that also sought to break the spell of all traditional literary,

⁵. Ibid.

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political, and moral narratives and adopt a democratic type of communicational ethos. If aestheticization and enchantment are perennial traits of state discourses and practices in China, it is perhaps unsurprising that a counterculture in modern literature should emphasize disenchantment. Where the state seeks to enchant, literature may seek to kindle doubt, to arouse debate. Chen Pingyuan’s seminal study of the key May Fourth journal *New Youth* (established in 1915 as *Youth*; it became an organ of the newly established Communist Party in 1921 and ceased publication in 1926) points out that in a general climate of instrumentalization of literature and culture for political goals, indeterminate the letters section of *New Youth*, though often used simply as a sounding board by members of the editorial committee writing under a pseudonym, could nonetheless function as a rare space for open debate.

Aesthetic appreciation of literature was a hotly debated topic throughout China’s twentieth century. May Fourth discourse accused traditional literature of fostering a form of passive enjoyment that made its readers incapable of questioning the political status quo. Aestheticization was increasingly suspected of being ethically compromised, of being a tool of (a)political enchantment. As Marxist criticism gained clout in the 1920s, literature was expected to be a source not of aesthetic enjoyment but of political critique and mobilization. When Marxist aesthetics were officially enshrined as the canon of cultural production in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after 1949, heated debates took place about whether certain fictional characters provided “correct” depictions of historical situations or class conflicts. Even today, in a more liberal environment for fiction writers, literary technique, often understood as a tool of self-censorship and aestheticization, is criticized as a way of avoiding a direct engagement with political issues. These aesthetic choices were also debated in great detail by literary critics on a theoretical level. At different times during China’s twentieth century, critical public discussion of the aesthetic merits of literature could therefore also serve as an accepted proxy for a form of political debate.


11. Lu Xun used the term *juiju* (chewing) to denounce the enjoyment derived by readers from the aestheticization of other people’s sufferings; see, for example, Lu Xun, “New Year’s Wishes” (*Zhufu*) and “The Loner” (*Guduzhe*), *Wandering* (*Panghuang*), vol. 2 of *Lu Xun Quanji* (Complete Works of Lu Xun) (Beijing, 2005), pp. 38, 100.

12. Perry Link, for example, discusses Mo Yan’s “daft hilarity” (Perry Link, “Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?” *New York Review of Books*, 6 Dec. 2012, www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/06/mo-yan-nobel-prize/)
The present essay attempts to revisit some of the literary debates that took place in China in the May Fourth and Republican periods (represented by Lu Xun), the early postwar years and the Republic of China (ROC) to PRC transition (Lao She), in certain works written during the Cultural Revolution (Jin Fan/Liu Qingfeng), as well as post-1979 literature on the mainland (Yan Lianke). It does so by selecting texts that challenge the aesthetics of enchantment, using literary devices to interrupt readers’ enjoyment and thus open a space for public discussion of both aesthetics and politics. Each of these texts is also bound up with a specific historical event.

The reception of these texts will be documented through some of the public debates about them that took place in the press. As Michael Warner notes, reading publics are constituted by nothing else than texts: “A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic. . . . It exists by virtue of being addressed.” However, an important condition for the formation of a “public” is that it cannot be constituted by the state: “It must first of all have some way of organizing itself as a body, and of being addressed in discourse. And not just any way of defining the totality will do. It must be organized by something other than the state” (“P,” p. 414).

To what extent do the aesthetic and political debates that took place in twentieth-century Chinese literature point to the constitution of a public or a “counterpublic” in Warner’s terms, which challenged the discourse of political enchantment produced by the state (see “P”)? To address this question, the present essay has selected a series of texts that share three characteristics: a thematic representation of public spaces of discussion; the incorporation within the text itself of a polyphonic self-reflexive challenge to its own appreciation; and a reception history in which aesthetic debates serve as a proxy for political discussions.

**Literary Appreciation and Critical Discussion**

There have been several attempts to connect discussions about aesthetic appreciation and political norms. In one of the earliest theorizations of the connection, Jürgen Habermas argued that, while literature and art had the status of a type of conspicuous consumption in court society, it was only when the publishing market replaced patronage and the locus of publicness moved from the royal court to salons and cafés within the city that a reading public formed that was able to freely debate matters of taste, based on rational...
argument rather than on statutory hierarchy or economic dependency. Cultural products such as literature and philosophy became widely available and were no longer subject to the judgment of church and state: “The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority” (S, p. 37). Habermas further stresses that regardless of its actual social realization, the sphere of cultural appreciation is unbounded in principle: “everyone had to be able to participate” (S, p. 37). There is no need for specialized knowledge in order to partake in aesthetic discussions, which in this manner become a privileged area for the expression of judgment by the public as laypersons, constituting a public sphere of debate. This space is subsequently “appropriated . . . and was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority” (S, p. 51).

Warner suggests that Habermas’s approach may idealize rational-critical discussion and overestimate its role in the formation of publics. While sharing Habermas’s interest in the connection between aesthetic debate and political discussion, he argues that any form of public discourse tries to characterize the “lifeworld of its circulation” through the use of pragmatics of speech: “Public discourse, in other words, is poetic. . . all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address” (“P,” p. 422). Affect and expressivity therefore play important roles in constituting publics, especially those counterpublics that are “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public,” which is structured by rational-critical discourse (“P,” p. 423). Relatedly, James Scott has argued that popular resistance can enter the public sphere as “hidden transcripts,” opening a nonelite space of political contestation, which also often eschews rational-critical discourse. Craig Calhoun suggests that the notion of a single public sphere structured around a strong, unified nation-state can be fruitfully replaced by that of “multiple, sometimes overlapping or contending, public spheres” organized by “clusters.” These formulations invite us to consider the connection between aesthetic and political debates in a more diverse, disaggregated, and empirical manner.

In the Chinese context, Xu Jilin has questioned the contribution of aesthetic debates to the nascent public sphere. In his view, the formation of a public in China was directly political rather than mediated by aesthetics; it derived from the repeated political crises Chinese society experienced from the late nineteenth century onwards. By contrast, Leo Lee has highlighted the role of satirical and literary essays in the Shenbao’s “Free Talk” column in creating a public space for discussion of political issues within the increasingly commercial and relatively conservative forum of the Shenbao. Commentaries on the Hongloumeng in the late nineteenth century often contained political speculation. Echoing Warner’s call to pay closer attention to affect and emotion, Haiyan Lee has argued that traditional-style romantic Butterfly fiction defined a specific literary public through the “exchange of emotional experiences,” in which a “sentimental community” asserted its individuality through emotion rather than rational discussion. Xu Jilin is probably justified in pointing out that literary debates did not play a central role in public discussions in the last decades of the Qing dynasty, although Liang Qichao, whom he singles out as one of the founding figures of Shanghai’s public sphere, certainly had a substantive literary agenda. But such debates nonetheless took place in more marginal spaces, as Leo Lee points out, or within the works of popular literature studied by Haiyan Lee.

In order to bring into relief the relationship between literary judgment and public sphere through concrete examples, I here discuss a series of well-known fictional texts spanning the twentieth century (from 1919, 1957, 1972, and 2010), each of which stages a version of the public sphere of reading or performance and incorporates a self-reflexive, self-critical debate about aesthetics. Taken together, the series of texts evokes major events of the Chinese twentieth century: the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution. The reception of each of these texts was marked by debates

19. For example, Chen Tui in Lie Shitouji yu zibu shuo (Classifying the Story of the Stone Among the Philosophers) discusses the novel in the context of theories of the social contract and democratic participation in the late Qing; see Yi Su, Hongloumeng juan, vol. 1 of Gudian wenxue yanjiu ziliao huibian (Taipei, 1981), p. 169. My thanks to Haun Saussy for drawing my attention to this source.
20. Haiyan Lee, “All the Feelings That Are Fit to Print: The Community of Sentiment and the Literary Public Sphere in China, 1900–1918,” Modern China 27 (July 2001): 293, 301.
that combined aesthetic and political aspects. Although the challenges to the
notion of aesthetic enchantment seen here are not uniform, each text is at
pains to construct a form of polyphony that undermines the assumed con-
nection between aesthetic form and moral message. Indeed, the discussion
of aesthetic appreciation that is self-reflexively inserted into the main nar-
rative generally serves as a metaphor for an open-ended political discussion
of the relevant historical events, which might or might not take place in the em-
pirical context of their reception. On one level, a discussion coded in the vo-
cabulary of formal aesthetics can be seen as a form of “hidden transcript,”
where philosophical jargon (in particular Marxist aesthetics) permits ques-
tions about the nature of socialist society to be asked in public.21 On another
level, it can be argued that this type of open-ended representation of histori-
cal and political issues defines a literary pragmatics in which the writer is
intent on abandoning a position of personal authority and opens up a space
for a critical reader as the inception point for social debate. Hans Robert
Jauss, in his earlier work influenced by the Russian formalists and their no-
tion of defamiliarization, had similarly suggested that reading implies iden-
tifying with as yet undefined “norms,” allowing the formation of an open
“consensus.”22 This conception of writing seeks to disentangle literature
from various types of hegemonic discourses that it may be bound up with.

The Court of Public Opinion in Ah-Q

In Lu Xun’s (鲁迅) iconic novella Ah Q zheng zhuan (阿Q正傳, The Au-
thorized Story of Ah Q) (1921–1922), public space appears mainly in two con-
texts: the main street of Weizhuang (No-Name village), which serves as a
stage for Ah Q’s spectacular performances, such as harassing the young nun
and performing some topical local opera songs to celebrate the revolution;
and the execution ground in the county town, where a crowd of onlookers
gathers at the end of the novella to see him shot rather than beheaded. The
two venues stand paradigmatically for the traditional community and the
advances of a modernizing administration. The last paragraph in the story
discusses public opinion (yulun, 輿論) in both places—the village and the
county town—pointing to the newfound importance of the term.

As to public opinion, the inhabitants of Wei Village were unanimous.
Everyone agreed that Ah Q had indeed been an evil man, the clear

21. See Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, pp. 115–17. This recalls Scott’s example
of how the use of religious language allowed open discussions to take place in coded form
about the legitimacy of slavery.
History 2 (Autumn 1970): 8, 37. See also Jauss, Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung: mit
kunstgeschichtlichen Bemerkungen von Max Imdahl (Konstanz, 1972).
proof of which could be found in the fact that he had in truth been executed. If he hadn’t been bad, then how could he have gone and gotten himself executed?

Public opinion in town, on the other hand, was something less than favorable. Most townspeople were disappointed—a shooting had not proved nearly [as spectacular] as a good old-fashioned beheading. Worse yet, in his role as a condemned criminal Ah Q had given a miserable performance—paraded through the streets all that time and not a single line of opera! They had followed him in vain.23

Lu Xun’s choice of the term yulun is not an innocuous one; rather it highlights how important concepts circulate between the general discursive environment (in particular the press) and literary texts. Joan Judge describes the background of the term as follows:

Yulun, the character compound the reformists used for “public opinion,” dated back to at least the third century, and had been used throughout Chinese history to describe elite opinion within the bureaucracy. The constitutionalists invested this old term with a new political meaning in the early 1900s, redefining it as the “collective opinion (gonglun [公論]) of the common people (yiban renmin [一般人民]) toward government and society.” This redefinition reflected the reformists’ larger agenda of forcing the transition from dynastic to public politics. The Qing court unwittingly advanced this agenda by adopting the new political idiom itself, declaring in the 1906 edict on constitutional preparation that “all affairs of state would be open to public opinion” (shuzheng gongzhu yulun [庶政公諸輿論]). As the terms of the political discourse shifted, so did the practice of politics.24

The reinvention and popularization of the term yulun thus marks the rise of a new conception of sovereignty rooted in a culture of public debate. Judge goes on to discuss how the first journalists in the late Qing, writing in newspapers like the Shibao (Eastern Times), strategically deployed the notion of “public opinion,” which they contrasted with the traditional roles of yan guan (言官) or jian guan (諫官, remonstrating official) and yan lu (言路, roads of speech), in order to position writers like themselves as the only

23. Lu Xun, Ah Q—The Real Story, in Diary of a Madman and Other Stories, trans. William A. Lyell (Honolulu, Hawaii, 1990), p. 172; trans. mod.; hereafter abbreviated A.

legitimate spokespeople of popular interests. In Shibao articles of the last years of the empire, the notion of public opinion was therefore repeatedly mobilized to support democracy and constitutionalism: “Today, advanced nations in the world have abolished autocratic politics and adopted the politics of public opinion (yulun zhengzhi [輿論政治]); “If one wants to ensure that the nation does not perish, it is absolutely necessary to implement constitutionalism and have all national affairs decided by public discussion (gonglun).” Democratic politics were now seen to be based on public opinion.

As he often does, Lu Xun strategically weaves significant words borrowed from social discourse into his narrative (unfortunately, these topical allusions are often lost on modern-day readers), directly quoting from late Qing debates to raise the question of democratic politics, as embodied by the differing opinions of the villagers of Weizhuang and the townsfolk in the county seat as to whether Ah Q’s punishment is fair. Indeed, the Weizhuang villagers are all in agreement, and their judgment is based on an equation of legal outcome with moral judgment: “Everyone agreed that Ah Q had indeed been an evil man, the clear proof of which could be found in the fact that he had in truth been executed” (A, p. 172). The townsfolk, by contrast, take an aesthetic approach to the execution, finding the use of a firearm lacking in beauty (“Most townspeople were disappointed—a shooting had not proved nearly as spectacular [haokan] as a good old-fashioned beheading”) and Ah Q’s own performance unsatisfactory (“Ah Q had given a miserable performance—paraded through the streets all that time and not a single line of opera!”) (A, p. 172), in contrast of course with Ah Q’s own aesthetic enjoyment of how a revolutionary was beheaded (“Killing revolutionaries, ah, a beauty to behold!” [haokan]), so that a majority (duoban, 多半) remains unsatisfied (A, p. 141). In both cases, the specific word haokan (好看, beautiful), unequivocally points to the aesthetic quality of the judgment offered by the protagonists. In this instance, aesthetic debate is the first expression of a form of public opinion and serves as a proxy for the necessary moral debate about Ah Q’s execution. Although the villagers know Ah Q well and may have their own judgment about his moral qualities, they defer to the judge’s decision. The townspeople, on the other hand, are put off by the low aesthetic quality of the show, but no more than the villagers do they question the legitimacy of the execution: this is left to the readers. In this case, aesthetic appreciation appears to be a poor substitute for the exercise of public reason.

25. Quoted in ibid., p. 75.
26. These citations are more literal translations of the Chinese original (Lu Xun, vol. 1 of Lu Xun Quanji, p. 534).
Lu Xun’s general skepticism about mass democracy based on spectacle (perhaps going back to Friedrich Nietzsche and Gustave Le Bon) is well-attested: “Humankind likes theatre. When writers themselves put on a skit or when they are tied up to be beheaded or shot in the nearest corner, everyone can have a little fun.”28 In “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home,” he issued a call to “deprive readers of spectacle” (shi tamen wu xi ke kan, 使他們無戲可看), 29 an idea he further developed in the “Reply to the Editor of Theatre” in which, discussing a possible stage version of Ah Q, he hopes that spectators who will make fun of Ah Q can also be made to identify with him (hence the need for the actor to speak in local vernacular), sparking the realization: “It’s yourselves you’re making fun of.”30

Of course, the ending of Ah Q is highly ironic and is meant to provoke a similar feeling of distance in the reader. Lu Xun’s early works proved so puzzling to his contemporaries for this reason. As Eva Shan Chou has documented, it was only after Lu Xun’s brother Zhou Zuoren wrote an essay steering the interpretation of Ah Q in the direction of allegory (pointing out in particular that “although a work of satire has a kind of loathing at its core, yet this loathing is a type of love; although a satirical work is on the surface the opposite of a utopian fiction, its spirit is the same”) that commentators stopped reading it as a roman à clef and trying to figure out who the real-life model for Ah Q might be.31

When the narrator notes that public opinion in the county town was not good (bujia, 不佳), he is poking fun at those spectators who derive only aesthetic satisfaction from the execution. However, by denying those spectators the pleasure of a beheading that would signify a reconciliation of aesthetics and morality (an identification that still functions for the villagers), Lu Xun also denies his own readers a happy ending (da tuanyuan, 大團圓). In this way, the story connects the author’s refusal to resort to aesthetic enchantment with the appearance of a deliberative community that can discuss not only the execution of Ah Q but also the fairness of justice and ultimately the significance of revolution as a whole. Can bystanders, opportunists, or

29. Lu Xun, “Nuola zouhou zenyang” (What Happens After Nora Leaves), in vol. 1 of Lu Xun Quanji, p. 171.
30. Lu Xun, “Da Xi zhoukan bianzhe xin” (Reply to the Editor of Theatre), in vol. 6 of Lu Xun Quanji, pp. 149–50.
31. Zhou’s review of Ah Q, published in March 1922 in the Chenbao supplement, is quoted at length in Eva Shan Chou, “Learning to Read Lu Xun 1918–1923: The Emergence of a Readership,” China Quarterly 172 (Dec. 2002):1058. She further points out that Mao Dun also wrote in “Reading Nahban”: “if we reflect upon ourselves, we cannot help but suspect that in our own selves we are carrying an element of ‘Ah Q-ism’” (p. 1061).
Even benighted members of the old society be transformed into an aesthetic spectacle for the benefit of the revolutionaries? By leaving this question unanswered, Lu Xun foreshadows many discussions that took place throughout the subsequent century.

**Staging Public Discussion under Mao**

Another text that combines self-reflexive questioning of aesthetic enjoyment and public discussion of historical events is Lao She’s (老舍) *Teahouse* (*Chaguan*, 茶館). Written in the Spring of 1957 during the Great Airing of Views (*daming defang*, 大鳴大放) that preceded the Anti-Rightist movement, perhaps in response to Mao’s speech “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People” (27 February 1957), it was staged publicly only in 1958 after initial reactions were negative, including Zhou Enlai’s opinion that it was “insufficiently representative” (*bugou dianxing*, 不夠典型). By choosing the teahouse to serve as a microcosm of Chinese urban society throughout the twentieth century, Lao She was already making an implicit statement about the nature of the public sphere. As Lao She said in an explanatory interview printed in 1958 to accompany the play: “A teahouse is a place where people from all walks of life come together, and it can contain people of all stripes. A large teahouse is like a small-scale society.”

In the opening stage directions, teahouses are described as places of central importance in pre-1911 society, polyphonic spaces for business discussions or matchmakers, for airing birdcages and absorbing the latest gossip, places where “everyone, regardless of whether they had something to do or not, could sit around for as long as they wanted.” Despite the famous paper scrolls warning customers “Don’t talk about state affairs” (a traditional imperial taboo) and the threatening presence of the secret police and other informers, customers in fact talk about little else throughout the whole play. In act 1, set in the early 1900s, debates touch on the boycott of foreign goods, the trade in opium and heroin, and the need to build up national industry, as well as the status of bannermen and the failure of the Hundred Days’ Reforms of 1898. In act 2, set after the fall of Yuan Shikai, characters discuss cutting off queues, the difficulties of the republican government,

34. Lao She, *Chaguan*, p. 6.
the pauperization of society, and how revolutionaries have retreated into Buddhism. In act 3, set around 1945, everyone complains about the corruption of the Kuomintang (KMT), its links with religious secret societies, its violent repression of student and teacher strikes, the destruction of national industries, and the transformation of the teahouse itself into a nightclub by a corrupt KMT officer, which drives the owner to suicide. The Clapper, who appears at the beginning of each act and at the end of the play, provides further self-reflexive commentary on the plot and characters. The imperial taboo is no longer able to stifle public discussion.

This can be contrasted with another famous literary representation of a teahouse in Sha Ting’s (沙汀) short story “In the House of Fragrance Teahouse” (Zai Qixiangju chaguan li, 在其香居茶館裡). Set in a Sichuanese village, it stages the protest of a village tyrant (Xing Yaochaochao or Loudmouth Xing), who comes to the teahouse to complain to the local KMT Ward Chief Fang Zhiguo about his son’s conscription (plotted by Fang). While this public space is also dominated by looming political issues, they are never openly discussed, rather the scene is dominated by violence and the hierarchies of village society. In the end, the ward chief is bypassed, and the son again avoids conscription. As Marston Anderson writes: “The townsmen’s impassioned quarrel is revealed as a mere tempest in a teahouse.”

Not all public spaces are conducive to a reflexive staging of the reader’s aesthetic enjoyment. By contrast, Lao She’s choice of setting should be understood as an intentional displacement, in which the people from all walks of life who make up the social microcosm do precisely what the political posters on the wall order them to refrain from doing.

Throughout Lao She’s play, the teahouse as an (albeit constantly threatened) place for social critique functions like a stage within the stage, providing a metaphor for the role of the theatre within society. The last scene—in which the three main characters come together for a final lament on their lost illusions of reform before the owner of the teahouse Wang Lifa hangs himself—is particularly meta- theatrical, especially when the three characters eat peanuts together (as the audience may be doing) before throwing paper money to mimic a funeral, attempting to put on a good show, not unlike Ah Q. The KMT officer’s high-pitched expressions of hāo! (蒿) suggest the “bravo” traditionally voiced by spectators of Peking Opera. In this manner, audience appreciation is both built into the play by the author and satirized because it is voiced by the most negative character. Gregory Arthur

36. See Sha Ting, “Zai Qixiangju chaguan li” (In the House of Fragrance Teahouse), (Zai Qixiangju chaguan li), (Guangzhou, 2011).
Lloyd has compiled a list of historical events discussed in the play that may allude to specific events taking place outside of the theatre in 1957–1958: repression of free speech, confiscation of property, the arrogance of party bureaucrats, and suicide as a way of preserving moral integrity.\footnote{See Lloyd, Two-Storied Teahouse, pp. 302–35.} Aesthetic enchantment (as suggested by the references to audience enjoyment like the bravo and the peanuts) is exposed as ethically compromising (in view of the contemporary political events alluded to in the dialogues), as the audience is placed in a double bind and challenged by the author not to enjoy the show.

Despite the changes Lao She had to make to the manuscript and the difficulties encountered in bringing it to the stage, the fact that Teahouse was performed at Beijing People’s Art Theatre in 1958 indicates his hope that aesthetic-political discussions could still take place in the cultural sphere of the PRC in the 1950s, even after directly political debates became all but impossible.\footnote{On a comparable topic (the staging of the play Red Flag Song, which deals critically with the collectivization of small factories after 1949), see Ying Qian, “The Shopfloor as Stage: Production Competition, Democracy, and the Unfulfilled Promise of Red Flag Song,” China Perspectives 2 (June 2015): 7–14.} The play’s reception shows that aesthetic debates were indeed understood as a (possibly threatening) proxy for political ideas. In a famous article published in Dushu in 1959, three critics penned a fierce critique of Lao She’s aesthetics and politics, singling out the seven hao sounds at the end of the play as symbols of Lao She’s lack of historical optimism and lack of faith in the people.\footnote{See Liu Fangquan et al., “Ping Lao She de Chaguan” (A Critique of Lao She’s Teahouse), Dushu 53 (1959): 6–8. The monthly Dushu was discontinued during the Cultural Revolution and reestablished in 1979.} The core of their discussion concerns a question closely linked to the anti-Hu Feng campaign of 1955. During the Airing of Views campaign in early 1957, Lao She had written an essay titled “Freedom and the Writer” (Ziyou yu zuojia, 自由與作家) in which he defended the need for authors to depict “middle characters” (zhongjian renwu, 中間人物), a concept advocated by Shao Quanlin (邵荃麟), and criticized “formulism” (gongshi zhuyi, 公式主義).\footnote{Lao She, “Ziyou yu zuojia” (Freedom and the Writer), in vol. 14 of Laoshe Quanji (Beijing, 1999), pp. 643.} Lao She put these ideas into practice in Teahouse, which lacks a dominant character and seems to call into question a whole series of different ideologies. Against the absorption of literature into a totalizing monologue, Teahouse chooses to represent a chaotic social polyphony, in which no voice and no class enjoy a position of authority. The Dushu article unsurprisingly attacks Teahouse for displaying characters with unclear class identities and for its absence of working-class characters, concluding that
Lao She has adopted a viewpoint “lacking in class consciousness.” It is particularly significant that the satirical inversion of audience enjoyment or enchantment in the self-reflexive cry of hāo (bravo) proves intolerable to the official critics writing in *Dushu*.

**Epistolary Debates among the Educated Youth**

Another unique literary work of the Mao era that paradoxically incorporates the notion of public sphere in its title is the novel by Liu Qingfeng (劉青峰), writing under the pen name Jin Fan (靳凡), entitled *Open Love Letters (Gongkai de qingshu, 公開的情書)*. This epistolary novel, written in 1972 shortly after the death of Lin Biao and circulated in handwritten (later also mimeographed) form among the Sent-Down Youth (*zhìqìng*, 知青) in Guizhou (where Liu Qingfeng was), Inner Mongolia (where her sister was) and Hangzhou (where her husband Jin Guantao was), is a self-reflexive literary reenactment of the widespread social practice of exchanging letters among the educated youth. Liu and Jin, at the time recent graduates, went on to pursue very distinguished academic careers, first in China in the 1980s, then in Hong Kong when they had to leave the mainland after 1989. They were notably the founding editors of the major intellectual forum of the 1990s, *Ershiyi shiji* (二十一世紀, Twenty-First Century), published in Hong Kong. As Liu Qingfeng has pointed out in an interview, during the Cultural Revolution letters were often exchanged at a very intensive pace (sometimes several a day) among the rusticated students, constituting a polyphonic space of discussion at a time when there was little freedom of public expression.

Of course, we must assume that these letters were also read by censors, making them open in yet another sense.

Song Yongyi has studied Cultural Revolution correspondence groups (*tongxin quan, 通信圈*), which sometimes collected their letters into journals. One of the most famous was the group established by Xu Xiao and other rusticated youth from Beijing in Shanxi province. The government labeled them a Fourth Internationale Counterrevolutionary Clique and punished most members harshly, pronouncing death sentences on two of them. It should be pointed out that correspondence groups were a well-established practice

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42. Liu Fangquan, et al., “Ping Lao She de Chaguan,” p. 7. In an amusing repetition, the critic He Xin attacked Xu Xing’s avant-garde novella *Variations without a Theme* in *Dushu* in 1985, highlighting the need to oppose the Oblomovs of Chinese literature; see Geremie Barmé’s introduction to He Xin, “A Word of Advice to the Politburo,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 23 (Jan. 1990): 52. I am grateful to Geremie Barmé for pointing out this analogy.

43. See Liu Qingfeng and Huang Ping, “Gongkai de qingshu yu 70 niandai” (*Open Love Letters and the 1970s*), *Shanghai Wenhua*, no. 3 (2009), web.archive.org/web/20181205103805/http://xinpiping.com/?page_id=236
in premodern China (perhaps echoed in today’s weixin quan or WeChat groups), offering a literary model to Liu Qingfeng. More generally, underground literary reading groups and salons played a central role in the experience of rusticated youth. The books they read included many works of both philosophy and literature, as well as politics (Milovan Djilas’s critique of class relations under socialism, translated in the internal publication series for party officials known as grey-cover books, was disseminated in these groups). Song Yongyi mentions a particularly extreme case, in which Wang Shengyou, a student at East China Normal University, started an underground reading group in a labor camp with other sent-down students and was eventually executed for criticizing Mao.

The dialogical nature of Liu Qingfeng’s novel is immediately apparent in the relations among the characters. The plot is basically a love triangle, with the main female character Zhenzhen communicating both with Lao Ga, a painter who works in her school in Guizhou, and Lao Jiu, a young scientist working in a lab in Hangzhou, introduced by Lao Ga. Art and philosophy are often at the heart of these discussions, as Lao Ga is a painter and Lao Jiu has a passion for G. W. F. Hegel. Zhenzhen’s life philosophy is based on feeling and authenticity, as summarized by her name (true) and in the formula truth, goodness, beauty (zheng shan mei, 真善美). She sees only hypocrisy, emptiness, and useless persecution in the dominant system, which she feels has cast her out. In a letter to Lao Jiu, she quotes a line by Adam Mickiewicz: “The saddest person of all is the one who does not have the resolution to fight for happiness.”

By contrast, Lao Jiu is supremely confident in science and in the ability of his generation to make the nation better than the previous generation. As he writes: “Our hard work stands for a whole generation’s way out of its predicament” (G, p. 121). The painter Lao Ga is the most conflicted, despairing because his art cannot change reality. The others repeatedly exhort him to be more daring, like his friend Lao Xiemen (“Old Weirdo”): “Our generation does not like the so-called artistic flavor of well-organized ‘revolutionary music’ and ‘revolutionary ballet,’ but neither do they like those popular singers crooning sweet small tunes. A tender heart cannot contain the epic transformations our world is experiencing. You are the artist of our new epoch, you must be a torch, a sword!” (G, p. 78). At the end of the novel,

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46. Quoted in Jin Fan, Gongkai de qingshu (Open Love Letters) (Beijing, 1981), p. 55; hereafter abbreviated G.
Zhenzhen chooses Lao Jiu, and Lao Ga sets off to roam the country and paint. The aesthetic dilemma formulated by Weirdo in fact encapsulates the political debate that would be faced by the post-Cultural Revolution generation. Is the only alternative between revolutionary tunes and the sugar-water of commercial art? Contained in this anxiety is already the question of China’s foreseeable political course after the end of Maoism.

The most interesting aspect of these discussions is the aestheticization of life choices and the self-reflexive staging of these discussions as the plot of the novel. Although concrete materials on the reception of this hand-copied literature are still lacking, we may surmise that there was a strong thematic resonance between the discussion within the text and the social debates that were taking place among its readers in the years 1972–1978. While ostensibly unpolitical, and only rarely mentioning the ubiquitous ideology and bureaucratic control (although Zhenzhen makes some pungent allusions to it), the novel conveys a sense of the ongoing social debates it is rooted in, as well as a strong rejection of the enchanting ideology of the sublime that made up the mainstream of literary and artistic works at the time. Zhenzhen’s use of the line by Mickiewicz is typical of the technique by which an author who is acceptable as a revolutionary nationalist from a small oppressed nation (ruoxiao minzu, 弱小民族) (indeed whether he truly wrote the quoted stanza is irrelevant) is used as a front to express a philosophy of life at odds with the dominant tune.47 Through the Polish poet’s words, Zhenzhen can assert the value of individual happiness in a society dominated by the collective. When personal self-fulfillment takes the place of revolutionary epics, the readership is no doubt aware of the deeper implications of aesthetic discussions.

Furthermore, Zhenzhen’s views do not provide a conclusive answer to the discussions carried out among the protagonists. To some extent, the question of how to live an authentic life under the Cultural Revolution remains open. Hence, the novel itself, because of its epistolary and polyphonic form, not only challenges revolutionary enchantment but also avoids providing a single alternative to the disenchantment of revolutionary aesthetics. Rather, it remains open-ended, a further source of uncertainty for its readers.

**Polyphonic History**

A final example is taken from a more recent work: Yan Lianke’s (閻連科) *Four Books* (Sishu, 四書). The discussion focuses on intratextual polyphony and how the aesthetic reception of the book in critical circles was in fact a

47. *Ruoxiao minzu* was a popular notion at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren edited a volume of translations of fiction from oppressed nations in 1909; see *Yuwai xiaoshuo ji*, ed. Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren (Shanghai, 1929).
tool to initiate a public discussion on a sensitive topic, the famine caused by
the Great Leap Forward (1959–1961). The polyphony within the novel is
clearly materialized by the use of different typefaces for the three competing
parallel narratives (and a fourth one which appears in the epilogue). Each
narrative voice is determined by a set of both aesthetic and political choices.
“The Child of Heaven” is a narrative, strongly inflected with biblical vocab-
ulary and rhythm, which provides a heroic version of the rise and fall of a
labor camp, intended to reform intellectuals, on the banks of the Yellow
River. Centered on the Christ-like character of The Child, it suggests a par-
allel between religious ritual and Maoist faith. “The Old Course” and “Rec-
ords of Criminals” are both ostensibly written by the character named The
Writer. “Records” is the compilation of secret reports he has written inform-
ing on other inmates of the camp. By contrast, “The Old Course” is presented
as a fictional account of the most egregious acts of cannibalism and betrayal,
and in it The Writer eventually provides a symbolic expression of guilt and
repentance by cutting off and boiling two pieces of his own flesh. Finally,
the “New Myth of Sisyphus” that appears in isolation at the end of the book
is supposedly a manuscript authored by The Scholar, a fellow camp inmate
who refuses to undergo reform through labor, and originally given to The
Child to take to Beijing to inform the leaders about the famine, which is
why the narrator finds it in an archive. It contains a philosophical critique
of Chinese civilization.48

Each of the four books is given a fictional publication history. “Records of
Criminals” is presented as an internal party publication of the 1980s, remi-
niscent of the self-righteous approach of the authors of Scar Literature. “The
Old Course” was supposedly published in 2002 to little public interest. “The
Child of Heaven” is supposed to have been published in a collection of myths
and legends, whereas “Sisyphus,” we are told, has remained unpublished.49
In interviews Yan Lianke has repeatedly presented this structure as an at-
tempt to open the discussion on the complicity of intellectuals in the vio-
ence and deaths of the Mao era.50 In this sense, the polyphonic presentation
of his fictional discussion of the famine is in itself a way of avoiding the
monolithic quality of official discourse (or nondiscourse) on this historical
episode. By putting side by side different narratives of the famine, and dif-
ferent aesthetic approaches to writing about it, Yan Lianke opens up a space
for indirect discussion of the famine itself, at a time when memoirs and un-
official research on the subject are steadily appearing.

49. See ibid., p. 374.
Interestingly, although the novel was ultimately not published in mainland China (Yan Lianke tried to make cuts to get a publisher to accept it but was not able to persuade them to take the risk), it did enjoy a critical reception, especially in academic and media circles, which discussed precisely the aesthetic choices made by the author. While the scholars and critics Wang Binbin and Chen Xiaoming focused on the different ways in which literature can depict the violence of history, Sun Yu underscored Yan’s self-reflexive quotation and questioning of the Mao-style (Mao ti, 毛體) as the greatest accomplishment of the book. This echoes Yan’s preoccupation with highlighting different modes in which history can be narrated: as myth, as religious or ideological enchantment, as documentary (jilu, 紀錄), as fiction (“The Old Course,” which takes its name from the former bed of the Yellow River, a metaphor for Chinese history), and finally as philosophical reflection. In this manner, the opening of a polyphonic space that questions the aesthetic persuasiveness of any single narrative is an important aspect of Yan’s fictionalization of the Great Famine. Different aesthetic modes stand for different attitudes toward the Maoist past. Should it be envisaged as a foundational myth of the People’s Republic, in which bloody memories will eventually dissolve into the narrative of national revival? Should it give rise to a settling of scores, whereby the perpetrators and their collaborators are called to account for their acts? Or simply to a form of personal and philosophical introspection? Each of these responses of course also sketches out a political position in today’s China, although they do not need to be spelled out. Ultimately, the polyphonic structure undermines the internal coherence of each attempt to enchant history. The biblical allegory, in which the famine appears as a kind of foundation for a new religion (The Child was compared by critics to a figure of Mao) is undermined by the protagonist’s self-crucifixion. The attempt at self-justification by one of the inmates (transforming the violence of history into an aesthetic enjoyment) is implicitly revealed as mendacious. The philosophical meditation in “Sisyphus” also fails to offer a key to the events of the Great Famine. While “The Child of Heaven” is the most obviously satirical challenge to aestheticization, the polyphony of the entire novel also undermines the more general way in which fiction brings coherence to the disorder of history.

The works discussed in the present essay serve to illustrate the existence of an antienchantment aesthetic tradition in twentieth-century Chinese literature, thematically using debate and polyphony to contest hegemonic discourses. They establish a new figure of the writer as skeptic rather than as prophet—and of the reader within a broader public network rather than as a passive or mobilized member of the masses. Each of the works resorts to a dialogical structure in which the reader is put in a position to question the narrative. Several of the works also stage specifically aesthetic debates, mirroring the readers’ own possible discussion of the merits of the work: Ah Q is, in this respect as in so many others, the foundational work of this modern tradition. Aesthetic debates moreover took place around the reception of most of these texts; political issues that could often not be debated openly were never far from the surface of their readers’ minds.

Hidden transcripts embedded in aesthetic discourses found echoes among social groups (interpretive communities) throughout the twentieth century. Relying on certain ways of reading texts, they resisted political enchantment in repressive contexts through critical engagement with dominant norms. Aesthetic debates could therefore sometimes serve as proxies for politics. Whether participants in these debates can be said to constitute a full-fledged “public” or even a “counterpublic,” in Warner’s terms, is matter for further debate. While it is true that the circulation of the four texts discussed above constituted networks of readers in ways that were not directly organized by the state, the stability and durability of these networks remains an open question.