

## Democratic Modernism: Rethinking the Politics of Early Twentieth-Century Fiction in China and Europe

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Although the discussion on modernism in Chinese literature is anything but new, it remains a controversial one, not least because of its implications in conceptualizing China's historical experience. Wang Hui—whose intellectual starting point, we may note, was also Lu Xun and early twentieth-century Chinese literature—has in his recent four-volume study, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, brought together an unprecedented breadth of textual evidence to question the characterization of Chinese modernity

I thank Arif Dirlik for extensive comment and encouragement on earlier versions of this article, as well as Esther Cheung, Gina Marchetti, Esther Yau, and Dan Vukovich, who generously extended an invitation to present it in a seminar at the University of Hong Kong in November 2008. This essay draws inspiration from a book I recently published in French: *Fictions du pouvoir chinois: Littérature, modernisme et démocratie au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2009), which provides additional textual evidence; however, the argument has been reformulated and recontextualized in different ways in the present essay.

All translations, unless otherwise specified, are my own. For primary sources, the original is quoted, using Hanyu Pinyin romanization for Chinese; for secondary sources, only the translation is provided.

(both Song-era “early modernity” and the late Qing–early Republican juncture) by the emergence of a nation-state model, a rational bureaucracy, and an institutional (rather than ritual) understanding of politics. While criticizing the application of certain “Western” concepts to Chinese history, he does not directly challenge the term *modernity* itself (he rarely uses *postmodern*, for example, and endorses the idea of a distinct Chinese modernity), provided it can be broadened to “show how the possible ways out of modernity were incorporated into the process of pursuing modernity as a whole.”<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, the stakes in the discussion on literary modernism are high: Is China’s twentieth-century history best viewed within a universal or within a particularistic framework? Conversely, if the notion of modernity is to be retained, can Chinese history help to redefine it in a manner that inflects its cultural biases? Can the notion help to uncover strata of historical experience previously neglected or overseen?

In literature, the debate today still largely echoes—in an increasingly sophisticated theoretical manner—the position of orthodox Marxist historiography, according to which China’s “backwardness” in social and economic terms precluded it from experiencing “true” literary modernism before the early 1980s (at which time it is inevitably termed “belated”). This consensus reflects the convergence, over the last two decades, between state-sanctioned Chinese historiography and the neo-Marxist, Jamesonian paradigm that has asserted itself as dominant in American academia. In a seminal article following his first visit to China in 1985, Fredric Jameson thus argued that certain texts should simply be accepted as subgenres: “Nothing is ever to be gained by passing over in silence the radical difference of non-canonical texts. The Third World novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce; what is more damaging than that perhaps, is its tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development.”<sup>2</sup> This is a formulation of the classical thesis according to which modern Chinese literature was preoccupied with enlightenment, science, progress, and, most importantly, literary realism, at a time when “modernism” in the West is associated with a critique of rationalism, of the alienation of industrial modernity,<sup>3</sup> and growing preoccupation with literary form (“high modernism”).

1. Wang Hui, “The Liberation of the Object and the Interrogation of Modernity: Rethinking *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*,” *Modern China* 34, no. 1 (2008): 139.

2. Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65.

3. In this article, following Jürgen Habermas, *modernity* is used in a very general way

It was later argued that Chinese literature did experience formal modernism (sometimes described as “treaty-port modernism”) in Shanghai in the 1930s,<sup>4</sup> that such modernism was already latent in late-Qing fiction and then “repressed” by the dominant narrative of enlightened realism, only to “reemerge” in the early 1980s,<sup>5</sup> or even that the focalization on this kind of modernism is a sign of Chinese writers’ intellectual capitulation to the West, characteristic of “Third World modernities in general as a by-product of colonialism and capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, building on T. A. Hsia’s early insights, portrayed Lu Xun as a “reluctant modernist,” using the word in a formalist sense, and adding that Lu Xun ultimately sacrificed this modernism to his political ideals.<sup>7</sup> But none of the arguments addresses the question of whether and how the May Fourth (or New Culture) “canon,” with its political agenda of engaging with “democracy and science” (the two catchwords of the May Fourth demonstrations in 1919), can be seen as a form of “modernism.” Russian futurism and avant-gardism, politically far more radical, are by contrast routinely considered part of the “Western” canon of modernism, whereas “realism” remains very much the centerpiece of the interpretation of the new literature in China, even when it is viewed in terms of its “limits” and described as having ultimately failed in its goals or when the concept is questioned under the heading of “fictional realism,” broadening it to include writers like Shen Congwen.<sup>8</sup> Lee comes closest to ques-

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to refer to what Max Weber describes as “rationalization” and “institutionalization of purposive-rational economic and administrative action.” Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1988), 9. On modernism, see Matei Calinescu’s definition below.

4. Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

5. David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

6. Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China: 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), ix.

7. Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For Shu-mei Shih, Lu Xun, as the writer most closely associated with the New Culture movement, embraced (Western) modernism only through a self-hating critique of Chinese culture (Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 84). On the topic of “modernism” as “taboo” in China studies, see also the extensive discussion and bibliography in Jeffrey Kinkley, “Shen Congwen among the Chinese Modernists,” *Monumenta Serica*, no. 54 (2006): 316–17.

8. Marston Anderson forged the notion of “Limits of Realism” in *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Regarding Shen Congwen, see David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in*

tioning the dominant paradigm in an article entitled “In Search of Modernity”; nonetheless, although he concedes that Lu Xun “may be considered a great ‘modernist’ in a unique way,” in that he “made a creative paradox out of the double meaning of modernity,” he stands by the view that Chinese writers “did not choose [. . .] to separate the two domains of historic and aesthetic modernity, in their pursuit of a modern mode of consciousness and modern forms of literature. There was no discernible split; on the contrary humanism and realism continued to hold sway. The majority of writers, perhaps buoyed by their new historical consciousness, were eager to create realistic narratives that incorporated the unilinear sequence of historical time.”<sup>9</sup>

The first goal of this article is therefore to question the dichotomy between Western “high modernism” critical of socioeconomic modernity and the purported embrace of modernization by Chinese writers. To do so, it seems necessary to “add up” the series of reservations regarding the nature of May Fourth and to reformulate the core of the New Culture writers’ project. The belief that fiction writing could somehow directly “promote” enlightenment and Westernization has been largely revised (if it ever really existed):<sup>10</sup> none of the May Fourth writers shared Liang Qichao’s belief that reading science fiction would do away with “superstition” and reading biographies of men like George Washington would make readers into democrats.<sup>11</sup> As subtly pointed out by Wang Hui in two seminal works, May Fourth thinkers were certainly cognizant of the legacy of European Enlightenment but also deeply engaged with what they understood as its radical

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*Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

9. Leo Ou-fan Lee, “In Search of Modernity: Some Reflections on a New Mode of Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Chinese History and Literature,” in *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, ed. Paul Cohen and Merle Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990), 135 and 125.

10. This “canonical” understanding of May Fourth was criticized in papers delivered by Charlotte Furth and Leo Lee as early as a 1967 symposium; see also Benjamin Schwartz’s preface; all published in Benjamin Schwartz, ed., *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement: A Symposium* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1973); Merle Goldman’s edited volume, *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), also steers clear of overly iconoclastic interpretations.

11. C. T. Hsia, “Yen Fu and Liang Ch’i-ch’ao as Advocates of New Fiction,” in *Chinese Approaches to Literature from Confucius to Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao*, ed. Adele Austin Rickett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 221–57.

critique by Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, highlighting how the democratic individual was imperiled by social competition for survival (an idea popularized in Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, published in 1896 as *Tian yan lun*), by the new inequalities created by capitalism, and by remnants of old guilt-inspiring systems of morality.<sup>12</sup> It seems reasonable to rephrase the May Fourth ideal as a general preoccupation with the emancipation of the individual in a modern or democratic context, and a widely shared one that is attested in works ranging from Shen Congwen's or Zhou Zuoren's "academic modernism"<sup>13</sup> to protomodernist "romantics" like Yu Dafu or the full-fledged "treaty-port modernists" like Shi Zhecun or Eileen Chang, and, finally, to the very heart of May Fourth in Lu Xun's fiction.<sup>14</sup>

This characterization, in turn, questions certain definitions of Western modernism, which is the second aim of this essay. As early as 1977, Matei Calinescu pointed to a similar ambiguity:

practically no distinction is made by most American critics of twentieth-century literature between modernism and avant-garde. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the two terms are taken as synonymous. [. . .] This equivalence is surprising and even baffling for a critic familiar with the Continental usage of the term avant-garde. In France, Italy, Spain, and other European countries, the avant-garde, despite its various and often contradictory claims, tends to be regarded as the most extreme form of artistic negativism—art itself being the first victim. As for modernism, whatever its specific meaning in different languages and for different authors, it never conveys that sense of universal and hysterical negation so characteristic of the avant-garde. The antitraditionalism of modernism is often subtly

12. See Wang Hui, *Wudi panghuang: "Wusi" jiqi huisheng* [Wandering nowhere: May Fourth and its echoes] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1994); and Wang Hui, *Fankang juewang: Lu Xun jiqi wenxue shijie* [Resisting despair: Lu Xun and his literary world] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007).

13. Kinkley, "Shen Congwen among the Chinese Modernists," 323–29.

14. Leo Lee formulated a similar idea in an early article but did not relate the "widely shared" ideal of individual emancipation back to the core of the "May Fourth" canon and its political beliefs (Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Romantic Temper of May Fourth Writers," in *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement*, 69–84). Within the scope of the present essay it is unfortunately impossible to unfold the entire breadth of what may be viewed as Chinese modernism. Suffice it to say that the focus on a close reading of Lu Xun does not imply that other authors do not qualify in this debate.

traditional. That is why it is so difficult, from a European point of view, to conceive of authors like Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Thomas Mann, T. S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound as representatives of the avant-garde. These writers have indeed very little, if anything, in common with such typically avant-garde movements as futurism, dadaism, or surrealism.<sup>15</sup>

Modernism, in this sense, can be defined by a form of duality: its preoccupation with modernity and the new is never exempt of nostalgia for the past, or at least of anxiety, because the new itself will in turn become passé.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one could take Calinescu's argument one step further, adding that what he describes as the "avant-garde"<sup>17</sup> in fact produced very little literature (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Tristan Tzara, André Breton), rarely read or studied today, and which has faded in comparison with what is now considered the "modernist canon," just like the overly politicized writings of Mao Dun and Ba Jin in comparison with the more ambiguous works of Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, or Eileen Chang. It seems logical, therefore, to characterize modernism as engaged in a dialectic endorsement and criticism of modernity. Having formulated this hypothesis, it is striking to observe how sorely the discussion on Chinese modernism lacks a comparative component, which could clarify the alleged "shortcomings" or "delays" of Chinese modernism.

Going back to Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin's charac-

15. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 140.

16. Hans Robert Jauss, in his critique of Benjamin's study, underlines that Baudelaire's decisive contribution to defining modernism is this new obsession with the present instant as the central object of literature and art, cut off from the aesthetic ideals of the past and bereft of future utopias. Jauss, "Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewußtsein der Modernität," in *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 11–66 (see also the English translation, "Modernity and Literary Tradition," trans. Christian Thorne, *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 [Winter 2005]: 329–64).

17. Like Calinescu, Peter Bürger opposes "modernism" (which he equates with apolitical aestheticism) and "avant-garde," in which he sees a potential for reuniting art with life because it undermines the very "institution" of art. In this sense, he considers Brecht an "avant-garde artist." Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), in particular, 83–88. He is criticizing Adorno's endorsement of "autonomy" as the highest form of political protest (see Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1973], 334ff.). Without devoting too much time to this debate, the present article follows Calinescu in leaving aside "avant-garde" as an "extreme form of artistic negativism" (which in this sense cannot include Brecht) and devoting itself to "modernism" as an ambiguous response to socioeconomic modernity.

terization of the Baudelairean flâneur as both enchanted by the modern metropolis and capable of penetrating—by flashes—the true nature of the alienation it exerts on him,<sup>18</sup> European modernists can be characterized both by a general preoccupation with the emancipation of the individual from traditional hierarchies and morals (and quite often the psychological and ethical dilemmas arising from it—Arthur Schnitzler or Robert Musil come to mind), and simultaneously by doubts about the capacity of reason, capitalism, democracy, or indeed any political system or historical movement to translate into the kind of autonomy they were concerned with (an idea that runs from Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert to Franz Kafka and John Dos Passos).<sup>19</sup> Marshall Berman similarly refers to the historical experience of modernity as a “dialectics of modernism and modernization,”<sup>20</sup> the latter referring to the socioeconomic transformations, the former to their critical cultural appropriation. To which one could add, echoing the importance Calinescu gives to the ironic self-reflexive trait in modernism: their doubts about the relevance, the role, and specific authority of literature in an increasingly egalitarian world. While some attempts were made at insulating it completely from the democratic world (Paul Valéry), most of the writers we think of as modernists were mainly concerned with reinventing a form of literature both relevant to (and therefore taking stock of) and critical of modernity, not from the point of view of tradition but as insufficiently fulfilling the promise of emancipation it brings with it—a concern that is also to a large extent at the heart of the generation of Chinese writers who had witnessed the failure of the Revolution of 1911 and sought, through literature, to reinvent modernity.

In searching to redefine modernism, this article therefore proposes to consider it not from the point of view of the formal experiments associated with the avant-garde but from that of its ambiguous relation to modernity in the broadest sense. This approach implicitly rejects the multifaceted dichotomy first formulated by Georg Lukács between an apolitical “high modernism,” later defined by the “ideology of autonomy,”<sup>21</sup> and a very

18. Walter Benjamin, “Der Flâneur,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 537–69.

19. This characterization is not very different from Marshall Berman’s definition of the modern experience through the two terms *development* and *self-development*. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 18.

20. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 16.

21. Positively by Adorno in *Ästhetische Theorie*; negatively by Jameson in *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).

broadly posited “realism,” which is most easily understood as an aesthetics that represents the world as a coherent whole (Lukács’s idea of totality is echoed in Jameson’s idea of “singular modernity,” or modernity as a “single narrative”<sup>22</sup>). In order to break apart this opposition, this essay proposes to understand modernity as a socioeconomic but also a political phenomenon.

Unlike Jameson, who follows Marx in believing that modernity is ultimately synonymous with capitalism,<sup>23</sup> it seems worth exploring its distinctly political dimension, by attaching to it the term *democracy*, as Alexis de Tocqueville famously did. In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville indeed moves beyond his earlier definition of the notion in terms of a set of political institutions guaranteeing individual rights and freedoms, and broadens it to encompass a widespread social ethos of “equality of conditions” that seeks to regulate social interaction in the absence of the statutory hierarchies of the traditional world (an ethos which in his view encompasses capitalism).<sup>24</sup> This is also relevant insofar as *democracy* was one of the catchwords of the “new literature” in China (*capitalism* was decidedly not). This essay therefore seeks to redefine modernism through its relationship to the specifically political facet of modernity, characterized as democracy. By doing so, it will deal with related concepts like liberalism or enlightenment (and capitalism), but its main focus on democracy is meant to highlight specifically political rather than economic or epistemological aspects.

Several attempts have been made to look at literature and democ-

22. See Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Theodor Adorno et al. (London: NLB, 1977), 28–59; Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 88–92.

23. Jameson writes, “I believe that the only satisfactory semantic meaning of modernity lies in its association with capitalism” (*A Singular Modernity*, 13). Arif Dirlik, on the other hand, explores several more diverse views of modernity, but also moves beyond a simple understanding of “alternative modernities” by underlining that “the question of modernity is subject to debate within the cultural, civilizational, national or ethnic spaces it takes as units of analysis,” including in the “West.” Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007), 82. Meng Yue also explores the history of “non-capitalist modernity” in *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). By limiting itself to the scope of literature, this article does not purport to take a stance on whether democracy can define an “alternative modernity” or whether it is part of a hegemonic understanding of modernity. For such a discussion, see, for example, the special issue of *Daedalus* entitled “Multiple Modernities,” in particular the article by Björn Wittrock, “One, None or Many? European Origins and Modernity as a Global Condition,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 31–60.

24. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835–1840), 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), in particular 2:395–455.



racy in conjunction.<sup>25</sup> Claude Lefort addressed this aspect in a famous commentary of Tocqueville, linking institutional democracy and a “democratic ethos” by a common preoccupation with preserving a symbolically empty space:

The place of power becomes an empty place. No need to insist on the details of the institutional arrangement. The important point is that it prevents those who govern from appropriating, from incarnating power. [ . . . ] The place of power reveals itself as impossible to represent. Only the mechanisms of its exercise, or the human beings, the ordinary mortals who hold political authority, remain visible. It would be wrong to think that power is now vested *in* society, simply because it emanates from the popular vote.<sup>26</sup>

The democratic world is therefore one in which there is no supreme place of power, or rather in which this place must be left empty; in contrast with romanticism, the writer can therefore not claim a privileged position as prophet, not even as a harbinger of revolution and emancipation, but must in turn symbolically vacate the center of discursive power. Democracy is not a new utopia, a new eschatology (enshrined in a linear conception of history), no more than it is a new principle or supreme norm of legitimacy. It is an institutional arrangement without a norm, a historical process without a destination.<sup>27</sup> The ambiguity of democracy echoes the ambiguity of mod-

25. For example, Jacques Rancière: Gustave Flaubert and Stéphane Mallarmé are the paradigmatic authors of his “democratic turn,” in that they believe in the “equal dignity of subjects” (anything is fit to become a subject of art, as opposed to the system of belles lettres, in which the hierarchy between literary genres echoes social hierarchy), but only on the condition that the subject is transformed into art by style, and thus made impersonal or absolute. For Rancière: “The absolutization of style was the literary translation of the democratic principle of equality.” Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 19. However, this hypothesis seems to lead back to a formalistic definition: Rancière is concerned only with how the writer reasserts a form of aristocratic distinction over the magma of democratic subjects, never questioning the writer’s own status and legitimacy.

26. Claude Lefort, “La question de la démocratie,” in *Essais sur le politique XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2001), 28.

27. It is safe to assume that this conception was widely shared in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe; Pierre Rosanvallon has documented that it is also relevant to the French Revolution in *La démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000). To what extent this disenchanting vision of democracy can be applied to American history must be left open for discussion. See also David Graeber, who argues along slightly different lines that there is no identifiable “source” or

ernism formulated by Benjamin, its original preoccupation with the present that can look to no source of legitimacy in the past and to no utopia in the future (just as Tocqueville's reluctant endorsement of democracy as "inevitable" is echoed by the modernist's paradoxical stance toward modernity).<sup>28</sup>

Based on this understanding, rather than a new theory of modernism, the present essay seeks to suggest some analogies between modernism and democracy, mainly by exploring Lefort's idea of an empty center under several aspects: normative, historical, and sociopolitical. To this end, arguably the most canonical text of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q," will be compared with texts by two authors generally considered as part of the European "modernist canon," Kafka and Bertolt Brecht: one often described as an apolitical "formalist," the other on the contrary associated with the avant-garde and its endorsement of progress in history and a future utopia. In this way, the comparison will attempt to question or qualify the contrast between realism as the dominant paradigm of Chinese modernity and formal "high modernist" experimentation on the European side.<sup>29</sup> By using works that thematically deal with China, Kafka's "Building the Great Wall of China" and Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the comparison also seeks to highlight that modernism is not, in this case, a colonial discourse that "Orientalizes" its extra-European other, no more than Lu Xun idealizes his "extra-Oriental" one.

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"cultural tradition" in which democracy is somehow "rooted," in *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), in particular, "On the Emergence of the Democratic Ideal," 344–47, and "Traditions as Acts of Endless Refoundation," 355–62.

28. This formulation also echoes Adorno's view of Enlightenment rationality as sufficiently "empty" to accommodate its own instrumentalization in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1981).

29. Realism continues to refer broadly to an aesthetics that aims to reproduce reality as a coherent whole. Erich Auerbach, for example, characterizes Homer's style by the impetus to "represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable, in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations." Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 6. This restrictive definition of realism is used because it is the one on which the implicit opposition with modernism in fact relies (for example, in Lukács). See also Roman Jakobson's enumeration of the various meanings of realism in "On Realism in Art," in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), 19–27.

### The Poetics of (Deconstructing) Normativity

The idea of a normative void is central to Lefort's understanding of democracy, just as the emancipation from moral norms is an important aspect of the "autonomization" of literature characteristic of modernity. Jürgen Habermas, for example, writes, "modernity is no longer able or willing to borrow its orienting criteria from the models of a bygone era: it must draw its normativity out of itself."<sup>30</sup> This democratic autonomy is not a form of "depoliticization of the avant-garde" but rather a distinct form of politics that cannot simply be reunified or subsumed under the aegis of a new utopia. Paul Bové has drawn attention to a similar connection between Jameson's allegorical readings, some of which are critiqued below, and an antidemocratic form of utopia.<sup>31</sup> Lu Xun and Brecht were both preoccupied with the question of the norms explicitly or implicitly imparted by literature, in particular the "old morality" encapsulated in traditional fiction. Paradoxically, however, "The True Story of Ah Q" and *The Good Person of Szechwan* are generally read as replacing one form of exemplarity with another. While Lu Xun ironically spoofs the conventions of hagiographic historiography (mandarins' biographies), "Ah Q" is construed as an indictment of Chineseness, an allegory (albeit a negative one) of everything that is uniquely "wrong" about China, and therefore to an extent, as a new "master fiction" of China's incomplete modernization and necessary national revival. Similarly, critics insist that Brecht's parody of biblical themes and language in *The Good Person* allows him to turn the parable to his own use and construct a "Marxist parable" meant to "demonstrate" the proposition that, within the capitalist system, it is impossible to "be good" and survive at the same time. These readings, substituting nationalism for Confucianism in one case, and Marxism for Christian morals in the other, appear similarly disputable at closer examination.

The first and arguably main target of Lu Xun's irony is the Confucian obsession of the would-be historiographer with "orthodoxy" (zheng), as suggested in the title, "The True Story of Ah Q" ("A-Q zheng zhuan"), which could also be translated as "The Edifying Story" or "The Official Biography" of Ah Q. In the introduction, the narrator quotes Confucius's famous sentence "If the names are not correct, then one cannot speak clearly"<sup>32</sup>—

30. Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, 16.

31. Paul Bové, "Misprisions of Utopia: Messianism, Apocalypse, and Allegory," *Field Day Review* 6 (2010): 71–93.

32. "Ming bu zheng, ze yan bu shun"; Lu Xun, *Nahan* [Outcries] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), 67. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as AQ.

although of course nothing could be more “incorrect” than a title juxtaposing a nickname containing the foreign letter *Q* with the category of “orthodox biography.” Belying the entire plot, Ah Q is similarly described as a *zheng ren*, a “true” man, “full of rectitude and who zealously pursues heterodoxy—the likes of the little nun and the fake foreign devil” (Hen you paichi yiduan—ru xiao nigu ji jia yang guizi zhelei—de zhengqi [AQ, 79]). As in a mandarin’s biography, episodes from Ah Q’s life are concluded with quotations from the classics, which they purportedly serve to illustrate. Ah Q justifies his assault on the young nun with a quotation from Mencius: “Among the three ways of being an unfilial son, the worst is to be without sons” (bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da), about which the narrator comments ironically, “Therefore, Ah Q’s ideas were in fact in full agreement with the classics and the scriptures” (ta na sixiang, qishi shi yangyang heyu shengjing xianzhuan de [AQ, 79]). This is a clear attack on the moralizing core of Confucianism that is quite comparable to satire of Christian morals.<sup>33</sup>

In general, Lu Xun’s irony has been interpreted as an iconoclastic attack on (Confucian) tradition and, by extension, on China and Chinese-ness, in which Ah Q functions as a totalizing emblem of the “diseased Chinese mind.” Lydia Liu, in a refined version of this reading, suggests that the category of “national character” (*guomin xing*, a term that first appeared in Japanese as *kokuminsei*) was borrowed by Lu Xun from missionary discourse, more precisely from Arthur Smith’s book *Chinese Characteristics*. Pinpointing what she calls Lu Xun’s “life-long obsession with national character,” she goes on to analyze the “ambivalent reinvention of that myth [of national character] by the Chinese themselves [. . .] whose climactic event is Lu Xun’s ‘True Story of Ah Q’ (1921).”<sup>34</sup> While *guomin xing* indisputably entered social discourse at this time, it is questionable that it plays a central role in Lu Xun’s own writing. Commenting on Lu Xun’s preface to his collection *Nahan* (Outcries), Liu tellingly glosses over a key phrase: she suggests the author’s intention can be summed up as “*gaizao guomin xing* (reforming the national character) [which became] the dominant theme in the meta-narrative of Chinese modernity.”<sup>35</sup> However, Lu Xun actually used a different formulation: *gaibian tamen de jingshen* (to change their

33. Confucianism as a state-endorsed moral doctrine (in this sense quite similar to monotheistic religions) of course provided the favored target for attacks by New Culture intellectuals.

34. Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity; China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 47.

35. Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 50.

[the people's] spirit [AQ, iii]).<sup>36</sup> In fact, Lu Xun almost always uses the term *spirit* (*jingshen*) to point to the target of his criticism, as he does in "Ah Q" when the narrator ironically describes the protagonist's habit of declaring "spiritual victory" as being "no doubt the proof of the superiority of China's spiritual civilization over the rest of the world" (*Huozhe ye shi Zhongguo jingshen wenming guanyu quanqiu de yige zhengju le* [AQ, 78]). There is nothing "inherent" or "cultural" in Lu Xun's angle of criticism; on the contrary, he is poking fun at those who invoke China's "spiritual civilization" to set it apart from the world. This is all the more remarkable as the national character discourse was indeed becoming pervasive in his time. One might add that, as Liu herself points out, following Patrick Hanan, one of the texts that probably inspired "Ah Q" is "Bartek the Victor," by the Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz (therefore Lu Xun cannot have conceived of Ah Q's shortcomings as somehow uniquely Chinese); more generally, it should be remembered that Lu Xun's criticism of Confucianism as a rationalization of weakness was conceived as parallel to Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality, and therefore in universal terms.<sup>37</sup>

However, the obsession with *zheng* displayed by the narrator is not only Confucian: Lu Xun underlines in the preface that he has borrowed the term *zheng zhuan* not only from historiography but also from traditional vernacular novels, in which the narrator, after a digression, would return to the "true story" (*zheng zhuan* [AQ, 68]). This highlights the question that is in fact crucial to Lu Xun's thinking: How is fiction genealogically intertwined with normative discourse? As in a traditional *zhanghui xiaoshuo* (novel by chapters), the chapter titles in "Ah Q" exaggerate the protagonist's heroism, an attitude which Lu Xun also associates with the "spirit of Niu Er" in the vernacular novel *Outlaws of the March*.<sup>38</sup> The story should thus be read as a parody not only of Confucianism but of the whole idea of *zheng*—the

36. This idea is no doubt inspired by Xu Shoushang's account of his discussions with Lu Xun in Japan. However, according to the full-text database of Lu Xun's complete works maintained by the Beijing Lu Xun Museum, the term *national character* (*guomin xing*) in fact only appears in seven of Lu Xun's essays, not once in his fiction, and eleven times in translations and personal letters. He never used the phrase *gaizao guomin xing*. See <http://www.luxunmuseum.com.cn/lxFindWord/> (accessed June 27, 2011).

37. David Kelly makes this point in "The Highest Chinadom: Nietzsche and the Chinese Mind," in *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 157–58.

38. In Lu Xun, "Suiganlu 38" [Random thoughts 38], in *Lu Xun Quanji* [Complete works of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 1:328.

“true,” “orthodox,” or “official,” in a word, the edifying nature of literature, as is confirmed by the narrator’s initial doubts that he is suited to be a biographer: “indeed, an immortal pen has always been meant to recount an immortal life: in that case the text is transmitted with the memory of the man and the memory of the man with the text—so that little by little it becomes unclear which is transmitted by which [. . .]” (AQ, 67).

As Marston Anderson has underlined, these relations of “textual governance” are the actual target of Lu Xun’s criticism:

[D]oes the text exist to cast reflected glory on the individual, or does the individual exist to corporealize texts and the cultural prescriptions of which they are the vessel? The narration of Ah Q’s execution may simply constitute another link in the chain of substitutions (of acts of ritual sacrifice and of the representations of those acts) through which the originary violence at the heart of Chinese society is perpetuated and disseminated. The sudden narrative breakdown at the moment of Ah Q’s death, at the expiration of the subject which is to make his writing “known to posterity,” attests to Lu Xun’s urgent need to break that chain. To save Ah Q would be not simply to rescue the individual from the anonymity of cultural processing, but also to preserve the possibility of an independent critical stance inassimilable to such processing and, not incidentally, the possibility of a fiction to express it.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than Confucianism per se, Lu Xun is preoccupied with the complicity of literature in general in legitimizing norms that perpetuate injustice.

This preoccupation with not transmitting norms, with creating a non-normative form of fiction, is what has been described as Lu Xun’s distinctive modernism. The denouement is explicitly crafted in such a nonnormative manner, as identified by Anderson: Ah Q, arrested for a robbery he has not committed, is brought before a judge in an explicitly normative trial scene, signs a confession he cannot read by drawing a circle (which slides into Q-shape, thus giving him the only name he is remembered by<sup>40</sup>), and is executed because the chief of police wants to set an example to put an end to the revolutionary agitation. Neglecting to sing and boast as he is paraded through the streets, Ah Q is finally shot rather than decapitated,

39. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 84.

40. Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 75.

doubly disappointing the gaping villagers. The story ends with an injustice that is not avenged, yet the reader can hardly sympathize with a character whose only claim to innocence is the cowardice that held him back from joining in the looting he is accused of. Yet the narrator suddenly intervenes, in what Anderson designates as the “narrative breakdown”:

Those eyes seemed to have melted together, and had already begun to gnaw at his soul.

“Help . . .”

However, Ah Q had not spoken. His eyes had already gone black, there was a buzz in his ears, and he felt his entire body disperse like fine dust. (AQ, 105–6)

Anderson hypothesizes that Ah Q’s silence is meant to show that he learns nothing from his punishment and that it is in fact the narrator who speaks in his stead. In this case, the blatant contradiction between the exclamation “Help . . .” (Jiuming) and the comment “However, Ah Q had not spoken” (Ran’er A Q meiyou shuo) may be interpreted as a final authorial critique of the narrator, who in truly orthodox fashion, is prone to tell his reader who is right and who is wrong. His plea for help should therefore appear as deeply disturbing to the reader: Ah Q is not an outcast or a persecuted member of the proletariat who needs to be saved but the incarnation of how the Confucian spirit can be adapted to the era of masses; he displays only his own inaptness at founding a democratic community, and in this sense offers no “new norm.” In this respect, Lu Xun’s fictional construction marks not only his mockery of Confucian happy endings but an attempt to deconstruct the normative dimension of fiction as a genre: this for Anderson is the “limit” of Lu Xun’s realism, defined as a discourse that seeks to order reality into a cohesive moral or philosophical discourse.

As suggested by David Wang in his comparison of Lu Xun’s story with Wu Zuxiang’s “Guanguan’s Tonic,” Lu Xun’s argument is that modern literature should resist the possibility of pronouncing a final judgment, in order to finally escape from its age-old entanglement with moralism, depriving the reader both of the feeling of justice done that could be derived from Ah Q’s singing and bragging on the street, and of the feeling of injustice that the narrator would like to impart by crying “Help.” Lu Xun’s refusal to call for revolt and revenge in Ah Q’s name highlights the absence of any guiding principle of legitimacy, in stark contrast to what David Wang calls the “high-strung, contentious call for justice” pervasive among Lu Xun’s

contemporaries.<sup>41</sup> Lu Xun's carefully crafted conclusion (his "forensic discourse," in Wang's terms) places his readers in front of a normative void from which they must draw their own conclusions.

As Lu Xun is often described as a proponent of politically committed writing in which revolutionary ideals fill the "normative void" left by critical realism, it is worth quoting at length Lu Xun's recollections of the new culture movement written in 1933:

My works published in *New Youth* were quite in step with everyone else, therefore I think they can be counted as "revolutionary literature" of that time. However, I was not very enthusiastic at the time about the "literary revolution." I had seen the 1911 Revolution, the Second Revolution [the movement led by Sun Yat-sen in 1913], I had seen Yuan Shikai crowned as emperor, Zhang Xun's restoration [of the Manchu emperor in 1917], I had seen so much that I was overcome by doubts and hopelessness, and became extremely dispirited. [. . .]

If I had no direct enthusiasm for the "literary revolution" why did I bother to use my brush? Thinking back, it was mainly out of sympathy for the enthusiasts. These fighters, I thought, although lonely, had some good ideas, I might as well cry out a few times to give them some encouragement. Naturally, in the process, I could not avoid slipping in some hope of exposing the roots of old society's wrongs, of making people pay attention and finding ways to cure them. But in order to fulfill this expected hope, I had to walk in step with the avant-gardists, so I cut out some of the darkness and added some joy, to make my works a little brighter: these were later collected as *Outcries*, fourteen pieces in all.

One could also say they were "compliant literature." Nonetheless, what they complied with were only the orders of the revolutionary avant-garde of the time, orders I personally wished to obey, not the decrees of an emperor, nor the threat of money or of a real knife.<sup>42</sup>

Lu Xun was therefore well aware of the dangerous proximity between "revolutionary literature" (geming wenxue) and "compliant literature" (zunming

41. David Der-wei Wang, "Crime or Punishment? On the Forensic Discourse of Modern Chinese Literature," in *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond*, ed. Wenhsin Yeh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 260. See also 272 for the comparison with Wu Zuxiang.

42. Lu Xun, "Zixuanji zi xu" [Preface to my *Selected Works*], in *Lu Xun Quanjí*, 4:468–69.



wenxue).<sup>43</sup> “The True Story of Ah Q” is paradoxically one of the least “compliant” works which Lu Xun offered his friends of the revolutionary “avant-garde” (qianqu zhe), its realist “exposing” (baolu) of old society and hope for the future are indeed at best “slipped in” (jijia), occupying only a marginal position. Anderson’s view of a realist aesthetic constrained by “moral impediments” therefore does not seem adequate: “Ah Q” is not primarily a realist narrative but first and foremost a parody, ironically playing with the form of the uplifting biography, which is only incidentally “realistic” (a similar argument can be made for “Diary of a Madman,” which is even more “fantastic” in texture<sup>44</sup>). Realism is not present in this story as a “disinterested investigation of the external world” based on the “Enlightenment faith in the capacity of human beings to free themselves from superstition and prejudice through the exercise of their faculty of reason.”<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, Lu Xun’s concern with expressing his “doubts” about the normative dimension of literature gives rise to a highly sophisticated pastiche of both official historiography and traditional vernacular literature, expressed in vocabulary, themes, and structure. The pragmatic uncertainty that expresses these doubts at the end of “Ah Q” is what may be viewed as the central “emptiness” characteristic of a democratic system of norms.

Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechwan* (*Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, 1943) is described by the author as a “parable” (Parabel) and referred to in the epilogue as the reverse side of an elusive “golden legend” (goldene Legende),<sup>46</sup> or a saint’s biography (a genre Brecht also alludes to in the title

43. It should be remembered that Lu Xun uses *revolutionary* in the general sense, common at the time, which translates into both nationalist (pro-KMT) and communist political forces. For Lu Xun, the term is simply equivalent to “progressive” or “politically committed literature.”

44. See Tang Xiaobing, “Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman’ and a Chinese Modernism,” in *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and Quotidian* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 49–73. Tang’s arguments for a “Chinese modernism” based on the “Diary” are quite similar to the ones developed in the present article: in particular the use of “modernist language” against literary realism, and his statement of the “modernist problem of history.”

45. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 11. David Wang also characterizes Lu Xun as a realist, underlining the role of allegory in his realism: “his realist discourse evokes at the same time a counter-discourse, an allegorical subtext that reveals the tension between what the real should be and what the real is” (Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, 4). In the case of “Ah Q,” the present essay argues that the allegory implicit in “Ah Q” breaks apart into pastiche and inconclusiveness, undermining the coherent form of realism described by Wang.

46. Bertolt Brecht, *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964), 144. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *GP*.

*Saint Joan of the Stockyards*). The play itself, set in a semi-Europeanized Szechwan, where there are “still gods and already airplanes,”<sup>47</sup> massively uses the style of the Luther Bible—one of Brecht’s favorite books by his own admission.<sup>48</sup> It also contains many biblical quotations and situations, including the seed of the plot itself: the gods’ search for a “good person” in Szechwan is inspired by God’s search for “righteous men” and the subsequent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18–19. The parable ends up, not unlike Lu Xun’s pastiche of Confucian historiography, demonstrating that the opposition between good and evil it purports to exemplify is in fact devoid of meaning, emptying out the normative center of the literary text.

On the surface, the play is structured around the two personas of the main character: the prostitute Shen Te, the only “good person” the gods have been able to find in their search, must, because the world is so “bad,” resort to regularly donning the disguise of a male “cousin,” Shui Ta. As Shui Ta, she ruthlessly exploits the poor people living off the alms she distributes, in order to keep herself financially afloat. This division within the character stands for a larger tension in the play between the traditional world, imbued with Christian (and Taoist) morals (“good”), and, on the other hand, industrialization and technical progress, embodied in Shen Te’s lover, the pilot Yang Sun, and the budding capitalist Shui Ta, who transforms the poor into workers in a modern sweatshop (“evil”). Shen Te’s world and that of the gods is governed by giving; in it, politics are ultimately subordinated to virtue and morals, an idea probably inspired by Brecht’s reading of Confucius’s *Analects* in Finland.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, there is no opposition between moralizing Confucianism and Christian morals. The gods come to Szechwan because of rising complaints about poverty and injustice, to ascertain whether the traditional predominance of morals can still ensure social justice in the modern world: “The resolution states: the world may remain as it is if enough good people are found who are able to lead a life worthy of human beings” (In dem Beschluß hieß es: die Welt kann bleiben wie sie ist, wenn genügend gute Menschen gefunden werden, die ein menschenwürdiges Dasein leben können [GP, 10]). Although, on the surface, Shen Te is deemed to lead a “good” life, the “gift” she receives from the three lonely

47. Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 52.

48. Hans Mayer, *Brecht in der Geschichte: Drei Versuche* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 61.

49. Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, 227.

(male) travelers in return for her hospitality is immediately misunderstood and, far from enabling her to ensure a more equitable form of social organization by “giving” in turn (rice and shelter to the poor), it in fact exacerbates the struggle for survival. Shui Ta, by contrast, invokes the ethos of individualism to justify the capitalist organization of work: “The meals without provision of service in return shall cease. Instead, everyone shall be given the opportunity to work their way up in an honest fashion” (Die Speisungen ohne Gegendienst werden aufhören. Statt dessen wird jedermann die Gelegenheit gegeben werden, sich auf ehrliche Weise wieder emporzuarbeiten [GP, 106]).

The traditional interpretation portrays Brecht’s critique as directed primarily against capitalism. While Christian morals may seem excessively rigorist to some, the Taoist variant of “kindness” (Freundlichkeit) offers a virtue that critics believe Brecht would like to uphold as an alternative, simply criticizing capitalist society for not “allowing” its members to practice it.<sup>50</sup> Volker Klotz refers to this idea as a “general law” that Brecht sets out to prove in a “dialectic parable.”<sup>51</sup> The division between Shen Te and Shui Ta is therefore explained as a satire of the “bourgeois individual,” divided into private (moral) and public (capitalist) halves.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, Marxist critics like Klaus-Detlef Müller endorse a redefined idea of virtue: “Virtue is only the collective fight for a better world, in which morality is no longer necessary.”<sup>53</sup> In this reading, revolution simply replaces Christian morality as the subtext of a parable, which aims only at “converting” its spectators to a new form of hegemonic discourse.

Such an interpretation raises many questions, including why the play proved so difficult to stage in East Germany (where it premiered only after Brecht’s death, and with an additional preface read out loud before the performance, specifying that the society depicted in the play had now been “liberated” from oppression). Firstly, one might object that the opposition between good and bad does not follow the clear division between Shen

50. Some critics, like Antony Tatlow, go so far as to conclude that Brecht advocates a Taoist withdrawal from political and social life. See Antony Tatlow, *The Mask of Evil: Brecht’s Response to the Poetry, Theatre, and Thought of China and Japan; A Comparative and Critical Evaluation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1977), 450.

51. Volker Klotz, *Bertolt Brecht: Versuch über das Werk* (Wiesbaden: Athenaion, 1957), 15.

52. Jan Knopf, *Brecht Handbuch*, vol. 1, *Theater* (Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler, 1980), 206.

53. Klaus-Detlef Müller, *Die Funktion der Geschichte im Werk Bertolt Brechts* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 60.

Te and Shui Ta. Shen Te herself (not disguised as Shui Ta) is willing to follow the man she loves to Peking, knowing that he has bribed an acquaintance to have an innocent pilot sacked for negligence in order to take his job. More generally, Shen Te can do “good” only with the money Shui Ta has extorted from the poor in his sweatshop. Indeed, in the first version of the play, the “gift of the gods” was no more a gift than the check Shen Te receives from her admirer, Shu Fu. Even Wang, the traditional Taoist and confidant of the gods, shows no scruples in using a false bottom in his water buckets to trick his customers. The theatrical device of travesty brings a vivid image of the artificiality of moral categories to the spectator, when Shen Te changes into Shui Ta’s clothes onstage, in full view of the public, gradually “becoming” Shui Ta as the successive stanzas of the song she sings become more and more ruthless (*GP*, 65–66).

More generally, the categories of “good” and “evil,” whether rooted in the Ten Commandments that Shen Te quotes and then transgresses one by one (*GP*, 16), or in Zhuangzi’s fable of the “Sufferings of Usefulness” read onstage by Wang (good people suffer more, just as straight trees are cut earlier), are presented as part of a discourse that obscures reality. The “idealistic” categories of “good” and “evil,” used by theater (and fiction in general) from time immemorial, are portrayed as a theatrical illusion, a trick to elicit a response from the spectator; just as in Lu Xun’s story *zheng* stands for the traditional intertwining of fiction with normativity. This becomes most clear in the final trial scene: Shen Te/Shui Ta, although she announces her confession and doffs her disguise, ends up pleading both innocent and guilty: “Condemn me: All my crimes / I committed to help my neighbors” (Verdammt mich: alles, was ich verbrach / Tat ich, meinen Nachbarn zu helfen [*GP*, 139]). She underlines that she is both good and bad: “Your former command / To be good and yet to live / Tore me apart into two halves like lightning” (Euer einstiger Befehl / Gut zu sein und doch zu leben / Zerriß mich wie ein Blitz in zwei Hälften [*GP*, 139]). The audience is therefore hard put to pass any judgment on Shen Te: it is impossible to understand the play as a “dialectic parable” endorsing a “materialistic” understanding of virtue, in which being “good” depends on a better organization of society. This impasse is echoed by the gods’ precipitated departure and flight from their responsibilities as judges. Their conclusion, in which they both assert that they have found a “good” person, and nevertheless authorize the “evil” Shui Ta to appear from time to time, is so unsatisfactory that the spectator can only in turn blame the gods themselves and the inept moral categories they have tried to impose on the plot. The

baroque kitsch of the gods ascending to heaven on a pink cloud not only demystifies the connection of theater and religious experience, echoing Nietzsche's critique of Wagner's "theatrocracy," but also suggests a deeper engagement on Brecht's behalf with Nietzsche's radical denial of the moral concepts of good and evil, epitomized in the play by the "Song of Smoke" inspired by Nietzsche's poem "Vereinsamt" (Lone) in *Twilight of the Idols*.

Rather than suggesting the necessity of a collective fight for a "better" world, by "moralizing" and enlightening the proletariat, Brecht shows that it is precisely the idea of morality, of "doing good," that impedes individual emancipation. For Shen Te, modernity translates into personal emancipation through a marriage of love; for Yang Sun, into flying an airplane high above the mediocrity of society, an eloquent image of the emancipatory potential of technical modernity. Both see their hopes dashed and resort to joining forces to exploit the poor: rather than marry, they become partners in business, once again using morality to exploit others. Social injustice continues to be justified by morality:<sup>54</sup> while traditionally, poverty is explained because the poor are "bad," in Shui Ta's factory, "honest labor" is described as morally uplifting.<sup>55</sup> Brecht's play, intent on doing away with these categories, is therefore less a "parable in reverse" meant to illustrate the impossibility of "being good and surviving nevertheless" (*gut zu sein und doch zu leben* [GP, 139]) than an attack on fiction's involvement with morality in general. If it wishes to emancipate its readers, fiction must allow them to construct their own categories of discourse to interpret the plot and its outcome, as suggested in the epilogue in front of the curtain, and ultimately to derive their own norms from these categories.<sup>56</sup>

54. The play can also no doubt be read as an account of the socioeconomic modernization of China in the first decades of the twentieth century (possibly inspired by Brecht's exchanges with his onetime friend, the Marxist historian of China Karl Wittfogel) and, more largely, of how a largely rural society imbued with traditional morals (like Weimar Germany) could modernize without questioning traditional hierarchy and morals.

55. Giorgio Strehler's production of the play in Milan in 1981 represented Shui Ta's factory as a concentration camp. While this seems to be an extreme interpretation, the implication that fascism arose from the problematic conjunction between a form of democratization of society and surviving traditional morals is certainly related to Brecht's questioning.

56. Hans Robert Jauss made a similar point when he formulated the idea that literature could impart "norms still awaiting completion" (*weiterzubestimmende Normen des Handelns*). He links this question with his own reading of Brecht, underlining that "Brecht's problem was how to present his audience with norms of action, without openly or surreptitiously forcing them upon it." Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und Literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 89 and 185.

Brecht's modernism, rather than the expression of an avant-gardist faith in future utopias or an uncritical embracing of technical modernity, can just as well be seen as a critical reflection on how modernity reinforces some of the most oppressive traits of the traditional order, a reflection not devoid of a form of nostalgia for the "kindness" which has disappeared with that world. However, Brecht shares with Lu Xun the concern of radically disentangling normativity from literature, in an attempt to preserve—in what can only be described as a modernist form—a normative void at the center of his text, inherent in the image of smoke he borrows from Nietzsche's poem. Far from depoliticizing Brecht and Lu Xun, this reading brings out their distinctive political stance, which encompasses their doubts about the hegemony of certain types of Enlightenment discourse, including in their Marxist variants.

### Open-Ended History

Modernity is usually closely connected with the Enlightenment idea of linear history leading toward progress, famously questioned by Benjamin. Similar to its doubts about normativity, modernism, with its fixation on the present moment, can be viewed as engaged with a "democratic" understanding of history, a perspective in which democracy is not proclaimed as a new ideal reflecting a law of history but as an uncertain path, bereft of a clear outcome or destination. Lu Xun, writing fourteen years after the Revolution of 1911 (which had made China into Asia's first Republic), rejects the idea that democracy entails any kind of linear progress:

It seems to me that the so-called Republic of China has disappeared long ago.

It seems to me that, before the revolution, I was a slave; not long after the revolution, I was deceived by slaves, and became their slave.

It seems to me that many citizens of the republic are enemies of the republic. [. . .]

It seems to me that everything must be started all over again.

And yet I hope that someone will conscientiously write the history of the foundation of the republic for the young to read, because it seems to me that the origins of the republic have not been transmitted anymore, even though it has only been fourteen years!<sup>57</sup>

57. Lu Xun, "Huran xiang dao, III" [Sudden thoughts, III], in *Lu Xun Quanjí*, 3:16–17.

"The True Story of Ah Q," written four years before this comment, illustrates Lu Xun's commitment to probe history, from a standpoint that is disenchanted but not resigned or antidemocratic.

Lu Xun's portrayal of the revolution can be structured around four notions used in the text, which betray Ah Q's essential misunderstanding of the nature of the event. The first is his confusion between *geming* (revolution) and *zaofan* (revolt or rebellion), the word for traditional peasant uprisings. Ah Q is enraptured by the decapitation of a revolutionary during his earlier stay in town: "Without knowing why, he held the opinion that revolutionaries were all rebels, and that rebels would only make trouble for him, by consequence of which he felt only 'profound hatred and burning dislike' for them" (AQ, 92). In a subsequent dream, in which he portrays the revolutionaries as Ming dynasty loyalists in white armor (a common misconception among peasants at the time), the confusion is the same, but the values are reversed: revolution now appears as a carnival in which Ah Q turns society upside down while marching down the main street of No-Name village: "Suddenly, he seemed to be the revolutionary and the villagers were his prisoners. In his joy he lost all control over himself and began to scream: 'Rebellion! Rebellion! [. . .] Whatever I want, I'll take; whomever I like, I'll have'" (AQ, 93). Ah Q has no political program: revolution for him is rape, pillage, and renewed oppression—a pure outburst of violence and revenge on those who have oppressed him in the old system, a simple reversal of hierarchy rather than its abolishment, just another peasant rebellion to be forgotten, in a cyclical pattern of history.

Indeed, he seems to suggest it may be impossible to break out of the cycle of tradition, as attested by two other notions. After his dream, Ah Q, in true loyalist Confucian fashion, decides to "surrender" (*touxiang*) to the revolutionaries. In the same way, the "Fake Foreign Devil" and the village laureate justify their conversion to the revolutionary party by the Confucian saying *xian yu wei xin*, "all shall take part in reform" or "all shall be allowed to amend" (AQ, 96) and set off to loot the village temple, closely preceding Ah Q's own iconoclastic raid on the nuns' vegetable garden. But in fact, when Ah Q is denied participation in the revolution by the Fake Foreign Devil, he resorts to an even older term inspired by traditional punishment: "I'm not allowed to revolt? Only you are allowed to revolt? You bastard Fake Foreign Devil—all right: go ahead and revolt! Revolt is a crime punished by death. All I need to do is accuse you, and I'll see you arrested and taken to town for execution—and your whole family put to death. Chop, chop!" (AQ, 100–101). The "execution of a whole family" (*man men chao zhan*) is for

Lu Xun the very symbol of the most archaic of political practices in China, which he associates with the Qin dynasty in an aphorism from the series “Minor mixed thoughts” (here he refers to it as *zu zhu*): “When Liu Bang defeated the tyranny of Qin, in agreement with the patriarchs, he published a code of law in three chapters. But the execution of whole clans and the banning of books continued to exist, it was Qin law as before.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Ah Q’s use of this term not only implies, for Lu Xun, the stagnation of history but underlines the idea that democratization, and the empowerment of the masses that Ah Q represents, can bring about a particularly frightening combination of modern and archaic violence (and Ah Q’s parade down Main Street, calling for rape and pillage, cannot but remind the present-day reader, as has been pointed out, of scenes of the Cultural Revolution). In an essay on how he wrote the story, Lu Xun adds, “The first year of the Republic is long gone and has left no traces, but should there be another reform, I am quite sure that more revolutionaries like Ah Q will appear. I also would prefer to think, as people say, that I have written about the past or a certain period, but I am afraid that what I have seen is not so much what came before our present time as what will come after it, or even what will come in twenty or thirty years.”<sup>59</sup> Lu Xun, using a dream scene that owes little to realism and much to the imagery of village opera, underlines that giving power to the “masses” cannot, in and of itself, create “democracy,” leaving wide open the question of how to foster democratic citizens.

Is Lu Xun’s understanding of history entirely traditional, “antimodern”? Despite his ambivalence about modernity, there is little trace of nostalgia for the cyclical peasant rebellions of traditional China. A comparison between two texts yields a better understanding of his position. In “A Madman’s Diary” (“Kuang ren riji”), Lu Xun’s first story and manifesto for vernacular fiction (published in *New Youth* in 1918), a young intellectual rebelling against Confucian morals in prerevolutionary times is locked up and taxed with madness (and therefore begins writing a diary). His form of revolt is stigmatized in biological terms (as madness), whereas Ah Q, in a postrevolutionary world, is simply found guilty and sentenced by a judge in a trial in which he is, at least nominally, allowed to defend himself—although by having him executed, Lu Xun is certainly also criticizing the shortcomings of legal modernization in the 1910s. Nonetheless, a trial by law has at least the potential to be less arbitrary than the stigma

58. Lu Xun, “Xiao zagan” [Brief random thoughts], in *Lu Xun Quanjī*, 3:557.

59. Lu Xun, “‘A Q zhengzhuan’ de chengyin” [The composition of “The True Story of Ah Q”], in *Lu Xun Quanjī*, 3:397.



of “madness” decreed by a Confucian patriarch. It is true that, on a meta-textual level, the “madman’s” marginality can be expressed freely inside the diary, just as in the personal notes or *biji* traditionally written by literati, even though it is dismissed by the official preface in classical language that presents the entire diary as a symptom of his “madness”; by contrast, in “Ah Q,” the main character’s illiteracy denies him access to any such form of expression. This is the relative freedom granted to some in the traditional world: fiction—even stigmatized as madness—could freely develop as a private activity among the literati. Is Lu Xun really nostalgic for this world? David Wang suggests he may be, drawing a parallel between the beheading of a Chinese spy Lu Xun saw on a slide in 1906 and “the mutilated condition of the meaning system that makes reality what it is.”<sup>60</sup> Comparing “The True Story of Ah Q,” in which the villagers are disappointed because Ah Q is shot by a modern (Western) firearm, with the denouement of Shen Congwen’s “The Old and the New” (“Xin yu jiu”), he subtly suggests that, for Shen, “re-membering” can counteract “dis-membering.” However, the analogy does not quite work: dismembering criminals is an attribute of traditional, not modern, society; Ah Q is precisely not “dismembered.” In this sense, nostalgia is not really an option. Lu Xun’s fiction does not reconstruct a linear temporality that would allow the reader to seek comfort in tradition. Depriving itself of any clear status in a postrevolutionary, proto-democratic space, it has no “re-membered” meaning to offer the reader, no more than the promise of a bright future. “The True Story of Ah Q” is, one might say, exactly the opposite of what communist historiography, after first attacking it, tried to portray it as: a “master narrative” of revolution and the march of history. “Ah Q” remains trapped in the “in-between” of democratic time.

This crafting of history into an indecisive movement in which the present and the past interact and overlap can be compared with Kafka’s story “Building the Great Wall of China,” which deals with the political changes of modernity, both in China and in Europe.<sup>61</sup> The story was almost certainly written in March 1917, only weeks after the first Russian Revolution, and less than six years after the Chinese Revolution of 1911, which Kafka had marked by an entry in his diary on November 9, 1911, recounting a dream of revolution in Prague. The first publication of a fragment of

60. Wang, “Crime or Punishment?,” 174.

61. Kafka was reasonably familiar with contemporary Chinese politics, as shown by Hartmut Binder in *Kafka Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 1975), 218–22.

the story ("An Imperial Message") in the Prague Zionist weekly *Selbstwehr* (Self-defense) on September 24, 1919, where it was discussed in the context of debates between "cultural" Zionists like Martin Buber and more politically oriented activists like Kafka's friend Max Brod, shows how the theme of the traditional Jewish culture of Eastern Europe feeds into and intertwines with Kafka's reworking of Chinese themes.

Benjamin has formulated the most penetrating analysis of Kafka's depiction of the slow metamorphosis of the imperial into the modern state in his analysis of the "pre-worldly powers that staked a claim on Kafka's creative work; powers that, it is true, one could just as rightfully describe as worldly ones of our time" (die vorweltlichen Gewalten, von denen Kafkas Schaffen beansprucht wurde; Gewalten, die man freilich mit gleichem Recht auch als weltliche unserer Tage betrachten kann).<sup>62</sup> In Benjamin's view, Kafka himself did not fully understand these powers: "In the pre-worldly mirror held up to him in the form of guilt, he only recognized the future in the form of judgment" (Er hat nur in dem Spiegel, den die Vorwelt ihm in Gestalt der Schuld entgegenhielt, die Zukunft in Gestalt des Gerichtes erscheinen sehen).<sup>63</sup> This is the essential duality of the world sketched out in Kafka's writings: under the apparently modern structure of judgments, laws, and a proliferating technocratic bureaucracy, it is always possible to find the traces of an older world resting on hierarchy, transcendence, and a form of guilt inherent in the individual's immanent nature.

Two examples of this duality are described in "Building the Great Wall of China": on the one hand, the Tower of Babel and the Great Wall; on the other, the emperor and the directorate. In both cases, the former figure, which symbolizes transcendence and therefore seems bereft of empirical existence (the tower, the emperor), continues to cast a sacred aura on the second figure, which represents the modern form of power (the wall, the directorate). Although it is presented as a new Tower of Babel, the Great Wall is shown to be an effective way of enrolling the laboring masses of Chinese subjects in a purely immanent political project under the banner of a sacred form of legitimacy. Contrary to the narrator's initial assertion that "The Great Wall was completed at its North-East extremity" (Die chinesische Mauer ist an ihrer nordöstlichsten Stelle beendet worden),<sup>64</sup> the wall is in fact never completed, and can perhaps not be completed; it is riddled

62. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pt. 2, pp. 426–27.

63. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 427.

64. Franz Kafka, *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlaß* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1994), 65.

with holes and gaps that defy its official purpose of guarding the borders of the country against the “Northern Peoples.”

Nonetheless, it mobilizes the population on a truly vast scale. The narrator justifies such mobilization by using a form of rhetoric directly inspired by an archaic, organic vision of the state: “[the builders] had never seen how vast and rich and beautiful and worthy of love their country was, every countryman was a brother for whom they were building a protecting wall and who would thank them for it with everything he had for the rest of his life. Unity! Unity! Breast to breast, they made up a great dance of the people, blood no longer imprisoned in the miserable vessels of the body, but rolling sweetly and nevertheless returning home through the immensity of China.”<sup>65</sup> The fragmented and useless wall, to which these workers devote their lives, is presented as a symbol of organic unity among the subjects of the emperor: the metaphor of the people as the country’s blood is taken directly from the nationalist rhetoric of his time, which Kafka came in contact with both in its German and Jewish variant, for example in Buber’s texts.<sup>66</sup> In this way, the Great Wall comes to symbolize how the modern state, deprived of vertical, transcendent legitimacy, exploits its horizontal, imperfect projection to exert a form of control over the lives of ordinary subjects, preventing them from fully seizing the power that democratization should bestow on them.<sup>67</sup> The justification for this violence, drawn from a sacred conception in which the emperor embodies the polity, is transposed to the nation as his modern, immanent equivalent. By showing that building the Great Wall is essentially a pretext, Kafka demystifies this nationalistic rhetoric and its manipulation of the subject. He shows how the myth of a sacred empire, emerging from the remnants of the Tower of Babel, is manipulated to maintain an authoritarian form of government, generating the rhetoric of modern nationalism: myth and history overlap in a blending of archaic and modern themes.

A similar interpretation can be made of the dual figures of the emperor and the “directorate,” or *Führerschaft*, which wields the real power:

65. Kafka, *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer*, 68.

66. See Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 173.

67. In another story titled “The Tower of Babel,” Kafka describes how modern nations are the result of the barracks built by the workers engaged in the construction of the Tower of Babel. As the tower is never built, only these shantytowns remain, becoming the main form of political organization of the modern world that has renounced its Babelian aspirations to a political order grounded in transcendence.

"In the directorate's room—where this was and who sat in it, no one I have asked seemed to know—in this room all human thoughts and wishes were undoubtedly circulating, and all human goals and realizations circulating in the opposite direction; yet through the window, the glow of heavenly worlds would shine on the hands of the directorate as they drew up their plans" (GW, 70). The power of the directorate, although modern in that it is based on a form of representation ("all human thoughts and wishes"; *alle menschlichen Gedanken und Wünsche*) and technical competence, continues to bask in the "glow of heavenly worlds" (*der Abglanz der göttlichen Welten*), a remnant of the traditional legitimacy, just as the nationalist rhetoric of wall or border building receives its "glow" of natural legitimacy from the organic rhetoric inherited, so Kafka suggests, from archaic representations of the State. Thus, when the dying emperor, at the center of the story, dispatches a messenger to his subject, pinning the imperial emblem of the sun on the messenger's clothes, it comes as no surprise that this messenger is unable to reach the distant subject but remains bogged down in the endless courtyards, stairs, and crowds of officials that stand for the mediation between the emperor and his subjects. Thus, the emblems of power remain the property of the court, or the "directorate," so that the individual never receives them and must dream them up.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have pinpointed the peculiar historicity of Kafka's Chinese world: "Modern bureaucracy is naturally born within archaic forms, that it reactivates and changes by giving them a perfectly contemporary function. That is why the two architectural states that Kafka describes in most of his texts essentially coexist: they take place one within the other, and in the modern world. Both the terracing of celestial hierarchy *and* the contiguity of almost underground offices."<sup>68</sup> As already suggested by Benjamin, this uncertain historicity, in which the "world of fathers" and the "world of officials" overlap, is also characteristic of *The Trial* and *The Castle*.<sup>69</sup> In *The Trial*, the promise of "real acquittal" (Frei-

68. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), 135.

69. In "Franz Kafka: For the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," Benjamin writes, "In his famous conversation with Goethe at Erfurt, Napoleon substituted politics for destiny; Kafka, in a variation on this comment, might have defined organization as destiny. Organization is not only displayed in the bureaucratic hierarchies that spread throughout *The Trial* and *The Castle*; it appears to him even more palpably in the complex and inextricable construction projects for which the venerable model is provided in 'Building the Great Wall of China'" (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pt. 2, pp. 420–21).

sprechung) contained in modern legal procedure is replaced by an infinite “procrastination” (Verschleppung) and horizontal proliferation from one office to the next. In *The Castle*, the request for recognition of K’s individual rights by the castle is met with the offer of a compromise: the position of janitor at the village school, which neutralizes K’s aspirations through a traditional paternalistic gesture similar to the modern welfare state.<sup>70</sup> These are two examples of how the emancipatory potential of modern institutions is bridled by the new bureaucracy in the name of archaic principles. There is no historical predetermination which can guarantee that modernity’s promises will be kept, because modern and archaic forms of power have always coexisted; on the contrary, democratization may sometimes simply mean substitution of a more modern form of propaganda for the archaic one. This disenchanted and historically uncertain view can be seen as relevant to Kafka’s understanding of democratization both in China and in the European societies of his times, given the Jewish-Zionist context in which he published this story.<sup>71</sup> Bereft of any belief in historical predestination or progress, this view of history as an overlapping of temporal frames shows distinct analogies with the Foucauldian or Deleuzian view of the emergence of democracy in the interstices of changing power structures rather than as the progressive realization of an Enlightenment ideal.

Kafka and Lu Xun thus share a view of history that can be described as characteristic of modernism: the absence of a decisive historical revelation for the individual engaged in a struggle for emancipation from traditional cyclical views of history and the transcendent hierarchies that go with them.<sup>72</sup> There is no “outcome,” no historical conclusion, to be drawn from the two texts; much rather various historical strata overlap. On a reflexive level, this sets them aside from “master narratives” of democratization and

70. See Hannah Arendt, “Franz Kafka,” in *Die verborgene Tradition: Acht Essays* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976).

71. Kafka’s Chinese stories have often been read as allegories of the condition of the “Eastern Jews” Kafka came in contact with during the First World War (in particular by Robertson in *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature*). This is not necessarily incompatible with a “Chinese” reading, as, in both cases, the archaic forms of political organization, though perhaps viewed with a form of nostalgia or fascination for the belief in the sacred nature of political organization, are seen as obstacles to the full empowerment or liberation of the individual (it should also be noted that, on a biographical level, Kafka repeatedly endorsed Brod’s political Zionism against Buber’s mystical views).

72. This is also highlighted in Tang, “Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman’ and a Chinese Modernism,” 73.

from the linear conception of time often criticized as the implicit subtext of modernity: on the contrary, they underline that democratization is bound up with an “open” view of history that allows the readers to forge their own understanding and define their place in it.

### Public Space

How can the democratic nature of these literary constructions translate into social reality? A truly “democratic” practice of literature implies a democratic pragmatics, a communicational configuration in which the reader’s role takes on a new importance. Romantic writers, as well as “traditional” realists, had few doubts about their authority to represent the readers and their experience; the relation of representation was direct. Modernism, in the approach pursued in the present article, is on the contrary crucially preoccupied with the difficulties of “representing” the reader. The act of fictional representation is made problematic—in itself not an innovation—in a way that seeks to institutionalize a space for such questioning, much in the way democracy institutionalizes its own endless preoccupation with political representation. As shown by Pierre Rosanvallon, it would be wrong to think that the adoption of a “democratic system” by the French Revolution or the United States Constitution was synonymous with a consensus about the nature and legitimacy of popular sovereignty and the mechanisms by which it should be represented. Rather, in Lefort’s perspective, it permitted the institutionalization of a public space in which these undecided issues were—potentially endlessly—debated.<sup>73</sup> In a similar way, the modernist quality of the texts analyzed in the present essay is bound up with the systematic, institutionalized way in which they question their own legitimacy to represent the reader.

The works examined so far deal with the issue of representation by reflexively incorporating their own reception by the reader or the spectator within the text, thus questioning the writer’s authority in “speaking for” the reader. In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Brecht parodies the

73. See Rosanvallon, *La démocratie inachevée*. Similarly, Uri Eisenzweig has pointed to an analogy in late nineteenth-century literature and politics, between the “bomb-throwing anarchist” and the intransitive poetry of Mallarmé, as two related rejections of the legitimacy of the principle of “representation,” through popular vote and language, respectively. His study opens up a line of reflection concerning the similarities in the ways democracy and literature perpetually question the legitimacy of representation. Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l'anarchisme* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2001).

spectator's expectations related to the "anticipated completeness" of fiction.<sup>74</sup> Rather than to create a completed, closed text destined to procure private, individual pleasure, Brecht aims to break down the barriers between it and the social sphere in which it comes to existence.<sup>75</sup> This form of incompleteness is conceived to open a space for contestation and debate. Playing with the expectations of the audience, in the last scene, Brecht parodies the "sublime" aesthetics signaling formal completeness, deriding elements of baroque, romantic, and "Wagnerian" theater. Quoting Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Great Theatre of the World*, the gods miraculously appear to solve all difficulties, admonishing Shen Te, "Above all, be good!" (Vor allem: sei gut! [GP, 16]) and assuring all characters that in this way a "happy end" is sure to come about, guaranteeing an aesthetic solution to the misery of mankind: "We firmly believe that, in this world of darkness, our good person will find her way" (Wir glauben fest, daß unser guter Mensch sich zurechtfinden wird auf der dunklen Erde [GP, 95]). However, at the end of the play, the gods disappear, singing a trio on a pink cloud, leaving Shen Te's pleas unanswered, priding themselves on being "only contemplators" (nur Betrachtende [GP, 95]) of the "theatre of the world." In this way, they are presented as a reflexive image of what Brecht termed the "culinary" spectator, who, having enjoyed the show, might join them in saying, "Let us go home. This small world / Has captivated us. Its joy and sadness / Has refreshed us and pained us" (Läßt uns zurückkehren. Diese kleine Welt / Hat uns sehr gefesselt. Ihr Freud und Leid / Hat uns erquickt und uns geschmerzt [GP, 141]). Brecht's argument seems to be that this type of fictional completeness, manifested in the baroque imagery of the happy end, encourages spectators to go to the theater to enjoy other people's suffering and return home refreshed. Yet in this case the completeness of the happy end is shattered. The gods leave Shen Te in despair, with an accusing mob knocking at the door, to raise her child, make a living, and attempt to be good, while they gloss over these contradictions with pink lights and music. Shen Te is thus sym-

74. As shown by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, this anticipation is what makes up the "suspense" and a large part of the joy of reading or watching a play or a film. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1999), 184.

75. According to Bürger (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*), this aspect of Brechtian aesthetics demonstrates the "avant-garde" nature of his writing; one might wonder to what extent this is not a more widely shared characteristic of modernism, including among writers Bürger sees as politically uncritical toward the institution of literature (James Joyce or Marcel Proust).

bolically left alone with the audience to deal with the complexity of the empirical world.

The incompleteness of the plot is underlined a second time in the epilogue, when an actor addresses the audience in front of the closed curtain, expressing his regrets at seeing “The curtain closed and all the questions open” (*Der Vorhang zu und alle Fragen offen* [*GP*, 144]). This is a comment on the artificial nature of the “closed” fictional world onstage, behind the closed curtain, and introduces the physical space of the theater as a public venue for debate and discussion. The questions raised by the fictional world remain “open” and are in this fashion explicitly directed to the audience and the real world it lives in. Brecht here uses a metatheatrical device to deconstruct the boundaries of fiction, when the actor presents himself as an actor and refers to the material aspects of the theater itself, adding for the benefit of the audience, “We are dependent on you / On your feeling at home here and enjoying yourself” (*Dabei sind wir doch auf Sie angewiesen/ Daß Sie bei uns zu Haus sind und genießen* [*GP*, 144]). Brecht is critical of immersion and the emotions it entails among his audience; however, for the spectator to feel deprived of an ending, there first has to be a “good story” that creates suspense. This combination of creating both belief and disbelief, both separation from and return to the real world, is what must bring the spectators to ask their own questions, whereas in a theological or allegorical form, formal completeness either precludes literature from spilling over into reality or reduces it to a message that is ready for use within reality. Brecht’s incomplete form points to a democratic world in which the audience must draw their own conclusion on how literature relates to reality. Brecht’s play may be seen as an example of democratic pragmatics in that it questions any privilege of position that literature might claim within the empirical world.

The actor ends by saying, “Respected audience, please find your own ending! / There must be a good one to be found, there must, there must, there must!” (*Verehrtes Publikum, los, such dir selbst den Schluß! / Es muß ein guter da sein, muß, muß, muß!* [*GP*, 144]). This is firstly an explicit reiteration of the effect achieved in the last scene, when, as the gods desert the stage, the audience is invited to formulate its own judgments. The most important aspect of this final call for reflection is therefore that it maintains individual reflection (each spectator is invited to “search” for an ending) against the idea of a collective solution: it can be seen above all as a call for the existence of a public space in which everyone may indi-



vidually question political norms.<sup>76</sup> *The Good Person of Szechwan*, displaying the double incompleteness of an aborted last scene and a reflexive or metatheatrical challenge to the audience, is characteristic of Brecht's ethics of fragmentation and, more importantly, his understanding of democracy as a process in which political norms can emerge only from a unique combination of individual reflection and collective discussion that is possible, among other places, in a theater.<sup>77</sup> For this discussion to take place, literature must renounce its "theological" role and status as a discourse uniquely related to truth.

Lu Xun, for very immediate historical reasons, was particularly preoccupied with the problematic popular dimension of democracy. If fiction seemed capable of fostering an individual critical spirit, how was this spirit to crystallize in legitimate institutions capable of modernizing early Republican China after the Revolution of 1911 had failed, in the eyes of many intellectuals, to foster a democratic culture? How could Ah Q be made into a citizen? While May Fourth activists were convinced that fiction writing was the way to build the new China, Lu Xun's form allows both hope and doubts about the democratic impact of fiction on its readers.

In "The True Story of Ah Q," the final deadlock between Ah Q and the narrator, the illiterate farm laborer and the post-Confucian intellectual, is in fact arbitrated by a third party: the villagers present at the execution who, as spectators, symbolically stand for the readers and their enjoyment of the ending of Ah Q's "story." This crowd takes the same aesthetic plea-

76. Hannah Arendt makes a similar case for an ethical reading of Brecht's didactic play *Die Maßnahme*, or *Measures Taken*, in "Bertolt Brecht," in *Walter Benjamin—Bertolt Brecht: Zwei Essays* (Munich: Piper, 1971).

77. Brecht gives a characteristically un-Marxian definition of democracy in his *Arbeitsjournal*: "democracy can only prevail as a constant fight against *red tape* [in English], rigorism and 'iron discipline'" (Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, 403). While the proposed reading of Brecht may seem overly "Habermasian" to some, it is grounded in comments by Brecht similar to this one, as well as Habermas's insistence on Brecht's relevance to his own ideas in his reception speech of the Kyoto Prize, "Öffentlicher Raum und politische Öffentlichkeit," accessed September 1, 2009, [www.nzz.ch/2004/12/11/li/article9Z0Q0.html](http://www.nzz.ch/2004/12/11/li/article9Z0Q0.html). It also probably reflects a difference in Brecht's status in the United States, where German has become a "marginal" language, and Brecht is largely read as an elite Marxist author, and in post-reunification Germany, where he is firmly anchored in the canon of modern German literature and widely taught in schools as the "common heritage" of East and West. Jameson's reading of Brecht's *V-Effekt* as an expression of Marxian reflexivity, not (high modernist) autoreferentiality, is typical of this divide: see Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 39.

sure steeped in political unconsciousness in seeing Ah Q executed as Ah Q took in watching a revolutionary executed earlier. Ah Q and the crowd of villagers are in strictly symmetrical positions, and, consequently, this symmetry can also be transposed to the reader, who is associated with the blood-thirsty enthusiasm of the villagers, in whose eyes Ah Q, moments before his death, recognizes the eyes of a wolf who once followed him. In this way, as underscored by Anderson, Lu Xun confronts the reader with the terror he provokes in the victim.<sup>78</sup> In this way, Lu Xun also makes a point about the nature of fiction: by using the sufferings of others for aesthetic purposes, fiction traditionally transforms its readers into a gaping crowd of onlookers.<sup>79</sup>

How does Lu Xun's fiction purport to fracture this aesthetics of enjoyment and create a space for democratic debate? The discussion among the villagers following Ah Q's execution focuses exclusively on the use of a firearm rather than decapitation, while, concerning Ah Q's guilt, "Naturally, everyone said that Ah Q must have been bad, his execution was the proof of his badness" (Ziran dou shuo A Q huai, bei qiangbi bian shi ta de huai de zhengju [AQ, 106]). This final exchange, in the last lines of the story, demonstrates that, by summing up Ah Q's life under a moral judgment ("bad" rather than "guilty"), the villagers have once again missed the point. Their discussion nonetheless presents a virtual image of the public space that literature must try to create in questioning the political norms of society. In this case, the villagers' fascination with the modalities of execution prevents them from questioning what is really at stake: whether Ah Q's execution was legitimate.

How is this discussion to be brought about? While Ah Q's incapacity to sing and perform for the assembled crowd cannot reasonably be attributed to a conscious intention on Ah Q's part to deprive the villagers of the traditional spectacle of an execution, it can be read as an authorial ploy to deny his reader the kind of pleasure the latter would be used to deriving from consuming traditional fiction. Rather, just as in Brecht's subversion of the Christian parable, Lu Xun uses fragmentation, and the dissatisfaction it entails for the reader, to question the legitimacy of his own literary construction. Lu Xun writes in the essay "What Happens After Nora Leaves," "The masses—especially in China—are eternal theater-goers. [. . .] There is nothing to be done with people like that. The only way to save them is to

78. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 83.

79. Lu Xun's insistence on the "cannibalistic" dimension of fiction, was probably rooted in his criticism of the neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi's (1130–1200) aesthetics of "savoring" (*jujue*; "chewing on") literature.

deny them their amusement.”<sup>80</sup> To counteract this traditional mechanism by which fiction produces pleasure, Lu Xun makes Ah Q as ignorant and despicable as possible, while at the same time presenting him as a fictional “representation” of the reader.<sup>81</sup> As Lu Xun writes in “A Reply to the Editor of *Theatre Magazine*,” discussing an adaptation of “The True Story of Ah Q” for the stage,

In *The Inspector General*, Gogol has the actor directly address the public in this way: “You are laughing at yourselves” (funnily enough, this most essential phrase is omitted from the Chinese translation). My method is to prevent the reader from telling who else the play could be about but himself, so that he backs off immediately to become a mere onlooker, but, concentrating his attention, understands that this portrait represents himself, and also represents everyone, which opens the way for introspection.<sup>82</sup>

This Brechtian view of identification, forcing the reader to empathize against his will with a character such as Ah Q, is perhaps the only way for literature to avoid transforming the suffering it describes into an object of aesthetic enjoyment and bring about a public discussion that goes beyond the simply aesthetic dimension of the execution. It designates the individual reader as the only hope for democratization, although it does not resolve Lu Xun’s skepticism about the actual existence and institutionalization of a public sphere within the new political system.<sup>83</sup> And ironically, the absence of a public sphere in China after 1949 has precisely had the effect of pre-

80. Lu Xun, “Nuola zou hou zenyang” [What happens after Nora leaves], in *Lu Xun Quanji*, 1:170–71.

81. Liu also underlines that, when the narrator highlights Ah Q’s “incredible stupidity” (Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 71), the reader joins readily in the fun, even if he may feel guilty afterward. In her view, Lu Xun takes as much delight in compromising his reader as in mocking Ah Q.

82. Lu Xun, “Da Xi zhoukan bianzhe xin” (A reply to the editor of *Theatre magazine*), in *Lu Xun Quanji*, 6:149–50. Theodore Hutters first drew attention to and commented on this crucial text and its relevance to Lu Xun’s authorial strategy in “Hu Feng and the Critical Legacy of Lu Xun,” in *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 129–52.

83. In this sense, Lu Xun does nothing to resolve the empirical problems posed by the link hypothesized by Habermas between the reading habits of eighteenth-century Europe and the emergence of public space. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1971). The question of how to transform the voyeurs at Ah Q’s execution into rational citizens is left wide open.

cluding this type of reading of “Ah Q.” Is this a politically “harmless” version of Lu Xun? In the mind of the author of this article, at least, it is not: Wang Hui, when characterizing Lu Xun as a “true revolutionary” (in the sense of the “permanent revolution” with which Takeuchi Yoshimi associates him), describes him as a thinker who “never renders ‘power’ abstract, nor does he render tradition or culture abstract.”<sup>84</sup> Lu Xun’s “permanent revolution” is a form of permanent critique, in which every critical concept must in turn be submitted to further critique. In this sense, he is exactly the opposite of a “permanent revolutionary,” because he is deeply uncomfortable with any form of generalization, and in particular with the generalizations of Schmittian politics. Gloria Davies has recently highlighted how starkly Lu Xun’s commitment to the plurality of “paths” stands out among twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals.<sup>85</sup> His meticulous “permanent critique” is what has, in the present article, been associated with democracy.

One may note, as an aside, that the public space of the village square where the discussion takes place is explicitly related by Lu Xun to local theater, a favorite pastime surprisingly shared by Ah Q in the story and Lu Xun in reality (as related in his autobiographical piece “Village Opera” [“Shexi”]), as an invitation to the village inhabitants to reappropriate local culture as a base for questioning representations of legitimacy.<sup>86</sup> While Ah Q uses the lyrics of local opera only to swagger and brag (“My hand seizes an iron whip to strike you” [Wo shou zhi gangbian jiang ni da]), Lu Xun in “Village Opera” seems to suggest a possible protodemocratic role for local culture and village communities untainted by Confucianism.<sup>87</sup>

84. Wang Hui, “Dead Fire Rekindled,” *boundary 2* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 6.

85. Gloria Davies, “Affirming the Human in China,” *boundary 2* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 57–90, esp. 68–70.

86. While David Wang discusses the “forensic discourse” in “Ah Q” (“Crime or Punishment?”), he does not dwell on the spatial representation of the “forum,” instead linking “public space” with the traditional conventions of courtroom drama and other late-Qing genres. It should be underlined that, in both Lu Xun and Shen Congwen’s works, this space is very much steeped in locality.

87. Interestingly, in his much-discussed play *The Teahouse* (1957), Lao She, in three acts set roughly in 1898, 1916, and 1946, portrays the modernization of China as having essentially stifled a democratic public space embodied in premodern times in the local Beijing tradition of the teahouse. The metatheatrical equation of the teahouse of the title with the theatrical space in which the play is staged suggests that Lao She had doubts about whether the cultural institutions of the People’s Republic after 1949 could accommodate the critical (democratic?) spirit transmitted by local culture. On political criticism in *The Teahouse*, see G. A. Lloyd, “The Two-Storeyed Teahouse: Art and Politics in Lao She’s Plays” (PhD diss., University of California–Berkeley, 2000).

It can therefore be argued that the ending of both works represents a self-reflexive contextualization of the narrative itself within a public space represented by Brecht's audience and, virtually, by Lu Xun's readers. Kafka's text, unpublished in his lifetime, offers no comparable aspect, although the publication of a fragment taken from it in a politicized journal widely circulated in Jewish, German-speaking intellectual spheres in Central and Eastern Europe, resonates with Lu Xun's and Brecht's preoccupations.<sup>88</sup> In fragmenting the completeness of traditional aesthetic forms, Lu Xun and Brecht do not merely indulge in a reflexive form of aesthetic play: by contextualizing this fragmentation within a space of public discussion, which mirrors the space in which literature is received in reality, they invite the audience to question the status and legitimacy of their own texts.

### Conclusion

The close readings of three texts by emblematic modern writers presented in this essay suggest that these works are primarily preoccupied with redefining the role of literature with respect to morality, to history, and to its own pragmatics. The connection between the completeness of a work of fiction and the transmission of norms, between a linear understanding of narrative and a linear view of history, and between literature as a private, pleasurable activity and the public dimension of its realization is contested. Brecht's strategy of fragmentation of the fictional universe, by calling into question the border between the stage and the audience, and thus between fiction and reality, invites the spectator to take the unanswered questions posed by the play back into empiric existence. Kafka, by portraying history as a juxtaposition of fragments and narratives associated with different temporalities, is not simply crafting an autoreferential image of obscurity of his own text: he suggests to the reader that history is not significant in itself but must be read, interpreted, and rearranged—although there is no guarantee it will yield meaning. Lu Xun's unsatisfying story, which both mocks its readers and presents them with a distorted image of themselves, implicitly calls for a public discussion to overcome the impasse of its ending. All three authors shift the focus of their fiction to the reader,

88. On *Selbstwehr*, see Hartmut Binder's study, "Franz Kafka und die Wochenzeitschrift *Selbstwehr*," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 41, no. 2 (1967): 283–304. Interestingly, according to Binder, Kafka considered the journals he published in as a type of forum in which to exchange news with his friends and colleagues who also wrote for them.

and, in this sense, the reflexive potential of fiction, which is as old as the genre itself, is exploited as a ferment for democratizing literary and cultural practices.

The three texts make a case for a new practice of fiction that echoes the understanding of democracy as emerging from history only as an undefined and hesitant anti-utopia. In this respect, the three texts echo the preoccupation with freeing the symbolic center of the political order, the nexus of meaning or of legitimacy. This break with the writer's role as prophet or as moral authority ("taking responsibility for the world under the heavens" [yi tianxia wei ji ren]) and the possibility left to the reader to individually reflect and collectively discuss the questions unresolved in fiction may therefore be viewed as a defining trait of their modernist character. In this sense, it has been argued that each of the three texts constructs an analogy between its own modernism and a democratic ethos. Modernism may thus in turn be envisioned as a form of democratic pragmatics, in which the author opens up the center of discursive power to multiple interpretations and public discussion. It should be noted that it also opens up these texts to manipulation, just as the openness of democracy cannot entirely be guarded against the danger of being "filled."

The hypothesis of an analogy between a democratic ethos and the pragmatics of modernist fiction leads to a redefinition of modernism, which calls into question the dichotomy between autonomous, aesthetic "high modernism," as a prerogative of the colonial West, and the politically committed literature, realist in the Lukácsian sense, that supposedly characterizes May Fourth China. This tentative definition of modernism should not be seen as an attempt to depoliticize, but rather to do justice to the subtle political constructions of the Eastern and Western modernists discussed in this essay. This does not lead to denying the significance of certain formal experiments of modernism: they are simply, as in the case of Kafka's fiction, often related to the preoccupation with opening a symbolic space at the center of the text, a space that may be termed democratic. In this light, Chinese modernism is neither belated nor colonial. If we understand realism to refer to a concern with representing the world exhaustively, coherently, and unequivocally, or, as Anderson writes, as a form ultimately reliant on reason to enlighten the reader, then Lu Xun is not primarily a realist, not even one who ends up "disturbing the realist model he inherited from the West."<sup>89</sup> His main concern is, on the contrary, in a style not unlike Kafka's,

89. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 92. As Schaeffer points out, a fictional world not constructed in "global analogy" with the laws of the empirical world (this includes the fan-

to make reality equivocal, to blur the borders between the legitimate and the illegitimate, to use old words to question modern practices.

Relocating sovereignty in the reader and, symbolically, in the people, is of course not unproblematic. Popular sovereignty does not always ensure that political decisions are made that in turn enhance democracy. Empty centers are easily replaced by well-organized parties. Democracy itself is pregnant with many possibilities, not all of them democratic, as suggested by Kafka's legal administrations, Brecht's sweatshop, or Ah Q's program for revolution: totalitarianism is clearly within the scope of the democracy they envision. Lu Xun, perhaps even more than Kafka and Brecht, is emblematic of a generation of writers whose carefully crafted fictional dilemmas of resisting and acquiescing to modernity could only be construed as an endorsement of modern nation building at the price of obscuring their critical, democratic modernism. From this perspective, we may finally pinpoint a Chinese specificity in Lu Xun's modernism: while Brecht and Kafka depict the structures of capitalism and the legal apparatus as the decisive elements in institutionalizing modernity, Lu Xun's democratic space is perhaps the "emptiest" of all—if anything, it is village culture that provides the framework for democratic deliberation and activism. This distrust of institutional arrangements and preference for small communities, local culture, and not least for writing literature as a "pure act," situated outside party politics and any form of organization, is perhaps indeed a small specificity of Chinese modernism, which removes nothing of its intellectual and historical significance among other modernist moments.

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tastic) would be simply incomprehensible: there is no equivalent—at least within fiction (perhaps it can be conceived in poetry)—of abstract art (Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la Fiction?*, 218). For this reason, "realism" in the widest sense can be used to refer to virtually any work of literature.