Approaching Politics in Contemporary Chinese Fiction

Yang Jincai
Institute of Foreign Literature, Nanjing University, China
No. 22 Guangzhou Rd., Gulou District, Nanjing, Jiangsu, P. R. China
Email: jcyang@nju.edu.cn.

Abstract Chinese fiction in the 21st century is featured by various thematic concerns of which the political concern stands out. Writers in the new century have diverged from the conventional way to sing along with and speak for the dominant ideology of the reform as many did during Deng Xiaoping's reign. They have shifted their attention to the shaded side of contemporary China, writing about the disadvantaged/marginalized and reflecting on the social problems that accompany the existing social order. Their voice is harsh, interrogative, but heart-wrenching. The paper will cite the newly released texts by Yan Lianke, Mo Yan and Liu Xinglong to examine how these writers interrogate the leading policies and write up the grassroots rebellion against the orthodox society.
Key words contemporary Chinese fiction; politics; social transformation

It is no easy job trying to identify the defining characteristics of any period of literary history, especially when the period under examination is close to us. However, even from our relatively short distance from the 2000s, it is possible to map out some of the dominant trends within the fiction of the period. Two things can be said with relative certainty: first, that the period is one of healthy production of narrative fiction seen by the vast number of novels produced in China during the past decade or so and fuelled by the rise of popular culture and commercial globalization. As Lei Da has argued, the novel of the new century has fully recovered from the sentimental retrospection and naïve, simplistic socialist realism in the decades following the end of the Cultural Revolution(11). The second main characteristic of Chinese fiction in the 21st century is its sheer diversity featured by various thematic concerns. Examples of novels can be identified that address issues of globalization, hi-tech, urbanization, marketing economy, internet and poverty and their impact upon the lowly common Chinese such as the disadvantaged rural farmers. Writers in the new century have diverged from the conventional way to sing along with or speak for the dominant ideology of the reform as many did during Deng Xiaoping's reign.[1] They have shifted their attention to the shaded side of contemporary China, writing about the marginalized and reflecting on the social issues that accompany the existing social order. Efforts have been made to explore specific national and regional identities, displaying a reengagement with a realist tradition. Their voice is harsh, interrogative, but heart-wrenc-

hing. The paper will cite the newly released texts by Yan Lianke, Liu Xinglong and Mo Yan to examine how these writers interrogate the leading policies and write up the grassroots rebellion against the orthodox society. I will limit myself to a brief survey of three novels in relation to their interrogative presentations of politics in contemporary China.

As China enters its age of rapid economic development, many writers have to respond in various ways to the socio-historical contexts and ideological agenda underlying a persistent interest in material achievement and wealth seeking. Different from their predecessors in the 1980s and early 1990s who simply depict life in rural and urban China against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution and its upheavals, Chinese writers in the 2000s are more socially critical, investigating mechanism of the present society. Yan Lianke, for example, offers a sociopolitical commentary on a way of life generally unfamiliar to Westerners in his brilliantly conceived writing such as *Serve the People* (2005) and *Dream of Ding Village* (2006). Within this range of shift, the relationship between fiction and historical context has been of central concern. On the one hand, the Chinese novel in the 2000s responded to contemporary social and cultural movements within the decade, while on the other, there arose a concentrated focus on the place of historical legacies and its marginalized dwellers. Yan Lianke (2004), Liu Xinglong (2009) and Mo Yan (2009) explore social and cultural issues embedded but largely ignored in contemporary Chinese society. In this sense, their novels have served as a means to reveal an unknown world of misery which you can never acquire from Chinese official mass media.

Attempting to periodize literary history is a process that is always fraught with difficulties, and the 2000s is no exception. In many ways the 2000s represents a continuation of central themes and concerns of the previous decades, although the period from the 1990s onwards represents a phase in Chinese literature different from that of the earlier decades of the post-Cultural Revolution period. In the late 1970s and 1980s Chinese literature went through a period of political revisions and economic reforms. Writing at the time known as "shanghen wenxue" (Scar literature)[2] and "gaige wenxue" (Reform literature) either rebuked the Cultural Revolution or hailed reform policies in favor of Deng Xiaoping's mission and the Party to rectify past tragedies. A typical example of the former genre is Liu Xinhua's 1978 story "Scar," critiquing official hypocrisy and corruption and Liu Xinwu's earlier undertaking "The Class Teacher" in 1977. Jiang Zilong, however, exemplifies the latter genre of which his story "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" is the exemplar. The story became the most popular one in the country and the titled film was also widely acclaimed in those days, for it reveals that China was gripped with a "Chinese modernization" fever (Link 27, footnote 10). It was not until the mid 1980s and early 1990s that Chinese literature began to deviate slightly from the conventional way of following the Party leadership. A case in point is Zhang Chengzhi's idealism regarding his experiences during the Cultural Revolution in his *Black Stallion* and *Rivers of the North* known as rebuttals to the negativism of both scar literature and the reform one (McDougall 395 – 396). These efforts were soon followed by the trend of pleasure seeking movements and a satirical style embodied in Wang Shuo's novels such as *Masters of Mischief*

(1987) and *No Regrets about Youth* (1991),[3] displaying a satire that is less of a direct confrontation with the Communist autocracy than it is a mockery of their lack of cool and a statement of utter indifference to any political or nationalistic correctness (Yao 431). It must be remembered that this post Cultural Revolution period marked an ideological change in Post Mao era, and Chinese writers in the 21st century are especially aware of it. Instead of "going marginal" or pursuing a nihilistic attitude, they are more socially concerned and continue to write about both urban and rural life inflicted by Cultural Revolution and Party-led policies. They are more politically conscious, emphasizing a thorough interrogation of all Party-led political maneuvers in the past decades, and exhibiting a severe critique of dominant ideologies in the past decades. Yan Lianke's banned books are undoubtedly cases in point.

The second rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping in July 1977 initiated an age of Reform and opening to the outside bringing about a sea of changes in Chinese people's life. There have been recognizable differences in Chinese society and culture between the 1980s and the 1990s that are reflected in the fiction of the period. Two historical events may have a crucial political and symbolic resonance for Chinese culture. At one end was the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 followed by a democratic voice against the corrupt Chinese leadership. The incident posed a direct threat to the Chinese communist political reign and it was actually a warning signal that Chinese government should take into account something more than the mere economic reform under way. Chinese intellectuals, including writers were then strongly questioning and doubtful about their political system. They began to think about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent dismantling of the Communist powers in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, calling into question the orthodox notion of socialism with Chinese characteristics and communist policies in general. Instead of writing in line with the dominant ideology and acting as pure promoters for the main theme of their time, the Chinese novelists almost gave up their grand ideas of becoming people's artists, a cliché prevalent during Mao's time. They scorned what is called "an engineer of the human soul,"[4] giving rise to a phase of nihilism in contemporary Chinese literature.

At the other end of the period, or at least close enough to represent a symbolic shift in Chinese way of life, were the rapid developments of market economy. The Chinese leadership then abandoned most of its orthodox communist ideologies and turned to economic construction, following Deng Xiaoping's doctrine of "crossing the river by feeling the stone." Socialist ideology was then largely threatened and even ignored. There arose a unique phenomenon that the whole society was crazy about making money without caring much about whether it was right or wrong. In this heyday of economic pursuits, China collapsed morally, entering an age of no-belief and becoming an arena of ruthless struggle for either pleasure or survival. "Dagongmei" (working girls), "nongmingong" (peasant immigrant workers), and "xiagang" (laid-off) came into being immediately followed by a variety of social problems. While the impact of Chinese economic reform is probably too close to see clearly in a cultural perspective, the subsequent social injustices, polarization between the rich, the poor, and the gradually degraded and marginalized people in rural China have already been represented as part of a "revival of China" or a "harmonious society",

with the leading Party's political principle shifted away from its original Utopian communism to a dominant capitalist marketing ideology. The 1990s, therefore, can also be seen as a decade of destruction, frivolity and moral degradation in 20th century China despite its boastful claim of tremendous material achievements.

While reflecting on the political/ideological impact on Chinese society, many Chinese writers in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed their dissatisfaction with the political system. They abandoned their former political enthusiasm and became attracted to a more interrogative cultural root-seeking, starting to critique character weaknesses in Chinese intellectuals and the devastating influence of the communist political rule since 1949. As official censorship was quite severe, they could only search for subtle alternatives to express their minds. Accordingly, they turned to the secular to cater to the rise of popular culture, resulting in a lack of fine works in the early 1990s. Novel writing at the time shrank in quantity. Those who continued to write began to turn to personal sensitivity and to focus on their own private experiences. Body writing became trendy and so did local writing. In 1993 there appeared several fine novels such as Chen Zhongshi's *Bai Lu Yuan* (*The White Deer Plain*)[5] and Jia Pingwa's *Fei Du* (*The Abandoned Capital*)[6] which deal with family history and changes in a local Chinese community.

Observed from a cultural perspective, Chinese fiction in the 1990s displays a multifaceted value system in which there is a mixture of idealism, radicalism, cultural conservatism, feminism, religion and secularism. It responds to a market-oriented society featured by desire, fierce competition, commercialism, unemployment and pleasure-seeking. Various forms of entertainment are revitalized to meet the growing needs of the Chinese people. It is hard to single out consistent thematic concerns, for writers can change subjects easily to commercialize their works. Writers now often touch a wide range of themes rather than one or two subjects. They mix instructive stories with entertaining scenes, implying a far more complicated hidden message in which Chinese families and social communities are somewhat historicized. It is easy to detect in a novel Chinese politics, sexuality, social and economic activities and officialdoms. Typical examples are *Feng ru fei tun* (*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*), *Riguang liunian* (*Life As It Is*), *Chen ai luo ding* (*Red Poppies*), *Huo zhe* (*To Live*), *Yi ge ren de zhanzheng* (*One Person's War*) and *Siren shenghuo* (*A Private Life*)[7] which all trivialize ideology though differing in subjects. Traces of popular culture are visible in these works and this writing fashion continues into the new century, but many writers at the turn of century are growing conscious of the reality they are supposed to write about.

The relationship between fiction and reality is therefore central to an understanding of 1990s culture. The importance of folk culture and leisure and the concentration on the form in which pleasure is made accessible to the public are all aspects of anxiety prevalent in China today. The nature of the "real" is largely historicized and mimicked in the first decade of the 21st century. Since 2000, Mainland China alone has turned out more than 8000 novels of which works of merit are numbered, but *Qinqiang* (*Qin Opera*), *Shengsipilao* (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*) and *Langtuteng* (*Wolf Totem*) are some of the highly recommended novels.

As Chinese writers are now observant of reality, there has also occurred a trend toward a critique of Chinese modernity and an exposé of social inadequacies. Occasionally, their works catch the attention of the Party watchdogs and get banned. A case in point is Yan Lianke's *Wei renmin fuwu* (*Serve the People*), which contains vivid and colorful descriptions of sex scenes, resulting in extensive controversy. The novel was banned soon after it was released in 2005 in a literary magazine *Huacheng* (*Flower City*) partially because of its depiction of items related to Mao and political issues.[8] The storyline is very simple, about the younger wife (32 yrs) of an old and impotent PLA general (52 yrs), who begins to seduce a soldier (28 yrs), assigned to do the domestic chores for the general. During sex, they have discovered that by smashing items with Mao's image or his writings such as the slogan "To Serve the People", they can achieve incredible climaxes. Thereafter, they collect Mao's statues or busts and keep them nearby, to be smashed while having sex. This explicit portrayal of sex scenes and obvious negation of Chairman Mao is controversial and thus gets banned, but such experience of conflict with the Chinese government has made Yan much wiser, for he now knows how to avoid direct confrontation with Party watchdogs. He can navigate between what he wants to say and what the party might allow. As a result, he often writes two versions at once, watering down the controversial sections for Chinese readers and party watchdogs while keeping the full flavor of his provocative imagination for editions to be published abroad.

Writers like Yan feel impelled to tell the world how the majority Chinese in rural areas are suffering all along from various forms of "Zheteng," the flip-flops of the Chinese Communist Party's political maneuvering in the countryside. According to Yan, China today is a mystery glorified by the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda mass media, yet largely hidden by dazzling neon lights. Chinese modernity that juxtaposes modern urbanization to a backward, remote countryside is actually saturated with its ugly side. It should be kept in mind that at the heart of the problem of Chinese modernism lies modernity, and that consequently at the base of a purportedly stylistic or formal procedure lies also a political dimension, a social meaning. Modernism, according to Theodor Adorno, is the art form capable of combating new forms of capitalist modernity—not necessarily direct combat, but rather through an expression and awareness of the experience and brutality of modern life, Anorno's concept of "aesthetic resistance." "[T]he development of artistic processes," Adorno writes, "usually classed under the heading of style, corresponds to social development… The basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society" (Adorno 5 – 6). As we have seen here, Adorno claimed that modernism emerged as the aesthetic form capable of opposing new forms of monopoly capitalism that were rising in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However this does not necessarily mean that modernist works combat the increasingly brutal experience of existence under capitalist rule via their content—that is, overtly—but rather via form, or the "unconscious consciousness in the midst of the work itself" (Adorno 334). Art works like contemporary Chinese fiction bear what is op-

posed to them in themselves and should be read toward a realization of the critical consciousness. It was only recently that Yan turned again to his birthplace a world he knows so well that he can use "aches and pains" to express his love for the wide earth and its peasants. So do his peer writers Mo Yan and Liu Xinglong. What follows is a brief analysis of three recent novels *Shouhuo* (*Enjoyment*), *Wa* (*Frog*) and *Tianxingzhe* (*The Fate of the Citizen-managed Teachers*) to reveal how Chinese underdogs are represented in marginalized rural China today.

The release of Yan's *Enjoyment* was accompanied by a firestorm of hype, fuelled by controversy over the politics of rural modernization. The book stands out as a scathing critique of Chinese reality under Party leadership. It is different from modern Chinese fiction about peasants and New China farmers such as Jiang Zilong's *Nongmindiguo* (*An Empire of Peasants*). In modern Chinese fiction, the peasants vary from silent victims to revolutionary activists and from honest toilers to deformed idiots. Its authors often inject too much of their own imagination into the original status of rural China. More often than not, they would exaggerate the changes that have taken place in the countryside. In fact, much of rural China and life of its peasants remain unchanged. Seen from this viewpoint, the emergence of "root-seeking" fiction in the mid 1980s is now problematic despite its pastoral aspects and idealization of rural life. Gao Xiaosheng, Han Shaogong and Wang Anyi all unexceptionally view peasant virtues as the cause of their shortcomings and see deformed peasant bodies as the manifestation of their moral defects. They criticize peasants though often in an implied way. In a similar fashion, *An Empire of Peasants* exaggerates a saga of peasant success embodied in the image of Guo Cunxian who is brave and adventurous and knows how to get rich in an age of marketing economy. Yan's *Enjoyment*, however, voices peasant grievances and the devastation that results from poorly reasoned human acts including the Chinese Communist Party's political maneuvering. Its burlesque style makes it one of the best novels in the new century.

Ironically, *Enjoyment* constructs a Utopian boundary that goes beyond the reach of government's power. The story takes place in a remote mountainous village in Northwest Henan across ages from the great immigration in late Ming Dynasty to the end of the 20th century, but what attracts the reader most is the rollicking story of local Chinese officials who try to buy Lenin's corpse from Russia to attract tourists to their backwater town. *Enjoyment*'s protagonist and narrator is Liu Yingque, a village politician raised in the valley Village of Enjoyment, which is part of Chinese countryside. He is deeply entrenched in contemporary Chinese political mores, a product of the party's education and propaganda, unique and typical. All his fantasy originates from his firm belief in the party's rural policies. He strongly believes that he is able to lead his villagers to a prosperous life. Also remarkable is his aptitude to please his boss which results in his promotion. His idea to purchase the remains of Lenin from Russia does sound idiosyncratic but his real purpose is self evident when he says the village can then make money while honoring the great revolutionary leader. Here one can see it is merely a matter of formality to pay respect to Lenin, for Liu assures his fellow villagers that Lenin's corpse will make a fine tourist spot. The Village of Enjoyment can then sell tickets as is implied in the following: "A ticket, he says, can sell

for 10 yuan. If foreigners come, we can sell it for 10 or 15 dollars" (Yan 27). Socialist legacy from Lenin is not what Liu interests, for his aim is to consume the revolutionary leader as is the case with hanging the image of Mao in a car or filming the red classics nowadays. His purpose has become more associated with the impulses of a secularly acquisitive culture.

Another scene in the novel is Mao Zhipo's determination to quit the collective commune so as to live a less controlled life. It is again a satire of the Party's ideology and marks the failure and dissolution of the commune or socialist co-op. According to her, the commune or socialist co-op, instead of taking care of its participants, has brought the Village of Enjoyment havoc and losses. What is more striking is the contrasted portrayal of both the able and disabled who are struggling for a living in the village. Here Yan seems to empathize with his handicapped characters who are involved in the village's economic development. In these handicapped but genuine, innocent, smart and helpful villagers Liu finds something that turns profitable like goods. They are also consumed, for it is their deformed bodily performances that help the village get rich. The physically healthy villagers are however portrayed as the other, lazy, shrewd, secretive and stealthy. They cannot get along with the rapid social changes in a rural society and become totally lost in an age of economic competition, implying Yan's negative views of the market-oriented, profit-driven group of Chinese. Thus, the portraiture of the rural political culture in the Village of Enjoyment mirrors "the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group" (Eagleton 34). In this sense, *Enjoyment* is a superbly well written account of a sick and morbid rural society constituted by disadvantaged groups manipulated by the power obsessed and politics driven maniacs in the countryside. It is a biting satire symbolic of a rural tragedy of political power which skillfully responds to "San nong wen ti" (three dimensional rural issues concerning agriculture, countryside and farmers) in China today. It is therefore not difficult to understand that only the weak handicapped can take care of themselves in such a debased socialist new countryside.

If Yan mourns over his depopulated rural hometown in his *Enjoyment*, Liu Xinglong explicitly addresses in his *The Fate of the Citizen-managed Teachers* the question of politics in a marginalized group of countryside intellectuals known as "Minban jiaoshi" (Citizen-managed Teachers). Politically respected as engineers of the human soul, these citizen-managed teachers are all poverty stricken, and not only under paid but also maltreated by village carders. Very often they do not receive a stipend for several months. Their students even don't have textbooks, and in order to run a school the headmaster has to raise pigs. Zhang Yingjin, a new teacher, is shocked when he "looks at the pigs and the pupils" (Liu 14). Poor as they are, these countryside teachers are dedicated to their teaching as the headmaster does. Some of them have done the job for over 20 years hoping that they can be officially accepted as state-managed teachers. Ming Aifen started to teach at 16. Only 2 days after she gave birth to a child, she went for an examination designed for a job transformation from a citizen-managed teacher to a state-managed one. Unfortunately, she got seriously sick and paralytic. Even many years later, she still dreamed of becoming a regular teach-

er. "It is just the urge to be a regular state-managed teacher that has kept her from despair. She has visited Death several times but returns from it simply because her wish is not fulfilled yet" (Liu 72). Ming is excited to die when her chance of job transformation finally arrives. Cheng Ju, a teacher's wife "loses her sense when her husband receives a stipend" (255). Such narrative creates a kind of frisson that heightens the vividness of the scenes of the poor and miserable countryside teachers. One effect of this juxtaposition is the observable aesthetic investment in the sad and pitiable scenes in contrast to the background of indifference in the rural government. A red national flag flies over the school and it rises with the National Anthem every morning. The song "we are the successors to the communist cause" is also heard at school every day. Language in the novel is obviously tied to physical reality, displaying a sense of incongruity. On the one hand, the government tends to give verbal honors to teachers and the job of teaching is idealized as the greatest profession under the sun; on the other hand, so many rural teachers are living in poverty. It is a grotesque one that calls into question the compulsory education in rural China promoted by the government.

As has been analyzed above, both *Enjoyment* and *The Fate of the Citizen-Managed Teachers* are concerned about the marginalized groups of Chinese that are totally abandoned and ignored during the process of China's modernization led by the Party. The two novels are insightful in the way in which contemporary China is subtly examined and judged. Mo Yan's *Frog* goes further to offer a close look at the Party's policy of family planning in the countryside. It is again a telling story about rural China, written to call an enlightened public's attention to the systematic campaign for contraception in the countryside. In a mix of fact and fiction, Mo Yan is actually characterizing a woman country doctor named "Gugu" (Aunt) whose potential and reality are different, generating a far more complicated nature of her mind. She is both a firm executor of family planning policy and a humanist, for she forced mothers of children to have induced abortions or a ligation of the oviduct. She would track down and launch a massive manhunt for runaway pregnant mothers. As a midwife, she gives life to hundreds of babies, but as an executor of the family planning policy, she is a killer. Here in the narrative, we read three different aunts: one is the gynecologist aunt addressed in a letter at the beginning of the novel, one is the fictionalized protagonist around whom the story unfolds, and one is the aged reflective and despondent aunt in the play that follows the novel. Approached from its surface literal meaning, *Frog* may be read as a story of a woman doctor's experience in rural practices of contraception. But, if we observe it from the context of family planning, we find *Frog* not only truthful but emblematic as well epitomizing life and death. Its significance lies in an account of forced abortions which have killed hundreds of babies. The novel does not judge the policy of family planning, but its author continues to inhabit a spiritual world wherein rural resentments against it are handled, exhibiting a huge amount of antagonism and spiteful attitudes from the empowered peasants towards the policy. Then the text is well aware of the issue of human rights accompanied by the policy family planning and the government's imposition of power on its subjects.

Having read *Enjoyment*, *The Fate of the Citizen-Managed Teachers* and *Frog*, I

feel impelled to call your attention to China's postsocialist transformation in the past couple of decades. It is extremely helpful to comprehend contemporary China and its fiction writing. One can easily detect in China today an explosive capitalist growth, multiple social contradictions, tumultuous strategies of re-linking with global capitalism, an apparent lack of coherence between theory and practice, and a vast transformation of the social body into emerging interest groups. China's increased globalization has also kept rural China ever on the edge in producing interpretations of what China's transformation means, ranging from coming collapse to inimical rise, with uncertainty and ambivalence in between. While such colossal transformation has been central to contemporary China, Chinese writers are becoming more and more reflective in their criticism. This is especially true of Yan Lianke, Liu Xinglong and Mo Yan.

Notes

1. Many writers in the 1980s hailed the Chinese reform and offered their salient critical stances in rebuking the Cultural Revolution. Gu Hua, Li Guowen and Zhang Jie are such writers whose well-known novels are among many *Hibiscus Town* (by Gu Hua), *Spring in Winter* (by Li Guowen) and *Heavy Wings* (by Zhang Jie).
2. This is a genre of Chinese literature which emerged in the late 1970s, soon after the death of Mao Zedong, portraying the sufferings of cadres and intellectuals during the tragic experiences of the Cultural Revolution and the rule of the Gang of Four. See, for further reference, Chen Xiaoming's "The Disappearance of Truth: From Realism to Modernism in China" (158 – 166).
3. These works are criticized by conventional Chinese intellectuals as a "spiritual pollutant" for his hooligan style of writing, marked by rebellious behaviors.
4. In China, for a long time it is believed that writers are the engineers of the human soul. Thus a novelist should turn out healthy spiritual food for his fellow countrymen. Wei Wei, for example, urged his contemporaries to write more works that can boost up the prestige of the Communist Party among people and help them build up their confidence. For further information, see Wei Wei, "How I Wrote *The East*" <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class12/200707/21444.html>.
5. The story tells of the hardships and spiritual pursuits of several generations living on White Deer Plain, mirroring the radical changes taking place in the Chinese countryside over a near-half-century. It was an enormous success and Chen Zhongshi shot to fame almost overnight, since when, he has been held up as an idol. In 1997, Chen was given the Mao Dun Literature Award, the highest such award in China. Today, he is fast-becoming a household name among Chinese readers.
6. The novel describes the chaotic sex life of a renowned writer and was once banned for its explicit sexual content.
7. *A Private Life* by Chen Ran is a monologue written in autobiographical format that reflects on the coming of womanhood in its female heroine from the time period of the mid 1970s to the mid-1990s. The novel explores the main character's individuality of existence, her desires and sexual ideologies, and the problems in her inner life that caused her disconnections to the outside world. It is a reflection of a new woman's image in post-modern China.
8. Yan's first novel *Xiariluo* (*The Setting of the Summer Sun*) was banned in 1994 because of official outrage over its depiction of two army heroes who go bad.

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