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Social Criticism in Chinese Literature – Techniques and Styles used by a selection of leading writers from the 1919 Student Movement to the Present Day

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Abstract

This paper will introduce six leading Chinese authors and focus on one of their major works, the stance they took against the society and government of the time, and the literary styles and genres they utilized to deliver their stories. The authors and works that have been included in this paper are:


All of these writers have written very critically of China at various times – sometimes obliquely, more directly in other instances – and all have suffered censorship and other repercussions. In their writing styles they all mix farce, absurdism, surrealism, grotesquerie, exaggeration and literary realism to paint worlds that are in many ways dreamlike, where they create societies that, superficially at least, are distant from the contemporary China they are critiquing.

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This paper will introduce six leading Chinese authors and focus on one of their major works, the stance they took against the society and government of the time, and the literary styles and genres they utilized to deliver their stories.

The authors and works that have been included in this paper are:

Lu Xun – The True Story of Ah Q
Lao She – Cat Country
Mo Yan – The People’s Republic of Wine
Yan Lianke – The Four Books
Chen Xiwo – I Love My Mum
A Yi – The Perfect Crime

All of these writers have written very critically of China at various times – sometimes obliquely, more directly in other instances – and all have suffered censorship and other repercussions. In their writing styles they all mix farce, absurdism, surrealism, grotesquerie, exaggeration and literary realism to paint worlds that are in many ways dreamlike, where they create societies that, superficially at least, are distant from the contemporary China they are critiquing.
While they have all suffered at the hands of censors at times, it should also be said many of their works are still available in China in the simplified Chinese characters used on the Chinese mainland. All of the contemporary authors are members of the Chinese Writers’ Association, a government-run organization that supports authors with grants and stipends, but is also said to engage in censorship and encourage self-censorship. Writers like Yan Lianke and A Yi, who have been widely censored in the past, are both currently employed by the state as university lecturers in leading academic institutions on the mainland, yet they still write stories that are censored and don’t get published in China. So the relationship between contemporary authors and the authorities is a somewhat complicated one, and the writers face a challenge to remain truthful in their writing but at the same time trying not to fall foul of the system. This conflict is a key reason behind the widespread uses of satire, farce and other literary styles to portray societal issues. So in taking six key texts from these leading writers, I will look at not just the content and the subject of the writers’ criticism, but also at the literary devices they have all utilized to impart their social messages.

Lu Xun – The True Story of Ah Q

Lu Xun was the pen name of Zhou Shuren (1881-1936), a leading figure in modern Chinese literature. He was a short story writer, editor, translator, literary critic, essayist, and poet, and he was the first writer of the time to adopt
the vernacular language-of-the-street into his writing. He was the head of the League of Left-Wing Writers in Shanghai in the 1930s.

Lu Xun became a very influential literary figure in China after the May 4 Movement in 1919, an anti-imperialist political and cultural movement growing out of student actions in Beijing protesting against the Chinese government’s weak response to the Post-WWI Treaty of Versailles, and in particular allowing Japan sovereignty to former German holdings in Shandong province.

Mao Zedong professed to being a life-long fan of Lu Xun’s, but in 1942 he told artists and writers who believed in freedom of expression that they did not need to copy his style because China was already free. "But in our Communist bases, where democracy and liberty are granted in full, we do not need to be like Lu Xun." (Julia Lovell, The Guardian. 12/6/2010). Most of Lu’s writing colleagues were purged at one point or another, and Mao was said to have commented that had Lu lived on to the 1950s he would “either have gone silent or gone to prison.”

While he was a permanent fixture in Chinese schools for decades, in recent years however Lu Xun’s work has gradually been taken off the school reading lists, which was perhaps, as Julia Lovell wrote in the Guardian, “an attempt to discourage the youth of today from Lu Xun’s inconveniently fault-finding habits.

His best known fictional creation is The True Story of Ah-Q an episodic novella (1921/22) that follows the hapless Ah Q, a working class man with no proper Chinese name, no clearly known background and no fixed occupation. Ah Q was famous for self-delusion, and calling every humiliation or failing a spiritual
victory. When Ah Q was beaten up one day and called a host of names, including the “foremost self-belittler” he still managed to turn that into a compliment.

*In less than ten seconds, however, Ah Q would walk away also satisfied that he had won, thinking that he was the "foremost self-belittler," and that after subtracting "self-belittler" what remained was "foremost." Was not the highest successful candidate in the official examination also the "foremost"?*

After another fracas where he came out a poor second, he took to beating himself up to make himself feel better, saying that if he was doing the hitting he must be a victor somehow.

*After this slapping his heart felt lighter, for it seemed as if the one who had given the slap was himself, the one slapped some other self, and soon it was just as if he had beaten someone else—in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory.*

Ah Q mused once that for other victors after a fight they might find that now “no foe, rival or friend is left ... Then they find their triumph a tragedy.” Not so Ah Q:

*But our hero was not so spineless. He was always exultant. This may be a proof of the moral supremacy of China over the rest of the world.*
As the story concludes Ah Q finds himself sentenced to death for a petty crime. Rather than fight for justice he concludes:

\[ It \text{ seemed to him that in this world probably it was the fate of everybody} \]
\[ \text{at some time to have his head cut off.} \]

And as the townspeople watched him on the road his only emotion was one of embarrassment because he hadn't had the presence of mind to entertain the masses as he was being carted off to the execution fields.

\[ \text{Ah Q suddenly became ashamed of his lack of spirit, because he had not} \]
\[ \text{sung any lines from an opera.} \]

In the closing lines it shows the townspeople were also dissatisfied, not at the lack of justice but at the lack of entertainment Ah Q delivered in his final moments.

\[ \text{Most people were dissatisfied, because a shooting was not such a fine} \]
\[ \text{spectacle as a decapitation; and what a ridiculous culprit he had been} \]
\[ \text{too, to pass through so many streets without singing a single line from an} \]
\[ \text{opera. They had followed him for nothing.} \]

Shortly after he published this novella “the spirit of Ah Q” became shorthand for many of China’s commonly perceived national failings at the time, such as self-delusion, its obsession with “face” and being granted due respect, an
inherent both superiority and inferiority complex, and a tendency to show cruelty to those weaker than them and total servility to those in power. Lu Xun is widely considered the father of modern Chinese literature and his socially-critical, satirical and vernacular writing remains relevant to China today. He is still often quoted and referenced widely. Contemporary Chinese author Yan Lianke, for instance, when discussing his Chinese literary influences lately, said “From the modern period, there is Lu Xun. I have always said that Lu Xun makes up half of my soul.” (Interview with Eric M. B. Becker on www.wordswithouthborders.com). Mo Yan too refers to him as a literary hero in the novel *The People’s Republic of Wine*.

**Lao She – Cat Country**

Lao She (1899-1966) was a vitally important Chinese writer who was strongly influenced by Lu Xun, both in his Chinese realism and satirical styles, and for his use of the local Beijing dialect. He was best-known for his novel *Rickshaw Boy* and his stage-play *Teahouse*, and also for *Cat Country*, a satirical science-fiction fable published in 1932. Lao She was attacked by the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution and accused of being a counterrevolutionary. He was paraded through the streets and humiliated and badly beaten. According to official reports, the day after one particularly intense bout of mistreatment in 1966 he drowned himself in Taiping Lake.

*Cat Country*, published in 1932, is written from the perspective of a visitor to the planet of Mars and is a thinly veiled, scathing criticism of China at the time.
and its handling of the ongoing Japanese invasion. In the novel, Lao She lampoons not just the government of the day, the landlords and rich businesspeople, but also the student and the revolutionaries. The novel tells the story of a man who crash-lands on Mars and is taken captive by a group of cat-people who inhabit the planet, but he is able to go free once he realizes they have not mastered military technology so his pistol scares them off. The civilization, which was once evidently a superior one, is now in steep decline.

He befriends one of Cat Country's richest men, Scorpion, who has an opium-like plantation of a plant called 'reverie' that produces mind-numbing leaves that all the locals are addicted to. The visitor views the planet with disgust as corruption, greed and apathy have conspired to drag the world into the gutter.

He slams the Chinese system of guanxi, or connections, when Scorpion tells him:

“If you had an influential friend at court, then you could rocket to the top immediately, no matter what you had studied at college.”

In a comment on the youth of the day in China, Scorpion indicates he has little faith in the young people:

“the young people among us are even more antique in their thinking than my grandfather.”

The ruling political ideology is “Everybody Shareskyism”, whose leader killed the cat-emperor to assume the position. But there is more brutality involved in the
ideology than sharing, apparently, and in a chilling line Scorpion explains their ways, and predicts the demise that’s in store for Lao She some three decades later.

“You see adherents of Everybody Shareskyism will kill a man without thinking twice about it .... “It is a very common occurrence to see students butchering teachers, professors, chancellors, and principals.”

*Cat Country* is an important novel that on the one hand tells the tale of a feline-dominated planet in a state of major change, and on the other casts a cold look at a country and a culture gone very much awry.

**Mo Yan – The Republic of Wine**

*The Republic of Wine* (translated by Howard Goldblatt) is a Mo Yan novel that explores the relationship between Chinese people and excessive consumption, and comments on societal corruption, greed, gluttony, desire, censorship and a pervasive lack of integrity.

The novel has two distinct narratives, the first a standard fiction format that follows Detective Ding Gou’er as he visits Liquorland to investigate allegations of cannibalism, particularly of a reported local tradition of serving braised baby boys at banquets. The second narrative string is a series of letters between an established writer, also called Mo Yan, and Li Yidou who is a fan of
his and an aspiring writer himself. As the novel progresses the focus shifts from
the standard thread to the metafictional one, and some characters appear in both
storylines.

In the book the “real” Mo Yan uses satirical devices and story angles to
comment on and criticise China in sometimes an oblique manner, on other
occasions more directly. Though wildly exaggerated in content and tone, it could
be suggested that Mo Yan’s underlining assertion in this novel is that
contemporary Chinese reality and this far-fetched satire, somewhat sadly, share
strong similarities at the root level.

Liquorland is a fictional city famous for its culinary arts where people
obsess over fine food and drink and over-indulge on a daily basis. This potent
immersion results in a collective lost consciousness that the book refers to often.
An analogy could be drawn with the period of the Opium Wars when China
succumbed to foreign control, while many of the leaders and ordinary people
languished in a perpetual drug-induced stupor.

When the detective visits Liquorland he immediately finds it a huge
personal struggle to stay focused, and retain his moral consciousness,
surrounded by strong alcohol, and culinary and sexual temptations. After his first
banquet with the man he was supposed to be investigating Ding realises he has
lost control. “I’ve fallen into the trap of food-and-liquor! Fallen into the trap of
pretty faces!” Extremely drunk “his conscious had turned into a butterfly whose
wings were curled inward for the moment.” And a little later on “his
consciousness sneered as it hung from the ceiling” and “His body and his
consciousness were filing for divorce.”
So although well-intentioned initially and determined to bring the criminal to justice, he finds that once he stepped into this world he is unable to retain his moral values. Furthermore, as he’s the only one who appears to be questioning these things he starts to wonder about his own judgment ("He had become a man terrified of his own suspicions: p 70), feeling hemmed in by a mix of isolation and paranoia that autocratic states tend to induce in individuals who question the establishment.

Looking for a reaction of any kind from the locals he finds they are oblivious to the world around them. At one point (p 67) a “deaf ferryman” was cooking his breakfast while a married couple “sat quietly, staring at the muddy water with eyes blank as marbles.” And as he said “something unintelligible” to a boy he “astonishingly seemed to understand him”.

Cannibalism is a reality around him but neither he nor the locals can speak up. Exaggerating this reality into a physical condition Detective Ding says: “I was ready to expose this monstrous crime, but was thwarted by a mysterious skin disease – scales all over my body that oozed pus when you touched them.” (p 101)

Throughout the book the author regularly takes aim at the political and social system that prevails and results in collective amnesia and inertia. Ding’s first encounter with officialdom is with a Mine Director and the Party Secretary, two people who look the same, dress the same, and utter the exact same words at the same time. Regardless of his efforts he can not prompt a real human reaction from either of them, mirroring the faceless and anonymous wall of bureaucracy citizens often face. And when they remain silent he said, “the gods never speak—how true that is.” But they lavish him with praise, fine foods,
strong liquor and false modesty (“Try to put up with this meager fare as best you can”). In the face of this apparent kindness, even though Ding highly suspects they are murderous his “heroic mettle vanished in the face of this genuine show of courtesy”.

The concept of ‘face’ or ‘mianzi’ in China refers to giving other people appropriate public displays of respect, and in negative terms it can be used as a ploy to get people to do something they do not want to do for fear of committing the ultimate social sin, ie causing someone “to lose face”. At the first banquet, even though Ding is initially adamant he will not consume alcohol as he is conducting an investigation, he feels obliged to after the two officials chant: “Have a little, just a little, to let us save face.” Other social conventions can be applied to situations too to get people to behave in a certain manner, and again Mo Yan takes some of these to extremes, for example when Ding fires his gun once he realises they had served a baby boy at the meal. “Comrade Ding,” the officials said, “you had no reason to fire your pistol. Your punishment is three glasses,” forcing him to get even more drunk.

Mo Yan also takes aim at the allusions of grandeur the rich and powerful create in societies that intimidate the ordinary people and leave them in awestruck silence. When Diamond Jin, the primary suspect in the baby-eating practice, arrives at the banquet Ding was preparing to apprehend him, but “his body sparked like diamonds, emitting a golden aroma … like a breath of spring, a ray of sunlight, the embodiment of ideals, the promise of hope.” Afterwards as Jin was leaving, Ding sees his car and the vision that that creates. “A gleaming silver sedan was parked on a smooth cement road that cut through the sunflower
forest.” Consequently he felt ill-equipped and overwhelmed, so could not confront the official.

Corruption is something Mo Yan regularly swipes at, such as when he finds out a company that is selling monkey brain fungus realises there was no way they can gather enough monkey brain fungus to meet the demand, so they simply lace it with wood-ear fungus or dried mushrooms. “This surprised me as I never dreamed that even medicines were adulterated. If they’ll adulterate medicines what can we expect to be unadulterated?”

While Mo Yan’s primary approach is to use satire to present a world that is extremely similar to modern society he often uses grotesque imagery too as a method of presenting a scenario in an absurd and exaggerated fashion. While at a spa, “He sensed that a pointy-mouthed, multi-hued fish was nibbling at his anus, gently removing his hemorrhoids with the surgical skill of a trained proctologist. And Diamond Jin’s wife complained that: “Five times I’ve been pregnant, and each time he’s sent me to the hospital in my fifth month for an abortion ... he ate every one of the aborted fetuses.” Towards the end of the book, getting back to the grotesque culinary theme “they drenched the donkey with scalding water and scraped every inch of the hide. The customers would choose the part they felt like eating, and the butcher would cut it out for them then and there. Sometimes all the meat would be sold off, and you could still hear the animal’s pitiful wheezing. Would you call that cruel?” While these storylines go way beyond reality, it could be argued that in essence similar scenarios are being played out on a daily basis in the author’s real world.

On creative writing and the concept of freedom of expression the novel starts off very idealistically in the discussion between the two authors. "I want to
be like the young Lu Xun, who gave up the study of medicine for a writing career; I want to use literature to transform society, to transform the Chinese sense of nationhood.” And a bit later on the aspiring writer said he wanted “to launch a violent attack against all the corrupt, venal officials here in Liquorland, and the story must be considered ‘a ray of sunlight in our dark kingdom,’ a latter-day *Madman’s Diary* (by Lu Xun).” However towards the end of the novel the aspiring writer sees that none of his writing is getting published so he takes a more self-censored approach. “I believe that the reason my stories haven’t been published has to do with intervening in society. So I’ve corrected that failing in *Swallows Nests*. It’s a story far removed from politics and far from the capital” (p 253). Towards the end they give up completely the idea of writing honest societal appraisal and instead are lured to advertising copyrighting by the promise of riches and facing the reality that no one in China will consider publishing their novels or stories. “News releases are closer to creative work ... Liquorland is going to rely on your heroic pen to become famous.”

Through a variety of methods Mo Yan criticises the post-Mao era leadership and society in China, while also pointing out that the citizenry are often greedy and selfish and content to sacrifice ideals if their basic needs are met. He does this in a humorous, often extreme manner using a mixture of satire, meta-fiction, grotesquency, absurdism, exaggeration and magic realism.

This book was allowed to be published on the Chinese mainland, after some initial reluctance on the censor’s behalf. It could be argued that had the author taken a more direct approach with this form of social criticism this book would not have seen light of day in China, while a more fantastical take on reality managed to pass through the censor’s net.
Yan Lianke – The Four Books

Yan Lianke was born in Henan in 1958 but now lives in Beijing. His books have been widely translated and he has won the international Kafka award, and in China he has won two of the country’s most prestigious awards, the Lu Xun Literary Prize and the Lao She Literary Award. He joined the army at age 20 and began writing then. He currently teaches in People’s University in Beijing.

Serve the People, his first big international success, is a satirical take on the Cultural Revolution and is about a young woman and her older lover who can only find sexual pleasure when they smash portraits and statues of Chairman Mao. Dream of Ding Village exposes the horrors of a botched government-run blood collection drive in Henan in the 1990s that left tens of thousands of villagers with HIV/AIDS. While Lenin’s Kisses takes a swipe at rampant consumerism and capitalism with the story of an entrepreneurial local official who buys Lenin’s embalmed corpse and uses it to drive a tourism business.

Yan uses a colourful blend of farce, satire, vivid realism, exaggeration and grotesquerie in his writing, and in Serve the People he used the line which speaks to his style that: “Sometimes the truth shines more brightly through a curtain of farce.”

His most recent novel, The Four Books, translated by Carlos Rojas, visits the catastrophic years between 1958 and 1962 as Mao’s deeply misguided Great Leap Forward strategy left the country devastated and an estimated 45 million dead. The story is set in the 99th re-education camp near the Yellow river. Intellectuals who have been labeled ‘rightists’ are being politically reeducated
through labour. The camp is run by a pubescent character known only as The Child, and all the intellectuals, or now ‘criminals’, are known only by their professions, such as the Author, the Theologian, the Musician, the Scholar etc. The Child keeps warm during the cold months by burning the banned books confiscated from the intellectuals, and rules with a twin-pronged approach of abject fear, for the torture and death he can arbitrarily dish out, and also with a convoluted incentive scheme where he hands out red paper cuttings in the shape of blossoms and stars for good behavior. It was believed that a sufficient number of cuttings would earn an intellectual an early release.

The title is a reference to both the Four Books of the Confucian canon and the bible’s four gospels, and the novel is made up of four interwoven texts. Two are written by the Author – Criminal Records which is a collection of secret reports on his fellow intellectuals he regularly presents the Child to curry favour, and the second is The Old Course, a novel he is working on. There are also extracts from Heaven’s Child, an anonymous manuscript that utilizes biblical prose, and the New Myth of Sisyphus, a philosophical take on punishment and human ability to endure it. Taken together the four texts paint a bleak picture of an insane political agenda that backfired tragically and resulted in millions of deaths.

In an effort to “catch up with England and surpass America” the Maoist “higher ups” as they were only referred to order villages to produce industrial quantities of smelted steel in their backyards and grow impossible quantities of grain from barren land. Driven by fear and patriotic fervor the intellectuals are initially able to keep up with targets, but quickly all the good steel is smelted down, all the trees have been chopped to fuel the fires, and the over-planting of
seeds to try to reach unattainable targets is having a detrimental effect on the crop output. Rations dwindled and people begin to starve. The leaders blamed the foreigners initially.

“But among the higher ups, there were some who said that the country’s problems were due to the fact that foreigners – which is to say, Westerners – had grabbed China by the throat. The Chinese should hate those foreigners – those blond, blue-eyed, big-nosed foreigners.” (kindle 3296)

The villagers are dying by the day, resorting to eating bark, shoe leather, mud and bird poop.

After eating too many of these mud pancakes, everyone became very constipated. The scholar then organized them into pairs and had them take turns using chopsticks to help each other defecate. (kindle 3395)

He noticed that, mixed in with the dirt and sand, there were two rice-sized clumps of bird poop, and without hesitating he immediately popped them into his mouth. It’s unclear whether he chewed them or not, but after making a peculiar expression, he stretched his neck and swallowed them.

Soon the living take to eating the dead, more desperate than they were ashamed. The Author, who had cut himself open at one point in the book to irrigate the
wheat crops with his own blood, was wracked with guilt towards the end of the novel for spying on and writing about his comrades. After the Musician died he decided to offer up some of his living flesh as they grieved her.

Remembering how I had sliced my fingers, my wrists, my arms and my legs to irrigate the wheat with my own blood, it occurred to me that I should slice two pieces of meat from my own body – from my thighs – boil them, and present them to the Musician’s grave, inviting everyone to eat them as I watched.

He bit into it and chewed, concentrating so hard that the veins in his temples pulsed. My palms were covered in sweat and my fists were tightly clenched. The sound of the Scholar eating and drinking was like boiling water coursing through my body. When he chewed the meat I felt as though the pain from that thorn in my heart was being gradually relieved, as every bone in my body slowly returned to normal.

The final chapter of the book is a philosophical revisiting of the myth of Sisyphus. In this version God realizes that Sisyphus has got used to pushing the boulder up the hill and actually enjoys one element of it as he meets a sweet young, smiling child on his way up each day. God then changes the system and the boulder rolls up the hill of its own accord, and Sisyphus has to use all his might to push it back down to the bottom. In this new way he doesn’t meet the child, a fact that initially greatly saddens him, but he does catch glimpse of a faraway hamlet on this new route, a view that gives him great pleasure each day. He doesn’t let God
know he is deriving some pleasure from the daily task and Yan ruminates on the core essence of divine punishment and the mortal capacity to withstand it.

As soon as someone develops a sense of familiarity and comfort with respect to the difficulty, change, boredom, absurdity and death resulting from the punishment, the punishment thereby loses it meaning. As a result, the punishment ceases to be an external force, and instead can be transformed from a form of passive acceptance to a beautiful significance.

Yan said that *The Four Books* took him 20 years to plan and two to write. In the dedication he writes, “The book is dedicated to all of those who have been forgotten by history, and to those millions of scholars who have lost their lives.”

With his previous novels *Serve the People* was not published in China, and *Dream of Ding Village* was initially published but later distribution was forbidden. Yan approached more than 20 Chinese publishers with *The Four Books* but none have opted to publish it as yet.

“Although he (Yan) has had his novels banned in China and was, for a period of three years, prohibited from obtaining a passport or travelling abroad, Yan continues to speak honestly about the impact that government censorship – and self-censorship – have had on contemporary Chinese writers.

(https://paper-republic.org/authors/yan-lianke/)

**Chen Xiwo – I love My Mum**
Chen Xiwo is the author of the controversial novella *I Love My Mum*, which is banned in China. He teaches comparative literature at Fuzhou Normal University and has published seven novels. After graduating from Fujian Normal University, Chen studied in Japan from 1989 to 1994. One recurring theme in Chen’s fiction is sex, and perhaps his most famous work *I Love My Mum* uses incest as a metaphor for a dysfunctional society. Published in English first in 2010 (translated by Harvey Thomlinson), it tells a shocking tale of a sexual relationship between a severely disabled man and his mother. In the book’s opening pages the scene is set when a senior policeman is chastising one of his charges for arresting some prostitutes in an anti-vice raid.

“The sex industry is a pillar of our city’s economy. Don’t you want us to get rich? Well, a city has to rely on whatever resources it has. What we have here is prostitutes. There is no choice but to release them.”

When the question of morals arises, the senior official reacts cynically.

“Morality?” He laughed coldly. ‘Morality is for those who have enough...

Later when a stench steeps out from under a doorway the police captain is called to investigate.
“The murder victim was a woman in her fifties, and the murder suspect wasn’t a stranger but none other than her own son. The world has it all: shameless prostitutes and a son who kills his own mother. What a mess.”

The autopsy showed there was semen in the mother’s vagina, semen that came from the son. In the ensuing investigation the son explained how they had been engaging in S&M when she died.

“One blow at a time she became thoroughly intoxicated. She was so far gone that she didn’t move. Mother, how can you only think of your own pleasure? What am I to do? You are selfish! But how can a mother not be selfish! Stop, I want you to wake up. How could I make Ma wake up? Ah, I knew. I did what she feared the most! So I did it. As I did it I shouted: ‘Ma, Ma! I love you, I love my mum! I love you, Mum.’

In 2007, copies of a book published by a Taiwanese publisher that included the traditional Chinese character version of I Love My Mum were sent to Chen Xiwo’s mainland office but the books were intercepted by the authorities and the customs declared them banned in China. Chen then took the unusual step in China of taking the censors to court asking for his books back. He ultimately lost the case “the reason given that this was the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic.” Nowhere is it explicitly stated what is forbidden, he said, “the whole system depends on self-censorship.”
Writing in the afterword to *I Love My Mum* Chen writes: “In this world I don’t look for moral virtue, because there is none and there never has been. What moral codes mainly prove is that past generations have never lived up to them.” He writes that even if people behave in a despicable way there can be moments of illumination: “Even if they don’t change their behavior, they may realize what they are doing. If this is all, it is already no small thing; the beginnings of human awareness. In *I Love My Mum* the central character has just this kind of awakening. In this respect he is not only no degenerate, he is even a model for morality in our generation.”

Chen acknowledges that lots of people do not appreciate his style of writing, saying it often makes people unhappy or anxious. “People look at me like I am an evil spirit. Well I prefer to be this kind of evil spirit rather than an angel who sings all day long in praise of some “golden age of China”. He is deeply critical of the country and the writers that support it. “A country which has reached middle-income country apparently still needs to sacrifice people to economics. Well a country without people at its core is worthless; a writer with no dignity, writing what he is told, accepting of being banned and censored, is a coward, and this writer will only write rubbish. I am not willing to write rubbish. And I am not willing to be a coward.”

Harvey Thomlinson, from Make-Do Publishing who translated and published the book in English said: “Chen’s works explore the link between dysfunctional society and dysfunctional sexuality, arguing that ‘extreme’ sexual behavior is often the sign of a soul and a culture in a poor state of health.” He said *I Love My Mum* “does not merely advance a generalized bleak view of human nature, but a view on China specifically as a society ruined by its lack of freedoms
and failure to place ‘people’ at its centre.” He added that “Chen’s China is a society where rank crimes such as the Tiananmen killings and the Cultural Revolution have gone unacknowledged, leaving a corrupting stench. When the neighbours in the story visit the house and the mother blocks the doorway, they comment that a ‘sour smell seeped out from behind her body’.”

In Chinese society, Chen argues, there is no interest in truth; only in ‘business as usual’. The phrase ‘talking nonsense’ is used by all three main characters in the story to deflect unpleasant realities. For Chen, this is very much a political novella and the ‘morality’ of the narrator lies in his eventual willingness to publicly admit to his crimes. “In this sort of country where there is no hope, to continue to seek the courage to keep living is precisely to embrace an S&M relationship where one finds pleasure in being abused.”

A Yi – A Perfect Crime

A Yi is a Beijing-based writer who was shortlisted for the People’s Literature Top 20 Literary Giants of the Future in 2010. He worked as a police officer for five years before becoming a full-time writer. He is the author of two collections of short stories and in 2015 A Perfect Crime was first published in English (translated by Anna Holmwood). A Yi’s protagonist is a teenager seemingly going about a routine day, but he is also planning the brutal murder of his one and only friend. He strangles her and stuffs her body into the washing machine in a shocking and apparently motiveless murder. As the story unravels A Yi’s writing casts light on how grotesque acts like these can take place in a
country undergoing enormous change and where everyone seems to be out for themselves.

Born in 1976, A Yi’s style is refreshingly pared down, verb-driven and to-the-point. The crazed killer in his story is somehow very lucid in his approach and he sees the world around him in very clear terms, often much clearer than those around him can see it. In an interview in the Los Angeles Review of Books (2/9/2015) A Yi said that Crime and Punishment by Dostoevsky and The Stranger by Camus were big influences for him while he was framing the book. In a review posted on the same website (9/6/2015), reviewer Paul French looks to A Yi’s inspiration and roots in producing this biting piece of noir realism and he draws a line to Lu Xun and Gogol.

“When talking about the instigation and crafting of A Perfect Crime ... Lu Xun’s 1918 short story A Madman’s Diary (itself inspired by Gogol’s 1835 Diary of a Madman) is a first-person account of a man driven by a persecution complex. Lu Xun’s “mad man,” like Gogol’s, ultimately sees reality more clearly than those around him, something A Yi’s nameless narrator also believes. Lu Xun’s story has been interpreted as an early rejection of the increasingly outdated literary tradition of classical Chinese writing, and the adoption of a more accessible and vernacular language that was to become the hallmark of the New Culture Movement writers of the 1920s, who sought to portray China realistically and critically.”

Just as Lu Xun’s The True Story of Ah Q stringently criticized the society at that time, A Yi’s murderer rejects China’s political system and the societal norms, and so happily heads to the execution chamber as a release. A Yi’s style is less satirical, but instead utilizes brutal literary realism and grotesqueries. He said in
the LARB interview: “I wrote it for anyone who is willing to think about current Chinese society. I hope they will think about the world they live in, and their place in society. There’s no question that people’s place in their society is increasingly remote, low, and useless. And I hope that my readers can find a sense of heroism from ancient times, and not just be pitilessly manipulated by their society. To be creative. To be responsible. And not to become like the protagonist of the novel, a shameful reptile.

A Yi is very familiar with Ah Q too, and French suggests that in looking back to that story, perhaps we can better understand where the author is coming from with A Perfect Crime. “Marxists then, and the Communist Party now, have long struggled with Lu Xun’s story of a put-upon but sycophantic bully who refuses to accept the omnipotence of those in power and stubbornly insists that he is morally superior to them. Ah Q is eventually executed. In the novella, Lu Xun exposes Ah Q’s moral failings as symptomatic of the Chinese national character of his time. The True Story of Ah Q had a realism that undermined the promised Communist utopia. Though the Communists sought to present Ah Q as a victim of a pre-communist social order, it is impossible to ignore the society that creates him. So, too, A Yi’s story shows that despite the hyper-nationalist rhetoric of China now, there is a much darker undercurrent to the society. There are two sides to China’s current story of economic growth and overweening obsession with social stability, and A Yi gives us the one we officially don’t hear about. As his killer declares, “If I hadn’t committed a murder so intolerable to our hypocritical society, what would have been the point?”

Ultimately, A Yi’s unnamed narrator was isolated in his own homeland, as Ah Q was. “I wanted to reflect a kind of isolation. Solitude can be poetic in works
of art, but in this novel it’s a more bestial kind of solitude, and hard to resist,” the
author said. At the end of the novel the narrator wonders how the prosecutors
would explain his bestial motives. “They’d no doubt come up with their own
suitable to propagate to the masses. They sure as hell wouldn’t let people know it
was out of boredom … This is the full record of my last words. Let it be recorded
in history that once lived such a person. Goodbye.”

Conclusion

Over the past century – both up to 1949 when the Communist Party came to
power, and from that point to the current day – China has never had a
democratic system in place. Freedom of expression has also been greatly
controlled in this period, and the judicial system has never been independent.
Given these realities it has always been difficult for citizens and writers to
comment on and criticize their leaders and the society around them. Writers
have regularly faced persecution for their work and consequentially self-
censorship has always been prevalent. In this context writers over the years who
want to publish work that comments critically on the society around them have
to find oblique methods to avoid incurring the wrath of officialdom. Lu Xun, with
his seminal work The True Life of Ah Q established a model that made scathing
criticisms of the society around him but did so in a subtle, satirical and farcical
fashion. On a superficial level this story is purportedly about one peculiar, self-
delusional man, but of course it operates on a much deeper level and is a reaction
to the political and social despair of the time. Lu Xun became a national hero and
was ultimately praised for his caustic writing by officials. He wasn’t persecuted but he almost certainly would have been had he lived longer, as China was getting increasingly more repressive. As a celebrated writer, and one who has featured prominently in school curriculums for many years, all aspiring Chinese authors who came after him studied his work closely. The other five writers and stories above show how they are indebted to Lu Xun, both in regard to his social conscience and his writing style. They too are all driven by a patriotic belief and a pervading sense of injustice, and they all hope to improve the world around them with their social commentary embedded in fictional prose.

Given the censorship restraints none of the writers above tackle their topics directly, instead choosing a variety of forms and styles that include satire, farce, absurdism, surrealism, grotesquerie, exaggeration and literary realism to create their worlds that represent the China they live in yet doesn’t address it overtly. In their hopes of getting work published in their homeland, and also in the hopes of avoiding imprisonment or other forms of harassment for their craft, this approach is a well-established self-protection mechanism.

It is notable, too, that all these books involve extreme acts of violence and brutality. Satire as a literary style is not necessarily violent or brutal, yet all these books encompass heinous and shocking acts. It could be surmized that in one way this is a reflection of and reaction to the historical violence that China has suffered over the past century. Moreover, I would suggest it represents extreme anger on behalf of the writers towards figures of authority, perceived mismanagement of society, and widespread impunity in the face of egregious crimes.
One paradox of modern China is that writers are celebrated as heroes in the culture, yet officiandom tends to reject anything that might be perceived as criticism. These six writers are somewhat conflicted as they were and are both very much a part of the official apparatus, and yet outside it as critical thinkers and voices. This conflict all leads to something of a perpetual game of cat-and-mouse, where Chinese writers look for creative means and a variety of styles to impart their societal messages in a highly restricted environment.

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