

NAN Z. DA

Disambiguation, a Tragedy

**The diminishing returns of distinction-
making**

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Patty Chang, *Hand To Mouth*. 2000, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

IN HER MEMOIR *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, the contemporary Chinese American writer Yiyun Li recounts something that Marianne Moore's mother had done, which recalled something that Li's own mother had done. The young Marianne Moore had become attached to a kitten that she named Buffy, short for Buffalo. One day, her mother drowned the creature, an act of cruelty that Moore inexplicably defends: "We tend to run wild in these matters of

personal affection but there may have been some good in it too.” Li appends a version of this story from her own childhood:

The menacing logic by which Moore’s mother functioned is familiar. When my sister started working after college, she gave me a pair of hamsters as a present. I became fond of them, and soon after they disappeared. I gave them away, my mother said; look how obsessed you are with them. You can’t even show the same devotion to your parents.

Having something that you love snatched away because you love it is maddening because there’s no way to gainsay it. You can only protest on the grounds that indeed you experience the attachment of which you’re accused. This leaves the child Li in a position roughly analogous to anyone who, having been punctured, bristles at the accusation of being thin-skinned. Protesting would have been to play into her mother’s hands, proving her mother right.

Everyone knows the stereotype of the Asian tiger mother, the cold, over-scrutinizing mother popularized by Amy Chua’s 2011 self-described memoir and parenting manual. Asian tiger mothers conjure other Asian parenting stereotypes (and, if we’re being honest with ourselves, Asian realities): parents who are averse to pet ownership, who hold a fluid interpretation of personal property (especially when gifts are involved), who simply inform you that “what is best for you”

has been done. By conforming to these known stereotypes, Li's mother gets away with a subtler form of tyranny. In addition to the arbitrary power she exercises by thieving her daughter's pets, she makes it impossible for Li, the victim, to defend herself.

The trope of the Asian tiger mother is not necessarily false or complicit with neoliberal capitalism, as some critics maintain. The stereotype is cruel because, like the most sophisticated forms of propaganda, it subsumes differences, collapsing one mother's tyranny with the next. If you complain to the world about your Asian tiger mother, you will elicit all the empathy it is prepared to give you; detailing your parent's particular cruelties won't get you any more sympathy or acknowledgment. Why bother disambiguating if to do so has no effect?

Elsewhere in *Dear Friend* Li recounts the private drama of her daily journey home as a schoolgirl in China. The trip is both boring and treacherous. After a classmate is molested and disappears, Li is asked by her mother, "with omniscient suspicion, if any man on the bus had touched [Li] inappropriately." Li internally deflects this violating question with irony: "How could she not understand that I was made invisible by having been old already, too old for those men lurking in the dark?"

There's a crucial, if finely drawn, difference between being forced to say what you do not believe and being left with no logical way to say what you *do* believe.

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To apply the logic of the hamster tale: Li effectively tells us that her mother's torments were so extreme that they had aged her out of attractiveness, even though she was still a child. She was too "old" to receive unwanted attention. But how could she complain about this? What—would she have actually wanted to look sexy and appealing to predators? Her "self-imposed silence," as Li calls it, was the only possible response. The logical conundrum forced on the child Li by her mother's question is the ultimate form of gaslighting: while her mother is not exactly sowing doubt in Li's mind about her own reality, she makes it pointless for Li to register *how it really was*.

But even now, among her contemporary readers, the circumstances of Li's victimization can be difficult to discern. Li's reticence can be explained away as a cultural or personal

flaw: she won't speak up or stand up for herself because she's Asian, and shy, and weak-willed. Her mother's acts of victimization, meanwhile, can be accounted for by the tiger mother stereotype. That indeed many people *are* shy by cultural habit, upbringing, or something else involuntary, and that the stereotype—here manifesting as cruelty and prudishness, respectively—is robust make the cases in question even more painfully isolating. Victimizers cannot be punished twice when the two offenses are outwardly identical (here, the behaviors of an Asian tiger mother and gaslighting), and the redundancies make the suffering of the victim even more vivid to herself. The only place for Li to develop this insight is in literature, long after the fact.

THE FELT POINTLESSNESS of subtle disambiguation names a problem foundational to literary studies: the diminishing returns of distinction-making. By distinction I don't mean what Bourdieu identified as those ever finer, ever more abstracted ways of signaling one's status. I am referring instead to the bias-correcting mechanism that midcentury literary critics saw activated when readers acknowledged the difficulty of basic comprehension; of mapping out what has actually happened in a piece of literature and what

confusions the author has deliberately put in place. What I. A. Richards meant by “the difficulty of making out the plain sense of poetry”—to read what’s actually there and not project onto the text what one thinks ought to be there—was also an attempt to put distance between the reader and society’s unquestioned beliefs. Viktor Shklovsky’s term *defamiliarization* was also essentially an acknowledgment of the incredible art and effort required to overturn your preexisting opinions when working through a text.

As an art of disambiguation, literary criticism is especially valuable in periods of enforced ideological judgment and conformity. While literature departments and critical publications are everywhere being defunded and undermined, literary criticism is gaining popularity as a mode of storytelling. Many contemporary writers, Li included, import this art form into their works of fiction or prose. They build plot around the interpretive readings of other writers—in the case of Li’s memoir, Elizabeth Bowen, William Trevor, Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, D. H. Lawrence, and Marianne Moore. Authors who embrace this literary-critical sensibility seem to recognize the good of interpretive openness, of leaving people to draw their own conclusions, and at the same time to feel that this might not be true. This interpretive literature, as I call it—which sometimes aligns with autofiction—wants to explain the psychomachia of our political catastrophes (e.g., Ben Lerner), or help us figure out

the range at which harm from another person comes into view (e.g., Rachel Cusk). It speaks with the aphoristic authority of someone who has done the processing for you.

Geoffrey Hartman once called literary criticism “institutionalized irony.” No less dramatic than the object of its study, literary criticism has a knack for building narrative suspense into the predicament of being left with no logical way to register a complaint or name the grievance, even if given the chance. The ironies inherent to victimization and speaking up for oneself have been variously studied across different intellectual traditions. Much antipositivist sentiment within the academy boils down to skepticism toward studies and measurements that depend on self-affirmation—on people being asked to speak on their own behalf. For a genre and trauma theorist like Lauren Berlant this kind of irony is embedded within the dynamics of social recognition: in exchange for a modicum of acknowledgment, or membership in a community, the dispossessed and downtrodden (as all others) will give up complexity, nuance, difference. Because social power and participation require empirically reliable, broadly recognizable traits, we will opt into clichés as often as they are imposed upon us.

Postcolonial studies informed by deconstruction are also particularly interested in the subject position that is constitutively, and not just circumstantially, mute. When asked in a radio interview to explain the title of her famous 1985 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak

quipped, “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore.” A few years ago, in the pages of the *New Yorker*, Yiyun Li echoed this logic in a formal renunciation of Mandarin, which is her native tongue. The title of that essay, “To Speak Is to Blunder,” had nothing to do with the acquisition of English as a second language. It referred rather to these more counterintuitive acts of silencing that have been robustly theorized in the academy.

Writing well outside of postcolonial deconstruction, the literary critic and philosopher Stanley Cavell, in his essay “The Avoidance of Love,” saw a similar dilemma for Cordelia at the start of *King Lear*. Lear, looking to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters, asks them each to publicly profess her love for him. For the two oldest daughters, Cavell writes, the task is simple enough; they need only pretend to love where they do not love. But Cordelia isn’t simply being asked to falsify herself. Cavell explains that it is actually worse than this. For Cordelia, “to *pretend* to love, where you really *do* love, is not obviously possible.” There’s a crucial, if finely drawn, difference between being forced to say what you do not believe and being left with no logical way to say what you *do* believe. The subtlety of this difference lets the literary critic know that they must now intervene, because no one else will.

I MENTION THESE various critical arguments in order to present a shared truth before claiming cultural and political specificity. Like many writers of the Chinese diaspora, and specifically those who have self-exiled from the Chinese state, Yiyun Li has a knack for extracting plot and character from the predicament of being left with no logical way to register a complaint. ① Such impotent discernment has pain behind it, and a history. While Li prefers to make studies of isolated victimizations—between family members and between friends, in short stories, novels, and autobiographical writings—her moral psychology is distinctively Chinese. Her sustained intellectual interest in propaganda is distinctively Chinese.

In making this assertion, I am risking an essentialism. I am also disrespecting Li's wish, expressed in her memoir and elsewhere, that readers refrain from politicizing her work or foisting upon her undue historical responsibility for being one of the few humanists to emerge intact from post-Mao China and leave behind the immigrant default career in STEM. "I have spent much of my life turning away from the scripts given to me, in China and in America," she writes in *Dear Friend*. "My refusal to be defined by the will of others is my one and only political statement." Elsewhere Li has stated that insofar as politics is inevitable, it's not something that

one should “cash in on.” I risk this because I think that the tragedy of disambiguation is her greatest literary achievement.

Disambiguation becomes tragic when it is rendered useless or when it leads to outcomes that are inhumane. As we all know by now, the application of micro-justice can be situational and incoherent without being at all reduced in its power to penalize and constrict. We have a version of this in our online close-reading industries, forums in which people compete to see who can pick up on the smaller offense or oversight. Writings become subjected to overinterpretation and overzealous prosecution. The snide “I guess she didn’t learn to close read” remark that we see so much of these days can also issue from an abusive interpretation of close reading for the purposes of political signaling.

I am drawing a connection between those who appreciate this dynamic—the tragedy of disambiguation as it unfolds through *readings*—and those who are intimately familiar with the abuses of the Chinese state. *Gaslighting* means two things to this demographic. First, it accurately describes the nature of the abuses of the state—its on-the-ground victimization tactics that make you believe that crimes you know to have happened have not in fact taken place. As such, it names the state’s revisionist historiography and the psychosis of life under Maoism that still has not abated. Second, gaslighting is a disciplinary technique widely used by Chinese citizens on one another as they detect crimes that

may never have occurred and mete out punishments for them. Here, the mechanisms of gaslighting grow in severity with the elusiveness of the supposed crime, a dynamic that has long powered the state-inflicted trauma named above.

I can only make this proposition in the half-dark as there aren't—and will never be—enough psychologically and physically intact victims of the Chinese state, and the Cultural Revolution, to form patterns supporting a strong inferential claim. The parental tyranny and state tyranny that Li writes about depend on the invisibility, the constitutive muteness, of the victim and on evidence of wrongdoing so scant it sits below the threshold of what is empirically obvious. Li's literary-critical sensibility speaks to those familiar with one of the longest and most effective uses of gaslighting that's ever been perpetrated.

ASIDE FROM THE WORK of discipline, surveillance, and control, authoritarian governments sustain themselves by removing all of the spaces in which a person may conclude that there is meaning in parsing slight differences. The act of discernment is not merely punished; it's made infelicitous. In ordinary language theory, *infelicity* describes the absence of conditions that allow a speech act—be it truth-telling, oath-

making, or command-giving—to mean anything.

Discernment is made infelicitous when there are almost no forums in which to present one's findings, no suitable objects to discern, no audience to recognize and encourage the act.

Creative forms of truth-telling no longer link up, at the institutional level, to self-fulfillment and recognition. This can be achieved outright by direct censorship or over time by systematically degrading institutions, publications, and public forums via corruption and favoritism, which is practically guaranteed when the curriculums and procedures of higher education are dictated by the state.

Effective gaslighting both alters the historical record and impoverishes spaces of discernment. People familiar with authoritarian rule tend to know about the first, but even so they may fail to appreciate its effects over long periods of time. Louisa Lim's 2014 *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, a book about the erasure from collective memory of the events of June 4, 1989, succinctly names a political regime built on revisionism. The distortion begins much earlier, of course, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) covered up the crimes and deaths amassed in the Great Leap Forward and the famine that it manufactured, the massacres of the Cultural Revolution, and the persecutions in the decade after the end of the Cultural Revolution, even as they were happening. Mao's 1946 statement to the American journalist Anna Louise Strong and his subsequent 1956 speech "US Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger" exemplify the party's canny appreciation of the consensus-generating power of anti-imperialism, which

served as its rallying cry even as the People's Republic of China was itself blossoming into an imperial state. (2)

These statements came at the end of multiple internecine purges—beginning in 1930, in what is known as the Futian Affair—throughout which party leaders committed widespread acts of torture and killed off 90 to 95 percent of intellectuals within the party's ranks. Interspersed among these big purges were softer rectification methods, with party officials showily taking partial responsibility for the violence of previous purges. But the constant need to demonstrate and verify party loyalty always ended in more violence.

By even the most conservative estimates, at least fifty million people perished during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. They were intellectuals, landlords, and the party's old guard; but they were also factory workers, peasants, students, and teachers, ordinary people caught up in increasingly bizarre taxonomies of ideological purity and facing nightmarish punishments doled out by adolescents. Many Westerners who visited China during those years recast the reality of what they saw into a fantasy of radical cultural change marked by a perverse essentialism. Jung Chang, lifting the veil on the Cultural Revolution with her 1991 memoir *Wild Swans*, impugned “people with no experience of a regime like China's [who] could take its propaganda and rhetoric at face value,” including a journalist who after listening to cheerful accounts by Chinese citizens of “how they had enjoyed being denounced and sent to the back end of beyond, and how much they had relished being

reformed. . . concluded that Mao had indeed made the Chinese into 'new people' who would regard what was misery to a Westerner as pleasure." Public opinion toward these events vacillated with attitudes toward liberalism in the West, and each reversal would revise prior claims about the extermination and devastations under the CCP, even if these claims were plainly true. When in the 1970s, the Belgian scholar Simon Leys's suite of three books—*The Chairman's New Clothes*, *Chinese Shadows*, and *Broken Images*—exposed conditions on the ground, he was discredited by CCP sympathizers around the world using a standard strategy of spin. These denials contributed to a litany of j'accuse narratives about the bitterness of life under Mao and his successors by ordinary citizens, people who could rarely speak using well-vetted facts at their disposal. (3)

There has never been a resounding indictment of the CCP's wrongdoing at the level of the national or even international community. And so people like me go on and on about it even now, unable to let it go. Because the goalpost for what constituted a thought crime kept moving, and because schadenfreude toward others was encouraged, victims of the regime never found themselves part of a defined identity group with a cause warranting advocacy from others. People were disincentivized to come to the defense of their closest family members and friends. This was a piecemeal victimization strategy that historians like Gao Hua (in *How the Red Sun Rose*), Sun Shuyun (in *The Long March*), and Frank Dikötter (in *The People's Trilogy*) have shown was

perfected in the earliest days of the party. Worse, survivor stories and sympathies with survivor diasporic communities are now foregrounded in reactionary propaganda around the world, or else seen as nothing but holdovers of a cold war mentality. The subsumption of the finer points of Chinese diasporic identities into Asian American and identity politics narratives (such as the tiger mother) made for standard irony. Subsumption into right-wing propaganda narratives completed the tragedy.

IN HER 1993 BOOK, *Writing Diaspora*, the literary and cultural critic Rey Chow proposed China as a special case for the exercise of intellectual discernment—for understanding the crisis of the humanistic disciplines and, implicitly, the state of the world. Chow was not riding the coattails of a crass, market-driven, rise-of-China zeitgeist, nor was she trying, as she writes, “to glorify ‘Chinese wisdom.’” On the contrary, her decision to center China and “the discursive intervention from the perspective of the Chinese intellectuals who are now living overseas” came out of a despair about the profession and the terms of the culture wars being waged at the time. Chow was looking across the state of discourse and noticing something wrong, something that she felt could be

addressed by taking a turn through the Chinese diaspora. Far from being a privileged identity like the Chinese globe-trotting cosmopolite, the diaspora, which crosses ethnic boundaries, could teach you what gaslighting looks like, at scale, in time.

The Chinese diasporic subject experiences outrageous revisionism no matter where they go. We learn in Chow's *Writing Diaspora*, and in other scholarship from the 1990s combining China studies with cultural theory, that this revisionism frequently plays out in the American academy. Insofar as it has supported extreme-left apologies for the CCP and knee-jerk, misguided applications of postcolonial and Marxist critique (which, importantly, Chow and others reclaim with moral force in the rest of their writings), it was neglected by the spokespeople of the Chinese American experience, an older generation of Asian Americanists who, with different points of entry into the US and different economic and cultural priorities, understandably focused their attention on disenfranchisement and the politics of representation.

The Chinese diasporic voice, disobedient both to American liberalism's system of recognition and acknowledgment and to nationalistic party ideology back home, is deemed inauthentic by American colleagues and treasonous by Chinese colleagues with loyalties to the mainland. *Writing Diaspora* is motivated at least in part by the irrational expectation that immigrant scholars represent their

homeland's reigning political ideologies and by Chow's frustration at being lectured to by white armchair Marxists. A mainland Chinese scholar also dismissed Chow's views on the grounds that she was from Hong Kong, an incident that Chow uses to underscore the greater irony: "The person who attacked me lived through the hardships of the Cultural Revolution, which disrupted and hampered the institutional education process of the Chinese youths of that time. He should have been quicker than most to recognize the cultural violence."

Although the name and numbers suggest otherwise, the Chinese diaspora is not a real collectivity. Those who did the harming and those who were harmed got mixed up (in an uneven ratio favoring the former) when opportunities to live and study abroad became available. There are very few communities of trust, which means that Chinese diasporic subjects routinely find themselves alone.

Chinese victims of the state often consider it difficult to tell their story correctly, consistently, or without resorting to hyperbole and melodrama. This tendency to offer inelegant misstatements or overstatements comes out of prolonged, unremitting exposure to propaganda and to whitewashed accounts of the crimes perpetrated under Maoism and its present-day iterations. The impact on Chinese people has been so great that even ordinary transactions between family members and intimates compulsively replicate the language and psychic structures of "reeducation" and coercive reform.

Internalizing one's persecution meant that one often mimicked their forms and passed them down to the next generation. All of this complicates what in other circumstances might have brought about an oral history in absence of an official one.

To appreciate the long-term psychological impact of Maoist indoctrination and state-fostered trauma, we need only look to contemporary Chinese diasporic writers, like Jung Chang and Madeleine Thien. In their work, punishments doled out between loved ones frequently take the form of public humiliation and forced self-correction, the very same things to which their parents' generation were once subjected. People who learned of these atrocities from their parents and inherited from them a basic skepticism about the nation-state find these same parents unpredictably defending and even championing ultranationalism, Mao, and now Xi's regime. The magnitude and casualness of these reversals differentiate Chinese trauma from that of other origins. Rehabilitation in the 1970s and '80s took place without a change to party rule or an international tribunal. Human dignity was restored—some possessions were returned, posts were reinstated, and apologies were issued—but the manner of that restoration was fraught. Those who had been victims were required to reenter the space of hyperbolic speech, vacuous banquets, and photo ops with dear leaders. They could be acknowledged, finally, but only if they were willing to recommit to the same propagandistic forms that underwrote their persecution.

Centering the Chinese diasporic consciousness means putting something plainly ugly on display. By *ugly*, as opposed to *damaged*, I refer—after Sianne Ngai’s theory of contemporary affects—to feelings that don’t lend themselves to catharsis. Some tragic forms render collective devastation sublime, elegant, and therefore recognizable. These include narratives of getting out from under, speaking truth to power, and newly fashioning the self, having identified and named a trauma. By contrast, stories of the Chinese diaspora blunder along, resistant to narratives of overcoming. Those who suffered most under the regime are also those who, *by design*, cannot describe what happened to them, to borrow a concept from Masha Gessen, writing about Russia. In China, the arts and sciences that facilitate self-knowledge—comparative literary studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology—were systematically dismantled and replaced by state-sanctioned versions overseen by party acolytes. Or else they were displaced by global English and theory, and by their representatives who sometimes wielded the authority of these disciplines to further delegitimize the narratives of oppression under the Chinese state.

BECAUSE NEITHER OFFICIAL nor personal narratives could be relied upon, many Chinese students and thinkers, myself included, found in literary criticism a mechanism for truth-telling by deduction: you can tell what has happened to us by what we are able to discern, and what we are willing to leave at the act of discernment. It did not seem like the truth would ever come to light. We felt that it would be overlooked or dismissed, like important legal evidence that happened to be formatted incorrectly. What then does it mean to read Li, Chow, and the literary-critical labors of two generations of Chinese writers and scholars at a time when the volume of spin in Sino-Western relations has finally tipped things into absolute unambiguity? On that score, the Hong Kong protests have marked a turning point. In the past half-decade, the party has repeatedly cited China's colonial traumas to stigmatize the protests in Hong Kong and to blame Westerners, including many longtime residents in China, for instigating them. Now ordinary people around the world can see the CCP's practiced use of self-victimization, of claiming "hurt feelings," to inoculate themselves against all criticism.

Other signs of change have emerged in the past few years. Literary magazines have felt emboldened to criticize China: the *London Review of Books*, provoked by the egregious alliances between neoliberal corporatism and Chinese power, published a biting dismissal of Facebook's pandering to the Chinese government (see John Lanchester's "Document Number Nine"). Campus newspapers in the West have begun to uncover Beijing's overreach both in the deliberative

procedures of higher education and in US immigration and admissions policies that unfairly target Chinese students. Campus reporting, such as Isaiah Schrader's *Yale Daily News* op-ed "Beijing Comes to Yale," has exposed the rhetorical savvy of mainland Chinese students studying in the US who wish to disrupt lectures and silence their peers. Increasingly, these rhetorical strategies feature the appropriation of left-liberal lingo. Last fall McMaster University, in Ontario, followed many other universities in deratifying their local Chinese Students and Scholars Association after the group attempted to silence a talk by a Uighur victim of persecution, accusing her of "playing the orphan" and "reversing black and white." The university's decision was also based on evidence that the association surveilled and intimidated students who spoke out against the Chinese government. Then an anonymous op-ed in their campus newspaper protesting the deratification called the decision "a classic example of racism, even though it is covert."

Even as the Trump Administration fumbles with Covid-19 and everything else, Beijing's rhetorical opportunism and self-branding during this crisis is being received with hilarity by members of the China-watching community. Proceeding as if gimmicks enjoy longer shelf lives than they actually do nowadays, the State Council Information Office in China has recently issued "The Record of Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2019," a thirteen-thousand-word report (in translation) that takes the US to task:

Such hurtful acts are a grave violation of international morality and human conscience and are despised by all people who hold on to kindness and justice. We advise the US authorities to restrain their arrogance and prejudice, make a clear-eyed examination of the United States' own human rights problems and fix them, instead of pointing fingers at other countries and making irresponsible remarks.

The accusations aren't wrong, per se, but they are nevertheless shameless in their hypocrisy, especially on the topic of race relations. Like Li's mother's reasoning on the hamsters, this political gesture has guarded itself against rebuttal by throwing the rules of argumentation out the window.

It's perverse to say it, but many Chinese people living in the US, and journalists and scholars who have worked in or on China, will meet this unambiguity with relief. It took forms of violence that are politically recognizable to liberal societies—Uighur ethnic cleansing propped up by so-called reeducation camps, a technological dystopia in which people are forced to scan themselves in and out of their own homes, and the effective end of Hong Kong's right to self-determination—for the West to acknowledge the nation-state's oppressions. Even Maoists living in the West, known as “tankies,” have to admit that things have gone too far in Xinjiang, although out of self-interest they attribute the

crimes of the Chinese state to something other than ideological persecution. These concessions have been received with bitterness and irony.

For these truths you don't need literary criticism at all, only guidance about where to look for information and whom to read. Mainstream and nonmainstream media are doing an astonishing job of reporting on Sino-Western relations and exposing bad-faith arguments on both sides—seeing them where they exist and not overstating the case where they do not. Those in higher ed and other cultural institutions no longer cynically round up every well-funded cross-cultural activity under the heading of Chinese soft power, or cower when such programs discriminate, censor, or serve as platforms for speechifying about One China. More of us are reading the scholarship produced in Chinese Western institutional collaborations without reflexively preaching about opening China to liberal thinking, though we're also more attuned to the surveillance that can happen in these settings and the elaborate shows that are put on for foreign scholars—junkets so tightly choreographed that even the student faces have undergone careful selection.

Our favored mediums of disinformation have also offered clarity in these matters. Across several social media platforms, social justice terms such as *racial imperialism*, *triggering*, and *gaslighting* are on heavy rotation among Chinese ultranationalists and state apologists. The webs they weave on their feeds are so tangled that you could almost

walk away believing that liberal democracies and autocracies are the same. But spin itself is now more visible. Social media's relentless categorical impulse means that extremely bad actors can be identified through tics and digital traces and quickly sidelined using labels that we all recognize (*trolls, bots, spammers, vandals*, et cetera). It has become easier to see the efforts of the 50 Cent Party—those paid 50¢ by the Chinese state for each post of misinformation and vitriol—to draw false equivalences wherever possible and capitalize on geopolitical tensions. Even the term *human flesh search* has entered into Western journalistic discourse, a reference to the state-backed vigilante groups that go after critics of Beijing by doxxing and cyberbullying them, siccing citizens on their friends and families on an unimaginable scale. (4) Another outcome is that more people can finally see how terms like *whiteness* or *liberals* or those describing any outdated class of activist are used to denigrate experts, scholars, and journalists writing on China who don't happen to be ethnically Chinese.

From where I'm standing, reportage on China across all media looks like it's moving toward proportionality and reason (this in spite of the recent purge of American journalists from China, and the resumption of retaliatory foreign policy, all of which will have terrifying consequences). Those accustomed to decades of adventitious revisionism and expungement under cover of darkness now stand blinking under the flare of a giant, collapsing star.

SO WHY READ literary criticism? Why not stick to journalism or history? Why not just read literature, for that matter, by writers such as Can Xue, Zhai Yongming, Ma Jian, Jung Chang, Mo Yan, Yang Lian, or Liu Cixin, who can report firsthand experiences with state-sponsored injustices and who have developed ingenious ways of settling debts with their home country?

Yiyun Li herself has done more than her share for the silent victims of the past through fiction alone. Her first novel, *The Vagrants*, from 2009, is set in 1979, three years after Mao's death, the Gang of Four's arrest, and the nominal restoration of order. It portrays a small-scale attempt at democracy, media transparency, and juridical reform through the strange inner lives of the main organizers. Their movement is quashed, the vicious acts leading up to the collapse revealing how easy it was to desert prisoners of conscience during those years, even when the tides seemed to be turning. Reading what happens to these people under the false hope of liberalization is like watching a brutal crime take place in broad daylight after everyone is declared safe and accounted for.

You can practice this kind of disambiguation even against the tyranny of people whose own tragedies shield them from criticism.

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Her second novel, *Kinder Than Solitude*, from 2013, is a murder mystery based on a famous cold case of thallium poisoning at Tsinghua University; it's set in 1989, during the Tiananmen Square massacre. *Kinder Than Solitude* does its political work not by glorifying the protesters but by demonstrating how an unrectified crime against humanity can make its way into interiority and habit. Four people's lives are changed by a murder that one of them may have committed, but the interest of the novel lies in its depiction of their menacing interiorities. Every character indulges in a relentless parsing of differences between appearance and actuality in matters of causation, motivation, and intent; in this way they all get to be contemptuous of one another's interpretive mistakes. On the one hand, this ruthless drive to disambiguate is a symptom of a political system that encouraged ordinary citizens to mobilize against one another for supposed "crimes" committed in their innermost thoughts. On the other hand—and from a vantage more

optimistic—this reflexive habit reveals that freedom of discernment does not have to be granted from on high. It requires no structural conditions to exist (except the ones that made Li's writing career possible). No one in Li's stories, however terrible or abject, can be deprived of the ability to say *You would be forgiven for thinking it happened this way, but in fact it happened that way.*

You can practice this kind of disambiguation even against the tyranny of people whose own tragedies shield them from criticism. In *Dear Friend*, Li reads Stefan Zweig's novella *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, offering an example of this secret power. In Zweig's story, a famous writer receives a mysterious letter from a dying woman who discloses a few secrets. Li glosses it like this:

She was his neighbor as a young girl and watched him live a busy life among women. Later, he mistook her for a prostitute. She bears his child, who dies in the flu epidemic of 1918; she, about to die herself, writes the letter to narrate her lifelong love.

When I first read the novella at fourteen, I was enamored of the woman's valiant loyalty. I now see what I missed. Rather than a story of unrequited love, it is a story about melodrama's transgression. The woman accuses the man of "almost inhuman forgetfulness," yet the necessity to forget is only human. What is truly inhuman is the woman's refusal. She has the courage to keep her melodrama intact; the callousness to imprison another person in it. . . . More damaging than becoming a victim of political or historical turmoil is becoming the casualty of someone else's memory.

Li recognizes the mawkishness in the woman's ambush on the famous writer: not only is she accusing him of a crime of which he was unaware, a crime he now has no recourse to correct, she overpowers the actual story, whatever it is, with her preemptive claim on psychological immunity. Li is showing us how anyone can be held hostage by the person most committed to their own melodrama. What do you do with someone like that? Such actions amount to what the literary critic Sharon Cameron, describing a similar case of overpowering in a Henry James novel, calls "lawlessness,

which may be surmised but may not be interfered with because there is no arena—no common space of meaningful articulation—in which it can be challenged.”

But of course it's not quite true that such tyranny can never be challenged. Cameron has challenged it with these words. Li has challenged it with hers. Their readings form an extralegal court. The tyranny unleashed by Li's mother, Zweig's unknown woman, King Lear, the Chinese nation-state, and so on, cannot be properly tried because it works by removing the conditions required for speaking up and for making a claim on behalf of the victim. The only consolation one can have is in correctly identifying the act as a subtle tyranny, which means that there are no practical outcomes for this kind of distinction making. At the same time, you can practice it *sub rosa*, anywhere you like.

APPRECIATING THE INHERENT futility of disambiguation puts us in the realm of moral reasoning, whose degraded state in intellectual discourse represents the final twist in Sino-Western relations.

Those who managed to leave the Chinese system established under the CCP and who sought refuge in the Western academy found many of its discursive forms recreated there. They faced a terrible dilemma: relax into the discourse of victimhood, because they are in fact true victims, or refuse to do so because they know the repercussions of its mobilization. Here's another version of this dilemma: agree with conservatives who say that the academy has turned Maoist in its obsession with purges and moral purity and overlook the reactionary ill will toward minoritarian scholarship, or disagree with them half-heartedly because one cannot afford to lose the gains made by post-Enlightenment critique to more intractable, less obvious, forms of victimization, silencing, and neglect. How can you denounce the academy's violent, often nonsensical energies—even if you know exactly how these will end—if its critical tools have helped you accurately name what has been done to you, once and for all?

For Rey Chow the urgency she recognized in centering the Chinese diaspora was connected to what she saw as the ongoing crisis of professional hypocrisy and Maoist anti-intellectualism in Anglo-American higher education: people in the academy who assume an oppositional view for the social power it confers, whose “victimization-in-solidarity-with-the-oppressed” is exposed in the “widening gap between the professed contents of their word and the upward mobility they gain from such words.” Part of her point was that this economy of moralizing comes as old news to

Chinese victims of the state. They have seen it all before, “the sanctification of victimization in the American academy and its concomitant rebuke of ‘theory.’” A version of our current disdain for intellectualism in favor of mere attitudinizing was already experienced by the Chinese, who also saw how the degradation of the institutions of truth-telling set up the conditions for being told by many, repeatedly, that their trauma never existed.

Chinese diasporic literary critics and writers, accustomed to moral prescriptivism as a *regime*—the politics of high-handed virtue signaling; the aggressive factionalism that emerges from the competition for ideological purity—struggle with the imperative to renounce moral philosophy tout court. In fact, they cannot do it. This is where the burden of discernment lies, in the places where most people have conceded moral judgment because they’ve been relentlessly assaulted by its counterfeits in the form of cant.

I’m not suggesting that the Chinese intellectual tradition prioritizes discernment over social control, or moral judgment over moral oppression. That’s plainly incorrect. ⁵ I’m just pointing out the tradition’s useful illiberalism. For better or worse, liberalism is a project that tries to remove the burden of moral disambiguation through political design by prioritizing innate rights over other forms of self-differentiation. Hypocrisy, which flourishes when displays of virtue are functionally indistinguishable from real acts of virtue, becomes part of what makes liberalism work,

as Jenny Davidson and other scholars of the Western 18th century have argued, because unvirtuous beliefs—their public expressions considered dangerous for society—are censured by social norms and thus only ever shared in private, if at all. Chinese intellectuals who rigorously uphold liberal values still find this hard to accept. They feel that perhaps the burden of moral judgment shouldn't be lifted. Moral discernment might still be the whole game, not just in the identification of a logical trap but in delineating discernment's actual lived environments and outcomes.

Haiyan Lee's 2014 monograph, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, represents, for example, a literary critic's unwillingness to give up moral discernment because the political stakes are too high. In it she diagnoses paragons of moral behavior—like the folk hero turned socialist do-gooder Lei Feng, who after his death in the early 1960s was portrayed in several major CCP propaganda campaigns—as “the root cause” of China's contemporary moral crisis, explaining that while the Cultural Revolution

bequeathed to us a trove of numbingly repetitive stories of betrayal—between parents and children, husbands and wives, teachers and students, friends and colleagues . . . Such failures are only the instantiations of the state-mandated suspension of moral agency. . . . In reckoning the ethical fallout of the Mao era, we need to speak not of individual moral infirmity but of the systemic smothering of the moral instinct.

For its target audiences, propaganda neutralizes the practice of moral reasoning by assuming its likeness—moralism—which in turn incapacitates the practice of intellection. This powerful insight into similitude is echoed in Yiyun Li's disturbing realization that she could easily have become a successful propaganda writer, her ability to create sentiment out of thin air evincing an intimate knowledge of its forms. Propaganda's power lies in its empirical closeness to the truth.

Haiyan Lee indicts moral prescriptivism for short-circuiting the labor required to encounter the other and grant her dignity—tasks you can only accept as labor if you appreciate that they are difficult to do. For this reason, “literature,” which offers a real simulation of these processes in lieu of the state's cheapened ones, “may yet prove to be the final cordon sanitaire between us and the banality of evil.” Combining Western hermeneutics, critical theory, and Chinese moral philosophy, this approach treats literary analysis as a game of simulation in which reading acts as a test for telling near-identical things apart, which should also mark the limit of one's critical acumen, and thus of one's powers.

WHILE AUTHORITARIAN regimes repress or seek to render purely utilitarian the kinds of discernment and distinction I mention above, there are some differences whose vicious parsing they encourage. Mao's Hundred Flowers Campaign famously established the precedent for closely analyzing writings for signs of ideological nonconformity and attaching the findings to a punitive apparatus.

Chinese (diasporic) writers understand therefore that "close reading" can mean technical hairsplitting or combing the text for minor, semantic transgressions to be handed over to a public tribunal. Fixating on certain details at the expense of compassionate understanding can also devolve into paranoia, if not outright victimization. In the case of Zweig's unknown woman, Li's identification of the woman's transgressions feels gratuitously cruel because, like all the dispossessed of the world, she has nothing but theatrics at her disposal. It might thus be more humane to see it, mark it, and pursue it no further.

Stanley Cavell executes a similar half-turn in his reading of *King Lear*. After he names the illogical structure that traps Cordelia, he limns the mistake of tracking such things too closely. Take, for example, Lear's connubial imprisonment with Cordelia in Act 4, Scene 3 ("We two along will sing like birds i' the cage: / When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, / And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live, / And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies"). In almost every way that counts, Lear has given up the world.

He is in prison about to die. And yet Lear has found a way to have everything he's ever wanted that's taboo, his daughter all to himself; his renunciation of the world becomes the condition of loving in secrecy. Incarceration provides the best kind of alibi. Is it humane to call this out? What Lear wants to get away with—keeping his daughter with him for a while longer; hiding this sin of desire under his greater, more obvious sins of rash misjudgment and petulance—is not such a serious crime if it is a crime at all.

Against the accusation of uselessness literary criticism can claim to teach the skill of inferential deduction: What had to happen for this kind of thought to be possible?

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Generally speaking, the sin hidden in a different, more obvious one—in the Lear example, the sin of wanting to be close to his daughter—is more flagrant, more deserving of punishment handed down by social or institutional tribunals if only they functioned more fairly or efficiently. But the observer who tries to see past the decoy has at their disposal

only those penalties belonging to imperfect discrimination. Shaking out distinctions when there are only so many penalties to work with—death, deprivation, bodily harm, shame, isolation—will always feel much too severe for subtle differences. There would be no need for impartiality if it is always a net good to expose what is purposely obscured.

Consciously or not, this insight has driven at least two generations of critics in the Chinese diaspora, people who are deeply confused by others who ask, at the end of long procedures of interpretive insight and readerly care, what good these procedures do if they don't lead to direct political action. It's a jarring question for people who have experienced politics as harm. Putting action downstream of literature vexes even those committed to revolutionary futures who believe that the transformative power of literature grows in relation to its indeterminacy—the when, where, and how of transformation. Whether this belief comes from systematic training or from habit and instinct, I and others with similar cultural backgrounds see in literary criticism a preclusive function as much as an enabling one. One version of this belief is that literary criticism occupies readers in proportion to the difficulty of the object of study and thus *potentially* keeps these same readers from either experiencing or committing harm. Another version of this belief is that the study of literature offers you many chances to trace causality, many chances to precisely understand the forces that compel and trap us so as to recognize them when they come again.

Against the accusation of uselessness literary criticism can claim to teach the skill of inferential deduction: What had to happen for this kind of thought to be possible? What has to be true so that this other thing can be true? In the existence of accurate discernment we can deduce a certain amount of justice in the world, configured even if briefly to allow felicitous discernment to take place. The person who practices discernment will not find that it translates into a normative ethics, a prescription for what one ought to do or how one ought to live, but they may learn over and over again that under certain conditions everyone has recourse to it. To practice discernment is free, in the sense that the late Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo meant it in his 1988 PhD dissertation "Aesthetics and Human Freedom." Liu, a literary critic of international renown before his longer stint, beginning in 1989, as a human rights activist, served four prison terms in China, totaling seventeen years, for his role in the Tiananmen Square protests and the Charter 08 movement; he was still in custody when he died in 2017. The untranslated "Aesthetics and Human Freedom" expresses an idea that has long linked Chinese human rights activism to autonomous literary criticism: aesthetics means the free exercise of objective judgment on subjective experiences, which are necessarily finite.

Follow the argument in Liu Xiaobo's entire body of writing to see that the exercise of discernment, judgment, and taste directly confronts the logic of propaganda. An examination of Chinese propaganda from the 20th and 21st centuries must

consider more than content alone (i.e., disinformation, jingoism, sloganeering, and so on) and rely on a type of analysis different from those ordinarily trained on mass communication media (for example, Noam Chomsky's model, which focuses on information dissemination and persuasion). China's propaganda operates through the structural muffling of discernment, not only through official repressive mechanisms but also in its total endorsement of clichés, which discourages critical thought through social norms.

In portraying the mental brinksmanship of those who are as likely to be victimized as they are to victimize others, Li, Chow, Lee, and many other critics are effectively creating conditions under which discernment would be considered impressive rather than rote or expected. Disambiguation is practiced as an art form. Rehearsed on the page, and learned for future reference, it stops short of enactment in real life, where a person can be subject to punishment or disciplinary action. It's not that discernment makes no difference in literary critical writing, or makes nothing happen, it's that whatever cashing in can be done of this discernment has already been done, and that literature, and literary criticism, is it.

The net effect of these acts of attentive, intelligent reading might be politically quietist, in the sense that Hannah Arendt describes in "Thinking and Moral Considerations." Arendt's startling insight in this lecture is that the ethics of thinking — What good does thinking do? Does it engender righteous

action?—remains unintelligible and, in a way, irrelevant, until we are tested by circumstance. The “faculty of judgment,” which is itself liberated by thinking, “may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for [herself], in the rare moments when the chips are down.” When the social order remains intact, “thinking as such does society little good. It does not create values, it will not find out, once and for all, what ‘the good’ is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct.” Imminent harm changes its valence: “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.” Accordingly, the procedures of discernment and judgment have no natural alliance to social order or to politics, which itself has no natural alliance to the good. Let me then extend the same logic to similar procedures found in literature and used by literary criticism. When the chips are down, these tools are useful for recognizing, at the bare minimum, what is being done to you, and to those around you, as it’s being done. It may even, as Arendt suggests, hold off catastrophes, at least for a little longer.

Forecasting the future of China-West relations or its impact on scholarship and higher education seems a bit theatrical and as such, as Zweig’s unknown woman shows, requires caution. The hope is that these relations and entanglements will leave at least one signature: literary criticism may be a last recourse for those trapped within the tragedies of

contemporary China, just as those same tragedies can finally test and illuminate literary criticism's capacity for truth telling. +

1. I use *Chinese diaspora* to refer mostly to Chinese who expatriated during or shortly after the Cultural Revolution and the democratic uprisings of 1989, or who have emigrated since the 2000s. Many of these figures have subsequently been exiled or self-exiled and are (sometimes self-identified) victims of the state. There is significant overlap between this group and long-standing Chinese communities in the US, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, and elsewhere. ↩
2. Mao's strategic anti-imperialism that pitted first worlds against third worlds "was to a great extent a product of the radical ideology of the Cultural Revolution, which, despite its expressed concern for the non-Chinese oppressed of the world, had as its chief interest the domestic legitimization of Mao as the 'great leader' of the Third World," as Xiaomei Chen writes in *Occidentalism: a Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*. ↩
3. Such impulses have to be contextualized, of course, as do the outlooks of people like Abimael Guzmán (who visited Beijing from 1965 to 1967) and Julia Kristeva (who visited in the 1970s) and groups like the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), US-based scholars and students who were sympathetic to Mao's experiments. There's a large body of work on global Maoisms and Mao Zedong Thought that traces the alliances of third worldism—its achievements, contingencies, and failures. It's not within my power to render judgment, and, anyway, it would be infelicitous to do so. ↩

4. It has become easier to see what happens when critics run afoul of both the American alt-right and the Chinese alt-left, and propagandists come out of the woodwork to rain vicious attacks on a particular individual. This is what befell the *New Yorker* staff writer Jiayang Fan during the Covid-19 crisis. Fan's documentation of the trials faced by her mother in her care facility earned her the depiction of a faithless dog on both sides—for daring to critique America, even as she enjoyed its benefits, and for daring (in her other writings) to critique her motherland, thus bringing a death wish upon her own mother. ↩

5. See Zhang Longxi's 2005 *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* for insight into this tension within the Chinese intellectual tradition between predigested wisdom and oppressive orthodoxy. ↩