

INTRODUCTION

On Futures, Literature, and Anticipation

It is easy to gather a kind of energy from the rapid disintegration of an old, destructive and frustrating order. But these negative energies can be quickly checked by a sobering second stage, in which what we want to become, rather than what we do not now want to be, remains a so largely unanswered question. . . . This is of course much easier to project than to do, but it is in fact far from easy, under current pressures and limits, even to project it. Yet one immediately available way of creating some conditions for its projection, and perhaps for its performance, is now . . . to push past the fixed forms in the only way that is possible, by trying to understand their intricate and diverse formations, and then to see, through and beyond them, the elements of new dynamic formations.

Raymond Williams, Afterword to *Modern Tragedy*

YE YONGLIE'S *Little Smarty Travels to the Future* (1978) was as much a jump forward in imagination as it was a resumption of aspirations of the past.¹ The first science fiction book for children published after the end of the Cultural Revolution, *Little Smarty* recounts the adventures of a young journalist on his tour to Future City, where cars fly across the clear sky and an artificial moon brightens the nights. In this fantasyland of technologically induced happiness, giant vegetables and synthetic rice have solved all food shortage problems, and manual labor is performed by robots. Let us imagine a child reading about these wonders some place in China at the turn of the 1980s: a nine-year-old squatting on the edge of a dusty alley, leafing through a tiny booklet bought for a few pennies at a nearby kiosk or borrowed from a relative or friend. How did those water-drop-shaped plastic cars intermingle with the powerful hands of revolutionary heroes and the dignified protagonists of old vernacular novels that also crowded the illustrated booklets so popular at the time?

As in many other places in the world, fantasies of technological happiness were common in China in popular science writings and children's stories in the 1950s. But they might have seemed new to this nine-year-old, for they later largely disappeared from Chinese children's publications and were replaced by celebrations of collective labor rather than automation as the means to build socialism. *Little Smarty* did acknowledge, if briefly, the manual work of previous generations. Precious because it had made Future City possible, manual labor had nonetheless been superseded. Ye Yonglie's tale thus worked as a transitional piece, exposing the contradiction between the physical labor that was up to that point regarded as indispensable to transform the world and the specialized knowledge that was about to be seen, once again, as the most appropriate means to push it forward.

Little Smarty is among the texts that inaugurated the post-Mao era. Although it might be dismissed as a symptom of the ideology of modernization and expertise that was to become dominant in the 1980s, it is not exclusively the product of that transitional time. Distributed in three million copies between 1978 and 1982, *Little Smarty* was the updated version of a draft that the author had first compiled while studying chemistry at Beijing University in 1961. Its existence is emblematic of many works first drafted in the 1960s but only completed and released in the late 1970s that call attention to underexplored continuities between the Maoist and post-Mao era. Discolored copies of the booklet, worn at the spine and corners, are currently traded online, inviting us to reflect on its durability: it may owe its popularity to the charm of futuristic trivia or to nostalgia for a time in which speed appeared as remote as a science fiction plot.

Little Smarty challenges conventional historical periodization and therefore serves as an excellent point of departure for *Tales of Futures Past*, which investigates how visions of the future have shaped diverse genres, texts, and editorial practices of Chinese literature from the mid-twentieth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century. When and how was the future deemed knowable, or at least imaginable, in contemporary China, and what were the aesthetic, ethical, and political consequences of envisioning the future for the writing and reading of literature? In *Little Smarty*, the future is a separate world that can be reached by means of a superfast vehicle—a nuclear-powered hydrofoil. It is a promised land realized through rational planning. The booklet thus exemplifies a common way in which the future was represented in twentieth-century Chinese literature—as a technologically developed, socially cohesive, and economically successful place. In Western-language Chinese literary studies, this

concept of a perfect new world that one could strive toward or even plan ahead has often been seen as inimical to the nuances expected of literary writing. It is undeniable that the very idea that one could plan economic, social, and cultural life has led to oppression, persecution, and massive loss of life. Tales of development, nation-building, and advancement toward socialism have therefore often been contrasted to personal expression, individual satisfaction, and even sheer survival, all of them rooted in the present.

Such a dialectic of teleological vision and personal expression has been theorized as one of the main tensions characterizing twentieth-century Chinese literature, the fundamental features of which have been defined by such pairings as “the epic and the lyrical” and “the heroic and the quotidian.”² Even though temporality is not a central concern of the scholars who have proposed these categories, and even though each category has been used to refer to a complex variety of styles and themes, they can be associated with contrasting dimensions of time. “Epic” and “heroic” have often been used to describe texts that assume or even glorify a forward march, or—to borrow from historian of the Soviet Union Sheila Fitzpatrick—“life as it was becoming, rather than life as it was.”³ These are tales of movement and action, in which the concern for groups or collectivities is paramount. “Lyrical” and “quotidian,” by contrast, have been used to describe more intimate writings devoted to either recollecting the past or conveying mundane desires rooted in the present and in the everyday. These are texts focusing on the exploration of the individual psyche; they problematize the very possibility of epochal change and hence have often been viewed as subversive of hegemonic narratives of nation-building, development, and progress.

That such dialectical tensions are at work in twentieth-century Chinese literature is an attractive proposition that has led to insightful readings across various genres. But the polarity between a teleological future and an immediate present leaves out a crucial aspect of futurity, one that is not at odds with the personal and with everyday life. My central claim is that twentieth-century Chinese literature imaginatively reconfigures and is institutionally shaped by two different though related notions of the future: the first understood as a “destination,” a condition of higher perfection, a time and place that is better than the present; the second, as “anticipation,” the expectations that permeate life as it unfolds. Understanding the future as a destination means conflating it with notions of progress and a strong nation, with the utopian visions promoted by the Maoist and post-Maoist developmental state, and more generally,

with a preconceived endpoint that is propagated, at times even imposed, by a center of power. This is the way the future is commonly understood in relation to twentieth-century Chinese literature. Anticipation, however, involves the fears and aspirations that shape lives and narratives in their very unfolding, and the perception of the possibilities and limits that inform human actions and are often mediated by literary texts. It engages an aspect of the future that is phenomenological and affective rather than ideological; it is embodied and practiced rather than merely narrated or projected onto a subsequent time-space. Anticipation is both structural and subjective and thus calls attention to the contingencies that bind human agency. It is a dimension of the temporal economy regulating modern work routines and private lives but also an imaginative site permitting the open-ended search for new forms of emancipation. Anticipation dislodges the common identification of futurity with hegemonic visions of progress.

By complementing a notion of the future as destination with one understood as anticipation, *Tales of Futures Past* aims to enrich our understanding of the relationship between literary texts and their historical contexts and to open up new methods of reading that combine the textual, institutional, and experiential aspects of literature. Anticipation is an inherently plural concept, irreducible to a single definition. Its diverse modes shape contemporary Chinese literary culture. Parsing these modes involves detailing how literary institutions affect the labor of writing through aesthetic forecasts that are often conveyed as if they were infallible, even as they turn out not to be. It entails reconsidering our very concept of literature, understanding it not solely as a body of texts but as a collaborative practice involving different literary professionals—editors, translators, critics, and writers—whose ideas and feelings about what Chinese literature ought to become or how it ought to move forward proved decisive in determining what was published, collected, and read. Parsing these modes in fiction, in particular, means teasing out overlooked aspects of how narratives work—the ways in which they convey forward-oriented emotions and how these emotions, in turn, might affect readers. This book proposes, then, a reconceptualization of contemporary Chinese literature and futurity around a contingent and intimate perception of the anticipatory dimension of time. It explores the ways in which emotions and ideas related to what may come next find concrete expression in a variety of Chinese texts and institutional contexts, ranging from science fiction to translation journals and from modernist writing to environmental literature, with the aim of tracing overlooked continuities throughout the second half of

the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century and thus refining our understanding of Chinese socialist and postsocialist literary cultures.⁴

Although contemporary China may seem disconnected from the socialist past, it is still deeply shaped by it. The complexity of this condition urges us to open up notions of Chinese socialist and postsocialist cultures to further scrutiny, deepening our exploration of what they entailed and continue to entail for the people who made and experienced them. This book hopes to contribute to the elaboration of better ways to apprehend these cultural formations.

Modes of Anticipation within the Modern

At the turn of the 1980s, while popular science magazines in China offered optimistic forecasts on life in the twenty-first century, much critical discourse in Europe and America revolved around the crisis of the idea of the future. This sense of crisis was partly a reaction to the neoliberal restructuring of the workforce and to waning social and political alternatives to global capitalism. In his afterword to the 1979 edition of *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams noted “the slowly settling loss of any acceptable future” that accompanies the capitalist economic order’s “defaulting on its most recent contract: to provide full employment, extended credit and high social expenditure as conditions for a political consensus of support.”⁵ Arguably, only a small portion of the world population had enjoyed those privileges in the first place, yet Williams’s assessment prefigured what was to happen in the United Kingdom under Thatcher and still applies to the swelling waves of unemployment that followed the 2008 financial crisis worldwide.

Pronouncements about the loss of the future pervaded the cultural debates about the onset of the postmodern era. In 1979, art curator and critic Kim Levin wrote about the demise of modernism in terms of a loss of “faith in the technological future” and the declining possibility of the emergence of original forms of art. Zygmunt Bauman wrote of a postmodern sensibility characterized by a sense of “perpetual present.” For Fredric Jameson too postmodernism was predicated on the bankruptcy of the concept of the new and on the complete integration of the economic and cultural spheres.⁶ These pronouncements are heterogeneous in tone and intent, but they share a few basic assumptions: a radical epochal change was underway; the notion of the future as an open-ended horizon that characterized modern temporality was waning; the modernist belief in the possibility of preserving an autonomous space for art and

the idea that this very autonomy would enable art to transform social and political life were becoming obsolete. The conditions for these changes had been laid down in the 1960s, but their consequences only became fully apparent from the 1970s onward.

More recent theorizations of modernism have deemphasized the rupture brought about by the postmodern and have argued for a more nuanced relation between the forward-oriented temporality of modernity and modernism itself. For T. J. Clark, for instance, modernism was already characterized by a deep ambivalence toward the “charisma of technique” and confronted with “an ending—a crushing and freezing of revolutionary energies” during the interwar years. Clark cautiously suggests that modernism and postmodernism might in fact stand in the same “undecidable relation of ambivalence toward the main forms of modernity, of bourgeois industrial society.”⁷ The spatial turn of postmodernism may have led to a disengagement with problems of temporality, but since the early 2000s scholars in postcolonial studies, literary and cultural studies, queer studies, and philosophy have returned to grapple with the political and ethical implications of privileging a particular dimension of time over others—with what we could call the “chronopolitics of culture.” An important point of contention in recent debates is whether a preoccupation with the future might serve as a site of alterity, interruption of the habitual, and progressive change or whether it rather signifies the extension of oppressive models of social and biological reproduction; whether the concern with the yet-to-come can help redefine the functions and forms of contemporary literature or whether a focus on the immediate present is better suited to respond to the contingencies shaping human creativity and life in liberal-capitalist societies.⁸

Tales of Futures Past proposes a concept of anticipation that aims to carve out a middle ground between the contrasting positions that emerge from these debates, a middle ground that I believe is best suited to account for the fractured temporalities and perception of belatedness that characterize Chinese literature under the conditions of socialism and postsocialism. As the ensuing chapters will show, my proposition emerges primarily from a detailed engagement with various texts and institutional contexts of contemporary Chinese literature, but it also draws on several other disciplinary fields. In *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (a book whose title has inspired my own), Reinhart Koselleck has argued that historical time is constituted by the disjunction and tension between a “space of experience” and a “horizon of expectation,” terms that correspond to the past in the present and the future in the

present.⁹ In Koselleck's view, the gap between these two aspects of the perception of time widened dramatically in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe; becoming modern meant experiencing time as open toward an unknown future, in which history lost its explanatory status. Any conclusion drawn from the past appeared irrelevant after the French Revolution, which "liberated a new future, whether sensed as progressive or as catastrophic, and in the same fashion a new past."¹⁰ The categories that Koselleck proposes might appear inseparable from the main tenets of the Enlightenment, particularly from the belief that changes for the better were accelerating and that human beings were increasingly in control of their history. But they can also be seen as metahistorical categories, variably related to one another and thus transposable to different post-Enlightenment (or non-Enlightenment) contexts. The dissolution of the *topos* of progress itself represents one variation of their relationship.¹¹ One of the premises of *Tales of Futures Past*, then, is that the transformations, crisis, and demise of the Enlightenment notion of progress open up different configurations and variable distances between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. This study explores how these configurations and distances are envisioned in Chinese literary texts. Like Koselleck's "horizon of expectation," my concept of anticipation indicates a forward-oriented dimension of the perception of time inscribed in the present, shaped by past experiences, and encompassing such private and public affects as hope and fear.

Whereas Koselleck aims to explain the changes in the perception of historical time that occurred with the onset of modernity, the anthropologist David Scott adopts the notion of "horizon of expectation" to discuss transformations of temporality "*within* the modern [itself], from one rhythm of modern time to another: from a moment, for example, when the future appears guaranteed by the present to one in which it seems undermined by it."¹² Scott claims that narratives of anticolonial struggle elaborated before independence were premised on the possibility of absolute resistance to modern colonial power and were hence "emplotted" as "romances" with a happy ending—that is, complete emancipation—without taking into account that revolutionary historical figures had no alternative but to act within narrow conceptual horizons; they had no choice but to become "conscripts of modernity." The shift from anticoloniality to postcoloniality that defines our present, however, requires a change in narrative mode from romance, which assumes complete overcoming, to tragedy, which assumes that time is uneven and that human action is subjected to contingencies and chance. Only by reassessing the present horizon of expecta-

tion in ways that account for the limits of human agency can a different, even if imperfect, future be imagined.¹³

Scott's discussion offers important suggestions for the study of twentieth-century Chinese literary culture. His notion that one cannot choose to operate outside the modern serves as a persuasive response to the idea of "alternative modernities" that, while valuable for the ways in which it foregrounds local agency, risks obscuring the relations of power within which alternatives had and have to be sought. Scott urges us to understand modernity not as a force that "occurs" and to which individuals "respond in more or less creative ways" but rather as "the transformed terrain on which these creative responses are being enacted [and which] is itself positively constituting (or rather, reconstituting) these subjects, their new objects of desire, and the new concepts that shape the horizon of that desire."¹⁴ Following this trail, *Tales of Futures Past* locates the "transformed terrain" of modernity in the institutional processes that shape contrasting visions of literary and political futures to which individuals contribute and respond. Scott's work also alerts us to the relation between expectations and the ways that scholarly questions are formulated: expectations and hopes shape our objects of study, our field of scholarship, our own work, however implicitly and however unaware of them we might be. Anti-colonial and Chinese socialist revolutionary narratives shared a perspective of total emancipation that may still affect the way scholarly problems are defined, whether in the form of a lingering appeal for those who once embraced them or as an enduring repulsion for those who rejected them, hindering a more open-ended reelaboration of possible futures. Even though Koselleck and Scott address completely different contexts, this book draws from their work two major premises. First, expectations about the future (however diverse and inchoate) find concrete manifestation in political and cultural practices; therefore, the future can be a valid topic of historical and literary inquiry.¹⁵ Second, such expectations affect the ways in which academic questions are formulated and scholarly narratives are "emplotted"; hence, we had better pay attention to the narrative modes we employ.

Whereas Koselleck and Scott help define anticipation as a cluster of forward-oriented intellectual, political, and emotional dispositions, a third inspiration for my use of the term comes from the work of medical anthropologists who have defined anticipation as an affective state emerging from practices related to health, technoscience, and biopolitics; it is "an excited forward looking subjective condition characterized as much by nervous anxiety as a con-

tinual refreshing of yearning, of 'needing to know.' Anticipation is the palpable effect of the speculative future on the present. . . . *As an affective state, anticipation is not just a reaction, but a way of actively orienting oneself temporally.*"¹⁶ Adams and others argue that anticipation is intensified by the peculiar "management of time" characterizing our present. A "regime of anticipation" denotes a condition of deep uncertainty under neoliberal regimes but also a heightened desire to preempt contingencies, a desire nurtured by technological innovations supposedly able to do so. The basic condition of a regime of anticipation is precariousness in work and economic life and a broader access (for those who can afford it) to more refined technologies to predict, extend, and reproduce biological life. Defined as one of "the practices employed to navigate daily life and to sustain relations, the practices which are at the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such,"¹⁷ anticipation is a temporal orientation resulting from economic and technological conditions that affect bodies at the capillary level. This is the mode of anticipation explored in Chapter 5.

Throughout the chapters that follow, anticipation serves as a heuristic category that takes on different guises in the literary contexts examined—not, that is, as a totalizing principle but rather a cluster of dispositions that assume mutable features in the historical moments and texts considered. I take anticipation to encompass the perception of simultaneous uncertainty and inevitability that prompts individuals to write. It includes a variety of modes of feeling, depicting time as it rushes forward, sometimes manifesting itself as hope or possibility, sometimes as constraint or even paralysis. It is a state of exertion that is neither limited to personal anxieties and aspirations nor reducible to the technologies that are meant to soothe or nurture them. It encompasses thematic, formal, and practical aspects of literary culture. Bridging the textual and the social, the notion of anticipation allows us to explore the ways in which writers and other literary professionals have attempted to control literary time, making and responding to political and artistic forecasts in socialist and postsocialist China. Finally, it provides a thread to weave patterns where others have seen ruptures, without discounting the new motifs that have emerged at each turn.

Anticipation as Literary Practice

In an often quoted essay, Leo Ou-fan Lee has argued that a "new temporal orientation" characterized by an "implicit equation of newness with a new temporal continuum from the present to the future" was introduced in China during

the 1910s.¹⁸ A faith in progress, accompanied by a sense of belonging to the distinct epoch of a forward-oriented present, constituted an essential component of early twentieth-century intellectuals' visions of modernity. This new consciousness of time was responsible for the limited appeal of literary modernism in China. Drawing on Matei Calinescu, Lee defines modernism, or aesthetic modernity, as a rebellion against the ideology of historical modernity. In his view, "Chinese writers did *not* choose (nor did they feel the necessity) to separate the two domains of historical and aesthetic modernity in their pursuit of a modern mode of consciousness and modern forms of literature."¹⁹ For Lee, the orientation toward the future translated into a notion of the present as homogeneous time and led to the predominance of a discourse of realism.

This emphasis on a radical rupture with tradition in the early twentieth century has since been questioned. Scholars of Chinese classical thought have shown that there was no such thing as a monolithic Chinese "cyclical" time that was allegedly replaced by a new model of linear temporality.²⁰ A broad range of modern fictional genres in the late Qing has been documented, and the version of literary modernity promoted by the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s—a version emphasizing the use of vernacular language in place of classical Chinese and imported ideas of progress, science, and democracy—has been criticized for having repressed earlier, more imaginative manifestations.²¹ Authors previously marginalized from the canon because of their apparent orientation toward the past have been restored as belonging to the modern.²² Highly representative figures such as Lu Xun have been shown to have an ambivalent relation toward ideas of historical progress, and this very ambivalence has been seen as constitutive of their "modernism."²³ Perhaps most radically, Michel Hockx has claimed that what is generally defined as "May Fourth literature" never existed, in the sense that "the variety of literary products to be found in the journals of the late 1910s and early 1920s cannot possibly be covered by referring only to a single mainstream, a single genre, or a single sociopolitical event that occurred in 1919."²⁴ The highly Westernized, socially committed realist fiction that was later canonized as the mainstream "May Fourth literature" was only one among various modes of writing competing in the literary field.²⁵ In short, the early twentieth century is now seen as internally varied and in intimate dialogue with the literature of the previous centuries. Historians have shown that the time of the modern is not exclusively forward-oriented. In *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, Prasenjit Duara has argued that the modern perception of linear time creates an anxiety that is then allayed through a cir-

cular return to mythical origins. Capitalist modernity and the diffusion of the nation-state engendered a process of stretching back into the past in the effort to make local and ancient what had been global and historically contingent. The modern nation-state, Duara reminds us, justifies itself through a discourse of timeless authenticity that is simultaneously retrieved from an invented past and projected forward. The ideology of the nation-state conceals the simultaneously forward- and backward-looking gesture that locates in antiquity what does not yet exist.²⁶

It is not my intent to reinstate the vision of a temporal rupture in the early twentieth century that others have so convincingly torn apart. Leo Ou-fan Lee's statement on the futural orientation of the modern has been complicated in many ways; however, his suggestion of a contrast between historical and literary modernity continues to inspire many assessments of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. The very dichotomy of realism and modernism in Chinese literary studies is based on the assumption that an emphasis on the future has led to privileging the first. Although this is well documented for the first half of the twentieth century,²⁷ one of the arguments of *Tales of Futures Past* is that a forward-oriented temporality does not necessarily lead to a privileging of realism. In the light of the literary practices explored in the following chapters, realism and modernism ought to be rethought as less dichotomous, more interdependent terms. Rather than equating the emphasis on the future with the repression of alternatives and the homogenization of literary forms, this book shows how diverse modes of anticipation fracture the present in socialist and postsocialist China. This move entails shifting the focus from ideology to the nitty-gritty details attending to the emergence of literary formations, a task undertaken by Chapters 1 and 3.

The Ends of Literature

The work of anticipation involves imagining a different literature as a means of imagining a different world and is premised on intense negotiations about the "ends" of Chinese literature itself—with ends understood as the boundaries between what is literature and what is not, the aims it is supposed to serve, and the limitations that might hinder its flourishing and lead to its exhaustion. Such negotiations, in turn, inevitably shape our object of study. This book defines literature broadly, drawing on a wide range of writings, including children's tales, drama and film scripts, essays, novels and short stories. Chinese contemporary

literature is often treated as a corpus of alternative narratives of major historical turns or traumatic events, an approach that has often reduced literature to a position ancillary to history. It is true that many contemporary works are set in dramatic historical moments and register epochal transformations. But if literature is imprinted by traces of the past, it is also the place where the everyday is shown to be sustained by promises and fantasies of future perfection. Hence, literary writing will not be treated as an alternative archive but rather as a social act—as writers' and other professionals' medium to intervene in the public arena and participate in a national and global literary field. I borrow Sheldon Pollock's term "literary culture" and follow his suggestion that "the literary needs to be understood as a historically situated practice: how people have done things with texts."²⁸ I am also inspired by Michel Hockx, who in his study of early twentieth-century Chinese literature endorses approaches that "seek to describe aesthetic processes of literary creation and reception from a rigidly historical perspective, on the basis of a thoroughly documented understanding of the *practices* of writing. They do not take any concept of literature, nor any kind of canon or mainstream, for granted. . . . They allow historical literary views to emerge from the discourses and practices analyzed and described."²⁹

Discussing science fiction, popular science writings, and children's literature under socialism, Chapter 1 demonstrates the historical contingency of the boundaries of "literature," showing that the problem of whether these genres belong to the domain of literature was widely debated among its practitioners. Although aiming at comprehending "how people have done things with texts," the readings I propose are inevitably informed by my own understanding of what literature does and how it works, an understanding that is susceptible to ongoing revisions in dialogue with the texts and contexts examined. In *The Literary in Theory*, Jonathan Culler traces a history of definitions of literariness in Western criticism from the emphasis on self-reflexivity in the 1960s to a focus on questions of identity in the 1990s.³⁰ Noting that the literary cannot be reduced to objective textual qualities, Culler draws on Adorno to suggest that a concern with "redemption"—that is, with "the opening of the subject to the nonidentical, to alterity, the other, the indeterminate, or some other site or event beyond instrumental reason" is central to it. The reality of redemption is unimportant: redemption is "a figure that enables such discourse."³¹ Culler suggests that literariness might consist in the openness to an undefined alterity, implicitly relating it to notions of potentiality and futurity, but concludes his essay with an invitation to readdress the question to the literary text itself:

“it seems to me quite possible that a return to ground the literary in literature might have a critical edge, since one of the things we know about literary works is that they have the ability to resist or to outplay what they are supposed to be saying.”³²

Although Culler’s suggestion echoes Pollock’s and Hockx’s proposals to approach the literary without a preconceived notion of what it should be, it prioritizes close reading as a process of bringing to light the contradictions intrinsic in the texts themselves. But such an elevated term as “redemption” recalls Rita Felski’s definition of a “theological” style of reading as “any strong claim for literature’s other-worldly aspects, though usually in a secular rather than explicitly metaphysical sense. Simply put, literature is prized for its qualities of otherness, for turning its back on analytical and concept-driven styles of political or philosophical thought as well as our everyday assumptions and commonsense beliefs.”³³ Felski is skeptical of approaches that posit the value of literature in its difference from other kinds of discourse.³⁴ She is not persuaded that “the literary work enables an encounter with the extraordinary, an imagining of the impossible, an openness to pure otherness, that is equipped with momentous political implications.”³⁵ Drawing a separation between literature and daily forms of communication comes, in her view, at the expense of “showcasing its impotence.”³⁶ In contrast to such theological approaches, Felski proposes four modes of textual engagement that she considers closer to how readers actually experience texts. These modes are drawn from the consideration “that reading involves a logic of *recognition*; that aesthetic experience has analogies with *enchantment* in a supposedly disenchanted age; that literature creates distinctive configurations of social *knowledge*; that we may value the experience of being *shocked* by what we read. These four categories . . . denote multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts.”³⁷ For Felski, then, the literary needs to be redefined in accord with readers’ diverse experiences, although she acknowledges that these experiences are never as discrete as her taxonomy suggests; indeed, the modes she traces may very well interact within the same reading experience. Although reconstructing readers’ reactions to texts is notoriously difficult, Felski’s categories are helpful in that they attempt to account for the ways in which literature affects readers. Her four modes are not incompatible with the notion that something “beyond instrumental reason” (Culler) is central to literary writing: the opening up to forms of “alterity” can emerge from an affective, multilayered reaction to a text encompassing recognition, enchantment, new knowledge, and shock that

would be fully enmeshed in daily life, variously susceptible to its historical contexts and permeable to other discourses and therefore not at all “other-worldly.” Indeed, the very articulation of that something “beyond instrumental reason” that defines the value of the literary ought to be seen as the result rather than the premise of concrete reading experiences and social processes.

The approaches that I have outlined emphasize three different dimensions of the literary: the first focuses on how literary value emerges from historically situated practices involving authors and other literary professionals (Pollock and Hockx); the second prioritizes the texts themselves (Culler); and the third tries to account for readers’ affective responses (Felski). None of these approaches alone can fully account for the complex dynamics attending to the writing and reading of literature, but however diverse they may be, they are not incompatible with one another. Therefore, my strategy has been to combine them so as to retrace the social practices, textual figures, and reading experiences that enabled the discourse of the literary in contemporary China. My ultimate aim is to show that an eclectic approach to Chinese literary culture—a “hybrid” method combining a concern for literary institutions, writers, texts, and readers, prioritizing one or the other depending on the context at hand—is possible and even desirable. Thus, Chapters 1–3 focus on editorial and authorial strategies, while Chapters 4 and 5 offer close readings of texts that self-reflexively reconsider the functions of literature through representations of scenes of reading and writing.

Tales of Futures Past explores not only the debates in contemporary China over what constitutes the “literary” but also the “ends”—the goals and limitations—of literature. Both have been variously reconceived as the country transitioned toward socialism in the 1950s and away from it over the last three decades. This redefinition has been accompanied by an anxiety over inadequacy and fear of decline, partly born out of the perceived belatedness of Chinese writing in relation to the global literary sphere and partly from a sorely felt erosion of spaces of autonomy brought about by the politicization of culture under Maoism and by its commercialization from the mid-1980s onward. In seeking to account for the different meanings of the “ends”—as boundaries, goals, and fears of exhaustion—of Chinese literature, *Tales of Futures Past* explores not only the past visions of the future emerging from fictional narratives but also the assumptions concerning the possibilities and limits of Chinese literature—the anticipatory tales about literature that shape texts, debates, and editorial practices.

Each of the following chapters details how different modes of anticipation find concrete expression in the institutional and textual aspects of contemporary Chinese literature, with a focus on fictional genres. The term “contemporary” refers to post-1949; Chapters 1 and 2, however, trace continuities across the 1949 divide even as they document how socialist literary institutions formalized and furthered certain practices. Similarly, if the sense of a sharp break after the end of Maoism was created through cultural and ideological work, literary practices could not but build on what had been put in place in the preceding decades. Therefore, Chapters 3–5 seek to identify the legacies of socialism in Chinese post-socialist literary culture from the 1990s onward. Anticipation finds expression not solely in the forward-oriented rhetoric of socialist realism—in which the future was supposed to be “guaranteed by the present,” to borrow David Scott’s terms—but also in texts that show how the future “seems undermined” by present conditions, as in the dystopian environmental fiction discussed in Chapter 5.

As recent theorizations of the “sinophone” have pointed out, the category of “Chinese” literature is problematic because it privileges the writings in Mandarin produced in a Chinese “homeland” over the variety of textual and visual cultures in other Sinic accents, both within China and elsewhere in the world.³⁸ This study focuses on the PRC not to reassert the centrality of Mandarin and the mainland to Chinese literary and cultural studies but rather to show how transnational exchanges shape national literary practices. Chapter 1 uncovers forgotten publications from the 1950s to the 1980s dealing with the technological future of humanity, including popular science magazines, children’s literature, science fiction, and films. The chapter demonstrates that Chinese socialist culture participated in an imagination of the future widely shared across the Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War. Chapter 2 argues that translation functions as an anticipatory practice by mapping particular literary futures onto specific geographies. The future, then, is not only a time but also a place. The chapter situates Chinese socialist literary culture from the 1950s to the 1970s within a global network of literary exchanges stretching from Cuba to France and from India to the Congo, showing how diverse regions were identified as more or less advanced—politically or literarily—at specific historical junctures. It thus unveils the crucial role of translators in promoting the shift from socialist internationalism to literary cosmopolitanism in the late 1970s. Chapter 3 details how expectations of what literature ought to become played a large role in motivating editorial selections in the 1980s. Through an examination of letters between editors and writers, memoirs, and interviews, the

chapter historicizes the emergence of modernist avant-garde fiction and foregrounds the collaborative practices that made it possible. A rhetoric of “future making” structured the work of literary journals and affected the lives and careers of writers. These first three chapters build on one another by discussing how technological, political, and literary horizons of expectation shaped editorial and writing practices. Above all, these chapters attempt to retrace the roles of translators and editors whose work generally goes unacknowledged. The task of explicating practices takes precedence to a certain extent over that of close literary analysis. Although many of the texts discussed deserve a fuller engagement, it seems more urgent to account for the complex dynamics of negotiation and collaboration and the myriad tensions between creative agents and institutions in socialist China.³⁹

Since the late 1980s, Chinese literary culture has been changed by market reforms. Private publishers have emerged, and writers have increasingly come to rely on royalties rather than state stipends and have become more invested in expanding their readership. In more recent years, online publication venues and portable digital media have been transforming how people read and write, weakening the authority of state institutions, academics, and professional critics in assessing what constitutes literature and in affecting its success. As the chronological focus of the book moves into the present, the complexity and fragmentariness of our time and the lack of historical distance has compelled me to rely less on the investigation of formative processes and to engage instead in close readings of texts that cogently reflect on the nature and functions of literature in contemporary times. The shift from distant to close reading in Chapter 4 also reflects the increasing valorization of self-expression in Chinese literary discourse since the 1980s.

Chapter 4 contrasts the rhetoric of the future with the recursive temporal structures in the short stories and novellas of the late 1980s and early 1990s by Wang Meng and Ge Fei. Relating these recursive structures to the figure of the “strange loop” in Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, I suggest that their mode of anticipation manifests a fear of loss—of culture, identity, and life itself. This chapter offers a different perspective on Chinese modernism than that examined in Chapter 3, demonstrating the variety of ways in which the relationship between literary experimentation, foreign literatures, and Chinese literary tradition was understood in 1980s through the early 1990s in China. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a close reading of Ge Fei’s 2011 novel, *End of Spring in Jiangnan*, exploring its use of fog as a poetic trope, as a concrete

manifestation of environmental pollution, and as a vector of social toxicity in postsocialist China. There is probably no other contemporary Chinese author experimenting with intricate temporal structures to the same extent as Ge Fei. He has generally been appreciated for his concern with the elusive nature of memory and his “fascination with the marginal moment between the past and the present.”⁴⁰ The reading of his novella *Jinse* (Brocade zither, 1993) proposed in Chapter 4 and of *Chunjin Jiangnan* (End of spring in Jiangnan, 2011) in Chapter 5, however, reveals that his writing is equally concerned with capturing the states of apprehension, fear, and hope that affect how characters act. In this respect, Ge Fei’s texts provide compelling instances of the anticipatory dimensions of fictional narratives. *End of Spring in Jiangnan* registers the threats posed by the current environmental crisis in China with a rare intensity, asking what kind of literary language might be appropriate to address the toxic haziness of air and social relations in contemporary China. In sum, Ge Fei’s fiction offers an ideal lens to reconsider the legacy of the cultural practices discussed in the earlier chapters, bringing together the literary, historical, technological, and environmental modes of anticipation that form the thematic core of this book.