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Introduction: Corruption, Realism, and the Return of the Political Novel

“Almost invariably, every book on contemporary China is about corruption.” A scholar writing in squeaky-clean Singapore invented that bit of hyperbole to open his review of a book printed in America. In fact, China itself, from 1995 until the inevitable clampdown in 2002, published an extraordinary number of books “exposing” its corruption. However, most of the Chinese books, or at least those trying to put all the pieces together rather than just point a finger at crime rings or flaws in the system, necessarily took the form of novels. They were a short course in corruption and its politics for the Chinese public. This book draws inspiration from the major novelist-instructors, while subjecting their observations and imaginings to critical analysis and real-world verifications. I contend that some of the novels and their mass media adaptations deserve to be examined both as social commentary and as art, or at least as popular entertainment that engages real social and moral problems. The works’ historical and literary reverberations are many.

Transparency International (TI), known to be less waggish than the reviewer writing from Singapore, likewise gives China low marks in its oft-cited “Corruption Perceptions Index.” In 1996, when Chinese fiction about corruption was just getting a toehold, China ranked 50th among the 54 nations TI rated (above Bangladesh, Kenya, Pakistan, and Nige-

ria), with 2.4 points on a scale in which 10 signifies incorruptible. China's 2004 rating was still only 3.4, up from the bottom mostly because the number of countries rated had expanded to 146. China tied with Syria and Saudi Arabia for 71st place. The United States scored 7.5, tied with Belgium and Ireland for 17th. Indonesia, original home of the provocative book reviewer, tied for 133rd, at 2.0. Singapore, in fifth place, got 9.3, which ought to dispel attributions of corruption to ethnic traits or even authoritarianism, since most Singaporeans are ethnic Chinese living under a benevolent despotism.²

TI's ratings are based on samplings of international businesspersons' perceptions of the illegitimate costs they incur in their global deal making. But a perception of rampant corruption in their country is just as prevalent among the Chinese at home—young and old, male and female, rich and poor, ruler and ruled, urban, rural, and migrant—and it makes them furious. More pervasive than China's discourse of reform itself, "corruption" is its evil twin. It ties into a global discussion with ancient roots both in China and abroad—one that spans the divide of oceans and continents, of capitalism and socialism. The abortive Beijing democracy movement of 1989 was partly caused by public outrage over corruption. That was before Deng Xiaoping in 1992 sped up economic reform, enabling rapid growth and what TI calls "grand," rather than simply "petty," corruption.³ The World Bank's comprehensive "governance indicators," which compare countries according to citizen voice and legal accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption, revised China's position downward in all categories from 1998 to 2004, noting the sharpest decline in the nation's control of corruption and rule of law.⁴

Prosperity may have lessened the perceived damage or discomfort caused by corruption, but it probably has only heightened the impression of its ubiquity, since personal income growth has been so uneven. It is not just that China's "system" is changing in ways that many Chinese see as decay. They also feel increasingly ambivalent about what they used to see as the health of the old system. A great deal of corruption is therefore "discovered in plain sight" these days, much as "creative" CEO compensation tends to come under scrutiny in the United States for the first time during an economic downturn. Academics have described Chinese corruption as epidemic, endemic, systemic, routine, collective,⁵ at a crisis level, and even as an officially tolerated form of compensation.⁶ Some business sectors have been called "quasi-criminalized."⁷ Informed by their own culture's age-old fears of social-moral collapse, the public is not

averse to thinking of China as having entered late-stage or end-game corruption, in which behavior that used to be considered corrupt has become the new standard.⁸ One implication is that the Chinese see corruption as a dynamic process, not an easily codifiable list of transgressions. Another is that they are more sensitive than ever to the concentration of political power. Outright calls for democracy are few and far between, but “excessive” power is coming to be seen as “corruption.” That perception may some day threaten Communist Party rule.

“Corruption” as a General Malaise, and the Paradox of Fictionalizing It When Culture Is Considered Bankrupt, Too

The precise nature of “corruption” is a controversial question that we shall revisit in the conclusion, after viewing the full spectrum of corruption as it is popularly imagined and depicted in China’s most famous recent novels with corruption themes, together with their film and television adaptations. These works tend to be thrillers, but few of the corruption cases in them were invented from whole cloth. Most of the novels are to one degree or another romans à clef. I believe that these works represent a rebirth (short-lived, perhaps) of the Chinese political novel following a hiatus after the 1989 Beijing Massacre. The novels’ formal realism is debatable, but they were arguably the works of their day that “spoke truth to power.” They gave the Chinese people *stories* about where their social and political problems came from, and these narratives resonated with familiar tales from Chinese history and literature. As the sanctimonious charge, these novels also made the decadent lifestyles of the rich and infamous fascinating. Corruption itself and the power struggles it causes were enshrined as popular culture.

We still need a working conception of corruption that will acknowledge both the concrete and the abstract, even metaphorical, manifestations of it that we find in the novels and in popular discourse generally. Lynn T. White III some years ago found “a surprising consensus on the proper definition” of corruption among Western political scientists, as *the misuse of public power for private gain*. He went on handily to demolish the utility of that formulation by contrasting Mao-era and post-Mao-era Chinese ideas of corruption in practice.⁹ Still today, problems arise in distinguishing the private from the public and the less entitled “lesser public” (e.g., a firm or unit) from the “greater public” (the state or “the people as a whole”).¹⁰ And the rules keep changing. Making and keeping a profit used to be considered corrupt. Paying workers a bonus was “bribery.” The very language of China’s reforms

can mislead. When a Chinese enterprise “goes public” (sells shares), usually it is a state firm being privatized.”

Despite these uncertainties, consensus that certain covert high-stakes transactions are “corrupt” is not hard to find, particularly in this age of excess. Bribery of officials, graft, fraud, and looting of the company one manages are corrupt by international standards and punished by Chinese law. Still, novelists and analysts like to examine gray areas and new kinds of malfeasance before the law catches up to them. Beyond even this, however, are much broader and yet related concepts of “corruption” (*fubai*) as a general rotting or disintegration of society, morality, and the very standards that society and morality claim to cherish. One hears of “spiritual corruption.”¹² “Corruption” in practice is often a code word for any observed social injustice perceived to be caused by unjust accumulation of power, whether in the hands of an individual, individuals, or a group, not excluding the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself. Some scholars hypothesize a broadening of the Chinese concept of corruption since the early 1980s, in concert with an upsurge of malfeasance accompanying China’s economic reforms.¹³ That new forms of corruption involving vaster sums of money are now possible is indisputable, but I will argue after we examine the novels that the broadening of the idea of corruption is more a matter of linguistic usage and freedom of expression catching up with very old ideas of corruption as a general social decay. This reflects a change in values and reevaluations of recent Chinese history. Conversely, since China under Mao’s socialism tended to lump corruption together with waste and mismanagement, the purview of “corruption” as a group of behaviors may have shrunk in some areas. Today, it is often the unbridled power to manage people or resources that used to be quite legitimate that is considered by many Chinese to be the root of corruption, if not its essence. The broader and the more particular meanings of “corruption” coexist in the Chinese language as they do in English, and these different fields of meaning enrich each other. Old ideas that corruption leads to regime decay and collapse (under a Mandate of Heaven theory) or to an even more cataclysmic apocalypse religiously defined¹⁴ come quickly to mind in the Chinese case. Even the “tamer” prospect of regime change suggests something more dramatic: the final fall of communism as an international system.

Hence the larger subject of these novels is social change, negatively conceived as social-moral decay leading to citizen resistance and protest and finally to the collapse of a system and a way of life. That is what this book takes to be the Chinese discourse of corruption at its most abstract.¹⁵ It encapsulates a general social malaise. The implications for action are paradoxical.

cal, for everyone fears regime collapse, even clings desperately to the idea of savior bureaucrats emerging to save the day—which means clinging to the status quo and all the corruption it now represents. When official Chinese propaganda denounces corrupt officials, it, too, conjures up a general miasma of economic, moral, and sexual indiscretion that bespeaks a general moral lapse (in Maoist times, it was a class or ideological lapse) and even a loss of regime legitimacy, of the Mandate to rule. In the meantime, as China moves ever closer to having a market economy, it finds itself enmeshed in other cycles besides those of the Mandate of Heaven—business cycles. This could create conditions for a “perfect storm.” Corruption turns out to be, in essence, a pessimistic and teleological discourse, its own narrative of social decay and upheaval, national enfeeblement and destruction (*wangguo*), and a story of corrupt values themselves becoming the norm, all the more so because old communist ideals have come to seem hypocritical. Corruption thus conceived is itself a causal explanation for society’s ills. Many a novel about corruption is an *ideological narrative* in Tzvetan Todorov’s sense, in which “all actions of the characters can be presented as the products of a few very simple and very abstract rules.”¹⁶ As for Lévi-Strauss’s distinction of “raw and cooked” versus “raw and rotten,” demarcating the cultural sphere against the natural, metaphorical corruption as the Chinese know it applies to both.¹⁷

Worries about the health of Chinese society overlap and interact with a somewhat differently conceived perception of a *cultural* crisis. Culture, too, is embodied both abstractly and concretely, the latter in monuments of high culture, particularly literature. Under Mao, as under the emperors, literature had a vanguard role in popularizing correct ideology or thought (*sixiang*), formerly the Dao—the Way. Part of China’s cultural crisis since the Beijing Massacre of 1989 and the freeze-frame politics that followed it is, according to high-powered social observers, that there have been few serious, no-holds-barred ideological or literary explorations of the Chinese people’s fundamental concerns.

Literary critics, too, often describe Chinese literature as in crisis since the 1990s, but usually for a different, if complementary, reason: because the avant-garde creativity that won China fame in the 1980s has declined, and with it, affirmations that China is in the international cultural vanguard. Chinese culture appears now to be dominated by popular literature, the self-obsessed musings of disillusioned young people, sexposés by young women trumpeting their libidinal appetites, and variously stale or trend-catching media productions—movies, television, and video and Internet games (often imported or poor examples of their type)—re-

quiring little if any literacy.¹⁸ Literary controversies no longer hold the public's attention. China still has famous writers, but they have lost their mystique, their romantic heroism. Many write for television. Some critics blame all this on pandering to the new market economy and the power of international capital (e.g., Hollywood) more than on the CCP and its determination to remain in power. Optimists, on the contrary, seem to think that China's new soap operas, karaoke bars, and eye-popping storefronts and advertisements are the best thing in Chinese culture since instant noodles. Celebrity critics, in Chinese as in English departments worldwide, tend in any case to celebrate that which is marginal, not what is fundamental.

Were the pundits looking without seeing? By 2000, Chinese novels about corruption were being written in the hundreds and read by the millions, including even the banned ones.¹⁹ These works already had a generic name: "anticorruption fiction." Only the social observers and cultural critics failed to notice. Probably the critics found anticorruption novels on the whole too popular and artistically undistinguished to take seriously. I do not intend to argue that China's recent anticorruption novels are as a whole *good*, much less great. C. T. Hsia regards corrupt officials as stock characters in works that for centuries have not raised "fundamental issues about the soundness of Chinese civilization."²⁰ But "bad" and "popular" are not the same, and "popular in style" is not the same as best-selling. Contrary to the opinion of many Chinese intellectuals, much fiction that they deride as "popular" is not commercially successful,²¹ whereas the relatively "high" novels of Wang Anyi and even the experimentalist Mo Yan sell well, as did works by Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Eileen Chang in different times and places. Social commentators may have disdained the novels as "freedom of expression lite" under the impression that their "measured" scolding of the status quo helped polish "the government's reform credentials,"²² but that is letting a political "best" that is unobtainable under present rules be "the enemy of the good." (Some skeptics take anticorruption novels' very existence as proof that they must not be very deep.) Even the optimists have ignored China's political novels. They prefer a Chinese "mass culture" at the cutting edge of a global, postmodern, postpolitical pop culture in which long-term and structural social concerns are simply not chic.

Now, many Chinese readers may well consider sex, religion, the pursuit of happiness, youth alienation, or, contrarily, the cluelessness of old people to be "fundamental concerns." Those looking for social comment, though, surely seek a literature about problems of livelihood, personal se-

curity, equity, and justice: about unemployment, unjust privilege, obstruction of justice, official corruption and incompetence, discrimination, inflation and deflation, environmental degradation, diminished health and welfare security, inadequate infrastructure, crime, urban crowding, occupational and consumer safety hazards, "social instability" (a euphemism for protests and mass unrest), declining civility, loss of home and other property by government fiat, and manipulation of the new stock markets, where the new middle class is already heavily exposed.²³ The Chinese also remain concerned about national security, prosperity, foreign investment, morality (however defined), and preventing a run on the banks. The overall health of the political system concerns many Chinese, too. This book does not mean to overturn the aforementioned conventions as to what is fundamental, though they are conventions. Like the Chinese, I worry about these problems in both our countries, and I am not displeased to see them treated in well-plotted page-turners that trace high-stakes social threats to political and social leaders.

China's discourse of corruption transcends simple bribery and graft cases, encompassing nearly all the aforementioned social problems, yet it has its limits. Fundamental concerns of Chinese readers that cannot be directly addressed include their desire for democracy (or at least greater consultation), political and civil rights, freedom to form groups to solve current problems inside and outside the workplace, and freedom to become well informed or sometimes just to work safely for a living wage. One may not suggest that the CCP should share power with other parties or depict constitutional change, much less describe nationally organized resistance to CCP policies. Excessive discussion of big losers in society, such as AIDS victims and drug addicts, is taboo, and so too, perhaps, is excessive focus on the sins of China's capitalists, professionals, and foreign investors, except those in collusion with corrupt cadres.²⁴ Little mention is made in the literature of the Beijing Massacre of 1989 or the freer social tendencies just prior to the massacre (including press freedoms evidently endorsed, at first, by Deng Xiaoping himself).²⁵ Fang Lizhi says a politically mandated amnesia about political protests is reinforced by rapid social and generational change in China.²⁶ After the transition to new leaders at the Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002, license to write about corruption diminished. One needed permission. Just before the congress, China's General Anticorruption Bureau proudly announced that the spread of corruption in China was "effectively checked!"²⁷ (In 2004 there was renewed government attention to, though not openness about, corruption. A citizen Internet poll still ranked corruption as "pub-

lic enemy no. 1.”²⁸ Novels and television serials with corruption themes, which had appeared intermittently after 1995, arrived in force at the millennium, climaxed in a spurt of seemingly geometric growth in 2001, and suffered an abrupt falloff, though not a complete extinction, in 2002.

This book, then, a study of “anticorruption fiction” and its mass media adaptations, is an analysis of the rise and at least temporary fall of a genre that has been a Chinese way of addressing a variety of fundamental popular complaints and the protests and riots organized to express them (some 60,000 incidents annually by 2003, rising to 74,000 in 2004).²⁹ Anticorruption fiction was a place where the needs of Chinese officialdom and the general populace met. The officials thought the subject of this fiction was malfeasance by a limited number of its midlevel cadres; mass readers thought it was the entitlements and duties of all those in power, their right to hold power at all, and thus the system that had installed them. These are, respectively, the official and nonofficial discourses of corruption. “Anticorruption fiction” was from the first a “concept literature” or “problem fiction” at best, a wholly untransgressive formula fiction at worst.³⁰ The quasi-Malthusian proliferation and diminution of the works partly suggest the rise and fall of a market-driven fad, but raw political power was also at work.

I call the turn-of-the-millennium period and beyond “China under late socialism.” That term is speculative and teleological, but terms like “postmassacre” or “postdemocracy movement” look backward, not to the inevitable coming of something new, and I am not inclined to follow current fashion in cultural studies and affirm that Chinese culture, or even its economy, was or is “postsocialist.” (That term, as translated into Chinese, can mean either “postsocialist” or “late socialist.”)³¹ In 2001, when the number of anticorruption novels was at its peak, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were still “the nucleus of China’s industrial and financial system,” “accounting for more than one-half of industrial employment, two-thirds of industrial assets, almost one-half of industrial output, and more than two-thirds of all liabilities held by Chinese industry.”³² The decentralizing thrust of reform has actually increased the resources owned by SOEs.³³ Millions of people have in recent years been laid off or retired from SOEs, their sole source of a pension. Retirees and the unemployed are much in evidence in China’s anticorruption novels.³⁴ This is not to speak of the farmers and ex-farmers, variously underemployed, migrant, or working in effectively privatized township and village enterprises (TVEs)—originally capitalized by local governments—for local Communist Party bosses who now double as enterprise owners.

State and party employees in organs rather than enterprises are yet another part of socialism's unreformed payroll. According to an official Chinese source, in 2003 1 in 30 Chinese was a "civil servant," compared to "Indonesia, 1:98; Japan, 1:150; France, 1:164, or the U.S., 1:187."³⁵ The Chinese financial system that worries economists throughout the world is still, for want of a better word, "socialist," though not firmly under central or local control: it follows political dictates rather than market rationales. Moreover, even large-scale private enterprises, if only because they provide local employment and perks to local officials, can count on local courts and police to do their bidding in case of disputes with workers, foreign partners, or even domestic suppliers and buyers. Private money and official power remain enmeshed in complicated ways.³⁶ Ordinary Chinese blame both the state *and* the market, but few would follow China's New Left in thinking of the state as "neoliberal," though certain foreign and domestic players in the market may fit the label.³⁷

The late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century were, however, good times for China as a whole, with the private sector being China's hope. China's economic growth was nearly unequalled internationally. A newly rich middle class was developing. Observers would soon call China manufacturer to the world. The international opprobrium of the 1989 massacre had faded, and so had domestic and foreign fears that China might turn back the clock on its market reforms. China entered the World Trade Organization at the end of 2001, and Beijing was chosen to host the Olympics in 2008. But there were still all those aforementioned problems and citizen protests, as well as worries about fundamental changes in morality, family stability, and human relations, not to mention ideology, which led to contradictory yearnings for both change and social stability. And a broader question haunted Chinese citizens even as, or especially as, they contemplated the boom times. Was it all real? The seemingly contradictory coexistence of rapid economic development and stagnation or worse in social equity and reform led some to ask the same question that many Japanese were asking of their society, for different reasons: Are we a "normal" country? Are *we* for real? The question partly reflected doubts, ever more repressed in the official press, about China's "normality" in the era of Mao Zedong and the possible continuing legacy from those years.³⁸

As leadership shifted to Hu Jintao in 2003, still within the political party of Mao Zedong, doubts intensified about the very reality of China's economic development. Was it just a bubble? Was it sustainable in China's overburdened environment? Were the products of China's econ-

omy themselves real or counterfeit? Was China's economic miracle, in other words, sustainable? There was also a crisis in high culture. China's culture did not match the nation's newfound power, prosperity, and international prestige, much less its past glory. Which spectacle represented China's future: Shanghai, the once and future "pearl of the Orient" with its grand opera house, or the knockoff boomtown of Shenzhen, dependent on Hong Kong and the outside world and yet fenced off from them and protected from having to obey their commercial and intellectual property laws? Foreign media and observers have largely accepted the Chinese state's narrative of future change coming from the cutting-edge cities of Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen, and yet there is always room for a minority view—encouraged by China's anticorruption novels—that an upheaval might come from those parts of the country that change has left behind.³⁹

Realism and Its Limitations

In addition to corruption, realism is the other major theoretical concern of this book, and it is another concept so moot that I shall hold off addressing its finer points until the penultimate chapter, when we have acquired a feel for the novels. The term "realism," as Western critics have used it, is so diffuse, encompassing now the very subjectivity that realism was originally framed against, that René Wellek writes of it as a "period concept" in French literary history, though he also defines realism as "the objective representation of contemporary historical reality."⁴⁰ (Another critic specifies that it lasted from 1848 to 1871, followed by naturalism, from 1871 to 1890.)⁴¹ Wellek proceeds to classify the part of the "eternal realism" tradition that followed the French period (acknowledging that Auerbach's masterwork *Mimesis* begins with the ancient Greeks) into individual national traditions of realism. I think we can speak of a national Chinese tradition of realism, and now of a post-Mao mainstream realist tradition, so long as we recognize that it still competes with a related but different official dogma and practice of realism that is less critical and closer to Maoist realism. When major Chinese writers speak sympathetically of realism today, they mean the "nonofficial" critical mainstream. In chapter 7 I shall propose an inductive characterization of it according to the traits that make it admired by partisans of realism, rather than a tight definition, for the concept must fit many diverse works. When speaking of realism as an international tendency, I endorse George J. Becker's eclectic view of realism as an umbrella term for works associated with re-

alist movement(s) variously by their (1) subject matter (unprettified, or worse); (2) techniques (slice of life, lack of a judgmental authorial voice, use of dialogue as spoken in life, and so forth); and (3) philosophy (that is, philosophies).⁴² Henri Lefebvre's emphasis on themes of failure and defeat in nineteenth-century European literature suggests to me another broad marker, which like the others is potentially sufficient but not necessary: (4) mood (pessimism).⁴³ This book does not pursue the idea of a "real" realism; I take no stand on the ultimate nature of "reality" or the best way of conveying it. Such concerns do not necessarily inflame the authors featured in this book, either. They go for the story, the dirt, and, to their credit, the "real story" behind the unseemly appearances.

Chinese critics trace their own national tradition of literary realism not to the European and American movements, but to their own May Fourth and increasingly to their late Qing masterworks from the first half of the twentieth century. Critics today even speak of a "classic tradition" of modern Chinese realism. This implies an improbable linguistic, technical, and ideological continuity since May Fourth (and even late Qing) realism, down through the dubious socialist realism of the Mao period that followed it, and including now post-Mao realism, which is itself a very diverse practice of orthodox and relatively dissident modes of realistic writing. I find that in principle, however, even orthodox Chinese critics now expect Chinese realism to hit hard against the establishment, in the manner of not just the icon Lu Xun, but also the great contemporary realist Liu Binyan, who is still officially considered dissident. This book argues that the well-developed Chinese conceit of literary realism, shaped now by decades of socialism—not only influenced by socialist-era literary techniques, but also dependent on and symbiotic with socialism's deficit of truth telling—can be viewed as a force of its own, a force that has inspired literary achievements. It overlaps, but is not coterminous with, Western realism; it need not be seen as a divergent or defective offspring of the latter. For now, let us simply note that Chinese realists of the twentieth century, despite their ideological differences, have generally believed that literature must (1) "tell the truth" in the face of a bureaucracy not so disposed; (2) directly address and even be instructive about major and preferably problematic social trends, rather than use experimental techniques to convey subjective inner states or apolitical family psychodramas; (3) speak for the downtrodden; and (4) be accessible to a mass readership, not just an intellectual elite.

The outpouring of novels about corruption at the turn of the twenty-first century was, or perhaps under better circumstances could have been, a

major “realistic fiction.” Most Chinese critics favorably disposed to the novels saw them as a branch, or even the main branch, of Chinese realism of recent years.⁴⁴ Others would no doubt think this formulation an excessive compliment to the popular and sometimes racy works. To most observers, though, what stands out about anticorruption novels, if not their realism in any strict doctrinal sense, is their instructive observation of China’s rapid transition from a centrally planned economy and severe, locked-down Maoist society to a “Wild East” market economy, underregulated and yet still subject to unstoppable bureaucratic whims.⁴⁵ This body of fiction does not simply describe what some see as a happy ending in a prosperous, postmodern urban society, though such a society has been described by other kinds of authors “realistically”—that is, using realistic technique (works by He Dun and Qiu Huadong are often cited).⁴⁶ The fervor with which most novels with corruption themes portray what officials call a “transitional” society (though this society is not even debating a change of political system) suggests to some the inutility and even immorality of continued CCP rule. Alternatives to sudden regime change include abolishing the CCP committees that control from within government ministries, courts, schools, and factories, a proposal of Zhao Ziyang when he headed the CCP in 1987–89, but this kind of “peaceful evolution” has been off the table for fifteen years. On one level, one sees the rapid integration of China into a postmodern world. On another, one feels the old us versus them paranoia of an internally weakening CCP organization originally steeled by civil war and global Cold War. Some critics read anticorruption novels in the manner of their forebears, who considered late Qing novels about corruption to be “novels to warn the world [of an impending catastrophe].” Critics have invoked that very phrase from a century ago. Anticorruption novels are often criticized for their all-seeing, ever-moral, incorruptible official heroes, but the villains are naturally more interesting, and they point upward, toward heroic problems of “system.”

My personal slant does not favor the all-out market liberalization and privatization so often promoted by America’s international institutions just now; the current CCP leadership may have more faith in markets than I. China has demonstrated that capitalism can be compatible with communist bureaucratic rule. My bias is liberal, pro-democratic, and in favor of a new global civil society. To the novelists, the current position of the CCP as a privileged, self-perpetuating, legally protected, and self-supervising elite still controlling the state, with socially egregious techniques in proportion to the very decline of its old bases of power, suggests evils that can be named without help from our neo-liberal world:

specters such as tyranny, social irresponsibility, and “feudalism.” It is not simply a case of the people versus the state. Many fighters against corruption and unaccountable leadership want a stronger Chinese state that will take more responsibility for citizen welfare. It is more a case of “the people” vs. “the system”—the real system, since “the government,” in CCP propaganda, is often a euphemism for the government-within-the-government, namely, the CCP. The party is now unsure enough about its legitimacy that it sometimes refers to itself in print as “the ruling party,” as if there were an opposition. When it denounces the corrupt, it tends to identify them by their government position, not their rank in the party hierarchy.⁴⁷ Anticorruption novels often employ a bureaucratic euphemism for the CCP, or perhaps an immanent principle behind the godhead (the CCP) itself: “the Organization” (*zuzhi*).

“Realism”—not pornography, youth counterculturalism, or artistic experimentalism—remains the literary practice that most offends China’s authoritarian regime. Realism can enlarge artists’ palettes when its advocacies appear new, as they did during the May Fourth movement and the early post-Mao days, yet the commitment to “realism,” I will argue in the chapters that follow, can also be charged with some of the limitations of China’s anticorruption fiction. The several aspects of this can appear singly or in combination. (1) Since its European genesis, realism has in various hands eschewed certain viewpoints (subjective ones), techniques (experimental ones), and high literary languages (viewed as affectations). Realism is in principle a doctrine of self-discipline, and hence of self-limitation, as exemplified in the Jamesian unities. (2) China’s own “classic” tradition of twentieth-century realism tends in practice to limit realistic themes even further, since it dramatizes conflict in terms of social clashes, often for instructive purposes. So far it has tended to pull the “realistic novel” toward melodrama. (3) In contemporary China, realistic novels invite censorship.⁴⁸ (4) Single-mindedly opposing bureaucratism imposes a focus of its own—concentration on the bureaucracy—and this, too, can be limiting. (5) The straitjacket on the imagination can be even more pronounced when literature is a substitute for journalism. The temptation for creative authors to try to do the work of journalism is great, since the news is more heavily censored than fiction, and Chinese realism privileges truth telling above all. (6) A limitation placed on realism is that Chinese fiction now has to serve market expectations, as so many critics have pointed out. Realistic “exposure,” whether didactic or simply to parade the lifestyles of the rich and infamous to serve reader curiosity, caters to this.

Each of these limitations will be discussed in the ensuing chapters, in

relation to one or more major novels of 1995–2002. The sequence of the next five chapters will reflect not the chronological order of the genesis of these limitations, which is hard to fix, but rather the chronology of the publication of the novels. Earlier works influenced later ones, and one can also observe a pattern, a rise and fall of the Chinese anticorruption novel as such. Let us finish with a brief historical overview of the genre before turning to the works.

The Rise of Anticorruption Fiction

The late 1990s were propitious for literature about uncomfortable social change and also corruption. Novels about unemployment, obstacles to industrial reform, and other problems of the factory shop floor and urban life appeared in mid-decade, leading to a flurry of critics' comments in 1997–98 about a rebirth of Chinese realism, or, as some put it, a "new realism."⁴⁹ One critic spoke hopefully of a rebirth "of the spirit of Chinese literature of the late seventies," before literature allegedly became divorced from reality, evidently due to the much-trumpeted Chinese avant-garde.⁵⁰ Another critic's 2001 retrospective found realism to be the literary mainstream of the late 1990s, with anticorruption novels and novels about officialdom at the head of the list.⁵¹ Still others noted the rise of "economic novels."⁵² One scholar called attention to "bankruptcy novels" of the 1930s, leaving the connection to present fiction unstated.⁵³ The new realism was surely buttressed by the fact that very long novels were now a mass consumer trend.⁵⁴ One Chinese critic links the upsurge of novels about officialdom in the later 1990s to a larger literary "turn from lyricism to narrative."⁵⁵ Another speaks of "an unconscious effort to return to tradition."⁵⁶

International anxiety and pessimism about the end of a Christian millennium had little to do with the rise of anticorruption fiction. Internationally, China had gone from a reputation as a regional pariah in 1989 to one as a regional stabilizer, particularly after China easily rode out the 1997–98 economic crisis that beset other parts of East and Southeast Asia. Corruption, crony capitalism, and nontransparent financial institutions took much of the blame for the debacles of 1997–98, and this may have influenced China's writers and intellectuals, but they had to look within to buck world euphoria about China as the exception, a 100 percent successful emerging market and manufacturer for export.

Novels about corruption could become a trend only as the atmosphere for literary production and consumption improved in the wake of Deng

Xiaoping's 1992 reinvigoration of the reforms that the 1989 Beijing Massacre had almost derailed. Academic, literary, and subliterate production prospered again, popular culture above all, and by the end of the millennium even domestic cop shows were ascendant on television. Literature about corruption needed not only freedom, but also a market that indicated that consumers wanted to read about corruption. With the regime's recommitment to economic reform came the restructuring of the old industrial base (SOEs), the dismantling of the old social welfare system, mass layoffs from SOEs, and worker unrest and protests, all major topics of anticorruption novels later in the decade. In time came official anticorruption campaigns, particularly after the death in 1997 of Deng Xiaoping, the last and highest protector of the 1949 revolution's old cadres and their wayward, self-enriching children. An official anticorruption discourse was already well established, though politically seasonal in its appearance. In the 1990s, corruption was vast enough to encompass illegal privatization of whole factories, massive land grabs for private development (with kickbacks to officials), misuse of power to authorize business ventures and gain access to capital, and covert diversions of monies to real estate speculation, the new stock markets, and foreign bank accounts.

Literature bemoaning corruption of course has ancient roots. Late Qing fiction exposing a corrupt officialdom is often cited as a particular model for current anticorruption fiction. From Mao Dun to Zhang Henshui, writers after the May Fourth movement continued exposing the corruption of their age. Soon after Mao Zedong's death, China was again treated to hard-hitting works of reportage and fiction excoriating corruption, though often still from a Marxist perspective, as by Liu Binyan.³⁷ These fictional and nonfiction works of the late 1970s were christened, outside China, a "new realism." But works by Liu, living in exile in America since 1988, were no longer widely available or topical in the 1990s, nor were the exposure writings of his spiritual followers who came to national attention before the 1989 Beijing Massacre.

Another precedent for anticorruption fiction in the nearer past was *guanchang xiaoshuo* (fiction about officialdom), which also traced its roots to the 1890s³⁸—and beyond—and was purveyed in the early 1990s by Liu Zhenyun and others. Overlapping anticorruption fiction, these works about officialdom focused on the manners of officials as a privileged group, but were not so hard-hitting about massive corruption and fraud.³⁹ In film, "corruption lite" was combined with the comedic talents of director Feng Xiaogang in highly popular movies about the travails of everyday life. Perhaps partly protected by his fame, in 1992 Mo Yan wrote

Jiu guo (The republic of wine), a grotesque fantasy novel about corruption. It was initially published in Taiwan. Meanwhile, space previously devoted to reportage was taken over by a fatuous product called “enterprise literature,” which lauded the achievements of entrepreneurs.⁶⁰ It was prevalent in the 1990s in *Beijing Literature*, critic Li Tuo’s former bastion of avant-garde fiction. Such “literature” was one more provocation that must have led to calls for realism about factory enterprises.

Zhang Ping had been publishing novels and reportage about corruption since 1991 with the powerful backing of the Masses’ Press,⁶¹ but Lu Tianming’s *Cangtian zai shang* (Heaven above; 1995) appears in retrospect to have been at the head of a more defined anticorruption fiction trend.⁶² It was in 1995 that Chinese growth in real wages took a nosedive, and unemployment reached the prereform level in absolute numbers.⁶³ It was also in April of that year that Beijing’s vice mayor Wang Baosen committed suicide, providing a spectacular first act in the corruption scandal of Chen Xitong, party boss of Beijing. All this must have spurred interest in the television series based on *Heaven Above* aired in 1996, now deemed to have been the first anticorruption TV series and one of the decade’s most influential contemporary TV dramas, along with *Kewang* (Yearning).⁶⁴ Lu Tianming’s novel and his teleplay embody many aspects of what was to become an anticorruption formula, though the works’ creative premise of a beleaguered bureaucrat returning to an old haunt that has changed beyond recognition has precedents in Ke Yunlu’s *Xin xing* (New star; 1984),⁶⁵ Jiang Zilong’s late 1970s stories about Manager Qiao,⁶⁶ and even Maoist stories about cadres who go down to the grass roots and are surprised by what they find there. That Lu Tianming’s early novel in a nascent genre is one of its better examples suggests the unhappy possibility that anticorruption fiction’s brief history may well be mostly a story of decline and variations on a theme. In his own opinion, anticorruption fiction was and is in its infancy, leaving deeper questions untouched, as China’s earliest socialist war literature does.⁶⁷ A few years were to pass before another major anticorruption TV drama followed *Heaven Above*. Zhou Meisen in 1996 published a long political novel, very much in the Lu Tianming mold, about dysfunctional municipal and SOE governance; it was made into a 1998 television series, but it was largely in retrospect that the novel and teleplay were seen as the start of Zhou’s now famous interest in corruption.⁶⁸

The June 2000 release of the film *Shengsi jueze* (Fatal decision), based on a novel by Zhang Ping, finally opened the floodgates for novels exposing corruption.⁶⁹ The notions of anticorruption fiction and fiction about

officialdom, which overlapped and were sometimes interchangeable, became generic trademarks or logos matching authorial output with reader interest in government malfeasance. One could enter a bookstore in most of urban China, ask for *fanfu xiaoshuo* (anticorruption fiction), and service personnel would lead one directly to the relevant books and TV series on VCDs and DVDs, though the term had come into play only after 1995–97 or so.⁷⁰ “*Fanfu*” is a slightly acronymic formulation, not unlike “anticorr.” in English, so if that phrase did not communicate one’s meaning, one needed only to spell it out, as *fanfubai xiaoshuo* (anticorruption fiction), or, more formally, as *fanfubai tici xiaoshuo* (fiction with anticorruption themes). The term *fanfu xiaoshuo* appeared in China’s higher literary criticism (*pinglun*) by at least 1999. Also heard was the equally acronymic phrase *fantan xiaoshuo* (antigraft fiction, or anticorruption fiction).⁷¹ The less abrasive term *guanchang xiaoshuo* (fiction about officialdom) is probably older.⁷² Once fiction about Chinese official corruption was named in literary criticism, it had legitimacy in official as well as nonofficial discourse, like the anticorruption cause itself in life. However, “anticorruption fiction” and “fiction about officialdom” were more *tifa* (formulations, programs) than recognized genres. Nor were they officially constructed critical appellations, like *fazhi wenxue* (legal system literature), though the terms were permitted in official publications. That is also to say that the terms had some conceptual validity among critics even without a full, formal push from the officials. In the bookstores, by 2001 one could go to the fiction section and pick out an armful of books with the word “power” or “black” in the title and be sure that the works had corruption themes.

The twenty-first century saw a virtual canon of full-length anticorruption novels and a growing list of authors considered masters of the genre, among them Lu Tianming, Zhang Ping, Chen Fang, Zhou Meisen, Liu Ping, Wang Yuewen, Jin Yuanping, Zhang Chenggong, and Chen Xinhao. Yan Zhen, Li Peifu, Bi Sihai, and Zhang Hongsen also contributed major works to the canon.⁷³ Tian Dongzhao became noted for novels and essays about low-level officialdom, like Liu Zhenyun and Chen Yuanbin before him. Ke Yunlu also entered the fray. Regarded by the public as anticorruption heroes like Liu Binyan before them (though they took fewer risks in their writing), Zhang Ping, Lu Tianming, and Zhou Meisen were besieged with fan mail from aggrieved citizens urging them to take up their cases or expose injustice. Even Chen Fang, who remained discreetly in Japan, kept adding chapters to his banned blockbuster *Tian nu* (Heaven’s wrath; 1996), until he ended up with a three-volume behemoth that,

for various reasons, finally could be published openly in China in 2000. Wang Yuewen and Liu Ping went on to create serial works about official life and its corruption that were greeted as relatively literary contributions, though from the point of view of exposing corruption they were less audacious than some contemporary works.

After 2000, TV series with explicit themes of official corruption burgeoned. However, they did not yet overshadow the novels. Of the seventeen best-selling novels in the first half of 2001, six were anticorruption novels, each with sales from 300,000 to one million. Major presses would have a half-dozen or more anticorruption titles in print at a time. Whole publishers' series were devoted to novels about corruption and officialdom, with the generic terms *fanfu* or *guanchang* serving as markers for customers. About a hundred relevant titles were published in 2000–2001.⁷⁴ A magazine in 2002 selected “ten classic anticorruption novels,” a canon that confirmed most of the aforementioned writers (except for Chen Fang, whose reputation remained officially dubious)⁷⁵ as masters in the field, a generic association that not all of them eschewed.⁷⁶ Mainstream periodical outlets for fiction such as *Xiaoshuo jie* (Fiction world), *Dangdai* (Contemporary), and *Zhongguo zuojia* (Chinese writers) began to serialize anticorruption novels in volume in 2001–2002. They all stopped after the summer of 2002, before the CCP congress.⁷⁷

The Fall

Readers sensed that, with so many real cases of corruption being exposed in the press, adding inordinately to the numbers with fictitious ones was bound to cross the line at some point. An interviewer asked Zhang Ping in 2002, “Teacher Zhang, how long do you think the mania for anticorruption literature can go on?”⁷⁸ Even as it created some of the excitement of a booming literary trend such as had not been seen since the 1980s, anticorruption fiction was becoming a proverbial nail that stuck out, begging to be hammered down. I believe that the heyday of anticorruption novels with real “edge” was over by 2002, if not 2000, although (and perhaps partly because) the number of titles peaked in 2001. In the twenty-first century, the novels poignantly assailing corruption were overshadowed by fiction about officialdom. The latter overlapped anticorruption fiction but tended to be tamer, as some critics acknowledge, if only because fiction about officialdom spread good and bad so evenly among all the characters and institutions, if not Chinese “culture,” that individual choice and institutional revision seemed precluded.⁷⁹

Novels about smuggling, legitimated by official propaganda about the Yuanhua case in life, became popular in literature and the media, but they tended to deflect part of the blame onto criminals from the outside, perhaps Taiwan or Hong Kong. Smuggling is “corruption” under a broad definition of the term, but only accompanying crimes such as bribery and extortion fall under the jurisdiction of anticorruption bureaus. New anticorruption television series, often about smuggling, or simple cop stories pitting bad cops against good cops, led to some new novels,⁸⁰ but this confirmed that anticorruption’s social criticism was now tame enough for prime time. New themes such as the rise of female CEOs and the recapitalization of state factories by selling stock to workers entered anticorruption novels.⁸¹ Even so, critics have yet to announce artistic or political breakthroughs in works produced since the novels in the aforementioned anticorruption canon.

Sales of anticorruption novels began to slip by 2002,⁸² even as anticorruption fiction began to be printed serially in respectable journals of mainstream serious and popular fiction. Not surprisingly, earlier anticorruption novels’ commercial success (and even some degree of official, or rather superficial, social status—Zhang Ping’s *Jueze* [Choice] won a Mao Dun prize after Jiang Zemin extolled the film) inspired quickly produced imitations and also “pseudo-anticorruption novels” (*jiamao fanfu xiaoshuo*), which promised corruption themes on the cover but in fact were not about corruption at all.⁸³ Other works were said to expose social dirt journalistically, without much commentary or authorial digestion of the material. Fiction and media productions with anticorruption and officialdom themes began to get sustained bad press in July 2002. They were reportedly the subject of a clampdown in the run-up to the Sixteenth Party Congress of the CCP—a time of anxiety which, like all preludes to big party meetings, did not brook dissent.⁸⁴ It was at this time that the General Anticorruption Bureau declared victory over the spread of corruption in China.⁸⁵ Certainly some novels must have been trashy. A secondhand report tells of plots in which a corrupt official offers up his wife and daughter to a leading cadre, lingering over the sexual and violent aspects, or a high official has relations with a female personal secretary who schemes against his wife.⁸⁶ But China has laws against pornography, which are abused as it is; the main offense of these books seems to have been *lèse majesté*, or indeed excessive negativism—the writing of *heimu xiaoshuo* (scandal fiction), which, like pornography itself, has not so far squeezed out “healthy” serious or popular culture in free societies. The novels analyzed in this book were read predominantly by males, for

whom anticorruption fiction was the top genre in 2001–2002.⁸⁷ Given that, and the plentitude of prostitutes and mistresses in the plots, the willingness of so many authors to refrain from titillating passages is noteworthy—an indication that they thought of themselves as true realist writers.

The decline, particularly in literature, was subtle enough that in 2004 workaday criticism was still being written about anticorruption fiction, and the term was still attached to new novels that the concept seemed to fit, including those by the protected Zhang Ping, who was now a deputy director of the Chinese Writers' Association and still a favorite money-maker for the Masses' Press. The CCP renewed its commitment to fighting corruption in 2004. Anticorruption series on television hardly suffered at first.⁸⁸ Three different TV series adapted from Zhou Meisen novels with corruption themes appeared in 2003.⁸⁹ This, however, was not proof of renewed vigor, since television is generally a medium for feel-good entertainment.⁹⁰

Why the decline? On the one hand, say some observers, the market for anticorruption fiction appeared saturated in 2002. Just too many titles were available, and one seemed much like another. On the other hand, political control was much in evidence. Books were not usually seized off the shelves, but negative criticism grew strong in the press and at forums reported on by the press. A sign of the times was a new crop of "economic" fiction, including some about bankrupt SOEs, without themes of corruption or abuse of power.⁹¹ One could not necessarily call them less "realistic" in tone and technique than the anticorruption standard bearers, but they did seem less audacious in their truth-telling function. In 2004, the State Administration on Radio, Film, and Television announced that television programs with crime themes would no longer be shown in prime time.⁹² General propaganda about state prosecution of corruption did not diminish, but neither did it appear to be gaining in transparency or depth. Accounts of the penitence of corrupt officials blossomed in 2004–2005. Chinese critics were hard put to defend that new didactic subgenre's literariness or even its authenticity.⁹³

Was it CCP discouragement or market saturation that diminished controversial fiction about official corruption? Under CCP leadership, the market and political needs do not necessarily work at cross purposes—often they support each other. In this writer's judgment, written and filmed works became formulaic and mutually indistinguishable because the genre rather quickly ran up against its limits. As the quantity of works mushroomed, the limits became all too apparent as large numbers

all ran up against the same ceiling. The ceiling was much lower for television productions than for novels, so to the extent that television became the main purveyor of criticism of corruption, homogenization and dilution of content were especially pronounced. Works with themes of corruption would now be judged critically only by their ability to entertain mass audiences, and chiefly by their ability to maintain suspense.

Each of the next five chapters treats a representative and influential novel about Chinese corruption with an eye to what made the novel popular, what kinds of corruption upset the author, what the novel says about the root problems (and, less frequently, possible solutions), and some of the apparent limits on the novelist's creativity and persuasiveness. The chapters examine these problems under uniform headings. At the outset is an introduction to the selected novel's (1) *storyline*, followed by an analysis of the work's (2) *corruption cases* and of the relation between (3) *the novel and realism*. Next is a look at the novel's (4) *contributions to the discourse of corruption* and what the novel reveals about (5) *limits on and of realism*. A final section, (6) *aftermath*, discusses sequels and mass media adaptations. The last two chapters of the book revisit the general questions of realism and corruption in light of the novels and academic theory. For all the limits of and on Chinese realist novels that the first six chapters elucidate, the conclusion is inescapable that Chinese realism has much unrealized potential. In the current climate, critics may overlook that. Chinese realism may well need as a foil—as its muse—a bureaucratic government that lies. Yet, even the fall of communism may not be enough to stifle that muse, unless it brings an end also to two thousand years of centralized power, bureaucracy, and greed among the bureaucratically privileged.