

**Daniela Licandro, EALC**

**Thinking of Value, Anachronism, and Contiguity in the Study of Contemporary Chinese Literature**

In a nutshell, my dissertation explores how self-criticism (jiantao 检讨), merely known as a Communist technique of thought reform, became a predominant mode of expression in twentieth-century China. By examining how self-criticism affected literary genres like autobiographies, diaries, and memoirs, before, during, and after the socialist period, my project aims at revealing the scope of self-criticism beyond contexts of punishment and political re-education, and its influence on writing practices other than the distinct self-critical essay. As soon as I decided to work on Chinese self-criticism and explore its connection to literary writing practices, I knew that I was going to tread on a dangerous ground: a territory where the relations between history and literature, between the political and the literary cannot be taken for granted and need to be newly defined and negotiated. The first problem that became apparent while working on the proposal was the question of sources. Written self-criticism has not been systematically collected nor organized. Many self-critical essays are lost or inaccessible because preserved in personnel files that are not open to the public. How do you build up your archive when so many texts are unavailable or lost? How do you choose your material, when so much self-criticism was written in China? Methodologically, how will you approach texts that are nonetheless so different from each other—for instance, political essays and autobiographies? These questions became even more crucial when I confronted myself with Chinese scholars in China. The preoccupation that the field of studies of contemporary Chinese literature is still fairly “young” and “unstable” has prompted scholars to engage in a painstaking work of reconstruction of historical sources and organization of the material. The empiricist trend underlying the effort of collecting material and sources is expression of specific assumptions pertaining to what constitutes evidence and what makes the evidence/source valuable from a literary and/or historical standpoint. In fact, the two things might not coincide and what is preserved for its historical value might not necessarily possess literary value. Nonetheless, scholarship has favored the empiricist attitude that points to the importance of quantitative collecting to legitimize scholarly findings in the field of literary studies as well as emphasizing the scientific character of literary scholarship. Among other things, the material should include, as Professor Wu Xiuming maintains in a related article, critical pieces and self-critical writings that are tied to the history of political campaigns in the socialist period as well as diaries and other disparate sources to ensure an impeccable scientific approach to the studies of contemporary Chinese literature.<sup>1</sup> At stake, obviously, is the shared belief, and the anxiety, that historicizing and collecting historical sources that help contextualize literary evidence add value to scholarly findings. Beyond questions of value, what this position seems to assume as certain is the reflective relation between a text and what

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<sup>1</sup> See Wu Xiuming’s 吴秀明 “Xueke shiyuxia de dangdai wenxue shiliao ji qi jiben xinggou” 学科视域下的当代文学史料及其基本形构 [Historical Sources of Contemporary Chinese Literature and Their Configuration from a Disciplinary Perspective], *Wenxue pinglun* No 4 (2014). See also Hong Zicheng’s 洪子诚 “Dangdai wenxueshi yanjiu zhong de shiliao wenti” 当代文学史研究中的史料问题 [The Problem of Historical Sources in Research in Contemporary Literature], in Hong Zicheng, *Wenxue yu Lishi Xushu* 文学与历史叙述 (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2005), 194-205.

surrounds it (other sources, the context, etc.). Historicizing then becomes the imperative for the literary scholar/historian.

While my project claims to historicize what I call the culture of *jiantao*, I am not much interested in taking an absolute position in favor or against historicization. The issue, for me, does not boil down to an either/or question. Rather, it is *how* one historicizes, *when* different sources are connected, and *what relation* is established between the texts that intrigues me. I want to go back to the material I engage with and the challenges it poses to articulate some thoughts in this respect.

How do we understand, for instance, the adoption of the language of 1950s *jiantao* in writer Yang Mo’s diary entries from the early 1980s? How do we conceptualize this kind of anachronism? How do we “historicize” the relation between the diaries and the earlier practice of self-criticism, without reducing it to an act of random intertextuality? Intertextuality as a mechanism is certainly at work but alone does not properly capture how it operates actively and affect both the way we might read the diaries *and* the previous practice. How might the literary text inform our understanding of the historical text (i.e., *jiantao* essay) and vice versa? The fundamental anachronism set off by Yang’s diaries makes theories of reflexivity and causal relation inadequate and insufficient to illustrate the nature of the link between texts/practices that belong to different historical moments. Neither causal nor reflective, their relation, in my view, might be better conceived in terms of contiguity. Contiguity emphasizes adjacency as opposed to linear genealogy and descent. In the space of contiguity, texts and practices can refer to each other without necessarily being directly derivative of one another. In my work, I appeal to contiguity to spell out the connection between the literary and the historical (and/or political) text. In doing so the act of historicizing does not consist merely of reconstructing a certain, specific context/reality to make sense of a literary text, coeval or otherwise. Contiguity allows me to address forms of anachronism as well as overcome rigid generic distinctions. By contiguity and analogy, the 1980s diaries work *as jiantao*, relate to the earlier practice, and invite an alternative understanding of the latter.

Unfortunately, contiguity does not solve everything. *When* a literary text is contiguous to a historical text/practice or to what extent knowledge of history is relevant to make sense of contiguity (as well as continuity) between texts and practices are questions I am still struggling with and remain germane to selecting appropriate material as well as to the overall argument of my dissertation.

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**Yuqian Yan, CMS/EALC**  
**“History” in my project**

My dissertation studies Chinese costume dramas made between late 1920s to the end of 1940s. There are three levels of “history” in my project: first of all, the films are all set in the “historical past”, no matter how vaguely defined this term is; secondly, the historical context for the production, exhibition and reception of these films; and lastly my own attempt to compose a

“historiography” of costume dramas in the Republican China in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The majority of films I’m working on, especially the ones from the late 1920s and early 1940s, are not strictly speaking “historical films” since they are mostly based on popular legends, folklores and novels rather than verifiable historical facts or events. This is a commonsensical form of historical knowledge that is circulated through storytelling, opera performance, festival and religious traditions, as well as visual representations. It can be rather far away from official historiography, but deeply grounded in people’s everyday experience of life and understanding of history. I propose the term “vernacular history” to refer to this category of historical knowledge and imagination, and the way it is integrated into the fabric of everyday life through different medium and practices. “Vernacular history” differs from the systematic knowledge of history in its fragmented and semi-fictional quality, and it is mostly acquired through sensorial and emotional engagement with character-orientated narratives. History in this sense almost becomes a form of embodied knowledge and experience, somewhere between facts and imagination, and enables me to include fictional characters and fictionalized stories about historical figures. I am mostly interested in the way cinema participates in the circulation of vernacular history and how it opens up new perceptions and imagination of the past through specific cinematic means.

Vernacular history is not a fixed set of historical imagination, but actively interacts with the broader historical context. It constantly absorbs, highlights, and eliminates certain content throughout its ongoing process of formation. If “all history is contemporary history,” as Benedetto Croce famously announces, the present is always inevitably reflected in our perception and usage of the past. The cinematic representation of history only updates it with the latest modern technology, but also reveals the social concerns and interests of the time. Part of my endeavor is to engage the social, academic, and political environment of the production and reception of Chinese costume dramas. In the 1920s, costume drama was largely associated with the debates on the relevance of the Chinese past and the promotion of folk and popular culture; while in the 1940s, wartime politics becomes the totalizing condition for the imagination of the past. But I am not satisfied by simply pointing out the connections between content and its context, it is more important for me to analyze how cinema as a specific media reflects and complicates these connections.

My own effort to construct the history of Chinese costume dramas is motivated by the lack of scholarship on this genre, as well as my own interest in history. As any form of historiography, it is largely conditioned and determined by the specific historical context I am in, yet adding another layer of history to the project. I am hoping to have certain degree of self-reflexivity on my own intellectual and historical condition, how it shapes my project and my understanding of these films and their history, and what limitations I have, rather than presenting an objective, impersonal historiography which seems to be the opposite of the concept of vernacular history that I am working on. (I am not quite sure how this can be achieved in academic writing.) If we all agree that it is important to expose the constructedness of history writing, why compose another seemingly objective, coherent account of history?

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**Adhira Mangalagiri. Comp. Lit.**

**On Rescuing Literature from History: Notes on a Methodological Problem**

The figure whose historical writing comes closest to challenging the totalizing disposition of History is the great writer, and sometime literary historian, Lu Xun... Standing at the intersection of fiction and history, Lu's *The True Story of Ah Q* turns out to have been the most compelling narrative of Chinese history to his generation and beyond. Although it is fictionalized, I have found few that can better his analysis of several events of modern Chinese history... The fictional form allows Lu to work with a range of techniques of satire, distanciation, and self-parody which constantly undermine the totalizing monologic of the Historical voice. For instance, the extended introduction to *True Story*... has been read as reflecting Lu's anxiety about his ability as an intellectual to give voice to a peasant. Whether self-consciously or not, Lu develops techniques that undermine the authority of ...History... It is therefore interesting to consider Lu in his role as historian. (Duara 44)

In this quotation, from his well-respected 1995 book *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Prasenjit Duara identifies Lu Xun's writing as an alternative to repressive History – the capital H marking a distance between the intellectual construct of History as a discourse or discipline, and the “real,” “on-the-ground” histories and experiences of the past. Duara's larger argument posits a collusion between History (a reified, linear, teleological model of Enlightenment History) and the nation (the sovereign subject of History, in which national identities appear unitary, stable, and monolithic). One strategy Duara employs to challenge these totalizing concepts is to look to literature, and to identify literature as providing access to that which History renders absent. Such a strategy has been widely adopted by historians, particularly those challenging the hegemony of and colonial power relations implicit in their own methodologies. Unfortunately, however, such an approach has also become widely prevalent in literary studies. As a student of literature, I find this historicizing approach – in which literature is constantly in the service of history – highly problematic and no longer acceptable.

Duara's passage on Lu Xun is so egregious, it warrants a closer look. Duara begins by identifying Lu Xun's “historical writing” as “challenging the totalizing disposition of History,” but he overlooks Lu Xun's essayistic works and immediately cites *The True Story of Ah Q* as the exemplary example of such “historical writing.” Duara lauds *Ah Q* as “the most compelling narrative of Chinese history,” as though its *literariness* is valuable only insofar as it informs the reader about historical events and experiences. For Duara, the “fictional form” is worthy of study solely in its capacity to “undermine the totalizing monologic of the Historical voice,” to give voice to “alternative” voices otherwise repressed. I am not suggesting that Lu Xun cannot be studied “in his role as a historian,” or that *Ah Q* does not make important contributions to historiographical methodologies. What I am reacting to is the repeated presumption demonstrated by many “radical” historians (including Subaltern Studies members) looking to combat the oppression of statist historiography. Again and again, these historians take refuge in literature as though literature is there for the taking, as though scholars trained as historians are automatically fully equipped to study literary texts. Thus, literature is robbed of its own reading practices and methodologies, and consequently, the study of literature becomes subsumed by that of History.

Even in Chinese literary studies, historiographical methods now comprise the dominant approaches to studying literary texts. So often, a literary text is treated as a conduit to some historical condition, be it the socio-political conditions surrounding the production and circulation of a text, authorial intention, or the experiences of a group of historical actors identified as the “intended” or “original” readership. Such positivistic approaches are important, but are also damaging when the study of Chinese literature becomes limited *exclusively* to the material arena. Take for example, Andrew Jones’ wonderfully comparative study of Lu Xun in his 2011 book, *Developmental Fairy Tales*. Attempting to break with the tendency to regard Lu Xun as an idol-like figure with super-human capabilities, Jones importantly suggests that “‘Lu Xun’ is not a singular figure, but instead a composite voice constructed through myriad processes of creative citation, even in his ‘own’ writing... nor were all of his writings originally composed under the sign of a stable authorial identity” (167). So far so good. It appears as though Jones is interested in reading Lu Xun’s writing *as literature*, and that he is resisting the urge to make all of Lu Xun’s writing lead back, in the final analysis, to the historical man (Zhou Shuren). But even in a piece of literary scholarship like Jones’, even when the scholar is invested in comparative and literary methodologies, the project again makes recourse to history. Jones only allows those intellectual figures a constitutive role in Lu Xun’s composite voice who demonstrate some historically verifiable connection with Lu Xun – either through Lu Xun’s translations, or his writings in which he explicitly mentions the works that influence him, or some piece of textual or historical evidence that establishes a “real” link. “Literary historical methodology,” in Jones’ words, continues to prevail (167).

Rey Chow cogently articulates the problem of this “literary historical methodology” dominating Chinese literary studies. In 1991, Chow was already “problematiz[ing] the dichotomy between the “realpolitical” non-West and the “imaginative” West” (xiii). She argues, “Often, in an attempt to show ‘the way things really are’ in the non-West, our discourses produce a non-West that is deprived of fantasy, desires, and contradictory emotions... Another way to arguing the same point: since the West owns not only the components but also the codes of fantasy, the non-West is deprived not only of the control of industrial and commercial productions, but of imaginary productions as well... To my mind, the exclusion of psychoanalysis as a [literary theoretical] method of reading the non-West reveals a no less hegemonic politics with its presuppositions of what the important messages from the non-West ‘really are.’” Some twenty-five years later, the importance of what Chow is asking for – for a truly *literary* methodology, different from historiography in the study of Chinese literature – is yet to be fully realized. We continue to study *and teach* Chinese literatures as though they are historical documents, with, for example, the mandatory paragraph (or powerpoint slide) on the author’s biography or on the May Fourth movement whenever Lu Xun enters into the conversation or classroom. Can we, should we, rescue Literature from History?

In my own work, I find the field of literary theory as providing access to much-needed *literary* methodologies. For me, a historicizing and contextualizing approach to studying literature must be at least supplemented, if not replaced, by an attention to the creative and imaginative apparatuses at work. Harnessing the intellectual tools of literary theory is one way to

study these literary energies of a text – that which is lost when a text is subjected to solely historiographical methods of study. Importantly, I am not suggesting that literature and history are entirely separate objects of study without convergence. Rather, I am suggesting that literary modes of study differ, and adamantly so, from historical modes of study. Many strains of literary theory, for example, are not invested in the struggle to access historical “truth.” In other words, I am locating the distinction between literature and history not “out there,” not in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China or in Lu Xun’s intellectual circles. Instead, I am rooting this distinction “in here,” within my own current academic sphere – in this university campus and its disciplinary distinctions between History and Literature – and within this current academic environment in which the Humanities and literary studies must everyday prove its importance and value beyond a secondary status as a mere alternative (to) history.

Works Cited

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**Junko Yamazaki, CMS/EALC**

**Japanese period film’s problematic relationship with history**

Thesis: We do not know how to talk about *jidaigeki* (時代劇, Japanese period film). This is a problem not of the films, but of criticism, and it relates to their—for lack of a better word—“pastness.” For one thing, to study film, not just *jidaigeki* but any film, as an object of the past is not without controversy (e.g., Philip Rosen 2001; Thomas Elsaesser 2004; Sabine Haenni 2014). It is a temporal art form that needs to be viewed in time. Furthermore, given its relatively short history, and the “unruliness” of the medium as part of the cultural industry, but also due to its mimetic nature, film might not be best studied historically (e.g., Horkeheimer & Adorno 1944; Hasumi Shigehiko 2004). As a problem of criticism, *jidaigeki*’s relation to “pastness,” I would argue, has a lot to do with the discourse of modernity and the tenets and assumptions about modernism in which film, and film studies as a discipline, have been deeply invested. I am interested in developing a critical vocabulary for talking about *jidaigeki* while revealing obscure forms of dissensus around *jidaigeki*, and the contradictions and the absence of a place for *jidaigeki* in contemporary scholarship on (Japanese) cinema and its relationship with modernity. For this task, I find historicization as a method necessary (i.e., demystification) but not sufficient (but I’m still trying to articulate it why it is the case...at least better than I have done). As a starting point in my investigation of *jidaigeki* as a problem of criticism, I engage some of the seminal works in film scholarship that address *jidaigeki* and its “pastness” not simply as an object of their analysis but as a potential critique of, or threat to, their own frameworks. From there, I move outside of scholarship

on film or *jidaigeki* in order to touch on broader issues surrounding its “pastness” and explore the intersections between historiography, aesthetics and politics that are more or less specific to the period that I work on (1950s-1970s). In any event, below are my notes on a few instances where history enters, and becomes a problem in, my way of thinking about *jidaigeki*.

- *Jidaigeki* is not simply a genre (i.e., a matter of conventions) but a temporal ideology (i.e., Yoshimoto Mitsuyoshi, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano). The introduction of the term *jidaigeki* in the early 1920s marked a transition from a classification according to the pre-existing dramatic forms (*kyūgeki* 旧劇 versus *shinpa* 新派, i.e., old versus new) to the one characterized by historical periodization (*jidaigeki* 時代劇 versus *gendaijeki* 現代劇, i.e., past versus present). Put it more simply, the existence of *jidaigeki* lets people imagine a time before the modern, and so solidifies the idea that we are now (or not yet?) in the modern age...
- *Jidaigeki*'s relationship with historical film (*rekishi eiga* 歴史映画), the distinction made by people like Mori Ogai.
- *Jidaigeki* as an apparatus of (post-WWII) orientalism (i.e. international reception of Japanese cinema and its impact on film criticism and film studies) → here historicization, especially identifying the ways in which *jidaigeki* is modern, a product of cultural permeability characteristic of cinema, is useful, but my primary interest lies elsewhere: What does this aspect of film reception reveal about the medium?
- Postwar *jidaigeki* films brought some of the most powerful aesthetic experience and critical discourses to the history of cinema in response to the ongoing historical events. It is their continued relevance in postwar Japan that interests me for rethinking the relationship between history and aesthetics.
- The importance of the concept of (popular) reception for *jidaigeki*; how it is said to be related to other “popular” cultures and media (but also postwar mass cultures and media). Shifting the focus to the spectator as a historical agent structuring its very historicity was part of the dominant discourse in historiography and the political imagination in the 1950s and 1960s. It had a major impact on film aesthetics.
- Political sentiment around *jidaigeki* and its realism (or even actuality). *Jidaigeki* is part of unfinished business. Here “history” feels more like a burden, *jidaigeki*'s “pastness” comes to closer to “feeling backward” (Heather Love 2009). Furuhashi Yuriko's dismissal of *jidaigeki* in her analysis of the avant-garde filmmaking practices of the 1960s and 70s is a good example. In her book, the relationship between history and cinema is conceived in such a way that *jidaigeki* films of the avant-garde filmmakers figure as political and aesthetic compromises (i.e., retreat into the distant past and disengagement from actuality), or worse, pathological dead-end. It raises a lot of questions for me: How can we make sense of backward feelings such as shame, depression, and regret and the debates about “good” and “bad” pleasures of these feelings from the perspective of political subjectivity? Or rather, what do these questions and our tentative answers reveal about our assumptions regarding the past, the relationship between affect and action and historical writing?